

War is a strange business. But not nearly as strange as it will be in the future.

Extreme Squad

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The new weapons are coming today. Or so the scuttlebutt claims. When they sent us here we didn't have any of the weapons we needed. God damn, we're still using slugthrowers. Slugthrowers! They used these suckers in World War IV.

The Others have been kicking our butts for weeks now. They've forced us back to the perimeter around the spaceport. Every night they send troops at us. Waves and waves of relentless attackers. They never surrender, they never quit.

When we first arrived, the Others sent a fleet after our support ships. We watched the fight at night from the ground. Bright flashes, followed by more brilliant white flashes. New nova's, the stains of things dying in the night sky. We cheered, imagining each flash was one of the Other's ships getting pulverized. When the sun came up, our fleet was gone, taking half our supplies with them. Damn space jockeys. Now the only support we get is from the portable mass throwers and the occasional fighter sortie from the spaceport. When they run out of bombs and fuel, we won't even get support from them anymore.

I used to believe space as cold. A frozen wasteland of cold like the training base on the moon. But not this planet. Without your suit on, you'd fry in an instant. This is what makes the slug throwers so effective. It's too damned hot to run the electronics. Too scorching for lasers on this planet. But if a single round cuts through your suit, you incinerate before anyone can do anything about it.

To make everything perfect, we went on half rations as soon as the supply ship left orbit. Great. This could only mean no one was sure when they would come back, if at all. So, we spent the next couple of weeks with hunger gnawing at our bellies and the enemy chewing at our ranks.

Today, after the Others dropped a load of holomortars on us, I went looking for Rodrigues. All I found was an empty suit with Rodrigues' name tag on it. I kicked over the suit and a small pile of ash shifted from side to side in the helmet. The residue of Trooper Rodrigues. It's all there ever is. Rodrigues had been real cute. She had quite the set of ... teeth, yea, a big set of beautiful, round chompers. She never liked it when the guys talked about her ... teeth. I guess it doesn't make any difference now, they are nothing more than a pile of cinders. Frack, I hate politically correct speech. Now she'll never know how I felt. I looked all over her suit. The armor plates were pitted with the old impacts of 20mm rounds, but nothing seemed to have penetrated. Finally, I found it. A small nick in the asbestos fabric section at the elbow, between the armor plates. It was all it took to let in the superheated atmosphere.

I wish to hell I'd been posted to Mercury. They tell me it's much cooler out there.

I kicked Rodrigues' suit into a whole. Nobody wanted to die on this crappy planet. Hell, there wasn't anything left of bury. Occasionally, they'd stick a cross in the ground if one of the officers bought it. The rest of us ended up like Rodrigues. An empty suit with a name tag. A least there was no stench from the dead bodies.

The only other nice thing about this crappy world is the low gravity. It means you can walk around with 20mm of armor plating on your suit. But you still need to move your arms and legs, so all you had at your joints was a layer of protective material. It might have been paper for all the good it does. Only paper wouldn't last a second in this heat. Outside, in the trenches, a near miss is a good as a hit. It's what took out Rodrigues. One small piece of shrapnel from a near miss. The Others are bastards.

Yea, I don't know what they are called, and I don't give a shit either. All I know is they're killing us out here.

Time for another rain of shells.

I throw myself in a slit trench when they start falling. I press myself as close as I can to the far wall of the trench. It's the only thing you can do. I cross my fingers. I don't want to end up like Rodrigues. The wait for the shelling to be over is endless. You lose track of time when you're being shelled.

Do you know the worst part of being in this damn suit? Itching. Let's say you get an itch on your nose. What are you going to do? There's nothing you can do. You can't take your gloves off and open the visor of your helmet, you'd become a walking torch. Right now, I can sense my uniform rotting. I've been sweating in this damn suit for so long the uniform material is breaking down. I get the sensation of wet, rotting cloth on skin ... and damn, it itches. I've lost about ten pounds locked up in this thing with my itchy skin. It's all I can contemplate while I'm being shelled. How much my damn uniform is itching.

They invented all sorts of devices to take care of human waste, so we can stay out here for months. Hell, I've got a tube so far up my ass, it seems like it ends in my throat. It must run into the other one I've got down my throat to put my rations into my stomach. Bastard corps, they don't even let you eat out here. They just pump the shit into you. The only good news is, you don't have to taste it.

Corporal Charlie once vomited in his suit. Worst thing you can do. Charlie's got a sensitive stomach when he's being shot at and ... well, I guess the food quality's not quite four-star. The smell turned his face green after a couple of days. I'm not kidding, it was green like a melon ball. I didn't mention his melon ball color to Charlie. You don't want to hear about food when you've got vomit in your suit.

Some of the feeding tubes must not be the right size. Apparently, it's a one-size-fits-all type of arrangement. In boot camp, we nicknamed Hammerstein, Oink. He was a big fellow, not tall, but boy was he wide. The kind of guy who looks like he is going to need wider doors. We still call him Oink, but you'd never guess why by looking at him now. Oink weighs 88 pounds.

Even with all the tubes and sensors, you'd suppose they figure out some way to get rid of the itching. Griffin has the right idea, he gets into his suit nude. Of course, they fine him for doing this every time he comes out. Shit, right about now they can fine my ass all they want. I just want the itching to stop.

The itching doesn't stop, but the shelling does.

I pop my head above the trench line. Half the time, the shelling is a lead into a mass attack. The other half of the time, it's to keep us awake. I'd say their style is human wave attacks, but they are anything but human. Funny how the propaganda wing doesn't have to do any work to dehumanize them for us so it's easier to kill them. They do all the prop boy's work for them. I have no trouble killing the little slimy bastards. When you hit one of 'em, silver glop oozes out of their armored suits and they go up like somebody lit a torch ... just like us.

No fun today, though. No one is coming. I guess they were trying to mess with us again. Damn, I was looking forward to a little payback for Rodrigues. No matter, they'll be back again. They'll be charging us in waves again soon.

Everyone on the line goes back to the boring job of waiting. Waiting and cursing the guy who invented these suits without figuring out a way to deal with the itching.

Looks like you got the bugs crawling on you, my captain comments.

Bugs is what everybody calls the itches. I guess it's appropriate. Sometimes it feels like ants are crawling all over you. Some of the boy's crack, believing they are being attacked by actual bugs. They open their suits to get at them. At least we assume this is what happens. All we ever find are the empty suits. Stupid assholes. As if bugs could ever survive at this temperature.

Yes, sir. I got'em real bad this time.

I suspect we all do, sergeant. I guess it's just something we'll all have to learn to abide.

Yes, sir.

Everybody respected the captain. He was always out in the trenches with us. The other officers retreat to the bunkers, where you can take your suit off and scratch like hell. But not the captain. The other officers are all fine the troops for this and fine for some more infractions. Not the captain. He saw Griffin once without his uniform back in the support area. All he said was: better cover your shit up sergeant, you look like hell. As I said, everyone respected the captain.

Maloney turned out to be the asshole who brought in the new weapons. New weapons my ass. I was expecting some kind of new shielding, capable of working in this heat. Maybe an updated mass driver. But no, all we got was twelve troopers with extra thick armor. They looked like well-dressed armored knights. Only in place of a jousting helm, there was a space helmet. Every man jack of them had ricochet marks of armored piercing rounds on their armor. But none of them had any of the black mud which was caked on everyone else in the company. Maloney marched them into the trench without any weapons, their hands here cuffed behind their backs.

What am I supposed to do with these jerks? Are they sending us prisoners now?

No, Maloney replied, these guys are special forces.

What?

You know how in the old days, they'd put electrodes in the heads of criminals to calm them down. Kind of turning them into walking meatballs?

Yea, so what?

They put electrodes into these guys heads to make'em crazy.

He handed me a small box with twelve switches on it. Above each switch was a green and a red light. Right now, all the red lights were on.

When you ready to use them, just point'em towards the enemy and flip the switch to green. The cuffs come off and they are ready for action. But stay out of their way.

You don't give them any weapons?

They don't need any. Use'em one at a time, if they return, just flip the switch back to red and put the cuffs back on 'em.

I stared at Corporal Maloney. This was the most stupid ass thing I'd ever heard. I'd have preferred a couple of police special .38's. They'd be more useful.

I'll be taking 2nd and 3rd companies back with me. They're expecting an attack on the north side tonight. Everybody who's not nailed down is being sent north. They're even arming the battalion paper pushers, only there aren't enough battalion paper pushers.

Are you shitting me? What are we going to do if they hit us?

You're on the south side, Maloney said. Intelligence says they're not coming here. If you run into anything, just let the boys at'em. He pointed at the twelve, hyperclean armored suits in the handcuffs. After all, I brought them out here, so they could get some exercise. Get'em dirty.

I looked out over the assembled squad. Yea, they had better armor than we did, but what they didn't have was name tags. So, when these guys got messed up, they got nothing. Not even a name tag on an empty suit. Seems like there weren't even being treated like soldiers. From my point of view, you're not a true soldier if you can't tell your officer to go to hell when he's giving you a FUBAR command.

It was almost dark. After the 2nd and 3rd companies left, I ordered Charlie forward to set up a forward OP. There was a defilade on the forward slope of a hill where you could observe all the movement in the next valley without being seen.

As the sun went down, my mouth got dry. My water bottle was reading empty. Damn those bastards, they never give you enough water rations. Of course, they are back in their bunkers. They have no idea how hot it is out here. I'd recently seen one of 'em out here once, briefly looking around for souvenirs. Damn jerk, I almost shot him myself.

The Others knew we couldn't get any air support in the dark. During the day, if things got hot, I could call in a strike and splatter their bodies all over the rocks. So, they liked to attack at night. Which meant every night. Sometimes twice before the sun came back up again.

Every fifteen minutes, Oink sent up one of those sputtering green flares. They gave the red rock odd olive shadows. As the flare floated down, it made the shadows move. God damn, the effect always makes me freak out. On top of everything, there was the stupid waiting. I'd given up sleeping at night, it wasn't working anyway. Funny thing about sleeping in combat, you wake up as tired as when you closed your eyes. While the flare was up, I could type in a quick letter home to Ma. The glow from my COMM screen didn't give my position away when the flare was up.

Dear Ma,

Don't worry about me. We've got nothing to do here. It's nothing but waiting around. When you're not waiting around outside, you're waiting around on chow lines. How are Dad and Sue? You can tell them

I've even put on a little weight. This year, I'm sure I'll be home for Christmas. I bring you back something from their homeworld after we take it. I'll send you a postcard ...

The flare goes out and I had to turn off the screen. I'll get back to it when the next one goes up. Sitting in the dark is when you ask yourself if anyone at home has figured out you're lying your ass off. But you can't tell your folks the truth. They'd sit around worrying about you all day. It's better if they don't know the truth. Everyone else is doing the same thing. Sending home a message to their family or a girl back home. Sometimes I reflect on the sweet thing I met in Perth. God, she was nice. Soft skin, eyes so bright they looked like headlights. Maybe after I finish my letter to mom, I'll write to her. I'd write her a note from time to time, only I never did get her address ... I pick up the COMM line. It's Charlie.

He whispers into the mike. They're heading your way.

How many?

The whole goddamn army.

I don't believe Charlie was any idea how big their army is, but it sounded like more men than we could hold. I retrieved the box of switches. Looks like I'll be using all twelve. They sat there in the back of the trench, like they were bumps on a log. Rarely have I seen such effective goldbricking. I pushed them all to a standing position at the front of the trench. I stood to one side, peering through the range finder. We had to use old-fashioned optics. Infrared was useless on this planet. Everything showed up red. The best thing about the range finder was the position of the eyepiece. It was below the level of the trench, so you didn't have to expose yourself to fire to look through it. Only the two lenses at the other end poked above the trench. Still, the eyepiece was filled with nothing but blackness.

I told Oink to send up another flare. Even though the helmet, I could hear the launcher go off. I seemed to take forever for the damn thing to reach the top of its arc. The scope still showed nothing but black. In a flash, there they were. Charlie was right, it was their whole damn army. I'd never seen so many at the same time.

They charged us running on all six legs. They didn't have arms, per se, they used two of their legs to fire their weapons. Running across the valley, they had a gate like a baboon ... or an octopus, imitating a baboon.

1st and 2nd platoons opened up. I would hear the chatter of automatic weapons fire. A few holomortar bombs explode to my front and left. Looking through the scope, I watched the enemy bodies fly through the air. The others didn't have armored suits, so when one of our rounds hit them, they went right through. Explosions took them right off their feet. The light gravity sent them flying high in the air. About halfway up in the sky, their suits would open, and they change into a bright red flaming ball. I could hear the shouts of 3rd platoon running up to the forward positions. We couldn't be needing them as reserve tonight. We'd need everybody on the front line.

Everyone was letting loose with everything they had. We'd be out of ammo in minutes at this rate. Ordering Harold and Demetri back to the regiment, I gave them instructions to bring back as much ammo as they could carry. More if they could manage it.

The enemy let loose with a barrage of their own. The light from their tracers was so bright, we didn't need the flare anymore. Of course, you didn't need tracers much at night on this piece of crap planet to know where your shots were going. Most of the rounds glowed all by themselves in the heat. I wasn't looking forward to dying on such a miserable hell-hole. We couldn't just escape into the hills and act like guerilla fighters if this all went south. We'd be dead within days without regular water rations ... and probably sooner when our O₂ ran out. I plugged my hose into one of the spigots in the trench to top off my tanks. Who knows when I'll get another chance.

Shells started dropping all over the place. They were right on top of us. Apparently, those bastards didn't care if they killed their own guys, as long as they got us too. I huddled below the top of the trench, Out of sight. I was shivering. I wouldn't describe my behavior as being cowardly. There must be another level below coward. I was firmly on this level. Performing the acts people beyond cowards do. The twelve guys without names stood there, glancing over the parapet. You could watch the tracers reflected off their visors. It was eerie. It seemed as if no one was wearing those suits, at least, no one who gave a shit.

The Others just ignored them. You'd imagine they'd take out twelve helmets doing nothing but staring at them. My impression was the Others saw them as a trick. You know, like in the old days, when someone stuck a helmet above a trench with a stick to make a sniper give away their position. I couldn't figure out any other reason why they simply seemed to be ignoring them.

Turning around I reached down for the controls. I flopped all twelve toggle switches until they showed green. The cuff went flying. They jumped up, out of the trench, as if I had stuck a red-hot poker up their ass. Although, in this temperature, they may not have discerned the prodding.

Immediately, they went up and over the trench top like WWI Tommie's. I watched their progress through the range finder. They were soon drawing fire. Bullets were bouncing off their armor like old-fashioned sparklers at a Fourth of July fair. Whatever those wires were doing in their brains it must have been removing all fear. It also seemed to be pumping out enough adrenalin to make them act like living tanks. They didn't need weapons all right. They simply grabbed one of the Others by the arms. Then they'd yank the arms in different directions. Their silver blood bubbled out, for an instant, before they burst into a ball of flames. They ducked and weaved between the shells and the tracer fire like madmen. But then, I suppose they were. They sure behaved like madmen. I've seen guys with rows of medals as long as your arm who wouldn't stand out in the open in the face of fire like these boys were attracting. You'd have to be nuts. I thought I saw some of the Others quake when they came face to face with one of them. It was the first indication I had ever seen to give me the impression these alien freaks felt fear.

They split up into sections of three and roamed through the enemy waves like insane lawnmowers, blazing drunken trails through a jungle of assault troops. Watching through the scope, I saw a near miss blow one of them into the air. These guys didn't even have numbers on their suits. The one flying through the air right now could have been switch nine or maybe three, who knows? He landed square on one of the creeps, knocking him flat. Scrambling to his feet, he picked up the critter by one of his legs and started swing him like a baseball bat. This guy had quite the batting arm. He could have knocked homers out of Fenway Park with ease. Aliens where being knocked out into the stands left and right. Well, there would have been stands to knock them into if this hell-hole was a baseball stadium.

There was a flash of light and the alien's suit went limp. It looked like the guy was holding a limp rag with a helmet clipped onto the end of it. I guess the alien's suit fabric finally gave out.

One of our guys got plastered by a direct hit. There was a bright flash and I saw the helmet and the backpack fly into the air. At this stage, the suit was waving around empty. Following the backpack down to the ground, I watched as the O₂ tank inside disintegrated and the cooling chamber exploded. Once it hit the ground, the round water ball broke open letting fly a jet of steam. Damn, those bastards had water!

By now, the Other's rounds weren't dropping on us anymore, they were falling short. Damn bastards were deliberately targeting their own troops. Looks like they figured the squad attacking them was much more dangerous than the shits like me hiding in the trenches. Explosions were erupting all over the place. They had crappy fire control, I'd have to put the observation in a note with my report. Most of their rounds landed in the middle of their own troops, spreading empty alien suits all over the valley.

On this planet, the only water reaching the surface appears as a guiser of steam. The valley floor was made by the erosion effects of a lead stream which flowed down the middle of the valley. One of their rounds must have found a hidden steam reservoir when it exploded in the silver stream. Lead droplets filled the air, carried aloft by the steam. It intensified the light from the tracers and explosions, so the air seemed filled with a thousand tiny disco balls. It was so bright, I had to turn my eyes away for a second.

When I looked back across the expanse, at least two more of our guys were gone. Now there were nine left. But the remaining waded into the enemy like it was surf at Coco Beach. Sometimes you had to admire the enemy. No armor on their suits, but they kept coming anyway. An attack wasn't over until they were all dead. Oink had this theory. According to him, the Others were all dead. The aliens had discovered a way to reanimate their dearly departed and turn them into mindless soldiers. At least, they fought like they were mindless. Still, who knows what goes on inside an alien's head. Or their stomach, or groin, or wherever it is they keep their brain matter.

Another one of our guys ran into a heavy weapons section. He took out one of the loaders and two of the support slimes before they got the gun turned around to face him. I couldn't tell what happened to him in all the smoke. Maybe he got a few more at the end. All I saw was a helmet. I watched it slow roll down the slope and splash into the shiny lead creek.

Our fire had slacked off a bit now, we didn't want to hit our own guys. We're not bastard aliens, you know. Still, we gave them as much cover fire as we could. Harold and Demetri showed up with a pile of ammo and I sent them back to get more. The two of them made about six more trips. Then it was just Harold. One of the Others got Demetri with a tracer. He was carrying a load of ammo at the time and the entire bundle went up like it was a firecracker factory some idiot had lit a cigarette in.

HQ called, and I picked up the COMM. They wanted to know what was causing all the god-damned noise out here. I told them. I'm afraid I wasn't too polite about it. I made some pretty nasty assertions about the officers in the intelligence section.

Impossible, they said.

I held the COMM external mic up towards the top of the trench. I could hear the explosions and the gunfire drowning out the officer on the other end through my earpiece. Finally, I pulled the mic down and switched back to the helmet mic.

Sound impossible to you?

There was silence on the other end for about six seconds. Then I heard a meek voice ask if I needed anything.

Need anything? How about some god damn help!

We needed reinforcements. We needed'em bad and we needed'em now. The word sorry came floating back over the COMM line. No can do. Command won't release any troops. They are still expecting an attack up north.

Well, if you can't send us any help ... why the frack did you ask me if I needed anything.

I disconnected the line. Stupid conversation anyway.

I looked back out over the battlefield. I could only find about half the guys, but enemy numbers had started to dwindle. For the first time, I had a meager impression we might make it after all. I glanced down at the control box, only seven of the green lights were lit. The others remained dark. Frantically, I took another look through the scope. There he was, number seven. I hadn't seen him before because he was half hidden behind a boulder. He was also obscured by the flashes of the Others he was throwing into the giant rock, like some maddened racquetball player. Yep, he was there all right ... ops, not anymore. I watched as his helmet seemed to float into the sky and sail back down behind the boulder. Checking the control box, I got my confirmation, six lights left.

Correction, make it five. Another light blinked out as I was looking directly at it. Returning to the scope, I tried to figure out what had happened, but I never did find out what transpired with the sixth green light. Who were these guys? Did high command empty out a prison colony someplace? Don't these guys have any family someplace? Where was I supposed to send the letters? Sorry, your mindless son or daughter had all their fears stripped from them by tiny electrodes placed in their upper cortex. They were forced to march helplessly into a wave of the enemy, unable to resist or even protect themselves. With the sheer terror of combat forcibly removed from their brains, they walked directly into a massacre. I want to thank you for their service, they sure saved my butt.

Responding this way seemed to be a good sign. When this whole thing started, I was imagining the captain writing home to my parents, telling them how sad it was our unit was wiped out. Now at least, I could imagine my survival. I was imagining writing letters for guys who not only didn't have names, they didn't even have numbers.

Three lights now.

It wasn't really an attack anymore. It was more like a mop-up operation. The enemy doesn't retreat, but sometimes they saunter about without any clear aim or purpose, waiting for one of us to finish him. The Others were broken into scattered groups. There was so much smoke I had a tough time finding our guys. I could mostly locate where they were by the evidence of stray limbs flight through the air. The was one and two ... where the hell was three?

I looked down at the box. Two lights. OK, there is no number three. Kind of explains why I couldn't find him. Looking back out through the scope, I saw number two again, he was under a massive pile of enemy bodies. They'd tackled him like he was some football runner from Notre Dame. There was a flash at the bottom of the pile. A grenade. I checked the box. One light left.

The sun had just started to glow on the horizon. It'd be daylight soon. I opened COMM and called in an airstrike for dawn. There didn't look like there were many of them left, only a handful. But like a cancer surgeon with a scalpel, I wanted to get them all.

Finally, I couldn't observe any movement in the scope. Checking the box there was still one light left. I was going to shake this guy's hand. I didn't care how crazy this frackin' idiot was. He could have been a convicted psychopathic serial killer with a mean streak, I didn't care. Right now, he was my hero. Only I couldn't find him. Was he down somewhere? He couldn't be wounded. Nobody gets wounded on this rock, you simply get dead.

Walking up a slope the last one appeared right in front of the lens. His eyes ... there was no expression in his eyes. It might as well have been a medieval painting. Unblinking, unfeeling, uncaring eyes. He looked like one of the last survivors of a slasher horror film. But then, he was. I saw his helmet crest above the top of the trench. I stepped back so he could climb his way back into our positions. His feet were at the edge when I heard the crack. Instinctively I held out my arms to catch him. All I got was an empty spacesuit, with a nice clean sniper's bullet hole right through the backpack.

We did a roll call after it was over, we lost 80 men. Not counting our twelve nameless wonders, so I guess we lost 92 altogether. The company was down to eight souls. We did a quick count of the suits in front of the trenches, nobody was willing to venture out there, but there was general agreement as to the number. We could make out 900 suits which did not belong to a human form.

Later, someone from command came by to pick up the control box. Apparently, it was top secret and we weren't supposed to have it any longer. The guy demanded it in quite the snotty tone for someone who had spent the battle safe in a rear bunker the whole time. I walked over to the place where I had left the box. When we got there, I turned to the snotty officer and pulled out my .45. He took a step back. I jerked my arm to the right and put a round through the box. I didn't even look at it, but I could tell from the sound it now had a nice hole in it.

Sorry. I thought I saw something move. You know who jumpy some of us can get out here at the front.

Mr. Snappy just leaned over and picked up the remains of his box. I was told to report to the command bunker. Shit, let'em bust me for shooting the box. Personally, I don't give a damn. I sat around the bunker office for some time. At least I was able to get out of the damned suit. My uniform was a soggy mess, made worse by all the scratching I was doing. I know, you shouldn't scratch, but it felt so good. Maybe, if I was lucky, they'd let me take a shower before throwing me in the brig.

I stood at attention and saluted as the as the captain walked in. I had to quickly use my left hand to stop my trousers from falling down around my knees.

As you were, sergeant.

He sat down at his desk and started looking at a pad in front of him.

As you were, sergeant ... it means you can take a seat. We're pulling your unit out of the line. The 3924th regiment is being sent up to replace you. After you get your men off the line, I want you to go to supply and get a clean uniform which fits. Report to the conference room by 2100.

Sir?

You're being awarded the Council's Medal of High Honor.

Sir, I'm afraid I'd have to decline, sir.

Say again, sergeant.

It's a great honor sir, but I'd have to decline.

The hell you will.

Excuse me, sir?

The medal's not for you sergeant, it's for them. The captain pointed out toward the battlefield. High Command's got to award someone for this mess and you got chosen. Not only do you get awarded a medal, but you'll wear it. It's for all the other guys who have no necks to put it around ... and no names to attach to the citations. They got dead, you get a medal ... this is just how it is. Get used to it.

Yes, sir.

Try to look smart for the ceremony. Dismissed.

Yes, sir.

Somehow, I would have preferred it if he had thrown me in the brig.