

In the volcanic cauldron of Andrion 3, the young Legion trooper Thinker and his squad battle a merciless alien enemy that has never known defeat. The mission is victory or death, for failure will mean extinction of their species.

The Black March

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The Black March

by

Marshall S. Thomas

Chapter 1

The Kitchen of the Gods

I awoke to a great light shining directly into my eyes. My body ached, but it was beyond pain, just as I was beyond pain. I propped myself up on my elbows and looked around. I was stunned.

I was clad in my A-suit on a black beach on the shore of a vast, luminous white lava sea that glowed under dark skies. Little volcanic islands rose here and there in the sea, smoking. On the lake's distant shores, great steaming slabs of tortured rock rose almost straight up to an opaque sky. Overhead, evil clouds streaked the sky, clouds with glittering edges of fire, a volcano sky.

The lava lake, this was the lava lake. The surface moved in a slow, relentless flow towards a thunderous roar where the lake dropped over its edge to some hellish conclusion.

The river had spit us out, right into the lake.

All of the 12th had dropped on to Andrion 3, but for us that only meant Squad Beta, CAT 24, Second of the Ship. One under-strength squad, that's all we were; and to us it didn't matter who else was out there. It was only us, against the O's. The mission was clear. The Second had clarified it for us, back on the *Spawn*: "Our mission is to die for the Legion." Well, we were almost there, already. It was a bad drop, the aircar took a horrific hit and we crash-landed in one piece on an island in the middle of a fast-flowing river of molten lava. We quickly cannibalized the aircar, built a cenite raft, and launched ourselves into the river. All of Beta drifted along helplessly as a giant Omni shuttle passed overhead, attacked by Legion fighters. Then our pitiful, brave little raft, the *Beyond*, pitched over the lava falls, and right into Hell.

The squad! I struggled to my feet, dizzy and weak.

There was no sign of the *Beyond*. The earth shuddered and a flight of leathery birds shot past me, screeching. Lightning arced down into the lake. Thunder reverberated. It was a wide lake of bubbling lava, several K across, the far walls misty and indistinct. I was alone, horribly alone, on a beach of black pumice, at the end of the Magic Road. My E was still strapped to my chest, but I knew that would be no

help if the O's found me. With every passing instant, the danger grew—movement, heat, metal, energy—even in this hellhole, the O's would find me. I knew it.

Stunned and despairing, I staggered along the beach; the pumice crackled underneath my boots. Thunder rattled my bones. Lava rain hissed down from the skies—fire in the heavens, rolling overhead. A distant volcano was erupting. A geyser of lava boomed out of the lake near the far shore, lighting up the scene. There was no life except for the deathbirds wheeling and croaking in the sky. Even the exosegs did not venture this far—this was a planetary graveyard, fit only for deathbirds and Legionnaires.

Past a steep rock wall, I found the falls—a golden, glittering torrent of molten lava shooting over the caldera's face, falling almost straight down to the lake, awesomely beautiful, hitting the surface with a continual thunder. How could anyone survive such a fall? How had I?

"Thinker." It was a whisper. I stopped, confused. I could see nothing, only tortured rocks, black sands and a white-hot lava lake.

"Thinker." Were the Gods mocking me? My faceplate filled with information and Sweety, my Persist, blinked the designation—Beta Nine. A form stepped forward from the rocks, an A-suited Legionnaire—Priestess! She ran into my arms and we met in a clash of armor, two prehistoric warbeasts in the kitchen of the Gods. She smiled behind the faceplate, but her cheeks were streaked with tears.

"Priestess! I can hardly believe it!" She was so real that my legs weakened. A lovely, enchanting girl with black, silky hair and hypnotic dark eyes.

"Thinker! God, I'm so glad! I'm so glad!" We stood there together, swaying in each other's arms. "Hold me, Thinker! Hold me! Deadman, I thank you! I'll never leave the Legion, Thinker—never! I promised Deadman."

Movement in the rocks. My adrenalin exploded. "Beta Ten," Sweety informed me immediately. My heart was in my throat. Priestess pulled away from me.

"It's Redhawk," she informed me. "He's all right, Thinker—he saved me! He pulled me from the lake. He saved my life, Thinker!"

We approached Beta Ten—Redhawk. He was lying on his back in the rocks, almost invisible in his camfax. I leaned over him. He grinned at me weakly. Sweat covered his forehead, but there was still fire in his

eyes. Strands of sticky long hair were plastered over a pale splotchy face with a scraggly red beard.

"You earthers can't even pilot a raft," he declared. "Should have let me do it—you'd have had a soft landing."

"How ya doin', Redhawk!" I could scarcely contain my joy. We had tangled with the O's air defense units near the ground, and Redhawk, our pilot, had taken one burst right in the cockpit. He had serious multiple injuries—but he was alive.

"The doll took good care of me—think I'll keep her."

"She says you saved her, Redhawk."

"Ha! Funny. I was just hanging on 'cause I didn't want to lose my mag supply."

"We'll get you out of here, man, don't you worry—nothing's going to stop us!"

"Where's the rest of the guys?"

I did not answer him. I stole a glance over to Priestess, and she shook her head glumly. I looked around. Primeval chaos—lightning flickered in the distance. Fire in the sky.

"I suggest you get under cover quickly, Thinker," Sweety said. "This is an extremely dangerous area."

"Where do you suggest we go?" Sweety usually had good ideas. She had been programmed to do my thinking for me.

"We are in the vicinity of the starport. Search the shoreline and the cliffs for an entrance."

"It's good advice. Priestess?" I turned to her.

"What about Redhawk?" she asked me.

"Can you walk, Redhawk?"

"I can fly, Thinker. As high as the sky. But I can't walk. Not any more." He sighed, and looked up at the dark sky.

"I have to stay with him, Thinker," Priestess informed me.

"Tenners, Nine," I replied. "I'm going to recon the shore. Sweety's right, we've got to get under cover. Stay there in the rocks and don't move. I'll be back, I promise—I'll be back!" I reached out and touched her, hand to hand, one last time, and then I turned and crunched away along the pumice shoreline. It was hard to leave her behind like that.

* * *

I could see it from the beach and it turned my blood cold. I waded out into the molten lava and got a grip on a jagged shard of metal and pulled it to shore. There was no mistaking it—it was cenite planking from the deck of the *Beyond*. I had found a tiny fragment of our raft. It had been ripped and torn by tremendous forces. I released my grip and let it fall to the black sands. It was an evil omen, I knew.

"Alert! Lifeform! Muffled signals! Legion camfax! Beta One and Five ahead!" Sweety was on top of it this time. She highlighted their location on my faceplate.

"One! It's Three," I whispered. "Hold your fire!" I scrambled off the narrow beach and up a steep slope of loose rocks. Snow Leopard and Psycho were barely visible, two lumpy volcanic rocks, blending in perfectly with their surroundings. The A-suit camfax is excellent. A lightning flash lit up their faceplates. There was lunacy in Psycho's eyes and a raging fire in Snow Leopard's.

"Go to ground, Trooper," Snow Leopard ordered. "Don't move." I dropped, and froze.

"Good to see you, guys!" I ventured.

"Likewise," Snow Leopard replied. "Report!"

"Nine and Ten survived. They're hiding on the shore, waiting for my return. Ten can't walk."

"What about Six?" Snow Leopard demanded. I could see his face behind the faceplate—deathly pale flesh, a lock of white-blond hair, and hot pink eyes that glowed like coals.

"I haven't seen him."

"Damn. Neither have we. Any equipment saved from the boat?"

"I found a torn-up piece of the deck—that's all."

"We've located a way out. It may be an entrance to the base," Snow Leopard said. "It may be undefended. We've got to get in there quick."

"You have! What about Six?"

"Yeah. What direction did you come from?"

"Uhh...Northeast from here, along the shoreline; the lavafall is back there."

"No sign of Warhound?"

"Nothing from the falls to here."

"I'm not leaving Warhound." It was Psycho. He had been silent up to that point. I don't know why, but his voice brought a chill to my flesh. Psycho was a little guy, but he carried a great big gun. He had

short blond hair and pale blue eyes that never seemed to be quite with us.

"You'll do what you're told," Snow Leopard replied. "Nobody's leaving anybody. Three, we've been two K up the shore to the southwest—he's not there."

"Deadman." I tried to deal with the thought. Beta Six—Warhound—was dead. I could hardly comprehend it. He had been with us so long, he was a part of us.

"I'm not leaving Warhound." Psycho just sat there, a child of chaos, clutching his Manlink. I was glad I did not have to deal with Psycho—he was Beta One's headache. A sharp triple explosion boomed overhead. Dark volcanic skies, blotting out the sun.

"Aircraft," Sweetie informed me. "Readings unclear."

"Death," Psycho commented. It was so instinctive he probably did not even realize he had said it.

"All right, Thinker," Snow Leopard said. "Let's get Priestess and Redhawk over here."

"I'll need some help with Redhawk."

"We go together. Psycho, get off your ass. Maybe we can spot Warhound on the way. Let's go."

Chapter 2

In the Camp of the O's

Lunchtime on Andrion 3. Try it sometime; you're not likely to forget it. Somebody said it's always lunchtime on Andrion 3, and the trick is to be the diner, and not the dinner. That was Psycho, of course. He was having a good time, on Andrion 3. But he was a homicidal maniac. Frankly, the place bothered me. Psycho said it was because I was a pussy.

Lunchtime! No, you won't find this place in any Galactic Guide to Fine Dining. It was bitterly cold and as black as the back of my soul. The only light was what we brought along, and we were not advertising. We were in the O's unholy world, so close I thought I could hear them breathing, all around us. We were freezing, but not from the cold. I was having a lot of trouble with my body parts. We were all terrified and exhausted. I really believe even Psycho was scared.

Priestess and I lay close together, blocking one end of the corridor. The Omnis had made this place; it was part of their starport, burrowed into the heart of a massive volcano in the tortured primeval terrain of Andrion 3. We had said our initial hello with a barrage of antimats, right on the starport, and it upset the O's. I can tell you the O's get very cranky when they're upset.

Snow Leopard ordered a food break. We hadn't eaten since the drop. I didn't care much for food, but my body did. We were in armor, eating cold comrats from the rat tubes in the helmets. It was an awkward procedure. I saw Nine through her faceplate by the cold muted lolite of my flash. She was a pale angel, stricken with some terrible, mortal malady. She trembled in the cold and the dark, eyes glazed, lips wet from the food. The lolite glimmered dully off her black armor. We were all in bad shape. I felt we were inside the beast that was the O. Its metal coils wrapped around us like cenite intestines; dark wet alien metal, a corridor for fools, our own death's road, and I thought it was everything we deserved.

"Deadman!" A hoarse whisper from Psycho. "This is the second

best thing I've ever tasted!"

"Blackout!" Snow Leopard whispered back. We were all a little tense. One did not want any noise, so nobody asked Beta Five the obvious question. I already knew the answer—"Your sister!"

Deadman, it was cold! The base was in the heart of a volcano—how could it be so damned cold? My faceplate kept melting the frost. This corridor had once been pressurized and breathable, for both the O's and us, but we had vaporized a good deal of the base, and Andrion 3's poisonous atmosphere was seeping into what was left through shattered walls and airlocks. The corridor we were following burrowed into the rim of the lava lake that sheltered the Omni starport.

A faint light flickered to one side. Black armor, a red faceplate, a pale ghostly face, piercing red eyes, a loose lock of white-blond hair. It was Beta One—Snow Leopard.

"How's the food?" he whispered.

I paused briefly. "It's fine! Haven't you eaten?"

"Not yet. Somebody's got to stay on guard." He cradled his E in his arms, and his helmet continued to track from side to side as he spoke. His faceplate was pitted with scars; we had caught it good when we decarred. I swear, our One was so good he was hardly human.

"I'll take the watch," I said. "Get some eats!"

"Appreciate it," Snow Leopard responded. "Keep scanning, all over. We won't have much warning if it's the O's."

I snapped on max alert, and the screens glowed to life on my faceplate. I knew we would not have much warning if it was the O's. I knew that, for sure. There wouldn't even be time to say our prayers. I cradled my E and slipped off the safeties and set it to xmax. My mouth was all wet and sticky from the food. My body, inside the A-suit, stunk like a corpse. I sipped some water from the helmet tube and focused on Priestess.

She had stopped eating. Her E lay across her legs, and she was using her fieldpak as a cushion for her head. I was exhausted and stunned; and the whole world seemed to focus in on Priestess at that moment. I was overwhelmed with longing and gratitude and regrets when I thought of Priestess. She didn't have to be here at all; she didn't even have to be in the Legion. She had told me about her world, Korkush, a Legion world; it was hard to believe she had ever left such a place. Now she was here, at the very end of Atom's Road, a child of the

Legion, clutching an E instead of a doll, worrying about casualties instead of boyfriends.

Crawling, cold and frightened and hungry, into the domain of the dead, awaiting the evil embrace of the O's. Hopeless—surely it was hopeless. We did not know what had happened to the mission; deceptors were so heavy, we couldn't even hear command overrides. We were on blackout, dead to the world, cowering like dogs, burrowing like worms, twitching at every sound, every movement.

Priestess deserved better, I knew. We would die together, at least. Together. My eyes roamed over the corridor walls. A slimy, gritty, dark cenite metal. Centuries of filth encrusted the deck. I did not like it. It reminded me of the exos. This was an exoseg world, and this corridor stank of exos. Perhaps the Omnis didn't use it any more—well, that was fine with me.

"How ya doin', Redhawk?" A quiet whisper from Psycho, down the corridor.

"Flying...I'm flying, Psycho. Pink clouds, it's really beautiful. I'm all right, earther, big ten on that." Redhawk was completely out of his head. He was our worst casualty. Priestess had kept him alive and stabilized the wounds and patched his armor. Now he was in Neverland, Nineland, courtesy of Priestess's tender armored fingers. Priestess kept us all alive, in Death's Holy Land. Redhawk could not even walk, now. But Priestess would keep him alive, until we all died. Redhawk, Beta Ten—a certified lunatic. He had gotten us almost there, almost down, when it happened.

Psycho was trying to get Redhawk to swallow his rats. I saw them as shadows in cold muted light. Psycho was having trouble—Redhawk's face was flushed and beaded with sweat, and he was hallucinating and didn't want to eat. Priestess had been struggling with him when Psycho pushed her aside and told her to get something to eat herself.

"Priestess—how you doing?" I whispered it.

She stirred slowly and came to life, looking my way. "Thinker...I'm all right. Psycho, how's Redhawk? Is he eating?"

"Yeah, he's eating now," Psycho responded. "He's not all here, though. You sure you didn't give him too much of that stuff?"

"I gave him the correct dosage. His injuries are extensive—we must spare him the pain." Priestess raised her eyes, looking up into the dark.

What was there for her to see? Nothing—there was only nothing, for us all.

Spare him the pain, I thought. Why not the rest of us as well? There was probably a regulation against it somewhere. Pain is good for you—that's what we believed, that was Legion doctrine. Pain is good for you.

The earth trembled, a faint, distant shudder, and suddenly it was as if the corridor was made of jelly and we were moving. We could feel the vibrations in our bones, a deep deep lava heartbeat. Specks of dirt floated down from the roof, and we all froze, in the grip of the Gods, awaiting our fate.

It slowed, and stopped. Once again it was solid rock, all around us. Adrenalin, still flooding my veins. Terror, cold and exhausted. How much more? Deadman, how much more?

"Earthquake. Scut." Five sounded disappointed.

"It's the lake," One informed us. "The whole starport is floating under the lava, and the lava is moving all around it—and through it. The lava must be busting up their starport. We dropped two antis right into the lake—it's got to be an unholy mess by now."

"Nice job," Psycho responded. "How come the O can build a starport like that, when we can't?" Psycho was short and wiry, pale blue eyes and a smooth, child's face. But if you looked closely into his eyes, you could see there was something wrong.

"I'm sure Merlin could explain it," One replied wearily, "but I can't." Merlin was Beta Four, our science wizard.

"Well, let's go back to Atom and ask him." Psycho was an incurable little smart-ass.

"Fine idea," Snow Leopard said. "You got an ops plan that will accomplish that, you let me know." It was indeed a fine idea. Beta Four had all the answers, but he had lost his legs in the Coldmark raid, and he was growing a new pair back on Atom. Atom was all we wanted, just to see Atom, again. Atom's Road was a holy place to us, our only home in a hostile galaxy. Atom held Beta Four; and Beta Eight, Dragon; another casualty from Coldmark. Deadman, I missed them! Merlin was a genius—we could sure use his insight here! And Dragon—he was like a force of nature, he was simply unstoppable. I'd rather have Dragon covering my back than anyone I knew, but Dragon was not with us either. Serious internal injuries, and a clenched fist, to show he'd pull through. There was not much left of Beta now—Two

and Seven—Coolhand and Ironman—were also back on Atom, in the Body Shop. Coolhand was my blood brother, from Providence and Hell. It was not the same without his calm, faint smile. I wondered how Ironman was. We all had a soft spot for Ironman, the Kid. But he was long gone now—Two and Four and Seven and Eight were only memories, here in the guts of the beast. Whatever was to happen here would depend entirely on us: our leader Beta One, warname Snow Leopard; our Manlink Beta Five, warname Psycho; our medic Beta Nine, warname Priestess; our pilot Beta Ten, warname Redhawk; and yours truly Beta Three, warname Thinker, the Fool, the Fatalist. Lastly was Beta Six, Warhound, now missing in action. Six soldiers, out for a walk in the dark. We were still on Atom's Road; believe me, we all knew that.

Priestess sat up, her hands moving against the corridor wall. A faint reflection from a cold knife. Now what?

"What're you doing, Priestess?" She did not answer. I moved closer. Her pale face held no emotion. She was scratching something into the dark cenite metal of the corridor wall with her cold knife. I moved the lolite closer. It was a Legion cross, spidery silver lines cut into the black grime of the centuries. She wrote her lover's name under the cross: 12/22.

She put away the knife, and contemplated her handiwork calmly. I wondered if Beta Nine was going over the edge. I pondered the cross. 12/22, the 12th of the 22nd, the 12th Colonial Expeditionary Regiment of the 22nd Legion. The Black 12th, we called it, and the 22nd was the Black Legion, the Rimguard. The Legion was Priestess's lover, and my rival.

She always had a Legion cross on the wall in her quarters. I wondered about that, but I thought it a harmless eccentricity. Priestess was a believer, I knew. And here, in the cold jaws of death, she still believed. I took a deep breath.

"You planning to be here long, Priestess?" I whispered.

She slowly turned her head and focused on me with a sad little smile. "No, Thinker...no, I hope not. I just wanted to show we had been here."

"Who do you think is going to see it?"

She sighed wearily, and let her eyes stray back to the cross. "It doesn't matter, Thinker—it doesn't matter. Probably nobody. But it

means we were here. It shows we came this far. This far, at least, into the camp of the O's."

Into the camp of the O's. Lord, that we were! The Twenty-second's motto was "Deliver us from Evil," only in the Legion chant, it was "I will deliver us from Evil." Well, this was it, all right; the O's were all the Evil you could ever want, and it was up to us to do the delivering. It was all up to us—one under-strength squad, Beta of CAT 24, Second of the Ship, Atom's Road, 12th CER, 22nd Legion. And maybe Beta Nine was right; why shouldn't we mark this place with our sign? It might be our epitaph. But even if we were never heard of again, at least we knew we had done it. Perhaps a million stellar years in the future, an intrepid band of brave archaeologists would come probing into a cold, dead world; full of extinct volcanoes and dead lava seas; and billions of bizarre, petrified, monstrous fossils; and come across our Legion cross and the notation: 12/22. What would they think? What sort of lunacy, they would wonder, could have drawn intelligent life to such a violent, savage, primeval world?

What sort of lunacy, indeed? The Second had stated it clearly, back on the *Spawn*. He had put it in terms we could easily understand. The mission was to die, for the Legion. What else did we need? It was as good an explanation as any.

My faceplate lit up. "Alert! Movement!" It was Sweety's clear, metallic voice, right in my ears. My adrenalin exploded.

"Don't move," I hissed. The visible lights vanished, but to me, it was as clear as daylight, a cold green invisible light, my faceplate's darksight illuminating the corridor with its magical glow.

"Life form!" Sweety whispered in my ear. A red glow on my faceplate, outlining the target somewhere down tunnel. "Exoseg Gigantic, species unknown. Advancing as marked."

"Nobody move!" I repeated. "It's an exo—I've got it on scope."

"Scut!" Psycho cursed. "Scut!"

"No movement!" Snow Leopard ordered. "Not a muscle! Thinker, try biobloc. If that doesn't work, go to flame. No energy weapons! The rest of you, as soon as Thinker fires, attack, but until then don't move a frac!" Exos could see in the dark and they could spot the slightest movement. If nobody moved, they would not detect us. I was positively relieved it was only an exoseg. Only an exoseg! The creature could tear us all to shreds and have us for breakfast, armor and all, but they were a

lot more fun than the O's—that was a definite ten.

"Species unknown! Exoseg advancing! Recommend no movement!" Sweety was absolutely right. The O had already demonstrated their mastery over these nasty exoseg buggers, and we had no way of knowing what kind of exo this was; we could not let it escape. I was frozen inside my suit, on my knees, the E in my arms. Priestess was on the deck before me.

"One, can we forget the biobloc?" I asked. "Let me go to flame right away." We all know the biobloc would probably not work, and it might spark the creature into fleeing. We did not dare try laser, or xmax. We were afraid the O would detect it—we did not know their capabilities.

"Negative, Three. Do biobloc, then flame." One knows best, kiddies!

"Exoseg Gigantic approaching, species unknown!" Sweety had it on scope. I could see it vaguely now, a green blur twitching on my faceplate.

"Thinker, you earther, don't screw this up!" Psycho was angry, probably because he wanted the exo himself. I ignored him.

"Blackout, Five," One ordered. One put up with Psycho only because the little lunatic was totally fearless in combat and a genius with his Manlink. He had saved us on Andrion 2, even I had to admit.

"Exoseg within range! Biobloc is set!" Sweety had it under control. I could see the exoseg clearly now, magnified on my faceplate. A grotesque bulbous head, glistening with compound eyes, topped with a mass of spiky, coarse bristles. Gaping, pincered jaws; long antennae, trembling, probing. Flashing black forelegs, snapping out in front of it. Exoseg Gigantic, species unknown. These were the natives of Andrion 3, and this one had probably found its way in from the outside after we did the starport. On the other hand, it could be a watchdog.

I was frozen with terror, but it did not matter. By this time, we could all deal with terror. I watched the creature twitch, coming closer and closer. I could hear it now, clicking and snapping. I raised the E and fired on biobloc. Biobloc was soundless. The creature stopped, stunned.

"Firing biobloc!" I informed the squad through clenched teeth. "No effect!"

"Thinker, give it a few more frags!" A frantic scrambling, all

around me, armor clashing against armor. I stood up and stepped over Priestess and walked forward, into the green, and that mindless horror filled the tunnel ahead of me—Deadman, it was big! I watched myself as if from far away, ice cold and paralyzed. My body functioned perfectly. I leaned into the biobloc, the E at my shoulder, aiming right at the exo's massive head. The creature twitched once, then the antennae cracked forward and the forelegs snapped to life. It came straight at me, berserk. My very own death, my image glowing in every facet of those dead compound eyes; multiman, microman, a whole squad of Thinkers, cold black armor and winking red faceplates.

I fired and the corridor exploded in a thunderous boom and a great rolling ball of fire hit the exo with a mighty fist of flame, enveloping it immediately in spitting, blue-hot sheets of sticky, burning gas. The exoseg exploded in flames, stopped in its tracks; now burning brightly, an obscene, fiery monstrosity, doing a dance of death. I took a few more steps, hypnotized. I had the E on autoflame and I directed the stream right at its awful head. It melted like wax right before my eyes. The corridor walls glowed white-hot; the filth spitting and burning; my black armor now glowing white in waves of superheated air, a great roar in my ears; the exoseg's massive legs curling and melting, burnt black, the entire exoskeleton one great sheet of flame.

I stopped. I released the trigger, and raised the E. I stood in a river of fire. Flames licked up my A-suit; and the corridor walls were afire and the massive exo burned like paper, crackling and spitting sparks, its insides popping open, its head all burnt and melted, evil greasy smoke rolling over me. I was frozen, hypnotized. I felt nothing except a cold, mute terror. Psycho appeared beside me, the barrel of his Manlink probing ahead of him. "Well, scut," he said. "You didn't leave much, did you?"

I did not answer. I watched the exoseg die. Why in the world had I advanced on it like that? Lunacy. Sheer lunacy. I was losing it. We were all losing it, in the Camp of the O's.

"Good work, Thinker," Snow Leopard said.

"Override encoded transmission from Command," Sweetie interrupted. "I have recorded, amplified, filtered, and repeated." At last! We were all getting the same report, each from our own Tacmods.

The burst was almost inaudible in the howling roar of the deceptors. I strained to hear it, closing my eyes for better concentration. "...obtain

objectives..." a piercing shriek drowned it out, then it warbled back in. "...by the magma. All units..." Another ear-shattering screech. Then a few more words, very faint. "...the lower levels. Maintain blackout but..." inaudible, drowned out in a rushing blast of static.

"What does it mean, Snow Leopard?" I asked.

"Hard to tell, Thinker. Something's happening in the lower levels of the base, or the starport, or whatever is down there. Sounds like it involves magma. Maybe the base is being torn apart. But whether we're supposed to go further in, or get out, it's not clear."

"So what do we do?"

"We continue the mission. This corridor leads somewhere, and that's where we're going. We're inside the rim of the caldera and not far from the edge. I want that starport. That's our mission. Priestess, you're in charge of Redhawk. Let's go." Snow Leopard was right next to me. I saw him clearly through his faceplate—his square cut, chunky face was deathly pale, and blue veins were throbbing faintly at his temples. His pink eyes glowed, eyes from another world. I had been close to him once, but now he was lost to us all. Our One was always decisive. I'm glad he was, because I sure as hell wasn't.

We set off, Priestess pulling Redhawk in a jury-rigged trav we had fashioned as a stretcher. Redhawk was mercifully unconscious. The dead exoseg glowed as we passed it, still faintly burning. Dying flames licked here and there on the walls, and wisps of dirty smoke drifted past us. It was dead quiet. There had been no reaction to our killing of the exoseg.

It appeared the Omnis did not know we were there.

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