

Posleen FanFic

Edited by
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Food Will Win This War

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Leigh is a Barfly, a regular posting member of Baen's Bar, in good standing. Her background, as it obvious from the story, is in Russian history and literature. This story very much met the standards I was looking for; it took a different approach on life during the invasion and it dealt with areas with which most people are unfamiliar.

It's also a cracking good yarn.

Stalin had an intense dislike of travel, and for many years he avoided visiting his mother, although she begged him to come. Only when she was very old and near death did he make the trip to Tbilisi, where his henchman Beria had installed her in the old viceroy's palace. The aging woman was delighted to see her famous son once more.

As their visit drew to a close, she had one question she wanted to ask him. "Tell me, Soso," (even after all these years she still called him by that Georgian diminutive of his given name), "what exactly are you?"

"You remember the tsar. Well, I am like the tsar."

Ekaterina Dzhugashvili smiled and shook her head. "You'd have done better to have become a priest."

Part One Feed My Sheep

The supply caravan of old Soviet-made trucks threaded its winding way along the narrow ribbon of pavement through the northern Caucasus Mountains. The Georgian Military Highway had fallen into disrepair since the Posleen invasion had thrown all Earth into the turmoil of war. However, it remained the best route to Grozny, once capital of the Chechen Autonomous Republic and now one of the few remaining strongholds of human resistance in the northern Caucasus Mountains.

In one of the middle trucks sat Dr. Nanuli Tamarashvili, a retired pediatrician lately of Gori in the Republic of Georgia. That market town on the Mtkvari River was notable primarily for having been the birthplace of Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, who under the name of Stalin had ruled the Soviet Union for nearly thirty years. But Gori was gone now, fallen to the Posleen landing that had taken Georgia's central valley, and Nanuli had lost her family along with her home.

The hard seat wasn't the best place for a woman in her seventies, but Nanuli had plenty of experience

with privation. She was old enough to remember the dark days of the Great Patriotic War, and more recently she had pulled through the privations of the civil war after the fall of the Soviet Union. Her old bones might ache for days when she arrived at the forward base overlooking the ruins of Grozny, but she wouldn't let it keep her from seeing to the patients who were waiting for her arrival.

In the meantime she had Gamsakhurdia's Georgian translation of *The Lord of the Rings* to occupy her. The rhythm of reading aloud to Soselo helped to take her mind off her growing soreness.

Soselo was a quiet boy who made Nanuli think of her grandsons, who had perished in Gori and in the flight to the mountains. He rarely spoke, which was hardly surprising when one considered that he and his father Beso had been literally one jump ahead of a hungry Posleen when they'd encountered the caravan's Cossack outriders. After her own experiences in the flight from Gori, Nanuli had a good idea of what the boy probably witnessed.

It hadn't helped in the aftermath of that fight when the Chechens had wanted to abandon the two refugees as deadweight who would only eat up valuable food and give nothing in return. To save her fellow countrymen, Nanuli had drawn on all the status afforded her by her age and her medical degree. Even now she heard more than a little grumbling among the Chechens, and it was spreading to the other Muslim nationalities.

And we can't afford a split along religious lines when we Caucasians are barely holding out against the centaurs.

A sudden bang ahead brought Nanuli to full alertness. Gunfire?

Beside her, Soselo ducked, whimpered in terror. Someone in the truck ahead of them cut loose, sending bullets ricocheting off the rocks on either side of the road.

Voices shouted in several languages for the shooter to stop. The agreement among the caravan's members was to use Russian as a common language, but Nanuli knew that one's native tongue penetrated better in adrenaline-heated situations like this.

Beso looked up, growled through gritted teeth. "Trust the ragheads to blow a whole clip on a shadow. We'll be lucky if they don't shoot one of our own."

In front, the Chechen fighter riding shotgun glared at him and spoke in heavily-accented Russian. "What you say? Talk so I can understand."

Beso flinched, looked away from the Kalashnikov the Chechen had pointed at him. In his anger he'd used his native Georgian, and his tone was sharp enough that the Chechen had to know it was uncomplimentary. And probably took it personally.

Nanuli's medkit was already in her hands when she raised her head to get a good look at the situation. No sign of an attack. but Beso had a point about friendly fire. Not to mention whatever had caused that first bang. Possibilities ran through the back of her mind, along with the most likely injuries to go with several forms of mechanical failure, from a burst radiator hose to a broken axle or drive shaft.

Beso was just helping her over the tailgate when one of the Cossacks heeled his horse over to them. Although he carried a Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder, the traditional Cossack saber and whip hung at the belt of his cherkessa.

Nanuli's eyes shied away from the string of claw-tipped Posleen thumbs that dangled from the high cantle of his saddle, trophies of past encounters. "I was concerned there might be injuries." Russian came awkwardly to her tongue.

The Cossack, Grisha, nodded although his lips curled downward in a tight frown. "Yes, Doctor, but it is dangerous for you to be walking about by yourself."

Nanuli started to protest, then realized how right he was. A doctor was too valuable to risk running about unprotected. And her old bones might well shatter from a simple slip and fall that would only bruise one of these young fellows.

Much as it hurt her pride, she accepted his offer of escort. She walked beside his stirrup as his horse ambled along the column of halted vehicles. At least everyone had gotten stopped in time; she saw no fresh dents on fender or bumper, and the people within showed no sign of injuries, just boredom festering into frustration.

Grisha noticed the latter as well. "Enough sitting around. Top off your tanks, all of you."

From the vehicle climbed men of every nationality of theCaucasus : Chechens, Circassians, Inguish, even an Armenian. They pulled the big gas cans from their mountings over the vehicles' rear bumpers and set to work.

Nanuli kept a close eye for any injuries. At least the war had made tobacco almost impossible to get, so no one was smoking while handling gasoline. But there were plenty of other ways to get hurt.

As soon as she arrived at Ataman Masuyev's command car, she saw the blown-out tire that had sent it sliding into the rocks at the side of the road. The fender had crumpled like tinfoil, but she didn't smell antifreeze, so it should be just superficial damage, and they could drive away as soon as they got the tire changed.

Ataman Masuyev thrust his head out an open window. "Good, you brought the doctor. Isaak took a knock on the head."

Nanuli bit back the urge to point out that she'd come on her own initiative and Grisha had only escorted her. Antagonizing the Cossack ataman would only delay getting to Isaak, and concussions were not anything to trifle with.

Although what can you do, with no air evac, no hospitals, no neurosurgeons?

At least the ataman's vehicle had a wide running board which made getting in much easier for old bones. Within, a thin, hawk-nosed young man half-reclined across the back seat and cradled his head in his hands. He moaned each time the vehicle rocked.

"Hello, Isaak." Nanuli spoke slowly and distinctly, her voice pitched low to avoid irritating him.

The young man looked up, blinked. No sign of bleeding from the ears or blackening around the eyes, so he shouldn't have a fractured skull. The pupils were dilated evenly, which meant he shouldn't have any brain damage, although she didn't like the dazed look in his eyes.

She looked directly into those dark eyes, hoped that he wasn't from one of the nationalities who could take direct eye contact from a woman the wrong way. "Do you know what happened to you?"

He rubbed at his scalp, said something in a language that she couldn't follow. In addition to Russian and her native Georgian, Nanuli also knew Svanuri and Megruli, but those two were about as closely related to Georgian as Polish or Bulgarian was to Russian. Whatever Isaak was speaking, it didn't sound at all familiar.

"Isaak, I don't understand you. Can you speak Russian?"

He nodded, slow and careful in the manner of someone favoring an injured part. His "da" of affirmation was shaky, but at least he'd successfully switched languages. However, the mental shakeup of being injured could make one forget a second language.

"Do you know where we are?"

Isaak looked over Nanuli's shoulder to the open door behind her. "In the mountains."

He left *gory* in the nominative plural instead of switching to the locative plural as he should have with the preposition *v*, but she didn't know his pre-injury level of skill with Russian grammar. Not all Caucasian languages had as complicated a case system as Georgian. More significant was his quick look to check, and that over-general answer. He should know that they were on the Georgian Military Highway, just south of Vladikavkaz.

"So how is he, Doc?" Ataman Masuyev's voice boomed loud in the enclosed vehicle.

Nanuli gestured for him to keep his voice down, stepped over to speak to him without Isaak hearing. "He has a concussion. A mild one, so he will recover, but only time will heal him, and until then he will need rest--"

"Damnation, woman, I can't afford to lose my only comm tech." Masuyev jabbed a thick finger at her. "That Jew-boy's too good with electronics for this kind of crap."

Nanuli flinched. She'd suspected that Isaak was one of the Mountain Jews of Dagestan, but she hadn't expected so crude a confirmation.

Still, it wouldn't be productive to remind the Cossack ataman that the polite term for a person of Jewish faith or descent was *evrei*. Instead she spoke in her level doctor-to-angry-parent voice. "Since Isaak is your best comm tech, you will not want to endanger him by pushing him before he's recovered."

Masuyev growled, but before he could say anything, there was a strange wailing cry from the tail of the caravan, followed by gunfire and the scream of an equine in pain.

"Dammit, we're under attack." Masuyev grabbed Nanuli, pushed her down. "Get out of the way, woman. I won't have you killed playing the goddamn hero." He grabbed his own AK, stuffed it out the window and looked for something to shoot.

The roughness of his action forced a gasp of pain out of Nanuli, but she didn't think he'd done her any real injury. Much as the rough handling affronted her dignity, she realized that he was right about his need to protect her from her own foolish heroism. There was simply nothing for her to do but stay under cover as best she could until she was actually needed. Even then, at her age she could hardly play the battlefield medic running under fire to the side of the wounded.

Still, she could make herself ready. Even from her vantage point, she had a decent view of the caravan, of the yellow shapes moving up the road behind them.

Posleen.

Only why weren't they firing their weapons? Nanuli remembered the hiss-crack of Posleen weapons all too well from the fall of Gori, from the flight to the mountains and the terrified days of running through the Likhi Range and into the Great Caucasus, a flight that had taken her to the inaccessible fastness of Upper Svaneti. Here she heard only the rat-a-tat-tat of Kalashnikovs being fired, now in disciplined three-round bursts, and the occasional pop of a Nagan pistol.

She noticed a set of field glasses in their case beside Isaak's sheepskin hat. An inquisitive glance to him and he gestured for her to go ahead. Maybe she was taking advantage of his infirmity, but she consoled herself with the knowledge that she had no intention of placing the priceless equipment in any greater danger.

She focused them on the lead Posleen, then readjusted the focus, unable to believe what she saw. They weren't firing their weapons because they didn't have any, just their bare claws. They didn't even wear gear harnesses.

Yellow fluid gouted from a row of holes that stitched across the alien's chest. All four legs buckled under it and it fell sideways onto the rocks at the side of the cracked pavement. Its toothy maw opened in a gape that might be pain, or just muscles relaxing in death. For certain other muscles were relaxing, since the mountain breeze carried a fecal stink.

The next Posleen paused to swivel its head toward its fallen comrade, gaped and ran a thick pink tongue along razor teeth as if trying to decide whether to start eating the available corpse or continue the attack on the humans. That hesitation cost the centauroid its life, as a shot blew right through its vulnerable eye and sent pinkish brain tissue fountaining out the other side.

The firing continued further back, along with those high keening cries, but Nanuli couldn't see anything for the vehicles and the granite outcropping around which the switchback bent. Somehow it hadn't seemed quite so sharp when she'd walked it with Grisha. She could only hope that Soselo and his father were faring well. Masuyev certainly wouldn't let her go back to check while the fighting was on, and when it was over, her first priority would be tending the injured.

Nanuli's ears were still ringing from the last shots when a bearded man banged his fist on the door. "Dmitri Petrovich! Where's that doctor of yours?"

The moment he spoke Nanuli recognized him, and immediately wished she hadn't. Mahmood Dudayev was a Chechen, but unlike most of his people, he did not practice the Sufi branch of Islam. Rather he was a Wahhabi, and fiercely proud of the time he had spent in a training camp in Afghanistan with a pan-Islamic militant organization, before returning to the Caucasus to fight the Posleen. He also had a big thing about purity, and according to his notions of it, just so much as talking to a woman outside his kinship circle was polluting.

Damn, but she hated the way that man would talk to whatever male she was near, instead of speaking to her. She pulled herself up, squared her shoulders and looked him straight in the eye. "I am Dr. Tamarashvili. Where are the injuries?"

Mahmood tensed, started to swivel his head over to look at her, only to suppress the reaction and keep

his attention on the Cossack ataman. "They're strung all up and down the road. Cuts and bruises for the most part, but Vartan took a ricochet and Akhmeti got it real bad before we could take that last poska down." He used the derogatory diminutive of "Posleen" that the Cossacks had started.

Nanuli retrieved her medkit and pulled herself to her feet. A bruise on her hip complained at the movement, but her leg bore her weight, so Masuyev's push hadn't broken the bone. She'd just be sore for a while, and in the meantime she had patients to tend. She gritted her teeth and climbed down.

"Take me to them. Akhmeti first, and then Vartan." She hoped she wasn't making a mistake putting the Armenian second.

The men were already dealing with the dead Posleen, cutting off each centaur's right thumb as a trophy, then shoving the rest of the carcass off the side of the road. The stink of Posleen blood and feces filled the air. And more than a little human as well -- even if no one had died, some of them had obviously lost control of their bowels in the fear-filled moments of the firefight.

"Ekh, what's this?" One of the Circassians lifted the head of one Posleen, careful not to let any of the blood from the throat wound smear his red cherkessa. When he twisted the creature's head, a feathery crest ruffed up from the long serpentine neck.

"Looks like a God-King." His companion, a Kalmyk to judge by his Tatar features and the style of his wooden-scabbarded kindjal, curled his lips in a thin smile of admiration. "Only where's his little saucer-thing?"

"Hard to tell." The Circassian slid his kindjal out and set to cutting the God-King's head free. Such a trophy would command much honor, since God-Kings were hard to take intact. Their saucer-shaped personal ground-effect craft had a habit of exploding when hit, taking out not only the God-King but most of his honor-guard.

"They must've been desperate, coming at us like that without a single gun for the lot of them."

"That or ferals. Although I've never seen ferals work together like this. Wonder if you can have a feral God-King?" The Circassian twisted his trophy free with a crack of bone snapping.

As it turned out, Akhmeti was beyond help by the time Nanuli arrived. One of the Chechens had tried to stop the bleeding but the bite gashes on the Adzaran's legs and right arm were simply too deep. Perhaps tourniquets could have saved his life, albeit at the cost of his limbs, but those would have needed to be put on within a minute after he'd been attacked. Now, whatever of his skin wasn't covered with a soup of red and yellow blood had turned white from blood loss. No pulse at wrist or carotid, and if she'd taken time to get the cuff out, probably no blood pressure either. Even now she probably could've saved him if she'd been in a hospital and could transfuse as many units of blood as it took, or if she had some of those GalTech medicines they'd talked about in the first hopeful days of preparation against the invasion, medicine the mountain peoples had never received.

When she shook her head, all three of the Chechens around her frowned. One of them even reached for his kindjal, until Mahmood extended a hand in restraint. Were they angry that she had given up on their co-religionist, even thinking that she were abandoning him so she could save her supplies for a fellow Christian?

No, she couldn't back down, not when they could not afford to waste scarce medical resources on one already beyond mortal hope. She had to make it clear that she was a doctor first, and acted only on the

basis of which patient would benefit from her attentions, irrespective of nationality or religion.

She rose and faced the Chechens. "I'm sorry, but I can do nothing. His soul is in the hands of the Lord." She'd intended to keep her voice hard to forestall argument, but it wavered at the end.

Christians would have crossed themselves, perhaps even removed their headgear, but the Chechens merely bowed their heads, spoke in their own language, their voices harsh with emotion. She made out nothing but "Allah," the Muslim name for God the Father.

Odd, to see these hard men so emotional. We're all coming down from the adrenaline rush of combat.

Which meant that she needed to get to Vartan quickly, before shock could set in, perhaps kill him where he might otherwise have survived. A word to Mahmood and they were walking down the line of stopped vehicles, past men repairing friendly-fire damage, women tending minor wounds. At least her time teaching first aid had not been wasted.

Nor had it been wasted on Vartan. She noted with relief the pressure bandage on his thigh to control bleeding, the elevated legs to help blood flow back to the heart. Beso sat beside him, face dour as always, but posture attentive. Soselo had even ventured out of the truck to get a better look. For a change he didn't cringe in terror at the sight of the Posleen corpses. Might the sight of humans wiping out an entire squad of them have served as an anodyne to remembered trauma?

Nanuli knelt beside Vartan, checked his vital signs and then the injury. "How do you feel?"

The Armenian essayed a weak smile. "Well, Doc, I'm alive."

"You'd be a lot better if we could've gotten our fair share of all those medicines the damn Galactics promised us." Beso grated the words out, his Georgian accent making him sound even angrier. "Stalin would never have let those freaks treat us like this, or the capitalist running-dogs to take the lion's share--"

A click, and Mahmood pointed his AK right in Beso's face. "You Georgians love that thug--"

Good Gori native that she was, Nanuli reflexively bristled at the attack on the city's most famous native son, even as she realized she couldn't afford to even appear to take sides. "Gentlemen, enough." She looked directly at Mahmood. "Weapon to the ground, soldier." To Beso, "No politics." Much as she wanted to talk to her fellow-countryman in their common native tongue, she kept to Russian so Mahmood could understand as well.

Both men obeyed. Even if she wasn't talking about a specifically medical matter, she'd spoken with sufficient authority.

She returned her attention to Vartan, satisfied herself that his leg was properly tended. "It's a flesh wound, so you'll keep the leg. You'll just be off it for a few days, and then take it easy--"

A roar of shooting swallowed her words. There was no mistaking the sound of Posleen weapons; they sounded like nothing Earthly. If the earlier assault had been half-organized ferals, these were most definitely not. Nanuli looked up just in time to see a dozen of them coming around the last bend, weapons up and firing. Just behind them was one of their God-Kings on his silvery floating vehicle.

Worse, she could see more of them further down, where the road jogged back into view. Lots more,

both God-Kings and their normal troops.

Mahmood grabbed her around the waist, said something too rapidly for her to follow, probably in Chechen. Before she could get out a word of protest, he half carried, half dragged her up the rough slope to a boulder that sheltered a sort of half-cave.

Nanuli watched the hopeless battle below. Posleen fell by the dozens from the concentrated fire of AK's and the pintle-mounted Gatling on the top of the APC at the front of the caravan, but a dozen more stepped over every corpse.

A truck burst into flames. The smell of burning grain rose from it. Whether the Posleen had hit the grain truck or someone had destroyed it to keep it from falling into their hands, Nanuli couldn't guess.

Her throat constricted at the sacrifice that grain had represented. The fields of Upper Svaneti were not overly fertile, but the Svans had given generously so that the fighters of Forward Firebase Grozny could eat, even if it meant hungry nights for themselves. Still, better that it burn than feed the enemy.

More trucks burst into flame. A few engines started, but with the Ataman's command car jacked up with a half-changed tire and blocking the road, there was nowhere to go.

Or at least nowhere survivable. Two more of the grain trucks and an ammo transport veered across the road and straight over the edge to tumble down the side of the mountain.

Please let the drivers have gotten out alive. Nanuli wanted to cross herself, yet the knowledge of Mahmood's presence beside her held her back from something so visibly Christian. God and the saints heard one's prayers whether or not they were accompanied by visible gestures. Even if the men didn't survive, she asked St. Michael that God not judge them suicides, but brave soldiers who died denying materiel to the enemy.

Already some of the Posleen were climbing into the remaining vehicles in search of raidable supplies. She heard a few more shots, then nothing but screams. A few survivors ran, but it was already too late for running. Long yellow arms plucked them from their feet and blades flashed.

There was nothing for Nanuli to do but watch. The back of her mind gibbered in horror, but her conscious mind went clinical, noted each wound delivered, each body part severed.

"We can't stay here much longer or they'll scent us." Mahmood's voice was a hot whisper in her ear. So much for being too good to soil himself by talking to a woman. "Right now they're too busy looting, and we may actually have a chance."

Up they scrambled, following the cover of stones and rhododendron trees as best they could until they encountered one of the narrow high-mountain trails. Nanuli panted with the unaccustomed exertion, but the memory of what she'd seen kept her going even as her old bones cried in protest at every movement.

Only when nightfall made further progress impossible did Mahmood finally pause, set up a makeshift camp in the shelter of a rhododendron grove. He built a tiny fire, no more than enough to drive away the chill of autumn in the high Caucasus. They could only hope that the smoke would not attract further Posleen.

Nanuli tended their sore and swollen feet as best she could with the supplies in her medkit. She didn't even remember grabbing it up, but she still had it. But it was not much, and with the loss of the caravan

she could not replenish it until they encountered some remnant of civilization.

* * *

The next morning they started at first light, after carefully obliterating all trace of the fire. At least now they could moderate their pace, even pause long enough to pick and eat a few wild berries that grew along the trail, or drink from chill mountain streams. Not much nourishment, but enough to keep them moving forward.

Time and again they glimpsed movement along other trails in the scrubby forest. Wild animals for the most part, but sometimes Posleen moving by twos and threes, their heads swiveling with alertness. No ferals these, for they carried their strange weapons in the unmistakable posture of one ready to use them.

"They're learning to patrol," cursed Mahmood after hiding from the fourth or fifth such near-encounter.

Once Nanuli thought that she had glimpsed some of the local mountain folk, but Mahmood had stopped her before she could call to them. "They aren't moving right for humans. We don't want to attract the poski."

Nanuli wanted to respond that they certainly weren't moving right for Posleen, but decided this was neither the time nor place to argue with Mahmood. Still, she would've liked some human company, and even more a decent night's sleep in a bed.

The worst thing had been finding the bones, still fresh and scarred by bite marks. Much as Nanuli wanted to believe they were merely animal bones, she could not mistake the attachments of the thumb tendons on the humerus for anything non-human.

"Posleen ate him?" Mahmood scratched out a shallow grave with makeshift tools.

"Teeth aren't right." Nanuli pointed at a clear impression of a single bite in the softer part of the bone. "Posleen teeth are all alike, pointed like a crocodile's. These were made by a mammal's teeth. See the incisors here, the canines, the bicuspid and molars back here."

"Bear, then, or maybe some kind of cat."

Nanuli shook her head. "Jaw's too short." A memory came back to her. "Just like in Ushguli." At Mahmood's blank look, Nanuli explained. "It's a village in the highest part of Upper Svaneti. Last winter, people started disappearing from one of the four settlements. Then their bones started showing up with bite marks like this. That's when Colonel Granidze called me to examine them."

Nanuli swallowed hard at the memory it brought forth. "One of the refugee families, former Communist Party officials from southern Russia or Ukraine, were luring people into their home and butchering them, then scattering the bones in hopes that we'd assume that wild animals or Posleen got them. Sometimes they sold cuts to their neighbors as 'pork.' Granidze, he was a Security colonel rather than regular Army, tried them and sentenced them all to death by firing squad. Lined up the neighbors who'd bought their meat and put AK's in their hands, made them shoot the whole family, even the boy--" Nanuli's voice squeaked and failed.

"It was necessary." Mahmood's voice was hard as stone. "Cannibalism is a stench unto Allah and destroys the fabric of society. It must be punished, visibly and decisively."

"But a twelve-year-old boy?"

"Twelve is old enough to know right from wrong." Mahmood's tone cut off all possibility of argument.

In silence Nanuli laid the bones in the shallow grave and helped Mahmood pile a cairn of stones over them. Since they didn't know whether the victim had been Christian or Muslim, each of them spoke over the grave in hopes that one of their prayers would lay the soul to rest.

By the time they were finished, the sun had given way to gray clouds that covered the sky and cut off the peaks around them. Soon the first fat flakes were falling.

She almost didn't hear the cry of the Posleen, its harness caught in the branches of a mountain oak that suspended it too far up to retrieve the weapon it had dropped in the snow beneath it. However she definitely heard Mahmood's shot, which went straight through the alien's vulnerable eye and blew right out of the top of the head.

"Help me butcher this thing." He slung the AK, reached for the kindjal at his belt.

"You can't eat Posleen." Nanuli reached for his wrist. "The protein's incompatible. It'll rot your brain out."

"In ten, twenty years. I've heard the reports too." Mahmood twisted clear of her grasp, slid the tip into the soft skin around one of the Posleen's shoulder joints and cut. "If we don't eat something we'll never make it to shelter. You're almost collapsing from hunger already, and I don't see any berries or wildlife around here."

It was all Nanuli could do to choke down the chunks of slimy yellow flesh as Mahmood cut them from the carcass. She gagged and only by sheer willpower did she keep from throwing it all up.

Mahmood scooped up a fistful of snow and used it to wipe the Posleen blood from his beard. The next fistful he stuffed into his mouth.

"Don't eat snow." At his frown, she raised her voice. "That'll kill you now. Lowers your core body temperature. Melt it in your mouth and only swallow it liquid."

He looked dubious, but obeyed when she demonstrated the technique she'd learned from the Svans. It took patience, especially when she wanted nothing better than to wash the foul taste of Posleen flesh out of her mouth and a fistful of snow came to little more than a spoonful of meltwater.

Before they moved on, Mahmood searched the dead Posleen's gear harness, removed several pouches and tied them together for Nanuli to carry. The sheer weight nearly made her knees buckle.

"It's hardly twenty kilos, old woman. My grandmother carries that much every day." Mahmood brushed the clinging snow from the Posleen's weapon. "I'll go ahead and tote this. I may have to get the gunsmith at Grozny to do the conversion, but if I can do it myself once we find some shelter, I'll use it and you can go with the AK."

Nanuli realized what he intended, shook her head. "No, I am a doctor. I'm sworn to preserve life, not take it."

"All right, but you're still toting it, even if you won't use it."

Within an hour the snowfall had grown so heavy that they could scarcely see beyond their own arms' length. Nanuli's feet grew numb in her thin boots, and the gloves that had been sufficient for a trip in the safety of a military truck proved grossly inadequate. She tried not to look at Mahmood's bare hands. They'd be lucky if they didn't lose more than a few digits to frostbite.

"We can't go on." Her voice came in ragged gasps from the effort of forcing her way through the deepening snow, even in a path broken by Mahmood.

"We can't stop until we find shelter."

"Leave me, then. I'm just a burden on you."

"No, I will get you to Grozny or die trying. I have sworn to bring them a doctor." He took her firmly by the arm and led her onward.

Nanuli's consciousness became reduced to the process of putting one foot in front of the other. In their exhaustion they almost stumbled right by the entrance to the tunnel. In fact, they only noticed it because Nanuli's foot took that moment to slide out from under her. At least the snow cushioned her fall.

As Mahmood helped her back to her feet, she noticed the dark area. "Is that a cave?"

"I don't know." The Chechen's voice wavered, the first time she had heard him display uncertainty. "Let's look."

The opening was carefully faced in concrete, so there was no question of it being a natural cave. Inside, they found a smooth wall leading inward. Renewed hope enabled their numb feet to carry them down it.

And straight to a dead end. Nanuli thought it was a door, although in the dim light she could find neither hinges nor latch. They'd come so far, only to find shelter just beyond their reach. Exhausted, both of them slid down to collapse against it. With her fading consciousness Nanuli saw movement, but she no longer had enough will left to respond.

As he grew old, Stalin decided that it was time to choose a successor. He summoned to his side two chief members of his Politburo, Malenkov and Beria. He called for two sparrows to be brought, and bade each man to hold one.

Malenkov held his so loosely that it squirmed free and flew away. Beria, determined to show that he knew better than this fat toady, held his so tightly that he crushed it.

Irritated, Stalin ordered his guards to bring him a third sparrow. Taking it by the legs, he carefully plucked its feathers. In minutes the poor creature lay shivering in his hand.

"To hold something, you must make it helpless and dependent upon you." Stalin held up the bird for his cringing sycophants to see. "See how it is even grateful for the warmth of my palm."

Part Two

In the Hall of the Mountain King

Nanuli awoke to the realization that she was surrounded by warmth. She wiggled her fingers, relieved to find them all present and accounted for. She stretched her legs, flexed her toes. Could she be dead, in heaven? She'd thoroughly expected to lose her feet, even her hands to frostbite.

A panel over her head slid back to admit a strange greenish light. Over her stood a chestnut-haired young man in a white lab coat. "Greetings, Nanuli Akakievna." He pronounced her patronymic with the soft Russian "k" instead of the glottalized "k" of Georgian. "I am Vladilen Ivanovich."

He extended a hand to her, helped her sit up. With astonishment she realized that her hand was no longer that of an old woman, wrinkled and bony. The skin was firm under toned muscles like it hadn't since the first bloom of her youth.

"Where am I?" Her voice sounded strange in her ears, too strong and clear.

"A secret installation in the Caucasus mountains. You were in pretty bad shape when we found you, and you've been out for a few days while we got you back on the mend."

"How's Mahmood?"

"The Chechen?" Vladilen Ivanovich frowned. "The tissue damage was so extensive that he'll be regenerating for another two or three weeks. In your case, the nannites were able to repair the damaged cells, but his hands and lower legs were so far gone that gangrene had set in and we had to amputate."

"Nannites?" Comprehension sank through. "This is GalTech! What is GalTech doing here?" Surprise gave way to anger. "We were told that it was too expensive for us mountain-folk to afford."

Vladilen Ivanovich scratched at that goatee of his which made Nanuli think of Nikolai Bulganin. "It's a long story. How about you get dressed and freshened up, and we talk about it over a meal in quarters more suitable for humans."

He retreated to the door on the far side of the room, leaving her alone in this room full of equipment whose sinuous lines made her nerves uneasy. She should have welcomed the privacy for the sake of modesty, yet something in her hindbrain wailed at the loss of the one human contact in this place that Was Not Human.

It made her even more uneasy to discover that the clothes lying neatly folded beside the capsule were just her size. How had he known?

Stop worrying, she told herself. The man is a medical professional, not some kind of voyeur.

And it did feel good to change from the ragged travel clothes, even if they were no longer crusted with filth. The nannites must have cleaned them while mending her flesh, but they weren't able to reweave cloth. Even if they had, she would still have been glad to exchange the coarse camouflage pants and shirt for this outfit. She would have felt comfortable wearing it on a trip to Tbilisi, before the war, but even in this setting it didn't make her feel overdressed.

A man with taste, too.

Dressed and hair brushed, she stepped through the door. Vladilen Ivanovich looked up from a computer. A *human* computer, not one of those weird alien machines that made her skin twitch. Nanuli could even recognize the corporate logo on the monitor.

"Shall we go upstairs?" He extended his arm.

Together they walked through a maze of corridors and spiral ramps, all lit in that same blue-green light. Although there was some recognizably human technology, mostly computers, comm equipment and the data cables to connect them, the rest was of the same style as the stuff in the capsule room. Now and again she would glimpse short, hairy figures that put her in mind of the legendary wild men of the high mountain forests in Caucasian legend.

Indowy. One of the Galactic species. Nanuli had heard about them in those halcyon days when the Posleen invasion was a threat to prepare for, not a nightmare actuality with everything gone wrong. They were supposed to be geniuses with technology, but the peoples of the Caucasus certainly hadn't seen much in the way of that technology these Indowy were supposed to be making to defend humanity.

"They're very shy around humans," Vladilen Ivanovich explained when she asked. "Only a few of them can actually work in close contact with us, although this clan seems to do better than those I worked with in Stalingrad before it fell." There was a catch in his voice.

Nanuli noted his choice of name for that city -- not the meaningless "Volgograd," but "*Stalingrad*". Although there had been motions to return it to that name, nothing had come of them before the Posleen invasion had made them a historical footnote.

They climbed a set of metal stairs -- how good it felt to be able to climb them briskly -- and opened a door. The unearthly blue light gave way to proper white, although from no visible bulbs or florescent tubes. It was as though the ceilings themselves glowed with light the color of a sunny day. Nanuli relaxed and only then did she realize just how tense she'd become.

The rooms were handsomely furnished, although clearly to a Russian taste rather than Georgian. Beyond the front room lay a dining room with a table already set. The luxury was a bit unnerving -- to have so much food before her, to be able to eat her fill and not have to worry about taking more than her share, or going hungry later.

Vladilen Ivanovich helped her to a seat. "My apologies for the poor fare. Vegetables and fruits are easy enough since the Indowy set up a hydroponic garden as part of the waste reclamation system, but meat is a serious problem. The salvagees cannot be relied upon to prepare anything fit to eat, and because of taboos the Indowy will not even handle meat for someone else's table, or tend animals destined for slaughter. I've had them even take offense over mushrooms."

"Mushrooms?" Nanuli frowned, trying to imagine why. Especially since those taboos clearly did not extend to cheese, not with a khachapuri, a Georgian cheese pie, right in front of her.

"Near as I understand, it's cytological. Mushrooms have no cell walls, so they would seem closer to animal tissue. Yet another reason to suspect that Indowy vegetarianism is a cultural taboo. Their dentition and jaw structure more typical of an omnivore than an obligate herbivore like a sheep or a horse, but you'll get to see that for yourself as the installation's medical officer."

Nanuli hardly heard his lecture about comparative biology and his theories about the various Galactic species, of how the Darhel had to be carnivores because of their sharp teeth and lack of cheeks, of the dozen reasons why the Posleen had to be a biological weapon designed for some forgotten war and run wild to destroy everything. Her mind was busy gnawing at how Mahmood would respond to her new assignment when he got out of regen. This was hardly the place or the time for her to tell her host that she had obligations elsewhere. Yet the longer she left Vladilen Ivanovich thinking that she had no other claims on her, the worse the news would sound when it came out.

And come out it would, Nanuli knew for a certainty. The food sat sour on her stomach, and even the bottle of Georgian wine, a fine red Khvanchkara, couldn't entirely raise her spirits. She should have welcomed it, after having nothing since the fall of Gori but the fiery moonshine vodka of Upper Svaneti.

I should be happy. I'm safe, in comfortable surroundings and being wined and dined by an intelligent, articulate man. All my infirmities have been healed and I have a challenging job ahead of me.

She decided it was grief, the backlog of loss that she'd had no time to mourn in the weeks and months when the necessities of survival had consumed all her energy. Even in the highest fastness of Upper Svaneti, in Ushguli and Kala where the Posleen rarely braved the treacherous mountain trails, she had been continually busy tending the various hurts and illnesses of the people who had extended their hospitality to her. Now for the first time since the fall of Gori, no pressing needs demanded her attention.

But mourning would have to be delayed a little longer yet, since Vladilen Ivanovich had one more thing to do when dinner was finished. "I'd like to show you around our facilities, so that you'll have a better sense of where to go if we have trouble. And it will give you a chance to meet at least some of the senior members of Clan Tk'shvi." He gave her a wry smile. "I think you'll find it somewhat easier to pronounce Indowy names than I have. The consonant clusters do seem more like those of Georgian than Russian."

"No doubt." Why did that assumption irritate her?

Vladilen Ivanovich led the way through the rest of the human residential quarters. "Your personal quarters will be in the wing over there. I had Khalool's team outfit it for you, but if you find anything not to your tastes, don't hesitate to ring him up. He speaks and reads Russian, and his pagecode on the facility LAN is KhL922. By the way, Khalool is actually what they call a transfer-neuter, rather than a true male, but the first Russians to work with Indowy agreed that giving transfer-neuters honorary masculine grammar was more acceptable than the possible offensive connotations of using the neuter gender to refer to a sophant."

Nanuli nodded dutifully and tucked it away for future reference. Grammatical gender had always been one of the more difficult parts of Russian to keep track of, since Georgian had no such system, just a single third-person-singular pronoun doing duty for he, she and it. And none of the agreement of adjective and noun for gender, or gendered forms for the past tense of a verb, all of which she always had to make a special effort to remember when speaking Russian.

They descended several levels, past rows of doors, most closed but a few opening onto workshops and laboratories. There were more than a few bullet holes in the walls. The few people she saw were crouched and furtive, and they appeared to be dressed in rags. Their movements reminded her of those half-seen movements on the higher mountain trails, when she had thought they were being followed by locals but Mahmood had forbidden her to try to contact them.

"What is wrong with those people?"

Vladilen Ivanovich shook his head. "A lot of the salvagees are pretty badly damaged, even after they've been through the regen tank with my special mods. But I'm so desperate for fighters that I program them as best I can and send them out to patrol the trails and harass the poski. Most of them have pretty severe control problems, so I have to keep them away from the Indowy. I can't afford an attack and a panic, especially not while I need every Indowy technician I can spare on cracking that fabricator we captured from the Posleen."

"We?"

"Actually the last of the mafiosi who set this place up and smuggled the Indowy in here. Chechens, a treacherous lot but damned good mountain warriors when they aren't busy sticking people up. How they got that thing away from the centaurs and up here, I can't speculate, but it's here. From what they let slip before they fell out and started fighting among themselves, I think it makes those railguns the poski use."

Nanuli nodded. Memories returned unbidden of the horrors of the flight from Gori, of the Georgian Army trying to hold the lines with Soviet-made T-72 tanks, only to have them ripped apart like so many tin cans.

But she could also see the possibilities. "If you could get it to make them on a human scale, we could arm the entire Caucasus. Ship them up to Forward Firebase Grozny, instead of worn-out AK's and reloaded ammunition."

She had not expected Vladilen Ivanovich's expression to darken so quickly. "And reveal ourselves to the poski? Or worse yet, the Darhel? They'd love nothing more than to discover survivors of an Indowy clan reported as exterminated to the last soul. It's risky enough sending the salvagees out to patrol the high trails and set ambushes for the poski, without advertising ourselves far and wide."

Nanuli flushed with embarrassment, averted her eyes. What had possessed her, to go babbling with enthusiasm when she knew almost nothing about the subject? She was a mature woman, a professional, not an adolescent.

Vladilen Ivanovich made no further comment, just led her on down until the white lighting gave way to that eye-twisting blue-green glow. Strange odors wafted through the ventilation system, some spicy, some oily and others unidentifiable except as *alien*. Still she got no more than glimpses of the Indowy, many of them ducking out of sight behind equipment as the humans passed. Yet it was enough to give her an impression of vast numbers, even hundreds. All the time Vladilen Ivanovich talked about the grid scheme by which each corridor, each workshop, each residential block and refectory could be located so that she could respond to calls rapidly.

And then she got her first face-to-face meeting with an Indowy. It was in a sparsely-furnished room that Nanuli immediately decided had to be an office, although she could not say exactly about the place gave her that impression.

More interesting was the Indowy himself. At first glance he looked like nothing more than a tubby child, just short of puberty. But the greenish fur that covered his body recalled the legends of the wild folk of the high mountains, while a closer look at his batlike face made Nanuli's stomach clench. Yet those wide eyes took her full-circle, right back to the impression that she was dealing with a goggle-eyed child. Like her grandchildren, or little Soselo.

Vladilen Ivanovich inclined his torso in a half-bow, almost Japanese. "I see you, Clan Chief Dgvei."

The Indowy responded in accented Russian, albeit in a pitch high enough to reinforce that impression of a young child, however it clashed with the being's grave manner. "I see you, Academician Vladilen Ivanovich."

Galactic protocol satisfied, Vladilen Ivanovich introduced Nanuli and explained her new role. It bothered Nanuli to hear him describing her as a permanent addition to the staff. Yet she couldn't find a way to inject a clarification without sounding like she were contradicting him, and from what little she knew of protocol-riddled Galactic society, she suspected that would not do well for either human's standing in the eyes of the Indowy.

And all of us depend on their technical skills to keep this place going.

The Indowy clan chief responded with a lengthy greeting in very formal Russian, the sort that hadn't seen use since the fall of the Romanov tsars. Some of those words Nanuli hadn't even seen used in pre-Revolutionary Russian literature, and had to guess their meanings from their context. However, most of it seemed to be ceremonial, so she merely needed to nod and smile. Vladilen Ivanovich had warned that the Indowy considered it crude in the extreme to display one's teeth, so she carefully kept her lips sealed.

She'd been ready to write off the promises of co-operation as simply more ceremony, until the little alien led the way out of his office. Even what little Nanuli knew of Galactic society was enough to tell her that this was a significant honor.

The sight of their leader accompanying the humans must have given the Indowy courage, for they no longer ducked behind cover, although many of them trembled with visible fear and more than a few averted or even closed their eyes. Still, enough remained at their workbenches, mending human devices or operating alien equipment, that she was put in mind of a children's TV show she'd watched with her grandchildren, back in Soviet days, of Grandfather Frost's workshops at the North Pole where cheerful little magic folk made toys to give all the good boys and girls of the world on New Year's Day.

She decided to risk an inquiry, gestured to some of the most incomprehensible machinery. "Are some of those devices the GalTech manufacturing systems we were told about?"

"Unfortunately we are able to produce only the simplest of Galactic technology." The clan leader's thin voice quavered in regret. "Although we were able to preserve enough of our tools, many of our finest *dashon* mentats and *sohon* masters perished on Diess, and it will take years to train their replacements. Perhaps even generations."

There was nothing for Nanuli to do but nod politely, make some generic condolence for their losses. She intuited that asking for an explanation would only lead to an infinite regression of such questions. It was at best tangential to her duties, and might well impinge upon matters proprietary to the clan.

The tour continued through several more levels of workshops and living quarters. Although much of the decor was clearly Indowy work, Nanuli couldn't miss the occasional sign of earlier human work, in particular the hammer-and-sickle emblems high up on some of the support pillars.

When they went down the last level, Nanuli fully expected yet another maze of workshops. Instead they opened the metal doors to reveal an enormous expanse of enclosed area, so big that the hordes of Indowy scurrying around on the floor beneath the catwalk looked like so many tiny green ants. Maybe the chamber had been a gymnasium at one time, or a motor pool, given the big sliding door on the far

wall. Whatever, it now had become an enormous workshop, filled with a mixture of the sinuous Indowy equipment and boxy human computers, all centered upon the lumpy piece of machinery in the middle, big and bulky as a T-72 but nothing so comprehensible.

"The Posleen fabricator?"

"Exactly." Vladilen Ivanovich beamed, only at the last minute remembering he was in the presence of the Indowy clan chief and closing his lips over that toothy grin. "We have over half the surviving members of Clan Tk'shvi working on it, including all the senior technical experts. For the most part trying to crack the control systems and get it to respond to our commands. Once we do that, it'll be just a matter of providing the proper chemical feedstocks and we'll be able to turn out all the guns and ammunition we want. Maybe even be able to modify it to turn out other things of more immediate use, although Mk'orktei's team suspects that will require completely recoding the computers from the ground up."

There was nothing for Nanuli to do but nod and make agreeable noises of appreciation. For certain nothing in her background gave her the wherewithal to understand what they were talking about.

The tour completed, Vladilen Ivanovich escorted her back up to the human living quarters at the top of the complex. As he took her to the door of her private apartment, he pressed a bottle of vodka in her hand.

"I think you'll need this."

* * *

Nanuli spent the next day crying her eyes out and drinking. But once she had all those months of stored-up grief washed out of her system, she settled into her new role and the routine that went with it. Other than meals, during which they chatted about various oddities of Galactic civilization, Nanuli saw very little of Vladilen Ivanovich. He responded to questions about his work with convoluted technical jargon and made it plain that she was not welcome in his private labs.

He had his research projects, and she had her medical responsibilities. She set her first priority as learning Indowy physiology and medicine. That proved harder than she'd anticipated because whoever had translated the source documents into Russian had clearly been neither a native speaker nor trained in the field. She doubted that asking for a translation into her native Georgian would produce anything more useful.

Some things were easy enough; for instance, the digestive tract was almost elegant in its human-like simplicity, with none of the various enlarged pouches and complications one saw in animals like sheep or horses. But other things were bewilderingly different, if the translation could be trusted. For instance, a single large organ just under the stomach seemed to do double-duty for both liver and pancreas, although their equivalent of the Islets of Langerhans appeared to be part of a gland that otherwise corresponded to the adrenal but was located at the base of the spine instead of being paired and over the kidneys. A small sac on the bottom of the "livancreas" which she first took to be the gall bladder revealed itself to be their spleen-equivalent, once she realized that Indowy blood was green and used a chemical completely unlike hemoglobin for oxygen transport.

Fortunately she had almost no Indowy patients. Earthly diseases could find no hold on their metabolism, and their manufacturing processes, unlike those of Soviet and post-Soviet factories, created few industrial accidents. What few incidental injuries she saw, mostly scrapes and bruises from excessive haste in getting to and from workplaces, she was able to treat quickly according to the electronic "cheat sheet"

that came with the multi-species diagnostic device included in the Indowy-made medkit she was given to replace the ruins of her own.

Not so the salvagees, who provided her with most of her work. Almost every day one or more of them would come back from patrol with injuries serious enough to require attention, but not enough for another trip to one of Vladilen Ivanovich's modified regen capsules. If the weather was too bad for them to go outside on patrol-and-harass missions, she could count on them to fight among themselves, which was almost worse.

She had been there almost two weeks when the emergency call came. She was studying at the time, or attempting to. A chance remark in the reproductive section of the Indowy physiology manual had led her to track down some references on Galactic law relating to Indowy inheritance procedures, a course of action that might have provided a welcome distraction but instead only led to further frustration. She set aside the bound flimsies and hurried down to the salvagees' levels, fully expecting to have to break up a fight.

A crack of gunfire carried through the closed doors, and Nanuli flinched. Vladilen Ivanovich had said that he conditioned even the most severely damaged salvagees so that they wouldn't shoot at each other, even if he couldn't keep them from going at it with teeth and fingernails. Was his programming coming unglued and those wrecks reverting to bestial madness?

She walked into the room to find a Posleen lying in the middle of the floor, its head blown almost clear off its neck. A feral from the lack of any gear harness, but that wouldn't make it any less deadly, particularly when facing an enemy with not much more wit. The remains of two salvagees lay beside it, probably beyond even Vladilen Ivanovich's skills from the way their whole torsos had literally been torn open by the Posleen's claws. The rest huddled in small groups, whining and gabbling in broken Russian.

"What the hell happened here?" Nanuli strode across the room to face the most intelligent-looking salvagee, one who actually could eat with a spoon and was almost fit for polite company.

"Boss want poska, us bring poska." The poor creature looked at the dead Posleen, then to his fellows. "Poska look dead, then it wake up, tear up everybody."

Nanuli knew better than even bother to ask them why in God's name Vladilen Ivanovich would order them to capture a Posleen, even a dead one, and bring it inside the compound. No, she'd need to ask the man himself. She ordered the salvagee to bring the Boss up. In the meantime, she had patients to tend, those who'd just taken superficial bites and clawings she could disinfect and cover with dressings.

Five minutes later Vladilen Ivanovich burst into the room, red-faced and scowling. Before he could even say a word, she glared directly at him. "This is quite a mess you've made here, ordering these poor lost souls to bring in a Posleen for some hare-brained project of yours. They thought they'd killed it, but the damned thing must've only been stunned, because it came back around and killed two of them."

Vladilen Ivanovich spread his hands in a protestation of innocence. "They had directions on how to kill it to cause minimal damage--"

"And of course the instructions were probably too complicated for them to understand and carry out." Nanuli rested a hand on the shoulder of the salvagee whose wounds she had just finished spraying with quick-heal. "What do you need a Posleen corpse for, anyway?"

"A long-term project of mine." Vladilen Ivanovich gestured for the salvagees to gather up the remains of

both the Posleen and their slaughtered fellows.

Although Nanuli had doubts about her ability to follow his technical jargon, she refused to let him dodge the question. "Just what kind of *long-term project* are you up to?"

"You are aware that the Posleen are resistant to every known poison and chemical agent."

"Of course I am." Nanuli had to restrain the urge to snap the words out. "I am from Gori, in case you've forgotten. When First Army was routed at Mtskheta, north of Tbilisi, they threw everything in the Soviet-legacy chemical stockpile at them. If Moscow had left us Georgians any nukes, they would've used those too. I suppose you think that you can come up with something that everyone else has overlooked, Academician Biochemical Genius with Three Doctorates and 200-plus IQ?"

No sooner than she'd said those words, she regretted them. This was no way to speak to one's host, and Vladilen Ivanovich had never boasted about his degrees or his ability to max out every intelligence test known to humanity, just joked ruefully about them one evening over too much vodka after he'd had a truly frustrating series of failed experiments.

When Vladilen Ivanovich did speak, there was no anger in his voice, only old pain. "No, no, Nanuli Akakievna. Not at all. My daughter was four years old when she found a can of drain cleaner under the kitchen sink. We gave her everything Soviet medicine could do, but it was too late. I swore that I would find some way to make sure that nobody else's little girl would have to die that way. When I discovered that the Posleen had been genetically engineered to be resistant to every known poison, I knew that I had to find their secret and give it to humanity." His eyes glowed with the excitement of the prophet in the rapture of a messianic vision.

"Are you sure that's wise?" Nanuli moistened her lips, considered how to phrase her objection in a language not her own. "What if the change were to make us into ravening conquerors like them? We could gain life to lose our very souls."

Vladilen Ivanovich gave her a smile that came far too close to patronization for Nanuli's comfort. "I'm quite sure that the gene complex for poison resistance can be separated from the ones that drive their aggression."

"And in the meantime you've killed two innocent men--"

"Not at all, Nanuli Akakievna. I'm already taking them down to the regen lab. With my latest mods on the system, that poska would've had to eat them to keep me from bringing them back."

"But they're dead--"

"Oh, the Crabs would have a hissy-fit if they knew I'd figured out how to change the parameters to override their lockouts and restart biological systems, but they're a squeamish bunch who'd be Posleen fodder right now if it weren't for our soldiers holding the line for them. Too good to fight, but not too good to die." Vladilen Ivanovich curled his lip in disdain.

Nanuli nodded, unable to put words to her unease. How many times had she heard someone in the depths of remorse say, "I'd do anything to bring them back"? For Vladilen Ivanovich it wasn't a figure of speech, but a technological problem to be solved. Only should it be solved, or was death still a misfortune that should be meekly accepted once it did overtake a person?

They were now arriving at the chamber in which the regen/rejuve capsules were located. The salvages laid their fallen fellows into the two empty ones. On the far wall, the third hummed away, continuing its work on Mahmood Dudayev's extensive frostbite injuries.

Or so Vladilen Ivanovich had told her. Nanuli watched closely as the master bioengineer tapped commands into the special control consoles he'd had the Indowy rig for the capsules. When he wasn't looking, she compared them to the ones showing on Mahmood's.

Only when they were safely outside that room, clear of the range over which the Darhel-made AIDs incorporated into the capsules could pick up her voice, did she confront Vladilen Ivanovich.

"What are you doing to Mahmood?"

"As I told you before, he had far more extensive frostbite damage--"

"I saw the program you have in that thing. You're giving him the same mind-control programming you've given the salvages. You told me it was just to replace function lost to brain damage, not frostbite."

"Do you think I want an al-Qaeda fighter running around loose here?" When Nanuli gave him a blank look of incomprehension, Vladilen Ivanovich continued in the slow, careful tones of a parent speaking to an upset child. "Those men are not only trained in every form of unconventional warfare. They are also religious fanatics who consider us to be only slightly less dangerous than the Posleen, and thus lower on their priorities for destruction. They were planning a major terrorist attack on the Americans for September of '01, and only shelved it because the Galactics showed up. I endured far too much from those Chechen gangsters, and I do not intend to relive that nightmare as long as I have the power to prevent it."

"Then why didn't you use your nasty little modifications to debase me as well?"

He rested a hand on her shoulder in a patronizing gesture. "Nanuli Akakievna, they are not 'nasty,' but a work in progress. Eventually I hope to have a completely selective process in which I can restore full function no matter how extensive the damage, or impose controls to remove objectionable elements such as religious fanaticism. In the meantime, even if your personality profile hadn't been completely oriented to saving life, I needed your complex skills unimpaired--"

"More than you need a competent fighter who might actually be able to organize your debased horde into a real combat force, instead of a pack of orc-wannabes?" How could Nanuli explain the transformation she'd watched Mahmood undergo as they'd fled along the trails, or the Chechen tradition of hospitality hardly less strong than that of the Georgians?

Vladilen Ivanovich stood stiff and unmoved, his pale blue eyes cold as the heart of a high-mountain glacier. Nanuli could tell that his resolution was born not of pride, or even the fear of having lived with cutthroat Chechen mafiosi, but from the pain of having lost first his youngest son, and then his wife, to the Chechen rebellions and terrorism of the 1990's. Mere words would not move him, but there might be other possibilities.

Nanuli had steadily ignored or deliberately misunderstood Vladilen Ivanovich's various attempts to hit on her, the sly little passes and double entendres. Not that she was frigid, for she had enjoyed many years of marital bliss, but she no more intended to betray Irakli now that he was dead than she would have during his lifetime. But with the humanity of a man she owed her life hanging in the balance...

* * *

The shower was set as hot as Nanuli dared without scalding herself. She'd scrubbed herself from head to toe three times already, and if she scrubbed much more certain places were going to end up raw. Yet she still couldn't get his touch off her.

No, it was not the memory of his touch, she decided as she toweled herself off and wrapped herself in a bathrobe. It was shame, the sense that she had made a whore of herself. She told herself that she'd given herself to Vladilen Ivanovich only to repay her life-debt to Mahmood, but she couldn't shake the sense that she was rationalizing.

She stalked through the rooms of her private apartment, searching through the papers and general clutter that had built up over the past weeks. Behind a row of books she found what she had been looking for. There was not much vodka left, but it would be enough to wash the memories out of her mind.

* * *

Vladilen Ivanovich kept his promise; Mahmood emerged from the regen capsule two days later, standing straight and tall as a man, not a debased salvagee. Nanuli considered telling the Chechen of the Russian's original plans, but the words stuck in her throat.

Perhaps he still suspected, for he set to finishing his rehabilitation with a fierceness that worried Nanuli. He refused to join her and Vladilen Ivanovich for meals, preferring to fix his own meals according to his religion's purity laws. He insisted upon creating a firing range on one of the human levels, ostensibly to train some fire discipline into the salvagees and get them to stop accidentally shooting each other on patrol. When he pulled Nanuli in as well, she knew he had other plans.

She met his summons with the same gentle but firm insistence she had used on the trail. "I am a doctor, sworn to save lives, not take them."

This time he was adamant. "I'm not asking you to kill people, just the centaurs."

Nanuli started to argue, then realized the question of Posleen personhood was fundamentally a religious issue, and they'd agreed not to discuss religious matters so long as the survival of all the Caucasian peoples depended upon Christian and Muslim working together. Anyway, if she balked, he could always throw at her the fact that she'd joined him in eating that Posleen in the snowstorm. If Posleen were people rather than monsters, she would be as guilty of cannibalism as if she had eaten human flesh.

Still, the marksmanship lessons did have the advantage of getting her out of the residential area and away from Vladilen Ivanovich. He was bringing work up to the common area, lingering around in hopes of encountering her. She could hardly speak to the man without it turning into an argument, especially now that he'd taken to addressing her by the familiar *ty* rather than the formal *vy*. How long would she have to refuse to reciprocate before he figured out that she was not going to become his permanent mistress?

Not that Mahmood was getting along with him any better. Every day brought a fresh quarrel, especially after Mahmood discovered their growing successes with the fabricator. They'd nearly come to blows over the question of establishing arms shipments to the holdouts at Grozny.

That's the only thing that keeps him here, Nanuli realized one day during a particularly loud and angry shouting match, something about a radio transmission to Grozny about the railgun fabricator and how it could have been intercepted by Posleen. *He wants take a shipment of weapons to replace the ones*

we lost with the rest of the caravan, and he's not going to take off as long as there's a possibility of getting it.

The door banged open and the Chechen stalked through, his whole body bristling with fury. "This has gone far enough."

He shoved a set of camo into her hand. "Put this on. We're getting out of here."

Nanuli stared at him. "What?"

"You sure as hell can't travel overland in that outfit." He jabbed a finger at her skirt and stylish pumps. "And we are not staying one more day under that man's roof. That is final. So get changed, now."

Such was the authority in his command voice that Nanuli started unbuttoning her blouse before she even realized that he didn't mean she had to do it on the spot. She ducked into the privacy of a sheltered alcove and finished changing.

Mahmood had already selected weapons and appropriate ammunition. "Now that he's rejuved you, you can carry a full load as well as your medkit."

Nanuli whuffed at the burden, but her strength held. "Why now? The salvagees are saying the Posleen are on the move again."

"For starters, how much Galactic law do you know?"

Nanuli shrugged. "I've read a little."

"Try this. There are some very specific Galactic laws establishing Earth as a human-only reserve, and prohibiting any Indowy settlement, on pain of death. Individual technicians and small teams are granted temporary visas to perform specific duties that cannot be accomplished by humans, but no long-term settlements and absolutely no reproductively complete groups. Both stipulations are being flagrantly violated here, in case you haven't noticed in spite of having attended a birth."

At the memory of helping the female craftsman give birth to one after another tiny infant, each no bigger than a kitten, Nanuli flinched. "But the Galactics can't kill. That's why they need us--"

"Exactly. And any organized human force that knows and refuses to stand everyone in this compound against the wall is in breach of Galactic law."

"But we didn't bring the Indowy here, the mafiya did--"

"Doesn't matter. As long as we're here, we're guilty. And you can't get a sharp lawyer to talk your way around Galactic law the way you might be able to talk a medical review board out of revoking your license for aiding and abetting unethical medical experiments by whining that you didn't know what he was doing."

"The salvagees? Most of them would be dead without his techniques."

"His blasphemies, you mean. Life is for Allah alone to bestow, and those who presume upon His will can only produce abomination. And yes, I know how you spared me from that man's meddling, for which I owe you my life. But he's making monsters, bestial cannibals. That's why we never found any settlements

on the way up here. The damned salvages hunted everyone down and ate them, when they weren't hunting and eating Posleen. That's what happened to whoever it was we buried, right before the snowstorm. They only do it when they're on patrol, but that Russian has to know what they're up to."

"Oh my God." Nanuli's voice was a tiny squeak in her own ears.

By that point they were almost to the back exit. Nanuli hated it, since the only way to get to it was by crossing a slender catwalk suspended over the main environmental plant. She dreaded looking down at the huge tanks in which sludge was separated and the nutrients fed into the hydroponics tanks, while heavy metals were recovered to become feedstocks for Indoway manufacturing. Even if the hundred-meter fall didn't kill a person, they'd drown or be poisoned before the Indoway technicians could pull them out.

"Just hold it right there." Vladilen Ivanovich stalked across the catwalk, a Nagan auto-pistol in hand.

Mahmood held his ground. "We know what you're doing, Academician Voronsky. And we know why the Crabs sent you back in disgrace from America."

Voronsky? Nanuli blinked, recalling the photographs of a portly man with wispy white hair, hiding behind his hat as he hurried to the plane, escorted by US federal agents. But she'd known that Vladilen Ivanovich had to be a rejuvie, had to be older than herself, just by little things he'd said here and there during the past month.

Vladilen Ivanovich clicked off the safety, pointed the pistol directly at them. "You're not going anywhere, either of you."

Nanuli's gut clenched. He wouldn't even have to destroy them, just wound them badly enough to turn them into two more debased salvages.

"Honored Academician!" The Indoway's cry was at the very limit of human hearing, and loud enough to make ears hurt even over the constant rumble of the equipment below.

Vladilen Ivanovich hesitated, turned. "What is it?"

"The stone fill barrier has been breached and the Posleen are invading the fabricator laboratory. There are thousands of them, coming as fast as they can get through the door."

Nanuli recalled the size of that door. Not a good situation.

"Son of a bitch!" Vladilen Ivanovich howled in fury. "You betrayed me!" He raised the pistol, squeezed the trigger. The pistol barked, accompaniment for his near-incoherent epithets against Chechens.

A stream of blood burst forth from Mahmood's chest, followed moments later by another. At the third he fell backwards against the slender wire railing of the catwalk, overbalanced and tumbled off toward the huge sludge tank below.

"You killed him!" Nanuli didn't even remember raising the AK. It was over before she even realized she'd pulled the trigger.

She landed one round in his chest, near the shoulder. The rest went wild, the barrel of her weapon drawn upward by the force of her earlier shots. He fell like a rag doll, crimson spreading across the white

of his lab coat.

Then the clip was spent and she stood staring at the result of her handiwork. This was no alien Posleen she had just killed, but a human being, whatever his crimes. What sort of doctor was she, to slaughter him like that?

But there was no time to contemplate, for already the doors below were buckling, giving way to admit a stream of yellow centaurs, their knives out and flashing as they butchered their game. Terrified Indowy scrambled across the floor, up ladders set in the walls in hope of getting to some meager safety, at least until the Posleen made their way to the upper levels in other parts of the complex.

Nanuli knew what she had to do. "This way!" She gestured with the AK in her hand to the door on the far side of the catwalk.

The first few hesitated at the bloodstained body, but the sight of the Posleen streaming in from every direction gave them decision. These were Indowy who had survived the slaughter of over 99% of their clan on Diess and knew what would happen if they hesitated. They scrambled over Vladilen Ivanovich, heedless of the red smears that now decorated their fur.

Nanuli threw open the door, flung herself to one side as the Indowy stampeded into the tunnel, dozens, even hundreds of them. How many she couldn't even begin to guess.

And as quickly as it had begun, the flood trickled off. Already the Posleen were pouring across the entire room, grabbing at the ladders and shaking them to knock loose the last few Indowy desperately fleeing for the marginal safety of the escape route. A few more intelligent Posleen actually tried to scramble up the ladders, gripping the rungs with all four taloned feet. However the ladders were no Indowy construction, but human work from when this was a Soviet military installation, and the bolts pulled right out of the rock under their weight, sending them crashing down onto their fellows.

Some of the salvagees must have been fighting as well, because Nanuli could hear gunfire, both human-made AK's and Posleen weapons. Here and there they must have hit important equipment, for there were the sharp thuds of explosions.

Not a bad idea. Nanuli grabbed a grenade from the satchel Mahmood had given her, armed it and flung it in the direction of one of the big sludge tanks. Hoping the explosion would slow the Posleen from figuring out how to get up to the catwalk, she plunged into the tunnel and hauled the door closed behind her.

Nothing to do but run. There was an enormous *whud* behind her, then the bangs and cracks of secondary explosions. She was almost to the top when there was a particularly large one. She felt heat on her back and looked over her shoulder just in time to see a ball of orange cloud come rushing toward her. She was certain that this was her last mortal moment when instead the cloud of flame halted, replaced by a fountain of dust and a wind that lifted her from her feet to fling her the rest of the way out to land in the snow beyond the opening.

"The tunnel has collapsed behind us." The Indowy spoke in a matter-of-fact voice, the tone one might use to say that it was raining.

As Stalin hovered between life and death, incapacitated by a stroke, the members of his Politburo gathered around his deathbed. Many of them spoke respectfully, even pleadingly, to this man they'd served and dreaded and adored. But Beria openly sneered at the fallen tyrant, mocking him in front of the others. Only when Stalin opened his eyes would Beria resume the posture of the fawning sycophant.

As his life trickled away, Stalin's breathing grew steadily more labored, as though he were choking. His eyes opened one last time, yellow with fury, and glared at those around him. Summoning the remainder of his strength, he raised his left arm to point in wordless imprecation, and took one last strangled breath before his spirit tore free of his mortal flesh.

No sooner than the dictator's body had begun to cool, Beria called for his car and hurried back to the Kremlin, leaving the other senior government officials standing in bewilderment.

Part Three The Long Shadow of a Dead God

The fog rising from the snow gave the landscape a dreamlike quality, but it was a nightmare that they fled. Nanuli led the way through the rhododendron forest, grateful of the heavy-soled combat boots on her feet. Mahmood had been right, she could never have run in her dress footwear.

Now Mahmood and Vladilen Ivanovich would lie in a common grave along with an unknown number of salvagees, Indowy and Posleen. The ground had finally stopped shaking, so she had to assume that the explosions were over and everyone was dead and buried. At least the fusion bottle had never lost containment, or the whole mountain would've disappeared in a flash and a mushroom cloud, and there would have been no one at all left to run.

Trying to keep the Indowy going in the same direction was easier said than done. Only about half of them understood any Russian, and all of them were panicking, scattering all over the mountainside. Even the one who'd greeted her moments after her ejection from the tunnel had since gone from numb shock to flat-out terror and was running like all the demons of hell were on his butt.

Worse, not all the Posleen had been in the compound when it blew. Scattered and confused as the centaurs might be with so many of their God-Kings dead or incapacitated by the blasts, they weren't so witless that they'd pass up easy prey like a hundred or more fleeing Indowy. Screams of agony echoed through the scrub.

Having the AK made it almost worse for Nanuli, since it took all the discipline she could manage not to go firing full-auto at every scream. She'd already made the mistake of wasting her whole first clip shooting air after she hit Vladilen Ivanovich. The ammunition she was carrying was all she had to use, and she had to spend it wisely. Three-round bursts, Mahmood had drilled into her day after day.

Still, two weeks of an hour a day in the firing range couldn't make a soldier out of a retired MD. Not even a rejuvenated one.

She was so tightly concentrated on picking off Posleen that she almost didn't see the salvagee jump down from the rocky crest ahead of her. His lips drew back in a feral grin and he pulled a crooked-bladed knife from the belt of his ragged cherkessa. The Indowy in front of him froze in goggle-eyed horror.

"No!" A quick squeeze of the trigger and the salvagee slid off his perch to go tumbling down the slope, bouncing against the trunks of the rhododendrons until their branches finally entangled his mane of wild hair.

But it was already too late for his victim, whose throat lay open clear back to the white of the vertebrae. Worse, Nanuli recognized her -- the female craftsman whose birthing she'd attended only days earlier. Her babies must have been in a creche back in the compound, since none of them were on her.

Further down the mountain she could hear more gunfire, some of it Posleen but some clearly human. Salvagees most likely, since most of them still had enough mind to handle a relatively simple weapon like the older-style Kalashnikovs. At least they were keeping the centaurs busy, which might give her a chance to lead some of the Indowy to safety.

And that meant getting the roly-poly little aliens to climb. Many of the Indowy would not even try, just kept running along the trail even when she called for them to follow her up.

But some did. They were technicians from hydroponics, from the Earth-plants area, so they would be used to strange new things and ideas. No more than a dozen, all young, they scrambled over the rocks like little teddy bears, right up the slope. Nanuli had no idea how far they needed to go to reach even a modicum of safety, but she didn't intend to stop until she couldn't hear any more shots or screams.

The fog grew steadily thicker as they ascended, until they could scarcely see one another even at arm's length. Although calling to one another ran the risk of attracting unwanted attention, they had to keep together and it simply wasn't possible to hold on to one another when both hands were essential for climbing.

When the fog gave way to clear sunshine, she looked down at a sea of thick cloud from which other peaks emerged in the distance. She turned, counted her charges. Eleven Indowy, out of four thousand who had been illegally transported to Earth by the mafiya to staff their secret base, those the survivors of a clan of over eighteen million who had once lived and toiled on the distant world of Diess before the Posleen came.

Eleven exhausted Indowy, to judge by their posture. Much as she would have liked to put a few more clicks between herself and the battle, she knew that pushing them any further would only lead to their collapse and death. Rest was essential, even in this marginal safety. Time to dig in.

A little looking and Nanuli located a sheltered depression between two boulders. A little work piling brush and she created a space in which they could huddle, protected from the cold mountain air. A tiny fire provided a little extra warmth, enough that they would be able to survive the night.

* * *

As soon as her charges were rested enough that they could safely, continue, Nanuli urged them on, although the sky was hardly more than touched by the first light of dawn. Before they left, she gave them each a thumb-sized chunk of nutrient paste from one of the emergency food tubes in the rucksack Mahmood had given her. It was one of two that didn't list any animal products among the ingredients, and she had no idea how long either would stretch when divided among eleven Indowy.

While rationing out their food, she worked at drawing them out, learning their names. Except they had none. For Indowy, or at least those of Clan Tk'shvi, a personal name was not a birthright but something

given to those who needed be marked out as individuals. Since having eleven hey-you's was unworkable, Nanuli named them all. The senior transfer-neuter, who was now technically clan chief, she gave the name Iosebi, while his two sub-chiefs became Yakov and Vasili. The other eight she gave various Georgian and Russian names.

They soon settled on a comfortable routine, with Nanuli in the middle so she could cover both ends of the column. The eight lower-ranking Indowy took turns leading the way, pushing through the brush and clearing the trail for the rest. They fit in pauses for rest or the replenishment of water and food as the need came.

Three days later, eleven Indowy abruptly became ten when Zviadi fell victim to a booby-trap. He was one of the three true males in the much-diminished clan, and had been taking his turn at the front when the ground erupted in front of him.

Nanuli squashed her instinct to rush to help him, and instead worked her way slowly, wary of further such surprises. The other Indowy murmured in their own language, their little bat faces wrinkled up in their expression of fear.

For Zviadi it was already too late, but two his fellows who'd been immediately behind him had received shrapnel injuries severe enough to need attention. Nanuli hesitated at opening the medkit. She had taken a human life, in violation of the physician's oath. Did she have any right to continue using her medical skills, now that she stood forsworn?

Arkady's choked-back whimpers decided her. He would die if she didn't get the bleeding stopped. Moving almost automatically, she stanchd the flow of greenish ichor, closed the wounds and sprayed them with quick-heal, that Galactic wonder that doubled as a bandage and a skin graft, self-adjusting to whatever species it was applied to.

Now that they were aware of the danger, the Indowy watched the trail carefully. Within half an hour the new point located a second booby-trap. Its slender trigger of nylon fishing line would be almost invisible to someone not looking for it, but the explosive device to which it was attached would have blasted the life out of whoever tripped it. Someone had to have set it recently, since wildlife hadn't triggered it, but it was far too complex to have been set by even the most capable of the salvagees. Which meant that the Posleen had not yet wiped out all human resistance in these mountains.

But to find these potential allies, they first had to get past this barrier. Nanuli was trying to decide how to safely detonate it when one of the Indowy walked up.

She threw up an arm to block his path. "No, I cannot permit you to throw away your life--"

Iosebi interceded. "We cannot allow you to needlessly risk your life when all our survival depends upon your skills, both medical and military." Although only the Indowy equivalent of a twenty-something, the clan chief was already gaining skill in command.

Nanuli's horror gave way to amazement as the Indowy nimbly disarmed the booby-trap. Incapable as they might be of setting any device to kill another living being, they certainly had no such disabilities in regards to removing them. In five minutes she was presented with a detonator and a lump of explosive, carefully separated so they could do no harm. She hesitated only a moment before tucking them away among her gear. One never knew when they might come in handy.

However, the elation of having gotten her charges safely past that hurdle did not last long. It was nearing

nightfall when the trail took them up to a cave entrance that had been partially blockaded with hasty brickwork.

The silence made Nanuli's skin prickle. There should be sentries, some sign of activity. Or were they watching her, deciding whether she was a friend to be welcomed or a burden, even one who would betray them?

She took a risk, laid the AK on the talus before her and raised her hands in the air. "I come as a friend." She shouted in both Russian and Georgian, not sure which language the defenders might know. Still no response. She called a greeting in Ossetian, hoping she had the pronunciation right and wasn't inadvertently insulting them. In growing desperation she called out, "Salaam!" which Mahmood had once told her was the Arabic word for peace.

An evening breeze blew at the door, or rather half a door that swung loose on its hinges. A night-bird, or perhaps a bat, flapped its way out.

Nanuli's throat tightened. They would find no hospitality here, for the Posleen had found it first. Still, the cave would shelter them for the night. She retrieved her weapon and led the Indowy inward.

The floor of the cave bore silent witness to the violence, and the mountain-folk's bravery. Yellow stains mingled with the brown ones on the stone, among the wreckage of human occupation. But with some searching she located a fair amount of salvageable material, mostly ammunition and tools, but also a few cans of food that had rolled into out-of-the-way spots when the Posleen cleaned out the larder. Dented as they might be, they were welcome supplies with the emergency rations rapidly dwindling in spite of efforts to eke them out by foraging what few wild roots and berries remained at so late a season.

Nanuli was despairing of how they could possibly pack all these things out when she heard a shrill cry from one of the Indowy. Fearing the worst, she hurried down to find them all busily suppressing delight.

In a side-cave, half-hidden under a detritus of branches from the mountain oaks, stood an old truck. Hope filling her, she scrambled to clear the vehicle of its overburden. The tires were low, but those could be aired back up, and the rest appeared intact.

Her hope melted as soon as she lifted the hood. Even in the fading light of evening, she could see that the truck had not been started in months, even years. Cobwebs covered the engine and a bird had built a nest in the air breather intake.

In frustration she slammed a fist into the sheet metal of the fender, swore in Georgian. The suddenness of her anger made the Indowy flinch back, but they didn't panic and flee as they might have only weeks earlier.

"Please, do not be angry." Iosebi pressed his hands together and made that little half-bow of "apologetic interruption." "We can repair it."

"This wreck?" Nanuli paused, smiled. "Of course, you are Indowy. But how will you do it when you lost all your tools and equipment?"

"You said that you had found tools within the main cave. We can learn to use them and improvise."

Nanuli had her doubts, but decided to give it a chance. Particularly now that she'd found a map in the main cave and re-oriented herself, she was having serious doubts about their ability to hike all the way to

Grozny. If the Indowy were as good as their word, getting that truck running would turn weeks of walking into a few days' drive.

In the meantime, there was nothing to do but settle in.

* * *

The nightmare was back in force again. She watched in helpless horror as the Posleen massacred Ataman Masuyev's caravan. One of them knocked the rifle from Beso's hand with one swipe of that leaf-shaped blade, then split him in two with a second.

Soselo bolted up the gravelly slope, only to get no more than a dozen steps before a second Posleen grabbed him. This one didn't even bother with a knife, just tore the boy's arm right out of its socket and shoved it into a toothy maw even as he struggled, blood pouring--

Nanuli awoke gasping for breath in a blanket soaked with her own sweat. As quickly as she sat upright, she was seized by nausea. She barely managed to get to the mouth of the cave before she hurled the contents of her stomach into the brush. She would have to get sick right now.

A quick press of hand to forehead detected no fever, but not all gastrointestinal upsets caused it. Time to make that GalTech medical sensor earn its keep.

She'd been expecting it to tell her that she'd picked up a mild bug, or perhaps that the can of chicken soup she'd eaten last night was spoiled. Certainly not that she was pregnant.

It was absurd. However well GalTech rejuve could restore her appearance to that of a teenager, it couldn't possibly restore a woman's fertility. Oogenesis in humans occurred entirely during fetal development. A baby girl was born with all the eggs she would ever have, and by the time she reached puberty, most of them had been reabsorbed by the body for reasons still unknown to human medical science. The remainder would be shed once a month throughout her reproductive life, until by menopause a woman's ovaries looked like shriveled potatoes from all the burnt-out egg follicles.

As a doctor Nanuli knew the facts, yet the readings before her were unequivocal. The GalTech medscanner had detected the characteristic hormonal changes of pregnancy in her blood. One way or another, her ovaries had been restored to function. How would her having been rejuved affect the fetus? From what she understood of the process, the nannites remained in her body after the initial treatment and maintained her body at its current youthful state.

So she was pregnant. Nanuli looked down at her abdomen, still flat at the moment, and imagined it swelling as it had with each of her two sons. Except this would not be Irakli's child. There was only one person who could be the father.

Perhaps it was poetic justice. She had taken Vladilen Ivanovich's life, and now she would give life to his child.

Or could she? Nanuli's throat tightened and she swallowed, hard. She had prior obligations: to the Indowy refugees, to the people at Grozny who had been promised her services as a physician. Did she have any right to carry through this pregnancy for some private atonement while other people were depending upon her?

On the other hand, did she have any right not to try, when the future of humanity as a species might well

depend on how quickly the enormous losses of the war could be replaced? She had the hips for childbirth -- both her sons had come out smoothly, without a hitch, although Dr. Merekhadze had been a bit amused to have her as patient rather than colleague.

She got no further time to dither, for at that moment Arkady walked in and bowed to her. "We have finished."

That was the roaring she could hear -- the truck engine, repaired at last after three days of steady work by all eleven of the Indowy. They had been as good as their word, even if they'd lost the first day just to learning to use the strange human tools.

Now there was nothing to do but load up their supplies and roll out. Only then did she realize how little she had prepared in the meantime, fully anticipating several more days. Half-filled sacks lay everywhere, a roll of nylon fishing line sliding from the mouth of one. Irritated, she stuffed it into a pocket of her jacket.

At least now that she had the help of the Indowy again, she could get things packed and in the truck quickly. Then it would just be a matter of finding their way to the Georgian Military Highway and avoiding Posleen patrols until they arrived in Grozny.

* * *

As it turned out, getting down wasn't that hard, since the Posleen had opened up the overgrown service road when they came up here, clearing out the booby-traps with their lives. Nanuli saw the broken and scavenger-picked remains of more than a few in the brush just beyond the cut path. A path just wide enough to let the God-Kings' ground-effect vehicles pass.

They quickly decided that Nanuli couldn't drive and defend them at the same time. However, Indowy were simply too short to drive a human vehicle. After a little discussion among themselves they worked out a system. One steered while another worked the pedals, and a third handled the gearshift. It made for a hair-raising ride, but Nanuli soon decided that it wasn't that much worse than Georgian roads before the war, when many drivers considered their cars a means for expressing their individuality and their contempt for bureaucratic foofaw.

The little band of refugees had brought the map with them, and as clan chief Iosebi took great pleasure in navigating, charting their progress along the narrow mountain roads that lead to the Georgian Military Highway and their goal. Since the rest of the Indowy took turns as lookouts, watching for any trouble, Nanuli had time to rest and think.

And she had plenty to think about. Everything looked different with a new life nestled within her. Even after her rejuvenation she'd still thought of herself as an old woman whose time was done, but now she had a stake in the future.

What kind of world would her child inherit? She watched the passing countryside, the slopes and peaks scarred by the weapons of Posleen and human alike. Even if humanity could drive the damned centaurs off their world, what would be left? Would there even be a Georgian nation left to rebuild? Many of the small nationalities of the northern Caucasus, those represented by only one or two villages, were already extinct, either wiped out by the Posleen or swamped by the refugees from southern Russia, from Rostov and Astrakhan and even Stalingrad. Might the Georgians end up not much better off, reduced to a handful who would have to choose between preserving their culture in impoverished enclaves or assimilating to the larger Russian culture in order to follow professions of wealth and prestige?

The hiss-crack of a Posleen weapon snapped her out of her reverie and to full alert. The truck skidded to a halt sideways of the road.

"Get out! Get out!" Nanuli threw open her door and jumped, AK already in hand.

The Indowy piled out just in time as another hypervelocity missile came hissing at them. This one didn't miss, but went straight through the front end of the truck. With a deafening thud the engine erupted in flames so hot that Nanuli could feel it through her camo jacket. Two of the Indowy weren't quite far enough away, and were engulfed by the flames, their little bodies turning to charcoal even as they ran. The rest of them dived into a snowbank, while Nanuli prayed that there was enough snow on the brush to keep it from bursting into flame and starting a forest fire that would kill the rest of them.

Relief was brushed aside by fury as it registered upon her conscious mind that this was no accident, but a Posleen attack. "You tried to kill my baby!" The words came out so harsh her throat hurt.

The Indowy huddled under cover as Nanuli fired at the three Posleen trotting down the narrow mountain road. The sheer brilliance and heat of the blazing truck must've made it impossible for them to focus on her as a distinct target, for their shots went wild while hers found their marks.

Then it was over. In the shaky comedown of the adrenaline crash, she realized three things. First, those Posleen were just scouts for a much larger unit, who had to be alerted by now. Second, there was no way in hell that she could fight off a whole platoon or company of Posleen, even if the Indowy could give her a miracle and convert the Posleen weapons. Third, they had just lost their transport and supplies, and there was no way they could run the rest of the way to Grozny with the Posleen on their tails. Ten clicks might as well be the distance to the moon.

Miserable, she looked through the trees at the slope below, at the yellow forms trotting along the road which would inevitably lead them up here. She had failed everybody -- the Indowy, the fighters of Forward Firebase Grozny, and most of all her unborn baby. She rested her elbows on her knees and set her chin in her cupped hands to cry.

Something pressed against her left breast, now tender with the hormonal changes of pregnancy. Puzzled, she pulled out a thick palm-sized disk -- the spool of nylon fishing line. She might have lost all the explosives, but there were other possibilities.

* * *

Half an hour later she was crouched in the brush, holding a hastily converted Posleen railgun while her trusty old AK lay at her side, ready in case the conversion didn't work quite as planned. She just hoped that the Indowy wouldn't be traumatized by seeing the result of the "harmless" little strands she'd persuaded them to string from tree to tree.

She counted the seconds as the Posleen came trotting down the road. At least a full platoon of them, and they were bunching up rather than trying to fan out into the brush. Better yet, their God-King was zipping right along at their rear, urging them to a gallop with nudges of his little saucer.

Now.

A quick squeeze of the modified trigger and the railgun spat steel needles which tore at the bark of the tree just down from the last of her little surprises. The Posleen reacted just as she had hoped with a burst of speed that threw them right into the nearly invisible lines of nylon monofilament. The slender lines might

slide off the bony armor, but eventually they would find a vulnerable joint and cut into flesh. Eventually they would break under the sheer press of bodies, but it slowed and confused them enough that she had time to lay a decent field of fire on them. And did that railgun ever do the job -- its rounds smashed right through the thickest carapace, unlike AK rounds that had to be aimed at particularly vulnerable parts, something she still wasn't overly skilled at doing.

But it was the God-King that took it worst. Panicking at seeing his normals falling victim to some unseen menace, he gunned his saucer for all it was worth. It proved his undoing, for he hit one of the last and highest lines fast enough that it sliced straight through his neck. The huge crocodilian head went flying, while the ground-effect saucer bounced along with the rest of the body.

Nanuli gritted her teeth, fully expecting it to smash into one of the trees and explode. Instead it just skidded to a stop along the shoulder of the road, not far from the burnt-out carcass of the truck. Only when she let out her breath did she realize she'd been holding it.

"Here's our ride." She heaved the beheaded Posleen corpse off and waved to the Indowy. "Let's get the controls cracked on this thing."

Iosebi looked it over, wrinkled his brow in thought. "It will require time."

Nanuli brought her field glasses to her eyes. "You've got about thirty minutes before the main body of the poska force gets up here. If we're not out of here by then, we are all dead meat."

It was a measure of just how much being survivors of two massacres and having worked for so long in close co-operation with a human had given courage to the Indowy that they did not panic at her words. Instead all of them set to work with the tools they had thankfully taken to wearing in pouches on their persons.

Within a matter of minutes they determined that there was too little room for them all to work together. While Iosebi and Vasili, being the oldest and most experienced of their number, assumed the task of cracking the controls on the ground-effect saucer, or *tenar*, as it was properly called, the rest set to salvaging what they could from the wreckage of the truck.

The minutes passed with agonizing slowness for Nanuli, who had nothing to do but alternate between cleaning her weapons and monitoring the progress of the main body of the Posleen force. If she hadn't kept her nails trimmed down to the quick, she would have set to biting them. Part of her longed for a cigarette, although her medical knowledge told her that smoking was not good for her unborn child, even with the rejuvenates swarming in her body to protect both of them.

And it grew steadily more obvious that they were not going to be done in time. Iosebi and Vasili almost had the *tenar* ready, but with their makeshift tools, the conversion was taking longer than it should have. Nanuli wanted to cry from sheer frustration.

Arkady walked up to her, two of the transfer-neuters beside him. "We will go down and make a diversion."

Nanuli knew how totally incapable of violence Indowy were, how completely unable to resist any attack. "But you'll be killed--"

"It is better that a few lay down their lives and the clan survive than all perish." Arkady's voice had a strength she'd never heard in an Indowy.

Before she could stop them, all three scrambled down the slope, cutting across the long switchback to the road where the Posleen were approaching. The tears Nanuli had to wipe from her eyes were no longer of frustration, but of pride and incipient grief. Perhaps Indowy couldn't fight, but they could learn how to die meaningfully, instead of as stampeding sheep fleeing their devourers.

She could barely make herself watch the Posleen ranks break in confusion, scatter into the brush on either side of the road in pursuit of three mad Indowy. She knew how it would have to end, and swore to see that those three gallant little aliens were remembered alongside the human heroes of the war, Mahmood Dudayev and all the other people who had given their lives in the faint hope of stemming the yellow tide and making Earth once again a human planet.

Vasili's cry of triumph was almost human, not exactly what one would expect of the usually demure Indowy. But there was no mistaking it, and Nanuli scrambled back to join the five surviving aliens in piling onto the tenar.

There were only moments for Iosebi and Vasili to instruct her in the operation of the tenar and its pintle-mounted plasma cannon. The first Posleen were already coming around the bend. Nanuli hit the dual triggers for the plasma cannon almost by instinct, fired a gout of eye-searing whiteness down the road at the enemy. Their first ranks simply *vanished*.

No time for awe. She spun the tenar around on its axis and pointed it down the road, toward the ruins of Grozny and the firebase that was supposed to be waiting for her. At least she was beyond the last of the lines they'd strung, so she didn't need to worry about being hoist by her own petard. If any of them remained to surprise this bunch of poski, that was just icing on the cake.

It took her a few tries to get the tenar to go where she wanted to, and she didn't dare run it in a straight line, not with the rest of the Posleen still after her. Whenever the hiss-cracks of their weapons got too close, she'd spin the tenar around and give them another taste of their own medicine.

And then she burst out of the scrub forest and into the ruins that had once been the capital of the Chechen Autonomous Republic. The firebase was supposed to be in a cave on the mountains to the south, right over there--

Coming under AK fire was such a shock that her brain "missed a step" before she could really register it. Instantly she realized what it must look like, coming in on a Posleen God-King's vehicle/badge of rank, with five little Indowy bunched up behind her.

She waved her arm over her head, opening her hand to show her five fingers. Moments later she heard shouts of "check fire" coming from all over the slope ahead of her. Followed by orders to give her covering fire as the Posleen burst forth from the forest and spread out, guns firing.

The battle was pitched and to the point. The fighters of Grozny threw everything they had at the enemy, including fire from more than a few captured pieces of their own. Once Nanuli got the tenar safely under the cover of their fire, she turned it around once more and laid down the fire until the plasma cannon threatened to overheat. Although she had no way to know how long she could keep going before the tenar "ran out of gas," this was no time to hold back. As soon as the plasma cannon was cool enough to operate, she set to it again.

The Posleen fell in waves under their fire. It had been at least a company of them that had been marching along the road that entered Grozny from the north, perhaps more since Posleen military structure was

shaky at best. Such warm work could not last for long, and even with the benefits of terrain and strategy, the humans could not win without taking losses of their own. Which meant that she would have her duties waiting.

She was greeted by a pleasant young Ossete who introduced himself as Suslan. When she introduced herself, his eyes went wide.

"Nanuli Tamarashvili? But we were told that you are... that you were an old woman, a grandmother."

"I was." Nanuli's mouth twitched into a wry expression. "I had some *adventures* on the way up here."

With a little encouragement Nanuli told of the ambush of Ataman Masuyev's caravan, the flight to Vladilen Ivanovich's secret base and her time with him. When she got to the Posleen attack and Vladilen Ivanovich killing Mahmood, her throat tightened and she had to force the words out. "Then I killed Vladilen Ivanovich. Do I have any right to do medical work when I have broken the physician's oath and taken a life?"

"Are you sure he's dead?"

"I shot him in the chest. I didn't go back to check for a pulse, but he still would've had to escape the explosion. In any case, the oath commands, 'do no harm,' and to that I stand forsworn."

Suslan shrugged. "Let's leave that for after the war, when there's time to convene a board of Inquiry. In the meantime, we need someone to treat our wounded, beyond first aid. We thought you were lost along with Ataman Masuyev's caravan, with the grain shipment." Hunger was plain in his face, in his words.

Nanuli nodded in sympathy. "We couldn't save the grain shipment, but I've brought something better." She gestured for the five surviving Indowy to come forth. "Indowy technicians, with experience in hydroponics and waste recycling. If you have any seeds, any suitable vessels, your days of hunger are over."

It took a moment for the significance of her words to sink through, but when it did, there were cheers throughout the cavern.

<http://leighkimmel.freesevers.com>

Catharsis

Richard Waechter-Williamson

Richard is another Barfly, a posting member of Baen's Bar, who currently resides in England.

"The piece of shit couldn't hang." The Lieutenant Colonel looked around the table, sweeping across the members of the Board of Inquiry. It was clear from his expression that he was expecting support in his disdain of the Second Lieutenant over whom the board had been convened. The lieutenant in question had not completed the "Twelve Day War", the field exercise/final exam for the Armor Officer Basic Course, and his final disposition was now in question. If the battalion commander had his way however,

which seemed likely, that disposition was not, itself, in question.

The options available to the board were to allow the officer to redo the field exercise with a different AOBC course, or not, and if not to require that the officer in question resign his commission. The third option, to rescind the commission outright, was to the majority of the board not available.

Unfortunately, the majority in this case was the majority of one.

The single window in the room looked out onto a snow-covered quad outside the training unit headquarters' building on Fort Knox, Kentucky. A brisk, late-February wind blew across the clear blue skies, keeping the temperature outside down, well below the freezing point, where it had been sitting for the better part of the previous eight weeks. Beneath the window, a single 1940's era radiator tried its best to keep the physical temperature inside the room above freezing, but could do nothing against the psychic chill generated by the board president's attitude.

The two junior members present, CPT Grundvig and 2LT Mathsden, made as if to say something in response to their commander's comment, but then stopped as their own sense of self-preservation kicked in. The two things to remember about LTC Feckette were first, he could prattle on for days about his belief in God, and second, the fact that he was a self-described God-fearing Christian Believer wouldn't stand in the way of his dicking anybody over if it progressed his own career, could be done with a reasonable chance of avoiding official recrimination, or frankly, just for the hell of it. The current board of inquiry had him in his element, and the other members of the board could tell that This Was Not the Time.

CPT Grundvig had spent four months working with 2LT Paulson and the rest of AOBC-91-10, and the test scores showed that the absent lieutenant was by far *not* the weakest mentally or physically in the course, regardless of what the battalion commander might say. The written tests had been a breeze for the ex-enlisted, ROTC officer, the practical *tests* a bit less so, but once you got the man into the simulators he was on the bounce. One of his instructors had remarked after one such event, "Man. I'm glad that LT is on our side. Otherwise, like, I'd have to kill him!".

Lieutenant Mathsden, who wasn't actually on the board but represented the absent Lieutenant Paulson, initially froze at the battalion commander's statement. As the LTC looked back down at his notes, CPT Grundvig turned slightly and caught the eye of the Second Lieutenant. The two very carefully looked at each other out of the corner of their eyes. A mental shrug was conveyed from the captain to the lieutenant, and the lieutenant's hand, flat on the table, relaxed.

The other captain on the board, CPT Gott, was looking at another piece of paper from the packet that had been prepared, regarding the acts, actions, coursework and service record of the lieutenant. "Sir, did you see this? It's the class Order of Merit list." CPT Gott was from another battalion, and as such was pretty much safe from the board president's extracurricular activities.

"What about it?" asked the LTC, clearly not interested, already writing up the board's final recommendation for the disposition of the failed student, not bothering to have asked *a priori* for said recommendation.

The captain frowned at the colonel's attitude as he looked back down to verify that he held what he needed. The paper in question was the rankings of the students from the course, based on test scores, evaluations and ratings from instructors, commanders and peers. Gott looked up at CPT Grundvig. "Are these the final rankings?"

"I believe so ... " Grundvig brought up the paper from his own packet and looked at the date. "Yes, yes it is," he said, before re-filing it into the packet before him. The residual frustration at the colonel's attitude kept him from saying more.

"Thanks, Red." Gott turned back to the colonel. "Sir, Paulson was ranked as lowest but five in the class of 125."

"Your point, Captain Gott?" the colonel asked, still not bothering to look up.

CPT Gott gamely continued, trying to break through the battalion commander's air of indifference. "Sir, two students were failed by the evaluators after the TDW. Those two are ranked 124 and 125. Two other students were *passed* by their evaluators, but still are ranked below Paulson who'd only a DNC. How can that be?" It was clear what CPT Gott saw, that had Paulson completed the course, he probably would have placed in the top percentile of the Order of Merit List, placing him as one of the top two or three students on the course.

"Who the fuck cares, Gott? The 'artsy' lieutenant couldn't put up with a little weather. They should have failed his ass outright, not given him the 'did not complete'." The colonel's voice dripped scorn. "This man's Army will be happy to be quit of the little fuck." The colonel dismissed the captain's question with a flick of his head, and looked around the table again. "Anything else? Good. We yank his commission. The piece of shit second lieutenant, for however so much longer, is obviously not Army Officer material. Comments?"

The other board members looked around the table, but nobody bothered to speak up.

* * *

Six months and several AOBC cycles later, and beer bottles clinked and music played low as a group of soldiers toasted yet another one. In one corner of the room stood a much smaller group, congratulating Captain (Promotable) Grundvig on his new orders, assigning him to a line battalion in the 8th Infantry, while at the same time commiserating with him that it was an Infantry division and not an Armor one that he had to report to.

This had been going on for some time when another soldier wandered up. The group of officers nodded in greeting as the newcomer verified that he knew everyone standing there. "Gentleman," First Sergeant Timpton said, greeting the group of officers, before turning to the outgoing captain. He nodded a greeting to the man personally, and then, without preamble, said "So, what really happened, Sir?" The first sergeant did not supply any context to the question, however it was obvious that the captain would understand it anyway.

Captain Grundvig didn't say anything for the first couple of moments, as he looked the first sergeant over. Finally, he nodded, saying "You remember he was medevac'd from the TDW?"

"Yeah, I had to fill out the paperwork on that, so even after the whole thing was suppressed I still knew about at least part of it. He was in the gunner's seat when the M1's driver fell asleep and dropped the vehicle into a tank ditch at speed. Paulson took a nasty knock against the gun-sights and was a bit hazy for awhile, then passed out. He was still hazy when he came to. Plus other classic symptoms of a complex concussion, which is why they dusted him off."

Grundvig nodded. "That's right. Then the doctor in the emergency room returned him to duty, and sent him back out to the field."

There was a pause. "So what am I missing?" asked the first sergeant, but before the captain could answer, the way that the captain had said it gave him the necessary clue. Timpston blinked. "What? Immediately? Just like that?"

"Yep. The doctor, a civilian contractor, x-rayed his neck to make sure it wasn't broken, then shipped him back out to the woods. He said that there was no visible external bruising, so he assumed Paulson was making it up."

The first sergeant frowned. "Bullshit. Gun-sights are mostly padding, and I assume he was wearing his CVC helmet. It isn't outside the realms of possibility that there would be no bruising if the CVC took the impact. Happens to football players all the time." Timpston's expression darkened. "And *then* they pull him off the course and send him home?"

The captain shrugged off the non-com's question. "After about 24 hours, after Lieutenant Paulson had had a chance to think about it, he walked over to the chief evaluator and *pulled himself* off the course. He said afterwards that if the Army couldn't guarantee someone reasonable medical care in a time of peace, how could he assume that he'd get it during a time of war?"

After a lengthy pause while everyone tasted their beers to make sure they were still cold, the first sergeant said, finally, "and so they showed him the gate."

The captain nodded. "And so, as you say, they showed him the gate."

"If that's the whole story, Sir, that's fucked."

The captain shrugged again. "Maybe so. I doubt that was all of it, but the only one who knows for sure is Lieutenant Paulson."

"*Mister*Paulson," said one of the other officers, one who obviously knew the much of the story.

CPT Grundvig took the correction in good grace. And he grinned. By way of response, he asked "You want to hear something funny?" This was greeted by cocked heads and inquisitive looks, so the captain said, "We get all the paperwork together to yank his commission, and we send it away to the personnel department at Fort Ben in Indiana. The colonel thinks he's done his duty to the Army and his command, and life goes on. Then about a month ago, we get the packet back, saying that Paulson isn't a Two, he's a One LT. He'd actually been promoted to First Lieutenant several months *before* the course even started because of time-in-grade."

This caused some confusion in the group, as they tried to figure out how that could have happened.

The captain nodded, then continued. "Because he was an echo, he--"

"An echo?" interrupted one of the blackbird lieutenants in the group. The blackbirds had completed the AOBC course, but were still assigned to the training unit while awaiting their first duty stations.

Grundvig looked calmly at the lieutenant for a moment, until the light bulb burst.

"Sorry for interrupting, Sir," said the embarrassed lieutenant.

Grundvig nodded. "An 'echo' is an officer who's a pay grade of 01e, 02e or 03e, and that means the

officer spent at least four years enlisted. Paulson had made Sergeant before leaving to go to college." The captain paused until the lieutenant nodded his understanding. "So, as ex-enlisted, he only needed to take the two year ROTC course and then received his commission, then had to finish his degree, which took another two-and-a-half years. He couldn't get a slot on the course for another nine months, putting him over the three year time in grade requirement. No one bothered to tell him that he'd been promoted, and when he asked about it, was told that the regs would not let him be promoted until after he'd completed an OBC, so no one bothered checking."

"I know about that reg," said one of the other company commanders. "So why was he promoted before the course, then?"

"It's a new regulation. He'd been promoted before that rule came into effect."

"Oh."

"And so we have to redo the entire packet. Which means tracking down everyone who had to sign off on it, including Lieutenant Paulson."

"And that's funny?"

Grundvig laughed. "Oh yeah. We're still trying to track him down. His family says he's traveling across Europe with his girlfriend, and they'd leave a message for him at a couple of postal drops they're using, and would let him know should he call. Better: Lieutenant Colonel Feckette is about to get dinged on his OER by Colonel Ramsey, 'cause the fact that Paulson was a first lieutenant and not a second should have been noted by his command even before the course started. And best: when we finally find the peckerhead, he's going to get a paycheck covering the earnings difference between what an O1-echo and an O2-echo would have made during the course."

The officers in the group laughed dutifully, while the first sergeant nodded. "Thank you, Sir. One other question, Sir, but I will understand if you choose not to answer it."

The captain regarded the NCO for a moment, then nodded.

"What was Feckette's beef with Paulson, in the first place?"

Grundvig nodded. "Thought you'd spot that, Top. Paulson's degree is a BA, not a BS." At the first sergeant's look of incomprehension, the captain continued, saying "His degree is in French, and not something 'real' like engineering or math."

The NCO shook his head and started to speak, then stopped. Finally, he shrugged. "'Stranger Things' ... Fuckit always did strike me as missing something in the brains department. Fucking managers."

There was a non-verbal gasp from the rest of the group; hearing something disrespectful about the standing battalion commander was not expected. The senior NCO ignored them.

Captain Grundvig looked the first sergeant over. Finally, after the first sergeant failed to apologize for the implied rebuke, the captain said "You seem displeased, Top." The use of the nickname, reserved for company first sergeants, and only as a sign of respect, indicated that the captain might actually agree with the NCOs assessment of the situation.

1st SG Timplon shrugged at the implied question. "Yes, Sir. And also 'No, Sir'. He wouldn't talk to me

after he came back in from the TDW, and before he left the base to fly home, and that's what bothers me. And still bothers me, too."

Grundvig frowned. "Why was it important that Paulson talk to you, Top? And what makes you think he would want to, in any case?"

Timpton nodded at the question. "Silver Lions, Sir." The first sergeant came to attention, said "Thank you for the background info, enjoy the party. Good luck in the 8th." With that, he nodded again to the captain, turned and stepped off in a crisp, concise military manner.

The captain blinked at the first sergeant's back, wondering if it was worthwhile to call the man back. Before he did, however, he realized that the first sergeant hadn't actually ignored the question. The answer, cryptic as it was, was apparently all he would get. With a frown and a slight nod, the captain tried to integrate what he knew about the first sergeant, and what the first sergeant had said. The other officers looked around at each other, as the captain finally nodded again, this time noticeably, shrugged and turned his back on First Sergeant Timpton. The answer would come, or it wouldn't. Captain Grundvig was not about to lose any sleep over it.

* * *

In theory, the man under the desk was trying to track down, test, find, diagnose and either repair or replace a damaged ethernet cable. In reality, he was using the majority of the time to look up his wife's skirt. "I see the problem," he said, carefully, loud enough to be heard by his wife. "The elastic on your cat wrappers is worn thin. When's the last time you changed them?" Because the rest of the ladies in the room were all local nationals, whose first language was not English, the probability that they would understand the comment was remote.

Of course, that probability also stood for his wife, whose first language was *English* English, and who would *always* be, by her own preference, a bit hazy on American idiom.

"Sorry?" she asked in return, bending over to look under the desk. From where she was sitting, she could see that her husband was not visible to anyone else in the room. He held a sign that read "I can see your panties." As she started to blush, he flipped it over and on the other side it said, "Wanna boink?" Before she could say anything, however, the phone on the desk above her head rang, and she disappeared quickly upwards. The man on the floor taped the flash card to the underside of the desk and resumed looking for the broken cat-5 cable.

"Political Section, Caithness Weaver speaking ... Oh, hi Carol ... My home number? Sure, I could do that, or, I could just hand him the phone 'cause he's currently hiding under my desk and making rude suggestions ... Sure, half a mo'" Kay stuck her head back under the desk. "Oi, Gov. It's for you. It's Carol."

A hand came up from under the desk and made grasping motions. "Carol from the international school, or Carol from the US Embassy?"

"Embassy," came the reply as Kay whacked the palm with the receiver.

"Ouch. And I'm not old. I'm not even, what, 37? That's not old!" The receiver disappeared under the desk, and without breaking stride the conversation changed to "Hi Carol, what's up? Yeah, sure, I'll hold." There was a pause, and then "Hello? Tom Weaver speaking."

There was a lengthy pause, interrupted only by the tall, lanky man crawling out from under the desk. He stood up and leaned against his wife's desk, and ran his free hand through his grey streaked, half-inch long hair, then carefully adjusted the pepperbox hideaway so its holster stopped pinching. Crawling around on the floor had caused it to move out of its normal position. Tom had lived in any number of interesting places over the past decade. He always carried a backup, in case the third world locals got restless or attempted a return to socialism through clumsy attempts at sharing the wealth.

There was a voiced question from the receiver, to which Tom replied "Yeah, that's me. I took my wife's name when we married." There was another lengthy pause, and the man's voice had lost some of its habitual humor when next he spoke. "Yeah, that sounds like it could be me. Do you have an SSN, last four are 3-8-2-6 ... Yep. Ok, that's me all right."

Tom's gaze went to a 'thousand-mile-stare', and he began biting his lower lip, not seeing or just plain ignoring his wife's quizzical look. "Right now? I'm doing some IT work at the Delegation ... um, the European Commission ... Sure. I'll let the doorman know you're coming ... Sure, until then, then. Good bye." Tom looked at his wife, and then handed her the phone. "That was the embassy."

While that was obvious, Kay realized that something was up so didn't point out the stupidity of what he had just said. "And ... ?" she prompted, putting her hand on his arm.

"Somebody from the military liaison detachment is on his way over. Said something about having received a telegram from Indiana for Tomas Paulson, and they tracked me down through State Department records. All those times that I'd registered with the embassy whenever the commission shuffled us off to another third world country."

"Who do you know in Indiana? And why the *military* liaison?"

"It's from the US Army personnel department, Fort Benjamin Harrison."

"The *Army* ? Why for you? I mean, it's been almost ten years now."

Tom grinned wryly, the initial effects of the phone conversation beginning to wear off. "Well, if I'd stayed in, I'd have, what, over nineteen years service and be looking at retirement, so I'm not that old." Tom then shook his head like a horse trying to get rid of a fly. "Nah, no idea."

Kay looked up at the ceiling, thinking back. "You know," she said, finally, "you never did receive a copy of the final disposition of your status. For all we know, y'are still in. Maybe you *are* being retired. Think they'll send you a check?"

Tom snorted. "Don't even joke about that."

The ghost of a haunted look, however, couldn't be hidden from his wife. Because she knew it would be there and was watching for it. Tom pushed himself away from the desk, looking away from the woman he'd married eight years previously. "Gotta go warn Igor--".

"What hump" interjected Kay.

"--yes haha. What hump," Tom finished, rolling his eyes for effect. Over his shoulder he said "Hell, maybe this telegram *is* the final disposition that we've been ignoring for the past decade. Maybe they are just writing to say that they finally got my DD form 214 unscrewed."

Kay snorted, and to her husband's back said "After nine years? Now why would that not surprise me?"

Tom stopped as he passed through the doorway, turned and leaned briefly against the door frame. "Because you work for a governmental organization, and you have a firm, grounded knowledge of what 'bureaucrazy' means?"

There was a short pause, and then the pair said "Nah!" simultaneously.

* * *

Tom looked up from the telegram, trying to figure out what his reaction was supposed to be. It was hard. Nine years ago, he had stepped out of the world that had been his since his eighteenth birthday, at the low point of what had started out to be a decent career. He'd started out as an enlisted armor crewman, serving in M60A3 tanks at Ft. Stewart, Georgia with the 24th Infantry Division (Mechanized), then later with the 8th ID(M) in Germany, achieving the rank of Sergeant. From there, he'd moved on to University and received a commission, again in branch Armor, spending the three years between the date of commission and heading off to AOBC working in the reserves with the 91st Division (Training) in California as a Company Executive Officer. His degree wasn't in his first choice, Math, it was in French because he was running out of money and he finished the requirements for French before finishing the Math. The Army itself didn't care, they just wanted to see a degree. That wasn't true for everyone *in* the Army, but hey, dice fall where they may.

Then came AOBC, the accident, and the Board of Inquiry.

And now, nine years later, this. He looked down at the paper again, his brain floating precariously free, as if the head space and timing settings were loose.

* * *

Dear Sir:

Pursuant to Presidential Directive 19-00, you are ordered to report to RAMSTEIN AIR FORCE BASE, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY, no later than 2400 HOURS, 20 NOVEMBER, 2001, for transport to FORT KNOX, KY ARMY BASE, for further duty with the armed forces of the United States of America. Failure to report will be prosecuted under Section 15 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice: Failure to report for hazardous duty. All requests for waivers on the basis of age, civilian position, health or compassion shall be considered after reporting. Public transportation may be compensated using the attached vouchers. These are good for air travel using United States flagged carriers, MAC or CRAF aircraft, as well as train, bus or taxi when within the United States or certain other national jurisdictions, but may not be used to reimburse travel by personal vehicle. In the event that the vouchers are not accepted, reasonable travel costs will be reimbursed directly.

DO NOT BRING: personally operated vehicles, personal weapons, radios with attached speakers, large musical instruments or ANY communication devices to include cellular phones or pagers.

Do bring: 2 (Two) week's civilian clothing, uniforms, toiletry items, small entertainment devices, radios or music players with headphones, small musical instruments and/or reading material.

Tom looked at the return address again. There had to be some sort of mistake.

* * *

"There must be some sort of mistake!" Kay couldn't believe it, staring down at the telegram in her hand. "Why the hell would they call you up? They can't-- they pulled your commission, right?" The concept itself was so far outside the realms of reality, even when dealing with a government bureaucracy, it beggared belief. "It's been nine bloody years! What did the military guy from the embassy say?" She waved the telegram around as if swatting flies.

"He said I wasn't the only one. There appears to be three of us in country. He's going to book us a flight back to Frankfurt together, as soon as the other two make it in. They're apparently working as civilian contractors with the NATO Military Integration Liaison Teams out in Lviv--"

"I don't care where the others are working! This is bullshit!"

Tom looked at his wife for a moment, knowing what was coming. "C'mon Hon. What's the worst thing that could happen? I mean, I didn't break any laws, so they aren't going to throw me into jail. Maybe this is just some sort of training exercise, and I'm still in their computers someplace as a very inactive reservist. Stranger things have happened." He started talking faster, because he could see the warning signs of a really major wobbly coming on. "So I get a flight out to Knox and back. Whippy skip. Maybe a week, ten days at the most."

"And what do I do with Allison and Edward in the meantime?"

"We can call Vita and see if she can drop them off at school, and pick them up again. I don't see that as the major problem, Hon. Nope. The major problem will be getting this dog-and-pony show over as quickly as possible. I'm scared it'll be a classic case of hurry-up-and-wait." Tom had found over the past decade that faking an overreaction had the effect of disarming his wife's own overreaction. It was a trick that would come in handy over the next several days.

"Have you ever heard of anyone doing this before?" It was obvious that Kay still wasn't happy about it, but at least she hadn't stopped thinking yet.

"No. And *that* tells me that everyone from the gate guards at Ramstein all the way to the MEPS station at Knox, and back, will be staffed by povlabis."

"MEPS? Povlabis? What is that, Ukrainian?"

Tom grinned slightly, as if he had put one over on her. "Nah. MEPS is 'Military Entrance Processing Station'. And the other, I just made it up. Persons Of Very Little Ability, Brains and Initiative."

"Piker." She looked around their flat, and out the window at the early season snow falling onto the street, momentarily covering the Podol district, turning it temporarily into a fluffy, white paradise for the district's children, their own included. All too soon, it would become a muddy, waterlogged mess, but at least the kids would be able to play in it some, before the real winter set in and the river froze over entirely. Finally, she sighed. "Ok, what *is* the worst thing that could happen?"

"Now your talkin'. Let's see." Tom looked up at the ceiling, unconsciously mimicking his wife's own habit. "If there were going to be a really big war, we'd know about it, right?" Tom looked around, thinking, trying to remember everything he'd forgotten about the military structure of the reserves. "Ok. If they had to call up the reserves, they'd start with the active reservists and national guardsmen. Step two

would be to call up all the recently discharged who were still in the inactive ready reserve and stick them back onto active duty, or use them to round out the open slots in the reserve units. They'd also activate the reserve training divisions like the 91st out in California, or reconstitute it if it's been mothballed in the interim, if there was a probability that a lot more bodies would be needed."

"Stop saying 'bodies.' You're making me nervous."

"Nyis, dear. Ok, so we've nationalized the reserves. We've activated the training divisions and kicked the 'selective service' over into 'draft' mode. It'll be six to nine months before those come together, meaning a year or more before the first training cycles, using the reserve training divisions, are finished. You'll still get the recruits from the active component, but that won't be very many. From there, the recruits go to their advanced training courses. Result: Up to two years before a real sizeable mass of privates come online."

Tom looked around again, thoughts trying to catch up with his voice. "In the meantime, where needed, they'd activate the remainder of the inactive ready reserve, those that had been out more than two years, but less than eight years since they enlisted, say. After that, who's left? Everyone else on the inactive lists, the recent retirees that they could coerce back into uniform, the borderline medically disqualified and way down at the end, me. I'm so far down the list that they'd have to be expecting to lose World War III before the computers would spit *my* name out." Tom walked over to the window, opened it, and stuck his head outside into the snow, peering through the sycamore trees that bracketed the bottom of the Andreivskii Spust. After a moment, he pulled it back in, turned, and said "And I don't see any WW III outside the building, do you?"

"And the aliens?"

Tom blinked. He hadn't thought about that. Once the initial hooraw had blown over, everyone had gone back to their lives, secure in the knowledge that the world's armed forces were up to the task of protecting the planet from any 'alien invasion'. Then he shrugged, stoically. The ghosts were back, momentarily, but he shrugged them off. He had had a lot of practice at doing so. Finally, he sighed. "Dunno. Frankly, how bad can *that* be? But I gave up the commission. Why would they want me?"

* * *

"What was that, Geezer?"

"Sorry?" Tom looked up from where he was writing into a little notebook. He was trying to remember everything he could about military customs and courtesies; he could have asked the guys he was traveling with, but they had already started making fun of his age. The whippersnappers.

"You just mumbled something. Sounded like you sighed, then said 'In transit *mumble* *mumble*.'" The second corner of the traveling triangle was a big bulky type who had announced his name as 'Terrance K. Schank'. That was how he talked, as if you were hearing it over a public address system. Tom expected every sentence the man boomed to be followed by a burst of static and "using a white courtesy telephone, please".

"Ah, oh. Um, 'In transit, gloria mundi'. The original is 'sic transit gloria mundi' and is Latin for "And so passes the glory of the world". However I just wrote 'In transit', which would mean 'Experiencing the death of the glory of the world', but in reality the 'in transit' bit was English and not Latin. Thus, 'In transit, the glory of the world." You know, all the world's a stage, sort of thing. Sitting here, watching the tireless ebb and flow of random effing humanity, as we hurry up and effing wait for the next effing piece of our

little effing odyssey to drop into effing place, pick us up, and shuttle us off on our own effing merry little way."

There was a short pause while the two former NCOs digested this.

"Geezer?" This came from the last corner of the small group, an average sized joe of no significant distinguishing characteristics. The Sergeant First Class had a low, pleasant speaking voice, normal body structure to go with his average height. He had hazel eyes, mud colored hair and could have passed for any normal class of traveler, from any number of Western or even Eastern European countries. His parents, to make up for being so average, and having passed on their lack of distinctiveness to their only son, had apparently named him Zedulon Yanik Xavier Wesley Vance Unger-Thomas. He said that they could call him Stuart, but to make things easier, he would just answer to Zed.

As humor went, Tom thought, it was a pretty feeble attempt. The man's repeated attempts to talk about which part of the family the various names came from were, however, politely ignored. It was however quite annoying that Master Sergeant Schank kept calling him Rhett.

"Yeah?" asked Tom, looking up from his notepad.

"Your mind is just too far out there, dude. They do say that senility is a sign of advanced old age, you know."

Tom snorted. "I'm only thirty-seven, thanks."

Zed (or Stuart, or Rhett) gasped, while Terry said, awed, "Gosh! That's ancient"

Then Zed nodded. "Ahah! I know what it is. You were an officer, weren't you?"

Tom froze, then unfroze, and shook his head in an affirmative. "For a while, yeah."

The two NCOs looked at each other, then nodded solemnly. "That'd be it, yep," said Zed.

"Such deep thinking, such deep thoughts," intoned Terry. "I almost want to spring to attention and salute."

"You'd disturb the locals," said Tom, jerking a chin at the Ukrainian Army privates patrolling through the airport with their Kalashnikovs strung across their backs.

Zed thought about this for a moment, then an elfin grin appeared momentarily across his face. Catching the grin, and its unspoken meaning, Terry sprang to attention just as Zed did. They both snapped off text book, parade ground salutes, in unison, and in *perfect, flawless Ukrainian* said "Yes, our captain!"

Tom looked at the two, frowning to keep from breaking out into laughter. "Sit down, you fools," he replied, also in Ukrainian. He at least knew that much of the language.

At Tom's response, the two NCOs broke into soundless laughter and sat back down to watch as around the room, all of the patrolling privates turned and began patrolling elsewhere. Specifically, anywhere but close to the three plainly dressed men[, all three of whom exuded an air of competence and command.][ed cmt: Do I want that bit? or is that overdoing it?]

* * *

The glass hit the cheap-linoleum covered concrete floor, shattering into several hundred pieces. Kay would have screamed at it, had indeed screamed at equally inconsequential things over the past forty-eight hours, but she was finally beginning to maintain calm in the face of her two children, who stood, frozen, expecting another outburst. Even Edward, the younger of the two, had noticed the intermittent explosions were happening more often over the two days since Papa had left for the airport.

One or the other of their parents were often gone for days at a time, away on business, and to the children, it was just the normal state of affairs. The parent who stayed at home during these instances normally just dealt with it. They went to their job, came home at night, the local au-pair had been with them long enough to know what her job was when this was the case.

That their Mama was reacting poorly to the absence of Papa was something the children found new and unexpected. And generally, "new" and "unexpected" were not descriptions that went well around Mama. If the children had been old enough, they might have described it as a negative feedback loop of her own devising. It was necessary for them to, as Papa called it, 'walk on eggshells', and so they did what they could to not cause trouble, or worse, more explosions.

Kay, on the other hand, *was* trying to cope as best she could with the absence of her husband, and doing her utmost to not take out her frustrations on the kids. Thus, the explosions directed at inanimate objects. With a bitter sigh at the frustrations that tormented her, she reached around the corner of the fridge and found the broom without looking. "Stay on the chairs, kids. Let me get the glass up, first."

Allison said, "Can I help, Mum?"

"Not yet, dear. Once I get it into a pile you can hold the dustpan."

"Can I hold the dustpan, too?" asked Edward, hoping to help.

"Well, I suppose you could both hold it? But let me get the glass off most of the floor first, so you don't have to step in it."

There followed much verbal horseplay as Kay kept the two children occupied with eating their lunches, making jokes about their ('American') manners and ('Murican) accents, and asking what they had learned in school the previous week.

Eventually, they got the glass cleaned up and the floor swept, hoovered and mopped. As the cleanup operation continued, Kay said less and less, and by the end of the job, the tears had returned.

Edward, always the more observant of the two children walked up and hugged his Mama's leg spontaneously in sympathy. Seeing this, Allison took advantage of Kay's free leg, and when the adult bent over and grabbed the two in a bear hug, the sobs once again broke loose, wracking her body as she tried to ignore the lonely future that she could see, stretching out before her.

* * *

The gymnasium was full of tables, the tables were full of computers. Behind the computers, there were chairs, and they were full of civilian clerk typists ruffling through stacks of paper. Above each desk was a placard, happily proclaiming that the desk beneath was for this group of ranks, and that group of SSNs-Ending-In and a single digit. The room had started out full, but that was six hours ago, and it was starting to look like he would have to stop stalling. He'd been able to wander back and forth between

various points of the room, here gathering up a cup of coffee (cream, two sugars), or there a packet of crackers (soup, two each), while the mass of humanity (reservists, recalled) separated themselves from the feckless mass and joined the line that they clearly belonged in.

As each person reached a desk, there'd be a flurry of scrambling through boxes of personnel files, until the correct one was found, pulled out, verified and then handed to the person in question. They would then be sent through one of the several doors leading out of the gym, and according to his observation, that was the only way out of the room. His attempts to exit had been politely refused by the Military Policemen standing at the door, nominally there to check IDs against movement orders, but obviously also to prevent people from leaving once they had arrived and signed in.

In one corner of the gym, there was a single desk with a placard proclaiming that the MP sitting below was the source of any help that the returning reservists might require. Apparently, the help that the MP Specialist 4 was equipped to give, however, was minimal. Apparently, it consisted of asking what rank someone had when they mustered out, and then asking what the final digit was in their Social Security Number. Tom knew he would be presenting a problem that the MP would no doubt be hard pressed to answer, given that he himself would be hard pressed to answer it.

Each time it looked like the crowds were thin enough that someone might start taking notice of him, forcing him to run the gauntlet and annoy the MP, another bus load of reservists, fresh from the Louisville Airport, would arrive and restock the tank. But the last bus had been over forty-five minutes ago, and it didn't look like there would be much more. And he had to use a latrine, badly. All that coffee. Tom sighed, braced to attention, and marched resolutely over to the MP.

Said worthy glanced up from the FM he was busily memorizing. "Can I help you ... Sir?"

Possibly, Specialist ... Mott, possibly. There is some difficulty as to which line I'm supposed to be in.

"Easy enough." A hint of resignation creased the MP's face, but he gamely pursued the requirements of his post. "What's your rank?"

"Well," Tom shrugged, "that's the problem. I don't think I have one."

"Not a problem. You're not IRR, then?"

"Nope, at least I don't *think* the inactive ready reserve database includes me."

The MP looked the suppliant over, noting his age by the graying of his hair, and the lines on this face. "In that case, what rank did you hold when you last served, reserves or active?"

"Um. That'd be first lieutenant. But--"

Now appraised of the man's previous rank, the MP was all business. "There you go, Sir. In this case you will be in one of the Company Grade Officer lines. All the returning soldiers are taking their previous ranks. I'm sure that the Army will decide if you should be promoted past that once you've had a chance to settle in. So for now, you are certainly still an LT. Last digit of your SSN, Sir?"

"But there's still issues with that, Specialist."

"No worries, Sir. The entrance specialists," Spec4 Mott waived a hand around to indicate all the desks and their attached civilians, "will sort it out. We just sorted everything by last rank held to make it easier

to track you down. That is by no means an indication of what rank you will be holding during the emergency."

Tom scrunched his forehead up. "Why not just use the computers?"

"Network's down, Sir." The specialist shrugged, indicating that this was the normal state of affairs.

Tom reached up and rubbed the back of his neck. Then he shrugged. "Oh boy. Ok, I guess that's where they'll find my file, then," he said, waving his own hand over at the "Company Grade Officers, SSNs ending in 6" desk. "This'll be interesting." He looked back at the Specialist. "Thanks for your help, Specialist Mott. Hopefully I won't be back over here in forty five minutes causing trouble."

"No problem, Sir. They'll have it sorted in no time."

The confidence of youth ...thought Tom, as he stepped over to the desk and joined the cue. In front of him were a pair of women, both approximately the same age as himself, but they were in an animated discussion about how they'd spent the past decade. Tom's previous decade had been spent filling up the pages in his passport with entrance, exit and residency permits and visas, and moving house every couple of years. He doubted they would find that interesting, so he ignored them, wrapped in his own sense of foreboding.

* * *

"Finally! The last one. Good afternoon, Sir. Last four digits of your social?" happily asked the young gentleman behind the desk.

"Three-eight-two-six."

The lad turned away to his row of file cabinets and quickly found the correct drawer. The file, however, appeared to be missing. "Can I see your orders, please?" the man asked, calmly. He didn't appear to be bothered by the missing file, as if this was expected to occur occasionally throughout the day. Taking the orders that Tom handed him, he perused them, then said. "Ah, there's the problem. This code group indicates that you are a Sergeant. Why are you in an officer's line?" The man looked back up, gestured at the placard hanging over his head, and then set about waiting for whatever excuse the accused was prepared to give.

"No idea. The last grade I held was 02e. First Lieutenant."

This took the man by surprise. "You sure?" he asked.

Tom just looked at the man, who, after a moment, blushed lightly and reached for a bell on his desk. "We'll soon have this sorted ... Sir." Tom just grunted in reply. Eventually, an elderly woman, obviously the man's supervisor, arrived, scooped up Tom's orders without speaking and shuffled off again. The man started clearing up his area, locking down his file cabinets and generally getting ready to go home. He tapped a couple keys on the computer keyboard, inspected the screen for a moment, sighed, pulled his hand back and slapped the monitor.

"Did you try waiving a dead chicken?" asked Tom, to pass the time until the supervisor returned.

The civilian froze, then laughed. "It'd take more than that, Sir. I think they went with the lowest bidder."

Tom grinned back, but was saved from having to continue the conversation by the return of the supervisor. "Social security number?" she asked. Tom gave it and she carefully noted it down, then compared it to the travel orders. With a 'hmmmm', she wandered off again, but returned immediately with a 201 personnel records jacket. "That SSN ain't yours."

Tom nodded. "Yip. Paulson. Thomas J-for-John. Currently known as Tom Weaver, or if you prefer what is on the marriage certificate, Paulson-Weaver," he clicked his heels together while sketching a slight bow. "How may I be of service."

She regarded him for a moment, her lips pursed. "Tom Paulson? 'Zat's you, then?"

Tom nodded. "Yeah, that was the name I had when last in uniform ... before I got married."

The woman looked down, then back up from the file. "Trying to complicate things, huh. Say's here your end of term of service was June 27, 1986. Right? Served in Grenada, Right?"

Tom frowned, then half-nodded, half-shrugged again. "First go around, yeah. The 'service' in Granada was a fluke. My armor company was in theatre for all of a hundred twenty minutes before the boat we were loaded on paused, turned and returned to Savannah. The theatre commander wanted heavy armor support, so we were on our way when they found out some Marine armor was passing right by the island on its way to Beirut. They got detoured, we got turned around. Then Germany, then I was honorably discharged, so as to go to ROTC and get a commission. My date of commission was December 9, 1988."

"Don't say nothing here on this DD-214 'bout no commission."

"No doubt. After I left Knox in '92, I got a 214 that just had my time as an officer on it. I tried for three years to get them combined, then just gave up when I couldn't get any movement out of the VA. Is there anything in that file, at all, dated after my ETS?"

"Ummm. Buncha stuff in the reserves ... 91st Div Training out in Cali."

"Yeah, that was the five, six months between my discharge and starting ROTC. Then once I was in ROTC, I worked with the 91st as a cadet, then when I got my commission and before leaving for AOBC I was a company XO. Anything there about that?"

"Ahhh. Nope. Nix. Apparently, you left the reserves in January, 1987."

"That's when I started university, and ROTC."

The woman looked over the file for a moment, deep in thought. "Hm. You enlisted in June of 1982 ... on your 18th birthday?"

"Give or take a few hours, yeah."

"Initial contracts dating from that era were for a total of eight years. You spent four active, you would then be in the computers as a reservist, either active or inactive, until June of 1990, then. But your file was closed out in January '87. That's odd. The only way that I've seen that happen would be through the death or medical discharge of the individual concerned. If you were dead, you wouldn't be standing here, so that cuts that one out. And if it were a medical, there'd be a specific notation on your 214 which there isn't."

By this time, Tom had had time to think about it. He still thought this was some sort of training exercise, so rather than cause trouble, he said "How about I just amble over to the Sergeant's tables, and go through this rigmarole that way. That way I get out of here, to someplace where I can use a latrine, hopefully, and you all can go home. I'm not bothered. Just make a note someplace to get all this sorted out and in the meantime I can play E5 again." Tom was perfectly aware that as soon as they found out about the less than stellar termination proceedings of his time as an officer, he'd be back on a plane, and on his way home. In the meantime, maybe he could find a toilet, preferably before he exploded.

Strangely, the ghosts that he had feared ever since reading the telegram were absent.

The memory ghosts that followed quitters around.

The woman snorted. "You *must* be a sergeant at heart, Sir. That's way too logical to be something dreamed up by no ossifer."

* * *

"I'm sorry, Hon. Are you sitting down? It's for the duration--"

"WHAT?!"

Tom didn't bother stopping, the explanations would be too time consuming, and the phone call was costing a lot. And besides, there was a line forming behind him, or rather the row of phone booths that he was currently a part of. "--I recommend that you finish out the current posting, then quit, abandon everything but some clothing and all the cash, and fly out to California--"

"WHAT!?! You're not an officer anymore!"

"Caithness. Shut up and listen. *Everybody* who has ever worn a uniform and been in combat is in the process of being called up--"

"You weren't in combat, you said you never left that damned boat!"

"Which is true. I never did. But the records show I was in theatre, and consequently I'm apparently a combat veteran. So now I'm back on active duty as a nationalized reservist. I'm going to be assigned to the 1st battalion of the 149th Armor, California Army National Guard, but I won't be joining that unit for six months at least while I get retrained. Which is why I want you to finish your current posting. By that time, I should know where I'll be stationed, and you can move out that way."

"And your commission?"

"The records file, my '201', doesn't show any service as an officer. It has me down as, and I'm currently standing in the uniform of, a Sergeant. With a twice damned 40th Inf Div patch on one shoulder and a thrice damned 24th Inf Div Mech patch on the other." There was a tone across the earpiece, warning Tom that his money was about to be used up. A recorded voice told him that to continue with the call, he would have to insert an additional \$6.30 for another two minutes.

Calling Eastern Europe from a pay phone seriously ran through the quarters.

"Look, Hun, I'm about to run out of money. I'll go get some more and call back, OK?"

"*I won't allow--*" was what Tom heard, as the phone cut off his wife. He knew he would have to let her calm down first, so he would take some time finding more coins. Eventually, he found a pay-phone that was owned by a phone company that would allow him to make a collect call to Ukraine, but by that time, when he finally did call back, she wouldn't answer.

* * *

"Yo, Sergeant Weaver!" The voice came up the company street, intersecting with other sounds and finally making it to the intended target. Staff Sergeant Tom Weaver, Company Training NCO, Delta Company, 1st-149th Armor, 40th Infantry Division (Mechanized), California Army National Guard, turned at the call and recognized the sergeant as one of the NCOs from the battalion S1 section. He held up at the door to the company headquarters until the woman made it to his position. He could see she was carrying several personnel jackets, the brown colored files were unmistakable.

As the sergeant jogged up, she fished out several of the files. "New meat today, Tom. Can you give these to your First Sergeant?" She held out four of the files.

Tom grabbed the stack, and nodding as he did so. "Anything of interest, or just 'cruits?"

The woman shrugged. "Three privates and a Spec4, but other than that nada. We did get the new smaj though. You might let your First Sergeant know."

"Right, I'm on that. Hope this one lasts longer than the last two." A second lieutenant wandered by at that point, and the two broke off their conversation long enough to salute the passing officer.

Once the lieutenant was out of range, she answered. "He's a retread, so I'm figuring he's here for the duration." With that, the sergeant shrugged, nodded at the other in salutation, kicked off and headed up the street to the next company on the line. With a pro-forma wave at the back of the departing NCO, Tom turned and entered the company headquarters' building.

As he came to the First Sergeant's office, the door was open so he ducked his head in and looked around. The First Sergeant was present, but had his back to the door as he studied a terrain map of Camp Roberts, and its depicted plan for the upcoming battalion-level field training exercise. At the side of the map, and half covered by it, was a sign that Tom knew read "Chance favors the prepared." It was placed so that anyone coming through the door would see it first. As they then made the turn to face the desk, they would see a second sign that read "The prepared take no chances."

And as the visitor turned to leave, there was a third sign that read "Pure dumb luck favors the effing enemy."

"Heya, Top. Word from Battalion: The new smaj just checked in."

1stSG Samuel 'Sock' Audobon nodded, either at the map or at the comment, without turning around. Then he waved a hand in further acknowledgement. "I heard he'd be here this week. Thanks, Weaver. Anything else?"

"Four new crew members. Three Privates," Tom said, looking down at the folders he carried. "Curran, Park and Manaev, and a Spec4, Birch." Tom quickly glanced through the files. "The privates are fresh from Knox ... The spec-four is ... joining us from the 2-70th Armor, compassionate reassignment."

"Joy. He'll be AWOL quicker than you can say 'So, your family's from here, heh?' Ok, throw the files onto my desk. Take the second one from the bottom. That one's for Wilcox. Top one's for Hammersmith. Bottom one's for Johnson. Mr Last-but-not-Least--"

"MizLast," corrected Tom, grinning, as he continued to shuffle through the files.

"Your shit, Weaver, interests me ... not," said the First Sergeant, still studying his map. Eventually, he continued. "Who gets the girl?"

Tom thought about the vacancies in the TOE for a moment. "Back to Hammersmith."

"Right. And damn straight if he doesn't need one. What's that leave us with, vacancy wise."

Weaver grinned at the double-entendre. Still looking through the record's jackets, he froze. "Uh oh."

"What, 'uh oh'."

"Looks like Birch is more than just a compassionate. Article 15s for insubordination, among other things. Could just be related to the reassignment, though."

"We'll assume so. If it turns out she really is a hard case, we'll just turf her and be done with it. Remind me to send the battalion command sergeant major for 2-70 Armor a bad Christmas card this year. Back to vacancies."

"Right ... um ... ok. Wilcox needs a lieutenant and four more crew members. The Hammer now needs only four more crew. Johnson needs three, and frankly, She needs a new LT also, 'cause 1stLT Beckman is gonna get Charley Company. So that leaves us short two platoon leaders and an XO."

At that announcement, the other finally turned around, and regarded the junior NCO for a moment. "Really? Where'd you hear that?"

"Here and there," Tom said, cryptically, not giving up his sources. "So with a company's nominal strength of 56 in the tanks, we are looking at 43, plus a couple odds and ends, and some pulling double duty like the CO and XOs drivers."

"Hot damn. We might almost be able to field a four tank platoon for the BFX," the first sergeant said, hooking a thumb over his shoulder at the map. He looked down at the files on the desk, then sighed and grinned wryly. Picking up his coffee cup, he gestured at the staff sergeant with it and asked "You wouldn't happen to know any officers lying around, looking for work, would you? And do you think Alpha company'd notice if we were to kidnap some of their people?"

Tom carefully didn't answer either of the rhetorical questions. "Do you want me to find out about the new sergeant major? I'm heading up to battalion to collect these four, I could ask around."

The First Sergeant took a mouthful of cold coffee and thought about it for a moment, swirling the mouthful of tarry liquid in the hopes of warming it up. Finally, he swallowed and said, "Nah. I'll come up there with you." He set his coffee cup down and gestured over his shoulder at the map again. "Need to talk to someone in the -3 shop about the trip to Camp Bob. Toss me my hat. And, oh. Your coffee sucks."

"I keep telling you, Top. Never ask someone who doesn't drink coffee to make coffee. You're just

setting yourself up for indigestion." Tom had very carefully cultivated the image of not being a coffee drinker, and for the most part he wasn't. It was a trick he'd learned back in the -3 shop in Baumholder, back in the day, back when he really *didn't* drink coffee. The rest of the section had immediately decided that he shouldn't be tasked with making the coffee after having tasted his first couple of batches. It was a trick that stood him in good stead ever since, and in any number of ways.

* * *

"Curran, Park, Manaev and Birch! Fall in!" Tom found the collection of in-processing soldiers and called for the four Delta Company replacements to step up. The privates stopped what they were doing immediately and grabbed their duffles before jogging over, coming to attention in a line to his front. The specialist finished her conversation with a wave and ambled over to join the line at its head, and assumed something which could, in a pinch, be related to the position of attention. Tom looked at her intently for a moment, then decided it was time to ignore her attitude as he looked the other three over.

"At *ease*! Welcome to Delta Company 1-149 Armor, 40th Infantry Division Mechanized. I am Staff Sergeant Weaver, the company Training NCO. The company commander is 1st LT Caldecourt, and has been since he made the Captain's list last Summer. The First Sergeant is 1st SG Audobon." From behind Tom's back, there was the sound of a window being thrown open. "If no one has told you yet, your Battalion Commander's name is LTC Kuzio, and the Sergeant Major's name is unknown to me, but probably known to you all, as he is joining the unit today, also. As soon as 1st SG Audobon comes out of the HQ building, we will head--"

"Lieutenant *Paulson* !?"

Tom froze. There had always been the chance, and he'd rehearsed this in his mind a hundred times, a thousand times. He unfroze. "--up to the company to meet your platoon sergeants. Any questions?"

Specialist Birch nodded to get Tom's attention, but without saying anything used her chin to point towards the window that the voice had come from, indicating that the voice *had* been talking to him. Tom hadn't recognized the voice, but that wasn't surprising. If someone *had* recognized *him*, their last contact would have dated from almost a decade ago.

Tom looked over his shoulder, than turned completely, noting in passing the stripes sewn to the sleeves of the man's Class-A uniform. "I'm sorry, Sergeant Major?" *My god, it's Timpston!* "SSG Weaver, Delta Company Training NCO." ... *And he must have had rejuv, because he looks like when I met him, back in Baumholder ...* "Can I help you?"

The Command Sergeant Major blinked, swallowing what he was about to say, and regarded Tom closely. "Training NCO, huh. Not only that, you're a dead ringer for someone else ... just ten years older I'd guess." Timpston paused, but continued before Tom could respond. "I've got your First Sergeant here, I'll be with him for awhile longer. Drop *them* off, and then come back. We want to talk about the exercise we've got coming up, and I need your comments on the training schedule between now and then."

"Right, Sergeant Major," Tom said, "It'll take me about fifteen minutes?"

Timpston nodded. "Make it thirty. I need to get the S3 NCOIC on the horn sometime between now and then." With that, the senior NCO in the battalion nodded his dismissal and disappeared back inside.

"Right ... *Rest!* Pick up your duffles ... and now, off to the company headquarters. Group! Atten ...

shun! Right ... Face ! For'd ... March !"

* * *

Command Sergeant Major Ronald Timpston pulled his head back into his office and shut the window, but didn't turn away from the view. He carefully watched the staff sergeant as the NCO marched the troops off towards the Delta company area. Behind his back, the First Sergeant stepped over.

"Somat up, Sergeant Major?"

"'Weaver' he said? I want to see his 201." Timpston turned to look at Delta's first sergeant. "What do you know about him."

Audobon blinked and turned to look out the window at his training NCO's back, while he ordered his thoughts. "Called up November 2001'ish with all the other combat vets. Rank of Sergeant. Did refresher training at Knox, then came out here. Promoted just after arrival. Married, but his wife and family live in Ukraine. Oh, he took his wife's name when they married."

Timpston grunted at that. "'Weaver' isn't Ukrainian?"

"No, British, she just works there. He's smart, and knows his shit. Has a four year degree but doesn't like to talk about it. Thinks it ruins his image as an NCO."

"BA in ... " the Sergeant Major looked up at the ceiling, thinking deeply, trying to remember something. From out in the hallway, through the thin walls of the hastily built building came a sound similar to that of glasses clinking, and he looked down as the memory flooded in. " ... French?"

Audobon blinked again. "I ... How'd you know *that* , Sergeant Major?"

"Let me see the 201 first. I want to check something, make sure it's him. *Orderly!*"

* * *

Tom was thinking hard as he returned to the battalion headquarters. He doubted he'd be able to maintain the act if Timpston came right out and asked, so it might be better to just admit it. What's the worst thing that could happen? *It's not like I'm impersonating an officer*, he thought, sardonically. *Of all the dumb effing luck ...*

The specialist sitting at the desk in front of the Sergeant Major's office recognized him, and waived him up. "Sergeant Major Timpston is expecting you, Sergeant Weaver." Rather than use the intercom to announce him, the specialist had just spoken in a voice loud enough to be heard in the next room. Tom nodded and continued up to the door.

"Come on in, Weaver," said the sergeant major as Tom tapped on the door frame.

Tom marched up to the desk and came to attention, staring at the Sergeant Major's hairline. "Staff Sergeant Tomas Weaver, reporting as ordered, Sergeant Major."

Timpston ignored him for the moment, and looking to the side nodded to someone. Behind him, the door closed with an ominous click.

"So. You gonna play stupid, now, *LT*?"

From behind him, Tom heard a noise that could have been a snort, a choke or a gulp, or maybe all three, as First Sergeant Audobon spun back to the desk from the door that he had just shut. Apparently, the sergeant major had succeeded in keeping the first sergeant from knowing what was up.

Tom's shoulders dropped, as did his point of reference. He looked at the Sergeant Major in the eyes for the first time in almost ten years. "So, you recognized me."

"Yes. I. Did. Two questions. Why the hell are you wearing the rocker of an E6, and second, what do I do with you, Sir?"

Tom blinked away the frustration that suddenly hit him, his composure breaking down almost immediately. "Don't. Call. Me. That." Ten years of hidden anger and self-doubt slammed to the fore as Tom waived his arms around. "They yanked my commission, dammit, at effectively what was my own request. And I'm pretty sure they've lost the damned records, because my 201 only shows service up until I was discharged as an E5, but doesn't show my starting ROTC, but does show my having spent *one effing afternoon* in the effing Caribbean." Behind him, the First Sergeant was perfectly silent. "So when I got called back up for the duration, they brought me in as a *combat veteran* and a *Sergeant*. And here I am." Tom said, hooking a thumb at his chest and then pointing at the floor. Then he looked over his shoulder at his first sergeant. "And I'm pretty sure that Top, here, wants a reasonably competent Staff Sergeant as his Training NCO, more than the company needs a *cashiered fucking First Lieutenant* as its company commander."

"Commander?" asked the first sergeant, startled.

Tom looked over his shoulder. "I've got time in grade," he snapped, ironically, the taste of the bitterness of the situation on his tongue.

The battalion's senior NCO leaned across the desk and opened his mouth to say something pointed, but he was interrupted as Tom heard the movement, turned back and met him half way.

"And so," he said, bracing his fists on Timpson's desk, "you may assume that *First Lieutenant Thomas Paulson* is dead, Sergeant Major. If you can't make that assumption, or don't want to *work* under that assumption, then you can just treat it as a fucking order."

Timpson leaned back from the vitriol in Tom's voice. Carefully, he said "1st LT Caldecourt is on the promotable list. I believe that means he ranks you."

"Bullshit. Returning lieutenants with combat experience were bumped grades. I'd be standing here in *at least* captains' bars. Probably because of this," he growled, pointing at his collar and the rank there, "I'd have been bumped straight to Major by the California Guard and be sitting at the command and staff college right now." Tom looked hard at the man across the desk, his eyes narrowed. "And now, will there be anything else, Sergeant Major?" he hissed.

Timpson leaned back forward over his desk, not giving an inch. "We will see about this, Sergeant Paulson. Sir. What ever the hell you are. Get out of my office. First Sergeant? Stick around."

Tom came to attention, turned and stalked out of the room. He did not look at 1st SG Audobon as he passed.

* * *

The first battalion, hundred-fourth-ninth Armor, the 'C Forty Niners', were still pretty far down the list when it came to non-combat related GalTech equipment. The command and staff were repeatedly asking the 40th's supply officer when they would be getting their AIDs, and the G5 was repeatedly telling them 'shortly after I get mine'. Until then, they were making do with standard earth technology for their communications with the world.

Beyond the window, a grey dingy sky looked down on Command Sergeant Major Toby 'Tiptoe' Tipton as he sat, blindly regarding his computer monitor. The blinking cursor on the screen admonished his inactivity, but couldn't seem to break through the man's lethargy. What the computer didn't know was that the sergeant major wasn't lethargic, merely thinking furiously.

If it were an AID, he thought morosely with a sigh, *it would* .

Perched lightly on the edge of his chair, his fingertips together in a chapel before his face, he rocked quickly forward and back, eyes clearly unfocused. Various girlfriends and ex-wives had usually found the habit to be at first cute, but then later to be an indication that he suffered from Asberger's Syndrome.

Occasionally, the swaying motion would freeze, and the man's hands would drop to the keyboard before him, and he'd type a few words before stilling. Then he would backspace over what he had written and return to staring blindly at the screen, fingers once again in a chapel before his face. The forward and backward rocking motions of both the sergeant major and the cursor on the screen had gone on for over an hour, and through several attempts to get the message out. Finally the man's hands clenched into fists and he looked away from the monitor, his yet unfocused gaze landing on his Love-Me wall.

One of the many plaques there caught his eye and he focused. Azure, a Lion argent passant. He didn't need to read the banner at the feet of the silver lion as it stood there on its blue field. 'Ventre a Terre' it said. Literally the French translated to 'Belly to the ground' but it was an idiomatic expression and was used historically to mean 'with great speed'. A more modern, more creative, and actually much *closer* translation would be 'balls to the wall'.

As his mind focused on what he was thinking, Tipton snorted. He leaned back into his chair and looked out the window. A gust of winter wind chose that moment to blow a wet leaf up against the window where it stuck momentarily. Eventually, it was prized up again and sent about its merry way, but before it could something about its shape triggered a memory, a memory that was as yet amorphous, but hovered on the edge of awareness.

Just then, a civilian construction vehicle outside was shifted into reverse, and the loud peep-peep-peep of the backing vehicle ripped the vales away. It was a memory of Germany, a winter REFORGER from the mid '80s, that popped up and he remembered. There hadn't been any snow, just a lot of rain and wind and wet, slick leaves on the ground. And memories of the MILES gear, the 'laser-tag' engagement system that was worn or carried by everything from dismounted infantry to crew-served weapons to tanks and APCs, with its near-miss and kill tones. And memories, if anything, are herd animals. They chose that exact moment to stampede.

* * *

The observer/referee was relentless in his after-action-review, as he discussed The Plan. Or more realistically, the Failures in The Plan. The Failures in The Plan that had resulted in ' *Hell! This wasn't a cluster fuck, this was a god-damned Custer fuck*'. The Plan that resulted in over sixty five percent of

the battalion being wiped out in the first hour of the defense, The Plan that had required an E-god-damned-5 leading a counterattack made up of a scratch built tank platoon in order to free the less than twenty-five percent that were considered to have got out of the encirclement in the end.

Eventually, the O/R finished his tirade, and then it was the Division Commander's turn. "This is," he said simply, "why we train. Where is the E5 who pulled off the counterattack, by the way?"

Tom Paulson disengaged himself from the back of the tent where he had been standing in a loose approximation of parade rest. He posted himself before the two-star, saluted. "Sergeant Tom Paulson, Sir."

"At ease, Sergeant. Are you a warrior? Or how much luck was involved, Son?" asked the general.

"There were two points that if they had known I was coming, they could have shot us up bad with direct fire, Sir. But we still had some indirect available so I drove them off with that before ducking around that pond. I guess it was pretty lucky they missed when they *did* have us under direct. And I'd noticed that their indirect kept missing several hundred meters to the west every time they had a sensing round. Looked like their tubes weren't dialed in correctly ... so I knew that we'd be able to dodge pretty effectively."

The general looked over at the O/R who quickly looked at his notes. There was a short pause as the man ruffled out the correct sheet of paper. "Shit howdy," he said. "He's right, Sir. They were roughly thirty mils off. At ten kilometers away, that's three hundred meters offset."

The general looked back at Tom speculatively. "How'd you know?"

"Just something I noticed sitting in the S3 track, transcribing the sitreps and shotreps from the various units calling in." Tom got a distant look for a moment, then nodded. "Anyway, it was a guess, actually, based on that."

The general snorted. "And how would you have done it differently?"

"I would have started with a different defense plan, Sir."

The general nodded. "Brutally direct, Sergeant."

"Yes, Sir," he replied, shrugging slightly.

"And effectively correct. Well then, nothing left but the shouting. Once my G1 gets finished typing up the orders, Sergeant, I'll be awarding you an impact Army Commendation Medal."

Tom blinked. "Thank you, Sir. That's a bit unexpected."

"Just don't tell me your counterattack was a fluke, Sergeant."

"No, Sir. It would have been a fluke if they'd actually been able to get us under direct fire, Sir."

The general laughed. "You got any college, Sergeant Paulson?"

"No, Sir. My platoon sergeant keeps trying to get me to go, though. Says I'd make a fairly decent lieutenant." Tom shrugged it off, though, as if to say that it didn't really interest him.

The general looked at Tom for a long moment, then nodded. "Who's your platoon sergeant?" he asked, looking around the tent.

Tom pointed back over to where he had been standing originally. "SFC Timplon, Sir."

Major General Dekalli laughed. "Ok, if Timplon will go out on a limb so far as to say 'fairly decent', then I guess you've got a reasonably ok career in front of you." He looked around. "Ok, I'm through here," he said, and the tent came to attention. "Colonel Bunch? Lieutenant Colonel Gomez? Major Farington? This way, please."

* * *

Timplon returned to the present, leaned forward, and with a pointed smirk, started typing. After a lengthy couple of pages, he reached toward the screen and tapped the 'send' button with his index finger. The touch-command was quickly noted and acted upon.

Timplon nodded at what he had just done, and punched his thigh with another fist.

"Fuck your assumptions, LT. I know someone who outranks your nasty ass any way you look at it. Let's see what *Dekalli* has to say about this."

* * *

The room was an even 350 square meters in area, seventy meters long and fifty meters wide, and the holograph projectors were currently displaying a large portion of the state of California at a 100:1 ratio, centered on the fortress city of Sacramento. The projectors were working from real-time satellite data; the representation was accurate to the nearest half-centimeter on the ground. If you looked carefully, you could even see tiny aircraft flying over the top of the image.

LTC Abraham Kuzio looked out over the Map from his podium, before nodding and saying to the room at large "AID? Center the projection at thirty kilometers due West of Angels' Camp, with a ratio of ten to one." The image flowed and reformed to show the battalion's area of operations. "Now give us the plan ..."

Color-coded defensive fire zones, routes of march, artillery ranges from planned and existing artillery batteries, civilian and military evacuation routes, planned artillery fires, direct fire avenues, routes of ingress and egress for passage of lines operations, as well as hundreds of other details of the minutia of a planned battle appeared on the map. When viewed through the MilSpec visors, parts relevant to the visor-wearer pulsed while those not directly germane faded to grey. Tom had done his best in pre-setting the various filters available, but information overload was still a factor when trying to follow what was going on.

And then it got *really* confusing.

"AID?" requested the battalion commander. "Give us a landing in the valley, anywhere North of Fresno and South of Modesto. For the viewers at home, this will be known as a landing 'in the South-40'. AID, one lander for this time. Engage the animation."

The lander came in this time from the west, out over the ocean, with several of its mates from a single battle dodecahedron. The eleven others dropped along the coastal range, landing both before and after

the initial range, with some along the shoreline, some in the area South of Silicon Valley, some as far east as Pleasanton along the 680 corridor and the BART light rail line. The single lander that passed beyond the ranges to land in the San Joaquin valley itself, moved pretty far South and dropped onto I5 just West of Los Banos. The *oolt* and the pair of God-Kings that it disgorged started shooting up cars along the main North/South artery of the California transportation system, as well as west along Highway 152 towards the San Luis Reservoir and the attached hydroelectric power generator.

Almost immediately, however, battery fire of 155mm howitzer as well as 120mm mortar fire, directed by scouts and spotters on the mountain tops, took their toll on the bodies of the exposed Posleen. Once the incoming ballistic rounds swamped the sensors on the Kessentai's tenars, a pair of sniper rounds put paid to the Kessentai themselves, and then two companies-worth of pre-emplaced, dismounted and dug-in mech infantry assets engaged the surviving, leaderless Posleen ferals in the kill sack. It was one hell of a beautifully executed ambush of an airmobile operation with a known objective.

Meanwhile, and contrary to what the humans would expect, the civilian vehicles in the initial landing area were using precise tactical maneuver to disengage and retreat. Vehicles that got hit stayed hit of course, but the actual number taking fire rapidly dropped off as vehicles got into hidden egress routes, or failing that, the occupants jumped out and got into culverts and ditches, and "e-and-e'd" out of the way.

LTC Kuzio was fuming. "Freeze the simulation, AID. What the hell was that?"

There was a pause, and then the AID responded. "This device assumes some error has been committed. Probability is that the lack of pre-set initial conditions, and subsequent assumptions on the part of this device, led to an animation not desired by the leadership present. I'm sorry? Should I have let the invaders win? Instructions?"

The battalion commander turned to the S3. "Major McKinney?" he said, shortly.

The Major was looking around wildly, his gaze frantically searching out salvation. It found it in the stance of SFC Weaver, recently promoted and moved to the Assistant S3 NCOIC position. Tom was currently the S3 NCOIC (acting) in reality, however, since the master sergeant currently on the books as the NCOIC had been arrested on suspicion of aiding and/or abetting the desertion of upwards of four of the battalion's enlisted personnel, some with their GalTech issued equipment.

"Well?" the S3 squeaked.

Tom looked up from his notepad and said, "Yes sir. Taking your points in reverse order, as you know we have a selection of preconceived operations plans, based on probable or even random landings, in the area specified by the battalion commander for the simulation. The majority have yet to be approved however." Tom gestured at the frozen simulation. "If you want, I can bring up one of the more interesting ones, certainly from *our* viewpoint." Tom's voice lacked all the keys that would have let the Battalion's staff and commanders know what he was thinking at that point about his new boss. "Keep in mind that this battle plan, the one I'm thinking about, has not yet been approved by the S3." At Kuzio's silent, short, sharp nod, Tom continued, speaking directly to his own AID rather than the Commander's ... or the S3's, as that one was nowhere in evidence.

No doubt, it was back on the Major's desk, checking his e-mail for him.

"AID? Battle plan simulation Alpha-Tree-South. Four lander diamond. Exact landing point not stipulated in preconditions, however it must be in the San Joaquin Valley, North of Highway 152. Time now. Equipment light. Initial Posleen axis of advance North ... Battalion initial deployment in defensive

diamond, positions centered at Point Charon, Phase Line Nickel." The AID chirped at Tom in acknowledgement, while the simulation morphed back into a real-time representation of the area of operations. Corps, divisional, brigade and battalion level markers appeared, as well as company level for the First of the 149th Armor, 40th Division (Mechanized) of the California Army National Guard.

"Excuse me, Sir. Is the auto traffic and the behavior of the civilians on the interstate realistic?" asked First Lieutenant Valley, the charlie company commander.

The battalion commander nodded. "Good question. AID?"

"Initial conditions not set," reminded the disembodied voice. "Also, vehicle occupant reactions show typical response patterns for humans when facing an armed force of Posleen invaders."

"'Typical'? Based on what?" snorted the battalion XO, Major Li.

"Based on observations of humans classed as 'American' by this equipment on Barwhon and Diess," replied the computer, using the third person 'this equipment' to indicate any of a number of AIDs that it had been in contact with. That said, the AID had obviously failed to take into account that the humans on Barwhon and Diess were highly trained soldiers from the best military forces on earth, and that using them as 'typical' values when modeling civilian reactions was like using 'cornered female warthog w/piglets' when trying to model the behavior of mice.

The commander looked over at SFC Weaver. "Sergeant?"

"I believe the work I did on the civilian refugee streams will take that into account, Sir, but I will look into it specifically."

"Ok, I can live with that. Anything else?"

When no one answered, Tom looked over at the battalion commander. At the man's nod, he said "AID? Roll it."

Almost immediately, actinic washes of plasma flame burned in from the East, coming in from beyond the edge of the simulation, taking out any aircraft that happened to be up in the sky at that point. Eventually, the culprits resolved themselves into the ships making up several battle globes, which appeared in the air over the ocean and moved eastward towards the coast, in line with Monterey and moving northwards. The ships split up as they intersected the coastline; four landers appeared in the sky "overhead" to be heading inland. Quickly they began their final descent towards the landing area. Any light aircraft trying to hug the terrain in the valley, behind the shadow of the coastal ranges, were engaged and destroyed at that point.

Outside the building, a battery of howitzers in training fired a salvo at a distant target; the concussions rattled the walls of the warehouse. Inside the building, several of the witnesses to the simulation jerked at the noise and then looked around in embarrassment, taken in by the quality of the sim.

"AID, simulation, freeze," ordered LTC Kuzio. "How much information would we have about their approach? Would be able to get any civilian aircraft down?"

There was a pause while Major McKinney looked, panic-stricken, at Tom, who answered the question when no-one else seemed prepared to. "It would really depend on when we got notification, and would be handled elsewhere. You might bring that up to Brigade, Sir." Tom stepped out of the bleachers and

walked down onto the floor, "into" the simulation. After a quick study of the landers, he nodded. "It looks like they are headed for Turlock, Sir. I'll add your question to the list of start-condition variables, Sir"

Kuzio nodded. "Yep. Ok, what happens next. I'm glad to see that you are on the ball, Sergeant Weaver. Remind us of the overall plan." Most of the ears in the room failed to hear any undue stress on any part of the colonels comments. Specifically, the majority were listening for, but didn't hear, any stress on 'you'. Tom, however, might have noticed a hint of stress on "sergeant", and wondered if he was just being oversensitive.

"Yes, Sir," he said, nodding sharply. "The city of Sacramento has been designated as one of the cities to be fortified, and work is ongoing. There isn't really any natural terrain there to hide behind, or within, aside from the few rivers, but even those are passable with minimal effort. Any significant rush by the horses will take the place.

"Consequently, the way to defend it is to prevent the significant rushes from happening. This can be accomplished by either destroying en masse any conglomeration of the pozzies that shows itself, or alternately, in detail by letting them bounce up against a prepared obstacle that is deep enough to take the recoil. Our operational position, ladies and gentlemen, is of the second sort. We will be providing the defensive overwatch on the obstacle that is known as the Sierra Foothills. We entice the invaders to turn towards the mountains, where we allow them to break their pointy little heads against us ... ably assisted by the gazillion-year-old basalt and granite mountains at our rear.

"According to our intelligence from the Barwhon and Diess campaigns, the horses have a tendency to move to where the shooting is. This means we should be able to get their attention pretty easily, get them to turn into the foothills ... and then kill each and every one of the goobers."

Tom looked back up from the simulation and at the group of watching officers and non-coms. "And to your front, here, you have our first exercise in this simulation tank," he said, pointing at the holo-field. "At this point, the pozzies are landing here, and it is up to us to prevent them from getting to the incomplete defenses at Sacto. Any simulation that we play in this building will be done using real-time data gathered by any platforms that happen to be handy. The only difference will be when the word 'go' is added, then any level of Posleen invasion will be added. Feel free to suggest stuff that we should sim." Tom turned back to the battalion commander. "Sir," he stated, formally. "I recommend that we go with defense Alpha-Tree-Echo, based on the expected landing area around Turlock. According to the Corps' G3, civilian defense authority will have been notified of the imminent landing and refugee streams can be assumed to be forming shortly. This is an 'Alpha' scenario, so there will be no further landings from this group. The civs in the non-directly effected areas should be going to ground and evading where necessary, not refuge-seeking in the mountains yet. That said, I've programmed in a 20% variance factor on the civilians, so we can expect to see a larger refugee stream up highway 4 than what is planned for."

"Thank you Sergeant Weaver. Excellent cover of the high points of the plan." LTC Kuzio looked at the frozen simulation again, then sighed and nodded one more time. "With Sergeant Weaver's information, we know where we are, where the enemy is. S2? How long before initial contact?"

Captain Rodriguez looked down at her notes, then at the display to check that they agreed. "Sir, assuming landing in or around Turlock, initial contact with scattered and unprepared forces will be taken on by units of the First of the 167th Mechanized Infantry plus assorted support. They will have mostly organic arty support, however. There is a single battery of self-propelled M155 howitzers in Modesto." As the S2 continued, her AID helpfully highlighted the assets as she described them. "There is no point in cratering the freeways, as the land around wouldn't cause them any undue trouble. The first East/West feature of any tactical value is the Tuolumne River. In order to make it usable as a defensive line, the

flood gates at the San Joaquin fork are shut, and simultaneously the dams on several of the smaller reservoirs in the foothills are opened to create a flood condition in the river bed. Meanwhile, Corps engineer assets are tasked to blow the bridges *over* it, however they have to get there first.

"The engineer assets will be coming from the Modesto barracks, so will no doubt start with the Modesto bridges, then work their way downstream to the Tuolumne/San Joaquin fork, then return to Modesto and work their way upstream. The reason for this is that we want the horses moving generally due North, or East if we can help it. We certainly don't want them moving West towards the coast, or South, away from the party that we've laid on for them. This means that we leave them an out that way, if they can get to it before the river floods. By shoving them due North and by preference East, they come up against the Sierra foothills, bringing them into the range of the pre-placed artillery along their axis of advance.

"As they get around one river, we use the next the same way, attriting them as they come. Eventually they get to us, and we are the first real resistance that they will see. The plan is for us to pull back and around in line with Phase Line Nickel, then pull even further back to Copper." On the simulation, a pair of colored lines, one silvery nickel, the other an orangeish copper, pulsed briefly, the copper one centered on the ridgeline running NW-SE, just to the west of the small town called Copperopolis, from which the phase lines had got their names.

At that point, we put the vehicles into their pre-prepared hull-downs, and that's as far as we go. Additional assets will move into place at Phase Line Zinc, passing through our lines if necessary. The purpose of 1-149 Armor, however, is to stop the Posleen advance at Copper, and failing that, DRT. Questions?"

Second Lieutenant Nott, the youngest officer in the battalion, asked "DRT, Sir?"

"*Die Right There*", son," said the battalion commander. "Anyone else? No? AID? Roll the sim."

* * *

The piles of paperwork in her inboxes stared at her reproachfully as she got up to leave for the day. Stretching, Kay regarded the piles, sighed, and grinned almost sadly before giving them the typical British two-fingered salute. There was so much to do and coming into the office in the morning was so much easier when she knew she could bury herself in the work that would be waiting for her. The President of the Commission was coming out for a visit with the President of Ukraine, and Protocol, Kay's bailiwick inside the political section, was working long hours to make sure that it all went off without a hitch. It was what she was good at, and she enjoyed doing it.

Then, of course there were those NATO advisors coming, and the US Embassy had requested assistance from the Commission's Delegation (i.e., her friend Carol had called her up, and begged some help off of her), and then so on and so forth.

In the back of her mind, she knew she was stalling. She'd worked hard to get this post, accepting postings to other, less prestigious delegations so that she could gain the seniority to start getting what she wanted rather than what was left over. She couldn't see why she should give it up to move to California, where her university degrees and skills and languages would have little or no value, except within some marketing or public affairs company, for which she held absolutely *no* interest. She was a governmental flunky, and damn proud of it. And she'd have to give up her friends in the various embassies in Kiev, and the kids would have to leave the school and all of their friends, there, too.

Of course, that'd be true once her current posting was up anyway, but she was skillfully avoiding thinking

about that, since it wasn't until the end of the year. And then they'd be back in Brussels for a turn, before being sent back out to another delegation someplace. Maybe she could swing her acquired seniority in peoples' faces and coerce a posting to Washington DC or New York out of the powers that be. While thinking along these mental pathways, meanwhile, Kay carefully missed realizing that California to Washington DC was the same distance as from London to Moscow, and would still mean living apart from her husband for long, lonely periods. But she *couldn't* give up her job and become a military spouse. There was no way.

Over the past decade, they had watched one flair-up in the world after another, each involving a certain amount of US Army blood to extinguish. Both halves of the Gulf war, Bosnia, Afghanistan, the names rolled off her tongue one after another. Whenever another news report rolled in about another accident on a training base, or a friendly fire incident, or even, on those very, *very* rare occasions, casualties from enemy action, and how many soldiers had been killed, they would look at each other and they would joke "I'm glad you're not a soldier anymore"

And yet.

She knew that Tom was haunted by how it had all finished up, there at the end. Occasionally she'd get him drunk enough to talk about it, because she knew he needed the release mechanism that talking about it had built in. And she knew also that without the alcohol, it was buried and wouldn't come out, except in his dreams. She could tell when he was dreaming about the Army ... sleeping at the position of attention she called it. Afterwards, he would only claim to remember shivering, standing at attention, waiting for something to happen. He might remember more, but without the alcohol acting as a lubricant, the brakes just dug in and he'd say "Sorry, don't remember", and roll over and fake going back to sleep.

But all that didn't change the fact that Kay was competitive. She treated everything she had accomplished in her life as the steps in a grand game, and couldn't step away from that contest even for a moment. Kay could come up with hundreds of reasons to explain why she hadn't packed up her children and moved to California. The only one that was really insurmountable, of course, was that she couldn't let Tom win.

Of course, Tom did know the one thing she wouldn't miss in all the world, and so had cheated. The tickets had arrived in the last dip-pouch, sealed into a frilly envelope that was sealed with a sticker in the form a big red pair of lips. The kind of lips that you'd find, with the letters 'SWAK'. Or possibly, the kind of lips that you would expect to see, just before seeing a pair of tickets to a Stones concert at the Warfield theater, in San Francisco.

So she and the kids would fly out to California, no doubt have a great time, and then fly back. In fact, she could drop the kids off at Mums on the way back, and they could stay there until she had closed up shop in Kiev and found a place to live in Brussels. All the better. And what could go wrong? It was six months or so away, so she had time to convince her mother, book the holiday, and get the airplane tickets and all. And with the kids out of the way, she could ship everything to Brussels ahead of time and move in with Carol for the last couple of months.

The more she thought about it, the better it sounded. In fact, the less it bothered her, so she decided to stop whinging about it and just go. Besides, Carol would be *sooo* jealous! The *Stones*!

And hell, once the current crop of visiting dignitaries had crawled back under their rocks, it would be an empty plate straight through to next year, and that would be Somebody Else's Problem.

Kay nodded, stood up and headed for the office of the assistant head of delegation. *Better do it now,*

before something comes up to change my mind, she thought. Stop off at home, see Mum ... have a curry, she thought, now grinning evilly. That'll show him! Sit on the beach at Santa Cruz, visit the cabin in the Sierras, See the Stones in a 2300 seat venue

All in all, she decided, this sounds like it's going to be one of those holidays, after which you need to book a holiday to recover.

* * *

"Tom, Dude! What's up? You look like you didn't get any sleep last night."

"Didn't. I woke up at three thirty this morning, craving a curry."

"A what?"

"A curry. I could have murdered a vindaloo."

"A *vindaloo* ? Your crazy, Tom. I had one of those once ... I was TDY to a British base in Germany, back in the day. I still wake up screaming, it was that hot."

"Nah. The vindaloo's aren't hot, unless you request it that way. Someone must have been playing a trick on you ... What you want to watch out for are the phal. Anyone tries to offer you one of those? Shoot him."

* * *

"British Air nine-five-two heavy come to two-two-oh at angels three two thousand, over."

"British Air nine-five-two dropping to angels three two at two two oh, ta. Traffic, over?" The plane banked as Captain Richard Danter pushed the yoke forward and brought the nose around to the new heading. He had been flying for British Airways for years, and had made the run from Heathrow to San Francisco hundreds of times. The occasional seemingly random diversion was just another thing to help him stay awake while the giant Airbus skimmed across the sky. He looked out through his half of the cockpit windows, saw nothing, double checked his co-pilot's view as she did the same. Nothing about this one seemed out of the ordinary, probably just the ATC kids having some fun.

"Negative traffic, nine-five-two, g'day. United Air seven-three-three, come to angel two-five thousand, new heading two-two-five."

"Now that's odd," said Lieutenant Emma Gibson as the ATC voice in her earphone continued to 'push tin'. It got odder as it continued, more and more planes were being diverted to new headings. "What do you think?"

"Cor. Sounds like 9/11 all over again. Sounds like *everyone* is being diver-"

"British Air nine-five-two heavy, contact Churchill Field ATC on nine-seven-six-comma-five."

"British nine-five-two, nine-seven-six-point-five, have a good one." The co-pilot reached for her dash with an index finger and changed the radio frequency. "Churchill ATC this is British Airways nine-five-two LHR to SFO, instructions, over".

" *British nine-five-two, squawk ident on one-two-zero-zero.*" There was some movement by the navigator as he punched something into his own board, and then grunted to indicate that he had heard and complied.

After a pause, ATC continued. "Roger, nine-five-two. I see you ... ok, Airbus 370 heavy? right ... ok ... too big for us. Wait, over."

"This doesn't look-" started the captain.

"British nine-five-two, divert to military airfield at Thompson, Manitoba. Come to new heading one-nine-zero, new altitude two-two-thousand. Be advised VFR traffic will be at your twelve, twelve-thirty, indicating nine thousand at range fifteen miles."

"British nine-five-two going one-nine-zero at two-two-kilo, diverting, roger, searching for VFR traffic." repeated the co-pilot as the Captain again banked the plane.

* * *

The plane banked again, and this time her head rolling from one side to the other woke her up. Kay had fallen asleep someplace over Scotland, after firmly telling the kids, the flight attendants and the little old lady in the seat across the aisle, that if anyone woke her up, they could expect to be walking the rest of the way.

The threat was to prove prophetic.

"Mum?" Edward was curled up into a small ball onto his seat, but Allison was sitting up and had her in-flight headphones pressed to her ears.

"Yes, luv?"

In response, Allison only handed over the earphones. Kay blinked and put them on. At first, it took her a moment to realize what it was she was listening to, but then it dawned on her. Her daughter had the entertainment program set to the ATC chatter-channel, and was listening in to the pilots' conversations with the ATC centers as they passed over. Kay's own father had been a pilot, and she had toyed with that career also when in her teens, and now her own daughter was showing an interest.

The standard vocabulary of the ATC communications protocols was evident, and from what she heard, it didn't sound good. Kay quickly brought up her own in-flight entertainment system and set it to the map that showed their flight plan and current position. The little airplane that should have been following the dotted line, had turned drastically south and was dropping quickly through the atmosphere towards a big, open space in Manitoba. At the moment, the pilots were still receiving corrections from some Canadian ATC center, so Kay wasn't too nervous. Still ...

"What is it, Mum?" asked Allie.

"It looks like we've been diverted south a bit. Maybe there is some weather up ahead that they are squeezing us around it."

* * *

"I've got a bad feeling," said the captain, thinking. "Spike? Kill the internal ATC feed. I don't know how

long this will take, but we should be in the landing pattern in about forty-five minutes. Let's not have a passenger riot on our hands."

* * *

The in-flight entertainment audio channel carrying the ATC chatter made an ominous click, and Kay was greeted by the sound of silence. The voice had cut off mid-phrase, so it was probably intentional. She noticed that the map on the seat-back video display also had shut off. So whatever it was -- and she recognized the 'if we don't let them know, maybe the passengers won't riot' syndrome when she saw it -- it was something that impacted all the flights in the air. It was obvious from the number of diversions that it wasn't just BA 952, enroute to SFO. Kay wondered how long it would be before the announcement, and wondered if they would claim some sort of mechanical fault. If this were United, they could probably get away with it.

* * *

"Captain? You need to listen to this," said the navigator, connecting the feed from one of his radios to the Captain's console. The captain nodded, showing that he now had the voice in his headphones.

"So that's the status, ladies and gentlemen. Posleen ships have been engaged by our space going fighters and armed frigates, earth is now on a landing watch, and you all are being diverted to the nearest airfield or port with a runway long enough to handle your specific aircraft.

Ladies and gentlemen? It's just like 9/11 all over again. We took care of you then, and we'll take care of you now. ATC-Manitoba, out."

"Shite," said the Captain, finally.

The navigator reset the main console to their current ATC channel. After a moment, a voice came on line. "So now you know. This is Thompson MAF. As I call the roll, please respond with flight time remaining in minutes, based on fuel first, crew fatigue second. We'll get you down, just hold on. Right, American Air eleven-five-five?"

"American Air eleven-five-five, Roger, Thompson, MAF ... um, say eighteen-five, I say again one-eight-five minutes, over."

"Roger, American eleven-five-five, I copy one-eight-five. British Airways nine-five-two?"

"British Air nine-five-two, Roger, two hundred minutes, over."

"Roger, Brit nine-five-two, I copy two-zero-zero. Canadian Air sixteen -three-eight? ... "

* * *

When the announcement finally came, they told the truth, and that simple fact scared her more than if she had received an expected lie. Then the realization hit and she learned what fear was.

Tom.

* * *

The air pressure differential popped their ears as they came down fast towards the runway. The Airbus specification stated that the shortest runway that it could land on was a good thirty percent longer than the military airfield that they were coming down towards. The pilot knew this, but he assumed that the people who wrote the manual had increased the actual value by a third to ensure that anyone trying to land on a marginally short runway would not be able to sue them afterwards.

The pilot touched down by eyeball on the outer rim road, just before the runway proper began and immediately went to full flaps, air breaks, thrust arrestors, foot breaks and if he had had a sea anchor and a kitchen sink, he would have had the co-pilot deploy them also. As it was, it still looked like he was going to end up with his nose in the bushes. "*Brace for impact*," he said, calmly, judging that it was going to be close.

Both pilots fought hard against their yokes, fighting to maintain their straight path along the tarmac, as the plane skidded and bucked along the ice cracked surface. "I think," said Emma, the co-pilot, in her roll as the eternal pessimist, "we aren't going to make it ... "

"It's going to be close," Richard agreed.

* * *

"Brace for impact."

Caithness grabbed her knees tighter and looked to the side to ensure that the kids were braced also. Allison appeared aware of what was going on around her, as tears appeared to be near to overflowing through her squeezed-shut eyelids. Edward, on the other hand, appeared to be "eating this shit up" as her husband used to say.

Some day, preferably sooner rather than later, she planned on asking him just what the hell that meant.

"Are you holding on tight, Edward?"

"Yes, mum! This is the greatest! It's like a roller coaster!"

"Make it stop, mummy?" said Allison, confirming Kay's original, almost instinctual call of the eight-year-olds probable reaction to the rough and bumpy landing.

Looking the other way, Kay could see very little out the windows, but what she could see didn't look inviting. Straight out the window, across the taxi areas of the airfield, she could see several hardened hangers, of the kind she affiliated with fighter aircraft, and towards the front she could make out the occasional glimpse of pine tree forest.

The forest, however, appeared to be getting closer quickly. Reflexively, her mind shied away from that fact, even as her arms clamped even more tightly around her legs. To her side, Allison started whimpering.

As a passenger in a plane that looked like it was about to have a bad day, she needed to stay braced. As a mum, she wanted to reach over and hug her daughter and tell her it was going to be all right. She compromised by reaching out with one arm and patting Allison on the back. "It'll be okay, dear. Just hold on ... "

She looked back out the window, and the forest, while still approaching, didn't appear to be

approaching as inexorably as before. But the plane was still moving forward.

Just then, the airframe jerked mightily as several of the tires blew underneath the weight of the plane. Coupled with the skidding and rough surfaces that they were being dragged over, the front gear finally gave in and snapped off, causing the plane to nose down onto the tarmac. No longer able to effectively steer the plane, the pilots braced their feet onto their consoles and held on as the combined friction of the nose against the runway and then the taxi way, along with all the other devices designed to stop the plane when on the ground, succeeded in bringing the plane to a halt as the nose cone passed beyond the airfield proper and ended up against the first couple of trees in the pine forest.

"I think they've bent the plane, mum," said Edward, as loud cheering broke out amongst the passengers.

* * *

"I think you've bent the plane, boss," Emma said, up in the cockpit as she looked around, her eyes as big as dinner plates. She carefully reached down and started picking up the larger shards of Plexiglas off her lap. A six inch diameter pine branch had punched through the front canopy and between the pilot and the co-pilot, and would have decapitated the navigator had he not taken the foresight to pop the quick release on his five point harness and duck.

Wild-eyes, Richard looked around also, the adrenaline still mostly in control of his actions. Finally, he unfroze and nodded, saying "Silly place to put a forest, if you ask me."

"I don't mind the forest," said the navigator, picking himself up off the floor, "but I could do without one or two of the trees."

" *British Air nine-five-two heavy! Status, over!*". The voice was a bit panicky, but understandable.

"Roger, ground control. I believe we're going to need a tow truck." Behind them, the doors on the aircraft slammed open, and all the slide ramps were deploying as per specification. Warning tones and overhead idiot lights came on as the cabin crew began the mostly orderly evacuation of the plane. Looking up at the sound and seeing the blinking lights added "And maybe a few busses, too."

"Roger, Bah-nine-five-two, glad to hear you are ok. Emergency Services are on the way. Be advised, Alaska one-oh-five-seven is landing behind you in approximately ninety seconds. Should I wave him off?"

"How much of the runway does *he* need?"

"Not as much. Certainly not the bit you are sitting on. But we're going to get a couple dozers out there and a crew. We're going to need to drag you out of the way, since there are a couple more that'll probably need that space your sitting in. The crew will be cutting down the trees and extending the runway down at that end. Meanwhile, we've got a combat repair crew heading out to the touchdown end, too, and they're going to crash extend the runway another couple hundred or so meters in that direction!"

"We certainly could have used it, control ... this is Bah-nine-five-two, we are off the air." Richard ripped off his earphones. "Right, crew. Everybody healthy? Speak up if not, else let's get out of here."

* * *

Caithness looked out at Churchill, Manitoba, as they approached it in the military supplied bus. They'd spent several hours at the military airfield while they waited for transport to the nearest town with a rail connection. Now that the landings had started, they couldn't risk putting a plane up to fly them anywhere, and so had to wait for the busses to arrive from Churchill to carry them back. The Canadian air force personnel had used the lifeboat drill, women-and-children-first, which meant that Kay and the kids were one of the first ones to board for the trip up to Churchill. Even then, they still had to wait for several busloads, as there were other women with even younger children than Edward.

Eventually, however, they got their bags onto the accompanying pickup trucks and themselves into seats and now sat impatiently, waiting for them to get where they were going. They were still an hour out, and Kay wondered what they were going to do once they got there. So far, the Canadians had been well generous in getting them sorted and on their way. Kay wondered morosely if that was out of good heartedness, or simply because the sooner they got the damned foreigners out of their hair, the less they would have to feed them and otherwise put up with them.

For the most part of the people they encountered, she assumed it was the first. For the occasional other, however, she was positive they fell in the second group.

They had been promised transport on a passenger train heading south through The Pas to Winnipeg. From there, it was a little less certain, but they said that they could reasonably expect to find them a train heading west through Saskatoon to Edmonton. At that point, however, they would have to see.

It would take them over a week to reach the US/Canada border, they would even have to walk several miles of the distance several times. The main routes were covered using trains or busses supplied by various governments, but getting from one mode of conveyance to another usually meant a trip across some town or other. And the towns were full of refugees who thought 'Someplace else' was better than wherever they'd been beforehand.

With the town full of refugees, the locals were none too happy to be using their own soon-to-be rationed fuel to move them around. So rather than wait for the one or two electric powered vehicles to move them from the bus station to the train station in Churchill, Kay had just sold or traded what gear they no longer needed for stuff that they did, or for fresh vegetables and fruit, and walked. They saved a lot of time, and it would get them to the border that much quicker. What they were going to do once they got there, however, was still unknown.

* * *

Tom sat at the S3 NCOICs desk, reviewing plans with his AID, when Private Go stuck her head around the corner. At his enquiring look, she said "I'm back from the motor pool Sergeant Weaver. I've brought your set of keys back."

Tom reached across the desk and grabbed the ring from the Private. "Thanks," he said, just as his AID gave a warning tone.

"Priority Message from Brigade pending, Sergeant Weaver." Weaver looked at Go, who nodded and disappeared. He dropped the keys into his pocket, he'd lock them in the key case later.

"Let's hear it, AID."

"Five Posleen globes have just exited hyperspace in near-Earth orbit. TERDEF analysis calls for landings in approximately three hours."

Tom stared at the AID as it sat, innocuously, on the desk. "Oh, shi ... " he muttered. "Anything else? Any idea where the landings will be?"

"Negative info this time," replied the toneless voice.

"Right." Tom stared around for a moment, then nodded. The curtain was going up, no time to stand around dally diddling yourself. He strode over to the doorway and stuck his head out into the common area.

"This is it, folks. Landings warning coming in over the secure channel, expected landings in three hours. It's showtime. We should be rawhide in an hour. Sergeant Tkachenko, track down Birch, she's probably the only one who knows where the Three is." 'Rawhide' was the code word for pulling up tent stakes and getting out of dodge--it was the same word that the S3 section in Baumholder used. Who knew *how many* S3 sections in the world used that same word. All it took was one English speaking opfor commo interceptor, who had grown up watching TV westerns from the '50s and '60s to understand what the code word indicated.

Luckily, Tom thought, the Posleen probably were *not* Clint Eastwood fans.

"Can do, Sergeant Weaver" said Alla Tkachenko from her desk. "She's supposed to be up at the motor pool replacing the tires on the hum-vee. So I'll go look in her quarters, first. Winters, you head straight to the motor pool and get your hum-vee down here."

Specialist Winters, the S3 NCOICs driver, jumped up saying "Roger that!" and headed out the door.

"You do so know your people, Sergeant. Let me know if you have any trouble. If she's done have her bring the hum-vee down here, also. And the rest of you, consider this your deployment orders. All of you with your kit in the quarters, go get it and bring it back here. Let's get hot, ladies and gentlemen, let's get ever so effing hot!"

"Do we know where, yet?" asked Captain Rundle, the assistant S3, coming through the doorway and sidestepping the rush of non-coms and specialists heading out to their quarters to pick up their kits.

"Negative, Sir. Initial landing warning only."

"Check. Keep us informed, will you? I'm off to the arms' room to check out the Three Shop's weapon case." The weapons' cases, sealed boxes that held up to ten assault rifles and as many handguns, as well as cleaning kits, holsters, magazines and other assorted related equipment, were stored ready to be moved to save time. Because they weighed over a hundred pounds, however, it took several people to move them when they were packed. "Send one of the hum-vees around and enough bodies to lift it once they're here."

"I'm on that, Sir. Do *you* know where Major McKinney is?"

"Negative, Sergeant. That information is on the strictly need-to-know list, and right now I don't think we need to know that."

"You're three kinds of all right, Sir," said Tom. "Why are you still here, Private Go?"

"My stuff's under this desk, Sergeant Weaver."

"Check. Go with Captain Rundle, stand guard on the weapons once he's got them checked out. You okay with that, Sir?"

"Check. The horses are here and it's time to dance, Private, so let's go, Go. I need to stop by the BOQ first to get my own kit, so let's shake a leg."

"Yes, Sir. That joke's old, Sir," Go said as she moved to the doorway to follow the Captain out.

Captain Rundle turned and looked at the private momentarily. "What joke, Private?"

"Sorry, Sir, I thought your were making a joke about my name."

"I never joke about people's names, Private. Weaver, have the team assemble in the yard with their equipment for a quick shakedown. And check on the busses."

"Roger that, Sir," responded Tom, and once he was sure that the Captain was well and truly gone, he turned back to his desk. "AID? Status on transport to Objective Charon?"

"Armor has priority on transport, Sergeant Weaver. The first busses should be arriving in fifteen minutes. Note, insufficient space for crew, staff and personal equipment in a single run. The S4 is working on prioritization."

"And we'll let them. Let me know if the situation changes." Tom pulled his dog tags up over his head and grabbed the key that was with them. The key unlocked the side drawers, and then he quickly reached under the desk and pulled a lever to one side. When he pulled the middle drawer out, the entire drawer came out instead of the just the top three-quarters and the full front. He lifted out the junk and dropped it onto his desk, then lifted the false bottom out and grabbed the holstered M1911A1 Colt .45 ACP found therein. He strapped on the shoulder holster, then quickly verified that the weapon was loaded and that so were the several spare magazines.

It would be awhile before the weapons' case got here. And besides, he always carried a backup.

* * *

"Sergeant Weaver? There is a situation developing at the arms' room."

"A situation, AID? How so?"

"Specialist Birch is trying to check out the Three Shop's weapons' case, using the authority of Major McKinney. I understand that Captain Rundle has not yet arrived there, and won't be there for at least another ten minutes."

"That's odd. She's not normally on the access list. Can you access your sensors and find out where Tkachenko and Winters are?"

"Tkachenko and Winters are on there way to the motor pool. They did not find Specialist Birch in her quarters."

"Obviously, as she's now down in the basement of the headquarters barracks, trying to sign out a case load of assault rifles and handguns."

"Sergeant Weaver? There is a tag on Birch's record, recorded by 1st SG Audobon. It says that she is a flight risk. She is also known to have consorted with organized gangs in Stockton, where she grew up, before joining the military. Based on that and other comments and records, I would recommend that she not be allowed access to the weapons."

"Cor- effing- *rect* , AID. Warn the armory to *not* release the weapons. I'm heading down there."

"Done, Sergeant."

Tom grabbed his field jacket and put it on as he ran out the door, reviewing what he knew about Specialist Birch. She had been originally assigned to Delta company on arrival, had received two company grade article 15s for insubordination and was suspect in a rash of barracks rat robberies that they had unfortunately been unable to pin on her. Since moving to the S3 Shop to be the Three's driver, most of the problems had stopped. Tom had his suspicions as to why that was, but since what she was doing with the Three, it at least kept *both* of them out of his hair.

The Three Shop's floor was deserted, but he ran into one of the other section members on the way down. "Beatty. You're with me. Dump that stuff in the commons and run to catch up. I'm on my way to the headquarters' barracks. Do. Not. Dally." The private nodded, out of breath from carrying the duffle up the stairs, and lurched into a jog, taking the steps two and three at a time. Tom continued down to the first floor and out onto the battalion road.

He turned left and sprinted up towards the company areas, heading directly towards the HQ barracks. Parked in front of the building was a hum-vee, and as he got closer he recognized the bumper numbers. It was Major McKinney's vehicle, and as he came up to it, he walked out into the street and looked inside the driver's compartment. The steering wheel was unsecured, and on a hunch, he dug the spare padlock keys that he still had in his pocket, pulled the chain up and secured the wheel.

The front door of the barracks bounced open and four people came out in a rush, carrying two weapons' cases, stacked, each person on a corner. The four appeared to be wearing their ALiCE packs, also, and the packs' top flaps were open and rifle barrels could be seen poking upwards.

One of the four was Specialist Birch. Tom didn't recognize the others.

Tom realized that while the weapons' cases didn't normally carry ammunition, if Birch was doing what it looked like she was doing, then she probably brought her own to the party. From where he was standing, still concealed behind the vehicle, he couldn't tell if the locks on the gun boxes had been defeated. It became apparent as they neared, however, that it was irrelevant. Just over the top of the upper gun box, Tom could see that Birch was wearing a shoulder holster, and the flap was undone. Tom reached into his coat and undid his own holster. He pulled the weapon, jacked it then stepped back from the vehicle further into the street. This gave him the clearance needed to bring the weapon up far enough to not quite clear the hood of the vehicle. He kept it hidden from the approaching group as he side-stepped away from the cab of the vehicle, the weapon kept just inches below the group's impeded sight lines. With the engine block between himself and the approaching bandits, he said "Hold it, Birch!"

As he was noticed, the three strangers shifted their carry holds on the load, just as the specialist at the far read corner let go and stepped around them in a quasi-coordinated movement. The three broke into a jog and ran towards the vehicle's back gate. As Specialist Birch cleared the obstruction that the boxes and their carriers made, her hands came up with a Beretta M9, which she must have been carrying in her off hand. She didn't bother saying anything, just began to zero in on an aim point in Tom's center of mass.

She didn't make it.

Tom's first, mostly unaimed round hit her in the shoulder and pulled her aim point off just as her own weapon fired, the round hitting the glass windscreen of the hum-vee and ricocheting away. Her eyes registered shock as Tom's second, aimed round hit her just below the chin and knocked her backwards onto her back.

As the booming echoes tailed away, Tom heard the gun boxes crash to the ground. He turned in that direction, and his third, snap round hit the man coming around the back of the vehicle, just as that one returned fired at Tom. Tom jerked as the bullet passed cleanly through his upper arm.

Using the pain from the wound to harden his voice, he barked "Freeze!", and then, because he didn't trust them, he dove to the ground around in front of the vehicle. This proved to be prophetic, as additional small arms fire passed through the space he had occupied up to that point.

From his current vantage point, he could see the feet of one of the two remaining deserters. From the sounds, the fourth was opening the clamps of the gun box. Rather than draw this out, Tom shot the one he could see in the ankle and then as the man fell, forward, shot him again in the top of the shoulder, the massive forty-five caliber round punching through the man's shoulder blade and passing down into the body cavity.

Before doing anything else, Tom hopped back up and clambered up onto the bumper of the vehicle. He'd just given the remaining deserter ideas, and he wasn't about to stick around waiting for the man to act on them. From where he was standing, he couldn't see the man, so he quickly reloaded the colt.

"Throw down your weapons," he ordered, trying to buy time.

The only answer he got was the sound of a magazine being slammed into the belly of an 7.62mm AIW, and the bolt being shot home.

"Ah, man ... " thought Tom, crouching down behind the engine block of the hum-vee, still balanced precariously on the bumper, as the man fired bursts from the assault weapon blindly into the vehicle a couple of times before stopping suddenly. Tom wanted to stick his head up to find out which way to jump, but was afraid that was what the thief was waiting for. Tom decided to go for the high ground and prepared to hop up onto the hood and from there the roof of the hum-vee.

"Sergeant Weaver! How many are there!" The voice came from behind the vehicle, beyond the fourth deserter.

Tom froze, listening intently. Aside from the moans from someone at the back of the vehicle, he couldn't hear any other noises. Finally he yelled "Four! I hit three!"

"I got the fourth one, we're clear!"

"Beatty?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"You were carrying?"

"Yeah."

"Good thing, that," Tom said. The adrenaline was beginning to wear off and his arm started to pulse pain in time with his heart beat.

"Yeah, well ... I had this Sergeant tell me once, 'always have a backup'. Words to live by, if you ask me ... "

* * *

Outside the ambulance was a storm of activity as the Criminal Investigation Division of the local Army command tagged and marked the scene, while around them moved the battalion as it alternately stood in formation waiting for the busses that would take them to their prepositioned equipment, or broke up to search out missing equipment.

Inside the ambulance was a sea of calm however, as Tom sat on a gurney having his arm looked at by a medic. Also in the vehicle was another investigator from the CID, who was alternately asking questions and dictating comments into his AID. "And where did you get the handgun?" asked the CID investigator calmly.

Tom shrugged with only one shoulder. "I keep it locked under a false bottom in a drawer of my desk."

"You do realize that maintaining a privately owned weapon outside the arms' room is chargeable under the Uniform Code of Military Justice?"

Tom looked out the window at the storm that was gathering. He looked back at the CID investigator. He nodded. "I know that. I believe that Colonel Kuzio will be doing an Article 15 on me shortly." The pain killers had dulled his sense of humor as well as his sense of pain, otherwise he would probably have tried to laugh it off.

The investigator nodded. "That sounds like reasonable punishment. My own recommendations upwards will be to allow a simple non-judicial on that. Same thing for Private Beatty."

Tom nodded again. "That's a relief. It would be bad for him to save my life, then turn around and go to jail for it."

"Ok, one more question about the .45 and that'll be it for now. You say you keep it in a locked drawer. Did you take it out of the drawer *before* your AID warned you about Birch, or after?"

Tom looked up at the ceiling, thinking back. "Had to have been before, wait ... " Tom pulled his field jacket over and pulled the AID out of the pocket. "AID? Replay everything from when you first notified me about the situation that was developing in the arms' room."

The AID dutifully replayed everything, collaborating Tom's rethink. "Yeah," Tom said, eventually. "I was already wearing it when the message came in."

"And that replay also collaborates with your statement. I believe it would be admissible as proof that you did give them every opportunity to give themselves up without anybody getting hurt ... Well, that's about all. Have you got any questions for me?"

"Yeah, the MPs got here almost immediately after Private Beatty. How did they know?"

"They had been summoned by the silent alarms from the arm's room. Installed just below the lower half of the two part door is a kick plate that activates the alarm. Your warning through your AID to not allow them access arrived too late to save the armorer, but when he started kicking the plate frantically just before they shot him, it added to the priority level of the notification to the MP station. The MP dispatcher summoned the cavalry even before checking the camera feeds from the room."

"So they wouldn't have got away with it, then."

"Maybe. They must have had a plan for the get-out."

"And all that for only, what, twenty rifles."

"You didn't know?" asked the investigator.

"Know what?"

"Those boxes could have been carried by two of them, if it had only the equipment that your section needed. They'd crammed as many AIWs in there as they could fit, and four or five SAWs, then had filled out their rucks with more AIWs and M9s. They had easily a hundred-thou in black market value there."

"Ah."

The investigator's AID gave a ping noise, and the man listened intently. After a moment he said "Roger." After another moment, he nodded absently and frowned, then said "Ok, thanks for the update." He turned to Tom. "We've found your Three."

"Really? Didn't know you were looking for him ... " said Tom, absently, around the haze of pain, as the medic finished bandaging the bullet wound.

"We weren't. But we found him anyway. He's in his BOQ, stark naked, strapped to a chair and with a bullet through his brain pan. Specialist Birch and the others had initially tried to draw all the weapons using Major McKinney's authorization, and we were wondering how she had acquired the it in the first place. I guess now we know."

Tom nodded, the pain killers deadening any reaction he would have had to the death of the S3. "His AID," he said absently.

"What about it?"

"That's how they knew. His AID would have warned him at the same time mine warned me that the landing were imminent. I think they were rushed."

The investigate nodded thoughtfully. "Good point," he said, then dictated some more notes to his AID. "Any thing else you'd like to know, Sergeant?"

"I won't keep you, Sir."

"Good luck, Sergeant."

Tom focused on the man. "Thank you, Sir. I think I just used mine up, though," he said, gesturing at his arm.

* * *

"Sergeant Weaver?" Beatty threw a chin over Tom's shoulder. "Here comes the Six."

"Thanks, Beatty." Tom turned to the road, came to attention, and then came to parade rest, waiting for the vehicle to pass. As it approached, he returned to attention, looked over his shoulder and said "Section ... *Atten tion*". As the vehicle neared, Tom saluted.

To the section's complete lack of surprise, the vehicle pulled up and the colonel hopped out. He returned the S3 NCOICs salute precisely, frowning slightly. "At ease, Sergeant. Brigade can't find me another O4 to take over as my S3. That leaves Captain Rundle as Three Acting. Can you live with that?"

If anyone was surprised at the commander's question, they disguised it well. It wasn't often that an O5 asked an E7 for his opinion. Tom nodded, once, sharply. "Yes, Sir. Captain Rundle knows the plans as well as I do."

Sotto voce, so that only Tom could hear him, the LTC nodded, whispering "Which is a *lot* more than we can say about our late, unlamented ex-S3. If anything, Birch has done us a favor I think ... Sorry to hear about your arm, though. That always was the problem with the Weaver Stance, you know. Leaves the arms exposed ... " His voice came back up to a normal speaking voice for the last part. "Have your assistant get the section out to their vehicles and bring up the net. I'm holding a staff meeting in ten minutes, and there are a few things I want to go over with you. It looks like the initial landings in force are headed for the eastern seaboard, but we might get a rogue or too. Ride with me, Sergeant Weaver."

"Yes, Sir," Tom said, ignoring the pun. He came to attention and saluted. The CO returned the salute and returned to his vehicle, while Tom turned back to the formation in front of which he was standing. He looked down at his watch, then back up. "Right. Initial landing in just under an hour, but it won't be here. Tkachenko, Apple, you know where your teams are supposed to be. Beatty, grab my stuff and follow us. Dismissed." Tom spun back around and jogged the couple of steps over to the battalion commander's vehicle and climbed in.

As he settled himself, the CO tossed him a small piece of cardboard with a three pins attached. "Here, put these on, Master Sergeant. Do you know where your family is, Master Sergeant?"

Tom looked down at the pins and grinned lopsidedly, until the CO's non-sequitur got through to him. The grin faded. "Yes, Sir. They are in England. I left a message for them via the AID, but I don't know if it will get to them anytime soon."

"Wrong. They boarded a British Airways flight this morning and were someplace over Canada inbound to San Francisco when the initial globes appeared out of hyperspace. Their plane was diverted and they are now on the ground in Manitoba, Canada."

Tom's jaw dropped open. "How ... "

"Yes?" asked the Colonel Kuzio when Tom's voice faded.

"They have tickets for next week."

"I guess they moved it up. I need you focused, Tom."

The use of his first name by the commander didn't register. "Yes, Sir. Have I ever not been?"

"I'm assuming I've never seen you in the kind of situation that *would* cause you to unfocus. I just don't want this to turn out to be one. Your family is currently safe, and on this continent. They are, I'm assuming, enroute to California by other means. Do you know where they will be staying?"

"Yessir. If I can get a message to them, I'll tell them to get to the cabin in the Sierras. That looks like the safest place to be right now."

"You have a cabin up there? Where?"

"Small place straight up highway 4, called Lake Alpine. My family's had it since the late forties. Over the past couple of years we've turned it into a right fortress, dug straight back into the hill and built our own Sub-urb. She knows about it, and has been there before, so that is where I'd tell her to go to."

"Use your AID. I'll have Rundle give the briefing. Get her the message. Are we clear?"

"Sir, we are clear, Sir!" Tom felt stress draining away, stress that he didn't know he had been suffering under. "And, *Thanks*, Sir."

"No problem, Master Sergeant." There was a significant pause while Tom futzed around with the new rank insignia. "Tom?" the battalion commander said, quietly.

"Sir?" Tom asked, looking up.

"I got a call from a General Dekalli the other day. That ring any bells?"

Tom frowned, as the name *did* ring a bell. Then he remembered and the frown deepened. He shot a hard look at the battalion commander, his eyes narrow, but didn't say anything.

"Thought as much. Pull over, Cassel." The three soldiers were quiet as the commander's driver pulled over to the side of the road. As soon as the hand break was set, the commander said "And now go take a leak or something."

"Sir," the specialist said, quietly, before dismounting and wandering off.

LTC Kuzio turned in his seat and looked at Tom. "I won't go into what he said. But he asked me to give you these, also." Kuzio dug into a breast pocket and pulled out another insignia set. The rank flashed gold as he handed the set to Tom. "After getting off the horn with General Dekalli, I called in Timpton and he told me a story. Was it true?"

"Probably, Sir," said Tom, staring at the oak leaves in his hand. Tom handed the rank back. "I gave that up, Sir."

"I can give it back, Tom."

Tom's eyes closed. "I don't know, Sir. Even when I was a lieutenant ..." Tom stared at his cap and began fiddling with the newly pinned-on Master Sergeant's rank. "... Sir, I don't know. What if they were right. You tell me ... *Am* I a warrior?"

"You took down Birch in a pretty warlike manner, Tom."

"Yeah, but that was just ..." Tom waived a hand around.

"Just what?"

"That was just luck, Sir."

"Dekalli thinks you know how to manufacture luck, Tom. Or was that Winter REFORGER end-around you pulled just a fluke ..."

"No, Sir. But they were humans. I know how humans think."

"That puts you a leg up on just about everyone else around here, Tom. Well, here comes Cassell. Think about it. If you put on those leaves, Tom, you'd be my S3 in a heartbeat. Think about that."

But what if they were right?

* * *

Later that evening, Tom sat in his hum-vee, reviewing the images from the initial landings in Virginia that afternoon. They weren't good. What *was* good was that the Posleen fought just as they had been seen to fight on Barwhon and Diess. That meant that the doctrine that was in use there, should work here too.

Quality of the soldiery withstanding, of course.

Tom sighed, then looked up at the ceiling of the vehicle. Finally, he nodded. "The problem with the poke them in the nose strategy is that you can't poke them in the nose with artillery," Tom dictated to his AID. "Sure, you could swat them around a bit, but you can't actually get their attention focused in the right direction.

"To do that, you need to walk right up to them and, well, poke them in the nose. And even that presents its own level of issues.

"First off, you have to poke them in the nose from the correct direction. If a lander came down in the middle of a field, and there are four sentries (or platoons, or companies, or battalions, or *pocking great armies*), one on each side of the field, then one, and only *the* one, should grab the horses by the short and curlies and do a habeas testiculos on them.

"But just let one individual or device break fire discipline from any of the other three corners, and its uh-oh time. There will be *no way to predict* what the horses would do under those circumstances."

"Master Sergeant Weaver? Two incoming priority messages from Brigade S3."

"Go ahead, AID."

"In perceived order of priority: First, the refugee office in Canada has notified the Rail operator, and has passed over your message. The message arrived too late to get to your wife before the vehicle left Churchill for Winnipeg. There are no AIDs on that vehicle. As soon as the vehicle arrives in Winnipeg, the message will be forwarded to your wife."

"Thank you, AID. Keep me posted on that, will you?"

"Yes, Sir. Second message: Inbound Posleen battle globe heading east north east across the Pacific. Expect landings along the Western seaboard and inland, North to Point Arena, South to San Luis Obispo Bay, within fifty minutes."

* * *

It was closing time at the Riverbank Army Ammunition Plant, eight and a half kilometers North East of Modesto, but that hadn't stopped the machines as the civil service workers ignored the hooters and bells and continued working frantically.

At first, the government had quietly started stockpiling large quantities of the 7.62 ball and tracer ammunition that was the primary production output of the factory for the Army. Train car after train car had rolled through and been loaded with thousands of cases of the ammunition needed by the AIW infantry weapons.

Then came the initial landing warning in the morning, and the factory had gone into overdrive. The warehouse and docks were full to overflowing of the cased ammunition loads, but the trains weren't coming fast enough to bleed off the excess. Not that they were supposed to, the factory had its own local, home-grown, "defense strategy".

Then came the west coast's first landing warning, and the factory production had, if anything, gone *up* a further notch. Now, however, the trains had stopped and Army deuce-and-a-half trucks had moved in, even now were rolling through the enclosure, having two pallets of 7.62 ammo loaded via forklift and then rolling back out again.

But the machines assembling the ammo were still working faster than needed to supply the machines that were taking the fruits of their labor away. The excess production of bullets and powder was being stacked around the fences in a long pile behind hundreds of thousands of brass ingots, along with whatever heavy metal sheeting that could be found. Around and through the pile were being placed large quantities of combustibles and explosives ... and detcord. Lots and lots of detcord, because that was the secondary production output of the factory.

As months passed before the landings, the ring around the facility had got higher, and thicker, and more substantial.

The original fence around the Riverbank facility was over two and a half meter high and close on 1200 meters long. By the time that time ran out, just inside the original fence was a new, secondary fence that was a half meter shorter, a meter and a half thicker ... and some wag had painted "Front Towards Enemy" on the inside in meter and a half high characters.

* * *

The Battle Globe, or rather what was left of it, glided effortlessly up to the coast and split into thirty or so Battle Decs, each in turn fanning out to cover a wide area of the Northern California area.

The Globe had started out much larger, much more complete, but it had run into several of the converted frigates of the Earth orbit defense forces, and before destroying them had had a large portion of itself destroyed in turn. It had shed all the damaged landers and Command Decs and had reconfigured itself as best it could, but all told it had gone from several hundred of the Battle Decs to something slightly smaller than one-sixth its original size.

A one-sixth size Battle Globe is still at least a quarter million Posleen normals and more than 600 Kessentai.

As the space ship came in over the coast it began shedding single and multiple landers, which spread out and began to drop towards wherever there was enough terrain for them to land on.

The people in the Northern Central California Coast looked up and watched the invaders' ships as they passed high over head, and for the most part there was panic as many of those who were out and about tried to return home.

But for many, they had watched video of the East Coast landings on the news and the Internet. They understood that the only way to prevent their family and loved ones from being eaten by the invaders was to stand and fight. Those people were at least somewhat mentally prepared for what was now happening, and they turned to their vehicle cabs, and their trunks, and their gun cabinets, and brought out an infinitely variable collection of weapons, from medium and large bore handguns, to assault rifles bought on the black market, to shotguns.

As those singleton landers dropped and opened up to disgorge their complements of Posleen normals and lone Kessentai, they were engaged by whatever organized military units, law-enforcement and unorganized civilians that were on the scene and happened to be armed. The remaining civilians in the immediate area changed their status to instant refugee and made a run for it, covered in part by a mass of disorganized fire that took the Posleen by surprise.

While the Posleen had a vast superiority in weapons, they were still outnumbered at any moment by three or four to one—and each and every one of those pesky Threshkreen were carrying weaponry that, while not as flashy or high tech as those carried by the invaders, still carried enough bullets to drop an oolt.

Which point the defenders were also noting with glee. While a single 9mm pistol round wouldn't stop one of the horses, the thirty or forty of its mates coming in from every other direction would certainly do so.

And there were even enough sniper rifles around to put paid to the Kessentai who were aggressive enough to come out of their landers riding their tenar.

What it meant then was that for the most part, the singleton landers were vastly overwhelmed by the local forces. Battle Decs, however, that dropped their landers where they could support each other, succeeded in making beachheads throughout the area between the coast itself and the coastal mountain ranges. But even they found themselves in highly hostile terrain where even the pens where the Thresh lived would explode if they were entered injudiciously.

And then they found out what all the mountain valleys in the coastal ranges were good for. They were good for hiding artillery. And artillery likes nothing more than big, fat dumb landers to shoot at, where they don't have to worry about counter-battery fire.

For the most part, any landings between the coast and the coastal mountain ranges were enveloped, contained and destroyed in short order. Yes, there were massive casualties on the civilian human side. But the sacrifice they made to keep the Posleen bunched up long enough for the Army to show up with the big guns is what saved the day for that part of California.

But once the remains of the Globe passed over the coastal range and split in half, things were different. The sparseness of the populace coupled with the miles and miles of tactically flat terrain meant that the landers could drop anywhere, in any force, and not face any amount of significant resistance while they organized and moved out to their objectives.

The Globe commander seemed to realize this, and as it crested the range above Los Banos it turned North and split into two parts.

* * *

"What are they up to, Captain?" Lieutenant Colonel Kuzio was finishing his staff meeting when news of the Globes bifurcation came in over the brigade tactical net.

Captain Rodriquez was looking down at her notes when the question came. She looked up, frowning. "One half, the smaller one, appears to be heading towards Stockton, and will pass over it in approximately fifteen minutes. It's really moving slowly, much slower than we know they are capable of. Division thinks that from the small size of the Globe, and the indications of battle damage, that it is damaged in some way. Or, the commander of the ship has learned restraint. We'll probably never know.

"The second half is moving towards Turlock. I guess they want Turkey for dinner—"

"Turkey?" broke in the commander.

"Turkeys from Turlock, Sir. Turlock's primary export. If they land south of the Tuolumne, we can slow them down at the river. If north of it, then we'll only have the Stanislaus and a bunch of aqueducts to work with."

"Ok, but we really need to worry about the smaller bloc at the moment. Stockton is due West of here, and there are *no* significant terrain features between there and here and Phase Line Nickel." 'Here' was the small town of Farmington, where the command post was currently set up.

The battalion commander looked down at the floor of the schoolroom in which they were standing or sitting on the little people's desks. "Ok. First priority is the smaller one. Sixes?", he said, to get the company commander's attention. "Move out from the diamond to a line along highway 4, and then move up to the positions at Phase Line Cobalt. Don't go into the hull downs until you get word, though. I might need to swing you around to Nickel on the south front, based on what both halves do. If the small half passes north of Lodi, then they're out of 3d Brigade's Area of Operations, and into Somebody Else's Problem." The colonel looked around. "Questions? Suggestions? Points?"

"Infantry Support?" asked one of the company commanders.

"Sorry, we're organic for this one. Infantry are spread out all over hell and gone, because the overall defense plan says they should be. Further deponent sayeth not. If they drop into our AO, we will get some crunchies passing through lines. In what condition they are, again, further deponent sayeth not. Next question?"

"Refugee streams," said Captain Crupi, the S5. "They've already started coming up highway 4 and on through up into the mountains."

"Right, those would be the smart ones." responded the colonel. "They stay off the roads. This is all farmland, they walk through the orchards and along the drainage ditches. Orderly vehicles can pass

through. Anyone being disorderly can walk. This shouldn't be a problem since they widened the 4 from two lanes to four. Anything else?"

Captain Rodriguez had her AIDs ear bug on and was listening to something. "Sir, the small one is breaking up and landing. Looks like just south of Stockton ... Brigade confirms, the Metropolitan Airport."

"And the big one?"

"Still moving more Eastwards than North, Sir. Maybe pass just North of Turlock, North of the Tuolumne. Might continue beyond the Sierras, Sir."

"Ok, we ignore it for now. Boogie on out, Ladies and Gentlemen."

* * *

The minefields to their front were all clearly marked, because it was assumed that the horses couldn't read English or Spanish. That didn't stop the odd group of refugees from trying their luck, however. The only incident so far had a family group killing themselves by defeating a triple concertina wire fence, and detouring around a warning sign, and then triggering an anti-personnel mine when one of the children kicked it ... The mines were meant for the horses, so to solve the problem, one tank gunner from each platoon position was ordered to fire three round bursts from their co-axial 7.62 machine guns at anyone trying to not use a cleared channel.

Which meant that anyone not on a road ran the risk of catching a round fired either at them, or at someone else. Anyone who wanted to complain about this was offered a lift back to the Brigade Forward Headquarters in Modesto, which was currently in the state of being overrun by ninety thousand Posleen invaders.

Surprisingly, nobody took them up on the offer.

In addition to the tanks along the battle line, there were also several hundred bunkered manjacks, pre-emplaced by Army Corps of Engineer assets at the same time as they had built the tank hull-downs.

Each bunker had three high-capacity 7.62mm M60 machineguns, manjacks, each with its own 50,000 round battleboxes of ammo.

* * *

"Tango six-two, this is Tango four-eight, We've got a situation developing here, Sir, over" Tom said into the tactical radio set, as he looked down over a map projected by his AID.

There was a short pause, then a voice which Tom recognized as Birch's replacement. "Tango four-eight, this is Six-Two Foxtrot, wait, over."

Tom looked up from the hood of his hum-vee, where the map was being projected, to look out over the valley towards the sounds of thunder coming from the Stockton landing. Almost immediately, the radio squawked back to life.

"Tango four-eight, this is Tango six-two actual. Talk to me, Master Sergeant," replied Captain Rundle, still acting as the working S3. Division Headquarters had promised the battalion commander a

replacement S3 as soon as they could find one. Nobody, from the battalion commander down, was pressing them however, confident as they were in the team they had now.

"Sir, Stockton is being chewed up and spit out by the horses. I doubt we'll get anyone out of there who was still within the city limits when the landing hit dirt."

"How is this a problem for us?" Rundle sounded a bit peeved, but Tom knew it wasn't about his comments. He was probably still fighting off the Brigade Three's "helpful staff". "Less refugees. Improves the human genome. We're selecting for intelligence."

"Whoa. Bloodthirsty, Sir. But that isn't the problem. The other half of the lander looks like it is about to drop onto Turlock. They've been wandering around up there indecisively for a good ten minutes."

"Maybe they are trying to figure out what a turkey is?"

"No way, Sir. Posleen are a strict dichotomy: Can I eat that? Yes, No. Maybe they're having a turf war up there. Whatever. But if they get off their butts and land, that means that we'll be trying to entice both sets into Zinc. And if that happens, we'll do what we can to whittle them down, but I don't think we can do that from Cobalt."

"No, the Turkeys would roll right up our South flank. Suggestions?"

"We may need to pull back as far as Charon, Sir, before either the 'turkeys' or the ... the ... well, cows get here."

"Cows?"

"Only critter ever to come out of Stockton, Sir."

"Right. So you believe that if the cows turn this way at all after the turkeys land, then there is no way we can hold Cobalt."

"Right, Sir."

"Where are you right now, Master Sergeant?"

"With Bravo, Sir. They've got a pretty good sight line in the direction of the Stockton landings. Can't see all the way there, but can see a goodly distance."

"Ok, I'll get with the Six. Anything else?"

"Not at this time, Sir."

"Roger, Master Sergeant. Isn't what you are doing the job of the Assistant S3?"

"Fresh out of officers, Sir."

"Humph. Ok. Tango six-two, out."

* * *

The tank commander of tank Bravo Three Two stuck his head out of the hatch and looked around. Spotting the S3 NCOIC, he called him over. "Something odd on the thermals, Master Sergeant," said the staff sergeant. "You wanna take a look?"

"Sure, Sergeant. Any reason to hop into a tank nowadays is a good one. Let's see what you've got." Tom grabbed hold of the tow cable that was strapped to the outside of the turret to steady himself, as he stepped across the gap between the wall of the engineer-built hull down position and the M1Es fender.

He threw a momentary look at the quad-pod of 25mm 'Bushmaster' cannons on the near side of the turret and shrugged ruefully. He'd like to track down whoever it was that thought that up and slap him around a bit. Sure, the firepower inherent to eight bushmasters mounted coaxially on the turret sounded like a good idea. But did the guy know how much *damned Ammo* those things could go through? The 25mm ammo bunkers almost *doubled* the size of the turret, in both width and depth, and added almost a foot around the bustle rack, completely covering the blowoff panels for the main gun round bunkers.

And even then, the guns could go through *all* of the available ammo in less than *twenty seconds* of firing on full auto.

Probably some ex-infantry guy. Damned crunchies.

The tank commander had dropped down inside the turret and stood behind the breach of the main gun, the loader having scrunched further around to make room. Tom hopped up onto the turret to allow the gunner the ability to traverse the turret without having to worry about ripping the Master Sergeant's legs off. "Ok, Gunner. Show me what you are looking at."

"Right, Master Sergeant. See these glows here? Those are refugees, they were pretty clear a moment ago, but now they just seem to be standing there looking around." The gunner traversed and elevated the gun sights a bit to the left. "And this glow here is what it seems they are looking at. Any idea what that is?"

The thermal device showed a glowing spot just cresting the distant horizon momentarily before settling back down behind the hill. Tom reached to the side of the display and punched the magnify button just as it started to bob back up.

Tom froze as he recognized the thing. The Barwhon and Diess campaigns had generated a lot of intel over the past several years, much of which he'd been able to see as part of his various positions during that time, or from having been shown them by the S2 as 'Hey, wanna see something cool?' type video shots ... and even had found a lot of them on the internet using any number of civilian search engines.

What he was looking at was the perfect thermal signature of a tenar, one of the 'flying saucers' that the Posleen leader caste rode. He gulped. The vehicle was up in the air, and he doubted that it was traveling alone. Probably the mass of its oolt'os would be found just below the horizon created by the range of low hills just to its front. "Ok. Sergeant, take your hands off the cadillacs. Do. It. Now." Once the sergeant had clearly released the turret traverse and gun elevation handles, Tom continued. "Estimate the range on that, Sergeant. Do *not*, and I repeat, do *not* use the laser rangefinder."

"Um." The sergeant reached up and flipped the sight from thermal to visual, then magnified. "I dunno Master Sergeant. Maybe ten clicks?"

Tom grabbed his AID. "AID, I need the battalion artillery push and the FSO."

"Frequency enabled. Your call sign is Tango four-eight, the Battalion Fire Support Officer's call sign is Foxtrot eight-eight."

"Thanks. 88. How fitting." Tom looked down into the turret. "You'd better get back up here Sergeant. The show is now. AID, estimate angle and range to that tenar, and its offset from the nearest Target Reference Point."

"Yes, Master Sergeant. The Posleen vehicle is at TRP 3, left 300, up 300. Would you like me to call it in?"

"No, thanks, AID." Tom looked out over the sea of grass, to where he could just make out the floating vehicle that was moving slightly towards them, and slightly to the North. There were now signs of movement along the range of hills. No doubt, the accompanying oolt'os. "No, AID, I think that this one is on me. Foxtrot eight-eight, this is Tango four-eight, adjust fire over."

"Roger, Tango four-eight, this is Foxtrot eight-eight, authenticate Alpha Tango over."

"AID?"

"Romeo, Master Sergeant."

"Foxtrot eight eight, this is Tango four-eight. I authenticate Romeo. From objective Deimos. TRP 3, left 200 up 200, horses in the open, over."

"Roger Tango four-eight, welcome to the net. From Deimos, TRP 3, left 200 up 200, horses in the open. Six rounds One-Fife-Fife Super Quick fused HE, wait over."

Tom watched as the tenar moved towards the offset that he gave. "C'mon, c'mon," he mumbled.

"Shot, over," came the voice of Foxtrot eight-eight out of the AID.

"Shot, out," replied Tom. Far to his rear, he could hear the sound of a single cannon battery firing.

After several seconds, the voice from the AID said "Splash, over."

"Splash, out," replied Tom. Off in the distance a perfect hexagon of 155 HE rounds detonated, just beyond the range of hills. Tom could clearly see the broken body of one of the horses being thrown clear by the blast. "Fire for effect. Drop 500 right 200 repeat."

"This is eight-eight, roger. Fire for effect, drop 200 right 50 repeat." Tom watched the impacts through his binoculars, continuing to call in corrections as the mass of Posleen normals swarmed out of the way of the incoming artillery.

As this was happening, the tank commander had called up his platoon leader and had made a sitrep. The third platoon leader had repeated it up to the Bravo company commander. The Bravo commander had duly notified the Battalion S3 shop, who didn't bother notifying the battalion commander, because the battalion commander had one of his auxiliary radios on that same frequency.

"Tango-Tango-Tango, this is Tango six-six. Battalion fire! Beehive! Tanks, troops in the open! Range eight-five-zero-zero meters! At my command!"

And fifty eight tank loaders loaded fifty eight 120mm anti-personnel flechette rounds and announced "Up!" almost as one voice ...

And fifty eight tank drivers started fifty eight turbine engines ...

And fifty eight tank commanders designated enemy concentrations or enemy tenars as their pre-configured orders determined ...

And fifty eight gunners laid in their guns on the targets so designated ...

"Master Sergeant!" yelled the tank commander of Bravo Three Two over the sound of the turbine engine and the turret's hydraulics replenisher which chose that exact moment to squeal.

"Yeah?" replied Tom, as he continued to look down range through his binoculars.

"You might want to get down, Sir. All hell is about to break loose!"

Tom replayed what he had listened to but not heard in his mind. "Holy *shit* . Roger that, Sergeant. You keep your head down, too!" Tom jumped down off the tank and sprinted over to the hum-vee. He climbed in and started rummaging through his pockets for hearing protectors. Beatty handed him a pair, then started the vehicle's engine.

"Thanks," Tom said, taking the little spongy buds. "You ever see a battalion fire, Beatty?" he asked as he poked them into his ears.

"Yes, Sir. Fort Irwin, couple years back. A thing of beauty. It's a thing to warm even a tanker's heart."

In the back seat of the vehicle was an array of radio receivers. Tom turned up the sound on the one tuned to the battalion frequency.

"What's he waiting for, Sir?" asked Beatty.

"Probably a high enough concentration of the horses. Probably wishing we had some sort of air support to at least get a picture of what's happening out there."

"Fire! And keep on firing you sorry sons a' bitches!"

And fifty eight gunners pulled fifty eight pairs of triggers, and fifty eight 120mm smoothbore guns fired, almost simultaneously.

It was, as Private Beatty said, a thing of beauty.

A thing of beauty that lasted for almost a second, before all hell broke loose.

"Holy *shit*! *Get us out of here!* " barked Tom, as the mass of Posleen returning fire rent the air above their heads.

Beatty threw the vehicle into reverse and skidded around in a half circle. As soon as he was clear, he rocketed off back down the hill towards the S3s current location.

"Sir!"

"Yeah, Beatty?"

"You realize I've heard you say 'Holy shit' at least three times in the past ten minutes? You don't normally swear, Sir."

"Beatty?"

"Yes, Sir?"

"Why do you keep calling me Sir? I work for a living."

"Yes, Sir. One hears things, Sir."

"You call me 'Sir' one more time, Beatty, and I'll cap your ass myself."

"You wouldn't do that, Sir."

"You think?"

"Yes, Sir. You might need me to save your butt again sometime."

* * *

The 'beehive' flechette round had a secondary timer on it that determined how far it had flown, based on nominal speed of flight from the time of firing. The top of the round had a dial on it that the loader set to the distance required, generally about fifty to a hundred meters in front of where the enemy infantry concentration was found.

Once the round reached its range, it detonated, spraying thousands upon thousands of finned, four centimeter long aluminum darts out in a cone in the direction of travel. It had a spread not unlike a shotgun round.

While one or even five of the darts hitting one of the Posleen was not a sure fire way to kill the horse, hitting one of them with a thirty or forty certainly was. And since the Kessentai rode on top of *open-topped* vehicles, it meant that they were just as vulnerable to the weapon as their normals.

Beehive rounds weren't as classy as a Barrett .50 caliber sniper rifle, but they did the job ... and since there were still several thousand aluminum darts that would miss the prime target, they were almost guaranteed to still hit something. Consequently, the first wave of Posleen that met the 'C Forty Niners' on phase line Cobalt suffered almost 70% casualties in the opening salvo.

Unfortunately, it also meant that the score of waves coming up behind them now knew where the enemy was. Almost immediately, Posleen survivors from the first wave, as well as the follow on waves snapped around and returned fire.

Most of the normals in this group were carrying the Posleen equivalent to a flechette shotgun, and were miles out of range. There were, however, those in the crowd with 1mm and the odd 3mm railgun, as well as the much more dangerous automatic HVM guns and plasma cannons.

When ever one of the centaurs fired a plasma cannon, however, it was like lighting a beacon inside the

tanks' thermal sights. Those horses so designated received a lot of counter fire and were quickly taken out of the equation. Even then, the plasma guns had to be *fired* first before the tanks could counter them.

Whenever a kessentai got sloppy and popped up too high on his tenar, they would acquire special attention, also. But the HVM launchers amongst the enemy were difficult to spot amongst the masses down range, and it was those that were starting to take their toll. Brava Three Two was one of the first of the First of the 149th to end up on the wrong end of an automatic HVM, which stitched its turret and peeled the top six inches back like a can of sardines.

One of the benefits of the rounds being hypervelocity, however, was that they didn't tend towards spalling the inside face of the armor. The staff sergeant tank commander, unfortunately, happened to be popped up and using his binocs for a direct look when it happened. The hypervelocity rounds cut him in half. Surprisingly, the vehicle was still running, and without prompting the driver kicked it into reverse and backed back down the back side of the hill their hull down position had been cut into.

With the top of the turret gone, so to were the gun sights. With no way to aim the main gun, the tank swung around and rabbitted back up the track to the road. It swung by the company command post to let them know they were out of combat and then continued up highway four. It wouldn't stop until it was beyond phase line Zinc and the Farmington Dam.

Behind them, the tanks of Bravo company, as well as those of Bravo's sister companies, continued to pour fire down upon their enemies. And all the while the artillery continued to pound the enemy concentrations.

Over the next twenty minutes, thirty five thousand Posleen normals and over seventy Kessentai would die as the massed fire of the battalion artillery and direct fire from the tanks rained HE from 155mm and 8in guns and 120mm mortars, 120mm beehive and sabot rounds, and 25mm HEAP from over four hundred bushmaster auto cannons.

During that twenty minutes, a large collection of broken up units of infantry and support groups passed through the lines, coming from the fall of Stockton. The support units continued on up into the foothills, while those portions of the infantry still able to fight took up positions along cobalt.

As the centauroids pulled up close and the tanks had run out of their primary ammo, the fight degenerated down to .50 caliber and 7.62 from the co-ax and loader's and commander's machine guns, as well as the bushmasters from the infantry's Bradley AFVs and AIWs. The horses were having a hard time digging out the bunkered up weapons platforms and hunkered down infantrymen.

And all the while, the artillery continued to grind the horses into dog meat.

And then the other Globe-half landed, just South of Turlock.

" *Tango Tango Tango, this is six-sixacting. Bugout! I say again, bugout!*". As the surviving tanks pulled off phase line cobalt and turned to retreat back to copper, the mechanized infantry jumped back into their vehicles and followed. Of the 58 tanks on the line at the beginning of the engagement, only one in three made the trip and of those only two-thirds were still able to fight effectively. Over the preceding twenty minutes, the battalion's combat strength had been reduced to that of a single armor company.

Behind them, the pre-emplaced manjacks opened fire to cover their retreat as the first of the horses reached the minefield.

* * *

Tom found LTC Kuzio in the classroom being used as the field hospital, being treated for significant second and third degree burns related to plasma cannon fire. "Doesn't look too bad, Sir," he said, peering intently at the man's face.

"Fuck you, Tom. How do we look?" the man said, voice hazy under the influence of GalTech pain killers.

"The landings weren't at full strength, which is why we are still alive. Had that been a full Globe, we would have been staring at over two million of the beasties. As it is, the total amount is probably only on the order of a quarter million made it into the San Joaquin Valley.

"Surviving units are moving back to copper, where the battalion ammo details are waiting with quick-load pallets." Tom rubbed his eyes and sat on the edge of a nearby desk. "The second landing came down South of the Tuolumne, so they've got to get across that, then the Stanislaus. We've asked the Southern units to not kick the anthill yet, to give us a chance to ammo up and get some food in us."

"What have we got?"

"Thirteen tanks still at full capabilities. Another five are engineering failures, and are being worked on right now. And another six are combat damaged beyond the ability of local maintenance to repair. They are being hauled back up to depot maintenance at Murphy's."

"Dead and wounded?"

"Of the 232 tank crew, 173 are dead, another fifteen, including yourself, are wounded and won't be returning to duty any time soon. That leaves 44 still doing their jobs. We've rounded out the crews using company assets, company hum-vee drivers, etc to ensure that the eighteen tanks we have left are full up on crews."

"Command structure?"

Tom rubbed his forehead. "XOs dead, Sir. So's CPT Rundle. Alpha company is gone. Delta has one tank left active and two of the combat casualties on the way to depot maintenance. Charlie and Bravo are the only companies that still have officers, Beckman from Charlie is the only surviving commander. Bravo's got that fresh-out-a AOBC two LT that arrived last week.

"And I believe the rest of the staff section officers are still around. Sergeant Major Timpton is around someplace. Oh, and we've picked up some infantry assets from around the Stockton area."

The battalion commander lay there for a moment, not saying anything. Finally, he sighed. "Ok, consolidate everyone into two light combined arms companies. Either armor heavy or one armor one infantry heavy, depending on how many infantry we've got."

"Ok, Sir. One armor, one infantry."

"Based on the enemy strengths, put the infantry heavy company facing the lighter front."

"That'd be the Stockton side, Sir. We gave them a beating. G2 thinks the infantry accounted for about 30% of the initial landing around Stockton before the retreat, and then we took out 75% of the pozzies

that came North and East. There might still be 50,000 of the centaurs out there to our West, but they are busy in Stockton and trying to avoid the artillery fire." Tom didn't think about *how* they were busy in Stockton. "It's the Turlock landing that's going to be hairy. That one might be at least twice the size of the Stockton one."

"But they've got two rivers to cross and have three times the distance to travel to get here," said the colonel quietly. "And the better part of a division to get through." At the door to the room, there was a disturbance, which the colonel seemed to expect.

Tom looked over and saw the S1 coming through the door. "Good Evening, Captain Harris," Tom said, politely, albeit tiredly.

The captain simply nodded at Tom in response and said the battalion commander "I've got the orders, Sir."

"Do it," replied the commander. He turned to Tom and said "You will sign where you are told to sign, Master Sergeant."

Startled by the unexpected order, Tom blinked momentarily. "Yes, Sir?" he said, ending in a rising note.

The S1 started laying out sheets of paper. "Sign here, please, Master Sergeant Weaver," he said, dryly, holding out a pen.

"What is it, Sir?" Tom asked the S1 as he took the pen.

Before the captain could answer, the battalion commander said harshly "I said sign it, Weaver. I didn't say read it."

Tom straightened up and looked at the commander. Just from the way it was being done, he knew what was happening.

"Now, Weaver."

"I'm not--"

"Are you a warrior, damn you, or aren't you? Sign the damned papers, Weaver, and that's a damned order," yelled the commander, before collapsing back down in a fit of coughing. The attending medic rushed up to check on her patient.

Tom looked down at the papers, his face hardening, and started signing.

* * *

The Posleen landing South of Turlock was induced to crossing the Tuolumne River by the simple expedient of shooting at them. This got the entire mass moving Northwards.

The river itself hadn't flooded as high as was hoped, the time of the year meaning that the reservoirs were well below capacity. So the horses were able to cross carefully when they found the previously arranged fords.

Then they moved north through Modesto, which was almost a ghost town given the large streams of

refugees that had fled since the Stockton landing. Modesto, they found, had the annoying tendency to explode also.

It was a large, mostly frustrated band of Posleen that first found a trail of brass ingots leading to Riverbank, and decided to follow it. Brass wasn't as exciting as gold and other of the heavier metals, but the net still considered it a valuable commodity. So they gathered it up.

Other groups found other trails, and since all the trails led to the same place, there was the occasional fratricidal dust up as squabbles happened. Eventually the kessentai sorted out who could lay claim to what and, having decided that the fence enclosed area that they now surrounded appeared to be the location of large quantities of the ingots, they charged it.

And the world's largest claymore mine exploded in their faces. And then yet more of the *fuscirto* Threshkreen started shooting at them again from across the river.

* * *

Refugees of the infantry and armor units from their south started trickling in the following morning, first heavily damaged but still mobile tracked vehicles with skeleton crews, but then combat worthy but short on ammo Abrams and Bradleys, followed eventually by equipment fighting a running battle with the front edges of the vastly reduced Posleen hoard from the Turlock landings.

Major Tom Weaver took them all in, strengthened his lines around Copper, passed along the damaged and wounded and refugees through and up into the hills. Ammo wasn't a problem yet, so every piece of combat ordinance was reloaded with its basic load. By the time the invaders reached phase line Copper, he would be back up to full strength as an Armor battalion, as well as having at least two companies of mechanized infantry in support, and all the artillery that he could want.

Everyone else was passed along to phase line Zinc, and the Drains.

What he didn't want, however, but what he was looking at getting in the very near future, was close on to two hundred thousand centaur invaders.

The bright side of that equation was that the invaders had started out with twice that many.

* * *

Phase line Zinc ran North-South across a draw that ran Eastwards up into the foothills of the Sierras, due East of Farmington, along highway 4. The draw started out as a single cut between two high walls, but split immediatly into a pair, one running North of East, the other running South East. Collectively and individually called 'The Drains'.

Highway 4 followed the Northern of the two drains, and ran between the two natural and man-made walls that defined the draw. The area between the walls was Objective Hammer.

The South East half ran for over four kilometers of high-walled canyon, called Objective Throat, before it opened out into a many-lobed flat area behind the Farmington Dam. The flat area was part of the flood control plain that made up a large section of the spill area of several large reservoirs further up the mountain side. The flood plain itself was bounded by *serious* natural terrain. The plain was given the name of Objective Anvil.

Major Weaver and the 1-149 Armor's job was to poke the Posleen in the nose to get their attention (which Tom conceded, was much easier *done* than *said*), and then to make a hasty withdrawal up towards the Anvil. As the Posleen followed, they would be serviced first by the First Brigade, 40th Infantry Division, Mechanized, who currently sat on the high ground in engineer built bunkers and firing positions along both sides of the Throat.

Any Posleen who wandered up towards the Hammer was entitled to the services of the First Brigade, similarly emplaced.

But because the bulk of the forces were arrayed around the Anvil, that is where the Posleen needed to be. For that reason, the C-Forty Niners would need to make their withdrawal under fire, because anything else would risk causing the Posleen force to lose interest, and not make it to the Anvil, where the 41st Infantry Division, in its entirety, was to be found.

In engineer constructed deensive positions, on the high ground.

All told there were about nine thousand "Shooters" arrayed around the hills, along with several thousand manjack emplacements, several *tens* of thousands of anti-personelle mines, and the odd civilian refugee who had brought their own weapons to the party.

All told, it came out to about a 20:1 ratio of horses to shooters. Tom did the math, and decided it was going to be close.

* * *

The view down over phase line Copper was unnerving. The horses, still at over five miles distance, looked like nothing more than Amazonian army ants as they flowed northwards across the grass cow pastures. Even through the binoculars, Tom was having difficulty making out individual Posleen, however the odd God-King on his Flying Saucer stood out like a metallic leaf against the sickly yellow background created by the mass of normals.

Almost continuous artillery fire landed amongst the massed invaders, but they flowed over, around and through the momentary interruptions like a lake around rain drops.

"Entertain a question, Sir?"

"Sure," Tom replied, without dropping the binoculars.

"You told that gunner from Bravo company to estimate the range to the saucer out at Cobalt. You didn't let him use the laser range finder. Why?"

Tom didn't answer for a moment. "I dunno. Those things are supposed to have an excellent sensor suite. I know that our passive devices, like the thermal sights, don't register on them except as just a power source. But I don't know how they'd react if you bounced a laser off of them. They might consider that a hostile act and react immediately." Tom shrugged, finally bringing the binoculars down to look at Beatty. "Didn't want to risk starting the furball early."

Private Beatty nodded his understanding, and went back to staring down range through the hum-vee's windscreen.

"That's the second time you've done that."

"Done what, Sir."

"Commented about something I said, but I don't remember you being there when I said it."

"Oh, that. I think your AID likes you. It broadcasts everything you say to this radio, here," the driver said, pointing over his shoulder at one of the PRC receivers behind his back. "Has done, ever since you took down Birch."

"AID?"

"Yes, Major Weaver?"

"Is that true?"

"I don't broadcast everything, Sir."

"Thanks ... I think." Tom brought the binocs back up and looked at the mass of horses. "AID, battalion push, please."

"Enabled, Sir."

"Thank you--AID, what's the battalion callsign today?"

"Romeo One Victor, Sir. You are officially Seven-Three and your driver is 'echo'."

"Thanks. Victor-Victor-Victor! This is Victor six-six. Remember. Half your ammo loadouts, then disengage and retreat to the throat. No resupply this side of 'game over, dude.' ... Victor, this is Victor six-six. Engage, out. AID! Roll the thunder."

And with that, the Five hundred men and women of Task Force Copper engaged 200,000 Posleen with their direct fire weapons. All the while, two divisions worth of artillery rained fire upon the invaders' heads.

Tom sighed. "Okay, Beatty, take us to the first line of the Throat. We'll probably need to be standing there to catch the retreating units and make sure their guns are pointed in the right direction."

Fifteen very long and very loud minutes later, vehicles started pulling off the line and retreating back from Copper into the Throat. The first vehicles to arrive were guided into the first line at the mouth of the draw, once those positions were filled the follow on units were guided up the right hand draw to the positions there.

Eventually, no more vehicles left Copper, as the only vehicles left on Copper were burning cheerfully.

As the horses came up over the top of the berm that marked the phase line, they were engaged by the line at the mouth, again with one half their remaining ammo. This had the correct effect, and the wave of horses turned eastwards.

The 120mm smoothbore loaded with a sabot round is just as effective as a .50 caliber sniper rifle ... and has a range that is four times longer. By the time the Posleen wave crested the berm, most of the God-Kings from the mass were no longer living, or had gotten down off their saucers having found them

to be bullet magnets.

A lot of the horses in the mass were, by this time, effectively feral, un-bonded to God-Kings because their God-King had been killed. That didn't stop them from following the mass towards the fire coming from between the two hilltops.

As the mass turned, the line at the mouth backed out of their positions and fled up the Throat, bypassing the second line.

As the horses entered the mouth, the second line got their attention and then also fled up the Throat.

And the artillery continued to pound them as the horses turned to follow.

"Will you look at that," said Tom from his position with the second line as they fell back. Edward Beatty, currently serving as the Battalion Commander's hum-vee driver was a bit unhappy about being the only unarmored vehicle amongst the two platoons' worth of tanks and infantry AFVs.

He did not 'look at that'. "Busy drivin', Sir. What else should I be looking at?"

"They bought it. Private? Do not hesitate to outrun the tank line. I'm beginning to feel a bit exposed here ..."

"Yes, *Sir!*" he said, jamming the accelerator to the floor.

"AID, what do we have left?"

"Twenty four tanks, eighteen AFV. Ammo supplies read about 25% across the board, Major."

"Ok. Battalion push ... Victor this is Victor six-six. Get behind the dam and back on line. Use up every last bit of ammo you have, than head for the flood basin egress points. Do not dawdle, and don't wait for stragglers. Six-six, out."

"How many you think will make it, Sir?" asked Beatty, concentrating hard on the gravel road they were following.

Tom, eyes closed, didn't reply.

* * *

"AID, what do we have left?"

"Six tanks, twelve AFV, Major. Ammo supplies read 0% across the board."

Tom opened his eyes as they sped across the flood plain. The wave of invaders were still several hundred meters short of the dam, but they were being hammered by the artillery, the bunkered manjacks, and 2d Brigade. Tom hoped that it would keep them beat back enough to allow the remains of his task force to get "around the corners" and to the egress points.

The egress points started out as zigzag tunnels, just wide enough for a human. Survivors would abandon their vehicles and run for it on foot.

Also slowing down the horses was the problem treacherous footing, of trying to run over the top of 50,000 of your dead fellows. And where there wasn't a dead centaur, the ground was six inch deep slick mud made up of two parts dust and one part Posleen blood.

The hum-vee pulled up at one of the corners and waited, watching as the remaining vehicles bolted for the exits. Along the dam were a score of burning vehicles. Any wounded who had made it out of the tanks and AFVs alive had either made it to one of the retreating AFVs, or hadn't bothered. He could still see at least ten people, prone and firing from the reverse slope of the dam.

"Idiots," Tom said, over the thundering drone of combat.

"Maybe not, Sir," replied his driver. Beatty pointed off to one side, to where an AFV stood, exit ramp down, even with the infantrymen, below the level of the dam, but not moving. "I saw that Bradley move. I think they are picking up the stragglers."

"I thought it was a maintenance casualty," Tom said.

Just then the line of infantry scrabbled backwards, almost as one, and dropped back down the flood plain, and it was clear that they were, in fact, all wounded to some extent or other. They flooded into the AFV, and once inside it took off like a rabbit as its ramp came back up. It headed for the nearest corner.

Tom was watching where the fire from the surrounding hillsides was concentrated, using it to judge where the front of the Posleen wave was. "I don't ..."

Horses began cresting the dam, using the same access ramps that the human vehicles had used earlier. The fleeing AFV's bushmaster was pointed over the back deck, and it opened fire as soon as there were targets. Horses exploded backwards as they caught 25mm explosive rounds, knocking follow ons back also.

Unfortunately, one of the invaders not so blessed happened to be carrying a 3mm railgun, and that horse turned to fire at the fleeing AFV. One of the incoming rounds hit the Bradley and tumbled it, end over end, where it came to a halt and then suffered secondary explosions.

"Idiot," said Tom.

"Hang on, Sir!" said Beatty, as he floored the accelerator and the hum-vee zipped backwards. As soon as they had the basalt wall between them and the Posleen, he spun the wheel and bolted off towards the clearly marked exit point.

* * *

Later, Tom sat in the canteen, in his grimy, sweat soaked uniform, listlessly eating a bowl of soup. In the distant background, he could hear the thunder of combat as the Posleen came onto the anvil and were hammered into paste. In a distant corner of the room, Beatty sat staring disinterestedly at his own meal.

Tom sat, wondering why they had all had to die. They had been that close to safety.

There was a disturbance at the doorway and Tom looked up with dead, read-rimmed eyes to see Colonel Binghamton come in, followed closely by a Lieutenant Colonel who looked vaguely familiar. Also in the group was a very, *very* angry looking CSM Timpton.

The brigade commander looked around the room, and then, seeing Tom, headed in his direction. "Good afternoon, Major Weaver. May we bother you for a moment?"

"Certainly, Sir," Tom said, pushing his half-eaten soup away and standing to acknowledge the man. As the group sat, Tom nodded at the Sergeant Major, seeing him for the first time since leaving the Modesto barracks.

Timpton nodded in return, however did not lose the angry, burning glare that he leveled at no one in particular.

"I don't believe you've met my new S3, Lieutenant Colonel Feckette," said the colonel, introducing the third man.

Tom froze, then turned to look at the man directly. At the name, Tom remembered who he was. Years of mental meanderings about 'what I'd do if...' played back over his mind. And he grinned evilly. "Holy, Ape Fucking Shit, Sir. It's good to see you again. And how's the family?"

Timpton froze, and then burst out laughing as LTC Feckette turned red in anger in turn. "Do we know each other, Major?"

"Well, *shit*, Sir! I guess you don't recognize me, it's been, what, fourteen years? I took my wife's name when we married, which is probably it. You might remember me as *First* Lieutenant Tomas *Paulson*, Sir," said Tom, standing and offering his hand to shake.

The light colonel snapped a look at Timpton, who was still failing to control his mirth at Tom's reaction, realizing it for what it was.

"And still an L-T-C, I see," Tom said to Feckette, looking at his pristine, pressed BDU uniform, internally suppressed anger making him careless. "Shit, well, don't worry, Sir. The promotion opportunity for *combat* vets around here just went through the roof, you know. *Christ*, I started out this mess as an E5, just yesterday I was a Master Sergeant. You should make Colonel in no time. Sir."

Every time Tom put stress on a word, it was a calculated insult. Tom's own belief in God was based on "Don't bother me, and I won't bother You", but he really detested anyone who waved their beliefs in your face and then used it to justify their own actions.

Tom turned back to the Colonel. "S3, Sir? What happened to Lieutenant Colonel Jubal?"

Colonel Binghamton frowned, looking back and forth between the evilly grinning Tom, and CSM Timpton, and the apoplectic Feckette. "Lieutenant Colonel Kochan was killed in an auto accident last night. Colonel Jubal's my new XO. Am I missing something here?"

"Long story, Sir," replied Tom. "What can I do for you Sir? You obviously came down here personally to find me."

"The horses are figuring out that to head up to the Anvil is to die. So they've started looking elsewhere. We need you to go out and kick the anthill again."

Tom looked hard at the Colonel, then nodded. "Okay, Sir. Can do. What have I got to work with?"

"We've reconstituted two companies worth of the 1-149 Armor. Your still the battalion CO ... which

reminds me." The colonel reached into a pocket and pulled out silver oak leaves and tossed them onto the table. "Battalion Sixes are Lieutenant Colonels. General Dekalli is the authority for this, but I suggested it." As the rank insignia hit the table in front of Tom, Timpston collapsed into helpless laughter, his anger totally dissolved.

Tom looked over at Feckette. "See?" he said.

* * *

Thirty one tanks sat in rows, turbine engines idling over waiting for the word to move out. The tanks hadn't been the problem, tracking down enough qualified crewman had. Many of the vehicles had three person crews, the loader position being taken over by the gunner, and the tank commander firing the weapons from the TC position.

Of the ninety nine men and women in the vehicles, exactly two had been in the 1-149th two days previously. Both had worked in the S3 shop, one as the NCOIC, the other as one of the hum-vee drivers.

Tom was looking over the maps one last time. The Posleen force had backed off from the Mouth and were in the process of consolidating or reorganizing, or whatever it was that the horses did.

The ones out there hadn't been routed, they had been the ones with the God-Kings who were smart enough not to enter the draw in the first place.

Tom's job was to take his two companies down through the Hammer, poke the remaining Posleen in the nose, and then retreat back up the hill. He was to lead the enemy up the Hammer, because the ammunition was critical on the Throat and Anvil sides, and because the manjacks on the Hammer side were still available.

Posleen plasma cannon could take out the manjack bunkers, and so the bunkers on the other side had been reduced to blasted and scorched rubble during the fighting. Tom's job was to take thirty one tanks out into the jaws of over sixty thousand remaining Posleen invaders, and kick them in the tonsils. These were the smart ones, and poking them in the nose might not be enough.

"Victor, this is Victor six-six ..." Tom started to say, but then saw a hum-vee come rushing up.

A figure hopped out of the still moving vehicle and ran up to the tank. Without permission, he hopped up onto the front fender, moved over to the loader's position and told the woman there to get into the gunner's seat.

"What are you doing here, Timpston?" asked Tom, not in the mood for games.

Timpston didn't say anything, just moved into the loaders position and put the spare CVC over his head and ears. "Good evening, Sir. Permission to ride along?"

"Get out of here, Toby."

"Sorry, Sir? There must be something wrong with this helmet. The intercom doesn't seem to be receiving. Daylight's burnin' Sir. Don't you think we should be out of here?"

Tom frowned at the sergeant major. "Remind me to kick your ass when we get back. *Victor, this is*

Victor six-six, wedge by company, Alpha, then Bravo. Move out! " Tom waited while Alpha company pulled out of the bivouac, moved on line and then vee'd out into an echelon. "Driver, move out," he said over the intercom. "Pull in behind the Alpha point vehicle ... Stay back about three tank lengths."

Behind them, Bravo pulled out and formed up.

Normally, a maneuver like this by a scratch built unit could expect to go to hell in a hand basket in a hurry. Coordination of this nature would require weeks of practice before a unit showed any sign of coherency. Practice, or GPS computers and route finding software built into the engine speed and steering controls.

Tom found that he liked the new navigation software that the drivers had to work with. It made ARTEPs a breeze with the purely mechanical stuff, and let the teams concentrate on the important stuff like gunnery practice.

As the two wedges passed out of the Hammer into the Mouth, heading due West, the tanks' thermal sights started picking up hotspots. "Victor, this is Vic-six-six. Alpha, echelon left. Bravo echelon right. I will be the point. *Battalion fire! Whatever's loaded! Whatever's moving! At my command!* "

"You call that a fire command, Sir?" asked Beatty from the driver's compartment over the intercom, laughing hysterically.

"Sabot up!" announced Timplon, as he loaded the round and pushed the safety forward into the armed position.

"Sabot indexed!" replied the gunner. "Saucer Identified!"

"Fire!"

"Target!" announced the gunner a moment later, as a distant tenar disintegrated and then exploded with the actinic glare of an antimatter containment failure.

"Gunner, six rounds Beehive, Troops!" yelled Tom over the intercom, over the ripping sounds of the coax quad-pod bushmasters.

Tom popped his head out of the turret momentarily and looked around, counting burning tracks as return fire picked off members of the thundering herd. Thirty seconds later, the gunner announced "Rounds complete! Gunner! Co-ax! Troops!" and opened back up with the quad-pod.

"Victor, Vic-six-six! About FACE! Forward MARCH! Quick time MARCH!"

Eighteen tanks spun around in narrow bends, their turrets remaining pointed in the direction of the enemy thanks to their four layer stabilization equipment. Two others, who'd had their antennae shot away, continued towards the enemy for several seconds longer until their crews noticed that they were now alone. By that time, the Posleen sensors had noticed them. Neither succeeded in making their turns before they exploded under the concentrated HVM and plasma cannon fire.

Behind them, the hornets nest followed.

Tom popped his head back out and looked around again. He didn't see any more tanks burning, other than the ones that were facing forward, and it looked like they had thrown off the scent. "Victor, slow

down. Don't outrun the pursuit. If we do this wrong, we're just going to have to do it again!" He flipped the toggle switch over to intercom. "Driver, slow down."

The Mouth was approaching quickly, but now the hoard of invaders could keep up.

"TC," yelled the gunner through the intercom. "We're out of 25mm co-ax."

"Roger. Use up the beehive. TC, .50 cal, troops," Tom said, grabbing the controls for the commander's .50 caliber machinegun.

Several exciting minutes later, Beatty spoke up "There's the Mouth, Sir!"

"Thanks. Ammo check?"

CSM Timpson did a quick check. "Two 120mm Sabot. Co-ax 7.62 full up. Loader's 7.62 full up."

"Right, fire the two sabot, then go to co-ax, loader's 7.62. The Ma-Deuce is out, but I can't take the time to--"

There was a massive concussion to their left, as the wing tank on that side caught an HVM and their remaining ammo cooked off, throwing the turret clear, as the tank went up in flames.

Before anyone could react, however, the same centaur HVM gun put a round through the vehicle currently carrying the designation six-six. The round entered the turret just to the right of the main gun, passed through the gun sights without noticeably slowing, decapitated the gunner and ripped off the commander's left leg before exiting out the back of the turret where it eventually impacted with the distant wall at the back of the Mouth.

"Holly SHIT! What was *that* " yelled Beatty.

"Tom's hit! DRIVE DAMMIT!" Timpson grabbed Tom and pulled him down to the turret floor, yanked off his belt and tried to get a tourniquet around his upper thigh.

The vehicle lurched forward, moving quickly up to its top governed speed of 60 miles an hour, and Beatty guided over and up onto the highway 4 road bed. He ignored what the tracks of the sixty ton vehicle would be doing *to* the road, however.

The damage to Tom's leg was too high up, Timpson found, and he had to press on the pressure point on the hip to stop the blood flow instead. By the glow of the turret lights and molten metal, he could see the gunners head bouncing around down by her feet. He looked away.

"Smaj?"

"Yeah, Beatty?"

"I think you should tell anyone else to bugout, too."

Timpson grabbed the toggle at his ear. "Victor, this is Victor six-six lima. *BUGOUT! I say again, BUGOUT!*"

"Is he going to make it, smaj?"

"I don't know."

* * *

"This came last night, Sergeant Major. Have you seen it?"

"No, Sir." Sergeant Major Timpson sat outside the hospital, on a park bench, smoking a cigarette. It was the first one he'd had in twenty years. He'd stopped, because a young Spec 4 had asked him to.

He'd been impressed enough by the kid to do so.

Colonel Binghamton handed the man a single page of computer print-out, which he read. Slowly his hand dropped back to his lap.

"Do you think he knew?"

"I don't know. Now neither will."

Private Beatty sat on the wet grass watching the sunrise. He was momentarily tempted to look over his shoulder and say something.

* * *

To: General Arkady Dekalli, Commanding
From: Canada/US RAP, Winnipeg Office
Date: Sat, 16 Oct 2004 16:42:03 PDT
Subject: Info Request 041016:091014:16

Dear Sir:

Your request for information regarding the status and whereabouts of Caithness Paulson-Weaver, Spouse of LTC Tomas Paulson-Weaver, Allison Paulson-Weaver, their daughter, and Edward Paulson-Weaver, their son is as follows:

Caithness Paulson-Weaver: Killed in action involving Refugee Train #041015-AXT, Sat, 9 Oct 2004, enroute from Churchill to Winnipeg, engaged from orbit by Posleen kinetic energy weapon. Identification through DNA records supplied by British consulate in Toronto.

Allison Paulson-Weaver: Missing, presumed killed.

Edward Paulson-Weaver: Missing, presumed killed.

Due to the nature of the attack, and assuming that the children would have been in the same compartment with the mother, the Refugee Assistance Program believes that the children died at the same time as their mother. Since the Posleen used a KEW on the train, and there are no DNA records available for the children, it is unlikely that their bodies will be positively identified.

We are sorry to bring this news to you. Our condolences to LTC Paulson-Weaver, should you see him.

/s/

Allison Paquin,
Refugee Assistance Program,
Canada/US (Winnipeg)

Task Force Smith

Shane Gries

Shane is a captain in the Army, currently stationed in Wisconsin. Prior to that he was a company commander in Korea. Who would have guessed??

Diess IV

0340 Hours May 18th , 2002 AD
Phase Line "Axe"

Steve felt someone gently nudging his shoulder and heard a *voice* through a sleepy haze.

"Sir, it's Manchu Six on the radio for you; are you awake?"

He opened his eyes, unzipped his fart-sack, and slowly sat up. He yawned, ran his hand over the stubble on his face, and rubbed his eyes. "Yeah, I'm up." He could barely see inside of the track, as dark as it was, but he could just make out his gunner squatting next to him. He cleared his throat, and took the handmike from his gunner. Staff Sergeant Whitmore then switched on a light, crawled through the turret access door, then up and outside of the vehicle through the gunner's hatch. Steve could hear him standing up on top of the turret, taking a piss over the side of the vehicle.

Steve put the mike to his ear, "Manchu 6 this is Dragon 6, over." He felt a little apprehensive as he waited for the response. What the hell did the colonel want at this time of night anyway? He pushed the light button on his watch in order to read the time. It read 0340. Forty minutes until stand-to.

"Dragon Six this is Manchu Six, I'm sitting up on V.I.P. Hill back here looking at your positions. I'm seeing a lot of lights down there. You need to police up your noise and light discipline. Acknowledge."

Shit, here we go again. The colonel is prowling around again checking up on the companies. Doesn't that friggin' guy ever sleep? "Roger, I'll get on it. I'll have the positions checked to make sure everyone is doing the right thing, over"

"Roger. Make sure that you check the positions with night vision goggles on so you can see light escaping from the vehicles more effectively, over."

No duh. He was getting lectured like a cherry-assed private again. "Manchu 6 this is Dragon Six, wilco, over." He could hear Whitmore finish taking his piss, and him climbing down back into the turret. "Hey Whit, can you hand me the other handmike?"

Staff Sergeant Whitmore grabbed the other handset with the company frequency and handed it to his commander.

"Dragon Six, Manchu Six, make sure you remember that we pushed back the time of the commander's huddle to 1000 hours."

1000 hours? They must have changed the time again and somebody forgot to get him the message. Well, that was typical. "Roger, 1000 hours."

"Manchu Six, out."

Steve was about to raise his platoons on the radio and have them check noise and light discipline, but before he could press the "push to talk button" his first sergeant called him first. "Dragon Six, this is Dragon Seven, over."

He smiled to himself. His first sergeant was the most professional NCO he had ever met, and he considered himself lucky to have him. "Seven this is Six, go ahead, over."

"Six this is Seven, I'm down here at the XO's track and we monitored your traffic with Manchu Six. If it's okay with you, I'll go check 3rdPlatoon, the XO can hit the tankers, the Mike-Golf can take Headquarters, and you can hit 1st. We gotta get the platoons ready for stand-to here pretty soon anyway, over"

Steve rubbed his eyes again and fished a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. "Seven this is Six, sounds good to me. Six, out."

He grabbed a pack of MRE matches and lit his cigarette.

"You know there's no smoking inside of military vehicles sir." Whitmore's voice was dripping with sarcasm.

"Well, you better turn me in to the PC shocktroops."

"It's a safety issue you know; you are sitting on crates of ammo right next to the fuel tanks." Whitmore's sardonic tone was strong as ever.

"Being an infantryman, in a combat zone, on some weird-ass planet, zillions of miles from home, ain't too safe either. I'll take my chances with the cigarettes. Besides, it's a quality of life issue, a man's gotta be allowed at least one vice. Lord knows, I ain't had a decent shower or a shot of ass since we left Earth."

Whitmore just smiled back. "Hey sir, I'm just tryin' to help you quit smokin'."

Steve sucked delicious smoke into his aching lungs. "Oh yeah? Well winners never quit and quitters never win. Giving up cigarettes would be a sign of weakness. Anyway, the boss was on the radio just now and he said our noise and light discipline sucks. I want you to go check Headquarters while me, XO, and Top check the platoons."

Whitmore reached under the gunner's seat, grabbed his gortex jacket, and started putting it on. "Roger, no problem sir. You need me to do anything else?"

"Yeah. Make sure you take your nods with you when you go."

"Mine are busted, but I'll take Simmons' pair."

"Okay, whatever, just make sure that you take a set of night vision goggles. You can't always see some of the light escaping from these vehicles easily with the naked eye."

"Sir, do you think that the aliens can see as well as we can at night?"

"Fuck if I know dude. I guess it's better safe than sorry."

Whitmore looked at him and simply nodded in agreement, "Hooah."

"Hey sir, go ahead and finish your cigarette. I'll go outside and wake up Jenkins and have him get your truck ready. It'll take him a couple of minutes to get out of his fart-sack and get dressed."

"Thanks man." Steve then took a long drag on his cigarette while his company master gunner rummaged around in the back of the messy Bradley looking for his driver's night vision goggles. "Hey Whit, do you know where Kim is at?"

"Roger sir, he's with Schmidtke and Janovich over at the CP. You want him too?"

"Yeah. Does he know how to set head-space and timing yet on the .50?"

"I don't know. Jones was supposed to have given him a class yesterday." Whitmore started getting frustrated as he continued to dig around gear and bags that were strewn all over in the back of the Bradley, looking for Simmons' night vision goggles. He mumbled something incoherent to himself.

Simmons was sleeping soundly on several stacked boxes of unopened 25mm ammo less than two feet away from Steve. Whitmore slapped his feet that were warmly wrapped up in his sleeping bag. Simmons, deep asleep, simply moaned a little. Whitmore hit his legs this time, "Hey, wake up shitbird. Where'd you put your nods?"

Simmons didn't bother getting out of his bag to answer, "What's up Sam't?"

"I need to borrow your fuckin' nods cause mine are broke. Where'd you put 'em?"

Simmons answered weakly, "They're sitting on the driver's seat."

"Hooah. Go back to sleep."

Specialist Simmons rolled to his other side and immediately racked out.

Steve took another drag from his cigarette and exhaled the smoke casually. The only light on in the back of the vehicle was the glowing cherry of his cigarette and one of the lights affixed to the inside of the hull. It had three settings; off, on, and filtered. It was turned on the "filtered" setting, casting a dim blue light on everything. As Steve smoked, the entire compartment began to appear hazy. He pulled his legs out of the fart-sack, slipped his boots on, leaned over Simmons, and turned the light off. He then reached up and popped open the overhead cargo hatch. The cigarette smoke started wafting out, and moist, cool night air came rushing in.

Whitmore, bent over, with most of his gear in hand, managed to wade through all of the crap strewn on

the floor of the vehicle and made his way to the back. With a quick tug he pulled on the troop door access handle. It made a rather noisy, low pitched squeak as the door opened. He exited the track and made his way around to the front of the vehicle and eventually to the driver's hatch in order to retrieve Simmons' nods.

As soon as Whitmore left the vehicle Steve opened up the top of his rucksack and pulled out a plastic mouthwash bottle. When he unscrewed the cap he immediately smelled the sweet, delicious bourbon inside. He took a short pull and felt the familiar burn in the back of his throat when he swallowed. Just the right kick to start off the day.

Now it was time to get to work.

* * *

When Steve exited the vehicle he plopped his Kevlar helmet on his head, snapped the chin strap and cinched it down tight. He then lowered the helmet-mounted night vision monocular into place in front of his right eye. After a few adjustments, he switched it on and took a second to orient himself to the bright green image produced by his nods.

He walked up and out of the deep two-tiered vehicle fighting position that his Bradley sat in. He looked up at the sky and the stars. It always seemed so peaceful at night. The only sounds were the handful of diesel engines idling in the distance. It seemed as if the universe were still asleep.

Steve looked back down at his own vehicle, numbered "D66," to make sure that it was not giving off any unnecessary light. It wasn't, it was sitting silently in its hole. The only thing from the vehicle that stood higher than ground level were the antennas for the radios and the Bradley's optics that were located on the top of the vehicle's turret. In a fight, the vehicle would sit on the bottom of this hole, while the crew scanned for targets. Once a target was found the Bradley commander would order the driver to pull the vehicle forward up onto a firing platform. This platform too was dug into the ground, exposing only the vehicle's turret and weapons systems; this was known as a "hull defilade" position. The crew would then start slinging lead downrange and blow the dog shit out of their enemies. Once complete, the driver would back down into a "turret defilade" position where the crew would again scan for their next hapless victim. If the vehicle needed to leave the position for whatever reason, it backed out of its fighting position up a gentle incline. This was the ideal position for a tank or infantry fighting vehicle, and it was used whenever engineer assets were available to dig the necessarily large holes in the ground.

Steve placed his battle positions on the forward slope of a ridgeline that overlooked a rather large open valley, which he and his men referred to as "The Bowl." His combat vehicles and dismount positions were arranged so that they could overwatch the "Bowl" and cover this engagement area with direct fires. His positions were located high on the ridgeline but not on top of the high ground, so as not to silhouette his positions. These forward slope positions were placed on what was known as the "military crest" of the ridge.

Down in the valley the engineers had painstakingly emplaced miles and miles of wire obstacles, reinforced by conventional and command detonated mines. Building those obstacles had been a stone cold bitch. The ground was hard clay, and the engineers spent more time punching holes in the dirt with pneumatic drills than anything else. Just putting in a metal picket to support a roll of concertina wire, or to

bury a landmine took a great deal of effort, and ate up tons of time.

Once in place though, the obstacles would be worth their weight in gold. They would create a temporary barrier that would slow the advance of the enemy while the good guys called in mortar, artillery, and direct fires on them.

While his battle positions were on forward slope positions, Steve's company trains were located on the reverse slope where they would be shielded from hostile enemy fire. This is where his mechanics, cooks, medics, and the rest of his headquarters element were located. The first sergeant was usually back there, handling resupply, and maintenance issues. This was also the location of Captain Stephen Murphy's Humvee and driver.

The company commander and the first sergeant weren't *technically* authorized drivers for their Humvees, the practice of having drivers for those vehicles was perfectly normal, and very widespread. Since the war started, some commanders began driving themselves around and sent the drivers down to beef up rifle squads; but Steve didn't do this. The drivers pulled maintenance on the vehicles, and served as radiotelephone operators. More importantly, these vehicles could be used in the middle of a fight as an additional crew-served weapons platform, and to evacuate wounded. Besides, since the Manchus left Korea for distant Diess, manpower hadn't been a real problem; at least not yet.

1st Battalion, 9th Infantry was part of 2nd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division. Before the war it was stationed on Camp Hovey, Republic of Korea in order to maintain peace in that region of the world. That is, until they were hastily redeployed to fight the Posleen.

In the Eighth U.S. Army, stationed in Korea, thousands of Korean conscripts were stationed with American units. These conscripts were known as KATUSAs, short for Korean Augmentees to The United States Army. These young men were selected to serve their enlistments with American units because of their ability to speak English. Originally the KATUSA program was established to provide translators for the American Army. Eventually they became a very important, and unique, part of the American Army. While they wore American uniforms, worked in American jobs, slept in American barracks, and ate American food, they were still actually members of the South Korean Army.

The KATUSA was expected to fight and die in American units should a war break out in Korea; but no one quite expected the 2nd Infantry Division to redeploy almost overnight, to an alien planet, to fight some weird interstellar war.

The U.S. Army made it perfectly clear that if allowed to stay, the KATUSAs would be more than welcome to accompany 2 I.D. to Diess. They were fully trained and integrated members of their units, and served a plethora of vital functions. Ultimately the Korean government left the decision up to the individual KATUSAs as to whether or not they would like to fly off into outer space and get killed with a bunch of obnoxious American G.I.s.

At first the invitation to accompany their American brothers in arms was not warmly received. While most of them felt a close relationship with their American comrades, they were not all that anxious to volunteer for a perceived "One Way Ticket to Hell." That was, until they learned that the ROK Army too, was getting mobilized for deployment among the stars.

Figuring that one suicide mission was as good as another, practically all the KATUSAs remained with their American units.

Since the KATUSAs generally had elected to stay with their American units, the 2nd Infantry Division

found itself pleasantly over strength, with plenty of trained, talented personnel to go around.

As Murphy approached his Humvee, he could hear a lot of movement from inside of the vehicle, and could see someone up in the gunner's hatch working on the .50 caliber machinegun. When he got a little closer he could see that it was Corporal Kim up top, loading the crew-served weapon.

"Good morning sir." Corporal Kim had his night vision goggles on and had spotted his commander approaching.

"What's up Kim? You guys ready to roll?"

Kim had a fairly thick Korean accent, but his English was good. He was especially talented in the use of American profanity. "Not yet sir, Jenkins is still putting his shit away."

Murphy opened the passenger door of the Humvee to find Jenkins still struggling to put his sleeping bag in the back of the vehicle. He wasn't wearing his BDU shirt, his boots were unlaced, and there was MRE garbage and assorted articles of clothing scattered all over the inside of the truck. "For fuck's sake Jenkins, what happened to the inside of this vehicle? Are you going to be ready to roll sometime this century?"

Jenkins tossed the rest of the sleeping bag into the back, grabbed his BDU blouse, and started putting it on. "Umm, uh, I'll be ready in a minute sir."

Murphy just shook his head. "Are the radios even turned on?"

"Uhh..."

"Fuck, what is that smell?" Steve wrinkled his nose. "Is that you Jenkins? Christ, did something crawl up your ass and die?"

Jenkins continued to struggle with his uniform.

"Never mind." Murphy looked up at Kim, who was closing the feed-tray cover of his weapon. "Kim, did Jones give you a class on how to set the headspace and timing on that weapon?"

"Yes sir." Kim didn't sound convincing.

"Did you set the headspace and timing this morning?"

Kim took a second to respond. "We did it a couple of days ago sir."

"Well, do it again." Murphy was getting a bit irritated.

"I can't. I lost my headspace and timing gauge. Sorry sir."

"Jesus fucking Christ Kim, you better find that goddamn thing! Those fuckin' things don't grow on trees around here!"

"Roger sir."

Steve was trying not to lose his temper. He was failing. He wasn't a morning person, and he wasn't a terribly patient one either. "Alright Kim, at least get the radios switched on and do a couple of radio checks. Let me know when you and Jenkins are done. I'll just be standing here, with my thumb up my ass, waiting on the both of you."

Kim sounded a bit sheepish. "Roger sir." He then ducked down inside of the Humvee and started turning on the radios.

Murphy unbuttoned his chinstrap and scratched his chin. "It's going to be a long goddamn day."

0340 Hours May 18th , 2002
Phase Line "Razor"

Specialist Carl Myers pulled his poncho liner around him a little tighter as he stared off into the darkness. The stars were bright and everything seemed peaceful. He looked down at his watch for the thousandth time, checking to see if it was time for his shift to be over. The little hands on his issued watch glowed in the dark and read 0340 hours; still twenty minutes until he could wake up the LT and go crawl back into his sleeping bag.

Myers sat on the roof of his Humvee. His legs hung down into the vehicle through the hole in the top that served as the gunner's hatch. In front of him was the .50 caliber machinegun with a monstrous night site mounted on it, and some of his gear. His helmet sat next to him, as did a cold canteen cup of instant coffee. Beside the weapon were two handmikes, which enabled him to speak to the rest of his platoon on their internal frequency, and also to communicate with battalion on the Operations and Intelligence net. He had a map-board in front of him with a number of overlays taped to it, and also a small maglite, with a red filter affixed to it.

Specialist Myers was the platoon leader's driver, one of three men that lived, ate, slept, and bitched in the vehicle. He was a cavalry scout in the battalion's scout platoon, and usually found himself on the "pointy end of the stick." Right now, the platoon's mission was to conduct a "screen line" in front of the battalion, which meant that he and the rest of the guys were to establish positions roughly three kilometers in front of the battalion's forward elements, and act as the "eyes and ears" for everyone else. They were out front, in camouflaged positions, and would give the first warning if and when the bad guys were about to attack. They would then give detailed reports about enemy movements and draw first blood by hitting them with mortar and artillery fires without revealing their locations. This was almost always easier said than done. If they did their jobs correctly, they would see the enemy first, and report it, giving the rest of the battalion time to alert subordinate its companies and ready themselves for the impending attack. Meanwhile, the scouts would contribute to the fight by reporting the enemy's size, actions, and locations, while pummeling them mercilessly with indirect fires.

Myers was a good scout. He had been totally dedicated to his job since the day he joined the Army. At the time of his enlistment he was eighteen years old, a recent high school graduate, had no plans for the future, and a pregnant sixteen-year-old girlfriend. His prospects didn't look very bright at the time, considering the limited opportunities available to him in his hometown of Bangor, Wisconsin.

His parents, after finding out that his girlfriend Sarah had a bun in the oven, told Carl that he needed to

get a job at the local IGA, and get started taking care of his new family. Carl was hardly enthusiastic about the idea of working his way up the local corporate ladder, and he was even less enthusiastic about his parents telling him how he should live his life.

His father, a hard working man who had spent most of his life as a heavy equipment operator working for a local excavation company, had always been tough on his sons. He loved them dearly, but didn't express it well, which eventually led to the alienation of the very children he worked so hard to raise. Carl constantly fought with his father. Sometimes their fighting was especially bitter, and no matter how hard Carl's dad tried to help, the more he pushed his son away.

When Carl came home one night and told his parents that he was going to marry Sarah, and then join the Army, his father was furious and his mother simply broke down crying. Carl's father was a Vietnam veteran, a former infantryman who never talked of his time in Southeast Asia. One thing he did talk about, was that he had fought hard, and his country returned the favor by treating him like shit. Needless to say, Carl Sr. was not a big supporter of his government. He felt that young people that joined the military were pawns, their lives to be cheaply squandered by uncaring and inept politicians.

No matter how passionately Carl's father tried to convince him not to join the Army, the more he wanted to sign up.

A couple of weeks later, Carl's new wife, and his mother dropped him off at the bus station in nearby Sparta, and gave him a tearful goodbye as he embarked on his new military career. His father refused to see him off.

The Army had been good to him, even if things back home hadn't been so hot.

Carl and Sarah had decided that she should stay home with her parents and finish school, while Carl was away. When she graduated, she and their new little girl, Miriam, would join him at his new duty station at Fort Carson, Colorado. He had been anticipating the reunion of his young family and of eventually cashing in on his G.I. Bill benefits. He planned on getting out of the Army after his four-year enlistment, in order to go to college, and get himself a decent paying job in Colorado. Things were starting to work out for him.

Unfortunately, things didn't quite work out the way he had hoped. Sarah started seeing someone back home while Carl was away. She ended up getting pregnant again, with a local boy's child. It was Carl's mom that broke the news. She called the barracks and asked for him soon after he and the rest of his squadron had returned from the field.

Carl didn't take the news very well.

He jumped in his beat-up Ford Escort and went AWOL. He started driving back to Wisconsin. He didn't know what he was going to do when he got there, but he figured that he would work that out on the way there.

It took a couple of days before he arrived back home, to find his mother and father waiting for him. Carl was glad to see his mother, and he had very mixed feelings about seeing his dad again. To everyone's surprise, it was Carl Sr. that got through to Carl, and probably ended up saving him from himself.

Carl Sr. told his son that he shouldn't see his wife. He told him not to go looking for her new boyfriend. He told his son, that he was proud of him, and that he should go back to Colorado and report back to his unit before he threw everything away. Carl agreed and went back to Colorado Springs.

When he got back to Fort Carson, he was an emotional wreck. He couldn't sleep, he couldn't eat, and pain was his constant companion. He just didn't care what happened to him anymore.

Fortunately for him, his chain of command was sympathetic. Carl had proven himself a good soldier and a hard worker, and that was all taken into account when he received his Article 15 for being AWOL. He was given seven days restriction, and seven days extra duty in summarized proceedings; none of which went on his permanent military record.

After completing his punishment, his buddies decided to lift his spirits in a truly soldierly fashion, by keeping him good and drunk. They managed to keep this up for weeks.

It wasn't long after that, that Carl received his orders for Korea. He felt that his luck just went from bad to worse. The general consensus was that duty in Korea was a fate worse than death. It was considered a miserable purgatory that was to be avoided at all costs by anyone with a brain in their heads. But, he really didn't have a choice in the matter, and reluctantly he went.

His arrival at Kimpo airport was uneventful. His in processing at Camp Mobile was even more unremarkable. He was in a daze as he filled out reams of paperwork and hoped half-heartedly that he would get up to Camp Gary Owen, and get a job up in 4-7 Cavalry as a gunner on a Bradley. He had been a driver before and he was ready take position in the gunner's seat. It seemed as if he deserved at least that much, after all, hadn't he been punished enough?

Apparently not, because when he did finally receive his orders, it wasn't for duty in his beloved Cav, it was for duty in 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry.

Infantry? It was official. God hated him.

He was too numb to care anymore.

It turned out that life in the Manchu's wasn't nearly as bad as he thought it would be. He was assigned to the battalion scout platoon, and discovered that he had found a new family there.

The scouts were highly motivated, well trained, and highly regarded in the battalion. This was all due to his platoon sergeant, a Sergeant First Class Washburn, a redneck of the highest order.

When Sergeant Washburn wasn't drinking and chasing Russian hookers with the mortar platoon sergeant, he was planning and executing training. The man lived to be a scout, and he made sure that his troopers were good ones. He would constantly train his platoon on their weapons, communications equipment, and tactics. He would get with the fire supporters and train on calling for fires. He would get with the Air Force guys and train on close air support. He would bug his platoon leader and commander until he could get his platoon out in the field and train on infiltrations, counter-reconnaissance, and general field craft. He was obsessed with weapons qualification and maintenance, and demanded excellence from his scouts. His attitude was "We're Cav dammit! We lead from the front!" His attitude was contagious, and his guys loved him. The men of the scout platoon didn't push themselves to exhaustion because they were afraid of their platoon sergeant, they did it because they looked up to him and they wanted to please him. The platoon was tightest knit group Carl had ever seen since he first joined the army, and he was happy to be there.

As time wore on, things started getting better for him.

Late one night, after finishing an obstacle course in the cold rain, and low crawling through a bunch of mud, Carl received his "Spurs." This highly coveted award was given to him after his successful completion of the ritual known as the "Spur Ride." His company commander was there waiting to congratulate him, and on Carl's request, reenlisted him right there. Carl stood there on top of that hill, covered in mud, soaking wet, shivering in the cold, with his right hand raised, and swearing his oath to defend the constitution while his buddies looked on. It was probably the proudest moment of his life.

It wasn't long though, before events took a turn for the surreal.

Carl remembered when they had all first learned of the war with the Posleen. The division alerted at 0200 hours and recalled everyone. But instead of going through the typical alert procedures of drawing weapons, ammo, and loading vehicles, the company was told to stand in formation, and receive a briefing from the company commander.

The CO pulled them in around him in sort of a horseshoe so that he didn't have to shout in order to be heard properly. When he told them of the aliens and the war, and how they would be likely be deploying very soon; the soldiers thought it was all some big joke. It seemed too ridiculous, too unbelievable. Word spread around quickly that it was all just a bunch of disinformation briefed to the "Joe's," and that the real reason they were redeploying was for a war with China, or Russia. That rumor persisted right up until they found themselves staring at their first space ships. They were cargo shuttles, hauling equipment up to star freighters that were anchored in orbit. Rumors of war with China, Russia, or Outer Mongolia, quickly came to an end, when Americans found themselves loading personnel and equipment on many of the same shuttles with some rather exotic foreign armies.

After the division was loaded on the freighter, the intelligence briefings began. It made everybody's head hurt. Posleen, Indowy, Darhel, Himmit, Big Foot, the Loch Ness Monster, whatever... it just didn't seem real.

Now Carl found himself staring off into the darkness, occasionally scanning with his night vision goggles, wondering how come this rotten fucking planet could be so miserably hot during the daytime and freezing cold at night.

Carl looked down at his watch again. 0343 Hours. This shift was never going to end.

0345 Hours May 18th , 2002
"V.I.P. Hill"

Lieutenant Colonel Brian Smith hung up his handset on the piece of parachute cord that had been affixed over the radios expressly for that purpose. He then looked down at his map with his red-lens flashlight. He flipped through several overlays until he got to his engineer overlay and studied it for a moment. He then reached into the plastic tub that he kept next to him in his Humvee that contained any number of things to include copies of operations orders, spare maps, alcohol pens, and even the occasional field manual.

He pulled out the file folder that contained the battalion operations order, and he went through it until he

found his engineer execution matrix, which listed engineer priorities of work, obstacles, their locations, and a time table for their emplacement. According to the matrix, the engineers should have been almost finished with their last obstacles. Colonel Smith wanted to see if his engineers were in fact on schedule.

"Mr Shin, why don't you turn the heater on, it's getting chilly in here." The colonel cupped his hands together and blew into them, trying to warm his fingers. The colonel's driver switched on the blower without saying a word, folded his arms together, closed his eyes, and leaned his head against the window.

He picked up the transmitter with the battalion frequency and pulled out an alcohol pen in case he needed to write something down.

"Bulldog Six, this is Manchu Six, over."

There was silence.

"Bulldog Six, this is Manchu Six, over." Colonel Smith didn't like having to call twice. Someone should be monitoring the radios at all times.

"Manchu Six, this is Bulldog Six Delta. Bulldog Six Actual is on the ground right now. Can I relay your traffic, over."

Colonel Smith was trying to raise the engineer company commander on the radio and discuss the status of his obstacles. Instead, he was talking to the company commander's driver. That wasn't always a problem, but it could be a fairly painful experience if the driver on the other end of the radio wasn't very bright, or articulate.

"Bulldog Six Delta, what is your current location, over."

"Manchu Six, wait one, over." There was silence on the radio for almost an entire minute. Colonel Smith imagined that Bulldog 6's driver was looking for a map, or a flashlight, or somebody else to talk on the radio.

"Manchu Six, this is Bulldog Six Delta, we are currently vicinity south end of Obstacle Number Nine. Do you need a grid location, over"

"Six Delta, that's a negative. I think I can find you without the grid. Tell your boss that I'm heading to your location, and I would like to meet with him when I get there, over"

"Wilco Manchu Six."

Colonel Smith switched off his flashlight. "Manchu Six, out."

He hung up his hand mike again, placed his map-board on top of his radios, and put the alcohol pen back in one of his ammo pouches that was stuffed full of other writing utensils.

"Okay Mr. Shin, let's go."

There was no response. The battalion commander flipped his night vision goggles down, turned them on, and focused them so that he could look over at his Humvee driver. His driver, a KATUSA named Corporal Shin, was snoozing away, with his head resting against the driver's side window.

Colonel Smith simply reached over and tugged on the sleeve of Shin's battle dress uniform. "Mr. Shin, wake up! It's time to go!"

Shin awoke with a start. "Uh, yes suh." He seemed a little panicky, and quickly started the engine of the truck, disengaged the parking brake, and put it into "drive." He wasn't quite prepared to go however. His night vision goggles were still hanging around his neck, and he was only half awake.

The colonel didn't mean to make Shin nervous, but the kid acted like a mouse in a room full of cats whenever the battalion commander got in the vehicle with him. He simply couldn't help it. And whenever Shin was nervous, he made silly little mistakes, like the time he drove off of a mountain trail back in Korea, and almost killed the both of them. This was maddening for Colonel Smith, but he always showed a great deal of patience with Shin. He didn't want to make his poor driver any more of a nervous wreck than he already was.

"Alright Mr. Shin, hold on a minute." The colonel was trying to speak in a soothing tone, even though he felt utterly flustered. "Put the vehicle in park, and take a minute to get your night vision goggles on."

"Yes suh."

"Are you okay to drive? You aren't too tired are you?"

"Yes suh."

The colonel was starting to get even more frustrated. "Does that mean you are okay, or that you're too tired?"

"Yes suh."

"Mr. Shin, you don't understand what I'm asking you, do you?"

"Yes suh."

"Switch places with me Shin, I'll drive for awhile. You need to get some rest." As the colonel got out of the Humvee he couldn't help feeling that it was going to be a long goddamn day.

0945 Hours May 18th , 2002
Manchu Tactical Operations Center

The ride was bumpy as hell, rattling Steve's teeth as the Humvee approached Manchu TOC. There weren't any roads or trails in the area, except for the ruts being cut in the ground by the constant vehicle traffic within the battalion. As the vehicles drove around they created huge clouds of dust. Steve, Jenkins, and Kim all wore green cravats around their mouths and noses, to cut down on some of the "Moon Dust" that they were constantly inhaling. Inside of the truck, it covered everything.

The climate in this part of Diess was harsh. The sun would rise each morning and begin the slow process of turning the surface of the planet into a massive hotplate. The ground everywhere was covered in boulders and seared clay, that was not only a terrific conductor of heat, but was also hard as hell. The

Manchus had a wonderful time trying to dig into the stuff. Each and every day the soldiers of the task force, and of the expeditionary forces in general, wondered what crimes they had committed to justify banishing them to such an awful place. And just when they would resign themselves to their fate, the sun would go down, and things got worse.

The same adobe-like clay that baked them during the day, sucked every bit of warmth from the air at night. They spent the hours of darkness wrapped in cold-weather clothing fighting off the effects of hypothermia. The one saving grace of the mechanized infantry was that with all of the vehicles, came heaters, and they ran constantly. Except if you were one of those pathetic dismounted infantry types. Then you just suffered. It was your lot in life.

The battalion was in a very hilly and mountainous region of the planet, which made it an ideal area to defend, no matter how much the arid peaks were cursed by grunts with heavy packs.

In all, Diess was universally hated by every poor soul who was unfortunate enough to be deployed there. More than a few asked themselves why they were risking their lives for such a terrible place. The least they could do is build a bar or two, and maybe ship in a few women. Preferably women of low morale character.

As they neared the perimeter, Steve could make out the TOC, and the growing parking lot of tactical vehicles right next to it. The TOC was the center of planning for the battalion. It was run by the battalion executive officer, and a significant portion of the staff lived and worked there. It physically consisted of three M577 command vehicles, which were grotesque looking armored personnel carriers, with very high profiles, and bristled with antennas. They would be backed up, rear ends facing each other, ramps down, and connected by a series of lightproof "boots." These would then connect to a medium sized modular tent, and outside would be several long-range antennas. The whole monstrosity would be surrounded by concertina wire, and guarded by some of the young soldiers who worked in the staff. Inside of the TOC were radios, maps, tracking charts, computers, a bunch of staff pukes who never saw the light of day, and one humungous coffee maker.

This was the realm of the battalion executive officer, or "XO" for short. The XO's name was Major Charles Jaeger and he was an intellectual, a rarity in the infantry to be sure. He held a couple of doctorates, and had been a history professor at West Point for several years. He was average height, a bit chunky for infantry standards, and had a generous number of "scare badges" adorning his BDU blouse. He was almost always in a good mood, except whenever the S-4 was around, and he was a commensurate professional.

When Captain Murphy entered the TOC he removed his heavy Kevlar helmet and hung it by the chin-strap on one of his canteens. He then removed his other canteen, retrieved the metal canteen cup from the bottom of the canteen pouch, replaced the canteen, and made a beeline for the spectacularly huge coffee maker.

As he poured steaming hot coffee into his canteen cup, he looked around the inside of the TOC, trying to see who else had arrived for the daily meeting with the colonel. This was the best opportunity during the day to meet with his fellow company commanders, some of whom he considered friends, and shoot the bull.

The inside of the tent was starting to get warm. Steve had ditched his cold weather garments, nicknamed "snivel gear" about fifteen minutes prior, and it felt like he was going to be uncomfortably hot within the hour. He wasn't enamored with the local climate, it was akin to some of the less hospitable deserts back on Earth-- the temperature extremes within a single day on Diess were brutal. Steve imaged that the

TOC monkeys were going to be rolling up the sides of the tent pretty shortly. If not, they would be stewing in their own juices. And Lord knows, those guys smelled bad enough already.

Steve walked over to the refreshment table to get himself something to put in his coffee. Somehow, the TOC always had goodies like doughnuts, or cakes, to go along with their coffee. Steve always wondered how it was that the staff geeks could get doughnuts, yet there were none to be had for the guys in his company. He made a mental note to bust HHC commander's balls over that one. Sitting next to a recently emptied box of doughnuts were packets of cocoa powder mix. He opened one up and stirred it into his coffee with an ink pen. It made for a decent field expedient mocha. He took a sip, and felt contented for just one short moment. The cocoa covered the badly overcooked coffee taste.

He took a look around at the battalion's maps and overlays, hung up by the radios. The intelligence NCO was at a field table, penciling in some graphics. In the back of the fire supporter's M577 the fire support officer, Captain Frandsen, was playing cards with the S-2, Captain Gaston. Next to the maps were the tracking charts listing the battalion's maintenance status, its current personnel status, logistical stats, and an 8x10 digital photo of the Charlie Company Commander, Captain Assgaard. On the bottom of the photo was scrawled "The Ass-Master." Next to that were hung several other pieces of sophomoric humor, that were infinitely funnier at two o'clock in the morning when everyone in the TOC was suffering from sleep deprivation, and certifiably slap-happy.

As he took another sip of his noxious brew, Steve checked the dry-erase board that was prominently displayed with the title "Word of the Day" written on top. One of many inside-jokes among the staff was the "Word of the Day." The battalion XO, who had an IQ like a phone number, would think of a vocabulary word to teach the officers and men who frequented the TOC. It was the running joke that everyone in the infantry was a knuckle-dragging Neanderthal, with a strong back and a weak mind. This point was almost always reiterated by other members of the battalion task force, such as the engineers, air defenders, tankers, and artillery folks—all of whom were convinced beyond a doubt of their intellectual superiority among their less refined brothers in arms. The battalion XO, who was not only the smartest guy in the task force, was also an entertaining fellow with a rapier wit. In order to dispel the myth that infantrymen were incapable of learning, and that they were not completely devoid of any sort redeeming academic qualities, he started posting the "Word of the Day." The "Word" was almost always some fancy fifty-cent word, with a couple dozen syllables. The word on the board was "BUCOLIC," and it was the same word that had been up since yesterday. Steve was mildly disappointed; it was one of the few things he looked forward to when he came to the TOC each day.

"This shit sucks."

Steve looked over to see the Captain Jake "The Snake" Rodriguez standing next to him. Jake was the Bravo Company Commander and he was one of the few people that Steve considered a "friend." Jake was a bit short, very stocky, and always, always, had a big fat dip in his mouth. He had the gait of a weightlifter, and physical strength to match. His subtle humor and his direct approach made him a great leader of men, and those in his command regarded him highly. He was also one of the crudest individuals that Steve had ever met.

"What shit sucks?" Steve asked.

"This fucking coffee man, have you tasted this crap?"

Steve smirked a little. "Yeah dude, I had to cut it with a little cocoa just to make it drinkable."

"Cocoa? You drinking that mocha shit again?"

"Of course, you got a problem with that?"

Jake had two paper cups, one in each hand. One held some very awful coffee, and the other was his "spit cup" half full of putrid tobacco juice. Jake chose that moment to spit some more brown saliva into his rapidly filling cup. "Real men drink their coffee black. That mocha shit is for limp-wristed, poetry reciting, clove cigarette smoking queers that hang out in tea houses."

Steve took another sip from his cup. "You make it sound like a bad thing. Sometimes you have to get in touch with your feminine side."

Jake set his coffee cup down on nearby field table scratched his butt and farted. "I get in touch with my feminine side every chance I get. Usually it's in private with a naughty magazine and a tub of petroleum jelly. I touch myself a lot."

Steve almost choked on his field expedient mocha. "Dude, you're a funny bitch!"

"I try."

It was at that moment that the "Currahee" company commander approached the two of them. "Good morning fellas." He was way too chipper.

Steve didn't answer, he simply hated Captain Marcel's guts, and he didn't hide it very well. Jake however, hid his contempt for his "peer" very well, and reciprocated the greeting. "What's up Matthew?"

"Just getting ready for Colonel Smith's meeting. I really enjoy coming to briefings here, the command and staff in my battalion is so boring. They don't have any sense of humor, you guys are totally different."

Captain Marcel commanded Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry (Air Assault). His battalion was also in the same brigade as the Manchus, and for the time being his company had been cross-attached to 1-9 Infantry. That meant that the battalions had swapped a company; 1-9 Manchu gave up a company of mechanized infantry to 1st of the 506th, and in return they received a company of air assault infantry from the Currahees. This was quite a normal procedure in the mechanized infantry and armor communities, but not nearly as common in the light infantry world.

Jake spit in his cup again. "Yeah, us Manchus are a bunch of funny little bitches."

Marcel just smiled and nodded. A pregnant pause followed. It was a bit uncomfortable. Marcel took another drink of nasty coffee. "Well, I'll talk to you guys later." He then left and went to the other end of the TOC where the briefing was to be conducted.

Steve watched him leave. "Dude, I hate that fucker."

Jake shifted his dip from the left side of his lip to the right. "I couldn't tell. You hide your emotions so well."

"Whatever dude."

* * *

The meeting was about to begin, and all the commanders within the battalion were seated in folding chairs, lined up in front of a couple of maps and a "butcher board." The XO was standing with a wooden pointer in his hand, telling an off-color joke with the Assistant S-3, while the company commanders, the command sergeant major, and the battalion S-3, were seated in the front row, leaving the middle seat for Manchu Six.

Everyone that didn't work in the TOC was covered in a fine layer of yellowish dust and grime, which made for a quite obvious contrast between the staff guys, and everybody else.

"Everybody listen up!" The battalion XO was trying to get the attention of the assembled group.

About half of the people in the room shifted their gaze over to Major Jaeger, while the rest continued with their sidebar conversations.

"Can I have it quiet for a second?" The XO continued.

Still the talkers in the back of the room continued to yack away, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the XO was speaking.

"I SAID, SHUT THE FUCK UP!" The XO yelled.

Silence.

"That's better then." Major Jaeger pushed his thick glasses back up his nose with his index finger and began to smile; he had the look of a mischievous child.

"While you gentlemen have been toiling away making the planet safer for the freedom loving peoples of the universe, the staff and I have been working round the clock to provide you with the utmost support that you in fact deserve. But still some of you persist in complaining about the inconsequential. I hear things like 'Sir, the coffee in the TOC tastes like camel piss,' or 'Sir, I haven't taken a shower in over three weeks,' or 'Sir, why can't we get Porta-Johns in our company areas so we can beat-off in private like the staff?' Gentlemen, I hear your cries, but alas, I cannot work miracles. I can only give you a brief respite from your labors, and point of light if you will, to brighten your miserable, stinky, little lives. Therefore, I give you this."

He then walked over to the "butcher board" and flipped the cover sheet over, revealing a very long word, written in big, black, bold letters.

"The 'Word of the Day' today is 'JUXTAPOSITION.' Can everyone say it with me? 'JUX-TA-PO-SI-SHON.'"

Everyone in the room was sporting a toothy grin as they said the word along with the XO. Everyone that is, except the Sergeant Major. He didn't think anything was funny.

It was at that time that Lieutenant Colonel Smith entered the "room." He had the S-2 in tow and was taking long determined strides. He had a very business-like look on his face, and the room sobered immediately upon seeing him.

Major Jaeger came to attention immediately and sounded off like a drill sergeant. "Gentleman, the battalion commander!"

"As you were!" The colonel barked. "Take your seats!"

Colonel Smith stood in front of the room with the S-2 right behind him. He looked his commanders over for a moment before he began.

"Listen up, we don't have time for the typical battle update briefing this morning. We're going to cut to the chase and start off with the meat and potatoes of this thing." The colonel turned to the S-2. "Deuce, take it away."

The XO handed the pointer to Captain Gaston as he took position in front of the assembled group. "Manchus Gentlemen. Well, the time has finally come. We have received word that enemy action within our sector is imminent. Indications are that we will be attacked within the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours." The atmosphere within the tent cooled.

"As you already know, we are arrayed here generally along Phase Line "Axe" oriented to the Northeast, covering this major mobility corridor." As the S-2 spoke, he used his pointer to indicate positions on a large map.

"When enemy elements move forward they will be canalized mostly by terrain and with the help of some of Bulldog Six's obstacles. They will have to eventually move through this large defile which Manchu Three has nicknamed "The Valley of Death."

Colonel Smith looked grim while Captain Gaston spoke. On the battalion operational graphics, "The Valley of Death" was actually listed as "Engagement Area Pistol," and it was covered by fires from both the attached D Company, 1-72nd Armor, and elements of D Company, 1-9th Infantry. The two companies straddled the valley, with the tank company team on the north side of the defile, and the infantry company team on the south. It had a series of obstacles in it, and it was well covered by fires. None of this information was news however, except for the revelation that the enemy attack would kick off very soon.

The S-2 then flipped over a sheet of paper on the "butcher board" revealing a detailed course of action sketch. "Sir, based upon new information we have come up with this as the enemy's most likely course of action." The sketch roughly outlined the terrain and units occupying their area of operation, with several enemy units and icons drawn in with large arrows, indicating their probable axes of advance. "This is very similar to the Course of Action briefs that you were given before, except adjusted for the new information we have received on the enemy."

Colonel Smith interrupted the S-2. "Where is this information coming from Deuce?"

"Sir, this intel is being given to us by our alien allies. How they are gathering it is not known to me at this time. Brigade and Division has assured me that it is in fact accurate."

Colonel Smith smiled like a caged predator. "And we all know how accurate information from Brigade and Division usually is."

The S-2 didn't quite know how to respond. "Uh, roger sir. Hopefully this time they are correct."

"Okay Deuce, that's enough. Go ahead and take a seat." The battalion commander finally removed his

helmet, and scratched his head. He seemed tired, and it looked as if a few more gray hairs had sprouted on his small head. "Guys it's like this; the enemy courses of action that you have been briefed up until now have not changed appreciably. The thing that has changed is the number of Posleen we should expect to see in our Area of Operations. It's bad. And it ain't specific either. The numbers could be anywhere from the hundreds of thousands to millions attacking our itty bitty task force." Everyone in the room had been briefed on the Posleen, their doctrine, their tactics, and most importantly, their numbers; but it was like a splash of ice water in the face to hear the colonel say it out loud.

Colonel Smith focused his attention on the battalion fire support officer. "Niels, do we still have priority of fires?"

Captain Frandsen responded immediately. "Within the brigade we do sir. We will have priority of fires from 2-17 Field Artillery, and naturally we will have the battalion's mortars. Unfortunately, we will receive no MLRS support. 1stBrigade is the division main effort, and they will receive the big guns, since they have the dubious distinction of holding the most important mobility corridor within the division."

Colonel Smith took a minute to digest this. "What do you mean MLRS? I thought that we couldn't use them against the Posleen. Won't they shoot the rockets out of the air in mid-flight?"

"Normally that is correct sir, any munition under power would be targeted and easily destroyed by Posleen weapons. That is why we can use conventional tube artillery as opposed to guided cruise missiles. However, due to the terrain we are operating in, we have a unique opportunity to employ a wider range of weapon systems."

"Could you please break that down in English for me FSO?" The colonel looked slightly irritated.

"Sir, we are deployed in an area with lots of hills. Artillery, mortars, and MLRS will all be set up well behind us, normally in the low ground and valleys. If rockets are employed, it will be from positions up to thirty kilometers to our rear, well below the horizon from the Posleen. The rockets will then fire their boosters until shortly before reaching apogee. The fuel ought to burn out before our rounds come into Posleen line of sight. At this point, they will no longer be under power, and will not be tracked by alien weapons, and will act similar to conventional artillery rocket assisted projectiles." The fire support officer looked around the room to see if the intellectually challenged infantrymen fully grasped the implications of what he had just said.

"Jesus Niels, this is news to me. Were you planning on keeping this a secret or what?" The colonel chided.

"Well sir, we aren't sure that the MLRS is going to work. We have been basically hypothesizing whether or not we can pull it off. We won't really know until we try it on the enemy. But the bottom line is, if anyone gets it, it'll be 1stBrigade and not us, so it's really a moot point."

"Okay I got it." The colonel was not in a good mood. He was more edgy than usual. "Listen fellas, we've got just a few more preparations left to make and not much time left to make them in. Get out there to your companies and make it happen."

The tent was quiet, some looked around at each other, not sure what how to respond.

"That's it. Go! You're dismissed. Get the hell outa here!" The colonel snapped.

People jumped to their feet and headed on out. There was lots of stuff left to do and not much time to

do it in.

1012 Hours May 18th , 2002

Phase Line "Axe"

Overwatching "The Valley of Death"

Specialist Cartright approached his two-man fighting position from the rear, with his M249 Squad Automatic Weapon slung across his back, his entrenching tool in his left hand, and a roll of coarse toilet paper in his right. He was returning from his visit from behind a nearby rock outcropping, where he had recently "finished his business." It was quite a relief, since he hadn't had the urge to conduct a "Class I download" for the last three days. The MREs always plugged him up like a cork.

"You finally back?" PFC Smigelski was still in the fighting position, looking out over the defile down below him. "You took long enough."

Cartright unslung the SAW, extended the bipod, and set it down next his rucksack. "Why? Did you miss me?" He opened up his ruck, pulled out a ziplock bag and put the toilet paper in it. He zipped it shut, and replaced it in the backpack.

"I thought maybe you got lost back there or something."

Cartright slid down into the hole with his battle-buddy. "Anything happen while I was gone?"

Smigelski gave him a strange look. "Are you nuts? What have we been doing out here for the last five days?"

"Sitting on our asses doing nothing?"

"Exactly. Not much has changed since you left to go take a dump."

"Well I'm glad, I didn't want to miss anything."

Smigelski rolled his eyes. He picked up a pack of Marlboro reds sitting next to his weapon, extracted a cigarette, and lit it with his Zippo.

"Can I get one of those?"

"Man, I told you to pack more cigarettes before we came on this trip. You never listen to me, but noooo, what do I know? I'm just a dumb private."

Cartright set his weapon up on its firing platform. "Okay Mom, are you done lecturing me? Can I have a smoke now?"

Smigelski shook his head in feigned disgust. "You're hopeless. It's a good thing I like you man." He then tossed a single cigarette at his buddy.

"Thanks dick."

"You're welcome sweetie pie."

"You know you wouldn't be a private right now if you hadn't been running your cock-holster and ended up in that fight." Cartright scolded.

"Man, that motherfucker deserved his ass whoopin'."

"Was it worth it to get busted back down to PFC?"

Smigelski looked thoughtful for just a moment. "Sure, that dude was talkin' major smack, he needed me to thump his skull. I think I did him a big favor. Besides the courtesy patrol might've let me go without reporting it if I hadn't knocked out two of his teeth."

"Remind me never to piss you off after you've been drinking Soju buckets."

It was then that they noticed a lone figure that was trudging up the side of the hill toward their position. He moved with grim determination, and kicked up a bit of dust as he took each deliberate step. It was Sergeant Holmes, their team leader, and it looked like he was not terribly happy.

When Sergeant Holmes reached their fighting position, he dropped his rucksack, sat down next to it, and placed his weapon on top of the eighteen inches of overhead cover that served as their roof. Holmes was black as night, and when he removed his Kevlar helmet, it revealed his perfectly shaved head, covered in sweat. He wiped the perspiration from his face and head with the sleeve of his BDU jacket, grabbed a canteen of water, and took a couple of gulps before addressing two of his subordinates. "What're you two heroes doin'."

Smigelski, as usual, was the first to answer. "I was just holding down this entire sector while Cartright was wandering around fucking off."

Sergeant Holmes screwed the cap back on his canteen and put it back into the canteen pouch that was affixed to the pistol belt on his load bearing vest. He then started looking through his rucksack until he pulled out two MREs, and then tossed them to Cartright. "Is that so? Then I suggest that you police up your buddy, Private Smigelski."

Smigelski took a drag from his cigarette. "I would Sam't, but Cartright is a total turd. It'll take me years to square his ass away."

Cartright flicked his cigarette butt out of the fighting position. "Sam't, do I have to be teamed up with Smigelski? He smells like ass and he's a known homosexual."

Sergeant Holmes pulled out a pack of Newports and lit one up. "You two sound like you're married or something. Except you get along better than me and my ex-wife. Y'all ain't getting freaky with each other when nobody else is around are ya? Anyways, I brought y'all MREs for lunch. The LT says we gettin hot chow mermited up to us for supper."

"What's for dinner then?" asked Cartright.

Sergeant Holmes shrugged. "I don't know, but whatever it is, I hope that nasty bitch Allen ain't cookin' the shit. He ain't washed since we got here, and that boy stank!"

"No shit Sarn't, Allen and Sergeant Fuentes are both fuckin' sorry. Can't the CO and the First Sarn't get some better cooks for the company?" asked Smigelski.

"Top and the CO got other shit to worry about. But you're right though. Those two are the worst cooks I ever seen. They can't even boil water right." Sergeant Holmes seemed thoughtful as he puffed away on his menthol. "Anyways, the LT just called down and said the engineers are sending up some SEE trucks to dig trenchline, to connect our fighting positions."

Cartright sounded surprised. "SEE trucks? You mean those backhoe-lookin' things?"

"Yup."

"You mean those little bastards are gonna come up here and dig trenchline? Holy shit Sarn't, I hope they bring some dynamite, this ground is hard as shit. They might break one if they try digging in around here."

"Yeah, well I hope not, I'm tired of diggin'. I got blisters all over my hands from swingin' a pick and a shovel in this shit." Sergeant Holmes carefully placed his Kevlar on his immaculately shaved head. "This heat's gonna kill me. I gotta get back to my hole and make sure that Miller ain't sleepin'. You two hang tight."

"Take it easy Sarn't."

Sergeant Holmes put his rucksack back on and started back down the hill.

2143 Hours May 18th , 2002
Phase Line "Razor"

Carl put on a pair of black leather gloves before he pulled his MRE component out of its chemical heater. He wore the gloves so that he wouldn't burn his fingers while handling the heated meal's packaging. He slid the green packet out and held it with his left hand while he sliced it open length-wise with his Gerber multi-tool. It was spaghetti with meat sauce, and the smell of the freshly heated meal quickly filled the vehicle. He added crushed crackers, cheese spread, Tabasco sauce, and mixed them all together before putting the first spoonful in his mouth. It tasted okay. Three months ago, Carl would have traded just about any other meal for spaghetti because it was his favorite. Now, he could barely stand the stuff. The lack of variety was really starting to get to him. With MREs there were only twenty-four different menu selections, and it didn't take long for a soldier to become very tired of even the more palatable ones.

Lieutenant Andersen had been sitting over in the passenger seat of the vehicle, writing a letter home, when the smell of the spaghetti hit him. "Hey Myers, did you get M&Ms with your spaghetti?"

Carl swallowed the mouthful he had been chewing before answering. This particular meal was starting to taste a lot like cardboard. "Yes sir. Why, you want to trade something for them?"

"Yeah dude, how about tradin' for a pack of Charms hard candy?"

This was how it always began with the LT. Anyone else in the platoon would have offered up an

equitable trade, but not Lieutenant Andersen. His offers were always total shit. The worst part was, whenever a person turned his offers down, he would get completely indignant, as if it were a personal attack. "No way sir. Charms suck. You're going to have to sweeten the deal a bit before I part with my M&Ms."

"What the fuck is wrong with Charms?"

Here we go again. "Sir, come on. Nobody likes Charms. I bet if I went through the MRE trash out behind the truck, I would find three or four packs of 'em that were just thrown away." Carl scooped another spoonful of food and reluctantly put it in his mouth.

"Sabre Six, this is Red Three, over." Thankfully Carl was spared the pain of arguing with his platoon leader over some trivial horseshit by the radio once again.

Lieutenant Andersen, picked up the handmike, irritated with the interruption. "Red Three, this is Sabre Six."

"Sabre Six, I've got beau coup movement vicinity Checkpoint Three Three, break. There is a large number of aliens moving through the valley heading from east to west, toward Check Point Three Four, over."

Andersen pulled down his mapboard, placed it in his lap and located the checkpoints. "Okay roger, got it. How many and what type of aliens do you got down there, over."

"It looks like Indoway, break. There's hundreds of 'em running at full speed, break. They are kind of moving like a herd of stampeding buffalo, over."

"Roger, okay I got it, keep me updated as things develop, and try to get me more solid numbers when you can, over"

"Sabre Six, this is Red Three, wilco, over."

As Lieutenant Andersen sent his report up to Battalion, Carl quickly scarfed down the rest of his meal. Dinnertime was over.

2216 Hours May 18th , 2002
Phase Line "Axe"
C Company, 1stBattalion, 506thInfantry
(Attached to Task Force Manchu)

"Sir, Manchu Six is on the radio for you. He says that it is urgent." The RTO was trying to give the handmike to Captain Marcel.

Captain Marcel sat upon a case of MREs, with one green jungle boot off, while he changed his socks. It was a something he did at least three times a day, whether he needed to or not. He seemed arrogant as ever when he took the handmike from his RTO.

"Manchu Six, this is Cherokee Six, over." Marcel sounded bored and just a little annoyed by the interruption.

"Cherokee Six, this is Manchu Six, where have you been? I've been trying to reach you for the last thirty minutes!"

"Manchu Six, this is Cherokee Six, we've been monitoring and haven't received any traffic from you, over"

"Cherokee Six, you better stick up your long whip antenna or establish wire comms with us because I can't afford not to be able to talk to you! Fix your commo! Now, you've got a large number of refugees heading your way. The scouts have been reporting large scale movement of Indoway, pushing into Engagement Area Rifle, vicinity TRP number seven. They are moving through the low ground and should be hitting the obstacle belt any minute now. You are to hold your fire. Remember that these are friendlies! Acknowledge, over!"

"Manchu Six, this is Cherokee Six, wilco. I will get the word out before we have any fratricide incidents..."

Before Captain Marcel could finish his transmission, a dozen Claymore mines detonated in the distance. He jerked to his right, just in time to witness the first tracer rounds racing down range, impacting into a large group of Indoway that were attempting to run over or around several rows of triple strand concertina wire. Once the machineguns initiated fire, everyone one else in 2nd and 3rd Platoons started to join in. The volume of fire was so intense, that it sounded somewhat like a giant chainsaw, and it was doing a very effective job of annihilating the fleeing alien refugees.

Captain Marcel felt like there was a chunk of ice sitting in his belly. He was momentarily in shock, and was slow to react. He snapped out of it when his other RTO shoved a handmike in his face.

"Sir, the company net is out of control. Everyone is stepping all over each other trying to send reports and call for artillery. It's a total mess sir." Specialist Jones had a pleading look in his eye. He wanted his commander to bring order out of chaos.

Just as Marcel attempted to regain control of the situation another call came in from the battalion commander.

"Sir, Manchu Six is on battalion and he sounds pissed. He said he wants to talk to you right now." Specialist Lowthorpe wanted to hand off the battalion handmike to his commander as soon as humanly possible, it was like a hot potato and he wanted to get it out of his hand.

Marcel steeled himself before transmitting. "Manchu Six, this is Cherokee Six, over."

"Cherokee Six, this is Manchu Six, what is going on down there? I told you there were friendlies in the area, and not to engage! Acknowledge!"

"Manchu Six, my men opened fire before I could get them to stop. Now my company frequency is a mess with people trying to send reports. I'm trying to get the message through, over"

"Goddamnit Captain! Get your people under control! I don't want excuses! You have thirty seconds to make it happen before I relieve you on the spot! Acknowledge, over!"

Captain Marcel just stood there staring at the handmike. He couldn't believe that this was happening to him. He looked like a complete fool. It just wasn't fair.

2220 Hours May 18th , 2002
Phase Line "Axe"
Overwatching "The Valley of Death"

"Man, what the fuck is going on down there?" Cartright had the butterflies, and he was starting to get them bad. They could hear a massive firefight taking place out in the distance, but total silence in their company sector.

"I don't know, get on the phone and call Sergeant Holmes to find out what's going on." Smigelski popped the magazine out of his weapon, checked it, tapped it on his Kevlar to reseal the rounds, and slapped it back in the magazine well of his M16.

Cartright reached for the TA-312 field telephone that sat in their fighting position. It was connected by communication wire with the field phone in their team leader's fighting position, and was the preferred method of reaching him when they were supposed to be hunkered down in their hole. Just as he was about to pick up the receiver, the phone started chirping like a cricket, indicating that there was an inbound call. Cartright immediately answered it, "This is Cartright, over."

"Cartright, this is Holmes. Check it out, we got aliens comin' our way, but they're friendlies... do not fire 'em up whatever you do. It sounds like those 506thguys are fuckin' this up by the numbers and are blowin' the shit out of the wrong people down there. I guess Manchu Six is going ape-shit right now. I need you two to stay cool, and keep 100% security. You got any questions?"

"Yeah, are there Posties anywhere out there?"

There was a pause before Sergeant Holmes answered. "Probably. Nobody's said so for sure, but something bad is happening out there. You two keep your heads down and scan your sectors. I'll keep you updated as shit changes."

"Thanks Sarn't, out here."

Cartright passed on the information to Smigelski, but it did nothing to ease the tension the two of them felt. Something was brewing and they knew that it was going to be happening soon.

* * *

"Hey LT, I think you ought to take a look at this!" Lieutenant Andersen's gunner beckoned to him.

Andersen pushed his mapboard off to the side and crawled up through the gunner's hatch in the Humvee, until he was shoulder to shoulder with PFC Moulton. He was still pissed about the whole

"M&M's" issue.

"Myers, take the radios for a minute." The lieutenant said.

Carl grabbed the mapboard, a small notepad and an alcohol pen.

"Roger sir, I got it." The reports were starting pour in, but Carl could handle it, and he relayed them up to battalion without any trouble.

The gunner, PFC Moulton, handed his binoculars off to the platoon leader and pointed out in the distance. "Check it out sir, vicinity Checkpoint Four Seven, South 300 meters. There's some Indowy still trickling in but look what's hot on their tails."

Andersen focused the binoculars out in the distance to see a mass of Posleen just coming into view, chasing down the few remaining Indowy that were fleeing toward the battalion's main line of resistance. The Posleen easily numbered in the thousands and created a dust storm in their wake. They were chasing the Indowy and running them down with ease, hacking them to pieces with their monomolecular blades. Lieutenant Andersen stood, staring through the binoculars dumfounded for just a moment. "Holy shit." He slowly handed the binoculars back to Moulton, and then immediately grabbed the battalion O&I handmike from Myers' while he was in mid-report.

"Manchu Two, this is Sabre Six, I've got Posleen normals, thousands of them, vicinity Checkpoint Four Seven pushing west." Andersen squat down inside of the Humvee, "Myers punch up the fires net!" He swallowed hard before transmitting, "Manchu Steel, this is Sabre Six, adjust fire, over."

* * *

Murphy stood in the turret of his Bradley, glassing Engagement Area Pistol, watching the streams of Indowy move around the man made obstacles that seemed to carpet the valley floor. There were dead Indowy strewn everywhere, some hung up in the wire. When Murphy first received word that the refugees were coming, he ensured that his platoons held their fire, and indeed they did, however the little bipedal aliens were totally unaware of the anti-personnel and anti-tank mines that were buried everywhere, reinforcing the wire obstacles. The little creatures detonated mines with regularity. Not only did they succeed in killing a large number of their own, but they also unintentionally weakened the obstacles that the human defenders relied heavily upon.

Steve was wearing his Combat Vehicle Crewman's helmet, and was monitoring the company command and battalion command frequencies while scanning the Valley of Death. He pushed the little lever on the side of his CVC to the rearward position, so that he could talk to his crew on the intercom. "Hey Whit, did you hear that on battalion?"

SSG Whitmore was sitting in his gunner's chair, scanning through his gun's optics at the same scene as his commander, while also listening to the radios. "Roger that sir. Sounds like the scouts have just seen the Posties and have requested a fire mission."

Simmons sat in the driver's seat, chain smoking. He could hear everything that his gunner and Bradley Commander could hear, but since the vehicle was in its turret defilade position, in the bottom of a deep

hole, he couldn't see a thing. Simmons keyed his intercom, "Hey sir, where's Checkpoint Four Seven?"

Murphy didn't even have to look down at his map to answer, he had memorized most of the battalion's operational graphics, and all of the local terrain features. "Four Seven is five clicks east of 1st of the 506th's lead elements. They're getting real close. It won't be long before we see 'em over here."

Simmons could barely light another cigarette, his hand was shaking so hard. "Great. I can't fuckin' wait."

* * *

"Sabre Six, this is White One, I need fires at grid Charlie Hotel 457983, over!"

"White One, what's the target description, over."

Staff Sergeant Jiminez was a little surprised by the question. "Sabre Six, this is White One, target description is Posties in the open... lot's of fucking Posties in the open. What did you think it was, over."

Andersen was getting a bit flustered, "Watch your tone White One! Okay I got it, grid Charlie Hotel 457983, over"

"Sabre Six, this is Manchu Steel, your push. I monitored your internal, FA is currently shooting your last mission, but I'll put the mortars on this one, over"

"Manchu Steel, roger that, Sabre Six, out."

Lieutenant Andersen watched as the field artillery hammered the landscape, shredding Posleen normals by the dozens, and driving God Kings to whatever cover they could find. It was like pissing on a house fire though. The deluge continued to flow unabated. Fortunately for the scouts, they had managed to camouflage themselves on ridges and hilltops reasonably well, and were as yet unnoticed. With any luck, they could manage to keep it that way.

* * *

"Guidons, guidons, this is Dragon Six, scouts report Posleen pushing into Engagement Area Pistol vicinity TRP Thirteen. We should see them any time now. Remember your fire control and distribution. When sending reports stick to SALT format and keep it short. Acknowledge."

Steve put down the handmike and lit another Marlboro. His throat was starting to get a little sore from smoking so much, but it was hardly deterring him from sucking down another lung rocket. Darkness had engulfed them, and the only thing he could see were stars shining in the sky, and the vague outline of a ridgeline on the other side of the valley. He could hear the artillery rounds sailing overhead, thumping dully in the distance. Just then the first 25millimeter high explosive incendiary tracer round gently arced out toward Target Reference Point Thirteen. It exploded into the Posleen who were emerging into view.

The first round was a sensing round, fired to determine the proper range. It was quickly followed up by a three round burst. A moment later, the report of the weapon echoed off the hills, "Boom. Boom, boom, boom."

The Bradley Fighting Vehicles of Delta Company engaged from as far out as possible, and were having some success in thinning the ranks of their enemy. The Posleen, were emerging from a distant defile into the open "Bowl" and were quickly spreading out and racing forward. They started to return fire at the Bradleys, but it was not accurate, and it was fired at great distance. When the first God Kings emerged they directed fire, but it was still not having much effect. They fired at the human positions while racing forward to close the distance, their best bet was to overwhelm the battle positions and they knew it.

The attached tank platoon held fire with their main guns until they targeted the first God Kings. Once they did, their initial volleys were encouraging. God Kings riding in their small craft were destroyed quickly, and their normals scattered, losing focus, if only for a short time. Still, the Posleen pressed the attack, firing wildly and pushing forward at a full sprint.

The commander of the tank company team on the north side of Engagement Area Pistol took his cue from the infantry and ordered his platoons to open fire. The two tank platoons, and the single platoon of attached Bradleys rolled forward, up onto their firing platforms, and added the full weight of a tank company team to the fight. The Posleen did not even break stride as they divided their attention between both the infantry team to the south side of the valley, and the tank team in the north. The assaulting Posleen found themselves in a massive crossfire, in the open, with their ranks being torn to shreds, their leaders killed regularly, and now they were starting to hit strange looking obstacles erected everywhere, slowing their advance to a crawl.

"Manchu Steel, this is Dragon Steel, over." First Lieutenant Jimmy Ngyuen was calling the battalion fire support officer, Captain Frandsen, on the battalion fires net. He was desperately hoping to get through, but he wasn't holding his breath. The battalion fires net was getting a tad busy, and Captain Frandsen was a popular guy this evening, as every major maneuver element in the battalion attempted to request service from the painfully small number of available artillery and mortars.

"Dragon Steel, this is Manchu Steel, standby. I've got thirty fire missions stacked up and I'm trying to shoot them all. All the guns are real busy right now, out."

Jimmy Ngyuen wasn't thrilled with the news, even though he wasn't surprised. From what he could tell from monitoring several of the battalion's radio frequencies, they were getting attacked along the entire frontage and they were giving everything that they had. The enemy was not even slowing down, or noticing their casualties. He knew that at this rate, it wouldn't be long before the first calls were going to come in requesting final protective fires, indicating that positions were about to be overrun. And Jimmy knew that there simply weren't enough tubes available to make a difference.

He sat there in the back of his cramped FIST-V, staring at the radios and feeling helpless. He picked up his M16, pulled the charging handle, and chambered a round. This was going to get real ugly.

First Sergeant Jennings slapped another magazine into his M4 Carbine. The barrel was hot, almost white hot, and he was afraid that if he kept this up for much longer the weapon would be useless, and that he would have to find another. Not that that was going to be a problem, there were more and more

weapons becoming available as casualties mounted within the company.

"Lowthorpe! Have you raised 1stPlatoon yet?" Jennings didn't wait for an answer before he popped his head out of the trench again and started firing wildly into the solid wall of Posleen that was making another rush at this part of the company's line.

Specialist Lowthorpe huddled down at the bottom of the trench, with a handset in each hand, trying to communicate, while a deafening fight raged all around him. "Negative First Sarn't! I can't raise anyone down there, and battalion's screaming for a SITREP!"

Jennings jumped back down into the trench next to the RTO and dropped another empty magazine in the dirt. "You got any more mags left?"

Lowthorpe simply nodded in the affirmative as he answered another desperate call coming in from 2ndPlatoon.

The first sergeant handed his M4 to Lowthorpe and snatched a handmike from him. "Here, reload this fuckin' thing!" He then pulled a laminated map from his left cargo pocket. "Manchu Six, this is Cherokee Seven, over!"

Colonel Smith heard the call coming in, but ignored it for just a moment. His track was sitting in between two dismounted infantry positions filled with guys pulling triggers like it was going out of style. The one covered position to his left took a direct hit with a hyper-velocity missile. The concussion rocked him and his entire vehicle. The explosion sent chunks of clay, rocks, railroad ties, and pieces of soldiers flying into the air.

"GUNNER, HE, TROOPS, 800 METERS!" The colonel screamed.

His gunner responded before his battalion commander finished the fire command. "IDENTIFIED!"

"DRIVER UP!"

The driver slammed the vehicle forward, up to its firing platform, and then stomped on the brake.

Before the vehicle's suspension quit rocking from the sudden braking movement the colonel screamed. "FIRE!"

"ON THE WAY!" The gunner squeezed the trigger hard, and let loose a deafening, twenty-three round burst into a sea of four-legged monsters. It was then that the M242 Bushmaster auto-canon made that sickening "Ka-Chunk!" sound as the weapon cycled on an empty chamber. They were out of ammo. Again.

Each high explosive round from the 25mm auto-canon exploded like a fragmentation hand grenade, and they were highly effective against individual Posleen. They were not very impressive when fired into massive groups of the horse-like creatures though. It just couldn't kill them fast enough.

"CEASE FIRE, DRIVER BACK!"

The driver jolted the transmission back in reverse and launched them back down into their hole, just as the first Posleen railgun rounds and flechettes blasted their position. Colonel Smith looked up just in time to see the tip of one of his antennas get sheered off by some odd Posleen weapon system.

The gunner, Staff Sergeant Colburn yanked open the turret shield door and jumped through it. "I'm clear sir!"

The battalion commander then elevated the gun, and spun the turret to its proper position, so that the gunner could reload in the back.

"Cherokee Seven, this is Manchu Six, I need a SITREP, over!" The colonel transmitted over the boom mike on his CVC.

Dirt showered down on First Sergeant Jennings, and the ground vibrated as he spoke. Smoke drifted into the trench and made it practically impossible to breath. He kneeled in a shallow puddle of blood that pooled on the broken ground from the half dozen mutilated bodies lying in the ditch.

"Sir, it's bad up here. I've got thirty confirmed dead, at least that many wounded, I can't raise 1stPlatoon on the radio, I've got the company mortars shooting FPF for 3rd, and 2ndabout to be overrun. I think we're going to fold any minute now. Request permission to fall back, over!" The first sergeant was so scared he felt like puking his guts out.

Colonel Smith could hear his gunner in the back ripping open ammo crates and loading heavy 25mm rounds into their trays as quickly as his exhausted muscles could move them.

"Cherokee Seven, this is Manchu Six, roger, understand. You've got to hang on for just a bit longer. I'm going to push the reserve up to you, once that happens, I'll give you further instructions. Acknowledge!"

Lowthorpe handed the loaded M4 back to his first sergeant. "Okay, I got it sir. But don't make me wait too long. I like action and adventure as much as the next guy, but this shit is out of control!"

Colonel Smith looked over at the two boxes of coax machinegun ammo right next to him and noticed that they too were getting a bit low. "Colburn! When you come back up, bring some coax ammo with you!"

"Roger sir!"

Smith turned his attention back to the radio. "Cherokee Seven, don't worry, I'll get some folks up to your position, just keep up the fire! Manchu Six, out."

* * *

Smigelski put the red dot center mass of another Posleen normal that was hung up in concertina wire. The animal thrashed around in the obstacle uncontrollably, trying to escape, and in doing so, mutilated itself badly on the razor-like barbs that protruded from the wire. Smigelski jerked the trigger of his M16. The bullet smashed into the creature's throat and killed it almost instantly. The bolt of the weapon slammed back, and locked to the rearward position, as it always did whenever the last round was fired.

"RELOADING!" Smigelski ducked down low in the fighting position so that his head was no longer exposed. He was totally focused on the task at hand; he had tuned out the rest of the world. He knew

that Cartright would pick up his rate of fire, and cover down on his sector while he reloaded. His ears were ringing badly, and even the sound of Cartright's machinegun was barely audible. He pressed the magazine release button and the empty magazine dropped to the dirt floor of his fighting position; it was littered with spent shell casings and other flotsam.

Stacked in the rear of the enlarged fighting position was a cache of ammunition, food and water. Smigelski and Cartright had spent days in preparation, loading magazines, prepping drums of SAW ammo, and placing them in ammo cans in the back of their hole. He reached into an open can and retrieved another loaded magazine, slapped it into his weapon, pushed down on the bolt release button, and let it snap forward. He then tapped twice on the forward assist, ensuring that the bolt of the weapon was firmly seated.

"I'M UP!" Smigelski jumped back up so fast that he hit his head on the overhead cover that served as their roof. He hardly noticed as he peered through the M68 site and scanned for another target. It wasn't hard, there were hundreds of centaur-like creatures flowing around a turning obstacle not far down the hill from him.

Mortars and grenade launchers fired flares into the air illuminating the engagement area down below, casting uneven shadows as they floated back to the surface. In the low areas, Posleen rushed the wire like crazed fans at a Metallica concert. Thousands of tracers flew back and forth thrashing and ripping into them. Hundreds of them got cut to pieces under the murderous fire.

"I'M OUT! RELOADING!" Cartright screamed.

Smigelski put the dot on another animal that was firing in his general direction. He squeezed the trigger and watched as the Posleen dropped to its knees in agony. He consciously slowed his rate of fire to allow Cartright sufficient time to reload the SAW.

Cartright dropped to a knee and pulled his machinegun down with him. He quickly set the weapon down on its bipod, grabbed the carrying handle, pressed the release and removed the smoking hot barrel from the weapon. During the preparation of their position, he had carefully laid down several asbestos mittens in the corner. He tossed the barrel on the mittens, grabbed a five-gallon jerry can full of water, and poured it over the white-hot metal. It immediately sizzled like a load of French fries dumped in hot grease. A plume of steam rose up and out of the fighting position as Cartright jammed the spare barrel on the end of the SAW.

"YOU DONE YET?!" Smigelski bellowed down at him.

"JUST A SECOND! WORKING IT!" He detached the empty ammo drum from the bottom of the weapon and tossed it out of the foxhole. He wasted no time snapping another plastic drum in place, grabbed the belt of ammunition, and gingerly placed it in the feed tray. He slapped the feed tray cover down on the belt of ammo, and sprung back up onto his firing stoop.

"I'M UP!" He immediately pulled the trigger, and sent another seven round burst of 5.56 millimeter NATO downrange.

It was dark outside, but hardly anyone noticed at all with bullets flying in every direction, explosions all around, the noise, the charred bodies, burning vehicles, and the smell. Most noticed nothing at all except for the terror they felt, and how their muscles felt like lead. Some were so scared they didn't know that they had shit all over themselves.

Smigelski tried to put the gut-wrenching fear out of his mind and stay focused, until Bradley number Delta Two Two went up in a fireball just fifty meters to his right.

The vehicle rolled up to a hull defilade to fire just when a hyper-velocity missile penetrated the protective berm to its front, entered the vehicle's engine compartment and exploded. Shrapnel and liquid metal entered the turret of the vehicle and sprayed the Bradley Commander and his gunner, bursting organs and shattering bones in a nanosecond, killing them both instantly. The driver, Private Jorgensen, was positioned next to the engine compartment and had molten aluminum splashed all over his lap and upper torso. He screamed horribly until he went into shock and then unconsciousness. He was spared the pain of burning alive when the fuel tanks caught fire and the ammunition cooked off. The Bradley burned, and burned hot. Blue flame vented from the top hatches from the vehicle, as combustibles ignited, and armor melted.

* * *

"Bushwhacker One-Six, this is Manchu Three, over." The battalion operations officer didn't bother to remove his Nomex glove as he stuck his finger into his mouth, scooped out the old Copenhagen, and flicked it off the side of his Bradley.

There were four Bradleys parked roughly in line on the backside of the ridgeline where the battalion was fighting for its life. The battalion operations officer, or S-3, was in his Bradley, and he had rounded up three Bradley Stinger Fighting Vehicles from the attached air defense artillery platoon. Since there weren't going to be too many enemy planes to shoot down, the battalion commander kept most of his air defenders back in the vicinity of the TOC as the task force reserve. Now the S-3, Major Gianforti, was preparing to lead the reserve into the fight, to counter-attack and keep Charlie Company, 1st of the 506th from disintegrating.

"Manchu Three, this is Bushwhacker One-Six, over."

"You guys ready to roll yet?"

"Manchu Three, Bushwhacker One-Six. Bushwhacker One-Two can't get his gun to go into 'sear.' He's trying to fix it right now, over"

Gianforti bristled at the news. The air defenders had always been a problem, their maintenance was substandard, their gunnery skills were lacking, their ability to navigate on the ground was non-existent, and their platoon leader was an idiot. All in all, they were a big pain in the ass. Now a whole company relied on them to come to the rescue, and they were ill-prepared for the task.

"Listen Lieutenant, you had better get your guys unfucked right now! There are a bunch of light-fighters on the other side of this hill that need us, and they can't wait! Do you read me?"

"Manchu Three, this is Bushwhacker One Six, wilco, over."

MAJ Gianforti checked his equipment again while he waited for the air defenders to get their weapons ready. His mapboard was laid out in front of him, he had a loaded port-firing weapon, a pair of night vision goggles hanging around his neck, his spall vest secured around his torso, and a nine-millimeter

pistol in his shoulder holster. He looked over to his left to find that his gunner was standing up in the hatch, looking over the left-hand side of the vehicle.

His gunner, Sergeant Lightfoot tapped the S-3 on his shoulder. "Hey sir, get a load of this."

Major Gianforti had to climb out of his commander's hatch in order to see what was on the left side of the vehicle. The "spaghetti cable" that connected his CVC helmet to his radios was stretched as far as the coiled little cable could reach. When he looked down he saw an Indowy standing next to the vehicle, motioning with his hands, trying to get their attention. About thirty meters away, was a small group of Indowy, hiding behind a large rock, obviously frightened, looking like kids caught in a tiger pen but not willing to leave their comrade behind.

Gianforti looked at his gunner. "What do you suppose he wants?"

Before Lightfoot could answer, and strange voice came over the intercom. "I would like to help you."

Both of them did a double-take at the hairy little creature. In its hand was a small metal box, and Gianforti immediately recognized it as an AID. He had heard about the AIDs, but he had never actually seen one. The Indowy was using the AID to translate language, and then transmit it to the Bradley's intercom. It seemed like absolute magic.

Gianforti felt a little silly talking to the small alien, but he decided to do it anyway. "What do you want there little fella? I don't really have time now, I've got more pressing matters that require my attention right now." It was then that the S-3 became very aware of the radio traffic that was going crazy on the battalion command net, and the noise of battle just on the other side of the ridgeline.

"I simply offer my expertise. I can fix things for you, and help your people in this fight." The Indowy had strange gestures and body language that made no sense to Gianforti.

The S-3 didn't know how this small unarmed creature could help them at a time like this, and he didn't really care. Right now, there were much bigger fish to fry. "Listen little friend, I've got to go now, but Delta company is over that way. They need all the help that they can get. If you want to help, head that way, and up over that hill." Gianforti pointed in the direction of Delta Company, and The Valley of Death.

The Indowy looked to where the S-3 pointed and then looked back at him. "Thank you. I will go there and do what I can." He then scurried off with his friends to the sound of the guns.

Major Gianforti watched them as they disappeared into the darkness. "Good luck little guy."

* * *

Jimmy Ngyuen lay on his back against a hard clay berm next to his wounded driver and RTO. His sweat-soaked BDU shirt stuck to him like a second skin, steam rolled off his body in the evening chill. He pulled the pin on the M67 fragmentation grenade and heaved it down the slope of the hill. It landed in amongst a group of three Posleen who attempted to claw their way through some wire. When it exploded all three fell to the ground, one dead, and the other two writhed in the dirt, bleeding profusely.

He looked over at his FIST-V. It burned brightly and did a good job of illuminating the immediate area. "How you feeling Bennett?"

The FIST-V driver, Specialist Bennett, lay next to Lieutenant Ngyuen. His shoulder was a bloody mess, and it was bandaged as well as possible under the conditions. He was conscious, but moaned softly, in absolute pain. On the other side of Ngyuen was his RTO, Specialist Jacobson. Jacobson would alternate between talking on his PRC-119 radio, and popping up over the berm to fire his M16 at the Posleen. Jimmy Ngyuen did his best to contribute to the fight, considering that there wasn't nearly enough artillery to go around.

Jimmy peered over the berm to try and size things up. The company had been pushed back earlier that evening to their alternate positions, located much higher up on the ridgeline. It was a nasty little maneuver that cost them a tank, a Bradley, and a bunch of grunts, all of which littered the hillside just down the slope from them. As bad as it was, the move saved the company team from total annihilation as the Posleen breached the last of the protective obstacles and started overrunning sections of the line.

As it was, the company was down to two tanks, seven Bradleys, and forty-four dismounted infantry. The alien attack had bled to death after throwing themselves against a buzzsaw. It hadn't been an easy fight, but it had been a successful one, at least up until now. Jimmy monitored the battalion command net and knew that Delta Company and Team Demon to the north had only defeated the first wave, and that the scouts were reporting a second wave, of undetermined strength, heading their way. It was enough to make a grown man cry.

* * *

"Sabre Six, this is White One, over"

"White One, this is Sabre Six Delta, send your traffic, over." Carl held the handmike up to his ear while trying to read the map with a red lens flashlight.

"Six Delta, I've got another large group of Posties, approximately 3000 of them pushing past Checkpoint Three Four. Can we get some fires on Target 0024, over?"

"White One, standby." Carl leaned over from the driver's seat of the Humvee, to get his platoon leader's attention. "Sir, White One reports about 3000 Posleen pushing past Three Four. He wants to know if he can get some fires on Target 0024."

Lieutenant Andersen was busy talking to the S-2 on the O&I net. "Manchu Two, this is Sabre Six, standby, over." He turned his attention to Myers. "What did you say?"

"Sir, Sergeant Jiminez wants fires on Target 0024, he says there's 3000 Posties pushing through Three Four time now."

"Tell him that I'll check." Andersen reached over and switched his radio to over to the battalion fires net. "Manchu Steel, this is Sabre Six, over."

The fires net was busy, but not as chaotic as it had been earlier. "Sabre Six, Manchu Steel, send it,

over."

"Roger, can you fire Target number 0024, we've got 3000 Posleen pushing through Checkpoint Three Four, time now, over."

"Sabre Six, can't do it right now. I've got the big guns servicing another target in Maddawg's sector, and the mortars are "Red" on ammo."

"Manchu Steel, roger, understand. Sabre Six, out." Lieutenant Andersen shook his head in disgust. He was starting to feel helpless.

Carl didn't waste any time. "I monitored sir. I'll pass the message along to White One."

Andersen just nodded, as he sent White One's report to the S-2.

* * *

"Manchu Three, Bushwhacker One Six, we're up, over."

That was music to Major Gianforti's ears. "Good, let's go. You guys follow me in. Guns free on anything running on more than two legs. You got it?"

"Roger sir."

Before the S-3 could give the order to move out, his gunner cut loose with a long burst with the coax machinegun. Gianforti was so startled he almost jumped clear out of the turret.

"SIR! POSTIES COMING OVER THE CREST OF THE HILL!"

The S-3 looked up at the hill directly in front of him, and saw hundreds of Posleen coming over the crest, running at full speed down the slope straight toward them. It was crystal clear that the Charlie Company had finally broken, and that the counter-attack was too late.

"BUSHWHACKER, THIS IS MANCHU THREE! CONTACT FRONT! GET ON LINE NOW!"

The four Bradleys were in a column, prepared to follow the S-3 up and over the hill. They were in a poor position to engage the Posleen unless they spread out. Which is exactly what they attempted to do.

The air defenders pivot steered their vehicles and began to peel off in each direction in order to get a clear line of fire on the enemy, as they raced down the ridgeline. As they did so, they were riddled with fire from 3mm railguns and flechettes. The rounds did not cause significant damage to the vehicles themselves, but they were deadly to the exposed Bradley Commanders.

Bushwhacker One Six, Second Lieutenant Voorhees, took two flechettes to the chest, and one in his left eye socket. He dropped like a bag of wet cement into the turret of his vehicle, while his gunner cut loose with the 25mm auto-canon. The driver hammered the accelerator as hard as he could and broke to the left of the S-3's track numbered HQ 33. The driver then pulled the steering yolk to the right while the

vehicle was at speed and succeeded in throwing track clear off of the road wheels on both sides. The vehicle was effectively immobile.

The other three Bradleys fired a mix of 25mm and coax machinegun fire up the slope erratically. The fire was panicked, and unfocused.

It was then that the first God King flew over the crest of the hill and unleashed his energy weapons on the stunned counter-attack force.

The first vehicle hit was HQ 33. It took a solid hit to the right track and lengthwise along the armor plating. Sergeant Lightfoot fired back but his rounds flew wide. A hyper-velocity missile then hit the left side of the vehicle at an oblique. The missile didn't explode, it just passed in one side of the turret and out the other. The over-pressure it created crushed flesh and bone. Major Gianforti and Sergeant Lightfoot never felt a thing.

The surviving crews didn't last much longer. They were quickly destroyed without giving much in return. The Posleen continued to push their attack, running past the burning piles of slag, hunting for more prey.

* * *

Manchu TOC was a frenzy of activity. People darted around inside of the modular tent passing messages, updating charts, answering radios, and processing calls for fire. The assistant S-3 was sending and receiving situation reports while motioning in a primitive form of sign language to the S-2 NCOIC that he needed another dip of Wintergreen Longcut. The battalion fire support officer and his NCO sat on folding chairs in the back of their M577 with the ramp down managing the traffic that was flooding in over the fires net, while chain smoking Marlboro reds and using an old coffee can for an ashtray. The S-2 paced in front of "the big map" and listened to the hundreds of urgent transmissions coming in over the loudspeakers, and would move small unit icons, update the combat power chart, and write battle damage assessments on a large dry-erase board. Sergeant Major Branaugh stood quietly in a corner, watching the staff scurry around on the wooden floor pallets, drinking his millionth cup of coffee.

Major Jaeger picked up the transmitter for the Administration and Logistics net, while staring at the posted maps, constantly updated by the Assistant S-3 and the rest of the staff. The atmosphere in the TOC was tense, but everything was running as smoothly as could be expected.

"Manchu Four, Manchu Five, over." The XO decided that now was the time to get the emergency resupply pushed forward.

The S-4, Captain Krieger, sat in his Humvee with the engine idling. He was in the lead vehicle in a convoy of cargo trucks. They had been positioned there for the last few hours, waiting for the word to head out with their emergency re-supply of fuel, water, and ammunition. In the meantime, he listened to the battalion command net, and how the fight was going.

"Manchu Five, this is Manchu Four, over."

"Manchu Four, need you to move your element from the Combat Trains to the logistics rally point at this time. Expect representatives from Demon, Dragon, Thumper, Bulldog and Maddawg. We can't raise

Cherokee at this time. Be prepared to run support packages to their company trains and to conduct hot refueling there. Acknowledge."

"Manchu Five, this is Manchu Four, roger, moving." Krieger picked up his ICOM hand-held radio and gave the order to the drivers and vehicle commanders in his convoy.

The ungainly group of vehicles consisted of refuelers, large cargo HEMM-T trucks, smaller LMTVs, and a couple of Humvees. They were stacked with crates of ammo, water cans, thousands of gallons of fuel, and they started down the rough trails with their headlights turned off, the drivers relying on night vision devices.

As Major Jaeger set the hand mike down he heard someone fire a SAW just outside of the TOC. Everyone in the tent stopped in their tracks and froze for just an instant.

"EVERYBODY GRAB YOUR SHIT AND GET OUTSIDE!" The XO screamed. "MOVE, MOVE, MOVE!"

The assistant S-3 dropped his spit cup, snatched up his load bearing vest in one hand, his carbine in the other, and bolted out the exit and toward one of the handful of perimeter bunkers. The rest of the staff sat there stunned and did nothing.

"Come on you sonsabitches let's go!" Sergeant Major Branaugh grabbed the S-2 NCOIC and the S-3's Humvee driver by the back of their BDU jackets and dragged them outside.

Upon seeing the sergeant major manhandling two full-grown men out of the TOC, the rest came to their senses, picked up their weapons and ammo and ran outside to man their fighting positions.

The XO was pushing and pulling people out the door until he found himself outside in a jumble of bodies. His eyes weren't adjusted to the darkness yet, and everything was black as a coalminer's ass. The one thing that was visible were the tracers being fired from a machinegun on the perimeter, and Posleen plasma weapons firing back at them. He could hear soldiers screaming orders at each other and could start to make out people running all about, looking for cover as the TOC and everything in its vicinity got pelted with shotguns and flechettes.

"This is a complete cluster-fuck!" He said to himself as he tried to get his bearings, and do something to get the defenses somewhat organized.

"Major Jaeger, is that you sir?" The S-2 was standing next to him. He was starting to regain his night vision, and could just make Captain Gaston out.

Before the XO could respond, the S-2 lurched backward like he had been hit in the chest with a Louisville Slugger, and fell flat on his back, dead.

Major Jaeger didn't move. He was kneeling on the hard clay with his sidearm drawn, trying to figure out what to do. It was obvious that most had found their way to some form of cover and the volume of small arms fire increased dramatically. He squinted hard, and began to see the enemy.

There were hundreds of them, charging the perimeter wire at a full gallop. Many were being shot and killed by the pathetically inaccurate fire coming from his men, but most kept coming. When they hit the protective concertina barrier the first twenty or so got themselves hopelessly entangled, but by doing so, flattened the wire with their bodies, opening the floodgates for others to flow through.

The creatures poured into the perimeter and fired their weapons at everything. Sergeant Major Branaugh stood at the front of an M577 with two other soldiers, holding their little piece of ground, until they were dismembered by Posleen blades. The assistant S-3 rallied a small group of drivers and radio operators, and attacked the aliens at the breach in the wire and got torn to shreds. The S-3 NCOIC tried to use his empty M16 like a club, but was pounced upon by three normals. His screams were horrible as they sank their teeth into his flesh.

Major Jaeger got to his feet and stood in the middle of the perimeter, while the defense crumbled around him. Carnivores and defenders fought and died. The shrieks of young kids being torn apart while still alive, raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

He looked to the sky and saw the stars, and how they illuminated the hills. He felt a cold breeze on his skin. He felt the hard clay under his boots, and smelled the spent gunpowder hanging in the air. And he distinctly saw the dozen or so Posleen normals coming straight at him. The XO pulled the hammer back on his pistol, brought it up and held it in both hands. When the creatures closed the distance and were almost upon him he fired. He fired his pistol quickly, killing one after another, but still they came. He kept firing until the slide locked to the rear, and the bullets were gone. He closed his eyes and flinched just a bit when the creature chopped off his head.

It wasn't long before the last of the humans were silenced. Some had tried to run but must stayed and fought. In the end it didn't matter, they were slaughtered.

The God Kings reigned in their oolts, and brought them under control inside of the wire. They howled in ecstasy as they hacked their quarry into chunks of meat.

The feeding began soon after that.

"Manchu Steel, this is Dragon Steel, over!" Jimmy Ngyuen threw the transmitter to the ground. "Jacobson, give me Company."

Specialist Jacobson complied, and then checked to make sure that his weapon was still loaded.

"Dragon Six, this is Dragon Steel, over."

"Dragon Steel, this is Six. You have any luck raising anybody on the fires net?"

"Negative Dragon Six. There are plenty of people talking on the fires net, but not Manchu TOC. I can't raise them on command either, I think they are off the air."

"Jimmy, I need you to take over as the battalion fire support officer until Manchu TOC comes back up on the net. I need you to send all fire missions to the mortar and artillery fire direction centers for the time being, over." Steve's voice cracked as he spoke, he was starting to get hoarse.

"Roger that Dragon Six, just be advised that my vehicle is gone and I am on foot. I'm talking on my dismount radios, and their range is limited, over"

"Yeah, I got it. Just do the best you can. Things are a little fucked up right now. Acknowledge."

Jimmy could hardly argue with that. "Roger, I'll be dropping off your company internal net for awhile Dragon Six. Sergeant Sanchez will take over for me until things change, over."

"Okay Jimmy, talk to you again soon. Dragon Six, out."

"Dragon Seven, this is Six, over"

First Sergeant Taylor was up in the hatch of his M113 armored personnel carrier cresting the hill on the backside of the company's battle positions. During the lull in the fight, he was racing around, picking up wounded with his vehicle and bringing them back to the casualty collection point located back in the company trains. "Dragon Six, this is Seven, go ahead, over."

"Roger, we have just completed our move. We have pushed back down the hill to re-occupy our primary positions. We need emergency re-supply though. Most elements are "Amber" or "Red" on water, ammo, and the tanks need gas too, over."

The first sergeant pulled up behind a Bradley that was a total wreck. An orange VS-17 panel was attached to an antenna, indicating that there were wounded crew members that needed to be evacuated. The back ramp was down, and the entire crew was lying on it, with an assortment of injuries. It was the company XO and his crew.

"Roger, I've been talking to Manchu Four on A&L. He says that he'll be at the LRP in fifteen mikes. I'll head back there in a minute to bring up re-supply. Oh by the way, I'm down here at the XO's track. Him and his crew are all alive, but they'll need evac, over."

"Roger, understand. Hey, tell the XO to quit malingering and get his ass back to work. Dragon Six, out." Steve checked to make sure that his gunner wasn't watching, then pulled out his mouthwash bottle and took a swig. The bottle was starting to get low, he'd have to go in the back of the track and top off pretty soon.

* * *

Sergeant Holmes crept forward cautiously as he approached the empty fighting position from the rear. He looked back behind him and felt a bit reassured when he saw the other three members of his team in a proper wedge formation. He raised his right hand into the air, and gave the "halt" signal to the other members of his element. All of them stopped, crouched down on a knee, and faced out, providing security. Things were somewhat quiet in their sector at the moment, but fighting could be heard both to the north and south, for hundreds of miles.

This calm wasn't going to last long. The squad leader had called on the ICOM earlier and told him to re-occupy their primaries, because another wave of Posleen was on the way. He had moved his guys out immediately, but carefully. The area was covered in Posties. Practically all were dead, but a few were just wounded, and still armed. Every time they came across an injured one they would quickly administer a killing shot to the head, and move on. They had to get back in their holes; there was no time to waste.

He looked over to the right and saw Delta Two Two ablaze, and then back behind him at Smigelski and Cartright. "Okay you two, back in your hole. Give me a commo check on the TA-312 when me and

Miller get back to ours."

Smigelski and Cartright nodded in understanding, moved forward and slid back into their position. Sergeant Holmes headed off with Specialist Miller in tow.

Neither one of them was very excited about moving back down the hill and back into their original spots, but at least this particular hole had their ammo cache. The alternate position didn't, and it was starting to become a real problem up until they broke up the first wave of Posleen. The two of them immediately set to work reloading their ammo pouches, clearing empty ammo cans, empty SAW drums, and other garbage from their cramped little foxhole. A commo check was conducted with Sergeant Holmes, sector stakes were replaced and canteens refilled.

When the work was finished Smigelski pulled out a zip-lock bag containing a smashed pack of Marlboros. He pulled out two, handed one to Cartright, and lit the cigarette for him. "You doin' okay man?"

Cartright took a long pull on the cigarette before answering. "Yeah. I'm good. Just a little shook up. You?"

Smigelski lit his smoke. "I'll be okay. You think that this next push is going to be worse than the last one?"

"Hope not. If it is, I think we're screwed. We barely made it this last time."

They both stood there quietly smoking. The sounds of battle raged in the distance all along the line. It wasn't going to be long before they were thrown back into the mix again themselves, and they knew it.

0214 Hours May 19th , 2002
Phase Line "Axe"

Colonel Smith continued trying to raise the XO and the S-3 on the radio to no avail. He could speak with his companies and to the scouts, but not with the TOC or his operations officer.

The colonel was having his worst fears realized. Charlie Company hadn't reported in a long time, and their sector was quiet. The S-3 didn't answer the radio. The TOC was off the air. Communication with Brigade was breaking down. Last reports had 1st of the 503rd on his right flank hanging on by a thread, and then nothing. It was entirely possible that the Posleen had steamrolled over Charlie Company, were now in the battalion rear area, wreaking havoc, and effectively cutting the battalion off. The thought sent a chill up his spine.

The scout platoon out front was still intact; they had managed to keep themselves concealed very well as they sent valuable reports back, and called in dozens of deadly accurate fire missions.

The Bravo Company Maddawgs had received a bloody nose along their section of the line, but they still held. Captain Jake "The Snake" Rodriguez had lost half his company, but didn't give an inch of ground to the enemy. Things were quiet there now, as the Maddawgs licked their wounds and awaited the next inevitable enemy push.

Team Demon, the attached tank company, still occupied positions to the north side of Engagement Area Pistol. They had lost a Bradley and three tanks, but were still in relatively good shape. Their commander, Captain Hans Eichelberg, was killed early on in the fight, but his company XO had quickly taken command and was doing a superb job. Their biggest concern at the moment was getting an emergency re-supply of fuel for their M-1s.

Team Dragon to the south of EA Pistol had been hit hard, and pulled off a brilliant maneuver under pressure. They had succeeded in bounding their platoons back up the hill to their alternate positions just before being overrun. This was in no small part thanks to a certain First Lieutenant Jimmy Ngyuen who directed the battalion mortars to put white phosphorous almost on top of their own men, while they pulled out. It didn't sound very impressive, but the timing was perfect, and timing was everything. Captain Steve Murphy still had two M-1 tanks, seven Bradley Fighting Vehicles, most of his dismounted infantry, and he had just reported that they had re-occupied their original positions, overwatching the Valley of Death.

The \$64,000 question was now, "what was the status of Charlie Company, 1st of the 506th?" They had fought the hard fight, in the rock outcroppings and cliffs located roughly in the middle of the battalion's center. The Posleen had a difficult time clawing their way up the ridgeline just to get at the Cherokees, and they paid heavily to do so. But once there, they exacted a terrible toll on the light infantrymen. The S-3 was supposed to take the counter-attack force up the one trail that could support vehicle movement, and occupy an attack by fire position that would have certainly relieved pressure along the entire company's line. As it was, the Cherokees and Manchu Three weren't answering the radio, and Colonel Smith had just about mentally written them off along with Manchu TOC. But he had to be sure.

The scouts were reporting a second wave of Posleen about to hit them along the entire battalion frontage again. He needed to know what the status of Charlie Company was. He needed to know what the status of Manchu TOC and the battalion rear was. The scouts were for all intents and purposes, stuck in their forward positions, and were totally unable to send any elements to the rear to recon and give him a report. He didn't dare to have one of his heavy companies dispatch a reconnaissance element, not when enemy action was imminent. His only option right now was the Bulldogs.

The task force engineers weren't decisively engaged right now. They weren't scouts, but they did know where all of his positions, obstacles, and engagement areas were, and they could get to them quickly, even in the dark, with nasty aliens shooting at them. They were the only option at the moment.

"Bulldog Six, this is Manchu Six, over"

"Manchu Six, this is Bulldog Six." The engineer company commander sounded even more exhausted than usual.

"Jonathan, I need you to take some of your sappers on a recon. Need to know what the status of Cherokee is. I also need you to send someone back to the rear, vicinity Manchu TOC and see if we've got enemy elements in our rear. Acknowledge."

"Manchu Six, this is Bulldog Six, wilco. I'll take a squad up to check on the Cherokees and send another to check the rear areas along 'Route Willow' and 'Route Alder,' over."

"Sounds good. Get me a SITREP as soon as humanly possible, over."

Captain Jonathan Powell wasted no time getting prepared. His engineers had been ready to do

something, anything, for quite some time now. They were ready to go.

* * *

"Did you just hear that sir?"

Captain Krieger spat out the window of the cargo Humvee. "What are you talking about Jones?"

Krieger's driver was focused on his driving, but he was also paying close attention to the radio traffic coming across the net. The speakers in the truck were difficult to hear when they were moving, but not impossible.

"It sounded like the colonel just ordered somebody to recon the rear to see whether or not there are Posleen running around back here." Jones said.

"Are you sure?" It felt like electricity shot through Krieger's body.

"Roger sir."

"Stop the fuckin' truck!"

Jones slammed on the brakes, which caused every other vehicle following him in the convoy to do likewise. There were a lot of drivers cursing at the top of their lungs as the cargo trucks narrowly averted collisions with other vehicles along the dusty, darkened trail.

Krieger was about to call the battalion commander to request guidance when the first Posleen rounded the corner only twenty meters in front of his Humvee.

"Oh my God!"

The first normal was followed by dozens more, and they swarmed over the convoy before anyone could react. The occasional truck driver would get to his .50 caliber machinegun and get off a few rounds before he was shot down, dismembered, or worse. A God King fired a plasma round into the melee only to have it strike a truck carrying white phosphorous mortar rounds. The entire column, loaded full of precious fuel and ammunition, created a cataclysmic explosion.

* * *

The engineer company commander yanked back on the charging handle of his M2 Heavy Barrel and then toggled the transmit switch on his CVC to the rearward position for a quick commo check. "Jackson, can you hear me okay?"

His M113 driver had his hatch open, and turned around to look at his commander before answering.

"Roger sir."

In the back of the track was an entire sapper squad, standing up through the open cargo hatch, with their weapons oriented in every direction. When Captain Powell turned to check on them, the squad leader simply gave him the "thumbs up," acknowledging that they were ready to go.

"Okay Jackson, let's go."

The M113A3's Detroit Diesel came to life as the driver gently applied pressure to the accelerator. He had adjusted his seat so that he sat high up, with his head completely outside of the vehicle, in order for him to see better. The M113 had a night vision block that fitted in through the normal periscope mounts, but hardly anyone ever used them, since they were cumbersome and difficult to see through.

"Where're we going boss?" Jackson asked his commander.

Powell scanned the scene with his night vision goggles while the vehicle rocked and jerked up and over every small bump in the trail. He rotated the .50 caliber machinegun off to the side and locked it in position. Many an inexperienced track commander had left the weapon in the forward position. Inevitably the driver would hit a stump or rock, causing the "TC" to slam violently forward and "eat" the weapon. Usually a concussion and or broken teeth resulted.

"Just follow this trail forward for about a klick. When it forks, we'll turn right, up and over the hill and go straight into Cherokee's battle positions."

Jackson had driven around the battalion sector so many times within the last week, he was intimately familiar with every route, battle position, engagement area, obstacle, and goat trail within twenty kilometers.

"Roger, got it. What happens if we make contact with some baddies?"

Powell continued to scan while he talked to his driver. "We haul ass."

"Hooah." Jackson smirked while giving the patented generic Army response.

0228 Hours May 19th , 2002

Phase Line "Axe"

Overwatching "The Valley of Death"

"Dude, here they come!" Cartright loosed a long burst from his SAW into the front rank of charging centaurs. This triggered a reaction along the entire line, as dismounted positions came to life, and a storm of small arms fire tore into the charging beasts, ripping gaping holes in their lead ranks.

The second wave of Posleen took heavy losses as they charged forward, but not nearly as bad as the wave that had preceded them. Artillery was doing a good job, but everything else was degraded in effectiveness. The mortars were practically out of ammunition, the Brads and tanks had taken significant losses, and most of the obstacles had been reduced or breached in some way. Entirely too many of the creatures succeeded in reaching small arms range. A situation, that was highly alarming.

As Cartright and Smigelski shot at a small group of Posleen running over a small pile of carcasses, they were jolted by a mass of directed fire on their position. 3mm railgun rounds, flechettes, and shotguns blasted their foxhole and the area immediately surrounding it. The eighteen inches of overhead cover, consisting of railroad ties and sandbags, disintegrated, having never been designed to survive such punishment. Both soldiers were knocked backward into their hole, and were partially buried when it caved in. Their position silenced, the Posleen focused their attention on other positions along the line.

"Sarn't Holmes! I think Cartright and Ski just bought it!" Miller was trying to clear a double feed from his rifle when he saw the other two members of the fire team get hammered.

Sergeant Holmes jacked the M203 grenade launcher open and the spent 40mm casing fell to the ground. He jammed another grenade in the breach, and slammed it back shut. "What the fuck're you talkin' about?"

Miller was firing his M16 like a madman down the slope, into the screaming mass of carnivores. Un-aimed fire beat their position sending chunks of dirt and rocks flying everywhere, making it difficult for him to return fire with any degree of accuracy. Sergeant Holmes shoved him out of the way in order to get a better look up the slope at his two subordinates. It was hard to see, but the burning Bradley just a bit further down the line cast enough light. The roof of the fighting position had caved in and he couldn't see either one of his guys.

"Miller, when I tell you, I want you to blow the last of our Claymores and then lay down some fire while I go check on those two! You got it?"

Miller's eyes were wide as saucers. "Sarn't, you want me to stay here by myself?"

"I ain't gonna leave you behind. I'll be back in a minute. Just do what I tell you!"

Miller swallowed hard and nodded. "Roger sarn't."

Just down the line to their left a dismount position took a nasty hit. Someone over there started screaming for a medic at the top of his lungs. His voice was barely audible over the deafening rifle and machinegun fire.

"Now! Blow the fuckin' Claymores!"

Miller picked up the two remaining Claymore clackers and detonated a half-dozen mines that were "Daisy-Chained" down the slope behind a final protective obstacle. Twenty Posleen that were trying to tear their way through the wire were blown into scraps of bloody flesh and shattered bone. Miller then laid down the best suppressive fire he could manage with his rifle; just like he had been taught back in Fort Benning.

Holmes scrambled out of the fighting position and ran up the hillside for what seemed like a mile until he reached the smoking hole in the ground that contained the other half of his fire team. When he got there he dove in head first, as the ground around him was beaten with flechettes and railgun rounds.

He found both Cartright and Smigelski buried up to their waists, blood running from noses, ears, and other assorted cuts. Holmes leaned forward and started slapping them in their faces, trying to revive them.

"Come on you two! Wake up! You ain't dead yet!"

An illumination round popped overhead, producing an eerie light inside of the hole. The two injured soldiers looked like they had been dead for days.

Cartright started to regain consciousness first. He started coughing violently, and then his eyes slowly opened. It took him some time before he fully realized where he was, and what was going on.

Smigelski jolted back to reality. One minute he was out, the next he was lucid. The young soldier was in rough shape though, he looked like a heavyweight boxer after fifteen rounds; his left eye was swollen shut, and his nose was broken.

The both of them groaned as they came around, to find their big, black, bald, team leader grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"So how are my two white brothers feelin'?"

Smigelski coughed hard. "Like shit sarn't."

"How 'bout you He-ro?"

Cartright slowly wiped blood from his nose. "I'm okay I think."

"Good. Dig your weapons out of this mess and get hot. We ain't out of this shit yet."

As the two dazed soldiers started to dig themselves out, their fire team leader stood up and started popping off rounds and engaging targets just down the hill.

"BACK UP! BACK UP! BACK UP!" Captain Powell was yelling into his CVC boom mike while he unlocked the .50 caliber.

Jackson hit the brakes and everyone in the vehicle flew forward. The squad in the back of the M113 piled on top of each other in a big heap, Jackson hit his chin so hard it started to bleed, and Captain Powell was almost thrown out of the cupola. Jackson put the vehicle in reverse and gunned it. Powell was hanging on for dear life, but still oriented the M2 Heavy Barrel over the front deck of the track and pressed the butterfly trigger, slinging lead in the general direction of the enemy.

The engineers in the back of the track tried to get back on their feet while the vehicle bounced backward down rough trail, at top speed, straining the vehicle's suspension. Captain Powell's nods fell off and he could see absolutely nothing except for the massive muzzle flash of the .50 caliber machinegun, and the bolts of plasma that screamed past his head.

The engineer commander had just established that the Posleen had indeed overrun Charlie Company's position. Now all he had to do was live just long enough to report it over the radio. At the moment he wasn't all that sure he was going to be able to accomplish that simple task.

"MANCHU SIX, THIS IS BULLDOG SIX! THERE IS AN UNDETERMINED NUMBER OF

POSLEEN CURRENTLY OCCUPYING BP CHEROKEE!" A flechette ricocheted off the front slope armor and almost nailed him in the face. "THERE ARE HUNDREDS OF THEM PUSHING THROUGH THE HOLE IN THE LINE TIME NOW! OVER!"

Jackson suddenly jammed on the brakes, the squad in back suffered from a chronic case of inertia and again piled on top of each other against the back ramp. Captain Powell's head snapped back with such force, his CVC came clear off. Jackson pivot steered the vehicle in position, and swung it around 180 degrees, put it in drive and punched it. A couple of sappers in the back untangled themselves, got back to their feet, put a couple of machineguns over the back deck and sprayed rounds at the enemy while the driver attempted to get them out of there as fast as he could manage.

The Detroit Diesel screamed as they bounced down the trail. Mission accomplished.

* * *

Colonel Smith had pulled his vehicle back into a shallow ravine while he feverishly worked out his next move. He didn't have any time to waste, or else the battalion was lost. Things were starting to get hairy, and if he didn't come up with a plan fast, they were screwed.

He had confirmed that 1st of the 503rd had been routed and was in full retreat; the right flank was wide open. He couldn't raise anyone from Brigade. The adjacent unit to his left had just told him that they were making preparations to pull back, on orders from the division commander.

It was settled. He was going to retreat. He would try and reestablish contact with the other battalions within the brigade along the way, but until he could raise someone, anyone, on the radio, he was just going to have to do what he had to do to keep his men alive.

His most immediate problem was how to fall back from his current positions, while still in contact with the enemy. With the Cherokees destroyed, Bravo Company was cut off from Team Dragon, and Team Demon. He had to get them linked up somehow. The scouts were out front, but every single route back to friendly lines was swarming with Posleen; they were stuck. Everyone else was okay, the battalion aid station, the combat trains, the unit maintenance collection point, and the mortars were close to secure routes and could bug out easily, as long as they started moving soon.

The colonel relayed word back through the S-1 at the combat trains, to have the HHC commander start picking out battle positions back vicinity of the brigade support area, which was over thirty kilometers to their rear, and get guides ready to place surviving combat units into position. Once he got the battalion back there, assuming he could pull it off, the companies would have to occupy hasty positions immediately, in case the Posleen were in pursuit.

It was bad. Things were going to shit.

"Guidons, guidons, this is Manchu Six. Make preparation for withdrawal. Maddawg, you will fall back along 'Route Alder,' to 'Phase Line Hatchet,' then push north until you reach 'Route Willow' vicinity 'Check Point One One.' You will have focus of fires as you fight your way through Posleen formations in order to make link up. Bulldog, linkup with Maddawg at 'One One.' Demon, on order you will pull back along 'Route Willow' and link up with Maddawg at 'Check Point One One.' Dragon, on order you will

fall back along 'Willow' also. You are the rear guard protecting the back door. Sabre, there are no clear routes for you. Leave your vehicles. Head out on foot. You need to E&E back to friendly lines. Manchu One, take the aid station, combat trains, the UMCP and the mortars back to the BSA, time now. Once you arrive, Havoc Six will take over from there. Once the companies have consolidated at 'Checkpoint One One,' we push along 'Route Willow' all the way back to the brigade support area vicinity grid AV 268835. Order of march Maddawg, Bulldog, Demon, then Dragon. We've got to make this fast guys, time is running out. All stations acknowledge, over."

The company commanders sounded grim as they responded to their march orders. They were pulling out, quickly as possible in an orderly manner and the clock was ticking.

* * *

Sergeant Holmes fired the last round in his magazine, killing the last Posleen normal that was charging their hole. As he dropped the empty mag he noticed the sky to his left and right shimmering with green fireworks. It was green star clusters being fired into the air by several people all along the line, and it was almost pretty. It was also the signal for everyone in the company to fall back to their alternate positions.

"Cartright, Ski, both you guys need to fall back to the alternate position. The signal just went up all along the line!"

"Aren't you coming with us Sarn't?"

"Not yet. I gotta go get Miller. That kid ain't too bright. If I don't police him up, he's bound to get left behind. Now both all y'all get movin'!"

Sergeant Holmes leapt from the hole and raced down the hill toward his fighting position and Specialist Miller.

"Come on Cartright, let's get the fuck outa here!"

"Okay, I'm ready. Let's go." Cartright slowly got up and grabbed his SAW.

The two of them pumped their legs furiously up hill toward the crest of the ridgeline. Their muscles felt weak as they made the move, their lungs burned after each breath, and their legs ached. All around them the ground was pummeled by enemy fire, motivating them to push harder and get to some cover. Once they reached their position, they hopped in, and oriented their weapons back down the hill and began immediately scanning for targets. They could barely aim their weapons while hearts pounded, chests heaved, and eyes watered from the acidic smoke that hung in the air.

"Ski, I think my weapon is fucked up!" Cartright was wheezing as he gasped for air.

Smigelski moved over to his battle buddy and shined his red lens Maglite on the weapon. The SAW had taken a direct hit, and the receiver was bent inward and cracked. The bolt was jammed in place, and the machinegun was completely useless.

"You think I should go back down the hill and look for another weapon?"

"Negative. Sit tight man. We'll find another one for you later."

The situation was total chaos. Posleen bodies lay everywhere, their blood soaking the ground. Vehicles burned in their positions, while the ammunition inside cooked off. Tracers criss-crossed the killing fields, and explosions rocked the valley.

In the north, the armor company was firing madly down into EA Pistol at targets that were invisible to the naked eye. There were three machineguns on each M-1, and tank crews fired them simultaneously, raking the valley floor, as they desperately tried to beat back the steadily advancing Posleen formations.

It looked as if organization were starting to break down as practically every surviving member of the company struggled to get up the hill, trying to put some distance between themselves and the enemy.

A few Bradleys along the line maintained position in order to provide cover while the rest moved back. Their fire was inconsequential in the face of such overwhelming odds. The remaining vehicles climbed the steep grade at sprint speeds, the crews doing their best to get into better vantage points and rejoin the fight. The dismounted infantry could be seen everywhere, running under fire, some being cut down in mid stride. Others dragged wounded comrades and heavy equipment under a hail of fire. From behind the First Sergeant brought his track, the company mechanics, and the commander's Humvee over the crest of the hill, and used their crew-served weapons to try and lend some meager support to the move.

"You see Sergeant Holmes or Miller down there anywhere?"

Cartright tried to focus. It was practically impossible for him to tell who was who as individual infantryman and crews tried to fall back.

"I can't tell Ski. There's people running around all over the place."

"What a fucking mess! Where the fuck is the artillery? I haven't heard from them in a long while!"

Just then somebody else jumped in the hole with them. Both soldiers were startled to see that it was an Indowy, and it was trying to communicate.

"Do either of you need assistance?" It said.

Cartright and Smigelski looked at each other dumbfounded.

The creature had a weird, almost archaic accent, but neither of them had any problem understanding what the little Indowy had to say.

"What are you doing here?" Smigelski asked.

"There is no time for questions now. I am the leader of a small clan of my people. We have a small workshop hidden in the hills not far from here. We can repair or fabricate equipment and tools for you. If you don't need my help please tell me, so that I can move on to find others in your unit who might."

Cartright stood silent for only just a moment. "Can you fix this?" He showed the smashed machinegun to the hairy little creature.

"Yes. Is there anything else?" The Indowy gently took the SAW from Cartright.

"No, I guess not."

The Indowy leaped up to the edge of the fighting position, and strained a bit as he pulled himself out. He cradled the SAW in his arms as he ran back to two other Indowy pushing some sort of cart that hovered a few inches above the ground. The cart was loaded with broken weapons, night vision gear, radios, and other equipment. The three of them then quickly pushed the cart back over the crest of the ridgeline, and out of sight.

"What the fuck was that all about?" Smigelski asked.

"Fuck if I know. You got any empty magazines? I'll start de-linking some of my SAW ammo and reload for you. At least I can do something around here."

0257 Hours May 19th , 2002

Manchu Field Trains

Brigade Support Area

"Havoc Six, this is Manchu One. Manchu Six wants you to guide all elements into position back in your area once they arrive. He says that he hasn't had time to do terrain analysis, so you get to pick the battle positions for the surviving units, and firing points for the mortars, over."

"Manchu One, Havoc Six, wilco, I'll do what I can. Just be advised, it's a big goat-screw back here. Roads and trails are jammed with vehicles trying to retreat, and it doesn't look like anyone in particular is in charge, over"

"Roger, understand, I'll pass the word along, over"

"Hooah, Havoc Six, out."

Just as the Headquarters Company commander put his handmike down, the company XO walked into the Field Trains Command Post through a partially open tent flap.

The Field Trains Command Post was one of three fully operational command posts within the battalion. It normally functioned as the primary support element for the battalion, pushing supplies forward, and taking requests for parts, personnel, and equipment to the brigade. It was the direct support link between its parent battalion, and the Brigade Support Area. It was also the command and control for the rest of the Field Trains which was made up of the battalion's Support Platoon, the Mess Section, a slice from the Headquarters Company Maintenance Team, representatives from the S-1 section, reps from the S-4 Section, and the supply sergeants from each of the rifle companies.

Basically, the Field Trains was a hodge-podge of over a hundred support personnel, run by the HHC Commander, his XO, and the First Sergeant. It would typically take logistical requests from the TOC and give them to the brigade support elements, while delivering logistical packages forward to the company first sergeants at designated logistics rally points, or LRPs for short. The logistical packages, or logpacks, would be pushed forward on a small convoy of trucks under the leadership of the support platoon leader or his platoon sergeant. The logpack was the battalion's logistical lifeline.

The Field Trains Command Post itself was not much more than a small tent attached to the back of an M577 armored command post vehicle with tracking charts, maps, overlays, radios, field tables, folding chairs, and a small pot-belly stove. The FTCP was the domain of the HHC training NCO, Sergeant DuBois, and his assistant Corporal Ahn.

Sergeant DuBois was a portly NCO, with bad knees, a bald head, and a normally upbeat demeanor. He was an infantryman by trade, but had been stuck in the HHC training room for his bad knees, and his unfortunate ability to use a computer. He was always accompanied by his KATUSA assistant, Corporal Ahn. Ahn was a poor Korean rice farmer from the east coast before being drafted into the army. He had huge braces, liked to drink copious amounts of Soju, and enjoyed telling stories about his failed sexual exploits with young Korean college girls. The two of them spent hours playing video games on government computers, smoking cheap Korean cigarettes, processing paperwork, and pulling radio watch. An existence perfectly suited for the both of them.

"Well XO, could you find out what the fuck is going on out there?" Captain Fontaine asked.

Second Lieutenant William Pfeil placed his M4 Carbine on a field table and removed his Kevlar helmet. He was six-foot two, 200 pounds, blonde hair, blue eyes, and two eyebrows that almost touched each other. He had the look of a really dumb football player.

During his enlisted days in the 10th Mountain Division, 2LT Pfeil had made a reputation for himself as one of the finest NCO's in his battalion, and was assigned to the reconnaissance platoon. While there he earned his Expert Infantryman's Badge, went to Airborne School, Pathfinder School, Ranger School, and was getting ready to go to Air Assault School before he left the Army and went to college. After four years of school and ROTC, he was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in Military Intelligence, and was sent to Fort Huachuca for his Officer Basic Course. Upon graduation he was sent to Korea and assigned as the assistant to the battalion intelligence officer, or S-2. It wasn't long before Pfeil established himself as a rock solid performer, with plenty of potential.

When the vacancy for the HHC Executive Officer opened up the battalion commander hand picked him for the position. The HHC XO slot was easily the most demanding and difficult job that a lieutenant could tackle within a mechanized battalion, and Bill Pfeil was the obvious choice. The HHC Commander, Captain Rick Fontaine, was more than happy to have him, and in the following months proved to be a tremendous asset not only to the company, but the battalion overall.

As talented and experienced as the HHC XO was, nothing had prepared him for what he saw when he went to the 2nd Forward Support Battalion's TOC.

The 2nd FSB was the primary logistical unit that supported the brigade. They were responsible for maintenance of weapons, vehicles, and equipment. They were responsible for pushing water, fuel, parts, and rations to the maneuver battalions. And they were responsible for treating casualties received from the battalion aid stations. It was also the core element that composed the Brigade Support Area, which encompassed the 2nd FSB, the brigade S-1 and S-4 shops, and the field trains from each of the battalions within 2nd Brigade.

The FSB commander was in charge of the Brigade Support Area, and he was responsible for ensuring that maintenance, re-supply, and casualty evacuation were occurring within the brigade. At the moment however, he wasn't in charge of anything.

"Sir, you wouldn't believe what is going on over in Mustang X-Ray right now." Pfeil said.

Captain Fontaine was nonplussed. "What? You mean above and beyond the absolute insanity that is taking place outside right now?" Fontaine was biting his fingernails again, just like he always did when he was getting really stressed out.

"Colonel MacMillan was trying to prevent people from deserting their posts after word of the retreat got out. He was flagging down trucks loaded with FSB personnel on them, trying to get them to stop and return to their positions."

"Well, I'm glad he was trying to do something, although it hasn't done any good. Those FSB pukes are still bailing out of here like rats from a sinking ship."

"Apparently Colonel MacMillan was trying to stop a small group of mechanics from rushing the west gate and running off. He couldn't stop them so he pulled out his sidearm and shot some girl in the back. When I was up there at Mustang TOC the MP platoon leader was reading him his rights and placing him under arrest."

"You've got to be shitting me." Fontaine couldn't believe it.

"No sir. Major White is in charge now, but he ain't doing much to fix the situation."

"White is a fucking moron. What about the SPO? What's he doing?"

"Don't know sir. Nobody's seen him. I think that he took off too. It's a total disaster. As I came back over here there was abandoned vehicles and equipment everywhere, even weapons. What do you want to do sir?"

"I've called a meeting with the other HHC commanders from the other battalions. The field trains elements haven't run, and they are basically looking for guidance. I'll get those guys squared away, in the meantime I want you, Top, and the Support Platoon leader to go out and recon these potential battle positions." Fontaine pointed to positions he had drawn on his operations map. "What are your questions?"

"How much time before our first elements start to arrive back here?"

"Not sure. The support elements could arrive within the hour. The combat units sometime after that. Is that clear as mud?"

Pfeil smiled. "Roger sir. I'll go get Top and Harry and go get started on our recon. I'll be sure to knock this out fast and get back here." Lieutenant Pfeil was starting to think that his dad had been right, and that he should have gone to medical school instead of joining the Army.

"Thanks Bill. Just stay close to the radio in case there are some changes."

"Hooah. I'll give you a radio check before heading out." Pfeil plopped the helmet back on his head, picked up his carbine, and headed out into the early morning darkness.

* * *

"I don't think that this is such a great idea. I think we should try a little harder to get contact reestablished with brigade headquarters and try to get the maneuver elements organized. This is not going to accomplish anything." The HHC commander for 1st Battalion 503rd felt strongly about his opinion. He thought that Captain Fontaine was proposing a suicidal course of action for them and the men under their command.

Captain Fontaine gathered all of the HHC commanders within the brigade together and explained his plan to them. The division was in retreat, no one was in contact with the brigade commander or his headquarters, and the infantry battalions were either destroyed or running with their tails tucked firmly between their legs. Fontaine wanted to establish strong-point defenses at key choke-points located within valleys and ravines that the Posleen would have to pass through. This would buy enough time for the surviving combat units within the brigade to get their shit together and get back on the line. Nobody gathered inside of Fontaine's command post was arguing with the general concept of his plan, just the personnel available to execute it.

"Listen Dale, we've got to do something to slow the enemy advance down until the brigade gets reorganized. We can't just bail out of here like these FSB fucks." Fontaine was trying his best to reason with Captain Johnston.

"But you are proposing setting up defenses within the brigade sector with Field Trains personnel. You are aware that we are commanding a bunch of cooks, fuel handlers, truck drivers and mechanics right?"

"Okay Dale, don't forget about your clerks, commo guys and medics. Seriously though, I am painfully aware that we don't have any combat troops running around here, but we are all soldiers, and we all have trained with our rifles and wear camouflage suits for a reason. Our guys can handle this." Fontaine looked around the tent at all the other commanders that were assembled. None of the others argued, they were just happy to have someone come up with a plan.

The commander from 44th Engineers finally spoke up. "Dale, I think Rick's right. We've got four full-blown battalion field trains here in the BSA with just under a hundred personnel in each one. We've got almost a battalion's worth of people here amongst ourselves. If done right, we could kick some serious fuckin' ass back here. I say we do it."

Captain Johnston looked down and spat on the ground. "Okay, I guess I'm in. Who's going to lead this operation? Somebody's got to command this goat-fuck."

* * *

"HEY! I'VE GOT ROOM IN THE BACK! YOU GUYS GET IN!" Steve Murphy waved both of his arms and tried to get the attention of some dismounted infantry that were running past his vehicle.

Captain Murphy had backed his track into a vehicle fighting position so that it was oriented rear-end to rear-end with Delta One Two. Delta One Two was a Bradley from 1st Platoon, and it was commanded by Staff Sergeant Ko.

After Murphy had given the order to withdraw back to the company assembly area, Sergeant Ko reported that his vehicle had blown its transmission and couldn't go anywhere. Steve, was not about to abandon a vehicle so he raced down to Ko's location under a hail of fire and backed in. Murphy's gunner, Staff Sergeant Whitmore, leaped from the track and went to work disconnecting Delta One Two's universal joints while Staff Sergeant Ko attached a tow bar to his company commander's Bradley. The two NCO's worked as fast as they could while Murphy nervously waited and monitored the progress of his company's withdrawal.

Sergeant Holmes was running up the hill as he saw his company commander waving his arms and yelling at him. He stopped and turned around to face Cartright, Miller, and Smigelski.

"Come on let's go! Better to ride than walk!" The entire fire team started toward Captain Murphy and Delta Six Six.

Sergeant Whitmore worked the ratchet in his hand quickly while he shined a light into the vehicle's engine compartment with a maglite clenched between his teeth. Finally, after endless minutes of feverishly cranking on a handful of bolts, the last nut fell free and he pulled the joints loose. With the ratchet still clenched in his greasy fist, he squeezed himself between the side of Delta One Two and the wall of the fighting position until he got around to the back of the vehicle. Just as he rounded the back, he found Sergeant Ko emplacing the last safety pin into the massive tow bar that connected his vehicle to Captain Murphy's.

"You ready to move man?" Whitmore yelled.

"Yeah, I'm ready to go. Let's get the hell outta here!" Sergeant Ko clambered up on top of his track and started toward the turret.

Sergeant Whitmore didn't miss a beat. He climbed up the side of Delta Six Six in record time, jumped in the gunner's hatch, and jammed the CVC on his head.

"We're ready sir!" Whitmore wiggled himself back through his hatch and down into the gunner's seat.

"Just a second Whit, let's get these guys first."

As Sergeant Holmes and his fire team reached Captain Murphy's vehicle, a Posleen railgun stitched the ground in front of Miller, almost scoring a hit. He squeezed his eyes shut and started running harder.

"You guys get in through the troop door! I can't lower the ramp with the tow bar hooked up to One Two!" Steve yelled down to them. "Give me an 'up' when you guys are inside!"

Captain Murphy watched as four of his soldiers started boarding his track, and was a bit surprised to see them assisting an Indoway into the back of the vehicle with them. Oh well, he had seen a lot stranger things in the last twenty-four hours.

Holmes banged on the turret shield door with the butt of his M203 as the last of his small group entered the troop compartment of the vehicle, and started closing the armored door. "WE'RE UP SIR!"

"Okay Simmons get us the fuck out of here!" Steve said over the intercom.

The driver responded by putting the vehicle into gear and easing it forward. Since he was towing another Bradley behind him, he didn't gun the engine, fearing that it might shear a pin and disconnect the tow bar.

The vehicle's engine strained as it worked to drag the other track up the side of a fairly steep incline. Simmons kept adding more pressure to the accelerator until the two vehicles started to creep up the side of the hill.

Delta One Two still had turret power, and Staff Sergeant Ko was slinging lead, killing anything on four legs as his track was dragged slowly up the ridge.

"Dragon Steel, Dragon Six, over."

"This is Dragon Steel, send it, over."

"Dragon Steel, go ahead and fire immediate suppression on the FPF, time now, over."

"Roger Dragon Six, fire immediate suppression on FPF, out."

Steve looked over the back deck of his track to see Ko firing down the slope at the Posleen normals until his guns went dry. Around him the last of his command was cresting over the hill to the other side where the surviving Dragons were assembling to move out, and link up with the rest of the battalion somewhere down the road at Checkpoint One One. It felt like a hot knife in the gut to see how few of them were left now. But at least the ones that were still alive would get clear; he hoped.

"Dragon Six, Dragon Steel, shot, over."

"Dragon Steel, Dragon Six, shot, out."

The air was filled with metal and plasma as Steve's track crawled up the ridgeline at a seemingly glacial pace. His heart raced, as he looked back and forth at the advancing hordes down below, and the relative safety of cresting the hill up above. Where the fuck was the goddamned artillery?

"Dragon Six, Dragon Steel, splash, over."

At last! "Dragon Steel, Dragon Six, splash, out."

The first 155 millimeter WP rounds started impacting and exploding all along the line. Each round made a beautiful white puff of smoke that showered the immediate vicinity with burning white phosphorous. The final protective fires created a wall of death that separated the ravenous carnivores and the retreating infantry.

As the rounds detonated among the attacking aliens, they covered their victims in burning goo. The unlucky Posleen caught in the barrage shrieked as the white phosphorous burned them unmercifully. The fires were so effective and concentrated that the Posleen were forced to break and run. It didn't last long though, the God Kings rallied them in a matter of minutes, and the attack continued.

Through it all, the heavy rounds continued to fall, and inflicted a terrible toll, allowing the last of Delta Company to escape by the skin of their teeth.

When Steve crested the hill he could see the remnants of his command lined up on the trail down in the open valley, ready to roll out. There were five Bradleys left in the company, including Delta One Two that he was towing. He had one tank, which was out of fuel and was being dragged by the M88 recovery vehicle from his maintenance section. The first sergeant had his M113, and so did the medics and the mechanics. The tool truck was down there, along with his and the first sergeant's Humvees. The rest of

his vehicles were either destroyed, or had retreated with the battalion aid station after shuttling casualties back. All of the vehicles were packed with surviving infantry, and wounded. The wounded were sprawled out on litters and seats in the vehicles, while most of the able bodied grunts rode on the tops of the trucks and the tank. Rucksacks and equipment were piled on and strapped to vehicles in total disarray, and the whole scene resembled a gypsy caravan rather than some sort of military unit.

He drove up to take his position in the middle of the formation before giving the order to move out. As he did so he looked at each of the vehicles and the soldiers riding on them in order to get a quick mental headcount. He was a bit astonished to see dozens of Indowys riding on top of his small fleet of vehicles along with his troops. It was a tight fit to be sure. The Bradleys and tank could not move their turrets because they had so many riders.

Steve shouldn't have been so surprised to see the Indowy with his men, since all throughout the second half of the battle he had seen Indowys running around with his troops, hauling equipment back and forth for them, and repairing damaged fighting positions. The hairy little creatures had been assisting him and his men throughout the latter part of the fight, and now they were retreating with them. So be it. It looked as if there was enough room for everybody.

"Guidons, guidons, this is Dragon Six. Let's move out. Keep the formation tight, and come up on the net if you have any problems. White Four, you've got the lead. Six, out."

0612 Hours May 19th , 2002

Manchu Field Trains

Brigade Support Area

Lieutenant Colonel Smith had his driver pull the Bradley up next to the Field Trains Command Post, right next to the HHC commander's Humvee. He pulled off his CVC and rubbed a hand through his closely cropped hair without removing his nomex glove. He looked back in the bustle-rack of the turret, and had to dig through a large drip pan, some empty ammo cans, a chock block, some empty Doritos bags, an oil can, and a case of MRE's before he found his Kevlar helmet. Once he did, he plopped it on his head and fastened the chin strap in place before dismounting the vehicle.

He jumped down onto the hard clay and felt the reassuring weight of his nine millimeter pistol slap against his side, held securely in its cheap black shoulder holster. He gazed off into what passed for the direction of "East" on Diess, to witness a somewhat beautiful sunrise as the golden globe in the heavens cast its light upon the rolling hills and mountains of this hostile, alien world.

The drive from Checkpoint One One had been a long one. The enemy had been left behind in the dust, and they hadn't been shot at for the last three hours or so. Colonel Smith had taken this opportunity to plan his next moves, and to try and reorganize his command. But as each moment without immediate life-threatening danger passed, the adrenaline flowed a little slower, and fatigue gradually settled in. He hadn't slept in days and the lower lids of his eyes felt like they were stuffed with cotton. His head repeatedly bobbed and jerked back upright as he caught himself dozing off. It was getting harder and harder to concentrate, and he figured it wouldn't be long before the hallucinations started, just like they did back in Ranger School.

The sunlight of a new dawn did wonders to clear the head and to wake a person up, but the "Great Heat

Tab in the Sky" could only help so much.

"I need a cup of damned coffee." He said to himself as he started toward the entrance of the FTCP.

He opened the tent flap and entered to find the training NCO, Sergeant DuBois sitting in a folding chair with his legs propped up on a field desk, arms across his chest, asleep. Corporal Ahn sat next to him, talking on the radio while writing something in the log. The pot-belly stove was running and the inside of the tent was noticeably warmer than it was outside. Captain Fontaine stood there, staring at his operations map posted on the wall with a Styrofoam cup of cold coffee in his hand.

When Fontaine noticed that the colonel had walked in, he spit some tobacco juice on the ground and offered his right hand for handshake. "Welcome to Shangri-la sir."

The colonel, too tired for humor, politely smiled and shook his subordinate's hand. "Thanks Rick. What's the situation back here?"

"Well sir, we've basically got it under control now. I've taken command of the other field trains elements and we've deployed them roughly along this line." Fontaine pointed out the positions on his operations map while he briefed the battalion commander. "I've designated this line as 'Phase Line Katana.' We've kicked out LP/OP's forward, and we've managed to get a large number of crew-served weapons oriented on decisive chokepoints throughout the sector back here."

The colonel studied the map with its scores of grid squares and contour lines. The positions that Captain Fontaine had prepared were tactically sound, but they weren't supported by obstacles, dug in, and most importantly, occupied by infantrymen. The whole thing stunk of desperation.

"What about fires Rick?"

"Sir, I've got every surviving piece of tube artillery and mortars within the brigade situated in firing points to our rear. They have been resupplied, refueled, and provided with a fires plan. They are ready to shoot." Fontaine replied.

"What are their numbers? What have we got left?" The colonel was starting to fade, he had to force himself to concentrate.

"2-17 Field Artillery is intact. They've got eighteen tubes of 155 millimeter self propelled guns just now pulling into their positions. I've got them setting up caches of rounds as we speak. We've got all the mortars from the Manchus. Headquarters Four Four blew a pack, so they've had to dismount one of the tubes, but they still have six guns total. All of the 81 millimeter mortars from 1st of the 506th made it back, and there are four of six tubes of 81 mike mike from 1st of the 503rd."

The colonel stood there silent for just a moment. He took off his helmet and yawned before pulling off his nomex gloves and rubbed his bloodshot eyes.

"Do you want a cup of coffee sir?" Fontaine asked.

Colonel Smith just grunted in the affirmative.

"Sergeant DuBois, could you get the colonel a cup of coffee please?" Captain Fontaine gently tapped the NCO on the shoulder, waking him from a light sleep.

DuBois opened his eyes and squinted hard until they focused and he could make out who was in the room with him. He saw his battalion commander standing there studying the map and Corporal Ahn dutifully passing radio traffic along.

"Roger sir. I'll cook up a batch." His voice cracked as he answered. He then went into the back of the M577 to find a canteen cup and the small propane stove.

"Sir, what's the official count? What's our total combat power?" Fontaine asked.

Colonel Smith reached into one of the many pockets of his olive drab nomex suit and retrieved a 3x5 card, with notes scrawled on it.

"The last count had us at five tanks, eleven Bradleys, and fifty-something infantry. We've got less than one-third of the combat power that we had yesterday. We're in pretty bad shape. There are only three tracks left in Bravo Company; Captain Rodriguez didn't make it. Lieutenant Christiansen is in charge there."

"Jake the Snake bought it? Jesus." Fontaine was shocked, Captain Rodriguez was not just a crude individual who scratched his butt and farted a lot, but he was a warrior and a regular killing machine. He was the last one anyone expected to die. The news came as quite a blow.

"Delta Company has a tank, five tracks, and some infantry left, and Captain Murphy is the only officer left in the company. Delta Tank has the rest with Lieutenant Hively in command. There just aren't enough of us left to cover our section of the battalion line, let alone covering the rest of the brigade sector." The colonel folded up his 3x5 card and put it back in a pocket. "Have we regained contact with anyone else outside of the battalion?"

"Yes sir. Most of the 506th survived, but their command and staff hasn't been heard from; we're assuming that they're dead. We've regained contact with their surviving companies and they report that they are in decent shape, but they have been bypassed and are well behind Posleen lines now. They are going to exfiltrate back to us, but they are pretty far forward and on foot. It could take them days to get back here. 503rd is in much worse shape. We've got communication on and off with one of their companies. They report that they've got most of their people, but they are in the same situation as the guys from 506th. They are on foot, behind enemy lines, and will take a long time to get linked up with us."

"Okay Rick, let me see if I got this straight. The division is in retreat. We've got no communication with higher headquarters. We've lost contact with the units on both of our flanks. Our sister battalions within the brigade are behind enemy lines and might catch up with us in a few days. My battalion is down to one-third of its strength, and the line is currently being held by mechanics and fuel handlers. Is that an accurate assessment?"

"Yes sir."

"Is it also a fair assessment to say that the enemy is hot on our heels and should be here soon?"

"Yes sir. In fact, I estimate that they should be here in just over an hour."

"Great. So give me one reason why I shouldn't order a general evacuation and get every surviving unit within radio range to start falling back until we regain contact with someone, anyone else, with some combat power left?"

"Well sir, our support personnel have established fairly decent positions and we've got some good leaders out there in charge. Plus, we've had some unexpected help in our defensive preparations."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there are hundreds, maybe thousands of Indowys running around all over the place. They have been digging holes, and helping to prepare fighting positions and obstacles everywhere. It's unbelievable."

Just as the colonel was about to respond Captain Murphy walked in the tent with a furry little Indow in tow.

"Manchus sir, I've got my guys heading toward the refuelers and the cargo trucks loaded with ammo. We should be ready to roll within the next half hour. What are your orders?" Murphy asked.

Colonel Smith gestured toward the map on the wall and addressed his senior surviving maneuver commander. "Steve, I need you to take your people and place them..."

"Sir, there is no time for this." Captain Fontaine interrupted his battalion commander in mid sentence. "You are the ranking commander on the ground within the brigade right now. You need to take command of all the battalions and try to get communication reestablished with Division. If you don't, the brigade will fall apart in no time."

There was a pregnant pause within the tent. The only sounds were of Corporal Ahn talking on the radio, and hissing sound of Sergeant DuBois heating instant coffee on a propane stove.

Colonel Smith's guts churned inside of him. He had to take command of the brigade, Fontaine was definitely right about that. It sickened him to think that he would have to give up command of his Manchus though, not at a time like this, not when they needed him most. As much as it hurt, there really wasn't any decision to make, the only correct thing to do was give his beloved battalion to the next in the chain of command.

"Okay. You're right Rick. Are there facilities available here for me to regain command and control of the brigade?"

"Yes sir. The FSB TOC has communications gear and all the other facilities you need."

"Alright then, I'll go up there and try to get things under control. Rick I'm placing you in command of the battalion. Don't let me down... Manchu Six."

Sergeant DuBois handed the colonel a hot canteen cup full of instant coffee. The colonel took a careful sip before he spoke.

"I should have asked you for a 'To Go' cup. I need to get out of here and get to work. You don't have a set of wheels for me do you Rick? I seem to be short a Humvee at the moment."

"No problem sir, you can have my truck. It's parked just outside, I don't have a driver for you though." It dawned on Fontaine that the colonel's Humvee and driver were at the TOC when it was overrun by Posleen. He didn't want to think of what had probably happened to Corporal Shin.

"No big deal. What else needs to be discussed before I take off?" Colonel Smith started putting his

helmet back on.

"Sir, before you leave I think that you need to hear this. It's a pretty interesting development that may be pretty helpful." Steve said as he pulled a pack of Marlboro Lights out of a ziplock bag and lit one.

"Let's just make it quick Steve, I need to go." The colonel took another sip of the hot coffee. The stuff tasted better than any other coffee he had drunk in his entire life. It seemed to give him renewed strength.

"Roger sir."

The little Indowy that had followed Captain Murphy into the tent, stepped forward and wasted no time addressing the new brigade commander.

"Colonel Smith, my name is Aelool, and I am the leader of my clan."

The colonel was taken aback by the small creature and its ability to speak English. It spoke well, but with an accent that seemed "old" to him.

"Before this great battle I was a 'dishon mentat,' a simple tech among my people, and had no particular leadership role. Now I have the great burden of taking charge and caring for my people. I am here today because I feel that it is in the best interests of my race to assist you in any way that we can. We are at your disposal, to help you in any way possible." Aelool wanted to tell the colonel that he was a member of the Bane Sidhe, and to explain the relevance of the organization to which he belonged, but decided there was not enough time for that. If they all survived to see the sun rise again, he could make that known, when the situation was more appropriate. He then continued with his story. "When the senior members of my clan were killed, the responsibility of leadership fell upon me and I took that opportunity to begin aiding your soldiers during the fight."

"That makes sense to me, we're all in the same boat. So it is you that is responsible for the assistance we have been receiving from all of the Indowy in the area?"

"Partly. There are fewer than fifty members left in my clan, so I went and talked to another more powerful clan leader in the area and convinced him that it would behoove him to lend help to you and your soldiers."

"I see. So how willing were they to come to our aid?"

"Not very Colonel. My people are afraid of you and your soldiers. But I convinced the other clan leader that his fate, and the fate of his people are intertwined with yours. Only if you prevail will we survive. He seemed to accept that and begrudgingly offered his support."

"Well Aelool, I'm glad to have the help. If you'd like, you can come with me and help me as a liason with your people. We can better coordinate our efforts that way. You can also better explain to me how you can best assist us during the fight."

The Indowy bowed slightly to the colonel. "It would be my pleasure Colonel."

"Well alright then. Why don't we head up to the TOC and get to work."

Colonel Smith turned to face Captain Fontaine and Captain Murphy. "Okay guys, let's get this thing rolling. Stay on the radio and get me SITREPs on our hasty defensive prep. With any luck we'll live to be

old men and tell our grandkids about this."

0614 Hours May 19th , 2002

Phase Line "Razor"

Carl gently leaned the heavy five-gallon "Jerry Can" forward until water flowed out into his canteen. He had to hold it steady so that he wouldn't spill water all over the place. After filling both of his canteens, he screwed the cap on the plastic water container, and put it into its bracket on the back of the Humvee. When he came around to the front of the vehicle he tossed the canteens onto his seat and lit a cigarette. He shivered a little in the early morning chill.

Lieutenant Andersen was working hard in the truck, trying to figure out a plan to get the scouts back to friendly lines. While he did that, PFC Moulton scanned the horizon occasionally with their only set of binoculars.

"Hey Myers, you're the only white dude I ever saw smoking Kools."

Carl was hardly in the mood for their morning ritual of giving each other shit. "They're Newports, not Kools you retard." Myers retorted.

"Whatever." As usual, Moulton had a witty reply.

"LT, you want me to try and raise somebody from Battalion again?" Carl asked.

Lieutenant Andersen didn't even look up from his map to answer. "No, don't bother. They are well out of range by now. We could barely understand their broken transmissions an hour ago."

"So what are we going to do? The whole scout platoon is stuck out here." Carl took a deep drag from his menthol and looked out at the rolling hills in the distance. Morning fog filled the low areas, and made it difficult to see.

"Like the colonel said, we're going to have to E&E our way back to friendly lines."

E&E stood for "Escape and Evasion." It was the standard Army vernacular for sneaking around in the woods in small teams, with few weapons, while a better armed and numerically superior enemy hunted you down. If you were lucky, or skilled, or both, you would make it back to your lines where hot chow and a hero's welcome awaited you. If you weren't so lucky, you would end up eating fish heads and rice in a bamboo cage. Of course, since the Posleen tended to eat their enemies instead of incarcerating them, the latter outcome was quite unsatisfactory.

"When do we go?" Carl thought about the half-filled water can, and the last case of MREs on board the vehicle. They had to be moving out soon, they just didn't have the food and water to hang out on their happy little rock outcropping for long.

"We move tonight. Everybody gets some sleep today, then after the sun goes down, we move under the cover of darkness on foot. We can't move through the valleys or the low areas, 'cause that's where the Posties are, so we're going to have to stay up high, in the rocky shit, where they won't be."

"LT, don't we have to move something like forty kilometers on foot?"

"Yeah, at least that far. It's going to take a long time to move that far through the hills, especially humping rucks and weapons. It'll take us a couple of days minimum."

He looked down at the ground next to his door and saw a growing pile of cigarette butts. They had been accumulating nicely.

"This is going to be a suck-fest. How are you planning to brief the platoon?"

"I'll have to give an oral operations order over the radio. I'll be sending it here pretty soon so that everyone has enough time to start getting their shit ready for the long walk." Andersen put the map down, and pulled a can of dip out of his pocket.

"What kind of equipment are we going to bring with us?"

"Personal weapons, ammo, radios, batteries, some snivel gear, and all the food and water that we can carry. We leave the rest of it."

"What about the stuff we leave? Are we going to blow it in place?"

"No. We have survived this long by not compromising our positions. If we blow this shit, we will draw unwanted attention to ourselves." Andersen stuffed a small pinch of dip in his lower lip. "We'll just abandon it, and sneak off into the night. Not very sexy, but probably the best course of action."

Carl shivered some more. He decided to go grab the poncho liner from his rucksack. It was going to be a few more hours before it started to get warm again.

0616 Hours May 19th , 2002
Phase Line "Katana"

Cartright rocked back and forth in the back of the Bradley as it covered rough, broken terrain. The blue-filtered lights were on in the back and they cast just enough light so that he could see everyone else jammed in the belly of the iron beast. As they rocked and swayed, he became more and more conscious of how nauseous he was getting. If they didn't stop soon, he was going blow chunks all over his buddies.

Smigelski sat next to him, asleep, his head rolling from side to side under the weight of the heavy Kevlar helmet. On the other side was Miller, who was also sleeping, his head occasionally rolling over and resting on Cartright's shoulder. Sitting on the opposite bench was Davis, Montavor, and Sergeant Holmes. Sergeant Holmes was wearing a CVC and was communicating over the intercom with the platoon sergeant. It was extremely loud inside of the vehicle while it was moving, and he couldn't hear a word of what Sergeant Holmes was saying.

Davis and Montavor were from Alpha Team, and were the only two other surviving members of the squad. The squad leader, Staff Sergeant Jessup, had been killed along with the Alpha Team leader and his SAW gunner. That left six guys left in the squad, with Sergeant Holmes in charge. Six guys in a squad

wasn't a lot, but they had faired better than most compared to the other squads in the battalion.

After the company arrived back in the BSA, the column came to a halt, and the drivers shut down their engines and dropped their ramps.

The CO gave some quick instructions to the first sergeant before he left to go talk to the battalion commander. Everyone took that opportunity to un-ass the vehicles, stretch legs, and light up cigarettes. It became readily apparent to Cartright that they weren't stopping for rest and recuperation. The job wasn't finished yet.

First Sergeant Taylor started giving out orders to the NCOs in the company and actually had everyone form up in company formation! The only ones that didn't fall in were the medics; they continued to load wounded onto their track, and shuttle them over to the FSB medical company which was only a few hundred meters away.

"FALL IN!" The first sergeant barked.

The dismount squads wearily shuffled over and the track crews hopped down off of their vehicles, and took their places in each of the platoons.

The Indowys that had arrived with them milled around and watched the spectacle. They weren't quite sure what to make of the whole thing. It seemed like some sort of primitive ritual that they couldn't understand taking place right before their very eyes. It seemed pointless and a waste of time. Nonetheless, the whole thing aroused their curiosity, and they watched in utter silence.

The formation was reminiscent of the countless others that had preceeded it, except that it was noticeably smaller. Corporal Kim came running up to the front of the company with the guidon in hand, while the unit mascot, a skinny in-bred mutt named "Coax," sniffed around, looking for a good place to pee.

The first sergeant took that opportunity to get a good count on his personnel, and to reorganize the chain of command. He called the NCOs forward while the enlisted men stood at the position of "At Ease."

The NCOs received a quick briefing from Top in a small huddle, and came jogging back to their platoons, falling back into formation.

Once everyone had resumed their positions, First Sergeant Taylor stood there in front of the guidon bearer for just a minute as he looked at the assembled group. Their faces had the look of the walking dead. They were pale, expressionless, and cold.

"Company!"

The platoon sergeants snapped to the position of "Attention" before echoing the command.

"Platoon!"

"Atten-shun! Platoon Sergeants take charge!"

The platoon sergeants saluted, faced about, and immediately started issuing orders. Cartright's platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class Hernandez, addressed the eighteen remaining members of the platoon that stood in front of him.

"At ease! Okay check it out. This fight ain't over yet. Top says that the Posties will be here soon. We gotta go get refueled, get more ammo, and follow the CO up to our new positions. He says that the positions have already been picked out for us so all we have to do is occupy 'em. After this, all remaining wounded are to be placed over next to the FTCP so the medics can come back and police them up. He also said that all the support platoon personnel are up on the line right now, so when we get to the refuelers it's 'self serve.' Any questions?"

"Hey Sarn't, is it too late to cancel my appointment with the re-enlistment NCO?"

The platoon sergeant ignored the one smart-ass in the formation.

"Okay then, let's hustle. Fall out!"

The platoon scattered immediately. The wounded were carefully moved over next to the field trains command post, while squads reorganized, and reloaded tracks. Surprisingly, the Indowy also reloaded the vehicles with the members of Delta Company. They made it quite clear that they were part of the company now, and that they were going back into battle with them. Nobody argued with them.

As Cartright loaded into the back of his platoon sergeant's track, the small Indowy that had been helping their squad scampered up the ramp, and squeezed into the back of the overfull Bradley. In his arms was a seemingly new SAW, and he handed it to Cartright.

"What's this?"

"It is your weapon, and it is repaired." The Indowy replied.

Cartright studied the weapon and was in awe. The serial number was the same as his weapon, but that is where the similarity ended. The receiver had been repaired, and other changes had been made to the small machinegun. The butt-stock had been replaced with a skeletonized version, with a cheekrest that perfectly fit his face. The iron sights had a glowing material added to them, similar to tritium, making them visible under low light conditions. On top of the feed tray cover a three-power scope had been added, which amplified ambient light, making it useful in the dark also. The pistol grip fit his hand better than it had before, and the bipod was sturdier. The barrel was fluted, which enabled it to radiate heat faster, and the overall weapon felt lighter. The weapon had been completely rebuilt, and customized for him.

"What the hell did you do to this thing?" Cartright asked.

The Indowy seemed puzzled by the question. "It has been repaired in one of our workshops. Is it not to your satisfaction?"

"Yeah, it is to my satisfaction. This thing is fuckin' great. Where did you say you brought this thing? I haven't seen any workshops around here."

The Indowy's face wrinkled. The expression could have been anything but Cartright was sure that it was a shit eating grin. "All creation is of the individual. People are here, each to do the daily ritual. The ritual on your... weapon is of no consequence."

"Okay, that explains a lot," Cartright said, shaking his head. "not. Hey, next time, instead of a puny little SAW, can I get me a BFG?"

"A 'BFG?' I don't understand." The alien replied.

"Yeah, a BFG, a Big Fucking Gun. Maybe one of those electric gatling guns? Those things friggin' rock. Or maybe a plasma gun like those Posleen got?"

The Indowy continued to grin, but said nothing.

"Anyway, if you are going to stay with us, you need a name. I can't just keep saying 'hey you' all of the time."

The Indowy sat in his lap and made himself comfortable. The thing seemed to have a slightly higher body temperature than a human. It was real cozy when the driver raised the ramp.

0805 Hours May 19th , 2002
Phase Line "Katana"

Lieutenant Pfeil handed the headspace and timing gauge back to Private Koch and stepped back from the .50 caliber machinegun. "Okay, do you guys understand how to do this now?"

Private Koch and Sergeant Billings both nodded in understanding, after receiving quick instruction on how to operate the unfamiliar weapon system. Sergeant Billings still had a few questions though.

"Sir, at what point do you disconnect the weapon from that thing there?"

Lieutenant Pfeil took a deep breath in order to control his frustration. He had been at this all morning, trying to teach his soldiers how to use crew-served weapons, how to fill out range cards, primary directions of fire, signals, and other minutia. He kept reminding himself that they were truck drivers, mechanics, and fuel handlers, and that he should remain patient. After all, they were trying their best to learn under the circumstances.

"That 'thing' is the Traverse and Elevation mechanism. Don't disconnect it unless it's absolutely necessary. Use your T&E just like I taught you, or else you won't be able to hit shit with this weapon. It's not like in the movies, you can't just 'free gun' and blow all the bad guys away. What else? Any other questions before I take off?"

"Yes sir, I think we got it." Billings sounded less than confident in his response.

Pfeil looked them both over and felt almost guilty leaving them there to fend for themselves. The two of them were wheeled mechanics and they were obviously frightened, standing there wearing their olive drab cotton coveralls, smeared in grease and grime.

Koch looked especially pathetic. He was eighteen years old, five foot four inches tall and weighed 110 pounds soaking wet. His Kevlar helmet was cocked back on his head exposing his entire forehead. His filthy uniform hung off of him like a shroud, and his load bearing vest didn't fit correctly. He had rolled up his sleeves to just below the elbow, and his greasy hands shook each time brought a cigarette to his lips.

Pfeil did his best to sound confident in order to reassure them.

"Listen, if you guys need anything, just call me on the ICOM. Okay?"

"Yes sir." Billings said.

Lieutenant Pfeil moved out quickly. There many more positions to check, and lots of inexperienced troopers on the line.

When he emerged into the sunlight, he surveyed the scene quickly and was somewhat encouraged by what he saw. The area swarmed with combat engineers and Indowys working on obstacles in the valley floor, and fighting positions along the high ground. The activity reminded him of an anthill that had just been kicked over. The obstacles were fairly standard concertina wire and landmine setups, but the bunkers were another animal altogether. The Indowys were constructing them out of some composite material, that resembled concrete in some ways, but set infinitely quicker after being poured, and was a whole lot stronger too.

The Indowys were running around pushing carts that floated just off the ground loaded with strange equipment, and operating other bits of machinery. They worked in a frenzied manner. They seemed to be very aware of the approaching danger. By the way they moved, he guessed that that danger had to be close.

He was now the HHC commander after Captain Fontaine had been placed in command of the battalion. He inherited the defense of "Hill 353," which was one of a series of hills that ran roughly north-south along what had been recently named "Phase Line Katana." He had taken the Manchu Field Trains personnel and a platoon of engineers from Bravo Company, 44th Engineers, and told to hold at all costs. That roughly translated into a "Die In Place" mission.

He had a completely jacked up commo setup to control his element with. He had a dismounted PRC-119 radio to talk on battalion push, an ICOM hand held radio to talk with support platoon, a civilian Motorola walkie-talkie to communicate with the maintenance team, and a TA-1 field phone to talk to the engineers. His RTO, PFC Weyland carried the PRC-119, and with the exception of the field phone, he carried the rest. Not an ideal set-up, but it functioned.

Pfeil had assembled his group earlier that morning, established a quick down and dirty chain of command, and briefed the defensive plan all inside of ten minutes. He then got his men, as many crew-served weapons as he could scrounge, and loaded them on support platoon's trucks. Once up on Hill 353 Pfeil personally placed each two-man buddy team into their newly constructed bunkers. After they had been emplaced, he, the first sergeant, and the support platoon leader went into each bunker and established sectors of fire, talked through the fires plan, signals, and gave classes on how to operate unfamiliar weapons.

He felt like some German officer on the Eastern Front at the end of the Second World War, hastily given the task of rounding up a bunch of stragglers and forming them into an ad hoc unit, to be desperately thrown into battle to beat back some enormous Soviet attack.

"Now I know how Grandpa Wilhelm must have felt." Pfeil said to himself.

He raised a pair of binoculars to his eyes to check on the progress of the obstacles. His attached engineer platoon was to continue work down in the valley floor up until the last possible second, and then pull back to occupy their battle position. Working with them had been about as fun as eating broken glass. Their platoon leader was a prima donna pain in the balls who believed he was God's gift to the

Army. The kid was a competent officer who was convinced that his shit didn't stink. Bill entertained the idea of having a private conversation with the smart-ass later on and knocking some sense into his thick skull, but that would have to wait.

"Weyland, have the OP's checked in?" Pfeil was responsible for manning two observation posts about a kilometer forward of Hill 353. Because of a lack of radios, among other things, they were communicating directly with the S-1 at the Combat Trains. The S-1 had been made the battle captain/battalion XO, and the Combat Trains was now acting as the TOC for the battalion.

Weyland shifted the weight of the rucksack that carried the dismount radio, along with some other gear. "Yes sir, they called in a few minutes ago and reported everything as still quiet out there."

"Good. Did they ever locate any maps back in the BSA?" Another problem that plagued them was a shortage of maps for the area that they were currently operating in. The observation posts, and key leaders throughout the battalion didn't have enough, and therefore would have difficulty sending detailed reports, and calling for artillery. It was a major concern for all of them.

"No sir. They can't seem to find anymore right now. I guess some people are still looking, but they're not having any luck."

Bill sighed. "Alright then. Let's get over to the company CP bunker and talk to the first sergeant. We need to get some more ammo cached up here."

"So did you figure out a name for him yet?" Smigelski watched all of the activity down in the valley, and then looked to the north at Hill 353.

Cartright finished taking a drink of water from one of his canteens before answering. "I'm going to name him 'Gunga Din.'"

Smigelski was exhausted, and his swollen eye throbbed.

"What kind of name is 'Gunga Din?' I don't get it."

"Don't you ever read books man?" Cartright screwed the cap back on his canteen, and put it back in its pouch on his left hip.

Smigelski yawned. "No. I spend my free time getting laid. Not wasting it up in my room reading."

"Getting laid? You haven't been doing much of that lately."

"I didn't mean here on Diess genius. I meant back home."

Cartright smirked a little. "Anybody can get laid in Toko-Ri. All you need is fifty bucks and forty available minutes."

"I can tell you didn't get out much. A 'Short Time' costs sixty bucks, not fifty." Smigelski removed his Kevlar helmet and looked inside to ensure that his casualty feeder card was still taped in there.

"Whatever, at least I didn't have to go see the doc to get 'The Swab' and 'The Silver Bullet.'"

Smigelski set the Kevlar down next to his rifle. "I didn't get that case of chlamydia from any of the girls working in the Olympus Club, I got it from that female MP I was banging."

"Oh. My bad. You got a cigarette?"

Smigelski retrieved the pack from his pocket and pulled out two. "This is my last pack, so we gotta take it easy. The rest of my cartons are in my 'B Bag.' So where is this 'Gunga Din' anyway? He took off a while ago."

"Beats me. Maybe he's down in the valley there helping the others put in those obstacles."

Just then the back door of the bunker opened up, and Gunga Din stood there smiling.

"I brought something for you Cartright." The Indowy was up to something and Cartright knew it.

"If it's not a hot meal and a bed with clean sheets, I'm not interested." The novelty of having this intelligent, hairy little creature hadn't worn off yet. It was like having a big puppy dog following you around, except that it walked on two legs, spoke English, and fixed broken shit.

"Come with me and I'll show you."

Smigelski slowly exhaled some cigarette smoke. "You go. I'll stay here. I'm too fuckin' tired to move."

Cartright grabbed his shiny new SAW, folded in the bipod, slung it across his back, and followed Gunga Din out the door. The bunker was recessed into the ground with only the top sticking out, but the backside had a paved ramp leading down to the back door. The two of them walked up the ramp to find one of the Indowy "carts" with a large crate and a couple dozen ammo cans stacked on it.

"What's this?" Cartright asked.

The Indowy grabbed a small tool and popped the top of the crate off so that Cartright could look inside.

"Ski! You gotta see this!"

"What?" Smigelski sounded annoyed.

"Just get your ass up here!"

"Fuck me." Smigelski mumbled as he came up the entrance ramp.

When he came to the surface he saw his buddy staring into a crate with an animated look on his face. He approached, mildly curious, and mildly agitated, until he saw what was inside of the box.

"Holy shit man! That's a fuckin' mini-gun!"

Cartright looked at Gunga Din. "Where'd you get this thing? Is this for us?"

"Yes, it is for you. I will help you assemble it in your bunker and show you how to use it." The little Indowy replied.

"Ski, go get Sergeant Holmes and the rest of the squad. We're going to need a little help hauling this heavy bitch into the bunker. Man, is he going to be surprised!"

0841 Hours May 19th , 2002
Phase Line "Katana"

Fontaine tried to spit over the side of the turret but could only manage a couple drops of saliva and a few flecks of Copenhagen. His mouth was dry and his head hurt. He was getting dehydrated and he knew it.

"Hey Colburn, you got any water on board?"

The gunner was fast asleep, his head resting on the brow-pad that was affixed just above the optics at the gunner's station.

Fontaine had his Bradley in turret defilade, sitting in the bottom of a brand new fighting position that had just been finished only a few minutes prior. The combat engineer who had recently dug the hole, was driving his D7 dozer off to another hill to dig more holes. He had the machine going as fast as it could drive, at a whopping three miles per hour.

Fontaine keyed the CVC again. "COLBURN! WAKE UP!"

Staff Sergeant Colburn snapped his head back, suddenly very awake.

"Whu? What do you need sir?"

"I asked you if there was any water on the track, but you were out cold." Fontaine replied.

"Uh, yes sir. There's some in the back. Do you want me to get you some?"

"No, I'll get it. When I get back up in the turret, I want you to go in the back and get some sleep. I'll wake you up when I need you. You look tired as hell."

"I'm fine sir. I'll be okay. I'll go in the back and make some coffee for us."

Colburn pulled off his CVC and gently placed it in the stowage space just behind his head. As he turned to open the turret shield door he felt the familiar sensation of pins and needles all over his legs. They had fallen asleep while he was dozing in the cramped and uncomfortable gunner's position. He opened the door and willed his unresponsive legs into motion.

"You want me to get any chow for you while I'm back here? There's half a case of MRE's left."

Rick thought about it for a minute. "No thanks, I'm good. Not very hungry right now."

When Sergeant Colburn turned on the light in the back of the track he found gear scattered everywhere in total disarray. Nothing had been lashed down or put away according to load plan prior to going into action, and as a result, equipment was piled in the middle of the troop compartment. Tools mixed with

clothing, ammunition, weapons, batteries, bags, rucksacks, trash, and other junk. It reminded him of his three-year-old son's bedroom after he had just dumped the contents of his toy box onto the floor. After rummaging through it all, he finally found a small propane stove and a jerry can with some water still left in it.

It wasn't long before the coffees were ready, and Colburn handed one off to their driver Specialist Cummings through the "Hell Hole," before carefully bringing two steaming canteen cups up into the turret.

Fontaine happily took possession of his coffee and blew on it to cool the hot liquid a bit before taking his first sip.

"MANCHU SIX, THIS IS OP FOUR, OVER!"

Fontaine figured that by the tone of the transmission, he wasn't going to get to enjoy his coffee after all. "OP Four, this is Manchu Six, let me guess, you've got eyes on the enemy, over."

"Roger sir, I got Posleen coming my way!"

"OP Four, Manchu Six, can you give me a better report?" Fontaine swallowed. His mouth suddenly filled with cotton. "I need numbers and a specific location, over."

"Sorry sir, there're more than I can count, and they are down in the bowl in front of me, over."

"OP Four, Manchu Six, do you have a map? Can you give me a grid location so that I can put some artillery on them, over."

"That's a negative Manchu Six, I got no map. There's just lot's of them coming our way!"

Rick looked down at his own map. OP Four's position was clearly marked on it about 1500 meters forward of Phase Line Katana, just in front of Hill 353. Assuming the two guys manning OP Four were in the correct position according to his map, he could make this work.

"Okay OP Four listen up, I'm going to put some artillery in the open bowl in front of your position. The first round is going to be a marking round. If it does not hit in the right spot, you give me the corrections and I will shoot another. When the marking rounds are in the right place we'll fire for effect and hammer 'em. Do you understand? Over."

"Manchu Six, this is OP Four, roger, we understand. We'll be standing by for the first marking rounds to fall, over."

"OP Four, Manchu Six, standby. I'll get you some fires shortly, out."

"Manchu Six, this is Manchu Steel, I monitored your last transmission with OP Four. I'm shacking a grid time now, over."

Sergeant Colburn stood up in the gunner's hatch right next to Rick's commander's position. They both looked out at the open valley in front of them. Colburn took sip of instant coffee before toggling the intercom transmit key. "Let the games begin."

Fontaine picked up the binoculars and raised them to his eyes. "Yeah. No shit."

Colonel Smith clenched the handmike in his fist while he stared at the huge map that was suspended from the tent frame in front of him. The brigade S-4, Major Nixon was the acting brigade XO and stood next to him.

Smith turned to Nixon and then to the brigade Signal Officer, Captain Buchanan. "Okay, so now explain to me again why we can't raise anyone from Division."

"Sir, we can't transmit very far in this terrain because of the hills. FM just bounces off of the mountains here making it difficult at best to maintain contact with anyone." The SIGO's response was very condescending. It sounded as if he were lecturing a total idiot. This did nothing to improve the colonel's good mood.

"What about retrans? We've got the assets to set up retrans right?"

"Sir, we do have the assets available, but even FM retransmission has limits to its range. I'm afraid that we're just too far away to talk to anyone."

The colonel was getting angry. "So what do you propose SIGO? Just sit on our hands and do nothing? Why don't you offer me some solutions here instead of telling me that nothing can be done?"

Captain Buchanan's skin flushed. He didn't know how to respond to Colonel Smith. He just didn't know of any way that they could extend the range of their radios and get in touch with someone outside of the brigade.

"Sir, I'm doing the best that I can."

Colonel Smith just turned away from him in disgust. The radio traffic was starting to pour in. The Posleen were attacking again and he wasn't sure that he was going to be able to do much about it.

* * *

The God Kings pushed their oolts as hard as they could drive them. The oolt'os intermixed with each other as they herded through the valley. The dust was so thick that normals could see nothing except for the other centaurs immediately surrounding them. They ran forward at a full gallop, their lungs burning and filled with dust, driven on by their Kessentai. Occasionally one would trip and fall, to be trampled and crushed into the dirt by the thousands of oolt'os that followed.

They had started taking casualties from artillery and mortars and had yet to make contact with any humans. It seemed to them that the hills had eyes, and those eyes were being used to bleed them as they advanced.

Though the artillery fell amongst them, there were no obstacles to slow their advance, so they ran. Better it was to get through the artillery quickly, rather than linger and be killed without getting the opportunity to exact revenge upon the Threshkreen. Besides, if there was artillery, the humans were sure to be near.

* * *

Steve could see normals working their way through the obstacle belt as mortars rained down on them, exploding and sending steel splinters in every conceivable direction. The Posleen suffered terribly from this pounding, but were hurt far worse when the artillery started dropping DPICM. It was a massacre. Still, they kept coming, using their bodies to detonate mines, and to jump onto the wire. The obstacles were reduced by the sheer weight of numbers charging into them.

"You see 'em?" Steve asked his gunner.

"Hard not to." Whitmore replied.

"Driver up!"

Simmons drove the vehicle up to its firing platform, and into the hull defilade.

"Fire!"

"On the way!" Sergeant Whitmore pulled the trigger and started sending long bursts of high explosive rounds downrange.

Captain Murphy watched through his binoculars as the rounds impacted among the Posleen, shattering and wrecking their unprotected bodies. Legs, arms, and heads were ripped from bodies. Disemboweled and disfigured creatures lay everywhere, screaming, their guts spread out all over the ground. Their blood flowed freely. But still the God Kings pushed them on.

"Cease fire! Driver back!"

Simmons put the vehicle back down in its hole, in the protected turret defilade position.

Steve looked to the south and saw the remnants of Team Demon engaging from their positions. The tanks were again doing great work of cherry picking God Kings on their small craft with 120mm smoothbore main guns. It was actually entertaining to watch a tank round take out a God King. Their small craft would explode, or cartwheel into a mass of normals, killing everything in its path. When God Kings died, they died with style.

* * *

Sergeant Holmes slapped the feed tray cover down on the M240B machinegun. The weapon was set up on a tripod in his bunker, with plenty of 7.62 NATO readily available. Miller had neatly lined up five spare barrels for the weapon, along with a couple pair of asbestos mittens.

Holmes set the sights on the machinegun for 1000 meters and peered down them as he manipulated the

traverse and elevation mechanism. Out in the distance the aliens were pushing deeper into the engagement area even in spite of their best efforts to keep them back. The enemy was now close enough to start engaging with crew served weapons, and Sergeant Holmes was going start making his contribution to the fight.

"Miller, call up Ski and Cartright and tell 'em they got the green light to start engaging with that fuckin' contraption they got over there."

Miller picked up the receiver to the field telephone and started cranking on the ringer. "Roger Sam't."

Before Miller could finish delivering the message, Sergeant Holmes placed the weapon from "safe" to "fire," and fired his first bursts down into the valley floor. 1000 meters was a long way, and Sergeant Holmes had a difficult time seeing where his rounds were striking, but he could follow the path of his tracers, and it was obvious that they were landing in the mass of Posleen attempting to penetrate Obstacle Seven.

"Miller, when you get off the phone, pick up those binos and spot for me!"

Miller finished delivering the message to Smigelski and hung up the phone. "Roger Sam't!"

When Miller picked up the binoculars Smigelski cut loose with the mini-gun, and just for a moment the noise from that impressive weapon drowned out all the other sounds of battle.

The lead Posleen were reduced to carrion but they still came, and the distance between them and the defenders continued to shrink. They began to fire their weapons back at the defenders, and the occasional railgun round or bolt of plasma would dig a furrow into the dirt or the roof of a bunker. Their fire hadn't started to claim any victims, but it did have a sobering effect felt all along the line.

0957 Hours May 19th , 2002
2ndBrigade TacticalOperationsCenter

"Okay Larry, how's it coming?" Colonel Smith asked.

The brigade XO set the mike down and took the last drag from a cigarette that he had "bummed" from one of his NCO's before crushing it out.

"Sir, Major Johnson has rounded up another half dozen personnel and has handed them off to Lieutenant Ostercamp." The XO started coughing uncontrollably. He wasn't normally a smoker.

Colonel Smith had his back against the wall. He felt like a cornered animal that was about to be pounced on. He was going to go for the jugular, and make his enemies pay dearly before he was taken down. They wouldn't get him for free.

Phase Line Katana was the last bit of hilly terrain for the next couple hundred miles. If the line broke here, then the Posleen would spread out into open, practically undefendable terrain. It was too horrible to even think about. Not only would they not be able to stop Posleen attacks there, but they couldn't run from them either. If the Posleen pushed them out of the hills here, they were as good as dead.

Phase Line Katana was being defended to the best of their abilities, but the line was thin, and was currently getting even thinner. Casualties were starting to come off the line, and gaps were starting to open up. Smith had to get a reserve, and use them to plug any holes that the carnivores tore into his lines. They were to be the fire brigade, loaded on trucks, sent to where the situation was most desperate. The problem was to scrape together some warm bodies to make up the reserve.

He gave that task to the brigade S-1, and sent him with a small "press gang" to gather any stragglers that he could find. Actually, Colonel Smith had given him authority to grab anyone in a set of BDU's that he and his team happened across, with the exception of medical personnel actively caring for wounded. The S-1 was having a great deal of success and the reserve was growing at an impressive rate.

The fire brigade needed a leader, and the only available unemployed officer happened to be the FSB Shop Officer, First Lieutenant Ostercamp. Ostercamp was an ordnance officer by trade, but he had led a platoon attack once during ROTC Advanced Camp at Ft Lewis, and that made him the most qualified man for the job.

"How many people do we have now in Team Striker?" Smith asked.

Major Nixon rubbed his tired eyes. "We've got damn near three hundred people in the counter-attack force. At this rate, we'll have more people in the reserve than actually manning the line."

"Do they have enough trucks to move them?"

"Yes sir. One thing that the FSB doesn't have a shortage of right now, is abandoned vehicles."

"Sounds good."

"Don't we want to take some of these people and put them in bunkers?" Nixon dropped the cigarette butt to the floor and crushed it out with his jungle boot. "I mean, wouldn't some of them be more effective manning fixed positions, rather than in the reserve?"

"No Larry. First, there aren't positions prepared for them and the fight is well underway. Second, if we try to be strong everywhere, we'll be strong nowhere. Just keep integrating more people into Team Striker. If and when the time comes, they'll be more effective as the reserve, assuming of course that we've got some decent leaders on the ground with them."

Nixon pulled out a can of Skoal and put a pinch in his mouth. "If and when the time comes, I'll go out with Major Johnson and Ostercamp to help lead any counter-attacks. Three hundred people is a lot for one lieutenant to control, especially if he doesn't have enough quality NCO's running around."

Smith nodded in concurrence. Things were in the toilet, and the Posleen were getting ready to yank the chain. The only thing that could save them would be if that idiot SIGO could get ammo with Division and get the brigade some help.

* * *

Bill Pfeil ran as fast as his legs could carry him with his M4 Carbine tucked firmly into his shoulder, firing aimed bursts at the rushing mass of creatures ripping their way through the last layer of protective wire. He was sprinting toward the next bunker and eventual cover, checking every now and again to make sure that his RTO was still following him.

Rounds and plasma zipped and flashed past him, kicking up rocks and dirt, while he moved. He tried to concentrate on keeping a good sight picture while running, but failed entirely. All he could think about was the gut-churning fear that gripped him like a vice.

"WEYLAND! GET MANCHU STEEL ON THE HORN! WE NEED SOME FIRES UP HERE RIGHT NOW!" Pfeil leaped into the air and jumped headfirst into the entrance trench behind one of the bunkers. His head slammed into the hardened wall, shredding the cloth cover on his helmet. He fell ungracefully into the bottom of the trench, still alive.

When he stood and looked over the top at ground level he saw Weyland running as fast as he could, right on his heels. Before he could make it into the trench he took a railgun round to the face. His head blew apart and the rest of the lifeless carcass dropped right in its tracks.

Bill climbed out of the recess in the ground and sprinted toward Weyland's body. He still had the radio, and Pfeil needed to retrieve it.

The base of the hill swarmed with aliens, and they tried to hold back the flood with dwindling numbers of weapons and people.

Using every bit of strength in his being, he ran over and tore the radio and its pack from the motionless RTO. He threw it over one shoulder and leapt back into the entrance trench, to the rear of the bunker. He could still hear the two soldiers inside of the bunker firing, so at least he knew that all wasn't completely lost.

"Manchu Steel, this is Havoc Six, need you to fire FPF for me time now, over!"

"Havoc Six, Manchu Steel, just hang on up there, I got rounds on the way. Keep your heads down, over." The sound of Jimmy Ngyuen's voice was not very calm or reassuring.

Pfeil slipped his arms into the shoulder straps of the rucksack containing the only available SINCGARS radio in the company and then picked up his weapon. He could tell from his position that the defense of Hill 353 was starting to unravel.

"Havoc Six, Manchu Steel." It was Jimmy again, and he was all business. "Shot, over."

"Manchu Steel, Havoc Six, shot, out."

The Posleen could be seen running through several holes in the wire attacking bunkers head-on, sticking their weapons in the firing ports and blasting the soldiers inside into bloody meat. Some of the men were fighting to the bitter end, while the rest were starting to break and run. He had to stop them. They had to stand and fight.

Bill started getting back to his feet. His knees shook under his own body weight, but he managed it. When he stood, he looked up to find a Posleen normal standing up above, looking down at him in the trench. The Posleen seemed almost curious as it stared.

Bill raised the carbine to his shoulder to fire and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. The bolt was locked to the rear, the magazine was empty. He dropped the weapon to the ground and went for his M9 pistol. As he fumbled with the clumsy holster the creature jumped down into the trench with him.

Bill was knocked to the ground by the weight of the huge beast, but he managed to get the pistol free. As he lay on his back he saw the creature pull a monomolecular blade from its belt and raised it high into the air. Bill pointed the nine millimeter handgun and yanked on the trigger again and again. The Posleen normal jerked and twisted after absorbing hit after hit from the small weapon. The blade flew from its hand, and the animal fell on top of the young lieutenant in a heap.

Bill breathed a sigh of relief for just a second before attempting to push the large creature off of him. He wriggled and squirmed to no avail. He tried to struggle free but the body was too heavy for him to move. He was pinned underneath the corpse in the bottom of a shallow trench just when his company needed him the most.

"Havoc Six, Manchu Steel, splash, over."

He couldn't get his arm free to answer the radio. He felt completely helpless when the mortars started exploding all around. He was pretty sure that Grandpa Wilhelm never had any days like this.

* * *

"FOR THE LOVE OF CHRIST! ARE YOU IN POSITION YET?" Colonel Smith was literally screaming into the radio. He had lost one fight already within the last twenty-four hours because the counter-attack came too late, and he wasn't about to make the same mistake twice.

"Strike Six, this is Team Striker, we are in position and are now commencing our attack, over."

"Give me SITREPs often, do you understand? Over."

"Affirmative Strike Six. I'll make it happen, over."

"Good. And good luck to you. Strike Six, out."

Colonel Smith stood there, with the radios going crazy with people all around him, but he felt alone.

"SIGO, have you come up with anything yet?"

Buchanan sat in the corner of the tent. He was hoping that Colonel Smith had forgotten about him. He still hadn't figured out a way to talk to Division, and he wasn't on the verge of coming up with any miracles at the moment.

"No sir. I still haven't been able to raise them."

Rage was boiling up inside of him. Colonel Smith felt himself about to lose control. He had his Kevlar helmet in his hand and he was about to throw it at the pathetic signal officer in hopes of killing the useless piece of shit. But just then he heard the very distinct sound of Blackhawk rotors.

"What the fuck is that?" The colonel exclaimed.

Buchanan was still in a daze. "What do you mean sir?"

"The helicopter damnit! Don't you hear it?"

"Yes sir. It's the medevac bird. They're getting wounded from Charlie Med."

Charlie Med was the medical company from 2ndFSB. While most members of the other two companies had fled in the face of the enemy, Charlie Med had not. The doctors and medics weren't much to look at when the bullets weren't flying, in fact they normally resembled something out of an episode of M*A*S*H, but in actual combat their dedication to duty was something remarkable. They had not run, and they had tirelessly treated and evacuated the wounded without guidance or orders. And all throughout, there had been helicopters running wounded back from the medical clearance station.

Aircraft were a definite "no-no" when operating against the Posleen, but choppers were used with regularity in rear areas that were far from the front, especially when the front was located in mountainous or hilly terrain. This bit of information was coming as a big surprise to Lieutenant Colonel Smith.

The colonel was speechless for just a moment. "Are there any other choppers that have been flying in here besides the medevac birds?"

"Well... yes sir. There have been log-birds flying into the FSB at least once a day." Buchanan was confused. He didn't understand why the colonel was so interested in aviation at the moment.

"Don't you get it SIGO?"

"No sir, I don't understand."

"Aerial retrans SIGO! Use a chopper for the retrans platform! It'll extend the range of our radios because we won't have radio signals bouncing off these damned hills. We'll be relaying transmissions over top of them! Damnit SIGO, didn't they teach you any of this shit in signal school?"

Buchanan felt like a fool. He should have thought of this long before now. "Uh, sorry sir. I just didn't think of it."

"Get on with it SIGO! Get me an aerial retrans, and get me talking to Division, NOW!"

* * *

Smigelski fired another long burst down into the onrushing tide of assaulting marauders. The mini-gun fired over one hundred rounds in a second, and had the effect of cutting the Posleen down like a scythe. As he fired Gunga Din scooped up the spent brass and links with a large snow shovel and dumped the detritus into five-gallon pales in the corner of the bunker. Smoke from the huge gun slowly filled the unventilated bunker, stinging eyes and lungs. The three of them coughed and had tears running down their faces constantly.

Cartright kept pulling on the trigger of his SAW, heat shimmering off the barrel, the deafening sound all but drowned out by the roar of the gatling gun next to him. It didn't matter, his ears were ringing again so badly that he couldn't hear anything anyway. He kept it up until his weapon jammed.

"Goddamn motherfucking sonofabitch!" Cartright yanked on the charging handle of the weapon furiously but nothing happened. "FUCK ME! COCKSUCKER! GODDAMNIT!!"

As he worked to clear the misfeed he burned his fingers, but Cartright hardly even noticed. He looked out the viewports of the bunker at the carnage surrounding him. The valley down below was moving as if alive, with thousands upon thousands of carnivores, running and clawing their way toward the line, being slaughtered wholesale as they advanced.

Along the line, Bradleys could be seen burning on their firing platforms, thick black smoke rising into the air. Tracers flew and ricocheted everywhere, the dull thump of grenades and claymores echoed through the valley. But the most gruesome scene was to the north, on Hill 353.

The hill was over a kilometer away, and the humans and aliens visible to the naked eye were little more than specks in the distance, but Cartright could easily make out what was going on there.

The Posleen had broken through the last of the obstacles and were swarming over the defender's bunkers. Artillery and mortars were detonating at the base of the hill, showering the attackers with white phosphorous, ICM, and high explosive, effectively halting the alien charge. But the most shocking thing was the hundreds of soldiers that had crested over from the back side of the hill and were counter-attacking down the slope. There was no finesse in the human attack. There was no bounding overwatch, there were no support or assault elements, there was no fire and maneuver, there was only a large mob charging down the hill, firing their weapons from the hip. They ran and fired until they intermixed with the Posleen.

Even from a distance it looked awful. Cartright could tell that most of the fighting was hand to hand, bayonets against monomolecular blades. Mortars started falling in the midst of all of them while artillery continued to fall at the base of the hill, preventing more Posleen from reinforcing and breaking the back of the counter-attack. The mortars killed attacker and defender, they killed human and Posleen, they killed without rhyme or reason. It was a melee.

Cartright forced himself to look away. He cleared the jam on the weapon and brought it back into action. He was numb now. Nothing mattered anymore.

* * *

"Well SIGO, you got it worked out yet, or are you going to waste more valuable time while good folks are getting killed?" Colonel Smith was furious.

"Sir, it's ready. You can give it a try now." Captain Buchanan said meekly.

Colonel Smith shoved him out of the way.

"Warrior Six, this is Strike Six, over!" Smith's guts were tying themselves into knots. He had to get comms with Division. If he didn't, they were dead. There wasn't any other alternative.

"Strike Six, Warrior Six, nice to hear from you! How's about a SITREP eh?" The voice of Major General Philippe LeMay came over the speaker loud and clear. Smith never thought that he would be so happy to hear from that rotten Cajun son-of-a-bitch for as long as he lived.

"Warrior Six, we are in trouble! We have lost one battalion and another one is cut off. The rest of the brigade has been pushed back nearly forty clicks and we are holding the line with whatever personnel we can throw into the battle. I need reinforcements in strength or else we are going to fold, over!" The colonel didn't sound very dignified as he pleaded for help.

"Colonel, I ain't got any reserves left, and all the units holding the line are in pretty rough shape. But I do have some MLRS, and that should be enough, get me some grid squares to smash and we'll make it happen."

"General, that isn't going to cut it. If we don't get some maneuver forces up here to help us out, the graves registration folks will be able to locate this brigade by looking for the circling buzzards!"

"You let me worry about that Strike Six. We've got this MLRS problem whipped. When we first employed the rockets most of them were getting shot down because they were still under power when they came into view by the Posties. We have moved the firing batteries several times until we found a couple of spots that work for us. We've got them squirreled away in gullies and wadis behind some large mountains and ridges. The rockets are masked by the terrain until they burn out their fuel. They then just sail on down to their target areas. It ain't perfect, but we've had an over 50% success rate. Just get your fire supporters to send us some grids, and we'll do the rest, over." The general sounded way too confident.

"Are you sure General? I'm not convinced." Smith wanted more than a couple batteries of MLRS, he wanted armor and infantry battalions.

"Goddamnit Colonel! Just give me the grids! I've lost far too many people to listen to this bullshit! You are not the only ones who have had a bad night! Do you understand me?" The division commander wasn't in a good mood either.

"Warrior Six, Strike Six, wilco, over." Colonel Smith wasn't going to hold his breath on this one.

"WE'RE OUT OF TWENTY-FIVE MIKE MIKE! I'M SWITCHING TO COAX!" Whitmore screamed.

The coax machinegun started firing at full cyclic, the ammo cans next to the Bradley commander emptying at an alarming rate. Captain Murphy hardly noticed, he was quite busy up in his hatch engaging carnivores with a fully automatic port-firing weapon.

A hyper-velocity missile went off next to Delta Six Six and a small piece of shattered rock flew through the air and smashed Steve in the forehead, just above his right eye, knocking him down into the turret of the vehicle. The fragment opened up an impressive cut but caused no serious injury, other than the blood that ran down his face like a kitchen faucet.

The radio chatter was heated, but the net wasn't overwhelmed with traffic like it had been the day before, when there were many more Manchus still on the roles. He looked over at his gunner who continued to fire the last of their ammunition without saying a word, the look of grim determination etched on his filthy face. He knew it too. He knew that they were about finished. They had done all that they could do this day, it just wasn't enough. He just hoped that his death would mean something, that it just wouldn't be a total waste. Murphy wiped the blood from his eye, secured his weapon, and started to stand back up in the turret.

"COAX IS OUT! SIMMONS BACK UP!"

The vehicle lurched back down into the hole and temporary safety.

"Dragon Six, Manchu Six, over!"

Steve dropped an empty magazine from his port-firing weapon and flung it out of the turret. He slid a fresh one into the magazine well and snapped the bolt forward. "Manchu Six, Dragon Six, over."

Whitmore looked up at his commander and they stared at one another for a short moment. "We're out of ammo sir. What do you want to do?"

"Dragon Six, Manchu Six, the colonel just gave me a call and said that he has just re-established contact with Division. He said that MLRS is inbound! Keep your heads down and hold your ground! Over!"

Steve acknowledged but was beyond caring. He was already dead. There was no point in dragging it out.

* * *

The Kessentai whipped their oolts onward. The prize was in sight now, the Threshkreen were beaten, their final defenses smashed, their dead lay just ahead, good meat going waste, bloating and rotting in the hot sun. It was soon time to harvest.

The fight had been a brutally hard one. They had fought and died by the thousands, and the last of them survived to benefit from sacrifices of all the others. They had shot their bolt, but what they had thrown at the humans this day had just been enough. So now their hearts raced with excitement, and their tired bodies found renewed strength. Finally, victory was at hand!

The MLRS is a mobile rocket launcher based off of a Bradley chassis. It can fire twelve rockets in a salvo, with an impressive range and devastating effects that conventional tube artillery cannot match. Each of its twelve rounds contains 644 submunitions which when properly deployed, have the capability of killing everything within a square mile.

At first they had very little success as the God Kings knocked the rounds out of the air routinely, but

after trial and error, the batteries found firing points that allowed the rockets to fire their boost phase behind cover. They became "dumb" rounds powered only by inertia before they could be targeted. At least most of the time. But it was effective enough, and the system was saving everyone's bacon.

The MLRS batteries of the 2nd Infantry Division had spent the last twenty-four hours firing round the clock hurtling death and destruction along the entire division frontage, beating back the Posleen onslaught time and time again. The infantry and the tankers would meet the enemy and die by the hundreds, holding the carnivores in place just long enough for artillery and rockets to pulverize them. This game played out in the mountain passes and valleys for hundreds of miles in either direction, by soldiers of other divisions and armies ever since the enemy launched their attack the day before.

Some divisions were destroyed, their soldiers and equipment lost forever. Some units ran. But a few had managed to fight and survive. The 2nd Infantry Division was one of them.

Whether it had been by skill, divine intervention, or blind luck, they had somehow held on, by the skin of their teeth at times, but held on nonetheless. In the last hours things had begun to wind down, and all sectors were relatively quiet, except for 2nd Brigade. Their situation was falling apart but that was nothing new, it was just their turn. Luckily for them, they had the undivided attention of the division commander and his staff, and all of the assets he could bring to bear.

The launchers fired mission after mission, and reloads were shuttled down to them on a fleet of trucks. Warrior Six had determined that his division was going to win, and the "Ragin' Cajun" always got his way.

* * *

Lieutenant Ostercamp groaned as he wrapped a field dressing around the gaping hole in his leg. He sat in the bottom of a destroyed bunker surrounded by wrecked equipment and bodies. He was missing his Kevlar helmet, his weapon, three fingers, and over a pint of blood, but he was in fairly good shape compared to the others he had led into battle. His counter-attack force of three hundred stragglers and a battalion of field artillery had driven the enemy back down the hill, but they had totally spent themselves in doing so. There weren't many of them left now, the few remaining holding their ground in the handful of intact bunkers. He knew it was going to get interesting soon, he could see the God Kings down in the valley preparing the normals for another assault up Hill 353. That was, until he saw the first of the rockets fly overhead, spreading their seed of death.

The rounds soared over the valley below and sprayed the entire area for kilometers with sub-munitions called DPICM.

DPICM stood for "Dual Purpose Improved Conventional Munition," and it was basically a small shaped charge about the size of a human fist. One of these could punch through armor plating, and they were falling from the sky by the thousands.

Ostercamp watched in awe as the hills and valleys in front of him erupted in tens-of-thousands of small explosions. The ground churned. It looked as if the gods had decided to shake a giant Etch-a-Sketch right before his very eyes. It was the most impressive thing that he had ever seen. As impressive as it was, it just kept coming. It seemed to last forever.

Survivors along the line stopped shooting and dropped down inside of their holes and the hatches of their vehicles. The little shaped charges were wiping out entire grid squares, and some of them were falling short.

* * *

The God Kings spotted objects under acceleration just over the horizon. They fired at once and started scoring hits on the invisible threats. But many were getting through, unseen by automated targeting systems, and their ranks were mauled as a result. Entire Posleen formations were blotted out in an instant by the new human weapon.

The landscape was blasted and blasted again until nothing down below was recognizable. Those that survived tried to run, but were engulfed in hellish retribution. They couldn't escape, there was nowhere to hide.

The hills and valleys were awash in yellow Posleen blood.

* * *

1211 Hours May 19th , 2002
Phase Line "Katana"

The entire area as far as they eye could see resembled a freshly plowed field. The rock solid clay of Diess, was churned and broken up for miles around. Smoke drifted slowly skyward, and a few small fires continued to burn.

Only a few normals remained, leaderless and without direction, they were dispatched with ease by the remaining defenders. The mortars, artillery, and small arms fire gradually wound down, and then ceased completely as the last carnivore was slain. The only thing that could be heard was the crackling flames from the burning vehicles, the idling engines, the secondary explosions, and the whimpers of the wounded.

Steve stood up in his hatch, disconnected the spaghetti cable on his CVC, and then lifted himself out of the turret. He jumped down to the ground, and climbed out of the fighting position, his all-leather boots stirring up just a bit of dust. Whitmore took off his CVC and joined his commander on the ground and just stood there in his sweat-soaked Nomex and said nothing. Neither of them noticed when the driver's hatch popped open, and Simmons crawled out. He removed his spall vest, put his Kevlar on and approached the other two members of his crew.

Steve pulled out his mouthwash bottle, took a large swallow of bourbon and passed it off to Whitmore and Simmons. The other two members of his crew drained the small plastic container before handing it back. Steve screwed the cap back on and put it in his pocket.

Soldiers began to emerge from their bunkers and vehicles, and stood there staring into the valley. The only movement was from those who dragged and assisted the wounded, but even they made little sound.

Cartright, Smigelski and Gunga Din sat on the floor and leaned up against the wall of their bunker. The three of them shared their last canteen of water. Smigelski tossed a cigarette into Cartright's lap and offered him a light.

Sergeant Holmes emerged from his bunker and sat on the roof. He took off his Kevlar and wiped the sweat from his face and bald head. He hardly even noticed Miller when he sat down next to him. The two of them sat that there in total silence.

Bill Pfeil finally managed to squirm out from beneath the dead Posleen normal. He climbed out of the small trench and was sickened by what he saw. Bodies covered the entire hillside, humans and Posleen intermingled. He saw a few battered survivors moving about, but not many. Over the crest of the hill came a Bradley, and it drove down the slope and stopped about twenty meters from him. Up top was Captain Fontaine biting his fingernails down to the nubs. He looked over and saw Bill standing there staring at him. Fontaine pulled his fingers out of his mouth and smiled. Pfeil felt relief wash over him for the first time, and he smiled back. He was thrilled to still be alive.

The mood could be felt throughout the entire battalion. The Manchus had fought and died in scores of battles in a dozen conflicts. They earned their battle streamers in a number of places with unpronounceable names, and now they had just earned their first on Diess. They were somber, but their spirit was not broken.

Lieutenant Colonel Smith walked outside of the TOC and squinted as his eyes tried to adjust to bright sunlight. He felt about eighty years old. Mental and physical fatigue was starting to get the best of him. He walked over to a nearby Humvee and sat down in the passenger seat. It just felt good to get off of his feet for a few minutes.

He tried to reconstruct the events of the last twenty-four hours in his head, but he couldn't do it, everything was just a blur. All that he knew was that they had won. It had been a Pyrrhic victory, but a victory nonetheless.

He struggled to his feet, and back toward the TOC. As much as he wanted to, he just couldn't afford to take a break right now. They had to reorganize chains of command, rebuild obstacles, casualties needed evacuation, supplies had to be brought in, and lines of communication re-established. There was a tremendous amount of work to do.

Rest would have to come later.

THE END

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