

## Chapter One – The Men with Blue Eyes

It was a battlefield. Just past dawn, the land of mud and blood bathed in grey twilight made darker by fog; thick, dank, stinking of death.

The ground was churned, scarred, wasted. Nothing grew there; nothing that didn't kill lived. The twisted, rusting wrecks of lifeless war machines rotted like huge cadavers among the collapsed dugouts, caved-in trenches, the tottering lines of angle iron and pig-stakes that trailed rusting barbed wire - and the innumerable, ubiquitous abandoned boots – cut off or blown off, the litter of war. They said that if you ever found two that matched as a pair, you wouldn't live another day.

In a place called Dead Man's Dump, a dip between three huge mounds of mud that might once have been hills, there was a long abandoned machine gun position, sandbagged on the bank behind a concrete pillbox, and a lieutenant aged just sixteen, his black uniform immoderately darned, looked up as his twenty two year old sergeant murmured, 'Got to cut the wire, sir'.

Sub Lieutenant Cleck craned his neck to survey the shattered landscape; fifty metres in front of the pillbox, across the open ground, the enemy were bunched behind a dirt rampart. Battle-weary men in ragged uniforms of synthetic fibre patched with animal skins, faces hidden by gas masks painted red and yellow, and the usual mix of equipment – museum pieces slung alongside the merely obsolete; trench clubs and rad detectors. They blocked the way back to the lines.

He nodded slowly to Sergeant Hask, who mouthed, 'How is *he*?'

Cleck shrugged. The third man behind the sandbags – Captain Tane - was gasping, his face washed in blood and his tunic soaking. He leaned toward the stricken officer, whispering 'Quietly, if you can, sir'. They had given him a shot of something; with luck he'd be better shortly.

Hask deftly conjured a pair of cutters from his map pocket, and reached gingerly for the ragged, tangled wire.

Below them, uniformed figures hunched over the edge of the trench around the pillbox, but behind the goggles and gas masks were empty eye sockets in long dead faces; the corpses propped up with broken guns. In the old days death had at least got you de-mobbed.

Hask squeezed the cutters and the strands flopped aside. The pillbox held an old automated machine gun – Cleck hoped it was still live and working, but (depending on the type) it could be rusted to a lump of slag, or ready to go berserk – shooting wildly in any and all directions – in their position, there was no way of checking.

Something stirred in the mud. A goggled, helmeted head peered over the ridge. A hand beckoned, and the enemy rose and shambled towards the pillbox; the automated gun stuttered, causing them to falter. Cleck and Hask raised themselves far enough to fire, and killed those that the robot didn't. The score was two each to Hask and Cleck, and two to the robot.

Cleck took Captain Tane's hand, pulling him upright, 'Should be safe now, sir'. Tane mumbled something, and coughed, then he looked up looking feverish. 'Yes, we must go'.

They clambered down the shale slope, skirting wide past the fallen corpses, and the robots detector range. Cleck said, 'We mean to aim for the Scriob Battery, sir; its supply trench is still maintained - after a fashion, anyway'.

Sergeant Hask led the way along a redoubt, past a dead officer, the tunic having lately rotted off, and under the side of an embankment, festooned with angle iron, barbed wire, and corrugated metal. Their boots squelched through mud mixed with rotting effluent. A star shell burst overhead, bathing them for a moment in its sickly green light before it sputtered into darkness. Too tired to react, they plodded on.

Around midnight, four of them had been sent on a rescue mission. Two had been killed by tracer fire early on the way out, and when they found the trapped group of Scientific Elite, only Tane was alive, and the observation post they had been trying to strip had been hit - and wrecked; to Cleck this was the worst.

It had been an unmanned position, supplying useful information from cameras, radar and seismic sensors; clad in iron, ingeniously fashioned as a tree, it had never broken down, and had occupied no more than the two technicians taking

turns to read the results. All in all, it had been a real boon from the Elite – until they'd decided to take it back – and the enemy finally spotted what had been under their noses all along. Bang.

They passed the side of a huge crater, filled with water, the surface stained with oil, mustard gas and urine. Thick grey foam on shores bordered with rotting metal cable. Up on the ridge a dead armoured personnel carrier was wedged at an unnatural angle; one reason both sides had fought themselves to a standstill was cavalry failure. Without tanks, the infantry was bogged down in trenches with small arms.

The Scriob position was a wreck of three field guns, the spent shell cases standing by. Strategic importance now nil, it still served as a useful landmark. From there the supply trench went to the old SAD 14A.

As they neared the battery, they saw a black robed figure, standing framed between the gun barrels; an old man in a black skull cap. For up a long minute they stared up at him, as he stared down curious, benign, and somehow pitying. At length he addressed them; 'Goodbye'

There was a sharp rat-a-tat as Tane swung up his machine pistol and fired. When the powder smoke cleared, the old man had simply vanished; there was no corpse.

In the ground in front of them, set side by side standing to attention, was a pair of worn and muddied army boots. Above the distant chatter of automatic weapons, came the thump of artillery, the start of a creeping barrage.

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At the edge of the warzone, a city of one million people was protected by a vast concrete dome. One man was named Ven Bercol, and he lived in a large family apartment with his wife, Mari, and their three children, named Joel, Rai and Qia.

Mari made breakfast for the whole family every morning; it was often the only meal that they could all eat together.

'Why are we having waffles for breakfast today, Mother?' Qia asked.

'You know why', Mari replied, with accustomed patience, 'It's Rai's sixth birthday today, that means he's a big boy now and this evening after Instruction Centre, he'll be going to Youth League for the first time'.

'She does know, Mother', said Rai, with accustomed *impatience*, 'I've told her six times this morning already'.

'What do you do at Youth League?' Qia asked.

'Are you eating that waffle?' said her mother.

'You learn to march, abseil, fight hand to hand, and clean, load and fire a weapon', said Joel, who had been attending Youth League for four years, but Qia had already interrupted and was chanting 'I want to go, I want to go', over and over again.

Bercol looked up from his papers, 'Quiet, Qia. It's Rai's day today, not yours'.

Rai stuck out his tongue at Qia, who turned her back and folded her arms. 'Girls aren't allowed in Youth League anyway, stupid', he said.

'Why?' Qia demanded.

'Qia, be quiet and eat your breakfast', said Mari.

'It's not fair!'

Bercol addressed his son, 'Rai, have you got all your kit ready and packed?'

'Yes, Father'.

‘And your boots are clean and shiny? Your brother has checked everything with you?’

‘Yes’.

‘You mustn’t be nervous, you know’, Bercol went on, ‘Youth League is fun; it’s not like Instruction Centre’.

‘I know that, Father’.

Bercol glanced at his elder boy, ‘Just come into the salon with me, Joel’.

Mimicking Qia, Joel asked ‘Why?’

‘Because I tell you to’, but Joel was up and following. Bercol shut the salon door behind them both, looking Joel in the face. ‘Now listen’, he paused, partly to ensure Joel’s attention and partly to assure the boy that he wasn’t in trouble. ‘I want you to make sure you look after your brother this evening’.

‘course’.

‘No, listen; you remember your first time at Youth League? It wasn’t very nice, was it?’

‘No’.

‘Well, then. You don’t have a big brother, but Rai does, and it’s you, and it’s your job to look after him: Understand?’

‘Yes, Father’.

‘Good’. Bercol reached for his briefcase, ‘Now it’s time you three were getting to the transport to Instruction Centre, and I was going to work. Get your things’.

As Joel opened the door, Mari came in from the other side, echoing ‘Get your things, Joel’.

She stepped into the room and pulled the door half shut, before saying in an undertone, ‘Ven, it’s Rai’s first time in Youth League tonight...’

‘Yes; I have just been giving Joel a reminder of Standing Orders’.

‘I guessed. Ven, will you come and see Rai at Youth League this evening?’

‘Yes, I’ll try’.

‘Because when Joel came home after his first time...’

‘Yes, I remember’.

‘The hell you remember – you weren’t here; I was the one that had to put that poor, frightened little boy to bed, and if Rai comes home like that...’

‘He’s got Joel to look after him’.

‘Joel’s only ten!’

Bercol inhaled, ‘Joel is a squad sub leader, he’s going up to Cadets next year, and if any little squirt looks at Rai the wrong way – well, it will be *his* mother kissing *him* better’.

‘All right!’ Mari hissed, then took a deep breath. ‘You’re probably right, but...’

‘I’ll try my hardest’, said Bercol, closing the distance, ‘I’ll get away as soon as I can. Promise’.

'I know', she replied, kissing him, and allowing him to reach the door, 'and...'

'And?'

And', she said, 'This war has been going on for a thousand years, but your son has his sixth birthday once'.

Bercol smiled ruefully, 'You are absolutely right, and if the minister demands I work late, I shall tell him exactly that'.

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In the scrubbed concrete corridor that ran below Ven Bercol's apartment bloc, a transport came to a halt, clanking on its narrow metal tracks. The passengers were a cleaning team and a young, thin woman in pink knee boots; all the seats were filled, except for that next to the driver labelled 'Ministry Only'. Bercol took the seat, saying 'I'm with the Ministry'. He looked at the driver with some surprise, 'You're new!' The transport was being driven by a woman.

She was broad and sturdy, with her hair tucked into her cap. She smiled roughly, but with good humour. 'So I am, and I thank President Mogran for it'.

One of the reforms of the new, and radically liberal president, was to extend women's rights to work. Bercol said, 'It doesn't take you too much from the home?'

'No', she replied, 'I've only got one cub still at Instruction Centre, and she's old enough to cook her own supper. Mind you', she added, 'When I first got selected for this, she was furious, the little overseer; all set to report me for neglect'.

Bercol laughed.

'But I said to her, "You can drive the transport yourself then, can't you?", soon shut her up that did!' she sighed, 'Cubs reporting! My father would have knocked me all round the room!' She glanced sideways at him, 'You got family yourself?'

'Yes, three. The middle one starts Youth League today'.

'Ooh, I used to love that! Well, it was The Brigade of Maidens for me of course, but they was great days', she glanced sideways again, 'Are you sure you're Transport Ministry?'

I said I work for a ministry'.

"Oh, I see', and a little colder, 'Well it had better not be Rationing'.

'No, perish, the thought; I'm with Media'.

'Ooh', with an approving inflection, 'Must be nice, that. Been with them long?'

'Ten years. I did my time with the Service Corps, and that got me into Media as a technician. I make news vis-casts nowadays'.

'That sounds like it could be fun sometimes' she said, 'Now I think about it, I recognise your voice from the commentaries. Now', she paused for breath, 'There's a story for you!'

'What?'

'Children informing on grown-ups – parents, and instructors, even Youth League leaders!'

'If only I were the children's editor', Bercol replied wryly, 'but this is my stop'.

She stopped the transport. Bercol got off, but added, 'I understand President Mogran doesn't like denunciations either'.

He walked off toward the Palace of Truth; the main reason that children's testimony was being down valued was that it was seldom reliable: For every observant boy or girl patriot, there were a whole gang of false accusers out to blacken the

names of disliked adults and, by the time each claim had been pursued, the Security budget was starting to rival the cost of munitions.

They'd had to start fast-tracking complaints made against Instructors, after the Instruction Centres had reported fifteen percent undermanning.

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From the old Strategic Ammunition Dump 14A Cleck, Hask and the captain jumped a transport back to Blockhouse Perimeter 1/01. Tane was recovering fast, and once showered and in clean overalls, he seemed fine – the blood had not been his own – he looked around the command point, with its worn out kit and tired boy soldiers and asked 'Where's the man in charge?'

'Lieutenant Stanisk ; sick bay, sir', Cleck replied, 'Gas'.

'That's bad news', Tane said, 'But they'll pull him round, you know'.

Stanisk was – or had been – the most promising of young officers, just seventeen and surely headed for great things, except that now his immediate future was of froth corrupted lungs, and slow, agonising death, unless the drugs could be spared, in which case he might be lucky to end his days shambling around the internal walkways with a mop and bucket because, while the drugs kept you breathing, they stopped thinking, stone dead.

'What's wrong with your scanners?' Tane asked.

A technician was elbow deep in the side of a monitoring desk, the inspection panel long lost. 'Sorry, sir', he reported, 'We'll be live again directly, but they've got Cam Four-Six, and it's fritzed the internal relay. Ah-', around them the screens all went live again, 'All well again, sir'.

'You all deserve commendations', Tane said wryly, 'I can't see how you keep going – but Thank Azal you do'. He looked at Cleck, 'You and your sergeant saved my life today; I'll see what I can do to get you some better equipment. The amount of perfectly good stuff we throw away, I could weep'.

Cleck smiled, 'That'd be very helpful, sir'. He saw that Tane was ready to leave, 'I'll show you to your transport'.

In the tunnel below, Tane said quietly, 'I can see how difficult it is here'.

'We get by, sir'.

'I meant for you, Lieutenant. You've got the worst of jobs.'

'It's not so bad, sir'.

'Nonetheless, if there's ever anything you really need to address with a brother officer, here –' Tane handed him a card. 'That's the private line in my office'.

There was the thump of a shell from above. 'I must go!' Cleck gasped, 'Gas attack I think, sir!' He ran for the stairs and back to the command point to the sound of safety catches being raked back as the half dozen men stared at the monitors.

Outside, the enemy were loading a mortar, and massing to make a rush, probably on the trench outside. Cleck gave a short, scornful laugh, 'They've got one camera – *one* – but do they look for others? No! they're stupid – *stupid*! That's why they're losing this war'.

And the mortar fired; the stubby projectile whizzing across the sky, and then landing with a thump in the trench outside. 'Another one wasted!' Cleck cried, 'Stand by, masks down, and let's welcome them in!' He pulled down the thick rubber face plate and glanced at the screen.

'Quickly!' Three figures were already grappling with the stiff corpses 'guarding' the trench, pulling off the gas masks – 'Who the hell are they?'

The squad were bunched at his back. Cleck stared at the screen as five enemy troops jumped into the trench. He hit the release control, but the bulkhead stayed still. The trench was now a mass of fighting bodies. He hit the button harder. The shutter hissed back. Cleck ran forward, spraying bullets.

They were well drilled, and Cleck was a good officer; he had every hope of a majority by twenty five. After just four seconds of firing, the last of the enemy fell, and one of the squad ran forward to retrieve the camera; it could be mended and re-installed.

But at the back, a figure was struggling in the mass of bodies. Cleck ran to help, 'This one's alive' he yelled, 'Get him inside'. Another was rising to his knees. 'This one too; get him inside!'

They half-dragged, half-carried the two men back into the command point. As the doors closed, they pulled off the broken respirators, their eyes were running from the effects of the gas – an irritant only, not a poison. Both fell gasping.

Cleck pulled his mask off; and knelt down, staring at the pair. They smelled odd; not like people: Both men had blue eyes.

'They're not Thals'. The hair colour and skin were too dark, and Whiteheads didn't smell like that either. Their clothes just looked stupid ...

He glanced over his shoulder; two of the squad were covering the men, faces twisting in hatred, knuckles whitening on triggers.

Cleck stood up, facing the gun barrels; sometimes procedure was just there to make sure you did the correct thing instead of the right one. He shouted at the nearest man, 'Get 'em on the transporter. I'm taking them to Headquarters to General Ravon', that was the correct thing, and he added, to remind the men that they were soldiers and not murderers, 'The rest of you conserve ammunition and clean your weapons'.

He made the prisoners ride in the back of the transporter; standing orders were well enough, but he preferred the pair downwind.

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On the top floor of the Palace of Truth, Minister Cheney stood up with a smile, 'Ven, very prompt. Good to see you.' He extended his arm, introducing his other visitor. 'You know Major Kravos?'

Bercol smiled delicately, 'I don't think we've ever actually met' – but everyone *knew* Kravos, indeed, Bercol's training in programme-making had included a module that showcased Kravos's story as a textbook piece of best-practice propaganda. Fifteen years ago, the body of Lieutenant Kravos, horribly broken by a landmine, and sole survivor of his unit's first disastrous patrol of Zukan Ridge, had been borne to the operating theatres of the Scientific and Military Elite and, before the tearful eyes of a million people, restored to full health by the magic of science, his very heartbeat maintained by a revolutionary piece of technology embedded in his chest.

After a year he had been returned to active service, and because the battlefield contained far too many threats to an expensive piece of propaganda, the tall, dark and very handsome Kravos, eighteen years old, of noble family, the very image of the army hero, was swiftly promoted to Captain and appointed to head the Youth League, a post he had held for nearly fourteen years until a recent illness. He seemed fully recovered now, looking very dashing in his sleek black uniform with the badge of The Elite – an eye pierced by a thunderbolt – fixed to the collar; and he stood up, extending a hand. 'We've barely met, but now that's remedied. My pleasure'. His manner was politely deferential, almost shy.

Cheney sat down, and the Major followed, as did Bercol, asking 'What have you for me to do, Minister?'

'It's what Major Kravos has', said Cheney. 'I've had you up first, Ven, because I want you to be working on this, while I'm talking to the President'.

'Sounds bad', said Bercol.

'It could be', Cheney admitted, 'As with so many things it depends on the army, but on the people too, and that's where we come in'.

Kravos opened his document case and produced a small sheaf of photographs. 'I can't let you keep these; they were taken by one of our agents in the enemy dome. It's a rocket, as you can see'.

Bercol looked at the pictures; if he couldn't broadcast them they didn't interest him much, and only on one image was there a figure to give some idea of scale. 'It looks big'.

'Biggest', Kravos replied. 'Death or Glory; all that's left of their resources are going into that, and if it works they win at a stroke'.

Bercol put his head on one side. 'Your tone doesn't suggest to me, Major, that it possibly can work'.

'It hasn't a hope', Kravos acknowledged, 'Our Dome's impregnable, but it's our view that once that rocket has flown and failed, the enemy will launch a massive ground assault with everything they've got'.

'A final heroic sacrifice', Bercol shrugged. 'Presuming they lose, of course,' he weighed a pause, 'but since we barely have enough bullets to shoot *ourselves*, I don't think that's a foregone conclusion'.

Cheney leaned forward. 'We need munitions', he looked hard at Bercol. 'So inspiration for the factory workers'.

Bercol felt less comfortable, 'Analeptic for the Masses *again?*'

Kravos produced more photographs, 'This is an image that you can use; the enemy are now using slave labour'.

'We can't dress that up as news,' Bercol objected, 'The Wasteland's alive with biological garbage, ours and theirs, slavery is the only way to make the creatures do an honest day's work – we've said it countless times'.

'Look closer', Kravos told him. 'Those aren't Mutoes'. He pointed with his finger at some faces outlined in red. 'Those men are prisoners of war'.

'Our brothers and fathers', said Cheney reasonably, 'Forced to toil long hours, without food, in conditions too dangerous for the enemy to brave. And that's true, isn't it, Major? The danger, I mean?'

'Highly dangerous', said Kravos earnestly; Bercol simply raised an eyebrow. The major's predecessor had told him, with just as straight a face, that the enemy were developing robots, but that liar had been hanged a week ago, in accordance with the standing order to conserve bullets.

'I'll get on with it', he said.

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In General Headquarters, Lieutenant Cleck found himself required to wait. He had the prisoners shut in a cell; they gave him the creeps, and the sergeant that kept the general's door seemed determined to make him feel worse.

'Are you sure that you're acting in your own best interests, sir?' asked the man, with all the condescension of the war weary NCO, who firmly believes that Sergeant is the most important rank in the army, and Sub-Lieutenant slightly less significant than Acting Unpaid Driver. 'He likes to stick to the big picture. Could be you'd have been better to slot 'em both; save time and trouble'.

Cleck swallowed a blistering rebuke with difficulty. 'Sergeant, you've already conceded that you don't know what they are; what if there's more of them? Do you mind?'

He had snapped out the last words, as the sergeant had started to investigate the box of prisoners' belongings, and he continued undeterred. 'Just curious, sir. No harm meant. Strange heap of stuff though'.

'Leave it, please'.

The sergeant picked up a u-shaped coil set in a metal housing, 'Looks like the power coupling of an old Six-Two, but I've not seen one of them in use since I was a cadet, which is twenty years ago, and they all had yellow bases and five pin plugs'.

'Put it back, Sergeant'.

'As you say, sir; but I can tell you one thing about it, for a sure certainty: No Whitehead made that stuff.'

Cleck shut the box. 'In that case, all the more reason that General Ravon sees it,' he looked up at the sound of the lift, 'Is this the general now?'

'I would say so, sir'.

'In which case', Cleck told him levelly, 'I think you might save his valuable time, by getting the prisoners out'. He took satisfaction in the change to the sergeant's expression; clearly the man didn't like the way they smelled either.

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'...this is the way that they ill-use your brothers, husbands, fathers; this is why they must ultimately be wiped from the face of this beautiful world'.

Martial music swelled as the screen faded to black, then the text in square, white letters: 'Bullets win wars'. Ven Bercol switched off the player; a very serviceable two and a half minutes of reasons to work harder - if you could ignore the shameless falsehoods and outright lies, but the public were trained to ignore the truth every time they heard it.

He put on his jacket and made for the door; in the foyer, Cheney's mistress lolled in a chair, looking sultry and spoiled in her tight leggings and pink boots. Downstairs the regular guard had a transport waiting. Bercol fell into his seat, and was surprised to see that it was not the regular driver. 'Hello again', she said, 'It's Aenid from this morning'.

'Who did you offend to earn a double shift?'

Aenid rubbed her eyes. 'Scheduled driver's sick. Probably radiation, but they're not sure. I took his shift; all for the war, eh?'

'Quite right. Let's get on, Aenid'.

She pressed the switch, 'Which bloc?'

'Six-Seven'.

Ahead in the tunnel a yellow bulb was flashing, and Aenid slowed the transport to a halt. 'Doesn't look good, air.'

'No'. Bercol stared into the darkness. 'You could risk it. I wouldn't report you'.

'Good of you to say so, sir, and I would too, but my father used to clean these corridors; I know what's down here'.

'Monstrous creatures of Hell?'

'Coolant pipes for the gas reserves', was the reply. 'Maintenance don't have the parts, and if that lot leaks...'

'On balance, I think I can wait'.

'Funny, isn't it?', said Aenid, 'It's the sort of thing I'd expect the Scientific Elite to be looking at; solving problems for the ordinary people, so we can all get on with the war effort. I mean, here's you and me stuck down here, which means the gridlock could go as far as Grand Square, and we've no idea how long it's going to last'.

Bercol didn't reply; he was going to miss Rai's first night at Youth League.

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'General not pleased with us then, sir?'

It was darkening; grey clouds smouldering into red, and now and the men of Perimeter 1/01 were patrolling the wilderness of rubble called The City.

'No, which is why I got sent to the Bunker with the supply transport', Cleck replied bitterly, 'His orderly said we should have shot them'.

'Can't do that, sir', Hask reproved mildly, 'Me? Shoot a body unidentified and without no docket? 'Gainst Regulations, sir!'

'Good job I didn't tell him about the... What we saw. What did you make of it, Sergeant?'

'Hard to tell, sir. Spectre of Junolucino, maybe?'

Fifty clicks away was a plateau, one of the more infamous killing grounds of a war gone on too long; the Junolucina Flat, where (it was said) one could stand, on the anniversary of the battle and see the spectres of the men that had died there, except... 'Scientists have proved ghosts don't exist,' Cleck said, 'But we saw that old man – whatever he was, he was *real*'.

'Real men don't disappear when you shoot 'em', Hask observed, 'Memorable day altogether, sir. You like a drink?'

Cleck considered his duty to put Hask on a charge. 'Where might this drink come from, Sergeant?'

'I was on a firing squad in the Death House a year back,' Hask replied, 'And I found something a little bit special, sir'.

'Oh, yes?'

'Well, we're not far, are we sir?'

The 'Death House' was all that remained of the old Royal Palace. At the start of the war, the Whiteheads had bombed it, without warning, killing the Royal Family outright. When Whitehead prisoners were shot, that was where they were taken; it had ritual significance, and with the shortages, there was talk of a gallows.

It was ancient broken walls now, and Hask led the way up a flight of stairs, and into a room that had been half ripped away, and so was now merely a platform. A peeling notice proclaimed 'Dangerous Structure' - Hask puled it aside, revealing a locker, from which he produced a pair of dusty bottles. 'Crown Prince Sarkoff's very best, sir'

The label was mouldering, and the cap rusted, but it came away. Cleck sniffed at it, then gulped the brackish, warming spirit.

'Sarkoff be damned, Hask. It'd have eaten through the bottle by now. It's good stuff though'.

'You won't go blind drinking that, sir?'

Cleck laughed. Evening patrol could wait – all night maybe.

In the dark distance the order 'Stand to!'

Cleck tensed, ready to bolt, but Hask shook his head almost imperceptibly. From the darkness came the sound of running booted feet, and the order 'Stations! Stations!'

Hask had stowed his bottle and held out his hand for the one Cleck had briefly so enjoyed; he surrendered it reluctantly. Down below, on the far side of the wall, a truck was manoeuvring to a standstill.

Truck doors banged open, followed by the mumble of orders, more running feet, then a light came on, illuminating the ground below, where a wide space had been cleared, flat and swept – the palace ballroom?

Three man-shaped targets were set up along the far wall. Closer to, a seated figure, seemed to be directing matters, and while it was turned away, and hidden by the back of the chair, it's voice was clear enough; soft, old and rasping. 'Observe the test closely my friend', it hissed, 'This is a day that will live in History'.

Hask nodded to a man who had walked into view; plump, rubicund and well, and very smartly uniformed in black. 'That's General Gharman, unless I'm mistaken, sir. That means Elite stuff, and we're both in the shit, sir'.

Down below the parchment voice uttered an order, 'Move forward...' and Cleck breathed 'What is *that*?'

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Surfacing slowly from black water into a cold world of jagged solidity; the constant keening wind and the pain.

Eyes hurting to look, the brain recoiling from the horror of existence; blot out the sound of death and soak up the taste of fear.

Why did they want to make it die? How could they hate it so much?

And in the world of vile horror, a voice of kindness and reason, the voice it knew and loved.

It would do anything to please that voice; anything to protect it. It's own life meant nothing, compared to the priority of defending the thing it loved.

And now it was time to dance, so it began to dance. It so wanted to please.

But the three wicked things hated it, and their hate was agony, there was only one way to stop the pain, and the voice said, 'Kill'.

So it killed, again, again. And then all was well; the pain was gone.

And it sank back under the black water...

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'That's a gun to win the war', Hask whispered.

'It's a battle machine', Cleck muttered. 'It's incredible'.

Down below, moving in the same way as the war machine, the seated figure glided into the light; a tiny shrunken man, huge-headed, the skin stretched back over the skull, the eyes blind, and one lens glowing blue upon the forehead. A single withered hand hovered, spider-like, over the switches built into the chair, which looked like the base of the war machine.

The slit of a mouth moved. 'The weaponry is perfect. Perfect. Now we can begin'.

Cleck realised that he was gaping. The seated figure was gliding away and two Elite guards were clearing shattered targets. He rolled back and looked down.

There were men around them; black uniforms against the grey rubble. Cleck heard the officer's voice and knew it.

'Kill them.'

Captain Tane.

Cleck dived sideways, firing his pistol wildly as the machine guns of the Elite guards sputtered around him, and he saw Hask fall, blood pouring from his mouth. Then he was through a gap in the wall, falling headlong, landing with a sickening thud, then stumbling away into the night.

Darkness closed as clouds obscured the primary moon, and bullets sang around his head as he stumbled headlong across the Wasteland.

How long and how far he ran he never remembered, but suddenly, it seemed, he was facing the barrel of a sidearm, and a green uniform, and a white-haired man.

'Drop the weapon. Your war is over. Kneel down'.