

The war at the river Zitar Nuo

By

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One

The Zitar Nuo was the great river set winding between a valley and two mountain ranges. It sat strategically between the battle-lines of two corporations whom lusted after it. Each company's employees were set to fight the other, their machines grinding through the dirt of the riverbanks while sinking ever deeper into its muck and mire. The soldier's boots sinking into the mud, sucking on them as they struggled to break free. Each company's soldiers running from the massive machines pounding the muddy ground even more. The men of the Nenthar Corporation set against the Xelon Dru Company. One must hold the land, power, and only one. The Xelon Dru Corporation slung fire right in the water of the Nuo pounding the Nenthar Corporation's loyal soldiers with heavy mortars, fire mortars and then the gas bombs. The Nenthar's shrunk from the withering fire, digging into the mud forming a deep defensive trench line using machines and monster equipment's straight from the factories, the silicon and steel machine factories.

The Nenthar soldiers sucked precious filtered air in their sealed suits, their air conditioners strapped to each of their backs, their helmets protecting their face and lungs from the noxious gases. Their suits also tapped with computer electronics and antenna. Another wave of gas streamed from the splintering shells as they sank into the muck, plasma shooters and rifles, useless as they dangled from straps about the Nenthar soldier's shoulders. Abreon in his suit was a trained Nenthar buried deep into the pits riding upon the platform of a machine which task was to drill forward and underneath their defensive line and under no man's land. The machines drilling auger was steaming hot punching vertically down under the muddy ground. Abreon turned the machine about, the machine bogging in the thick mud, as he spoke into a helmet speaker, "Drean, the driller is choking in the muck, it's not drilling down any further."

A mortar flew overhead reaching the location of another Nenthar trench, blowing up soldiers and equipment. The commander of the corporate unit of 1 Beta, Drean swearing at the blast and yelling at the struggling Abreon, the driller and Abreon caked in thick brown mud, "Keep drilling! We need the trench deeper to prepare for the final assault," referring to an assault over the Zitar Nuo, which would later prove to be fruitless.

Abreon yanking at the driller controls, but the driller seizing up completely consumed by mud packed in all around it. He struggled, breathing heavily, sweat pouring down his face, behind his mask as a mortar hit the ground nearby, throwing muck up everywhere. Most of the Nenthar soldiers began to pull back from the unfinished forward trenches to rearward previous dug in older and deeper bunkers. They scurried back timidly awaiting the offensive cease-fire that still had yet to occur. Abreon cursing to himself, giving up on the driller, jumping off as his suit warned him that it was now running off emergency power. Abreon leaped off the machine into the mud, forcing himself back, through perpendicular front line tunnels, like a sewer rat. Abreon struggled as a display within his helmet began flailing red as he pulled himself along, past others and their suits, the mist of poison gas thick. Abreon yelling to his commander, "Drean help me, damn you!"

Drean hiding in a well-placed bunker, the guns of the Nenthars in the distance and rear of their positions, barking back into his suit microphone, "Abreon, I'm in authority over you!"

Abreon pushing himself through the mud, screaming, "I'm going to die!"

Drean, "I am your superior officer! Hold your position, dig!"

Abreon falling into the mud, standing as the flashing red helmet indicator grew even more urgent. Once power shut off he would not be able to filter the poisoned air. He would suffocate to death. Abreon wiped his mask off with a muddy forehead, soaked in thick, brown mud, water from the river seeping into the corporations defensive line trenches. Abreon struggled into still another trench, the computer within his suit whispering more subtle warnings:

"Warning, you have twenty seconds of remaining power."

Abreon screaming to his commander, "You used me and you're going to let me die!"

Drean, "No! You wasted yourself! You're a Nenthar soldier!"

"You have ten seconds of remaining power."

Abreon finding a bunker, "Come on!" pulling the airlock door open and grinding it closed behind him. Abreon punched in the detox codes on its key panel the airlock drawing any residual air remaining inside then refilling it with a fog of cleansers.

Abreon, "Please!"

The airlock cycled through the cleansing procedure, pulling back out the cleansers, finally depressurizing the unit with clean purified oxygen.

Abreon's suit shut down, now without power. He gasped for breath while snapping his helmet off. He fell back to the floor of the airlock choking but recovering as he took deep breaths of fresh air. Through those gasps, he spoke into his helmet, "Drean?" You deserve all the hell you get! You know that! I'm alive, damn you!" He pulled himself up, opening the second internal door open as he looked at the outside door's portal window. He could see several other men, outside clawing at the door. He closed the second door behind him, as one of the eight men grabbing Abreon and his helmet. One yelled into it, "Save us! Save us! There is no food or water here!"

Another one snatching the helmet, as Abreon stood, then fell back to a bunker wall, the other one screaming into his helmet microphone, "We're all going to die! The gas is thick outside! The mortars push us down further, every day!"

Finally, Drean speaking through Abreon's helmet, "I am your commander. You will speak to me with respect! Have patience, your time will come."

Abreon standing there amongst them, shaking, "Let me see that!" stumbling over, taking the helmet back, the words of Drean reverberating as the bunker shuttered and as a mortar impacted the

ground nearby, Dreon continuing "Listen to me! We need new tranches and shafts under the 23rd quadrant... HQ wants us..." Abreon turned the communicator off line, shaking his head in disgust. He looked at those around him, a rag bunch. He sat down next to the closed air lock noticing they were in shambles and the fact that they still had their plasma rifles over their shoulders, "We need to conserve the battery life of the helmet transceiver. My suit is out, but my helmet has its own draw."

All eight of them sat on the floor of the bunker. They looked like a morally and physically destroyed group of men most with their suits half off or simply naked. They seemed hungry and thirsty but at the ready to murder, with their guns slung. One of them who was sitting, hunched over, "Your name?"

"Abreon is my name. I need the helmet switched off because we need to know when the gas and mortars have stopped, so that we can continue through the trenches. We will send out a communique every six hours."

A second: "Do you have any water?"

"I have some water rations hooked into my suit."

A third looking up, "Do you have any food?"

"I have none."

They hunkered down near the airlock, waiting.

The second night of Abreon's imprisonment within the bunker the fire light flashes from the gun battery's outside launching mortars no longer streamed through the six-inch acrylic plate that formed the internal and external airlock windows. He looked around, now just the pale overhead lights illuminating the inside of their bunker. One of the surrounding eight began to shake, then after a few more hours he broke, screaming out to them all, "Let me out! Let me out! I'm going to die! We are going to die in here!"

Abreon pulling him away from the airlock, "If you leave we'll all die!"

The bunker shaken by another mortar and another causing the internal lights to flicker off, putting them in near total darkness.

Another one screaming, "I can't see! I'm blind!"

A second naked soldier, "Shut up! Shut up!"

Abreon struggling with them, "Listen! Stop it, all of you!"

"I can't see!"

The second soldier grabbing the one who could not see, "Shut up!"

The first "Let me out! Let me out!"

The soldier who grabbed the third soldier beating the one who could not see, "Shut up!" punching the poor man, "I'll show you about seeing!"

Abreon letting the soldier he detained slump to the ground pulling the third soldier off the second, punching him then shaking him in a bear hug till he was exhausted and finally dropping him to the ground. The soldier slunk back into a corner and began to cry. Abreon wiped the sweat from his head and sat back down sipping on some of his suit water. He closed his eyes, the other soldiers, sobbing or whimpering returning to their fitful sleep.

That night came and went. The next day passed and as the night grew long, Abreon decided it was time to send out a broadcast. He flicked on the power to his helmet transceiver ready to send out another status update. He upended his helmet with its power indicator glowing red in the darkness. He spoke into its microphone, "Drean, Drean? When are the gas mortars going to end? Drean? Is anyone there? When are they going to end?"

Another of the eight in the dark yelling at Abreon, "They'll end when we die, of thirst!"

A second whispering, "Soon."

Drean from Abreon's helmet, "Any moment now! If our calculations are correct, the battle should end soon!"

One of the soldiers in the bunker with Abreon, "Shut up, everyone stop crying!"

Drean, "Then we can fight again."

The second soldier again, "I can't see you!" coughing, "I still can't"

Drean squawking from inside Drean's helmet, "Then we can dig again."

Another crying, others scratching, some words, others with only tired primal fears. Drean now livid, "Just shut up!" The first soldier as Abreon's eyes widened, "Kill him!" as the soldier snatched his gun, the second unknowing, firing in the general direction of the crying voice, the clear plasma melting into the chest of that man eating a hole the size of two fists through his flesh. Abreon yelled, "No!"

The crazed soldier holding his rifle out, finding Abreon, through the glare of the gun's light. Abreon dared not breath, the soldier, "I'll kill you too." as the crush of sound from inside the bunker ceased. The now hysterical soldiers became silent as the mortaring outside ceased and all was quiet. Drean yelled from Abreon's helmet, "What the hell is going on in there!"

One of the soldiers, "They stopped shelling!"

Another, "Soon we will be able to leave the bunker!"

Then all of them began to push, obtaining a view through the airlocks windows and out toward the field, to watch and see when the haze of gas would lift. Dreaan, "See of course! Our calculations were correct!"

Abreon disgusted switching his helmet off and waiting for the poison clouds to break. They cycled through the airlock and stepped out into the war torn barren world around them. They looked around, all brown with mud and ash. Abreon took a deep breath of the fresh air. They took the time to look up at the sun, the horizon, for they were between moments of war, bombs, gas, mortars and firebombs. Many had died from the gas, as they're suited bodies lay everywhere, but the corporation would be pleased.

Abreon was stuck inside the machine and the machine drove him on toward his mark. Now the Nentharr Corporation's heavy cannons and launchers began to work and flex their muscles of steel and grease, as they cycled between fire and rest. Each moment after grinding moment those turrets began to launch their steel shells directly at the Xelon Dru first across the Zitar Nuo into their trenches and in to their bunkers, smashing them. The Xelon soldiers seizing a break in the onslaught dimbed up and out of their muddy trenches and charged from where they were most safe onto water craft the Nentharr guns lowering their sites to continue firing on the closing water craft. They followed the encroaching Dru, the mortars hitting the water with impact, the shock waves overcoming their boats in great gulps of liquid and shards of metal. Many soldiers were thrown into the air, ripping them and their boats to pieces.

As the Nentharr cannons fired ruthlessly on their encroaching targets, a significant quantity of boats and surfing jeeps still were able break onto the Nentharr beachhead territory. The generals of the Nentharr Corporation called a limited withdrawal their men struggling to free themselves of the dirt and muck surrounding them, all of them dimbing up and out of their trenches to flee from the pushing Dru. Abreon seeing the retreat dragged several bodies to the foremost trench wall, stacking them, standing upon them as they sunk into the mud, other soldiers shored up his flanks, some stacking bodies in like fashion, "We have to fight hard for the Nentharr Corporation!"

Another near to him, gun ready over the waft of the iron and steel, "We are the people's soldiers!" The soldier thumbing up to him then firing his weapon at the onslaught of Xelon soldiers making their way over the beachhead and into no man's land. Abreon lowering his weapon and overtop the waft of stacked bodies, firing bursts of molten rounds at the charging Xelon Dru. Abreon screamed as they began to fall from the hot accelerated plasma ejecting out from his gun and others, the charge of the Xelon slowing as they returned their fire from their own laser rifles. The momentum ground down but it continued. They were nearing the Nentharr trenches.

Abreon, "They're gaining!"

Another Xelon Corporate soldier, "What are we to do!"

Still another, "Have no fear!"

Abreon critically sized up the situation as the enemy pushed forward from the badlands of the Nenthlar Corporation, up from the shell shocked no man's land, up from the thick mud and corpses, to the front trenches of the Nenthlar Corporate front lines, needing to act. Abreon yelling out to one of his loyal soldiers, "Soldier, aim for their torsos! Aim for those with the rank of B4."

The soldier rotating in a wide angle scope, the view port finding his keyed targets, the face of the loyalist full of sweat dripping from his head onto his face and down his chest, "Yes, sir!"

Others men or crying in the background, as Abreon switched from semi-automatic to automatic, Abreon squeezing the trigger, the fine line of plasma warping the air about as the Dru fell, but it was too late as one lunged at him grabbing the barrel of his the weapon. Abreon fell back. Abreon clawed back, releasing the trigger, depressing a thumb-slide upon the weapon, a knife releasing from the stock of the weapon. Abreon screamed in terror, "Die!" grabbing the uniform of the Dru, pulling him down, stabbing him in the throat, throwing him over, as he snatched his gun, firing in a long line of heat, killing those Dru who were now in the trenches with him. He did not want this.

Another leaping onto Abreon, struggling with him, Abreon fearing his own mortality gripping his knife tight, turning the blade and ramming the knife into the abdomen of the Xelon Dru then pulling it out. In tears, Abreon rammed the blade back into the man tearing it out of the other side, turning as he saw yet another soldier upon him, this one with her own held above her head ready to plunge it into him, as another Nenthlar shot her with a plasma burst right into her back. She fell, Abreon wiping the tears from his eyes, trying to be proud toward him: "Good shot soldier."

The Nenthlar soldier, "We need to head to the rearward trenches!"

Abreon running from the Dru soldiers, leaping over dead Nenthlar's some from the gas while others from the Dru Corporation. As Abreon ran, his boots sucked down into the mud, pulling him, he could hear men screaming, others fighting. He passed a Dru as he ran toward the rearward trenches, banked toward a closer one, tripped over a soldier and fell into the mud. He struggled as a Xelon Dru found him, putting him up from the muck, the Xelon strong and angry, "You're going to die!" The Xelon shook Abreon punching him in his head, Abreon then falling back into the mud from the blow. He rolled, unable to grab his knife deep in the mire or a gun, as the Dru angled his rifle, to the chest of Abreon from above him. The Dru grinned a toothy grin, ready to pull the trigger, as his chest exploded over Abreon, as a long hot line of plasma streaked over from another Nenthlar in the distance hitting the Xelon. He fell ripped apart. Abreon wiped his face again, full of blood and mud, grabbing the Dru's rifle. Abreon pushed himself up with the rifle and continued his retreat.

From the other side of the river the Dru Corporation aimed their artillery just beyond the approaching Dru charging soldiers. They list the sky with shells, which rained back down on Nenthlar territory. Abreon heard the high-pitched screech of an incoming shell. He leapt, timing it, as the shell hit the ground behind him the blast blowing a gaping pit into the ground, bucking Abreon in the process. The shell impact threw Abreon to the ground, covering him in mud, fire from plasma rifles streaking over his head. A soldier cried out, grabbing him as he stood up. Abreon fell again, kicking the soldier away from him. He found a gun and fired at him, the soldier falling. Abreon looking back at still more soldiers

firing at him and other retreating Nenthar's. He ran and leaped onto the surface wall of a second defensive trench line. Abreon climbed over the wall and down into the trench. He found a tunnel, crouched down and snaked his way down it, leaving the Dru behind, leaving most of the remaining Nenthar's behind. He scurried down the tunnel, took another and then hit his head on a steel supporting ring knocking himself unconscious.

Two

“Drean, why must we bore the tunnels deeper and longer?”

The Nenthar were hit hard by the Xelon Dru's offensive. It was strong and effective at eliminating over twenty-two percent of the Nenthar's forces, but they managed a counter offensive, which pushed the Xelon back to their own shores. Now they needed to work on their tunnels again, their small but extensive connecting crawl-ways and on extending their excavations right under the Zitar Nuo itself. The Nenthar were continuing in that struggle, in order to reach under the banks of the Dru. If they could do this, they could attack the Xelon Dru from the shore itself without mounting a sea assault. They could swarm the Dru with soldiers from their own corporation right from the tunnels themselves and overtake them. Each tunnel was torso high, so that you had to crawl to enter or leave the channel, each supported by metal O-rings. The metal rings supported the soft earth above from caving in and from the earth below.

Abreon knew the answer, from his helmet, which was in his hands, “We must bore them deeper so that we can attack the Xelon Dru and crush them and their corporation!”

The Xelon Dru was a mining company. Their desire was to seize, envelope and destroy the Nenthar Corporation while in the process taking its land for strip mining. The Nenthar Corporation was a data and network facility, supporting other corporations and governments. Without its existence, other companies could not exist. A pause from Drean and from Abreon's helmet, “You must take one of the drillers from depot 33E and continue excavating tunnel 33, commander Uewno will assist you further.”

Uewno was there in his suit, lesser soldiers standing and waiting with equipment for use in the process of elongating the tunnel 33. Abreon sat on the tunnel floor next to his driller, a small belted treaded device, made to fit into the channel and drill forward while self-propelling itself. The rear was equipped with a sled with controls on the handles. Abreon could lay headfirst on the saddle and control the drill by its handles. Abreon talking with one of the soldiers next to him, “I was in the bunker and one soldier stood up, just blowing the other away.” That soldier, “Hell is what you make of it.”

Abreon, “I see, but...”

Uewno, “Each one of you had a job, and that job is to further the cause of the Nenthar Corporation. You are here to preserve your way of life. You left your wives, husbands, your children, your families, your homes; your possessions at the company controlled and regulated living barracks. You are soldiers, citizens of this corporation. You worked and toiled for us, slaved for us. We honor your dedication to the corporation, but now more than ever you must realize they are the threat to us and our society. Those Xelon corporate raiders, without souls seek to take your stock options and your common shares! You must fight back for what you own and what you will pass on to your children. In so doing, you will follow my orders and from your senior commander Drean. We are your managers and we are corporate. In the end, I follow my orders too. We all answer to the Chief Executive Officer and President of the company.”

Abreon to that solider in tired futility, "But, he died."

Uewno retorted angrily, "So, what of it? You're stepping on a corpse right now solider and there is another one next to you. Look about you can see them all along this trench, buried in mud, flesh and bone torn apart."

Abreon capitulating "Yes, I see."

Uewno proud he had broken the remorse of his soldiers, "Abreon, you take the first drill shift, which shall last eight hours. Censar will take the second drill shift."

Abreon's mind began to wander into a haze. He looked up at the clouds above them collecting. It was going to rain.

It did rain. It rained hard. The greasy polluted rain fell on no man's land, the river swelling it and filling the trenches both companies dug on opposite sides of the river. The rain collected in the trenches and began to fill the tunnel he was drilling deeper. Crawling out of tunnel 33, he wiped the oily rain from his face, his helmet in hand. Someone, or some solider was handing out food rations and plastic water canteens to the soldier, which happened about once per day. Abreon held out his hands to the female soldier. The woman kept her helmet on to protect her head from the rain. It grew progressively darker, the sun seemingly setting earlier because of the dark cloud cover. He took what she gave him, which were two nutritional bars and a canteen of water.

Another worker within the tunnel escaped from the deep shaft with his helmet light still activated and bright, sitting in the mud, pushing a corpse away. He grabbed a couple nutritional bars and a canteen of water from the distribution soldier and began eating it. They tasted of meat and fiber. The solider switched his helmet light off and removed it from his head placing on the corpse next to him. Abreon looked at him oddly. They wiped the grease from their faces. The soldier asked Abreon, "Are we going to survive?"

Abreon finishing one of the calorie bars, "I will, I feel it."

"What of me, do you know? Do you think I will survive?"

Abreon drinking, "Nothing, I don't know if you will survive. But, I will live."

The rain continued as a downpour, burdening the earth with its cold, drenching tides. The torrent of rain, breaking the ground, the dirt under them crumbling into still more muck and mire. The muck and mire deepened still further, filling the trenches, saturating everything, the water collecting into a shimmering layer above me muck. The layer trembling, shimmering, as the rain fell into it. The waters swelled the massive river, the Zitar Nuo, drowning any hopes of another attack by the Xelon Dru or in that matter one from the Nenthar. Unfortunately, the drilling of the tunnels continued and especially tunnel number 33.

Three

Abreon was at the northern most edge of the tunnel, a hell of dark mire and smoke from the drills. He was splayed right in the mud, laying down on his stomach and head first in the crawlway they had created. He clenched his teeth as he took filtered air from inside his helmet, taking to his drill as others behind him wedged in metal O-rings keeping the tunnel from falling on them. The small bucket sized tractors took the dirt from behind him, pushing rearward to the entrance. In the dirt and in the dark he thought. Abreon thought to himself there must be another way than to work and fight for the corporation. The tunnel began to leak water, oozing out from the walls of what they had dug. Several soldiers moved an O-ring into place behind him but the ceiling began to crumble. They quickly removed it, repositioning the ring in another place. He drilled further, water now causing chunks of dirt and rock to collapse around the drill. Abreon let go of the drill throttle, the machine stopping. He removed his suit helmet, releasing the seal between it and his suit. Abreon clicked on his helmet transmitter, wiping the mud from his shoulders, "Drean?"

Abreon looking about, uncertain as Drean answered, "High Commander Drean status, rank A9."

"It is Abreon, rank B4."

"Drean, I'm having trouble with the tunnel, tunnel number 33."

Drean squawking from within Abreon's helmet, "What is the trouble with tunnel 33?"

"The walls are saturated with water from the swollen river. The pressure is causing the ceiling and walls to crumble with water."

Drean from his helmet, "You shall continue as ordered soldier."

The ceiling falling onto the face of Abreon, as he looked up at it, wiping his face, pulling close to his helmet, "This shaft is going to collapse if not now then soon. You must let your workers evacuate, or I shall go to Commander Uewno with these findings."

"He is a rank of A2 and he will say no in this matter."

"But..."

"You will continue until your shift is completed, the boring of tunnels and of shaft 33 will continue."

Abreon now so very concerned, angry and afraid, "Yes."

Abreon continued to drill into through the night and into the early morning, sweating and crying because he knew he and many others would die. Another soldier crawled up to him, pulled up beside him with his suit ripped and muddy, with a hat and light instead of a helmet, which was what Abreon was wearing. Abreon wiped the thick mud that had caked up on his visor and then turning on his external speaker he spit at his microphone, "We are in trouble my friend."

The soldier behind him trying to wedge a metal O-ring in place, "The walls are liquefying."

Others were crying around him, "Among the wrong already produced."

"What'?" The soldier next to him yelled.

Abreon listening to the sounds around him and the shaking before him, "What could it be?" Abreon peering out into the darkness before him while his drill lights illuminated the wall before him, which was crumbling from the inside out. Abreon yelling, "Everyone, pull back!" while waving behind him.

The soldier next to Abreon again yelling, "What!" the machines and the ground tremors creating a roar he could not hear above.

Then the wall of rock and dirt collapsing in front of Abreon and his driller, revealing spotlights a massive driller and hot green laser blasts. All of them covering, Abreon flicking his transponder to a longer-range secure band, "The Dru are all around us! Dreaan!" yelling, flicking to wideband as he ducked a blast from a Dru soldier before him, "Pull back! Everyone, pull back!"

A mass of Dru soldiers before him and his Nenthar diggers as the front collapsed. Dru soldiers with suits, lamps and lasers began to fire over the mound of dirt left from the collapse before them. A Nenthar soldier yelling out, "Escape! Run!" another yelling, "Get weapons!" as the Dru rushed into the Nenthar side of the tunnel, aiming at the defenseless Nenthar's as they struggled to flee the Xelon's. The Dru shot their lasers, the blasts burning into the drill as they climbed over it, following their corporate enemies. Their lasers searing the cold wet tunnel, other blasts burning into the Nenthar's who were caught, or slow, or unlucky, killing them or wounding them only to finish them with another blast, the darkness lit by the helmet lamps of both corporations. Later, it was found that the Xelon Dru knew of the Nenthar's tunnel expansions and so bored their own to intercept their enemy and to defend their territory.

Abreon crawled away from the ruin behind him, struggling to keep himself before others and thus, unfortunately utilize them as rearward shields as the Xelon pursued them out of the Nenthar tunnel, "We need weapons!" another soldier crying as he was shot from behind. He ducked his stomach falling into a heap of other soldiers, a laser beam narrowly missing the side of Abreon's face. The Xelon pouring out of the tunnel, Abreon yelling out again, "I need a weapon!" a Nenthar from before him with two weapons, "Here!" Abreon grabbing it and checking the weapons charge.

The other soldier nodding and firing back at the Dru, "Fight!"

Abreon pulled himself up from the mud, turned fired a few shots from his rifle and reached to climb up and into another bunker. Other Nenthar's turning as they found weapons, firing and retreating into tunnel 33, their enemy perusing them over the bunker and down into the new tunnel as well. The blasts from behind the retreating Nenthar's licking at their heels, the missed shots kicking up the muck from the floor of the tunnel, the mire from the walls of the tunnel. Abreon knew they were out matched without heavy weapons, but unfortunately, they had been caught off guard while digging. Abreon

having an idea, yelling out to his fellow soldiers, "Shoot the walls! Blast the ceilings!" The Nenthlar aimed their rifles at the tunnel, the plasma bursts crumbling the tunnel behind them.

A Xelon soldier outfitted with a flame thrower, crawled up and over the dead bodies, Abreon screaming, "Get back, chemical flames!" escaping, seeing the soldier who gave him the rifle again, "Will all bum! Come on! Get out of the tunnel!"

Abreon aiming his rifle at the enemy with his flamethrower, "Fire at his tanks!"

Another Nenthlar fired at the Dru's tanks, then another, the tanks of the flamethrower exploding. The blast shaking the tunnel, ripping soldiers about. The explosion hitting the tunnel with such force that it bent the tunnels supporting O-rings, tearing at the walls and the ceiling. Soldiers crying out, "The tunnel is collapsing!" Abreon struggling as the tunnel began to liquefy from above, the tunnel degenerating over them, the O-rings covered and sinking, the tunnel sealing itself from the rear. Soldiers of both companies buried alive.

The rain continued, pooled and drained into many of the tunnels and the trenches of both lines. The rains pounded the ground, slurring the blast pits into a muddy slurry, swelling the Zitar Nuo River until it roared and frothed in anger. The rain grayed out the sky, washing everything to pale hues while every man and machine hunkered down and waited. Abreon ate what little rations he had, alone in a bombed out pit, as the rains ended, and the sun began to shine down upon him and others. It had been several days and keeping his feet dry had been near impossible. He looked up at the sun and squinted. He had gotten every used to suffering. Abreon had forgotten what it was to see the light. He climbed out of his pit onto the muddy ground and watched the front lines. He drank his remaining water and felt a drop of rain on his head. Abreon looked up again, to see the sun sink behind the clouds once more, the rain coming again. Abreon looked at his empty ration can, tossed it and rolled back into his pit. Another day came and went. Abreon began to suffer from dehydration. He thought it was ironic that all around him was water, but he did not dare drink it. He kicked around in his pit full of water. There seemed to be something decomposing below the water, in the pit with him. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep. On the third day, a soldier on a supply sled was seen in the distance. Abreon eagerly attempted to flag him over. The soldier saw Abreon in the distance and worked his way over to him. The sled slowed and spun in the mud before Abreon. It kicked up the mire, the mud flying over Abreon's head. The soldier took off his helmet, placed it on his sled and opened the sleds packs, "Muck and mire everywhere."

Abreon climbed up his pit and onto the soaked ground, looking down at his muddy suit, "Yes... I need food and water."

The soldier took out and handed him his nutritional bars and a disposable plastic water thermos, "Long range sensors indicate clear skies tomorrow. The shelling will begin at dawn, in earnest for another ground assault."

Abreon took the food and water, drinking the water, "Can I have more?"

The soldier closing his packs saying, "No." as he drove off again on his sled to serve other Nenthar soldiers.

Abreon looked up at the sky. A strobe on his helmet, partially submerged in the pit began to flicker. It was a communication signature. He took his helmet, switched on his transceiver and looked at the frequency it displayed. It was still on the secure channel. The transceiver showed him the incoming signal was also on the secure channel. There was no need to match channels. Unfortunately, he also knew who was attempting to contact him. He spoke into the helmet, "Abreon."

"Abreon, Drean here. You are summoned to meet with me for a formal reprimand."

"Why!"

Drean angrily, "You know very well what you did was wrong."

Abreon began to walk. He needed to find the field headquarters before the shelling began, "I know what I did! I know the truth!"

"You collapsed two tunnels and many died!"

Abreon could not believe what he was hearing. He snapped his helmet on and coded in a string of numbers unlocking the directions to the nearest field headquarters, "I saved many more and you know we should not have been digging that deep under the river!"

Abreon walking through the drying tunnels, tearing a nutritional bar, foil wrapper with his teeth, eating, it and yelling at the same time, "I did what was right!"

"You killed your own!"

They walked toward the company field headquarters, one of several, "I killed to survive! It is the same whether I killed a Nenthar or a Xelon Dru! Death is death and they all have mothers and wives. This war is a farce and I kill to survive in your warped corporate dreams."

Drean: "No"

"Yes! This is sick! In war, you fight for survival! Those who survive win, you're not out there! You know it as well as I know it. I did not sign up for this war. I was working as an engineer in your multinational a thousand kilometers from here with a wife and two children!" then more solemnly Abreon added, "You made me a killer Drean, your company did."

"You got yourself a fine and a reduction in your stock options! If you keep ongoing you will also be headed for a formal inquiry!"

Abreon held back his continuing rage. They entered the bunker, other officers there and many guards. Abreon found a seat at a nearby table, "The truth hurts, Drean, Commander?"

“Good! Let the truth out! Let our high commanders know that whether you’re a DM or a Nenthar we are all are equal!” They will hang you for it!”

Abreon in dismay, “You’re twisting the truth!”

Drean smiled devilishly, “You think you know, don’t you?”

Abreon sat in the spacious bunker, with its white walls and two tables. One table was wider than the other. Drean sat next to him. There were a couple of Majors sitting at the second table. All of them sat under the behind bright overhead lights. Abreon put his helmet upon the floor, which was steel gray, the walls cold steel as well. A soldier came from an office toward the rear of the bunker with a carafe and coffee cups. He placed the cups next to each soldier and poured them all a strong cup of hot coffee. Abreon took the first sip; he had not had hot fresh coffee in quite a while. Before him from right to left were: Uewno, and another whom he would be introduced named Maven. For some time all of them were quiet were quiet. Then Uewno asked Abreon, “Abreon, this is not a formal inquiry but you do know why we are all here, don’t you?”

Abreon clasping his hands together, upon his table, watching Drean, her black hair cut close to the scalp, but not to the point of non-control, her hair smeared down, over her disheveled bangs, her small frame apparent under her suit. Abreon rubbed his thick, heavy brown hair, mostly falling back over his face, his muscular body concealed under his thick suit. He was tired, “I am here because I ran tunnel number 33 into the enemy’s line, indirectly caused the deaths of many on both sides of the conflict, caused the indirect destruction of heavy equipment, caused the failure of a significant number of O-rings and caused the detonation of flammable liquids which produced the collapse of a second main tunnel.”

Uewno to Abreon, “Well, in essence you are correct.”

Abreon, “Then what is the inquiry for?” noticing Drean staring at him, Abreon breaking eye contact with her.

Uewno correcting Abreon, “No, remember it’s not a formal inquiry.”

Maven now speaking, “My name is Maven. We are just concerned that you fled the tunnels, which had the cascading effect of producing the rest.”

Abreon shook his head and sipping more coffee, “No, digging when we should not and against my concerns caused the results that we observed.” He knew they cared very little for the men or the lost soldiers, but more for the tunnels and equipment and the fact he disobeyed orders, questioning them in general.

Uewno: “Now we are here to correct what has occurred. We already know of the truth and the gray areas. We are here just to outline a path to redemption and get you ready for combat again.”

Drean nodded, “What are we to do with him?”

Uewno, rubbed his head and drank more coffee, "Well, Abreon, you questioned the validity of direct orders from your superior officer. Then you disobeyed them. We can't have our officers doing that of course. If we did we would not have a unified army, would we? We cannot fight coherently if everyone ran separate ways."

Maven looked over at Drean and Uewno, "The death you caused by your actions was high, never mind the fact that you did save just as many with his heroism, fighting Sis Xelon Dru, pouring into that tunnel number 33."

Uewno, "Well your actions so some wisdom and yet much foolishness. Maybe you have learned too much, but it has not been tempered with a heavy enough weight of responsibility."

Drean thinking, "Are you thinking of another work duty?"

Uewno: "Something different perhaps."

Maven to them, as he was leaning over their table, "He has a fighter's spirit. He has a will to survive and from what you have told me Drean, he has the ability to drive others to surpass what was previously their limit."

Drean: "I believe he needs to be corrected in a way which will benefit all of us in a greater way."

Uewno, "What, Drean do you suggest?"

Abreon looked back at the guards, at the inquiry board, then at Drean who looked back at him and at the other Majors, "We could promote him."

Abreon surprised though hushed, "What?"

Drean smiling, "He is a unifier or divider depending on how we cull him. If we place him in charge of ten or twenty he might strike at a most crucial vanguard. Our soldiers would benefit and of course we would benefit."

Abreon subsequently was promoted to level B2 or a commander of ten and sent to the front lines for the last main Nenthur Corporation's assault against the Xelon Dru. Abreon had the feeling deep down that he would surely die.

Four

Abreon clutched his weapon with fifty men in suits with helmets on in order to protect them from possible gas, behind him. Grasping their weapons tightly, their plasma rifles with their light packs strapped over them, they were ready to fight. No pack was preferable to wearing one and so Abreon did not wear one for he knew his imminent death was at hand. He was a commander of ten among the fifty there. He knew that those in that the army crossing the river Zitar Nuo were going to perish. He knew that his corporation was going to dissolve in that still swollen river. Abreon was sure of it that as they sat crowded in their landing boat.

The A8 commander stood, as other crouched, "We will be landing any moment now."

Abreon lowered himself to another soldier, "When we land, if I die please carry out my orders, Gavcon."

Gavcon nodded, "Yes, Commander."

The A8 commander continued, "When we land and the door open," the ship bucking violently skipping across the water, "draw your weapons tightly, and maintain a low profile against the Xelon Dru territory. When I yell go we charge the beach!"

Abreon looked up at the night blue sky, the stars out and bright. They flickered as the clouds broke their glow, seemingly a trillion miles away. The moon ascended shining its pale brilliance upon them. The moonlit glow apparent on the shadows of all those men trapped inside their boats of steel, set among other boats of steel, among still more boats made of steel, each one of them rushing to hit the banks of the Xelon Dru, the Zitar Nuo clawing them back until they could not do it any longer. The earth had made a decision that divided them such that the river could not be traversed without a claim on life.

The skimmer crashed, with a metallic whine atop the shoreline and ground into the banks of Dru territory. The doors of the skimmer dropping quickly and heavily as the loyal Nenthars gasped for fresh air. They ducked as the Commanders yelled for their soldiers to charge up through the beach with their teeth clenched and their bodies hunched low. Their visors fogging temporarily as they hyperventilated from the fear of death, until their suit mechanics took over and evaporated the moisture. Abreon, motioned for his ten to follow him out of the skimmer, as they did so, Abreon looking about in the night, thousands upon thousands of other skimmers landing, in a reverberation, long and violent, substantial and sustained.

The columns of men, soldiers of the Nenthars Corporation, pouring out from their skimmers, in gray and brown earth tone suits, they crawled along the barren wasteland as waves of precision bombardments hit them. The Dru launched mortars towards them. The Dru being pushed rearward in retreat back into another territory, the advancing Nenthars unimpeded, for each corporation was in entity nearly separate from another, and technology isolated, so that it was varied in implementation. The Nenthars were technically superior, but only for moments, as moments are brief.

The Nenthar artillery shells returning the strike back at the Dru emplacements. The Xelon Dru's bombardment had not weakened the Nenthar's push up the shoreline and through the Dru's first line of defense. The Xelon poured gas upon their whole territory, the green mist whispering about as Abreon motioned at his platoon, speaking to them from his helmet, the laser fire now apparent as they cleared the Dru embankments and headed to their front line trenches, "Keep low! Keep silent!"

The Nenthar began to be picked from the trenches, as they stood upon platforms, to fire red over the breakwaters, Abreon climbing, keeping low, as he had commanded his troops, "Fire!"

His Nenthar did, their plasma rifles held up returning fire, a plasma shot hitting one head of one Xelon, the shoulder of another, a third peeking up from his bunker to fire upon them hit through his visor, his visor cracking, the soldier dying instantly. Abreon listened to the screams of men hurt, yelling or crying out. Abreon wanted to run, he wanted to escape but he could not. He wanted to close off the world and stop the noise, but he could not. Abreon was forced to fight, be corporate, be a good employee, "Have faith!" Abreon and his men climbing over the first embankment, into the main trenches, the gas everywhere, as he shot one, then turning to shoot another a second Nenthar killing him with plasma, "Thank you!"

"Yes, commander!"

Abreon was indeed now a commander. He shot again turning his rifle to pulse, firing one plasma shot after another killing as many enemies as he could while avoiding crossfire from his own troops running along that trench. One Nenthar found Abreon shooting a bolt of laser at him, Abreon falling, the laser hitting a second Dru in the chest, destroying him. Abreon shooting the first, a second Nenthar removing the blade from his weapon, "Commander!" stabbing a Xelon Dru in the shoulder and again in the back, as Abreon stood, "Thank you!"

Abreon running into another trench, the Nenthar's working deeper into the heart of the Xelon stronghold, Abreon diving under a Dru, cutting her from her booted feet, falling, Abreon rising firing before him, the line of plasma burning one than another as the first Dru rose from his behind him. One soldier from his company, yelling to him, through his helmet, "Escape, duck commander!" Abreon dropping to the dirt, as that Nenthar shot the Dru, her tense body crumbling weak, Abreon firing as he went, their army working deeper into Dru territory. After an hour, the resistance from the Dru began to fade. Abreon paused and began to rejoice to the seven remaining soldiers under his command, "We have done it!"

A Nenthar from his company, "Yes, we have Commander!"

A second, "Yes!"

Then it was quiet. Suddenly, there were no more fighting Xelon's. They were left with to themselves with just the corpses beneath their boots, and those rotting from wounds or disease from before the strong offensive. Abreon tapped his helmet and then snapped it off his head. He strained his

ears for a moment. Then he looked out far ahead of him and ached to hear what he could not, "Listen, everyone, silent!"

The soldier's under his command began to listen. Abreon could hear his breath. He looked up into the night sky, watching the darkness, watching the trenches, watching the far out ahead of them. The man/machines were coming he could hear them, "Shit, fall back! Return to the skimmers!" Abreon and others running through the tunnels, as the man/machines hurried toward them. The Xelon Dru soldiers were inside, the machines covered them, each draped in black metal plated and rubber jointed machines. The machines each were equipped with two pulse cannon lasers. The suits had their packs sealed to the backs of the machines, each with vents, fans and their motors, whining. The mechanized Dru with their black helmets, black visors looking out at the fleeing Nenthar. They could be heard through their vents, fans, and motors. They made a faint whine, filtering the surrounding air.

The machine encased Dru began to overtake the fleeing Nenthar's, Abreon yelling as he snapped his helmet back on, "Escape to the skimmers."

Others fighting, shooting at the machine Nenthar's, their rifle shots hitting the Xelon Dru suits, some falling, their metal plates damaged, burned from the plasma but most not yielding. The Dru returned fire. The laser cannons of the Dru machines rolled out through the territories. Their double turret cannons sending high powered, targeted, rapid laser bursts at their enemies. The machines were effective and efficient. The feeling Nenthar's were being slaughtered, the red laser pulses boring right through them. Abreon turned and fired at a Dru in his machine suit, the plasma hitting his torso plate, the black metal peeling away, twisting, buckling hot, but still effective. It held, the Dru inside unaffected. Abreon yelling to himself, inside his helmet, "What!" Abreon fired again, depressing the trigger, holding it down as round after round of plasma shots hit one after another, upon the torso plate of that Dru, the Dru backing up and falling back. The machine covered Dru fell back onto to its knees and fired back at Abreon. Abreon flanked the blast, as he returned fire again. Finally the Dru's torso plate gave, Abreon killing the Dru in the process. Abreon in shock ducked from another blast by another Xelon in his metal mechanical suit. Abreon running, shooting another Xelon, at dose range, the heat from the impacting plasma, felt by the Dru but his suit not yielding. Abreon aimed hire and fired at the Dru's helmet shattering its visor, killing the enemy. Abreon switched his helmet from short range to wideband, "Run, escape!"

Abreon heard screams over the wide band frequency, over his helmet's internal speaker, Abreon flicking a dhin switch cutting the noise, the pain of those about him. A Xelon Dru jumped before him as Abreon retreated. Abreon fired at his enemy, the Dru collapsing after three sharp blasts, a laser blast from a Dru above him ripping into his arm, that one standing upon a trench embankment peering down to him. Abreon ducked as a second burst hit one of the walls of that trench. Abreon running again, glancing above as several gas shells were launched out into the area. The poison canisters opened up along the enemy lines and wafting down into the trenches. It started crawling along and began to nip at his boots. He turned the corner hurrying as he unhooked the strap of his gun, tying it tight around his exposed, bleeding arm. He would be safe if he tied his arm tight, for the poison gas only affected the

lungs through inhalation, not skin absorption, Abreon stopping the spread of the gas to his lungs through the tourniquet.

Abreon crawled down along that trench, a Nenthlar near him fired at a Dru, the Dru returning fire killing him. Abreon scampered to find another bisecting trench, taking it and fleeing with speed, with fear. He bounded up upon its embankment clawing at the muck as he went, as the machine-encapsulated men were slaughtering other Nenthlar's. Abreon climbed up and over, some of his army's remaining soldiers fleeing as well, what was left forming groups, or clots of survivors. The survivors struggling down out from the Xelon territory to their skimmers, the Xelon's devouring them as they tried to escape, Abreon opening the doors of one skimmer, directing the others: "Come on, let's go!" Others firing from behind the skimmer doors, the sequencing fire of the plasma forming red-hot bands that streaked along the banks of the Zitar Nuo hitting the mass of Xelon's charging down the beach at the remaining Dru army. They returned fire at the remaining Dru's, attempting to cut off their escape, as they entered into their skimmers. The Dru's in their metal suits, running down the beach to meet up with Abreon's skimmer, one of them leaping onto Abreon, as he was partly inside of the skimmer. One Nenthlar starting the skimmer, speeding the skimmer off the banks and out into open water while the other Nenthlar's fought to pull the Dru off Abreon, the enemy soldier firing haphazardly about the boat, Abreon holding his legs above the water, "Help me!" as a group of three pulled him fully into the skimmer. Abreon now fully in the skimmer took hands and disengaged the blade from his weapon, stabbing the Nenthlar in one of his shoulder joints, slashing him again, the Nenthlar still hanging onto Abreon's legs as he dangled half in the boat and half submerged in the water.

One Nenthlar pulled at the Dru, still clutching his gun. The Dru fired a laser blast killing one Nenthlar, others pulling the rifle away from him, turning to fire at the Dru shooting at him, the blast missing and killing another Nenthlar instead. Abreon listening to the motors and fans of his suit as he went to plunge the blade into the Dru a third time, hitting the Xelon's chest plate, the knife breaking inside the plate. The remaining two Nenthlar's near to Abreon finally pulling the Dru off him. The Dru forearming both of them turning and charging toward Abreon knocking him down. Abreon standing as the boat leaped in the water, hitting the wake of another retreating craft. Abreon slipped and fell back toward the open skimmer doors. The Dru grabbed him as they both fell back and into the water. Abreon kicked the Dru off him struggling to remove his helmet, popping it off as he swam toward the skimmer, but he was not nearly fast enough. The skimmer bounded away, leaving him behind. He turned around in the water to see if the Dru was there. Instead, he found he was all alone in the Zitar Nuo.

Abreon washed up on the banks of the Zitar Nuo. He stumbled up, wet and exhausted for he had swum and nearly drowned to get there. He swam with his heavy suit on, swallowing the dirty, polluted waters of the Zitar Nuo, pulling himself and his suit along, for he was not a strong swimmer. He looked around. He could tell by the placements far back along the beach that it was Nenthlar territory. Abreon walked along, sinking his boots in the sand, looking out and spotting a Xelon Dru passed out on the beach. He did not think it was the soldier who had dragged him out of the skimmer however, he was curious. He was also afraid, "Xelon Dru?" The soldier was still wearing its suit. Abreon shuddering, tired and weak decided to investigate the soldier. Finding a blade from a Nenthlar's rifle partially buried in the sand, he detached it, took it and ran to the soldier. He looked down, there his last blade lay embedded in

the chest plate of the Dru. Apparently, he was the soldier who had almost killed him. Abreon sat down and waited. In time, the Dru began to move. Abreon got up kicking the soldier, "Get up!"

The soldier removing her helmet, a female with short-cropped red hair and laser altered red eyes. She sat up, "Okay, okay, soldier."

Abreon holding out his knife, "Get up! You are my prisoner of war!"

She turned and looked at him, stiffening her neck, "Why? Can't you leave me alone?"

Abreon shook his head, "No. You're no good to me dead, woman so get up."

"My name is Marcy."

Abreon twisting the knife in her face, "Abreon."

"Abreon?" Marcy questioned.

"Yes. Get up."

Marcy turning away, "You knocked me into the water," and then as she looked out toward the river, "Why do you want me up so quickly?"

"Because the Nenthara offensive was crushed, and they took their skimmers, and now they must have eliminated any remaining resistance by the Nenthara. I am assuming that by this time tomorrow, the Nenthara Corporation will not even exist."

Marcy turned back to Abreon, "What rank are you?"

Abreon looked down at the muddy sand, "B2."

Marcy nodded, "B7."

"Good, now stand."

"Help me up then B2." Marcy replied with a crooked smile.

Abreon pulled her up and pointed to the banks of dirt before them both, "We need to climb these and get into the trenches. It is there we may find a sealable bunker and there we will wait for a few days. If no Xelon find us, perhaps the front will have moved farther in land, deeper into our territory."

Marcy eyeing him, "My role?"

"Your role is to be my prisoner to which I may be granted some leverage if needed."

"Yes."

Abreon jabbing the knife at her: "Let's go then."

Abreon looked around the sealed bunker, the airlock doors shut and locked from the inside. That would prevent any random attack from one or a few Xelon's in the vicinity. They would have to find Abreon and Marcy in the bunker, then melt the doors just to enter and extract them. He would wait there with her. Abreon hoped that he would survive the pending counter assault. She peered at him from across the steel of the bunker; the bunkers centered ceiling light beaming rays of yellow down upon them. He turned his glance from her and then toward the first doors small rectangular window. Finally, she spoke to him as he was determined not to speak to her, "You can stop clutching that knife, and I won't attempt to flee."

"Why?"

"If I run, the Xelon may mistake me for Nentharr and shoot me anyway."

He released the blade, placing it next to his thigh, "Yes."

"Yes."

"Yes, I see." Replied Abreon

Marcy looking about, "If you don't mind..."

Abreon rubbing his tired eyes, "What?"

As she was removing the torso plating from her suit, "I'm removing the machine suit I'm wearing. The suit is too heavy and too hot for me to wear."

"If you wish."

"Thank you." She removed her chest plate, the rear the torso unit, shoulder plates, upper arm plates and then forearm plates. She removed the gauntlets from her arms and hands. The turrets had been ejected. Perhaps when she was in the river. She worked on her legs next. She left herself with just small shirt and briefs. She pulled up her shirt exposing her abdomen and most of her chest. A large red welt ran along her sternum where a blast of laser had hit her. She rubbed it, "This hurts." Apparently, a scar ran along her abdomen and another near her neck that traveled down her shoulder down her shirt. She scratched the welt and then let her shirt down again.

Abreon, then sighing removing his suit. He left just his briefs on, exposing his tattooed chest and arms. He had several other tattoos along one of his muscular thighs, "When did you get those scars?"

Marcy turned and moving her equipment into a pile, "Well, the one scar from my neck down across my left breast when I was testing some new protective armor. I was demoted at the time for spitting in my officers face."

"Why?"

“Because he wanted me to test out the new armor.”

“Why did you no try the armor on?”

Marcy smiled, “Because the tanks in the back had detonated before. The last two people who attempted to wear them were burned to death from the faulty equipment. It has other problems as well.”

“As you can see it is still pink. The scar is fresh.”

Abreon nodded, “How recent?”

“Four months ago.”

Abreon thinking, “What?”

Marcy poking the suit next to her, “Yes, I was one of the testers for the new machine suit, next to me here.”

“Okay.”

Marcy showing a crooked grin, “Yes, the metal plates had lamination issues at the time and the blast of plasma went through.”

“And you survived.”

“And I survived but because of that they promoted me back up to a B7.”

Abreon shaking his head, “And now you’re here with me, with nothing but a metal blade between us.”

“You have that right, B2.”

“Perhaps, or perhaps more.”

Marcy laughing, “Come on, perhaps nothing B2, perhaps nothing.”

The Xelon Dru did find the bunker. At first, they tried to coax Abreon and Macy out, then shot at the doors. When this did not happen, they attempted to open the bunker with heat pumps. They took their plasma tipped wands and began burning through the bunkers metal doors. They cut along the edge of the first door specifically where the bolts were within the housing of that unit. It took near an hour to open up the first and another hour to open up the second. Abreon watched as they progressed through the second: “When they capture us they will kill me.”

Marcy sitting next to him, there bare thighs touching, in warm contact, as she watched them, through the second doors window, they each watching her and him, as she looked at the knife beside him: “They will kill me as well.

Abreon turning to her, "Why?"

"Because I failed them again."

Abreon looked through the second door window at the Dru cutting through the door, "They don't know that do they?"

"They'll check my name ID number and rank. Do you think they will mind killing two more soldiers?" Marcy holding her hands in her lap: "How many were there?"

"There were fifteen thousand along the trenches, ten thousand within the corporation."

"Twenty-five thousand soldiers in total. If your corporation got to us than most of them are dead." Abreon closed his eyes, peering up at the window, "Assuming a 50 percent casualty rate, over twelve thousand men and woman are dead. I figure the rest were captured or taken prisoner. What are they going to do with the rest of them, Marcy?"

"Your corporation would essentially be in default. You can figure that there mines and tree harvesting will be expanded and any remaining soldiers or employees will be used as slaves for production purposes."

Abreon resounded: "Better to be dead. The day you stop being able to make your own decisions is the day you lose your last chance for redemption."

Marcy sighing, shaking her head, "What of you?"

Abreon quietly, "I shall never be forgiven."

The Xelon Dru gathered the remaining Nenthar's, those from the front lines of both the Nenthar and Xelon territories, as well as the corporate compounds that lay back in lands which the Xelon Dru lusted for and forced them on the move. They gathering and merged the prisoners into groups, those groups into larger ones, then into one main camp. The camp was hastily built from the remains of one of the many Nenthar corporate compounds. Some of the building had been destroyed during the rout of Nenthar forces. The now fenced in compound was approximately two kilometers square.

It was believed that the Xelon Dru possessed inferior technology and that was true but the company had progressed rapidly. They had obtained superior science through one of several ways. They could have developed the new technology they needed to win the war, which was unlikely given the scientific knowledge they had or they could have bought it. It was more likely they bought it, but that strategy had its drawbacks, one being that they were beholden to their makers. Abreon thought about it as Marcy and he were relocated to the Nenthar compound. The compound had been turned into a Dru prison camp, which was, renamed the Strife. Others, those remaining in captivity due to fierce rebuff or distance in travel, were brought in over time. Abreon and Marcy were thrown from a transport and into a crowd and that crowd in turn being directed to join with others, so that the whole continued to walk,

along the great concrete roads that intersected the compound at all angles. The prison camp was still far off in distance.

Abreon walked next to Marcy. Marcy was still very much afraid as the throng of people walked on along the barren land, which used to be Nenthar land. Xelon Dru were swarming about the outer perimeter of the crowd of marching prisoners each extending their electric prods, with which they used like spears without blades to shock the slow or weak to stay in line or be compliant. They Xelon laughed and spit at their captives, those who had worked in the corporation and those who had fought against the Xelon Dru, in the days previous. They all marched in their wet, muddy clothes. They were hungry, tired and many seriously wounded. Abreon and Marcy tried to safely center themselves in the mass of people, protected by several layers of the corporation. Abreon knew the electric prods had made contact when painful screams broke through the sound of boots on roads and muck. They had been clothed before deportation back to Strife, and after several days, the sun had begun to shine. It was a warm day. Abreon's feet hurt, his legs beginning to grow numb from use. Abreon to Marcy, "Those soldiers who are wounded won't last long without medical attention."

One fell and a second, others walking over them both, "I will survive." Marcy whispered.

Abreon replied in grief, "I will survive as well."

"Then we will both survive."

"I sure hope to God we do...we will survive Marcy...we will."

The hours went by then the days at the compound named Strife. During that time, the compound grew in size and complexity. Those detainees that remained too weak from fighting in the war were left beside the road. Several of those too weak or wounded to continue on the march to the camp were pulled back up by the Xelon and shot, a laser blasts to their chests. Others who were deemed too slow were pulled from the marching prisoners, shot, left to die and to decay in the fields. In line, they reached the compound several expressing muffled excitement. Some thought that they were going to rest; others thought they were going to finally be given food and water. Unfortunately, they would neither rest, nor food or water.

As they neared the gates the mass of prisoners were stopped, "I believe their going to segregate us."

A Nenthar to Abreon, "Are we going to get food?"

Abreon to him in reply, "I think not, Nenthar."

"Why?"

Marcy to him, "Because where prisoners and we are now slaves."

A woman to her, "But I thought we would be released soon."

Marcy to her: "You may hope."

Abreon to Marcy: "Their going to speak."

Marcy in a low tone to him, "Those gates must sonic, maybe laser."

A Dru soldier stood upon two crates with a sonic booster in hand. He held it up to his mouth, addressing the prisoners, "You are now our captives. You are war criminals and will be dealt with in such a manner. You have no rights as of this point forward. You shall have no wants or desires. You are in the control of the state now. You are now wards of this state and from now on you will act on the wishes of the state. You will submit to the wishes of that state, if you do not you will perish. If you attempt to escape you will summarily be executed." A sergeant took over from the lieutenant, the lieutenant handing over the sonic booster to him. The sergeant spoke into the booster, pointing out toward the crowd of prisoners before him, "You are to form two columns; men will form one on my left and women on my right. There you will be split into wards, where you will await further options by your section captains. You shall start now. That is all."

Abreon to Marcy: "I will see you again, have faith."

Marcy gave a weak smile to Abreon as soldiers began to mix into the mass of three thousand detainees pushing them with their electric prods, their rifles slung about them, dividing them into their gender specific lines, "And I will see you again my friend."

The Dru drove the men and women from each other, prodding them as they went separating them by a few hundred meters. Once the groups were divided, they were instructed to form lines and wait. One detainee spoke low to Abreon, "Why are they doing this?"

Abreon answered the Nenthar softly, "To see who is healthy for work and who is not."

A Xelon who was close to them noticed, "Hey, shut your mouths or you will get the butt of my rifle."

Abreon observed his warnings as the soldiers began to pick out those who were too weak, sick or lame to work. The captains went one by one pulling those who seemed unfit for harsh labor and against their will dragged them out before the prisoners to be executed by a shot in the head with a laser blast from their rifles. Abreon held his breath as a captain and two lieutenants passed by him. The captain with a smile on his face going down the line picking people as he went, "Not you, not you, not you," and when he had found a weak man, "You! Dispose of him." the two lieutenants pulling the man and passing him to other soldiers who subsequently shot him dead. The captain continued, "Not you, not you and not you." until he reached Abreon, "And..." looking him over, "Well, now," tapping the butt of his rifle on Abreon's chest, "Aren't you healthy."

Abreon looked into the captains eyes, "My rank is B2, soldier."

The captain smiling, "B2 huh? You think you have clearance above us, Nenthar? Your troop is dead my friend."

Abreon said nothing.

"Say something Nenthar?"

Abreon looked at the captain and then at his lieutenant's, "No one won this war."

The Xelon Dru twisted his rifle butt into Abreon's chin, pushing hard, "You're pretty healthy for a Nenthar soldier. You'll work fine for us until you die from it," laughing at him, "But first you'll need plenty of hurt." Fingering him to the other soldiers, "Take this prisoner and hurt him bad, but don't kill him." The lieutenant pulling him out of the line and passing him to a group of eager Xelon. They threw him into the mud, picked him back up, beat him with their guns and pushed him back into line.

Abreon staggered then wiped his bruised mouth, holding his wounded body, returning to the line, as the selection for death continued. Abreon watched as those less fortunate were picked to die at the hands of a sick corporation. He thought it was novel or had it always been that way? Abreon did not know, the pain he felt clouding out his thoughts. The prisoners who remained waited for further instructions. Out of a total eight hundred men in rank, seven hundred remained after selection. Abreon hoped that soon they would join the others in camp and he could close his eyes and sleep.

Another Xelon Dru stood before the line of detainee's with another amplifier. He spoke into it directing his voice to the enslaved, "Men of the Nenthar Corporation! You are now worthy of work for the Xelon Dru Corporation! You are strong and good men! You are all fortunate to become a small part in our glorious growth! You will now enter Strife where you will be given bar coded stamps, corresponding ID numbers and barracks assignments! Tomorrow you will be given work assignments and food rations, upon which receiving you will be transported to the mines, or the strip mines, the natural gas wells, oil wells, the forestry division, or corporate duty among the Xelon Dru corporate towers. They are among the company compounds over the Zitar Nuo River."

Abreon listened intently, if he was to survive and save Marcy he would have to become a corporate sponsor and work in the towers. He might even be able to help his fellow soldiers and the Nenthar civilians who had been caught up the war. The addressing soldier continued, "You are to each align himself four men in across for the length that is necessary! You will form a column four men in width. Once this is established you will be escorted into the Xelon compound one-half kilometer before us! That is all."

Abreon prayed to God for the sole he did not possess It seemed he was about to undertake a purging of what remained. The compound itself was one kilometer square, surrounded by sonic fences. The only visible portion of the fence was their posts. The posts were ten meters high, each post separated by ten meters. Abreon waited on line to receive his bar coded stamp and 10-digit serial number. He was a hundred meters before the sonic fences, "See those posts?"

A man to the rear of him questioning, "Yes."

Abreon pointing, "Those are the pillars of a sonic fence."

A soldier before him turning, "A sonic fence? What does it do?"

"They use high frequency sonic waves to disrupt any soft matter in proximity to them."

The one before him, "What?"

"When someone passes between the posts, the fence senses the motion and then sends a cycle of high frequency audio waves which destroy a person's outer flesh, shredding it to the muscle, perhaps even bone. From what I know about the product was developed by the Oozo Corporation, a military high grade arms producer, in the Tarpina sector."

The first: "You think anyone can get through them?"

"Only if you dig beneath the posts, but more than likely they have some kind of mine system within the earth about the fence. Don't try."

The first, "Have faith my friend."

Abreon smiled wiping the remaining blood from his face, "I have."

The questions continued among the detainees, the uneasiness grew, the misinformation trickled through the group and everyone thought better of the situation that what it really was. Abreon knew the real answers, ones that nobody wanted to hear for themselves. He did not care, what he needed to do was survive and help those who would listen. The soldier before him, as they were quite close to the stamping station, along one of the gates, "What are the stamps for? What will they do with us?"

Abreon replied to him, "They are going to mark us for easy identification, through the use of scanners and visual checks. The id numbers are will be on our wrists while the bar codes are going to be engraved or stamped onto our foreheads. The numbers are for field access without technical equipment."

The one before him, as they moved progressively forward, as dusk and nighttime was setting into the camp, "There going to farm us out like animals?"

Abreon: "Yes."

Another of the interned annoyed at Abreon for his opinion on reality, "How do you know?"

"Because, I simply do."

One of the many guards surrounding the line of Nenthar's at the stamping station, commanding Abreon, "Give me your head!" Abreon stood before a long metal table with an array of electronics tossed onto it. Several of the camp guards sat with weapons near to the detainees, some laughing, others drinking. Abreon moved forward, the stamping soldier pulling his head farther to him, "Stand still now."

The stamper engraved Abreon's forehead, the stamp burning a little as the metal powdered bar code was imbedded into the flesh of his skull. Next, an identification number was burned into his wrist, the stamper pushing Abreon back, "You're done." Another Dru at the station giving him clothes, "You are to report to the service station at the center of the facility."

Abreon took his doths, made his way to the service station and again waited on line there. Eventually, Abreon made his way to the front of the line. There he asked the commander sitting at a table before the small building, "Where do I go from here?" The commander pulled his arm, looked at the 10-digit number and scanned his forehead. He read the answers on his hand held display. He then keyed in a few options with a stylus, "You're heading for barracks 18C, northwest of here. You are to enter the barracks change you doths and throw them in a pile outside the barracks, return to the barracks and stay there until you receive further notice."

Abreon sat upon the wood planks, which were supposed to be his bed. He looked around the barracks and at the others sitting as well. The barracks had two rows of beds length of wall. He sat there with his white jumpsuit, with a couple of reflective patches sown on them to spot a detainee from a distance. To Abreon, the camp seemed to a mixture of civilian and army, about three to one. Most likely the remaining soldiers were of the Menthan variety, which were better trained than the standard guards were. Those soldiers were likely those who were to survive the longest, if anyone could. Some of the prisoners in the barracks with him were changing, some lying upon there planks, some crying, others praying. Abreon only waited. A prisoner beside him sitting upon his plank bed, "You think I shall survive?"

Abreon shook his head, "No."

Another standing turned around, "What?"

"No"

The one next to Abreon sitting on his bed, "What do you mean?"

Abreon indignant: "Just what I said, were not going to survive this. If you understood the severity of this situation, you would know this was true. We are in the gravest of circumstances. Do you think that they would have kept us alive if they knew we were in the end going to survive?"

Five

Moments passed, hours passed, then the first day. All of them were looking about, some still resting, others pacing, still more playing endless rounds of Otto, a mind based game of guessing. Most of the detainees in the barracks grew hungry and voiced their complaints. One of them in the center of the hall, blurted out, "Let us eat!"

Another replied, "Eat what?"

The first prisoner, "Let us step outside and demand food for us to eat?"

Abreon to him, he had seen this before, "I would think better of it my friend or you will get shot!"

Another, "That's right anyone who steps outside will be crucified."

The first pleading with them, "But, I am hungry!"

The second day:

"We need to eat!" Said the first of the group who wished to eat. He cried out again, "We need to eat!"

Some were lying about, some were crying, some were praying, while others were still playing "Otto", slowly going numb from the isolation, Abreon yelling at him, "Sit down and develop some resolve!"

The man pointing to him, "No, you listen! I want to eat. All of us want to eat!"

"Then go out and die."

Another one, raising his head from his bed, "One of us can't go alone, but if some of us go..."

Several shots of laser fire were heard a few barracks down, accompanied by screams of men. Abreon to them, "Is that what you want for yourself? You all need to sit, rest and conserve your strength. They are using this time to weaken us."

The third day:

Men were lying about, others crying, others praying, all were hungry, none were playing "Otto".

The fourth day:

Men were lying about, others crying, others cursing, all were hungry, some were digging at their clothes, others had urinated and defecated in the corners of the barracks as more shots were heard outside. The smell in the barracks was becoming unbearable.

The final day:

The prisoners were lying about weak, other were crying, others were cursing, all were hungry, some were digging at themselves as one stood, stumbled and pulled himself back up, "Let's go!"

Another one, weakly, "Were?"

"Outside."

"There is only death outside."

Abreon lying upon his wooden planks, eyes closed, "You hear that gunfire out there, you'll be as good as dead if leave the barracks."

"Listen to him," Another weakly yelled.

"No!" The first yelling out in anger, "Who's with me!"

A very weak Nenthlar struggling to raise his head, "Fee food!"

A third, "I am!"

Finally, a fourth prisoner, "Let's go to them!"

Abreon sitting up: "You fools! They will shoot your ass and you'll join the others in the pit!"

The first, "Let's go, for food! We can't wait a longer!"

Another, "No!"

Then another, "Don't

A handful of them leaving the barracks, Abreon yelling at them as they left, "Fools, all fools! All of you!"

Abreon saw them race up to the guards, then after a heated discussion between them, the Xelon soldiers beat them with their rifles and subsequently shot them execution style, kicking them over. One of the Xelon walked over to the still open door of the barracks, "Let that be a lesson to you Nenthlar," smiled and closed the door on them.

Abreon put his head down, "They died for nothing." dosing his eyes, others in the barracks with him crying again.

Four hours after the previous incident the wait was over for them. In the dark, a prisoner questioned Abreon, "Where are we?"

Abreon, as they all stood double file, "We are in the dark."

Another Nenthar, "What are they going to do to us?"

Abreon looking about, "Their going to hurt us."

To Abreon it seemed there were about a hundred of them, from two or three barracks. He could see in the distance the lights of camp, for they were only a half kilometer away. The moon was a crescent casting shadows all around. It was cold and unlike their military uniforms, their battle suits, the garments they were given offered little protection from the elements.

"Why don't we try to escape?" Said one interrupted by a guard.

"Talk shall be kept to a minimum, or the parties involved will be punished!" Yelled the guard that caught them speaking. The guards where accompanied by two terrain vehicles with four troops each excluding the drivers. A few of the soldiers had stepped out of their vehicles and were walking alongside the prisoners. A second Xelon, "You have all been given orders; they are orders of employment. They are as follows; your three barracks are to be employed at the Ashwon Strip Mining Facility, in the Xelon Dru territory west of the Zitar Nuo River for the length of your stay. You will rotate with two other divisions. Each work period will last ninety days, before you are rotated out, back to the camp."

Abreon whispering to one of the prisoners, "We're going to die there."

The other detainee, "Maybe."

The same soldier, with his Gatling gun held out, supported by two shoulder straps, "You are to arrive there by walking." Upon hearing muffled outcry could be heard from them, "This is a PGT-200 laser Gatling gun. It will clear the field. Do not run and do not attempt anything unreasonable. You shall proceed in obedient, willing and quiet manor. Anyone who attempts to desert us shall be killed and dumped into a pit. Stay in file and walk at a brisk pace! Let us go, watch the terrain...March!"

There was a moment in time for Abreon, a few moments perhaps when the Xelon left their vehicles and surrounded the prisoners that some of them, including himself, were going to die along that trip. He knew it. He could feel it. He knew for sure, but the feeling wavered and his anger rose up again. He was not a part of that war. He did not choose it; it took him from his wife and children and threw him to the dogs. He would not be one of them. He was not going to perish. Abreon needed a way out. He was not going to be a victim of a useless corporate war. He needed to reclaim himself, for what he had done in the war, all the lives he took, for no reason at all but to meet the management's

benchmarks. Abreon needed a plan of escape, for him and then for the others, but first him, he needed to escape, create damage inside, and so provide them a means of redemption. He had no redemption, but he could give it to others. The soldier with the Gatling gun looked about at them as some were already walking. He waited and then yelled out, "Now Proceed! Let's go, follow me!" Turning his back on them, he switched the heavy gun for a rifle, handing it off to another soldier who mounted it to one of the all-terrain vehicles. The vehicles began to roll on as other soldiers flanked the prisoners. They all began to move as a single unit, one of pain and suffering. They still had not eaten. They were given water, but not food.

They walked and walked that night. Slowly they dragged themselves onward, first one kilometer, then five, then ten. The prisoners walked bravely and strongly in the moonlight, in the cold. They walked until they could feel their feet blister in the boots they wore. They walked until they could feel the pain in their bones, as the splintering pain sank deeper and deeper into them. They were driven on. They became weaker as the night drew long, as they began to stagger, after many kilometers, continuing until daybreak. The sun rose to begin to warm them, from reddish hues to yellows and bright streaks, which broke through the overcast. Finally, without warning they were allowed to stop and collapse. Water was given to each; some were kicked while others were punched. One Nenthar whispering to Abreon, an older man still panting from the overnight march, "I am exhausted, I can't walk any further."

Abreon to him, "But you must."

The older man nodding, "I'll try, but I can't walk much farther."

Abreon smiling a weak smile, "Good, try my friend, try."

As they began to walk again, their feet blistered, walking until their legs ached, broken under sharp splintering pain. The prisoners struggled onward through the wilderness; those considered too slow beat by the soldier's rifle. Those who struggled last died first. No one wanted to continue, but none wished to die so they moved on, each in their own personal hell. Then after a few days when it seemed all was lost, when they could not move any longer, when their hunger was so intense they felt it no more, they were forced to run. They began to run, forced to run or be killed. One prisoner fell, and then a second, as their Xelon Dru soldier escorts shooting them as they fell, yelling from their vehicles, "Run you fool's! Run!" as their vehicles drove a little faster, "Run! Run slaves!" as those soldiers who ran next to their prisoners randomly beat them on their backs, as they drenched their suits with sweat which poured from off their faces, as their palms were drenched with perspiration.

Along the Zitar Nuo:

All the prisoners kneeling within a skimmer, guns pressed to the backs of their heads, the soldiers before them holding their rifles and the Gatling gun overseeing the whole group, one prisoner to another whispering, "What if we were to rush them?"

One Xelon Dru before them in the skimmer, "Settle down Dru or you'll get the butt of my rifle, you hear me?"

A third Dru, "We could overtake them and take their weapons killing them."

Abreon listening to the Dru next to him, whispering to him and the others, "No, don't you forget they have the automatic Gatling gun which could kill us all in a matter of moments. Even if you were to subdue them, then what my friend? Are you going to escape the whole Xelon army? You were all soldiers, please think straight."

The second Dru, "Yes, they control a large expanse of territory, now. Perhaps we should find our commanders?"

Abreon: "There will be a time for that."

The expanse was great, the strip mines pit kilometers in scope and size. The greenery surrounding the great pit seemed to contrast with the snake of gravel roads entering the facility, the torn grey rock everywhere. The pit bare, cut from the life about it, gray stone amidst lush flora, its terraces of strata wrapping around the recesses of the pit, some jutting out to form bases from which to carve deeper into the mountain. There inside the mine there was much activity, a great amount of machinery, heavy ground equipment, massive trucks and cranes rolling about, lifting and dumping coal, transporting it out of the pit to be processed. Other machines implanting detonation rods, to blast more from that stratum, temporary elevators, cargo transports, driving along the perimeter of that pit.

The soldiers and the prisoners stood above the pit, the activity below and beyond hectic in midday sun. Several more soldiers from the company plant met with them, driving up from afar, the mines outer plant processing stacks belching smoke out into the sky. The plant soldiers stepped out of their two terrain vehicles. One of them spoke, "You are now at the Aswon Strip Mining Facility of Xelon Dru. This is your station. You will be here for the next three months. You will eat here, you will sleep here and most importantly, you will work here. You are corporate, you have been acquired by hostile takeover and now you're an asset to us, work and you remain an asset, do not work and you become a liability. A liability to the company reduces our profit margin and must be eliminated."

Abreon looked far out deep into the pit in the distance, then at the horizon. He thought for a moment. If he could get to a crane, he could end operations in a quadrant of the pit. It was risking his life, but he could do it, and he could destroy some of the Xelon Dru soldiers. He just did not know. It was war and in war, blood is shed, but then perhaps he had shed too much already and that he had to be accountable for what he had done. All he knew at that point was he had to take one-step before he could take another.

The lot of soldiers then escorted them down the pit and to their barracks. They were given water, some bread and rest, but not fresh cloths. The next day they were brought out deeper into the strip mine. Several soldiers and employees were about. A truck was nearby. One of the soldier lowered the back hatch of the truck and pulled out a case. He opened it, pulling out a hammer, "These are capacitive hammers, you are to take them and crush the larger stones about you into smaller ones, one or two fists in diameter is approximately size you should make them. The hammers will recoil a bit, work with them and they will make your job easier, fight them and you could break your wrists." The soldier continued, "When you are done, when we tell you that you are done, you are to load us your stones in these," The soldier handed the hammer to a prisoner and grabbed a sack from the back of the truck showing them, "When they are full, you load them upon the back of one of our terrain vehicles. When the vehicle is full you will be given rations."

Abreon and the others grabbed hammer. They were then escorted to where they would work. Abreon found the man to whom he talked to while they were walking. Abreon pushed through the group of weary prisoners to him. The man was gray and weak, but upright. He waited for a chance to talk to him, when their escorts would not notice, "I need you old man."

The elderly man turned up to him, a bit surprised, "What?"

"I need your help."

The man shaking his head, "I almost died out there, and I will die here. Please, leave me alone to die."

"No, I need your help."

The old man nearly dragging his hammer, 'But why?'

Abreon grabbing his arm, helping him with support, "Because, you are chosen, that's why. You have a gift, a special one. I need your help and others. You must help me find them, please?"

The old man named Rufus, shrugged and laughed quietly at him, "Okay, I've had a life anyway."

A soldier pointing his rifle at them, "Hey you two, shut your mouths, now!"

The prisoners took their hammers and began to work. They split the stones that lay about them, hammering them into smaller chunks, splintering off hunks of rock from the boulders and breaking those rocks into still smaller ones. Once the rocks were fist-sized, they placed them into piles. Once the piles were large enough, they bagged them and threw them onto a transport. Those who had survived the march were weak and already losing weight. They could barely stand, no less break rock from the quarry, though they must or die. Abreon stopped for a moment, lowered his hammer, took a deep breath and begin again, the soldiers watching him intently. Abreon turned looking out toward one of the cranes, cycling between movement and rest. Abreon continued to split the boulders, until every

swing was punctuated by sharp splintering pain shooting from the base of his wrists up his forearms and into his shoulders. His hands blistered, then bled until finally he gave a whimper, letting the hammer go to the ground. He picked it back up and went to swing. The hammer slipped from his grip and crushed his foot. He cried out again, this time louder collapsing to the ground himself.

A soldier came over: "What's the matter?"

Abreon crying, "I crushed my foot!" The soldier taking his rifle holding it out, "Get up now and work again or you will get more than you have!"

Abreon held his boot, the blood of his hands smeared over it, "I can't move my foot." while the other prisoners simply watched

The soldier, "Alright," taking the butt of his gun and thrusting it into Abreon's ribs once, "Get up!" then twice, as other soldiers and prisoners watched, some in horror, others in delight. Abreon was ready to die from the vicious onslaught, until a high ranking captain worked his way through the crowd and pulled the Xelon off Abreon, "Enough!" the soldier yelled at him, "But, I was just-" the high ranking soldier, "No! You were not! Don't you see if you kill him we can't push him to work? Look how strong he is! He will work hard for us for quite a while, just don't kill him."

"Okay, commander."

The Captain looking at Abreon "I will help you up."

Abreon looking at him, "Okay."

The commander pulling him up, looking at him and the rest around them, "Get back to work."

Abreon picking up the hammer holding his side, Abreon looking at Rufus from over the heads of several people, looking concerned at him. Abreon took a deep breath and began to crush rocks again, thinking of his wife and children, of Marcy and Drean, perhaps he could see his wife again, perhaps Marcy again, but he needed a way out. He looked over to the Captain and for a moment, he thought he had found it. Abreon prayed his plan would work He prayed that Rufus would survive long enough

The prisoners were resting, all the prisoners sitting in the dark moonless night, the clouds blocking most of the stars, windy and cold, the soldiers doing as well, all upon the ground, those soldiers having given out water and nutritional bars. He had not seen a nutritional bar since before the compound, which was many days before. Many of the prisoners had not eaten in so long that, they could not properly digest the calorie bar, but attempted too anyway. Abreon was sitting next to Rufus and a few others he thought he could trust, "Rufus, were you ever in a war?"

Rufus gritted his teeth and then smiling, "Oh, yes of course. I was in the Globalist war between the Zetti Corporation against the government of Saris, the last great war of this century, the last between a corporation and a government." Then pointing at them, "Of course, you know how that turned out. The government lost and we have this."

Another a male: "What was your rank?"

"Oh, well, I think it was B1, commander of hundreds." With this, all were silent.

Abreon broke the silence nodding, "Yes."

The next day they again pounded the rocks in the quarry, the coal and rock, then the next, day in and day out one or two passing away, others growing weaker, others setting into the routine, all losing weight from lack of nutrition. Abreon began watching a strong man, of red hair and a beard, as they all were growing them now. The man was short and awkward. Abreon could use him. Abreon moved closer to him as they both continued pounding the rocks. That day it had been rainy. Abreon grabbed the red bearded man by his suit, "What do you know?"

"What?"

Abreon showing fear in his eyes, the look becoming apparent to the man with the red beard, "Shhh! Can you help me?"

Quietly the red bearded man questioned him, looking over his shoulders, "Why?"

Abreon, "Continue working," again hammering a rock, as the man with the beard took up his hammer, "I need your help to create a disaster that will kill many Xelon Dru."

"If you are going to kill Xelon Dru, you may have my help."

"My name is Abreon."

"My name is Danavar, Danavar."

By now, the jumpsuits that they had been given were well worn, ripped and soaked with sweat, tears and blood. Most were ripped along the elbows and along the knees. Many of the prisoners had worn the boots that they had been captured with were also wearing thin. The days grew shorter, as they worked into the second month, then the third, as they worked in the rain, and then in the snow. Abreon and the other detainees pounded the rocks in the snow. Sometimes they worked in snow that was as up to their knees. They would break the rocks, which would then fall to the snow and to the ground. The prisoners would dig for them in the snow, their hands frost-bite. They broke rock in the biting wind, many eventually dying, and all the while the blasting continued, destroying what god made for wicked games, crumbling the rock and coal, but old man Rufus, and Danavar were alive still, and so was Abreon.

They were ordered to cease after two straight days of work, tired many collapsed into the snow. They were given some food rations and warm water. Those who survived were showing their bones, losing most of their weight during the time they were encamped. Those who could get up slowly did and

made their way to rocks that they could sit on. Abreon ate and drank the water handed to him from the guard, then sat watching the soldiers warm themselves next to heaters. He watched and noticed that the captain who had saved him months before was sitting alone separated from the remaining soldiers. Abreon staggered to him, "I beseech you!"

Two Xelon soldiers from the group hurried over plowing through the snow grabbing Abreon, "Shall we drag him back, Captain, Pertho?"

"No, let him say his peace."

"But!"

Commander Pertho annoyed, "He poses no threat."

The soldiers let Abreon go, and went back to their transports. Abreon nodding struggling to straighten himself. He was weak from lack of food and hard labor. The Commander sipped a cup of warm tea, "Speak."

Abreon moved closer to him, "Let us rest sir, their dying."

The Commander looking back at his prisoners, looking back at Abreon, distraught, "I cannot."

Abreon pleading, "Why?"

"Because others have a far greater power than me."

Abreon kneeling to him, "You are a reasonable man, I can see it, I can see your soul."

"But, I am ordered to work your people until they perish or ninety days."

"No."

"What do you mean?"

Abreon in the melting snow, "You can help us, help me personally."

Pertho a bit surprised, "What?"

"Commander if you help me, you will benefit yourself immensely."

Pertho looking about and then in hushed tones, "How so?"

"You will rise to greater rank and authority among your army. I too had rank, and you have greater, but help me and you will rise to the rank of General."

Captain Pertho frowned and looking down at the snow spoke low and slow, "So then, I will help you discreetly, not because of power, but because it is just and good."

Abreon standing: "Then you are very wise, indeed."

As they Nenthar died off in the snow, in the bitter cold, as one by one they passed, the work long and arduous, the wasting taking its toll Abreon prayed to survive. The remainder would work, with heavy machinery always nearby and incessant. Those men and women whom did survive grew in their knowledge of the work they had done. Surprisingly, they were promoted within the system, of course only to a certain extent, but even that was unusual. As the days grew longer and warmer, as spring began to bum away the ice and snow, Abreon was promoted and then with his alliance with Pertho was promoted again. Thus, when rotation was over, Danavar and the old man and he chose to stay in large part because they were saved from the hammer. They now had a better chance of survival in the mine then back at the prison camp. Abreon was sent out to the loader and picker station, on the outskirts of a blast site.

The crane ascended some prisoners with protective suits and hats inside it were watching. As it climbed higher supporting itself on its struts, bolted into the rock face of the mine and along its vertical face Abreon worked. He carefully moved along one of the steel walkways suspended near the crane. He watched it move and then turned around. It was Marcy. Abreon, shocked, quickly grabbed the walkways railings to prevent him from stumbling backward.

Marcy yelped, "Oh!"

Abreon laughing, "You seem to have the gift of survival!"

"Thanks B2." Marcy hugging him, kissing him on the cheek, "I am so glad you are alive."

"What about Drean?"

"Drean is alive. Many others are..."

A technician soldier pushed them apart, "Time now to work or you'll head back to the rock quarries. Don't forget that."

Then another technician, "You have to help heat rivets, come with me."

Marcy smiling and leaving for her work assignment, "Your work is never done soldier, Nenthar."

Indeed, it was never had been. Abreon struggled to be more than what he felt he was, he strived to succeed against his limited abilities and ways. He grew learning as he went. Abreon plotted and eventually with Pertho's help again was promoted for a second time. Abreon underwent training to operate the picker. He was sent back and then he drew his plans, in a meeting behind the closed doors of one of the mines office suites.

They all sat around a steel rectangular table. Those who were present where huddled over the blue prints of the picker. Marcy looked them over then shook her head: "Pertho, how did you acquire such a room?"

Pertho rubbed his head, "Someone owes me."

Rufus: "What are we to do?"

Drean: "Yes."

Abreon looking about, "This will be a practice run for one of the worst disaster the Xelon Dru have ever seen. This should be effective enough to provide clearance in the factory. Four spring encased hydraulic struts support the picker. Each strut is in turn supported by rock below, which is unstable. However, they have reinforced the supports with concrete. We are to sever the struts from the base rock, causing the picker to collapse upon itself and tear the rock beneath it from the terrace. The rock terrace then will partially collapse."

"How are we to do that?" Questioned Danvar.

Pertho: "We use a special powerful corrosive called Lire. It is a compound that when spread onto metal; it combines to form a salt and a gas, destroying the metal's integrity."

Danvar rubbing his beard: "How are we to use it then?"

"It's only corrosive when applied to metal. It is safe to handle, but we will to apply it with thick gloves because the reaction occurs while you apply it."

Abreon pointing on the prints, "We are to apply it here, here, here and here along each strut."

Drean, "How will they not know?"

Pertho: "They only do maintenance checks on the massive picker every two weeks."

Marcy, "Then?"

Pertho: "Then we wait until the day before they do the checks."

Abreon nodded in agreement, "The compound takes a day to fully react with steel that thick. We will apply it early before our shift, while the third shift is ending, that way the change in shift and the disarray involved will be to our advantage."

Pertho, "The compound is clear, no one will see it. I will provide it."

Abreon: "We spread it on that day. I will operate the picker from atop inside the cab and go about my position normally, lifting and lowering rock from the quarry. The second day I will again operate the picker. During that day, when the second load is lifted Pertho will be informed from you Marcy that the pickers struts have been compromised. Pertho will then contact higher authorities as I swing the load. This will cause the struts to shear from themselves. This will cause the whole multi-ton picker to collapse, bringing the end of the terrace down as well and many Xelon Dru's."

Drean concerned: "How will you survive?"

"The cab has adequate protection. It has a strong roll cage. I will not be harmed excessively."

Danvar, pointing to the map: "Who will disable the rear pylons for the picker? The pylons descend to the face of the terrace. You would have to lower yourself down by rope until you come in contact with the base of the unit."

Abreon looked about the table, "Whoever attempts to disable the rear pylons will go down, but cannot go back up for the risk of detection would be too great. It must be done, for this is a stepping stone toward the greater prize, the factory."

Everyone was bound up by his or her own emotions, except for the old man. He stood and leaned over the blueprints, "I will go. Everyone at this table is taking a risk and everyone at this table might die. If I don't go and do it more of my people will die, the factory will stand and the aggression will continue."

Abreon peered down from the cab of the picker. He peered a hundred meters down to the heavy rock being loaded upon the steel trough, the cabling that held it a heavy gage. The cable bound itself to the comers of the trough and to a latch, the latch connected to still another latch. More cabling of steel composite traveling up to the picker's boom. The boom then was attached to the cabs superstructure and its engines. The yellow cab was supported beneath the red superstructure, its glass shielding permitting a wide angled view of the earth below. Abreon's seat was suspended above the glass floor, which ended where his controls began.

The cab's controls were upon floating steel bars, wrapping the cab, about the windows and ending below his feet. The computerized controls and gages were above him with a few key indicators at a center console. The cab's features also included a rear-facing seat. The two seats were suspended from the superstructure of the cab, a four-point harness for the chest, two straps for his thighs and footrest to place his feet held in Abreon. Fire suppressant and compressive gel packs were arrayed in the cab at various locations. They reacted to both heat and impact. The gel was a blue oxygen rich insulator, which smothered the flames, or shielded the operator from the stress of compression or impact. The fire would burst the gel or impact causing it to explode. Breathing was supplied by inhaling the gel. Once the gel filled a person's lungs, oxygen transfer would take place.

Abreon waited, he could feel the pylons undermine themselves. He waited for his chance to rise to prominence and destroy the facility, ending the oppression of the Nenthara by the Xelon Dru soldier/corporate worker. This would start the end. The end would start the beginning; the fight for it would be at hand. Abreon would sacrifice his life perhaps for it, but he was confident that the safety devices present in the cab would prevent this and then it was time. Abreon pressed indicators on the controls lifting the heavy rock from the ground. The rock ascended in the bucket of the lifter toward him and the cab. As the bucket was pulled up by the machines engines, he heard the pylons groan, grind

themselves together. Abreon ever so gently swung the lift and it was enough. The steel struts twisted off from themselves at the base, the cab, the superstructure the boom and from the earth. The remaining segment of the pylon collapsed, causing the cab to lurch downward, Abreon perched headfirst dangling a hundred meters above the many Xelon Dru below. Most of them running as Abreon grabbed his harness, the cab impacting the edge of the rock terrace, splitting from the rest of the picker, crumbling rock everywhere, all of it racing down the wall of the strip mine, hitting the floor of the mine below, crushed and broken bodies everywhere, most dead some wounded. Abreon breathing the gel into his lungs, the fluid taking him, as he went unconscious, fading away as the pain twisted through them. He took another breath and then drifted away...

The advisory board was there before them. Abreon felt the sensation this had happened before only now he was not alone. He, Marcy, Drean and Pertho sat behind the first long table. Abreon and the other two prisoners were wearing new uniforms. Pertho was wearing the Xelon Dru's customary gray uniform with his insignias that showed his rank upon his sleeves. The advisory board sat before them and consisted of three higher-ranking soldiers. One of the advisory board spoke, his badge had the name Honsesi, "Abreon, ID number 452-7873A of barrack 18C it has been proven that you have indeed acted with great courage while working for the Xelon Dru. It is for this bravery that you have been given a level W3 clearance, which will entitle you to work in the mining and ore processing facility."

Abreon smiled, the pain of the fall wracking his joints and muscles. The rest of the advisory board nodding to him in approval, Abreon's smile quickly vanishing, his hand under the table squeezing the thigh of Marcy. Honsesi continuing, "Marcy ID number 452- 7823C, of Barrack 13A, it has been proven that you have indeed acted in great courage while working for the Xelon Dru. Because of this you have been given a level W4 clearance, which will entitle you to work in the mining and ore processing facility." Marcy looked at Abreon and then him at her. Marcy then looked at Drean, who was next. Again, Drean was promoted and given a higher clearance level. Finally, Honsesi addressed Pertho, "Pertho, Captain rank B2 you have shown extemporaneous courage and bravery for your act of reporting the cowardly undermining of that picker. Of course, it is regrettable that it was not reported in time, but for your aid, you shall be promoted to B1 Captain of hundreds."

Outside the barracks, Abreon hugged Marcy, Marcy kissing him: "We have clearance now!"

Abreon smiled, "Yes, yes we do."

Pertho as Abreon and Marcy began to walk together under the protection of Pertho's rank, for men and women were not allowed to be seen together as prisoners: "Now, that I am a rank of B1, I can help YOU better. I will rise to the top and stop this machine before all society pays."

Abreon holding Marcy's hand, "Yes."

Pertho to Abreon, in a dark corner of worker barracks D2, beside one of the beds. He looked around then removed a weapon from a small pack: "This is a new device."

Abreon looking at it. It was a small white and plastic hand held pistol, with a flaring cone extending out from the muzzle: "So, it plasma?"

Pertho taking out its power cell from the pack, "It is plasma." holding it; "It is a new type of plasma weapon, instead of a short powerful burst of plasma, it produces a field of plasma, an expanding mass of plasma, which is effective up to five to ten meters."

Abreon surprised, "Only ten meters?"

"Well, in open combat situations it is ineffective, but in close combat, it is highly effective, which is what you are likely to expect along the bulkheads of the facility."

"What are its effects?"

Pertho: "A blast from the gun produces second to third degree burns, where the plasma comes in contact with flesh. It will not kill them, but disable them." Pertho taking the power pack and sliding it into the butt of the weapon, "It's not powerful, it will not give you many shots, but it will save your life and its small enough to hide on yourself at the facility. It's not metal so it will pass through scanners."

Abreon understanding, "If it was more powerful it would have to contain metal and so I would not be able to take it with me anyway."

"Exactly."

The plan was then set.

Pertho was to disable the security fields, A2-A, RS-E, C4-D and C4-E and C4-EA, E8, and EC, ED and EF. This would allow easy clearance for Abreon. Dreon would enter through security field A2-A, disabling main power conduit A3.478. Disabling the power conduit would shut power to all non-essential services in area C. Security and emergency systems would not be effected. Security and emergency systems drew power directly from the two nuclear plants under the facility, more than two kilometers in length, and one in depth. Marcy would pose as Dreon, as a maintenance staff. This would allow Dreon to sever control lines from the nuclear command center to their primary systems.

Abreon strolled down the corridors of the coal ore processing and steel facility in sector C. He had only to wait, as unsuspecting men and women, all wearing different jumpsuits for different meanings strolled by him. Abreon was wearing a blue jumpsuit, which indicated that he was a technician, a jumpsuit he was not assigned to wear. As Abreon walked about, toward his intended destination, he began to pass on his right steel grated platforms, which rose every few meters. They expanded above his head and angled their way higher up. He could hear his boots on the metal for he was upon one as it sloped up toward where he needed to execute his plan. Toward Abreon's left were great cooling tanks that were needed to cool the nuclear reactors. Abreon waited for his signal.

Then the lights flickered and died, emergency lamps kicked on provided spotty illumination. Abreon held his breath and then exhaled deeply. He now had two minutes of time remaining to complete his task, as he hurried down the shadowy halls. Some men were rushing around and working to determine the problem at hand, others were looking about worried, some leaving the facility and below him, others yelling out the settings on their instrumentation.

One minute

No one knew that he would carry out the final act of this facility, a home to four thousand workers. As he rushed downward, the hall began to widen again, as he flanked the leftmost bulkhead, the crowds of workers dwindling in the dark.

Thirty seconds

Many meters down he neared, the water conduits cooling the nuclear containment units, those conduits dark red, ten of them, each one meter in diameter and rising from the bulkheads below.

Ten seconds

As Abreon watched a few employees beneath him on a lower platform, as he craned his neck upwards, the conduits, ascending high above him. He looked about stopping at the first conduit, a control box, jutting from the unit about a half-meter in width and a meter deep. A computer panel angling out from it and a display.

Zero seconds

Security was breached at the control boxes with the power out. He now had five minutes to key in the control codes, disable the coolant flow and exit the facility. Abreon keyed in the first series of codes shutting the current of coolant water from the conduit. He keyed a second series of codes. No one noticing his actions. Abreon keyed in the third series of codes and the fourth in the series. Employees began to look over to see what Abreon was doing. As he keyed in the fifth series of codes, workers pointed to him and yelled, then during the sixth in the series, they began to run over to him. Quickly Abreon put in the seventh and eight as he removed his pistol. He turned, removed the pistol from his jumpsuit and shot at them. The blast burned two employees as they fell back. Another worker charged at Abreon as he keyed in the ninth code, Abreon ducking as he threw a punch. Abreon shot him burning him severely. His coworker fell to his knees crying. Others seeing this became afraid and began to run. Finally, Abreon coded in the tenth in the series and he began to run, shooting a path through those employees remaining who stood in his way.

Four

Abreon yelled out to those still in the facility, "Run, we're all going to die!"

An employee hearing him, "He's shut the coolant down, everyone run! Everyone run!"

Abreon running as well, some beginning to run, near, above and below him.

Another, "The cores will melt down! Run!"

Abreon shooting a worker, burning him bright red, as he kicked him and pushed him down, stepping over him, most screaming dropping equipment, work, fleeing, some because they did not want to die, some because they did not know the nature of Abreon's weapon. Abreon burned another, "I have a weapon. Flee, save your life!"

Others now shooting laser rifles at him, one blast missing Abreon's head as he burned his way up the steps to a second platform, another laser shot missing him again but burning a hole in the metalwork next to him.

Three

As he burned another worker, a second worker charged him with a laser rifle. Abreon fired, burning him as well. Abreon grabbed the laser rifle and shot around him, killing some, others running, others staying, as he ran dimbing another set of steps. Abreon shot some with the laser, burning others with the pistol as he screamed, the laser blasts glancing everywhere. Abreon pushed one worker shooting him with a laser blast, running and yelling, as the barrage red laser was shot after him. Abreon running toward a sealed window of glass thick, two five centimeters. He shot at it with the laser rifle, the window unaffected. Abreon surprised quickly turned to fire upon other workers and spun around shooting the casing of that window, set within the bulkhead. Abreon then backed up, charged the window and broke through, the window snapping from its housing. He fell through hitting the ground five meters below.

He stumbled, fell again, got up and ran again.

Two

Abreon ran down the sloping concrete lots of the facility. He found a transport unit, jumped in, grabbed the metal beneath its front console and pulled it off. By now, most workers and soldiers were running away, others watching and then running, for the facility was going to melt down. He threw the console, grabbed a fist full of wires underneath the dashboard, finding the one he needed, pull them apart and then patching the wire back together. The console of the cart lit up ready for him to drive the transport away. Abreon stepped on the gas.

One

He turned the cart about and drove straight for the first perimeter fences, driving through.

Zero...Set

Now Abreon had only five minutes before the containment units grew hot enough to have a core meltdown.

Five

He drove down through the facilities grounds and then through a set of new concrete lots.

Four

He drove from those lots into a third set, then through another series of fence, no one following him, because they were all fleeing the facility as well.

Three

Abreon eventually left the facility grounds and entered the fields.

Two

He entered the plants grassy areas beyond the facility, its lots and the mine itself.

One

Abreon entered the woods and then drove on toward and then along of the back paths, forgoing the now clogged roads which led out of the facility.

Zero

He now had five minutes before the radiation would reach him.

Five

Abreon floored the transport and he rode on through the woods.

Four, three, two.

Abreon was nearing a ravine, having traveled a total of three and a half kilometers.

One

The ravine was ten meters deep and ten meters wide.

Zero

Abreon ran over into the ravine, the cart flipping as it hit a tree, bending, Abreon hitting a rock, with his back, tumbling down to the bottom, slumping over as the cart collapsed upon him near a stream that made its way through the ravines bottom.

Seven

“Yes, indeed.” Said a doctors in a radiation suit to the others. Each one of them stood around Abreon inside a white walled, white door room, insulated; with thick glass windows to watch him from should they find the need too. Abreon found himself strapped upon a table, naked, his body blistered and burned, in some places more severe. The burns were deeper around his knees, his ankles, his forearms and his wrists. Abreon’s eyes were on fire as he spoke, his vision blurry, his lips chapped, his hair falling out on the table he was strapped, “Who are you?”

One of them speaking to him through the visor of her suit, a woman, “We are from the recycling plant Tarnar. You are in basement level four, med/lab area, isolation room three.”

Abreon struggling with his straps, “What?”

The woman holding out her gloved hands, “Oh don't struggle, it will be of no use to you. Your movement has been restricted for good and probable cause.”

Abreon lifting his head struggling, “Why!”

“Because, you have been radiated. Our employee’s found you after they did a perimeter sweep of the Zitar Nuo Corporation’s main smelting and mining facility. We are still salvaging the ore from their strip mine pit. This will undoubtedly bring us into the war at some point. However, some of the area is radiated from the meltdown.

Abreon dropped his head back down onto the metal table, weakly, “No...”

The doctor, “Oh, don't worry, we are confident that we will win it. That is part of the reason we are doing it.”

Abreon looking at a technician, noticing the meter he was holding another one beginning to unbind his legs, wrapping them in mesh cellular growth medium, “You don’t understand they had a secret weapon.”

One of the four in a suit, a second doctor, “We all do.”

The technician binding his legs again. Abreon looking down at him then up at the doctor, “How long until I can leave?”

The doctor, “I am doctor Nece. I will be your doctor and help you regain your health. You may have to stay for a year or two.”

“What?”

For many days Abreon could not eat, he could not sleep and he could not drink. He would dehydrate, come back from the brink, take in fluids and then dehydrate again. After several days, they

removed their containment suits, replaced by standard uniforms. They changed his bandages daily, applied what growth medium they could as his skin began to scar and waited. They fed him through a catheter that went into his arm. He vomited and bled from his nose. He cried bloody tears. Abreon's skin cracked, oozed, and healed again. However, he did heal. Abreon did gain his strength, it slowly returned and he again began to grow strong. He made fists upon his bed in anger and pain, as Nece visited him every day, giving him words of encouragement. Abreon's hatred of the Zitar Nuo began to fade, and he began to wonder if his wife and children were alive, or if Marcy survived.

One day Nece walked into his room her path following blue lines that were painted on the tile floor. For the first time he noticed there not only were blue lines on floor but also yellow. Abreon thought that he had been too weak to notice the paint previously. Nece walked to the side of his bed following the blue lines intently, "How are you feeling, Abreon?"

Abreon watched her adjust the flowers that were in a vase, next to his bed. He had not seen flowers since before the war, which had been over three years ago. It took him aback and for a moment, he forgot where he was, for he was in a different place.

"Abreon?"

Abreon watched as she sat next to him, noticing her warmth through the sheets of his bed, "Why are you following those blue lines, walking that way?"

Nece laughed a bit, "In order to save precious environmental energy, as dictated by our parent company, Tarnar."

Abreon gave a pained laugh back, sarcastically, "Why not the yellow?"

"The yellow is for returning."

Abreon frowning, "How much longer will I need to stay?"

"You're here to stay."

Abreon frightened, "Why did you not say this before to me, Nece?"

Nece smiling warmly, "Because, Abreon, it would have been to your detriment. Come, I think you're well enough to go on a trip. Let's go on a trip and I will show you the area and your house."

She helped him up, in his white and blue gown, "Abreon?"

"What?"

"Walk the yellow indicator lines. I will show you when to change to the blue."

Along the way, Nece pointed out the recycling plant and the corporate tower next to it in the foreground. In the distance, Nece showed Abreon the recycling plants metal yards, the heaps of plastic, glass and other materials, which could be melted and reused. Nece showed Abreon the companies various machinery, trucks and workers. A few minutes' walk from the hospital, they found themselves on a great hill that led to a park of grass and trees and down to a community of small houses. There seemed to be many of them each painted white with solar roofs. Between them were windmills. Even farther, off in the distance another recycling plant and upon its own roof, solar panels. A second field flanking the right from that plant was a wide solar array. Toward the east in the background were the Tarnar Corporation's facilities. Nece pointed back toward the houses, "Those are where our workers live. You shall live there."

Abreon noticed the directional lines along the roads from the community dwellings. They radiated outward. He picked at the scarred skin of his forearm. Some of his hair was growing back in patches on his arms and upon his head. Abreon's scarring had partially concealed the barcode that had been burned onto his forehead, "And what will I do?"

"You will work in the recycling plant."

"I have a level B technology certification."

They sat in the park on a bench. Nece arched her back, as she looked into the sun, her eyes dosed for a moment. She had long blond hair, down to her waist, her face an oval, soft features and mild lips. Nece neck was long and fragile, her shoulders small but strong, her thighs wide, her legs, slender and long. She smiled and turned to him opening her eyes, "Then I'll place you in recycling product development."

Abreon moving closer to her, "You really think you're going to win?"

"Win what?"

"Win in a war with the Xelon Dru." Nece assured, "We consume less resource than they do, they will burn out in their efforts against us."

"They take what they need!"

"We will win."

Abreon pulled at the strings of his gown, not looking at her, "You don't understand. I know they took a lot from me. I have to pay them back. I have to stop them from destroying our lands, other communities. How am I supposed to do that if I make recycling bins?"

"Huh?"

"You don't know do you? You don't even have a militia, or an army. You stepped on the snake, and now it's going to bite you."

Nece: "I don't know about you stopping them, but I can help you and the company."

Abreon looking up to her, "How?"

Nece looking out at the windmills, then at Abreon, "Abreon you can transfer from the recycling product developing division into weapons development."

"How?"

"I'll write up a proposal and we will talk to the President."

"But, why would he see us?"

Nece unzipping the top of her jumpsuit, pulling up her inner shirt, "Because," taking his hand and having him feel her breast, "He put me up to this."

Abreon was in his hospital bed yelling at Nece, "You knew all along, that that's what I wanted!"

Nece ready to cry, "We know who you are. We did a bio-scan on you. We do it with everybody above a 04 clearance. We matched the scan up. Nenthar may be gone, but the bio-scans of their soldiers were stored offline. The network Diggaco held the keys, but they sold them to whoever had the money to buy them. We just bought your profile, not knowing if it was really you, but we got a positive. We think you sabotaged the Xelon nuclear power plant."

"What makes you say that?"

"The Xelon Dru put 500,000 credits on your head."

"Why not just ask me, Nece?"

"Because...why would you help us unless you felt obligated?"

Abreon leaning back, "So you found my mental profile as well?"

Now sitting up again, Abreon looking at the fresh flowers near his bed, "What was that before in the park? Is this a ruse?"

Nece, "I did that because I love you!"

Abreon standing in anger, "I don't even know you!"

"There is a parasitic corporation out there that is feeding off its competitors. They are expanding, their shares are heavily traded and growing in value. There even offering a dividend this year. They have had new technology, new weapons, new types of armor, their attacks are stronger and their company soldiers are braver. They stand for the steel war machine. They destroyed one race already. I know I am one of the last survivors of it. They set their line and you crossed it by salvaging their refuse. Now you must move your corporation in a different direction."

The president of the Tarnar Corporation listened as he sat rocking on his leather chair behind a wooden desk in a glass-encased office atop the main corporate building. Avamar was a wider man of graying black hair. He wore his suit made of recycled cloth. He sipped a drink from a small glass next to his display. Avamar stopped rocking in his seat. He removed his hands from his chin, which had been clasped below it, "Why?"

Nece in her official doctor's jumpsuit, as Abreon was standing, "Because they are strong now and in order for them to remain strong they must continue to eat."

Abreon: "You must change your research and development division and allow me to assist; so that we can develop war machines."

Avamar again rocking back and forth in his chair, "That would disrupt the innovation we have had with our recycling. We have strived for protection through nature in as much as the body allows and now you are saying we must change that and fight a dirty war, why?"

Abreon leaning forward on Avamar's desk, "You have valuable ways to recycle, valuable ways to save and generate energy, technology they must have. You have just sprung your own trap. Now you must escape. It's your choice, you have time."

"How much time?"

Nece, "Based on surveillance, perhaps in two springs, since this summer is waning."

"My God."

Abreon walked the blue lines to his house. There were so many houses; all painted the same, all with their own solar roofs. Some people hurried alone walking their lines, following them as their guides. Some employees were just talking with one another, others peering out their windows. Abreon found his house, door number 12853 that was home for him now. He glanced back at the park and the corporate facilities, the corporate center, the recycling plant, its fields. He felt sick as he entered his home. It had two rooms, one bathroom, but no eating facilities. All must eat at the plant, except those who worked in the field, or in the corporate center. His home was sparse, one bed, chair and table. The table and chair were in one room, as well as a computer console, which was attached to the wall. The second room held his bed and the bathroom. He sat upon his bed, fell over and slept for a while.

Abreon awoke later in the night, the rooms pitch black. He turned over, and began to stare at where he thought the chair was. He thought about his life before the war. In the dark Abreon thought of those who were still in the concentration camps. He spoke to the computer and it dimly lit the overhead lights. The chair was real however, his knowledge was not. His own wisdom was wicked. Man's knowledge was his downfall. What did men want to know, weapons, war, power, money, a blade or maybe it did not matter. Abreon felt sick again, then felt hurt, wounded. He began to become tired again, all too soon finding him. It whisked Abreon away to sleep. He dreamed of his death.

The technicians worked hard on their goals, the employee's of the recycling facilities research and developments division. Some two hundred technicians, with a class C degree of higher worked on hurried projects. Some of those new developments so advanced that Abreon could not comprehend, but progress continued even if he did not understand all of it completely. Abreon walked with Nece both in their white coats along the corridors of the research divisions laboratories. Abreon holding her hand as she pointed to one of the lab doors they passed, "We are putting 40 percent resources toward our military projects, which is considerable to say the least."

Nece watching some technicians work in the halls, stringing wire, sitting, fiddling with computer components and weapons system, "How close are we to completion?"

Abreon smiled pleased, "We estimate completion within eight months, which is on schedule. With two hundred technicians working on it, progression toward a final build is proceeding at a rapid pace."

Abreon, stepping over a hunk of metal, to one of the technicians nearby, Elron please remove this metal from the hallway." Elron stepping over, "Right away." Abreon continuing with Nece, "We know from scouting reports that the Dru are amassing equipment In the Decaro hills, west of here. No troops have been seen though, except for a few pro-visionaries."

Nece with a crooked smile, "What has been accomplished, show me, Abreon?"

Abreon took her, "We have three major components, comprising the offensive and defensive capabilities of our new army, which from what I have been told is now training in the fields beyond the windmills every day."

"I know I see them when I travel through the area."

Holding his arm out, "Here," entering a lab with some technicians sitting writing on computer tablets, some wired to instruments themselves. Abreon pointed to a pedestal chest high, "This is an offensive weapon. One of our hand weapons." The weapon was long and its stock of metal was wide, it had two grips, one at ninety degrees from the other. An explosive cartridge clip was inserted at an angle."

Nece touched it, "What does it do?"

A few of the technicians were now watching Abreon. He rifled through equipment and parts on a counter, found something and showed her, "It fires these."

"It fires these."

It was a thin sliver of metal, "These are spiked projectiles. We call them needles. It loads twenty of them, per charge, and fires them in a shotgun blast. The shotgun holds twenty charges."

Nece surprised, "Those will go right through them!"

“They’ll hit their targets, enter, exit and damage those in the vicinity. The benefit over plasma is its low charge time and wide angle accuracy.”

Abreon moving her to another counter, “This is Total Body Armor.” Abreon said, picking up a boot and setting it on a table where the rest of the suit was located.

“Like what you told me before about the Xelon Dru’s armor.”

“Correct,” Abreon picking up a leg of the suit a shade of black and deep green, “But with a difference.” Poking at a thigh plate, gripping it from a center bracket, “Each of the armor units is made of hexagonal honeycomb carbon fiber sandwiched between two high tinsel strength polymerized steel plates. When a blast of laser hits the outer steel it deflects some of the power, absorbing the rest within the honeycomb and stops at the inner second plate. The honeycomb melts from the blast, sealing up the impact site and the armor is ready for more.”

Nece holding the unit, “How many times can you hit this thing with a rifle blast?”

“This unit, probably four or five times before it’s integrity fails, more for a larger unit, like a chest or torso unit, perhaps ten to twelve, if there is no convergence in the blast areas.”

Nece remembering the psychiatric report she had purchased of Abreon, “What did the Nentharr Corporation do to you?”

“More than you want to know Nece.”

They stepped through double doors into a very large room, the ceiling high, at least four meters and its length twenty meters. Nece stepped back in the bright lights, “Wow!”

Abreon held her hand, “I know.”

Inside the room, filling it, a hulking, killing machine. The machine had two arms, a torso, two legs, all controlled by jutting pistons and hydraulic lines. Shocks and steel pistons controlled its three steel-toed booted feet. The unit’s legs were massive, meeting at a rotatable axis and merging into its armor plated torso. Its arms were spindles, wires and hydraulics with fists made of fifty-millimeter chained antifreeze cooled plasma cannons. The unit’s power and liquid gas tanks were housed dorsally suspended as well as protected by heavy rear plating. It lacked a head, instead a great camera inset into its chest. Abreon pointing to the back of the unit, “A controller’s seat is in there, you can barely see it, but it is there. It is positioned just above the unit’s power units, protected by more shielding. The chair has the units control modules mounted to a dash. It also has a heads up display, everything superimposed by the imagery from the forward facing camera.”

Nece impressed, “Okay.”

Abreon pointing again, "And we just installed a new rearward secondary camera. We are still working to patch it into the heads up display software."

"Oh."

Abreon kicked one of its huge steel toes, "You know what it is, don't you?"

Nece knew because they worked in the recycling facility and in the recycling silos, "Sure, they drop down on control tethers from the sky cranes and scavenge for recyclables. About five or six cranes can be controlled from a single boom housing six technicians. These units do the work of those who could not because of safety restrictions. They can be used when toxic materials are found as well. They shove toxic refuse in sealed tanks we had on their dorsal spine."

Abreon, glancing over at a technician with a computer: "We just severed the tether on this one. Now just the rider in the rear of the machine controls it. We have three, we are hoping for a total of forty."

Nece discouraged, "That's all, Abreon?"

"Unfortunately, Nece. We have hundreds, but we have to outfit them and then patch them into new onboard computers. All this takes time. We don't have much of that, but it could make all the difference. What should we call these machines?"

Nece thought for a moment, "How about tanks?"

Eight

Abreon watched from the top floor of the company's corporate center, down and across the way, the battle field two kilometers away. Next to Abreon stood Nece and President Avamar all watching the field before them through binoculars. The room was kept dark so that they could see out toward the battlefield and assess what they thought would be the last battle of the war between the Dru and the Tamar. Abreon watched as the Tamar fought the Dru valiantly holding their own among the flashes of red and white plasma, laser and needle gunfire. The Dru dug slashed and dug through the razor wire, the constructed walls and then the Tanar trenches. The Tanar poured down the Decaro hills to push them back into their trenches and pin them to the rear of their concrete bulkheads. The Tanar held off the Dru, some forty thousand Xelon Dru, against twenty thousand Tanar. The Tanar held them off their own hills until both armies tired and wounded a stalemate emerged between them. An hour passed and then two. Avamar to Abreon, anxious as the Dru continued to push wearing out the remaining Tanar soldiers, "When are we going to introduce the Tanks, Abreon?"

Abreon watched as the Tanar struggled, another hour passing and the battle seeming to slip away from the Tanar. As the sun began to lower itself behind the hills. Then, when the stalemate seemed to be broken in favor of the Xelon Dru, the Tanar sent in the tanks, down the hill and in a wedge formation along the battlefields flanks. Nece pointed, "I see the tanks!"

Abreon watched as alternating pairs of plasma shots burning, streaked across the walls over them and into fields. The Xelon Dru pushed forward into the Tanar with their mix of weapons, their protection suits and then their tanks. The tanks pushed toward the Xelon infantry, pinning them back as they fired cannons at them. They took their toll on the tanks and the remaining Tanar soldiers, but it was too much, the Xelon lines crumbled. The Tanar ran the last of the Dru to the walls, back from the fields.

A technician entered the office of Avamar whispering to him and then leaving. He lowered his binoculars and smiled turning to Abreon, "We have won."

Nece, "The Corporation is saved."

Then something happened. In the seconds which were to follow, a massive blast from the Xelon Dru, which ripped through the Tanars defensive walls. Three four legged units, machines than moved out from the entrance created through the center of the blast site and into the mass of Xelon Dru, Tanar and tanks. Each Dru machine extending multiple arms, each arm with multiple line, ejecting, grappling soldiers or tanks, current riding them to disable electronics and kill their victims.

Abreon looking through his binoculars, "What are those things?"

Avamar, "What's happening?"

Abreon looking out at the clots of flickering light, the Dru having some type of new weapon system. The machines shot out their reticulating claws with electric force destroying what it touched and then drawing the back. It appeared that each arm had six filaments, in a shotgun style array.

Nece, her voice limp, "What's wrong Abreon?"

Abreon now turning to the Nece, "There destroying the Tanks! The men! Everything!"

Avanar turning to him, "How long?"

"An hour at most."

Avanar, "We should leave!"

Abreon pushing him off, "How, how are we supposed to do that!"

"There's terrain vehicles in the parking basements."

Abreon yelling, "Where are you going to go? Where is anybody going to go! There is people left in this building, the woman and children and remaining civilians in their homes waiting! There is not enough vehicles."

Avanar eyeing him, "I'm going!" running out of his office.

Nece to Abreon looking back at the doors Avanar ran through, "What are we to do?"

"There are still some workers left in the building. We have to round them up, create a militia and scrounge for weapons. I believe we have twenty needle guns in development. They just need to be assembled. They are in research and development ward C. A tank is also in ward C. We can take it up to the top of this building and fight there."

Nece, "Why?"

"Because we can't let them win again. We can't let them enslave another corporation. I've come too far to let them win again. There are five thousand of their soldiers left. It will take two weeks for assistance to reach them, another division of men. We can pick them off and still win this!"

"But, they still have twenty thousand troops in the Dru Territory, over the Zitar Nuo!"

Abreon holding his head, "I don't know, maybe if we take back the recycling facility, they'll leave us alone. Then we can gather the remains of the work force here and engage in a counter attack."

Abreon running down the halls of the corporate lower, floor ten of sixty-five, running, opening every door, of every office, finding nothing, or sometimes somebody, finding one corporate worker in a corner, "Come on! Let's go! We have to climb the building!"

Nece, "Come on!"

Abreon running again, turning back, "Come on everybody!" Others in commotion, some yelling, opening other doors behind him, one, "Come on!" Abreon running, Nece behind him, "We can't climb all the floors, ourselves Abreon!" Abreon spinning holding his hands out, "Wait!" waving, "Wait, everybody!"

All slowing stopping, about twenty-five, one questioning, "What is wrong?"

"We need to split up into teams."

Another employee, "How many?"

Abreon thinking quickly, "Six of two each and one of three." then pointing, "Your name?"

"Jake"

Abreon pointing to another, "You?"

That one, "Chy."

Abreon again, "And you?"

She spoke to him, "Pethra."

Abreon to them, "You're leaders so pick more and form teams. Each of you take five floors and repeat it, when you get to floor sixty-five, stop and wait for the remaining pairs, report to me." Then Abreon stopped again, "Okay, I need a barricade here!" Abreon pointing to the hallway, as a mass of forty workers were had arrived, "We also need a barricade here, two per floor!"

Chy was tall and lanky with streaks of blond hair. He scratched his head in confusion, "With what Abreon?"

"With desks and anything more you can find!" Abreon yelled to Pethra. Pethra had long streaky, curly hair to her shoulders and a deeply accentuated face, "I want you and a few others to disable the elevators, but not the C cargo elevator; we need that to move the tank. Make sure the rest are made inoperable. Take out the elevator's computer intelligence that will make them junk."

Pethra, "Will do."

Abreon to them all of them, "I need twenty men to come with me. We need to take all the needle guns, assemble them and load them. We need to take the remaining suits and put them on. We need to take the Tank and bring it to the top floor. There we will make our last stand in the president's office. Does everyone understand?"

One employee, "Yes sir!"

Another employee, "You bet!"

Abreon waited as the Xelon Dru soldiers made their way through the last blockade on floor below theirs. He could hear them as he picked on the green directional lines upon the floor of that level. Nece looked at the floor and at him, into his eyes: "I wish you could have learned more of our ways."

Abreon to her, smiling, "I learned enough."

"Yes."

Jake was kneeling on the floor with a protection suit on, however, since there were only twenty weapons and sixty-five people, only twenty were positioned as the first defense. All twenty were suited. Abreon's helmet next to him, Jake, "Should we position ourselves?"

Abreon stood, "All of you step back by ten meters from this spot, behind the desks before the barricade. Fight until they close in and then fall back to the stairs. Hold those stairs. That will give us an overwhelming advantage, forcing them to retreat. They can't go through the floors or through the ceilings, because as we fall back toward deeper barricades they'll get picked off and they can't go through the second staircase because we have the barricades, which we are defending."

They took their positions behind the metal desks and waited. In a moment several men and a desk were blown from its position in on the barricade, the desk hit a wall and fell crushed and smoking to the floor. One Tarnar saw the helmet and rifle of a Xelon Dru. He yelled out, "There they are!" Then another Dru appeared behind the first.

Abreon from behind another desk, "Fire!" shooting, as three others were behind that buttress, all yelling fire themselves.

Nece shooting a needle blast at the hole in the barricade, "Let's get them!"

A clot of Dru began building along the hole from the buttress, firing laser, the needles hitting their suits, piercing their metal shielding, Jake, from a rear shelter, "Look at them! Look!"

A laser blast boring into the metal of the desk that Abreon was behind, "Don't let them through!"

Then they ran as another blast blew the barricade into pieces, as they took cover among them. There were fifty Dru now in the room and another hundred in the wings, laser blasts everywhere, burning holes into everything, Jake yelling out, "Abreon!"

Abreon firing, "Retreat!" as Nece, the others, and he fell back to another desk. Abreon took a peak above the desk firing back at the Dru, "Don't give up!"

Chy, "They're everywhere!"

A blast hit Abreon's his shoulder, the site smoldering, Nece to him, through her helmet, "Abreon!"

Abreon fired at a group of the Dru, "Don't mind me!" Abreon watching as they gathered, "They're making a crawl!" the Xelon rushing on their stomachs toward the Tanar, Abreon firing at them. They were now only twenty meters away, "Take them out"

Pethra, "Get them!"

The wave of Dru soldiers some twenty, crawling another ten meters, down to ten in the charge a-s another wave of twenty began before them, Abreon shooting, standing spraying out quickly, "Don't let them near!" a blast of laser hitting him in the chest, Abreon falling back on his knees, "Don't let them pass!"

Now the Dru were ten meters from them, Abreon and another standing shooting point blank, killing one then another, Abreon signaling, "Retreat." Abreon quickly then dropping to his knees as another desk wracked with holes began to crumble, others retreating to the remaining two before the next barricade behind them. Abreon crawled backwards as some Tanar were left in the open, as a third wave of twenty Dru fell down on their stomachs and crawled towards them. Another several Tanar being hit from laser blasts, Abreon before a desk, looking toward the stairwell doors, "Ten of you climb behind the next barricade!"

Pethra from the rear, "Me?"

Abreon, "You too!"

Nece as ten of the second twenty fell behind the receding barricade, dropping low to the floor, "What about me?"

Abreon to her, "You're coming with me, to the stairwell" as a third wave of twenty fell upon them, firing, attempting to pin them down. Abreon pulled Nece to the stairwell under heavy fire, leaving the bodies of the Dru behind, some sixty-five out of a hundred total in the first company while another hundred poured to the stairwell. The remaining Tanar fell back to the stairs, Abreon up front and in the foreground, desperate to keep the Dru from finding a foothold in the stairway, "Come on!" as they did, the laser blasts blinding around them. Some remaining Tamar failing under extreme fire, some of their needle guns running out of ammo, Abreon picking up a needle gun, throwing it to a rearward recruit as the Dru worked their way up the 's stairway.

Nece, "We need a plan!"

Abreon, "We had one Nece!" As they continued their retreat nearing an upper stairwell entrance, now using what guns were salvaged and given to those who were not suited or armed in the rear as much remaining ammo as possible. Out of the Tanar left only seven men and women remained, Abreon pointing to the entrance, "Put the desks out!"

Abreon helping to pull the desks out. Abreon and the others backing up and over them, with a heave throwing them down the steps at the Dru. The desks bounding down the stairwell, as the last free Tanar retreated further up the stairwell, fighting until it was only Abreon and Nece left. Once they

reached the top floor they met up with ten who were unarmed and two who were. They took an entrance to the stairwell back into the building and met up with the ten who had guarded the barricades, Abreon to Jake who was one of the twelve still armed, "How did you get here so fast?"

Jake, "We took the second stairwell. We figured you would need the help."

Abreon, "We have to filter through this barricade and defend it until we're back at the president's office!"

Nece looking back, "Let's go."

The Xelon Dru opened fire upon the innocents, those remaining who did not have protection suits or even weapons to shoot with. It was disgusting the Dru holding their own, picking targets with laser shots and burning them, killing them, those left to fight with their weapons shooting in vain. Abreon waited with Nece and Jake from his point of vantage, with his needle gun firing, almost out of ammo yelling to Nece and Jake, pointing back into the president's office: "We have to get to the machine it's our only chance!"

Abreon, Nece and Jake peeling off from the fight, the dead everywhere. There was no one left with at least a few thousand Dru soldiers in that building and in the hallway preventing them from escape. Abreon fired his last rounds at them as they surged forward. Abreon kicking one as he mounted the machine, the tank. He helped Nece up and then Jake. He helped them all to the rear of the tank piggy backing the beast, as he activated it, "Let's go!" amidst a vault of laser fire, another attempting to climb it as the tank lurched forward. Abreon caught a glimpse of him and using the controls of the beast kicking the Dru off, laser fire holing the machines plating, one blast hitting the helmet of Abreon's protection suit, Abreon shaking off the cracked and smoldering helmet, "We are leaving this place!"

Jake, as he looked out at the thousands of shoulders, Abreon firing plasma into them, killing five or six with one blast, seven with the second in succession from one cannon to the next, "Um, where, Abreon!"

Abreon backing toward the president's office windows firing as he went, "Look back!"

Nece, gripping the back of the tank, "No!!"

Abreon backing the machine out the window, the thick glass shattering as the tank and all three of them plunged downward, Jake and Nece screaming. Abreon pressing the controls forward, the clawed boots of the tank digging into the steel of the building, shattering more glass as it plunged down the side of the building, sparks shooting everywhere burning through the night air. The friction slowing the tank's descent, the machine hitting the ground, the struts of the tank compressing with a groan, struggling, then in a moment, the machine stood, relaxed its strain. Abreon turned the tank around and he pushed the tank forward, they left, not stopping until the several days later.

The machine ran, its energy reserves draining, it's nuclear power plant unable to charge it's batteries quickly enough, continuing until its hydraulics began to fail, seizing from the heat generated, the tanks oil running hot, the unit steaming as it lurched and sunk out of power. Abreon knew they could not ride anymore. The unit did them good. It had served its purpose putting them out of range from the Xelon Dru. The tank had brought them to a place where they thought they had found peace. They jumped off the tank, on foot climbed through a range of hills and then descended the other side until they reached a crevasse stopping their progress. The crevasse was some two thousand meters across, and two hundred meters in depth. It had been formed from the massive river below. Far down and in the distance they spotted a bridge. The three slowly made their way down the crevasse following the steppes formed by the river over thousands of years, careful not to misplace a step or slip. As they neared the bridge, they noticed just how immense it really was. The bridge had massive supports, concrete lanes and arched steel spans. It was strong, probably able to support hundreds of metric tons at a time and many thousands of people. A core of engineers could only have built it and they had since vanished, leaving the bridge behind as a testament. It was awe-inspiring.

Abreon, "Let us cross the bridge to see the other side."

Nece; "Good Idea."

Jake, "It should take us awhile."

About halfway across the bridge a group of thirty men in carriers met them. Most of them stepped out of their vehicles to get a closer look at them. One of them had binoculars, "I am committee leader Loss, of the town Cantor, what is that thing of yours up on the terrace? One of my men spotted it."

Abreon looked back and up, "That is what we call a tank. It is...was a machine with weaponry that serves a military function."

Loss: "Then it military in nature?"

Abreon: "Yes. We had to leave it up there."

"Why do you possess it?"

Abreon: "We have come from an area upon the map that is in a complete state of war. We were permitted to escape only by way of that machine."

Loss was of medium build with long braided red hair, and steel teeth: "What is that suit you wear?"

"It protects me from weapons fire, smaller arms."

Loss, "What is your purpose crossing this bridge into our town?"

Abreon answering, "We only seek refuge, from our militarized companies, that is all."

Loss speaking with others, then to them, "We are an independent state, we exist as an independent state, it is very rare these days and we shall continue to exist as one. We are a non-militarized people, and shall remain that way. You may enter and remain in our town, but the machine must remain up there."

Abreon nodded, "Yes, we agree."

The town consisted of approximately thirty-five buildings; none more than four levels high, none having the capacity for holding more than a hundred people. The town was split in quarters, by two main roads, one traveling east, and one traveling northeast and beyond the town, another off shooting perpendicularly from the northeast, northwest. A circle could be drawn about the town so that its diameter would encompass twenty of the thirty-five buildings. The remainder were scattered along the roads. The buildings were powered by solar panels on their roofs and more outside the town limits. Each building was in turn made up of corrugated metal, sprayed with a foam outer insulation to protect their inhabitants from the heat of the summer and the cold of ~~winter~~. Water pumps were scattered here and there about the town, and along its outer limits.

As they entered the town they learned more about how the town operated, one building was a relay station and network hub, another was food distribution site, a third a metalwork's factory, another a computer fabrication shop, one a warehouse, a pub, and other shorts. The people's livelihood was met by farming of which they did in rectangular plots of land outside the city. Later Abreon found out they had a successful hydroponics labs and a greenhouse, which grew under acrylic what could not be grown efficiently outside. The foodstuffs were transported to the town warehouse and town distribution sites, some located in other towns also scattered across the countryside like theirs. They seemed to primarily be concerned with the growing, selling and trading of crops. What they could not eat they sold or traded for other food outside the town, in other towns like theirs, then bringing back the profit and sharing that with the community. Abreon thought it strange to have a whole territory without corporate influence. It seemed very communal to him.

Money was in the form of Rue. One Rue being equivalent of .7 credit units. Abreon needed to find a place for himself and this task was completed at the local pub, as he sat for a drink. He had found a place to live after the townspeople's generosity ran out. Unfortunately, money was an issue for him and his two companions. He could not access his bio-site because the Dru could trace him back to where he was and endanger not only himself but also Nece, Jake and the town itself. Money was garnered instead by selling his total protection suit. The purchaser gave him five hundred Rue for the suit. It had bothered him, because he thought five hundred Rue was not enough, especially since he helped design the product. Abreon took that money and paid for two weeks at the pub, which had rooms for rent on the third floor.

Abreon sat there drinking his synthetic alcohol, thinking about his life and his fate. He had been many places, but none so poignant as the one he was experiencing. Abreon was angry, he felt alone with his wife gone, his children gone, his world gone. He was alone with nothing but his fists to shake at God

himself and the poor fortune that was his existence. How was he supposed to give when he had so much to take back? Perhaps, he was destined to have an end, where his own ragged ruined life would cease to exist, and a new life would begin. He did not want to rise to glory; he wanted to sink into mediocrity. Somehow, Abreon knew his steps were ordered. It frightened him.

Nece and Jake walked into the pub, Nece to Abreon, "How are you stranger? I haven't seen you in a couple of days, what have you been doing?"

Abreon patted a seat next to his. I was out at one of the townspeople's homes last night and sold the suit today. I got two weeks here at least."

Nece sat down ordered something and Jake sat on the other side. Jake elbowed him, "A lot can happen in two weeks."

"Easy for you to say."

Jake, "No not easy, we just came from the computer fab shop. We were given employment. Maybe you should go there too."

Abreon drinking contradicting his own thoughts, "I didn't come this far to wind up stocking parts on shelves."

Nece, "It's not that, we can just lie low here until the war over there is over. Some other corporation will become involved and that corporation will just bum itself up. Remember we must be wanted for 1,000,000 credits apiece by now."

It hit Abreon hard, "I don't know what I want."

Nece shrugging, "Well it's a start; nature is all about us out here, in this sector. We can at least enjoy it."

"If I have a start. It keeps going in circles. I keep losing people close to me. I do not want you all close to me. I seem to always survive, though my friends don't."

Jake, patting him on his shoulder, "Abreon, I know, we both know. The suns getting lower now, we'll have a few drinks and we'll go scouting in the morning through the fields up to the tree line."

Nece: "Maybe will find something, a hill we can look out upon?"

Abreon nodding reluctantly, "Yeah."

Abreon crawled into his bed, in his one room. He found nothing but a bed, a dresser, a closet, a terminal hook up and a bathroom, nothing more. He thought of his wife, how he had loved her. He thought of his children and how he loved them. He thought of Marcy and how he loved her. He had wished he had spent more time with her, but then that was the way it was.

Abreon, Jake and Mary were driving out from the town in a rented cart; having found a hill that looked promising, they were driving through the tall grass. The three kept their binoculars handy around their necks. Abreon finally was having a good time, holding hands with Nece, "Where you taking us?"

Nece driving and pointing, "To the top!"

Jake sitting behind them, "Hey, maybe we'll find something in in the fields?"

At length they reached the top of that hill which was the highest in the series, along the grassy meadows stretching from the town out five kilometers to a line of trees passed the fields. They were one kilometer from the tree line. They stepped out of the cart and they began to walk. Abreon pulled on Nece's binoculars, "Let me see!"

Nece pushed him away, "You have yours!"

Abreon and Jake began to look out along the fields. Nece was looking as well, sweeping in one direction then another with her binoculars. Jake then began to examine the town again. Abreon turned his attention to the tress: "I found nothing in the fields. I'm switching to infrared; maybe I'll find a bird or something in the trees."

Nece turned and began to look into the line of trees, "There old, seems to be a patch of old growth forest."

Abreon scanned the tree canopy then the base of the trees. He thought he saw something and then, peering deep into his binoculars adjusted spectrum he found something, the white of warmth creating a partial glow behind cool dark trees. It moved leaving it's heat signature behind to quickly fade. The person had apparently seen Abreon too through his own binoculars. Abreon lowered his binoculars and grabbed at Nece's jumpsuit, "Nece! Nece?"

She lowered her binoculars, "What, found something?"

Abreon adamantly: "Yes! Over in the woods, it was a person!"

Jake: "Where!"

Nece, "What?"

Abreon pointing, "Over there, look!"

Nece looking through her binoculars, "I don't see anything?"

Jake now looking as well, "Me neither."

Abreon looking through his binoculars again, "Turn to infrared!"

Nece doing so looking: "I don't see anyone."

“That’s because he fell back into the trees, but you can still see his heat signatures.”

Nece looking about through the infrared spectrum, “Ah, no...wait...I see them, but that could have been an animal.”

Abreon, “You ever see an animal tight up a whole tree like that?”

Jake lowering his glasses, looking over to Abreon, “Could have been a bear.”

Nece more convinced, “If it was a person, why?”

Abreon, “It was a scout.”

Nece holding her hair, “A scout from where? Why?”

Abreon rubbing his eyes, “Because, we didn't see him in the trees until we switched our binoculars over. He was wearing camouflage. Why would anyone hide in a forest, in camouflage, with no back up and watch us?”

Nece: “We could have just not seen him.”

Jake: “I turned to look over there too.”

Abreon: “Listen, he ran back deeper into the woods. Whatever he wanted, we must find out.”

Jake nodding, “Better we find out. We almost lost our lives once already.”

Nece sighing, “Oh, alright.”

Abreon smiling: “Good, let’s get are gear and hike over.”

Nece, “Lets.”

Abreon marked the faded heat signature with a way point on a small portable display pad and made his way to the location where the scout had been. Nece and Jake followed him as he read the display pad into the forest. Once they found the tree, they began to inspect it. Abreon feeling it, “Looks unmarked.”

Jake shaking his head, “What do we do now.”

Abreon looked around the trunk of the tree then pointing to the ground where boot prints were in the grass and soft earth, “We follow the marks he left until we reach him, provided we keep a safe distance of course.”

Jake looking deeper into the woods, “He could very well be armed.”

Abreon, “Let’s hope not, but we need to know. His report could jeopardize not only us but this whole sector.”

They followed the tracks until they caught up with her. They peered at the scout from behind several bushes. She took off her helmet to wipe the sweat from her forehead letting her hair fall back down to her shoulders. Over one of those shoulders was slung a long three barrel rifle. The scout sat upon a rock, pulled out a nutritional bar and began to eating it. Abreon told the team to lower themselves further, "Come on get down so she can't see us."

Nece kneeling peering through the bushes, "Shall we continue to follow her?"

Abreon whispering back, "There must be some other soldiers someplace."

Jake tried to get a better look at her, "This is not a militarized zone; there are no corporations for several hundred kilometers."

Abreon raising his eyebrow to Jake, "Exactly, which is why we still need to follow her."

They continued to follow the scout until she met with what appeared to be her commanding company. Abreon, Nece and Jake encroached upon them slowly and quietly carefully onto the site where the company was now together, they were thirty meters away from the company hiding in the bush. Abreon and the other two could hear the scout speak with her company commander: "There's a town some kilometers from here, north-west of here. Here are the coordinates." She said handing over a tablet, "I estimate approximately five hundred people. I have determined from my observations that they are advanced technologically. The community has solar panels, pumps, foodstuffs and what we are interested in, a computer assembly plant and a warehouse."

The company commander looked at the tablet and smiled among his soldiers, "What's the capacity of the warehouse?"

"It is extensive, probably able to hold parts for ten thousand computers.

Nece not having a good view of the company, "How many are there? I can't see too well."

Abreon grabbing his binoculars and zooming out. After a few seconds of scanning the location, putting them back down, "A few hundred."

The company Commander asking, "How many levels is this building?"

The scout, "Three above ground, unsure below ground possibly two or three."

The commander nodding pleased, "Are the five-hundred well-armed?"

"No. They possess no substantial arms, few small arms and some rifles perhaps, but nothing more. They are as the reports cited, largely agrarian in nature."

Abreon to the other two as they struggled to get a better view, "They're going to raid the town and capture it."

Nece, "Why?"

Abreon, "For their manufacturing capabilities." then looking down to them, "Stop, they're going to hear us!"

The Commander, "Then-" breaking his thought process and looking about into the woods, "Did you hear something?"

The scout shaking her head, "No, Commander."

Abreon, "Stop!"

"Then we can assault the town within five days."

Abreon falling from the bushes, "Shit."

A soldier catching the rustling of the bushes, "Look, over there!"

The Commander pointing to his soldiers, "You, you, you-and you, go capture them and kill them."

Abreon standing. Nece and Jake standing. Abreon's adrenaline surging, "Go, run! Split up! I'll fight them! I'll find you!"

Abreon then splitting up from them as the four soldiers ran after them, following them in pursuit. One ran after Jake, one after Nece, the remaining two following Abreon. Abreon ran through the trees and underbrush as they raced after him, one stopping to take aim and fire a rifle blast at Abreon's back. The blast missed splintering a tree next to Abreon. Abreon cut back into dense brush, cutting again into another series of trees, running, and running, the sweat pouring from his face. Abreon threw his binoculars in one direction, then running in the other, one of the pursuing soldier's rearward and behind the second by ten seconds. He stopped to pick up the binoculars, the first bypassing the other.

Abreon stopped and quickly looked around. He took a deep breath, tore a sleeve from his suit and placed it on a tree branch next to him. Abreon jumped up and climbing the tree. He waited, hesitating until the first follower stopped to examine the torn strip of sleeve. Abreon jumped down upon the soldier knocking his weapon from him. Abreon reached for the weapon, the soldier stepping on Abreon's wrist. Abreon cried out in pain, knocking the soldier off his feet just as the second pursuer found him. The second pursuer held his rifle, firing as he ran, buming a blast into another tree. Abreon stood, charging the second soldier knocking him off his feet, his rifle tossed away from the hit. As they struggled Abreon found the soldier's blade, pulling it from the soldier's sheaf as the first pursuer took his weapon, standing, Abreon plunging the blade in the second soldier's chest. The first stepping back scared yet taking aim, Abreon quickly rolling finding the second soldier's rifle shooting at the first, the blast, tearing a strip of flesh, from the right side of his face.

Abreon then went over to the second soldier to see if he was truly dead, but he had removed the blade from his chest stabbing Abreon in a calf. Abreon pulled the knife from his leg. He threw it and fired a final shot into the soldier. Abreon picked up the second rifle, running, hobbling with both weapons slung on his shoulders, until Jake caught him, pulling him down to the ground. Jake from behind a tree, "Sorry -they heard your blast."

Abreon scurrying behind the tree, brushing more dirt from himself, holding his calf as it bled through his hands, "Thanks for tripping me."

"Sorry -there coming for you and me -your leg?"

Abreon picking both weapons back up, "Here" giving him one of the rifles "Take this and we will triangulate our fire at that point there." Abreon and Jake then positioning themselves behind two trees, waiting until the third soldier drew near. Abreon held his breath until the third pursuer was at the point they aimed at yelling, "Now!" Both of them spinning about the trees and fired, shredding the soldier's chest as he flew back up in the air then to the ground.

Abreon hobbled over to the dead soldier taking his rifle as well, "My leg is fine, Jake." as he tossed it to him, "We have to..." interrupted by a scream, "Nece!"

Jake, "Nece!"

Abreon, "She's close by!" both of them running toward the cries. In a moment both Abreon and Jake found her, the last remaining pursuer holding her captive. Abreon and Jake pulled their rifles on him, "Let her go! Raise your hands!" Abreon yelled, both of them aiming at the soldier's head. The soldier pulled Nece closer using her as a shield, the soldier pressing his knife on her neck, "Abreon!" she yelled out to him.

Abreon, "Don't move Nece," then to the soldier, "Drop the knife or you'll die!"

The soldier, "No you listen! Drop your rifles, both of you!"

Abreon tossing his rifle, "There."

The soldier to Nece, "Pick up the rifle, woman!"

Abreon: "Don't do it!"

"Pick up the rifle or I'll kill you right now!"

Abreon quickly thinking, "You shut up! Don't do it Nece, if he kills you he's dead too!"

Nece picked up the rifle.

The soldier, "Hand it to me...now!"

Nece handed it to him, so that in his left hand he clutched the blade under Nece's neck, and in the other the rifle held out in aim toward Abreon."

The soldier pointing to Jake: "Now you, you drop your rifle too!"

Abreon, "I don't think so." then pointing: "Jake, rotate about him until you reach the other side."

Nece, "Abreon, he's going to kill me!"

Jake in an arch, walking slowly about the trees keep aim at the pursuer, "Alright."

Abreon moving a bit closer, "No he won't his hands a full already."

The soldier began to break down, shaking, trying to see both Abreon and Jake as he was leaving his field of view, "Stop, I will kill her!"

Abreon taking another step closer to the pursuer, "Now, let her go!"

Glancing to his side, "No! You let me go!"

Nece sweating, "Abreon?"

Jake almost around towards the soldier back, "Okay."

Abreon ready, waiting for something, the soldier slightly lowering his blade in order to hold his rifle barrel up, Abreon grabbing the barrel, pulling it aside as the abductor fired a blast, the blast missing Abreon, as Jake fired at the soldier destroying his right soldier. Nece free from the pursuer, Abreon now in possession of the rifle turning it about and firing at the soldier again. This time the blast tearing through the torso of the abductor, killing him. Abreon ran over to Nece, "Nece!"

Nece hugging him, "Abreon, oh God! Thank you!"

Abreon to her in her ear, "You got me! You'll always have me "

Nece nodding, then turning to hug Jake, "Thank you!"

Jake looking about to find the dead soldier's lost rifle. He found it behind a tree and tossed the gun to Abreon, "Here you go."

Abreon to them both, "We better hurry back to town; we want to give them a good fight."

Abreon, Nece and Jake running along the town's main road, yelling out to the towns people, "Their coming! Their coming!"

Jake, as they ran, "Their coming!"

Nece, "Their coming!"

A town's person in the area meeting up with them, "Who is coming?"

Abreon, as three or four began to gather about them, "Soldiers!"

A second town's person shaking her head, "It can't be! There isn't a militia for over a thousand kilometers!"

Abreon holding out his two rifles, "Then how did I get these, in a non-militarized zone!"

The woman, "I don't know."

Abreon: "Take me to the town's committee leader!"

Loss was pulled out of a tailors shop, "I'm here! I'm here!" They waited until he reached them. Loss, looking over heads, "What is the problem?"

Abreon, as Loss made his way through the gathering, "There is an army company in the woods passed the hills."

One, "The kuffor hills?"

"Yes, and we have the guns to prove it," Abreon holding folding them out, "See!"

Loss making his way to Abreon, "Let me see." Abreon handing him one, "Looks real. It's not a hunting rifle. Not one of ours, " then handing it back to Abreon, "But were in a non-militarized zone."

Abreon to him, "I understand, but maybe a few town's decided to incorporate."

Loss, "Impossible!"

Abreon incredulous, "Well their here now!"

Loss, "What are we to do?"

Abreon angrily to him, "We must fight! We must hold the warehouse; we have a better chance of surviving if we keep the warehouse!"

The townspeople strung lines of wire back and forth along the road leading to the warehouse to form a grid. Abreon, Nece and Jake then tapped into the warehouses leads, patching the outside power grid to a control unit inside the warehouse. The three of them then connected the leads ready to energize the grid when necessary. Finally, they with the help of some of the townspeople covered the outside grid with dirt and debris in order to conceal it. It was compulsory for all the townspeople to enter the warehouse and reside in basement level three. That is where they would hold their final stand and although they were equal in number to the opposing company, they lacked weapons. This problem

was solved by the clever use of the warehouses automation units and the surrounding storage units, forming corridors and mazes while the townspeople could wait in ambush them watching through cameras.

Abreon, Nece, Jake and another named Samuel all had the rifles, which were available from the previous incursion in the woods. Samuel was a thin short townsman with little hair, and a long nose, "I'm getting word," Samuel speaking into his headset, "they've entered the town?" then, "Okay, let me know, don't keep me waiting." to Nece as they sat in front of a glass window upon the second level, "When they are in rage, we will electrocute them. Any who remain will fight hard. Remember, this is only the beginning."

Nece, "We will."

Samuel, "We have the laser rifles, but the few townspeople with rifles have the combustion type."

Jake, "Well, we have the high ground advantage "

As the company neared, the hidden grid Abreon waited watching from one of the warehouses window, waiting, holding his breath, as four, then ten, then twenty-five of the total stepped onto the power grid, unaware of what they were stepping on. Abreon whispering into his headset, "Read, hold it...No, No, hold it until more get onto the road."

Jake, "We have got to get them now."

Nece, "No, no we have to wait a little longer."

Abreon whispering into the headset, "Just a few more moments."

Now a total fifty-five of the company's soldiers were on the road to the warehouse and on the wire grid. Nece: "We have to do it now!"

Abreon, "Now! Charge those lines now!"

The grid lit up in blue and white arcs jumping, trailing and traveling about the lines of the grid, gripping them from their boots up, burning them, killing them almost instantly. The remaining hundred and fifty left in the company scatterings taking refuge where they could.

Nece to Abreon, "What do we do now?"

Abreon stepped away, "Get back." each of them doing so, Abreon blasting the window away, it splintering everywhere. Abreon, "Okay." pointing; "Each one to their own window. Blow them out and fire!"

Each doing the same to their windows that looked out on the remaining company. The rest of them seeing the encroaching soldiers firing at the warehouse windows and at them, each of the

townspeople crawling to the edge of the windows, looking out, then when shots came, pulling to the side. Abreon looking out, "Hold you fire until there on top of us!"

Nece clutching her rifle, "Okay!"

Jake, "Got it."

Samuel, "Yes."

Three of the invaders crawling closer upon the ground in the open, Abreon, "I got the nearest!" aiming, shooting, missing, he and the others returning fire, Abreon ducking Nece and Jake, "Will pick them off!" Abreon peeking out and firing again, this time killing two of the three, "Rounds!"

Nece, "Eight on the charge."

Jake, "Seven!"

Samuel, "Eight on the battery."

Abreon watching as three more crawled up, others firing from where they hid, Abreon firing, killing one, then the others in Abreon's team firing with a few of their combustion rifles, killing another, everyone in Abreon's team backing from their windows, "Rounds everyone?"

Nece, "Five!"

Jake, "Six."

Another with a combustion rifle, "Ten."

Samuel, "Six."

Abreon: "That's enough, we got them worried. Save your rounds and go to the Omega position! Let them in."

Abreon waited behind a wall of crates, with another of the townspeople, with five rounds left in his rifle, he waited for another weapon, two soldiers flanking the contours of the warehouse bulkheads tight. Abreon waited, hesitated until he saw one of their barrels poke through the darkness. Abreon pulling the rifle as he swung the interloper about, the second towns-person, snapping the invading soldier's neck. The second soldier charged them, Abreon kicking the second, his weapon dropping, Abreon then shooting him as he got up. Abreon tossing one of the dropped rifles to the towns-person, then taking the second he tossed it to another, who was atop a crate near him while still holding onto his laser rifle.

Abreon winding his way along a corridor formed by crates, upon the second level of that warehouse finding four more soldiers, shooting one, then another, the other two backing away taking cover behind a crate. Abreon dropping his empty weapon taking the two dropped by the dead soldiers and firing both of them as he turning about to hit a wall of seven more invaders. He fired, firing at them

until he was out of ammo. Abreon looked at his rifles then dropped them. He thought he was as good as dead, until a wall of crates fell upon the ducked soldiers killing them. Abreon smiled to himself as he took two of their rifles and fired upon the remaining other two, flanking the forefront crate until they were hit. Abreon now heard the sounds of gunfire loud, everywhere and in all directions.

Abreon looking at concerned faces through the darkness, "Tomorrow morning their going to come back and swoop over this town, killing everyone. Glaring at Loss, "Were going to burn this town with or without you."

Loss, "Why?"

Abreon ducked behind the controls of a robotic arm, waiting until two soldiers were near and then with the unit's controls swung the arm, nocking one of them across the corridor killing him instantly, grabbing the second crushed him. He listened again to the sounds of rifle fire, now light and then finally ending.

Abreon pulled Loss over to him, shaking him, "Listen? We can't defend the town against hundred's or thousand troops! We have to bum the town!"

Loss, Jake, Nece and Abreon walked out of the warehouse as other townspeople followed. Others came out of various hiding places as a hundred and seventy stood on the main road intersecting the town, Loss again to Abreon, "Why!"

Abreon, "Because Loss, if they capture this town intact tomorrow, they use it to further their domination in this region! You all will die or become slaves."

Ten

Those buildings burned, the corrugated aluminum buckled and turned black, the flame retardant insulation peeled from the metal, the solar panels cracked and shattered, the assembly factory drew hot flames of red and white, the warehouse collapsed from the intensity of the fire, Abreon turned about, looking. The world was on fire.

Abreon raised his fists yelling out, "Burn them all!"

Nece hugged him, "They'll have nothing left at all to take from us!"

Three thousand soldiers on foot and upon vehicle stormed into the town. The vanguard in the lead troop transport stopped before the townspeople, a high-ranking soldier stepping out, with guards surrounding him. He stood with his rifle to his side, "Who is the leader here?"

Abreon pushed Loss aside and stepped forward, "I am."

The commander looked around at the smoldering ruins surrounding his division, "I am commander Dulo, head of the Srax army division two. Why have you burned this town?"

Abreon, "To save the world."

The commander was perturbed with Loss answer, "I will not accept this answer. You are quite wrong. The world cannot save itself. The strong break the weak, the weak break the fools and the fools perish. That is how this world of ours functions." Then with a wave of his hand, the commander told his troops, "Take him back to camp! Take them all back to camp."

Abreon found himself strapped to a chair within a domed tent of fogged plastic before a table with two seats behind it. Commander Dulo entered the tent, and sat down in front of Abreon, "Now, why have you torched your own town?"

"It is not my town, but I have saved it from you."

The commander nodded, "Explain, it is not your town."

"I mean I did not originate from it. I came from the Nenthar people's corporation."

The commander interest was piqued, "They have been enslaved, destroyed."

"Yes, this is true however, I am one of its survivors."

"I see."

Abreon, "Look," showing him the scars along his fingers, arms and neck, "I have survived the Xelon Dru's ore processing facility at Aswan."

Dulo surprised, "Then you have honor and luck on your side. So then, perhaps I can aid you?"

"You can't, just leave this town."

Dulo frowning, "We can't do that, we need the facilities you just burned down."

Abreon wringing his wrists against the metal of the chair he was strapped to, "I know, but what were you going to do with them?"

"We were going to use them to aid in the fight against the Xeion Dru."

"You are going to die if you fight them."

Dulo, "If you help us..."

Abreon interrupting, "If I do not help you?"

"Then you die."

"I see then, help you with what?"

"Help us fight the good fight."

"I suppose I must, then I shall do so."

They began digging trenches, around the perimeter of the burned town along two parallel tangents angled toward the bridge and along the roads that intersected at the center of the town. Then the Srax as they were known began to move in their weaponry, positioning it along the trenches they dug. The Srax weapons were aimed toward the bridge, which was called Linar, by the Srax. Abreon, Nece, and others were in charge of the wideband radio wave linkup for the commanders of each company, as each company in turn were to receive a live feed from the division commander. The feed and signal routing was to be coordinated by computer unit, of which Abreon was working on. In his hands were a pair of pliers and cabling.

"Their bringing in domes?"

Nece holding a pair of pliers and insulation tape, crimping wires together, "Yes, behind the lines, starting this week. The domed tents were being brought in from Srax camp and vehicles as well as personnel to staff those tents.

Abreon, "I wish Jake was here with us."

Loss came over and sat down in the dirt with them, "I have strange news."

Nece bitter, "Yes?"

Loss repeating himself, "I have news."

Abreon to Nece and Loss, "When I cut the signal they are going to lose the battle."

Nece, "What are you talking about?"

Abreon: "When the battle begins and there comes a moment where all of it hangs in the balance then I will cut there transmission capability."

Nece, "But, Abreon, you vowed to destroy the Dru."

Abreon nodding, "I know Nece. The Dru are pushing the remaining Nenthar and Tamar from their positions back this way. If they then intercede, then no one will win and from the ashes we shall rise."

Loss, "That's what I was going to tell you."

Abreon, "Tell me what?"

"An advanced team of Srax have scouted ahead and found a company of Nenthar forty days' journey from here."

Nece, "How do you know?"

"Because, Abreon may now be our leader, but I'm the people's representative and their town. It is still mine. I'm building connections with some of the lower ranking officers in exchange for land grants and other such rights."

Abreon, "They can just take it."

"They don't know that and besides, who is going to have any land less they have a legitimate claim to it."

Nece, "Is that enough for you to pull the trigger?"

"No."

"What is?"

"Total destruction."

Abreon was sitting in a domed tent set within the town limits, a table and a Major before him. H spoke, "Tell me Abreon, who do you wish to win the battle? Do you want the Xelon Dru to win or us? Neither are your home corporation."

"I wish for you to win, so that the war will be prolonged and it will burn both their and you're people out leaving only the meek to live and thrive."

The Major nodded, "Good."

"Am I matching up with your psychological profile of me?"

"Not quite."

"You could always buy mine from Diggaco, they hold the keys."

The Major smiled, "We prefer to build ours from scratch. It's cheaper."

Abreon, "Tell me something, why did you decide to incorporate?"

"Someone had to fill the vacuum."

Abreon irritated, "But, you were living fine without one."

"One can always live better. Isn't that what drives you, Abreon?"

"No, the perfection of body and soul."

The Major pulled his chair up closer, "You know you can never be perfect, you know."

"No."

"Then you must realize you're being somewhat insincere with yourself. Perhaps, you want to leave your sins behind?"

Abreon sweating, angry, "No."

"You must want to forget?"

Abreon standing, "No!"

"You can't leave your sins behind, Abreon!"

The Major standing, leaning over the table, "So, tell me Abreon, how many men have you really killed?"

Abreon shaking, sweating and then sitting back down, closing his eyes, "My name is Abreon rank serial number 45932-001A, commander of companies in the Nenthara Corporation rank B2."

"Well?"

Abreon opened his eyes, "And, yes I have killed many, commander."

The Major stood, "Good, then let's continue with building your profile."

Abreon and Nece sitting in the night, behind the burnt out warehouse. Abreon holding a small computer unit in his hand, "This is it. This is the key to our success; see they have one major flaw, all of them in that they give me too much power. They underestimate me and I bite back."

Nece to him, leaning forward, "But doesn't that make you just as bad as them."

"I struggled to save a few lives, more than would be lost, but it did not bring any good to anyone. I have failed, but I will not fail again. They have a profile on me and it says that I will not turn against them for the Xelon Dru, but they don't understand that life is more complicated than a profile, that two men should die for one if it was just and right."

Nece put her hand on Abreon's thigh, "Yes."

"Sometimes I don't know, but I must help these people. There are only a hundred fifty left. I must save them. They represent what is good in this world, what we are losing."

Nece began to unzip his jumpsuit, "Yes."

"When I press the trigger on this device it will cut communication between the Srax ranks. I can only use it once."

Nece kissing his chest, whispering to him, "I love you."

Abreon pulled her up to his lips and began to kiss her, "I will be put upon the front lines. When the end begins meet me here inside the warehouse, basement level three." For a moment, he thought of Marcy, pushed her image away and then sighed in pain. He felt like a fool, "Nece?"

Nece whispering back, "Okay."

Eleven

He was on the front lines, in a trench facing the bridge, hesitantly watching as the two hundred heavily armed Nenthars began to cross the Unar River. Advanced scouting reports held they were the last in the region. The Srax kept their helmets low, in their trenches with their weapons ready; they waited for them to cross. The Nenthars could conceivably show a good fight, for their armor was thick, their offensive and defensive capabilities strong, but that was to remain to be seen. Abreon thought that within sixty days all of it would end, for before the Nenthars were the Tarnar, and before them were a division or two of the Xelon. He began to count the days down.

SIXTY

During the night, the Srax began to shell the Nenthars who had quickly buried themselves in dug out positions. The Nenthars in turn began to fire plasma back over, it arching into the Srax own trenches, the blasts burning many, killing some. It was such an effective defensive weapon that more fire was ordered from the second trench, which was south-west of Abreon and the Srax position. The Srax were forced to dig another trench behind their first with deeper bunkers. The Srax abandoned their forward position and retreated to that second rearward line of trenches. In turn, the Nenthars dug in deeper and continued in their assault.

FIFTY-FIVE

Abreon began to pick at his wet uniform. It had been raining out for a few days. The sky was dark and he was cold. Although the Srax had given Abreon a new suit that was woven with steel fibers, which was flame resistant, apparently it was not rain resistant. It could stop a low powered laser, or a laser rifle at long distance but not a plasma mortar. Abreon's helmet was made of metal as well, and camouflaged like his suit. He held his rifle tight next to him. Next to him a female soldier looked up at him from sitting in the mud, mortars flying overhead, "How many battles have you been in, 27?"

Twenty-seven was the rank of an enlisted man, "I've been in too many. People are just killing themselves for a title on their grave."

"Maybe, 27."

Abreon pulling out a food ration, "It's an act of attrition to see who will run out of shells first."

One soldier, "Who will run out first?"

A second soldier, "The Nenthars, but they have superior weapons."

At this, the first soldier turned in disgust. Abreon shrugged his shoulders and continued eating ducking as a plasma shell rocketed toward them. They ducked to avoid the blast as it hit the ground near their line of trenches.

FIFTY-ONE

The day was long, the blood dripping from the wounds of the men who had fought against it. For most of that day, Abreon, sat inside one of the bunkers behind the lines. On that day, the sounds of launching plasma were constant, the whine or steel shells loud as they hit the earth and soldier's they targeted. Abreon and the rest of the Srax soldiers who could fit in that bunker listened to the sound of all those projectiles being launched, the sounds of bursting powder and the impact moments later. Abreon heard the high-pitched scream of an incoming plasma shell, holding his breath as part of the shell burst hit the casing of the outer door of the bunker, the lower left corner of the door, turning to slag. A chunk of the door dripped away, the door buckling, warping from the heat. One soldier stood up screaming, "We can't get out!"

Another Srax yelling, "We can't get out! Oh!"

Abreon stood opening the first door, "Everyone, everyone fire at the door!" backing away, he aimed and, "Now!" the door being peppered with holes, until all inside the bunker were satisfied. Abreon walked through it, "Now then."

One soldier, "You'll die out there!"

Abreon crouching down in the trench walking away, finding a few others huddled in the dirt, "No, I won't."

The day waned into night. Word began to spread from intelligence, to officer and finally to enlisted man that a division of Tamar, which was approximately a thousand men, heavily armored and heavily equipped were only two days away. This was in addition to the two divisions of Xelon Dru that had set themselves before them, with still another five divisions of one thousand in route to combine their forces with the original two divisions. Once the two Xelon Dru armies combined, there would be a total of ten thousand moderately armored, heavily equipped men and women bearing down on the Srax and their conscripted soldiers, which included Abreon. This did not include the Nenthar his own people who were now playing defense against the Xelon and offence against the Srax. Abreon looked up from the trench over the sand bags, waiting for a flash, once Abreon saw it he began to count.

ONE

TWO

THREE

Abreon placed a well-timed duck into the Srax trench he found himself in as the massive plasma shot hit a buried launch truck, disintegrated the barrel splintering the hull of it, wrenching the axil into the air and slinging it a few hundred meters away. Abreon looked up at the ruin and then ducked again as a piece of truck landing near him. He opened his eyes, removing his hands from his helmet, eyeing

the chunk of machine before him, it being a large bolt with metal encasing still twisted around it. He went to touch it. It burned him. It was hot. He felt like a fool for doing so.

FIFTY

The Tamar began to dig in deeper before the bridge, which was to the front of the Srax lines. For the Tamar, it was good fortune that they had crossed the bridge several days earlier for now the Xelon Dru were marching toward the Linar from where the Tanar had crossed. At least the Tamar had the water and the bridge to their backs. However, that did mean that they were between the invading Xelon and the defending Srax with the Nenthar toward the southeast of their position. The Tanar had progressed before began vaulting plasma across it into the town, both at the Nenthar and at the Srax to the south east of them. From the start, Abreon did not understand why the Tanar did not align themselves with the Nenthar however Abreon began, from overhearing the gossip between frustrated officers, to understand that the Tanar did not care for either Nenthar or the Srax. The reason for their apathy in generating an alliance with the Nenthar against the Srax was only because the Nenthar were a relatively small force and a small target. In addition, the Nenthar's guns were not currently facing them and they were not in the Tanars direct path. As far as the Tanar were concerned they could just ignore them, two hundred men were of little concern to them. Still though, they bombed them for some reason, perhaps just on accident or just because they could. The end result was that for every one volley sent over the Nenthar lines, four were sent over to the Srax. To make matters worse Commander Dulo, could not explain why both the Nenthar and the Tamar were shelling his positions. It did not make sense that an enemy of his enemy was still that enemy's friend.

Abreon stood before Dulo, in a shelter. Dulo was drinking coffee and pouring over computerized maps. He looked up at Abreon, "Tell me, why are the Tamar saving your people?"

"There not saving them. The Tanar are shelling them as well, but they are of little concern to them."

Dulo was puzzled, "Then tell me why the Nenthar, don't route us from the west?"

"Because, both trench lines run parallel to one another."

Dulo: "I know."

Abreon walked over to the coffee and produced three straws. He set two of the straws down at an angle, but still parallel to each other and pointing with the third, "They can come in from the west with cover from the Tanar, but the-fire would burn them when the neared the second line. Fire would come from your first line of defense. The Nenthar only have two hundred men." pointing at a spot on the table, "It is just not enough to sustain a valid assault, yet."

Dulo put his cup of coffee down raising an eyebrow, "What do you mean, yet?"

Pointing at the table, in front of the trenches, "You have to deal with the Tamar, but before them you have a division of the Xelon Dru."

Dulo angry, "How do you know this?"

"First I listen and am aware. Second, I may be a 27 here, but I am a commander in the Nenthara militia. Before them is another five divisions and there pushing the Tamar toward us. The Tamar have to launch an assault soon or they will be crushed from the rear. When they do it will be to the west of us, hitting the Nenthars and then I assume they will arch in a pincer movement toward our west flank. The Xelon Dru are strong enough to launch a full frontal attack and the pincer will close destroying us all. The Xelon Dru as the vanguard, the Tamar attaching our westward flank, while the small Nenthara army moves from out west and in front around near our eastward flank."

"What do you recommend?"

Abreon looked up at the commander, "We have to eliminate the Nenthara forces," and then Abreon knew he was nothing. He felt like nothing.

Dulo now eager, "Yes, we shall attack the Nenthars!"

FOURTY-EIGHT

Abreon was crawling in the mud, his rifle cradled in arms as he dug into the wall of the trench pulling himself up from over the pit, up and over the sandbags. He glared out at a quarter-division before him, two after him, Abreon in the front rushing the enemy lines while the remaining forces in the rear, sustained shelling from both plasma and solid shell cannons. Abreon pushing himself forward, past the incoming shells blowing people to shreds around him, Gatling guns peppering the surrounding air with hot plasma rounds, "We have to go!"

A plasma burst hitting some twenty meters away from Abreon, the impact destroying six soldiers, the ground up-heaving spraying dots of mud and rock onto Abreon and others. The impact left its pit and scattered bits of bone and tissue behind. Abreon crawling but even fast, another shell, a metal shell hit the ground right in front of him, a hundred meters away, then another sixty-five meters to his side, the ground churning, kicking and then swallowing soldiers in whole or in part, Abreon screaming, "Get me the hell out of here!"

But no one would listen to his cries. Abreon scurrying, another blast volleyed over, hitting the land between the two trench lines some two hundred meters away from him, then one east of him, another even closer, fifty meters away from him, Abreon hearing screaming as waves of soldiers to the rear of him pushed onward rushing as they neared the trenches of the Nenthara. The Nenthara began to poke their helmeted heads up from the sand bags with automatic weapons ready, firing bolts of plasma

up upon them and into no mans land. Abreon heard silence, then the whine of shells, as they were slung into the air, the plasma bombarding those still in the fields, the earth shaking, the earth turning to liquid behind him, hundreds dying as the total assault began.

Abreon began to return semi-automatic rifle blasts at the Nenthar outmatched by their automatic weapons, as they were at a disadvantage in the exchange impeding their progress, costing Srax lives. Abreon crawled closer, firing his rifle killing a Nenthar from within his trench. Abreon and the others firing as fast as their rifles let them. Up and then over, they went, Abreon shooting a Nenthar in the head, turning shooting another in the chest, running, stopping shooting another. Abreon fell, kicked another, shooting her as she was down, more Srax coming, more over the trenches, more into them, more killing the Nenthar soldiers while taking their weaponry until the Nenthar were utterly consumed and not one was left. Abreon ran as best he could in the muck over to a large gun leaning over its turret vomiting repeatedly. He felt ill for what he had done to his own people. Did he even have a choice?

FOURTY

The guns of the Nenthar, now in the Srax hands were swung about to face the two Tarnar divisions or about two thousand men. From the assault on the Nenthar and from the still limited engagements with the Tarnar about four hundred Srax men were lost from their own three divisions leaving twenty-six hundred men and woman, now spread from the north-west, to the lower east across the plain which held the town of Cantor. The Tarnar continued their shelling of the Srax. Both the Tarnar and Srax armies began to increase their bombardment of each other, if that was possible. It had rained again and everything had turned to muck. A deeper, thicker brown mire, one that he had remembered from a long time ago. He began to hate his 27 rank, but he had to stay with it. Abreon could ultimately win.

THIRTY

Abreon watched as the Tarnar army, forced by the first wave of the Xelon Dru to begin to be pushed toward the positions of the Srax, dove into the killing field and then through it. The killing field consisting of a large semi-circle of land, which arched about the bridge. The Xelon Dru now within the zone of conflict began to surge from behind the Srax into their army and toward the Tarnar's positions. Abreon pulled his rifle and fearfully waited as they were shelled from both the Xelon Dru and the Srax, creating a deadly crossfire with Abreon and the Srax in the middle. Abreon cried as he saw the slaughter around him. The crossfire killed many of the Tarnar in the conflict though half were managing to make out of no man's land alive, near the trenches west of them. They were firing at Abreon from only fifteen meters away.

Abreon aimed, pulling the trigger on his rifle, the blast killing a soldier right in front of him. He fired upon another, then another and another, blood everywhere, ducking as a wave of machine fire

sprayed out above the sandbags before him. Abreon fortunate that they had no remaining needle guns or the rounds would slice right through the bags. Abreon looking up, shooting again, and gain, his gun heating up from the explosion of powder. Another Srax yanking at him, "We have them!"

Abreon pulling away from him, "Don't think you're correct!"

Abreon shooting again, as they began to get closer, swarms of them, ten meters, five meters, and then one was on top of him, as Abreon pushed him off, as he shot him, Abreon turning as another leapt toward him. Abreon hit him with the butt of his weapon, yelling out, "Commander!"

The commander in hand to hand combat, "Fight boy!" for now all the Srax who had made it through the crossfire of the killing field had entered the Tanar trenches.

Abreon attempted to make his way to the Major in time, but he did not as he was killed before Abreon could get to him. Abreon killing the woman who killed his commander. Abreon pulling the headset from his dead commanders helmet, putting the headset on, listening, removing the unit he had shown Neice many days before from his suit, pressing the switch, the headsets communications cutting out and turning to static hiss. Abreon scurried and pulled his way out from the trench, clumps of mud in his hands as he climbed. Abreon heaved himself out of the Tanar trench and over their sandbags, running but in a crouch heading to the town, heading for the factory.

TWENTY

By then, the battle between the remaining Srax and the first invading divisions of the Xelon Dru had wasted their manpower. Over the last ten days the Srax defenses had degraded to such a point that their line of defense no longer existed, instead the remaining Srax had filtered back into the burned out town and were using it as a stop gap new defensive zone. The remaining Srax forces had taken refuge inside the ruined collapsed buildings and were using them to fight an urban door to door type of war. This resistance was here and there but effective in slowing down the oncoming Xelon Dru's offence considerably. Again it had rained and was now raining hard and heavy. Some of the remaining Srax were in the base camp to the west of there as well, while some were hiding deep in the forest. Abreon estimated that there were less than a thousand left of them, about seven hundred to the Xelon Dru's nine hundred men.

Most of the heavy equipment was left where it was abandoned. A few attempts to haul it to the bridge were tried most of them ended in frustration. The rain and bombardment of the area had made the dirt turn to mud too thick to move anything over a couple tons successfully. Although the bridge had been avoided in the conflict the incessant shelling had managed to strip much of the concrete away from the bridges moorings and main girders. However, the bridge was still quite strong. Abreon thought that it must have been made from some polymer steel not manufactured in the region and built from some unknown people long gone. Abreon had made his way through the sporadic fighting, skirmishes and heavy rain to the town's warehouse. Although the warehouse itself had burned down, the basement levels were still intact. He had been inside, below ground for more than four days. He waited for the Tanar to arrive but they did not. The rain flooding the town and swelled the river. Abreon continued to listen for the sounds of soldiers but he did not hear them. He expected Loss to be dead, but Nece was of a different sort, they would have taken her back to the base camp. They could use her technical skills. Nece could have made it through the fighting.

Abreon was not alone; seven other Srax were with him. They had made it into the underground sanctuary shortly after Abreon had. All of them were still armed and in uniform. He had told them that he was a conscript in their army and if they could to look for a woman of such and such height and such and such build. He was sitting with two of them upon a piece of floor that had not burned through, drips of water splashing down on them from the above floors upon the ash. Abreon sat next to a pile of that ash, which he had scraped away from where he sat into a pile. Abreon was full of frustration pushing his rifle aside he said to them, "When is she going to get here?"

A soldier, one of the seven named Romon, "Maybe she can't get from the base camp here."

Angle rubbed his stubble, "There not going to give her an escort."

Abreon picking at the ash, forlorn, "Maybe she was captured or killed."

Romon, "It is war."

Abreon rebutting Roman's coldness, "Over land, nothing more."

Angle kicked his legs out from under him: "Here, here!"

Abreon looking out into the darkness three levels down from ground level, "I have done all I can. I have lost all I can and now I need her with me."

Angle stretching out placing his helmet under his head to prop it up, "She will arrive, give it another day, unless the Tanar arrive first. Besides we shouldn't leave this hole yet anyway." Adding, "I'm going to sleep my shift is next."

Romon: "So s mine."

Abreon looked out up, seeing a bit of light enter from a floor above where the fire had eaten away the floor. His thoughts drifted toward his past, his wife and children, the burns he suffered, the scars...drifting away...

"Someone's here! Two on shift detained someone upstairs for questioning!" Romon yelled climbing up the burnt out emergency stairs.

Abreon all alone, "She is?"

"Their bringing him up right now!"

"He?"

The two on shift brought Loss down into the basement of the warehouse, Loss looking tired, weak and soaked from the rain, seeing a familiar face he beamed showing his steel teeth, "Abreon!"

"What?"

Loss running to him, "Abreon!" hugging him, "I missed you so!"

Abreon pushed him away, "Get away, then, "Sit down."

Loss sitting in the ash. Romon to Abreon, "What do we do now?"

Abreon taking a seat on the floor as well, "Um."

Loss, "I came from the encampment."

"What happened?"

"They burned it, killing any soldiers they could find and scattering any civilians they came across."

Abreon, "So there is hope."

Angle, "Maybe she's still alive."

Loss begins, "Can I have some food Abreon? I am hungry."

Abreon frowned, opened a chest pocket, pulled out a nutritional bar, "Here," and tossed it to him, "Eat this."

Angle, "But what do we do? We have to make a run sometime."

Abreon asserting authority he felt he did not have, "Not without her."

It seemed to work. Perhaps because they believed in Abreon, perhaps because they needed Nece's wisdom, perhaps they were just frightened to venture out back into the war zone, Angle, "So what do we do?"

"We wait."

Loss nodding, munching on the nutritional bar, "Sounds good to me Abreon!"

Another few days past. They were almost out of rations. The rain and ash had fully penetrated their steel thread uniforms and was festering on their skin. They could not wait any more. Abreon had to give up hope. Abreon looked at the washed away piles of ash he had made he had made. He cried silently again. In a moment of resolve, he let it go. Abreon stood up ready to call over the remaining soldiers, but then he turned, hearing a voice yelling from the floor above. He ran up the emergency stairs, up to basement level two, then one and then he was at ground level. He hopped over the broken holes, which were the ground floor of the warehouse, the building partially caved in. Abreon ran to one of the warehouses broken windows. It was Nece.

Nece yelled to him, "Abreon!"

Some of his team of seven rushed out to get her. They took her in and began to bring her downstairs. When they reached the warehouses basement level three he grabbed her, pinning her to the wall and kissed her, "I love you!"

Nece, rain dripping from her forehead, "Abreon."

"What?"

"I love you too and I missed you."

Abreon grabbing her hands and then walking with her, "I missed you too. I was afraid for you. Come we will feed and protect you. We will run through some plans tonight and with your help execute them tomorrow."

Loss pushing in, "What plans?"

NINETEEN

The rain had stopped, but the flooding remained. Everyone was there, the seven soldiers, Nece, Loss, and Abreon. They were all sitting in a semi-circle on basement level two of the warehouse. From left, to right there sat Kotto, Lune, Angel, Nece, Sam, Wy, Ramon, Donna, Loss and Abreon. All of them minus Loss, Nece and Abreon were Srax, all of them except Loss were well trained seasoned soldiers. Abreon addressed them, "I did not have a specific plan of engagement with the Xelon Dru. Now I believe I have. You see, they must be stopped for they are the common enemy of many other corporations, including your own yours. I do not want to see war anymore. I want all to be at peace with each other and be among friends. You are all my friends. What I ask from you is great, what I can give in return is little. I know I am a conscript, but I was a commander in my own army and have seen much. You need to fight alongside me or I fear we all shall die along with this entire sectors way of life. The Xelon Dru will destroy it. They have nearly accomplished it; they only have to take the key."

Loss, "What is the key?"

"The key is the Unar bridge."

Kotto, "Why should the bridge be the key to anything?"

"The Unar connects this sector with the one before it. It is the only way to cross the canyon safely for a thousand kilometers. If we destroy it, the Xelon Dru will not be able to pass from where they are to where they want to be which is here. We shall be saved."

Kotto shaking his head, "But they could just build a new bridge."

"They lack the technology to span such a long way with a gorge that deep. The river is too deep for them. There is no science that can repair that bridge for heavy equipment to cross for a thousand kilometers."

Angel picking at the ash, "What do we need to do?"

Abreon thought for a moment, "We need to first obtain my total protection suit."

Romon, "Why?"

"That is the only way to safeguard my passage up to the tank."

Romon, "Why do we need the tank?"

"The tank is a powerful machine. Generating that power is a nuclear decay mechanism. Wearing the suit, I can safely remove the unit's safety mechanisms, causing to detonate. The nuclear explosion will destroy the bridge."

Nece angry, "And you with it." then crying, "And you with it!"

“Perhaps not Nece. I’ll have the suit on. It is damaged, but still operable. When we reach the suit, I will put it on. Then from there I will head toward the bridge along and cross it, make my way to the plateau and run it down from there. I will try to go undetected, though I will undoubtedly take heavy fire from the Xeion Dru who are painstakingly rebuilding and crossing the bridge into this sector. Once I get passed the bridge I can escape into the hills until I return with the tank.”

Lurie: “How will you survive this? Surely the explosion will kill you?”

“The panels of the suit are lightweight. They will allow me to jump into the river before the explosion and still stay afloat. The swift current will pull me down river and I will survive.”

EIGHTEEN

Abreon stepped out of the warehouse onto the flooded ground, his unit right behind him. Kotto and Luna directly to his rear, the remaining, still within the building. Abreon flanking what remained of the building burned out walls, the scars of the fire present from the immediate past. The rain had collected on the roads leading into the town, the collapsed buildings. The clouds still heavy, shimmering at them. He could hear intermittent gun fire and returning cross fire seeming to come from nowhere. Abreon took it slow, peering out from the corner of the warehouse to see if there would be fire. When there was none he motioned for the first two to take the first building they could reach.

Kotto and Lune ran across the street. Quick wispy sound could be heard and a laser blast was seen hitting the ground behind them. The hot blast turned the water, which had collected into pools on the ground turned to steam. There was a sniper held up in one of the building forward of their position. Kotto and Lune quickly took the house's doorway and hand signaled that it was okay to proceed cautiously. Abreon inched forward along with Kotto and Lune. Sam, Angel and Wy were next out the warehouse. Abreon nearing where the next forward location was, another home. Abreon stopped and waited as Kotto and Lune ran to that building. Again, another shot was heard and another laser blast was seen, this time biting the heels of Lune. Kotto and Lune quickly found the edge of the next building, Sam and Angle taking the first, Wy to the rear of him.

Abreon looked toward his left at the next building, where the water was deeper and then to his right. Out from the shadow of that building he saw the sniper peek out of its corner and fire at him. Abreon fell to the ground the blast just missing him. Kotto, Lune and Wy fired at the sniper. Kotto and Lune missing, Wy striking him, just before Wy fell dodging a second round of fire. Another sniper from a second adjacent building fired at Abreon as he stood up, Abreon falling back again, the blast again just missing him. Romon and Wy turning to fire at the second sniper, missing as she ducked behind a doorway. Abreon stood, pulled his rifle, turned and aimed. When she appeared again he fired at her, but not before she had fired a round at Wy. Wy was hit in the shoulder, the blast burning through muscle and into bone, Abreon's shot hitting the sniper in her face. She died instantly, collapsing in a heap. Kotto and Lune rushed up pushing her aside into the water, taking that position as they shifted up and forward. Now Donna, Nece and Sam flanking out, Abreon to Wy soaked from the mud and water all around them; "Donna will take you back."

Wy holding his shoulder, blood seeping through his hand, crying out, "But, it hurts!"

Donna motioning to Abreon, "Go on." Then, "I'll take him back."

Abreon nodding struggling in the water to reach yet another house, a laser blast hitting the doorway. Abreon yelled for those to his rear to enter the building. Abreon, Romon, Loos, and Sam entering, Angle and Nece occupying a house tangential from his location, as he faced out to a two story building forward of his position. He fired at a burnt out window, another soldier firing back, then another, then someone from the Srax side firing back and then still third soldier on the first floor firing.

He fired at Kotto and Lune, Kotto returning fire. The first soldier returning fire and then Abreon and Sam shooting out at the building. The return fire hit the casing of the door of the home Abreon was in, Abreon returning fire. Then for some reason all was quiet. Abreon waited, ten minutes later he turned to Sam, "Were not getting anywhere."

As he spoke the firing began again, Sam dodging a blast, "Were running out of ammo."

Abreon: "How many shots you have left?"

"I only had a few to begin with, now I have three."

Abreon to Romon, "How many round you have left Romon?"

"I have eight."

"Loss?"

"I had nine, now I have seven."

"This isn't good. Were only four buildings out from the warehouse if we stay here will waste all our offensive capabilities. We have to run for it."

Romon, "I agree."

Abreon, "I will go; you and Loos will stay and cover me. Sam your with me, if you choose?"

"Okay."

Abreon listening to the shots of fire and return fire, a Srax was out there, maybe more-peeking out of the doorway to Kotto and Lune. Angie and Nece to the rear. He wanted Nece to stay to the rear, to be safe and live for him another day. He could not help it. It was wrong to give her the advantage for the others deserved it as well, but he did not want to see another woman in his life to die. Abreon signaled and held a finger up and when there was a lull in fire they charged out of the buildings, running, Abreon and Sam, Kotto with Lune, Angle, Nece, Romon and Loss at the rear providing cover.

In an instant the street exploded with fire, fire from the snipers, fire from the Tanar, from the Srax, fire from those left behind from Abreon's unit. A blast hit the wall of a building flanking Abreon. Sam fell on the flooded ground with a slosh, as a blast angled to hit the wall of that building, narrowly missing him, a blast from the Srax shooting Kotto in the chest, killing him. Abreon yelling as he fell. Their own army was killing them! Abreon pulled Sam up from the ground, "Come on!" as they ran, Lune being pinned down by the Srax and the Xeion Dru, Angle and Nece returning fire, but fleeing. Abreon looked back at Lune dying in a hail of laser blast. Sam ran with Abreon to another building, shooting as they went, killing another Xelon Dru and then reaching the home where the person whom he had sold his suit to formerly resided. Abreon and Sam running through the door, tripping falling to their knees panting. Abreon, "There it is, in the comer."

Sam pointing at it, "This will save us! God I pray so!"

Abreon standing, nodding, wiping mud from his face. A hook held Abreon's suit from the ceiling, "This is the key." then sadly looking at him, "You know Lune is dead."

"I know."

Abreon began pulling his suit on and snapping pieces together, first the chest plate, then the abdomen plates, then the legs, boots, arms, and gloves. He could hear the sniper fire burning into the door jams of the house, holding the helmet of his body armor, picking at the burnt out holes in the suit, "This is it."

Sam: "I guess it is."

Abreon, "How many rounds do you have?"

"Three."

Abreon, "I have four." giving the rifle to him, here."

Sam, "But..."

"I have the suit."

Sam, "But..."

"Take the rounds out."

Sam doing so, "How will you fight back?"

"I've always fought back. I will do a straight run to the bridge and over it, about a kilometer from here."

Sam looking down at the mud, "All that way?"

"Yes."

Abreon ran in his total protection suit, his boots splashing through the water soaked ground and passed another several buildings. He glanced back then to the left and right, running behind a building and again rushing forward. Abreon reached the road which lead toward the bridge. He took a deep breath and ran, a blast hitting him in the back, Abreon tumbled, fell forward in pain. He stood with all his reserve, the burn intense, continuing, fleeing from the fire, passed all that was left of that town, running, finding soldiers of the Xelon Dru scattered here and there along the way. They saw him and began to fire at their target. Abreon with all his weight and his heavy armor slamming into one of them, knocking him back, removing his laser weapon from him in the process. Abreon turned the rifle around and shot him, running again toward the bridge.

"Get him!" Another Xelon yelled.

A second firing upon Abreon, Abreon turning firing back, turning again running, running off the road to where there was only tall grass, partially submerged in the swampy mire. He ran, lumbering with the weight of his suit through the weeds, firing at soldiers as he went, some running after him, Abreon tiring, reaching the bridge. Abreon took a deep breath, the burn on his back peeling his skin. He flashed back to the mine. He flashed back to the hospital. He shook his head, banged his helmet, passing by still more soldiers who were attempting to rebuilding parts of the bridge they needed intact in order to move multi-ton war machines across. Abreon made contact with another Xelon shooting him in the chest, tossing his spend rifle away, "Oh God!" Abreon yelled to himself, grabbing the dead soldier's weapon shooting laser left and right at soldiers, the barrage of return fire boring into his suit. Abreon pushing a soldier, stepping over him, running down the remains of the bridge, finding a small all-terrain troop carrier shooting the surprised soldiers who turned about in it. Abreon leaping upon the carrier, kicking one soldier, then killing him, as he turned to fire against another killing her in the process. Abreon falling as a soldier from behind kicked him.

Abreon rolling firing killing him as well. Abreon stood, fell and stood again, grabbing the P6T-200 laser Gatling gun. He removed it stand firing the gun into the mass of soldiers running toward him. He saw fire in his eyes. He remembered the burns, the pain. Abreon could not push it away. He continued to fire, as he leaped off the carrier and continued, the sounds of belching heat from the gun loud, merging with against the roar of the swollen river. He remembered the poison gas, the trenches, the smell of death everywhere. Abreon screaming as he spun about, scattering thick laser into all of them, Abreon running, shooting as he went, flanking himself and spinning again, mowing down soldiers behind him, turning, running again until he reached the end of the bridge. He tossed the Gatling gun, merged into the heavy tall weeds again and snaked his way toward the hills. Abreon found the passages he needed to find up to the plateau where the tank was. He stepped toward the tank, collapsed and then pulled himself back up. He looked out over the war zone. Abreon pulled off his helmet, vomited and snapped it back on. He climbed the tank. Abreon activated the unit and it powered on. He worked the controls and the machine moved with his direction. Abreon turned the unit around twice for a quick diagnostic and pushed it down the plateau. It groaned from its previous use, smoking from worn hydraulics but it would execute its final act of obedience.

The Xelon Dru seeing the tank make its way down the hills began to fire at it. They swarmed the machine as it got within range. Abreon, shooting at them, the tanks guns roaring to life as he made his way onto the bridge again. The Xelon Dru soldiers seeing the tanks guns rip through the air with heavy fire backed away.

SYSTEM CONTROLS

Submenu:

INTERNAL SYSTEMS

Submenu:

POWER

One of the tanks guns made a metal on metal grind, a snapping sound and then it seized, "Shit!" He let go of the tanks gun triggers. A few soldiers seeing this from behind the tank took the opportunity and rushed the tank. Abreon kicking a soldier from one of the legs of the tank.

NUCLEAR SYSTEMS

DEACTIVATING SAFTY CONTROLS...

Are you sure: Yes? No?

Abreon rotating the beast, stepping upon one of the soldier, "Yes I am sure!" tapping the heads up display.

DONE

DEACTIVATING COOLANT SYSTEMS... Abreon stepping upon them, the beast taking severe hits upon its shell from some type of rocket.

COOLANT SYSTEMS OFFLINE... THERMONUCLEAR MELTDOWN IN TEN SECONDS...

Abreon struggling...

EIGHT

The machine smoking from the fire, Abreon bleeding from the shoulder, from sustained blasts, the beast stepping and then falling down to its knees.

SIX

Abreon punching one soldier from within the tanks cab, then kicking another with a well timed boot. He yanked the controls again, the tank standing for a moment then lurching forward and falling again. Abreon leaped out of the unit and into the crowd, pushing two of them into a cratered hole within the bridge. They fell into the foaming white river down below, with a scream. Abreon also seeing the opportunity bounded into it, falling hitting the water hard. Abreon sank down, deep, his helmet filling partially with water. Abreon held his breath in fear as he began to rise, reaching the surface now already several hundred meters downstream from the bridge.

Abreon spitting water from his mouth into his helmet, coughing as the swift current pulled him down the river.

FOUR

Abreon tried to swim to the banks. He was over a kilometer away now.

TWO

It was no use.

ONE

The explosions destroyed the bridge, the blast ripping through not only the bridge but also everything around it. It tore through twisted what was left into hot metal shreds and concrete chunks, throwing them as if they were blown sand on a beach. The immediate zone vaporized, soldiers disappearing in an instant, swept away like so much dust on the wind. Trucks, soldiers and cannons around both sides of what used to be the bridge torn apart, thrown and scattered as so much burning wreckage, some into the river, some into the hills and some into the fields. What wreckage that was thrown into the river concealed by the immediate spray produced by the blast concealing some of the larger chunks of debris for a moment. Abreon attempting to swim away as the massive tidal wave created by the small nuclear blast pushed much of the debris toward him. The wave caring steel, concrete, hunks of machine and parts of men nearing him, twisting, churning and roaring toward him. Abreon turned again as it hit him bending the steel of his suit. Abreon knocked unconscious for a moment then quickly awakening, climbing upon it leaping from it to another hunk, a piece of metal, turning in the water, the current undercutting his legs. Abreon fell back into the water, but this time mercifully being pushed by the hunk of concrete to the banks of the river, the concrete rolling onto him crushing him in his suit against a river rock. The concrete snagging him pulling him back into the river and under. Abreon panicked held his breath again, was able to free himself but was hit by another chunk of concrete. He grabbed it with his gloved hands, climbed on top of it, leaped toward another piece, missing it and fell again. Abreon was pulled under the river again, found another chunk of debris that was now accumulating near the river banks, grabbed the piece of bridge re-enforcement bar and pulled himself back up. He grabbed another piece of steel, as it dragged itself along the bottom, breaking free from the ruin and he too with it. Abreon held onto it as it slowed to a stop. Abreon gripping it in the water, pulled his helmet off and tossed it. He closed his eyes in pain...

The broken bones eventually healed, the laser blasts eventually healed, the burns dutifully created their scars, but the memories remained. They would not yield, being reborn in sweat and in midnight dreams. He was free in a way, not totally, but it would do. Abreon stood along the edge of the plateau overlooking the river and where the Unar Bridge used to be now only some of the mooring left as a witness. He held Nece in his arms. No one would could cross it. No one would dare find them. The Xelon Dru weak from too many wars, too many losses and ruined morally would not consume any more corporations. Abreon and Nece were now in a world where the corporation did not exist. Abreon was now in a world where life mattered and the machine did not. Perhaps he did it all wrong, maybe he had no choice. Maybe he did the best he could as a pawn of the corporations and of the war machines. Maybe, he could live with that reasoning. Abreon turned to Nece as the sun was setting over the hills and plains, "I believe it was another wonderful day."

"I believe it was too."

Abreon kissing her softly as a gentle wind took them, "I love you."

Nece grabbing his collar kissing him back, "I love you too."