

ALIENS™ vs PREDATOR

Divided Loyalties:



Written by: Sean P. Funk

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On Earth, humanity faces a crisis
Natural resources have been depleted
Pollution, famine, and drought has spread
Civilization collapsed leaving mankind to
vie over the remaining essentials
Governments and nations united to prevent
the inevitable
Now, five superpowers hold the fate of the
planet in their collective grasp
However, with conflicts spreading like
wildfire, these nations find themselves in
overwhelming debt
A crippling economic depression sinks the
Earth deeper into misery
The corporations step in to help
Decades later, corporations hold more
power than the combined governments...

Prologue

Xo, circa 2189 C.E.:

Anastasiya Belousova, a twenty-one year old Russian-born woman, fresh out of college, stared up at the Xo sky. The gas-giant Iropia, the planet that Xo orbits, dominated the pitch-black sky; a huge storm raged within its southern hemisphere, and streaks of red, white and brown jet streams and smaller storms dominated Iropia's hydrogen and helium upper atmosphere. Smaller, bright-white specks could also be seen orbiting Iropia, along with a beautiful set of thick rings along the equator; those would be its other numerous, uninhabited, moons. Tonight was something special. Around the poles of Iropia, a brilliant display of physics could be seen; the oscillating and sinuous dance of auroras, ionized protons and electrons coming from the central star, was as visible as the stars on Earth. As Anastasiya gazed up at the elegant sight, a cold wind blew through. She quickly wrapped her body in the synthetic leather coat, and pushed the blonde hair from out of her eyes.

Suddenly, from behind, a gruff, hard voice woke her from her stupor, "Day dreaming, are you?" The burly Russian replied.

Quickly, she turned around and looked up at the small shack in front of her. At the doorway stood a hefty man, with hard features and short brown hair. She walked up to the shack and gave the man a smirk, "It hasn't been daytime in eight hours, Aleksei."

He laughed quickly, "Well, let's just finish up this last drill and get out of here."

She nodded, and headed into the small, dirty shack. Inside, off to the side, was a stack of wooden boxes taller than she was; inside were metres upon metres of rock core, long cylindrical pieces of rock from the drill. The plywood-panelled floor was covered in chunks of mud and grime. The walls were in no better shape. There was no ceiling above her head because the drilling equipment was so tall. Inside were three muscular, well-built men, all of them filthy, labouring over the drilling equipment. They barely noticed her. The drilling equipment made an inane amount of noise so she dawned her noise-cancelling headphones. She turned to her left and glanced at the makeshift wooden table, a piece of plywood atop of brick legs, and saw a new set of rock core was prepped and ready to be logged.

She sighed. Core-logging wasn't her most favourite of activities, but it was required if she wanted to be a geologist. After all, that was what the company, Khokhlov Mineralic & Petroleum, Inc., was paying her for. Truth be told, she was very

lucky to get this job. With the economic and resource crisis on Earth, not many companies were hiring, not within the Three World Empire, that is.

She turned on the small iridescent lamp, leaned over the table, and studied the core. With pen and paper, she began describing the length of the core. It was the same rocks she had seen for the better part of two months now; granite. Nothing too exciting, but nevertheless, the rocks that her employers wanted to see. She made several notations along the side of her clipboard, cataloguing and describing anything of remote significance.

She glanced at her watch. Her shift was almost over; this prompted a smile of relief. Finally. It had been a long twelve-hour day for her. Twice the drilling equipment had jammed, resulting in outbursts from her supervisor and senior geologist, Aleksei Voronov. She looked over to her left and saw him standing by the drill-team, observing the men work. He wasn't talking or giving orders; he merely stood by the drill, and stared at it as it plunged deeper and deeper into the bedrock. Finally, she stood upright, and stretched her back and arms. Suddenly, along the small of her back, a few of her vertebrae popped. This prompted a quick exclamation of pain, followed quickly by a sigh.

It had definitely been a long day.

Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a pair of lights in the sky approaching the core-drilling shack. Her shift was finally over, and the company helicopter was coming to relieve her, and drop off the next poor soul. Quickly, she finished the last of her notations, and then set the clipboard down.

She grabbed her backpack, and leaned against the door to watch the helicopter touchdown. The drilling shack was situated deep within a foreign, and potentially dangerous, jungle, on the side of a mountain. This portion of jungle was clear-cut so a helicopter, with various equipment, could land on reasonably flat ground. Finally, after several minutes, the white-and-blue stripped helicopter touched down, and the lateral doors slid open; out from the belly of the helicopter, two junior geologists came out and approached the drill.

Suddenly, from behind, Aleksei tapped her on the shoulder. She jumped and immediately turned around. After that heart-pounding moment, she giggled and removed her noise-cancelling headphones. Aleksei then told Anastasiya, "I will tell them. Go back and get some rest."

She grinned and nodded. She turned around and headed out of the door just as the two junior geologists came in. She gave them a nod and a tired smile, then headed into the helicopter. She threw her backpack onto the backbench and climbed aboard. After slamming the lateral door shut behind her and strapping herself in, she put on the helicopter headset.

She looked toward the cockpit and looked at the pilot, a thirty-nine year old veteran, staring at her, "Hello, Boris."

"Ah, Anastasiya. Good night for a fly, yes?" He replied with a cheerful tone.

"If it gets me home. Yes." She tiredly replied.

He laughed, turned around, and pulled back on the yoke. Suddenly, they were up in the air, and headed back to the main mine-site. The mine-site, and her living quarters, was only about ten minutes away. She was so tired she could barely keep her eyes open.

"Good food back at camp?" She asked.

"It is hot." He answered.

She chuckled, "Good enough."

He nodded with a smirk on his face. Just then, she peered through the side-facing window and looked upon the mine-site. The mine, nestled up against a mountain, was absolutely huge; it was almost a kilometre and a half deep, and over four kilometres wide. The sides of the open-pit mine were lined with benches, a series of concentric steps that acted as roads for huge trucks to move material out from the depths of the mine. Huge spotlights surrounded the top of the mine, allowing the operation to work around-the-clock. Even now, as she was gazing out onto the mine, she could see huge machines chewing into the bedrock below, with massive multi-tonne trucks hauling boulders the size of houses out from the mine. On the periphery of the mine were several buildings, permanent buildings, unlike the makeshift shack she had been working in; a concentrator plant, smelter, and refinery were among the buildings closest to the open-pit mine. As a result, the air there was dense with smog, and the tailings and other toxic run-off had polluted the surrounding jungle soil, leaving it barren and dry.

It was a shame, really. The jungle, although foreign in nature, still had its intrinsic beauty. Rather, now, humanity with its greed and power-lust, had polluted

and poisoned another world. Regardless, she was too tired and hungry to protest at the moment; she knew that many people, including many employees of Khokhlov Mineralic & Petroleum, Inc., agreed with her. She also knew that she and the others were powerless against the megacorporations now; they had grown too powerful through recent conflicts and crises that crippled Earth and her politics.

As the helicopter swung to make its landing, they came across another set of buildings; the living quarters and cafeteria portion of the mine-site. After a few minutes, they successfully touched down with no mishaps. Anastasiya unbuckled her straps, grabbed her backpack, and slid open the lateral doors. She ducked underneath the speedily rotating blades, and turned around, "Thank you, Boris."

"Good night, Anastasiya." Boris quickly replied.

He gave her a thumbs-up, and she slid the lateral doors closed. Hunched over, she took several steps towards the cafeteria, then turned around, and knelt down on one knee. She watched as the helicopter took off again, keeping eye contact with Boris Lebedev at all times. Once safely out in the distance, she grabbed her backpack, swung it over her right shoulder, and headed into the cafeteria to get some hot food and something warm to drink before it was all gone.

She pushed open the metal double doors, the hot air warming her chilly body immediately. She left her backpack on the nearly empty table near the entrance, and turned, hopeful to find a friend. She scanned the rather large cafeteria. The cafeteria had a ceiling that was about three metres tall, filled with fluorescent lights, and along the east wall was where they served the food; the rest of the cafeteria was filled with stainless-steel tables, all situated in long, narrow rows. There were only a few people in the cafeteria at this hour, all of them from the late shift. Finally, she saw her friend standing and waving at a far table, a big smile on her face. Anastasiya's expression immediately lifted. As she hurried towards the table, she was glad to see a steaming bowl of synthetic chicken soup and a hot cup of tea waiting for her. As she got closer, her friend stood up and gave her a hug.

"Good to see you, Vera." Anastasiya greeted with a friendly expression.

They disengaged the hug, and sat back down across from one another. Vera Biryukova, a twenty-two year old exobotanist, had already started eating her soup, so Anastasiya immediately dove into hers. She savoured the warm tasty fluid as it slid down the back of her throat. Immediately, the tension held in her shoulder and neck loosened.

"When did you get in?" Anastasiya asked.

"An hour ago." Vera answered.

Anastasiya nodded and slurped down another mouthful of soup, "Anything interesting?"

Vera nodded and swallowed her mouthful of soup, "Good hike. Beautiful plants." Vera answered, then smiled; this prompted a quick laugh from Anastasiya, "Found some plants worth looking at more closely."

Vera Biryukova was actually an employee of another corporation, Morton & Alan Apex Chemical Consumables, Inc., who paid Khokhlov Mineralic & Petroleum, Inc. so that she could conduct research into the plant-life on Xo. Morton & Alan, a pharmaceutical and medicinal company, were always interested in seeking out new plants on new world that could potentially be medically important; as a result, Morton & Alan was a multi-billion dollar corporation with powerful ties to the Three World Empire, and the other superpowers on Earth.

"How have you been?" Vera asked.

About to scoop another spoonful of soup into her mouth, quickly replied, "Work. Work. Work."

Vera laughed, "Good or bad?"

Anastasiya stared at Vera with cold eyes; Vera stared back with her piercing brown eyes. Anastasiya broke first, with a smirk, "Like before."

Vera nodded, then took another slurp of her soup. Anastasiya, hungry from a hard day's work, finished her bowl of soup in record time. They talked for another thirty minutes, mostly about how work was going, mediocre gossip around the workplace, and any boys they thought were cute. Then suddenly, the lights in the cafeteria went out, plunging them in near darkness.

"Shit. Power out again!" Vera snapped.

As with standard protocol, they all filed out of the cafeteria and stood outside. The air was cooler than before, and the night sky was much darker. Anastasiya zipped up her synthetic leather jacket and tucked her bare hands into her pockets in a poor attempt to keep them warm. As she breathed in-and-out, she could see her breath. She

looked over to her right and saw that the white-and-blue striped helicopter had landed on the landing pad and was powered down.

"Boris must be back." Anastasiya whispered to herself.

Anastasiya and Vera both stood next to each other for several minutes, not a word said between them. Power outages had become common recently. Before, they were just nuisances; now, they were beginning to become problematic. As Anastasiya stood in the cold air, she began playing with her breath. It was mildly entertaining, and kept her mind off of the fact that she was freezing cold. Soon, Vera joined her. They smiled and giggled together. Moments later, a screeched resonated from deep within the jungle to the south. Both Vera and Anastasiya snapped their heads and stared out towards the south jungle. The jungle itself was absolutely pitch-black, and a prominently enforced company rule was that no one was to enter the jungle after dark.

"What was that?" Vera asked.

Anastasiya didn't answer, but rather shook her head unknowingly. Both Vera and Anastasiya stared into the pitch-black jungle, only five hundred metres away. Suddenly, out of the corner of Anastasiya's eyes, she caught something moving. She looked up, towards the roof of the cafeteria, and gazed upon something utterly terrifying. On four legs, atop the roof, was a hideous creature with no eyes; the reddish-black coloured exoskeleton was ridged and angular, with a rough carapace, covering the creature. Elongated fangs lined the inside of the vicious-looking mouth, while its tongue sported another set of razor-sharp jaws. Lining the outside of its jaws, however, was something quite unusual; a pair of sickle-like tusks protruded outward from the upper-jaw and came together just in front of the main set of jaws. Spines, and other spikes and barbs, lined the creatures back and tail, with a nasty razor-tipped edge at the end of its tail. Interestingly, there appeared to be a metallic leash around the creature's neck, attached to a spiked metal chain.

Anastasiya was utterly petrified; too stiff to even scream. She simply gazed upon the terrifying creature with wide-eyed terror. Confused, Vera asked, "What is wrong?"

When she got no reply, she looked up in the direction of Anastasiya's gaze, towards the cafeteria roof, and saw the creature that had mesmerized Anastasiya. Vera, however, was not petrified, but was equally frightened. Instantly, Vera let out a high-pitched scream, snapping Anastasiya out of her stupor. The others around them, probably seeing the creature as well, screamed and ran off deeper into the maze of buildings that littered the mine-site. Just then, the creature atop of roof peered down

upon the small crowd below, and leapt of the roof. The creature, about the size of a full-grown man, pounced on top of Vera. The weight of the creature easily brought down the petite woman, slamming her body into the hard dirt ground, kicking up a plume of dust with it. Anastasiya, a mere metre away, could only watch in silent terror. Vera screamed her lungs out as the creature clawed at her chest. With every swipe, flesh and blood tore from her body; blood poured out of three deep gouges made across her chest. Vera's screams were gurgled by the blood that was now trickling out of the corner of her mouth. At her last moments, she turned her head to look at Anastasiya, reached her right arm towards Anastasiya, pleading for help. Before Anastasiya could even move her arm, the creature's fang-lined tongue snapped out, with lightning speed, and punched a small hole into the left temple of Vera; the blood gushing out from the wound appeared black in the night-light.

Slowly, as if in slow motion, the serpent-like creature rose off of Vera's body, turned its eyeless head towards Anastasiya, and hissed; both mouths, including the one on the tongue, opened, showing off its incredible display of fangs. Before the creature could move towards her, just off to her right, a massive thud slammed into the ground next to her. The thud almost knocked off her feet. A large plume of dust, much larger than the one made by the serpent-like creature, washed over her. She peered into the dust plume. She saw movement, but not really; a shimmer perhaps. Something like wafting air coming off asphalt on a very hot day. Suddenly, standing over sixty centimetres taller than her, a pair of glowing white eyes flashed into existence, and then disappeared just as suddenly. Frightened, she immediately moved backwards, taking note of the serpent-like creature to her left.

Just then, Boris, holding a handgun, ran in front of Anastasiya and fired three wild shots at the shimmering object. "Run!"

Boris fired several more rounds into the shimmering object; the bullets seemed to have no effect on it. Anastasiya immediately turned to run in the opposite direction, towards the refinery and the mine. Seconds later, she heard a terrible blood-curdling cry, suddenly stopped dead midway. She didn't turn back; she didn't want to. To get to the open-pit mine she had to make her way through a maze of buildings, mainly machine-shops and other tool sheds.

All around her, she could hear screaming. She hadn't noticed it at the time, probably because she was too shocked, but she had begun crying. Streams of tears flowed down her cheeks. Running as fast as she could, she was determined to make it into the mine. For some reason, she thought she would be safe there. She moved past

the machine-shops and was now butted up against the wall of the refinery. The air was thick with smog, prompting her to cough suddenly. Out in the distance, she could hear more screams from terrified co-workers, added onto that, the screeches of those serpent-like creatures. She ducked into a ball, closed her eyes, and covered her ears.

"No. No. No." She repeated to herself.

She stayed there for several seconds, unable to move, unwilling to move. Suddenly, a co-worker picked her up, a machinist she thought, someone she had never run into. His face was caked with soot and dirt, and his clothes were in tatters.

"Into the mine. We can hide there." He said.

She nodded, then followed him as he led the way. As she walked behind the machinist, out past the refinery, she noticed the barren ground was soaked in pools of blood. The sight almost made her gag, but she forced it down. As they got closer and closer to the mine, she also noticed that the massive spotlights that illuminated the open-pit mine were disabled; the open-pit mine was plunged in absolute darkness. For a moment, she thought that the mine might just be able to hide them.

Just then, she caught a shimmer of light to her left. She saw no distinct outline, but something strong and powerful picked the machinist sixty centimetres into the air. The sight was astonishing in a frightful way.

"Run!" The machinist roared.

She immediately sprinted into the mine. Just as she passed the machinist, she saw blood flow out of the man's mouth; he was coughing it up. Then, with brute force, accompanied by a terrible moist rip, she saw the man's spine and head torn from his torso. The sight stopped her in her tracks. She stared at the shimmering object as it slowly stroked the spinal column, oozing blood as its claw ran down its length. Then shimmering object held up the severed head, still attached to the spinal cord of the man, up above its towering figure and roared with success. She looked down at the corpse; a bloody hollow fissure gaped at her. Then, just as the shimmering object took its first step towards her, she heard a blast from a hunting rifle; that shimmering object immediately turned to face its new attacker. Without thinking, she ran into the mine.

She could not stop running now. She ran deeper and deeper into the ever darkening mine. The road downward was layered in concentric circles, but it was wide enough that she didn't really notice. Finally, after nearly fifteen minutes of running, she came across a batch of abandoned fully loaded trucks. The trucks, standing over twelve

metres tall, loomed over her. Immediately, she climbed aboard, scrambling up the stairs and ladder. Quickly, she pulled herself into the passenger's side, slammed the passenger door shut, ducked underneath the register, and curled up into the fetal position. She could stop shaking, and she quietly sobbed to herself.

Outside, she could hear noises. She quickly closed her eyes. She didn't dare look out through the window to see what was happening outside. Suddenly, she heard a massive, bass-filled roar, like the ones she heard from the shimmering creatures. This was quickly followed by another, then another, then another. Suddenly, into the mix, she heard the screeching screams of the serpent-like creatures; there were so many of them, too many to count. The roars of triumph continued again and again. Slowly, Anastasiya covered her ears with her hands, and remained in the truck, quietly whimpering to herself.

Praying.

Divided Loyalties

One Day Later:

Blooded Spear, the clan leader of the fabled Yautja hunting tribe, disengaged his cloaking device. With a shutter of sparks, Blooded Spear appeared within the visible spectrum. He looked around the mining colony; it was broad daylight. After several hours of searching, they came across a mountain of dead bodies. They had all been mutilated, torn of their flesh, skulls, and spinal cords. The ground was damp with blood, making it sticky and reek of death. As Blooded Spear circled the mountain of death, he noticed that not one of them had a weapon; they had been all unarmed.

Blooded Spear growled to himself.

The Kautya were here. The murdering, savage, feral creatures that disobeyed every hunting regulation they had. Immediately, Blooded Spear turned and walked out of the mining colony, cloaked himself, and returned to the jungle. Now he will hunt the rebel Predators; now, Blooded Spear will bring back honour to his tribe.

Around the Gamma Virginis System, thirty-nine light-years from Earth:

Major Scott Mitchell, commanding officer of delta squad, a team in the United American Bioterrorism Task Force, a group created specifically to weed out and eliminate biological and chemical agents, traversed the hard vacuum of space in a small shuttle transport; the shuttle, fitted with the latest in stealth technology, passively drifted towards the unmarked vessel. Through one of the small viewports on the shuttle, Mitchell could see the vessel slowly grow larger and larger. The vessel, a large, rectangular rusted hunk of metals, hung lifelessly in the dark abyss of space. It floated hundreds of miles from the binary stars; the combined luminosity of the stars merely silhouetted the giant hulk of a vessel, providing no clear details or features.

Finally, after several minutes of floating through the cold vacuum of space, they docked with the unmarked vessel. Suddenly, a series of sounds resonated within the cabin; the clunk of the magnetic clap echoed in the hold, followed by the slow hiss of the hard dock. The stealth shuttle was now securely fastened to the metallic hull of the vessel. Mitchell immediately unbuckled himself, then walked towards the far end of the shuttle; there, he equalized the pressure, then revealed the rusted hull of the vessel. Behind him were the rest of his team.

He motioned with his head, then ordered, "Open it."

Almost immediately, Captain Tonya Reade, a tomboy from a family of blue-collar factory workers, and Lieutenant David Foster, an ex-helicopter pilot, approached

the rusted hull with a cutting-torches in hand. Together, they sliced through the metal hull; the flame hissed to life, instantly superheating the air around it. The metal hull almost melted instantaneously under the intense heat of the white-blue flame of the torch; the metal transformed into a shower of glowing orange-yellow globs. Sparks rained down from the torch, followed by splatters of molten metal. The heat around the torch was almost unbearable; Mitchell sweated profusely, the salty sweat stinging his eyes as it dripped forth from his forehead. After several minutes, they successfully cut his way through the thick hull.

Captain Reade and Lieutenant Foster moved out of the way. Then, with two magnetic clamps, Mitchell lifted the metal piece of hull and slid it out of the way. A slight whirlwind followed; the quick gust of wind rustled through his thick, dark hair. Mitchell stepped through the small hole he had just cut, and put his hand on the opposite wall. His hand was covered in black, greasy grime; with a face, he wiped his hand clean on his pants. He was in the vessel's air system. He looked to his left, and moved forward, crawling on his belly since there wasn't enough room to stand; behind him, the rest of his team piled in. His military uniform was covered in grime, and his face poured with sweat. After only thirty feet, he stopped. Lying on his back now, he took out his cutting-torch, and cut the top of the pipe. Luckily the pipe was made of very thin metal and cut easily; sparks rained down upon him, searing his retina's. After only a few seconds Mitchell cut a hole through the pipe. Above him was the steel grating of the main corridor; relieved, Mitchell breathed in the somewhat fresh air. Putting away his cutting-torch, Mitchell pulled out a snake-cam. He thread the thin optical camera through the steel grating, rotated it three-hundred and sixty degrees, then pulled it back.

He whispered, "All clear."

Quietly, he lifted the steel grated panel, pushing it aside; the sound of sliding metal cut into Mitchell, causing his nerves to intensify. Having pushed the steel panel aside, Mitchell lifted himself up and out of the pipe. He crouched on his feet, looking in front of him and back. The coast was clear; he looked back down into the pipe. There, lying on her back, was Captain Tonya Reade, covered in the black, greasy filth that lined the inside of the pipe.

In hushed voices, he spoke, "Go on through the piping system and secure the bow." He explained, "I'll take the new guy."

She nodded, then proceeded crawling through the dirty piping system. One after the other, they followed Captain Reade. Finally, at the end of the line, Corporal Daniel

Kim crawled out of the pipe. His black attire was covered in dark brown filth; Mitchell imagined that he was too.

Mitchell looked at Kim, then said, "Go silent."

Mitchell reached behind him and pulled out his M-4A4 handgun; with ease, he screwed on the sound suppressor, a long, cylindrical metal tube that muffles the sound of gunfire. Kim did the same. After quickly checking the rest of their gear, Mitchell and Kim moved deeper in the vessel. After only a few paces, they came across their first guard. The guard, a Russian male holding an assault rifle, just came around the corner. Reacting purely on instincts, Mitchell raised his handgun and fired a round; an almost inaudible *puck* resonated within the narrow hallway, and the casing for the bullet shot upward, which Mitchell caught it in mid-air. The nine-millimetre round sliced through the Russian's temple, logging itself into his brain; before the Russian guard could collapse onto the steel grating, Mitchell sped forward and caught him. The dead body was surprisingly heavy. Silently, Mitchell eased him toward the flooring.

Mitchell then took a quick peek around the corner; the long, dark, narrow corridor was clear of guards or other personnel. Mitchell quickly turned the corner, then with Kim behind him, raced through the as quickly and silently as possible. After a few more paces, they came to an intersection. Taken completely by surprise, another hulking Russian guard came tearing around the corner. The over-muscled Russian knocked the handgun out of Mitchell's hand, which *clacked* on the metal grating, then grabbed him by the flak jacket and tossed him into the far wall; Mitchell struck the metal wall with a thud. Pain shot up his back and head, and suddenly his vision was filled with spots and stars. Before the Russian guard could follow up on his assault, Kim fired a sound suppressed round into the back of the Russian's head. Mitchell barely heard the shot, but immediately leaned forward and caught the Russian in his arms; hefting him in his arms, easing him gingerly towards the flooring.

Mitchell looked up at Kim, then nodded in thanks.

Kim nodded back, then proceeded to round the corner, making sure no one else was down the corridor. Mitchell, meanwhile, picked up his handgun. Just then, Kim came back around the corner.

"Coast is clear, Major."

Mitchell nodded, quickly catching his breath; residual pain still emanated from his back, but it was nothing that he couldn't work through. He then pointed down the

corridor, "You go down this path and swing around." He explained, "I'll go down here," Indicating towards the corridor the Russian had come from, "and meet you there."

"Got it, Major."

Kim, silently, moved down the original corridor, blending in almost perfectly with the shadows that filled the hall. Mitchell, on the other hand, peered around the corner one more time; thankfully, it was clear. He slowly made his way through the gloomy hallway. The walls, Mitchell noticed, were covered in soot and grime, the grease seeming to drip and ooze down the metal panel; maintenance, it appeared, was not a top priority on this vessel.

Mitchell came across another intersection. Before reacting, Mitchell took out a small mirror and peered around the corner. With his back towards Mitchell, another Russian guard stood in the middle of the shadowy hallway, draped in darkness, smoking a cigarette; Mitchell seemed fixated on the glowing orange-red ember at the tip of the cigarette. Then, with lightning fast speed, Mitchell spun around the corner, and squeezed the trigger of his handgun. A near silent *clack* resonated in the hallway. Mitchell, expertly, caught the ejected casing of the bullet in mid-air, followed by a quick lunge forward to catch the downed guard. Silently, he eased the body onto the steel grated panel. Mitchell, once again, peered around the corner; seeing the corridor was clear, Mitchell proceeded forward.

Suddenly, over his headset, Kim spoke, "*Major, I'm in position. Over.*"

Mitchell touched his ear, "Guards? Over."

After a slight pause, "*One. Over.*"

Mitchell, having finally reached the end of the corridor, quickly looked around both corners; he could only see one guard, "Same. Over."

"*Engage? Over.*"

"On three." Mitchell said, "One... two... three!"

Mitchell immediately came out of cover, raised his handgun, and squeezed the trigger, all in one smooth motion. Again, Mitchell caught the casing in mid-air, then raced forward to grab the downed guard; Mitchell saw, to his right, that Kim did the same. Kim immediately raced over to Mitchell, keeping as silently as possible. They were on a second-floor catwalk overlooking a loading bay; on the other side, Mitchell noticed two of his men, Sergeant Derrick Parker and Lieutenant David Foster, hooking

up their repelling gear. Below, stacked almost to the ceiling, were a variety of metal and wooden crates and boxes; on the side of every box were Cyrillic lettering.

Russians, Mitchell thought.

Mitchell stood up slowly. He peered down below, toward the middle of the loading bay. There, Mitchell saw ten men standing around a table, talking. Five, standing on one side of the table, were definitely part of the Russian mafia; they wore dark leather jackets, dark coloured collared shirts underneath, and light coloured trousers. It was also evident that they were packing heat; two were armed with assault rifles, while the rest had handguns tucked into the back of their pants. On the other side of the table, were five Chinese men. Four were definitely part of the Chinese triad, but the man in the middle, the one doing all the talking, didn't seem to fit. He wore a white medical lab coat, and had a pair of black-rimmed glasses. Regardless, the business suit wearing Chinese gangsters were armed too.

Mitchell looked over to Kim, "You got ears?"

Kim, now with a sound-amplifying dish, nodded. Mitchell listened.

"*We come long way!*" The Chinese man in a lab coat shouted in broken English, "*You have it or not?*"

A hard looking Russian man with a scar across his eye replied, "*Don't worry little man.*" He said with a heavy accent, "*Our merchandise is best. You got money?*"

The Chinese man in the lab coat motioned with his head. One of the triad gangsters stepped forward with a briefcase in his hands. He rested the briefcase on the stainless-steel table and opened it, revealing its contents to the Russians.

With a closer look, Mitchell suddenly recognized the scarred Russian; then, with whispered surprise, "Holy shit."

Kim looked over at Mitchell, and whispered, "What is it, Major?"

"That's Stepan Zakharov." Mitchell answered, "Head of the Russian mob."

Kim looked confused, "What would he be doing here?"

Mitchell shook his head, "If he's here, then this must be big." Then, over his headset, Mitchell informed, "Be advised, Stepan Zakharov is present."

Captain Tonya Reade replied, "*Copy.*"

Then, over his headset, the conversation below continued, "*Ten million Imperial credits,*" The Chinese man said, "*What we agreed.*"

Stepan Zakharov nodded his head in approval; then, the Chinese man added, "*Show me now.*"

Stepan motioned with his head. Suddenly, a forklift approached and stopped in front of one of the large stacks of crates. The forklift operator took down one of the crates from the top, then lowered it down; hydraulic ramps whirred and pistons hissed inside the loading bay. Finally, with a thud and a plume of dust, the crate was placed on the concrete floor. Two Russians moved toward the crate, crowbars in hand, and pried open one side of the wooden crate. With a clank, the wooden siding fell. The Russian men reached inside and pulled out a large glass container; he placed the glass container on the table. Inside, Mitchell saw, was a live facehugger, suspended in water.

"*As you see,*" The scarred Russian said, "*We have best.*"

The Chinese man in the lab coat stepped forward, inspecting the glass container. Inside, the facehugger squirmed and writhed, trying to escape and attack its prey; its hideous eight fingers clawing at the glass. The Chinese man seemed satisfied.

Then, the Chinese man said, "*You promise Queen!*"

Stepan Zakharov motioned with his head again; the Russian gangster reached inside the crate again and pulled out another large glass container. The Russian set it beside the other glass container, allowing it to be inspected. The Chinese man leaned forward, excitedly examining its contents. Mitchell, even from a distance, could see what was inside. It was a super-facehugger; a special, and rare, breed of facehugger that hosted a royal embryo, one that would grow and evolve into an Alien Queen. The super-facehugger had black colourations all along its body, with brownish translucent webbing in between its fingers; it also possessed an amour-plating that resembled the Alien Queen. Along its tail, spines and thorns lined it, ending with a stinger that bore a resemblance to a scorpion. The super-facehugger was a hideous creature.

Mitchell watched as the Chinese man in the lab coat rose from the glass container with glee; then, the Chinese man said, "*Ah! Excellent! Most pleased!*"

Then, they began their exchange. The Russians placed the glass containers back into the crate, while the forklift operator went back to grab another crate from off the stack. Stepan, with a gleeful expression across his scarred face, quickly counted the money in the briefcase.

Mitchell, heart racing, spoke into his headset, "Location?"

Captain Tonya Reade replied, "*In the ventilation system, bow of the loadin' bay.*" She informed, "*Standin' by and ready. Over.*"

"*Copy. We're high, aft of the loading bay.*" Mitchell informed, "*They've made the exchange. Be advised, live facehuggers are present. Repeat. Live facehuggers are present. Over.*"

"*Copy. Live facehuggers present. Out.*"

Mitchell and Kim pulled out some clamps and rope from their backpacks, and hooked it up onto the railing. Then, Mitchell spoke again, "On three." He said, "One... two... three!"

Mitchell immediately leapt over the railing, and repelled downward towards the hard concrete floor of the loading bay; Kim followed seconds behind. Meanwhile, Captain Reade and the rest of the team punched through the vents and stormed into the loading bay from the opposite end. Mitchell slid down the black rope rapidly, the rush of wind howled in his ears; within a second, he hit the concrete ground with a thud, the harness digging into his shoulders. Mitchell immediately unbuckled his harness, retrieved his M-44A Pulse Rifle, and raced forward. He quickly navigated his way around the stacks and piles of crates, quickly moving toward the center of the loading bay; Kim was close behind. Mitchell turned a corner; on the other side were the Russian gangsters. They were dazed and confused, cursing in their native dialects.

Mitchell immediately shouted, "Bee-tee-eff! Freeze! Nobody move! Bee-tee-eff!"

On the other side, he could here Captain Reade scream, "Hands up!"

Suddenly, one of the Russian gangsters raised his assault rifle to fire. Instinctively, Mitchell fired his Pulse Rifle. Three cracks echoed in the loading bay; the bullets sliced through the air, striking the man in the chest, followed by the spray of a pinkish mist. The Russian grunted then dropped to the concrete, a pool of blood slowly spreading underneath him. Both the Russians and the Chinese seemed confused by the sudden turn of events, but none fired their arsenal of weapons.

Mitchell immediately ordered, "Weapons on the ground! Now!"

Both the Russian and Chinese gangsters hesitated for a moment; their faces were filled with anger and hate. Mitchell stared right into the bald-headed, scarred Russian's eyes; Stepan glared at him with furious rage, his right hand just hovering over his holstered handgun. Nevertheless, Mitchell stared him down.

Mitchell's heart was pounded out of his chest; Mitchell shook his head, "Don't even think about it, Stepan."

Then, after a few tense seconds, reluctantly, Stepan dropped his handgun onto the concrete. The rest of the gangsters quickly followed suit. Assault rifles, handguns, and submachine guns; they were definitely packing heat. Without saying a word, his team began arresting the gangsters; they placed their wrists in metal handcuffs. The gangsters ached and moaned while being cuffed, but none really struggled.

Suddenly, Kim came charging out from behind Mitchell; he immediately grabbed the closest gangster, Stepan Zakharov himself, and forced him to the ground. Mitchell covered him while Kim slapped handcuffs around the gangster's wrists. Out of the corner of his eyes, Mitchell saw the others doing the same.

Stepan Zakharov struggled, cursing in Russian as Kim wrestled the handcuffs onto the scarred Russian's wrists. Suddenly, the Russian spat at Mitchell, lodging the sputum into his face.

With a growl, Mitchell wiped the spit off his face, "Get him out of here!"

Kim immediately forced the scarred Russian off the cold, hard concrete, leading out of the loading bay. Mitchell had the pleasure of cuffing the Chinese man in the lab coat. The Chinese man struggled quite a bit, but was eventually wrestled to the floor. Mitchell shoved his right knee into the Chinese man's back while binding his hands together; the Chinese man screamed in pain, struggling to get free. Then, he reached into the man's pocket and fished out his wallet.

"Now let's see who you are, shall we?" Mitchell said.

"Go to hell!" The Chinese man screamed.

Mitchell flipped through the wallet; after a few seconds of fishing, he came across the man's identity card; DR. QING XIANG it read. Mitchell called, "Hey Reade, come over here!"

Captain Tonya Reade walked over to Mitchell, she said, "Crates secure." He handed her the identity card; she replied, "A professor?"

"Who researches molecular genetics at Peking University." Mitchell finished, "He's one of China's top researchers."

"How do you know that?" Reade asked.

"His name is on the Task Force watch list." Mitchell answered.

Reade was obviously confused; "So what's a world-renowned academic doin' runnin' around with thugs an' gangsters?" Reade asked.

"I don't know." Mitchell replied, "Let's ask." Mitchell pushed his knee harder into Dr. Qing Xiang's back, "What were you doing here?"

Dr. Qing Xiang looked behind his shoulder, "I say nothing without lawyer."

Frustrated, Mitchell forcibly picked up the Chinese man; Captain Reade took the Chinese man by the arm and led him off the vessel. Mitchell quickly assessed the cargo; inside the wooden crates were numerous glass containers containing facehuggers. He inspected one of the jars; there was Cyrillic lettering all along the base, probably an item and shipping manifest, and underneath was a scratched-off logo and serial number. Mitchell shook his head.

Untraceable.

Mitchell placed the glass container back in the wooden crate. Overall, Mitchell was pleased with the operation.

Three Days Later: Aboard the *Aurora*:

Mitchell ran through the narrow corridors of the *Conestoga*-class battleship as part of his daily exercise routine. He was working up quite a sweat; his grey muscle shirt was soaked around the neck area and along his back, while his shorts hung loosely from his waist. His two-day beard was starting to itch, while his dark brown hair was dripping with sweat at the moment, trickling into his eyes, stinging them. Suddenly, he rounded the corner, and as fast as he could, ran down the empty, narrow hallway. He would always do this at the end of his routine, just to see what he had left in him. Mitchell was getting worried about getting "too old" for this kind of work.

Then, just as he reached the end of the hallway, a junior officer, wearing a black formal military uniform, appeared in front of him. The junior officer looked towards Mitchell; the junior officer's eyes were like saucers, wide with shock and surprise. Mitchell, instantly reacting, skidded to a stop, just inches away from the junior officer. The junior officer let out a near-quiet sigh of relief.

After a few seconds, the junior officer, replied, "Sir!"

"What is it, Ensign?"

"Lieutenant-General Waters requests the presence of your team immediately, sir!" The ensign informed.

Mitchell sighed, *Leave was over*, "Thank you, Ensign."

The ensign saluted, then marched down the corridor he came from. Mitchell made two fists, then placed them on his hips. He quickly caught his breath, then walked down the corridor, headed to the gym. After a few minutes, he reached the large double doors that led into the gym. Inside the dimly lit gym were rows and rows of mechanical equipment; in the center, Mitchell could see, was a boxing ring. The only strong source of light in the gym hovered just above the boxing ring.

Standing around the perimeter of the boxing ring were a dozen army and navy personnel, cheering and hollering as the two men inside fought it out. Then, out of the corner of his eyes, Mitchell spotted Kim.

Mitchell walked over to him, "Hey, Kim!"

Kim was sitting at the leg-press, pushing a good five-hundred pounds with both legs; sweat had thoroughly soaked through Kim's shirt, "Major?"

Kim just finished his set with one final push; Mitchell finally answered, "The General wants to see us. Where's the rest of the team?"

Kim pointed at the boxing ring, which then prompted Mitchell to reply, "Figures."

Then Kim continued, "The Captain and Lieutenant are in the mechanics bay, I think."

That makes sense, Mitchell thought. Then, he replied, "Jump into the shower and meet us in the conference room in thirty."

"Yes, Major."

Mitchell turned to walk away, when suddenly, Kim shouted, "Major!" Mitchell turned to face Kim, then he asked, "Did I do alright out there?"

Mitchell nodded, "Yeah, Kim. You did alright."

Kim smiled, then got up off the machine. Mitchell immediately walked towards the boxing ring. The hollering and screaming gradually grew as he neared. Slowly, he pushed his way through the crowd, finally ending up ringside. Inside the boxing ring

were Sergeant Derrick Parker and Corporal Marcus Brown. Parker was a pretty large and muscular man from the southern United States, with a grizzled beard, blue eyes, and short brown hair; Brown, a towering mountain of muscle, was a hardened veteran of the slums from Chicago.

Mitchell looked over to his right and caught a glimpse at a familiar face. It was Major Tim Rowe, the commander for alpha squad; Major Rowe was screaming at the top of his lungs, red-faced and pumping with testosterone. Slowly, Mitchell pushed through the cheering crowd until, finally, he was shoulder-to-shoulder with him.

"Major Rowe?" Mitchell said.

Rowe looked over, "Hey, Major!" He said, "Your men in there are really something."

"That they are."

Mitchell turned to watch the match with anticipated glee. Parker already had a busted eyebrow, which was trickling blood into Parker's left eye. Marcus, on the other hand, seemed in perfect form. Sweat poured down both men's chest. Parker, surprisingly, lashed out at Marcus, landing a hard blow to Marcus' gut. Marcus, however, expertly countered, forcing Parker back onto the ropes; the crowd went wild as Marcus pummelled Parker with blow after blow.

Parker shoved Marcus off him, moving sideways off the ropes. Parker, obviously dazed by the recent onslaught, shook his head as if to knock the cobwebs loose in his head. Marcus persisted. He inched closer, jabbing with his left and right. Parker, however, wasn't quite done; he blocked, and occasionally he jabbed. Suddenly, Brown lunged forward with a powerful one-two combination. Parker blocked the first jab, but got clipped on the chin by the second. Parker caught the full brunt of the attack, sending a shower of sweat upward into the air. Mitchell watched as Parker plummeted to the floor; he had obviously had his lights knocked out. The crowd behind him cheered relentlessly. Brown, the cocky corporal from the wrong side of the tracks, cheered in victory.

"Yeah, baby! Yeah!" Brown hollered, "Wha'? This my house, baby! Always will be!"

Parker and Brown had always had their little rivalry. Mitchell shook his head with a smirk. Then, he reached up and grabbed the rope; the bright lights above him blinded him, and the rope was coarse, and dug into the palm of his hands as he pulled

himself up. Brown looked over at him, then held out his fist. Mitchell pounded it, which prompted Brown to smile through his mouth guard.

"Alright, boys." Mitchell said, "Fun's over."

"Say wha', boss?" Brown asked, "Naw. We got one weeks—"

"Leave has been cancelled." Mitchell explained, "The General wants to see us, ASAP."

Brown was about to protest, but suddenly bit back his tongue. Parker, meanwhile, picked himself up off the canvas floor. Parker, having lost the match, was obviously upset. Parker tore the tape wrapping his wrist off, then threw the gloves off to the side. Then, he replied, "No problem."

Parker held the ropes apart for Brown, which Brown slipped through. Together, they walked off towards the changing room. Mitchell, on the other hand, leapt down from the boxing ring, and headed towards the opposite side of the gym. The crowd surrounding the boxing ring started to disperse. He entered the hallway, and walked towards the elevator. Mitchell pushed the button for one of the lower floors. The elevator was surprisingly fast; Mitchell could feel his gut rise into his chest. He waited until the metallic double doors opened. He stepped off the elevator and into the mechanics bay.

Inside were tonnes of broken down machines, most were vehicles of some sort. An army of mechanics and engineers were working, more-or-less nonstop, trying to fix them. Almost instantly, a cacophony of buzz saws, drills, and the sizzling sparks from welders, filled Mitchell's ears; the smell of diesel oil, sweat and acrid smoke flooded his senses. Mitchell cautiously walked through the web of mechanical parts. Black grease covered the asphalt floor, sticking to his boots, while the sparks from welder's torches blinded him.

Suddenly, from behind, one of the mechanics called to him.

Mitchell turned around. The mechanic tossed him a hardhat, which Mitchell caught. Then, after several minutes of searching, he found the two other members of his team. Both Foster and Reade were lying on their backs, side-by-side, perched underneath a broken down armoured personnel carrier. The armoured personnel carrier, one of many on this battleship, was a simple four-wheeled rectangular-like vehicle with grey armour-plating on all sides.

Mitchell heard the banging of a hammer, then Reade screamed, "Damn! Son of a bitch!"

Mitchell smirked, "Now, where did a nice gal like you learn such language like that?"

Suddenly, Reade slid out from under the broken-down armoured personnel carrier. Her clothes, a simple tank-top and cargo pants, along with her face, were covered in brownish-black grease; she looked up at Mitchell, and slowly grinned.

She replied, "Who said I'm a nice gal?"

Just then, Foster slid out from under the armoured personnel carrier. He reached over to his side and grabbed a towel. With stubborn force, he whipped his mucky hands clean of the thick, viscous grease. Foster, as was his way, made little-to-no eye-contact with Mitchell. It wasn't considered rude, since Mitchell knew Foster; it was just his way.

Finally, Reade asked, "So, what's up?"

Mitchell looked at her, "Look's like we've got a date with the General."

"What for?"

Mitchell shook his head, "No idea."

She nodded, "Alright. Give us a few to clean up. We'll meet ya up there."

Mitchell nodded, then turned around and headed out of the mechanics bay.

Major Scott Mitchell hurriedly walked down the narrow hallways of the battleship in his beige khaki army uniform; on his collar was the golden leaf of a major, which he proudly presented. He passed several naval officers, saluting some of them as he made this way to the bridge. The battleship was kept in pristine condition. The task force commander, Lieutenant-General James Waters, summoned his team, delta squad, to the conference room. After making his way through the maze of corridors, he entered the bridge; he immediately turned off to his right and entered the conference room. The conference room was small, with three rows of chairs situated in front of a holographic projector. At the far end of the room stood a tall, aged man, with salt-and-pepper hair and a pure-white moustache.

Major Scott Mitchell stood with military precision, and saluted, "Good morning, General, sir!"

"At ease, Major." Lieutenant-General Waters replied; he motioned towards one of the seats, "Have a seat."

Major Mitchell nodded and took a seat in the front row. Having just taken a seat, the rest of his team poured into the room. Each were dressed in their military dress uniforms, pressed and nicely worn; they saluted the General, and took a chair, filling out the rest of the room.

Finally, after a few moments, Lieutenant-General Waters began, "I just wanted to congratulate you and your team on a job well done; that was some op."

"Thank you, General." Major Mitchell replied, "Any follow up?"

Lieutenant-General Waters sagged, "Worst case." He said, "It's almost certain the Chinese are conducting their own research into Xenomorph biology, with the Russian mafia supplying them with illegal biologicals."

"And what about this Doctor Xiang." Mitchell asked.

"Officially, he has no position within the Chinese government." Lieutenant-General Waters answered.

Mitchell shook his head, "So nothing."

"Have we traced where the Russians are gettin' the biologicals?" Captain Tonya Reade asked.

"Not yet." Lieutenant-General Waters answered, "But it can be safely assumed that the Russian mob is getting their supplies from the Imperial Security Service. It is still unclear where the ie-ess-ess is getting theirs."

Mitchell shook his head; the idea of the Russian internal security bureau, known as the Imperial Security Service, working with gangsters was a disturbing thought.

"We'll get 'em, General." Major Scott Mitchell replied, "Sooner or later."

"If it's to be sooner or later, I'd have it sooner, Major. Anyways, I didn't pull you guys off leave to small talk. We've got trouble brewing." He dimmed the lights, and with a push of a button, activated the holographic projector; the image showed an above-plane view of a foreign binary system with a yellow and orange sun, and three

planets, two rocky inner planets and an outer gas-giant, "This is the Alpha Centauri system, four light-years from Earth. Currently, it is occupied by the Imperials, and has been red-flagged as a possible location for illegal Xenomorph activity."

Major Scott Mitchell was intrigued; he had read many United American Intelligence bureau reports about the Alpha Centauri system over the years. With one world within the systems habitable zone, actually a moon of a gas-giant, it was described as a simple mining colony. Evidence, collected over the years, suggested that because the Alpha Centauri system was so far away from Earth, it would make the ideal place to set up a Xenomorph research facility. Recently, there had been a resurgence of chatter about the system.

Lieutenant-General Waters continued, "Yesterday, we received a distress signal from the mining colony on Xo." He explained, "The recording was in Russian and of poor quality, but they describe creatures overrunning the mine, and gunfire was clearly audible."

"Sounds like Intelligence thinks they might've made contact with the Xenomorphs." Captain Tonya Reade examined.

Major Scott Mitchell looked over to his second-in-command, and stared at her. She had her long, flowing brown hair tied behind her head in a ponytail, and a fair, pale complexion that seemed counter to her current occupation. After a few moments, she noticed that he was staring at her. She glanced towards his direction, having finally taken notice, and winked at him with her green eyes.

"Intelligence thinks their experiments have gotten loose." Lieutenant-General Waters corrected.

"Sounds like it to me." Sergeant Derrick Parker commented in a deep, low voice.

Mitchell couldn't help but shake his head. That was the typical response from Parker. The overgrown, over-muscled, over-confident Sergeant just didn't know when to keep his mouth shut.

"Orders, sir." Major Scott Mitchell requested.

Lieutenant-General Waters turned to the keyboard, punched in a command key, then watched as the holographic image zoom towards the gas-giant. The image of was of Iropia, and orbiting the planet were thirty-two small moons, including Xo, "Because we're less than half a light-year away from Alpha Centauri, we get first crack at these

bastards. Our task is to infiltrate and, if necessary, eliminate the research lab. So you're going to have to prep for a one-day operation, with demolitions."

Marcus nodded, then whispered, "Yeah, baby."

The holographic image zoomed toward the moon of Xo, "Now, the Imperial mining colony is situated here," He pointed, "The *Aurora* will be parked just outside the system. You, however, will enter the upper atmosphere on one of our stealth reconnaissance craft, and jump at ninety-thousand feet; there, you will only deploy your chutes at less than two-thousand feet." The holographic image depicted the insertion.

Mitchell sank back into the padding of his seat. *A goddamn HALO jump.*

"You're drop zone will be four clicks northwest of the mining site near the tailing ponds." Lieutenant-General Waters explained; the holographic image rotated to show a birds-eye view of the mine-site, including the most up-to-date layout of the buildings, "There, your job is simple. Search, gather evidence, and secure any valuable personnel."

"Resistance?" Major Scott Mitchell inquired.

Lieutenant-General Waters pondered the question for several moments. Slowly, he turned to address the entire team; with a sigh, he laid out, "Remember, this is an Imperial-held world. If this is indeed another research lab, you can expect resistance to be high." He warned, "We have no satellite data on military activity, but keep an eye out anyway."

"Rules of engagement, sir?" Captain Tonya Reade asked.

Lieutenant-General Waters let out a quiet sigh, "You are not to fire unless you are fired upon." He said, then added, "Is that understood?"

The room collectively nodded, and acknowledged the order with "Yes, sir".

"Extraction?" Major Scott Mitchell quickly asked once the room quieted again.

"Okay." Lieutenant-General Waters excitedly replied; he stood in front of the holographic image, facing it, as it rotated towards the jungle, "Extraction point alpha is here, a clear-cut patch of jungle three clicks due east of the mine." Suddenly, the holographic image rotated again, "Extraction point bravo is a lava field seven clicks

northeast of the mine." Lieutenant-General Waters turned to face the soldiers, "All you need to do is call one of our birds and wait for pick-up."

"What kind of aerial cover can we expect?" Lieutenant David Foster asked.

Lieutenant-General Waters shook his head, "None. This is enemy territory and we cannot afford to be caught with our hand in the cookie jar."

Foster, the shy guy on the team, simply nodded his head in acceptance. Mitchell could understand Foster's concern though. With no air cover, and no possible chance for reinforcements, they would be left open and vulnerable if anything were to go wrong. It was a bad spot, and with Foster's background, it probably made it worse. This, however, was not the first time they would be put in this situation. Besides, they were elite; they were trained to handle this.

"Any other questions?" Lieutenant-General Waters asked; he waited, and when no reply came, "Alright then. Dismissed."

One Day Later: Over the upper atmosphere of Xo:

The rear hold of the stealth reconnaissance craft yawed and rocked as it descended through the thickening atmosphere. The seat Major Scott Mitchell sat on shook and vibrated, reflecting the turbulence the aircraft was experiencing. Mitchell's knee shook up-and-down, nervously. To take his mind off the bumpy ride, he checked his M-44A Pulse Rifle; the M-44A was a compact and lighter version of previous Pulse Rifles, designed for urban-combat, and was painted black for covert operations. Quickly, he checked the magazine of his M-4A4 handgun; it was fully loaded with nine-millimetre rounds. He looked around and saw the others doing the same. Without thinking, he stopped and listened. Outside, he could hear the howling wind surround the stealth craft; it was a tremendous freefall. He never liked aircraft, and he never liked the idea of jumping out of one; but, it was, after all, part of the job.

Suddenly, the rear hold flashed with a red light, providing the only illumination on the stealth craft. Major Scott Mitchell immediately snapped into command, "Alright, prep and ready to jump!"

They immediately checked their jump equipment and gear. They had all been wearing black wingsuits, a specially made jumpsuit with webbing in between the legs and arms with a parachute on their back, over their flak jackets and military uniforms. In sequence, they gave their thumbs-up. Then, from the forward cockpit, the co-pilot shouted, "One minute to drop!"

"One minute!" Major Scott Mitchell repeated the information.

After a moment, the light changed from red to green, and a siren blared. Suddenly, the rear boarding ramp opened with the mechanical whir of gears and hydraulics, revealing the night sky of Xo. Below them was the dense, pitch-black jungle; above them was the gas-giant.

Suddenly, Major Scott Mitchell snapped into action, "Go! Go! Go!"

One-by-one they jumped out of the stealth craft; Major Scott Mitchell was the last to jump. As he hurdled towards the ground, the roar of the wind deafened him. He could feel the air moving between his arms, legs and face at near terminal velocity. After about seven minutes of free-fall, Major Scott Mitchell pulled the ripcord. Suddenly, his entire body felt the forceful jolt of deceleration, then floated carelessly towards the ground. Out in the distance, he could see five other parachutes deploy and land on the ground.

After several seconds of drifting, he slammed into the dusty dirt surrounding the tailing ponds. The tailing ponds, pools of sludge, emanated a reviling stench; it was toxic runoff from the mine after all. Expertly, he rolled onto his feet and retrieved his parachute. He made a quick glance around and saw that the other members of his team had already packed their parachutes and were ready to deploy. Quickly, he unzipped his wingsuit and stuffed it in with the rest of his gear.

"Do we have a read on our position?" Major Scott Mitchell requested.

Immediately, nineteen year-old Corporal Daniel Kim raced over to Major Scott Mitchell's side and showed him a holographic display of the topography and geography of the surrounding area. The image showed a terrain that was similar to Swiss cheese; the landscape was spotted with twenty-five-metre diameter tailing ponds, with thick, dense jungle in between. The holographic image also showed delta squad's position relative to the mine-site; they were approximately four and a half kilometres northwest of the mine-site.

"Alright, everyone put on your visors." Major Scott Mitchell ordered, "We're heading for the mine. Move in teams of two, five metre spread."

They nodded in agreement and immediately set out for the mine. Captain Tonya Reade stayed with Mitchell; in previous missions, they would always form a group. Major Mitchell watched the team set into the dense jungle just as he activated his headset, a thin glass visor that went across both eyes; suddenly his vision turned into a

swash of greens, blacks and whites. He motioned with his head, and they immediately followed the rest of the squad.

Major Mitchell and Captain Reade made up ground within the jungle. Now they were the ones leading the squad through the traitorous jungle. Never in his life had Mitchell ever seen jungle that was like this. The trees were twisted amalgamations of razor-sharp leaves and thorn-lined bark; every branch looked like a horribly twisted creature, crying out in pain. The ground was covered in deadfall; leaves, moss, broken branches and other foliage lay down before them. Hanging down from the upper most branches of the trees were vines. Above, the canopy of trees completely blocked out the night sky; as a result, visibility was only ten feet in front of them, even with the light enhancing visors. Combined, they made for an uneasy sight.

As Mitchell slowly hiked through the dense brush, watching so he doesn't trip over a loose branch, he noticed something incredibly odd. There was only complete silence. The cacophony of animal hollers and chirps were nonexistent. The silence that followed him through the jungle made him uncomfortable, almost anxious.

Then, suddenly, Mitchell heard a loud snapping crack reverberate within the dense jungle; soon after, Captain Tonya Reade screamed in sheer and utter pain. With one smooth motion, Mitchell immediately knelt down on one knee while rotating one hundred and eighty degrees. As he prepped his M-44A Pulse Rifle, but quickly realized that it wasn't an attack; Reade had stepped into a booby-trap. Mitchell immediately came onto his feet and ran towards Reade, a mere three metres away. He slid to a stop beside Reade and knelt down to see the injury. She was on her knee, clutching her left ankle; tears freely streamed down her cheeks, and her jaw was clenched shut from excruciating pain. Her left foot had stepped into a wooden foothold trap; the jaws, edged and razor-sharp, locked down on her foot with menacing strength. Blood surged forth between her fingers.

"How... does... it... look...?" Reade painfully muttered.

Her breathing was erratic and laboured. Reade, for a moment, let go of her ankle, giving Mitchell a clear view of the injury. Mitchell then took a quick assessment of the wound. It looked bad. Her ankle was snapped in an unnatural angle, and he could see bare bone protruding from her flesh. The blood was black as the night sky poured out of the wound.

"Hold on Reade, I'll get you out." Major Scott Mitchell reassured.

Just then, the rest of squad, having heard the initial cry, surrounded Captain Reade. They set up a defensive perimeter around her, only occasionally glancing behind them to see what was happening. Meanwhile, Mitchell grabbed the two wooden jaws with his gloved hands, and pried them open; with a moaning strain, it took all of his strength just to separate the jaws. Immediately, almost relieved, Reade removed her mangled ankle from the clutches of the trap. Instantly, Mitchell let go of the jaws; a cracking snap echoed in the deep jungle.

Mitchell immediately turned all of his attention onto Reade; she was lying on her back, clasping her ankle, which gushed with blood. Mitchell immediately turned to his teammates, "Foster, Kim, patch her up."

Mitchell got a better look at the injury once it was out of the trap. A chunk of bone stuck out of the flesh, and the flesh around the gash was flayed and torn to shreds. Her ankle also started to swell. Immediately, as ordered, Lieutenant David Foster and Corporal Daniel Kim approached. They both knelt down beside Reade, one on either side of her ankle, and began patching her up.

Before going any further, Foster looked up at Reade, and said, "The bone is sticking out of the wound. I have to splinter it, but first, I have to shove the bone back in.

Reade gave him a frightened look. She nodded, "God dammit. Do it!"

Mitchell gave her a stick to bite on, while Foster shoved the broken bone back into the gushing wound. Reade screamed and moaned through her teeth, tears flowing from her eyes down her cheeks; her breathing was erratic, and laboured. She clasped onto Mitchell's arm like a vice, threatening to break skin, as she squirmed. Blood poured onto Foster's hands; his face was mired with troubled agony. After an excruciating minute, the bone went back in.

Reade almost collapsed from the pain.

Foster splintered her ankle with a metal pipe, and wrapped it in disinfecting bandages, while Kim, a small, toned American-born Asian, injected her with a fast-acting painkiller. Mitchell held her by the shoulders, reassuring her; he watched as the needle emptied of the clear, translucent fluid. Reade sagged into him. Within minutes, they had done all they could for the mangled ankle.

Foster, shaking his head, looked up at Mitchell with an unsure expression, "Now what, Major?"

Mitchell contemplated the question for a moment. Before he could answer, Reade looked up at him, "I can... still... complete this... mission..."

There was an underlying strength in her voice, although a little shaky, but he knew that if it were to come down to a firefight, she would be a sitting duck. Finally, he came to a decision, "Alright. We're going to have to switch things up." He pointed at Corporals Kim and Brown, "You two will scout the mine up ahead and report back here, ASAP."

Then, just before they got up, Mitchell added, "Remember, do not enter the mine-site. Observe from afar, collect visual data, and return here immediately."

The hulking African-American replied in a raspy and low voice, "No worries, boss. We got dis."

Just as fast, they were swallowed into the darkness of the jungle, into the abyss of the unknown. Reade, on the other hand, seemed to be doing better. The bleeding had stopped, and she had quieted down considerably. Sergeant Derrick Parker and Lieutenant David Foster remained in a defensive perimeter, Parker sporting his Pulse Rifle, while Foster had his flamethrower out. Major Scott Mitchell, meanwhile, held Reade in his muscular arms, holding a M-4A4 pistol in his right hand.

During their wait, Reade had come around and was conscious now; she was still in agony, but she kept as quiet as possible. She sat propped up against a mound of moss attached to the base of a tree, her M-44A Pulse Rifle in her arms. As a result, Mitchell was now free to add to the defence of the group. Mitchell, with a sharp eye, looked around the shadowy jungle. He didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. As his eyes roamed the thicket of foliage, he did notice that Foster seemed tenser than normal.

It was probably the jungle, Mitchell thought.

Foster, the oldest of the group, had once been an army helicopter pilot. Seventeen years ago, during the Venezuelan Uprising, Foster had been shot down in his helicopter by rebel forces. He and his co-pilot, along with a small platoon of special forces guys, had to endure almost four days of agonizing terror as they retreated deep into the jungle. As a result, Mitchell assumed, Foster never cared much for dense jungle. Interestingly, Mitchell had fought in that same war; he was only eighteen at the time, and it was the first combat he had ever experienced. It was something alright. They never talked about their experiences during that war; maybe they should.

Almost an hour and a half after he had sent two of his men on a scouting mission, Mitchell heard a distant rustling. Immediately, with military precision Parker and Foster snapped into a prepped position, ready to fire at anyone or anything that may be approaching. Mitchell, more cautious crept towards the direction he heard the rustling. Reade, behind him, covered him.

With a hard whisper, Mitchell called out, "Bugs."

For several seconds, he didn't get a reply. Mitchell could feel his heart pounding out of his chest. Slowly, the others behind him brought their Pulse Rifles to ready-to-fire positions. Those seconds, possibly some of the longest in his life, were filled with tension and nerves. Then, with relief, he heard, "Squash 'em."

Mitchell could feel the tension from the others behind him loosen immediately. Then, out of the shadows of the jungle, Kim and Brown appeared. Crouched, they approached Major Mitchell.

"Report."

"The mine is completely deserted." Kim detailed.

"Yeah, boss, it's a ghost town." Brown added.

Mitchell contemplated what that could mean. If the Xenomorphs had indeed escaped, then they would have either killed or captured the residents there, "Anything else?"

"It was hard to see, because it was so dark, but there might have been blood on the walls." Kim continued, "And the lights were out."

Mitchell nodded, "Good work."

Foster and Parker were behind him, listening in. Finally, Parker questioned, "Now what, Major?"

He had to weigh his options at the moment, "We still have a mission to complete." He answered, "We go in, gather evidence, and look for survivors."

"Reade can't walk on that ankle." Foster stated.

"No. She can't." Mitchell agreed; he motioned for Kim to prompt the holographic image of the local geography, "When we go in, Kim will set up a position on that upper ridge, here." He pointed, "Reade will act as his spotter."

He turned to look at Reade. She nodded, "I'm fine with that."

"Okay. We move together." Mitchell ordered, "Foster will carry Reade, while we provide three-hundred and sixty degree cover."

They nodded in agreement, and moved to execute their objective.

Captain Tonya Reade lay on her belly next to Corporal Daniel Kim. Her left ankle was still bothering her, but she couldn't say anything about that. They were situated atop a heightened ridge about two kilometres west-northwest of the mine-site. She had a pair of electro-binoculars in her hands; she stared down into the valley onto the mine-site. Beside her, Kim, also on his belly, held his beloved sniper rifle in ready-to-fire position. The XM-105 sniper rifle fired a .50 calibre tungsten carbide round at supersonic speeds using good old-fashioned gunpowder as a propellant; a custom attachment on Kim's was that it featured a prominent muzzle-brake to reduce recoil.

In a whisper, Kim spoke, "They're in, Captain."

This snapped Reade to look down at the mine-site with greater acuteness. Energy, it seemed, flowed through her with ease; her ankle injury, as well, seemed to take a backseat in her mind. The mine-site was dizzying labyrinth of buildings, great and small. Finally, she caught sight of Mitchell.

"Got 'em." Reade replied.

Major Scott Mitchell led the insertion team into the mine-site. It was tactically difficult since the area around the giant open-pit mine provided no cover for their approach. However, navigating the barren terrain was the least of their problems. Everywhere in the mining colony was dark; the power generator had been cut. Mitchell ran towards the first building, a concrete domed roof concentrator plant, and propped himself up against the side of the concrete wall. Parker, Foster and Brown weren't far behind.

After taking a moment to catch their breath, "There are over three dozen buildings we're going to have to search." Mitchell informed, "We break up into pairs and do a building-by-building search. Brown, you're with me."

"Right, boss." Marcus Brown replied.

Mitchell peeked around the corner of the concentrator plant, then ordered, "Move."

Parker and Foster immediately jumped from out of the wall and headed straight towards the adjacent building, the smelter, over six hundred metres away. Meanwhile, Mitchell leading, he and Brown rounded the corner and stood just outside the entrance; both men stood on either side of the doorway, eager to storm inside. Mitchell looked up at Marcus, who nodded that he was ready. Then, like a blazing wildfire, Mitchell kicked the door in and stormed into the concentrator plant. The metal door slammed into the wall with a clunk. Mitchell was the first to enter; he cleared his corner. Marcus was seconds behind him, and cleared the opposite corner. No one. Inside, all the machinery had gone dead, and the depths of the massive building were completely dark. The air in the concentrator plant was eerily dense and cold. Brown tried flicking the switch on-and-off, to no avail. Evident that the lights were dead, Mitchell flicked on the infrared light-attachment on the side of the Pulse Rifle; Brown did the same.

Suddenly, Mitchell found himself staring at the massive tanks they used to concentrate the mineral ore they get from the mine. Above him were metres upon metres of steel piping, seemingly layered in a tangled mess. Slowly, they worked their way through the plant. They tried to move silently but it was no easy task since their boots clanked on the steel-grated panelled floor. Mitchell quickly found that the maze of buildings outside was nothing compared to the maze of corridors, ramps, hallways, and rafters inside the buildings.

Mitchell slowly moved deeper and deeper into the bowels of the concentrator plant. He was surprised by the sheer size of the plant; he was also frightened of all the nooks-and-crannies and shadows that filled the vast building. Anyone or anything could be lurking inside or behind any number of places. While moving forward, he kept a close eye on the motion tracker that was displayed on the bottom right corner of his heads-up-display. With a thirty feet range, he should have far warning if anything moved in front of him.

Suddenly, Brown called out, "Movement!"

Mitchell's heart skipped a beat; the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Immediately, Mitchell ran down a catwalk, racing toward Brown. Seconds later, Mitchell stood behind the hulking man.

"What is it?" Mitchell asked.

Marcus Brown looked over his shoulder, and whispered, "I dunno, but I caught something on my tracker."

Mitchell looked forward, then suddenly, a dot appeared on his motion tracker. The eerie blip resonated within his eardrum; it was the most feared sound anyone in the Marines or Army could hear. Both Mitchell and Brown readied their weapons, cautiously moving forward. Step-by-step, they walked toward the blip. Mitchell could feel the sweat trickle down his forehead. Mitchell watched as the blip moved closer. Fifteen feet. Ten. Five. Mitchell licked his lips in anticipation.

Suddenly, a giant rat came scurrying out from underneath the steel grated catwalk.

Mitchell immediately let out a long breath of relief, "Damn it, Marcus."

Brown simply shook his head in disbelief. They had a quick chuckle, then proceeded alone, moving deeper and deeper into the abyssal concentrator plant. After securing the concentrator plant, they moved southward. They ran over a kilometre across open terrain until they reached a three metre tall chain-linked fence with barbed-wire on top. At the base was one and half metre tall reinforced-concrete wall, almost a foot thick. They saw, at the other end, Parker and Foster crossing the massive parking lot, heading into the power plant. They circumnavigated the nuclear power generating plant, a massive set of buildings with three huge hyperboloid cooling towers. Mitchell motioned for them to take it, and they proceeded on with the mission. Following a dirt road, they ran another kilometre and a half to the next set of buildings. They were now checking the living quarters that were provided to the miners and other employees. Mitchell's hopes of easily finding evidence of the hidden laboratory were quickly evaporating. As they approached the first housing developments, they immediately felt a different atmosphere surrounding the buildings.

Suddenly, Marcus Brown whispered, "We've got blood here."

Mitchell looked around the rest of the buildings. On the adjacent domicile, dark red blood smeared a good portion of its white panelled wall. As they moved further and further in, they found casings from small arms fire, mainly from a nine-millimetre handgun. The dirty ground they stood on was soaked in dried blood, and the air stank of death. There was also evidence of frantic, chaotic fleeing, since the foot tracks seemed to go in no particular direction or in any sort of order.

"What's goin' on, boss?" Marcus Brown asked in a hard tone.

"You got me." Mitchell whispered.

Mitchell looked around; the buildings, the dirt ground. Then, something caught his attention. It was utterly terrifying, something he hoped never to find. Next to a pile of bullet casings was a translucent, vicious fluid. Mitchell swallowed at the sight. Slowly, Mitchell knelt down to take a closer look.

Before he could even think, the crack of a high-powered rifle rang out within the mine-site. The soundwave bounced off the buildings, adding an echo effect. Mitchell and Brown immediately craned their heads towards the direction of the gunshot; it came from the north. Fear settled in. After a few seconds, the unmistakable rapid-fire gunfire of a Pulse Rifle echoed within the living quarters.

"Shit!" Major Scott Mitchell forcefully whispered.

Immediately, they ran towards the shot. They ran as fast as their legs would carry him. Brown, being a bigger man and carrying a much heavier load, and was much slower. In the distance, Mitchell could see Parker taking cover behind the concrete barrier of the nuclear power plant, with Foster firing his Pulse Rifle wildly. It was evident that Parker had taken a bullet to his right shoulder because he was firing his handgun with his left hand. Ahead of Parker and Foster, maybe about six or seven hundred metres or so, were three distinct muzzle flashes from rapid-fire assault rifles. Each time they fired, a stunted pounding crack resonated throughout the camp.

Mitchell and Brown, over a kilometre away from the shooters, arrived just in time to see another salvo of bullets hammer into the far side of the concrete barrier. Like chalk, the reinforced-concrete disintegrated into dust with every impact; huge craters were slowly gouging deeper into the side of the barrier. Mitchell thought about firing his Pulse Rifle. Although inside the effective range of the M-44A Pulse Rifle, Mitchell didn't want to give away his position for such little gain.

Then, Marcus tapped Mitchell on the shoulder and pointed to a set of buildings, "Over there, boss."

Behind the shooters was a densely packed set of buildings; these were the machine-shops on the map. Although it would give them a reasonable position to fire at the shooters, they would have to cross at least five-hundred metre stretch of open terrain, and a helicopter landing pad, to get to it.

Throwing caution into the wind, "I'm going to move around." He explained, "When I run, cover me."

Marcus nodded. Quickly, Mitchell turned around and ran down the length of street between houses. After making it to the edge of the living quarters, he stopped to make sure he wasn't seen. He wasn't. So far, so good. Mitchell took a second to calm himself; he took a series of deep breaths. Then, with a burst of speed, Mitchell ran towards the machine-shop. Off to the side, Mitchell could hear the auto-shotgun Brown always carried pounding shell after shell into the air. The distraction seemed worked because Mitchell hadn't come under fire, yet. Running hard, breathing hard, he made it across the first six-hundred metre open stretch of dirt, finally coming to rest behind a destroyed and heavily burned commercial helicopter. Mitchell slammed into the side of the charred metal hull; he quickly rested his back on the soot-lined twisted metal. Mitchell looked above him. The burned helicopter had its main rotors completely torn off. Mitchell took a few moments to breath.

Almost immediately, Mitchell came out from behind the downed helicopter and sprinted the next four-hundred metre stretch. Finally, after the most gut-wrenching sprint of his life, he got behind the closest building for cover. Mitchell again caught his breath for a second, then whipped around the corner and fired his Pulse Rifle on full automatic. The bullets flew through the air at supersonic velocities, striking the concrete around the shooters. The high-velocity bullets gouged small, centimetre diameter holes into the dark-grey concrete. Suddenly, Mitchell came under fire as bullets ricocheted off the steel girders around him. The flashes from the muzzles blinded him temporarily. Instinctively, he ducked back behind cover. Just then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Marcus take cover behind one of the resident homes. Across the mine, he could hear Foster firing his Pulse Rifle at the shooters too.

They had the shooters surrounded.

Mitchell felt good. It had been a while since Mitchell had seen real combat, since Venezuela at least, and it felt exhilarating. Taking a quick breath, Mitchell swung out of cover again and fired quick successive bursts of bullets down at the shooters. The tracer rounds streaked brilliantly through the cool night air. Suddenly, bullets struck all around him; small chunks of steel from the siding of the machine-shop flew into his face. It caused him to wince and flinch ever so slightly. Regardless, he never stopped firing his Pulse Rifle.

Suddenly, his ninety-nine-round magazine ran out, "Shit." He bit.

Mitchell immediately swung back under cover and quickly reloaded. Before Mitchell could even fire his Pulse Rifle again, he heard the distinctive sound of a rifle cocking behind him. Slowly, he turned his head around. Behind him stood a tall, toned

woman holding a Russian-made RPK-217 assault rifle, the premier weapon in the Three World Empire.

Ferociously, she barked at him in harsh Russian. He didn't understand the words coming from her mouth, but he knew what she must have been ordering him to do. Slowly, he raised his hands, and dropped his Pulse Rifle. Forcefully, the woman kicked him in the spine, knocking him forward and into the side of the machine-shop. She immediately grabbed the Pulse Rifle from off the ground and tore the M-4A4 handgun holstered on his belt. Achingly, Mitchell picked himself up off the dirt ground but remained on his knees, hands still up in the air. In the distance, he saw Marcus Brown in a similar predicament. Grudgingly, Mitchell guessed, Brown forfeited his weapons. Out of sight, the sound of gunfire had ceased. He could only guess what happened.

Suddenly, the Russian woman barked at him again, this time in an even more aggressive tone. She motioned him to get up and move. Reluctantly, Mitchell did so. Agitated, the woman snatched the headset from off his face. Then, he turned the corner and found a Russian soldier approaching him. Forcibly, the Russian grabbed him by the arm, twisted it behind his back, and led him towards where he came. Off to the left, Marcus Brown was being led out of the housing residence at gunpoint; he had his hands above his head and wore a terrible expression on his face. Having reached the building the Russians were firing from, the mining headquarters as it turned out, the Russian woman suddenly struck the back of Mitchell's left knee with the butt of her rifle. This prompted a groan from Mitchell followed by a sharp, stinging pain that shot up his leg and spine; as a result, he fell onto his knees. As Mitchell looked back up, thankfully, he saw Foster and Parker being brought to the headquarters too; both were alive. The Russian woman ordered the men to line them up next to Mitchell where they remained on their knees.

Mitchell knew that Kim and Reade were watching this. Thankfully, Kim had kept his finger off the trigger. If he had fired at any time, they would have to go on the run, making it even harder for them to help him. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, Mitchell shook his head. It was unlikely that Kim or Reade would see the motion, but he had to try. A million thoughts and ideas were racing through Mitchell's brain, none of them were particularly good. Slowly, Mitchell calmed down; he forced himself to think rationality, logically. Then, Mitchell looked at the group of Russians, or Imperials he should say. The woman was clearly in charge. She had that air about her, and the way she talked to the other men made it even more obvious. They stood in a circle, probably discussing what to do with them.

He glanced over at Derrick Parker, who had been shot in the right shoulder, and whispered, "You okay?"

Parker merely moaned a confirmation. He could barely remain upright, let alone fight or run. Mitchell cautioned a glance to his left, and took a look at the wound. It looked superficial, merely a flesh wound; nevertheless, it was bleeding freely.

Reluctantly, Mitchell asked in a whispered voice, "Parker, do you understand what they're saying?"

Parker nodded again, but before he could open his mouth, the Russian woman stormed up to Mitchell. With military precision, she shoved the barrel of her RPK-217 assault rifle in his face, and glared at him.

Then, with a forceful tone, she barked in Russian, "*Amerikanskij?*"

Mitchell wasn't sure how he should answer. He was an American, but on an Imperial world. That act alone could, and probably would, be considered an act of war. Even though the United America's has no real desire to go to war with the Three World Empire, the thought of total annihilation has been floating around the media for a while.

Reluctantly, he nodded.

She scowled, then with lightning speed struck Mitchell's left temple with the dark-oak butt of her rifle. The strike knocked Mitchell onto his hands and knees. Stars flashed into existence and his vision instantly blurred; this was quickly followed by the slow, growing pain. In the cool night air, he could feel blood trickling down the side of his head and cheek. She turned around and barked another order in Russian. Then suddenly, the four other Russians motioned for them to stand up. Mitchell couldn't compel his body to function, prompting one of the Russians to tug his body up. Slowly, the stars clouding his vision disappeared, but he had a hard time focusing. Two men, also armed with RPK-217 assault rifles, trained their barrels on them, while the other two reached behind each man and cuffed their wrists with plasticuffs.

When the Russian behind him was finished with him and Parker, he whispered, "What are they doing?"

Slowly, almost tiredly, Parker answered, "They're taking us hostage."

* * *

Reade and Kim watched in horror when the first crack of gunfire rang out within the valley. The valley, which the mine-site was situated in, tended to resonate and refract soundwaves, creating an echo. Immediately, after the gunshot, both Kim and Reade looked frantically for the location of the noise.

"What the hell is going on down there?" Kim asked while looking down his scope.

"I dunno." Reade replied, through her electrobinoculars.

They were horrified to hear the distinct gunfire of a Pulse Rifle immediately follow. She quickly zoomed in, and frantically searched the mine-site for any signs of combat. Nothing.

Suddenly, Kim called out, "I got 'em. Bearing one-zero-zero, by the entrance of the power plant."

Reade immediately shifted her gaze to those general coordinates. After several seconds of searching, Reade caught the muzzle flash of the Pulse Rifles. Instinctively, she slowly shifted her sights along the direction they were firing and caught another set of muzzle flashes.

"Kim, can ya get a line on the shooters?" She quickly asked.

Kim shifted his rifle towards the muzzle flashes of the shooters. Then, with a sigh, "Can't get a clear shot, Captain."

Reade cursed under her breath. She needed to think, fast. Finally, the only thing that she could come up with, "Kim. Uproot and move southward down the edge of the ridge 'til you can getta line on these shooters." Before Kim could ask the next logical question, "I'll meet ya there."

He nodded, then snapped the bipod at the end of the long barrel up, and rolled onto his feet. With a quiet speed, Kim disappeared into the shadowy jungle depths. Achingly, Reade slowly picked herself up, keeping her weight off her left ankle. Her footing was unsure, and her balance was a little off. After a few wobbly hops, she managed to steady herself. Using the trees as support, she limped forward, in the direction Kim had run in. She moved down along the ridge as fast as her mangled ankle would let her. Off in the distance, the clatter of gunfire continued unabated. Unusually, she hadn't heard the distinctive pounding of Kim's sniper rifle. Then, just as suddenly as it all started, the gunfire ceased.

Just then, after several minutes of hobbling through the dense foliage, she found Kim in the prone position, sniper rifle ready to fire. She collapsed next to him with a thud, and took out her electrobinoculars.

"What happened?" She asked.

Kim shook his head, "No matter where I go, I can't get a line around the cooling towers." He explained, "This was the best spot."

She nodded. Then she peered down the valley, scanning the mine-site. She immediately saw Marcus Brown, hands above his head, moving out from the residential area; a man, an Imperial, holding an assault rifle, followed him. The Imperial wore a jet-black flak-jacket, and a standard urban-warfare combat uniform; in his hands was Brown's auto-shotgun. She scanned the rest of the mine-site. Parker, apparently shot in the right shoulder, and Foster were being led by two Imperials, while another headed in the opposite direction. Then, out the opposite side, Mitchell came around the corner, followed by a tall, toned woman. The woman, wearing the same standard Imperial equipment, held an RPK-217 assault rifle; she noticed her long, dark-red hair almost looked black in the night sky.

With a heightened interest, Reade watched. She winched when she saw Mitchell struck on the back of his knee. Kim, meanwhile, remained in a state of relaxed fury. They watched as they lined them up on their knees.

"She's the commander." Reade informed.

Kim looked at her, "How can you tell?"

Reade thought about it, "The way she talks to the others. Her swagger."

"So, what are we going to do about them?" Kim asked.

Reade didn't answer. She didn't have one. With quiet intensity, she watched the five Imperial talk in a circle. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the slightest of movement from Mitchell. He shook his head.

Confused, she replied in a whisper, "What the hell?"

"What?" Kim inquired.

Just then, the woman approached Mitchell and shoved her assault rifle into his face. This caused Kim to tense for a moment. Suddenly, the woman struck Mitchell on

the left temple with the butt of her assault rifle. Immediately, Kim went into action, ready to fire.

Suddenly, Reade grabbed Kim's shoulder, "No! Stop."

"What are doing, Captain?" Kim frustratingly questioned in a whispered tone, "They're going to execute them!"

"No, Mitchell wants us to lay low." Reade answered.

"What?" Kim, in a confused voice, asked, "When?"

"Just now." Reade answered, "He shook his head. He doesn't want us to give up our position."

Kim stared at her with a sharp glare, "You don't know that was intended for us."

She gave him an equally sharp stare, "It does no good to fire." She explained, "You can't get them all. And you'll only put them in greater danger if you do."

Kim relaxed, then nodded.

"If we're out here, we can get them out." Reade reassured.

Then, Reade stared down at them again. Their hands were bound behind them and they were being led into the mine.

"They're movin' out." Reade informed.

Kim, once again, snapped the bipod on his rifle shut, then helped Reade up onto her feet. Her mangled ankle was killing her, throbbing with insistent pain. Unsteady, but she leaned up against a nearby tree.

"Scout ahead and see if you can find a place to cover them." Reade ordered.

"Got it, Captain."

Then, just as quickly, Kim made his way up the side of the mountain, working his way effortlessly through the dense plant life. Reade sighed, and closed her eyes for a moment. This mission just wasn't turning out the way they had planned. Then, slowly, she made her way up the side of the mountain, using the trees around her to steady herself, and to pull herself upward.

* * *

The Russian woman led the way towards the open-pit mine. Mitchell, followed by Foster, Brown, then Parker, who was falling behind because of his gunshot wound; four heavily armed Imperials trailed them. Their weapons and equipment, including their headsets, were confiscated by the Imperials. Having made their way through the maze of buildings, they arrived at the upper ledge of the open-pit mine. Because it was still dark, the pit itself looked like a deep shadowy abyss with no conceivable bottom. Mitchell, however, knew better.

The Russian woman barked an order, then took out a flashlight; the other four did the same. Slowly, they made their way down the dirt road of the mine; the road itself was wide enough to fit two massive hauler trucks. Mitchell looked down at his feet. Although visibility was reasonably poor, he could still manage to see footprints and tracks in the dirt. Several dozen human footprints led down into the pit, but none were coming up. There was another set of curious tracks; several sets of huge, four-toed, clawed tracks leading up and down the mine beside a three-toed variety. Mitchell immediately had an idea of what left those tracks, but kept it to himself.

Just then, one of the Russian soldiers shoved Derrick Parker forward. In his weakened condition, Parker stumbled and fell forward. Because his hands were tied behind his back, he was unable to brace for impact. Parker, a heavily build, muscular man, slammed into the dirty ground with a thud, kicking up dust and debris. Bled of energy, Parker remained on the ground.

"Hey!" Mitchell confronted.

With an expression of rage, the Russian soldier stepped toward Mitchell. Almost face-to-face, the Russian screamed something in his native dialect. His breath, stale from several days of not brushing his teeth, washed over him. Then, with a powerful lunge forward, Mitchell smashed his forehead into the nose of the Russian with a deafening crack. Mitchell recovered quickly, and was greeted with the sight of a downed Russian, his nose overflowing with blood.

Mitchell confessed a smile.

Then, he instantly felt the air leave his lungs. Winded, Mitchell fell to his knees. Slowly, almost a creeping sensation, pain spread throughout his body. The Russian woman, apparently, had forcefully kicked him in the gut. She stood over him with her assault rifle drawn. Mitchell couldn't provide any protest. Suddenly, air rushed back into his lungs, prompting him to hack and cough uncontrollably for several seconds.

She cursed something in Russian, then turned and started down the mine again. Then, moments later, another Russian soldier picked Mitchell up off the dirt road, while another soldier picked the other one up. Being pushed forward, Foster and Brown moved past Mitchell. Slowly, Mitchell started walked. Derrick Parker was right behind him.

Parker leaned forward, and whispered, "Thanks."

Mitchell, not wanting to draw any more attention onto them, simply nodded.

Now, deep in the pit, the only light source came from the flashlights the Imperials had brought with them. Mitchell couldn't see past a few feet in front of him. Several times while walking the rough, dirt road, he almost tripped over a loose rock. After almost half an hour of hiking down the slopes of the pit, almost at the bottom, they reached a small column of giant hauler trucks, four in total. Each truck stood twelve metres tall and had a full load of boulder-sized rocks in the back. Mitchell was taken completely aback by the sheer size of the machines.

With a tough tone, the Russian woman pointed to the truck, and shouted an order.

Immediately, two Russian soldiers approached the first of the towering trucks. Mitchell watched as they climbed the ladder, then crawled up the stairs to get to the cabin. Before the first Russian could open the passenger-side door, Mitchell looked over his left shoulder. Derrick Parker stood right behind him.

Then, the Russian shouted something in an excited voice. Suddenly, the Russian woman also grew eager.

Mitchell leaned back, and whispered, "What happened?"

Parker, still in a weakened condition, whispered back, "They found someone."

A survivor? Mitchell thought. He turned his attention back towards the Russians. The two Russians carried a petite girl from out of the passenger-side door, and eased her down towards the dirt ground.

Immediately, the other Russians, not including the woman, quickly checked the other trucks. Mitchell, on the other hand, watched as the Russian woman approached and held the young girl in her arms. The survivor, a girl not much older than twenty, was shaking uncontrollably, not from cold, but from fear; she was covered in filth, days

without bathing, and had clearly been crying recently. Mitchell couldn't help but feel terribly sorry for the young girl.

Quietly, the Imperial woman and the young girl talked, speaking in their native dialect of Russian. The young Russian girl's hands continued to tremble, while her voice seemed too quiver.

Mitchell leaned back again, "Can you hear what they're saying?"

Parker closed his eyes, and leaned forward. Finally, he responded, "I think she said that they were attacked..." Parker started, "Something about invisible men..." Parker paused again, waiting for the conversation to continue, then, with a sigh, "I can't make out anything else."

"No. That's good, Parker."

"Wait." Parker replied, "She just asked if there were any more settlements around the mine."

Mitchell, curious now, waited for the reply.

"The girl mentioned something about a drill." Parker translated, then shook his head, "I don't know."

"That's good work, Parker." Mitchell reassured.

Reade finally made it up the side of the mountain to the next ridge. There, Kim had already set up a sniper post, and kept his eyes through his scope at all times. Clumsily, Reade collapsed onto the jungle floor next to Kim. She was exhausted, and her ankle was throbbing with waves of pain. She rubbed her ankle, a tightly bandaged tangle, to ease her pain.

She turned to Kim, "Sit rep."

Kim, not taking his eyes off the scope, whispered, "They've been down in the mine for thirty minutes now."

"Anythin' else?"

Kim shook his head, "No. Nothing yet." Then, with a worried tone, "Do you think they've been executed?"

Reade immediately replied, "No. Makes no sense." She replied, "They would have just shot 'em up here."

Kim, pleased enough with the answer, returned to his scope. Then he replied, "Well, we better think of something soon. Daylight's coming in about three hours."

Having checked the three other hauler trucks and finding only one survivor, they continued down the open-pit mine. One of the Russian soldiers wrapped a warm blanket around the young survivor, while the others trained their assault rifles at Mitchell and his team. The Russian woman, as usual, led the way down. After five more minutes of walking, they reached the bottom. There, standing on five metre tall tank-like treads, and standing over twenty metres tall, a giant rock chewer stood. These were the machines that crushed, and excavated the rock at the bottom of the mine. Suddenly, wafting through the air, a dreadful stench struck them. Metres away, a more horrifying image struck Mitchell.

The pile of human cadavers, most completely mutilated, stood over three metres tall; a swarm of buzzing insects surrounded the pile. A majority were severed limbs, either arms or legs, stacked on top of each other. Others that Mitchell could see were bodies that were decapitated, with a gaping cavern where their spine ought to be. More horrific, some bodies were even skinned. The dusty ground beneath them, including under their boots, were sticky with dried blood.

The sight almost made Mitchell vomit.

Likewise, Foster, Parker and Brown felt it too. Even the Russians were petrified. Surprisingly, the petite girl, the survivor, didn't react; she probably had gone through so much her brain couldn't interpret any more.

Suddenly, with jerks and jolts, the Russian woman, wide-eyed from shock, scanned the surround area with her flashlight, keeping her assault rifle ready for an attack. The beam of light that emanated from the flashlight jerkily illuminated the massive base of the open-pit mine. Suddenly, out of the corner of Mitchell's eyes, he saw something unusual. The Russian woman had apparently picked up on it as well, because she immediately returned the beam of light back onto the object.

It was a blood soaked pike, a metre and a half long wooden stick with a sharpened end. On top bore the decapitated head of one of the miners. The head, eyes rolled back into his sockets, was covered in blood; his mouth was contorted in a

hideous position, a bluish-black tongue hanging out of the corner of his mouth. Below the head, it was evident that the man's spine was still attached; black dried blood caked all along each vertebrae.

The Russian woman cursed.

The sight was traumatizing. Not even in war had Mitchell, or his team, witnessed something as horrific as this. It was clear that the Imperials hadn't either. Not waiting for anything more, the Russian woman, in a shaky voice, shrieked something in Russian.

Immediately, the young girl and the Russian soldier that accompanied her turned and exited the mine at a hurried pace. Soon, the other three Russian soldiers motioned for Mitchell and his team to do the same. The Russian woman, still obviously petrified, was the last to leave.

It took nearly an hour to exit the dark open-pit mine. Mitchell, and he could only imagine, the rest of his team, were exhausted. As they entered the labyrinth of buildings, Mitchell noticed that the sky wasn't nearly as dark as it had been when they entered.

Morning was coming.

Finally, after crossing the entire length of the mine-site, through the maze of buildings, they were tied onto a series of piping outside of the cafeteria. The Russian soldiers, and the girl, entered the cafeteria, presumably to grab something to eat and possibly a quick nap. One Russian soldier, just out of earshot, remained behind to keep an eye on them. Mitchell watched as he paced, smoking a cigarette.

Finally free, when the Russian soldier was far enough away, he whispered, "You okay, Parker?"

Parker was obviously weak, but he replied, "Fine, Major."

Foster, who sat next to Derrick, asked, "What was that, Major?"

Mitchell was at a loss for words. He watched as the Russian soldier walked towards them, turn on his heels, then started walking away again. Then, he whispered, "I don't know. Something's not adding up." Mitchell answered, then, "Parker, tell me everything that that girl said again."

Parker closed his eyes, either from fatigue or to help him remember, then replied, "She was freaked out of her mind. He mentioned monsters. Something invisible. Blood..." Parker shook his head, "I can't remember all of it."

Mitchell was disappointed, but bit back a quick and harsh response. They were all under a lot of stress and pressure. However, the more Mitchell thought about it, the less this seemed like a simple case of Xenomorphs escaping from an illegal laboratory. In fact, the more he thought about it, it didn't seem like Xenomorphs at all.

Then, Brown leaned forward, "The fuck we gone do about dis, boss?"

He was referring to the hostage situation. Mitchell really didn't have a good way to getting them out of the situation. Before he answered Brown's question, he asked, "Parker, do you remember anything else? Do you know what the Imps are going to do next?"

Parker suddenly snapped out of his daze, "Actually. The girl mentioned something about drilling equipment." He excitedly whispered, "I bet they're going to go out looking for any other survivors."

Mitchell nodded. That seemed logical. As long as the Imperials were busy looking for survivors, they had a chance to survive.

Then, Brown interrupted again, "Boss?"

"Cool it, Marcus." Mitchell ordered, "We'll be fine. They haven't killed us yet."

Marcus Brown leaned back and sighed. Mitchell looked over to his right, and watched the Russian soldier pace back and forth. Minutes later, the doors of the cafeteria swung open, and the Russian soldier entered. The slight, but unmistakable, warmth from inside washed over them.

Just then, Mitchell heard *psst!*

Mitchell snapped his head to his left and looked over by the residential area. Then, out of the darkness, a figure approached. It was Daniel Kim, armed with only a M-44A Pulse Rifle. Dressed in his typical all-black attire, and with a facemask, he looked almost like a ninja. He raced over to the four men and knelt down.

"Alright, let's get you out of here." Kim replied.

"Where's Reade?" Mitchell asked.

Kim motioned with his head over to the far ridge, "She's got us covered with the sniper rifle."

Then, Kim pulled out his combat knife, ready to cut them loose.

Suddenly, "Wait." Mitchell ordered, "Not yet."

Kim stared at Mitchell with a confused expression, "Major, this isn't time for heroics. We're enemies of the Empire."

"Corporal!" Mitchell snapped, "We have more important things right now."

The other three men, although equally confused as Daniel Kim, simply leaned back and listened.

"Kim. We think we know what the Imps are going to do." Mitchell outlined, "If we're right, we're out of harm's way for a little while."

Kim, grudgingly, listened. Then, "What do you want me to do, Major?"

Mitchell, relieved, outlined his plan, "You and Reade are unknowns to the Russians. We think they're going on a scouting mission looking for more survivors." He said, "I want you to track the Russians, see if they're hiding anything elsewhere."

"What about the mine?" Kim asked.

Mitchell shook his head, "It looks clean." Mitchell looked back up at the sky; morning was rapidly approaching, "Look, the suns are coming up. You better get back before they notice you."

Kim nodded, then like a cheetah, dashed across the open stretch of land and into the living quarters. He was silent, barely noticeable if you weren't paying attention. Tired, Mitchell closed his eyes, leaned his head up against the cafeteria wall, and took a much-needed nap.

Hours later, Mitchell was suddenly awoken by a slamming door. Mitchell snapped out of his daze and immediately looked around for any signs of danger. There were none, and the suns were reasonably high in the sky. Mitchell looked to his left and assessed the rest of his team. They looked awful, but were alive. Derrick, in particular, looked weary; his shoulder had stopped bleeding, but he was still weak and exhausted.

After a quick glance at everyone else, Mitchell asked, "What's going on?"

Foster was the one to answer, "They're heading out."

Mitchell recalled the drilling sites, "Okay."

Then, Mitchell glanced over to his right, and stared at the Imperials as they double-checked their gear and set out to leave. Assuming that either Kim or Reade was watching him, Mitchell, ever so slightly, motioned to the Russian woman. After watching the Russians discuss plans and orders, and talking with the young girl, who he'd heard them call Anastasiya, his interests peaked. Then, he watched as two Russians were left to guard them, while Anastasiya led the Russian woman and two others eastward.

Reade was now armed with the XM-105 sniper rifle. She had ordered Kim to rest after his little covert mission down to the mine-site. Since then, she had stared through the sniper's scope for the better part of three hours. She was exhausted, sure, and her ankle was hurting more and more as the painkillers wore off, but she couldn't abandon her team. Just then, she noticed that the Imperials had congregated outside the cafeteria; with them was a civilian she had not seen before.

That must be who they brought out of the mine, she thought.

There was more talk between the Imperials, then they broke up into two different groups. It appeared that two of them would stay behind with her team, while the other three, including the civilian, headed east.

She hated to wake Kim up, after all he was exhausted too, but duty called. She reached over with her right hand and shook him awake, "Kim. Wake up."

Almost immediately, Kim came out of it, "What is it?"

He grabbed a pair of electrobinoculars and gazed down onto the mine-site. She then informed him, "They're movin' out. Those four seem to be heading east."

"What for?"

"I've no idea." She told him, "That's what you're about to find out."

He looked at her, then nodded in confirmation.

She continued, "I'll stay here with the sniper rifle. I want you to ghost them, see where they go, observe. Do not engage." She stressed the last part.

"And if you get into trouble?"

She gave him a smirk, "I'm pretty sure you'll hear me if it comes to that."

Kim smiled, then nodded to the sniper rifle, "Yeah. I guess so." He half turned, then added, "See you soon, Captain."

Then, in only a few seconds, Kim grabbed his M-44A scoped Pulse Rifle, double-checked his M-4A4 handgun, and headed into the thick jungle. Reade, on the other hand, shifted her gaze back through the scope of the sniper rifle.

It took nearly an hour and a half to loop around the mine-site. It took a little bit longer than he had originally thought because he had to go around the water and waste treatment facility that was located three kilometres southwest of the main mining colony. Actually, while traversing around the water and waste treatment facility, Kim came across a dead body of a Russian soldier; the soldier, dead for no longer than two days, had evidently fallen into a wolf-hole, a deep hole with sharpened poles at the bottom. The Russian had fallen into the trap and impaled himself on one of the massive wooden spears; blood had soaked into the wooden spear. Swarms of flies buzzed around the body, while maggots and other insects crawling across his sunken, greying face and body.

Despite the detour, he had managed to track and catch up with the four Russians. He followed them, keeping his distance at a safe seven hundred metres, headed eastward. He had to travel mostly uphill, which made it more tiresome. Instinctively, he had a pretty good idea where they were headed. After traversing three kilometres through the dense, shadowy rainforest, eating up maybe three hours of daylight, they had apparently arrived. The Russians were surveying a seemingly abandoned core-drilling hut. Kim proceeded further south-east where he could climb to higher ground to get a better vantage point. The extra hike took thirty minutes, and by the time he set up, luckily, the Russians were still there.

He peered through the electrobinoculars, "What the fuck?"

As he spied down onto the small drilling shack, he immediately noticed something terribly wrong. On the south-facing wall, the plywood was smeared with

dried, dark-red blood. Outside, pools of dried blood spotted the dirt terrain. Kim watched as the Russians entered the small shack; the civilian girl stayed outside, obviously troubled and traumatized by the events that had transpired. Kim peered through the small doorway that led into the shack. Although he had a limited view, he could see obvious signs of a slaughter. Blood soaked through the plywood-paneled floor, and he swore he saw a body inside. After a moment, it was later confirmed; one of the Russians shifted a dead body inside. As horrible as it was, Kim could clearly see that the body had been partially skinned; a large patch from a hefty man's back and chest had been torn apart, probably while he was still alive.

"Holy shit." Kim whispered to himself.

Just then, one of the Russian soldiers, a gruffly-looking short-haired blond man, came storming out of the entrance. Suddenly, the Russian soldier vomited off to the side of the doorway. He was followed by the other two hard-looking Imperials, then by the woman. She pointed and said something, then one of the Russians went around the shack. Suddenly, all of them, including the civilian girl, turned their heads and followed him behind the shack.

"Damn it." Kim cursed as the Russians went out of sight.

He watched patiently for a few minutes, then the Russian woman came out from behind the corner. The civilian girl, then the three Russians, followed her. The Russian soldiers were dragging something large, the size of a man, and reddish-black in colouration. From his vantage point he could see what it was. So, it was confirmed. After a few moments, Kim realized that they were heading back towards the mining colony. Just then, he looked at his watch. It was going to be dark in a few hours.

Daytime only lasts half as long as on Earth, Kim remembered.

Immediately, Kim uprooted himself from off the damp forest floor, and headed back towards the mining colony as well.

About one-kilometre northeast of the core-drilling shack, Forgotten Darkness, the clan-leader for the Kautya tribe, stared down into the valley. He was crouched atop one of the trees, cloaked. He watched intently, as the four warm bodies of the *Soft Meat* searched their most recent slaughter. Minutes later, he watched as they left and headed back to the large colony. He looked down onto his left forearm and deactivated the cloaking field that refracted and bent light, making him almost invisible. Now, he was

completely visible. On Forgotten Darkness' right shoulder was the black skull of an Alien Queen; he had killed the great beast when he was much younger. That act had granted him much respect and prestige amongst his people.

All around him, on other adjacent trees, the other members of the Kautya tribe deactivated their cloaking fields. The Kautya tribe was considered a "bad blood" tribe amongst the more numerous and far-reaching Yautja tribes. The Kautya, in fact, were a separate race from the Yautja. Kautya tended to be much larger and more muscular than their Yautja counterparts; they also had darker colouration on their hides, and their mandibles tended to be far larger and more pronounced. Culturally, they were also quite distinct. Where the Yautja lived for the hunt, the Kautya thrived in the kill. Because of this, the Yautja dubbed them murders, or "bad blood". Also, represented in their technology, the Kautya used edged weapons rather than energy-based weaponry; the Kautya enjoyed the feel of blood gush between their clawed fingers. The only technology they used was their bio-masks and the cloaking field generator.

Forgotten Darkness looked around at the dense foliage. The other Kautya also had parts of the Alien creature attached to their bodies. One had the elongated skull of a *Hard Meat* wrapped around his left forearm as a shield; another wore the skull on his chest. Another had a bandoleer of *Soft Meat* skulls tied diagonally across his massive, hulking chest. The Kautya enjoyed showing off their trophies and kills.

Then, off in the distance, Forgotten Darkness caught something off in the distance. The warm body of a *Soft Meat* started moving through the jungle, paralleling the four warm bodies surveying the slaughter. The warm body seemed to be keeping his distance. Forgotten Darkness thought this was curious. He watched the glowing white-red-orange body silently traverse the traitorous terrain expertly.

Forgotten Darkness quickly snapped his head to his right, the braided black-and-red dreadlocks on his swung forward with the motion, and growled at one of the younger, less experienced Kautya. This Kautya, smaller than Forgotten Darkness, didn't have any trophies hanging from his body; battle or kills didn't mar his skin. Baring only a black bio-mask, the young Kautya cloaked himself, then leapt off the twisted branch he crouched on. A shimmer in the daylight suns, he disappeared into the rainforest. Forgotten Darkness watched as the young Kautya tracked the single warm body.

Then, Forgotten Darkness peered below. Underneath him was a legion of the reddish-black exoskeleton Alien creatures, the *Hard Meats*, which they've tamed and trained; the Kautya, unlike the Yautja, use the *Hard Meats* to hunt and kill prey. The Yautja had banned the use of the *Hard Meats* for the purposes of hunting; the Kautya

ignored the rule. Below, a hulking tower of a Kautya held the reins of five of the serpent-like, sickle-tusked creatures. Forgotten Darkness pointed towards the mining colony, and with a great bellow, roared a call for slaughter. The roar, deep and full of bass, echoed within the valley.

At that moment, Mitchell, still tied to the piping outside the cafeteria, watched the two Russian soldiers. Just then, a rumble of a roar resonated within the valley. The roar was definitely nothing like Mitchell had ever heard before. Whatever the creature that made it was, Mitchell was pretty sure that it was huge, and angry.

He looked at the other three men. They turned to him with worried expressions worn on their faces. To reassure them, "It'll be fine, guys."

Despite his words, the three men turned towards the east, towards the direction of the roar, and stared blankly. Mitchell noticed even the Russians turned to look in the direction of the sudden roar.

It'll be fine, Mitchell told himself.

By the time the Russians had finally come back from their excursion into the jungle, there wasn't much daylight left. Mitchell watched as a disgruntled Russian woman walked towards the cafeteria, and without saying a word, swung the door open and entered; the young girl, Anastasiya, followed quickly. For several moments Mitchell saw no sign of the other three. Suddenly, his mind was a flurry of emotions and thoughts.

Had they been killed? Mitchell thought, *Was that the roar we heard?*

Just then, the Russian woman stormed out of the cafeteria, a bottle of cheap vodka in her hand. She took a quick slug, then passed it to the other two Russian soldiers whom been watching them. They too took a quick slug of the clear alcoholic beverage; the last one finished off the bottle, then tossed the bottle. The Russian woman then walked them towards the main offices, the headquarters, of the mining colony.

Quickly, Mitchell asked, "Parker! Can you hear what their saying?"

Derrick Parker leaned forward, listened intently for several seconds, then shook his head, "Sorry, Major."

Major Scott Mitchell shook his head, "Don't worry about it, Parker."

He watched as the Russians heatedly talked to one another. It was obvious that the Russian woman was furious about something, probably something they found while out in the jungle. Just then, Mitchell looked over to his right and saw the three Russians coming out from the dense jungle.

They weren't dead, Mitchell thought.

Then he noticed something. They were dragging something behind them. It was reddish-black, and about the size of a full-grown man. Whatever it was, it must have been heavy, since it took three rather strong Russian soldiers to haul it out of the jungle. Then, out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the Russian woman rapidly approach him. This shocked him into attention. For most of the duration of his capture the Russian woman had tried to ignore them.

Almost as if it were timed that way, the three Russian soldiers dragged whatever it was they were dragging, and dropped it in front of him just as the Russian woman arrived. His attention was on the Russian woman, who, although quite beautiful, snarled a hideous expression. She crouched down in front of Mitchell, slowly, steadily. He never took his eyes off hers. Then, when they were nearly eye-level, he glanced, only for a moment, at the thing that was dragged out of the forest. In an instant, he knew what it was. His gaze returned onto hers.

Then, with a heavy accent, she spoke, "You know what dis is?"

So she does know English, Mitchell thought. Then, staring deep into her blue eyes, he nodded, "I know what that is."

Mitchell glanced at the creature again. It was the reddish-black exoskeleton of a Xenomorph warrior. There was something unusual about the creature, but he just couldn't put his finger on it. The serpent-like creature seemed to have died in combat; three deep claw gouges scarred its face, and its right arm seemed to have been snapped off just below the elbow. Its elongated cranium was cracked in half, and the protruding ribcage was nearly broken outward. The vertebrae running along its back and its tail seemed intact, while the four tubules protruding from them was snapped off. Molecular acidic blood, yellow and hard, had oozed and dried atop its exoskeleton. Interestingly, there seemed to be a metal collar around its neck.

In a harsh tone, she replied, "You came here looking for dis?"

Mitchell shook his head, "No."

She snarled, "Why you here?"

Mitchell took in a deep breath, "To help."

She obviously wasn't buying it; she repeated the question in a sterner voice, "Why you here?"

Mitchell repeated his answer, "We came here to help."

She reached behind her back, and pulled out a Russian-made handgun. She cocked the weapon, then shoved into his face, "You came here for that, *da*?"

"No!" Mitchell sternly said.

She stared at him for a few seconds; her glare was as hard as concrete. Then, she eased off her weapon, and shoved it into the front of her pants. Then, she reached into her left boot, and pulled out a combat knife. She held it up to him, "You will tell me everything you know, *da*?"

Mitchell thought for a few moments. Information about the Xenomorph was classified above top secret in the United Americas. Providing information about them, especially to enemies of the state, would be considered treason. On the other hand, if there was no such laboratory, or if the Xenomorphs now roamed the jungle, then the Russians would need to know what they were up against if they all were to survive.

Mitchell sighed, "I will help you."

Mitchell could almost sense the confusion and revulsion from his teammates, but they couldn't see the bigger picture. Then, with a forceful grasp, the Russian woman shoved Mitchell forward. Then, with a flick of the wrist, she cut the plasticuffs that had bound him to the pipe. For a moment, he too felt confusion. Unconsciously, he rubbed his wrists; they were sore after hours being bound. Achingly, he picked himself up off the dusty ground with a moan.

He stood eye-to-eye with the Russian woman, who glared right back at him. He held out his hand, "Major Scott Mitchell, United American Special Forces."

Her demeanour softened, only slightly, then she replied with a heavy Russian accent, "Colonel Natalya Chernova."

A colonel? Mitchell thought.

Behind him, the other Russian soldiers were cutting his team free. Foster and Brown, elated with the recent turn of events, immediately stood, glad they could after spending untold hours sitting cross-legged in the dirt. Parker, because of his injury, couldn't even if he wanted to.

"Colonel, my colleague here needs medical attention." Mitchell demanded.

She stared at Parker, ordered something in Russian, then turned back to Mitchell, "Sergeant Dmitri Osipov will help your friend."

Mitchell nodded in thanks, then added, "And we need food and water."

She nodded, "Of course." Then, with a flick of the head, she motioned towards the cafeteria.

Reade watched as the Imperial woman cut the plasticuffs that bound Major Scott Mitchell with her combat knife. Mitchell himself seemed surprised; she was surprised.

What the hell? She thought.

Then, one-by-one, the other three were cut loose too. Captain Tonya Reade had no idea what to think. From her vantage point, it appeared as if the Imperials had found the corpse of a Xenomorph, although a rather mangled one, and dragged it out of the jungle.

Suddenly, Corporal Kim appeared behind her through the shrubbery. He startled her, "Damn it, Kim!" She forcefully whispered.

Kim gave her an apologetic look, "Sorry, Captain."

Reade sighed, then turned to stare down the scope. Then, Kim lay down next to her and pulled out a pair of electrobinoculars.

"What happened while I was away?" Kim asked.

"The Major and his team have been cut loose." Reade informed.

"What?" He responded with a puzzled tone.

Then, Reade watched as Mitchell, Foster and Brown walked into the cafeteria; the Imperial soldiers followed them. Interestingly, Parker was brought to the mining

headquarters; he was escorted by only one of the Imperial soldiers. Nothing seemed hostile, yet, but something was definitely weird about the situation.

She turned and looked at Kim, "Okay. You're goin' to tell me everythin' you found out there."

Tiredly, Mitchell, Foster and Brown walked over to the entrance of the cafeteria; four Russians followed them. Mitchell looked behind him. Sergeant Dmitri Osipov, headed to the headquarters, was escorting Parker. He presumed that inside the headquarters was a medical kit or something. Mitchell flung the door open. The first sight to greet him was the young girl Anastasiya. She glanced up at him for a moment, then immediately shied away. He didn't take it personal, and proceeded to the far left wall. On the stainless-steel table he saw several opened cans; baked beans. Mitchell scooped himself a bowl-full, then proceeded to sit down at the nearest table. The stainless-steel seat felt cold on his bottom. The Russian woman, Colonel Natalya Chernova, beckoned the young girl over, then sat down across from him.

Just as Mitchell was about to scoop a spoonful of baked beans into his mouth, Colonel Natalya Chernova asked, "Why are you here? You are trespassing on Imperial-controlled world."

Mitchell looked up at her, and scooped the much-needed food into his mouth; he savoured the flavour of the baked beans for a moment, then answered, "We heard a distress signal coming from the mining colony. We came here to see if they could use our help."

The Colonel merely stared at him with a blank expression, considering the story. Then, she asked, "And the creature?"

Mitchell stopped in mid-air, then dove in for another mouthful. He quickly decided on what to reveal and what to keep to himself; it was a delicate balance. Too much might be treasonous; not enough might get them all killed. Then, he replied, "That thing out there is a Xenomorph." The Colonel looked very confused, as if she never heard the term, so Mitchell clarified, "An alien."

"We hear of them." Colonel Natalya Chernova replied, "Tell me about them."

Mitchell nodded, then Foster and Brown took up seats next to him. He looked back at the Colonel, "They're a hive-species, eusocial like ants or bees." Mitchell started,

"They also have a central leader, a Queen, who lays eggs and controls the rest of the hive."

Then, one of the Russian soldiers replied in his native dialect. Mitchell noticed that the three other soldiers sat behind Colonel Chernova, on the other table in fact, while Anastasiya sat furthest away. Then, Colonel Natalya Chernova translated, "Dangerous?"

Mitchell looked at the soldier who originally asked, "Yes."

"How?" She quickly asked.

"They're fast... really fast." Mitchell started, "They can climb on walls, blend into shadows... and if they wanted to, they can tear a man in half." Then he paused, "But they usually don't."

Then, the same Russian soldier barked something else in Russian. Colonel Natalya Chernova responded, then turned to Mitchell, "Captain Vlad Ushakov wants to know why."

Mitchell looked at Captain Vlad Ushakov with a hard glance, "Because they use us to breed."

The comment obviously troubled the nearly thirty-year old Russian captain. However, it was the Colonel to follow up, "How?"

"They have small creatures," Mitchell mimicked it with his hands, "that attach to a man's face, and they lay an egg in our body. The creature gestates inside us," Pointing to his chest, "then bursts out."

Colonel Natalya Chernova leaned back into her stainless-steel chair. She wrapped her hand around her mouth in shock. Mitchell, taking the moment, finished the rest of his baked beans.

Then, she continued, "How many?"

Mitchell shook his head, "I don't know. Depends on the hive."

Obviously the Colonel was contemplating the information she had just heard from him. Mitchell, however, knew he was holding back information; important information. He didn't feel they needed to know that the Xenomorph they found out there wasn't like anything he had seen before; the strange colouring, a sickle-tusk

protruding out from its jaws, and that metal collar around its neck. Mitchell didn't know what it all meant, and that worried him.

Then, after a few seconds, the Colonel stood up and started to walk out of the cafeteria. Beside her, the three other Russian soldiers followed, while Anastasiya stayed behind. Just before the Colonel could exit the building, Mitchell yelled, "Colonel!" She immediately turned around, "We have experience with these creatures. We're glad to help, but we'll need our guns."

Immediately, Captain Vlad Ushakov protested in Russian. The Colonel stopped his protest with her raised hand, then replied, "We will see."

Colonel Natalya Chernova stormed out of the cafeteria, absolutely furious; she slammed the two metal doors against the wall. She walked forward, stopping just outside the double doors; then, with her hands on her hips, she looked down at the hideous black creature. The eyeless creature, somehow, seemed to be taunting her. She snarled back with a vicious expression. Then, with a surge of rage, she kicked the creature in the ribcage. The exoskeleton cracked and shattered under the force of the assault. Luckily, the carcass was a mere husk, and any of the acidic blood that would have pumped through its veins had dried or bled out.

Suddenly, Captain Vlad Ushakov stormed up to her, then, in a harsh Russian tone, "You cannot work with these Americans!"

She turned to glare at him, then with a cold manner, replied, "What choice do we have? We know these creatures as well as they do!"

He pointed at the Americans inside the cafeteria, "They haven't told us everything they know!" Captain Vlad Ushakov countered, "It would be treason for them!"

"As it would be for us!" Colonel Natalya Chernova snapped back.

The Captain stared at her, and sternly replied, "I don't trust them, and either should you."

The atmosphere around the small Russian group was tense. Then, breaking the silence, one of the other Russian soldiers put forth his thoughts, "What about their story? It doesn't make sense."

With that, Captain Vlad Ushakov stared at the Colonel, waiting for an answer. She considered the story while the American had told it to her. She answered, "It is possible."

Captain Vlad Ushakov cursed, then retorted, "They are here to collect the creature for their weapons research!"

Eight years ago, a Weyland-Yutani corporate research laboratory vessel, dubbed the *Neptune*, sailing off the coast of Japan and Russia experienced an infestation of the Alien creatures. The situation was a political disaster, leading to events that almost brought the Three World Empire and the United Americas to war. Later, the United Nations had proclaimed that research into the Alien beings was illegal.

She, as well as everyone else, knew better than to believe governments and corporations would follow, "Maybe."

Then, the Russian soldier added, "Even if they are not, which I don't believe, if we choose to work with the Americans, it would mean giving them back their guns."

Colonel Natalya Chernova seriously considered the statement; giving potential enemies of the state their guns could land them in a gulag somewhere. She looked at Lieutenant Vladimir Tikhonov, then replied, "We have to consider it."

This prompted an agitated expression from Captain Vlad Ushakov. He faced away from her, and shook his head side-to-side persistently.

She looked over to Private Aleksandr Belyakov, and quipped, "Anything from the helicopter?"

The nineteen-year-old man, a boy really, shook his head, "All communications are cut off."

"Did you check the one in the headquarters?" She asked.

"Smashed."

She cursed, then looked down at the creature, "Okay. New plan."

Back in the cafeteria, Mitchell finished the rest of his baked beans; as simple as it was, it was the best meal Mitchell had ever eaten. Foster and Brown likewise finished their respective bowls of beans, and were quietly talking amongst themselves. Mitchell

looked over to the young girl, Anastasiya, then frowned. She looked to be in a constant state of terror; mortified and traumatized by her recent experiences. He had seen this on many worlds, to many people.

Softly, Mitchell reached out and said, "Hey."

The young girl, snapping out of her daytime daze, turned to look at him. She wore an expression of both anxiety and confusion. That wasn't unusual for a person who had gone through as much trauma as her. After several moments, she didn't respond to his greeting.

Then, Mitchell added, "Your name is Anastasiya, right?"

She refused to move at first, then, cautiously, she nodded her head.

Good, a reaction; that means she's at least attentive. He then pointed to the baked beans, "Do you want anything to eat?"

She shook her head.

Mitchell, unsure about what to say, said the first thing to come to mind, "Can you tell me what happened here?"

After several seconds, Mitchell realized she probably didn't understand what he was saying. He sighed and sank in his chair.

Then, she shakily replied in a thick Russian accent, "Monsters."

Mitchell, surprised that she understood English, snapped into attention, "Monsters? Like the one out there?" He pointed towards the door.

She nodded.

Mitchell turned to Foster and Brown, who were both listening on the conversation intently. They looked at him; then Brown asked in a burly voice, "Infestation?"

Mitchell nodded, "Looks like it."

Then, Anastasiya added, "There were also invisible men."

Invisible men? Mitchell thought; he pondered this for a moment, then replied, "Like ghosts?"

She shook her head.

Mitchell sat back into his stainless-steel chair. The situation here was getting more and more bizarre.

Major Mitchell led his team out of the cafeteria, followed by Anastasiya, after they had finished eaten. Outside, Colonel Natalya Chernova and her soldiers were standing in a circle, talking amongst themselves in Russian. When they exited, the Russians turned and looked at them with harsh expressions. Then, past them, Mitchell could see Derrick Parker being escorted by one of the Russian soldiers, Sergeant Dmitri Osipov. Colonel Natalya Chernova spoke with her sergeant, then motioned them both into the cafeteria.

Mitchell nodded to Parker.

Then, Mitchell spoke, "Colonel. Have you made your decision?"

She turned to face him, then with a hard expression, "You will help us?"

Mitchell nodded.

"Good." She replied, "Our plan is to set up defences around this place."

"First, I suggest that we concentrate on a much smaller area." Mitchell recommended, "The mine is far too big for only nine of us to cover. If we focus on a smaller area, we have a shot at defending ourselves."

She nodded, "*Da*."

"And second, I think we have to get off-world as fast as possible." Mitchell completed.

Colonel Natalya Chernova simply stared at Mitchell, "Communications are out."

Mitchell motioned to the headquarters, "The radio equipment?"

She shook her head.

Mitchell then sighed. Though contemplated his thought for several seconds, then decided, "I can get air-support here in a few hours."

Colonel Natalya Chernova glared at her, "You have ship here?"

Mitchell looked back at his team; they shrugged. Then he looked back at her, "Just outside the system."

The Colonel let out a long, steady breath, then answered, "Call them."

Just before Colonel Natalya Chernova could turn around and walk away, Mitchell inquired, "And... Colonel, what about our guns?"

She let out another long and tired breath, obviously contemplating the request quickly through her mind, then promptly responded, "You will get back your guns." She informed, then added, "But you will be under constant supervision by one of my men."

Mitchell nodded, "Okay."

Night descended quickly on this world. After an exhausting day, both the Americans and the Imperials fell asleep; they decided to sleep together in a single room, the cafeteria hall. The cafeteria was the largest enclosed room they had available to them, and while they didn't trust each other, it afforded them the opportunity to keep an eye on one another. Mitchell was always a light sleeper; as a soldier, you really had to be. A soldier never knew when danger was going to creep up on you; a soldier always had to be alert to his surroundings, even while asleep.

Hours passed without incident. Suddenly, Mitchell was violently awakened by a high-pitched scream, followed shortly by a quick burst from an assault rifle. Immediately, Mitchell rose from off the stainless-steel table he was sleeping on; his eyes darted back-and-forth, quickly assessing his environment, gauging danger. Mitchell didn't see anything immediately threatening. Similarly, the others were doing the same; most, in fact, had already grabbed their weapons and were scouting the shadowy room. Instinctively, Mitchell grabbed his Pulse Rifle, and walked over to Anastasiya's position, providing her any protection she might need; Mitchell figured the young girl had already gone through enough, he'll take some of the blows for her if it ever came to that.

Then, from across the cafeteria, Colonel Natalya Chernova screamed in English, "Who was it?"

Mitchell's heart was racing like a freight train. Mitchell quickly did a head count of his people; after a moment of terror, he discovered that everyone was accounted for. Mitchell announced, "All my men are here!"

Colonel Natalya Chernova looked around the cafeteria, her assault rifle at her hip. However, it was the young Russian private that shouted in Russian, "*Kapitan! Kapitan!*"

The private was right; it was the Russian Captain. Colonel Natalya Chernova suddenly turned pale, cursed something in Russian, then stormed out of the cafeteria. Mitchell was right behind her. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Foster and Marcus moving to follow. Mitchell caught a look from Anastasiya; she had that petrified look on her face again.

Immediately, Mitchell stopped them; he pointed to the young girl, "Her."

Reluctantly, they stopped mid-stride, and nodded in compliance. Mitchell followed the Russian Colonel out of the cafeteria. She was pacing back and forth, fury and rage burning from her soul. Mitchell looked down at his feet and saw a handful of shell casings from an assault rifle, and a very obvious trail. Immediately Mitchell began piecing together the picture; the Captain must have been dragged away into the dense forest.

Why didn't Burke or Kim see anything? Mitchell thought, but figured the Captain must have been in a blind spot at the time.

Colonel Natalya Chernova turned to face Mitchell, "We go after him!"

"No." Mitchell quickly replied.

The Colonel growled, "You let him die... just because he is Russian!"

"If we go, we all die!" Mitchell rebuked; then, in a calm tone, he added, "Wait for morning."

Colonel Natalya Chernova contemplated for a split-second, "Morning is too far away."

"It will have to be morning."

Colonel Natalya Chernova glared at Mitchell for several seconds, then turned to gaze upon the darkened horizon. Angrily, she stormed back inside, furiously walking past Mitchell.

At least she saw reason, Mitchell told himself.

* * *

Morning could come soon enough, especially for the Russians. None of them got any real sleep after the incident. At first daylight, they packed up gear and weapons, and were ready to move into the jungle within an hour. It was decided that Parker and Sergeant Dmitri Osipov would remain behind, along with Anastasiya; everyone else went into the jungle.

The moment Mitchell entered the jungle, a tingle crept up his spine; something didn't feel right about the jungle. Over the years, Mitchell had learned to trust his instincts, and right now, his instincts were telling him to get out of the jungle as fast as he could; although every fibre of Mitchell's being wanted to escape the dense, shadowy jungle, he couldn't. There was a man down somewhere in here, even though he was a Russian.

The group crept along the forest floor at a slow, but steady, pace; they followed the trail left behind the Captain's dragged body eastward. Everyone kept their eyes open for possible ambush; Mitchell was particularly worried about the treetops, hoping the attack wouldn't come from above. Mitchell also kept his eyes on the forest floor, remembering that booby-traps were laid all over the jungle.

He hated jungles.

After nearly three hours of searching, Colonel Natalya Chernova came across a small clearing. Mitchell was right behind her. After chopping away some of the dense foliage, Mitchell could finally see into the clearing. At its center was a massive tree, with contorted and twisted branches, lined with thorns and giant green leaves; vines, covered with small red flowered, hung from its branches, giving it a sinister, eerie feel. The most striking thing of all was Captain Vlad Ushakov, shirtless and bleeding from cuts across his chest, was hanging underneath a branch from his wrists; he was at least ten feet off the ground, which was bare basaltic rock.

Almost without thinking, Colonel Natalya Chernova charged into the clearing. Mitchell could barely restrain her.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Mitchell pleaded.

The Colonel struggled against him, "What are we waiting for?"

Mitchell quickly looked around the clearing; he replied, "Something's not right."

Suddenly, Lieutenant Vladimir Tikhonov stormed out passed Mitchell; he ran across the jagged, coarse bedrock, making his way towards the Captain. Then, just out

of the corner of Mitchell's eyes, he saw it. There was a slight shimmer of light, a rustling of leaves, possibly movement up on one of the branches.

Mitchell immediately let Colonel Chernova go and charged after the Lieutenant. Luckily, the Lieutenant had to slow down while making his way across the rocky terrain, or risk twisting an ankle; Mitchell had no such luxury. Within seconds, Mitchell was mere feet away from the Lieutenant. Suddenly, the Lieutenant stopped and looked up; his eyes became globes as he gazed up towards the canopy. A spear, made from the hardened wood from the surrounding jungle, was hurdling towards him.

Just in the nick of time, Mitchell tackled the Lieutenant, sending him out from the path of the deadly spear; the air left Mitchell's lungs as he made contact, and part of his face smashed into the butt of the Lieutenant's assault rifle. Dazzling stars danced in Mitchell's vision. Having landed on the black rock, Mitchell looked behind him; he himself missed the spear by mere inches. The wooden spear, a primitive weapon by today's standards, imbedded itself into the bedrock. Quickly, Mitchell looked up into the canopy; he saw movement, but no identifiable outline or silhouette. Regardless, Mitchell unleashed a short burst of fire into the canopy. The branch snapped, splintering into hundreds of needle-like pieces. Something plummeted toward the ground, growling as it fell. Mitchell and the Lieutenant rolled out of the way just in time. Mitchell heard a thump when the thing landed, and even felt its mass when it did. Quickly, they picked themselves up and staggered back toward the jungle.

"Get back!" Mitchell ordered.

Just then, Colonel Natalya Chernova rushed over to the Lieutenant; she screamed at him in Russian, the Lieutenant nodding in shame.

Mitchell looked back towards the others. Against his orders, they all were flooding into the clearing, rifle pointed in all directions. Fury washed over Mitchell; he screamed, "Get back!"

Mitchell's gaze returned to the fallen object, but surprisingly, it was gone. Disappeared. Vanished. Into thin air. Confusion rattled Mitchell's mind. He definitely saw something big fall from the branch. He had felt it when it struck the ground. He cautioned a quick glance upward; nothing could have survived a fall from that height into jagged rocks. Mitchell's heart was racing; this was unlike anything Mitchell had experienced or read about.

He was in new territory now.

Suddenly, Colonel Natalya Chernova grabbed Mitchell by the shoulder, "What was it?"

Mitchell couldn't say a word; he was too stunned. Rather, he just shook his head in disbelief.

Colonel Natalya Chernova stepped out in front of Mitchell, and walked towards the hanging captain. Suddenly, the Captain wiggled against his restraints, and screamed something in Russian. Mitchell had assumed he was dead, hanging lifeless from the branch of the tree. Colonel Chernova, however, rushed towards the Captain with surprising light-footedness and grace. She grabbed the Russian Captain by the foot, then turned towards the others and screamed orders in Russian. Immediately, Lieutenant Vladimir Tikhonov and Private Aleksandr Belyakov hurried over to their captain. She barked orders, all in Russian. Mitchell watched as the Lieutenant and Private got underneath the Captain; then, Colonel Natalya Chernova shot the branch holding the Captain up with her assault rifle. Splintered wood showered upon her. Luckily, the Russians had caught the Captain.

Mitchell, still in shock and disbelief, slowly stood up. He was glad the Russians got their Captain back, but now, with his new threat looming over them, his mind was definitely not at ease. Mitchell slowly walked over to where the... whatever it was, landed; he knelt down, and saw a viscous, glowing green fluid splattered across the jagged black rock.

Blood? Mitchell thought.

Then, Marcus Brown stood behind Mitchell. He asked, "What was it, boss?"

Mitchell shook his head, "No idea."

Brown, possibly disheartened, walked away. Mitchell looked over at the wooden spear; the primitive weapon was imbedded at least an inch and a half into the bedrock. Whatever threw that weapon had impressive strength.

Suddenly, Captain Vlad Ushakov walked by. Mitchell looked up and nodded in approval. The Captain, hard faced as ever, nodded back, then walked on past. Mitchell then went back to the glowing green blood. This was definitely a new threat.

If it bleeds, Mitchell thought, we can kill it.

* * *

It took nearly all day to get back to the mine-camp. By the time they reached the mine, they were all utterly exhausted. Captain Vlad Ushakov was in bad shape; the gashes across his chest were at risk of getting infected, and he had lost a lot of blood during the night.

The moment they were within earshot of the cafeteria, Colonel Natalya Chernova screamed, "Dmitri! Get over here!"

Sergeant Dmitri Osipov immediately came out of the cafeteria, running towards them as fast as he could. Colonel Natalya Chernova explained the injuries to the medic in rapid Russian. Sergeant Osipov and Private Belyakov carried the Captain off to the cafeteria.

Parker, walking slowly towards them, asked Mitchell, "What happened out there?"

"Yeah, what did happen out there?" Foster added.

"It was a trap." Mitchell replied.

"What?" Colonel Natalya Chernova asked.

"Whatever it was out there, it kidnapped Captain Ushakov to lure us into that trap." Mitchell explained.

"Did you get a good look at it?" Parker asked.

Mitchell shook his head, "Any of you?"

Everyone shook their heads; Brown replied, "Too far away, boss."

"Whatever it was, it was big, heavy, and strong as hell." Mitchell added.

"What we do?" Colonel Natalya Chernova asked.

Mitchell looked around the mine-site. Then, he answered, "We prepare for a war."

Night had fallen about an hour ago. She hated this world. Daylight only lasted a few hours here, while night seemed to last forever. The gloomy, shadowy abyss of a jungle didn't help matters any. Although, all things considered, things were improving. Major Mitchell and his team were no longer prisoners, or at least, no longer bound, and

seemed to be helping the Imperials. She watched them through the electrobinoculars as they set up claymore mines, set up fixed defensive emplacements, and other cautionary measures. They seemed to be focusing on the residential area, the cafeteria, and the headquarters as their main focus.

Smart, she thought.

They couldn't possibly defend the entire mine, so there was no point in trying. By focusing on a smaller area they could defend it more effectively and efficiently. Just then, she glanced over at Kim. He had taken the sniper rifle after his return from his scouting mission. Although he hadn't gotten much rest since this morning, he persevered and stayed on watch with her.

Suddenly, she heard a massive roar, just like the one from before, and sharp splitting pain shot up her spinal column. Reade screamed her lungs out in agony. She glanced backward and saw a long, metallic spear pierce her back, and go through to the ground; the axe-like blade pierced her soft flesh, missing her spine by millimetres. She could feel blood soaking into her clothes, and spill onto the dirt ground underneath her. Seconds passed, but they felt like hours. Already injured, her vision started to close in on her; she started to blackout.

Reflexively, Kim got onto one knee, and aimed his sniper rifle at her attacker. There was a flash of confusion from Kim, then he fired. For a moment, Reade was completely blinded by the enormous muzzle flash that emanated from end of the long barrel. The massive tungsten carbide core shot out with a deafening bang, and sliced through the cool, damp jungle air. Reade, having no time to cover her ears, took the blast with its full might; her ears were ringing as if she had gone to a rock concert and stood too close to the speakers.

Surprisingly, the round struck something standing behind her. Some creature, vaguely humanoid, growled in pain when the round struck its body. The shimmering object, now with a hole in its side and bleeding phosphorescent, glowing green blood, stood behind her.

Kim was taken completely aback, "What the hell?"

Kim immediately cocked back the bolt, loading another .50 calibre armour piercing round into the chamber. Reade, meanwhile, pinned to the forest floor, was unable to move or turn around. She could, however, see enough of the humanoid creature that attacked her. Slowly, with a shower of sparks, the cloaking field that made

the creature almost invisible faded. Underneath was the beast itself; a dark-skinned, hideous, towering monster with mandibles and braided dreadlocks.

The beast, bleeding profusely from the first shot, clutched the wound and fell onto its knees. Kim, not wanting to take any chances, immediately fired the rifle again. The tungsten carbide round sped out of the barrel at hypersonic velocities, and struck the creature again. The round pierced the helmeted head of the creature; radiant green blood splattered across the trees behind the creature. Finally, the dark, hideous creature collapsed onto the leaf-covered floor, green blood pooling underneath it.

Kim, seeing that the creature was dead, immediately ran over to Reade and grabbed onto the metal spear, "Hold on, Captain."

He pulled up on the metal spear. The blade slid out of her body, grudgingly. Reade moaned and screamed from the excruciating amounts of pain. She could feel every edge and jag of the axe-like blade as it slid through her fleshy body. Finally, with a sigh of relief, the metallic blade was out of her body. She hadn't realized this, but tears flowed from out her eyes and down her cheeks. Kim immediately tossed the spear and knelt down next to her.

She grabbed him, "Run, Kim. Get outta here!"

"No way, Captain." He strongly replied, "I'm getting you off this mountain."

He reached into his pack and pulled out the med-kit. He quickly wrapped disinfecting bandages around her, just enough to hinder the bleeding, and then grabbed his Pulse Rifle. He gave her his Pulse Rifle.

"Cover me." Kim said.

Holding both Pulse Rifles, she nodded.

Kim then slung the sniper rifle onto his back, grabbed Reade by the straps, and dragged her down the side of the dense, jungle-filled mountain. The task was considerably easier since they were going downhill, but no less traitorous. The ground was covered in leaves and thorns, but also large rocks and fallen branches.

Suddenly, Kim screamed, "To the right!"

Reade looked over to her left, and saw the same shimmering being that attacked her. Without hesitation, she raised her left arm and fired the Pulse Rifle. Like a jackhammer, the recoil from the Pulse Rifle rocked her weak arm, pounding into her

chest. The muzzle flash from the Pulse Rifle briefly illuminated the jungle. She could see the tracer rounds lanced through the night sky, escaping into the shadowy depths behind. She couldn't see if her rounds struck the creature, but she couldn't stop firing at that moment. Kim, on the other hand, continued running down the mountainside, dragging her with him.

Suddenly, Kim tripped over a loose root from one of those thorny, twisted trees, and fell face first into a pile of leaves with a hard thud. Kim expertly rolled onto his feet, swung his sniper rifle from off his chest, lined his sights, and fired into the distance. She was momentarily blinded by the absurdly bright muzzle flash, and her hearing was less than ideal. She couldn't see the bullet, but it definitely struck something. From beyond, not too far from where they were, a massive roar resonated on the mountainside. Kim immediately cocked the bolt and loaded another round into the chamber. He didn't fire, however; rather, he grabbed Reade again, and dragged her behind him. Kim was panting now, exerting himself well beyond what the human body should be capable of performing.

She looked off to her left again, and saw another shimmering object. Then another. They were everywhere, it appeared. Without bothering to aim, she unloaded her Pulse Rifle in all directions. Tracer rounds sprayed throughout the jungle, striking trees, breaking branches, and killing the creatures. The cacophony of gunfire filled her sore ears, while the recoil pounded her soar biceps. Suddenly, her Pulse Rifle ran out of ammunition. She immediately tossed the rifle, and swung Kim's into her hands. Again, she started firing wildly into the jungle.

Mitchell sat atop the roof of the west-most house in the living quarters. They had concentrated on planting trip-mines and other booby-traps on the east side of the mining colony, and manned the western side. They had tried to get the power up-and-running, but it was useless. Instead, luckily, the gas-giant Iropia provided the main source of illumination in the night sky. He sat there, uncomfortably, with Colonel Natalya Chernova. Armed with his M-44A Pulse Rifle, he stared out into the jungle-laid mountain. The night, it seemed, was eerily silent. It was cold enough that Mitchell could see his own breath; goosebumps ran up and down his arms. Unconsciously, Mitchell continued looking toward the dark, night sky. He waited, rather impatiently, for the dropship to come and pick them up; he knew that when they came, he was probably in for a reprimand and possibly a court-martial.

That didn't matter.

Then, out of nowhere, he heard the distinctive pound of a XM-105 sniper rifle echo within the valley. This immediately caused him to stand up and gaze forth into the jungle. Colonel Natalya Chernova, too, stood up. Her expression was one of betrayal and anger.

"Friends?" Colonel Natalya Chernova grunted.

Mitchell's heart skipped a beat. No point in denying it, "I had scouts up on the ridge."

Suddenly, Captain Vlad Ushakov raced towards Mitchell, and screamed in a harsh voice, thick with a Russian accent, "He lied to us!"

Mitchell turned to the Captain. He was going to refute the fact, but then another hammering pound resonated within the valley. Instantly, Colonel Natalya Chernova screamed an order, "Get ready!"

She gave Captain Vlad Ushakov a hard stare, forcing him back to his original position. Everyone else immediately checked their weapons and trained them towards the west. Mitchell, worried about his colleagues, took a deep breath, loaded his Pulse Rifle and readied the weapon. Minutes ticked by with nothing heard. Then, suddenly, another loud hammering thud shocked through the valley. Seconds later, the distinctive sound of a Pulse Rifle firing at a nearly constant rate resonated within the mining colony. Mitchell waited. And waited. And waited.

He was getting anxious.

Suddenly, out of the jungle, Corporal Daniel Kim came storming out, Captain Tonya Reade being dragged behind him. His eyes widened with shock and terror. Without thinking, Mitchell leapt off the roof of the house, and landed below with a thud. Picking himself up, he ran with all of his might towards Kim and Reade. He crossed nearly a kilometre of open dirt terrain before reaching them. Mitchell immediately noticed a trail of blood following behind them; Reade's legs and waist was covered in dark grey and brown dust.

Mitchell immediately screamed an order, "Go!"

Mitchell, grabbing hold of one of Reade's straps, helped Kim drag her bleeding, nearly unconscious body through the dirt. Kim was wheezing, struggling to catch his breath. Suddenly, towards the right, the southern part of the mining colony, the unique screeching of Xenomorphs reverberated throughout the jungle. Suddenly, charging out

of the depths of the dark jungle, two reddish-skinned Xenomorphs, sickle-tusks protruding from their jaws and metal chains dangling from behind, attacked the three. Mitchell immediately knelt down and fired short, concentrated bursts from his Pulse Rifle; Kim did the same. Tracer rounds sliced through the night air and struck the charging Xenomorphs square on their ridged skulls. Yellowish acid blood erupted from the cracked exoskeleton, spilling onto the dirt floor. With a screech, the creatures skidded to a dead stop, kicking up a plume of dust in their trails.

Immediately, Mitchell and Kim stood up and continued dragging Reade back towards the residential area.

Foster came out of the housing units first, screaming, "Behind!"

Mitchell and Kim immediately ducked, giving Foster a clear line-of-fire. High-velocity rounds whizzed past them both, striking an apparent threat from behind them. Then, Mitchell dragged Reade the rest of the way, passing her off to Foster who picked her up and carried her deeper into the housing units. Mitchell turned around, along with Kim, and faced their attackers. Out of the black, shadowy jungle, more-and-more of the unusual-looking Xenomorphs poured out. Surprisingly, the Xenomorphs seemed to be chained to... what looked like shimmering objects.

Suddenly, it hit Mitchell. *Invisible men.*

A horde of the invisible men followed behind the Xenomorphs; they were the ones that seemed to be holding the leashes. Suddenly, from behind and above, Lieutenant Vladimir Tikhonov, armed with a heavy machine gun, poured a stream of hot lead into the cool night air. The powerful supersonic rounds struck the ground where the Xenomorphs came charging. Like small meteors, the bullets cratered the dusty ground. The skulls of the Xenomorphs, when struck, exploded in a shower of acidic blood. The corrosive agent burned and sizzled when it met with the ground. Once in range, about five hundred metres or so, Mitchell unloaded with his Pulse Rifle; he was seceded by the rest. The recoil hammered into Mitchell's sore shoulder. Bullets filled the night air; lances of tracer rounds the only evidence of their paths. The cacophony of gunfire was utterly deafening. Surprisingly, the hail of bullets stopped the charging Xenomorphs for a mere second.

"Marcus!" Mitchell screamed, "Unleash hell!"

Almost on cue, Marcus Brown, armed with the M-83 SADAR, the shoulder-launched, active-homing, disposable, anti-tank rocket, appeared atop one of the roofs.

Then, like a boom from thunder, Marcus unleashed one of the powerful rockets. The rocket streaked through the sky, carving a path towards its target. Greyish-white smoke trailed the rocket, finally disappearing into the night sky. Then, in the distance, Mitchell saw the rocket explode in mid-air; an air-burst, Mitchell knew. Xenomorphs in the blast range were instantly vaporized or were shredded by shrapnel.

Mitchell continued to fire his weapon; Mitchell screamed, "Keep it up, Marcus!"

Mitchell saw the Marcus quickly reloading the rockets, sliding the projectile into the tube from the rear. Meanwhile, tracers from a half dozen rifles streaked through the sky. Xenomorphs shrieked in the distance; Mitchell, very consciously, noticed that the shrieks were getting closer and closer. Suddenly, Marcus was ready with another rocket, and quickly launched it. The rocket blasted forward, tearing through the night sky, leaving only a trail of grey smoke in its wake. The rocket struck the ground this time, heaving dirt up and outward; shrapnel tore through the limbs and torsos of the charging Xenomorphs.

Marcus screamed, "I'm out!"

Suddenly, Mitchell's ninety-nine-bullet magazine ran dry. Instinctively, Mitchell immediately popped the empty magazine out, and slapped another in. Then, out of the corner of his eyes, Mitchell ducked for cover. Just then, an invisible spear hammered into the ground next to him. Instinctively, Mitchell fired a sustained burst of bullets into the shimmering object. The bullets pierced flesh, and out of three puncture holes, oozed glowing green blood. Suddenly, a shower of sparks poured out from the creature, and gradually became visible. It was a towering, muscular beast with dark skin, razors on his wrist, and a mask. The creature, possibly in mild pain, roared at Mitchell.

"Fuck." He cursed.

Mitchell raised his Pulse Rifle again for another sustained burst, but just as suddenly as it came, the massive, hulking creature leapt into the air and atop one of the housing units. Mitchell's eyes followed as the creature soared through the air, finally landing on the roof with a powerful thud. From above, Mitchell heard Colonel Natalya Chernova scream an order in Russian. This was seceded by a brief burst of rounds from an RPK-217 assault rifle, then the Russian holding it was knocked off the roof and landed on the tough compacted dirt ground. The massive creature dropped down next to the Russian, Private Aleksandr Belyakov, and grabbed him by the hair. He screamed in terror, wide-eyed, blood trickling out from the corner of his mouth. The towering creature placed foot on his back, using it as leverage, broke the man's neck. Then, with

brute force, the creature tore the private's head off; the flesh around his neck split and tore, spilling blood everywhere. Finally, with one strong tug, the humanoid creature separated the head from the body. The body fell to the floor, and a pool of blood leached into the dirt ground. The creature held it up in celebration, followed by a bellow.

Surprisingly, he then saw Colonel Natalya Chernova leap off of the adjacent roof. She landed, rolled onto her feet, and fired a quick burst from her assault rifle. Instinctively, the hulking creature swung his bladed spear at her head, trying to decapitate her. She ducked, rolled, and fired ten rounds into the creature's belly. Glowing green blood streamed out of the creature.

Just then, Kim slapped Mitchell on the shoulder, "We have to go, Major!"

Mitchell snapped out of his daze, and peered towards the jungle. The Xenomorphs were closing in at a horridness rate. More-and-more, hundreds, poured out and attacked them. He fired another sustained burst of rounds into the crowd of Xenomorphs, then retreated back into the housing units.

Lieutenant David Foster ran as fast as his legs to take him, carrying an unconscious Captain Tonya Reade in his arms. Black blood poured down his arms and chest from her open wounds. He cut a corner, around one of the housing units, and ran for the cafeteria. His was already exhausted, huffing and puffing with every step.

Suddenly, above him, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a towering humanoid figure leap of the roof of one of the houses. The massive creature slammed into him with a powerful kick. The force from the sudden impact kicked him up off the ground. Unfortunately, he was unable to hold onto Reade, causing her to slam side-first into the hard, dirt ground. Foster, on the other hand, smashed his head against the concrete wall of the opposite house. A sharp, stinging pain filled his head. Immediately, his vision blurred and doubled; stars flashed into existence. Instinctively, he slowly reached behind his head and touched the gash; as his hand entered his blurry field-of-view, he saw the distinct signs of blood. Ahead, although his vision was fuzzy, he could just make out that the towering humanoid creature approaching Reade. He tried to reach for his Pulse Rifle, he dropped it about a metre away, but it was futile.

The creature, almost taunting him, stared at him for a moment; it tilted his head inquisitively. Ignoring Foster, the creature knelt down beside Reade, then with both

clawed hands, ripped open the flak jacket and uniform she was wearing. Her bare chest was exposed, although covered in dried, dark-red blood and spots of mud and dirt. Then, the creature unsheathed a razor-sharp, edged knife, and held it high above his head. Then, with a forceful punch, plunged the blade into her chest, shattering her sternum and ribs. Reade let out a blood-curdling scream, just for a moment, before her mouth filled with blood, drowning it out. Foster hoped she died quickly, at least.

The humanoid creature, using the knife like a saw, started cutting down from her sternum to her navel. Then, having torn the knife from her soft body, the creature grabbed one of her breasts with its clawed hand, and tore the flesh from her body. spurts of blood splattered across the dirt ground; the blood leached into the ground. Not all of the skin freed itself at once, prompting the creature to jerk and rip at the flesh. With one final tug of her flesh, the creature tore her skin free of her body; a splatter of blood washed over Foster's face. Underneath was bare, exposed muscle and bone, all saturated with free-flowing blood. All of this took a mere minute or so.

Then, having ripped a hefty chunk of flesh from Reade's body, the creature swung its braided, dreadlocked head towards Foster and offered a deep roar. Foster, still groggy from his head injury, could barely move to defend himself. The creature, arms soaked in Reade's blood, stood up and walked towards Foster in what seemed like slow motion; in its hands, Reade's flesh hung loose and bloody, taunting him with threatening fear. Foster, somehow mustering the strength to unholster his sidearm, raised his handgun towards the creature; his grip was loose, and his hand was shaky. Despite his lack of strength, and his unsure aim, Foster squeezed the trigger three times. The small nine-millimetre bullets barely scratched the hulking beast of a creature; glowing green blood, did however, trickle from the small wounds.

Suddenly, the creature stood a mere metre in front of Foster; with lightning fast reflexes, before Foster could squeeze off another round, the creature grabbed his hand and wrenched the handgun from his grasp. With surprising strength, the creature crushed Foster's hand, breaking his wrist and hand bones in the process; Foster screamed, the sound of crushed bones resonating in his ears. Then, out of the corner of his eyes, in slow-motion, the creature unsheathed the knife-like utensil, still covered in Reade's blood, and taunted Foster with it for a moment.

Then, just before the creature plunged the edged-weapon into Foster's skull, he heard a powerful shotgun blast come from behind. The creature roared in pain, then turned around to face its attacker. It was Marcus Brown! The towering brute approached Brown. From behind, Foster could see where the pellets from the shotgun

struck; glowing green blood trickled down its back, although the creature didn't seem affected.

Just then, Foster started to black out.

Marcus Brown stared down the towering brute of a creature as it approached him. Brown, being a tall, muscular man, stood his ground. Then, in quick succession, Brown fired three shotgun shells into the exposed chest of the creature. The pellets struck the creature, puncturing its flesh; glowing green blood seeped out of its wounds. Surprisingly, the creature seemed unfazed by the shotgun, and continued its slow, steady, almost robotic, approach.

Marcus took several steps backward, trying to increase the distance between him and the creature as fast as possible. Then, out of nowhere, he tripped over something. He landed on his back, knocking the wind out of his chest; a plume of dust settled on top of him. Just at that moment, he noticed what he had tripped on; it was Captain Reade's mutilated and partially skinned body. Her dead eyes stared at him; her face was bloodied. The sight horrified him.

"Sick fucks." Corporal Marcus Brown growled to himself.

Marcus then noticed that the creature now stood over him. Marcus raised his shotgun and fired a shell into the masked-face of the creature. The pellets merely ricocheted and scarred the mask. Then, the creature reached out and grabbed the end of the barrel with its claws hand. Marcus fought to wrestle the barrel from the creature's grasp, but it was futile. In a surprising feat of strength, flexing its massive, veined bicep, the creature bent the barrel.

Marcus, speechless, could only stare and watch.

Then, the creature reached down and grabbed Marcus by the flak jacket; immediately Marcus could feel the creature's sheer power and strength. Surprisingly, it hoisted him up, lifting him about sixty centimetres into the air, then threw him into the concrete wall of the house like a ragdoll. The hard impact knocked the wind out of him again. Lying face-first in the dirt, Marcus coughed and wheezed as the air rushed back into his lungs. Slowly, off his shoulder, Marcus swung the M-92 grenade launcher around into his arms. He pointed it at the towering creature and squeezed the trigger. The fragmentation grenade flew through the air. Surprisingly, the dark-skinned creature caught the grenade in its hand and held it above its head.

Unbelievable.

However, these creatures weren't as smart as they thought they were. The grenade exploded in the beast's hand. A blood-soaked stump now existed where a massive, powerful clawed hand used to be. With a powerful, yet pained, scream, the creature charged. Marcus fired another fragmentation grenade. This time the creature didn't catch it. Instead, the powerful explosive struck it square in the chest, blasting a gaping hole where its sternum should have been. The creature dropped backwards, glowing green blood oozing out of the fresh wound.

Marcus breathed a sigh of relief, then shouted, "Foster! You okay?"

Foster was still out of it. Then Marcus noticed that a clear, viscous slime was dripping onto his shoulder. He immediately looked up. He was greeted by the hideous fanged-face of a sickle-tusked Xenomorph. The Xenomorph immediately lashed out at Marcus. Instinctively, he ducked and rolled out of the way, narrowly missing its razor-sharp claws by mere centimetres. The Xenomorph snarled and hissed, then pounced off the wall it clung to. Landing on top of Marcus, the Xenomorph attempted to lash and bite him. Marcus propped the Xenomorph off him with the grenade launcher. Regardless, the Xenomorph struck at Marcus with its tongue; the smaller jaw snapped at him, just centimetres from his face.

Then, from behind, a Pulse Rifle rang out. Bullets pierced the hard exoskeleton of the reddish-black Xenomorph, spraying acid blood into the air. Marcus shoved the creature aside, then stood up. Some of the acid landed on Marcus' flak jacket, sizzling and burning its way through to his flesh; he could feel the heat closing in on his chest with every passing second. Finally, getting on one knee, he tore the black flak jacket off his torso and tossed it aside. Luckily, the acid didn't eat its way through yet. Suddenly, he looked up and saw Foster holding his Pulse Rifle in his left hand; quickly, Marcus gave him a nod, then turned his attention to the charging Xenomorphs. On both sides, Xenomorphs crawled along the shingle-tiled roofs of the housing units. Foster immediately fired a quick burst from his Pulse Rifle; the bullets, inaccurate and wild, sliced through the air and eventually struck one of the reddish-black serpent-like creatures in the chest. Acid blood poured onto the house, eating away at the ceiling.

Marcus realized that Foster must still be dazed from the knock on the head.

Marcus, on the other hand, fired a fragmentation grenade into a group of Xenomorphs. A sphere of shrapnel sprayed in all directions. The razor-sharp jags of

twisted metal flew through the air, shredding three Xenomorphs caught in the immediate vicinity.

"Move back!" Marcus Brown screamed.

Immediately, both he and Foster backpedalled, putting as much distance between them and the Xenomorphs as possible. However fast they moved, the Xenomorphs were faster. With a screeching cry, one of the Xenomorphs lunged at Marcus. Marcus Brown leapt out of the way and dodged the creature's attack by a metre or so. The Xenomorph, on all fours, stood between Foster and Marcus. The creature's gaze fell onto Foster, however. Foster, obviously still dazed and seeing double, simply stood his ground, staring back at the creature. Marcus trained his grenade launcher on the creature but couldn't fire; if he did, the grenade was likely to kill Foster too.

Just then, Marcus screamed, "Foster, get outta the way!"

Immediately, the elongated cranium of the Xenomorph snapped towards Marcus. Before the big man could fire, however, the creature pounced. With lightning speed, the creature soared through the cool air and struck Marcus. Marcus, although a hefty man to begin with, was no match for the force of the impact. The Xenomorph pounced directly on top of him and attacked. Marcus fought with all his strength, using the butt of the grenade launcher and his bare hands as weapons. Foster, on the other hand, couldn't get a clear shot at the Xenomorph without injuring, or even killing, Marcus. Suddenly, the razorblade-like tail of the Xenomorph lunged forward and plunged into Marcus' gut. Blood oozed out from his stomach and Marcus coughed up a mouthful of blood.

Marcus looked up and stared at Foster, who remained petrified on his knees. Then, with a gargle, Marcus screamed, "Run!"

Foster immediately looked up from Marcus' face, and saw the approaching Xenomorphs. Grudgingly, he got onto his feet and ran in the opposite direction. Marcus nodded, then stared up at the Xenomorph who attacked him. The hideous creature snarled at him, baring its spiny fangs and horrendous tongue. Translucent, viscous mucus slobbered onto his chest and face. Immediately, Marcus reached for his waist and pulled out a high-explosive grenade. He pulled the pin and shoved the grenade into the creature's jaw.

"Fuck you!" Marcus screamed.

Then, in a ball of white light and intense energy, the grenade exploded.

* * *

Sergeant Dmitri Osipov, armed only with an assault rifle, fired into the horde of serpent-like creatures from atop the roof of a house. They poured out of the jungle, held back only by leashes and chains. Osipov was wild, not bothering to aim. The spray of bullets struck anything and everything in front of him.

Suddenly, one of the reddish-black serpent-like creatures crawled up the side of the building he was situated on. Sergeant Osipov, wide-eyed with surprise, immediately turned his assault rifle towards the creature.

In Russian, he cursed.

A quick burst of heavy bullets hammered into the ridged, elongated cranium of the creature. Acid blood sprayed everywhere. Suddenly, a couple of drops of the molecular acid fell on his left hand and arm. Immediately, Sergeant Osipov could feel the acid corrode and eat his flesh.

He screamed in pain.

He watched as flesh turned to smoke, exposing the muscle and bone underneath. Then, almost immediately, another serpent-like creature crawled up the wall and faced him. With his good arm, Sergeant Dmitri Osipov fired his assault rifle. The muzzle flash was blinding; his aim was wild, but he managed to hit the reddish-black creature. Although stricken, the serpent-like creature pounced. Sergeant Osipov turned around and leapt off the roof of the house. Surprisingly, Dmitri did not plummet towards the ground.

Dmitri looked down toward his chest and saw a blood-covered razorblade-like tail protruding from his chest. At first, he felt no pain; slowly, spreading outward from the wound, the pain registered in his mind. Blood, black in the night sky, poured out from his chest and from the corners of his mouth. Slowly, Dmitri turned to look at the serpent-like creature; the creature, a mouth full of fangs, snarled and hissed at him. Then, suddenly, the creature tore its tail out of his body, sending his body crashing down to the ground below. He hit the ground face-first; a plume of dust kicked up from the impact. His right leg was bent in an awkward position, knee bent in a direction it was not meant to, and several ribs were broken. Slowly, a pool of blood collected underneath him. He started to feel cold and numb. Sergeant Dmitry Osipov did not die instantly, rather, he slowly bled out.

* * *

Meanwhile, Mitchell, Kim, and Parker along with Colonel Natalya Chernova ran towards the cafeteria with immediate haste. Mitchell looked over his shoulder and saw the houses overrun with screeching Xenomorphs. The Xenomorphs, however, leashed to their masters, couldn't pursue nearly as fast as they normally could. After passing the twelfth house, Captain Vlad Ushakov jumped off the roof; Lieutenant Vladimir Tikhonov, however, turned around and fired at three Xenomorphs that had been chasing them on the rooftops; the Xenomorphs screeched, the bullets hammered into their craniums, splattering acid blood across the roofs.

Then, moments later, Tikhonov jumped down from the roof. Then, with an angered expression, Captain Vlad Ushakov slammed the stock of his assault rifle into Mitchell's chest. The shock of the impact surprised him, knocking the wind out of his lungs. Then, the Russian Captain raised his assault rifle at him.

Instinctively, the three Americans rose there's. Just then, Colonel Natalya Chernova immediately grabbed the assault rifle and shoved it towards the ground, and screamed, "Stop!"

Then, with a heavy accent, the Captain refuted, "He lied to us! He will betray us, and kill us!"

With a stern expression, the Colonel barked, "Vlad!" They stared at each for a moment, and then Natalya growled, "Get the girl."

Reluctantly, Captain Ushakov ran towards the cafeteria; Lieutenant Vladimir Tikhonov followed close behind. Almost immediately, Mitchell, Parker, Kim and Natalya followed. Mitchell, out of the corner of his eyes, noticed that the "invisible men" had appeared within the residential units, and the Xenomorphs were now free to pursue. He immediately let out a short burst of bullets into the roofs, spraying hot copper into the Xenomorphs. Droplets of acid blood sprayed onto the houses and ground. Suddenly, a great roar from one of the "invisible men" rang out within the houses. Mitchell's gaze dropped down; a horde of Xenomorphs charged towards him.

"Shit!" Mitchell screamed.

Kim and Parker turned around. Immediately, they fired a sustained burst of bullets into the horde. Several Xenomorphs exploded, spraying acid blood across the dirt ground; their dying screeches filled Mitchell's ears. Suddenly, out from the shadows, a Xenomorph pounced. Mitchell dived to his left, while Kim and Parker dived

to their right. Mitchell, expertly, rolled back onto his feet; he turned, and gazed upon the Xenomorph that now stood between him and Kim and Parker.

He saw Kim raise his sniper rifle; immediately, he screamed, "Don't!"

Kim lowered his sniper rifle, and stared at the Xenomorph with terror and fright. Then, Mitchell screamed, "Run!"

Hesitantly, Kim and Parker ran toward the cafeteria. The Xenomorph hissed, then turned its attention towards Mitchell. The Xenomorph snarled, showing off its impressive set of fangs. Mitchell instantaneously raised his Pulse Rifle and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened.

Gun jam! Mitchell thought, "Shit!"

The Xenomorph snarled again, then pounced. Mitchell dove out of the way, just in time. The Xenomorph slammed into the plastic siding of the house behind him; stunned, the creature staggered to get up, hissing with aggravation. Mitchell, meanwhile, rolled onto his feet, and ran in the opposite direction. His legs were exhausted, and his chest protested; his lungs, it seemed, couldn't hold enough oxygen to power his muscles anymore. While running, weaving in-and-out of houses, running a convoluted path, Mitchell tried to clear his rifle; dirt, it seemed, clogged the receiver. Finally, he managed to clear the receiver of dirt, and reload his Pulse Rifle. Just then, a Xenomorph leapt off the roof of a house. Reflexively, Mitchell fired a short burst of rounds into the chest of the Xenomorph. It's exoskeleton burst, spraying acid blood everywhere. Mitchell dove for cover, just managing to avoid the acid blood. Mitchell watched as the Xenomorph corpse crashed into the dirt ground with a thud; a dust plume rose and then settled onto the creature.

Mitchell breathed a sigh of relief. It was short lived. Suddenly, an invisible weight dropped in front of him. Mitchell looked over to his right, wide-eyed with surprise and shock. Slowly, the invisible creature revealed itself; Mitchell watched as the hulking brood of a creature showed itself. The creature wore almost nothing except a loincloth, netting across its chest, and a biomechanical mask; in both its hands were two shurikens. Consisting of five razor-sharp, edged, retractable blades that folded onto itself, the weapon looked formidable indeed. The creature seemed to taunt Mitchell for a second. Then, suddenly, the hulking beast threw both shurikens at him. They sliced through the air, spinning at a wild speed, hurdling towards him. Instinctively, Mitchell dove forward, ducking beneath the flight path of the blades; Mitchell rolled onto his feet, raised his Pulse Rifle, and fired a sustained burst into the creature. Glowing green

blood splattered onto the ground. Growing closer, Mitchell heard the distinctive sound of slicing metal approach behind him. He turned, then quickly ducked. One shuriken flew right by him; the second, on the other hand, managed to catch his right arm. The sharp blade sliced through flesh and muscle; blood trickled down the length of his arm. Mitchell screamed from shock.

Homing! Mitchell thought.

Seconds later, the creature caught both edged disks, then threw them back at Mitchell one at a time. Mitchell dove to avoid the first one; he heard the slicing blades whiz by his head. Instinctively, he spun around to avoid the second. Mitchell quickly recovered, and squeezed the trigger a second time. The hulking creature took the brunt of the bullets again; surprisingly, the massive beast took a few steps backward, increasing the distance between the two. After a moment, Mitchell dropped to the dirt; the two spinning blades flew right past him, centimetres from his body.

Got to finish this soon! Mitchell thought.

Mitchell quickly picked himself up off the dirt ground, knelt down on one knee, and fired his Pulse Rifle again. The creature had just caught both shurikens when the impact of the high-velocity rounds struck his chest. The creature roared in rage and pain. Suddenly, the creature threw both spinning blades again. Mitchell held down the trigger, firing wildly at the monster. Surprisingly, with a clank, Mitchell managed to shoot down one of the spinning blades. The second blade went wild, lodging itself into the side of a house. Reflexively, Mitchell reached below his Pulse Rifle, and fired his grenade launcher. With a thump, the thirty-millimetre grenade shot out and struck the creature in the chest. With a flash of energy and a shower of shrapnel, the grenade knocked the hulking beast off its feet and onto the dirt. Mitchell, temporarily blinded, was forced to look away from the bright orb of light.

Recovered, Mitchell, cautiously, approached the downed monster. Its chest was a gaping cavernous wound, oozing glowing green blood; the reddish-black flesh surrounded the wound was torn and shredded, embedded with smoking twisted metal. Astonishingly, the creature was still alive. It moved its head, and snarled. Mitchell stood above the creature and looked into its eyes. The creature's eyes were hideous; its iris' were sulphur-yellow and blood-red, with jet-black pupils that looked like black holes. Without hesitation, Mitchell raised his Pulse Rifle, and put a round into the creature's cranium. The small round pierced through its thick skull, entering the brain. Mitchell took a quick look around; he saw nothing in the immediate vicinity. Suddenly, he heard screaming. He immediately ran toward it.

* * *

Foster was completely lost. Aimlessly, he ran through the maze of streets. All the houses looked the same! Frustrated, he simply ran towards the light. Foster, still groggy and dizzy, struggled to run straight. Blood trickled down the back of his neck from his head wound, and his skull was pounding. He was in agony, but he forced himself to move on. Suddenly, he tripped over his own feet. Barely able to get his hands up in front of him, he slammed face-first into the dusty ground. A flash of pain shot up from his face; meanwhile, his right wrist and hand were throbbing with pain. Suddenly, Foster was seeing stars, and his nose was bleeding. With a groan, he tried to move, but couldn't. He sucked in a lung-full of dust, prompting him to cough uncontrollably.

Suddenly, from behind and above, he heard the distinctive screech of the Xenomorphs. He immediately snapped his head back, and stared into the darkness. In the shadows, subtly, he could detect movement. Immediately, with his left hand, Foster swung his Pulse Rifle around and held down the trigger, firing a sustained stream of bullets, aimed wildly into the shadows. The muzzle flash was blinding, but Foster could barely see anyways. Immediately, he could hear the Xenomorphs screech in pain.

Foster let go of the trigger and tried to pick himself up. It didn't work. Instead, he crawled backwards, never taking his eyes off the moving shadows. Occasionally, he fired a quick burst of hot lead into the shadows; the bullets were wild and poorly aimed, but they managed to keep the Xenomorphs at bay for the moment.

Out from the shadows, a Xenomorph lunged towards him. The creature was a blur, moving faster than his eyes could follow. Suddenly, the Xenomorph was on top of him. It reached out with its clawed fingers and grabbed his ankle; the serpent-like creature hissed, revealing its impressive fangs. Then, the Xenomorph began dragging Foster through the dirt. After a few feet, reflexively, Foster smashed the butt of his Pulse Rifle against the creature's jaw. Acidic blood shot out from its mouth, prompting the creature to let go of his ankle. The Xenomorph looked back at Foster and snarled, revealing its fang-lined tongue. Foster aimed the barrel of his Pulse Rifle as best he could, and with a quick squeeze of the trigger, he fired a short burst of rounds. The bullets pierced the hard exoskeleton of the Xenomorph, exploding on impact. Luckily, Foster managed to avoid getting sprayed with acid blood.

Foster looked past the smoking corpse of the serpent-like creature, and out from the shadows, more Xenomorphs approached; Foster, wide-eyed with surprise and terror, simply said, "Shit."

After stumbling, Foster managed to pick himself up off the dusty ground. Running backwards, sometimes stumbling, he fired a wild stream of hot lead into the shadows. Suddenly, the creatures burst into action, charging him with surprising speed and agility. He held down the trigger, firing a hailstorm of bullets. Xenomorphs exploded into smoking hides left and right, but they kept on charging.

Then, at the worst possible time, his magazine ran dry; Foster screamed, "Shit!"

He quickly glanced up; the Xenomorphs were closing ground quickly. He ignored reloading his magazine and turned to the underbarrel grenade launcher. He fired one of the thirty-millimetre grenades at the charging Xenomorphs. The grenade strayed to the left, and exploded when it hit the ground. Regardless, the explosion enveloped the Xenomorphs in a sphere of orange-yellow energy, and a cloud of shrapnel. The Xenomorphs were blown to pieces or shredded. Then, out of the corner of his eyes, he caught movement above him; the Xenomorphs were attacking from the rooftops. He pumped the grenade launcher, loading another grenade into the chamber, and fired. The grenade flew low, and struck the side of the house. The explosion tore through the aluminum siding and dry wall, ripping the house apart; plastic and metal debris rained down upon Foster.

Not waiting to see if he repelled the Xenomorphs, he simply ran towards the lights, limping most of the way. While running, he ejected the empty magazine, grabbed another one from his belt, and tried to slap it into place. He struggled for a moment, until finally, he managed to reload his weapon. Quickly, he turned around, and fired another stream of bullets into the shadows. He held down the trigger for several seconds, firing off thirty rounds or more. Running backwards, faltering over his own feet, he kept firing into the darkness.

Finally, after several minutes of running through the residential area, Mitchell could see the cafeteria ahead. In front, Mitchell could see that Natalya was leading the way, and was the first to exit the housing area; without hesitation, she ran across the three hundred metre stretch of open terrain that laid between the houses and the cafeteria. Just outside the entrance of the cafeteria, Mitchell saw Vlad and Anastasiya walking out. As Parker and Kim were running to catch up, Mitchell turned to his left and saw Foster running backwards towards him, firing burst after burst of rounds into oncoming Xenomorphs.

He screamed, "Foster!"

Foster immediately snapped his head back and looked at him, "Major!"

Mitchell then brought his Pulse Rifle to attention and fired a quick burst; powerful rounds flashed past Foster. A charging Xenomorph, just three metres from Foster, took the brunt of the storm. With a spray of acidic blood, a screeching howl, the Xenomorph collapsed to the dirt ground with a thud. The Xenomorph skidded to a stop, falling short of reaching Foster. Then, Foster picked himself off the ground, and ran towards Mitchell. He noticed that Foster was running funny, staggering side-to-side and seemingly off-balanced.

After a moment, Foster lurched to Mitchell's side; Mitchell asked, "Where's Reade?"

Foster shook his head, "Dead. Same with Brown."

Mitchell cursed.

Together, the four ran towards the cafeteria, trying to catch up with Colonel Natalya Chernova. Suddenly, a gigantic dark-skinned humanoid creature with an Alien Queen skull on its right shoulder plummeted in front of them; then, using the Queen's skull as a ramming shield, slammed shoulder first into the Mitchell, Foster and Kim. Foster took the brunt of the attack; Foster, kicked up off his feet, flew backwards, landing on his head. Mitchell and Kim, meanwhile, simply got pushed off their feet, slamming into the hard dirt on their backs. Mitchell watched, although unfocused and blurry, as Parker, with his left arm, lifted his Pulse Rifle and fired at the humanoid creature. The bullets struck the thick hide of its chest; glowing green blood trickling out. Then, with a Xenomorph-tail spear, the humanoid creature lashed out at Parker; the razorblade-like spear shattered the M-44A Pulse Rifle, knocking Parker onto the ground. Then, the humanoid beast plunged the spear into his chest, a surge of blood spilling out, then lifted Parker off the dirt ground. Parker, screaming at the top of his lungs, coughed up blood, gripping the spear with both arms. Suddenly, with a quick whip of the spear, sent Parker flying into an adjacent building; blood splattered across the white sidings. Bones broke upon impact.

Mitchell cursed himself for not being able to act sooner.

Before Mitchell could react, the massive creature roared in triumph, then, from off the rooftops, an Alien Praetorian leapt next to the humanoid creature. The Alien Praetorian, a juvenile Alien Queen, had reddish-black colourations across its extra-hard

exoskeleton, sickle-tusks, and was leashed. The Alien Praetorian snarled, revealing an impressive set of teeth and fangs; drool seeped out of its ferocious mouth.

"Oh fuck." Mitchell whispered.

Alien Praetorians were notoriously hard to kill because their exoskeletons were ten-times harder than normal Xenomorphs; as a result, anything short of armour-piercing rounds would not suffice. Suddenly, from behind, Colonel Natalya Chernova and Captain Vlad Ushakov came running towards him, firing their RPF-217 assault rifles. With a quick and smooth motion, the humanoid creature turned one hundred and eighty degrees, ducked down behind the Alien Queen's skull, and hunkered down. Not surprisingly, the bullets ricocheted off the Queen's massive and thick skull, protecting the humanoid alien behind. Unfortunately, simultaneously, the hulking humanoid creature had let go of the leash holding back the Alien Praetorian.

On all fours, dragging the heavy metal chain behind it, the Alien Praetorian charged. The Alien Praetorian scrambled towards Mitchell with a furious snarl and frightful speed. Mitchell, still laying on his back, picked up his Pulse Rifle and fired a sustained burst of fire at the creature; with a shout, he held down the trigger. Bullets ricocheted off its massive, crowned head. Suddenly, the Alien Praetorian reached out with its massive claw, and lashed out at Mitchell. With lightning quick reflexes, Mitchell rolled out of the way, missing getting mauled by centimetres. A millisecond later, the Alien Praetorian lashed out with its razor-sharp tail. Mitchell just managed to avoid decapitation. Then, the Alien Praetorian turned to face Mitchell, then hissed. Mitchell, instinctively, kicked the face of the Alien Praetorian with his right boot; the creature bucked its neck, then reared its massive crowned head up in the air and screeched. Again, Mitchell fired off another burst of rounds from his Pulse Rifle; the tracer rounds bounced off the creature's chest and head. Then, at the worst time, the magazine ran dry.

Mitchell cursed, "Shit!"

On his butt, Mitchell pulled himself backwards, trying to put more distance between him and the Alien Praetorian. Then, with a quick swipe of its razor-sharp claw, the Alien Praetorian lashed out. The claws managed to scrape his left cheek; pain flashed across his face, and blood poured down his cheek. Then, just as it was about to sink its elongated fangs into flesh, Kim, on his knee, aimed his sniper rifle.

"Down!" Kim screamed.

Before Mitchell could even react, Kim fired his sniper rifle. The bright muzzle flash temporarily blinded Mitchell, and his ears rang in protest. The powerful round struck the Alien Praetorian in the back, shattering the thorny spikes that ran down spine. The Alien Praetorian slowly turned around and hissed at Kim. Then, Mitchell watched as Kim loaded slapped in another magazine, chambered a round, and fired. The massive .50 calibre round smashed into the crowned skull of the Alien Praetorian, spilling yellowish acidic blood across its face and onto the floor. Suddenly, the Alien Praetorian reared onto its hind legs and howled; the shriek cut deep into Mitchell's psyche. Mitchell watched as Kim immediately cocked the bolt back and loaded another round into the chamber. Prepared, Mitchell immediately covered his ears, and watched as another tungsten carbide round struck the Alien Praetorian. The massive round pierced the creature's rib cage, shattering its hardened exoskeleton. Finally, in its death throes, the creature gave its last visceral scream and collapsed in a pool of its own acidic blood.

Mitchell instantly picked himself up and ran over to Foster; Kim did the same. Mitchell immediately asked, "Foster, you hurt?"

Foster, clutching his ribs in pain, moaned, rolling around on the dirt ground. It was now obvious that Foster must have cracked a rib during the assault. Distracted, Mitchell immediately looked up at the humanoid creature; the Russians had him distracted, but the death of the Alien Praetorian seemed to direct its attention back onto them.

"Kim," Mitchell screamed, "pick him up!"

Forcefully, Kim and Mitchell lifted Foster up off the dusty ground; Foster screamed in protest, but Mitchell and Kim ignored it. Mitchell wrapped his arm around Foster's waist, then placed Foster's arm around his shoulder. Then, instinctively, Kim fired another tungsten carbide round. The dark-skinned humanoid ducked behind the Queen's skull again; round pierced the top of its crown, shattering its pristine exoskeleton. Suddenly, the humanoid came out from behind the shield, and roared at the three men; Mitchell could feel the soundwave reverberate his organs. Then, out of nowhere, Vlad threw a fragmentation grenade at the humanoid creature; the grenade landed right at its feet.

Mitchell screamed, "Get down!"

Mitchell, Kim, and Foster hit the dirt. Just then, with a blinding flash of twisted metal and energy, the grenade exploded. The pressure wave washed over Mitchell,

carrying with it dust and debris. Shrapnel dug its way into the hard hide of the dark-skinned humanoid alien, embedding super-heated twisted metal into its flesh. The explosion, although not powerful enough to kill the creature, merely dazed it. Glowing green blood trickled out of wounds made by the entrenched shrapnel, and smoke rose from its body.

Mitchell picked himself up off the dusty ground. He quickly looked around and saw Kim struggling to get up. He immediately ran over to Kim and grabbed him by the shoulders. A thick layer of dirt and dust covered his face, and his eyes were tearing; blood slowly trickled out from Kim's ears.

"Kim!" Mitchell shouted, "Get up!"

"I can't see!" Kim screamed.

Without thinking, Mitchell dragged Kim further away from the humanoid creature. After several seconds, Mitchell knelt down and grabbed the water bottle from off his utility belt. Kim, squirming and screaming in obvious pain, struggled to keep calm.

Mitchell grabbed Kim by the head, "Hold still!"

Finally, Mitchell poured the water over Kim's face, washing away the dirt and grime from Kim's eyes. Kim's eyes were burning red, irritated by the particles that had imbedded themselves into the sensitive cornea. Mitchell immediately felt Kim relax.

"You okay?" Mitchell shouted.

Kim quickly nodded his head, and picked himself up. Suddenly, with a burst from an RPK-217 assault rifle, Natalya came running toward them, screaming, "C'mon!"

He noticed that she wasn't firing at the injured humanoid creature, but behind them; both Captain Vlad Ushakov and Lieutenant Vladimir Tikhonov provided covering fire as well. Mitchell hazarded a glance behind him and saw a mounting horde of Xenomorphs just outside the shadows of the housing units. The heavy bullets streaked through the dark sky, striking Xenomorphs with a fury. Then, Mitchell picked himself up, and hauled Foster onto his feet. Together with Kim, they carried Foster towards the rest of the group.

Finally, Colonel Natalya Chernova reached them, firing her assault rifle the entire time. She looked over to Mitchell, and screamed, "What now?"

"We have another ell-zee seven kilometres northeast of here!" Mitchell had to shout to be heard over the hammering of the assault rifle.

She nodded, then motioned with her head to lead the way. Immediately, the small group ran for their lives, firing at anything that moved within the shadows. The Xenomorphs had clearly taking control of the residential area. Their screams and screeches filled the valley.

Mitchell, activating his headset communicator, screamed, "Black-Knight leader! Come in, Black-Knight leader!"

Then, over the communicator, "*Black-Knight leader here. Mitchell, we're just entering the upper atmosphere, ee-tee-ay—*"

Mitchell cut him off, "Negative Black-Knight leader! Ell-zee alpha comprised!" He screamed as he ran full speed, "Proceed to Ell-zee bravo, over!"

With a buzz of static, "*Copy. Ell-zee bravo. Out.*"

Mitchell switched off the communicator, then ran to catch up with Colonel Natalya Chernova.

Blooded Spear watched from the periphery of the mine. Cloaked, he rose from the tree branch he stood on. Earlier in the day he had been tracking the rebel Kautya, and now, just southeast of the mine, he watched as the *Hard Meat* poured into the mine. The *Soft Meat*, as they usually do, fired their primitive weapons at the creatures. Blooded Spear always enjoyed hunting the *Soft Meat*, but not tonight; tonight, he was eliminating a murderous clan. Just then, Blooded Spear found the beast he was searching for; Forgotten Darkness.

Then, Blooded Spear roared a call for war.

Suddenly, two-dozen Yautja, all cloaked and armed with various edged- and energy-based weapons, poured out through the jungle, headed straight for the mine. Blooded Spear leapt off the branch he was on, landed on the leaf-covered ground, and sprinted towards his target. Blooded Spear was fast, faster than the other Yautja he led. Quickly, he was leading from the front of the pack. Then, out of the corner of his vision, one of the Yautja fell into a trap; the relatively young hunter impaled himself on a sharpened wooden pole. Glowing green blood spilled onto the jungle floor.

Blooded Spear couldn't concern himself with the traps that may lay in front of him. He had only one objective.

He had to kill Forgotten Darkness.

Forgotten Darkness, pained with shrapnel and bullets, glared at the fleeing *Soft Meats*. Without looking, Forgotten Darkness reached for his chest; embedded into his left pectoral muscle was a rather large portion of smoking metal. With a quick tug, he tore the jagged splinter out from his flesh; glowing green blood poured forth from the wound. Angered, filled with a blood-rage, Forgotten Darkness screamed a call for blood. He pointed at the fleeing *Soft Meats*, then roared again. Suddenly, from behind, his *Hard Meat* wranglers released their creatures. Like a hurricane, the *Hard Meats* charged forth, closing the ground between them and the fleeing *Soft Meat*.

Then, from behind, Forgotten Darkness heard a blood-curdling roar from the southeast. Forgotten Darkness snapped his head towards the southeast, his braided dreadlock hair spun around his face. He immediately recognized the roar, even with the echo within the valley.

The Yautja had tracked them down.

Blooded Spear charged forward, finally escaping the confining clutches of the dense jungle. Through the enhanced vision of his bio-mask, he immediately saw mines, trip-wires, and other *Soft Meat* traps laid out before him. The *Soft Meats* traps were never a problem for experienced hunters; they were merely an inconvenience to be avoided. Around Blooded Spear, however, were inexperienced hunters. The young Yautja hunter in front of Blooded Spear stepped on a mine; a powerful explosion lifted a column of dirt into the air, along with the hunter. Limbs, blood and dirt rained down onto the cratered earth. Blooded Spear simply ran through the shower of dirt and mud.

No time for mourning.

Around him, Yautja hunters were falling victim to the *Soft Meat*'s traps and mines. Explosions rocked the ground all around Blooded Spear. With the anticipation of warfare approaching so quickly, even the most experienced hunter made mistakes. Not Blooded Spear, however; expertly, Blooded Spear leapt over mines with ease, taking caution never to step on one.

Suddenly, he saw a horde of *Hard Meats* released from their chains, charging towards the fleeing *Soft Meats*. Instinctively, Blooded Spear roared an order and pointed towards the north. A dozen or so hunters ran towards the north, chasing the *Soft Meats* and the *Hard Meats*.

A handful of hunters remained with Blooded Spear, however.

Then, with a powerful leap, Blooded Spear jumped over the traps and landed on the roof of the nearest building. He immediately ran towards the edge, seeing a river of *Hard Meats* below him. Quickly switching vision modes on his bio-mask, he locked onto the *Hard Meats*. A set of three glowing red lasers peered out from the side of his bio-mask; this was followed by another set. Two red triangular crosshairs appeared in front of him, indicating a lock. Then, with a rain of plasma, he fired two bolts from his shoulder cannons, one on each shoulder. The blue plasma bolt streaked through the air, leaving behind it a trail of blue ions. The plasma bolt struck both *Hard Meats*. The intense heat immediately boiled their blood, while the actual impact itself shattered the hard exoskeleton; the result was a violent explosion that tore the *Hard Meat* in two.

Suddenly, a portion of the *Hard Meats* stopped in their tracks and snarled up at Blooded Spear. He immediately activated his duel energy flechettes, one on each wrist, and pointed them downward. The *Hard Meats* had begun to crawl up the side of the wall of the building he was standing on. Then, with a fury, he unleashed a river of green plasma darts from both energy flechettes; the smaller, less energetic plasma darts struck the *Hard Meats*, but did not effectively stop them. Blooded Spear, experienced enough with hunting *Hard Meats*, activated his shoulder cannons. In concert with the two energy flechettes, he poured plasma in all directions. The air lit up around him as blue plasma bolts and green plasma darts lanced outwards in all directions; the air, noticeably, began heating up. Acid blood sprayed in the air, and the *Hard Meats* screeched and screamed.

Outward, to his left, Blooded Spear saw the rest of his hunters engage the Kautya. There were many brawls, many involving wristblades and combistaffs. The slicing and clacking sound of metal meeting metal resonated throughout the mining colony. Then, in the distance, towards the west, Blooded Spear spotted the *Hard Meat Mother's* skull shoulder of Forgotten Darkness.

Blooded Spear growled in anticipation. Immediately, Blooded Spear leapt off the edge of the building, spun, and lashed out with his energy flechettes. The *Hard Meats* were cut down off the wall, plummeting onto the hard, dusty ground below. Blooded Spear, however, landed gracefully on his feet and knees; all around him, the smoking

cadavers of *Hard Meats* rained down. In front of him, a *Hard Meat* stood in his way. With his combistaff, a deadly blade-tipped spear, he spun and sliced a *Hard Meat* in two; a spurt of yellowish acid blood flew through the air as the two halves fell to the ground. Suddenly, another *Hard Meat* pounced on top of Blooded Spear; expertly, he grabbed the creature by the cranium, and flipped the creature over his shoulder, slamming it into the ground in front of him. Then, with a powerful rage, he crushed its skull under his clawed boot; the exoskeleton shattered with a deafening crunch, and acidic blood spilled all over the ground.

Then, ignoring the rest of the *Hard Meats*, Blooded Spear charged towards Forgotten Darkness. He was already battling another Yautja; inexperienced; dead. Holding his combistaff above his head while he ran, Blooded Spear roared a challenge. Forgotten Darkness, already having spotted him, turned to face him.

Forgotten Darkness brawled with a young, raw Yautja hunter. The young Yautja fired several blue plasma bolts in his direction. Expertly, Forgotten Darkness ducked behind the *Hard Meat Mother's* head; the superheated plasma sizzled against the hard exoskeleton, leaving behind only large, black scorch marks. Forgotten Darkness then came out from behind the *Hard Meat Mother's* head, and charged with his *Hard Meat* tailed-spear. The young Yautja backpedalled, trying to increase the distance between the two. Then, with a powerful leap, Forgotten Darkness lunged and stabbed the tip of the razorblade-like tail into his chest, breaking his sternum and ribs. Forgotten Darkness roared; glowing green blood dripped out from underneath the young Yautja's bio-mask. Then, with a terrible tear, Forgotten Darkness ripped the spear out of his chest. Phosphorescent blood splattered onto his chest. Then, with a firm horizontal slash, Forgotten Darkness decapitated the young Yautja; the Yautja, young so its vertebra and bones were still soft, keeled over into a pool of its own blood. Forgotten Darkness stared down at the pathetic hunter.

Suddenly, a roar echoed within the mining colony.

Forgotten Darkness stared down his charging assailant, Blooded Spear. With an expert twirl of his *Hard Meat* tailed-spear, he stood his ground in a ready-to-fight stance. Then, with a powerful shoulder strike, Blooded Spear ploughed straight into his chest. Forgotten Darkness, pushed back by the impact, took several steps backwards in order to regain his balance. Suddenly, the axe-like blade of Blooded Spear's combistaff came down on his head with lightning fast quickness. Forgotten Darkness managed to duck the attack, blocking the strike with the *Hard Meat Mother's* head, then spun around and

kicked Blooded Spear in the gut. Blooded Spear folded over and took two steps backwards.

Forgotten Darkness roared.

Then, Forgotten Darkness charged. With powerful, but wild, swinging attacks, Forgotten Darkness smashed his *Hard Meat* tailed-spear into Blooded Spear; expertly, Blooded Spear blocked and parried each attack. Then, with a quick leap, Blooded Spear roundhouse kicked Forgotten Darkness in the face. Suddenly, Forgotten Darkness saw a swath of red; his biomechanical mask had been dislodged.

Recovering quickly, Forgotten Darkness peered at Blooded Spear. His vision, no longer enhanced by his biomechanical mask, was a blurry mix of reds, blues and greens. Regardless, he could still make out Blooded Spear's outline.

With a deep breath, Forgotten Darkness roared a challenge.

Then, Blooded Spear attacked. With spins, twirls, and powerful lunges, Blooded Spear advanced. Although heftier than Blooded Spear, and a bit slower, Forgotten Darkness managed to deflect and block the attacks. The assault was fast and furious; each swing a mere blur to the naked eye. Suddenly, in a turn of events, Forgotten Darkness got the upper hand. Immediately, with a powerful overhead strike, Forgotten Darkness smashed his spear into Blooded Spear's. Surprisingly, the hunter blocked the attack with a horizontal parry, spun on his heels, and lashed out at Forgotten Darkness with his wristblades. Glowing green blood spilled out from Forgotten Darkness' belly; pain surged upward from the wound.

Forgotten Darkness reared backwards, not so much from the pain, but from the dishonour.

Just then, Blooded Spear charged toward Forgotten Darkness; his shoulder smashed into Forgotten Darkness' chest, picking him up off his feet. Instinctively, Forgotten Darkness struck with his knee, making contact with ribs. Blooded Spear immediately faltered, stumbling onto his knees. Then, Forgotten Darkness reached out and grabbed Blooded Spear's bio-mask; with a forceful tug, he tore the mask off of Blooded Spear's face. The tubes tore, hissing with gases. Then, holding Blooded Spear's mask in his hand, he kicked Blooded Spear in the chest. Blooded Spear fell onto his back with a thud and a groan.

Forgotten Darkness looked down at the etched and marked bio-mask; then, with a rage, tossed it aside. Slowly, a mere meter away, Blooded Spear rose. Blooded Spear,

with the patient motions of a hunter, reached over his shoulder and disconnected the two shoulder cannons; like toys, he tossed them aside. Then, he laid down his combistaff. Forgotten Darkness merely watched as Blooded Spear removed his weapons.

With the sound of slowly sliding metal, Blooded Spear activated his wristblades, two parallel jagged, edged knives that protruded a foot ahead of the right fist. They were polished, gleaming even in the low light. Then, with a powerful roar, Blooded Spear taunted Forgotten Darkness.

Forgotten Darkness, honouring the initial challenge, laid down his spear and activated his single-bladed wristblade.

They charged, wildly swinging and stabbing at each other with powerful strokes. The blades made contact, sparking with every hit. Forgotten Darkness, the stronger of the two, pushed Blooded Spear backwards. He punched Blooded Spear in the gut, then lunged with his wristblade. The jagged blade missed flesh by a mere centimetre, Blooded Spear expertly spun out of the way. Suddenly, completing the spin, Blooded Spear struck Forgotten Darkness. The two edged blades sliced through his right cheek, spilling glowing green blood; Forgotten Darkness roared in pain. Then, with a quick step forward, Blooded Spear plunged both blades into his gut, spilling even more blood.

With excruciating pain, Forgotten Darkness roared.

Taunting him, Blooded Spear roared back. Instantly, Forgotten Darkness grabbed hold of Blooded Spear's wrist, twisted, and pulled the blades out of his body. The wristblades were covered in his blood. Then, with a powerful downward slash, Forgotten Darkness chopped at Blooded Spear's forearm. The bone stopped the first hack, but broke bone; the second cut clean through, amputating the forearm. Glowing green blood spilled out of the stump.

Forgotten Darkness took two steps back, held up the amputated forearm above his head, and roared in triumph.

Meanwhile, Blooded Spear clutched his wounded arm, bleeding spilling all over the place. To his credit, Blooded Spear did not scream. Then, with a powerful horizontal strike, Forgotten Darkness chopped at Blooded Spear's neck. The razor-sharp blade sliced through flesh, spilling more blood, but was stopped by the thick vertebra bones; Forgotten Darkness chopped again, and again, each time with a grunt of force and

determination; glowing green blood splattered onto Forgotten Darkness' chest and arms, spilling onto the dirt ground. Finally, with frustration, Forgotten Darkness grabbed the braided dreadlocked head of Blooded Spear and wrenched his head off its spinal cord; bones broke, flesh tore, and blood profusely spilled out of the wound. The headless body of Blooded Spear, soaked in his own blood, collapsed. Forgotten Darkness, victorious, held the decapitated head above his head, and roared in triumph again.

Mitchell finally stormed into the dark, dense foliage of the rainforest and surrounded the mine site. Because of the toxins and waste produced in the mining process, the vegetation around the mine had started as a yellowish-greenish-brown and gradually returned to a more healthy green. Toxic tailing ponds also spotted the landscape towards the northeast of the camp. Leaping over fallen branches and roots, Mitchell sprinted through the jungle. He was the last of the group to enter the jungle.

Suddenly, he heard a screech from a Xenomorph behind him. Immediately, while running forward, he looked behind him; a Xenomorph, leaping from tree-to-tree, pursued him. With a concentrated burst of fire, Mitchell shot it; in a hail of bullets, and with a splash of acid, the Xenomorph exploded. Off in the distance, Mitchell could see Lieutenant Vladimir Tikhonov with the heavy machinegun turn around and lay down some covering fire. The massive bullets lanced through the jungle, piercing bark and breaking branches. Mitchell, surprised by the sheer volume of the hammering gun, staggered only slightly, then continued running. Luckily, the massive rounds struck a Xenomorph that had been following closely behind Mitchell.

Then, in a hurried panic, Mitchell screamed, "Run!"

Instantly, the Russian Lieutenant turned around and ran in the opposite direction. After five paces, the Russian Lieutenant screamed in surprise. Mitchell immediately looked over his shoulder; the Russian Lieutenant was nowhere to be seen in the dense jungle. Panic seeped into Mitchell. Instinctively, Mitchell ran over to where Tikhonov had been.

Tikhonov screamed in Russian, pleading for help.

Mitchell immediately saw Lieutenant Tikhonov precariously dangling off the edge of a large pit, grabbing a thick root for support. Mitchell leapt forward, sliding on his chest, and grabbed Tikhonov hand before it slipped from the root.

With an oomph, Mitchell screamed, "Hang on!"

Beyond Tikhonov, down below in the pit, Mitchell saw five or six sharpened spears positioned on the bottom, pointed upwards. Mitchell strained to pull the young Lieutenant up and out of the pit, but his muscles protested. Suddenly, out in the distance, Mitchell saw several Xenomorphs quickly working their way towards him. Struggling with his left hand, Mitchell reached for his Pulse Rifle, quickly raised it, and fired an uncontrolled burst into the jungle. Tracer rounds filled the cold night air, spraying haphazardly into anything and everything in their paths. Mitchell's right arm was killing him.

Tikhonov protested, "Don't let go!"

Suddenly, out of the shadows, an Alien Warrior leapt towards Mitchell. It sailed past Mitchell, and landed behind him. Unable to roll over, Mitchell was completely defenceless. The Russian Lieutenant screamed in fear and protest. Mitchell, meanwhile, could feel the cold sweat pour forth from his forehead.

Then, with a nightmarish screech, the Xenomorph lunged.

Reflexively, Mitchell squeezed the trigger; in a hailstorm of bullets, the Alien Warrior exploded in a shower of acid blood and smoking exoskeleton. Out past Mitchell's field-of-view, Colonel Natalya Chernova came running forward. She immediately knelt down next to Mitchell and reached for the Russian Lieutenant's hand. Together, they pulled him out of the hole.

Tikhonov said something in Russian, probably something of gratitude, as they pulled him up.

Then, just before the young Russian Lieutenant was free of the booby-trap, a wooden spear pierced Tikhonov spinal cord. Black blood trickled out of the corners of his mouth, pouring down his chin and throat. Tikhonov slowly slid down the length of the spear, leaving behind a trail of reddish-black blood. Mitchell, meanwhile, was too shocked to scream.

Immediately, Colonel Natalya Chernova grabbed Mitchell from off the leafy ground, and screamed, "Keep moving!"

She pulled him up, and together, they ran deeper and deeper into the shadowy jungle. Out in front, Mitchell could see, Foster was now running on his own, no longer needing Kim to help him stand upright; although more independent, he was still

obviously still feeling the effects of the head injury he sustained during the firefight back in the mine-site.

Then, just as he caught up to Foster, the three turned around and laid down suppression fire; Mitchell, firing at anything that moved in the shadowy, dark jungle, saw tracer rounds dart across through the air. The guns pounded his ears, deafening him momentarily. He then heard the distinctive sound of screaming Xenomorphs; a high-pitched sinister scream. Immediately, they turned to run again, trying to catch up with the rest of the group.

After a minute of dodging loose branches and occasionally blindly firing his Pulse Rifle behind him, he screamed at Colonel Natalya Chernova, "We need to concentrate our fire!" Mitchell screamed.

Natalya skidded to a stop, then ordered, "Suppression fire!"

"Everything you've got!" Mitchell added.

Immediately, they all turned around and fired in concert. The jungle, temporarily, illuminated from all the muzzle flashes. Suddenly, from the trees, Xenomorphs started falling off branches and acid blood rained down onto the forest floor. Their screams, for the moment, were all that Mitchell could hear; it filled his ears with terror. Mitchell watched as the tip of his Pulse Rifle started glowing red, then orange, then white hot.

Foster, kneeling metres away from Mitchell, fired his Pulse Rifle at short bursts. The tracer rounds were wild, aimed in no particular direction. After a few moments, his Pulse Rifle ran dry.

He cursed.

That was his last magazine. Suddenly, he remembered he had a flamethrower on his back. He swung the sling around his shoulder, then, firing from the hip, let out a jet of orange-blue flames. The air in front of him burst into flames, and the heat washed over him. A roaring whoosh overcame his ears, drowning out the screeching of Xenomorphs. The jungle grew bright, illuminating the dark serpent-like creatures. Foliage ignited; the Xenomorphs, Foster knew, recoiled from the intense heat. He watched them burst into flames, screaming as charred and burned to death.

It pleased him.

Suddenly, from the abyssal depths of the jungle, a Xenomorph pounced toward him. The creature just managed to dodge the flaming jet and landed straight on top of him; already with a bruised rib, the weight of the creature broke one of his ribs for sure. Foster knew his time had come. In a last-ditch effort of defiance, he pointed the flamethrower at the reddish-black creature. It snarled, revealing two rows of fangs. Foster pulled the trigger, engulfing both him and the creature in deadly napalm.

The last thing he saw was the Xenomorph enveloped in flames.

Before Mitchell could even react, Foster's napalm tanks exploded. Suddenly, the jungle was consumed in flames. Mitchell, luckily, jumped behind a fallen log before being caught in the explosion. After the intense heat dissipated, Mitchell hazard to stand up. The trees were on fire and Foster was nowhere to be seen.

Mitchell sighed.

Meanwhile, the rest had resumed firing their weapons at a nearly constant rate. Bullets shot out and struck the various Xenomorphs that populated the trees and the floor. For seconds at a time, the jungle was no longer so gloomy and shadowy. Mitchell could actually see the depths of horror that awaited them in the jungle. With Foster dead, Mitchell resumed firing his Pulse Rifle at the charging Xenomorphs, adding to the maelstrom of bullets. They were relentless; no matter how many they killed, the Xenomorphs kept coming.

Mitchell growled and roared, out of anger and rage, firing his Pulse Rifle like a wild man.

Suddenly, up from above, Mitchell saw a massive, bright blue flash streak through the jungle and hit one of the Xenomorphs in the chest; the Xenomorph exploded in a spectacular flash that illuminated the jungle, followed by a spray of sparkling embers, exoskeletal shrapnel, and acidic blood. Suddenly, from the branches of the trees around them, several more blue plasma bolts streaked through the cool jungle air, leaving a faint ion trail behind them, slamming into the Xenomorph horde. The plasma bolts were something spectacular to look at, but they sounded just as spectacular; they cracked and sizzled like lightning.

While firing, Mitchell caught sight of the beings firing the plasma bolts. All he could see was its shimmering outline, but it was definitely one of the "invisible men", crouched on the branch of a tree. Mitchell paid no attention to that fact at that moment;

Mitchell simply concentrated on firing his Pulse Rifle. Then, at a horrible time, his Pulse Rifle ran dry. Immediately, Mitchell pulled out the empty magazine, grabbed a fresh one, and slapped it in.

Just at that moment, Colonel Natalya Chernova came up beside him and slapped him across the shoulder, "Go back!"

Mitchell, looking behind him for an instant, followed Natalya. She led them towards their original direction, then turned around to provide covering fire. The rest of the team followed in suit. Suddenly, the entire jungle seemed to be filled with plasma bolts, bullets, and acid blood.

After taking only five or six strides, Mitchell glanced over to his right. There, crouched behind one of the larger trees, Anastasiya hid; she held her hands over her ears, eyes clamped shut. Without thinking, Mitchell ran over to her and picked her up.

"We gotta go!" Mitchell screamed over the explosions behind him, "Run!"

Perched on the branch of a twisted and contorted tree, a young and relatively inexperienced Yautja named Dark Stalker, fired his shoulder cannon into the dense foliage of the jungle. The flash of blue ions streaked through the cold air, heating it instantly. Out in the distance, through his image-enhanced biomechanical mask, he could see the *Hard Meats* explode on impact. Acid blood and hardened exoskeleton rained down upon the rainforest. Through a finely tuned range of the electromagnetic spectrum, he could see the green outline of the *Hard Meats*; a red triangle appeared within his vision, indicating a positive lock on his target. Dark Stalker fired the shoulder cannon again and again. The two plasma bolts lanced through the jungle air, leaving behind it a faint trail of glowing blue ions. The first plasma bolt missed, striking the trunk of a tree, volatilizing the water within, causing the bark to explode; the second bolt smashed into the side of the *Hard Meat*, causing it to explode upon impact.

Suddenly, from above, a *Hard Meat* grabbed hold of him. Its razor-sharp claws dug into his chest; glowing green blood oozed out of the wound. With a hideous snarl, the *Hard Meat* hissed; suddenly, it lashed out with its tongue. Dark Stalker flinched, narrowly avoiding the fang-lined tongue. With a roar of pain and rage, Dark Stalker grabbed the *Hard Meat* by the throat, and with all his might, ripped it apart. Yellowish acid blood spilled onto the *Hard Meat* as it screeched with pain. Suddenly, in its death

throes, the *Hard Meat* tore the shoulder cannon from off Dark Stalker; in its final moments, Dark Stalker threw the dying *Hard Meat* onto the jungle floor.

Just then, its tail wrapped around his ankle, dragging him off the branch. Dark Stalker plummeted toward the ground at terminal velocity. Seconds later, he slammed into the hard dirt ground, the wind knocked out of his massive chest. With a growl and a cough, Dark Stalker spit up some blood. Slowly, he picked himself up off the leaf-lined floor. He looked around; there were *Hard Meats* everywhere.

Quickly, he took out his razor blade lined whip, and lashed out at the closest *Hard Meat*. The whip wrapped itself around the *Hard Meat's* torso, tightened, then sliced cleanly through; the creature fell apart into two smoking pieces, acid blood spilling onto the jungle floor. Expertly, Dark Stalker twirled around, using the momentum of the whip to lash out at another creature. The thorny tipped whip slapped the face of a *Hard Meat*, splattering acid blood onto the trunk of a tree. Before Dark Stalker could even react, the *Hard Meat* lunged. Soaring through the air, the *Hard Meat* smashed into Dark Stalker's chest, knocking the wind out of his lungs. The *Hard Meat* clawed at his chest, digging and tear through his hard hide. Immediately, after the pain settled in, Dark Stalker kneed the creature off him, then with all his might, punched the creature in the jaw. The hardened exoskeleton cracked his knuckles, sending a quick sharp pain up his arm. Dazed, momentarily, the *Hard Meat* staggered. Then, as quickly as he could, Dark Stalker unsheathed a one-foot long edged knife, and smashed the tip into the serpent-like creature's cranium; acidic blood poured out from the wound.

Suddenly, Dark Stalker looked behind him; a *Hard Meat*, leaping from tree-to-tree, charged towards him. Dark Stalker spun and lashed out with his whip. The sudden impact from the razor-tipped whip knocked the *Hard Meat* off its claws, slamming it into the ground. Recovering quickly, the *Hard Meat* scurried onto its feet, and pounced. With quick reflexes, Dark Stalker flicked his wrists, wrapping the length of his whip around the *Hard Meat's* neck; then, with a forceful tug, he decapitated the creature.

Dark Stalker, feeling the exhaustion from battling with the *Hard Meats*, glanced momentarily to his left. Off in the distance he could see more of his clan mates engaged in fierce combat with the *Hard Meats*. One, he saw, had been grabbed from behind, then impaled by the *Hard Meat's* powerful tail; the razor-sharp tip of the tail was drenched in glowing green blood.

A righteous kill.

Then, out of nowhere, a Kautya, holding the chained-leash of a *Hard Meat*, charged. The murdering Kautya warrior released the chain, freeing the *Hard Meat* from its shackles. Moments later, the *Hard Meat* lunged towards Dark Stalker. The *Hard Meat* slammed into him with incredible force, easily knocking him off his feet. Expertly, however, Dark Stalker kicked the creature off of him, sending the *Hard Meat* slamming into the trunk of a tree. As quickly as possible, Dark Stalker picked himself up.

Dark Stalker roared.

Just then, the murderous Kautya warrior, wearing only a loincloth and a scarred biomechanical mask, kicked Dark Stalker in the chest. The impact knocked him off his feet, winding him almost instantly; Dark Stalker, however, rolled over backwards, emerging on his feet.

With a rage, they stared at each other.

Just then, the *Hard Meat* scurried onto its feet, and hissed. Dark Stalker immediately turned around to face the creature. Just in time, the *Hard Meat* lashed out with its scorpion-like tail. With lightning fast reflexes, Dark Stalker caught the tail in mid-air, before it could impale him; then, with epic strength, Dark Stalker snapped the hard exoskeletal tail in two. Acid blood poured forth from the wound. Screeching in pain, the *Hard Meat* recoiled.

Taken completely by surprise, the scarred Kautya warrior charged. Then, with a piercing pain, the Kautya stabbed Dark Stalker in the gut with a single-bladed wristblade. The two-foot long edged blade sliced cleanly through his belly; glowing green blood poured forth from the wound, coating the razor-sharp blade as well. With a rage, Dark Stalker forced the blade out of his belly, then stabbed the Kautya brute with the scorpion-like tail in his hands. The thorn-like *Hard Meat* tail dug deep into the brute's shoulder, causing him to recoil in pain. Then, with a hard backhand, Dark Stalker smacked the brutish creature back; the Kautya took several steps backwards, recovering from the sudden assault.

With a sudden confidence, Dark Stalker uncoiled his razor-tipped whip, and lashed out. With a crack, the whip sliced through the air, wrapping around the Kautya's neck. The razorblades dug into the brute's flesh; glowing green blood oozed from around the length of the whip. The Kautya warrior tried desperately to free himself from the grasp of the deadly whip, but it was a futile attempt. With a quick tug, Dark Stalker shattered the brute's cervical vertebrae, spilling more glowing green blood onto the jungle floor.

Dark Stalker roared in triumph.

All of a sudden, Dark Stalker heard a terrible snarl behind him. As quickly as he could, he turned around. Before Dark Stalker could even react, the *Hard Meat* slashed at him; the claws dug into the metallic biomechanical mask, knocking it off his face. Dark Stalker was taken completely off-balance. In an attempt to recover, he took two steps backwards; his vision needed time to adjust to the new parameters.

During that time, the *Hard Meat* pounced. Dark Stalker, again, was knocked off his feet. The creature stood on his chest, crushing it, preventing him from getting a proper breath. Dark Stalker, in a rage, punched the *Hard Meat* in the face; one of its sickle-tusks broke off, acidic blood spat out, some of it dropped onto his knuckles. It burned through his flesh, deep enough to reach bone; it hurt, a lot, but Dark Stalker didn't express the pain. Instead, he punched again, and again, kicking the creature as well; he tried everything he could get the massive creature off his chest, but it was futile. The *Hard Meat*, instead, reached out with its two clawed hands, grabbed his head, and lifted it off the ground. Dark Stalker struggled as much as he could. The *Hard Meat* snarled and hissed, drool oozing forth from its hideous mouth. Dark Stalker roared, then punched the creature again with all his remaining might. The shock was enough the momentarily daze the serpent-like creature, and easily broke his wrist. Instead of fighting back, Dark Stalker reached for his left wrist, and activated the self-destruct device.

The countdown was initiated; the beep-beep-beep of the bomb rang in his ears.

The *Hard Meat* hissed again, then, like a powerful ram, the jaw-lined tongue of the creature punched through the hard cranium of Dark Stalker. Glowing green blood splattered onto the jungle floor and onto the *Hard Meat* itself. The *Hard Meat* hissed in triumph.

Then, enveloping the jungle in a blinding white orb of pure energy, the self-destruct device exploded.

Mitchell, running side-by-side with Natalya Chernova, raced through the dense jungle as fast as his tired legs would take him; he swatted branches out of the way in an attempt to move faster. He was breathing hard, huffing and puffing, almost gasping for air. Besides the breaking of branches and the rustle of leaves, Mitchell couldn't hear

anything else. The Xenomorphs, it seemed were no longer behind them. Regardless, Mitchell didn't want to stop, just in case they were.

Suddenly, in between staggered breaths, Natalya shouted, "How far?"

Mitchell didn't quite know; he knew it was close though. Before Mitchell could reply, the jungle lit up. Mitchell immediately covered his eyes with his arm, but the intense illumination still burned through his retinas. Seconds later, the ground rumbled, knocking them all off their feet. Mitchell collapsed behind a fallen log, then slid into a shallow ditch. Moments later, the powerful pressure wave slammed into them; the wind, caused by a massive explosion, roared through the jungle. The twisted, contorted trees deflected in the gale-force wind, arcing and sometimes breaking at their trunks; branches snapped off, swept up and carried by the wind. The air, suddenly, was filled with flying debris. Mitchell immediately covered his eyes, keeping his eyes shut at all times; his senses were taking a pounding.

After several seconds, the wind seemed to die down. Debris rained down upon him. His ears rang, and his eyes were still partially over-exposed by the blinding light. Slowly, Mitchell picked himself up. Suddenly, to Mitchell's left, he heard a deafening crack; the tree trunk next to him had taken a beating, and snapped like a twig. The giant tree, almost in slow motion, collapsed towards him. Mitchell, acting only on reflex, dove out of the way. Mere centimetres away from being crushed by a massive log, Mitchell quickly looked around. Off in the distance, more trees began collapsing from the brutal onslaught.

"Out of the forest!" Mitchell screamed, "Get out, now!"

Mitchell immediately ran towards the edge of the forest. He didn't know how far it was, but he knew he needed to get out of the jungle. To his left, he saw Kim running through the gauntlet of fallen trees, broken branches, dug up root systems, and plummeting trees; to his right, Natalya and Vlad were running for their lives as well, Anastasiya right on their heels. Mitchell could hear the cracking snaps of tree trunks all around him; the thick wooden bark splintered and shattered, toppling the twisted contortions toward the leafy ground.

Out from the shadows, to Mitchell's right, another tree came crashing through the canopy. A cracking shatter resonated within the jungle. Mitchell immediately skidded to a stop, sliding through the damp leafy ground. Metres in front of him, the tree smashed into the ground, shaking the ground. Mitchell, caught under the leafy branches, was forced off his feet; one of the thick branches smacked the top of his head,

while another crushed his left leg. Mitchell clawed his way through the tangle of branches; his head was killing him, and his vision was doubled and blurry. Regardless, after only a few moments, he was free.

"Fuckin' hell!" Mitchell cursed.

Mitchell, having successfully freed himself from the fallen tree, began running towards the edge of the forest again. His body ached, his muscles protested and pleaded for rest, but Mitchell fought on. Besides the snapping of branches and the splintering of tree trunks, Mitchell could only hear his laboured breathing. Then, from behind, another contorted tree slammed into the ground; the force from the fall shook the ground, knocking Mitchell off his feet.

Fear permeated Mitchell for a second.

After a second, realizing that it wasn't a Xenomorph, Mitchell rolled to his side, picked himself up, and continued running. His heart felt like it was going to explode, but he kept on running. He dashed forth, leaping over fallen trees, sliding under loose foliage, and trying to avoid as much falling hazards as possible. Minutes of hard running proved to be fruitful; he could see the edge of the forest. With a sudden burst of energy, Mitchell raced for the edge. Trees plummeted and collapsed all around him. He dodged expertly, either diving forward, or stopping short. Twice he was nearly crushed by several tonnes of wood and bark. After several more harried minutes, Mitchell dove for the edge of the forest. He slammed into hard basalt, sliding across its rough, vesicular surface.

Mitchell rested there for a few seconds, catching his breath. Off in the distance he could hear the ear-pounding shattering of wooden trunks; it was a sharp crack, followed by creaking, ending in an earth-rumbling boom. His face was red from exhaustion and scratches sustained from the ordeal. Slowly, achingly, with a terrible moan, he picked himself up off the hard, heated surface. The rough, coarse rock stung the palm of his hands as he lifted himself up. Finally, grudgingly, he got onto his feet. Standing nearby, to Mitchell's right, was Daniel Kim; he stared deep onto the broken forest. There was a terrible gash on Kim's forehead; a stream of blood dripped down his cheek. Natalya and Vlad, on the other hand, were far to his left, slowly walking towards him.

Suddenly, Mitchell noticed that ash had started raining down upon them, like snowflakes.

Mitchell, lungs stinging with every breath, simply stood in silence. Kim came over to Mitchell; the gash on Kim's forehead probably wasn't nearly as bad as it looked, but Mitchell felt compelled to ask, "How is it?" Pointing to the forehead.

Kim touched his forehead, then looked at his bloodied fingers; apparently he hadn't noticed until just now. Then, Kim answered, "It's fine, Major."

Unknown to Mitchell, Natalya stood in front of Mitchell. He was suddenly taken aback. She looked at him with a hard glare; he met hers. They remained that way for several tense seconds.

It was Vlad, however, that spoke first, "What was that? Nuke?"

Mitchell broke his glare, and looked upon Vlad; he shook his head, "No. I don't think so."

Kim, now, has begun walking towards them. He ripped the headset off his head, "Electronics are fried."

Mitchell checked his; the visor was completely dead, and he wasn't getting a signal from his radio, "Mine too."

Natalya, showing the first bit of heated emotion, screamed, "What do we do?"

Mitchell provided no answer; he didn't have one.

Vlad asked, "Will shuttle still get here?"

Mitchell thought for a moment; if the shuttle had been in the atmosphere when the explosion went off, and if indeed the explosion sent out an electromagnetic pulse, the shuttle would probably have been disabled and destroyed. Finally, he replied, "I don't know."

Everyone collectively sighed. Mitchell turned around and looked upon the barren, desolate landscape. Huge mounds of hardened basalt, looking more like black knife-like jags jutting out from the surface, skewered the terrain. The rock itself, cracked and potted with holes, was hot and steaming. Occasionally, fissures would erupt, sending jets of superheated steam and volcanic gasses into the surrounding air. Underneath all the black rock must be an active volcanic terrain. It was beautiful, alien, but also harsh and desolate.

Then, something occurred to him, "Where is Anastasiya?"

Suddenly, everyone started looking around. Everyone was surprised that they had forgotten about her during the assault.

Natalya answered, "She was right behind me in jungle."

Mitchell gazed into the ashen, ruined jungle; he gasped, "Shit."

Immediately, he ran into the broken jungle landscape. The dead trunks of trees lay in random positions all across the jungle floor; now, more than ever, branches and leaves littered the jungle floor. Worse than all that, ash from the explosion descended upon them. Almost everything now was coated in a fine layer of ash. Mitchell coughed, his lungs trying to clear its airways. Together, they searched the jungle. It was an almost impossible task; now there were all sorts of random shadows and crevasses. She could be trapped anywhere.

After nearly twenty minutes of searching, Mitchell was the one to find her. He sighed and sagged, "Over here!"

Moments later, the others descended upon him. Just as quickly, they realized what had happened. Mitchell stared at the young woman, crushed underneath the trunk of a twisted tree, a broken branch severing her heart in two; two broken ribs protruded from her chest. Her face, once so youthful and beautiful, was covered in mud and blood; her appendages lay on the damp ground at unusual angles, probably broken from the impact. It was a bad way to die. Terrifyingly, her eyes seemed to stare up at him.

Painfully, Mitchell knelt down beside her and closed her eyes. He whispered, "I'm sorry."

With a sense of anguish, Mitchell picked himself up off the ash-covered floor. He sagged, and shook his head. Then, slowly, he walked out of the war-torn jungle. Right behind him were the others. While walking through the jungle, Mitchell thought of everyone he had lost on this mission; Mitchell, for the first time, felt demoralized.

It wasn't supposed to happen this way.

Together, they stood on the basaltic lava field in silence. No one seemed to know what to do next. Mitchell simply stood there, staring off into the misty distance; the entire terrain was black rock. So desolate; so... depressing.

After a minute, Vlad then pointed behind him, towards the lava field, "There is smoke coming from there."

Mitchell looked up, in the direction Vlad was pointing. Off in the distance was a column of dense, black smoke rising from the black surface of the lava field. Dread permeated Mitchell's mind.

He looked behind him, turned to Kim, and asked, "How far, Kim?"

Kim looked at the smoke column, probably with the same dread Mitchell felt, then said, "Three kilometres."

Natalya, full of concern, replied, "Shuttle?"

"Probably." Mitchell whispered.

Natalya shook her head, "What do?"

"Hike over there." Mitchell answered.

Grudgingly, he started walking across the harsh, barren terrain. Behind him, the rest followed. They hiked over the jagged, hilly, landscape. Mitchell had to avoid crevasses that littered the cracked surface, as well as fissures and geysers spewing superheated steam from the depths. The air was hot, almost sweltering, and only getting hotter as they went deeper and deeper into the lava terrain. Mitchell sweated profusely; it poured down his forehead, stinging his eyes, and down his cheek like a river. His uniform was definitely soaked. It hurt to breath, as the air was so hot and laced with all kinds of poisonous gases.

Finally, after nearly an hour and a half of walking, Mitchell came across a ridge. His knees ached, and the heels of his feet were in excruciating pain. Below, maybe three storeys or so, was the source of the smoking column. Down below, lodged into the jagged rocks, was the crisp wreckage of the shuttle. Parts of the wings were aflame, the cabin seemed filled with noxious smoke, while the rest was a mere tangle of twisted metal.

Mitchell, gazing upon the wreckage, sighed.

Moments later, Natalya, Vlad and Kim stood next to him. They too looked down upon the crash site. No one said a word, but Mitchell knew what they were all thinking. He knew how screwed they were.

"Son of a bitch." Mitchell whispered to himself.

* * *

Hours passed; now, it seemed, like daylight was upon them. Not that you could really notice; the air here was so dense with steam that it almost blocked out the luminosity from the binary stars. After reaching the crash site, they merely sat on the edge of the ridge. Kim continually tried to fix his headset, but to no avail. Depressed, Mitchell simply watched as the shuttle was slowly consumed by flames and enveloped by dense black smoke. The rest seemed to be in a similar state of depression, frustration and emotional agony.

Suddenly, a massive roar resonated within the lava field.

"Where did it come from?" Mitchell asked.

Natalya answered, "Southwest."

Mitchell recognized the roar. It wasn't from any I he knew; it was from one of those invisible creatures. Immediately, Mitchell snapped into action, "Kim, get onto that ridge," Mitchell pointed to another cliff platform towards the north, "and see if you can get a vantage point."

Without a word, Kim took his sniper rifle, and ran off towards the ridge.

Natalya added, "I will follow."

Running behind Kim, Natalya followed closely behind. Vlad, meanwhile, stared emotionless towards the southwest; his gaze seemed hard and strong. Mitchell, too, drew his stare towards the southwest. Out past the jagged terrain, fissures had erupted, filling the low-lying topography with steam and toxic gases.

Then, moments later, a massive hulking creature walked towards them. Wearing only a loincloth and a biomechanical mask, Mitchell could see its ripped, hard muscles. Spots of dried, green blood covered the creature's chest. Standing over seven feet tall, it towered over all of them; its massive pectoral muscles, ripped abs, and huge arms made it seem even more massive. The most surprising thing, to Mitchell anyways, was that on its right shoulder was the head of an Alien Queen.

Impressive.

Before Mitchell could react, Vlad opened fire upon the hulking creature. His assault rifle assailed his eardrum, but that was the least of his problems. Seconds behind Vlad, Mitchell too opened up his Pulse Rifle. Together, two streams of hot lead shot towards the beast. Surprisingly, the creature ducked behind the Alien Queen's head,

using it as a shield; the bullets, although travelling at great velocities, merely bounced off the hardened exoskeleton.

"Fuck!" Mitchell screamed.

Forgotten Darkness ducked behind the *Hard Meat Mother's* skull. The bullets hammered into its skull, bouncing off harmlessly. After only a moment, he came out from its protective shield. He gazed upon the two *Soft Meats* in front of him. They looked afraid.

Pathetic.

Forgotten Darkness, however, was having a hard time focusing on the *Soft Meats*. The landscape around him was so hot it almost camouflaged their warm bodies; his vision was blurring their warm bodies together with the warm surroundings. It didn't matter. Forgotten Darkness was an experienced killer.

With a terrible roar, Forgotten Darkness charged.

The creature charged. Mitchell and Vlad continued their onslaught of bullets. The bullets had little effect on the creature's hard hide, but those that did penetrate left glowing green craters on the creature's torso. Regardless how many rounds they put into the creature, it kept on charging towards them. Mitchell felt fear permeate his body.

Then, out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Vlad pull the pin on another fragmentation grenade, and roll it towards the charging creature. The grenade hopped and bounced on the rough, coarse basaltic terrain, finally settling in front of the charging creature. Then, at the most perfect time, the fragmentation grenade exploded. With a bright flash, followed by a puff of dense dark grey smoke, the grenade sent out its twisted metal shrapnel. The creature stopped dead in its tracks, shrapnel embedding itself into its chest and legs. Trickle of glowing green blood poured forth from its wounds.

With a roar, Mitchell shouted, "Kim! Get on that fifty!"

At that moment, Mitchell saw a quick muzzle flash, then the pounding thump of the .50 calibre round rang out within the basaltic terrain. Suddenly, Mitchell saw, the

powerful tungsten carbide round pierced through the top of the Alien Queen's crown, blowing a clean hole straight through it. Unfortunately, the heavy bullet missed the creature.

With that, the hulking beast turned his attention towards Kim. It roared, almost like a cry for war, then charged. Kim fired again, another pounding rang across the barren terrain; this time the heavy round passed through the Alien Queen's exoskeleton and struck the creature in the shoulder. Glowing green blood splattered across the black rock; the creature itself staggered onto its knees.

Mitchell, meanwhile, fired relentlessly at the creature.

Kim brought the monster to its knees. Glee filled Kim. The heavy round, it seemed, was the only thing that could bring it down. Immediately, Kim cocked the bolt action back, chambering another round, then slapped it back in place. He aimed, and fired again. Like a sledgehammer, the concussive force from the round assailed his eardrums. The heavy round struck the Alien Queen's crown again, shattering the top portion.

Bloody steam! Kim thought.

Reflexively, Kim cocked back the bolt again, loading another round. Kim's heart was pounded, while he clenched his jaw, slowly grinding the enamel off his teeth. Then, he looked down the scope; this time, however, he didn't fire. When he looked down the scope of his rifle, the hulking beast was nowhere to be seen. For a split second, Kim was utterly terrified. He had no idea where the creature was. Suddenly, the creature landed centimetres away from him, off to Kim's left side. Surprise, then terror, filled Kim's heart. Never in his life had an enemy get so close to him.

Kim immediately swung his rifle around. The creature, as fast and strong as it was, managed to catch the barrel in mid-swing. Kim, however, squeezed the trigger anyways. The muzzle flash blinded Kim, and his ears were completely shot, blaring in protest. The round, however, sailed right by the creature, missing his head by a centimetre or two. Then, with an incredible feat of strength, the creature bent the barrel of the rifle over.

"Oh shit." Kim said.

* * *

Forgotten Darkness bent the rifle barrel in half, destroying their most powerful weapon against him. He gazed down upon the small *Soft Meat*, then began to laugh. His laugh, maniacal and hideous, echoed throughout the basaltic terrain. Then, with a fury, Forgotten Darkness pummelled the *Soft Meat*. He punched the *Soft Meat* in the face with his right fist, easily crushing bone. Forgotten Darkness gazed down, revelling in the sight of blood profusely pouring forth from the *Soft Meat's* mouth; the *Soft Meat* groaned in pain, pleading for salvation. Then, with his left, he punched him again. Red blood spurted out from the *Soft Meat's* mouth and nose, flowing freely from both orifices.

With glee, Forgotten Darkness played with the blood in his hands.

Then, with a rage, Forgotten Darkness resumed his pummelling. He punched left and right, crushing bone, tearing flesh, and spilling blood with every assault. The cheek bones collapsed, and the skull caved in. Soon, Forgotten Darkness was simply hammering flesh and bone into the black rock underneath the *Soft Meat*. The red blood splattered across Forgotten Darkness' chest; it felt cold.

Finally, he stopped. He gazed down on the *Soft Meat*; he was nothing more than a mash of bloody goo. He reached into the bloody mess, worked the bloody flesh through his fingers once more, then wiped it across his chest. The blood felt slick and smooth against his palms and fingers.

Then, in a triumphant roar, he laughed.

Natalya ran through the warm mist towards Daniel Kim as fast as she could. By the time she got within visual range, she saw the hulking brute playing his what remained of Kim's bloody mess of a face; reddish-black blood ran down its hands and arm. The creature seemed full of glee and triumph. The sight disgusted her, prompting her to almost vomit.

She raised her assault rifle, but before she squeezed the trigger, she decided against it. She remained in the limited cover of the steamy mist and quickly pulled out her magazine. Slowly, as silently as possible, she reached behind her and pulled out another magazine that she saved for "special occasions". The bullets in this magazine were made from depleted uranium, an incredibly dense material that was also pyrophoric; they were also illegal. Silently, she slipped the magazine into the receiver. It slapped into place.

But just then, the massive creature leapt downward off the ridge.

Natalya cursed in her native tongue, then ran to the edge of the ridge. She raised her assault rifle and lined up her sights. The creature was fast; almost too fast. She couldn't get a clean shot at the beast. Then, just as suddenly as the creature appeared, it had disappeared into the mist.

She cursed again.

Forgotten Darkness landed on the hard black rocks below with terrible force; the basaltic rocks shattered and cracked from the force of the impact. Landing on his knees, he slowly rose to full height. Off in the distance, through the hot mist of steam and gases, he saw the two *Soft Meats*. He could barely make out their outline; their bodies were slightly colder than the surrounding ambient air, but the distinction was barely noticeable.

Regardless, he charged forward. Every step he took, it seemed, shook the ground. He could feel the glass shards and jagged rocks dig into the soles of his feet, but the pain offered him some degree of satisfaction.

Joyfully, he attacked.

Like a freight train, the hulking beast charged towards them. Together, they fired their weapons, sending a maelstrom of hot lead into the creature. With incredible agility and versatility, the creature ducked behind the Alien Queen's skull again, protecting it from the hailstorm of bullets pummeling it. Moments later, the beast closed the distance between them.

Reflexively, Mitchell pushed Vlad out of the way.

Suddenly, like a hurricane, Mitchell was kicked up off his feet. The massive black Alien Queen's skull slammed into his chest, knocking the wind out of him instantly. Stars flashed into view, and suddenly, he had the sensation of free-fall. Seconds later, he smashed into the basaltic rocks underneath him; a sharp, stinging pain shot up his spinal cord. Rolling, he nearly plummeted off the edge of the ridge. Luckily, he managed to grab hold of a jagged rock before falling off completely; hanging on for dear life, only by his right arm, he dangled off the edge of death. Mitchell looked down for a split

second; he saw his Pulse Rifle plummet downwards, smashing into a million pieces upon impact.

Mitchell cursed, then hazarded a quick glance at the creature.

The hulking beast had turned his attention towards Vlad. Vlad, backpedalling, fired wild shots into the creature. Some ricocheted off its tough hide, others penetrated into its flesh. The creature, although nearly all muscle, was spotted with its own glowing green blood.

Mitchell tried to pull himself up, but he struggled, nearly slipping off the cliff completely.

He was forced to watch as the hulking beast closed the distance between the creature and Vlad. With incredible power, the creature reached outward with its left hand and grabbed Vlad by the throat. The powerful creature brought Vlad to his knees, slowly crushing and strangling the life out of him. Vlad, to his credit, fought on; he fired his assault rifle nearly point-blank, but the creature quickly wrenched the weapon out of Vlad's hands and smashed it against the black rocks. Vlad's face was red, slowly turning bluish-purple.

With all the defiance in the Russian, Vlad cursed him.

Then, with its right hand, the creature grabbed Vlad's face. Slowly, agonizingly, the creature dug its clawed fingers into Vlad's eyes. Vlad let out a horrible, blood-curdling scream; blood gushed out of his eye sockets. Deeper and deeper the creature plunged its fingers into his eye sockets. Mitchell could see the blood pouring down Vlad's cheeks and neck, soaking into his uniform.

Then, with shocking fury, the hulking beast tore his fingers out of Vlad's sockets. Blood splattered across the black basaltic rocks. Then, in a rage, the creature smashed Vlad's head into the jagged rocks repeatedly. Vlad's skull cracked open, spilling more blood onto the rocky terrain. With every successive blow, more and more blood splattered onto the creature's chest. Every knock resonated a hollow, empty echo; it was disturbing.

During this, however, while the creature was distracted, Mitchell managed to pull himself up onto solid ground. Slowly, out of the creature's eye line, Mitchell stood up.

* * *

Charging out of the superheated steam, Natalya emerged to see the hulking beast smash Vlad's skull into the hard, jagged basaltic rocks. Her mind was suddenly washed over with emotions; rage, mainly. She screamed with all the anger in her heart, then, without thinking, she raised her assault rifle, lined up her iron sights, and fired a quick burst as the creature.

The first few rounds streaked through the hot air and into the creature's flesh. The dense rounds easily passed through the creature's muscular torso, sending glowing green blood spurting out the exit wound. The creature immediately turned his attention onto her. It roared, showing off its massive pectoral muscles and ripped abs. Natalya fired again. Instinctively, the creature ducked behind the Alien Queen's skull. The depleted uranium rounds easily passed through the hardened exoskeleton of the Alien Queen; each round, it seemed, struck its mark.

For the first time, Natalya heard the creature scream in pain.

"Not so good now, huh?" She screamed in Russian.

Suddenly, the creature came onto its feet, and charged towards her at a frightful speed. Still ducking behind the Alien Queen's head, it stormed forth. Natalya stood her ground, firing short concentrated bursts of depleted uranium rounds. Each round punched straight through the Alien Queen's skull, hammering the creature behind it. It screeched and screamed, but continued its relentless charge. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw a trail of glowing green blood spots; the creature was definitely injured.

Before she knew it, she ran out of ammunition.

Then, at that moment, the creature came out from behind the Alien Queen's skull, raced forth and closed the remaining distance between them. Like a clamp, the creature reached out to her and grabbed her by the throat. The creature, slowly, lifted her off her feet; she remained dangling there for several seconds. Her vision began to blur as her windpipe closed. A terrible pain spread throughout her body. She choked and coughed for air, but to no avail. She was being strangled.

Then, just before she was about to black out, something or someone came out of the mist. It was Mitchell! Holding a twisted RPK-217 assault rifle like a baseball bat, Mitchell swung at the creature's head. With a terrible crack, the force from the strike knocked the creature off-balance, causing it to stagger for a moment.

Then, with a furious rage, the creature threw Natalya towards the jagged ground. Before she knew it, she struck the side of a sharp boulder-sized rock; her left

arm took the brunt of the attack, snapping like a twig upon impact. She screamed as a wave of pain washed over her; then, before she knew it, her vision started to fade. Soon, she completely blacked out.

Mitchell swung the butt end of the assault rifle again. This time it connected perfectly; it smashed into the creature's face, knocking lose its biomechanical mask. At that moment, Mitchell gazed upon the hideous creature's true face. It was much larger than the one Mitchell had seen previously; its face had four huge mandibles, like tusks, and its mouth was lined with sharp, blood drenched fangs. Its skin was dark, black or dark brown, and all along its forehead and cheeks were red and orange spots and stripes. Its eyes were the most hideous of all; they were sulphur-yellow and blood-red.

In awe, Mitchell replied, "You are one ugly... mother fucker..."

Then, the creature roared.

Mitchell charged and swung the assault rifle like a baseball bat again. This time, however, the creature caught the rifle in mid-swing. Mitchell was wide-eyed with surprise. Then, with a display of incredible strength, the creature jerked the rifle out of his hands. Mitchell was taken completely aback. The creature examined the rifle for a moment, then, smashed it on the jagged rocks; the metal and hard oak parts of the assault rifle shattered like a kid's toy.

Mitchell, out of ideas, started backpedalling. The creature, however, closed ground too quickly. Then, with a fury, the creature punched Mitchell in the gut. Mitchell felt an incredible pain wash over him, and suddenly, he felt like he was going to vomit. Seconds later, before Mitchell could even recover, the creature backhanded him in the face; blood spat out of Mitchell's mouth.

The creature's attacks were relentless. A combination of punches and slaps were indefensible. Every punch weakened him further, bleeding energy and will out of Mitchell. Then, for a moment, the onslaught paused. Exhausted, Mitchell stood, swaying from side-to-side; blood poured freely from Mitchell's mouth and nose; his face was bruised, and some of his bones must have been broken. Then, just when Mitchell thought he could take no more, the creature kicked Mitchell backwards, off his feet.

Mitchell landed awkwardly, on his head and right shoulder. Pain surged up his spine and permeated into every muscle in his body. Mitchell could barely see, let alone

fight any longer. Seconds later, the creature walked towards him; it stood over his body like a towering monolith. With a fury, the creature grabbed Mitchell by the hair, wrenching him up off the warm, rocky ground. The creature looked right at him, into his eyes. With the slink of sliding metal, the brutish creature then showed Mitchell his single-bladed wristblade; it was an edged weapon, razor-sharp, bloodied. Then, seconds later, taunting him, the creature began to laugh.

Angered, Mitchell looked around him. He reached out, and grabbed a head-sized jagged rock. Mitchell, with a rage in his tone, screamed, "Laugh at this!"

Anger unleashed, Mitchell smashed the hard basaltic rock into the creature's face. He heard bones break, and suddenly, glowing green blood spat out of the creature's mandible mouth. At that moment, from the force of the impact, the creature let Mitchell go. Then, with another furious attack, Mitchell slammed the rock into the creature's cranium again. The hulking beast staggered backwards from the impact; green blood pour forth from the creature's cranium. The creature screamed, trying to fend off and repel the vicious attacks. Relentlessly, Mitchell smashed and slammed the basaltic rock into the creature's head, breaking and shattering bones, and spilling blood. The hard thud of every impact filled Mitchell's ears; glowing green blood splattered onto Mitchell's chest.

With every smash, Mitchell roared in rage.

Finally, after four or five powerful hits, the creature collapsed. It fell backwards, finally settling onto its back. The creature's face was covered in its own blood; now, with so many broken bones and deep gashes, its face was deformed and mangled. The beast's eyes seemed unfocused, like he was in a daze, and it coughed repeatedly; blood, almost continuously now, flowed out from the creature's mouth.

Mitchell, utterly exhausted from the onslaught, took a few moments to catch his breath; his breathing was laboured, probably because the air around him was full of noxious fumes. He looked down at the basaltic rock he held in his hands. The rock itself was covered in glowing green blood, along with his hands and forearms. Slowly, Mitchell approached the creature's resting body. He looked straight at the creature, ever taking his eyes off it.

Mitchell asked, "What the hell are you?"

Surprisingly, the creature replied in a deep, grizzled voice, "What... the hell... are you..."

The creature began laughing again. Mitchell was confused. It had to know it was about to die, yet it was laughing. These creatures had a sick sense of mortality. Mitchell, in a rage, stood over the creature's head, then with one last pummel, smashed the jagged rock into its skull. This time, the creature's skull caved in completely; the rock smashed and tore brain matter, shattered cranial bone, and killed the creature instantly. Blood profusely oozed out of the gaping wound.

With a sigh of relief, Mitchell dropped the blood-soaked rock.

Then, in that moment, he ran over to Natalya. She laid on the ground, unconscious and unmoving. There were terrible purplish bruise marks around her neck, dried blood around her nose and at the corners of her mouth, and her left humerus was clearly broken. She looked dead, but Mitchell refused to believe it; a powerful emotion rose up within him.

He shook her, trying to wake her up, "Natalya! Natalya!" Then, in desperation, he slapped her across the face; suddenly, her eyes widened, and she looked upon him. He smiled, then she did.

"Dead?" Natalya asked.

Mitchell nodded, "Yeah, it's dead."

Natalya sagged in relief, "Good."

Mitchell had opened up the med-kit and tried to treat Natalya's wounds as best he could; he salvaged the barrel of the assault rifle, using it as a splint for her arm. Then, after nearly an hour, Mitchell gazed up into the cloud-filled grey sky. Through the clouds, the dropship descended upon them. It soared through the sky, leaving two white contrails behind it. After a few minutes, the dropship finally settled for a landing just two hundred metres away.

Out of the berth, several men in white HAZMAT gear exited. Mitchell immediately picked Natalya up and carried her over his shoulder. They raced over to Mitchell and Natalya. Without saying a word, they grabbed her from his clutches and carried her to the dropship. Mitchell was about to protest, but then out of the corner of his eyes he saw a familiar face.

"General!" Mitchell shouted.

Lieutenant-General Waters slowly walked down the boarding ramp; he wore his best military uniform, something unusual for an officer. Then, out from behind Lieutenant-General Waters, Major Rowe came down the ramp. Mitchell found that odd, but he was just glad to have this ordeal behind him; as quickly as his tired legs would take him, he ran over to the Lieutenant-General. As he approached the roar of the turbine engines seemed to overwhelm his senses.

"Major!" Lieutenant-General Waters shouted; Waters looked around, then replied, "Is this it?"

Major Scott Mitchell stood up straight and saluted; Lieutenant-General Waters complied. Then, he replied, "Yes, General. I've got people down all around, sir!"

"We'll get to them as soon as possible." Lieutenant-General Waters looked around at the barren landscape, then asked, "What the fuck happened here, Major?"

"It was a clusterfuck, sir!" Major Mitchell replied.

"Xenomorphs?" Lieutenant-General Waters asked, "Did you find the evidence we need?"

"Negative, sir!" Major Mitchell replied, "There was no lab here?"

"No lab?" Lieutenant-General Waters looked off to the distance for a moment, contemplating the information; finally, after several seconds, he replied, "Then what the fuck was it?"

"The Xenomorphs," Mitchell started to explain, "they were brought here by another alien race! Unknown!" He said; then added, "They were trained! The Xenomorphs were trained, like hunting dogs or something, sir!"

Lieutenant-General Waters absorbed the information for a moment, "So it wasn't the Imperials..."

Mitchell shook his head.

Lieutenant-General Waters sighed, then said in a soft tone, almost too soft to hear, "Well, I'm very sorry, Major."

"Sorry for what, sir?" Mitchell asked.

Suddenly, almost quicker than his eyes could register, Lieutenant-General Waters pulled out a handgun and pointed it at Mitchell's chest. Mitchell couldn't even

react; he simply stood in place, wide-eyed with surprise. Then, a fraction of a second later, Lieutenant-General Waters fired. A white puff of smoke exited the muzzle of the handgun, followed by a powerful thud on Mitchell's chest. A moment later, Mitchell looked down and saw a dart pointing out of his sternum.

Mitchell tried to protest, but suddenly felt very groggy and dizzy. Almost immediately, Mitchell collapsed onto the hard basaltic landscape. His vision was blurry and unfocused, but he could still hear just fine. His body, however, was almost completely paralyzed; he could move his head side-to-side, slowly, but none of his extremities or limbs.

Then, in an almost echoed voice, Mitchell heard Lieutenant-General Waters call out, "Get him out of here!"

Out of the inner depths of the dropship, several men in white HAZMAT suits exited; Mitchell noticed that over their left bicep was the triangular emblem of Morton & Alan Corporation. Then, Major Rowe appeared in his field-of-view; Rowe looked down upon Mitchell with a smile on his face. His body felt weightless, but his mind felt heavy.

"Sorry, Mitchell, but you're just shit outta luck." Rowe explained, "The General just couldn't trust a boy-scout like yourself."

Rowe gave him one more smile, then disappeared. Then, almost in slow motion, the HAZMAT personnel carried him into the cargo-hold of the dropship. Inside he saw Lieutenant-General Waters sitting on one of the seats; across from him was Natalya Chernova. She had a sling across her arm. Neither said a word, but it did seem like they knew each other.

Then, out of nowhere, Rowe struck Mitchell in the head with butt of a rifle. Then, everything went black.

Natalya sat across of Lieutenant-General Waters. There was an uneasy tension between the two. Her arm hung in a makeshift sling; it was killing her, the kind of persistent, throbbing pain that seemed to slowly spread up her arm and into the rest of her body, even with the morphine, but that wasn't her biggest problem. With a hard glare, Lieutenant-General Waters stared at her. She hazard a quick glance at Mitchell's unconscious body; then, she stared back at Waters.

Then, one of the General's lackeys, Major Tim Rowe, walked up to the General with a smirk on his face. He leaned into the General, then whispered something inaudible into the General's ear. Then, after a moment, Major Rowe disappeared into the forward section of the shuttle. The General's expression was a snarl.

Then, in a harsh, grizzled voice, Lieutenant-General Waters spoke, "So this was a complete waste of time," He then added, "and resources."

"Not—" Natalya started before being interrupted.

"I don't like exposing myself like this!" Lieutenant-General Waters remarked, "It's too risky! It jeopardizes the mission!"

"Not a complete waste." Natalya replied in a thick Russian accent.

"I don't see how?" Lieutenant-General Waters asked.

"My status in Imperial Army?" Natalya asked, "What is it?"

Lieutenant-General Waters looked at her, "Dead."

She nodded, "Good."

He leaned back, then glanced at the unconscious body of Mitchell; he then turned his attention towards her, "A small consolation."

"We have enough to proceed." Natalya replied.

An hour later, onboard the *Aurora*:

The dropship touched down on the concrete and asphalt landing pad within the *Aurora*'s massive launching bay. Natalya was the first to descend the boarding ramp; Lieutenant-General Waters was close behind. Then, she turned around and stared at the old man.

Just then, Mitchell was being carried off on a gurney; Natalya replied, "We can still make this work."

"You goddamn better!" Lieutenant-General Waters replied, "Morton & Alan aren't paying you sit around!"

Angered, Natalya asked, "And what of you, General?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why are you doing this?" Natalya pushed.

Lieutenant-General Waters looked behind him. All around him were "company men"; some were military, but most were just men and women in business suits. The sight must have sickened the old man, just a little bit, but she couldn't be sure.

Lieutenant-General Waters looked back at her with an angered expression; it was obvious that he dislike her, probably because she was an Imperial. Finally, he answered, "My reasons are my own."

Then, just like that, he walked away. Natalya was left standing there. She didn't mind. She actually didn't care what their reasons were. Lieutenant-General Waters wasn't her employer, or superior; Morton & Alan Apex Chemical Consumables Corporation was her employer. She answered to them.

Then, a creeping sensation ebbed up her spine. She turned around and saw Major Rowe at the top of the boarding ramp staring at her with a smile on his face. He man, clean-shaven, with dirty blond hair worn short, and hazel eyes, was ogling her, staring at her butt. The man disgusted her.

Snapping her out of her thoughts, a medical doctor approached, "Ma'am. The nanite rejuvenation treatment is ready." She informed, "Or, would you rather I show you the laboratory?"

She looked at the young African-American woman, "The arm will keep. Show me the lab."

She had followed the young medical doctor to the medical ward. There, she quickly changed into civilian clothes; then, she put on the white lab coat last. It felt good have wear the white lab coat again; it has been awhile. She was led to the clean room; inside, everything was immaculate. The floor and ceiling consisted of tiles of fluorescent bulbs, and all the tables and stools were made of brushed stainless-steel. It was very sterile, almost uncomfortable, but it was necessary.

She entered the clean room, a glass sliding door granting her access. Inside, on a gurney, laid Mitchell; he was bound, drugged, and restrained, preventing him from moving or escaping. He was stripped nearly naked, a thin blue gown his only article of clothing. Off to the side were large glass containers; inside were the real prizes. Facehuggers.

Slowly, she approached. She stood over Mitchell; then, she ordered, "Wake him up."

Slowly, Mitchell's vision returned. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. Everything was still blurry, and his head was pounding. His vision was doubled, but slowly, they coalesced into a single image. His hearing, echoic at first, also returned to normal. Then, after a minute, he realized that he was looking up into a bright light; it nearly blinded him.

Then, Natalya appeared into view. She wore a facemask and glasses. Suddenly, a rage filled his heart; he struggled against his restraints, to no avail. Mitchell screamed, "Who are you!"

Natalya shook her head, "You not understand."

In a growl, "Try me."

Underneath her facemask, Mitchell sensed her smirk. Then, she answered, "I am Colonel-Doctor in Imperial Army." She started, "I am research scientist."

"Xenomorphs." Mitchell cursed.

"Da." She answered, "They are fascinating creatures, the Alien. And valuable."

"You're going to weaponize them?" Mitchell screamed.

"That is goal of Morton & Alan." Natalya answered, "Not mine."

"And Waters?"

She looked away, then back at Mitchell, "I don't know."

Mitchell was going to ask another question, but out of the corner of his eyes, he caught something horrifying. On the far table, to Mitchell's left, was a glass container; inside was the black, hideous figure of a super-facehugger. Even more disturbing was that all along the base of the glass container was Cyrillic lettering; the glass container was from Mitchell's takedown days ago!

Son of a bitch! Mitchell cursed.

Then, before Mitchell could protest, Natalya disappeared from his field-of-view. Then, before Mitchell knew it, another figure in a white HAZMAT suit appeared;

Mitchell couldn't see the person behind the reflective, polarized visor. The HAZMAT technician injected Mitchell with a sedative; slowly, his mind went heavy. His vision blurred slightly, his mouth dry and achy, and his limbs felt like lead-weights. Then, the person was pushing Mitchell out of the clean room. He saw the overhead lights streak by him.

After nearly ten minutes of being pushed through glass corridors, they entered a new room. On each side, two brutish men in military uniforms hauled Mitchell off the gurney and securely fastened him to an apparatus that kept him upright. Mitchell realized that they had placed him in a self-contained glass tube; it was in fact one of several glass tubes, each containing its own victim. Mitchell slowly looked upward; drool dripped out of the corner of his mouth. He saw a female figure approach him; finally, when she got close enough, he realized it was Natalya wearing a white lab coat. Rage suddenly filled his heart, but he couldn't move.

Then, Mitchell realized something terrible.

Natalya, in her arms, held the glass container with the super-facehugger inside. She passed the container to one of the HAZMAT technicians, then walked out of the room. His gaze, however, never moved away from the glass container. The HAZMAT technician twisted the glass container into place, then walked away.

With all the strength he could muster, Mitchell screamed.

A moment later, the glass container opened; the water inside sloshed around as the super-facehugger struggled and scurried out. He could feel the creatures fingers cling onto his chest, slowly working its way upward towards his face. Soon, the first finger appeared in his field-of-view, followed by another, then another. Mitchell's heart was pounding out of his chest; he was afraid and completely helpless. Suddenly, a disgusting, slimy tubule slid into his mouth, forcing its way down his throat. He gagged, trying to choke the foreign object out of his body; he felt like vomiting, but it was futile. Slowly, and forcibly, the tubule slid down his oesophagus.

Just before his eyesight was completely consumed by the super-facehugger's grasp, he saw, through a large window on the far side of the room, Natalya and Lieutenant-General Waters, along with several other personnel in white lab coats and high-priced business suits. They all watched him in silence.

Then, at that moment, darkness consumed.

* * *

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Mitchell awoken. He coughed, as if his body was rejecting the very air he was breathing; he felt like vomiting too, but instead started a series of dry-heaves. His mouth felt dry, as if it were stuffed with cotton balls. For a moment, his mind couldn't comprehend what had happened to him.

Then, like a brick wall, it all came back.

He was impregnated with a Xenomorph embryo. Worse, it was the embryo of an Alien Queen. Suddenly, he felt a tearing sensation from within his sternum. A powerful pain shot through his entire body. All he could do was scream. Then, like a punching ram, a jolt shook his entire torso; he felt two of his ribs break instantly, along with his sternum. The sound of cracking and grinding bones resonated within the glass tube. Blood trickled down the corners of his mouth, and slowly leaked out of gashes from his chest.

Mitchell cursed.

Then, with one final punch, the Xenomorph punched his way through his ribcage. Blood splattered across the glass tube. Mitchell, with a final wash of pain, descended into darkness for the last time.

Everyday, Natalya watched as the creatures burst forth from the human hosts; many times, she was the only one in the observation booth. She watched each victim birth her specimens. She had, however, a particular interest in Major Scott Mitchell; he had an Alien Queen gestate within him. She watched, every day. Waiting. Anticipating. She could almost taste her desire.

Finally, the creature, after nearly three days, finally burst forth from Mitchell's chest. It was the last to arrive. She watched as the creature tore through Mitchell's ribcage; breaking bones, tearing flesh, gnawing at the bloody mess as it clawed and writhed its way free. A surge of blood poured from his sternum, soaking through his white shirt. Natalya, surprisingly, felt a little sad. Mitchell had saved her life; for that, she was grateful. But he did not see the greater picture. For that, Natalya had no forgiveness, no remorse.

Suddenly, Mitchell screamed at the top of his lungs. It was coming! Then, the glass tube erupted in a geyser of blood. Natalya's heart skipped a beat. Her vision was blocked by the burst of blood that splattered across the glass tube, but she could still see the creature crawl and claw its way through flesh and bone. Even through the thick

glass that separated her from the room beyond, she could hear its high-pitched scream for freedom. Using its spindly arms for support, the chestburster pushed and slithered through the cavernous hole it punched through.

Natalya immediately turned to the visual monitor within the glass tube. The beige-black creature was covered in Mitchell's blood; chunks of flesh and bone covered the creature. The creature, not surprisingly, was much larger than other chestbursters; although from just as young, the creature was already two feet long head-to-tail, and twice its weight. As she studied the creature, she immediately recognized the infantile black crown on the chestburster, along with a second set of vestigial arms located on its chest.

Illation filled her heart; she whispered in Russian, "Perfect."

Just then, Lieutenant-General Waters entered the observation booth. With a hiss of hydraulics, the sliding door opened. She jumped, startled. She quickly looked over at the taller, older man standing at the door.

"Has it arrived?" He asked.

She nodded.

"Good." Then, just like that, he disappeared back into the bowels of the ship.

Her attention returned to the infantile Alien Queen in the glass tube. So young, yet already it was a deadly creature. Then, impressively, the creature looked up into the monitor; then, in a horrific display of prowess, the creature snarled, its jaw-lined tongue slinking out of its blood-filled mouth.

She smiled, then in Russian, "You will be my saviour."

Epilogue

The Aurora:

Lieutenant-General Waters calmly walked through the narrow corridors of the massive *Conestoga*-class battleship; instead of military personnel, Waters walked passed science officers, medical researchers, and worst of all, company men. He despised the fact that he had "suits" on his ship, but they were necessary for his purpose. Morton & Alan Apex Chemical Consumables Corporation was one of the largest and best financed corporations in the known galaxy; secondly, they were also one of the few corporations who had an interest in Xenomorph biology. Although, Waters knew, their interests differed from his, he knew he could take advantage of the situation regardless.

After nearly walking for ten minutes, he arrived on the bridge. To his left was a conference room. He walked in the dark room and locked the massive sliding blast doors behind him. He turned to the console and pushed a series of buttons. Suddenly, on five separate monitors, images appeared in front of him; the blue glow providing the only illumination in the shadowy room.

Directly in the middle was the CEO of Morton & Alan Apex Chemical Consumables Corporation, Alexander Lawrence; the fifty-seven year old CEO had wrinkled, pale skin, he wore his well groomed golden brown hair slicked back. After a moment, he spoke, "Well, General, good to hear from you... finally."

Lieutenant-General Waters bit back a snide comment; then, he continued, "What progress have you made?"

Waters looked directly into his piercing green eyes, and replied, "We have successfully cultivated the Alien strain."

Lawrence nodded, obviously pleased with the comment; then, he asked, "And the Queen?"

Waters smirked, "Born."

Suddenly, the five monitors were filled with gleeful expressions and nodding heads; Alexander Lawrence continued, "What is our expected timeline?"

Waters rejected the term "our" when it was really "him", but didn't comment; instead, he answered, "It will take several days, possibly a week, for the Queen to fully mature. Once matured, she should produce eggs within two or three days."

"Excellent new, General." Lawrence commented, "Really."

"Thank you."

"How are the facilities?" Lawrence asked, "Are they adequate for the job?"

Waters thought for a moment, "The facilities are fine. But the personnel..."

"What of it?" Lawrence quickly asked, a moment of worry flashed across his face.

"The Russian woman, Natalya," Waters answered, "I don't trust her."

Suddenly, a forty year old blonde woman wearing a dark blue naval uniform with a multitude of ribbons and metals across her chest, expressed her concern, "A Russian?"

Lieutenant-General Waters knew her, of course. Admiral Alexis Alexander Woods was a super-star in the United American Navy; she was dubbed the best naval pilot in the modern United American Navy, something of an ego boost. He respected her and was glad that she agreed to oversee this clandestine, and very illegal, science project.

Lawrence immediately countered, "It's no concern!"

Waters instantly replied, "I beg to differ. How can we trust her?"

Lawrence sat back in his expensive black leather seat, then answered, "Colonel-Doctor Chernova came to us, not the other way around. She has no allegiance to the Empire." He said with a smooth, calm tone, "She is dedicated to this project."

Lieutenant-General Robert Townes, a middle age Army man with white hair and cool blue eyes, protested, "I'm with the General. This is a United America funded project! We can't possibly have Imperials working on this!"

Lieutenant-General Townes had a strong hate for the Russians; he had joined the Army at eighteen, against his parent's wishes, and fought in nearly every single conflict since then; most of those conflicts were proxy wars between the United Americans and the Three World Empire. Waters recalled that during his early years, he had fought beside Townes on several occasions, most of them taking place in Africa; during the Eritrea-Ethiopian War in 2148, Townes had saved him from an exploding grenade.

"General Townes, please!" Lawrence pleaded, "Colonel-Doctor Chernova is the most qualified scientist Morton & Alan has! If anyone can find the solution to behavioural modification of the Xenomorph, Natalya can!"

"Bullshit." Lieutenant-General Townes cursed.

Lawrence sighed, "If it makes a difference, I am sending General Waters another top research scientist."

Lieutenant-General Waters was surprised, "Who?"

"A former Weyland-Yutani scientist who worked with the Alien before." Lawrence briefly explained, "We acquired his services after much... strife."

After a moment, Townes pressed, "The United Americas will still have first bids on the contracts once this is done, right?"

Lawrence nodded slowly, "They will have the first chance to acquire the technology, yes."

And that was that; she was the most qualified and best hope Waters had, and the United Americas will have the first opportunity to acquire the technology. He had to deal with it, but he didn't like it. After a moment, Waters replied, "We'll have to deal, I guess."

Lawrence nodded.

Waters added, "Speaking of Weyland-Yutani, what progress has our competition made?"

Lawrence sagged in his seat, "General Thomas Spears has taken reigns of their Xenomorph project."

Townes spat, "Spears! The man's a sociopath!"

Waters agreed. General Spears was a brute who ruled his troops with an iron fist. More of a dictator rather than a military officer. Waters and Townes had personal experience with General Spears during Operation Island Thunder, an United American invasion of Cuba in 2180.

Lawrence replied, "Regardless of your thoughts, he *is* heading the project. They, too, are pursuing Xenomorph behavioural modification."

Waters then added, "On that subject, I have news to report." He took a quick breath, "On the Xo campaign, one of my officers reported an alien species that had apparently tamed and trained the Xenomorphs."

Suddenly, everyone rose in great interest.

Major-General Kelley Owens, a balding, relatively young officer in the United American Marine Corp., quickly asked, "Which species?"

Waters punched up an image on the monitors; the low-resolution image showed stills of a hulking humanoid creature with a multitude of weaponry. Waters answered, "The hunter species."

Lawrence sunk in his seat, "Are you sure?"

Waters answered, "Yes."

Lieutenant-General Waters immediately knew the significance of the situation; although most of the records were lost during the mid to late twenty-first century, an age dubbed the "Dark Times" by the survivors, it is excepted common knowledge that over a period of centuries before, a series of "incidents" had occurred where one or several "invisible creatures" descended onto Earth and hunted humans for sport. One such occasion that is regarded as fact was in Gunnison, Colorado, the former United States, where an energy-based weapons technology was recovered; the United States government, at the time, provided the technology to the Yutani Corporation. In turn, the amalgamated Weyland-Yutani Corporation had several defence contracts based on energy-based weaponry, none that were successful in reverse-engineering the technology.

After several seconds, Owens followed up, "How did they do it?"

"Unknown." Waters answered, "But it gives us hope that its possible."

Moments later, General Malcolm Granger of the United American Air Force, a late sixty year old African-American man with salt-and-pepper hair and large clear glasses, asked in a deep, bass-filled, burly voice, "Follow up?"

Waters answered, "We'll stay out in unregulated space and conduct our research." He paused, "Until then, we'll have to keep this quiet. We can't afford to have the United Nations catching wind of this."

General Granger nodded, agreeing with the comment. Everyone stared into their monitors, contemplating the new information or thinking of the future. They all had muted excitement painted on all their faces.

This could finally happen, Waters thought.

Then, after a few moments, Lawrence spoke, "Good work, General. Keep us informed of your work."

Waters nodded, "Attached to this message is a summary of the events that transpired on Xo. You might find some incidents of interest."

"Anything recoverable from Xo?" Lawrence asked.

"No." Waters immediately answered.

"That's too bad." Lawrence replied; then, after a second, "Keep in touch."

With that, Lawrence signed off; his monitor went black. The others didn't sign off, however.

Woods spoke, "General Waters, what are the true chances of success?"

Waters thought for a moment, "Good. The hunters showed us its possible, although the methodology is beyond us at the moment."

"And the *Aurora*?" She added.

The *Aurora* was an outdated *Conestoga*-class battleship, but he still thought it was fit for active duty; he answered, "Just fine, Admiral."

"What will you do, General?" Woods asked.

Waters thought for a moment; he still had responsibilities to the United American Bioterrorism Task Force. Then, he replied, "I will monitor the progress here only occasionally." He explained, "I can't afford to take too much time off. It would raise suspicions."

She nodded; then, before signing off, General Townes added, "General, you watch that Imp!"

Waters smirked, "Always."

Then, with that, they signed off, all the monitors going black. Waters suddenly found himself plunged in utter darkness. For the first time in a while, Lieutenant-General Waters found time to think. His plan was falling into place. Soon he would have an army of Xenomorphs, the ultimate soldiers.

Soon, he would be invincible.