

10 GALACTIC TALES

STARS & EMPIRE

JAY ALLAN
MICHAEL BUNKER
JOSHUA DALZELLE
ISAAC HOOKE
CHRISTOPHER G NUTTALL
EDWARD W ROBERTSON
JASPER T SCOTT
ENDI WEBB
DIETMAR ARTHUR WEHR
RAYMOND L WEIL



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- OMEGA RISING: OMEGA FORCE 1
- PENNSYLVANIA: PART 1
- MARINES: CRIMSON WORLDS BOOK 1

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MARINES

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THE FOREVER GATE

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GALACTIC EMPIRE WARS

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MARINES

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BONUS!

[“THE GATES OF HELL”](#)

(Prequel Novella III)

MARINES:
CRIMSON WORLDS: BOOK 1
JAY ALLAN

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*There are only two kinds of people that understand Marines: Marines and the enemy.
Everyone else has a second-hand opinion.*

—General William Thornson, U.S. Army

CHAPTER 1

Landing Bay 3

AS Guadalcanal

In orbit above Epsilon Eridani IV

“Ninety seconds to launch. Activating final lockdown procedures now.” The mechanical voice of the assault computer was deafening as it reverberated in my helmet. Almost as loud was the metal on metal sound as the locking bolt on my armor clicked firmly into the steel frame of the landing craft. I was now held securely in place—between the bolt and the sheer weight of my armor, I couldn’t have moved a centimeter if my life depended on it.

I’ve always been claustrophobic, and standing there held rigidly in place was starting to get to me. It was more than just the closed in feeling, though. To tell the truth I was scared to death. It was cold enough in the launch bay to make the metal of my armor uncomfortable where it touched my skin, but I still felt a thin sheen of sweat on my forehead. I kept trying to concentrate on the launch procedure and put everything else out of my mind. That’s what they teach you in training, but I can tell you it’s pretty damned difficult when you’re bolted into a landing ship waiting to get blasted out into the upper atmosphere of an enemy planet. Especially the first time.

I guess everybody feels pretty much the same right before his first assault. You’re waiting for the launch you know is coming. You’ve done it a dozen times in training, but this is for real. A few thousand kilometers down there are real enemies waiting to kill you. Ok, got to get that out of my mind right now, got to concentrate on the launch. It’s a job, and I’m a trained professional.

Actually, that’s not really true—you don’t have to concentrate on the launch. It would be a lot easier if you had something to do to keep busy, but the truth is everything is pretty much controlled by the ship’s computer until you hit ground. Nothing to do but stand in the harness and count off the seconds. And think about what was waiting down there.

“Sixty seconds to launch. Activating armor power circuits.” There was a loud whine as the nuclear power plant on my back kicked in and fed juice into the circuits of my armor. I could see the green light on the display above my visor indicating that all systems were fully powered and functional. Of course the indicator was of minimal importance—the relevant flow of information was between the microprocessors in my suit and the ship’s assault computer.

It didn’t make much difference anyway, not a minute before launch. All of the suits go through a full diagnostic check right before an assault, and any that don’t pass 100% are red flagged. No malfunction can slip through this failsafe procedure, at least theoretically. In actual practice it does happen occasionally, and when it does it usually means serious trouble. Any problem discovered this late was just that much tough luck for the wearer. There was no way to get you out of the harness in a malfunctioning suit. Not in 60 seconds. And you can be damned sure they weren’t going to postpone an assault because one grunt’s armor was on the fritz. So the best you could do is stand there motionless and reflect on the greatly

increased odds of your turning up KIA on this mission.

With the suit power activated there was at least some relief from the crushing claustrophobia. I still couldn't move, but the unrelenting feeling of more than two metric tons of dead weight around me was gone. The neural impulse sensors of the suit are tied into the servo-mechanical systems that move the armor just like a human body. Once on the ground and unlatched from the landing craft, you move just like normal. Walk, run, jump, whatever—you just do it and the suit goes along. Of course the armor is a lot stronger and faster than you are, and it takes some getting used to before you are comfortable running 80 kph and jumping 10 meters straight up. You can lift at least 500 kilos in your arms and you can crush an unarmored person like so much overripe fruit. If you're not careful you can kill yourself walking across the room.

I was pressed hard against the front of my suit as the Guadalcanal's braking thrusters fired. Sub-orbital insertions can make for a pretty rough ride, as the ship executes a series of abrupt maneuvers to position itself for the launch. After about ten seconds of rapid deceleration we went into free fall. I had undergone intense conditioning during training and been given the normal drugs and the standard 36 hours of intravenous nutrition prior to launch. I knew that it was almost physically impossible for me to get sick at this point, but that didn't stop the bile from rising at the back of my throat as we plunged toward the launch point.

When the dull roar of the ship's engines died down there was an almost eerie quiet in the launch bay. There was a very faint buzz; I think it was coming from the lighting track on the ceiling. A couple of guys were talking softly to themselves. I thought I could make out a few words of a familiar prayer.

There was a red tint to everything from the battlestations lamps in the launch bay. The naval personnel had all left about 5 minutes prior to launch and we were alone—2nd Platoon A Company, 1st Battalion, 3rd Regiment, 1st U.S. Marine Division—and ready to go.

The launch bay was sealed off from the rest of the ship, but there was still a heavy smell burnt machinery in the air. The Guadalcanal had taken at least one hit on its approach. The sailors didn't seem to be concerned, so the damage must not have been too bad. Stunk up the place, though.

"Thirty seconds to launch. Transferring life support function to Marine armor." My visor clicked down automatically and there was a whooshing sound as my suit replaced the Earth-normal air of the Guadalcanal with the oxygen rich mixture designed to maximize alertness and physical endurance during combat. My armor was now 100% operational and could keep me alive, even in deep space.

With my suit sealed and the blast shield down over my visor I couldn't see or hear anything going on in the bay. But I knew from training that exactly 5 seconds after my visor clamped down, the bay of the Guadalcanal was depressurized to match the atmospheric density of the launch point. Five seconds after depressurization our suits were pressure coated with a special foam designed to absorb the intense heat of the atmospheric entry. Then the hatches would open.

The TX-11 Gordon atmospheric assault craft is designed to accept modular armor plating panels that effectively make it an enclosed ship rather than an open landing sled. However, the panels severely reduce its speed and maneuverability. The armor was effective against small arms fire but useless against the SAMs and other ground to air armaments that were the biggest threat during an assault landing. These weapons were best countered with the

enhanced maneuver capabilities of the light, unarmored ship.

~~“Ten seconds to launch. Good luck Marines!”~~ The skipper's voice had replaced the coldly mechanical tone of the assault computer. By tradition the ship's captain delivered the final pre-launch announcement and wished the assault team luck.

I counted down in my head, five, four, three—I gritted my teeth and braced myself for the shock of launch—two, one...

I felt the jarring in every bone in my body as the catapult accelerated the assault lander down the launch track and out into the upper atmosphere of Epsilon Eridani IV, commonly known as Carson's World. By the time the assault ship cleared the hatch and fired its own thrusters, our velocity was 1,200 kph. The G forces caused by the launch would have killed an unprotected man, but with my fighting suit on I only lost my breath for a few seconds.

With the blast shield down I still couldn't see anything outside, but the monitors in my helmet activated automatically, feeding me all sorts of information—altitude, velocity, armor skin temperature, heart rate, and a dozen other informational tidbits of questionable usefulness. I pressed the small button under my left forefinger and the deployment display was projected on the inside of my faceplate. I could see 50 tiny green dots in ten groups—the entire platoon in ten landing craft. It looked like our formation was perfect (though as the junior private in the squad my only real concern was my location and that of my fire team leader). I knew the 1st and 3rd platoons were scheduled to launch 20 and 40 seconds after we did, with the company command and heavy weapon sections right after them. I had no reason to believe they hadn't launched as planned, but their assigned position was considerably outside the range of my deployment display, so I didn't know for sure. I didn't need to know.

The Gordon is a five-man disposable sub-orbital insertion vehicle designed to rapidly land attacking powered infantry forces onto a hostile planet. Actually, “vehicle” is a strong word—it's really just an open steel frame with a large triangular heat shield in the front. The entire thing looks a little like something you could build out of a child's erector set. With 5 armored Marines bolted to it.

The ride down started to get pretty rough as we entered the denser levels of the atmosphere, and the lander's thrusters fired to lessen the angle of descent. Despite this maneuvering, and the protection of the forward heat shield, the status display indicated the external temperature of my suit was rising as the protective foam coating burned off. The readings were well within the expected mission parameters, so I felt pretty confident that I wouldn't be incinerated during the landing. Unless we were hit, of course.

The comlink crackled to life. “Altitude ten kilometers, retract blast shields and prepare for landing.” The lieutenant's voice was calm and steady—I doubt mine would have been so reassuring. Fortunately, no one was waiting for instructions from me.

I depressed the small lever under my left thumb to retract the blast shield, and with a loud click the steel plate slid up over my helmet, and I could see. Mostly I could see the back of Will Thompson's helmet. As the squad's junior member (and only new recruit), I occupied the last position on the assistant squad leader's lander. Will was the senior private in the squad—traditionally the one given the task of babysitting new guys—and he was positioned right in front of me.

I was still locked in place on the lander and couldn't even turn my head to look around. It was just about dawn over the landing site, and even if I could have taken a look, the visibility

in the early morning light was pretty limited. I did have a peripheral view of the lander's top-mounted point-defense laser turret (there was a bottom mounted one as well, though it was well out of my field of vision) as it whipped around and fired at something off to the right. I didn't see any explosion, but we weren't hit by anything either, so the laser must have been on target.

Fleetcom had told us to expect minimal ground-based fire during landing. There had been a few orbital platforms hastily positioned by the enemy, but the navy had blasted those long before we stepped into the launch bay. We had total local-space superiority, a prerequisite to any landing that wasn't going to be a bloodbath.

According to Fleet, there were no ground-based installations whatsoever, so any surface air fire would be from hand-held rocket launchers or maybe a light vehicle or two—nothing the Gordon's onboard point defense couldn't handle. Of course, no one from Fleet was bolted into a lander right now, so I suppose all of us were a little more concerned about it than they were. I certainly was. It didn't make me feel any better when an instant later the top laser turret whipped around to the left and fired twice within two or three seconds. Only the onboard tactical computer knew whether there were two incoming targets or if the first shot was a miss.

I rolled my eyes up to check the status monitors. Our altitude was just under 6 kilometers—a bit high to be taking this much fire from hand-held rocket launchers. According to the training manual, most hand held surface to air weapons had an effective range of around 3 km against a point defense equipped target, though the theoretical maximum ranges were far greater. Most likely there was some kind of vehicle mounted SAM down there. Not a huge danger if there weren't too many of them—the Gordon's point defense was state of the art. Besides, the SAM couldn't fire too many times without moving. The Guadalcanal was still monitoring the landing area and would provide suppressive fire if the launcher gave up its position.

The lander's thrusters fired again, and we banked sharply to the left. I couldn't see any of the other ships, but a quick click of my finger brought up the deployment display again, and we were still in perfect formation. Our altitude was 3.5 km and descending rapidly. The comlink crackled to life. "Four minutes until touchdown. Landing proceeding according to projection. The tactical plan is unchanged ... I repeat, the tactical plan is unchanged."

Every specific aspect of a planetary assault is thoroughly planned before a single Marine enters the launch bay, but with so many variables it's crucial that modifications can be made at any time. If any of our landers were off course, or if the resistance on the ground was substantially stronger than expected, the battle plan could be altered in response to the change in conditions. Our platoon commander remains in constant contact with the company CO, who himself is tied in directly with tactical support services on the Guadalcanal. If changes are required, he can revise the plan, and the new instructions are downloaded into the squad leaders' personal AIs. After a briefing by the platoon commander, the squad non-coms would then be responsible for transmitting revised orders to their own troops.

With the landing going as expected, the mission was to proceed as planned. The entire population of Carson's World lived in a cluster of small mining towns in the southwestern section of the single major continent. The Central Asian Combine had sent in an invasion force about three months before and had taken control of the developed areas. With no regulars stationed on the planet to support them, the local militia had been unable to hold the

towns against the CAC assault troops.

Intelligence reports indicated the militia, rugged miners all, had hurt the CAC regulars badly though, before they withdrew into the hills with much of their strength intact. Based on these reports, Fleetcom had decided to launch an immediate counter-invasion with a single understrength battalion rather than wait for more units to arrive.

“Two minutes until touchdown. Power-up weapons systems.” I clicked the levers under my right middle and forefingers. There was a series of loud clicks as the autoloader fed five grenades from the magazine on my back into the launcher on my left arm. My AI could have done that for me, but I felt better feeling the switches under my own fingers. It gave me something to do beside think about how scared I was.

“Squad two, weapons check. Report status.” The voice on the comlink had changed. It was Sergeant Harris, our squad leader. One by one the members of the squad sounded off. “Jenkins operational. Kleiner operational...”

I glanced up at the status monitor. The two green weapons control lights indicated that my AI had successfully completed a full diagnostic test of armaments. My grenade launcher and auto-rifle were loaded, charged, and ready. As the only raw member of the squad, I had not been outfitted with any other weapons, though my armor could have carried and powered at least two additional systems.

“Thompson operational.” The rest of the squad had sounded off; it was my turn. My throat had gone dry, but I managed to croak out the required report. “Cain operational.”

The second squad was ready. Although I couldn't hear it on my comlink, I knew the squad leader was reporting this status to the lieutenant over the command circuit. Weapons power-up was our last procedure prior to landing. I couldn't speak for the other three squads or the command group but our two fire teams were ready.

The lieutenant's voice came over the comlink again. “Touchdown in one minute. Squad leaders initiate tactical plan upon landing. Good luck, Marines!”

Even from my closed in position I could see the ground now. We were landing in an area rugged, sparsely wooded hills, about 10 km west of the nearest settlement. We were to establish contact with and rally the local militia units believed to be dug-in up in those hills. Once we linked up with the locals, we were to evaluate the situation and, if command gave the go-ahead, drive toward the built-up areas. The assault was to be coordinated with the attacks of the rest of company A—they'd be moving in our direction from their own landing points along an arc stretching 20 km northeast of our position. Company B and the heavy weapon section would move toward us from 50 km south. If all went according to plan, the CAC troops would be caught between us and penned in. If the plan went awry Company C was still in reserve, buttoned up on their ship and ready to launch on short notice.

I was slammed against the front of my armor as the lander's braking thrusters fired, causing us to decelerate rapidly as we neared the ground. The forward pressure ended abruptly as we came to a virtual stop 30 meters up. The landing jets mounted on the underside of the assault ship activated and eased us slowly down. We hit ground with a gentle thud. There was a metallic scraping sound as the locking bolt retracted, releasing me from the lander. I fell a few centimeters, my boots gripping the rubberized ledge along the bottom of the lander. One more step, and I'd be standing on Carson's World.

“Fire team B, disembark. Come on, let's move it!” The gravelly voice on the comlink belonged to Corporal Gessler, my immediate superior. Gessler commanded fire team B, my

half of the squad, consisting of the five occupants of this particular lander.

I scrambled out of the harness and onto the rough, rocky ground. The dirt of Carson's World was a reddish gravel, a sign of extremely high mineral content, particularly iron. There were some tufts of bristly weeds, scorched now from the ship's landing thrusters, but most of the ground was bare dirt.

I glanced up at the tactical display and confirmed that there were no enemy contacts within 2 km. An experienced Marine would have done this before disembarking, but I was lucky this time—the LZ was well outside of the enemy's defensive perimeter, and our landing was unopposed.

I was still scared out of my mind, but I managed to remember what I was supposed to do. The entire squad was forming a skirmish line at 100 meter intervals and heading northeast toward the last reported location of militia activity. If they had landed in the right spot (and if I'd thought to check out the status monitor I could have confirmed that they had) the 1st squad would be deploying to extend this line to the northwest of our position. The 3rd and 4th squad was to deploy in support about a klick behind our line.

I headed out toward my designated position at a slow trot. The rest of the squad was doing the same, except for Kleiner, who was retrieving the squad heavy weapon from the Gordon's cargo hatch. She was just strapping the massive M-411 rocket launcher over her shoulder as I trotted by. An unarmored person couldn't even have lifted the 300 kg weapon, but it was no trouble at all for an Marine in a combat suit.

The lander itself was in pretty rough shape. It was a disposable vehicle designed for a one-way trip to the surface. The heat shield was three-quarters gone, and the remaining portion was pitted and blackened. The frame, though bent and twisted in a few spots, was essentially intact. Although they appeared to be in decent condition, I knew from training that the Gordon's thrusters pretty much burned themselves out during the landing. The ship would stay here, with its upper point defense laser remaining operational and providing the immediate area with some protection against missile attack.

If all went well we would never see the lander again, but if the mission went seriously awry the Gordon, with its anti-missile defense and emergency ammunition and supplies, was our designated rally point. Of course, if the rally command came it would probably mean a lot of us were already dead.

I continued toward my assigned position at the trot, and I could see Will Thompson jogging off to my right. My position was second to last in line with Will positioned on the right flank of the squad. His blackened armor was speckled with a few remaining chunks of partially charred, heat-resistant foam. For all its equipment and capabilities, the Model 7 fighting suit was remarkably trim. The wearer looked like a slightly bulkier version of a medieval knight.

I glanced up at the mission clock—it read 00:21:05. All aspects of an assault were scheduled according to mission time, measured from the moment the first Gordon launched. This avoided any confusion, since ships were run on Earth Greenwich standard time, and every planet had its own timekeeping system. Mission time was consistent for all troops in an operation, whether a single platoon was engaged or an entire army.

I glanced up at the area display. I was about half a klick from my assigned position, jogging slowly. I was almost a minute ahead of schedule. I forgot the amplification factor of the powered armor, and my slow jog was moving me close to 40 kph and bouncing me a good two meters into the air with each step. It had just occurred to me that I should keep lower

when Corporal Gessler's voice barked over the comlink. "Cain, get your god-damned head down before you get it blown off!"

"Yessir!" I hoped I sounded confident, but I was pretty sure my voice cracked. I slowed my gait and concentrated on keeping low. Actually, there were no enemies showing on my display, so all of this was probably needless caution. But if there's one thing they tried to beat into us in training, it was that carelessness gets Marines killed. I was ahead of schedule and there was no reason for me to rush, not when those big, exaggerated strides bounded me high enough to be a perfect target for any enemy within 1,000 meters.

I had drawn a pretty good mission for a first assault. Because we were trying to contact and rally the locals, we landed much farther from the enemy than we would have in typical assault. That gave us plenty of time to form up before we were likely to see any action. And because we were attacking an enemy who had recently seized the planet themselves, we didn't have to face entrenched defenses. At least nothing serious. They hadn't had time to build forts and bunkers, not yet.

I reached my assigned position, approximately 2 kilometers northeast of the landing zone about 45 seconds ahead of schedule. I took a quick look down the line, and it seemed like most of the squad had reached the assembly point. The terrain was fairly rugged but relatively open for most of the way. Ahead of us the ground was rocky with scattered patches of the yellow-green fungus that seemed to be Carson's World's equivalent of grass. Our intel had advised that there was a militia group positioned somewhere in the area ahead, and we were here to establish contact.

"Second squad, I want a slow advance. Crank up to magnification level three. Report any signs of militia presence." It was Sergeant Harris, the squad leader, on the comlink.

A slow advance was a very moderate pace, about 5 kph. I headed northeast, taking care to move very cautiously. I depressed my right thumb three times, activating my visual magnification system and toggling it up to level three. My vision was now enhanced, allowing me to see much farther than I could with my unaided eyes. Level three is just enough to double the range at which you can pick out a man-sized object. In theory the price for amplification was a loss of detail, but the AI worked constantly to sharpen the images, so usually you couldn't detect any serious fuzziness until you got to mag 10.

As we advanced, we moved into an area with scattered stands of scrubby, grayish brown trees. There were tangled clusters of the thorny weeds around each one. After about fifteen minutes of moving through the sparse woodlands, we came upon a section that was burnt out. The ground was blackened, and the few remaining trees were charred and splintered. It was obvious that there had been some pretty heavy fighting here. I knew I needed to report this to Corporal Gessler and the squad leader, and I took a deep breath. I was still thinking about what to say when Will Thompson beat me to it.

"Thompson reporting. Signs of some kind of action at coordinates 45.05 by 11. The area's all burned out ... looks like there was some pretty heavy fire here. Some kind of incendiary strike, maybe. Scanning ... stand by for results." There was a brief pause before he continued. "Temperature normal, spectral analysis negative. Looks like whatever happened here was at least a day ago."

Will's report was broadcast over the squad frequency, so the entire unit was aware of the situation. Nevertheless, after a brief pause (during which he'd probably reported to the lieutenant), Sergeant Harris addressed the squad. "Alright second squad, we know there was

some kind of fight over near our right flank. Keep your eyes open and report any contact immediately.”

Over the next 20 minutes there were no additional contacts in our sector, but there were three other burnt out areas in the first squad's zone. It appeared the enemy had been conducting search and destroy ops in this area, trying to hunt down the locals who were operating out of these hills. There was no sign of casualties at any of the sites.

I was just thinking that the CAC troopers didn't seem to be doing too well when I crested a small hill and saw what looked like six or eight bodies in the center of a blackened section of grasslands at the extreme edge of my visibility.

This time I didn't hesitate. "Cain reporting. I see bodies up ahead." My voice was shrill with excitement. I could feel the droplets of sweat running down the back of my neck.

The sergeant snapped back quickly. "OK, Cain. Get a grip, and give me a full report. Now."

I swallowed hard and said, "Estimate six to eight bodies, range 1000 meters. Area burnt out like the others. No energy readings, no enemy contacts." After a second I added, "Should I move up and check it out, Sarge?"

This was our most important sighting so far, and it wouldn't have surprised me if the sergeant had told Will to check it out. But that's not the way the Corps works. I may have been the new guy, and this may have been my first assault mission, but I was a Marine and was expected to perform as one. As far as my field commander was concerned I wouldn't have been assigned to an assault unit unless my instructors, combat veterans all, considered me ready. And that was good enough for him.

"Squad, halt. Cain, move forward and reconnoiter the area. Thompson, move in and provide cover."

I started forward slowly, checking my display for any signs of artificial energy output that could indicate a hidden enemy. Negative. No power output. I glanced over and saw Will moving in on my flank. He maintained a distance of about 40 meters, to the right of and slightly behind my position.

Temperature readings were all normal as I approached the bodies. Whatever happened here, it had been at least a day ago, the same as the other sites. The area had clearly been subjected to some type of incendiary or high explosive fire—the grass was completely burnt and a small stand of trees nearby had been blown into charred matchsticks. I reported as I advanced, doing my best to sound calm, despite the fact that I was so scared I could hardly take a breath.

The bodies were clustered on a small rise. There were seven of them in total, three wearing the uniform of the planetary militia, the others in civilian miners' dress. All of them were clad in heavy protective vests and metal helmets. Their faces wore horrid expressions, their features twisted in agonizing contortions. Their mouths and nostrils were caked with dried blood.

As my mind reached its conclusion, a warning light on my tactical display confirmed my deduction. Gas. "Cain reporting ... seven bodies total. They appear to be victims of a gas attack. My sensors confirm the presence of..."—I looked up at the tactical display for the answer—" ... trace quantities of Kirax-3 nerve gas. Current concentration .032 parts per million ... within the danger zone but below immediately lethal levels."

So they were using gas to hunt down the locals. The militia's little guerilla war must have been doing some pretty serious damage for the CAC forces to resort to these tactics. Nerve

gas is a nasty weapon, largely ineffective against powered infantry, but deadly to second line troops lacking effective counter-measures. Still, it was a banned weapon, used only in the most desperate situations. By custom, those who employed gas could expect no quarter if the battle turned against them. Why would they take such steps in a fight over an unimportant hunk of ground like Carson's World? I would get an answer to that question one day, but not until years later.

There were several moments of silence—the squad leader conferring with higher authority, no doubt. Then the comlink crackled. "Alright second squad, continue advance. Full chemical warfare procedures in effect."

That last command didn't really change anything. We still had our suits fully sealed, though the atmosphere of Carson's World was well within the acceptable range. Normal operating procedures would have called for us to switch to filtered external air after twelve hours, leaving a full day of atmospheric capacity in reserve. Standard chemical warfare protocols dictated that we remain on our internal air supply/regeneration capacity until we were down to a four hour reserve. As with many of our procedures, there was a certain element of overkill. The atmospheric purification systems in our suits were perfectly capable of filtering out most known bacteriological and chemical agents, including Kirax-3 nerve gas. Still, better to be overly cautious than to see a whole company wiped out by some new or unexpected weapon.

It took us ninety minutes to cover the next two clicks. There were still no enemy contacts, but further up the line they found two more groups of bodies. The first had four corpses, definitely gas victims. The second group consisted of eleven bodies, but these were spread out over a much wider area. They were all wearing protective breathing gear and had been killed by rifle and grenade fire. Though we found no enemy bodies in the area, there were enough bits and pieces of CAC armor lying around for us to conclude the enemy had indeed suffered casualties in this firefight.

A full analysis indicated the battle had occurred within the past eighteen hours. From the look of the tracks leaving the location, the enemy had withdrawn back toward the settled area. Whether they had been repulsed or had simply completed their mission and retired was unclear.

We continued our advance, but about fifteen minutes after leaving the site of the last skirmish, we were ordered to halt. The first squad had made contact with the locals.

The militia had been advised of the basic tactical plan through scrambled pulse communications from Fleet, but they were not provided with specific schedules or locations for fear the enemy would intercept the transmissions. Their instructions were to be ready for action on short notice, and apparently they had listened.

We held our position for almost an hour, and if there is one thing I learned quickly in the Corps, nothing makes a sergeant crazier than watching his men relax with nothing to do. Fortunately, Sergeant Harris managed to come up with lots of ways for us to use the down time. We checked and re-checked our weapons, ran a system diagnostic on our armor and did a full analysis of the surrounding area—atmosphere, energy readings, chemical residue. Anything to forestall the sacrilege of a squad of Marines sitting around resting.

Finally the orders came. Our squad was to advance due east toward the settlement of Warrenville and take the position. Our attack would be supported by one fire team of the third squad. Warrenville was the smallest of the dozen or so towns that were the only inhabited areas of Carson's World.

According to the locals, the town was lightly garrisoned and we could expect minimal resistance. Most of the guerilla activity had been to the north, and the enemy had deployed its strongest forces to that sector.

Our attack was essentially a diversion. We were to go in first, take the objective, and hold it against any counterattack (It was the “any” part that worried me the most). After the enemy had moved troops south to deal with us, the rest of our troopers would link up with the first platoon and a large group of militia for the main attack against the northern defenses. The third platoon would cover the eastern and southern perimeter, and move to intercept the enemy retreat.

We covered the first eight clicks in about two hours. The sergeant halted us just short of a small rise and sent Wilson, the platoon’s scout, to report on visibility from the top of the hill. I watched him scramble up the gentle slope and crouch down just below the crest. His recon armor had a different look than ours ... sleeker, lighter.

“Wilson reporting. Good visibility to target, estimate distance to nearest structure 1,800 meters. Twenty to twenty-five buildings, look like modular plasti-steel structures. The terrain’s completely open between here and the town, no cover at all. Looks like there’s some kind of trench dug along the perimeter. No enemy sightings.”

No cover. Shit. That meant we’d be advancing almost two kilometers over open ground, probably under enemy fire.

“Alright Marines, form up at 30 meter intervals behind the crest. We’re gonna advance leapfrog fashion—first even numbers, then odd. Fifty meter intervals, grab some dirt between moves. Stationary troops, I want heavy covering fire. Assault to commence in 90 seconds.”

We were really going in. I’d been nervous about this for weeks and flat out scared to death since we stepped into the landing bay, but for some reason knowing we were finally heading into battle actually calmed me down. Maybe it was the training or some kind of silent resignation to my fate. Or the massive dose of adrenaline surging through my veins (some natural, some courtesy of the performance drugs my armor was pumping into me). Whatever it was, I suddenly had a clarity of thought I hadn’t felt in weeks now. I had been trained for this, and I knew I was ready.

I was the ninth one in line, so I was supposed to provide covering fire while the evens went forward. I was pressed against the ground behind the hill, my head maybe half a meter below the crest.

“Covering fire, now!”

I threw my arms up over the rise and rested my assault rifle on the ground in front of me. I had it set for burst fire, and when I pulled the trigger it began to spit out micro-bursts of four rounds every half-second. The fire left a faintly glowing trail of plasma as the hypersonic bullets ionized the air.

The M-36 auto-rifle is a state of the art projectile weapon. Specially designed for use with powered armor, the gun uses electromagnetic force to propel the projectiles at tremendous velocities. Without the need to carry their own propellant, the bullets are extremely small, and a single magazine holds 500 rounds. Despite their tiny size, the hardness of the osmium/iridium darts and the kinetic energy their velocity imparts to the target makes them extremely effective, even against armored enemies.

Two clicks was well within the range of our rifles, and the entire western edge of the town was raked by our fire. I still couldn’t see any enemy soldiers through the dust and shattered

rocks we were kicking up, but the main purpose of our fire was to keep their heads down. Another hit at this point would be just so much dumb luck.

“Alright evens, move it out! Odds, continue covering fire.”

Half of the squad leapt over the crest and ran forward. I kept up my fire, stopping only to grab another clip off my waist and reload. The guys who were advancing were immediately targeted by the defenders shooting from the trench, but our covering fire was definitely hampering the enemy response. Their shooting was sporadic and poorly aimed.

“Evens, stop and hit the ground! Covering fire!”

The advancing troops dove forward onto the ground and began spraying the enemy positions with fire.

“Odds, move out! Seventy-five meters.”

I stopped firing and climbed up over the hill. Although we were to advance in 50 meter intervals, our first move was an extra 25 so our positions would be staggered with that of the evens. It took less than 20 seconds to cover the distance, but it seemed like we'd been running forever when the comlink crackled again.

“Odds, down and fire! Evens, forward 50 meters!”

When I flopped down on the ground I let out a deep breath. I could hear my heart pounding in my ears, and I tried to breathe the way they taught us in training. I couldn't believe I wasn't hit.

We continued in this manner until we had covered half the distance to the trench. We still had no one down. Not yet.

The evens had just hit the ground, and the order came for us to advance. I scrambled up and headed forward. Before I had covered 10 meters, something else opened fire from the enemy trench. The volume of fire increased dramatically, and I saw two of our guys go down within seconds of each other.

“Odds, hit the dirt! Cease all movement! All units fire!”

I dove to the ground, bringing my rifle up to bear as I went down. Damn! They had a heavy weapon in there. I remembered something from my ordnance training—the Shadeng-7 heavy auto gun, primary infantry support weapon of the CAC assault forces. I couldn't recall all the details, but I was pretty sure the thing had a rate of fire of better than 3,000 rounds per minute.

The sergeant spoke again. “Ferguson, report your condition.” He didn't ask about anyone else, though I was sure that I'd seen two casualties. I found out later the other was Jenkins, and the sergeant's monitors had already confirmed he was dead.

The reply was quick but a little shaky. “Took one in the leg, Sarge. I'll be OK. Don't think I can walk, though.”

The armor was designed to minimize the effects of a wound—the longer an injured Marine can survive, the greater chance he will be recovered and given real medical treatment. The injury control mechanism automatically injects drugs to treat shock, minimize pain, and slow the metabolism to reduce blood loss. Additionally, there is a kit attached to the exterior of the armor containing bandages and other items the Marine himself can use if he is able, though there isn't really much you can do when suited up.

“Stay put, Ferguson, keep your head down. We'll be back for you.”

In a larger operation we'd probably have an embedded medic with us. But with a single company spread over 100 square kilometers there was no workable way to provide support

services. The wounded just had to depend upon their suits' trauma control and hope the battle was a victory.

"Second squad, maintain positions." The lieutenant's voice. "Evens, continue fire. Odds, I want a grenade attack. Target the section of trench in front of those storage tanks, three rounds each. Reserve team, I want you to flank that heavy weapon—advance 500 meters to the right of the second squad."

My rangefinder confirmed my estimate that I was about 1100 meters from the target area. I clicked the small button under my left thumb to lock the range into the firing system and, pointing my arm in the direction of the target, I loosed three grenades in rapid succession.

A few seconds later the ground all along the target area erupted as nine 100-milliton high explosive grenades exploded within a 5 second period.

The automatic fire from the trench stopped, at least momentarily. We had no way of knowing if the gun had been hit or if the crew had merely been stunned or knocked to the ground.

"Odds, covering fire. Evens advance 50 meters."

We had leapfrogged another 200 meters with only sporadic enemy fire when we got our answer, as the big gun opened up again, pinning us down about 800 meters short of the trench. This time we weren't surprised, and no one was hit, at least as far as I could tell.

By this time the flanking force was in position on a small hill to the right, and they opened up on the trench. If there had been a few more enemy troops, they could have engaged the flanking force and held the entire position strongly. As it was, however, the Marines on the flank were only challenged by a single enemy trooper, firing from behind one of the small buildings on the edge of the settlement. About thirty seconds after he opened fire, a lucky shot landed a frag grenade a meter behind him. Five or six pieces of osmium-iridium shrapnel slammed into him, one tearing his head clean off his body, eliminating the only effective opposition to the flank attack. Our guys quickly moved into position and began firing down the enemy line.

With no other protection from the enfilade fire, the enemy had to hurriedly fall back from the trench, leaving three casualties and the auto gun behind. A few seconds later, with the other half of the squad providing covering fire, my team took possession of the trench.

The flank force then pursued the three retreating enemy troopers, picking one off as he ran for the cover of the nearest building. The two survivors sought refuge in a small, plasti-crete structure that looked like some kind of warehouse.

Sergeant Harris' voice barked over the comlink. "All troops, cease firing. Kleiner, take that building out."

With no fire coming from the broken CAC forces the rest was child's play. Kleiner moved down the trench about 10 meters to get a clean line of sight to the building. Once in place, she braced herself against the wall of the trench and selected a high explosive, short range rocket (we were way too close to use the normal charge, and an armor piercing round would blast right through a small building). She yelled, "Clear!" Then she pulled the trigger. Less than half a second later the area where the building had been was engulfed in fire, smoke, and shattered plasti-crete.

The sergeant was on the com before the chunks of blasted 'crete hit the ground. "Flanking force, advance north. Fire team A, advance east. Leapfrog house to house with at least two men covering each move. Fire team B, stand by in reserve at the trenchline."

The sergeant's orders may have seemed overly cautious, but they were strictly by the book. I think we all agreed there were no more live enemies in the town, but there was no percentage in betting anyone's life on that assumption.

It took about half an hour to complete the house to house searches. As expected, the town was deserted. We'd won the first engagement.

From their insignia we determined that the six CAC troopers killed in our attack were the remnants of a single squad. If so, they had already suffered losses of more than 50% in the campaign (CAC squads have 13 men). It looked like the militia had put up one helluva fight.

We spent the next four hours fortifying the eastern and northern approaches to the town. Our armor made each of us a miniature backhoe, and in a few short hours of work we had extended the trench along the entire northern and eastern perimeters of the town.

We moved the CAC auto gun and set up a real strongpoint at the corner of the northern and eastern sections of trench. We had plenty of ammo for the gun—one of the buildings held crates full of extra ordnance.

By nightfall we were ready for any attack. We had detection devices positioned out about five clicks; whatever happened, they wouldn't take us by surprise. We even managed to grab a few hours of sleep in shifts. We were ready for the counterattack. But it never came.

Later, I managed to piece together what had happened. Apparently the plan was working perfectly. The enemy had sent an entire platoon supported by two light support vehicles to deal with us and retake the town. That would have put us neck deep in it, but it would also have fatally weakened the northern perimeter where the main attack was coming.

Our attacking forces were supposed to wait until dark to give the enemy time to divert his forces. Unfortunately, one of the planetary militia units ran into an enemy patrol, and the local commander panicked and sent his men in five hours early.

Without the expected coordinating attacks along their flanks, the militia was in big trouble from the start. The regulars could either hold back and watch the locals get chewed to pieces or attack immediately, hours ahead of schedule. The captain had no choice.

Realizing that a major attack was developing in the north before the force heading south toward us was engaged, the enemy commander recalled those troops to strengthen the main defensive line. He left a small force to delay any thrust we might make out of the town, but the rest of the diverted forces were recalled in time.

With no way of knowing that the forces we expected to attack us had withdrawn, we remained in our defensive positions all night. By the time we got the order to advance it was just about over.

The firefight had raged through the night, but just about an hour before dawn the enemy lines were broken in two places. After that it was just a question of mopping up.

On our way north we ran into a few enemy troops who tried to surrender. They must have known what to expect, since they'd used gas on the locals, but they tried anyway. We gunned them down on sight. They were more fortunate, at least, than the ones who fell into the hands of the militia. That is if the stories I heard later were true ... and I have no doubt they were.

The reconquest of Carson's World was complete. The tactical plan had been excellent and would have worked perfectly, except for the failure of one militia officer to follow orders. But such is the friction of war, and few battle plans survive contact with the enemy.

After the battle the captain made some noise about bringing the responsible officer up on charges, but it didn't get very far. I suspect if the battle had been lost instead of won, there

would have been more of an appetite for an investigation. But the planet was back in our hands, and the attitude seemed to be that no harm was done.

We felt differently, of course. The company lost almost 20% of its strength, and most of the casualties occurred in the heavy fighting on the northern perimeter. How many of those losses were caused by the foul up? No way to tell. But there was nothing to be done. The high command made its decision. We didn't have to like it, but we had to accept it.

Our squad had one killed and one wounded. Ferguson's wound turned out to be a single clean shot through the left leg. He'd be back in the line before our next assault.

The rest of the squad—the entire company, actually—remained on the planet as garrison for six weeks. This kind of duty is usually pretty slow, but not this time. We were busy as hell the entire time. We rebuilt and expanded the ground fortifications, digging trenches and constructing new bunkers everywhere. We provided the strong backs for the engineer platoon that arrived a week later with a freighter full of ground-to-air defense systems. We emplaced them not only around the developed area, but also near what looked like the entrance to a large mine. We built a veritable fortress there.

By the time the relieving force arrived, every one of us was exhausted, and we were in line and ready to go the morning the shuttles from the Guadalcanal landed. While waiting for the order to board, I watched the new garrison troops unloading and forming up. They were Marines, not assault troops, but Marines nevertheless. And there were a lot of them. From where I was I couldn't see the whole formation, but they landed in at least a dozen ships and there were a good 300 already formed up in the center of the landing area. I guessed there must have been seven or eight hundred in all.

Extensive prepared defenses and a reinforced battalion as a garrison? It seemed like a lot of effort to defend a small, relatively insignificant mining colony. Of course, that was up to the high command, and they didn't ask my opinion. If I'd known then what I know now, I would have understood, but at the time I had no idea. One thing was certain—if the CAC wanted to take this planet again they were going to need one hell of a bigger force than they sent the first time.

A few minutes later we boarded the three transport shuttles and headed back to the Guadalcanal in a considerably more comfortable and leisurely fashion than we'd departed six weeks before. The ships were designed to evac a full platoon plus wounded, medical personnel, and equipment, so there was plenty of room for the 28 of us.

After docking we had to hang around the landing bay until we got checked out by the doc. There were two other newbies in the company. We'd actually landed with five, but one was killed and the other evac'ed with a partially severed spine. The three of us were last, so I had a few hours to kill. We'd been in the field for six weeks, so the captain gave us a break and cut back on the discipline. We pretty much had the time to ourselves. I played a game of chess with Vergren, the platoon's sniper, but he was really good, and I lost pretty quickly.

A lot of the guys had been pretty standoffish since I joined the unit, but now people who'd barely said two words to me in the past four months were coming up and asking me how I was and congratulating me on the mission. A few of the privates from the first squad invited me to play poker while we waited. I won about 15 creds.

After my examination I headed down to my billet. It was about midnight, ship time, but there was a message waiting. I was to report to the landing bay in full dress uniform immediately.

My mind raced. What had I done? I figured I must be in trouble. My heart was racing as I threw on my dress blues and hurried down to the bay.

I was in the corridor outside when the lights went out. I felt at least two pairs of hands grab me from behind and someone threw a sack over my head. They dragged me into the bay and threw me down to the deck. Someone pulled the sack off my head and then the lights snapped on.

The entire platoon was standing in a circle. Sergeant Harris was standing over me holding a small container. No one said a word. He leaned over and poured a few drops of the contents on my forehead. At first I didn't know what it was, but then I realized it was blood. I figured it was animal blood of some kind. I was wrong, but I didn't find that out until much later. Everyone in the bay started cheering.

The sergeant reached out his hand and helped me to my feet. The blood ran down my face as I got up. I nearly retched when a drop trickled down to my lips, but I held back the impulse. I was beginning to understand. This ceremony had meaning—it was a baptism. I had proved my worth to them in battle. I was one of them. After so many years on my own, I had finally found a home.

CHAPTER 2

*Manhattan Protected Zone
New York City, USA
Western Alliance*

The Marine Corps saved me.

I was born Erik Daniel Cain in 2232 AD in Lenox Hill-Fargus hospital. My father, John Cairn, was a project manager for Metadyne Systems Corporation, and we lived in a company-owned apartment block in the Midtown Protected Zone of Manhattan. My family wasn't rich, but we weren't poor either, and we lived better than most people in 23rd century America.

New York was the third largest city in the country, with over a million residents, though you could tell that this was a small fraction of the number that had once lived there. North of the Protected Zone, outside of the 77th Street gate, was the semi-abandoned northern sector, and beyond that the badlands of the Bronx, a wasted area filled with centuries-old factories still producing basic goods and decrepit ancient apartments occupied by the lowest strata of workers. The whole area was ruled at night (and day) by the Gangs, who owned the illegal narcotics trade and terrorized and preyed upon the outcasts living beyond the armed bastion of the Protected Zone. Below the 10th Street gate was a forbidden buffer area and 500 meters farther south, the Crater, the still radioactive pit remaining from the worst terrorist attack in human history.

Between these two urban no-man's lands was a clean and well-ordered cityscape where law and order reigned. The Protected Zone was the home of the educated workers who ran a modern, high tech society, and if there were some murmurs that past generations had enjoyed far higher living standards and much greater personal freedom, they were never more than hushed whispers. Certainly such things were never taught in school, where we studied how modern America and the whole Western Alliance was the highest pinnacle yet reached in the development of the human condition. If anyone had any doubts, all they had to do was take a look outside the gates of the Zone to appreciate what they had. And keep their mouths shut.

Manhattan was crowded, but there was enough food, more or less, and there were plenty of diversions to keep people busy in their free time. Twenty-third century bread and circuses, though I never thought of it that way back then. If laws were strict, the mail monitored, and people conditioned to accept the wisdom of their leaders without question, in return they were fed (well enough), entertained, and protected from the harsher realities facing those unfortunate enough to live outside the walls of the Zone.

The northeast corner of the Zone was called Sector A, and it was the home of the Political Class and their Corporate Magnate allies. Most of the residents of Manhattan never set foot inside the inner walls that separated Sector A from the rest of the Zone. I did, but that was years later, under circumstances I could never have imagined as a child, and I can tell you that no one in America lives like the politicians and their corporate cronies. The luxury is

almost unimaginable.

My parents managed something extremely rare for anyone outside the Political Class—they had three children. Reproduction rates were strictly controlled everywhere in the USA, but they were especially restricted in crowded Manhattan where the legal limit was two—and that only for the most skilled workers.

My parents got around the limitations in a pragmatic way. Three years after I was born my mother gave birth to twin girls, Beth and Jill. A compulsory abortion would have been standard procedure but, in a freak error, the technician did not identify the second fetus at the single pre-natal exam my mother's health care ration allowed. So my sisters, both born alive and healthy, were something of a surprise.

With my father in a responsible position for a major government contractor, he was able to obtain a waiver legitimizing the births. We were lucky—a less educated and affluent family would have been subject to a mandatory termination for one of the twins.

My childhood was a pretty normal one for the middle class. My father worked long hours, but his position allotted us almost 70 square meters of living space within the safety and comfort of the Protected Zone. We were happy and content, and my earliest memories are pleasant ones of family and childhood. That happiness came to an abrupt end shortly after my eighth birthday.

When they were four years old, my sisters became infected with a strain of the X-2 super virus. Developed as a bacteriological weapon during the Unification Wars, the virus caused a deadly disease commonly called the Plague, though it was far deadlier and more difficult to treat than its historical namesake. Although the frequency of infection had declined dramatically in the decades since the virus had last been employed in war, it was still a serious health problem throughout the world. Advances in medical technology and treatment had reduced the mortality rate from 100% to approximately 50%, but no outright cure had ever been developed. In many cases the survivors suffered serious damage to vital organs and other bodily systems.

My sisters were young and strong, and they both survived the disease itself. Unfortunately though Beth recovered fully, the virus virtually destroyed Jill's liver. Her only hope of survival was a transplant or regeneration. While organ regeneration had been perfected in the previous century and offered a near-100% success rate, it was extraordinarily expensive, and my family's health care ration did not allow the procedure. As a third child, my sister's medical priority rating was extremely low, so even a transplant was out of the question. In the government's analysis, my sister's life simply wasn't worth the resources required to save it, particularly since my parents would still have two other children.

My parents didn't give up though. Black market organs and cut rate transplants were readily available outside the Protected Zone. Though illegal and dangerous, it was the only way to save Jill's life, and my father and mother didn't even think twice.

A black market transplant was still expensive, and my parents sold everything we owned and borrowed every credit they could. My mother even tried to go back to work. She had been an assistant chef at the Plaza Hotel before she married my father, but with more than 50% of the population unemployed the government allowed very few two income families. When my parents were married, my mother lost her work permit.

My mother and father did what any parents would do—they scraped together the money. My father requested additional work assignments, usually almost impossible to get, but thank

to a huge contract for the guidance system in the new Gettysburg class battleship, he was able to get an extra four paid hours a day. With her experience at the Plaza, my mother was able to get some unauthorized and illegal jobs catering for various functions. Somehow, and was never quite sure how they managed it, they put together enough money to fund the transplant, which in true black market fashion had to be paid for in full upfront.

The operation was performed secretly, in a storage room instead of in a hospital, but in spite of the less than ideal conditions the transplant was successful. Extensive drug therapy was required to force acceptance of the poorly matched organ, and the high dosages caused permanent damage to her immune system. But she was alive, and with proper medication, which would also come from the black market, she could live something approaching a normal life.

Just when it seemed that everything would work out our world fell apart. I never knew exactly what happened, but the authorities found out about the illegal operation, my mother's freelancing ... everything.

We were in the closing years of the Second Frontier War and the government was looking everywhere for revenue. So my parents were offered the chance to pay a large fine and escape further punishment. Having just spent every mil they had on the surgery, there was no way they could come up with the demanded funds.

I vaguely remember the inquisitor visiting us. My father told me to stay in the room I shared with my sisters and not to come out until he came back for me. It didn't matter that my parents had been desperately trying to save the life of their child. They had broken the laws, and that was all the inquisitor cared about.

After he left, my father came in and told me to go to bed. I wasn't even nine, but I could tell he was scared. It was the first time I'd ever seen my father afraid of anything. I knew something terrible was happening, but I didn't say anything. I just said goodnight to my father and got into bed. He whispered, "Goodnight," and turned off the light on the way out. Laying there in the dark I could hear my mother crying in the next room. All night I could hear my parents talking and the sounds of them walking around the apartment. Most of all, I remember my mother's sobs.

The next day six armed government marshals summarily seized all of my parents' property including their occupancy rights to the apartment. My father was terminated from his employment (his job was excellent and could easily be sold to another qualified candidate), and our residency permit was revoked.

We were forced to leave the Midtown Protected Zone. I will never forget the image of the five of us huddled together as the 77th Street gate slowly slid open. I remember taking a last look behind me before my father wrapped his arm around my shoulder and led me out over the cracked pavement north of the gate.

Northern Manhattan had once been densely populated, but now it was mostly abandoned. The two kilometers immediately north of the wall had been completely razed during the Disruptions to prevent rioters and gangs from sneaking up on the Protected Zone. It was an eerie landscape of ancient, crumbling roadways and scattered pillars of broken masonry—the remnants of demolished buildings that had once housed thousands. There were deep trenches in several places where the ground had collapsed on abandoned underground rail lines. Partially filled with putrid brown water, they looked like nightmarish canals making their way northward.

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