



MECHANIZED BATTLE

The Bloody Mess of Space

I've been in the military for three months now, which makes me a veteran. If you think this makes me happy, you couldn't be more wrong. That's because I still have 25 years in my enlistment to go.

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They say the interior of the place looks like a Star Trek bridge. It was supposed to appear exactly this way. It's the way they recruit troops to fight off-world. Half of the new recruits were just space jockeys. People who had spent their whole lives dreaming of flying an x-wing against the evil empire. The others joined because the first alien species we encountered thought of humans as a nice snack. They were out for revenge. I guess I'm a bit of both.

I imagine the recruiting office in my village looked like this in August 1914. Lines of young men eager to sign up, forming a massive queue in front of a single desk and a recruiting sergeant who looked like he should have retired 30-years ago. That's me, 37th one back in the second row. No, not that one, the line that curves its way around the building. For the first half-hour, we stood around and told jokes. By the second half-hour, we were standing on one leg, constantly shifting between feet.

Most of us felt the same way our American cousins felt after being attacked at Peral Harbor. Everyone was angry. Mostly we were angry at the aliens who attacked us. But more than a few we ticked off at our own governments. Angry they had failed to see the threat. Pissed off at the crappy response. In less than a week, the United Nations had crumbled, an ineffective organization without a backbone. It only took a few days for its replacement to form, the Earth Defense Initiative. Funny how when someone else is trying to kill you, all your other problems seem like small potatoes. The EDI became the most financially supported organization since the Nazi's were on the other side. Everybody put everything they had into it.

Fortunately, England is a small island. They didn't hit us as hard as they hit China. According to the news vids, there was no more overcrowding in India either, and probably wouldn't be for another century or more. Three billion people captured and hustled off the planet in little more than an afternoon. There are still some cities people still couldn't get near. The fires were burning too hot. The only thing odd about the event was there were no dead bodies. What the aliens didn't take with them, they ate on the spot.

After an hour, everybody sat down on the street and got out their iPads, smartphones, and Gameboys. Between lunch and dinner, everyone batteries began to run out. Derek had an actual deck of cards with him, so we went old school. Poker, Gin Rummy, Crazy Eights, we even played a hand or two of Bridge. Every once in a while, the line would shift. By the afternoon, people didn't even get up. You simply slid your butt down the street a stretch, settled back down, and drew your cards.

Even my friend Charlie was playing cards with us. But I could tell, being in line with us made him nervous. "My mom and dad don't want me to join up."

"They're against the war?"

"No, they're just older. My dad says space travel takes so long; they'd never see me again. They'd be dead before I get back. My mom's real broken up about it."

"So why don't you go home?"

Charlie got an insulted look on his face. "What? There's an EDI recruitment center down the street for women. They're taking women Elias. I'd have to walk right past them to go home. I'll never be able to live with myself."

After dinner, I finally got into the building. At least I think it was after dinner. It was at least after we sent Derek out to get us more fish and chips while we held his place in line. It was almost nightfall when they got to me. Throwing down my hand, I folded. I would have lost anyway. All I have was a deuce, a three, five, six, and a nine. A worthless hand. This recruiter was wearing an old red uniform jacket and black pants with a white stripe down the outside. I thought these uniforms had gone out of style before the Boer War. It looked totally out of place in the Star Trek setting. It was as if the old gentleman had walked onto the wrong movie set. The old sergeant called my name. I was barely able to rise; my legs were so cramped from sitting in the street the whole day. He had had a voice like an old mule "Name?"

I found myself looking under the table. He leaned forward putting both elbows on the table. "Both legs still there boy," he remarked gruffly, "this isn't Starship troopers, you know. Name?"

All the air escaped from my lungs. I was forced to mentally remind myself to breathe so I could actually talk. "Archibald, sir. Archibald Harry Leech, but everybody called me Elias."

He grumbled. "How nice for you Elias. But you don't call me sir. I'm Colour-Sergeant Habersham or just Colour-Sergeant. Age?"

I choked slightly. "Nineteen, Colour-Sergeant Habersham, but I'll be twenty in May."

"We'll call it Nineteen then shall we boy. Occupation?"

I glanced around nervously. "We'll I was inducted into the Lancashire Fusiliers before the army was dissolved and they told me to report here."

"Did you serve?"

"What?"

"Did you ever wear a uniform?"

"Well, no. I only joined up a fortnight ago."

"What did you do before that?"

I stood up proudly. "I was an apprentice newspaper boy."

He snickered, "We'll put down unemployed."

Newspapers had died long ago. Wiped out by electronic news services you could get on any device. News services now collected stories and videos from ordinary people armed with smartphones. If you were lucky, you got a story first and the services would use your story or the footage you shot. Then they'd send you a check. People, like me, who were yet to sell anything were jokingly called apprentice newspaper boys.

I went on to recite my home address the names of my parents, next of kin. All the boring stuff you filled out when you were writing out an employment form. Only the sergeant was writing it all down on a pad. I don't know why he didn't just have us the pad and tell us to fill out the form ourselves. Some people can't let the past go.

"You understand the terms of service?"

I grinned, overly pleased with myself. “Yes, Colour-Sergeant Habersham. Four years or as long as the war lasts.”

He laughed. He outright laughed in my face. “The EDI isn’t the British Home Army, boy. Terms of service are 50 years, extendable until the war ends.” He shoved the pad in my face. “Sign here.”

I thought he was kidding. I didn’t even read the print on the screen. I simply ran my fingernail across the screen and signed my name. The camera on the unit flashed to take a picture of me after I finished. I passed the unit back to the colour-sergeant. He thrust it right back in my face. “Put your thumbprint in the box, boy.”

I glanced at the pad. There was a white box after the signature. I pressed my thumb into the box as the colour-sergeant held it until it beeped. “Congratulations and welcome to the EDI, Recruit Leech.” Then he pointed to a door at the back of the office.

I stared back at him. “You go through the door, mate.”

“Then what happens.”

“They’ll tell you when you get in there. Now off with you. I’ve got a whole line to process after you.”

On the other side of the door were two men in their distinctive black EDI uniforms. They had badges of rank and everything... and the EDI was less than a month old. One of them glanced down at his pad.

“Archibald Leech?”

“Call me Elias, please.”

He didn’t look very happy. “Are you Archibald Leech?”

“Well, yeah.” I pointed at the pad. “There’s my picture and everything. He took it right out there.” I pointed behind me. “I haven’t even had enough time to grow more stubble on my face.”

The second one looked grim. “You’re required by law to confirm your identity.” I just stood there, because I thought I had done it already.

“Great,” he replied glancing down at the data on his pad. “Another moron.”

“Hang on,” I protested.

He put an arm around my shoulder and pulled me in tight. “Tell you what I’m going to do for you governor, I’m signing you up for a mechanized battalion. I think it’ll be right up your alley.” He gave me a push on the backside and sent me off down the hall. “First door on your left.”

Of course, they were assigning everyone who was unskilled to mechanized battalions. It sounded nicer than calling us cannon fodder. Anyone with any brains got attached to flight or an engineering School. This was the door on the right.

The old sergeant wasn’t kidding, the terms were fifty years. You’d think that a 70-year-old soldier would be effectively useless. And if we were talking about human beings, you’d be correct. But space travel is incredibly slow. So slow the human body isn’t worth anything, not in the physical sense anyway. When

you joined the Earth Defense Initiative, they put your body in frozen status. You could have it back when your enlistment was up.

One of the reasons for this was they figured it was going to take at least 50 years for scientists on Earth to learn how to awaken someone after they'd been cryogenically frozen. The second reason was so you wouldn't be fifty when we finally arrived at the target. But they did want my brain. They were, truth be told, looking for people who were good at video games, just like the ads had said.

What they did was transfer your consciousness to a machine. It was an unbelievably painful process. This is why the recruiter wanted to know my age. Even people over 25 didn't often survive the process. It felt like someone was driving a ten-inch-long steel spike down the back of my neck. I came within a millimeter of passing out. In the end, I could feel my self being yanked out of my body. I felt as if I was trapped in some kind of giant vacuum suction tube. I could feel myself leaving my body. Then I did pass out.

When I awoke, I was a machine. At least it's were they transferred my consciousness. I was a living tank. I looked a little bit like Ed-209 from the Robocop movies, except I was better armed. They didn't take us to be trained, we just sat at the depot and they transmitted images right into our minds. The first image was Colonel Francis Bittlefield. His image appeared as a tall white-haired man of about forty dressed in the typical black uniform we'd come to expect of the EDI. He was a nasty little cuss with the voice of a drill sergeant.

"The first thing I want to introduce you to is the Multi-Attack Phase-20 or MAP-20 for short. These are your weapons." A picture showed up behind him of two heavy objects matching the big barrels attached to each of my arms. "This weapon is unlike any weapon you've ever seen or heard of before. They were actually invented about five years ago, but they were too expensive for any of the nation-states of Earth to purchase. Lucky for you, things have changed."

That was a serious understatement. "You can reconfigure the weapon to fire up to 20mm rounds. Ammunition is manufactured for you by the suit. The weapon is a rail gun. This means that the projectile is shot from the barrel using a series of magnetic rings shooting the rounds out of the barrel at ultra-high speeds. This allows you to keep firing, even in the vacuum of space."

I had a new respect for arms designers. The colonel continued, "The weapon can't supply you with endless ammunition. The smaller the rounds you use, the longer your supply will last. Using the rail gun and 20mm rounds you could blow holes through an Abrams tank. But you can fire thousands more 7.62mm rounds. The MAP-20 can also super heat your rounds so that you can fire blasts of plasma for short periods. When I say plasma, I'm not talking about blood. This is material shooting out of your suit at temperatures hotter than the sun. Use it sparingly, or you'll melt the weapon down."

I felt empowered. As I watched a different picture appeared behind Colonel Bittlefield. It was one of them. The news media had dubbed them Blurbs. Who knows what they called themselves. "These little bastards are tough cookies. They are armored like a Sherman tank, plus they use some kind of magnetic shield. It'll take several rounds for you to bring one of them down."

A grave look came over the Colonel's face. "I can't stress the next point enough. The Blurbs do not take prisoners. There is no such thing as the Geneva Convention protecting you. We've put you in a metal

tank so you can't be eaten, but you can be destroyed. These things cracked open Abrams tanks like they were walnuts and ate the crew inside. They are *not* going to give you a break. Even for a second. When you fight the Blurbs, it's a fight to the death." He took a short breath. "If you run out of ammo, you'll be dead in the water... and in this case, literally dead. Do not... I repeat do not overdo it."

Two hours later we were out on the shooting range. At first, we were only allowed to fire the 7.62mm rounds at paper targets. Both my guns worked like chain guns. I didn't so much hit the target as it ripped the paper in half. My friend Freddie and I spend the afternoon comparing shots. Freddie and I had grown up in the same town. He was the only one from home I found in my training platoon. We were never really mates, but we had gone to the same school. I had known him slightly. We didn't become the best of mates, but he was at least someone to talk with. We sort of had a friendly rivalry going.

"Alright, one round, dead center. Whoever gets there first wins," I sneered.

Freddie lifted one arm and fired. "Ha. You missed the bloody target altogether."

"I'm just getting warmed up," he hollered back.

I didn't do much better, although with my first shot I at least hit the paper. It a bit tricky aiming down a barrel when your entire arm is the gun and it looks like Popeyes arm with too much spinach. We exchanged shots for a few more minutes but neither of us did better than getting inside the blue.

Finally, Freddie got one in. I was fairly sure it was by accident. My next shot missed the paper entirely. "Ha," Freddie screamed.

"I'm getting warmed up," I spat back. It never dawned on me the drill instructor had been watching us the entire time. He could tap right into the video feed we were using as our eyes. "Cadet Leech," he barked at me. It sounded like he was inside my head. But then, of course, he technically was. "If I was you, I'd start out warm. Alright you assholes, stop firing."

I could tell life was going to be a breeze for the NCOs. They had override control on all our mechanisms. There be no disobeying orders in this platoon. I pressed the trigger several times, but all I got for my trouble was a dull metallic click. As we stood there, they swapped out the paper targets of metal plates about 50 millimeters thick. "Switch to 20mm rounds."

All I had to do was think about the 20mm rounds and I could feel the cannons in my arm rotate. You know, like those old-time television cameras changing lenses. The new barrels rolled right into position. "Try to hit the target this time Leech."

I pulled the trigger... and almost fell backward. I straightened up and glanced at the metal target. My aim was a little off, but I'd hit the damn thing. Barely. Still, I drilled off the entire lower right corner. Some of the better shots had put holes right through the middle of the plates. They were nice and clean. It looked as if someone had drilled a hole through the plate. Needless to say, Freddie and I were not one of these.

"Leech."

"Yes, Sergeant?"

"Try shooting with your eyes open next time."

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Alright, we’re going to try one plasma burst,” I swear I could hear the sergeant grinding his teeth. “JUST ONE.”

Again, with a single thought, the barrels in my arm rolled into position. I tried to take a better aim this time. To be quite honest, I’m not sure where I hit the target. Or if anybody else did better. The targets simply melted. Smoke rose as the molten material hit the ground. But by this time, I was instinctively waving my arm in the air. Damn, those things are hot. I felt like I just stuck my hand in a furnace. At this point, I shouted about why with a robot body they couldn’t have gotten rid of the pain.

“Because, Cadet Leech, we use it to teach lessons. You need to be reminded when you could be damaging the equipment. It’s expensive. And it’s worth WAY more than you.”

Two lessons learned. One, keep your mouth shut. You could think anything you wanted, but there was no privacy if you vocalized anything. And two, the plasma burst was a weapon of last resort. As I was thinking this, two fellows in black overalls stepped up to me. Pressing a button, they released the magazine I was carrying under my arms and slid in a new one. “Alright boys,” I heard the Sergeant’s voice in my head again. “Get as much practice as you can. Especially you, Leech, you need all the practice you can get.”

Freddie and I kept firing for the rest of the day and on into the night. We didn’t need to sleep anymore. We were robots. Without any organic brain, there was no need for sleep to recharge the neurons. We simply kept going. It was nice not to get tired, although it wasn’t all peaches and cream. With no time for sleep, we didn’t get any time to ourselves. There was no such thing as taking a break. Fifty years of being awake the entire time. It was going to be a long 50 years.

We finished our practice in under three days. By the end, Freddie and I were pretty matched. Not only were we hitting the target, but we were also putting rounds through the same holes. The sergeant explained to us the suit was learning to compensate for our aiming practices. So, even if Freddie and I hadn’t learned to shoot straight, the equipment had.

I found out I was assigned to the 333nd EDI battalion, But Freddie got posted to the 128th. I was hustled aboard the *LSM Douglas Haig*. Christ, what a ship to be posted to, the name didn’t inspire much confidence. At first, I was a little angry. The guy flying this ship was from Oxford. The smart, posh guys just have to fly the ships, not shoot the guns. Smug bastard. I didn’t get a cabin or even a bunk. They simply shoved me up a drop tube. No need for food, oxygen or a bunk in our case. This is why we had to get rid of our bodies. No supplies for living organisms. Even the pilot was nothing more than electrons running around in the ship’s computer.

It was going to be a long ride, so we were told we were going to be turned off. I didn’t know what being turned off meant, but...

...The next thing I remember, we were over the target. It was 25 years later. Nice, half my enlistment period was over. The planet below us was called Raelik. I don’t know what I was thinking, it wasn’t a peaceful landing. They didn’t let us arrive without a welcoming committee. I no longer felt sorry for the Oxford pilots. Ten of our ships were nuked before we even hit the atmosphere. The *LSM William Riddell Birdwood* was blown up first, followed by the *LSM Lord Kitchener*. So much for Royal Navy tradition,

unless you're counting disasters. Our ships went up like the *Queen Mary* at Jutland. Even the *Titanic* fared better. I was sure we would be the next ship to buy it.

But luck was with us. I guess being on the *Haig* wasn't as bad as I had imagined it. I mean old Duggie boy fought in the Great War and never got a scratch, didn't he? They stooped shooting at us once we entered the atmosphere. I guess they didn't want to damage their own ecosystem. Their world was a surprising place.

Raelik is a very earth-like terrestrial world. The purple oceans are dotted with low lying land masses covered with blue and teal grasses. At first glance, it didn't seem like the Blurbs lived here at all. It was peaceful. Small multi-winged birds glided across the air. Short four-foot-tall trees were filled with small blue monkey-like things with three eyes. The ape-creatures ran as soon as they saw us. Chances are they knew what it was like to be hunted for a snack by the Blurbs as well.

The Blurbs must have been attacked by other races before. There wasn't a single structure on the planet's surface. Everything was built below the ground. We'd have to go into a warren of tunnels and flush them out. They paired us off and sent us down the tunnels. I was posted with another fellow called Alvarez. We had nothing in common. My bet is he didn't even know how to speak English. Fortunately, whatever passed for Google Translate between the suits worked well enough. Although I never cared much for what he was babbling about. It was all family this and family some other story. Damn, I didn't even have a girl back home. And I wasn't likely to get one for half a century, not the way I was now, looking like an accident at a Lionel Toy Train factory.

The tunnels looked like smooth sewer tubes, coated with some type of black rubbery substance. Apparently, it was designed to keep moisture out. There was lots of room to walk around in them. Even with the Ed-209 suits, the Blurbs were bigger than we were. The first tunnels we entered were surprisingly empty.

"How many of them do you think there are?" Alvarez asked.

I didn't have a good answer for him. "At least enough to make trouble."

"Do you feel okay about this?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we're about to commit genocide."

"Bloody hell, I do that every summer when I spray the mosquitos."

Blurbs, however, are a bit bigger. They were armored creatures looking like a cross between the body of an eight-legged Gila monster with the head of a shark. The damn thing had a toothy maw that could fit an entire person inside. This would have been bad enough, but they also had weapons that threw 30mm rounds. They'd stand on their back two legs and often operate a pair of these weapons with the top set of legs.

Alvarez and I discovered why the tunnel was so empty, they were waiting for us. When we got to the first junction, they opened up on us from all four sides. Blurb rounds were 30mm ball that looked a lot like grapeshot. Beats me what propels them, they're kind of slow. You can see them coming. Although

this doesn't help much when they are coming at you a hundred at a time. Damn things had an interior explosive warhead in them with a proximity fuse. As soon as they got near you, they exploded. I felt like I was fighting in the Seven-Years War. There was smoke everywhere. Fortunately, our bodies are equipped with magnetic shielding, so most of the rounds bounced harmlessly off.

"Switch to 7.62mm," I told Alvarez. "You clear the tunnel behind us and to your right. I'll clear the other two."

I felt like a God-damned hero, shooting in two directions at once. My arms were pounding. You had to group your shots. The first several rounds just made a hole in their natural armor. The next few penetrated and did some real damage. The tunnels were soon starting to fill up with Blurb dead. But this only made the one's behind the dead bodies harder to hit.

The walls were made of rubber alright. The Blurb 30mm balls started bouncing around the place like a Ping-Pong tournament gone mad. I felt like I was in the middle of one of those video games with the thousands of bouncing balls going everywhere. In one sense, it made me feel comfortable, I was good at this game. But a nagging realization hit me, this wasn't a game. This feeling increased when the alarm started to go off. The shield was only meant to be used for short periods. It was never intended to be used continuously. The alarm meant we only had a minute of shield power left.

"Alvarez, this isn't working. On the count of three, we're switching to plasma and getting the bloody hell out of here."

"How about on the count of one?"

"Shut up and follow orders. One. Two. Three."

If firing one plasma burst is bad, firing two at the same time feels like you've fallen into a blast furnace. The only good news was it took care of all the bouncing balls. "Let's get out of here." We headed back up the tube we came down. Most of the Blurb bodies we encountered were piles of ash from the plasma burst. It was a good thing. I have no idea how we'd have been able to use our three-fingered toes to walk over dead Blurb bodies without falling. I think it's what the bastards were counting on. The only thing they were not ready for was how fast humans could build new weapons. It may be our one real talent as a race. This time we were killing them.

We worked our way back up the tunnel. "What does radar say?"

"I don't know," Alvarez claimed. "Either they are jamming it, or they are all dead."

"You may be missing one other possibility."

"What's that?"

"There a million pissed off Blurbs following us right now."

"Yeah well, let's hope they get lost on the way."

When we got back to the surface, the engineers had finished building a heavy weapon's emplacement. Basically, it's a fast-firing 88mm gun, capable of firing 30 rounds a minute. They'd been watching our

video feed from up top. As soon as we were out of the hole, they started lobbing rounds down the tube. Both Alvarez and I had to be resupplied, we were almost out.

“Okay,” The sergeant’s voice sounded like a drum beating in my head. “Plan One didn’t work. It turned into an expensive scouting mission. Now we are going down in platoon size groups. Shoot anything you see. Leech and Alvarez, you cover our rear.”

“Yes, sergeant.”

“Make sure you cover the Goliath. Alright, let’s get it done you bastards.”

The Goliath was a tracked vehicle which carried ammunition. Stick your arms in the back and it removed your empty magazines and loaded you with new ones. We didn’t know if the Blurbs could figure out what it did, but it needed to be protected or we were toast. Unfortunately, it was also the biggest thing in the platoon, so it made a tempting target.

The Blurbs are smart little bastards, they didn’t try the same tactic twice. They sacrificed hundreds to sucker us deep into the tunnels. Once they got us where they wanted us in the tunnels, they flooded them. They knew from their last visit to Earth we couldn’t breathe water. What they hadn’t reckoned on was as machines, we no longer need to breathe air... or anything else. The water flow did push us back up the tunnels. It was moving too fast to resist. Once we got back on our feet, we resumed the march.

This time we made it to one of their chambers. Opening before us was a high domed roof filled with irregular crystalline buildings. The sergeant called for reinforcements and before long we had most of the battalion present. We rose out of the water like some evil version of Venus from the sea. We took them by surprise. Everyone opened up at once. It was a mess. Shooting the building turned out to be more effective than shooting the Blurbs. The glass panes on the buildings shattered and send down a deadly rain of broken shards into the streets. Before long the streets were slippery with Blurb goo.

Things were going well until they started firing back. But by now we’d learned to shoot the slow-moving incoming balls. This caused them to explode before they reached us. The whole dome was soon filled with smoke. You couldn’t see the incoming balls anymore, so everyone started firing wildly. After a minute, small red brackets started appearing in my vision. It was the suit’s targeting system. It had adjusted to the Blurb rounds. They were no long masked from our radar. My suit was showing me where to shoot, even though I couldn’t see a thing. It must have worked because only half of them were getting to us. Still, it was a rain of shells.

I switched to 20mm shells, and the rain lessened... at least a bit. The shield alarm went off and then a minute later my shield collapsed. Now it was harder to aim, the explosions were buffeting my suit pretty bad. I could feel pieces of metal being torn out of my arms and legs. Stupid pain sensors. I can see why this suit doesn’t have hands. I’d be busy in my off-hours trying to tear out the pain receptors. Rounds kept hitting me. I could feel deep gouges running into the carbon steel structure of my body.

Finally, the officers told the second platoon to switch to plasma. I was glad it wasn’t us. The extreme heat removed most of the smoke and the blast leveled most of their city. The fire was reduced to sporadic shots. Still one of the shots hit my left arm and the whole arm went dead. It felt numb and the arm dropped and stayed uselessly at my side. But I kept blasting away with the right. “Alvarez how you are doing?”

“I’m out of 20mm and I’m almost out of 7.62mm as well. But I figure I can fire for a couple of minutes still.”

“Go back to the Goliath and get a new magazine. I’ll cover you.”

“You only have one arm,” his voice sounded concerned.

“So? I’ll cover you with one arm.”

Alvarez at least did what I told him to do, but he ended up standing in line. I ran out of 20mm and I switched back to 7.62mm rounds. The smoke was starting to build up again. Just when I thought I was going to lose the other arm, the last building in the city collapsed, taking about twenty snipers down with it. Finally, the firing began to slack off. For a while, I thought the atmosphere had changed to mostly heavy metals and debris clouds.

I relaxed, but my break was short-lived. You can’t let your guard down for a minute. Now I thought it was over as three of them charged me. I mean they charged be personally. You can work up quite a sprint with eight legs. They gave me the impression they intended to squash me using their fists as a sledgehammer. I got one and he fell like a bull moose. His momentum and speed carried him forward like a bowling ball in an alley. His massive body was covering his two friends. I think this was their plan.

One of them picked up their former friend by a leg and tossed the body at me. Trouble is, although this suit is tough, it ‘s not particularly fast. I wasn’t able to get fully out of the way. The Blurb body slammed into me and I fell over backward. His buddies kept vaulting directly toward me. I was able to raise my good arm only to heard it click. I had spent all my ammunition. I felt like a sitting duck with two freight trains barreling down toward me. Only in my case, ducks moved faster.

One of the most annoying features of the suit is the fact you can’t close your eyes. I tried to steady myself, waiting to receive their charge when I fell over. Somebody had pushed me out of the way from behind. It was Sarge and Alvarez. They took the two Blurbs down in a hail of gunfire. “Your turn to reload,” Alvarez shouted.

I went back to the Goliath. Now the nice thing about living in a computer is you have all the instruction manuals for your equipment right at your disposal. You don’t even have to read them. They are already in your memory. Even though I had never used the Goliath before, I knew exactly what to do. Still, as I was about to put one arm in, the other one jumped up. My left arm was working again. “What the hell is this?”

“Nanobots,” I heard the sergeant’s voice in my head. “They start repairing any damage to the suit as soon as any part becomes inoperable.”

I slid my arms into the receptacles. “Don’t you think they should have told us this at the base?”

“Why would it have made any difference?”

“Maybe,” I shouted back.

“Not very likely. Maybe the designers didn’t want you to know about them because they didn’t want you to start thinking you assholes were invincible and begin taking unnecessary risks with their expensive equipment. Every think of that?”

“Yeah well, believe me, I don’t think I’m invincible.” when the Goliath had finished rearming me, it pushed my arms out of the sockets. Then another trooper pushed me out of the way. I had to struggle not to fall on my face.

The sergeant did cut me any slack. “You ready now Leech?”

I leveled my guns. “Whatever you say, sergeant.” I started looking around for more targets. This is when I noticed things had gone strangely quiet. I wasn’t prepared for this. We had won.

“Next time you are reloading, get the hell out of the way when you are done.”

“It’ll be my pleasure, sergeant.”

I looked around. About half the platoon was gone. Twisted hulks of metal and broken pieces. It seemed like someone had thrown up a scrap metal junkyard into the middle of our platoon area. I gestured at the others, lying on the ground. There was nothing in my database about medics. “What do we do for them.”

“What do you mean,” the sergeant yelled back, “They’re dead. Get over it.”

“Shouldn’t we do something?”

“Like what? You want to say a prayer or something?”

“I donno. I guess I just wasn’t ready for people to be dead.”

“Didn’t you read the fine print on the enlistment form? One of the possible outcomes of your service is death.”

“Still shouldn’t we do something?”

“Nope, Not our job. Our job is to secure the area. EDI has a whole platoon for salvaging and recycling parts. That’s their job. By this time next week, those dead guys will be part of our ammunition stock. Now get down the street and help Alvarez cover the tunnel opening on the other side.”

It took us a day and a half to find the second city. Everything was built at odd angles. I have no idea how this architecture stood without falling. It appeared more like a random outcropping of crystals than buildings. Only, in the case of the blurb buildings, the crystals were growing out of each other. There were fine and neat streets though, laid out in a beautiful crisscross pattern. I imagine some of the symbols written on the buildings were no parking signs. Otherwise, the place would be a parking nightmare, like home. This time we *started* with a shower of plasma bursts. The crystal city exploded as if a volcano had burst under it from below. The result was a shower of red-hot molten material spraying up in the air like some grotesque blood fountain.

You’d think command would be happy with this, but no. They had to send us off patrolling the streets. Seeing all the charred remains of the Blurbs made us relaxed when we shouldn’t have been. The only good news was I wasn’t at the point this time. Some other poor suckers got the job instead. I was happy about this until the guy in front of me blew up. The damn Burbs mined their own city. The worst thing about walking around on an alien planet is the unexpected. And as a combat robot, the last word you want to hear is “unexpected.”

“Alright nobody moves,” Sarge yelled, “we’re in the middle of a minefield.”

“You gotta be kidding me. How the hell didn’t the plasma set them off?”

Sarge was not in the mood to have a long, drawn-out conversation about heat and physics. “Shut the fuck up Leech. Knowing you, the weapons are set to go off from your smell. Now here’s what we are gonna do. Everybody walk slowly and carefully back the way we came in. Try to walk where you walked before.”

At first, nobody moved. We were all waiting for Jones’ body parts to stop raining from the sky. Alvarez got about three steps before he joined Jones as a debris field in the sky. “Alright you assholes, listen up.” From the sound of his voice, you could tell that Sarge was well beyond pissed. “Don’t walk backward. Turn around so you can see where you are fucking going.”

I turned around. Although by then it was a bit late. My backside was already covered with Alvarez. “Leech, you stick with Chen. Since both Jones and Alvarez are gone, he needs a new partner.”

There was another moment of silence before the platoon started to move out again. “Don’t step on anything you don’t recognize.”

“It’s an alien planet, Sarge, I don’t recognize anything.”

“In that case, don’t fucking step on anything.”

I was now joined with Chen’s COMM line. Chen was a woman. My friend Charlie would have been embarrassed. She did have a nice voice though. “What do you think they look like... the mines I mean?”

The sarge sneered. “Something you don’t want to step on. Now move and keep moving.”

Everyone walked like they were on eggshells. Which is quite the exercise when you are a 25-ton tank. I no longer had a real face, but I imagined myself cringing every time I heard something crunch under someone’s foot. It was the longest walk of my life. By the time we got back, we were no longer the 4th platoon. Group had nicknamed us “The Flat Feet.” But we didn’t even have time to relax and become used to the name. Command just handed us mine detectors and set us right back out there.

Only this time I was the point. I prodded Chen to walk out in front of me. She was reluctant. Then the sarge stepped in. “Move it, Chen. Flat Feet, follow Chen.”

“Thanks, sarge,” I said.

“Don’t thank me,” he retorted, “I just don’t want the mines smelling your stink again.”

About 60 meters into the city the alarms on the mine detectors started squealing and red lights started flashing. “What do we do, Sarge?”

“Do you know how to disarm an alien mine, Leech?”

“No. They didn’t cover it in training.”

“Then mark it and walk the hell around it. Jesus, do I have to tell you morons everything? Now, get moving.” A thousand years of human combat and no one had ever come up with a better command system than a screaming NCO. I’ll bet your average Roman Centurion never talked below 80 decibels.

We made it through, although we had about twelve close calls. In the end, we made it through and started heading on for the next town. We leveled residences, industrial areas, and I think we even took out a few parks, playgrounds, and recreational areas. But on the other hand, not being an expert on Blurb culture, they could have been shooting galleries or bookstores filled with paperbacks about eating humans as a snack food. The one thing I can say for sure is the first places we hit were outlying towns. The cities were much bigger.

I lost Chen in the second city and got assigned to Ustinov. Command had been right, they plugged Chen when she ran out of ammunition. When you can’t fire back, you’re nothing more than a 25-ton, slow-moving target. She didn’t go right away though. She lay on the ground, both arms and legs shot off. I could hear the pain in her voice. Damn bastard engineers. When you died in the suit, you had to die in agony... just like in real life. I hated their guts. “Leech,” Chen was barely able to mutter to me through the pain, “what do you think they are going to do with our bodies? If you make it, would you mind having my body...” The internal lights in Chen’s machine went dark. It was the last thing I ever heard her say. I have no idea what they do with bodies in China nowadays. I guess I should have paid more attention to Social Studies in High School.

They brought the platoon back up to strength with replacements. Then they sent us back underground. “Say,” Ustinov asked me while he was busy spraying bullets. “I hear you’re one of the originals.”

“In the platoon, I guess so.”

Ustinov gave me a slight snicker. “No, I mean you left Earth 25 years ago.”

“What? When did you leave?”

“Last week. They invented FTL drive while you guys were asleep and already on the way here.” He poured rounds into one of the Blurbs who jumped off a building at us. His body disintegrated as it fell. Although we did end up covered in Blurb blood. I had to shake my head. They don’t put windshield wipers on these things. “Lucky for you too. I still have 50 years to go in my enlistment. There was a lot of talk about them not counting travel time for you guys. The argument was if you were sleeping you weren’t serving, so the time didn’t count against your enlistment. Good thing they finally decided it did count. You only have 25 years to go now.”

I was flabbergasted. But not as much as when he turned some kind of coherent energy on the next batch of Blurbs who tried to kill us. “What the hell was that?”

I could almost hear him smile. “Upgrades.”

We’ll I guess technology had to improve in the last 25 years.

The fighting went on for another week. We’d go in starting with a plasma barrage, leveling the city. Then they’d send us in with minesweepers to mop up the remains. I should have realized the Blurbs would be advancing their technology as well. As soon as I put my foot down, I heard the click. *Damn*. The little bastards had invented mines our scanner couldn’t detect. The blast took off my right leg and my right

arm. I got dizzy as I tumbled out of control into the air. Everything was spinning. As instantly as it started, it came to an abrupt halt. My back smashed into the wreckage of some building. I found myself sliding down a pile of debris. The glass and steel tore into the rest of my body. The pain was insane. Somebody needs to talk to the engineers. A warning is one thing, but this much pain can affect your mental health. There was so much pain, I couldn't even effectively slow my decent with the arm I had left. I could see the bottom rushing up toward...

I woke up back on board the *Douglas Haig*. It had been converted to an in-place repair depot. "What the bloody hell is going on?"

"Language Leech," the engineer scolded me. He was the first human I'd seen on this world. But at least seeing someone in the black EDI uniform was comforting. Even if he was an engineer. I moved and lo and behold, I had two arms and two legs. "We've upgraded you by transferring your consciousness into a new armored unit. I'm surprised you hadn't been called in for upgrades already. You were in one of the oldest suits I've ever seen. The thing was practically an antique. You find this one weighs less, so you can move faster. Plus, you'll be carrying around a backpack capable of manufacturing ammunition for you. It's basically like carrying a Goliath on your back."

I moved around. I didn't feel like a giant heavy tank anymore, I almost felt... human.

"You can access all the new data files about your upgrades whenever you want." He took out a screwdriver and turned an adjusting knob on the suit. "Oh, and someone had the pain receptors on your old suit turned all the way up. Must have been a real sadist, I turned them down to the lowest setting for you."

"Thanks," I said, "I can't begin to tell you how much I like *that* improvement." I could see out the window there were all sorts of tents set up outside with real people walking around without the black EDI uniform. "Who are they?" I asked.

"Colonists."

"How long was I out?"

"You've been down for about two weeks," he smiled roughly. "Sorry pal, there's been a real backlog on repairs. It took me a while to get to you."

"So, what happened while I was out?"

"We cleaned up the rest of the Blurbs. That's when the colonists started moving in. Most of the fleet has moved off already. Turns out this isn't the Blurb homeworld, It's simply one of their outlying colonies. You're in luck though, the Flat Foots stayed behind."

"That's Flat feet."

"Whatever. Your unit is joining the next attack wave."

"Another Blurb colony?"

He patted me on the back. "Nope, this time you'll be fighting the Razacks. Lucky for you... you only have 25 years left."