

EXODUS CONFLICT

Sample of Chapters 1-2

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AWARDS FOR EXODUS CONFLICT

2013 Next Generation Indie Book Awards finalist in the sci-fi/fantasy category



Honorable mention from the 2013 London Book Festival in the science fiction category



Future awards can be viewed at: <http://www.exodusconflict.com/>

Five stars from *Readers' Favorite*



Praise for Exodus Conflict from *Readers' Favorite*

“Exodus Conflict is a thrilling and suspenseful novel that is not only about the continued existence of two different species, but also a story about inner conflicts of Alex and Andrea . . . As the reader turns the pages, each layer of both struggles will be revealed in a well written plot which grips the reader and won't let go. Excellent read with plenty of action and emotion.”

—*Bil Howard for Readers' Favorite*—

“Michael J. Brooks' Exodus Conflict is a thoughtful look into a catastrophic future, where this planet can no longer sustain life.”

—*Jack Magnus for Readers' Favorite*—

“What did I like about Exodus Conflict? Everything!”

—*Lorena Sanqui for Readers' Favorite*—

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“Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living beings and all of nature.”

—Albert Einstein—

PROLOGUE

BECAUSE OF THE ways of mankind, Earth was brought to the brink of catastrophe. Destructive wars left nations' infrastructure in shambles and devastated people's homes—further impoverishing millions of men and women. Due to humanity's overuse of declining natural resources and avoidance of developing alternatives to them, the cost of fuel and everyday necessities skyrocketed—making it difficult for the average person to survive. And years of environmental mistreatment contaminated skies, lands, and waters—killing plant life and allowing sicknesses to flourish in many communities.

The consequences of humanity's self-decimation brought forth the collapse of civilization, causing the fighting amongst warring nations to officially cease. And even though the end of the fighting was followed by a period of peace, there was no unified effort in the world's recovery. Each nation preferred to hoard their resources and fend for themselves, rather than help their fellow man, though the planet's greatest crisis affected not just one area but all of mankind and every living creature on Earth.

A great deal of hostility remained between the war-ravaged nations, and accusations continued to fly. "Who started the problem?" and "Who was responsible for the many deaths?" were debated with ferocity, as pundits pointed fingers. Such matters should be of little concern after the hardship that had befallen all of mankind, but people stubbornly clung to their animosity.

As time went by, the worldwide condition of the human race worsened. Nations slipped into economic turmoil. People suffered from starvation. Those who had previously lived lives of

stability became vagabonds on the streets. And with famine and new strains of illness and disease adding to humanity's mounting perils, it seemed the entire human race was reaching its apex.

These devastating times soon became known as The Great Crisis.

In order to preserve the existence of humanity, the nations of the world—whose post-war tensions had made any type of cooperation unlikely—banded together to create the Global Solutions Committee (GSC). The GSC assembled the world's greatest thinkers, scientists, and problem solvers; however, only provisional solutions to Earth's global affairs arose from the union. These so-called solutions only prolonged humanity's self-destruction.

After a year of the GSC's failed attempts to save humanity, many prosperous nations fell into a state of disorder, and Earth's population decreased by a billion. Realizing that none of their solutions were working, the GSC initiated a deep-space exploration project, desperate to sustain Earth and its people. The purpose of the project was to find a new homeworld within the Milky Way Galaxy. This *terra nova* had long existed and was simply waiting for humanity to make its way there.

In order for the GSC's project to be a success, nations shared their latest technology with one another to begin the development of a vessel capable of searching deep space. A special power cell created for the craft would eliminate the need for fuel, allowing the expedition to take the estimated time needed. Perhaps had the cell been developed years ago, all of Earth's skies would be pure. It took a point of desperation to convince nations that it was time to make a true effort to develop an alternative to fossil fuel consumption. Nations had even claimed that the cell could be modified to power motor vehicles within a few years. But humanity would be on death row by then, if the expedition was a failure.

On the day of the vessel's completion, a crew assembled from various nations was sent into the unknown with everyone's hopes resting on their shoulders. The crew's mission was to seek out a new planet for mankind to inhabit, and once this new planet had been found, mankind would be able to begin its exodus.

A year of exploring yielded success. The crew of Earth's vessel, the *Genesis*, came across what they were seeking. It was a world that bore much similarity to their current homeworld and appeared to be the perfect planet to call Second Earth.

The crew of the *Genesis* thought this planet would be entirely for humanity's taking, but almost simultaneously, as Earth's vessel touched down, another craft landed. From this foreign craft emerged a race of people no one had ever imagined, and though these beings couldn't communicate with Earth's explorers, there was some understanding between them.

Together they bridged the communication gap—a task the *Genesis*'s crew thought would take months, but these beings were able to learn at an astonishing rate, a rate beyond that of any ordinary Earthling. In a mere three days, they were able to speak well enough in several human languages.

With the communication gap bridged, the *Genesis*'s crew learned this intergalactic race was called the Zull and that they were from a galaxy just outside the Milky Way. But their homeworld and people were in danger of extinction because of a series of severe climatic changes. Rising temperatures were causing crops and animals to perish. Thus, less food was produced each year—making starvation inevitable. The infernal heat was also causing lands and waters to dry up. The Zull's planet was slowly becoming a barren desert. It was dying. Therefore, they also needed to make an exodus onto this new planet. So a settlement between humankind and the Zull had to

be reached, but Earth's explorers didn't have the authority to be emissaries for all of humanity. So, using their technology, the Zull assisted the *Genesis's* crew in transmitting a message back to the GSC.

After the transmission was received, the GSC sent diplomats to assist the crew in establishing a dialogue between humankind and the Zull, and thanks to a new method of space propulsion called Hyper Stream Travel, the diplomats arrived in two weeks.

Hyper Stream Travel was developed by the GSC's deep-space exploration project during the *Genesis's* crew's yearlong expedition. Apparently, the *Genesis's* propulsion system was only the prototype for a better, faster one. Even so, Hyper Stream Travel seemed beyond humanity's scientific capability, almost "extraterrestrial." This drove conspiracy theorists to contrive a slew of possible explanations. Some of them believed governments had kept hidden alien technology from a previous encounter with extraterrestrial beings, but only the GSC and the world's top leaders would know the secrets behind the Hyper Stream, unless they decided to go public someday.

When the diplomats arrived on the New World—the planet humanity considered their Second Earth and the Zull considered their homeworld to be—everyone was sure that a settlement could be reached, but the Zull and the diplomats weren't able to compromise. Each race had too many reservations about sharing the planet with each other. The Zull learned about humanity's poor treatment of their own world and feared such careless people would desecrate this one. Mankind had searched an entire year for this paradise amongst the stars and didn't really want to partition its lands. Also, polls taken on Earth showed that the majority of the population felt uncomfortable intermingling with an alien race. Zull and humanity seemed incapable of casting

aside their fears and doubts to live together on the planet they *both* had discovered.

Seven days of failed talks between the GSC's diplomats and the Zull only served to anger the two races. Not long after peace negotiations ended, a declaration of war followed. Then Earth's nations united their militaries to form the Earth United Front (EUF), a powerful coalition that would train soldiers in their respective nations and send them to fight alongside each other in the most important war in human history—not a world war but an interplanetary war—a war between two different worlds of people that would be fought on the planet needed for their salvation. And with both races building up their arsenal, constructing bases, and trying to establish territorial dominion over different Regions of the planet, it was clear that the Exodus Conflict over the New World had begun.

CHAPTER ONE

The New World

GUNSHOTS CRACKLED. EXPLOSIONS boomed, battering eardrums. Spritzes of blood stained the broken asphalt. Drove of South Koreans, with hopeless faces, were manacled and herded into dark armored vehicles at gunpoint, as the invaders shouted their battle cry.

Journalist Alex Mercer, safely hidden out of sight behind an alleyway dumpster, helplessly watched a mass of South Koreans be massacred in the rubble-strewn street—heart hammering against his ribcage, lungs screaming for air. *Just what the fuck have I gotten myself into.*

The crunch of metal against metal and the tinkling of shattering glass blended as cars rammed into each other. Pandemonium reigned, people scattering everywhere in a rightful frenzied panic.

Rooftops exploded into bursts of flames. Windows disintegrated, hailing splinters of glass down on fleeing citizens.

Everything in Alex's view vanished in a storm of smoke and debris. *Cant see a damn thing.*

The smoke dissolved. A mess of bloody corpses littered the streets.

Alex stared about at the carnage, suspended in disbelief. The remains of human limbs, a dead child—maybe seven-years-old—with a fist-sized impact hole in his chest, a man's body with its severed head at its shoulders. *This is hell.* Alex clenched his arms over his stomach and retched, holding in the vomit.

South Korean soldiers swarmed the streets to ward off the North Korean invaders.

Gunfire roared. Automatic weapons rattled. Small arms popped shots. Bullets struck a South

Korean soldier from behind with force. His guts blew outward and splattered across the concrete.

As a bead of sweat trailed a path between Alex's brows and trickled off the tip of his nose, he watched a dark sphere hurtling down from the clouds. It hit with a blinding flash. The sky and earth quaked as a puff of red-orange fire evaporated entire city blocks. "Shit!" Now, Alex did the only thing he could: he snapped his eyes shut and prayed, hoping that God would be merciful enough to allow him to escape back to the States, where it was safe, for now. In the midst of his plea, a shrill scream shook him to the core. It was female. *What the hell.* His eyelids jumped open. He saw a young raven-haired woman, with a tattered skirt and blouse, being forced into the alley by three of the North Korean invaders.

She plummeted to the pavement—sobbing and moaning—and huddled her knees to her chest. She looked up at her aggressors, her face black and blue. The bastards towering over her smirked and licked their lips, ready to satisfy their sick and perverted cravings.

Alex barred his teeth. *Savages*, he thought. He clenched his fists, wanting to do something . . . something to stop them. But there was nothing an unarmed civilian could do. Fists were no match for bullets.

One of the soldiers hauled her up onto his shoulder. She cried and begged to be spared the physical and mental torment they had in mind for her, but their black hearts remained void of mercy. The three men—possessed by their hunger—took her through an unsecured boarded-up door, vacating the alley to find a more suitable place to have their fun.

Alex shook. His heart thumped. Distant gunshots rang. The wind whispered, breezing bomb-scented air. He was clear to flee the alleyway; the soldiers were gone. Now was his chance. But his stubborn conscience wouldn't let him leave. He had to know the woman's fate.

With a shuddering hand, he cautiously opened the door. Its rusty hinges screamed.

Alex's pores burst into a sweat. He paused and let loose a frightened breath as he stood in silence, summoning the courage to move forward.

As he tread down the lightless, rat-infested hall of an abandoned motel, he saw roaches climbing the dingy walls of flaking paint and smelt the stink of a foul odor—like some animal had died and decayed.

A scream echoed, causing Alex to jump. He pinpointed the scream's direction and quickened his pace.

A distant voice: "Bitch." Overturned chairs thudded. A woman whimpered without restraint.

Alex came too a door and slowed his walk, taking quiet steps. Once at the door, he put his ear to its dry-rotting wooden surface.

A vase crashed, and a thrown chair banged the wall—sounds of a struggle.

Alex lowered his eye to a crack in the door and saw the woman and her three captors in a compact room.

Thick nets of cobwebs hung from the ceiling and corners. Dark mold coated the walls, and dust blanketed the floor and every piece of furniture.

The soldiers stripped the woman down to nothing but her socks—tearing the clothing from her squirming body with vulturous grins. They delighted at the sound of every rip—and every scream burning through her throat. Her resistance was met with smacks to the face, as hard and loud as the whack of a whip against bare flesh.

The crack of every slap shuddered Alex. His only thought was "Please, someone stop this insanity." But there was no rescue in sight. The soldiers forced the woman down into a supine

position on a worn, mildewed mattress and cuffed one of her wrists to a bed pole. She tried to squirm free, but the soldiers held her naked body down and unzipped.

Agony and fear rose in the woman's face. Her bloodied lip trembled. Her body shook.

Grinning, one of the soldiers splayed her closed thighs and positioned himself between her legs. He pinned down her free wrist and plunged his burgeoning erection forward with aggression. The woman's scream tore through the room.

The soldier smiled sadistically and pulled out. With the instinct to fight back, the woman wriggled her left arm loose from her assailant's grip. A defiant swipe of her nails raked abrasions across his cheek.

The soldier rubbed the side of his face. Enraged by her resistance, his eyes became infused with madness. "Bitch." He held her down by the throat and shoved his erection in deeper, breaking her will to resist. She screamed. He punished her with another too-savage, too-deep thrust—and did it with a smirk of satisfaction. Then he squeezed out—the tip of his stiff member coated in blood. And he repeated the motion while snickering, ratcheting up the intensity with every thrust—rocking the bed with so much ferocity that the headboard began cracking the aged wall plaster.

Alex squeezed a hand over his mouth to stop himself from making his abhorrence vocal.

Bastards.

All three soldiers continuously took turns relentlessly having their way with the woman—one after another, never letting up.

How? Alex wondered as he watched the woman's human rights be violated. *How could this shit cause a man satisfaction?*

The bed rattled violently. Floorboards creaked. The woman's lungs burned as she screamed. High-tempo animalistic thrusts stabbing their way in and out of her felt like piercing knives, and her face expressed her excruciation.

Alex subdued his urge to burst into the room; he would simply be overpowered.

As the vicious assault between the woman's thighs continued to bedevil her body, her yelps were choked back by moans of pain, and her loins clenched in agony.

The soldiers grunted and drooled their satisfaction. Their victim wailed for help, but her cries went unanswered. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Alex continued to watch with horror emblazoned across his face. He wondered what sort of demons possessed a man to torture a woman like this, and cause him to actually derive satisfaction from such torture. He wanted to shut his eyes but forced them to stay open.

After fifteen minutes of raping her, the soldiers dumped the woman on the dust-covered floor, like garbage. She gasped in the stale air of the unventilated room and lay panting, her flesh laden with sweat. Not done yet, one of the soldiers knelt beside her.

The woman's shuddering thighs clenched shut in protest. But the soldier wedged his fingertips between her inner thighs and forced them apart. Then he sprawled her spread-eagled calves atop his shoulders and went into her—ferociously hard.

Another soldier hunkered down and clamped his hands over her mouth.

Muffled screams and tears.

After an elapse of fifteen more minutes, one of the soldiers put a round in the woman's frontal lobe. Her torment was over.

A range of emotions welled up inside Alex. He didn't cry often, but watching that young lady

be sexually victimized made him shed tears like a baby. He was a God-fearing man, though he didn't wear his religion on his sleeve. And to him, if woman was indeed created for man, then that meant woman was a gift to man from God. Because, to him, if something was created and given to you, then it was a gift. And a gift was something to be cherished, especially a gift from the Creator himself. So, at least in Alex's opinion, woman should be cherished by man—not treated like a slave, physically and mentally abused, or sexually assaulted.

Alex stood immobile, unable to exorcise what he had witnessed from his mind. He kept hearing the woman's screams, kept seeing her bruised-up face—showered in tears.

As he thought about the rape and the many deaths he had seen today, he said to himself, *I hate war.*

Suddenly, he heard movement at six o'clock. He pivoted around and found himself at point-blank range of a muzzle. The North Korean soldier yelled something in Korean. Alex threw his hands up and spread his fingers. Merciless, the soldier squeezed the trigger. The gun thundered, ejecting bullets at rapid fire. The scent of hot lead drifted, and shell casings pinged the floor. Then . . . “Alex Mercer, please report to Gate 11 for clearance,” a Scottish female voice sounded over the Reception Station's PA system.

Alex drifted out of the past and back to the present. He had been reflecting on the hell he had witnessed firsthand—the hell of war, a hell he was about to plunge himself into once again. But it was the atrocities he had seen and damning experiences he had suffered through that shaped and molded him into the person he was today.

The twenty-seven-year-old journalist sheepishly rubbed his tired eyes, trying to tune out the hubbub of the concourse. He attempted to recover his mind from the horrid memories of the past,

but wasn't doing so well.

As he rose, a myriad of green, black, and desert-camo battledress strode from one bulkhead to another, marching toward their designated launch bays. These deploying soldiers had attended extensive briefings and conducted spaceflight preparation, to include Emergency Shuttle Evac training—here at the EUF's Reception Station, a satellite which orbited Earth. Now, it was time for them to be flown to the New World, so they could take part in the war between Zull and humanity.

To Alex, they were being flown to die, and to him, it was for no goddamn reason. But it seemed that humanity and Zull preferred war over diplomacy. Most wars were pointless, to Alex. Just look at the war-torn nations of Earth and the people plunged into a life of misery by the most recent World War; tell them that the lives and homes lost were worth it, Alex often thought. However, others had different viewpoints and saw the war as a needed means to an end of a heated conflict.

“Alex Mercer,” the female voice repeated over the PA system, “please report to Gate 11 for clearance.”

Alex slung his bags over his right shoulder, mind still bogged down by wartime memories. Usually he was at peace. Sure, he thought about his experiences every now and then; how couldn't he? They were forever a part of him, unfortunately. But as of late, as he prepared to journey into hell once more, his mind seemed to be recapping his experiences far too often, for him. Maybe that was a sign to turn back, to head back to Earth now, before it was too late. But no, he couldn't turn back. He would regret it if he did. This was his only chance to have all his questions answered, and his only chance to learn about . . . himself.

Not wasting another minute, he shouldered through huddles of soldiers—a racket of conversations finally jarring his mind loose from the stranglehold of the past. At the counter, he saw the face of his Scottish awakener. And he found her to be quite attractive: honey-blond hair, blue eyes, lips outlined in red.

“You must be Alex Mercer,” she said, as he edged closer.

“I am,” he responded. His eyes dropped from her face to the chrome name tag pinned to her dark blue service jacket. “Pleased to meet you, Lizzy.”

“Just call me Liz.” She glared at Alex’s bleary face. “You look stressed and unreseted. You okay, hun.”

“I just . . . haven’t gotten a lot of sleep lately.”

“Take it easy. Life’s too short to be all stressed out.” The receptionist uncrossed the leg over her knee and stood. She straightened her rucked up skirt and laid a data pad in front of Alex.

“Press your hand to the screen.”

Alex flattened his hand across the screen. The data pad scanned and recorded his biometrics. After a quiet *beep*, Alex lifted his hand, and the receptionist took the device.

She glanced at it: IDENTITY CONFIRMED. “Alright, you’re clear to go, hun. You know what shuttle you’re assigned to, right?” Alex nodded and pivoted around to head to his designated launch bay. “Hey, wait up,” the receptionist kindly bellowed, after Alex was ten paces away.

The journalist looked back over his shoulder and fixed his eyes on her. “Yeah, what?”

“Just wanted to say: be careful. Last reporter who came back here alive lost both of those.”

Alex looked at his hands. “Thanks, but this isn’t my first rodeo. And I’ve actually gotten pretty good at surviving, with all my limbs intact.” He looked forward and moved on, with bold steps.

He passed info boards streaming departure times and entered a silver capsule-like elevator. The door slipped shut. “Tier 1,” he said. The elevator descended, smooth and fast.

* * *

Inside Launch Bay 15, a shuttle bound for the New World was about to leave the Reception Station, but the shuttle was not only being used to transport soldiers; it was also being used to transport Alex.

The shuttle’s entry door slid up with a barely audible hiss. Alex’s rubber soles thumped the metal stair-ramp as he strode up into the passenger section, which was conjoined to the cockpit, forming a single compartment.

The door whispered shut. He took a look around. It was quiet—only the hum of machines and the sound of ventilation stirring. Since the deployees hadn’t arrived yet, he and the pilot had the craft all to themselves, for the time being. *Geez, they were right when they told me it’s cramped in here*, Alex thought. The aisle was far from spacious, the compact seating didn’t leave much elbow room, and the ceiling was almost low enough to rake the hair on his head. Alex had assumed the soldiers’ warnings about the shuttle’s claustrophobic design were lies meant to intimidate him, but then, he hadn’t been expecting first-class.

Wondering if the male bunking area was more accommodating, he peeked into the rear cabin. To his dismay, he saw that the wall plating was a mosaic of dingy salvaged metals and that the flat-panel berths (box-like alcoves) which aligned the walls looked about as comfortable as concrete. Since many shuttles, like this one, were made as inexpensively as possible due to declining resources, their interior was far from luxurious—nothing like their gleaming outer hull. Now Alex knew why many soldiers called these craft scrap shuttles. Lucky for him, he would

have to put up with these annoying conditions for only two weeks.

I'm guessing there isn't much else to see. Might as well get comfortable. Besides the lower deck, which consisted of the pilot's quarters and cargo hold, there were no more areas where passengers were authorized, so Alex took a seat, dropped his two bags down beside him, and eased back into his headrest.

From where he was sitting, he could see the pilot tinkering with the controls on a panel of flickering lights in the front. *Not long before takeoff, maybe four or five minutes,* Alex anticipated.

As he waited to begin his journey, he was overwhelmed by excitement and curiosity. *I wonder what's waiting for me when I get there.* He tried to picture the landscape—would it be wild and beautiful nature, or would the land be torn apart by war? And what were these Zull beings like? A soldier aboard the station had told Alex they were merciless creatures, ruthless bastards with no respect for anyone but themselves. But Alex knew people would say anything about what they fear and hate. It was fear and hate that had driven the war for three years. Alex believed there had to be some way for Zull and humanity to overcome their animosity and live together.

He was hoping his venture would help him understand why the bloodshed was still taking place. So Alex wasn't making this journey to the New World simply because he felt compelled as a journalist to cover the most important war in humanity's history. He was also going there to learn. Alex wanted to find out why the war had been drawn out for three years, even though the simple solution of "coexistence" could end it tomorrow.

After finishing his systems check, the American pilot turned to get a better view of his golden-brown-haired passenger.

Seeing that Alex was dressed in civies—a casual black T-shirt and blue jeans—and had three days' growth of stubble on his face that made him look rugged, the pilot knew he wasn't a soldier of the Earth United Front but asked him to make sure. "You a EUF soldier, Mr.?" he said, in an accent that was distinctly Southern.

Alex shook his head from left to right. "Not me," he stated. "I'm a journalist."

Suddenly, the pilot realized he had seen Alex several times before, just not in person. "Wait a sec, aren't you the reporter I always see on NYN News?"

"Yep, that's me," Alex sighed irritably. Sometimes being renown was a pain in the neck, especially on days when people kept approaching him to complement his work. There were even days when he couldn't walk into his local coffee shop without being bothered, most often by college kids wanting his advice on how to break into journalism during these tough economic times.

However, Alex completely understood why young aspiring journalists sought his advice. In the past, he had written stories and done investigative journalism for several news organizations. Now he was a reporter for one of the most watched news networks in America, and he wrote articles for the network's website. Alex had expertise that anyone determined to get into his field could learn from.

"So, how is it being a television news reporter?" the pilot asked, making smalltalk.

"I can't speak for everyone, but I think it's awesome. I've been fortunate to be doing something I love. When you think about it, I've been fortunate to have a job at all."

"You're right, you are fortunate. We both are. And though things in America are pretty bad, it, Britain, and other nations are paradises compared to the ones in the gutter right now." Voices

overflowing with enthusiasm approached the shuttle. They started faint but amplified as they got closer. “Must be the rest of my passengers,” the pilot concluded.

Thirty-four bellicose EUF soldiers, hyped about their second deployment, came bustling through the shuttle’s entryway in a single file—making a ruckus—and scrambled into their seats. Their rowdiness was so deafening that Alex wished he had brought earplugs. Their rowdiness was so deafening that Alex wished he had brought earplugs.

“Hey, news boy,” said a soldier standing over Alex, in green battledress, “we told ya it was gonna be tight in here. You didn’t believe us, huh?”

Alex’s face became stern. “News boy? That’s Mr. Mercer to you, *pal*.”

The soldier was a jackass when Alex met him inside the Reception Station, and he was still a jackass now. “Sounds like I’m getting on your nerves,” the soldier said with a smirk.

Alex was indeed reaching the boiling point. He was ready to wipe the smug look off this smart Alec’s face.

“Alright, everyone standing needs to take a seat,” the pilot demanded, trying to defuse the situation before it could get ugly.

“I hope you’re ready, news boy,” the soldier continued, ignoring the pilot. “Like I said before, the Zull are some ruthless bastards. You can’t even begin to imagine how vicious they are.” He leaned into Alex’s face, coming nose to nose. “I bet you’re pretty damn nervous, huh?”

“No, not really,” the seasoned journalist responded calmly, with a free-from-fear look on his face.

Not much scared Alex. As a war correspondent for New York Network (NYN) News, he had covered events of World War IV live from the battlefield. But traveling to a new planet and being

thrust into the middle of a conflict with a foreign race was enough to make his palms sweat, though he didn't want to admit it.

“Get comfy, everyone,” the pilot advised. “This trip’s about to get underway. And no bullshitting or talking during takeoff.” He pointed to the headset snug against his ears. “Gotta hear commands from Control. *Got it?*”

The soldiers’ silence confirmed their understanding. When it was time be discipline, they knew how to keep quiet; when it was time to relax, they knew how to cut loose.

Knowing he had to comply with the pilot’s orders, the soldier pestering Alex finally left him alone. “Later, news boy.” He went to the back row and squeezed into a seat between two of his comrades.

Pompous asshole, Alex thought, keeping his comments to himself.

A blinking message appeared on the shuttle’s heads-up display (HUD): SYSTEM LAUNCH AFFIRMED.

Alex fastened his seatbelt, remembering his safety briefing. *That’s the confirmation message. The shuttle’s about to launch into orbit.*

Alex felt like it took forever for him to get to this point. He started at the EUF shuttle station located in Arizona’s desert. Once his health was cleared, he and sixty American soldiers boarded a spacecraft that took them to the Reception Station. They docked along with other American ships and some from other nations as well. Once situated, everyone began the in-processing phase. The next day was full of preflight preparation and then assignment to an EUF headquarters. Now, here Alex was, about to travel into the depths of the Milky Way for the first time.

Most people wouldn't be as calm as he was. But Alex had used his journalistic research skills to discover that the pilot had an extensive flight background, which included years of spaceflight experience, so he felt confident that his voyage would take place smoothly.

The pilot flipped three switches on the control panel. "We're launching now," he informed his passengers. Gears cranked. Mechanisms tinked. A cacophony of heavy-sounding mechanical noises, from the shuttle's undercarriage, forced their way into the passenger section. "Here we go." The shuttle's landing wheels spun the craft into motion.

A high-volumed muffled announcement came over the launch bay's loudspeaker. "Shuttle 51, you are a go."

The bay's hydraulic door raised, surrendering the shuttle to the infinite darkness of space. Then a bridge extended from the bay, and intervals of path-indicator lights along the bridge flashed on—one at a time—guiding the shuttle's way.

At minimum-burn, aft thrusters propelled the craft across the bridge, and the landing wheels retracted as the craft left the Reception Station, flying toward its destination.

"Mr. Mercer, take a look-see out your window," the pilot said. "Magnificent, isn't she?"

Alex looked out of the window and down at Earth, where humanity was assisting in its own rapid demise. When viewing Earth from space, one could almost forget the planet was going through its darkest hour; one couldn't see gray clouds caused by environmental contamination or see people's misery. Nevertheless, Earth was indeed within the midst of a crisis, and this crisis threatened the entire planet Alex saw before his eyes, along with all of its inhabitants.

As the vessel sped away from Earth, the planet diminished in size until it finally disappeared from Alex's sight. He wondered if humanity would destroy themselves and the planet, before

they could undertake the mass migration, or survive until the conflict with the Zull was resolved.

“I can’t wait to get back into the fight,” a soldier said to another, breaking Alex’s chain of thought.

“Yeah, me too,” the other soldier said. “That planet is gonna be our Second Earth, not the Zull’s . . . Zulltopia or whatever the hell they plan to call it.”

The deployees, pumped and ready for action, resumed their clamorous chatter.

Alex once again became annoyed, wanting nothing but silence right now, so he could think and reflect.

“Hey,” he said to the pilot, “do you mind if I sit up there with you?” Since a copilot wasn’t required, the seat next to the pilot was vacant. “I was thinking we could seal the cockpit and both get a little peace and quiet.”

“The only ones permitted to be up here are the people doing the flying,” the pilot let Alex know, “but I guess it couldn’t hurt.”

“Thanks.”

Alex grabbed his two bags and climbed to the front. With the pilot’s permission, he palmed the oversized yellow button on the control panel, and a bulkhead came down from the ceiling to divide the cockpit from the passenger section, muting all thirty-four voices.

“Now that’s much better,” the pilot said.

“Definitely,” Alex agreed. To kill time, he took a computer tablet from his bag to read the latest news he had downloaded.

The featured article listed the most likely top five causes for why mankind was in such a dire situation. Number one was war. Number two was global pandemic. “I hate to think about the

countless human beings who've died because of preventable diseases and wars that didn't have to happen," Alex said. In disgust, he tossed the tablet aside. His thoughts began to replay all the horrors he had witnessed. "The things I've seen make me sick to my stomach. Hundreds lying dead in the streets because of sickness that could have been cured. Innocent women and children being mowed down by crossfire simply because they just so happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time." The expression written on Alex's face personified his anger.

The pilot looked at him and said, "Well, you know, Earth's population seemed to be growing kinda fast. But the wars and diseases that helped produce The Great Crisis wiped out a bunch of people. Some say, since the planet can't sustain over a certain amount of people, maybe disease and war are a good thing."

Alex's brow furrowed, his teeth clenched, and his nails dug into his palms as his hands became shivering fists. "Neither is a good thing, *especially* war." He began to hear the bullets and the screaming children. He began seeing the women who had been raped, the brutal massacres, and the streets that became blood-rivers.

"You're a pacifist, huh?" the pilot speculated.

"Kind of, and for a *damn* good reason."

Alex seemed to have inherited the pain and suffering of those whose lives and livelihoods had been destroyed, causing him to often voice his disapproval of war through television and his online articles, whenever appropriate.

After a minute, the outrage burning inside him went from a wildfire to a flicker as the terrible memories imploding his mind faded.

For him, suggesting that war could be a useful type of population control was unthinkable. His

view was that most wars were an awful solution to global dissensions—a solution that only destroyed lives and caused grief, when the tensions could have been resolved another way.

Earth's last two World Wars had definitely caused their share of death and grief, and those wars had certainly helped reduce the planet's population greatly. But who knew: maybe another World War would annihilate the population completely—if the conflict between Zull and humanity didn't accomplish the feat beforehand.

“You got a wife and kids, Mr. Mercer?” the pilot asked, curious to know.

“Me? No, haven't met the right woman.”

“I have. Here, see for yourself.” The pilot handed Alex a photograph. The photo showed a woman in her mid-thirties holding the hand of a smiling blue-eyed seven-year-old girl. “That's my wife and daughter. Beautiful, aren't they?”

“They are.” Alex gave the photo back to the pilot.

“I've been busy running shuttles back and forth from Earth, flying soldiers home and bringing their replacements, so I haven't been home lately. I knew I would stay occupied when I signed up to work as a transporter for the EUF, but I'll be requesting my entitled two-week vacation in a couple of days.”

“That's good. I've been intending to go to Delaware to visit my cousin, Jessica. She's twenty-five, works as a lawyer. We don't always get along, but I call her when I get time.”

“Try to maintain a good relationship with members of your family. Relationships are what gets us through these troublesome eras.”

Alex nodded his head in agreement. “I second that.”

The pilot activated the auto navigation system and reclined his seat. “I'm taking a nap. Enjoy

the scenery while you can because when the shuttle goes into Hyper Stream Travel, in about six minutes, everything's gonna be nothing but a blur." The pilot shut his eyes and fell asleep shortly thereafter.

Alex gazed into the black sea again. He had heard that many rookie EUF soldiers being sent to the New World on their first deployment were frightened of space travel. Alex assumed this was because if a shuttle malfunctioned during spaceflight, its passengers would be forever lost to the never-ending void of space. They would die of starvation or suffocation. Maybe the thought of such a slow death was why many new EUF soldiers were frightened of adventuring into outer space for their very first time. But Alex felt relaxed within this dark encirclement. Space gave Alex a feeling of tranquility that he could rarely obtain on chaotic Earth.

After reveling in the calmness of space, Alex turned his head away from the window and lay back in his seat. Sleep's calling then weighted his eyelids, so he closed them and slept comfortably as the fuzzy blue haze of the Hyper Stream enveloped the craft.

On October 08, Alex joined the pilot in the sealed-off cockpit one last time, for atmospheric entry.

Turbulence jolted the shuttle. Equipment in the cargo hold thumped and rattled. A series of button presses and a slight change in vector settings stabilized the craft's descent.

As the shuttle dove onto the planet, a thrill of excitement shot through Alex. *This is it, Second Earth*, he silently exulted while looking at the blue sky and vibrant sun that greeted him.

Below, he saw a utopian valley. It was a wondrous place that hadn't been tainted by asphalt, concrete, steel structures, exhaust fumes, and toxic materials. Its pristine nature was something to behold, and Alex felt grateful to be one of the few who would see it this way.

While flying over another area of the planet, Alex saw the foundations of some of mankind's next cities amidst a treeless meadow. Though most of the planet had yet to be touched by the hands of mankind, three years worth of construction had taken place, and it was the EUF's mission to secure the planet and defend all construction sites from Zull attacks, as Earth's nations began colonization. Their mission was to also seek out and destroy the Zull's military factions, hidden amongst different Regions of the planet. The Zull forces' mission was to do the same. So the EUF and Zull attacked each other's construction sites and military bases, determined to not let the opposite race dominate the planet.

Since both races had ground satellites that kept their bases and city-development sites cloaked from each other's devices, they had to send scout teams on long search-and-find expeditions to locate them. And because it took days, weeks, or months to come across a single base or construction site, the Exodus Conflict was a war where days, weeks, or months would go by without a single firefight for EUF factions, but when battles happened, they were vicious.

However, the EUF had a tougher time defending their territories than the Zull did. This was because the Zull had the uncanny ability to connect with their environment and take on its characteristics, giving them special abilities and also allowing them to blend in with their surroundings to get the jump on EUF soldiers on guard.

After dealing with the guards, the Zull would go on to completely annihilate all structures within the EUF's vicinity: military bases and/or construction sites.

After a year and a half of blood-filled battles, the Zull's attacks on EUF construction sites and military bases declined substantially. Six months then went by without much conflict. This led the EUF to believe their enemy was on the verge of defeat, but a sudden upsurge in Zull attacks

proved their theory wrong. The Zull started striking more fiercely and frequently than ever before. The planet then became no longer safe for noncombatants. So, about three months ago, all construction crews and land surveyors were sent home, leaving the EUF with only one task now: to scour the planet for Zull factions and exterminate them.

Throughout all of this conflict, though, one question has plagued the thoughts of a few EUF soldiers. That question was: if the EUF had satellites that could hide their bases from the Zull, wouldn't that mean they had some technology that could rival theirs? These few EUF soldiers began to think there was some truth to conspiracy theorists' claims that nations had acquired alien technology from a previous encounter with extraterrestrial beings. Even some of the weapons the EUF was using seemed a little ahead of humanity's time. But most EUF soldiers didn't buy into superstition.

Anxiously waiting for the shuttle to touch down, Alex caught a glimpse of something flashing past his side-door window, from the corner of his eye. He thought it might have been a figment of his imagination, but he turned his head to the window and took a better look to see if it wasn't.

He saw something zipping in and out of the clouds, playing hide and seek with his eyes. Suddenly, not one but two . . . *things* darted past the cockpit window. Speechless, Alex's jaw dropped. The flying forms he saw were massive and transparent-looking. And they had what appeared to be glowing threads coursing through them. Whatever they were, they were real. "What in the world are they?" Alex's heartbeat went into overdrive.

"Don't get scared," the pilot said to Alex with a chuckle. "I've seen these things a couple of times; they're friendly."

A tide of relief settled over Alex.

The birds waltzed across the sky effortlessly, keeping pace with the shuttle. Their eight-yard wing span and slanting eyes peering into the cockpit window caused Alex a surreal moment. These birds certainly didn't exist on Earth. As a matter of fact, many birds and other wildlife no longer existed on Earth at all. Their habitats had been destroyed in the desperate search for things mankind couldn't live without, such as fossil fuels.

"We'll be on the ground shortly," the pilot informed all the soldiers over the intercom.

Somehow, the birds' undulating, vibrating bodies played a heavenly melody of chimes. Alex could have lost himself in its enchantment for hours, but as the shuttle made its way to the surface, the songbirds ended their duet and jettisoned into the blue. Seeming to feed off the rays of the sun, the threads of light coursing through them crackled, and the birds became streaks of light as they headed toward the bright star's warm embrace.

Maybe they live there, Alex speculated. Maybe they did and this celestial species of bird just paid the planet a visit every now and then.

The pilot steadied the shuttle thirty feet above a grassy field and brought her down slowly.

Once the craft became stationary, Alex unbuckled his seatbelt, took hold of his door's side-rail, and pulled himself up to stretch. After expelling the stiffness from his body, he took a good look outside, through the cockpit window. With a keen eye, he noticed there wasn't an EUF soldier in sight, nor were there any facilities. He only saw dense forest. "Why are we in the middle of nowhere?" he asked the pilot.

"We're at the outskirts of the Forest Region. I got fifteen in the back who're gonna be stationed at the EUF's base here."

Like the Zull, all of the EUF's factions were located in different Regions, and each faction had

their own base of operations, which the EUF simply called HQs. The soldiers who would be serving with the faction in the Forest Region were lucky to have such a beautiful land to call home.

“What base am I going to?” Alex asked. He wished he had been told more about his arrangements, but the personnel at the Reception Station simply gave him a shuttle number and told him to have a nice flight.

“The base you’re gonna be staying at is located in the nearby Desert Region, which is only about a one-hour drive from where we are,” the pilot answered Alex. “If everything’s been worked out like it should, a soldier from your base is coming to take you the rest of the way.”

“Good.” Looking outside, all appeared to be peaceful, to Alex. “I gotta say, for a war zone, it doesn’t look too dangerous out there.”

“Don’t be fooled by what you see,” the pilot warned him. “Second Earth is a battlefield that’s as dangerous as hell.”

It may not seem like it but he must be right.

The pilot pressed a button on the control panel. Alex’s door dropped open and fell to the ground with a *thunk*, becoming a ramp. “It was nice meeting you, but this is where you get off.”

Alex grabbed his two bags and hoisted them over his shoulder. “I enjoyed the trip. Maybe we’ll meet again someday.” Coming down the ramp, the sun’s warmth kissed his skin, and a breeze whisked by, rustling bushes and tree leaves.

As his eyes explored his surroundings, he became wowed by the riot of colors he saw: plants that were multiple variations of red, orange, purple, and green; some were of colors he had never seen before. *Amazing*, was the first word that came to his mind. He closed his eyes and caught a

delightful whiff of the grass-scented air as he became suffused with awe and wonder.

The fifteen soldiers to be stationed in this Region exited the craft. Three vehicles rolled up to pick them up. Their commanding officer stepped out of one of them and welcomed his new men to the Forest Region. They saluted him, jumped on board, and rode away.

Powering up the shuttle's engines, the pilot waved farewell from the cockpit window. The shuttle then lifted into the sky, leaving Alex alone among the mountains, lakes, and endless forest. While exhilarated by such beauty, he wondered if mankind had truly learned from its mistakes, or would this planet, too, inevitably be destined for ruin?

A feathered, winged animal glided down and perched itself on a tree branch to rest from its travel, but the sputter of a vehicle engine frightened it, causing it to burst into a succession of caws as it flapped away.

A soldier, with close-cropped brown hair, wearing a pair of EUF Desert Camouflage Fatigues (DCF) drove up in a Combat Rover (EUF off-road jeep) and parked beside Alex. He got out and walked up to him. "I'm Scott Myers, your escort. I need to see your journalist credentials; it's just a formality."

Alex let his bags slide from his shoulder into the grass. Then he pulled a card from his jeans' pocket and handed it to Scott.

He took the card, glimpsed at it, and gave it back to Alex. "Mercer? Hold on, I know you." Scott had seen Alex on NYN News broadcasts. "That's right, you're that war correspondent for New York Network News."

"Yeah, that's me."

Scott went to the Rover, grabbed a duffle bag from the passenger seat, and prepared to throw it

to Alex. “Here, catch.”

Alex held out his arms, palms up.

Scott slung the bag through the air. It slammed into Alex’s chest and dropped into his arms.

“Sorry, I forgot I need to be more gentle with you civilians,” Scott said.

“Don’t worry, I’m not as fragile as you might think.” Alex opened the bag. Inside was a protective vest.

“Put that on,” Scott ordered. “Even though we’re inside the EUF’s territory within the Forest Region and the likelihood of Zull forces getting past our border is slim, anything’s possible. So, if we do run into some trouble, you’ll need it.”

Alex did as told. “This vest is a nice fit.”

“Good. Don’t take it off until we reach our destination. I’ve learned from experience what a lifesaver that vest can be.”

The two new acquaintances jumped into the Combat Rover. Scott flipped the ignition switch. The engine cranked and purred. Then the Rover sped away on an unpaved path, tires spinning up a cloud of dirt.

It was unusual for Alex not to be surrounded by bustling city life. Instead, trees and the ravishing scenery of flourishing plant life encompassed him in a silence that would make anyone feel at ease. *I could stay in this wilderness forever*, he thought as wind frolicked his short wavy hair.

A vicious explosion boomed, breaking the silence. Alex’s brief period of peace was over.

“What the hell is going on?” he yelled over the noise.

Scott slammed on the brakes, sending the vehicle to a screeching halt that nearly jerked Alex

from his seat, as more explosions went off. “It sounds like a unit is engaged in combat against a couple of Zull scout teams, a few kilometers outside our territory’s border,” he answered.

“Zull scout teams? I’m guessing their purpose is to find EUF headquarters and do recon,” Alex said, making an intelligent guess that was right on the money.

Two fighter jets roared overhead as they cut the clouds.

Scott tilted his head skyward and used a hand to shield his eyes from the blinding gleam of the sun. “Yep, I was right. I thought those sounded like Shrikes. They’re flying toward the origin of those explosions.”

Alex looked up at the EUF fighter jets. They had sweptback wings, and they were dark and sleek.

These jets were armed with state-of-the-art weaponry. The EUF had no aircraft as swift, maneuverable, and as lethal as these.

“Wherever that battle is, it’s one hell of a fight if they’re sending Shrikes,” Scott said. The jets zoomed out of viewing range.

More earth-tremoring explosions boomed. Pillars of gray smoke rose beyond the distant mountains. Alex didn’t know which side was winning, but he did know lives were being lost and that the planet was reaping the repercussions of the battle.

Scott stepped on the accelerator. “I don’t wanna get behind schedule. We need to be on our way.”

The sounds of the explosions reminded Alex not to become too comfortable. The New World was a planet where two warring races were trying to annihilate each other, and he could easily be caught in the crosshairs of the conflict. As the shuttle pilot had warned him, the planet—despite

its peaceful appearance—was a battlefield that was “as dangerous as hell.”

CHAPTER TWO

Cold Gray Eyes

SCOTT WAS NOW driving through the Desert Region, a place the exact opposite of the lush landscape where he had picked up Alex not so long ago.

Even here Alex was marveled by all he saw. Towering dunes replaced the mountains. Furry critters popped in and out of their burrows, alarmed by the chugging of the Rover's engine. Grains of sand became animated as whatever slithered beneath scoured their way across the desolate landscape. For a Region so dry and bare, it was full of wonder.

"Alex, you must be incredibly brave, or stupid," Scott commented.

"Why is that?"

"Only a handful of journalists have made it back to Earth alive. Either they got caught in crossfire, killed by friendly fire, stepped on a mine, died in the wilderness, whatever. That's why I say you've got guts."

"Thanks, but how much longer do we have before we reach the base?"

"Not long at all. It's right there." Scott pointed to an EUF headquarters several miles ahead of them.

The base Alex was being taken to was HQ One. The mission of the HQ One faction was to exterminate the Zull in the Desert Region and surrounding Regions as well. But since they had only thirteen units (combat teams), each one consisting of fifty troops, and only one air platoon, HQ One didn't have the manpower other factions had. Nevertheless, the soldiers and airmen of

this faction were some of the finest. Alex was in good hands.

Scott stopped the vehicle at the checkpoint in front of the tall wall that protected the base. The wall was a hideous melding of rusted scrap metals. Parts of it were speckled with dents; other parts weren't so dented. And the entire wall was lined with coils of barbed wire that looked like it had been salvaged from a junkyard. It wasn't the most durable wall, or pretty one, but apparently it was good enough to do the job, or the EUF didn't want to release any of its funds to make a more attack-resistant one. Most of those funds went toward the development of new weaponry.

A soldier stepped out from the security booth and asked Scott for the proper password. After receiving an answer of "Nightfall," he spoke into his radio. "Bryant to watchtower, Private Myers from Unit Two is back. Open the gate."

"Roger," came over the radio, garbled with static.

The automated gate clinked and creaked as it retracted on its guiding rail.

"I know it looks like crap but it's home," Scott said, once the base had been revealed.

HQ One wasn't what Alex had thought it would be. It was a shabby concrete building surrounded by a couple of tents and munition sheds, but HQ One wasn't exclusive. All of the EUF's bases were like this. And they all had the same interior make up: low-grade quarters, a few bleak conference rooms, a mess hall, and an infirmary—on a single floor. However, the bases had been drastically improved compared to the way they were at the start of the war. During that time, the soldiers barely had electricity and running water, but with patience and steel resolve, they were able to live with the below-standard conditions while enhancements were made. They fully understood that the EUF was at war and had to put together these installations fast, so they "embraced the suck," as they had to.

Scott drove into Terminal B through a well-lit surface tunnel and made a hard left into a motor pool full of armored vehicles. The Rover squealed to a stop, between two yellow lines, in lot 5.

Scott switched off the ignition. The engine whined down, and he hopped out in a hurry. “We need to get a move on.”

Alex pulled off his vest, opened his door, and slid out.

He surveyed the terminal, eyes shifting all around. There was a buzz of activity. High-powered hoses—operated by mechanics—gushed sand-dusted vehicles with blasts of water, in the wash pit. Soldiers conducted Preventive Maintenance Checks and Services (PMCS) on Rovers. A convoy rolled in, the smell of exhaust adding to the already oil-scented air.

A dusky-skinned female mechanic in a pair of blue faded coveralls left her worktable full of engine parts and came to Scott’s side. “Who’s your new friend here?” she asked, her Puerto Rican accent overtly noticeable.

“Just another journalist,” he responded.

The mechanic toweled her grease-stained hands. “First one in quite some time. He gonna be hanging with you misfits?”

“Nah, I think Bryson’s got him with Unit One.” Scott glanced at his watch. “Hey, I’m on a tight schedule. I gotta get him to where he needs to be.” Duty before pleasure; Scott would have plenty of time to mingle with his lady friend later.

“Okay. See ya tonight in my quarters?” She winked.

“Oh yeah, I’ll be there.”

She blew Scott a kiss and went about her business.

“Come on, Alex,” Scott said, “Commander Bryson’s expecting you.”

HQ One was a Joint Forces Base, meaning soldiers from at least two nations made up the army here. It happened to be comprised of British and American forces. A few other nations also lent a couple of their soldiers, so while walking through the windowless arched corridors with Scott Myers, Alex saw men and women of several different nationalities. This was perhaps the most positive outcome to emerge from the armed conflict with the Zull. Nations that were previously at war with each other—and still harbored deep seeds of resentment—were fighting together for a common cause.

However, there were soldiers who felt uneasy fighting side by side with soldiers from nations that had played a role in the deaths of great numbers of people from their own nation. Earth's previous wars had created scars for many, but the formation of the EUF had begun the healing process. And the EUF gave Alex hope that maybe, just maybe, peaceful coexistence between the Zull and humanity could also be achieved. Because if all of these nations—which had fought each other during the last two major wars—could strike a truce, why not Zull and humanity?

Alex continued to see more Joint Forces soldiers pass him by. “When I think about it, Scott, it's kind of ironic.”

“What is, Alex?”

“After years of war, what unites the nations of Earth is a war.”

“Hey, it doesn't matter how things work out, only that they do.” Scott had almost forgotten the next step in protocol for a new arrival. “Oh, that's right, you need to go to the infirmary for your checkup. We have to make sure you're fit to be out there when the fireworks start.”

“My health was okayed at the shuttle station on Earth,” Alex said, cocking an eyebrow, wondering why he had to go through a *second* health assessment.

“Another health check is required upon arrival, just to make sure nothing was missed. It’s procedure.”

“Fine,” Alex grumbled.

Scott pointed to a set of doors. “The infirmary is through there. I’ll be out here in the corridor.”

Entering the infirmary, Alex’s senses were bombarded. He heard a fusion of multiple conversations from nurses and doctors. He saw patients being rolled in left and right, and the acrid scent of sterilizing chemicals invaded his nostrils, causing him to crinkle his nose.

“Hey,” Alex said, flagging down a doctor, “I’m here for . . .”

The doctor turned to him—every muscle in his face pulsing with tension, his grizzled hair drenched in sweat. “Not now! Can’t you see I’m busy?”

Alex backed away. “Yeah . . . sorry.”

Doctors and nurses with stern faces moved purposefully about the all-white room—hurrying here and there, blending into each other.

Adding to the commotion, an aggravating scream erupted from the Patient Recovery ward—piercing everyone’s eardrums.

“This way, come on,” said a male nurse to four others, moving at break-neck speed in Alex’s direction. “That didn’t sound good.”

Alex clambered aside so they wouldn’t run him over. *This place is a madhouse*, he thought as they blurred by.

Though the infirmary was perhaps the most polished and up-to-date facility inside HQ One, at times it was also the most disturbing. Being in this place right now creaped Alex out.

Suddenly, the clacking of high heels approached.

“Can I help you?” a warm, welcoming voice said throughout the overlapping noises of gurneys squealing by, patient screams, and ambient beeps and clicking of machinery.

Alex turned to his left and saw a woman around thirty years of age, sporting a white lab coat, thin oval glasses, and curly dark brown hair that fell halfway down her back. “I sure hope you can, ma’am.”

The woman’s beaming smile made her stick out like a sore thumb amongst all the stern faces drifting throughout the room. It was a smile that often made patients feel safe in her care. “Hello, I’m Dr. Linda McKinnon,” she introduced herself.

Dr. McKinnon’s bright smile and kind voice started to melt away the creepy feeling Alex got from being in this place. “Hi, I’m Alex Mercer,” he said, closing the distance between him and the doctor.

She was surprised that the well-known journalist was here. “The reporter for NYN News?”

“Yeah. I just got here. I was told to come in for a checkup.”

Two doctors blew by wheeling a soldier on a gurney, who had nothing but a wrapped-up bloody stump where his hand once was.

Alex cringed, thinking about the soldier’s pain.

“Sorry you came at such a busy time,” Dr. McKinnon said. “We *just* had some soldiers from our faction and another medevaced in from a joint mission. And since we’re extremely tied up, a lot of us are racing back and forth like madmen.” She looked at the blood that had leaked onto the floor from the limb. “Just a warning, things can get rather . . . graphic around here, so you might see some more . . . unpleasant stuff.”

Alex thought about what he had seen during World War IV. “Don’t worry, I’m used to seeing

blood and guts, though such gruesome sights still cause me to cringe.”

“Yeah, me too.” Thinking about all the “gruesome sights” she had seen here in the infirmary, Dr. McKinnon shut her eyes and bit her lower lip. Her voice saddened. “Can’t wait for this war to end so people can stop . . . dying.” She became quiet for ten silent seconds, remembering the dead, and then used her finger to trace a cross over her heart. Getting back to business, she opened her eyes and pulled a slimline data pad from the pocket of her lab coat. “Just let me confirm that you’re on my list and we’ll get started.” She tapped the screen with her well-manicured nail. The text magnified. Then her eyes skimmed down a roster of names onscreen. “There you are.”

“Dr. McKinnon,” a voice blasted over the ceiling loudspeaker, “you are needed in Patient Recovery. I repeat, you are needed in Patient Recovery.”

“*Damn it,*” Dr. McKinnon said, “I can’t catch a break. I’ll be back shortly, okay?”

“Take your time.”

“Thanks. Don’t go anywhere.”

“I won’t.”

Alex watched Dr. McKinnon maneuver her tall, slender frame through the jumble of doctors and nurses racing back and forth from different areas. After she glided across the square-tiled floor and around a corner to another part of the infirmary, leaving his peripheral vision, he glanced around for the waiting area and spotted it amongst all the moving bodies.

He went behind a wall of plexiglass to a row of chairs. There, he saw a petite young soldier sitting by herself.

Because she was in the infirmary to get a physical done, she wasn’t in full uniform. She wore a

sleeveless black shirt with her desert-camo pants, and the shirt was tight against her skin, revealing some flab that tugged at her waistline.

Squeamish from seeing all the injured bodies being brought in, she nervously twiddled, in her fingertips, threads of the light brown ponytail draped across her shoulder.

Alex knew she had to be a newbie, a fresh soldier who hadn't seen the carnage that seasoned soldiers had. She could even still be a trainee.

The young soldier hand-flipped her ponytail behind her back, crossed her arms, and started shuddering while tapping her foot. She was probably now asking herself just what she had gotten into, like Alex during the invasion of Seoul.

Not the type to be a stranger, and he himself familiar with the emotions going through her mind, Alex decided to keep her company and try to calm her nerves.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" he asked, lowering himself in the chair beside her.

Startled, the girl jumped. She answered him in a low, shy voice that was almost a squeak. "Um . . . not at all, sir."

"Where are you from?"

"North Carolina."

"You're awfully young. How old are you?"

"I had my eighteenth birthday three months ago."

"How long have you been fighting the war?" Alex asked next, to see if she was indeed a newbie or trainee.

"I'm actually still a trainee," she said. Alex's journalistic instincts were right. "I finished half of my training on Earth, and I'm currently finishing up the other half here on Second Earth. After

I'm done, I'll be assigned to a unit."

"Be careful, war is no playground," Alex cautioned.

"So I've been told." The girl's eyelids stretched. "Hey, have we met?" She thought hard about where she had seen Alex. On TV, obviously. "I recognize you." Her ruddy cheeks seemed to become even puffier as an adorable smile pulled on the corners of her mouth. "You're Alex Mercer." She was delighted to meet the famous journalist in person.

"That would be me," Alex said, offering his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Miss . . . ?"

"Christina Love." She extended her arm, which was not refined by any musclebuilding whatsoever, and opened a palm of stubby fingers. She clasped Alex's hand.

He noticed her handshake didn't have the biting grip most soldiers had; it was gentle, like her. And looking into her bright hazel eyes, he didn't see the fervor for battle that he saw in a lot of other soldiers' eyes. There was a child-like innocence in hers; they were too kind. Being such a sweet person, he hoped she had what it took to be an EUF soldier . . . what it took to kill.

Not letting go of her grip on his hand, a cryptic expression passed over Christina's face. "You and I . . . are the same. I can feel it. I'm not alone."

Alex's eyebrows drew together in a look of bafflement. "What do you . . . ?"

Before Alex could finish asking his question, Dr. McKinnon came into the waiting area and motioned for him to come with her. "Alright, you're up, Mr. Mercer," she said, forehead moist with sweat. She peeled off a pair of blood-stained latex gloves and toe-touched the foot-pedal of a trash can. The lid popped open. Then she dropped the gloves inside.

"Don't worry, I think we'll meet again," Christina said to Alex. She could tell he wanted to stay and finish their conversation.

In the Patient Care ward of the infirmary, Alex sat down in a chair and waited for Dr. McKinnon to begin his Health and Physical (H&P). “Being a doctor for a military base in a war zone, you see plenty of injured men and women, don’t you?” he asked conversationally.

“I do,” Dr. McKinnon said, taking off her lab coat, unveiling the knee-high navy blue skirt underneath. “Some soldiers brought here have minor injuries, like cuts and bruises. Some have not so minor injuries,” she said, adding, “really, really not so minor injuries.”

“I can imagine. You’ve seen some men and women die in this room, haven’t you?”

The doctor hooked her coat on the wall. “I have. It’s very heartbreaking to see people so young fighting to hold on to life.” She went to a computer console and keyed in name, time, and date of patient being seen. “A lot of times, I’m the last person they lay their eyes on. But I take great pride in knowing I do everything I can to save people from dying.”

Alex sometimes wondered why people chose their profession. But when he thought about the somber tone of Dr. McKinnon’s voice when she said she couldn’t wait for this war to end so people could stop dying, and when he thought about her tracing that cross over her heart, he definitely knew what made her choose her profession: compassion for people’s lives. “You’re passionate about what you do and the role you play in people’s lives,” Alex commented. “You’re the kind of person I’d like to have as my doctor.”

She stopped entering data on the computer and looked over her shoulder at him, curls tumbling across her face. “Why thank you.” There was that smile again—so powerful, so comforting.

“No need to thank me. I was just being honest.” Alex really did wish that McKinnon was his doctor. She was personable. And she was selfless and empathetic; she saw her patients’ pain as her own. Not to mention he thought she was easy on the eyes.

A medic rolled a stretcher through Patient Care's opened doors. Alex watched as he took the body bag on it through a set of automatic sliding doors and disappeared into a chilling mist.

Feeling a cold draft crawl over his skin, Alex stood and rubbed his arms.

Dr. McKinnon's beautiful smile of stainless snow-white teeth had faded, and she had closed her eyes, not wanting to see the bag as it passed. After hearing the doors clank shut and feeling the cold draft dissipate, she reopened them. "You would think I'd be used to seeing body bags, but I continue to get chills up and down my spine when I see them."

"That's understandable." Alex looked at the sign posted over the automatic sliding doors: WARNING! FREEZING TEMPERATURES BEYOND THIS POINT! "Where was that medic going with that body?"

"He was taking it to Cryogenics. Bodies are stored inside conservation capsules and frozen, so they can stay preserved for the flight back to Earth, where a proper burial and funeral then takes place."

"Cryogenics doesn't sound like a place I would want to be a part of my tour of the building."

"If I were you, I wouldn't want it to be either. Let's go ahead and get you checked out."

Once Alex's health had been cleared and it was confirmed that he didn't carry any strain of Earth's newest diseases (some communicable, some not), he returned to the patient waiting area to see if Christina was still there, but she was nowhere in sight. I wonder what that girl meant when she said we were the same.

* * *

Base commanders were the ones in charge. They created strategies and kept world leaders informed with progress reports. No one could argue that Eric Bryson, an American lieutenant

colonel, wasn't the perfect choice to be commander of the EUF's HQ One.

He had served with honor during the last two World Wars, and his leadership had led troops to victory on more than one occasion. He was definitely qualified for the job.

Scott entered the office of Commander Bryson. He turned a sharp right face on the uncarpeted floor and walked up to the commander's metal-frame desk. Scott then froze and rendered a salute. "Private Myers reporting as ordered, *Sir*."

Bryson rendered his salute and Scott dropped his, crisply. "Report," Bryson said in a rough-edged tone of voice—like this was just an unneeded distraction that he was more than ready to dispense with, so he could attend to more important matters.

"The civilian journalist from Earth is ready to see you, Sir. He's outside your door."

"Send him in," Bryson said coldly.

Scott opened the door and told Alex, "The commander is ready to see you."

Alex walked in and saw the dark-skinned hefty commander sitting upright at his desk, his posture straight and dignified. He was dressed in a military coat decorated with ribbons of valor, he was clean-shaven from head to chin, and his bold face spoke of courage.

Behind his desk was a wall plastered with medals and certificates of achievement. But what mattered more to him than anything on that wall was the photographed portrait that hung above his window. The woman and the two children in it were his life, his reason for breathing. His wife, Sheila, and two eleven-year-old sons were what had sustained him throughout his long military career with the U.S. Army and now the EUF.

Alex went up to Bryson's desk and began to introduce himself. "Hello, sir, I'm . . ."

Before Alex could finish, Bryson cut his introduction short. "Yes, I know who you are. Your

dossier tells me everything about you.” He spoke with command presence, every word demanding you keep quiet and listen. And his voice was deeper than the Grand Canyon. It seemed like if he raised it, it would cause echoes to journey from his office throughout every hall in the building.

Bryson read from a computer tablet. “You’re originally from Phoenix, Arizona, which is where you spent your childhood and most of your teens. As an adult, you’ve worked for various news organizations, and you got your major break in the profession by working as a journalist for NYN News, located in New York City, where you currently reside. And now you’re here to cover this war from a firsthand perspective, but this isn’t anything new for you, seeing as how you covered certain events of World War IV. Have I misstated anything, Mr. Mercer?”

“Sounds about right,” Alex answered with asperity. He was a bit angry because he was interrupted during his cordial greeting.

“Journalism *can* be dangerous. What made you choose it as a profession?”

“I have my reasons.”

Bryson grew tired of the chitchat. “I can see you’re not one for smalltalk. Well, neither am I. Let’s get down to business.” He was always to the point and never liked wasting time.

Even his movements were to the point. With stiff, quick motions, he opened a drawer of his desk and tossed Alex an ID badge.

“What’s this for?” Alex asked him.

“That ID badge is the key to your room. If you’re caught in the middle of a firefight and get killed, that badge is how we identify your body, if you haven’t been blown to scraps.”

Alex clipped the ID to his shirt pocket. “Any areas of this facility I need to stay away from?”

“Areas that would be off limits to you can only be accessed by someone with a military ID. So don’t worry about accidentally straying into an area outside your parameters.”

“Good. I guess I’ll head to my quarters now,” Alex said, turning away to leave.

“I think you should get acquainted with your assigned unit *first*,” Bryson said in a freezing tone.

Alex paused and spun back around. “My assigned unit?”

“Yes, the team of soldiers you’ll be allowed to accompany on missions, giving you the opportunity to cover this war from firsthand experience. They will be responsible for your safety.”

“Where do I go to meet this team?” Alex asked, ready to go ahead and get “acquainted” so he could go to his quarters and get some rest. It had been a tiring day already.

“Your unit leader is awaiting you in Terminal C. Private Myers will point you in the right direction.” Bryson began silently organizing the papers littering his desk, obviously dismissing Alex.

The journalist looked up at the portrait of the two smiling boys and the fine-looking woman whose brown skin, full lips, and deep-set ebony eyes would leave an imprint in his mind for days to come. “She’s captivating.”

“No kidding,” Bryson said. He thought the world of his wife. After giving Alex a hard look that basically translated to “get the fuck going,” the journalist turned and left with Scott. Bryson then resumed his work.

* * *

Alex began wandering around Terminal C, looking for the leader of the unit he was assigned

to.

He staggered over a mass of fuel-tank hoses splayed across the floor. *Damn it.* He cringed at the screech, clink, clatter, and buzz of mechanics' devices and tools servicing and prepping vehicles for combat, in the motor pool. *Where's this guy I'm supposed to meet? It would've been nice if the commander had told me what he looks like.* Just then, a woman of a soft, pale complexion, who appeared to be around his age, approached him.

Light blond hair raking her shoulders, she moved as if anything in her way would get bulldozed, and her stare was direct, laser-focused on Alex.

Soldiers she passed snapped to the position of attention quickly—as if they didn't, they would get the cussing of a lifetime, and probably would. Then they gave her the greeting of the day: “Good afternoon, Ma'am.”

Alex noticed her DCF was neat and proper. The desert-camo cargo pants and short-sleeved shirt were well-pressed, and the boots were spotless. She looked professional to a T, upholding EUF standards.

Could she be the soldier I'm looking for? Alex asked himself.

As she came closer, he wondered what kind of reception he would get, but her cold, soul-piercing gray eyes answered that question for him. This woman wasn't someone who was all smiles and giggles.

The woman put a hand on her hip and took a good look at Alex, trying to determine if this noncombatant would slow down her unit.

He didn't like the look on her face right now. It wasn't quite a frown, but almost. And her icy eyes were glaring holes through his pupils. It was the look of someone who *really* didn't want to

be bothered with tag-along civilians.

After a few seconds, she discontinued her vetting and decided he didn't look completely hopeless, but she told herself she would watch him closely.

"I'm Unit One's leader, Lieutenant Andrea Blair," the woman introduced herself in an elegant British accent. "You must be Mr. Mercer." Alex extended his hand, but he was rebuffed. Andrea rudely turned her back—basically giving him the middle finger—and quickly walked toward what is known as a Multi-Terrain Assault Vehicle (MTAV). "Come with me, Mr. Mercer. You might as well join my two men and me on our intelligence gathering op. And please do keep up." She walked forward with a sense of urgency, like there was no time to waste.

Trailing Andrea, Alex contemplated her beauty. She was eye-catching, definitely a head-turner in his opinion—an opinion he assumed many men shared. But he wasn't sure if what was on the inside matched the outside, because her demeanor wasn't the least bit cordial, and her bright gray eyes were fixating yet so emotionless . . . so . . . *cold*.

Andrea guided Alex to the MTAV's control room, where two members of her unit stood ready to introduce themselves.

First up was a Tennessean in his late twenties, who had sky blue eyes and blond hair that was tapered into a crew cut. "The name's Bobby Dixon." He extended an arm painted in tattoos.

"Hi, I'm Alex Mercer, NYN News journalist," Alex responded, shaking the corporal's hand. "You might have seen me on TV before."

"I have." Standing behind Bobby was the other soldier. He was tall, toned, and had skin of a dark brown complexion. "My fearsome comrade here is Sergeant First Class Tyrell Reese, leader of Unit One's first squad—and a fella even I wouldn't wanna go head-to-head with," Bobby said,

giving his friend the props he deserved. He then slid aside so Alex could get acquainted with Tyrell too.

Tyrell took a heavy step forward and stroked a hand down his well-trimmed goatee, wondering the same thing Andrea had wondered: would this civilian be a liability and slow down the unit? Tyrell was a reasonable man. He told himself to let time tell.

He clasped Alex's hand and shook. "I've seen you on the news a lot. Nice to meet you in person."

Damn, that's some handshake, Alex thought, resisting the urge to massage his hand. It felt like he was gonna break my bones. Definitely looks like this guy could, if he wanted.

Tyrell's strong build gave Alex the impression that Bobby was right; he wasn't someone to be messed with. But Alex couldn't know that not only was this Chicagoan a strong fighter; he was also a smart and calm, by-the-book individual who always thought things through. Tyrell was a combination of intelligence and physical power, which made him one of Unit One's best.

"I'm sure we'll all get along well," Alex said.

Rolling amid the barren desert on auto drive, the MTAV's spiked caterpillar tracks grinded large rocks into pebbles and pummeled anything in its wake. This massive armored juggernaut was an unstoppable weapon of destruction. The word "tank" couldn't even describe it. It had the firepower to level a town.

Alex stood inside the spacious interior of this behemoth combat vehicle with his face pinned to a circular window and his hands gripped across a rail, while everyone else sat. "Just how hot is it out here?" he asked, over the MTAV's rickety thumping and clunking noises.

"The temperature is currently ninety degrees and can become even hotter before the day is

over,” Andrea informed him quick and sharply, her tone stiff and frigid. “Of course, this heat is nothing for a Zull. Their bodies, according to Global Research Center, adapt to weather conditions, just like cold-blooded animals.” That was it; she spat out the information Alex wanted and went back to being silent. The look on her face said she wasn’t in the mood for any sort of cordial get-to-know-you talk, and though Alex had thought about trying to strike up a conversation with her a minute ago, he dare not try now.

As the ride to the mission objective continued, Alex noticed that, unless spoken to, Andrea wasn’t saying a word—remaining statuesque—whereas Bobby and Tyrell chatted and joked occasionally. Also, her face either stayed expressionless or had a scowl on it.

He wondered why she was such an unsocial loner, not engaging in any sort of conversation with her comrades. And he wondered why her face continued to be dead of any sort of emotion, besides anger. While trying to figure her out, he glanced at her every now and then, and couldn’t help but admire the symmetry of her face—jawline creating narrow angles. However, when she finally caught him eying her, a glare from her cold gray eyes sent his stare retreating toward the window.

“I’m curious,” Alex started, “just how many Zull bases do we know the location of?”

“Over here, Alex,” Tyrell said, gesturing his hand, “see for yourself.” Alex stood beside him. Tyrell turned on a monitor, and a three-dimensional holographic map emanated from its screen. “Those purple spheres are EUF bases. The blue spheres represent the bases of Zull factions that haven’t been taken out yet. And we have no idea whether those are all that’s left or not. All the EUF can do is continue to send units on search-and-find expeditions to see if there’s more.

“Unit One has been on a lot of these missions.” Tyrell reminisced about many of the

expeditions Unit One had embarked on. “We’ve discovered Zull bases underground, on the ocean, you name it.”

“Doesn’t it get irritable scouring the planet, sometimes just to come across nothing?”

“It does, but the mobile living facilities we use aren’t bad. And the time that a unit spends together helps strengthen their bond. Besides, us soldiers have learned how to ‘embrace the suck.’”

Alex stared at the map. “So after a Zull faction’s base is found, all the EUF has to do is launch an assault and take it over.”

Tyrell thought Alex was making it all sound too simple and decided to give him a reality check. “That’s easier said than done, Mr. Mercer. It’s not like we can just waltz up to a Zull faction’s HQ and commandeer it.”

“I didn’t think it was a piece of cake,” Alex retorted, letting the sergeant know he had common sense.

“It damn well isn’t. Take a look.” Tyrell touched one of the blue spheres, and the map zoomed in on it. “That Zull base is in the Jungle Region, and those red spheres are the smaller forts and outposts that fortify the territory around that base. It takes time to get rid of ‘em. That’s why it’s not so easy to get to a Zull faction’s HQ.”

“There’s quite a few red spheres.” Alex estimated maybe fifty or so.

“Yeah, the longer we don’t know where a Zull faction is, the more time they have to build up the defenses of their territory, and the Zull set up shop pretty fast.”

Alex’s eyes remained focused on the hologram. “So whose job is it to break through those forts and outposts, get to that base, and make sure that Zull faction is completely erased off the

map?”

“The EUF’s HQ Three is located in that Region, so it’s their job. As a matter of fact, I bet they’ve got units staging assaults against those outposts even as we speak. It’ll take time, but they’ll eventually get to that Zull faction’s base and take it over.”

“How long do you think it will take to accomplish that?”

“It can take up to three months to wipe out an entire Zull faction and annex their territory for the EUF. And believe me, the ordeal is no picnic. I remember when units One, Two, and Three of HQ One spent over a month in the Mountain Region, trying to take out a Zull faction there. We had to go through hell to get to their base. And one day, an operation went south. That’s when Michael . . .” Tyrell paused, his thoughts wandering through the past.

Everyone instantly became motionless, and Alex saw Andrea’s dead-of-emotion eyes blink away a few tears.

Noticing Alex’s curious gaze, she rubbed her eyes and stiffened. “Excuse me, Mr. Mercer, I notice you’ve been eying me a lot lately. Do you find me amusing or something? Or is it that you find me attractive? Whatever it is, I suggest you keep your *damn* eyeballs off me if you want to keep them.”

Alex turned away, disliking her volatile tone. “Did I miss something here? Who the hell is Michael?” he asked Tyrell.

“Sorry, I got off subject,” he said, ending any further discussion about the name “Michael.” He touched the blue holosphere again, and the map zoomed out.

Alex, always observant, took another look at the holo-display. “I count forty Zull bases but only fifteen for the EUF. How did we get *this* outnumbered?”

Tyrell explained. “Well, after we declared war on the Zull, it took three months for Earth’s leaders to get the EUF established and figure out how it would operate. Then we started constructing bases and transporting troops, to prepare for the war ahead. But the Zull were much faster than us. By the time we created our first five factions, they had fifteen of their own ready to take us on, and their soldiers had far more advanced facilities to run operations out of.”

Alex was absorbing the information like a sponge. “I didn’t know the EUF was outdone from the start. Our world leaders seem to give the public only what they want them to hear. They act like things aren’t as bad as they seem, when, in reality, everything doesn’t seem to be going all that great.” Alex knew this would make a good story. His excitement was kindled.

“Yeah, but now you’re getting the truth. The Zull had us beat when it came to force development. And we believe the reason wasn’t just because they had faster shuttles that enabled them to transport their construction materials, troops, and arsenal quicker than us. We’re guessing they must have gotten back to Second Earth at least two months prior to the EUF, giving them a head start in this race to see who can establish military dominance the quickest.”

As Tyrell continued to explain, Alex learned that it took six months of Year One for the EUF to have twenty-five of their subpar bases up and running. In that same amount of time, the Zull had fifty highly advanced ones, and they had twice the amount of aircraft and combat vehicles that the EUF had on the New World. But even though the Zull and EUF were mostly building up their armies and staking out their territory during Year One, battles did happen as they developed their forces. The second year of war is when things really got intense.

The EUF would establish factions and try to occupy Regions before the Zull, as the Zull would do the same. The EUF would try to conquer the Zull’s territory, and they would do the same. It

was a back-and-forth struggle that continued till this very day.

“Overall, who would you say is winning this war, the Zull or EUF?” Alex asked Tyrell.

“We once had *far* more factions than we do now, and there was a time during Year Two when it seemed like we had bested the Zull. For six months, we experienced very few attacks, but those six months were soon followed by a bunch of ‘em. Over time, the Zull found the majority of our HQs and took ‘em out, decreasing our number to fifteen. And even though we’ve dismantled a great deal of their factions too, I’d have to say the Zull are winning this war.”

“Not what I wanted to hear.”

“Do you want more bad news?”

“There’s more?” Alex’s tone was marked by disbelief.

“Unfortunately, there is,” Tyrell sighed. “Do you see that green cube at the center of the map?”

“How could I miss it?” The green cube was plainly visible among the blue spheres.

“That represents the Zull’s primary fortress. We call it a fortress city. Though we’ve had difficulty attacking a Zull faction’s base, their defenses are insubstantial compared to that main fortress.”

“Sounds like that place is no joke. How long do you think it took the Zull to build it?”

“We don’t believe it was built here, like their other bases. We’re guessing that thing is one huge starship, and the Zull brought it with them to use as their main headquarters. But you’re right, that place is no joke. The fortress must be heavily armed at every corner, and we have absolutely no idea what’s in store for us inside there—no data, nothing. But we do know all of the Zull factions’ essential needs, from food to weapons, are made and distributed from there. That’s one reason why the Zull have an advantage over the EUF. We have to transport our food,

vehicles, weaponry, and medical supplies from our current homeworld but they don't. They can resupply those things in no time. We've also learned that the materials the Zull use to build their bases now come from there as well."

"So what the EUF needs to do is crush the Zull's main fortress." Alex was learning fast.

"Right. By destroying it, we're cutting the head off the snake."

"Can't the EUF just rush the damn place?"

Tyrell wished, but the EUF didn't have the manpower. "With only fifteen factions left, we're not strong enough. And if we did try such a stunt, you can bet that soldiers from several of the Zull's factions are gonna come join the thousands already there, to help 'em overpower us, if needed."

Bobby inserted himself into the conversation. "Well, whatever we're gonna do about that place, we need to do it *soon*. Because the EUF's current plan of action, trying to eliminate all the Zull factions we can find before going to the main stronghold, ain't good enough."

"Why not?" Alex asked him, curious for his take.

"The Zull are annihilating our forces and depleting our resources faster than we are theirs. So even if the EUF manages, by some long shot, to find and take out the majority of their factions, before going to the main stronghold, I don't think we would have much of an army left to attack with. The plan we're working with now just ain't getting us anywhere."

"He's right," Tyrell agreed. "The EUF hasn't been fighting with a winning strategy, and we're damn lucky the Zull haven't found our last fifteen HQs and disposed of their factions."

Bobby stood and rested his back against a wall of the MTAV. "Hopefully, Operation Scorpions' Nest will end this war for good."

“Operation Scorpions’ Nest? What’s that?” Alex asked him.

“Because this war has dragged on long enough, the big wheels on Earth have been planning something huge. They call it Operation Scorpions’ Nest, and I’m guessing it involves the destruction of that primary fortress.”

Tyrell clicked off the monitor. “I know we need some kind of master plan, because if we continue on the course we’re on, I think the Zull will eventually beat us.”

Bobby hit the palm of his right hand with his left fist. “You got that right. The Zull are kicking our asses. They’re killing more of our guys than we can replace in a timely manner. That’s why the EUF is on a big recruiting campaign. I know the option of nuclear armaments is off the table. There would be no use fighting for a planet that’s been blown to hell. But if that option was open, we could win this thing a whole lot quicker.”

Alex knew that using nuclear armaments wouldn’t be good for the planet. “Quicker but not smarter. We don’t know how the Zull would retaliate if we used something as mass-destructive as a nuclear weapon. The Zull might strike back with something equal to or a whole lot worse than what we’ve got. And if they did, this war could escalate into an all-out massacre, wiping everyone out and severely damaging the planet.”

Tyrell reentered the conversation. “If Operation Scorpions’ Nest works out, that will never happen, and we’ll have finally claimed what’s rightfully ours.”

Alex wondered why someone would think the planet rightfully belonged to the human race and not the Zull too, but he wisely kept silent.

“Our mission for today is to scout out a Zull outpost, to gather Intel for an attack,” Tyrell said to Alex.

Alex shifted his attention to Andrea. “Ms. Blair, you must be proud to be a unit leader. Someone must have seen a lot of potential to select you.”

“If you’re trying to compliment me, shove it,” she snapped. “Only weak imbeciles need other people’s praise.”

Andrea wasn’t making it easy for Alex to like her, but he continued to converse cordially. “As long as you and I are talking, Ms. Blair, it would be nice to know a little more about you.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but I’m not a topic of discussion. Now is there anything else you’d like to know, Mr. Mercer?”

“Yeah, there is.” Alex pulled a digital mic from his duffle bag, held it to Andrea’s lips, and pressed RECORD. He decided she was going to be his first interviewee. “I’d like to get your opinion on what you think makes the Zull any different from us.”

“Their superior physical strength. Their rapid healing ability.”

“No, I’m saying: what makes our cause for fighting greater than theirs? Because of the arrogance and mistakes of mankind, the people of Earth need a new planet to inhabit and found this one. Because rising temperatures are turning the Zull’s homeworld into a crisp, the Zull also need a new planet to inhabit and found the same world as we. The Zull need this planet as much as we do. Why do we make them out to be the ‘bad guys’ and humankind out to be the ‘good guys,’ when, in fact, we’re all fighting for the same thing, survival? The Zull’s purpose for wanting this planet is no less worthy than ours, yet we see them as evil beings that don’t deserve to live among us.”

Andrea swatted the mic from her face, knocking it to the floor. “They’re killers, Alex. These ruffians are nothing like us. They’re murderers,” she said fiercely, obviously disagreeing.

“That’s not the way I see it.”

Andrea’s brow creased. “Look, Mr. News Reporter, you need to drain your brain of this pacifistic bullshit before . . .” She was cut off by the shrill wail of an alarm.

“Andrea,” Tyrell said, “the receiver is picking up an SOS signal. I think it’s from members of Unit Six. They’re engaging enemy soldiers close to our proximity and need assistance. Orders, Ma’am?”

Andrea jumped to her feet. “We’re it? There aren’t any other units in the area who can help them?”

“None.”

“Let’s do it.” Andrea attached a gun belt around her svelte waist. “Our conversation will have to be concluded another time,” she said to Alex, icily poking him in the chest with a finger.

In eight minutes, the MTAV was at the coordinates of the emergency distress signal.

The vehicle growled to a stop. The engine shut off, purring. A fading mechanical clunking was followed by a hiss.

“I trust you know how to use this,” Andrea said to Alex, presenting him a handgun, handle first.

“Yeah, I do.” He reluctantly took the weapon and stared at it repugnantly.

Any journalist stupid enough to come to the New World was required by EUF Regulation to undergo a week of firearm’s training. Though guns weren’t Alex’s specialty, he was fully capable of using the EUF’s standard handgun, if he *had* to.

Andrea clipped on some knee pads and turned to Alex with her game face on. “While we’re out there, pay close attention to your surroundings. Because of the Zull’s ability to take on the

characteristics of the environment around them, the soldiers we're about to face may very well blend in with all that sand out there."

"So do their uniforms change with their bodies or something?" Alex asked as he slid on a vest, which he would be wearing anytime he went into the field.

"Yes," Andrea replied. She began loading her handgun's blast cartridge. After a blur of snap-fast hand motions and a *click-clack*, the gun was ready. She had done this so many times she could load it without even thinking—a result of muscle memory. "According to Global Research Center," she went on, "the Zull's military uniforms are biomorphic; they're organic. And somehow they link with the Zull's bodies and change with them. It's believed their uniforms are made from their own DNA."

"Well, the Zull's ability to become like their environment must be a hell of an ability to have."

Andrea jammed her firearm into her belt holster and threw on a vest. "It definitely makes them deadly. I've even seen one of these *creatures* turn their skin rock-solid just by touching a stone. I've seen others camouflage themselves by becoming as green as the forests. This entire planet is an asset to them."

"I'll have to be very alert then."

"Yes, you will; situational awareness is crucial out here, if you want to live." Andrea saw that Bobby and Tyrell had on their combat gear and were good to go. "You two grab a rifle, and set your blast level to maximum flux capacity," she ordered, then proceeded to leave the vehicle. "If you're coming, Alex, *move it*," she said in an assertive tone.

As Alex and his new acquaintances walked across the desert, they came closer and closer to their destination, which was just outside the border of the EUF's territory in the Desert Region.

Tyrell, his hair and skin sweat-soaked, noticed Alex wasn't annoyed by the hot weather. "This heat doesn't bother you?"

"I'm used to it," he answered. "I was a resident of Phoenix, Arizona after all." Alex looked at the eight-pound long-barreled deadly-looking riffles Bobby and Tyrell were carrying and then looked at his small handgun. "You two get the big kids' toys; that's not fair."

Bobby playfully slapped Alex on the back. "Sorry, buddy. We didn't have another rifle for you, but you'll be okay with what you've got. Besides, that handgun is the only weapon you journalists have been trained on."

A gust of wind blew past. Tyrell used his hands to block a dusting of sand from his eyes. "If this wind picks up, we'll have to put on our head gear. We don't want this stuff in our eyes or our lungs."

Andrea stopped and faced Alex. "We're not far from the location of the distress signal. If you see a Zull soldier, armed or defenseless, do not hesitate to pull that trigger."

Alex's lips pressed together. The skin between his eyebrows crinkled. "Kill without remorse, is that it? Is that a part of military institutionalism?" He received no response from Andrea, only a frown and a roll of the eyes.

* * *

The fight was over when the team arrived at the battle site, and they found seven dead EUF soldiers shot to a bloodied pulp.

"These guys must have went head-to-head with a Zull scout team while on border patrol duty," Tyrell said. "We've seen a recent increase in the number of scout teams close to our territory here in the Desert Region, especially along our border. If the Zull keep up this kind of effort, I fear

they might discover HQ One soon.”

“Earlier, there was some action near the border of the EUF’s territory in the Forest Region,” Alex stated. “I guess these Zull scout teams are really good at their job.”

Bobby looked down at the dead bodies. Not being there for his brothers-in-arms irritated him. *Sorry we weren’t able to make it.* Even though he wasn’t there to witness the battle, he was sure that the EUF soldiers had given the Zull one hell of a fight before going down.

Andrea’s eyebrows furrowed. Then her anger exploded. “Damn it. Damn those Zull,” her voice shook. She pushed Alex in front of her, causing him to almost stumble to his knees. “Take a good look, Alex. This is what those bastard Zull do to us. What do you think of them now? Do you still believe us humans aren’t better than them?”

“My mind hasn’t changed,” Alex shot back. “We would’ve done the same to them. Wasn’t it you who told me to kill on sight, whether they’re armed or otherwise?”

“Stop being a soft-hearted moron and start . . .”

Bobby’s eyes zeroed in on a survivor lying in the sand, but he wasn’t one of theirs. “People, we got an injured Zull over here.”

For the first time, Alex came face-to-face with a Zull soldier in the flesh.

The Zull wore a sleeveless formfitting organic uniform that was an odd bluish-gray color. His body was humanoid, but his skin was neither coarse or smooth. And the skin’s color was similar to the pale surface of Earth’s moon. The Zull also had a set of V-shaped ridges receding from his forehead to the tip end of his nose. More ridges originated at the edge of his chin and continued under his jaw, and he had no hair covering his head, a characteristic of Zull males.

Andrea removed the handgun from her holster. She toggled the selector switch from SAFETY

to FIRE and started slowly walking toward the injured Zull soldier with menacing steps. *He won't be breathing much longer.*

Alex pulled a mini video camera from his duffle bag to film everything he saw. As the lens of the camera zoomed in on the dark pupils within the yellow sclera of the Zull's eyes, Alex could see fear, the fear one knows when he's about to die at the hands of an enemy. "Andrea, don't. He's defenseless. He isn't a threat. So why snuff out this Zull's life for no reason?"

The thought of showing mercy to the Zull seemed to only provoke more anger within Andrea. "Alex, this Zull bastard wouldn't hesitate to shoot you in the back, given the opportunity!" The volume of her voice elevated even higher than it already had, and her tone became razor-edge-sharp. "Besides, we cannot allow him to kill again!"

The Zull soldier breathed out some words in his language, weakly rose to his feet, and threw his arms up in surrender.

Andrea shot him a frown. *Too late.* She aimed her gun at the Zull soldier and depressed the trigger.

The Zull's chest exploded into a mess of bone fragments, muscle tissue, and blue blood.

Feeling the blast puncture his chest, the Zull howled a scream that echoed throughout the desert, and his body dropped.

For Andrea, he was one less enemy to worry about. *Good riddance. One less piece of filth fouling up the planet.*

A flock of airborne carnivores circled the lifeless Zull soldier, whose carcass would become their next meal.

The red-eyed black-feathered creatures descended one by one and began pecking and pulling

flesh from the Zull soldier's face, with their beaks. Some uncoiled their split-tongue to lick blood from the impact hole in his chest. Others dug their talons into him, shredding away strips of meat for later.

Done, the scavengers flapped away squawking, leaving some of their feathers spiraling in the wind.

The Zull's face now looked like it had been put through a meat grinder.

Andrea glared at him darkly, a plethora of hate-filled emotions racing through her mind. *You deserve to be animal food.*

Alex went over to the dead Zull first, and next he approached the slain EUF soldiers. To him, these two sensible, sentient races—who shared the same desire to see their people survive—were butchering each other for no reason. Humanity and the Zull had more in common than they wanted to admit. They all mourned their dead, they all breathed the same air, and they all had feelings and emotions. Looking at the dead bodies through grievous eyes, repulsion tightened Alex's chest, weighing down his heart. He couldn't stand seeing this happen.

Andrea zigzagged the tip of her boot in the sand, rubbing away the Zull blood that had dappled it, and then she reactivated the safety on her handgun.

After pushing her weapon into her belt holster, she made her way back to the MTAV without saying another word.

The expression on her face as she walked forward was . . . nothing.

Alex couldn't believe that someone could be so emotionless after a point-blank kill. He figured something must have happened to Andrea in the past to make her this way, but what? He was dying to know.

* * *

The MTAV returned to the entrance gate outside HQ One. Andrea had called in a medevac team to retrieve the bodies of the EUF soldiers, and then she, Bobby, and Tyrell successfully completed their probe of the enemy territory using remote-controlled surveillance drones, gathering the necessary data for an attack. It was an easy three-man op. They never had to leave the vehicle.

A voice was heard over the MTAV's audio. "This is watchtower. Password, please."

Andrea said, "Password: Angel Eyes." The gate screeched open, and the MTAV lumbered into Terminal C.

While exiting the vehicle, just a few steps behind Andrea, Tyrell, and Bobby Alex heard a *ping*. He paused. He looked down at the terminal's concrete floor to find the source of the sound. A gold sparkle caught his eye. He stooped down and picked up a pendant. Engraved in its surface was the name *BLAIR*.

Bryson was waiting for Andrea in the terminal and met her as she was coming from the MTAV. Bobby and Tyrell were chatting at a distance as the commander and Andrea spoke. "I was informed that you had come back from your mission. How did it go?" Bryson asked Andrea.

"Here, Sir." She gave him a data cube, which was three centimeters cubed. "All the reconnaissance data we obtained is stored there."

"Excellent." With the reconnaissance data in his hands, Bryson could begin formulating a strategy for HQ One's next assault. "Good work. I'll be seeing you tomorrow." He walked off.

"Where are you off to?" Bobby asked Andrea, stepping up beside her.

"The indoor range. Join me if you'd like."

“I reckon I will.”

Andrea commenced with firearms practice at the range and shot every light beam through the head or heart of her sim-targets. *Zull scum, none of you deserve to live.* Anyone could see the hate in Andrea’s eyes. For her, every hologram was a living, breathing Zull soldier. *Die, all of you.* It didn’t take long for Andrea’s practice gun to be depleted of power, but she didn’t notice and continued to unconsciously pull the trigger—almost like she was in a trance. *I’ll get you for what you did to him.*

Bobby snatched the gun from her hand. “Hey, gal, your weapon’s dead. Must not have had a full charge. You okay?”

“Yeah . . . I’m alright,” her voice stuttered.

“You must’ve been doing some deep thinking.”

“No, I’m just pissed off by what those Zull did to our men today. And my mind was on them and their families, so I got sidetracked and wasn’t paying attention to my gun’s energy level,” she said haphazardly, her voice teeming with untruth.

Bullshit tall-tale excuse, Bobby thought. “I could see you were pissed off, but I don’t think you were thinking about those soldiers we found today. I think you were thinking about Michael and what happened when . . .”

“I need to take a shower and grab a nap,” Andrea interrupted. She spoke the command to end her training session. The hologram console powered down, and she left the area.

Tyrell passed her on his way inside the range. He noticed the scalding expression on her face. “She okay?” he said, walking up to Bobby.

“No telling. She seems to become more infuriated by the day.”

“I understand how she feels. I was there; I saw what she had to go through a year ago.”

Bobby responded, saying, “Yeah, but I’m afraid her anger might be getting the best of her, and leadership requires a clear head. You know that. We can’t just turn a blind eye to . . .”

Tyrell pushed forward an open palm, silencing Bobby, telling him he had heard enough.

“Andrea’s been leading Unit One pretty darn effectively for an entire year. I think she’ll be fine,” he said with certainty.

“I hope you’re right.”

* * *

Andrea stepped into the four-wall shower in her quarters. “Soap,” she said. White foam dispersed from the sprayer jets. “Water, on.” Her entire body sighed with relief as water rushed over her lathered flesh.

Fatigued from a long day and tired of her strenuous life, Andrea dropped onto her knees on the sleek shower surface. The cool, soothing downpour of water cascaded over her back and drenched her hair. To Andrea, the sound of the falling water was a refreshing relief from the noise of gunfire and screams of the dying.

For an instant, it was as if time itself stopped. She thought about the seven EUF soldiers who had died today, causing memories to flood her mind—*painful* memories. Still on her knees, she buried her face in her hands. Her heart swelled with grief, and tears streamed from her eyes. The hurt and pain bottled up inside was uncovered and exposed.

There came a knock at the door. “Off,” she said, causing the pouring water to cease. The knock was heard again. “Hold on!” she shouted, not wanting her privacy disturbed. It was the worst time for someone to drop by, uninvited.

Andrea stood up and combed her fingers through her soaked hair. “Dryer, on.” Vents above the shower blew gusts of heat down. Once fully dried, she pulled back the semi-transparent screen, stepped out, and tied a silky teal bathrobe around herself.

Andrea opened the door and rolled her eyes. At her doorstep was none other than Alex Mercer. She had seen enough of him for today.

“Sorry if I came at a bad time, Ms. Blair,” Alex apologized, “but you dropped this earlier.” He opened the palm of his hand and revealed the pendant he had picked up.

Andrea snatched it from him and showed no gratitude whatsoever.

“I took a look at the picture inside,” Alex said. “Sorry, journalistic instincts. So, who is he, a relative or lover?”

“None of your damn business.” The door closed. The lights went off.

Alex thought about Andrea. *What a grouch.* Was that all she had to say?

On his way from Andrea’s room, he came across Bobby, who had finished target practice and was coming from the range. “Where are you hurrying to, Alex?” Bobby asked.

“Dinner.”

“Mind if I join you?”

“Not at all.”

In the mess hall, forks clattered against plates and loud voices conversed. Soldiers laughed and shared stories as they ate their evening meal.

A group of soldiers, all from the same unit, came in with gratification on their faces and took their place at a table.

“How many did you get, John?” one soldier asked another.

“I killed ten of those Zull,” he answered proudly.

“Ten? I got twelve.”

The other soldiers at the table joined the conversation, boasting about how many Zull they had killed today.

Waiting in the dinner line, Alex listened to them prattle on about their kill number and saw how pleased they were. But the Zull had loved ones; the Zull were parents. Alex couldn't understand how the deaths of others could cause someone to feel satisfaction. Maybe it was because humanity saw the Zull as simply “the enemy” and not as people.

Bobby tapped Alex on the shoulder. “Second Earth to Alex, you're next in line.”

Alex, lost in his thoughts, hadn't noticed the line had moved. “Huh . . . oh, right.” The zoned-out look glazed over his face deteriorated.

Alex and Bobby chose their meals and seated themselves.

“Not bad,” Alex admitted, stabbing a fork into his meatloaf. “The meat's a bit chewy, though.” It was better than the rations he was forced to eat for two weeks on that shuttle. “Bobby, why did you sign up for the EUF?” he asked with a mouthful.

“I'm U.S. military, and anyone currently serving is sent to Second Earth sooner or later, like it or not.”

“You enjoy the military?”

Bobby spoon-shoveled some potatoes into his mouth and then answered. “I do. My father and grandfather were military. It's kinda a tradition. And I'm a thrill-seeker anyway. Life gets dull quick if you don't keep it interesting.”

Bobby couldn't have described himself any better, because a thrill-seeker he was. He loved to

hang glide, mountain climb, and bungee jump; he loved anything that involved risk. And there was never a fight he would run from or a dare he wouldn't take. Bobby was also a ladies' man; he enjoyed taking a woman home at the end of a fun night, which wasn't hard for him to do, using that Southern-boy charm.

"After the horrors I witnessed while reporting on Earth's last major war, I'd never want to be in the military," Alex made known. "I'd never want to find myself fighting a senseless war."

"You're one of them antiwar types, aren't you?"

"Not exactly. I believe war is sometimes necessary, but many wars aren't. Peace negotiations could often settle things, rather than the use of guns and tanks."

"You don't really think we can negotiate with the Zull, do you?" Bobby countered. "The GSC's diplomats tried that, but after all was said and done, the Zull and the diplomats weren't able to see eye to eye."

"The talks between our peoples ended far too early," Alex said as Bobby continued to chow down. "After just seven days of back-and-forth negotiations, the Zull and the diplomats all became convinced that war was the only way to resolve the feud. I believe if peace talks had progressed longer, this war, which is causing many deaths for Zull and human, wouldn't have occurred. But it isn't impossible to end this conflict diplomatically and stop the senseless violence."

"Keep dreaming. That isn't gonna happen, and if you don't open your eyes, stop feeling sweet for the enemy, and realize this is 'survival of the fittest,' you're not gonna live long. To the Zull, all your 'can't we live in peace' talk is meaningless. They see that as a sign of weakness, and weakness only gets you to one place—the grave. If you aren't ready to go there yet, you'd better

toughen up.”

Alex wasn't going to budge on his beliefs. It would be a cold day in Hell before he would do that. “My beliefs are part of who I am, and I believe we can end this thing peacefully.”

Bobby leaned forward, his face tense. “I'm telling you, there's no chance of that.”

“We'll have to agree to disagree,” Alex said calmly, ending the conversation.

Bobby leaned back. The tension in his face slackened. “A world where two men can't disagree and be friends is a world I wouldn't wanna live in.” He gave Alex a look of respect. “You stand up for what you believe in and don't back down to anyone. I like that.”

“Thanks.” After Bobby and Alex devoured the last of their meals, Alex asked the question Bobby knew was coming. “So, what do you know about Andrea?”

“Not a whole lot.”

“Tell me what you do know.”

Bobby wiped his mouth with a napkin. “I know her pop's deceased. Her mom's alive, though. And Andrea has a brother who's ten, I think, and a sis in her teens.”

“What else?”

“I know that before joining the EUF, Andrea was a member of the British Vanguard.”

“British Vanguard? That's some special division of Britain's military, right?”

Bobby nodded. “Yeah. They're like Britain's knights in shining armor. They operate in five-man strike teams, and they don't kid around. The Vanguard has played major roles in many of Britain's military operations, and they've often worked with the U.S. military to topple regimes and neutralize threats to both countries. The Vanguard has done covert stuff the public will never know about, and they're top notch. You'd have to be out of your goddamn mind to wanna mess

with them. That's all I know about her. She tells Tyrell more stuff than she tells me."

"They must be good friends."

"They are. Tyrell was a member of Unit One a year before I was, so they're tight. The only other thing I can tell you about Andrea is the obvious: she's quiet, keeps to herself, and she isn't all that cordial."

"That, I could tell. Is she always so cold and reclusive?" Alex asked pointedly.

"What can I say? Andrea's not the tenderhearted type. She's a woman who's deeply devoted to her duty, and she isn't interested in making a whole lot of new friends, especially with new arrivals, like you."

"She isn't easy to get close to, is she?"

"True, but she's one hell of a companion to have in a firefight." Bobby reminisced about all the times Andrea had saved his neck. "She'll guard your back with all she's got. You may not like her attitude, but she's a good person."

"Oh, and just a heads-up, many guys have tried to get her attention, but she gives them all the cold shoulder, and their hopes of getting inside her panties sink faster than a brick in water. So don't go getting your hopes high."

"What are you trying to say?"

Bobby grinned. "Admit it, you're interested in her."

"No way," Alex murmured, taking a sip of his fizzing orange soda, trying to ignore Bobby's claim.

"You can't fool me," Bobby laughed. "I've seen you staring at her, wondering what she's got under that uniform."

Alex continued sipping.

“Hey, no need to be all hush-hush; it’s just us guys here,” Bobby said. “So admit it, you wanna bang her, right?”

Alex said nothing as he tilted his head back and turned his cup all the way up to finish the last drop of drink.

Bobby went on, trying to get Alex to loosen up. “You’re taking a liking to her. You got a thing for blonds, don’tcha?” Alex actually did. Not to mention he thought Andrea’s accent was sexy, another reason he found her attractive. “Hey, I don’t blame you for wanting her. She’s one lovely dame.”

Done with this conversation, Alex got up from the table and kindly said, “Thanks for the company, Bobby.”

“Anytime.”

Alex left the mess hall and proceeded to his quarters.

At this hour of night, the corridors of HQ One were dimly lit. As Alex walked through the shadows, his thoughts became filled with questions. He sought to find an answer to why the Zull and mankind couldn’t reconcile whatever differences they had and share this world. But he hadn’t found that answer. Was it because many humans were like Andrea: did they feel too much anger to coincide? Or was it because the Zull couldn’t tolerate sharing this world with a race of beings that weren’t their own? These were questions Alex would seek the answer to for as long as he remained on the planet.

As he swiped his ID card across the scanner on his door to unlock it, he felt like he was being watched—someone threatening his privacy.

He heard the squeal of a rubber boot, turned, and saw someone retreating into the darkness. The metal floor panels creaked as the figure vanished. It was the girl from the infirmary, Christina. Alex briefly wondered why she was sleuthing around in the shadows. Was she watching him? Knowing only she held the answer, he stopped thinking about her, went inside his quarters, and began perusing.

The room was all concrete. It was small, shabby, and furnished with a bed, desk, table, and sofa that all looked worse for wear, but the room was good enough for Alex.

Noticing the worn-looking coffee maker sitting atop the table, he went to it, picked it up, and examined it—wondering if it was still functional. Seeing that a complimentary bag of coffee had been left for him as a housewarming gift, he figured it was and gently put it down.

Burned out, he wearily slumped onto the sofa. There came a *creak*. For a second, he thought the piece of crap was going to fall apart.

After removing a voice recorder from his duffle bag, he initiated the recording sequence to document his experience thus far.

JOURNAL ENTRY 01:

On Second Earth, I've discovered a world of boundless beauty and wonder, a world where plant life flourishes and abundant wildlife roves freely. But I've also discovered that Second Earth is a world where, in my opinion, vicious battles are being waged for no reason. One would think that two civilized societies could settle disputes without the use of violence.

Why Zull and humanity are killing each other baffles me, but what baffles me just as much is this woman, Andrea Blair. She's beautiful . . . at least on the outside, but inside she's being consumed by hate and anger.

She shows the enemy no mercy, she's rarely kind, and she's short spoken. I wonder what she was like in an earlier life.

END OF JOURNAL ENTRY 01

Feeling drowsy, Alex stopped the recording. Within seconds of closing his eyes, the recorder slipped from his hand and landed on the carpet.

Alex had a very exciting yet exhausting first day, but tomorrow would prove to be even more interesting.

Thank you for reading!

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