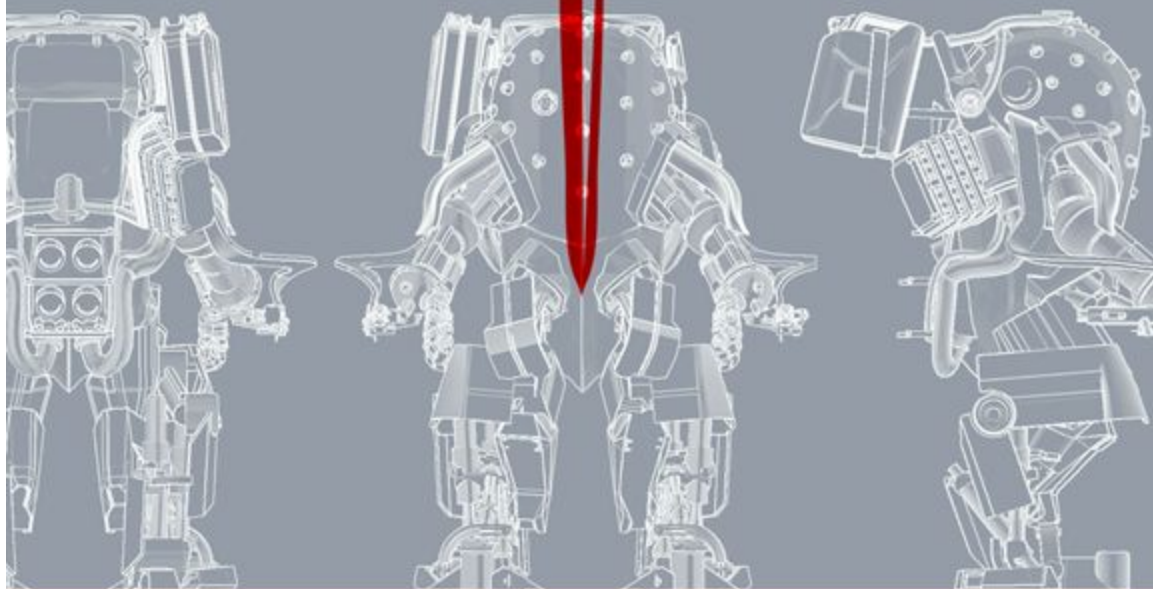




BRIGADOR
BRAD BUCKMASTER

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BRIGADOR

By

Brad Buckmaster

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This book is dedicated to the Monahan brothers
because they paid me, and I am nothing if not filthy
mercenary scum.

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FOREWORD

Brad Buckmaster writes the best military action scenes I've ever read. Probably has something to do with the fact that he's been a soldier his entire adult life. First an infantryman, now a main battle tank gunner in the British Army; he jokes that he takes his book research very seriously, but clearly it's true.

I'm a game developer, I spend a lot of time trying to conjure up characters that live the life that Brad has actually lived. And it's all there on the page. Our team has worked a long time on *Brigador*, and I can tell you it is a rare and strange treat to read a book that turns you into a fan of your own little universe. I'm biased, but you can see for yourself.

Just don't judge him too harshly for the eponymous mech in the opening scene. We named it the Buckmaster in his honor before the book was ever conceived, but now it makes Brad seem vain as well as sociopathic. He is certainly not vain.

Jack Monahan
May 2016
Solo Nobre

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ONE

The hissing of pistons, the whine of servos. Armour-shod feet rhythmically stomping, weighed down by the brute power of a railgun. All of these were things he enjoyed.

The Buckmaster, a marvel of engineering, is the only scout mech chassis able to mount such a heavy weapon. He thought the Buckmaster deserved a better name, so he called it what it truly was.

A hunter.

Specialist Hugh Armbruster loved his mech.

Sector 78. Perimeter patrol. Call sign 'Hunter'. 2052 hours

Armbruster's body swayed gently in time with the machine's loping gait, safely cocooned in the darkened cockpit.

Perfectly in tune with his steel hunter, he surveyed from twenty feet up, silently begging for a reason to unleash hell.

Armbruster was absolutely certain of his abilities. His faith in both his skills and equipment were unbreakable. The smells of grease and gun oil, the only things he had been able to identify clearly for some years now, told him he was home.

The only trouble was, after ten years of loyal service, there were still no wars to fight.

He viewed the world through a series of vision blocks and several monitors, showing the washed-out feed from cameras mounted upon the pitted hull. Carrying out standard checks with monotonous regularity, Armbruster's eyes flicked across to view his left flank and – as always – all he could see was mould-strewn concrete.

The perimeter wall.

Vast and imposing, the hundred-foot-high sheer surface was an ever-present reminder to the citizens of Solo Nobre that Great Leader was there, and he was looking after them.

To his right, the light mech was just coming up on the edge of the habitat area for Sector 78. He could already see off-duty shift workers milling about outside several dingy bars, smoking and chatting amongst themselves.

Being the furthest outpost of District 4, Sector 78 was a dead end, in more ways than one.

Once a primary logistics hub, responsible for shipping vast quantities of supplies to and from the other capital cities, it possessed a large rail depot within its confines.

The military put an end to that after the Troubles, vowing to make every capital self-sufficient, a fortress against attack from an outside foe. All the outer gates but one were welded shut, and units were posted to each and every sector with no exceptions. Great Leader was determined not to make the same mistakes as his late progenitor.

The former rail depot now stood unused, its engines and carriages rusting onto their tracks, reducing Sector 78 to several square miles of mostly wasteland.

The inhabitants were overspill from other sectors. This new generation lived atop the bones of their forbearers, too exhausted to care about their plight after a thirteen-hour shift down the mines.

It was these people that Armbruster viewed through his hazy cam feed. Hard-faced young men and women, lean of frame, the deep red dust of the mines etched into their clothes and skin, ageing them beyond their years.

Heads turned practically as one at the sound of the mech's approach, faces displaying the uniform scowl of disenfranchised youth.

Armbruster zoomed in and had to laugh at the weird facial tattoos and hairstyles that these people sported, despite their hard working life.

How strange these people were.

He looked at his watch, then brought the scout/hunter to a halt.

"Hunter 2, this is 1, hold here," the pilot said over the squad radio net.

“Hunter 2 roger,” was the clipped response from his wingman, Specialist Chris Almeida.

Releasing the right joystick for the first time in what felt like hours, Armbruster flexed his knuckles painfully, before reaching up to his right and flicking a switch on the com panel.

Feedback buzzed from the cerebral jack. It always felt like a slight pull on the socket, like some phantom was gently teasing the cable out as his own mental faculties took up the slack from reduced manual input. His mind kept the unstable war machine balanced as external speakers crackled loudly, and he cleared his throat.

“Citizens of Sector 78,” he said, voice projected so it could be heard for a thousand yards in all directions, “please disperse. Curfew will be in effect in seven minutes.” Curt and precise, Armbruster was happy with his delivery, then decided to add: “You may require the time to walk home.”

Indeed, the sun had already dipped below the wall line, casting a sickly yellow light over scattered clouds.

The civilians’ collective scowl intensified, and they started drinking their sundry concoctions ever so slightly faster, before returning to previous conversations.

It was Armbruster’s turn to frown. He had never appreciated disobedience. It stank of a lack of discipline, so he drove both joysticks forward and flipped the thumb safety of his secondary weapon.

The scout mech lurched towards the bar patrons, machine gun bolt clunking loudly as powered ammo feeds drove an 8mm FMJ round into the chamber.

It had the desired effect, the civilians dispersed, picking up coats and other assorted personal items before briskly walking deeper into the slums.

Several threw hateful looks over their shoulder as they went, but Armbruster didn't care as long as they did what they were told.

"They don't usually do that," Almeida observed from his own mech, a couple hundred yards away.

"No," replied Armbruster, watching the last of the civilians disappear down a side alley, "they do not."

Captain Edwina Blake was uncharacteristically nervous. Nothing usually rocked 'Steady Ed', not on the surface at least, and today had been no exception until now.

The morale tour had gone smoothly. All leg units had been clean and well-presented, functioning well within acceptable parameters for the inspection. Senior Sergeant Kroenig had worked wonders, being seemingly everywhere at once during the preparation phase, cannibalising old junkers and wrecks to get the maximum amount of legs online.

It had been hard on everyone. The usual patrol matrix had to be maintained, as well as an active quick reaction force, the members of which grumbled the loudest upon being informed of the inspection.

But it had to be done. You don't let your guard down when the hero of Solo Nobre comes to say hello.

Colonel Charles Rome looked immaculate and invincible as always. He'd grown a few grey hairs and gained a few laughter lines since Blake had known him at the academy, but not even the neat shrapnel scar diagonally bisecting his chin could diminish his charm.

She hadn't seen him in the years since the food riots, and couldn't help but wonder if he'd let the fame go to his head. Those thoughts had been quashed soon after he arrived.

He immediately ignored the prescribed tour schedule and went to see the troops first. Blake thought him acting the shrewd politician, cultivating his immense popularity with the conscripted forces. It was an obvious play. Nobody likes standing to attention for hours, waiting on senior officers. Then she saw him in action, and changed her mind on the spot. On the immaculate garage floor, Rome returned a crisp salute to Senior Sergeant Kroenig, before cracking a smile and telling the troops to relax. A moment of uncertainty was followed by a collective sigh of relief, and Edwina felt days of tension disappear from the base.

He engaged the men with easy banter, not in the forced, awkward way that made her usually avoid such interactions. *Your boots fit okay? Mail getting through? Hmm, very good.* There was none of that where Rome was concerned.

He cracked jokes, taking the thinly-veiled jibes that characterised enlisted soldiers the globe over, and fired back with a razor wit. Pulling no punches, he instantly crossed the carefully constructed barrier between officers and enlisted and became one of them.

She quietly observed this easy back and forth, the effortless rapport that Rome established with her fighters, and she just could not resent him for it despite the obvious reasons.

So what if he had advanced faster than her? So what if it was a case of right place, right time? Blake had often wondered if she would've reacted differently if she was present during the riots, but it didn't matter.

She saw why Rome had been picked up as a symbol and a hero while he was talking to her men, even putting them at ease while he inspected the slowly decaying equipment.

"It's not your fault," he said. "You're doing the best you can with what you've been given." She could tell he really meant it.

None of that was responsible for making her nervous now. The inspection had been a resounding success, and indeed the 'morale tour' had achieved the desired effect for once.

It was that Colonel Charles Rome had requested to speak with her, in private, with that trademark glint twinkling in his eye.

Ed Blake threw water on her face and reached for a towel. She rubbed vigorously, getting the grime out of her pores that always accumulated after any time spent around mechs.

Peering into the mirror, a heart shaped face toned by years of physical training looked back. Tanned skin and coal black eyes were now streaked by worry lines that betrayed her carefully-maintained image of an emotionless rock. *What the hell does he want to talk about?*

We'd already reminisced over the good old days. The Colonel had reminded her that she had scored considerably higher than him at the academy, to which she'd retorted how ironic it was the brass deemed her the epitome of officer standards.

It was a conversation they'd had before, and about as far as things went in terms of common ground.

So it isn't a chin wag he wants.

Hanging the towel back on its railing, she glanced up once more to fix her composure, taking a breath and picking at a nonexistent loose thread. Dark eyes and black hair, shot through with streaks of grey, were characteristic of the original settlers of Novo Solo, and assembled themselves on her face in a manner that she would describe as 'nondescript'. Despite this, she had never been short of potential suitors of either sex, most of which she had rebuffed. There were no rules against relationships with colleagues in the Great Leader's military, but after several fumbling attempts early on in life, Blake had genuinely lost interest in romantic pursuits and concentrated on her career.

And how gleaming that had become.

Commander of Outpost 78, last bastion at the edge of the city, manned by the heroic forces of the Novo Exército do Povo, or "New People's Army" in the modern tongue.

Here they patrolled the outer border of the city against the non-existent threat from outside, while simultaneously staying apart from the occasional outbursts of civil unrest witnessed deeper within the districts.

It was quite possibly the most boring posting available in the whole city.

The civilians of Sector 78 didn't even get involved in the food riots that engulfed most of Solo Nobre six years previously. The sector seemed lost in time, as if stuck in that exhausted first year after the Troubles ended, its population giving a collective shrug of indifference to outside events.

It seemed to Blake that the world was equally indifferent to her. She held no jealousy for Rome. If anything she was proud of the figurehead he'd become. The city needed more soldiers like him in command positions, countering that bitter weight of the old guard. But given the stark contrast between her and Rome's career trajectories, she wondered if he and the rest saw her as utterly mediocre – just a by-the-numbers captain who never caused trouble and safely landed in a dead-end assignment. Gathering her hair into a tight ponytail and exiting her quarters, she agreed with that assessment.

Private Ranulph Kinny was pissed off.

“No stand-down,” the Sarge had said, “not while the Colonel is still in the base.”

He didn't understand it. They only had three hours until rotation to QRF, and he wanted a couple hours of shuteye before ready up. He looked across the garage floor at his powersuit, a Mongoose M-841 or 'Mog', and hated it with irrational venom.

Its canopy was open, which was just a single piece of curved armour raised on hydraulic rams, showing off the assault harness underneath. Twin 8mm machine guns were raised on the Mog's arms, pointing to the ceiling in the stowed or 'safe' position. The whole machine had a fresh coat of olive drab paint on it, but even that couldn't hide the age of the thing.

Adapted from an older design that the first colonists brought with them, the Mongoose was a bastard of a machine. Those colonists used to strip them down to bare-minimum functionality so they could be mass produced with the limited resources at their disposal. The Troubles put an end to that, however.

Now they were stuck with rust buckets, forced to constantly cannibalise what they had left and repair their ageing arsenal – all to maintain the military's precarious position of power over the populace.

Kinny used to think it made him special when he got pulled from infantry training for Mog school. He scored damn well in the tests too. His cerebellum was sufficiently attuned to accept a cranial jack, and that meant he got to stride into the battlefield in his own eight-foot-tall death machine.

Except, there weren't any battlefields anymore.

His Mongoose powersuit was a relic from the last conflict, adapted from a war machine to a utility vehicle and back again. He constantly got bad feedback, ghost images on his cam display, and the left leg twitched with annoying frequency – so much so that he swore the M-841 was a living being, one that was trying to kill him. Sometimes it simply refused to respond to any commands at all.

Sergeant Kroenig had informed him that it was just teething problems. It would be okay after a few months of bedding in.

“Mogs are a bit temperamental when breaking in a new driver,” he had assured him.

After seven months into a year-long tour of routine patrols and Sgt Kroenig, the novelty of being a Mongoose pilot had worn off. Plus, the Sergeant's mentality right now didn't make any sense – the Colonel himself had told them all to relax. Hells, even the so-called “hero of the riots” had turned out to be a legend.

The Colonel was nothing like “Steady Ed” Blake, the most boring, uninspiring ice bitch he'd ever met in his 19 years of life. That guy Rome had a way with words, and Kinny had felt empowered by them. He nearly bought into his smooth BS before giving himself a reality check.

“Ulf! What're you thinking there, little brother?” The voice belonged to Private Stephen Bader, Kinny's ‘battle buddy’ and best friend in the unit.

He wasn't his real brother, but they had bummed around together since they were kids, and were rarely apart.

“Because, by the look on your face, I'd say you were about ready to re-up.” He capped the comment with a big, shit-eating grin.

Bader was a year ahead of Kinny, and his compulsory service contract was up at the end of the tour. Then he'd be off to join Kinny's actual older brother Carlos, and all their other friends with the Corvids.

Kinny looked up to him, not just because he was friends with Carlos, but because he looked out for him out of genuine respect.

"Shut up, man, just 'cos you're short. I heard you were having second thoughts yourself," Kinny retorted, his heart not in it.

"Nope, I'm as good as gone little man. You watch, I'll come visit you next year, and you'll be like him," Bader gestured across the garage to where Sergeant Jack Kroenig was tinkering inside his powersuit, "invoking the Saints every time a piston head cracks in your power plant."

Kinny laughed.

"Seven Hells no. Promise you'll kill me if I get like that."

Bader ignored him, jumping into a pitch-perfect gravelly growl, impersonating the old Sarge.

"By Martim's toolbox, I command you to find a firing solution."

"By Nara's duct tape, please hold this assembly together," Kinny chimed in, and they both burst out sniggering.

"Are you two questioning the holiness of Saint Nara's duct tape?"

Corporal Ana Mirante loomed behind them, a white-toothed smile plastered across her wide, blunt features.

"No Corporal!" both Privates chimed, and Ana chuckled. The big Mog driver pulled over an ammo crate and sat down on it, resting muscular arms on the knees of her jacksuit.

Mirante was a career soldier, a few years older than Kinny and Bader, and she had the classic Mog driver's physique. She was tall, but lean and well-muscled from years of sitting in a hot cockpit, dealing with the constant exertion of willing the damn things to do what they were told.

She was in a different squad to the two Privates, but they got on like a house on fire.

“So, what are my girls talking about? Ulf?” Kinny shrugged. He hated that nickname, but it stuck like a limpet mine ever since he made the mistake of exclaiming “My name’s Ranulph, not Ulf!”

“Nothing much, Ana. I just wanted to get a bit of head down before we ready up. That’s all.”

Bader shot him a crooked look.

“Don’t sugarcoat it, Ulf,” he said, “you’re sick of that idiot.” He threw a thumb over his shoulder to where Kroenig was deep in the guts of his machine. “We both are,” he continued.

“Why are we here? He keeps us hanging about for no reason. He knows we’re on QRF in a few hours, but we’re sitting here sweating in our jacksuits. For what?”

Ana turned slightly red at the cheeks as she watched Kroenig fuss over an accelerator linkage. He had probably checked it a dozen times.

“I know what you mean. I swear, if he makes me call him ‘Sergeant’ one more time I’m gonna shoot him in the face next time we’re on the ground. I’m an NCO too, for Etim’s sake.” Although the tone was kept light, she stressed her words.

Bader feigned surprise.

“Corporal, did you just take a Saint’s name in vain? For shame! And, I find your undermining of the chain of command quite disturbing. Expect my report on Kroenig’s desk!” Bader flinched as Mirante gave him a solid right cross to the arm.

“Dick,” she said. Kinny laughed.

“Ow. Let me finish,” Bader went on, raising a finger with a wince. “I’ll report you right after he makes us do a bunch of stupid battle drills we’ll never use. If I can still walk.”

“And he’ll probably ‘hand-to-hand combat’ you for it,” Kinny chimed in with the appropriate chopping motions, “because that’s essential stuff to know when driving a war machine.” Another round of laughs.

There was a natural pause in the conversation, and the trio found themselves looking at Kroenig once more.

“Look at him,” Bader said, “he’s one of the ‘greatest generation’ apparently.” Kinny nodded absently. “Who even calls them that? Nobody. What has Kroenig done with his life? Why should we respect him?”

Kinny could’ve mentioned that he won the Distinguished Service Cross, whatever that was, but didn’t want to contradict his friend. He had wondered many times how good Kroenig could actually be, with the fact that he was in his fifties in an army that promoted on merit, and still only an NCO.

“Their generation put that monster in power, and what has he done for us since?” Bader was on a roll. The tone had got more serious immediately, and his voice dropped with it.

Speaking out against the Great Leader was treason. Even now it carried a death sentence.

“I’ll tell you what: he’s hamstrung our society with this autocracy of his. We can’t build anything to better ourselves anymore. All we have is conscription, or a life in the mines.”

“A life in the Army isn’t so bad,” Ana shrugged, reluctant to engage fully, being a career soldier herself. “It’s a living.”

“No, it isn’t,” Bader bit back, “it’s an existence. It’s just slightly better than the alternative.”

Kinny found himself transfixed on Bader as he spoke. This was the stuff that he lived for, and why he needed to be out of the Army.

“These fools let themselves be led around like cattle,” he pointed over at Kroenig’s Mog again, “practically slaves to the system until they’ve bled out for some state pension, and they’ll have you believe we should be

thankful for it. They grind us down, with no incentive other than perpetuating the cycle, and then wonder why so many of us join the Corvids.”

“Revolution, man,” Kinny said quietly, “that’s what we need.”

“Ah, don’t start with this again,” Ana said with a roll of the eyes, “the Corvids are a joke. Nobody takes them seriously.”

“That’s because you’re from central. If you lived where we came from, out in the dead, you’d know.” Bader nodded firmly in agreement with his friend. “There are hundreds of thousands of them out there. You’ll see, they’ll tear this wreckage down, and rebuild.”

Ana frowned. She didn’t want to get drawn into this argument again. It would always devolve into a back and forth about the orbital guns, and whether they actually did stop the corporations from taking over.

“Ulf’s right,” Bader said energetically. He was slipping into his comfortable routine, bringing up well-worn points they’d all heard before.

“When was the last time you saw a ship leave the city? Or heard of one leaving the planet at all, for that matter?”

He stared at Ana, who shrugged reluctantly. “Never. Not in our lifetime at least. You know why?”

“The blockade,” She said flatly.

“The blockade,” Bader and Kinny parroted with enthusiasm.

“We can’t go anywhere, or do anything, because of those stupid orbital guns. The rest of the galaxy is advancing out there and here we are, trapped on our own world because our leaders are too arrogant to open a dialogue with the corporations.”

Ana shook her head.

“You know there were orbital guns before, right?” Ana replied, her tone still conveying unwillingness to truly engage.

“Yeah,” Bader bit back, “there were about one-tenth of what we have now. And they were all way smaller in calibre. The old ones were just a deterrent. The Hierarchy knew they didn’t mean business.”

“The old Hierarchy knew that a comprehensive orbital gun grid would cripple the economy,” Kinny chimed in.

Ana was about to retort, but she stopped herself. She really couldn’t be bothered tonight and instead smiled.

“Tell you what,” she said, “when you rise up and overthrow us, I promise not to waste your piddly asses with my Mog – how’s that sound?”

Glances were shared, then they all chuckled gently.

“That’s a deal, Corporal,” said Ranulph Kinny, “when I’m in charge, I’ll make you a General or somethi-“

“Corporal Mirante,” Kroenig rumbled. His voice seldom rose above a hate-filled growl.

The trio jumped collectively, Kroenig had just appeared from behind the M-841.

How long has he been there? Kinny thought with a jolt of alarm.

“Yes?” Ana replied politely.

“Yes, what, Corporal?”

Ana’s face flushed, and her eyes flickered with rage for the shortest moment.

“Yes, Sergeant,” she corrected herself, through practically gritted teeth.

“Can I have a word, Corporal? In private.”

“Yes, Sergeant,” said Ana, her voice louder now, flat in tone.

She rigidly stood up from her seated position and moved in the direction of the Senior Sergeant’s office.

Kroenig remained, and stared at the two young men.

He was tall and broad, with a frame of solid muscle that only recently had begun to soften at the waist with age.

Kroenig's grey hair was high and tight, reminiscent of old regulations that no longer applied to today's Army. The haircut revealed the black alloy plate that comprised a fair portion of his skull, curving round from the cranial jack to stop just behind his temple.

His left arm twitched spasmodically. The joint servos were made of the same black alloy as the skull plate and gave little mechanical whimpers with his every movement. Every twitch was matched by a slight change in his expression. He was clearly in constant pain, and that only made him more difficult.

"Privates," the Sergeant said softly.

Kinny and Bader automatically stood to attention

"Sergeant," they responded in unison.

He glared at one of them for an awkward few seconds, then the other, boring into their skulls with his eyes.

Kinny wondered how he still managed to appear more smartly presented than either he or Bader, despite his jacksuit being covered in oil.

"If I hear either of you speaking of revolution again, I swear in Martim's name I will fucking kill you."

And with that, he turned to stalk after Corporal Mirante.

Kinny and Bader turned to each other, both wearing the same smirk.

They sniggered like school boys.

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TWO

“Hunter 2 this is 1, hold up a minute. I’m updating our map trace.”

“Hunter 2 roger.”

Armbruster settled the Scout mech into its dismount position, and it dropped to the ground on reverse jointed legs like a nightmare chicken roosting.

Almeida stomped off to a flank and started slowly covering a 360° arc.

Armbruster switched on a blackout light, and the cockpit was bathed in a dull red glow as he cracked his knuckles.

Skirting the perimeter of the slums had taken a lot longer than anticipated, civilians kept leaving their houses in groups, and had to be corralled back into their homes.

Armbruster wanted to start firing at them. After all, breaking curfew was an executable offence, but Almeida had talked him down.

It was unreasonable, he argued, to gun people down in cold blood simply for being outside. He had said that the rule was a throwback to the Troubles, and now it would be insane to start shooting the place up on a whim.

Damn Almeida and his logic.

The time they had spent yelling at civilians had meant that they would not meet their return deadline if they kept to the same route, so something had to change.

Armbruster scrutinised his laminated map board, and pulled out a marker.

“Hunter 2, this is 1, I’ve changed the route, over.”

Armbruster paused to give his wingman time to observe his own map board.

“1, this is 2, go on,” replied Almeida. Armbruster traced the new route as he spoke, keeping one eye on the monitors.

“I’m switching from route green to route blue. 11, then 13, then 24, then back to green and back in. Roger so far?”

Almeida repeated the map spots correctly.

The Army used a spot system for each of its sectors, with every major road junction being assigned a ‘spot’ which included a colour and a number.

This was for ease of use, as they could go on patrol and simply say “I’m using patrol route green today,” for example. Also, if any unit got into contact, all they would have to do is report which spot number they occupied and the QRF would immediately know where they are. Complex grid references took time to relay, as the user had to figure it out first.

It was an elegant system, and had worked well in the past.

“The reason is, we’re going to be back late otherwise, and I want to swing by the last gate on the way back.”

“Roger that mate. Hunter 2 is on the move.” Almeida seemed as unconcerned by the route change as he did about anything else.

Armbruster switched on his long range HF antenna to report his route change to sector command as he took control of his machine and followed his wingman.

Static.

He tried again, listening intently to the carrier wave as he was rocked gently by the stomping motion of the scout/hunter.

Nothing. Maybe the high-rise habitat blocks around them were messing with the signal.

Never mind, he thought to himself as the long-range antenna retracted, *it’s just a quick shortcut, a gate check, and we’ll be back to base.*

“Hunter 2, 1, we’ve got no comms to command.”

“Hunter 2 roger, we better make sure these heaps don’t break down then.”

Armbruster laughed, then stopped abruptly.

“Get back inside your building!” he screamed through external speakers to a small huddle of civilians who stood, smoking in a doorway.

They just ignored him, and stared.

Damn these people, he thought, and they walked on.

“What’s wrong with this picture?” Almeida asked, rhetorically.

“By the saints...” The two scout mechs halted, and Almeida smoothly swung around, to cover the way they had just come.

The gate was open.

Fifty feet high, and as wide as the carriageway, the district gate was a nigh-impenetrable barrier.

It was only opened twice a day on shift changes to allow the workers to get to and from the mines.

Now wasn’t either of those times.

“We should check the job list.”

“I checked it before we left,” Armbruster replied, annoyance in his voice.

“Maybe they changed it.”

“They wouldn’t change it without telling us.” He didn’t like this. Unscheduled gate openings were serious business.

“Maybe they tried, and they couldn’t reach us,” Almeida pointed out.

“Would you shut up please?” Armbruster bit his lip as thought for a moment.

“Cover me, I’m going to disembark and check the gate computer.”

“Roger that boss,” Almeida deadpanned.

Every district gate had a terminal, about four feet high and made of reinforced steel. It was painted matte green, just like everything else owned by the military, and had two doors on the front that were secured by a heavy combination lock.

Armbruster thumbed the wheels of the lock into the right positions, occasionally glancing about up and down the partially lit roadway. His other hand tightened on the pistol grip of his carbine as a light rain pattered down.

He hated being out of his cockpit. Even though his mech was roosting just a few feet behind him, he felt unsafe without its protection. He hated how the breeze felt against his face, how the air carried with it the tang of pollution, as opposed to the scrubbed air inside his hunter.

He shuddered at the minor chill, and pulled the lock away from the door, sliding the deadbolt to one side.

The computer door swung open to reveal a scratched Plexiglas screen, with a weather-proofed, rubbery keyboard beneath it.

“C’mon, c’mon.” he muttered as he heard the tubes warm up, and the screen presented him with the familiar red text of the city bulletin board system.

He tapped in his access information carefully with one finger, unused to typing with leather gloves on.

He hated computers too, didn’t trust the things, but these ones were hard lined in a network that spanned the city. It would allow him to communicate with sector command, albeit slowly.

Internal workings made screeching noises as he waited an age to be redirected to the military board.

He didn’t get the chance to reach Sector 78’s specific thread.

“What in the Seven Hells...”

There was just one message, repeated over and over again. He scrolled through different sector threads, then district, then even central, which he shouldn't have been able to access.

The same message, in the old tongue, invoking the spirit of the fighter.

Armbruster decided to open the message.

“Welcome Brigador. Here is your contract...” Armbruster read it all, carefully, then again to be sure.

It was simple logic. The corporation owns hundreds of worlds. The corporation outranks the Great Leader.

Armbruster made his choice.

He shut down the terminal and hurried back into his cockpit.

As soon as he sealed the top hatch, he reattached his jack and systems came alive.

“This is Hunter 2, what took you so long? What did command say?”

Armbruster thought about it, and wondered if he should tell his old friend about the contract. “Well?”

“Nothing,” he replied “there were no instructions or alterations. This is an unauthorised gate opening.”

Armbruster looked at the darkness beyond the gate, and felt a thrill of excitement shudder through him.

This was it. Something big was about to happen.

“Well, I suggest we get out of the open and cover that gaping hole in our defences then,” Almeida said impatiently over the ‘net. It made sense of course. Scout mechs could not take a beating like their heavier counterparts, and use of cover was instrumental to their success in a fight. He was already moving away from the gate, towards the heavily built up habitation zone when Armbruster replied.

“Of course. Lead the way.”

The civilians watched as they approached, and did not move.

“You have the best legs I’ve ever seen,” said Colonel Rome, flashing a smile. Edwina Blake stared at him with intensity. He was sprawled on a chair that he had fashioned from a table and several crates, letting his spotless jacksuit get coated in grime.

Was this why he had asked her to meet him privately, and in the wreck yard of all places?

She had expected more from him, really. “That isn’t a proposition, you can stop looking at me like you want to gouge out my eyes.” Her look faltered a bit, his smile did not.

“I truly mean it. Your leg units are the best I’ve seen in all the districts. It was specifically why I left your sector till last on my list of visits.”

Blake was confused.

“Thank you, sir, but how? How could you possibly know what my leg units would be like?”

He waved in the air dismissively.

“Don’t worry about formality when we’re out of earshot of the troops, Ed, we’re peers. You know we’re equals, regardless of rank.”

Blake appreciated the gesture, but had no time for ambiguity.

“Well then Charles, thank you again, but can we not dawdle? I have a sector to run.”

He laughed unexpectedly, then replied.

“That’s exactly what I mean. That right there,” he paused, allowing time for his comment to sink in. “I meant what I said earlier. You scored highest out

of our intake. I've been watching your career closely these last few years, Edwina." He looked away, another smile threatening to appear, as though he were about to say something dirty. "Do you know what the troops call you?" She did.

"Steady Ed."

"That's right, and there's a reason for that," Rome went on. Sooner or later she was sure that he would get to his point.

"You have never rocked the boat, never missed one quota, never fouled up a patrol, or submitted a report with so much as a typo in it."

Edwina was fully aware of her own service record. She was also aware how unimpressive it was.

"I've never done anything of note either. Never successfully broken up a food riot without causing thousands of casualties."

"Well you know what they say, right place, right time-," Rome was saying, before Blake cut him off.

"That's not it at all, sir. Using the Mongooses to form a defensive baseline, using smoke launchers to disperse the crowds, making the infantry use their transports to gather wounded and take them to medical stations, all without firing a shot. No commander in the history of Novo Solo has done that before," Blake shook her head as she thought of the correct words "it was inspired."

Colonel Rome looked like he was about to blush. "You realise that you're the first person to gather both the support of the military and the Corvids?"

"Stop, just stop there. I don't need you blowing smoke up my ass. I get enough of that from central." Rome toyed with a piece of loose metal that jutted from an overhanging mech arm. "You know that whole riot thing was as much luck as skill. Some of those rioters were armed, if they fired one shot it would've turned into a massacre."

But it didn't, Blake felt like saying.

And that's how heroes were born.

"It leads me to why I'm here," finally, "after that incident, people started to notice me. Long story short, I've had an audience with the Great Leader, and he wants me to take over as commander of District 4."

Blake was taken aback. She knew he was a flier, but to make General in your thirties? That was fast.

"And as I said, back at central I have a bunch of people buzzing around, blowing smoke up my ass. Those guys will lead me to the noose, while telling me that it's a great idea, and I thought of it myself. You understand?"

Blake understood perfectly. Her ears popped, and she started to feel light-headed.

Rome went on. "I'm going to need a staff colonel, one that's straight as an arrow. I need someone that will tell me when to reign in my dumb ideas, and when to go for it."

"You want me to be your advisor," Blake stated flatly.

Rome nodded.

"When I look at your career I don't see mediocrity. I see consistency. I'm this wild public figure, and I need you to knock me off my pedestal every now and again. Of course you would move onto your own command after the initial posting." The last sentence, spoken almost as a throwaway line, ignited a fire inside Blake that she hadn't felt in years.

"What do you say?"

Captain Blake did not hesitate.

"Yes, of course yes. What officer doesn't want to advance? It's what I've always wanted."

Rome smiled, not without warmth.

"I knew you'd be on board. Brace yourself, though, Edwina. I see big changes in the future. You see this?" he gestured around them, at all the

junkers and ruined machinery Blake's forces had whittled down and torn apart over the years to keep themselves going.

"There'll be no more of this. I want reforms, building projects. We can bring in a new era of-,"

Lieutenant Greer burst out of the door, urgency written into every aspect of his body language.

He was currently ops room commander, along with Major Trask, the second in command to Colonel Rome.

"Sorry to intrude Colonel," he said without preamble, before addressing Blake, "Ed, you're needed in the ops room, now!"

"Ready up! Ready up!"

Kinny screwed up his eyes as the strip lights flickered on with a hum, and cursed loudly.

"I want those legs on the line in three minutes!"

It had to happen. Kroenig couldn't let them rest.

Several more curses joined his in a chorus, and there was a general commotion as tired bodies dragged themselves from iron-framed beds.

He hated being on QRF. He hated leaving his personal bed space to go sleep on these awful bunk beds with the green plastic mattresses. The whole platoon was crammed into one small room, and so many troops had passed through there that someone almost always caught scabies from the damn things.

More than any of that, he hated Kroenig's shout. It wasn't really a shout, his vocal chords were too damaged. It was just his regular growl but amplified to the point where it grated the senses.

Kinny had just managed to drop off to sleep, too. He rolled over and looked at his watch. Two hours. It had been two hours since taking over from 2nd platoon and already the dickhead was running a crash-out drill.

Couldn't he at least wait till first light?

Kinny felt gloved hands grab his jacksuit and drag him off the bed. He half-fell from the third bunk, but he blinked and Kroenig was there, nose to nose, holding him upright.

“Get on the line,” he said quietly, before releasing Kinny and pushing past, already zeroed in on Markovic, who was scrambling to put his boots on.

The veteran trooper wasn't too bright, but he had jack compatibility and always re-upped his contract, so that was good enough for the Army.

Kinny wasn't dumb, he slept with his boots on during QRF rotation, so he just staggered through the flimsy wooden door onto the garage floor.

Rows of Mogs filled the expansive space, with the Buckmaster scouts and the Heavies off to one side.

The QRF Mogs were to the fore, cockpits open, kept on standby mode for the duration of the rotation.

Kinny quickly identified M-841 and made a beeline for it, then stopped.

He looked across to the other end of the garages where the human-sized doors connected them to the rest of the base, where Captain Blake was climbing the access ladder up the side of 'Eddy'. The Touro-class heavy mech was an imposing sight, and Kinny did not expect to see it in action that night. Across from her, the visiting Colonel climbed his own machine, the command variant 'Wolf Mother' and dropped out of sight through the top hatch.

That wasn't normal. Officers rarely got involved in drills, and if they did it was only in an observation role.

What's going on? Kinny thought, as he climbed onto the stumpy access steps, one situated on the inside of each calf of his powersuit. From here he

leaned in, and pulled the carbine from its rack, where it sat stowed to the rear right of his assault harness.

It was a blocky piece of stamped metal with plastic furniture and a folding stock. It also had a ridiculous laser unit on top, which was supposed to be used for close quarter's warfare, but added so much weight as to make it useless. The grunts on base used it to disperse crowds in potential riot situations.

After the Troubles it became ingrained into the human psyche somehow. If you see a red dot on you, you get out of there.

A knot threatened to twist in his stomach as Kinny conducted routine ready-up checks, and he swallowed hard to push it down. It just felt wrong.

He checked the mag was already fitted, racked the charging handle, put the fire selector to 'safe' and stowed the carbine away.

Kinny then shrugged into his lightweight survival rig, which resembled a canvas vest, containing spare magazines for the carbine, a couple of grenades, water, a small med kit and an escape map, should he become separated from his Mog.

Giving his torso a confirmatory wriggle to ensure the rig was comfy, he spun around in a practised motion, slotting his feet into the thigh sections of his suit, and leaned back.

He reached behind him and found the jack, then slotted that into his cranial port.

It started without warning, as always. The feeling of icy fingers prodding inside his flesh, creeping out from his neck and worming through the body until his extremities tingled uncomfortably.

The Private got goose bumps and shuddered, he never got used to that.

The power plant kicked out of standby mode upon detection of a driver, and rumbled softly with an energised hum that Kinny found soothing.

Once connection was established, he pulled a clip from the rear of his jacksuit, which extended on a tensile cord, and clamped it over the jack port. The last thing he needed was to become disconnected in the middle of contact, and the clip would ensure nothing short of emergency ejection would sever him from his Mongoose.

Next, Kinny clipped the leg and shoulder straps of his assault harness closed, and cinched them up tight. Rumour had it that Kroenig drove without straps to afford better manoeuvrability, but Kinny thought that would make it extremely tiring to drive, what with the slight lag between driver movement and that of the machine.

Finally, to complete the seal he reached up and pulled on the ram holding his canopy up and it came down smoothly, movement synchronised with the closing of the thigh plates.

Once cocooned inside his powersuit, Kinny squirmed around until he managed to slot his arms into armoured gauntlets, and wrapped his hands around the trigger mechanism of his machineguns.

Thumbing the top button of each gun, he was rewarded with the clack of full metal jacketed rounds being chambered.

As soon as his weapons were ready, blurry white crosshairs appeared on his forward display, which darted about in sympathy with the motion of his arms.

Kinny looked down and to his left. Every bulb on his diagnostic board displayed green. It was a rare occurrence, but one they had assured happen for the inspection.

He was good to go. The whole process took no more than a couple of minutes.

All around him, Mog drivers were readying up, reporting their status in clipped tones over the squad net.

Kinny was 1st Squad, so reported to Sgt Kroenig. The senior NCO was chief administrator and disciplinarian inside base, but on the ground he was the technically the equal of Ana Mirante, commander of 2nd Squad.

Three squads of five Mogs made up 1st Platoon, and their role was to protect the heavies from infantry and light armoured threats, so that they were free to take out whatever objectives lay before them.

Kinny waited his turn in the queue, until he heard Bader ready up.

“This is Kinny, ready.”

Kroenig grumbled a confirmation, then reported up the chain to the commander.

Mogs weren't important enough to warrant their own names, and individual call signs were unnecessary at the squad level, so Kroenig permitted his troops to use their names on the net. It was less confusing that way.

“What's going on Sarge?” crackled Mirante over the squad net.

“From what I can gather,” Kroenig returned, “there has been an unauthorised gate opening.”

Shit, thought Kinny, that was bad for the Army. The gates were instrumental to Great Leader's power. Keeping separate elements of the Corvid masses apart was key to stopping them from rising up.

Kinny wondered where his brother was.

“A garbled contact report was received from Hunter team. They reported being under attack by armed civilians before the transmission cut off.”

“Enemy numbers?” That was Corporal Neto, commander of 3rd Squad. He rarely spoke, but when he did it was usually important.

“Unknown, but the rest of the base is readying up in reserve to give us support if we need it.”

“We get a grid from the contact report?” Neto again.

“Roger, they were in the blues, directly east of the district gate.”

“That's tough terrain for heavies, narrow streets,” Mirante said, and Kinny found himself nodding in agreement. The standard patrol routes usually consisted of perimeter checks and curfew calls, they rarely ventured into the

rat's maze of habitation blocks that made up the western portion of the sector.

“Well, it'll be us dragging them out of the shit if it goes off,” Kroenig rumbled, “We aren't taking dismounts.” It was standard procedure to leave infantry behind if a platoon crashed on QRF. They couldn't keep up with leg units on foot, and the transport trucks were too vulnerable. “You better make sure your men are on point.”

As soon as he finished, the ground rumbled noticeably, and ceiling fans chugged into action to extract waste emissions as the heavies powered up. Their shields were so powerful, Kinny could feel his teeth itch even inside his suit, and a barely perceptible buzz could be heard on the radio's carrier signal.

He turned the Mog in place to watch as the slab-sided war gods stood up to their full height, accompanied by a groan of hydraulic pistons.

'Eddy' was armed with a quad-barrelled artillery piece that could flatten city blocks and decimate squadrons of tanks, and its armoured prow could crush anything in its path. Even the secondary weapon, a kinetic laser affectionately known as the 'Bully' could turn lesser units into scrap in short order. They rarely got to patrol with heavy support, outside of tactical training. Kinny was still in awe every time he saw one in action.

That's what it meant to be a career soldier in his mind. If he re-upped, he could be piloting his own war mech in a few years.

He dismissed the thought before it left him feeling confused again.

He hoped that Carlos hadn't done anything stupid.

Connection.

Blake detected the distinct smell of ozone that accompanied shields rising to full power, as she settled into her command couch. The Captain observed

the multitude of displays available to her, and all seemed well. Hoppers and magazines were full, autoloaders well-oiled, and power plant was in the high nineties. The techs had done a good job.

When she was satisfied, she opened up a comms channel to ‘Wolf Mother’, currently standing across from her.

The Colonel’s mech was a command variant, a Praetor class, identified by the nest of antennas that sprouted from the upper carapace to the rear of the machine. It had an outlandish design stencilled across either side of its blunt visage, that of a snarling wolf’s head in brilliant white paint.

Only Rome could get away with that, she thought.

He said that he would join her on the ground as her second. His mech was outfitted for direct fire, mounting a 105mm cannon and heavy machinegun for defence, so theoretically should be no different to working alongside Lt Greer.

He would complement her artillery, cooperating to bracket targets for destruction should the need arise.

“Are you sure about this, Colonel?” she asked. If this was going to get bad, and there was a good chance it might, she didn’t want a future district commander getting killed on her watch.

“Stop worrying Ed, I won’t get in your way. Just treat me as you would your usual battle buddy. Besides, I won’t be allowed to stomp concrete anymore after my promotion. There’s a good chance I’ll be piloting a desk after this outing.”

He had a point. Still, he had the worst possible timing. *Why had he chosen today of all days to visit her sector? What if it all went to shit?*

“Okay then,” she said “if you’re certain, then we better get moving.”

Blake flipped a switch on her console, and the huge garage doors began to open on rollers mounted from the ceiling.

Huge concrete floor plates shuddered into life, rotating the heavy mech to face the exit.

As it rumbled slowly on great gears, the skyline of Solo Nobre came into view, all grim high rise blocks and crumbling industrial machinery. There was a faint orange glow to the horizon, too bright to be cast by the magnesium bulbs of the street lamps.

It appeared as though the city was burning.

Blake was gripped by a cold chill, as though her mech had interpreted her emotional state and shivered in sympathy.

“Eddy, this is ops, over,” came Lt Greer’s voice over the command net.

“Go ahead ops,” she responded, impatient to get going.

Greer opened the line, but there was a definite pause before he spoke again.

“It’s the bulletin board network. There’s something wrong with it.”

Blake had no time for vagaries, not now.

“What’s wrong with it? Are there any orders from District?”

“Well, no, but the bbs seems to be corrupted somehow,” he started, but Blake cut him off.

“It can wait. Have you managed to get comms with Central yet?”

“Not yet. There’s a lot of interference on all channels.” There was definitely something bigger than a simple error in gate scheduling going on.

“Well, inform me via VHF as soon as you hear anything. We’ll be setting relays as we go, so you should have no problem keeping comms with us. Eddy, out.”

She closed the link and switched over to the squad net.

“All call signs, this is Eddy. We don’t know what to expect out there, so be on your guard. Chances are there has been a gate malfunction, and Corvid separatists are using the opportunity to cause some havoc, nothing more.”

She stopped, and considered her next words. “Regardless, this is just a patrol like any other. Remember your training, and look to your NCOs for guidance. All leg call signs, move out.”

“I want a standard Phalanx formation. 1st Squad on point, 2nd left flank, 3rd right until we’re out of cover range of the base.” Kroenig’s commands were clipped, and spoken with a calm urgency born of years of experience.

Ranulph Kinny barely heard the orders. He was too busy fixated on the Captain’s little speech.

Real dread began to set in as he shuffled into position.

She’s never done that before.

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THREE

Kinny strained to look directly up, his machine struggling to match his movements as it lacked a separate head unit. He could barely see the top of the high rise blocks that loomed on either side of the street through his forward display as he trained gun barrels on windows. There were hundreds of darkened portals, all of which contained the threat of ambush.

All it would take was for one disgruntled civilian to open up on them from any of those crumbling facades, and it would turn ugly.

The street was narrow, not wide enough for two heavies to pass abreast, and progress was slow.

For some reason civilians filled the streets, milling around in groups, congregating around their scrapyard collection of vehicles.

There was a tension in the air, like the city was holding its collective breath. Ranulph Kinny could barely stand it.

“Citizens, clear a path,” Kroenig boomed over external speakers up ahead. “Heavy mechanised units are in operation. You are at risk of serious injury.”

The miserable Sergeant was tip of the spearhead, ensuring the street was clear for the big legs to advance.

Kinny was behind him, offset to the left. His job was to cover the high areas, armour being vulnerable from above in built-up environments.

Behind him, offset further, was Bader, covering the left flank. He would scrutinise every alleyway and side street. There were no end of rat holes and dingy areas where the mechs simply could not go without smashing the place apart. Grayson and Braga mirrored their positions on the right side respectively, forming the spearhead formation.

Behind 1st Squad, Wolf Mother stomped forward slowly, scanning with methodical efficiency, each heavy footfall drowning out the sounds from

Kinny's own suit momentarily and throwing up echoes that confused his audio sensory gear.

2nd Squad followed the heavy, Ana Mirante and her boys concentrating purely on flank protection in a box formation, with Ana at the centre for ease of command.

Eddy followed 2nd Squad, and Captain-Commander Blake concentrated on juggling the mishmash of various comms signatures that were bouncing seemingly at random around the city. She could barely make sense of it since the relays usually weren't worth their weight, but it seemed that there had been a terrorist attack in District 1. Gate power was being disrupted all over the city.

How many dissident elements now had free reign of the city, with no means of controlling them?

The thought was unnerving.

"Be wary of these civilians," she repeated many times over the course of the patrol. "We have no solid intel, but be prepared to engage immediately." She hoped that it didn't come off as too aggressive in the eyes of Colonel Rome, but there was no way these people would be breaking curfew by coincidence.

Bringing up the rear of the formation was 3rd Squad, commanded by Corporal Neto. He was covering their asses, and would be active reserve should anything happen.

"All call signs this is Wolf Mother, we're coming up on the gate now."

Rome had the best view of the area, with his raised elevation, and could now see the evidence of the Hunter contact.

Several small fires flickered in the steady rain, flames whickering fitfully against the water. Plumes of smoke rose from chunks of cooling metal.

"Squad 1, seen," Kroenig replied a few seconds later.

The unit broke cover of the close-packed buildings and spread out into an extended line to bring their full firepower to bear on an even frontage.

The open gate loomed ominously, its unlit highway leading into the dark, framed by the orange glow of a distant skyline.

There was wreckage strewn everywhere.

Bullet holes peppered the rough concrete floor and the perimeter wall, and shell casings littered the ground in all directions.

Turning around to check rearwards, Kinny saw that a few larger chunks had been blown from the nearest buildings, exposing the rooms beyond to the elements.

The Private zoomed in, and saw a meagre mattress on the floor, next to which sat a small gas stove that had been knocked on its side. The blanket had been blown out of the room, and hung limply from a jagged piece of rebar two stories below. The scene reminded Kinny of what he had to look forward to after his time in the service, and he turned away.

“Looks like we missed the fight, Sarge,” Bader began.

“Shut up,” Kroenig cut him off, before switching to the command channel.

“Eddy this is 1st Squad, I think we’ve found the remains of one of our Hunter call signs.”

The second heavy mech was only now exiting the cover of the buildings, and she stomped towards the scene with caution.

There was one reverse-jointed leg, the mangled outline of railgun plates, pointing mournfully at the sky, and not much else. The entire hull of the Buckmaster class had been blown out by some immensely powerful force.

“It looks like it was hit by heavy weapons.”

The words hung heavy in the air.

Mere small arms fire wouldn’t put a dent in a mech the size of something as large as the scout class.

The implications didn't need to be said.

The silence hung on for an awkwardly long period, punctuated only by heavy footsteps as Eddy approached the site. Kinny was about to ask Kroenig what they should do, when the Commander spoke:

“This is Eddy. 1st Squad, I need you to dismount and see if you can recover the black box from that Hunter. All other call signs, form a ring of steel.”

A chorus of confirmations answered her in short order, and legs began the well-practised manoeuvres of shuffling position to cover their comrades.

“I'm dismounting, Kinny cover me.” Without waiting for a response, Sergeant Kroenig popped his oversized power suit, and stalked on foot to the wreckage.

Kinny stayed close to the empty machine and watched as his Sergeant clambered up the side of the broken Hunter. Carbine in one hand, he hauled himself up with his other artificial limb.

He paused at an opening, a huge hole, edged with jagged steel that peeled outwards, like it was a grotesque freeze frame of an exit wound in flesh.

“Look out, not in, idiot!” Kroenig yelled at the young Private before dropping out of sight.

Kinny cursed inwardly, then turned to cover back towards the direction of the buildings.

He seemed to be the only one who saw the incoming projectile.

It sailed slowly through the air, spinning and on fire, before hitting Neto's Mog and exploding in a cascade of flame. The brilliant blue of hardshields flared as the burning liquid struck, then that same liquid dropped to the ground, denied any surface to adhere to.

A group of civilians cheered, while a small pack splintered off to light more bottles of homemade alcohol.

“3rd Squad here. Civilians are throwing fire bombs at us. How do we respond? Over.”

The reply was fast and assured, but it was not Blake.

“This is Wolf Mother, pop smoke at the civilians, they’ll disperse.” Rome ordered calmly. “We anticipated this. It’s nothing more than a little civil unrest. There’s always someone ready to take advantage of an unusual situation.”

Canisters launched from dischargers mounted atop Neto’s hull, trailing streamers of smoke, before hitting the ground directly at the feet of the fire bombers.

A thick grey cloud formed in seconds, and the angry civilians ran away, covering their faces with sleeves and the tops of shirts.

One stoic individual stood amidst the torrents of suffocating smoke, screaming curses and gesturing wildly, until he too was under threat of being overcome.

The cloud began to disperse, picked up by the wind and swept up above the level of the high-rises.

It worked for a couple of minutes, but when it dispersed the group had grown considerably, and now they moved forwards again, a bit more tentatively this time.

“Won’t that smoke just act like a beacon to these guys?” Bader voiced exactly what Kinny was thinking. Some people with heavy gear were out there, and they wanted a fight.

“Shut up, Bader,” Mirante crackled over the net, “Colonel Rome knows what he’s doing. Maybe he’s drawing them out. We got the big guys out this time.”

“Yeah? Well why aren’t we looking for the other scout? Isn’t that more important than securing this dead machine?”

“Show some damn respect, Bader,” the words surprised Kinny, and he could hardly believe they came from his mouth. “One of our own has died here. We need to see what can be done.”

The squad net went silent again. Kinny could practically feel Bader scowling at him.

More firebombs sailed overhead, splashing down behind the 3rd Squad with the sound of smashing glass, accompanied by whoops from the crowd. There were now several pools of burning liquid in between Neto's unit and the rest of the formation, and Kinny was having difficulty separating the Mogs from the flames on his display.

"3rd Squad, tighten up your spacing, you're in danger of getting separated," Blake ordered, sounding as though her thoughts were elsewhere.

The command net was alive with contradicting reports and static, and teasing useful nuggets of information out of the maelstrom put a huge burden on her concentration.

It seemed now that the incident in District 1 was not an isolated occurrence. But without specifics, all Blake could do is furrow her brow and tell her troops to be ready. Again.

What's taking Sgt Kroenig so long? She wondered, before returning her attention to the scene unfolding in front of her.

The first shot hit her front, the hardshield flickering briefly at her leg's knee height.

The crack came a split second later, and her display went wild with icons. She cancelled them all as one of the Mogs reported over squad net – Corporal Mirante this time.

"Shots fired, shots fired. Firing point unseen."

Blake frowned. This was escalating quickly. The crowd had been emboldened by the previous fight here. How many of them, she wondered, had witnessed the death of one of her men?

It made her angry. She had never lost a man before, not once, and she knew the reality of it had not sunken in yet. And these bastards were cheering.

Blake knew that the first round would be akin to opening a set of flood gates, and the heavies would be like magnets for incoming fire.

The Captain settled her mech into a hull down position, the mighty machine hunkered down behind its heavily-armoured forward leg armour, presenting less of a target to the unseen enemy.

“3rd Squad only, fire warning shots above the heads of the agitators. Be careful not to strike the buildings,” and then she added, “I want that crowd gone.”

Kinny heard Neto firing. Single, booming shots whipped above the heads of the rowdy citizens with deliberate delay between rounds fired.

The Corporal was demonstrating excellent discipline, to be able to feather triggers and crack off single shots like that, though it was getting difficult to see both the Mogs and the people that they were warning.

The fire bombs were coming down like rain now, the crowd had a rhythm going and before long, all the Mogs could see were smoke and fire.

Kinny risked a glance down at his diagnostics board.

The internal temperature of the cockpit was rising steadily, and he shook his head in an attempt to remove the bead of sweat that threatened to run into his eye.

“1st Squad, where are we on that black box?” Blake enquired. They had to move, needed to get away from the area and get some clarity from command. She couldn’t do anything without understanding the bigger picture out here.

Kinny waited, before realising that it was he that had to reply.

“Um, I don’t know, the Sergeant is still dismounted right now, over.”

“Well find out!” The Commander raised her voice, and Kinny responded by switching on his external speaker.

“Sergeant, how long is it going to take to get that black box?”

Instead of answering, Kroenig appeared at the hole, a lump of mangled solid state electronics cradled under one arm. He slid down the side of the ruined Scout mech and sprinted the short distance to his powersuit, before leaping into it.

“Eddy, this is 1st Squad, we-,” Kinny started, before he was interrupted by a huge explosion.

Corporal Neto’s hardshield flickered briefly before going out with a pop, accompanied by the overwhelming tang of burnt ozone.

It was a rocket, handheld, and Neto’s squad could make out the trail from its point of origin, just as the second one hit.

It was a perfectly timed attack.

The firers must have known that the first rocket would knock out the shields of the small powersuit, and the second smashed into Neto’s cockpit as he reeled from the force of the first.

The entire upper torso of the ancient Mog vanished in a cloud of smoke and twisted shrapnel, and the gutted machine slumped forward, as though it was tired and just needed to rest for a moment.

A cheer erupted from the crowd.

The squad net went utterly silent.

The shockwave had blown some of the flames from the firebombs out. It gave Kinny enough visibility to see the burning carcass of the venerable fighting machine that was – up until recently – driven by one of his most competent colleagues.

Kinny had never experienced anything like it. He was unable to process what was happening. People didn't just explode like that, there had to be a sequence to someone's passing. Even mine shaft accidents left remains, and people expected those to occur.

But this was so sudden, like something out a dream that made no sense.

Everybody was in shock, and even the officers froze.

“Contact front!” roared a voice over the net.

Sgt Kroenig barrelled through the flames, and he brought a firestorm with him. He strode forwards, firing machine gun, 25mm autocannon, and shoulder-mounted rocket launcher simultaneously.

The front rank of rioters simply ceased to exist. Scores pitched over in plumes of pink mist as high velocity rounds tore through them. Others exploded via hydrostatic shock as cannon rounds meant for armoured vehicles detonated among them. Rockets arced overhead on flaming contrails erupted deep in the civilian ranks, flinging chunks of human meat into the air in expanding vertical columns of gore.

Kinny snapped out of his stupor and followed his squad leader, the rest of the group sluggishly following behind, dropping into formation.

3rd Squad still wasn't moving, so Kroenig pushed past them and continued to pour fire into the now fleeing civilians.

“Suppressing fire, clear the street,” Kroenig barked orders, unphased by the death of his comrades and subsequent murder of civilians. “Prepare to pop smoke on my order.” Kinny chorused confirmation with the rest of his squad, raised his machineguns... then stopped.

The rest of the squad were firing, a hailstorm of tracer and cannon fire that decimated the mainly unarmed crowd, leaving a trail of broken bodies in its wake.

The intensity of muzzle flashes distorted the air around the squad, and Kinny's air scrubbers whined as they failed to keep the smell of burnt cordite out of the cockpit.

He could feel the vibrations through his suit, such was the immediate weight of fire 1st Squad put down.

“1st Squad, Wolf Mother, do you have the black box?” It seemed that Colonel Rome had shaken off the shock.

“Affirmative, am preparing to pop smoke,” Kroenig growled. “Standby to break contact.”

“Roger,” Rome said, seeming to roll with this idea, “We’ll advance north-east, use the cover of the train yard and circle back to sector command.”

The two surviving squad leaders relayed his instructions as Kinny grit his teeth and squeezed tighter on the triggers. He had a cluster of people in his sights. They had clearly underestimated the range of Mog machine guns, or were simply panicking as they ran away in a perfectly straight line down the road.

Kinny thought of his upbringing, and his brother, and how some of these people had simply been caught up in the excitement of something to break the monotony of their lives.

He wrestled with the decision, then it was no longer his as the people disappeared into a side alley some eight hundred yards back.

“Martim’s beard, that’s rough!” Bader exclaimed. It was unlike him to invoke the saints, and Kinny could hear the smile in his voice.

“Pop smoke,” Kroenig said calmly.

Kinny fingered a secondary trigger on his left gun-arm, and his carapace shuddered slightly with the thump-thump of canisters launching overhead.

“Cease fire.” The carnage stopped almost immediately, the sudden, startling silence punctuated only by the sound of shell casings falling on concrete.

The whole frontage was obscured for hundreds of yards almost immediately, as dozens of smoke rounds landed amongst the corpses of people that were cheering the death of a soldier mere moments before.

Kinny kept his guns trained on the main street as the smoke built up.

“2nd Squad move out,” said Colonel Rome, “followed by Wolf Mother, then 3rd Squad, then Eddy and 1st Squad bringing up the rear.”

“Roger that,” Ana Mirante said, her Mog already lurching off at a decent speed, following the perimeter wall north.

The now leaderless 3rd Squad shuffled after Wolf Mother in something resembling a box formation, but to Kinny they clearly appeared to still be in shock.

He knew that they looked up to Neto. He had always been fair and respectful to those under his command, regardless of their level of experience.

As Kroenig turned to lead 1st Squad away from the scene of devastation, Kinny had to think about the Sergeant’s reaction. He couldn’t decide whether to be impressed or disgusted.

Blake had frozen, plain and simple. She was disgusted with herself, and frustrated in equal measure. She was lucky that Rome had been there to take command. He had probably saved the situation from deteriorating further, but on the other side of the coin, how could he have faith in an officer that couldn’t command?

The numbness she felt at the loss of one of her scouts, and then unexpectedly one of her best NCOs right after, had manifested itself into a kind of rage that boiled internally, deep in her gut.

It was late, too late though, and the rage was impotent as the platoon ran from any further threat.

It made sense. The unit wasn’t configured to fight in the tight confines of the streets. Separatists could rain fire down on them from above and they couldn’t react in that maze.

Blake wanted to turn around and unleash hell, she could raze those building to the ground along with everything in them, but she caught herself and checked her anger, before opening comms.

She tried the radio again, focusing her mind and feeling the illogical rage quieten somewhat. Comms to sector command were choppy, but she had managed to get her message across, her voice shaking as they hand-railed the decaying perimeter wall in order to get away from the heavily-populated area.

At least the relays were still good for something.

No, she didn't need support just yet – and yes, she would get the rest of the unit back to base to regroup.

It had been a mistake to leave the base without checking with Central first.

District weren't answering either, and the sky was getting increasingly bright in the direction of their base over there.

There was clearly some kind of mass civil unrest occurring. Probably Corvid cell leaders taking advantage of their new-found freedom to sow widespread chaos among the districts.

Blake decided to try again.

“Central command, this is Sector 78 Commander ‘Eddy’, we have been engaged by insurgents with small arms and anti-armour weapons, and have broken contact. We are currently regrouping to base, what are our orders? Over.”

Still that same interference, as though there was a kind of inefficient active jammer in operation.

“Central command, this is Eddy, radio check, over.”

Nothing.

Blake snarled in frustration, and opened a private channel to Colonel Rome.

“Wolf Mother, Eddy. Have you had any luck getting through to Central?” The cluster of antenna mounted atop the Colonel's heavy packed considerably more technical punch than Blake's own, and she figured he must've been trying different frequencies, as she had.

“I’ve got nothing here. Just the same interference, over and over.”

Blake nodded, even though he couldn’t see her.

Was it too soon to bring up the fight at the gate? It might come across as insecure, or lacking focus, but right now she didn’t care. It had to come out.

“Look,” she started, “about the gate contact.”

“I know,” Rome cut in, “Your man Sergeant Kroenig really saved our asses back there. I froze up bad, no telling how it could’ve escalated without his intervention. Remind me to write him up for citation when we get back in.”

Well, she wasn’t sure that she agreed with that, Kroenig probably could’ve used a little less force... *But damn Rome for doing that! How dare he be cool about it and just turn it into a non-issue.*

“No, that doesn’t make it acceptable. I’m a leader and I didn’t lead. I was tested and failed at the first checkpoint.”

Rome stayed silent for a bit, and Blake had nothing but the sound of her machine’s thumping steps for company.

“We lose men, Ed. It’s always a shock the first time. Hells, it freaked me out and I’ve been through similar situations before.”

It was hard to read people when you could only hear their voice projected in poor quality audio from a speaker in a darkened cockpit, so Blake couldn’t tell if he was being sincere, or merely placating her so she functioned properly.

Probably both.

“But the important thing is that we detach ourselves. It’s hard, but it will save more lives in the long run. Think about your troops that are still alive, and we can talk about the dead ones when we are safely back at base.” He was right, as always. They weren’t out of the woods yet.

“Wolf Mother, 2nd Squad. When do you want us to break right, into the train yard? Over.”

Blake looked to her right and noticed that indeed, they were at the old rail depot. Rusted cargo containers sat upon trailer beds, overgrown by weeds that had burst through the concrete to slowly reclaim the land.

Blake also noticed that Corporal Mirante had deferred to Colonel Rome instead of her.

“This is Wolf Mother, I think that maybe you should be asking your Commander, over.”

Mirante opened the channel for a moment, mumbling something before she responded.

“Roger that Wolf Mother, out to you. Eddy, this is 2nd Squad, shall we break right yet? Over.”

Blake scanned her map board and made a quick estimate.

“This is Eddy, Roger, enter the rail yard now. Out to you, 1st Squad, how are we looking to the rear? Over.”

Kroenig’s squad had dropped back a few hundred yards more than usual, to give early warning of a follow up attack from the rear.

“If anything happens, I’ll tell you. Out.”

Blake was slightly taken aback. Kroenig was usually so rigid, dismissing an officer so easily seemed below him.

She decided to let it go for now and instead concentrated on watching her arcs as Eddy followed behind 3rd Squad, who were bunched a little closely for her liking.

Kinny didn’t like how Sergeant Kroenig had spoken to the Captain. It was like a switch had been flicked in his squad after the little firefight. Or massacre, depending on how you looked at it.

In Kroenig, it had turned him into an even more extreme version of himself, and Kinny saw flashes of the psycho he must’ve been during the Troubles.

He hadn't hesitated for a second when the rockets took out Neto. It was as if instincts that had long been at slumber had been awakened in him, and it scared Kinny how ready he was to fire upon civilians.

Equally bothersome was how the rest of the squad had changed. After their first taste of "battle", Bader and the others hadn't shut up about it. The squad net was alive with chatter, the three of them excitedly recounting recent events with gusto. The transformation was alarming and sudden, especially from Bader, who grew up in the Deads alongside Kinny and Carlos.

Kroenig did not chastise them for it, which wasn't normal. He had been utterly silent since they left the gate, apart from his curt reply to Captain Blake.

"Ulf, did you see that? I hit one guy as he was about to throw a firebomb. He fell over and the damn thing went off in his hand – turned him into a human torch!"

"Yeah, I saw it," Kinny replied.

"What's the matter, brother? You sound pissed."

"It's not that," said Kinny, trying to articulate what he was feeling, "I'm just not comfortable firing at innocent civilians."

Bader turned to check the rear, pausing on Kinny's Mog for a second as he turned back around.

"Are you kidding me? They killed Neto, I'll kill every one of the bastards if I have to!" Bader got a chorus of encouragement from Grayson and Braga.

"Your conscience is clear, Kinny," rumbled Kroenig. Everybody else went quiet.

So he noticed I didn't fire.

"It's just tha-"

"Stop talking," Kroenig interrupted. "This is the beginning. It will get worse. If you won't fight, then you're dead weight. Don't be dead weight."

Feeling suitably chastised, Kinny didn't bother to respond. It would only make things worse. The whole squad felt more subdued as they made the right turn into the decrepit train yard.

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FOUR

The depot was a maze. Thousands of cargo carriages were linked together and just left when they were no longer of use, creating artificial alleyways and thoroughfares out of the few tracks that remained unladen.

It was through one of these that the leg platoon now ventured, hemmed in on both sides by an unbroken chain of crates and cars. The route had been chosen to force any enemy to approach them head on, a death wish for infantry fighting against armour.

While it was true that the Corvids could set up an ambush from inside the railway containers, the reality was that they were made of cheap, low-grade steel. They offered no protection against the kind of firepower carried by mechs and powersuits.

Any ambush would be short lived, and the armed civilians didn't seem willing to throw their lives away, if recent experience was anything to go by.

The heavy units could see above the level of containers, and the whole area was generally open from a certain height.

It had made sense to come this way.

None of that mattered to Kinny, now ruminating over what Sergeant Kroenig had said to him.

Had it been another threat? He wasn't above it, Kinny was still bothered by the last time Kroenig had threatened to harm him.

But the tone he had used just sounded disappointed, maybe he just saw something in Kinny that he didn't like.

"The Fear" he had called it, in one of the rare times they had managed to get him to talk about the Troubles.

When a soldier first meets combat, in that first moment when rounds start to fly on a two-way range, he feels that momentary pause of disbelief, and decides there and then how it will affect him. After that point, regardless of what he says to the contrary, “You can see it in his eyes”, Kroenig had said.

They might drag themselves out on patrol every time, they might even fight, but their heart won't be in it. It was the lack of commitment that got you killed.

“War isn't something that happens to you,” he remembered Kroenig growling, in a way that seemed so trivial and cheesy at the time, “you have to participate willingly.”

Kinny tried to focus on his faint reflection in the forward display, but to no avail.

Do I have the fear in me? He thought to himself. Maybe it's just a twisted old man, warped by his experiences, talking shit.

A low rumbling pulled him out of this reflection. There was no noise. Instead, he felt it through the metal feet of his suit. It wasn't the definitive stomp of heavy armour, but something older, more primal. It came as much from antiquated power plants as it did from treads on the ground.

“Tanks!” Kinny didn't know who the call came from, but he could just make out squat shapes up ahead through the gap in Eddy's armoured legs. He increased the gain and the blocky things could be seen rolling up on them, three abreast, grinding along the old railway tracks. They were a hodgepodge of reclaimed wrecks and outdated surplus retrofitted with ablative plating, hastily welded in place to cover vulnerabilities in the ancient hulls. Black smoke bellowed from exhausts, and the roar of engines reverberated up and down the rows and rows of old container carriages.

Too far away for the Mogs to engage, Kinny worried over this fact, right about the time they opened fire.

Three elevated cannons boomed, almost in unison, barrels spitting tongues of flame ten feet long as shells screamed through the air.

Behind them, another three tanks followed, a tactical bound behind, and fired in the next second.

The sky was filled with deadly high-explosive shells, designed to wreck the armour of tanks and mechs with extreme violence, punching through their hulls and mincing the crew members within.

Colonel Rome took the full force of the fusillade across his frontage.

Explosions blossomed against hardshields, brilliant blue coronas of light competing with greasy fireballs as anti-armour rounds detonated prematurely.

Wolf Mother didn't even slow down.

The huge machine fired its own cannon in response as it strode through roiling balls of flame. The armour-piercing sabot that exited the barrel left a shockwave in its wake that picked up gravel and dirt, flinging it against the clustered containers in a hailstorm of shrapnel.

This shell struck the first tank square on its glacis plate. It flipped backwards into the air, still being carried by its forward momentum, before crashing down onto the upper section of its turret. The whole superstructure, unable to endure the forces exerted upon it, simply crumpled—as though trodden on by a giant.

Straight away, the munitions contained inside the tank's magazine went up, producing a mushroom cloud a hundred feet high. Kinny swore he felt the blast of heat inside his cockpit.

Recognising that they had severely underestimated the threat, the remaining two tanks of the front rank slewed to a halt on squealing treads. Waves of burning matter rolled over them, struggling to find purchase as they inadvertently polished the old railway tracks. The first one dipped slightly into the blackened crater left by its comrade and promptly got stuck, rapidly elevating its barrel in an attempt to fire upon Wolf Mother again. The

second of the tanks slammed into reverse, and began to retreat, firing all of its weapons.

Somebody in 2nd Squad cried out in alarm, but it was lost in the noise as the remaining tanks opened up with turret machine guns and powersuit shields flared.

“Get out of the way!” Colonel Rome roared over the radio.

The squad of Mogs broke down the centre, scrambling out of the way as Wolf Mother stormed through their position, picking up speed.

The reversing tank shuddered as a tungsten slug punched clean through it, then simply disappeared in an expanding ball of flame and fragmentation as the heavy mech fired again.

Tank number three still had a track caught in the crater inhabited by its dead buddy, and swerved back and forth with futility as its engine threatened to blow with the effort.

Wolf Mother, now several hundred yards ahead of the front of the platoon, reached it.

A solid foot stamped down hard against upper armour, which buckled under the impact.

The tank’s barrel sheared off completely, tumbling away from the damaged turret as Wolf Mother raised its foot, and drove it down again.

Kinny could hear the screech of tortured metal a thousand yards away from him, as tons of armour was crushed flat under the might of one of the Army’s finest fighting machines.

The second rank of tanks was now in full retreat, still firing haphazardly.

HE rounds whipped past the heavy mech, all firing discipline lost now as the rebels discovered they had bitten off more than they could chew.

They couldn’t be allowed to get away.

“Eddy, get that artillery up. 1000 yards, two volleys, narrow spread.”

It was then that Kinny heard something. A high-pitched whine, like small engines being pushed to the limit.

“Contact rear!” he yelled over the squad net as the first biker raced past, dousing Bader’s Mog in liquid flame. The powersuit went up like a torch. For some reason his hardshield didn’t register the fire as a threat, and the whole machine was turned into a walking pyre.

Bader reacted by firing wildly down the track, streams of tracer whickering across the space, churning up concrete and punching jagged holes in container boxes.

The whole squad had missed it, being distracted by the excitement occurring up ahead, and they had been caught off guard.

The bikes were big, dedicated attack bikes, much like those used by the Army’s outrider squadrons, but even older. Even though they looked like they were about to fall apart at any minute, they were heavily armed with a mix of cannon, MGs, and flamethrowers.

And there were dozens of them.

“Are you okay, Bader..?” Kinny’s almost softly spoken question was immediately drowned out by radio chatter.

“Grayson, watch the left...”

“Spread out, don’t bunch up, make yourselves harder targets for these bastards...”

“I’m fucking trying, the damn things turn so slow...”

From the sea of voices came a cry of pure terror: Bader’s.

“Somebody help me!”

Kinny froze again, fingers paralysed over triggers as Bader’s scream echoed in his mind. I shouldn’t be here. He tried to fight the rising tide of panic, but ending up thinking about his brother, and how he could be out there. He might be one of those bikers. He could already be crushed beneath Wolf Mother’s armoured tread for all Kinny knew. His thoughts were flickering

across these scenarios when Corporal Neto's gutted Mog appeared unbidden, and something deeper stirred within him, straining against the flimsy membrane of his consciousness. Ranulph's eyes focused again on Bader's cockpit, engulfed in flame.

Something inside him tore free.

What was an eternity in his mind had lasted no more than a second. Both barrels let rip, and his rounds kicked up plumes of debris as they tracked the Corvid bike bearing down on him. It jinked to one side with a practiced ease, and fired its own machineguns in reply. Rounds crackled against his shield and Kinny adjusted behind flickering blue, but the bike was past and he spun around with effort, strafing gunfire all the while.

"Pay attention, you're hitting Eddy!" Kroenig bellowed, and Kinny watched as the bike weaved between the heavy mech's legs.

Tiny blue ripples spread across the invisible shield surface like water around Eddy's legs, as it moved to actually avoid stepping on the bike.

He's using it as cover! Kinny thought, but before he could adapt, a bone-jarring impact slammed into the rear of his armour.

"Where's my rear protection, 1st Squad?" Blake demanded over the net.

"We're engaging multiple attack bikes now, closing fast." Kroenig reported flatly.

Kinny yowled in pure frustration, cancelling the flashing warning icons on his display before swinging his powersuit round again.

He could make out small arms fire from the middle of the platoon, 3rd Squad engaging the bikes now too.

"Aim low, ambush the bastards!" Kroenig ordered, before demonstrating with an on-point shot from his autocannon.

"Please help me!" wailed Bader, less coherent this time. Kinny couldn't make him out now, just a beacon of yellow flame.

Kroenig's 25mm shell blew out a bike cockpit in an explosion of Plexiglas that catapulted the ragdoll form of its rider through the air. The spinning wreckage of the bike tumbled, disintegrating at speed as it flew into the Mog's position. Kinny neatly sidestepped as it skidded past before laying down fire onto a pair of bikes fast approaching.

Both vehicles shuddered, shedding vast chunks of fairing, and slammed into each other. Kinny gritted his teeth as the MGs rattled away, recoil vibrating through his entire suit. One bike triggered the flamethrowers in the midst of its death tumble, coating the side of a Mog in burning napalm as it fired at depth positions.

Kinny would never know whether it was through a weakness in his ammo feed or a crack in the hopper, but Grayson's ammunition started cooking off. 25mm light cannon rounds blasted huge chunks from his hull. The Mog jerked like a drunk puppeteer's marionette. Grayson flailed ineffectually before an explosion finally engulfed him.

Meanwhile, Bader's Mog had slumped against a cargo container where it still burned, and Braga and Kinny sprayed up and down the road in long bursts, verging on frenzy.

The left leg of his suit twitched almost uncontrollably, and Kinny wrestled mentally with his systems to calm it down as he adjusted aim and mashed triggers hard.

Get to Bader. Come on, take these guys out. Is he even still alive?

Kinny fired a burst at another bike, shredding its front tire and causing it to clip a railway sleeper and spin wildly to one side. The bike was still firing when Braga finished it off, before switching to trade fire with a bike that mounted a light cannon.

It pumped shots at Braga, causing his hardshield to overload, popping with that familiar stink as he returned fire with both barrels.

Rounds sparked from his Mog's frontal plating and he staggered, but armour held, and Braga shredded the bike with a relentless hail of 8mm slugs.

Kroenig swung his powersuit round in a vicious arc as a bike attempted to pass, slamming the front wheel with his right weapon arm. Both bike and driver cartwheeled into the air, which the Sergeant tracked for a moment before turning back to the rear.

Braga and Kinny bracketed another pair of bikers between them, causing one to careen straight into a comrade's wreckage, igniting in a fireball that could have only been caused by high-octane fuel.

The other just came to a stop and fell over, rider nowhere to be seen.

Kinny swept his guns to another bike, locking it in his sights and adjusting low to allow for the speed as it approached.

The entire forward section of the bike strobed suddenly from red to white, gun barrels wilting as the main armour plate was scoured clean of paint and grime. A moment later the tire exploded, dropping the front forks into the ground. As the metal drove downwards, it simply collapsed into itself like hot wax, one of the front stanchions offering the only resistance. The rest of the bike pinwheeled sideways with enough momentum to keep it spinning through its own metal slurry, before grinding to a halt. What remained was a half-melted frame in a puddle of sputtering slag, the non-metal components on fire.

Kinetic beam. He looked around to see Eddy stood watching them, auxiliary weapon pointed in their direction.

Kinny could smell burning meat as he blinked sweat out of his eyes, and he snarled as he searched for further targets, muscles and joints aching as he forced the machine to match his movements.

His ears were ringing, even with the noise-cancelling effect of the Mog's systems, and his arms throbbed from the constant recoil of sustained machinegun fire.

Even when it was keeping him alive, M-841 was beating the hell out of him.

The attack had slackened off for the time being. They had given the separatists a bloody nose, though eyeing his ammo counters Kinny doubted

they could weather many more attacks like that.

“We need to help Bader,” Kinny blurted, searching frantically for his friend.

The Mog had somehow fallen into a seated position, and its blackened hull smouldered with the remains of burning fuel.

“Negative. Braga, cover us, Kinny, help me kick these bikes across the tracks, we need to limit their mobility.”

Braga confirmed the order but Kinny hesitated at first. Every moment counted for Bader, and instead they were shoring up defenses they might not even need. Kroenig’s threat from that morning loomed heavily, and he knew the man had no tolerance for insubordination. “Roger,” said Kinny as he moved towards the closest bike husk. *Fuck you, Kroenig.*

In short order they managed to close off most of the open space while leaving a large enough gap at one side, should they suddenly need to double back.

“1st Squad, sitrep,” Kroenig said, audibly out of breath after kicking attack bikes around.

“Braga, 55% ammo remaining, no shields. I’m still green.”

Kinny bounded towards the downed Mog.

“Kinny, 70% ammo, 60% shields, I’m green. We need to help Bader.”

He reached the charred powersuit.

A scream sounded over the squad net.

“Roger, 800 yards, two volleys, narrow spread. Shot, over.”

Blake did the mental calculation and gently squeezed the trigger. Her cockpit shuddered as the quad barrel cannon mounted upon her hull belched flame, lobbing rounds in a low arc over Wolf Mother’s position.

She let two seconds pass, and squeezed the trigger again.

Tanks! Blake thought, somewhat alarmed. *In Nara's name, how did the Corvids get tanks?*

It was obvious how they got into her sector. They had free reign of the Districts since gate power had been sabotaged, but how they even procured them in the first place just raised more questions.

Still, these particular tanks wouldn't last very long, and Blake felt a sense of redemption as she shifted position.

There had been no hesitation this time, she had simply fallen back on her training and reacted automatically to the fire mission. She stepped to one side, crushing a cargo container in the process. Blake had to see, she needed to see the first shots she had ever fired in anger. She managed to catch the impacts through Eddy's display.

The first volley touched dirt in front of the fleeing tank's direction of travel, and blasted columns of shattered concrete and muck straight up, disintegrating containers on both sides of the tracks.

The tanks slammed on the brakes, and rolled into the quagmire of twisted sections of railway and falling debris.

The second volley dropped directly onto their heads.

All three tanks burst apart as though they had been constructed of dry twigs. Secondary explosions rippled as they split into pieces, and Blake let out a small whoop and stepped back onto the thoroughfare, narrowly avoiding stepping on a bike that sped past.

Wait, a bike?

"Where's my rear protection, 1st Squad?" Blake demanded over the net.

"We're engaging multiple attack bikes now, closing fast." Kroenig reported flatly.

That was the second time in short order that the old soldier had disappointed her. She was beginning to understand why he hadn't advanced

any further in his career.

She didn't reply, instead switching to the kinetic 'Bully' laser as a second bike sped past.

She played the beam across the ground, melting concrete and catching the bike as it jinked in an effort to avoid fire. The rear wheel assembly was instantly turned to molten slag and the bike tried to melt itself to the ground, failed, and simply spun on the spot.

Blake raised a foot and stamped down, smashing the bike like it was an empty matchbox. She could feel the impact shudder up her leg, as the cerebral jack interpreted her machines actions into neural feedback. It was surprisingly satisfying.

Turning her mind from bloodshed, she scanned the flanks as 3rd Squad bracketed and destroyed the other bike, while Wolf Mother stood dangerously exposed out front.

She had appreciated the heroics, but there was a gap that could be exploited and she had to close it up.

"2nd Squad close the distance, keep up with Wolf Mother. 3rd Squad watch for gaps in the containers." She had to regain balance in the formation.

As if hearing her, Wolf Mother strode out again, seemingly in deliberate mockery of her orders.

She opened a channel, and was about to order Rome to get the hell back when he beat her to the punch.

"Rocket trucks, nine hundred yards, engaging with canister rounds."

She could hear the clunk of autoloaders switching out rounds in his machine before the signal cut off.

Wolf Mother was enveloped in fire, multiple rockets slamming into it as the reckless Colonel moved to engage once more, and once more his shields held.

Blake could barely imagine the heat inside Rome's command pit, and wondered how long he could keep taking punishment.

Wolf Mother's snarling mouth spat flame once again, the canister round a blur in the air as it neared its target.

The shell airburst several yards before impact. Blake could see thousands of flechettes expand in a dark cloud, before tearing into the squadron of trucks.

Designed for use against light vehicles, the canister round was in effect a giant buckshot cartridge, and would be of minimal use against tanks or other decently protected vehicles.

The rocket trucks, however, were shredded into scrap instantly before their payloads blew, still in their tubes.

Thunderous booms rippled across the train yard, and Rome didn't let the sound die away before reporting that his sector was clear.

Blake spun her heavy on its axis, rotating the upper body to face rear, while the legs remained still.

She could see Kroenig's squad had taken a beating, and were just mopping up the last remnants of the enemy bike squadron.

She pulsed the Bully once and took out a single bike for them, before checking flank monitors again.

Smoke trails. Several rows of containers back. Left of axis of advance. The damn containers gave a false sense of security, but in reality offered practically no protection from armoured attack. There was at least another troop strength of tanks rumbling on their position right now. Their guns weren't all that powerful, but shields were finite, and it wouldn't take much to wear them all down.

She opened a channel to Rome.

"Tighten it up, we've got armour on the left-," was all she got out, before a scream blared from her internal speakers, filling the cockpit with a wall of sound.

Damn damn damn!

Kinny had to eject quickly if he wanted to save his friend. He didn't wait for orders, he just pulled both his arms out of their gauntlets in a practiced motion, and mashed the red control button on his diagnostic panel.

The cockpit punched open, his assault harness clips detached and he jumped from the Mongoose, crossing the few yards to his stricken comrade with hurried strides.

He could still hear the amplified scream blaring from his suit radio, and as he approached Bader's Mog he could hear that same scream, muffled behind layers of rolled steel plating.

He ducked under a smoking weapon arm, and gloved hands fumbled with the emergency release lever, situated below the Mongoose's armpit.

The rubber cover had melted through, and Kinny grit his teeth as he grasped the scalding hot lever, hot enough to hurt through suit gloves, and yanked it hard.

The cockpit and thigh plates wheezed open with a sucking sound. Partially-melted rubber seals left gummy strings in their wake, and a wave of steam rose from the cockpit.

The smell hit him first, that of burnt hair and pork. Resisting the urge to vomit, Kinny stood on the access steps to assess the situation.

Without looking at his friend, Kinny reached up and manually cancelled the radio transmission, then reached behind Bader for the personal first aid kit.

A mighty crash sounded behind him, followed by multiple reports of heavy weapon fire, but Kinny paid it no heed as he tore open the velcro pouch and laid it out on the diagnostic panel.

Bader was red raw, his skin was blistered and hot to the touch. His screaming was hoarse, more like an agonised groan and not loud at all when

the man was right in front of him, which made it all the worse. Parts of his jacksuit had melted into his skin, including the large metal zip that closed up the front. Kinny could see no way to help Bader without surgery.

He grabbed a large dose of analgesic from the medkit and stabbed the auto injector into Bader's leg. The screaming stopped almost immediately, and Bader grinned at Kinny, blinking through unfocused, bloodshot eyes.

"Can you see okay?" he asked.

Bader nodded slowly, accompanied by more gunfire that shook the earth around them.

Kinny gingerly reached behind Bader's head with one hand, to feel for his cerebral jack. The connector had melted to the socket, but the cable was still attached. Kinny wanted to be sick again.

Good, that meant he could control his suit. If it worked.

Next, the young Private grabbed a large dose of combat stims, and inserted the cartridge into the auto injector. There was a chance it could kill him, but he wouldn't get back to base if he couldn't walk under his own steam. There was no way they could remove him from his suit without the proper expertise.

He stabbed it into the other leg.

Bader's eyes went wide, then the skin of his face split, bleeding in numerous places as his mouth twisted into a snarl.

"You good, brother?"

"I'm good Ulf!" he yelled into Kinny's face.

"Whatever you're doing, do it fast," blared Kroenig over external speakers.

Kinny couldn't believe that bastard had already written Bader off without trying to help him. Assisting the Mog driver hadn't even entered the Squad leader's decision cycle. *Greatest generation, my ass.*

“You need to drive yourself back to base, then we can help you. Can you do that for me?” Bader’s head lolled, before snapping upright. The Mog lurched suddenly, and Kinny nearly fell as Bader shuffled his legs on the spot.

“I can do that, little brother,” he said, though the pain in his eyes was obvious.

“Okay good. When we get back, I swear on the All Saints that we’ll get you some help.” He reached up and grabbed the hydraulic rams of Bader’s cockpit and jumped down, closing it behind him.

“Just follow us, don’t worry about fighting,” Kinny shouted, before jumping back into his own mongoose.

“I can fight,” replied his friend.

“Wolf Mother, watch my fire.” Blake said calmly as she lobbed a salvo to their left flank. The rounds landed in a horizontal line, booming detonations seeming to chase the tanks as they closed in, weaving a path through the containers.

The artillery caused a tremendous amount of damage, flinging carriages around and causing others to burst like ripe metal fruit, but the tanks were too evasive. They had good spacing this time, and all three took their own route, careful not to get funnelled into a choke point.

“Seen,” replied Rome, as Wolf Mother’s main cannon tracked a target.

Muzzle flash speared out as the hyper velocity sabot found its target, sending a tank skidding sideways before it flipped onto its side.

The remaining two didn’t slow down, they continued their desperate advance, going hell for leather and Blake could see why.

She tried to lower the elevation of her artillery to fire in a direct role, but the tanks were too fast, and even as target indicators remained frustratingly out of alignment on her display, the tanks engaged.

One shell washed across her shield, blanking out her display momentarily in a broiling wave of blazing yellow. The other missed, and Blake punched out with a Bully beam.

The tanks slowed, being forced to a standstill by the beam, paint bubbling on its frontal armour and Rome fired again, timing his shot to obliterate the target with deadly accuracy.

The last tank fired, and shields flared as Blake reacted on instinct and kicked out, hitting a cargo carriage full force. It lifted into the air, bowed in the middle as it spun twice, and the tank swerved to avoid it.

Many tons of metal smashed to earth in an explosion of mouldy grain sacks and tortured metal, narrowly missing the separatist armour. Covered in ancient cargo, the tank nudged forwards to get a line of sight past the mangled train carriage, poking its turret edge out around the corner.

Eddy was there, and stomped down hard on the hapless machine.

It gave more resistance than the bike, and she drove the leg down again and again like a piston, demolishing the target beyond recognition.

Again she felt the feedback vibrate up her leg, and again it was satisfying.

I'm getting good at this, she thought, rotating her torso to scan for targets.

“Good kills Ed,” Rome complimented from his war machine, “I think we got them all here.”

“Good kills yourself, Charles,” she replied, a feral grin on her face. “We need to keep moving, don't you think?”

“Agreed.”

Blake switched nets. The squads sent their sitreps in. 1st Squad had been hit hard, with one dead and one wounded. 2nd Squad were currently unscathed, though if they kept going at this pace, Blake knew it wouldn't be long until every squad was mangled beyond recognition. 3rd Squad was recovering from the shock of losing Neto and had managed to take down the rogue bike between them. It wasn't ideal, but it would do.

She reported the situation back to sector command. Comms were getting clearer now as they reduced the distance. Blake switched to her command net once again.

“2nd Squad, lead on.”

“Roger that boss,” said Corporal Mirante, a hint of tiredness in her voice.

The patrol had been testing for everyone, but they were on the home straight now. With only about a mile to go, Blake followed on at a slow pace, remaining vigilant.

There would be some serious questions getting raised once they were back in.

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FIVE

Finally, some good news.

Lieutenant Greer had reported that Specialist Armbruster had returned to base, seemingly unharmed, meaning that at least one of her scout patrol had survived.

The eccentric warrior had point blank refused to talk to anyone, and had set about re-arming his hunter for redeployment. That had been about 30 minutes ago.

There would be time to mourn Almeida and the others later, but they would be a step closer to forming a feasible plan to combatting this civil uprising when they were back in a relatively secure environment.

They would not be caught short again.

Greer had also reported that he had gained communications with Central, and that they ordered Colonel Rome to return to command at once, with all urgency and with the necessary escort.

The remainder of the base was set to remain in situ, and wait for further orders.

Blake wasn't happy about losing some of her troops to escort the Colonel back, but understood the necessity of having him be where he could do the most good.

Rome had, of course, insisted that he and Major Trask would be fine. Besides, they had two of the finest war machines ever built to carry them through the city. But Blake, embracing her role as his advisor, had told him to shut up and stop being so stupid.

The orders were to provide an escort, so provide an escort she would.

Something big was happening, and Central was remaining frustratingly tight-lipped about it, they needed all the help they could get.

Even now, Blake could see flashes in the distance, dull glows that gently lit up the sky, sometimes followed by a rumbling.

Garbled fragments of messages had come through about the orbital guns being under attack, of them firing, and that alone was enough to send a chill up Blake's spine. She carefully watched the skies, saw no tell-tale signatures of super-heavy shells leaving the city. The anti-air batteries, however, were another story. They lit up the sky, puffs of light and smoke adding illumination to the dim rocket trails falling onto the city in the distance.

Who's hitting us with rockets? Blake wondered. *One of the other cities? Surely not.* Then she had another thought.

Maybe they aren't rockets.

Eddy shuddered in sympathy, and she had to compensate to stop herself from falling over.

She had to come to terms with the fact that the revolution, usually spoken of in jest (after all, how could that unwashed Corvid rabble organise anything remotely threatening), may actually be occurring.

She feared for the Great Leader.

Blake had no frame of reference for this. Hells, Rome had no frame of reference for a revolutionary war.

She wanted the best information, and believed that it was proper for her troops to know what could be coming.

Blake chewed her bottom lip as Eddy rounded a corner, and the base gates loomed, becoming the platoon to enter.

Against her better judgement, she transmitted on the squad net.

"1st Squad, this is Eddy, over."

"1st Squad, go ahead," came Kroenig's monotone response.

"You fought in the last war, Sergeant Kroenig. How did it start?"

“Ed, are you sure-,” Rome started. He’d had the same reservations as her. Many officers believed it best to keep everything on a need-to-know basis. There was no sense in causing a collapse of morale by voicing unbaked theories and presumptions, but for once Blake didn’t agree.

She decided to put faith into the intelligence of her troops.

The broad strokes of the uprising were taught at the officer academy – but it was all propaganda, coloured as a mighty victory for the true loyalists, overthrowing their corrupt dictator to usher in a new age of prosperity.

The minutiae of the individual chain of events were glossed over.

Evidently, the establishment was paranoid of their officer cadre getting any bright ideas.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Blake responded bluntly. “We need to know what we’re getting into here.”

“It happened much like this, boss. But the other way around. Army units started leaving their posts, and it was the civvies that rose up to try and stop us. The last leader was massively popular with the people.”

“But what did you do, specifically? Where did you strike?”

There was a long silence, and Blake could practically hear Kroenig’s mind drawing parallels with recent events.

“We jammed city radio on all frequencies to sow confusion. Our units had been given individual missions that required no greater overview, it had been in planning for years and we could operate without comms.” Kroenig sighed. “We then sabotaged the gate grid to allow ease of movement, as well as denying access to the enemy. It’s on a separate network from the city power, so it would remain operational in case of a complete shutdown.”

Blake shuddered, before she interjected.

“Then you took the orbital guns.”

“Then we took the orbital guns,” Kroenig confirmed, after a pause.

“What did you do after that?” The feeling of dread had wormed its way through her whole body now.

“We stormed central command and executed the Leader while the city was too busy dealing with the chaos of Army units running wild to organise anything to stop us.”

Shit, Blake thought, *what is Central keeping from us?*

Captain Blake decided there and then, that upon returning to base, she would petition to Central to relocate her entire company to district command. It made no sense for every sub-unit to be an island, waiting to be picked off by the numerically-superior separatists. She was willing to lose ground if it meant being alive to retake it at a later date.

“Boss,” Ana Mirante said from up front, “this isn’t no riot that’s got out of hand, is it.” It wasn’t phrased as a question.

“No, Corporal Mirante,” she replied, “I don’t think it is.”

“Look, there it is, that big gate welcoming us home,” Kinny was chatting incessantly over a sub channel. “As soon as we get you back in, I’ll get the ops room to get a doctor sent over. You’ll be patched up in no time.”

He didn’t believe a word of it.

Bader had been dropping behind steadily, his Mog stumbled sluggishly behind the patrol and they had to keep stopping to allow him to catch up.

Kinny cursed the system. There were no recovery vehicles at Sector 78. It had been deemed of such low importance that if they experienced breakdowns, they usually just left the mech in place with a guard overnight until a recovery wagon could be scrambled from district in the morning.

That would not do right now, there was a man dying in there, and Kinny was waffling at him to keep him conscious.

“You still with me, brother?”

There was a long pause, Bader had opened the mic, he could hear him breathing, but he took a long time to talk back.

“I’m good, Ulf. You don’t have to worry about me.” There was a definite slur to his words now. “I’m the one supposed to look after you, remember?”

“We look after each other,” he said, eyeing the back of Kroenig’s big Mog in distaste, “We’re soldiers.” For now.

The best Kinny could figure, they’d have to get a mechanic to cut him free from his Mongoose, then try and make him comfortable while they waited for a doctor. But the likelihood of that happening out in the sticks was minimal. Medical personnel were in short supply, and if the Captain was to be believed, they were at the fringes of some major uprising.

Kinny was half considering just jacking it all in right there, dropping from the patrol to go find his brother and join the right side.

The only trouble was, if he did that, Bader would follow him, and most certainly die.

At least back at base they had drugs, and basic medical training. The Corvids would probably just abandon him, providing he didn’t die on the way there.

No, for now he was stuck in the system, one that he had grown to dislike more and more over the events of the evening.

“Ops, this is Eddy, get that gate open, we’re on approach, over.” Blake crackled over the net. That damned interference had lessened, but it was still present, limiting their communications to short range VHF radios.

“Roger, opening now,” came the barely workable response.

The heavily armoured gate shifted on oiled rollers, and began to slide out of the way when a piercing squeal of feedback blasted across the radio.

“Ah, shit!” Kinny exclaimed. The whole platoon had stopped dead, such was the impact of the noise. It felt like needles being forced into his ears,

and Kinny hurriedly turned the volume down on his radio.

“Can anyone hear me?” he sent over the net.

Nothing. He switched to the command channel and tried again.

Nothing. Kinny tried channel hopping, setting his radio to random frequencies but it was all the same, a persistent screech that invaded the mind and made it hard to think.

Then it cut out.

“Welcome, Brigador,” said a voice, with peculiar inflection. It was synthesised, utterly inhuman, sounding how Kinny would imagine a mech would speak, if it had a mind of its own.

What in the hells is this?

“Great Leader has died. Solo Nobre, must, fall. Here is your contract.”

The voice went on to detail the objectives of a corporation calling itself the SNC. The young Private sat in silence, as it said that the population should destroy vital infrastructure, disable the orbital guns, and overrun military outposts. The contract was open to everyone, regardless of rank or social status. Kinny didn't even have to sign anything. Action alone would be enough to be granted generous compensation.

Great Leader is dead, how is that possible? His mind reeled. The Great Leader was an immovable rock, regarded as practically a living saint by the older generations. He was rarely seen outside of Central, he spent all his time buttoned up in the most secure location on the planet, yet the corporation had got to him.

It was happening, Kinny realised, it was really happening. The Corvid dream of breaking the blockade, opening lines of communication with the corporations and reintegrating into the galaxy at large, all was within grasp!

Kinny moved slowly, back towards the city, taking a single step.

“Ulf, what's going on?”

“Don’t worry, it’s okay brother, everything’s okay.” Kinny told his old friend.

“I take it everybody heard that?” Mirante said over the squad net.

Nobody replied.

“What do we do now?”

Kinny was expecting Kroenig to come growling across, telling them to carry on back to base and carry on as normal, to shut up and follow orders or whatever, but his “not-a-Mog” just stood there, immobile.

It seemed even the officers were at a loss for words, neither of them had spoken since the transmission ended.

At least the interference had gone.

The interference had gone.

“Eddy, Eddy, this is ops, did you hear that?” Kinny recognised Lieutenant Greer’s voice. There was a commotion, Major Trask was yelling in the background, something about getting Rome to Central right now, and he was back on.

“Eddy, ops. That’s what I was telling you about before you left. The message on the bulletin boards – it’s the same contract.”

Blake replied this time.

“Did it mention anything about the Great Leader before?”

A pause.

“No, that’s new. We don’t know what to make of it, Central isn’t replying either way.” Again, Major Trask acting delirious in the background.

“Ops, this is Wolf Mother,” Colonel Rome said sternly, before the big machine started walking again. “Tell Major Trask to calm down, I’m fine. We’ll figure things out when we get back in, in the meantime, we will carry out our last known orders.” He walked past 2nd Squad, impatient to get back inside. Shock started to wear away, and the rest of the platoon started

to shuffle forward, all sense of formation lost. It seemed as though everyone was lost in their own thoughts, and just blindly following on.

Only Kinny remained still. As Bader limped past, his pain evident even in the stride of his armoured machine, he was paralysed, unable to move.

The revolution was real. All the stuff he had been brought up to believe was happening in his lifetime, tonight, right now.

But he couldn't just abandon Steve Bader.

He watched Wolf Mother pass the front gate up ahead, the stylised heads running up its flank armour now partially blackened and flaking away, and came to a decision.

That was when the base exploded.

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SIX

It wasn't a single blast.

First, the ammo magazine went up. The whole thing, as though it had been rigged to blow. The flash was so bright it washed out every visual feed within two miles. Then, within nanoseconds, the generator, buried a full hundred yards underground, suffered a catastrophic meltdown. It was fully armoured, the fusion core capable of withstanding a direct strike from an orbital cannon without causing a rupture, but it went up all the same.

The ground heaved, coughing tons of soil and shattered concrete into the air as though the earth itself had come alive and was taking its first deep breath, then disappeared into a cavernous hole.

Then, just for good measure, all of the gate defences detonated simultaneously, even as they collapsed into the newly formed crater, just in case the previous two cataclysmic explosions weren't enough to disable them. It was a fairly simple task to overload the individual power cores throughout the networked system, if you were so trained.

The QRF platoon didn't experience this. All they felt was a cacophonous hell storm of light and sound. The shockwave flattened every Mog without exception. The nearest ones skidded back along the road, carried along by it, shields flaring all over from debris impacts. Eddy rocked back, being forced to take several steps backwards to remain upright. Blake felt a cold dread at the back of her mind, had she trodden on a power suit? When visuals came back online, the base, the entire square mile of it, was gone.

Wolf Mother stepped away from the crater edge.

The shields were gone. Already reduced, they never stood a chance against the ferocity of the forces that had been unleashed. The mighty machine turned, and Blake saw that the front armour was glowing, partially melted like a waxwork parody of itself held in front of a candle.

The rapidly cooling plates were the grey of brushed steel, as though the paint had been sand blasted off, and the war mech's tremendous weapons had been damaged beyond recognition.

Blake couldn't allow the shock to set in again.

Don't worry about what just happened, concentrate on the now. She had a commander in front of her, one who could be critically wounded, and must be saved.

That was something tangible, something that could be achieved, all else could wait.

"Charles!" she shouted, fearfully.

She then remembered to open a radio channel, took a breath, and spoke again.

"Wolf Mother, Eddy, send sitrep."

Wolf Mother's upper glacis burst open, the tortured composite armour plates opening like some vile, over ripened fruit. It was a perfect shot, targeted to kill the heavy mech pilot, a difficult hit to make from behind. The shock hit then, and Blake stared open-mouthed, though her subconscious registered the tell-tale air distortion that trailed in the wake of the strike.

Railgun slug?

"Sucks to be him," said a voice over the net, one who Blake didn't think she'd hear from, seeing as he should've just been atomised.

"And you were doing so well," Specialist Armbruster told her, his voice free of emotion.

Armbruster? But how could he? Blake's muddled thoughts aligned with a sudden, pinpoint clarity. He's taken the contract.

"To hell with this."

Eddy shook as the 155mm barrels thumped in sequence from the upper carapace, launching shells on a practically flat trajectory. She aimed in the general direction of the railgun shot, following the disturbed air back to its source.

The range was short, and the high-explosive shells impacted almost immediately, throwing up great clods of recently churned earth, still steaming from the terrible devastation endured by the sector base.

Wolf Mother's carcass teetered on legs no longer under instruction, and fell, backlit by terrific flashes and a storm of glittering shrapnel.

The machine crashed to the ground, going unnoticed by the Captain, so set was she on walking rounds into the smoking crater.

The effect of her fire, up until recently so impressive, was like firecrackers in a tin pot in comparison to the sabotage Blake had witnessed. She could barely hear the impacts.

"All call signs," She screamed over the net, "kill the traitor!"

But she was the only one firing.

The much smaller Mongoose units were collecting themselves off the ground.

Those that had come to rest on their backs were unable to stand unaided, and the squads were a mishmash of individuals pulling each other to their feet, the squad net alive with barely comprehensible chatter, and cries for help.

"What's happening brother?" Bader slurred, as Kinny and Braga each took an arm and hauled the Mog to its feet.

"I have no idea," Kinny replied, "the Captain is screaming about traitors. I think the base just got hit by an orbital barrage."

"That was no incoming, man," Braga said with a grunt. The veteran trooper's suit was dented and chipped by numerous impacts, and had seen

better days. Nevertheless, he spun quickly to cover outwards arcs after he had helped Bader up. “The base just went boom. Like the magazine went up.”

Kinny contemplated this, half listening to Sgt Kroenig demanding a sitrep from the Captain over the command net. She had got herself in a state of berserker rage, and 3rd Squad were scrambling out of her way as she slowly stomped in circle, pounding fire into the thick smoke.

Kinny figured she must be tracking something on her scanners. Her gear was far more advanced than the Mog’s, and she could probably see whatever hit the base.

“Come on boss, did you think I wouldn’t relocate after my shot?”

Wait, was that Armbruster’s voice?

Nobody was responding to the squad net, so Kroenig switched on his external speakers and growled over at 3rd Squad. Two of their number were dragging a third, and the fourth man was clumsily sprinting in their direction.

“3rd Squad on me, on me. Form up and provide perimeter defence. 2nd Squad, maintain forward protection of Eddy, but stay clear of her.” The grizzled Sergeant then switched back to the command net without waiting for a response. “Eddy, this is 1st Squad, you need to stop moving so fast, you are at risk of hurting your own men.” Even as he spoke, an armour-shod foot slammed down, cracking concrete mere feet away from the Mongoose drivers.

Kinny looked across at the struggling 3rd Squad members and decided to run over to help. The prone Mog seemed unable to stand up and he thought he could lend a hand.

He’d only taken two steps when the air distorted and two of the Mogs were gone. The one lying on the deck, and one of his would-be rescuers, obliterated.

They had vanished, leaving nothing but a smear of dark brown something for twenty yards to Ranulph’s left.

Kinny had no way of telling who had died, as the hypersonic crack followed the route of the railgun slug, which had gouged itself a crater in the ruined road half a mile back.

The surviving Mog was stood, holding a severed gauntlet, still containing a flesh and blood arm which dribbled fluids from a ragged stump. The driver turned it dumbly in front of his forward optics.

Kinny screamed at the Mog driver, who snapped out of his stupor and lumbered over. Kinny pointed out Kroenig, bawling at troopers further down the road, and the pair returned to 1st Squad's position. They were now back to full strength after absorbing the remnants of 3rd Squad, not counting the critically-injured Bader, who would be no good in a fight. They were a few hundred yards down the road, moving back towards the rail depot, staying clear of Eddy's unpredictable movement.

The war machine kept lobbing shells around in a wide arc, but it had finally come to a standstill.

The squad moved off of the street into the relative cover of the edge of the train yard, hunkering down amongst an ancient scrap heap that had been piled twenty feet high against the site entrance.

Kroenig spoke over the squad net "I'll give her a minute to calm down, then try again. She's no use to us like this. Cover your arcs." Kinny grunted an affirmative, and looked back. He could just make out 2nd Squad at the edge of the base crater. He counted five Mogs. It seemed that, by some miracle, Mirante's squad were still yet to take a casualty. Kinny thanked the saints for their protection, then shook his head once, an exaggerated movement.

He wasn't usually one to pander to the superstitions of the old ones.

"What just happened Sarge?" Kinny asked, trying to get to grips with recent events. The reply was devoid of the usual sense of self-assured confidence that radiated from the old NCO.

"When I know, I'll tell you."

A loud beeping noise buzzed in Blake's ear. She snarled and squeezed her triggers hard enough to turn knuckles white. She could feel calluses forming on her palms from so much use of the lever controls over the last few hours, and she cursed herself for not wearing gloves.

Blake felt herself breathing heavily and began to regulate it, forcing herself to settle, her chest heaving through the effort. She wiped spittle from her chin with the back of a hand and released the trigger with the other. A noise stopped, one that she only became aware of in its absence: empty auto-loaders whirring around, trying to extract non-existent rounds from ammo carousels that cycled regardless of supply.

The beeping was irritating now, and she looked at her dazzling array of diagnostic displays.

PRIMARY WEAPON: AMMO DEPLETED

Armbruster had been using friendly radio channels to taunt her, meaning he could be easily triangulated, regardless of visual acuity. She had used this to fire using instruments, following a blip that had overlaid on her tactical screen.

It was only now that she realised they were no empty taunts.

The Specialist hunter had been doing it deliberately. He had been talking and moving, drawing fire in order to drain the QRF platoon of its most potent firepower.

She looked at the blip, now stationary, and getting achingly close. The tall, skinny chassis of the Buckmaster class paused on the edge of the smoking crater. It was right in front of 2nd Squad, no more than fifty yards distant, hints of the curved upper carapace visible when the wind blew particularly strong.

She knew she had to do something. If one of the squad simply looked up, they would surely notice the distinct lines of a scout mech, and it would be as good as signing their death warrant.

The tips of railgun plates pointed at her menacingly.

Blake's mind raced. How many slugs could she take before her hardshields failed? Would it be long enough for her kinetic laser to finish it off? One way to find out.

She thrust her controls forward and charged, full power at the crater, finger playing over the trigger of her auxiliary weapon as she watched the range counter tick down.

Armbruster did not fire. The outline of the Hunter just quietly moved backwards, and she lost sight of him, invisible in the smoke once more.

“Well this was fun,” he said, before her display scrambled momentarily and the blip representing him vanished.

He's triggered his electronic warfare package.

Scouts were equipped with tech that actively jammed sensor suites, making them all but immune to electronic detection. They were known as “silent running” kits, and in the absence of line of sight, practically turned the leg unit into a ghost.

“Get out of the way!” Blake shouted, as 2nd Squad scrambled to either side of her advancing engine.

She barrelled into the smoke, rotating her turret left and right, scanning for targets. She played the beam of her kinetic laser about, hoping to register a hit, watching the smoke burn up as the Bully beam superheated the air in a jagged line, but there was nothing there.

There was no way she could catch up with Armbruster now, his machine was lightly armoured, and had superior speed.

The Captain released her trigger and Eddy stood in the immense crater, forty feet of walking doom completely impotent, nothing to do with all that

strength.

Blake cursed inwardly. Even in her worst nightmares she could not have imagined a day like this. What in the seven hells would she do now?

Everything was ruined.

Practically all of her command was dead. Her leader was dead, her friend was dead, her prospects for promotion were dead. For all she knew, the entire New People's Army had been routed, and they were the only remnants.

"Ma'am," Ana Mirante said softly over the squad net. Fires still burned all over the base, and occasionally some ammunition would cook off, sounding as though bands of people were hiding out of sight, stealthily making popcorn.

As the smoke slowly cleared, being wafted away by prevailing winds, Blake could see the mangled remains of buildings and heavy vehicles.

Her buildings, and her heavy vehicles.

Here and there she saw charred bits of meat, none of which could be identified as human. A lone heavy mech stood – Greer's by the look of it – in what was left of the garage complex. The entire building had been gutted, leaving naught but several crooked support pillars and a few crossbeams that led nowhere. The machine was slumped, blackened and melted to the ground in a barely recognisable lump.

But it still stood.

"Ma'am." Mirante repeated, this time her voice shot through with steel.

All pretence of voice procedure was gone now, and Blake didn't care. What was the point if anybody could be the enemy? They would recognise call signs, know procedures, there was no such thing as operational security when your entire military could be the opposition.

"Blake. What are your orders?" Edwina snapped out of her melancholy, and looked around her.

“Keep looking out,” she said, her voice strained, “I’ve lost that bastard Armbruster. He’s still out there.”

“Did he do this?” Ana could not keep the disbelief out of her voice.

“I’d bet my life on it, Corporal. He’s sided with the Corporation. He’s sold out his loyalties.” Blake spat the last sentence.

“Damn.”

The reduced squads of Mogs had reassembled themselves without instruction. There were eleven left in total. She had lost another two soldiers without even noticing. Blake swallowed.

“Who died?” she asked.

“Carter and Delgado,” Kroenig reported, “I have folded Victore and Machado into my squad, bringing us up to six, though Bader is combat ineffective.” Kroenig left the line open, before adding, “He’ll die soon without medical attention.”

Bader drowsily retorted something in pure gibberish.

“Roger that. 2nd Squad, how are you doing?”

“We’re good, boss. I think we just want to know what happens now.”

Blake considered this as she fished her pilot gloves from a cargo pocket on her jumpsuit, thoughts churning in her mind as she worked individual fingers into well-worn leather.

The Captain wasn’t entirely sure what to say.

Kinny was exhausted. He couldn’t even start to deal with the deaths of nearly everyone he’d known for the best part of a year. How had Armbruster done it? Why? He had seemed like the least likely person to side with the revolution in Ranulph’s eyes. The man was a fanatic.

And now, the consequences of the contract were dawning on him. If all it took was one determined man to wipe out a sector unit, how much would it take to bring down the whole Army? Were scenes like this being played out across the city? Had the entire military been neutered because of a single radio transmission?

He wanted revolution, sure, but this was just senseless carnage. Armbruster had no need to create such an overwhelmingly destructive spectacle. He could've waited for their return, and they could've discussed it like adults. Surely reason would have won over? Unit cohesion would've been maintained had they all decided to side with the Corvids. Then Kinny looked over at Kroenig, and realised that some would never accept the inevitable.

It didn't matter, Ranulph decided, recalling the earlier encounter in the garage that now felt like a lifetime ago. Something had to be said.

"We need to talk about the contract." It blurted out before he could stop it.

Kroenig's machine rounded on him, and he was acutely aware of weapon barrels pointed in his direction.

"I'm warning you, you little shit," the Sergeant rumbled.

"No," the Captain interrupted, before he could say anymore, "He has a point. This needs to be cleared before we proceed. Speak up, Private Kinny."

Eyeing Kroenig's large power suit warily, Kinny spoke again.

Here goes,

"The Leader is dead," he started, "and some would argue that the Corporation has legal ownership of our world." Like the Corvids, he thought.

Kinny was determined to give diplomacy its chance here, nobody else had to add to the already appalling loss of life.

“Most of the civilian population is aligned with the Corvid ideal. They think it can’t hurt to negotiate with the Corporation, open up interstellar trade routes again, bring in people from off world to advance our tech. We’re stagnating here, living in the past, and I wonder why we can’t just join forces with the Corvids and start something new.”

Kroenig took a step towards the young Private.

“I’ve listened to enough of this. You think the Corporation gives a shit what your little separatist friends think? They want profit, and they’ll bleed this world dry to get it. This,” spreading his arms in an encompassing gesture, servos whining in sympathy with the movement, “is what the All Saints fought for in the first place. Anyone who stands against that is a traitor and will die as one.”

Kinny couldn’t stand it. The old man would grind himself into dust before seeing reason.

“Weren’t you a traitor?” he asked, simply.

He could practically feel Kroenig’s glare through the black optical lenses of his “not-a-Mog”

“That was different. Our last leader was weak. He wanted to give ownership back to the Corporation. We fought him to stop this from happening.”

“You can’t blame people for wanting something better!” Kinny was angry now, it was like banging his head against a wall.

Kroenig took another step forward.

“You think Armbruster wants something better? There’s people out there like him right now, using the contract as an excuse to wage their own private wars, and they’ll be the ones in charge after the smoke clears. Do you think they will be open to parlaying with your beloved corporation?”

Kinny didn’t have an answer for that one. He just stared defiantly, a useless gesture since his squad sergeant couldn’t see his face.

“If you two are finished,” Captain Blake said, after a few moments of uncomfortable silence, “I have received word from District command that they are under attack.” She paused to let that sink in. “A combined force of separatists and renegade Army units are within hours of breaching the walls, and they’re recalling all loyal units to assist.”

Kinny agonised over this as he heard the words. He couldn’t let comrades die, even if he didn’t agree with anything they were fighting for. *Why won’t they just surrender?*

“Now,” Blake continued, “I frankly don’t give a shit what you people believe, but you signed a contract and swore an oath, so I’m holding you to it.”

The torso of Eddy swung down, and the Captain made sure that every individual Mog felt the scrutiny of the Bully laser’s targeting optics.

“I’m going to support my fellow soldiers. Are any of you coming with me?”

“I will fight to the death to protect our nation,” said Kroenig bluntly.

“I’m a soldier, I’ll do my job,” said Ana, sounding quite weary about it.

“What about the rest of you?” Blake asked. “Do any of you wish to carry out the Corporation contract? Please bear in mind that upon severing your service to the military, you will immediately be designated a threat.”

Kinny’s heart leapt in his mouth for a moment.

He contemplated it, he really did. Kinny nearly spoke out, despite an imminent violent death being the outcome.

Eddy turned back towards the city, and started to walk with that tell-tale, thudding gait.

Kinny watched as the Mogs fell into their squad formations and followed on. He saw Bader, half-comatose and in terrible pain, blindly lope behind Kroenig like a loyal dog, and let out a shout of pure exasperation. It echoed

loudly inside the power suit, heard by nobody but him. Then Ranulph grit his teeth and began to walk.

“I thought so,” said Edwina Blake.

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SEVEN

Armbruster was restless, eyes flitting about warily as he ground his teeth, only half concentrating as the Hunter loped along at speed.

Despite the combat, there was still no satisfaction to be had.

The daring sabotage, the murder of his former allies, the ensuing destruction of the base at his hands – it had all been too easy and he couldn't put his finger on why.

Armbruster feathered the trigger, absently sending stuttering bursts of machinegun fire into several small groups of armed civilians too dumb to hide fast enough upon hearing his approach.

He didn't check to confirm hits. He knew they went down, chopped into burst bags of blood by accurate 8mm FMJ rounds.

No, they were irrelevant. The priority now was figuring out why he still felt empty inside.

Unfulfilled.

A lone bike shot out from a side road as Armbruster stomped past, intent on ambushing him, spraying wildly with machineguns. The Hunter reacted with lightning speed, thrusting out with a clawed foot that caught the bike squarely on the side.

It spiralled into the air with a metallic crunch, sailing away from him, and Armbruster yelled,

“Pull!” Just like he saw on an aged vid from old Earth once, then blasted it with his railgun.

The bike disintegrated into a glittering cloud of jagged shrapnel as the slug punched deep into a habitation block several hundred yards down the street, and Armbruster chuckled at the distraction.

Then it hit him.

He felt no satisfaction because the Corvids – or whatever the rabble called themselves this week – were not skilled opponents.

And his former comrades had not expected a fight, they just lined up willingly to be killed like drugged-up pigs in a slaughter farm.

There was no challenge to be had here. His skill was not being tested.

Armbruster nimbly sidestepped as another bike, the first guy's companion no doubt, barrelled at him at speed, seeming to aim directly for the skinny mech's legs, maybe hoping to topple the Hunter onto the deck.

His torso rotated as the bike missed, and Armbruster put a precise burst of fire through the Plexiglas cockpit, perfectly compensating for the speed of the whole sorry affair.

He didn't check the bike's demise, but heard it crash into something hard with a mighty grinding thump of metal meeting concrete.

Another meaningless kill.

What I need to do, he thought to himself, is investigate those things that fell from the sky.

Half of him thought they were simply rockets, fired by an opportunistic enemy from a neighbouring city, no doubt going through the same motions as Solo Nobre.

But half of him dared to hope that they were something else.

With this in mind, Armbruster checked his map boards, made a mental calculation, and headed towards the Necropolis at top speed.

It took several hours to reach District HQ. Nobody had said anything for the longest time, and the only sounds on the net were occasional grunts when somebody needed to hand Bader over. They made best speed, Mog's going at full pelt to keep up with the punishing pace laid down by Eddy.

The much smaller machines had great difficulty maintaining their rate of advance, as much due to the fact that Mog drivers were literally walking, their suits interpreting movements and copying them with artificial musculature, as with their size. The Captain by comparison, was a true pilot, sat in her command pit, her machine controlled by a combination of mind impulse and lever controls.

For her it was considerably less taxing.

Any semblance of formation was lost, and the whole QRF was strung out in a haphazard convoy, grouped dangerously close together, while Eddy forged ahead.

In the wake of the base sabotage, it seemed that a reckless streak had been born in their Commander, one that they hoped wouldn't get them killed.

It had felt eerie when they had passed through the sector gate, unopposed this time, surrounded on all sides by the featureless perimeter wall.

It was the first time that Kinny had left the sector since the start of his tour. He felt like they were stepping into the unknown, figuratively and literally. That sector they left behind now felt part of an earlier era, a time of fleeting peace that would be marked down as an interesting footnote in some historian's research.

The next sectors were much like the ones that Kinny, Carlos, and Bader had grown up in. A sprawling mess of high rise blocks and industry, all built on top of each other in a morass of human endeavour. Huge pipelines cast shadows over population centres, sometimes boring holes straight through the large buildings, as it would've been cheaper than building around them.

The only thing missing was the people. These sectors were usually teeming with life, but as Kinny walked he could see only fleeting glimpses of the civilians, flashes of yellow, lone survivors and small packs moving from cover to cover in the distinctive rain macs that were issued to each and every citizen.

Those drivers nearest to Eddy tried their best to cover the flanks of the convoy, but a combination of speed and fatigue made the job difficult.

The convoy had set itself into a sort of rhythm as it advanced through burning streets and buildings holed by weapons fire of various calibres.

Kinny saw a family – mother, father and two kids by his guess – huddled in their living room on a ground floor apartment, gripping each other tightly. Their home no longer possessed a front wall, and they were exposed to the rain as they shivered in yellow against the cold.

Eight bright eyes stared at his Mog as the convoy passed, blank expressions on dirty faces. Kinny was quickly becoming accustomed to the sight of shock on a person, and knew that they would be unresponsive for some time.

An unspoken command had rippled through the unit: every Mog driver took turns to hold each of Bader's hands, one driver on each side, effectively pulling him along.

Usually, if a Mog driver becomes incapacitated, in the absence of a recovery vehicle another driver can link up to his suit via a thickly insulated slave lead, so one trooper takes on the cerebral load of two suits to get them back to a safe zone.

A cursory check of Bader's heat damaged suit had confirmed Kinny's suspicions right away, the slave socket was melted.

So they dragged him onwards.

To Kinny, he was reminded of a time when he must've been little more than five years old.

Carlos, Bader and himself had been playing out in the Deads when they noticed it was getting dark.

The young boys had lost track of time, they weren't meant to leave the block when their parents were working the mines, but boredom had got the better of them that day.

The three children had held hands, gripping tightly in a little line, wandering the alleys until they stumbled into a pack of miners coming off shift.

Luckily, the men had recognised the boys and took them home, but Kinny had never felt so scared in his life.

He never wandered again after that.

Ranulph gave his friend's hand a comforting squeeze that wasn't returned, and his opposing number indicated that he wanted to change.

When one trooper became tired, he simply gestured to the next in line to take his place, before surging up the convoy, taking position to cover the flanks.

In truth, both patrolling at speed and dragging Bader were similarly taxing, but the comforting routine of doing something useful helped to steel the tired soldier's resolve.

It was somewhat miraculous that Bader was still standing in his present condition, and Kinny broke character to thank the Saints for his continued survival.

Kinny gave Bader's hand another squeeze without thinking, then wondered if it was actually for Bader's benefit, or his own.

As he pondered this, they trudged on.

By the time they had filtered through the third sector gate, the novelty of passing them had worn off. The convoy gave a wide berth to the gargantuan, still-burning corpse of a command tower that sat, ominous in death in the middle of the narrow highway between sectors. A literal mobile fortress, it had apparently died defending its gate, surrounded as it was by the broken and ruined shells of enemy vehicles. The once proud machine stood nearly a hundred feet tall, dwarfing even Eddy in its reduced majesty as a funeral pyre.

Kinny wondered what in the Seven Hells could have the power to destroy such an incredible feat of human engineering.

He hoped not to find out.

They had passed through three full sectors without incident. Evidence of fighting was everywhere, as though every sector had erupted into violence simultaneously, which Kinny figured was exactly what had happened.

Bodies littered the streets. Some relatively intact, others little more than gobbets of meats strewn across a wide space, tatters of shredded yellow material among the mess the only thing marking them as human remains.

In Sector 76, a pile up of hundreds of civilian cars had occurred. The panicking population no doubt tried to flee via the gate, and found themselves trapped in a choke point. Most of the vehicles were now burnt out as the convoy approached. Eyeless sockets stared from grinning, blackened skulls, their bodies partially fused with car seats. The vehicles were jammed so closely together, the people hadn't been able to open doors to escape the flames.

Kinny felt sick to his stomach as he noticed that the charred roofs of many of the vehicles were punctured in multiple places, they had obviously been hammered by high calibre shells from above.

Mechs had done this, or grav tanks. Something that could fly, maybe.

Whatever it was, that kind of tech was owned primarily by the Army, and Kinny tried not to imagine rogue soldiers pouring incendiary rounds into gridlocked traffic.

He failed.

The convoy had stopped, while Eddy surveyed the scene.

Kinny looked to the skyline, hidden behind yet another sector wall, towards the centre of the city. It appeared as though everybody with a gun was heading there, drawn like moths to a flame as the horizon burned ever brighter. Tracers laced the sky with increasing frequency and, if he strained, the Mog driver could make out the sounds of gunfire and explosions over the walls.

“There’s no way around,” Blake said, after carefully considering her options, “we need to go through this.” She took the first step, and cringed, the cheap stamped metal shell of the civilian car offered practically no resistance as she ground it flat.

It was nothing like stomping on tanks. There was no threat here, nothing alive even, and that somehow made it worse, that the people inside the cars were allowed no respite in death. They would be defiled by the awesome weight of her war machine, and all because she needed to get somewhere fast. She stepped on another one, it was impossible not to, they were packed so tightly together.

Blake kept her pace slow as Eddy crushed the traffic jam, and watched her miniscule rear display carefully.

The Mogs were having a harder time of it. Kroenig simply smashed the cars with blows of his weapon arms, the thin material no competition for his armoured bulk, to allow him to more easily walk over the things.

Some of the others tried to clamber atop the cars, clumsily hoisting themselves up with futile motions, for as soon as they put any weight on the burnt husks they crumpled like cardboard boxes under the hefty suits.

Blake’s eyes shot across to scrutinise the main display, and zoomed in on a portion of the sky up ahead.

Rocket contrails again, in formation no less, streaked down from above in a diagonal curve. Blake estimated where their trajectory would take them, as they were chased by flak shells fired from wherever, that burst in dark veils of spinning fragments. The effect reminded her of a particular kind of fungus that puffed out clouds of spores when disturbed. The fungus grew all over the city. It thrived in the dirty environment, and caused no end of respiratory problems amongst the old and infirm.

I think these clouds are slightly more deadly, Blake thought absently, as she factored in orbital gun density across the city, and realised she knew where they would touch down.

The Necropolis.

Part crash site, part shrine, the Necropolis was where the original settlers, led in time by Martim, Nara, and blessed Etim in spirit, had landed.

The huge colony ships, each up to a mile in length, had made a controlled crash in an unknown wasteland, and it was from there that the saints led their people to prosperity as an independent world, free of Corporation rule.

Because of this, because of the massive importance of the site to religious leaders and pressure from the hierarchy, Great Leader had never put orbital guns directly on the site.

It appeared as though the hierarchy were about to be bitten in the ass by their decision.

Blake opened a channel.

“Spacers, 12 o’clock high,” she tried to get a fix with her range finder, was offered only wildly fluctuating numbers, and thought about the distance to the Necropolis, “roughly four to five miles.”

“What in the Seven Hells are Spacers?” said Markovic from 2nd Squad.

“Spacers, Private, are one of the many cultures that comprise the galaxy at large. They probably heard about the contract, and are here on an asset grab.”

“Should we be worried, given the level of shit we’re currently buried in?” Mirante queried. It was understandable for anybody without outside experience, but unlike Mirante, Blake had seen footage of Spacers in combat.

“We most definitely should. Spacers are aristocratic by nature, arrogant, and ruthless. They’ll kill anyone who stands in their way without a second thought if we let them.”

“There’s a lot of that going around,” said Kinny. “What makes you so sure they’re Spacers? Don’t most of mankind fly about in space ships these days?”

Kroenig answered on Blake’s behalf.

“The contract was issued only a few hours ago. Spacers live in space. Use your damn head, Private.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. Spacers are the only void-travelling force that could reach us within such a short time frame.” She eyed the rapidly descending contrails again, and saw parts flake away from them, like the outer husks of cocoa seed pods, a rarity on Novo Solo.

“Drop pods, I think they’re called.” She went on, as Eddy slowly tromped along the overcrowded highway.

“They’ll probably contain weapons we’ve never seen before.” There was no point sugar-coating it for the troops anymore, they had to be aware that they should expect the bizarre.

Eddy stepped onto solid ground, and Blake gave a cursory glance to her rear display once more.

The Mogs were right behind, no doubt grateful to be away from the dead traffic.

She could only imagine what it looked like from their point of view, and didn’t envy them in their power suits down there.

“Shake out into formation,” Blake ordered, “2nd Squad up front, 1st in reserve. 1st Squad take control of Private Bader, and be ready for anything.” A chorus of confirmations sounded across the net. There was no telling what could be out there waiting for them, and that bastard Armbruster was probably lurking out of sight, stalking from the shadows.

Sgt Kroenig was undoubtedly good in a fight, but Mirante’s squad were whole, and she put more value in coherency than individual fighting skill at that moment.

As they fanned out and prepared to advance, the low rumble that had been the heartbeat of the city for hours now begun to coalesce into individual sounds. It took her a moment, but Blake increased her audio gain and recognised them for what they were. The sounds were gunfire, so many weapons discharging at once that it overlapped into a sonic assault, a pure deluge of noise. Being a career soldier, Blake had been used to the sound of

weapons fire her entire life. She thought of how many weapons would be required to fire at once to make her lose recognition upon hearing them, and she did not like the answer.

They were getting close now.

This sector bore the scars of battle much more than the previous sites they had visited on their way through to District HQ. Many buildings were little more than rubble, twisted skeletons of rebar and shattered concrete clutching at the sky, not that Kinny was paying attention anymore.

He was tired, and had injected himself with a small dose of stims to keep going.

Kinny rotated his torso and looked across at Braga, who held Bader's other arm. Mog drivers could not see each other's faces, but over time learned to recognise their comrade's moods via body language. Braga looked frustrated, shuffling in place, clearly just as tired as Kinny. He tugged Bader's hand to keep him moving, and his friend said sorry about his slow speed.

He kept apologising. And Kinny kept telling him that it was no bother, no bother at all. They would be at District soon, and probably in for the fight of their lives, but at least they would be able to re-arm, and get Bader to some medical attention before being thrown into the meat grinder. It made Kinny's bones ache just thinking about it. He felt like he had doubled in age over the course of the previous few hours, and he could not fathom how the positively-ancient Kroenig kept going. Combat as a Mog driver was tough, make no mistake.

Kinny's arm jarred painfully, and he looked behind him to get Bader moving again.

"Come on buddy, it won't be long now."

But Bader squeezed his hand hard, and said with surprising clarity,

“Brother, look at that.”

Kinny looked to his front, and it was like staring into the hells themselves.

District HQ was under siege.

Higher than even the perimeter wall, the sheer concrete surface was laced with razor wire across its entire surface. Thousands of muzzle flashes and glittering beams of energy weapons speared down from the battlements dotted along the top of it, pouring like rain onto the attackers below. The Corvids, an entire army of them, advanced at a snail’s pace under torrential ordnance. Huge shield generators were pulled along by armoured tractor units. They crackled and sparked, giving off a fitful blue light that made it difficult to focus under its irregular strobe effect. Beneath this bubble of protection, infantry and armour of all varieties advanced.

The shield umbrella wasn’t perfect, a veritable shit ton of fire was getting through, and the army left a trail of bodies and wreckage in its wake as it continued its grim advance. As Kinny looked, a heavy artillery round fired from a type of vehicle he had never seen before, detonated perfectly on the top of the wall. Chunks of masonry collapsed down the frontage, and Kinny could see men and machines tumble to their deaths.

The focal point, the spot that the entire force was aiming at, was a breach. The wall already had a gaping hole blown in its immense frontage.

Plugging the void was a command fortress. Through the constant flickering and huge weight of gunfire, at first Kinny thought it was out of action, burning like its cousin back at the gate.

But as they advanced, insanely, towards Armageddon, he could see that it was very much alive, it was simply firing all its armaments at once.

Artillery boomed from its back, lobbing HE shells into the hordes below. Main cannons tracked the shield generators, thumping in rhythm, trying to knock out the enemy’s formidable protection.

The explosions bloomed like deadly flowers, causing the hardshields to ripple fiercely, waves of energy cascading across the irregular surface. The

fire appeared to be ineffective, but everyone knew that shield power was finite, and it was simply a matter of attrition.

Even as Private Kinny formed the thought, one of the generators popped with an almighty backwash that blew through the Corvid ranks in a gale. Before they had time to react, small arms turrets opened up on the Fortress's lower tiers. Scores of infantry and light vehicles, which had just enjoyed near-impenetrable protection moments before, were mown down in buzzing streams of tracer.

Other shield units were converging upon the entrance, and Kinny could see that soon the gap would become meaningless as all units reached the spear point of their attack.

District HQ would fall.

What can we do to stop this? Surely the NPA is done.

“Well, they're screwed,” Markovic said, seemingly reading Kinny's mind, “can we go home now?”

Despite the situation, Ranulph couldn't help but laugh.

Kroenig was in no mood though, as his growling words attested:

“We need to offer support, right now. We can hit them in the rear, disrupt the attack if we move now.

“With what, exactly?” Mirante contested, her words failing to hide a humourless laugh. “We've got small arms and our bodies to add to that fight. You think those tanks and heavy guns are gonna just give up because we're the good guys?”

Kinny frowned, he couldn't believe he was about to say this.

“I agree with the Sergeant.” His stomach twisted in knots as he spoke, “We need to help them. I can't watch more of our guys die.”

But what if Carlos is out there, advancing with the Corvids? A voice said in his head.

He could worry about that once they got inside District HQ. His immediate concern was Bader, he couldn't just go around assuming his brother was in every Corvid group out there.

Besides, we're from the other side of the city, I'm sure he's fine, Kinny lied to himself.

"I don't care what's going on," added Markovic, his voice pitched slightly too high, "I'm jacked off my tits on combat stims."

"Shut the hell up Marko," snapped Mirante, but a few sniggers over the net took the impact out of her words.

"Listen up kids," Blake said. There was an authority to her tone that wasn't there before. "I'm not interested in what any of you want to do, I've just had orders from headquarters. We are to proceed east, skirting the perimeter of HQ, and approach via the hydroponic farms. It is currently the only flank not under attack, so is the only entrance that can be opened. Any questions?"

She waited about a second. "No? Good. Corporal Mirante, move."

And they stepped off the main road, to weave among the cluttered streets of Sector 70.

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EIGHT

Armbruster found his challenge.

He sped through the sectors at a pace that Mogs and Touros could not hope to match, the spindly machine light on its feet thanks to his expert touch at the controls.

The key was to allow the mech some leeway, not to be afraid of it, not to try and force it. Just go along for the ride, giving a gentle nudge in the right direction every now and again.

He gave himself a generous estimate, and was confident that he was hours ahead of his quarry now. They had to come this way, so he didn't have to waste time tracking them.

Armbruster had time to play.

The traitor approached a mobile fortress with confidence, one that had evidently defended the sector highway with great success. It sat, smoke pouring from multiple weapon barrels, armour pitted from hundreds of impacts, turrets swivelling to regard him as he strode straight at it.

He didn't bother to open a channel to the huge war machine. Instead, Armbruster reached above him and flicked a switch, broadcasting a powerful, short range identification tag, heavy with encryption that only another Loyalist unit would be able to decipher.

The fortress kept its guns trained on him, but did not fire as he stomped past, his speed giving a sense of urgency to his movements.

Just another loyalist, cut off from his unit, desperate to regroup at District.

That's what he was.

That's what he looked like, as he scanned the hull of the fortress with a practiced eye, noting the extensive damage wreaked on the outer plating by

what must've been an incredible amount of ordnance thrown at it.

Armbruster figured the shields were definitely down.

He was beyond the thing now, taking in every inch of the exterior, thinking about the characteristics of the mighty engine.

He knew that fortresses were slow to turn, and that their armour was weaker at the rear.

He was a leg hunter, specifically equipped to destroy vehicles of a much greater tonnage, but even his railgun wouldn't be enough to take on a fortress with its shields up.

The evidence suggested that the shields were not operational, but he could not be sure.

Only one way to find out.

Armbruster spun his Hunter's body like a turret and snapped off a single shot without slowing, recoil rocking his command pit as the hypersonic slug crossed the distance quicker than human thought.

There was no blue flash, no ripple of oil effect of a functional hardshield. The dense projectile smacked into an ammunition magazine with pinpoint precision, punching through with ease.

At first nothing happened, then after several seconds, Armbruster saw the muted flashes of secondary explosions. Jets of flame erupted from vents and weapon ports as the interior of the fortress suffered. A confined chain reaction of ammo cooking off ripped through the compartments in a maelstrom no crew member could hope to survive.

As he rotated to face front, Armbruster liked to imagine the screams as the Loyalists burned at their stations.

Served them right for being too trusting in this most troubling time.

But that wasn't the challenge.

It met him head on, at speed and without warning, coming the other way.

The Hunter saw combat action of sorts as he approached, and was curious. There was a heavy traffic jam. Vehicles clustered to get through the sector gate, and had funnelled themselves into a bottleneck as the various streets converged at the entrance.

Horns honked, and raised voices could be heard through his audio feeds as the civilian exodus crawled along at the pace of a sump slug.

Light whickered fitfully from the left, thrown against the concrete of the sector dividing wall, the out-of-sight explosion caught Hugh's attention.

Some distance away, a civilian car was propelled into the air against a backdrop of flame, and something fast skimmed into view as the boom of sound reached him.

One, then another, then a third vehicle sped along, following the course of the perimeter wall, chased by tracer fire.

They were A-gravs of a kind, though much sleeker and efficient looking than anything the Army had ever produced, painted the colour of dry blood and moving like nothing Armbruster had ever seen.

They were firing into the densely packed traffic, chased by a group of Corvid scrap mechs, heavy machineguns blazing away, uselessly converting ammo into brass.

The trio of war machines strafed and swirled through the air, deftly avoiding the incoming rounds whilst picking their shots at the crowded civilians with admirable precision.

It was almost leisurely the way they went about their murder. Armbruster had to shake his head to avoid being mesmerised by the alien things.

He saw it in the way they moved, the way they ignored the threats with utter disdain as they gleefully murdered screaming civilians, who by now were climbing over each other in their attempts to escape.

They were kindred spirits, true warriors amongst this rabble of peasants and desk soldiers.

A broad smile smeared itself across Armbruster's face as he checked the plate integrity and power levels of his railgun. They were good.

He simply had to kill them.

"2nd Squad, I got visual on fast movers, left flank," Ana Mirante's speech was clipped, tension evident in her voice.

"Numbers?" Blake asked.

Kinny was on the left of his squad, taking a break from dragging Bader.

He caught sight of bikes and infantry moving along, a few streets down from the platoon's position. They were being flanked.

"Hard to tell," Mirante replied, "I'd say they outnumber us though, bikes and dismounts, and at least one gun truck. They're paralleling us."

"Roger that," said the Captain, "has anyone else got an idea about numbers?"

Kinny was going to respond, when the sound of 8mm machinegun fire blazed out right in front of him.

"Contact left." Kroenig reported flatly, the rapid fire of his weapon lighting up the block of apartments directly to their flank. "Infantry in buildings with small arms, fifty yards."

First on the trigger again, the sergeant obviously thought it wasn't worth talking about any longer, as he started pumping 25mm rounds into windows in a methodical pattern.

Each window got a double tap, bang bang, switch target, bang bang,

With smoke and debris spewing from several buildings in reaction to the attack. Kinny passed an alleyway and stopped to scan for threats. As he did so, he made eye contact with the rider of an assault bike, sat stationary at the far end, engine idling.

The man just sat there, goggles raised onto his forehead, creating rings of clean skin on a thin face otherwise caked in grime. He stared at Kinny, eyes narrow, full of hate, before gunning the throttle and he was gone.

“Don’t slow down, fire on the move. The vehicles are trying to circle us,” said the Sergeant over the rattle of gunfire.

The rest of the platoon joined in and they were suddenly in a game of cat and mouse, darting between side streets, trying to outmanoeuvre the highly mobile Corvids that stalked them.

Eddy and the Mogs equipped with 25mm guns sniped back and forth with the vehicles, snap-shooting at bikes and jury rigged trucks on pure reflex.

The much larger machine called out targets for the Mogs, whilst spears of coherent light lanced into those targets in rapid succession. The Bully beam slowed the big trucks to make them easier targets or, in the case of bikes, melted them to the ground.

Kinny, being armed with twin 8mm guns, engaged the closer targets within the buildings themselves.

The incoming fire fizzled ineffectually from his shields, more an annoyance than a threat as they progressed to the next block. These guys were armed with no more than basic rifles and machineguns, and their fire was practically inconsequential. Even the unshielded Mogs were unharmed, such was the thickness of their plating. Hard rounds pinged and ricocheted from rolled steel armour, and the separatists paid the price.

Kinny swept both muzzles across a fixed MG position on the second story of an accommodation block, mounted at the front of a ruined storeroom. Reinforced by cement bags obviously stolen from a yard and piled up to form a makeshift fortification, the rebels clearly had high hopes for their improvised gun pit.

The Private watched as bags shredded under the assault, spilling their contents into the street. The pair of gunners spasmed and jerked as the FMJ rounds ripped through them, then they both slumped across the smoking weapon.

Kinny did not stop to confirm his kills, merely giving a quick glance to his ammo counters and swept for targets.

It was hard firing on the move.

He could barely see the enemy in the darkened rooms until they lit themselves up. Each burst of Corvid fire was like a beacon, and Kinny was simply engaging muzzle flashes.

The targeting reticules were not the most accurate aiming tools at the best of times. Kinny had to walk his rounds on target using his tracer as reference – a technique usually frowned upon in training for its wasteful nature.

But training isn't combat, he thought to himself as he focused on the wildly shaking white targeters.

He saw Kroenig, calmly firing single shots on the move as though it was a day on the range. A gun truck went up with a shot through the fuel tank. The improvised turret on the bed of the truck flew straight up, cartwheeling through the air, its helpless gunner kicking at nothing, unaware that he was already dead.

Markovic whooped over the net from up ahead, and the wreckage of a bike came skidding out of a side street, missing a wheel.

It came to a stop just in front of Eddy, who kicked the machine with full force.

Kinny expected it to sail through the air and crash into a high rise, then perhaps explode in a fireball, but it didn't.

The entire structure of the bike just disintegrated with a sad crump, its component parts flung like confetti.

“Wooh, did you see that!” Markovic yelled over the squad net.

“On your left,” Mirante stated, before the pair of them opened up on a bold truck that was barreling down the same side street.

Hundreds of holes appeared in its framework within a couple of seconds. The windscreen smashed, but the crew was hunkered behind the dash, driving blind.

The truck smashed straight into Markovic, who simply braced himself.

A great screech married a smash as metal collided, and the truck crumpled all the way up to its crew compartment as the jovial trooper put his shoulder into it, driving the engine block into the crew members and pinning their legs.

Markovic skidded back along the ground, carving deep gouges in the concrete with clawed toes until the truck had run out of momentum, then stuck his gun arms through the opening of the windshield.

The truck crew burst like blood-filled water balloons under automatic fire, coating the hardy Mog in a sheet of gore. The buzzsaw report of his weapons chopped clean through the truck’s bodywork and into a group of infantry that were following behind.

“Yeah! Have that you bastards!” Mirante added to the carnage, who was walking her rounds through the dismounts.

They had hugged the walls to allow the truck to pass, and unwisely still hugged them for cover now.

Tracer rounds ricocheted all down the narrow street. Some hit the brick work and skipped along, smacking into the infantry that took cover there.

The combined assault from two Mogs firing chopped the unfortunate separatists into mince in short order, and 2nd Squad were soon cheering over the net.

Kinny returned his attention to the next side street left of his own position.

A front wheel, light glinting from a lightly-armoured chassis, those same eyes again, filled with hate.

Except this time the bike was facing him, and he stared down the barrel of a 25mm anti-material gun.

“Sergeant, bike!” he reported, words lost to the noise as both he and the Separatist fired simultaneously.

MGs rattled, shell casing spewed from ejection ports, and the vibration pushed up Kinny’s arms into his shoulders once again. He was firing blind, his vision whited out as a direct hit cannoned into his Mog.

The shields took the hit, then popped with their characteristic sound that advertised to all and sundry that their target was now unprotected. Kinny was assailed by a wash of ozone, followed by another 25mm AP round that he never saw.

The round punched through armour, bored a hole straight through flesh and expended its energy, forcing superheated spalling from an exit wound of the Mog, that pattered against Kinny’s armour.

He heard the clang of fire against bare armour, and as Kinny’s vision cleared he saw the outline of a burnt Mog, and let go of his triggers.

“Oh no...”

In Kinny’s periphery, Sgt Kroenig advanced on the attack bike, firing a rocket salvo that erased it from existence in short order, before resuming his advance.

The young Private looked at the blackened chassis stood in front of him, saw the bare-edged metal of the exit wound contrasting with the charred exterior, and tried to catch Bader as he fell.

It was a clumsy effort, doomed to fail. Kinny couldn’t get a grip, the relatively stumpy gauntlets of his suit unable to pass the barrels of his guns. As a result, armoured hands slipped on the Mog’s power pack, feeling the heat of the exhausts as it pushed him back, and Bader crashed to a heap at his feet.

Unable to form words, Kinny simply scrambled, manoeuvring the best he could to try and reach the emergency eject cord once again.

“Leave him,” Kroenig growled over the net, “he’s dead.”

Kinny ignored him and grit his teeth, getting a handhold of the melted lever.

With a momentous strain that Saint Martim would’ve been proud of, he tugged on the lever from his precarious position, one machine stooped over another, and immediately wished he hadn’t.

The cockpit plating punched open on hydraulic rams, revealing the carnage within.

Bader’s face was twisted in a desperate snarl, eyes wide with the supreme effort of a mortally-wounded man protecting his friend.

His legs were still strapped in place, but there was nothing of him from upper chest to waist, and his upper remains collapsed into his own lap as the remnants of his harness detached. Kinny tried not to gag inside his suit.

Suddenly, he was yanked to the side by a weapon arm, and Kroenig kicked his Mog in the back, causing him to stumble forward.

“I told you boy, he’s dead, now move!”

Kinny choked down bile as he attempted to move his legs. Tears streamed down his face, his legs felt like they were made of concrete, they just didn’t want to go anywhere.

“Don’t be dead weight, trooper.” Kroenig said, as he shoved past, opening up again on distant targets with controlled bursts.

“How can you be so cold?” Kinny asked quietly, his voice shaking, without malice.

The Sergeant did not hesitate.

“Imagine the friends I’ve lost,” and he was gone again, barking orders up and down the line.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. They were meant to get Bader some medical help. Even if he was doomed, they could've at least made him comfortable.

Maybe he figured out that he was on borrowed time, Kinny thought, and decided to die doing something heroic instead.

He half-heard Captain Blake issuing instructions over the net. Kroenig reported the death of Bader.

"Heroic," he spat out loud, to himself. There was nothing heroic about dying for a cause you had no faith in.

But it was the Corvids that killed him, not the NPA.

Everyone on Novo Solo had to complete their mandatory two years of service. Everybody knew this, so they all knew that they would be fighting brothers, sisters, daughters and sons.

And they're killing them anyway.

Kinny shook, tears streaming down his face. It didn't make any sense. If they had just negotiated, half the damn Army would've downed tools and quit on the spot. So many lives could have been saved, instead of forcing the soldiers to defend themselves.

Ranulph took a moment, stopping his stomach that threatened to coat the inside of his cockpit, and set his jaw.

His political views were meaningless now, he had their blood on his hands, and the Corvids would kill him regardless.

Kinny shook his head, accompanied by an incomprehensible yell of frustration, and followed his Sergeant.

Captain Blake played her Bully beam across a group of infantry that had broken cover at her advance. Intimidated by Eddy's obvious power, they were scurrying to the next hard point they could see.

The slowest members were superheated so fast that they disintegrated into smouldering swirls of dust, weapons, glowing white hot, clattering to the ground.

Blake tracked the remainder as they leapt into the ground floor of yet another bombed out accommodation block, and followed them in.

How dare they, she thought, full of righteous fury, how dare they stab the system in the back, the system that supports their very existence?

How dare they turn my own men against me?

And all it took was a stupid contract from a corporation that nobody had ever seen.

Eddy bull rushed into the ruined building, bringing the ceiling down upon the Corvid infantry, burying them in plaster and concrete.

Several grotty forms crawled from the mess, coughing and spluttering, wild eyes darting back and forth as they desperately searched for fallen weapons.

Blake melted them to the floor. Clouds of brick dust diffused the beam enough so that the air itself inside the building caught fire, bathing Eddy in a short lived breath of flame, making it appear as though the machine was a dragon from legend.

Vermin!

Behind her, the undisciplined crackle of intermittent rifle fire competed with the chatter of twin 8mms, interspersed with the occasional crump of low level artillery detonating.

It was nothing her QRF platoon couldn't handle, though ammo expenditure was definitely an issue. She asked for updates, and calculated that there should be enough, as long as a tank battalion didn't come rolling around the corner.

Blake spun Eddy's torso and stepped back, careful not to tread on any of her Troopers, before rounding the corner of the block.

The agricultural facility was to her 10 o'clock. Over the tops of smaller buildings she could just make out the shattered roofs of enormous greenhouses, edged by artificial crop fields that ran for miles, following the line of District. The facility and its fields provided vital sustenance for dozens of sectors, including Blake's own.

They were riddled with craters, entire crops ruined by indiscriminate shellfire.

People will be eating fungus and rats this winter, the Captain thought absently.

Infantry, and what appeared to be junker Mogs, scrambled among the churned muck, maybe company strength, attempting their own attack against District HQ.

The flank was meant to be uncontested.

No matter, that was their way in.

"All call signs, do not stop, we are approximately one mile out from the eastern entrance."

"We will approach in extended line, 1st Squad to my left, 2nd to the right. All call signs confirm."

She got a pair of breathless responses from her squad leaders, accompanied by the whine of servos and clanging of small arms fire against unshielded Mogs.

It sounded like heavy hail against a tin roof.

"What's the status on our wounded? Is he still moving?"

"Negative," Kroenig reported, "Bader is KIA. AP round."

"Dammit," she said to herself. But then, Bader's death would speed them up somewhat, and allow all legs to focus on the mission.

She cursed herself for the thought, but maybe he would help them more in death than he could have, had he continued to cling to life.

“Roger that,” she responded to the Sergeant, “Continue to make best speed. We’re nearly there people.”

Eddy’s generator screamed, and as the massive machine cleared the last street of the habitation area, lumps of masonry shaking loose from the carapace with every step, Blake surged forwards once more.

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NINE

Armbruster chased the fliers, watching from a distance as they dispatched the pursuing units with little effort, and concluded their massacre of the civilian traffic. The Hunter nimbly wove through the carnage caused by the A-gravs, each footfall placed to miss a burning car or mangled lump of Saints-knew-what, lest he give his position away and become the quarry.

He observed how they travelled, the erratic evasion and lateral movement capability that ground based units simply lacked, and devised a plot to destroy the trio of interlopers.

They sketched a hasty route around the District, sticking to side roads and byways at a rapid, almost reckless pace, clearly skirting their way back to the Necropolis.

He knew it!

The falling objects were not rockets at all, but off-world contractors, eager to carve out a piece of Novo Solo for themselves.

Well, Specialist Armbruster would be damned if he was going to let some foreign bastards take credit for the good work being conducted by men and women like himself. This was local business, and the reward money from the corporation would be brought home with the victors.

With this thought playing on his mind, he struck.

It was of course, like everything else he had done up to this point, perfect.

He had waited until the enemy unit was transiting through a particularly narrow street with high rise blocks on both sides. This forced the blood-coloured cretins to travel in single file, their manoeuvrability limited by the tight terrain.

His weapon was at the very limit of its operational effectiveness, some 2500 yards or so, then fired just as the last of the A-gravs was turning a corner.

Uncharacteristically for Armbruster, he paused to watch his shot, its passing marked by air distortion, such was the speed of the slug as it shattered everything made of glass in its wake.

The final A-grav was just about to take the turn, his fellows were ahead, out of sight, and so could not see the strike.

Shields blew out in a pop not dissimilar to what the Hunter had been seeing all night. The superdense tungsten slug whacked the rear armour, just about where he reckoned the power pack was placed, judging by the venting louvres. The 20mm dart cored the elegant vessel like a pneumatic drill punching an apple, expunging a morass that looked like a mixture of machine parts and organic matter from a horrific exit wound.

The whole vehicle was ripped apart by secondary explosions, and was unrecognisable in about a second.

Armbruster simply stared through his forward monitor, observing into depth, all pretence of anything remotely human now gone from his gaze.

The superficial joy gained from destroying his former comrades, the disgust felt when fighting the peasant Corvids, all gone.

This was an alien enemy, an invader, this was the fight that he was born for.

There was a void where Armbruster's approximation of a personality had been, discarded now it had been deemed no longer necessary.

Only the Hunter remained.

He didn't attempt to hide as the remaining contractors wheeled around the corner, one rising above the other on screeching grav plates, attempting to get a bead on this new threat.

He gave them a second to spot him, operating his external speakers as they started to accelerate toward him.

"You are not welcome here," said the Hunter, flatly.

Then he triggered his silent running gear, and disappeared into a side road.

They would think he was running, would be eager to get revenge, anger would get the better of them, and they would die.

He moved no more than ten yards and turned, hunkering down behind his leg armour for a more stable firing platform, waiting for the first sap to serve themselves to his railgun.

A blur of red, like a flying blood clot, and Armbruster fired reflexively, not even having to think.

But it was gone.

The slug hit an accommodation block, kinetic energy round doing little damage to a heavy concrete structure other than punching a hole straight through it.

Before he knew it, an A-grav – the second A-grav! – was firing at him with autocannon and lasers.

Hardshields flared, and his eyes flicked across to see the power levels dropping at an alarming rate.

The Hunter triggered his machinegun and backed up, firing long bursts with little effect to cover his retreat.

Break line, do not think in a linear fashion, said the cold, detached mind that would kill these scum, and he stepped sideways, using his twenty foot war machine to smash directly into the adjacent building.

The incoming slackened immediately as he ploughed through apartments, cutting a zigzag through concrete and iron rebar with almost no regard for his own safety.

They were quicker than him, and smart.

Contrary to what he had expected, the contractors had figured out the nature of his main armament, and the first A-grav had drawn fire to allow the second to attack while the heavy railgun was busy in its loading cycle.

One to remember.

They would not follow him inside the building, of that he was certain, given their flimsy construction and reliance on speed and manoeuvrability.

Their options were to wait for him in ambush, or leave, neither of which would be optimal for Armbruster. He needed this over quickly.

Do what they do not expect.

The Hunter doubled back after no more than a couple of seconds, causing more damage to the structure of the building as he barrelled straight out of his improvised entrance, torso facing right at the A-grav that had been unwilling to follow him in.

It immediately jinked to avoid the expected slug but anticipating this, Armbruster did not fire, instead he charged full speed back into the original street they had been travelling on.

Unlike his machine, the off world contractors could not smash their way through large structures easily, so the second A-grav had only managed to get a hundred yards or so away from him when he fired.

The shot impacted on the craft's front shields, the pilot being savvy enough to keep his glacis facing the enemy as he withdrew. His A-grav spun wildly, bouncing first from a block wall, then the floor before it gained elevation, flickering grav plates struggling to power the shields and correct the violent action being wrought upon it.

But the damn shields did hold.

The Hunter sent long bursts of tracer into the staggered vehicle, then got nicely and close, and stamped all over it.

Clawed feet crumpled red armour into an unrecognisable pulp in a mechanical frenzy of stomping, before Armbruster stopped to think.

The last one is outflanking me. Splashes of rounds against shields, dangerously weak now, came from the rear.

The Hunter spun its torso to face rearwards, and Armbruster caught sight of the final A-grav, smoke pouring from autocannon barrels trailing behind as

it zipped away, ducking into the alleyway he had just escaped into moments before.

Aware that he was being baited, Armbruster spun and followed, sprinting his war machine past the junction first, getting a split-second glimpse down there, long enough to confirm that the A-grav was not there waiting for him.

He doubled back and ventured down the tight alleyway once more, eyeing the mech-sized hole that he had created with caution as he lurched past.

Not in there either.

The alleyway continued for a couple hundred more yards, leading to an open, square-shaped area, walled in by the faces of several tower blocks. It was a communal space, indicative of the slightly higher standard of living that the citizens of this sector were accustomed to when compared to those on the boundaries of Solo Nobre, replete with a grassed area and children's playground.

The damn A-grav had found itself an arena where it could manoeuvre.

It wasted no time coming straight for him, moving too fast to track, spraying fire from the left flank in a strafing run that left the Hunter reeling.

It flashed across in front of Armbruster so close he could make out the individual power vanes that spider-webbed through the grav plates under the machine's hull.

A shrill beeping in the dark cockpit pierced his thoughts, alerting him to the fact that his shields were down under 25%, which Armbruster ignored as he struggled to rotate his torso fast enough to keep up with the alien craft.

It stopped at the edge of the communal area, spinning to face him with effortless grace as he lined up his targeting reticule, a solid shot, centre mass, just squeeze.

The thing moved laterally, a little boost-assisted dodge, just as his finger found the trigger break.

Armbruster saw it and responded in that microsecond, but would later curse his primitive human nervous system for being unable to keep up with his instincts.

The railgun cracked, the round missed.

Another strafing run came in and Armbruster snarled, blanking out the alarms as the A-grav shot past at a rate of knots.

Adapt, react, win the fight.

He reached up and slapped the auto-stop button on his railgun's load mechanism, halting it before another slug was rammed into the breech.

Then, Armbruster quickly dialled down the shot power to 50%, whilst simultaneously rotating the Hunter's torso onto line, overlaying that white reticule on his enticing target.

The contractor had made one mistake in its bait-and-move tactic.

It was waiting in the corner, and it could only dodge one way.

He squeezed the trigger. Magnetised rails cracked loudly, discharging 50% of their capacity.

The A-grav dodged, the Hunter tracked.

Armbruster slammed the autoloader back into action, and a slug was fed into the breech with a satisfying clunk.

The enemy contractor began to move forward, just as Armbruster fired.

The slug smashed into the thing with reduced force, causing powerful shielding to ripple, but it still had enough kinetic energy to knock the gravity-defying vehicle back into the fascia of an accommodation block.

Lack of contact with the ground was the downside of piloting things that floated. They were damn unstable, and Armbruster could capitalise on it.

Indeed, he was moving at a sprint, ploughing furrows into the grass of the communal area with every footfall, as soon as he'd pulled the trigger.

Not bothering to throw a kick, or stomp the enemy unit, the Hunter simply ran straight into it as it attempted to right itself, relying on superior weight and momentum to do the work for him.

The contractor's red craft slammed into the wall of the apartment block and went through it in an explosion of dust and shattered concrete.

It came to rest about ten yards in, simply sitting motionless on the ground, like someone had flipped a switch inside it.

Armbruster lined up another shot at full power, in case the machine's pilot was bluffing, but it didn't move again, and Armbruster's personality began to reassert itself.

He allowed himself a grim smile as he wondered about scavenging power from the off worlder's flying machine.

He had successfully engaged and destroyed an unknown threat, with no prior knowledge, relying purely on his warrior's instincts and adaptive abilities.

He looked at the pitiful thing just lying there, and realised that he was probably the first Novo Solo native to have ever bested an off-worlder in combat.

It was relatively intact, and there was a good chance that the generators carried enough charge to replenish his shields somewhat.

Armbruster detached himself from the command seat and started to prep the vampire cables.

He would have to move fast. Fighting could be heard coming from the direction of District HQ, and he wouldn't miss that for the world.

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TEN

Something impacted on Eddy's front hardshield with enough force to distort her optical feeds.

The shock reverberated through Blake's skull, shaking her so hard her teeth hurt, and she felt the feedback needling through her jack.

Shit, what was that? She twisted both her control sticks on their horizontal axis, bringing Eddy into hull-down mode. The huge machine hunkered down behind its heavy leg armour, and her feed cleared to display an enemy heavy.

Its legs were like hers, but that's where the similarities ended. The upper body seemed to be made out an old truck chassis that had been welded to the waist gimble, and up-armoured with sheet steel.

Damn junkers, where are the separatists getting all this gear?

It had a 105mm gun rigged to the side of the haphazard torso, which boomed as it strode forward, causing her shields to flare once more.

Blake looked across and eyed her hardshield power readout.

Not good, she could only take maybe one more of those before she was down to armour plating, and that wouldn't do.

She opened a channel as the enemy heavy opened up with its 12.7mm turret MG. High-calibre rounds splashed against her depleting shields, rippling across its surface like stones thrown into a pond.

She responded by triggering her Bully beam, and played it across the Mech's torso, hoping to toast some optics or something.

Paint bubbled upon the heavy welded steel, and the machine juddered as the kinetic beam did its work, but the enemy junker just pushed on like a man walking against the wind, and continued its advance.

"Contact heavy, five hundred yards, my axis."

“We’ve got nothing that can scratch that boss,” came Mirante’s instant reply.

“You don’t. All call signs peel past Eddy and proceed with the plan. Use me for cover.”

“Roger that,” from Kroenig.

“Yeah boss,” Mirante.

Another 105mm shell hammered into Eddy, and her shields blew with a supersonic pop that shattered the few windows that had somehow remained intact on the upper levels of the nearest habitation blocks.

She waited agonising seconds, staring hard at the approaching mech as it closed the distance.

She cancelled the incessant beeping of her shield alarm and waited, focusing hard on her breathing.

Blake shot a glance at her rear display, caught grainy images of Mogs high tailing it past at a speed she didn’t know they could manage.

Hurry up, dammit.

“Last man across boss,” reported Kroenig, and instantly Blake was driving forward, powerful servos pushing Eddy to its feet in a whine of grinding metal.

The enemy mech fired again.

“Spread out spread out,” Kroenig barked, his voice crackling with distortion in Kinny’s ears. “Ignore the infantry, concentrate on the Mogs first.” Kinny was left of the line, so halted and knelt in the mud, waiting for the rest of his squad to get into place. He looked left, and saw Captain Blake barrelling into the enemy heavy, Bully laser blazing across its surface, causing its glacia plates to burst into flame.

He understood, as his leader's machine charged with startling speed, why that particular class of heavy mech was named the Touro.

They collided with a mighty boom, and the ground shook, worrying the dirt around Kinny's feet.

They were outnumbered two to one by the enemy legs. There were nearly two dozen of them, supported by three times as many infantry as they tried to take the wall of HQ's least-defended side.

They had the drop on the dismounts and the crappy Mogs that were attacking District HQ, so it would come down to speed and violence of action to take them out.

A straight-up assault. *"Hey diddle-diddle, straight up the middle" as the instructors at Mongoose school used to say.*

Kinny never thought he would be doing one in real life.

"Listen in." Kroenig said, positioning himself at the far right of 1st Squad so he could maintain visual on 2nd, "Bounding cover by squads, go flat out and surprise the bastards."

Mirante confirmed the orders, her voice cold.

Markovic whooped with joy.

Braga said something in the old tongue.

Kroenig invoked the protection of the Saints.

"1st Squad, move!"

They were up and running at a flat sprint across open ground, while 2nd Squad poured the hate downrange.

The soil was soft underfoot, churned up by a combination of ploughs and artillery shells, and the Mogs sunk a good eighteen inches for every step taken. Despite this they kept a good pace, with powerful strides that flung disrupted earth everywhere.

Incoming fire was non-existent for the first bound, and Kinny puffed hard as he saw tracer whip across no man's land.

Mirante's squad bracketed and destroyed two enemy Mogs before they even managed to turn around, tracers finding backs, shoddily-welded rear armour coming apart under the fire. Huge chunks of vital mechanisms chipped from the chassis of the enemy engines until the machines were dead on their feet.

It was impossible for 1st Squad to offer support fire, Kinny could barely see as he sprinted awkwardly, such was the violence of the juddering motion caused by machines being driven beyond their usual limits.

"Down," came the shout, and he instantly dropped to one knee, momentum ploughing a small trench into the soil, and Kinny was firing before he had stopped.

The enemy had begun to turn now, realising the threat to their rear, their movements sluggish compared to the Army machines.

Kinny's guns spewed rounds in a nonstop firestorm.

The first target juddered, caught mid turn, and the unshielded, cobbled together mech was quickly dispatched. Many of Ranulph's rounds bounced off, red phosphorescent beams of tracers winging wildly into the night sky, but some got through the joints and weak spots, smashing vital systems.

Braga's fire found his own, and the enemy Mog came apart under the joint assault, much to his comrade's approval.

Kinny worked his guns left to right, focusing from one target to another. He chopped down infantry as he strafed from Mog to Mog, the poor bugger's deaths simply a by-product of machine warfare, and concentrated on his next victim. A flurry of rockets screamed from the friendly line, corkscrewing wildly across the muddy terrain before slamming into the enemy Mog, blowing it from its feet in a shower of shrapnel.

"Haha that one was for Grayson, you prick!" yelled Braga as Kroenig's rockets did their damage.

“He’ll have a headache in the morning,” huffed Markovic, as 2nd Squad sprinted past their position, aiming for the entrance to the skeleton-framed greenhouses.

Shots pinged and ricocheted from Kinny’s armour now, as the enemy brought their guns to bear.

They might not be equipped with shields, but neither was he anymore, and he figured that it would come down to who could get most lead downrange in the shortest time.

Like every straight assault, it would come down to attrition.

Sporadic fire came from the HQ walls, causing several of the enemy Mogs to switch fire back again.

Beams glittered and hard rounds stitched the earth as the suddenly-outgunned Corvids became crippled with indecision.

They must’ve been aware of their precarious position, trapped as they were between the wall and an unexpected attack from the rear.

Kinny thought it would probably make them fight all the harder.

As a third Mog caught fire under 1st Squad’s assault, and crumpled into an undignified heap, Kinny couldn’t help but be reminded of Bader, and he pumped more and more rounds into the flaming torch of a vehicle.

New fires echoed from the right, outgoing, he could tell by the disciplined bursts a hundred yards up ahead, signalling that 2nd Squad were in position. Without requiring any prompting, the entirety of 1st Squad were on their feet again.

Kinny eyed his ammo counters as he sprinted for all his worth towards the hydroponics buildings, arms trying to pump in the restrictive armoured gauntlets.

He was unsure if he could manage any more prolonged bursts like that.

The junker Touro fired its main gun again at almost point-blank range.

It was a wild shot, and the 105mm round just clipped Eddy's upper carapace, shearing the Bully beam turret clean off with a screech of tortured metal.

Blake used her momentum to launch a powerful thrust kick, and Eddy's right leg pistoned out with deadly intent.

The enemy stepped back, anticipating the blow, causing it to fall short and scrape the junker's leading leg.

Eddy's armoured foot scraped down the enemy's leg in a shower of sparks, causing Blake to lose her balance. She turned her mech's stumble into a head-butt, smashing Eddy's carapace into the Corvid machine's cockpit. Welded steel was no match for composite armour, and the separatist mech's visage crumpled with the strike. It fired again, the shot having no hope of finding its target, as Eddy was practically on top of the failing machine, the enemy's barrel looking over its shoulder.

Blake's head-butt took the motion out of her fall, and she managed to find her footing again, stamping down on the enemy's injured leg, causing it to buckle at an angle.

She felt triumphant as the lower leg sheared off completely, and the junker fell, twisting as it did so.

Its torso swung around, 105mm barrel barely clearing Eddy's carapace as the fall gave it space to line up one last shot.

Blake was too close, too off-balance to manoeuvre her bulky machine in any way that might save her, so simply stared into that smoking barrel for the longest split-second, imagining how long it takes for an autoloader to complete its sequence.

A shot cracked across her bow. Not the cannon, but the distinctive hypersonic boom of a railgun slug.

The junker mech was gutted from flank to flank, like somebody had fired a shotgun at a melon, and she followed the air distortion back to its source.

She saw nothing.

“You’re my prey, boss. Nobody else’s.” *Armbruster*.

“Thanks for that, you prick,” Blake retorted. She refused to be baited, her pragmatic nature engaged fully and she began to check systems.

The shot that took out her turret did some damage to the power relays, causing a feedback surge to fry some of her lesser systems. If she didn’t shut down now, it would cause permanent damage within the next couple of minutes, and the last thing she wanted was her engine blowing up without warning.

Eddy would be sat still for a while as it reset, and went through system start-up routines, entirely in the open.

She was entirely at Armbruster’s mercy if he decided to attack. Her mech couldn’t even find him, let alone shoot him with anything, lacking any weapons other than Eddy’s considerable mass.

So she decided to carry on with her plan, and if her former scout/hunter shot her in the back, then so be it.

“Down!” came the call, rather unnecessarily in Kinny’s opinion. 1st Squad had huffed and puffed their way through the smashed glass of the hydroponics facility and crashed into the first available cover after crossing no man’s land.

Kinny dropped into an irrigation ditch, and M-841 was immediately plunged up to its knees in water.

The ditches were uniformly spaced every hundred yards or so, and normally provided water to the crops that currently sat, mangled and chopped to pieces among the dirt.

Unfortunately, the enemy had the same idea, and now the QRF platoon was engaged in a form of improvised trench warfare.

Kinny stuck his guns over the trench lip and rattled off a short burst before ducking down.

Great clods of soil were thrown up around him, splashing down alongside his shell casings in the dirty water.

The Private engaged his optic wipers as water made it difficult to see, and blazed away at muzzle flashes.

“Mirante, Kroenig. Continue your advance, break down into fire teams. Try to maintain the line.”

“Roger,” Mirante replied over rhythmic cannon fire, “Moving now.”

The nature of the trench system made it impractical for the squads to cover each other’s advance, so Kroenig had decided to move up in smaller teams.

“Kinny, Braga, you’re ‘Delta’, stay here and cover. Machado and Victore you’re ‘Charlie’ with me.”

“Roger” chorused the Privates.

“Charlie, prepare to move,” Kroenig got a good grip of the lip of the trench. “Move!”

Braga and Kinny laced the field with fire, suppressing the enemy under a hail of tracer.

Kroenig and the others scrambled madly up the trench side, the soft earth providing little purchase for a heavy war machine, but were soon away at a mad dash, mirrored on the right flank by Mirante’s squad.

Kroenig’s D-99 and the Mogs jumped down into the next trench, and immediately began laying down fire.

“Delta, move.”

Kinny and Braga flailed and scabbled from the trench and set off at a good pace, keeping their spacing loose.

Kinny had managed about sixty yards, when an incoming cannon round from Saints-knew-where detonated to his left.

A great plume of mud rose into the air, and the blast buffeted him hard, knocking him to his knees mid stride.

Shit, he thought as he rose to one knee, and pushed off.

Servos screamed, and nothing moved.

Shit shit shit, he thought. *Not now*.

M-841's leg had jammed. Kinny grunted and strained, it always did it at the worst possible times. Veins bulged in his neck as his face went bright red, he felt like his head would explode from the effort. Something felt like it was starting to give.

"You okay?" Braga called. The other Mog driver had stopped just short of the trench, and was looking back. His body language looked worried.

"Why are you trying to kill me you bastard!" Kinny yelled, unsure whether he was transmitting or not.

With a final whine of protest, the knee joint popped into motion, propelling him to his feet and into a run once again.

Small arms fire peppered from his plating with worrying regularity, pinging and sparking with gusto as Kinny finally reached the trench, and dropped into the water.

"What the hell happened?" Kroenig demanded.

"Servos locked up," Kinny replied, leg muscles burning from the effort, "I'm good."

Kroenig growled something, before Charlie fire team moved off.

The squad completed another bound without incident, chewing through precious ammo to gain ground. Kinny was unsure if he hit anything, but was painfully aware that his short pause had delayed the unit, costing time and ammunition they couldn't afford.

Mirante's squad had to hold up a short while for 1st Squad to catch up, but soon enough the line was firm, and Kroenig opened a channel.

"Listen up. The enemy are in the next trench line. There's more of them and we've got practically no ammo, but they're pinned in place. We have to get through them to get to HQ."

Braga shuffled uncomfortably next to Kinny, the physical embodiment of how the Young Private felt about it.

"Can't the base give us some support? Smack 'em from the rear?" Mirante enquired. Kinny thought it sounded like a good idea.

They had to have more than the piddly support fire they were currently putting out. Just one cannon could solve all their problems for the near future.

"Negative. They're in siege mode, they probably barely have enough troops to man the walls. Plus they don't know if they can trust us yet, with Army units going nuts all over the place." He paused, as though reluctant to say the words himself. "The only option is hand-to-hand combat."

Mogs weren't built for hand-to-hand combat. In the past, there had been modifications, saw blades and crushing claws, etcetera, but those were used in times of war. Today's Mogs are outfitted for urban pacification, primarily smoke bombs and small calibre MGs for dealing with dismounts and light armoured targets.

Fitting a power saw to a Mog would be breaking a dozen or more regulations these days.

Kinny wondered if the Corvids cared about that.

"We advance on my command, full charge. If anyone's got smoke, pop it on the approach, save your ammo for the trench. Kinny, you're with me. If you lock up again, I'll drag your ass myself."

The confirmations were half-hearted, not filled with confidence at all.

Until the ground shook, then again, and again.

It was the rhythmic thumping of a heavy on the advance.

Kinny turned to look, and a wash of relief swept over him.

“Great Leader compels you to die!” Captain Blake roared from external speakers, as Eddy thundered up the centre line of their advance.

“Go, now.” Kroenig said, as he heaved himself from the trench and popped smoke.

The rest of the Mogs followed suit, sending a fusillade of canisters ahead of them, pitifully few, that popped just in front of the next trench line.

The incoming fire was directed solely at Eddy as it rampaged through, chugging past the line to crash into depth positions like some out of control train.

The commander obviously knew she couldn't get caught up in Mog business, for fear of squashing her own men, and Kinny caught a glimpse of her through the smoke, stomping up and down the final trench line, flinging mangled machines and bodies left and right.

The infantry in that trench fled for their lives, nowhere to go but the wall, where Kinny imagined they would be gunned down by its defenders.

Then he was in the smoke, blind, tracers snapping past like supercharged fireflies, and he fell, straight on top of another Mog.

He came down hard into the trench, and the junker Mog disappeared under the water as his weight bore down upon it.

Kinny opened up at point-blank range, rounds and casing kicking up brown spume that splashed wildly. The flat report banged loudly as rapid fire chewed through shoddily-fashioned armour and pulped the driver inside.

The guns suddenly went silent, barrels steaming as water splashed against them and Kinny's autoloaders whined on empty as he snarled, pushing himself from his kill.

Dismounts, chest high in the murk, fired rifles at him ineffectually, faces contorted in screams that was lost to the gunfire. They couldn't move fast

enough in the brown liquid, and Kinny ground forward, punching out, using his weapon barrels as improvised spears.

The first two men were pole-axed off their feet, ribcages shattered despite body armour, and clattered into another of their number.

Kinny didn't stop, and rifle rounds spattered from his armoured hide, deforming and falling away as he strode on. He crushed the spluttering men under metal shod feet, and continued to lash out in short punches, mashing flesh and breaking bones with every strike.

Up ahead, Kroenig fired a 25mm AP round into a Mog at point blank range, obliterating the upper glacis of its cockpit, and the upper torso of the driver inside.

His gun clicked empty, so Kroenig swung it vertical into the stowed position, and grasped the dead Mog in an armoured gauntlet. Being a full foot taller than a Mog, D-99 had little trouble lifting the enemy machine from its feet. Kroenig advanced like a legionnaire from legend, hunched under a punishing fusillade behind his makeshift shield. He fired his single MG at another pair of enemy drivers, one of whom had extended his legs to shoot over his comrade's head.

The 8mm gun had little effect, and clattered empty after a short burst, but it had got Kroenig close, and he rammed his shoulder forward, battering the lead Mog back. He dropped his shattered shield and allowed it to sink to the waterlogged floor of the trench, simultaneously firing a single rocket from his shoulder mounted launcher.

The HE round exploded, engulfing both engines in a short-lived ball of orange flame, but the force was directed at the enemy machine which cannoned back into its brother, knocking him off his feet.

Seemingly out of ammo, Kroenig emergency ejected, launching his body from the machine.

Kinny stopped, staring open mouthed at the insanity as Kroenig landed like a long jumper, skidding hard before he clambered across the destroyed Mogs, carbine in hand. He paused to mow down an infantryman that

appeared with a short burst, before leaping onto the last machine that lay partially obscured by water, pinned by its fallen buddy.

The driver fired wildly, twin MGs spraying into the air, but Kroenig was well inside his arcs and remained unharmed as he found footing on the machine's carapace.

He's going to be deaf if he survives that, Kinny thought, as Kroenig ducked down, his face set in grim determination, upper body vanishing under the water.

The enemy Mog's cockpit opened as Kroenig reappeared, stepping back to avoid getting knocked into the water.

He's pulled the release cable!

Sergeant Kroenig calmly shot the enemy Mog driver in the face, then hurriedly returned to his own machine, balancing precariously on the wreckage of three leg units as he went.

"My flank is clear," Braga reported as Kinny still stared past Kroenig's D-99, at the destruction he had wrought in short order.

"Roger that," Kroenig replied, breathlessly, "We're clear here also. 2nd Squad report."

"We're good here, no casualties." Mirante reported in her usual, clipped tone.

"It would seem," Markovic added, "that their machines are held together with spit and happy thoughts.

"Indeed, unlike ours that are held together with duct tape and string, praise Nara." Surprisingly, it was Kroenig that had fired back with a witticism of his own.

It got a chorus of "Praise Nara!" from the platoon, and even Kinny had to smile.

Eddy stood, battered but unbroken, in front of the Eastern gate of District HQ.

Blake's machine was a vision from the Seventh Hell, blackened and scarred, its feet covered in mashed body parts and mud.

Kinny thought, in that moment of stillness after the combat, that "Steady Ed" was absolutely terrifying.

"Attention," she boomed, her loudspeaker still clearly operational. "We are soldiers from Sector 78, loyal to the NPA, and we are expected. Open the gate."

And just like that, the gate began to move, massive rollers shifting the iron monstrosity to one side, painfully slow.

"Kinny," Kroenig said, over a private channel that only the two of them could hear, "good work."

Kinny wondered if he should respond, but merely nodded to himself as the gate continued to grind.

So, he thought, *this is District HQ*. He looked back to where Bader's broken body lay, somewhere back there, unrecovered. *I wish you were here to see it.*

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ELEVEN

Blake carefully settled Eddy down into a maintenance bay, paying close attention to the hand signals of the mechanic as she backed the damaged machine up.

She could complete the task herself with her rear monitors, but protocol dictated that in the garage, the mechanic's word was law.

How ludicrous, she thought, that we are still strict about this when the world is crumbling around us?

She looked at the clock mounted on her cockpit, where hands illuminated by tritium ticked away softly.

It was 0437. The sun would be coming up soon.

And up until last night, I probably would've agreed with them.

With one final step, the Touro class heavy mech locked into place, accompanied by several loud clunks, as clamps engaged about Edwina Blake's machine.

As soon as the maintenance bay connected, control of Eddy was wrenched from her, and the neural uplink was severed. The persistent notes of her engine powered down with a whine of fading turbines, and she was left in silence.

Blake felt like an amputee. Phantom pain from the huge mechanical body that wasn't hers anymore ached, and all of a sudden she was vulnerable, convinced that something terrible was about to happen.

She felt diminished.

That is also ludicrous, she thought, the terrible thing has already happened.

She sat there for an age, listening to the distant sounds of mechanics clambering over her armoured chassis, listening to the squad net as Sergeant

Kroenig took a grip of essential admin, in the manner of Senior NCOs, and listening to the sound of her breathing.

The echo of disconnection faded away, and left a void in its wake.

The Captain was numb.

A laboured clunk of heavy metal being levered, then blinding light stabbed into the gloomy sanctuary of her control pit, offensive in its intensity.

Blake shielded her eyes with one hand and scowled at the offender, a District tech that she had never seen before.

The light was partially blocked as the silhouette of his shaved head dropped through the hatch, upside down.

The man blinked several times, his eyes adjusting to the dark before he spotted the officer, then cleared his throat and spoke.

“Captain Blake,” he said, fatigue seeping from every syllable, “Major Thompson would like to see you on the deck, ma’am.”

Blake just nodded her head, before shutting down the control pit and climbing from her command couch.

“Do you mind?” she said, gesturing to where her waste disposal unit linked into her jacksuit.

The young tech looked away in embarrassment, with a “sorry ma’am,” as he left.

Blake detached her gear and stood up, accompanied by a cracking of weary joints, protesting after many hours of relative inactivity. She had never felt so old.

The garage floor was huge.

Like the one in Sector 78, it had separate bays for each powersuit and mech, organised in uniform lines across the plain concrete floor. Like Sector 78,

techs bustled back and forth, collecting and using tools mounted inside cages that lined the outer walls of the complex.

But that's where the similarities ended. Sector 78's leg garage wasn't half the size of this space, Sector 78 didn't have blood stains and worse dotted over the floor, didn't have a makeshift triage station in one corner because there were too many casualties to fit into the med centre.

Kinny had never seen the techs move with as much purpose as the ones at District HQ, and never would.

And he had never seen Sector 78 so empty.

Apart from the QRF platoon, a mere two squads and one heavy Touro, there were no other machines occupying the space.

The few mechanics present waited impatiently for the platoon to dismount so they could get to work, harried looks on lined faces.

Kinny felt annoyed at their annoyance. They hadn't even been outside the walls this whole time.

Something rumbled outside, louder than the constant dull reverb of the battle for the wall, and Kinny felt his heart leap into his mouth.

Not already, he thought to himself, *we've only just got here*.

"Kinny, are you deaf?" He looked confused, before realising the voice emitting from his radio was talking to him.

"Say again Sergeant, my systems are a bit fried."

Kroenig repeated himself without hesitation.

"I said, take your Mog to bay thirteen," with a metal gauntlet pointing in the required direction. "Prioritise ammunition and mechanical repairs, then shield recharging. Once the techs have had a look at '841, back brief me on your repair time."

"Roger that Sarge," Kinny replied, before shuffling over to the bay in question.

He turned round and backed his Mog into the docking clamps, then cycled the standard eject procedure.

Light slowly spilled into the coffin of his powersuit as the hydraulic rams extended, pushing his cockpit plating up and away.

The thigh sheaths split to the sides, and Kinny manually released each strap of his harness with an economy of motion led more by tiredness than efficiency.

Reaching up to disconnect his cerebral jack, Kinny undid the safety clamp and yanked it out with one motion.

Feeling the blessed release of disconnection, he let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding and stepped down from the suit, being mindful not to slip on the assorted muck that had accumulated on the access step.

At the same time as feeling though a massive burden had been lifted from your shoulders, Mog disconnection made you fuzzy for a while as the body adapted to normality.

Neurons were firing at stimulus no longer present, and it felt like having pins and needles jabbing over your entire body.

Unable to think of anywhere else to go at that precise moment, Kinny simply sank to the floor, resting his back against leg armour that was encrusted with mud and gore.

A wave of emotion swept over him. Not sadness, not elation, maybe relief. Kinny couldn't tell, but he just sat there and rested his arms on his knees, looking at his hands for a moment.

They were shaking. "A fairly normal response when one is coming down from a dose of combat stims."

Yeah, keep telling yourself that.

"Usually rectified by a decent night's sleep."

Yep.

He pulled his gloves off and stowed them in a cargo pocket on his suit, purely busy work, anything so he didn't have to be reminded of his human frailty.

Another distant boom, and a spike of fear unlike anything Kinny had ever felt shot through him like a lightning bolt, only to fade just as fast.

That was new. It wasn't a fear of anticipation, no, that had been replaced.

The new feeling was one of knowing what was going on out there, of having experienced something terrible that he couldn't quite articulate.

Kinny didn't know whether he was bothered more by the intensity of the fear, or by how quickly it disappeared.

He took comfort in the fact that he was still bothered by it at all.

"You just gonna sit there all day buddy?"

Kinny looked up into the face of a tech, who loomed over him in oil-stained coveralls. The man had the look of someone who had a job to do, and doing it was the only thing that helped him make sense of what was going on.

"Sorry man, it's been a long night," Kinny replied, "I'll get out of your way."

"Yeah, it's been a long night for everyone." The mechanic said dismissively, "Just go over there with your buddies and chill out for a bit, I'll give you a shout when the diagnostics have run."

Kinny felt a spike of anger at the tech's casual dismissal of the platoon's nightmare of an evening, but he was too tired to bother calling him on it.

The man reached out a hand, which Kinny took, and pulled him to his feet.

Kinny nodded his thanks and wandered over to where the rest of his comrades were.

They had found a stack of ammo crates and were sitting or leaning in small groups, wearing a variety of expressions.

Braga and Markovic sat next to each other, staring blankly into space. The veteran troopers did not acknowledge each other, merely taking comfort in the proximity as they chain-smoked cigarettes and looked at nothing.

The majority of 2nd Squad huddled around Mirante like children around their mother, and she spoke to them in quiet tones, an intensity to her voice that was matched by the look in her eyes.

Her squad looked confident, good to go.

The final pair were Machado and Victore, who sat together and simply cried.

They had arguably been hit the hardest, having three of their squad killed in the most helpless of situations.

They were younger than the stoic veterans. Despite having exactly the same amount of combat experience, they were from the same generation as Kinny, and therefore less restrained with their emotions.

Ranulph wanted to go over and join them in their grief. It looked cathartic, then saw Kroenig and just stopped.

The Sergeant was briefing his assigned tech, growling at the man and gesturing with swift chops of his artificial hand, pointing out problem areas of D-99, no doubt.

The old man had dark circles under his eyes from lack of sleep, but otherwise looked utterly unaffected by the night of battle.

Kinny shook his head, suppressing a humourless laugh.

Just let the man do his job, he thought as he looked at the bewildered tech, before looking back to the young pair of troopers.

It seemed he had interrupted his own train of thought.

He didn't feel like sharing his emotions any more, it seemed unnecessary.

Instead, he found a crate by itself and just sat down, watching the crippled form of Eddy as the technical team of District HQ swarmed over it.

Blake already knew Major Thompson. He was an advisor to Brigadier Levine, wherever the hells he is, and a competent staff officer. What he wasn't, however, was commander of District, or anything else for that matter. Blake wondered why he was meeting her here on the garage floor.

"Hello Edwina," he opened, with a polite nod.

"James," she responded curtly. "May I ask why I'm here, and not in the ops room?"

James Thompson was of Kroenig's generation, and was very much like him, being a veteran of the Troubles except for (in Blake's opinion) where it mattered.

A lifetime as an NCO had made Kroenig hard and unflinching, while rank had softened Thompson. It had taken his edge off – physically as well as mentally if his rotund physique was anything to go by.

This made him a lot easier to deal with as an officer, though he still had an air of danger about him sometimes, especially if one disagreed with him.

He had settled into his rank, as many a major did over their long careers. Accepting that there were so few Colonel positions to promote into, like most he would stay at that level forever.

However, this didn't mean he was incompetent, simply unremarkable. Much like how Blake viewed herself.

"Of course," he replied to her, lips pulled tight, disguising a grimace.

"We're meeting here because District Hierarchy are dead, and I'm all that's left." He turned his grimace into a false smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I don't want to alarm the junior officers with that little titbit, you see."

Blake nodded, surprisingly unsurprised by the news.

"Did you receive an order to move the Brigadier to Central, once the radio interference had cleared?" Blake enquired, already certain of the reply.

“Indeed,” Thompson responded grimly, “A very specific order, instructing not only the boss, but his entire command to go with him, with a token bodyguard. Important business they had to discuss, so I’m told. He left me in charge, not heard a peep since.”

Blake nodded, absorbing the information.

“And what makes you believe they’re all dead?”

“Well I recently re-established comms with Central command, as well as the other districts. Central insist they never sent the order, and the districts insist they did. Nobody has seen hide nor hair of our commanders for hours.”

Blake remained unmoved. They had been consistently sucker punched again and again during the course of the evening, and she was strangely vindicated by the knowledge.

It wasn’t just her that got torn apart tonight. Others shared her massive misfortune.

“Where’s Rome?” The large man asked. “I take it he met the same fate.”

“No,” Blake responded quietly, “We got the same order, but we never got the chance to carry it out. I saw him die.” She said matter-of-factly, “he was assassinated by one of my hunters, the same one who sabotaged the base reactor.”

“We saw that,” Thompson said, nodding gravely, “lit up the sky for miles. Thought you had all been vaporised, truth be told.”

Blake raised her brows and sighed.

“Well, most of us were, and that bastard is still out there. He saved my life just now, but he’s hunting us. I think he’s made a game of it, you may want to warn your men.”

The old man shook his head emphatically, jowls wobbling a tad.

“If he comes for us, so be it. The Fort will take him down without effort. We can’t afford the loss of morale at this time, not when we’re on the cusp

of our first victory you see.”

Wait, victory? The force they had witnessed attacking the base had seemed all but unstoppable from the outside. Blake had fully expected to be sent straight to the walls to reinforce.

“What do you mean?” She asked, “I’m struggling to see anything victorious from our current position.”

This time Thompson gave a real smile, restrained as it was.

“Well, you see those rebel bunch couldn’t organise a piss up in a brewery, Etim curse their names, and they’ve kept nothing in reserve.”

“The damn fools, they’ve been throwing themselves at the wall all night, and we believe they’ve just about run out of momentum.” Thompson looked quite pleased with this appraisal, regardless of its authenticity.

Blake remained sceptical.

“That contradicts the extremely well-coordinated strikes conducted against power systems, not to mention the assassination of not only our Great Leader, but also most of our upper chain of command.”

Thompson flashed. There was something in his eye for the shortest moment before he replied:

“I was getting to that. We have been gathering information all day. In all the chaos it’s been like fishing at night in a sewer with no bait, but we believe we are beginning to catch all the pieces.”

Get on with it, Blake thought, frowning.

“We, I should say the tech officers and I, think they had outside help.”

“Rogue Army units?”

“Possibly, but I was thinking more along the lines of the off-world variety.”

That made sense.

“We saw multiple drop pods land in the Necropolis on the way here. I had planned to brief you properly.”

“Yes, we’ve heard much the same from other units that reached us, which as you can see,” he cast a glance around the practically abandoned garage complex, “have been few and far between.”

That particular fact was cause for concern, regardless of whatever made up victories were about to be “won”.

“What are our current numbers?” Blake asked.

Thompson responded as if on auto pilot, the words flying out of him like he’s been over the facts a thousand times.

Being the acting commander of a District that oversaw thousands of soldiers in hundreds of units, sorting through the mess to get a handle of logistics was probably all he had been doing all night.

“Sector 70 turned traitor, along with 72. They are out there somewhere, without command, working as independent war bands alongside the Corvids. Sector 69 went rogue, taking the war into their own hands. They ceased communications after vowing to rid Solo Nobre of the separatist threat.”

Three entire sectors hadn’t even attempted to conform to some kind of larger loyalist plan? Blake was slightly shocked by this.

The thought stopped her in her tracks.

When did I start referring to friendlies as loyalists? It’s the Troubles all over again.

“Sectors 75 and 73 were wiped out, 75 was steam rolled by the same force that’s beating at our door as we speak. 76 tried to make it here, but were killed to a man in the process.” Thompson looked her directly in the eye, breaking his recital. “Listening to them die was nothing I’d like to repeat.” He sighed deeply, before continuing. “We thought the same of you, before you turned up and politely knocked.” He looked around, seeming to lose his

focus. “Let’s see, that leaves 71, 74 and 77 who all made it here at roughly fifty percent strength.”

Blake absorbed the information. She didn’t need to be told exact numbers. Looking at the vast emptiness of the garage complex once more extrapolated all she needed.

“This attack,” she started, “It’ll break, but you won’t be able to hold off another, will you.” She didn’t phrase it as a question.

Thompson shook his head.

Another fact he had kept from his subordinates, no doubt. This guy was old school to the core, and Blake felt a sense of liberation in her new found role as a combat leader. She wasn’t like these people, her so-called peers, and she embraced it.

It must be what the old timer must’ve felt like in his day.

“I can see why he liked you,” he said out of the blue, to which Blake screwed up her face. “But,” he went on, “we hopefully won’t have to hold off another attack. Saints be praised, you’re here to answer my prayers!” He shouted the last sentence unnervingly.

Blake wondered what the hells he was on about, but he didn’t leave her waiting.

Thompson leaned in conspiratorially, eyes darting behind Blake to look at her troops, as though they had suddenly developed the ability or desire to hear him from several hundred yards away.

“I’ve got a mission for you. Secret stuff, terribly vital to the war effort. Come with me and I’ll tell you more while your troops re-arm.”

“A mission?” She definitely was questioning this time. “If you want us back out there, we need to be armed properly. We need a full refit.”

“Of course, of course,” Thompson waved dismissively, “we’ve got weapons and ammo for weeks, just no bodies to hang them from.”

With that, the Major gestured for her to lead him out of the complex, then stopped mid arm-sweep.

“What the hells? I thought you were dead!”

Major Thompson yelled across the open space, and Sergeant Jack Kroenig looked up from a diagnostic chart.

His face lit up with recognition.

“I’m surprised you could see me from over there, old man!”

“Ha!” Thompson barked, “I’m a year younger than you, granddad.”

Kroenig came bounding over, before slapping wrist to wrist with the Major in a warrior’s handshake. The Sergeant didn’t salute, didn’t even acknowledge his Commander as he bit back at an old comrade.

“Damn, you got fat.”

Thompson looked at Kroenig in his sweaty jacksuit, with its black chevrons on one shoulder denoting his rank.

“And you got nothing, you useless old sod.” They both laughed, big guffaws at something that was obviously hilarious to them.

Blake was confused, she had never seen either man act like this before. It was as though rank meant nothing to them, and they had relapsed into some earlier versions of themselves.

Edwina stood uncomfortably, waiting for their laughter to die down, before Major Thompson gestured to the Sergeant’s stripes again.

“They really meant it didn’t they.”

Jack looked at his own arm, as though only just becoming aware of some crucial fact.

“Yep, they definitely did, Major. The bastards.”

“Bastards.” Thompson echoed. “Well, We’ll catch up later mate, but now I have to go and do boring officer stuff with Captain Blake here.”

“Roger that, ‘Sir’,” Kroenig said sarcastically, before throwing the slickest salute Blake had ever seen.

Thompson sloppily waved his arm in an approximation of the same thing before turning back to the Captain.

“Shall we?” He gestured with his arm once more.

“I think we should, James.”

As they turned to leave, Kroenig shouted over his shoulder.

“I’m raiding your armoury, by the way. You still got the old gear?”

“What do you think?” Thompson deadpanned.

“Nice one Tommo. They won’t know what hit them.”

Blake shook her head at the spectacle she had just witnessed, before pushing through the double swing doors leading away from the maintenance bays.

That was weird.

Kinny watched the slat windows, mounted high in the garage walls. They were too high to afford a view of anything outside, being designed simply to let natural light into the gloomy complex during the day, but Kinny enjoyed watching the sky brighten. He was focusing on trying to name the shades as they slowly brightened.

It was hard to make out, the powerful strip lights inside the complex tended to wash everything out, but the sky had gone from black, to grey, through a bizarre wash of purples to settle into a warm orange.

He’d once read that several of the original colony ships had crashed hard enough to go nuclear, and that the detonations permanently changed the colour of the sky.

The young Private wondered how much the sky had changed tonight, based on the huge amounts of ordinance expended, and how much crap they

must've kicked into the atmosphere.

"How you holding up, Ulf?" said Mirante, and Kinny jumped.

He looked down into his calloused palms, noticing how the dirt and sweat from inside his gloves had ingrained itself into the skin.

"I'm okay, I guess," he said with a shrug.

"That's it?" The big lady asked, plonking down onto the ammo crate beside him.

"I guess."

Mirante frowned.

"It's okay to feel sad, you know. Nobody is going to judge you for it. You and Bader were like brothers."

I can still hear him screaming.

"I know," another shrug, "to be honest I thought I'd feel worse, but I know it takes a long time to sink in with some people. At the moment, I kind of just feel guilty, for not feeling too bad about it." He shook his head slowly. "Does that make sense?"

"Not really," Ana replied softly, "but I guess nothing makes sense at the moment. We all deal with this stuff in our own ways."

"What, like making the rounds, offering words of support to everybody else so you don't have to think about it yourself?"

Mirante's eyes flashed with anger, and she looked hurt.

"Well fuck you then!" she said too loudly. Markovic snorted himself awake, looked around dumbly, then fell asleep again.

"I don't mean it like that," Kinny said in a placating tone, "I just mean I realise what you're doing. You don't have to be the strong lady all the time."

Ana looked down, then sighed.

“I do,” she said, “I’m a squad leader.” She jumped up, and patted Kinny on the arm. “I’m going to bed. Don’t be too hard on yourself.”

“Same to you Corporal.”

“Ana,” Kroenig said, as she turned to leave.

Both Kinny and Mirante looked alarmed, before she responded warily.

People needed to stop sneaking up on each other.

“Jack.”

The Sergeant nodded at her, before addressing Kinny.

“Private Kinny.”

Even when speaking softly, the Sergeant seemed to growl with malice.

The man had been supervising a tired tech to fit extra weapons onto the “not-a-Mog”. D-99 now sported a diamond circular saw blade and a hydraulic claw arm, piggy-backed onto his powered gauntlets. Illegal close combat mods were now a thing, apparently. He had also swapped his tertiary rocket pod for an 84mm recoilless rifle. It was old tech, a short barrelled, ugly thing, and Kinny had been intrigued. Kroenig had explained that it was a Close Quarter Battle mod, utilising implosion shells to utterly ruin targets within close proximity. Kroenig called it a “Donkey” on account of how hard it kicked. Kinny had never met a donkey, and didn’t want to.

To Kinny, it sounded like a shotgun from the Seventh Hell.

“Sergeant,” he replied, blinking tired eyes.

Kinny had seen the bizarre interaction between the camp base and Sergeant Kroenig about an hour before. He couldn’t hear what had been said, but the body language was some of the strangest he had ever witnessed. The two men clearly knew each other, well enough to make the grim old bugger lighten up for a bit. Kinny had seen what lay beneath the surface of his squad leader, and it altered his perception more than an entire night of fighting.

He is human after all.

“Get some sleep.” Kroenig said simply.

He had a point. It was soldier basics, taught informally back in depot, before infantry training, before selection for Mog school. It was a fundamental part of being a soldier.

When you stop, sleep. You don’t know when you will get the chance again.

And Kinny was damn tired. He looked around at the prone forms of his comrades, some snoring softly, some quiet, using bunched up survival vests as pillows.

Braga was curled in the foetal position, so still and silent that he appeared to be dead. Markovic lay next to him, snoring like a tank engine with a blown exhaust. How the hell he didn’t wake anyone up Kinny couldn’t tell, but that wasn’t the reason he couldn’t sleep.

“I don’t want to dream, Sergeant.”

The squad leader stared at him for the longest time.

Kinny tried to find something, anything in that gaze, but he just couldn’t read the man. The defences were back up.

“Don’t worry about dreams,” he said, finally. “They come later. Years later.”

Kinny nodded. “Get some sleep,” repeated Kroenig, before turning to walk away.

Kinny laid his head down onto his survival vest, and succumbed to fatigue immediately.

He didn’t dream.

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TWELVE

Stomping. Always the stomping. It sent shivers up the spine that were beginning to hurt, but Kinny paid it no heed.

He had managed to get about four hours sleep before Eddy's refit was complete. It was not nearly enough, but it was definitely welcome, and Kinny discovered a new layer of alertness that overrode the crippling fatigue he had felt a few hours before.

It reminded him of being back in the depot, where trainee Mongoose drivers would be sent out on "patrols" for days at a time. Sleep deprivation was an important part of training. It helped the mind get used to functioning properly when all your body wanted was to sleep.

Kinny blinked bloodshot eyes, and focused on his targeting reticles, which were stable to his front. White symbols swayed gently in startlingly high resolution.

The ever-present fuzziness was gone. District techs had worked some measure of infernal magic on M-841, and the cantankerous old lump of metal felt like a new beast under Kinny's command.

He had triggered his autoloaders upon exiting the base, and rejoiced at the different tones of the ammo feeds as rounds clunked into chambers.

To his right, he now sported an armour piercing 25mm autocannon, capable of spitting a round a second with dreadful regularity. It was potent enough to chop bikes and light vehicles to shreds, and pulp infantry without effort.

To his left, he mounted an 84mm rifled cannon, loaded with High Explosive Anti-Tank shells. This baby would allow him to take on real armour, and leg units of a much greater tonnage than his own.

The Private swung his body to check his left, being placed on flank protection as before, and rejoiced at the lack of painful feedback that usually accompanied every movement within his steel shell.

Kinny felt potent, powerful, ready to complete the task at hand.

A nagging feeling of guilt threatened to surface from the depths of his mind, but he pushed it down.

He wasn't relishing the idea of killing those who, on any other day he would count as comrades. Putting down Corvids shouldn't amount to a sensation of satisfaction, but it was survival now, and he wanted to get through this by all means necessary.

Yet another part didn't agree, it seemed to say that a job well done felt good on a primal level, and Kinny shied away from this instinctual betrayal of his values.

As he turned back to face the axis of advance, left leg servos ground loudly, twisting his left knee painfully as they refused to move for a split second.

He couldn't tell whether it was a momentary lack of concentration that caused it or not, but it felt like hot poker being jammed under his kneecap.

Nobody would've noticed it if Kinny hadn't yelled over the open net.

Don't forget me dickhead, M-841 seemed to say, I'm still your nemesis.

Kinny shook it off, he didn't mind. He was ready for war.

"What's wrong?" Kroenig rumbled, crystal clear now the jamming effect was well and truly quashed.

"Nothing Sarge," Kinny reported, "just the sticky servos again."

Kroenig grunted something, Kinny didn't listen.

Eddy was up ahead, between 1st and 2nd Squads.

Captain Blake had wisely chosen to put Mirante and her boys on point again. They seemed raring for a fight, chomping at the bit, as it were. Mirante had switched out her smoke dischargers for an ancient EMP gun. The thing was a weaponised science tool, one which fired a self-contained projectile. This projectile focused an enormous pulse through several series

of conducting rings that decreased in size, in order to create a blast and fry its targets.

Blake had thought it would come in use against the Spacers with their shiny tech, but it could be almost as good against Corvid gear.

The Captain's machine was rigged up for a scrap, with a shiny new 12.7mm heavy machine gun turret, and a 105mm smoothbore cannon replacing her artillery mount. The gun was the same variant that Wolf Mother had carried into battle. With its abundance of ammunition types, it could counter any threat.

She had also made the curious decision not to have Eddy cleaned after the last battle.

The entire machine was caked in mud and dried offal, as well as sporting various scorch marks about its heavily armoured chassis.

Kinny thought the Captain's mech looked like something from a nightmare, and that was probably the point.

Kinny scanned about in the midmorning sun, watching the rays glint dully from battered armour. The Mogs were clean now, which only exaggerated the scarred nature of their carapaces in the light of day.

They carried themselves differently too, he noted. No longer did the drivers move hesitantly, having to be told to watch their sectors every two minutes by squad leaders. Everybody scanned alternate arcs, moved, checked blind spots, swept alleys and murder holes without being told. In one night the platoon had been transformed into veterans, forged in battle.

Kinny almost thought he saw Braga's machine swagger.

Markovic's definitely did.

They looked ready to tackle the plan.

It wasn't a regular mission, by any stretch of the imagination.

Blake had informed them that one of Major Thompson's advisors was a coder in a previous life – whatever that was – back in the days when the

hierarchy still thought that computers were a viable means of getting stuff done.

Great Leader had scrapped the computer program, but some of the old staff were still serving in the Army, having been reabsorbed by their parent units.

Blake had explained that the coordinated enemy orders, the weird contract messages, even the radio interference, had been orchestrated by some highly-skilled coders from off world.

These enemy coders had broken into the old broadcast network, and used it to access everything from gate power to unit radio frequencies.

It was all above Kinny's pay grade, but he thanked the All Saints that the orbital gun grid was on its own isolated network.

Without those, Solo Nobre would be helpless. It was why the Corvids had been forced to attack the guns (mostly unsuccessfully) all night.

Major Thompson had also been thanking the Saints for all his worth, as the orbital gun grid was integral to his plan.

His lunatic coder had theorised that the gun grid could be re-routed into the gate network, as everything could potentially be interconnected throughout the city via the monitoring stations, which in turn tied into the old broadcast system.

His idea was that a piece of his code could be uploaded to order the gates to close, and answer only to commands issued from the gun grid.

The only problem was, Blake had explained as Kinny's brain slowly stewed in his skull, that the gun grid was on a hierarchical network controlled from Central. Commands come down, not up, so without being loaded at the source, it couldn't cascade down to the rest of the grid.

In short, the code had to be uploaded at Central Command in order to work. Then, the orbital gun stations needed to be contacted via radio to be instructed to switch their broadcast computers on.

That's where the QRF platoon came in.

With the piece of code handily uploaded to poor old Almeida's black box, now safely cocooned inside Blake's control pit, the platoon had to make its way to Central Command and save the city.

Take away the Corvid's ability to move freely and they couldn't coordinate. No coordination meant Army units could dispatch them in a piecemeal fashion, isolating and destroying them with superior firepower.

All they had to do was get there.

Thompson had allowed them to use the old supply railway track that ran under District HQ which hadn't been used since the Troubles.

It ran underground for a couple of miles, then came out into the Necropolis. Kinny felt a sense of déjà vu as the platoon followed another railway track in the gloom, hemmed in on both sides by neglected shipping containers. There was no threat in the tunnels – District was sealed in from all sides by a variety of heavy barriers. From there, it was a choice between a massively difficult trek through the Necropolis, or a horribly linear march along the track.

Neither sounded appealing to Kinny, as he stomped along the narrow pathway, following the rest of the platoon. They had exited the tunnel mouth a few hundred yards back, and were venturing into Novo Solo's most prized historical site.

Before the Troubles, thousands of citizens made the pilgrimage each year to wander the streets of what used to be simply called "Dropsite 1".

The pilgrims would pay their respects, and there were even small groups of particularly pious individuals that lived there, existing on the charity of others. These groups would pay their way by maintaining what later became the Necropolis, keeping the weeds at bay, cleaning the crypts, and so on.

That had all changed when Great Leader took over. The pious were evicted, forced to work the mines like everyone else. He had no time for useless members of society.

With everybody else too busy working to bother visiting the site, the Necropolis became a grim echo of society at large as it fell into decrepitude.

Kinny felt a sense of awe as he looked up at the ruins, his display monitor automatically dimming to compensate for the blinding sunshine. He had never been this close before, never borne witness to the cradle of civilisation.

He eyed the haphazard arrangement of old industrial machinery – surrounded by ancient crypts – each one a devotion to one of the original settlers, and the nearly as ancient habitation units. They weren't the high rise concrete type made popular in the age that followed the initial colonisation, but temporary prefab blocks hastily-assembled and only meant to last for a couple of years while the colonists manufactured something more permanent.

Hundreds of years later, thousands of them still stood, defiant in the face of time and neglect.

Their plastic and chipboard walls looked incredibly fragile to Kinny, as though they would crumble at the slightest pressure.

Narrow paths and tracks beaten smooth by millions of footfalls wormed between the stacks. They clustered around the factories like weeds, mostly overgrown by rough grass and the ever-present fungus that permeated the city.

The entire sprawling mass was built on a large hill, inside an even larger valley, and it loomed high above the left of the platoon as they powered along the rusting track.

Even in the brightness of the day, Kinny could feel the grim power of the place, and he whispered a quick prayer to Martim as he eyed the coarse granite monuments of the All Saints. Perched on a large memorial plot atop the hill, their stern visages glowered down upon their domain, crudely carved out of the hard stone, holding the tools symbolic to their individual plights.

Martim stood as always, with hammer and wrench in hand, wearing the patched coveralls he had worn up until his death as first Leader of Novo Solo.

Nara stood to his side, tool bag hefted over one shoulder, a kind smile permanently fixed on her delicate features. The sculptor had paid particular attention to her face, as the great Nara was said to be able to calm the most tumultuous of situations with barely more than a glance.

Completing the triumvirate was blessed Etim, wrapped in her angelic wings, head raised to the sky.

Without her sacrifice, not a single soul would've made it to the surface of Novo Solo alive, and the Leaders of the planet always held an empty seat next to their own in her honour.

As the tracks slowly swept around the edge of the hill, Martim's bearded face caught Kinny's eye, stone beginning to wear smooth from years of erosion.

I wonder what they would make of all this? He thought idly.

Something moved.

Over Martim's shoulder, Kinny was sure of it.

He halted to get a better look, and increased to maximum gain.

There it was again. A jerky movement around the statues, distorting the air around it like a heat shimmer.

Is that something flying?

It appeared to be a rusty red colour, spherical in shape, with four short struts that formed corners and terminated in grav pads. The thing moved jerkily in a straight line, stopped, and shot back behind the statue with great speed.

It looked like nothing Kinny had ever seen.

"Sergeant," Kinny began, "there's something up there, on top of the hill. It doesn't look like Corvid tech."

“Roger that, it’s possibly those Spacers the Captain warned us about. I’ll send it up the chain.”

Before he could get the message out, everything started to go to shit.

Eddy’s cannon boomed, its muzzle flash clearly visible even in broad daylight, and the sabot round screamed off into the distance.

2nd Squad, out to the front, went firm and guns were panning about, eager to fight.

“What the hells, boss!” Mirante yelled over the net, “I near enough shit myself. What we got?”

Eddy slowed its pace, then hunkered into hull down mode.

From her elevated vantage point, the Captain would always see the enemy first.

“Corvid tanks approaching, I’ve seen six so far, following the curve of the track, nine hundred yards. One destroyed.”

Without waiting to be told, Kinny and 1st Squad inverted their arrow head to face rearwards, with Kroenig being the tip, facing where they had just come from.

“We know their tactics now,” he said, “Watch for bikes.”

Sure enough, a squadron of bikes and light halftracks came screaming down from Braga’s flank, now Kinny’s left, in a rough arrowhead of their own. They bounced and wobbled down the side of the valley, towards the rear of the platoon at a breakneck pace.

Kinny would be amazed if any survived to greet them, but if they did he was prepared to mash them into the dirt.

He heard Kroenig report the bikes up to Captain Blake, and the squad adjusted its position to meet the threat, both parts of the arrow head folding together to create a single line of guns.

The bikes were faster than the tanks, and barrelled on without regard for their own safety, straight at the Mog line.

Aim low to compensate for the speed, Kinny reminded himself, only fire if you're sure you can hit what you're aiming at.

1st Squad let them get within 100 yards, before Kroenig spoke.

“Fire.”

The line erupted into a torrent of flame and thunder. Kinny's chosen target disintegrated as autocannon rounds blasted it apart, accompanied by fierce recoil that thud thudded up into his shoulder. He switched fire.

A second bike took an 84mm HEAT round straight in the Plexiglas cockpit and the whole thing exploded into a ball of shrapnel, most of which ploughed a furrow into the rocky slope, skidding to a halt by his feet.

Kinny switched again, panned about intently, but it was done.

After literally two seconds of intense violence, the bike squadron was dead.

Why didn't they fire at us? Kinny wondered, as Kroenig reported the kills.

Blake didn't answer the Sergeant, she was happy that he could deal with a bike group on his own.

The five surviving tanks were two abreast, negotiating the train tracks at best speed towards her. The first one was a lucky shot, and the rest were partially obscured as they raced closer, using the curvature of the hill and its ruins to block line of sight.

She didn't want to waste ammo, so she remained hunkered down, and opened the net.

“Mirante, move ahead one hundred yards and hold, prepare to fire.”

“Roger that boss,” replied the Corporal enthusiastically, before her squad sprinted ahead and crouched down, guns pointing directly down the tracks.

She would pin them in place, dividing their fire and allowing Blake to pick them off without difficulty.

The tanks came careening round the corner at speed, each one a sixty-ton mass of armour and weapons, which blazed upon seeing the Mogs at close range.

At almost the same time, Mirante triggered her EMP gun. The small shell coughed from its tube in a puff of discharging gas, and popped in the air right above the encroaching tanks.

It wasn't enough to kill the vehicles dead, the massive amounts of metal used in their construction would provide some protection, but they slowed immediately. One tank slewed to the side, firing its cannon into the deck right in front of it, tearing up old tracks. A second tank accelerated and fired all of its weapons blind, causing blue shimmers to ripple from the Mog line. Another skidded to a halt, the crew somehow aware of their reduced capacity and attempted to arrest their uncontrolled advance.

The Mog squad opened up with everything they had.

Several 84mm shells smashed into one tank that had started to steer up the curve of the valley whether by its own devices or not, who knows, and the side armour crumpled under repeated impacts.

The junker collapsed into itself in a pathetic heap with no secondary detonations and just rolled to a halt, thick smoke pouring from a multitude of entry wounds.

The tank that had charged was on a beeline for Mirante, and the Corporal calmly aimed and squeezed off a shell. The HEAT round flew to meet the approaching war machine, then clanged wildly, glancing from the frontal glacis and straight into the stratosphere.

“Oh shit!” She had time to say, before the tank burst spectacularly to her front, no more than twenty yards from rolling right over her.

The shock of the blast lifted her off her feet, and the Corporal was left weightless for a second, before gravity asserted itself and dumped her on her knees.

Despite her harness straps, the woman bounced from the inside surface of her Mog like a boat dashed against the rocks, and she cursed loudly.

She'd have bruises for weeks.

Eddy switched targets and cracked off another sabot, ripping a turret clean off another tank.

Mirante looked up as her commander loomed directly overhead and smoothly engaged all remaining targets, eliminating them without taking a single shot in return.

Each shot boomed tremendously, pushing Mirante back in her harness, pressure pulsing in her ears.

"Thanks boss," she said too loudly, picking herself from the floor.

"No trouble at all, Corporal."

Blake rotated Eddy's chassis in a quick three sixty, already done with the combat. She was looking for depth targets, and they didn't have her waiting for long.

Several dozen tanks, flanked by a mishmash of gun trucks and bike squads, began to emerge from over the lip of the valley's edge. They were converging on the platoon's position.

Then a second wave came.

And then a third.

"Captain," Kroenig warned.

"I know," she replied, counting the enemy units.

There were hundreds of the bastards.

How did they know where we are? She thought. It could've been Armbruster, colluding with the separatists, a mole within District, or something else.

Whatever, who cares, it doesn't matter right now.

“I’m not doing this.” Blake stated simply. “All call signs, follow me, Kroenig watch our asses.”

She got two confirmatory replies before she swung Eddy around, and thundered into the Necropolis. She smashed an old prefab out of the way, simultaneously ducking under a crane that had tilted on its side.

The terrain would be a nightmare in there, and Kroenig wouldn’t like it, but to stay on the track would be suicide.

In the Necropolis, she could use the tight angles and debris strewn tracks to slow tanks and bikes. It would work in favour of leg units. They could outmanoeuvre them and pick them off in small groups.

Let them come after us, the Captain thought with a grim smile, and we’ll show them how loyalists fight.

Why are we moving towards the Spacers? Kinny thought with alarm. If they ran into the things in there, they wouldn’t stand a chance against antigravity units. Kinny much rather preferred their chances against the bolted together crap-show of the Corvid army.

Was the Captain insane?

“I don’t like this Sarge,” Braga announced, voicing Kinny’s concerns.

“Me neither,” growled Kroenig as he led his squad, though as he saw Eddy demolish the crypt of an original settler, Kinny couldn’t help but think it would be for different reasons. “Braga, drop mines.” Braga voiced confirmation, he waited a few beats, then trailed the rest of the squad by several dozen yards.

A mixture of anti-personnel and anti-tank mines dropped from a new dispenser mounted on his Mog’s back.

The AP and AT mines would not cause too many casualties, but would hopefully act as both a deterrent and warning system, slowing the Corvids down, and signalling their advance in death.

“Eddy, 1st Squad,” the Sergeant barked, not waiting for the Captain to reply, “can you try not to destroy our entire heritage as you advance, over.”

“Trying my best not to die, Sergeant,” came Blake’s clipped response. “Just shut up and cover our rear.”

Kroenig growled something to this, but didn’t send it over the command net.

“Blake, Kroenig,” he started again, “be advised that the Spacers are almost definitely in there. I think our tactical options are limited, can we get any support from Central?”

“Negative, Sergeant. I petitioned for Grav tank support when we were back at District, but they don’t seem to believe in this operation.”

Kinny wasn’t sure he believed in it, but surely Central could see the benefits of the idea, even if the possibility of success was minute.

“Roger that,” the Sergeant responded. Kinny stared at the back of D-99, powering ahead in front of him. He could picture him speaking through gritted teeth in there, almost rabid at the thought of damaging some holy relic.

Kinny had other ideas about the Corvids. He reckoned he knew why those bikes hadn’t fired upon them.

“Sergeant,” he opened on the squad net, “I don’t think that load of separatists expected to find us here.”

“Go on,” the Sergeant replied, following the trail of destruction left by the forty foot war machine to their front.

“They were moving too fast to fight effectively. I think they might have been a scouting party, looking for a decent entry point into the Necropolis.”

“You think we could steer them into the Spacers?” Kroenig replied, cottoning onto Kinny’s idea.

“That’s exactly what I think Sarge. I think they’re here to fight the off-worlders, and we caught them by surprise.”

And we can draw them together, get them to take each other out and slip away in the chaos.

It was a simple idea, and could be effective, if it worked.

If it didn't, the platoon would be caught in the mother of all crossfires.

"I'll send it up." Kroenig said, before switching nets.

Blake agreed with Private Kinney's plan, and she said as much to the Sergeant.

Eddy ducked low under the service doors of a factory complex that was never designed to admit Touro class mechs.

It had slipped down the hill about a dozen yards over the years, and as a result the whole structure was slumped slightly, making Blake want to tilt her head to make sense of the architecture as she entered.

The upward slope of the ground made the going tough, littered as it was with loose debris and the cracked flooring of archaic constructs. Seeing as there was no other through the other side of the building, Blake slammed her levers forward and bull rushed the wall.

I hope the whole thing doesn't come down, she thought as the impact jarred her senses, Eddy exploding from the other side in, followed by a wave of dust and concrete.

She looked down, and saw that she had narrowly avoided stomping on a group of bodies, unceremoniously dumped to form a pile.

Civilian bodies, all wearing the yellow rain macs from the night before.

Flies were gathering around them in the heat of the new day, and Eddy had to wonder,

Is that a mass grave?

The beam of a visible laser burned across her vision, and a red metallic object flashed past.

Eddy swept left to track it, then another flash of red blurred past as her shield dissipated the attack in its usual cascade of blue.

Two A-grav units – both sporting a squat, curved chassis that bristled with weapons, which was sunk into a large flat gravity disc that vibrated with distortion – sped away from her.

She led the rear machine, allowing for the speed of its movement, and squeezed her trigger.

Boom.

The sabot round punched through fizzing shields and speared through the flying machine like a lightning bolt from an enraged god. It came crashing down hard into a stack of prefabs, disappearing as their flimsy structures folding around the thing.

Blake yelled with fierce joy.

The lead A-grav jerked in another direction, then back again, too fast to follow. It turned a corner and was lost to the chaotic layout of the Necropolis.

Markovic whooped over the net, congratulating his boss on her kill.

First blood, Blake thought. She had seen the enemy, and they could be killed.

Several explosions rippled to the rear of the platoon, the unmistakable crump of AT mines, accompanied by the lesser pops of the APs.

“Contact rear!” shouted Braga over the net, before opening up with both barrels.

“Maintain speed and follow on,” Blake demanded. “Do not slow, we have them in our sights,” she said before she crashed through the collection of prefabs that encapsulated the fallen flier.

“They fall just as easily as the Corvids,” Blake assured her men over the din of crunching wood, plastic, and sheet metal.

“Just keep them coming.” Eddy was grinding on in the terrible terrain, kicking prefabs and ancient machinery she had never seen before out of the way with armoured feet.

She checked to make sure her squads were keeping up, glancing at her rear monitor, and sure enough, ten Mongooses were spread out among the rubble, following her trail of destruction the best they could.

Then she fell.

Afterwards, she figured that there must have been an unusually large cellar carved into one of the structures. It must have been repeatedly built upon over again and again in the years that passed, or maybe there was a natural cave that had been covered over, but in the moment all Blake knew was one minute there was ground underfoot, then there wasn't.

Eddy tilted, gyros unable to compensate for the lack of footing.

The step had already been taken, the weight distributed forward. There was nothing on Novo Solo that could have arrested her fall, and so Eddy went down like a titan dying at an old god's hand.

Blake screamed in her control pit as her world lurched, being thrown on its side. Gravity attempted to rip her from her command couch, straps bit into the meat of her shoulders and thighs as they painfully did their job.

She instinctively twisted, and Eddy copied her movements, coming to rest on its side, after forward momentum had carved a rut into the hillside.

Blake luckily retained her consciousness, despite feeling as though she had just been thrown off a cliff, and she observed her monitors.

The mech had come down with the force of a cannon shot, and it had kicked up a nigh impenetrable cloud of dust all around.

Dammit! Not again, I can't mess up again! She was angry with herself as she frantically absorbed information from a dozen readouts, all bleeping in alarm for her attention.

Blake had been blinkered, so excited by the prospect of defeating the off-worlders, that she had not paid proper attention to her surroundings.

What do I do now? The thought got cut short, as she heard clangs to her left side, which was now facing up.

The clangs increased in their frequency, and she could hear them above, heavy footfalls. It seemed there were machines climbing on top of Eddy.

“Eddy, 2nd Squad,” crackled over the net, “don’t know if you can hear me, but don’t move, my squad are climbing over you to secure the far side of where you fell.”

“Roger,” Blake replied, regaining her composure instantly at the sound of her level-headed squad leader. It was the right thing to do, the Mogs would form a ring of steel while Edwina corrected her mistake. A mistake that could get them all killed. “Inform me when you are clear, and I will engage my self-righting mechanism.”

“Roger that.”

She waited for what felt like forever, sweat dripping off her as gravity continued to tug at her restraints, but which her internal clock told her was only thirty seven seconds.

The net crackled open again. “This is 2nd Squad, we’re clear, but be advised, we got some strange robot ball things floating about up ahead.”

Blake replied as she was busy with the controls. She had to manually crank the self-righting lever to the positive position.

It was rarely used. *Decent pilots didn’t fall over, and decent pilots didn’t take their troops into a labyrinth either.*

“Shut up,” she said to herself, straining with the effort, before opening the net.

“Are they like the A-grav I killed?”

“Negative,” replied Markovic. He must’ve been the only one to see the A-gravs. “These are smaller,” a pause, then he added, “I think they’re

unmanned.”

Unmanned. That meant recon or suicide units, neither of which bode well for the QRF platoon.

“Roger that,” accompanied by a grunt, “keep your heads on a swivel.”

Blake finally got the lever locked into the ‘open’ position, then leant back and braced herself.

“What’s going on?” Braga yelled over the gunfire, eyeing the pile of corpses warily as he cleared the gaping hole in the factory’s gable end.

“Why have we stopped?”

“The boss fell over,” Victore replied, voice almost in a panic.

“You know what to do,” Kroenig interrupted, before the young driver could say anymore.

“2nd Squad push ahead, cover our frontage, 1st Squad spread out, cover the rear.”

A chorus of confirmations, then the drivers moved into positions, ignoring the narrow man sized footpaths, smashing prefabs and crypts into rubble as they formed a semicircle of amour around the prone form of Eddy.

“Not much to say,” Kroenig began, when the troops were in place, “sight lines are for shit, just shoot them when you see them.”

Kinny didn’t bother replying. He didn’t need to – he just ground his teeth together and watched.

Kinny found himself covering the way they had just come from, his machine perched unnervingly close to the mound of festering bodies.

He had no idea why they were there, or why they had been arranged in such a fashion, but their dead-eyed stares seemed full of accusation.

I never gunned down civilians, he thought to himself, my conscience is clear.

Regardless, he tried to avoid looking at the unfortunate souls, and wondered if they had been placed there as a trap.

Maybe the Spacers had their own thing going on with the Corvids. Maybe they had called them out, hoping to capitalise on their rage to draw them into terrain where their superior numbers wouldn't count for much.

Just like we're trying to do.

Kinny didn't like drawing parallels with the off-worlders, so he focused hard on his monitor.

The terrain afforded them lines of sight for no more than fifty yards due to the disordered mess of the Necropolis, not counting the trail of wreckage that the platoon's advance had already left in its wake.

Nobody would be dumb enough to approach that way now, he hoped.

Braga had been last to join the formation, and he had managed to disengage the bikes and half-tracks that were on their asses, so he reckoned they wouldn't be following them directly anymore.

The mines had bought them some time.

Loud bangs erupted all around the exterior of Eddy, as locks all around the waist gimbal disengaged, and the legs began to move of their own accord.

The joints popped, freeing the left leg that dangled in the air from its usual range of movement.

The reverse-jointed appendage shot out of its socket several feet on hydraulics, then began to paw the air like a sleeping dog.

Acting on the mechanical gyros built into Eddy's chassis, the free leg swivelled at an unnatural angle, and stomped down onto the deck.

This leg pushed up, lifting the waist from the floor and scraping the chassis along the ground, tilting Blake further upside down.

Servos screamed as the second leg kicked out, scrabbling for purchase before joints compressed and rotated.

The right foot gripped hard on the uneven ground and suddenly thrust out, lifting the whole weight of Eddy from the ground in one movement.

Blake slammed upright with a bone-crunching thud, and her teeth clacked together hard enough to let her know she would need some kind of corrective surgery when this was all over.

She felt an irrational sense of elation wash over her. All she had accomplished was standing up, but she couldn't help herself.

The self-righting mechanisms of heavy mechs were never tested, in case something catastrophic happened to the venerable machines, and they couldn't be repaired.

The NPA never had the resources to lose a Touro to something as dumb as a failed self-righting drill. They usually just brought out recovery vehicles and did it the easy way.

Blake reached forward once more and yanked on the lever, switching it to the closed position.

The chassis jerked to one side as the left leg clunked back into the waist section, accompanied by the sound of locking bolts re-engaging.

Eddy didn't move after that.

“What the hells is she doing?” Kinny asked nobody in particular, as he risked a glance behind the squad to where Eddy stood perfectly still.

One of the huge mech's legs was still jutting out awkwardly to one side, hydraulic struts looking far too thin to support the weight of the machines for long. “Why isn't she moving?”

He could make out 2nd Squad, laid out in a similar formation to his own guys, slightly higher up the hill.

The red things, slightly smaller than the unit he saw at the statue, huddled in groups, just out of weapon range, darting about like flocking birds among the narrow pathways of the Necropolis.

Kinny didn't like that at all.

"These things are freaking me out," Mirante said, as Kinny returned to his front.

Me too, Kinny thought, as the sounds of struggling engines drew closer from the rear.

Different notes echoed wildly from the ruined factory they had exited from, sounds bouncing all over, merging together to form a collective growl down the hill.

Kinny could barely make out the dust trails from hundreds of vehicles before they merged into one chaotic mess, as they had no doubt abandoned any semblance of formation and attempted to tackle the hill individually.

An engine squealed, separate from the pack. It was close. Before he could react, a half-track came out of nowhere, nearly on top of Kinny.

Instinctively, he triggered the 84mm and smacked the vehicle dead on, causing it to ripple under the shock before falling apart without ceremony.

A two-man crew clambered from the wreckage, only for Kinny to take them out with two rounds from his autocannon, their bodies bursting like they'd been thrown into a meat grinder.

Simultaneously, further down the hill, a trio of gun trucks had found its way up through the tracks, and opened up with quad anti-air guns.

Victore and Machado traded fire with the trucks, hardshields flaring as they unleashed everything they had.

Machado took the brunt of the fusillade, his Mog skidding back through ancient detritus as his feet struggled for purchase. He absorbed the hits and survived, paying the trucks back in kind with twin autocannons. The trio of

trucks were bracketed and destroyed by the pair, but Kinny made a mental calculation of how their shields would be drained from the hits.

There was no cover there, just those damn prefabs which hindered movement and blocked vision, and as Kinny had the thought, he saw a stream of tracer buzz through a habitation block, kicking up the dirt about Braga's feet.

The veteran trooper traded blind fire through the dust, demolishing the habitation unit with gunfire, sweeping left and right.

Light bikes weaved through the factory, daring to use the route taken by the QRF platoon, defiant of Kinny's wishes. They paid the price accordingly, as Kroenig and the Private tore the area apart with heavy fire.

One bike swerved manically through the deluge of ordnance, miraculously managing to avoid everything, before opening up with a flamethrower at close range.

Kinny felt the flames wash over him, feeling the heat rise in his Mog as the blue shields held the fire at bay.

Blinded, he didn't see the bike slam into the fist of Kroenig, powered claw grabbing the front of the bike and tearing it clean off.

The Sergeant followed up with a straight right, and his saw blade emitted an ear splitting screech as it sheared through lightweight metal, then flesh.

Kroenig threw the bike wreck away, into the path of a gun truck. The Corvid wagon appeared from a tunnel, formed of two stacks of decayed prefabs that had slumped together, already firing.

Several rounds were soaked up by D-99's shields as Kroenig completed his turn, and Kinny's vision cleared just in time to see the Donkey kick.

The truck was rolling forward at speed, then it wasn't, as the short-barrelled cannon spat an implosion shell with a meaty whump.

The point of impact flashed as though about to explode, then the whole truck disintegrated back into the tunnel, spine of the chassis smashed in half

as the machine was ripped to pieces by tremendous forces.

A nearly perfect circle had been gouged from the tunnel of prefabs. The old structures could no longer take the strain and promptly collapsed under their own weight atop the unrecognisable scattering of truck remains.

The combat was close and barely coordinated. Kinny sent another barrage across the cracked flooring of the old factory, spending far too many rounds to wreck the first tank that had managed to make it up to them.

The heavy beast roared as it chewed concrete to reach him, and Kinny's knuckles were white on the gun grips as shells speared into the enemy junker.

It got off one well-aimed round, which slammed Kinny's Mog back several feet, feet leaving the floor momentarily and his head smashed against the display monitor.

Shaking his head groggily, Kinny blinked furiously and checked his shield readout, ignoring the trickle of blood that weaved a path down his forehead, coupled with a dull pain that felt like he had been punched square in the face.

48%.

The tank had taken off a full half of his shields with one hit.

Thankfully it sat, gutted, flames licking air from turret hatches as the crew burned inside, adding to the increasing pile of enemy dead.

Each one made the going harder, and the Corvids weren't exactly having an easy time of it to begin with.

He appreciated Blake's decision to bring them up there.

The leg units could move far more capably than those propelled by wheels and tracks, and Kinny suspected that was the only reason they were still alive.

Another tank announced its entrance, copying the Captain and crashing through a section of factory wall nobody was covering. This was a big one.

The turret was a stick-welded menagerie of heavy cannon and multiple machineguns that sprayed tracer in all directions.

Braga spotted it first and growled a target indication, and the entire squad fired upon the heavy junker.

Even as the entire squad tore it up with everything they had, dozens more tanks and trucks were reaching the fight, drawn in by the sounds of battle as they carved their own paths up the hill.

With combat balanced on a knife edge, Kinny wished the Captain would hurry the hell up.

Nothing happened.

Blake wrestled with the controls. She pulled levers every which way. She willed the machine into motion. She could feel the electrical impulses through her jack, connecting her to Eddy's gigantic frame.

Nothing happened.

Blake interrogated her diagnostics panel. Among several minor warnings about things that had rattled loose in the fall, there was a single bulb glowing red that she hadn't seen before.

The meaning for said bulb was stencilled above, in worn black paint on the olive drab board.

Right leg: Joint obstruction.

This was not good. Without the legs locked correctly in place, the shield generator couldn't complete its circuit, so wouldn't work at all until rectified.

Without mobility, she couldn't even crouch down to allow smaller units to assist her. A Mog can't climb a ladder.

That left one option, dismount and clear the obstruction manually, exposing herself to all manner of enemy fire.

Even now she could hear fire rattling from her hull armour, Eddy acting as a magnet for the enemy's wrath.

She felt a wave of utter dread as she stared at her forward monitor, then she noticed something.

Her elevated position gave her a view that her troops lacked, and she could see that the erratic, flock like movements of the drone machines were not random.

They would dart out and back into cover, then another group would attempt the same at a different point, each time pushing down a path before scurrying out of sight.

The sequence would continue, fast, the drones getting closer each time.

The movements weren't random, they were probing.

The damn things were calculating Loyalist reaction times, scoping out weapon ranges for their masters no doubt.

She opened the net.

“Mirante, the drones are mapping your behaviour, attack, now!”

“I'll see if I can hit them with an EMP-,” was all the calm squad leader got out, before the drones decided they had enough data.

One sped out of cover, frighteningly fast and unnervingly quiet, to slam into one of Mirante's squad.

Before the trooper had time to react, the drone exploded, engulfing him in a wash of flame.

Blake felt slight relief as she glimpsed a flicker of blue amidst the expanding ball of roiling firestorm, then another two hit him.

“Fire,” Mirante was shouting, “fire now!”

The squad opened up as the first Mog fell back, its armoured shell cracked, a blackened ruin.

Dozens of drones spilled from every crack and crevice, battering their way through flimsy architecture and collapsed rubble, eager to reach Mirante's squad.

They met a hail of high-explosive fire as the remaining four Mogs laid down a solid wall of ordnance.

Drones exploded in their droves, some causing chain reactions that undulated back into the ruins.

Scraps of red material spun and twirled through the air, surviving robots peppered by the remains of their explosive comrades as they jinked and dodged the withering fusillade.

A dozen of the things swiftly manoeuvred straight up, and followed each other in a straight line on identical trajectories, homing in on another of Mirante's men.

She barked orders, but Mogs always struggled to elevate their guns rapidly, and lines of tracer chased the drones ineffectively as they terminated their arc.

Every one of them hit the trooper in a massive show of overkill, drone after drone slamming into the powersuit, ripping great chunks of armour away with every blast until there was nothing left.

Mirante howled over the net, an incoherent roar of rage and sorrow, as the survivors of her squad continued to pour rounds downrange.

Blake wanted to give her orders, maybe tell her to identify the obstruction that caused Eddy to be immobile, but that was Officer Academy thinking. There was only one thing she could do to improve this situation.

Blake detached her cerebral jack and reached for the escape hatch.

She didn't see every drone stop, hang in the air for no more than a second, then change direction, as though acting on new orders. She didn't see them take to the air, sailing over the embattled platoon, and she didn't see them pour into the Corvids like a tidal wave of death.

The drones detonated against the huge tank and the machine weathered the assault, rocking back every time one of the diminutive machines exploded against its pitted hull.

It was like waves crashing against a cliff, and like any cliff the machine eventually gave up against the tide.

Scores of the machines blew up, swarming in to break the tank down into an unrecognisable hulk.

Kinny didn't know what to think. He didn't have time to, as Corvids were overrunning their position.

The drone swarm rose up and dispersed into distinct tendrils that sped down to ground level, splitting into smaller and smaller groups until they hit the separatists head on in a synchronised bombardment.

The incoming fire slackened immediately, as Spacer tech met cobbled together armour in a battle only one side could win.

The sound was deafening, explosions overlapped in a constant roar as Kinny kept firing into the maelstrom, targeting bikes too nimble to get hit by the drones, or tanks too tough to go down in one hit.

He couldn't even hear his own guns.

"Sarge, I don't understand what's going on," he heard Victore yell over the net, as the young trooper followed the drones with a stream of AP rounds.

"Shoot anything that isn't Army," the Sergeant replied, tone no different than if he was telling someone off for not wearing their boots whilst on QRF duty.

There was no sense trying to figure it out, for whatever reason the Spacers were helping them, or at least Kinny thought for all of thirty seconds.

“You got A-gravs up your ass 1st Squad.” He recognised Mirante’s voice over the net and turned to see three red machines clear the top of Eddy’s static frame, chased by tracer as they swooped down, beam weapons burning the air.

They were bigger than the drones, definitely manned, and heavily armed.

As one, 1st Squad turned to engage.

Blake emerged atop Eddy to a vision of absolute chaos.

Explosions rippled through the Necropolis like oversized chains of firecrackers, throwing armoured vehicles through the air, and toppling habitation stacks.

A collection of prefabs tumbled, unable to support their weight, and crashed into the side of the factory building. The whole structure groaned like an old giant in pain, and swathes of dust and debris fell from its tortured frame.

From her elevated position, Blake could see the whole hillside below her, spread out like a moving stratagem board, one that had a lifetime’s worth of trash dumped on top of it. A drone detonated against the ground directly in the path of a bike, which launched into the sky, tumbling and on fire, to narrowly miss one of her Mogs. The driver had been facing the other way, and didn’t even notice the flaming metal comet that nearly scrubbed him out of existence.

Tracer fire skittered across the ground, churning up weeds and broken concrete to the left of the Mog, which nimbly stepped to one side and shoulder barged a truck that had skidded onto the scene. The vehicle crumpled, crushing the Corvid manning an MG turret at the rear, and the Mog fired a cannon shell into it. Both units were engulfed by the blast, before a smoking powersuit came trudging confidently from the other side.

Braga, that had to be Braga.

Blake turned to head to the access ladder, then hit the deck instinctively as a squadron of A-gravs skimmed the top of Eddy's carapace.

They were close enough to touch, and Blake could feel the static from their shields pulling at her hair, making her gums itch as the red craft swooped down to engage her drivers.

She didn't dare look as the strange craft opened up with exotic weapons that emitted an unfamiliar bassy pulse. Instead, the Captain scuttled on all fours to the access ladder, and began to descend the outside of her four-storey-high machine, exposed and alone.

From somewhere a machinegun blared, small calibre, and rounds rattled from Eddy's Composite armour as Blake descended.

She had never been so scared, but she retained her clarity as her world consisted of a single view of Eddy's scarred hide, pulled close as she was against thick plating.

She had not noticed the textured surface of the paint so close up before, designed for crew members to walk on without slipping. She had never noticed how large the chips and pits were from multiple high calibre impacts. Any one of those rounds would leave a bloody mess of her, where only minutes ago they were something to be ignored.

She could feel the wake of bullets tugging at her jumpsuit. Someone was definitely aiming at her, and in a moment of daring she let go of the ladder.

The Captain fell, landing heavily on the waist gimble, one leg slipping over the edge as she felt herself being pulled over the side.

She was still over twenty feet up, and Blake dug a gloved hand into the grill of the crew decking, legs kicking ineffectually against the relatively-smooth hydraulic ram of the self-righting mechanism.

For a moment she dangled by one arm, being given a stomach lurching glimpse of the sloping ground, which was torched below by the tongue of an incinerator weapon as her eyes widened.

“Are you fucking kidding me!” she shouted into the sky, voice lost to the maelstrom of combat.

A flash from behind and a wash of heat buffeted her back, shifting her position just an inch. It was just enough for her to cross the tipping point, then Blake braced, and managed to drag herself forward with one crazed pull, desperation lending strength to her tired limbs.

Her fingers hurt like hell, and Blake breathed hard as she rose to a crouch, eyes darting wildly around.

Where is this damn obstruction?

She walked carefully along the crew decking, then dropped onto her belly to look underneath it, following the join where leg met waist.

There.

A piece of jagged iron rebar, no more than two feet long, stuck out of the joint like a mechanical middle finger, raised at Blake in defiance of her efforts. She laughed out loud.

“Is that it?” she yelled against the background din, pleased that it was something simple for once.

She grabbed hold of the bottom rung of the access ladder and lowered herself down, making sure to keep one hand on it as she braced against the bar with one foot.

A cannon shell struck Eddy above her, and the shock pushed down on her shoulder, forcing the air from her lungs.

In a split second, thousands of tiny impacts sounded all around the chassis and Blake was consumed by a pall of black smoke.

She coughed, somehow managing to retain her footing through the ordeal.

Am I hit? She disregarded the thought as another line of tracer ricocheted from the hull, and concentrated her attention on that iron rebar.

It felt like being punched, then her right arm was dead, flopping lifelessly to her side.

I'm hit now, she thought with a surprising detachment, glancing down as a red stain spread along the length of her arm, *must've been a ricochet*.

No matter. My troops are dying, and I'm the only thing that can save them.

With all her might, Blake jumped, then slammed a booted foot down onto the bar.

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THIRTEEN

Armbruster was glad he had chosen to follow from a distance.

The idiots had gotten themselves involved in a three-way fight, surrounded on both sides by overwhelming forces, and there was no way he was getting involved in that.

The Hunter had begun to lose hope after the QRF platoon disappeared into District HQ, and after an hour or so without seeing a single soul he recognised posted to the walls, he decided to get some head down.

The Corvid attack had petered out to a pathetic dribble, then a half-assed retreat that saw many of the rabble cut down as they ran for their lives.

That fortress. Whoever was crewing the damn thing knew how to fight. Its shields were probably powered directly from the base itself, and would no doubt have ammo for days.

Attacking from that angle had been suicide, but Armbruster supposed it was preferable to attacking full strength via the fields of the agriculture facility.

Without a covered approach, the Corvids would've been picked off by heavy artillery before they got within a mile of the place.

No, if Armbruster was leading the assault, he would've split his forces and attacked at speed on two fronts, gambling that the fortress could only cover one approach without time to relocate.

Oh well, he thought to himself as he saw the last remnants of the separatist attack chopped to mince as they fled, *the point is now moot.*

After the attack, the Hunter found himself a little nest in a gutted habitation block no more than half a mile from District, just before the rise of the valley that led into the Necropolis.

He figured that if they ever were to come out again, they would be heading for Central. There was nowhere else he could think of that would be worth

the effort of leaving that safe little hidey hole.

Hunched down inside the building that had been occupied by civilians just hours before, Armbruster set his sensor array to passive mode and promptly fell asleep.

Movement.

A low beeping, accompanied by a flashing point on his display, one that matched a “friendly” heavy unit.

He could track a Touro’s engine signature from over a mile, and he picked up a faint report now, one that pointed him to a concealed railway track that seemed to emerge from nowhere amidst the floor of the Necropolis.

Armbruster activated all of his systems, slow time, as he was in no rush.

He watched the levels on his gauges rise as he brought the Hunter out of its slumber.

Railgun plates warmed, and the 8mm machinegun swivelled lazily on its turret, slaved to the watchful gaze of its owner.

Armbruster relieved himself, took a sip from his hydration tube, then flexed his hands and wrapped them around his control levers.

With a thought, he brought the Buckmaster class mech into a standing position, and started to walk.

Multiple scanner pings.

He froze.

Units, more than he could have ever anticipated, uneven engine notes betraying the poorly-maintained nature so typical of the separatists.

His attention had been focused forward, meaning scanners would not sense anything rearward until it was almost on top of him.

Stupid.

He should have centralised the scanner position and checked his surroundings before committing to movement.

Bikes raced past his hide location, followed by trucks, tanks, halftracks, and several improvised behemoths, seemingly brought to life by throwing several other vehicles together.

Armbruster felt a thrill as the enemy passed, no more than ten yards from where he stood, holding his breath in the darkness.

He allowed himself a wide grin.

Only a thin wall of cheap concrete separated him from certain death. All it would take was for a single observant person to really look into the building as they passed, and he would be forced to fight till he fell.

The ground rumbled with vibration from the strike force as it drove on with singular intent, looking as though it was homing in on his former comrades.

That isn't possible, the Specialist thought, even Touros don't possess the kind of sensor package I have.

Either the Corvids had their own Scout/Hunters to call upon, or were about to have themselves a fortunate accident.

Armbruster gave it a minute or so after the last of the Corvid force had rumbled past, then carefully exited the building.

He crested the valley edge and dropped down in the wake of the formidable taskforce. He would follow them up to a point, then split off to a flank, and lose himself amongst the ruins of the past.

The Scout/Hunter picked its way through the industrial chaos of the Necropolis with an ease that betrayed its twenty foot high frame.

Armbruster had followed up behind a light tank, using the path it ground out to make his own ingress easier, before breaking off to the right several hundred yards short of the fight.

For most of his ascent he kept close to the tank, too close, taking delight in the Corvid's ignorance as he trained his railgun on the throbbing exhaust ports.

Notice me, he dared the tank crew, wondering if any of them had the basic sense to check their six o'clock position periodically. *Give me an excuse.*

The stalk was uneventful, and the Hunter dipped his head to the vehicle as it grunted its way up the slope, battering prefabs and burial mounds out of the way in a relentless slog.

On his own, Armbruster accelerated, skilfully picking his route, each footfall of the Buckmaster class finding the flattest ground, the most stable surface as he circled around a factory building that leaned at an alarming angle.

He skirted the edge of the chaos, noting with curiosity a pile of civilian corpses that were drawing a swarm of flies, until he happened across a smaller warehouse, nestled in among a cluster of prefab towers.

The pile of bodies was denied dignity even in death, as combat was joined by several parties, and the whole mound bucked and jumped under a flurry of impacts, individuals breaking apart under the assault.

The hunter ducked his engine slightly to get under the roof of the prefab tower, and pushed through to the forward edge, gingerly digging a hole through the wall with one clawed foot.

Pawing at the construct without toppling over took a great deal of concentration, and after a mere few seconds he had to wipe beads of sweat from his brow.

Balancing on a single leg was seriously advanced piloting skills, and Armbruster congratulated himself as he peered through his murder hole, eyes lighting up as the scene unfolded.

Eddy, that great machine piloted by old "steady Ed" herself, was in the process of standing up.

Its legs flailed around as the upper carapace scraped along the ground in the most undignified way, and Armbruster burst into laughter.

How absurd these people were, turning on them had been the right choice.

How he had ever seen himself as a peer to these incompetents he could barely fathom, and Armbruster felt himself wondering how he would fit in among the corporate forces that no doubt were on their way. He could barely imagine the fantastical tech they would bring with them, tech that would augment him, make him a better warrior.

He patted his diagnostic board as he thought about leaving the Scout/Hunter behind, and an unfamiliar feeling of sentimentality washed over him.

There weren't many things he would miss, but the machine was one of them.

It's a shame that Almeida had to die, Armbruster thought, a frown creasing his brow, but he had too many principals.

It would've taken too long to convince him to join the corporation, and they only had a limited window to seize the initiative.

No, it's much better this way. He had to die.

"Ooh, what have we here?" The pilot mumbled to himself, as dozens of brightly coloured spherical robots started throwing themselves at the Army platoon.

They seemed to be a kind of suicide unit, filled with high explosives, sacrificing themselves to take out their enemies.

Armbruster was fascinated. *Drones.*

He had heard of them being used during the Troubles, but the archive footage of Army drones showed big, cumbersome things that needed to be protected on their flight, otherwise they would be blown out of the air before nearing their objectives.

They were a world apart from these nimble little things.

The drones terminated two Mogs before their attention was drawn elsewhere. The drivers were utterly powerless to halt their demise as they poured fire into the swarm with negligible effect, and as a group they flew through the sky in a bounding arc, before Armbruster lost them behind the factory building.

Very clever. Kill the enemy without any risk to yourself.

Eddy had been motionless for some time, obviously experiencing locomotive problems, as one leg jutted out at an awkward angle.

There was a reason nobody tested self-righting units.

Armbruster caught a little movement, and increased gain on his forward monitor as a tiny figure appeared on Eddy's upper carapace.

There she was, his illustrious former leader, boring as mud and about as equally as inspiring.

Captain Blake hit the deck as she was buzzed by a group of A-gravs, painted the same red as the suicide drones and clearly designed along the same lines.

The larger flying machines disappeared from view and Blake picked herself up, before beginning to descend Eddy's access ladder.

She cautiously took it a rung at a time, stopping each time to look down and make sure the thing wouldn't break underneath her.

It was painful to watch.

"Get on with it woman!" Armbruster yelled in his cockpit, stroking the trigger and sending a burst of 8mm rounds her way.

He saw the impacts spark in a line, no more than a foot away from the Captain, who paused, then promptly fell to the decking below.

Oh, shit, did I hit her? He didn't mean to hit her, he didn't want the game to end just yet.

Armbruster scanned around, couldn't make out Blake's form for a minute, then there she was, inspecting the leg joint that still sat immobile, gleaming hydraulic ram contrasting starkly with the drab and damaged exterior of Eddy's armour.

An HE shell burst against Eddy's unshielded flank, and he lost sight of her again as smoke rolled out from the centre of the blast.

It wafted past quickly, and the officer just sat there dumbly, probably shocked at yet another near miss.

Armbruster triggered another burst of MG fire, raking the area around the Captain, in an attempt to snap her out of her stupor.

She flinched, and one arm flopped down to the side, where just before it had been gripping the ladder tightly.

Oops, he looked hard through maximum gain, and saw a darker patch on her uniform.

Yeah, definitely hit her that time.

He really needed to stop doing that.

Blake seemed to barely pay attention to her wound, as the slight woman leapt up and down on whatever was obstructing the leg joint.

After the third attempt, she pulled herself against the ladder and looped her good arm round the rung, as something in Eddy shifted.

The offending leg shot back into its joint with force, pulling the entire machine laterally, and Blake held on for dear life.

It settled, and she immediately began the laborious climb back to her cockpit, made punishingly hard by her wounded limb.

Arm up, one foot, push, second foot, start again.

Armbruster found himself willing her on, letting out a little cheer every time she advanced a rung.

That was some dogged determination she was showing. Still, she wouldn't have had to do it if the silly bitch hadn't fallen over in the first place.

Finally, looking exhausted and trailing blood, the Captain dragged herself over the edge of Eddy's upper glacia and disappeared into her hatch.

It closed slowly, and Eddy shook.

Hardshields rippled, luminous waves of blue overlapping as they warded off kinetic impacts.

Armbruster was happy for her, happy for himself.

The game would continue, for how long he couldn't tell, but he would be grateful for every moment experienced.

After all, he needed something to keep him occupied until the corporation showed up, and taking out his own unit had proven to be mostly unchallenging so far.

Deciding he was bored of the quiet, Armbruster switched his radio on, and quickly found the channels that the QRF platoon were operating on.

He looked at his map board, and hastily traced a route.

The Hunter knew exactly what Blake would do next, and he wanted to be able to hear it.

In this terrain, it would be glorious.

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FOURTEEN

Kinny grunted as the truck collided with him, a strange contraption of utility vehicle and tank treads. It caught his flank at high speed, intending to crush him, and his head snapped to one side. Kinny winced under the impact.

He turned his autocannon to the offending machine and pulped the crew with a thumping burst that tore the guts from the truck and rendered its occupants into thick mulch.

Pivoting on the spot, he put a HEAT shell into the side armour of a tank that trundled past, hell-bent on killing Victore across the way.

The tank hadn't seen Kinny, his powersuit being obscured by the wagon that had wrapped itself around him, and that was to be its demise.

The shell penetrated, and the tank slowed to a halt, before secondary explosions popped the turret off in a gout of flame.

"They're shielded, dammit, pour it on!" Braga growled over the net.

Kinny couldn't see him, but he guessed he was talking about the Spacer Agravs that had joined the party.

Red beam stabbed out of the dust, often joined by burning tracers that whipped up tiny vortices in their wake.

A trio of suicide drones silently scooted past, ignoring Kinny completely, to detonate among the infantry that were methodically bounding forwards. Bits of mangled bodies were thrown into the air, accompanied by the screams of the dying.

Kinny eyed his ammo counters, half gone already after merely a few minutes of fighting, then had a minor brain wave.

He lifted his gun arms with a grunt and locked them in the stowed position, before tearing at the truck with armoured gauntlets.

He shredded chassis and shell, and managed to get a grip on the hard mounted .50 calibre heavy machine gun that sat on the back. Bunching his shoulders, Kinny pulled, metal groaned, and he ripped it clean from its base.

Ammo belt trailing behind him, Kinny held the HMG from the hip and sprayed an inaccurate hail of fire as he advanced to the hulk of another tank that had thought itself the match of shielded Mog suits.

He turned the Corvid gun on its own comrades, and the infantry that were just now catching up with the vehicle assault bore the brunt of the fire. Large calibre rounds cut them down as they traded fire behind questionable cover.

The site was rapidly getting cluttered with wreckage, and Kinny hadn't seen any bikes for at least a minute or so, which was a lifetime in a firefight.

They had probably lost the ability to manoeuvre as the area filled up with mangled vehicles, and Kinny used that to his advantage, taking up position on the corner of a smoking tank carcass to spray fire into the confines of the factory.

He had been wrong before, very wrong about the separatists' behaviour, and now hundreds of men were conducting an advance through the old factory, following the exact line of advance that the platoon had taken themselves.

Kinny looked right and saw Victore, engaged in a melee with a large brute of a machine, the driver clambering about its bulk, tearing off anything he could get a hold on.

Kinny had lost sight of the others, he didn't know when but he could still hear them through the smoke and dust, taking the fight to the enemy in their own personal battles, punctuated by the occasional choppy radio message.

The Private's face was fixed in a scowl as he played the HMG barrel left and right, using tracer to walk his rounds into groups of rebels that scattered like leaves under the beating.

They fired back with small arms and handheld RPGs that corkscrewed wildly through the air, unnerving him with every shot.

The damn things whistled and screeched like banshees as they shot past, too fast to evade. Kinny couldn't help but think of Neto as he hunkered down tighter, casings and disintegrating link piling up around his feet.

The Mogs had excelled in this battleground. They were the only things capable of moving freely among the rubble-choked paths. Vehicles were forced into chokepoints, and even dismounts were of little use as they were pinned easily, the cheap materials used for the colonists' dropsite practically useless as cover.

The gun clacked empty. That dreaded "dead man's click" seeming louder than the fire that preceded it. Kinny looked down, eyes wide at the smoking barrel of his useless gun.

The whole thing glowed red with heat, and Kinny could feel it through his left gauntlet, as he gripped the thing tightly.

Kinny didn't notice Eddy shudder behind him. He didn't realise it was cause for the infantry to increase their efforts. They were terrified.

To his horror, a roar emitted from the factory entrance, simultaneously resonating from many ragged throats. Before he could swing his own weapons back into play, the separatists charged.

He couldn't count them – such were the numbers that poured from the broken walls of the structure.

Guns, clubs, grenades, swords – the crazed masses wielded any and all objects as weapons against him. They were furious. He had killed their friends, their colleagues, their families.

Their anger was righteous, and as Kinny saw the looks on the dirty faces of the men and women coming to kill him, it scared him more than any vehicle.

He clung to his analytical abilities by a thread, while the fight-or-flight instinct screamed in his head.

Now would be a good time to run, it seemed to repeat, over and over, too fast and too loud to drown out.

“I’m still one of you!” Kinny roared back at the horde, unaware of whether he was broadcasting or not. How could he make them understand that he was fighting through no choice of his own? “I don’t want to die!”

If they heard him, the mob did not respond. *What did I expect, understanding?* And they kept coming, intent on taking down this faceless monster in their midst.

He reversed his grip on the HMG, powered gauntlets hefting the thing like a club, and met the charge. More than a ton of armoured steel waded into a sea of angry flesh.

Blake moved with a speed and efficiency born of anger.

She hadn’t really felt anything like it before the events of the last day. This treachery, this great calamity had woken things inside her that she never knew existed.

She had never felt so alive, and so savagely proud of serving the Army all at once.

She applied the haemostatic gel to her arm deftly and with great precision, before using her teeth to steady the dressing that she applied.

She was not calm. She was holding back, exerting tremendous self-control, reserved. She was saving herself, and knew what she had to accomplish before re-engaging the enemy.

Mistakes could not be rectified, but the fallout could be minimised with the application of force, and she now took the calculated risk to treat herself before getting into the chair.

Blake desperately wanted to reconnect, to feel the power course through her, to lay about in every direction and destroy the vermin that scurried about her feet.

But she wouldn’t be able to do any good if she bled out within the next hour.

Her chances of overall success increased a hundredfold if she kept a level head, cut through the emotion and actually performed like her reputation warranted.

So she did.

Then she reconnected, and Eddy welcomed her presence.

It was like a drug, this feeling of potency, and each time it reached out for her more, pulling her into its grasp.

Each time it became more of an effort to disconnect, she felt a sense of loss when not part of her machine.

Her right arm was now effectively dead, muscle and sinew punched through by a steel-jacketed round, so her neural link would take up the increased inload of stimuli, an activity that tired the brain with rapidity.

She didn't take any painkillers – she needed to be sharp – the anger would help with the mental load.

My soldiers are dying.

Eddy staggered, unbalanced, as the rigid lever-controlled left hemisphere attempted to counter the wobbly mind-controlled right.

The heavy mech stamped down hard to steady itself before another fall, and she hoped, not for the first time in recent memory, that she hadn't squashed something friendly.

The Captain concentrated hard, and the entire right side of her real body seemed to slacken momentarily, as Eddy's right leg straightened. Slowly at first, but with more confidence in every movement, Blake had Eddy rotate on the spot, facing towards the direction of the battle, where both squads now resided, fighting in absolute disarray against both home grown rebels and unwelcome visitors in a ragged line.

She pushed the lever forward, matching it with her will, and Eddy took its first proper step, before teetering alarmingly.

It wasn't going to work.

Then she had an epiphany, and let go of the controls completely.

The feeling of pressure was tidal in its immensity, and threatened to overwhelm Blake's senses, dumping Eddy face down amongst the ruins once more, but she closed her eyes and breathed, slow and deep.

The pressure began to fade, as sweat ran down her brow.

She wiped her dampened forehead with her good arm and opened her eyes, noting how hot her skin was to the touch, even through a glove.

She could see through her eyes – no, Eddy's eyes, not hers – and she noted how small all the creatures looked out there.

Blake felt lightheaded, giddy, then sniggered at the absurdity of it all. All that power and she was nearly undone by a piece of iron rebar. *Well now they would see, the vermin would pay the price.*

She was sure there was something about not being led by emotions.

Then Eddy tightened its grip, and Blake snarled.

The ground shuddered, and Kinny stepped into his swing.

The steel body of the HMG whirled in a power-assisted arc, blurring as it swept across his frontage.

Bodies were crushed, broken, flung afar with every clumsy blow. Every hit took a life as Kinny circled and spun on the spot, wielding the hefty gun like a Stone Age club.

He was breathing hard, blood rushing in his ears and panting in his cockpit from the effort, and Kinny bellowed as he put his strength into another crunching strike.

A man's face, one moment all indignant rage, grimacing as he clutched a grenade – which he clearly intended to jam into some vulnerable joint of M-841 – simply vanished as the mangled lump of metal pulped his entire upper body.

The grenade fell, flying away from deadened fingers and exploded on the ground, mincing another half-dozen frenzied soldiers.

Inside his suit, Kinny barely noticed.

No, not soldiers. Just people. Half of them weren't even armed.

People fighting for something they believed in.

One woman, hair braided tightly to her skull for efficiency or fashion he couldn't tell, armed with a pickaxe handle and bravery he would never know, put her entire life's energy into one swing.

The axe handle snapped against Kinny's carapace as he met her with his own strike, and her body added its meat to the end of his improvised fighting tool.

The ground shook once more.

Another man, expression placid, except for the concentration in his eyes, tattered yellow rain mac billowing as he ducked under a brutish sweep of the gun, got in close and emptied a pistol at point blank range.

He was attempting to damage M-841's cyclopean optical array, but he should have known that even the lenses of such devices were armoured against small arms fire, and he died with a shattered rib cage as Kinny simply ran over him.

Kinny couldn't think, couldn't breathe, couldn't stop moving. He simply could not do anything other than react to avoid being overwhelmed.

But it still wasn't enough.

He heard a scrabbling, like multiple rats running across a solid surface, and realised it was people clawing for purchase on his armoured frame.

Proximity warnings went off, bleeping shrilly as his vision was obscured by a hand attempting to cover his optics.

He could feel the weight of one or more people gripping his chassis, and loud bangs sounded, as though someone was having at it with a sledge

hammer.

He spun wildly, and his vision cleared, just in time to see three large men step in, grip his arms and wrench gauntleted fingers away from the mangled machine gun.

He tried to lower his weapon arms, but servos just protested as something, probably a person up there, stopped them from descending into the ready position.

He stumbled under the added weight, and all of a sudden Kinny felt tired, then succumbed, collapsing onto his knees. The background noise of scraping and clawing and hitting carried the promise of death, and he wished that the hardshields would function against low speed attacks.

If he could just take a breather for a moment, he'd be okay.

Kinny was fairly certain his armour would hold.

Then his shields did flare.

His vision was filled with light – blinding light that seared the retinas, leaving patinas that he blinked away, momentarily struck dumb.

The people climbing over his powersuit heated up, too fast for them to even scream, as a high intensity laser played across Kinny's Mog.

It lasted no more than a second, but the portions of people outside the close radius of his hardshield were immediately burned to ash, while the undamaged remains inside the shield's protective bubble flopped to the floor, suddenly robbed of life.

One of the large men stood, face to eye against Kinny's optics, completely enveloped by the shield. His eyes had reactively clenched shut as soon as the laser hit, and he opened them, mirroring Kinny as he blinked furiously, to see the carnage wrought by the weapon.

The man seemed to snap out of some sort of daze, and scurried for the nearest cover as Kinny stood up and brought his weapons down.

Forgetting the fortunate fellow, Kinny zeroed in on the culprit: a Spacer A-grav. The rust red vessel zipped overhead, switching directions in a random way that was very frustrating, chased by tracer from both sides. Braga appeared from the dust, spitting obscenities over his loudspeaker, armour once again blackened by whatever forces had expended themselves upon it.

He let a HEAT round go, which splashed against advanced hardshields that barely flickered from the hit. The Spacer vehicle switched directions in that unnervingly fast way that was rapidly becoming their trademark, and trained its laser weapons on the fierce veteran.

“Kill it!” somebody screamed.

Both Mogs opened up with all guns, and the A-grav detonated in mid-air, accompanied by a boom all out of proportion to its size.

“That was easy!” exclaimed Victore, breathless, now wrestling with a lone junker Mog that had found its way into the battle.

“That wasn’t us,” Braga replied, pumping an 84mm round into the enemy powersuit’s back, smashing it to ruin in a shower of shrapnel.

Victore gestured thanks as Eddy loomed out of the dust, torso twitchily moving in small increments, scanning about for targets like a wolf with a scent, and its heavy cannon boomed once more.

A canister round this time, which detonated in the air several yards short of a cluster of Corvid infantry and light vehicles that remained unseen to Kinny, shredding them all.

Kinny had no idea what the shell had struck but whooped anyway, somewhat hypocritically he would later think, given the compassion he felt towards the rebels. Yet he couldn’t help feeling elation at the knowledge that their best chance of survival was back in the game.

Eddy rampaged through the enemy ranks, narrowly avoiding trampling Markovic as Blake piloted her mech into their line with reckless abandon. She stamped and kicked, while simultaneously engaging targets with both her HMG and cannon.

The remaining A-gravs darted for cover, attempting to extricate themselves from a battle they could not hope to win, lasers washing against Eddy's shields as they retreated. One of them was not lucky, and was speared by a sabot as its partner eluded the fire, wreckage tumbling end over end to crash down in a plume of grit and broken machinery.

Captain Blake's rage was palpable, it was nearly a physical thing in its own right, and it manifested in how she threw Eddy around. The machine moved with a speed and agility that seemed unlikely for a vehicle of its size, and it smashed the spine of the Corvid attack in an unstoppable charge, crushing and shooting and grinding them apart in a display of violence that shocked Kinny even now.

Then Victore died.

Fortunately he didn't feel it, as a beam weapon unlike anything Kinny had yet witnessed blazed along the floor, turning cracked concrete into bubbling liquid. Fat enough to fully envelope a powersuit, the ray completely disintegrated the young trooper, before navigating upwards to carve into the factory building.

The beam scorched a molten furrow several feet deep into the ground before playing with surgical precision across the support structure of the derelict complex.

The entire grand old building groaned once, then collapsed in a vast implosion of concrete and steel, completely crushing the large Corvid force that had been picking their way through the rubble.

Kinny thought in an abstract way of the poor soul that had just run away from him, and figured him probably dead.

He was slightly less bothered about Victore, and the fact worried at his gut.

The beam ceased, leaving only a trail of flame in its wake as the air ignited along its path of travel.

The entire battlefield went silent, and bells rang in Kinny's ears from the intensity of sustained gunfire as he turned to look, following the rapidly dissipating fires to their point of origin.

The top of the Necropolis.

An A-grav larger than anything that seemed possible hovered, perfectly immobile, dwarfing even the imposing statues of the Saints. Kinny had to do a double take as his eyes refused to accept it. He blinked several times, convinced he was experiencing a false perspective. It was like a mobile fortress had taken flight.

How can any grav plate hold that thing up? He thought, as Eddy clunked audibly, switching ammunition types.

The heavy mech sighted and fired with admirable speed, and the tungsten slug was a blur as it shot through the air with deadly accuracy.

It crumpled against hardshields with barely a shimmer, and Kinny gasped, as he waited for the thing to return fire.

It didn't. Not at the loyalists, anyway.

The huge A-grav lashed out with multiple smaller beams, expertly tracing their paths across the statues of the saints, dissecting them slowly. It seemed as though it was playing with the relics, like a psychopathic child might idly dissect a rodent, and they tumbled into pieces. Martim's severed head bounced, carving a path of destruction through several stacks of prefabs, before coming to rest amongst a crypt of a minor saint, an angelic statue of its own looking solemnly at the fallen father of Novo Solo.

Kroenig, still unseen, roared in anguish.

It was not like the animal rage emitted by the Captain, but rather the noise of something broken being pushed beyond its limit, his tortured voice box being given an even more mechanical tone when expressed through external speakers.

The Sergeant appeared from the blanket of dust that obscured the brightness of the day and sped up the hill at a flat sprint, ploughing straight through the flimsy prefabs, on an intercept path with the giant Spacer craft.

Kinny knew at that moment that his Sergeant had a death wish – that he would perish because couldn't let such a slight towards his beloved Saints

go. The man was absolutely going to die if he ran off up there alone, and nothing was going to stop him.

So he took off after him.

Blake blinked, her vision flicking between the off-worlder monstrosity and the almost comical image of her platoon Sergeant rushing to meet it.

This isn't funny.

She wrestled her mind away from Eddy's predatory instincts and assessed the situation.

She ignored the fact that more of her soldiers were dead. She ignored the fact that Kroenig, and even more strangely Kinny, had literally just run off into the maze of the Necropolis.

In Officer Academy, instructors often waxed lyrical about instinct, and how experience lent itself to feelings of intuition one couldn't effectively explain, but were not to be taken lightly.

They mentioned a time where an Officer could straddle the middle ground between absolute chaos and pure analytical detachment, and in turn feel the ebb and flow of a battle.

Colonel Rome mentioned this concept frequently in lectures after his action in the food riots and subsequent promotion. In fact, he made it something of a personal specialty.

And Blake was feeling it right now.

The Corvids had numbers far greater than she had anticipated. Even now she could see troops pouring in over the valley's edge to join the battle after the first wave.

It was like the entire population had risen up in a frenzy against the powers that be.

But here, now, the double punch of the Spacer's collapsing the factory, and Blake herself running amok in the centre of their haphazard advance had halted their momentum completely. They were shocked, and would recover, but for the moment nobody was moving.

The Spacers themselves had intelligently decided to withdraw for the time being.

They had dispatched drones and light units to whittle down the forces they saw as threats, and had not anticipated that Blake's Touro would sort itself out.

Even the huge floating fortress had seemed unwilling to engage, preoccupied as it was with carving up the cultural heritage of her people.

Blake's head was perfectly clear. There was nobody shooting at them.

This was her chance.

"Boss, orders?" Mirante sounded strained, and her usually calm voice cracked on the second word. It was understandable – she had just witnessed two of her soldiers being brutally killed. "It's gone quiet."

She couldn't afford to go after Kroenig and Kinny, just as she couldn't afford to wait for them to come to their senses. The opportunity was not to be wasted, the mission had to come first.

Besides, the old maniac probably had a death wish, he would be impossible to reason with. It was a just a shame he had to drag a youngster along with him.

Time to go.

"Everybody follow me, run." She checked her compass, then Eddy loped off like the huge predatory creature it was, a trail of powersuits following behind, ever decreasing in number.

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FIFTEEN

The silence didn't last long.

Artillery crashed behind them as Kinny ran, struggling to keep sight of his Sergeant as he continued his manic climb up the slope.

They had found a set of steps carved into the hillside, made of the same stone as the statues that now lay, reduced to neatly-dissected heaps atop the peak.

The steps were worn with age and too small for Mog feet, but crunching a path up the things was distinctly easier than beating a route through prefabricated housing units.

Kinny risked a look behind him to the bottom of the hill, where a veritable Corvid army was amassing.

It appeared as though somebody with some sense had organised the rabble, as they weren't randomly rampaging up the slope anymore.

Kinny could make out a line of artillery units on the adjacent valley edge, barrels raised to lob HE shells in the general area he had just ran from.

The shells were powerful, and the entire midsection of the hill erupted into a series of detonations that rippled along its frontage.

The ground rumbled hard. Kinny scraped back down the slope several yards before he regained his footing, and accelerated to keep up with Kroenig.

He hoped that the others had escaped the barrage.

“What am I doing?” He thought out loud.

He had no obligation to protect the Sergeant. It didn't make the slightest bit of sense. If anything, he was causing more damage by abandoning his comrades downslope. *How were Braga and Machado coping now?*

But there was something in him, something that kept reminding him of Bader.

Kroenig would not have done the same for him, but for some reason that just validated his reason to back him up. It meant that he still had compassion.

That or he was just trying to convince himself he wasn't a complete idiot.

“Sarge!” he called over external speakers. He couldn't be sure that Kroenig had his radio switched on now, as he hadn't responded to several hails. “Wait up. Where are you going?”

The higher up the hill they went, the more the surrounding architecture changed. The prefabs petered out, giving way to larger, more formal crypts, obviously owned by more important dead people. The few habitation blocks here were made from solid stone blocks, ornate carvings decorating their facades.

Kinny glimpsed partially-eroded scenes depicting crashed spaceships, overseen by heroic workers standing at the peak of a mighty hill. Each scene was a variation of the theme: proud men and women overcoming great adversity to build a great civilisation.

Everyone knew the damn story.

Kinny lost sight of the Sergeant as the stairs rounded a curve, cutting close to what looked like a well-constructed administration building.

They had reached the original seat of power in Solo Nobre, the small district where the original settlers laid out plans for their free civilisation hundreds of years before.

There was a lot of history there on that hillside, and Kinny had always wanted to visit the place when he was a child. He was fascinated, as many others were, with the tales of greatness that were drilled into them from an early age.

Now it just felt fitting that he would witness Kroenig, a relic from the old era, die at the hands of foreigners in the place where it all began.

Of course that meant his own death would come right after the fact, which encouraged him to fight all the harder.

He cornered the building, and almost collided with Sergeant Kroenig in D-99, who stood quietly in the shadow of the structure.

The shadows were short, as it was almost midday, but the building was several stories high so they were adequate to conceal the machines quite well.

Kroenig held a finger up to the front of his cockpit, to where his mouth would be.

Quiet.

He stuck a thumb out, then turned it down, before chopping his hand in the direction of a cluster of larger buildings some three hundred yards upslope.

Enemy, there.

Simple hand gestures, taught in basic.

Kinny pegged what was happening, Kroenig probably suspected that the enemy may be able to detect their radio transmissions, and he wanted to retain surprise.

Kinny rattled his brain, couldn't think of why this would be a reasonable assumption, but the old lunatic had survived this long, so decided to go along with his paranoia.

He made the okay symbol with his hand to signify that he understood, then zoomed in on the buildings.

It was hard to concentrate, as his limited periphery was full of that floating monstrosity, which circled the hilltop lazily as artillery fire chased the QRF platoon away. Its forward edge pointed downslope all the while, like a cautious but amused parent watching its children play-fight.

The buildings looked quite similar to the one they stood by, nothing out of the ordinary, until he saw it.

Movement. An A-grav raised itself from the ground, shaking off a layer of silt that had settled on its hull, before disappearing into the wide alleyway between the nearest two buildings.

Kinny hadn't spotted it at all until it shifted. The rusty red of its body, covered in local dust, had blended in perfectly with the decayed landscape.

They had nearly run right into it.

Kinny wondered if Kroenig might try and bypass it on his suicide charge to the big fellow, maybe try and avoid all contact outside of punching the fortress in the face, but no, as soon as the thing disappeared the Sergeant was off, running after the damn thing.

Of course, he wants to kill them all, Kinny lamented common sense before dutifully following on, a safe tactical bound behind.

He legged it across the open street, refusing to acknowledge the floating death machine to his left, and the fact that it could snuff out his existence in the blink of an eye, and then he was in the alleyway.

Suddenly he was plunged into shadow, and his eyes adjusted just in time to see Kroenig's insanity at work.

The Sergeant had managed to sneak his machine up to the A-grav, which hovered several feet off the ground, somehow managing to look bored as it observed the adjacent street, and was reaching out with his hydraulic claw arm.

Kinny couldn't believe his eyes, how the Sergeant could dull his servos enough to be that quiet he would never know, and he stepped forward to lend a hand. His left leg locked, much to his frustration, and Kinny teetered, before slumping sideways. His shoulder scraped against the wall, and Kinny was stuck leaning at an awkward angle as the A-grav turned at alarming speed.

There was an awful scraping of metal as the hydraulic claw scabbled for purchase, and Kinny felt a rush of pure terror as he strained to unlock his leg joints.

The optical cluster on top of the A-grav swivelled about, before fixing its compound lenses on Kinny's rigid form as leg muscles burned with lactic acid.

The craft swivelled a short-barrelled cannon into place, locking its aim onto M-841.

Kroenig's claw scratched frantically across the curved hull of the A-grav, then clamped onto a strut, or an access step or something, and pulled down.

The vehicle tilted at an angle, fired, and attempted to lift higher into the air.

The conventional shell blew up in front of Kinny's feet, shockwave buffeting him, his carapace showered with chips of brick and concrete. Kinny closed his eyes, and noticed with dismay that his shield hadn't engaged, despite diagnostics showing some charge remaining.

The enemy pilot probably couldn't see D-99 directly underneath its machine and tried to take off, but Kroenig held it there, his powersuit's leg hydraulics extending involuntarily as it was pulled along the ground.

Foot claws scraped on concrete as Kroenig bucked spasmodically, attempting with one arm to jerk the thing down.

He realised, as his leg joint popped into motion, that his squad leader was trying to align the centre mass of the Spacer vehicle with his shoulder-mounted implosion cannon.

Kinny took aim with both of his own weapons to assist, but needn't have bothered.

The Donkey kicked, its percussive boom sounding impossibly loud in the alleyway, and a wave of dust rippled out from Kroenig's position as his leg unit rocked back under recoil.

It gutted the A-grav, which jerked, spewing shrapnel and a strange grey goo from a massive exit point that punched out of its upper armour. The shrapnel was travelling so fast it triggered the hardshields, causing it to ricochet wildly all over the place, contained by protective shields that utterly failed to protect their owner.

The Spacer machine slowly drifted to the ground, the deadweight of it dragging Kroenig to his knees as he tried to release the hydraulic claw from the dead object.

His close-combat attachment had gouged an ugly furrow into the small craft, and now servos whined in protest as he tried to tug it out.

Kinny was impressed by how the Sergeant had got within the boundary of the shields to execute the machine, and hurried over to pull him away from the thing, which had now caught fire and proceeded to burn with a peculiar green flame.

The impact felt like being kicked in the back by a Touro, and the Private sprawled, limbs flailing as he landed cockpit down, monitor display filled by an extreme close-up of broken concrete.

The Mog scraped along the deck before coming to a halt near the Sergeant, who was still ripping chunks of metal away from the A-grav, trying to free his arm.

Kinny coughed, cancelled the alarms that screeched in his ears, and attempted to stand.

His shields were definitely gone, and blood trickled down his forehead for the second time in recent memory as he struggled to rise to his knees.

They snuck up on us too, he thought, cursing himself, *I should have been covering the rear.*

A shearing of metal signalled the Sergeant standing up, and the old man extended his leg hydraulics to shoot over Kinny with all his weapons at an unseen foe.

“Stay low,” he growled into the radio, to which Kinny responded with a grunt.

He managed to make it to one knee, and stayed there, having no room to manoeuvre further, being so close to Kroenig and the ruined A-grav that had now turned into an inferno of light, exotic chemicals turning the flames a myriad of colours.

Kinny could do nothing but watch as his Sergeant, silhouetted by the fire, unleashed everything he had on the enemy behind, sending 84mm HEAT and 25mm AP shells downrange as fast as he could.

An incoming shell, conventional in nature, slammed into the Sergeant and his shields crackled as he was lifted from his feet and thrown into the flames, a black cloud of smoke inhabiting the space where he just stood.

The blind panic had receded incredibly fast in the young trooper, and Kinny started to rise as soon as the Kroenig disappeared from sight.

He turned, painfully slowly, sensing that something was wrong in the grinding way his suit juddered, but he grit his teeth and pushed on anyway, determined to take up the slack and fight the off-worlder.

Another impact slammed into him mid turn, shearing off his left weapon arm and he spun, landing face down, in exactly the same position he was ten seconds ago, except now he had his arms pinned under him.

Kinny snarled in frustration, spittle spattering against his display, before glancing down to his internal temperature gauge. It rose at an alarming rate, and he could feel the heat inside the cockpit already.

He wriggled ineffectually to free his arms, and the powered gauntlets just scraped under his armoured bulk, as flames began to lick the edges of his external vision.

Kinny settled for a moment, at a loss at what to do, and simply said to himself,

“I’m on fire.”

Blake skidded down the rubble slope, stance wide, and centre of gravity low, weight and momentum shredding a path down the steep north face of the Necropolis. She found herself wishing that Eddy possessed a pair of arms, so she could balance herself in a superior fashion.

It, she reminded herself, is a machine – it balances itself.

Her little group had narrowly avoided the artillery fire that even now pounded the hillside they had previously fought upon, and she held hope that the other legs could keep up as she blazed a completely undisciplined trail down into the valley.

The newfound agility with which she could control her mech was exhilarating, and Blake could simply not understand why the practice of operating on a hundred percent neural load was frowned upon.

Eddy approached the bottom of the slope, a wonky streak of absolute devastation in her wake, and arrested her momentum with a jump. The heavy Touro slammed to the deck, making it shudder as leg hydraulics squealed under the stress.

She stood to her full height and turned her torso, training Eddy's guns back up the obvious path she had torn through the holy land, covering the descent of her subordinates.

The retreat had been the most overtly-wild action she had ever conducted in her life. If the combination of noise, dust, and the new linear feature that had been gouged into the hillside didn't get them noticed, then nothing would.

Blake chewed her lip impatiently as the remnants of her platoon, no, her entire company, made their way down the hill in single file. The Mogs would skid and bump a few feet, performing little hops to slow themselves down, letting their weight dig into the ground before starting again.

She looked at how far they had to go, and calculated that they would be down to her within thirty seconds.

Blake eyed the Spacer fortress warily, though it seemed to be ignoring them, and counted her remaining Mogs as they filed in.

It was bleak.

She attempted to figure out who was left by their body language alone, fancying that she could recognise them by their individual quirks by now.

Mirante led the way, always the professional, moving as close to prescribed arcs as possible, keeping good spacing, doing everything right. Behind her was Markovic, and his machine bounded and slid down the slope like an excited puppy. The veteran trooper seemed to be the least affected by the insane events of the previous hours, and she hoped that his attitude wouldn't become complacent. There were times to rush like the Hells were upon you, and times to focus, and he had to be able to recognise the difference.

You can talk. Hypocritical, much?

Lagging some way behind was another of Mirante's squad, one of the "triplets" as they had been known around base. Even fresher than Kinny, the three young men had been inseparable, being as they went through training in the same unit. It was unusual for so many men from a training platoon to stay together in an operational unit, and to be honest Blake had always found it difficult to tell them apart.

It chilled her slightly to think that two of the three were dead, and that she would somehow be condemning both of them by guessing which of the triplets was still alive, limping down the slope as she stood there, waiting. Blake decided to leave him anonymous for now.

Bringing up the rear was Braga. Like a miniature version of Blake, he moved aggressively and with confidence, throwing his Mog down the slope in a manner most would deem reckless, stopping every now and again to allow the triplet to make progress, while the older trooper covered their platoon's rear.

There was no sign of Machado, no sign of Kroenig, no sign of Kinny.

"1st Squad, this is Eddy, radio check." She sent on the command net.

Static.

"Rest up here for a few minutes," Blake sent to everybody over the squad net. "Get some water in you, re-org under Corporal Mirante."

A chorus of tired affirmatives, except Braga. Braga sounded pissed.

“Mirante, I want an ammo state. Also, where is Private Machado? I didn’t see him follow the Sergeant.”

Mirante gave her ammo state.

She also informed the Captain that Machado had died shortly after Kroenig and Kinny had left. He had been confused as to where to go, spying the pair race off up the hill, and had been caught in the first barrage as the platoon retreated around the hill.

Braga had seen him die. He was vowing to kill the pair of “traitors” as he now saw them, endlessly chanting a death oath in the old tongue.

Blake was only half listening, the Captain kept her eyes fixed on the slope, homing in on every movement like a hawk searching for mice.

There was still a hunter out there, her shadow. Armbruster would have survived the artillery. She was sure of it. Simply standing in place in the open, waiting to get shot, made her skin crawl.

She glanced at the fortress again, and it was in the process of unpacking some new hardware she had yet to see deployed. A multi-barrelled launcher extended from its upper hull, protruding from a hatch that sat flush against the plating. The barrels rotated swiftly, and the distortion below the grav plates intensified so that the ground underneath the mighty machine resembled nothing more than a blur.

This, Blake realised, was to counter the recoil.

The fortress shuddered as it launched projectiles over the hill, each barrel coughing in sequence, in the direction of the Corvid artillery. To Blake, it looked like a giant hissing cockroach giving birth to high-explosive larvae, and she was disgusted by it.

There was something abhorrent about the off-worlders, on some instinctual level that she didn’t want to put into words, and Blake would be glad to be away from them.

The Captain couldn’t see the effect on target, but the Spacer counter battery fire was short, just a couple of salvos, then it ceased.

Several clouds of smoke slowly mushroomed up, rising from the far side of the valley where the Corvids had sited their artillery.

The incoming from their positions ceased.

Blake glanced at her chronograph, five minutes had passed.

“Kroenig, this is Eddy, if you can hear me, proceed on mission. We will RV at Central command, out.”

She couldn't afford to wait any longer, Kroenig and Kinny had chosen to abandon the mission, and now she would abandon them in turn.

The objective came first.

“Okay,” Blake said, pausing unexpectedly to clear her throat.

She coughed and swallowed, then wiped her nose, feeling a tickle there.

Blood stained the back of her glove, and she stared.

“Okay,” she repeated on the squad net, checking her compass again.

“We'll proceed northwest as planned, we are still on point to reach Central by nightfall. I will lead, the rest of you just be ready to support in a contact. Acknowledge.”

Another chorus of affirmatives.

Blake turned her back on the Necropolis, and started to ascend the outer slope of the grey valley, squinting in the darkness of her command pit into the midday sun.

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SIXTEEN

Kinny squirmed as the heat rose, and he could feel the metal surfaces inside his cockpit begin to burn him. There was nowhere he could position himself to avoid touching something that hurt. His own jacksuit was flame retardant, but the damn zippers were metal themselves, and these were scalding him through his undershirt.

He had managed to pull his arms from the armoured gauntlets, so he could manoeuvre inside the cramped space somewhat, but he was lying face down, weight pulling against his harness straps, of which the buckles were also metal.

He managed to slide his arm down, and fumbled for the emergency eject lever.

It was strong enough to work even when the Mog was face down, powerful cockpit hydraulics were designed to create space for the driver to escape.

Except...

Except he couldn't find the lever.

A series of impacts rang loudly from his hull armour, and Kinny juddered violently inside the now useless machine. He barely noticed.

The air was getting hot now, and Kinny struggled to breath. Each lungful was like inhaling from a kettle spout and he did his best not to choke.

The cerebral jack was a white hot spear of agony, lancing into his skull as its metallic construction heated up inside the meat of his head, and Kinny used his other arm to wrench it out.

Gasping with relief at disconnection, Kinny opened his eyes as his hair began to smoke, and they immediately filled with tears, the moisture evaporating from their surface.

He squinted, searching down between his legs, eyes urgently darting about for the eject lever, coloured a luminous yellow in order to be visible in the mostly dark confines of the powersuit.

I will not scream, I will not scream, I will not scream.

There it was, resting against a thigh plate.

Kinny saw images of Bader's ruined face, jacksuit melted into flesh that looked like boiled ham, *I WILL NOT SCREAM.*

The lever had snapped off.

Then Kinny screamed.

He screamed, loud and hoarse, thrashing wildly, trying to kick out against the dead weight of his Mog, to no effect. He punched his display awkwardly in an outburst of pure frustration, which only succeeded in hurting his hand, and that only made him scream louder.

Every passing moment felt like a lifetime as the pain got worse. Kinny only stopped screaming when he couldn't breathe anymore. Instead it became a violent coughing – which he couldn't stop as every sucking breath made it worse – and every hacking movement left him gasping for air.

He wanted to black out, wanted it to end, but the pain kept him awake in that hateful blackened cocoon, and as Kinny smelled his own skin beginning to burn, he could imagine M-841 laughing at him, its malevolent mechanical voice mocking him, pleased that it had finally gotten him killed.

The medical kit! The thought popped into his mind at random, and he reached behind his head.

He couldn't free his rifle, not when he was inside the cockpit and it was racked behind him, no chance, but the medkit was small and situated behind his head, to the left.

He could overdose on morphine, and make the pain go away.

It suddenly became all he cared about, and he snaked his right arm up and around, ignoring the pain he felt through gloved fingers, as they closed

around the glowing metal tin of the medkit.

Pull it out, open it, inject, that's all it would take. A few moments of concentration and it would be over, he didn't have to suffer like Bader.

Then the cockpit opened.

The whole powersuit raised up a couple of feet as the hydraulic canopy and thigh plates forced themselves apart, exposing the ground beneath Kinny's Mongoose.

A rush of cold air, blessed by the Saints themselves, blew against Kinny's skin and he sucked it in, before his assault harness disengaged automatically, depositing him painfully onto the concrete.

"Move," Kroenig growled over external speakers, retracting a hand from the external eject lever on Kinny's Mog.

The Private scrambled on his hands and knees as Kroenig's D-99 suit roared, opening up with all its weapons.

If he thought they were loud before while protected inside his fighting machine, now Kinny was reduced to an uncomprehending mess by the aural assault, being no more than a few feet away from the big leg unit as it engaged the Spacer.

Thankfully, Kroenig only fired a short burst before crouching behind M-841, which took a cannon round in reply, losing another chunk of its chassis as the stricken machine was increasingly consumed by flame.

How long was I trapped? Kinny thought, barely hanging onto his sanity.

It felt like hours, but must have only been a few seconds – otherwise the Spacer would've finished him off.

The Private cowered between the two burning vehicles, nowhere to go in the alleyway, so he stayed down and cupped his hands over his ears and squeezed his eyes closed, willing it all to stop.

His skin felt red raw and tingled painfully against the comparatively cool breeze that wafted down the alley, despite the fires either side of him a few

yards away. It was something he never would've noticed before, and it scared him.

Kroenig stood as soon as the off-worlder finished firing, and using Kinny's dead Mog as a ramp, stepped up onto its slumped shoulders, before leaping, extending D-99's legs in an explosive jump that launched him through the air.

He collided with the Spacer craft, digging clawed toes into the upper glaciis while it sunk to the ground slowly. Finely-tuned grav plates whined a discordant note, unable to cope with the additional weight, as Kroenig pumped cannon fire into it at point blank range. Being careful to avoid the centre mass, he swept the muzzles of his cannons across the A-gravs guns, took chunks out of the grav plates, blew the optical bundle clean off and, using his saw, carved a jagged square hole into the top of the thing.

The Sergeant pulled the scrapped metal away from his improvised hatch and flung it away, where it clanged along the road for a few feet.

Without turning, his voice grated from his external speakers once more, sounding like two great stones being forced over one another.

“Kinny, get up here.”

No censures for compromising their mission, no rebukes for nearly getting them both killed, and stalling Kroenig's plan to take out the floating fortress. The Sergeant had simply responded, adapting to the new data as it was presented.

The Private didn't want to move.

He had heard of it before, a strange phenomenon, one that could accumulate very rapidly and bring on “the fear” in a driver with little warning.

He had disconnection shock. If a Mog driver is violently disconnected in battle, for whatever reason, his normality is shifted into reality too fast, and the external stimulus can be too much.

A driver can easily become terrified of everything now that his skin is not rolled steel, and his senses are not filtered.

Kinny had it bad.

He thought he was hallucinating when he saw M-841 shift, then stand up on its own accord, upper torso still burning furiously.

It got to its feet, open cockpit yawning like some monstrous mouth coming to eat him, then continued to rise, leaving the ground completely.

Kinny was stunned, then alarmed, when the thing moved towards him, and he scrambled to the wall of the alleyway and wrapped his arms around his knees.

Kroenig threw the ruined Mog, and it bowled into the burning A-grav, clearing a path for Kinny to move back the way they had entered the alleyway.

Kroenig's machine loomed over Kinny, olive paint scratched and burnt away in patches, hundreds of impact marks of various sizes visible on its scarred chassis.

The cyclopean optical array focused on him, and the senior NCO spoke, more softly this time.

“Are you good?”

Kinny looked up at him, skin still red and in agony, nerve endings misfiring at both the damage from the heat and the disconnection shock, and shook his head.

“Everything hurts.”

Kroenig didn't respond for a moment, prone as he was to going absolutely still when he was thinking, then he gave a noncommittal grunt of some kind. D-99's multitude of weapons raised into the stowed position, and Kroenig reached down with his armoured gauntlets. He took hold of Kinny's hands, and pulled him to his feet, almost gently, before picking him up under the shoulders and carried him across to where the Spacer vehicle still lay with its crew compartment intact.

Kroenig set Kinny down, where he wobbled unsteadily, before gaining his balance.

“Listen,” Kroenig said softly, placing a gauntlet on Kinny’s shoulder to steady him, “I need you to get up there, and drag that foreign bastard out of his cockpit.”

Kinny looked into the optical array, the words bringing him back to his senses somewhat.

He nodded. “Now we need to be quick, because no matter what happens, that big one won’t ignore us forever, and I want to question this fucker before I decide what to do next. Besides, we don’t know how many more of the things are lurking out there. Do you understand?”

Kinny swallowed as adrenaline dumped from his system, and cold reality sunk back in. The Sergeant seemed to have calmed himself down, and was willing to think about what to do next.

Kinny hoped he could persuade him to get off the damn hill.

“Roger that Sarge.”

“Where’s your rifle?” The NCO enquired.

Kinny looked past him, to the twisted pile of burning scrap that used to be his Mog.

Kroenig’s cockpit popped open with a hiss of depressurisation, and the Sergeant’s stern visage appeared. He twisted in his suit, unencumbered by harness straps, and grabbed his carbine, tossing it to Kinny.

“Use mine,” he said as his canopy closed down again, “There’s one in the chamber, now get up there.”

Kinny stared at the carbine in his hands like it was an alien for a moment, before remembering what to do, and checked the safety before he threw the sling over his head.

The Private found a wealth of handholds about the shattered disc of the A-grav’s plate setup, and hauled himself up to meet his first Spacer.

The QRF squad crested the valley edge, then dropped down the far side, back into the murk of the city proper. Here, as the unit slowly picked its way through rubble-filled streets, the population seemed to be trying to carry on with things as normal, as though last night's chaos had not occurred.

Those that chose no side, the ones that did not care either way who won the fight – just that they survived it – moved cautiously through the nearly deserted streets, giving Captain Blake's squad a wide berth. They looked like sorry little ants down there, the kind that nip you if you get too close, and she had to restrain herself from opening up on them. She could end their lives with a thought, but forced herself to look at them, really see them, and remind herself of why she was willing to endure all of the pain that came with a command.

It was for the citizens, these people, those like Blake's family back in District 1, whom she hadn't heard from in days. All of these poor people had families too, and they had not raised arms against the Great Leader. They were loyal subjects, some of them probably weren't even aware that he was dead, and were to be protected at all costs.

That is why she had to carry on.

That, and how good it felt to destroy the enemy.

Confused by conflicting thoughts, Blake shook her head. A drop of blood fell from her nose, the dark liquid shaken free by the rhythmic pounding of her footsteps on concrete and the motion of her skull, to land in a slowly expanding patch on her jacksuit.

The shaking motion brought on a sudden and violent pain, the kind that feels as though hot poker are being inserted into your temples, as your head is slowly crushed by invisible pressure.

So intense was the feeling that it caused Blake to vomit, her whole body contorting as one unit to void the contents of her stomach in one motion.

Her eyes watered as blood and bile purged from her system, and Eddy shuddered reactively, as it coated Blake's jacksuit as a lumpy, stinking stream of liquid.

The Captain spat once as she blinked rapidly to clear her vision, hardly noticing the bitter taste as she regained focus, piercing the fog of pain with a barely-human force of will.

She did not bother to wipe her mouth. A string of puke and spittle hung from her chin as the warrior scanned her feeds for the enemy.

There was little sign of the Corvids here.

Blake did a quick estimate, calculating numbers of enemies present at both District HQ and at the Necropolis, and was glad. There could only be so many rebel soldiers out here, away from Central District. There simply weren't enough important objectives to bother with.

Most of the enemy forces had probably been drawn to the centre, like moths to a flame the previous night, and that was where making her way through would get tough.

That and the gates.

Despite being down, the gates were choke points, and strategically-critical ones at that. Looking through her rear monitor at the pitifully small force that followed, Blake quietly dreaded the thought of running into a gate that was under separatist control.

Blake felt a sudden thrill of excitement at the thought of running into a gate that was under separatist control.

It pulsed through her cerebral jack and spread throughout her body in a wave, causing adrenaline to spike.

Woah, she thought, shaking her head once, *was that me, or the machine?*

"Boss, eyes right," said Mirante, jerking Blake from her twisted notion. She rotated her upper chassis and looked, taking in the scene of devastation.

If there ever was a sizeable Corvid presence in this sector, then chances are it lay dead on the ground in the killing fields to their three o'clock.

An area once occupied by several blocks of the typical habitation stacks that characterised poorer sectors throughout the city was now home to hundreds of corpses and shattered machines, laying still, frozen in death amidst piles of rubble that were homes to many just the night before.

Flies were swarming around the bodies of infantrymen and vehicle crew, and Blake tried not to zoom in on any of the faces. She wasn't sure how it would make her feel in her present state.

A road ran through the centre of the ruined blocks, terminating at a gated compound where concrete walls were breached in several places.

Four orbital guns stood in a loose, square battery formation. Three of the macro calibre barrels stood a hundred feet high, pointing at an invisible threat somewhere in the cloudless blue.

The fourth barrel was black and broken, snapped in the middle, the fallen piece lying upon a section of wall that had been obliterated by the weight.

A single Mog stood sentry at the gate, overlooking the field of dead as the QRF squad filed past, its body slowly turning to watch them as they continued on their way.

He was flanked by the wreckage of two Army Touros that had been unceremoniously dragged aside by heavy machinery to keep the gate clear.

Peering over the walls from a distance, Blake could see the scene inside wasn't much better, with many buildings reduced to smouldering ruin, and very few troops moving about inside.

Were they loyalist, or separatist? There was simply no way to tell.

The battle to defend the guns must've been fierce.

"Can we stop here boss?" Mirante asked, once Blake's determined gait had made her intentions all too clear. "Maybe recharge shields, scrounge some ammo?"

Markovic waved at the lonely Mog, who, looking as uncertain as one could inside a powersuit, raised his arm awkwardly to wave back.

“I don’t think they have anything for us, Mirante,” the Captain replied, hating to admit to herself that she was beginning to feel dizzy through lack of blood. “It’s imperative that we move on, make best speed to Central.”

“Roger that.” Mirante said, looking at the gate begrudgingly.

“Are you sure boss?” Markovic piped up, in a sing-song voice, “That guy looks like he could use a friend.”

“You’re just sore because I won’t let you be the big spoon anymore.” Mirante said half-heartedly, engaging in mild banter seemingly on remote.

“You think he would be down to cuddle?” Markovic enquired a bit too earnestly.

Braga growled something, everybody laughed.

Blake felt an uncomfortable spike in her anger, and she wanted to bark a reprimand, to chastise the harmless antics of her troops. Eddy shuddered imperceptibly in her stride and it fell away again, forgotten immediately.

Blake didn’t respond to the soldier’s remarks, she just kept walking, wondering when in the Hells they would run into some more targets.

She could feel that bastard Armbruster out there. A ghost, always just out of sight, lingering on the peripheries.

Blake could feel him watching her, planning his attack.

“Keep your eyes peeled on the flanks,” she reminded her squad, just in case.

One of the orbital guns boomed. Its muzzle flash created a crazed contrast all about for a split second. The intense brightness of a small star in one direction, forming long shadows that loomed ominously, jumping from every object like they were running away from the centre of the discharge.

Blake closed her eyes as the shockwave washed over them, letting herself wallow in the intensity of the back-blast, the deafening report overcoming audio filters and punching into her skull as though lightning had struck her mind.

“Martim’s beard!” Mirante shouted breathlessly on comms, “They could’ve warned us!”

Eddy craned her torso up, and watched as the cannon shell, easily the size of a main battle tank, went hypersonic, a white blur that speared through the atmosphere and was gone.

Another drop fell, increasing the stain on the chest of her jacksuit.

She didn’t bother to wipe her nose.

Blake stared at the sky for a few seconds, hopeful of more macro cannon fire, then slowly looked back down to earth, disappointed that the spectacle was over. Returning her attention to the task at hand, Blake moved on, quietly worried that she may be growing too attuned to the ebb and flow of combat, too attached to it.

It was advantageous, she told herself, only half believing it. She needed that edge to win against the Hunter when he dared show himself again.

“Where are you?” she asked on the radio, using the channel that Armbruster had last used to speak on.

Nobody replied.

Kinny dropped the man-thing onto the floor and gagged, doing his best not to vomit.

The smell was overpowering, a combination of burnt plastic, human waste and rotting flesh, and Kinny could barely believe that something could survive inside that environment.

The young Private had found that he could not just simply jump inside the A-grav and drag the crew out. Upon looking down into Kroenig’s

improvised turret hatch, he was greeted by the sight of a viscous, clear grey goo. It was lit from within by various displays, which he guessed were diagnostics. Kinny made out a form within this slop, skinny and weak-looking like a malnourished child, floating in the gelatinous mass.

The creature looked up, craning a head covered in bizarre headgear, to regard Kinny through a black visor.

It offered no resistance when he held his breath and reached in, submerging his head, arms and shoulders in the goop to grab hold of the pilot.

It had been ice cold, and took the air from Kinny's lungs as he caught hold of scrawny limbs and pulled, putting his back into it to yank the pilot out of the liquid.

The pair of them came free with a sucking noise that sounded like a plunger on a clogged drain. Kinny threw the pilot over his shoulder, dry heaving all the way as Kroenig led them into a building further downslope.

Luckily, the Spacer fortress had decided to unleash some unsaintly ordnance at the Corvid artillery, and the pair of Loyalists had used this opportunity to hightail it out of there with their prisoner.

It was the crypt of some former noble – not anybody that Kinny could recognise by his eroded likeness carved above the entrance – but the doorway was large enough to accommodate D-99, and Kroenig apologised to the dead colonist before pushing his way inside.

Kinny looked down at the thing now as it writhed on the floor, clutching at its head gear with slim, all too human hands.

It was as far removed from the danger it represented as an A-grav as he could imagine.

And it nearly killed me, Kinny reminded himself.

The Spacer was wearing some cross between a helmet and goggle setup, probably to allow it to see better in the grey goo, and nothing else – assuming that the unhealthy pallor of the thing was skin and not some advanced environment suit.

Kinny had closed the crypt door behind them, and the Sergeant had positioned his powersuit with its headlamps on, bathing the scene in a harsh light.

Kroenig knelt down, out of his suit, and assisted the creature in removing its headgear.

The man-thing looked at them with fiercely intelligent eyes. They were bright blue – an unusual colour on Novo Solo – set deep within a noble-looking face. His undeniably handsome features were at odds with the cruelty behind his gaze.

He looked like he was about to say something, before he broke into a coughing fit. Each convulsion wracked his entire body, and the off-worlder brought up gobbets of the grey stuff, which he spat on the floor.

A low rumbling filled the crypt, occasionally rising in volume, accompanied by distant thuds that shook dust from the ceiling.

Kroenig gently lifted him off the floor as though he weighed nothing, and propped him in the seated position against a stone wall, and the man-creature began to shiver. The temperature, despite being several degrees colder than outside, was orders of magnitude warmer than the interior of the A-grav, and Kinny wondered if there was something wrong with him.

“I don’t think we’re going to be able to torture him,” he said aloud, and the volume of his voiced surprised him.

Kroenig nodded silently, and the Spacer drew in great, slow breathes, a look of fierce determination on his sculpted face.

“Can you understand me?” The Sergeant rumbled. The man nodded.

“What’s wrong with you? Does the grey stuff keep you alive?”

When the enemy spoke, the voice was quiet and obviously strained, as though it rarely had cause to use it.

“The interface gel creates a pressurised atmosphere, as well as feeding us, protecting us, and allowing us to control our weapons.”

The accent was peculiar, and Kinny wondered where he had heard it before, before recognition struck.

The radio message, he thought, eyes widening, the contract.

“Protect you from what?” Kroenig enquired, looking unconvinced.

The man, closed his eyes, took several laboured breathes, then replied.

“Hard vacuum and kinetic shock, among other things, it acts as an absorption layer.” he coughed up another gobbet of the stuff, and wiped his mouth with a long, delicate hand. “I will be fine as soon as I eject the remainder from my lungs.”

Kinny couldn't help letting out an “Oh”, as though that answer had been obvious all along, and he was just dumb for not knowing it.

He could barely imagine the technological base required for constructing a liquid that could be breathed by humans.

He had so many questions. This man had been out there, had seen things of the greater universe. Kinny could barely imagine what knowledge lay inside his head.

“Are all people like you, I mean, out there, off this planet?”

Kroenig looked at him in annoyance, but said nothing, while the off-worlder let out a hacking sound.

Kinny thought he might be dying, but realised that the Spacer was laughing at him.

“No,” he said with a vehement shake of the head, his dark veins pulsing and appearance exaggerated by the harsh light, “most of the cattle races look like you.” He looked through Kinny for a moment, before adding, “They could only hope to aspire to the level of insight we have achieved by leaving the ground behind.”

Kroenig growled, unimpressed.

“Why are you here, what do you want with us?”

The off-worlder looked confused.

“You? Why would I want anything to do with you?”

“The bodies,” Kroenig said dangerously restrained anger in his tone, and Kinny was reminded of how the Sergeant had murdered civilians himself in the not-so-distant past.

They were all civilians before they took up arms against us.

“They were just some local peasants that took shelter in our drop zone. We tidied them up as part of our mission preparations.”

“Well, why are you here then?” Kinny asked, when the man made it clear he was going to elaborate no further.

“We are here for the same reason as you.” Blank stares all round. “We have been contracted by the Solo Nobre Concern to secure assets and disrupt infrastructure, in order to lay the groundwork for the corporate takeover.”

The off-worlder switched between Kroenig, who looked angry, and Kinny, who looked worried and evidently unsure of what was going on.

“Well, why are you here? Are you not contractors?”

Kroenig stiffened, spine straightening without conscious effort as he responded.

“We serve in the Novo Exército do Povo, the Army of the Great Leader, Saints rest his soul. We will bleed your army dry before we let you take our planet from us.”

The man broke into fits of laughter again, obviously gaining strength, physiology rapidly becoming used to the new environment it found itself in.

Kroenig lashed out, too fast for Kinny to follow, and punched the roughhewn stone beside the off-worlder’s head. The Sergeant’s black alloy fist actually cracked the stone.

This stopped the man from laughing.

“I can crack your skull like a lizard egg, I suggest you start taking this seriously, before I decide you’re not worth the effort and kill you.”

The Spacer looked at him quietly, ribs visible as his chest rose and fell, breathing more laboured than it seemed just a moment ago.

“Is that really necessary?” He said, in a tone often used by adults making a point to an unruly child. “I apologise, I should not have offended your mighty army, but if you’re not here for the contract, then why are we even talking? Just set your terms, and we can arrange my handover to the proper authorities.”

“What?” Kroenig asked, shaking his head involuntarily.

“The ransom,” the Spacer explained. “Whatever it is you peasants want. I imagine a flight off-world would seem appealing to your sort, yes? My kind are not savages like you disgusting ground dwellers. We have honour. You will be rewarded handsomely for my safe return.”

Now he was talking as though explaining some tedious procedure to a complete idiot.

The soldiers glanced at each other, Kinny’s face betrayed a massive conflict of emotions, as he processed the full possibilities of a flight off of Novo Solo in a heartbeat, and begrudgingly dismissed them.

Kroenig just looked angry.

“Intel,” he growled, “I’ll ask you a series of questions, and you’ll answer them.” Kroenig fixed the off-worlder with a stare.

“If I think you’re bullshitting me, I will break every bone in your body. Your death does not have to come quickly.”

To prove his point, the artificial arm reached out and encompassed a skinny grey limb in its servo assisted grip.

A sharp tug, the sound of something snapping wetly, and the Spacer looked down at his ruined arm.

He scrutinised it as though it was a tremendously fascinating puzzle, one which he didn't have time to figure out right at that moment.

“Is this a debilitating injury for you people? My cerebral makeup is adapted to cope with great deals of shock.”

Then he smiled serenely, a false smile, like how an instructor may smile at a particularly poor recruit before delivering some horrific fact that results in a harsh punishment.

Kinny had seen Kroenig wear the same smile many a time before today.

“You do your race no favours, Mr. metal arm. You are just reinforcing all the opinions I already held about your people, and your cultural deficiencies.” The smile intensified.

“You also, might I add, have no say in your perceived performance against our army. Simply because you have yet to meet our army.”

Kroenig's stony expression did not change.

“I've killed you people today, you die just fine.”

The enemy chuckled dismissively.

“You snuff out a few individuals from an isolated squad in that poor man's infantry bot, and think yourself worthy of us? We are merely a scouting party, preparing a landing site for a force of many thousands. You will be swept away, and the survivors will be sold to the SNC as slaves.”

Kroenig assimilated this information, nodding his head.

The background rumbling had gotten louder. It sounded like a busy construction site out there.

“When?”

The Spacer appeared to think about this seriously. It took him nearly a whole minute to muster an appropriate response.

Finally he replied, appearing to be totally honest in his peculiarly blunt way.

“The first drop is scheduled for tonight, soon after dark rotation begins – providing, of course, that the landscaping bot has cleared enough space. The first wave will consist of a squadron-size element. That is a hundred android infantry, four heavy units, plus fire support weapons like mine. Each force will, of course, bring with it its own base building capabilities, and our territorial expansion will increase in speed exponentially after initial landings.” A pause.

“In my rough assessment, in my modest capacity as a mere scout warrior, I predict total city control within four cycles.”

“And if the landscaping is not completed?” Kinny asked, loudly now, as the background noise was making it hard to hear. There was a definite constant vibration now, getting stronger too, Kinny could feel it through his boots.

“The invasion will be delayed, of course.”

“Why are you telling us this?” Kroenig said, concern somehow apparent in his growling cadence. “Considering we have nothing to threaten you with. You obviously don’t fear pain, but surely you should feel fear of betraying your own side. Their punishments must be severe. You’re being too helpful, and personally I think you’re full of shit.”

The off-worlder looked confused, possibly unfamiliar with the figure of speech.

“I have no reason to lie to you.”

Kinny was also sceptical.

“I can think of a few,” he said, “operational security being the main one. Why would you tell us troop numbers, timings and all that? You aren’t making any sense.”

The Spacer laughed again, and Kinny could tell that every time he did, Kroenig’s anger boiled more intensely.

He stopped after a particularly hard cackle, wiping spittle from his mouth with a forearm that flopped limply, shattered bone threatening to push

through the skin as he removed the flecks of spit from around his face with delicate movements.

Kinny found it most unsettling.

“Ask yourself, ground crawler,” he began, and the two soldiers had to lean in close to hear him, “if you were a god, and you told the ants of your plan to steal their home, would you care how the ants prepared to defeat you?”

Kroenig’s eyes flashed, and he growled through gritted teeth.

“You’re pretty fucking sure of yourself for somebody that got his arse kicked.”

He waved his uninjured arm dismissively as he replied.

“Yes yes, aggressive posturing is all very good, but I’m growing rather bored of all this. If you could just set your ransom terms clearly, we can move ahead and get this unpleasant business behind us.”

“I’ve had enough of this,” Kroenig stated, matter of fact, before his fist pistoned into the Spacer’s face. He pulled his punch just enough to knock the man out without killing him, before he turned to the Private.

“The prick was wasting our time,” Kroenig explained, wiping his metal hand against grimy overalls, “running interference to stop us taking out the big one.”

A fresh round of explosions rocked the building violently, sounding as though they were impacting further up the hill.

The background rumbling ceased, and revealed a roar, emitted from a mass of human throats, from what direction it was hard to tell.

“Take a look,” Kroenig ordered simply, gesturing with a nod to the door, as he hurriedly re-embarked D-99, and doused the headlights.

Suddenly plunged into darkness, Kinny pushed the muzzle of his carbine gently against the old door of the crypt.

He managed to push it open a crack, and blinked as a beam of sunlight speared in. Through his narrow field of view, Kinny saw trucks and tanks roll past, supported by junker Mogs, and scores of dismounted Corvid infantry.

The natives were determined to strike the off-worlders, who could be aliens for all they knew, from the face of their world.

Kinny desperately wanted to go outside and help them, but knew it was futile.

“How does it look?” Kroenig’s metallic voice rasped from the external speaker of D-99.

The Sergeant had all his weapons pointed at the door. No doubt he would attempt to fight all the Corvids alone if given the chance.

“Not good Sarge,” Kinny replied, a knot in his gut. He had no armour now, and wouldn’t have fancied his chances even if he did, not with the numbers presently passing mere yards from their hiding place.

“There’s thousands of them out there.”

Kroenig didn’t reply straight away, just went absolutely still, as he was prone to doing whilst in thought.

Eventually he said,

“Okay. I think we can let this play out, see if the rebels can’t do our job for us.” Kinny released a breath he didn’t realise he had been holding, and closed the door, welcoming the darkness once more.

“But as soon as we get a window of opportunity, we take it.”

Kinny nodded in the dark, as the sound of a fresh barrage of weapons fire echoed above them.

Eddy charged. Blake didn’t remember thinking about it, but she was suddenly at the gate, HMG spraying rounds at targets around her feet,

punching bloody holes into men and women that were too small and nimble to crush.

They let out terrified shrieks and yells as she run amok along their barricade, a hasty collection of ruined vehicles and rubble dragged into a line in an effort to control access to and from the sector.

She kicked a tank, and it skidded some twenty feet along the floor, chassis buckled beyond repair, grinding an unlucky man under it who faced the wrong way at the wrong time.

The only evidence of his existence was a red smear, left in the grooves gouged along the road by the scraping of tank tracks.

Another junker fired, missing Eddy's leg by no more than a few inches as she raised her foot high, and brought the whole of the mech's weight down on it.

It felt like stamping on cockroaches, as one was prone to do backs in barracks.

“What the Hells is she doing?”

Markovic asked on the squad net, voice pitched high in alarm.

The commander had just run off without warning, and the small squad of Mogs had to sprint to catch up, approaching the checkpoint as an antique-looking Mog flew through the air, breaking apart around its driver mid-flight. The poor soul's body ragdolled, boneless, flailing at speed, before becoming an unrecognisable splatter against the pockmarked wall of the sector highway.

“Survivors coming our way,” puffed Braga, attempting to bring his weapons to bear mid stride.

“Hold fire,” ordered Mirante, before adding, “We don't even know if they're the enemy.”

She was right, in the chaos it was impossible to tell which the faction the gate guardians fought for. They were dirty and bedraggled, their scared

faces and battered looking machinery could've belonged to anybody after the events of the preceding hours.

Two men hobbled away from the gate at best speed, supporting a third, injured man between them. The injured man appeared to be covered in blood from head to toe, and his would-be rescuers simply froze as the Mogs approached, utterly powerless to influence fate in the face of imminent death.

“Move along, now.” Mirante barked over external speakers, and the men moved awkwardly past, before disappearing down the first side alley they could find.

Mirante could practically feel Braga's eyes boring into the back of her head, and pre-empted him over the net.

“They've suffered enough, don't you think?”

He didn't respond.

A single gun truck tried to flee the blockade as Mirante and her boys approached, driving in an erratic zigzag pattern, gunner on the flat bed holding onto his HMG for dear life as they went.

The Corporal couldn't help but wonder where they thought they could go, as no doubt the other end of the highway was also guarded, possibly by their own forces, but who knew?

The point became moot. Ana heard the clunk of Eddy's autoloader as they neared the huge machine, switching shell types to meet the threat.

The 105mm smoothbore boomed, and a canister shell airburst a few yards short of the truck. The air filled with flechettes that turned the gunner into mist, and shredded the truck, and the surrounding area into useless junk. The lifeless machine skidded to a halt, perforated engine pouring black smoke as Eddy clunked again, and a huge brass shell case clanged against concrete in front of them.

“On me, men,” Blake said aloud over her external speakers, rather than broadcasting on the radio. There was a manic edge to her voice, like she

wouldn't be able to stop if she wanted to. "We can't afford to stop now, must maintain momentum. Keep your eyes peeled for that traitorous bastard."

And she was off, already targeting the blockade at the other end of the highway.

"Wait, boss, are you okay?"

Eddy slowed, and Blake transmitted to Mirante on a private channel.

"I feel tired," she said, voice utterly calm now, as though it was a different person speaking "I think it's the blood loss." Then she was gone again.

Blood loss? Corporal Mirante had no idea she was injured. It must have happened when the mech fell.

Mirante and her men clambered over what remained of the blockade, taking care not to step on the fresh corpses and dismembered body parts there. The squad leader increased her gain and observed the far end of the highway, where a cluster of vehicles were already scrambling to get through a tiny opening, forced into a lethal chokepoint by their own defensive measures.

"What's wrong with her?" Braga said, breathing a bit too heavily for Mirante's liking. The stoic soldier sounded exhausted, and she wondered how long he could keep it up. "I mean, I appreciate this new attitude, but anyone else notice she's thrown tactics out the window?"

"I think she's hurt."

"How bad?"

"Unknown," Mirante said, shaking her head, "but it might be interfering with her cerebral link, affecting her behaviour. We'll have to keep an eye on her, stop her from totally losing it."

"How we going to do that?" from Markovic, as he squeezed between two smashed-up cars. "You got a qualification in cyborg psychology we don't know about?"

"Noise down dickhead, I haven't figured it out yet."

“Be sure to tell the rest of us when you do, Ana, because my vote is with ‘Run the hell away’.”

She shook her head, suppressing an inappropriate smile.

“Well it’s a good thing the Army isn’t a damn democracy then, ain’t it? Now hurry up before we lose the crazy bitch.”

Once Markovic was through, bringing up the rear once again, Mirante broke into a run, feeling the deep aching tiredness in her muscles as they pumped ceaselessly, crying out for rest.

Losing the boss would mean death. That’s all that mattered. They were low on ammo and shields, and were big enough targets to attract far too much attention. They could attempt to survive if they ditched the Mogs, but then they would have to deal with a public that knew what a jacksuit was, and what they represented.

She didn’t imagine stealing clothes would go down well with the civilians around here, and taking them from dead bodies was too horrible to think about.

Nope, Mirante thought as she attempted to push the fatigue from her mind while trying to keep the rampaging machine visible up front, the mission is still our best chance. The boss is still our best chance.

“Martim give us strength,” she mumbled to herself, as one foot fell after the other.

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SEVENTEEN

Armbruster followed the diminished platoon, all that remained of the once-mighty forces of Sector 78, laid low by attrition and his own machinations, and was concerned.

The Captain was talking to him.

Or rather she was talking at him, her sentences no more than a confused jumble of aggressive words, thrown together in a poor attempt to express whatever the woman was going through.

She had switched one of her radios over to the Scout/Hunter patrol frequency, evidently because she thought it wouldn't be monitored by the rest of her forces, and he listened quietly as she rambled.

Armbruster didn't respond, there was nothing he could really say, so instead he allowed the sounds to wash over him as he moved, slowly and carefully, through the sectors as the QRF platoon, and their unwelcome tag along, neared their objective.

He had ascertained that they were heading towards Central command, which was the only logical reason for leaving a well-defended District HQ, as far as he could tell.

He had been enjoying the game up until now, Armbruster reflected as he blinked the sweat from his eyes, had enjoyed being the hunter that stalked on the peripheries, picking and choosing victims at his own leisurely pace.

But then she had sped up.

Armbruster quickly realised what had caused this sudden change in strategy, the newfound reckless disregard for security, placing speed and aggression above all other priorities.

She was stuck in there, wounded and possibly delusional, being overwhelmed by the warlike computations of a Touro's neural inload, unable to do more than think her way to her objective.

He had brought it on himself, he realised with a curse, when he had wounded the former commander in a fit of impatience.

He wasn't complaining though, it was merely another layer of challenge that had been dropped in his lap, and for that he could never be less than grateful.

This war that was blossoming, one he never thought he would live to see. This gift, this beautiful thing, was just a playground of opportunity for those inclined to take advantage of it.

Armbruster had never been happier.

Oh, he was sure that – if the Saints really were up there looking down on all the pitiful residents of Novo Solo – even now Martim and his companions were planning a special level of the Hells just for Hugh Armbruster, but it was still worth it.

When his time came, he was sure that the Saints would understand. After all, it was Martim that said,

“It is better to be great at something for one day than to be mediocre for a lifetime.”

And nothing expressed that sentiment to Armbruster more than excelling at warfare, regardless of who you were killing.

It was difficult, and required great concentration on the Hunter's part to manage to keep up with the reduced unit's speed. He couldn't directly follow them, and had to rely on quick decisions, coupled with his mech's superior speed, to weave a convoluted path through the Sectors – all the while remaining unseen. Half the time he was operating on instinct alone, guessing and feeling the route that his quarry would take, only breaking cover now and again to confirm that he was still on their tail.

The Buckmaster class was a hit and run predator. It lacked the mass and power to plunge headfirst into the enemy like a heavy mech could, so he had to be careful to avoid everything the best he could, as he could not afford to waste the ammunition, nor shield strength in a dozen minor skirmishes.

The Captain had no such issues, being blessed with inches of composite armour as well as tremendously efficient shielding, and he occasionally glimpsed her move with frightening speed and skill, engaging multiple targets with her guns, whilst simultaneously ploughing through weaker opponents with little thought for her own safety.

In a way, he thought, as Eddy crushed a cluster of gun trucks that had the misfortune of racing around a street corner and directly into stomping range.

In a way, I'm responsible for all their deaths too, as one truck detonated under an irresistible clawed foot, roiling fireball surrounding the dense plating of the heavy, diverting away as an iridescent blue flicker warded the flames aside.

Blake muttered through Armbruster's headset, interrupting her perfect recital of an auto loader's technical characteristics to hurl a threat at him, before switching channels and loudly ordering her troops to keep an eye out for the traitor.

As well as concern, he felt a twisted sense of pride at having turned his commander into an unwitting engine of murder.

That said, some part of her was driving them surely to their objective. Blake was straight as an arrow, in a way that became quite terrifying to behold, the more he thought about it.

A lone man stepped from a shanty-like building, constructed from scrap as Armbruster skirted his way through a bombed-out area in order to avoid line of sight with the QRF platoon. They were currently savaging a small unit who had the bad luck to be trying to secure a gate from intrusion.

The man stared up in wonder, and then attempted to scream as the Hunter slipped from his silent concentration to grind him into a paste.

That's it, he thought, as the rest of the man's companions came out to see what the commotion was about. It was a young family if Armbruster had to guess, judging by their appearance.

It's not just focusing her brutal aspect, as a short burst of 8mm chopped them down, and Armbruster cringed at the volume of the sound.

Her connection to Eddy must be amplifying everything, causing not just her killing urge, but all her desires to be realised to their fullest extent.

Armbruster hurried out of the area, lest anything with big guns had heard his little altercation, and emerged back onto the highway as the platoon rampaged away into the next sector.

Whatever she was doing heading to Central, it must be important. It sent a chill up Armbruster's spine, causing the Hunter to shudder in sympathy.

He would have to put an end to this stage of the game in order to drag the war out. It had been fun to stalk his former comrades, but he wasn't ready to stop just yet. They had no part to play in the greater scheme of things – of that he was sure.

So, he thought, as Blake unleashed a mumbling diatribe about the detrimental effects of encouraging fungal harvests in impoverished sectors, *whenever the opportunity presents itself, I'll terminate them.*

"I don't want to go out there." Kinny said firmly, blocking the powersuit's path.

The sounds of battle had quietened down somewhat in the last few minutes. Either everybody was dead, or the action had moved on, Kinny couldn't tell, but Kroenig's "not-a-Mog" had suddenly lurched into action, overlapping sounds of servos and hydraulics causing Kinny to jump in the gloom.

The metal armoured form of Kroenig stood there, looming over Kinny's scrawny frame like an iron golem from legend, illuminated only by weak slivers of light that seeped through the cracks in the ancient crypt door. For a moment, the Private thought that D-99 was going to crush him on the spot, an obstacle to be disposed of, before continuing on the Sergeant's futile personal war without further comment.

“Why?” The suit rumbled.

“You’re going to get us killed.” Kinny replied at speed. Kroenig grunted.

“I thought we had moved past this,” he began. “You were quickly becoming a decent soldier-”

“No, you’re not listening,” Kinny interrupted, gesticulating a bit too wildly.

“I know you’re stuck in this whole ‘psycho-death machine’ mentality, but you need to stop and think about it.” The words rattled out of him like machine gun fire, almost too fast for his mind to keep up, frightened as he was that Kroenig might strike him down for being a traitor.

“The enemy desecrated the holiest site on the entire planet, Private, and must be punished. What is there to think about?”

Kinny wanted to bash his head against the wall.

“It’s nonsense. It’s all made up to control people like us. The Saints were just people, like us. The monuments are just stone. It’s not worth dying for.”

Any second now. The Private felt light-headed, a rush of exhilaration joined his words as they flowed. He simply didn’t care anymore.

“And if we go out there, we will die. No amount of skill or experience will change that. Either that big thing will kill us, or the Corvids will kill us, and everything up till now will have been pointless.” He laughed as he shook his head, what had they even been doing up till now? “We haven’t even achieved anything except the murder of our own people, and I want to be alive long enough to at least try and make amends for that.” He straightened fully, and set his jaw. “I won’t be a part of this anymore.”

This is it, he was certain that the Sergeant would smash him, like he intended to smash the Spacer without a second thought, and leave both of their lifeless bodies to fester in the corner.

But it would be worth it. He hadn’t agreed to anything that he had been caught up with in the preceding hours, and Kinny had had enough.

He breathed out hard, and waited for death.

He thought of Bader, and Carlos, and of a childhood dominated by shared hardship that had shaped their ideas for the future.

“You don’t understand.” The words grated out through the speaker, and for the first time Kroenig sounded something less than an unstoppable force of warfare.

Kinny looked up at him, and furrowed his brow.

“I’ve been you. I had all the bright ideas. I’ve taken part in a revolution. All the killing, and pain, and dying, it’s all I know. We have to stop it before it all happens again.”

“It’s already happening,” Ranulph said quietly.

Kroenig popped his suit, and stepped down. He took a perch on the small access step that jutted from the inner calf of D-99’s metal shell.

The Sergeant winced slightly as he sat down, rubbing the small of his back with his flesh and blood hand. He had never looked more like an old man.

“Do you think that this corporation – the SNC or whatever they call themselves – will be better than the Great Leader?” He pointed an artificial arm at the motionless Spacer.

“Do you think that they will treat you better than the Great Leader? We are all just assets to these people. Something to be used up and thrown away. They come with promises of rewards if we damage the system, and these separatists they jump on it, bending it to their will with exciting words about change and freedom.” Kinny had never heard the Sergeant speak with such passion about any topic before, and he was slightly alarmed at his sudden willingness to engage on the subject.

“But you know what happens?” He asked the younger man. Kinny shook his head.

“Nothing,” he said. “The names change, people make new flags, and new slogans, then it all dies down and we’re back where we started. The higher-ups are still up there, we’re still down here, and life grinds on, except that now all your friends are dead.”

Kroenig looked to the floor, and shook his head. "I'm fighting against this revolution, because revolution changes nothing."

Kinny frowned. *When had he made that decision? When had it changed from simply quashing a civil disturbance, to stopping a full blown revolution?*

Kinny had always been invested, ironically in the other side, but had Kroenig always been so similarly devoted, beyond military programming?

Kinny supposed that the veteran would recognise the signs of genuine unrest more readily than most, even before they had become blatantly obvious over the last day.

"But surely, using that logic, why bother to fight at all?" The young man asked, still sure that he was pushing his luck with the volatile senior NCO, but unwilling to abandon his logic.

Kroenig did his thing where he turned into a statue, an occasional blink the only thing that alluded to life as the grizzled veteran sunk deep into thought.

When Kinny felt as though enough time had passed that he wasn't going to get an answer, he carried on. "Why not just stand aside and let it play out? Why do the bidding of the Great Leader if it doesn't matter who's in charge? Surely you should let our generation find things out for ourselves."

Time passed, and the Sergeant was so still that Kinny was wondering if he had fallen asleep, so he slid down the door, collapsing into a surprisingly uncomfortable sitting position, grateful that the imminent danger had passed.

The battle still raged in the distance. It sounded like the fighting had moved to the far side of the hill now, as it was mostly a series of rumbles and shaking masonry, felt rather than heard through the ground, channelled through the structure of the crypt.

Ranulph Kinny was tired.

"You know what, I don't know." Kroenig said suddenly.

He went on, talking in a halting manner as though unsure, as though this exact moment was the first time he had been challenged in years, and he had forgotten how to respond to new things.

Kinny remembered how the Sergeant had unflinchingly opened fire on “enemy” citizens, and shivered. It had come to him far easier than an earnest conversation should have.

“You do things in combat that don’t make any sense. None of it does, you know that now yourself. Your actions conflict with the thoughts in your head, but you carry on anyway because your primal instincts take over. You understand on some subconscious level what it takes to stop yourself from dying.”

He took a deep breath, like it was physically hard for him to continue.

“I’ve been in the Army for over thirty years. I didn’t have a choice. No man can be principled for that long and remain sane. The system breaks you down until you accept it, and I just became an extension of their policies.”

Kinny could barely stop his jaw from dropping.

“I know you young people like to talk in metaphors, being soft on the inside as you are.” He paused again, and rubbed his head with his real hand. “It’s like, I think, it’s like a dust storm. The insanity of the system, I mean. You can either be the man caught up in it, resisting, holding onto your morals and ideals with all your strength, until you succumb, then it strips the flesh from your bones and consumes you entirely.” Kroenig shuffled, clearly uncomfortable with speaking like this.

“Or you can be the dust.”

Corvids, Mirante thought as she panted heavily, these lot are definitely Corvids, thank the Saints.

How strange it was to be thankful for the presence of the enemy in these circumstances, Mirante reflected in a detached manner as her Commander tore through them like a tornado.

They had been roving through the city all day, sometimes with caution, but more often than not the pace had been more of a mad dash, interspersed with desperate gun battles that were over nearly as soon as they began.

Braga and the others were flagging, slowly but surely, the hellish pace was sapping them of the will to go on, but Mirante had managed to push through the pain of her muscles, and lapse into a sort of half trance, allowing her mind to steer her actions where her body could no longer keep up.

It was working to some degree, and she could only assume that the others had figured out the same technique, as the net was quiet, every individual lost in their own little world, utterly lacking situational awareness, focused on simply putting their feet forward via mental impulses.

It was in one of these now frequent lapses of awareness that Mirante had lost her Captain.

She had lost sight of Eddy a few minutes before, in the high rises of Sector...23 was it? Or District 2?

She couldn't tell. Ana had lost track of where they were, but she could at least track the heavy mech by the devastation left in its wake.

Broken bodies, crushed and burning tanks, gun trucks, even several sorry-looking Touro substitutes had met a grisly end at the guns and feet of the preternaturally dangerous pilot.

“Any Central call sign, this is Eddy, over.” Captain Blake said with surprising clarity on the command net, from somewhere up ahead.

“This is Central Ops, Authenticate, Eddy.”

The Captain reeled off her authentication code perfectly, a unique code assigned to specific units that changed on a daily basis. The codes were only given to sector commanders at their monthly centralised briefs, and usually while separated from other commanders.

There was always an element of doubt, especially on today more than any other, but an individual manning the radio inside Central command could be

pretty certain of who they were talking to if they received the correct code of the day.

There was a pause on the line, then the voice came back.

“Code confirmed, go ahead Eddy.”

“My call sign is about two miles out of Sector 1, making our final approach.”

“Roger that Eddy, is the package still intact, over?”

“I’m looking at it now,” a pause, “It’s still good to go, over.”

The voice on the other end seemed relieved, a tinge of happiness crept into his tone, breaking an air of detached professionalism.

“This is Ops, that’s good to hear Eddy. We were beginning to wonder if you were coming.”

Blake left the line open for several seconds before responding, and Mirante was sure she could hear panting in the background, and a half mumbled, half growled command, accompanied by the flat bangs of HMG fire.

“We have had several delays en-route, but we’re still here Ops.”

“Roger that Eddy, do you have an ETA?”

The pause was longer this time, and Mirante increased the gain on her audio, to try and triangulate the sound of gunfire outside and find the Captain’s position.

“This is Eddy, ETA forty five minutes, approaching from,” another pause, probably as she consulted her map boards, “gate seven.”

“Ops, roger all, ETA figures forty five, gate seven. We’ll have the welcome party waiting, out.” And the net was silent once more.

Ana approached a tight T-junction, hemmed in on both side by buildings that were overgrown with a multitude of extensions and attachments, such as spiderlike antenna arrays and bulky air cooling units that hummed as

they dutifully cooled rooms with no occupants, having been deserted in near panic the night before.

Suspended walkways crisscrossed the road several stories high, and all manner of additional substructures had fallen to the ground as Eddy stormed through, smashing all and sundry in her path.

“Right or left?” Mirante wondered out loud, and as if in response, the burning wreck of an attack bike sailed through the air from the left junction, only to plough into the second story of a well-to-do looking apartment building, shattering glass and setting the insides alight.

The enemy here is cleaner, Ana noted, their machines newer, being closer to Central as they were, and better off as a result. It was testament to just how deep the feelings of resentment ran, when even the middle classes had risen up against Great Leader.

“Left it is then.”

They didn't have any more idea how to use the weapons properly though, wherever they had sourced them from, and Mirante figured that District 2 had been spared much of the fighting that swept across Solo Nobre like a plague the night before.

That had changed drastically within the last twenty minutes, as Eddy approached the latest gate checkpoint with deliberate caution. She did not respond to hails, and the Corvids showed their lack of experience through their hesitation to fire upon an unknown mech relentlessly marching on their position.

By the time they realised that Blake's machine was not friendly it was too late, and she was upon them, using her bulk more effectively than projectiles, stamping and kicking about her in a brutal melee, firing the occasional cannon shell at dangerously close range.

It was a cunning move on Blake's part, and Mirante had to respect the Captain's ability to maintain at least some grip on reality as she walked, quite calmly towards the blockade.

This one had been much more heavily-armed than the previous sector entrances they had encountered. As powerful as it was, the Touro probably would've been taken down if Blake had sprinted at it, firing like a lunatic.

She had managed to assess the situation, gambled that they wouldn't kill her, and then erupted in a flurry of violence that the enemy were not prepared for.

The Captain had become frighteningly efficient at killing.

Mirante rounded the corner, and there was Eddy, far away, facing them.

Why is she looking at us, the thought came, but Mirante recognised her mistake before it had even fully formed, and she froze, feeling of relief immediately replaced by a cold dread that threatened to rigidly root her to the spot.

The Mech wasn't far away, it was much closer than that, and it was half the size of a Touro.

“Shit! Take cover!” Her words were drowned out by a hypersonic crack that blew out every surviving window within two hundred yards, and Mirante blinked hard, bright contrails searing into her vision as her display screen overloaded momentarily.

Markovic was reduced to a smear on the road by the tungsten slug before he even had time to register what was going on, and all three surviving Mogs opened up on the Hunter with everything they had, tracking it as the light mech loped across the road, straight into a side junction.

Tracer and cannon fire followed it, too slow to hit the nimble machine, instead chewing up concrete and glass as the combined firepower of three Mogs missed their target.

“Armbruster!” Mirante screamed in frustration, a guttural howl of anguish at the death of another of her friends.

“Let's kill the fucker!” Braga roared, passing Mirante with thudding steps, weapon barrels smoking.

The third triplet followed just on his shoulder, eager to avenge the death of Markovic, confident in the ability of their 84mm cannons to take out the traitor machine.

It was sound thinking, the lanky hunter was nowhere near as formidable as a Touro, but then again, Armbruster's strength had never come from unit tonnage, or even his potent railgun.

It came from unexpected movement. In combat exercises he was always where you didn't expect, luring you in, coolly taking advantage of his enemy's bloodlust.

"Braga, wait-," but the Hunter popped right back around that same corner, and fired in the same motion.

Braga ceased to exist from the waist up, upper carapace transformed into a molten spear by the super dense railgun round, one which fragmented and splattered across the triplet's machine as white hot spalling, biting deep into his frontal armour.

The other Mog instinctively dropped to the ground, a bad idea, as Mog drivers could not rise rapidly when sprawled on their chests, and just lay there, hoping to wait out the incoming attack.

Armbruster came towards Mirante slowly, firing a long, continuous burst from his auxiliary machinegun at her, the rapid rate of fire sounding tinny and weak compared to the autocannons and smoothbore gun she had come accustomed to.

It was only an 8mm, designed for taking on infantry, and Mirante heard the cracks and pings of dozens of rounds impacting without effect on her armour. She aimed her weapons quickly, bringing them down, having still been stowed after her flat out sprint, and squeezed the triggers hard enough to turn her knuckles white.

Nothing happened.

She blinked, released, and pulled the triggers hard again.

Again, nothing.

“I was aiming for your weapons, your trigger mechanisms, optics, whatever, really.” Armbruster said.

Mirante snarled, her trigger mech’s had been shot to shit, linkages severed, made useless. No matter, she could still see, and she wouldn’t go down without a fight.

She made to charge, would try and tackle the comparatively skinny leg of the Buckmaster class, bring it down and rip that scum out of it with her gauntlets. She only managed two pounding steps before Armbruster lurched, in that alarming gait that seemed too fast for a machine of that size, and stopped above the stricken Mog to her front, one clawed foot raised threateningly above it.

“We’ll have none of that, Corporal Mirante. Unless you want this young fellow’s grey matter, and all his other matter spread across the concrete here.”

Mirante stopped in her tracks, unwilling to sacrifice her last living comrade in a last ditch attempt to bring the traitor down.

She would not lower herself.

“We’ll kill you,” she said through gritted teeth, over external speakers for emphasis.

“Oh really?” Armbruster replied, feigning alarm. “Because you’ve done such a good job so far.”

She laughed at him, a humourless bark that sounded like an angry dog was trapped inside her suit.

“You have nowhere to re-arm, nowhere to charge shields. You’ll run out of ammo, power, whatever comes first, then no matter what you do, someone like me is going to rip you out of that cockpit and have your head on a spike.”

“Wow, I never thought the stoic Corporal Mirante had capacity for such brutality. You have my approval, little Mog driver.”

“Nothing less than a traitor deserves, specialist.”

“Yeah, you’re boring me now,” Armbruster said, no longer willing to verbally spar with the NCO. “I only compromised my position for one reason.”

He lowered his foot gently, just short of the triplet that even now was managing to struggle to his feet.

Mirante noted that there was a slight wobble in the Scout mech’s stance as the foot came down, and questioned how long the traitor had been awake.

Was he as tired as them? More so, even? Maybe it had slowed him down somewhat. Maybe there was still a chance.

To her, it reeked of desperation to come out of hiding like that. Something she could exploit, if given time.

Either way, it would soon become a moot point, as Mirante would shortly discover.

“So,” Armbruster began, sounding almost bored, “where is that Commander of ours?”

His chassis rotated about erratically, detecting something that Mirante couldn’t hear with her inferior detection gear.

“And what,” yelled the traitor, clearly exasperated with being interrupted, “is that damn noise?”

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EIGHTEEN

They talked for hours. They talked about growing up, it turned out that Kroenig also grew up in the Deads, outside of the influence of the industrial sectors, in abject poverty. He had a similar upbringing, fleeting images of parental figures, and lasting impressions of a small group of tight-knit friends, getting into trouble and doing what they could to get by.

Kinny was surprised, then thought himself stupid to have never connected the dots before.

It was strange. If he and the Sergeant weren't separated by a couple of generations, they would probably have been friends.

They talked about conscription into the Army, finding the regime distasteful, full of ideas and hope for the future, the pride of being selected for Mongoose training, the soul-crushing reality of routine operations.

After a time, Kinny began to wonder how many others in the base whom he'd just seen as faceless oppressors were actually individuals with their own stories, and not just mindless slaves to the machine.

The hierarchy had all just been faces to him, permanently grim, yet interchangeable fixtures that symbolised the oppressive regime of the Leader. Because Kinny refused to call the dead bastard Great anymore.

He'd never get to know those stories, those people were all dead.

Later, Kroenig told him about D-99. The peculiar machine was one of the last of its kind: a true battle machine that came down with the colony ships, not retrofitted from an industrial lifting vehicle.

Kinny ran his hand over the pitted armour in the dark, thinking of how many soldiers had driven it over the years, and wondered if their neural links had left any residue of their being behind.

The techs and mechanics always said that every Mongoose had its own personality, Kinny's own M-841 was a malicious beast that he never

trusted, despite telling himself that it was just a mechanical suit.

Running a gloved palm over the old and battered plate of D-99, really looking at it for the first time, he realised that it was as important as the monuments that Kroenig coveted so dearly, if not more so.

He told the Sergeant this, to which the older man responded,

“You can have it, it’s just a weapon,” with a shrug.

Kinny squinted, trying to make out the older man’s face in the receding beam of light that seeped through the door, searching for any sign of mockery. “I’m serious,” he continued, when Kinny hadn’t replied, “I can’t go back, and someone needs to take D-99 back into service.”

Kinny shook his head slightly.

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Defying orders,” Kroenig explained, “deserting my post. I’ve done it before, during the Troubles.” He shifted position, then got up to stretch his legs. “So you see, whoever wins this war, I lose. Corvids win, I’m a war criminal, Loyalists win, I’m a deserter. I’ll be executed, I can’t go back.”

“But I deserted with you!”

Kroenig shrugged again,

“You were just following your Sergeant, backing up a superior. You had no idea what I was doing in the moment. The worst you’ll get is a reprimand. Not me. I have a history of pulling this shit.”

Kinny rubbed his head, then it dawned on him.

“That’s why you’re still a Sergeant, isn’t it?”

He could just make out Kroenig nodding his head in the gloom.

“You going tell me the story then, Sergeant?”

Kroenig let out a huff, then sat back down.

“Okay, but I’m only telling you because I firmly believe we’re going to die soon, alright?” Kinny laughed, then later wondered if he was actually joking or not.

“It was near the end of the Troubles.”

“We were making good progress against the Loyalist units, mostly made up of crusty old guys with a lifetime of traditions and no actual experience, versus us young lunatics and our wild ideas of independence.”

“They never stood a chance really, and it was just a matter of time before we drove them from the city, or wiped the bastards out.”

“But, going back a bit, before I joined the Army, I had a girlfriend back in the Deads.”

Even now, after their frankly disturbing bonding conversations, Kinny still had difficulty imagining the Sergeant being kind to another human being.

“She left me when I got conscripted. Can’t blame her really, but she broke my heart, and I never lost feelings for Emma. We remained in contact via the message system over the years, as friends.” He stopped and breathed hard, and it occurred to Kinny that the old soldier had probably never told his story to anybody before.

“Eventually she got engaged to a factory worker, and she moved to an industrial sector just before the troubles broke out.”

“Initially it was okay, the fighting didn’t really touch where she lived, but as the war dragged on, we shepherded the enemy forces closer and closer to the outer sectors, intending to drive them out entirely.”

Kinny already felt like he knew how this story would end, but he just nodded his head occasionally, and continued to listen.

“We were about to launch a major offensive, designed to shatter the cohesion of the Loyalist units in a final push, then split off and mop up the remains and secure victory. Our axis of advance took us through the sector directly next to the one Emma lived in, but I couldn’t warn her because the message system was disabled to enforce operational security.”

He stopped and swallowed hard, evidently this was bringing things to the surface that he had not confronted in a long time.

“The heavies went in first. They took the first line of resistance, and utterly smashed the Loyalists.

My Mog unit was to echelon through them and continue the advance, but this was where we learned that the remnants of an enemy Mongoose regiment had scattered into the adjacent Sector.”

“Where Emma lived.” Kinny said quietly.

“Where Emma lived,” Kroenig confirmed gravely. “I ran. I took D-99 and made a beeline for Emma’s habitation stack, and found the rogue unit wrecking the whole place, scorching the earth as they went.”

Kroenig went very silent, and Kinny shifted uncomfortably, unsure of what to say.

“You couldn’t save her.” He spoke the words softly, not wanting to upset the Sergeant, but wanting to know her fate regardless.

“Oh no, I saved her alright,” he replied, “it was just how I saved her that did the damage.”

Kinny had seen the Sergeant fight enough to know what he meant. But he explained anyway.

“I get angry sometimes, and that was definitely one of those times.”

“I ripped them apart. I smashed their chassis, tore drivers from their harnesses, sawed their heads off, crushed torsos, burned flesh. I wanted to drown the city in their blood that day, and Emma saw all of it.”

“After it was over, I popped my canopy, I wanted to tell her I had come to save her, but the look she gave me was pure terror.”

Kroenig went still as a statue, before letting out a breath he’d been holding.

“She didn’t even recognise me. I tried to explain, but her fiancé started screaming at me, so I just dropped canopy and left.”

“Most of my Squad died in that assault, and I wasn’t there with them. Understandably, the Army viewed their deaths as my fault. I don’t feel guilt, and I don’t regret my choice, I willingly traded their lives for hers. And she broke my heart again.”

Kinny absorbed it all, tried to imagine what it must’ve looked like, the Donkey, that awful claw and saw blade, and what they can do to a man.

“What happened when you turned yourself in?” Kinny asked, though it didn’t really matter, as the result was this damaged old relic sat in front of him.

“The war ended shortly after that assault. The Army needed jack-compatible drivers, and couldn’t afford to execute me. Instead, I was given a lifetime promotion ban, and a social downgrade to ‘zero asset’ status.”

Kinny had heard of the term when growing up. Being reduced to a zero asset was effectively the civilian equivalent of execution, as it made it illegal for prospective employers to actually give you work.

“You were given a life sentence of service.” Kroenig nodded awkwardly at this, as though he had never thought of it in those terms.

“So you see, I deserved everything I got, and if I go back, I’m dead.”

He patted the thigh of D-99 with his metal hand, and it clanged dully.

“That’s why you get to return this. The old beast is Army property.”

Kinny laughed, there probably wouldn’t be an Army left after another couple of days of this chaos.

Whatever came next, whether it was the corporation or a new local government, whoever piloted D-99 in the future would not be a soldier of the NPA.

“What are you going to do instead?” Kinny enquired, wasting no time in climbing up into the confines of his new war machine, as Kroenig did a chamber check of his carbine and rolled his shoulders.

“Well, Ranulph,” The former Sergeant said, a new levity to his growling voice that Kinny had never heard before. “I think I’m going to walk up that hill, and kill every fucking thing I find.”

Kinny nodded, and pulled his canopy into place with a clack of metal.

Kroenig wanted to continue speaking. He was about to tell Kinny that he was proud of his young charge, for not once mentioning the Spacer’s offer of a flight off-world. Regardless of whatever side he fell on, the Private was invested in his world, and would not abandon it, wouldn’t take the easy way out.

He was about to put all of this into words, when Kinny’s voice grated from D-99’s external speaker.

“Sergeant,” he said with an exaggerated point of a gauntlet, “He’s awake.”

Kroenig looked to the wall, where the intruder sat. This physical embodiment of an invasion from a hostile, almost alien force sat up, and regarded him with those cruel blue eyes.

“Are you happy now that’s out of your system?” He sneered in his unusual accent. “Are you primitives ready to make a deal now?”

Kroenig moved.

The wall exploded. Fifty feet of the damn thing, a mixture of concrete, rebar and glass. It was like the habitation block itself had grown sick of Armbruster’s nonsense, and decided to punch him.

To Mirante it looked like a giant claymore going off, the huge directional blast completely engulfing the Scout leg unit in tons of masonry and broken furniture, rendered unrecognisable as it mixed in with the grey mess that poured over the traitor, and she just stared in disbelief.

The triplet scrambled backwards, and narrowly avoided being swept away by the deluge as a wave of dust rolled over him, obscuring the Mog from view.

Mirante just stared at the mess as the dust began to settle, open-mouthed, as the triplet ran out of the cloud and promptly collided with her.

Metal clashed, and Mirante was nearly tipped off of her feet. She grasped the hysterical young man and yelled into his face, urging that he calmed down.

The Private did so, and the powerful Corporal released his chassis and pushed him away with armoured gauntlets, as she watched what emerged from the settling debris.

There, covered from top to bottom in a thick layer of grey powder, shedding rubble with every movement like a snake sheds scales, was Eddy.

The heavy mech had run through the habitation block. It was brute genius, Mirante realised, practically the only way to sneak up on the hunter without his sensor equipment picking up the Touro's considerable mass.

Then she realised that Blake had used them as bait.

She stood now, all forty feet of her looming, chassis tilted down to observe the pitiful vision of the traitor's mech, half-buried in concrete, skinny legs askew, mangled and pointing to the sky.

Eddy's long cannons barrel angled down, until it was no more than an inch away from Armbruster's glaxis.

Her auto loader clunked loudly, as the smaller leg's hardshield flickered out of existence, and the traitor's buckled railgun tried to traverse into a position where he could engage the new threat.

Blake broadcast one word over her external speakers, somehow carrying the rage of an entire unit betrayed and murdered by one of their own.

“DIE.”

She fired. The muzzle flash obscured the mech completely, and kicked all powder from Eddy's frame in one almighty thump, deafening report cutting out Mirante's audio as the concussion shook her guts even inside her suit.

The armour piercing, fin-stabilised, self-discarding sabot did not even have time to discard its slug casing before it punched through Armbruster's darkened sanctuary, pulping his torso and pushing it straight through the rear armour of his dead machine, before embedding his munched carcass a dozen feet into the ground.

When her hearing came back online, Mirante realised that Blake was speaking. Her voice came out slowly, deliberately pronouncing every syllable so as to not make any mistakes.

“Corporal Mirante. Corporal Mirante. I'm sorry. Corporal Mirante.”

“Yeah boss. I'm here.”

There was a long pause, before the Captain switched from her external speaker to radio. The transmission seemed to be suffering from interference, as though that damn off-world jamming had started up again.

“I think I'm dying, Corporal. You should see the blood in here. It's everywhere, I must've lost nearly all of it. Oh Ana, I'm sorry.”

“Shut up boss, you're not going anywhere. We still need to get you to Central command.”

Blake did not answer.

Mirante took a deep breath, made a conscious effort to stand up straight as she could, and turned to her last remaining trooper.

If the boss died now, she would either tip over again, or just stand still, either way Mirante did not relish the prospect of popping her canopy to go and retrieve the black box from her command pit.

She had to take action, right now, before the moment passed.

“Private, I'll take the lead, cover our rear, and we'll escort the Captain to the objective. Confirm.”

“Roger that Corporal.” The triplet said without complaint.

She felt guilty that she couldn't tell which one he was.

“You with me boss?”

“I think so, Corporal. We need to get to Central.”

“I know,” Mirante replied, striding past the heavy mech, with a glance at her compass. “Just follow me, we’ll be fine Edwina.”

And with no ammo, no shields and no real clue where she was, Ana Mirante led the survivors of Sector 78 towards their final goal.

“Thank you for the offer of a ransom, but on behalf of Great Leader and all his armed forces, Saints rest his soul, we must respectfully decline.”

Kroenig said the words with such force, such finality, that the Spacer’s eyes met his, and grew wide.

He had just enough time to realise what was about to happen, and his scrawny arms, one broken and flopping uselessly, rose to protect his face as fate caught up to him. Kroenig’s black prosthetic shot out like lightning, crushing the off-worlder’s skull against the unyielding stone of the crypt with a sharp crack of impact, ending him in an instant.

It did indeed look like a lizard’s egg being squished, Kinny observed silently.

Without pausing to even clean the gore from his fist, Kroenig pushed the door of the crypt open slowly with the muzzle of his carbine.

He smoothly checked his arcs, weapon tucked in tight, body and head moving as a single unit, both eyes open, just above the weapon sights as he scanned for threats.

He cleared the doorway quickly, and Kinny stomped out after him, checking himself so he didn’t accidentally break into a run.

D-99 was a different beast to the cantankerous old M-841. The Private felt no resistance through the jack, no tingling of the fingers or ghosts on the display screen, he simply thought, and it reacted. He understood now, how Kroenig had operated all those years without an assault harness securing

him in place as the large powersuit rotated on the spot, panning about with guns up.

It didn't fight him, this machine, like it knew on some level that it was designed for warfare, and was totally comfortable with the fact.

He had to suppress a childish grin.

This was what he always imagined it to feel like piloting a Mog, not that travesty of cobbled together crap the Army issued out, but this smoothly operating killer.

It would make a fine addition to the Corvid arsenal.

Fingers hovered over triggers as Kinny swept gun barrels across the terrain, noting in the failing light that all was still.

Smoke spewed from countless wreckages of vehicles upslope, mingled with thousands of dead, bodies butchered and burst by guns meant for taking on armoured vehicles. In the failing light, Kinny noted how the Spacer casualties were few and far between. There was the odd A-grav, and a strange assortment of robotic-looking infantry units that were definitely not local spread about among the dead.

He was glad of his filters, and wondered how Kroenig was dealing with the inevitable horrific smells, mixed odours of ozone, burnt cordite, and flesh laid open by high-powered weaponry.

He knew that corpses voided their bowels shortly after death, and never wished to experience that particular smell again.

Kroenig probably didn't even notice.

"It looks clear," the former Sergeant sub-vocalised, and Kinny's systems picked up the sound, automatically amplifying it perfectly.

He increased audio gain as he replied, straining his ears for something, anything that might warn of any enemy out there. It did not seem likely that the two forces had wiped each other out.

"There's no rumbling," Kinny said over speakers, as quietly as he could.

“Maybe the floating fortress has been taken out.”

Kroenig replied, his customary growl in place.

“I intend to find out.”

Kinny shook his head inside the powersuit. The old geezer was truly insane.

“Are you really going to go up there?” Kroenig turned to face him, and a smirk crept onto his face.

“Of course. What, you think because we had a nice chat, that I can undo thirty years of experience? You separatists are vermin, and I’ll kill every one of you if I can.”

Kinny took a tone of mock offence.

“Hey, I never said I was going to run off and join them now.”

Kroenig patted Kinny’s carapace, and turned back up the hill.

“No, of course you won’t. You have your orders, Private.” And then the man laughed at the absurdity of the situation.

Kinny turned to look down the hill, catching the last rays of light as the sun dipped below the horizon.

The city sprawled in all direction below them, lights began to turn on across all the sectors, slowly lighting up Kinny’s lifelong home as he watched.

He thought that it was beautiful from up here, when all you could see was the orderly spacing of the sectors, neatly arranged and quiet, as though there was no fighting going on down there, no death, no poverty, no hunger or suffering.

From up there on the hill, he could see why the original colonists had put such value in the place, and claimed it for their own, rather than let the corporations take over.

But that was then, he told himself, frowning at his mind’s attempt to undermine his beliefs with simple sentimentality.

And this is now.

“Martim’s beard!” Kinny blurted, as synchronised movement suddenly lurched into life across every sector he could see.

Every gate, perfectly in time, rose into position without ceremony, isolating every sector from its neighbour, instantly making every Corvid’s, every Spacer’s job considerably harder.

“Kroenig, look at that. They did it!” And he turned to look at his Sergeant, but there was nobody there.

Kinny took it in. They had succeeded, the Loyalist mission had been successful, and it hadn’t depended on him or Kroenig to get it done.

Their impact could not be quantified, but Kinny did not presume his impact on events had been any more than minimal.

He was just a man, and now he was alone – free to pursue whatever goals he wanted.

Kinny turned his radio on, gave a token check to any Loyalist units, but that damn interference was back, and he got no reply.

He decided to leave the thing on. It would give him something to listen to as he went about his work, now he had nobody else to rely on for the first time in his life.

He did not like the silence.

“I think I’m going to go find my brother,” Ranulph Kinny said to nobody at all, then started to descend the hill, one well-oiled, mechanical step at a time, as a familiar message began to play.

“Welcome Brigador. Great Leader is dead. Solo Nobre must fall. Here is your contract...”

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AFTER

Blake blinked, slowly, and attempted to sit up. She regretted it instantly, as the pain in her head felt as though a procession of Touros were dancing on her skull.

A wave of nausea swept through her body, and she did her best to avoid throwing up as her whole body tingled with disconnection shock.

Wait, I'm disconnected, she thought, and a momentary pang of panic rattled through her body, as her eyes darted about, searching for displays and readouts.

The only one was the small screen belonging to a machine that was hooked up via medical diagnostic jack, attached to a wire that led directly to the back of her head, and showed all of her vital signs to anybody who cared to look.

She looked down to her body – her real body, she was somewhat disappointed to discover. Blake saw that she was wearing a disposable paper hospital gown that itched against her bare skin.

The wound in her arm had been dressed properly, and hurt like the Hells, and her other arm was hooked up to a drip that fed fluids into her system, and it was then that she realised she had no idea how she had come to be inside a medical ward.

“Ah, you’re awake.” The voice startled her, and she looked across to where a tall, well-groomed staff officer sat in a chair beside her hospital bed.

“That’s good, the medic said it wouldn’t be long.”

“Where are my men?” Blake asked, her voice small, “How did I get here?”

“You walked in,” the officer stated simply, “and your two surviving soldiers are in the next ward.” He looked down to a small unit mounted to his belt, pushed a button on it, and spoke softly into a small headset discreetly mounted on his cranium.

“They’ll be here shortly,” he continued after his message was finished.

“I won’t mess around, as time is short. The assassination plot took out most of our upper echelons of command, and we’re only just now managing to consolidate after yesterday’s attacks. The separatists have already recommenced their assault, as of sun down, and these off-worlders are going to be nothing but trouble. You’re one of our few proven combat commanders, as evidenced by your impressive efforts to bring the gate system back online, and as such you are receiving a promotion to Colonel, effective immediately.”

Blake stared, wide-eyed, taking in the information.

“Acting Leader Dawson will wish to brief you in person, so don’t dawdle in here. You will be expected to discharge yourself as soon as it becomes safe to do so. We do have a war to fight, after all.”

Blake didn’t know what to say, it was too much. She hadn’t even had time to properly process the loss of her unit. All those men and women, and then the frantic battles that came after, the emotions were surely to come crashing down like a tidal wave soon enough.

But now, there was no time for that.

“Okay,” she said, “I’ll be out as soon as I can.”

The officer stood up, and leant forward, extending the soft hand of a man who hadn’t piloted a mech in years, which Blake gripped numbly with a calloused palm.

“Congratulations, Colonel Blake.” Then he turned and left without further comment, nodding to the two people coming the other way.

Corporal Mirante and the young private entered,

Collins, his name is Collins! she thought as she recognised the tired face, and stood still next to her bed.

The young man looked like he was dead on his feet, and swayed slightly in his fresh jacksuit. Mirante looked as though the recent events had

absolutely no effect on her at all. She looked fresh, both had showered and changed, probably eaten, and Mirante wore a grim expression, but otherwise looked ready to get straight back out there.

“Did you drag me out of my command pit?” The Colonel asked, addressing Mirante without preamble.

She nodded.

“Yes boss, as soon as we got here. You were sat in a mess of your own blood and vomit,” the formidable NCO paused, and her façade momentarily cracked with her voice, “I thought you were dead.”

Blake considered this.

“I probably would be if not for your efforts, for which you have my thanks.” The new Colonel sat in silence for a minute, unsure whether to broach the subject of her recent behaviour, and the actions that came as a result of it.

In the end, Mirante made the decision for her.

“You used us as bait.” The tall woman stated bluntly.

“Yes, I did.” Blake replied, “I was weakening, getting reckless. I had to find a way to lure Armbruster out before I lost the ability to kill him.”

“So you let him think you were going nuts?”

Blake nodded.

“It was only partially an act. I think a full neural inload does something to your brain, damages you somehow,” she trailed off as she met Mirante’s gaze. There was a quiet fury there. “But that’s not important now.”

“You got lots of us killed out there,” the Corporal said sternly, but without menace, “But, you’re also the reason any of us are still left alive.” The woman was experiencing some internal struggle, and Blake was content to let her. But she would not apologise for the deaths she had caused, the mission was more important than any of them.

“We can’t change anything,” Blake assured her, making her stance on the matter clear, unwilling to show weakness at this crucial point. “It’s done.”

“I know,” Mirante surprised her by saying, “and I know I couldn’t do your job, Colonel.” And she left it that.

Blake knew that the NCO was strong, and she would just suck it up like everything else the world had thrown at them recently.

“So you heard then,” Blake said, “about my promotion.” Bought in blood, she had wanted to say, but these things were not to be dwelt upon.

Not now.

“Of course we did,” Ana replied matter of fact, “Your new Sergeant Major needs to know everything about you.”

Blake smiled, but it felt inappropriate. She wanted to congratulate the former Corporal, but that didn’t seem right either.

“I and Corporal Collins will be instrumental in the organisation of your new regiment.” She patted the Colonel on her uninjured arm. Blake noted the informality, and did not mind it at all. “I’ll leave you to rest. We need to be ready to deploy within the day, and it’s going to be a nightmare organising the veterans of a dozen sectors into an elite leg unit.”

Blake nodded at the news, acting as though nothing could surprise her now.

“I shall be ready in a couple of hours,” she said, as the two soldiers turned to leave, “and I expect a full brief when I arrive.”

“Roger that boss.” Mirante said without turning, raising a hand in acknowledgement as Collins held the door open for her.

“And don’t dawdle,” Blake added, her voice confident, one used to being obeyed, “We’ve got a war to fight.”

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About the Author

A lifetime gamer and avid reader of science fiction, Brad Buckmaster joined the British Army at 16. He spent 11 years in the infantry serving in roles such as reconnaissance (green army and covert) and as a section commander on operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

He left in 2011 to pursue a career in maritime security, guarding commercial shipping against the threat of Somalian piracy throughout the high risk area.

After 3 years of this mundane but well paid work, Brad decided to use his savings to support him while he tried to follow his childhood passion for writing books.

Recently, he joined the Army Reserves and is a gunner in a heavy armour regiment.

After self publishing a couple of novellas on Amazon, he was approached by the Stellar Jockeys team to write the book you see before you now.

Brad hopes you enjoy it.

If you want to talk to Brad, or keep up to date on future writing, you can like him on Facebook:

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