

NECRON

Part II



Fortunate Son

By Oliver Strong

Necron (part 2)

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Chapter One

The Necron hung in orbit off Tau Ceti E, a hot planet just within the habitable zone. Its hard and cracked surface whipped up a thick atmosphere shielding colonists from Tau Ceti's glow.

Volcanic explosions, visible from orbit, threw forth mighty rock and hot stone as war might cast forth men to faraway lands. The Necron's blinding engines, captured those who could not run to safe harbour, who could not flee to a better life ... because for whatever reason they had already passed away, beyond the veil of death and into a new existence aboard the S.S. Necron.

A faster than light carrier pigeon burst into view, announcing itself in a plume of white light before employing the star in breaking manoeuvres, crashing out of faster than light, into near light then sub light, shifting behind the sun to emerge on the other side before coming to a halt beside the Necron.

In Command and Control Patterson viewed its message. A hologram of a black lady in her later years appeared over the tactical map, her voice travelled with a great burden, 'This is Jennifer White Proconsul of Alpha Centauri Bb sending a distress call to all ships in the vicinity, we are under assault,' Alpha Centauri appeared on the tactical table. Three Drax vessels locked in close combat with a third larger vessel. Drax destroyers, sleek and smooth, displayed a long body with what resembled ribbed wings on either side, at the fore a massive gothic figurehead snarled as if to swallow its prey. On the rear of each vessel a set of six exhausts were built into the super structure, suspiciously similar to the Necron.

Proconsul White continued, 'the U.S.S. Kennedy has been taken by surprise, she's trying to withdraw,' a large carrier was a flame, jets of fire burnt oxygen stores lighting her dark camouflage in a torrid inferno. Flack guns fired feverously, Patterson recalled old footage taken during the London blitz, tracers reached into darkness in an attempt to expose German bombers concealed within the clouds, whilst women and children huddled in shelters below.

The U.S.S. Kennedy was larger and longer than her assailants, she displayed a gaping mouth, underneath her figurehead. It permitted pilots to land and take off while a command bridge on top the vessel observed. Like carriers of old she was the supreme symbol of a nation's power. Yet today Drax tore her to pieces, pumping out swarm after swarm of cruise missiles and light fighters.

Proconsul White was desperate, Necron Industries being her only hope, she ignored the President's executive order, Rule 48, 'The enemy has nullified our orbital defence satellites and inserted troops onto the planet. Our military facilities are under assault as I speak,' she held onto her desk, a tablet fell off the edge as explosions rocked the area, screams of men, women and children could be heard in the background. Proconsul White stared at the camera and whispered, 'I'm willing to do a deal,' the message cut off.

Before Commodore Patterson could speak Dwight was calculating profit margins on his tablet, chewing gum so quick his jaw became a blur.

Executive officers waited until Necron Industries' bean counter completed his calculations, 'Got it!'

Dwight tapped the tactical desk, downloading his file, 'Okay, send her off.'

Petty officer Brown glanced at Commodore Patterson, Patterson nodded and the tiny carrier pigeon was sent back to Alpha B. Firing engines it gathered pace reaching sub light speed, passing into near light as it rounded the star to appear on the other side before bursting into a flush of pure light.

Two minutes later it returned coming to a halt near the Necron. Proconsul White's image appeared as before, 'We the people of the United States Colony of Alpha Centauri B refuse to accept these terms, we'd rather fight to the death than be ...' another explosion rocked her building, loud alien clicking noises cut through the atmosphere between blood curdling screams, the enemy came down on her precious city as a child might open a toffee wrapper before consuming its contents.

Proconsul White hesitated then slapped her palm on a tablet, certifying Dwight's offer with her DNA, palm print and blood vessel scan, 'By the time you have this a copy will have reached Geneva, NOW GET HERE BEFORE THERE'S NO-ONE LEFT TO EXTORT!'

Rocky let out a sigh of relief, 'Okay let's get going.'

'Not until Geneva certifies it has both our signatures,' snapped Dwight as he sent a carrier pigeon to Earth.

Two minutes later it returned from Earth, confirming a contract had been registered, 'Okay Cliff, it looks like we can bail out your buddy on the Kennedy,' smiled Dwight while calculating the Alpha Centauri tax rights he'd skim off this deal, and it was a big deal. Dwight clapped his hands in merriment.

Klaxon's fired all over the Necron as she prepared to go beyond Einstein's barrier, to travel faster than the speed of light and arrive at Alpha B in a few minutes, despite a distance of many light years.

Men and women locked down ship's stores then made for regeneration booths. The ship's super brain computed their path whilst officers disappeared from Command and Control as water swirls down a drain, moving to the safety of regeneration units before acceleration began.

Diana and Victor had been on a stroll, enjoying each other's company, Marines jogged past them, techs pulled open panels checking junctions on the quantum wiring of Necron's computer brain. As he observed her loving eyes the klaxons made him jump, 'Alert, all crew return to your regeneration units, acceleration to faster than light will begin in nine minutes forty three seconds. Alert, all crew return to your regeneration units, acceleration to faster than light will begin in nine minutes thirty three seconds.'

'What's happening?' asked Victor.

A tech replacing a panel answered his question, 'Looks like we got a contract.'

'Do you have any idea where we're going?'

'We'll find out when we wake up sir.'

'Thank you ...'

'Kelly, First Technician Kelly sir,' he saluted Victor.

'Thank you First Technician Kelly,' Victor returned his salute, 'dismissed.'

The technician finished up what he was doing as Victor and Diana walked on, 'I guess I'll see you in twenty four hours Dee.'

'It's a date, hey maybe we'll get to see some action?'

'I always get plenty of action when you're around,' he winked.

She slapped his chest, 'You know what I mean, action-action.'

Victor smiled and nodded his head, 'Sure I do, but it won't be for a while, we could be years training for this.'

'Years getting action with my favourite Lieutenant, I could live with that ... so to speak.'

'Yeh, well you better get going Private or I'll have to report you to the Colonel.'

'Before you do think about the years of not getting laid before we reach a colony.'

Victor gave her a comedic salute, 'Yes Ma'am,' then marched to his cabin.

Diana jogged to a lower deck where enlisted regeneration units lay one beside the other in massive halls. She and the new recruits were sectioned off into "Green Company".

Victor a 2nd Lieutenant, made it to his cabin above decks, removed his black camos and boots, placed his black beret on his bed, its badge glinted under the light, then climbed inside his unit, dressed only in his underwear.

Nanite mist covered his dead body. The doctors said he shouldn't dream whilst inside, but he did, who could forget the trauma of death so easily?

Its top slid upwards locking down Victor's coffin, a light turned green and he drifted into an induced coma until given the all clear to awake from his misty nightmare.

Once the crew had been secured the Necron fired her engines in a single blast, accelerated, engines fired again then a third time until Tau Ceti's gravitational pull dragged her in. Blasting into its corona, fire ignited either side of the vessel, as a great phoenix spreading its wings she hit the hot plasma encompassing the star.

The vessel shook, pots and pans came crashing down, time dilated, objects distorted, elongating as the vessel stretched along with the fabric of space around Tau Ceti. This is why crew remained in regeneration units. Much the same as a pilot can only suffer G-forces to a certain extreme before he blacks out or even worse it becomes fatal. Time dilation is so extreme upon the human mind crew must remain comatose during acceleration and deceleration. If not, the violent forces at work would strip a man's sanity away as a tempest might strip bark from a tree, leaving a void or perhaps worse.

Spikes protruding from the fore section stretched out, then her tall blocky body, next her exhaust, burning Yeonum fuel like it was going out of style.

A black pimple on Tau Ceti's skin stretched out as it passed close by. Via superior mathematical calculations, stolen from a derelict Drax Vessel decades earlier, she punched hard into faster than light flooding the system with pure white light. Bathing Tau Ceti's heavenly bodies in faultless white ambrosia, cleansing them of all contamination as S.S. Necron and her crew passed beyond Einstein's barrier.

Victor's coffin lid slipped back, his senses aroused and dragged away from haunting images of people he no longer knew and into cold grey reality.

He dressed in his Necron Marine Corps uniform, white gold stars on the shoulder straps of his black shirt, black cargo pants (unlike the flyboys he put them on one leg at a time), black boots, and with a grey face and a smile he set his beret just right.

His wrist shook, Victor turned his hand and pulled back his shirt sleeve, officers briefing in one hour ... this was it ... he was finally going to get his chance to see action and get out of Green Company.

In the Officers Club nearly everyone had combat experience. Green Company was a stigma newbies had to bear. Even his Captain, an experienced man, suffered jibes concerning the post, but someone had to lead them.

An hour later Victor walked into his Captain's office, he saluted, Gibson returned the salute. Company Captains had spoken with the Majors who'd spoken with the Colonel who'd spoken with the Commodore. Plans were being laid for interception of three Drax destroyers and planetary defence of the Capitol and its outlying military installations.

'Take a seat Lieutenant,' Victor removed his cap and sat down at the Captain's desk, 'It seems the United States colony of Alpha Centauri Bb, Alpha B for short, requested our assistance, anyone you know there?'

'No sir.'

'Well the Drax engaged their fleet, only the U.S.S. Kennedy remains,' a hologramatic map appeared of the planet and its settlements, 'our mission is to reinforce this forward firebase, Firebase Lima.'

Victor scanned the map picking out points of enemy activity, according to intelligence Drax were amassing in the North, yet they were going South, 'Sir ...'

'I know Lieutenant, it's a milk run but this is Green Company and you're still newbies. If you're lucky a few Clicks might present themselves, you never know.'

'But sir the men want out of Green Company, we can't do that with guard duty.'

'I understand Lieutenant but I don't give orders, I follow them.'

Victor had raised his voice to the wrong man, Captain Matthew Gibson notorious for being big, black and bad didn't enjoy commanding Green Company any more than they serving in it, he was an experienced officer with more kills to his name than some platoons, a man Victor could learn a lot from, 'Sorry sir.'

'No problem Lieutenant, the mission is, we exit faster than light, Necron dispatches six Companies to board and seize Drax vessels. Simultaneously ten Companies are flown to the surface. We'll be delivered directly to Firebase Lima by Blackbird where I'll take control from the current senior officer. The job of your platoon ... Green One, is to secure the perimeter on landing, is that understood?'

'Understood sir.'

'Good, I want a network of trenches, razor wire and bunkers ready within three hours. Now here about fifty metres off there's a tree line, I want trip flares, movement sensors, razor wire and anti-personnel mines so thick that if a rat farts it'll be barbecue in a cold second, understood?'

'Understood sir.'

'If we do this by the book maybe the Colonel will hand us a little action and the tax rights to go with it later on,' Captain Gibson smiled.

Lieutenant Victor Zellmann returned his smile, 'Understood sir.'

'You'll need a medic and communications specialist.'

'You want me to pick them sir?'

'You trained with them for five years.'

'Yes sir.'

'Dismissed Lieutenant,' Captain Gibson returned Victor's salute and Victor exited the office.

Diana had been waiting outside, 'Well?'

Victor walked down a grey corridor to address his platoon of thirty men, 'We got a mission Dee.'

Her face lit up with joy, 'At last!'

'Hey calm down there cowgirl, it's just a milk run, we're reinforcing a forward firebase. Drax are in the North, we'll be way down South.'

'Damn! I'm gonna be stuck in Green Company forever!'

'If we do this by the book the Captain says some action might come our way.'

'UUURRRRHHH!' groaned Diana.

'Sorry ...'

'Oh shut up Vic.'

'Well what else can I do?'

Diana replied in a sarcastic pitch, 'Yes sir, no sir, by the book sir, you want your ass wiped sir?'

'Give it a rest Private.'

She stopped walking, her face red as hellfire, 'Private?'

'Do you have a problem PRIVATE?'

The corridor stopped moving, techs, Marines, pilots, engineers, all paused, eyes fixed on Victor and Diana.

Diana peered down each end of the corridor then back at Victor, her normally cold dead complexion roasted with fury, 'NO SIR!'

'Good, now get your fat lazy ass down to regeneration and have Sergeant Michaels assembled the platoon, NOW PRIVATE!'

'YES SIR!' Diana Saluted.

Victor returned the salute and she marched to regeneration, he instantly regretted his words yet a Lieutenant couldn't permit that from a Private, not in public.

Without Diana his life would be bleak and vacant yet she had to compromise too, now that he was LT.

'ATTENTION!'

Victor entered a small hall, every Marine faced him in a salute. Diana's profile raged as lava exploding forth from Krakatoa.

'At ease,' he returned the salute, hands fell behind backs, legs slightly astride.

'We'll arrive at Alpha B in two years. Our Company will reinforce a forward firebase, Firebase Lima, South of the capitol city. This is a milk run,' groans accompanied mumbles, 'However, it may lead to greater things, so

we're gonna do this BY THE BOOK!' Victor locked eyes with Diana, 'is that understood?'

'Yes sir!'

'Good, Green One will secure the southern perimeter. Afterwards we'll lay the tree line with trip flares, personnel mines, razor wire and movement sensors.

That's the bad news, the good news is that along with our first assignment come two promotions,' he fixed his eyes on a young Latino man, 'Private Diego Ruiz?'

Ruiz stepped out.

'Come here,' Victor handed him some patches, 'Congratulations Specialist Ruiz.'

He was now the platoon Medic.

Ruiz saluted.

Victor returned the salute, before pulling a second set of patches from his pocket, 'Private Zeng?'

A confused Diana stepped front and centre.

'Come here Private.'

She approached the Lieutenant, 'Congratulations Specialist Zeng,' she was now the communications specialist.

Diana saluted Victor.

'You may return Specialist Zeng,' Victor saluted returning her to the ranks.

Victor examined Diana, she made life, or death, or whatever you want to call it, bearable. The thought of existing without her depressed him even more than one of those Jean-Paul Sartre books she'd bugged him to read a while back.

Chapter Two

After hours of running drills and Diana's laser eye vision of bitchiness roasting his conscience no matter where it hid, Victor decided to relax at the Officers Club before regeneration.

He felt bad, yet belittling a superior like that, in a public area, could only result in one response.

A Marine's job was hazardous if not fatal; such risks seemed greatly diminished when compared to the glance of Diana Zeng.

This was their first real bust up. Diana lost her temper all the time, his Chinese firecracker, ready to explode unexpectedly in all directions.

Previously Victor kept his cool but rank didn't allow for niceties, he was expected to act a certain way as was she ... damn ... why does life ... death ... have to be so complicated?

Victor knocked back a slug of vodka, even that nasty rocket fuel they drank together couldn't snap his psyche out of its malaise.

Victor caught the words of a song playing in the club that night, according to the jukebox it was an old tune, "Sympathy for the Devil", pah, whatever.

Vodka flowed from bottle to glass then down his throat, it failed to slap his miserable face like she could.

A young woman approached his table, 'Hi there, drinking alone?'

Victor's face wrenched into the most pitiful visage she had the misfortune to witness since passing away, a self-inflicted misery mixed with anger and torment. The mere sight of this man's mental self-conflagration made her step back, 'I guess you are drinking alone,' she disappeared into a mass of men and women nattering at the bar, gossiping about how many Centauri tax rights they'd be earning on this mission.

Captain Gibson plonked his ass and drink at Victor's table, 'Son, you look like a moose just pissed in your mouth.'

Victor grunted then downed a slug of vodka.

'I don't know what your problem is but there's another six months of planetary drills before we go into regen for the rest of the journey. I strongly suggest you work it out sooner rather than later, understood?'

Victor grunted again.

'Listen son, I will replace your platoon if I think's its Lieutenant isn't ready for the job.'

That caught Victor's attention, he pulled out of his malaise and replied, 'Understood sir.'

Gibson smiled, that type of warming smile from a big brother watching your back even when you think you're indestructible, to discover you're only indestructible because he's guiding you from danger's path, 'Are you gonna share some of that vodka?'

Victor gestured toward the bottle of clear liquid, 'Be my guest sir.'

'And you don't have to call me sir, my name's Matthew, my friends call me Mat,' he poured himself a drink, 'So why you drinking alone, what with all these chicks lining up to be banged?'

'I've got other things on my mind sir ... I mean Mat.'

He pulled out a carton of cigarettes, 'Smoke?'

'No.'

'You will,' Captain Gibson drew a smoke from its carton, placed it between his lips then produced a white gold lighter with the Necron Marines emblem etched on its side.

'Nice lighter.'

'Thanks, I picked it up during the Sirius rebellion.'

'Sirius rebellion, they never mentioned Necron?'

'No,' he fondled his lighter looking stoically at its white metal, glimmering as the sun hitting a lake first thing in the morning.

'So how'd you get it?'

'Ah some of the rebels fled in a stolen star liner, my platoon boarded her and made a bee line to the engineering section.'

'But they weren't Drax ...'

'So?'

'So what did you do?'

'My orders were to secure that section with deadly force, no prisoners, no mercy, and that's what I did,' Gibson smiled at his lighter, 'One of the rebel leaders, I can't remember his name now but he was one of those long haired Che Guevara wannabes, full of revolutionary bullshit. I put more holes in that son of a bitch than a wind chime,' Gibson held up his lighter, 'That mission got me this,' he gestured toward his chest, 'and this.'

Victor focused on a ribbon beneath his forefinger, 'You won a Silver Star for killing humans?'

'No son, I EARNED a Silver Star killing rebels.'

'But ...'

'There are no buts, just orders, and you follow them to the letter if you want to get anywhere. And just so you know there were a few green Marines on that mission who refused to shoot those fucking communist assholes, something to do with principles or whatever.'

'What happened?'

'I had them executed on the spot.'

Victor's eyes widened, he took another shot of vodka, now he understood why no-one fucked with Captain Gibson and why Gibson was in charge of Green Company.

'Remember son there's only one nation, one ideology and that's Necron, Necron has plenty of enemies, some alien and some human. So get your shit together before we hit ground zero on Alpha B because you might have to make a few uncomfortable decisions that'll make or break your career, understood?'

'Yes sir.'

'Sure you don't wanna smoke?'

'I think I need an epidural.'

Gibson broke out laughing, his moustache rose and fell around his cigarette like the bow of a sailing ship in choppy grey seas, 'You'll do fine son, just focus on the mission and get your ass back in one piece.'

The Necron exploded into Alpha Centauri. A plume of white light bathed the system as a mother would her new born. Fires of hell licked Necron's hull as her engines engaged in braking manoeuvres. All attention torn from the battle as S.S. Necron passed behind Alpha Centauri B then out the other side, deliverance for the colony and its beleaguered carrier the U.S.S. Kennedy, sufferance to its besiegers.

Victor's unit slid open, nanite mist spilled over its edges, awakening from a reality invisible to those populating Necron's synthetic existence. He leapt out already dressed in combat uniform, tough black fibre reinforced weak points such as his knee caps and elbows.

Victor opened his locker to remove his weapon and pack, strapping his backpack on before securing the weapon to his body. Victor grabbed his helmet, it clicked into position with the pique forward, this was it, this was the real thing.

'Alert, battle stations, all personnel battle stations, this is not a drill,' blared a klaxon as the clamour of boots hitting the floor filled the ship.

Victor jogged through the ship's corridors as fast as possible without colliding into others. Pilots charged to launch stations, engineers to duty stations, techs to monitoring stations from Command and Control to the engine core, medics to harvesting, and finally the Marines, off to do the dirty work and earn Necron its pay cheque.

Captain Gibson waited on Deck C, 'Nice you could make it Lieutenant Zellmann, I hope the journey wasn't too tiring?'

Marines laughed, except Diana, she smirked in delight at Gibson's mockery.

'Sorry sir,' Victor saluted.

Gibson returned the salute.

They stood on Deck C, a deck so long you couldn't see either end from their position. Multirole space craft waited, mechanics checked fuel and ammunition whilst communicating with pilots for as far as the eye could see. The space craft, known as Blackbirds, faced large hatches on the side of the runway. Victor observed a few being loaded inside, probably fighters, giving cover to boarding craft and landing craft, it was all go, bustling like an ant colony as the klaxon blared out, 'Alert, battle stations, all personnel, battle stations, this is not a drill.'

'This is it,' shouted Captain Gibson, 'we will be reinforcing U.S. Colonial forces in Firebase Lima, and by the time this is over I want them to understand what a bunch of pussy ass bitches they are!'

The Company shouted over the klaxon and bustle of mechanics loading Blackbirds into launch tubes, 'YES SIR!'

'What is the motto of the Necron Marine Corp?'

'VICTORY OR DEATH, SIR!'

'And you're already dead so that only leaves one option, am I right?'

'YES SIR!'

'WHAT THE HELL YOU DOING HANGING AROUND HERE? LET'S KICK SOME ASS!' he dismissed the Company into Blackbirds, one assigned for each

platoon.

Victor lead his Marines into the rear hatch, they secured themselves in seats along its interior wall, similar to a rollercoaster. Weapons secured the rear hatch rose, Victor took one last look at his home before it disappeared, he felt a jolt as the Blackbird loaded into her tube.

‘Good morning, I will be your pilot today. The weather on Alpha B is somewhat unpleasant, humidity high, temperature a cool twenty degrees centigrade but heating up to the mid-forties as we approach afternoon.’

The inner hatch to S.S. Necron closed, atmosphere drained and the outer hatch opened, gravity fell to zero, the Blackbird’s engines fired against Necron’s blast plate, claws holding the craft in place released and they rocketed into space, ‘WHOOOAAAAAHHHH YEEHHHH!’ screamed the pilot.

Victor felt G-forces tugging his body as his consciousness caught up with it. If it weren’t for the nanite solution running through his veins he’d have passed out. Captain Gibson rolled his eyes, another dumb flyboy who thought it was all about him, they were ten to the penny.

Carriers, Destroyers and Cruisers battled in space while Green Company made for Alpha Centauri B.

They gathered speed leaving behind a torrid space battle, Victor no longer sensed the drag of acceleration, he bumped up and down as Alpha B’s atmosphere pushed against three Blackbird’s entering in formation; Passing the planet’s equator in a choppy, electrically charged equinox, two powerful scram jets kicked into action with a thump.

‘We are now entering the atmosphere at a speed of,’ he paused to look at his dial, ‘Mach 37, the air is charged, your Blackbird is hot and I’m amped!’

Blackbirds moved with such speed air molecules within the alien atmosphere split releasing an electrical charge and generating a thunderstorm for the Drax below.

‘It’s about five in the morning at our destination ...’ the pilot paused, ‘Shit! LZ’s hot! I’m picking up small arms fire sir.’

Captain Gibson smiled, his Marines smiled back, ‘LOCK AND LOAD MARINES!’

Green Company One removed personnel clamps, unsecured weapons, locked a magazine behind the trigger then loaded a round into the chamber.

The Blackbirds dropped below Mach one moving no quicker than a helicopter, sides opened, two gunners grabbed onto heavy calibre weapons lowered from above.

They flew over Alpha B's jungle canopy in formation, a marquee of dense green leaves dropped off, fifty metres of open dirt then Firebase Lima, under heavy assault.

Bolts of blue light fired into the atmosphere, colonists indiscernible from Clicks at this distance.

'Sergeant, gimme a flare!'

Sergeant Michaels loaded his grenade launcher and fired over the base, flooding it in red light. Drax flooded Firebase Lima, immense creatures in blue armoured suits and pointed helmets fought retreating colonists.

The Blackbird's gunners opened up, firing high calibre pulse guns loaded with depleted uranium shells into anything big and blue. Three beautiful birds descended as mana from heaven onto blackened plains of hell.

Gibson shouted to the pilot, 'Get us down.'

The pilot shook his head ... he thought he was the crazy one!

Hovering a few metres above ground Blackbirds deployed their cargo of Marines one by one.

'Zellmann secure the Southern flank, Hernandez you got the North flank, Lieutenant Turner you're pushing West, got it?'

'Yes sir,' replied the Lieutenants of Green Company platoons one, two and three.

Victor's heart beat so damn hard he had to force himself to concentrate, this was it, fighting the Drax for the first time, 'Michaels secure those bunkers ... FIRE AND ADVANCE!'

They moved into the red night, several Drax leapt out of a trench only a metre in front, screaming a horrific alien cry, demons from hell clutching out to pull down whomever they might snag.

Zellmann didn't know who fired first, he thought it was Corporal Mercer, but it could've been anyone, even him. Marines let rip, instead of picking targets and firing controlled bursts they sprayed and prayed ... everything.

Victor was sure he could hear Mercer shouting through his helmet coms whilst rounds chugged out his mini-gun, a high calibre weapon that required a harness for the owner to wield, 'EAT LEAD MOTHERFUCKERS!'

Or was it his own voice, no it sounded like Mercer. Time slowed down, stretching out. Each moment of terror and fear elongated to torture his mind intensifying the experience, is this what honour and glory felt like?

Victor forced himself to concentrate on the battle, his men needed him to be coherent, 'Clear out that trench!'

Michaels jumped into the trench, N-13 rifle in one hand, Fairbairn-Sykes combat dagger in the other ... damn that's not what Victor meant! He meant grenade the trench first, shit, that psycho son of a bitch was trying to fuck up his command ... Victor was tempted to chuck a grenade in there and frag the guy ... no, Michaels may have a screw loose but he was a good killer and he was killing Drax.

'Trench clear sir!' shouted Michaels in between gasps for breath.

Damn that was fast, 'In the trench and hold positions!'

The platoon leapt in, Drax moved to intercept but his Marines cut them down like grass in summertime.

Green One fired ammo like it was going out of style. 'Select targets and fire in bursts!' shouted Victor. He had no idea how long this battle would last.

Rate of fire reduced, Mercer tried to calm down but he was pumped like a crack head skydiver who'd forgotten his parachute!

Each and every Marine, despite all the tough talk, was terrified. Terror and horror flung itself into their faces, leaping from the dark, accompanied by an alien scream or a bolt of blue light.

Colonists lay in foetal positions, crying, praying, teeth chattering, arms and legs unable to answer commands.

A deep alien shriek carried the air above a clicking noise that just refused to quit. Victor was sure they used it as a terror tactic, unfortunately it worked.

He went to infra-red selecting targets past the base perimeter before squeezing a burst of fire into whatever it was, it produced results.

The Drax push on Lima slowed substantially. Blackbirds strafed the alien assault with heavy calibre explosive rounds. Their wings moved forward from a retracted position, winglets hanging just above its main body. Eight cannons, four on each wing fired into the tree line, AI selected individual targets for each cannon, when that cannon destroyed its mark another was selected, gunners on each side ripped the enemy in half with a single shot.

'They're retreating, LET'S GET 'EM!' shouted Mercer climbing from his position in the trench.

'HOLD YOUR POSITION CORPORAL!' ordered Victor dragging him down as a hail of blue bolts flew above Mercer's head, skimming his helmet.

'Zeng, give me the horn,' Victor beckoned Diana.

She crawled through the trench, pulled a pad connected to communications equipment on her back then tapped away, 'You got it.'

Victor spoke into his helmet mic, Diana had patched him into each officer's communications set in Green Company, 'Green Actual, this is Green One Actual, enemy retreating, do you have any orders, over.'

'Roger Green One, this is Green Actual, good job Zellmann, hold your position until further notice ... any casualties, over.'

'That's a negative Green Actual, over.'

Captain Gibson sighed with relief as blue fire accompanied alien screams, flying overhead into Alpha B's humid night, 'Good job, Green Actual over and out.'

Chapter Three

Dawn's warm fingers caressed colonists and Drax alike, butchered one beside the other, fallen beyond the veil of tears and into Hades realm, some in glory of battle as Hector to Achilles, others in bunkers and foxholes as cowards, teeth chattering.

Victor moved through his platoon, instilling confidence amongst its men, except Michaels, that crazy bastard relished every moment of last night's blackened hell.

Michaels cleared that trench alone; steaming through a terrifying foe as if they were no more than cattle waiting for his knife.

'Lieutenant Victor Zellmann, this is Green Company, Captain Gibson wants to see all platoon leads in the Command Bunker.'

'Roger that Green Company,' replied Victor.

He turned to Sergeant Broc Michaels, 'Get this place cleaned up, we'll work on the tree line when I get back.'

Michaels nodded, 'Yes sir.'

Victor made for the Command bunker, N-13 assault rifle casually held in one hand.

He strolled into the centre of Firebase Lima, bodies strewn everywhere, it wasn't possible to walk a straight line without stepping on a hand here or an alien organ there.

The Command Centre was a bunker dug out the earth and covered by sand bags. The sun of Alpha B rose, clipping its low lying roof, a thick jungle tree line surrounded their base, except for a single dirt road heading North to the Capitol.

The air was thick with moisture reminding him of the ever present mist inside Drax vessels. Bugs made noise, rubbing wings in Mother Nature's symphony, building to a crescendo before a sudden halt ... it amazed Victor how they did that.

Colonist soldiers gave him odd looks, poking their friends, drawing attention to the dead man. He still wore his helmet, they must be speculating as to what he lay beneath, most colonist soldiers looked to be

conscripts and below the age of twenty, some were easily sixteen, maybe less.

He removed his helmet and stepped down into the Command Bunker where Lieutenants Turner and Hernandez waited, 'So nice of you to join us Lieutenant Zellmann,' stated Gibson in his usual brash, sarcastic, manner.

'Rough night Captain.'

'I hear that brother,' mumbled Hernandez under his breath.

'Well it ain't gonna get any easier, we had the jump on those Clicks ... but now they know we're here.

Last night was a slumber party, tomorrow night the Hells Angels are hitting town and they're real pissed!

'Yes sir.'

'This is what the Marine Corps is about, you assholes have been bitchin' about seeing combat since you arrived on the Necron, so don't give me any shit now it's here, understood?'

'Yes sir.'

'What was that?'

'YES SIR!'

Gibson grinned, 'Damn right,' he motioned toward a fellow dressed in green camos, 'This Gentlemen is Major Hill.'

The Major stepped forward, Lieutenants saluted, rifles strapped to their side and helmets under arms. The Major returned their salutes, 'At ease Gentlemen, may I say thank you for bailing us out the shit last night.'

'You're welcome sir,' stated Gibson.

'I know but I had to say it, we were a shot away from being totally overrun, then you guys turned up like angels of life,' he sighed, 'As you can see most of my boys are ... boys, conscripted from towns and vills after the blockade. Clicks annihilated the larger part of our regular infantry.'

'I'm sorry to hear that sir.'

'I know, but most of these colonists think you're just vampires feeding on our disaster. Don't take it personally Captain, I understand you're all good men, following orders, that bitch Proconsul didn't have to contract you boys in, but I'm glad she did.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Major Hill moved to a metal table and tapped it bringing up a hologramatic image of the base and its surrounding terrain, 'So what's the

plan Captain?’

‘I don’t want to impose, sir.’

‘You saved my ass last night, so start imposing Captain before I have to make it an order.’

Gibson highlighted areas on the image, ‘We’re securing the perimeter, after that platoon’s will patrol the tree line setting trip flares, sensors, personnel mines and razor wire.’

‘After that?’

‘Since your intelligence is,’ he gave Hill an uncomfortable glance, ‘flawed, we have no idea where they are based. My plan is to dig in and ride out this storm until the Necron can free up some ordinance and flatten the jungle surrounding Firebase Lima, sir.’

The Major examined his plans, ‘How long before the Necron can turn those Clicks into pancakes?’

‘I don’t know sir.’

‘Educated guess?’

‘Maybe twenty four hours.’

‘Shit!’

‘Sir?’

‘That’s two nights we have to hold out,’ the Major wrangled his hands whilst examining Firebase Lima’s perimeter.

‘Two nights?’ inquired Victor.

‘Alpha B has twelve hour days Lieutenant, don’t you remember?’

Of course, in the six months of planetary drills, Diana’s cold shoulder probably caused a few facts to slip his mind, ‘Sorry sir.’

‘A grenade explode too close to your head last night Lieutenant Zellmann?’

‘No sir.’

‘Then get with the program, the last thing I need is a platoon leader with dementia!’

‘Understood sir.’

Captain Gibson let out a huff, ‘What are your orders Major?’

‘My troops are at your disposal Captain, keep me abreast of developments.’

Captain Gibson and his three Lieutenants saluted the Major, ‘Yes sir.’

Hill returned the salute, ‘Dismissed.’

They exited the Command Bunker behind Captain Gibson, into the hot steamy atmosphere of Firebase Lima, moisture mixed with the stench of smouldering flesh, 'Who's burning those bodies?'

Victor looked around, a group of young conscripts had created a bonfire, slinging Drax bodies on top. Close by colonist bodies were being bagged and tagged, 'Over there sir.'

'Zellmann, sort that out, now.'

Zellmann approach a group of startled youngsters, aged from perhaps fifteen to twenty, startled by a dead man walking, 'What are you boys doing?'

'Burning Clicks,' stated a lad no more than eighteen as he poked the fire of flesh and fuel.

'You must be an officer?'

'No.'

'THAT'S NO SIR YOU FUCKING MAGGOT!' bellowed Victor as a great lion might display its foaming mane to a pack of trembling jackals.

The lads jumped in fright, despite a night of terror with the Drax this dead man scared them stiff.

'What's your name boy?'

'Campbell, sir.'

'Campbell, who ordered you to burn these bodies?'

'Errmmm, no-one I guess ... sir.'

'Put this fire out and lay these Clicks in a pile, remove all weaponry and ammunition and place it into separate piles, understood?'

'Yes Sir.'

Zellmann pointed toward colonist bodies some in bags others in the process of being tagged, 'Campbell, what's this?'

'Bodies sir.'

'I can see that you idiot, what are you doing with the bodies?'

'Oh, preparing them to be transported to the city, sir.'

'Pile them up, when requested you'll supply them to Green One, Two and Three, understood?'

'Sir?'

'Did you understand my order?'

'No sir, I mean yes sir, but why?'

'Clicks attack at night, time is limited, these bodies will make excellent sandbags, understood?'

The young lads had an expression of disgust, desecration of the dead, they didn't sign up for this.

'UNDERSTOOD CAMPBELL?'

'Yes, yes sir,'

'Good, carry on.'

The sound of crackling flesh filled his ears, competing with jungle bugs rubbing their wings. He looked around at dishevelled colonists, beaten physically and morally after last night's assault. There was Hernandez directing his men, reconstructing the last artillery piece in this firebase. Hernandez gave him a wink. Victor grinned but behind their expressions lay thoughts of an ominous attack. In these situations a man's most critical error is to mistake the outward appearance, the mask, the illusion of flesh, for a man's spirit. For his soul is the true measure of his capability, the true test of a warrior when faced with adversity, and in four hours the sum of these warrior's bravery and ability would be weighed against that of the enemy.

Drax were blind, using sound waves to see, like a bat, that's why they're called Clicks. You can hear a noise, always there, cool, calm and constant in the background, clicking, while that hubcap on its chest blurts out horrifying alien screams. Damn bastards had gotten to these kids, they still shook from a few hours ago. Some of them swallowed blue burners, an amphetamine pill issued by the U.S. Army to keep its soldiers awake and alert. Blue because well, they're blue, burners because it burns the candle at both ends leaving a shell of a man.

Fortunately Victor was dead, he didn't require sleep outside a regeneration booth, so no burners on the Necron. Not that he knew of anyway, but who knows what some of those techs and engineers got up to on leave. Marines were too busy getting ready for the next mission to worry about becoming a fiend and as for pilots? Those guys were getting high on adrenaline and their own egos, blue burners could never match up to that kick, not in a million years.

'Michaels, Mercer, Ruiz, Johnson, Ting, Gomez, Sharma, Lipov, Barnes, Cooper and Zeng.'

His Marines stood in a line, 'Okay, we're going on patrol, I want plenty of trip flares, mines, wire ... you guys know the drill. We'll be hauling out at,' Victor looked at his wrist, 'twelve hundred hours, got it?'

'Yes Sir!'

'And get that colonist, Campbell, we'll need someone familiar with the terrain.'

'Yes Sir.'

'Dismissed.'

Marines dispersed, Victor walked up to Diana as she moved out, 'Hey Dee, glad to see you made it.'

She sneered, 'Thank you sir.'

'Come on, don't be like that.'

'Is there anything else you want Lieutenant?'

He sighed, 'No.'

She pulled a stiff salute which he returned, six months and Diana was still pissed at him, damn that woman could hold a grudge and hold it well. Whoever said the beautiful is a necessary of life was speaking for the dead too. Diana was the single gold thread woven into a black death shroud, casting her warm light on Victor's spirit, giving him a reason to be Lieutenant Zellmann and command a platoon on some planet that stank like stale liquorice. His golden thread was being pulled out before his eyes, as Penelope undid Odysseus' shroud at night while the suitors slept, drunk on wine, helpless to prevent her true desires. Except Diana did not hide her intent from Victor, it was to make him as miserable as he'd made her and so far she'd achieved her goal.

'Something wrong Lieutenant,' whispered Captain Gibson.

Victor spun around, damn that son of a bitch had crept up on him like a snake in the jungle, he'd probably witnessed the whole thing, 'No sir.'

'That's not what I saw Lieutenant.'

'I, I, don't know what to say sir.'

'Lieutenant, provided you keep your mind on the job and your men safe you can screw a dead pig for all I care. But if I see any lapse in judgment I'll recommend the Colonel issue you a one way trip to harvesting, understood?'

'Yes sir.'

Gibson pulled out a carton of cigarettes, 'Smoke?'

Those cigarettes were looking a whole lot more attractive now, 'Maybe just one.'

'It'll take your mind off Specialist Zeng's sweet ass,' he raised his brow while lighting Victor's smoke.

'We had a tiff, I suppose you can call it that, six months back. She hasn't spoken to me since.'

Gibson drew an inch off his cigarette letting a plume of smoke disperse while dead bodies were being employed as sandbags around the perimeter, 'What happened?'

'Ah, she spoke to me disrespectfully, made me look real small.'

Gibson chuckled quietly, 'I've found women excel in that area.'

'Well it was in a public area, you know people were watching and she's a Specialist and I'm a Lieutenant so I had to berate her, publicly.'

Gibson laughed as he puffed smoke into the atmosphere, 'Do I need to ask how she took it?'

'No.'

'You care about her?'

He puffed on his cigarette and let out a cough along with some smoke, 'I shouldn't be telling you this sir.'

'Do you care about her?'

'Yeh, but she won't listen to me, she just ignores me.'

'Sucks.'

A shot rang out, a blue bolt emerged from high in the trees followed by the thud of flesh hitting dirt within the firebase. Victor drew his weapon, scanning the canopy ... nothing. He snapped his helmet on and went to infra-red, there, a small red glow from the barrel of an ion rifle, Victor went to single shot, squeezed the trigger, felt his N-13 push into his shoulder, a momentary rustle amongst the leaves and a Drax sniper fell to the ground.

'Good shot Lieutenant.'

Victor scanned the canopy, it was clear for now. That Drax bastard had taken out Major Hill, how many more were there waiting up in the canopy? Waiting for a Marine to salute him, let the damn Click know he was an officer and then bam, an ion bolt in the chest.

Victor's squad made their way through the jungle to the South of Firebase Lima, not a single dead Drax, he'd seen the Bird's mow those bastards

down but not even a single limb was to be found.

As they moved around, pausing to place trip flares, their usually black combat suits changed to different shades of green, mirroring the foliage surrounding its owner. A chameleonic ability built into the suit, it was like one of those pictures psychoanalysts give folks then ask them what they see. The men and single woman of Green One faded into the background, Campbell stuck out, if Drax attacked he'd get it first and they'd jump those bastards just like last night.

The jungle was as still as a jungle could be, nothing seemed a miss until Campbell felt the bottom of his boot move an inch down, it caught his attention but too late, 'SHIT!'

A spinning canister ejaculated from the jungle floor throwing dirt in all directions, 'TAKE COVER!' screamed Zellmann.

The squad dived, half to the left, half to the right, Campbell remained rigid on the mine, an electric charge forced his leg muscles into an unyielding pose. The Drax anti-personnel mine made it above his head and exploded firing ball bearings in a downward cone. Foliage was cut down, Campbell took most of the blast saving the others.

After the explosion three Drax warriors appeared almost magically from behind a tree, moving cautiously toward Campbell's body, they hadn't seen Victor's squad lying on the ground.

Zellmann whispered over his mic, 'I want to take one captive, kill only if necessary, understood?'

'Yes sir.'

'Michaels ... Michaels?'

'Understood sir.'

'Good, I got the middle one, Michaels left, Ting you're right, understood?'

'Understood sir.'

'GO!'

Marines appeared from the foliage taking the Drax by surprise, single shots were fired. Two dead, one was injured as it tried to bind Campbell's body.

After setting mines, flares and razor wire Marines returned with their prisoner, the camp was in shock, Captain Gibson grinned, maybe now he'd get some decent intel, numbers, positions, plans, who knows?

Chapter Four

Marines clad in combat suits guarded a door. A single light illuminated a latrine, swirling with urine and excrement. Thick mist rose a foot from the dungeon floor, just enough for its captive to breathe. It were as if a portion of hell had been lifted up and set down in Firebase Lima.

Captain Gibson restrained its head beneath the foul mirth, wrists tied to its ankles. As the beast stopped struggling he pulled it out, the creature had no combat suit, no pointed helmet disguising its ugly features. It was an image used to frighten children at Halloween back on Earth, the bat beast spluttered, spitting out a vile stew of human waste before gasping for air, an oxygen/carbon monoxide mix, deadly to humans but heavy enough that it clung to the floor leaving room for their oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere above.

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