

# My Life for Aiur

by Cronoss

## Chapter 1 - Firestorm

December 7th, 6:31 A.M., 2499 A.D.

Like a thousand thunders crashing at once, eighty of the hundred-some siege tanks opened fire, hell itself releasing through their molten barrels. The cataclysmic sound rang through Ethan's bones, causing him to wince and recoil from the destruction. The fire from the artillery, the destruction from the siege tanks, all hotter and brighter than Chau's sun itself, the super-giant Sara. A raging inferno, the fire lit up the skies, cooked the heavens, and shredded through the water-thick fog. Clasp his rifle in his right hand, Ethan, hidden away in his standard pressure suit, took a glance out of Bunker B5's westward window. Nothing - only fog - could be seen. As if reality itself ended ten meters from the window, the fog blinded all. Flashes from nearby siege tanks were the only signs of any other existence. The only indication of an enemy out in the oblivion was the slow, plodding klaxon of the bunker's motion tracker. A steady but horrific beep, each sound off became closer and closer, the computers in Ethan's suit translating it all, displaying it on his HUD:

20 seconds

Ethan scowled at the number with disbelief. Goddamn things never work, he thought. As the words rang through Ethan's head, a flash of light illuminated the sky. Chau lightning was unparalleled throughout the Koprulu sector for sheer force - and brilliance. With its coming, Ethan was shocked at what he caught glimpse of: thousands, perhaps millions of milling insects, clambering up over a ridge hundreds of meters away, a sheer carpet of death. And then it was gone, absorbed by the blackness.

"Saddle up, soldiers!" came a voice from behind him, digitally transferred in 3D over the suit's network, no doubt from Cpl. Grim, or, as most knew him, Grimmy.

Ethan grabbed his rifle with both arms and swung it up to the bunker window, clicking it into the auto-ammo feed tube on the window railing. Ethan glanced at his HUD readout:

15 seconds

Shit, he thought. The Bunker [Computer](#) began displaying a massive amount of red converging on the bunker, just outside the perimeter spider mine field.

"The mines are going off... Now!" Grimmy cried, as the faint sound of clashing and explosion reached the suit's sound sensors. Hundreds of round expanding circles appeared all over the front of the enemy convergence on the BC screen. "They're coming - look sharp!"

8 seconds

Ethan checked his rifle over, making sure the safety was off, then fixed his vision on the oblivion outside. A downpour had begun, limiting his vision to about eight meters in front of the window, the dry-cracked mud of Chau now molasses in the rain. Still nothing could be seen. Sweat began to drip down his face, a sign of the battle anxiety the common soldier was often a victim of.

6 seconds

"This is gonna hurt," he mumbled, bracing himself for some kind of impact. Just to experiment, Ethan decided to try Infrared in the air conditions. "Infrared," told the suit, and its computer complied. Ethan winced, millions of flashing white lights striking the ground, like a hail of ultra-bright lasers, on a background of incredibly bright purple blazing in his visor. "Normal," he cried, squinting in sight of the incredible color, trying not to be blinded by his visor. Damn rain

ruins everything. The visor view switched back to normal and Ethan's vision was flooded with dancing purple flecks.

3 seconds - bearing 65 degrees

Wave after wave of adrenaline flowed through Ethan. A crosshair appeared on his visor, 65 degrees above where he presumed the ground zero mark would be. Trying to line his massive rifle sight up with the crosshair, Ethan overheard the network that controlled the firing sequence announced "FIRE" piercing through his concentration. Hands shaking madly, Ethan lined the rifle up and slammed his armored finger down on the trigger, unleashing an entire clip of ammo in less than a second.

Ethan followed the crosshair as it became closer and closer to ground zero, guided by the computer. The network that controlled the crosshairs was an ingenious invention, introduced several months ago by the Confederacy; A massive computer calculated where each soldier should be firing to maximize kills, which produced an easy-to-follow crosshair for the soldier to shoot at. The crosshair moved at a rather rapid pace, however - especially when an enemy line traveled quickly. The system was incredible, to say the least.

1 second - bearing 3 degrees

And thus the enemy capped the hill directly in front of the bunker, his crosshair disappearing as his enemy came into visual contact, about 40 meters from the bunker and closing fast. In the dark foggy sky, Ethan could only see moving objects, a sea of milling life, screaming towards his position. He ceased firing, allowing his rifle to cool, as a marine slammed his rifle into the railing next to him, opening fire in an orgasm of violence. The HUD readout changed:

6 seconds to impact

"Range!" someone cried, as another marine circled in on his right side, firing just like the previous. Ethan recognized him as Enrich '8-ball' Sanchez, from the crude pool-ball insignia sketched on his suit shoulder. Ethan felt his rifle cool rapidly through the suit's finger nerve-sensors, and pulled his trigger down once again on what appeared to be the enemy advance about 30 meters away. Burst after burst of fire ripped through the front of the wave, and Ethan could see hazy objects falling over throughout the advance, reducing the front line into a disorganized mass of figures. The Arclite Siege Tanks near the bunker opened fire with their 120mm 'Shock Cannon', an alternative, more powerful mode of attack that severely reduced the tanks' maneuverability. Fire ripped through the front line of aliens, illuminating the enemy charges with explosion.

5 seconds to impact

"Fire Range!" Grim cried, the marine on his left quickly replaced with a hulking Firebat soldier, the ultimate in short distance destruction. Twin flame-throwers opened up in a steady unyielding stream of hell itself, filling Ethan's vision of dog-sized insects with flames. Ethan let his rifle rest another half second.

4 seconds to impact

Ethan heard the opposite window to the bunker open fire, showering fire and lead. The enemy advance, now completely hidden by flames, seemed to slow the counter on Ethan's HUD, remaining at 5 and 4 seconds for more than it should have. In the distance, flashes of light mottled through the fog were sure signs of other bunkers opening fire.

3 seconds to impact

The siege tanks opposite to Ethan's window ripped off another salvo of fire from directly adjacent to the bunker, the machines slowly traveling backwards, away from the oncoming threat. The sound of alien screams and thousands of machine guns firing at once now snuffed the sound of Ethan's irregular breathing, like a gust blowing out a candle. The enemy line, about 10 meters away from the bunker, completely illuminated by flame, suddenly became entirely visible. Brown and black insects, at least the size of a large dog, they were covered in spines and mandibles, weaving in and out like hungry wolves. Their strangely intelligent, red eyes made him shiver, a knife sliding down his spine. Damn, I hate this. Another one fell, lost in a cloud of mud and fog.

2 seconds to impact

All four soldiers were now centered in Ethan's window, guns blazing at full tilt, fire rolling down the slight incline up to the bunker. Trenches behind the bunker began to fire, their thunderous fire in unison, like a death march. Thousands of bits of the ground lifted up, flying into the mottled air. Mottled not from fog, but from the sheer amount of metal coursing through the air, streaking the fog into wave patterns, covering the ground in what appeared to be a downpour, but was in actuality pure destruction.

1 second to impact

The first line of aliens, totally visible in the light of fire and numbering in the hundreds, was incinerated as a group of siege tank blasts pummeled the ground. Ethan felt the backdraft of high-pressure air meeting low, fire and smoke wafting into the open bunker window. If it were not for his suit, Ethan's ears would have blown from his head from the pressure change, his skin scorched and crisped. Although, he thought, without the suit, he would not be able to breathe the super-heated air surrounding the entire battlefield without singeing the contents of his chest. While Chau Sara usually remained at a nice 20 degrees Celsius at night and less than that during monsoon, the air around him now was surely at an incredible heat from the siege tanks' artillery blasts. His HUD recorded 64 Degrees average temperature, and had just skyrocketed to a blistering 358 Degrees upon contact with the super-heated vapor pouring in the bunker window from the blast. Ethan wondered what would happen when the aliens began charging the bunker - reinforced by incredible electric shockers, the aliens wouldn't be able to get in through the windows. Provided with some time, however, and Ethan was sure those mandibles and claws could surely rip through the bunkers rear-door. No time to think about that now - just hold down the trigger.

0 impact

Like a group of massive grasshoppers, the first eight aliens in the line catapulted up, descending on the bunker window. Three of them were shot down by fire from companions, two others wrought down in flames, hurling towards the ground not a meter in front of the bunker window, which was about 1 meter from the ground. Ethan pressed the trigger of his rifle harder, as if it would kill faster. Two of the dogs were shredded, invisible bullets ripping through their leathery hides. The bodies came hurling down, and landed directly in front of the window, slammed up against the sloped bunker outer-wall. Ethan glanced down at them, to see the eyes of Satan itself up close. He found no eyes, the bodies mutilated beyond comprehension. Another eight jumped, followed closely by another row. Ethan could now see the piles of scorched dead a few meters behind them, remnants of the siege tanks. The first eight fell, the next eight fell, all piling up just outside the window. One creature blocked Ethan's line of sight, so he reached out to push it over, but was suddenly reminded of the electrical barriers when his hand felt a very sharp tingle in the tips of the fingers. He withdrew his hand, and glanced to the left, catching eye of siege tanks being overrun by hundreds of sprinting aliens.

The next group came, and fell, and then another, and another, bodies piling up around the bunker. Slowly but surely, the aliens were gaining. Bodies of aliens began to fall right in front of Ethan's rifle barrel, blood splattering over his visor. Ethan was forced to back up, unclipping from the auto-ammo railing. His rifle was full, having been re-armed before clip-off. The LED on the side of the rifle read:

100 Rounds

100 rounds... Estimating 3 bursts per alien, Ethan could take on about twelve of the little buggers-assuming they didn't get to him first.

"Out!" A voice cried to his left, sounding a lot like a Cpl. Grim in distress. Ethan wheeled about in the cramped window, only to find the opposite window surrounded by aliens rushing past the bunker to some other objective, probably the eight-meter high wall directly behind the bunker. The sky, black as night, had cleared somewhat, and Chau's moon Fiona could be seen, its massive bodice hanging in the horizon. Silhouetted against it were alien shapes larger than anything Ethan had ever seen move on land.

"You heard him, let's get the hell out of here!" Ethan mumbled into his comm., sweat dripping from every inch of skin he had. Grim, clad in jet-black armor like the rest of the platoon, lumbered to the center of the barracks, into a small depression directly underneath the main bunker [CPU](#). He bent down and unlatched the twist-exit, like that used on an

ancient submarine, for total pressurization. The sound of metal scraping against metal nerved Ethan, but once the huge door had been swung upright; he felt a huge sense of relief - and danger. Cries from behind him had him spinning on his heel to face three aliens, all mauling the Firebat in the chest, ripping through his armor as the Firebat lighted up the bunker ceiling uselessly. "Die you sons of bitches!" Ethan cried out in disbelief at himself, jamming the trigger to his rifle harder than before, swinging the massive gun to bear on the aliens. Rounds chambered in his rifle, the familiar low-pitched chock sound, and then they let loose, fire from his mouth. The aliens fell after two bursts, and Sanchez joined in the fray, puncturing the Firebat's armor all over, though the soldier was obviously dead from the staring, open eyes. Crimson blood mixed with brown, and the bottom of the bunker became a pool for vampires.

"Come on," Grim stated, and Ethan complied with a rifle-nod. The two marines lumbered down the shafted ladder, backing in slowly, firing at the general direction of the window. Ethan arrived at the padlock door at the bottom first, hitting in the key number 006-789. '8-ball' came clambering down the ladder, dropping into the dim, smelly room, untouched by the carnage. Just as Grim's feet became visible down the ladder, a gurgling noise could be heard over the chatter of his rifle, as the chortled fire turned into clicks of an empty chamber, blood spilling down the ladder.

"Shit, get out!" Sanchez cried, his face filled with pain through the visor. Grim's mutilated body fell down the rest of the way, smashing on the floor, his face unrecognizable. The door computer complied and swung open, just as 8-ball launched a small hand held grenade up the ladder tube. They ran through the door as the tube light up, blinding anything facing the other way, shockwaves flowing down the tube. Ethan and 8-ball slammed the door shut behind them, it soundness totally reliable. "Holy shit," Sanchez exclaimed, letting out old air held in his lungs. "I can't believe they got through the electric shocks... I can't believe..."

"God knows. Hell alive for all I care. Let's get out of here," Ethan said hastily. 8-Ball agreed without saying so. The two marines clambered down the long corridor, which traveled under the outer-wall, and towards Nuark base. "God knows..."

Reaching the end of the corridor much faster than the a normal un-armored human could, Ethan and his compatriot heaved themselves up the next ladder, which went directly outside into the vast array of trenches within the outer wall. What awaited them was a sight neither of them would forget.

## **Chapter 2 - Ethan's Dream**

Ethan always thought of himself as a smart kid, a wise kid. He never thought of himself as being the one who died, the one who never came back. He grew up in the city, with the other city-kids, 'dirty' and 'tough'. Or, at least they had thought they were tough. They were city-kids, after all. They could handle anything . Even war. Oh yeah, war was great as a kid. You flew off to some exotic planet somewhere, shot some bandits, came back home, and got all the glory, all the girls. Heck, back then, they didn't even know who the 'bandits' adults talked so often of were. In reality, the bandits were terrorists, killers, murderers, the stuff kids shouldn't hear about. When they used to play war, they pretended the bandits were pirates and of course, the good-guys were the confederates. The loving Confederacy, the Confederacy that gives everyone what they want, the Confederacy that everyone worships, the Confederacy no one argues with. Do times ever change, Ethan had recently began to think. When the kids began hearing of the glamour of war (from various sources, mostly broadband propaganda broadcasts put out by the Confederacy to try and convince young hopefuls to enlist in the military) and believed it, they only showed it on the outside, a gruff 'I wanna be a soldier' fascade all the kids would put on themselves so any doubt they weren't tough (As city kids should be) would be removed. Deep down, in the recesses of his childish soul, Ethan knew of some kind of truth; that what the kids were told wasn't really what was. The other kids knew it as well, but if they admitted it they wouldn't be tough anymore. Oh no, you could never admit to being a softie. You had to be all tough and rough on the outside to get any respect in the city, when really you are as soft as a peach on the inside. City kids were microcosms of the adults in Ethan's life; people who couldn't actually express what they felt without fearing ridicule, without fearing embarrassment. That's what war is for, Ethan used to think, war is to kill the softies.

Ethan had had life all figured out back in his High School Days - girls, fun, and games. No work, no conflict, no effort. Ethan had built a cocoon of haze around him, and while he was aware of the facts of life (probably more aware than anyone else) he never realized it wasn't just a picture on a holoscreen. Funny things, children are; like sponges, or

mirrors - they soak up information, then reflect it, but they don't assume or acknowledge any sort of responsibility, credibility or reality for what they reflect. When they see someone smoke a cigarette, and that someone tells them it's bad, they go ahead and smoke their own cigarettes, oblivious to the fact that it's killing them too. Or perhaps they do realize it is killing them too, but it doesn't sink in just what killing is all about in relation to themselves despite their knowing what killing is all about on vidscreen. That's why Koprulu society ended up being as corrupt as that of Ancient Earth - kids soak up and imitate their parents ways, and their kids in turn do the same; a vicious cycle of greed, slavery, crime and war.

In fact, Ethan had once concluded in childhood, if it hadn't even been for adults, kids could run the world better than the adults could, for the sole reason that the kids - being thinking, functioning, rational beings - would have realized how stupid the adults were. Without role models, kids would have to fashion themselves to suit their situation best, while avoiding their parents' mistakes. But then, Ethan also used to think, the kids were just as stupid as the adults for imitating them, and probably would never come to any sort of rational, functional society at all. Although it could have been just a tertiary fact, Ethan thought it was something more, a sixth sense perhaps, that drove kids to be like the generation before. There were deviants, as always, kids who either had no parents or enough will to change when they were older. Kids who grew up to change the world.

The events of Koprulu that flooded Ethan's vidscreen every night after school and further solidified his disgust for modern society set off a ticking time bomb in Ethan's head. He wanted to change life, change the cycle that he realized inhibited man from truly improving itself beyond inner childish squabbling. He then, on his 11th birthday, decided how to make his dream come true; he would join the military when he finished school, get away from his parents, move up through the ranks, and become someone important. He would change man, change them so that kids no longer imitated adults - only for one generation - and allow them to grow up to be a better race under guidance. Their kids in turn could imitate once again, and the cycle of everlasting humanity would be purified after millennia of corruption; this was the first part of Ethan's lifelong dream.

When he reached the age of 13, Ethan killed the only squirrel in his urban neighborhood with a shotgun he had stolen from his dad's shed. He never admitted he had felt any remorse for having killed the squirrel. Its fur and intestines had splattered haplessly across the roots of the tree in which it had lived; the space was never going to be used again; it would wither and die with the tree. There would be no more bird chasing, or birdbath tipping, or chirping at the crack of dawn; the squirrel was gone. No one in the neighborhood cared. A few weeks after he shot the squirrel (and had reluctantly fessed up to the heinous crime) it hit Ethan - when you die, you're gone, and no one gives a damn for any longer than five minutes. Not one damned single person. They just move on, to have another kid to replace the previous one, or a dog, or a squirrel; nothing at all would change, not the neighborhood, nor the planet, nor the Confederacy would ever change. Man was an object of constant movement and changing characteristics, but underneath the names and descriptions of the dead and the laws passed on Tarsonis every day that filtered in on the Koprulu-wide newsfeed every evening was a massive block of corruption and greed and carelessness for anyone or anything but itself that would never, ever change, and made up the bulk of humanity. No one within humanity really cared about anything but themselves, and humanity itself cared for nothing but itself. Ethan added to his dream - he added, I will become something more than a faceless facet of humanity. I will break from the block of blackened corruption and destroy it, I will reshape society anew. Ethan began his quest for power.

When Ethan enrolled in the military, at the age of 21, he thought he was ready to take on the universe. His dreams of leading man into a new age of prosperity had vanished into pure dream, and were replaced by thoughts of real life. His tireless questioning of Koprulu society had been shuffled into the background by the world of becoming adult; issues about his future, his dating life, his social life, sports, his family, exploring Koprulu. Ethan grew confident within himself, surrounding his day-to-day life with friends and activities that most teenagers of any age participate in. All thoughts of epics dreams and doubts were destroyed by reason; none of that mattered anymore to Ethan. They were delusional dreams of kid with an imagination to big for his own good, and had nothing to do with real, relevant life. They were soon forgotten; what did remain, however, was a passion for human history and ecology, as well as a set career path into commanding army platoons for the Confederacy. Ethan, after years of metaphysical questioning, had settled himself into the corporeal world rather nicely. The thoughts of grandeur would return, however.

Months before the mysterious beings he now fought appeared in his backyard, killed his parents, brother, and ripped apart his whole town leaving him the only survivor, Ethan was looking forward to a promising career in the Confederate Military, an enlisted officer. After half a year of training as a grunt - something all military recruits had to

do whether part of neural re-socializing or simply volunteers - Ethan was going to be shipped off to the Confederate Marine Corps Head Quarters on Tarsonis Prime to become the newest member of an anti-rebel strategical team specializing in the neutralization of rebel factions, notably the Sons of Korhal, which throughout Ethan's childhood had been constantly fighting the Confederacy in the southern states of Chau Sara near the metropolis of Los Andares.

A few weeks prior to his departure, the confederate news feed released a major story that police had seized Sons of Korhal camps throughout both Los Andares and Flannum, and area outside Los Andares which housed Confederate military compounds that were of very high military classification. Chau Sara Magistrate Rudy F. Collins had made the announcement, or shortly thereafter every regiment of Sons of Korhal 'freedom fighters' left the planet in a massive exodus. Even some families living near Ethan had disappeared, most likely Korhal supporters. All routes into Los Andares were barricaded, and large portions of the southern states of Chau Sara were depopulated and relocated near Djakel Starport near the North Pole.

Whatever came in through the Confederate frequencies on the vidscreen, Ethan had wizened to know, however, had to be taken with a grain of salt. Several freelance stations took stabs at the occurrence, everything from an alien invasion that had been fended off by Confederates to the entire Los Andares are having been captured by the Sons and Collins held prisoner there. The Rising Sara, probably the most neutral and trustworthy of all the press in Koprulu, made mention of elite Sector-Wide Confederate 'Cerberus' forces going through Djakel starport sometime on the 8th of November along with Alpha Squadron, a reputable Marine squadron based in the Sara region. Nevertheless, by mid November, the Confederacy had placed a massive quarantine on the whole of Chau Sara - no one was allowed to leave or come in. Magistrate Collins assured Chau Sarans over broadband that the quarantine was simply Confederate precautions to prevent another Sons of Korhal takeover, however, Collins disappeared shortly thereafter, and a massive communications blockade shut down every news station on Chau Sara. No one living in any area of Chau Sara could tell what was going on in another area; any attempts at driving south in virocars were stopped by militia blockades; all airports and starports planet-wide were closed.

Ethan could still remember the night they broke into his house, the day after the communications blockade. He awoke beside his bed, having fallen off during the hot Chau night. He got up and put on what appeared to be a white shirt. After turning on the main lamp in the kitchen and momentary blindness, Ethan pupils adjusted. What he then saw was his mother and father, whom had both been around 50 years of age, ripped apart, their limbs and carcasses spread all over the white tiles of the kitchen. A pool of blood centimeters deep dominated the floor, and splatters of crimson stocattoed the entire room. Dark pieces of flesh and rubbery organs littered the counters, the table was ripped up and bloody, the doors to the patio had been smashed apart. When the realization of what he beheld sunk in, Ethan lost all strength in his legs and sunk to the staircase, his face awash with tears of anger and fear, his eyes wider than full moons. When a flash of the current reality hit him, Ethan made a mad dash to the virotruck, started its engine and zoomed off in the direction of the garrison. Every house on the way had been destroyed and mangled, often bodies lay strewn out of windows, red with blood or black from burns. Mad animals, insect-like in appearance, followed him in the distance, howling into the air. When he arrived at the town garrison in his truck, having lost the things following him in the desert trip, no one believed his story.

That was, until they died too, not ten minutes later, when the aliens reached the garrison.

Now, only 3 days later, reports were that the entire southern hemisphere lay in a fog so thick no one could breach it; half the planet had fallen to these things that no one could explain, not one communiqué had been sent out to Confed; every interstellar transmitter on the planet had been destroyed or no longer worked. The only way off the planet was through Djakel Starport, on the North Pole, but reports for orbiting space stations - most of which were also destroyed - made hopes of escaping Chau Sara doubtful. not one area left unaffected. As Ethan fought for his life, he realized he had nothing left. His family was dead, his friends were dead, his dreams crushed. There was nothing left to do except to escape this world, and, remembering his dream, become something more.

### **Chapter 3 - The Horde**

All along the Outer Wall were masses of dog-sized figures, swinging their claw-like mandibles at the huge, hardened walls of Nuark Base. Armor-clad Marines above, decked out like robots in huge powersuits, held down their triggers,

unleashing fire and death upon the enemy below. Areas where the aliens had been more concentrated were razed, burned by the artillery of a siege tank. Piles of dead aliens stacked high on the wall, to the point where the creatures began climbing up over the wall; using the mounds of their dead kin as a ramp. 'Firebat' soldiers constantly surged forward along the front edge of the wall, their plasma-backed inferno flame-throwers reducing the enemy to cinders, cooking them alive.

The enemy, however, numbered to great; as one alien was burned and fell, two more took its place. Like water breaking through a dam, the aliens surged over and past the three-meter Outer Wall, circling back and cornering the marines along the wall's inner edge. The aliens' carapaces were unlike and biological material human kind had ever encountered; it was as durable as steel and as tough and sharp as diamond. CMC armor was sheared like paper; helmets cracked like eggs. Ethan watched as the marines were ripped apart like wet, raw meat, their limbs streaming crimson blood over the hard-packed rock of the Nuark ground. Beyond the wall, massing, was a second enemy advance. Ethan, able to see well beyond the Outer Wall from his perch on a small hill, awed at the presence of the enemy's horde; giant brown and green insects stretched from the tiny, now broken Outer Wall to infinity - to the horizon, the column's end no where in sight. Further still, beyond the break of the sky, Ethan could see larger shapes, almost ten times the size of the tanks, moving, milling; hundreds of them, no doubt coming this way. All around Ethan was the presence of Anger; not experienced first-hand by Ethan himself, but anger, hatred and bloodlust seemed to saturate the air Ethan breathed, the sound Ethan heard, the sweat Ethan felt. The outer wall had fallen; the trenches behind it would not hold. A brown organic body of anger and hatred began to rise up the incline to the trenches, to where Ethan stood. The Tide of Death was upon them.

"Run for the trenches, go!" 8-ball yelled shooting past him, running full speed in his armor. Ethan did not hesitate to follow the soldier's orders, despite rank. With a quick turn, he ran as fast as he could in the direction of the defensive trenches which lay in a network around the massive Inner Wall. He quickly approached the nearest trench, and found it brimming with soldiers; a grim site they were, having ran from the bunkers much like himself. Some were missing limbs, other had no armor. A good third of them lay in the muddy trench gazing into the dark, rainy sky, their chests and lips unmoving. The rest of them cursed and yelled and tried to issue out orders, their voices drowned out by screams, rifle fire and the percussive beating of the artillery. As Ethan clambered down into the ditch, screams of pain and fear drowned Ethan's vision and ears, the smell of the dead surging into his nostrils, burning his sinuses like horseradish. Dropping to a crouch in the crowd, Ethan checked the read-out on his gun.

87 rounds

Far from full, 87 rounds would not last him long. "Ammo check! Ammo check!" he cried through his comm. From the bottom of the trench Ethan couldn't see anything of the enemy, but could hear them coming, a thunderous basso; like the flapping hum of an oncoming tanker. A soldier, clad in light skirmish armor, pants ripped and worn at the knees exposing blood and metal plating, quickly came down the back end. Slipping on the mud of the trench, he handed Ethan a few clips. The soldier's hands shook so much Ethan could see dried blood flaking off of them.

"Make 'em count, we dont have too many left!" the soldier said, his small helmet unhitched, revealing a huge scar where his left eye should be, and dirty, gray hair, strung across his face like hay. He spoke with the usual twangy accent of southern Chau, and had darkish southern Chau skin (Neither of which, to his surprise, Ethan had, despite his upbringing in Los Andares, the heart of southern Chau Saran culture). He also noticed the insignia on the soldier's left shoulder, marking him as a squadron commander of Epsilon, a rather reputable squadron of light reconnaissance and hit-and-run commandos.

"Aye sir! Do you really think we can hold out sir?" Ethan questioned.

"God damnit, no, but we'll die trying," he answered, peering off into the distance, "we'll all die trying..." The commander cracked a stalwart smile and looked back at Ethan. "Give em hell, will ya?"

"I'll... I'll do my best, sir!"

"Good-" at that moment, a large brown-green object slammed into the commander, spinning through the air, sending the small man flying into the back side of the trench. Blood spilling all over the loose, muddy surface, causing mini landslides under the commanders feet. He sunk to the ground, his eyes becoming grey and lifeless. "Goddamn it all..."

Were the last words he spoke, his neck and limbs going limp.

"Shit..." Ethan stated, stepping backwards and bringing his massive rifle to bear on the brown object, the insect-like creature now staring Ethan down with piercing red eyes. Ethan let off a short burst, cracking through the animal's hide, spilling dark, mollases-like blood over top of the commander. Ethan collapsed, overwhelmed with grief. Ethan couldn't let go of the trigger. His rifle continued to pump round after round into the lifeless animal, chewing the body of the commander into bits behind it. Ethan's entire body convulsed as he was overwhelmed with nausea and grief. The commander's face became his father's; the trench became his bloodied kitchen.

"Goddamn this!" Ethan spat, with a face full of hate and frustration. He spun on his massive metallic heel, the pressure suit making his every move much quicker and much stronger. Ethan glanced around the trench (now deserted from fear of Ethan's uncontrollable fire), threw his rifle to the ground and sank to his knees. He too looked to the sky for answers; its reply was one of dark, solemn silence. There was no answer except death. A flash of lightning drew no thunderclap as the sound of slashing claws and grinding teeth deafened all of existence; Ethan lurched to his feet and stood facing the enemy. Gnashing and gnarling, nearly on top of him, they clambered over the trench pitch with bloody talons. Ethan's rifle was too far away to reach.

"Damn... you... all!!!" he screamed, throwing his hands into the air, bearing his chest and screaming to the sky overhead, only to see sleek objects swooping down, their silhouettes unlike any other had ever seen. The aliens in front of Ethan retreated back out of the trench. Ethan's frustration with the universe suddenly shrank, replaced with a distant horror (and curiosity). He stared at the things bearing in on him from the sky.

"Oh shit!" he cried, dropping himself as low as he could into the curve of the trench wall, the bulky powersuit clasping the ground like a leech. Just before his sudden evasive action, Ethan had noticed several silvery shapes being fired from the alien gliders, cascading towards him at an alarming rate. Ethan braced himself, and upon impact, his vision went black and his body was thrown through the air with a horrendous force - smashing against a hard, unidentifiable object - like an ant being squashed on fresh pavement. The world swallowed him.

Opened eyes met an area well out of the trench; Ethan was lying on the ground in spread eagle, hundreds of the dog-like marauders running past him in a swirling stampede. Ethan couldn't see much more; his eyes were adjusting to the bright desert sand. The sky was clear, the sun beating down on Ethan's furrowed brow. It has to have been hours since I lost consciousness, he thought. His visor had been shattered, though no remnant of it remained in Ethan's helmet; a brief probe from his un-gloved right hand revealed an unscathed face. Propping himself up on his elbows, Ethan detached the helmet swivel mount from around his shoulder to allow his head the full degree of movement.

A clearing had been carved by the stampede; Ethan lay in its exact center in his own crater. One of the creatures, colored red with noticeably sharpened mandibles than the others, had left the crowd and attached itself to Ethan's leg, his armor twisting under massive jaws. Ethan let out a scream, though he felt no pain, and at that very moment the hideous beast let go of him and clambered off. Must have spooked the thing, Ethan thought.

Sitting up with legs braced in hands, Ethan surveyed his suit. The armor on his legs hadn't been broken, but it had been dented into the flesh of his calf quite sharply. His entire suit was covered in a thin, dusty film that was, oddly enough, incredibly cold.

A sudden shadow covered Ethan. The stampede quieted. Peering up into the sky, Ethan stared at a massive silhouette beginning to take shape before his eyes, emerging from the dusty fray. At least twice the size of any ordinary tank, a huge rhinoceros - dinosaur - god-knows-what revealed itself, letting out a howl that almost tempted Ethan to empty out his stomach. Two huge mandibles swung out in front of a crusty head, the size of two men head-to-toe, covered in sharp gullets and pitches and curved like the wickedest of blades. Shrills and screams emanated from the smaller aliens all around, as if watching some sort of hellish spectacle. Ethan was no doubt the prey, it the predator. Brining his hand up to point a rifle at the alien's eyes, Ethan found his hand empty. The incident back in the trench freshened itself in Ethan's memory. With a small gulp and a large, rather loud curse, Ethan closed his eyes in anticipation of pain.

An Eternity passed. Ethan lay, on the Chau dust, elbows to the ground, head exposed, for eons upon end. Pain remained absent. Ethan's eyes remained shut.



A growing sense of curiosity slowly overcame Ethan; Something compelled him to open his eyes. The beast was still there; frozen in position to strike. Ethan peered deeper, deeper still into the massive, glowing eyes of the thing. They consumed him; pools of glowing red, endless red. The color of death; the color of inevitability; the color of rage; the color of destruction. Ethan could hear its thoughts in his mind; its anger. Not words; sounds, feelings, emotions flooded into Ethan. Hatred, above all, shot from the beast like a spear of lightning, bearing down into Ethan's skull. A single sound shot into Ethan's head causing him to wince in momentary agony:

OM

The sound was meaningless to Ethan. It came again louder still:

OM

The sound repeated; louder, harsher, an apocalyptic drum beat. It seemed to probe his mind, pillaging through his memories and twitching distant emotions. Ethan felt traces of emotions - he felt sad, jealous, happy, joyous, exuberant. A fanfare of seemingly artificial feelings marched through his head behind a lightning-fast slide-show of images from his childhood and adolescence, smeared in a long blur. Ethan's arms clenched his head; With each sound, each emotion, each thought came the pain of a thousand lashes. The sound grew wordlike as if a language unto itself; frantic, angry:

OM

OM

OM

It was unbearable. Ethan let out a scream of agony; a plea of mercy to the heavens. He was answered by the rattle of machine gun fire. Ethan opened his eyes once more to stare at the beast again only to be astounded to find he was standing straight up, his arms held up to the sky. His fists were clenched around tufts of his own hair, blood streamed from his nose and mouth. The veins in his head pulsed with the rhythm of the now-gone words that echoed through the caverns of his mind. Aiur...

Tens of tiny pockets began exploding off of the huge thing's side. Turning its head in annoyance, the beast let out a roar than shook the ground and reared up its mandibles just as the familiar fiery-red explosion of an Arclite Siege Tank shell smashed itself against the side of the animal, smashing it back. The thing swivelled away from Ethan and began storming forward, blood spilling from a gaping hole in its back. Ethan gave himself a few seconds to get up and regain his bearings. Straight in front of the monster was a small contingent of some dozen marines, rifles ablaze, and three Arclites. Nothing else was in sight. The sun was high; the alien stampede gone. The horizon was shrouded in milling dust and thick, hot air.

From what Ethan could tell, he was past the outer wall and on the hard packed dirt plain just outside the base perimeter, an area previously covered inch-by-inch with teeth and claws. Straight ahead of him was Nuark; to his immediate left Ethan caught sight of the beast falling to its side. Ethan let out a sigh (and shiver) of relief. The huge thing slumped over, gallons of blood and green liquid spilling out onto the cracked desert floor. The soldiers continued firing at the carapace, mostly out of fear that the thing would get back up. Ethan sauntered in their direction, carving a wide circle around and away from their line of fire. For the moment, he was so unsure of what he had just experienced that he felt almost skeptical. His entire suit was in ruins; Ethan felt hungry and weak.

"Soldier, did you see that thing? You must have had a hell of a time with it alone! It took three siege blasts to take it down! After what you've been through, I'll be damned if you-" he said in a light tone, suitable of that of an eighteen-year-old (2).

"What the hell time is it? And where is my rifle? Is it around on the ground, or did you lackeys pick it up?" Ethan asked quite impatiently, giving the other soldier a quizzical look. He knew damned well where his rifle was; it was ruined, back in the trenches. What Ethan didn't want anyone to know was that he had flung it away himself; actions like that were grounds for dishonorable dismissal, and a hefty fine at that. Ethan had lost rifles before; there was a key to avoiding getting fined: speak to someone of lower rank about the missing item, act pissed off, and make them feel it was their fault.

"Rifle? What rifle?" the soldier asked innocently, a look of fear stretching across his face as Ethan began to become impatient. Or appear impatient, anyhow.

"My rifle, you dolt! Don't give me that, you squirmy little cadet! I'll have you court-martialled all the way to Dynakar at the rate you're going!" Ethan began to take on a false sort of authority, and stood up straighter, spitting in the soldier's face.

"Well, soldier, you've been out here for a good twenty-five minutes! It's probably been dragged off by-" The other soldier stuttered. If one could ever really shake in his boots, this soldier was doing just that.

"My name isn't soldier! Don't you know how to read name tags?" Ethan interrupted, his tone growing very annoyed. Conveniently his name tag had been horribly smudged during the action, and playing with this idiot's mind was quite fun.

"I'm sorry... Mr.... uhhh... (pause) it's been a long day and...(longer pause) Oh, never mind. Come with me, I'll get you a free gun from the boys," the officer squawked out. Ethan followed the officer towards one of the Siege Tanks, which had been retro fitted to act as an APC - the main artillery gun had been removed, the entire inside overhauled, and the ordinance replaced with a personnel bunker as well as an armory. The officer disappeared into the APC's hatch and reappeared soon after hoisting a massive C-14 'Impaler' Gauss Rifle. The officer lugged it over to Ethan.

"It's about time..." Ethan muttered under his breath, just loud enough for the soldier to hear, as he picked up the rifle.

"What was that?" Another officer asked, having just rounded the corner of the APC; one who clearly outranked Ethan in his pristine captain's uniform, blue velvet shining in the hot Sara sun.

"I said 'thank you'," Ethan said loudly and rather ashamedly, wondering where the heck the captain had come from.

"Good, that's what we want to hear from you grunts," The captain said rather wryly, his thick Chau accent the only hindrance to his high-class persona, "Debrief is in three hours; you two better be there."

"Yeah... Grunt!" the young soldier said, the look of fright still heavy on his face. Ethan glared at him. The officer quickly darted off into the darkness of the APC.

## **Chapter 4 - Eye of the Storm**

**D**ecember 7th, 12:13 P.M.

Ethan looked out across the sea of destruction, once his home; now a wasteland of death. Sitting unmoving on the east control tower, it's clean, almost spartan chrome walls and floor a ghastly change from what lay just beyond the massive inner wall of Nuark Starport. Nestled high upon the central complex, the east control tower overlooked the corner of the inner wall which had nearly fallen, it's gray barriers filthy with brown and maroon hues, no doubt remains of the intruders cooking in the sun. The entire outer wall had been overrun, it's structure buried beneath meters of mass dead,

both alien and human alike. What was not buried was scorched, the unending siege tank blasts having taken their toll.

The defensive trenches, just inside the outer wall, were now a scene of hell. Their walls collapsed in, the mottled lines Ethan could make out as the trenches were no sight any human would willingly see. Upon arriving at trench no. 1, the closest trench to the inner wall, the clean up squad promptly emptied their stomachs, and disbanded towards shelter. It had been decided the dead in the trenches would be razed by artillery blasts, rather than cause more suffering for the living. Body parts littered the fifteen trenches; their puddles of mottled water now puddles of crimson and pain. Piles of dead marines pocketed the areas between them, a feast for the native shaliv fly, a breed of mosquitoes the size of one's arm. Other carrion eaters scurried about, feasting on corpses, turning most dead into a gruesome pudding. The trenches were un-walkable to any human with eyes, nose or conscience.

When the Horde finally hit the Inner wall, all hell broke loose, fire on earth. From any position on the battlefield, nothing of the carnage could be seen. From the inner wall to trench no. 2, smoke and fire dominated the battlefield, blocking any sensor. About two meters up the huge fifty-meter tall inner wall, sixteen heavy flame-throwers were nestled within the trantium alloy, used for emergency defense. The Brass, Ethan guessed, classified the now-estimated half-a-million Alien wave that had struck as an emergency situation. The flame-throwers, two on each of the octagonal-base's sectioned walls, had been - and still were - emerged from their slumber within the edifice, having unleashed a few million liters of plasma-napalm upon the unwelcome visitors. For two-and-a-half hours, fire breathed from the wall, and masses of Aliens began succumbing to the carnage, turning and fleeing before being sucked into the black wall of smoke surrounding the base, forging the barrier between life and death. Eventually, all the invaders fled. They fled in small pockets, in various directions, and the fire stopped. What was revealed beneath inspired courage and hope in every soldier who ventured outside, and every man who viewed during debrief. Black and scorched, the skeletal remains of carapace and exoskeleton, belonging to hundreds of beasts, lay strewn on the perfectly flat black ground, cracked and dry. Steam spewed from small inconsistencies in the terrain, smoke and fire still vibrant in most remains.

One inspiring remain, framed during the marine debriefing, an image which still remained in Ethan's mind, was the image of a much larger elephant-sized alien, much the same as the one Ethan had previously encountered. It had fallen over a few tens of meters away from the inner-wall, and within its giant mandibles endured the abandoned armor of a marine, inertly locked in its final position, rifle slammed up inside the beast's mouth. Around the other side of the head was the most inspirational shot, the image of a thousand bullet holes blasted through the creature's skull, no doubt stirring it's feral brain (if they had brains) into a viscous consommé. What was more amazing was the Marine; Pvt. Lance O'Connel had survived by leaving his armor behind, fearing the eventual advancement of the flames from the wall. The Private was still alive to that moment, but had suffered serious burns and had been admitted to the Medical bay in serious condition.

And thus, after a brief three hours (of which the last hour was not so brief), the invasion had been halted. But not without the deaths of some six thousand soldiers, most of which had been recruited in the last 42-hours, under the impending loss of Chau Sara. The enemy had been unyielding in their hasty take over of Chau, and in a period of only 23 hours nearly the entire globe had succumbed to their horde, leaving only the north cap of Chau untouched. Centrifuge, Kliasta, Djakel, and the present base, Nuark, the furthest south, were the only gatherings of human life left, as well as one orbital platform among dozens destroyed, tens of warships lost to aeronautical attacks of mass size emerging from the now shrouded southern hemisphere. It was not, however, a huge surprise that, during the minute of silence for the dead, a communications officer with an unsteady voice intruded the debriefing hall with three words. It was however, absolutely dreadful.

"They are coming," he stated, his words ringing throughout the circular room. Positioned in the middle, on a small rise that allowed several people to conduct meetings with holographic aid, the Commander-in-Chief looked up from his quietness, enraged. A sea of faces among the dimly lit sloped chamber simultaneously played out his action.

"Who are coming?" he more commanded than questioned, his white-bearded face full of fury.

"The aliens - err, the things..." the comm. officer spat over the speakers surrounding the room, obviously taken aback by the Commander's tone of voice. Ethan, who had been sitting in a chair very close to the central podium, at the bottom of the downward slope the room floor, took note of the Commander mumbling something to an officer standing next to him. The officer immediately stepped down the stairs to the man-height podium and began accessing bright controls in an orderly fashion, situated just next to the guardrail. All of a sudden the list of the dead, still scrolling despite the

interrupt, was replaced by the image of a man no older than Ethan, with a quirky face covered in fear. The image, having appeared on one of the four displays just above the Commander's head, nestled into the sloped-down roof in the center of the room, was also displayed on every other screen in the room, which entailed screens every two meters all along the circular wall. The Officer began talking, his eyes reading off of a screen to his right. "Sensors just picked up a mass of movement outside the perimeter, heading towards the east tower once again. The reading is about... about..."

"Get on with it!" shouted the Commander in frustration.

"About twenty minutes away from what was the outer wall, sir-" he gulped as he spoke the last word, adding a sense of doom into his message. Dread washed over the dimly lit room, the faces of hundreds of squadron commanders recoiled in anguish and fear. Ethan himself, normally able to control himself under such circumstances, was taken aback. The enemy had regrouped, re-calculated, and re-launched their attack. Perhaps they were not as savage as he thought... What do we do now, I wonder...?

A murmur of worried discussion settled over the crowd, a slow crescendo until everyone present was speaking at slightly-above normal volume, a frenzy of scared and arguing squad commanders. Ethan, from his chair, caught bits of phrases that were louder than the normal conversation being carried across the huge room: "What did we do to deserve this!" was one haughty officer, with a thick Chau accent. Another, more chaotic voice, spoke "They are hell unleashed on us by the devil himself!", and the occasional "Earth has come back to claim its prize". This bewilderment continued until finally the Commander-in-Chief spoke, hastily and fearfully, his amplified voice commanding over all the confusion:

"Get your men together, Commanders, this one ain't gonna be pretty. Assemble on the inner wall, we will have to hold them off there - I'm ordering a full evacuation to Djakel..." The comm. officer then mumbled something else too low to be intelligible in the mass perplexity of people jumping out of their chairs, but the Commander-in-Chief understood the message. In a final note, he added: "We've just received word from Centrifuge they are under attack - Magistrate Collins is ordering a full retreat to Djakel! Briefing will be conducted on the battlefield! Go now, you are dismissed!"

The room swam with terseness, commanders scurrying out of their chairs into the six aisles that broke up the sea of chairs at regular intervals. Ethan got up, and began striding up the aisle's slight incline towards the exit, perhaps more nervous than ever. For he, unlike most others, had not been a Squadron Commander two hours earlier, during the thick of battle. And he, unlike most others, was about to meet his squadron for the first time, in battle and under fire...

As Ethan left the room, walking through the double-doored exit into the dim curving hallway, he caught wind of a message from the comm. Officer, directed at the Commander, that would remain in his head for years to come - and the subject of the message would change his life.

"We've picked up something else sir... a fleet entering the system... probably from Tarsonis..."

As Ethan's interest in the conversation heightened, the distance between him and the exit shortened, and he was swept out of the auditorium into darkness, surrounded by other commanders, rushing down the hallway. If what he heard was true, they were saved.

## **Chapter 5 - Into the Tempest**

As hundreds of crazed and worried commanders fled the briefing chamber, General and Commander-in-Chief of Nuark Frederick McDonnell remained a cool popsicle on a summer day, his rigidity and sterility slowly melting as the others left the room. Despite the loss in his composure, he continued to stare blatantly at the young and obviously under-qualified officer on the screen, his words stuttering out of his mouth unprofessionally and with a strain of uncertainty. However uncertain, the officer's words seemed to speak the truth.

"They definitely aren't signals from a fleet of the aliens we are fighting now, sir... t-they aren't resonating like the aliens do - they are b-broadcasting their signals," an audible gulp, temporarily cutting off the flow of speech from the

officer, ended his sentence short. Frederick didn't need to hear anymore from this man, he would have to 'look' at the signals himself.

"I'm coming up," he said softly, his voice ringing through the empty auditorium despite its volume. His gaze drifted from the screen to the back wall of the chamber, his mind deep in thought. "Are you sure it isn't a Confederate fleet?" he queried. All this talk of space fleets had deeply reminded Frederick of his wife Maria, on Char. After having been swept away from Char when men under his command died in an accident, the Commander had been stationed as General at Nuark for a year, the last damned place he wanted to be. Now, after four months stationed here, he just wanted to get off. Fleets reminded him of safe passage through the stars, back to his home, his family. With retirement looming ahead, he just wanted to spend the last eight months on Nuark in peace, and then go back to Char and settle down with Maria and his married son, Danny. Neither Maria nor Frederick had anticipated the pestilence that now plagued Chau Sara, the pestilence that had legs, eyes and jaws. The folks on Char, Tarsonis or Fulcra wouldn't even know of this terror yet. Frederick planned to live to tell them about it.

"I'm- I'm quite sure sir - you'll s-see when you get here," the officer quivered, sounding unsure, despite his words, "They are only about t-ten-thousand clicks from us, had they been Terran they would have s-surely-"

"Ten-thousand clicks?" Frederick shouted in surprise, now standing halfway down the stairs to the addressing platform, his hawkish features and crew cut pointed strait at the officer on the screen. "How did they get so close without previous detection?"

"T-they only appeared to our sensors a short while ago, and-" Frederick's booming voice cut off the officer, and the volume surprised even himself.

"Enough! I'm coming up! Save the excuses for your superior, officer," the Commander interjected, again storming towards the exit, now heading up one of the six aisles that divided the room.

"Y-yes sir," The officer gulped, and his image switched off with a small beep. Sweat glistened on the Commander's forehead. Eight more months, and this all would have been over. I could have gone back Maria on Char, spent time with Danny and the Grandkids... Now this... The rush of hot air hitting Frederick in the face reminded him of Char, and his longing for home only grew stronger. God's throwing one last judgement at me, one last test. Well, I'll beat it, just like all the others... Maria, I'm coming home, alive or not...

Ethan raced up the massive staircase to the top of the Inner Wall, tens upon tens of brown duracrete steps stretching to the sky's end. The smooth, mottled surface began to make Ethan sick, upon his fifteenth minute of climbing each step, made for a normal man's pace. They sure didn't have battlesuits in mind when they built these steps, Ethan thought. Each step was an intensifyingly-annoying task, the individual steps far too short for the massive silver boots equipped on his suit. At least, he pondered, I'm faring better than these other blokes... Ethan turned his head as far as he could inside the wide-open helmet, the internal sensors of his eyewear allowing him to see further backwards than any normal human could. The other 11 men were fully engrossed in their footwork, sweat and frustration dripping off of their faces as if involved in some athletic competition on Kaszur. The dry sand-like brown of the Nuark inner-workings and superstructure backed up their oily images, the pentagonal slopes of pyramids rising into the midday sky behind them, a sea of brown geometry. And onto that was a mass of milling soldiers, racing out of slits at the bottom of the massive pyramids, faces full of anguish, fright, and a hint of excitement. Behind Ethan's squadron of twelve spanned an inspiring sight: thousands of soldiers doing just the same as he was forced to, faces locked in concentration as they rushed up the narrow stairs. What was inspiring was the sheer size of the line, spanning several hundreds meters up and down, a line of silver moving objects, with almost a sense of rhythm as each step was conquered.

"What the bloody hell are you lookin' at, pretty-ass?" the nearest soldier yelled at him, his terrible half-toothless grin bearing into Ethan's eyes. Ethan recognized him at Private Daemon Smith, or as the others knew him, 'Hacksaw'. The large dark-skinned man always wore black round sunglasses, lip and nose rings, and kept his head shaved. He had kept his routine up even today.

"Not much," Ethan replied with a sardonic grin, and turned back around as not to begin tripping on the too-small stairs. His comments got a few oo's from the soldiers around him, and Hacksaw kept on walking. For a while all Ethan could

hark was the soldiers' footsteps, and the eerie synchronization of hundreds of people breathing in unison. Then, all of a sudden, just nearing the top of the column, Ethan heard men shouting; shouts of terror, panic and fear.

"Here they come!" he heard a soldier cry, and, "Saddle up!" was the all-too-familiar 8-Ball off in the distance. That guy just keeps on going, Ethan thought, I don't know how he stays so... happy. When Ethan reached the top of the staircase, some two hundred meters above the inner-base ground, he was met by a confusion of soldiers running around on the large platform that was the wall 'roof'. About twenty meters from front to back of grated metal, the drainholes of the wall roof exposed just feet underneath it, this was the area where the soldiers could tip their rifles over the wall ledge, a small wall protruding one meter above the platform. The platform ran all around the entire base, tens of kilometers in length. Ethan moved over to the far edge of the wall, where a small one-meter tall safety wall-fence stood to prevent anyone from falling off accidentally. There, he found soldiers buzzing around him in [conquest](#) of finding their assigned position along the wall, numbers marked into the khaki safety wall at intervals of five meters. Ethan leaned over the edge of the wall, and looked out across the desert-canyon landscape of Chau Sara.

It took Ethan a few moments to realize that he was standing on the edge of a two-hundred-meter plus wall, staring out at the landscape for tens of kilometers beyond the outer wall. Off in the distance was the now-ruined city of Nuark, population 150'000. Or at least, that had been the population no more than one day ago. A City much like the one he had grown up in, Nuark had been one of the seven hubs of Chau Sara, complete with a in-system Starport, military base, government, Confederate representation, and a stable economy. Now, not one building stood over three meters tall, their endless peaks toppled by the alien dominions. Almost eight hours earlier, almost everyone in Nuark had been killed, their homes crushed by the alien onslaught. The Starport was the first target struck - a sign of the beasts' intelligence. After the initial attack, which happened sometime late yesterday afternoon, the entire city was plundered and destroyed, all save the military base was wrought. When Ethan - and everyone else alive - thought the aliens would come for the military base, they retreated. As predicted by many, the retreat didn't last long. Shortly thereafter, Nuark base had been attacked three times, twice the day before during the siege of the city itself, and once already today, December 7th, 349 A.L. Every time the aliens attacked, they seeped further into Nuark's defenses, destroying and killing more. The flame-throwers embedded on the wall, of which the housings Ethan could now see if he glanced down, were the their first line of defense - a radical change from being the last hope not twenty-four hours ago. With no reinforcements, Nuark would not survive another large attack.

Beyond the ruins of Nuark lay nothing, a giant flat desert of cracked mud, once full of desert life, wrought in a few short days by the aliens. What were once hills were now lifeless craters and unrecognizable splutters on the ground. The entire area around the base of the wall was perfectly flat; a hard black reminder of how close Nuark had been to annihilation not twenty-four hours earlier. The black scorched ground flowed into a pocketed cratered mess, almost intraversable to man, no doubt easy terrain for the intruders. And there, just left of Nuark, sun directly behind, driving strait towards the base, was a huge plain of brown movement, like a flood of muddy water, the size of ocean, the deluge of death. A wave of doom swept over Ethan, and gasps could be heard all around him, echoed cries of his thoughts. Dear god, we are doomed...

With a crackle, Ethan's comm. initiated, and voices flooded his hearing. "Get into your positions, and be ready for recalling to the base floor for evac." Came the voice of a very determined and confident officer. Ethan recalled the numbers he had been given over the intercommunications briefing after having exited debrief. A54, where is A54... He looked at the crowded edge of the safety wall for his digit, but did not find it. He spun around to address his squadron, his movements enhanced by the armor.

"Boys, any idea where A54 is?" he cried over the background chattering of soldiers along the wall.

"I believe it's over to our right, sir." A soldier stated, sounding confident. Ethan recognized him a Vincent Gough, one of the higher more accomplished men in his squadron, who had even more experience on the field than himself.

"Alright then, everyone, follow Gough. He knows his way around here better than I do" Ethan said jokingly, though his comments were taken much too seriously, judging on the looks the rest of his men gave him. They followed Gough through the crowd back out onto the platform that ran all around the wall, and Ethan was faced with an inspiring sight. As far as he could see, thousands of soldiers were stacked up on the edge of the wall, rifles pointing outwards. A few kilometers down, near the corner of the wall, Ethan could make out lines of soldiers, ant-sized in his vision, climbing up the long staircase to their positrons on the wall, a giant ant colony readying itself for war. Down on the dusty base

floor, siege tanks were pulling out just behind the marines and deploying themselves, accompanied by the much larger mobile artillery. Tens upon tens of tanks lined themselves up in columns, and Ethan caught sight of highly-trained Ghost commandos, who's mind skills bordered on being the stuff from fairy-tales, climbing up the stairs to the command towers above. A feeling of pins and needles showered over Ethan's scalp, having never witnessed a project of such mass scale before. To his right, Ethan heard the familiar sound of massive hydraulics lifting the twelve giant immobile nuclear artillery guns stationed at the middle of the base. When he glanced over, Ethan caught sight of one of the massive barrels, the size of a cylindrical building, hoisted in the air at a forty-five degree angle. Maybe we aren't so doomed after all...

Upon arriving at A54, Ethan's comm. Promptly spoke up, the voice of the sterile computer spoke up:

"INCOMING TRANSMISSION: FOR COMMANDERS EARS ONLY"

Ethan put all focus towards listening to the comm. A young man spoke it hastily and nervously:

"Looks like we've got a bunch of red blips coming in MUCH faster than the rest of the alien advance - we assume they are air bogies - be on the caution, and try to get a visual for confirmation. Comm HQ out."

Ethan immediately glanced up, and searched the now violet Chau skies for anything moving. Sure enough, just above the field of aliens were several tens of unrecognizable blobs, and despite the distance, Ethan could sense they were moving fast. He mentally queued up a direct line to Communications HQ, which was nestled deep within the inner maze of the Nuark superstructure. "I confirm airborne bogies heading... strait this way, at high speed-" Ethan was cut off by a loud, gargled electrical noise from his comm. He swiveled his head around in time to see a black blur shoot overhead, and his eyes locked on a massive brilliant green comet-like object screaming towards the wall, with a large stream of super-heated air behind it.

Before Ethan could speak, the familiar voice of Gough broke in with an incredible intensity, "Get Down!" Ethan and some other hundred soldiers complied. The fireball curved sharply downwards, and the entire platform vibrated with astonishing force. The soldiers stood back up, only too see a column of smoke erupting from below their vision over the safety wall, no doubt on the outside somewhere. Ethan, who was crouching at the front of the lines that were three soldiers deep, peered over the safety wall. About one hundred meters down the massive structure was one of the immense custodial flame-throwers, twisted and chortled like a dead stick from a tree, half-hanging from its casing in the wall, the entire area scorched and smoking. They are going after the flame-throwers, Ethan began to think, just as another green fireball erupted against the wall, two hundred meters across from where the original impact was. When the eruption cleared, Ethan saw another flame-thrower, ripped from its shell and smoldering. The aliens' accuracy was no longer a doubt in Ethan's mind, nor was their strategic intelligence. These weren't just animals on a hunt, with a lust for the kill. These were intelligent beings, bent on annihilating the Human race. Ethan's mind flashed with Images of his girlfriend's home, her parents, her beautiful eyes, her sexy smile. Images of all the holovids they'd seen together, their first date under the Chau sunset. Priceless memories, Gone... Gone to these killers. I'll avenge you Beth... I'll kill all these damned things, whatever they are... Anger and hate filled Ethan, his blood boiling from the thoughts of lost possessions, friends, and times. He would have revenge...

"Wake up, dream-boy!" yelled the old familiar voice of Enrich Sanchez. At least I've got one friend left, Ethan thought happily but despairingly as he turned to face Enrich, standing next to him on the wall. Enrich didn't share the same smile Ethan was wearing. Instead he only pointed past Ethan towards the landscape, eyes widening, a sardonic, almost satanic grin filling his face. Ethan followed his gesture (minus the satanic grin) and found himself staring at hundreds of green fireballs, swooping in towards him ponderously, but relentlessly.

"Shoot those... comets!" Ethan found himself yelling into the open comm., bringing his rifle up to bear at the closest fireball, its fiery bodice cruising in on Ethan's location. As Ethan's finger found its home in the clutch of his rifles trigger, hundreds of other soldier's fingers did the same. An eruption of bullets blurred the sky as the nearest comet was showered with hot metal, unyielding in its advance. The plight continued until the soldiers' rifles began to overheat, and the firing stopped. As the fireball approached, its true size was finally realized, and all the soldiers near Ethan got down on their metallic stomachs in sequence, including Ethan. They gazed up at the thing, and it soared right past them, a tail of hot green something scattering into the air. The soldiers stood up, swiveled around to face its backside. The fireball suddenly gained velocity, and dipped down to strike one of the helpless-to-air siege tanks, ripping it apart, showering

the base level with sparks and fires. Twisted metal flew everywhere, and a crew of repairers and medics flooded the scene. Again, Ethan swung around to face the oncoming invasion, and found no more fireballs sailing in the skies, but instead found the alien advance not two thousand meters from the far side of the Inner Wall. Smoke smoldered up the surface of the wall at a regular interval all around the base, or at least from what Ethan could tell when he looked from side-to-side. They've taken out all the flame-throwers... we are so very, very dead, Ethan thought to himself, with a surprising hint of humor. It was fitting that he die; everyone and everything he knew had already taken the same voyage, save Enrich. Breaking the despairing thoughts, Ethan's comm. opened up.

"Firing angles ETA 3 minutes, people. Look sharp, and brace for artillery fire!"

Ethan flipped down his still-open visor, and grabbed the railing on the safety wall. A small vid of one of the massive artillery guns in the center of Nuark popped up in the corner of his enhanced eyewear, no doubt being taken from one of the command towers stationed at each point where the base's walls cornered. The entire barrel of the piece, a stunning sixty-five meters long and eight meters wide, began to protrude slightly, and a small countdown began under the vid. 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... The barrel of the artillery light up in an inferno of white, the entire object shuddering backwards with an incredible force. The entire sky flashed as a huge straight blur appeared in the sky, marking the trail of the monstrous nuclear shell just fired. Another countdown began underneath the vid, which was now projected onto the oncoming alien mass - still a sea of moving objects, undefinable at their distance. Ethan began to wince slightly, bracing for the white light about to show, as the black blurs that had launched the fireballs swooped back around again. This time, however, Ethan got a good look at them. Not craft, nor metal, like most would presume, but these flyers were biological. Without any wings, either, but four long sickly index arms, or legs, hanging off of a brown-green oval body - which raised the question of how these monstrosities flew. Ethan's train of thought suddenly interrupted by the overcoming blinding flash of white light, filling his vision completely. When it died off, Ethan's scope was filled with purple hazes, and he could barely see. Thankfully, the enhanced eyewear he wore began reducing the after-glow of the explosion. A few short seconds later when his vision was returning to normal, and he caught sight of the mushroom cloud off in the distance, the sound of the explosion cut in, followed by a wave of hot air that nearly knocked him over. The sea of marines to either side of him did the same, a field of robots in unison. Ethan took a second to look around, noticing the flyers were gone, and the sea of death that was the enemy advance was broken up, and as far as Ethan could tell, they had halted their advance.

"Whew, that got em good," Enrich began to say next to Ethan, when all of a sudden his comm. broke in sharply:

"We got bogies coming at point-nine-zero, fast! Look sharp!"

Ethan swiveled his head ninety degrees west just in time to see a huge mass of blurs flying towards his position, parallel to the wall, at a horrendous clip. Like a single-minded machine linked together, all the soldiers Ethan could see brought their rifles up to bear on the intruders, raking them with hot metal. One of the flyers spun through the air, green blood pouring out in an expanding spiral, and collapsed onto the platform, its carapace spilling open, green fumes erupting in every direction. Soldiers scurried backwards as another swooped overhead, launching a devastating fireball that wrought the platform - and several soldiers - in green flame, acid spilling out onto the grate, chewing through into the top of the wall. The third flyer was shredded with bullets, and the Anti-Air turrets behind the wall kicked in, firing missiles into the fray. Two more of the flyers erupted upon contact with the missiles, their pieces showering the soldiers below. Sharp chunks of carapace cut into soldiers' helmets, killing one directly behind Ethan with a chortled scream. Blood spilled out onto the grate, falling into the giant drains down below, built for that sole purpose. Ethan found the next flyer and pressed the trigger only to find it blown to pieces by an AA missile, fire and blood erupting like smashed magma. Ethan fired at the next one, and the next one, all swooping in at the same angles. The platform around Ethan became a mess of chewed up metal as Marines fell over screaming from the acid released by the fireballs, firing their own rifles into the roof of the wall. Ethan took a second to calm himself, and look to his left, towards the far side of the safety wall. What surprised him, of most, was their rapidity. To his left, clambering up the wall, was the alien advance, already at the base. Ethan watched them smash into its foundations, and begin climbing onto the wreck that was the flame-thrower for this section of the wall. Then, to Ethan's surprise, a new alien emerged from the fray.

Ops

"What's going on out there?" Communications Chief Geoffrey Saldan shouted at the no one in particular. The entire Ops room echoed with his voice and tens of officers turned from their posts and vids to look at him in fright. "What the



hell is going on out there, anyone? Doesn't anyone notice this screaming we are hearing over the comm.?"

"Sir, there is nothing we can do," one Officer started, his black hair and young sweating face glistening in the light, "they are being bombarded by what appears to be flying bugs, sir. Over on the east wall sir. The ground bogies have also caught up with them - but are remaining outside the wall-"

"Of course they are on the other side of wall," the chief interjected loudly, "they are goddamn grounders, people! They can't climb up a wall or anything-"

"Sir, sorry to interrupt, but these sensors show aliens actually climbing in altitude up the wall..."

"What? Let me see this!" the Chief walked over to the officer's HUD, located on the wall of the upper-right of the auditorium-shaped room, and tilted towards himself. Displayed on it was a cross-section of the inner-wall, all two hundred meters tall. The inside, built on an eighty-degree angle, was outlined in blue, whereas the outside, on an eighty-degree angle also, was in red and being attacked. All along the 'ground' (represented by a flat white horizontal line) were large concentrations of red, obviously representing the attackers. What was intriguing were the red concentrations spreading halfway up the wall, and out from the wall on a forty-five-degree angle, travelling up the wall at an alarming pace. "My god," the Chief stated in disbelief, staring at the screen, "get a visual... get a visual!"

### Inner Wall

Squadron Commander Enrich '8-ball' Sanchez was heavily engaged in shooting down the strange flying bogies, unleashing clip after clip into their carapaces, when his comm. crackled. A line straight from Communications HQ opened up in his visor, bringing up a small image of an officer in his vision, with the confusion on the platform in the background.

"What is it - I'm really busy," he near-shouted into the comm., his finger heavily pressed on the trigger, tracking another of the flying death-machines through the sky along with a few other ten marines, including Ethan, standing just to his left.

"Ops needs a visual on the surface of the wall... if you could please turn to your right an examine-"

"Hold on," Enrich said determinedly, and glanced over the wall's edge to his left, still shooting into the air. The glance caught his immediate attention. Not fifty meters down, the aliens were somehow loading themselves onto a larger alien, like sickly marines loading into a twisted, biological APC of sorts. The large alien resembled a huge deadly crab, but brown and made of thousands of fibers, with jelly-fish like tendrils hangings from the bottom, pulling the dog-sized aliens up like a man-o'-war would to its prey. The thing had incredible piercing eyes, and was slumped over like some sort of ogre from myth, with two giant mandibles, far outsizing everything on its twisted body, save the torso itself. To Enrich's surprise, the 'loading' process was very rapid - the alien was scooping and 'climbing' at about five meters every second. The most surprising part of this was that the climbing action wasn't climbing at all - the alien transport was floating upwards. Ethan then looked around, and saw the same similar scene a hundred times over, all along the foundation of the wall.

"Holy sweet mother of God," he exclaimed, then pulled his rifle to the edge of the wall, "Over the wall, they are coming over the wall!" he screamed into the comm., and the attention of hundreds of other soldiers along the strip was caught. The smaller aliens let out screams of terror as hundreds of rifles popped up over the wall's edge, and began firing. The sound of rifle fire nearly drowned out all other noise, topped only by the shrill of the defenseless insects at the base of the superstructure. "You want your visual? You want your visual? Here is your visual!" Enrich hit the switch on his live video feed camera installed in his helmet, and sent a 30-second clip of the massive brute aliens rising up the huge brown wall face. Enrich kept his trigger pulled, bullets flying into the beast's carapace almost uselessly; blood splattering on the dusty-brown slopes of the colossal barrier.

### Ops

"Jesus, they are smart buggers!" Chief Saldan exclaimed upon witnessing the alien structure. He sat there for a few seconds, no doubt analyzing the situation, and coming up with every strategy possible. "These bigger aliens, these

transports - why are they now only loading their troops, in the thick of the battle?" the Chief said to himself, his strategic mind brimming with activity, his eyes deep in thought. A rude, mad man he was, but perhaps the most brilliant man at Nuark, or perhaps even on Chau Sara, save another brilliant mind that inhabited Chau's largest non-Starport military installation.

"Perhaps they miscalculated the strength of our wall, in their decisive efforts, Mr. Saldan," exclaimed General Commander-in-Chief Frederick McDonnell, walking in the door at the back of the auditorium shaped Ops. "Is it possible, Mr. Saldan, to hit those transports with our anti-air turrets?" He quizzed, obviously knowing the answer, using the question as a test.

Suddenly, chief Saldan stood up, lost all anger and frustration his face, replaced by a cold serene stare. "Yes, it is sir, if we re-calibrate the turrets to fire over the wall, by equipping the missiles with short booster-packs instead of engines, ensuring they fall once outside of the walls range. A booster pack of 50 liters would have to be used, and the turrets' firing scope would have to be downed by thirty meters."

"Good work, and good thinking. Why don't you get your men doing that on the double, before they get over the wall? Do as much as you can here, and get ready for evacuation."

"Yes sir!" the Chief snapped as Frederick exited the room. "You heard him, get those turrets recalibrate to fire just above the wall!" The usual furiousness and demeanor accompanied by Saldan returned to his persona. "On the double!"

## Inner Wall

Ethan glared upwards as a monstrous creature unlike anything he'd seen before rose over the edge of the wall, floating just to his left. With a yelp of surprise, Ethan twisted his suit as to give him a firing angle on the creature, but found it moved very quickly. The thing, which he would describe as a giant floating jellyfish with monstrous arms, very crustaceous in appearance, glided over the safety wall, dominating over it, like a tank to a schoolyard picket fence. Just as Ethan re-aligned his rifle, he found himself unable to pull the trigger. Captured with curiosity, Ethan stood in horrific questioning as tendrils began uncurling from the beast's belly, revealing the now-familiar visages of the alien attackers. Just meters away, with no one between him and it, the beast 'unfurled' over ten of the deadly insect-dogs, of which quickly gained some bearings, and began running strait for Ethan.

With a curse, Ethan opened fire with all his might, slamming the metal clutch of the trigger hard against the rifle's handle. To his surprise, the monstrous brute, still hovering overhead, quickly turned and began to float back over of the wall at a very quick pace. Just as the creature reached the open, an anti-air missile flew up its rear, blowing red chunks of alien carapace in all directions, scattering and bouncing on the platform, red blood staining the grate. The ensuing shockwaves obviously caught the attacking aliens by surprise, of which all ceased running towards Ethan. When they did not, however, continue their attack, Ethan began to become skeptic of his situation. There, ahead of him were nearly ten dog-sized killing-machines, the same creatures that had killed his family, his friends, his life, and they hesitated. In fact, they very well nearly looked as if they had been frozen in time. Then, about three or four seconds after they paused, Ethan's brain clicked, and he proceeded to open a channel directly to ops.

"This is Squadron Commander Nigel Saaris, currently on the Inner Wall platform. Do you read Operations?" Nigel clearly stated his inquiry into the comm., keeping his eyes peeled for more alien transports, but only found hundreds scurrying marines filling his direct view.

"Yes, we read you, Commander Saaris. This is Officer Fogarty, please continue," the cool-edged professional voice stated, with a hint of rushing.

"Are you aware of the transportation situation with the baddies out here, sir?"

"Yes we are, Saaris."

"Are you aware that when killed, they impede the thoughts of the grunt aliens - or at least, totally stop all functioning thought within a certain number, or area?"

"No we aren't... are you saying that these transports control the smaller aliens?"

"I believe I am, Officer Fogarty"

"Cripes... stand by..."

Ethan kept his eyes locked on the scene before him, the ten aliens still frozen. Still moving, still twitching, looking around, the aliens appeared as docile as a calmed kitten. Total brain lock, Ethan thought. Further down the platform, behind swarms of firing marines, Ethan found the blurs of tens of similar transports - or lords - floating up over the edge of the wall. Deploying troops in mid-air, pouncing on the marines below, Ethan added his rifle to the fray, after quickly glancing at his ammo. Having had to reload three times, Ethan only has three clips left, and, to his opinion, he hadn't shot much yet. Suddenly, the general comm. opened up, addressing every man at the battle:

The same cool, but rushed voice of Fogarty announced a message of grand importance, and to Ethan's delight, he had the satisfying feeling of being right.

"Marines, attack the large crab-like aliens floating about... Once they are terminated all enemy brain functioning ceases. I repeat..."

Once again, like an automated assembly line, Ethan witnessed a hundred rifles swing in unison towards the skies, shooting every floating object there was, a massive blur of flying bullets and carapace dominated Ethan's view. Aided by a massive outburst from the anti-air turrets, the battle suddenly took a swing for the better. Over the next few seconds, Ethan simply unloaded his ammo into approaching lords. Over the wall, the scene of the alien masses began to disperse, siege tanks and artillery constantly barraging everything on the ground with a hail of hell itself. Another four nuclear artillery pieces were fired, their destruction scattering the alien hordes outside the wall beyond the point re-assembly. Just as Ethan thought the alien attack would break, the swarms outside no longer stretching to oblivion, the hundreds of lord flying out of no where being downed before being able to load, the attackers pulled out another, final surprise.

Much to Enrich's dismay, the lord he and his squadron had been pummeling with bullets for three minutes strait was suddenly vaporized by the interception of streaking anti-air missiles, their smoke trails slowly dispersing in the thick, hot battle air. Deeply involved in the battle, Enrich never noticed the orange gas creeping over the wall, or the huge orange fog rolling in from outside the wall. Eyes to the skies, not one soldier noticed, until those with open visors found themselves coughing on thick orange gas. Visibility was limited to several meters before anyone knew, orange fog clouding their vision, a blanket of blindness and deafness covering them all.

"What the hell is going on here?" Enrich screamed into his comm., upon witnessing a lord disappear into the fog, on the base side of the wall. "They are getting through! What is this?" To Enrich's surprise, there was no response. In fact, all comm. chatter no longer existed. He looked around, and found he could only see two or three meters around, finding fellow squadron mates talking to him, but with no sound coming through the comm. He could barely read the opposing marine's mouth, saying something like "the fog has cut all communication". Enrich began to panic, realizing how many lord must be slipping through. As his thoughts of horror progressed, attackers emerged from the fog, much to close for reaction. In a split second, his rifle halfway up to a firing angle, Enrich was knocked backwards, sliding on the grate to the inside edge of the wall. Much to most soldiers' dismay, a small rounded curb about half a meter tall was the only barrier between the inside edge of the platform and the ground of the base. A two hundred-meter drop behind directly his head, Enrich thought of the fall strait to the hard-packed dirt of the base floor. Before realization of his situation set in, a demonic creature flashed in his view, and Enrich fell. Almost a set reaction, Enrich let out a blood-curdling, but silent scream. No one would hear him; no one would see him. Blackness took hold of Enrich's world, and he fell into infinity...

"Get to the transports! Get to the transports!" was Vincent Gough screaming behind him, his visor cracked, a marriage cloth held to his face. Despite the efforts, his screams could hardly be heard. Hacksaw, directly to his left, shotgun in hand, was screaming something vulgar within his helmet, shooting into the orange brew, blurs of death just behind the smokescreen. Two four legged figures leaped from the abyss, knocking Hacksaw over, smashing his helmet into pieces, the visor shattering all over his face. The words "you want some? You want some" eerily stretched through the orange dimness, blood pouring all over the grate, Hacksaw's body and suit a disgusting melange of metal and gore. Ethan's gun

flew up, almost in slow motion, as if the fog had slowed time. He pulled the trigger, ever so slowly, letting eight rounds fly. His mind began to bend wildly as he saw the bullets, sound shockwaves ringing off of their bodies, flying through the soup. The first four struck one of the intruders, having left Hacksaw's body, shattering it's skull like a melon. The second four struck the next in across the torso, blowing it over in an alien scream, let out ever so slowly. Ethan's rifle focused on the next, and he let go to his instinct. Almost anticipating where they would emerge, he blasted down the aliens one after another, each bullet hitting the eyes of the intruders. Ethan felt almost invincible, almost able to alter the bullet's courses. He was altering their courses, but of course, Ethan didn't think of that. He kept on shooting, until a pile of dead lay in his vision, his rifle making a horrifying 'click' sound upon the entry of the next attacker. Suddenly, the words 'get to the transports' rang in his mind, and he set himself in motion. Focusing the image of the stairs in his mind, he ran into the fog unsure of where he was going. But alas, as if miracled by god, he stumbled upon the staircase, and fled downwards. All his concentrative energies were immediately focused on the ensuing staircase; its length stretching into the unknown of the orange fog. He began to run, to pounce down the stairs, his body moving faster than it had ever before, screaming down the stairs at incredible velocity. Upon reaching the bottom, Ethan mentally summoned up the image of the Nuark superstructure, calculating where to go next. After several moments of thought, Ethan decided to run strait ahead towards the East Command Tower, and seek aid within the base. As he began running through the fog, the only signal of his direction the footprints he left on the hardened dirt, he realized the staircase had been completely empty. Then, as Ethan began thinking once again of the situation, the sounds surrounding him flooded in.

Sounds of wailing, screaming, shrilling, no doubt from the invaders, accompanied by screaming, shouting, and the interminable sound of rifles chattering off fire at an irregular basis. Sounds of siege tanks deploying and undeploying, their massive guns firing in the air. The fog surrounding Ethan was alight with calls and screams of death, yet Ethan could see nothing. He continued on, running away from the sounds, between them. Just like I ran from them back home, just like I ran from them in Nuark City, just like I run from them now. We run from these aliens, we run in fear and fright. Surely they will win if humanity keeps running, our fear of the unknown taking control, driving us to the brink defeat. Faint sounds of dying marines filled his ears, siege tanks firing in unison, a rumbling basso shattering the near-silence of death. Our fear of the unknown, our human nature, will be the death of us all... Suddenly, as if coming towards Ethan at an incredible speed, the wall of the East Command Tower, octagonal and brown, much like the rest of the base, appeared before Ethan, swooping in. Ethan immediately put the breaks on his continued running, and searched the massive structure - which disappeared in his vision in all dimensions except down, where it met the ground. He walked around it slowly, keeping about 10 meters away from its featureless hard surface, as he suddenly realized the orange fog was thinning. To his sides, he could make out the silhouettes of other structures, and quickly found the outline of the large East Command Tower gate. Galloping over towards it, Ethan only found the open controls in time to witness the door shoot open, silver plating sliding upwards into the structure. Behind the once closed door, Ethan found himself staring down the Bore of a massive sniper rifle, held by a Ghost Commando, positioned at the ready, aimed strait into Ethan's head.

"Shit, you scared the bejesus out of me!" The Ghost said in a long exhale of held-up breath, his cool almost deadly voice causing Ethan think of predatory snakes.

Ethan, who had immediately brought his rifle to bear on the Ghost, began talking in strained calmness, hoping to impress the Commando. "Woah, I was about to waste you... what is going on? I've been stuck out there in this fog for quite some time, and have no Idea where anyone has gone!" Ethan glanced behind the ghost only to find blackness filling the interior of the Command Tower. It was obviously offline, and was no help to Ethan. Behind him, the fog continued thinning, and the base of the staircase to the Inner Wall platform was nearly visible.

"The command tower has been wasted, they dropped those four-legged bitches on the roof, and ate through right on top of us. We were in heavy communication with ops - they are under the same siege as everyone else, and they've locked all their doors," Spoke the Ghost, his snake voice adding grimness to the situation anew.

"What now? I've got no Idea how to get to the transports in this fog," Ethan began hastily, though he kept fear from invading his tone, "and I've got no idea if any of them are left... I fled the wall platform like a bat-out-of-hell, everyone is dead or dying-"

"Calm down, lets simply go to the transports. As soon as the fog screen arrived, the bitches dropped all over the base. From what we I could tell in the command tower, none of the transports had left because of the visibility." The Ghost

spoke with a pseudo smart-Alec-ness, only, his masked, goggled head bobbing from side to side.

"Well, it's thinning now, let's go. The transports should be over in the west half of the center courtyard, unless they've been moved," Ethan spoke into the comm., his voice sounding wise and assertive, to his liking.

"Good, lets go." The Ghost, still in the same position he had been upon encounter, stepped outside the large door and its bulk slammed to the ground. He then punched a few buttons on the control panel, and after a short series of beeps and flashing, the panel announced the door was locked. They set off, and Ethan's mind, always bored with only one task at a time, began wandering.

As Ethan followed the Commando around the freestanding Command Tower, Ethan began to remember his late high-school days. High-School, an idea taken from the ancient Earth records, had kids aged fifteen to eighteen going to a large edifice, known as an Education Centre, to learn specialized subjects, and meet others around them. Of course, for the first fifteen years of one's life, you were schooled at home, and met kids of whom lived around you. Ethan had met Enrich when he was six, because of the relatively short distance between the two of them. Once you went to High School, however you met many different people, and a lot of people who had the same interests in you. Following his dream, Ethan enrolled himself in 'Military Sciences', in hopes of becoming one of the famed Ghost Commandos, whom were renowned to use superior intelligence, knowledge and exceptional fighting skills to form an incredible sect of killing machines. Armed with the famed 25mm C-10 Canister Rifle - capable of penetrating nearly anything - and clad in one of those most expensive suits known to man - the special issue Hostile Environment Suit, some equipped with stealth technology - Ghosts performed the special tasks, the important tasks, the covert tasks. When Ethan did more research, however, he found that to become a Ghost, one must spend an interminable amount of time serving in the special-ops marine department, of who are selected from the general soldier caste. Another discovery was that only 2% of all Ghosts were selected soldiers, the rest chosen at birth, and brought up in a world where killing was the main objective. The choosing process, which was very racist and selective, had never before visited Chau Sara. Considered a backwater planet with no talent of the physic kind running in the DNA strains of its residents, the confederacy passed it up in their evaluations and searches. How disgusting, these methods of raising people to kill. Disgusting, yet effective...

After his Ghost goal was crushed, Ethan decided to go towards the Confederate Air Force, and become one of the 'fine and honorable' pilots that marked the 'upper half' of the Confederacy. The Guardians of Freedom, the Confederate called them, piloting Wraiths and Wyverns 'wherever evil lurked'. Unfortunately, when Ethan's grade-point average in his final stage of education rolled in, he found himself less than 3% below the pilot's cut of 95% percentile. And so, not to his dismay, Ethan was enrolled in the General Soldier caste, and made his flight from High School, to the Barracks. Or more specifically, Nuark military base. Because most members in the Soldier-Marine caste of the Confederate Military (dubbed CMC for Confederate Marine Corps) were renegades, criminals or rebels that had undergone the horrific 'Neural Resocialization' process, Ethan was immediately given short-cuts to attaining better ranks, because he signed up for the CMC on his own will. Some of these shortcuts included cutting the amount of points needed for promotion in half, and superiors singing him up for promotions as much as possible. So far, in his 6 months of training, Ethan had gone from Trainee, to Private, to Squadron Commander, skipping the three ranks in between, in a matter of weeks. He also wore the badge of a free-will recruit, a large black Ace of Spades painted on the shoulder of his battle suit, which immediately gave him superiority over a non-free-will recruit, no matter the rank. Here he was, after 6 months of training as a soldier, not even halfway to legally (and by the book) graduating from 'Trainee' status (despite his rank), and he was already a Squadron Commander. Facing an unknown enemy, relentless in its attack, an unyielding force of death, Ethan suddenly doubted the professionalism of the CMC, himself being at one of the highest on-battlefield ranks attainable. Ethan found a sense dark humor in the situation, and chuckled, despite his vigilant attitude.

Just ahead, the shadows and outlines of landing bays began cultivating in Ethan's vision, his wandering thoughts suddenly narrowing down on the present. While Ethan hadn't been paying much attention, he could have wagered a few credits that he had been walking with the ghost for over twenty minutes, in a sea of orange, with no sign of other structures or people, other than the faint, almost deadened sounds of death and battle. As the landing bays began to sharpen, he realized that the fog had thinned considerably, Chau's sun now easily visible, and the faint darkening of the Inner Wall clearly distinguishable far behind Ethan. As for the rest of the base's super-structure, it was all a blur of dark orange geometric shapes to either side of him, the fog masking all but silhouettes. The ghost turned towards him, a few feet in front of Ethan, and motioned him to follow. The quickly sprinted towards the left of the still-mirage-like landing bays, the eight circular structures still rather blurry in the fog. Standing at about 60 meters tall, each bay could house an entire Battlecruiser - of which never came to Nuark - or nearly twenty-four Transports, of which they were housing

now, each transport capable of ferrying over two-hundred troops across the planet. As Ethan and the Ghost - who had no trouble keeping up despite his lack of artificial enhancements - narrowed in on the closest structure, details became apparent. While Ethan had been in the base for slightly over half a year, the landing bays were in the middle of the 'off-limits' zone to soldiers, which only sunk Ethan's failure in school deeper, and Ethan had thus never seen them up close. Like gargantuan round gas containers, the eight structures loomed into view, the closest nearing perfect focus; with an orange haze covering its silver front. Ethan, and no doubt the Ghost, could make out outlines of gates on the otherwise featureless wall became apparent, and a large fence became visible on the top of the stadium-shaped exterior. Suddenly, the silhouettes of soldiers materialized in front of the two of them, rapidly closing in, and Ethan's comm. flared to life after a long period of downtime, causing Ethan to jump within his suit.

"Thank god you two are alive! Quickly, come this way!" the first figure motioned with his hand in the thinning fog, which now left an open space of twenty meters to all sides of Ethan in clear view.

"Do we know you?" the ghost asked, sounding very skeptical for a reason Ethan couldn't decipher, or at least as skeptical as his snake voice could sound.

"No, but you two are the only two we've gotten in the last ten minutes or so, come get inside-" the figure stepped into the fog and began jogging towards the gate of the closest bay. Ethan followed suit, and so did the Ghost, catching up to the figure, then keeping pace.

"How many have come back so far?" Ethan questioned as the image of the bay filled his vision.

"Only about a hundred - all at the beginning, about half an hour ago... they have already been shipped off to Djakel in 4 transports or so... it's deathly calm out there, we can't get any word out, and the soldiers we've sent out scouting haven't come back. It's like we are blind deaf, and isolated. There are twenty thousand men out there, dead or alive, and we have no idea what's going on. Every system you can imagine is shot - anything with an AI is shut down, anything involving electronics short of door access is completely off. As if they are all being paralyzed by this gas... You two are the first two soldiers to come in after the initial rush," the soldier panted, slowing down as they reached the ten-meter-wide gate on the monolithic structure. Suddenly, as if the gate's control panel controlled the weather as well as the door, the orange fog surrounding existence suddenly retracted from as far as Ethan could see, rolling away in clouds at incredible speeds, like a backwards avalanche. In a matter of seconds, totally stunned, Ethan witnessed the fog withdraw over the Edge of the Inner Wall, over a kilometer away; parallel with his view inside the landing bay. The three soldiers stood there, next to the open gate to the massive inner landing bay, capped with tens of transports and rushing officers. But, despite the spectacle in front of them, all three turned around, to look in the direction they came. The massive pressure change brought by the sudden disappearance of the gas was inane, and shook Ethan in his suit, but nothing took away from the sight laid out in front of them. As small as ants, thousands of dead soldiers piled along the Inner Wall, piled along the banks of stairs, on staircases, on the hard-packed ground near the base of the wall. Blood and metal were mixed in a deadly melange from left to right in Ethan's vision. Like a play-by-play sequence, Ethan followed the thinning lines of dead soldiers from the edge of the Inner Wall, through the pyramids of the inner-base workings, to his current position. The last dead soldier stood nearly one hundred meters away from Ethan, the closest to the landing bay. The building in between the landing bays and the wall were the same, holes and crevices marking their walls, some totally uprooted from their foundations. Smoke plummeted into the sky; pieces of metal and concrete were skewed across the flat dirt bed of Nuark, crushed soldiers and officers beneath them. The ground nearest to the wall - or furthest from Ethan - was pitch black, slowly brightening to red, and then returning to its natural dusty brown khaki color as it drew closer to the landing bay. To the right of the stairs Ethan had descended, which still remained miraculously clean, was a pile of siege tanks over fifty-meters high, totally destroyed and twisted, some still red-hot and smoldering. With the wind brought smell - and Ethan found he closing the vents on his suit - which normally blocked out all smell. The odor of thousands of burning dead and twisted metal flooded his nostrils, and singed his lungs. Ethan bent over coughing in the hot Chau-Sara sun, surrounded by dead bodies and smoldering heaps. The other two soldiers did the same, perhaps less definable by the Ghost. When Ethan returned to normal, he stood up, and looked around once more - to realize there was no sign of the enemy. None, not a body, not a bit of alien blood, nothing. Ethan was aghast, and behind him, officers within the landing bay stood the same, staring out the door, past the soldiers. Then, a title wave hit Ethan's comm.

Thousands of garbled voices broke in, their high-pitched frequencies beyond any human comprehension. Slowly the noises began to slow, and one voice stood over all. It was Commander-in-Chief Frederick, addressing in his

commanding tone as usual, "-to the transports, retreat to the transports. All hands to the transports-" then the transmission cut off completely, and his comm. went dead. All three soldiers looked at each other in confusion, then back at towards the wall. A deadly silence came over the entire base. Nothing could be heard except the low howl of the wind. Suddenly, to Ethan's left, a low metallic sound could be heard, and the sound of treads. Ethan stood and watches in curiosity as a battered siege tank wheeled around the corner of one of the shattered buildings, about sixty meters away, and stopped. All three soldiers froze, staring at the tank. Just then, the sound of creaking metal emanated from the shattered structure, and the battered door opened up, smashing to the ground unattached. Behind in, some ten soldiers slowly, cautiously emerged from the buildings depths, rifles held high on their shoulders, awaiting attack. When they caught sight of the Ethan and the ghost standing just outside an open landing bay, they visibly relaxed. Ethan saw one of the figures make a few motion with his hands, and an opera of screeching metal began. Five or so more siege tanks wheeled around corners on various buildings, and hundreds of soldiers began exiting crashing doors on six separate structures, all battered. Of which structures still remained intact, the doors opened up, and soldiers began piling out, at first cautiously, but then jubilantly. Ethan's heart raced as so did many others, and officers came running out of the landing bay to greet the soldiers. After a few minutes of this exodus from hiding, a large contingent of battered soldiers came from around the corner of the landing bay, escorting the Ops command crew, C-n-C Frederick one of them, of whom immediately entered the landing bay, out of Ethan's view. When most of the soldiers arrived and relaxed a little around the landing bay gate, Ethan's comm. opened up with hundreds of voices, all relieved, but surprised. "Holy god, I'm glad to be out of there" and, "Shit, we locked ourselves in there thinking we were the only ones left". Others directed more to Ethan were, "How the hell did you survive out here," and, "Jesus, you guys have been out here all along!"

After a few minutes of talking in the inactive base, it was determined soldiers had run inside of buildings when the fog rolled around, and had barricaded themselves inside, most buildings easily accommodating the siege tanks' bulk. However, the happy quality to the comm. began to seep away when realization set in of the situation. Fifteen thousand soldiers dead, no doubt hundreds of officers, all but six tanks destroyed, the entire base a mess. Communications HQ had been totally wiped off the face of the base, soldiers reporting a giant crater where it once was. Black humorous phrases like 'Woah, that's a lot of dead people...' and "My god... they got us good..." spouted from soldiers mouths, slowly but surely, as they stared off into the distant carnage. They stood there for minutes simply staring, and realizing just how lucky they were. Or, at least, Ethan was.

As if to break up the silence in a horrific way, shrilling noises began emanating from the far side of the Inner Wall, soldiers' heads turning in unison towards the wall. To their dismay, in the sky, were a hundred black objects, all too familiar, all too horrific. The lords swooped in at incredible speeds, over the Inner Wall to the ground. Ethan stood there frozen as he watched the first line of Lords drop to the ground, spewing their minions onto the base floor. A line of the dog-aliens began screaming towards the soldiers; their eyes locked in thirst for blood.

"Rifles up!" The Ghost standing next to Ethan yelled, his voice nearly losing it's snake-edged cool. A sea of rifles raised, a chorus of safeties being disengaged followed, metal flashing in the hot sun, the dusty brown-red sky perfectly cloudless. Once most of the soldiers, including Ethan, got a bearing on the aliens, their rifles opened up, hell on earth. Gun chatter filled Ethan's vision, his ears, and his senses. The flashing, the pummeling, the vibrations - everything consumed Ethan's mind. His bullets flew through the air, the first to strike the enemy advance, followed by a nearly visible wall of bullets. The first line of intruders collapsed, their skulls shattering in on themselves. Right behind however, was another line, and another, Lords dumping their troops closer and closer, hundreds of them piling over the wall. They started coming over the wall to Ethan's left and right, encircling, hundreds of dog-aliens scrambling to the ground, their shrills piercing the air, topped only by rifle fire. The soldiers kept firing, and ammo was running out in a matter of half-seconds, and the enemy was advancing faster than it was dying. The second pile of bodies landed a few meters in front of the last, the next twice that distance in front of the previous. This continued for almost half a minute, until the aliens were within a hundred meters of the soldiers. Ethan popped his spent ammo cartridge, than reached down on his leg, opening up the ammo storage on the battle suit. He quickly grabbed the square ammo cartridge, and slammed it up into the rifle's handle in one fluid motion, and began firing once again. His comm. then opened up, the C-n-C addressing the soldiers:

"All persons, retreat to the transports! Accord your wall placement with the landing bay number. Go now! We are blowing the base in exactly eight minutes, I repeat, eight minutes!"

Every soldier on the field heard the comm. loud and clear, turned around, and ran. Ethan did the same, remembering

how a network of tunnels underneath the ground connected each landing bay. Hesitating slightly when it came to turning his back on the advancing enemies, Ethan's ammo clip ran out, giving him all the more reason to run. Dashing through the door and into the landing bay, Ethan witnessed hundreds of men and women scurrying about the transports, their rear loading bays wide open, battle-suited soldiers pouring in like ants into an anthill. Nobody gives a damn about which number they correspond to, Ethan thought. They just run for the first one they see... no order in these humans, no discipline... Suddenly, Ethan shook the strange thoughts out of his head, and looked around for some sort of number. All over the curved inside walls, the number 1-50 was written in large blue paint. I'm A54... Ethan continued looking around the circular space, running along the edge of the wall. As he found a staircase down to a blast door that read 50-100, Ethan could hear the scream of engines behind him as one of the horseshoe shaped transports lifted from the air, swiveled, engines flaring, and shot out of sight. Just below it, the walking sea of death poured into the bay.

As reflex, Ethan pointed his rifle at the aliens now shredding through various officers near the door, their cries in vain. When Ethan slammed down the trigger, he found himself listening to the familiar but terrible clicking of an empty ammo case. Realizing his efforts wouldn't help much now, he jumped down the stairs to the blast door, and opened it up using the small square control panel to its left. The door slammed open, and Ethan exited the bay into the dim pipe-covered hallway. The blast door shut behind him, and the sounds of rifles firing and screaming ended. He ran down the dark corridor, the top of his helmet nearly smashing against the black pipes that lines the ceiling, his arms nearly scraping each side. This wasn't designed for battlesuits, he thought, or wasn't updated. Another fine example of how much the Confederacy cared. Upon reaching the other side, he found the dog-like aliens smashing through the original blast door, the sound of twisting metal echoing down the corridor. Ethan promptly stepped up the stairs in bay 50-100 (presumably bay #2), and shut the blast door. Upon looking around, he found the bay to be nearly as full as the last, Soldiers entering through the open gate to his right, a quarter along the curved wall. Soldiers stationed along the edges of the gate were firing their rifles outside at a horrendous clip, constantly re-arming, and several officers behind them supplying them with constant stream of the small boxes of joy. Ethan did not hesitate to run for the nearest open transport, of which there were only four. As he neared the open 'gang-plank', two siege tanks rolled in the now opening gate on the far side of the bay, directly across from the underground tunnel. The quickly deployed themselves behind the first row of transports - of which Ethan was entering one of them - keeping the wall of transports between the siege tanks and the gate under attack. With a slam, the gate the siege tanks entered shut, and Ethan reached the top of the boarding ramp, greeted by a tow soldiers standing on either side of the airlock into the Transport's main chamber. One of them was talking into his comm. with an assertive voice, his face masked by his downed visor.

"That's the last one coming up here now... let's go!"

Ethan watched the soldier nod a few times as he reached the door, and all three of the men stepped quickly into the warehouse-like interior, which was clustered with sitting soldiers, their visors popped up, half of them smoking cigars.

"Saddle-up, boys!" one of them cried in a scratchy voice, his hand motioning to the harnesses along the walls. An echo of 'Yessiree' and 'Whatever you say' followed; one of which came from Ethan's mouth on impulse. Half of the soldiers were already strapped into the harnesses on each side of the chamber; the rest quickly found a spot and hooked in, the harness auto wrapping itself around their suits. Ethan found a spot nearest to the entry door, still wide open, and strapped in, his muscles and weight relaxing onto the support. The door began to slowly shut as Ethan caught glimpse of running soldiers, and aliens following them, quickly overtaking the tow siege tanks nearby. With a chortle in his stomach, he felt the Transport rise from the ground, and begin to turn. Suddenly, the inertial dampers kicked in, and Ethan no longer felt any force. The door and boarding ramp now shut, Ethan should felt a slight pulse as the transport's engines shot out a burst to drive them away from the base. Nothing happened. In his visor, a small vid of the base's four main reactors - giant, featureless brown domes with four silver cylinders rising from the apexes - opened up, displaying the readout '1 minute 30 seconds until critical mass'. Shit, lets get the hell outta here...

Ethan, who far outranked most of the soldiers in the room, ejected his suit without unstrapping. After the short - but rather violent - process of his suit opening up from the chest and expelling his body, Ethan stepped out of the suit onto the deck, clad in light-blue fatigues. He then proceeded to stride - as to maintain his professionalism - to the end of the room, where the ramp to the pilot section was situated. Upon reaching the top of the ramp, about one meter above the cargo room's floor, the light door to the cockpit opened up, and Ethan stepped in, the door closing behind him. He stood on a blue-carpet platform, which then lowered down to a large area in which the pilot and co-pilot's seat was situated. In front and above him was a huge transparatum dome, in which he could see 360 degrees around, the simple but beautiful mesas of Chau Sara - and most of the interior of Nuark base - around him. Just below the front of the dome, directly in



front of him, was a large three-meter wide control panel, filled with buttons and colors that made Ethan's head spin. Taking a quick breath, Ethan stepped down next to the pilot's chair, of which the pilot seemed engrossed in fingering a yellow twelve-button keypad on his chair rather feverently. After a few moments, and realizing there was no copilot, and that the pilot wasn't going to acknowledge his existence, he began to speak, only to be interrupted by the now-aware pilot.

"Please remove yourself from my bridge, grunt." the pilot wheezed monotonically, his snotty voice enraging Ethan, "I'll not have you stinking up my bridge." The tone coming from the pilot's breath gave off the air that Ethan was garbage, an insignificant bug on a city street. Ethan retaliated with pure truth.

"Squadron Commander Ethan Saaris - inquiring where we are going, lieutenant, and why we aren't getting there?" Ethan spoke the last few words as sharp as a knife, accentuating 'lieutenant' and 'Squadron Commander'. The pilot gulped, his face boiling like a volcano, carefully re-assessing his situation. Unfortunately, he wasn't as quick on his tongue as most.

"Uh... uh, we are heading to Djakel Starport, Saaris," the pilot mumbled, staring strait ahead at the control panels before him.

"Well, what's the wait, why can't you get us out of here?" Ethan loudly spoke, itching to get the transport going, quietly laughing to himself mentally. Well, as much as one can laugh when 28 seconds remain on a self-destruct timer.

"Sir, yes sir, Sir! Sir. Djakel Starport, Sir, an eight hour flight, Sir." The pilot spoke loudly, tripping over his words, obviously caught off guard by being outranked by a grunt. He looked around on the control panel for a rather long moment, then finally 'ah'ed to himself, and pressed a button. In the view screen, the pyramidal structures of Nuark swept behind them, replaced by the blur of mesas and canyons passing under the transport at incredible speeds. "Is that all, sir?" The pilot asked making sure the 'Sir' came out loud and clear.

"No, it's fine. Maintain course... I'm going to go keep the other 'grunts' company," Ethan exclaimed with a hint of dissatisfaction, "and brace for impact -the base blows in a few minutes... I've got no idea what the minimum safe distance is, though we should be ok..." Ethan said, more thinking aloud than talking.

"I believe its Forty kilometers, Sir," The pilot mentioned hastily as Ethan spun on his heel to leave the cockpit.

"Where are we now?" Ethan inquired, still facing the exit.

"Only Twenty-two kilometers away, at about a klick a second, Sir." The pilot said hastily now fully absorbed in the control panel once more, as if it would speed up the transport somehow. Realization sunk in on both men, and sweat began pouring from the pilot's head. Ethan's hands began to tremble, very little, but they trembled nonetheless.

"Brace for Impact," Ethan exclaimed loudly into the cockpit's stale air, realizing the Critical-Mass timer was now at 5 seconds. The pilot nervously repeated the order into the ship's intercom, no doubt alerting everyone in the cargo compartment of their situation. Ethan raced up and around the 'bubble', which contained the exit door, looking strait backwards through the monstrous transparent dome, hands clasped together, firmly placed in front of his mid-stomach. With the ruins of Nuark City to his left, barely visible, and the tiny hectare that was Nuark base straight ahead, a monstrous flash filled his vision, invading his closed eyelids, showering them in white light. When the flash faded a few seconds later, a monstrous egg-shaped globule of white-hot plasma replaced the flash's focal point, expanding at a horrendous speed, vaporizing air all around its surface. Along its base was a thick ring of super-heated black ash, so hot that it warped the air around it, sucking in light and wrapping a wall of compressed gas around its edges. Just behind the wall of ash stood a knife-edged white shockwave, travelling at incredible speeds outwards, overtaking everything in its path, knocking down mesas and outcroppings as if made of flour. Ethan witnessed several tiny oval-shaped specs crashing through the air around the shockwave, tiny comets falling from a monstrous gas-giant. They were no doubt transports, suffering the fate of annihilation by their own kin. There go another six hundred people, Ethan thought, how ironic that in killing the beasts, we are so stupid as to kill ourselves as well... As if God had sent him a message to break his thoughts, the shockwave caught up with Ethan's transport. His world went white, then black, his body thrown against a hard, flat object of some kind, his limp body sliding down its smooth surface. The entire Transport buckled, it's nose driving towards the reddened Chau skies. Ethan's vision returned to normal, and the hot, white light blinked

out of existence. All that could be seen near the base was a smudge of gray gasses, slowly expanding, a large mushroom cloud in the sky, red sun rising just behind.

When it came to the interior of the Transport, he found the pilot absolutely fine, still sitting in his chair, still obsessed with the same sequence of buttons on the control panel. The vid of the cargo bay displayed fifty shaken-up people; still all strapped in, including Ethan's empty battle suit.

Encircling the 'bubble' without speaking one word to the pilot, Ethan headed towards the exit: the lack of gas and fire in the cockpit was proof enough of the Transport's hull status. He reached the exit door, and collected his thoughts.

Now, to keep myself enlightened for eight hours, Ethan thought as he stepped through the door back into the cargo chamber, and inspire these 'grunts'. Fifty battered eyes greeted him on the other side, dead stares and sleeping officers. Ethan collected his thoughts once again, and what 'speech' he was going to give fifty people who had just witnessed the deaths of fifteen thousand soldiers, or something near to that, and the destruction of their homes. Ethan took a breath, stepped down from the ramp onto the floor of the cargo bay, and began.

"I am Ethan Saaris, Squadron Commander of the Terran Confederacy"

## **Chapter 6 - Djakel Ridge**

**D**ecember 8th, 7:38 A.M.

Ethan stared out the frost-edged window to his left, desert thousands of meters beneath him stretched for miles in what was called the 'Badlands of the North'. No more than sixty kilometers from his transport's current position lay the temperate magnetic north pole of Chau Sara, and no more than three hundred kilometers after cresting the pole would one find Djakel Ridge, Chau's largest Starport, capital of the Northern Provinces. Home to well over two million colonists, Djakel was situated in one of the most strategically sound peninsula known to the Confederate. Djakel was surrounded on all sides by water, except an austere sand bar stretching three kilometers across the northern sea that connected the peninsula to the mainland of the Badlands. The island of Djakel, enclosed by a massive sharp ridge two kilometers tall that ran all the way around the peninsula, resembled a treasure amidst massive towers of rock.

Where the Ridge's seventy-five degree 'slopes' narrowed and shortened, lay the entrance to Djakel directly north of the three-kilometer neck-like sandbar that connected the fortress to the main continent. Where the ridges ended abruptly began the grassy field called 'The Gate'; a space only three hundred meters across that was the sole entrance to Djakel. On either side of The Gate, the ridge swiftly rose from the earth, like a massive fallen horseshoe planted like an archway to the north.

Within the horseshoe, the edges of the ridge once again plummeted into water, a ring-shaped lagoon that surrounded the entire inner-edge of the ridge. In the middle of this 'doughnut' lagoon lay an oval island seven kilometers across, and five wide, within the embracing horseshoe. Upon this oval island lay a wall no less than one-hundred meters tall that followed the shoreline's every curve, only discontinuing in one spot - where eighteen bridges connected the island to the grassy fields of The Gate, over the violent waters of the 'doughnut' lagoon.

Within the walls of this island lay the heart of Djakel city, an economic marvel bursting with merchants, business men, journalists, scientists, mercenaries, and most of all, military officers. What drew colonists from all over Koprulu was the guarantee that none of these pilgrims had to worry of any outside attack from rebels or native creatures, due to Djakel's natural and man-made defenses.

Foremost among the defenses of the former, Ethan noted on fly-by of the Starport, was the impenetrability of the massive ridge that emerged from the ocean on all sides. Steep and rocky, it's sharp towers and crevassed slopes surrounded the entire lagoon, in exception to The Gate. Any foreigner wishing to enter Djakel by means of land or

hover technology would be forced to approach the peninsula by means of the grassy strip connecting the peninsula to the mainland. Upon reaching the outer landmass (which was a basic ring, of which most was mostly entirely made of the ridge itself, breaking at The Gate). Upon reaching The Gate, one of eighteen bridges had to be taken across the inner lagoon to the island itself. Anyone entering the Starport via air or space was required to plot a specific entry vector into the only massive airspace gap, located directly over The Gate, with Djakel officials. If any beguiled individual craft were to enter the inner encompassment of the ridge without authorization, they would be promptly shot down by one of two-thousand three-hundred and ninety guided anti-air missile turrets embedded on the ridge walls and peaks, both on the interior and exterior of it's rocky slopes.

In case of mass hover attack, hundreds of permanent artillery defenses from the slopes of either side of the opening in the ridge directly adjacent to The Gate area would solve the problem. For backup, thousands of automated gun and RPG turrets embedded in crests on the sand-dune plains of The Gate area were also kept active.

If a threat from the stars presented itself, a multi-trillion dollar nuclear disposal laser system, connected to fifty orbital military defense satellites, and the counter-ion shield system, could provide for ample defense against anything a rebel group of space-farers willing to attack the colony could throw at them. Positioned in the center of the city were fifteen mini-nuclear artillery guns much like the four at Djakel, all able to fire over one hundred kilometers in any given direction over the protecting ridge. Situated at regular intervals throughout the city were clusters of artillery turrets, anti-air turrets, plasma shock cannons, and eight Inter-continental-nuclear-missile launchers, each equipped with sixteen missiles. If all fired at equal and corresponding areas of the Northern Hemisphere, the launchers could raze over half of Djakel's horizon into a flat, black wasteland. Djakel ridge, along with its normal accompaniment of 250,000 troops and 600 Arclite Siege Tanks, as well as over 180 Wraith-A space superiority fighters and Wyverns area bombers, was virtually impenetrable. Attacked on average thirty times per year from divisions of open-assault terrorist armies - such as the Sons of Korhal - Djakel became the most prized and wanted location in all of the outlying colonies. Also one of the most military sound installations the Confederacy had created, Djakel was bested only by select Starports and cities on Brontes, Tarsonis and Dylar IV; Not to mention being the base of operations for the Confederacy's most elite squadron, General Edmund Duke's 'Blood Hawks'.

Ethan's transport quickly drew to within a few kilometers of the cliffs of the outer ridge, turning hard to starboard, exposing the violent seacoast along the bottom of the gargantuan sheer rock wall. Water surged tens of meters into the air, white fury lashing into thousands of tide-breakers - massive tic-tacs the size of a house interlocked in a band that surrounded the better part of half the island's coast. As the transport leveled with the horizon, Ethan was left with only the sharp, jagged tops of the cliffs viewable through his window. Resembling a mountain range on itself that tipped the massive cliff wall, the great spires - if located a temperate world like Tarsonis or Char - would be covered in ice and snow, it's peaks plummeting into the super-subzero temperature range. Of course, on Chau Sara, which gained most of it's heat from air and water currents, the temperature difference between sea level and the ridge peaks was just shy of ten degrees centigrade. Despite this, the temperature atop the peaks was by no means a luxury; they cut winds off of the open sea, storming at a blinding two-hundred kilometers per hour, gusting up to three, even four hundred on unusually violent days.

Veering sharply, the transport began to drop in altitude at an incredible rate, twisting until it fell on its starboard side, turning frightfully close around the ridge wall. When Ethan's vision - and stomach - leveled, his view of the ridge wall suddenly dropped into the sea, producing a rolling plain of massive dunes and spires, covered in thousands of lines of black dots, all converging straight into the awesome huge gap that was The Gate. Refugees, waiting to seek shelter within the Starport... Ethan thought, refugees of the same damned pestilence I am fighting, the same damn pestilence we are fighting... there must be thousands of people out there, lined up like meat about to be processed... processed into the rage and fury that is our pestilence, our bringer of death...

The transport stopped its slow but driving turn, Ethan shifting his gaze towards to shiny metallic bulkheads in front of him, towards the tiny porthole on the cockpit window. Through the eye-like porthole, Ethan could see only a fraction of Djakel, his line of vision passing directly through The Gate; a blur of brown and silver, sketchy lines and scratches. He had to see more.

Ethan stood up from his position in the main cargo area of the transport, walking up the ramp to the cockpit, a few dozen slumbering marines at his back. The silver door slid open upon his approach with a hiss, revealing a few gazing marines staring straight forward, mesmerized in the epic painting that confronted them. Ethan stepped into the cockpit,

which was surprisingly brisk, his being clad only in his armor inner lining. He fixed his vision straightforward, and was immersed.

Ethan had studied the characteristics of Djakel a hundred times over in geography classes, and heard tales of its grandeur. Nothing he could have possibly witnessed short of first-person knowledge could have prepared him for this. Two massive ridge walls swooped in towards him, as if to smash him where he stood. Grandfathers of time, they stood triumphantly tall into the dim Chau sky, guardians of all that existed on this mortal plane. Between them, nestled like an evangelic cradle of Eden, was a vast rolling plain of beige beauty, parallel to the course of the transport. Following up the plain, massive shadows covered the ground as his gaze entered the protective confinements of the cliffs, the famous eighteen bridges that spanned across the doughnut lagoon - all still parallel with the transport - into a miniscule silver strip, the walls of Djakel city. Shining dwarves within the massive, craggy cliffs, they offered Ethan a quest to discover what lay within. Beyond the wall lay thousands of peaks and tips, silver, white and gray, alight with the illuminescence of all colors imaginable, arranged in epic checkers of light - no doubt massive streets - that orchestrated in beauty. Meeting the same silver wall on the far side of the island, the city of Djakel was a marvel compared to the small-town wonders Ethan had grown accustomed to. Beyond that lay the far side of the lagoon, it's green shimmering surface hinting of warm and shallow water, followed by the soaring ridge on all sides, Djakel's heavenly protector, ancient and strong.

Breaking the comfortable silence of awe and discovery that had consumed everyone in the cockpit, the Comm. crackled open, an anal robotic voice speaking loudly and clearly.

"Transport HOC1479-1846798-0067HZ5HJ, please respond,"

Upon the automated comm.'s finishing of the ridiculously-long registration code for the transport, the pilot suddenly awoke from his haze, his pasty face contorted and annoyed, holding down the round 'broadcast' button on his metallic chair's left armrest.

"I copy that, Djakel Command. Please state the directions and landing procedures for-"

"That will not be necessary, HOC1479," the automation broke in sharply, "automatic-pilot guidance is now being uploaded into your navigational computer. You have been given high-priority military clearance. Prepare yourselves for rapid acceleration and deceleration. Thank you, and enjoy your stay at Djakel Ridge Starport"

Looking rather embarrassed indicated by the dark, reddish tones in his cheeks, the pilot complied with to the automated voice with a small 'ok', pressing the 'AutoPilot' button on the holographic screen just above his knees. The transport began to accelerate, and everything around Ethan became a blur. The next image that Ethan's brain received successfully was that of the inside of a small empty docking bay, no doubt embedded deep within one of the lagoon bridge's housing terminals. The numbers HOC1479 read in large, man sized-letters on the spartan mottled-blue metal that enveloped the transport's view screen. Ethan turned on his heel rather sharply, leaving the cockpit behind him, stepping through the now-open airlock on his extreme left. The other side revealed a spartan white hallway, arrows flashing down the walls in a brilliant red, towards a large door that read 'Lancelot Bridge Entrance 67' in large, blue letters. A deadly contrast to the spec-free white of the large door, the letters were crude and seemed hand-written with some kind of viromarker. The hallway was silent except for the sounds of other marines exiting the transport behind him.

Upon reaching the door, the large, metallic frame swung outwards revealing the inside of a long, bullet shaped shuttle, rows of chairs pointed forward to a concave window that spanned around the front of the bullet. The window, tinted completely black, glistened in the light shining from six octagonal lights on the ceiling of the shuttle. Ethan walked into the shuttle and proceeded to the front, sitting down in one of eight chairs in the front row, divided into two groups of four by a wide aisle. The chairs were constructed of some cracked, leathery-rubber substance, spartan white (though stained from use), just like the rest of the shuttle's interior. On the armrests were cupholders, and a small set of complicated-looking ear plugs, sculpted somewhat like a miniature anvil. Ethan, deciding the earplugs were somekind of communication system, placed each in one ear with his trembling-from-hunger hands, having not eaten for nearly a day. Ethan caught sound of the large door shutting behind him, and turned his head to see a small sea of faces looking directly at him. The last of some ten dozen marines taking seats in the back row of what seemed to be ten rows, half of their faces alien to Ethan; obviously from a different transport, but one sharing the same origin and fate as his. Facing

forward again, Ethan felt a twinge of acceleration as a quiet, but obvious engine shrill began to shriek from beneath the floor of the shuttle, vibrating through the floor into his feet. As the familiar twinge of acceleration grew in his stomach, Ethan found his head sinking into the white, leathery head-rest that had slowly emerged from the back of the chair upon the shuttle's acceleration, it's curved crescent moon cupping his head nicely.

Suddenly, his body was thrown forward with incredible force, but was stopped a few inches from his previous position, sitting on the edge of the chair; the shuttle's internal damping had kicked in and was holding it's contents in a gravitational limbo. Ethan had just begun to settle himself back into the comfy white seat when the concave window on the front wall of the shuttle began to un-tint from black to clear. Light flooded the shuttle; dim light from the Chau Sara sunset. A large white cylinder dominated the upper-section of the viewscreen, stretching straight forward, parallel to the shuttle's movement, into a massive, glistening silver wall directly ahead. No doubt it was the once-dwarfed city wall. The shores of the green lagoon lashed playfully at its feet, a stark contrast the sharp spires that rose into the night above all. Along the curved sides of the cylinder were hundreds of white pods - obviously other shuttles like the one Ethan currently inhabited - moving at relatively the same speed as Ethan's shuttle, neither growing larger or smaller in the window's view. Arranged in a straightforward fashion, they slowly circled the cylinder, their bright white engines flashing in the receding sunlight. When Ethan focused on the cylinder, he realized that it wasn't moving at all - rather he and the rest of the shuttle was moving along it, at such a velocity that any details on the cylinder became a blur. They too, like the other pods, were revolving slowly around the Cylinder Bridge, the silver wall ahead growing larger in leaps and bounds.

White mist whisked by the window, and the shuttle began to slow. The silver wall began to dominate Ethan's vision, glaringly brightly in the dim sun. More white mist came over the window, enveloping it until all Ethan could see was faint outlines of the Cylinder Bridge, quickly fading into oblivion. The shuttle came to what seemed to be a halt, the window tinting totally black, cabin lights within the shuttle began to brighten. After what seemed to be somekind of spinning motion that traveled both forwards and down, the shuttle stopped completely, the door in the back opening with a familiar hiss. Ethan stood up, turned about, and began to walk out, his views of the exterior lost behind the heads of clumsily bustling marines.

Once outside, Ethan stopped - feeling overwhelmed - on a sort of balcony-walkway that the shuttle had exited to. Both left and right it's mottled white bodice stretched, hundreds of other shuttles docked to it. The shuttles themselves were embedded into the side of an off-white wall that soared both up and down from Ethan's position. From the safety railing a few short meters from the shuttles, Ethan could see what appeared to be several kilometers down, a massive floor, clouded with people of all sorts, large booths rising from the crowds of buzzing, milling masses. Smoke and mist hung in the air, giving the entire place a very rustic feel. Music and roaring discussion wafted up from below. Above him was a large rusty-brown dome ceiling that stretched up from the wall behind him to a huge round hole open to the now-bright semi-blue semi-purple sky above. Following the topaz curves of the dome back down, Ethan found himself returning his stare to a massive window, which spanned an entire third of the gargantuan domed area, revealing what he presumed to be the city of Djakel.

Hundreds of darkened silver buildings pierced up into the sky like evangelic needles, interconnected with thousands of tiny bridges, lines of thousands of bright dots (which were actually streams of viocars in traffic lanes) weaving patterns in the twilight skies. Where the buildings met ground existed large flat terraces, squares, parks and civilian streets, bustling with activity. Through it all, up above, the huge dark shape that was the ridge wall could be seen, it's silhouette marked by lights that ran along the inside of the wall at half-kilometer intervals. After staring at the glory that was mass-civilization for a few moments, Ethan began to center his vision on the ground near the edges of the window, what seemed to be a massive square around the base of the pyramid-shaped base of the dome Ethan was currently in. The walls emerging from the base of the dome were at such a pyramidal angle that the bases of the walls could just be seen through the massive window. It wasn't till Ethan found his way to the building's exit did he realize what covered more than half the city.

## **Chapter 7 - Of Men and Zerg**

**December 7th, 8:51 P.M.; Death Had Been Given A Name: ZERG.**

In monolithic stripes they gathered, hundreds upon hundreds of tents, hoochies, tarps, and other less-recognized forms of shelter. Huge clumps of refugees sat about in tatters; refugees from hundreds of cities, towns and camps, their souls broken, beaten, and smashed, their heads low, their honor poisoned. Commander-in-Chief Frederick McDonnell felt a sudden urge to vomit, as he stared through the side window of a VIP ViroLimo, travelling slowly through the congested Djakel streets. The sights before him were beautiful and appalling at the same time, *the juxtaposition of war*, he thought, his gaze drifting above the terrible crowds to the soaring peaks of Djakel ridge. *The juxtaposition of war, he thought, that was eons away, with no one to fight it. This war isn't war at all. It is pure arcane slaughter, with no one to help, no one to hope for. No nations riding on your back, no ultimate goal to strive for, no revenge to fill your blood. This hunt is purely survival - we, the hunted; sickly babes that have left their herd unprotected by their parents. We are weak, and thus we are weeded like the vermin we are.* McDonnell stared at the plumes of smoke that covered the horizon, visible from the sky that existed directly south, in the opening of the Ridge, where centrifuge had been sieged by the alien war machine. *They, perhaps then, are not the pestilence. By my enraged reasoning, we are a pestilence to this universe, and perhaps they have come to rid us - and existence - of our troubles.* Images of the destruction of Korhal came to mind, a world that wanted to be renewed its innocence, to leave the Confederation to pursue its people's own personal achievement. Of course, like any responsible government would, the Confederation razed Korhal, instantly killing the vast majority of its population, decimating a premier colony into wastelands of super-heated gasses.

*Perhaps we are to them as Korhal was to us - an irregularity in a conformed universe of order and paradise. False Paradise nonetheless, but seen by many as paradise. Our downfall is, most likely, the result of propaganda created by higher powers that wish to maintain the people of the false paradise locked in their self-absorbent utopia. This propaganda, aimed at the proper audience, sparked the demons that now hunt us, sent by the threatened people of the false utopia to rid themselves of our ignorant inner-utopia, which so blandly threatens theirs. Or perhaps it is simply an action created by the higher powers themselves, backed publicly by this propagation that we, the humans of Koprulu, are an infestation on their superior immortal plane. But then, do we, as the humans of Koprulu, want to continue on our evolutionary scale simply to join the false Utopia that has been created by the higher powers, or join the ranks of the dead. Should we let these demons kill us in hopes that in the after-life we may gain pardon from the higher powers, and join them in their corrupted rule of hiding the truth from others? Should we fight back, damned to eternal suffering, assuming we survive? It seems that no way anyone can look at it, we must belong to a universe of perjury, a universe of lies, a replica of our own past, present and future. Unless of course, the utopia of the higher powers is real, and we simply have to defeat these demons as proof that we are willing to join the paradise - or then again, it may be a test of loyalty to faith, loyalty to fate. To allow the demons to consume us while trusting in the powers that exist beyond our mortal realm, no doubt the creators or the enemies of these demons may inject us into utopia. Perhaps these demons are of no consequence, a space-faring race of the utopia gone bad. There may not even be powers that are above - or they have simply quit, overcome by the denizens of their false utopia upon realization that it was indeed false. The denizens of the universe now run free to do as they wish - these demons are simple one of these races, gone mad driving them to prey on the species of the less-fortunate, we humans. Perhaps they were unleashed by one of the space-farers in some war of evolutionary weapons, and have accidentally befallen on us. Or, perhaps, in the worst case, they are weapons of our own selves, experimentation gone wrong, or experimentation gone right. One thing is for certain, these aliens have a purpose, they aren't simply flora and fauna. They arrived here with a goal to kill us, and they were sent here by some power that is unimaginable to our feeble human minds. No matter, their hunt continues, whether it be a mistake, a strike, or chaos, and our survival prays on their downfall, perhaps not by our hands, but by some hands.*

Frederick's attention snapped back to the real world as the ViroLimo lurched up onto a long ramp leading into a dark garage. Out of his window, the views of the downtrodden had left, replaced by the steep edges of massive structures, all cascading towards the city's floor. Behind the limousine lay only air, the vehicle suspended hundreds of meters above sea level. Darkness fell over the black-leather interior of the car, creeping over Frederick's vision. The vehicle, nestled within the confines of the dark garage, came to a stop. The ramp that led out lurched upwards, slowly closing off all view of outside world, until it finally stopped, locking into the garage's frame. Lights switched on with a clack, both doors of limousine sliding open at once. The white lighting - ver artificial - revealed a very square garage, grey emptiness if not for the ramp leading to a blue but otherwise featureless door. On either side of the limousine's left door - that which was nearest to Frederick's comfy posturing on the rear seat - stood two Confederate soldiers, outfitted with the standard grey/blue light field armor, it's sharp angles and high shoulders glinting from the pale light. Atop those futuristic armors nestled two heads, visors drawn down, black glass revealing no emotion or sign of the human that stood within.

"Come with us," one of the soldiers ordered politely, his voice as sterile and robotic as his appearance, "sir". Frederick stood up, stepped out of the parked vehicle, and quickly strode past both men, disallowing them both confirmation and salute. Frederick joined the ranks of the ViroLimo's driver and Militia Chief Geoffery Saldan on the grey ramp, a stern look across his face. *I won't be guided around by a bunch of grunts in a Confederate installation...*

"I'm sure Mr. Saldan and I can find our way to the Operations Station, if you would allow us," Frederick spoke politely, with a no-nonsense tone, as the two men fell in behind Frederick on the ramp.

"We have specific orders to escort you and Chief Saldan to the medical facility without questioning," one of the soldiers explained, his voice losing a small fraction of its sterility to an aggressive edge, "and with due haste."

Frederick spun on his heel, his eyes staring into the speaking soldier's visor with every bit of energy he could muster after the drowsily slow ViroLimo ride. "Haste, eh? Well, in that case, private, We will follow your lead," he stated, adding extra oomph to the word private. *Perhaps I can beat the concept of rank and authority into this grunt's head with selective wording, Frederick thought sarcastically, though, he probably doesn't have the IQ it takes to understand such a complex theory as 'the man with the higher rank makes the orders'...* Stepping towards Saldan, Frederick cleared a small path on the ramp for the two soldiers to take the front. Saldan made a sneer as the lead soldier lumbered past, a full head-and-shoulders taller than all three men. Frederick fell in behind, following the soldiers to the top of the ramp and through the now-open blue door. On the other side lay a round grey elevator, and once the men had piled into its rather stale and confining structure, quickly accelerated upwards. *To the heavens, Frederick thought, to the heavens we go on our journey... the heavens, or more suitably, to hell.*

The lobby of the medical research facility astounded Geoffery Saldan; its pure white walls and floor spanning distances that exceeded most of the chambers back at Nuark. Several tens of scientists continuously exited and entered the various doorways spread evenly along the room's octagonal wall, clearly visible to both Saldan and Frederick as they sat on waiting chairs by the main entrance. It seemed that the two commanding men at Djakel - Mayor Pierre LaHave and General Edmund Duke - were currently being sterilized in an adjacent chamber. For what, the medical secretary had not told either Frederick or Saldan, even after repeated questioning. Nor had she told them why the mayor had left specific orders for them to wait in the lobby.

When three doctors jogged across to Saldan from the door labeled 'STAFF ONLY', and asked both him and Frederick to follow them through into an area of the facility marked by hazard signs and spartan clean hallways, Saldan only grew more frustrated and confused. After being sterilized - a process which involved stripping down to undergarments, standing in a strange green shower of cleaning liquids for 30 seconds (which left burning sensations all over the skin), and suiting up in an awkward and large environmental suit - Saldan and Frederick were guided through a series of airlocks into a medium sized operating room. Jumbled with equipment and very expensive-looking technology, Saldan noted that the room was centered on a large, sloped, round table. It was on this table - surrounded by General Duke, and another, smaller person in a bio-suit, presumably a doctor - where most of Saldan's attention was attracted. Its chest ripped open, a massive alien, unlike any Saldan had seen yet, lay on the table, and its brown spine-like tail sloping onto the floor.

At first, Saldan was hesitant to advance any further than he currently stood. A wave of pins and needles washed over his scalp, making his dark thin hair seem to pulse with electricity. Tubes of all colors and sizes ran the from spots along the room's wall across the white floor, and up nearly two meters to the top of the massive, round table. There, they connected in no simplistic pattern to a number bulges along the table's edge, pulsing with liquid. Atop of the table, the alien lay strewn; a brown mass of angles and curves. Its head, emerging from an very slender, thorn shaped torso, resembled that of an ancient earth horseshoe crab, long an expanding to its spiny end. The alien's face was like a warped human skull, with deep-set black eyes, bony ridges ridiculously long teeth. The rest of the body was no less satanic. Arms the size of a man's leg emerged from the torso, brown and ridged, a massive spike replacing where a hand should be, a praying mantis' killed scythe. Cupping the torso - just below the scythes - wrapped two rib cages, covered in a tough green layer of leather-like skin, pulsing in and out like lungs. Below the cages, the alien's tail emerged - no legs - thick and powerful, brown on top with a paneled, beige bottom; a massive evangelic snake. At its end, a massive spire of claw and bone protruded, twisting in a cone of sharpness, its end covered in blood. The entire creature pulsed in a slow rhythm, as if breathing. Hissing sounds emerged from small holes along its back, next to ridge of protruding

bone that ran the entire three-meter length of the beast. Saldan had seen horrific monsters before, but this creature was unprecedented. A true demon, its eyes slowly glowed red, then dimmed once again with every pulse of the beast's body. A wave of nausea swept from Saldan's feet up, as the fact finally clued into his brain that the thing was still alive. Saldan could only stand and stare at the creature, unable to move even an inch from where he stood.

"It seems our friends from Nuark have finally joined us, doctor," came from General Edmund Duke, his snake-like voice insidious even in person. "Why don't you join us, Commander Frederick, and... and..."

"Saldan, General Saldan," Saldan replied eagerly, still frozen solid to the floor of the chamber's doorway.

"Ah, general Saldan. I'm very sorry, I did recognize you through my suit's visor, here," Edmund said in his slow rasp, tapping his visor. "Feel free to join us here at the table - it's quite a view. Hop on one of the platforms over there," Edmund pointed to three more hydraulically attached platforms, extending from the center of the table on long, square arms.

"A sure thing, General," Frederick replied, sauntering over to the platforms, no longer affected by the beast's presence. With a surge of courage, and a relaxing exhale through his mouth, Saldan followed the Commander onto his own platform, boots clanking on the metal floor. Saldan pushed the flashing red button on the platform's waist-high console, the only button that was illuminated. The platform quickly elevated to level of the table, where the entire beast was easily visible. The platform then neared the beast on its hydraulic arm, placing Saldan's platform in a circle around the table with the others. The beast's front chest was slowly being cut down the center by a large robotic appendage extending from a circular pod on the ceiling, a cutting laser extending from its end. The arm was being controlled by - from what Saldan could tell through the visors on his and her suits - a young attractive doctor, of about a meter and three-quarters tall, standing on a platform directly across from Saldan's. Intense concentration of the cutting task virtually beamed from her eyes to the beast, her hands grasping the small joystick-like controller on her console.

Edmund, from his position at the head of the beast, looked from Saldan to the young doctor, then back at Saldan, his voice penetrating through the suit's communications system: "This is one of our newest additions here at Djakel, Doctor Kimberly Versos. She recently finished her doctorate here in the field of Extra-Terrestrial Biology, and is an accomplished-"

"Done," the young doctor interrupted, looking up at the men from her task, having switched off the laser cutter, as if emerging from some other dimension. She quickly realized that the General was speaking, muttering a profanity to herself. "I'm very sorry, I was concentrating-"

"No apologies necessary, Dr. Versos. I believe this operation should be a... learning experience for all of us," Edmund broke in, his voice strangely inviting, despite its serpentine quality. "Now, shall we proceed with the operation?" Edmund stated in a more serious tone, turning his head through the visor towards Saldan and Frederick.

"By all means, continue... we do not mean to be a hindrance to your... operation here, General," Frederick replied in a very sincere tone, obviously manufactured as to impress those of higher command.

"Nonsense, you aren't hindering anyone here, I hope," Edmund laughed, an unnatural grin spreading across his face, the skin on his bald head wrinkling. "Dr. Versos, please continue,"

The doctor gave a small nod through her visor, locking her vision once again on the creature. A small six-fingered cone-shaped silver probe emerged from the large robotic appendage hanging over the beast's chest. Slowly winding towards the beast, it emerged about 3 feet, a tiny shrill emerging from the motor, somewhere within the appendage. Upon reaching the beast, the three fingers opened suddenly, the clash of metal ringing in Saldan's helm.

"We call it 'Hydralisk'," Edmund explained proudly. "A few of our men picked it up in Centrifuge earlier this morning, and brought it here. We never had a chance to dissect one of them during the Flannum installation ordeal last month..." Saldan glanced over at the General, a huge grin stretching from ear to ear, his eyes enveloped in demonic curiosity. "Magnificent, isn't she?"

"Quite," Frederick replied sardonically, obviously disgusted by the beast's presence. "In case you had failed to notice,



General, this thing's brothers and sisters - if they have sexes at all - have slaughtered several million people in the last three days," Frederick began to raise his tone, Saldan sensing scores of strains of anger and loss in his voice, "and quite frankly, the prospect of-" Frederick cut off, interrupted by the flapping noise of the beast's rib cage ripping open. Spasming slightly in his suit from the shock, Saldan's eyes quickly returned to the beast, its entire rib cage opened by the robotic arm - who's fingers now spread nearly six feet in a circular pattern, holding the rib cage open at the edges - in a brown butterfly of monostrosic proportions. Within the chest was what frightened him the most.

Row by row they lay, ranging from an inch to two feet in length. Spears forged in hell itself; hundreds upon hundreds of them emerging from the creature's ribs, covering the majority of the inner torso in the satanic pelt. The spines pointed down the body, streamlined; closely matted to the animal like a porcupine's coat. Each of the things began with dark crimson hue near the base (of which was not entirely visible due to the concentration of spikes) and slowly developed into a tan-colored brown similar to the beast's hide. At the tip of each spike was a tip so finely sharpened that it seemed they simply tapered into nothingness. On the tip, the color became deep acidic green, hinting at some sort of alien poison. Saldan's heart was all he could hear, beating violently, reverberating through his suit.

"Are you getting this on tape, doctor?" Frederick stammered nervously, swallowing loudly at the end of his question. The doctor, looking more intrigued than frightened, nodded sharply, her intense eyes locked on the beast. Fingering a few controls on her platform's panel, she resumed control of the massive appendage, which now revealed a smaller human-hand shaped tool emerging from the center of the rip-spreading robotic hand. The hand slowly emerged down towards the sea of spikes below, and stopped near the tip of the area where the largest spikes were located. The hand opened up, positioning its fingers as to grasp one of the spikes - and more obviously - to rip it from its host. Saldan's heart beat louder. A drop of sweat rolled down his face. Edmund sniffed through his half-slogged nose, the mucus forced back up into his Eustachian tube, where it would reside for the next several hours, infecting his hearing system with hundreds of types of bacteria and virii, until beginning the slow decent back down towards his nose cavity.

The hand was about one inch from its intended target spike, Dr. Versos consumed by her task. Saldan cleared his throat, forcing mucus up his windpipe and into the tonsil area of his mouth. A bead of sweat mostly comprised of salt water, squeezed out through a sweat gland opening on Frederick's oily forehead, rolling down his moist cheek, leaving a trail of bacteria and skin oil behind it. If left unclean, the trail could ignite into a terrible skin infection within a day or two; a ridge of pus-filled acne blisters and blemishes, boils and warts, hamlets anything infectious, white, and bulbous as they are.

The hand grasped with all five fingers, converging on one point, pinching the spike with incredible force.

A single of hair fell from Dr. Versos's head, a pool of dead cells and living bacteria floating through the dry air; a wasteland for microscopic vultures, micro-organisms and insects, their eggs embedded into its sides. The creature before us has no such corruptiveness, she thought. The robotic hand pulled slightly, its motor purring. No effect. The hand pulled again, harder this time, in accordance to Versos's control. Still no effect. The hand then moved itself down the shaft of the spike, until the palm touched the tip of the spike. Upon this contact, every spike on the beast suddenly erected itself straight up, a sea of movement. All four men - and woman - jumped slightly, Saldan gripping the side of his platform's console.

"What the-" Duke questioned, confusion and caution running through his tone like blood through a vein. A green liquid began to fizz up from the bases of each spike, bubbling and chortling, growing louder with every passing second. The beast's rib cages pivoted up towards its head sharply, and its eyes turned bright red all at once, a strong, snappish exhale of air coming from its skeleton jaws. Its arms closed up next to its body, as Saldan pushed the 'emergency exit' button on his console hastily, in reaction. The beast's tail flew up sharply, grasping the entire massive robotic arm extending from the ceiling. With a few sparks and a snap, the robotic arm was severed at its midpoint, wired dangling. The arm crashed down to the side of the table, a shower of sparks raining upon the floor. A claxon immediately went off within the chamber, large red lights penetrating Saldan's vision.

"Run!" Versos shouted over the comm. Saldan looked up from his console just enough to see all three other platforms quickly rearing back from the table, visions of fear stricken across the others' faces. Suddenly, unprecedented, the sea of spikes in the creature's chest launched out of its torso in an orgy of green liquid, flying in all directions at supersonic speed. Blackness enveloped Saldan's vision, pain searing through every nerve on his body. And thus, he fell into the void of nothingness, his moment come and gone.

## Chapter 8 - Augustus

December 8th, 10:58 P.M.

Ethan's pupils shrunk down into small, focused dots almost on command as Sanchez's snapping fingers brought his drifting mind back to the present. Sitting on high stools positioned opposite from each other at a large, round, teal table, the two marines sipped noiselessly on their drinks. Sanchez, his facial features accented by the lounge's dim overhead lights, was vibrant and energetic as always despite his current medical condition – 8 shattered ribs - his crystal blue eyes piercing his surreal dark skinned face. Ethan, on the other hand, was drowsy, and beginning to feel the 'buzz' effect of his dry, shaken martini. The murmur of voices in the busy, hazy outpatient's lounge was just loud enough to make the smallest actions inaudible: Ethan's graduation ring dinging on the martini glass's tall stalk, Sanchez's dark fingers running over his Velcro-like crop. Soft Jazz from ancient Earth days could be heard playing over the buzz of conversations, the [music](#) emitting from an environmental audio system that actually turned every solid object in the room into a sort of speaker. The system was not problem-ridden, however. Often the bass on various recordings would match the 'breaking point' frequency of large glass objects in the lounge, causing them to crack without warning. Thus, all large glass objects from this particular lounge – 'The Smokey Pharaoh' - had been removed and replaced with plastics.

"So what are you gonna do, man?" Sanchez inquired enthusiastically. Ethan remained locked in a focused stare on Sanchez's eyes. All of a sudden, he shook his head slightly as to refresh his mind, placing the raised martini glass back down onto the table.

"Huh? About what?" Ethan was still recuperating from his apparent brain lock, unaware of what they had been discussing earlier.

"About... well... this!" Sanchez replied, his facial expressions changing from quizzical to outright frustration, spreading his hands palm up, his shoulder tight against his body, in reference to their surroundings.

"This... if you mean our situation," Ethan replied calmly, still unsure of what Sanchez was referring to, "then I have no idea what I'm going to do. Stick it out with the confederation, I guess... get some high-end cushy desk job where I can really make a difference. And, if you're talking about what I'm doing here," Ethan said with a bit of anticipation, mimicking Sanchez's hand-arm gesture, "Apparently I'm just having a couple drinks."

"Yeah," Sanchez replied, nodding his head slowly, staring over Ethan's shoulder, "sounds like a plan..." Sanchez's voice trailed off as Ethan turned to see what he was staring at. With hands on hips, legs crossed and elbow leaning on the side of the bar, the 'thing' Sanchez was so interested in was an average-height young woman, with slightly Italian features, a voluptuously sexy body – by Ethan's account – and shoulder-length wavy brown hair. Ethan took a good look at her, then turned back to face Sanchez, who immediately returned his gaze towards Ethan.

"Whew, she's a fine one, Ethan... a *damn* fine one," Sanchez said, following up his sentence with a long drink from his tall blue glass, returning his equally blue eyes to the Italian over Ethan's shoulder.

"Why don't you go but down the 'Sanchez Charm' you always tell me about-" Ethan began to suggest sarcastically, when Sanchez suddenly waved his hand above his head, still looking over Ethan's shoulder. The waving action was easily recognizable as the universal gesture for 'please come join us'. Ethan let out a groan, foreseeing a social disaster, and turned himself on the stool to face the coming guest. The Italian, walking over with a sense of sophisticated grace in a short flowing red flowered dress that clung closely to her curved body, retained a cool look of objectivity on her face. Her gaze was set firmly on Ethan's eyes. Unsure of what to do, Ethan searched blindly around for his drink behind him on the table, finding its cool smooth and taking a long gulp of the drink surface just as the Italian reached their table.

"Good evening miss," Sanchez began to say in the most serene and charming male voice he could muster, "we just

noticed you arrived without company, and would-"

"Are you Ethan Saaris?" the woman interrupted, crashing Sanchez's show of 'cool' into the bellows of hell.

"What?" Ethan stammered, putting his glass down with a small slam, totally surprised by the woman's question. The martini still burned in his throat. "Yeah, that's me," he managed to stutter out, his eyes glancing about the room, avoiding making contact with the woman's.

"Sorry to surprise you like this, but I recognized you from the debrief issued to the chief science staff here at the Starport..."

"I'm in a debrief issued to the *chief medical staff*?" Ethan questioned suspiciously, with a hint of surprise. "And aren't you a little young to be on the *chief medical staff* anyway?"

"Ahem," the woman spoke exaggeratedly, "I'll have you know I'm the co-chair of the entire medical staff here at Djakel, *and*, that you *are* on the Nuark Military Base Scientific debrief – for having discovered the Overlord complex. Now, if you don't know what that is, then perhaps I have the *wrong* Ethan Saaris." There was a hint of frustration and annoyance from her last few words. She did, however, keep a smile on her face. Ethan decided to mend the situation.

"Oh, I'm very sorry, I just don't see scientific staff nor do I appear in debriefs very often... please, have a seat," Ethan gestured to the stool next to him and Sanchez – of whom was still transfixed on the Italian, "and do tell us your name."

"Dr. Kimberly Versos, Mr. Saaris, though my friends simply call me Versos," she replied, accepting Ethan's offer to sit down. Here every move seemed planned and practiced, graceful and perfect. "And you are?"

Enrich snapped out of his dreamy delusion. "Oh! Enrich Sanchez, at your service. Most people call me 8-ball though, miss," Sanchez spoke oddly, beginning first with obvious startlement then slowly assuming his charming facade, smiling from cheek to cheek. "I never supposed the co-chair of the Djakel medical staff would be hanging around an outpatient lounge, but I guess there is a first for everything," Sanchez trailed off, as if his last comment were an afterthought not meant to be spoken aloud. He quickly re-affirmed with blatant boasting, using the largest words he could think of: "They call Ethan and I the E-Team, due to the superior nature of the first digits in our divine God-given names!"

"Is that so?" Versos asked playfully, obviously aware of both men's social shortcomings when dealing with the opposite sex, "You boys must not be from the neural re-socialization then, are you?"

"Nope," replied Ethan happily, eager to dispel any thoughts of him or Sanchez coming from the Confed rehabilitation program, "we are just normal human beings who like to kick a little ass now and then," he thought up something clever, "as I'm sure you like to break down a few chemicals now and then."

"Oh, we do much more than break down chemicals on the medical staff, Mr. Saaris," Versos replied, her lips curving upwards in a sassy smile, "As for marines, unfortunately, I'm afraid you guys don't get out much."

Breaking the three officer's playful conversation, a loud beeping klaxon emerged from the breast pocket of Ethan's jacket. Ethan quickly reached into the pocket, squeezing the coin-shaped pager with his thumb and forefinger. The sound promptly stopped. *Not now*, Ethan thought, *not when things are going this... well, comfortably...*

"Have you managed to catch any of the *things* for dissection?" Sanchez asked, a strange change of subject that didn't seem to fit. *He probably has some kind of plan to lure her in to bed... who knows what the aliens have to do with it...*

Versos suddenly became serious, the smile wiping off her face. She brought her right hand up to cover her mouth as if in deep thought – and, for the first time, Ethan noticed a series of small grooves in a striped pattern all down her arm. After a few moments of thought, Ethan realized the grooves were indeed the after-effects of hypergenetic-growth, a method used by medical staffs to regrow lost flesh by cloning cells from surrounding flesh in a matter of minutes. Versos' grooves looked very fresh as well. For a few seconds, the three of them just stood there, eyes cold and motionless, Versos' brow slowly furrowing into a frustrated, questioning look. Ethan was about to change the subject

once again, when his pager rang once again, several times louder than the first.

"Hold on," Ethan said nervously, fumbling to get his coin-sized pager out of his jacket. When he finally managed to get a hold of the thin flashing red disc – which had wedged itself in the pocket's inner-seam, he pulled it out and squeezed it in-between his fingers, ending the embarrassingly loud klaxon. A hologram quickly appeared above the disc, which Ethan set on the table, reading:

DEPARTMENT OF SECURITY AND DJAKEL DEFENCE

EMERGENCY – CODE AUGUSTUS

REPORT TO A16 DJAKEL DEFENSE BRIEFING HQ IMMEDIATELY FOR GROUND ZERO BRIEFING

A wave of nausea quickly flowed through his system. Code Augustus, as they had been trained in the short while he had been in the CMC, meant the total withdrawal from Chau Sara in the face of a planetary-scale invasion. Ground zero, the last point of standoff before leaving the planet in its entirety, depended on the situation. In their current dilemma, Ground Zero was Djakel. A16, the code-name for a mass-Briefing of all commanders of any squadron, garrison or brigade, referred to the main briefing complex in the Djakel Defense headquarters in the middle of the city. Something big was about to happen, something disastrous. Ethan could feel it.

*The enemy was upon them.*

Ethan quickly got up from the table, exchanged confused glances with Versos – who looked very surprised at the message – and Sanchez, who looked more calm than surprised. Sanchez was never one for military code – he preferred he be told straight up what was going on. Ethan took the initiative:

"Something's brewing – I've got to get to the briefing over at the DD HQ... Stay here, and don't break another set of ribs while I'm gone."

"Sure thing boss", Sanchez replied coolly, with a hint of concern in his eyes. Versos was muttering several profanities under her breath when Ethan slid the pager off the table and into his hand. "It was nice meeting you, Dr. Versos," he said as nicely as he could, waves of nausea still rushing over his system, "but I really must go"

And with that, Ethan strode out of the lounge's transparent sliding doors, pager in hand.

**December 9th, 12:01**

**CENTRAL BRIEFING ROOM, DJAKEL DEFENSE HEADQUARTERS**

Corporal Vincent Gough walked through the massive entrance that connected the Djakel Defense headquarters Main Hall to the Central Briefing Room, along with some fifty other commanders like himself. Perhaps the largest and most crowded briefing room he'd ever been in, the Central Briefing Room resembled a small sports stadium; rows and rows of seats arranged in a massive ring, with a monstrous platform in the center, covered in displays of all kinds. The shallow domed roof of the auditorium was a mass of structural supports that stretched up towards the center of the ceiling, where 4 massive screens – they must have been several stories tall each – were suspended, one screen facing each side of the square auditorium. Vincent had, apparently, walked in right just as the briefing began, the screens filling up with the image of a thin, hawkish-featured man with black hair – Pierre LaHave, Mayor of Djakel. Vincent quickly began to stride down the aisle he had entered on, finding an empty seat in the relatively crowded arena. The audience quieted as LaHave began to speak, and Vincent sat down, focusing all his attention on LaHave. A booming voice filling every corner of the auditorium, and a sudden silence came over the some 10 thousand commanders present.

"Good evening gentlemen. We are currently under life-threatening circumstances which threatens all of our lives, so I will make this as objective and calm as possible." *The pressure on LaHave must have gotten through to his speech-*

*giving skills*, thought McGough.

"At about 0400 hours on the 6th, wraith patrol Bravo IV encountered a large buildup of non-terran frequencies emerging from space directly above the South Pole. They sent Space Station B a coded transmission with copies of the frequencies – which matched no frequencies ever used by the Confederation – and stated they were going in to investigate. We never heard from Bravo IV again.

"By 0700 hours, all communications with every city in the Southern Hemisphere of Djakel had been lost to every space station and military base. No evidence of conflict was heard – all communications were simply cut. Orbital installations could find no evidence of any crisis from orbit, because a good majority of the South was wrapped in the blanket storm that has been going on since the 3rd of this month. The only cities viewable from orbit were on the far side of Chau, revealing only blackness – no life, no lights. Nothing. When three other Wraith patrols went missing over the 60th parallel, Department Heads and Magistrate Collins, who is unable to join us due to an injury sustained yesterday, seeing this as an interplanetary crisis, sent message to Tarsonis and Mar Sara requesting military assistance. No sign of any hostile or foreign objects could be registered on all sensor sweeps of Chau or proximity space from Djakel. At approximately 1200 hours, the Chau Sara Communications Bureau received reply from Tarsonis Central Confederation Command stating a fleet of 128 warships and eighteen CMC garrisons was being sent from exercises near Korhal, with an ETA of midday on the 9th. Mar Sara also replied shortly after, sending a fleet of 10 BattleCruisers and assorted warships to our assist, ETA 1930 hours that night.

"Soon thereafter, all communications with orbital facilities in the south sectors was lost, as well as an expeditionary force of 5 warships sent from the Central Command Space Station. All sensor sweeps revealed absolutely nothing in the Southern Hemisphere – no objects of any kind whatsoever – not even floating space junk or energy residue. At this point, we determined our sensors were being blocked.

"Around 1900 hours, Chau Sara Communications Bureau received mayday cries in text format from 17 of 20 orbital stations in the Northern Hemisphere, excluding Space Stations A, B and Central Command. The enemy was described as flying demons, with arms and teeth. No contact was re-established with these bases, and sensor sweeps still revealed nothing.

"By 2000 hours, the reinforcements from Mar Sara had not replied, nor was Mar Sara replying to any of the Bureau's hails. Some kind of mass jamming had – and has - severed all communications outside of Chau Sara. Contact with Space Station E was then re-established, the only surviving station south of the 60th parallel on the Northern Hemisphere. The invaders had withdrawn into the shrouded space to the south. It seemed we had been given some time to get a handle on the situation. At this point, only 18 of Chau's 32 BattleCruisers remained, and less than 20% of our total space forces remained. Over the evening, contact with 13 minor cities below the 45th parallel was lost, ending before 0130 hours. The military was reeling from the invader's lightning strike attacks, and most withdrew to Nuark and Centrifuge.

"It wasn't till yesterday morning that we heard of the enemy again, at approximately 0330 hours, when the major cities of Nuark, Denhague, Centrifuge and Tripoli were sieged and consecutively. By 1530 hours yesterday, both Centrifuge Military Base and Nuark Military Base had fallen to the invaders by means of mass land attack, as well as smaller towns all along the 45th parallel. Over 980'000 people were killed in these attacks, and near to 25 million have gone missing and presumed dead since the 6th. Currently, all contact with cities outside of Djakel has been lost and only Central Command Space Station remains, directly above our North Pole. All attempts to mass nuke the Southern Hemisphere or shrouded sections of space have been presumed failures. Any aircraft or missile sortied in these areas simply ceases to exist upon entering zones of negative sensor activity, with no signs of radiation or nuclear explosion. The only mass-destruction attempts that have worked to some extent are the lackluster bombing of and self-destruction of military bases that have been attacked so far. While this does seem to destroy mass amounts of the enemy, their advance has not hesitated. All bombing attempts on behalf of Djakel since yesterday have ended in failure – for either our aircraft is shot down, or the enemy cannot be sighted within their fuel range. The enemy remains extremely deceptive, despite having massive recorded ground and air forces.

"One hour ago, a Wraith patrol headed by Lieutenant Pierre Nikolov sighted a massive column of hostiles headed this way. They will be arriving sometime tomorrow morning. As we speak, every Wyvern bomber we can equip with remaining nukes is being sortied against the now-spotted enemy, and our entire nuclear arsenal – eighty 2 megaton

devices on short-range ballistic missiles – is being fueled and prepped for launch. They will be fired in a circle around Djakel and the North Pole, at the approximate positions the enemy columns are expected to be entering. This process will be complete in several tens of minutes, and is an attempt to disable the enemy forces to the greatest extent possible before they reach Djakel.

"As for you, all squadrons must assume the defensive positions as disclosed in the documents given to you upon leaving by 0230 hours tomorrow morning. Failure to do so could mean the overthrow of Djakel and the loss of Chau Sara to the enemy. Also attached is an overview of the defensive layouts that we will be exhibiting within the next 5 hours. Feel free to make any comments to the Communication Bureau across the street.

"That is all. Good luck, and Godspeed. This is a war of survival folks – lets survive."

The buzz of conversation returned over the auditorium, as the screens became black once again. Vincent got up from his aisle seat and began to stride up towards the exit to the Main Hall, where several baby-faced officers were handing out disc-sized holographic pads. Vincent took one from the nearest officer upon reaching the exit, quickly pressing its center access button. A small punch-number button pad was projected near Vincent's waist, in which he entered his 18-digit identification number, while walking towards the elevators on the far side of the Main Hall. Schematics of blockade wall partite 18A, deep within the virtual fortress of the gate, popped up in front of him as he reached the elevators, along with a list of the twenty-four marines under his command. Vincent let out a deep breath – not sure if it was anxiety or stress relief or both, and entered the near-full brass elevator. Turning around just behind its doors, he took a good look at the Main Hall – bright and colorful, its soaring roof, huge tapestries and Romanesque columns that dwarfed even the grandest of palaces in Nuark.

*This plan better damn well work*, Vincent thought, the shiny brass doors closing just in front of his face; he stared at his reflection a moment; curly red hair, sharp jaw line, mellow brown eyes, *or this could be the end of Vincent William Gough...*

## **Chapter 9 - Ground Zero**

**D**ecember 9th, 3:38 A.M.

**BUNKER NR85**

Ethan crouched low to the steely ground, relieving his aching leg muscles of any sort of work. The effects of lack of sleep were beginning to set in on Ethan; he could barely keep his eyelids open and the world around him seemed as if on the wrong end of a telescope. The only thing keeping him conscious at all was the regular adrenaline and caffeine shot his battle suit was administering to him regularly through his blood stream. Glancing from left to right, Ethan re-evaluated the scene before him for the hundredth time. The Chau Sara sun, a good half-hour from rising over the eastern horizon, to his left, was beginning to show signs of light, refracting onto the shimmering North Chau Sara Sea that encompassed the Ridge. The bunker view port gave Ethan view of everything in a 360-degree circle around him, interrupted only by the bunker's domed transparent roof supports that stretched up across the view port's corners. Above Ethan's head existed a huge spider-like mechanism built into the roof, with hundreds of black metallic legs jutting out from a central body. The mechanism was normally used to house an anti-aircraft gun, but was currently empty.

Unfortunately, none of the other three Marines assigned to Ethan's bunker had arrived yet, nor had the weapons the bunker required been delivered yet. The Bunker, Bunker NR85, was located on the top of a spiral peak along the North Side of the Ridge. Well over five kilometers above sea level, jumping out of the north or south side of the bunker, if Ethan chose to do so, would mean plummeting the full five-thousand five-hundred and forty meters down and crashing into the waters of either the North Chau Sara Sea or the Djakel Lagoon depending on which side he jumped out of. That is, if Ethan wasn't skewered or bashed to death on the Ridge's gradually sloping faces. To the east and west sides of the bunker – parallel with the Ridge - were the few meters that remained of the top of the spiral not covered by the bunker's base. After those few meters, the spiral suddenly became an 105 degree rock face that descended some one-hundred meters towards a canyon of sorts on either side of the vertical ridge wall, than back up another spiral tower towards the next bunker. Only in few spots did the top edge of the Ridge actually level out so a man could walk from one bunker

placement to another.

Directly in front of Ethan (albeit several kilometers down) the North Chau Sea spread in a shimmering carpet of waves for several hundred miles, over the North Pole to the shores of the continent on the opposite side of Chau Sara from Djakel. Turning one-hundred and eighty degrees, Ethan faced directly south, revealing a good portion of the rustic Djakel Starport. Ethan clambered towards the bunker window railing, which was about four feet off of the bunker's grated floor, giving him a better view to the spectacles to the south. Below him and the bunker's edge, the Ridge's cliff sloped out – a dark mass of what seemed to be angles and protrusions, until it descended directly into the green, murky and polluted Djakel Lagoon. Within the city, even from this height, Ethan could make out thousands of virocars – mere blips of light – zooming around between the city's dusty grey skyscrapers. Ethan identified some structures he had visited the day prior: The Central Intelligence Bureau, a massive shimmering egg; The magnificent Chau Sara Museum, a wavy oyster-shaped building; The Djakel Medical Facility and the Djakel Defense headquarters existed next to the CIB, massive brown pyramids recalling the Egyptian ruins of Ancient Earth. Ethan held his gaze in wonder. The ever-present Ridge, which he could make out easily spanning to his left and right, enclosed the city like an oyster's pearl, until the ridges sloped down into the dunes of the plains where the Gate lay. A grid of bright lines, no doubt gun emplacements and tanks awaiting the oncoming invasion, graphed the Gate's doorstep. An oncoming invasion which would surely destroy all this beauty, this cradle of civilization. Perhaps humanity wasn't as bad as Ethan had thought.

Through the Gate existed nothingness – plains of desert that spread for thousands of kilometers until a traveler would hit Nuark, or Centrifuge. And somewhere between Djakel and those two cities existed the massive Alien army, slowly approaching.. On the horizon Ethan could see flashes of light by the hundreds, like some far-away lightning storm. In reality, it was a nuclear storm, the final attempts to discourage the enemy from assaulting Djakel.

Ethan jumped in his armor, swirling around on his heel to see the round sewer-like door located on the floor in the center of the bunker slam open. An armored hand swung up and grasped the edge, and a marine in full light-armor hoisted himself up out of the hole. The light armor, or CMC-300, provided much more mobility than the medium CMC-400 armor the CMC normally used for heavy engagements. Elevating the wearer by a mere 20 centimeters, versus the near half-meter of the 400, the 300 series Powered Combat Suit were a heavier but less advanced version of the Ghost's Hostile Environment Suit. A fully rotational helmet with a rubbery, flexible neck area gave the suit a distinctly agile look as well as having body armor that wrapped closely around the skin. The liabilities of the suit ran from mediocre hydraulic movement aid – making carrying around Impaler Rifles a chore – to not-so-great protection, and a much lengthier equip time. It was, however, Djakel policy to equip anyone in a barrack outside The Gate with the 300's; they did provide full-life support and Nuclear/Biological/Chemical shielding.

Popping off his helmet, the young soldier – probably the same age as Ethan – revealed fiery red buzzed hair and piercing blue eyes. A square, clean-shaven jaw classified him as a Private (it was against regulations for Privates to grow any type of facial hair and had to keep their heads buzzed to a minimum crop). The soldier stood up to full height – towering at well over six and half feet – and saluted Ethan, his closed fist pressed against his chest. He had the look of anxiety about him, sweat glistening in the dim illumination of the bunker. "Private Kit Mulgrave reporting for duty, sir" he spoke loudly, staring at the far ceiling, in what seemed to be a very rustic, twangy accent born of the Chau Saran deserts. Ethan saluted him back.

"Take a seat, we are going to be here a while, private. Do you have a callsign of any sort?" Ethan inquired informally, trying to relax the obviously tense Private.

"The Pole, sir... it comes with my height, sir," The Private said while smirking, still loudly, as he crouched down, leaning against the eastern most railing. Ethan let out a small smile. Mulgrave seemed to be slowly easing, "So... we are stuck up here when push comes to shove, eh?"

"Looks like it, Mr. Pole," Ethan replied cynically. *Stuck in a death trap... I've gotta get outta here as soon as the fighting starts.*

"I agree with you, sir," Mulgrave said in a shaky, but still loud voice, spitting through the grate on the bottom of the bunker.

"Agree with what?" Ethan questioned, suddenly suspicious of Mulgrave's psychic abilities.

"That this place is a hellhole... you said it just a second ago..." Mulgrave replied, sounding insecure once more. *Maybe I did say that out loud... kid's probably questioning my sanity right about now. Wait a minute, did I just call him kid?*

Ethan's train of thought was derailed violently as the hatch to the bunker slammed open, two gloved hands tossing a large container into the Bunker's north-east corner. Both Ethan and Mulgrave stood up, grabbing the next box as it emerged from the dark hole. After about 4 of these boxes, a short but thick technician - clothed in the faded-red and blue Confederate Supporting Personnel uniform - hopped out of the hatch. Two marines, fully clad in 300 light armor, followed him up and out of the hole, slamming the hatch door shut behind them.

"Guns are here, boys," the technician said, more a grunt than actual spoken language, pulling the lid off of one of the large man-sizes containers. Beneath its gray plastic-like surface lay shining black weaponry encompassed in gray foam. The greasy technician pulled out some of the parts and began to assemble them in one of the bunker's corners. "Get the lids off those other boxes, and see if you can stick that stuff together," the technician continued to grunt, still facing away from all the other four men in the room. Ethan lurched up from his spot on the bunker's wall, stretched his legs for a few seconds, then strode toward the nearest box. Upon opening, the box revealed what seemed to be a C-14 Impaler Gauss Rifle; the large double-bored barrel classified it as Gauss weaponry. Ethan pulled all of the pieces of rifle out onto the grilled bunker floor and began to assemble them as best he could. Despite his best efforts, the greasy mechanic had to lend some verbal direction as to how to connect the last few pieces - near the gun sight and barrel - together. The C-14 'Impaler' Gauss Rifle which Ethan now held in his hands - using 8mm Spikes of metal instead of normal magazine bullets - was the what he had been taught to be the mainstay of the Confederate Marine Corps.

Unlike the 5-mm C-12 'Fury' Automatic Rifle - which Ethan had been accustomed to using back at Nuark and featured both single-fire and fully-automatic functions, the Impaler was purely a burst weapon. Upon pulling the trigger the rifle would fire three spikes at high velocity, thus maximizing ammo conservation but allowing for burst fire. Each spike was 8mm wide and 30 centimeters long and narrowed to something like a single molecule at its point. Ethan suddenly felt the urge of destruction clawing at his fingertips. *Calm down, Ethan. You're turning into a killer...*

Next to him, the other three marines had managed to assemble three more Impalers, a large six-barreled C-50 Vulcan Cannon, a pile of large ordinance that had yet to be assembled, and a large amount of the 8mm spike cartridges piled in stacks in the center of the bunker. All three of the marines grinned like children opening gifts on Christmas morn; their eyes lit up with hope; sadistic hope. *It is time to give back some of the destruction they have dealt upon us,* Ethan thought.

As two of the Marines attached the C-50 to the side of the bunker railing facing due North to the Blue Sea, the mechanic lifted his cap in salutations, revealing flat, sweaty hair combed over a bald head, and headed back down the tunnel out of the bunker. Ethan returned his gesture with a crisp salute, then turned towards the young Mulgrave who stood facing directly at Ethan, his eyes gleaming with the lust for kill. Ethan noticed above his head an entire 150-mm (or so) Anti-Aircraft gun had been assembled in the transparent blister.

"You going to man that?" Ethan asked with a sardonic grin.

"I sure am," Mulgrave replied, turning his crazed stare up towards the dome, revealing the dim skies, "I sure am".

"Get to it," Ethan spoke, turning towards the other two marines who had finished setting up the C-50, their helmets blocking Ethan's view of their faces. He could still see those eyes, though, the bloodlust tore through any amount of transparacarbon. "You've all read the brief?" Acknowledgments echoed from each of them. "Good... Which one of you two wants to man the C-50?" Ethan certainly couldn't - he'd never been trained to operate heavy ordinance. Firing a rifle was one thing, firing a large machine gun was another. Both marines shrugged. "What are your marksmanship ratings?" Ethan asked. Let the numbers decide.

"7.01 on small, 4.20 on big," replied one, in a confident voice. Marked out of 10, each marine had an ever-changing marksman rating that had been set in training by overlooking gunnery sergeants, which was then computer-adjusted in the future by a means of a visual confirmation automation system. The system was very complicated, and Ethan had never bothered to learn the specifics, but the gist of it was that there was a relatively inexpensive infrared sensory link between the tip of each bullet and the rifle housing it. When the bullet struck something, it relayed the distance, time



and position back through the rifle into the marine's [computer](#) complex within the battlesuit at hand, which then transferred to the sensors maintained within the nearest Confederate sensors array (in this case, Djakel). In essence, the system could tell whether an enemy had been downed by a particular marine or not, and calculating how many bullets had not struck any intended targets, the system could then decipher the hit/miss ratio of any given marine. [Computing](#) all these factors, in addition to distance fired, accuracy, type of weapon used, type of ammo used, situational conditions, number of enemy, type of enemy, weather conditions, topography, standing orders and tactical/strategical conditions, then designated every marine in the Confederate Marine Corps with a set of statistics so accurate (and complex), that every characteristic of every marine could be studied at length. And this was as simply put as the system could possibly be explained. Among these statistics was a marksmanship rating, with various types of weaponry, scored out of 10.

The marine's rating of 7.01 in 'small arms' was well above the general average of 5, but his 4.20 in 'large arms' was rather poor. Ethan did not want his hands on a 6-foot long gun. Glancing at the large timer displayed on a four-panel console hanging just beneath the AA blister, Ethan noted that there was about twenty-six minutes remaining until the marines would have had to assume positions.

"4.98 small, 8.9 large, sir" squeaked out the shorter marine, obviously over-modest. *It's better than over-arrogance*, chuckled Ethan heartily. Ethan turned slightly as to make his address to the shorter marine obvious.

"And you name, private?"

"Wilcox, sir, Private Amy Wilcox." A sudden wave of embarrassment and surprise washed over Ethan. He wasn't used to dealing with women in the corps, especially not in Nuark, where there hadn't been one woman enrolled in the corps. *At least I haven't said anything rash...* Ethan thought, then redoubled, *oh, bother... She's a marine, no different than Mulgrave or me...I can say what I damn well please.*

"Think you have the balls for the C-50, Wilcox?" Ethan inquired, realizing the stupidity of his comment after it spat out of his mouth. *Well, maybe I should watch what I say, for respect's sake!*

"Excuse me sir?" Wilcox inquired, having obviously heard his question. She sounded a little annoyed.

"Nothing, Ma'am- uh, Private," *Damn, damn, damn...* "Just uh, assume your position at the C-50, please." *Shouldn't have said please*, Ethan thought critically, *Shouldn't have said Ma'am. I'm just a smoothie tonight. Damn society!*

*This*, Ethan mentally sighed, *is going to be a long wait.*

Behind him, due south of Djakel, the flashes over the dark horizon continued.

## THE GATE

Vincent McGough's hands trembled, his sweat turning the battlesuit's gloves into a fanfare of skin squeaking against rubber. He gripped his rifle defensively against his chest, sat, and waited. Around him were the walls of confinement; Vincent was the sole marine in a tiny hillside bunker on the eastern slopes of the degenerated ridge, facing directly south. Ahead of him, the enemy paraded, low dunes of grass and sand stretching into oblivion. The once serene illuminations of nuclear explosions and artillery batter silhouetting the dunes on the horizon had now become malevolent orgasms of energy that shook every bone in Vincent's body; rattling every screw in the bunker. His objectives were clear: When the enemy came into range, he was to shoot them until 'all hostiles are neutralized'. Unfortunately, that was all the information he had. No clues as to how he should escape when and if The Gate should fall, or where he should escape *to*. While he had a vague idea of where the Starport central complex was in the city, he would surely be lost in complex street system of Djakel. Not to mention the impending Alien Horde –Zerg horde as he heard several officers say on his way to the bunker – following his every move. It was a small miracle he hadn't soiled himself already. Vincent had, however, come up with a plan of his own. *When they reach that hill*, he thought, picking a hill out with his eyes about a kilometer away from his position, *I take off down the tunnel behind me. And I don't stop until I have to*. As another wave of air smashed into the hillside, Vincent locked his gaze on the small readout in the bottom-right hand area of his visor. *Three more minutes until ground zero.*

"You're from New Lhasa? What year did you graduate?" Asked Ethan eagerly. It seemed that Private Thomas Lepreaux had been from Ethan's hometown of New Lhasa.

"May 15th this year. Well, this Tarsonis 1 year anyhow. Which year were you?"

"Last year, '98. May as well. Funny I didn't see you at all. Though Rockhard was a big school." Big was an understatement. Ethan could remember seeing at least a few hundred new people each week throughout his entire stay at the school. While the total number of enrolled students was never given out, Ethan imagined it was somewhere in the tens of thousands.

"I guess it doesn't matter anymore... the whole school has probably been taken apart and... digested by these demons... or something horrific like that." A sudden change from the cheery reunion-like eagerness, Lepreaux was suddenly very somber. His helmet pulled off; his slim face turned down, looking toward his boots. Pain and loss flashed across his sunken eyes.

"We're just ordinary men wound up in extraordinary circumstances, fellas." That came from Mulgrave with his peculiar twangy accent, already seated above the rest of the marines in the Anti-Aircraft Blister, leaning back gazing at the stars. "If I get out of here, that's where I'm going. The stars. I'm going to find me the first aliens anybody ever saw – 'cept these monsters whatever they are. I'm going to make friends with them, and just leave all this crapola behind."

Ethan stretched his vision up towards the massive starfield above him; above them. It beckoned like no heaven ever could. Glimmering slightly in the Chau Sara sky, it seemed alive; tiny meteors zipping across massive nebulae and clouds. A tingle slowly brushed down Ethan's neck and back. *I know just what he's talking about...*

Wilcox's high female voice broke through Ethan's dreamy state, "Wouldn't that just be another case of an ordinary man in extraordinary circumstances?" She asked, leaning on the c-50 with her right elbow, facing inward to the bunker.

"I suppose so..." Came Mulgrave from above.

"I don't think we are ordinary men at all... rather, unordinary men put in extraordinary circumstances. Or extraordinary men put in unprecedented circumstances of death and violence that has never been seen by any human eyes, never heard by human ears, never touched by human fingertips. We are the line between sanity and insanity out here." That was Lepreaux. Apparently, the guy was planning to be a writer before the Zerg ripped New Lhasa apart. Ethan chuckled at his rhetoric.

The timer above Ethan's head striking 15 minutes remaining, the flashes from behind him suddenly halted their steady, pounding crescendo. Just as Ethan turned to look behind him just as a startling impact threw him into the air. Ethan revisited the world of blackness.

DJAKEL RIDGE CENTRAL COMMAND ROOM, 10 minutes later

Edmund Duke glared at the tactical report screens in front of him. He still could not believe his eyes. Having marched forward for at a horrendous rate for hours despite a constant barrage of small nuclear, plasma-based, anti-matter and conventional ordinance, the alien column had suddenly disappeared from all sensors and had been completely invisible for some ten minutes. Even orbital fixes from the remaining satellites yielded nothing. *Where have those bastards gone*, he thought to himself, grinding his teeth, hand clenched in a fist and pressed tightly against the nearest bulkhead. *Where have they gone...* The clomping of boots on grated floor approached Duke.

"Sir, the larger craft of the enemy air fleet is bombing the North Side of the Ridge, sir," came a communications officer somewhere behind Duke. He didn't turn to greet the officer; his fist tightened. "Should we commence the evacuation, sir?" The officer continued.

"Are the Wraiths not engaging them?" Duke retorted angrily.

"Yes, sir, but reports indicate an overwhelming amount of enemy air to air craft..."

"How many?"

"The current count is..." The officer clomped back across the metallic floor to his previous post, "the current count is somewhere around one-thousand one-hundred and fifty, sir."

Duke's angry, furrowed brow was immediately replaced with wide eyes. He turned to the officer, a look of concern consuming him, "How many wraiths do we have in the air?"

The officer glanced at his readout. "All of three-hundred and twenty-six of them, sir, the entire fleet. Our anti-air craft guns are occupying almost the majority of the enemy aircraft, sir, but the remaining craft seem to be to much of a match for our Wraith fighters. Our boys can't hold the air with two to one odds, not for long, anyhow-"

Duke interrupted the officer with a characteristically angry, menacing tone, "Standing orders for this situation are to stand ground until there is no other option. I can't have a mass alien infection of the whole of The New World on my resumé if one of these things gets out. We beat them here, and now. There will be no evacuation! The Gate will hold!"

The table-sized main holographic tactical display in the center of the dimly lit control room began flashing and beeping loudly. Both the officer and Duke turned towards it; the officer stationed at it let out a loud explicative.

"Report!" Duke screamed.

"They are on us sir! They're all over us!"

Duke stormed up to the main console which was displaying a 3d map of Djakel. The North Side of the Ridge was swirling with red enemy dots punctuated by friendly green lights. "What, have they broken through? I don't see it!" Duke questioned.

"No, here!" The officer retorted, pointing to the section of the six foot map that displayed the Gate. It was swarming with red; more importantly, the sea of red was within the Gate, spreading towards the Ridge-side banks of the Lagoon. Duke's brow furrowed once again deep thought. He knew damned well that the aliens would get off world whether they stopped them at Djakel or not; he wanted victory at all costs. *Victory is impossible now... I know it, and so does everyone else in this room. To hell with confederate quarantine protocol. I want to see tomorrow.*

"Goddamnit...." Duke breathed slowly under his breath, clenching his fist as if it could somehow save his perfect military record, now ruined. "Start the evacuation. Lets get the hell out of here."

<sup>1</sup>All times in the novel are written in Tarsonis Standard Time, which is identical to Earth Time. Tarsonis has the exact same day-year ratio as Earth, pare a few millionths of a second each year. Chau Sara's day and year have a two-hour offset to Earth Time per day and 16 day offset per year. Thus, each day, the sunrise and sunset on Chau Sara moves back two hours in Tarsonis time, until 6 days later, when PM and AM are simply reversed. Chau Saran years are counted as cycles, and have no relevance to anything but agriculture.

## Chapter 10 - End Game

the Testing is done.....

.....the results?

there is a number.....

.....and of Them?

weak of Mind..... few of them possess Gifts..... the strongest, It is marked.....

.....but?

weak of the Discipline.....It is not trained as Others are.....

.....would that not make our task lighter?

easier to bend to the Will, yes..... unable to control the Powers, possibly.....

....and the others?

weak of Mind..... I already told You that.....They are the opposite..... none of Them show the Strength we seek.....  
the mental barrier They inflict on Themselves ruins the Potential.....

...so what will be of this?

patience..... It has been marked. The Monitors are open for Them.....

.....They hide no secrets..... what is Your plan?

the Fleet approaches.....I will arrange a contact.....the marking is useless with Them.....

.....They hope to raze the planet..... how will It continue?

It goes with Them..... They lead to the Unraveling.

## THE GATE

Vincent 'Vinny' McGough sat feeling like a man who was paralyzed in a hospital bed; helpless but sadistically aware of the events going on around him; the collapse of the unbreakable Gate blockade. Set up with the intention of repulsing invaders from afar, the Gate had been arranged so that no incursion from the surrounding plains would be able to enter Djakel. Currently, the Gate's ability to fulfill this role had not been compromised. The problem, rather, was the origin and location of the alien incursion.

McGough could hear the screams of officers and lieutenants through his open comm.; A chaotic symphony of voices and gunfire. The Zerg had emerged from underground, behind the Gate area, which was now swarming with them. The Zerg and Confederate forces had become a frantic mélange; friendly fire had become an enormous problem. The Zerg, using mandibles instead of guns, reveled in the hot mixture. Having no worries of friendly fire, they feasted on the Confederate forces. In a brief moment of folly, several Confederate artillery pieces had opened fire straight into the skies, their payloads pulverizing Zerg and Man alike. Terran machinery was no match for the invading hordes; they destroyed artillery treads and pried open tank hatches in their lust for human blood.

McGough was receiving a thousand orders at once: "'Run for the north!' 'Retreat to the south!' 'Retreat?' 'Stand Your Ground!' 'Who's in command here?' 'Shoot anything that moves!'" Useless bantering, McGough thought. The Zerg were everywhere at once; the Confederate line had been completely broken. Marines ran every which way, their guns often nowhere in sight. They were hunted down, one by one. And to think, McGough recalled, some of these guys were skeptical - skeptical! - of the Zerg's ability to kill. McGough felt sick to his stomach. Many had wondered how bug-like creatures on foot using archaic methods of warfare had so utterly and spectacularly devastated almost all of Chau Sara's

military might in under a week, given that the planet had been built to withstand conventional attacks similar to the Zerg approach. The complete ban (and subsequent destruction) of large-scale nuclear devices enforced by Confederate law - introduced some two decades ago - had changed the face of modern warfare; the conception of Marines as valuable assets (compared to their previous status as archaic and purely symbolic figures) was re-introduced; this was the main reason Vincent had signed up for the Marine corps instead of desk jobs. A good deal that's doing me now, he thought.

Without spending more than five seconds in awe of the maelstrom directly in front of him, McGough began to think of escape. Directly behind him was a network of tunnels that led to a military launching pad. Somewhere back there also lay tunnels, which would inevitably take one across the lagoon to the central Starport complex. Given the uncertain condition of the former, McGough would try for the central complex. First, however, he would do his duty to the faceless Confederate rule and empty his Rifle into the enemy flanks.

## THE RIDGE

Ethan clasped his head with his hands, his body pressing against the dusty steely floor. His world rocked and shook without end, the sounds of pulsing aircraft zooming overhead. His brow furled into the bridge of his nose, Ethan remained like this, for minutes on end. He was strangely out of breath; his head spun in ellipses -- not circles, ellipses. Above him, a small pocket of air provided oxygen. Above that, tons of twisted bulkhead and fried metal lay in ruin; Bunker NR85. Mulgrave lay next to Ethan, his brain splattered in gooey lumps along the contorted ceiling. Ethan didn't know where the other two Privates were, though if [memory](#) served him right he had seen someone blown off the ridge completely before the bunker caved in. They were both certainly dead, in any case. Ethan calmed himself, and drew his head face down back over to his right. Darkness. Mulgrave's body was certainly starting to stink -- a smell that brought the bitter memory of dead friends and family back to the forefront of Ethan's mind. I have to get out of here. Wedged in-between massive chunks of rock and metal, this was no easy task. Ethan had been forced to strip off his battle suit after the cracked, super-heated metal had begun searing his skin. The insulation rubbery in the suit had had been completely overwhelmed by the wash of heat when the bunker had been hit; most of it had melted away onto Ethan's skin. Ethan's head swam; he felt as if he'd just run a marathon and come out of a decades-long coma simultaneously. Nonetheless, he had to escape; Ethan had no idea how long the oxygen in the tiny space would last.

From his position on top of one of the larger spires along the Ridge wall, escape seemed very plausible. One of the thickest sections, Ethan's bunker was built on a relatively flat upper-edge to the northern most peak of the ridge, several kilometers above sea level. Outside his bunker, the ridge's 'roof' extended 15 meters to either side, sloping slowly at first, then quite drastically as the surface of the ridge became vertical dropping off into oblivion. The other two sides of the bunker faced down the lengths of the ridge, which extended several tens of kilometers around in the circle that enveloped Djakel, dropping to surface level only at the Gate. The entire top of the ridge was not accessible, however, because not all of it was flat enough for bunkers to be successfully placed. In several areas where the wall sloped down toward the Gate entrance, the 'roof' or edge of the wall was several centimeters wide, not nearly enough for one to walk on.

In the thickest section, some five hundred meters east of Ethan's bunker, the Ridge's edge roof stretched to nearly two hundred meters wide. This is where Ridge H.Q. was located, a massive edifice that protruded up from the ridge by 35 stories, delving nearly a kilometer deep into the ridge. Just below the installation lay the only means for an ordinary human being to travel to the top of the Ridge: hundreds of elevators traveling throughout the Ridge's superstructure. A large bridged edifice was located on the Ridge's inner-lagoon shores; the bottom section was attached firmly to the side of the ridge and suspended over the lagoon's choppy waters by thousands of massive supports. Four large bridges connected the lower installation to Djakel City itself. The entire system could transport thousands of troops, tanks, and small aircraft up to the higher H.Q., where several launching pads were located. Tunnels traveled from the upper H.Q. to each of the one-hundred-and-eighty bunkers located along the wall's surface, as well as over five hundred massive gun emplacements along the interior and exterior walls of the Ridge. To escape any pending death, Ethan simply had to reach this launching pad complex, or make his way floor-side to the main Starport complex in downtown Djakel.

I've got to get out of here, Ethan thought to himself. Unfortunately, the piles of metal surrounding him in darkness weren't going anywhere. The smell of Mulgrave's dead body had really begun to stink up the alcove; Ethan was finding it hard to breathe. Without really knowing which direction was which, Ethan stabbed out into lighter areas of darkness ahead of him with Mulgrave's boot. The attempt produced a loud clang of solid metal against boot-heel, several

explicatives, and stagnant, lukewarm blood splattered across Ethan's face; much to his dismay, Mulgrave's severed foot was still in the boot. Ethan searched around with his left hand, feeling the surface of the rubble just ahead of his right shoulder.

Occasionally whacking something of interest with the boot, making sure to hold his hand over the top to prevent any blood from spraying about, Ethan managed no progress after several minutes of searching what lay directly in front of him. His shoulder had begun to ache from the bone-quaking reverberations of hitting solid metal against solid metal. On the verge of desperation - after scraping his hand on twisted, cut metal for some time - Ethan's probing fingers stumbled upon what felt like loose cement. Ethan stabbed out at it with the boot; previous metallic clangs were immediately replaced with a newfound crumbling. Eureka! A small glimmer of light came from the void. Repeated boot attacks eventually ceded a gaping hole in the side of the rubble; Ethan soon pulled his head and shoulders through to get a look.

Winds hurled about Ethan, swishing his hair around in violent tantrum. Gusts of bone-numbing cold, scalding hot and sweaty, mild air bashed against the spiny Ridge wall. The cuts on Ethan's hands stung and his head throbbed with the constant temperature changes. In all directions swirled a smoky haze of greens, reds and pinks; a patchwork of explosions, flashes and thick, muddy smoke subtly highlighted in the derisory sunlight.

Ethan could feel his inner ears popping in frenzy as air masses moved about, equalizing the mottled atmospheric pressure. The sound of laser fire, alien scream and concussive explosions came with each gust, underscored by a rumbling basso. The Sound of War. To his left and right, the Ridge had visibly changed. Huge craters and holes had knocked the ridge thinner to some extent; his bunker now sat perched atop a long column of rock that had once been part of the wall but now stood alone. Spires carved from destruction emerged out of the gloom on either side, silhouetted against the stormy backdrop like tall, ancient sentinels. Most importantly, Ethan could make out the once-buried armored tunnel jutting from spire to spire in the direction of the Ridge Headquarters complex.

Ethan pulled his head back into the moribund alcove and assessed the situation. Deciding to chance falling off of the Ridge rather than dying of suffocation in the niche, Ethan pulled himself out through opening. He had no problems standing almost erect on large chunks of rock directly underneath the alcove. Wind, however, threatened to knock him off the Ridge, so Ethan's hands remained firmly gripped onto the rough rock. Straddling the formation with his knees, he slowly strafed his way eastward along the rocky bulge. He couldn't see much except rock straight in front of his nose and smoky gloom elsewhere.

Rounding a small bluff, Ethan found what he was looking for; an explosion had dug into the Ridge wall deep enough to expose and break the network tunnel, which gaped just to his right. The rock Ethan clung to curved sharply into a crater between the tunnel and Ethan's position, breaking the continuity of the ledge. He would have to make a jump for it. Moving eastward as far as he could around the sharp bluff, Ethan managed to cut the distance between him and the few large bars of metal protruding from the tunnel down to less than three meters. Here goes nothing. Ethan leaped just as something behind him exploded violently, putting him off balance.

He missed. Arms stretched forward, Ethan had fallen short of the bars - which had been at the same altitude as his head while on the ledge - by several vertical feet. Ethan slammed against the Ridge wall and began to fall, his body keeling over giving Ethan clear view of the kilometers of space between him and his pending death. Pain shot up and down his chest; the cuts on his hands had begun pouring out blood into the misty air.

Before he could begin to contemplate his ultimate demise on the short but substantial fall to ground zero, another explosion rocketed just below Ethan. He was immediately surrounded in a thick, suffocating smoke. After a millisecond delay, however, the smoke became inviting; the force of the explosion sent Ethan careening upwards. He brought his head up just in time to see the same two metal bars he had been aiming for come into proximity, rising from the smoky maelstrom. Ethan grabbed them for all his worth.

McGough ran for his life. Alien screams were just seconds behind him as he ran at full clip through the claustrophobic

hallways and catwalks networking the Ridge to Djakel. No matter how many blast doors he shut and locked, the Zerg kept pace with him. How long is this goddamned hallway gonna keep going, he thought to himself, eyes looking straight forward down the cool blue corridor.

The frantic clanging of McGough's footsteps came to a halt as he reached the next blast door. Queuing up the sequence code to open it, McGough expected the door to reveal another long stretch of shiny indigo and smooth bulkhead. Instead, the warm glow of the Chau sun crept up the length of McGough's power suit as the door creaked open.

"Thank the maker!" McGough said aloud, surprised to find himself making allusions to the ecclesiastic. Racing out into the daylight, McGough took in his surroundings; he had exited Djakel-side of the Lagoon, and was standing on a small, deserted platform. The last corridor he had taken was in fact a bridge across the lagoon; McGough was facing a compact city square. Behind him loomed the massive Ridge, circling the city high above, now shrouded in a thick gray fog. A swarm of miniscule specs could be seen flying about despite the haze, their lasers illuminating the cloud. Dark, oily smoke drifted from behind the haze towards the ruby sky; explosions thundered distantly.

On the ground, what McGough could see of the city was wrecked and deserted. Papers, garbage and miscellaneous items, most likely items belonging to those who fled in haste - littered the empty street. Windows were smashed all the way up on several of the ten-storey high-rises directly in front of McGough, and there was no sign of a working street light in sight.

The clanging of metal against talon encouraged McGough to keep going. He centered himself on the eastern rising sun - most likely the direction to the central Starport complex - and started running.

Edmund Duke glanced sympathetically out of the porthole-style window on his right. Nestled comfortably (if somewhat nervously) in the co-pilot seat of the Alpha Squadron Command transport, Duke let out a long sigh. Leagues below him, in panoramic view, lay Djakel's broken defenses. Only a matter of time remained between now and the Zerg's total domination of the entire planet. A last-minute communiqué with the previously presumed destroyed Central Space Station orbiting over Chau Sara's north pole had confirmed this.

The communiqué from SS Central had brought two important articles; for the moment, it seemed, the space ways between Chau and the nearest planet side way gate into hyperspace were clear. The space-faring Zerg fleet had left proximity of Chau on a direct course for the mysterious alien fleet. This move, the station put forth, was prompted when the alien fleet began bee lining towards Chau at an otherworldly pace, quite in contrast to the lurking it had been doing for the last week on the other side of the system. The Alien fleet was moving so fast that it would arrive within several thousand kilometers of Chau Sara in less than ten minutes. Henceforth, Duke had re-ordered the full-scale evacuation of Djakel to the way gate rather than the land-floats of the North Pole.

The second article of interest concerned the welfare of humanity on Chau Sara as a whole. The orange communications-blocking fog which once clogged the expanses between Chau's greatest city had vanished the moment the large Zerg fleet had left orbit to intercept the inbound alien force. With the communication lines cleared, SS Central had received thousands of communications logged over the weeks preceding Djakel's siege from all over Chau. At present, only two of the dozen small settlements that spotted Chau's surface held against the burgeoning force: Los Andares and Djakel. Between the two cities survived some 5 million Chau Sarans; they were all doomed, Duke conceded. Both cities' defenses had fallen to the Zerg. What the incoming alien force intended, God only knew.

Duke allowed a single tear to roll down his cheek as Djakel rolled out of the transport's view and into oblivion.

"The hangar should be through this door," the officer said anxiously, "let's hope it hasn't moved". Standing directly in front of Ethan and at the console of a blast door marked HANGAR, lieutenant Arthur Jenkins looked as if he had been



covered in water and then rolled in a pile of soot. His nervous system had taken quite a beating since the attacks began; Jenkins' thin hands jittered, his jaw rattled and his neck jerked about as he spoke. His short blond hair was marred with ash and dried sweat; his round face caked with dirt mixed with crusty blood. The tone of his voice wavered about nervously; his breathing was sparse and nervous. Nevertheless, despite Ethan's complete skepticism of Jenkins' sanity, the lunatic had saved Ethan's life; he had helped Ethan up from his precarious hold on the Ridge, moments before losing grip. Jenkins had also led Ethan throughout the bewildering maze of Ridge Central Command straight to the door they now stood in front of in minutes - for that Ethan owed him some degree of loyalty.

Ethan nodded at Jenkins, who responded by punching the console. Both men jumped in surprise as the blast door snapped upwards. Ethan peered inside.

Lying before his eyes was the golden pass to the stars. The door had revealed a huge cavern, its rocky walls lit up with the warm glow of floodlights. At one end lay a massive door, about a hundred meters wide, that revealed the North Chau Sea. Between Ethan and this door lay a few dozen or more massive interstellar transports, their horseshoe-shaped amber hulls lined up facing the hangar door in three rows. All were untouched by the Zerg.

The large hangar was full of frantic officers, marines, medical staff and the like, most of them climbing up transport's ramparts or directing other frantic people towards ramparts. Ethan and Jenkins didn't hesitate to run full steam ahead towards the nearest transport, its rampart wide open.

The officer crouching at the base of the rampart motioned for Ethan and Jenkins to come; the men complied with even more haste.

"This one's almost full," the officer yelled over the bustling noise of the hangar as Ethan and Jenkins came to halt, out of breath. Jenkins leaned over and braced his outstretched arms against his knees, spitting blackened saliva onto the floor. The officer glanced at Ethan's burnt shoulder rank insignia; "Commander, you two go ahead and climb aboard... she's only equipped with enough food and oxygen for ten people to get to Mar, so you'll have a spacious ride. Tell the flight officer to close her up and ship out." Ethan nodded to the officer as Jenkins started up the rampart into the transport's small cargo bay. Ethan followed him, gripping the hydraulic supports on either side of the ramp on his way up for support; he had become dizzy from exhaustion.

At the top of the rampart was a small, grease-covered room filled with wires and consoles, of which half the floor was the now-extended rampart. The ceiling was high and had all sorts of hydraulic lifting mechanisms on rails; directly ahead of the ramp was a large door heading deep into the craft.

"All aboard?" stated a female with a distinctly Chau Saran accent. Ethan glanced up: she was dressed in a faded blue Confederate Aerospace Forces jumpsuit and stood next to the rampart control box just next to the airlock door. The officer at the bottom of the entry ramp nodded an affirmative to her, then stood up and jogged out of view.

Ethan did a double take of the woman: She was short - probably just over five and a half feet tall - but she had defined, compact muscles and a shapely body that lay so in her tight blue jumpsuit as to make Ethan lustful and the scrawny Jenkins depressed. She has a damn nice face too, Ethan noted mentally. Glancing at Jenkins, who seemed spellbound and had stood up somewhat, Ethan concluded he thought the same.

"Are you the flight officer?" Jenkins inquired, reaching the top of the entry ramp. His voice had leveled out somewhat, but his physical spasms remained. Ethan stood to his right.

"Aye," the officer looked both men up and down. "Aren't you two a pretty bunch?" Ethan grinned, leaning in to make out the words 'Janine O'Grady' printed on her chest pin, and found himself staring directly at the officer's magnificent bosom.

O'Grady, who was looking directly at Ethan, let out a mental sigh (men...) and glared back at Ethan, her face covered in scowl, putting her hand to her hips. Ethan immediately went on the defensive, his grin collapsing:

"I was just reading your name-

O'Grady didn't want to hear it. Sardonicly, she interjected:

"Are you two the last two?"

"According to the fellow at the bottom of the ramp, yes" Jenkins replied, assuming a neutral position in the ordeal. The officer looked like she could fold him in two.

"Alright... you boys go inside would ya? Door's that-a-way," she motioned towards the large airlock door at the center of the bay. "I'm closing up shop." With a heave of a large control switch, steam from hydraulics engulfed the ramp as it slowly shut. All three officers then filed through the open airlock door into the narrow airlock quarantine chamber. With a two successive bangs, the rampart and airlock door sealed shut behind them.

Ethan's time on Chau Sara was up.

## **Chapter 11 - Dae'Uhl**

Maazus glared at himself. His white scales needed polishing; he had been so frustrated in the last three sukaal that his scales had tarnished semi-permanently. And now this problem: the psi-links of the shuttle had been tampered with. Tampered with! Maazus' scales were darker than ever before. Glaring at himself wasn't going to accomplish what he needed, however, if anything could be done. A broken psi-link was a broken psi-link; there would be no returning to the fleet. A thousand Khalai tenders could not fix the shuttle now.

Maazus shifted his gaze forward to the planetary bodice that hung in front of him, filling his visual cortexes. Chau Sara... what an awful brown world, he concluded, an endless Shin'tael. Maazus had been lost in the Shin'tael once, a place devoid of the Primal Link, a place where one was absolutely alone; alone with the ghosts of Ni Monn Adun. He had wandered the desert for two threes of shinsaal, an experience which had yet to leave him; the sight of desert – any desert – brought to the tip of his archival cortex the horror of being unbearably alone. Perhaps I am doomed to wander again, on this world of infected simians.

Maazus turned his sensors directly backwards, to the fleet. Fifty of the Khala's grandest carriers held themselves in front of the heavens, pointed towards the doomed world with deadly intent and grace. The Gantrithor, Pride of Aiur, Protector of The Khala, Hand of The Conclave and Steward of the Dae'Uhl, stood before the rest of the fleet, its belly glowing with the azure energy of the Psionic Matrix. Within the Gantrithor's reinforced shell lay a massive Khaydarin crystal, ten isaari long, braced with massive psionic energy converters. The profound energies of the Khaydarin, forged at the dawn of time by Ata, and backbone of the Khala's might, was to be converted into raw energy and thrown at the corrupted planet. Fifty Khaydara had been mounted, one in each carrier, to execute the task. All life on the world – and the neighboring worlds – was to be eradicated.

The infection that the Protoss had spied only a single nine of scaal ago had spread throughout the entire population of "Terrans" as they called themselves, and thoroughly corrupted the planetary crust of the world. The Terrans were an interesting folk of which Maazus had taken keen interest; short-lived, unruly and greedy they were, yet capable of profound expression and art, some of which surpassed the Protoss' own on occasion. Such high holding of Terran forms could easily earn Maazus a crisp sentencing of blasphemy and thirty threes of scaal in a prison back on Aiur, if he were to make his thoughts public. Maazus was, however, very keen to prove to the Conclave on Aiur that these "worthless" Terrans could be worth some investment after all. Little was known of their origins; they had appeared on the edge of Protoss space in fairly advanced spacecraft and had begun consuming resources in the area at unprecedented rates.

Maazus himself had never seen sentience breed or expand so fast; in two hundred years they had bred to two threes of billion! Their warfare technology development was also worth studying; they had small weapons fully capable of damaging even vaunted Templar shields and an uncanny wielding of atomics. None of this was of any interest to the Conclave, however, who were more intent on merely allowing the sub-psionic Terrans extinguish themselves in one of their short but destructive wars - and then forget the remains.

When the infestation appeared on a Terran world, the Conclave effectively ordered the entire race killed. Maazus was appalled. The infestation, which harnessed the Khaydarin crystals and came from the Creators, and proclaimed that it would assimilate the Terrans, was as much a mystery to the Conclave as the whereabouts of the Creators themselves. And yet they ordered it burned from existence! The hypocrisy of the Ara Conclave ran on more than one level; the Templar were newly ordered to defend the Terrans, whom the Conclave had previously cared nothing about; “leave them to their own fate,” they had once said. Now, the Conclave issued orders to have the species and its infestation annihilated without discretion! Without examining, without questioning, without knowing! And In the name of what? Aiur? Maazus could not see how the infestation posed any threat to the homeworld or the Khala. The infestation should be examined: it came from the Creators! Alas, Executor Tassadar and his Templar fleets had succumbed to the Conclave’s wishes for annihilation; the world held nigh in front of Maazus, hanging so gently against the cosmos, unprepared for the fury about to be leashed on it. The szintar attacks the hapless giluteus egg. The Terrans would decidedly burn along with the undiscovered specimen, and the prospect of examination of a species akin to Protoss genealogy would be lost... such despairing thoughts. It came from the Creators!

Maazus’ refreshed his intent and purpose on this trip on the tips of his cortexes. If he did happen to survive this debacle, he would have to convince Tassadar to break off his mission. More human casualties and infestation purging was to unacceptable, in the name of science! If only this confounded shuttle would work.

The psi-links were broken! There is a saboteur among my ranks, Maazus concluded. Perhaps the red Ara tribe does not wish a white Shelak bookkeeper to thwart their plans for annihilation, he considered for a moment, then went on with rebuttal: Nonsense. The ancient tribal divisions are nothing more than ethnic catalogues. Or so the Ara would have me believe. Maazus sat and thought, considering every executive Judicator and Templar who crewed the expeditionary force. Who sabotaged the shuttle? I must know. No titles sat with him well; he held his colleagues too dearly. Protoss on Aiur must be responsible for this...perhaps Zakiara, or Vasilus. Maazus’ competitors on Aiur, however, had no real reason to have him killed. The prized position of Advisor to the Templar had never been given to a member of the Shelak Tribe, of which Zakiara and Vasilus were not. Who is the saboteur?

Maazus’ attention snapped to the present; behind him, the Carriers prepared to fire. And so ends the eight hundred and forty year life of the Shelak Maazus. Whoever had planned his shuttle’s malfunction had done so well; it sat in the direct line of fire between Chau and the Gantrithor.

Maazus brought his attention back towards the North Pole of Chau, which he hung over, and awaited imminent death. The Creators!

The transport lurched.

“What do you mean, ‘they are on top of us’?” Duke seethed. The flight officer hovering just to the left of his seat was a river of babbling nonsense.

“The alien fleet, sir, it is circling the North Pole sir, blocking our path to the way gate, sir” the officer babbled in squeaky, high-pitched voice. What a stupid creature, this one. I must find more intelligent help once I get out of this shit-pile of a mess, Duke thought.

“Do you mean to tell me that a few ships are completely blocking progress? That’s impossible!” Duke shouted back at the officer, his python voice loud and strong. Let me rephrase... I MUST find more intelligent help NOW before I pull my hair out! Duke mulled for an instant. You are bald Duke; don’t flatter yourself.

“Their numbers have quadrupled, sir, and there is some kind energy field slowing our course,” came the babbling fountain. An energy field, slowing our physical course, brilliant... Duke wondered at where did this nitwit took thermodynamic physics. Certainly not the University of Tarsonis Prime. A sense of pride filled Duke; no matter what mess he got himself into, he could always fall on the memories of the order and achievements of his student hood.

“Let me see this,” shouted the Duke, his words rumbling with discontent. To describe Duke’s harsh voice as shouting would be a grave understatement; his angered vocalizations were more akin to the sound of shearing metal. The large lump of man placed his burgeoning hands on either armrest and began to rise from his chair, aided by the transport’s lack of gravity.

“We’re going to have to go around them, sir, it’s no big problem.... They seem to be transfixed on the North Pole-” the officer gulped on the last word, cutting the sentence short.

Duke glanced at the officer as he pulled himself up. A pale, pure, hairless face stood atop a thin, wiry, feminine figure; Duke was surprised that man passed as natural sex of birth at all. Duke made a point of enlisting only natural sexes – switchies always had mood problems in mid-life and couldn’t take the rigors of following orders well in stressful situations. I’ll have to double-check this one’s file. And the sweat! Sweat poured from every inch of this man like a Dylar monsoon. And so skinny! I must make sure my intelligent help isn’t all chicken bones, too, Duke added to his mental queue. The officer seemed to be at a lack for words as Duke pushed past into the isle and up towards the cockpit of the transport. Silence surrounded him; Duke’s men had been surprised by his conversation with the flight officer, and it was best to stay silent when the Duke was angry.

They’re hovering right above Djakel, Duke thought as he half-floated up the aisle. He had no idea who these aliens were, or where their intentions lay, but he would rather jump system and ask questions later. Confed Intel must know something about this, he decided as he slid the cockpit door aside.

Storming into the cockpit, Duke placed his hands on either pilot’s shoulders, strapped into their chairs. Neither pilot budged; they were transfixed on the sight that filled the transport’s cockpit with a green glow. Duke could only mumble, “Dear lord...”

A massive yellow-green object which could only be some sort of interstellar vessel lay directly in front of the small Terran ship, filling the view port. Swarming around the massive thing buzzed hundreds of small, sleek shapes. The ship itself appeared as if a work of art; three massive hulls arranged like the pedals of a slightly budded flower ran the craft’s immense length and joined in a maelstrom of curves and arches at the stern. Within the belly of the flower pedal hulls glowed a monolithic indigo light which seemed the sources of pulsing waves of blue lightning that rippled along the ship’s hull. All around the craft extended an aura of green light, swirling around the tiny Terran transport as if it were a minnow caught in the ink plume of a giant predatory squid. The sheer beauty of it all and the underlying sense of imminent doom at the hands of the ultimate predator both horrified and humbled the duke.

“What are you reading?” questioned Duke, his stony voice now smooth and fragile. The transport was equipped with enough sensors to discern decaf from regular coffee even if the cup was sitting on some planetary magistrate’s desk five million kilometers away.

The pilot to Duke’s left answered with confidence: “There is a massive energy cloud literally drowning any readings I can get. One thing is for certain: this craft, entourage not including, is over ten kilometers long-”

Ten kilometers! Duke wondered at the number. The thing was half the size of Tarsonis Station Alpha, he reckoned.

The pilot continued: “-and there are fifty of them centered around the North Pole in front of us. One problem here is that they’re all surrounded by some kind of energy field which is physically blocking our progress to the way point.”

“And energy shield?” Duke inquired, “Can you show me?”

The pilots hands danced over the holographic console that lined the front of the cockpit. A small holograph of Chau Sara appeared in the center of the view port. A small green specs could be seen fixed above the Saran North Pole.

“There’s Chau at the moment – and here’s the shield” the pilot said, punching a button on his console. A large green eggshell-shaped dome appeared on the hologram, centered around the small green specs. The thing covered a good quarter of the Northern Hemisphere.

“Good God,” Duke rumbled, “We’ve got to get around the thing!”

“Well, that brings me to our other problem. You see, we’re here-“ A small red blip appeared on the inside of the apex of the green shell “-and everything else that’s floating around in space is getting pulled up here too. Looks like the shield has created a gravity well, as if whoever that is that set this up doesn’t want anybody getting out.”

Duke was stunned. Trapped, trapped here, in this hell hole. Duke looked back out the view port as the pilot queued out the hologram, replacing it with the real-life view of the massive ship – only it was no where to be seen.

“Did it move, or did we move?” Duke questioned.

“We were slowly moving towards the exact middle of the shield’s curve, but this doesn’t make any sense...” the pilot came back, an expression of frustration collecting on his face. He glared at his console for a moment, then continued: “We should be drifting a hundred clicks or so ahead of the apex well, so if anything else get sucked in there, it shouldn’t hit us, but-” The pilot to Duke’s right, the co-pilot, suddenly started madly hitting controls on his console. Something flashed across the viewpoint; it became obvious wherever they were, they were moving fast. “We’re getting bucketed around by something, sir, we’re sliding in circles at high velocity-“ the co-pilot spoke nervously.

“Are we going to hit anything?” Duke snapped, leaning in towards the frustrated pilot. He shook his head, slamming his fists down onto the console, mouth opening to speak.

The co-pilot cut him off abruptly: “Brace for impact!”

What appeared to be a small alien craft suddenly presented itself in front of the transport and promptly smashed into the cockpit. The bulkhead next to Duke exploded in a shower of sparks as the world went black.

Staring at the violent brown word, Maazus’ executioner couldn’t help but brighten his scales. They almost radiated as he floated in the observation pod, anxiously awaiting the coming storm. With the Dae’Uhl stewardship of the Terrans a slight closer to ruin, triumph over the Senate burned closer. The agenda must not be allowed to rot in the judgement of the Conclave by an old wornscale Elder! Maazus’ time with the expeditionary force, and corporeality, was over.

The executioner let the sweet, damp air out of his lung coils and focused his attention on the present cosmos. A furious vibration buzzed through the ship as he became witness to the fury of the Khala unleashed with such tantamount that scarce but the eldest of the Eld had seen such tribulation before. The cosmos screamed.

## Chapter 12 - Demons Within

Ethan had seen Chau Sara burn to cinders. He had seen Djakel sear under the white weight like an ant caught in the sudden oppressive burn of a cosmic magnifying glass and he had seen the world incinerated below him by hands from the skies. Great demonic hands in the form of bolts from heaven, they had come, strangling any life Ethan had left. His murdered parents, burned; his slaughtered friends, burned; his shattered school, burned; his conquered barracks, burned; his broken faith, burned, buried and forgotten. His past existed only in super-vapor and ashes while his life lay burning up in front of him, second by second, [memory](#) by memory. Ethan’s identity as a living, thinking being had been splotched with [whiteout](#) until nothing had remained visible, not but a few [bits and pieces](#) of words. Now, the pages of Ethan’s life were seared and smoked on display right in front of him. He could almost imagine his dull caption in a tired old museum: *Saaris, Ethan. Burned in life, death, waking and sleep. And the sub-caption: Burned not of flesh, but of man and family.*

Chau Sara’s atmosphere no longer existed in any state which one would consider it an “atmosphere”. The planetary crust was baked, beaten and pressed in flat, mottled fields for tens of thousand of kilometers, pole to pole, east to west. *Nothing* remained.

Ethan Saaris sat drained of energy in an environmental suit, donned in haste at the last minute when realization had set

in that the transport would never break orbiting level. Now, he was in a world of shit, slumped in a corner of the downed spacecraft. The hole in the center of his vision, singed there by doomworld pyrotechnics, had grown larger and larger until Ethan had become blind. *Blind just in time to witness the deaths of everyone else on this fucking ship.*

Aftershock fatigue gripped Ethan's body; he could move, but he wouldn't move. His mind and body no longer agreed on a suitable course of action. Withdrawal from the steady regimen of Battle Enhancing Chemaids had sucked him dry, unable to process any thoughts of physical movement. Every breath he took was a battle against the desire to simply end the kaleidoscopic measuring tape which ran and rated and scored. *I've got a zero. He was still alive; a one then. I've amounted to one, one in a million, one in a billion. One which squared results in the same, one which cannot amount to anything outside of its self, times itself, and only when it uses the strengths of others can it result in anything but its pit of static, unmoving mediocrity.*

Inhale; the battle, exhale.

Ethan had become blind to time as well; the burning of his entire homeworld could have been moments, days or weeks hence. He hadn't eaten or moved since blackness had stolen his sight, minutes after the transport's violent crash. His ship and only hope of escape from the demonic claws filling Djakel below had been sucked back and squashed into the razed crust of Chau Sara. *Jam to Toast...* he could feel the sweet sting of marmalade on his lips; the earthly smell of coffee. He could see the scruffy, sincere look of last night's invisible partner, the laugh of faded friends, all washed out of Ethan's tumble-dried brain.

*They don't exist!* Ethan cried out to himself. *They are nothings, ghosts, phantasms!*

Nothing existed outside of himself. The events of Ethan's life were meaningless, as good as cheap umbrellas full of holes. All the contributions, the interactions, the memories, the accomplishments, the encouragements of parents and peers, the sense of building one's self as individual, the sense that one's life was amounting to something and going to someplace, established and safe – it was all wrong, shattered by the violent events of the days past. His whole life had been filled with promises and directions which had now become falsities and lies. Society had built him up, shown him examples: a desirable job, a faithful family, a distinguished military career perhaps; the importance of having routines, schedules, a clear head and healthy body.

It was set in stone, no questions asked. The stereotype of how to live one's life had become self-enforced law. Anyone wishing to have any sort of social stability among their peers and loved ones had to follow the example, set the example and build towards the example: *The Confederate Way*. It disgusted Ethan, how fragile this way of example was, he thought, how wrong it was in its own perceived importance. How wrong it was to think that life consisted only of work and dues, hours and paychecks, the building of homes and families. Life was the greatest lie Ethan could think of. Its subscribers lived proud with self-perceived accomplishment but absolutely void of reality: the reality of death, the reality that it was all senseless, all vapid and useless in the face of death.

Ethan had met reality, and it had eaten him alive.

Ethan supposed that, now on his deathbed, he had become kin with the destroyers. They had shown that the false veil of modern life and social acceptability could easily be revealed, hung, and left for the slaughter. *He* had been revealed, hung, and left for the slaughter, unprepared by years of the most constant and belligerent social indoctrination.

Breath; inhale, the battle, exhale.

The world had died. Ethan consisted a stubborn refute to the constant which now drained him, like a sapped tree, unable to change the inevitable.

Sitting slumped in a storage closet, environmental suit maintaining a reasonable atmosphere around him, Ethan filtered through his memories. No life had flashed before his eyes, no consistent arrangement of thoughts or events had ever occurred to Ethan throughout the week prior in which the tiny flame of his life, his measuring tape of one, had come so close to completely unraveling.

*Unraveling.*

The word struck with discord, a dissonance which pinged through Ethan like a funny bone body smashed against a wire's edge. The twanged, metallic sourness edged like a dull razorblade against his thoughts, cutting them, categorizing them. There would be no unraveling of miscellaneous items, Ethan decided; rather, his death would bring placement, finality. Ethan's life would be a discarded but preserved document, a data file sealed and shrunk.

He worked methodically, sorting his memories, sifting images of faces and names, remembering, lingering and closing. As each memory passed it was realized fully, cleaned, and discarded far beyond the reaches of Ethan's conscious awareness. People, places and things were remembered, given a value – an assessment of sorts, without words but deeper than words still, a *feeling*, a lasting impression – and then filed away. These memories and strands and intertwining paths, anecdotes and homes and people's faces, they were all no use to Ethan anymore. They were the seals and idols of the belief now hollowed, now stripped bare revealing the meager, flatulent body beneath the misleadingly positive exterior. They were the liars, the unknowing liars, all these people and places. They were nothing, not now, not ever. Had they really existed? Had they served any end other than to delude themselves and those surrounding them, delude and march them in blindness; unto the end, unto the brink upon which all men face what they pushed aside before?

The battle; inhale, exhale.

They were the misled fools to which paradise pulled up its iron wool, the fools to which ignorance became pleasure and pain became myth. Ethan felt betrayed, but at the same time he felt an uplifting sense of distant, *observational* superiority. While they had died in the happy arms of belief in life everlasting, Ethan had been inexplicably spared and shown the damned reality beneath his kin's delusions. And in that, he was necessarily above them, transcending them with the horrors they so sheepishly and irresponsibly pushed aside. *Horrors they pushed aside until claws and fangs split their veins and opened them onto the floor.*

Ethan moved on; more memories filtered by, places, things. His many trips to Los Andares chronologically depicted and documented, through only a few days of memory, the changing years in Ethan's life. He saw himself grow older in Los Andares, *Los Andares, the documenter of my malediction*. And as he grew older, he treaded deeper, deeper into the lie. Ethan remembered his last visit to Andares, his mind set on joining the military. He had applied for flight school; he was young, eager and had so many expectations in life. He had imagined himself fighting pirates in the outer worlds, making new friends and seeing new worlds, marrying a beautiful wife and growing old.

*Who did I go with?* Ethan couldn't remember their faces or their names. *It is of no consequence.*

More memories: Graduation. His first kiss under a red Chau Saran evening, images of romps and hijinx in Graham Parker's old rusty Virotruck, full of synthale and laughs - memories of pranksters and futile romantic excursions. Ethan's memories were full of friends, happy occasions and good times, but he couldn't focus in on any of them specifically. He couldn't remember any faces, barely any names... *I remember my first kiss... but who was there?* Everywhere he searched, finding only unfocused images - and the demons.

*Had I gone to Los Andares with Parker?*

The halls of his school flipped by like an unused calendar, full of white squares but no detail. Next came his uninspiring teachers, late assignments and the glare of the work vid screen; hours upon hours of work squeezed, twisted and poured down a giant drain. A life poured down a drain, a pipe with LIES etched across its bloodied bowl, the confederate standard stained onto the head of its spout.

*Enough of lies!*

A parade of anonymous faces marched through Ethan's head; faces of soldiers, broken and beaten. The horrible feeling of failure to gain admission to flight school, a life goal which had seeped through the cracks of Ethan's fingers as if he held the very damned papers they'd sent him, set the overtone of the parade. Perhaps he would have gotten out – no, he *would* have gotten out if Chau Sara. Instead, he had been doomed to a swift career unfairly ascending the ranks, free of any real accomplishment or qualification, over legions of barely human resocials.

The parade stopped and was replaced by an urgent sense of fear. Ethan tried to grasp the memories of his happier days, but they had left him. He felt helpless as red eyes stared through the fog. All memory faded to mist, leaving Ethan alone with his consciousness and the demon. *The demon, Sandman, come to take what's left.*

His life closed, Ethan let the battle be lost. Cold darkness let filter in warm shade.

Exhale.

News of Chau Sara's destruction arrived silently on Tarsonis. Surveillance probes launched into the system and those that had remained intact had recorded almost everything. Though the invaders had destroyed what they could, most of the out-of-system long range probes had been left untouched. The images they sent back to Confederate Command were unprecedented.

Secretary General of the Terran Confederacy Central Command and Commander in Chief of the Executive Command Council Jonathan Clayton let out a sigh, his gaze sweeping across the solemn faces gathered around the room, the entire Executive Counsel to the United Terran Confederation of Stars. To his left sat half of the Command: the High Attendants, publicly elected officials chosen to publicly reside over various bureaucracies; to his right sat the rest: the Chief Secretaries of those same bureaucracies, more experienced folk chosen from within the system without specific term lengths. Those individuals formed the bulk of Central Command – the day-to-day administrative center of the entire Confederacy - which made up slightly over half of the present Council.

Outside of the Command and forming the second half of the Counsel was a loose tangent of executives from a myriad of bureaucracies. At the far end of the massive round table waited the joint chiefs, Generals and Admirals from the various components of the Confederate Military.

All around the edge of the room perched on stools sat notables from the executive staffs of the various government security and taxing Bureaucracies, representatives of Magistrates to the various Core Worlds in the Confederacy, the entire executive staff from the Department of Defense, and finally, representatives from the various departments of the Confederacy's political inter-planetary organs, such as the General Assembly of Confederate Worlds and the House of Representatives. Clayton's own Staff – the Executive Administration whom he had chosen for his Administration – were late coming but had slowly begun to arrive and filled in on either side of him at the head of the table.

Holding the floor directly behind Clayton, just in front of the main vidscreen, stood a group of Council-sponsored crisis management specialists and experts from various fields of analytical science. Assembled into the Crisis Management Boardroom in less than an hour, solemnity – rather than nervousness or anxiousness - had gripped the whole lot of them.

“Any thoughts?” Clayton inquired. As the Chief Executive of the council and Secretary General of the Confederacy, Clayton held mediatory privileges over everyone else in the room. The counsel, however, acted as a single head of state and because of that, Clayton possessed no extra veto or command authorities that the others in the counsel did not possess, outside of being able to turn a deadlock voting tie.

At the moment, however, no approach to any sort of vote could be made. The entire situation was had everyone up to their necks with hypothesis, speculation and unknown variables; the counsel was stupefied with both the information intelligence had presented and the lack of information the presentation implied. *Collected in this room is all the command power in Koprulu, military and political, decorated and academically endowed, yet all brain activity had ground to halt.*

“Should we alert the Combine or Tarsonis Executive about this?” piped up Donald White, his tenor voice warbled and distraught. He was the publicly-elected Administrator of Intergovernmental Relation, dealing primarily with the core colonies, and was an easy going and agreeable man, if somewhat meek.

“Tell them what?” harped back Donald Grisoldm, Chief Secretary of Defense and Security, his voice sandpaper to White's rippled stream. Grisoldm was old, weathered, respected and generally pushed anyone around who couldn't go toe to toe with him. Not necessarily more intelligent than anyone else, the conservative old man used a brashness when discussing issues that could make one think he felt he was in some sort of intellectual growling match and simply had to



barrel over others. Grisolm's most noteworthy political traits, however, were his hate for anything non-Confederate, his hate for change, and his contentedness with sternly warning everyone that "things worked" when he was "in charge", and had the rest of the Command left them alone, "everything would work now". Of course, Grisolm had never been in charge of anything aside from his Bureaucracy and had little knowledge in Command dealings with non-security issues. Though he was agreeable with the joints chiefs and the rest of the Counsel, most of them generally considered him somewhat blockheaded, a political dam of sorts. He continued the barrage: "We've got nothing here but ghosts and rumors. We need facts. Mengsk's people are behind this, I swear it. We need to move fleets into Korhal and Dynakar and declare martial law, and kill these bastards. Tarsonis could be next--"

"And how," Clayton interjected, "did a terrorist organization as scattered as the Sons of Korhal attain alien vessels, and incinerate a planet with them? Please, Don, your paranoia is tiring."

Grisolm came back disgusted: "My *paranoia* is the only thing that holds this place together!"

"Really?" Clayton made his stance clear, his voice drenched with sarcasm. He had heard this kind of self-centered nonsense out of Grisolm before. *Oh Don, when will you pop out of your bubble?*

"You don't need to acquire alien vessels if you can forge a tape, that's what my paranoia says. For all we know Chau Sara is perfectly fine and the Sons have taken the whole damned thing over--"

"The frequency jamming?"

"Mengsk has jammers, he's proved that before--"

"We had the tapes looked over by experts, Don, and they say there's been no tampering."

"The Sons have their experts too, John. It's not that hard to imagine one of them could foil us – this *is* the best organized terrorist establishment we've ever seen, and we're talking about something they've been trying to do for decades."

Grisolm had a point. Suppose the tape was doctored, however, and even more questions popped up; why fake an alien invasion? Why not simply make it out to be that Chau was fine, put in placeholder broadcasts? The system had been locked down; the only communication from Chau was coming straight from the highest source - and only two or three times a day at that. Nothing else was allowed in, our out; essentially, Chau had been bottled, and only Confederation communications had been allowed within the planet's vicinity since November. A blackout of the Tarsonis-Chau Sara communications of more than a day would warrant an investigation, but it would take a week for any confederate expeditionary force to get there. Presumably, the Sons could have the whole place converted into a fortress by then.

The official communications out of Chau had stopped for a week, and an expeditionary force *had* been sent after a day or so of nothing from Chau or any [satellite](#) near it. Confed also sent some live-feed probes from Mar Sara which would transmit images at light speed straight to a inter-system hyperspace relay module which would then send the recording in a complete stream back to Mar Sara via hyperspace in one-hour clumps, at a three-day delay; it was revealed later upon a system inspection that the live-feed satellites which would have simply transmitted to inter-system hyperspace relayers already in place around Chau had been destroyed – nobody knew but the doomed souls on Chau. Because of the lockdown, all the relayers with the exception of the official communications one in Los Andares had been disabled.

Recalling deep space probes which stored visual and sensory data to of the entire Chau area from afar, however, had revealed a major change in weather patterns over the entire southern hemisphere of the planet in a matter of days, when all communications had stopped. Mar Sara had collected the probes and hyper-spaced their contents to Tarsonis. Confed had no way, unfortunately, of telling whether official communications out of the system had simply stopped because Los Andares lost the capability to send interstellar communiqués through their sole active relayer, or if they had stopped because all in-system communication had ceased due to extraordinary jamming or the physical destruction of communicators. If the system hadn't have been locked down, the answer would have been obvious; commercial and private communications out of Chau to other systems had been superfluous and from hundreds of sources on the planet prior to the Flannuum incident. Had *everything* ceased suddenly, intelligence would have immediately known something was taking place of massive proportion. Unfortunately, with only one source functioning to begin with, it

was unclear what was happening when that source stopped and massive weather turmoil enveloped it.

It had become obvious, however, that something had gone horribly wrong when the last probe recalled revealed nuclear activity in the upper northern hemisphere, which was without cloud cover, sometimes directly on settlements themselves. No deep-space telescope from anywhere in Koprulu could locate any of the hyperspace relays or probes either – it was assumed they had been recalled or destroyed. At this point, Grisolm had ordered the expeditionary force of a few craft sent from Mar Sara recalled from its position halfway to Chau. A new force from Tarsonis was sent, bolstered with fifty battlecruisers and several legions of troops, ‘Mechs, bombers and the whole planetary invasion package Confed generally sent to lock down a planet. This was yesterday.

When live-feed probes from Mar Sara arrived in Chau and sent the first signals back through hyperspace to intelligence on Mar, they came in range of the world just in time to witness the whole thing be razed by derelict space craft of obviously advanced construction. Long range probes from Tarsonis and Mar which had tried to observe the planet from afar were greeted by a planet almost completely surrounded in clouds and light so intense from the southern pole it marred the visuals of the exposed extreme north.

The recordings were immediately sent to Tarsonis; the hyperspace time from Mar Sara constituted about five days, and another from Chau to Mar, in a straight line through space. It was unclear, however, when the live-feed probes had taken their images and hyperspaced them back Mar Sara, when they had been taken. Though it only takes a single day to hyperspace to Chau Sara, the probes took three days to get anything back to Mar, with all but the core visual information completely scrambled. That meant Chau had been razed either eight days prior or seven days prior to the recording reaching Tarsonis.

Today’s recording revealed the derelict spacecraft had left. Analyzers here had concluded perhaps the probes arrived, were jammed from sending signals and could only send out their data, one day late, after the derelicts had left, or the probes hadn’t been able to record anything for a single day, and for some reason or another, the derelicts lifted this visual block to allow the probes to witness the destruction of Chau Sara and nothing before it. Most believed the first theory to be true; proponents of the second argued that something else had been happening on Chau the derelicts did not want to the probes to see.

Why then, Grayson had asked, did the derelicts let the probes begin recording shortly before Chau’s destruction? Also, it was pointed out, the time of day as evidenced from both Sara Major and Sara Minor (Mar Sara’s star, which was mere two light-years away and often considered a second sun to Chau) appearing on the surface of Chau suggested the probes had been sitting in their positions after emerging from hyperspace some forty-thousand kilometers for several hours before recording. Assuming the first theory was correct, this meant the probes had been several hours late arriving. Craft could be minutes late after traveling through hyperspace, depending on the positions of the other planets and large hyperkinetic gravity objects such as asteroids and comets, because objects such as these leave large hyperwells or “reflections” or “images” in hyperspace which must be avoided, similar to avoiding physical objects in realspace, and navigation computers aren’t always precise in calculating the time of hyperspace routes of increasing complexity due to the fact most asteroid and comet movement patterns in the fringe and border worlds hadn’t yet been integrated into navigation computers because of the limit of information these computers could store.

Though new navigational computers would have logged almost every physical presence in the area - kinetic, magnetic and dimensional specifics right down to specs of dust programmed into their mainframes - older models either didn’t have the capacity to carry everything. Many objects floating about simply hadn’t been successfully charted yet. The probes were a few years old, but not so old as to take an additional three hours and thirteen minutes to arrive than projected – so he was told. Perhaps both probes experienced some sort of mechanical problem when they arrived; a field of some sort, perhaps whatever fried their cataloguing databases.

In any case, the probes both took extraordinary recordings of the alien vessels, thousands of small “inconsistencies” flying all about around Chau that resembled giant space flies, several destroyed space stations, a good look at the clouds covering all but Djakel in the north, and some – if hazy – images of Djakel apparently under siege by derelict land forces.

The conclusion was that this was some sort of alien invasion, and coupled with the technical anomalies surrounding the probes and communications, could not be the result of terrorist action. Contingent to the theory was the fact that when

live-feed probes arrive in a system, information is immediately sent to the accompanying relay on a unique gamma frequency and within nanoseconds this information is hyperborne. To provide a manufactured tape, the Sons would have either had to alter the information being transmitted from the relay, something which wasn't impossible for the most elite of Confederate intelligence ops, but was far beyond the resources of the Sons, or, the tape from Mar Sara had been swapped in transit. That meant either the Sons of Korhal had an agent inside Tarsonis who had switched the recording upon arrival, an agent on Mar Sara who switched the recordings then, or the recording had been sabotaged mid-transit and replaced by the manufacture.

The anomalies on the tape regarding the probes didn't make sense, however, and if a forgery was horribly juvenile from a technical standpoint. Artistically, the alien craft looked stunningly real, the images of Chau Sara perfect. As such, the only argument Clayton could make was that either the Sons were trying to confuse the Confederacy into being unsure of what to do while they secured the system under the pretense of an alien invasion that *could* or *couldn't* be a hoax, or, this was the real deal.

Moving fleets into Korhal and Dynakar, however, was a ridiculous idea. Sensors there – and so many it would be almost impossible to falsify, including double agents, mercenary sources, hired hands all over both Dynakar and Korhal in addition to cloaked probes, revealed probes and a host of militia patrols all communicating to Tarsonis and the other core worlds, midway space stations and military fleets all on thousands of frequencies, some so heavily coded they took hours to decode even with the key – showed that the Sons of Korhal hadn't moved their fleets or forces out of the ordinary.

Key to the theory were CI double agents; hundreds of them, revealing the Sons every move – nothing about attacking Chau Sara. No intelligence over the past year signaled the Kel-Morian Combine or Umojan Protectorate were to move against the Confederacy or even had incentive to do so; they were prospering as trading partners with Confederate commercialists under newer, freer trading laws from both sides. In fact, because of the lockdown on Chau Sara after Flannuum incident, the system had been pumped full of so much military bravura and additional personnel – an estimated million and a half plus on Chau itself – it would have taken a sizable force to invade the place with any result other complete failure, a force which the Sons simply did not and could not possess. Grisolm had to be wrong no matter how the cake of circumstance what cut.

“You need more than a false tape and a few battlecruisers to take Chau Sara, Don. We had Los Andares stocked full of a few hundred battle groups. Terrorists simply wouldn't invade a system and fake an alien invasion, botch the cover tape and then hold steady for a massive counter-strike. It simply doesn't add up.”

Grisolm rolled his eyes with an exaggerated sense of supreme annoyance. His powerful, worn hands splayed out as if grasping a bowl as he rebutted: “The tape was botched as a matter of creating confusion and throwing doubt-“

“But why fake an *alien* invasion at all?” That was Art Jarrett, a sharp mind from CIB, the intelligence bureau. His nerdy, almost insidious demeanor deceived; he was cunning and very observant. He knew Grisolm was throwing about skeletons, bare of any real meat.

“Because they did at Stalartis IV and they did it again at Gamma Prime and they did it yet again in Kiel, in our own fucking backyard, that's why!” Each location's name was punctuated by a shake of Grisolm's outstretched hands, his gruff voice filling the room with rough tones.

Clayton cut back in: “They've never faked an alien invasion, of all things. Christ, I can think of a million things more surreptitious than announcing an alien invasion in golden tape at Confed Prime's front door!”

Grisolm called his bluff - not so much a bluff as unpreparedness.

“Such as?”

Clayton sank. There were probably a million – or some substantial number – better ways to deceptively take over a system, or at least a million better situations to falsify on a satellite feed. He just couldn't think of any right now.

Inter-Planetary Mobilization General Hermel Gaust cut in; a pasty, balding man of huge proportions, he was a sharp

character, too – pretty much everyone in the room, with some exceptions, were affable, intelligent, well-read and understandable men, Grisold included. “Why would the Sons want to take Chau by force only to lose it back to us when reinforcements inevitably arrived? Wasn’t-Isn’t the whole idea behind these uprisings on Chau to dissuade the local populace in majority agreement against Confederate rule?” It was good to see Gaust speak up; he had been displaying his upturned hands over the dark, reflective table for several minutes, obviously trying to get a word in.

Grisold didn’t respond; rather, he clenched his jaw visibly, squinted, and gave out a breathy whine of consternation. Affable he was, yes – agreeable, no. The old man had simply locked himself in a box years past, not so much isolating himself as simply putting up walls against new information, and now refused to open the box back up. *It must be nice to always think and know you’re right even when you’re wrong...*

He reconsidered; ignorance, from his experience, *was not* bliss.

Clayton was about to continue the debate, much to the consternation of the others in the room, when his pager rang. He put up a finger to pause the argument, tapping his ear to open the audio/visual signal to his left ear and iris.

“Sir, you’re going to want to see this.”

“Put it through” Clayton closed his eyes and hit a large red plasma-contained button floating just in front of him over the table. The button signified he was busy; watching a visual transmission through open eyes could taint important information.

A slight buzzing in Clayton’s sinus was followed by a three-dimensional graphic appearing across his right iris, reflecting back into the retina and across the inside of Clayton’s eyelid from a tiny projector lodged in Clayton’s plasma-contained communication contact. It only took a moment for him to recognize the man clambering down the elevation lift to a priority transport.

General Edmund Duke had survived.