

FUTURE WARRIOR

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BASED ON THE SCREENPLAY BY
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FUTURE WARRIOR

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A tribute to *The Forever War* by Joe Haldeman

One

“You must not forget that your job is to die in the service of our nation. Every objective, every duty is subordinate to this requirement.”

The instructor paced the room as he talked. I stole a glance at my Lieutenant, who looked like he’d heard this speech before. It wouldn’t be the first time or the last time the ICF—Intergalactic Combat Forces—drilled this into our heads.

“Hudson.”

“Yes sir!”

“Tell the class what the three prime directives are.”

I stood at attention.

“One, protect the innocent. Two, obey the President of the Republic of America. Three, uphold ICF values.”

“Thank you Hudson. Ten-hut!”

The class stood up. In unison, we stomped our feet.

“Dismissed.”

I went to the café for a coffee and called it a day.

* * *

The year was 2205 A.D. From the pollution, overpopulation, and government corruption to the out-of-control genetic engineering of this time, it was probably the worst time to be alive since the Dark Ages.

The biggest problem was that at the end of the twenty-first century, we knew we weren’t alone in the Galaxy. A stray piece of metal traveled through the only maneuverable Einstein-Rosen Bridge in our quadrant, and we were lucky enough to catch it. We studied it. We tore it apart atom by atom and realized our worst fears. Intelligent extraterrestrial life that was far in advance of our own civilization, and apparently building weaponized nanotech.

We understood enough about the alien technology to

know what it meant—the security bubble and isolationism that humans had felt for millenia was over. We called the new race the Ursae, after the constellation Ursa Major where their device came from.

Judging by the contents of the probe, if that's what it was, the Ursae were enough of a threat to prompt the Republic of America to form the Intergalactic Combat Forces. The ICF were supposed to be the first responders in our reachable universe. Explorer mercenaries, essentially. The wealth of Earth was funneled into this global effort, and we soon made contact with the Ursae.

The Great Ursan Conflict was what they called it, but anyone who was involved knew better. “The War” is all it was to the soldiers fighting in it. By the time I was born, the war had been going on for a hundred and eighty years, and it would be another twenty before I was drafted.

The Army's personnel system issued a requirement for a college junior pursuing a math degree, and my name came up. They took me right out of class one day and told me about my new career as a soldier. It only took two years of training before I knew what that meant—and my first deployment was going to teach me what that really meant.

* * *

Explosions rocked the rubble around me. Two men and a woman ran through the open battlefield, stopping only to return fire toward unseen enemies. We dove behind some low shrubs, panting hard. Our breath was visible in the chilly air. With a few hand signals, we agreed to split up and meet at the objective.

Stone fell to the ground, shocked unconscious by an enemy weapon. I kept running and tried to jump over a ravine ahead of me, barely making it. I was proud of myself for a second, but it didn't last long.

All I saw was a sudden, blinding blue light through my visor, and everything went black.

* * *

I woke up on a thin cot with a thick blanket over me. I still shivered. With a groan and all my muscles sore, I sat up. The doctor was in a few moments later.

“You made it to fifty-six percent cleared, Private. Not as good as some of your team, but better than most. We’re just checking your vitals, making sure you’re stable enough. I think you’ll only need one day in Heaven, then it’s back to the field for you.”

“Great.”

The doctor turned a dial at my feet, making a soft beep. The blanket got warmer, but I still groaned. I looked around.

Ten other soldiers occupied cots. From first platoon, half of us failed the exercise. Some were awake but others were still out, their bodies covered in a thick, hovering mist. I closed my eyes and felt the mist spread over me.

* * *

The next evening, I walked through a hangar bay at Ice Base that was bustling with activity. Morrison and I stopped to admire the fighting pods with their sleek metal and transparent panels.

“When did you get to Ice Base, Morrison?”

“Yesterday. Came in from Sahara Base. What’s it been, a year?”

“Must have been two by now. I’m glad to see you still have your limbs attached.”

“Right back at you. I heard you were in Heaven for a bit.”

“Only a day. The drills have been getting rougher, and the odds get worse for us cannon fodder after every fight.”

An announcement came over the comms: “All second wave privates report to Ice Base level three. The General is in attendance.”

We shrugged and hurried off to the elevators.

Above ground level, we could see the fierce snow outside as well as the harsh terrain of the training fields. My platoon filed into the assembly room on level three, our faces scanned and identities confirmed by the tinny voice of the computer system. We joined the other platoons in standing at attention for the General.

A man dressed in his Class A uniform strode across the stage, commanding the attention of everyone in the hall. He addressed the assembled troops.

“On behalf of the civilians of the Republic of America, as well as the rest of the world, I want to thank you personally for your service in ICF. You young men and women are the future of this planet. Without you, the Earth would be left with no protection, and no hope.

“You are the best of the best, the most determined, the strongest, and the fastest. The next year of your training will be intense, but it is necessary. The Ursae will not pause and wait for you to be ready to fight, but we can do our best to accelerate your education with veterans from First Battalion. The Elders know their chops, and if you listen to them, you stand a better chance of coming out alive. Do not disappoint them.”

The General saluted us, and we stomped our feet. He left the stage and a lesser commander stood up.

“All troops report to your barracks. New superior officers to be debriefed at oh-eight hundred. Dismissed.”

* * *

Morrison and I stood with our platoon, our jackets all sporting the same patches. We were at attention as a man walked in. His stance was stiff and he stared tiredly at us. Light glinted off his titanium right arm, his fingers flexing and relaxing. He addressed us.

“I am Captain Eric Snow. From now on, I’ll be your supervising officer during this tour of duty. I’ll observe your training for your remaining time on Ice Base, then I’ll accompany this squad—Orca Squad—to the Ursa Delta Galaxy for a five year tour. We’ll explore and defend, and sit on top of the wormhole mouth to make sure none of those damn bugs get through. We’re the first line of defense.

“As some of you may know, Second Battalion is captained by us Elders—the survivors of First Battalion who made it back to Earth after the first decade of the war. We’re old, but that doesn’t mean we can’t fight, and it doesn’t mean we’ll be lax on any of you. So no sniveling or bullshit. Got it?”

“Yes sir!”

“Good. Drills in sixty. Get some hydration and meet outside. We’ve got a long year ahead of us before deployment.”

* * *

We trained. When we weren’t training, we sat in lecture halls and pored over diagrams of enemy ships, weapons, and tactics. Out in the freezing cold of the tundra landscape, we ran drills for both team building and solo activities. Other squads did similar training, their captains yelling and prodding them. Snow would stand to the side, always watching us. He didn’t shout commands at any of us except to switch to the next drills. His way of communicating was strange to us, but we chalked it up to Snow being an Elder.

It was late one night and I couldn’t sleep. I went to the mess hall for some warm milk and saw Snow sitting at a bench, nursing a drink. I slid over opposite him.

“Captain, permission to—”

“If you’re gonna sit here, none of that captain B.S., you hear me?”

“Uh, yes sir.”

Snow slid over his bottle of tequila. I didn’t see another glass around, so I took a swig. Before I could comment on the burning taste, Snow spoke up.

“What kind of things did they teach you lot about First Battalion?”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Just humor me,” he said.

I tried to explain. “Well, we were taught everything that you brought back for us. We didn’t have pictures of them until after you came back, so we had to use our imagination. They told us that First Battalion saved our planet—saved the whole Galaxy. The War would have been an invasion if it weren’t for you.”

“Bullshit.”

“Excuse me, sir?”

“You got cotton in your ears, boy? I said bullshit. Before we found and attacked them, the Ursae didn’t even know we existed. But as soon as we took the bridge into their galaxy,

they got curious about the Milky Way.

“We don’t even know if they were violent before we got there. So that’s what they didn’t tell you in school.”

Snow took a long drink from his glass, pausing to think. He continued.

“You can’t really blame them, can you? Earth wanted a war. Earth wanted a reason for the masses to stop being curious about space, and get hunkered down in their little homes, fearful. That’s what they wanted, and they got it.”

Snow lifted his glass toward the large ICF insignia hanging over the door. “Congratulations, suckers.”

I took another wincing gulp from the bottle before replying.

“Sir, if you don’t like the ICF, why are you here again? Why not settle down and have a life on Earth? You Elders were lucky that way.”

“Lucky? We weren’t lucky. They taught you about time dilation, I’m guessing.”

“Of course.”

“Then you know when I was born?”

“You must have been born around 2025.”

“Something like that. It means I’m almost two hundred years old. Do you think I still know anyone but the Elders, anywhere?”

“I guess not.”

“Time dilation is going to mess up your life, just like it did mine. And time is going to be the least of your worries, son.”

Snow knocked back the rest of his drink. “At ease, Hudson. I’m off to bunk—drills at oh-six hundred as usual.”

Snow didn’t wait for a reply before setting off toward his quarters. I took a long pull from the bottle.

* * *

Orca Squad stood shoulder to shoulder, looking forward intently. A combat suit stood in front of us along with an armorer. Snow walked in.

“This is an Exo. Your lifeline. Your skin. Fitted to your body, and to your mind. Morrison, step in the ring.”

Morrison walked up to the Exo and held his arms out, as

if he wanted a hug. The Exo came to life.

Tendrils of what looked like smoke curled up from the floor, surrounding Morrison. He started screaming, apparently in pain.

The Exo slowly lost definition, edges blending together and sinking inward, bleeding into Morrison's skin. His face turned a silvery gray, his skin shimmering.

Snow smiled. "Nanobots, fresh off the Smar-Tech line. Grade two—smart little things, and they don't hurt you half as much as grade one. I wasn't joking when I said these are your skin. And there's nothing you can do about the pain, which will dull to a long pinching sensation after a while. It never really goes away."

Morrison started to look more comfortable, although his face was still ashen. Snow continued. "All righty then. Time for everyone to get fitted. And no turning back."

Two

Months of training passed more quickly than I expected. We learned how to use the Exos and avoid falling. We had our weapons installed and conducted more and more dangerous exercises, culminating in live fire at full speed. And suddenly, we were ready.

* * *

A line of soldiers in their Exos marched through the hangar at Ice Base. Chunks of the line, squad by squad, branched off and entered their assigned ships. Twelve dreadnoughts holding one troop of two hundred forty soldiers each, for a total of just under three thousand men and women. That didn't include all the support personnel who were coming with us.

Orca Squad headed down to the end, where Snow was waiting, stern as ever.

"Asses on board, people. Strap in and turn on your screens. We're in a holding pattern until all the ships are mobile, then it's off to Summit.

"You've been prepped well for the six month journey. You'll be in Heaven for most of it, with occasional defrost and cardio training. Let's get going."

We boarded our ship, *Rogue Mariner*. The familiar smell of hot metal filled my nostrils. With all the supercomputing power on board, heat dissipation was a serious issue until reaching space.

The ships took off one by one, exiting the hangar into the darkness. Inside *Rogue Mariner*, our Exos fogged up as we all went to Heaven.

* * *

When I woke up, they said we were at Summit station. If we had defrosted or exercised during the six month flight, I sure

didn't remember it.

Morrison and I got up, the fog of Heaven drifting away from our bodies. Some soldiers stretched, others did a few lunges to limber up. We marched out along with the rest of the squad, looking curiously at our new surroundings.

I reached the Summit barracks and found my quarters. The rooms were larger than I was used to, with only two soldiers per room—pilot and co-pilot of each two-person fighting pod. The idea, apparently, was to build rapport between us.

I folded my ICF regulation clothes and slid them under a bunk. My co-pilot, a tall, muscular Egyptian woman, walked in and clapped me hard on the shoulder. Her name was Khali.

“You ready for this, Hudson?”

“I was born ready.”

“Good. If you aren't, I'll kick your ass back to boot camp. Better to do it now instead of ejecting you into the abyss mid-flight.”

I smirked, and nudged her playfully. We bumped fists and finished unpacking. The comms crackled a request to meet in the engineering bay, and we left.

Snow was there to greet us. “Orca Squad, today and the next two weeks will be solely pod training. The simulations back home may not have prepared you enough for these things. From what I understand, they baked you all up a nice, fresh batch of these Mark II pods, so they shouldn't malfunction. Let's get to it.”

We suited up, our movements quick and focused. Khali and I got into our pod and sped out of the hangar. On the screen in front of us, colorful pulsing orbs ran across the void.

We slid our arms into the holsters on the sides of the pod and felt the Exos' hand pads connect. My visor lit up brighter, combining a head up display of my vital signs with the pod's navigation and radar to create a stunning array in front of me.

We sped through the range, arming our weapons and firing at the drones that flew across the space in front of us in complex patterns. Although the drones didn't fire back this time, it still felt dangerous.

After a couple of months, the drones starting firing. And then they started firing fast, aiming to destroy the pods. Then the drones got smaller and faster, and much harder to hit. But

Orca Squad had talent, as confirmed by the display in my visor showing colored icons flashing all over the place, reflecting expert maneuvering.

A message flashed across my screen ordering us back to base. Khali and I flew in and landed. As I took off my helmet with a sigh of relief, I could feel stubble on my face and bags under my eyes. Morrison and Stone, getting out of their pod next to me, looked equally haggard.

“Nine days,” I said.

“Nine days and we’re out of here,” said Morrison.

Khali grinned. “And you thought Ice Base was suffocating. The joke’s on you because the first planet supposedly has a nice atmosphere. Poisonous, but nice.”

We shared a laugh and headed out of the hangar.

* * *

I walked through the corridors of Summit station to a large meeting room. Snow and the other captains were gathered around a viewscreen with a colonel briefing them.

“Am I interrupting a happy thought, Snow?” said the commander.

“No sir, just checking my squad’s stats.”

Snow pulled up a progress meter showing Orca Squad’s performance since the beginning of training. We were near the top, with Nineveh Squad close behind us. The colonel continued the briefing.

“If you folks can spare your eyes for a moment, there’s some vital new information you need to hear.

“The latest scan of the enemy system shows only one planet in our neutral zone that has the potential to be not so neutral. Initial reports tell us that there is a high chance of weapons manufacturing near the Ursan base.

“Seeing as how the bugs haven’t set up an actual neutral zone, this could simply be their furthest outpost from their mother ship or home planet. For all we know, it could be their home planet, but that’s a long shot. The Ursae haven’t recolonized the other four planets previously reconned by First Battalion. That’s a good sign that we’re on the winning side of this war.”

Snow looked forlorn. His screen showed a list of us, and I guessed he was thinking that these were the people who wouldn't be coming home.

* * *

Orca Squad got into our Exos and headed for the pods. The engineers helped us check everything out to make sure it was in tip-top shape.

A huge floating head materialized from a flurry of particles in the hangar. We all stopped to look at General Cyrus's avatar, which spoke to us.

"Congratulations, soldiers. You've made it to the end of your terrestrial and home galaxy training. This is where things get tricky; you're off to Ursa Delta Galaxy and many of you may not come back in one piece.

"To reward you all for your efforts over the last two years, every last one of you has been promoted to Corporal.

Hearing the General's words, we looked down at our Exos. A second chevron was seared into our rank insignia. Some of us smiled proudly, including me. I looked over at Snow, whose chest now wore the gold oak leaf of a Major. I expected to see a similarly proud look on Snow's face. He wore a somber frown instead.

General Cyrus's talking head continued. "First Battalion stood where you are standing now, and they know what you are feeling. Let them guide you, and don't take anything for granted. Space is a harsh reality, and you need to stay strong. Most importantly, you need to win because Earth is counting on you. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes sir!"

We scattered to the pods and jumped in. My visor lit up when I connected, and I could see the excitement in Khali from her body language. The pods took off, more organized and smooth than before. We formed lines as we headed toward the mouth of the wormhole.

I took a deep breath in anticipation as I watched the pods in front of us head into the portal. And soon, it was our turn.

Space bent around us, and I could see the light at the other end forming a ring from all the distortion. What took us

only a few minutes of subjective time would take us fifty years into the future, and tens of millions of light years away.

Halfway through the bridge, I heard a blast of static through my helmet comm.

“—flict at opening. Ursan atta—. —treme caution!”

The choppy voice cut out, and my visor started malfunctioning. I turned to look at Khali, who was tapping her helmet.

We shot out of the tunnel at Mach 25, right into a raging battle. Lasers shot everywhere, bouncing off the ablating armor of our pods and scattering into space.

My screen flared up with the pulsing auras of the Ursae inside their ships, which flitted here and there in a strange rhythm. They were totally unpredictable in their movements. The Ursan fighters were several times the size of our pods, but they were less agile.

My pod passed the floating debris of another pod, and I could see charred pieces of two bodies stuck in the twisted metal.

Before I could stop to think, Khali put our pod in battle mode and armed our weapons. We joined a formation of other pods that were systematically returning fire with both kinetic and laser weapons. Several Ursan fighters blew up as we appeared to get the upper hand.

The battle continued until our pods outnumbered the Ursae, who eventually retreated to their mother ship and shot off into hyperspace.

Then there was an eerie calm. One pilot called for a headcount just as *Rogue Mariner* and the other ships came through the wormhole. Khali and I flew into our ship's hangar, a chaotic scene in front of us.

We landed next to the other pods and could see some troops retching over burnt bodies on the floor. Most people were too dazed to even take off their Exos. The engineers came up and gave our pods a once-over to see what kind of damage there was. My pod had an angry-looking gash in the graphite exterior where an Ursan laser had almost killed us.

Snow jumped out of his pod and began barking orders. I found a barrel to sit on and dropped my head into my hands. An officer went up to Snow with the results of the headcount.

“Sir, we've lost nine pods—two from your squad. Wood

and Devlin, pod twenty. Mancias and Morrison, pod thirteen.”

I looked up in horror just as Snow turned to look at me. His expression was nearly blank, with just a tinge of sadness for the loss of my friend. I slumped even lower, then felt the blood drain from my head as I fainted.

* * *

I woke up in sick bay, squinting in the bright white light. Sounds of pain surrounded me. I tried to sit up, but didn't make it. I took a few breaths and pressed the button on the side of the bed to tilt it up. The large welt on my forehead from where I had fallen was aching with each heartbeat.

I felt a sudden wave of sadness come over me. Just as I started to cry, I turned into my pillow and balled it up around my head so no one would see me. I felt better.

After a few minutes I got up and put my clothes back on. I checked out with the duty nurse and made my way back to the barracks.

The ship was still chaotic. Troops were pushing equipment here and there, along with damaged pod parts and damaged soldiers. I saw Snow and walked up to him.

“What happened out there, sir?”

Two orderlies wheeled a body past us, half of his Exo gone and a deep cauterized hole running through his midsection.

“Come with me, Hudson.”

Snow and I walked into an empty conference room.

“Son, how would it help you at all to hear why your friend died? It really wouldn't, not at all. The only thing you should care about is that he died instantly. Painlessly. And now you've got a damn good reason to keep fighting on.”

Snow grabbed my shoulder, fingers bunching up the fabric in an angry gesture.

“No more of this psycho bullshit, Hudson. You don't get free reign of the standard procedures just because you're a hot shot. You weren't even hit in this battle, but you passed out like a little bitch. It doesn't make any difference to me or the higher-ups, but you should get your head screwed on right so you don't crack up next time.”

I didn't know what to say, so I just nodded and stood up

a little straighter. Snow let go of me and walked away, leaving me in the conference room. I looked out the windows into space, with my breathing controlled and my eyes focused.

* * *

I walked through the mess hall, a tray of synthetic food in my hands. I scanned the room and looked for a place to sit, like in high school all over again. Half the soldiers near me gave me dirty looks, and the others didn't raise their eyes. I found a table and sat by myself. My fingers unconsciously peeled back the plastic lids and I started eating in silence.

A man from Nineveh Squad came over, his face open and friendly. "Hey there, man."

I just ignored him.

"Hey, uh, so I've seen you around here a couple of times, and I just wanted to—"

"Just stop," I said. "Whatever you're thinking about doing, just don't. I don't want what you're selling."

"I'm not selling any—"

"Just move on, pal. I'm not worth your time."

The man stood up and walked away, scoffing at me.

As I was watching him walk away, I heard a sudden screeching crash, followed by screams. A huge, monstrous figure bounded into the mess hall. It picked up several people sitting at tables and cut them to pieces with what looked like giant razor-sharp pincers. The screams continued as gouts of bright red blood spewed from the victims' dismembered corpses. I locked eyes with the creature, which stared at me until I felt pinned in place, transfixed like a mounted specimen. I saw a bright, searing light.

* * *

I could feel my body jerk upright from my bed. I was covered in sweat, the sheets stuck to me. Khali was sleeping peacefully in the other bunk. I rolled out of bed and ran into the hallway in my briefs, fully expecting there to be more monsters. There weren't any; all I could hear was the calm, quiet breathing of my squadmates. I groaned and slumped against the nearest

wall, hands wiping the sweat off my face.

“Getting worse,” I mumbled to myself. I sat down in the hallway, trying to catch my breath and get the nightmare out of my head.

* * *

My insomnia kept me up all night. The baggy-eyed face staring back from the mirror splashed some water over his face, to no effect. I changed my clothes and walked to the research bay, where the rest of Orca Squad was listening to Snow explain Ursan anatomy. I joined the semicircle around a 3-D display of an Ursan carcass, and I noticed that we all shared an expression of disgust and anger on our faces. Snow paced as he talked.

“Auras. What are they?”

Khali spoke up. “What the pests emit on our scanners.”

“We call them Ursae in my presence, Khali,” said Snow. “I won’t tell any of you that again. Continue.”

“Right. Well, the Ursae emit an unknown combination of elemental energy that our primary sensors can’t pick up. Now we use aural detectors so we can see the Ursae in recon and battle, in any conditions.”

“Good. Where does this mysterious aura come from?” asked Snow.

Silence in the room. “We don’t know that information, sir,” said one of my squadmates.

“Of course you don’t. It wasn’t deemed relevant to your studies, therefore it was not taught to you. Lucky for you, I don’t give a rat’s ass what they think is relevant. It’s all damn relevant to me, so it’s all damn relevant to you. Here.”

Snow strode through us and up to the display, his hand waving to spin the image around. He pointed to spikes running down the back of the Ursan.

“This is where the aura comes from. The pores at the base of these spikes are what emit the aura. Our tests show that if we breathed in this cocktail of chemicals, our organs would fail in minutes. Fortunately, we have our Exos. Lucky, really, because the planets we’ve explored so far don’t support human life.”

Khali raised her hand to ask a question. “Sir, why can’t

we call them pests? It's what they are, so why do they deserve to be called their official name?"

A deep scowl set onto Snow's face as he turned angrily toward her. "What kind of goddamn question is that? Have they gotten that deep down into your brains already? They must have scrubbed those neural walls clean.

"The Ursae are the first intelligent life forms we have ever encountered. Just because they look a little buggy doesn't mean they are lesser than us. In fact, they have a more advanced civilization, and so we are the threat to them, not the other way around. Get that through your brainwashed heads—that we may not be doing the right thing—"

Snow caught himself, and stormed out of the room. We stayed silent, Snow's words slowly sinking in.

* * *

Orca Squad was going through its daily routine. Pushups, jumping jacks, situps, pullups, and other exercises. We chanted in unison with each rep—everyone but me. I did my drills in silence.

The comm spoke up: "Deployment in ninety minutes. Formation in sixty minutes."

We stopped drilling and scattered to get ready. I changed into fresh clothes to prepare for the flight to the nearby planet. The engineers prepped the pods for takeoff.

We all stepped up to our Exos, jaws set firm as the nanobots crawled over and into our skin. Without a moment's hesitation, we synced the Exos and the pods, and Snow's voice came over the comms.

"Comm silence unless you're in distress. Land in formation. We know the quadrant we've been assigned; we just don't know what is there for us to find. So don't lose focus. Out."

We flew in formation toward a light blue planet that looked oddly like Earth.

On reaching the planet, we descended through a cloudy atmosphere toward a surface where we didn't know what to expect. Everything was in shades of blue, but looked like Earthy terrain.

We landed in a large field of grass-like stalks. Scans showed no aural emissions within a twenty kilometer radius, so we climbed out and looked around. Even though there was no wind, the grassy stalks swayed. I ran my fingers through them and they stood up straight, then gradually resumed their motion. Snow walked up.

“Are we in primary school or something? How about we don’t let the grass distract us?”

“Yes sir,” I said.

Snow turned and walked East. I looked at the other squads, each heading off into a different direction, spanning out to cover as much ground as possible. The trees we walked toward were impossibly tall; the shortest of them was larger than the largest redwoods on Earth.

The vastness of the forest made us hesitate, but Snow didn’t slow down. I shouldered my laser rifle and looked through the scope. My sensors had marked the position of several dog-like creatures in the distance, and I turned up my visor magnification to see better.

After a long hike without incident, Snow motioned for a halt. I got in formation and looked where he was pointing.

We had reached a clearing in the forest, and the grass here was the same as before, only taller. It was shoulder-height, and off in the distance I could see what looked like oversized cattle chewing on it. They had four long, spindly legs and skinny bodies. Through my scope, I could see that they were transparent, with all of their internal organs showing as clear as day. The fast-beating hearts and bundles of veins were a stark contrast from their clear skin. Snow whispered through the comms.

“Those things are harmless, really. They aren’t what we need to worry about. It’s the—those.”

Snow crouched in the grass, followed by everyone else. Out of the sky came a screeching howl, and the creatures in the field started bellowing and scattering. Huge flying beasts circled lazily, waiting for the best time to strike. One by one, they swooped down and scooped up cow after cow, flying back to where they came from. They looked like giant black eagles, with two pairs of jagged, sharp wings jutting out of their bodies. And a long, teeth-baring snout instead of a beak. They let out

piercing wails as their talons snatched the transparent animals from the grass.

We stared in fearful awe, as if we were witnessing something we were never supposed to see. Snow stared too, but with a grim look in his eyes. He straightened up suddenly, and I could hear his private comm buzzing.

“It can’t be. Already? Yes, I understand sir. Out. All right people, we have to move. Dingo squad has made contact on the far side of this sector. We have to head out and cover our ground.”

Snow signaled for us to move after the last dark eagle flew away. We crouched and moved through the grass, completely concealed. Whatever kind of grass it was made it hard to see each other visually, although the sensors marked everyone’s position in my visor.

Suddenly, I heard a shriek overhead. We all stopped crouching and ran for the cover of the trees. I sprinted forward, launching myself through the grass. A sudden movement next to me made me turn my head, just in time to see a pair of giant talons pierce Khali’s suit and pick her up. She only had time for a gurgled scream, and then she was gone.

The rest of us made it to the trees, but we didn’t stop. We kept running forward, jumping over hulking roots twining out from under the tree trunks. Only after we stopped hearing the birds’ screams did we slow down and stop. The Exos kicked in to help regulate our bodies’ adrenaline levels and hydration. Snow doubled back to make sure we weren’t being stalked.

“So...that was about one percent of the wildlife on this planet. The forest is denser up ahead. Let’s hope we don’t meet the other ninety-nine percent. Move out; we’re meeting Tango Squad in twenty-two kilometers.”

Snow left it at that and signaled us to spread out and keep up his pace.

The trees got taller and thicker, and the roots got harder to climb over. Our Exos helped us not slide back to the ground, because the roots were smooth and gave us no friction.

The tree cover made day turn to dusk, and I switched on my night vision. Through my visor I saw large pulsating objects hanging from trees. The others craned their heads to watch these things, which descended with an electric blue crackle. It

was a hypnotic effect.

Snow knew what was coming. “Stay away from those! Don’t touch the tentacles!”

Just as Snow yelled out, two huge arms grew out of the back of one of the things, electrocuting a soldier. This snapped us out of our daze and we started running again. The movement woke up the rest of the beings, which dropped down and spread long blue tentacles out to grab us. I shot a few with my laser, and the rest of the squad followed suit. The creatures burst into bright blue fireballs as we killed them. Wisps of smoke rose from where their blood hit the ground.

We ran toward the objective and left the trees, finding ourselves in bright sunshine.

In front of us stood a huge domed Ursan base, with a high fence surrounding it. We scrambled back to the relative safety of the forest to regroup. Snow gathered us together and pushed a patch on his suit to activate a holographic map.

“We made good time, all things considered. Now to the mission. I don’t see Dingo Squad on the sensors, so it looks like we’re early. We’ll mount the first wave of the attack and then wait for them to back us up. Our orders are to neutralize all threats, but don’t wait for them to threaten you before taking action. We’ve lost enough of us as it is.”

His last sentence hung in the air as we watched the hologram switch to a 3-D representation of the base.

Snow continued. “During the first wave, the fences around their bases were primitive. They shouldn’t prove to be any problem this time. Once we cut through, regroup along the outer wall. Then fire teams will split off and take the surrounding buildings. Any Ursan with a weapon in hand will be taken out. For fuck’s sake, speak up if you need help. We work as a team, understood?”

We all nodded, not daring to speak aloud.

“See you on the other side, troops. Out.” Snow nodded and then stood, moving to face the fence. He took two of us and ran toward the fence. But when they got within a meter of the fence, the trio skidded to a stop and turned back quickly. Snow was panting when they got back.

“Well, they got smart. The fence shuts down the Exos—some kind of magnetic interference. Solutions?”

The group muttered quietly. I watched a stream of text fall down my screen as I looked up a technical paper on the Exos. Someone else beat me to it.

“Sir, we can counter the magnetic field and bend the fence out. We wouldn’t have to get too close to it either.”

Snow perked up. “Good work; it’s worth a try. Four of you, up and out. Two on the fence, too on cover. Remember, don’t get too close.”

I volunteered and ran forward with the others, wary of the sudden lack of cover. My squadmates covered me as I charged up my suit’s capacitor. I pointed my arm at the fence and reversed the polarity. Instantly, a depression appeared with hairline cracks forming in the metal. It made high-pitched screeches as it snapped apart. I switched the polarity again and the hole in the fence moved toward me, spreading wide enough for two of us at a time. I shut off the magnets and motioned for the squad to come up.

Two by two, we infiltrated the base. We lined up against the wall of the nearest building, where I finally noticed how many of us were missing. Ten out of forty troops, dead.

My Exo scanned for the nearest life forms but came up empty. Snow signaled for us to split up, and I joined one of the fire teams. We started off through the base.

I led my team into a building on the outskirts of what looked like a barracks. We burst in, ready to fire, but there was no one inside. I checked my sensors, and several faint auras appeared further inside the complex. We left the barracks and moved toward the large dome in the center of the base. The auras grew brighter.

I could see Dingo Squad, marked by green icons, enter the base. We moved closer to the dome and saw that there was a large open space in front of us with no cover.

The dome was like a huge beehive, flawlessly smooth except for hundreds of openings running from top to bottom. I could see some of Orca Squad spread out on either side of the dome, observing and calculating distances and risks. Snow’s voice came over the comm.

“Hold here until Dingo is in place. The auras are really strong here—seems like there ain’t one Ursa that ain’t in there. Switch to sonic.”

I pressed a patch on my hip, and I could feel my rifle humming.

“Watch the holes,” Snow said. “That’s where the real trouble—”

Just then the hum of our weapons was drowned out by a much deeper, louder one, coming from all around us. The ground shook and we crouched to fire positions, on alert.

The dome lit up a bright blue and started flashing.

“Shit, that’s their alarm. Dingo must have let one of them escape. Get ready, kiddos!”

The humming grew deafeningly loud until, all of a sudden, the Ursae came swarming out. They crawled out through the holes, their four feet sticking to the sleek wall of the dome. Their two arms held hulking weapons. Snow started the attack, stepping forward and aiming his rifle toward a line of Ursae streaming out of the dome. His arms surged with power, and his rifle shot a pulse of sonic energy at the enemy. The Ursae spasmed and fell to the ground, their bodies rigid. The rest of us followed Snow’s lead and the enemy corpses started piling up.

The Ursae started fighting back as they reached the ground. Lasers flashed across the open space between us and the dome. Our Exos deflected most of the beams. We moved forward, pinning the Ursae to the dome. They started retreating, but from the far side of the base I could hear more fighting. Dingo Squad.

As Dingo and Orca got closer to each other, the Ursae became more and more frantic. They were trapped. Moments later, one of the Ursae dropped its weapon and bowed its head. The others followed suit, and soon we were facing dozens of unarmed Ursae standing on the remains of their kin. Dingo Squad stopped shooting on the other side of the dome.

Snow called out to Orca: “Let’s wrangle these guys up and stick them in some pens. We’ll put guards up and keep them there until we get further orders.”

Just as Snow said this, there was a stirring inside the dome. From out of the lowest holes, smaller Ursae crawled out, unarmed and cautious. Snow stepped toward them and pointed with his rifle.

“You’ve surrendered. Join the others and you won’t get

hurt.”

The young Ursae just stared, not understanding a word Snow said. After a moment of confusion, one of the Ursan soldiers, a huge battle-scarred specimen, brought his head up and made a whirring, clicking noise to the civilian Ursae. With that, the civilians moved forward and joined the captured soldiers.

The Ursan who looked like their leader gazed at Snow with a penetrating stare. I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and Snow’s head jerked to one side.

“Ri—right. Let’s get...moving. We’ve...got a lot of work to do.” Snow didn’t sound like his usual self.

We rounded up the surrendered aliens and set up a couple of massive pens, with stakes driven into the ground that connected sections of fence taken from the Ursan base.

We and Dingo Squad were able to mingle and congratulate each other. No one was lost in this first battle; the worst anyone had was a broken visor. I looked around for Snow, but he had walked off.

Suddenly I heard an alarm klaxon over the comm and saw a red light flash on my screen. Snow came running back from wherever he was, and told us to clear out.

“They’re leveling this place! Go!” he said.

I looked at the captured Ursae in pens. We weren’t going to free them.

“I...Captain Snow...we can’t just leave them in there. There are children in there!”

Snow had a grim look on his face. “You heard the comm. We need to evacuate unless you all want to be barbequed with the rest of these poor souls.”

Orca and Dingo Squads ran out of the base just as a dozen fighting pods flew overhead. I could see canisters of napalm dropping out of their weapons bays.

When the canisters hit the base, flaming gel sprayed over everything. One of the Ursan pens took a direct hit, and I could hear the high pitched screams of the trapped, burning Ursae. A huge black cloud of billowing smoke rose into the air, the smell of burnt hair and well-done steak searing into my brain.

Snow led the way back to the landing zone. I was a few steps behind him, seething with rage. I lunged out at Snow,

tackling him to the ground.

We wrestled for a few moments, the Exos amplifying our strength. Snow got the better of me and pinned me to the ground, face down. He pressed his palm on the back of my helmet, and a fast sequence of images flashed in front of my eyes—not on the screen in front of me, but in my mind. I went limp and listened to the terrifying screams of the Ursae as everything faded to black.

* * *

When I woke up, it was dark and I was lying under the open night sky. I panicked for a moment, feeling no Exo around me. But then I saw the bio generators, which created an Earth-like atmosphere inside a protective bubble.

I felt around my head, not remembering getting knocked out or hurt. I got up, on shaky legs, and looked around. Three other cots were occupied by soldiers in Heaven. I found my Exo and suited up.

The camp was in a large clearing with short grass in places. I could see troops on the edges keeping watch for dangerous wildlife. I walked stiffly through the camp, not really making eye contact with anyone. I ran into Giles on the way to the armory.

“Sorry, Giles. I didn’t mean to—”

“No worries, mate. Glad to see you on your feet.”

“I don’t remember when they got me. It must have been one of those caged up bugs that hit me from behind.”

Giles smiled. “No, mate. You went rogue and attacked Snow.”

I felt myself turn pale. “I did what?”

“You wouldn’t follow evac procedure, at first. Then you tackled Snow and started wrestling with him. Seeing you two rolling around the ground while the pods were about to raze the place was a sight to behold.

“Snow got the upper hand and you went limp as a noodle. He carried you back to the neutral zone and we set up camp. We thought you had a fit or something.

“Whatever it was hit Snow pretty hard. He’s been off-site ever since.”

If I attacked Snow, I sure didn't remember it. Giles pointed off into the distance.

"Snow went toward that thicket of trees. Keep your head up, mate. You lived, so you should count your blessings."

I walked toward the trees, nodding to the sentries. I climbed over the roots quietly, careful to avoid the sleeping creatures above me. Eventually I reached a clearing where I was surprised to see a small cliff and a waterfall emptying into a pond. Everything was glowing—blues and greens radiated out into the darkness. Snow was sitting on a rock, watching smoke waft up from the "water" and shift colors under his hanging feet.

I walked up to Snow. "Sir, this planet keeps getting weirder."

"This ain't even that strange," he said. "Trust me—first planet recon I was on was a lot crazier."

An awkward silence settled between us. I scuffed some pebbles near my feet, breaking the silence.

"What happened yesterday?" I asked.

"We secured an enemy site."

"That's not what I meant, sir."

"Yeah, I know." He took a deep breath, settling his mind before explaining. "Remember back Earthside, when they put you all under and did your physicals? And when they implanted the control chips for your Exos? Well, that wasn't all they put in you.

"See, when First Battalion got into some tough patches, when morale got low and people got cagey, they didn't have any big red safety button to hit—nothing to put us in our places like good little ants.

"They got their shit together with you lot. A failsafe. A physical command that only captains and above know about.

"You remember what you saw right before you conked out? Pictures, lots of them, too fast to really stand out?"

The visuals slowly came back to me. "It's all a blur."

"That's the point," he said. "They don't want you knowing they could shut you down anytime they want to. All they need is the right puzzle piece."

I just stared. "What does that mean?"

"It means my Exo, right here in my left palm, has direct access to your brain. Frontal, temporal, and occipital lobes.

To give it to you straight, they brainwashed you, kid. Power washed your noggins and gave us the switch to kick you into high gear.”

I was silent for what seemed like minutes. He continued.

“And it gets worse. See, the Exo feeds you those subliminal commands constantly. The thing they implanted in you to connect you to the suit also controls part of you. When to be hungry, when to piss, and when to need some alone time.”

I felt a wave of anger taking over. “Those sons of bitches.”
“My thoughts exactly.”

I swung out and punched into the rock Snow was sitting on, making bits of it crumble away. As the rubble fell to the ground, it sizzled with phosphorescent sparks.

“Trust me, Hudson, this is just about the right way you should feel. Hell, I needed to do some soul searching when they told us about the procedure. They said it was new, just for Second Battalion, but I had my doubts. And you’re not going to like this next part at all.”

“You mean it gets worse?” I asked.

“What I’m about to tell you is classified. This could end my career and send me to prison. It would also cause dissension in the ranks. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“You got ‘the kick’ in a very public way when you cracked up and attacked me. Up to that point, we had only given the kick in training—privately.

“The kick is subliminal mind control, and you all were trained to accept it. Testing showed that repeated use of the kick alters a soldier’s mind, making him a hell of a lot more xenophobic. As if you could be more brainwashed.”

“Please stop saying that. The Ursae are a real threat.”

“That’s what they want you to think,” he said.

It was so Army—conditioning us to hate the enemy with our full consciousness and subconsciousness. I was at a loss. “I haven’t gone one day of my life without hearing about the war. You’re going to tell me there isn’t really a threat?”

“I didn’t say that. There’s some kind of threat, but we don’t understand it at all. There hasn’t been a breakthrough in coding their language, so we’re flying blind in terms of the enemy’s intentions. It doesn’t matter, because instead of being

diplomatic about the Ursae, all they did was train you guys to ‘squash those damn pests’ without a moment’s hesitation. Does subliminal training sound like a good idea to you?”

“I guess not.”

“All you and I need to do is survive this tour, get Earthside again, and stay off ICF’s radar. You should find some girl, make a family, and enjoy your life as best you can. Me, I get to be my old grumpy self on a nice plot of land supplied by the government. Or whatever will be available when we get back.”

We stood in silence for a moment, the gravity of our conversation hanging in the air. Snow grunted and slid off his rock, glancing back at the waterfall. “Might as well head back to camp.”

It wouldn’t be the last time we talked about brainwashing.

Three

The camp grew in numbers as another squad joined us. It was bustling and loud, with soldiers hurrying here and there transporting supplies and parts.

Domes were staggered throughout the camp, and the medics had their own stations where the injured could unsuit and get checked out.

The guards around the camp had doubled, but the indigenous creatures didn't bother us.

I saw two women carrying pod parts. They wore a patch with a wrench on it—engineers. That would be Palmer and Olsson. They talked to each other.

“How many of yours need repairs?” said Palmer.

“Twelve. You?”

“Eight. But one of my team was picked off by a tentacled creature, so we're only three strong. That should put you and me at the same pace.”

Olsson smirked. “Two days should be enough. I think I heard that we get a four day break out here. Squads are doing recess, getting a feel for the rest of the planet.”

“Good. As soon as we get these fixed the meatheads can get out there and stomp some bugs.”

Palmer and Olsson went to work on a couple of pods and kept talking.

“I wonder if the colonies would move this far out,” said Palmer. “I doubt it; ICF can barely manage us all the way out here.”

“Tillman said that our first contact made home base shit their pants.”

Palmer laughed. “Can't blame them. No one expected those bugs to be right on top of the wormhole exit.”

“Don't you think the Elders should have known?”

“Maybe. You never know with them; they have a lot of experience, but time dilation must scramble your brain after too

many trips, don't you think?"

Olsson didn't answer. "Some of the Elders are a little odd. Some of the odd ones are still eye-catching."

"Olsson! They're older than your grandparents."

"Oh please, as if age really matters anymore. Think about it. We get back Earthside and we're at least twice as old, technically, as the guys we're looking to shack with. Fortunately, we won't look our age."

Palmer stopped working. "Damn, I forgot to grab the reactor for this one. I'll be back."

"Mess hall drinks when we're done?"

"Sounds great. See you around, Palmer."

Snow passed Palmer and Olsson and came up to me. "Recon starts at oh eight hundred. With three squads here, we'll cover enough ground to get off this rock in double time."

I suddenly remembered why we were there.

"We'll be heading West. It's already been scanned, and there's no obvious Ursan life or tech around. But we can't be too careful. Stay in V formation and make sure to keep four eyes on the skies at all times. We're taking the route with the least amount of tree cover, which means nights under the stars and open to attacks."

"Yes, sir."

Snow paused for a moment, lost in thought. "One more thing, Hudson. I'm promoting you to Sergeant. Field commission. You get second platoon until you're dead or I find someone better. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know the drill. Get your platoon ready."

Snow walked off. I'd never been more surprised than at that moment—Corporal to Sergeant is a big step up in responsibility, and I thought there were many other candidates better than I.

I went back to my tent and sat down. Whatever just happened, I was exhausted from it. I ran my hand over my forehead and took a deep breath, staring at the fabric above me.

* * *

The next morning, I took my platoon through the open

fields on the way to the objective. The knee-length grass shimmered in the rising sun. We took turns pushing the hover carts with all our supplies in them. Our Exos kept us hydrated, but we still had to bring food.

The group moved fast, not pausing to look at the scenery. We covered a lot of ground, observing more strange wildlife but never disturbing them. Fifty kilometers out from base, we stopped for the day.

The platoon and I pitched rough tents in a field, this one barren of grass and smoldering in places. We slept fitfully, our visors dimmed to simulate night.

I woke up the next morning surprisingly well-rested. The platoon assembled for a briefing as I gathered my thoughts.

“We’re doing the same thing today. Set your Exos to double hydration, because we won’t have a break until fourteen hundred hours. Also, set your sensors to scan safe paths at least two hundred meters in front of you. We can’t trust the way this planet’s terrain changes.”

As we were packing up, I saw a dozen pods approaching us from far off. The pods circled once before landing, and I could see that they were all empty except for the lead pod. Snow got out.

“Hudson, emergency deployment back to the ships. Ursan ships are approaching at 0.95c and will be on us in four hours or less. The rest of the squads are already in route—you’re the furthest one out and it’s lucky we reached you in time.”

“Shit.” I turned to my platoon. “All right, people. Leave the supplies behind and get in the pods.”

They didn’t need any convincing. We took off and headed into space.

We went as fast as we could, but didn’t make it to the start of the battle. I could see explosions and blasts in the distance. The rest of Orca Squad was already there, along with most of the other squads. When we joined the battle, it looked like the tide was turning because the Ursan ships were scattering. We fought hard.

Snow came over the comm. “Clear gamma sector. Deploying railgun.” On the underside of *Rogue Mariner*, a huge set of panels opened and a large gun lowered into space. It charged fast, force building around it, making the ship appear to

vibrate.

The weapon fired into space at several of the Ursan ships, which couldn't maneuver fast enough to avoid the depleted Uranium shells. One by one, the Ursan ships were disabled or escaped. I heard a screeching scream over the comm, which made me flinch.

Snow came back on the air. "The enemy is suppressed. Return to base—mission accomplished."

* * *

The mess hall was packed, with rows of benches filled by anxious soldiers. Some sported injuries, though none so bad as to go to the medic stations. Two tables were vacant at the front.

The squad captains walked solemnly to the front of the room, some whispering to each other as the highest ranking officer, a colonel, began to address the troops.

"Folks, it's been a long few weeks. Before we continue, let's have a moment of silence for the sixty-four souls who won't be heading back to Earth."

Eyes turned to the empty tables, the room silent as heads drooped in reverence to the fallen. The moment seemed to last forever. The colonel continued.

"That being said, Second Battalion is being recalled to Earth. Initial reports show that the planet known as Ursa Delta has been cleared of enemy forces. The entire sector is clear. So, this tour of duty is done."

I heard whispers of disbelief throughout the hall. The colonel cleared her throat to gain the silence of the room once again.

"It will be another two weeks before we start the trip home. We'll have a volunteer group to stay behind at the base, waiting for the next wave of troops to take their place." She let that sink in for a moment.

"We agreed to use volunteers for one reason. The Earth we will be returning to is not the Earth that we left. You all know the effects of time dilation. These past six years subjective have been sixty on Earth. Your families may be gone. Your friends as well. You may not have a home to live in.

"The ICF will take care of any of you, of course, but that

might not be enough. So I want you to think it over these next couple of weeks. Talk with your squad captains if you want to stay behind.

“I would hope none of you look down on your colleagues who stay here. They are not weaker or stronger; they are just walking a different path. Say your goodbyes and who knows—we may see each other in the future.”

The colonel walked out of the room along with some of the squad captains. Snow stayed where he was, scanning the room. Our eyes met. Snow made no gesture; he just blinked at me and left the room.

The troops chatted loudly, excited to go home.

Four

On the day of return, I couldn't sleep so I took one last walkthrough of the ship. A few others joined me. I slowed in front of a large screen on the wall. It displayed a list of twelve names under the word "volunteers." Next to the display was a handprint scanner for volunteers to use. I contemplated the screen and the names with a blank stare. I moved on.

* * *

In the hangar, some said their goodbyes to the soldiers staying behind. There were hugs, handshakes, and occasional kisses. Not all eyes were dry, the emotion of the moment hanging thick in the air. The comm made an announcement.

"T-minus ten minutes to departure."

Final goodbyes were said, and the personnel staying behind stepped into their pods for the trip back to the planet. Only a few looked back.

We stowed all our gear and went into Heaven. It was strangely peaceful, and for once I was able to sleep soundly. I had dreams of Earth and what it would be like when I got back.

* * *

I woke up feeling great as we exited the wormhole and made our way back to Earth. We landed on a dusty airstrip, where no one was waiting for us.

I stepped out onto the tarmac and took off my Exo. My fellow troops and I shared a sigh of relief, glad to be back on terra firma with no further burdens. Captain Snow stepped forward and addressed Orca Squad.

"The ICF is providing transportation back to your cities of origin. You will receive final orders, then you will be officially deactivated from duty. They will tell you that you can return

to any ICF recruiting station to re-enlist if you so desire. In my opinion you should give yourselves a break, goddamnit. The world is a whole new place now, so you might as well do some exploring.”

We took our gear onto the waiting ships, each designated for a different region of the Republic of America. I fist bumped my platoon and got on my ship, heading back to California.

Just as I was buckling up, Snow got on my ship.

“Sir?”

“Huh, you’re heading back to Sector Bravo as well?”

“I guess so.”

“Then you and I aren’t done with each other after all.”

Snow grinned.

We lifted off, dust and dirt flying everywhere. The ship was remarkably silent as we sped through the air. Under us, cities were packed high and tight, tall skyscrapers and apartment complexes reaching for the stars. I watched the ground moving and noticed that there were a lot of smokestacks and industrial parks spewing sludge into the air. I couldn’t help but notice that there was nothing green anymore. No forests, no parks—not even a single front lawn. They must have been rationing water.

* * *

I sat at a desk in the ICF office in San Francisco. The room was empty aside from the desk, two chairs, and a small flat box sitting on the desk. I waited patiently, taking deep, controlled breaths.

A man came in wearing a lieutenant colonel’s uniform, and he sat across from me with his hand on the box. A hologram popped up at eye level, right in the space between us.

“Sergeant Ian Hudson.”

“Yes, sir?”

“I am Colonel West. On behalf of the Republic of America, and in the name of the President, I hereby promote you to the rank of First Lieutenant. Should you choose to return to active duty, you will be promoted to Captain after two years of service. Do you accept this offer?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Place your hand on the box.”

I did as I was told. The box lit up, casting a shadow on the ceiling as it scanned my handprint. The colonel disappeared without another word, and the officer in the room with me spoke instead.

“Here is your mandated ICF Priority Sustenance Card.” He slid over a sleek, blank, chrome sliver of metal. I picked it up and examined it. “Present this card at any Sustenance Kiosk and receive as much nutritional supplement as you need.”

“When you say ‘nutritional supplement,’ what do you mean?” I asked.

“The government does not regulate the sale and distribution of whole food items. It does, however, ration nutritional supplements, which are mandatory for all citizens to take. Make it your priority to take these supplements every day.”

The officer placed a black strip of metal on the table. “One prescribed OxyBreath. Mandatory for all citizens to wear when out in the atmosphere. Failure to comply will result in a heavy fine.”

“So, that smog isn’t too good for us, huh?”

“Prolonged exposure to the atmosphere within twenty miles of all urban areas can result in organ failure and death.”

Earth was even more polluted than when I left. He continued.

“We have been informed that you have no remaining familial ties.”

“Actually I do. My brother.”

The officer gave me a look of slight sadness. “He passed seven years ago from an undisclosed illness.”

I felt the tears well up inside me.

“We have obtained a small apartment that you may occupy indefinitely. There will be an emotion stabilizer in your apartment that you should try.”

The officer stood up and left.

* * *

My black cab hovered in front of a building and lowered itself to the ground. I stepped out of it, duffel bag over my

shoulder and OxyBreath secure over my mouth. I squinted through the thick smog billowing above me, the building disappearing in the acrid clouds.

I went in and found myself in a sparse room with two rows of elevators. I took my mask off and looked around. People shuffled quickly in and out of the elevators, heads down, no one talking to each other. I looked at the card in my hand with my apartment number scribbled on it.

I walked up to my door and was surprised to see no doorknob. Instead, there was a retinal scanner in the middle. I stared into it and the door opened with a beep.

“Well look who finally got a hold of this future bullshit. Too good for doorknobs.” I was talking to no one in particular, but I felt better.

I went inside and tossed my bag, the door sliding shut behind me. The front room was a quaint open space with a table, two chairs, and a couch. The bedroom had a gray, scratchy looking blanket on a saggy bed. The bathroom was questionable. Bugs scuttled across the floor out of the way of my feet. There was no fridge. Instead, there was a dark panel on the countertop. I stepped up to it and it blinked on. Icons appeared on the screen. I touched the one that looked like a toaster, and the panel whirred to life.

As if pixel by pixel, two slices of toast appeared. “Done” flashed on the panel. I picked up the toast and took a hesitant bite. Not so bad. I left it on the counter because there was no trash can.

“Good start to everything,” I said to myself. I heard a beep and then a tinny voice.

“Please repeat your question.” A wall opened and a large screen came into view. A digitized face over the name “Watson” appeared on the screen, its features neither overtly male or female. It stared at me. “Please repeat your question, Ian Hudson.”

“Uh, it was a rhetorical question.”

“I see. In that case, shall we begin your mandatory emotion stabilizing therapy?”

“Mandatory? Who the hell are you? I think my emotions are pretty damn stable, thank you.”

“I am Watson Mark Twelve. Any former ICF member

must complete these steps within one month of release. Failure to do so may result in incarceration. Do you wish to continue?"

I paused for a moment. I supposed I had no choice. "Go ahead."

"Speak about your initial point of contact with the pestilent race," it said.

"Do you mean the Ursae?"

"Yes."

"Well this is already bullshit, then."

"Is that how you feel about the pests?"

"Not really."

"Understood, sir. The Ursan race attacked your squad how many times?"

"Three times? Technically, we instigated one of the attacks."

"Our records indicate that the attack on the Ursan planet was initiated by the alien race."

"No, I'm pretty sure we shot first. Besides, we were invading them; they had every right to—"

"Moving on. You have multiple reports of elevated adrenaline levels. You have attacked your commanding officer several times."

"Attacked is a strong word. And they promoted me. What is your point?"

"You are being prescribed with medication to level your moods."

"Are you a doctor?"

"I am an artificial intelligence. I coordinate with your medical professionals to provide you with the best possible service. Did you have any close, metaphysical contact with the pests?"

I turned to leave.

"Sir, if you disrupt your therapy, you will be reported."

"Report me, then. Therapy doesn't work."

The door slid open, and I left briskly with only my oxygen mask in hand. Watson's eyes never left me.

* * *

I walked along the streets observing people and things

around me. Everything was gray: the sky, the buildings, the clothes people wore. The sun wasn't visible at all. With my mask in place, I breathed easily. I watched as people shuffled in and out of a large kiosk with a bright flashing symbol of a pill over it. I didn't get in line, and kept walking.

Vehicles whizzed overhead. There were no traffic lights, just thousands of people walking in the streets. As I wandered, I came upon a place resembling a shopping mall. I stepped inside, taking off my mask. I saw rows and rows of people standing quietly. Every person was hooked up to a computer screen via neural cables connected to their temples. On the screens were flashing images of indeterminate subject matter. I heard the occasional sigh as well as strained, forced laughs.

Suddenly I was being jostled on all sides as a flurry of other people entered the building. As if on cue, the people hooked up to the computers stood up and stepped away, severing their connections. They headed for the doors, as did I.

Outside, I felt a wave of nausea come over me. After less than a minute, I couldn't feel my legs. After another minute I fell to the ground, writhing and clawing at my chest. I finally realized that I had forgotten to put on my OxyBreath, and this was the effect of the smog.

I fumbled around with my mask with clumsy fingers and was able to get it over my mouth. I just lay there for a few minutes to catch my breath. The public didn't seem to notice as they stepped over my weak body.

* * *

I went back to my apartment. Night had fallen outside and the room lit up automatically when I entered. I slumped into the couch, exhausted. Watson appeared almost immediately.

"Would you like—"

"No, Watson. There is no way I feel like talking to you. Just put on the news, whatever news station there is. Are there still news stations?"

"Of course, sir."

The face flicked away and the screen went blank. I sat there expectantly, but nothing happened. Then I noticed two neural connectors hanging from the ceiling. I hesitated, but

figured nothing could go wrong.

When I hooked up the connectors, I felt the kick all over again. This time, the news turned on inside my head. Strange, soothing, yet off-key music played as a fast sequence of images appeared before my eyes. They were all of bright colors, happy people, cute babies, sunlight and beaches, and leafy green meadows. A deep voice started reading the news.

“Air pollution is down for the one hundred fortieth day in a row, and the Republic is richer than ever.”

This went on for a few minutes as I just stared into space. After the news, there was a two minute commercial for Otium. “Life never felt so good as when you’re taking your recommended dosage.” The ad showed happy, dazed people going about their daily routines with wide smiles on their faces.

I tore the connectors off, gasping as if suffocating. I leaned back on the couch, staring at the ceiling as the cords retracted. Watson didn’t speak up again.

My stomach rumbled and I finished my toast, still where I left it on the counter. I kicked my clothes off and went to bed. I could hear the whirring of ships passing outside my window. I shut my eyes.

* * *

The alarm rang out from under my pillow, and I jerked awake. I hit the snooze button and tried to get some more sleep, but it seemed like the alarm went off again immediately.

I got out of bed, and just then there was a ringing in the front room. Watson’s screen flashed “Answer call” in bright red letters.

“Answer.”

The screen clicked on, and I saw Snow’s face staring back at me.

“Hello there, kiddo.”

“Major! I’m sure glad to see your face, sir.”

“Boy, you look like kicked shit, Hudson.”

“How the hell do you not?”

“Well for one, I don’t live in the city. How about we meet up and chat. I could help you out with a few things.”

“Sure, let’s meet up. How long will it take you to get over

here?”

“Which block are you on?”

“Uh, block two quarter fifty.”

“Shouldn’t take me more than an hour. You should go out, get your pills, and wait downstairs for me.”

“Roger that, sir.”

The transmission cut out and Watson’s face replaced Snow’s.

“Hudson, your serotonin levels are lower than recommended. I would suggest taking steps to correct this imbalance.”

“Gee, thanks. I’m heading out, Watson.”

“Please remember to use your OxyBreath, Ian. Two more infractions could result in a reduction in rations.”

“How did you know I forgot?”

Watson didn’t answer. Its face looked straight ahead, unblinking. I didn’t wait for an answer.

* * *

I looked at the line of people walking toward the pill kiosk, and I slowly stepped into the back of it. The man in front of me had his head up with a huge smile under his breathing mask. His eyes had a glazed look. I looked behind me and noticed that everyone else had glazed eyes and smiles. I didn’t know what to think.

I reached the front of the line, entering one end of the kiosk. There was a narrow counter with a woman sitting on the other side. I walked forward to her and took my mask off.

“Card?” she said.

“Oh, right.” I took out the ration card and handed it to her. She looked confused.

“Place it on the scanner.”

“Oh.” I looked around for a scanner but didn’t see one.” The woman took the card from me impatiently. She pressed it against her palm, and a moment later three panels on her hand opened up. Four pills pushed up to the surface and she held them out to me.

“Sir, you are holding up the line.”

I reached out and took the pills from her, then moved out

of the way. I watched the next several people in line get their pills from this high-tech dispenser, and I noticed that everyone was popping the pills without even waiting for water. I took one myself and swallowed it dry. I coughed and put my mask back on.

I reached the lobby of my building and felt a sharp pain in my stomach. I leaned against a wall and looked around. No one noticed. Some people were gray and depressed, others smiling in their haze of uppers.

Then I saw Snow. He came over and took me by the shoulders, straightening me up.

“Come on, kid, up you go. Better to be upright than all scrunched up.”

I rested my weight on Snow, and we went back outside with OxyBreaths in place. Snow nodded in the general direction we were going, and I did my best to walk.

As we were walking, a large shadow came over us. It was a double decker bus setting down in the street. The doors opened and a group of children in school uniforms came out. They walked somberly with their heads down. One of the kids bumped into Snow and dropped a book. Snow bent over to pick up the book and tried to hand it back to the child, but he just kept walking.

The book, titled “Enduring Vision,” looked like a history book of some kind.

Snow and I went into a nearby bar, which was nearly empty. I looked around and noticed that the air was surprisingly clean. The bartender gave us a strange look as Snow ordered two drinks. I sighed with relief knowing that beer on tap still existed.

“So, how are you holding up, Hudson?”

“Not so great.”

“I can tell. What are your problems?”

I held out my ICF ration card, which the bartender took and scanned on his arm.

“For starters, let’s talk about the androids.”

“They aren’t androids. Those are people with special electronic prostheses installed. Cyborgs. Remember when you were first fitted with your Exo? And I said you were ICF property? Well, any public service workers are property of the

Republic of America. There are no more unions, no more strikes, no minimum wage. Socialism at its finest.”

“Wow. On that note, the news. I tried the neural connectors last night and it was easily the most uncomfortable thing I’ve ever felt. It was all up in my brain stem.”

“You want to see weird? Check out this book.” Snow flipped the cover open. There were no pages, just a thin screen that flickered on and showed a page of writing with some pictures. Snow read out loud. “With the introduction of the drug Otium into the population, violent crimes such as robbery, rape, and murder are on the decline. As of May of 2267, the Republic of America boasts the lowest crime rate of all the nine world empires.” Snow hit a few buttons and read a different selection. “A stride in the field of genetic reorganization came from one Doctor Herman Day, who singlehandedly created a biological enhancement program for embryos in utero. When the program takes effect, the baby is born with a genetic disposition to have no diseases. They also mature with the necessity for less nutrients, thus creating adult humans with less of a need for natural food. The Republic put the Supplement Program into effect once the first generation of Day’s Babies came into adulthood. It is still a strong, fully-supported government system in place today.”

“So, people don’t have to eat anymore?”

“I guess not, Hudson. Out in the countryside, people aren’t like this. They grow their own food and barter between themselves to stay alive. It’s a good system for them.”

“Is the air bad out there too?”

“I’ve gotten away with not wearing my mask a little bit at a time. Still wouldn’t recommend it. You should come out for a visit sometime. If city life is already getting you—”

A loud beeping came from behind the bar. There was a rumbling outside. The bartender straightened up and stopped cleaning glasses. He looked expectantly toward the door. There was a sudden gust of wind as a large crowd of people swarmed into the bar. They gathered around the bar, where the bartender handed out small packets of red jelly-like stuff. The people tore them open and slipped the substance into their mouths. As fast as it started, it was over. Another beeping came from behind the bar, and the people filed out of the bar

quietly.

“What the hell was that?” I asked.

“I think it was their lunch break.”

Snow and I left the bar.

* * *

Snow and I sat on a bench in what looked like a park. Towering buildings surrounded us, barely letting any light onto the ground. The tiny square of park couldn't have been more than a couple hundred square feet. It had its own bio generators, so we had our masks off. We flipped through the history book and read more about our lost centuries.

“Everything around here is fake,” I said. Snow didn't respond. “Hey Major, you remember that grass on Ursa Delta?”

“Yeah.”

“I bet that felt like real grass. I mean, I know we could never actually touch it, but through the Exo it felt real.”

“Because it was real, Hudson. And if that planet was habitable, we would cart all these mindless people out there to that real grass and real land, and we'd wreck it just like we did the Earth.”

“I guess we're pretty lucky to have seen an unspoiled world like Ursa Delta.”

“Yeah, we are.”

We sat in silence, watching a couple walk together between two buildings, smiling contentedly. Suddenly, shots rang out and the couple fell to the ground. Men holding what looked like handmade weapons ran out of the shadows and took the couple's belongings.

Snow and I ran toward the muggers, who dropped their weapons and scattered. Snow checked out the weapons while I helped the couple stand up.

“Rubber bullets, Snow?”

“Looks that way.”

The couple stood up, shaken but not injured. They just walked away, leaving me and Snow in shock.

“They weren't even surprised, sir.”

“I guess all that ‘no crime’ talk is bullshit, Hudson.”

“Well, I believed it, just for a second. That's all they're

hoping for, apparently.”

“We’re soldiers, Hudson. We don’t question the status quo.”

“Understood, sir.”

Snow kept looking at the gun in his hand, and he slipped it into his bag as we headed out of the park.

* * *

I packed a small suitcase with a couple of sets of clothes. I summoned a bowl of gross-looking porridge from the replicator on the counter. Watson appeared.

“Good morning, Lieutenant. Are you going on a trip, sir?”

“Visiting a friend in the countryside.”

“Fantastic. Are you referring to Major Snow?”

“Yes. How did you even know that? You know what, don’t bother answering.” I dropped my half-eaten bowl of sludge into the sink and went to the door. “See you in a few days, Watson.”

“I eagerly await your return, sir.”

* * *

The old, clattering train rolled away from me as I stood alone on a run-down platform. I looked around for Snow and saw him in the ticketing office.

“I guess the industrial revolution is going strong, sir.”

“You have no idea. Lucky for me, there’s not a factory in sight. And none of those blasted buses passing overhead. So hell, I’m not complaining.”

We walked down an unevenly paved road, pitted with potholes. After a while, Snow looked around and took off his mask. “Go ahead, it’s safe. For a while at least. It won’t kill you.”

I hesitated, then slid my mask into my pocket. With a hesitant first breath and then a second deep one, I felt better. “This seems like the real thing.”

We turned down a dirt road and walked toward a small wooden house. I couldn’t believe it was Snow’s—it looked like something out of an old movie. Snow grinned and picked up the

pace, opening the door and stepping inside. I took a moment to appreciate the quaint building, then I went in also.

The house had rustic furniture, and the only technology I saw was the television against one wall plus some kitchen appliances. Old ones, but seemingly in good shape. The open space of the main room felt surprisingly large.

Snow pulled some frozen food out of the fridge and put it in the microwave. Delicious smells wafted around the room.

“What is that godly smell?”

“Venison.”

We sat at a small round table with a spread of fresh food. Nothing like those pills that city dwellers had.

Snow tossed a spoon at me in jest. I couldn't decide where to start, so I just tried everything. I had never felt so happy as I did at that moment. At least since leaving Earth for the Ursan campaign.

“I didn't know food like this still existed, sir.”

“It won't for much longer.”

“What do you mean?”

“There ain't a whole lot of free game wandering around anymore. Most of the remaining species have been rounded up and kept on reserves in the middle of nowhere. As in, the first step toward rationing. I only kill something when it's a special occasion, like you coming over. Don't expect such a feast tomorrow.”

“I had no idea.”

“Most people don't. Why would they? They live on their synthesized, bio-recycled sludge and those damn jelly rations. Why would they care if fresh food is finally going extinct?”

We fell into silence. The soothing voice of the news reporter spoke in the background, saying the same things as always.

* * *

I stayed with Snow for several weeks. We farmed the small plot of land next to his house for potatoes.

One day when we were working the field, we heard a car heading our way. It approached the house and landed, the shiny ICF insignia flashing in the sunlight. A man stepped out and

carefully picked his way over to us. A look of distaste appeared on his face.

“Major Eric Snow?”

“That’s me. Who are you?”

“I’m a representative of—”

“We ain’t blind. What do you want?”

“You have not returned any correspondence from us in the past several months. This warrants an in-person check on your welfare.”

“How do we look?” Snow asked. The man ignored Snow’s question.

“There’s a placement for both you and Lieutenant Hudson to return to the ICF. Not combat. You can receive more information if you join me in returning to the regional ICF office.”

“No thank you. Now leave my land.”

“Major, I would really recommend—”

Snow started to advance toward the man, who returned quickly to his vehicle. But not before setting down a small item on the gate. The car lifted off and left.

Snow was furious. “The nerve of those assholes.” We went back to work.

The man from ICF had left his card on the fence. When Snow and I finished gardening, I looked over the card, not sure what to do.

I heard a quiet scraping at the door, and Snow jumped up to answer it. He came back with a piece of paper and sat down across from me.

“What’s it say?” I asked.

“It’s a report.”

“What kind of report?”

“A report from a former ICF colleague. It says two of Orca Squad are dead.” Snow paused. “Suicide. Martino and Zarik.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Yes, it does. You’re lucky; you have food here, fresh air, and a real sky to look at. They don’t. They’re ten times worse off than this, and they just gave up.”

I remembered Martino and Zarik fondly. “That’s no reason to killself.” I couldn’t help but look at the ICF officer’s calling card. “If we re-upped, at least we would have jobs.”

“You can’t be serious, Hudson.”

“He said we wouldn’t be in combat. We’ve only heard good news about it over there, and not even one sighting of an Ursan.”

“That we know of. Information takes decades to travel back here. They could all be dead for what we know.”

“Sir, if you don’t want to go back a third time, I get it. But I’m sick of living on a planet that’s slowly killing us. I’d rather be jettisoned into the abyss than knowingly wait for death.”

“Someone’s being a little bitch about not living in luxury is all I hear.”

“Be your old bitter self by yourself. I’m heading into the city tomorrow and signing up for whatever they’ve got.” I climbed the ladder into the loft I was sleeping in, and I pulled it up behind me.

* * *

Back in the city, I walked into a spacious, sterile office. It had a small window cut out of one wall with the shadow of a person behind it. I talked to the shadow.

“Hello, I’d like to—”

“State your name and rank.”

“Hudson, Ian. Lieutenant.”

“State your business.”

“An officer visited me and a friend yesterday. He said there is a placement for both of us if we wish to take it.”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“What is the position?”

“A security post, Lieutenant. On a research vessel in the Ursa Delta Galaxy.”

“So, no fighting, but it’s in a combat zone.”

“No sir, it is approximately 1.7 light years away from the combat zone. It is a noted neutral territory.”

“How long is the deployment?”

“Indefinite.”

“Indefinite?”

“Yes, sir. Due to recent cutbacks, any non-combat personnel sent to the enemy galaxy are signed on for life.”

“Does this spot have an expiration date?”

“If I understand you correctly, the vessel to take all personnel leaves in seventy-two hours.”

“Three days. Not a lot of time.”

“If you are on the flight, your positions are considered accepted and confirmed.”

“Thanks, I guess I’ll think about it.”

“Not too much time, sir.”

“Yes, I heard you. Seventy-two hours.” I turned and walked back out of the building, waiting by the door a moment to take one last breath of filtered air.

* * *

Snow paced around his house as we argued about taking the positions.

“Major, you keep saying how much you hate this god-forsaken rock. Now you have a way to get off it for good.”

“I never said I hated it. I said it’s toxic and not worth anything anymore. I still ain’t going.”

“So you’d rather spend the rest of your life digging up potatoes and carrots, hypnotized by daytime television, waiting for some roving thugs to kill you. What kind of life is that?”

“It’s the life I choose.”

“We’d be working together and keeping things safe, not putting our asses on the line every day. I want to do this, and I’m going with or without you.”

Snow looked hurt. “You’d really leave?”

“I don’t owe you anything.” With that, I walked out of the cabin, leaving Snow along with his thoughts.

* * *

I sat on a long metal bench in an ICF hangar, waiting for transport to the research vessel. My future trainees were around me, as well as the scientists going for research. We sat and stood in groups, chatting quietly. There was an air of anxiety about them, and I seemed like the calmest of the bunch. I also was the only one wearing a proper military uniform. I wore my First Lieutenant’s bar proudly, not minding anyone else.

A landing craft set down in the hangar, and a man stepped out with a holographic clipboard. He looked over our group with a bored glance. "When I call your name, please step on board and strap in. Wheels up in ten minutes."

The man started reading out names in alphabetical order. The trainees hurried excitedly onto the ship. When my name was called, I walked slowly up the ramp. Just as I was going to strap in, I heard something.

"Snow, Eric. Major."

I went back to the door and saw the clipboard man standing by himself. "You're mistaken, mister. Major Snow isn't on this mission."

"Well it says his name right here on the list."

"I don't see him around, do you?"

"Sir, I don't know what he looks like."

"Just move on, he's not coming."

I moved back to my seat and strapped in. I looked out the window next to me, shifting around uncomfortably. A few minutes later, the doors shut and the engines whirred to life. The trainees chattered away, and I rested my head against the window. I heard a voice.

"Do I really look like a farmer to you?"

I grinned and looked over to see Snow sit down next to me. "Yeah, you do old man."

Snow just smiled and held his hand up, in a fist. We fist bumped, then sat back to look out at the Earth as we shot off the planet and away into space.

Five

Snow and I explored our new home. Everything was much more comfortable, and much less stark, than we were used to.

While walking through the ship, we went past a rec room that appeared to have virtual sports games. We stopped to watch the trainees box each other.

"I'll bet you a week of desserts that I could beat you on that thing," Snow said.

"Yeah, you're on old timer."

Snow just laughed, and we moved on. "We've got to start training them soon," he said.

"I know."

"Got to earn our keep somehow."

"I know."

He went on. "Man, do those kids look fresh. Scale of one to ten, how brain-scraped do you think they are?"

"I just hope they have some shreds of personality left. I don't want to work with a bunch of walking dead."

Snow smirked. "So you're nervous."

"About what?"

"Being in a position of authority. You're a lieutenant now, and this is really your first time leading."

"It's different, you know? I'm not leading anyone into a glorious battle; I just have to keep them on their toes and stop them from slacking off."

Snow smiled this time. "You never know, bud. Can't see into the future."

"Ain't that the truth."

* * *

I sat on the edge of my bed, looking at my new room. It was sparse and undecorated. On the bedside table sat a flat

metallic square. I picked up the piece of metal.

When my fingers touched it, it beeped to life and transformed into a postcard-sized screen. On the screen was a photo of Khali and me in a friendly embrace, years before. We were in our ICF training uniforms and were smiling broadly. I felt a tear come to my eye. It had been so long since I'd seen her or any of my former squadmates.

* * *

The line of young recruits stood in front of me. My eyes scanned from one to the next. I tried to keep my face blank and my jaw set. It looked like it worked, because the men and women were fidgeting slightly. I almost didn't feel the words come out, but I could hear my voice booming like Snow's did the first time I heard him, back on Earth years before.

"Why are you here?"

The recruits looked around at each other.

"Well?"

A recruit raised his hand, and I called on him.

"Sir, to keep this base secure from—"

"From whom? Do you even know? Hell, I don't even know. I think it might be the boogeyman."

I heard a few of them chuckle. Another recruit raised his hand.

"No sir. Against the pestilent race, the Ursae."

The other recruits nodded enthusiastically. I had to sigh.

"I can tell you all right now that that is not why you are here."

The recruits looked confused and uncomfortable for a moment.

"You are here to listen to me, to do your job, and to keep in line. That's what you're here for. Your job is security, but your purpose is to not fuck things up. Everything is already pretty fucked, so it's safe to say that one more fuck up won't be appreciated." I paused for effect. "Who here has worked in ICF the longest?"

The trainees looked around, shrugging. Then a lanky young man wearing a mohawk stepped forward.

"I've been here for three years, sir."

“What’s your name, kid?”

“Shawn, but everyone calls me—”

“Rabbit. That’s your new name. Rabbit, you’re as good a man as any to be my second. Are you up for it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Great. So, I assume you have some training facilities somewhere on this boat?”

“Yes, sir, we have the simulation room.”

“I don’t want to see that in use when you’re on the clock. You can spend every second of your free time in simulation if you want, but not for training. Not my training. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

I turned my back on the trainees to face a 3-D projection of the ship. I waved my palm over the display, moving the particles around. The display zoomed in and lit up a pathway running around the outer hull.

“There. That will be your training today. The brainbusters are not aboard yet, so there shouldn’t be too much traffic. I want to see ten laps to start with. Tomorrow it will be twenty. Rabbit, if anyone slacks off, cheats, or dies, come see me about it.”

“Yes, sir.”

The trainees looked mortified that they would actually have to do something physical.

“Dismissed.”

They filed out, leaving me alone in the room. I turned back to the display, bringing up the schematics for the engine bay to see where else I could send them.

* * *

I stood at ease as the room around me buzzed with chatter. I was on the security deck watching the trainees go about their business when I got a report.

“Sir, the travelers will drop out of hyperspace in two minutes.”

The trainees resumed their work, and I watched the display showing the rippling energy of the wormhole that the scientists would be exiting.

A moment later, machines in the control room started to

beep. I could see ships appear on the displays as icons speeding away from the wormhole. The icons gathered together before heading toward our ship.

“Sir, they’ve docked successfully.”

“Good. Stay here, all of you, and keep an eye on that passage. We don’t want anything hitching a ride on their coattails.” I left the deck to take a peek at the newest additions to the ship.

Men and women milled around the loading bay, maneuvering huge metal crates off the scientists’ ships using anti-gravity technology. I stopped to watch; this tech was new to me. The scientists muttered to each other and checked things off on their monitors. I could see that the crates were marked with weird symbols and nothing else. Suddenly, Snow clasped my shoulder from behind.

“I thought you’d be down here, sticking your nose where it don’t belong.” He smiled.

“I just wanted a look. Do you know what kind of gear they brought with them?”

“I don’t know and I don’t want to know. Probably best we just do our job and keep them safe and sound.”

I had to agree with that. Snow motioned back toward the door and I reluctantly followed. We walked down a long hallway in silence for a few moments before we stopped and Snow spoke.

“You know that no matter what they’re studying, we can’t get involved. We have no influence where they’re concerned.”

I nodded. “I understand.”

“And we might go our whole damn tour without knowing. Are you sure you’re good with that?”

“Yes, I am. We’re not here to be taught anything.”

That satisfied Snow.

“So, how are your ducklings getting along?”

“Slowly, very slowly. Some of them didn’t finish the first day of cardio without fainting. We’re going to have to work on that. How about yours?”

“I’ve got them doing some drills. Luckily, they’re a little scared of me, which puts them in the right place.”

I had to laugh. “They sound like me the first time I met you.”

Snow looked surprised. “You were scared of me, Ian?”

“Well, at that point I was scared of a lot of things. Jetting off into the void, the Ursae, then being assigned to you. It was icing on the cake.”

“I don’t know how I feel about that.” Snow looked pensive as we continued walking.

* * *

I was fast asleep when a loud alarm went off, jarring me awake. I sprung out of bed into my trousers and boots, then I ran down the hallways to the hangar.

All of my trainees were waiting for me. They were standing around a fighting pod, looking at it confusedly. I picked up a megaphone and rushed to address them.

“What are you waiting for?! We’re under attack! Get into your pods and—”

One of them interrupted my loud, echoing voice. “We don’t know how,” he said.

“What the hell do you mean, you don’t know how?”

“We weren’t taught how, sir.”

The trainees stood there like a herd of wide-eyed sheep, waiting for different orders.

Suddenly, an enormous hole appeared in the side of the hangar, ripping part of the hatch off. A massive Ursan pulled its way into the hangar. It was bigger than I ever imagined, and the loss of pressure in the bay sent several of my men and women soaring out into space, screaming. I grabbed a control panel and managed to stay inside. Then the alien looked right into my eyes, unblinking. I felt a fizzing sensation in my brain.

I woke up in a cold sweat, gasping for air as if suffocating. I recovered enough to stumble to the panel in my wall. I dialed up the bunk rooms of my team. One of them answered groggily.

“Yes, sir?”

“Get to Hangar Beta, ASAP.”

I heard a mumbled affirmative and got dressed, nearly mimicking my actions in the nightmare.

The team stood around in varying amounts of sleepy

murmuring, all of them confused about why they'd been pulled from bed. I walked among the trainees, looking each one in the eyes.

“Have any of you people been taught how to pilot a fighting pod?”

They looked around at each other before Rabbit finally spoke.

“No, sir, not properly. Only on simulators.”

I was incredulous. “You can't be serious.”

“We never had a reason,” Rabbit said.

“Well guess what? I'm giving you a fucking reason. Training starts now. Every minute you can spare will be spent here, learning those ships inside and out.”

I heard a gasp among the group. Ignoring it, I handed out digital manuals for the pods. “We'll start by taking one apart.”

Hours later, the pod was fully disassembled and the trainees prepared to rebuild it, slowly. I sat on a crate in a corner watching them. Snow showed up and I could see he was amused.

“What are they even doing?” he said.

“Learning.”

“Is that what's happening? Because I think one of them just put an exhaust pipe where a thruster needs to be.”

I groaned. “Great.”

“What's this really about?”

“They aren't prepared. For an attack, for a threat, for anything. They're just sheep dressed like security.”

“Security herd. Funny.” A look of mild contempt crossed his face. “So they're unprepared. So what? In my opinion, all you ICF first-timers were unprepared. And these kids aren't in combat.”

“How can they be expected to protect this ship if they can't even work a pod?”

“Now that is a good question,” he said. “Maybe they expect you to teach them.”

“Then everyone is getting what's coming to them. We're still on the front. If the enemy decides to—”

Snow interjected. “If? We're playing that game now? If? What if the Sun implodes and we never know our home

is destroyed? What then? See, there's no point in talking hypothetically. This station has never been threatened in the least, so calm down. Let them take their time learning this stuff while they do their jobs."

I sighed. "I guess you're right. But I don't have to like it." I called to the group again. "All right people. Half of you, get back to the security deck and relieve Snow's team. The rest of you carry on for now."

The trainees went about their business, dispersing. Snow continued. "See, that wasn't so hard. And look, we haven't had our asses shot down yet."

"Okay, old man. Don't you have a nap to be getting to?"

"Now you're a comedian, too? Wow."

We shared a laugh, the weight on my mind slowly lifting.

I wandered the halls, my eyes scanning the walls and the people as I passed them. I stopped at various doors and made sure they were locked.

I noticed a young scientist walking down a corridor marked "Hazardous." I followed her at a safe distance, watching as she pushed a door open into a room that was buzzing and pulsing blue. I hesitated before sliding the door open just an inch to look inside.

In the middle of the room was a man hooked up to wires that were attached to his head and hands. His eyes were covered by a mask. The buzzing seemed to be coming from him. Around the room stood machines, with more scientists attending them.

The buzzing from the man got louder, and he started screaming in apparent pain. No one moved to help him.

After a moment, though, the scream turned into something different. It lightened into a gargle, then clicking, and then I realized what I was hearing. It was the same sounds as the Ursae had made on their planet just before we slaughtered them.

The scientists ran around jotting notes on tablets and making low, excited remarks. As soon as it had started, the clicking stopped and the man collapsed forward. At that point I had seen enough, and I left in a rush.

* * *

I hung out on the security deck watching security camera feeds to pass the time. The room was filled with quiet chattering and clacking fingertips on keyboards. I took a deep breath and let my eyes close.

“Sir?” I could hear Rabbit walk up to me.

“Yes, Rabbit?”

“It’s third rotation’s time for training.”

“Good. Yeah, all right. Take them out, ten laps today.” I opened my eyes.

“Not twenty?”

“No. Light day today. I haven’t given them a break in a while.”

“We appreciate it, sir.”

“I’m sure you do. Get going.”

“Yes, sir.” Rabbit and a handful of other trainees headed for the door.

Snow walked onto the deck just as the group was leaving. They each saluted him and he gave them a casual nod.

“Hudson, where have you been? I haven’t seen you in a week.”

“How are you chipper this early, man?”

Snow just shrugged. “Probably half the bottle of meds I inhale every morning. Or, you know, I actually get some sleep. Ever heard of it? You look haggard, like you haven’t.”

“What are you doing here, anyway?”

“Is that any way to speak to your commanding officer?”

“I guess not. You pulling rank on me?”

“Relax, son. I just came to see how you are.”

“I’m fine. Say, have you gotten any messages from ICF lately?”

“Not for a couple of months. Understandable, but still a little strange.”

“Maybe they’ve forgotten about this hunk of metal.”

“They haven’t, trust me on that. The amount of money that went into this mission—”

An alarm went off, and red flashed across all the screens around us. I checked one of the monitors to see what was wrong. “Probably just some rubble floating into one of the shields.”

Snow looked doubtful. "Yeah, sure," he said hesitantly. The alarm stopped. I felt relieved. "See?"

Suddenly the whole deck erupted into frantic alarms. We scrambled to check things, and I saw several icons moving quickly away from the wormhole. "We're under attack!"

"I think so." Snow's voice lowered. "They're not too close yet, but they are traveling this way. And their weapons may be armed."

"Shit." I pressed the button for the security comms to make the announcement. "Team, up and out! Into the pods! Time to be big damn heroes."

My trainees ran out of the security deck, some staying behind. Snow and I followed the group, both of our faces ashen.

The pods were loaded as quickly as possible. All over the hangar, Exos beeped on and engines spooled up. Although there was less order than previous battles I'd been in, the trainees still looked like they knew what they were doing.

The few scientists still in the hangar ran for cover as we started heading out into the darkness. I went over to Snow as he was getting into his pod, his co-pilot already in place. "We aren't completely sure they're here to fight."

"The hell they aren't. Anyway, we can't take that chance. We have a job to do, so let's stick to it."

"These kids aren't half as skilled as we were back then. There are going to be casualties if we go in armed and attacking."

"We aren't waiting for them to send us a handwritten note. Be careful out there."

I ran to my pod and got in. My co-pilot, a woman named Berry, already had the controls ready for us to take off. We took off and joined the others.

The pods sat in formation, waiting patiently. The inside of my pod buzzed quietly as I listened to my team make system and weapons checks.

I looked at Berry. She was checking and re-checking the dash in front of her. I reached over and touched her hand. "Calm down. Don't overthink. Just keep looking ahead and keep your mind clear."

“Yeah. Thanks, sir.”

“I think today you should drop the sir. I’m just Hudson.”
Our ships sat in space, floating in wait.

I saw a flash ahead of us, then another and another as the enemy ships approached us. It was just starlight glinting off their hulls.

I dialed Snow’s private channel and spoke into my comm. “Are their weapons activated?”

“They’re too far away for our sensors to pick up.”

“We should stand down until we get confirmation.”

“No, we attack as soon as they’re in range!”

I felt a surge of uncertainty and indecision. “They might not be here to fight.”

Snow was not uncertain or indecisive in the least. “Why else would they come here?”

My dashboard beeped and a green light flashed.

“You see that?” I said. They aren’t armed. Stand down!”

“Ian, we have to do our jobs. We can’t just—”

A pod from the fleet blasted a laser at the oncoming Ursan ships. A moment later, I saw a small flash—direct hit. I heard another beep from my dashboard, and the green light turned steady red. “Shit.”

Snow spoke into the comm. “We don’t have a choice now, son.”

“I know.” I switched to the squad-wide comm. “Activate all systems. If your pod is damaged, return to the ship and defend from there.”

The pods surged forward, and the Ursan ships continued to approach. I could see lasers crossing through the darkness as the ships bucked and dived around them.

Then I noticed that the Ursae were not shooting back. “What are they waiting for, Berry?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

It didn’t make any sense. After thinking for a few moments, I made a decision. I pulled my pod back from the fight and headed back to the ship, startling Berry.

On our way back, a screeching started going over the comms. Berry and I cringed in pain for a moment, unable to turn the signal off. The screeching reached a crescendo, and then it was gone.

I looked back toward the fleet and saw that everyone had stopped moving, as if frozen in time. No more lasers shot toward the Ursae. “Snow, what is going on?”

“I don’t know, but whatever it is isn’t good.”

The standoff continued. One of the Ursan fighters was close enough that I could see two Ursae through its windshield. They just sat there and stared at us.

Over the comms came the same screeching howl as before, causing us all to double over in pain.

Snow called me on our private channel. “Hudson, this is goodbye.”

Before I could answer, I saw a pod take off from the main body and shoot toward one of the Ursan ships. The pod rammed what looked like the bridge of one of them.

“Snow?”

Silence. “Snow?” There was no response.

I felt a sharp pain in my chest. My visor lit up red, flashing “IMMINENT HEART FAILURE” across the screen. My chest suddenly felt soft, but pain shot through my left arm. “Berry, hurry up.”

As I was struggling, I saw the familiar outline of the hangar. I could barely keep my eyes open, but we managed to make it back just in time to hear an announcement over the public address system. It was one of the scientists.

“We’ve done it, everyone. The last piece! We’ve cracked the Ursan code!”

I saw a medical team walk up to my pod. They opened the hatch and lifted me out, putting me onto a gurney. As they rolled me through the hallways, I saw excited scientists standing around holding holographic tablets. Cryptic symbols flowed down their tablets. They were all yelling to each other.

“Peace!”

“They want peace! That’s what they demand!”

The doctor looked confused. “They couldn’t possibly mean—”

“Have the fleet get back here!”

Looking up at the ceiling, I saw myself being wheeled into an operating room. A large device hung from the ceiling with two metal paddles hanging off of it.

“Clear!”

The doctor opened my shirt and put the paddles on my chest. The machine whirred in a high pitched whine, and I felt a kick to my chest. Everything went black.

* * *

I woke up encased in a tight mist, which hung steadily around me. I was in a recovery room. I pressed the call button, and a doctor came in.

“Lieutenant, you’ve suffered a massive heart attack. We’re trying to arrange transport to Earth for further treatment.”

“What happened to the Ursae?”

“We managed to translate the Ursan language and respond to them. It turns out they wanted peace all along.” The doctor left.

I couldn’t believe it. All those lives wasted, and all that time spent. We’d been brainwashed, sent into battle, told to slaughter innocent civilians, brought back to a world we didn’t recognize, and left to fend for ourselves. Snow and I deserved better than what the ICF gave us.

But I didn’t mope for long. Our small battle brought about the end of the war as we knew it. Within months, the leaders of our people and the Ursae would meet to resolve what could have been the destruction of humanity. I made it back to Earth, though it was a hundred and fifty years into the future.

* * *

Snow gave his life to keep that one research vessel safe, but he really gave his life for the safety of the human race.

He was the hero of the war to me. But how many children back home would read about him in their copies of *Enduring Vision*? I might never know the answer; a bionic heart transplant is a risky procedure, and I’ll never be the man I was. I’ll never be the man he was. Snow was bigger than all of us, and I live on because of him.

I decided to ring in this era of peace with the spirit of Snow in my heart. That way, hope would never be truly lost.

Hudson will return in

FUTURE WARRIOR II: UNIVERSAL SOLDIERS

Also by Andrew Watters

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RÆLLIC

About the Author

Andrew Watters is a litigation attorney practicing in San Mateo, California. In his spare time, he writes screenplays and tinkers with ideas for inventions. He is a firm believer that sometimes, when you flap your wings hard enough, you can fly.

FUTURE WARRIOR

Ian Hudson, a 22 year-old native of the Republic of America, finds himself drafted into the Intergalactic Combat Forces to fight an interstellar war against the Ursae, an alien race.

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