

Abrams tanks, three-story tall robotic fighting machines, and vampiric assassins. A strange combination, but one that will keep reader's noses buried in the binding as they bore through this darkly erotic, yet grittily detailed, military science fiction thriller.

A Craving for Blood

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A Craving for Blood

For my family, who believed

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A Craving for Blood
Mark H. Walker

CHAPTER ONE

Tahoma, Sediana

1

Five kilometers south of Sedon's urban sprawl lay Tahoma, its white houses and sandy beaches a sharp contrast to the spaceport's bustling traffic and seedy citizens. Tahoma's quaint clapboard cottages hugged the shore of Lake Kayata and the first mile of the river flowing west from the lake, forming a picturesque, all-is-well-here greeting card scene. It was a nice place, as least as nice as Sediana's rural technology allowed. In fact, it was so nice that tourism was the area's main industry. The water formed the outland's northern border and although 10 kilometers south was hard country—country in which ranchers and miners alike struggled to scratch out a living—the shores of the lake were lush.

With the lushness came tourism, and with tourism came alcohol, and with alcohol came bars, but that was okay with Tahoma's inhabitants. Most of the watering holes were clean, open-air affairs that looked over the river's blue water, but some—those that catered to the less affluent locals and low budget tourists—looked out on little more than dirty, dimly lit streets.

In one such bar sat the assassin.

She sat at the end of the long, roughly hewn bar and watched, her sad, brown eyes missing nothing, her lithe body relaxed, her face—her misleadingly beautiful Earth-Asian face—impassive. It was closing time, but the couple she watched would need to be told, need to be tapped on the shoulder and told. Heck, they would probably need to be separated with some type of pneumatic tool, and then told.

You felt that way once, her tiny voice whispered, but the need laughed.

It's not that they were the only couple left in the smoky bar. Several kids shuffled out the last slow tune on the tiny, saw-dust covered dance floor, the braver guys cupping soft flesh that they wouldn't have dared touch four hours and eight beers ago. Others were clustered around the thick oak bar. Most of these were guys—the night's losers. They sipped their beer and stared balefully at the dancing couples. The assassin *heard* them wishing. Wishing that jerk in the blue shirt would break a leg so they could give the girl in the tight red skirt one last try, or wishing that maybe the guy in the plaid shirt would get sick so that they could move in on his chick in the blue jeans, who wasn't that good looking, but all women looked better at closing time, or even wishing that the chick at the end of the bar wasn't such a frigid bitch.

Inside, she laughed at that wish. *They don't want to know how hot my blood runs. Only the dead know that.*

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No the couple weren't the last folks in the bar, but to each other they were. They sat in a corner booth near an open window where the wind from the mild Sediana night blew through her light-brown hair. The boy sat next to her, now kissing her, now talking, watching her as she laughed, and smiling at her beauty.

The assassin knew they were the ones. When they left they would have eyes for nothing but each other. Easy prey. The streets outside were dark. Tahoma wasn't a big city, and on this side of town most folks were merchants. Folks who rose at the break of dawn, worked hard all day, and went to bed early. Good folks, folks who had nothing in common with her. Yes, the streets would be deserted, and the streets would be dark, and the couple would be easy prey.

She felt herself moisten. She hated herself.

Hated what the Terran Defense Force (TDF) had done to her. Hated the urgings, hated the genetic manipulations in her body, and hated the TDF scientists who had bred her to kill. She wanted to deny the need. But she couldn't... not for long. There were good days, days she felt strong, bright, focused. But then it started. A distraction at first, then desire, then the overwhelming, dark, need. Like the junkies she saw on the bad side of Hollis—human husks, without money, without food, without even a glimmer in their eyes, living—if you could call passing air through their lungs—for the next fix of crack. But she didn't care about crack, blood was her drug. Human blood.

A lanky young man rose from his stool at the end of the bar. She saw it, she saw everything, knew where he was going before he did, knew—more or less—what he would say. He walked toward her, the beer in his veins making his gait unsteady. *Idiot!* Hadn't he seen her push away every boy in the bar? Hell, the bartender had even stopped talking to her. Still he came. She knew the drunk just wanted in her pants, wanted to relieve his animal urge, wanted to see her writhing naked beneath him. Maybe she'd let him see something else instead.

He approached, she ignored. He approached closer, still she ignored. He was standing next to her now, and still she didn't look at him. She was actually enjoying this small game. *Deal with this one, and you want need to worry about any more Johnny-come-latelys.* It wouldn't take much.

2

David Long had watched the girl all evening. She was either very beautiful or he was very drunk, or maybe it was a combination of both. Whatever the ingredients of the love potion, he knew that he wanted her, and wanted her badly, and if he was going to do anything about that want, the time was now. The barkeep had flicked the last call lights, and the final tune was spinning, he had to make a move... at least that was the way that his slightly soggy mind saw it. She didn't look up when he stood up, but he felt she was

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watching —no, he corrected himself, tracking would be a better word— him as he walked unsteadily toward her. It was a creepy feeling. She didn't move a muscle, look up from her beer, squirm, or anything, but still he got this feeling she knew he was coming. Pretty creepy.

"Hi," he began...

"Go away."

The words must have come from the girl. In fact, he thought he had seen her lips move, but wasn't sure. Nothing else had changed. Not the tilt of her head, her hands on the beer mug, or her body on the stool. In fact, now that the words had hung in the air for a moment, he wasn't sure if they were hanging in the air at all, but rather in his head. He wasn't even sure she had spoken, but he HAD heard a voice —her voice he assumed.

He looked over at the barkeep. Not knowing why, perhaps looking for reassurance, or maybe just confirmation. Confirmation that he wasn't hearing things, he guessed. But the keep was washing glasses at the other end of the bar, and the rest of its inhabitants were busy studying the two women on the dance floor.

"Do you come here..." he said —the opening of the banal pickup up line he had rehearsed with his beer. But the rest of the line froze, froze hard, froze into a cold greasy lump in the back of his throat. This time she had moved. Slowly turning her head till he could see her eyes, and they were not the deep pools of brown he had seen from across the bar. The irises in these eyes burned —writhed might be a better word— a swirling bright blue. Not a baby blue, or even a steel blue, but an electric, lustful blue, and the lust that they telegraphed had little to do with sex. It was as if they peeled away the outer layer of David Long the person and bore into his most basic level. Bore into David Long the animal, David Long the *food source*. Her full lips moved, pulling back into a tight smile that never touched her eyes, a smile without the slightest trace of humor, a predatory smile. The incisors were white, even teeth, but the canines were wrong. Not wrong as in she-needs-a-trip-to-the-dentist wrong, but decidedly, pointedly, wrong. At first his addled brain couldn't grasp the difference, but when he did grasp it the hairs stood on the back of his neck. He opened his mouth to scream. *They were fangs!*

You won't scream.

It was too much. This time he was sure she had spoken, but he was looking right at her. Right at those heinous eyes, and he knew the lips hadn't moved. He wanted to scream. Scream, scream, and scream till the screaming blotted out her face and erased the voice in his head. But his vocal chords were no longer his. His bladder emptied, the warm fluid soaking his crotch.

Leave.

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It was a command, not to David Long, but to his brain. He wanted to leave. By God he wanted to dash for the door, yelling for everyone to run for their lives. Scream that the monsters their parents told them didn't exist, the ones in the closet, under the bed and behind the doors, really *did* exist, and they had come to kill them all. He wanted to do all those things, but he couldn't, his mind was no longer his own. Instead, David Long turned and shuffled to the door at the front of the bar, beer mug still in hand, his wet crotch chaffing, urine soaked tennis shoes squishing across the sawdust-covered dance floor, leaving dark tracks in their wake. A pair of boys at the far end of the bar laughed and pointed, and when they glanced at the girl they saw only the brown-eyed beauty that had been there all night. She gave them a small grin —not enough to encourage them, mind you— and shrugged.

As he pushed through the bar door the voice returned.

Forget.

David Long shook his head. *Did I black out?* He had heard of that happening. You drank so much you forgot what you were doing. He stood on the street outside the bar. *How the hell, did I get here? Oh my God, I've pissed myself.* He looked at the mug of beer in his hand, briefly considered returning it to the bar, but tossed it across the street instead, the crash sending a stray dog running into the night. A finger of a breeze pricked his neck hairs and, like the dog, David retreated down the street.

3

The couple stood, and that simple act sent an electric wave through the assassin. Oh yeah she needed it, needed it bad now. Deep inside, the tiny voice cried out. *Oh God, if I could just turn away. Just leave. Just forget it.* But the voice was small and her need was large. Yet despite her need she was cool, cool as if she had been bred for this, which —of course— she had been. The boy-man fished in his wallet for the beer money as the girl caressed his back through the light jacket he wore. The sight made her uneasy, but she wasn't sure why. He threw a handful of bills on the table — obviously more interested in getting to where he and the girl were going than worrying about calculating their tab, and without as much as a glance back into the bar they left, hand in hand.

The assassin was careful not to notice. The desire was great —she could feel blood pulsing in her temples, her heart pounding, and the wetness of her vagina— but her cunning was greater. She never fed close to home, and rarely in the same town. The police would have questions tomorrow, they always did, and she didn't want the bar keeper, or any of his remaining customers, to remember her leaving hot on the heels of the two. Casually, despite the urgency screaming in her veins, she signaled the keep and paid the tab —tipping him well, but not too well. Doing nothing memorable.

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She strolled out of the bar and into the street. She needed only to be still, smell the air, and listen to the night, to sense the couples' heat.

North, perhaps 500 meters.

Go south. Leave, the tiny voice said.

But she wouldn't. Couldn't. She crossed to the shadows on the far side of the street and began to run. Fly might be a better word, her genetically altered legs propelling her at a blurring speed. The wind whipping through her hair, her vision tunneled, allowing her to better focus on—and dodge—the crates a grocer had left in the street, the dog, who whinnied as she leapt over it, and the parking signs that jutted over the sidewalk. She was a god, as fast as the wind, invincible. Her lips curled into a smile, a smile that didn't conceal the shiny stream of tears on her cheeks or the canines that had grown into one-inch fangs.

4

The couple turned into a small ally. The glow from the main road street light didn't quite beat back the darkness lurking in the corners of the dead-end, but a young girl on a waitresses' salary couldn't afford better. It worried the boy and he had spoken to the girl about it. This wasn't the best side of town. This wasn't even the best ally in the worst side of town, and it was why he began wearing the 9mm in the shoulder holster under the jacket.

Her hair flowed over her face as she fished in her purse for the key, and for the thousandth time this evening and perhaps millionth time since they met six months ago, he marveled at her beauty. In a minute they would be inside, clothes thrown on the floor, the dark alley forgotten, his lips smothering her neck with kisses. A rush of cold air brushed the back of the boy's neck, breaking his pleasant fantasy. He whipped around, nostrils flaring, eyes wide. He saw nothing, but then again the dim bulb hanging from the small watershed over the door only served to exacerbate the surrounding darkness, repainting the ally's shadows as it swung gently on its short cord. The girl raised the key with a small smile and slid it in the lock.

5

The assassin crouched on the watershed above the door as the boy spun around, and felt it again—something about the boy made her uneasy. He had only to look up to see—an event that wouldn't bother her—but of course he wouldn't look up. It wouldn't cross his mind to look up; no human could perch on the steep incline of the small, jutting roof above the door. *But she wasn't human, was she?* Not entirely. *If I was entirely human, I wouldn't be here, would I,* she asked, loathing pooling in the pit of her stomach.

She was cautious by nature and training, so she planned her attack despite the desperate need urging her on. That was the way her makers—at least her human makers—had designed her. She'd kill the boy first; he was the only threat. Actually neither was a threat. Her boosted muscles, reflexes, and mental abilities made her a match for a dozen Nats, as the

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genetically engineered disdainfully dubbed natural born humans, and more than a handful of Purebred, the TDF's genetically bred warriors —lucky ones who were engineered with enhanced physiques, but without her insidious desires (or abilities). But she was cautious, trained to eliminate the risks that could be eliminated, and minimize the rest. And then there was that feeling that passed in the bar and rose again when the boy spun to pinpoint the cause of the breeze her passage had stirred, that feeling of unease. She dismissed it, concentrating on her plan as it were. She'd kill the boy, although it would mean less to feed on, but she would suck the girl dry as her still-beating heart pumped the blood to the assassin's waiting mouth.

Don't do it, the tiny voice screamed. Her need almost laughed. *I WILL DO IT*, it boomed inside her head. The assassin never made a mistake, but —conflicted to the point of near insanity— she made one now. A tear rolled from her eye, down her cheek to the tip of her chin, where it hesitated before falling to the tin watershed, landing with a soft, clearly audible, *poink!*

6

The girl turned the key and the tumblers retracted with a thick click. She swung the light door inward, and stepped inside the apartment, reaching for the wall light. The boy began to follow, but then —*poink*— something, it sounded like a drop of rain, struck the tin roof above the door. But there was no rain. The girl continued, but he stepped back, reaching under his jacket.

7

Damn! Roughly the assassin wiped her face with the back of her arm. And then looked down... into the gaping chasm of a pistol muzzle. She knew the specifications of every gun in existence, and was trained to use most of them. This was an old Beretta 9mm. Old yes, but also powerful; capable of punching a thumb-sized hole in her forehead, which is where the boy pointed it, and blowing away the back of her skull as the tumbling bullet exited.

Damn, damn! Now she knew the source of her unease. Of course! The boy wore a jacket in the bar. Why would anyone wear a jacket —even a light jacket— on a balmy night such as this? And then there was his reaction to her passage. Fear, yes, but also something in his wheeling about that hinted of more than prey, but rather predator.

"John!" The girl screamed from the apartment. "What are you doing?"

"Suze, get back inside, lock the door, and call the police." His eyes never left the assassin. *Not bad*, she thought.

"But, John," the girl's voice wavered, thick with the sound of approaching tears.

"Just DO IT!" His eyes never left the assassin's face. *He's ready*, she thought with a hint of admiration. This boy is ready for trouble, *but*, she

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thought as she tensed her legs, *he isn't ready for me*. The assassin bared her fangs with a growl-hiss that was half human, half beast, and leapt.

8

Complete, knee-buckling fear was the last emotion the boy felt. He had been frightened by the prowler, even weirded out —*I mean, what the hell is she doing on the watershed above the door*— but he had handled it, pulled the gun, and sent his girl to safety. But that was merely fright; this was abject, total horror. The... *thing*... the ...*monster* (he didn't know what else to call it)... was baring its fangs at him, growling. He blinked, unable to believe his eyes, and then the monster was a mid-air blur. He pulled the trigger and the gun shattered the summer night, the bullet driving a hole into the watershed and burying itself, in a splash of sparks and exploding brick, into the wall behind it. But the monster was no longer there; she was overhead, a shadow against the stars, and he pulled the trigger again. *Boom!* The bullet zipped through the ally air, hitting nothing. Then the monster was behind him, he tried to turn, but its hands were on him, stronger than a vise. He smelled its breath, oddly sweet, turned his head and stared into the fangs inches from his face and knew he would die. The complete, knee-buckling fear swept through him like an ice storm, and his world faded to black, but not before one last thought floated through his mind. *Why is it crying?*

9

The boy sagged against her and the Beretta fell from his slack hand to the pavement with an impotent *clack*. *Even better*, the large voice said, *I can bleed him while he lives*.

No don't, you CAN stop, answered the small voice. *I WILL NOT STOP*, the need bellowed, so loud that she thought she might have shouted the words. And, as always, the need won. The boy's head lolled in her arms and she bent to the exposed neck, just below the Adam's apple, and placed her lips on the hot flesh.

"No don't!"

The pounding of her pulse was almost deafening, and at first she thought it was the tiny voice, but then...

"Please!"

It was louder, book ended with sobs, and not of her head. She raised her face and saw the girl. The girl hadn't gone in like the boy had ordered, but rather, rooted by shock, fear or whatever (the assassin didn't know) she stood in the door. Dark paint stripped her cheeks. No, it wasn't paint, the assassin corrected herself, but rather rivers of black mascara-tainted tears.

The girl flapped her arms feebly toward her apartment. "Ya...you can have anything..."

KILL HER! The need boomed.

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No! The tiny voice was louder now. Louder than it had ever been. “anything,” the girl continued, “even”... another sob... “me. Just” she held up a trembling hand and closed her eyes, renewing the tear’s onslaught. They opened, “don’t. Don’t k-kill him.”

Something spoke to the need. Spoke from the girls’ tear-filled eyes. It was an even greater need. The need in the girls eyes when she looked at the boy, the need for his life, a need deeper than the girls need to live.

“I... I love him.”

Stop! Ordered the ever-larger tiny voice.

The need was receding, and the thrumming in her veins grew weaker by the minute. The assassin looked longingly at the boy’s throat and then let him slide to the ground. Without a word the assassin bounded to the watershed, onto a nearby roof, and into the night.

For a moment the girl stared through her tears at the blurry, but empty alley, her chest heaving with desperate sobs, expecting the monster to fall on her from an unseen angle. But it didn’t. She looked into the night. She saw nothing. She raised her face to the empty sky.

“Thanks,” she whispered, and ran to the boy.

CHAPTER TWO

Hollis, Sediana

1

Hollis' main street baked in the morning heat. Dust, stirred by passing traffic—horse, truck, and hover car—tanned the air.

Ayron Wytehawk studied the castles and knights resting on the wooden stool. The carved bone pieces shone dully in the bright sun, recounting an all too familiar tale: Once again, Jeff had beaten him. He shook his head, wagging his jet-black ponytail, and leaned back against the weathered planking of his friend's store.

"Gonna be a hot one today," observed Jeff Gunshee, returning from inside the store, munching an undisclosed snack, "absolutely miserable."

Ayron spotted a TDF, or Terran Defense Force, hover car, carrying two of the TDF's genetically engineered soldiers, or Purebred, creeping down the street. His reddish brown face remained impassive, yet his eyes burned murderously as he tracked the vehicle.

"It'll stay miserable till the Terrans are gone," said Ayron, gesturing toward the hover car. Dust gusting from the car's skirts forced Ayron to shield his eyes as the vehicle glided by. The gunner, a rock-jawed soldier with an arm casually resting on a spindle mounted pulse laser, glanced at Ayron and smiled, taking obvious pleasure in the native's discomfort. Ayron grinned and spat a wad *Pekete* juice, narrowly missing the blonde gunner. The soldier's expression soured as the car disappeared down a side street.

"You never were too good at math were you?" muttered Jeff. "Two men armed with *Pekete* juice don't equal one Terran with a Pulse Laser, Ayron.

Using his thumb, Ayron flattened a spider crossing the thigh of his faded jeans—repeatedly smearing the arachnid's remains. "Jeff, this planet is our home; to the Terrans it is nothing more than a mineral deposit. Earth has its colonies, it has its technologies, and has its test tube soldier clones. We need none of it. I'm proud that I came from my mother's womb. The whites have taken our land before; I don't want them to have it again."

"You are crazy, Ayron. White men are not all greedy bigots. Do you..."

"Stop it, you're hurting him!"

A woman's scream pierced the air, echoing in the narrow street.

Ayron looked at his friend.

"The market?"

Jeff nodded.

Jumping to his feet, Ayron bounded the length of the store's porch, his boots thundering against the wooden planking. Gripping the thick banister, he leapt over the rail, landing in the side street facing Hollis' open-

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air market. He spotted the hover car soldiers in the center of a throng of agitated market goers. The taller, blond man kicked a limp body lying in the dust, while his shorter, bearded partner glared at the assembled citizenry over the sights of his laser pistol, its dull, blue metal languidly reflecting the bright sun. A woman, her torn blouse revealing the paler skin of her cleavage, clung to the leg of the smaller, bearded soldier. Ayrton sprinted toward the crowd.

"Please no more," she pleaded, "he's just a boy."

"He is Nat scum," spat the tall blond, using the Purebred's disdainful slang for natural birth humans.

Her tone softened and she began to slide a hand up the bearded soldier's leg.

"I'll give you what you want."

"Urak is correct," said the bearded soldier, brushing the woman's hand from his leg. "He had a weapon. He intended to harm us."

The limp form coughed. "You touch mother again and I'll kill you."

Ayrton was close enough to see rage contort the blonde's face.

"Shut up, you piece of rat crap." The tall man drew back his leg to kick the boy again.

"Stop!" The word jumped from Ayrton's mouth, half pant and half shout, surprising him as much as the soldiers. "Warriors don't battle little boys, they battle men."

Glaring at Ayrton, the blond planted his leg. "There is no battle here Nat. This boy assaulted me; he is being punished. Why don't you return to your spittoon and leave this matter to us?"

Ayrton ignored the jibe. "Perhaps he had good reason to assault you," He said, gesturing towards the woman with his chin.

"I merely asked if she desired sex. Nats place too much significance on the act."

"It appears you did more than ask, unless your words are sharp enough to rip fabric."

"Either way, it is not your concern. Is it?"

Although Ayrton was big by most standards — almost two meters tall and perhaps 100 kilos— the soldiers he faced were bred, through the Earth's genetic program, to be massive warriors. The blond looked a scant hand shy of two *and a half* meters and his smaller partner was still several centimeters taller than Ayrton. It would be a tough fight. Yet he couldn't let the arrogant Purebred have their way with this woman.

Ayrton clenched his fists. "Your insolence makes this matter my concern. Or are you afraid to fight any but squaws and their children, tubeman?"

The blond turned and deliberately strode towards Ayrton. The onlookers parted and the boy slowly rolled to a sitting position. Urak stopped

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just short of butting Ayron with his chest and glared down at the Indian. "You will regret those words Nat."

With a piston-like motion Ayron punched the soldier's stomach and yelled. "Run boy, take your mother!"

Urak briefly gasped then smiled. "Is that the best you can offer?"

Out of the corner of his eye Ayron saw the boy and mother scamper away as the bearded soldier turned to face him. Ayron ignored him. He hoped Urak's pride would make this a one-on-one fight.

Quickly Ayron dropped and swung a leg through a swift, yet wide, arc, aimed at knocking Urak's feet from under him. The huge warrior deftly jumped back, avoiding the sweep, then stepped forward, kicking toward Ayron's head. The powerful blow swept aside Ayron's blocking hand, knocking him on his back. Pulling a knife from his boot scabbard, Urak leaped on his adversary. Ayron twisted hard, attempting to roll away, but the blonde's awesome weight pinned him. Urak swung the knife's butt against Ayron's temple, and before he could recover Ayron felt the cold blade press his throat.

"Perhaps a squaw would have fought better," smirked Urak. "Now, you will pay for your insult."

As he slowly gathered loose street soil in his right hand, Ayron spoke. "What do you know of insult offworlder? My people were torn from their home and forced to live like cattle in a pen hundreds of years before you were a twinkling in a gene splicer's eye."

With agonizing caution he closed his fingers.

"Once we were great, now we are but ranchers and miners."

There, he had it!

Urak laughed. "And what might your people, your great tribe, be called, Nat?"

Ayron smiled. "Maybe later."

Flexing his arm at the elbow he hurled the dirt toward his adversary's eyes. Urak briefly turned his face, shifting his position. It wasn't much, but it was enough. Ayron's right hand shot to Urak's head, and he pushed his thumb into the soldier's right eye, popping the eyeball, and squirting red mucus down Ayron's thumb. Dropping the knife, Urak screamed and clamped both hands over the socket. Ayron jerked his knee upward, striking Urak hard in the groin. The soldier collapsed next to Ayron, alternatively gasping for air and moaning. Ayron scooped the knife off the ground, rolled Urak over, sat square on his chest, and pressed the blade to Urak's throat—focusing the blonde's attention on himself.

"Now I will answer your question. We are called *Tinneh*—the people." Ayron leaned closer, lowering his voice. "But white men have a special name for us, a name which means enemy." Closer still, his voice a hiss. "You may use that name. You, my white skinned Terran, may call us

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Apache."

Ayron looked hard at Urak, their faces mere inches apart, then slowly slid the knife across his victim's throat. Urak's good eye went wide, then dimmed as blood gushed from the six-inch gash in his neck.

Knowing what would come, Ayron spun off Urak's body. *Whoosh-Crack*. A laser bolt kicked up the ground not twenty centimeters from Urak's head, and Ayron turned to confront his next adversary.

The bearded soldier stood three meters distant, leveling his laser pistol at Ayron. His hand was steady, the gaze fixed. Ayron knew there was no way out. Yet he was tensing his legs, preparing to spring at the man, when the laser bolt cut the air.

The bearded head disintegrated into a red mist, the dismembered body lurched forward, discharging the pistol into the dirt, and crumpled on the street. Behind the soldier, Jeff Gunshee leaned against a street lamp pole, examining the still softly glowing barrel of a lasgun. The street was momentarily silent, then both men were swamped by a wave of sound — cheers, shouts, and screams, as the writhing mass of humanity collapsed on them in celebration.

Ayron shuffled toward his friend, the movement slowed by the well wishers and back slappers, the stench of burnt flesh filling his nostrils. "I guess the TDF did teach you how to shoot. Did they also teach you how to wait till the last damn second?"

Jeff shrugged. "Couldn't find the discharge capacitor. It's not like I use this thing every day."

2

Amid the bedlam Jeff noticed a slim Earth-Asian featured woman on the far side of the street. Unlike the excited town folk, she rested calmly against a thick support beam, her baggy peasant pants fluttering in the breeze, a wide-brimmed floppy hat worn back on her head. Jeff felt her gaze, and when he met it her irises flashed an unworldly blue-white. An icy finger of recognition —mysterious as it was frightening— traced his spine, chilling Jeff despite the sun's heat. It was as if he knew the woman, yet was sure he would remember those eyes and their ravenous gaze.

"Sweet God" he whispered.

"What is it?" asked Ayron, straining to peer around a tall Indian attempting to pour whiskey on his head.

Jeff pursed his lips, deep in thought. After a moment, like a dog shedding rainwater, he shook his head.

"Nothing."

"But..." Ayron began.

"Really, it's nothing," Jeff said, slapping Ayron on the back. And indeed when his friend turned to the whisky-pouring Indian, Jeff looked again and there was really was nothing, and he could see no floppy hat

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bobbing through the noisy crowd. He looked back at Ayrton, who shrugged and offered him a sip from the whiskey bottle now in his hand.

Jeff glanced once more at the far side of the street, and took the bottle. "Yea, I could use a swig of that right now."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Outside of Hollis, Sediana

1

A Coyote rounded the corner of the ink-black road, stopped, and raised its nose to the balmy desert breeze. Frightened by the man-scent, the dog momentarily froze before scampering into the night.

Two Moons peered over the rock, tensing as he caught site of the Coyote. Quickly, he scanned the darkened scene for any sign of the TDF patrol. His night vision goggles bathed the road below in hues of green, but the moonless night revealed nothing—not even the 20 braves of his small command, but he knew they were there. A dozen—each armed with a Colt M18 assault rifle—waited in shallow foxholes dug into the slopes on either side of the road. The assault rifle's .33 caliber caseless ammunition was of little use against anything but exposed personnel, but the rifle—as the big black American, Ali, had said—"put out a lot of shit."

One hundred meters to the east the road curved to avoid a sudden swell in the ground. On the banks of that hill sat the Apache's ancient .50 caliber machine gun. Little changed since its use in Earth's second global war, the gun was impressive nonetheless. The versions stored in the underground warehouse used a laser to increase accuracy and several types of special ammunition to increase lethality.

Ali had recommended the .50 cal's high explosive proximity shells for tonight's work. The dark-skinned helicopter mechanic had explained that each round contained a minute sensing device that detonated the shell when it passed within six inches of an object with at least the density and heat signature of a human body. The sensing device, coupled with the targeting laser, insured that each shell meted out its own share of damage.

Hundreds of meters past the .50 caliber machinegun's emplacement rose Eagle Rock. Actually, more of a mountain than a rock, the 500 meter-tall boulder-encrusted rise had been named for the group of eagles that had chosen to nest on its side. Brought in with the first settlers, the Eagles had flourished in Sediana's rodent-rich desert. Two Moons knew, however, that a different hunter waited on its sides this night. He spoke into his throat mike.

"Mika?"

"Yes?" Mika Flowers' breathed in his ear. The American's communication gear was truly marvelous. Each helmet contained the headset, throat-mike combination. They also contained a transceiver that would provide Two Moons the location of each soldier, but that was inoperative without the satellite dependent GPS. Although Two Moons could instantly direct any member of his command, he found that approach cumbersome and limited his orders to the team leaders, setting his helmet

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to filter out all other communication.

"You ready?" Two Moons asked.

"Been ready since the first time you asked."

Mika worried Two Moons. They had been together once shortly after her arrival from Sedon, when a late night spent deciphering the tank tech-manuals had eased into a couple of beers, and finally an empty cot in the corner of the deserted bay. She was ravenous in bed, almost as if the sex alone could not satisfy her, and make no mistake, the sex was ungodly, the best he had ever had, even the passing thought stirred him. And what had started as an animal attraction had grown —her wit, intelligence, and kindness capturing him as no woman had before. Yet despite his attempts to build a relationship she remained distant, not cold, but neither warm. They saw each other daily, if not hourly, as they both worked to ready the Apache's tanks, but it was not his inability to grow their relationship that bothered him, but rather her ability to do her job, specifically her headaches.

At first she tried to hide them from him, popping painkillers and pretending nothing was wrong. But they worsened, the pain grinding a sharp edge into her personality, and then had come the absences. The first had been a week ago. The team had been practicing this very ambush. He looked for her after the team debriefed the rehearsal, but she was nowhere to be found. She didn't return that night, and the next day when he asked her where she went, she stared at him blankly and changed the subject. It hadn't been the last time. Sometimes she would only be gone for an hour or two, but once no one could find her for over a day. He worried because Mika's team —and the Javelin Anti-Tank-Missile launcher they manned— were a critical part of the ambush. Critical yes, but not decisive; the weapons that would decide the fate of the ambush were still over a kilometer distant.

Once again Two Moons studied Eagle Rock, peering at the mountain as if his intensity would allow him to see what waited on the other side of the hill. It was there, on the far side of the jagged rock mosaic, that the key to the upcoming encounter waited.

He changed the transceiver channel, cleared his throat, and once more whispered into his throat-mike.

"Wytchawk, can you hear me?"

2

Captain Markam Pershaw glanced at the hover car to his front and quickly scanned both sides on the road, paging through low-light and thermal views provided by his Mechanically Enhanced Combat Armor's (MECA) HUD. There was nothing, had been nothing since Soyenski had started these patrols after the incident at the Apache ranch.

Markam spotted a brief glow in the hover car cockpit as it rounded a sharp corner. "Collins," Markam called, "kill the cigarette. Do you have a

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death wish?"

A new replacement from the British Isles, the hover car's driver, Private Collins, was too dumb to understand what he didn't know. Markam hated training new replacements. Most young Purebred were too arrogant to realize that bullets would stop their genetically bred hearts just as quickly as they would a Nat's. Markam didn't care about one life more or less, but every casualty degraded his unit's combat capability and its ability to kill, and he did care about that.

"Yes, sir," cracked Collins voice in his ear. "It's not like we are going to see anything out here."

Once again the light grew brighter, outlining both Collins, who was the driver, and the hover car's gunner.

"I mean NOW," hissed Markam through the throat mike.

The light winked out.

3

The scout tapped Two Moons on the shoulder and pointed down the road. Across the top of the Indian's shoulder Two Moons could see a small red light bob and then wink out.

"Cigarette," the man whispered turning to face Two Moons.

Two Moons nodded and radioed his leaders.

"Here they come; don't fire until I give the order." Shifting channels he spoke again. "Mika, on my mark. Take the hover car."

"Got it."

Breathlessly, Two Moons waited for the hover car to drone past. He dared not move, frightened that the TDF trooper's motion detectors would sense him. Still his cheek twitched; it was an involuntary spasm that appeared when he was nervous. Through his night vision goggles' green haze he counted two TDF soldiers in the hover car and four more trailing behind. The procession crawled down the road, the hover car slowed by the walking troopers in power armor, the suits' dull green ceramite almost invisible in the lightless night.

Overhead, stars glittered against the deep black sky like white-silver dust. The soft breeze carried the scent of night-flowers and the chirp of mating insects. Two Moons wiped his damp palm on the sleeve of his desert-camouflaged fatigues. Below, the last of the TDF soldiers crunched past his position. Two Moons swallowed and spoke.

"Mika?"

"Yep," came the nearly instantaneous reply.

"Fire."

Immediately a finger of light leapt from Eagle rock. A split second later Two Moons heard the *Bam!* of the Javelin's rocket motor ignition. *Here we go*, the Apache thought.

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4

"What the...?" Markam whispered as his HUD locked onto and highlighted a streak of light reaching for the night sky. *Meteor? Flare?* His mind zipped through the opportunities. None made sense, unless...

"Patrol," he yelled. "Hit the dirt! Collins, maneuver." Markam dove for the sandy ground and saw the three other power-armored soldiers of his patrol do the same.

5

The Javelin's rocket motor burned fiercely as the arm-length missile rose to its apogee, tilted, and then dove on the Terran hover car. Traveling at 100 miles an hour the missile rushed to deliver its deadly payload.

6

Captain Pershaw's voice still ringing in his ears, Collins frantically searched the sides of the road for cover; there was none. The image of his boot camp vehicular operation instructor flashed through his mind. *When in doubt, blow it out*, the instructor had said, referring to a hover car's ability to rapidly shift the direction of its drive fan's nacelles and quickly accelerate. "Hold on!" Collins screamed at the hover car's gunner, Corporal Johns, a North American slightly older than himself. Collins jammed the control stick forward an instant before the Javelin impacted the car.

7

The Javelin's internal guidance system consisted of a small active radar that located its target and fed course corrections to the missile's stabilizing fins, and a passive heat seeker that assumed control during the terminal phase, which was usually no more than two seconds. The heat seeker ensured that the missile struck the hottest part of its target—normally the vehicle's engine. Not only were immobile vehicles useless on the battlefield, but often impacting the engine ignited whatever fuel the target carried. Such was the case with Private Collins' mid-engine hover car.

8

The Javelin struck the car directly over the engine—eight inches behind Collins' head. The impact crushed the piezo-electric crystal in the missile's nose, sending an electrical current to the missile's detonators. The detonators fired, which in turn ignited the plastic, cone shaped explosive. The explosive's conical shape produced a jet of flame that bored through the hover car's hull and into the engine compartment.

Although not a fragmentation missile per se, the residual lateral energy from the jet, coupled with the explosion of the missile's remaining fuel, shattered the missile's casing and propelled—at slightly faster than the speed of sound—the sharp metal shards into the back of Private Collins' neck and head.

Collins' eviscerated head flew from his shoulders as his torso

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slumped forward. Corporal Johns —the left side of his face stripped of skin by the same blast that decapitated Collins— almost had time to scream before the hover car's disintegrating engine punctured the hover car's fuel cells.

The turbines that powered the hover car's fans were not radically different from their twentieth century ancestors. As such they required a high-octane fuel to function at peak efficiency —a fuel that burned both cleanly and rapidly. Although the hover car's fuel cells were lined in synthrubber to reduce the chance of fire, the cells were never meant to withstand the onslaught of the superheated metal from the exploding engine. Temporarily confined by what remained of its cell, the fuel could not burn —there was nowhere for the gasses to vent. It exploded.

9

Markam's faceplate immediately darkened to protect his eyes, yet he winced as the hover car disintegrated in an orange-white flash. Debris —some mechanical, some not— pattered to earth in a soft rain. What remained of the hover car lazily tumbled ten meters above the scorched earth and slammed to the ground, crushing a veteran MECA trooper named Lars Niehausen.

"Niehausen. Status," barked Markam. The comlink hissed, the near silence speaking volumes.

Damn, thought Markam, *five seconds into this fight and I've lost three men and a hover car*. He was lying on the right side of the road, using a knee-high sized boulder for protection. Five meters in front of him sprawled Stephan Johansen, the dull olive sheen of his MECA suit partially concealed in the roadside scrub. Across the road was Sergeant Fritzen. On either side of the road the ground slowly rose, dotted by boulders, scrubs, and lanky Peyete trees. *What hit the hover car? Who —besides the Terran Defense Force— has heavy weapons on Sediana?* A hail of small-arms fire interrupted Markam's thoughts. The light caliber ammunition pinged off Markam's armor. His gaze swept the hills, picking out the lethally winking points of enemy gunfire.

Johansen rose to one knee and brought his mini-gun to his shoulder, aiming at the swell rising to the right of the road.

"No," screamed Markam. "Get down!"

10

Two Moons had held the .50 cal in reserve, waiting for a good target. He knew the rising power-armored trooper might be his best chance, and he radioed the machine gun emplacement.

"Get the kneeling trooper"

A pink light stabbed from the darkness, momentarily touching the bushes in front of the kneeling TDF soldier and then settling on the trooper's

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right arm. For an instant Two Moons caught a glimpse of the soldier as he glanced at the targeting laser stabbing his shoulder, then came the chugga-chugga retort from the huge machine gun, and the soldier flew backward—a rag doll thrown by an unseen hand.

Johansen slammed into the small boulder in front of Markam and rolled to the ground. Immediately, the Corporal began crawling toward Markam, pulling himself along with his left hand, and pushing with his feet. There was nothing but a short, bleeding stump where his right arm had been.

Markam reached out to the wounded trooper. Again he heard the chugga-chugga of the unseen enemy's large-caliber automatic weapon. The ground erupted into half-meter tall mini-geysers that traced a path toward the stricken corporal. Markam grabbed Johansen just as the lethal trace stitched the wounded soldier's back. Johansen screamed—a guttural sound amplified over the squad communication frequency, writhed, and then fell limp. The mini-geysers exploded twice—just left of Markam's arm—then stopped.

"Shit," Markam hissed. A renewed buzz of small arms fire followed his arm's retreat behind the rock. Markam's eyes flicked back and forth, frantically searching for a way to extract what remained of his squad from the ambush. Sergeant Fritzen raised briefly and swept the hillside with his flechette rifle. Markam could see sparks as hundreds of the 4mm long barbs glanced off rocks, more than once he heard screams from where the barbs struck something softer than the desert stone.

Again the enemy's heavy weapon fired, kicking up sand near Fritzen's position. Markam lifted slightly, trying to fix the gun's position. A flurry of incoming fire drove him back to the ground. *This was hopeless. Both he and Sergeant Fritzen were pinned; it would only be a matter of time before his unseen adversary realized their advantage and closed for the kill.*

Markam commanded his voice activated communication system to switch to the TDF base frequency.

"Base, this is patrol. I'm engaging an unknown enemy, grid location North Three-Seven, East One-Six." He hesitated before continuing, his gaze once again sweeping the surrounding hills. "I need assistance. Fast!"

Abrams tanks, three-story tall robotic fighting machines, and vampiric assassins. A strange combination, but one that will keep reader's noses buried in the binding as they bore through this darkly erotic, yet grittily detailed, military science fiction thriller.

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