



DOOM

BOOK I: THE SHORES OF HELL
AND
BOOK II: HELL ON EARTH

By Nick P.

The Shores of Hell

And

Hell on Earth

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Special thanks to Tim Corwin, and of course, Paul, the demonic overlord that came from beyond the moon.

Rev 4.0

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Thank you!

—The Author.

DooM

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The Shores of Hell

By Nick P.

PART 1

The Makings of a Nightmare

Prologue

Hell. That was the word that stuck in my mind. And was there ever a better word to use? With the towering flames of a dark red shade dancing menacingly in the abyssal background, the earth underfoot rooted with cracks from which sprang the faintest and most unearthly glow. Then there was the sound of thousands of people screaming in absolute terror, distant shrieks perforating the heavy, putrid smell that hung in the air, which was naturally blistering and humid. God, did I hate the hot and humid aspect of it all. But it did not matter, for it was Hell. I edged forward wearily, when something grabbed my shoulder—

And then I realised I wasn't in hell. I was at drill hall on Mars. This made no difference to me; my basic idea of hell was obsessively patriotic idiots smacking bags and training the proper way to shoot innocent people. But hey, that's just me. And the hand that grabbed my shoulder was not encrusted in spikes and satanic symbols, like that of some blood-thirsting horned demon, but rather the hand of Tim Davis. Staff Sergeant Tim Davis, that is. Shit. At that point, I really wished the hand belonged to a demon. Then I'd have an excuse to blow him away.

Why? Well, for starters, Tim was the biggest ass on our Martian dump. He easily fit all of the requirements above. Also, his superiority in rank to me did not ease the tension. Remember, I told myself: count to ten, focus on your breathing. Think of pleasant things.

My mind set in a meadow with distant mountains and furry bunnies scampering about, I spun around to face the painfully inquisitive marine.

"Hey Nik. Where are you heading to?" he asked me casually in his usual formal tone of speech.

I felt that I should answer with my fist rather than my mouth, but I was in a good mood that day. I forced a smile that was about as kind as the amount of tolerance I have for people stopping me and asking me where I'm going off to. "Oh, you know, I've got some duties to attend to." Then, mysteriously, I added, "Maybe a promotion."

The last bit I said to piss him off, or at least to make him uncomfortable. In reality, I already knew why I was going to Commander Briggs office, and it was two inches short of a demotion. You see, there was a little accident a few weeks ago—nothing spectacular, just an infinitesimal incident concerning the setting off of fireworks in the air processing facility. Oh yeah, and there was something about accidentally hitting an ammunition storage room, too. No big deal.

But enough about my personal toils in the wild Martian merry-go-round. You have perhaps asked yourself a thousand times, 'what the hell is going on?' Well, asking yourself won't do you a whole lot of good, so listen up. It was the year 2145, and humankind landed on Mars. Yeah, exciting stuff, that is if you work at NASA. Humans strolling around on Mars: big deal. Frankly, I didn't give a damn about it. Not that there was anything worth caring: the only people that took notice drastically were nature fanatics and tree-huggers who soon found out that now they had two planets to worry about. This is, of course, when they heard that a number of corporations were fighting for prime positions to milk the red planet of its nutrients, meaning that they were going to use it for mining: lots of good minerals beneath the red dust.

Yeah, I guess it was a great human achievement, and I acknowledged it, I was proud of it. What more was I to do?

I had entered the military. Did I want to shoot people for kicks? Did I want to keep order and peace and to protect the others? Nah. The thing is, the government pays for your college tuition if you join the military. I didn't have enough cash to pay for myself. So I got depressed, went to a bar, and drank away the money that I *did* have left. So I was broke. And these days, when you're broke (or an alcoholic, or a drop-out...), you enlist in the military. And that is why such capable minds make the military the brilliant organisation it is.

How I ended up a *Marine* remains a mystery to me. I think that it involved some drinking again, as well as a few very persuasive friends that were joining. They probably gave me the classic, 'let's join the Marines together' crap. Before I knew what was going on, I was doing push-ups in the mud with the drill sergeant's foot up my ass.

So what does Mars have to do with all this babble about the military? Well, mining started on Mars and all was good. But then, as usual, those military idiots put their foot in and said, 'let's built a military base on Mars!'

Now, why you would build a *military* base on Mars is an absolute mystery to me. If some war erupted on Earth, it would take all the guys in that base six months just to get there. Maybe they thought it was just plain cool. I thought it was stupid. Which is exactly why I got sent to the damned planet. You see, I tend to express my opinions very openly.

And here's another tidbit for you to mill over: these military installations weren't the only thing built on Mars. Like parasitic intestinal leeches, corporations tagged along with their ROTC and USMC pals. There were many buildings that I had no idea what went on inside them and they were unmarked in the directories, most owned by the UAC, Union Aerospace Corporation. They were top secret and all information regarding them was classified. I suppose it did make some sense to build buildings where dangerous secret stuff is tested away from Earth. But it was the usual military top secret, and I doubt they really did anything important in there. Probably developing machines that recycle human waste and pack it into a granola bar (true story).

As I said, Mars is six months away from anything interesting; no fighting, no action. Just staring out through red windows at the bleak, red Martian landscape, red day after red day, having to put up with chimpanzees such as Tim Davis and Commander Briggs.

And speaking of Briggs, I had arrived at his office. Bright sunshine and daisies! I should've downed several doses of beer; then maybe I wouldn't have to endure what was about to ensue.

I knocked on the door. There was an odd scraping sound and a low voice, followed by Commander Brigg's familiar diction saying, "Just a minute."

I shook my head in disgust. I didn't even want to know what the hell that was all about. Fortunately, I was spared from knowing. I guess there *is* someone up there who likes me.

But down here, on the Martian surface, it was the other way around.

"Come in," said Briggs, and so I did. That really was about as much obedience as I was willing to endow him.

Briggs was what you'd expect for a Marine Commander. Old, his face haggard, his hair cut short, he was sitting at his chair, forcing a rather innocent look upon his otherwise cruel face. Oh, and he happened to be a major-league asshole, and

saying that that is an understatement is an understatement all in its own. But I'm sure you probably already figured that out. Sadly, and perhaps to my own benefit, I had no time to observe or comment on this (even Nik Taggart knows when not to push too far). I stood at attention, my back straight, my hand at a salute (that, or shielding my eyes from the bright lights).

"Uh, at ease. Yes, corporal?"

Did he not remember? Maybe I shouldn't have come at all. Briggs is rather famous for his memory. The lack of it, I mean. But I didn't care anymore, so I continued. "You wanted to see me, Commander?"

He sat there for a while with a puzzled look on his face as he tried to recall why. After a long while paused, he said, "I don't remember why I wanted you to come here, corporal. Go on, you're free to go."

Feeling as if I might waltz my way out on my tiptoes in happiness, I headed for the door. Then, something with the likes as a thunderbolt hit my merriment and it all fell apart. It was Briggs's voice:

"Oh yes, now I remember: the whole fireworks thing."

Now feeling as if I was heading towards the Gallows, I marched forward. I must have seemed intent on examining my shoes. For some reason, I didn't feel it necessary to look up. There was a piece of gum slapped down on the front end. When did that get there?

"Damn it, Taggart, what the hell were you thinking? You know that all air is recycled in this place. You also know that our air has a higher oxygen concentration, meaning that stuff burns, well, better. Your silly games burned away one-third of our entire supply! So now, our machines have to synthesise more air per hour than normal, meaning more money, meaning millions of dollars wasted away just for a few seconds of joy for you!"

"Well, not just for me. All of my pals in the 546th squadron seemed rather pleased." Hastily, I added, "sir."

Briggs continued, ignoring my defence. "And when that one firecracker—"

"You mean the Black Flower 4500 explosive? Those are so hard to find. You should be proud, sir, that through my business dealings I came across one. And you should be proud to have witnessed its brilliant explosion—"

"Explosion made brighter when it flew into that ammunition bunker."

"Well, it *was* very impressive."

Briggs' face turned dangerously red. "We lost electrical power for four hours and twelve percent of all our ammunition. You know how much that costs, corporal?"

"Well, I'd like to ask what all that ammo is for, anyway. All the way out here on Mars, what could attack us? Aliens? Multidimensional beings? Some unknown creatures spawned in the deep vats where that slob you feed us is made?" Ah, my imagination! I could've gone on in listing different absurdities that endanger us, but was cut short by the surly commander.

"I have good news for you, Taggart."

"You're gonna shove the remaining ammo up your ass?"

Taggart, you dumbass, shut your goddamn mouth, I told myself, instantly regretting what I had just said.

Briggs trained his eyes as a weapon upon me. "You've got a serious attitude, corporal. I suggest you clean it up before you end up in this office again. And you should be thanking me, I'm going to do you a favour. I'm gonna let you off the hook. Why? This military base, more than anything else, is a publicity stunt. It is here not for real military reasons, but to simply stand as testament to human achievement."

Or human stupidity, I thought.

"It is here to show just how mighty and far-reaching our military is. So, we naturally control the flow of information, and we have managed to keep that little accident with the fireworks quiet. I am giving you a second chance, partly so the reporters don't get suspicious when they see you flying home. I'm sure you would spill some precious and secretive info to them."

"Oh?" I said testily. "Secretive info like that person trying to keep quiet in the closet?"

Wow, what the hell was wrong with me today.

Oh well, who cares? Nothing mattered to me anymore. What could Briggs possibly do?

This certainly caught the commander off guard. He wavered, and an odd expression crossed his face. "Leave," he growled menacingly.

I shrugged. "Yes sir."

"One more thing, Taggart. I still want you to understand the graveness of the damage you have inflicted. You're going to clean the cafeteria alone, after breakfast, lunch, and dinner, for the next four years. Failure to comply by this will result in you being sent into solitary confinement."

With a newfound feeling for the military burning in my heart, I left the office.

* * *

What had the military done to me? I used to be civilised and well read. I used to be able to point out all of the faults in the late 20th century physicist Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, and be able to discuss all of the fine points of every single epic, whether it be Nordic or Greek. I used to be able to list all the Russian Tsars, Japanese emperors, and English kings in chronological order. I used to play sports and excel at a vast quantity of other subjects. My virtuoso skill at playing the trombone has yet to be matched by some prodigy from Julliard, and don't even get me started on my original paintings in Abstract expressionism (see, most people throw paint at the canvas. So I thought, why not throw canvases at the paint?).

And then I joined the military. My IQ must've dropped a good seventy points and a nickel. Now the only historical figures I knew were Benito Mussolini, the Wright Brothers, and some poet named Escher (or was that an artist? Well, there you have it). My vocabulary must've fallen to less than a thousand words. No longer could I savour the five-star gourmet dishes I used to prepare (OK, now I'm exaggerating a bit), no longer would I woo women with my ability to make twenty minute brownies in just ten (taste like crap, though). It was complete mental degradation. As if that wasn't bad enough, now I had to scrub floors and tables clean from the spilled glob that was tentatively called 'meatloaf.'

And thank god I hadn't gone with my earlier plan to fire ten Black Flower 4500s in the *fuel storage facility*.

Perhaps you want to know a little more about the base. It was fairly large, sprawled over a four-kilometre radius, though most of it lay underground. The power generators lay in the centre, alongside the air synthesising machines that we sent to Mars long before we ever rubbed our fungi-harboured feet against the red dust. To the south was a rather Spartan looking complex which was our home abode. It doesn't look cosy, and that's because it isn't. There were some research facilities to the west of us. They were said to reach far underground, as much as ten kilometres, if not

more. But on the surface, they were rather unimpressive black, windowless buildings looking gloomier than our own facility.

There was some civilian housing on the other side of the generators, along with the appropriate greenhouse. And to the west of that was the mining complex. They had an airlock among other things, but most of it was tunnels below ground. And from all of these buildings, belowground corridors led to the airfield, which was cast a distance away from our outpost.

I had one good friend in the Martian base: Tyler. I didn't bother with his last name because it had way too many letters and way too little syllables. And then there was this other Chinese kid that always followed us around. I think his name is Zhao, or something like that. We simply call him Mexican guy because, well, because it's funny. This annoys him, but he still laughs with us about it. Political incorrectness can get you through the glummiest day smiling. Anyway, he was there too. He is always there, whether it is for better or for worse.

I tried to lift my mood, though I still felt as if I should let my fist do the talking. "Hey Tyler," I said. "Hi Mexican guy."

"I'm not Mexican!" Zhao replied in thick English, in his usual annoyed tone.

"Yeah, yeah," said Tyler absentmindedly as he turned to me. "Well, what happened?" he asked. "If you didn't get punished, I have four more Black Flowers under my bed. We could set them off tonight."

I sighed. "I guess not. I wouldn't be able to attend. Feel free to fire them yourself, though. Then maybe you can join me in scrubbing the cafeteria floor."

We began to walk away.

"So that's your punishment?"

"Yeah," I said lowly.

"Look on the bright side: the only thing you should be worried about losing when being demoted to a janitorial post would be women. But since we don't have any women in this place, you've got nothing to lose but your dignity." He slapped me on the back playfully. I said nothing.

In reality, there were several women Marines on our base. However, they were not to be messed with. Many men approach them and then walk away with broken noses. I think there was one case where it wasn't a nose, but an arm.

One time, a drunken Tyler, beer at hand, seemed inclined to joke around with one of our feminine Marines during their shooting practice. Certainly not the best time or place to do so. Next thing he knew, the can popped out of his hand and beer went splashing everywhere. I don't think he ever cracked another joke about her accuracy.

I sighed, "Hey Pedro," I turned to Mexican guy. "I'm feeling a little depressed. How about some Tequila to drown my sorrows?"

"Actually," said Tyler, "I have some gin stored up. You up for it?"

"I'm not Mexican."

"Yeah, yeah."

It was dinner, and the three of us had managed to secure a nice, by our lowered standards, round table away from the loud mayhem of the rest of the cafeteria, near one of the large panoramic windows that encompassed the room. Chipped as it was, at least the table's legs were relatively even, meaning that it wouldn't sway at the slightest touch. It was dark outside, so there wasn't anything to see. It was Mexican Guy's turn to get food, and soon enough he came around trays in hand, and distributed them amongst us. I glanced down. I think I have already described the food here on several separate occasions, so further elaboration is not needed. Tonight it was supposed to be ravioli, though the brown mass strongly

reminded me of the infamous meatloaf from several days before. Whatever. The nutrient-rich, vitamin-enhanced, artificially-flavoured glob was still edible.

We ate in silence for a little while. I moved my fork through the 'ravioli' and smirked at the wet, sloppy sound it made. Adding some hot sauce sent secretly by some friends on Earth (bringing it legally would be a pain in the ass, quarantine inspectors go crazy about regulating all organic substances that get shipped here) did not do much good. "I can't take this any longer," I finally said, setting down the fiery red bottle, which I had just half-emptied without much effect.

"Join the club. Mexican guy and I here are the presidents."

"I'm not Mexican."

"Well," I said thoughtfully. "We can resign. I know I've done my six years. But I don't think Briggs will be real happy. He doesn't want anyone leaving the squadron, and I think he wants to keep this up until we are liable for Social Security aid, if you know what I mean."

Tyler shrugged. "There are other ways to leave this rock. You could get court martialed, if you really, really tried. I guess those fireworks weren't enough. But if you do something stupid enough, Briggs will be forced to fly back to Earth."

"Yeah," I said, rubbing my chin thoughtfully. "But it can't be something illegal, you wouldn't want to be sent back to Earth, trialed, and shipped directly to solitary confinement."

"Hmm, dishonourable discharge, perhaps?"

"Honourable. You don't want people to treat you like a prick."

Tyler nodded. "True, but dishonourable is much easier." He paused. "And speaking of pricks, is it just me, or is Briggs a little on-edge lately?"

"Oh yeah, he really is." I recalled the scene back in his office. "There was some guy hiding in the closet. I don't know what Briggs takes me for, I could hear them talking when I knocked. Anyway, I pointed out the fact that the person was there, and I guess I hit a nerve. Still, he's very good at masking his emotions."

"One of these days I'm gonna go for a two-for-one and accidentally run over that son-of-a-bitch with one of the service loaders and then get discharged for it."

I laughed. "You'd have to do a damn good job making it look like an accident."

He shrugged. "I'm sure that everyone in the squadron could vouch as a witness. Everybody hates that asshole."

"Well, not everybody. And everyone knows that everyone hates Briggs, so as long as you have one or two people saying it wasn't an accident, you'd be in deep shit. The guys back on Earth aren't as stupid, at least they have their heads screwed on the right way."

Across the room, Briggs strolled in and his eyes immediately fell on me.

I stood up and, smiling and waving to Briggs, said, "God I hate that son-of-a-bitch."

"Careful, he might be able to read lips."

"Are you kidding me, you can say stuff right in his face and he'll make you repeat it till he finally gets it."

"Say, have you seen Sam?"

Sam was a marine who looked much younger than he really was and had a youthful, innocent face. This was of great value to him because it did loads to conceal the fact that he was actually the one person on the base who specialised in contraband dealings and had managed to get us those fireworks. He also secured the transportation for my hot sauce needs. Sam was a master at getting bootlegged and

illegal software, substances, high-grade plutonium, and just about anything that could pop into your head. He could get anything for anyone, as long as they were willing to pay up front.

“Nope.”

“I need to talk to him to see if he can hook me up some speakers that I can hook up to my personal database. I’ve got this whole plan worked out.”

“I see, already working on the next trick, eh?”

Tyler smiled mischevously. “Oh, this will be great. I just hope Sam has been careful covering his trails.”

“Oh don’t worry, that’s what he’s good at. Still, I wonder why Briggs wasn’t investigating further.”

“What do you mean?”

“He didn’t really ask where I got the fireworks. In fact, he didn’t ask me anything like that. He just lectured me, told me that it was a bad thing to do, and made me a janitor.”

I looked down at my tray, which was miraculously empty. I guess nothing matters when you’re hungry.

“Well, I heard he asked around, but he doesn’t want to get too inquisitive and spark an investigation. I mean, that’s become his obsession, to keep this and everything else that we—I mean, everything that happens, quiet. He’s really going out of his way to make this base look like it’s running like a well-oiled machine.”

“Well, that’s kind of good,” I said. “It means that we can really do whatever we want, without any fear of consequences.”

“He has his ways of making us miserable. Remember, janitorial duties.”

I grinned. “Oh, that’s well worth the fireworks.”

Tyler shook his head. “That’s not what you’ll be saying a couple of days from now. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Maybe we’ll get lucky and get to go home before your punishment term is up.”

“Maybe. What are you going to do when you get back?”

And so commenced a conversation through which we had gone numerous times before. But it didn’t matter; it was this nostalgia mixed with the anticipation of a brighter future that kept us going gloomy day in and day out.

“Well,” he started in a well-measured voice. “First women. And then maybe start a more exciting life. I’m thinking crazy parties, and no regard for my health. I’ll take all the money I’ve stocked up over the years and maybe invest a part of them, but spend the rest away. I’m thinking about buying a nice little aircar for the weekends, you know? Something without compromise, maybe Italian. Oh, and go out hiking. I need to see nature again. You know, the Martian landscape was exciting at first, and I used to sit here and look out at in fascination. Nowadays, I feel nausea when I look and all I see is the endless barren red wasteland, stretching to the horizon. What about you?”

“Amen to that,” I said raising my mug, only to find to my own dismay that it was empty. When had that happened? I sighed. “It’s a little late to get the military to take up on my college tuition. I honestly don’t know what I’d do.”

“Well, stick around when we get back,” Tyler said.

I nodded. “And what about you, Mexican guy? Gonna go home to Puerto Vallarta?”

“I’m not Mexican, I’m Chinese!!!”

“Yeah, and I’m Hindu.”

When boredom set in, we resorted to stereotyping.

“You know,” said Tyler. “One of these days we’re gonna have to stop doing that.”

“Yeah, but not today.”

The cafeteria was beginning to empty, meaning that dinner was over. And it was now that I would proudly serve the Marines, mop and bucket at hand, sweeping broadly across the floor. “You guys go on,” I said. “I’ve gotta clean the floor, remember?”

“Right,” said Tyler. “I’m gonna go find Sam. Do you want me to request something for you?”

“Nah, I can’t come up with anything off the top of my head. I’ll think about it while I’m sweeping. Just tell him that I’m running low on the hot sauce.”

Tyler nodded.

And so they left.

Where to get the mop? I realised that Briggs hadn’t specified anything. Oh well, I thought. I’ll just go on. Maybe Briggs already forgot. But then, half-way through the act of exiting the room, I noticed a neat little mop and bucket propped against the far wall. With a groan followed by some words I don’t feel like repeating here, I picked up the mop and began to sweep.

Now, you really don’t notice how big a room is until you are the one who actually has to clean it. The floor stretched out before me, and all of the filth on it seemed to jump out.

I sighed, but tried to lift my spirits, singing ‘Straight Through the Heart’ as I moved about the floor. I had just reached the solo of the song, wielding the broom as a guitar, when the lights went out.

At first I thought this was the doing of some joker. Marines were playful types, and I thought that some guy thought it was funny to turn out the lights on me. What a dry sense of humour.

Hoping to get back at the culprit, I vividly described where and how far I was gonna stick the broom when I found him, when I walked out and realised something. It wasn’t just the cafeteria where the lights had gone away; it was the entire building, if not the entire human outpost on the planet.

Well, OK. This has happened before, power outages, though not common, do happen. This was usually when some maintenance was taking place in the power generators. Still, daytime was the time to do things of this sort.

Feeling a little uneasy as to this unusual occurrence, I dashed back to the large panoramic window.

Now, I’ll tell you: I’m not the panicky type. I feel absolutely no panic whatsoever when my uniform gets converted to a two-piece swimsuit, bleached and tossed in the ventilation shafts to have the air freeze it solid before being hung over the entrance of the mess hall (a rather lame practical joke by a fellow marine) or even when I simply get called to Briggs office (something not uncommon as well). The only reason I felt such worry was because I had been on Mars for God-knows how long and I hadn’t seen any action. The most excitement in my day comes when I go to the bathroom and read up the latest magazines. That, and the whole fireworks thing.

I glanced out the window. Normally, off to one side you’d be able to see parts of the warehouse depot. However, the lights were off there too. This only added to my worrisome streak. We had separate power generators, and the technicians would never shut both off at the same time.

The only light was starlight, seeping through the windows.

At that point I thought it best to haul ass and find the others. Only then did the feeling of aloneness strike through me, and I knew I had to leave the abandoned mess hall. In my hurry, I tripped over a table and did a somersault in the air worthy of an Olympic silver medal. My landing, however, was not as graceful. A loud crack announced that I had broken something. Hopefully it wasn't a leg.

I continued onward, more wearily, limping. But then something stopped me cold in my tracks, and it wasn't the warm blood that oozed from my busted eyebrow. It was a human scream, and it came from beyond the hall.

As I walked towards the corridor, I fingered my pistol. It was standard issue; all Marines were permitted to haul it wherever they pleased. Of course, because of the lack of action, few actually carried it around. Fortunately, I was one of those few. Why? Well, commanders, generals, among other things, can give very, very drawn out speeches. We all get bored. So, while everyone else is sitting there, bored out of their mind, wondering just what offensive and inedible object to sneak into their buddy's evening stew, I sit there with my pistol. When Briggs opens his mouth, my pistol always turns unnaturally fascinating. I simply toy with it, wishing that I could land one of its virgin bullets straight between Briggs' eyes.

He, and the guy who sneaked a pile of used ear swabs in my sandwich last week.

As I said, marines were playful types.

I loved the pistol. It was small, yet not comical in any way. It had a sleek body and a firm handle with a custom grip. It only fired if it sensed the contours of my hand enclosed around its handgrip, though it could be programmed otherwise. It wasn't a very effective weapon by high modern standards, though when compared to the rather outdated 20th century pistols, it was extremely powerful and efficient. A simple pull of the trigger, or two, could easily bring a man down to a permanent effect.

I paused and contemplated the prospect of me overreacting. What if all the lights came back on and I found everyone staring at me walking around with my gun out? I'd feel like a complete idiot. Still, there was cause for alarm, and my pistol was my only reassurance.

Hmmm, I pondered. What could have caused that scream?

I cleared my head. A marine must not let his silly ramblings obscure his vision and slow his reflexes.

I walked out of the mess hall and straight into some large mass. I jumped back and realised it was a human figure, oddly contorted, limping towards me. How its face looked, I didn't know, but I had a feeling that I shouldn't try to find out. Wearily, I edged backwards, careful not to slip on some banana peel, when the damned thing, human, whatever, spoke. And through its distorted, wheezing voice, due to lack of breath perhaps, I realised that it was Tyler.

"Help me," he said simply. "Save me."

I straightened up and all fear left me. I was used to Tyler doing stuff to BS me, and I had a feeling this no different. Hell, I was used to BS coming from all directions.

"Tyler, you asshole," I said, almost absent-mindedly. My surroundings were so frightful, I wasn't able to come up with a better and cleverer comment. With the lights, and all energy, out, and a number of other strange circumstances, I felt annoyed that he would feel inclined to joke with me. See, the whole fireworks thing: it was his idea. And another time he got really curious just how flammable methane is. That's an unpleasant story that I don't wish to recall. Let's just say that the end result was three burnt asses and a very pissed off Briggs.

"No," he croaked.

"Yes," I said angrily. "Cut all this bullshit. What the hell is going on? And who screamed?"

He said nothing.

My eyes drew up and gazed about. At that point I wondered why the emergency floodlights hadn't come on. Call it a sudden breakthrough. I simply

wondered why floodlight wasn't dancing across Tyler's face. They were there for when there were outages, and they ran off of their own separate generators. And they had remained off. There was absolutely no power. I needed a flashlight. That, and a nice, strong cup of black Colombian coffee.

Sadly the latter of which was not available at the moment. Flashlights, however, were available in many different places about the station. All I had to do was to find my way to—

“Ah!”

Tyler's scream snapped me back into the depressing reality. His black silhouette had disappeared, apparently he had fallen to the ground. I could hear his groans coming from some vague area around my feet. At that point, I decided to work a tad harder to find out what the hell was going on. I don't think Tyler was joking anymore. I prepared my fist just in case he was.

“Tyler, what happened?”

His breaths came in short gasps as he struggled to form words. “I don't know, it was dark. Things came, inhuman sounds, like animals, squeals, someone screamed, but it was too late. I made it out just in time...”

“What happened to you?” OK, this was getting freaky, but I let the guy run his mouth off anyway.

“I don't know,” Tyler continued. “I had escaped, so I wandered around. I had to go back to my quarters to get my pistol, but I ran into Jones. I told him that I was glad to see him... But he... He attacked me, screaming like...” He trailed off. “He had his pistol, and he shot me in the...” He coughed. “...In the ribs... I don't know what the hell is happening.”

I stood there for a while listening to his hastened breathing, then knelt down. It was too dark to see anything, whether it be an oncoming freight train, a baboon's hindquarters, or Tyler's wounds. I knew I had to get a flashlight and then maybe a medikit. Fortunately, those two things were usually paired together.

Moving slowly away from Tyler, I ran my fingers across the walls. To some bystander, it might've been a comical sight, but it didn't matter. I knew that such emergency materials were stored in compartments behind marked panels that ran along the steel walls. Of course, the people who designed this system made the assumption that the markers indicating these panels would be visible by way of either floodlights or flashlight, the latter of which is paradoxically ironic.

Behind me, Tyler groaned, so I tried to speed up my pace. As I did, I wondered as to what happened to Lieutenant Jones and the others. Inhuman sounds and animalistic vocalisations? Right. As I said, freaky stuff.

And then I realised that I had wandered off too far. Slowly, I retraced my steps back to Tyler.

Damn. No flashlight, no medikit. No coffee.

With his arm over my shoulder, I helped him up and we slowly got a move on. My target was the hospital wing, the one place where flashlights and medikits were insured.

We walked in absolute darkness, but living for years confined in the same damn walls had taught me how everything is organised. Several days ago, I would've said that I could find my way around the place with my eyes blindfolded. Funny how things work out sometimes.

I allowed myself to lead the way. That way, I was the one whose head took all of the battering from walls and doors whose position I recalled a second too late. Walking in darkness is not my favourite pastime.

My mind wandering, I continued to manoeuvre my friend about the halls.

BAM!

Shit, I didn't remember a wall there. Oh well.

I think I broke my nose with that hit. But I continued onward.

And then, another loud bang rang out. Did I run into something else? I was probably so numb from all this battering, that I must not have felt it.

But then Tyler's body slumped, and I was forced to pull at all his weight. And I realised: someone, or something, had shot him. And if I didn't do something of remote intelligence, it could shoot me.

I felt my friend's body grow cold, and I knew nothing could be done. Call me egoistic, but I knew that what mattered at the moment was me. And only me. I had to get out alive, no matter what. I had to find a flashlight, that was my priority. What I was to do from then onward I had no idea, but it involved saving my own ass. So with that, I allowed Tyler's body to fall to the ground, and then looked up. There, at the end of the corridor, I could've sworn that I saw two dots of light, very pale, ellipsoid. Shaped like eyes, they were, a pale green, staring at me. For a few moments I sank my gaze into the cold unblinking eyes, and then I turned and ran.

As I said earlier, since I joined the military, my IQ had an exponential downturn, but I still had enough brain cells to know when to engage in the act of running for dear life.

I took off.

As I was sprinting down the corridor, shots echoed behind me. I guess someone doesn't like me very much.

BAM!

I ran into another wall. Well, that meant that there was a junction. I took the left corridor, and felt pleased that, at least for the moment, I was out of shooting range from that thing, whatever it was. However, with the lack of a life-threatening factor, all my senses returned and primarily focused on my nose. The damned thing hurt so bad, I almost wished another pair of glowing eyes would crop up so as to take my mind off of the pain. Oh, and a note for future reference: never hit a nose that has already been broken.

Feeling out of range of all danger for a moment, I decided to pause. I tried to figure out where I was, as well as to catch my breath, which I had dropped two junctions behind. Of course, in the near darkness, the former was not really feasible. Alright, I really, *really* needed a flashlight.

I had taken a left. Good, I was somewhere near the hospital wing. At least, I hoped so. I continued down the corridor. After a little while, I would have to take a sub-corridor that led to the hospital. So I ran my hands along the wall as I walked, waiting to feel the hall. I felt something wet instead.

Hmmm. I brought the finger to my nose to sniff it, but accidentally poked my eye instead. And damn, it stung. After mouthing several articulate and highly-expressive words, I finally got to smell the liquid. As expected, it smelled like urine.

Bright sunshine and daisies!

Wiping my fingers on my shirt, I continued forward. And then my hand gave way. I had found the corridor that I sought. I went inside.

Alright. The hospital wing.

I hit my knee. That's how I found the operating table in the centre. I felt something soft and wet there, but decided to examine it as soon as I got a flashlight.

Several shattered beakers and knocked over panels later, I felt comfort in my palm in the form of a large flashlight.

But then I heard the unmistakable sound of an engine, a rev. What the hell? The scary part was that it was in the same room as I, the tiny hospital wing. Another rev came, louder, more consistent.

My hands shaking, I struggled to turn the flashlight on. After pushing several of the buttons on its handle, I smacked it against the wall. That did the trick, and a beam of light illuminated the ceiling. Feeling as if a tiny Haiti person was doing a spiritual dance in my large intestine, I brought the flashlight to bear on the source of the revving sounds.

Then there was a final rev and the sound of an engine working, emitting a low guttural rumble.

And I saw what was making the sound, among other things.

I wished I hadn't.

There are people who can't stand the sight of blood. It makes them weak, queasy, and sometimes even pass out. And I will tell you, I am not one of those people.

After seeing the room, I was pretty damn happy this was so, though my phobias are always subject to change.

There was blood everywhere, still fresh, flowing from the walls, blood dripping from the ceiling, and wrapping around my boots. On the operating table in front of me were the remains of what must've one been some poor human being, but I didn't have time to examine this mess. On the other side was a human. Or what was once human, standing, looking at me hungrily.

My eyes travelled from its grey, hairless head and empty eyes, glowing a dull green, down to its tattered clothes. Its teeth were bared into a sly smile was about as nice and friendly as a pentagram scrawled in blood. And speaking of which, there was that red goo covering its mouth. And then my eyes came to a stop at its hands. The thing, call it a zombie for lack of a better word, was holding a chainsaw.

It looked at me and roared. And the sound of the roar could not have been created by human vocal cords. It was animalistic, demonic, but certainly not human.

And it revved the chainsaw again. The bloodied teeth spun and flecks of blood fell upon my uniform.

Oh shit.

The zombie-thing and I stood there, staring at each other. I really can't say if it was staring at me: its eyes were empty as could be, but I assumed it was. They were a light green, with no pupil in the centre. Of course, it knew I was there, so apparently its eyes were functional enough to discern my visage standing there, looking awed, trembling hand holding shaking flashlight. After a couple of indescribably intense seconds came to pass, my mind started coming to, and I knew that I had to do something. Not looking away, I fumbled with my fingers, fearing that any movement on my part could set off the dreaded reaction by the beast that I knew I had coming my way. With my mind racing, the image of my pistol popped into my head. That's what I had to do.

Jesus

I was still so shocked at the gorefest before me, that the zombie got a head start on the whole taking-action thing. It didn't seem as shocked looking at me. Its bloody visage radiated more hunger than anything else and soon contorted into a scream as it lunged forward, revving the chainsaw madly. I jumped back and the beast ended up slamming the machine against the operating table. Sparks mingled with blood flew as the chainsaw's spinning teeth caught metal and the flesh that lay on the table. The zombie shook its head in a manner reminiscent of some wild beast and roared again in absolute rage. At that point something clicked; shock left my body and instinct rushed in. I pulled out my pistol.

BLAM! The sound echoed loudly in the small, compact room. I hit the zombie in the shoulder. This didn't seem to do a whole lot of good, and now an exceptionally pissed off zombie lifted the sputtering chainsaw over its head. I pulled out a yellow stick-pad from my mind and wrote: shooting zombie in the shoulder—no good.

BLAM, this time to the head.

Have you ever taken shots at a watermelon? I have. And let me tell you, that zombie might as well have had a green head with a stem at one end. The gist of it: the result was very, very colourful.

This time, I felt the tiny dancing Haiti guy trying to force his way out my throat. After I had finished losing my dinner, I coughed and wiped my mouth on my sleeve. That was not fun.

Feeling queasy, though happy to have found a flashlight, I edged out of the hospital wing, careful not to slip on the messy floor.

Now what?

Well, I could try to restore power to the building, or at least to see what's wrong. Or I could go straight to the launch pad and fly away from this hell.

But what if there were other survivors? Also, some of the bigger doors required power to be opened, particularly the hangar door to the airfield. I would be hindered by them. Apparently, the launch pad was not the way to go. Then again, neither was the military, but that was behind me now.

Bright sunshine (I wish) and daisies!

I looked down at my pistol. Trusty as it was, I needed some more serious firepower. I had eighteen more shots, and another cartridge in my vest. Thirty-eight shots total.

And then a sudden realisation came over me: I needed to take a piss.

Taking the circumstances into account, I didn't think it was necessary to find a bathroom, and then to somehow struggle to hold the flashlight under my chin and my

gun under my armpit while I urinate. Actually, I had to do the exact same thing, except on the corridor wall.

Things were scary and I probably could've just done this in my pants. But that would be uncivilised, now wouldn't it?

Praying that some zombie with a chainsaw wouldn't pop out from behind some corner, I ensued in the act of relieving myself.

And then I heard a sound from down the hallway.

Oh crap.

Hurry, I thought to myself. The problem is, once the water starts flowing, there is no stopping it. It's like a juggernaut of processed liquids.

I freed one hand and grabbed the pistol, pointing it vaguely in the direction.

If I could only swing the flashlight that I held under my chin around to face the same direction...

There was only one way to do this. I spun around, still peeing, and faced whatever the hell was coming my way.

Was it some monster? A zombie?

Worse: it was Tim Davis.

"Don't move!" he said rather ferociously, pointing the pistol at me.

However, I sensed that he was human, not some zombie. How did I know? Well, for starters, he had pupils in his eyes. That's a pretty good sign right there. His skin had colour in it and his mouth wasn't covered in blood. So I decided to reply, to show him that I was human as well.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said. At that point Tim noticed that I was taking a piss. He seemed somewhat disgusted and surprised at the same time, but kept his gun up. I, however, continued speaking.

"Umm, can I at least cover myself?"

It was an awkward situation. But at that point, Tim seemed to see that I was indeed an anthropological entity with a fully functional cerebral complex (told you I was smart) and put his gun down. "Go ahead, Corporal," he said.

I tried cracking a joke. "Shouldn't I salute you?"

"No, please, don't! Just hurry up."

After I was done putting things where they belonged, I turned back to Tim. Of all the people in our base, why was he the one who had, like me, escaped unscathed? I think that I had expressed my dislike for Tim above. However, the disturbing situation that we were in seemed to let us cast aside our differences. See, Tim was always the perfect Marine, always striving to be the best, dedicated to his work, into the whole proud-to-be-a-marine thing that, in all honesty, pissed me off. Me, I had joined because I was broke and wanted a college education.

We stood there for a while, worlds apart.

"So," said Tim in his usual clear dictation, though it was rather shaky. Tim was scared. So was I. "Do you have any idea what's going on, Corporal? I'd love to hear your story."

I looked around with the flashlight just to be sure that we were safe. "Well, I have a name, as you might know. Some freaky stuff's going on, so I don't think protocol matters anymore." Tim was getting impatient, so I got to the point. "Call me Nik, not 'Corporal.'"

"Now," I continued. "I think you remember that whole fireworks thing. I was scrubbing the floors, proudly," I added the last bit with a quick glance. "And then the lights went out, and there was a scream, some strange sounds, and so on. The whole power outage was strange, so I knew I had to get a flashlight, which is what I did."

And in the hospital wing I ran smack flat into some thing that scared the hell out of me.”

Tim nodded silently.

“It was like, it was human, yet it wasn’t. Its skin was grey, its eyes empty, and there was blood everywhere. It roared, and it had a chainsaw...” My story was thickening into a smoothie, but it was kind of hard to describe what I had just seen. “So, what’s your story?”

“Well, I was back at drill hall, training after hours as usual. There were some other lieutenants and corporals there, but they soon left. And then, as you said, the lights went out. I went out in the hall and was attacked by one of my fellow Marines. Fortunately, I was carrying my pistol, as specified in the military protocol, section IV, paragraph two.” I grunted. Somehow I wasn’t surprised that he knew it by heart. This was the new protocol. You see, to Tim’s absolute horror, the marines etiquette was rewritten a few years ago and he had to memorise it all over again.

Tim continued, ignoring Yours Truly. “I shot him in self-defence. From then on, I walked out, in hopes of finding someone else, such as yourself. Instead, I was attacked by several more of these ‘zombies’, as you say, Corporal.” He paused. “Any idea as to what exactly is going on, Corporal?”

“Call me Nik,” I said rather forcefully

“Listen, PFC—”

“Nik, damn it!” Years of being referred to as ‘corporal’ and not liking it had built up a tower of anger inside of me. It was as if they were rubbing in my mistake, that of joining the armed forces. And quite frankly, Tim was really started to crawl up my nerves.

“OK,” said Tim, nodding. “Any ideas on what to do, Corporal?”

I sighed hopelessly. “Well, I say we fly out of his hellhole, but those airlock and big hangar doors require electrical power. So, we must restore power, if at all possible.”

“Good thinking, marine.” He said, slapping me on the back.

Damn, this was gonna take forever, working with Tim.

Staff Sergeant Tim, that is.

I remember the first time I fired a gun. The gun was my father's classic Winchester rifle, and the target was our neighbour's cat. It was such a fine piece of engineering, a treasure of human ingenuity. Its pure wooden handle, smooth and polished, flowed into the metallic trigger seamlessly, which was curved just right. Man, did I wish that I could have it now. It would've made things so much easier. I drew upon these glassy memories as Tim and I headed further down the corridor and rounded a corner.

We were drawing nearer to the energy processing facility. We had left our 'cosy' living quarters behind. No longer were there stained and torn carpets beneath our feet. No longer were there chairs and tables, having stood against time and the abused bestowed upon them by feisty, hyperactive marines. No longer. There were simply steel decks beneath us and Spartan walls around us. Walls where no one had bothered to cover all the tubing and wiring that ran through them and the hissing vents that lined its corners.

Tim was ahead as we rounded yet another corner. And we ran smack into another damn zombie. Tim jumped back, surprised, and he would've gone bye-bye at the hand of the zombie's shotgun if it weren't for several well-placed bullets by Yours Truly.

The zombie hit the ground first, then came the shotgun with the expected metallic CLANG! Tim and I looked at each other, and then the shotgun. Who gets it? I had a burning desire to carry the gun, naturally. Somehow, the fact that I was just wistfully thinking about a shotgun moments earlier, made it feel like the shotgun zombie was gift that was aimed at me. Besides, I would feel so much more secure if the gun's solid handle were to rest in my hand. And I knew that Tim felt the same way. When being attacked by zombies, the deep desire to carry more powerful firearms seemed pretty natural. And so, as we stood there both gazing at it, the question that formed in my mind was, now what?

"Um, do you have a Terran lire we could flip?" I asked, despite the fact that I knew the answer.

Tim thought for a while. "Rock, paper, scissors?" he suggested.

"Or we could jump for it." I added.

Jumping for it was out of the question (and besides, Tim had a good decimetre or two on me in terms of height, so I felt stupid for suggesting it), so we thought some more. I put my hands in my pocket, when I felt something small, round, and metallic. It was my lucky coin! It would serve its purpose now. And since it was *my* lucky coin, it was bound to get *me* the shotgun.

I grinned.

"Here," I said. "I have a coin." I took it out. The tiny thing had no heads or tails. One side had a picture of Earth on it with rays coming out from one side. The other had a picture of Mars with a tiny probe hurtling towards its surface. It was a rather large piece of moulded metal that was given to me by Sam. He had said that I should keep it because soon it was going to be the only one left and be worth a lot of money, or something of that sort. I had never thought about it, though it had become a lucky coin when I had used it to knock out a rather large and formidable marine named Davidson.

"Mars or Earth?" I asked as I flipped the coin.

"Earth," he called.

Damn, I thought as the coin landed Earth-side up. I still tried to bargain, though I had a hard time keeping my voice convincing.

“Mars,” I called.

“What?” said Tim, rather aggravated.

“That’s Mars.”

“No, it’s Earth.”

“We flip again,” I suggested.

Tim grimaced. “What the hell? You can’t do that—”

I flipped the coin anyway, though we never had a chance to call it. There was a sound to our left, and we both spun around. The coin landed on the railing below and fell through one of the holes in the railing. Below us, loud rings were issued as the coin bounced around decks below, clangs become more and more distant as the coin fell further.

A hiss came from somewhere. I hoped to God it was just another vent.

Seizing the opportunity of Tim’s distraction, I grabbed the shotgun and pointed it ahead. He saw this and made an angry gesture, followed by another one that isolated his central finger. I shrugged at this.

And then, illuminated by the flashlight, a zombie stumbled around the corner up ahead. It was just another zombie, weapon-free, and in need of some serious weight-loss treatment. That, and some bullets to its head.

At that point, looking at the big-boned post-human, I realised I was hungry, even for ‘meatloaf’ slop. I awoke from my dreamy state by Tim’s yell.

Oh yeah, I thought. I almost forgot there was a zombie attacking us.

BOOM! Click... I reloaded the gun with pleasure, surveying the zombie that was now wandering about without a head.

“Another shot,” advised Tim, staring ahead. “To the chest, finish it off.”

I raised my shoulders. “Looks pretty dead to me. Why waste ammo?”

But then both of us were caught off-guard as the zombie flew up into the air and its cumbersome body smacked against the ceiling with a loud, sickening version of a thud. It stood there for a while, seemingly hovering, and then with another sickening sound, this time a crunch, its torso was separated from its legs in a colourful spray of blood.

I don’t know why, but I remembered my first fireworks show.

Tim, now the one controlling the flashlight, kept it up, and we soon understood what had happened. There was something on the ceiling, something that had picked up the zombie and had shredded it apart.

“What the hell—”

Well, zombies were scary, sure. Yes, they did creep me out several times, but I don’t think they could anywhere near prepare me for what came next. The thing moved and the flashlight fell upon it more distinctly, making its lovely features stand out.

It was humanoid, a very dark colour, almost black. It had somewhat insect-type plates, I suppose ‘exoskeleton’ is a nice way to put it. Beneath these plates was a muscular body, though strangely deformed and inhuman. Its muscles stretched to its arms that ended in a large hand with five fingers with five long nails. Perhaps ‘claws’ is a better term to use. Its feet were basically the same story.

As if that didn’t make my day, the damned demon raised its head and hissed at me. And then I saw that it didn’t have two eyes. Nor three, nor four... How many there were, I don’t know. Maybe ten or so, sprayed across its face, each one glowing red in some malicious, hungry manner, examining me and Tim. Oh, and I think that you can figure out by yourself that its mouth was filled with fangs.

Charming as it was, I decided that it would be best if I just blew it away. I raised the shotgun, but the thing crawled forward, along the roof, like some damned demon, its body twisting as that of some animal.

BOOM! Man, this shotgun made a very pleasant sound.

Unfortunately, I missed. And no, it's not because I'm a bad shot. It's just that this monstrosity swiftly jumped down from the ceiling to our surprise and looked up at us with the same empty, sly glare.

Click! I reloaded while Tim busied himself at emptying his pistol at the impish beast.

And then someone decided that this beastie wasn't evil enough. It raised its hand and flexed its claws. And it grinned. It was the most satanic, evil grin I had ever seen, strangely human and intelligent, yet impossibly so. And in its hand formed a light that grew into what was a ball of energy, a roaring fire.

Tim stopped shooting in awe. I stood there, as in a trance, as well.

And then with a wild, full upper-body swing, it threw this magical fire at us. Instinctively, we both jumped to the opposite sides as the indistinct glob of energy roared past us.

After that, something in my head clicked, and I knew that something was very, very wrong. Years of shitty sci-fi holo-flicks had prepared me for the whole zombie ordeal to some extent, but this was now totally different. And I knew that I was in for a long, unpleasant ride. Or was I? I had begged for action so many times for the last three years. And now I had it. Of course, this was not what I had in mind, but who cares. All I knew then was that I had to put some lead between those ten insect eyes.

The imp seemed to be creating another ball of magical snot. It paid no attention to me or the gun that was pointed at its head. Just as sparks began to fly from its hand, I pulled the trigger.

Demon, alien, monster or whatever, I have to say that I was pleased that it still had red blood. Any other colour would've totally freaked me out.

It fell to the ground, but another such beast had come from under us. Tim and I jumped straight up in the surprise. The creature's claws poked in our directions. It couldn't pass through the railing, but I figured that its balls of energy still could.

"Come on!" I yelled, and Tim and I took off running.

We paused to catch our breath around a bend where there was no railing beneath us, just solid metal.

"I think..." I said, puffing madly and feeling in the mood for stating the obvious, "I think something's really gone wrong."

It's one of those barely-escaped-death kind of things.

Tim shook his head. "What the hell was *that*?"

I was silent for a while, trying to regulate my breathing.

"I don't know," I said after a short while, straightening up. "But it bleeds. And it dies. And for the moment, that's what's important."

"Alright," said Tim, his face gaining back some of its colour. "My turn with the shotgun."

I pulled it away as he reached for it. Tim looked at the shotgun as if it was a stuffed chicken.

"Alright," I said. "We go to the power generators and try to bring them back up. But first, I say we find something to eat and drink."

Tim nodded, his stare still fixed on the shotgun. I could almost see him sink his teeth into the handle. Hell, I was so hungry, I probably could too.

MRE: Meal Ready to Eat. I don't know if 'Meal' is a suitable word. And it may be ready to eat, but certainly not tasty. Still, though it may not please a five-star gourmet chef, it was way, way better than the cafeteria food I had been forced to rely on for months upon months. I felt that all these years I had missed out. We found a whole room of them, among other things and emergency supplies. Unfortunately, there was no ammo, but there was a rack of light armour. Also, the room was easy to lock from the inside and had plenty of flashlights. Tim and I sat among the boxes, preparing our meals. Due to their abundance, we had turned 6 flashlights on at once and scattered them about the room. I felt safe under all the light and behind a locked door. I still however kept my gun at my side, ready to be used if some imp wanted to join our party. Or if Tim tried to get it.

'Just Add Water.' I followed the instructions and took a bite. Could I just add some hot sauce?

For a second, I contemplated sneaking back to my quarters to bring a bottle back.

"Way better than the cafeteria food, eh?" said Tim, reading my thoughts.

"Yeah," I agreed as I popped another noodle in my mouth.

Tim spoke again. "So Corporal, those fireworks were your doing?"

"Yes."

"Well, I must say, though they did not go along with protocol and broke about a dozen rules, they were still impressive."

"Yeah."

Another pause, this time I broke it.

"You know Tim, you're not that bad of a guy. Why were you such an asshole all these years?"

"Me?" asked Tim quite suddenly, as if he was offended. "You were the one who stuck his nose up high in the air and left every time I entered the room. How was I an asshole?"

I thought about this for a second. "Maybe if you weren't so damn uptight all the time. So all these years of torture was a misunderstanding?"

"Maybe not," he replied thoughtfully. "But times change, and now we're stuck together. Maybe that's why. I mean, you break the rules and as I strain for my perfect record," he threw in a grin at this point, "I can't afford to be around people like you."

"Yeah."

Me, a troublemaker? Nah...

Don't get me wrong. I was actually a pretty good marine. When protocol goes to hell and lead starts flying, I am one damn good marksman. Guns, all kinds of them, work flawlessly under my control, each bullet landing precisely where I intend. I am a team player, always keep up, and do my job without question. It's just all of the discipline that pisses me off. I mean, discipline is not bad, but they give us way too much of it when we should be working on our accuracy or other aspects that contributed to our real-world performance. What good is a perfectly-angled salute when you're lying dead on the floor?

"Let me guess," I said. "You've been wanting to join the marines since you were five, right?"

"Two, that's when my dad told me all about them. He was a marine too, see, and I am walking in his footsteps."

"I see. Well, all these years of learning how to shoot stuff should come in handy now," I said, motioning to some vague area outside our room. "Zombies and demons! I wish I knew what was going on."

Tim nodded. "You know what? I think it's a good thing you set off those fireworks."

Hmmm, sudden change in the subject? Well, OK.

"You do?"

"Yes. See, otherwise you would've been along with the others when they were attacked or zombified or whatever."

Well, I think he had a point. "Go on," I said.

"And the reason I'm here is because I was practising after-hours as usual. We were away from the rest and wave of evil stuff or whatever missed us, it rolled by us."

Thank you Black Flowers 4500, and thank you Tyler for the idea! Uh, and I guess Mexican guy too for cheering me on.

"So," I spoke again. "We restore power, fly the hell out of here, tell our pals on Earth what happened, and that's it! I think this whole evil zombie invasion is reason enough to leave this rock. Hell, Briggs won't be able to keep this one secret. After this whole thing is over, no more military, we can retire!"

A rather grave look crossed Tim's face.

I laughed.

"What are you into, staff sergeant? You can't be an obsessive marine twenty-five hours a day, six hundred eighty-seven days a year, right?"

"Well yes, I guess you've never really caught me off-duty. I don't know, I just keep up with the stuff that's going on back on Earth, family and friends, stuff like that, you know?"

I thought about my family and friends. Close as I was to them (close meaning 75,146,021 kilometres) I only got depressed when I talked to them. Why? Simply listening to how they were enjoying their time, to how they went to the park or some party binge drinking relief party. It was as if they were rubbing it in my face, all of the entertainment and joy that I was missing. I knew that in reality they weren't, but that was the subconscious feeling that I felt burning in my chest every time I opened a holo-disk from Earth. There were several that I had received during especially low-times of my military career that I hadn't even bothered to view.

I cleared my head.

"You listen to any kind of music?"

Perhaps I haven't mentioned this because of all these damn zombies: I love music. It's what helps me get by. If it wasn't for some soothing Pink Floyd after five hundred sit-ups and a face-full of spit from the drill sergeant, I'd be sitting in solitary confinement.

"Uh, not really. I listen to some really old-school, obscure stuff that nobody listens to. I do sometimes listen to MC Hammer."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"Sergeant, I didn't ask you what your favourite instrument was. Just music."

Tim laughed and began to explain. "No, see it's a 20th century—"

"I know very well who he is," I interrupted. "He's a 20th century cab-driver."

Tim laughed again, and I did too until a noodle landed in my eye.

I tried to bring some common ground forth. "What do you think of military action at this point? Not quite the fiesta I used to know."

“I don’t know. When I joined, I thought I’d be shooting some deranged fanatics and Afghani extremists. But bloody zombies, it’s—it’s not quite what I bargained for.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Not the kind of stories you’ll want to tell your kids before bedtime, eh? Hey, where’s the water?”

Tim handed me a bottle.

“Thanks.”

After eating several MREs that I hoped I wouldn’t loose later to a headless zombie, we decided to spend the night in the room. I felt full, with food and energy, unusually so. I felt as if I could take on a dozen zombies with a knife. Of course, a little nap beforehand wouldn’t hurt. That, and also there’d be sunlight during daytime, filtering through the windows.

I had forgotten what a beautiful thing sunlight is.

* * *

We took turns sleeping, even though we felt pretty safe. However, I didn’t want to become an indistinct blob of red around some demon’s mouth, and I suppose neither did Tim. Having my body disfigured into nothing more than spineless mush is not my idea of a good time. I slept until early morning, when a refreshing kick to the stomach alerted me that it was time to switch.

I inquired as to why he had kicked me to wake me up.

“Well, tapping you on the shoulder and a glass of cold water didn’t do the trick. So, I took the next logical step,” he answered as he positioned himself between the boxes in an attempt to find a comfortable angle for sleep. The fact that Tim was taller than me made things more difficult for him.

I nodded. I can sleep though just about anything.

I glanced around but couldn’t find the shotgun. Damn it! Tim must’ve taken it while I was sleeping, the dirty bastard! Still, I had been hugging the weapon as if it was a cuddly teddy bear. And you know, it might as well have had two round ears and warm fur. I loved it, and it loved me. And now, Tim had taken it.

But where could he have put it?

With a sigh, I gave up, leaned against a crate filled with MREs, and sat there, thinking. And then I fumbled with my pistol. I ran my fingers along its metallic surface. I had done the same thing weeks ago at lectures drawn on by Briggs. How could I’ve known that I’d be doing the exact same thing a week later in a supplies closet with Tim. Tim Davis, of all people.

My feelings toward Tim had gotten considerably colder since he ‘stole’ my shotgun. So, when it was time for me to wake him up, I decided to do so with a nice kick to the stomach as well.

“Ow,” he groaned, a natural reaction.

I scratched my head.

“Wake up.”

“Wa— What?” He slowly got up. “Oh, it’s you.”

“You say that like it’s disappointing. So tell me, where’d you sneak the shotgun? Just curious, you know. I mean, it’s OK—”

This seemed to piss Tim off. “What do you mean? I didn’t touch your damn shotgun!”

This only set off a chain-reaction of pissed-ness.

“OK, then where is it?”

He shrugged.

“Come on, Tim. We’re stuck here, no point in doing things like this. Tell me: where is it?”

“I don’t have it!”

“You can carry the damn thing, just admit you fucking have it!”

His voice rose higher than I’d ever heard it go. “How many times do I have to tell you that I don’t have it!”

“You’re full of—”

Sadly, Tim was never able to find out what he was full of due to the sudden loud explosion in our tiny room. Sadly, he was just starting to convince me. The loud reverberation echoed throughout our miniscule room. Tim and I looked around nervously, forgetting all about our argument. Pistols at hand, we moved apart with our backs against the wall. Just in time, too, because at that point, the boxes filled with MREs exploded outwards, flying in all directions, the ready-to-eat meals smashing against the walls and other crates, hurling in our direction as well. From behind the splinters and torn carton jumped out a vicious-looking zombie, its blood-covered mouth flexing its needle-like fangs that I think were a new addition. It roared wildly, and then we saw that it was the proud new owner of our shotgun.

Oh, OK. Now I see.

The zombie seemed confused at seeing two of us; it didn’t know whom to shoot first. This was rather strange knowing that the thing had the intelligence to constitute an ambush. Anyway, Tim took advantage of this pause and began emptying his pistol into the zombie’s chest. However, this didn’t do anything, and soon, Tim’s pistol began to click; he had run out of ammunition.

“Tim,” I said. “You see, you never, ever shoot a zombie in the chest,” I explained calmly as a teacher would to his students. How the hell had he gotten this far? I shot the zombie in the chest demonstratively. “See, no good. You always go for the head. Like this.” I stopped my calm dictation, raised my pistol, and landed two shots in the poor zombie’s confused cranium.

The grotesque headless zombie wandered about for a few seconds, then fell to the ground.

“See?”

“Yeah.” Tim said, still staring at the dead monster. “I need some ammo. There must be more ammunition somewhere.”

“Yes, and more firepower, too.”

Tim nodded. “Keep an eye out for ammo bunkers and weapons...”

I nodded, and looked down at the zombie. Its blood was pooling around my feet. “Hmmm,” I said thoughtfully, rubbing my chin to increase the visual intelligence that I continually radiated. “How did it get in here? The door is still locked...”

Tim and I simultaneously looked up, knowing the answer to my rhetorical question. One of the ceiling panels had been removed. It appears that the zombie had snuck in, taken my shotgun, and then simply waited.

“Tim, you didn’t fall asleep while you were on watch, did you?”

“I, uh, might’ve drifted off,” he admitted. “Sorry.”

“Yeah, and I’m sorry for blaming the whole shotgun thing on you. Now we’re even, OK?”

“Right,” he said.

We both looked at the dead zombie that was clutching the shotgun.

“Damn, now who gets it?”

We stared at each other, and then back at the shotgun. Now what?

"I'm afraid I lost my coin," I said. I paused, though for a while, then thought: what the hell! "You can have it," I said. "You just ran out of ammo, you need *something* to shoot with."

Tim looked somewhat dubious, but conceded. "OK," he said.

With a look of disgust stretched across his face, Tim plucked the bloodied shotgun from the zombie's dead hands. He then wiped his hands on his shirt. "Takes the fun out of it," he said as he stepped over the dead body to the door. He unlocked it, and I followed.

I readied my pistol and checked the ammunition. Fourteen shots left.

"How much ammo do you have?" I asked Tim.

He examined the shotgun. "Eight."

Crap. "Well, use it wisely or we'll have to resort to fists."

Tim nodded, and we continued walking down the corridor. Our flashlight was not needed; a row of windows ran along the left side of the hall and Martian sunlight filtered through them, lending enough light to let us find our way.

We continued onward, dodging about the endless hallways and catwalks, ducking beneath whistling pipes and dark machinery. Tim and I knew the way, we had studied maps of the human complex on Mars extensively prior to this new development. It had been mandatory, and was now coming in handy.

And as we walked around, we ran into two more zombies and an imp. We came out unscathed, but with nearly empty weapons. Tim had two shots, I had five.

As we rounded another corner, we ran into another gang of zombies. They were a colourful assortment, two of them armed with pistols, one with a chainsaw, chainsaws courtesy of a mistaken shipment by a drilling company on Earth that was supposed to send drills for the Martian soil.

Tim and I backed away, unsure of whether we should use our ammo. The zombies, however, were more confident and began firing with their pistols while the zombie with the chainsaw tried to get the motor running.

Tim backed away and fired a single shot. His accuracy would've made our drill sergeant proud; one of the pistol zombies was down on the ground, twitching, while its head had seemingly vanished. Meanwhile, I fired three shots at the other zombie. This kept it busy, but did virtually no damage, for I was too far to accurately hit what I wanted.

Things weren't getting better.

I glanced at the chainsaw zombie. Well, I really wouldn't like to be killed by a chainsaw. I mean, a shotgun blast would be better. Hell, I'd rather die at the hand of a grenade than a chainsaw. It would be messy, but at least it'd be quick. Meanwhile, death by chainsaw would be painful, slow, and very colourful.

BOOM! Another shotgun blast and the chainsaw zombie fell to the ground just as its chainsaw sputtered to life.

I fired my last two shots at the remaining pistol zombie with no effect.

Our ammo was out.

And as if that wasn't bad enough, two more zombies, accompanied by one of those imps crawling along the roof, rounded the corner and saw us.

As this happened, the pistol zombie was rushing towards me, firing wildly. Thankfully, the dead aren't too good at shooting. Still, I would've been a goner. That's when Tim came in the picture.

Tim had picked up the dead zombie's chainsaw and jumped in front of me. The chainsaw strained as its teeth cut into dead flesh. The pistol zombie screamed in rage. They weren't too fond of death-by-chainsaw either.

“Go for the head,” I advised loudly over all of the commotion. I think that became our motto for the week. Tim swung back and the zombie was finished. Meanwhile, the imp and two zombies from up ahead were charging at us. Tim ran forward and cut into them wildly.

All of this was a blur, indistinct sounds and screams, blood flying everywhere.

As I mentioned, death-by-chainsaw: not the way to go.

Soon, the imp’s severed body was lying on the ground at the feet of a panting Tim. I ran up to him.

“You OK?”

He nodded.

“Thanks, you saved my neck, and the rest of me, too.”

Tim was too out of breath to speak. He looked at the bloodied chainsaw. “Now what?” He finally managed to ask.

“Well, check the zombies’ pistols for ammo, and then move on.” I looked at the chainsaw. “I think we should bring this along, until we finally find some ammunition.”

Tim continued looking down at the chainsaw. “That thing scares me.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I wouldn’t want to be killed with a chainsaw.”

There, I put in my two cents. Tim could only nod.

By the time we ran out of ammo, we were fairly close to the power generators and their operating room, something that I guess could be viewed as both a good and bad thing. Not much to describe, besides dark corridors and another zombie that got a face-full of chainsaw. It had a pistol full of ammo. As I unloaded its clips, I felt like I was having myself a little Christmas.

Dead zombies don't smell like gingerbread cookies. And I don't think that's mistletoe hanging from the ceiling. In fact, it was a zombie ear.

How did it get there?

Death by chainsaw can be a tad messy.

On our way to the power generators, we also passed by a bathroom. If you're wondering why I'd be poignant enough to point out a mediocre fact like that, let me add that there were some crunching sounds coming from inside it. I didn't want to know, and in our circumstances many such events went by without further exploration. We didn't stick around long enough to find out. And so, after another stupid zombie wandered into the bathroom behind us, we snuck through the hallway until the large metal doors to the power generator operations room lay in front of us. Now, maybe the engineers to this place weren't the brightest in the world, putting doors that require electrical power as the entrance to the control room. Still, they had enough grooves in their brains to put a manual override on the door, in case of emergency.

This, I'd say, qualified as an emergency.

Manual override involved smashing through a glass cover and pushing a large button that released the locks. From there, it was all muscle-power.

Tim did this and pulled the door open.

We walked inside and I wrestled to shut the door behind us.

In front of us lay a series of computer monitors and enough buttons and switches to drive a NASA engineer insane.

Tim however seemed to more or less know his way around.

"Hmmm," he said, lowering himself into the seat. "System is ready, it says."

"Good, cause so am I." I said absentmindedly, looking around intently at the room, just in case another damn zombie felt like setting up an ambush.

Tim quickly flipped through a number of programs while I looked on.

"Checking for a comm link to Earth?"

He nodded. "Yeah, we ought to let them know what's going on, don't you think?"

I allowed several minutes to pass while Tim scrutinised the computer screen, eventually the onslaught of switching programs coming to a halt and Tim simply gazing thoughtfully forward into empty space.

"Let me guess," I didn't need Tim to tell me what was going on; I could feel it coming before we ever neared the control room. "We can't communicate with Earth."

"Exactly," said Tim. "There's absolutely no signal. There is a constant link between Earth and the Mars base. Something must've knocked out the transmitters. We can't call for help," he finished simply.

I gazed at my feet quietly.

"On the other hand," said Tim with a mild hint of enthusiasm, gesturing towards the working computer screen. "You know what that means? There is power. It seems that our power cells were drained, but since the drain, they have synthesised

enough power to render everything operational again. The power is just sitting there, waiting to be used, to be activated.”

“So what caused the drain?”

“I don’t know, this computer must keep a log somewhere.” Tim said as he ensued in scouring the computer files.

After what seemed thousands of directories with four-letter, syllable-less names, Tim announced that he might have found something. “There are several log directories. I have to find the one that contains all of them.”

“Oh?” I said.

“The computer records all operations in separate log files that are eventually compiled into a single copy that is meant to be viewed. The other log files are encoded and *aren’t* meant to be read.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I think this is it,” he said as a new window came up.

The window read: FORMAT UNRECOGNISABLE.

“Wrong one, this must be it.”

A larger window came up that read:

LOG File- Personnel Formatted Version

“Here we go,” Tim said.

I grimaced. Somehow the actual log file fell short of my expectations. Not that I really had high hopes, but I did believe that at least I’d be able to read the thing. My eyes strayed between the syllable-less abbreviations for words that I probably didn’t even know the regular version, with the supplementary ‘@’, ‘=’, ‘#’ and ‘%’s thrown in for kicks.

“Look at this,” said Tim, pointing to a part of the screen.

```
1845:48 Main computers accessed > *password swap
      % Insufficient Data #
All power re-routed to power generator 4
      >Area of access = Sector 6.
```

“And this means what?” I asked.

“Someone re-routed all of the power, from all the generators to a single location.”

“Is that possible? I mean, aren’t all of the generators, emergency and not, in this place totally separate?”

“Apparently not; all of the power generators on our settlement were emptied into a single location, this location being Sector 6.” Tim shook his head.

I thought about this for a while. “Sector 6—That’s those black, unmarked buildings, the secretive UAC ones. Why did they need all of that power, though? Half of it is enough to feed an ion engine so that it reaches Pluto and back ten times. And how does this relate to these zombies and stuff. It makes no sense. Is there any other part of the log book of interest?”

“No,” said Tim. “The power outage was then. Even the emergency generators that run this room were emptied so all information after that point was lost. This is unusual as well.”

“Now what?”

“We turn the power back on. After the power outage, the synthesising machines began to create electricity, and they have been doing so for the last eighteen hours. They are simply waiting to be activated again.”

“Yeah, I got that part.”

After that, nothing interesting happened. Tim worked, and worked, and then worked. And after that, he worked some more. Following endless menus, programs, and modules, the room lit up, as did the rest of the facility.

“And there was light,” said Tim with self-satisfaction.

“Great,” I said. “Now we can open those big hangar doors fly away from this hell!”

“Yeah!” Tim answered enthusiastically. “And then we go back to Earth, tell what happened, and then get reassigned to a new post.”

“Err, yeah. But I think I’d like to take a piss first.”

“Amen to that!”

“So,” I said. “Do we use the bathroom like civilised people, or do we rust the steel walls of this place.”

Tim shrugged. “Let’s get going towards the landing pad. If we find a bathroom along the way, great. If we find a wall, even better.”

I laughed. “OK.”

With a groan, I pushed the door open and was pleased to see light; Tim had successfully restored all power.

We headed along the corridor until we came to a stop by the entrance of the bathroom I had seen earlier.

Hmmm, I had heard some strange sounds from inside before.

When nature calls, I answer.

“So?”

Tim examined the door to the lavatory. “Alright, but we’re gonna take turns doing this. I need someone to hold my chainsaw.”

“OK. Here, let me take care of business first.” I pushed the door and walked inside.

It was one of those times when you know you’re making a big mistake, but you do it anyway. As soon as I walked in, I knew that I wasn’t gonna relieve myself in that bathroom.

Why?

The light was flickering, giving me an uneasy feel, but that was only the tip of a very deep iceberg. The air was heavy and some strange, disgusting smell was driving my odour receptors wild. It was a rotten fragrance, a smell of death and decomposing.

And then my eyes fell to the centre of the bathroom.

There were bloody streaks everywhere, leading to the corpse of a zombie. In the dim, flickering light, I could barely make out its open stomach and entrails. Towering over the zombie was something alarmingly large. From my angle, I could just see a pair of mechanical hindquarters that dipped down as the strange monstrosity feasted upon the zombie’s flesh.

I guess that explains the smell.

It was a monster on four legs, like a very large dog. *Very* large, the top ridge of its exposed spine must’ve come up to my chest. And I’m not the shortest of people, either. So I suppose it’s better to describe it as a bull. A gigantic mechanised demon-bull monster.

Fortunately I couldn’t see its mug.

I decided to leave it at that.

I inched out of the bathroom and gently shut the door behind me.

Tim must've not seen my pale face. "Hold my chainsaw," he said.

"Let's get the hell out here. *Now!*"

"What? Why?"

Tim and I began to briskly walk away.

"There is some monster there. Huge, four-legged... I didn't see the whole thing, thank God."

Tim didn't question me any further, he understood.

"This is an interesting development. Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, I can't even take a normal piss!" Tim seemed rather outraged.

"It's Murphology, my friend."

"What?"

"You know, Murphy's laws? Here is one that applies to our situation: The number of zombies we encounter is inversely proportional to the quantity of our ammunition."

Tim nodded. "I see. Well, at least we have power now."

"Every solution breeds new problems," I said wisely.

In our hurry, we almost tripped over a damn spider.

A gigantic metre-long spider, that is. With a human head for a body.

Now, whatever demented mind engineered this thing must've been very pissed off when one of its workers mounted the head upside down.

The thing roared, revealing its fangs.

Tim and I backed away.

Here's some more Murphology for you: If you perceive that there are four possible things that can get in our way, then a fifth thing will promptly develop.

And then, from the ceiling dropped two more spideresque entities, spiralling downward on their webs until their eight bony legs came in contact with the steel decks. With the appropriate sharp *clang*, of course.

Those imps were frightening, the zombies were good for a few scares, but these spiders were just plain freaky. We stared at the unearthly arthropods for a few seconds, and then Tim revved his chainsaw, perhaps trying to frighten or intimidate the monsters, perhaps just building up his own courage. Meanwhile, I drew my pistol and quickly checked where I stood ammunition-wise. Seventeen shots. These monsters weren't too massive, and I hoped that they wouldn't eat up too much ammunition. I squeezed the grip in anticipation and felt a thin layer of perspiration between my hand and the pistol. The spiders started edging forward slowly, trailing a steady track of saliva.

My breathing hastened.

Nothing made sense anymore.

Tim lunged, shoving the spinning chainsaw teeth straight into the first spider's face. He did this whilst the second spider jumped towards him. With the reflexes of a mongoose on crack, I trained my pistol on the eight-legged bundle of joy as it skittered across the floor.

BLAM! It lost an eye and a whole lot of brain cells. I think I got its attention.

It turned on me as I fired three more shots at it. Just as its face began to strongly resemble a freshly prepared meal of Italian origin, it fell to its side, its legs limp. That took a tad more shots than I'd imagined.

Unfortunately, I had no time to examine its delightfully modified façade because the third spider was upon me.

Let me tell you, those teeth don't simply look painful. They *are*.

The damn thing was on my chest, its teeth wildly ripping into whatever they caught. For a while I flailed at it as I stumbled backwards. And then a little light bulb lit up and I poked the spider-thing in the eyes.

Freaky as it was, it felt pain. It jumped backwards and began to wander about, blind. This was my opportunity to put it out of its misery.

Soon, there was nothing but spider goo all over the floor.

Tim was fine, though a mess.

"We need to get you a new weapon," I said.

Tim looked at me. "And we need to get you a medikit."

I looked down and realised I was bleeding where the monster had jumped and teared at me.

It was like one of those old cartoons. Only after I saw the wound did I feel the pain. I felt dizzy. How much blood had I lost?

Tim put a hand over my shoulder and helped me walk. Thank god, or I would've gotten a face-full of steel.

"Our new priority is to get you fixed-up," said Tim

Right.

But who said that was gonna be easy?

As soon as we came round a corner, we were treated to a smelly, filthy zombie. Tim let me drop to the ground and then applied, for lack of better terminology, his chainsaw. The zombie continued to wander around without a head and grabbed Tim.

Tim does not like to be grabbed, let alone by zombies. Soon, the zombie was reduced to only a pair of legs. Meanwhile, its severed, headless torso began to inch towards me.

Talk about persistence.

“Tim!” I yelled.

He came around and dug his chainsaw into the monster’s back, which I’d say did the trick. Problem is, the chainsaw sputtered and died.

“No fuel,” murmured Tim.

He dropped the chainsaw, knowing that it was useless, and helped me up. I handed him my pistol. “Twelve shots,” I said. “Make them count.”

Tim nodded, and we walked away.

* * *

It felt nice to sit down, even though the steel decks were ice-cold. This didn’t bother me a whole; I always loved cold weather, and a simple chill in general, which had led to various fights over thermostats throughout the years. At least we could customise our temperature and light level in our living quarters. Not that it mattered now.

Tim had busied himself into opening a small storage compartment on the wall opposite of me. There were medikits inside, precisely what we sought. However, the wall panel did not want to come off. Apparently, it had somehow been tampered with. One end finally came free, but by then, Tim had already seriously bruised his hands in frustration.

And then the panel flew out and out rushed a torrent of medikits and MREs. To our surprise, along with them came a human body.

“Get away!” It screamed and raised some sort of weapon as it hastily pushed itself on its feet, stumbling over the numerous boxes. It fired, rapid machine-gun fire. Tim jumped to the side and I crawled away.

“Damn monsters, get away from me!” The figure, I could now see that it was an ageing man, stood up and slowly backed away, still holding his weapon.

“Calm down,” I said. I could see he wasn’t a zombie, though his weathered face might as well have been so. “There’s nothing wrong with us. We’re fine, as I see you are.”

The man wavered.

“You’re... you’re human?”

“Yes,” answered Tim as he walked towards the man. This made the guy nervous, so he raised his gun again.

“Don’t move!”

Tim rolled his eyes.

“Prove that you’re human,” said the man.

“Tim, let me handle this,” I spoke. “Look, do we look like zombies? Aren’t we talking to you? Come on, do the right thing. Put the gun down, it’s OK. I’m happy to see another normal person.”

The man slowly lowered his gun. “Who are you?”

“Staff Sergeant Tim Davis.”

“Corporal Nik Taggart.”

The guy nodded. “I see. I’m Frederick Harrison.”

“Can I call you Fred?” I asked.

“No.”

“What about Harry?”

“No.”

Tim broke our conversation. “Alright then, Mr. Harrison. What are you? What is your job here?”

“Me, I’m a scientist.”

“What exactly do you do?”

He sighed. “I’m afraid that’s classified,” he answered, his voice a little shrill.

Tim walked forward, somewhat incensed. “Look around you, nothing is classified anymore. Now, you’re a scientist. Can you tell us what the hell is going on in this place? How’d it happen?”

“Not now,” he said. “We’re out in the open. Let’s find a secure spot first.”

Tim nodded, picked up several spare Medikits, and led the way until we found a sort of closet. I decided to leave the stench in the air uncommented.

We walked in, and Tim locked the door.

“Alright, tell us what you know.”

“Well,” said the scientist, still somewhat reluctantly. “We’ve been doing some experiments, trying to create portals from one place to another. It would be so useful: no more would we need to wait months for supplies from Earth; they could be here instantly. You would be able to visit your families on Earth. See, it’s a way to almost instantly get from point A to point B regardless of the distance in between. You’re simply creating a doorway from one place to another. We have had many successful attempts on Earth. So now we are, or we *were* trying to create a portal to Earth all the way from Mars and to see if we could carry things.

“This is not an easy task, of course. You are essentially cutting a tunnel through space-time, a tunnel to connect the portal on Earth and the portal on Mars. We tried and tried, but always came short on power. So we drew power from more and more power generators, hoping to achieve the proper power requirement.”

Tim and I looked at each other.

“And then something happened. The tunnel never reached Earth. I don’t know what it reached, but these things came out. Spirits.”

I accidentally snorted. “Spirits?”

“That’s what I’d call them. Flying, glowing faces. Skulls. And they attacked, entered my fellow scientists’ bodies and regained control. Of course, I saw little of this. As soon as I saw that first skull push its way out the doorway and into our head scientist, I ran. I guess the others were too transfixed, but I knew when it was time to run. But it was too late. As more and more of these things came out of the portal, more and more power was used, and this power usage grew exponentially. Soon, there was no power left and everything automatically shut off. But the portal remained open, driven on by some unseen hegemony. I saw it myself as I came back later, hoping to find someone.

“Everyone was gone. And then I ran into my first zombie, as you call them. I ran again. I found this,” he said, motioning to his machine gun. “And then I hid, where you found me.”

“So you did this?” I asked, slightly infuriated. “You made these things come here, you dirty bastard.”

The guy simply looked at me.

“I swear, I’m going to fucking nail your sorry—”

Tim grabbed my hand.

“What’s done is done,” he calmly said as some ancient Chinese monk would recite to his disciples.

I nodded, trying to act as calm as I could.

“So, you still didn’t explain what we’re up against.”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Any ideas or theories?”

“I think,” Frederick recited slowly. “I think we opened a portal to Hell.”

erPART 2
Exeunt From Mars

1

“I think we opened a portal to hell.”

I almost laughed. This guy was kidding, right? Hell, the nether regions, limbo, it was all stuff just made up to keep little children from turning into ritualistic serial killers and psychopathic rampaging rapists, or so I thought. Right? Still, demons, imps, and zombies... Could it really be?

I’ve never really been a religious guy. Hmmm, I suppose a trip to the very darkest depths of hell could change that. Then again, hell could just be Frederick’s choice of words in describing the unpleasant situation.

I decided to find out if this was so.

“You mean *hell*? Like the devil and stuff?”

He said nothing. His smug though fearful expression seemed strained, as if he wasn’t saying something. His bulging eyes strained to and fro, his nose twitched.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tim fidget with my pistol while he eyed the guy mistrustfully.

But then the man nodded his balding head.

What took him so long?

I relaxed a bit. “You know, in Tibet nodding your head means ‘no’?” Hmm, one of my less sophisticated comments. Still, it did not disrupt my imposing and majestic radiance.

Still, feeling moderate stupidity, I busied myself in wondering whether it really was Tibet.

Frederick said nothing.

“So wait,” said Tim. “Why do you think it’s hell? I mean, you’re a scientist. Less than what, ten percent of the population these days is remotely religious, and none are scientists. Why do you say that?”

The scientist examined Tim with wide eyes for a second. “We did try to send more animate objects through the portal, first animals. The animals never reappeared. Various tests and observations, however, pointed out that it wasn’t the technology’s fault. The tunnel that went from one doorway to the other passed through some sort of area, and we were to believe that the animals were simply going off the path. So we sent in humans. As it turns out, we had never reached the receiving end on Earth. We had reached something else, a universe or realm of sorts placed only a proton’s width away from our own.

“A total of eight went into the portal and yet only three came out. Two were badly injured while all three were scared out of their wits. The two injured persons had claw marks in various places around their body and one was bitten where the neck joins the torso. Their wounds more or less recovered, though their minds were scarred for life. Their shock was so severe that they were unable to speak for over a month.” He shuddered. “Eventually, they came to, and they didn’t remember what had elapsed while they were travelling. This made us rather frustrated. But then they started having visions.”

I felt a chill climb up my spine.

“They would stand there, normal as can be. Then suddenly they would jump, collapse on the floor in spasms, screaming. These spasms were erratic and unpredictable. You never knew when it’d hit one of the travellers. They said they had

flashes of black where only white pinpoints of light, eyes, stared at them. Other said they saw themselves being tortured. Flashing colours, psychedelic hallucinations. They said they saw the end of the Earth. These people were eventually sent home. Two are fine last time I heard, though the third blew his brains out on the way to Earth.”

He paused while Tim and I started.

I still wasn’t convinced that it was hell he was talking about. After all, who knows what zooming along corridors through space-time did to your head. Hell, some people have weird visions for no apparent reason at all. Still, claw and bite marks? That part held me stumped. Perhaps they really were some kind of things that attacked them, like some of the beasts I had seen, but they couldn’t be actually demons. Or perhaps the only insane person in this entire ordeal was the scientist we were talking to and everything he had thus said was complete bullshit.

Maybe we were all mad.

Frederick coughed.

“Well,” Tim said. “What do we do? How can we stop this ‘hell’?” The variation in his tone while he spoke signified that he didn’t believe in all this satanic crap either, which in some way that I can’t explain reassured me. It felt good to know that Tim shared my scepticism.

“Well,” said Frederick “That is rather obvious, is it not? The portal remains open, allowing hell’s nightmarish creatures to seep through. It must be closed, and fast, too. It is only logical that these monstrosities try to spread their evil to Earth itself. And if they manage to open a portal there as well, humanity will have to endure eternal damnation.”

Ah, well that’s a flowery thought.

And then my heart froze. I had already wasted the first half of my life. If hell took over Earth, then I wouldn’t be able to enjoy the second. “Well,” I spoke defiantly. “Tim and I’ll plant one under hell’s belt.”

Grave as the situation was, such talk eased some tension.

“Alright,” said my fellow marine. “So the answer is obvious. What? We shut down the portal, right? But how do we do it? I think this is where you come in, Mr. Frederick.”

Frederick, who had been glancing around the room, his twitching eyes the most luminous part of him in the low light, lowered his gaze.

“Take me there.”

My mouth has always preceded me. For once I let it trail behind; we walked in absolute silence. We left shortly after Tim took care of my chest wounds with the medikits. And now, walking quietly, my mind wandered. I don’t know where exactly the portal was, though judging by how things usually work out, it was going to turn out to be far beneath the Martian surface. Fortunately, we had Mr. Frederick to guide us, though I didn’t trust him at all. I trailed back until I was walking alongside Tim and voiced my concern with placing so much trust into such an individual.

“His type freaks me out. There’s something seriously wrong with him,” I whispered. “I don’t trust him.”

Tim shrugged. “Maybe he’s just weird.”

“You think?”

“I don’t know. He’s a scientist.”

I chuckled softly. “Scientists are weird like that?”

Tim shrugged. "I don't know, I can't say I've known many. Still, what other options do we have right now?"

I nodded. "Still, while he carries that machine gun around, I won't exactly tiptoe in happiness."

Impenetrable silence set in for a while.

"The only thing that bothers me is that we're only going in deeper. We should be finding our way out. We should just leave and let others deal with it. Two people can't stop whatever the hell is going on."

"Maybe you're right, but let's hope you're not. First, remember that there may be more survivors. I find it hard to believe that somehow everyone's been completely wiped out and we're the only ones left. There has to be a sizeable group of marines left, surely enough to organise an offensive strike. Also, if we leave now, it may be too late."

I didn't say anything for a while. Tim was right; there was no way that something could instantly kill all the marines at once. After all, whatever hit us would have to make its way across the base, from point A to point B, which takes time, and the military furthest from the attack would have ample time to know something's wrong and prepare. That is, unless somehow the enemy had managed to disperse and distribute itself across the base evenly so as to suddenly strike everywhere at once. The latter was unnerving for two reasons: the consequences and the implications. It would mean that indeed just about everyone would've been killed and that it's likely that any other survivors would be scarce. Also, it implied that there was some kind of mind that organised this entire ordeal, which was very unsettling. I recalled Tim in the control room saying that the comm link had been taken out. I felt a chill. This attack was very systematic indeed.

"On the other hand," I mused, "If we flew back to Earth now, we'd be able to tell everyone what's going on. I don't see how it'd be too late. It takes six months to get to Earth, and I don't see how whatever hit us could beat us there. There are limitations to technology."

"We don't know that."

"Look, these things don't look too bright and I don't see them flying around in spaceships, especially ones faster than ours."

We made our way over a pile of cables that had spilled across the hallway when a wall panel had fallen out.

"It doesn't matter if we couldn't send out a signal, back on Earth they'll know something's wrong. We might as well stay and see if anything can be done in the meantime. We don't gain anything."

"We gain our lives. Six months here? Are you fucking crazy?"

Tim shook his head. "No, not six months. We just see if there's anything we can do about the portal. Or maybe if we can do something else useful. If not, we leave right away. If there is something we can do, we finish the job and then leave."

"Your logic's faulty."

"Listen, there might be survivors, and there might not." Tim stopped walking. "We might be able to really fix up this situation, but more than likely not. We have to try to get to the portal and close it, because for each minute it stays open, things only get worse."

I nodded. He was right. We did need to leave, but there was some business to be attended first.

"Come on," I said. "Frederick's getting a bit too far ahead."

As we rounded a corner, we ran smack into two more zombies. They seemed busy, eating some indefinite glob of red on the ground. One of the zombies stood up and lunged towards Frederick.

Frederick panicked and began firing the machine gun rather wildly. A few shots hit the zombie in the chest while the majority found nothing but metal, and the guy would've gone up to meet Elvis if it wasn't for Tim and my trusty pistol.

That very pistol also dezombified the second zombie.

Tim walked up to Frederick.

"When we run into trouble, I want you to hang back. You are too important to lose."

Frederick said nothing.

However, I did. "What about me? This party would be no fun if it wasn't for me." As an afterthought, I added, "That's why you should give me the machine gun."

I stretched out my arm for it, though the guy greedily pulled it away. After that I had a strong urge to spread the joy of broken noses (mine still hurt from my first encounter), though a glare from Tim stopped me.

God, I needed a valium.

As we were just about to set out again, my wandering eyes caught something shiny and metallic underneath one of the zombies that Tim had neutralised. I don't recall zombies having chrome fenders. Curious, I bent down and moved the zombie to the side. And what did I see? Chocolate? A stack of money? A monkey?

Better: A shotgun big enough to... big enough to... Ummm...

Its sheer size left me speechless. Big enough to deal some serious damage. It was at least twice the size of the one I had given to Tim.

My face struggled to express my emotions, and ended up in a broad grin. Why the hell didn't they show us this stuff back at the base? All they had was a tiny computer catalogue of all the weapons with pictures that had as many pixels as there are brain cells in Briggs' vacant brain cavity. Naturally, I never bothered.

A double-barrel, heavy shotgun.

Loaded with ammo as well. Does life get any better?

Tim seemed taken aback at this new discovery. He also surveyed it with glassy eyes, his face expressing awe.

Man, it was nice. I almost looked forward to coming across some hell-spawned demon just so I could try it out.

We set out again, and I walked forward, trying to be ahead of the others as I could be; I had dibs on the next zombie we came across.

Well, it wasn't a zombie, but rather, an imp.

As we were skipping along the silver-tiled road, one of the panels beneath us popped up and flew in the air. Then, out from beneath popped the ten-eyed splendour that's an imp's face. It hissed and jumped up in the air and made haste towards us.

This made me so happy, I restrained myself from running up and giving it a merry hug.

The imp started getting dangerously close.

I had no time to aim properly. Quickly, pointing vaguely in the beast's direction, I fired.

The imp wanted meat. Instead, it got a face-full of lead.

The gun kicked at my shoulder more forcefully than I had anticipated; I had forgotten this characteristic limited to the larger guns.

But my brain never registered this pain, however; it was entirely focused on the pair of imp legs wandering about while the nearly-severed torso hung down, attached by only a few muscles on the left side.

I imagine that hurt.

Needless to say the imp, which had now been transformed into something bearing resemblance to a Picasso painting, did not last much longer. It fell to the ground, still twitching.

We skipped over its steaming body.

For Frederick's weathered self, this was quite a hurdle. Soon, we were underway.

And though blowing an imp to pieces may not be the best way to prepare for a meal, we soon found ourselves seeking something to eat. In fact, my mind was just rummaging through some delicacies I had once saw on a culinary TV show, when ahead I sighted two vending machines.

Perhaps a Snickers bar fell short of a gourmet duck prepared with mushrooms and onions in a thick simmering gravy sauce, though as I gazed through the glass, nothing ever looked better. The chocolate bar was loaded with carbohydrates and sugar, and we really could use some energy.

As we headed forwards, I noticed that Frederick seemed to be scouring his pockets for a spare quarter. I snickered and jabbed Tim in the ribs so he could see this as well.

Tim and I are fun people, so we waited a few minutes until Frederick finally gathered up his change and walked towards the vending machine. As he did, Tim raised my pistol and fired.

The glass shattered.

"Keep your money," I told him. "You can buy me a beer when we get back to Earth."

The second vending machine, loaded with Cola and other carbonated goodies, proved to be more of a challenge. There was no glass; all of the cans were safely huddled inside. After knocking the whole thing over, carefully discussing and weakening the crucial and frail points of the machine's back, and Tim using the butt of his shotgun to finally knock the hind panel open, we succeeded. Our accomplishment was announced in a torrent of cans that went rolling across the metallic floor.

We backed into a corner and behind a control panel that jutted upward from the ground, and began to feverishly eat.

"Hmmm, no alcohol," I noted wisely.

"Well, what do you—" Tim and I were forced to stop and laugh as an obviously shaken-up Sprite emptied itself into Frederick's mug. "What do you expect? This is a research facility."

"They could've at least had beer. I mean, what, beer's 5-10 % at most alcohol. That's why you're supposed to drink it in large amounts."

Tim ensued in a thoughtful pose, bearing semblance to my own intellectual visage. "That's true."

"Oh, and judging by what's going on," I said to Frederick, "you guys do work like you're drunk."

He was a tad offended.

I ignored him. "Still, it wouldn't matter; I stopped drinking beer ages ago. I wouldn't mind starting again, though."

"Oh?" said Tim, mild surprise in his tone.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s beer that landed me in the marines. That’s why I haven’t drank in a while.” On a side note, I’d say that some other forms of fermented beverages might’ve been involved as well.

“I don’t drink alcohol, strong alcohol, at least. I could still go for a beer,” Tim spoke. “But that stronger stuff, it just burns through your throat. It’s a nasty feeling.”

“What about wine?” I inquired. “After all, when we get back to Earth, we need something appropriate to celebrate with.”

Tim smiled. “OK. I could go for that.”

I was just about to retaliate at Frederick, who coughed in a way that it remotely sounded like ‘drunkards’, when there was a loud bang. I peeked from around the bend; the sound was coming from the heavy pair of steel doors positioned to the left of the vending machines.

With each bang, the doors deformed, depressions etched into their surface; the corners curled as more incessant and rhythmic booms came.

I readied my double-barrel shotgun. Any such unusual activity was reason enough.

Finally, the doors fell to the ground with a metallic clang that wasn’t too kind to one’s eardrums. Two imps squeezed through; their grotesque forms clearly visible in the bright light, contorting over the mangled doors, crawling on all fours.

For the moment we were hidden in our dark corner behind the console, and we were safe. I pushed Tim and that other guy back further along the wall. The two imps rushed by us; we had escaped, avoiding any contact.

“Where are they hurrying off to?” asked Tim.

I shrugged. “I’m sure they had their reasons.”

This made me pause again. Watching those imps move with a purpose brought back that uneasy feeling. I felt slight terror. If they had a purpose, this whole thing could’ve really been organised from the start and it’s likely that we were the only ones left by some lucky chance. My heart stopped. I could almost see it, the creatures preparing to strike inside each person living quarters. After all they had struck when everyone was preparing for sleep. Tim and I had not been in our quarters. Could that be it? With the image of the vent that was over my bed in my quarters with a pair of eyes gazing from the darkness beyond it, I shuddered.

I pushed all these thoughts aside.

We couldn’t remain in that cramped corner forever, so we took off again.

The imps had opened the doors that would’ve otherwise hindered us. Well, Tim, the butt of his gun, and I could pry through just about anything, though I felt that squeezing through the gigantic two-ton solid metal doors would’ve been slightly more difficult than the coke vending machine.

The doors led us to a rather large storage facility. I suppose warehouse is an appropriate term. The dim roof hovered far overhead, and along the sides of our path were many boxes, stacked high.

“Should we see what’s inside?” I asked, motioning at the boxes.

Tim stopped to think. “We could find some firepower in there.”

“Yeah,” I sarcastically warned of hidden dangers. “I mean, all we need is a gigantic pine tree from hell, and it’ll be like a little Christmas.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” spoke Frederick.

Tim and I looked away from the tempting wooden crates.

“Keep in mind this is a research facility,” he continued. “Not a military base. You’re more likely to find metallic elements and materials used for experimentation in large quantities—”

“Or duct tape?” I said with a hopeful grimace.

Unfortunately we never really got around to deciding whether opening the crates was worthwhile; as I was just about to voice my views of the topic at hand, a gigantic figure lumbered ahead of us.

We all stopped, dead in our tracks.

And from the shadows emerged the biggest damn monster yet.

Its skin was a shiny grey, stretched over a body that must’ve been at least twice my height. Its large head was placed low, on the same latitude as its massive shoulders, joined by a short but prominent neck. The head was a joy to behold; large, giving a look of remote intelligence, with a distant outline of a monstrous, inhuman skull, within which lay two small, dark green, hungry eyes. Between and above the two eyes were two nostrils that joined at the top. Flesh stretched over the demon seemed sparse in spots where it was torn, revealing several open areas and a gigantic gash where the jaw met with the skull and neck. And to finish off this beauty’s face was a mouth big enough chew up all of Asia, and some of Europe, too. No, it didn’t have any fangs, though that didn’t ease the tension; its mouth was like that of a human, though raised to the fifth power in dimensions.

Beneath this was a massive chest, two thick arms ending in three equally massive claws. Underneath were its legs, oddly joined like those of a goat or some other hoofed mammal, ending in five thick claws.

It edged forward and stuck out its repulsively comely features in a roar. The soundwaves reverberated about the cavernous warehouse.

I glanced back at Frederick and rushed at him. I said a certain four-letter word in its verb form, followed by the word ‘this’. As I did, I snatched the machine gun from Frederick’s hands. He jumped forward to protest to me, though was forced to the ground courtesy of Mr. Elbow.

“Tim,” I shouted as I tossed him the machine gun. I had a feeling that his measly shotgun and my pistol weren’t going to do much good.

Tim caught it and began firing. Meanwhile, I took aim with my double barrel shotgun; its gigantic head didn’t require a whole lot of skill to hit. I fired and surveyed the results.

Up till now, I was used to blowing the tops off the monsters. The pistol was sufficient at severing a zombie’s head, let alone a double-barrel shotgun. And yet, the gigantic beast before us kept its head. All I did was to bloody its mug.

For the readers who lack a sense of deduction, this was not good.

While I was staring, horrified, the beast was still lumbering towards me; Tim had made a mess of the thing’s chest, though this was not slowing it down.

Well, I thought, at least it might bleed to death. Problem is, that could take a while.

And then I realised how close to me the thing had come; I jumped out of the way as it swung one of its massive arms towards Yours Truly.

Phew, I felt the wind on that one.

Now all that lay in front of the monster was Frederick, who was staring up, cowering at it with wide eyes and open mouth.

I started firing at the monster, though I didn’t enjoy any success.

The beast lunged forward and caught Frederick with its claws in a massive upper-body swing. Frederick’s body, diminutive in contrast to that of the monster, was flung across the room like a rag until it smashed through several boxes and came to a stop.

Unsure of what to do, I kept on firing.

And then a light shone upon me and a chorus of angels sang in the background as I fired a shot at its back. And it paused. Well, ok, maybe there was no light and angels, but there might as well've been; the monster swayed to and fro, seeking balance, though found none.

It tried to turn around to retaliate, but it fell on the ground instead.

"What the hell happened?" I asked.

"I think," Tim said, running up to me, "I think you hit its backbone."

Oh, I thought. "So I paralysed it?"

Tim nodded.

I took yet another yellow stickpad from my mind and wrote with the pen of experience: Big hulking monster things—shoot them in the back. As I recited this, I realised how cowardly it sounded. Then again, I'd say that those monsters had a slight advantage over us in size and strength, among other things. Playing foully was merited.

We ran up to where Frederick was lying amidst the boxes. Tim checked for a pulse, and luckily found one. However, Frederick was seriously injured and seemed to be in his own little place.

"Damn, now what? Where do we go? And we have to drag him around hell and stuff? This sucks."

A mild way of summarising the situation.

I reached down and pulled Frederick's security clearance card out of his pocket. "I don't know, but I have a feeling this might help us get by for the time being."

Tim shook his head side to side, then turned to the monstrosity lying on the ground. It was feebly groaning and stretching its bloodied limbs.

"Should I?" he said, raising his gun.

"Nah, leave Mr. Universe here. He's not going anywhere."

Tim nodded. "Well, I guess we'd better leave."

"Yes." I looked ahead. There was one door at the end of the warehouse. "Well, there's only one way to go now. Let's not think about what to do later until we actually get there."

Tim nodded as he flung Frederick over his shoulder (somewhat carelessly, might I add) and we took off, with guns considerably lighter though struggling with a heavier burden.

After the gigantic hell-beast, the four imps and overweight zombie we came across seemed rather dull and boring, though preferably so. So was the pack of spider-things with the upside-down heads for bodies. No later was the floor littered with indistinct things that were once a spider than I realised that I was hungry again. Yes, it is odd to feel hunger after splattering flesh and goo and blood all over the damn place, though I had grown accustomed to it. Fortunately, through many repeated and failed efforts, Tim had managed to find yet another unopened MRE storage room, with several medikits as well.

The latter was fortunate; Frederick, who Tim had propped against one of the crates, was in need of some serious medical treatment. His head had turned a dark blue and swelled and Tim feared that most of the bones in his left side were broken.

Tim had also picked up a nasty scratch or two himself from the spider-things.

After tending wounds and making an attempt at waking Mr. Frederick, Tim and I let our hunger loose on the few measly crates of MREs.

Between mouthfuls of 'ravioli', we talked, recalling our past lives.

"I can't believe," said Tim, "that everyone's gone. Everyone."

"Yeah," I said, chewing and looking at my food. "I guess the whole looking-for-survivors thing has fallen through the roof."

Tim cocked an eyebrow. "What about those two guys that always followed you around?"

I remembered Tyler and Mexican guy. I did miss them, and the final realisation that they were gone struck me in the heart. "Damn," I murmured, unsure of anything else fitting to say.

"No more John, Seth, Tina, Heather," Tim spoke somewhat dreamily.

"You never know," I said, trying to be supportive, though there was no question in the grave air of the room as to whether there was any real hope for others. "Tina and you, did you guys have something going?"

"Used to."

I slapped Tim on the back playfully. "Hey, then we have more things in common than I thought." He took this rather gravely, so I had to pause and explain my humour, which as any comedian would tell you, renders to joke void.

"And by Seth, you mean Seth Hoffman?"

"Yes."

I laughed. "He was the photographer, right? I remember him from all the way back on Earth."

Before being shipped like raw meat to some toolshed on Mars, Briggs had insisted that we all have our pictures taken, apparently as a supplement to his 'testament of human achievement'. Of course, it was just hard material to supplement the big publicity stunt that was our Mars base. Now, I don't contradict Briggs just to piss him off, but, as things usually turn out, I ended up opposing him. In this particular case, the fact that I hate having my picture taken surfaced. 'Come on, it won't steal your soul,' Seth told me jokingly, eagerly waving the large Canon in his hand. My subliminal answer was, 'If you don't let me be, you'll soon be taking pictures of your rectum.' Yes, having a wide knowledge of human anatomy was often useful in compiling insults.

Needless to say, Briggs was not very pleased. At that point, it was too late, and I had made a scene. So, I decided to make the best of it and express my opinions on this whole Mars thing for the second time. I actually had a large portion of my

audience nodding in agreement until Briggs shot them an angry glare and stepped into the picture. Hoping for all to forget my lecture, which had by then turned into a stand-up comedy act, Briggs started one of his famous speeches that worked better for insomniacs than Melatonin. Now, up until then I always thought that the concept of people falling asleep during the course of a boring speech was an exaggeration used for comedic purposes in films. I was wrong.

I myself felt drowsy afterwards, which is probably why I didn't fight too much while getting into the shuttle that was to escort us to Mars. In fact, I don't remember much from the day of my departure, though I think I might've been involved somehow with the black eye one guard sported for a few days afterwards.

Even on the shuttle, Seth had followed me around, begging for a picture. Then, one morning he woke up and looked out his window in usual morning fashion. To his horror, he saw his camera floating around in the vacuum of space.

After that, he left me alone.

I recalled this entire story to Tim, who laughed.

"So *that's* what happened to his camera? He never told me what it was. I mean, at one point he became really gloomy and I never saw him pull out the camera again."

"Yeah, I made good use of our airlock."

At that point, Frederick stirred.

"Let's make sure he wakes up," I said. "He needs something to eat and drink."

Tim nodded and took some excess water, splashing the guy's face. But all we got out of him was a long, drawn-out groan.

So, we left him to himself yet again. At least he was in some form of consciousness, because at one point he was muttering in his sleep. He said something about flying to Mars. However, Tim thought the guy had said 'lying in bars.'

We let the discrepancy hang.

I ate four MREs before I felt satisfied.

Tim agreed to keep watch first while I did some Zs. Then we were to switch after three hours had elapsed. Hoping not to find my shotgun gone as it had happened last time I slept, I drifted into sleep. For a while, Briggs' head floated in front of me, followed by Seth's, then Tyler's, all of them talking, though their voices were drowned out. Fortunately, I didn't remember any dreams after that. And with all of the horrifying things happening lately, I was glad it was so.

After four hours of uneventful sleep, Tim woke me up. This time, kicking was unnecessary. It seems that I had become a whole lot more weary than before this whole hell-invasion thing started. That's not to say that it's a bad thing. Anyway, a simple tap on the shoulder was enough to stir me up. Instinctively, I grasped at my shotgun, and luckily found it where I had left it.

Tim went to sleep and I was left on my own accord. My mind rambled, heeding the absolute silence that hung in the air, wondering as to what demented hell-prodigy might be wandering about outside the door.

We'd already seen all sorts of monstrosities constructed by some sick mind: the imps, the spider-things, not to mention the zombies. Though mostly human-looking, some of them still greeted us with a mouthful of unearthly fangs. And *all* of them had those creepy, empty, glowing eyes...

And that big muscular thing that had smashed Frederick, its imposing visage drifted into my mind. If hell could create such gigantic, colossal leviathans, then what more could it do? Surely they could go bigger, more powerful, more enduring. Surely there was no limit, besides the imagination of hell's engineers. It seems as we progressed deeper into the installation, and closer to the portal to hell, that we came across more and more horrible creations.

And I had been scared senseless because of a little zombie with a chainsaw.

The uneasy tranquillity was broken as Tim turned in his sleep.

How much time had passed?

I glanced at my watch. Barely forty minutes.

So I thought some more. How would we shut down the portal itself, assuming that we actually arrived there unscathed? After all, Frederick had said that it remained open ever after the power outage, that it drew power from some unknown power source. If taking away all of its power was not sufficient, that what was? And what will be?

I shook my head, trying to clear it. It was the absolute silence that forced me into my world of thoughts. I wished that I could clear my mind and simply rest, awake, though still resting.

Yet it was the thoughts that kept me from sleeping, so there was something to be gained by them.

What had happened to all the people that I knew? I had heard screams, but what did that mean? Were they zombified or simply killed? Or perhaps something much worse that could not be devised by my own mind?

We had to go on. And I had to keep my head. Reaching and closing the portal was imperative, or all of humankind would suffer in the same manner as my friends and fellow marines. Whatever hit us, hell or not, had managed to wipe out an entire military installation in a single, swift blow. Of course, they had the element of surprise on their side, and surely humanity would be more prepared if indeed these monstrosities did manage to get to Earth. However, if somehow they had organised themselves into such a silent, clever strike, who knew what else they could come up with. We had to stop them here and now. No human being should ever be forced to endure what Tim, I, and the rest of the marines did. It was not right. It isn't right. And it'll never be right.

And if there's hell, shouldn't there also be a heaven? I mean, assuming all that BS is true, where is God in all of this? Shouldn't He be helping us come through?

Maybe He is, I thought. Maybe that's why we have come so far.

I stopped cold, examining my thoughts. I was never a religious guy. Had I foreseen these thoughts several months ago, I would've dismissed them, maybe even laughed at myself. And yet now, locked in a cellar with hell-spawn wandering about, there was nothing to laugh at. Only perhaps my naivete and ignorance.

We don't know if it's hell. I was jumping to conclusions again.

Alright, that's enough, I told myself. Think about something else. Aircars. I love aircars. As soon as I get back to Earth, I told myself, I'll take my military compensation and throw it all at a nice, red, Italian aircar. Where the hell I was going to get money to buy food and other necessities, I didn't care.

A nice trip to the open outdoors, maybe some snowy mountain, would be a nice refreshment from all of the claustrophobic Martian walls. How I'd love to smell the pine aroma in the air, feel the cold draft over my face, to marvel at the distant snow-capped peaks. To chop wood, then, come evening time, to enter and light it in the fireplace. To look out the foggy window and see the snow falling whilst feeling the warmth billowing gently from the fireplace, bringing along with it the aroma of pine trees.

One hour, ten minutes had passed.

And my mind already felt like a pizza with all the toppings on it.

I picked up my double-barrel shotgun and examined it thoroughly. It seems that I had no time before to do this.

Silently I sighed. Nice as the gun was, I wish it had never come to a point where I had to use it. This was mildly ironic in the sense that for the longest time I had wished for something to happen, to dive into some kind of action. Anything. Well, now I had enough action to fill four military careers, and wished it had never come to me.

My ass hurt from the hard steel floor and I shifted into a different position.

Frederick murmured something in his sleep. I hoped that he would soon come to. It was quite a blunder, having to carry him around. We needed his directions to arrive at the portal, and it was he who held the knowledge required to shut it down. He was important, though quite odd. It's not a pleasant feeling to have so much resting on the shoulders of an untrustworthy individual.

My mind cleared, obvious exhaustion coming back to me. The next few hours were wasted in microsleep, coming to and out for a few seconds.

When the dreaded four hours had finally paused, I tapped Tim on the shoulder. He woke up and groggily glanced at me.

"Anything interesting happen?" He asked, the question muffled by a thick yawn.

"No."

"Alright then," he said. "Let's have breakfast and set out again. What about Mr. Frederick here?"

"You mean Dr. Frederick."

"Yeah, whatever."

"Not much to say. He did mumble to himself at one point, though he's been sleeping the entire time."

"I hope he wakes up soon," said Tim, reading my thoughts. "My shoulders are getting tired."

* * *

Breakfast was a welcome endeavour; it filled me with energy and strife, which led to a more optimistic outlook on a situation. I told myself it was all going to be over soon, and believed it too. Surely we had neared the portal since our encounter with the massive beast. We were almost there, all we had to do is shut it down and then leave. Smiling silently at these thoughts, I cast my finished meal aside. With a slight pause, I glanced about, and we set out again as before. Tim yet again was bestowed the honour of carrying Dr. Frederick about while I hovered ahead with my favourite shotgun. I offered to share the burden but Tim nodded with an air of indifference. Clearly he was in high spirits as well.

We didn't know the way to go without Frederick's advice, though we improvised, and I must say, quite successfully. We simply took whatever took us farther underground. Frederick himself had said that the portal lay deep beneath the Martian surface. Our hopes were that he would wake up and take over all of the navigation.

I thought that our environment couldn't get any more Spartan. I was wrong.

The corridors seemed unnaturally empty, until the unspoken and unnatural order was restored as we were greeted by three zombies. One of them had a pistol; the others went by unarmed.

"Allow me," I told Tim, my voice clearly lacking enthusiasm. I raised my shotgun and pointed it at the first zombie's head. I fired, but then something happened that made me grin.

It seems that the first two zombies were perfectly aligned so that the single shot I fired took off both of their heads. The third zombie spun around and quickly hid behind a large tube protruding from one of the walls. It was waiting for us to come by, setting a sort of feeble ambush.

But Nik Taggart is no idiot! As I came around the zombie jumped out, as I expected, mouth wide open in a roar. However, it was not human flesh it found in its mouth. Actually, it was the end of my shotgun.

At that point, the beastie knew it was screwed.

BOOM! Messiest explosion yet.

I wiped the crap out of my eyes.

This made me feel better; I guess these things weren't that smart, and they had somehow just gotten lucky with their strike against the Mars outpost. I couldn't see how such things could orchestrate something so complex.

I wiped the goo from my gun.

"You're getting too creative," Tim told me with a smirk. "That, and too cocky." He moved ahead, Frederick dangling over his shoulder, who gave a loud groan at that point. Tim took note of this and placed him on the ground. Slapping him in the face, Tim repeated, "wake up, wake up buddy." This went on for what seemed to be ten minutes.

Just when I thought Frederick was going to have a permanent scar in the shape of Tim's hand, the guy pushed himself up and said, "Ow, my head." Then, he ensued in massaging his face.

Tim gave me a thumbs-up.

"What happened?" And so came the dreaded question from Frederick; now Tim and I had to recall all that had happened since his tiny mishap.

"Well," Tim began, then looked at me.

I shrugged.

"Ummm," Tim continued his thought. "This big monster knocked you out. And we've been dragging you around since."

Frederick continued to rub his head. "And, uh, how did you figure out the way? What way have you gone? Did you somehow figure out where the portal is?"

"No," I said. "You said that it was far underground, so that's where we've been going: underground. We haven't really gone far since you met that gigantic thing's hand. We had to stop and rest more often. After all, we didn't know the exact way to go, nor were you as light as a feather."

"I see."

"Well," spoke Tim, "I'm glad you're OK."

The scientist shook his head. "My arm hurts," he said, poking it with his finger. "My shoulder, too, the entire arm. I can't move it."

"I think it's broken," Tim said. "I'll tie it down so it doesn't flop around too much first opportunity I get."

"One hell of a headache, too..."

"Let's get going," I said. "We don't have time."

Tim nodded, though Frederick remained at the ground, rubbing his head.

"Come on," I said, my voice somewhat harsher than I intended.

He glared up at me, then slowly pushed himself to his feet with his good arm.

"Well sorry for not having any Aspirin," I said, answering his dirty look. "But fine, we'll go in search of some medical facility so we could find you some medication. We'll find you your damn Aspirin while hell takes over the Earth."

"I think you've made your point," said Tim.

"Yeah, I tend to do that."

And so we continued down the hall.

After figuring out where exactly in the research facility we stood, Frederick was not too happy (judging from his groan). His reason for whining was that we were several kilometres off-course. To this, I said, “*Kilometres?* Just *how* big is this dump?” Yet again I simply received an angry glare as my answer. This glare could’ve stood for many things, many of them quite offensive and unnecessary to write here. Nonetheless, the news of our mistaken and improvised decision-making was not good.

Frederick was still murmuring under his breath about what idiots we were when we headed one of the long metallic corridors that we had grown accustomed to. In fact, it seemed that since his headache faded away, he simply wouldn’t close that articulating hole of his. Several times I considered contacting my fist with the back of his head in hopes fixing the problem. However, the thought that humanity was screwed without that asshole kept me away.

Well, one time I *really* would’ve spread some discipline with my fists, if it wasn’t for a sudden banging noise ahead of us.

Banging noises spelled unpleasant things for us. We halted and looked ahead.

I prepared my shotgun; I knew that I was gonna be needing it.

The noise came again, followed by the creaking of bending metal. A portion of the metallic wall on the left of our corridor began to bend outward. More creaking came as this protrusion grew.

Tim and I glanced at each other. Now what?

Another bang came and finally the wall burst. Several pipes were twisted and ripped, resulting in a hissing noise issued by the gas escaping from them. I hoped that the gas was in no way poisonous (hey, you never know what these idiots experiment with in these secret installations).

And from the hole in the wall squeezed the most ugly, disgusting, filthy thing I have ever seen. And immediately I recognised it; I had seen it before.

No, it wasn’t Briggs. It was the same monster that I had seen in that bathroom shortly after Tim restored the power. I hadn’t seen its face then.

I had been spared a whole lot of repulsion.

It had a large head that blended into the body, no neck. At the bottom was the biggest damn mouth I’d ever seen. Even while it was closed, the fangs protruded outward, like those of a crocodile. Except these fangs had a different shape and must’ve been twice as big. Above the mouth was a long, smooth curved surface. No eyes, nose, anything. However, I had a feeling that concealed beneath the smooth dome were some sensors that replaced the need for other sensing organs. Basic logic told me that this thing needed some way to sense its way around.

From behind its empty mug came an exposed spine. From the sides sprouted the front legs, muscular, ending in three-toed stubby claws. And from the waist down, the beast was entirely mechanical: its rear legs, its rear end ending rather abruptly.

This four-legged monstrosity finally squeezed out and turned to face us. I couldn’t help but notice the silvery saliva dripping off of its bared, gigantic fangs.

I wasn’t the only shocked person.

Tim finally started firing the machine gun. Meanwhile, I took aim and shot the monster right over its mouth, where one would expect to find its brain.

It wasn’t too pleased with this course of action. It reared up and began slashing wildly.

While backing away, I took another shot.

The monster couldn't take much more. After a few lingering shots from Tim's machine gun, the beast crumpled to the ground and a horrid stench filled the air.

"Our situation is not improving," I said gazing down.

Frederick, who had been cowering behind us the entire time, pulled himself back up on his feet. He and Tim were unnaturally pale. I imagine I was the same way. Feeling somewhat shaken, we circled around the corpse of the disgusting giant dog-thing and headed onward.

Not much happened for a while after that. We were rather pleased to run into several imps, all of which met the same fate. Frederick seemed to know the way, though to me it seemed like we were going in circles. The labyrinth quality of the base was not too appealing to me. Especially when knowing that there were numerous 'Minotaurs' of all shapes and sizes prowling around. The giant dog-beast left a lasting effect of a sort of jumpy-quality, where we would all jump at the slightest and most distant sound. But it wasn't the fear of the dog-beast that perpetuated this sort of paranoia, but rather that which we had not yet seen.

Soon, we left the corridors and came onto a rather open space, which, while strategically bad for us to be caught in, I found rather pleasing. In fact, it was unmistakably a platform, a train platform, whose Earthly qualities I found relaxing. It was pleasing to see such a reminder of Earth. And there was a train settled upon the tracks that ran through the centre. The doors were open, almost welcoming, with warm and bright lights humming from inside.

Tim smiled, as did I.

"Uh," said Frederick. But before he could finish his undoubtedly stupid thought, three of those freaky spider monsters descended from the ceiling and landed in front of us. The disfigured human heads they had for a body all hissed at us in unison.

By now, Tim and I had gotten pretty good at exterminating these sad excuses for arachnids.

Two shotgun blasts and some machine gun fire later, the floor was very slippery.

We ran up to the train, and Frederick followed.

"Could this take us anywhere near our final destination?" Tim asked.

"Well," started Frederick. "Yes." His finish was rather reluctant.

"What's wrong?" I asked, sensing that something that was going to piss me off was coming.

"I get motion sickness—"

I frowned. "But this way is shorter, right?"

"—my ears were damaged and I can't ride in trains and things of that sort. It was rather a miracle that I made the shuttle ride to Mars successfully."

"Couldn't we take this train a while back?"

"Well, yes..."

"Jesus!" I yelled. "You've been avoiding this train, even though it could get us there in a heartbeat, just because you get motion sickness! We could've already been there! You idiot!"

"I never take the train, I always walk—"

I could take it no longer and punched him square in the face.

Tim looked at me. "Thanks."

"No problem."

"I mean," he said with a grin. "I don't approve of this behaviour, Corporal, but thank you."

"Any time, sir."

And with that, we dragged Frederick's limp body onto the train. Tim went ahead into the control cabin to get the train working while I stood guard, making sure some monster didn't sneak onto the train.

There was a humming sound as Tim powered up the train. Then came a beeping, announcing that the doors were about to close.

I backed out into the train just as the doors slid shut.

With a quite more powerful kick than I anticipated, the train started. I nearly lost my balance there.

And Dr. Frederick here was complaining about *his* poise.

I examined exactly how much damage I had inflicted on the poor guy's mug. Judging from the large amounts of blood pooling from his nose, I had broken it. That, and he was unconscious again.

"Suits you," I mumbled under my breath as I hastily turned him to his side so that he wouldn't drown in his own blood.

There was a loud clang coming from the rear of the train.

My heart jumped.

As I mentioned, loud unusual noises were not welcoming.

I quickly strode to the very rear of the train.

The train itself was speeding at an amazing speed; metal beams, tracks and all else were a mere blur. So, it was a complete mystery to me how an imp had managed to jump and grasp on to the rear of the train.

Its now-familiar façade was conveniently pressed against the window.

I raised my shotgun and fired. The glass shattered and shards went flying with the imp. The monster fell, or rather, launched backwards and was out of sight almost instantly.

I kissed my shotgun. Another job well done.

Too bad I had only three more shots.

I walked back to the compartment with Frederick in it and sealed the door behind me. Just then, the train stopped and Tim came walking back down the aisle.

"Why'd you stop?" I asked.

"I figure we might sleep and rest here. Besides, we don't know where to get off, now that you put Frederick out of, uh, working condition. He needs to direct us."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Still, at least he isn't complaining or throwing up right now. If I hadn't taken action, he'd be tap dancing on our nerves right now."

"Alright, you deserve kudos for that. Still, this *is* a delay."

I felt anger surge upwards inside me again. "Still, not a delay as costly as the one of Dr. Frederick's doing." Still unable to believe the asshole, I couldn't help but continue. "The idiot has been guiding us the long way, avoiding the train just cause he gets sick on it. Can you believe that!? All of humanity is at stake—"

"I agree," said Tim in his usual calm voice. "But there's little we can do now. At least we'll cover those lost kilometres with the train."

"Yeah, but we should've done that a long time ago."

Tim nodded, then asked, "How do you stand ammunition-wise?"

"Three shots. You?"

"Forty-eight, which isn't a good thing considering that my gun eats up bullets by the dozens. That, and your pistol still has around seven bullets."

I nodded. "So one of our priorities at the moment is to find some ammo."

“Right. But now, we rest.”

Yet again I shook my head in accordance.

Tim had stopped our train in its tunnel, far from stations and corridors holding beasts and freaks. I felt safe, and it's this feeling that allowed me to drift into sleep with ease. I cleared my mind, though the image of the disgusting dog-beast drifted into my head. Once again I pulled the image from my mind, yet couldn't drift into my dreams. Maybe I was trying too hard to sleep. Hoping to find solace in a new, uncomfortable position, I shifted. Earlier I had told myself that all this was going to be over soon. Yet it was taking too long; we should've left by now. At least we were on the train and the end was in sight.

With this final thought, unconsciousness washed over me.

I was flying. The stars all wrapped around me, a blur of white streaks; the cold vacuum of space chilled me, though somehow I remained alive. However, I had no time to ponder why my body's pressure didn't make me explode in the calm of my extraterrestrial surroundings. This being because my speed increased, the stars twisted and warped and a large grey mass flew towards me. Or I flew towards it. Regardless, I soon paused to examine it, its silhouette massive against the canvas of space.

The body ahead of me, though seemingly large, was actually rather small, not spherical, but quite oblong. Its greyish speckled surface bore semblance to that of a turbulent sea, frozen in time because of the innumerable craters scattered about. And behind it loomed a planet, the unmistakable red visage of Mars that whitened toward the poles.

So I was looking at one of Mars' satellites. Was it Phobos? Deimos? It was Phobos that had the awkward shape, like that of a potato—

For the second time, I shot forward, towards the moon's surface. Fearing that I'll hit, I braced myself. Mars zoomed away and the stars disfigured themselves yet again.

I opened my eyes.

And then I saw that I was skimming the surface of the satellite, moving swiftly. Ahead there was an opening in the ground. My course was set straight for it.

As I flew onward, Mars loomed ahead once more. However, its red was a deeper tone, its form more ominous and threatening.

My eyes darted back down the canyon. It now encircled me; I flew between the chasm's walls. And then I looked beneath.

At the bottom was not the usual, dull moon surface. Rather, it was a fiery glowing red, unmistakably bubbling, churning lava. The molten rock swirled in beautiful yet dangerous patterns. In accordance with the flowing rock was a high-pitched sound that grew. As it augmented, I recognised it. It was the sound of thousands of human voices, screaming at once, drawing all breath from their lungs.

The screaming grew. I tried to plug my ears, though I had no hands. I had no body. I had nothing, was nothing.

I turned forward to see where I was going. Ahead of me loomed some new shape. It grew steadily, its ambiguous form finally taking shape.

It was what seemed to be a gigantic human skull, though disfigured, perched atop what seemed to be a stone sphere, as if looking over the fiery chasm. It was almost like a statue, a decoration, a symbol or marker. The jaw was missing, though it had some new additions. From the cracked, cream sides sprouted two massive horns, jet-black and contoured with a brittle, patterned surface with the likes of those of a goat. My eyes fell to the skulls pits, looking for any sign of eyes. I felt as if there had to be something in the darkness, yet saw nothing.

It grew more massive as I drew near, filling my peripheral vision. Soon, all I saw was the skull's mouth, towards which I was headed. It had fangs, canines set among massive inhuman teeth.

I screamed. And my scream joined the thousands of other human cries—

I woke up.

And in quite a sweat, too.

"Bad dream?" I heard Tim's quiet voice from behind me.

I turned around. He was sitting on one of the train's seats, gazing somewhat dreamily at me.

“Yeah.”

“Same here,” he said. “Every time I go to sleep, the dream gets progressively worse. I can’t sleep anymore.”

I nodded.

My eyes travelled to Frederick. I noticed that his broken arm was strapped firmly to his body with a torn piece of cloth while his face was clean, rid of any blood. Tim must’ve busied himself for the last few hours. Or minutes; I couldn’t keep track of time anymore.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said again mistily. “You sleep to rest. However, when I sleep, it’s always exhausting. My mind is working so hard. I figure that it’s easier to rest by *not* sleeping.”

“Yeah...”

He sighed. “I don’t know how much more I can take.”

Damn, I thought. We’re getting touchy. I was never good at this mushy stuff, the one where you had to make people feel better. It’s just not in my nature, never was, never will be. My personality (and job) didn’t allow for it. This is one of the many factors that contributed to my divorce. When I let some comment slip without my wanting, people consider me rude. But I’m not. I just can’t get soft and gentle. Sorry.

“*Semper fidelis*,” I told him quietly. Carefully, I weighed my words.

“Yeah,” he said, burying his face in his hands. “Well what good is honour anyway when all of humanity is about to go to hell.”

“This is the exact reason why you should keep on, Tim.”

He said nothing. So I spoke more.

“We’ve come this far. We can’t give up now. And you can’t let your emotions obscure your goal, what you seek.”

“But what am I to fight for?” he asked, finally looking up. “My friends, they’re all dead.”

Oh crap. This was going from bad to worse.

“Well, there’s, uh, nothing you can do there. But if you sit there like an idiot, billions more will.”

But this did little good. I watched his reaction, his empty stare into the floor. No tears, no reddened eyes, no other Hollywood nonsensical junk. A simple stare into emptiness. And though his eyes remained focused into nothingness, his mind had gained focus. And it was this that got to him.

“Come on, Tim. We’re almost there,” I repeated. “Don’t get all hopeless until we actually get there and see that it can’t be shut down.” *Damn*, wrong thing to say. I nearly slapped myself.

But Tim laughed. “Boy, you’re an optimist.”

“Always am.”

But after that, I felt as if he poured some of his emotions into me; the back of my throat tightened and my mind was weighed down with consequences and events that happened and thoughts of what will.

I tried being optimistic again. “And when we finally shut the portal down and this nightmare ends, we’ll be able to sleep again. This time is drawing near; I imagine that twenty-four hours after Mr. Weir do here wakes up, it’ll all be cleared up, this entire mess. And then we go home.” However, I didn’t truly believe in those words.

At last Tim snapped out of his sad state and back into his former self.

“We’ll get a Medal of Honour, I bet,” he spoke excitedly. “For a service to all of mankind!”

I nodded, though I thought it might be otherwise. We might still save Earth and be awarded some medallion, but would we make it back alive to receive it?

“Let’s hope we don’t get Purple Crosses,” I said jokingly.

Earth’s fate is a heavy burden.

And at this point, it was settled on our shoulders.

* * *

Outside, the sun must’ve shone brightly, searing the icy Martian surface. I knew that it was day. However, there was no way that we could’ve possibly known this simply by glancing at the long shafts and beams and metallic surfaces. The only gleam of light came off of the fluorescent lamps scattered about in logistical places and their reflections off of the numerous tubes and steel planes. If it weren’t for our trusty timepieces, we would’ve been totally unaware of the sun’s cycling. In the constant lighting and atmosphere of the dark shafts and corridors was taking its toll on my body’s rhythm and I felt in a constant state of jet-lag, my consciousness drifting in and out, never being truly asleep and never truly awake.

And it was exactly all these shafts, corridors, beams that led me to wonder. After all, the compound within which was the train that we had made our temporary residence was measured in square kilometres rather than metres. And we have been told that it was all built in seven years time.

Tim must’ve noticed my change in expression, from dreamy to sharply thoughtful.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I’ve been thinking about this whole place.” My eyes gazed around demonstratively. “The entire Martian base, I mean, but primarily this building we’re in right now. It’s gigantic! And the government has been telling the people that it’s all been built in seven years. Seven years! Can you imagine the manpower, the machinery, the materials required? The government would suck tax-payers dry just to get all of this damn stuff to Mars, let alone build these giant compounds.”

“So you’re saying that Patrick Leghale was not the first man on Mars? And that NASA lied?”

“Maybe you’re right on the first part. But unless I am mistaken, even NASA might not be involved in this. They’re still honestly thinking that Leghale was first. These are government installations, and they’re not run by NASA, but by a totally different branch—”

“Yeah, I know.” Tim interrupted. “UAC, Union Aerospace Corporation. But they’re not government-run.”

“No, but they might have affiliations. Or maybe the UAC is just a cover-up over some government project. Perhaps the UAC is even its codename. Of course, I don’t have any factual evidence—”

“Yeah, I’m not big on conspiracy theories.”

“Neither am I. But the question remains: how and why did they build this gigantic place over the course of seven years?”

Tim said thoughtfully, “Maybe they *did* build it in seven years. Maybe they *did* somehow muster up the money needed. But then the question becomes: why the rush?”

“Yes, that’s a scenario—”

Frederick groaned.

Damn, I'm getting sick of being interrupted today. Tonight. Whatever. I checked my watch again to be sure that it was daytime.

The scientist rubbed his head and pushed himself up. He seemed to have come back to consciousness in very much the same manner as he did before. Of course, the other time he had been out cold for several days. Bah, I've totally lost track of time.

"What happened?" he asked groggily.

"Well—" Tim began.

I cut him off. Now it's my turn to interrupt. "You had an accident." I said quickly.

"Accident?" he said stupidly.

"Yes. You saw, uh," my mind quickly facilitated a story. "Some boxes. Yes, there were some boxes, and you went to see exactly what they were."

"And what happened?" he asked half-wittedly.

"You tripped on a banana peel."

"A banana peel?"

"Yes, and you hit your head." I finished, satisfied.

"But what was a banana peel doing on the ground?"

I shrugged. "I dunno, all kinds of weird stuff lying around since hell started coming through."

"But a banana—"

"Look, how should I know? Maybe some damn ape from hell dropped it there. I'm telling you what—"

"Alright, alright." Frederick appeared too dazed to argue any further. "How long have I been out?"

"One night," said Tim, with a look of mirth and amusement stretched across his face. "You have to tell us where to get off of the train. All the stations look the same to me. And the geniuses who built this place apparently didn't bother with maps."

Frederick nodded and somewhat shakily hobbled towards the control cabin. Tim hung back.

"What was that all about?"

"Well," I said. "We're at a crucial stage in our, eh, mission. We don't need any hard feelings at this point. Maybe I'll tell him after he shuts the portal down and everything. Besides, I was bored and couldn't resist."

Tim laughed. "OK."

"When I think about it, he should be thanking me. I spared him a load of awful nausea from the train."

Tim, with an amused smile etched across his face, went to get the train going.

I remained there, staring through the pointless window with falsified interest. Besides, it was meaningless for me to squeeze my train-operating-challenged self in the already-crowded tiny cabin anyway.

The train budged and the beams and pillars I had been unconsciously staring at began to shift, snapping me back into reality. They increased speed until all my eyes sensed was a mere blur.

And then what better to happen? In front of the blur rose, almost comically, the butt-ugly face of an imp.

I raised my shotgun but stopped myself.

Jesus, I was starting to see things. There was no imp.

Apparently, I needed more sleep. And maybe a nice black coffee afterwards. Maybe I'll get lucky and confuse Frederick with an imp, I told myself.

I suppose I was being too hard on the guy. I was just suspicious. He hadn't really done anything displaying the possibility of him being an evil entity sent from hell to spy on us or whatever other scenario remained within the bounds of unreasonable reason. Regardless, trust was hard to come by especially in our unusual circumstance.

I was snapped back into our sportive reality yet again as Tim had apparently put the pedal to the metal. Sadly, it was the brake pedal.

The train stopped almost instantaneously. Maybe I would've marvelled at its wondrous brakes if I hadn't received a mouthful of carpet. Needless to say, this new development didn't work wonders for my broken nose.

Just as I slowly pushed myself up, Tim came strolling back, talking angrily to Frederick.

"—to tell me earlier next time. If you had, you wouldn't have hit your head on—"

"Sorry," retaliated Frederick, who had come out with a large portion of his head reddened. "But what could I've done? You were going way too fast. I mean, I recognised it too late. I've never ridden this train before, as I told you. I always walked—"

"What's going on?" I asked, running my fingers over my nose to feel the extent of my injury.

Tim shook his head dismissively. "Frederick here realised that this was our stop one second too late. That's why I had to make a rather, uh, *drastic* stop."

"I see."

"Yeah," continued Tim. "Mr. Scientist went flying forward and hit his head on the glass pretty badly."

I nodded. "Did he break it?"

"What, the head or the glass?"

"The glass, I don't very much care about the head."

Frederick looked at me with a somewhat offended expression.

"Nah, its Plexiglas. You'd have to have a head of lead and a whole lot of momentum to do that."

"Hmm, I hope we haven't inflicted any lasting damage," I said motioning at Frederick. "It seems that ever since we found him, all he's been doing is hitting his head."

Tim smiled. "No doubt with some help from you."

I shrugged. "True."

It seemed that everything unpleasant, even the latest development with the drastic stop and the hitting of my nose, all trailed back to him.

Frederick was mumbling something under his breath again. I distinctly recognised the words 'Tim', 'brake', and 'idiot'.

Alright then.

Tim gazed through the doors.

"I couldn't stop it on time," he said. "The first three carts are actually already off of the platform and into the tunnel. We'll have to exit through the last wagon."

I raised my shoulders. "Whatever, let's get going."

We did, though we were soon stumped. When I had sealed the last wagon after masterfully removing the imp off it, I had done so quite tightly. Maybe it's from that adrenaline rush thing you get sometimes. Or just my amazing and unparalleled strength. Tim suggested that he put the train in reverse and back out so we could exit out of one of the other carts.

As he headed forward, the sound of breaking glass behind him announced that I had broken through the window and crawled around the wagon, back into the platform.

He and Frederick followed.

“Simple solutions are always the best,” I told them.

Something caught my eye in one of the corners of the platform. It was thanksgiving as I found a box full of shotgun shells.

Tim looked at me enviously.

“Don’t worry,” I said, slapping him encouragingly on the shoulder. “I’m sure we’ll soon find something for you.”

And indeed, it was Christmas when nearby we found the tattered remains of what had once been a box containing bullets. Some were missing, though Tim was able to pull out enough to fill his machine gun until it was full.

“Something ripped through the box, took a whole lot of bullets, then simply threw it aside.” Tim noted mistily.

“I guess zombies aren’t very conservative. Come on.”

As we entered a corridor leading away from the platform, we noticed something. The hallway flowed into a turn. All we saw was an odd reflection in the metal panels, the unmistakable dancing yellow that meant a fire.

“There must be a fire,” Tim whispered, “around this bend.”

“This can’t be good. There shouldn’t be a fire, there’s no way there could be a fire. Is there any way around?” I asked Frederick.

“You want to get there the shortest way, don’t you?” said Frederick unpleasantly.

I was just about to express my displeasure in his tone of voice, when Tim moved ahead. Naturally, I followed, my shotgun held ready. Frederick appropriately stood back.

Tim and I both jumped around the bend at once, our weapons held high.

There wasn’t a fire. There was something worse.

“Holy—” Tim began.

You know, I wouldn’t mind having a chat with the bastard who runs this place before I blow them away. Why that highly thought-out, imaginative and expressive thought? Well, ahead of us floated three human heads. In mid air, no strings attached. Of course, their faces were modified to a level where they barely resembled those of a human; their eyes were a shining greenish-white. The jaws had been replaced with a row of needle-like three centimetre teeth that protruded outward in a rather chaotic fashion. The lower jaw was wide and muscular, anything but human, hanging down under its own weight and giving the creature a somewhat dumbfounded visage. From the back of their heads sprouted some metallic parts that were unmistakably a stout rocket engine out of which a dwarfish fire burned.

What the hell?

What will the pervasive minds who make these things think of next?

These awkward yet equally creepy monstrosities slowly drifted through the air, seemingly ignoring us.

And then the one thing at the very front jerkily turned towards us. It opened its mouth even wider, baring its fangs, hissing. Next thing I knew there was the sound of an explosion and fire billowed out of its jet engine in bountiful amounts. With this, it shot towards us at a blazing speed.

No filthy flying head was taking a chunk out of Nik Taggart’s ass!

I fired and to my pleasant, and unpleasant surprise, it exploded.

The pleasant part was that it was gone, dead, *unmonsterised*. The unpleasant was that the explosion threw me back, my exposed flesh burned, my clothing smoked.

I had the energy to finish off the other two things. And I did.

After that, however, I collapsed. Jesus, it hurt.

“Are you OK?” asked Tim in a worried and still shaking voice. I think we were all recovering from a bit of shock.

“Nah, it’s not much. Just some third-degree burns, that’s all.”

Tim hoisted my arm over his shoulder and helped me up. “We’ve got to get you a medikit,” he said.

I handed him the shotgun. “Make good use of them. Or we’ll have to resort to banging imps upside the head with my flashlight.” I laughed wearily, and then added, “Why do I think we’ve been through this before?”

Tim smirked. “We have.”

“Ah, you stole my weapon. Again.”

He grinned.

“Hey, Fred, it’s safe to come out now.”

Frederick came tottering around the bend.

“Don’t call me Fred.”

I couldn’t help but sniff my burnt hands. It was a disgusting smell, heavy and putrid. Awkward as it may seem, I couldn’t help but feel a little satisfaction as I gazed down at my blackened hands. It was an odd feeling of pride. Tim and I were putting on quite a fight, and my burn flesh seemed to stand as a testament to our ongoing achievement. It was that same kind of psychology that leads to men showing off their scars to their buddies. I guess it’s a guy thing. Nonetheless, the thought that there was no one else to share our experiences with was unnerving. But we were doing pretty

well thus far, save for some petty injuries, and we'd make our way back to Earth in a short while, where our deeds would be immortalised.

By then, Tim had grown quite accustomed to lugging other people around. Fortunately, his services were not required for too long a period of time; we found some medikits laying scattered about the ground, some torn open, while others remained virgin. Tim went for the latter.

"Hmm, what do you think happened? Why are they lying around like that?"

"I don't know," said Tim. "It's almost as if someone was looking for something. Reminds me of those ammunition boxes. Or maybe the imps are getting hopped up on some of the medications."

I found this comment somewhat comical and laughed weakly, but all the while, I found it perfectly plausible. My attention fell back to my throbbing hands. I wanted some medical attention badly.

Thank God for modern medicine!

A few minutes into my treatment, I felt all pain leave me. My hands were still burned and smelled grotesquely, but I had energy, there was no more hurt, and my hands felt perfectly dexterous. And that's all that mattered. It was all going to be over soon. Very soon.

I retrieved my shotgun from Tim.

As we walked on, Tim jabbed me forcefully in the ribs. This usually meant that something was awry.

I looked in the direction he was pointing, and saw that my instinct was correct.

To our left was a small hallway, with a dead end. This end was not to be seen, however. As the end of the hallway drew near, the walls turned a fleshy pink. I strained my eyes and saw that it was indeed made of flesh, wet slimy flesh, pulsating slowly while some unknown light source backlit it. It was revolting.

And as a final touch to the decoration, a human corpse hung from the ceiling, twitching lightly so that it was hard to notice. The corpse seemed somewhat decomposed, and was yet glossy and fresh at the same time.

I looked away. I could gaze on no longer.

"What the hell?" muttered Tim.

"Hell," said Frederick loudly. "Hell is starting to take over. It's coming, it's eating away at the station. It's here and there now. But within days, the entire human outpost will be transformed into what could only be a bad dream. It starts with this," he said motioning towards the corpse.

Tim and I looked at him awkwardly.

"Come on, we have to move on."

Not a whole lot happened after that. We ran into several imps and even encountered several more 'fleshy', organic areas. We must be drawing near, I thought. The train had brought us close, or so Frederick had said. The station may have dimensions measured in kilometres, but I was sure we had covered a good number of kilometres, and we had to be drawing near. I simply couldn't see it any other way.

But these thoughts were broken by the next interesting event in our little quest. No new monster.

It was a zombie that came blundering around one corner.

Better yet, it was none other than Commander Briggs himself, or what was once Commander Briggs.

I couldn't help but grin. I finally had an excuse to send him where he belonged.

“Permission to terminate?” I asked Tim half-jokingly, raising my gun without waiting for approval.

To my surprise, he answered, “Permission denied, corporal.”

I slightly lowered my gun and eyed Tim. “Why?”

I saw the same smile etch itself across his face. “I want to do this.”

“Oh, come on, Tim!”

While we argued, Briggs started firing away his pistol. Tim and I continued to argue, not even bothering to duck. When alive, Briggs had been an awful shot, and from past experience, apparently zombification did nothing to correct this issue.

“But all these years! He’s mine! Besides, you like the military, you liked Briggs!” I had a pretty strong argument there.

Tim had a pretty strong defence. “I wanted to get up there. I never really liked him; no one did. The whole Martian base thing, the control he had over the flow of information, his secret meetings—”

“You may hate Briggs as well, but Briggs liked you. Likewise, he hated me. I have an excuse to do this!”

A bullet whizzed by my unflinching head.

Tim hesitated. Briggs had limped considerably closer and the probability of one of his stray bullets finding its target had greatly increased.

“Fine,” he said simply.

Tim turned away angrily.

Without any hesitation, I blew Briggs away.

“Man, that was a release.”

“Oh?” said Tim somewhat angrily. “I’m the wiser for stepping down.”

“Don’t give me that noble bullshit,” I laughed, slapping Tim on the back merrily. “Being wise doesn’t give you that same sensation—”

“Damn you, corporal. Shut up.”

“—trigger, feeling it sink into the handle—”

“*Shut the hell up!*”

I stopped. I didn’t want Tim’s complaining to lure any other zombies in the vicinity. “Alright. I’m sorry Tim.”

He sighed.

Funny how adults can sound like children under extreme circumstances.

“What did it matter who did it? At least we know he’s gone for good. In a way, we both got him.”

“Yeah. But I’ve got dibs on Hemming if we run into him.”

I grinned. We were such assholes!

“Alright,” I said, recalling our drill sergeant. This was getting fun.

Our sightseeing was enlightened to some more varying scenery (besides the few other fleshy walls and hanging corpses, in one of which we were treated to a pentagram made of liquid tissue...) that made time pass faster. Areas became slightly more open, still supported by a colossal and intricate work of metallic beams and panels. We walked down a hallway with horizontally-placed tanks with transparent tops, beneath which blue water churned. We thought we’d seen pipes before, and yet their frequency grew exponentially.

At one point, we stumbled around a large roughly pentagonal room with a gigantic tank in the centre, stretching from the metallic floor to the no-less metallic ceiling. The bottom of the gigantic cylinder ended in a metallic base with the essential computer consoles, whilst the top fell into a metal cone that widened. All of this was

covered with intricate lines where panels came together, tubes, wires, and glowing lights, of course. Some of these tubes and wires led to minuscule versions of the larger tank that were scattered to the sides of the room.

Something quite distorted by the water ran through it.

I was just thinking, 'I don't wanna know', when Frederick said:

"Oooh, the cooling facility!"

Throwing him a somewhat dirty look, I wondered why he was getting so excited about some damn cooling facility.

"So?" said Tim, apparently thinking along the same lines.

Great minds think alike.

Frederick didn't look away. "Oh, I've never been here before. Still, though concealed from me, this room was essential to our experiments. Had it not been for the cool heavy water plates and constant ventilation, the accelerated particles in our portals would lead to an uncontrollable reaction that would blow a chunk out of Mars ten times the size of this place."

And this place was pretty damn big, too.

"Why didn't it happen when there was the power outage? Surely electricity is somehow involved in the processing of this water." Tim said this with a thoughtful expression. I thought about it. It really was a thoughtful thing, thus his expression was justified.

"I really can't say. Then again, when the power went out, the portal should've shut, but it didn't, did it? Apparently, something is somehow operating our portal from the portal on the other side, as well as keeping it stable."

"This other side being hell, right?" I queried, trying to pitch in to the conversation. Of course, I already knew. Why I asked this, I don't know. It felt appropriate to do so.

Tim let the silence dramatically linger for a while longer, before saying, "Let's go."

I agreed. Humankind was at stake.

And the odds weren't too good, either.

I glanced back at the door through which we had entered. The doors were bent and torn from their foundation. So that's how we had gotten inside this secure hall, meant for authorised personnel only.

A shadow spilled over the floor from that very hall.

I urged Tim and Frederick silently to get going. And so we did.

We never found out what exactly cast the shadow. It could've simply been some zombie, but it's no good risking it. Besides, our ammunition was highly valuable and unnecessary gunfights were to be avoided.

We had long since steered clear of the shadow, when Frederick shouted (well, excitedly whispered), "*This is it!*"

He led us forward until we came to gaze upon a steel cage. I bit my lip looking at it, then realised it was a lift. An elevator. Coolness, we didn't have any back in our base. I hadn't seen one since I left Earth, and that was ages ago. Literally.

One might be surprised that I found it so interesting. It was a very Spartan lift, with cables and tubes running through here and there, around the bare cage-like walls. But it fascinated me nonetheless. Get over it. However, the cage-like aspect of it made me a bit nervous.

Frederick led the way. "Where's my security clearance?" he asked as he fidgeted with his pocket.

It took me a moment to remember that I had taken it a while ago. I quickly fumbled through my own pocket and pulled it out, handing it to Fredrick. "I saved it for safety reasons when you were knocked out a while ago," I unnecessarily explained myself. He said nothing.

After scanning the card and his hand, he got in, and Tim and I followed.

It seemed that the scientist was going through what was once his daily routine when going to work. Only now it was a bit different.

The steel doors shut and the lift began to rise with a jerk and a whole lot of screeching and whirring. The latter part made me wince. We were nearing the portal to hell. I didn't find it necessary to blast, 'Hey, we're coming!' via the elevator. But if any hell-prodigy was hanging around, it was bound to have heard us by now. It was too late. So I didn't say anything, though quite a bit of comments came to mind.

The lift stopped and the doors fell to the sides with a hydraulic hiss.

And as the doors came to a rest, my mind was overloaded with information. We were there, I immediately knew it.

We all knew it.

And we all knew that it was going to be all over soon

It was the most cavernous chamber yet, perhaps only rivalled by the warehouse where Frederick was knocked silly. Still, it triumphed in its vastness. We were standing on what seemed to be a giant balcony, an enormous platform, encircled with railing to ensure some careless soul didn't fall into the abyss below. A gigantic cylindrical formation, a pit of sorts, ran from the ceiling into the dark below us. Ahead was another catwalk, behind which lay what we sought. There it was, what we had come so long to find, for which we went through so much pain and torment.

The portal to hell.

In some odd way, it didn't surprise me; it was what I'd come to expect: a swirling, turbulent red colour, semi-transparent, its shimmering surface toiling in the manner of a sea. To its sides were several gigantic generators with tubes and wires lying scattered here and there, many of them leading up the metallic base of the portal itself. There were several metallic plates scattered in strategic locations around the portal and room itself that I think were the plates that Frederick had said cooled the entire operation. However, they were unnecessary, I felt that blowing them away would do little good.

My eyes travelled upwards into what seemed a giant tunnel that might've stretched all the way to the Martian surface. Following it down, it seemed to travel quite a distance downward, with both ends ending in a mysterious darkness. There seemed to be fans scattered about it here and there.

I looked back. Centrally placed, facing the portal at a high vantage point was a cabin, as was another one to our right side. I motioned towards it.

"That's one of the control rooms," explained Frederick.

I nodded. "It's a logical place to start."

So we set out towards it. But as we neared, a human figure jumped out.

After all the zombies I had seen, I immediately recognised it as being fully human, totally unchanged. However, a malicious, hungry expression stretched over the man's weathered face, behind his large spectacles. His face was wrinkled in a sly glare, the bends in his forehead travelling all the way back over his bald head.

Judging from the white coat he wore, he was another scientist.

Frederick had just enough time to utter, "Thorpe—", when the man raised some gigantic gun and started firing.

I had no time to examine the weapon itself, though judging by its rapid fire, it was a very heavy chaingun.

Bullets whizzed overhead in rapid succession. The three of us scattered, seeking pipes, crates, and other things as protection.

Tim finally jumped out with my pistol and fired two shots.

Each bullet hit one of the man's legs. He crumpled to the ground in a heap, the chaingun escaping from his hands.

Tim approached him unwarily, kicking the weapon out of his reach. "I can see you're not a zombie, so you're spared that excuse. You owe us an explanation as to exactly what is going on. Go on, speak!"

The man looked at Tim with a look of spite unnecessary for someone he didn't even know. He said nothing.

Tim raised his gun, pointing it at the scientist's jagged forehead from point-blank range.

"Speak."

"Magis mos adveho quod vos mos intereo..."

“In English,” he added.

The scientist looked pleased at the thought. “You may kill me, but I shall not cease to exist. Shoot me now, and you will only send me elsewhere.” He motioned vaguely towards the portal, his raspy voice echoing loudly throughout the cavernous room. “And using this, I will be able to come back here. Isn’t it marvellous?” He paused, looking at the swirling red dreamily. “You see, there sits the key to eternal life. And besides, I am finished, my work here is complete. All I have to do is wait for more to come through.” He then shut his mouth, apparently not wishing to share anything else.

“I don’t think we’re gonna get any answers out of this guy,” I said quietly.

The man threw himself forward, his bony hands grasping for Tim’s pistol.

Left without a choice, Tim pulled the trigger. Soon, there was a puddle of blood at his feet.

“Damn,” he said.

“You know, why do we find all these damn scientists? Couldn’t we find some hot lady instead?”

“I don’t think a ‘hot lady’ would be very helpful in stopping hell.”

I shrugged. “You know, motivation.”

Tim laughed.

There was a long pause, after which, upon some silent agreement, we moved towards the control cabin. Immediately, Frederick set himself in the central chair, gazing at the numerous control panels and displays, preoccupied with the main console, working tirelessly with one arm while the other remained strapped to his chest. Meanwhile, Tim and I hovered around him.

“Hey!” I said excitedly, jabbing Tim in the side and pointing towards a silverish contraption off to one side of the room where a stack of Styrofoam cups was piled. “Is that a coffeemaker?”

Tim examined it. As he began to move towards it, he said, “Yeah, it is!”

Soon, the room was filled with the warm, pleasant aroma of coffee and the gentle bubbling sound as it slowly drained into the cups below. I felt its warmth, its comfort in an otherwise uncomfortable situation.

My eyes fell back to Frederick and his computer.

After a while, a screen came up showing bunches of Xs, Ys, Zs, Ts, among other symbols, and twice that amount of numbers.

Frederick rubbed his face thoughtfully.

“Aw, that’s lovely,” I said. “What is it?”

“Coordinates,” he answered. “We can’t simply cut through space and time blindly. You need to know where you’re going; you need the coordinates of your final destination. That’s what these numbers are. However...”

Tim and I looked at each other. “What?”

“These coordinates are not the ones that my colleagues and I put into the program. These are new ones.”

His eyes quickly darted to the computer itself. There was a disk lodged into the disk drive. Frederick tried to take it out using a variety of creative methods, though none worked.

“I can’t take it out,” he said angrily. “And this program, the program that is feeding the coordinates to the acceleration device, can’t be shut off either. It’s like a virus.”

“So this is the program that’s causing this?” I asked, motioning at the swirling portal.

“Yes. Someone must’ve inserted this disk with the new coordinates shortly prior to our creation of the portal. That’s why this happened. Someone intentionally made us open a portal to hell.”

All three of us looked at the guy who Tim had shot moments ago.

“But why would he do something like that?” asked Tim, as he exited the room and headed towards the corpse.

Frederick examined the computer intently.

“It can’t be shut down,” he said finally, demonstratively pushing the POWER button again and again. “And I don’t think it’d be a good idea.”

I raised my shotgun, pointing it at the computer. “I can shut it down.”

He hastily pushed my gun away. “As I said, not a good idea anyway.”

“Why?”

“There is an entire procedure, run by these computers, to shut down the portal once it is created. Suddenly ceasing the computer input will destabilise the portal; there’s a long, systematic procedure for closing an open gateway. And without any control, this could result into a chain reaction that could destroy all of Mars. But the main problem is, the portal, and these computers, seem to be drawing their power from some energy source besides that of our own station. I fear that after shutting down the computer, the resulting explosion will keep on drawing energy from this source. All this extra energy feeding the reaction could exponentially increase the blast.”

“So you’re saying that sacrificing ourselves and blowing everything up is also not a good idea?”

“No, because the explosion could grow to a level where even Earth may be in danger. Even if Earth wasn’t destroyed instantaneously, millions of large chunks from Mars will come riding on the shock wave towards Earth. As if that isn’t bad enough, the radiation generated in the process would wash over Earth and instantly kill any living things on the side of Earth facing the blast. And that is just one scenario. The tunnel, which is essentially like two black holes joined together, might instantly drain the energy, since it’s without control. All such gateways try to close, and require vast energy to be kept open. With the unstable energy, it might simply close and collapse and, under its own gravity, collapse to form a single black hole comprised of the two original gateway holes, only more massive because of the energy and matter it would draw in. Such a singularity would be more than powerful enough to tear Mars apart and swallow it up and pose a danger to Earth, perhaps destabilise the entire solar system—”

“I get the point,” I said. Damn, this was not good. “So, what do we do?”

Just then, Tim yelled from his position on the balcony. “Come and have a look at this!”

My question unanswered, Frederick and I set out to join Tim.

Upon approach, I saw that he was hovering over the dead scientist’s body.

“What?”

Tim pulled down the cuff of the man’s shirt so we could see a strange symbol placed on the right side of his chest.

It was a black pentagram, seemingly seared into his flesh, with odd runes and symbols placed in each triangle that was one of the rays.

“What do you make of this?” he asked.

“This guy purposefully did this. He wanted to open a portal to hell. And he might’ve been devising for quite a lengthy time, too.” I said, never taking my eyes from the guy.

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” I said, recalling my life a week or two ago, “I remember hearing his raspy voice in Briggs’ office.” Tim looked at me as if he wanted to hear more, so I continued. “I’m sure you remember the whole fireworks thing. Well, I was called to Briggs’ office, and I heard their voices inside, conversing. I knocked on the door, and after a pause and the sound of shuffling papers, Briggs told me to come in. This guy,” I said, motioning at the dead corpse, “was hiding in the closet during the length of my presence.”

“So Briggs was involved in this, too,” he said thoughtfully. “We should’ve checked his body when we killed him, should’ve checked to see if he had the same symbol.”

I thought for a while more. “So it all measures up this way: a satanic cult that has intentionally seeped into this scientific community changes the coordinates of a regular experiment at the last moment, so a portal to hell opens.”

Frederick nodded.

“How do we close it?” Tim asked, glancing at the surging portal.

“We were just getting to that. Frederick?”

Frederick looked at the ground. “There is one solution. It involves quite a bit of risk and danger, though it’s the only way out.” He said no more, apparently wanting to see if the words ‘danger’ discouraged us in any way.

“Go on.”

“The only way I see it is to go through the portal, to try to shut it down from the other side, from hell itself.”

There was a long silence.

He continued. “It could be a suicide mission, if it becomes necessary to blow all of their machinery and equipment up. As I explained to Corporal Taggart here, the resulting chain-reaction could be catastrophic. But if this is done from the other side of the portal, the explosion will only affect hell. The portal would be shut down, but the ones who did this would not come back.”

“I don’t like it,” I said finally. “But I guess there’s no other way.” I took a deep breath. “I’ll do it.”

“I’ll do it,” said Tim in his most determined voice, though I sensed a note of fear in his tone.

“And I have no choice,” said Frederick gloomily. “I understand how this whole thing works, I need to be there so I can run through the possible solutions.”

“Very well then,” I said. “Do we go now?”

Frederick closed his eyes. “Wait about a minute. I’m sure we all need a minute.”

I agreed.

“And maybe a cup of coffee before we go,” said Tim, rushing back into the computer room to fetch the finished cups of steaming goodness. I turned around, anticipating the hot drink. Finally, Tim rushed back, two cups in his hands and one under his arm.

My eyes closed around the Styrofoam as I was handed my serving. And we all stood there, savouring the moment and clearing our mind temporarily to ease ourselves. This was perhaps the last time we’d ever enjoy anything.

I took a sip. The coffee was strangely comforting.

And we sat down, thinking to ourselves, recalling all that was and fearing all that will be.

I closed my eyes, and sensed to coffee in my hands. I wanted to open my eyes and find myself sitting at home back on Earth, drinking the morning coffee, but I couldn't do it. I had lived away for so long, I could no longer imagine such seemingly ordinary tasks. It was like science fiction to me. Looking around again, vague and random memories from my childhood came to mind, that gradually progressed into adulthood. As the memories became more recent, their detail increased. I remembered enrolling into the military. First day, second day. Joining the marines. Getting ready to leave for Mars. My parting speech, the one that pissed off Briggs.

Briggs. He had been in this since the very beginning. As much as I had despised him before, now it doubled. He hadn't just screwed up my life. He hadn't screwed my fellow marines, but everyone. Every single human being that lived and that had once lived and worked for humanity to reach the state it was in today. Many times had I referred to him as evil, but I never really thought it literally true.

I pushed Briggs out of my head. It was done, he was dead. Apparently hell hadn't been too pleased with him, for he had been zombified.

Enough.

My eyes darted about the room again. This place wasn't built for random experimentation. It was clear that from the very beginning, when the first foundation to this entire complex was laid down, it was done so with the intention of developing this portal technology. Such a gigantic room couldn't be casually assembled for this experiment. This had been a goal since the very beginning, from whenever it was built, whether it be seven years or more, as Tim and I suspected. Nothing seemed to be what it seemed anymore. Had our presence on Mars been simply a publicity stunt, or had we been assembled on Mars to secretly provide security for a deeper cause?

My eyes fell to the floor. If so, we had failed, but it wasn't our fault. If that was the case, the problem was that we hadn't been informed, the seemingly purposeless base had led us into a false sense of security and carelessness.

I thought about Tyler and Mexican guy. About all the other friends and family back on Earth. I had already adapted with the thought that Tyler and Mexican guy were gone, and it was a heavy one. And my friends and family on Earth didn't weight on my heart too much, either. Why? I hadn't seen them in person for years, their meaning to me, valuable as it might be, was lost.

As I realised this, I knew that I had little to lose but my wasted life.

I was ready to do so.

And then, I realised my cup was empty. I had apparently unconsciously finished it. Perhaps, was the situation not so dire, I would've complained about the bland coffee, its lack of aroma and strength. It wasn't black enough. Coffee should either be strong and black or creamy with milk, but never watery. But it was still coffee, and that was all that mattered.

Tim's voice broke the silence. "Let's go," he said.

I threw the cup over my shoulder.

We all stood up silently and started heading towards the edge of the balcony, from where a catwalk twisted around and circled to the front of the gate itself.

I lingered, slowly lumbering after them, my mind still buzzing with activity, bits of information, small memories.

I saw Tim pick up the evil scientist's heavy chaingun and sling it over his shoulder. He busied himself with examining his newfound joy.

Just then, Frederick flew into the air.

Now what? As far as I know, people don't casually and unexpectedly fly into the air. But as I said, nothing made sense anymore, and I felt absolutely no surprise at this new development.

Tim spun around.

It seemed that some invisible force had grabbed the scientist by the foot and lifted him into the air; he was now dangling by one paw, his remaining leg and arms wildly flailing into the air, grasping at something that didn't seem to be there.

"Help!" he shouted.

I raised my shotgun.

But then Frederick spun around in the air, and went flying across the room until he came in contact with a large metallic wall. His body crumpled to the ground. Though his face was hidden, the blood that pooled around his head announced that he was dead. I couldn't see anyone surviving a hit to the head like that.

My heart sank. Frederick was gone.

My eyes turned back, seeking what didn't appear to be there. An invisible monster.

Tim fired several rounds helplessly at where he thought the invisible entity was, though he didn't enjoy a lot of success.

"Come on!" he shouted, and we both sprinted towards the portal.

Did it follow us?

I don't know. Tim stepped through the portal first. And he was gone.

I looked around, feeling as if I was seeing the last of our world. Glancing back for what seemed like an eternity, my eyes found strange joy and solace into the metallic tubing and brilliant sparks, their flawless forms casually falling in slow motion. I never thought that I'd miss the cramped metallic halls of Mars.

Suddenly, I felt like screaming.

What had happened to everything? Someone had taken everything in the universe and dumped it upside-down.

I heard a pair of heavy steps coming towards me on the catwalk.

Feeling the sense of urgency surging back into my body, my eyes gazed at the turbulent red surface, somewhat hesitantly. But I knew what I had to do.

I stepped through.

There was absolutely no feeling, no pain, no pleasure. As Frederick had said, it was just like stepping through a doorway, a portal. I emerged at the other side, feeling perfectly normal, though somewhat dazed and disoriented. When my eyes finally focused, I noticed that Tim was there, staring at me with a quite frightened expression set upon his face, his eyes wide.

I looked at him questioningly. "What?"

"You—when you came through, you were just, uh, you were a skeleton. And then all these muscles and flesh sort of grew out of nowhere, until you became yourself again."

"Tim," I said. "After all I've seen, I don't have a shred of doubt that what you say is true." And I had a feeling we were gonna see a whole lot more. "So it's like you're totally rebuilt at the other end of the tunnel, I guess."

Tim nodded. "Still, I wonder if it's like dying and being born again."

I shrugged. "Had Frederick still been here, he might've explained."

And then I remembered what had happened and where we stood.

We were in hell.

mPART 3 Transformation

1

We were in hell.

And did I see the towering flames dancing upon the dry earth? Were there thousands of people struggling, some faltering to their skinless knees upon the fiery glowing clay? Was there humid air, seemingly burning through my lungs and into my stomach? What about demons, fiends strafing about aimlessly, tearing randomly at the measly remains of human souls?

Nah.

I might as well have still been on Mars.

In fact, the room within which we stood looked quite familiar.

We were standing on a catwalk while the portal swirled in foreboding patterns behind us. Ahead was a large ledge with scattered control consoles and things set upon its surface. In front and above of us lay several large glass panels wrapping around the central control room while down to our right was a smaller version of it looking reminiscent to the one from which Frederick had tried to shut the computers running the portal down.

“Tim,” I whispered, looking up and around me in utter awe. “Do you think—do you think that, somehow, we went into the portal and came back out of it. This place is identical—”

“Identical to the large room from which we came, I know.”

I nodded.

He looked around, and said, “There’s one way to find out.”

I scratched my head in a gesture that signified my lack of understanding. Nevertheless, I let Tim run his course, walking around the room, seemingly searching for something.

A while passed before my suspense bladder could wait no more.

“Tim, what the hell are you doing?”

He looked at me. There was an odd look in his wide eyes; a look of sheer terror for which the human face lacked an expression. “We’re not on Mars anymore,” he said softly, though still audibly.

I turned to the side, still eyeing him. “And you know this how?”

“Frederick’s body isn’t where it should be, neither is that scientist’s. We are in an identical chamber, like the one on Mars. But we aren’t on the red planet anymore. We are elsewhere.”

My heart fluttered and a chill proliferated from my spine outward at hearing these words.

Elsewhere.

And through this realisation, I gained a new outlook on the room. It was darker, more dimly lit than the Mars chamber. The stillness itself was unnerving, the silence hanging heavily in the air like moisture in Luanda. Everything seemed to be a darker tone, different in some manner that cannot be possibly explained. It was the atmosphere, an unseen factor that contrived fear.

A gentle breeze bristled along my neck. And though it was warm, a glacial wave washed through my body.

"So this is it," I said.

"Yes," answered Tim. "We are in hell."

I rubbed my face and tried cracking a joke to ease the tension. It seemed appropriate to do so at the moment. "You know, I thought I might come down here eventually, I was just hoping it wouldn't be so soon."

Tim laughed, though it was a shrill, forced one.

We both kept glancing around at the room.

"Not quite what I expected," I broke the silence. "This room, I mean."

My fellow marine nodded. "I can see what you are saying. Still, you have to keep in mind that in order to create a gateway from one place to another, you need two receiving ends. Maybe the technology required doesn't allow for variation in design plans."

Hmm, he was probably right.

And with that, our brains began functioning again. I don't know whether it was the realisation of where we were standing or simply the daze that followed the journey through time and space that left us bewildered. Needless to say, it was all behind us now.

"Alright," I said, expressively rubbing my hands together. "Let's get to work, shall we? I believe we have to blow some stuff up."

Tim nodded, heading towards the minuscule control centre. "We don't necessarily have to blow them up. Maybe we'll be able to simply shut it down. Hell, if we're lucky, we could put a timer on it so the portal closes after we've gone back to Mars."

"Don't get your hopes up," I advised, following him. "Though I must say, that'd be nice."

By the time I got inside, Tim had already planted himself in front of the computer. An interesting side note: there were no chairs of any sort, no charts or abandoned coffee mugs. No coffeemaker. The place looked as if it had never been used, never soiled by a human hand. It was as if it was built, put to work, and abandoned.

"No chairs," mumbled Tim, yet again seeping into my thoughts. For the time we had spent together, our minds had begun to function amazingly well in unison. They tried to make this work in training back on Mars, though a majority of the marines had no brains to share. Majority doesn't describe it, it was almost unanimous, with Tyler, Zhao, apparently Tim, and I being exceptions. While listening to some speech, I often pondered at the military mind, drawing these conclusions.

Indeed, I had quite a bit of time to form my own theories and speculations, for which I had conclusive evidence. It seemed that the military mind was sifted from a filter containing many great minds. This mind can be normal, or even of high intelligence (me being a prime example). However, not long after that the mind is stripped down until it performs only basic functions necessary to life. Eat. Sleep. Walk.

Another function is the automatic retaliation, a small dictionary of words and phrases that are automatically uttered at some person if the situation requires it.

Eat. Sleep. Skin mammoth.

All the while my mind rambled, Tim was continuing to examine the computer, though he had yet to touch it.

“You know,” said Tim in his usual voice. “This whole thing had to be organised. Someone must’ve somehow sent the designs and blueprints for this technology down here. And *then* the portals had to be open at the same time so the computer can successfully connect the two doorways...”

“Yeah, and we know who did this, don’t we?”

Tim nodded, recalling the whole satanic cult thing, the evil scientist, Briggs. And I bet a whole lot of other people were involved as well.

But what did Briggs do? What was his position in this entire operation?

Well, he had power, I answered my own question. He could keep things quiet, he could issue security clearances, and he had all of them himself. He was strategically a useful figure in a doing such as this.

The bastard!

Hell has no pity, I thought, recalling that we had encountered him zombified.

For some reason, shooting him did not bring as much closure as I would’ve thought.

A loud whirring noise echoed throughout the colossal chamber.

Tim’s gaze flew upward and then back to me. We both recognised it as the sound of the lift; something was coming in our direction.

“Go and see if you can hold off whatever’s coming,” he directed. “I’ll try to figure something out here. Go on!” he said urgently.

I rushed off, my heart suddenly racing faster than I’d ever heard it before, snatching Tim’s empty shotgun on my way while wielding my own double-barrel treasure ahead of me. I had a feeling that I was gonna need a whole lot of firepower. And maybe some more after that.

Something was coming here, coming up the lift. Soon, the two doors at the end of the chamber would open, and God-knows what would emerge from inside.

My hands were shaking almost uncontrollably.

As I sprinted towards the door, my insides twisted and churned. The little Haiti guy, who had been absent for a long while, began his ritualistic dance in the bottom of my stomach yet again.

Finally, I reached the doors. My eyes darted around, searching for a lock, searching for something, anything...

I decided to utilise Tim’s old shotgun and wedged it in a way that the doors would be difficult to open.

The whirring and creaking stopped.

I looked about the room. There had to be something stronger, larger, with a more suitable shape... If only there were chairs, or some other free object of the sort. However, it was these exact things that were missing.

Even a damn broomstick would do!

The door banged and budged forward, the gun binding it slightly shifted in its position. Following was a loud roar that started as a growl and increased in decibels until it achieved the level of a deafening scream of rage, a raspy howl. It was a horrible scream, one that drowned out all of the banging noises coming as the beast battered the metallic doors.

The gun bent slowly with each hit.

A high-pitched raptor-like screech filled the air, echoing from behind the mangled door; the monster struck again and the gun bent furthermore.

Crap.

Now what?

This monster, whatever it was, would get in eventually. I knew that I had to face it, to kill it. Then a chilling insight came to me: could you kill things in hell? Where would they go? Maybe demons were immortal here?

I had to try.

So I readied myself, backing away from the door, raising my imposing shotgun.

“Tim,” I cried out, looking to my side while still pointing my weapon at the door. “How’s it going with the computers? Any luck?”

I had to repeat the last part cause the damn monster from beyond the door was making such a racket.

“No!” I heard Tim’s exasperated voice answer.

Damn. The situation was not improving.

BANG! The door continued to mangle itself at the beast’s fury.

“Come on Tim, hurry up! I’m growing roots here!”

BANG!

I took another step back shifted my stance, repositioning the butt of my gun against my shoulder.

Tim’s voice came, saying something with a loud angry tone.

I took in a deep breath.

A crashing sound came from Tim’s position, though it was soon drowned out by the continual banging.

BANG!

A moment before it happened, I saw it. BANG! The gun snapped in two and the deformed door flew to the side and came crashing down with a metallic resonance that set off a ringing in my ears.

And from behind the door I was greeted by some new damned freak.

This new monster came across my mind, coming to close with the fact that we were unable to close the portal, as well as the fact that we were in hell. These thoughts and feelings binded together seamlessly until they were pushed out of the way by a single thought:

We were screwed.

I think I'll repeat what I said many times before: we thought we had seen it all. Well, OK, maybe we knew that there was quite a bit in store for us, but we still believed that, were we to come across something new spawned in hell's bowels, we wouldn't be shocked. Maybe surprised, but certainly not shocked. Still, the skeletal being that stood before me was anything but mundane.

Hmmm, mundane. Is there such a thing as a trite monster? It seems that everything I knew was now inverted, awkward, strange, and anything but pleasant. Yes, taking a stroll through hell is not a fun practice. You don't even get a T-shirt.

Anyway, ahead of me stood a sick creation, though it didn't surprise me directly. I was surprised that it surprised me. Did that make sense?

It was a freaking skeleton. Literally, grinning toothily at me. Tubes ran across its shoulders and down from its neck into a unit that enwrapped around its chest, seemingly as a form of armour. From the two shoulders sprouted two things that were unmistakably something bad. Below stretched the rest of the creature, seemingly a human skeleton, and yet larger and somewhat deformed, inhuman, almost artificial. In fact, I had nearly concluded that this was not a true living entity, when my skipping eyes fell upon the greenish halo that encircled its bones. It was almost like a sort of transparent skin, oddly illuminating all around it green. But what struck me most were the two fiery green embers glowing deep from the eye pits of the skull itself.

The thing screeched at me, sounding almost like an eagle. Then it bent forward and a puff of smoke, followed by an explosion, came from one of the odd devices mounted upon its shoulders. I saw a grenade-sized missile flying towards me.

No joke! A freaking missile!

I jumped to the side, the missile impacting where I had stood moments before. The creature pushed itself back up and lumbered towards me in a fashion that might've almost been comical if it wasn't for the fact that I was standing in hell and all.

Finally, I brought my arm up and fired my double-barrel shotgun. BOOM-click. I was aware of a large chunk of armour sailing away from the beastie's chest. Quickly as I could, I reloaded.

Aim for the head, I told myself.

BOOM!

This time it wasn't armour, but half of the damn thing's face flying away. Ouch.

I began to reload again, hoping to even out its face with my next shot, but the skeleton-thing was faster. It continued to lumber towards me, bending forward as it did. I became aware of the two shoulder-mounted rocket launchers coming level with me.

Slowly, working my gun, I backed away.

And the monster, using whatever was left of its face, grinned at me, an evil, satanic grin looking reminiscent to that of an imp. The glowing eyes flashed at me and tightened and its perpetual grin seemed to stretch farther.

Another explosion came and I instinctively jumped to the side. As this happened, I was aware of the missile slightly curving towards me.

Jesus, they were heat-seekers, too!

The explosion of the missile that finally impacted little ways from my feet blended in with a second explosion, one announcing the launch of another rocket.

The damned monster was not giving me any time to reload.

I was forced to do an impressive dive to the side that would've made any Olympic trainer woo in awe. As I did, two of my shells fell out of the open shotgun and went rolling across the floor.

Shit.

The beast knew that I was helpless. As if to savour the experience, it slowly walked towards me. As it did, I slowly pushed myself backwards, hoping that some lightbulb would go off in my head.

The monster's pace quickened and it was soon standing next to... standing too close for comfort. As it rushed forward, it raised its hand backwards, ready to swing it at me. Though the monster was bony and somewhat frail looking, I had a feeling that a punch to the face wouldn't exactly be a breezy kiss.

I had just prepared myself to have my face smacked off, when the sound of rapid fire rose over the sounds of the creaking demon. Pieces of armour and transparent flesh went flying here and there, including in my face. BAH! I spit the demon carnage out. I would've rather been punched. At this machine-gun fire, the monster did a crazy dance, staggering backwards, away from me. Finally, the stream of bullets found the monster's head and soon it didn't have any means of expressing emotions.

The body fell to the ground, steaming.

I looked around to see Tim wielding his heavy machine gun.

"Damn it, Tim, what took you so long?"

He shrugged, then grinned. "I couldn't decide where to shoot it first."

Relief washed over me, and I couldn't help but to grin as well. "That was too close. Please, next time have some spot in mind so I don't have to wait for your sorry ass."

"OK."

I paused, and then asked, "What happened with the computers. Any luck?"

The grin disappeared from Tim's face. "Um, no. So I tried destroying them." He slumped to the ground. "They're shattered, lying all over the place, broken, and yet they continued to work. The portal remains open. I don't know what to do. Everything is a failure, everything's hopeless."

I looked away, pretending that the swirling patterns of the portal interested me.

"Well," I began after a while. "We can't stop the invasion. But we sure as hell can weaken it."

Tim looked up.

"Yes?"

"Well, we might as well make good use of ourselves; try to take down as many of these things as possible. You know, try to weaken them, maybe strategically, to make things easier for our boys back on Earth. What do you say?"

A smile returned to Tim's face. "Yes. Die proud, on our feet. As marines."

"Tim, you're such a fruitcake."

"What?"

"You. Fruitcake."

"No I'm not," he retorted, seemingly offended.

"Yeah you are."

"No I'm not. I'm a proud marine."

I laughed. "Nobody's perfect."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That *you*, my friend, are a fruitcake."

Tim rolled his eyes. "Damn it, Nik! We're in hell and you're acting like an idiot!"

I was taken aback. Not because Tim called me an idiot, but because he finally called me by my first name. He hadn't done that since mess hall on Mars, but it felt like forever.

"Err, yeah, sure," I said, allowing Tim to ease himself into his military fantasies.

"Hell, if we're lucky, we can take down some leader or something. I'm sure that there's somebody here, someone co-ordinating this whole invasion."

Tim nodded.

"Still, I wouldn't get my hopes up." Tim motioned at the body of the monster he had just reduced to beef stew. "It scares me to think what else we could come across. This is just the beginning."

I shook my head in agreement.

It really was just the beginning.

What Tim did to the skeleton-thing was impressive. But I was a lot more impressed with what he had done with the computers. He had reduced them to pieces, tiny pieces, tinier than I ever thought possible. I was just in the process of examining what must've once been a panel covered in integrated circuits, perhaps the memory, when Tim's arrival was announced by the crunching of post-computer under his boots.

"Let's not waste time here any longer."

I looked up to find a broad grin on his face. It didn't take long for my pretentious mind to find out why. My eyes travelled to his arm, within which was clutched something... big. It was unmistakably a gun, a weapon, a *demonsteriser*. Still, its size alone rivalled that of Tim's machine gun. It was large, dark, and intricate, with a large nozzle at the top, meant to launch... meant to launch the big rounded canister-type things that hung on a belt that stretched across Tim's shoulder.

I blinked.

"Jesus, what the hell is that thing!?"

Tim's eyes flashed and his grin broadened. "This, my friend, is essentially a pump. And this," he motioned towards the belt with the canisters. "These are devices of, um, shall I say an explosive nature?"

Oh yeah, now I remember.

"A grenade launcher!"

Tim nodded.

"Tim, you lucky son-of-a-bitch! Where'd you find it?"

He waved his hand in the air. "It was stashed away in that corner over there. I don't know why, but I'm not complaining."

"How much ammo?"

"Oh, eighteen shots, meaning eighteen dead monsters." His mischievous smile flashed at me. "Hmmm, but now my heavy-chain gun is lonely," he said in a rather fake tone and rubbed his chin in a no-less fake manner.

"I don't know, but I wouldn't leave it laying around for Hemming to find." I put out my hand. However, I was soon forced to pull out my other arm too because Tim's heavy machine gun was no helium balloon. Quite to the contrary, it might as well've been a bag of lead. A very *big* bag of lead.

I expressed these thoughts aloud.

"Stop whining."

"I'm not whining, I'm just making careful note, making sure it be known that, uh, this thing here is heavy. I mean, heavy isn't necessarily bad. But if we need to run, or if I run out of ammo, then I don't know what to do with this bloated thing."

Tim smirked. "Well, whatever you do, don't toss it over your shoulder. Take good care of her." He looked back down at his own gun. "Man, I'm looking forward to having an excuse to use this." He flipped it in his hands.

"Let's hope we won't need it too soon."

With that final and impossibly intelligent comment by Corporal Taggart a.k.a. me, we set out.

We walked around and out of the tiny control room, over the dead body of the monster thing.

“It’s like a revenant,” commented Tim. “A spirit, with that transparent skin.”

I couldn’t agree more.

From there, we hopped onto the merry lift and down we went.

At that point, I noticed that the lift didn’t creak and screech as much as the one on Mars. I was impressed.

“This lift is quiet,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“I guess hell has better maintenance.”

A smile etched upon Tim’s face, one of those smiles where a person isn’t really sure whether it would be appropriate for them to laugh, though the joke may be funny.

The doors slid open, and we were treated to a treat.

A pale, wheezing, demented zombie!

It roared, baring its fangs, and rolled its dry, empty eyes. Tim and I instinctively jumped in opposite directions so that the zombie was left confused, trying to decide whom to pick off first.

Soon, it made a decision.

The burlesque zombie began firing at Tim uncontrollably, its entire body shaking madly, as if going through convulsions. It seemed that only its hand remained steady. One of the shots hit Tim on the shoulder.

Tim looked at the zombie incredulously. “Ow, that hurt!” He then pulled out his grenade launcher and the zombie... well, it certainly wasn’t a zombie anymore. This whole situation seemed somewhat funny, at least until a zombie ear landed in my hair. That, and until blood began to flow profusely out of Tim’s shoulder.

There was so much blood everywhere, the Tim’s wound almost seemed ridiculous next to the zombie that had seemingly vanished, leaving red trails all over the place, the walls and ceiling included.

Despite his wound, Tim seemed pleased with himself.

“Nice magic trick,” I complimented him, then rushed forward to see if I could be of any assistance.

“It went through,” Tim informed me. “I just need to wrap some cloth around it, pressure. Nothing else.”

I busied myself in shredding a part of the shirt I wore under my battered armour. As I did, I spoke. “Kill in the spirit world. You know, that was a Black Sabbath song...” I hummed the melody. “I wish I had some music right about now.”

“Yeah, but problem is, while you’re listening, some demon might sneak up on you.”

“True,” I said, curling my bottom lip and nodding my head. “But at least I’d die happy.”

I had finally finished tearing at my shirt and began wrapping it around Tim’s arm as tightly as I could.

Soon, I completed the make-do bandage. And finally, we examined our new surroundings.

We were standing in a long metallic hallway with a door on the far end, and a small corridor sprouting from our own. The usual tubes and panels and circuits lined the walls and railing stretched beneath our feet. Sinister lamps glowed lightly and forebodingly, making shadows stand out, as if ready to pounce.

I headed towards the small corridor. "Let's check out what's here," I said.
Tim nodded and followed.
I nearly slipped on the zombie remains as I walked. I looked back down, then spoke, "So I guess there are zombies in hell too, eh?"
"Yeah," said Tim. "Not much smarter, though."
At the end of the tiny hall was a thick door. Tim came in step besides me, and so I glanced down at his grenade launcher.
"Uh, Tim?"
He looked up at me.
"Don't waste grenades on simple zombies, OK?"
"Yeah, sure. I was thinking the same thing. It's just that when that thing shot me, something came over me. That, and I couldn't wait to try it out." He smirked again.
I laughed. "OK."
My hand edged towards a large keypad by the door. I didn't know the combination, so I simply pushed 'ENTER', and to my pleasant surprise, the door slid open with a whoosh. As it did, a blast of cold air washed over us.
"What is this?" I asked. "You'd think hell would be hot."
"Maybe it is. This coldness isn't natural."
We edged forward on a metallic platform. Beneath us stretched an endless abyss, nothing but darkness, blackness, edging into eternity. My eyes strained around. Above, high above, dim greenish lights lined the ceiling, their featherlike light hurting me in its lack of luminosity. And with the help of these lights, my eyes slowly came into focus, and the abyss below me took an amorphous shape that slowly moulded into—
I gasped. It's not in my habit to do such silly things, but something came over me.
Out of the gloom came greenish spots of light, even dimmer than the lights above, so dim that they were nearly impossible to see.
I drifted to the side of the platform and saw a bare, metallic stairwell leading to the ground below.
Swinging my arm, I motioned for Tim to follow me. He, too, seemed transfixed, trying to form some idea of what exactly stood before us.
He and I walked down the stairs, guns held high, though the silence and stillness seemed to make this unnecessary.
We were standing in what seemed to be a large warehouse, crude, with metallic beams and planes and supports running along the sides, between which tubes and pipes dodged left and right. To our left lay an opening, hallway perhaps, while on the far side were a number of them. From the ground sprouted what seemed to be hundreds of containers, with one side of glass facing outward, arranged in many circles. Tubing running along the ground crept forward and inserted itself into each container. It was the glass that glowed lightly in the low light.
My eyes had grown accustomed now. Tim and I slowly worked our way to one of the containers and tried peeking through the glass.
What we saw was shocking.
There was a deformed humanoid-looking figure waving lightly into the churning green luminous liquid that bubbled softly, like coffee being readied. Tubes sprouted from the thing's arms and legs and chest, running into the sides. It seemed tranquil yet

ominous, slowly drifting to and fro. As I continued to examine it, I noticed the muscles warping around bone in an inhuman manner, the exoskeleton, the claws...

It was an imp.

"Jesus Christ!" I whispered to Tim. "Do you see what this is??? This is a freaking monster factory!"

Under the low light, I saw his face illuminated, his eyes wide and fearful. I imagine I looked the same way.

"They make these damn things!"

"Well this is a kick below the belt," said Tim quietly. "If they are manufacturing these things, then it doesn't matter how many we take down with us. They'll just make more. The best we could do is delay this whole invasion. Not weaken it."

There was a loud thump that, in the dark and gloomy and tranquil atmosphere, broke the absolute silence, and in doing so, made us jump. The imp in the tank had stirred, pushed its hands firmly against the glass, raised its head, and then roared, its cry escaping in bubbles and echoing loudly in the cavernous room.

We instinctively jumped back. Tim raised his grenade launcher.

I pushed his gun to the side, then motioned backwards. Quickly, we dove behind another container with an imp that looked as if it still had quite a bit to grow. Carefully, we peeked from around the corner.

The imp that had startled us had finally woken up. Its mad, numerous eyes were darting about in their sockets aimlessly. It roared again and banged against the glass. The front part of the container opened with a sweeping noise, and the green liquid escaped and spilled out onto the floor, where it drained away in drains built into the steel ground. Meanwhile, the imp slowly staggered out, flexing its new joints and muscles as it walked towards another opening at the side of the room.

It entered, darkness swallowed it. I had an uncomfortable feeling that the imp had taken an entrance that led directly to the portal.

Or maybe it was an entrance to another portal. Is it possible that there were more than one?

"This is hopeless," whispered Tim. "We have to smoke this place." He had raised his grenade gun yet again.

"Not with that. You found a grenade launcher, maybe we can find some other explosives. I mean, that monster that we ran into up there," I said, jerking my thumb upwards. "It had rocket launchers. So I bet that they have weapon bunkers, storages, hell, maybe weapons scattered about, like the one you found. I figure we find some explosives and blow this place to hell. That'll be a major help to humanity, I bet."

Tim nodded.

"Come on, let's get going."

And we stood up from behind the glowing container and retraced our steps up to the platform, and so we left the eerie, haunting room of silence behind us, knowing that we'll return. As we did, another sound of spilling liquids and a roaring monster rose behind us.

That's when it started, the dark room. It wasn't until then that my heart began to be constantly under pressure, fluttering and jumping. My stomach was toiling, the little Haiti guy inside constantly trying rid of the dryness in my throat with rain dances. Fear grew, amounted exponentially, and I began to experience mild panic attacks. These I managed to contain to myself, but the mere thought of them was enough to set off another one. These attacks were silent, as horrible thoughts ran into my head, thoughts of the future, thoughts of what lay behind each corner. My heart would hasten and Haiti guy would ensue in a break dance. Often afterwards I found myself having to stop and rest my head against some wall to calm myself down. Tim pretended not to notice, though he himself was struck psychologically and depressed and ran through symptoms similar to those of my own.

These times were the bottom. Often I found myself in a cheerful mood, especially after a hearty meal. Making jokes and talking cheerfully was the way to go; it made us forget our predicaments. But after a long day of fighting, my mind would creep back, exploiting all the details of this hopeless battle for which there was a remote chance that it would even end in a Pyrrhic victory. Any victory.

But my fearful thoughts did not truly reach me until my mind returned to the dark room, the endless capsules containing countless monsters, constantly building into an army of immense proportions, an army that slowly seeped through the portal and into our universe. It was the dark room that set off panic in my brain, the dark room and all that followed.

We walked out of the dark room, slightly dazed, though otherwise fine. My eyes ached and pleaded at the dim light that seemed rather bright and welcomed us back in the hallway. We stood for a while, checking this and that.

When they finally came to, my eyes caught sight of a box lying in a corner by the door, stashed by a twisted pipe. I ran to and saw that it had a nice belt with machine-gun bullets on it. I slapped it over my shoulder so it be ready when time comes to feed my heavy chain gun. I noticed that the box must've contained several ammo belts, but only one was left. Hmm, the zombies here weren't too conservative. Also, the fact that zombies had machine guns wasn't very charming, either.

"Now which way?" I asked rhetorically.

An odd expression crossed Tim's face, and he pointed ahead.

There, above the door at the end of the corridor, glowing red, was an 'EXIT' sign.

"You've got to be kidding me." I muttered, astonished.

He and I stopped at the door.

"Beyond this lies hell, I should think. The real hell, not the one built to reach Mars."

Tim nodded nervously.

"I hope this isn't like Dante's *Inferno*."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," I said. "Classic literature, you know. I knew this stuff fairly well before Briggs wiped my brain clean of its grooves."

Tim looked at the doors, then tried to keep me talking.

"So what is Dante's Hell?"

“This Italian poet, again classic literature, wrote about his supposed tour of hell. In it there were nine layers, or levels of hell, each one progressively worse. I think the worst ones were on the bottom. Or top? I forget. Anyway, what we’ve seen so far is nothing like that. I mean, it’s nothing like hell I’ve imagined.”

Tim nodded.

“But let’s look for explosives and blow that monster factory as soon as possible. Shall we?”

Tim didn’t answer. His eyes drifted back to the other end of the corridor. “We could still go back, you know. Through the portal, back to Mars. Maybe wait for things to come out of the portal, then blast them. Wait for others to come, inform them of the situation.”

“We don’t have infinite ammo. You saw the factory, we will kill a lot of monsters, but they’ll just keep on making them. Also, I’d imagine we’d be overwhelmed eventually. No, I say we strike on hell’s turf, because they’re not expecting that. We surprise them, give them a weakening blow.” I paused, then added. “Still, maybe we should’ve at least left a note or something.”

“You’re right,” said Tim.

I cleared my mind, knowing that my conscious and good sense would stop me from doing what I had to do next. Forcing my mind elsewhere, I moved forward, past Tim, towards the doors. Over me loomed the EXIT sign. Exit to where? What would we see beyond the steel doors? Surely this entire place wasn’t a steel, shiny complex. I dreaded the path that lay before us, the path that started just beyond these doors...

I found that I still couldn’t bring my hands up to push the doors open. So, my mind set on beautiful Earth and its meadows and mountains, I threw myself into the doorway.

BAM! My shoulder slammed into steel; the doors didn't budge, they were apparently locked. I wasn't too pleased with this, but my shoulder was even more pissed off; it cried and throbbed with pain. I rubbed it and rested my arm against the doorway, trying to think things through. Just as I did this, there was a beep and the doors opened from beneath me with a whoosh! Naturally, I fumbled forward and slowly caught my balance. I imagine I looked silly in doing so.

"You have to use the keypad here," said Tim, mild amusement in his tone.

"I knew that," I jokingly retorted. "I was just waiting for you to push it."

We walked beyond.

Jagged peaks of stone and peaks of dancing fire? Helpless souls?

Nah. Yet again we were disappointed by not finding what we dreaded. What lay before us was another metallic hallway with other corridors and doors sprouting from the sides amidst the rising steam from the catwalk below and pipes to the side. A staircase rose from one corner, leading upward. I couldn't help but notice the fire extinguisher that was built into the wall behind the stairs. The dimly lit hallway throbbed with an unseen evil force, a spirit that I felt run through my veins.

I shuddered and expressed my displeasure.

"Damn it! I always said that our Mars quarters were hell, but I never really meant it! What the hell is this???"

"This is actually a relief," said Tim, the colour of vitality slowly draining back into his relaxed face.

And ahead, off to the right side, I sighted the unmistakable sign for a bathroom, the tiny figure with the 'WC' sign above it. This reminded me that—

"I really have to take a piss," I announced to Tim.

He cocked an eyebrow and looked at me. "Well, do it outside, on a wall. You don't want to get cornered by monsters, especially while in the middle of taking care of business. You'll be monster food if you go in there."

And this reminded me—

"Tim!" I turned to him, mildly startled. "What are we gonna do about food? I mean, this is no longer the military Mars base or the UAC installation. I seriously doubt that we'll find MREs in this place, let alone something else, or a vending machine. And I sure as hell don't want to sit around a campfire, roasting zombies."

Tim examined me thoughtfully. "We found weapons and ammo lying around, surely there'll be MREs."

"But these monsters need the weapons. They don't need MREs, so there's no point, no way that we'll find any here." And then the feeling sunk in, and I added, "And damn, I'm hungry, too."

My fellow marine nodded, then wisely said, "Take care of business now, we'll think about food later."

I nodded and walked off.

Fortunately, this time my doings were not interrupted as before. Soon, I finished, leaving a big wet spot on the wall as a testament, 'Nik Taggart Was Here'. I hoped that no monster would have the brains to figure this out, however. For the moment, we needed

to lay as quiet as possible. The majority of hell still didn't know that we were on their own territory.

In our maze, we were unsure of which corridor led to the big cheese. So, Tim and I slowly drifted forward, aimlessly, set in deep thoughts. However, my train of thought was derailed when ahead the door slid open and a friendly bunch of zombies stumbled through. They edged forward, their shadows stretching across the floor, their faces wrapped in gloom, only their empty eyes glowing in the near-darkness. They were unarmed, apart from one in the rear that sported a pistol.

Tim raised his grenade-launcher, but I turned to him.

"No, Tim! Just let me handle these guys."

Truth was, I couldn't wait to try the heavy chain-gun.

However, pistols are lighter and smaller and generally drawn faster. So, the zombie was quick and began firing at me while I was still bringing my gigantic gun to bear. I was forced to jump to the side and roll behind a gigantic pipe. A loud clang echoed inches from my ear and a steady stream of steam began to filter out. I heard more clicking, and recognised the sound.

The zombie had run out of ammo.

Calmly, I pushed myself up from behind the pipe and faced the zombies. They had stopped while the one with the pistol was a little ahead, still clicking the gun madly. Just like an insect can't comprehend the concept of glass, the zombie couldn't understand what it meant to be out of ammo; it continued clicking away, grinning broadly, apparently thinking that it was inflicting some sort of damage on me.

I politely smiled back and pulled the trigger. RA-TA-TA-TA! The entire room shook under the heavy chant that was rhythmic with the gun that madly though steadily jumped in my hands. One by one, the zombies fell to the ground. Soon, they were nothing but goo on the bottom of my boots.

Panting, I laughed.

Tim walked up to me with a smile.

"I see you like my—"

Whatever he had to say remains a mystery to me. That's because at that moment, something jumped forward, out from behind the massacre. It appeared as a shadow at first, a dark spot in the halo of blood that still stood over the zombie carnage. And from the cloud burst another zombie.

At least I think it was a zombie.

If the other reanimated people were the bulk army of hell, then this guy must've been a sergeant or something of sorts. It had the usual humanoid appearance, and yet over its head was a helmet of sorts, a protective layer that wrapped around its greyish head. In the dark room, its eyes glowed, faint yellow points peeking out from the void. It seemed to me that it wore some sort of goggles. Beneath this was the usual jaw, perhaps once human, though now large and deformed, lined with needle-like fangs.

Its head rested on massive shoulders that wrapped sideways into the arms in a grotesque fashion. These slabs of muscle were also present in the thing's chest, and seemed to be only on one side of the creature, building up into a massive right arm. On the end of the muscular arm was an odd device. The other hand, however, was less muscular, more normal, ending in the 'usual' claw.

This torso rested upon two ordinary legs, as far as I could discern. The pants were the usual camouflage green, awkward in the metallic halls and what had once been red Martian dust.

It roared and jumped at me.

I was quite surprised and had no time to fire, let alone say something that expressed my displeasure.

The monster threw out its muscular hand out as it lunged forward in a fluid motion, and I was aware of something coming out of the device on the end. Naturally, I stumbled backward, though my eyes fell to the whip-like rope that shot out of the apparatus, curling and dancing in the air. The searching end found my stomach and whipped against it.

I screamed at the agony that proliferated from my stomach. As I stopped wincing to examine the situation, I saw the tentacle-like structure burrowing through my stomach. The sight was disgusting, filthy, and perhaps it would've made my stomach queasy if I still had it. It was animalistic, like a serpent, digging into my intestines. Immediately, I felt as if life itself, energy, everything inside of me was being drained away through the tendril.

I felt weak and stopped resisting. Knowing that my balance was gone, I allowed myself to stagger backwards and fall.

The whip shot out of my bloodied navel and went flying back into the triumphant creature's arm. It roared and charged to somewhere off to my side. Weakly, I gave an ineffectual effort to push myself up. I saw profuse amounts of blood bubbling out of the gaping hole in my stomach.

There was an explosion and a spray of more blood came over me, still warm. But my mind was fading in and out and barely registered this. It couldn't fight much longer. And slowly, all the red that enveloped me faded into black.

The next few days (if there is such a thing in hell) were a mere blur, a collage of indistinct and moving pictures and images. Often, my eyes would finally feed my brain information again, sending unclear views of a glowing lamp above, cold steel walls all around. I didn't know where I was and I didn't really want to know. I just wanted to die already; I couldn't take much longer. These thoughts ran through my head moments before I had my usual and periodic loss of consciousness.

Several times I tried to push myself up, though this was such a physical exertion that I felt my head impact the cold floor below with the swirling black following. Just about everything had gone wrong, and yet I was thankful that I didn't dream when all that I knew faded away. With all the horrid recent events, I feared how my mind was capable of twisting and forming the truth into an indistinguishable, frightening, and awfully realistic nightmare.

For how long this went on, I don't know. As I said, it might've been a few days, or even a week. Or maybe less than one day, depending on the length of my fits of unconsciousness. As I lay there, with my mind functioning, I thought about the hopelessness, my current weakness, how nothing had gone with the plan devised. We were going to die down here, if it's possible to die in hell, that is. If not, then we'd be captured, eventually ammo-less and tired, tired of fighting a lone war, hopelessly fraying to save humankind.

Maybe we were already captured.

What would they do to Tim and I? Torture? Maybe gather intelligence and information before throwing us in a pit of eternal damnation. Or maybe they'd reanimate us into unblinking, stinking zombies. Of all these thoughts, the latter pleased me the least. The thought of having myself mindlessly stumble to and fro did not appeal to me.

Whatever our fate, it wasn't going to please us.

My depressing thoughts gathered like clouds. They had started when this whole deal initiated, though I had tried to keep cheery, to crack jokes and such with Tim. It felt naturally, relaxing, it seemed to be a release. It was these minor and silly games that kept me going. And yet it was these games that kept my mind from the awful truth, the fact that nothing was silly anymore, the graveness of the situation. Our fate was horrible, humanity was doomed.

These thoughts surfaced in the dark room, the monster factory. Up until that point, they had been laying low, in the back of my mind stashed away with bits and ends of pointless information gathered from my numbering experiences. And their sudden birth from the pits of my mind was sudden, shocking. The realisation had washed over me and stayed in my mind. Nothing was a joke anymore. It never was.

Of course, we could still stumble through the portal, back to Mars. But what would we find there? What hell-spawn had already crept through? And besides, humanity was certainly doomed. The fate that rested on the other side of the swirling portal was little different from the fate that awaited us here, in hell.

In hell. That's where we really were. I had truly failed to realise that up until now. When we had come first through the portal and Tim had proven that we weren't on Mars anymore, I had felt the fear, but distant, disbelieving. I knew it was true, and yet at the

same time didn't accept it. It wasn't until the dark room that all these fears, leashed away, were set free to roam.

And roam they did, continually through my mind. I felt like an idiot.

But maybe our careless nature hadn't inflicted too much damage. Maybe it had done us good; perhaps if we hadn't acted as we did, we would be mentally defeated, defeated by our own selves rather than hell. But, though it disguised the truth in a more acceptable form, it also concealed it. But it had thrown its disguise aside with our view of the birth of the monster, its new unscarred black flesh, its first scream, the flexing of the joints, the filthy liquid spewing over the floor and draining away noisily into the drains. The monster represented more, not the birth of itself, but the birth of a larger monster, a true beast, a juggernaut, the birth of something that couldn't be stopped.

We lost.

The foam of unconsciousness washed over me.

I had my mind back. I pushed my eyes forward and winced at the light. All of the constant fading in and out had made me nauseous. Utilising all the strength left in my body, I gently lifted myself and turned my head to the side and vomited. Afterwards I felt even more sick and repeated myself. This made me feel weaker and I let myself lay back on the wet floor. I closed my mind and tried to fight my advancing thoughts. I couldn't believe how weary and drained I felt. But then, why not? I had come to a point where I could believe quite a lot.

Everything hurt.

My stomach churned. I felt as if it would've given me a whole lot of trouble with diarrhoea or something of the sort. However, the lack of food in my intestines prevented any such minor complications that would've magnified the unpleasantness of the situation despite their trifling ways in comparison to our upsetting plight. My throat was dry and body begged for food.

Parts of me that I didn't even know existed hurt, coming in waves, throbbing.

Slowly, Tim's worried face hovered over my range of vision, blurry though unmistakable in its un-zombified state. No glowing eyes, no fangs and claws, no greyish skin. I shuddered at the thought of the zombies and the image of my first encounter with the chain-saw zombie drifted into my mind: the spinning teeth, flecks of blood, the inhuman cry...

Jesus, we were going to die. Or worse.

I didn't want to die.

"How are you feeling?" Tim asked, his voice sounding exhausted.

The sound startled me. How long had it been since I had last heard the beautiful droning of human vocal cords?

"Uh," I groaned. I couldn't do more.

Through winced eyes, I saw Tim nod.

"Rest," he said.

Normally I would've wanted to know more, tried to nod my head in agreement or disagreement, to make a sign. And yet, I had no energy for that. I knew this, so I didn't heed it. I closed my eyes and allowed myself into sleep, normal sleep. I still had my mind when the blackness came over me, and for this I was glad. But what I feared was the fact

that my mind had been corrupted, scarred to a state where I would perhaps never have it heal. It was a deep wound made deeper with each passing hour.

The blackness moulded into the red image of Mars burning brightly against the black beyond and the distant stars, and below me zoomed in one of its satellites, Phobos. I skimmed along the greyish surface, allowing myself to drop lower into a chasm, and ahead of me loomed a dark shape. It drew near and I saw that it was the human skull with the horns, the one resting upon the stone. The one I had seen before, rushing at me, drawing closer.

Oh no, not this again.

I spun around so that I moved and avoided the skull. I, in my immaterial self, flew along with blazing speed, tailing that of the moon. In the black void of space broken by thin pinpoints of light, the moon glowed a demonic red, emitted by the numerous ravines and gorges that ran like veins along the surface, all of them reaching far beneath the surface and ending in rivers of twisting and churning magma. Slowly and awkwardly, in the silent vacuum of space, the high-pitched squeal of thousands of people screaming in unison rose.

How this happened, I don't know. Sound waves cannot be carried in space.

It filled my ears and I screamed and the stars warped as I flew along with the moon at a blazing speed, the little information fed into my eyes soon became an indistinct blur.

But then all came to rest and it all came to focus. Ahead loomed Earth, its form utterly beautiful and blue, contrasting the ominous red of distant Mars and its glowing moon. Beautiful blue oceans were topped with beautiful patterns of swirling white clouds that contradicted the weavings in the hellish magma. The ominous weavings of the portal.

Oh shit.

I knew what was going to happen moments before it did. Phobos zoomed ahead, the blue orb of Earth drawing nearer, continents left uncovered by clouds gained sharper edges of green and brown, tiny islands obtained a shape in the seemingly endless oceans. In the distant horizon, a line of black moved along Earth, the line between day and night. Between what we knew and what we didn't, between ourselves and the evil in ourselves. And as it passed, lights flickered on and cities formed clusters of water droplets, as if illuminated by some unseen source. They glowed in the vastness of space, almost eerily in their illumination. Not illumination of light, but that of intelligence.

I had stopped moving and the tiny moon zoomed ahead of me, drawing towards Earth. As it entered Earth's shadow, it grew dark, but its reddish illumination seemed to grow, to be more luminescent, the swirling magma grew more ominous, glowed more forebodingly. As it drew further away, it seemed to glow more and was soon transfigured into a ball of red that fell amidst the clouds, burning them and all else away. It burned through the atmosphere, destroying all it touched.

And yet, the destruction had yet to begin.

The rock finally hit terra firma, setting off an explosion of monstrous proportions. And yet, at the centre lay the seemingly unperturbed rock, a black void. From it proliferated fire, consuming everything unfortunate enough to be there in its path. Though I couldn't see it, I was sure that it devoured cities and humans alike. The wave expanded and expanded...

I was suddenly snapped back into reality, my dream over.

To my surprise, I mustered enough energy to push myself up and glance around. I was in a dark and small compartment with a dim light above. Like a cage. The only sound was my rapid and raspy breathing.

“Lay back down,” I heard Tim’s voice.

I turned around to find him slumped against one of the walls. He was looking at me with the guise of weary fascination.

“Where are we?” Yours Truly quickly asked, trying to solve the riddle of my steely surroundings. “We aren’t captured, are we? Prisoners?”

A weak smile spread over Tim’s face. “No, we’re still on our own, free to wreak havoc. Just rest now because we’ll have to be going soon.”

“We’re not captured?”

“No.”

“Jesus,” I buried my face in my hands.

Tim eyed me carefully, then asked, “Are you hungry? Thirsty? You haven’t eaten for several days now.”

“Is that how long we’ve been here?”

Tim nodded.

“What is this place?”

His slight smile returned. “We’re in an elevator. After you got gored by that monster, I was left without a choice, so I took care of it with my grenade-launcher. You had passed out and were bleeding really bad. I knew I had to get you out of there, somewhere where it was safe, so I found this elevator besides the stairway. Got in, closed the doors, then pressed the emergency stop. It’s very safe, rarely used unlike the one down the hall, the one that leads to the portal.

“And that’s basically what happened. For the last three or so days we’ve been in here. Me, wandering in my thoughts and using medikits to tend to your needs, and you wandering in and out of consciousness. You lost a hell of a lot of blood back there, soldier, and I have no idea what that thing did to you, but it tied up your intestines pretty good; I had to put them back in.” He winced at the thought. “I did leave on two occasions, to look for explosives, because I realise that we don’t have much time. Instead, I was treated to some new damned monster.”

He seemed to minutely shudder at the thought.

“What was it?” I asked. My heart sank and stomach fluttered.

He shook his head, looking at the ground. “I went down the stairway and cautiously here and there, keeping an eye for anything explosive. No luck. I was turning back, when from this corridor I heard something running. I turned around and this skeleton-like thing came out. It had a head like a skull but more swept back and sharper-edged. It looked like something from those old alien movies, you know. It had these weird bumps on its hands...” He paused. “Then it raised its hands in the air and I heard it whisper something. I realised that perhaps I should be shooting it, so I raised my gun, but then I felt this heat rise in front of me. Everything got hotter and hotter until it was unbearable. I swear, a sort of fire seemed to rise from me and surround me... At that point I pulled the trigger. I had borrowed your chain-gun. Anyway, that took care of it, but it ate a lot of bullets before it fell from its dance to the ground. Yeah, that’s it. I haven’t gone out after that.” He took a small package and offered it to me. “MRE?”

I stared at it. “Where’d you get it?”

“Well, I made sure to pack some after we left our last storage room that had tons of them.”

“But why didn’t you tell me when I asked you what we were going to do about food?”

His relaxed complexion continued to examine me as some object of curiosity. “What are you talking about? When you asked that, I was sure that you meant what would we do after these,” he motioned to a tiny stack of MREs, “ran out. And I must say, that really is a good question. At least we have plenty of water. There’s water here, too, you know.”

I nodded. “It’s really hot in here.”

“Well, it’s hell.”

I reached out and took an MRE, chilli, and began to eat feverishly.

“Take it easy, you don’t want to overwhelm your body,” said Tim, pushing my tray away from me gently. “Eating like that could kill you. Just take it easy.”

Nodding, I slowed my pace.

Maybe the MRE was good, but it was dull and cold in my brain. I didn’t eat for pleasure anymore, but for energy. I needed it. The walls around us were cold, the air was thick and humid, and a freak show of hell-spawn was parading within the nearby halls. I recalled all of my philosophising and pondering and I knew that we were doomed, our fate was sealed in an unkind matter; we had already lost, there was no point in putting up a fight. I wanted to die, I wanted it all to end. I couldn’t take any more of this literal hell, the struggle to live while knowing that it is bound to failure. I couldn’t much longer.

As these thoughts dawned, the chilli grew duller.

As we set out, death hung over our heads as an ominous cloud, casting its rain upon us. These mere drops only foreshadowed the downpour that lay beneath the overcast skies ahead. I had regained most of my energy, though I still felt physically weak. And I would be mentally weak forever after all that happened. And more was bound to happen; I knew this and began to fear myself. Would I crack? Lose control of my rebellious brain, do something unwanted? I could feel small fits of this coming along, usually alongside my mild panic attacks that were becoming more and more frequent. My heart only sank lower when I opened my eyes from my nightmarish thoughts and saw the bleak reality around us.

Tim and I walked in silence out of the elevator and back into the hallway where my gut had been wrenched from me. I didn't feel any sudden waves of strong feelings of pain or displeasure come over me as we went through; these feelings I felt constantly. Still, what was left of my stomach jumped at the sight of the fading bloodstains on the floor below.

I stopped.

Tim turned and looked at me questioningly, yet with mild understanding at the same time. He looked at my feet and continued to train his focus there. After a while, he finally said, "Come on, let's go."

I don't know why, but I felt planted to the spot. Why hadn't I died here?

"Come on, we have a mission to complete."

Sudden emotions came over me at these words, all that I had considered and built up inside myself came to a breaking point. I clenched my fist and my skin whitened. "What mission? What *is* our mission?"

"We have to keep going," Tim said quietly.

"Go where? Don't you see, we've just sealed our own fate. We are bound to be tortured, killed, and for what? What have we accomplished so far?" My voice rose so that it shocked me. "We should've shut down the portal, that was the only thing that could've truly stopped this whole invasion. And yet we failed! Mission failed, staff sergeant! But OK," I continued, my breathing hastening. "We could still destroy the dark room, the factory. And yet, did we? Can we?"

Tim said nothing.

"Don't you see, the further away we go, the worse it gets for us, and this isn't benefiting humanity! It isn't benefiting anyone! The further into hell we walk more, more horrible possibilities for our own future arise. If we go further, who knows what we'll walk into! It's pointless, it's all fruitless. I'm tired of fighting." I paused to catch my breath. "I didn't want to die, but there was still hope, imaginary hope in the back of my mind. But now it's gone. We're almost left without ammunition, and I feel weak. We have nearly exhausted our food supply. There's nothing left."

"We have to die on our feet."

"Why?" I retorted maniacally. "What does it matter how you die if you'll end up in the same place anyway. If I were stronger, I'd blow my own brains out right now! But no, I'm a coward, and my fear rises with every inch into hell!"

"Don't say that."

“What? What? That I’m a coward? Yes, I am a coward, and so are you. Everyone fears, everyone’s a coward! Many disguise it, but it’s still there. No point in hiding it. This is driving me mad, I can’t take any longer. Frankly, I hope that the next zombie we come across manages to put a bullet in my head!”

Tim’s eyes were wide, somewhat fearful. “Get a hold of yourself,” he said softly, but remained a distance away from me.

“No Tim, we lost, accept it. No happy endings here! No heroic marines saving the day! This isn’t some cheesy flick! No, we’re fucked. This is real, all this, and we have failed. There’s nothing we can do but save ourselves. So let us end all these troubles, this misery. I can’t take it any longer... I can’t...”

I didn’t know what more to say. And even if I did, I wouldn’t have been able to utter it because the back of my throat tightened and I felt a great weight fall upon me. I swayed to and fro and eased myself against the wall, burying my head in my hands.

Tim looked away, somewhat embarrassed and unsure of what to do.

I sat there for what seemed to be an hour, rehearsing these thoughts. And with each practice, they grew stronger in my mind, they etched themselves in fire in the grooves of my brain. I convinced myself furthermore, all was lost. Humanity was damned, what were we to do?

Tim’s voice broke the silence. “If you had seen yourself a week ago like this, what would you have said?”

I pushed myself back up. “Don’t give me that shit, Tim! A week ago, we still thought that we could save the day, we still thought we could close the portal.”

“Well what do you want to do, sit here and complain about it? We still have work to do.”

“Oh,” I said sarcastically. “And what would that be?”

“A leader,” he said simply. “Remember? There’s someone who has to be running this whole thing. A boss. And if we take them out, we can give a major blow to this whole invasion—”

“And when did we decide there is a leader? And if there is, where would they be? Surely far from here, guarded by a whole fucking circus of freaks that we haven’t met yet! We barely have any ammunition, food, and we’re both tired of fighting this war. Do you think we could really complete this task?”

Tim bit his lip angrily.

“I still have family, friends. I can’t let them down.”

“Don’t you see Tim? It’s inevitable, we’ve already let them down, them and everyone else. There was, is, and never will be anything we can do. What are a few monsters, a few drops in an endless ocean?”

“You are a pessimist, that is it. You overlook everything, all the sparks of hope,” Tim persisted, his voice wavering.

“What would those be?”

“There’s always hope. There’s always something to fight for. You can’t give in like this. And you never know, there could be a solution right around the corner, something that, if we quit now, we’ll never find.”

“The view of the pessimist is more realistic. While being an optimist will get you further, you have to know when to accept the fact that it’s too late. We’re in deep shit. I

can't believe you are so swept away by your 'hope'. There is no 'hope', we failed. Accept it."

"We failed the mission to close the portal," said Tim, coming forward abruptly. "We failed to destroy that factory. But we can still do the latter. We can still go on, search for food and ammo and something to do. I'm sure that there is something we can do, something around the corner. Something that would give hell a headache."

I shook my head dismissively.

"Fine," he said. "I'm going ahead. You can stay here if you'd like, but you know we have to stick together through this. You can't disagree with me there."

He spun around on his heel and headed toward the door at the end of the hallway. I knew I had to follow, so I did, trailing behind him. I would've liked to be alone, but it was impossible.

Hope. What is hope? It's just an emotion, a false emotion that rarely comes true. There was hope before, but now it was gone. And yet Tim continued to lie to himself, to disguise the truth from his innocent eyes. Yes, he was innocent, naïve, to me he seemed a mere child that was exposed to the horrific truth. And, as a child, he failed to accept it. But I wasn't as stupid, I wasn't as easily fooled by my own self.

But at the same time, Tim and I had formed a bond. We had gone through such horrors together, I couldn't let him trail ahead, alone. He knew this, so he used it against me. Somehow, I felt that we had to die together, fighting as one. I couldn't let him be torn apart while I stood off to the side. Though not at the moment, I liked Tim, his character, his actions. His mind. And that is what led to his deductive downfall.

I edged through the door and followed Staff Sergeant Tim Davis down a ramp. There was a junction, with a door on our right and our left.

Tim took a left.

We went through the door and were treated to a magnificent sight. We were in a giant circular room, with catwalks above and below us. In the centre was what seemed to be a gigantic pit. I edged forward on the railing and leaned forward. Below were three gigantic rings with some panels and edges sticking inward, slowly rotating, almost as an odd form of turbines. Above, far above, was a true fan beyond which lay a twisting reddish sky, its light broken by the spinning blades, casting forbidding light below. Lining the walls of the catwalk where we stood were computer consoles, and the usual pipes and panels.

There was a soft humming sound coming from the spinning rings below.

"What is this?" I asked, allowing my awe to temporarily postpone our argument.

Tim's eyes scanned the computer consoles. "This is the main power generator," he said. He grinned, but then caught himself, and looked away, frowning. "I think that shutting it down would do some good," he continued.

I said nothing.

He rubbed his chin, then said, "Destroying this place would mean that the monster factory would be shut down, because I'm sure that it requires a lot of energy." He grinned again, this time not bothering to hide his emotions. "I told you there was hope," he said. "Shutting down the dark room... that's a good start, isn't it?"

I nodded, acknowledging my subtle mistake.

"Ok, but how do you destroy this place? It's huge."

He busies himself with the computer. "Well, I can shut it down for now..."

“Yes, but that’s temporary, cause any old zombie could just walk up and flip it back on. We need something more permanent.”

“Well,” said Tim. “I think that it’s possible to turn up the generators all the way.”

“What good’ll that do?”

“Eventually, they will overheat. I don’t know how these things function exactly, but my guess is that we might trigger a very big, um, explosion. This will be a long-term temporary setback. They might get a new generator up and running eventually, but it’ll take a while.”

“Hmm.” I thought to myself, then addressed Tim. “But don’t they have back-up generators or something?”

Tim looked down. “Maybe. I imagine that they are controlled from here, too, and maybe we could overheat them as well. That’d be pretty effective, setting off the main generator and all the back-ups.”

I nodded and glanced around, seeking any current threat. “Well, get to work then. I imagine we don’t have much time.”

I edged away from Tim, towards the railing. As I did, I heard something move through the air, an indistinct sound. Something shot out of the corner of my eyes, a projectile of sorts. Next thing I knew, I was knocked off my feet as an explosion proliferated from where I had stood moments before. The fire died away, leaving a streak of smoke and charred metal below. My eyes trailed upward, into the abyss above.

Standing above me, mostly enwrapped in shadow, was an evil, grinning façade of a zombie, its white eyes shining brightly in the darkness, its fangs flexing, shadows dancing eerily upon its disfigured complexion. And in its hands, it held a gigantic weapon of sorts, having the gaping hole of the muzzle pointed precisely towards me.

And its grin widened.

I knew what I had to do. It was still in my mind, the will to die, the direness of the situation. And yet, I knew that I had to give Tim enough time to work his magic, which meant distracting, and killing, the zombie. Not only that, but afterwards I’d be left with a cool... big gun, whatever it was the zombie held in its hands. What if I died, here and now. I had wanted to do so, and yet—

Quickly, I stopped myself. Now was not the time.

My mind was scarred.

With the same sound of an object cutting through the searing air, I saw a projectile swoop out of the muzzle of the gun and fly towards me. Instinctively, I jumped forward and rolled to the side, the explosion grazing my side as I did. I quickly raised my heavy chain gun and fired at the zombie, exhausting all of my remaining bullets.

Due to the distance, the zombie being on a catwalk high above me, the bullets didn’t fly as precisely as I would’ve liked, and I had just caked the zombie’s chest and arm; I had missed the head altogether.

On the positive side, the distance made it so I had plenty of time to react to the monster’s fire. I had to dodge another projectile before pulling out my double barrel shotgun, casting the chain-gun aside, and firing at it again.

I still didn’t do much good. The lead fired by the shotgun scattered over the distance and all I did was take out the zombie’s eye.

It seemed a bit enraged after that and quickly fired two more projectiles in succession, but both missed.

I strafed to the side, firing as I went, climbing up a metal stairway, and trying to get as close to the zombie as possible.

Another one of my shots landed across its front, distracting it.

Quickly, I flew up another flight of metallic stairs and stood there, facing the once-human entity.

It raised its gun, but I was faster.

The zombie was no more.

Trying not to get my fingers filthy, I tried picking up the massive weapon with two fingers, but it was too heavy. In the end, I had to hoist it up with both hands and secure its strap over my shoulder.

I paused to examine this gift.

It was a long cylinder that ended in a thick grip for the rear hand. There was a grip for the other hand as well. Above it, there was a small round device covered with miniature missiles. Attached to the device was a belt with more of these projectiles that fed into it. It didn't take a whole lot to figure out that this device rotated, placing a missile into the cast moments before firing. I continued to strain my eyes, trying to pierce through its black coloration.

A rocket launcher.

Still gazing at it, I descended the stairs and retraced my steps back to Tim. He was still standing at the console, as if the entire battle hadn't taken place at all. His eyes pierced through the screen, and he stood there simply staring.

After debating as to whether I should break his concentration, I said, "Tim?"

He looked up.

"Yes?"

I was just about to inquire about his progress, when on the other side of the gigantic pit, I heard a groan that could only be a zombie. I turned around and tried to focus through the darkness. As soon as I heard the rev of a chainsaw, my mind fully formed a picture.

"Another zombie," I muttered. "Are you going to help me?"

Tim bent back to gaze around me. "Is it just one, cause then I reckon you don't need me at all."

I nodded and set forth by myself, my shotgun held high, my new-found rocket launcher dangling at my side, its heavy weight falling against my torso with each step. I crept around this way, coming around the pit.

There stood, not one, but three zombies, one of them sporting a chainsaw. Quickly, I took down the first two zombies. I really can't say why, but I left the chainsaw zombie for last. Perhaps not the best of decisions.

Regardless, I was just about to take care of it, too, when from the large opening and corridor behind it, I saw a gigantic shadow lumber forth. Meanwhile, the zombie continued to roar and rev its chainsaw at me.

The shadow drew near, and I saw what it was.

It was like the hell-knight we had encountered so long ago, roughly. And yet, it was different, it had a different poise, different coloration. But most importantly, it was bigger.

The monster still held the large head, the small beady eyes between which lay the two conjoined nostrils. Below was the mouth, mounted on the massive jaw, from which

sprouted the monstrous neck muscles. And yet, all these features were larger, more evil than I remembered. It wasn't a mere hell knight. It was a freaking baron of hell!

It had a more reddish skin and it seemed to be somewhat hunched over. Despite this, the backbone, which stuck out rather prominently from its back, was still higher than the hell knight, even at its peak. The monster edged forward with heavy steps, and yet it didn't roar. This was odd, and more frightening than if it had screamed at the top of its demonic lungs. It bent forward furthermore, rocking its massive arms, flexing colossal claws.

All the while, the zombie took no notice. It sensed something and had just enough time to gently twist its neck, when the gigantic paw of the creature slammed against the zombie's side and sent it flying across the room into a small group of emptied barrels. Its chainsaw fell from the reanimated human's hands halfway through its mid-air journey, falling to the ground and shattering.

Finally, the beast hunched over, spread its arms, and openly roared at me, baring its massive maw.

With each step the monster took, the ground beneath me vibrated.

I threw my shotgun aside and pulled out my rocket launcher. I raised it, but then paused. There was no obvious trigger. I fumbled with my thumb until it found an odd structure on the side opposite of me. Quickly, I pushed it down and saw a rocket fly out, leaving a trail of smoke behind it.

Since I had been preoccupied with finding a trigger, my aim wasn't as good as I would've liked. The missile impacted the monster's gigantic shoulder. This made the monster falter backwards for a moment, and yet the rocket didn't bring it down. It simply left a small crater from which blood began to gush out.

I aimed for the head and fired.

But the monster was smart and ducked to the side. The rocket flew by its head and hit the ceiling behind it, sending a rain of sparks downward.

"Come on!" I heard Tim behind me yell. I spun around and saw him waving frantically at me. "Come on, let's go! This whole place's gonna blow!"

Ignoring the monster, I charged after him and we soon left the power generator. I heard the monster thunder after us, but it was slower, and I imagine it had some difficulty fitting under the upper catwalks and tubing, and was thus slowed furthermore. Tim and I ran down a hallway, and ran through another door, entering yet another darkly lit room. We made sure to secure the passage behind us.

"Quick!" he said.

He and I bent down on our knees and covered our heads in the far corner, bracing for impact.

The ground beneath us began to vibrate. I looked at Tim.

He looked back at me, fearful though determined. "It's the generator, it's becoming unstable."

I nodded. "Good, I thought it was another monster coming."

Just then, the vibration grew into an uncontrollable shaking that seemingly bobbed as waves beneath us. We were thrown in the air, then fell back down. Around us, panels fell from the walls and pipes were twisted out of their place, allowing gas to seep out. The dim lights above fell from their glass casing and impacted the ground in another explosion of sparks that marked the last light present. In the darkness, I heard a loud

crash and felt something hit me in the back. My scream of agony was mixed in with all of the other explosions and thunders.

The impact forced my head down into the ground and the blackness in the world around me met with the coming blackness in my mind.

I was still alive. There, laying in the darkness, I questioned myself. We should've died in the explosion, I shouldn't still have been there, stuck in a tight spot in absolute blackness, wondering as to why my brain was still functioning. Unable to move or do anything else, all I had was my mind, and in recent days I found it discomfoting to spend time alone with my brain. That's why I lay there, with my eyes closed, asking why I was still there. Or was I? Was that death, laying in blackness with only your mind? Could I be dead?

This idea fell to pieces when a ray of light fell across my face. I imagine I had been in that tight spot for a while; the light hurt my eyes. But slowly, they came to, and I saw Tim's haggard face inches from mine. His face was lined with a thin beard, as I imagined mine was. In his hand, he was holding the flashlight that I had used so long ago. In order to shine it upon me, he had contorted into an awkward position with his arm twisted around in the wrong way.

I wondered if it was broken.

His eyes examined me.

"You all right?"

"I think so," I said, focusing my brain on my body, trying to detect any pain or inexplicable sensation. "You?"

He simply winced, motioning towards his arm.

I understood. "What happened?"

Tim's eyes darted about. "I don't know. I guess the ceiling grid must've fallen loose on top of us during or after the generator's explosion."

"Do you think we can move it?" I asked, testily pushing on the solid metal panel above me. It didn't budge.

As if to confirm this, Tim shook his head. "This way," he said. "Behind me there's a small opening. I think that we could crawl through. Here, this way," he said and slowly edged backwards, guiding himself with the dancing flashlight.

Soon, I followed and stood besides him. He played his flashlight over the wreckage from which we had just escaped. He had been correct in labelling it as a ceiling grid; the bottom composed mostly of panels and ventilation units. Now that we had left the ruins, I was looking at the top of the panel, the numerous wires and tubes and beams adjoining with large bolts and nuts, ones supported by tinier beams. There were electronic devices, chips, and what were once the dim lamps, now simply shattered glass and broken fluorescent tubes. Some wall panels had fallen off as well, revealing an unearthly greyish rock underneath.

"Damn," I muttered. "We're really lucky."

"Oh, we can thank my shoulder for that," Tim said, rubbing it. "I'd say it took most of the impact."

I nodded and examined it intently. "Can you move it?"

"I think it's broken, I can't move the arm up. I can still move my fingers, though."

"Any odd sensations? You don't want your broken bone to be pressuring blood vessels and such..."

"Nah," he said, "I'm fine, just a broken shoulder."

“Good, and it’s on the left arm, too, even better. You still want your right to shoot with.” I looked away from his broken shoulder. “Do you want me to make a support, a cast of sorts?”

“No, let’s get going.”

With that final sentence, we moved to a door on the side of the room and Tim pushed ‘ENTER’ on the keypad. With a hydraulic swish, the door slid open, revealing yet another catwalk.

We entered another cavernous hall, perhaps a dome. We were walking on what appeared to be a centralised catwalk, with many other metallic paths passing through, above, and below us. These walkways wrapped around huge pillar-like metallic structures that fell from the high ceiling into the abyss below. Naturally, all sorts of machinery, tubes and things protruded from them, many of them invading the walkway in the form of a computer console.

Everything was lined with railing, railing meant to protect any unfortunate soul careless enough to lose co-ordination and fall into the swirling lava below. And from the molten rock came the ominous reddish-orange glow I could recall from my dreams. It was the only true light in the darkness, that and the occasional glowing computer monitor stretching outward from some pillar.

Tim and I edged forward. The room was searing hot, fumes rising up and filtering through the railing. Almost instantaneously, I felt a thin layer of sweat wrap around me. And that’s on top of the sweat I had already accumulated. It seemed that everything in hell was covered in a thin layer of perspiration.

The heat was unnerving. Because of this, I pushed Tim forward and we made our way above the pool of lava.

As we walked, a gigantic arm lowered itself from its base built at an odd angle from one of the walls. Pistons pumped and moved as the mechanised structure manoeuvred a colossal container full of the viscous liquid. The end of the arm where the container attached rotated in an even more awkward manner, allowing the pistons to push the top forward. With a thunderous sound, what must’ve been thousands of kilograms of boiling stone was sent crashing below.

“Jesus,” Tim said over the commotion. “What the hell are they doing with this?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, but let’s move faster, I can’t stand it here.”

Tim, ignoring my last remark, stopped by one of the computer consoles. There was a large reading of something. Needless to say, the number was quite significant. As another container full of lava was emptied into the pit below, the number grew.

“I don’t understand,” he continued.

“Come on!” I pushed his as harshly as I dared with that broken arm of his. Reluctantly, he followed me forward. As we walked, numerous stairs and catwalks sprouted from our own, but we didn’t pay attention to them. The heat rose, the lava below continued to twist and churn, bubbling loudly.

Just then, I heard another sound, and I was certain that it wasn’t that of molten rock. Tim looked at me puzzled; he hadn’t heard anything and was wondering why I had stopped after continually urging him to move on.

“What—”

“Sh!”

I listened again. Just then, there was the sound of creaking metal and a loud thud. I glanced around, seeking the source of this sound. The creaking became audible again, but was momentarily drowned out by the pouring of another bucket of magma. As I searched, a black shape clumsily moved in my peripheral vision. I turned to look and saw yet another monster.

I was the same four-legged beast we had encountered before, the one of unnecessary filth. And yet it somehow seemed different from the ones we had seen previously. Maybe it was the atmosphere, or maybe the frightening shadows cast by the lava below. But it seemed bigger, more evil, its teeth were larger and sharper, its paws more massive. All of its grotesque features seemed magnified in some manner, giving it a more frightening guise than before.

It roared and swung at us from the catwalk it stood on, right and above of us.

With one swipe, it pierced through the railing and lunged. Our entire catwalk shook wildly as the beast landed astern of us, baring its fangs at the same time.

It was a loathsome creature. I had prepared myself to die; we had done some good. But the thought of falling prey to that monster's drooling mouth, the cavernous teeth placed under the faceless dome, the horrible stench repelled me. I was ready for anything, anything but this.

It might've looked tougher, but it still fell after I landed two shotgun shots in its nearly indistinguishable head. Afterwards, I handed the gun to Tim, a gift. After all, he had nothing to shoot with, especially after I had used up the last of the chain-gun ammo. Now it was empty, simply a burden to Tim's healthy shoulder.

We moved forth again.

The semi-darkness ahead was broken by red light, and yet it wasn't from the lava. As we drew near, I saw that it was another 'EXIT' sign, glowing brightly above a thick door with the usual keypad besides it. Tim pushed enter and nothing happened. I had just made peace with the thought that it might require a damn keycard, when the door slowly slid open. And we were hit.

It wasn't any monster or shocking sight, at least not at first. We were immediately hit by a blast of hot, humid air.

And up till then, I had perfectly known that we were in hell. My mind had grown accustomed to the thought, though not easily. Ever since the monster factory, I was numb, my body having no true feeling. And after the zombie sergeant drained me of my energy, I had felt even worse. The only true feeling I felt was fear, fear of being in hell. However, my surroundings hadn't truly reinforced this thought. But the malignancy that greeted us beyond the door did.

It was a large courtyard, a square, perhaps the central hub into which all of the hallways and things fed. This time, no one had bothered to cover up the ugly stone walls; the entire place was encircled in them, the same greyish, dead tone. In the centre lay a rather small building, systematically surrounded by thick pillars of stone decorated with quite possibly the ugliest faces I had ever seen. In the far distance I saw many other entryways built into the walls, though they were all sealed by the door that sat in the metallic doorframe, looking awkward when built directly into the stone.

Beyond were fiery looking red peaks, red as the sky that moved along far above in swirling patterns. The scene reminded me quite a bit of Mars... had it not been for the odd sky and the odd formations formed by the familiar-looking rock. There were jagged

peaks, sharp without mercy, cutting as knives into the burning sky above. This sky itself was barely visible, however. The six pillars that surrounded the central building supported a somewhat circular roof, separated in the middle by a line, left to reveal the sky, as were the two corners.

My lungs burned, as did my skin.

Tim and I carefully walked forth, nearing one of the pillars. Imprinted was a grotesque face with two burning eyes placed on an oblong head. The face was hidden by an awkward facemask-looking contraption that seeped downward until the block of rock ended. In rough letters, I read something with the likes of 'BELZBUB'.

Tim reached forward and ran his fingers along the letters.

"What does it mean?"

Me being the literary figure, I thought. And then I remembered. "Beelzebub. The Lord of the Flies."

"What?"

"It's Greek. Greek, meaning 'Satan' or 'devil'."

"Jesus," said Tim, not taking his eyes from the carving. "Beelzebub," he recited.

I backed away. We were in the open, meaning that we could be easily sighted. My eyes quickly darted about. There were no monsters to be seen, no threat. And yet, something hung in the air, something as thick as the moisture. A fear. No, not quite. Actually, worse, more powerful. It was perhaps a fear that could not be possibly felt on Earth. A fear reserved for hell and all of its unfortunate inhabitants. Rather, a feeling of constant sheer terror.

"Um," I heard Tim's voice. "We're too obvious, let's walk close to the buildings and things. We don't want to be seen."

"Don't worry," I assured him. "I've looked over the entire plaza, there isn't anything living, or dead, in this place."

And just then, irony came flying by in the form of a rocket.

It whizzed by my head, narrowly missing me. I swear I felt its wake and the heat of its engine! It flew behind us, its blurry form streaking forward until it impacted against one of the stone walls, charring them. It left a barely visible trail of smoke that revealed just how close it had come to me; as the smoke expanded into nothingness, it filled my nostrils. That freaking close!

Naturally, Tim and I spun around, our eyes searching. And yet, we found nothing. With the cognisance of forensic detectives, we scanned the path through which the rocket had passed and traced it back until it reached the edge of one of the pillars. But there was nothing, emptiness. Nothing but the evil stone face with its grinning eyes laughing at us, at our dire situation, at our inability to apprehend the circumstances.

“Jesus,” muttered Tim. His eyes had stopped, trained on some spot in the distance. “I have a feeling we’ll be needing more ammo soon.” He began to walk forward steadily. “Lots of ammo.”

I moved to where Tim had stood moments before while he briskly walked forward. My eyes tried to figure out what he had seen. They failed, and I began to follow him. Only after a while did I see that one of the several doors built into the rock was ajar, hanging high above the frame, resting on hydraulic pistons. As I continued to walk, I saw Tim glance nervously inside, then step forward. The darkness swallowed him.

Not liking the feeling of aloneness in hell, I quickened my pace before I stood at the entrance and glanced inside. The dim light outside allowed for my eyes to respond more quickly to the oncoming darkness.

Tim was dashing around inside, reloading his gun.

It was a weapons bunker.

And yet, I didn’t enter. The idea of being in a small room without exits... it made me nervous. Until you walk the path that I marched through, you really wouldn’t understand. Tim, however, seemed swept away by the bountiful amounts of ammunition. There were also some weapons stashed on racks over the ammunition boxes. We had, along our journey, collected most of them. At the end lay an odd gun that, to me, was unfamiliar.

Tim quickly snatched it off the wall, then threw me another belt of missiles. Then, he busied himself in reloading the chain-gun.

“Tim,” I said. “Hurry.”

Then came a sound in the distance. It started with a hydraulic swish, like the pumping of pistons, an unmistakably mechanical sound. Then came a loud thud as something heavy impacted the ground. Immediately following the impact came a loud hiss, like a gas of some sort being released. And then, the sound repeated continuously, looping itself.

Phhhh-THUD-hisssss....

Tim and I both looked up and outside the doorway.

“Tim...” I said warningly, not looking away from the courtyard.

He continued stuffing everything with ammo, snatching weapons from the stash above and replacing our own, old, and weathered exemplars.

Phhhh-THUD-hisssss....

I continued staring forward. Behind me, I heard a shuffling sound as Tim continued stocking up. I imagine that he was nearly finished, but each passing second was more and more unnerving.

Phhhh-THUD-hisssss.... Phhhh-THUD-hisssss....

“Tim!” I nearly shouted.

“Almost done...” he said, his voice strained as he gathered everything as fast as he could. “Almost...”

Phhhh-THUD-hisssss....

“Come on, damn it!” I shouted, not being able to contain my voice any longer. I wasn’t afraid of being overheard by whatever hell had to offer. Tim had to get out of the tiny bunker as quickly as permissible by the laws of physics.

Phhhh-THUD-hisssss.... Phhhh-THUD-hisssss....

The sound grew louder. Its rhythm was running alongside my own. Soon, my heart ran in synchrony with the resonance.

Jesus, it sounded like freaking footsteps!

Phhhh-THUD-hisssss....

“Tim—”

“Done!” He sprinted out of the cellar, and really fast, I must add, knowing that he was impeded by a whole damned arsenal’s worth of ammunition and weapons. Everything was a blur as we ran. The bunker was only a metre or two behind us, when another missile flew by, narrowly missing us again.

It flew into the cellar.

Oh shit.

What followed was an exothermic reaction that’d make any chemist proud. Immediately ensued the biggest explosion I had ever heard... no, not heard. Felt. The biggest explosion I had ever felt. I couldn’t see it, but everything turned a burning yellow and the ground beneath me shuddered violently. My feet fumbled and I was just about to hit the ground face-first, when the shockwave carried me off of my feet and into the air. But this time, I wasn’t able to do a nice roll to save myself from hitting the ground; I did a belly flop on terra firma. And it really hurt.

Between trying to catch my breath and wondering whether all my ribs were still intact, I saw bright pinpoints of light shoot out of the bunker, whizzing as they flew by in a very spectacular show.

For a second I felt sympathy for the monster; I had also once blown up an ammunitions bunker.

I was alive and well. And I had grown accustomed to the fact that I was going to die. In fact, I was rather cheery because I knew it was all going to end soon, very soon. Not long after I found out what the hell made that noise we felt, I was sure of it. We had done some good. And I had prepared myself. Everything was perfect, everything was right. Yes, in my mind everything seemed exquisite, despite the fact that we were in hell and had narrowly escaped death only to jump into our hopeless fate anyway.

With great discomfort, I pushed myself up. Tim, who was laying next to me, also with his face in the stone floor, was doing the same. As he did, he pulled out that new weapon he had found in the bunker.

Phhhh-THUD-hisssss....

I had just enough time to examine the black nozzle and light greyish surface that fell to reveal a tank of swirling blue matter, when I heard a roar.

But it wasn't a zombie roar.

Phhhh-THUD-hisssss.... Phhhh-THUD-hisssss....

The sound stopped, the ringing silence returning again.

I looked up and saw many things. The thing that stood before me could be called a lot of things: Satan, the devil, Ba'alzevuv, Beelzebub... Death itself. Our means of perishing were standing before us in the form of what could only be hell's sickest creation. It was an indescribable biomechanical monstrosity, a leviathan. If not the very devil himself, it could only be a demon, a real-life demon. All that we had seen up until that very point suddenly seemed normal, feeble to me. All we had done so far was simply a fast-moving film. But suddenly, as the sound came to a stop, so did the world around us.

It was a demon.

Perhaps it had once been a hell-knight. And yet, it was at least twice as tall. Its face did have a similar configuration with the empty green eyes cast upon a wide face. The nostrils, raised above the eyes, conjoined in an upside-down V. Below was a mouth that rested upon the most massive jaw I had ever seen. The monster had fangs, and yet, these were the least of our worries. As its tiny empty eyes scanned around, I grew cold. Even in the hot humid air, everything seemed to freeze at the sight of the colossal entity.

Its facial features were rather unimpressive, or at least they seemed this way in contrast to the two massive horns that sprouted from the sides of the creature's head. They spread out to the sides, reaching nearly as far as the monster's broad shoulders, then swept back, ending in two sharp points a tiny distance apart. The horns were an empty black, the blackest of all black, running over the rough pattern that ran along them, like a goat's. Around the monstrosity's shoulder ran two tubes that inserted themselves into the massive torso. These tubes sprouted from a gigantic mechanical structure that was built into its back, nearly hiding the titanic and prominent spine.

From its muscular, greyish torso sprouted two arms. One simply ended in the usual five claws. Just claws. But the other suddenly went from flesh to metal, into a gigantic box-type device, rounded at the bottom. It was lengthy, ending in the unmistakable muzzle of a gigantic gun. From the gun's back, wires and tubes developed, running along and under the arm into the massive device on its back.

Where its stomach should've been was a gaping hole, along which the same tubes ran in coiling and twisting shapes. Perhaps some of them were intestines, but many were clearly artificial, metallic, gleaming in the low light.

Its legs were just as massive. One was jointed at an awkward angle, like that of the hell-knight, and yet it ended in a gigantic hoof. The other leg, however, suddenly flowed into a metallic base and over a hovering black device besides which there were pistons that ran into the mechanised leg below. So this was the heavy thudding sound that we had heard echoing in the distance.

I would've rather not have known. Before I thought that not knowing is actually more frightening than knowing. I guess I was wrong.

The unsymmetrical creature roared, raising its head upwards, tightening the already-tight and somewhat torn skin. Around the stomach area, the grotesque flesh had

been stretched until it was rather stringy, with the small snakes of tissue joining the top and bottom.

Phhhh-THUD-hissss....

It started toward us.

The shock passed and I quickly fired two rockets at it in succession. I had a feeling that one wasn't gonna do the trick.

Meanwhile, Tim was preoccupied with figuring out how his new weapon fired.

The demon answered, firing just as many missiles back.

I couldn't help but notice that the leviathan fired the same kind of missiles as the ones I had, which was unfortunate because, due to their compact size, it meant that this beast wouldn't run out of ammo any time soon... Not that it mattered. My mind was preoccupied with the mesmerising green and glowing eyes and its towering stature.

Finally, Tim's success in finding a trigger was announced by a wave of bluish plasma that streamed out of the end of his gun, hissing through the air, and dancing across the demon's broad figure. The monster, distracted from its original target, turned to face him. Tim's fire was cut short as he jumped to the side to avoid the two rockets launched at him. They hit the ground where he had stood moments before, throwing him off to the side. He seemed to have suffered some injuries from the splash damage, judging by the bloodied skin that showed from beneath his ragged clothes.

To save Tim's, and my own, ass, I fired several more rockets at the creature, hitting the back of its massive spherical shoulders. It turned its attention back to me.

Jesus, how many rockets had I hit it with so far? At least four. And the thing wasn't showing even minimal damage!

As my second rocket impacted, Tim began to fire again.

The beast fired several more missiles toward me, then turned around and began to walk towards Tim.

Phhhh-THUD-hissss....

In avoiding the rockets, I jumped behind one of the massive pillars. Now all I could hear was the rapid fire of Tim's plasma gun and the rhythmic walking of the mechanised demon.

Phhhh-THUD-hissss....

I snuck around, keeping close, hugging the pillars and the centralised building. Soon, I could see the gigantic monster slowly walking towards Tim at a steady pace, not bothering to in any way avoid his gunfire. Tim was continually forced to stop firing as to not be hit by a rocket.

The monster, it seemed, could fire two missiles in quick succession, then had to wait a while before it reloaded.

Reloaded. But from where? Where was its missile supply?

As my eyes danced around the monster's back, I realised that the mechanical structure built into its back was actually the rocket supply. The thing had a freaking ammunition bunker built into its back!

Phhhh-THUD-hissss....

That last thought was the final piece to a puzzle that was the beginnings of a plan. The monster seemed entirely focused on Tim; it appeared to have had a memory lapse, the mere memory of me forgotten. The creature simply moved forward in a predictable

manner, I didn't have to bother to be quiet or keep low, not that the latter was possible in the open courtyard.

But it was evidently not worried. The beast *knew* that we could only bruise it at our best. It knew that we would tire while it chased us down at a steady pace. It knew that it was impervious to our weapons while this didn't work out the other way. It wasn't necessarily stupid. But it sure as hell was careless, and that could be used to our advantage. I had to figure out a way to do this. Tim was a bit busy at the moment.

I could see that Tim was getting tired from his constant running and jumping and rolling. It was time for me to step in.

I drew about three metres from the beast and still had to look up. It was huge, towering, the rocket supply lay high above. And even from my low vantage point, I could see a small device rotate and carefully transfer missiles into a tube that led into the launcher itself.

First, I had to disarm it. God knows how much armour was slapped atop the beast's rocket supply.

Carefully, I trained one of my own missiles on the tube that led into the leviathan's arm. *Click!* I fired and was pleased to see one of my own rockets fly across the air and impact the creature's arm, causing it to fly upwards. The beast roared at Yours Truly with an uttermost rage, baring its fangs and swinging its massive head around to look at me. I was so close that I could feel its stench, its breath.

It raised its missile launcher and pointed it at me.

Click!

It had worked. The creature seemed to notice something was wrong and shook the rocket launcher violently before attempting to fire again.

Click! Click!

The monster saw that it couldn't fire anymore. So, it resorted to more barbaric methods. With the loudest roar yet, the creature charged at me, swinging its arms malevolently. The gigantic rocket launcher built into its arm still made for a deadly weapon, even though it had no missiles to fire.

Hell, I'd rather be blown up than clubbed to death! Maybe my plan wasn't such a good plan after all...

"Tim!" I shouted, running away from the charging beast.

Phhhh-THUD-hisssss.... Phhhh-THUD-hisssss... Phhhh-THUD-hisssss....

The creature's hoofsteps were echoing loudly, faster, pounding in my ears, the ground beneath me shaking madly. I was losing my balance, my co-ordination. And the mere thought of what was chasing me only strengthened these feelings. This was it, I was going to die.

"Tim!" I shouted again. I knew that I had to have this bastard that was chasing me killed before I went. "Tim! Aim for its back! That's where its rockets are!" After uttering these words, my breath began to hasten. "Tim..."

He began firing his plasma gun.

The creature stopped running and roared. It was confused, unsure of who to pursue. In its desperation, it simply turned towards Tim, bent downward, and roared loudly and intimidatingly.

On cue, I raised my rocket launcher and began pumping rockets into the monster's back. Tim had already inflicted damage there, so the monster didn't even have

time to turn around. Its back simply exploded in a brilliant explosion and continued to grow even after the initial boom, as rockets finally gave in to the unbearable heat. The explosion tore the monster in half and sent its gruesome torso flying across the air in Tim's direction.

It landed in front of him. Meanwhile, the legs had collapsed and everything that was in between had been disintegrated.

Mark another victory for Staff Sergeant Tim Davis and Corporal Nik Taggart!

Tim was simply looking down at it, with disgust, some fear, but also a determination that came with the feeling of victory, a triumph over a juggernaut, an unstoppable force brought to its defeat.

I should've known, however, that things in hell are more persistent and don't die as easily. I had barely enough time to shout, "Tim—" when the torso stirred. For a second, I saw Tim's eyes go wide, moments before the massive rocket-launcher arm swung through the air and caught him in his side, dragging him along. Tim was sent flying across the air, trailing blood and ammunition as he did. The beast, with an evil grin stretching across its disgusting face, reached down for one of the ammunition belts Tim had lost.

Almost in slow motion, I watched it pull a rocket out of one of the slots and push it into its arm.

I was too far away to do anything. I ran forward to change this.

The demon's malicious empty eyes flashed and it raised its weapon, pointing it at the now-unconscious Tim. I could see Tim, his eyes closed, a puddle of blood under his chin. His arms clutching the plasma rifle, his body weighed down by all of the ammunition and guns he had been carried. He lay there, in his own world, unaware that he was about to be sent to another.

The monster fired and I watched the rocket fly through the air.

I stopped.

The rocket hit Tim or very near to him, setting off the usual large explosion. I imagine that all of the ammunition Tim had been carrying only enlarged the blast. The reddish cloud rose, folding in on itself, fading into greyish smoke. There was nothing where Tim had stood but two scraps that were once his boots. All else hung above like the small cloud of blood that was still there, suspended in the air.

It was incomprehensible.

Tim was gone.

PART 4

The Seed to Sow All Hell

1

Tim was gone.

And with that, all my pains, apprehension, dismay, and dread all rushed into me at once, flooding through as the High Desert on a rainy day, though in my body in the form of a cold wave. It wasn't supposed to be like this. I had always visualised it in an alternative way. I had to go first. Or at least Tim and I had to go together. This was the one way of events I had not envisioned, or hadn't dared to do so. It was frightening, remaining all alone. I regretted all my earlier thoughts of suicide, all the faulty traits of Tim's innocent personality that I always observed, simply ignoring their positive values. He was gone.

The cold wave inside of me turned a fiery red and burned through my veins as it flowed into my brain and heart. It grew and grew and something seized control of me. My feet beneath me broke in a run and my face contorted. I sprinted and heard myself raging in an animalistic fashion.

The demon was busy loading another rocket in its arm, its malicious smile trained on me.

It fired, but I never stopped running. I felt my body simply sway to the side and allow for the rocket to fly by.

Soon, I was standing a small distance from the monster. Tiny glowing eyes examined me, laughing at my futility, my human mortality. Laughing at Tim's mortality and all of our human shortcomings.

The red wave surged in my hands and my finger continually pressed down on the trigger, sending an incessant wave of rockets into its torso. Blood flew high as the remains of the monster did an awkward dance on the ground, churning and twisted. Tubes and wires waved in the air, uncoiling, dancing like charmed snakes. Other liquids and mechanical and organic pieces and organs flew in the air, only to fall down to more oncoming fire.

Soon, the demon wasn't anything recognisable.

Even after it reached the state of a puddle of red, I felt my finger continue to press on the trigger, even after all that the gun emitted was a clicking sound.

I backed away, panting from physical exertion, and sank to my knees.

It should've been me where Tim had stood.

I had prepared myself, but it still came as a shock. Tim and I had gone through such hell together, a diminutive and unwanted feeling of being immortal, unbeatable, unassailable had moulded itself in the darkest fathoms of my mind, where I was sure to pass it by. But now, it surfaced, only to be shattered by my good sense, good sense that could only come with experience. Why was my mind constantly lying and deceiving me? Why was it only looking for ways to confuse me?

Tim was gone.

I eased myself on the ground, lying down on the steaming earth. In this position I was vulnerable, but I didn't care. In fact, I wanted some monster of unparalleled proportions to come and crush me to a pulp, I wanted for some revenant to land two

rockets in my chest, I wanted for the tentacle zombie to come and suck out all my energy. Hell, I could even settle for the gigantic four-legged beast... that's how low my mind had sunk on a rational scale, a scale that lessened in size along with my happiness and good sense. All of my healthy mental qualities drained away slowly. I was scarred for life.

I was scarred, Tim was dead.

Humanity was still lost.

Everything was lost, everything was gone. All hope had vanished.

Hope. It was the word Tim had used to persuade me to continue. And what a silly word 'hope' is. There may be hope, but there comes a point where it becomes clear that everything is lost. It is then that the last remaining shred of hope is whisked away in a cloud of smoke, broken down and destroyed. Cast away. With each passing incident, the hope in ourselves fell apart. The dark room, the tentacle zombie. The gigantic demon. And now, Tim's demise.

Perhaps Tim was right when he told me that there was still hope. I had opposed him then, but he was right and I had been wrong.

But now, hope was gone for good. Tim couldn't put up an argument anymore, had he still been here.

We had done our job, our service to humanity. What more was there to do? Perhaps rushing into death before was premature, but now it wasn't.

And as I continued to lay there, my eyes trained on the passing red clouds, I hoped that some monster came along and ended my troubles, too. Everything had gone wrong up until now, but this was the most major blow yet. It wasn't supposed to work out this way.

And with the swirling skies above and death around me, I lay there.

I honestly can't say how much time passed as I lay on the hot ground. Some odd turn of luck prevented any monsters from carelessly strolling through the plaza and finding me there, lazily gazing up at the sky. It was the sky that drew me. Its form seemed to represent all life, life as I knew it. Its swirling patters were present everywhere, hinting at the truth, from the portal to the magma. The patterns swirled and turned, much as life itself, their contours eventually fading away in the red backdrop, only to be replaced by new waves. No wave was eternal, and Tim's had already faded away whilst mine was simply tapering, though still holding a definite shape, one that constantly turned and twisted, contorting to the constant onslaught of hopeless situations.

And as the clouds of life hung above, death reined below, hell itself. Of course, I hadn't seen hell yet. I didn't know what happened to people's souls when they came down here, and I honestly didn't want to find out. But would I? Even after my eventual passing, would I escape from here? Was it possible at all? Had Tim done it?

These questions played out rhetorically in my mind.

My wave grew faint.

I pushed myself up. It was time to go on. I didn't know where I was going, and yet it didn't seem right to remain there, staring emptily upwards. And besides, Tim would've moved on, and he would've expected the same of me. I couldn't remain there, my time was growing short, and it shouldn't be wasted by mesmerising myself with hell's weather patterns.

Damn, I was starting to think like Tim. He had poured some of his wisdom into me, and perhaps I had done the same to him. Not that that's a bad thing; by taking up on his good qualities, I simply became a more refined individual, something difficult to do in an oppressing military base full of grown men with the mentality of 4th graders. I felt pleased in thinking this, but my regrets for Tim's demise only strengthened.

I could see Tim's charred plasma rifle, his going-away present for me. Hesitantly, I picked it up and slung it over my shoulder, then ensued in scouring the courtyard for any remaining ammunition and supplies.

A medikit and two MREs had survived the explosion, along with tatters of Tim's clothing and flesh. It was disgusting, but I knew that I had to save them. Tim would've done the same.

With all the supplies gathered, I moved forth. Many doors emptied into the courtyard, and I had to choose one that was likely to be most productive and functional to traverse. A dangerous path.

An obvious choice was the largest door. There were actually two large entryways set on opposite sides of the courtyard. Tim and I had emerged from one, and now I alone was going to continue on the other. With obvious difficulty, both mental and physical, I set forth, walking slowly, allowing for the imposing metallic door to draw near slowly.

The usual keypad beeped as I pushed 'ENTER' and I did as instructed by the button.

For some reason, the metallic, mechanical door only empowered the thought that beyond would lay more metallic hallways with panels and pipes. Also, I had lived in such a place for the last few years. So it was awkward to find the signs of technology slowly

lessening. Beyond lay a stone hallway, lighted by torches running along the walls. It was awkward, strange, and altogether frightening.

And there I was met by my favourite, the four-legged beast. It seemed to be passing at the far end of the corridor. As it did, it paused and its massive and nearly non-existent head came to bear, I saw the dome of its head and massive teeth, gleaming in the low light, turn towards me. Its mechanical legs began to beat at the ground as it charged towards me, fangs flexing, spine contorting with each cycle of the moving legs and front paws.

It growled and swung at me, but quickly fell to my plasma rifle. Only then did I finally have the opportunity to finish examining my surroundings.

The door was connected to a tiny circular room from which this hallway extended. And ahead of that was a junction with two hallways sprouting to the left and right and a stairway of wooden steps heading forward, then curving to the side high above the ground. What lay there was hidden by the thick stone walls that defined the boundaries of this entire region.

I rushed forward and into the junction. This wasn't very smart. In fact, it was quite possibly the most idiotic and thoughtless thing to do, to simply storm forward, not heeding anything past experience had taught me. I imagine that's why the giant hell-knight demon I had met on several occasions before got a jump on me. Quickly, I emptied the remaining plasma rifle cells into its filthy mug. With superior ammunition and experience, it died a lot quicker.

Nice. Unfortunately, all the noise merely attracted a large gathering of imps. They rushed in like a shadow stretching across the ceiling; several crawled along it, their upside-down heads hissing at me with animosity. A few also came crawling along the walls, contorting their humanoid figures in animalistic fashions.

This was a job for my chain-gun, the ideal weapon to break up a large group with an indefinite centre, thus a group spread irregularly over an uneven area. Pulling out something with such proportions, however, took time. So, I tossed the plasma rifle forward. This confused them.

Why was this idiot human throwing his plasma gun away?

They turned back and hissed at me only to be greeted by a mouthful of hot lead. That was my reply.

Wearily, I skipped over the imp goo and recovered my empty weapon.

Phew.

Now I was left with the decision: where to go? For me, the two corridors on my sides seemed similar, while the stairway ahead stood out in some inexplicable fashion. A distant hissing prompted my decision. Hastily, I trailed up the steps and around the bend.

I wasn't liking this.

But soon, I was going to like everything even less.

Up, atop the wooden stairs and wooded corridor, I entered a small corridor of sorts, one that perhaps extended into a maze. What was most, well, unappealing, however, were the pink walls that stretched around me. Now, I don't think hell is made of furry pink walls and joyous fantastic and cute animals. In fact, the walls around me were pink, like stripped flesh. They were wet too, light dancing across them as they pulsed gently. They all wrapped and formed patterns. The surfaces bent and twisted around what

seemed to be spines that interlocked, the separate layers of flesh coming together at a point, held together in some way I'd rather not know.

It took a while for me to notice within just how grotesque of a place I was standing. I was much quicker in noticing the putrid smell, however. And I suppose it makes sense for the fleshy walls to not smell like some \$400 dollar fragrance sold in teaspoons by a well-dressed clerk with the lightest tinge of a British accent.

There, I stopped. With some hesitation, I retraced my steps back down the stairway and instead took a right turn. Instead, I was treated to another small courtyard of sorts. It reeked nearly as bad. It was a forest.

Not the forest you'd want to go camping in, though. The ground was soaking with blood while stakes stuck from the ground at irregular angles. Impaled over the stakes were writhing human bodies, still moaning and jerking slightly.

Another imp greeted me there.

But soon, it was just another tree in the forest of carnage.

This time, however, I decided to continue. I took an exit on the other end and entered another dark corridor. Along the walls torches burnt brightly, and another door lay at the other end. I quickly rushed towards it, not heeding the mini corridor that sprouted on the left.

The door was massive, seemingly lacking any mechanical parts. Engraved over its stone surface was a face similar to that we had seen before, with horns and all sorts of tubes and things sprouting in twisting patterns outwards and disappearing into the doorframe. The two tiny, pupil-less eyes peeked out from the rock, resembling a true living entity.

Besides was the usual keypad. Automatically, I pressed 'ENTER'.

The keyboard beeped an unpleasant note and a sign glowed in the darkness: 'Entry to Palace Denied. Proper Identification/Keycard Required'.

Cool, I thought. I guess English really *is* the one universal language.

Though this only gave me a headache, at least I gained a valuable bit of information: this was the entrance to the palace. The palace of what? To what? I didn't know, but I immediately felt that I needed to go inside, and to do so, I needed the Keycard. Keycard. Damn, now my stroll turned into a scavenger hunt.

Left without any other clear choice, I progressed into the sub-corridor on my left.

As soon as I passed through the sub-corridor, quite a bit happened, though none of it was really new and worth mentioning. It was another maze of sorts, stringing together all sorts of hellish rooms. The deeper inside I ventured, the more organic areas I began to witness, pink pulsating flesh with odd additions, such as sharp bone-like projections (read: horns) protruding outwards and downwards and so on. Occasionally, the pink flesh stretched around a pair of jaws, black teeth looking not unlike stitches on the skin, the mouth beyond holding only the unknown. At times it glowed gently and it always pulsed, bubbling softly. Occasionally, there were limbs, perhaps once human, protruding outward. When I walked through a rather tight corridor, several human hands sticking out from the walls grabbed at me with an iron grip. This startled and revolted me quite a bit and, after being unable to pry myself of their grip, I used my pistol to 'cut' myself loose. And so, I continued traversing the organic corridors, feeling almost as if I was walking through a vein, or perhaps a bowel. That led me to wonder: maybe hell is alive? Maybe hell is the devil himself, a shapeless living being through which I was continually afoot?

This thought frightened me, so I tried to pry it, just as I pried myself from the hands, from my mind. But the constant sound of throbbing flesh, its putrid smell, and pink coloration were present everywhere, and they shoved these thoughts back in my mind with unparalleled force.

Stone walls decorated by flattened humans, their flesh flat against the rock and surrounded by the broadly drawn blood that surrounded them, lay between stone floor and pools of blood beyond. Corpses and limbs hung from the ceiling on rusty chains that waved slowly under the slow, warm currents.

There were organs, what looked like gigantic throbbing organs held by straining snakes of flesh that connected them to the larger walls of flesh that surrounded it. Flesh flowed into flesh; structured spines led into the base of the organ, which churned loudly. And with the sound of the churning came screams...

This was only one of the many perverse things I saw in those dark hallways. Their exact function remained a mystery to me. I didn't even form any theories since I continually made ineffectual efforts to push the palpitating tissue out of my mind.

One could say that it was almost a relief as I exited out of the fleshy environment through a rather loathsome orifice and headed through a tight corridor that was cut rather hastily through the red rockface. Towards the end, the tunnel slightly tightened before opening into a grander expanse.

It was a circular place, as a pit cut into the rock. There was a path, a sort of stone catwalk that encircled a pit of lava below. There was a platform rising up from the centre, jointed with another rock bridge to the catwalk, this entrance being on the side opposite of me. At the centre was a mechanical device, with many wires and things rising from the rock and from pipes that ran from the sides that led up to a central chamber with an odd, bluish glow. It looked like some kind of massive generator or something. I guess even hell needed electrical power. As looked, there was a console attached to the structure, with what looked like a series of keycards closed behind a glass panel. It was like a security room where keys were kept. I hoped it wasn't Plexiglas. But that was the least of my worried.

Because seemingly patrolling the area was the most loathsome beast yet.

The four-legged demon had been frightening, and above all, disgusting. And yet, the four-legged beast sprouted pink fur and bunny ears when set next to the monstrosity that stood there, slightly turned away from me, walking jerkily, due in part to its small and stubby legs encircled in rolls upon rolls of fat. It grunted, and turned to the side, and sighted me.

As it did, I could see its front. It was fat, really fat, overweight, the most obese monster yet. It had two tiny green embers for eyes that rested deep into its jelly-like head, in the deep, black pits of its exaggerated skull. The basis for its creation must've been a human, though little more remained than skin stretched over blubber. The creature's nose was small and stubby and the nostrils stretched upward awkwardly and joined under a bend that fell downward and around the mouth with the shape of an upturned parabola. The mouth was askew; none of its features could be placed. Tooth blended in with gums and turned into the indistinguishable lip. From the sides of the mouth ran bloody trails, continuing the line of the parabola and flowing down the non-existent neck onto the creature's broad and fat chest.

The beast had some sort of device attached to its back that I had sighted moments before it had turned around. From it sprouted two tubes that ran above the shoulders, paralleling their round shape, and ran beneath the creature's arms, which ended in two gigantic devices that were reminiscent of the rocket launcher the gigantic demon had, except more round and symmetric, as well as longer. They ended in a gigantic round muzzle that danced up and down until it trained on me. And below sprouted the two trunks for legs, short and stout, ending in three broad claws.

There were odd things lying at its feet, small and shiny, like wet.

My eyes fell back to the keys. Why would that be? Why was the door locked?

To keep out zombies, I decided. Whatever lay inside the chamber must've not been too pleased with the mindless wanderings of the zombies. Perhaps it wanted them out simply because it found them displeasing. Or maybe the zombies were utterly uncontrollable.

Perhaps I would've continued to ponder at zombie psychology save for the two fiery red glowing fireballs that erupted from the monster's two guns simultaneously and flew through the air, searing the already-boiling air. Apparently, it had finished attending to its own business.

I jumped to the side and reached for my rocket launcher.

Bad idea. I didn't want to damage the keycards, so conveniently located right besides the monster. So instead, I pulled out my heavy chain-gun, laden with ammo, and carefully trained it on its head. Thank god the keycard was positioned behind it. I pulled the trigger and saw its chest erupt in red convulsions. Immediately, I gently drew the gun upwards until I saw the bullets dance atop its malformed head.

Knowing that I was shooting its head, the thing ate quite a bit of ammo before it went down. I cautiously circled the lava pit and, realising that the thing could've fallen in the lava, I nearly slapped myself.

But it hadn't and all was well. As well as it could be in recent days. A day spend in hell is hardly a good day.

Meanwhile, I became aware that the shiny things at its feet were coming awake. They looked like infants.

Now what?

The monster died in probably the most disgusting, foul, and offensive manner possible. It made a wet gurgling sound, then a sound as if it was throwing up. And indeed, the visuals paralleled the sound. The creature came forward, thick flesh and fat rolled off bone as if they were liquid coming together in a pool at the creature's feet. Everything slid forward and off, eyes, nose, all twisting into a promiscuous, random mix of paints and colours.

But it wasn't over. I began to wonder if these things were its children, if it had given birth to them. Let's say so for the sake of making things easy to describe. So, the three things it had given birth to gradually rose. Slowly, the odd form took a definite shape as two bony arms ending in sharp claws uncoiled; two iridescent and translucent insect wings unfurled themselves and gained form. They sprouted from a tiny body with a prominent grey backbone. Then the things, one by one raised their filthy heads. Grab a marker, take a baby picture of yourself, and draw in a pair of fangs and glowing eyes. That's what stood before me. And claws and fly-wings, of course. Babies from hell! Flies from hell! Cherubs from hell! Suddenly, in a flutter of wings, one launched itself at Yours Truly. Once again, the sound of bullets echoed through the chamber and the demon fell into the lava below. The two other cherubs rushed at me, teeth and claws flashing.

And I thought I had seen twisted things before. This raised the bar so far that I'd need an oxygen mask to see the end of it!

When I had finally decided which one to take down first, I realised my grave mistake: never hesitate. Baby #2 went down while the third cherub reached me and sunk its teeth into my temple. I staggered and felt a little dizzy at first, though conscious enough to swat at the fly-baby-thing. But suddenly, there was a flash of black and I saw two inhuman faces with round, glowing eyes gazing at me from a pit of darkness. This faded into a burning red. I shook my head and saw the cherub flashing its claws at me again. I edged back, seeking an angle to bring it down with my gun when another image forced itself into my head. I looked down and was aware that I was strapped to a pentagram with a dark shape striding towards me...

Flashes of red.

All the horrors in my mind were rising from the pits where they had been spawned by this journey.

Bright flashes seared my brain.

I pushed the vision away and hit the cherub with the end of my gun. It wasn't hurt, though now I had a clear shot. I took it out in a stream of bullets before I was back atop the pentagram.

No!

Everything became a dance of red colours that swirled like the clouds above.

I clutched at my head, hoping to pull out the images of the impaled persons I had seen, for I now saw myself among them. The image faded and I saw the familiar rock face around me. Then it moulded away into the same swirling, fiery red transition and I was back atop the pentagram, all before it faded out.

I was no longer standing at the pit. I was being tortured; the demon cutting at my stomach, I screamed... then I realised I had nearly fallen into the pit of lava. Still having difficulty keeping balance, I edged away against one of the walls and leaned against it

until I felt as well as I had before. No permanent damage, though I'd hate to go through that again.

It was all over. I felt the cherub's toxin leaving my body.

My fingers ran over my temple where I felt the two bloody marks. I got a headache just imagining what it looked like. I applied pressure until the bleeding stopped until all was well.

Well as it could be in hell. That should be my new catch phrase.

I ran through a quick summary of monsters: flaming heads with rocket engines, obese women-demons with cannons on their arms, upturned mugs with spider legs, freakin' skeletons with rocket launchers, rotting zombies, fire-throwing imps, giant hell knights, and now poisonous fly-baby-cherub-demons. What a parade of freaks! I always said that one should strive to be original, but man! Screw creativity! Why couldn't I just have to put up with the usual slimy aliens?

I had to get going, no time to write poems.

Feeling triumphant, I gazed around the keycards and plucked the unharmed card that had 'palace' scrawled on it and began to retrace my steps through the stone corridor, back through the wretched opening and into the organic intestine, through which I manoeuvred nearly seamlessly, had it not been for those two times when I came to a dead end, announced by the hallway narrowing into another sickening orifice that was too small to fit through and led to someplace I'd rather not visit.

And all the while, the thought that some demon-baby might be crouching in some dark corner sickened me. I hoped to never feel its venom again.

After a while, I felt relief as I exited the organic areas and left the tiny stone sub-corridor, taking a left to the gigantic stone door. I had nearly reached the keypad, fumbling with the card as I went, when I heard a wheeze behind me.

A dark human silhouette stumbled towards me, limping.

I raised the double barrel shotgun, my means of dealing with zombies.

But then, light finally stretched across its face, and I saw who it was. Someone that I had missed, though not to the extent that I'd want them returning as a zombie.

It was Tim.

Nothing seemed to be following the plan that had taken shape in my mind. First Tim had left me without my liking, and now he returned without my liking. Great. My good friend and fellow marine had returned as a damned zombie. I quickly raised the gun, knowing that it would be difficult to shoot him, wanting to get it all over with as quickly as humanely possible. He continued to stumble forward. My finger tightened around the trigger, and yet some force kept me from pulling it. He wasn't armed; perhaps I should just run away. I couldn't bear to shoot him.

But then he startled me.

"Nik?" he wheezed.

Hmm, unless I am mistaken, zombies don't talk.

"Tim? *Tim*?" I ran forward, throwing my gun aside. It was Tim, in person, alive! Alive. It couldn't be. I had seen him die in full graphic detail; nothing had remained but his bloodied boots and a mist of blood in the air. What was happening? Was it a trick? At the moment, I didn't care. It was Tim.

As soon as he reached me, he nearly collapsed, grasping on to my arm for support.

"Jesus," he muttered.

"Tim," I said, looking at him somewhat suspiciously, though pleased as well.

"What happened, Tim? You can't be here, you're dead."

He nodded gravely.

"What happened?"

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head, glancing at his feet, which as I noticed, were bare. "I remember the gigantic demon thing grinning at me and swinging its arm. And then everything went black, and a while passed. And all of the sudden, I was swimming in this liquid, and I was in a sort of rounded place, one made of flesh. I was swimming in this liquid that stung, along with other people. My clothes were gone and the fluid burned at me furiously. Oh," he shook his head, his voice faltering. "It was horrible. And then, this filthy looking hole opened up at one end and began sucking in all of the humans. I didn't want to find out what was on the other side. I grasped to this bone-like protrudence firmly, and then adrenaline shock came in."

He paused, glancing downward thoughtfully. "It was horrible," he repeated.

A while passed.

"What happened then, Tim?" I asked, wanting to hear the rest.

He shuddered. "It was like... a processing facility, like I was in the stomach of some gigantic being, and it was working us up, melting us into... something, I can't describe. I had a feeling that its job was to be completed once we all fell into the orifice. So I clung on. And then, strength came to me, adrenaline, and I ripped the sharp horn or bone thing straight out of the fleshy wall. Blood oozed out, mixing with the waist-deep fluid. Horrible. And then I used the sharp bone, swinging it madly until I cut through the flesh wall and waded out."

I let him stop. I guess when you die in hell, there's no escaping it. I shuddered.

Tim continued on his own accord.

"Fortunately, there were stone corridors around me while the gigantic organ behind me pulsed. Behind it, where the orifice probably led, I couldn't see, but I heard

screams, human screams.” His body shook violently again. “And then I wandered around and ran into a zombie. It was unarmed and I managed to subdue it and take its clothes and armour. Unfortunately, its shoes weren’t my size, so I went on barefoot.

“After wandering for a while, I found a familiar corridor you and I had traversed, the hall where you were gored by that thing. I walked forward, following what I thought to be your path, and so, here I am. I’m so tired,” he added. “Can we stop and rest somewhere? I’m going to collapse.” He slumped furthermore, as if to prove this.

“I don’t know where, Tim,” I said quietly.

He nodded curtly. “So what happened to you?”

“Oh, not much,” I answered. “I came to this door and—”

My wandering mind suddenly snapped. If Tim had retraced our steps from the corridor and passed through the courtyard, perhaps he had seen his own remains, where he had died. But that was a paradox, an impossibility...

“Tim, does this mean that you are dead now? That you are a soul?”

“I guess so,” he replied softly, poking himself testily. “Go on, then. Tell me your story, I want to hear it.”

Right.

I continued. “Well, I came to this corridor here and the keypad wouldn’t let me pass, so I went in this hall here,” I pointed to the sub-corridor. “After looking and wandering, I found the card required to open this door, and that’s basically it.”

“Why so much trouble for this door?” asked Tim, his eyes travelling along the stone engraving.

“It said ‘palace’, the keyboard. I don’t know whose palace it is, for whom it serves its purpose, but it felt logical to try to get inside.” I smiled. “Remember? A leader? Someone behind this entire thing?”

He smiled back. “When did we decide that there was a leader?”

I laughed. “What now? Do you feel ready to continue?”

“Honestly, no.”

“Alright. I say we go through this door, you hang back and I’ll take care of the monsters. However, you can’t be unarmed,” I said and threw him his plasma rifle. “Still, let me do all of the shooting. Only when things get out of hand or we become outnumbered should you come in. Anyway, once inside, keep an eye out for a possible spot to rest. Come on.” I moved to the keypad and inserted the card.

‘ACCPT’ glowed the keypad and the door heavily rose upwards, grinding as stone rubbed against stone, allowing a haze of dirt particles to waver between the doorframe, acting as a transparent shield as it gathered in our eyes.

We stepped through and left all organic and disgusting behind us.

We entered a tiny hallway that soon expanded into a gigantic circular room. It was absolute darkness in the hallway and our eyes jumped around aimlessly, searching for the tiniest beacon of light. As we edged across the wall, using it to guide ourselves, I fumbled for the flashlight. Tim had last had it when he had been struck by the gigantic demon, and I hadn’t found it afterwards. I guess that explained quite a lot.

Fortunately, a dim red light came from somewhere ahead, bouncing off of the walls. To my complete surprise, there were various supplies scattered about; a couple of machinegun clips along with an ammunition belt for the chaingun. There was also this odd helmet-like object lying on the ground, glowing lightly red. I paused, looking at this

sight in amazement. They were supplies, human supplies. Could it be? They implied one thing, but I found it impossible to believe.

Tim followed, his gaze following mine.

“Could it be that we’re not alone here?” I finally asked after allowing everything to sink in for a few good minutes.

“I—I don’t see how,” said Tim.

“Oh well, who cares, as long as we have ammo.”

Feeling curiosity creep into me, I picked up the helmet and held it up, examining it. It looked like a bulky version of otherwise standard-issue stuff, like a marine helmet on steroids. Two adjoining plates came together, with an odd sort of screen in the front that fell to cover a part of the face; this thing didn’t seem to great to use for protection. One thing was certain, though: it looked a lot more sleek than that half-assed gear we’re issued. Deciding to get a feel of it (and maybe figured out its exact purpose), I lowered it on my head and felt something surge through me. It was like energy. It snapped through my spine, straightening it. I felt an invisible force creep from it and spread through my body. It continued to enwrap me, adding an odd reddish glow to my skin—

As if that wasn’t bad enough, I heard a hiss, and I saw the bobbing red eyes of three imps stumble through the darkness, one on the roof and two crouching, sneaking along the ground menacingly.

Reddish light under my skin surged through my body, a dull orange in the darkness illuminating me, like a beacon for all imps to see.

Aw crap.

But then energy came to me, a sudden burst of adrenaline. As the reddish hue reached my eyes, everything blurred, but I could still see in the darkness. Everything was indistinct; the imps were just black blotches, spots in a Rorschach test of dark colours. They swirled and moved to and fro. I don’t know why, but this made me angry. My adrenaline level rose.

Unconsciously, I threw my gun aside. What did I need it for? I was going to take on these bastards with my bare, human hands.

They were blots. I rushed forward with surprising speed and punched the black spot, and I saw it fly away in a mess of different parts, all black. I saw the other two shapes, moving in fluid motions, wavering.

I rushed forward.

Someone was screaming at the top of their lungs. And then I realised that it wasn’t the imp that I had just dematerialised. It was me.

Another imp, another black shape.

BAM!

I smacked it with my fist and it fell to the ground.

Quickly, I spun around, feeling the adrenaline continue to surge through my veins, like in red energy, like the red halo that surrounded me. I ran, but I felt like I had infinite energy. And I loved it, the feeling of infinite power, of having the ability to accomplish anything. I rushed forward.

There was another black mass before me. I ran towards it, silently laughing. Or was it silently? The scream in the background continued, like that of a banshee. Was it a scream? Was it laughter? It had reached a frequency that could not be placed under any

category. My lungs, my vocal cords also seemed to be capable of anything, everything in me felt great.

“Nik!” I heard a distant voice. Who was Nik?

My feet continued to carry me forward, my vocal cords continued to draw themselves at their very maximum.

“Nik!”

Hmm, the black spot was talking to me. Odd. But I didn’t care. I didn’t have pity, I didn’t feel pity. I didn’t feel pain, but I did feel the energy, the feeling of infinite strength. And I knew I had to use it, I had to kill everything. Everything.

“Nik!”

Suddenly, my eyes adjusted and haze began to fade. And then I realised that my fist was hovering an inch from Tim’s face while his eyes continued to stare at me with absolute fright.

Tim hastily pulled something off my head.

What was going on?

“What the hell was that?” Tim asked, helmet in hand. “Are you alright?”

I shook my head and moved away from him. All of the sudden, I felt tired and realised that my heart was beating at near light-speeds. My vocal cords crackled and began to hurt, my arms, my entire body began to ache. As I was dashing around madly, I had apparently dropped my breath somewhere; and now it caught up to me hastily and I stood there, hunched over, breathing heavily.

“Jesus,” muttered Tim, his wide eyes continually gazing at me.

It took me a while before my breath could remotely allow me to form any sorts of sounds. “What— what happened?”

Tim shook his head in disbelief, still gazing at me. “I don’t know, man. You just started glowing red and yelling, screaming and running around, and you punched the hell out of those imps.” His eyes led me to the three indistinct corpses lying on the ground. “Jesus, you snapped one of them in half! And then you headed towards me and scared the hell out of me as well.” His eyes fell down. “I don’t know. What was it?”

“I don’t know either. It was like, I felt like... I just went berserk.”

Tim nodded and walked forward, mumbling “holy crap” as he stepped over one of the mangled imps.

I also examined the imp. Indeed, its bloodied torso was separated from its legs at the stomach. It was still attached by a few mere strings of flesh and intestines. The thick exoskeleton that usually covered it was snapped in half.

Man!

Still feeling dazed, though the fatigue was slowly wearing off, I followed Tim out of the circular room. Ahead lay an opening that offered light. Not a whole lot of it, but it seemed like a lot after the near darkness of the room where we were. Looking at my hands that had now turned blue, I followed Tim out of the blackness.

Before us stretched the entrance to a palace, one true to its name, though it still was dark and ominous. We were on a stone ledge, while beneath us extended a vast chasm of sorts, ending in a (surprise) pit of lava. On the other side of the chasm, carved into the stone face, rose large pillar-like structures that held an overhang over the ledge that ran parallel to our own. Between the pillars was a gigantic flat rock with a demonic face carved onto its abrasive surface, that of a skull, an animalistic skull. Literally. It was

like that of a goat or some form of horned mammal, though it still held fangs and a low glare that glowered outward evilly, its eyes seemed to glow in the darkness between the two horns that stretched far off to the sides.

Beneath was a gigantic stone door with a similar carving as to that we had seen on the other rocky door. But it wasn't identical, though I couldn't put my finger on a precise aspect; there was definitely a degree of variation, one like those in all handcrafted objects.

To reach the ledge on the opposite side, two stairways dropped from the two sides of our own platform and circled around the chasm until they reached the opposite end in an identical fashion, almost as a mirror image, had it not been for the palace itself.

As we traversed the gigantic chasm, I constantly thought that some monster would charge at us from some unforeseen spot where it had lain hidden from view. When we finally reached the other side, I was oddly surprised and my paranoia began to slowly fade away.

Just then, my weary eyes fell across two large and indistinct shapes lying on both sides of the gigantic door, the majestic entrance to the palace. They were greyish masses, rounded off with what my eyes soon identified as a spine. I considered that it was some other unsound mass of human flesh set there with some unknown purpose, when the greyish thing on the left began to shift. Soon, the right followed, and the two rose in unison. And as they did, everything fell into place. Gigantic limbs uncoiled and flexed, stretching the massive chest from which they sprouted. Almost like a turtle, a comparatively small head rose on a non-existent neck from between the two shoulders. Pushing this monstrosity upwards were two oddly jointed legs that ended in massive claws, as did the arms.

These creatures weren't new to us; I had ineffectually attempted to duel one back in the power generator while Tim made it so it overheated. There, my gun had proven futile against the monster, one much like a hell-knight but bigger, more threatening, with a more evil poise and look.

Tim and I slowly backed away, down the stairs that led over the two ramps that encircled the lava pit.

The two monsters rose to their full and impossible height, stretching upwards and sending a shiver down my spine. They must've been at least five metres tall! But then, they hunched forward in their usual stance, losing height though no ferocity. And then my eyes travelled to an odd collar-type ring that wrapped around their necks. Actually, since they had little neck, the ring wrapped under their gigantic jaw and over the protrusive backbone. From it stretched a gigantic metallic chain that must've been twice as thick as my arm (and I have pretty big arms, too!). These things were tied there as dogs, guarding the entrance to the palace.

Whoever owned this palace must be really paranoid, I thought. This much security in an already secluded realm I simply couldn't explain to myself. Paranoia. Well, the guy had reasons to be afraid because Tim and I were coming.

Now we just had to figure out how to get past the two gigantic hell-knights, call them hell-princes—it seems appropriate.

The creatures roared, first one alone, then the two in unison, their deep growls and roars magnified by the cavernous pit over which we hovered.

One of the monsters began to stumble forward but was soon restrained as the massive chain binding him straightened and strained the collar under its chin. The other beast observed this with a disgruntled look and didn't bother to try doing the same. Instead, it lowered itself forward even more, spread its arms and roared in a universal message for many things, among which there is 'Get away from here!' and the classic 'I'm going to rip you apart!'

At least they were restrained—I wasn't sure what I would've done had they been roaming around freely. So, I made the best of the situation, starting by pulling out my rocket launcher.

"Alright Tim," I said, pushing my eyes forcefully away from the towering, flexing giants we had to inevitably face. "We'll do this systematically. They're tied so they can't go anywhere."

Tim nodded. "We take them out one-by-one?"

I grinned at him. "My thoughts exactly."

As I finished that sentence, my feet began to carry me towards the left hell-prince. As we neared, it roared in a fashion similar to that of his right sibling. It threw its head vigorously left and right, its gigantic teeth chattering in the silence and sending saliva flying in every direction. Its small, beady eyes danced and despite their blackness, flashed at us, and evil glee.

I raised my rocket launcher and began firing at it. With each hit, the monster contorted, stumbling backwards, its feet seeking ground. The rockets left tiny craters of blood, but the monster still held its usual shape. That, I didn't like.

Soon, it was pressed against the gigantic stone wall. It roared in rage, but was cut short as another rocket hit its gut.

Tim had borrowed my double-barrel shotgun and began emptying it at the monster.

With a final rocket and several shotgun blasts, and innumerable ones behind, the creature's stomach spilled open, revealing unearthly insides of all sorts, shapes, and sizes, all gleaming red in the low light. They spread over the floor, standing as a testament to our victory over the gigantic leviathan, the unbeatable beast. Blood spread over the floor and across the catwalk and rolled down into the already-reddened lava. And as the blood pooled around its feet, the second monster howled in absolute rage.

Tim and I edged towards it, carefully placing feet over the wet ground and stepping over the demon carnage.

The monster ahead continued to howl and shift and lean forward to roar at us. Its feet moved forward, but it remained constrained, fighting against the metal that held it back. Teeth flashed in the dim light as giant arms flew swiftly through the air.

I fired, as did Tim. Projectile and lead all flew at it and the creature screamed in a mix of agony and raving. But then something went wrong. I think that Tim's shot, or a ricochet from it impacted the chain in some way. I can't say exactly what happened—it's one of those things that happen and that you don't question. You don't see them, but they make sense. Perhaps it was simply splash damage from my rocket, or a combination of both.

Regardless, the added rage and weakened chain fell together in an explosive solution. As it lunged forward, a loud metallic CLING! came, the unmistakable sound of

breaking metal. The monster drew forward, frighteningly close to us, obviously no longer restrained. Behind it the chain danced as it was dragged over the ground.

The monster rushed at us with blazing speed so that I didn't have any time to fire a rocket at it. It halted and roared, its horrid face contorting into an even more frightful expression in the low light, the expression of pure and unconcealed evil.

Then it glanced back at the chain it was dragging, the one attached to its neck.

Tim and I backed out, around the pit slowly. As we did, Tim fired a shot with his shotgun that hit the preoccupied creature in the side, but it didn't seem to mind at all. It simply continued to look at its chain. I watched as its massive claw reached down and closed around the massive chain. Then, it turned back around swiftly, a depraved and sly grin stretching across its animalistic features and gigantic skull. The pinkish spots where the skin was tighter only deepened in their tone.

The creature stepped forward and its arm flew out, flinging along with it the torn chain. What had once restrained the creature had now become its primary weapon. Its gaze continued to pierce through us as it swung its chain, a massive whip of solid metal.

Tim and I dodged to the sides, hearing the heavy metal fall where we had stood moments before.

It was a devastating weapon. Its sheer size and the speed with which it was wielded burned fear into me. A single blow could probably separate a person; disfigure them into something with few recognisable organs remaining. I could see it, the monster effortlessly swinging the chain down and breaking a skull, flattening it along the hard ground, a level image of what once had held dimension, a flat projection showing shattered skull and blood with loose skin stretching over it...

The image still burning in my mind, I swiftly dodged another blow.

At least the weapon was slow to raise, to bring to bear. That gave us some time, enough time to fire once or twice, moments before dodging death again.

It was a true demon, an evil smile set upon its disgusting face, drawing closer, swinging a massive chain of steel. I could see it in slow motion as it measured its steps, walking softly on its odd legs, the gigantic chain swinging leisurely from its hands lightly as I could dangle a mere rope.

Another shot that did little good.

Our hopeless battle had long since moved out on the right platform that joined the two sides of the chasm. It was a steel platform supported by beams underneath that ran into the cliff face. Each time the monster brought the chain down, slamming it across the metallic ground, the platform shuddered.

The monster was heavy enough, but the chain only weakened the foundation furthermore.

The platform was going to collapse.

Tim and I had to be ready, to stand alert at the edge. And yet, we couldn't draw the creature off the platform.

Yes, it was a plan. A true plan! But how to make it work? It required some serious timing and masterful dodging skills.

We edged towards the far edge of the platform that joined the ledge beneath the stone door from which we had come. The creature thundered behind us, cutting through the air with its whip.

And then I heard creaking, metallic creaking, the sound I had been waiting for. The platform itself shifted and swayed and the creature paused, balancing itself and looking down at the ground questioningly. Its broad and grinning expression faded, though it lingered on, eternally. Its facial features were simply arranged in this manner, in an ever-present smile.

“Now!” Tim yelled. He was closer to the ledge and jumped forward. I followed, throwing myself on the stone ground, leaving the metallic adjoining and unstable platform behind.

Beams gave way as rock crumpled and the platform leaned towards the pit and finally broke free of the rock that bound it while the demon that had enjoyed little time of freedom stumbled along with it, gigantic feet failing to find any ground arms swinging madly, yet in slow motion at the same time. Soon, the monster and what fell alongside it was a mere shadow, a silhouette against the fiery red, moments before it was swallowed by the churning lava. The long metallic chain followed, coiling itself over the magma and sinking in, melting and joining the swirling patterns.

With a final heave, a wave of lava washed against the rock as equilibrium set in once again, as much equilibrium as possible in the ever-churning molten rock. As I gazed on, the lava began to burn my eyes. I had become used to low light and the fiery stone wasn't too pleasing to my pupils.

Silently, Tim and I set out and circled the pit around on the left platform through which we had originally walked and reached the first monster. On the other side, the monster remains smelled awfully already and had turned a darker brown colour. Whatever objects had held a definite shape had now melted into the pool that fell as a waterfall in the lava below.

It was a great relief to be finally standing at the door for which we had fought so valiantly. The portal before us automatically began to lift itself and beyond laid another dark corridor.

Well, at least no more monsters.

We had just entered the hallway when one of the skeleton-like revenants charged at us, its transparent skin glowing oddly in the near-darkness, as did its burning eyes. Soon, the green glow was put in sharp contrast to the red exhaust of one of its fiery rockets as it dashed through the air towards Tim and I.

After the two hell-princes, this thing was still a piece of cake.

We scattered and threw ourselves back out the door and on the ledge. The revenant advanced, screeching loudly as it did and launching more rockets. Its rockets were answered by my own as I launched two in quick succession. But the revenant continued to charge forward while I continued to shoot at it. It trailed flesh, bone, and armour as it dashed forward, until it fell to the ground, a mere headless torso of what had one been a formidable monster. Behind it, it had left a ten metre or so line of carnage and demonic armour, still steaming.

There in the scattered debris I found a small and partially shattered launching device that still housed eight good missiles. Hmm, I guess it's a good thing this thing decided to drop by when it did—I had used up quite a bit of rockets on the two guardians. Still fumbling and loading rockets, I followed Tim back inside.

Tim and I, now more weary, progressed into the dark hallway and found a junction. After some investigation and peeking here and there, we were able to conclude

that both hallways rejoined at the other side of the wall in front of us, so we circled around to find a small bunch of imps, and soon, they all resembled the revenant out front.

Below us, the ground was cracked and decorative floor plates that had perhaps once been magnificent in their execution were now nothing more than rubble standing as a testament of time, only crumbling more with the passing years. At one corner, such an opening progressed into a somewhat downward tunnel cut straight into the rock, beyond which lay darkness.

Darkness offered temporary protection, a place to rest. I hoped that the tunnel wasn't too big and ended abruptly. I needed sleep, and Tim had openly discussed his weariness.

"Tired?" I asked.

Tim nodded. "Very."

I edged towards the opening and lowered myself testily inside. I hoped that some demon wasn't crouching under me, examining my kicking feet with extreme interest and wondering what kind of stupidity I was to lower myself in a dark spot. Tinged with adrenaline and ready to shoot out, I soon found the bottom of the empty pit. Something had gnawed away at the ground and left a hole, that was all.

More frightening thoughts came: maybe this had once been the home of something unpleasant, or maybe even a nest of some sort. A nest. But for what? The spider things? Or something we hadn't really seen up until this point, and we had seen quite a lot.

Soon, Tim followed.

"Rest," I told him. "I'll keep guard, and then we can switch."

Though I couldn't see it, I was sure that he nodded in agreement and soon fell into the world of sleep.

My eyes trained on the hole above from which light filtered and scanned for anything that might pass by, and sort of danger. We had no means of escape were some monster to decide to join our party. And even if I killed it, if it was massive, it'd block the opening and we'd be stuck in a rough, tight cave with an odoriferous monster hanging over our heads.

Hours flew by and Tim slept silently. Beyond the opening of the cave came mostly silence with the occasional shuffling of feet and whirring of opening doors. And as these sounds rose from the silence, I tensed up and my finger strained against the trigger. The cave was not a good spot to rest and hide, but it was the most suitable from all of the ones I had seen thus far.

More shuffling feet. Or shuffling claws? I didn't want to know.

But we were in the palace; finally I could die knowing that I had done something, not simply fall as a coward of sorts. Perhaps take down the overlord of this palace. But to what exactly did this temple belong? Satan? Some other powerful figure? Or maybe, I thought with my hopes soaring out of the cave and into the hall, maybe the one masterminding this entire operation, this invasion.

Tim stirred in his sleep.

How much time had passed? Surely enough.

"Tim," I said, nudging his shoulder. "Wake up."

And that's exactly what he did with a groan too loud for comfort. Any passing hell prodigy would've heard us. Fortunately the tranquil halls beyond remained unbroken from the time being.

"My turn, eh?" He asked, yawning.

"Yeah, I'm tired too. Wake me up in three or four hours, alright?"

Tim said nothing, but he was probably gesturing in some way to show his understanding, a gesture lost in the black void that was our cave.

I hadn't slept in what seemed ages because I feared my dreams. But as sleep pulled darkness over me, I was prepared, I knew the horror that was about to ensue in my mind, and the nightmare set in.

Mars.

It hovered there, red and foreboding as usual, its surface littered with craters offering little kindness. I could see why the planet was named after the Roman god of war; its surface, though still, seemed to be invisibly moving, restless, vibrant. It could be called many things, but certainly not peaceful. Its deep red patterns displayed one emotion, one thought: war. And war meant bloodshed, violence, nothing but red.

And then came Mars' satellite, Phobos, the usual ominous red with the churning lava. The human screams slowly rose from the screaming silence.

No.

Phobos zoomed through space and the blue jewel of Earth slowly neared. This time, as Phobos drew closer to Earth, I didn't hang back and observe from space; I tailed the satellite as blue oceans and continents filled the sky and drowned out the stars, the last remaining pinpoints of light lost themselves in the blue halo of the atmosphere. Before me, the moon fell through the atmosphere, glowing a bright red as friction heated its rock surface. And yet, the satellite that had now become a meteorite did not disintegrate, it didn't fall apart, burn into nothingness. It fell further and further until the ground that stretched below rushed upwards.

Then came a brilliant explosion and a massive shockwave that proliferated outwards in a perfect circle of brown dust and all else it caught with it. The wave went on and eventually faded away into a brownish haze that was swept away by the wind.

I could hear the screams issued from the moon as they mixed with the screams of the other humans, those around the globe. Roots, like tendrils, spread from Phobos and seeped into the Earth, spreading, branching, and extending further. I could see it all in the distance, the pulsating veins that soon reached the oceans. And the water turned a fiery, churning blood red, turbulent in the hot winds that swirled and blew from all directions. Human screams mixed in with inhuman growls and cries and they rose from the ground, from everywhere, beasts.

They came from all of the dark corners and cracks of Earth, of humanity, of society, rising like plants that came from the seed that was once Phobos. They were hell's children. They rose and ran amok in the anarchy that had crept over all of Earth. They tore at the confused and frightened human beings, sending blood high in the air that fell back down as rain.

Buildings that remained after the blast were shattered as strange forms filled the skies. Plants withered away, revealing harsh, brown dirt beneath. Unearthly sounds and inexplicable images filled the air and confused all that still had their own minds. And

with these sounds and images came insanity, insanity washed away as their brains were pried away from their clutching hands.

Screams came, more and more, coming from the violent reddish sea...

Grief came over me with such force that it threw me back into reality.

Tim sensed this. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," I said, slowly catching my breath and forcing the memories of my dream that still remained away.

"You still have an hour to go. Get some more rest."

"No," I said confidently. I didn't want to go back in the world of horror, the prophetic dream that constantly haunted me.

"Do you want to go on, then?" Tim asked.

After a moment, I said, "Yes," and we began to crawl upwards and out of the cave and into the stone hallway. Soon we stood there amidst our dusty surroundings, pausing for no reason, simply to think, to focus. With immobile determination, Tim and I walked forward towards the corridor's end.

At the other end lay another massive door that slowly began to whirr as cables tugged at the massive stone, causing it to drift upwards.

Beyond I saw another massive courtyard, this time roofless, with a pentagonal shape and a small building in the centre. A catwalk of stone ran along the green marble that covered large portions of the walls, decorated with the same disgusting faces Tim and I had seen in the other courtyard. And there was something else in the courtyard, something to one side of the centralised building. I strained for a better look, but I knew that I'd have to get close to find out.

Tim and I rushed inside.

And there stood a gigantic brain, though I could tell it was more than a mere mass of grey... The brain sat on a platform that was mounted on several pairs of mechanical legs. The platform itself was dynamic and fluid, curving downward from where the bottom jaw should have been and ending in a large nozzle that only spelled trouble for us. Beneath hung some machinery and tubes. From there extended the legs, six of them, reaching the spot of pivot, a rounded disk, from which extended the end of the leg, sharp, like a knife, reaching one more point of pivot before cutting into the ground with its edge. Yes, it looked like a spider, despite the fact that it had six legs. I suppose it was the threatening look, the dynamics of the creature itself, I really cannot say. My eyes took all of the information in, the running tubes, stray circuits, and brain, and then a realisation came into my mind: outlined on the front of the brain was a face, like a skull with the jaw missing, with two red embers glowing in the eye pits.

I heard a distant whisper.

"Frequento es accessio..."

I shudder ran through me.

And then my eyes fell to the human figure standing besides the gigantic spider. It was the scientist Tim had shot with his pistol back on Mars, by the portal. The same one who had refused to issue answers, who had the odd tattoo on his shoulder...

Light flickered across his gleeful face, magnified his wicked features, his large crooked smile that, as it stretched across his face, wrinkled up everything else too, from the bends running from the corners of his eyes to his wrinkled forehead that extended all the way back and across his bald head.

"Ah," he said, his eyes flashing. He seemed to have been discussing, or doing something, with the gigantic spider-brain before we had intruded. He didn't seem a bit surprised. "Hello."

"You," I said, announcing my recognition.

"Yes, I. As I am sure you have figured out by now, you really cannot get rid of me. Your friend here should know from first hand experience, no?" His eyes travelled to Tim. "You know, when you put that bullet in my head, I did not feel anything. A pity that you hate me and yet you cannot cause me pain. But how can you hate me and not know me?"

"I know who you are. You are the cult leader, it's your fault this whole thing started, it's all your fault." I attacked him with my glare. "Killing you did no good."

"Killing me? You never killed me, you fool. I have been dead for more years than you can imagine. I was killed many millennia ago for being a Satanist. I was decapitated.

That was the last time I ever felt pain.” He noticed my confused expression and continued. “We had been trying to accomplish this for many years. You probably do not understand how someone killed so long ago is so up to date, with all this technology and what not. Or did that thought cross your mind at all? The modern mind is very incompetent, only an aged one, one with experience succeeds. My mind is ripe; it is prepared and was prepared. You see, chance favours those who are ready, those who are prepared. See, we have our ways of observing your world, as more human souls come here, we can see their past, we know what has happened. We watched and watched. We watched the rise of technology, its birth, rise, and development that would inevitably lead to its downfall. And with the rise of technology, we saw opportunity break over the horizon.”

Hmm, everything was getting more and more twisted as he continued.

Behind the spider and the scientist, several rocks rolled down the stone rim and down on the courtyard floor below. I found this puzzling and hoped that it wasn't some other beast lurking behind those rocks. The sound of falling stones was distant and lost in the scientist's guileful voice; he took no notice. And so, I looked back at the sad excuse for a human being that stood before me, gleeful in its sick plans.

“Now, as I am sure you have noticed, assuming that there is even the tiniest spark of intelligence within that mind of yours, the Mars base was built long ago, ways before they officially announced its existence, and for years it remained secret. The UAC and military were going to disclose it, but then they had an accident. They were messing around with the portal technology when a glitch in their software caused a mistake in the final co-ordinates. Mind you, this was the first time they ever tried this technology. So, they established a link with us. But it was no mistake, no accident. It was fate, the inevitable. That, and the proximity of our worlds between the fabric of space-time: this realm is only a proton's-width away from yours. Our worlds sit there, nearly infinitely close, waving in the ten-dimensional ethereal macrocosm. I had been waiting. You see, I was chosen to go, being most loyal, as soon as any opportunity struck. I had waited for a long time. Once you die, you do not age, you do not feel pain. So I, along with several ‘minions’ as you might call them stepped through and attacked. We quickly eliminated everyone in the room.

“To remove all evidence, I killed the two monsters and then borrowed an explosive from your military base... you people keep a lot of them. Ah, the military mind. It is so absurd, and yet this absurdity only helped us. I can only thank you. Everything was engulfed in the explosion and all evidence was removed. The UAC report reads, and they still believe it to this day, that this early experiment in portal technology was unstable, the link was unstable, and that had caused the explosion. So, they moved to more mundane, less dangerous experiments where the portals they opened were tiny and allowed for the transfer of smaller objects.

“Meanwhile,” he talked on. My eyes travelled to the spider. It gently, almost invisibly shifted around so the bluish muzzle of its gigantic gun pointed at us. As its red eyes danced across me, I felt another chill.

“I sneaked into one of the supply ships returning to Earth. There were plenty of supplies there, left over from the journey. So there was food and water and the long journey fared well. There, on Earth, I contacted a person you know as Commander Briggs. His head is as dense as a neutron star, but perhaps that is why he was so easy to

persuade. Soon, he joined the cult. And with his control, I was disguised as a scientist and given all of the security clearances, and from there I went to Mars. I think that you can figure out the rest.”

Briggs. Was he down here too? He was zombified, but what did that mean? Where did zombies go when they died? I shook myself, no point in pointless pondering.

“And now that we’ve used Phobos, Deimos will follow, a way to reach Earth, the routing station set upon its otherwise bland surface was our first target, but first we had to start through the portal. We have, however, managed to get hold of the station. And now, hell itself is assembling there through the use of teleportation points. It has become more than a mere method of transportation, however; Phobos has become a hell of sorts, one much like this one, but smaller. But it is about to grow. It is the seed, you see. And it has been planted on Earth. Deimos is the last move we need to make for complete control.”

Had they reached Earth already? It was impossible, he had to be bluffing. Then again, how long had Tim and I spent in hell? I had lost track of time. It could’ve been two or three days, or two or three weeks, which was surely enough for them to reach Earth. It couldn’t be. I pushed the thought from my mind.

“But we caught your little friend who thought it clever to hide it from us, and now that it is in our own possession, there is nothing standing in our way. It was the last piece required to complete our plan.”

What the hell? I thought.

“Caught who?” I asked. The scientist ignored me.

“Perhaps stepping through the portal and coming here was the biggest mistake you ever made. If you had only seen hell, you would have never come; you would have remained back on Mars, cowering in a tiny storage room, jumping at the grunts and roars that came from beyond the door.”

“I’ve seen hell,” Tim told him.

“Me too,” I chimed in, recalling all of the impaled twitching bodies and hanging corpses.

“Oh, no you have not. The real hell,” he said, gesturing widely with his hands, “the real hell lies beyond these very walls.”

In the silence that followed I became aware of distant screams, echoing loudly as if in waves.

“But the impaled—”

He grinned more. “Oh, those are mere decorations. The true hell lies beyond these here walls. You are so clueless, so naïve.” He stopped and turned to the motionless gigantic spider. “What do we do now?”

There was silence, or perhaps a distant, raspy whisper that was as good as silence. In either case, I felt as if the spider was indeed talking to the man, talking in a way that we weren’t to hear.

I couldn’t stand anymore. I raised my shotgun at the man. “Now it’s time I blow your ass away!”

He raised his hands in a gesture of carelessness. “Go ahead. You will just send me to some other part of hell. Where else am I to go? You know you cannot kill me.”

“See you later, then,” I muttered coldly and pulled the trigger. In the bloody mess that followed, I heard the spider’s legs shift mechanically and I saw it slowly drift to the side. Now it’s your turn, dirtbag, I thought, and pulled out my rocket launcher. The spider

stood there, examining me with its red eyes... It was absolutely expressionless, and yet I felt that it had emotions, that it was a lot more complex than inferred through its blank expression and disgusting face. My eyes fell to its pulsating veins that seemingly merged with circuits and wires and tubes that ran along from the back of its brain into the base while some continued and encircled the legs...

And then my observations were cut short as all hell broke loose.

It was an American Revolution type of thing; I really can't say who struck first, Tim, the gigantic spider, or myself. But it happened fast, and before I even knew it, the world around me warped in a twisting frenzy of the dim colours that constantly surrounded me. The spider, knowing its size and all, was surprisingly mobile, jumping to the side and softly, yes, softly! landing to my far right, the muzzle of its gigantic gun opening in a rain of heavy machine gun fire. It was a more powerful chain-gun than my own, which made sense. The creature's stable platform and powerful-looking legs looked as if they could support a quite heavy weight. Me, I doubt I could carry a 500-kilo gun as well as all its ammo.

But the gun was definitely bigger. It was audible, the difference. The gun echoed heavily, the ground trembling as it did. The sound was deeper, the bullets impacted more loudly, and it all fell into a sort of rhythm that danced in one's head.

Tim answered the rain of invisible with waves from his blue plasma, plasma that stopped the bullets of the spider as they drew near to his body. The monster jerked sideways then back, its expressionless face staying bland, though it radiated a sense of pain, of displeasure. And this feeling grew inside of me until I almost felt a sort of pity for the damned thing.

That is, until Tim's gun sputtered and ran out of ammo and the thing began to fire furiously again. It was big, and it frightened me just how much ammunition it could carry at once.

But this was undoubtedly it, the leader Tim and I had disbelievably discussed over and over, continually telling each other wrong. It was the leader. And how was I sure of this? Well, none of the monsters we had come across so far had a brain the size of Alaska. Some were smart, or at least showed flickers of intelligence, and some were plain brainless marines turned brainless zombies. But this was smart, definitely smart. It was discussing something with the evil scientist... It was co-ordinating this entire operation.

It was the mastermind.

I fired rockets at it and it, in its surprising grace, ducked and moved to the side, the missiles impacting against the wall behind it with an amazing show of lights. This continued for a while before one of my rockets found the ground where one of its feet lay. There was a loud explosion and the foot recoiled, charred, but still functional.

The creature had opportunity to fire at me again and did so. I ran in an unpredictable manner watching as dirt spurted upwards at the impact of the bullets around my feet. In my zigzagging, I made it so my general direction was Tim, who was left rather useless after exhausting his remaining power cells.

As I passed by, I threw him my own chain-gun and he ducked to the other side, rolling away and diving as he went.

The monster was fast. It didn't hesitate once and kept its fire on me. Just then, Tim's finger found the trigger and bullets danced across its flesh. It recoiled back yet again and its fire ceased temporarily.

Damn, this thing was tough. Had it not been for our constant fire, the thing might've had enough time to aim properly and hit us. Fortunately, there were two of us. Had it been me, alone, I would've perished by now.

I fired two rockets, and then the spider's red eyes found me. Immediately came rain of heavy fire and I was forced to jump behind the tiny centralised building. The bullets were looking for my face, but instead found the mug of one of the stone carvings. As if the idol was holy, fire ceased immediately and then continued as the monster had turned to Tim.

I took a deep breath.

The rocket launcher wasn't doing much good. I needed something else.

Man, the military had really screwed up my life. If I had only known that joining the marines would lead up to fighting gigantic mechanical spider-monsters in hell, I probably wouldn't have joined. After laughing at the stupid tale, I would've used my classic laugh, 'When the going gets tough, I get going,' and walked away. It was in my personality to not get involved. I didn't care. So why did I care now? I was the type of person who, when spoken to inaudibly, wouldn't ask for the comment to be repeated. I'd simply mumble something inaudible back.

What was I doing here? This wasn't me. Why had I joined? Curses to everything alcoholic and bubbly! I had wasted away my life. All was wasted. I had joined the military, that was my mistake. And now I was fighting gigantic brains in the very depths of hell itself.

Oh joy.

I shook my head. I was an idiot, but I wouldn't let Tim fight alone.

I noticed that the building behind which I stood had doors. Well, of course it had doors! Why else would it be there? I pushed lightly on one of the doors, engraved with the usual beast, and it slowly slid upwards.

And before me stood the biggest damn gun ever, standing atop a metallic stand from which ran the usual tubes and wires and ran into the numerous machinery and things built into the walls, dodging the panels and steaming pipes. But these details were cast away at the mere sight of the gigantic gun.

My rocket launcher was a tiny Japanese person in contrast to the metallic Godzilla that I saw.

It had a large nozzle mounted upon the dark, metallic body of the gun. It was covered in intricate panels and things that curved and spun around it. From the two sides sprouted two tubes that ran directly into a protrusion on the bottom, which was unmistakably a gigantic power cell. Behind it was the grip that had a black rubberised part that stuck out slightly. And behind that was a massive shoulder-mount that rested the gun against one's body.

It was huge.

In the distance, I heard the echoes of Tim's chain-gun, answered by those of the spider. Any time now, he would be running out of ammunition.

What a huge gun!

Oh well, no time to sacrifice a goat in gratitude! I had to get going and help Tim. Quickly, I pulled the rocket launcher off of my shoulder and held it in my left hand while with the other, I hoisted the big freakin' gun, call it a BFG, and using all of the muscle in my right arm, carried it away.

As I neared the corner of the building, Tim went flying from behind it, dashing backwards and firing a constant stream of fire before, jumping away to rest beside me. In the distance, I heard the mechanised sound of the gigantic beast drawing closer.

Tim was panting.

“How much ammo?”

He shook his head. No?

“Here,” I told him, offering him the rocket launcher. He took it with great appreciation. That is, before his eyes fell to the BFG. He grinned, and his grin brought a great deal of warmth inside of me.

“What’s—what’s that?”

I shrugged. “I dunno, a BFG, I guess. I don’t remember this toy from the UAC listings. Must be something new, something secret.”

He nodded, and with new energy and hope granted by the sheer size of my new weapon, said, “Let’s go!”

We charged from behind the corner, making it unnecessary for the spider to draw any closer.

And around the bend lay the awkward human skull, reddened eyes, gigantic brain, and mechanical legs, all moulded into one dynamic creature with a silver tinge, broken by its deeply red eyes and blue chain-gun composed of the stout cone ending in the bluish nozzle, all of them made of curved sheets of metal, as if great care had gone into the building and designing of this monster. Its platform was undoubtedly dynamic, almost elegant. The entire creature would’ve been so, save for the massive grey brain that lay behind the skull-like face.

It screeched, a high-pitched and raspy screech that irregularly pierced through the air. Soon, its sound was replaced by rapid machine-gun fire.

Tim and I scattered and Tim fired a rocket at it. Meanwhile, I examined the gun, looking for a trigger. Damn it! What was this entire recent tendency for military guns to lack a trigger? This was really starting to piss me off!

Not seeing anything else, I pushed the black, slightly-protrusive part of the handle back into its metallic frame and I heard a whirr. The sound grew and grew into a steady whine that filled everything. Then there came a moment of silence that I considered the gun to be a big freakin’ piece of crap. However, the nozzle buckled and the entire gun began to shake wildly. Never mind.

Finally, after what must’ve been five seconds since I pulled the trigger, the front end of the gun erupted in greenish-white light that swallowed all around it as it finally drifted away from the gun with blazing speed, then it suddenly hastened and continued at a steady pace, lazily floating ahead. Hmm, I had just concluded that it was impossible to hit a target with such a slow-moving discharge, when lightning began to erupt from the ball itself.

Back on Mars, I had one of those plasma-lamps, the ones with the central core placed on a stand, all inside a glass sphere. When on, purplish-blue strands of plasma danced over the central core, their steady rays gliding over the glass ball. As I watched the green thing drift forward, I couldn’t help but see the similarity. Greenish lightning in wicked forms shot out from the ball and hit the spider as the lightning’s base slowly glided along the ball’s surface whilst the end of it danced wildly, chaotically over the creature. More and more lightning came as it rotated towards the creature and disappearing as the ball continued to spin. I noticed that the lightning seemed to go for the creature’s brain. Perhaps it sought organic matter.

And speaking of organic matter, it's a good thing Tim had jumped away, or I felt that he might've also been a target to the dancing plasma.

Tim launched two more rockets and the creature jumped away. By then, I had fired another shot and I watched it drift across the air. The unaware monster stumbled into it, the greenish ball of energy splattering over one of its legs. Immediately, the dissipating green halo revealed the charred surface below. The leg was still there, though it didn't seem to be functioning judging from the way the spider began to limp away from us, using its five remaining legs.

Tim fired another missile rocket at it, and he narrowly missed. The creature turned and began to limp backwards while keeping steady fire on us. This prevented me from firing another glob of high-energy plasma at it and allowed for its escape. At the far end towards which it headed, one of the doors silently slid open. And as the creature staggered inside, I heard it, or felt it, whisper something again. It was the same silent, raspy hiss, an inaudible command.

And with that, our attention was drawn away from the receding mastermind. At that moment, hundreds upon hundreds of imps began to pour out of everywhere, like cockroaches appearing from beneath all of the hidden corners and bends. Doors opened and they came in, others teleported in a fiery red flame, a blast of hot air serving as a shockwave. Some crawled over walls and others poured out of the top of the buildings. They all walked on fours, scuttling, clawing at the ground, malicious eyes dancing.

I glanced down at my gun. My BFG used fifty big freakin' cells at one time, meaning that I had one shot left. Oh crap. It was hopeless, everything was hopeless yet again. Everything. And I felt that even if I had ten more shots with the BFG, it still would've done little good. All was lost.

So I fired the remaining shot and threw the gun to the side, now useless.

The green energy glob of unwholesome goodness floated through the air and into the forest of impish limbs. The sudden contact with organic matter must've done something cause it suddenly blew up while rays shot out from it in all directions. The thing must've massacred at least a hundred imps! Meanwhile, the imps surrounding the blast radius, ones that were merely injured or flung to the side by the shockwave got up, slipping on the slippery-with-blood ground.

I couldn't help but grin before Tim pulled me away and we took off running.

There was nowhere to go, nowhere but the cracked wall behind us, the wall nearly broken from all of the rockets that had hit it, all of the missiles that had missed their original target. Tim saw this and fired another rocket at it. The charred rock easily crumbled away, and we ran towards it. The imps, still pouring out from all the dark crevices and entrances to the terrace, slowly pursued, not hurrying in any way.

Tim and I scrambled over the rubble, Tim hoisting his rocket launcher upwards. As he stood on top of the debris, he fired two rockets at the oncoming horde. It was impossible to miss, for there were now what seemed to be thousands of imps, all dancing and swaying as they slowly pursued us.

The launcher seemed weak after my BFG shot.

I held my shotgun up, and yet I didn't fire. Quickly, Tim and I ran out of the complex and into what the cult leader had referred to as the very hell itself.

The walls fell behind us and our feet scrambled over the reddened dust. Around me were mountains, wicked peaks looking like daggers, stabbing the sky. The sweat added from my physical exertion compounded with the intense humidity. My lungs, now working overtime, burned furthermore. Ahead, I saw the ground nearing to an end. My already-faltering heart fluttered additionally, my stomach churned.

Tim and I stopped on the very edge and glanced down.

It was quite possibly the worst sight I had ever seen.

It was an ocean, a never-ending ocean of blood, red as the peaks around us, red as the dirt beneath us. Even deeper. We stood on a cliff overlooking it as it churned in massive whirlpools and waves that pounded against the cliff beneath us, though they made no apparent noise. Instead, they screamed. And as the waves of red splashed to and fro, echoing loudly in the near silence, we could discern human appendages reaching out from beneath the red liquid. I could see them; thousands of disfigured souls all melted into one. An arm protruded from one's eye socket, a leg from another's shoulder, and they all joined at the waist. One held a skull-like guise that dropped into a mouth that was stretched all the way across its torso, and all of them screamed in unison, pulsating with the sea.

It was the screams that had haunted me.

We were standing at the Shores of Hell.

And it was shocking. It hit me in a way that I lost my balance and stumbled, and yet I caught myself. However, Tim was not as fortunate, and I saw him wave his arms in desperation, then fall forward.

In a swift movement, he grabbed on to the edge of the precipice and looked up at me, a look of horror, revulsion, and pure fear all moulded into one, moulded as the ocean of souls beneath him. He was on the very edge, the edge between life and death.

But then he caught himself; a look of determination and calmness crossed him. Just like me, he had finally come to acceptance with his fate.

"Hold on!" I told him and busied myself with finding a way to wedge my feet as to pull him out.

"Good idea," he replied calmly.

Behind me, I heard the hundreds of inhuman feet nearing, drawing ever closer.

And then Tim screamed. I saw the rock between his fingers crack and break. I jumped forward, but I wasn't fast enough. His hand was inches from mine; his eyes wide with fear piercing into my own. He fell and fell, for what seemed to be eternity. Beneath him, the sea crashed, almost as if it was hungry, ready to be fed. Ready to devour Tim.

I pushed myself back, feeling the agony of our reality grow exponentially.

But why was I so flooded with emotion? After all, I had accepted my fate; I was prepared to die. Tim had also realised this moments before his fall. Everything was alright in my mind. Still, Tim and I had not died together, fighting side by side as I envisioned. He had fallen to his death, alone, in the ocean of souls. And what had awaited him there?

I shuddered.

But I was perfectly fine. I was ready to die.

Determinedly, I spun around to face the oncoming horde of imps and monsters. They knew they had won and had slowed their pace, as if to savour this moment. I saw them, hundreds of them, slowly edging forward, flexing their claws and jaws, their numerous eyes flashing with a sly delight. The shuffling of feet grew louder, they drew nearer.

Slowly they dispersed and formed a half-circle around me as if some invisible force was casting them back. They continued to bristle, to flex their joints in anticipation. I could see their saliva dripping off of their teeth, falling to the red dirt below. And at the same time, the monsters seemed unsure of what to do, of when to commence, as if there was someone who had to start the ceremony.

Several imps hissed at me, and soon others followed.

They swung their arms, gesturing.

I turned to them and smiled. I threw my gun to the side and spread my arms wide, as if welcoming them. And in this manner, I began to walk towards them, my smile and determination not fading. The imps seemed confused and a few drew back as I neared. Perhaps they thought I had some trick up my sleeve.

They continued to hiss and flex.

My feet carried me closer and closer to the wall of organic evil. Behind it, I saw what could be described as another ocean, or perhaps a lake, of bobbing monster heads, all of them snapping with their teeth, scattering saliva high and far into the air.

Finally, I neared them. And with shocking speed and fury, all the monsters threw themselves onto me. Teeth bit and tore as claws ripped into my flesh. It was as if it was raining blood. I could see their eyes, red in the coming darkness, dancing in seemingly slow motion. Blood ran down my body, falling to the ground, reddening it even more than it already was. And yet, I didn't feel any pain. It was as if it was happening to someone else, some figure beside myself, but from first-person perspective.

One of my arms went flying away into the maw of a gleeful imp. And in the melee, imps began to tear at each other and soon there was no true enemy, all the beasts were for themselves. And yet, I remained a central target, heavy claws continued to rip through me. With a swipe of a massive imp arm, I saw my stomach open and entrails uncoil like snakes.

But I still wouldn't die.

Somewhere from behind me, another claw, or mouth, ripped at me, and I saw my body fly away, I was decapitated. And as my head was being carried away in the constant bobbing motion, everything began to swirl into ominous patters. Like those in the portal. Like the lava. Like the sky. Everything swirled and turned until everything around me was a cloud of churning red.

And besides me, in the gyrating void, the river of souls, I saw Tim's grinning complexion

END-Beelzebub's Onslaught

I woke up.

My breathing was fast and I was covered in a thick layer of sweat. Still left in confusion by my dreams, my eyes darted about, taking in the surroundings and trying to put them into place, to identify where I lay. For a while, as my eyes adjusted, I considered being dead, being somewhere elsewhere. But slowly, a lamp over me came into focus. It was a dimmed fluorescent lamp that, despite its dullness, burned into my eyes and stretched beyond my range of vision. With quite a bit of effort, made obvious by my sound effects, I pushed myself up and off of the soft bed where I lay.

And then I came to a realisation: I wasn't on Mars or hell but simply on Earth, and there were no monstrosities and demons tearing at me. No mastermind, no cult leader. There was a base on Mars, though it certainly hadn't fallen to hell's clutches and I had never been on it. They had however lost contact a few weeks ago and a rescue vessel was sent by protocol, though I didn't worry about it; things like this happened. Probably a damn solar flare.

Also, I didn't have any weapon in my hands at the moment. I had overslept and missed dinner at mess hall again.

Damn, I thought. That's the fourth time this week.

My nose was red; it had been buried in the pillow for a lengthy period of time while my dreams caused me to twist and turn. Man, it seemed like I had slept forever. I consulted the watch to determine the length of this 'forever'. I had slept away seven hours. I had also missed duty and the speech Briggs was supposed to host.

Hmm, not to say that's a bad thing. Regardless of whether I had gone or not, I still would've slept. Still, it meant that I should bring a snorkel next time I see him; I was bound to be steeped in his spit.

It seemed that all recent events were taken and somehow twisted and inverted into a very awkward dream. This was, no doubt, in part due to the generous quantity of beer I had taken before drifting back to my room. Actually, 'drifting' isn't an appropriate term. Perhaps 'carried' is better.

I rubbed my face.

I was not a marine on Mars, I reminded myself, coming to closure. I was just a marine on Earth, safe and sound from any demons and hell-spawn. There was no mastermind; there was no plan to invade our tiny planet.

Dinner was past, night had set on. My dreams had been so unnerving, that I still felt tired. A few more hours wouldn't hurt, I thought. Hopefully they wouldn't be as restless as the last six.

Ok, I said to myself. Time for some sleep.

As if on cue to disturb me, there was a knock on the door of my sleeping quarters. I got up to answer it, but the person knocking must've been really in a rush because he burst in before I even reached the door.

It was Axel Messinger, a fellow marine and buddy of mine. Also, he often found himself to be my informant.

"Jesus, Nik, I've been trying to call you for the last three hours. The damn lines are busy as hell, as is the transportation. And for some reason, you didn't pick up when I finally got through, either. I had one helluva time getting here!"

I looked at him questioningly.

“You know the rescue and investigation vessel they sent to Mars? They lost contact a good five hours ago and everyone’s been going through hell to figure out what happened. Anyway, here we are, working our asses off, when NASA call in and tell us they’ve detected a gigantic meteor heading towards Earth, coming from Mars! Apparently someone thinks that having a lost rescue vessel isn’t enough burden on our souls. I tried to call you then, too. Anyway, the meteor went meteorite and hit Earth about a half-hour ago. It hit smack-flat into the heart of Europe.”

What the hell? Quite a soap opera had stirred up while I was out cold.

I sent a look telling him to go on.

“And here comes the freakiest part: informants say that the meteorite didn’t disintegrate in the atmosphere at all! Or, at least not a lot, not as much as they would’ve thought, nor did it break up when it hit solid ground. Those that survived the blast say that there were goddamn monsters coming off of the rock. We all thought it was bullshit until a reliable source confirmed it with video feed. Goddamn monsters! Monsters attacking people and stuff! Can you believe this??? Anyway, come on!”

“What do you mean, ‘Come on’?” I inquired.

He looked at me incredulously and answered quickly.

“We’re one of the military units being sent there!”

THE END

HELL ON EARTH

By Nick P.



PART 1

Waking Into a Nightmare

Introduction-Back into the Fray

Hell. That's where I was. And no, this was no exaggeration for the mere prospect of making a strong point. I was there, all the while I gazed around wearily. Tim and I were running alongside, chased by the sound of thousands of imp feet rolling over dusty ground. This dusty ground didn't last too long, however. And with his usual grace (or lack, thereof), Tim halted, fumbled with his hands, and fell over the cliff. I was more fortunate and retained my balance. It was hell. Literally. There were no towering flames; the sky itself seemed ablaze, with swirls of fiery red clouds. Jagged rocky peaks rose from the harsh, brown mud below. And below, where the ground ceased and the ocean ensued, was a pitiful lake of red, of fire, with the moulded souls of the damned that clawed and screamed at empty air when it came, broken by the wave of red. Fused limbs and torsos pulsated, deformed extremities clawing through the air without purpose, moaning, screaming. It was over this ocean that Tim dangled helplessly.

Talk about a bad day.

"Hold on!" I screamed at him.

He glanced over his shoulder, and the churning, bloody mass that was doom itself. A few limbs waved at the air expectantly.

"Good idea," he retorted.

That's how I usually make them.

But it wasn't funny when a crack opened between the rock he was clutching and the rest of the cliff face. His whitened hands flailed, desperately looking for ground though finding none. Naturally, I dove after him, though I knew it was hopeless. His hand was so close that I could make out the grime that had accumulated under his nails. However, my eyes were drawn to his frightened face, which had contorted itself into a look that no Victorian author could describe. It was a hauntingly real look of fear, disgust, and more fear.

But that was that, and it was over.

I spun around and gazed at the advancing wall, or rather, ocean of imps. There was nothing left to do.

So I calmly walked towards them. And as I did, their limbs flexing, flashing malevolent smiles, I knew that I would soon join that ocean, the one place where Tim had fallen moments before.

Only this wasn't Malibu.

I remember several months earlier—Jacobs, a buddy of mine, dug up a suspicious wad of soiled and indistinguishable mass in his evening's meat stew. After choking for a while, punctuating his act of vomiting with the occasional burst of swearing, he laughed, his reddened face contorting into a smile. All around, others laughed as well. In those days, it had been a competition to see who could come up with the most twisted thing to sneak into someone's food. After a month or two of ear swabs and ice cubes of inedible fluids, the joke had started to wear out. Funny how isolation makes adults act like children. And speaking of ice cubes, just a day before that, I had carefully manoeuvred a few (packages) under a commanding officer's covers while he was sleeping. That's an

unpleasant way to wake up. Then again, he had thrown our favourite pet dog in the refinery a week or so earlier.

Anyhow, Jacobs, after he had stopped 'coughing up hairballs' as we affectionately called it afterwards, turned to me, scratchy voice, red face, and all. "Damn you, Taggart. I'll get you," he said laughing, something not uncommon to hear in those days. He coughed again and, still laughing, said, "Go to hell, Corporal!"

Funny how his remark had come true not long thereafter.

I walked towards the imps and they washed over me like water over stone.

Wow, and I had always hated poetry, too. I guess you really do become poetic when you go to hell. Hey, it worked for that Dante guy. Humour aside, it wasn't funny when it happened to me, but that's because it never did.

Or did it?

I woke up.

Vague images of grinning monsters and tearing claws faded out and took the familiar shape of cold, metallic walls with missing panels and rusty uncovered pipes.

So it was a dream, just a dream.

Fourth time this week. I think. I had lost track of time.

My breathing was fast and I was covered in a thick layer of sweat. Still left in confusion by my dreams, my eyes darted about, taking in the surroundings and trying to put them into place, to identify where I lay. For a while, as my eyes adjusted, I considered being dead, being somewhere elsewhere. But slowly, a lamp over me came into focus. It was a dimmed fluorescent lamp, flickering, that, despite its dullness, burned into my eyes and stretched beyond my range of vision. With quite a bit of effort, made obvious by my sound effects, I pushed myself up and off the harsh metallic ground atop which I lay.

And then I came to a realisation: I wasn't in hell, but I might as well have been. It was Earth, though it bore little difference from hell in recent days, ever since the fire fell from the sky. I wanted to say that there were no demons, no monstrosities to claw and tear at me, though that would be self-denial, unwillingness to accept the situation, the truth that surrounded me. It had started months ago when contact was lost with the bases on Mars, and with the rescue vessel that followed. They thought it was a solar flare. A solar flare. Flare my ass!

My hands ran along the cold, dusty ground, and found my trusty shotgun nearby. I squeezed its handle for reassurance as I squeezed my eyes shut. How much longer would it last?

Meanwhile, somewhere beyond, in the nearby halls, I heard the all-too-familiar lunatic screams.

My entire body ached in the spasms that ran synchronously to my heart. I ran over my chest, feeling for the bullet wound, as it was the final confirmation, the evidence that I really was there and not in another dream, another false reality created in the depths of my mind.

And as I clutched my throbbing wound on the ground, in the flickering light, I thought back to what seemed to be an eternity ago, when I had been lying in my bed in nearly the same way, pondering at what my first dream had meant, thinking about how I had missed Briggs' speech. Searching explanations for dreams I thought were triggered by ethanol. It had been my way of masking the horrible truth that would eventually lead

me to where I stood now, dusty, haggard, in rags, bruised, shot and bleeding, clutching my gun as I pulled at my hair, silently screaming. It was the day that marked the beginning of a new era. Since then, it had all become different. It had become Hell on Earth.

* * *

The further I travelled back in time, the more everything seemed odd and lacking seriousness. I had been mildly worried about facing Briggs. Back then, that topped the list of worrisome duties. After various scenes involving everything ranging from fireworks to darts, he had grown accustomed to having me standing before me while lecturing about air-synthesising machines, burning resources, injuring fellow military personnel, and traversing the off-limits kitchens late at night while in quests to find the exact materials used to prepare the infamous bar stew. Yet somehow, I felt that I didn't feel like having to put of with his idiocy yet again. But it was unavoidable; surely he had noted my absence while he lectured on the importance of keeping trash restricted to the trash bins and other 'exhilarating' topics meant to boost our morale. I wasn't too sad I had missed it.

Hmm, not to say that's a bad thing. Regardless of whether I had gone or not, I still would've slept. Still, it meant that I should bring a snorkel next time I see him; I was bound to be steeped in his spit.

I still felt bad about it. Things were serious now.

It had seemed to me that all recent events were taken and somehow twisted and inverted into a very awkward dream. This was, no doubt, in part due to the generous quantity of beer I had taken before drifting back to my room. Actually, 'drifting' isn't an appropriate term. Perhaps 'carried' is better.

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Dinner was past, night had set on. My dreams had been so unnerving, that I still felt tired. A few more hours wouldn't hurt, I thought. Hopefully they wouldn't be as restless as the last six.

Ok, I said to myself. Time for some sleep.

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I looked at him questioningly.

"You know the rescue and investigation vessel they sent to Mars? They lost contact a good five hours ago and everyone's been going through hell to figure out what happened. Anyway, here we are, working our asses off, when NASA call in and tell us

they've detected a gigantic meteor heading towards Earth, coming from Mars! Apparently someone thinks that having a lost rescue vessel isn't enough burden on our souls. I tried to call you then, too. Anyway, the meteor went meteorite and hit Earth about a half-hour ago. It hit smack-flat into the heart of Europe."

What the hell? Quite a soap opera had stirred up while I was out cold.

I sent a look telling him to go on.

"And here comes the freakiest part: informants say that the meteorite didn't disintegrate in the atmosphere at all! Or, at least not a lot, not as much as they would've thought, nor did it break up when it hit solid ground. Those that survived the blast say that there were goddamn monsters coming off of the rock. We all thought it was bullshit until a reliable source confirmed it with video feed. Goddamn monsters! Monsters attacking people and stuff! Can you believe this??? Anyway, come on!"

"What do you mean, 'come on'?" I inquired.

He looked at me incredulously and answered quickly.

"We're one of the military units being sent there!"

And that's how it had started.

* * *

I didn't doubt him, though I couldn't hold back my natural reaction. And besides, I thought it possible that he was trying to get back at me for that time I had put matches between his toes and pulled out my trusty lighter... all the while he was sleeping after a hard day's work. I did, however, prove a lot of myths regarding foot fungi being flammable as false. After a short while of yelling and jumping around the room, I had explained myself: 'Hey, it's all in the name of science!'

He had started incessantly wearing socks since then. Not that it mattered—Nik Taggart never pulls the same trick twice.

"Bullshit," I said.

He glanced at his watch. "Look, Nik, I haven't got time here. They've got the LZ scrambling all over the board, everything is hectic. I'm not lying! Hurry up, get dressed, and follow me. We've gotta ship out by 0200 hours!"

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The conflicting emotions killed themselves off and I found myself staring forward without any show of emotion. I took a deep breath. Keep it cool, marine, I told myself.

Numbly, I started to put on my military apparel. Meanwhile, Axel continued filling me in on the situation.

"The damned thing fell SMACK!-flat on Vienna. It's like someone was targeting the heart of Europe. Fairly centralised location if you look at it geographically. Whoever the hell did this was smart; they wanted to take down lots of people, good people. Anyway, it's spreading. Monsters roaming around and stuff, scary shit. No one knows what the hell they are, but they came on a meteorite, so we just call them E.T.s. Lots of stuff going 'round the rumour mill, I suggest you steer clear of them."

"Have they nuked them?" I asked, pulling light armour over my uniform.

He shook his head. "I don't think they've done it yet, but they're definitely gearing up to do it. The only thing that's holding them back is the prospect of survivors and such. I think several nations are waiting for full approval from the U. N. before a

massive launch and counter-strike. They're probably holding their emergency meeting now. It shouldn't be long, though. Hell, we might not have anything to do over there if they nuke it."

I was finished and paused for a second.

Axel looked at his watch again. "Well, come on, no time to spare."

He ran out of the chamber and I, still confused and trailing sleep all over the place, followed him out the door.

Something was amiss...

It was evident by the colourful array of people that darted to and fro, all with some sort of errand or purpose. Military personnel. Civilians carrying stacks of papers and disks. Worn coffee mugs and personal databases. And did I mention the coffee? I suppose I wasn't the only one to think the rich beverage to be a cure for everything. Seeing it only made me want a cup; I put it at the top of my priority list. Oh yeah, and maybe save the Earth or something... That is, if I could make my way to the launch bay—it was *that* crowded. Fortunately, my imposing presence cleared a path. Oh, and regarding that comment, you'll have to excuse me, but understand this: when you join Armed Services, your ego skyrockets so high, you'd need an oxygen mask to see it.

A clumsy civilian who couldn't handle the pressure collapsed in front of me. I had to step over him.

Ah, that thing called stress! For me, it disappeared after I joined the military. Sure, everyone with a higher rank and lower I.Q. gave me crap day and night, but I just didn't care. The army doesn't kick out people like that; they try to get as many people as they can get, and they don't want to lose any. Many people pulled their hair out (well, standard military buzz-cut doesn't quite allow for this, but you get the general idea) over the thought of coming assemblies and things. Me, I didn't give a shit. Maybe that's why I never got a promotion all these years. I didn't care. It was a lifestyle. The government fed me and gave me clean underwear, that's all that mattered.

Even now, I didn't care. Or, I did, just not enough.

Still, my heart was pounding and my mind dwelled in that dream. What the hell? Could it be true?

Demons? Imps?

Jacobs always gave me a hard time about not being too religious, said stuff about going to hell, things like that. I figured he was wacko, and I attributed that dream to him. I suppose that he had filled my mind with so much junk that I had dreamt that I *had* indeed gone to hell. It couldn't have happened to me unless someone had pulled me out... No, it was definitely a dream, but it was coming true. A chilling thought ran through me: maybe my dream had been true. Maybe I had somehow dreamed what someone else had lived...

Nah.

Whatever route my mind took, it all fell to religion, and that made me confident that it was something else.

Aliens, perhaps?

I had denied it.

Traffic went worse than L.A. at five and I had to elbow my way for those final metres that led to the entrance of the launch bay. Axel was already there, motioning with his arm to follow him, and quickly, too. I did, though knocked a few others down in the process. That was their issue.

"Man," I muttered as I finally reached him.

He nodded. "I know, it's been like that for the last few hours. It was worse before, though. Here, through here."

The fellow marine led me through the catwalk that encircled the rectangular launch bay. The launch bay itself was a cavernous rectangular structure. So it could hold maximum capacity, it had two levels and two main runways, with crafts of various sizes and structures arranged neatly around the perimeter. Overhead were the usual bright, long fluorescent lamps, with various wires and tubes running into them and warping about. The same went for the walls, where at least someone had bothered to put up the occasional flat metallic panels. The ground had the same panels, except more tightly packed, circling around the consoles that sprouted from the ground near each parked vehicle. As I watched, a SV-104 'Hog' (called so because it was so damn ugly) lit up its blue plasma engines and left the metallic deck, the air behind it shimmering.

Ugly? Well, it wasn't sleek like the fighters, but marines didn't get to touch those. Besides being mainly an AF duty, I think the idea of me or my buddies in the cockpit of one of those would frighten some (or maybe all) higher-ranking officials. I'm sure that Briggs, and a few others, had gone out of their way to make sure I wasn't put in marines air squadron. My personality had something to do with it. The presence of alcohol within our steely confines only reinforced their beliefs.

The only thing worse than Nik Taggart running amok in a fighter is a drunk Nik Taggart running amok in a fighter.

Where was I? Hogs, that's right. These wingless wonders had a delta-shaped form, something one comes to expect from the modern troop carrier. The rest, however, didn't. The front end was brute and short (someone had told me that the radar was there, and for structural reasons, the nose had to be shortened), with a machinegun, hanging slightly downward. Behind that front canopy, complete with thick pillars and small windows. From the sides were two gigantic air-guzzling intakes that flowed into the four massive plasma engines that were built into the thick wings. From them sprouted two fins. On the left wing were mounted a few forward-pointing sensors. Between the engines was the spacious (if you have a growth defect) interior, lined with the usual seats. As we approached one, it lit up its blue engines—pre-flight checks.

"The others are waiting for you inside. Hurry!" Axel yelled over the whine of the engines. "You're taking off in ten minutes."

"What about you?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm not catching a ride today. I've been running errands here, and no one seems to mind. You probably won't have anything to do either, soldier. This is the third wave they're planning to dispatch."

With that, he turned around and walked away. I was left to confront the craft that stood parked before me, that and the marines that waited inside its bay. I circled around, not wanting to find out what plasma does to the human skin and found six faces glaring back at me.

I immediately recognised Tyler, my best buddy. He had been in my dream. Wanting to keep it out of my head, I gazed at the others. There was Sergeant Davis, the one guy not to mess with. What can I say? He was the stereotypical marine who had seen one too many battles, but always wanted more. His face was harsh, his voice harsher, his short hair cut so evenly, you could probably balance a cup of water on it. Sergeant Davis was famous for slowly torturing all humour before killing it off.

There was the Jacobs I believe I mentioned earlier. Jacobs was a good friend, great soldier, and the only person who could take more 'Raw Waste' shots than me. And

that says a lot. He was amazing with guns and had perfected his accuracy. So, he was left with a lot of free time that he filled with pointless practice of spinning and flipping guns. He was also the guy that was always getting at me with religion, though it was all in good humour; he joked around and I liked him. He was fun to play pranks on because he always overreacted, then did nothing more.

Roach and Carson I knew from games of poker and a series of missions. They were both big jokers, which had naturally led to their names written down on various papers in Briggs' office, among other places. Their names had been set in the 'stone pillar of shame', as we called it—the military scoundrel database back on Earth. This also led to a sort of fame and aura that hung around them, a fame for being able to piss off just about any superior officer with their 'comeback wars' and jokes. The funny thing is, they spent hours figuring out methods to do their dirty deeds against superiors while, at the same time, not breaking any rules. There was a fine balance, but they had figured it out. Carson had recently busied himself in writing Roach's stupid remarks down, as well as good comebacks. Naturally, Roach laughed at first, though it wore out rather quickly for him, and he was soon pissed off.

And then there was Tim.

As I saw him, I couldn't help but jump. My feet carried me forward and I gazed at him with mild disbelief that I would regret afterwards.

"Tim!"

He looked at me with surprise, a look that soon moulded into a countenance of mild contempt.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

I looked at him, face caught in a transition of emotions, and remembered that he and I were not friends. No, we were not enemies, though he had, beforehand, always annoyed the shit out of me. Since I (and all other marines) didn't bother to hide my feelings, he had answered this dislike with his own. Why? He was like a posterboy for the marines. Commercials and posters had people like him in them. They worked into the night, training. They never broke rules and were always concise and abrupt. Meanwhile, I had joined the marines because I had wasted my money away on alcohol that fooled me into joining with some friends that were friends no more. Tim here was the prodigy of Sergeant Davis. That did not ease tension.

I backed away.

The others looked at me with one eyebrow raised.

"Running late as usual, Taggart?" came the sergeant's husky and all-too-familiar voice. It was one I didn't like to hear, probably because I linked it to mischief I would have done beforehand. The voice usually foreshadowed a meeting with Commander Briggs (the pinnacle of assholiness, also commonly referred to as The Asshole King) and the punishment of janitorial services.

"Yes sir," was the best reply I could come up with.

I suppose he had been expecting some smart comment back, so the awkward answer threw him off-guard.

"Well... uh, right. Anyway, now that we're all here—" he said that part with emphasis and a dirty look at me. Tim shook his head, apparently dissatisfied with my being. "—I can fill you in on the latest situation. Um, we've got some new info that just came rolling in from HQ in London, where we'll be soon flying, that the situation is a lot

more awkward than it already seems. So listen up, soldiers: it was not a meteor that fell. It was, in fact, one of the moons surrounding Mars. We know this because we had a relay station on it. It doesn't add up, though it's obvious that the odd situation on Mars is somehow linked to the one here. It was actually Phobos that fell from the sky."

A chill ran up my spine.

“What the hell?”

“That makes no sense,” said Carson. “How did it move? And how fast must’ve the damn thing been going to get here in three weeks? It’s damned moon, it doesn’t have plasma engines...”

“If a giant moon fell from the sky, we’d all be dead!”

“Bullshit, someone’s gotta check their facts.”

Faces all around twisted into disbelief.

“Look people,” Sarge was saying. “I’m only telling you the latest from NASA. I know it sounds crazy, so I bet that they’ve checked and double-checked. Take it as fact, cause it’s really the only thing we know for sure as of now.”

“So these damned things are fucking *Martians*?”

“Horse-shit!”

“Cow-shit!” said Roach, and he laughed.

Carson, still shaking his head, took out his notebook and wrote the comment down.

“So what does it mean?” someone was saying. “If it really is Phobos, how and why did it fall, and what the hell are those ‘monsters’ that are supposed to be coming off it. Aliens or something?”

“Martians, damn it!”

“I don’t know, who knows what those idiots were doing on Mars...”

Sarge was flipping through the papers. “We’re still here in one piece because the object fell at a slower speed than normal. Still fast, though it’s more like it was landing or something...”

“Let me see those!” said Carson, snatching for the papers and absent-mindedly adding, “sir.”

The disputing voices around me faded and my vision blurred. It’s not in my nature to faint or throw a tantrum, though when it happens, there’s nothing that can be done around it. I didn’t really pass out; I managed to save myself from going that far. Instead, the thought of my dream being reality, the swirls of colour before me, and the distant humming voices all contributed to the nausea that rose in my throat. I choked and managed to bend forward and save my chest-armor from the vomit. My shoes were not as fortunate. I must’ve retched myself for a minute, only feeling worse after each spasm. I imagine there wasn’t anything left in my stomach.

The heated conversation that had been going on around me had temporarily stopped, the annoying humming in my ears gone. Slowly, everything cleared up and indistinct shapes gained the form of six faces looking at me with odd curiosity and disgust. I coughed one last time.

“Sorry...”

“Damn it, soldier!” started Sergeant Davis. “How much did you drink last night? I’m tired of young, careless fools like yourself feeling invincible and drinking that damned poison... I don’t know why they even import it here! And you’ve gotta fly in two minutes! Probably flood...”

Tyler patted me on the back. “Alright there, buddy?”

“Hey sir,” said Carson, turning to the Sergeant Davis. “I think it’s that damn slop you feed us to blame.”

“Hey, he’s right!” said Roach. “It looks the same even after it’s been digested!”

Carson chuckled and pulled out his notebook. Roach seemed bothered.

“Why the hell do you write down all that stupid stuff?”

“Cause you say it.”

Roach shook his head. “Only you would take the time to write that stupid shit down on paper.”

“Yeah, cause you can’t write.”

“That joke wasn’t worth anything...”

Outside, the whining of the engines increased, though was soon muffled as the compartment door slowly lifted and closed, enveloping us in a temporary darkness, moments before the craft switched to internal power and the lights inside the cabin came on. There was a hiss as the craft pressurised, and various thumps and mechanical screeches came from the surrounding metallic walls. The craft slightly raised then lowered itself as the landing gear was put through its test. As it did, the intercom sputtered to life.

“This is Falcon-104, coming on-line. We’ll be departing in thirty seconds, awaiting final clearance. Please make sure that your safety harness is secured and that all cargo is secured in the cargo compartment. The aisle should be empty.” The pilot paused. “Alright, we’ve got clearance. Cleared for take off.”

The intercom went out and there was a slight bump as the craft left the ground and hovered over the launch bay, moments before taking the launch route from our parking spot. I was pressed against my right as the craft steadily accelerated out of the giant hangar-type structure. I could see none of it, for we had no windows. It was evident that it was all behind, however, when the pilot’s calm and steady voice returned.

“Flight time is one hour, thirty-eight minutes, over the Atlantic Ocean. You know the rest, over and out.”

Tyler, grinning, turned to me. “So, just how much *did* you drink yesterday? Don’t tell me I missed some new record.”

I shook my head. “A lot. But I was feeling fine till now. It wasn’t the drinking that got me, I think.”

“What was it?”

“Nothing,” I hastily replied. “Say, where’s Mexican Guy?” I said, though I knew the answer. I didn’t feel like discussing the odd dream. Hell, I didn’t want them to even know about it.

“Uh, you know. What in the hell kind of a stupid question is that? Different squadron. You just missed him, he was shipped out ten minutes before you got there, you know this.”

“Shame, he could’ve brightened my day with a Tequila Sunrise.”

With that, the usual boredom set in.

Jacobs, as usual, decided to take the moment of opportunity and show off a bit: he was spinning his pistol and replacing it in his holster. He took it back out quickly again, spinning it as he went, and he carried it in a circle over his head before bringing it back down and holstering it, all in a smooth motion, before he did it again. To do this, he had

loosened his harness, and was keeping an eye on Sergeant Davis, for he surely wouldn't approve. The others stared at him. He paused.

"Man," he said. "I should get taped doing this. I mean, seriously," he flashed a broad smile that revealed his yellowed teeth, survivors of more cigars than one would think is humanely possible.

"Exercising your ego there, Corporal?" Carson put in.

"What, you can't deny that it's awesome."

He spun it again, this time supplementing the visuals with the appropriate sound effects of his own conception.

The gun clattered to the ground.

"Ooooooh," said Roach. "All that you were building up... just went and shattered it there."

"Go, spinmaster!"

The others laughed. The washing machines we had back at in our laundry room at home base were that same brand name.

He picked up his weapon with some difficulty because of his harness.

"Now I've gotta do something cool and redeem myself," he said with the broad grin of a showman. It was all a joke, an improvised performance to get some laughter going, to pass the time.

He threw the gun in the air and caught it behind his back as he leaned forward. As he caught it, he allowed the off-centre centre of gravity to give the pistol a spin, which carried the momentum with it.

CLANG!

"Turbulence! It was turbulence!"

We laughed. "Excuses, excuses..."

"Why blame your shortcomings on weather patterns—"

"Shortcomings!" he gloated. "*Shortcomings!*"

Carson pulled out a deck of cards. "Poker, anyone?"

"Why?" Tyler asked. "We don't have anything to bet, it won't be fun. Quick, think of a game that doesn't require money."

"Thirteen, let's go."

"But there's five of us," put in Carson, apparently not counting Sergeant Davis as a person.

"One can sit out, replaces the loser in each round..."

"I won't play," I said. I didn't feel like it, anyway. I was still fighting nausea and it seemed inappropriate to play cards. I had to pause, to think it all out. Otherwise, I was going to drive myself insane. I wanted to look over my dream... Because it was all frightening, the way it added up. My dream was fearful, and everything so far pointed towards it as being authentic. I wanted to sort through my mind, to find something that would calm me, that would tell and confirm to me that it was just a dream, a nightmare brought on by liquor and uneasy thoughts. Odd, I actually wanted to believe I was drunk.

Conspicuous eyes gazed at me.

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

Tyler looked at me oddly. "You sure you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just don't feel that good. Go on, I'll watch."

They, however, soon found that the protective harnesses made it impossible to properly play out a game of cards. So they tossed them in the middle of the floor, calling out the name of each card as they did. Tyler was bombed after using the two of hearts by Carson, who eventually got second. After the game was over, the thought of how the cards were to be retrieved from the floor came into question. After a variety of creative methods, all of which failed miserably, the cards were forgotten and they started trying to get some sleep in before reaching London.

Meanwhile, I thought.

What did it mean if my dreams had indeed been true? Could it be that there was indeed a hell, and that it wanted global control? Massive enslavement? In my dreams, all these nightmarish beasts and things had come through the portal. They had been experimenting with portal technology, transferring objects from one point to another through the use of tunnels that cut directly through space and time. Of course, that was all in my dream. It could very well be that they weren't doing such secret tests on Mars. I hoped not. The implications if they did were frightening.

Stop, I told myself. I would have to see the wreckage, the remains. Maybe one of the 'monsters.' Only then would I know if it were true or not. I wanted to end it there, to travel in peace. But it was impossible. If my dreams were true, then I knew exactly what was going on, I was the only person aware of the exact circumstances. I would have to tell people, but what would they say? After all, it was just a dream, nothing more. Would they laugh? Would they dismiss me as mad or drunk? Perhaps. The latter was fairly common. The idea was so wild, so crazy that it was easy to push aside. Even I was having difficulty believing that things spawned in my mind could foretell what was going on millions of miles away across space.

Things spawned in my mind—that sentence frightened me. To dream something with so much detail... If it wasn't true then I must simply be mad. Instead of the world, it would only be my mind that was suffering. That thought was unnerving as well. It made me nauseous again; I wanted a doctor. The feeling of desolation grew in me; everyone around me was sleeping, only the humming of the engines was to be heard. The lights were dimmed. Everything was dark, everything was empty.

Sergeant Davis had been awake. In the darkness, I heard his earpiece come to life as he was updated on the situation; our own earpieces were turned off. After the message had finished, he muttered, "Shit," and turned on his side. Twenty minutes later, he was asleep and inert as well.

Now I really was alone.

I had to concentrate. I was fine. There was nothing I could do now but wait. Only when I got there, when I was at ground-zero, only then would I be able to come to conclusions and decisions on what to do.

The room grew darker and I saw a grotesque face form in the darkness. The image was dominating, all my other senses grew deaf. It wasn't human... I can't describe it. It had features I cannot explain, odd ridges under its eyes, hard skin, like the covering of a crustacean. Yes, that's it. These sharp features were dim, barely seen in the blackness. But what struck me were the two bright, round, glowing eyes that shone from the dark face, from the darkness. They hovered there, unblinking, unmoving. They were scanning, examining me. I shifted and tried to push myself away, but I was secured in my harness.

That helpless feeling rose in my chest. I closed my eyes and started kicking with my feet, going through convulsions driven by fear.

“No, no...” someone said, and I realised it was me.

And I screamed.

My scream was chilling in the small, dark compartment. The round eyes, like fog-lamps were no more when I opened my eyes again. I was swimming, my hands clutching the air before me. I couldn't move, only my feet and arms were free. I didn't know what was going on; there was blackness all around me, though, in some way I cannot explain it seemed to move. Like an ocean, invisible waves lost in the darkness turned and twisted, the unseen foam brushing against me. Then pairs of eyes broke through the darkness, round lamps for eyes put atop inhuman faces, all glaring at me. More and more came, like fireflies in the void, all staring and moving, like an ocean, like the invisible ocean. They swirled and came forward.

I closed my eyes again and screamed a second time.

The others in the cabin were now awake. It seems that I had startled the others almost as much as I had been startled myself. I heard quick shuffling as people wrestled with their restraints and I heard worried voices:

“What the hell is going on???”

“Somebody turn up the damn lights!”

“The pilot, get the pilot!”

The ocean of darkness had not disappeared. It washed over me, the little light my eyes perceived lost to its black.

The darkness was soon broken by a bright light, the only thing that could hammer its way through. I can't explain it, it simply rose and grew until it was blinding. I had to squint to see, and it was pointless, for everything was the same glowing white. I put up my hand to cover my eyes and tried turning my head to the side. The light did not recede, but merely hovered there. For some reason, I felt weak, and shielding my eyes from the brightness proved to be tiring. Soon, my muscles gave way and the only thing that I could do was to groan in protest.

"He's moving," a voice said.

"Oh, he is?" said another voice, this one with a tinge of a British accent. "It's been a good three hours."

"The light..." was all I could say.

"Turn it down a bit," suggested the first voice.

Soon, everything turned a shade duller and I could see normally again. I was in a white room with two people hovering over me. One was an ageing man with a pair of glasses, the other was Tyler.

"Call the others," advised the doctor.

Tyler moved away.

"How are you feeling?" asked the doctor. "Here, have a drink of water. You need to try to hydrate yourself with something other than liquor, I fear. You haven't had any water for the last thirty hours. Careful now, don't overwhelm yourself..." he said and took the bottle away after a tentative sip.

"So, come on, say something. How are you feeling?"

"Like shit. Where am I?"

"Well, you're at London HQ. They called for medical assistance to be promptly there upon their landing. As it turns out, we had to carry you off in a stretcher and here, to the medical wing. I think you might spend a lot of time here; I think it best for you to not go with the others. If they weren't departing so soon, I would let you go. You need to recuperate at least five or six more hours."

I groaned again.

Six pairs of feet could be heard marching into the medical wing. Somehow, I didn't want to confront the others. Above all, I'd feel like an idiot. Hell, I could just see in my mind Sergeant Davis walking up to me and saying—

"Corporal, what the hell is wrong with you?"

"I, uh—" was my only reply. "I don't know, sir."

"So what do we do now? The latest on HQ broadcasts is grim and we need all available men, and so I just don't know what the hell I'm supposed to do with you."

"Don't worry, sir. I'm coming."

"You sure soldier?"

"Yes sir, it was just dehydration, that's all. I'm better now."

After giving me a look of disbelief and incredulity, he moved away before he conveyed those thoughts in words. Tim followed him out the door. Meanwhile, Carson, Roach, Jacobs and Tyler approached me.

"Dehydration my ass! Tell me, corporal, what really happened?"

“Yeah,” said Roach. “When you don’t get enough water, you don’t just start screaming and jumping ‘round like crazy.”

I dismissed their questions. “I had a bad dream, that’s all. I’m better now.”

The others still thought there was something more to the story. And to be honest, there really was.

“Well, alright then,” said Carson. “We’ll be waiting for you in the briefing room in ten minutes. Don’t be late, Nik, I think you’re tap dancing on Sarge’s last nerve.”

With that, the four left.

After more water, I felt a lot better and got to my feet.

“Hey doc,” I turned to the man. “I don’t know my way around this place. Which way is the briefing room?”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll have someone escort you. Give me a minute. I want you promptly back here, however, as soon as you’re done.”

I felt too exhausted to complain.

One phone call and a minute later, some young kid was leading me around the metallic hallways that didn’t differ much from the ones back home. I bet the same sick architect had been hired to do both jobs. The same damned architect who could even make a bench uninviting. I never understood why they didn’t make the place a bit more lively, more easy on the eyes, but I guess the military guys with presiding command liked it that way. Once you left the last areas where civilians were permitted to enter, you can forget about carpeting and nice walls; it’s all metallic, with circuits and pipes snaking their way over the walls. Panels covered up various things, though it did little in the way of making the place more homely. I suppose they’d rather waste the budget on vending machines. Oh well, it didn’t matter—I was used to it by now.

After we reached a round room, central hub of sorts, we took a hallway away from it, and then turned left, where the entrance to the briefing room was.

“This way,” said the young man, and he left me there.

With some reluctance lingering on, I entered.

The briefing room itself was nothing special. It was about as exciting as a cardboard box and a roll of tape. It was large and rectangular, with one end raised above the others on a platform of sorts. There was a computer console with a built-in projector that could bring in images supplementing the lecture. Uncomfortable looking chairs arranged in rows went from there, split in the middle by a metallic aisle. Most of the chairs were occupied. I sighted my buddies all the way at the back, saving a seat from me. With a grin, I went down the isle, manoeuvring around other military persons from various other countries and stations.

I sat down.

“Don’t retch on the guy in front of you,” advised Carson.

“It’s alright, I’m better. This should be interesting,” I said.

Carson snorted. “Since when is being a marine interesting?”

“You know,” Roach started. “I think the marines are actually underrated... I mean, look—you get to drink all day, smoke all day, play cards, joke around, and shoot people. What could be better?”

“And Martians, too,” Jacobs added. “Get to shoot ‘em up as well.”

Tyler laughed. “Yeah, but you make it sound good. You left out the part about eating slop all day, putting up with idiot-superiors all day, and having their stupidity forced into your own brain.”

“Well, yeah...” said Roach, settling back in his seat. “The glass is always half-empty for you, isn’t it?”

The lights dimmed. A straight figure, unmistakably a general, walked up to the central console, which served as a podium of sorts. Without him uttering a word, the room fell silent.

“As I’m sure we have some conception of why we are here,” started he. “I feel that I need to confirm whatever suspicions you might have and discard any of the crazy rumours flying around. A series of events that seemed unrelated at first slowly came together like a puzzle, and the picture they were forming was rather grim. We have but little time, soldiers, so I will not further waste your time. I am here to fill you in on the latest and give you general mission specs. More specific and personalised mission details will be handed to leaders, who will distribute them among the others.”

He paused. “Here is what we know so far: as far as we are concerned, this entire event started a little more than two weeks ago when contact was lost with our base on Mars and the relay station on Phobos a short while after that. We came up with many sorts of ideas that explained the odd phenomenon: unusually-strong solar flares, our solar system passing through strange clouds of matter and energy as it spun around the galaxy’s hub... so on and so forth. Safety protocol required that rescue vessels were dispatched, so we sent them anyway, expecting to find everything normal upon arrival. As you may know, it takes about a week for our T-IV model plasma engines on the rescue vessels to reach Mars. Then they arrived—we know this—we received several odd transmissions before we lost contact. We did not notify the general public, simply stating that contact was lost, probably because of the same flares or storm that had caused mischief before.

“Not quite so. The video and audio feed was damaged, though we have it. As soldiers about to go into a nightmare, I feel that you all need to see this. The following was shot through the eyes of one of our medics, Jon Samson. This is the video from his headset.” He turned to a technician and said something.

Carson turned to me and whispered, “This is odd. I still don’t get how this whole Mars thing ties in. You think that these ‘aliens’ or whatever took that over, too?”

“Damn it, they’re Martians! That’s how it ties in,” whispered Jacobs.

I shrugged. “Probably right.”

“Yeah, but when the thing first fell, they were telling us information that was totally different from what they’re saying now.”

He moved back as the console projected a large, grainy video feed. Soon, the audio came online and accompanied it.

The video was dark, something that, when combined with the poor quality, became a black mass where different people could see different things. The medic was walking behind another, and both had flashlights that illuminated a long, metallic hallway.

‘What the hell happened here?’ said one medic. ‘It’s like it’s deserted.’

His raspy, hasty breathing filled the audio except for when he talked. Off in the distance was a loud, metallic clang. The medics paused and looked around. They then

continued moving. The video shook as the medic Samson moved forward, flashlight at hand.

‘Heating isn’t on. Generators must be drained,’ whispered the second medic. Footsteps sounded and raspy breathing was heard. At the end of the hallway was a catwalk. Midway through it, one of the medics said, ‘stop!’

The camera panned down in the abyss. ‘What’s that?’ whispered one and the beam of his flashlight fell on a dark form that was huddled in a dark crevice. The medic with the camera moved to the edge of the railing and tried to zoom on it. Poor quality showed an odd, dull glow of red and an odd form that was evidently not metallic. Whatever it was, it shifted. The man with the camera seemed to have been able to see what it was, for he suddenly jumped back and started running down the hallway where they had come from.

‘Corpse,’ said one into the camera. ‘See that? It was a damned corpse... Something else, too... something that moved... under it, dark black... I... to see...’

Between bursts of static, the lost medic seemed to run out of the hallway and into a dark room.

The video ended.

A silence followed.

“The video ended when the group of medics, separated from the others, apparently in their panic, moved into an experimental chamber with heavy lead covering and isolators and cooling panels. It is known that no transmissions can be sent from such chambers because the waves are trapped. We expected to have more feed once they left the room. We never received any. It appears that they never left that room. We don’t know what you just saw, but apparently the medics saw it better and it frightened them nearly to death. Federal law requires complete documentation of such rescue vessel dispatches, though we lost feed too early. We considered sending a second team, though voted against it. We were still in the process of deciding what to do about this entire event on Mars, when NASA called. They said that a gigantic body was heading for Earth.

“It was, as we would later learn, in fact Phobos, one of Mars’ satellites. Being around 27 kilometres in diameter, we thought it catastrophic for the entire planet. The blast wiped out most of Europe, though the moon fell in an odd manner. But the odd part was, it barely disintegrated when it hit the atmosphere. Whatever accelerated it out of its orbit slowed it enough upon atmospheric entry. Teams sent to the site found the damned thing, whatever the hell it was, still steaming around the wrecks of Vienna. It was horrible. But then, monsters—odd creatures—started coming off it, which is what we believe to be the creature you saw in the medics’ video. We received a few blurry pictures before the things killed off our team.

“Without hesitation, we were given approval by the U. N. to bomb the rock with nuclear weapons. Four separate bombs were dropped in succession in hopes of completely eliminating this thing. It has been rated as the most major threat to global security ever. And now, we are sending teams with full radiation gear into the site, and you will be among them. We will need you people to protect the research teams and to make sure none of the damned things survived. You will be flown there and split in groups to search various parts of the demolished city. Specific details will be distributed in packets.”

He looked around the room. Meanwhile, a map of the city appeared before him.

“And now, I’m sure you all are asking yourselves just what the hell those things are. It’s one of the many things we hope our research teams to find out. That is, unless they, the monsters, mind you, were all vaporised. As of now, knowing that they did not come from this planet but from somewhere beyond Mars, we refer to them as Extra Terrestrials. That is all we know, and now that you’re up to speed, get going. Best of luck and may God bless!”

After a moment of deafening silence, the room exploded in chaos. People talking, arguing, all holding opposing points as to what was going on. All of the new information was discussed, examined, turned over and examined again. It made so little sense that this went on for over a half-hour. To them, nothing made sense. But to me, it all came together. Yes, they were extra-terrestrial, not of this Earth. But they were not simply from space, they were from beyond that. From hell. At least, that’s what my dreams confirmed. I had told myself to hear it all out, then to judge it. Now that I knew what had happened, I fought nausea and dizziness again.

“Jesus,” Jacobs was saying.

I could remember it all, what my dreams had told me. And they explained it all with one sentence:

Phobos was the seed, the seed to sow all hell.

And it had been planted.

“Come on ladies, I don't have all day... Well, actually I do, but I don't feel like wasting it with *you* assholes.”

With his usual courtesy, Sergeant Davis rounded us all up outside of the briefing room, as did many others to their inferiors. In his hand was an opened envelope along with a stack of neat papers. We followed him away from the teeming, chattering crowds and worried voices. His face showed no emotion, but that's what he had trained it to do. I wondered what thoughts ran in his mind, what he felt at the moment. Knowing the military mind, probably emptiness. Then again, Sergeant Davis wasn't the worst of the lot. Either that, or I knew such pathetic cases that he actually seemed smart. Nah, I shouldn't say things like that, as much as we joked around and made fun of our superior, we also liked him and were prepared to follow him into whatever situation.

Someone murmured something about him growing a sense of humour.

“Here's the deal. We're not the first of these guys getting flown to ground zero. You'll be able to get a night's rest before we set out. I'll fill you people in while we're flying there, no point in wasting time now; go get some rest and don't get hammered.”

I couldn't help but notice the look he threw me with that last phrase. I was planning on following his warning; I think all of the recent stuff that had been brewing in my mind was cause enough to quit drinking. Still, what was one beer between friends?

No, I told myself. Sleep, I need proper sleep; despite the fact that I had dreamt away (in a horrible way) the day before yesterday meant nothing, it felt as if I had been going through a bad spasm of insomnia. It had gradually gotten worse; now all the lights and visuals around me seemed unreal, distant; my hearing was muffled. My reactions were slow and I continually drifted away from my surroundings. The loud and unsuppressed yawn I issued only contributed to my cause. So, still in a daze, I wearily followed the others as we wound our way through countless corridors and sub-hallways, on our quest to find the sleeping quarters. Tim remained with Sergeant Davis.

After a while, Carson, who had been leading us, stopped.

“Shit, now what?” Apparently, we were lost.

Roach pointed towards the end of the hallway. “There's a map over there.”

“Or we could just ask somebody,” Tyler put in.

“Ha!” laughed Carson. “Who ever asks for directions? Only women do that. Real men don't need directions, whether it's finding a hotel or building a lawn chair.” He paused at the map and scrutinised its contents.

“Real men don't need lawn chairs,” Jacobs said, laughing.

Ten minutes must've passed (maybe less, I was so tired that a minute felt like a Coppola movie) before Jacobs spoke up:

“Well?”

Carson didn't say anything.

“Ok,” Jacobs said. “We're here,” his finger fell to the red marking on the building's schematics. “There's the briefing room, but where the hell are the sleeping quarters?”

“What's this here?” asked Tyler.

Roach laughed. “Man, we really *are* lost without Sarge.”

“That’s the way to the power generators, that’s not it. Hey, wait a second, what’s this? That’s the level above ours, look, there it is.”

“Right, so objective number two: find stairwell.”

My PDA beeped at that moment, the sign of an incoming mail. I moved away from the others and looked at it. It was, without surprise, the doctor, who wanted me back at the hospital bay to run some tests. Not really caring anymore, I thought to myself, ‘What the hell?’ and pocketed the PDA. I turned to the others.

“I’ve got to go somewhere, I’ll catch you guys later.”

“Where?”

“Medical wing.”

I didn’t stay long enough to hear whatever they had to say. I didn’t know where to go, so the thought of using that as a possible excuse if the doctor hunted me down came to mind, though I was rather displeased to find that his e-mail included directions directing me from the briefing room. So, I made my way back from where we had come and followed the doctor’s directions. The people moving about the hallways were significantly fewer than before and I felt an odd sense of emptiness, of coming aloneness. Though I’m sure that the doctor had best thoughts in mind, I didn’t really like the way I was being singled out. It only reinforced the feeling of me having a pending condition.

I finally found the medical wing and entered. The doctor greeted me and led me to a line of beds, where one was set aside just for me.

“Why?” I simply asked.

“What?”

“What do you want? What could possibly be wrong with me?”

“Well,” he started. “There’s a variety of things, mental illnesses and things of that nature. Having visions to a degree where you’re convinced they’re real is usually not a healthy thing. Now...”

I eased myself into the hospital bed. “How do you know about the visions?”

“Well, screaming with your eyes wide open at something that apparently isn’t there is a good indication. What did you see?”

“I—well—nothing... I just, I need some rest, that’s all. The last couple of days have been hectic.”

“Aye,” he said. “Just rest for now, you’ll have a check-up before you go. We’ll see how that works out, you might not go at all. Sergeant Davis has requested a thorough mental examination. We just don’t want you losing it out there on the battlefield, ‘tis all,” he said at my glare.

I looked to my right, where another person was laying in bed. A chill of surprise ran through me. His face was scarred, burnt and cut and swollen. His eyes were hidden under a bandage whilst other bandages made ineffectual attempts at disguising giant gashes that ran across his partially-bared chest. One arm was mangled at the end. Hair remained in patches and his lips were somewhat blue. His scarred, thin chest with ribs that stuck out like spider legs was rapidly rising and falling.

“What happened to him?” I asked the doctor.

He turned to me quickly and pulled the curtain between us, isolating me.

“Powerplant accident,” he said curtly and vaguely. “Now, get some sleep.” And with that, he left.

The lights dimmed lightly and as I lay there, I thought for a while. As a silence started to settle, only then did I realise as to just how noisily the poor, mangled person in the curtained space adjacent to my own breathed. It was more of a wheezing. I shuddered at the thought of his wounds and pondered at what had happened to him. He had been a small, stocky person. He didn't quite look like soldier material. I didn't see how a generator, or any sort of mechanical thing, could render such gashes and scratches to a person, all at conflicting angles. He must've been attacked by some animal, there was no question as to that. Animal, maybe monster. Maybe demon, that was a chilling thought. But they couldn't have already brought back survivors from ground-zero, the fight had barely started. And surely they'd have medical areas set up closer to the battle area. And, as I said, he didn't look like a soldier, either. I considered trying to start a conversation, though it was late and the person didn't seem in a condition to communicate, anyway.

And so, I was left to my own thoughts and ideas. A while passed as I perused various notions and found myself in a semi-dream state. The rhythmic wheezing from my right was carrying me forward.

Everything went out of focus and all my senses numbed.

Finally, the opportunity to rest.

There was a scream. A second paused for me to realise where I was before I knew that it was the mutilated person that was screaming. His screams sounded unearthly, loud screeches, more like boar than a human, and muffled by bandages at the same time. I could hear shuffling as he twisted violently in bed. The dim lights had gone out and I could hear yells in the distance. Feet shuffled to and fro worriedly. I sat up in my bed, glancing around. The person on my right continued to twist maniacally. My hand outstretched, I reached for the curtain, about to pull it aside and see what was up with the person...

More screams came in the distance, accompanied by metallic screeches.

The person next to me stopped struggling and near-silence followed. I paused, my trembling hand shakily closed around the curtain. There was a thud from within the room and a hiss like escaping gas.

And with that, I found myself standing there, still, hand outstretched yet still, not wanting to move. I don't know how long I sat there, unsure of what to do, afraid to know just what was going on.

Then again, it could be nothing. I could be jumping to conclusions, as I have been doing quite often in recent days. Or it could be a dream, or another bad hallucination. Then again, it could all be real and I could be acting foolish simply because it was possible that I was mentally unstable. Somehow, the thought that it could all be a vision seemed more frightening than if it was real. That being because it somehow confirmed my own insanity.

I couldn't be.

The door to the medical wing opened and I heard numerous footsteps. I recoiled in my bed and readied my fists, just in case. I felt naked, left without a gun or any other means of inflicting damage to anything that might pose a threat other than my bare hands. And recalling the various assorted demons and things in my dreams, this was definitely not a cheery thought.

I heard low voices.

Then, the curtain at the foot of my bed was suddenly drawn and I saw four people standing there. I had been just about to pull another ‘Taggart’ (that’s what punching someone square in the face without any apparent immediate reason had come to be known) when I stopped myself. After a moment passed, I realised it was Tyler, Jacobs, Roach and Carson.

“We’ve gotta go, now!” one of them said.

I got up.

“Quick,” instructed Jacobs. “See if there’s anyone else here.”

Tyler pulled all the curtains to the side one by one. Two other people joined us. As he reached the bed of the person that was on my right and pulled aside the curtain, he recoiled back. In the pale, virtually nonexistent light, I saw his face twist in a look of disgust.

“What the hell?”

Where the person had laid was a giant black spot, what had to be blood as seen in the low light. The curtains were also sprayed with blood and yet his body, or any remains of it, were nowhere to be seen.

“Let’s go!”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Jacobs looked around wearily. “Don’t know. General’s ordered for us to round up any and all units. Lights went out, that’s all we know.”

We made our way out of the room into the dim corridor.

I had barely heard or seen anything; I was worried, though I had restrained my mind from jumping to conclusions. It’s what had landed me in the hospital wing in the first place. But at that point, any and all drowsiness and tiredness was removed from me. It was like a shot of adrenaline straight to the heart. It can’t be described. That feeling that hid in my gut slowly rose and started making clay figures with my brain. And I remembered a similar feeling, one that I had felt in my dreams. Though it had simply been images conjured by sleep, I had felt these strong emotions, the feeling of pain, of anger, of helplessness. Of anger at the helplessness. And why did I feel this?

The ground shook, the remaining lights above swayed, moments before they too blinked out. No more pale light; absolute darkness took hold.

We all looked up.

“Aw, you’re kidding,” said Roach.

Darkness came over the corridor. Somewhere off in the distance was a metallic screech, followed by heavy thumping noises that shook the ground beneath our feet. The station was busy and there were many other people in the corridor along with us: military and civilian. Between the screeches and scrapes and thumps, worried whispers and cries could be heard in the darkness. The ground shook again and a few sparks fell from the lamps above. The ground swayed with more steel groans. With one last screech, all of this moving, everything ceased and a moment of absolute silence and darkness took hold of the corridor.

“Holy shit!” said Carson. “Did you hear that? Those were freakin’ screams!”

“What do you mean?” someone asked with mild urgency.

My heart was about to burst out of my ribcage and run down the hall. I felt dizzy, but I wasn’t going to pass out again; not in this dire situation. I wouldn’t burden my friends, and I wasn’t ready to lose my life thanks, in large part, to whatever the hell had

happened to me since I had woken from my nightmares. And who knows? Perhaps it was a power failure, and why not? I nearly laughed at myself in the darkness. These conclusions I came to, they were identical to my dream. The world was at war, why couldn't it really be an attack from the unknown, from what we didn't know? And what were those screeches and thumps? And the shaking ground?

"The screeches, did you hear the screeches?"

"Yeah, like scraping metal..."

Suddenly, the emergency floodlights came on, illuminating everyone's face with an eerie, bluish light. Before me, I saw Carson, his complexion made odd and rather sinister by the dancing shadows. He gazed around us.

"Those were human voices."

"Bullshit!" someone announced. "That sound could not have been made by any living thing."

Slowly, people from the hall assembled around us. Low light revealed frightful faces of all sorts. These blue forms shifted uneasily in the darkness and listened to our conversation, pitching in occasionally. The scene was oddly tranquil, though the thought of what had happened beyond the steel walls of our hallway was anything but so, and it kept us on edge.

"Have you ever heard a person scream at the top of their lungs?" Carson asked.

"I've shot lots of people," said one marine that had joined us. "I was all over the Pamirs two years ago. Heard lots of screams, but not like that. Those weren't screams made by living things, I'm sure of it."

"Yes, but have you heard anyone ever scream as loud as they can?" Carson asked again, looking at the crowd of twenty or so.

Silence followed.

"I have," he said. "A person ripping apart their vocal cords. That's what it sounds like. I don't know what the hell just happened, but I'll tell you now: I'm scared. People never yell like that. That is, unless something really horrible happens. I've seen and heard it once before. It was a marine shot in the stomach, abandoned by his troops, being tortured. That's the only time you hear it, during torture. I never saw him, I just heard him. This was all moments before his own people dumped several thousand pounds of napalm over his head to clear out the area. Opposition was heavy. It's how you scream when you see death in the face. And after they dropped it, it was terrible. Something downright horrible is coming. And when it comes, we have to face it together, it's the only way to get through."

Even in the blue light, I could see that he was unusually pale.

"Mike," Jacobs started, referring to Carson by his first name. "That's enough, you're scaring the others here."

"I think he's scaring himself," said Roach.

"We have to move," I said. "We can't stay here forever. I don't know what just happened, but I don't want to sit here on my ass and find out."

Someone from the crowd wistfully said, "Probably just a power outage. Those metallic screeches and thumps must've come from the generators. They went out and then they were trying to come back on."

"Those weren't metallic screeches," Carson persisted.

"So what the hell do we do?"

Since I had been the first to propose the idea of actually moving, everyone's gaze fell to me.

"Uh, we move to the control room. It'd make sense for everyone to go there, I expect to find superiors and others there. There, we can figure out to do, we can consult them and understand exactly what happened. Only then can we make plans. That's our priority now."

Everyone nodded their heads.

"Anyone know the way?" Jacobs asked the crowd. Several people came forward, none of them military, something evident from bulging stomachs and feeble limbs, as well as the usual civilian clothing.

"You," he pointed to a spectacled man. "Lead the way."

"Stick close, people," said Roach.

With that, we followed the man down the long corridor, back the way we had come seeking the sleeping quarters. We rounded the corner, taking a left. It was an awkward lot, a group of people with very different purposes in life all bound together by a single human emotion: fear. No one knew what was going on, few were convinced that whatever had happened in Vienna had advanced and reached London, though they weren't ready to leave the group and wander off on their own. Still, we were vulnerable; we had no weapons to defend ourselves. But defend ourselves from what? I couldn't help asking myself. What if it really was a power outage? Then we were simply making fools of ourselves. We would be received at the control room with laughter.

But the odd noises, the screeches. Carson claimed they were screams. I wasn't ready to doubt Carson. He wasn't joking around, he wouldn't do so on such a subject. That story he had told us was not meant to be in any way humorous. And his face, his expressions—he really was afraid. I can't say that I had ever seen him that scared before, and I've been with him in countless battles and blackjack games for nearly ten years.

Up until that point, I was simply riding along, taking in whatever my surroundings told me as true. I had told myself that I wouldn't form any conclusions as to the validity of my dreams until I had complete evidence that pointed in one direction or the other. Up until then, I didn't know what to believe. But what came next was the long awaited confirmation, one that did not point in a favourable direction.

Up until then, the world around me still made sense.

As we came around another corner, the entire group immediately halted, and with good reason, too. The image before us couldn't be comprehended easily or quickly; such a horrid visage took time to acquire, to understand, for any sane person's brain would refuse it at first.

The ground was littered with corpses. There were four humans, however, eerily bent over them. Between the corpses and on the walls was an odd, black liquid. In the blue floodlights, my eyes struggled to make out the four people, when they raised their heads. Pinpoints of bright light gazed from the darkness and inhuman glances passed our way. Bald heads glowed blue in the darkness, flesh in an inanimate shade of grey was pulled over their malformed skulls. They jerkily struggled to their feet and grinned, revealing a mouth that could be anything but Earthly: pointy fangs built atop massive jaws. Their clothes, once belonging to simple maintenance workers, and the area around their mouth were also covered in black. And then I realised that this liquid was red, it was simply the floodlights that illuminated it in a way that it appeared black. It was blood.

The fourth zombie, which was still busy in masticating one of the bodies, raised its filthy head and roared, as did the others; it was a horrible cry that couldn't have been issued by human vocal cords, it was even worse than the screeches we had heard earlier.

No one moved, no one knew what to do, how to react.

I felt faint.

The zombies (I was surprised at how decisively I used the word—I was sure of them being zombies), however, spared no time. With a deep, guttural roar, they charged towards the group, which scattered into chaos and screams. There we were, weaponless, everyone caught unaware. Now any doubts that something truly terrible had happened were removed.

The four ghastly things staggered after us with surprisingly blazing speed for their awkward gait. The people closer to them ran and pushed the people in front, few fell to the ground. The zombies used their hands to tear at the receding humans, occasionally hitting some poor person in a way that they collapsed on the floor. These people were alive, knocked unconscious, only to wake up to some absolute horror later on.

Greyish and red limbs flashed, fingernails covered in grime and dried blood clawed through the air in an animalistic fashion. Their eyes flashed, mouths masticating. One jumped on a human and sunk its teeth into his neck. Blood pooled on the ground. Another jumped on the person who had been guiding us and it sunk its needle-like teeth into his face, massive jaws gnawing and working teeth into his skin. It was a complete massacre. People screamed and wept all the while they ran. The group moved, though they trailed dead bodies.

One of the gruesome four approached Jacobs, moving in an apish manner, with sloping shoulders shifting from side to side. The thing was very flatfooted and seemed to have trouble keeping balance. Jacobs pulled out his flashlight and shone it in its face. The former-human roared in displeasure and clawed at him. He whacked it in the stomach. Now, the only reason a person would budge or recoil from such a hit would either be pain or instinct. The zombie had neither. It did, however, pause for a second, allowing him to plant a nice blow flat in its malformed face. The sideways blow flung its head to the side, the neck snapping with the appropriate crunching sound. This did not stop the beastly

entity. With its head facing backwards, it continued running forward, but this time blindly, searching for human flesh with its outstretched, grasping arms.

As if on cue, all other marines pulled out their standard issue flashlights (why didn't we do that earlier?). If the situation wasn't as grave, it would've been a rather humorous scene: marines rushing forward and whacking zombies with flashlights. This only slowed and disoriented the zombies, though it gave time for all the others to make their escape.

We left them trying to screw their heads back on in the right direction.

As soon as they were left far behind, we paused with the survivors to catch our breath.

"What the hell?" someone said through heavy breathing.

"Shit."

"Someone tell me what the hell we just saw!"

Jacobs was looking down, shaking his head. "Now what? Now what are we to do? What if everyone else's dead...?"

I walked up to Tyler. "How many dead?"

"A lot," he said. "There must've been over twenty before. Now I count only eleven." He shuddered. "Any idea on what just happened?"

"No," I said, pushing recollections of my dreams aside. "But we have to get going. We continue towards the control room, as we had planned. Maybe try to snag some firepower on the way, I have a feeling we'll be needing it."

I looked to the six other survivors. "How many of you are military?"

Four raised their hands.

"Figures," I muttered. "The civilians were completely defenceless." I turned to them. "Do any of you know the way to the control room?"

None raised their hands.

"Damn," said Carson. "Now what?"

"We find a map."

"Ok," I said. "Are ammunition bunkers marked on the maps, or are they left for inside knowledge only?"

No one knew.

"Let's find one," Tyler said. "Then we can worry about that."

I had vowed to make conclusions only when I saw this horrible truth in the face. Now that I had, I didn't want to. In the silent walk that followed, I thought. It was all like my dreams. My dreams—it was what constantly ran through my head. And why not? They were slowly becoming reality.

I could remember in my dreams when I had wandered into the medical wing, looking for a flashlight. The mere memory made me queasy. After getting the flashlight to work, its beam of light had revealed the lustrous, red walls, courtesy of human blood. I could remember the tiny operating table, hidden under the new coat of paint and the mangled remains of some human being that had issued it. But what was on the other side had frightened me most. As my flashlight came to bear, dark shadows played and formed the image of a human figure, standing there. I had heard revving noises in the room, but only then did I know what they were. There stood, in human form, a monster. It was a damned zombie! Its head was bald and grey, eyes glowing from the darkness, mouth

grotesquely lined in blood. Just like the ones we had just seen. And in its hands was a chainsaw...

That was a frightening dream, and now it had slowly taken shape in reality. The zombies we had just seen were frightful, though the implications of seeing them scared me even more. If there were zombies, then wouldn't that mean that there were also thoseimps? And demons and monsters? If those zombies were like I had dreamt, did it mean that all the other horrors I had seen in my mind were true as well? And hell, too? I hoped not, but sometimes hope is worthless. I already knew the answer, though I failed to agree to it, to comprehend it.

At the distant end of the corridor, a limping human shadow played itself. A distant wheezing was heard. We rounded another corner and followed the corridor, which we were fortunate in following to the central hub. As we entered, we were sure there would be a map there. The room itself was somewhat vast, though no less metallic than the rest of the base. Rounded panels covered circuits and in three equidistant locations around the room sprouted computer terminals from the walls. We quickly moved towards the closest one. I gazed uneasily towards the pillar-type structure that sprouted from the centre, heading into the high, dome-shaped ceiling.

Jacobs had already brought up a map when I arrived.

Using the user interface, he scrolled through various views of levels, zooming on separate sectors. Grid outlines flashed while the blue and red contours of the building zoomed by, contorting into circular rooms and rectangular corridors.

"We are... here." Jacobs said, letting the moving digital map settle. "Now the questions becomes where and how to get to the..."

"You can ask it for directions," said Carson. "Go to 'options', then 'direction finder.' Type in destination."

Jacobs did as suggested.

"Control room," he muttered as he typed.

The map flashed until the control room schematics came into view. Then, the image zoomed out, revealing the entire installation, and a bright red route slowly traced itself over the map, showing our way.

"Do you want to print directions?" the console inquired.

Jacobs printed them out. "Look," he said. "We'll pass by the hangar on our way. We can drop by our troop carriers and get our weapons from there, just in case we find something we don't like in the control room. After what we just saw, I'm not taking chances."

"Who knows what we'll find in the hangar," someone added.

Jacobs didn't have an answer for that.

"What else can you do on this console?" asked one of the other marines. "Maybe there's something useful."

Jacobs exited the program, revealing a command-based console, something meant to ward off tourists that accidentally switch off the map program, something designed so that technicians and security could use it to their advantage. Jacobs, however, seemed to know his way around the program.

"It's kind of like DOS," he said. "Of course, a lot more cleaned up and simplified, but still a command line."

He typed:

LIST PROGRAMS

And received:

INVALID COMMAND

“What am I doing wrong?” he asked rhetorically. “Man, I hate this old-school bullshit.”

“This is meant for personnel only, right?” asked Carson.

Jacobs looked up at him. “Yeah, so?”

“Try shortening it, I’m sure that these technicians don’t take the time to write out all the words.”

Jacobs typed:

LST_PRGMS

And with that, a series of lines scrolled down the screen, displaying a series of programs and utilities.

ARCHIVE/DETAIL

ARL

BINARY

C_LINES

C_GRIDS

COMM_LINK

CP_GENERATORS

DATA

EXTRNL_LNK

LOG

MAP P. v2.5

UAC-SEC

VIDEO_F

ABOUT
CONSOLE OPTIONS
SETTINGS

“You guys see anything worthwhile?”

“What’s the ‘COMM_LINK’? Maybe it means that we can contact someone, if there is anyone, in the control room?”

Jacobs nodded his head. “Let’s try that. Then maybe we can look at the log.”

Somewhere from behind us, a shuffling sound could be heard, followed the constant background noise that was composed of distant air vents working and pipes hissing. Immediately, everyone spun around and gazed at the bluish circular room, trying to discern anything that could pose a danger of any sort. The room was empty, though my

mind wasn't; it continually composed graphic paintings of what could've issued that sound, of what could be coming.

"You guys in the back, Roach, all of you—keep watch, make sure nothing comes our way," said Jacobs, returning to the console.

"Don't take too long," I wisely advised.

After a few seconds, Jacobs said, "That won't be a problem. Communication is down, and I can't imagine why. I can reach other parts of the station, though not the control room."

"Maybe something chewed through the wiring."

"Try the video program, see what it's about."

Jacobs exited and returned to the menu, selecting 'VIDEO_F'. As he did, a map bearing semblance to the one we had viewed before suddenly flashed up on the screen, except there were bright-red flashing dots, displaying the precise placement of the security cameras throughout the military installation.

"Where should I start?" he asked.

"The control room, perhaps?"

"There are no external video links to the control room," said one of the survivors whose name I did not know. "As it is, they are cut off from the rest of the station, a desired move in any sort of hostile event, such as this one."

Carson suggested, "Try the hangar."

Suddenly, a wide-angle view of the hangar appeared on the screen, displaying a hideous and sordid view of what was once a launch bay. The ground was scattered with debris and human remains. Charred stumps of arms and legs lay scattered over the ground while the torsos to which they had been once attached were nowhere to be found. From the ceiling hung tubes and wires amidst the flickering lights, letting off an occasional bout of sparks. Three troop carriers were resting at odd angles on the ground, while a third, at least, the charred remains, lay sprawled over the main runway. A vivid fire burned from behind, illuminating the still glistening blood that covered a large portion of the floor.

"Jesus..."

A large object was blocking the right side of the camera view. It was out of focus and gently moving and swaying.

"What the hell is *that*?" someone put thoughts into words.

"Maybe I can rotate and focus the camera..." suggested Jacobs, and with shaky fingers, he found the controls. The camera jerkily moved towards the shape, which suddenly dropped out of sight. But as it dropped from view, it revealed a human torso that was hanging limply from the ceiling, its face still oddly animated, eyes still staring. I was sure it was dead. And then its face contorted into the unmistakable grimace of pain and it closed its eyes.

Slamming the console, Jacobs turned off the video feed. He was shaking, pale, and breathing heavily, a mirror image of what I suppose I looked like. With an uneven voice, he said:

"I can't take any more of this."

What the hell? My mind repeated to itself, cycling over and over. *What the hell, what the hell?*

A while passed where only heavy breathing and the beating of hearts could be heard. No one wanted to break the silence; everyone listened in, fearing the sound of some monstrosity coming.

“We have to move on,” Carson said.

“Yeah,” I agreed, feeling weak. “We have to move on, now!”

Jacobs was becoming frantic.

“No, man! I’m not passing by that hellhole, I’m not going anywhere near it. I’m just staying here where there isn’t any nasty bloody shit to get me...”

“Calm down. For all you know, it could be much worse in other places.”

Carson nodded. “We have to get to the control room, everything will be fine from there.” His voice wasn’t convincing.

“Aliens, shit,” he was muttering to himself. “Aliens! It’s that Roswell shit all over! I want to shoot down damned rebels! Human rebels! Not some damned freaks from outer space! Shit, I’ve gotta get out of here. I’ve got to—”

WHAM! Carson planted a punch square in the back of his head, knocking Jacobs straight into unconsciousness. Roach and I put his arms around our necks and dragged his limp body while the others hovered around, ready to provide (or at least try to, knowing that we had no weapons) any needed protection. Carson led the group, printout of the map at hand, guiding us through the maze-like stations, hallway after hallway, room after room. I felt as if I was still dreaming, though Jacobs’ weight on my right shoulder was all too real. And what lay between us and the control room couldn’t be, or so I had told myself. There was one way to go about this; I cleared my mind, making it devoid of any recollections of what had happened or was happening. If there was anything less real than what was happening, it was the thought of what had once been.

Distant echoes spoke of something awry. We continued forward, and after a good ten minutes or so, I already felt tired; Jacobs was no light load, and his armour didn't really help, either. Tyler and some marine I didn't know took over, and I switched my role in the awkward parade, walking with flashlight raised. Why the hell had we all removed our weapons at the troop carriers? Even in what lay ahead of me would I never feel as empty and bare as I did now. I was vulnerable, we all were, begging for some beast to come and claim easy victory. And as we neared the entrance to the control room, beyond which lay a nightmare of violence and flickering lights and the unknown, we all pressed ourselves against the opposite end of the corridor and wearily walked by.

"What's that?" someone asked, pointing ahead.

To the side of our corridor was an opening, one that was forcefully made. I judged this by the bent panels that had once covered the tiny space. Perhaps it had proper ways to be removed, though zombies didn't read instructions. Then again, neither did I. Regardless, debris littered the floor. As we neared, in the flickering light inside, we made out a tiny room with metallic racks lining the walls. It was, evidently, one of the ammunition bunkers that we sought out. However, something had got to it first. I peeked inside, seeking any weapons.

The thing was nearly emptied, save for the three pistols at the bottom.

I plucked them out and handed one to Carson and some other marine. I kept one for myself.

Roach gazed inside as he passed.

"Someone tell me what happened to all of the heavy weapons."

"Damn," someone else put in. "This isn't getting better."

I looked down at my pistol. It was standard issue, like my own pistol back in the troop carrier. The smooth barrel fell to give way to the comfortable handle with the standardised grip. Pistols issued to military personnel were programmed to fire only when they sensed the contours of that one person's hands wrapped around them. Of course, they could be programmed otherwise. Pistols stored away in such ammo bunkers were not programmed in any way.

I checked my ammo: I had a nice, clean ten bullets in the pistol. The ground was littered with cartridges. I picked up three of them, which made for forty-five shots, along with the ten in the pistol, making for a total of fifty-five. If that didn't last 'till the control room, it didn't matter. If it didn't last, we were as good as dead anyway.

After making sure all the other pistol-holders had plenty of ammo, I waved with my hand in the universal 'let's go' symbol.

We had found the weapons none too soon; as we came around another bend, we were hailed by three zombies, one of which I could've sworn I saw Sumo Wrestling on TV once. It tried to tackle me, wisely utilising its weight to pin me but found the end of my pistol instead.

BLAM!

Shot to the head.

BLAM! BLAM!

Poof! The zombies were gone. Magic.

“Always go for the head,” I noted to the two others who ineffectually had planted a few shots in the zombies’ chests.

“How much longer?” I asked Carson.

“Not that much,” he replied. “Round this corner here, down the hall, the big doors at the end.”

As we turned, a screeching noise came behind us and something moved in the darkness. It was too murky to see anything, though we didn’t feel like executing any acts of bravery at the present.

“Run,” I said. Carson and I hung back, running backwards, pistols pointed at whatever the hell had made that noise. A pair of pale, greenish eyes gazed back at us and indefinite shadows below them moved as the thing shifted in the near darkness. Distant blue light vaguely played over its rough features, revealing little more besides the mesmerising, round lamps that were its eyes. I was reminded of the vision I had on the troop carrier. I felt dizzy again. Suddenly, I felt Carson roughly grasp my arm and yank it backwards.

“Come on!” he said.

I looked away from the being and at the end of the hallway. The heavy blast doors to the control room were open, the others had already disappeared inside. Without looking back, and without the courage to do so, I ran as fast as I could after Carson. As we neared, the doors slowly started to close, and were finally sealed shut as we made it inside. We followed a small, uneven hall that finally led to a more open space. Warm, yellow light greeted us there. The feeling of solitude had passed; I felt safe and as if everything was fine at the moment.

The room itself had no definite shape, but rather, seemed to have been moulded around the countless consoles and terminals inside. At one end was a giant, thick glass that gazed at three giant cylindrical columns that were unmistakably the generators, with the ends glowing blue, reaching into the heavy metallic base and joining through the use of various tubes and panels. There was gloom beyond. Back inside, controls set astern the glass facing the generators glowed calmly, the chairs besides them occupied. To both ends were more consoles, set in odd booths that were like peninsulas in the tiny room. In the centre lay the biggest computer with a comfortable looking chair behind it. Inside it was the general who had given the speech earlier. One would think that it was just another ordinary day, was it not for the worried expressions everyone wore.

Something thudded against the blast doors in the distance.

People were scattered around the room, some sitting, others lying. Many were civilian, a few military. There couldn’t have been more than thirty in all.

And yet, I could recall seeing hundreds upon my arrival.

I was somewhat relieved when I sighted Sergeant Davis and Tim off to one side of the large glass, straining to make something out beyond it.

The general looked at us and smiled, a weary and tired smile. “I’m glad you soldiers made it out alive. If you’ll excuse me, we have some work to do with the generators, I’ll brief you on the situation in a few minutes—”

“Where are the others?” I asked. However, I found my thoughts and ideas quite a bit harder to express in words.

“What do you mean, Corporal?”

“The other people,” I said. “There were lots more. Are they hiding elsewhere?
Where are they?”

“Dead,” he said, and turned away.

“Alright, all military personnel gather ‘round. We don’t have much time, and in the last twenty minutes, we have formulated a plan. It is not sound, but it is the only way to go. I don’t know what all of you have been through, though I saw a lot myself. Gather ‘round the map table. You all know about what happened in Vienna. It was an attack against all of humanity. From what, we still don’t know. But as it is, we’re at war. The British Isles were the last surviving European nations, and Britain in particular, that had any chance of proving resistance. We figured that we would take the battle to their own turf, though these ‘things’ surprised us again by doing that very same thing to us.”

We had all assembled around the projector that was attached to the central console. Presently, the general looked up at us all, the map remaining unneeded.

“Six troop carriers flew in. We had received no transmissions, though we thought they were having some sort of transmitter failure. All sorts of electronic failures started going off when the thing fell. We never issued landing clearances, though it didn’t matter. And now as I look back, we should’ve shot them down. As soon as the doors to the main bay opened, these damned things poured out. You know the rest. They moved quick and knocked out the main power grid. The generators are still functioning, though they are disconnected from the grid and are thus, in that sense, useless. The station is overrun, we are powerless. Our supplies are limited. Waiting for support and reinforcements is unnecessary. We will proceed with our plan, though it must be made more suitable for the situation.

“I don’t know if alpha and beta waves made it. I don’t know anything, we’re cut out of the outside world, and there’s no guarantee as to how long those blast doors will hold. Whatever the hell is running this ordeal, it’s fast, and to be fast, it must be smart. And it spreads, it multiplies. It won’t be long before it figures out that the last remaining humans are hiding here.

“Now, how many of you here are familiar with portal technology? Perhaps some of you have heard rumours. There was experimentation with these devices, meant to instantaneously transport objects and things from one spot to another, that went on inside our Mars bases.”

This grasped my attention.

“We believe that these things are somehow linked to these experiments. Something went wrong. However, we plan on utilising this technology in our favour. Dr. Greenberg?”

One of the scientists that had been, for a while, working on the consoles near the window moved towards the general and planted himself besides the map. My heart stopped. I had seen him in my dreams. He was the one that had opened the portal; he had started the entire invasion. He had died in my dreams and had been sent to hell. But with the portal open, he had come back.

“Dr. Thorpe Greenberg’s is a sad story. He barely arrived here and this nightmare started, not something exemplary. We thought we had lost him on Mars, but it turned out that there was a glitch in the personnel database and he had been short-listed for a few days from returning to complete a project on Earth. It seems that your luck has caught up with you, doctor.”

“Yes, general. However, we must carry on.” He gazed at me sideways, scanning me through his peripheral vision. I wanted to grab him, then and there, and to uncover the satanic tattoo that I just knew I would find on his shoulder. My better judgement, however, stopped me. This Greenberg threw me a sideways sly grin and I glanced around at the others. Had they not caught it? I tried to concentrate on what he was saying. The others wouldn’t understand, it was still only something in my dreams, there was no proof. Unless he had that marker on his shoulder... that would certainly be proof. But what if I picked him up by the collar and bared his shoulder to show the tattoo? What if there was nothing there? What a fool I would be. I tried whisking away the lingering image of his grin and oddly inhuman grimace that had taken hold of him for a mere second.

“Here is our plan: The UAC, the company funding and running all of the portal research had experimentation centres set world-wide. There is one in this very base, for this effort was funded by the military as well. Now, none of our troop carriers survived, and even if they had, there would be no pilots to fly it. So, it is possible to travel instantly using the portal. Unfortunately, the UAC had no research division near Vienna. The closest we can get you would be Berlin. So the plan is: navigate the halls and find the portal here. I will guide you via walkie-talkies on how to set the co-ordinates and activate the portal. You will be instantly transferred to Berlin. From there, you can trek south and make our way to Vienna.”

Everyone was left speechless.

“Fortunately for you,” the general put in. “Dr. Greenberg will guide you. He can give you priceless tactical advice and guide you to your final destination. Also, we believe the EURN train network is still intact, and you can at least use the underground train to reach Prague. Beyond that, it is possible that impact damage may have caved in the tunnel, though it’s still to your advantage. Use the subway train to get as far as you can and see if there’s anything left to clean up after the nuclear strikes and alpha and beta waves. It just might be that these troop carriers that attacked us were dispatched before alpha and beta team reached the destination, it might’ve just been a last effort to take us down. There is still hope to go around, though none for this particular installation. If resistance is light, try to work your way and finish cleaning up. If it’s heavy, hold your position and wait for reinforcements.”

Everyone was staring at the map, mesmerised by the scaled depiction of what was, in reality, a ruin that had to be trekked.

“After you have safely passed through the portals, do not attempt coming back. If indeed this attack on our station is, as is one of the possibilities, a last attempt that had been dispatched before alpha and beta teams cleaned everything up, we must finish off these things off. We will overheat the generators and basically blow this entire installation to hell and all the damned monsters along with it. That way, this thing doesn’t spread beyond this facility. You have to get to the portal fast, before we blow the generators, so you can receive directions from Mr. Greenberg and make it through in one piece. We will hold out for as long as we can. If you linger too long, the generators will bring you down as well. Make haste! One of you needs to give me their PDA so I can upload all this information. We have no time!

“You will be split in three teams, though you should stick together at least until you’ve reached the outer limits of Vienna. You will be equipped with proper radiation-proof clothing, along with proper supplies to last you a week. A week is enough. By then,

either the reinforcements will arrive or you'll be dead. I won't hide the dire circumstances from you soldiers. You are a crucial part of this entire operation. Find out what happened to alpha and beta teams. If at all possible, take down whoever, or whatever, is organising this entire operation. Good luck soldiers, and Godspeed."

PART 2

My Revelation

1

“Good luck soldiers, and Godspeed.”

No sooner had I heard these words than I found myself numbly and with my mind elsewhere drifting towards the meagre weapons locker, picking up a shotgun and loading it up with shells. My shaking fingers worked, loading individual shells into the shotgun, twelve at a time, then taking additional bullet-strewn belts and slinging them over my lightly-armoured shoulder. My trusty pistol, newly loaded and with cartridges to spare, found its way back into its holster. Besides me, my fellow marines and other remains of what had once been an organised unit of soldiers, had been doing the same, nothing but the clicking and sliding of metal echoing across the room. I looked around and at myself one last time, ensuring that everything was in place, everything was as it should be. Weighed down by ammunition and the thought of what lay ahead, I turned around.

“Here,” said Jacobs, standing next to a metallic rack loaded with various supplies. He threw me a flashlight and a walkie-talkie. Holding the flashlight under my arm, I flipped on the walkie-talkie and checked the batteries.

After making sure everyone had received both items, Jacobs turned to the others, pale face looking pained, voice lightly shaking.

“Set frequency to seventy megahertz and make sure you stay on channel one. This is in case we, um, get separated or if we need to split up.”

One of the local marines whom I did not know looked at Jacobs and then the others. “Keep in mind that the main structural and outermost walls have radiation shielding. This will block the signal. If you cannot reach anyone from one location, try moving to a different spot.”

I clicked my flashlight on and off, checking battery power.

Odd bangs and screeches were issued outside the only door. The blinking light seen through the tiny trapezoidal window revealed an odd shape that flashed across it for a second, the small glass showing a small portion of something that we wished to leave unseen. More bangs were issued and a silence fell over the control room. The ground shook violently and several lights went out, allowing portions of the room to be illuminated by the red switches and glowing screens alone. Tension was thick as an aftershock of sorts followed. Several sparks fell from the ceiling.

“What in the hell...”

Suddenly, a wailing sound came and several red lights came on, drowning out all other spectrums. Screens flashed messages that I could not see from my point of view and people started jerkily moving about.

Another loud metallic groan in the distance.

I was rooted in my spot, as were all of the other marines, rendered functionless in the technical drama that was ensuing. The general was leaning forward, head suddenly flying from left to right, inquiring the passing technicians and scientists. He looked back towards us.

On the other side of the giant glass pane, from the top of one of the tower-like generators, came a flash of light and a rain of sparks, followed by an odd humanoid form

snaking its way down the vertical generator, illuminated by flashing light, crawling like a spider.

“We’ve been breached,” yelled the general over the sirens and worried voices. “You’ll have to go, the reactors will overheat soon, as we intend.”

“How do we leave?” asked Carson, thumb hinting at the door beyond which had come unearthly sounds and dancing lights.

“The door will be opened for a short period of time. Make haste and leave as quick as possible. We can’t allow anything to come through that door; we need to hold out for a while longer. Form up!”

All the marines arranged themselves in front of the blast doors, weapons raised. Some were crouching, other pressing themselves against the corridor walls, all with unblinking stares prying through the door that was about to open. There we were, a potpourri assortment of marines, the leftovers from hell’s feast. Sarge was at the front crouching, gun pointing slightly upward. Behind him was Tim, looking unflinching as always. Roach and Carson were on the right side of the corridor, standing in mirror positions. Tyler was behind them. Standing to his left and slightly behind him was I, with Jacobs gun hovering nearby to back me up. Back on the left was a total of six other marines, not from our unit, that had survived. There was a moment of absolute silence and tranquillity before the general’s voice rang out.

“Godspeed!”

The blast doors swished open.

For a second, the thought that the corridor was empty ran across my mind. Flickering lamps and eerie bluish floodlamps revealed nothing but bare metal panels and pipes and walkways. There came a hiss, which I firstly attributed to a leaking pipeline. However, as the shotguns around my raised, pointing upward, my gaze was drawn to a greyish form that was stealthily crawling on the ceiling. For a second, there was another silence. I fumbled for my flashlight as eleven shotguns went off in quick succession, muzzleflash providing a brighter view of the ghastly, grey thing.

I raised my flashlight in hopes of examining what had attacked us when something, to everyone’s complete surprise, darted out of one of the shadows cast by a large pair of pipes running into the wall on our right. The blurred form moved towards us with such shocking speed that there was a moment of hesitation before a few of the marines fired a second round. The creature, seemingly identical to the one that had been killed moments before, was flung upwards by the buckshots and did a gruesome dance of sorts before its moment landed the dead corpse at our feet.

My flashlight danced around the hard, exoskeleton-like plates that covered the beast and the arms and legs that ended in pointed claws. I used my boot to push up the head, and I saw ten eyes glinting lightly under the flashlight, an odd insect-type appearance that moulded downward into a maw of fangs.

With that came the time when someone would utter, ‘What the hell?’, though this didn’t happen. Someone further behind yelled, “Move out!” and we rushed out of the somewhat reassuring and safe control room. All traces of hope and easy-being were wiped away as the blast doors slammed shut. Immediately, I, along with several others, started fumbling with my walkie-talkie.

“Alright, where do we go?”

There was a silence.

“Answer me, damn it!” said Carson into the radio. “Where do we go?”

Through the static, I heard indistinct shouting, something that unmistakably sounded like ‘it’s coming through the glass!’ My eyes crossed in their uneasy searching with Carson’s, whose were wide with fear. There was a loud shattering noise that came through the radio, echoing distantly in the corridor. Sharp gunfire, garbled with static, echoed, then it suddenly ceased. Something was shifting, moving, they could hear through the radio. There was a hiss of some animosity and we could hear heavy footsteps. But between the impish hisses, I could’ve sworn I heard distant, silent muttering, words indistinguishable, nearly lost in the static. Someone was speaking...

“Iam nos fui plenus imperium , ceteri es ultra est ianua , sententia nos peos fatigo super lemma laxus...”

Carson brought his radio up to his mouth, then paused, unsure of what to say. I wondered as to whether he and the others could hear the distant voice. After a long while, he shifted again and his trembling hand raised the radio.

“Hello?” he said tentatively. There was no hope, it was evident that everyone was dead, but the voice... There was someone, and we did at least have to make sure. What if they weren’t all dead but held hostage? What if, in one way or another, there were still people left alive inside?

I hate the ‘what ifs.’

The voice I had heard before sharply ceased and a deafening silence fell.

“Anyone?”

We all felt silly, standing, waiting for something we knew would never come. Fear rose, with silence serving as a catalyst. In the near-darkness, where no flashlight beams fell, I could see the white of my fellow marine’s eyes, scanning, moving to and fro. Carson stood there, holding the radio with mingled thoughtfulness and fear, eyes gazing beyond the shrouded metal deck below. Metallic clangs and odd hisses and groans could be heard in the distance, barely audible and nearly lost in the silence. And it was this silence that was most unnerving of all...

“Let’s get the hell out of he—”

Something hissed sharply and my gaze, closely followed by the end of my shotgun, was drawn upwards. Sprawled out in a spideresque fashion, crouching right above me, stood one of the exoskeleton creatures, grey scales dully reflecting light and diffusing it into separate hues, exposed skin wet and shining, despite its semblance to elephant hide. Ten red eyes flashed as several shotguns went off simultaneously, illuminating the corridor, uncovering all that was lost in the darkness, for less than a second.

I narrowly stepped to the side as the humanoid thing crumpled at my feet.

And as I glanced at it again, my heart hastened. I had seen this creature before, in my dreams. Instantaneously, I labelled it as an imp, for that’s what I had called it in my vision. An imp. A demon.

I unconsciously twisted my face. I had called my dreams a vision. And yet, it was all coming true. Oddly enough, I wasn’t shocked at the sight of the imp. It was only the final piece of the puzzle, the final confirmation that what I had seen was true. Now I knew, and I also braced myself as to be ready in the event of any other monsters I had foreseen scuttling out of some dark crevice. What else was there? As a variety of beasts

wandered through my mind, I recalled the large towering demons, and the giant part-machine beast with the rocket launcher. My heart nearly stopped at the thought of it.

My trance passed as a hand slapped me on my back.

I looked around; figures around me were moving.

“Come on,” said one of the marines that had spoken before. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

High school had been a pain in the ass, but it was only a prelude to a Tom Clancy-sized novel of depressing moments to follow. It wasn't long after I graduated, high hopes of a high future in mind, that came the suggestion, "Let's go for a drink." I don't like to call it alcoholism. Let's just say that, well, a large sum of money was invested in various sorts of aged beverages. It was rather sad, to say the least, to find a few measly bills, along with triple-digit numbers left in one's bank account. So it was one of those "what the hell!" moments where I found myself back at the bar with several buddies. Then, one of them had said, "Let's join the marines!"

I don't think I was even aware of just what USMC stood for while I was putting my name down. I was mildly intoxicated at the time and for all I knew, I had thought it was some sort of application for a loan from a bank. It wasn't till boot camp that I realised what I had gotten myself into. I swore to never drink again. Not that it mattered. A day of running, push-ups in the mud, crawling, and climbing with the drill instructor's drawling voice ringing in your ears was enough to make the Marlboro cowboy go cold turkey. By the end of the day, exhaustion rendered the mere prospect of taking the time to *open* a bottle of, say, beer seem daunting. Sleep would've been welcome if you didn't have to get up at five the next morning for another round of pointless crawling and climbing with the drill instructor screaming loudly in your ears. I came to realise that he had the most pointless job in the world. So one day I decided to teach him that.

Well, maybe it had a point. It must've intimidated some of the smaller guys that were still wet around the gills. I remember vividly one day how he had been yelling. The guy would've made one hell of a rock star; all that yelling, and without losing your voice! Unfortunately, the military kills all talent.

"Move it, goddamn it. You'll be paid to do this! Stop wasting my time! Move out, move out! Come on, you pussies! I would've finished this course..."

I didn't know how far into boot camp I was, but the guy had been climbing higher and higher up my nerves until it reached a breaking point. Later I looked it up and found that it had been only four days. Wow, time flies inwardly when you're *not* having fun. Regardless, I broke away from the running line of exhausted marines and walked up to the drill instructor. His yelling paused and I realised my ears were ringing. He turned to face me, red face, steely eyes squinting, piercing into me. He opened his mouth to resume his blabbing.

"What the hell are you—"

About then, I planted five knuckles square in his face. For a second, I thought his mug was as tough as his vocal cords and I recoiled slightly, but then he crumpled to the ground. The other marines-in-training that had been jogging by paused and looked at me and then the drill instructor at my feet with incredulity. At that point, I didn't care anymore. I knew they weren't going to kick me out of their army, so I figured I might as well have a bit of a break. Not many people were joining these days (and I wonder why). After a long silence, the others filed around me and I received many smiles and pats on the shoulder.

Though well-received by my fellow comrades, the commanding officers were a whole other tale. It was then that I first met Commander Briggs, who I would come to know quite well after a few other misunderstandings with drill instructors and officers.

That, and several practical jokes and a spectacular fireworks show, courtesy of my friend Tyler. Briggs had lectured me for what seemed hours while I sat with my eyes out of focus, my hand rubbing my knuckles. I gotta hand it to that guy, he had one hell of a nose! Regardless, he said he'd let me off if I stay out of trouble.

I landed another annoying instructor in the medical wing a week later.

That probably contributed to the fact I 'graduated' early. Many of my friends were left behind. They shipped a good dozen of us to the Near East. Joy. The military promised that you'd get to 'see the world.' Yeah, see it, then bomb it. The prospect of going sightseeing around the cradle of civilisation was rather tempting. There came a short period when I considered 'borrowing' one of the buggies and driving a good eight-hundred miles West across Iran to visit the great city of Babylon. Too much risk. Hell, they hadn't let me go out to see one of the several giant Buddhas carved into cliff-faces that rested not too far out of town. It was apparently a 'see the world' deal deprived of any and all culture, something which, knowing that this was the military, didn't surprise me at all. And now I was getting shipped back out before I had even gotten to see one of the many archaeological wonders. Coming here wasn't Briggs' decision, but getting me out had to be. He wanted to keep me out of all action, if at all possible. Soon, this would become evident. But it was there that came a life-turning twist that would, without question alter what was to come, at least, in a part of me.

* * *

I remember, the desert sun was unforgiving, and the people even less. Shimmering in the distance, image distorted as heated air rose in search of someplace cooler, a line of trucks had moved against the desert backdrop, bearing semblance to army ants slowly crawling over dust and sand. Summer had come abruptly, patches of snow still dotted the landscape, seeking the refuge of dark corners. Qalat-e Sharaf wasn't a whole lot to look at from where we stood, though the quiet, dusty streets and nearly deafening silence was foreboding in its presence. And it was nearly always present. Ever since remaining fundamentalists started being on the run, the real trouble had commenced in all its horror. And to think that someday I'd be fighting hellspawn!

Me and my buddy Jenkins (the only other person from my unit who was sent here, also due to 'disciplinary disregard for senior officers') were laying atop another mud-brick building, surrounded by whatever protection the rocky roof guard-rail offered, and supplementing it with sandbags. Three stories below us was the road, a lighter hue of yellow than the rest of the desert. That's where the supply convoy of trucks that had come over the horizon nearly half an hour ago was supposed to pass through, and we were to ensure that this worked.

There had been more marines below us, some patrolling the streets, squinting against the brightness of the Near Eastern sun, even underneath their sunglasses. Shaky hands uneasily grasped loaded rifles. Across the street was a metallic shed that had suffered quite a bit because of the desert winds. This was because, apart from the shed, there was nothing else on the other side of the lane; beyond it started the great, yellow desert: miles upon mile of sand, dunes, and soaring temperatures. To the north, and to my left, started the Pamirs, a gigantic mountain range that fused into the Himalayas. My eyes were drawn to their imposing presence and their unnatural appearance, a crisp, blue

snow-capped form that strongly contrasted the desert sands, dunes, battered looking houses and housings dug straight into the clay hills.

"Here they come," Jenkins quietly said, shifting the assault rifle he was resting against the sandbags.

My heart skipped as he put thoughts into words. Qalat-e Sharaf was a town known as being a sort of resting place for fundamentalists and other terrorists. I twisted my head back, glancing at the rest of the town that lay behind us and to our right, carved out in the rolling foothills of the Pamirs. Peeling and flaking buildings from Communist times, covered in graffiti, stood as a dark silhouette in the early afternoon sun, hundreds of primitive antennas, poles and powerlines forming almost a type of halo that hovered over the city, an ocean of twisted and crooked metal and cables. It was a deep and undefeatable poverty.

I turned back.

Beneath me, the voices of my fellow marines were running. The convoys had snaked their way out of the desert and now approached us on our right, the mountain serving as beautiful background to what could be viewed as an anything-but-beautiful world. Weapons issued clicks as they were checked and rechecked, safeties snapped in and out of place. Sweaty hands gripped at handles, jumpy fingers curled around triggers moist from sweat. A sudden silence took hold, one that was soon broken as the distant rumble of engines made its way through the dry air.

A shuffle behind me announced the arrival of Johnson, another young corporal. He rested his rifle next to us and ducked behind the sandbags.

"Major says to get ready. He wants this to go down clean. Damned if that ever happens here."

Supply routes were constantly targeted by the extremists that ran amok. Four had already been hit in Qalat-e Sharaf last week. Without supplies, we were weakened. Never had we been left so, though unnecessary deaths had piled on. Civilians, what were truck drivers from home, were pulled out and replaced by military. Politicians seemed to think that the death of military people didn't quite stack up in worth as civilians, even when these military persons were doing simple and innocent things such as driving trucks. Regardless, everything was military-run now.

I was just about to comment on how pointless our presence there was (just for the sake of conversation) when a shot had rang out across the crisp air. We both froze, eyes glued to the still-distant convoys.

Yet again, we heard rapid machinegun fire and I watched as one of the trucks swerved to one side before twisting to the other. The effect was anything but subtle. Though wheels went to left and right, the truck's centre of gravity had its own plans in mind, and soon the truck flipped over, sliding on its side for a few good metres.

"Shit!"

"Move out! Move out!"

Soldiers were charging towards the ambush area while military trucks shot ahead. Soon, the air was nothing but rattling weapons.

"Let's go," I said, and followed Jennings down the building. We followed the other running soldiers, sticking close to the mud houses, not wanting to be caught in the open street.

We were nearing the ambush.

A burst of loud gunfire (louder than all the other firing) echoed and the mud wall ahead of me erupted in a fountain of small pebbles. I didn't pause, though my eyes travelled around, seeking the shooter. The bastards were everywhere! There were people living in the buildings that, as soon as they heard gunfire, they'd stick their weapons out of the windows and just randomly shoot stuff. They were on no one's side and they killed both. They killed out of fear.

A dozen marines charged into a seemingly abandoned building and more gunfire soon followed. Another unit was assembling on the other side of the street.

"Taggart, Jennings, go there, cover!"

We dropped behind one truck and looked around, making sure the soldiers that had gone inside the building would be able to make it out without being attacked from behind.

Someone was yelling in Arabic.

Then, a skinny figure ran in the middle of the street, shaking as if it barely held its balance. It raised a giant, cylindrical object...

"Shit!"

One of the marines jumped out and started unloading his clip into the figure, though it was too late. Just as the figure collapsed, there was a faint whistling to be heard in the air as a rocket flew towards us, catching sunlight and trailing smoke.

We jumped away from the truck, which erupted in a giant fireball. Metallic pieces rained from the sky, dropping back to the charred remains from where they had once come. Smoke rose in the air, billowing in the wind and blocking out the sun for a brief while. I wiped the black soot from my face and grimaced. The worst part of the job was when the enemy had things that you weren't allowed to touch for 'safety concerns.' Namely, rocket launchers.

I coughed.

Three troop carriers flew overhead, circling lightly before descending rapidly in the middle of the street.

"About time," someone grumbled.

Soldiers poured out of the back and quickly moved away from the crafts, arranging themselves against the building walls, machine guns raised.

A man sporting a general's uniform ran out of one of the craft towards a pair of marines that had been with us when the truck had blown.

"I'm looking for Corporals Stephen Jenkins, Frederick Moore, Brad Davis Jr., Nik Taggart and a PFC Walter," he yelled over the whine of the troop carriers, one hand holding a clipboard, the other keeping his hat from flying off because of the troop carrier engines.

I nudged Jenkins in the soldier and ran over to the general.

"Yeah?" I said. "I mean, what sir? PFC Taggart reporting."

His lip twisted in a pained grimace as he looked at me. He seemed to say, 'you!' in some sort of silent recognition. I get that a lot. Anyway, I didn't recognise him, but I'd ran into so many superiors in the last few months that I couldn't possibly remember them all. Then I felt a tinge of recognition creep across my own face. This was the dumbass that had thrown our favourite cat in the refinery! I had packed ice bags all around him while he was sleeping, littered the floor with ice cubes, and turned his air conditioner all the way down. He wasn't too happy about that.

“Feeling cool, general?” I asked.

His face twitched. “I’m having all of you shipped out, under Commander Briggs’ order.”

“What?” I said incredulously, forgetting the fun times I had been going over in my mind, gesturing wildly towards the building that the marines had just infiltrated. We were in the middle of a major firefight, no one pulls out men at that point. Even this guy wasn’t *that* stupid. Was he? “Now?”

“Yes.” He said curtly.

“But what about...” I motioned towards the building again.

He looked up briefly. “Don’t worry,” he said. “Everything’s under control.”

The top of the building erupted into flame as dried mud rained from the sky, showering dust and other debris. Several people, hit by larger pieces, issued various obscenities in protest. Several bodies fell from the sky, charred body parts landing near the general’s, and my own, feet.

“Come on!” yelled the general over the sound of falling rocks, screams, and a new wave of gunfire. “We have to move out now, we can’t afford one of these bastards nailing the troop carriers. They’re open targets, come on! There’s a third TC on the way, we’re bringing in more marines.”

I looked back at the collapsing structure, shrugged, and walked into the troop carriers. The general remained, yelling out the names of the other soldiers he needed to collect. I wondered if he still had those cold burns.

“What do you think?” asked Jenkins. “You know, I don’t mind leaving,” he added, glancing through the porthole at the battle scene.

“Are you kidding me? I’d rather take a fucking hike in the mountains here unarmed than to go back.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“If Briggs is involved in this, I want out.”

Jenkins looked at me with mild incredulity, before turning his gaze back to the battle that was raging outside.

Soon, all soldiers had been rounded up and the troop carriers took off.

Two days later, Briggs lined up the whole lot of us and gave us a long lecture about how we were the best. There were other commanding figures there, standing as if they’d swallowed a flagpole. We were all curious as to just what they wanted of us. They don’t just ship people out of battle for nothing. No one knew what they wanted, though speculations were running amok. Some marine I didn’t know had asked me.

“What do they want?”

“I don’t know what they want,” I replied. “I don’t know if *they* know what they want. Hell, I don’t even know if that made sense.”

As it turned out, we had a first-class (not really) ticket to Mars where new, polished military facility was waiting for us. Briggs brought out a photographer to take pictures. Naturally, I wanted to seize the moment and make a bit of a scene, though another soldier beat me to the punch. All the higher-ranking people present, and Briggs in particular, seemed to have expected it. I guess he made some good points, though, cause Briggs, and a few others, were really red in the face when he had finished talking. For a while I myself pondered at the absurdity at having a military base on Mars, away from any and all possible action. But now as I looked back on it, I did come to realise just why

soldiers were shipped there. They were shipped over there to protect and ensure safety to whatever those UAC folks had been brewing deep underground in their secret facilities.

Who knows what they had feared, probably rival corporations that might try to seize control over the facility and gain scientific insight into what the UAC had done. The UAC folks were caught by surprise, however, when they were not attacked by rival corporations, but rather, by a result of their own experiments. As I found out later, they had been developing new ways of transporting people and things by means of digging a tunnel through space time, creating a small wormhole of sorts joining two portals. They had been digging such a tunnel from Mars to Earth but had accidentally snagged something else on their way.

Something nightmarish and vile that was sufficient to spell out doom for the entire human race. Something that was, as my dreams suggested, hell itself.

I hadn't gone. The soldier who had protested had.

And with that, I came to a sudden realisation. What was it? That marine that had spoken against Briggs and the other superiors when they were going to ship him to Mars revealed everything. I could remember doing that in my dream. So in my dream, I must've relived what he had lived through, somehow dreamt his reality. I didn't know his name, or any of his superior's names, or any of his friends' names, so, in my dream, I had filled this gap with people from my own reality. His superior officer had become Briggs in my dream. His best friend had become Tyler. His enemy-turned-friend had become Tim (something not quite so in my reality). It all made sense! And yet, at the same time, it made little sense. What had that been? Some sort of warning? This event, this dream surely had to have some sort of specific purpose. Was there some sort of link between us? Was I a continuation of the dead marine's spirit?

Was I meant to finish what he had started?

Nonsense, I thought for a second. But then again, why not? What other explanation was there?

Enough questions! I told myself.

I thought back to that day, when it had looked as if I were to be sent there, too.

I had been just about ready to protest with Briggs as I walked up to him, but he spoke before I even opened my mouth.

"We're not taking you, Taggart. After a lot of discussions, we've reached a final verdict. We can't afford idiots like you screwing things up." And with that, he turned around and walked back to his office.

"Aw," I muttered to Tyler. "It's a pity he doesn't go."

A long while passed when something went wrong on Mars and then came here.

Fortunately, Nik Taggart doesn't go down without a fight. And zombies don't eat too much lead if you distribute it properly.

I sounded odd, almost cheesy as I recited this in my head, and yet there was little to laugh at when we (and in some cases, I) had come across the flying human heads or the spideresque heads or the baby cherubs...

I hope we don't come across any of those, I thought as we proceeded down the corridor, leaving the crumpled imp bodies behind us.

But it all made sense! My dream what was someone else had lived! It was what had led up to all of the recent events.

After a while of uneventful walking, thinking in my mind and trying to confirm my realisation, we reaching an inevitable fork in the road that left us to wonder as to just which way to go. After a mild pause, we took a left, though we were not looking for the portal exactly, but rather, a map. It was the same situation I had found myself in a while back. It didn't take too long (fortunately) as we came across another console intended for directional orientation. Jacobs approached it, various schematics of the structure flashing through the screen. After a while, he paused, and said, "What am I supposed to look for? It's not like they're going to have something labelled 'secret UAC installation with portals' marked on here."

"Exactly. There should be unmarked areas on the map. That's what we're shooting for." I advised.

He paused.

“Underground level seven has a bunch. So does eight and nine. All levels below that are not shown here, says, ‘Sensitive Military Op.’ Guess that could be it, eh? Levels increase as you go lower. Jesus, this thing goes far underground. I thought it was a military base?”

“It is,” said one of the marines. “Lots of government research goes on here. It’s been rented by the UAC since their program is government supported and funded.”

“So what do we do?”

I glanced over Jacobs’ shoulder at the map. Along the marked corridors was a large division between areas, unmistakably blast doors, beyond which lay a large corridor that led to a large hub with a central elevator and smaller sub-corridors radiating outwards, leading to large areas without any markings or explanations whatsoever. It was evident what we had to do.

“Find the shortest way to get here,” I said, tapping my finger on the console.

“Ok, let’s see, this looks promising here,” he said, pointing to a small area that was several corridors away from where we stood. “That’s an elevator. It can get us to the level where the blast doors that lead to the research facility are, though, it doesn’t go any lower. They might have lifts that are restricted only to the research place, but it’s not on the map, so we’ll have to get there and see.”

Carson nodded. “We might not have to go all the way down anyway.”

But all observations, intelligent and not, were cut short as we heard wheezing and the shuffling of feet behind us. As we turned around, I can’t say that anyone was surprised to see a big, lumbering zombie hobbling towards us. This one, however, was carrying a pistol. For a second, I wondered as to how good a zombie’s aim would be. I never really found out, though. Seven shotgun shots went off at once, reducing the zombie to a mere wall furnishing.

Messy.

Looking around wearily, I looked back to Jacobs. “The shortest route?”

“Got it,” he said, pulling his PDA cables out of the console. “Let’s see,” he said, looking at the tiny computer. “We go this way,” he led us down the hall, “then take a right and walk for a while, then on the right wall, at the end of the hall is where it should be. Unless you look at it this way...” He flipped his PDA upside-down.

“Jacobs!” said Sarge sternly.

“Just joking, joking.”

“Here,” said Sarge, reaching for Jacobs computer. “I’ll lead, being highest-ranking. Don’t get ahead of me.”

As we started, Jacobs gave me a whimsical smirk. It was odd to see him in such high spirits. For a while, PDA in one hand, shotgun in the other, Sarge made his way down the hall, with us behind him. No one spoke. We followed metallic corridors, supplemented with hissing pipes that released unknown (hopefully not poisonous) gases and flickering lights. The entire station itself seemed to be in pain, groaning and shaking from time to time, releasing showers of sparks down upon us in regular intervals. Wall panels were missing in various places, with darkness laying beyond. Carson paused, with Roach looking over his shoulder. He peeked inside one of the pits in the wall, lowering his shotgun so he could use his flashlight to gaze inside.

“Come on, let’s go!” I urged them on. A few others paused.

"I see something," Carson said quietly.

"So do I," I retorted with little patience. "I see an dumbass about to be bit in half by some freaking alien!"

"Martian."

"Come on!"

"No," he said. "Something alive, something moving..."

I grabbed him by the neck and, not sparing him any unnecessary pressure to his neck arteries, pulled him out. He looked at me for a second, then pulled his hand out of the opening, raising his shotgun again.

"Sorry."

We continued.

As we continued trudging along the halls, several times we came across corpses, with blood smeared on the walls here and there. Surprisingly, I found this somewhat comforting. I'd rather have bodies down on the ground rather than staggering towards me, grey, lifeless hands outstretched, green glowing eyes radiating from the darkness, bloody jaws salivating. Still, it was rather startling as we came around a bend to find what was almost a pile of bodies, resting atop a carnage-strewn floor with walls smeared in blood. Apparently the zombies (or something else?) were getting creative, for between the smudges and smears, words could be seen.

"Wow," someone said in half-awed voice. "Now they're fingerpainting."

I could read something along the lines of 'You lousy job,' lightly illuminated by the showering sparks, next to assorted random letters and symbols. There were also classic words that made more sense, like the simple 'die' and words that made little, like '*perfero*.' Being written in blood, I'd say they made a pretty strong statement. It was these words, the ones that I could not quite read, that really got my attention. They looked something like '*penetro flamma*' and to the right of that, '*exuro*'. My eyes were fixed on these words as we traversed the corridor, which was not an easy task, partly because of the numerous corpses, and mostly because of the putrid smell. The bloody handprints on the walls were also rather attention-grasping.

Someone behind me slipped, fell, and uttered a yelp of disgust.

"They'll be doing paper snowflakes next..." someone muttered.

“Is there any other way to blow this joint?”

We had barricaded ourselves inside a small supplies bunker. A shotgun held the door closed while weary people hovered inside the uncomfortable, small space. Racks with various necessities lined the walls, atop metallic crates that left little room for any other objects. Like people, for instance. Jacobs, Carson, Roach and a few others were sitting on top of the boxes, left without any other place to go. Sarge, closely followed by Tim, was standing at the centre, looking solemnly at the ground and listening to our conversation with vague hints of interest. Everyone was browsing through crates, putting on better armour and re-supplying themselves with ammunition. I pushed myself back in the cramped conditions, trying to find some space and finding none. This odd scene was illuminated by the two bright lamps high above. For a small closet, this tiny room had quite a high ceiling, probably so they could stack things like these boxes. Feeling the lack of space, Jacobs and Carson had started to scale the boxes and hovered a good two metres above us.

“They’ve got the control room. That’s where all the control is. There is no other way,” said one of the marines.

“Can’t we override it?”

Tim looked around thoughtfully. “You can’t override the control room.” He paused, a gleam of realisation coming across his face. “But if we cut the power and restarted everything, we might be able to gain control. The generators can be controlled from several locations. We’d have to work fast, because from wherever we work, the control room will be able to override us. We’ll have to get done before they realise what’s going on.”

He looked around.

“Well, it sounds like a plan,” said one marine.

“So mission’s changed? We’re no longer going to the portal?”

Sarge grunted. “Of course we are. We’ll just blow this joint first. So now we have to find the way to the generators?”

“I don’t know,” said Tim, looking down. “I mean, if we went there, we’d have to set a counter on the generators so we can make our escape. But a countdown while we run will be all the time the bastard running this thing from the control room will need to override us and stop the countdown.”

“So what do you suggest?”

“The only way I see it,” said Tim slowly, “is if one or two of us goes to shutdown the generators, restart and blow up this installation while all the others go on to the portal.”

There was a long pause.

“So whoever volunteers for this dies?”

“No shit, Mr. Holmes.”

“Yes,” said Tim. “And the people near the portal should wait until the generators start to blow, just in case whoever goes fails. Destroying this installation is a priority. So the others will wait, and they will send in another wave to blow this place up if the first people to go fail.”

“How will the people that go to the portal know when the generators are about to explode?” asked one of the marines.

Tim turned to him. “Believe me, you’ll know.”

“Now what?”

“Alright soldiers, get ready to move out!” said Sarge. “We find another map and the shortest way to get back to the generators. Then we split up. One group goes towards the generators, the other retraces their steps and proceeds toward the portal.”

“Who’s going to be the one that reboots and blows the installation?”

Another long pause ensued. The thought of volunteering to die was not one that was what I’d call inviting. It wasn’t one of those, ‘Oh, I guess I’ll do it’ types of decisions. In fact, the person chosen would have to have one hell of a nerve. Everyone glanced sideways. I knew I wasn’t the one to go. First of all, I was as good with computers as octogenarians are with snowboarding. The one person I knew who seemed qualified for this mission was the one person who had suggested this whole plan: Tim. I didn’t want to see him march off to his death, though I didn’t say anything. I could see he was ready to volunteer when one of the marines whose name I did not know spoke up.

“I’ll do it.” He said defiantly. “I’m a computer specialist, I know how to work these systems.”

“Are you sure?” asked Sarge politely. “You know what you’re getting into, you realise you’re not coming back?”

He shrugged. “The way I figure it, you guys won’t last very long either.”

I smiled. The guy’s philosophy was admirable.

“I’ll go too,” said another marine I didn’t know. “Just in case, you know, to help, one person may not be enough.”

“Me too, I’m coming—”

“No,” said Sarge sharply, cutting off the third volunteer. “This is not simply marching up to the generators gun in hand. This whole plan has to go down precisely and quietly. Two people are enough. We don’t want the enemy to know. We have to fool them into not noticing these two men. Maybe attract their attraction, make them think that we’re all near the portal.”

“Use the walkie-talkies,” someone advised. “Keep in touch.”

“What if they’re monitoring the transmissions?”

Sarge nodded. “Don’t use them unless you absolutely have to. Now come on, let’s move out!”

He pulled the shotgun out and swung the door open and with that, we made our way out of the room and into the dark corridor with Jacobs and Carson jumping off the boxes and trailing behind us. The only light came from dim floodlights and rotating, flashing alert bulbs. The air had gotten hotter and more humid as we had progressed deeper into the installation. The metallic panels covering up the walls had lessened, exposing pipes, circuits, and other machinery below, all of which was covered in a thin layer of perspiration. Occasional sparks flew from the ceiling, raining down on us. The distant noise stopped momentarily, and an unsettling silence took hold.

I looked up and saw a security camera light up and start to swing around towards us, whining gently as the motor worked. Knowing this was a crucial moment, I raised my shotgun and smashed the lens in.

The thought that the bastards were using cameras to spy on us was unnerving.

“There was a map somewhere around here.”

We headed down the corridor, took a left, and reached a fork where, to our great comfort, a computer console was placed between the two corridors that sprouted outwards. One of the corridors seemed to have taken quite a beating; not too far along, it was engulfed in absolute darkness, broken by the occasional bright flash of what I presumed was a malfunctioning lamp. In fact, the brightest source of light seemed to be the almost inviting computer console. Jacobs moved forward, but Tim reached the console first and immediately started browsing its contents.

There was a dripping sound coming from several directions, yet, as I looked side to side, couldn't find the source of the sound.

After a few brief flashes of schematics, Tim stopped.

“Here we go,” he said. “There's an elevator you can take, but that'd be too easy to spot. That, and we don't know if it's still operational. There is a maintenance chamber you can access from here,” he pointed to one part of the map, “after you've retraced our steps back near the control room. You can go in that room, there's a maintenance shaft that runs parallel to the elevator. If you take that all the way up, you'll emerge and the platform where the generator control room is located. You can use that to manually cut off power and reboot everything. You know what to do from there.”

The two soldiers nodded.

“If you get lost, you can use your walkie-talkies. The control room is heavily shielded, so it's likely they won't catch any transmissions. If you get lost, give us a call. We'll try to find someplace with a map to barricade ourselves in.”

“Can they monitor what you're looking up on the map?”

Tim looked up sharply and slammed the console, bringing up a schematic of the mess hall. A few more random locations later, he turned around. We stood there for a while, looking around uncomfortably, moments before the two volunteers separated themselves from the group.

Everyone took a deep breath.

“Good luck,” said Tim.

“Good luck to you guys,” said one of the two marines. And with a last look back, they ran away, down the corridor, and into the darkness.

Tim sighed heavily.

“That's that.”

“Let's hope this plan works out.”

I looked at Tim. “Are you gonna find someplace on the map where we'll go or are we going to improvise?”

“Improvise,” said Tim. “Remember, where we're going is unmarked on the map. I'm hoping that, once we get down in the research facilities that aren't shown on this map, we'll find another local map that *will* outline them.

“At least check to see if our way is clear,” said one of the marines.

Tim brought up the security program and started flipping through various cameras, all showing dark, empty corridors. Many were too murky to distinguish anything. Corridors, hubs, open rooms all flashed through the screen. The few corridors where there was enough light treated us to walls smeared in blood, along with the usual corpses lying on the ground. Through one of the cameras we sighted an imp that was

eating a dark, indistinguishable mass that lay on the bloodied floor. But then, something else came across the screen.

“Wait!” I cried.

Something warm and wet dripped on the back of my neck, though I was too preoccupied with the screen to bother.

Tim brought back the previous screen. There was a human figure there, wandering as if confused, clutching a pistol in one hand, a burning torch in the other. Judging by the white coat and the aged look, it was evident that this guy was not military. And yet, by his gait, and the way the person was mumbling to himself, it was evident that this was no zombie, but a civilian. Murmuring ‘Oh God, help me...’ several more times, a sound oddly garbled by the faltering transmission, the scientist wandered off of the screen and out of the camera’s range, with the odd flickering light of his torch slowly fading away, leaving shadows behind.

“We have to go, we can find him!”

“Wait,” said Tim absentmindedly. “Look at this.”

Everyone stopped breathing.

Another screen was brought up. It showed a fairly open room with two corridors extending from one end. From the ceiling, odd shapes hung, gently swaying, glistening, dripping blood. And between the two corridors, over what looked like a computer console, there was a group of people huddled, looking intently at the screen. I turned around, and as I did, I noticed one of the figures do the same out of the corner of my eye. Sure enough at the opposite end, there was a camera mounted, its mechanical gaze piercing through me. It seemed oddly cold, a machine, but the thought of who else might be looking through its lens left me with a sense of unease. We hadn’t noticed until now, but there was a forest of bodies hanging above us, disfigured torsos swinging from the ceiling, dripping blood. And as I turned back to look at the screen, I saw an odd, dark humanoid figure, crawling slowly between the mutilated human bodies, stalking silently, along the ceiling, right over the group of people.

We scattered, jumping sideways and lifting our shotguns as we went. Several loud shots went off and three corpses fell from above, partially shattering in a gruesome way. The imp followed, landing with a dull thud on the floor and hissing menacingly at us. Jacobs was close to the imp and started crawling away, though the blood from the disfigured bodies that had now gathered at the floor was slippery and his attempt was rather ineffectual. Fortunately, the solution to his problem came in the form of ten shotguns going off. The result was, well, rather interesting to say the least. Its body fell apart, with assorted colourful pieces flying in every direction.

“Ah,” I muttered. “It’s like a biology lesson.”

“Let’s get going,” said Sarge.

I extended my hand to help Jacobs off the floor, but recoiled when I noticed that he was covered in blood and imp goo.

“Funny,” he muttered, helping himself.

“Something tells me helping you wouldn’t be sanitary.”

“Yeah, well,” he said, wiping the stuff from his face and falling in step with me as we walked behind the others. “As if everything didn’t suck enough already, now I have alien shit on me.”

“You sure it’s alien?” I asked tentatively with fake absentmindedness. I really wanted to tell Jacobs, and all the others, about my dream, and yet, something held me back. Despite all that had happened, I felt they would think me crazy. Perhaps they would attribute this ‘insanity’ to all of the recent events. It won’t be an explanation for them, but a condition as a result. The last thing I wanted was to turn the others against me, to have to stare back while they gaze at me with pity. I knew I wasn’t crazy. My dream was real; it was a real event that had happened to someone, an event that led to where we stood. I wasn’t religious, I didn’t believe in God or heaven or hell, so why did I think it so?

“What do you mean?” he asked. “What the fuck else could it be?”

“I don’t know,” I said rather quietly. “A beast, well, you know monster, maybe, say, a demon?”

“A *demon*?” answered Jacobs rather loudly. He followed his incredulous quote with a loud snort that made Sarge turn around.

“Keep it quiet, damn it!”

A few seconds of silence passed.

“What’s wrong with it being a demon?” I inquired.

“A demon? Please! What demons, minions, are we gonna be fighting Satan next or what?”

Hmm, I’m no expert, but that sounded a bit like sarcasm.

“What the hell, Private First Class Jacobs? You’re the one that believes in all this shit, religion and all. Why couldn’t they be demons?”

“Well, yeah, but... It’s not... Um, it’s not like that. See, it’s different. That doesn’t make sense, it couldn’t be. I mean, how,” he paused, twisting his face, trying to think of a question. “How could they have come? Why?” he ended rather lamely, not finding anything better to ask.

“I don’t know, maybe global domination?” It was my turn to be sarcastic.

“Nah,” he said, shaking his head. “God wouldn’t allow something like that to happen.”

“Don’t bring Him into this,” I said half-jokingly. “Besides, what’s the difference whether it’s aliens or demons killing us? People are still dying. The result is the same. If they weren’t demons, shouldn’t we still get holy aid? There’s some logic for you.”

“God works in mysterious ways.”

“Don’t pull that crap with me.”

“I don’t get it,” he said. “You’re talking about these things being demons, and at the same time you act like there’s no God. There’s some real logic for you.”

He had me stumped; I had no answer for that. He was bringing up that same question again. In my dream I had contemplated the possibility, but only shortly. I didn’t believe in that stuff, but my dream told me they were real demons, and that contradicted my beliefs. It was confusing, everything was falling apart. If there was a God, none of this would’ve happened. Millions were dead. If God works in mysterious ways, then this was one hell of an enigma. This reaffirmed my atheistic view, and yet some stray thoughts lingered on.

“Nik, you’ve got to believe in God.”

I looked at him, a figure made bulky with armour, holding a shotgun in one arm, with large stains of blood where he had fallen on the ground shining a lustrous black in the darkness. His face was worn and tired, nearly concealed by lack of light. He looked back wearily, raising his shotgun.

“Tell me again,” I said. “Why did you take this job?”

“It was my calling. Maybe it was yours, too.”

“Wait,” I said. “So you’re saying that God made me get drunk so I’d end up here? That my drinking problem was divine intervention?”

“Maybe. After all, you’d probably be dead right now if you were still a civilian.”

It was my turn to snort.

“That’s the lamest thing I’ve ever heard.” And after a pause, “See, if religious people like you want to make an impression on intelligent atheists like myself, you need to present a better case.”

“Seems like a good case to me.”

“Drinking was actually divine intervention... tell that to my ex.”

Jacobs glanced back again.

“You’ve got to be open minded,” he told me.

“Wow,” I replied with the sarcastic tone I had acquired at the very beginning of the conversation. “Open minded. You’re pulling all the stops tonight, aren’t you?”

Sarge turned around again. “Keep it quiet!”

“Guess what?” I whispered. “I *am* open minded. Open minded towards things that make sense. Living my life by some book written by people over two thousand years ago is not being open minded. It’s being ignorant. You know, there have been quite a bit of technological advancements since the Bible was written, and I’m more inclined to believe them. Being open minded means accepting new ideas that make more sense than older ones. The Bible is not new ideas. It’s just a fantastic tale meant to teach people not kill or lie or do stuff like that.”

I seemed to have touched a nerve; Jacobs said nothing more and sped up, leaving me behind. This instance confirmed my belief that nothing good ever came out of religion. It had caused wars and now it seemed to have lost me a friend.

As I became lost in my thoughts, I was half-aware of the three zombies that rounded the corner ahead of us. After absent-mindedly blowing them away, I followed the others down the corridor. I was snapped out of my thoughts, however, as the people around me suddenly stopped and started charging backwards. As I began to wonder what the hell was going on, I felt a hand yank me by the collar and pull me back.

A giant creature had stumbled ahead of us.

I had, as pretty much with everything else, seen it before in my dream. It must've been about the size of a bull. It was roughly shaped like one, too, with a smooth, dome-shaped 'forehead' so to speak that went back quite a bit. At the end was a toothy, saliva-covered mouth, behind which were two horns that pointed downwards. There was no neck. The creature widened at that point and two massive, stout legs ending in claws extended from the sides. The creature was widest there, and it looked rather sprawled out with the unusual position of its legs, but even then it seemed huge. Then, behind that, the body abruptly ended. The rough spine that held a high ridge between the shoulders suddenly flowed into a metallic beam of sorts, supported by panels that looked like armour. The creature's back was rather small, metallic, and unimpressive compared to the front, almost comical, had the damned thing not been charging at us.

As it moved, light danced across its hide, revealing the fact that it was wet.

It was, to put it mildly, a disgusting creature.

The eyeless wonder charged at us, its mouth somehow extending forward and opening wider than I thought possible. Mismatched teeth that pointed in all directions flashed through the air, tossing saliva to and fro. As it moved, there were loud, rhythmic metallic sounds as its rear feet moved across the metallic floor.

Regaining some control, running backwards, I fired a round straight into its face.

It was like a freight train; it didn't even waver.

I wondered as to just how much more corridor I had left before the creature finally slumped down on the ground, dead. It had taken a clean four shots before it went down.

"Jesus," someone muttered.

"Let's go," said Sarge, working hard to remain composed.

And with passing glances at the dead beast, we retraced our steps and continued through the labyrinth of halls.

* * *

"He was somewhere around here."

More corridors and bends, dark halls, and two unfortunate zombies later, we had finally arrived at the spot near the blast doors where we had sighted the wandering scientist. Of course, he was moving, so it was evident that he wouldn't be there, though we guessed he couldn't have gotten too far, alive or dead. Where we stood, the hallway had widened, giving way to a good-sized rectangular room. There were few notable features, apart from some maintenance doorways and a bathroom on the right side, and the massive blast doors beyond which was unknown territory (and unsurprisingly, our

destination). After debating who should enter the bathroom first to check if it was safe, it was decided that the wall outside the bathroom was a lot more inviting. After finishing there, the water fountain proved to be a good friend. Feeling rejuvenated, time had come to calculate our next move.

“We have to find him.”

“Alright,” said Sarge, wiping his mouth with his sleeve and glancing at us. “We should split up. There’s ten of us, so I’m thinking five will go look for this guy, five will remain and try to get these doors open.”

Sarge, Tim, Tyler, some marine I whose name I didn’t know, and I remained while the others went to search. Jacobs glanced at me, then moved away with the others into the shadows. Feeling rather annoyed than sad or sorry, I turned back to the others and walked up to Tim, who had busied himself with the computer console at the side of the doors. Judging by Tim’s distant muttering, things weren’t looking too well. He would continually browse back and fourth, a silent exasperation taking hold of his face.

“So, what’s the problem?” I asked, knowingly breaking his concentration. He wasn’t angry, however. He seemed to have cast our grudge aside since this whole annihilation-of-humanity thing had started.

“Well,” he started, not looking up. “It seems someone managed to fire the alarm before everything went wrong. When the alarm is activated, various blast doors in strategic locations around this installation slam shut. And, obviously, there’s quite a few around these secretive areas.” He paused, moving to a new directory. “Problem is, the designers figured that, once whatever danger passed, the doors would have to be opened from one specific place.”

“The control room?” I asked semi-rhetorically, knowing the answer.

“Exactly. Everything can be put back up in working order from there. I don’t think I can do it from here, though.”

I nodded.

“But wait,” Tim said, snapping his fingers symbolically. “You can trigger the alarm from this console. So, if you can close the doors with this computer, it might be possible to open it. Just command it to have the mechanism move in reverse. I’d have to hack the damn thing...”

“Private,” said Sarge irritably, looking at me. “Get away from there and keep a lookout.”

I did as I was told.

“Sorry sir, just letting Staff Sergeant Tim soak up some technical expertise from me, that’s all.”

Tim grinned.

Sarge’s walkie-talkie sputtered to life, breaking the silence. There was what sounded like gunfire in the background, along with various shouts.

“Goddamn bugs coming off of everywhere!” screamed one of the marines on the radio. “We found the guy, but we’re stuck here! We need help, quick! Send someone... Johansson shot... Jacobs injured, three of us trying to fend off the damn things, running low on ammo... The Father is here... Damn maggots everywhere... Now! ...Cut the damned... Si—”

The transmission was lost in static.

“Taggart, Winston,” Sarge ordered, looking at me and Tyler. “Go back them up. We’ll continue trying to open the door.”

Without looking back, and wondering what the hell a ‘maggot’ was, we took off running down the hall.

“Where do we go?” asked Tyler.

“Wherever there’s gunfire.”

As we reached another fork, we paused. We could hear distant gunfire and yells emanating from the right corridor’s metallic walls. Following darkness, the beams of our flashlights dancing across the cold, steel ground, we entered. Below us, the solid metal panel floor was replaced by railing through which floors below us could be seen. We were walking down cavernous halls, listening intently. As the sounds became more clear, they also became more desperate; gunfire lessened, screams increased in frequency and volume. Feeling rather sick at the thought of what we’d find if we didn’t arrive in the next two minutes, I sped up my space, with Tyler tailing my heels. I saw odd tendril-like blood-red snakes that rose up from under various panels and tubes, wrapping around machinery and pipes, and disappearing elsewhere. They glistened lightly in the darkness. I had not time to make petty observations, however.

We reached another one of those damned hubs, giant, round, dome-ceiling rooms from which various corridors sprouted. We stopped moving and breathing, trying to place the location from where the yells were coming from. We were close; I could hear them clearer than before. They were no longer distant noise. Following my ears, I turned around to the direction from where they were coming and was greeted by a gruesome sight. Tyler, behind me, stopped breathing.

An entire side of the room was in ruins. But where hissing pipes and torn wall panels ended started a pink fleshy surface, lined with red vesicles, glowing lightly in the dim light, and gently pulsating. I stepped closer, looking up. Where metal ended and flesh began, lining the ceiling, the very top of the pervasive cave, was a dull spine, leading into the darkness. The damned thing almost seemed to be breathing. And God, did it smell! The odd corridor, which twisted its way into darkness beyond, was the least inviting thing I had seen since this damn conflict had started. I thought I had to be mistaken; pausing to listen again, I realised, to my great resentment, that I was wrong.

The yells were definitely coming from inside the living cave.

Sighing angrily, making sure my gun was loaded, I rushed inside.

What the *fuck* could *possibly* make them go in here? I thought.

Inside, it was absolute darkness; the only light came from Tyler's and my own flashlights. Everything beyond the circular beam was completely black, something not too assuring. And yet, even less assuring was the part that *was* illuminated; it was the usual nasty-looking fleshy wall material that I had hated in my dream, and now that I saw it in person, I hated it even more. The damned thing literally *assaulted* my senses. I saw it everywhere, I smelled it. Hell, I could even taste it. The thing made groaning sounds, and the soft, wet ground underfoot wasn't a walk in the park. And I swear, these guys work really fast. I mean, the base had barely been invaded for what, a few hours? And they had already renovated the whole place.

Oh why oh why the hell did they have to go in here?

Finally, we exited the corridor and were greeted to a no better sight.

It was a larger room. It seemed the growth still hadn't finished 'fixing up the place.' Halfway across the ceiling, there was a blend of metal and flesh with vine-like red tendrils twisting around the machinery. As my gaze followed these unappetising snakes, I noticed that there were many others, coming from other corridors and places, and they all converged at a single point on the ceiling. As my flashlight followed my gaze, it revealed another nasty picture (big surprise). They all led to a human body that somehow seemed pinned to the ceiling. Its face was skull like and sunken, with odd, yellow eyes that seemed to jump off the face. Skin was stretched over it thinly, where it was torn at the chest revealing a ribcage below. The filthy creature was twisting and writhing, doing what looked like talking, yet there was no sound.

Below it, in the half-demolished room, were two people lying on the ground while three (Carson, Roach and another marine) were still on their feet, apparently left without bullets, for they were wielding the ends of their shotguns as clubs. A third figure, glowing lightly due in part to a white lab coat, was crouching in the centre. Coming from air vents and all the little dark places, corners, and crevices of the room were these small, four-legged, two-headed things. I blinked, trying to clear my vision. What the hell? Their heads were expressionless, with two big, round, unblinking red eyes per head. As each one appeared out of the darkness, its red, glowing eyes (all four of them) were seen coming from the darkness. They crawled, a flash of grey, skittering towards the small group of people. We had thus far gone unnoticed, but I decided to change that.

BOOM! Click.

I fired and reloaded, watching one of the maggot-like creatures that had jumped towards the marines blow up in a bloody mess in mid-air.

Tyler followed my lead.

The others turned around.

The odd monster, the one pinned to the ceiling, was twisting faster than ever.

Tyler and I moved into the conflict, blowing up any of the maggot-creatures that got a bit too curious. There were hundreds of them, crawling along the walls, along the ground, occasionally jumping at us. Making sure this didn't happen with our shotguns, we slowly started to make our way back into the corridor. Looking up at the creature, which seemed to be the centre of the growth, I felt compelled to do something. I raised my shotgun away from the maggots and fired a clean buckshot in 'his' direction. The

father of the growth (as I mentioned before, facing hell makes you poetic) silently screamed and the maggots rushed at me before I could bring my shotgun down. I was pleased, however, to see his ribcage splinter in various bits and pieces.

One of the maggots had jumped on my chest and knocked me down. More jumped down on my, pinning my shotgun arm down. One took a swipe at my stomach with its reaper-like arm and received a foot in each ugly face for that. The others were busy cutting up my arm. Carson jumped in and with the butt of his shotgun, started flinging the little monstrosities away. As he did, Tyler did the courtesy of blowing them away before they had the opportunity to touch the meaty ground. A few seconds later, there was only one left on me, and feeling revenge creep into me, I knocked it away myself and, hesitating for a moment to decide which head I'd rather see blasted off, sent the damned thing squealing away with one head less than when it had first attacked me.

Why the hell had they gone in here???

Pulling myself back up to my feet and trying not to heed the various cuts, I followed the others. As we went, a few maggots felt compelled to pursue us but, a few shots later, decided they'd rather do something else. Carrying the two wounded, a marine named Johansson and Jacobs, we made our way back out of the fleshy cave and into the large, dimly-lit hub. There, we paused, catching our breath. I checked my shotgun and found that I had four shots left. I hoped they'd last the trip back to the blast doors.

I turned to Carson and asked a question that had been pressing me from the beginning.

"Why the *hell* did you have to go in there?"

He was panting and, after catching his breath, said, "We found him in the other corridor," he motioned towards one of the normal, metallic corridors that sprouted from the hub. "We must've surprised him, because he shot Jacobs. He had barely calmed down when those maggot things suddenly came out of everywhere. They attacked us and knocked the scientist guy down and started dragging him away. They pulled him into the fleshy cave. We didn't really want to go in, but we figured we could catch up before we got in too deep. We were wrong and then everything went to hell. This guy," he motioned towards the other injured marine, "was mauled by one of the maggot things. We called in you guys a little before we ran out of ammo and started knocking the things around, then you came."

A loud screech that couldn't have been made by a maggot echoed from the organic hall.

"Fine," I said hurriedly. "Let's go."

Half-jogging, slowed down by the two injured soldiers, we retraced our steps. I kept hearing sounds behind us and urged the others on. Although we didn't see anything (because there was darkness everywhere other than where our flashlights pointed) I felt that we were being pursued. At one point, I heard something shift right behind us and fired a shot over my shoulder. Hell, I wasn't taking any chances. Soon, there came light ahead and we entered the widened corridor. Tim was sitting off to one side, apparently he had given up, for the blast doors were still closed.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I found the program, don't know what to do with it, though," Tim said darkly.

I looked back from where we had come and sensed movement. I raised my shotgun. Only three more shots.

“We’ve got to do something,” I said loudly. “Tim, back me!”

Tim got up and stood at my side, shotgun raised. Sarge, Tyler and that other marine I didn’t know also stood there; they were the only people who still had ammo in their guns.

“We’re cornered!” someone exclaimed.

“No shit.”

“What the hell do we do now?”

There was a mechanical whirring noise behind me. I looked over my shoulder and saw the blast doors opening. My eyes fell to the computer console where the scientist we had rescued stood. He had opened the doors.

“You were pretty much there,” the scientist turned to Tim, explaining. “All you had to do is throw in a dummy variable to stand for—”

“Come on!” yelled Tim and, grabbing the scientist by the collar, dragged him inside. We followed them into the darkness beyond.

We had barricaded ourselves in one of the many research rooms behind the blast doors and into the unmarked, mysterious research facilities. As the scientist we had rescued, whose name I learned to be Reinhold, had explained, many of the rooms were like soft clay meant to be formed into whatever form necessary for various experiments. Many rooms were not used, but waiting. Ours was a room like that, designed with no specific purpose in mind. It was lined with computer consoles, along with two holographic projectors, and various instruments that lined the walls. There was one large panel of glass on one wall, a giant window, which we worked tirelessly to cover up with scavenged metallic panels.

We had noticed (hard not to) that the computer screens were now projecting an eerie dark-red pentagram. We had initially thought that we would be safe behind the blast doors because we couldn't find anyway that the demons could've gotten through. However, at the sight of the pentagram screens, the scientist Reinhold grew weary. Feeling bad news about to break out over the horizon, I braced myself. With the window covered in metallic panels from both sides, the last marines entered and barred the door still behind them. Jacobs, squinting with pain, pushed himself up to listen; he had been fortunate, barely scraped by the shot. The other soldier, Johansson was not as fortunate, however, and he remained in the corner, away from consciousness.

"What does it mean?" asked Sarge, looking at the screens.

"Well," said Reinhold. He was a thin man, greying hair, with a bony face and eyes that seemed to jump out. His movements were sharp, sudden, almost jittery. "It's obvious, they've gained full control of the computer systems. They could've changed all sorts of things, which is bad news for us. The thing is, they've accessed computer systems down here in the restricted area somehow. I don't know how they've done it; they must've had someone in here to load up a link program, which they can use to connect the control room and its terminals to these here. The problem is, now that they control the computers here, they can, and without a doubt will, use them to open up more portals here. Then they won't have to take the long way through Mars, they'll be coming in here with ease."

There was a long silence.

"Who the hell are 'they'?" asked Sarge. "If not from Mars, where else could they come from?"

"Are you saying they're not Martians?"

"It's, well," the scientist began. "It's a long story. It's... Well, you have to understand how our universe works. See, our own universe, stopping at its visible boundary, is essentially a three-dimensional—"

"Damn it, what the hell are they?"

The scientist looked up. "We—they, our research division on Mars—opened a portal to another universe. That's where these things are coming from. Not from Mars."

Oddly, no one seemed surprised and I heard quite a bit of murmurs of 'damned sci-fi crap.' A few minutes of whining passed.

"What do we do now?" Carson asked.

"We hope that our two boys heading for the generators make it?"

“What’s going on exactly?” asked the scientist and Carson filled him in on the whole deal with the two people planning to shutdown the generators and restart the systems. Reinhold nodded the whole way.

“They can’t perform a system shutdown unless they have maintenance or security clearances,” he said simply.

“What?”

“There’s a password. I mean, they wouldn’t want any random person just taking a stroll and shutting off the generators. It’s protected. And that is, I hope this new rewritten system hasn’t reached the generator systems, then they’d have nothing to do. It’s separate and not as big as the computer system for this underground facility, so I’m hoping they left it out. Assuming that they’re concentrating on opening more portals, they’ve probably overlooked the generators. They probably didn’t expect any resistance.”

“Shit.”

“All that for nothing?”

“Well,” said the scientist slowly. “I have clearance, I could dig up the password, but there’d have to be a way to call them.”

Sarge pulled out his walkie-talkie. “It’s taken care of.”

The scientist nodded. “Good.” He paused. “Oh, and another thing: this facility was cut off from the rest of the station for a good while. I’d say there’s a good chance for survivors down here.”

Sarge nodded. He motioned towards Tim, Tyler, Carson, Roach and the four marines I didn’t know. “We’ll go out, split up. We need supplies, anyway. Hopefully we can find some vending machines, MREs, anything. Look for survivors too, and maybe some ammunition and armour and things like that. Nik, you stay here with Reinhold and the others. You shouldn’t have a problem locking yourself in here securely. When we come back, we’ll knock four times so you know it’s us. Oh, and don’t fall asleep. We don’t want to be stuck outside for too long.”

I nodded.

“And keep your eye on Johansson and Jacobs.”

They removed the barring from the door and made their way out. I shut and locked the door behind them. With that, I was left with the two injured marines, Jacobs and Johansson, and Reinhold, who had settled himself in a chair and was digging through his PDA, looking for the password.

“Isn’t that a little unsafe,” I asked. “Having your passwords written down in your PDA?”

He smiled. “Don’t worry, you need a password to see them.”

Off to the side, Jacobs grunted, turned over, and went to sleep.

I let Reinhold work, and ten minutes later, he announced, “There we go, found them. Should we call them now?”

“No,” I said. “They need to be quiet, I don’t think they’d want their radio suddenly sputtering to life and alerting every damned demon around them of their presence. We’ll time this nicely, they’re sure to call us when they can’t get through.”

The scientist nodded, paused awkwardly, then said, “Demons?”

I shrugged. “That’s what I call them.”

He looked down. “Who knows, could be. Anyway, do you think you could do something for me. I—I don’t know how long I’ll last down here. I was wondering if you could take this disc back to the civilised world, if it’s still there.”

Reinhold held out a data CD.

I didn’t budge. “I don’t know if we’re going back,” I said. “Our only hope for escape once the two marines overheat the generators is the portals, you know that.”

“Yes,” he said. “But you will not go through to one of the portals across the Atlantic?”

“No,” I said.

“Really?” he asked, surprised. “That’s what I’d have figured.”

“No, we’re going straight into the heart of this thing. There’s supposed to be another portal in Berlin. That’s where we’re going, to see how far the other waves of soldiers got, clean up. They’re thinking that this whole invasion of this station was a last-ditch effort, so once we blow it, it’s likely we won’t find anything else to find. I’ve got a bad feeling though. And I’m guessing you’re coming with us.”

“Likely not,” Reinhold said, putting away the CD. “But maybe, since you’re going in, maybe you can find it... They didn’t tell the others, though they should have.”

“Find what?”

“The soulcube,” he said. He paused for a while, soaking up the dramatic effect. “*Animus tessera*. What you haven’t been told is that the Mars installation is built atop an ancient alien city. An old Mars civilisation. In fact, if it wasn’t for them, we wouldn’t be half as far as we are now. UAC reverse engineering took apart what they had left behind. It was brilliant! It is from them that we borrowed this technology. The technology to dig a tunnel through space-time and join two locations for instant travel between them. There is some sort of recurring flaw with this technology, however. Records left behind tell us that what is happening now happened before. In the records, nearly the entire alien race was wiped out. Rumour has it that some people are even claiming that the few survivors came to Earth and that we’re their descendants.”

I didn’t like the way this was going, but I said nothing, allowing it all to sink in.

“One of our test subjects, one of the first people to through, ended up, not on Mars as we had expected, but elsewhere. He had come back out of the portal, to our surprise, looking like he was mauled. Bleeding, gashes across his body, looking terrified. He’s been in shock for a little over two weeks now. He was mumbling something about finding something, about hiding it, when he first came back out. We didn’t know what he was talking about until we uncovered those documents. He claimed to have found the soulcube, taken it and hid it somewhere where only he knew. He didn’t know what it was, but he knew that it shouldn’t fall into the hands of the things that had attacked him.”

“What does this ‘soulcube’ thing do?” I asked.

“We don’t know. I’m just telling you, in case you need to know. You’re going into the heart of this thing. Chances are, the military has already cleaned this mess up. But just in case they haven’t and the situation becomes dire again, you need to know. If you can find this artefact, you can end this whole mess. The records claim it is the only way to close the seal. That’s honestly all we know. If you can find this superweapon, this war will be over for sure. Look at this as a back-up plan, for I’m only relying on ancient records that aren’t even human. This could just be their mythology for all I know.”

A long pause passed.

“Why didn’t you guys tell the other soldiers that were sent in?”

“It was, and still is classified information.” He glanced around. “I think circumstances have changed, however.”

“Damn straight they have!”

“These things hit us so fast, we had no idea what was going on. We didn’t make the connection until the alpha waves were sent in. Yes, I know, not how things should’ve turned out. But it’s too late now. I’m hoping that, now that I’ve told you about this device, you’ll make good use of this knowledge.”

He sighed and settled back in his seat, looking dreamily at the ceiling. “I’m sorry,” he said softly, one last time.

There was another long pause, which I used to allow everything to sink in. This weapon called the soulcube had been left behind; this whole event had taken place before. Could it indeed be the only way to stop this invasion? I had hoped that the attack on this base was a last effort, that the first waves and nuclear detonations would’ve cleaned everything up. This bit of information implied that my hopes were false. But where one hope failed, another arose, in the form of this soulcube. Was it still hidden? It wasn’t until one of us found it that the fate of Earth would be determined.

Great, I thought. It all comes down to a big scavenger hunt.

Exhausting these last thoughts, I decided to break the silence.

“Talk to me, about anything,” I said, answering his surprised look. I guess I had shattered the silence. “We’re gonna be here for a while with nothing to do.” I paused. “What’s on that CD you had anyway?”

“Well,” he started. “Many things, all of them a result of our research and experimentation here. Just information about the structure of the universe, things of that sort. We’ve had a quantum theory of gravity, a unified theory of everything, for a good seven decades now. But not until now, not until these experiments we have been carrying out have we had any direct proof or evidence to support it besides observations. It is very exciting, Nobel Prize material. Sadly,” he said, glancing around. “I don’t think I’d be there to collect it.”

“Can’t you send the files?”

“I would, but at this point, we’re completely cut off from the outside world.” He motioned towards the screens that glowed that deep red.

“So these things are from a parallel universe?” I asked.

“Not parallel. Don’t let science-fiction get the better of you. See, our universe is like a three-dimensional fabric or membrane that waves around in ten dimensional space. Imagine it kind of like a sheet of paper waving around in the wind in our three-dimensional world. It’s like that, but, instead of a two-dimensional sheet (which is actually three-dimensional, but let’s imagine it isn’t) waving around in a three-dimensional world, it’s a three-dimensional universe in a ten-dimensional super-universe, so to speak. I hope that made sense. The universe we observe is this three-dimensional surface, we call it a brane. Anyway, we aren’t the only universe, the only brane, waving around in this higher-dimension space. There are other universes, other branes, like ours, waving around minuscule distances from our universe.”

“If we were two-dimensional creatures, living on a flat piece of paper (something impossible, but view it as an analogy) and we had no concept of up or down, imagine if someone took another sheet of paper, perhaps also with two-dimensional beings, and put

it right on top of ours. We wouldn't know they're there, above us, because we don't have a concept of up or down, but there they are, indescribably close. Imagine this with higher dimensions. That is our universe. There are other universes hovering a proton's width away from our own constantly. Wherever you go, whatever you do, you will always be this close to these other universes. Still hanging in there?"

"Yeah," I said. "So far so good."

"This theory was suggested by some brilliant physicists around the turn of the twenty-first century. It's called an ekpyrotic universe. This theory had many implications. For example, it was thought that time no longer had a beginning, as was originally thought in the classic big bang model. This meant that space was also infinite. Time was eternal. Our universe was eternal. What was the big bang? It was when our brane and another collided. Some force, not quite gravity, draws our two branes together and they collide every trillion years or so. This is a sort of cyclic big bang. This cycle recycles everything in the universe."

"So basically we're gonna be blown up someday when our universe collides with another?"

"Probably not. Billions of years before that happens, our universe's stars will all burn out and it will be a dark, cold place. You'll have something like one electron in every quadrillion cubic light-years of space. It will be complete emptiness. Only then will everything be recycled. And who knows, if this cycle is eternal, it is likely that what is happening now has happened infinite times before. We've likely sat in this room before, had this discussion. We've existed before, we'll exist in the future. I'm sure that the universe turned out very differently on other occasions. But this ties up everything, a quantum theory of gravity that gave us much headaches."

"Why? What does it do?"

"Well, you know Einstein and his general relativity. Everyone accepted it as true, and to a large degree, it is. It describes how and why things behave the way they do on a macroscopic scale. Planets, stars, things like that. Then you had quantum mechanics, which described how things behave on a *tiny* scale: atoms, photons, neutrinos, other various particles. Both theories worked very well, though they weren't compatible; they didn't fit together. Some brilliant scientists had managed to link the two to some degree before the millennium, though there was one thing left to link, and it had people stumped for a good, long while. And that's the everyday force called gravity."

"Why gravity?"

"Gravity is a strange force. It isn't very strong. Sure, it keeps you from flying off the Earth, but gravity is a tiny fraction in strength when compared to other forces, like electromagnetic forces. Gravity is peculiar because it is weak but acts over long distances. The most distant stars are pulling on you as we speak. It's not a lot, but it's there. When it was finally implemented, it took years to smooth out the theory. And now, not until now, do we have experimental proof."

"So these things come from another universe?"

"Yes. They were working with a teleportation of sorts, digging a tunnel through space-time, a shortcut. They're supposed to join the two portals. This worked fine on Earth. Then when they tried to reach from Mars to Earth, they must've somehow mixed up their co-ordinates, dug into another universe somehow. It was one of our scientists' mistake, a man named Thorpe. He gave us the wrong co-ordinates."

“Are you sure it was a mistake?”

He looked at me oddly. “Are you implying that it was all intentional?” His eyes fell down. “Then again, odd things have been going on. Thorpe was an outsider, but then he was meeting with various other scientists and figures. He was given full clearance and had access to labs even I can’t get to. Someone wandered inside somehow one day. Didn’t see him again. I looked him up on the UAC database. His records were deleted. I thought it was odd and looked him up on other HQ records and he was listed as discharged from service. He was one of the military guys. There weren’t too happy that they weren’t told anything. There were some odd power failures, people disappeared for days. Some reappeared oddly enough, but I never had a chance to speak to them via video mail. Some were flown back here to Earth. Thorpe was constantly going back and forth. He was on Mars when things started going wrong. I still have only a partial picture of this whole event.”

“Sounds like the UAC doesn’t go by the rules.”

“Rules?” Reinhold laughed. “I’m sure that there was loads of illegal stuff going on beyond my eyes. Some information gets leaked you know. Rumour had it that they were sending humans through, but they came back disfigured and that they were being dissected. I doubt that. I remember, there were some maintenance workers working in one of the shafts on the cooling tanks, or something like that. The shafts run, more or less, from the bottom of the station to the very top. They said they heard screams coming from far below them where the secret labs were. The sound carried by the shafts. Screams and calm human voices talking. I heard it from one of the marines there that was relieved from duty and came back to Earth. Of course, it was all rumours. People do get a little edgy, maybe a bit mad, in the claustrophobic confines of that Mars base.

“The lab division that did these experiments was always putting out electronic flyers. People were paranoid and avoided them. Only the most desperate for money people took it up. Some didn’t come back, though they said they were flown home. But here on Earth, I looked at passenger lists for returning ships and they weren’t there; there was a discrepancy. See why everyone was on edge? Some took it up and came back out; I got to talk to one of the guys. I don’t know how sane he was, but he was real quiet about it. I had to get him drunk before I could extract any info from him. He claimed that he was taken down to some underground chambers and said that they made him scrub blood off the walls and various operating tables. He also said that he saw monsters, or something like that. He said that the scientists were too busy to do such janitorial chores, scrubbing blood off the walls. He said no more after that.”

“And so this ‘soulcube’ is supposed to break this tunnel or what?”

He nodded. “I suppose so. I don’t see in what other way it could possibly mean an end to such an event.”

“Could this universe be, say, hell?” I asked tentatively.

“I wouldn’t say that, yet, I don’t know what to think. Years of science make want to say no. Perhaps another universe that appears, through our eyes, like ‘hell.’ It seems very negative, very different from ours. Maybe it was another universe that developed for overall equilibrium in the superverse. Maybe the soulcube balances out this universe somehow. Maybe it’s just a shadow world, a universe moulded by our own minds. I don’t see why factors in one universe shouldn’t affect other branes. Maybe our creation, our mind, led to this. That’s how I’d explain it. Calling it ‘hell’ seems a little extreme,

though, unless you're saying that for the sake of making a point. It's a dangerous job, trying to tie up religion and science, and a near-impossible one, unless the human mind that spawned the idea of heaven and hell also led to their physical existence somehow. Then again, with things called 'soulcubes' I don't know what to think."

"Where'd you get that name?"

"Oh, we had great amounts of people working to break the alien code. It really wasn't too hard, because the language was very mathematical. It was very logical. The word 'soul' essentially refers to what these aliens believed were past lives. They believed they had existed in the past and in the future. 'Soul' really is the best human word we could attribute to this characteristic. And cube was an easy and obvious word to translate. Put the two together and you get 'soulcube'."

"I see, so—"

There was a loud hiss of static and my walkie-talkie sputtered to life.

"I—Hello? This... Charlie here, anyone there—I'm in a tight spo—We're gonna make it, God, I hope..."

"Hello," I said urgently picking up the walkie-talkie. It was, without a doubt, one of the two marines on the lone mission to the generators. "Hello? Do you copy?"

"God, who is this?"

"PFC Nik Taggart, who's speaking?"

"It doesn't matter," said the voice through the static. "Listen, I'm calling to say I don't know if we're gonna make it. They know we're here, they're coming. We're half-way up the maintenance shaft. We've stopped in a small supplies chamber, closed in. We're going to try getting all the way up. If we make it, you'll get a transmission in about ten minutes. If you don't, send others. It's our only way of telling you that we fucked up and that more soldiers will be needed."

"Listen to me!" I yelled in the mike, hoping that they'd hear me better. "You need a password!"

"Sorry, didn't copy that. Repeat Private?"

"You need a password. A password. You need it to access the generators."

There was a long pause.

"Do you have the password?"

Reinhold took the radio from my hands. "The password is," he said, looking down at his PDA. "The password is 'TF6'—Do you have something to write?"

"Copy that."

"It's 'TF6DC87-990.' Got it?"

"Wait, 'TF6DC811-what'?"

"Not eleven, *seven*! I repeat: 'TF6DC87-990'."

There was a pause. "990? Copy that. We'll get back to you in ten minutes, over and out."

The radio signal died. And with that started the longest ten minutes of my life.

“We’re up on the platform. You guys get ready, I don’t know how much time I can buy you,” hissed the radio.

I breathed a sigh of relief, then froze. The others were still searching for supplies and survivors. I ripped one of the metallic panels that covered the window away and glanced outside, hoping to catch glimpse of some passing fellow marine yet saw none. What now? How much time would we have? The two marines had reached the generators a lot sooner than we had expected and had caught us unaware. But now that they were there, we couldn’t ask them to camp out there waiting for us to be ready. They knew this, but didn’t know just how unaware we were. I knew this. After a few seconds of mild panic and turning to and fro, I looked at Reinhold.

“Is there any way to access a PA system?”

“Not since they took over the systems,” he said. “Maybe after they shut off power and restart the systems.”

“Shit,” I muttered. “That’s not enough time.” I picked up my walkie-talkie and tried reaching them.

“They must’ve turned them off. Otherwise, they would’ve heard the two marines’ transmission, too.”

“Why the hell would they do that?”

“I don’t know, he said. “Conserve battery power. It seems that they caught you by surprise.”

“Yes, it’s too damn early.” I turned to him. “Alright, I’ll go out and look for them. When everything is restarted, you use the PA system to call them in, if I haven’t found them by then. Got it?”

He nodded.

I ran over to the door, bolted it open and ran out.

The research facility was a clean one. I supposed they walked around with suits and gloves and facemasks. Knowing that it wasn’t a good time to marvel at cleanliness, I ran down one hallway, trying to put myself in the mind of marines looking for supplies. Rooms sprouted from the sides, many of them with large glass panels beyond which lay darkness. Lights flickered on here and there. Many pipes and vents ran along the ceiling. Randomly taking turns and choosing corridors, I ran about, occasionally stopping to shout ‘Time to go!’ or some more descriptive phrase. I stopped. Suddenly, I felt cold, and realised I could see my own breath. What the hell was going on?

I turned around. The system would be restarted any second now.

With that, I knew I had to get back to Reinhold. We’d use the PA. I started retracing my steps, running back and stopped at a fork. Shit! Which way had I come from? I looked back, trying to think. It had to be the left one. Feeling rather uneasy, I sprinted forward. Dim lights, shadows and hissing gas surrounded me. The air was cold and suddenly, my surroundings seemed distant.

I stopped.

Then, one of the large pane windows to my left, beyond which lay only darkness, exploded in thousands of fragments outward, many of them bombarding me. I jumped back, only to realise I hadn’t taken my shotgun, not expecting any trouble.

Damn!

And as if things weren't bad enough already, just then the lights went out, the whirring air conditioners went silent. All the power was out, meaning that the generators had been shut down. Talk about bad timing!

And from the shattered window, a dark form leapt, landing in front of me. I heard it more than actually seeing it. I was just about to pull out my flashlight when the power restarted. Lights along the ceiling flickered on in sequential order, and the distant humming and whining returned. And then I saw what had jumped at me. It was that disgusting, eyeless, four-legged beast again. It flexed lightly, allowing glass shards lingering on its skin to clatter to the ground, then turned to me slowly and menacingly. Growling, it turned, and charged. I pulled out my pistol and started shooting, aiming for its head. Running backwards wasn't quite as efficient as the monster's four powerful legs and its massive front paws found my chest and knocked me down. By then, I must've rattled off a good six shots in its face.

Using my foot by placing it on where its throat should've been, I managed to push its nasty, snapping jaws away. This also conveniently exposed the underside of its neck, which was soon ridden with bullets.

I don't know if I killed it, but it sure as hell didn't come after me when I took off running again.

As I ran, my radio came to life.

"The stupid bastards! They thought we wanted to reclaim the control room! But they're coming, I can hear them. Jesus! But it's working, hurry and get to the portal! We're giving you a seven minute window at most!"

Almost there!

An awkward voice ran out across all the halls and rooms, leading to a spasm that ran through me, moments before realising it was Reinhold, who had apparently managed to get hold of the system. At least it was all working!

"Attention, um, the power was just restarted, in case you didn't notice, so if you would please—"

I ran into the tiny room and found Reinhold standing next to a computer console with a radio microphone in his hand. I grabbed it from him.

"Alright, listen to me, damn it! You've got seven minutes to get your sorry asses here. I don't care what you're doing, get going *now*! Or you're going to be fucking regretting the fact that you turned off your radios for the last few seconds of your lives! Hurry!"

Tossing the microphone aside and grabbing my shotgun, I ran out. Reinhold followed.

Soon, my fellow marines emerged from one of the corridors, holding various boxes and looking bulkier than when I had last seen them. Apparently they had succeeded in finding supplies. Two people ran into the room where we had stood and returned a few seconds later helping Jacobs walk. We all looked questioningly in their direction.

"Johansson is dead," one proclaimed.

I noticed that there were also three new people with them. However, I had not time to ask questions. I turned to Reinhold.

"Lead the way."

As we followed him down twisting hallways, through dark portions, flashlights dancing ahead, I half-turned to the others, muttering loudly enough so they'd hear me.

"Why the *fuck* would you turn off your walkie-talkies?"

"We hadn't," Carson said.

"It must've been the radiation shielding. Many of the rooms down here have it, for safety reasons." Reinhold put in without looking back.

Soon, we came upon another set of blast doors. Jesus, I thought! Reinhold went off to the side, manipulating the computer console. Meanwhile, everyone else was dancing on their toes in uneasiness. Shotguns waved through the air, seeking anything else that might get in our way or slow us down. We couldn't afford to spare any time fighting some damned monster. It had gotten cold again and I shook. It was partly because of being under pressure, the uneasiness. How much of those seven minutes had passed? At least four...

"There," cried Reinhold triumphantly.

The doors swung open and we ran through. After following a long, straight corridor, we emerged inside a giant, cavernous, dome-shaped room. As we walked into it, we found ourselves standing on a sort of balcony. Below us extended what seemed to be an endless pit that ended in darkness. The dome was so big that its panels and tubes that lined the ceiling were nearly lost in a haze of moisture. Set in a triangular fashion in opposite ends around the room, with a tiny catwalk leading to each one, was a portal, like the one I had seen in my dream. It was like a metallic frame, held by two large columns built into the walls. From each ran tubes and other devices around the perimeter and feeding into our platform, above which was the control centre. One of the portals was working, glowing a deep red, like the computer screens.

Behind us was a set of metallic steps. Reinhold charged up them, heading for the control centre. He got there first.

There was a gunshot.

Damn, of course! If these bastards had opened a portal to hell, someone had to be here operating the thing! Without any thoughts clouding my mind, I charged into the room and fired my shotgun straight into the scientist who was standing at the consoles, not even bothering to examine the situation, to reason, or to knock them out. He flew a good two metres back, landing against the wall and leaving a bloody streak as he fell down, crumpling on the ground.

Tim had reached us.

"What happened? I heard a gunshot?"

"They shot Reinhold," I said, helping the injured scientist up in a chair. He immediately started working the controls.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Fine," he said, squinting, not taking his eyes away from the computer. "Go on, go towards the middle portal, that's the one I'm activating. Your destination was Berlin, correct?"

I nodded.

"Good, go on. No time!"

There was a distant rumble and the ground shook. The catwalks leading to the portals rattled uneasily. Below was what looked like a void and the catwalk didn't look too solid. But as the portal at its end suddenly sparked to life, glowing that same, red

halo, with its swirling and twisting patterns, Tim charged down the unsteady catwalk. Taking a deep breath, I followed, and behind me, so did the others. Halfway across, the ground rattled again and the metallic catwalk below me shook violently. Not wanting to fall over, I grasped the railing, finding my balance, then charged again. I reached the other end and stood on the tiny platform that surrounded the portal, with the giant pit less than a metre from my feet. I don't know if I ever mentioned this, but I have this problem when it comes to heights.

Tim went through the portal, his silhouette disappearing in the red surface and melting away in turns and twists, joining the other turning shapes.

And the others went through, while I stood at the side, somehow feeling obligated to stay and see that everyone got through. And with the last people entering, I found myself standing alone next to the portal. I gazed back at Reinhold, a nearly indistinguishable figure standing behind the glass of the control room. He waved for me to go through. I motioned for him to come, but he stood there. Then I saw something. Behind him, in the distance, the wall suddenly crumpled away and hundreds of the nasty maggot creatures, tiny skittering black shapes as seen from where I stood, poured into the room. Reinhold was dragged down and fell from my sight.

The ground shook more violently than ever.

Not looking back, I stepped through.

Everything around me melted away. There was bright light around me and I had the sensation of accelerating rapidly, like when riding on a troop carrier. And yet, everything seemed still. I couldn't see. It was like my eyes were closed. I tried forcing them open, and realised that they were. It was like travelling through nothingness. There was no feeling, no sensation, other than the gut feeling of motion. Then, suddenly, I could see again. Not see, but feel. I could feel something coming, like I was going toward some wall and hundreds of kilometres per hour. I tried turning sideways, not wanting to impact it, but I knew it was inevitable. It was a wall of white. And when it hit me, my senses slowly returned. I stumbled, losing balance. The light faded away. I was disoriented. Then, slowly my eyes came into focus.

I was surprised to see sunlight. The others were near me, dark figures.

But I didn't see any more, for at that moment the ground three metres to my left where Sarge had stood went up in a giant explosion, the ground shaking beneath.

PART 3

Hell on Earth

1

I would later observe that we stood on a large platform, upon which the swirling portal stood, that was attached to a crumbling building. The entire side of the building was demolished. There was a giant pit below us, though various beams and panels, still joined, had fallen across it. We were standing several stories above the ground and, because of the missing wall of the building where we had teleported, we were treated to a vast, panoramic view of what had happened in central Europe where hell had landed. It was all in ruin. Few buildings like our own still stood upright. There were no streets, no visible fields. It was rubble in whatever direction one looked: broken concrete, metallic beams, metallic panels, twisted frames of what had once stood. Foundations of buildings lay hidden under this mess that stretched as far as one could see. There was sunlight, though it was rather dimmed by vast grey clouds that hovered overhead.

As soon as I had come through, however, I was immediately preoccupied.

Moving with surprising dexterity over the rubble was what looked like a tank. Moving gears moving chains, the wheels bent on springs and contorted to the ground. The greenish tank flowed upwards in a set of massive tubes and devices that attached themselves to what looked like a disfigured human torso. What had once been human was now bulging and misshapen, with one massive arm flowing into a giant, mechanical device with an opening at one end (that's never good). It was one huge-ass weapon. The other arm was skinnier, with the fleshy shoulder ending in a very long mechanical arm with what looked like pincers on one end. Though I'm sure it used it for other common purpose (whatever those may be to a monster), they looked nasty enough that I was a bit worried about having them used as a weapon. And on top of the torso was a bloody head, no less disfigured than the rest, that looked oddly familiar.

It was the general from London. Of course, now his eyes were black and empty, as if they were gouged out, head bald, with one end heavily bruised. But that assertive and distinctive face was unmistakable. I don't know if the others noticed this; I was particularly good with remembering faces, better than most of the people I knew. Then again, I don't think they had time to notice. But it did look at me, and I felt a chill when those empty eyes fell upon me. It was like the monster recognised me, and it grinned.

The tank-monster rolled forth.

Suddenly, I remembered my aspirations of old to be the one driving the tank. It's what I had wanted to do in the military (after I got over the fact that I had to be there in the first place), but you never get what you want. Instead of a tank, I got a pile of armour and a machinegun.

Reality returned in the form of another glob of green energy.

And so our new struggle came to be to climb down and off of the crumbling structure. We ran along the edge. I was at the end, watching the others make their way across beams and wavering above what had to be at least ten metres of nothing but air above the ground below. Problem was, the green globs also damaged the building, so there was chance that the structure would collapse. Thankfully, the monster wasn't too bright. Had it any intelligence left, it would've taken down the building with two or three

well-placed shots and taken us all out. Meanwhile, another ball of green energy grazed by, lightning-like bolts jumping out towards us. It was too much for one of the civilians; the poor guy waved his hands frantically as he began to drop off the beam and to one side. The marine in front of me, who was behind him, clawed at him, trying to grab him and keep him from falling, but in doing so, lost his balance as well. The civilian fell, screaming, eyes wide, into the dark pit below, his cries fading away. The marine fell too, but I managed to grab him by the collar as he did. Now, I had very little balance on two feet, walking along a metallic beam, so I allowed myself to drop down on the beam (and thus not making the same mistake made by the marine).

With my legs and one arm around the beam and my other arm grasping the marine by the collar, I felt in even more dire straits than ever.

I looked up at the others and saw that they had made it safely across and were looking back at me and the dangling marine, reluctant to come back and help.

My eyes fell down. I was losing grip on his collar.

“Give me your hand!” I yelled.

The marine, eyes filled with fright, reached up and grabbed my hand with both of his. I released his collar and grabbed one of his arms. Unable to move, I started to twist my head the other way to see what the tank-monster was doing, but was cut short. There was a deafening sound, as if the air itself was being torn, and everything filled with green light. Pain shot through my body and travelled down my spine. And yet somehow, I managed to keep my grip and to not release the poor marine to his death. The pain lingered then started to fade away. I realised I had been squinting in pain and opened my eyes again. Clearing the red haze, feeling and my sense of being returned to me. The air cleared and I wondered what had happened before I realised something.

The marine had suddenly gotten whole lot lighter.

With stomach turning, I gazed down and saw that all I was holding on to was his arm; the rest of him was gone. Feeling queasy and suddenly shaken, I frantically let go, allowing the severed arm to fall below. It was the tank, it had killed the marine with a direct blast. And yet, I had been left alive. I would later decide that the beam must’ve shielded me, but at that point, that didn’t matter. As he had died, a sudden fear rose in me and I clutched the beam without moving. I wanted it all to go away; I shut my eyes, but I could still hear the rolling tank chains. Marines, me included, don’t normally fall into such senseless fright, but it’s hard to describe the magnitude and horror of what had just happened. It was beyond the marine, beyond me. It was what awoke fear that I had been storing in me for a long time.

I must’ve lay there for a good five minutes, but I didn’t die. Forcing my mind away from what just happened, feeling professionalism creep back in me, I relaxed. As it turns out, the others had made it off the structure and had managed to distract the tank-monstrosity. As this dawned on me, I felt stupid and selfish for not helping them but clinging on to that piece of metal. Shaky, but considerably better, I pushed myself and crawled to the end of the beam, from where I slid down a wall that had fallen at a light angle to the ground. As I did, I raised my shotgun, the only gun that I had. Looking at the beast, I knew that it wouldn’t get far, but at least there were others to help.

A yell rang across the air.

“Watch out!”

There was a scream that was suddenly cut sickeningly short, and I realised the damned tank-thing had run over someone.

Jesus, we were dropping like flies!

As I drew close, I realised that the monster hadn't seen me yet, for I had come up behind it, and I had the element of surprise on my side. I wasn't sure how I should use it, but I knew I had to think fast.

The creature drove forward and I sneakily ran behind it.

As fire echoed towards it, I was forced to duck down so I wouldn't get shot by my own people.

The beast stopped and shook angrily. It seemed to have taken a lot of damage.

Still unsure of what I was doing, I suddenly sprung onto its back and started crawling up its backbone, which was almost like a ladder. I didn't get far before tank-man noted my presence. It paused its relentless launching of green globs of energy and I saw its massive pincer reach back. Of course, it wasn't able to bend at an angle to get me, but it did come close. I was rather distracted by the cold, wet, nasty skin to which I clung. Not wanting to throw up, I decided to end this as soon as possible. Meanwhile, the monster had realised it couldn't get me, so it launched a sudden, furious attack on the others in hopes of taking them down. Clinging to it with one hand, I raised my shotgun and pointed it point-blanc at the back of the monster's head. And with a pull of the trigger, the haze became ten times redder.

Though gears were still working, the creature stopped moving and came to a rest. I jumped off just as it fell on its side.

Through the haze I limped and saw seven figures standing before me.

Seven. Jesus.

We came together in silence, looking across each other's faces. There were twelve of us before. One of the civilians had fallen to their death, and one of the marines had been hit directly. Sarge had been killed right off. I noticed another one of the marines was missing. And I guess the London general counted for something, too. I was sure he had died long ago and had been mutilated into an evil form beside himself. But there was one more person missing. Looking around frantically to see whom the last person that was gone was, my heart fell.

I turned to Tim.

"Roach?"

He was looking down. After a pause, he said, "He was run over."

It was a sudden throw back into reality. Sarge had gone first, then Roach. The poor civilian had fallen before we even got down off of the crumbling structure. The two marines, one who I had held onto as he died. They were gone as well. It was shocking, in your face. In around ten minutes, so many had fallen. But there was more. A dark, mental shadow cast itself over us survivors. It was evident that we had failed; everything was in complete ruins. Alpha, beta and gamma waves were nowhere to be found but for the occasional limb sticking out from beneath the wreckage. And as the beast we had fought showed, bombing the place had done little good, too. Reinhold had warned me, the general had warned all of us, that a situation like this might surmise, and yet, it was inconceivable. Now I found it hard to consider as we looked it in the face; random thoughts asserting the same subject ran through my head. I stood there, as did the others, over the steaming wreckage of the past, wondering, and fearing, what the future might hold.

A while passed in standing, reflecting on what was. It took a good twenty minutes for everyone to calm down, for heartbeats to lower and breathing to slow. But everyone stood planted in one spot, eyes hazily gazing beyond the remains of what was once a city underfoot. It was all so sudden, so shocking. They had no time to plead, to utter last remarks. One second they had all been there, and the next they hadn't. Feeling almost childish, I thought, 'It isn't fair.' None of it was, but where was I to change it? And with this shock and pain, I finally held myself convinced. It *was* hell. Hell had taken over. For no intelligent being from our own universe would have the mentality to wreak such suffering. There was a hell, and it had come.

It was here.

And so Jacobs was right, there had to be a God. Was he helping us? The sudden deaths of so many comrades seemed to contradict this, though it was a miracle we had gotten thus far. Jesus, I thought. It was like a giant chess game. And we were just pieces on the board. So were the demons. Could it really be this way? It had to be. We were just tiny, insignificant figures being steered into significance. Tiny pawns moving against other pieces. Demons from hell. It was a global board game, with what had to be God driving us. And perhaps Satan at the other end. This thought was unnerving. I had thought that believing in God brought some sort of reassurance, and yet believing in Him meant believing there was a devil, and that made me uneasy. The spider mastermind was directing everything in my dream, but was it just the king in hell's army, just another figure to be moved? Was hell itself the devil as I had concluded in my dream?

Enough! I thought.

I looked around me at the remaining seven persons. Tim had looked up, eyes distant, and was looking around as well. There were no tears, no sadness; that would come later. It was utter shock.

"We have to move on," said Tim, sounding unconvinced. "Since, uh, Sergeant Davis has passed away, I'm assuming charge."

No one argued.

Someone gasped. "Radiation!"

A sudden charge of electricity danced across the group. Shaking hands fumbled with various instruments.

“Someone, quick!” said Tim, regaining some of his former self. “Radiation readings.”

As soon as we had emerged, we had been engaged. We hadn’t had time to check for radiation. This region was bombarded by nuclear weapons, we had been given portable suits. But we hadn’t had time...

“Readings are above normal,” said one of the marines, looking at a small, round device. “Not enough to kill us right off, but damn.” He paused. “If we don’t hurry, we’ll be dead in a few hours!”

Everyone started moving. I unpacked my own suit and started pulling it on as fast as I could. The standard uniform nowadays was radiation proof, thus lightening the radiation suit load needed to be carried by a soldier. All I had to pull on was a jacket of sorts that covered my arms, a pair of heavy, bulky gloves, and a helmet. Pulling these articles on, and finally snapping the helmet into place, I checked the computer built into the suit (with a small screen and controls placed on the left arm) and made sure that it was in full effect. How much radiation had we taken in? Jesus, to get this far and be killed off by a sideways detail like radiation!

Nearly everyone had finished and was looking at the civilian. He didn’t have a suit, not being in the military and all, and was gazing around with wide eyes and gaping mouth, running his hands over his body as if to fend off the radiation. His eyes travelled around pleadingly, shaking hands reaching through the air. He made some odd motions and collapsed on the ground.

We all rushed towards him.

“Radiation?”

“No,” said one of the marines who had gotten there first, voice muffled by his helmet. “He just passed out from fear. He will die if we don’t get out here as fast as possible.”

“I’ll give him my suit,” someone offered.

“No,” said Tim, cutting the marine off. “We need all of the soldiers we can get. Trust me, it’s not an easy decision. But we’re heading for a firefight, and this civilian won’t be of much use there.

There was a long pause. I looked at Tim, who looked rather pale and unusually still. I understood his decision. And as he had said, it wasn’t an easy one. It wasn’t easy to decide whether someone lives or someone dies, to choose between the lives of two people. But we really did need all of military people we could get. We didn’t know where we were going, but we did know our needs.

Carson moved forward and he and the marine pulled the civilian off the ground. He gazed back at where what little remained of Roach lay. Looking down then away, he pulled the civilian off of the ground.

“Which direction?”

“We go southeast,” said Jacobs, leading the way. The General had uploaded all of the maps and mission details into his PDA.

And with that, we set off, a procession of suited marines carrying the civilian away. We knew it was hopeless, but we couldn’t give up on him yet. Making our way as fast as we could through the rubble-strewn, uneven ground, we found that the sun had already started to set, with a few futile rays reaching through the thick clouds on our right. We had to get out of the city as fast as possible, for night didn’t only bring

darkness. I felt that what we had come across was only a taste of other monstrosities to come, and I felt that nighttime wasn't too inviting to stroll about in the open. If we could leave the city, we'd be away from the radiation, too. That is, unless the wind carried it in our direction...

"Maybe we can find some kind of vehicle," I suggested breathlessly. "To speed things up, we need to get out of here before night."

"I agree," said Tyler.

"Yeah," Jacobs added. "Keep your eyes peeled. The EURN is far from here, and we can't spend the night here. It starts in a small satellite town, though there are small trains that lead to it, they've probably been destroyed by the blasts. So it's a good twenty kilometre hike." He paused to take catch up to his breathing. "If we can find something, maybe drive out in the countryside and spend the night there. Then drive south until we enter the city, we should get to the main station really quick."

"There'll be less damage as we move further out," said Tim. "Then we have hopes of finding a working vehicle."

Though I was sure the sun was still shining, the clouds overhead made everything darken prematurely. This only prompted us to move faster. Several times we came across large demons like the one we had fought, rummaging through the wreckage. But as a whole, it seemed the nukes had done their job and cleared a good bit of the bad guys. This was to our advantage, though we still had to duck behind larger pieces of debris every time we ran across one of the giant bastards. We couldn't afford another firefight like the last one. Soon, when it became so dark that we had to use our flashlights, we had reached the outskirts where buildings and things were more intact. Of course, that meant that there could be more demons stumbling about undamaged, so we remained as alert as ever. However, as we reached a nearly clear street with a few vehicles lining one side, we saw opportunity.

Tim ran ahead, towards an off-road buggy of sorts. Resting atop four large wheels, the buggy had a sleek front that flowed into a rather clouded glass, which wrapped around the two front seats and ran into the metallic edge that encircled the truck bed. The buggy was painted in brown camouflage. The front was aggressive, with gill-like intakes above the front wheels, which were nestled under covers that turned with the wheels. Trapezoidal headlamps rested low on the body. But in all cases, it was perfect. It wasn't as damaged as the other vehicles, so I figured that it had been flown in along with alpha, beta or gamma waves.

Tim had jumped in, though a new problem arose.

"No hydrogen," Tim said. "The guys driving it abandoned it when they're fuel cells ran dry."

"Maybe we can use another vehicle," someone suggested.

Tim had already gone to another car. We followed him. Sitting there, with the door open, he tried to start it. Apparently the key was still in the ignition. Whatever had hit this place, had hit it fast and suddenly. Yet oddly, there were few dead bodies laying around. This was not encouraging at all, for it meant that they were out walking about. Not encouraging at all.

"Damn," Tim said. "This one's got fuel, but it won't start." He scratched his head, a gesture signifying the act of thinking.

"What's wrong with it then?" someone asked.

“The electromagnetic pulse from the nuclear blast must’ve fried the electronics inside. We can’t use it. That buggy is our only hope because it must’ve been flown in along with the soldiers that were dispatched after they nuked this place. We’re gonna need to find a way to remove the fuel cells and put them in the buggy.”

“We need some tools.”

“Alright,” said Tim. “Find some tools, I’ll open up the cars and try to figure out just what we need to do.”

Tyler started browsing around, as did everyone else. Jacobs lowered the civilian, still unconscious, on the ground and joined the hunt. After a few minutes, it became evident that we needed to search the trunks of all of the vehicles. Feeling as if the darkness was closing in on me, and everyone else, I sped up my pace and urged the others to do so as well. We needed to leave. And fast, too. It all depended on finding some tools. Funny how situations work out sometimes. We were all in danger, but it was the doomed civilian who was suffering from this delay the most. Five minutes passed and I started feeling rather frantic.

“Found one!” cried Tyler. He was standing behind the open trunk of one vehicle. He pulled a box, a toolkit, from it and ran towards Tim, who had already dismantled the car to a great extent with his bare hands. Feeling useless, I moved aside and allowed Tim to work while gazing up at the skeleton structures above and ruins around wearily. I was restricted to seeing little of the world around me, however. Restricted by the narrow beam of my flashlight. I thought I heard rocks crumble and noises far off, but in the end, nothing of particular interest happened. I turned back and walked over to the others, where they had crowded around Tim.

“I’m gonna have to take off my gloves,” Tim was saying. “They’re in my way.”

“With all this radiation?”

“I’ll risk it,” Tim said and started pulling them off. Then, working quickly and nimbly, he quickly reached in and removed a large panel that had been in his way and unscrewed the grid underneath it. He then proceeded to pull his gloves back on and continued working for another minute. Then, with a cry of triumph followed by the whirring of the hydrogen engine, success was evident.

I clambered into the side seat while Tim got in as driver. The others squeezed their way into the truck bed behind. The four wheels spun, kicking up dust, and soon we were flying down the debris-scattered street. It wasn’t exactly smooth, and I imagine the people behind me were having a particularly tough time dealing with all the bumps in the road, but it didn’t matter. What mattered was that we finally had means to move about more freely and speedily, and we would soon reach our goal, whatever that was. And so I realised that we had no goal at the moment. We were supposed to go in and help and clean up after alpha, beta and gamma waves, but they were gone. What were we to do now? We were making our way towards the centre of this thing, but for what?

The soulcube.

“The *what?*”

“Soulcube. Reinhold, the scientist, told me about it. See, this whole thing has happened before. Except on Mars. But anyway, these things came and it was this ‘soulcube’ that stopped them.” I said, fighting sceptical gazes. Explaining the entire story surrounding the soulcube proved to be as easy as describing Internet to a medieval knight. One thing led to another and, like having to first explain electricity to the knight, I had to explain the entire Mars civilisation thing first. Though the knight would’ve had to understand what an atom and its constituents are, I managed to cut my way around explaining the entire space-time thing Reinhold had told me about. This was good, for another bit of information I felt would indeed be a mental overload for my fellow marines.

“Wait, so there are Martians and they’re attacking again?”

“No, no,” I said dismissively, feeling rather exasperated. “It’s not the Martians attacking us, it’s the beings from the parallel universe. And the Martians used this ‘soulcube’ to fend them off. Keep up.”

“Wait, so they attacked the Martians?”

“Yes!”

“Where’d they hear about this, anyway?”

Annoyance crept up my spine. “Records left behind by the Martians, how else? Come on people, exhibit a bit of common sense here!”

We had exited the city and left the ruins behind. We had then entered a dark forest, set atop rolling hills, which wasn’t too inviting, either. The trees, the ones that remained standing, that is, were stripped of most branches and all leaves. They were covered in dust, a grey coloration covering the irregular surface of their bark. It was an unearthly forest, with its wicked trees, hanging eerily about, still and dead. It seemed that everything was dead, everything was gone. However, it was away from the city, and that’s all that mattered. There were surely few beasts that would bother to roam the woods, and the portable Geiger counters spoke of no radiation. However, it seemed to be too late for the civilian, who was still unconscious.

“Uh-huh,” said Carson. “And how do we know that this scientist guy wasn’t imperfectly sane?”

“Listen,” I said, growing agitated. “If not for this, why did we come here? Why didn’t we just zip back across the pond? We had other plans, but now they’ve failed, and this is the only thing we have to go on. And if we don’t, who knows if there’ll really be anything left to return to. Everything we have tried so far has failed. Because of rash nonsense like what you are all saying. Don’t you see? Everything is gone, it has failed. This is our only hope. The only definite goal we can set. If anyone has better ideas, I’d love to hear them.”

No one said anything.

“Alright then,” Tim finally broke the silence. “Here’s how things are looking. We camp out the night here, then leave early morning. We want to cover as much ground, possibly make it to the EURN by nightfall and be well on our way. We’ll drive back into the city and to the outlying station. And from there, plan’s uncertain. We go to Vienna. Find where all of these things are coming from, maybe take a few bad guys down. And

we look for this 'souclube' thing. We haven't anything better to do, anyway. Even if it isn't real, we'll still take down a whole lot of bad guys, and I guess that's what counts. So get some sleep."

"What about radiation?" one of the marines asked, indicating his thumb in the civilian's direction. "When we go back into the city?"

Twisting his face, thinking, Tim looked at the unconscious civilian. "We have no choice. We take him, even if it means through the radiation. I will not let his life compromise this entire mission. Besides, it's likely we'll all die soon. Maybe he's going to leave before the real nightmares start," said Tim darkly. "Meanwhile, I want everyone to sleep with their radiation gear on. There is no reading now, but some wind or something might pick up during the night. We've been exposed enough as it is. Now, I don't want to attract any attention, so flashlights off and I want a complete silence. We'll take turns sleeping. Jacobs, Carson? Want to take the first shift?"

They nodded.

"Alright," Tim said. "Wake me and this guy here around one. We'll take over from there. Keep your eyes, and ears, peeled."

Feeling rather grateful that I'd get a full-night's rest, I started looking for a comfortable position on the ground. This wasn't easy; there were no leaves, no grass, it was bare as a rock. As I finally found a position that was mildly comfortable, I gazed up, hoping to see stars, but saw darkness instead. Everything became quiet and calm. I gazed at Jacobs and Carson, who were crouching, alert. I could see their eyes in the darkness. It was eerie, the silence, the stillness. There were no crickets or other such sounds I would've expected to hear in the forest at this time of the night; as silence settled in, I began to distinguish odd sounds coming from the distance, like cries. There were odd yelps, screams, and grunts, all coming from far away, carried by the wind. And then there were the occasional inhuman screams.

Unable to sleep, I twisted my head around. There was an odd, dull glow coming from somewhere beyond the tree line that disguised our presence. Quietly as I could, I edged away from the others and, crawling on my elbows slowly and stealthily, made my way out of the forest and on the edge of the tall hill. As I crept along, the distant yells became louder, only broken by my loud breathing. Finally reaching the apex, I peered over the edge and on to the other side. And then I saw that the city, or what remained of it, was glowing. Not as much in the outskirts, but further off into the horizon, it glowed even brighter. It wasn't really bright light; had it not been for the absolute darkness rendered by the night and clouds overhead, I doubted the outskirts' glow would've been visible. But it was there, a dim, hazy greenish light that seemed to hang over the city almost like another cloud.

Another scream broke the silence, blocking out all of the other distant yells, and so I decided that it was best to head back. And then I wondered if the radiation affected the demons. Surely it had to. I mean, they were living beasts from another universe; I didn't see how being demons made them any less susceptible to radiation sickness. But they were still there, roaming around. Even as I made my way back I could hear them. And that giant beast we had fought, there were more like it, roaming around the ruins. Feeling crazy thoughts creep into my mind, thoughts like hell being a fairly radioactive place where all demons were accustomed to heavy radiation bombardment, I sped up my pace. No time for that, I thought.

Finally, I reached the others.

“Who’s there?” Jacobs asked, looking in my direction.

“It’s me,” I said. “The city is glowing. Radiation all over the place.”

There was a pause. “Well, our counters were right. Let’s not worry about that until tomorrow.”

I rolled over, again seeking that one comfortable position. With that, I tried to clear my mind, to push away all of the recent nightmarish images: the giant beast, the smouldering remains of what was once a city, and the eerie glow that now hung over it. Someone coughed raspily, but it was all distant and unimportant. Some of the people around me were talking, but I was too tired to care why. My mind was reeling and yet I soon found that my exhaustion made sleep easy. Yet dreams were not and, as if I wasn’t already there, I dreamt my dream of being in hell.

A hand grasped me and pulled me right out of my nightmare and into another one. I woke up and glanced around me. The dark figure of what had to be Tim was shaking me awake. Clearing my mind from the remnants of my dream, I glanced around and realised that it was too dark to be day. Hell, I knew we were getting off to an early start, but it was the summer months and the sun rose early and set down late. Yawning loudly, I lay for a few more moments before pushing myself up. I never was a morning person, and thus had another reason for hating the military. Simply put, being a marine isn't for people who like to sleep in. I had quite a bit of discussions about this with Briggs after sleeping in late. He had fortunately gotten used to it, but I guess that's why he always considered me a hopeless case.

Fighting the urge to pull off my helmet and wipe the sleep from my eyes, I stretched and realised that the sun *was* up, for there wasn't complete darkness as there had been during the night. Yet the sky was shrouded in thick, dark grey clouds. I remembered them from yesterday, but then they hadn't been as dark or half as menacing. I edged out of the dead forest and gazed around to find such dark clouds making their way low across the land in the form of fog. I made my way back to see my fellow marines loading the buggy. Looking briefly to make sure nothing was incidentally left behind, we all climbed into the buggy (Tim assuming the position of driver, and me taking the side seat again) and it whirled to life.

"Can I get a radiation reading?"

"Higher than it was here yesterday, still not as bad as it could be."

Tim carefully manoeuvred the vehicle between the trees and out of the forest, accelerating over the hill. As we reached it, the city was unseen, shrouded by thick, dark fog. The air was seeping with humidity, which soon fogged up our helmets, which was rather irritating. Every few minutes, everything became too blurry to be seen. As we thundered down the bare hill and down towards the city, heavy raindrops started falling in ever-increasing amounts. Somehow, I actually liked the rain. It seemed like eternity since the last time I had seen it, and also, it somehow made everything more human and earthly. More normal. In fact, that was probably the best moment I had throughout my nightmarish experience: driving down the hill towards the city, which we could not see, looking around at the falling rain.

Tim stopped the buggy at the edge of the ruins and looked back at us.

"Where do we go now?" he shouted over the rattle of the falling drops.

Jacobs was consulting his PDA, where he had uploaded the maps, satellite photos and plans the General had given us prior to leaving.

"We should run parallel to the city. Turn left here. We shouldn't head straight off into the city."

Tim turned and so we moved on, dead, grey hills nearly masked by clouds to our left and the ghost-like skeletal ruins of Berlin to our right. The rain continued to fall as humidity continued to rise. Lightning rattled off somewhere in the distance, sketching the silhouette of the ruined city. After a while, Tim started having problems controlling the buggy; the ground had become more than muddy, but rather, a giant puddle with the occasional piece of mud peeking from underneath the grey waters. Spraying water about, and sliding sideways every time Tim made a turn to avoid some beam that was laying on

the edge of the ruins, the buggy chose every direction but the right one. Several times Tim had to wrestle with the steering wheel to keep the buggy from flying off into the city or sliding sideways and rolling over. Both possibilities weren't very inviting.

"We can enter here," yelled Jacobs. "Road's fairly clear a good ten kilometres in. We might have to foot it for the last stretch. There's really no way around that."

Tim, who had stopped, spun the wheel, and we headed off into the city. As Jacobs had said, the road was fairly clear, but not quite. There was still a great deal of beams and other debris scattered across it, and it was constant turning from the left side of the road to the right to avoid as many as possible, though the inevitable jolt came once in a while. Someone in the back must've gotten nauseous from all that twisting and turning because I heard retching sounds, followed by a long strain of coughing. I didn't look back, however. I didn't really want to see the mess, but also, felt almost like I was part of the team controlling the vehicle, which was heading down the uneven road with blazing speed. It was too frightening to look away, though I did gaze at the nearly-collapsed structures to the sides of the road as we passed. As buildings became lower and more ruined, my radiation counter clicked faster.

The frequency of the times when Tim was unable to avoid various obstacles and thus result in an upward jolt increased. Spraying water everywhere, we continued to make our way towards the EURN station, though we were forced to move at a slower pace. Soon, the road became altogether impossible to distinguish from the surrounding ruins. Tim slowed the buggy then, shifting to lower gears, started climbing up the hill of rubble that was at the street's end. Jacobs was intently staring at his PDA, occasionally looking up. For what had to be another five minutes, we managed to make our way across the wreckage, though we soon decided that it was faster if we just continued on foot. And so, boots on wet ground, we continued forward, Jacobs leading the group with his PDA, with Tim and myself following, then Tyler, another marine, and Carson along with the second other marine, who were helping the civilian walk.

"How much more?" I asked Jacobs after a while. It had to be midday by then. The rain had ceased and the fog had slightly receded, though weather was still as gloomy and looked set to rain again. Lightning danced across the horizon frequently, making odd shadows jump out from the shattered buildings and other remains.

"We're making good progress. The entrance to the EURN is four kilometres off. We'll be there by nightfall for sure, at latest."

Jacobs had abandoned his anger that he had directed at me. Funny how the most dire and dreadful situations can end feuds and bring people together.

"You know," said Jacobs. "I always wanted to trek across Europe. This isn't what I had in mind, though."

"Yeah," I agreed. "If it wasn't for hell taking over the world and all that, this would actually be kind of fun."

Jacobs cringed at the 'hell' reference, for it reminded him of our little argument. He still didn't seem convinced that it was demons we were fighting, and he found my lack of faith disturbing, as he always had. But nowadays, it was different. You know, maybe religion was invented for times like these, when people needed reassurance. But it was real, I had already decided upon that. I wanted to tell Jacobs that, though I wasn't about to get on my knees and start praying, I believed in what I could see. And now I saw that hell had come. It was the evidence for religion that had never existed until now, and

thus I hadn't believed until now. I wanted to tell him, but couldn't find a way to properly bring up the topic.

"Kind of sad," he said, averting the subject of religion. "A lot of Europe is gone now and we won't have the chance to see it standing."

"Don't worry," Carson cried out from behind us. "They'll rebuild."

I looked my shoulder over at him. He had lost his best friend in the fray we had jumped into as soon as we had emerged from the portal. Roach was gone. He had been distant and quiet since then (like pretty much everyone) and it was odd to hear him speak so cheerfully. As I looked back at him, he had a forced expression of optimism set on his face. He was struggling. We all were, and he knew it. But he said nothing and smiled that vague, false smile. I felt his pain. Somehow, the image of him was disturbing, so I tried to look away and my eyes fell to the scientist that he and another marine were helping to walk, whom I had not realised that he had regained consciousness.

He looked miserable; his skin was a pallid shade and his wide eyes were staring at the ground with a frozen expression of shock. His hair had started falling out in clumps and, as I watched, he bent forward and vomited blood then coughed loudly. After the pause, the procession carrying him continued on their way. It was horrible, watching him die for no reason, and I felt pity. No, I felt more than that; it was guilt. Yes, it was Tim who had made the decision that this poor civilian was to be sacrificed so we'd have more able men later on, yet somehow the decisions weight fell on me as well. Like I should've said something to stop Tim. And yet, deep down, I knew he was right.

I looked back from the dying man to Carson's fake grin and felt disgusted.

Jacobs must've noticed my odd expression, for he said, "Don't worry, three more kilometres."

"We need a break," said the marine that was helping Carson carry the civilian.

"Another kilometre and we'll stop," said Tim, not looking back.

The city seemed dead and deserted; it was hard to attribute those eerie screams and cries I had heard during the night to anything. Whatever was here, it was gone or hiding. Had to be hiding. I had seen demons wandering about during the day before, it was dark enough as it was. So where were they? My best conclusion was that demons weren't too fond of water and the rain had driven them away. Everything was unnaturally calm and I didn't like it. But I soon found my thoughts elsewhere, trying to focus on my breathing. The terrain was uneven and rough and was quickly wearing everyone out. As tired as I felt, I could only imagine the people carrying the civilian were about to collapse.

"Break, people!" said Tim.

I was just about to make a note of my hunger, when Tim said, "Once we get inside the EURN, we'll eat."

Nodding, we sat for a few minutes in silence before the inevitable and greatly dread remark, "Time to go." Grumbling, we walked in silence, and though it seemed to take forever, finally neared the EURN network. Clouds had darkened even more than I thought possible and another cold rain had picked up. Jacobs led the way, PDA held out at front, and we soon reached half-ruined building that could've been several stories tall but was now just one. Jacobs ran ahead and moved about it and even climbed on top, before coming down. Meanwhile, the temperature had suddenly dropped and small hail started falling.

“The entrance is blocked,” said Jacobs.

“Are we sure the trains are still intact?”

Jacobs looked at the ruins. “Should be. The EURN network is situated underground. It’s our best chance.” He looked down consulting his PDA. “There must be another entrance here somewhere... He we go. There are more entrances to the substation that’s joined to it, that takes trains from other parts of Europe and links them to the EURN. There’s an entrance four-hundred metres from here.”

We followed him as we neared another ruined structure. Jacobs was already there. Indeed there was an opening, with stairs that descended underground, into darkness. I looked at the others. It didn’t look too inviting. I figured all the monsters and demons were hiding right now, and if there was any place they’d be hiding, it was there. But we had gotten this far, and there was no backing out now. We fumbled for our flashlights, for at times like these they proved invaluable, and with a deep breath plunged into the darkness, ducking the few beams that were hanging ominously over the entrance. As we descended, our steps echoed loudly. I cringed. We were begging to be killed! Hell, we might as well have smeared ourselves with sheep’s blood before entering!

Too late now, I thought.

At the bottom of the stairs, we came across a giant room, like an indoor plaza. The EURN was a big network, so I figured they needed a big room like this to keep up with everything. There were ticket counters running along the walls and numerous benches lined in rows across the room. At the far end were two large doors, over which hung large boards with ‘Ankünfte/Abfahrten’ written over them. The room was rather warm, contrasting the cold outside. The falling hail was heard in the distant, an almost tranquil sound. We edged into the room, using flashlights to make sure that there were no damn monsters. But we were all convinced that there were, I mean, where else would they be? I remember all the screeches and yells that night...

Jacobs moved ahead, flashlight held high, shotgun in the other.

Something moved in the darkness.

Jacobs lowered his shotgun rapidly and, supporting it somehow with his flashlight arm, fired off a round.

There was a yell of pain and our flashlights caught up with the moving target.

It was a human that lay on the ground twitching and, judging by his cries, he wasn’t a zombie.

“Oh God, oh God...”

Jacobs was planted in his spot, looking wide-eyed and open mouthed at the person he had shot. A sickened expression came across his face and he reached for his head. If he had longer hair, it was likely he would have started pulling it out. Not being able to find a suitable expression, he did an odd gesture with his arms up, face twisted in pain, and chanting, “Oh God...” repetitively. He seemed to turn to look back in slow motion before he allowed himself to fall to the ground, where his chant turned to, “I’m sorry, oh God I’m sorry...” For a few seconds we stood there, trying to comprehend what had happened. Then, we all rushed towards the person who had been shot. Flashlight beams danced wildly as we reached him, only to nearly slip on the blood that had started flowing from his massive chest wound.

“He’s a civilian,” someone informed the others.

“Quick, cover his wounds!”

The man yelled in pain, his cries echoing loudly across the hall. Hell, if we hadn’t been noticed before, now it was certain.

Behind me, I heard Jacobs continue to chant, “I’m sorry... God, I’m sorry...”

Blood was pooling and the man’s pained expression continued to scream, though his yells became silent. As he continued to gasp like a fish on dry land, his skin turned to an impossible white colour in record time. As his lips turned purple, he slowly went limp and stopped moving altogether, facial features frozen in a moment of pain. Tyler, who had been supporting his head, allowed him to crumple to the ground and silence ensued. It was all so quick, Tim hadn’t the time to pull out the appropriate supplies from the medikit.

Everyone went silent and the only thing heard was the grovelling Jacobs.

Up until then, I had never seen a marine cry. Needless to say, the sight wasn’t pretty. Jacobs, looking pathetic, his face twisted in emotions with tears running down it, had crawled towards us throughout the mayhem. It was all so strange, so alien. These emotions, it was true that we were being pushed to an emotional brink, but Jacobs was truly falling apart. I looked away from his reddened eyes and felt an odd feeling creep up my spine, the feeling of conflicting and overwhelming emotions, all struggling to gain supreme control.

“Are they dead?” Jacobs said through a choked voice.

“Yeah,” I said, not sure what to say or do. Like the giant demon, everything had been so sudden. From the start, we had assumed that we were the only good guys roaming about and that everything else that moved was bad. It was natural, and here, in the middle of all the chaos, who would’ve thought? Hell, there could be a whole colony of survivors here, underground. Unlikely, but possible. And we had just reduced them to one less. It was horrible. We were here to save humanity, but everything was spiralling down, and this was just a part of it. The civilian had surprised us. It was partly his fault, I thought. But Jesus, it was mostly ours. Mostly Jacobs’. And man, was he suffering.

“Oh God,” he replied, twisting away from us and curling up on the ground. “Oh, I’m sorry, Oh Jesus... I’m sorry... I—”

“We have to move on,” said Tim quietly.

“I’m so sorry, I...”

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s go.” I wanted to say it wasn’t his fault or that it was all OK, but truth was, it wasn’t all OK. It was his fault. He understood it, and so he cried. I pitied him. He had just killed someone, and yet I pitied him. But it was natural. It was an accident, he hadn’t wanted it. I had every right to pity him, and to pity the person that had died. Somehow, this was a lot more horrific than the tunnel of flesh or any of the other things I had seen so far. I hated him for acting on impulse, for no one else had fired off a shot, and yet I hated myself for hating him. I couldn’t bare to watch Jacobs suffer, and I wanted him to end it all. To straighten up, to fix a steady gaze, and to walk along with us like before. I wanted him to feel better, and yet I couldn’t help feeling angry. It was foolish of him to act so suddenly, but it was all over. It was all behind us, and there was nothing more to do than to move on and hope for better fortune.

And Jacobs’ suffering was horrible as well.

“Oh God...”

“We have to go,” I said rather impatiently.

“I’m sorry, it was... It was an accident. How was I to know? Oh, I—I’m so sorry, I didn’t know...”

“Come on!”

I was getting annoyed, and thus rough, with him. I knew I had to act and be compassionate, but I couldn’t. He had killed an innocent person. Where was I to find compassion? That, and the situation didn’t permit it. Whatever demons and monsters traversed these halls had surely heard us by now. We had to move on for the sake of our own hides. We couldn’t afford compassion. Suddenly, I became angry at Jacobs. And I hated myself more than ever for it. But I felt angry. Angry that he had killed the person, angry that he was acting like a complete idiot now. Angry at everything. Angry that all of this had happened. Why had it all happened. ‘God wouldn’t allow something like that to happen,’ I remembered Jacobs saying.

Feeling this new anger, I grabbed the whimpering Jacobs by the collar and pulled him up and started dragging him, with the others behind me.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, I—”

Looking around wearily, dreading the sight of a pair of eyes creeping along the ceiling or something like that, I shook Jacobs violently.

“Shut up, you idiot!” I whispered in the harshest quiet voice I could muster.

Tim picked up Jacobs dropped flashlight, shotgun and PDA and led the way. We moved across the giant room, circling around the benches, and made our way towards the two doors. Warily stepping through, and more alert for possible survivors, we crossed into the complete darkness beyond. Dragging Jacobs with one hand, I found use in my other one to use the flashlight. As our dancing beams revealed, it was the loading portion of the station. It was a large underground area, with a ceiling a good twenty metres high, with deep, straight metal trenches that ran through the cavernous chamber, with tunnel ends at each side of the room. There was a total of four trenches, at the bottom of which was the usual train track. The tracks were there, but where were the trains?

I looked sideways at Tim.

“OK, so now what? We need a train.”

“The way I see it, the power must’ve been knocked out. I hope the electromagnetic pulse hasn’t screwed up the electronics, or this was all in vain. Then

again, they would've foreseen that. I'm guessing it's because this thing is pretty deep underground and it was protected. But how to get a train..."

I looked around and felt an eerie sensation creep up the back of my neck. It was that sixth sense of being watched.

"We don't have time, Tim!"

"I know, I know!" he snapped his fingers. "We need to restart the power. Umm, let's see. Control room. There must be a control booth around here somewhere. We can barricade ourselves in there. There should be a map. Then someone can go out and recharge the power so I can call up a train."

"Sounds good," I said, dragging Jacobs along.

At one end of the station was a corridor with heavy steel doors that were semi-shut. A sign in German was printed on them and our guess was that it was the right direction to go in. Indeed, after squeezing through (where Jacobs refused to go and I had to kick him in the face for him to move on) we found an elevator off to one side. Our hopes of using, however, were soon diminished as there was no power. Using the dark stairwell next to it, we made our way up and inside what had to be the control room. It overlooked the giant train room with large, sloped glass panels, and with numerous controls and monitors that were lined behind them. There was a total of five chairs there, with a corpse laying in one of them. Grimacing, I dragged it out of the room, before shutting the doors and sealing them through creative use Jacobs' shotgun.

"Alright," said Tim. "There must be a printed map around here somewhere."

After scouring various stacks of papers and boxes full of computer disks (all useless to us), I stumbled across a thick, heavy printed manual. I handed it to Tim, who flipped through it while Tyler provided light.

"Damn, it's in German," noted Tim.

"Look, there's an English section in the back."

He nodded. "Hey, there's French, too. Well what do you know?"

I shrugged.

"Here we go. The power room is back down the stairs and at the far end of that hallway."

"Let's rest," Carson suggested, allowing himself to fall into one of the chairs. "We can continue tomorrow. We need to eat and drink and get some sleep. I think this room is fairly safe."

Tim looked cross about the idea, but gave in. "Alright, that's fine by me. The train trip is what, about five hours? I guess I wouldn't want to arrive there early in the morning anyway. But we start at six tomorrow, is that clear?"

Not caring anymore and simply gleeful at the thought of rest, we all nodded.

The civilian coughed loudly and collapsed on the floor. Several people rushed to catch him, but it was too late. He vomited blood again. His hair had already completely fallen off and his skin had turned a sick yellow colour, which turned to white as he died. Blood ran from his ears and nose and eyes and, after a few violent convulsions, he finally stopped moving. A sickening smell filled the room. Feeling lightly nauseous at the spectacle, I shut my eyes. Carson checked for a pulse and concluded that he had indeed died. The inevitable had come. We had all known it all along. It was sad and pitiful, to be dying and to be unable to do anything about it. But it had to be done. I looked at Tim, whose decision it was to sacrifice the poor civilian.

“Take him out,” he said, turning away.

Carson and another marine pulled him out of the room, locking it again behind themselves.

Ironically (in a sadistic, really dark-humour sort of way), it was time to eat. We all felt bad, and lightly sick, though we hadn't eaten for a long period of time, and our bodies' need for nourishment exceeded our moral judgement and natural responses to what had just happened.

We all scattered around the room in silence, everyone finding their own spot to rest. Geiger counters read minimal radioactivity, and so we decided to take off our helmets. Though it was warm, the air felt cool on my head; our helmets (and altogether suits) didn't have air conditioning. There are no luxuries on the battlefield. And thus, I was soaked with sweat and it was a relief to remove my helmet. Tim went around, passing out the MREs they had salvaged all the way back in London. Using minimal water, we prepared our cold meals and ate in hunger. Ignoring the tinge of cardboard in my ravioli platter, I looked up to see Carson sitting ahead and to my right. He wasn't eating, but rather, looking absent-mindedly ahead. I was sure he was recalling the death of his friends. Looking back down at my food, I pushed the thoughts that were skimming through his head out of mine.

Jacobs, apparently exhausted from the day and all of his whimpering, had finally become quiet and was sitting on the far end, away from everyone else, breathing heavily and eyes half-closed. A few minutes later he fell asleep, or maybe finally lost consciousness, and Tim walked by, picking up his unopened MRE. Gazing a last time out the windows, we extinguished our flashlights, not wanting them to act as beacons to a demonic all-you-can-eat buffet. I could hear Tyler and one of the other marines moving; they were keeping watch. Then, a little past midnight, they were to wake Tim and I to keep watch for the rest of the night. Trying to push the unpleasant thought that I'd be forced awake in a few hours, and wondering why the hell I hadn't acquainted myself with the two remaining marines that were from another unite, sleep fell over me.

And for once, I was glad that there were no dreams.

It was the best sleep I had gotten in a very long time. And as I finally woke, on my own accord, I thought about how great it was. Hmm, wasn't I supposed to be waked? Oh well, I thought. I had slept really well, and that's all that mattered. Grunting, rolling over, and pulling out my PDA, I decide to check the time. As the PDA's screen came to life, emitting eye-hurting blue light that seemed oddly bright in the complete darkness, it showed that it was six o' four A.M.

My senses finally crept back in me and I bolted straight up. The dull, blue light coming from my PDA was enough to reveal our room, with everyone on the ground. No one was on watch. I could hear light snoring coming from multiple directions. In the eerie glow, I began to panic. Tyler and that one marine had fallen asleep. I could see them lying in one corner, chests heaving under heavy breaths. And then my eyes fell to the door on my far right. The door that I had bolted the night before. It was wide open, almost inviting to any passing beast. Beyond our dimly lit room, set in the frame of the door, was complete blackness.

A shiver crept up my spine.

Jesus, I thought. There could be some damned monster looking me now!

I darted forward. Upon reaching the doorway, I saw that the shotgun with which I had barricaded the door had been pulled out of the door and tossed on the ground. As I slammed the door, waking everyone in the room, I saw bloodstains beyond our door, running along the floor and walls.

I bolted the door with the shotgun.

Everyone had woken at the slam of the door. As I turned back, panting, I saw figures stir. Some groaned, others simply asked groggily, 'What the hell is going on?' Tim, however, had immediately jumped up. Soon his, and a few other, flashlights lit up and, after dancing for a few moments, all fell upon me. A silence echoed the darkness, and everyone looked up at me, questioningly, then with some understanding finally coming to them, back at Tyler and the other marine. It was obvious that they hadn't been keeping watch, but no one seemed to realise that the situation was much more odd and complex than simply them felling asleep.

"What's going on?" asked Tim. "What was that noise?"

"I woke up," I said through thick breaths. "Nobody woke me up when it was my turn to keep watch. I woke up and saw that the door was wide open. I ran and closed it."

Tim looked around.

"Everyone here?"

People moved about, glancing to and fro in the absence of light. A few seconds passed, when the question arose:

"Where's Jacobs?" asked Tyler.

"Jacobs!" cried Tim as loud as he dared, hoping to hear an answer. He had to be in the room, he had to be.

Something was very wrong.

"He was lying over there," I pointed.

We moved across the room to where he had lain and several flashlight beams fell across the spot, revealing a giant bloodstain running down the wall and pooling on the floor. His flashlight, walkie-talkie, and a few other such necessities were scattered around the spot. From there started a bloody trail as if he had been dragged. As our flashlights followed it, we saw that it ended at the now-closed door. With that, a while passed in mild understanding of what could've happened. Had something somehow come in and killed and taken Jacobs? But that didn't make sense, for the shotgun had been removed from the door, and thus it had been opened from the inside. Could a monster have come in from elsewhere? My eyes were drawn up to find one of the ceiling panels had been removed. But if something had come through the roof and out the door, why had it only taken Jacobs? After all, there were six of us, all sleeping unaware.

Something moved at one end of our relatively small room.

"Jacobs?" I asked, moving my flashlight to point to the object. It was standing next to a computer terminal and it looked rather large and bulky. The others noticed it too. Feeling queasy, I finally moved my beam in a decisive motion.

The form suddenly ducked down before the computer terminal erupted and was thrown upward in a shower of sparks. Tubes and various metallic structures followed, and, as they all finally settled down to a clang, we saw a large, monstrous creature

standing there, in the small room. It was so close I could smell the sudden wafts of a sulphur-like scent emanating from the creature. Feeling terror deep inside me, I backed away, glancing at the door, our only means of escape. It was bolted shut, and the creature would surely know that.

It was a trap.

* * *

I had seen this beast before, though never in person. It was in my dream that I had seen it, a grotesque, fat monster, with a face that looked garbled with indefinite features, a non-existent neck, and fat arms to which massive energy launchers were attached. From the weapon ran tubes that inserted into the device attached to its back. On the sides of the hanging belly were the two stubby legs. Of course, I saw little of this; in the darkness, all I saw was a pair of glowing eyes and a dark silhouette that was all-too-familiar. There was a short silence, filled with more tension than any rubber band could handle. And then, in another swift move, the band snapped as another pair of fireballs flew through the air, burning it away as they flew by, with one of them hitting the wall besides which I had stood only moments before. I couldn't even get to the damned door!

It was utter chaos in the tiny room. In the darkness one or two persons had managed to put up their weapons and fire a few rounds.

Figures ran and yelled. Fireballs grazed the air and sent whatever they hit flying.

A console beside me exploded and debris rained down along with a shower of sparks. Some metal tubes were bent by the sudden change in pressure and snapped at my right foot. I was knocked down and started crawling.

Someone dropped in front of me.

Lying on the ground ahead of me, I saw my shotgun. Crawling forward as fast as I could, I reached it.

Someone behind me yelled. The room shook as a part of the wall was blown away. Panels flew as pipes hissed gas.

More gunshots, mine included, went off.

To my right, someone had jumped on the consoles facing the windows that looked down upon the train plaza below. They shattered the window and, a second before it happened, I realised what they were doing.

They jumped.

What the hell were they thinking? We're over five metres up!

The giant fat monster roared and smashed another computer console with its massive arm-mounted weapon, sending it flying at one of the marines.

I fired two more rounds and reloaded.

"Someone open the door!"

As I watched the dancing black forms in front of me, the giant silhouette of the obese monster moved with surprising grace and speed for something with so much fat and approached another dark figure, a marine. Before the marine had time to react, the fat beast sent him flying across the room with its massive arm. The marine smacked against the wall then crumpled down with a sickening crunch. Feeling weak, I somehow managed to keep my head and saw opportunity.

"Now! The door!"

With a loud clang, the door was unbolted by what looked like Tim and we all darted out of the room, leaving nothing but shattering sounds behind us.

We paused.

“The generators!”

“Let’s go,” said one marine, slapping another on the back. They took off.

“Wait!” Carson yelled. “I’ll come, too!” He followed them, and so they disappeared into the darkness.

I looked at Tim. “What do we do?”

“Come on,” he said. “We have to go and wait for the power to come, and we start the train. Come on!”

Tyler, Tim and I ran back. Just then, a fiery pentagram appeared on the ground, with the shimmering mist over it, then something seemingly dropped from the sky. It was an odd figure, rather skinny. The new creature paused and gently raised its large, smooth head and gazed at us with black pits for eyes. It raised its hands, which I noticed were covered with odd, round structures, almost like red tumours. As it raised them, the bubble-like structures began to pulsate. The creature was skinny, its ribcage became clearly visible, oddly abrasive in the low light. I heard a whispering by the humanoid being, and as I watched, transfixed, more pentagrams seared across the ground and all of the sudden, imps started teleporting in.

Feeling primal instincts, I quickly whacked the thing on the head with my shotgun. It staggered and wavered, and screeched at me. It raised its hands then pointed them at me. Now, though rule of thumb is that it’s bad when weapons are pointed at you, ever since this ordeal had started, I had realised that it isn’t a good idea to have *anything* pointed at you. Vividly recalling the balls of energy imps made and threw with their hands, I jumped out of the way just as a billow of fire blew out of its hands and in my direction.

I stood up and whacked it again.

It screeched.

This was all the time I needed to bring up my shotgun and bring down the monster.

Meanwhile, Tim and Tyler had engaged the imps. I turned my attention back to them, and soon the floor had a new paintjob. Imps don’t take too long.

Tyler looked down and spat. “That’s what, close encounters of the fourth kind?”

“It isn’t an alien, dumbass,” I said jokingly, reloading.

“Now what?”

Tim pulled out his walkie-talkie. “Maybe we can reach them with this. They shouldn’t have any shielding to block their signal in here.

The lights above hummed to life.

Tim’s walkie-talkie crackled.

“Hello?” said Tim testily.

“What? Who—What is...” the signal was broken by distant gunfire, distorted by the walkie-talkie. “Damn it,” came the voice from the walkie-talkie. “Is that... shooting... Is that you guys? Stop shooting, you idiots! What is going on? We got the power back on...”

“Yeah, I can see that,” said Tim. “Hurry back!”

“What?” The voice paused through heavy static and the gunfire transmitted by the radios. “Someone’s shooting at us. Damn marines, too! At first we... and then we lost Robert... Thought it was you guys shooting. What the hell is going on?”

“Hurry back, damn it!” Tim yelled.

There was a pause. “...Coming, we’ll see... hold them off, could be... Oh Jesus! What the hell are you...”

The radio signal died.

A long while passed in standing.

“What now?”

Tim looked up at us. “I’ll go start the train. You wait out here for a while more. If they don’t get back in two minutes, we leave without them.”

He took off.

Tyler looked around uneasily. “Shit...” he muttered. “This just gets better and better.”

I looked around then paused, trying to hear anything, to give me a clue as to just what was going on. How long had passed? I flipped on my walkie-talkie and all I heard was static. I shut it off.

Behind Tyler and I came a loud metallic whirr. We spun around and saw that the lights on the train had come on.

We turned back around and continued watching the darkness, hoping for the marines to come rushing out.

“Come on, Carson...”

There was a distant gunshot and footsteps rapidly drawing nearer.

Tyler and I raised our weapons.

A human figure darted out of the darkness, arms waving madly. It was yelling something frantically, and as I looked on, I realised it was Carson. He ran forward and, losing balance and stumbling and nearly falling, slipped on the blood from all of the imps we had gunned down. When the bottom of his shoes met up yet again with metal, he regained his balance and continued running towards us, arms flashing. Tyler and I lowered our weapons.

“Go! Come on! Let’s go!”

“What happened?” I asked.

He shook his head wildly. “No time! We have to get on the train and move!”

I grabbed him by the collar and dragged him towards the train. Tyler followed. “OK, what happened to the others?”

“I don’t know... These marines, they opened fire on us. Another squad. We thought they were friendlies.”

I noticed the flecks of blood that were splayed across his face. Looking him over, I saw that he was not injured in any way and that it was not his blood. Throwing a sideways glance to Tyler, we entered the train. With a hydraulic swish, Tim closed the doors behind us and we slowly made our way towards the front, where Tim was waiting for us. The train started moving, and as it did, the darkness we left behind seemed to pulsate, like it acknowledged that we had got away and swore that it would get back at us and finish what it had started. With blackness flashing by the window, we left old nightmares behind and moved on to new ones. We reached Tim and, for a long while, watched the tracks ahead, illuminated by the train’s lights, flash in front of us and

underneath. And though we travelled in silence, it was no secret where everyone's thoughts fell: on the past and on those who had died. If, so far from the epicentre, so many had died, what waited for us at the heart?

The train sped off through the tunnel and away.

PART 4
The Seed That Was Planted

1

The train sped off through the tunnel and away.

And where it led was unnerving. It was like a cable plugged straight into a nightmare. I had seen enough horrors to fill a dozen lifetimes, but I felt that what we had seen thus far was only an appetiser to what was to come. I had been saying it all along, and I was sure it was right. The London base had been a horrible experience, but everything became a lot more dire and depressing when we finally arrived at Berlin. With each passing kilometre to Vienna, I felt a shiver make its way through my body. I felt on edge, shaking. Though in the darkness of the train tunnel, there was little to be seen, it pained me what the terrain far above us yielded with each kilometre. I could see nothing from the tunnel, but I felt it deep inside. It was that sixth sense again, telling me things I didn't want to hear. And as time wore on, I began to slowly prepare myself mentally for what was to come. I couldn't afford to yield to shock and surprise, to make myself vulnerable.

Normally, it would've been a four hour journey, though with the possibilities of obstructions in the tunnel from all the battering the Earth had taken, it proved much slower. Tim was a busy man, running back and forth, checking on me, my wound, and the others, then running back to the front. It seemed days that I spent my time lying in my bed on the train, talking, eating. It was like a break, a fresh breath before plunging back into horror. Knowing this, I wished deep in my mind that the journey would continue forever, but I knew otherwise. Tyler and I talked a lot, with Tim pitching in conversation on his periodic coming back from the front of the train. Carson, however, soon grew reclusive. We had all taken a mental, and physical, battering, but it seemed that he was the one taking it the worst. Since Roach's demise, he had been acting odd, displaying unnatural emotions, acting on edge and backing away from everyone else. Soon, we stopped seeing him altogether. I began to wonder if it was him that killed those two marines that had gone with him to the generators.

Not long after starting, Tim had helped Tyler patch me up and went up front. Carson was sitting off to the side, looking with unnatural curiosity at us, though not looking amused at all.

Tyler and I spoke of old times while he watched from the sidelines.

"You know," I said. "I haven't been on a train since before boot camp. Not too bad," I indicated the comfortable bed. The train was divided in compartments with four graciously spaced beds, two on each side.

"I don't think I've ever been on a train," said Tyler. "This is a new experience for me. Strange, huh?"

"Not really, with all these new transports out. What do you think so far?"

He shrugged. "Pretty much what I expected. But let's see. I've been on a boat, troop carriers, various air craft, that one hydrogen car we hijacked back in boot camp."

I laughed. "Oh yeah, I forgot about that one. Whose idea was that, anyway?"

"I think it was Roger's. It was swell, they never caught us."

"Yeah," I agreed. "It was brilliant."

Back in boot camp, we had been made to run laps around our military compound. This was after I punched out drill sergeant number one, and before I punched out number two. Regardless, every day we must've run something like ten laps around the damned place, and it's no tiny little compound, either. Starting at the front entrance, around back to the supply station, behind the cafeteria, around the field and training grounds, past the shooting range and around the various training courses, it must've been a total of several kilometres per lap. Our drill sergeant (along with others, if we were training together with other units) would stand at the front and time us. There really was no way to cut through the building and not get caught, so we were forced to run the whole damned course. After several weeks, it started getting more annoying than tiring. Hell, we had proven we can run it in around twenty minutes, I didn't see the point of running it ten times a day. One was enough to keep us in shape.

Others were getting pissed off, too. So one day, someone (who I now found out to be a fellow marine from another unit named Roger) decided to take some action. Now, there were three marines who would always sit in the cafeteria and watch us. One was from our unit. They had injured themselves and were relieved from doing exercises with us. One had shot himself in the foot (rumour says it that he did it to keep himself from doing the exercises), another had eaten something that had really screwed up his stomach, and I can't remember what the third had done. Soon, these three men were recruited by Roger to help. They managed to 'borrow' a hydrogen car from somewhere and had it parked back. Because of its government license plate, no one questioned why it was there. And, when we were made to run the course, these three marines would take turns in ferrying us across the entire back section of the course. They would take five of us at once and drive us so, in the end, we really ended up running about five hundred metres.

Even when we started pulling five-minute times for the entire course, no one really had the intelligence to grow suspicious. We were praised by our drill sergeant. Of course, I don't think he really would've cared if we cheated. All that mattered to him was to be able to show that we were running the entire several-kilometre course in around five minutes to the brass.

"Where did they get that car from, anyway?"

"I don't know," answered Tyler. "They pulled it off really well."

"I wouldn't be surprised if that car is still behind the compound. No one dared to touch it after all these years."

We laughed.

The train slowed, then sped up again.

Tyler sighed. "Those were actually good times. I thought I was in hell back then, but you know, none of it was really serious. All the times we made our way around the work, got in trouble, and laughed about it later—I miss that."

After a while, Carson left the compartment silently and, although Tyler reported to having seen him twice or thrice after that, he soon altogether disappeared. This troubled Tyler and I quite a while and was the basis of many discussions. We didn't know where he was, but we were sure he was on the train. Though he didn't seem perfectly stable, we were sure he had enough sanity to keep himself from jumping off of a moving train. Still, his exact whereabouts were unknown to us. When we told Tim, he looked down and didn't seem altogether surprised. After a bit of a silence, he told us that we'll see what we can do when we get to Vienna, then moved back up front.

A while later, I felt myself being tugged to my left, and realised that the train was stopping. A minute passed before Tim opened up the compartment door.

“The tracks are blocked from here on, the tunnel has collapsed ahead. We’re going on foot from here.”

I grunted.

“How far are we from Vienna?” asked Tyler.

“Something like twenty kilometres. We could probably cover it in one day, though it’s already midday, and the terrain isn’t easy to trek. It looks like it’ll be another two days before we get there. And we’re gonna have to find some underground spot to spend the night.” Tim looked back. “Anyway, we can’t get anywhere from here. I’m gonna back up the train to the last train depot, we continue from there.”

He left the compartment and, sure enough, the train started moving back in the opposite direction before slowing again.

“Let’s go,” said Tyler, slapping me on the shoulder.

We met Tim in the corridor outside the compartment.

“I’ll find Carson,” he offered. “You wait outside, and be alert!”

He moved away.

Tyler and I made our way out of the train and found ourselves in a vast, dark loading station, like the one on which we had gotten on our train. Except here were four trenches with tracks rather than four. My guess was that the extra bit was a maintenance track. I looked back at the train, with light seeping through its large, glass windows; it was the only source of light. Tyler loaded his shotgun, while I prepared my flashlight, for I knew that soon there would be no comforting light from the train as we moved away. We needed ammo; I had eight shells left. I wasn’t sure about how many Tyler had, but I was confident that it wasn’t as much as we’d liked.

In the distance, I heard Tim yell, followed by a loud gunshot that echoed in the cavernous room.

Tyler and I spun around.

One of the doors burst open and Tim and Carson clambered out and took off running.

“What the hell is going on?”

“One of those things attacked us,” said Tim breathlessly. “Imp or whatever.”

I looked back to Carson, who I hadn’t seen for quite a while. We had eaten several times after he had distanced himself from us. He already looked rather weak and ill. His face was pale and his eyes seemed to bulge out from his bony complexion. He looked around wildly and without expression and seemed not to notice that Tyler and I were both examining him. He scratched himself, shaking hand giving him an edgy, jumpy look. He looked to the ground absent-mindedly, thoughts elsewhere, then turned around and looked back at the train. Odd expressions fell across his face. At first he looked pained, but then I saw it was a grin. He chuckled.

I threw a sideways glance at Tyler.

Carson turned on his heel and started walking away from us. His way of walking was different somehow; not a steady walk, but rather, like one foot was shorter than the other, a limp.

“Where are you going?” asked Tim.

Carson ignored him.

“Answer me, damn it!” yelled Tim, getting annoyed with his odd behaviour. “Where the hell are you going?”

Carson stopped.

A dead silence settled in.

“Where are you going?” repeated Tim, sounding irritated.

Carson seemed to be frozen in his spot, facing away from us.

“Where the fuck are you going?”

Suddenly, to our surprise, Carson turned around, and screamed at the top of his lungs. “Shut up! Shut the fuck up!”

He paused breathing heavily and started chuckling.

We all stood looking at the shaking, laughing, mad Carson.

His chuckle had turned into a boisterous, over-inflated laugh. Then, he suddenly stopped and raised his pistol.

He fired.

Tyler dropped down on the ground.

Carson started running, laughing as he went like a little boy who had just done something mischievous and was running away from the crime scene. We didn’t shoot back; we didn’t have time. It was evident that he was mad, but to go as far as to shoot a friend, a fellow comrade—that was beyond me, beyond Tim, beyond what we had expected. We had expected to be dodging and fighting with real enemies, but having to be put up against someone who had once been a friend, it wasn’t easy. For a second, my eyes followed where Carson had ran; he was gone from our sight now, though we could hear his mischievous laugh echoing across the walls in the distance. We rushed back to Tyler, who was lying on the ground, a puddle of blood beneath him.

“That bastard!” he uttered weakly and coughed. When his coughing fit passed, he became frighteningly still. I raised his head and checked for a pulse.

Tim, halfway through opening the medikit stopped and looked at me.

I shook my head.

Running my hand over my face, I let Tyler go and got up. Tim pushed the medikit back into his pack.

Carson’s distant laughing had paused.

“What now?” I asked quietly, fighting strong emotions.

“We need supplies,” said Tim. “Get his, uh, ammunition. Maybe try to find some ammo, find some place to rest for an hour or so. I—uh—damn... Let’s just move on, we can’t waste time here.” He looked at me. Tim knew that Tyler was my best friend back home. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“You sure?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “It’s sad, but, umm... Look at it this way: it was bound to happen eventually. We’re all screwed, and it happened to be his turn.” I had started to adopt the philosophy of that marine who had volunteered to sacrifice himself to destroy the London installation after we escaped. He had said, ‘The way I see it, you guys won’t last too long, either.’ We were all bound to die. What other way out was there in such dire circumstances? There had been what, over ten of us at the beginning? Well, that’s not counting the entire armies taken down. So, there had been thousands. Now there were just two, Tim and I. Of course, there could be others like us, there had to be other

survivors. Jacobs had killed one a while ago. They were probably hiding, trying to do anything possible to survive. And yet Tim and I, it was as if we were looking for a way to be killed, like we were begging for death.

Taking any and all useful supplies from Tyler, we pulled him out of the open and performed a primitive and quick burial of sorts where we lowered him into one of trenches that housed the train tracks. You'd think that this whole hell invasion would've made me spiritual, maybe say a prayer. But the sudden realisation that religion was real only made me angry. So many of us had died, where was the goodness, the divine in that? In reality, it made me hate religion. I didn't refute it anymore but accepted it as true, and had done so after we had emerged from the portal and so many had died. It angered me, it was to blame. Where the hell was God in all this? We were being picked off methodically and we would soon all be dead. Where the hell was the spirituality in that?

"Where is God in all this?" Tim echoed my thoughts.

As we headed away from the train, something moved out of the corner of my eye.

I paused and looked around.

"What is it?" asked Tim.

Where I could've sworn to see an imp crawling there was nothing. I looked around, flashlight following my gaze, and couldn't find any place where it could've gone. Shaking my head, I said, "Nothing."

With that, I threw myself back into the depressing reality of the loss of a good friend and the death of a best one. I could feel tears rising and fought them. I tried to focus my thoughts elsewhere, though Tyler's death and Carson's madness, they were fresh memories, topping off a pile of horrible memories. I had thought about the future and how it could only be worse, but I began to doubt that. We had hit the bottom, it couldn't get worse. The future didn't matter. And so I was forced to dwell on what had just happened and the pain that came with it. With the image of Tyler's dead body in my mind, with uncontrollable emotions bringing forth tears, and the thought that I'd die soon, I thought, I'll take as many of these bastards down as possible before I passed. And my tear-strewn, pained face twisted in anger.

And we continued walking.

And that is how I found myself lying under that flickering fluorescent lamp, lying atop the cold, metallic ground. That is how I wanted to say it was all not true, that there were no demons, no monstrosities or beasts. But that was self-denial, and I had conquered that long ago. That is how I ended up lying on the cold, dusty ground, feeling the spasms of pain from my chest wound and twisting in agony, both mental and physical. That is how I found myself in a Hell on Earth, clutching my shotgun and silently screaming. Tyler's death was the final blow. And seeing Carson mad, beside himself, laughing as he shot him, it was all the final straw. It was the beginning of my downfall. Yes, I had been injured and started recovering. My mind was reeling with horrible thoughts, with memories, and it only made the pain grow and rise again. I was already dying slowly.

Tim and I, in our search for ammunition and other supplies, found a door that seemed to have been ripped away from its foundation and tossed to the side. It was evident that marines had been there. They must've barricaded themselves in the room, only to have something rip open the door and tear them apart. The room was covered in dry blood and scattered with limbs. I looked away, I had had enough already. Tim collected valuable supplies, however, and a large weapon that I guessed to be a plasma rifle. I found a machinegun lying behind the door. We had then exited and, after wandering around for a long while (as I continued to see moving beasts out of the corner of my eye, only to turn around and see nothing there) we found a place to securely barricade ourselves and rest for a bit.

It was there, in that tiny, cold room with the flickering light above that all of the pain and grief caught up with me. It was all too much. And so I pushed myself into one of the corners and simply gave up. I didn't try restraining my emotions anymore, no fighting the tears. I let it all out. I felt horrible, like an idiot. There I was, a marine, crying and whimpering in the corner of the tiny room. That is how I ended up there, tired and haggard, dressed in rags, pulling my hair out and silently screaming and crying, shot and bruised. That is how a new era had started. And I saw it as I listened to the distant lunatic screams that came from beyond the door. The screams of Carson.

Oh, Jesus!

I wanted to pull out all my hair. I wanted to scream as loud as I could. To throw things, to break things. I wanted to go out and die, and take as many of the bastards as I could with me. But I was tired, bruised, and had been shot. My wound had been well, but with all the grief and strong emotions that rushed through me, it had started to ache again with each heartbeat.

Though we were supposed to be there for an hour, we remained longer. Tim had a different way of expressing his emotions. He seemed more stable than me. He looked away from me and had sat there motionless the entire time. His face was nearly expressionless, save for the tinge of disgust or pain that ran through it in spasms. He was pale and looking beyond the cold, dusty floor. And so we continued to sit there until we finally pulled ourselves together. After composing myself, I instantly felt better. And I had a plan. Forget the soulcube. We would never make it. I, we, were going to die, and kill a load of the fuckers down with us.

Tim massaged his temples.

"Are you ready?" he said with a voice unlike his own.

“Yeah,” I said, trying to sound as steady as I could.

We exited the room and walked out into the hallway. I could hear insane laughs coming from the distance. I started to wonder whether Carson was alone in his insanity. Hoping not to run into him, for we would be forced to kill him, we headed down the hall and rounded the corner, taking a left. As we did so, I hoped to see some monsters standing there. I hoped there would be loads of them so I could take them all down. No longer did I want to avoid conflict; I wanted it, and I wanted it bad to a point where I felt extreme disappointment every time we entered a new corridor or room and found nothing. But I didn’t care. I wasn’t cautious. I often walked ahead forcefully, not bothering to look around.

The corridor widened and we entered an elevator lobby of sorts, with four elevators, two on each wall. As usual, I moved ahead.

There was a hiss.

I looked around.

The floor panel in front of me came loose and flew up. I raised my shotgun as an imp stuck its ugly face up and, using its claws, pushed its way out, followed by another. I started firing as a third imp started making its way into the room. The first imp had jumped at me and had received a buckshot in the stomach, taking it out completely. It was payback! The second imp had lunged at me just as the first was falling. I didn’t have time to reload, so I jumped sideways, trying to ready my shotgun for another shot. Meanwhile, the imp had landed where I had stood moments before and it stood there crouching. My shaking hands fumbled with the shotgun shell.

More imps started to pour out of the opening.

I threw the shotgun aside, exasperated, and pulled out the machinegun, firing crazily towards the imps screaming at the top of my lungs like a madman.

“Die, you bastards”

A hand grasped my shoulder and pulled me back. I fumbled, losing balance and started to fall back. The machinegun fell from my arm and landed on the floor, clattering loudly. I was breathing heavily, looking around...

What the hell was going on?

I struggled, trying to push myself back up, not wanting to be caught vulnerable. We were being attacked! Still struggling, I looked up and saw that it was Tim who had pulled me back. What the hell for? Was he crazy?

Anger rose again.

“What the hell are you doing? Let go! What are you doing you idiot?”

Tim didn’t say anything but rather, pinned me to the ground.

“Calm down,” he said, his worried-looking face hovering over me. I stopped resisting and he let me go.

“What’s going on?” I asked, looking around wearily, briskly picking up my machinegun again.

“Are you all right?” he asked me with an odd tone.

“Where did the bastards go?” I asked again, looking up at the ceiling. “They were all mine, why’d you have to stop me? What the hell is wrong with you? They were all mine! Why the fuck did you stop me? You could’ve gotten us both killed, you dumbass! Where did they go?”

“Calm down,” Tim repeated.

“What...” I trailed off, looking around again. Suddenly feeling tired and weak, I crawled to one of the walls and propped myself against it. Tim walked to the other wall and sat opposite of me.

“Are you all right?” he asked again, looking at me in an odd, almost frightened way. I looked sideways, avoiding this gaze.

“What do you mean? What’s going on?”

“I’ll tell you what I saw, and then you can tell me your story. OK?” he said in his calm, therapist voice. I nodded, and he continued. “We were walking, and suddenly you jumped and started shooting around and screaming. That’s all.”

I looked at him incredulously. “But there were imps. Several of them!”

“No there weren’t.”

“But, yes—how could there not have been? I saw them!”

Tim looked away. “Could it be that you imagined them?”

Imagined them? Me, imagine the imps? Well, that wasn’t hard to do, but it didn’t work like that. And besides, they had been so real, it couldn’t be, and it angered me that Tim would make such assumptions. I saw them! How could he not have seen them? He must be playing some sick joke. There was no other way, no other explanation. It was a lie, it couldn’t be...

“No!” I said, feeling annoyed. “I saw them, I’m sure they were there! I nailed one, then was going to get the others and you stopped me!”

“Nik, listen to me!” said Tim. “There was nothing there! You’re seeing things.”

“It couldn’t be—I am sure...”

“It was a hallucination. It’s OK, just calm down.”

“No, I’m sure it was—it had to be, I saw it—real, it really was... And they were there...” I pointed to the floor panel that had come loose, from which the imps had come. “There and...”

The panel was in its place.

“No...”

Could it be? Could I really be going mad? I had been angry before, but now as I had more energy, I got angry again. Damn it all! What the hell was going on? Was I really losing my sanity? What was next? No, it couldn’t be. But if it was, it was all religion’s fault! Damn it all, indeed! It was so real, it couldn’t possibly be fabricated by my mind, it couldn’t! Damn it all!

I rose up and, screaming as loud as I could, threw my shotgun at the wall with all of my might. It impacted loudly, knocking the wall panel out of its place and allowing it to fall down with a clatter. Feeling more anger creep into me, along with energy, I ran towards the wall and kicked it and several more panels fell out. I picked up the shotgun again and threw it down the hall, allowing it to disappear into darkness. Roaring again, though feeling fatigued, I punched the wall. I punched it again and again until several more panels fell down. My breath caught up with me and I felt myself gasping. Suddenly, pain rushed into my fists and my feet. Feeling tired again, I crumpled to the ground and crawled back against the wall.

All this time, Tim had been looking at me somewhat frightened, though under control.

A while passed in silence.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” I said softly, nodding. “Yeah, I’m good. Let’s go.”

I got up and followed Tim down the hall, where I picked up the shotgun I had tossed. The elevators had been knocked out, so we were forced to find a stairwell. I could hear yells and laughter still echoing across the halls. Would I become like them, a mad lunatic with no perception at all? I couldn’t, I wasn’t going to. Maybe it was too late, but I was to die before that. Soon, we’d reach the surface. Maybe some bigger monster, take it down, make a statement. That was it. I suppressed the fire that burned in me with that thought: soon, I’d have my chance. No point in throwing and bashing things anymore; soon I’d take out my anger on the first ass of a monster to cross my path. Only, I was seeing things, I had to be more careful now. But it was just once, I had been under severe mental pressure. I was at peace now, I was OK.

As we headed into another room and past the bathroom, something moved out of the corner of my eye.

I stopped.

“What is it?” asked Tim.

An imp was crawling along the ceiling, red eyes flashing, saliva dripping.

“Tim,” I said calmly as I could, pointing towards it. “Is there—is there a monster there?”

“No,” he said quietly.

I nodded. “Very well then, let’s go.”

Ignoring the leering demon, I walked on and Tim followed.

Soon, we entered a large open area that was a cafeteria of sorts. There were tables running the length of the room, with one end serving as a place to order. Circling around the perimeter of the food court, Tim and I made our way towards the other end. We weren’t certain where we were going, but were constantly on alert for any stairs that might lead upward. We had already taken one flight, and we would’ve continued up, but the stairwell had collapsed on itself above a certain point, so we were forced to find another one. As we had made our way, I couldn’t help but notice the distant human yells and mad laughs had grown louder. Fearing for a while that this time I was *hearing* things, I said nothing to Tim. So, I was really relieved when he stopped and said,

“Hear that? Sounds like they’re getting closer.”

I was just about to remark how grateful I was that he heard them too, when something flew through the air. I really didn’t have time to see what it was, but in our circumstances, when something is flying towards you, you want to avoid it at all costs. Turns out my judgement was right, for, as we jumped sideways, the place where we had stood erupted and a fireball rose into the humid air.

Tim pulled out his plasma rifle.

And then I saw something running behind the distant tables.

Was it real?

Well, it wasn’t an imp. It was a human, running and ducking behind the tables. I raised my shotgun and, crouching down, started walking in his direction.

Tim followed.

Circling around tables, we neared one of the four giant columns that stretched far above and held up the ceiling. Pausing behind it and gazing around to reassess our situation, I checked my shotgun. Taking a deep breath, Tim and I continued walking cautiously.

There was a loud laugh behind us.

As I spun around, I had a quick glimpse of a figure standing at the edge of the food court before I had to jump down on the ground to avoid rapid chaingun fire.

The person with the chaingun, who I saw to be a marine, started walking slowly between the tables, looking for us.

A rocket flew through the air and hit the chaingun marine, sending what remained of him flying high in the air, along with the billowing smoke. I traced the dissipating smoke trail and saw the marine that had initially fired at us standing at the other end, grasping a rocket launcher and chuckling softly to himself. It was an eerie sight. The marine lowered his weapon and screamed as loud as he could then started laughing and walking around.

“Got you, you goddamn spook!” he yelled.

I peeked at the carelessly strolling figure then ducked back down.

“Tim,” I whispered. “*These aren’t zombies!*”

“*I know,*” he said.

We sat there for a few minutes, unsure of what to do, periodically peeking above the table to determine where the crazy marine was.

“*Let’s get the hell out of here!*”

Tim leading the way, we started crawling in the opposite direction from the marine. We wanted to pass unnoticed. I had wanted to come across some bad guys so I could release some tension, but this was not it. Even though they were mad, killing each other for no reason, and roaming around, I still somehow felt partial to these marines. Besides, it was a waste of ammo to be spent on what was not really the enemy. I knew that we’d be forced into conflict, however, and this happened when I bumped into one of the tables. I had been looking over my shoulder at the roaming marine and hadn’t seen the misplaced chair. As I hit it, I cringed. *Damn it*, I thought. This kind of lame shit only happened in movies!

The marine’s head snapped in our direction.

“I see you!” he screamed in a drawling voice.

Not feeling the need to remain low and concealed anymore, Tim and I stood up, only to be greeted by a pair of rockets. Jumping sideways, we again escaped a fiery and messy death. Tables were sent high in the air by the explosion and, as they fell back down, proved to be as deadly as a rocket. Not having the time to roll again and avoid one such table, the best I could do was raise my hands. Fortunately, the table didn’t fall directly on me but scraped one of my elbows.

I had to end this.

Pulling out my machinegun, I charged towards the marine, jumping sideways to avoid another rocket. As I drew near enough to use the weapon effectively, I fired off a quick round as I bounded forward. The insane marine jumped, but he had been taken aback by all of the smoke raised by his own fire. So, I’d say he was quite surprised to see me flying out from the smoke.

Graceful as my act was, it had landed me in a bit of trouble. I found myself lying on the ground at the feet of a very pissed off, mad marine with a rocket launcher.

It appeared I had wounded him, but not too bad.

“Tag!” he screamed, turning the weapon on me. “You’re ‘it’ you son-of-a-bitch!”

The guy was freakin' nuts! He was about to shoot me point-blank with a damned rocket launcher!

I kicked the rocket launcher, forcing it up just as he fired. The rocket flew up and hit the ceiling, which naturally started to collapse. Insanity didn't seem to have given the marine any intelligence, and he stood there, gazing upwards, transfixed. I knew better, however, and sprinted towards Tim and the opening. Behind me, large cinder blocks and pieces from the roof started falling, landing on the food court and shattering tables and cracking the floor underneath. Soon, one of the columns cracked and fell down and the others followed. Dust rose in the air as more blocks fell. Metallic beams that had been supporting the roof bent and twisted and fell as well. As I ran towards Tim, I picked up the chaingun that the other insane marine had dropped. When I finally reached him, gazing uneasily upward to make sure the roof wasn't about to collapse on me, Tim and I made our way out of the room and soon only heard the loud crumbling of the giant room.

We shut the door behind us.

Looking briefly at my new weapon, I attached it to my belt, deciding that I'd save it for later when I'd really need it, and took out my machinegun, cringing as I looked at the dwindling ammo count.

The ground shook as we moved away, indicating that the roof still hadn't finished collapsing.

I could hear more maniacal laughing. Jesus, how many marines were here?

We had wandered into another large, open room, but I had little time to examine. As if things weren't messed up already, an odd glow appeared in front of us. Tim and I halted. An odd seal formed on the ground, a burning, glowing orange pentagram of sorts, that soon became searingly bright. Then, in the shimmering orange air above it, a dark form appeared, and it seemingly dropped from the sky. The seal faded away, revealing a giant beast. I had seen it in my dreams, and had named it a 'Baron of Hell.' It had that hunched-over form, with a large, muscular torso that was topped off with a thick neck. The head had a large, front dome, giving it an intelligent look, below which were contours of an unearthly skull. Deep in the grooves were two menacing, glowing eyes (a bright greenish-blue, almost white), between and slightly above which was the nostril. Underneath was the usual jaw with massive teeth, surrounded by the usual patches of blood. The creature raised one of its clawed arms.

It grinned.

"Tim..." I said, not looking away. "Tell me I'm seeing things again."

As the last of the fiery pentagram faded away, darkness settled in. There stood the Baron, a dark silhouette in the darkness. A short while passed (though it seemed like forever) where we eyed each other. The Baron's unnaturally white eyes passed over and examined us with mild curiosity. Then, as I watched, its facial skin tightened in a sickening form of a smile, revealing a toothy grin with fangs sticking in every direction. It raised its head and roared menacingly, swinging it from side to side, flinging saliva left and right, before turning to us. I lunged towards us, shaking the ground beneath it as it ran. Tim and I dove out of the way, waiting until the last second as to fool the beast. It ran past us and roared. Meanwhile, I raised my machinegun and managed to get a burst of fire in the monster's direction before I was forced to duck out of the way as it charged again. Jesus, it was like bullfighting! On a massive scale.

Tim had pulled out his plasma gun and soon, bursts of blue plasma streamed across the room. This seemed to be little more than an annoyance to the giant beast, however.

It charged forward and swiped its arm at Tim as he narrowly dodged it. The monster's momentum from the swing carried it to face me and it charged again. Firing my machinegun towards its face, I yet again made a dive that'd make any matador proud, narrowly avoiding the creature's club-like claws.

Meanwhile, Tim had started firing his plasma weapon at it again.

The creature was really pissed. It roared at us, then, looking down and sideways, picked up a large box that lay there and chucked it across the room at Tim with deadly force. Tim was forced to stop firing, rolling away from where the box shattered and fell to pieces. The monster thought this worthwhile and picked up another box, roaring, and threw it with uncanny might. This time, it was my turn to jump and roll sideways and away from the object.

"Tim!" I yelled over its anguished roars. "We should move on, we can't beat it!"

The problem was, the Baron of Hell was blocking the hallway through which we needed to proceed. An uninviting plan was forming in my mind. I ran towards the beast, dodging another crate, and stopping at a distance to provoke it to try and strike me with its claws again. Just like bullfighting! It worked and the creature's massive arm flew in my direction. I dove forward and sideways and thus made my way past the beast. I was still too close, however, and the monster spun around and took another swipe at me. Now, I was on the ground and not in a comfortable position to dodge deadly blows. Thankfully, blue plasma echoed across the air and hit the creature in the back, stopping its raised hand. The monster turned around.

Now it was Tim's turn to make it past.

As Tim charged towards the beast, however, it became evident that these Barons were not mindless monsters. It realised that it was about to be tricked the same way. So, as Tim ran towards it, the beast ran towards him. I suppose the image of seeing something so giant, frightening, and monstrous running towards you made Tim waver for a bit. As I watched helplessly, Tim dove down, but the creature had anticipated this and was ready to strike him on the ground.

I ran towards the Baron, pulling out my shotgun. I got close enough so that my shotgun would render significant damage, and fired a round. The beast stopped, raised its

head, and roared in its rage. Forgetting about Tim, who was at its feet, it turned towards me. And this way, a new feeling of panic ran through me as I realised that damned thing was going to trample Tim on its way towards me. So, to keep it from running towards me, I moved forward, firing off more shots as I went. Tim, meanwhile, managed to get up and run past the creature.

“Come on!”

Turning around, I followed Tim as we sprinted as fast as we could, away from the unholy beast. It roared behind us and the ground shook as it ran after us. I didn’t dare look back, for I feared what I’d see.

Ahead was a stairwell that led straight up. The ceiling there was low, too low for the monster to cross. The creature had teleported inside the structure, and had thus trapped itself inside it for none of the exits were made big enough for something of such stature to pass. Without looking back, Tim and I charged up the stairs. This didn’t seem to please the beast, because soon I heard crashes and other such sounds behind us. Finally gazing back, I saw the Baron of Hell ripping apart what he could, pounding the walls and ceiling, pulling hissing pipes from the walls and twisting them and throwing them in our direction. It roared a last time as we finally reached the top of the stairwell and continued to make our way through the darkness.

* * *

There, as we listened to the dying sounds of the receding Baron, we stopped to rest for a bit. I had seen that monster before, in my dream. Tim hadn’t and seemed a bit shocked. Hell, if I’d just seen it for the first time, I’d be shocked too. Shocked like that tank-monstrosity we had fought outside. Breathing heavily, I tried not to dwell in these thoughts. And then I realised that I had, in a sense, failed myself. After all, I had said that I’d get the next bastard I run across, that I’d take them down. But what had we done? We had run away, past the fleeting beast. And it had all been mine idea! What an idiot I was! Where was my sense? Feeling anguish at the monster, anguish at myself, rising, I picked up my shotgun and started to run back down the stairs.

Tim grabbed my hand and pulled me back.

I tried to wrestle away. “Let me go! I have to finish this!”

“No,” said Tim. “You’re gonna get yourself killed for nothing. Where’s your sense gone?”

“Let go you son of a bitch!”

After making ineffectual attempts to break away from his grip, I turned around and nailed him in the stomach with the butt of my shotgun. He exhaled steeply, but didn’t let go and instead, knocked me down on the ground.

I tried to trip him, but kicked his shin instead.

“Damn you! Let go!”

Tim pinned me to the ground again.

“Calm down,” he said. “You’re not being rational again. Calm down, and you’ll realise that you’re being an idiot.”

Maybe he was right. Maybe I was being senseless, but I had failed myself! And that’s what mattered. It was all pointless, so why not go down and take one the big ones down with me, a Baron of Hell. It made sense, but who knows? Maybe I would have a

higher purpose, maybe I would do a lot more than simply take down a Baron. Maybe there was a way to deal a lot more damage to hell. Then again, maybe not. Perhaps I was being an idiot, ignorant. I hated myself, and I hated what I'd become. Tim was right, though I was gonna go down fighting, which is what I wanted to do, I couldn't go about and do it senselessly.

Feeling finally calm, I saw something move and looked past Tim, at the ceiling above us. It was an imp, crawling stealthily, and it was right above us!

"Tim!"

As I raised my machinegun, Tim looked surprised and jumped away, just as I fired off a round at the imp. Something hard landed against my hand, however, knocking my machinegun away. I looked sideways and realised it was Tim's boot; he had kicked it out of my hand. I looked at him in surprise and crawled away from him, twisting around to look at the imp, which had jumped down from the ceiling to avoid the gunfire and was bent low, slyly stalking us.

Was Tim crazy?

"Tim, what are you—" I paused, with realisation hanging over me. "There's nothing really there, is there?" I asked quietly.

"No."

He had that same worried expression on his face that I'd been seeing for a while now, and it sickened me. Looking away, I pushed myself up and, breathing heavily, I started making my way down the corridor.

"Let's go," I said as I went, walking past the gleeful imp.

We weren't making good progress. According to our watches, night-time was already setting in. We were tired, and it became evident that yet again we'd have to find someplace to rest and eat. After taking care of business (read: bathroom) on one of the walls, we set out to find a proper room where we could seek shelter. It became evident that things were really active around us, however. Soon, there were sounds coming from everywhere: animalistic screeches, thundering roars, inhuman groans, and the occasional maniacal laugh coming from, no doubt, one of the deranged marines. And so, wondering what had become of Carson, we continued walking until, at last, we found a tiny maintenance closet that seemed rather safe and unimpressive to the passing monster, and so it would serve as good shelter.

Tim and I barricaded ourselves in and ensued in preparing something to eat out of our dwindling MRE supplies.

"What do you think?" asked Tim. "What happens when we get topside?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I suppose we head towards the centre of this thing. I don't know if the soulcube is supposed to be there. If it's not there, I don't know where it could be. But hell, I expect something there, at the centre. Maybe some leader, some big monster. If not anything else, we could take that down. That'd be an accomplishment, or at least something, worthwhile."

I felt an eerie sense of déjà vu as I spoke.

"Yeah. But how's this soulcube thing suppose to work, anyway?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Nobody really knows. Reinhold told me that all that the records left behind say is that it stopped the invasion. I guess it somehow seals all connections to our universe or something."

"Does it kill all the monsters?"

"Maybe," I said. "Or maybe all of the demons in our universe. Or maybe not. I don't know. That'd still be quite a victory, though."

"Yeah," he said between bites of nachos. "See, good thing I stopped you from going back and fighting that big monster."

I nodded.

"The way I see it," he continued. "We kill all these demons, maybe with this soulcube thing. If it exists, that is. Then we make our way back, celebrate. Get awarded with some medals, buy a nice place somewhere. You know, live it up."

Somehow, these thoughts of things that I was certain would never come true made me feel depressed. I knew it wasn't going to happen. The odds were too far against us. I decided to play along, maybe try to get immersed in the conversation. I wanted to get away from this horrible reality.

"Where would you buy a house?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe Florida, Malibu. Maybe something on the West Coast, I'm not sure."

"Why the hell would you want to buy something in Florida?"

"Why not?"

I laughed. "Come on! I mean, we're in hell right now, why'd you want to go back?"

Tim laughed.

“Boring landscape, too hot, nothing to do, and that feeling you get when people too old to drive start closing in on you from all sides.”

“Fine,” said Tim, laughing. “If you’re such a smartass, where would you buy a place to hang out?”

I shrugged. “Someplace cold. Somewhere in the mountains. You know, maybe the Rockies. Hell, I’d go to Nepal, but it’s a bit too far off. Yeah, that’d be good. I don’t think I’d want a house there, though. It’d be nice. Maybe try to scale Everest.”

“Everest?”

“Sure, why not? I mean, I’d like to try and challenge myself in a way where death doesn’t mean getting your intestines ripped out by a demon.”

He looked at me oddly. “So you’re convinced these things are demons?”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “Don’t you?”

“It scares me to think so. For me, they’re just monsters. They bleed, they die. That’s all I need to know.”

“Well,” I said, taking another bite. “That’s good philosophy.”

We finished eating and Tim volunteered to take the first shift, then we’d rotate. Feeling oddly full, I went to sleep. And for once, I didn’t dream of demons or monsters or hell, but rather, of snow-capped, icy mountains, stretching as far as the eye could see. And there I saw myself, scaling a peak. I was almost at the top. With thousands of metres below me, I could see myself, feet ineffectually pushing snow away before finally finding hold, which allowed me to get up higher until finally, with a final heave, I found myself there at the top. Everything seemed so far below me, everything was unimportant. It was a feeling of accomplishment, of conquering a challenge. It was pure, crystalline, and yet distant.

But then something happened. I slipped and fell and hugged the rock around me and realised the snow was melting away. I looked up and saw the sky turning a deep, red colour, with swirling patterns about. Around me, the terrain transformed, twisting and turning like a sea of rock. Peaks grew and became sharp like daggers. The air became hot and humid and hard to breathe. I looked about me and knew it was another damned hell dream. Somewhere ahead, I heard the unmistakable sounds of a battle. But I had little time to complain, for I heard a distant screaming. It was coming from behind me. Turning about, I could hear it more clearly, a pulsating chime of millions of human screams. And as I looked, there was the sea—

The rock beneath me crumbled and I started to fall.

With that, my dream transformed from a hell dream to one of those annoying dreams where you dream you’re falling and wake up and jump.

I jumped awake and looked about me.

Lying on the ground, still and quiet, my eyes fell to the door of the closet where we were camping. I felt fear creep into me, though no surprise at all, as I saw that it was wide open. But you probably already figured that out. With that uneasy sense of *déjà vu*, my heart quickened. But then something moved and I decided it would be best not to move at all. And so I lay there, still, trying to figure out what was going on. As my eyes, the only part of me I dared move, fell across, I saw Tim on the other side of the room, apparently asleep. But then, something moved between us.

A pair of grey human feet shuffled in front of me. They were centimetres from me; their putrid smell was overwhelming.

Wheezing softly in the darkness, hovering over us, was a zombie.

Moving as little as I could, I edged my hand towards my shotgun and grasped it firmly, ready for a sudden, decisive action.

The zombie seemed to be having trouble deciding whom to go for first. I was hoping it would choose Tim. Then I'd have time to jump up and blow the bastard away. In fact, an entire plan had drawn itself out in my mind. This was all crushed, however, as the zombie started stumbling towards me. Trying to formulate something new to do, I gazed at the oncoming zombie. In the near darkness, I could see its malicious, white glowing eyes and its inhuman fangs, sticking unevenly out of its bloodstained mouth. The manner in which it moved silently, its slow deliberate movements made a chill run up my spine. As it started bending towards me, jaws flashing and saliva dripping on my shoulder, I wondered what would've happened if I hadn't woken up. No time for that, however. I had to do something!

I spun around on my back and shoved the shotgun in its open, masticating mouth.

The zombie, surprised, jumped back while swiping me with one of its arms. It wasn't fast enough, however, and its head was soon off its shoulders and all over the walls.

That woke Tim up.

"What the hell is going on?" he asked wildly, jumping to his feet.

I shut the closet door.

"Damn it, Tim! This dozing off has to stop!"

But I didn't have the chance to accept his apologies, for, at that instant, Tim flew straight up in the air. Because of my surprise, I was left standing there, wondering what to do. As my eyes followed Tim, who was hanging limply from the ceiling, I saw an imp there. The roof panel had been worked loose and it was standing there, grinning slyly, half of it hidden behind the opening in the roof. Feeling helpless, I watched in horror as the imp dragged the unconscious Tim away and into darkness. I raised my shotgun, but didn't want to fire for fear of hitting Tim. So, with trembling hands, I fumbled for my flashlight and, when I finally found and lit it, shone it up into the opening. The imp and Tim were nowhere to be seen.

Feeling helpless, I looked around. I knew I couldn't stay there, I had to leave.

And it was from then on that I walked into a new nightmare.

As I recalled in my dream, Tim had (or whoever that was) had died, too. It was almost like a forewarning of what had just happened. But I had been in hell and he had reappeared there. But we were on Earth. Oddly, all of the recent happenings made me feel somewhat better in regard to Tim's demise, for, if there was a hell, surely there was a heaven, and that's surely where he had gone. But it didn't in any way help my situation. I was still left behind in hell, now left to myself. How long would I last without Tim? Until then, I hadn't realised what an important role he played. He restrained me from being rash and getting myself killed and he sorted out the damned imps I was seeing everywhere. And I had helped him, formulated many plans, led the way a few times. It was because we worked together that we had gotten as far as we did. Maybe that's why the marines in my dream had gotten so far.

But now, he was gone and I found myself in a hopeless situation. I could still see him, unconsciously being dragged away, probably never to wake up. Or to wake up to some horror. It was as if, when that imp had grabbed him and pulled him up and away into the roof, it had pulled away all hope along with it. I felt dizzy, and yet my surroundings felt all-too-sharp and real. Anger continued to burn inside me. Anger at what had happened to Tim, anger at everything. It was all too much to handle. I wanted to take a break, to sit down and think, like Tim and I had done after Tyler's death. But we had wasted so much time already, I knew that I couldn't do that. I knew I had to move on. And so I walked on.

As I walked out, I was greeted by the usual lunatic yells.

Trying to keep steady and keep emotions at bay, I walked down the corridor, fighting tears and inner anguish. I was walking fast, almost running, feeling hatred slowly rise. I rounded the corner, still running. I didn't care. I didn't look to see if there were monsters around each bend, if there were imps crawling on the ceiling. It didn't matter; they were going to make the first move. And as soon as one of the bastards tried to touch me, I was going to beat it back down to hell.

I took a left and entered a wider corridor, with a second story above that was in the form of catwalks running along the edges, with a high ceiling above. On both levels, there were doors and windows lining the sides.

A few meters ahead, I saw a zombie, which was dragging something human-shaped and rather bloody.

I charged silently and, not bothering to make proper use of my shotgun, used its butt to beat the zombie as hard as I could. It was a real release of anger. Over and over I beat the damned monster from behind until its neck broke with a sickening snap and it fell to the ground. Fearing a bit that it might get up, but mostly feeling that it hadn't had enough, I continued to smack it until I realised I had tired myself and was breathing rather hard.

Pulling myself to my feet and panting, I continued down the hall.

As I neared the end, I heard something shift, moments before a shot ran out through the air. I instinctively ducked down and searched for the source of the shot. Something moved out of the corner of my eye, and I turned. It was on the second level. Edging slowly and wearily towards the corridor's end, I kept my eyes fixed on that spot. For a second, I thought I was seeing things again, when a black for rose from behind the

second level railing. It was one of the insane marines. His face was hidden behind a helmet, thick armour giving him a bulky edge, with his hands closed around what looked like a machinegun.

He raised the gun and fired a quick burst.

I dodged sideways and pulled out my own machinegun; he was too far away to nail me with the shotgun.

As I did this, I was keeping my eyes on the spot where he had disappeared. But suddenly, gunfire came from my right and I realised that he had crawled to another spot, across one of the bridges joining the two sides of the corridor. Feeling annoyed and not wanting to deal with this, I fired in his direction and, using the time I rendered with him not daring to look up, I made my escape through the doors at the end and into the darkness beyond. There, I paused, breathing heavily and fearing that he might pursue me, and took out my flashlight. I was back in tighter corridors, so replaced my machinegun and pulled out my trusty shotgun.

Something moved across my flashlight's beam.

There was a maniacal laughter behind me.

My flashlight beam danced across the room, trying to find what had just moved. I stopped moving and breathing and, for a second, I could hear quiet, raspy breathing coming from my left. I moved my flashlight in this direction and saw something crouching low in one the dark corners. There was a click. And as I looked closer, I saw it was another helmeted marine. Behind the helmet, he seemed to be looking straight at me while he reloaded his shotgun silently as he could.

I fired as he jumped sideways, but I had the advantage. I fired at his chest and, not bothering to see if I had fully finished him, I moved on, charging down the hall.

It didn't matter, for ahead, I saw stairs, beyond which came warped daylight.

Upon reaching the foot of the stairs, it became evident that daylight had changed. Overhead were grey clouds similar to the ones in Berlin, and yet, they were darker, with patches of burning red glowing between them, with tapering edges of swirling black. The reddish glow in the clouds was really not reassuring. Something was falling from the sky, and as I looked closer, I saw that it was ash. With that, I began to slowly ascend the stairs, slowly taking in the surreal environment. The air was hot and humid and alight with distant sounds, like the ones I had heard during the night in Berlin, and yet it wasn't nighttime. Lightning crackled overhead in wicked shapes that tapered in the sky. A wind was blowing heavily. As I neared the end of the stairs, I began to see the wreckage of Vienna. It seemed more flattened than Berlin; between the fallen beams and crumbled walls, it all seemed oddly even, with the occasional metre-high block. Finally reaching the top, I gazed ahead and saw that these ruins stretched to the horizon, where they met with the deep-red sky.

I paused at the top for a second, gazing around me. It looked as if I was in the outskirts, for Tim had said it'd be twenty kilometres. Of course, we had walked quite a bit underground, this could've very well taken off five or six kilometres, depending on how big the underground installation was. Regardless, I had to walk south for a long while. Consulting my PDA for directions, I started walking south, over the rubble and remains of Vienna. Overhead, thunder rumbled, and as I drew nearer to the epicentre, it became more frequent. Soon, the red sky was alight with lightning almost constantly going off. I became glad that I had my helmet, for my Geiger counter was reading some massive radiation. Also, I suppose all of the ash floating around wouldn't have been too kind with my lungs.

I don't know how long I walked like that. It must've been a good twenty minutes, when, over the loud thunder and whistling wind, I heard the rubble behind me shift and fall. I turned around and saw a human figure stumbling towards me, a marine, gun in one hand. For a second, I thought it might be Tim, but it soon became evident that it was one of the marines gone insane, for he raised his shotgun at me as he moved forward. I raised my own and threw myself sideways to avoid the flying lead. I landed behind a large beam and started crawling as the marine came near. I paused and, over me, the marine helmet bent over, looking over the beam and straight at me.

A moment passed before I raised my shotgun sharply and tried to point it at the marine, but he knocked it away. Feeling desperate, I considered pulling out my machinegun, but found I had other priorities, for the marine was about to point his shotgun straight at me. So, I kicked him in the face, sending him flying backwards, and I reached for my shotgun.

The marine had recovered and charged at me.

I grasped the barrel of my shotgun and, using it like a bat, swung it at his face. It was, horribly stupid pun intended, a home run. His facemask had taken quite a beating and it cracked. I swung again, knocking shards away from his face, until he fell back. He sat on the ground for a bit, without a helmet anymore, wild face covered in blood and eyes flashing wildly, before he started choking and coughing. I moved back as the marine vomited then, bent over, and fell to his side, limp and evidently dead.

Wow, I guess it really was a good idea to keep your helmet on. The marine had lost his helmet and had died in a few seconds.

I moved forward to salvage any available supplies or ammunition from the marine when I realised something. Beneath all the blood was the face of Carson; it was Carson who I had just killed. My heart stopped. I hadn't identified him at first for, when his facemask had come off, I had battered his face and it was covered in blood. Also, his face was more sunken and had changed even more since the last time I had seen him, when he was laughing wildly after he had shot Tyler. I felt pain, thinking back to the jokes we had made together, back to the days of boot camp. And yet, he had shot Tyler. At that point, Carson had become dead to me and had become little more than a monster. I had killed a monster. And, I had in a sense avenged my good friend Tyler. And yet, Carson was more than just another foe, and seeing him lying there dead was difficult.

That was an understatement. It was almost overwhelming.

I collapsed next to his body, fighting conflicting thoughts and emotions. I had every right to grieve him, but I knew that I shouldn't feel guilty. And yet, I couldn't fend off the fleeting feeling of culpability, it was only natural. Carson had been a good friend. He had died long before now, back when we had gotten off the train, but now I had finished him off. He was no more.

And with that came a sea of grief, for I realised that between all of my friends, I was the only one left alive.

I wept inside my helmet.

But I had to move on. Soon, I'd join him. It was going to be over soon.

I pushed myself up and, trying to clear the tears from my eyes, I started to walk away, stumbling over the wreckage of the past.

From behind me came a yell.

I spun around and saw a human figure running towards me. It was wearing marine armour. Thus, I raised my shotgun and braced myself for another fight that might ensue. I guess it was a two-for-one kind of deal. How much more was I to take?

As the figure neared me, it saw my shotgun and stopped, raising its hands in the air in a sign of peace.

What the hell was going on?

"Nik?" said the figure.

I looked at the man standing there blankly.

"It's Tim," he said. "What are you doing?"

"No," I said, lowering my shotgun and backing away. "No, it can't be. I saw you die, you were dragged away..."

"What are you talking about?" asked Tim. Though his face was hidden by his helmet, I was sure he was looking at me crossly.

What the hell was going on? The imp had dragged him away, there was no way he had survived. Something like this had happened to the marines in my dream, but this was different, there was no way he could've come back from the dead, no way he could've escaped. Was this a trick? Was he zombified or was his mind modified in some way so that he'd be used as a weapon? Maybe he was pretending to be Tim, only to take advantage of me and kill me whenever opportunity first struck—

"What are you doing?" Tim asked me.

“What the hell are *you* doing?” I asked. “You’re dead. You’re one of them, I know it!”

He lowered his hands. “Do you hear yourself?”

“Tim, there’s now way that you... That you’ve survived.”

“Survived what?”

I was feeling hot. What the hell was going on? I was tired of this bullshit, I needed answers.

“Tim, would you *please* tell me what the *hell is going on?*”

He paused, examining me. “All I know is that I dozed off. I’m sorry. But then, when I woke up, the door was open, you were gone, and all of my weapons were gone. I didn’t know what the hell was going on. I started to move out, when I heard gunfire in the distance and I knew it was you. I just followed you here. So there you go, that’s what happened. Now tell me why you walked off and left me alone and took all my weapons. Go on, your turn.”

Needless to say, I was speechless.

“I, uh... I saw you die. There was a zombie when I woke up. And, umm, I killed it. Then you were awake and asked me what was going on, but then an imp descended from the ceiling and took you away. So I salvaged the weapons you left behind and left. It doesn’t make sense”

Tim was silent.

“You’re not Tim,” I repeated. “You can’t be!” I raised my shotgun.

Tim put his hands up in the air again. “Whoa, be careful with that. Don’t do something you’ll regret.”

Jesus, I thought. Tim was talking to me like I was mad!

“Shut up!” I screamed. “I know what you are! Do you think I’m that stupid! You sick fools, trying to take advantage of me, to use my own friend against me! You’re sick, you’re all fucking sick!”

“Calm down,” said Tim.

“No, I will not! Go away! I don’t want to shoot you! I know you’re not real, I’m either seeing things or you’re one of them! Go away!”

Breathing heavily, I looked around me, then back at Tim.

“Nik,” said Tim quietly.

“Don’t call me that,” I said. “You have no right to call me that, damn it!”

“Nik,” he repeated. “I think I know what’s going on. If you would just calm down and listen—”

“No, go away, I can’t take this anymore!”

“Just listen...”

Tim moved towards me. I raised my shotgun again and he halted.

“You’re right, you’re seeing things. But I’m real! I am! I think I know what happened. You had another vision. You saw things that weren’t there. You think you saw me die, but you didn’t. It was all in your head. In a sense, you sleepwalked out of that room. You took all the weapons. My death was all in your mind! The imp was in your mind, it was all not real. You see them all the time, I know. You see them, and this time these imaginary monsters did something to an imaginary me. It was a hallucination. You walked off thinking I was dead. But it’s good, now that I found you—”

“No, that’s not true! It can’t be.”

“Why not?” asked Tim. “Why can’t it be true? You saw those imps before. You were convinced they were real. Convinced enough to shoot them.”

“No...”

“How is it not possible that you thought you saw me die? You were convinced that I died and that it was real. And that you took action.”

Could it be? It was possible, but a hallucination taken to such an extent... I was really mad if it was true, I was crazy! If it was true, I had almost gotten Tim killed! What a fool I would be! But it couldn’t be true, and yet, why not? As I thought about it silently, looking at the ground, I thought, why not? It was possible. Then again, it was possible that I was seeing things right now, and that Tim was the hallucination and his death wasn’t so.

“How do I know you’re real?”

Tim said nothing for a while.

“I don’t know, you’ll have to trust me.”

Something caught my throat and I fought tears again. “Tim, I’m sorry. I almost got you killed! I’m so sorry, but I couldn’t do anything. I was sure it was real. If I had known, well... I’m really going crazy Tim. It’s like... like I’m lost in a maze of doorways, you know. And I can’t tell which doors are real. Everything looks like it! What am I to do? I’m so sorry...”

“It’s OK,” he said. “Listen, it’s behind us. Just stick close to me.”

I nodded.

“Do you mind giving me my weapons back? Or at least, something to shoot with?”

I tossed him his old weapons. Meanwhile, he pulled out something giant and black, a monstrous weapon that I had in fact seen before.

“Like it?” he asked, surely grinning under his helmet. “I salvaged it, it’s a rocket launcher.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” I said, feeling considerably better.

“What’s this?” asked Tim. I followed his gaze and saw that he was bent over the dead Carson. I said nothing for a while, allowing the wind to howl and thinking what to say, but finding it difficult.

“So he’s real, huh?” I said.

Tim nodded.

“It’s Carson. He attacked me here, we fought. I didn’t know it was him.”

Tim stood up.

“Come on,” I said, trying to sound cheerful. “I don’t care if you’re real or not, make yourself useful and lead the way.”

I didn't know what was real anymore. Was any of what I saw true or was it all in my mind? Nothing made sense, and I began to live in an altered reality. I didn't know what was real or what was not, but I vowed to take it all as true, for ignoring something as believing it was false could lead to my downfall. Tim, whether he was really there or just in my mind, still proved to be invaluable in providing answers as to whether a monster was really there or not. Many times I found myself walking by the imps generated by my mind. And this made it a supremely difficult struggle. As if reality wasn't bad enough already, now I had to find demons in my own head as well. I couldn't wait to end it, but I knew that we had to continue. We were going to go down fighting; there was still one battle left to be fought.

As Tim and I continued to make our way over the rubble, little happened over the next ten kilometres. Gusts of warm wind blew ash around. Everything became more hazy and it was difficult to see more than twenty metres ahead because of the ash that hung like a mist over the ground, constantly twisting and churning with the moving wind. And it was this wind that howled so loudly, I could hear little more. It made our walk a lot more difficult. Light lessened and the sky darkened, allowing the reddish hue in the clouds to become more noticeable. Everything darkened. It really was becoming a Hell on Earth. We couldn't stop it, and it only made me feel more desperate. Then again, if only we could find this soulcube...

The ground was thoroughly unstable. Various rocks and beams shook as I stepped over them. It wasn't too reassuring. That, and I could've sworn I saw stuff move in the darkness below the rubble, but I said nothing for fear it was another vision. Soon enough, however, Tim paused and raised his finger in the air. Indeed, I could hear skittering sounds coming from below. It was oddly loud, slightly audible over the howl of the wind. Then Tim's eyes fell down, and I followed his gaze. That was the sign that apparently, I wasn't seeing things, there really were some sort of creatures moving in the darkness below. A while passed in silence and stillness before, several things jumped out from the cracks below and rushed up at us. Tim recoiled in fear and surprise, but I didn't. I had seen these monstrosities before.

It was those nasty human heads, thoroughly different from the time when they had actually been attached to a body, turned upside down with three pairs of bony legs sprouting from the skull. The human heads, with their black, empty eyes, were turned upside down in a way such that their giant, enlarged mouth with its massive jaws and pin-like fangs was positioned in the most effectual way to bite people like Tim and I. Four or five of the nasty spider-monsters scuttled out of cracks in the ground and rushed towards us. I lunged forward to a beam I saw ahead of me to buy me some space between the monsters. When I landed, I turned back to see one of the ugly bastards sailing through the air towards me. It never really finished the jump, all thanks to my shotgun.

Tim, meanwhile, was left behind and was fending off two of the things at once. I didn't dare shoot in his direction for fear of hitting him, so I made my way over the wreckage to close in and maybe draw at least one of them away from Tim. Meanwhile, three or four (who's counting?) more skittered out of the ground and started attacking us. I made a long jump and landed on a shaky beam. Fighting for balance, my hands flailed in the air, moments before I found it. I made another jump on what looked like a sturdy

piece of rubble. Sad to say, I was wrong. As I landed on it, there was a crackling sound and the debris beneath my feet cracked and started falling into darkness below. Luckily, my hands found another beam to hold on to and I soon found myself hanging over darkness.

“Tim!” I called out.

I was hanging on over the darkness and could see little beyond. But then, over the edge to which I clung, a shape formed and I saw one of the spider demons hanging right over my hands. My heart stopped. I had never before been so close to one of the damn things, and I think I can safely say that it wasn’t too pleasant. If the things were ugly from afar, I don’t think there’s a word to describe how they looked from up close. ‘Hideous’ doesn’t quite come close. Their pale, greyish skin was so close, I could see all the bumps and pores on it. Its black, unblinking eyes flashed maliciously. I could see clumps of silvery saliva coming off the teeth that pointed in all directions. I could see the blood around its fangs and inside the dark-red depths of its throat. Hell, I could smell its breath.

Knowing I’d have to do something, I let go with one hand and found myself hanging on with only my left hand.

The spider lunged forward at me. As it did, I reached up with my right hand and grabbed one of its bony legs and, using the creature’s momentum, threw the monster behind me. The beast fell away from me and into the darkness beyond. I couldn’t help but chuckle at my own cleverness. All chuckling was cut short, however, as I heard a crack and had that uneasy feeling that it was coming from the rock supporting the metallic beam to which I hung. Generally, crumbling noises coming at situations like the one I was in were not to be taken lightly. Feeling panicky again, I reached up, trying to pull myself out of the pit, but as I did, I heard another crumbling sound and the beam to which I hung dipped down towards the abyss.

Oh crap.

“Tim, damn it!”

But there was no answer. I only heard gunfire, which told me that Tim was busy at the moment.

Crack!

It was one of the moments that you have just enough time to say, ‘Oh crap!’ before everything goes to hell. Loose rock started falling as a crack formed between the rock supporting my beam and the rest of the ruins formed. I started to fall along with the beam. My hands scrambled, looking for something else to hold on to, but there was just empty air. As I fell, I tried to push myself away from the beam. I didn’t want to be crushed by the damned thing. And just when I wondered how long I was going to fall, I felt hard ground meet up with my back. Hoping various internal organs hadn’t been knocked out of their place, I gasped for air and pushed myself up. The beam and rock had fallen besides me with a loud shattering crash. Lots of dust had been kicked up by that fall. Coughing, I pushed myself up.

As I looked up, I saw that the opening through which I had fallen, the only source of light, wasn’t too far above. It was just out of reach.

Cursing, I fumbled for my flashlight.

I guess that, although the ceiling wasn’t too high, the underground opening I had fallen into was still fairly large. I judged this by the echoing skittering sounds of tiny, inhuman feet moving about.

Damn! I guess this is where all of those spider things were coming from. Things weren't looking too good.

Something moved.

As if I didn't see this one coming. I felt more irritated than surprised or shocked when something giant and *spiderish* skittered out from the darkness. It was like a giant spider, with eight legs moving swiftly, joined heavily to a massive body, from the top of which, to my surprise, rose a female torso with two unusually long hands with spider-like qualities (naturally) and a head that sharpened at the back that might've been human save for the translucent skin over the brain and the six pairs of eyes scattered about. It crawled towards me, hissing, and raised its arms. I noticed the rather large abdomen behind it and started to wonder if this thing was making all those little spiders. Knowing that, I did nothing but stare; I was tired of dealing with such crap. I didn't feel like fighting another big monster unless it was the last one, and I knew this was just a detour, or rather, a hassle. I smirked at the grotesque spider-queen and waited.

Hell seemed to really like spiders.

Suddenly, something flew from above and a massive cloud of fire and debris filled the air between the spider and I. More things fell from above, setting off explosions in succession that danced across the ground and shook the entire cavern. Rubble fell as more went off, before stopping. As the smoke cleared, I saw nothing but spider goo left. Holy crap, what was that? My eyes fell up, where I saw Tim standing on a ledge overlooking the cavern, holding what looked like grenades. He looked at me and back, with what looked like lack of interest, before smiling in triumph. Still speechless by the suddenness of what had just happened, I walked towards him until I was under his ledge. I paused, gazing up.

"Holy shit, Tim!"

"What?"

I motioned towards the rubble and spider mush.

"Is there a problem?"

"Do you think? None at all, why can't you always pull stunts like this. Hell, we could've been through and done with things thing by now."

"Oh, I pulled these out of the ground after you left me. I was saving them for an appropriate occasion." He paused and motioned around. "I'd say this qualifies."

I nodded, grinning. "Come on, get me out of here."

After Tim pulled me out of that hole, we walked for a while in uneventful silence. We did come across another monster on our way. The encounter went as follows: outlined in the greyish ash ahead, we saw something floating over the ground, and indefinite shape. Not willing to trust in my mind, I asked Tim to see if he saw it too. I had been worried it was some monster or something in my mind, but when he said it was real, it only made me feel more worried.

What now?

It moved about, gently gliding along the ruins, almost like it was scavenging.

We raised our weapons.

The form stopped moving and, were it indeed something living, I was certain that at that point it was looking at us.

A deep, reddish orange glow appeared on the form, moments before something shot out towards us. Tim and I ducked in time to see another twisted creation I had seen before. It was like one of those monsters in my dream, where they were like a human head that flew around. It was rather skull-like, and it was absent of any mechanical parts. It zoomed about, sharp, needle-like teeth that pointed in all directions snapping like mad. Its eyes glowed in the hazy surroundings, eerily so. Feeling like I didn't want to look at it anymore, I raised my shotgun. It was like Tim and I had choreographed it; it was complete synchronisation as two shotgun blasts went off, ripping the tiny monster in several directions and pulling it apart.

The dark form ahead glowed again and another flying head zoomed towards us.

Alright, obviously we had to take that dark blot down. Tim dealt with the new flying-head-monster, while I dodged ahead towards the dark form.

As I drew near, it became evident that it really was a monster. As the haze between the two of us lessened, I could see it was a more or less round freak show of a monster. Its skin was dark brownish hue with what looked like boils covering the skin; bumps and various crevices lined its surface, contorting around the giant, teeth-lined mouth that stretched to its sides, giving it the look of a giant, grinning ball. Above the mouth was a series of dark, black, eerily empty eyes running more or less along a line with the largest being in the centre. From behind, odd appendages that looked like spiky arms hung down, flexing in the wind. As I watched, it widened its ever-open mouth and a dark glow arose from its depths. Knowing what was coming a moment before it happened, I ducked down just as another one of the flying heads zoomed out of its mouth.

The big brown monster was my priority. So, fending off this beast with the butt of my shotgun, and allowing Tim to deal with it, I fired off a blast at the big brown mass. My gun's buckshot spread out in a nasty way across its sickening flesh. Let's just say it got messy, and the damned thing wasn't even dead yet.

I was too close got a bit of flying-head teeth before wielding my shotgun as a bat and setting a new home-run record with the flying head.

This gave me another second to fire off another shot at the nasty looking monster that was spawning all of the flying heads.

One more shot later, it was all over. And, well, let's just say it didn't even have time to say, 'Ow.' It was rather messy, but I think I'd like to stay out of the details on this one. Use your imagination.

For a fleeting second, I thought I saw something moving on the ground behind me, but after deciding it was of no danger to me or Tim, we went on.

Stepping over brown monster goo, Tim and I continued to make our way.

A gentle rain had started falling along with the ash in a sort of muddy, grey rain. The metallic and concrete ruins underfoot became slippery and rather dangerous and slippery with its coating of ash and rain. All below was turned to mud and everything became a shade of grey. Walls of this grey matter were flung about the air along with the wind and visibility dropped noticeably. My eyes fell down to the wreckage below and I thought I saw something red and fleshy between the blocks, in the darkness, but I continued walking. The way I figured it, I was seeing things. But then, as I hiked over the rubble, my foot caught something, and as I looked down, I saw that it was a human hand sticking up from the ruins.

I paused and looked down at it. And to its left, I could see two more.

Tim was looking at me curiously.

Not looking away from the hand, I said, "There really isn't anything there, is there? I'm seeing things again."

He nodded.

To my left, a group of imps was crawling towards me, gliding elegantly over the uneven landscape. Were they real? I asked myself. They looked so real, their glistening black exoskeleton, their fangs with the dripping saliva. The way the grey water fell on them and ran down. I could see it, running along the uneven, rough surface and filtering down and falling on the ground below. Could my mind really create something with this much detail? It was incomprehensible. I really was mad. Nothing was what it seemed, and it was driving me only more insane. I looked back at the grey hands and noticed the same degree of detail; the dirt under the fingernails, the patches of grime.

My eyes fell back to the imps.

"What about there?" I asked, pointing at them.

Tim shook his head again and turned away.

But then I saw something else, underneath the wreckage. It was almost as if the hands were markers, guiding my gaze underneath. I bent down on the ground and stretched my arm to reach it. Feeling my fingers grasp its edge, I pulled on the object and found inexplicably heavy. As I pulled it out, I saw that it was a helmet of sorts, with various lines joining to form a central plate at the front. At the side were vents. I saw that it could snap on to standard marine gear, thus it was obviously military. What did it do? It was evidently different from my helmet, but I didn't dare take my helmet off to try it on, for fear of instant death. Then I recalled my dream; the two marines had come across a helmet like this, a helmet that made the person wearing it go berserk. I pushed it in my pack, thinking it might come in handy later, and looked up at Tim.

"Don't tell me that wasn't real either."

"It was. What was it?"

"I don't know," I said. I glanced around me. "We're getting close. Maybe we should stop and rest one last time."

Tim nodded.

I eased myself on the ground and looked up at the swirling skies above. But then, as I lay there, my surroundings seemed to melt away. Frantically, I pushed myself up and saw that I was standing in a courtyard of stone. Ahead was the a giant, mechanical spider,

besides him a man. And I realised I was having that dream again, the dream of those two marines who had bravely fought against hell. I was one of them, standing silently, though articulately talking. But what did it all mean? I still didn't understand why or how I kept on getting this dream. Surely it had some purpose, but how would something that happened in the past be of use now? It was what had happened to someone else, so how was it to concern me? This particular dream kept on playing itself out in my head time after time. But why? Thinking, I looked back up to see the spider and the man. Raising my shotgun as I had done in my dream countless times, I wondered again, what did it all mean?

Tim woke me to tell me an hour had passed. It was time to move on.

* * *

Our journey was drawing to a close, I could feel it. This feeling came in the form of the giant, grey silhouette that slowly gained shape as we drew closer to the epicentre. It was like a giant mountain that had been planted on the Earth. It was the Seed That Was Planted. It was Phobos, the moon that had fallen. It was the miniature hell that was to spread, and had already done so. It was many things, but most of all, it was the one place we had set out to reach. Inside it, or so I figured, had to be the soulcube. I had no idea what we were to do or in what way we could give hell something to think about, but I was sure that it existed and that I'd find it inside the giant mountain that stood ahead of us. What was it like? It had been used as a spaceship, had it not? A rather comical image of a monster hotel rose in my mind. But there was little to laugh about.

I looked down and realised that there were fleshy tendrils at our feet. They were stretching from Phobos ahead, like roots, and were slowly moving ahead, spreading. I looked away, not finding comfort in the twisting, pulsating red mass. In the air, I heard demonic cries and yells, roars and screams like the ones I had heard that night. Phobos sat there, a cold, lifeless form with its grey, cratered surface. And yet, there were valleys or cracks that ran through it, and a glow was coming from deep inside them, that same deep red. As I neared, I saw that there were large openings where the giant moon had planted itself. Half of the rather asymmetrical object was underground, or so I figured. We stopped.

I looked sideways at Tim.

"Are you ready?" I asked. "This is it, what we have worked so hard for."

We were something around twenty metres of the mountainous structure. As I looked I could see millions of imps start to slowly crawl out from the cracks, seeping out and lining the surface. There were millions of them. They looked at us, with ten eyes per imp trained upon us, glowing lightly in the near-darkness. Judging from Tim's stupefied look, he saw them too, and they were thus real. Not too assuring. But they did not rush down and attack. As I watched, thousands of imp started to crawl down and soon lined the ground ahead of us. I wondered as to what they were doing, but then they started arranging themselves. And as they crawled, I realised what they were doing. They created a pathway for us. A path that lead straight towards one of the entrances and into the Seed of Hell itself.

Tim mustered a confident smile.

“Let’s go!”

Glancing at the tunnel made of imps, I started to make my way forward. I could see them, almost pulsating as they moved. The sky grew ever darker while the deep red light from Phobos began to shine brighter than ever. The wind blew harder and ash fell harder. Soon, there was nothing to be seen but the mountain ahead of me and the imps surrounding it. But why were they doing this? We had made our way so far, we were evidently being offered passage to some higher authority. But what did this mean and what would happen to us? As I entered the tunnel, imps hissed and flexed their arms, flashed their fangs, and gazed at me in contempt. But they did not cross those invisible lines that formed the tunnel. However, I didn't get too far when I stopped. Something wasn't right. I turned back.

Tim was still standing at the mouth of the passage, looking at me.

"What are you doing?" I yelled over the howl of the wind.

He said nothing.

"Come on!"

I retraced my steps back to him. He was looking at me with an odd look, almost a pained smile.

"This is where you go on your own."

"*What?*"

"I am no longer here. You were right about me being a part of your mind. It's just that your timing was a bit off."

"Timing? What? You're not real?"

He gave me a pitiful smile. "I haven't been for over an hour. When we were fighting that brown monster that was spitting out all those flying head monsters. You let me deal with the flying heads while you took on the monster yourself. I couldn't fight off all three at once."

"No!"

"Yes," he said, looking down gravely. "You had a hallucination that I had died. After that you began to feel that I could never die."

"This can't be, it's all too much..."

"I'm sorry," he said. "You left me there, dying, and walked away thinking I was still with you. You walked off, talking to yourself."

I took a deep breath, taking what he was saying in.

"But, how, or, why are you telling me this? It doesn't make sense..."

"Because you have a mission, there is something you must do. And if you keep on thinking I'm real, you would rely on me, and that would be your end. Don't you see? Everything's on a grander scale than you can imagine. You have to win, and I would be your downfall if you persisted in thinking I'm real. You can't have invisible people backing you up."

My legs gave way and, after wobbling on my knees for a few seconds, I collapsed. It was incomprehensible. It had been bad before, but now my mind was much worse. No longer did I know what was real. I could go in and see some giant beast waiting for me inside the cave, but how was I to know that it was real? It didn't make sense, this part of my mind coming out and explaining what was going on. Tim had died. I had walked away from him while he was dying after fighting the brown demon. It was

my fault he had died. Everything was twisted up, complex, not making any sense. I had killed my friend.

"I'm sorry," I choked, weeping. I had a feeling of déjà vu, except the last time I had been crying in front of the real Tim.

"It's OK," he said. "You have a job to do. And trust me, you'll be seeing me soon. Now get up. You had accepted that I had died before. You must do it again. You had accepted this a bit prematurely."

I pushed myself up.

"It's hell that invaded Earth, is it not?"

Wiping my eyes, I nodded.

"Look at it this way: if there's hell, there's a heaven and life after death. I didn't die because of you. I just moved on to a new level. And besides, as I told you, I'll be seeing you soon, because you can't go through this alone. Maybe you'll understand soon. I don't, and yet at the same time it all comes together. I've served my purpose, I've told you what is real and what isn't. And now, I'm telling you that that thing there, and all those monsters on it, are real. And I'm telling you that this," he pointed to his own body. "This isn't." He sighed. "I regret that I can't be there and help you with what you're about to face. But you'll succeed, and I'll be waiting for you when you do."

What was he talking about?

I never really found out, though. Just as my voice returned to me and I felt I could speak again, Tim turned on his heel and started walking away from me. I had questions to ask him, I needed advice, maybe a last word. But it was too late. I watched him as he walked away silently and soon became a mere silhouette before disappearing completely into the haze of the rain. I looked away and down, thinking. Yet, so many thoughts were running through my mind that I couldn't stop on a single one. The sound of the falling rain seemed gentle and relaxing and I tried focusing on it for reassurance. Feeling courage and strength creep into my, I turned back and looked at the imps. What did they see with those ten eyes? Were they really looking at a lunatic who had just talked into thin air? Were they laughing silently at my madness?

Pulling out my chaingun, I started down the corridor of imps.

AMPLITUDO DENIQUE



PART 5
AMPLITUDO DENIQUE

1

As I marched to my death, my thoughts wandered elsewhere. The tunnel of flexing, shifting imps no longer impressed me. Nor did the mountainous meteor ahead, with its eerie glowing cracks from where imps continued to pour out. Savouring my human senses, smiling at the gentle touch of the wind, I smiled. The falling ash made it look like it was snowing. How I missed snow. I didn't watch the sharp claws and flashing limbs. How long had passed until now that I found myself, walking through this pathway of death? Several weeks, perhaps. How could I have seen myself back then, marching this way? But for the first time since this whole thing had picked up, I felt some comfort in religion. I figured I was about to die, but if there was a heaven and hell, I was bound to go upstairs. I mean, if they didn't let me in for what went on during the last two weeks, I'd say I wouldn't want to be in heaven anyway. Tim had told me, 'I'll be seeing you soon.' I guess that's what he meant.

The mountainous Phobos loomed ahead and filled my peripheral vision. I could see the end of the imps, where the corridor went from black exoskeleton to stone walls. The corridor was rounded, its walls sanded smooth, and the perfect size for a figure of my stature to pass through. From beyond, there wasn't darkness, but rather, a gentle, flickering orange light. As I neared the entrance, I stopped, as did the hissing of the imps. For a second, everything was still and quiet. I looked back for a last time, feeling I might never see Earth again. The ruins were now covered in ash and everything looked snowy. Somehow the fact that it was the ruins of civilisation under that coat of ash seemed to fade away and I was pleased at the landscape that had bothered me before. I had a feeling things weren't gonna get prettier.

I turned and entered.

I was about to reach for my flashlight, but soon found it unnecessary. As I walked ahead through the winding corridor, I found that the walls were lit with candles. Here and there, smaller tunnels sprouted from my own, though there was no confusion as to where to go; my tunnel was lit, while the others were dark. That, and it was silly to have anything other than a midget attempt to crawl around them. I paused for a second, looking around and trying to see if I could hear anything that might hint as to what was about to happen. I could only hear various distant noises, pale and distorted by the echoing. There was nothing I could distinguish. Using the pause, I made sure my chaingun was fully loaded and in working order then took what I thought would be the last piss I was to ever take. I was gonna let hell's janitorial services worry about the big spot on the wall.

With that, I moved on. The tunnel dipped down. It didn't seem to me that it was made for a bipedal humanoid like me to walk about. At times it almost dipped vertically. Maybe I would've had fun using it like a slide if it wasn't for the abrasive rock surface that was rather unkind to my bottom. Passing by more candles and odd, angular turns in all three dimensions, I started feeling annoyed. As I jumped down another vertical portion of the corridor, I saw that it widened ahead, inflating into a vast expanse beyond. Finally! I walked ahead and soon entered a cavernous chamber.

Cavernous chamber indeed! It was a huge cave, lit at a comfortable level, with the walls lined with various openings. From beyond these openings came orange light, as well as from the several lava pools that were strewn across the vast ground. Though surprisingly level at places, cave bottom was dotted with the occasional boulders and oddly-pointed rocks, as well as with the occasional candles. All in all, the place was bathed in deep, orange light coming from whether it be cave openings, lava pits, or the flickering candles. As my eyes were drawn upwards to the ceiling that was so far away, it was somewhat lost in a haze, I cringed. From various sub-caves, so to speak, sprouted fleshy tendril-like things, which all met up at a pulsating, organic growth that occupied much of the domed ceiling. Somehow, I had a feeling that's were all the imps and other freaks were coming from.

I moved forward and saw that there was a large pit at the centre, with a bright, twisting reddish sort of ether. It had to be a portal.

Looking around, I wondered, what the hell am I supposed to do now?

I turned back to the central portal, and saw that a figure was standing next to it, a dark silhouette contrasted by the bright light behind it.

Naturally, I headed there, walking over the hot, steaming ground and uneven terrain. My haste tired me out quickly because of the hot, humid air. I wiped the sweat from my eyes and felt uncomfortable in the layer of perspiration that had formed over me and all of my belongings. The last thing I needed was a gun with a slippery trigger.

At first, I thought it was a man. But as I neared, I saw that it was an odd figure, with an almost feminine face, with odd tattoos and signs scattered across it, the rest hidden under a dark cloak.

The creature raised its head as I finally came close, supported by a frail neck, and smiled with its odd, mild features.

"I must commend you," it spoke with an odd, whispering tone that still somehow seemed to fill the room. "To get so far."

"What are you?"

It opened its arms in a wide gesture, looking around. Then, it pulled off its cloak and there stood a figure way too skinny to be human. Its torso seemed oddly joined down to its hip; it was there that it was supremely thin. The creature's legs were oddly jointed and its arms were extremely thin and frail looking. If I had thought it looked somewhat like a human before, as I neared I thought it looked like a heavily tattooed man (although still oddly feminine). Tattoos of various swirling shapes (including a red pentagram scrawled on both its forehead and its chest) lined its body and its face, twisting around its eyes, which looked at first like they were tattooed upon an eyeless face as well. But as I finally came within normal distance, I saw that they were really there, though odd. The eyes were empty, and yet, somehow, flashed menace. It was as if there was a lot concealed behind those blank eyes. A twisted grin spread on its otherwise mild face.

"What do you think?"

"What?"

It sighed. "Apparently it wasn't intelligence that got you this far."

I continued looking at it blankly.

"Hmm, let's see, what, or should I say, who, could I possibly meet here? Here's a hint: I've been quite busy the last few weeks. So busy, in fact, that I didn't see you and how far you had gotten until today."

“You’re... Satan?”

It smiled. “Close enough. Satan has no body definitive body, and yet is all-encompassing. I’m just a messenger, a part of him. Satan speaks through me. Not what you thought, eh? I can see inside your mind. After those demons and monsters, who would’ve thought that I’d be a frail little thing, you ask? But don’t be fooled.

“Your story is really interesting. I only saw the last few hours of your journey, and it was really riveting. How sad that I missed all before it.” It grinned again. “I particularly enjoyed how you walked away from your dying friend.”

I said nothing.

“And then how you were talking to yourself. You know, you did that just now. I’m really not standing here, you know. This isn’t me. This is how I choose to look inside your mind. I, like the Horned One Himself, have no body, no material self. I, along with all the demons and beasts, am a part of Satan. And he *is* hell. He is everything there, the ether that pervades it. The air there. All the molecules, and everything that crosses into the boundary there becomes a part of him, and a part of me. All the buildings, the organs, the poor, impaled bodies. The souls. The rock, the ocean. You’ve see the ocean, haven’t you? In your dreams. And I think we all know who it is to blame for that.”

“You!”

“Wrong.”

“It’s your fault I’m seeing things!”

“No. Do you really think that I’d take my time to mess with the puny, insignificant mind of some human being marching to his death? As I said, I didn’t even know about you until an hour ago. It would be silly, a waste of time to bother myself in manipulating your mind. There are those,” it said, smirking and looking up. “There are those idiots who would, however. Mysterious ways, indeed! To use some poor, wasted human as a puppet, to do what? I know you’re angry, but who’s to blame here? I don’t have one finger in the undoing of your mind. So, who’s to blame here? There’s no good or evil, simply different perceptions. And as you see, you have suffered at the hand of all that is ‘good.’ A blind man could see it faster than you.”

“Get away.”

“Get away? Why? I haven’t done anything. I’ve simply come to commend you. I figure after all that trouble, you’d want me to help you out. You can’t escape from here. I’ll see to it that you’re pushed to the last bit of life and still keep you alive to feel more pain. Then again, that would be unkind. I could reward you for your journey. It would be a pity to throw away such a powerful person. Of course, I can see it now. You’re not going to join my side. Your mind’s made up.” It started walking towards me. “Do you really think that I’ll let you slip up and away? Convert or die? It’s all perception. I’m really not a bad guy. There’s less difference between me and Him than you’d think.”

“Except you’re an ass.”

It laughed, an odd, high-pitched, gurgling squeal. “Another good use I’d have for you. A sense of humour. I like that. Let me tell you, soon enough you’ll see that it’s someone else who’s an ‘ass.’”

I fired a quick succession toward the creature’s direction.

The bullets went through it.

“Fool, I told you I’m in your mind. You can’t touch me.” It briskly walked up to me. “That’s not to say that I can’t hurt you.” It raised one of its long, skinny fingers to my

temple and instantly, a wave of pain rippled from my temple and echoed through my head. The blinding, red pain filled my mind and pushed all other senses aside. It travelled down my spine, which felt like it had just broken and down to my toes. As the pain started to fade away, I realised I had collapsed and I was lying at the feet of the creature. “Anyway, that’s something to think about. Now, how about it? I have other things I need to take care of. What will it be?”

“No.”

“Of course. Right, that’s all I needed to hear.” It turned and started to walk away. “It’s what most answer. And I’ll tell you, they live to regret it. And then there are those that choose wisely.” It paused. “Regardless, I could use a bit of entertainment. Reward myself a bit. You know, this whole invasion business isn’t easy. Besides, a person like you deserves to die on their feet.”

I pushed myself up in time to see the figure walking and fading away until it was gone. I glanced around the darkness and picked up my chaingun.

Just then, my eyes were drawn to the pit-like portal at the centre, for something giant had started rising from it.

Though I was physically frozen in my spot, my thoughts were racing. As I watched, I couldn't help but to recall a trip I had taken to the museum when I was six. I remember being fascinated by a life-size recreation of a dinosaur, an allosaurus. But what rose before me looked as if it could eat up allosaurus and still have room for desert; it was giant and bulky vaguely humanoid, more dinosaur in shape than anything else. Heavily hunched over, it had a tail and plates of armour that covered its body, with many sharp bumps and things running across them, its body tapering in that blunt tail. Its colossal arms ended in what looked like massive clubs; somewhat round mace-like masses with spikes protruding in all sides. Between the spikes, running in cracks, and between the armour plates came a fiery orange glow. Its spiky backbone fell forward into the massive head, which was rather flat at the front. From the sides sprouted the most massive horns I had ever seen, between which was a mouth, supported by a gargantuan jaw, that put just about anything else with sharp teeth to shame. I noticed that, although it had pits for eyes, the creature seemed to be eyeless and blind.

Well, I guess that wasn't too bad.

But something else, in plural, was rising from the cycling portal. It was what looked like cocoons, shell-like objects with segmented tails that hung down, with small beady eyes scattered all about their bodies. Where there should've been a head, there was a round object, like a searchlight, that shone brightly. Just as the massive creature stepped out of the portal and on solid land, roaring and shaking its head and hands wildly, all the little flying cocoon things' searchlights fell on me. The massive beast froze and started turning towards me. It roared again.

It was a real demon.

A demon, in the truest sense of the word. Everything I had seen until now was like a mini-demon, or a demon-bonsai.

The urge to run back out was overwhelming, but I figured all those imps that were standing at the entrance wouldn't let me leave early like that. That, and I wasn't sure how I was to crawl back up some of the vertical portions of the tunnel. And of course, I had work to do; the soulcube... I looked around (finding it rather difficult to look away from the hulking monster), trying to see if the soulcube was anywhere in the room. I didn't know what the hell it was supposed to look like, but I figured I'd know it when I saw it. There wasn't anything of interest in the room, however; just rocks and candles and pits of lava in all directions. And of course, the giant, pit-like portal at the centre with the massive demon and the seeker-creatures that had come out with that stood beside the swirling red.

Oh yeah, the demon.

But if the soulcube wasn't here, where could it be?

My eyes fell to the portal to hell that swirled at the centre and I felt my stomach do acrobatics. Of course! Why the hell would they keep something as dangerous as the soulcube on Earth? They would take it back, where it's safe. They assume it's safe there and wouldn't give a second thought to the possibility of anyone striking on their turf and getting this weapon. I knew I had to go there. But as of now, I had bigger problems to worry about. Much bigger. About ten metres high, with club-like arms and a pair of

horns. My hands fumbled for one of my tools for inflicting damage. The chaingun was at hand, but was it enough to deal with the horned monstrosity before me?

Maybe not, but the thing was blind, and I knew I had to work around that.

Instead of shooting the giant demon, I started shooting the three seekers that were serving as its eyes. The demon charged at me and I strafed, still keeping steady fire in the seekers. Two went down fairly fast, but the third one flew around evasively and soon I was forced to point my attention away for fear of being clubbed to death by massive demon hands. I jumped sideways, escaping from what would've been an otherwise fatal blow. In classic fashion, I darted down and between its legs, which would force the creature to turn around. And since it was so damn massive, that was quite a task for it and it bought me a lot of time. Indeed I felt rather clever. For two seconds, that is, before what I considered my intelligence was shattered as the monster's tail beat at me. Lunging sideways and darting forward, it was just enough to nail the last seeker.

The giant demon paused unsure of where I was.

I rattled a quick succession of fire in its direction testily, to see how it took damage. This was only a mistake, for it alerted the monster of my exact position. I ran sideways, avoiding the creature that paused where I stood, waiting for me to make another noise.

It was an awkward moment; there I stood, unable to move as the demon sat still as well. Its patience ran out fast enough, however, and it started stumbling about blindly, hoping to bump into me.

As it walked, it made loud thumps that allowed me to move.

Just as I realised I had to get to the portal, the beast stepped between me and the swirling gateway to hell.

I started walking around, but then I realised that the demon had stopped moving and my footsteps were plain as day to hear. Feeling incredibly stupid, I darted forward as the demon jumped in my direction, charging forward.

I had made it, though, so it didn't matter. I could see the portal, made in the ground like a pit. I ran and ran, and jumped forward. Rock beneath me disappeared and was replaced by the swirling ether of the portal. There was a fleeting moment of triumph before something hard landed in my stomach and threw me back. I flew across rocks and lanced hard on the ground. Clutching my stomach and what felt like a broken rib or two, I looked around and realised the demon had caught me with its long tail. Maybe I would've felt stupid again, but I was in too much pain, and shit, to notice. The demon knew where it had thrown me and was charging at me again. It paused, to orient itself by sound. I lay as still as I could.

I couldn't help but groan, however, as I saw another seeker rise from the portal. I pushed myself up and ran (or rather, limped in a fast manner) past the monster and towards the portal. Just as the seeker's searchlight fell on me, I whacked it as hard as I could with my shotgun. The thing almost comically bounced around before falling to the ground dead. The demon had figured out my location and was coming my way. As it charged, I found myself having difficulty keeping my balance; the ground was shaking so violently. Not daring to look back, I turned and jumped, falling into the swirling red and hell itself.

I had entered the doorway from Earth and emerged in hell.

The travel through the portal was still as gut-wrenching and as disorienting as I had dreamed it, though I was ready for it. There was nothing and then there was everything. Moving light, moving time. Everything had been a line travelling forward through time, and I had jumped from line to line. I shook my head to clear it, though everything remained out of focus and nausea rose up from my stomach. I retched. I could imagine what I had looked like when I had come out of the portal; my skeleton materialising out of thin air, with red muscle fibres twisting and elongating, creating muscles that, in turn, wrapped around my skeleton, tendons, ligaments, with my skin and material objects like clothes and weapons appearing at the end. But the best part was when I realised my broken ribs were fixed.

I had been here before, or rather, in my dream. The person whose life had played itself out in my dream had come through here. And so I was ready. I wasn't surprised when I emerged into a large metallic chamber, on a catwalk that led to the main room with large glass hanging over the entire platform. I edged out, looking around in awe. I wasn't naïve like before. I knew. I knew what to expect, what to see. And yet, this was not comforting at all. The air was hot and humid, and yet something else occupied the air, an ether of sorts, an ether of fear. It was a dark and mysterious atmosphere, and a faint whistling was to be heard in the air.

But what caught my eye was a figure that strolled in, appearing in front of me. It was Tim, standing there, looking at me crossly with his arms crossed. He was smiling lightly.

"About time you got here."

"What's going on?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. We were there, fighting that brown demon that was spitting out all those flying heads and they swarmed on me and I fell. I called for your help, but you walked away and I died. Sorry I'm making this sound so horrible, it wasn't so bad. Anyway, then, it's like everything warped and I found myself here. I can't explain it, but somehow it makes sense, like it couldn't be any other way. Hell, I'm not complaining. Anyway, I was hoping you'd know what exactly is going on here." He paused. "You look terrible. What happened?"

"I fought this... Never mind that. How do I know that you're real?"

"Hey, there's an afterlife, and so I'm back. That makes sense, doesn't it? I can't prove it, but trust me, I'm real."

I figured he was right; the imaginary Tim had admitted to being fake.

"Seeing you come out of the portal was weird," said Tim. "Did...?"

"I just died, yes. And then I was created again."

Tim looked at me in partial amazement. "Well, we both died, I guess that makes us even, eh?"

I forced a grin and nodded.

Then, pausing, I found myself examining the room. Behind Tim, a good ten metres away, sitting lazily in a chair with his feet propped up, was Carson, staring at us. He didn't show any emotion, but rather, examined us with almost a lack of interest. As I watched, he continued to sit there motionless.

“Carson? He’s back, too?” I said, unable to restrain any excitement.

“What?” said Tim.

I stopped. In the distant end of the room, crawling out of the shadows, I could see a group of imps edging towards us, bent over and trying to remain concealed. Their red eyes, glowing a dim red in the crimson light that bathed the room, coming out of the portal. And to their left, my eyes fell back to Carson, who continued to examine us with that cold, empty expression.

I nudged Tim in the shoulders and pointed.

“Are there... is there anything there?”

His eyes followed my hand.

“No,” he said quietly, glancing at me with a semi-worried expression. I avoided his gaze.

“Let’s go, we can’t stay here long.”

We walked along the catwalk and past the imps that were flexing and leering at me. There was only one exit leading away from the portal and we took it. This time, there was no lift. And as we entered a long corridor that immediately turned from metal to brimstone and ended in a dark room beyond, my thoughts, and fears, for that matter, were confirmed; we had come through a different portal in my dream. Assuming my dream was accurate and I remembered it correctly, this could only mean that there are at least two open portals allowing for hellspawn to creep through. Possibly more.

Passing the end of the tunnel, we emerged into a dark chamber.

“I remember this—”

I halted in mid-sentence. Was it possible? The thought had crossed my mind before. It turned everything upside down, nothing was as I had thought! So there was a plan, I just didn’t know it up till now. But could it? So it was us...

Tim was looking at me with an odd expression.

“What?”

“Don’t you see, remember when you asked ‘Where’s God in all this?’ Remember that? Well, maybe this is it... I’m not sure, but it’s coming together, I get it now!”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

I looked around. There came a faint sound out of one of the tunnels.

“Let’s get out of here, I’ll explain.”

To Tim’s amazement, I threw the berserk helmet on the ground along with the few extra clips and one of the ammunition belts. I held up my hand to silence him and I led him to another corridor that I recalled from my dream. Light, from sun or whatever, greeted us and the already-unbearable heat and humidity was aided by searing light. Around the doorway were rocks, which I led Tim in climbing them. We were climbing the left side of the rocky rim of a large open area with a giant pit of lava at the centre and metallic catwalks circling around it and joining the two platforms at either end. We climbed the rocky foothills to the nearby mountains and neared the building on the opposite side of the pit. About thirty meters below was the pit of lava, begging for some bad judgement/accident to drop some helpless soul into its chasm.

“We’ll climb over this palace,” I said. Tim nodded. The rocky ridge was extremely high and provided a safe passage over and to the side of the giant brimstone structure, which remained to our right. Careful not to slip and fall, we edged along the rocky ridge and soon passed the building. I became aware that the mountains that had

been to our right were left slightly back. Meanwhile, we had emerged on the high rim of a giant pentagonal courtyard of stone. It wasn't until we reached the top and nestled ourselves silently behind one of the many large, sharp boulders. Only then did we manage to examine the courtyard below.

We both froze.

Standing there, next to a centralised building, was a giant mechanical platform, with various panels forming a gently rounded bottom from which six mechanical legs sprouted, ending in rather sharp points. At the front, from the underside ran tubes and various mechanicals into a rounded area that led to an unmistakable gun nozzle that gently pulsated a blue light. But the most striking feature was the giant brain that rested atop this platform, with torn grey skin serving as a form of rough encasing, to keep it in some rough shape. The brain moulded itself into a human skull that rested right atop the blue nozzle, lower jaw missing. And though we couldn't see them, I was sure that there, inside, lay two red embers.

It was the mastermind of the invasion.

Besides the spider stood a straight human figure. They seemed to be silently discussing something.

This was, of course, the scientist Thorpe.

Déjà vu.

Tim, after staring at them for a good ten minutes, turned back to see what lay behind us. His hand grasped my shoulder.

I twisted my head back and felt my heart sink. The rocky rim on which we stood continued behind us for a few metres before sharply ending in a sort of cliff. I heard the rolling screams, like waves, high-pitched and unyielding. It was the true hell, I had seen it before. An ocean of red with various moulded body parts protruding from the rolling surface, a sea of flesh. Arms and legs, outstretched limbs clawed at the air as the giant entity pulsated. Faces distorted and flowing into other parts, torsos stretched with wide eyes and a gaping mouth tapering at the end, millions of moulded souls screaming in unison, the sea of flesh extended to the distant horizon.

"Don't look," I said, forcing my head back.

A while paused as we both calmed ourselves.

"Will you now tell me what the hell is going on?"

I took a deep breath. "I thought it possible, but only when we entered that dark room was I sure it was true. That dream I had: I had always thought that it took place in the past, it was only logical. But it didn't. It was foresight, it was a vision of the future. It showed what happens to another person not in the past, but in the future. In my vision, not dream, I remember walking into that room and finding the berserk helmet and some supplies. I had wondered at why they were there and if there were any other marines here, in hell. Don't you see? That's happening right now! We left those supplies there, we are those marines, and the people in my vision are about to find them. My dream was insight into the future. And soon, they are going to emerge from those doors and enter this courtyard!"

Tim was looking at me with a frightened, sickening expression.

"And all this time I thought it was a simple dream of things that had happened to someone else. I never thought that it was a vision of something that hadn't happened

yet.” I turned to Tim. “Remember when you asked, ‘Where’s God in all of this?’ Well, maybe this is it! That’s how you were sent back here, to help me.”

He shook his head in partial disbelief. “I thought you didn’t believe in that stuff.”

“If there’s a hell, then there should be a God, shouldn’t there?”

Tim nodded. “OK then. But how is a vision of someone else’s future going to help us?” he asked.

I paused. I had no answer for that.

A long time passed as we watched the two beings below. The human, the scientist who I knew as Thorpe, was talking articulately, motioning towards the centralised building and tapping his arm. At one point he motioned to a distant door and the spider, seemingly a statue until then, had shifted. I recognised the door; it was there that the spider will escape after he calls in imps for reinforcements. My vision confirmed this. But what were we to do? I looked around and heard the scientist’s raspy voice, barely audible over the distant screams, evidently magnified by the rounded courtyard structure.

“Nos aversabilis accipio animus tessera ut a tutus locus. Is est non certus. Cautio, ut duos populus adepto hic.”

“Tim,” I whispered. “I’m not seeing things again, right?” He nodded. “Remember what that scientist had called the soulcube? In Latin?” He shook his head. “I could’ve sworn they just mentioned it.”

From there, I tried to listen in more, but heard an indistinguishable muffle of words. Then, after a while, the scientist went somewhere and the spider walked across the room to the door that I knew would later serve as his escape route. The door opened, the mastermind walked in, and the door shut behind it. A long time passed with only screams in the distance and a quiet, empty courtyard before us.

“So,” said Tim. “What did the people in your dream do about now?” he asked.

“Vision,” I corrected him. “Vision into the future.” I tried to think back to it. “I think that they just finished fighting the two barons of hell that were guarding the entrance to the palace that we scaled by rock-climbing. I figure this is where they took a rest in this sort of hole in the ground. Slept for a bit.”

“We’re gonna be here for a while, eh?”

I nodded. “Be patient. We should try to rest too, soon we’re going to need to do something.”

“What?”

“I don’t know yet,” I said.

I lay back and focused on the odd, twisting sky. I had lain this very way in my vision, marvelling at its patterns.

Everything had a meaning, but what was ours? Was this ‘divine intervention?’ Were we just puppets on strings somehow? If I only knew how and why. If we really were being manipulated somehow into saving humanity, I had to know what to do, and yet, I didn’t see how I was to see this. Another vision perhaps? Would it be apparent? I suppose I can say that I was ‘destined’ to be here, along with Tim. Otherwise, who would have left all those supplies and things the people in my dream had found? So far, I had done everything I felt I had to, but the future remained uncertain.

I tried to clear my mind, half-expecting to have some insight into what I had to do. The distant screams filled the empty space.

With that, I recoiled, trying to focus elsewhere.

Several hours passed before the spider returned, and the scientist came shortly. The scientist seemed gleeful in regard to something.

Then, the courtyard door to our right opened and two human figures walked in.

I jabbed Tim in the ribs and he looked up.

There they were, the two people who had lived everything in my vision, all the horror and pain and suffering. Not that I hadn't had my share, though I couldn't help but marvel and feel a deep sympathy for them. One of them was shorter than the other, dark-haired, rather stocky though looking bulky with heavy armour and all. He was holding a rocket launcher at his side. So in my vision, I had been him. Next to him was the slightly taller person, also loaded with armour, holding a plasma rifle. His hair was lightly blond. Both their faces were hard to distinguish from the dirt and blood that covered them, though both looked tired and pained, and yet triumphant to have finally reached what had been a goal, to find a leader.

They stood there for a while, examining the situation.

"Frequento es accessio..."

Their eyes fell to the scientist, whose face wrinkled up in a smile expressing his sick pleasure.

"Ah, hello."

"You," said the shorter, brown-haired marine.

"Yes, I. As I am sure you have figured out by now, you really cannot get rid of me. Your friend here should know from first hand experience, no?" His eyes travelled to the taller marine. "You know, when you put that bullet in my head, I did not feel anything. A pity that you hate me and yet you cannot cause me pain. But how can you hate me and not know me?"

"I know who you are. You are the cult leader, it's your fault this whole thing started, it's all your fault. Killing you did no good."

"Killing me? You never killed me, you fool. I have been dead for more years than you can imagine. I was killed many millennia ago for being a Satanist. I was decapitated. That was the last time I ever felt pain. We had been trying to accomplish this for many years. You probably do not understand how someone killed so long ago is so up to date, with all this technology and what not. Or did that thought cross your mind at all? The modern mind is very incompetent, only an aged one, one with experience succeeds. My mind is ripe, it is prepared and was prepared. You see, chance favours those who are ready, those who are prepared. See, we have our ways of observing your world, as more human souls come here, we can see their past, we know what has happened. We watched and watched. We watched the rise of technology, its birth, rise, and development that would inevitably lead to its downfall. And with the rise of technology, we saw opportunity break over the horizon."

Tim looked at me.

"We killed him, right?"

"Yes," I whispered back. "I guess he was at Mars, then he was killed by these two marines, sending him back here. That's what happened in my vision. Then he must've been sent back to Earth, where we saw him. After starting a mess there, we blew up the London installation, and killed him again, sending him back here. It makes sense. So I guess, in a way, I have killed him twice." I paused. "Now watch," I advised, not wanting to miss any of what was going on, even though I had already seen it and knew how it

would all ensue. I shifted my position because my ass was numb from sitting on the rock all day. As I did, a few small stones rolled down and fell on atop the courtyard floor below. I cringed and ducked behind the rock. The scientist, however, had taken no notice and continued talking uninterrupted.

“Now, as I am sure you have noticed, assuming that there is even the tiniest spark of intelligence within that mind of yours, the Mars base was built long ago, ways before they officially announced its existence, and for years it remained secret,” continued the scientist Thorpe. “The UAC and military were going to disclose it, but then they had an accident. They were messing around with the portal technology when a glitch in their software caused a mistake in the final co-ordinates. Mind you, this was the first time they ever tried this technology. So, they established a link with us. But it was no mistake, no accident. It was fate, the inevitable. That, and the proximity of our worlds between the fabric of space-time: this realm is only a proton’s-width away from yours. Our worlds sit there, nearly infinitely close, waving in the ten-dimensional ethereal macrocosm. I had been waiting. You see, I was chosen to go, being most loyal, as soon as any opportunity struck. I had waited for a long time. Once you die, you do not age, you do not feel pain. So I, along with several ‘minions’ as you might call them stepped through and attacked. We quickly eliminated everyone in the room.

“To remove all evidence, I killed the two monsters and then borrowed an explosive from your military base... you people keep a lot of them. Ah, the military mind. It is so absurd, and yet this absurdity only helped us. I can only thank you. Everything was engulfed in the explosion and all evidence was removed. The UAC report reads, and they still believe it to this day, that this early experiment in portal technology was unstable, the link was unstable, and that had caused the explosion. So, they moved to more mundane, less dangerous experiments where the portals they opened were tiny and allowed for the transfer of smaller objects.

“Meanwhile, I sneaked into one of the supply ships returning to Earth. There were plenty of supplies there, left over from the journey. So there was food and water and the long journey fared well. There, on Earth, I contacted a person you know as Commander Briggs. His head is as dense as a neutron star, but perhaps that is why he was so easy to persuade. Soon, he joined the cult. And with his control, I was disguised as a scientist and given all of the security clearances, and from there I went to Mars. I think that you can figure out the rest.”

Soon, the fight would erupt between the two marines and the spider, but what were we to do then?

“And now that we’ve used Phobos, Deimos will follow, a way to reach Earth,” the scientist was saying. “The routing station set upon its otherwise bland surface was our first target, but first we had to start through the portal. We have, however, managed to get hold of the station. And now, hell itself is assembling there through the use of teleportation points. It has become more than a mere method of transportation, however; Phobos has become a hell of sorts, one much like this one, but smaller. But it is about to grow. It is the seed, you see. And it has been planted on Earth. Deimos is the last move we need to make for complete control.

“But we caught your little friend who thought it clever to hide it from us, and now that it is in our own possession, there is nothing standing in our way. It was the last piece required to complete our plan.”

“Caught who?” asked forcefully Marine 1. The scientist ignored him.

I turned to Tim. “Did you hear? That must’ve been the person in the medical wing when I had been there. He was one of the first people to go through the portal. He had found the soulcube and had realised its importance and hid it. They needed to get it, so they caught him. I was there when they took him, I heard him struggle.”

Tim looked at me frightfully, then turned back. Meanwhile, Thorpe had continued unabashed.

“Perhaps stepping through the portal and coming here was the biggest mistake you ever made. If you had only seen hell, you would have never come, you would have remained back on Mars, cowering in a tiny storage room, jumping at the grunts and roars that came from beyond the door.”

“I’ve seen hell,” said the blond marine defiantly.

“Me too,” said the other.

“Oh, no you have not. The real hell,” the scientist said, gesturing widely with his hands, “the real hell lies beyond these very walls.”

“But the impaled—”

He grinned more. “Oh, those are mere decorations. The true hell lies beyond these here walls. You are so clueless, so naïve.” He stopped and turned to the motionless gigantic spider. “What do we do now?”

There was silence, or perhaps a distant, raspy whisper that was as good as silence.

Suddenly, the dark-haired marine raised his shotgun, a disgusted expression crossed his soiled face. “Now it’s time I blow your ass away!”

Thorpe raised his hands in a gesture of carelessness. “Go ahead. You will just send me to some other part of hell. Where else am I to go? You know you cannot kill me.”

“See you later, then,” he said and pulled the trigger. The scientist’s chest erupted in blood and his body crumpled to the ground, moments before erupting in flame and decomposing away, the ashes carried away in the wind. The spider shifted and a long silence followed. The dark-haired marine pulled out a rocket launcher. The spider and the two humans continued staring at each other, moments before the entire scene erupted with violence as head and rockets flew through the air. The two dodged and rolled away as the spider gracefully moved away, avoiding the rockets. After a second of recovering, the spider sent off another round of heavy chaingun fire, rattling the entire courtyard.

As it took fire from both sides, the spider mastermind seemed helpless moments before the tall marine’s plasma rifle ran out.

One rocket hit the ground at the spider’s foot. It recoiled, charred.

The dark-haired marine ran in a zigzag pattern towards marine 2, firing rockets as he went, and threw a heavy chaingun he had strapped to his side up until then. The other dived, firing a steady stream of bullets.

This dance of death continued for a while with many graceful dives, rolls, jumps and saves. Tim and I both stared in deep awe. It struck me in particular; it looked so different when viewed from the side and from a distance. It wasn’t quite as brutal, more elegant than anything else.

The shorter marine ducked behind the central building and soon, its four doors opened. The second marine soon followed and the spider mastermind started edging around the structure, coming after them. Just as it drew close, the two jumped out and

dispersed, the taller wielding the rocket launcher and the other, a gigantic piece of machinery. The spider screeched.

On my left, Tim had pushed himself up. "We can help them," he said. "Maybe that's why they're here. In your dream, they died, didn't they? Maybe we have to help them, work together to win!"

I grabbed his arm and pulled him back down. "No," I said.

"What?" said Tim. "We have to watch them die?"

"Our purpose is not to save them."

"What is our purpose?" asked Tim rather irritably, apparently displeased in having to helplessly watch the deadly game.

"I don't know," I said. "But they fought alone, in my vision, anyway. We shouldn't interfere. I suppose..."

"What?"

"I suppose they're martyrs."

He looked at me sideways. "What about us?"

"Maybe we are too, I don't know yet."

"You better think of something fast." He said as our gaze was drawn back to the battle.

The fight seemed rather odd; little did I know that, when I was dreaming this vision that I was actually concealed somewhere in the rocks above the entire battle place during the entire time. It was almost like watching myself fight. And because of that, I wanted to help; I dreaded what was going to happen. I knew that it was in reality another marine, and yet I couldn't help feeling like I was watching myself die. But in my vision, there wasn't any help; no two mysterious strangers that somehow appeared from behind the rocks overlooking the courtyard, I knew that this was not our function. We had something else to do, another purpose. With that, I cleared my mind and focused back on the fight.

Marine 1 had engaged himself in examining the gigantic weapon, looking for a trigger. What I recalled to have called a BFG (interpretation of this acronym left to the reader) in my dream had a handle that flowed into the bulky body, on the two sides of which ran two massive tubes, feeding the giant nozzle. It was a dark grey, unmarked, and very imposing. Marine 2 was busy firing rockets. Success soon came in the form of a large glob of bright-green energy that lazily floated across the air in the general direction of the spider. As it drew near, what looked like lightning started to erupt from the surface that came to face the creature as the sphere gently rotated. Marine 2 dived out of the way, not wanting to fall prey to the energy ball, which soon impacted the courtyard wall in a large explosion that clipped the creature's leg. It certainly looked different from my point of view; in my vision, I had felt that I had hit its leg dead-on.

Regardless, the charred piece of machinery left seemed useless. The spider mastermind started to limp away, firing its chaingun as it went, narrowly dodging another missile sent courtesy of marine 2. As it reached the door through which it planned to escape, there was a distant whisper and hundreds of imps started to pour out of everywhere, coming out of all dark corners and shadows and pits. Doors below opened and they crawled in. Tim and I ducked behind the rock as a few emerged from under some nearby rocks and crawled down the nearly vertical rock wall. Fiery pentagrams appeared across the courtyard with a wavy red haze hovering over them moments before

the figure of an imp seemingly dropped from the sky. More pentagrams cropped up as more and more imps teleported in. Soon, there were thousands overflowing the courtyard, a sea of grotesque demons that started to scuttle towards the two marines, walking stealthily on all fours.

Marine 1 fired another energy blast that cleared a good hundred imps, knocking down many. Marine 2, meanwhile, fired a few rockets at the already-crumbling wall and the two men climbed over. Two more rockets were fired before the two marines dropped out of sight, behind the wall, and the imps started climbing over the rim, following them. A minute later, the last few imps started scampering over the wall, hoping to join the others. Tim and I glanced at each other, wondering what to do. The lone spider mastermind had reached the door and had barely entered. As the door started to close, and as I looked across the empty courtyard, I suddenly knew what we had to do.

It all made sense.

It was a diversion.

“It’s a diversion, don’t you see!”

I yelled as I started clambering down the rocky ridge as fast as I could. It was nearly vertical and I fell on the walkway that ran around the entire perimeter. From there, I jumped down to the courtyard and sprinted towards the closing door. I didn’t look back to see if Tim was following me, I heard his footsteps and knew that he wouldn’t stay behind. As I ran, I loaded rockets into my rocket launcher, my weapon of choice, making sure it was ready for battle. Those two marines had been more than a diversion, I thought. They had also significantly weakened the spider mastermind. The dream hinted at this, the dream was what was giving me instructions! That’s its purpose. And now I knew! There was a problem. And my rocket launcher was the solution. The plan was obvious: Tim and I had to go in and finish the damned thing, then take the soulcube. What this mysterious object did, how it was activated, or what were supposed to do with it in general, I was not sure. We had to get it; once we did, we ought to know what to do then.

So my dream really had been a vision, it made sense. Because of it I knew what to do. And the dreams the person in my dream had had, the ones showing the fall of the Earth, hell taking over. Those dreams had been a moral catalyst; that was their purpose. They had made that marine push until the end, to fight and to create a diversion, all so Tim and I could have an opening, to finish the fight. It was brilliant, an orchestrated plan! Who was behind it? Could it really be God? Or some higher guiding force? Maybe events had to take place in a predetermined way and this was their way of showing it. It didn’t matter. I knew what we had to do, and that was all that mattered.

We had to duck to get under the slowly-closing door. And with a loud thud, all light from the outside was shut out. In a few seconds, my eyes started to adjust to the darkness, revealing a poorly-lit with pale green lamps cavern, or dome of sorts. Pathways carved in metal led from the edges of the round walls, leading and converging at the centre. There was a forest of metre-high cylindrical objects, looking like power generators, running along these lines, joined by tubes and other sorts of machinery, which snaked its way across the floor. Determinedly looking ahead, I made my way over these obstacles. I didn’t bother looking around for any monsters that might pose a threat; everything of that sort was drawn to where the two other marines were. We had to hurry, however; they hadn’t lasted too long in my vision.

The spider was clambering ahead, six legs proving useful in traversing the uneven, tube and piston-strewn ground, its metallic armour dully reflecting light while its brain gruesomely glistened in the near-darkness. The mechanical sound of its moving legs and the thuds issued when one of six legs came down to the ground filled the empty arena-type building with sound, drowning out our own footsteps to our own advantage. And as we neared the centre, we saw that there was a rising platform of sorts, which held a large, central mechanical column, atop which sat what had to be the soulcube.

Not that it really was a cube, but it was more than a gut feeling that indicated that it really was the ancient relic from the past Mars civilisation. It was more like a cube with a pinched underside, so the planes of its four sides sloped towards each other, though didn’t quite end at a point. Complex lines running along its surface formed odd shapes, many of which converged on the two opposite sides to form an upward-pointing sheath of sorts that ran along the side plane and gently overlapped the top, its tapering end pointing

at the ceiling. Its surface, thoroughly uneven by rounded forms running together, was a dark almost black colour. On each of its two sheaths, there were odd yellow bulges that protruded outward. Between the sheaths, atop the soulcube, was an odd depression of sorts that glowed gently.

The spider halted.

"It ends here," my own voice said, then I paused, wondering what the hell had gotten over me. I don't say things like that. The words had their effect, however. The spider spun around in its surprise, its screech echoing loudly throughout the colossal structure. It shifted uncomfortably and manoeuvred itself between ourselves and the soulcube. Its eyes bore into me, trying to see beyond. I didn't really hear it speak, but I felt its thoughts. It was trying to say something, trying to reason. It was describing me, my futility, Tim, describing our situation as hopeless.

I don't care, I thought, hoping the spider heard me. You will still die.

Then, everything turned upside-down as a human shape strolled between myself and the spider. My thoughts broke away, as did my gaze. A rush of incomprehension and surprise, a lack of desirability in believing what I was seeing to be true. I had known this person; he was a good friend. Yes, I immediately recognised the person.

It was Jacobs.

"Jacobs!" I cried. Tim was looking wide-eyed and open-mouthed at the drama that was ensuing.

"What the hell?"

"We thought you died!"

He grinned maliciously. "Yes, well, things turn out differently." He started pacing, wide, maniacal eyes twitching, gazing from me to Tim. "And now that you're here, I'm afraid I can't let you pass any further. You will ruin things. And it will be a great disappointment, now that we're so close. Great, great disappointment," he said, shaking his head side to side.

"You," I said. "You of all people, the one always talking about the virtues of God and religion and forgiveness!"

"Well, course of events can have impact on your will. Where was God when I shot that innocent scientist? I mean, where the hell is God in any of this? He may be there, but He sure as hell isn't doing his job. I've done mine!" His face was twisted in agony as he jabbed himself in the chest. "I've done mine! We all have! Oh, we're in deep shit man. This is where He pulls us out, man! But what now? Look what has come of it! You know it's inevitable, because there are those that take action and those that sit back and watch. The latter lose, and you're on their side! Don't you see? Are you blind to the truth? Blind faith, is it called? Well, you don't even have that. You never were religious. You said religion was bullshit. Well, look at where are now?" He spread his arms wide, motioning at his surroundings. "You're in hell, boy!"

"Things change," I said, trying to be calm.

He shook his hand at me madly. "Yes! Yes, that's it! Exactly, nail on the head. Things change, and you have to change with them. If you don't change, you're left behind, eat the dust. No more! You have to adapt, to change. Isn't that what life is all about? Isn't that the reason we have come to be as we are? And look! Another turn of tides has come. Look at this," he said, motioning towards himself. "Do you know what this is? This is change, adaptation, evolution! You have to know where to go and when to

do it! Cause if you don't, then the shit hits the fan. You can either watch it happen from the side or have it happen to you. Which will it be? I know I've made my choice. Have you? Do you know where you're going? Of course you don't know. Blind faith... Don't you see it's all bullshit?"

Jacobs had gone mad, I thought.

He briskly walked up to me. "I know what you're thinking," he said, eyeing me closely with those odd staring eyes I had never seen before when I had known him. "Yes, I know. Do you think I'm stupid? Adaptation doesn't mean losing your mind. Oh yes, I'm still here," he tapped his temple. "I'm still here, but *you* don't know where *you* are. You're thinking, 'Oh, he's lost it.' Well, I haven't lost anything. It's all in here, man. If anyone's lost it, it's you. Yes, I know. Your demons, they're everywhere. You see them, don't you? I know, I watched you. Well, how do you know this isn't real? How do you know what's real? Is this real?" He tugged on his armour. "Is it? Or am I one of your hallucinations? I'll tell you what's real! This, this place, it's all real. You know what's an illusion? An illusion that gives you false hope? Your God, that's what. You've been abandoned, that's what! It's a turn of tides. This is adaptation!"

I couldn't hide my sickened expression.

"What is it?" he asked. "Don't like what you see? Huh? Don't like my face, these clothes? These arms? Don't like adaptation? Well, get used to it, because this is the only future, the only way. There are not two paths, just one this time, and you either take it or you sit there and die. It's the only way, you have to see. Well, maybe you can't see. Those who are blind cannot see, and you are definitely one. Yes, you reek of blind faith. You don't believe, you don't want to believe, but because of this, these clothes, this face, you have to believe. It's all too real. You have no choice. Well, how do you like it? How do you like the truth? I am truth, I am evolution. It has this face," he said running his palm down his face. "These arms, these legs. There is no point is it? Do you see now? Have I shed rays of light on you? Or are you still in the darkness with your demons?"

"No," I said.

He started shaking. "So, you see? You have made a choice? Not so hard is it when you have no choice. There never was choice, just one path. You either walk it or you don't. You have to make a choice..."

"I've made mine," I said, coldly as I could, raising the shotgun that was strapped to my side and raising it.

Jacobs backed away lightly and lifted a machinegun that was attached to his belt. I noticed that there was a shotgun there, too.

"There is no leaving here," he said, his voice steady and more sane than it had been when he had spoken before. His eyes narrowed. "You have to stay. It's how you make your stay that's in question here."

While I had been gazing at him, I had not realised that Tim behind me had been building up anger. Before I knew what was happening, the rattle of his chaingun filled the room and we all dove to the sides while the spider strafed to the side. I fell on the uneven, mechanical ground and crawled behind one of the nearby cylindrical generator-type things. Jacobs was elsewhere in the mechanical forest. I only heard grunts, magnified by the vast, curved ceiling, and the heavy, constant sound of the six mechanical spider legs working their way elsewhere across the room.

"Tim!" I yelled. "Tim, talk to me!"

“I’m here,” came his voice, somewhere behind me and to my right.

I started walking in his direction, bent down to keep myself below the forest of generators.

A burst of rapid fire went off over my head. Instinctively, I threw myself down.

“Enjoying yourself?” I heard Jacobs’ voice, back to its unusual, uneven, high-pitched form, coming from somewhere on my far left.

I pulled a granade from my belt and threw it in his direction, hoping to get lucky.

There was a grunt moments before a fireball rose, twisting inwardly on itself, illuminating the giant room for a few seconds before fading to black as it rose to the ceiling. Then came a scurry of footsteps somewhere off in the distance.

Jacobs laughed, his eerie cackling voice carried overhead.

I made my way towards the centre of the room, where there was an open space, a ring that encircled the central pillar.

Tim appeared across the open space, sitting next to one of the cylindrical objects. He started edging towards me. He had bent over, though was considerably taller than me and had somewhat of a difficulty in completely concealing himself. He had half-way reached me when a figure rose up from behind him.

Jacobs had stepped out into the open, gun pointed at Tim’s back.

“Tim!”

I charged out in the open just as Tim twisted to look behind. I dove, shotgun raised, and managed to fire a round in Jacobs’ direction just as he let off a short burst of machinegun fire. I fell hard on my stomach and felt disoriented for a few split seconds. Then, recovering my senses, I rolled next to the central pillar and looked around, making sure that I was safe. My eyes travelled to Tim, who was lying facedown on the floor. Jacobs was nowhere to be seen.

“Where’s your God now?” I heard his sly, shaking with glee voice.

Shaking fingers reaching for my belt, I replaced the one round I had fired off with my shotgun.

I didn’t know what to do, but it was evident that I couldn’t stay there forever. With a deep breath, I dove out and away from the pillar, back into the mechanical forest. As I did, machinegun fire echoed over the air, followed by a hollow click. His clip had ran dry. Feeling the sense of opportunity, I ran back out, sprinting in the direction from where his fire had come.

My eyes caught him, ducking behind one of the small generators. I could see that I had grazed his shoulder with my shotgun blast. He threw his machinegun aside in exasperation and reached for his shotgun. I got there first, though, and I landed the butt of my shotgun flat across his jaw. He fell back as his hands recoiled in pain then reached forward for my neck. To prevent him from succeeding, I planted another hit across his face. He drew back and started trying to crawl away, trailing blood from his broken nose as he went. I grabbed his foot and tried pulling him back, which was a mistake on my part. He had stopped crawling and reached for his shotgun, and just as I pulled him back, he smacked me with his own gun.

I fell back and raised my shotgun towards him as I went, hoping to block whatever was coming, though I soon found that to be a huge mistake. He knocked it out of my hands with his own, sending it flying a good three metres, then started employing the butt of his gun in the same way I had.

“Where’s you God now?” he cried between hits, voice shaking like he was on the verge of crying. “Where’s you God now, you fucking good-for-nothing son of a bitch!”

Regaining some of my senses, I kned him in the stomach and pulled his gun away. Finally having some control, I planted my boot square in his face and pushed him away. As he fell back, I raised his shotgun and fired, and this time he was not getting away with mere scratches. With that, I lay there for a second, pausing to clear my vision, wipe the blood from my face, and clear my mind. When I could see again, I crawled out from between the mechanical area and tried to look over to where Tim was. He had apparently woken and was crawling painfully towards the central column that housed the soulcube, leaving a bloody trail behind.

With immeasurable effort, I pushed myself to my feet and started limping forward when, out of nowhere, a giant mechanical foot descended upon Tim, its sharp, tapering end piercing through him and pinning him to the ground. He yelled in pain.

And as Tim lay there, squirming in agony and yet unable to move, the spider turned to me, expressionless face gazing coldly at me. As its red eyes bore into me, I felt its emotions, its jubilation. It knew it had won. It was mesmerising, putting me in a trance. I knew it, and yet I could do nothing; I couldn’t fight and allowed the cold wave to wash over me. The dark, humid room washed away, and I was elsewhere. I was weak, losing blood, battered, hallucinating, and the spider mastermind was exploiting this. It knew I was into its thoughts, so it fed me peaceful ones that took me away from the battlefield.

But I caught myself.

I suddenly realised I was standing there, exposed, and dove away just as the spiders heavy chaingun echoed across the air.

Huddling behind one of the cylinders, I pulled out the rocket launcher that had thus far remained virgin and tied to my belt and made sure it was loaded. I wiped more blood from myself and thought, time to end this whole thing.

I jumped out, trying to keep steady as I could.

But it wasn’t stupid. It knew that I would dare launching rockets at it while my friend was there at its feet.

The mastermind shifted, moving to the side, dragging Tim with it.

There was one way to end it all: sacrifice Tim.

Sacrifice Tim. It was not the way I wanted it to end. Then again, it was possible that he was already gone, I thought. But then, didn't corpses in hell burn away only to be replaced by a soul? I remembered it in my dream; one of the marines had died and he later reappeared. Would that happen now? Surely it would, though the idea was not comforting. There was one other way: try to get the soulcube, draw the spider mastermind away somehow. If I had the soulcube, would the spider mastermind shoot me? After all, they have the soulcube yet they hadn't dared to destroy it thus far, which meant that this didn't present a solution to them. If they could, they would've destroyed it by now.

As of now, the mastermind wouldn't think twice before unloading its chaingun in my direction. Getting the soulcube was likely to change that. That, and I wouldn't endanger Tim in any way.

God, I hope he's alive! I thought.

Not sparing any more time, I lunged towards the central column. Immediately, the spider started rattling off its weapon. I ran forward as fast as I could and put the column between myself and the spider. Immediately, the firing ceased. I had assumed right, the beast wouldn't dare shoot in the direction of the soulcube. It did, however, try to edge around it, to get a clear shot at me. As it did, I moved sideways, keeping the mysterious object and the giant mechanical column that held it between us.

This game went on for a while. The spider repetitively jumped sideways, hoping to surprise me, to get an opening. Meanwhile, I was waiting for an opening of my own.

After a few more futile tries, I had a clear opportunity to grab the soulcube. The spider saw this and lunged forward, mechanical legs flashing at me, preventing me from reaching it.

It circled around, trying to reach me, though by then I had reached the other side.

Now! I thought, flinging myself forward and grabbing the odd object and pulling it out of its metal housing. It came free in my hands, a tiny cube shining dully in the dim light. Greenish hues danced around the black markings that covered it, its gently rounded edges fading into darkness. For a small object, it was surprisingly heavy. In fact, I thought it'd be rather burdensome, come time to run, roll and jump.

I backed away from the metallic column and the spider edged out from behind it. It wavered, stood there, red eyes dancing between me and the object in my hands. Tim, still attached to its foot, was being dragged across the floor, leaving a bloody stain. The spider was slowly and wearily walking towards me. Its chaingun barrels spun expectantly, whining. I held out the soulcube in front of me, as an indication that I had it, apparent as it was. The creature was now at a disadvantage at the hand of its own massive chaingun. The weapon was powerful though imprecise, and killing me would without question mean hitting the soulcube, especially at the central position that I held it.

A while paused, a silent tension filling the air. It seemed to be making up its mind. And then, it decided. The spider lifted its bloodied leg where Tim was and shook it in the air, sending his body flying a good ten metres and coming to halt. It turned to me. I had made my mistake, now it had made its. Ceasing the opportunity, I pulled out my rocket launcher and sent a missile flying towards it. The spider dodged aggressively sideways and charged towards me, several tons of biomechanical terror flying towards

Yours Truly, carried by six unnaturally fast mechanical legs that shook the floor with each step.

Oh shit.

I had really pissed it off, and the sheer shock of seeing something so massive and disgusting charging at me full speed, shaking the ground made me forget about shooting it. I spun around, holding the soulcube behind me to keep it from shooting me in the back, and charged into the metallic forest of generators. Behind me, over the thunderous steps, came loud, ground-shaking crashes. Glancing over my shoulder (which was a mistake) I saw the creature still charging full speed, using its front two legs to rip any of the metallic cylinders that got in its way. Massive panels and pipes, along with the heavy generators, were flying everywhere, impacting the ground in deafening thuds. The floor shook. Sparks were flying as the creature chased me, ripping apart anything that got in its way.

I was nearing the wall and would be cornered if I continued, so I veered to my left. Behind me, the creature roared in vanquish and charged after me. One of the generators fell from the sky and right at my feet. Feeling instinct creep in, I dived over it and landed in a hasty roll (because of the uneven, mechanical ground) and continued on my way.

A pipe grazed my shoulder as it fell from the sky, but I didn't stop.

As I emerged back into the central area, I saw Tim, who had weakly crawled beside the central column and propped himself against it.

"Tim!" I yelled, bending over and forcefully sliding the soulcube across the floor.

I could feel the raspy breathing of the spider mastermind behind me.

If it breathes, it dies.

In one swift motion, I threw myself forward, the spider's massive metallic foot falling where I had been moments before. I fell into another roll then threw myself to the side, turning over as I did, raising my rocket launcher.

The spider had halted a mere metre from me and paused. It turned, shifting ember-like eyes towards Tim. With that, it started charging towards him, full-speed, ground shaking. Tim was helpless. He was looking at the oncoming leviathan with eyes half-closed, one hand wrapped around the soulcube, the other applying pressure to the wound in his stomach where the spider had pierced him with its leg. He didn't move, didn't make any indication of being aware of what was happening. But he was alive, hanging by a thread, and I wasn't going to let that thread snap.

The mastermind didn't get too far before deciding I was unimportant.

I like attention.

And two rockets ought to get me some of that. I fired two successive rounds. Both landed at the creature's feet. They were already charred and damaged, and with the second explosion that erupted from its feet, one of the legs broke off, falling heavily to the ground, while two on its other side were rendered useless. The beast stumbled forward and fell, its remaining legs flashing and struggling. It continued to edge forward, legs scrambling, hungry, red eyes dancing in their sockets. The monster had nearly reached Tim, it was a mere metre away, and it stopped. It reached forward with one of its front mechanical legs, trying to knock the soulcube out of Tim's hand.

Tim pulled his hand away sharply, yet remained there, looking at it without any emotion.

The spider glared at him and I felt a sudden hatred rise in the air, in the spider's emotions. The air was alight with electricity. I could feel its anguish and bitterness as it screeched and sharply raised its front foot before bringing it down on Tim's arm, cutting it clean off.

Tim didn't scream; he simply fainted.

I charged forward, tossing rocket launcher aside and pulling out my shotgun. The mastermind didn't seem to notice; the biomechanical monstrosity seemed preoccupied in reclaiming the soulcube.

I finally reached it, and yelling in frustration, put my boot on its brain, as if to keep it from moving, and pointed my shotgun at the disgusting, grey mass. There was a still moment, like eternity, where I saw my own foot, the creature's brain at my feet, its light lustre in the dim light, the barrel of my own gun pointing at it. Was this it? The defining moment? The one that would mean the end of all this? It was an odd feeling that washed over me, of relief even though it hadn't yet ended. And yet I knew, I could feel it. This was the one moment. A second passed. The spider didn't do anything. It understood that its reign would end, that it had failed.

I squeezed the trigger.

A huge portion of the brain broke away and bits and other indistinguishable slimy bits flew away. The creature ran through convulsions for a few moments before it fell still, the mechanical legs relaxing and the metallic base dying away with a lessening machine hum that slowly faded away. The red eyes continued staring forward, caught in a mixed state of anger and surprise, and some triumph, too. I collapsed behind it, breathing heavily, exhausted, unsure of what to do. I sat for a few moments, catching my breath, reassuring myself that it was all over, before crawling to Tim, who was still lying unconscious and slumped against the base.

"Tim," I said between heavy breaths. "Tim!"

I checked his pulse and, after I managed to find one, busied myself in roughly patching up his wounds, tearing cloth wherever I found it. First his stomach wound, which had been somewhat softened by his armour. The gunfire he had received from behind was also mostly taken up by the surrounding armour as well, though a few stray shots had landed in his neck, which is why I presumed he had passed out. His worst wound, in the end, came out to actually be his severed arm; it refused to stop bleeding and was impossibly difficult to bandage properly. Many blood-soaked rags later, I felt that Tim was ready to move on.

Now what? I thought to myself. Well, we obviously couldn't stay there; we had to get out. I remember the scientist had mentioned recovering the soulcube, not using it there. We had to make our way back to one of the portals, to return to Earth. This wasn't inviting at all, however. I was tired and weak, my legs unsteady, breath constantly short, and was forced to carry Tim over my shoulder, as well as the soulcube, which didn't leave a whole lot of room for carrying any firearms or other means of protection.

I reached for Tim's severed arm, which was still clutching the soulcube, and pulled it from the cold fingers. Pocketing the object, I slung Tim over my shoulder, nearly falling over as I did, and took out my machinegun, my second to last remaining weapon and the only one besides my pistol that I could wield with just one hand. And so, not making a single steady step (something undoubtedly aided by the uneven ground)

lumbered towards the exit, hoping that whatever luck we had would last us the whole trip home.

My feet carried me into the forest of generators, towards one of the marked paths that led towards the exit. Debris and remains from the spider mastermind's rampage were scattered about, entire sections ripped from their mechanical housing. I neared the door, barely keeping balance, gasping for breath. It was a good twenty metres ahead when a shot rang, the unmistakable sound of a shotgun going off, and I felt severe pain shoot through my left leg. It was unbearable, and Tim's weight only added to it. Gravity was too hard to resist; with that, I allowed myself to crumple to the ground. As I did, my eyes travelled back to the source of the shot.

I could see Jacobs lying on the ground, maniacal face wrapped in wide-eyed fury, crawling towards me, a shotgun in one hand. His stomach was a gaping hole; his lower body was attached to his torso by a few mere threads; his intestines had spilled out and he was dragging them behind himself as he continued clawing forward towards me. His breathing came in short wheezes and his skin was oddly pale, though that didn't keep his face from achieving that inhuman expression of mixed hate and pain. The image was sickening and I fought the urge to vomit. His dark hair seemed darker than usual in contrast to his unusually white skin. And there he stood, trailing insides and blood, eyes boring into me.

Jacobs paused and made an ineffectual attempt and forcing his entrails back in his torso. He turned to me face twisted in agony and anger. "Look what you did to me, you son of a bitch!"

He yelled, raising his shotgun. However, I was faster, and all he received was a face-full of lead. I turned away, trying to keep my emotions together, though it was difficult. Jacobs was a friend, a comrade in arms, one of the many with which I had shared emotions from my waving love/hate relationship with fermented beverages to my utter dislike of Briggs. I knew that I had to do what I had done to him, though now that it was over and he had passed, the memory was only too painful and growing in my mind. As I made my way to Tim in hopes of picking him up again and continuing on my way, I made sure to look away from where Jacobs was lying. My last image of him, his poor, disfigured body, stood in my mind.

My vision blurred as tears rose, though I forced them away.

There came a distant rumble from the outside. I paused, Tim half-way slung over my shoulder. It grew, a steady noise, and soon the ground reverberated with its rhythm. I knew what it was moments before it charged in. The door at the end of the room slid open and imps started pouring in. They ran through the room, contorting over the machinery, covering everything. They moved like a liquid. I managed to push myself up and started hobbling over to the central column, away from the door. Soon, we stood at the centre. By then, several thousand imps had filtered in, not leaving any spot uncovered besides where I stood. They formed a circle around me, beyond which lay a sea of claws, flashing red eyes and exoskeletons.

Screeches came, limbs flashed, imps hissed. They were taunting me, waiting to attack. The two marines were dead, and soon we were to perish in the exact same manner. The soulcube was to fall back into their hands. And even with their leader dead, hell would rise again and complete what it had started. It was hopeless, unless—

I pulled the soulcube out of my pocket and raised it. Immediately, the room became still and quiet, as if all the imps were wax figures, unmoving and unheeding. Thousands of red eyes flashed in its direction. How the hell does this damned thing work? I asked myself as I examined it. If there was a time to use it, it had to be now. It had to be. Besides the markings, one of the faces, I saw a depression in the object's surface. Imps started shifting uncomfortably and suddenly, they started charging towards me, coming from all directions, claws flashing, trailing saliva. They drew closer, and as I did, I turned to Tim.

"Are you ready?" I asked even though I knew he couldn't hear me.

The imps drew near.

I put my thumb in the depression. A blinding flash came, and I started falling away from consciousness, catching glimpses of odd forms hovering and flying around. They were like spirits, shining a pearly white, that flew around, almost like giant knife blades, spinning, cutting through the mass imps, severing them in two, cutting through the room, cutting through me, cutting through reality. From where the imps were severed came a red glow that grew in intensity before it, too, shone brightly. It was overwhelming light, but I greeted it. It had been long since I had seen anything so bright, and it brought blind hope into me. I had done what I had come to do, I had completed my task, and from here, it had to work. There couldn't be complications, more problems or obstacles, I had come across innumerable odds and had succeeded, and if there were any decency left in the world, it would all be over. It had to be. Feeling relaxed, I bathed in the light before this glow faded to black.

What had we really fought for?

It was difficult to fend off this question as I emerged back on Earth. I didn't know how I got there. I didn't know where I was. Vienna? Back in Berlin? It was all the same, ruins stretching as far as the horizon with its rolling hills where, grey trees, stripped of all greenness, hung, devoid of life. Everything was covered in ash. Metallic beams and crumbling structures lay around. Could this not be Europe? Could this be North America? Was it possible that we had been too late and that Deimos had fallen? If so, it was all in vain, with nothing left to rebuild. Maybe I was the only person left on the Earth, I thought darkly. Maybe I was alone. Or maybe I was a prisoner of my own mind and I didn't know what was going on anymore, because none of it made sense. But if this was Earth, and I really was here, I had to ask myself one thing: What had we really fought for?

Smoke rose from the ground, glowing an eerie red that faded into black as it billowed up into the air, merging with the swirling grey clouds above. I wondered if one of the nuclear weapons had gone off in the area. I had discarded my radiation suit when I had first arrived in hell. I started to walk forward, heading elsewhere with no true direction in mind, rocks crumbled at my feet, their crackling sound an odd reminder that brought me back to reality, a sound carried away by the wind. My body ached, I felt helpless. And only more pain arose as I thought back to my friends, to all those that had died. And for what? I looked around at the shattered city that surrounded me. Skeletons of buildings became ominous silhouettes as everything darkened.

Had they died for this?

My face twisted in agony. Feeling alone, the emptiness everywhere, I didn't bother restraining my emotions and crumpled on the ground. There were no tears, no crying. It was emotions, pain, beyond that. There was no human expression, no human trait that could express how I felt. 'Don't worry, they'll rebuild,' I remembered Carson saying. But there was no one. In the halls of the London installation, underground under the wreckage of Europe, and even in my vision where I had stood on Mars, there I had felt isolation. But this was different. This was beyond isolation. I wasn't saved, I wasn't living. I was slowly dying.

I pushed myself back up.

All was gone.

Fighting my aching face that fought to crumple in on itself out of anguish and suffering, I walked on. I didn't know why, but I knew I had to. I was going to walk until I died. And thus, I was going to die on my feet, like I hadn't when I should've. Fighting, like so many of my fellow marines had. I wished I could've died at the hand of some monster, not out of starvation or exhaustion. It was a heavy burden, and my mind was falling apart with each passing minute. The steaming ground below me filled my lungs and the moisture brought on another wave of strong emotions.

Maybe it hadn't been all in vain. We had stopped hell. Civilisation itself had been targeted, but surely there were survivors who would be able to rebuild. Of course, most of civilisation had been wiped away. Humanity had to start over. Maybe we had done so good, but it was over for me. As I gazed at the ruins around me, it became evident that I wasn't going to make it out alive. Lack of water or sheer exhaustion was bound to get me first. And had the soulcube wiped out all of the demons on Earth or had it simply sealed

all connections? Maybe some demons had missed the shockwave? Still, we had won, but not without losing a lot.

Or had we? Reinhold had said that many were sacrificed by the soulcube when it had last been used. Had I sacrificed the human race to stop hell? Was everyone dead? If so, why was I alive?

No, it couldn't be.

Pulling out the disk the scientist Reinhold had given to me, I examined it. Making sure it was secure in a box, I found a rare patch of earth between the crumbling walls and structures, and buried it there. For the future archaeologists to find. Maybe Reinhold's hard work would someday be appreciated, for knowledge and understanding was the fruit of humanity. Pausing there for a second, I thought back to Reinhold and everyone else who had slipped past my thoughts. So many had died, it was painful to think back. There was a future, though it was uncertain. I would never find out, I knew that. It was a victory, but not a true victory. With that final thought, I wiped my hands and stood up, feeling pain shoot through my legs.

I paused again and looked around me.

And there I saw an imp, crouching by one of the rocks, its black form nearly disguised next to the charred rubble besides which it stood. Its red eyes gave it away, all ten of them, sprayed against its malformed face. It didn't move, not even twitch as it stared at me. For a second, I thought it might be dead. Had the soulcube wiped out all of the demons on Earth? It must've. Because I knew what this was. There really was no imp there, I was sure of it. It was another one of my damned visions. I was tired of them, tired of my surroundings, tired of everything. Feeling anger surge inside me, anger at every single atom that comprised this universe, I bent over and picked up a rock. Shaking wildly, I bounded forward and threw it at the imp with all of my might.

The imp recoiled as the rock hit and jumped off to the side, hissing angrily, baring its fangs.

Something washed over me. Pointing my finger at it, I heard myself screaming, "I know you're not real! You're not real, you son-of-a-bitch!" Feeling helpless, unable to control what I was doing, I bent over picking up another piece of debris and throwing it as hard as I could. "I know you're not real!" Then, with blind anger continually building up inside of me, I threw my shotgun at it. If there was one person to blame, it was God. It was His manipulation that drove me to insanity. It was all His fault! If it wasn't for his 'divine intervention' would I be here, screaming like a lunatic? Stalked by my own mind? And in the end, He, everyone, had failed. Humanity was dead, as was my sanity. What was there to live for? What was there to fight for? Nothing remained. Damn Him, damn everything!

It was manipulation! My madness was a side-effect of this machination. I hadn't wanted it, I hadn't asked for it. Insanity was just a hindrance in God's plans. That's why I had that hallucination of Tim explaining what was going on. That's why he had told me things fabricated by my own mind would never tell me, that there was more, that I'd see him again. It was God's way of fixing things. But it was too late, I had lost my sanity because I was nothing more than a playing piece on a giant board, and it's because I lost it that everything had nearly been lost. It was how Tim had appeared there, waiting for me in hell so we could finish this whole thing. If it wasn't for Him stepping in, things

would've worked out better; I wouldn't have started seeing things, Tim and I would've never been split up. It was a giant mistake that had nearly cost everything!

And now it had cost me my mind.

I had been used, a tool! It was all a grand game of chess, and God had lost. What else could account for the broken down carnage of a world that surrounded me?

I almost fell over as I threw the gun.

The imaginary imp avoided the shotgun, lunging sideways and landing gracefully, grinning back at me slyly.

It hissed.

"Get out of my mind!"

The imp hissed angrily, its eyes flashing maliciously. And it stood there on all fours, hunched over, watching me with what almost looked like curiosity.

"Get out!" I screamed again.

I was an outsider, I had no control. I watched myself roar loudly, inhumanly, face twisted in the lost expression of a madman. I felt it surge inside me. And yet, there was nothing to prevent it, no way to control it. I thought I had my sanity, but I was sure that the imp was not real, that it was an image of my own insanity, something constructed by my own mind, and I was tired of it. Tired of fighting what was real and what was not. The pain and suffering, no one could ever possibly know how horrible it was. I felt my face twist in pain again.

Weakness washed over me in a spasm. Cursing God and everything else in my mind, I nearly fell over from exhaustion.

"Go away..."

The imaginary beast bounded forward and swiped its claws at me.

I didn't move.

The imp moved back and hissed, its eternal grin remaining focused on me. And it started circling me slowly, all ten eyes never moving away from my direction.

My eyes fell down and I saw that something wasn't right.

Blood was falling from my stomach. My breathing hastened and an expression of sheer shock and surprise forced its way on my face. Running my hands over my stomach, I felt warm blood. My heart was throbbing in my ears, my lungs became devoid of air. Blood poured on the ground steadily, a deep red in the low light.

Utter silence echoed across the air. The warm wind howled in my ears and wrapped around me. The smoke danced like a charmed snake up and around as the current blew through it. The red flame underneath was fighting a losing battle and slowly dying away into darkness. As this happened, an ethereal darkness started to surround me and everything seemed to become distant. There was still the debris. The crumbled buildings. The grey sky. The rocky horizon. And yet, it was all unimportant, all distant and out of focus. All of my senses were numbed and fell away as well. Who cares? I thought. What did it matter?

The imp jumped at me, knocking me down. It tore at me in a mad frenzy, limbs flashing, jaws masticating, saliva flying everywhere.

And yet, it was unimportant.

Feeling a warm feeling creep inside of me, I thought back to my days of boot camp, the annoying drill sergeant, and my days spent in the Near East. It was all distant, and yet somehow tangible. I could feel Briggs' stale breath as he shouted at me for

punching out another officer. I could feel the sting of the sun as I watched the distant convoys moving against the desert. Then I saw that one mysterious marine, that individual, who protested against Briggs, and his tall friend. He seemed oddly vivid, as if he was standing next to me. I didn't know his name, but I felt like he was a life-long friend. Like he was a part of me. And I saw Sarge and Tyler, Carson and Roach. The scientist Reinhold. Then there was Tim, grinning, standing besides the others. I knew they weren't really there, and yet I felt they were real. And so, leaving my body behind where it was being ravaged by the imp, I walked towards them.

And as I reached them, I realised one thing. It hadn't all been in vain. Humanity always searched for a meaning in everything without ever considering that there was no meaning. That there was no answer to everything. That none of it mattered. Everything simply *was*. And if it were any different, we wouldn't be there to observe it. Could there be meaning in tiny beings in the vastness of the universe? Humans always overestimated their own worth. Humans are gods inside their own minds, and yet little beyond that. But it didn't matter. It was all distant, a fading haze, a darkening void. What mattered was being able to search for a meaning. To have one's mind. So, walking towards my old friends, I left all insanity behind me.

Feeling renewed, I smiled as everything faded to black.

THE END