



A Neverwinter Nights Campaign

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and the Players of the Monday Night Crew

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Introduction

Trying something new this time.

Readers of my previous stories know that I have thus far focused on fictional serials based on a variety of published D&D settings. This story is different. It is based on a Neverwinter Nights (NWN) campaign that I ran during the second half of 2008. I have been running campaigns at the matchmaking site [Neverwinter Connections](#) since NWN was released in 2002, and as of late 2010, I am running three games that meet weekly.

NWN has a dynamic custom content community, which includes the D20 Modern Project, a group that has created a total conversion of the game for the modern setting. The X-COM campaign uses this system and builds on it. The module and this story are based on the classic 1993 game by Microprose Software. The module was originally created by a NeverwinterConnections player named Mulu, which I took and expanded for this campaign. For those who are interested, the module is posted at the [Neverwinter Vault](#). I subsequently ran the same group through a sequel based on the 1995 game, *X-COM 2: Terror from the Deep*.

This game was played by my Monday night campaign group, over the course of roughly 30 weekly two-hour sessions. I recorded all in-game player conversation logs during the campaign, and got permission from my players to incorporate their characters and dialogues into this story. Because the flow of comments in an online game are often disjointed, I revised them as I wrote the story, and added descriptions to create a more unified narrative. However, a majority of the dialogue in the story comes directly from my players. They are an awesome group of roleplayers and the story is dedicated to them.

Here are the characters and their players. The characters started at third level at the start of the campaign. A few of the players didn't join until later in the campaign; we'll get to them a bit later. I also trimmed out a few player characters who only attended for a few sessions before dropping out.

- Vasily Kasprjak, Tough Hero/Daredevil, played by [Smart Alec](#)
- Catalina De Farrago, Fast Hero/Infiltrator, played by [vanya mia](#)
- Jane Swift, Fast Hero/Gunslinger/Smart Hero, played by [Jenniza](#)
- Buzz Oloff, Fast/Smart Hero, played by [TheBaldMan](#)
- Dr. James Allen, Dedicated Hero/Field Medic, played by [chiz](#)

If you want to follow the original game thread and its over 1000 posts, visit [Neverwinter Connections](#). In addition to forum roleplaying posts between sessions (encouraged with

bonus XP), I ran a “base building” game on the forum to simulate the strategic element of X-COM. Players chose which research and manufacturing priorities they wanted the organization to pursue, which affected the gear they had in the game. I’ve included a guide to this part of the game in the download at the Vault linked above.

Ken “Lazybones” McDonald
November 2010

Session 1 (April 14, 2008)

Chapter 1

Vasily Kasprjak dozed in the cavernous interior of the C-130 transport aircraft. The monstrous plane rattled and shook, its engines filling the interior compartment with a constant roar, but Vasily was not especially troubled by the din; he’d flown in old Tupolev bombers that had felt like they were trying to shake themselves apart.

Nor was he troubled by the men in khaki who sat across from him, who’d watched his every move since they’d embarked in St. Petersburg sixteen hours ago. They hadn’t exchanged more than a dozen words with him, and their hands never seemed to stray far from their sidearms, but the Americans just couldn’t seem to manage the level of cool malevolence that he was used to from agents of the FSB. That and he knew that if the Americans were willing to go through the trouble of flying this huge plane to Russia to pick him up—and the cost of two aerial refuelings to boot—then it was unlikely that they intended him harm. In truth, he’d probably become much safer when he’d stepped onto the American plane.

They had told him it was a glorious opportunity to serve the Motherland, a chance for new challenges, new responsibilities. Grim jargon, all of it. It meant, *We’re going to throw away the key.*

He knew it had been coming, in the days following what was officially being labeled “The Kalinovskaya Incident.” People had died, some of them true patriots. Attention had been drawn to an operation that was supposed to go unnoticed. Objective Achieved, he’d made sure of it, but at a cost some in the organization had felt was too high. He had wondered what was to become of him. A desk job? Forced retirement? A teaching post at one of the Training Academies?

No. It was far, far worse than that. They were sending him to *America.*

The enforced solitude of the trip had given him a chance to make peace with the reality of his exile. He still had no idea just what this new international organization that he’d been assigned to was all about, but secrets were nothing new to him. You didn’t get far

as a soldier in the *Federalnaya sluzhba bezopasnosti* of the Russian Federation without knowing how to accept orders without knowing their purpose. Of course, you also tended to go farther in the Federal Security Service when you didn't report superiors for accepting bribes. Had it been an accident that his backup had been four minutes late arriving at Kalinovskaya?

A slight shift in pitch in the engines warned him before the aircraft started its descent. Wherever he was going, he'd find out what he was getting into soon enough. He kept his face as impassive and as dignified as he could. *You may be the lowest of the low, they told every recruit, but it doesn't matter how high you climb - in the eyes of the World, You are Russia!*

So now, as always, that's what he'd be.

Character Record, Vasily Kasprjak

Human, Lawful Neutral
Tough (3)

Strength	14	2
Dexterity	14	2
Constitution	15	2
Intelligence	14	2
Wisdom	10	0
Charisma	10	0

AC 14
HP 36/36

Experience: 4676
Next Level: 6000

Main Weapon: Unarmed
Attack bonus: +4
Damage: 1-3 + 2 (Critical: 20 / x2)
Offhand Weapon: Not Applicable
Fortitude: 3
Reflex: 3
Will: 2

* * * * *

“De Farrago, we have an assignment for you.”

The information had surprised her. She had struggled to hold down that and the elation, and display in the emotionless manner they were expected to maintain. She had

responded with thanks, careful to use an even tone, while taking the rather slim dossier that now resided in her case. A liaison role would have been normal to begin with, and to put her in the field so soon was against policy. Now sitting and swaying easily with any bumps as the APC rolled along, warm and rather uncomfortable in the formal suit, Catalina ran her eyes over the people she travelled with. Her eyes wandered from the big soldier, to the rather hard-eyed woman, to the balding and bearded fellow, speculating idly on who they might be. So far there had been little conversation, and beyond accents she had no real information to go on.

“I cannot deny, this is soon for you to be in the field so actively, but your talents fit the desired profile sufficiently well to satisfy the official request, and frankly...” here the normally impassive face of the commander had wavered, *“the information we have been supplied is a little... unusual. Were it not for the trusted relationship with our cousins across the pond...”* He’d tailed off and coughed lightly. *“For this reason, a full briefing is being withheld, you need to go into this with an open mind.”* She’d listened, now concealing puzzlement, through the rest of the briefing concerning travel, contacts, reporting structures, plus the standard information on personnel arrangements and matters of protocol. It didn’t tell her a great deal, and nothing Catalina had learned so far had improved the situation. The flight across the Atlantic on a RAF BAe 125 had given her time to review the briefing folder, but that had only led to more questions. The plane had deposited her at Creech Air Force Base—she remembered that the Yanks controlled their drone aircraft from there, part of the ongoing War on Terror—and she’d found herself in an armored carrier without even a pause to adjust her makeup. The briefing documents were somewhat vague on her final destination, and the vehicle lacked windows to yield clues. From the way that the vehicle kept jostling her, it was somewhere that lacked proper roads.

“This is not an assignment for which we are going to pull a key agent out of the field. I’ll be frank, De Farrago, there’s a chance someone is trying to make a laughing stock out of the service, and that won’t do. So...” The commander had leaned forward with a severe expression at that point. *“...we’re officially removing the limitations of the normal inter-agency exchange arrangement. You have license to learn what you can, however you can, and report back if you can.”* He’d leaned back and tented his hands. *“Don’t put yourself, or the service, in an unsafe position, but we want to know what’s going on, De Farrago.”*

As the mystery surrounding this assignment deepened, Catalina found herself agreeing soundly with that sentiment.



* * * * *

Buzz was always the least-threatening looking "kid" among "grown-ups." Even now, pushing thirty, despite his receding hairline and the red goatee he'd finally managed to grow, much of the effects of puberty seemed to have decided to simply pass him by. The harmless look he had about him had gotten him out of trouble in the past.

He hadn't been born with many advantages, but he'd developed skills that could have led to success. If it were not for his incorrigible propensity for finding his way around what others thought of as "secure areas," he would have had a nice normal life; a life outside the rat-filled rooms of his childhood. Now he felt like one of those rats stuck in a glue trap.

In hindsight, he shouldn't have been surprised when they'd finally come for him. He had told them he had meant no harm, trying to play on those childless features once again, but these guys hadn't fallen for it. Even when they'd found his stash of removable hard drives he thought he'd get clear, but these guys had been good, good enough to break through even the encryption and other stuff he'd put on there almost as a reflex, security that even government spooks shouldn't have been able to crack. In hindsight, maybe

he'd been a little overconfident, a little careless. Into the back of a white van, *why was it always a white van*, he'd thought, and he was off out of the slums. And he knew no one would miss him.

He was tested, prodded and probed. His captors learned quickly to keep him away from anything electronic. He'd overheard one guard mutter in frustration, "*That damn kid could jack into our network with a paper clip!*" Buzz puzzled in silence about the possibilities of that while he fell asleep.

It was in the middle of the night that he was often awoken to "learn some real hacking" he was told. This meant bruises and bumps and blisters for the most part. Buzz was not used to such physical endurance. His captors seemed to take masochistic joy in pushing him to his limits. It was weird, instead of just beating him down, after the first few sessions, the exercises actually started to seem like some sort of regimen. The ring around his gut started to fade, and the unhealthy white pallor of his skin faded to merely pale. The days and nights blended together with one burning question, "Who were these people?"

It was in the middle of pondering this question one night, as he lay pretending to be asleep and waiting for them to rouse him off to more training, that he would finally get close to an answer. His captors—he never did find out who they were—roused him, and had thrust him still blinking back sleep into an elevator that had deposited him into a garage. Buzz had smiled weakly when he'd seen what awaited him there: another white van.



* * * * *

Jane didn't know why she was here. She wasn't with the CIA any more, though she still worked for them, after a fashion, doing contract work as security for foreign dignitaries. That was all she was going to get, she thought, after what had happened. She hadn't seen her file since then, but she knew there had to be a big red mark in it, and no doubt an extensive dossier from the psych evals that they'd put her through.

If only some one else on her team had seen what she had. If only there had been radar evidence, or a sat pic, or something else to confirm what she'd experienced. Or maybe it wouldn't have made a difference.

People didn't want to hear that you'd seen an alien.

Since coming off active duty, she'd been doing some fund-raising work. She'd gravitated to FOAA—no doubt another red mark in her file. A year ago she'd have laughed at the group, but after what she'd seen, Families of Alien Abductees no longer seemed as "fringe" as it had. Sure, there were lots of cranks that were drawn to orgs

like FOAA, but to her surprise, there were others there, serious people like herself, others who'd experienced things like she had.

She wasn't crazy, she told herself.

The orders recalling her to active duty had come as a surprise. The uniformed men in the black helicopter had taken her to a site somewhere in the Nevada desert, where she was transferred with very little explanations other than that the orders were confirmed by the right people in charge. From a nearly-empty base in the middle of the night she was transferred by a black van to another van and eventually to the armored vehicle that even now carried her across the desert to what she hoped was her final destination.

She looked around at the other passengers. There were five in all, including her. She discounted the man in black armor and dark camo in the front of the compartment, a carbine that Jane recognized as a late-model M4A1 with a SOPMOD kit attached slung under his arm. She knew better than to ask him questions, though she saw that he had a com unit with its telltale wire tucked into his left ear.

The other three passengers, however, seemed just as puzzled as she was by all the secrecy. There was a woman and two men, an odd mix. They'd barely spoken other than some curt greetings on being filed into the APC, but she'd heard enough to identify the woman in the suit as British, the big fellow as a Russian, and the other guy as an American, probably an inner-city kid of lower-class origin. Asking the obvious question of where they were going was as pointless as asking why they were all here. Still, wherever they were going it seemed pretty clear that they were going together, so it might be a good idea to get to know them.

Jane spoke up, "Name's Jane Swift. I guess I'm as clueless as the next as to why we're here. I suppose they wanted us to meet and get to know each other. I used to work for the CIA. Certed as a sniper, though I guess you could say I did a little bit of everything." She paused, and for some reason, found herself adding, "on the side I raised money for Families of Alien Abductees, a non-profit charity."

The British woman, raised an eyebrow, just slightly, but she extended a hand. Of the four of them, she was the only one who somehow had managed not to appear a bit disheveled from the journey thus far. "Catalina De Farrago. Attaché to the British consulate." After the slightest pause, she added, "Pleased to meet you."

Jane shook the woman's hand—she had a firm grip. She glanced at the red-haired American, and saw a flash of something in his eyes at her comment about FOAA—why had she said that? But when he saw her looking at him, he looked away.

The big man shifted slightly in his seat. "Kasprjak. FSB."

Jane saw that Catalina recognized the reference, but the red-haired man apparently did not, or at least he betrayed no recognition. *Russian Security Services*, Jane thought. *Interesting.*

Now that they were talking, Catalina leaned back in her chair, grimacing slightly as the seat jolted under her. "Does anyone actually know where we are going?"

Vasily inclined his head at the man with the rifle. "Him?"

The soldier seemed to be ignoring their conversation, although Jane would not have put money on that being the case. He touched the earpiece. "Roger that," he said, responding to whoever was speaking via the com unit. He didn't quite look at the others, but after a moment he said, "We'll be arriving shortly." The pitch of the APC's motor changed, and they felt themselves descending, the rough jolts of before smoothing out as they moved down some sort of ramp.

"Guess this is where it gets interesting," Jane said, looking around at her new companions.

The APC came to a halt.

The soldier rose as they all heard the latches on the back door cycling open. "Okay, we're here," he said. "Last stop, everybody out."

The Russian was the first to rise, straightening his weathered fatigues. The door opened onto a lighted area, and the others followed him out, ducking under the low overhang of the vehicle's exit.

They were in a large garage area that was full of activity. The place, likely underground from the steep descent they'd taken in the APC, had metal walls, floor, and ceiling, old metal by the look of it, with bits of rust drifting down from the pipework that was suspended from the ceiling fifteen feet above. In addition to the APC they'd arrived on, there were two large trucks in the bay, which men in the same black uniform as their loquacious escort were busy loading with crates that other men were bringing in via a steady procession of flatbed handcarts. It was evident that the place was in the midst of being emptied, and for a moment the four newcomers just stood there, not sure where they were supposed to go or what they were supposed to do.

After just a few seconds, one of the men in black came over to them. "He's waiting for you inside," he said, gesturing over his shoulder to a recessed doorway on the far side of the garage.

"Inside," Vasily said. Frowning, he headed in that direction, the others following behind. A soldier standing at the door watched their approach, talking quietly into a com unit. He opened the door, which had a round wheel set into it, resembling a compartment door on a warship.

The room beyond had been stripped of most of its contents, and they could see marks on the walls where panels and fixtures had existed before. A folding table with a large computer system atop it stood lonely on the far side of the room. A man in a black suit, white shirt, and gray tie was working at the computer, but he quickly stood as the four entered the room.

“Good afternoon,” he said. “I am Garret. Michael Garret. United Nations liaison to this ... operation.” He shook each of their hands, addressing them by name. “Sorry for the mess and the bustle. This was just our temporary home as we got organized. We’re about to move to a new facility not far from here that’s been specially adapted for our needs.”

He returned to the table with the computer, gesturing for them to follow, although there were no chairs anywhere in the room save for the one behind the table. Garret did not sit, however. “I understand that you have only just met, but each of you possesses certain skills, that are going to be vital to the success of this operation. You have all been released by your parent national organizations to us, to help in getting this new agency off the ground.”

“Ah, sir, if I may ask, what is the name of this agency?” Jane asked.

Garret smiled slightly. “The official name is the Extraterrestrial Combat Unit,” he said, spreading his arms as if to encompass the entirety of the base. “But we’ve shortened it a bit for everyday use.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to X-COM.”



* * * * *

Session 1 (April 14, 2008)

Chapter 2

The four recruits stared, blinked in surprise. For a moment, Garret's statement was greeted only with a shocked silence. Garret lifted a hand in reassurance. "I know, I know. Really, it's more of a research agency, at the moment. Although it may end up being much more."

He pressed a few buttons on the computer keyboard, then looked up at them. "You're going to learn some *unusual* things in the coming weeks, and will be out of contact with your sponsoring organizations for a little while. I ask only that you keep an open mind."

He started toward the far wall, where another door—this one just an unremarkable slab of sheet steel—stood within a slightly recessed alcove. "We'll be departing for the main

base shortly, but I wanted you to get a chance to know each other first. And in all honesty, we'd like to see what the four of you can do."

That sounded somewhat ominous. The four of them exchanged a series of weighing looks, then turned back to Garret, who was waiting beside the door.

"There is a gentleman in the next room," he told them. "His name is Smith. Sergeant Smith. He will be able to direct you from here on. I will speak with you again once we get settled at the new facility. If you'll excuse me..."

He turned and left, the door to the garage opening again at his approach. The four watched him leave, then turned back as the steel door ahead of them slid aside, rolling on some unseen mechanism that was recessed into the wall. For a moment they just stared, then Vasily, with a grunt, led them into the next room.

The new chamber was similar to the first, with empty sockets and connectors gaping along the walls, and marks on the floor that suggested that this place had once been crowded with heavy machinery. Now there were just two tables laden with several large white lockers, and a tall black man whose iron frame seemed to have been borrowed from an Olympic wrestler. He looked up as they came in.

"Good. I wondered if you were ever going to get here."

"Yes," Vasily said, while Catalina added, "As did we, sergeant."

"Name's Smith." He jerked a thumb toward the lockers. "Go ahead. Lockers right there, they're for you. Take whatever you need."

"Yes, sergeant Smith, Jane said, walking around the bulk of Vasily toward the tables and the lockers. The Russian watched as she opened the nearest, a wary look in his eyes.

If Smith was discomfited by his hard stare, he didn't show it. "This here's a little... well, let's call it an 'entrance examination'."

Jane whistled as she looked into the first locker. Reaching inside, she drew out a big rifle. "M110 semi-auto, chambered for the 7.62x51mm NATO round," she said. "These are new, U.S. Army's only had them for about two years, and only in very limited numbers." She looked at Smith, who only nodded.

The others started looking through the crates. Vasily took out a Heckler & Koch G-36 assault rifle and several magazines, and efficiently loaded the weapon, tucking the extra clips into the pockets of his coat.

"Live ammunition?" Catalina asked, examining a Glock handgun with a practiced eye.

“As live as it gets,” Smith replied.

“What kind of... test... are we talking about?” Buzz asked. He looked inside the locker that Vasily was exploring as though it were full of vipers.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be watching you on the monitors. And the systems are non-lethal. Well, mostly.” He chuckled, as if he’d make a joke, although none of the others were laughing. He turned as another door opened, and another man came in. He was also African-American, but while he was in good shape, he lacked the general sense of danger that seemed to hang around Smith. “Ah,” the sergeant said. “This here’s Doctor White. He’ll be supervising the exercise.”

“A pleasure to meet you all.” He walked over to Vasily, holding a small white object. The Russian drew back slightly, his rifle shifting just incrementally, the barrel pointing toward the floor just between them. Smith growled something, but White let out an exasperated breath. “It’s only a wireless bio-sensor, it won’t hurt you.” He held it up, fastened and unfastened its velcro band. “See? We really are pressed for time here, our gear is supposed to be on the next trip to the new base, and I want to make sure the guys there don’t break anything unloading it.”

Vasily’s expression didn’t change, but he allowed White to fasten the white band around his left wrist. He had others for Buzz and the two women; Buzz was already poking at his by the time that White drew back beside Smith.

“There’s an elevator through those doors behind you,” Smith said. “It’ll take you down to the training area. You’ll hear my voice on the com system. Try not to get blood on anything.”

“He is joking, right?” Buzz hissed at Jane, who was strapping a holstered Glock to her right hip.

“We’re hardly dressed for an assault course,” Catalina said, indicating her own suit, which would not have looked out of place on the CEO of a Fortune 500 corporation.

“I not worried,” Vasily said. Indeed, he seemed much more at ease now that he was armed.

“You’ll be getting new duds, where you’re going,” Smith said. “I wouldn’t worry about mussing up that nice outfit.”

“Part of the exercise is to see how you respond to stressful situations,” White said. “I’m sure you will all do fine. We really have done this before.”

“Here,” Jane said, handing a pistol to Buzz, who was having some difficulty sorting through the available selections. “It’s loaded and chambered, just point and shoot.”

Vasily led them to the elevator doors, which opened to greet them. The Russian waited until the others had joined him. "You all ... civilian?"

"In a way," Catalina said.

"I know my way around firearms," Jane said.

The Russian grunted. "Keep head down," he said, pushing past Buzz, who'd been examining the elevator control panel. There was only one button, which he stabbed with a finger.

The elevator groaned and lurched into motion. It descended for only about ten seconds, finally stopping and opening to reveal what looked like a decrepit subbasement. Rusted pipes were visible along the walls and ceiling, and a tinge of rust and decay permeated the place.

"Lovely," Catalina said dryly.

"Straight on ahead, ladies," Smith's voice boomed, coming from a speaker attached to the wall of the room ahead. "Watch your step, the cleaning crew doesn't get down here very often."

"After you," Buzz said, smiling weakly.

"This is joke? It feel like... joke," Vasily said.

"This is the U.S., do they do jokes?" Catalina replied.

"Jokes don't usually involve live ammunition," Jane said.

Vasily moved through the open elevator doors into the room beyond. His eyes scanned the surroundings, settling on a plain-looking metal crate situated near a steam pipe near the right wall.

"All right, select a direction, someone," Catalina said. The lighting here was dim, but it was enough to reveal two exits, a corridor that branched out to the left, and a staircase that descended a quick flight to a door on the far side of the room up ahead. "If they want to play games, let's play games."

Jane had followed Vasily's eyes to the crate. "Something wrong?" she asked.

"Crate. No rust."

Catalina turned to look at it. "Hmm. He's right."

Buzz walked over to it. "No lock," he said, reaching for the lid.

“No!” Catalina and Jane yelled together, but not before Buzz lifted the lid, and the crate exploded.

* * * * *

Session 1 (April 14, 2008)

Chapter 3

“Hrrrr,” Buzz groaned. He blinked and tried to get up, but everything spun around him.

“Careful,” a voice said. “Give it a minute.”

Buzz thought that was good advice, and after a few seconds, the painful brightness and spinning feeling began to recede. He looked up into the face of a stranger, a fit-looking man in his early thirties, clad in a dark coverall with a small red cross pinned to the lapel. “You a doctor?” he asked.

“Yep,” the other man said. “M.D. in Emergency Medicine from Harvard Medical School. James Allen. Nice to meet you.”

Buzz took the man’s hand, accepting his help as he stood up. They were still in the room from before, his other three companions watching him from a short distance away. He glanced back at the crate, expecting to see it in pieces, but it was lying on its side near where it had been when he’d opened it, black marks visible around the lid. “What happened?” he managed.

“Flashbang,” Jane said. “Looks like you got a full shot of it in the face,” Allen said, making sure that Buzz was steady before he let him go. “You sure you’re all right?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Buzz said. His head certainly seemed to want to live up to his name, but at least the ringing was starting to recede more into the background.

Allen put several implements back into the satchel that hung from his shoulder. He started toward the elevator, but Smith’s voice came over the speaker again, interrupting him. “Better stick around, Doctor Allen,” the sergeant said. “They might have need of your services again.”

Vasily watched the exchange with a neutral look. “No more boxes. We open door.”

The Russian led them down the steps. The iron door at the bottom looked like it was about a million years old. Catalina stepped forward, and ran practiced fingers along the

jam, careful not to disturb anything. "It's been maintained recently. Fresh grease on the runners."

Vasily took the handle and gave it a tug. The door slid open, revealing a short hallway that opened onto a larger room beyond.

Smith's voice followed them from the speaker. "There's some friends in the next room, they might not play friendly."

Vasily looked back at the others. "Stay here," he said. He turned and made his way down the hallway.

"It would seem that our Russian friend believes he can handle the world on his own," Catalina commented.

"Like hell," Jane said, hefting the big rifle, slipping after him.

Vasily stepped warily into the room, which was about three times as long as it was wide, the far side deep in shadow where the light from the two flickering lamps in the ceiling failed to reach. There was some scrap metal scattered about, trash that looked like it had been part of a large heating unit at some point. The Russian turned as Jane entered the room behind him, frowning as the others came forward in her wake.

He opened his mouth to say something, but a deep metallic groan from the far side of the room drew his attention back around. There was movement there; he lifted his rifle, drew off the safety in a practiced motion. Behind him, the others were readying themselves as well.

But Vasily had never seen what came forward out of the darkness before. As the figures entered the light, he could make out metallic outlines, humanoid shapes that were clearly nothing human.

"Robots?" Catalina asked.

"Cool," Buzz breathed.

Vasily didn't share the sentiment. He took aim at the nearer target, but before he could fire, he heard a hiss and felt something sting him in the gut. He looked down to see a pair of wires there, just as he felt a surge of electrical energy that blazed through his body like a runaway fire, blasting him off his feet.

Character Record, James Allen



Human, Neutral Good
Dedicated (3)

Strength		12	1
Dexterity		14	2
Constitution		12	1
Intelligence		12	1
Wisdom		16	3
Charisma		10	0

AC 14 Experience: 4033
HP 27/27 Next Level: 6000

Main Weapon: Unarmed
Attack bonus: +3
Damage: 1-3 + 1 (Critical: 20 / x2)
Offhand Weapon: Not Applicable
Fortitude: 3
Reflex: 3
Will: 5

* * * * *

Session 1 (April 14, 2008)

Chapter 4

“You’ll live,” Allen said.

Vasily grunted, pulling his shirt back down over the mark left by the taser. The device had been set to relatively low power, to stun rather than render unconscious, but that didn’t mean it hadn’t *hurt*. Taking up his rifle—which still hadn’t been fired—he ignored the lingering pain as he got up and rejoined the others.

Buzz was still poking around the wreckage of the two—robots? Vasily was growing somewhat impatient. The things had caught him off-guard, but they’d responded to weapons fire as though they’d been human; likely they’d been programmed to simulate

damage effects. He recognized the sophistication of it, even as his patience continued to ebb.

“Let us go,” he said, leading them to the next door.

They left the room and entered a crowded hallway, with several thick conduit pipes crossing the passage. There was a sickly sweet stink in the air, just strong enough to be unpleasant.

“Gas,” James said. “We probably don’t want to spend longer down here than we have to.”

The corridor continued, until they could see that the passage ended in another door up ahead. This door, unlike the others they’d used, had a lock set into it next to the handle.

“Door. Is lock?” Vasily asked.

Catalina drew out a small metal nail file. She ran it over her nails, then walked over to the lock. Grimacing at the dirty floor, she crouched next to it, probed at the lock with the file, then drew out a pin from her hair. Using both impromptu tools together, she poked at the lock for about twenty seconds, then stood, and smiled. Vasily leaned in, and grabbed the handle; the door drew open at his tug.

“Hm. Good.”

“Thanks.”

The room beyond the door looked like it had once been a repair bay or somesuch; it was difficult to tell with all of the heavy equipment removed. A few unused power cables dangled from fixtures in the ceiling. Another passage led off to the left through another doorway, this one standing open.

Smith’s voice sounded over another speaker set into the ceiling. “There’s a big bad robot blocking the way up ahead. He’s waiting for your to arrive. Guns might work... or maybe you can find something in that box that can help.”

“There,” Catalina said, indicating the crate lying on the floor under the speaker. She walked over to investigate, keeping her distance.

“You want to deal with the box, Catalina?” Jane asked, coming up to join her.

“I’ve no tools with me, which is making life difficult. This one doesn’t look like a hairpin will work.” She pointed to the locking mechanism on top of the box, which had a small numeric keypad attached and no apparent keyhole.

Jane drew the bolt on her rifle, and pointed the barrel at the lock.

“Hey! No! Box may have explosive...” Vasily yelled, but he was cut off by the sound of the rifle shot. Catalina simply looked at Jane with an open-mouthed look of horror.

“There you go,” Jane said. “Next time I ask, there’s your choices.”

“Would have been a good idea to make it clear to begin with, you trigger happy moron,” Catalina muttered under her breath, as Jane bent to examine the contents of the box. “Hmm. Grenades, explosives.” She handed up a package to Catalina, who took it, after a moment. “Anyone else want grenades?” Jane said, holding one up.

“Surely these aren’t real?” Buzz asked.

“Training gear, but same as real as far as robot concerned,” Vasily said. “You think you can make ambush for robot?” he asked Catalina, who was still examining the explosive device Jane had given her.

“I’m afraid explosives aren’t my specialty,” she said.

“Give it to Igor here,” James said, motioning to Vasily. The Russian sent a hard look at the doctor, but finally said, “Give me explosives. I try set trap.”

They made their way down the other passage, which bent to the left after about fifteen paces. Vasily progressed to the intersection, peered around the bend. “Okay,” he said. “Robot in next room. I set trap, you bring it through here.” He handed his rifle to James, who accepted it after a moment’s pause. While the others went on ahead, he knelt at the corner, focusing upon the device, pulling out a tripwire from the mechanism, looking for a place to anchor it. He wasn’t having much luck when there was a clank and clatter from ahead, followed by the rattle of automatic weapons fire, punctuated by the deep cough of single shots.

Catalina was the first back. “Too late, it’s seen Calamity Jane.”

“Incoming,” Jane said, with Buzz and James right behind her. They bypassed Vasily, careful to avoid the tripwire he’d strung across the corridor. The Russian cursed as he tried to find the trigger to arm the bomb; he wasn’t familiar with this particular type of construction. The loud *thump* of the robot’s tread drew steadily louder.

“Fifty feet,” Jane said, glancing around the corner.

Vasily felt his fingers slip, but it was too late to do anything but close his eyes as the explosives went off in front of him. The simulated blast was only about as strong as another flashbang, but it blinded him, searing his hands and face with the force of it. He fell back, dazed. He could still hear the others shouting.

And the tread of the training bot, which came ponderously around the corner, right into the midst of the new recruits.

SERVER : [DM] Vasily Kasprjak : Demolitions Check, Roll 1d20: 3 + Modifier: -4 = Total: -1

The bot was twice the size of the man, and its servos whirled loudly under a shell of plate armor that covered most of its body. It was armed with tasers that it fired at point-blank range, striking Catalina and Jane. Both women screamed and fell, Catalina banging her head on the nearby wall, while Jane dropped her rifle and crumpled into a heap. The bot came forward, almost stepping on Vasily's hand as the Russian tried to recover from the explosion he'd inadvertently set off.

With a whistling noise the bot drew the taser cables back into its torso, turning toward James Allen, who was backpedaling away from it, his eyes wide. It had missed Buzz entirely, who'd fallen back against the far wall, still trying to blink away the flare from Vasily's bomb. As the bot started forward again, right toward the fallen Russian, something just snapped in him; he rushed forward, and grabbed the access port that sat squarely in the center of the robot's lower back. A confused welter of wires and gears was visible.

He reached in and started yanking. Something flashed, burning his hand, and he screamed in pain. He kept on screaming as he drew out the handgun that Jane had given him, held its muzzle up to the opening, and pulled the trigger.

There was a flash, a loud noise. Suddenly the bot stiffened, and slumped over.

"Very cool," Jane said, as quiet returned to the corridor. She extended a hand and helped Vasily to his feet.

"Neat work," Catalina added.

When he could see and hear clearly again, Buzz took a closer look at the hole in the giant robot's back. He saw that his wild shot had penetrated what looked like a control box set right in the guts of the thing's torso. Tendrils of electricity still flashed around the opening.

"We're lucky someone wasn't killed," James said. "This is getting ridiculous."

"All right, looks like you kids get to call it a day early," Sergeant Smith's voice came from the speaker in the room behind them. "Too bad, we had a pool on how many times you'd each 'die'. Come on ahead, it's clear back around to the elevator."

There were more than a few muttered growls in the direction of the speaker, as the battered recruits gathered together and made their way to the exit.

* * * * *

Session 2 (April 21, 2008)

Chapter 5

The interior of the APC stank.

Or more accurately, Catalina thought, *we stink*. They hadn't been offered the opportunity to shower or change their clothes at the staging base, which had continued to come apart around them following the training exercise. All that Sergeant Smith had told them was that they'd have a chance to rest and get cleaned up once they made it to the new base.

Of course, there was no telling when *that* would happen. They'd been in the vehicle for at least two hours already, the ride just as jouncy as their original trip to the staging base. Most of them looked as miserable as she felt, although the Russian was slumped back in his seat, and appeared to be snoring.

By the time that the vehicle rolled to a stop, she thought that she would have traded her pension for five minutes in a hot shower.

Vasily woke without having to be prodded, and he was the first to the door when the latches popped. The five of them—James Allen had come with them—disembarked onto a barren expanse of rocks and sand. It was about an hour before dawn, and all that they could see was a line of vague shadows that might have been mountains far to the northeast.

"Over here," Jane said.

They followed her around the vehicle, where they could see a squat metallic structure half-buried in the ground. It didn't look like much, maybe twelve feet by twenty. A dark slit appeared to be a staircase or ramp that led down into the interior. A man emerged from that opening, clad in a pale khaki uniform and body armor, his face shielded by a visor that extended across the opening in the front of his helmet.

"Hey, rookies," he said. "They're expecting you. Go on inside, the lift mechanism's set for manual activation."

"There better be answer inside," Vasily growled. Catalina looked at him; apparently the Russian was becoming grumpy. "It would indeed be nice," she said in agreement.

"This getting stupid," he said, heading toward the opening the soldier had emerged from. The others followed. Behind them, the guard spoke quietly into his throat mike. "Security authorization, roger. The newbies are here."

The building's interior contained nothing save for an open-sided lift in the center of the space, its corners marked by steel shafts that extended up to the roof. There was a control panel that rose on a strut at one corner of the lift. The five of them stepped onto the platform, and James pressed the lower of the two buttons. The lift activated, descending into a shaft that took them down into the earth.

It took them a good two minutes to reach the bottom. There was a metallic grate there blocking the exit, which drew up into the ceiling as the lift settled.

"Couple of hundred feet," Jane noted. Catalina nodded, she was glad that the others were paying attention.

The man who was waiting for them behind the grate was dressed in a uniform similar to the one worn by the guard above. He was older, probably pushing fifty, and had a weathered look that bespoke experience hard earned. "Welcome," he said in greeting. "I'm Mark Hallorand, Base Chief."

The five made their introductions, although it was pretty obvious that Hallorand knew who they were. "I know you've come a long way, and I imagine that you're a bit tuckered out from your trip. So I'll show you the barracks, give you a chance to get some rest, a shower."

"Thanks, that would be appreciated," James said. Catalina thought it was the answer to a prayer, but she kept an eye on the others. Buzz was looking around, his bright eyes taking in everything, while Vasily still looked like his features had been carved out of solid rock.

Hallorand led them into a hallway that connected to the lift room. There were a pair of armed guards there, who gave the newcomers a thorough looking over as they passed. "When you're ready, I'll arrange for a little tour of this facility," Hallorand was saying. "I've gotten word that Director Garret is going to have a briefing for you tonight, but plenty of time before then." He turned at a steel door. "I know you probably have a lot of questions, but I'm sure the briefing will answer them. I'd just like to say, welcome aboard."

"Thanks," Jane said.

Hallorand pressed the control panel to the right of the door, and the heavy steel slab slid open. "I can say that we're all pretty new to this," he told them, leading them into the brightly lit room beyond. "This base has only been operational for a few weeks."

The five recruits blinked as they looked around the room, which had been decorated to function as a nicely apportioned lounge. Several deep padded chairs flanked two doors to their left, while to the right there were two large round tables surrounded by more chairs, a couch, and of all things, a small piano, which looked rather out of place. The

far side of the room had another door and a long counter, which supported a few cabinets, a microwave, and a soda dispenser. A portable stereo system had been set up on the end of the counter.

“This is our rec room,” Hallorand explained. “Over here on the left are the briefing room, and the communications center. I’ll show you the commissary after you’ve rested. If you want a snack, there’s a variety of instant meals near the micro.” Catalina felt her stomach grumble at the reminder that she hadn’t eaten since the flight—how long ago had that been? But she stifled her complaining stomach and followed Hallorand to the far door.

That one opened like the first, and led onto another long hallway with doors on both sides. She recognized the universal symbols on the doors to the left, the familiar white-stenciled outlines of a man and a woman, but Hallorand opened the first one on the right. “This is your barracks. New quarters for Alpha Team. That’s you lot.”

Catalina took a look. The quarters were spartan at best, with tiered bunk beds running down the long, narrow room in a row on one side, with plain metal lockers opposite. There was a poster stuck on the wall, depicting a very scantily clad blonde woman posing at an improbable angle.

“Shared?” Catalina asked.

“Sure, why not?” Jane said. “If the guys aren’t embarrassed by bras and stuff.”

Catalina smiled. “Well. At the very least, we will need a fireman calendar to balance... that.”

“But you said the showers work, right?” Buzz interjected.

“Yes,” Hallorand responded. “Men’s and women’s restrooms, with showers, are just across the hall. And there are privacy screens that pull out, divide this room into smaller compartments. Unfortunately we just don’t have the space for individual quarters at this point, things are even more packed for the base crew and technicians, believe me.”

“I just hope no one snores!” Buzz exclaimed.

“I’ll try to keep it down,” Catalina replied dryly. She headed to the far end of the room, and stopped at a locker that had her name on it. “Hmm. Well, isn’t this... basic,” she said, pulling out a plain coverall uniform. “Ah, our luggage!” she said, digging deeper into the locker.

“Your personal possessions were forwarded here. We’ll get you fitted out more properly once you get settled in,” Hallorand said. “Remember that this entire base was empty just two weeks ago.” He checked his watch. “I have to attend to a few things, I’ll come

back for you around noon, for that tour. You may hear a few unusual noises, nothing to be alarmed about. We're still building out parts of the base."

The chief paused at the door. "Grace Thelon, our engineer, will be by with IDs and communicators by the time you've rested. Until you get the IDs, best not to wander around too much. Go ahead and use the lounge, if you want."

"Any computers around?" Buzz asked.

"There's a few laptops in the rec room, but local access only, I'm afraid. No hookups to the Internet. I'll see you all at noon."

Once he had left, and the door had swung shut, Vasily shook his head. "If anyone have idea what this about, please tell." He was obviously tired, his accent thickening until the others could barely decode it.

"James?" Jane asked. "You were here before we were."

"Only for a day," he replied. "There is some threat, something related to the reports of aliens in the press. Other than that, I know about as much as you do."

"Don't look at me," Catalina said, "they refused to brief me properly. 'Necessary to keep an open mind,' I was told."

James looked thoughtful. "Well, either there actually are aliens, or... something stranger yet." He shrugged. "I'm guessing we'll find out soon enough."

"Well, all I know is that I need a shower," Catalina said, taking her toiletries bag out of her locker. "Excuse me, gents," she said with a smile, heading for the facilities.

X-COM HQ



* * * * *

Session 2 (April 21, 2008)

Chapter 6

This place is huge, Jane thought, as they returned to the rec room. Hallorand had been as good as his word, taking them all over the complex. It looked as though X-COM had taken over an existing facility, as some of the infrastructure had been pretty dated, but they'd also been shown rooms that looked as though they'd been bored out of the bedrock just minutes before. The laboratories and workshops had been impressive, even though a lot of the components were still sitting around in boxes and crates. The commissary-slash-kitchen had been simple enough but the food had been decent; Hallorand had commented on the importance of having a good cook for the morale of any large organization. He seemed to know his business; after talking to him for a while, she guessed that he'd been an officer in a military logistics command.

She turned the small communicator over in her hand. Grace had called it an "xPhone," and in fact it did resemble the consumer device that was all the craze now, with a touch screen and a sleek matte finish. But while Grace had only given them a brief summary of its features, she knew that there was more to it than met the eye.

The same could be said for all of this, this entire thing, X-COM, the base, the still-mysterious mission. She was perhaps a bit more open to it than the others, because she'd *seen*, she knew already, what was coming.

She glanced over at Buzz, who had already managed to get the back off his xPhone, and was poking around at the innards. Catalina was reading a file on her device, sitting on the couch with her feet up; James and Vasily had gone off somewhere, maybe to the firing range that Hallorand had shown them during the tour. She turned on the phone, and opened up the folder she'd only glanced at earlier.

X-COM Operations, she read, and started looking for answers.

It was a little after six when their xPhones chirped, indicating that it was time for the briefing. The conference room just off the lounge was decorated with a long table, its rich faux-grain top contrasting with the recently-installed paneling that covered the walls. Twelve black office chairs were lined up around the table. A laptop computer hooked up to a twenty-four inch monitor stood at one of end of the table, while a large LCD screen dominated one of the walls, with a bank of touch-input screens jutting out in a row beneath it.



The room was already occupied by a half-dozen people. Michael Garret stood at the table next to the computer. He nodded in greeting as the new recruits of Alpha Team filed in. “Ah, good. All settled in?”

“Working on it,” Vasily said, pulling out a chair. The others sat next to him, facing the wall screen.

“I believe you already know Grace, and Stan White, our chief medical officer. Allow me to introduce Doctor Kimberly Wagner, head of our research department.” The woman standing next to the wall screen was tall and blonde, in a white lab coat over a black blouse and trousers, stunningly attractive despite the subtle advance of years evident in her features. “Charmed, I am sure,” she said, a thick German accent tilting her syllables.

Garret continued the introductions, indicating a woman with long brown hair, dressed in jeans and a sweater, sitting near the far end of the table. “Doctor Jean Beauvais, our counselor.”

“Pleased to meet you all,” she said.

Garret indicated a young Asian man standing behind Beauvais. “Down there at the end, Ken Yushi. He’s a pilot, and more specifically, he’ll be your pilot, in Skyranger-1.”

“Skyranger?” Vasily asked.

“Ah, you’ll meet that member of our team a bit later,” Garret said. He turned to the woman seated next to him, the last to be introduced. She was a lean woman, dressed in a smart black suit, her hair cut short. She had a laptop in front of her, which she snapped shut as Garret spoke. “This is Agent Inise Drake.”

“Federal Bureau of Investigations,” Drake said, her words clipped.

“I am certain that all of you are curious about why you are here,” Garret went on.

“I think some of us had registered a passing interest,” Catalina said.

“I only had a chance to speak with you briefly at the staging base,” Garret said. “Let me explain, then, what it is that X-COM is about. Doctor Wagner, if you wouldn’t mind providing some context?”

Wagner nodded, and turned to the control panel under the large wall screen. As she touched the controls, graphics started appearing on the screen to accompany her words.

“We have little hard data about our enemy,” she began. “A few months ago, we started picking up unusual readings from our various orbital devices. Space station... some secret arrays as well.” Images of the ISS, a map of satellite orbits, and various depictions of the Earth as seen from space cascaded across the screen. “Very fast, like nothing we had seen before.”

The new recruits leaned forward in their chairs as a grainy, pixelated image appeared on the screen: an oblong disk, with a fat bulge protruding from its center.

“Various air forces attempted to intercept these, for lack of a better word, ‘UFOs’. There were a few encounters. Russian air force, China’s, and American. Let us just say that those encounters did not end well for us.”

The FBI agent’s stare was penetrating as she looked at the new members of Alpha Team. “Your job is to make sure that subsequent outcomes are more favorable.”

“Agent Drake is our liaison with our host government,” Garret said. “We are on American soil, although technically, X-COM is an extraterritorial entity.”

“Yes,” Drake said, “I am here to ensure that the United States government’s investment proves fruitful.”

A few of the team members shared looks. Catalina locked eyes with Drake, a staring match that was only interrupted when Wagner said, “The briefing, I am continuing, yes?”

At Garret's nod, she pressed another button on the console, and another image appeared, one that looked like the scene from the end of a war movie. "This, we have kept quiet."

The attention of everyone in the room was drawn to the screen like metal filings to a magnet. Doctor Wager continued, "This has been the worst incursion to date. An entire military base wiped out, in western China. The Chinese have not been especially forthcoming, but we've confirmed that this was the work of our unidentified 'friends'."

"Whoa," Jane said.

"When did this happen?" Vasily asked.

"Seventeen days ago," Garret said. "Doctor, tell them the rest."

"There have also been incursions. Landings. At least sixteen worldwide. Some animals, and a few people, have been ... taken."

"Sixteen that we know of," Agent Drake interjected. "Some may have gone unreported."

"That is likely, Agent Drake," Garret acknowledged. "All we have is some grainy surveillance photos. Their ships are like nothing any human government has ever built. And their occupants..."

He nodded to Wagner, who brought up another picture, a grainy, long-distance shot, depicting a small humanoid figure. It was impossible to make out any details given the poor quality of the picture, but all of them leaned forward, peering at it.

"We are calling them 'Sectoids' for now," Wagner said.

"You're telling us that the Roswell paranoia that the media's been going on about of late is true?" Catalina asked.

"There has been a lot of reports in the media, most of it wild fancy," Garret said. "Thus far, the leading world governments have been reluctant to confirm or deny anything."

"None of this information leaves this room," Drake said.

James leaned back in his chair and let out a held breath. "Aliens invading and abducting humans. Wow."

Wagner pressed a button, and the pictures vanished. "This is the mission of X-COM." Bullet points appeared on the screen to match her comments, under a logo depicting the name of the organization. "One. Investigate and gather data."

"Part of our job is to find out what we don't know," Garret said.

“Two. Research and analyze.”

“You’ve seen our labs,” Garret said. “We need to collect whatever hard data we can find, and figure out what makes these ‘Sectoids’ tick. That’s why several of you have been invited here. You have certain skills in this area that will be vital to our operation.”

Wagner stabbed at a button. “And finally, three. Intercept. Destroy.”

Catalina quirked a brow. “No ‘take me to your leader’?”

Garret’s expression was grim. “We’re not primarily a military organization. But Earth’s best militaries have proven ineffective against the Sectoids.”

“They don’t appear to be interested in communication,” Drake added. “They have ignored all attempts thus far.”

“We’re not above talking to them,” Garret said. “If we can figure out what they want.” He drew stare down the row of recruits. “You five are more than just our Alpha Field Team. You all have talents beyond firing guns and tromping about in heavy boots. You have seen what we have... but what we don’t have, is a government bureaucracy. We’re small. Our resources come as donations from the countries that comprise our consortium. We have a limited remit... and a lot of accountability. You will be given access to all of the data we’ve collected thus far, expected to assimilate it, and to participate in the mission profiles and the setting of priorities.”

He paced around the edge of the table, rested his fists on its edge. “X-COM has fewer than 500 operatives worldwide. We’re bringing in people as we speak. Scientists. Engineers. Soldiers. We’re building state-of-the-art research and manufacturing facilities here, and at our other operations centers around the world. The threat is real, and we’re going to do our best to confront it. “

He leaned back, sighed, in that moment looking more human than he had since they’d first met him. “I know it’s a lot to take in. Take the rest of the day to get settled in. Chief Hallorand will take you to Musa Babatola, our quartermaster; he’ll get you set up with uniforms and other gear. Doctor Wagner will send you the briefings via your xPhones, along with information about our current research and manufacturing priorities. If you have any questions, send them to the respective department heads. We’re busy as all hell right now, but we’re going to make this a team effort.”

* * * * *

Interlude: Base Priorities (April 22, 2008)

FROM: Kimberly Wagner, X-COM Research Chief
TO: Alpha Team
RE: Research and Manufacturing Priorities

Team members: per our briefing earlier today, you will be asked periodically to provide input on X-COM mission priorities. Director Garret has expressed confidence that your particular skills will help us to maximize our limited resources in these areas.

I shared two of our current research projects at the briefing, and Chief Engineer Thelon has asked that I apprise you of a third option that she believes can yield long-term dividends.

For research, here are our current open projects:

- **Laser Weapons:** Preliminary reports indicate that current-generation weaponry may be of limited utility against the "Sectoid" menace. We believe that we can develop man-portable weaponry from current advanced laser technology under development at DARPA, the European Scientific Colloquium, and the Advanced Technology Labs at MIT. The development of weapons will take time, but our research team indicates that this work is a necessary prerequisite toward the development of higher-order weaponry.
- **Motion Sensor Technology:** Doctor Sandesh has already developed a proof-of-concept prototype, based on a motion-detection technology used by the British S.A.S. Dr. Sandesh has suggested that this technology, once perfected, may yield useful battlefield applications.
- **Heavy Weapons Platform:** Chief Engineer Thelon has submitted a brief for the development of a HWP based on the U.S. Army's TALON remote platform used in the Iraq War. Our plans involve the development of this technology into a semi-autonomous, compact armored weapons platform, capable of accompanying X-COM operatives into combat situations. The advantages of such a technology should be obvious. Engineer Thelon's brief includes two possible models, one mounting a 20mm semi-automatic, armor piercing cannon, the other a 40mm grenade launcher.

Naturally we will continue to pursue all of these projects as practical, but it is necessary to select priorities for this organization.

Another message regarding manufacturing priorities will be sent shortly. I understand that you are about to commence a field operation, but get back to me when you can with your input.

FROM: Kimberly Wagner, X-COM Research Chief
TO: Alpha Team
RE: Research and Manufacturing Priorities (continued)

Here are our manufacturing projects, as submitted by Grace Thelon, X-COM Chief Engineer.

- **Base Capacity:** As you know from your initial tour, the X-COM facility is still under construction. We are continuing to develop the site, and have three areas where we can expand our capacity. These include: a) research capacity; b) manufacturing capacity; c) medical capacity. Improvements in these areas will expand our ability to respond to future developments.
- **Base Defense:** As stated in the mission briefing, we have not fully analyzed the capabilities of the "Sectoid" foe. However, it is clear from the destruction of the Chinese base that they possess an ability to strike with decisive force. While we intend to research defensive technologies in the future, we currently have the ability to install a Medium Extended Air Defense System (MEADS) based on the PAC-3 missile. Implementing this system will involve considerable expense and effort, but it may be worth it for the peace of mind such a system can offer.

Your feedback on these priorities is welcome. More options will be provided as new developments are submitted by our Research Department.

Session 3 (April 28, 2008)

Chapter 7

The roar of the Skyranger's engines filled the transport's main compartment, which was separated from the pilot's cockpit by a large metal hatch. The space inside the vehicle was cramped, with eight seats in two rows flanking a narrow aisle, flanked by numerous compartments and lockers that filled every inch of remaining space. Some of the containers looked more than a bit unusual, with warning emblems indicating that the contents might be dangerous in a variety of ways. The eyes of the recruits kept returning to the big one in the rear of the craft, a coffin-shaped oblong that was marked with the ominous words, "Live storage."

The ride was much smoother than it had been coming over in the C-130, Vasily thought. The Russian was still rather overwhelmed by everything that had happened since he'd arrived here in America, but he did his best to keep his uncertainty buried under a stoic expression.

Aliens. It was certainly a lot to take in. He wondered just how much his government knew about these Sectoids, and how many incursions had taken place on Russian soil. None had been recorded in the X-COM database, but he knew better than to accept that as proof that none had occurred.

He glanced over at the others. They seemed nervous, although some were hiding it better than others. The British woman seemed very cool, the American woman somewhat less so. The American doctor seemed to have accepted the reality of the alien threat faster than the others, and had focused on the practical challenges of their work. The last, the computer hacker, was a concern; he seemed barely able to keep it together, and Vasily was very leery of the fact that they'd given this Buzz Olloff a firearm.

The whine of the VTOL craft's engines changed, and Vasily felt himself pressed hard into his harness as the Skyranger shifted modes from horizontal to vertical flight. "We'll be down in five," Ken Yushi's voice came over the cabin speaker. "Better get ready."

Vasily was ready. It would have been better, though, if he'd known just what they were getting ready *for*.

The three days that followed their arrival at X-COM's Nevada base had been hectic. They'd gotten their uniforms, lighter in tone than the khaki outfits the American soldiers wore, outfitted in a camouflage pattern. The suits included a vest of armor that protected the torso, a composite material similar to the "Dragonskin" that Vasily knew the Americans had been testing, only lighter and more flexible. He carried various devices issued by his new organization in the suit's many pockets, but still felt woefully underprepared.

X-COM's research teams had started work on laser weaponry, although Vasily knew it would likely be some time before they saw practical results. In part the decision had come from Alpha Team's urging for better armaments, although they had the best that the world's armament manufactures could provide. Vasily still carried his G-36, which now sported a laser sighting device upon its top rail.

Jane Swift lifted her rifle, checking the mechanism with an efficiency that was obviously practiced. There wasn't supposed to be any shooting on this mission, or so they'd been told, but Vasily knew better than to stint on being prepared.

He remembered the doctor's words from the mission briefing. "*In the unlikely event we encounter live aliens, what are our instructions?*" Garret had blabbed about collecting information, but it was Drake's response that had stuck in his mind.

Capture if possible. Shoot to kill otherwise.

That was something that Vasily could understand.

The Skyranger's doors opened onto a breathless vista, the snow-crested peaks of the Rocky Mountains stretching in every direction all around them. It was cold, but to Vasily, trained in the harsh realities of the notorious Russian winter, the chill in the air seemed almost like a welcome.

"The Ranger station is about three hundred meters up the road," Ken Yushi's voice came to them through the xPhone's speaker. The communications device, nestled in a pocket high upon Vasily's chest, was connected wirelessly to an earpiece that provided an open communications channel with the other members of the team. They'd been trained on everything he wore or carried, but he was already quite familiar with such technologies; you saw people wearing similar devices on the streets of St. Petersburg, and apparently they were ubiquitous in western Europe and America. It was reassuring, almost, to find familiar realities in the context of this mission.

"All right, let's find this gentleman, and have a little chat," Catalina said, leading them down the dirt road.

His name was Niles Jansen, and he greeted them out in front of the Forest Station, his right hand resting on the butt of his holstered pistol. He wore the green uniform of the United States Forest Service, and while his look wasn't quite hostile, there was a noticeable chill in it as the five members of Alpha Team approached.

"Hello!" Jane called out.

"Hey there," the ranger said. "You responsible for that loud booming noise I just heard fly over my place?"

"Indirectly or directly?" Catalina asked with a grin.

"For a minute, I thought... well, never mind." He gave them a looking-over, his gaze lingering over their uniforms, the weapons that they carried quite openly. "You guys with Homeland Security or something?"

Catalina offered a hand. "Catalina De Farrago, X-COM."

After a pause, he took it. "X-COM? Never heard of them."

She showed him her identification badge. He frowned over it for a moment.

"What can you tell us?" Jane asked.

"We heard you had something a little unusual happen," Catalina added, taking back her ID, still smiling at the Ranger.

Jansen ran a hand through his hair. "Well, it's like this. A few nights back, saw some things. Some... *weird* things."

“Weird? Okay, what did you see?” Catalina asked.

“Lights in the sky, sounds, to the north. At first I thought it was a helo. But I served two tours in Iraq, and I never did see no helo that flew like that. Up, down, back and forth. Called it in, but after a few minutes it shot off into the sky, like a rocket. Nothing came closer, so I went to bed.”

“In the sky, you say. Over there?” Catalina asked, pointing vaguely north.

“Yeah. There’s a valley up there, trail leads up through them hills,” he said, indicating a gap about a mile distant.

“How close were the lights to the ground?” Catalina asked.

“Tough to gauge. Looked pretty close to the mountains, but it could have been a hundred feet above the ground, or a thousand. I went up there the next day, to check on a guy who lives up there.”

“A guy?” Buzz asked.

“A hunter, lives on federal land, has a permit. Not a bad fellow, but a bit of a hermit. You know the type?”

“I wonder if the Unabomber had a permit,” Buzz muttered.

Vasily grunted, and Catalina said, “A little bit of a loner, eh?”

The Ranger nodded. “Anyway, thought I’d better check on him. But I was attacked by this wolf... it was crazy or something. I didn’t appear to be rabid, but it came at me like I was covered in barbeque sauce.”

“That’s unusual, I take it?” Catalina asked.

“Yeah. The wolves up here, they know better than to screw with humans. Most of our hunters never even see one. Anyway, the thing, I’m glad I had my gun. I don’t normally carry it, but those lights had given me the creeps. Put one between the eyes, more luck than anything. Craziest thing I ever did see. I admit I was a bit shaken... more than a bit... so I came back, called it in.”

“You get the body?” James asked. “The wolf’s body?”

“I came back for it, that evening, but it was gone.”

“Wonder if it’s rabies, or something... else,” James said.

“Did you try to find it later?” Catalina asked him.

“To be honest, by then, I was feeling a bit creeped out.”

“Natural,” Catalina said.

“I’m glad you came,” the Ranger said. “I thought maybe that the guys at headquarters thought I was going buggy or something.” He looked them over again. “So... ‘X-COM’... you guys like spooks or something? You know, like Area 51 stuff?”

Catalina smiled. “Oh, nothing special! Now, can you point us to where you killed the wolf?”

“Yeah. It was near the entrance of the valley, just follow the trail up through the pass. It doesn’t really go anywhere else. It’s not too bad, you can be up there in a few hours if you keep a good pace.”

“Thanks,” Jane said, echoed by Catalina. “Thank you, sir.”

As they were making their way up the trail, Buzz whined, “Oh great, now I am a mountain climber.” He looked around the trail. “They got bears around here?”

Vasily touched his comlink. “Sky Ranger, this Team Alpha. Sightings to north, we head to investigate.”

After a slight pause, Ken’s voice hissed in their ears. “Roger that, Alpha.”

“All right, let’s be careful - one or two up ahead, others cover,” James said.

“Catalina and I got point,” Jane said. Vasily lingered in the back, taking the rear without further discussion.

They made good time up the trail, although the air grew swiftly colder as they ascended. It was still early, maybe an hour past noon, when they saw the valley through a break in the hills ahead. A thin fog hung over the dell, persistent despite the otherwise bright day.

“Ya think it is supposed to be this cold?” Buzz asked.

James headed off to the right. “Doctor!” Vasily yelled after him.

“Over here... got something!” James yelled back. The others hastened after him. The floor of the valley was heavily forested, with thick undergrowth in the area off the trail. It only took a moment to see what had alerted the doctor, but James pointed to it just in case.

“Is dead bear?” Vasily asked.

“Let me take a look.”

“You want to examine it after we’re sure it’s dead?” Jane asked.

“Wait,” Catalina added, but James was already examining it, careful not to touch it with his bare hands. Vasily came forward to join him. “It look... burned.”

Catalina sighed. “Great, big boots everywhere.”

James bent low over the dead bear. It was a big black, maybe five hundred pounds. He took out a scalpel from his kit and prodded at the marks that had been burned into its torso. “Penetrating burns. Not normal gunshot wounds.”

With Vasily and James investigating the bear, Catalina and Jane had taken a look around the immediate area. Jane signaled over the communicator, “Building up ahead to the north.” She and Catalina headed in that direction; after a moment’s hesitation, Buzz followed after them.

The building was a small cabin, somewhat crude-looking, clearly nothing more than a one-room structure. The front door was open, and Catalina approached it warily, glancing in through the tiny front window before pushing it open with the barrel of her pistol. The inside was a mess. “Hunting rifle in there,” she said, pointing at the floor.

Jane’s voice drifted to her from the far side of the cabin. “Aah... better take a look at this,” she said.

Vasily and James came up as Catalina joined her. Jane was standing over a patch of mud. “What is it?” Catalina asked.

“See for yourself,” Jane said.

The tracks in the mud were obvious. They looked vaguely human, but the foot was about half the size of theirs, and it had three toes instead of five.

“I don’t suppose that’s Bigfoot,” Catalina asked, as Vasily and James joined her and Jane in examining the tracks.

“Um... guys!” Buzz cried, panic tightening his voice. “Guys!”

The others turned to see a group of five gray wolves emerge from the undergrowth. The creatures’ jaws were drawn back into snarls, and deep, throaty growls came from them as they watched the members of the team.

“Nobody make any sudden moves,” James said. “We’d better...”

But he didn't get a chance to finish, as the wolves abruptly launched themselves at the members of Alpha Team, surging ahead in a frenzied attack.

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Session 3 (April 28, 2008)

Chapter 8

Gunfire exploded in the clearing around the cabin as the wolves attacked. Catalina tried to make it to the door, but a wolf cut her off, leaping for her throat. The creature jerked in mid-leap, hit by a round from Jane's high-powered rifle.

Buzz screamed as two of the wolves leapt at him. He got his pistol out and started shooting, but none of his shots came anywhere near his attackers. He staggered back, and barely kept his balance as the wolves pressed him, jaws snapping at his legs.

Vasily killed one wolf with a short burst from his G-36, then targeted another that was attacking James. James had shot the wolf with his own rifle, but the wolf kept pressing, seizing hold of his left leg just below the knee. Vasily switched to single shot, putting one, two, three rounds into the wolf's body. Even then the wolf didn't go down, until James lined the barrel of his rifle up with the wolf's skull and pulled the trigger.

Jane turned to help Buzz, knocking one wolf off him with a bullet that clipped its skull. Catalina started to follow, but the wolf that had attacked her suddenly surged back up to its feet, snapping its jaws on her forearm. Crying out in surprise, she lifted her other hand and pumped half a clip of pistol rounds into its body, tearing free as it sagged to the ground, really dead this time.

The last wolf had gotten a good grip on Buzz's leg, but as the humans rallied it drew back, snarling viciously. Even outnumbered and surrounded by fallen allies it surged forward to attack again, only to crumple as Vasily shot it right between the eyes. The Russian breathed heavily, although the fight had lasted less than a minute. "They not kid."

"Gads, it bit me," Buzz cried, limping heavily on his wounded leg.

"That... hurt," James said, already digging out his medical kit. He was limping too, but he turned first to Buzz. "Buzz, sit down on that porch there, I need to stop the bleeding. Cat, you hurt?"

"Yeah, but it's not too bad," she said, checking her bloody arm.

“Can you tell if they are rabid or anything like that?” Jane asked, poking at one of the corpses.

“Damn! It hurts!” Buzz yelled, as James cut away the cloth around the man’s wounds. “On the Nature channel they run away after they are being shot... especially after one dies!”

James worked quickly, cleaning the wounds and spraying them with antiseptic, then binding them with a bandage from his bag. After he’d treated Buzz, he did the same for himself, and then Catalina. “Buzz and myself will need some better medical attention soon,” he said, once he was finished.

“We need to hurry then,” Vasily said. He activated his communicator again. “Sky Ranger, this Team Alpha. Do you have fix on our position? What is likely of landing in mountains, over?”

There was a hiss of static over the communications link. “...no go, chief. Satellite shows no good spots I could put the Skyran...” The link hissed out. Vasily tapped it a few times for good measure, but the voice didn’t come back. He reloaded his rifle, and looked down at Buzz, sitting on the cabin’s tiny porch. “You okay to move?”

Catalina had gone inside the hut, and was poking around. She reemerged as Buzz got to his feet, with Jane’s help. “Hey, I am a geek with a gun, not superman. But yeah, I’ll manage.”

James cocked his head. “Do you hear that?”

Vasily looked over toward him. “What?”

“Thought I heard something, from over there. Be alert, guys.”

They headed in the direction the doctor had indicated. The ground was harder here, with the muddy earth giving way to stone. They could see the valley wall rising up ahead through the trees, and as they made their way ahead, they could see a broad pool up ahead of them, with a sheer cliff face behind it.

“What’s that?” James said. He pointed at an object half-buried in the muck at the near edge of the pool.

They carefully edged forward. The object James had spotted was an oblong bulb, immersed at the edge of the pool.

“It green?” Vasily asked, squinting at it.

“Well, it doesn’t look like it belongs here,” Buzz said, grimacing with each step he took.

“Water looks green... nasty,” Catalina observed.

Jane edged closer to the object, but Vasily stopped her. “Hold! Remember exploding box.”

“Some kind of green goop around it,” James said, careful to give it a wide berth as he edged around the border of the pool. “I’ll get a sample.”

“Careful,” Jane said.

“I know what I’m doing,” James replied, taking out a small plastic case from his utility kit.

While James attended to the alien artifact—if that was indeed what the strange object and its green ooze was—Catalina continued poking around the edges of the pool. “More footprints over here,” she said. “Our three-toed friend.”

“Do you hear that?” Jane asked.

They stopped moving, and listened. There was a faint sound of wind blowing through the trees, but then they could hear another sound, a faint humming noise, high-pitched, almost beyond perception.

“There!” Buzz shouted, pointing through the forest. They just had a chance to see a dark metallic object, hovering in mid-air, before it unleashed a bright pulse of energy that slammed into Buzz’s chest, knocking him over onto his back. He laid where he had fallen, and did not move. His companions stared down in horror at him, saw that his armored uniform had been burned away by the hit, leaving a blackened hole from which rose the sickly sweet smell of charred flesh.

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Session 3 (April 28, 2008)

Chapter 9

Vasily opened up on the hovering disk, which flashed as bullets pinged loudly off its metallic frame. It was maybe a meter across, its body glinting slightly with the sunlight that filtered down through the tree cover. They could see no obvious motors or jets to indicate how it managed to float there in the air, but it had no difficulty flying between the trees, drawing closer even as more bullets struck it.

James and Catalina ran forward and grabbed hold of Buzz, who didn’t stir as they dragged him back behind the rocks at the edge of the pool. Jane lifted her rifle and took

aim, snapping off shots that struck the flying thing. The disk returned fire with another blast, a bolt that streaked past her head to hit the cliff behind her. Rocks exploded in a spray of dust and stone shards from the point of impact.

“Take cover!” Vasily yelled, putting his own words into action as he dove behind the nearby trunk of a fallen tree. Another bolt followed him, exploding half of the big log in a storm of destruction. The Russian yelled and popped up long enough to fire off another burst.

Catalina crouched over James as the doctor worked frantically on Buzz. She fired off several shots at the disk, which continued its slow approach. It turned to track Jane, who ran along the base of the cliff, darting behind a boulder moments before a shot from the disk blasted half of it into dust. It started to follow her, but as Catalina started scoring hits, it swiveled back toward her and James. It was tough to tell who it was targeting, as there were no gun barrels or other obvious projectors, just a crease that ran around its entire circumference, from where the energy blasts originated.

“We’ve got to get out of here!” Catalina yelled, ducking back into cover as a shot streaked overhead.

Vasily drew up out of his position, drawing back the bolt of his rifle after he slammed in a fresh clip. He and Jane took aim together, both hitting the disk with their attacks, Vasily’s spray of autofire punctuated by the larger bullets from Jane’s sniper rifle. The disk listed almost onto its side, released a high-pitched whine that was almost painful, and exploded.

Debris rained down around the clearing. Bits of metal were still falling when Vasily ran over to the spot where James was still working on Buzz. “What his condition?”

“He’s bad,” James said, without looking up. “We need to get him out of here *now*.”

Vasily cursed in Russian, trying the communicator again without success. Meanwhile, Jane and Catalina were poking around in the remains of the alien disk, gathering a few of the larger pieces.

“Can he be moved?” Vasily asked.

“No choice. He’ll die if we leave him here. I’ve done everything I can for him now.” He bent over Buzz as if to pick him up, but sagged as his wounded leg gave out under him.

“I get him,” Vasily said, picking Buzz up and lifting him into a fireman’s carry.

Their communicators started working again as they were retracing their steps back out of the valley, but there was nothing they could do but return to the original insertion site along the mountain road; the terrain along the trail was too rugged for Ken to attempt a landing. Catalina and Jane scouted ahead while James protected the rear, following

Vasily, who carried the dying hacker. The Russian did not complain or stop to rest, but his face was red from exertion by the time that they reached the Skyranger. Ken had the engines running, and had patched in Stan White from the X-COM base.

"Damn it, he's crashing!" James said, as he bent over Buzz, once Vasily had laid him down in one of the Skyranger's jump seats.

"How long to get to hospital?"

"Too long..." James took a syringe from his kit, stabbed it into Buzz's chest. He started doing CPR. "Open that cabinet there," he ordered Vasily. "There's a defibrillator unit inside. Yes, the red box. Open it and turn it on!"

While James worked frantically, White's voice drifted in over the Skyranger's internal speaker. "I've got a medical intervention team ready back at base." The engines fired, rocking the ship as Ken lifted off. James and Vasily had to scramble to avoid falling back into the rear of the ship as Ken transitioned quickly to horizontal flight; Jane and Catalina had already strapped in, and were watching the scene with wide eyes.

"I won't give up on him!" James said, grabbing the unit's paddles from Vasily and pushing them against Buzz's chest. "Clear!" Buzz's body jolted as the charge hit him, but he didn't otherwise respond.

"It's no good, the medical indicators are showing flatline," White said. "We might be able to revive him back at base, but by then there will be too much brain damage."

"Come on, Buzz," James said, charging up the paddles again. "Clear!" Again the charge had now effect.

"There's only one chance," White said. "If we can quickly lower his body temperature, we might be able to slow brain decay long enough to get him back. James, I need you to put him into the container marked "Live Storage." Grace is setting it up remotely as we speak. It hasn't been tested yet, but Buzz doesn't have any other options."

James went to the long canister and tried to open it, but the LED on the seal flashed red, refusing to budge. While he struggled with it, Vasily came over and gave it a hard kick; the long door at the top slid open with a hiss, revealing a dark interior like that of a coffin.

The two men manhandled Buzz into the tube. They closed the canister, which began to glow as the mechanisms attached to it came to life. A rime of frost quickly formed around the sliding hatch on top of it.

James managed to get up and fling himself into his seat. The Skyranger's engines screamed as Ken took them past their intended levels of thrust, pushing hard at the members of Alpha Team in their harnesses.

“So much for our first mission,” James said. Although the words were lost under the roar of the engines, the sentiment behind them was reflected in the faces of each of the four members of Alpha Team as the transport flashed over the Nevada landscape back to the X-COM base.

* * * * *

Interlude: Aftermath (May 4, 2008)

Buzz shifted awkwardly in the chair in the small office. In the other chair, sitting opposite, Jean Beauvais watched him, waiting.

"Doctor Beauvais, I don't know what else to say," Buzz finally said. "...I can't lose the feeling of death." He rubbed his arms as he clutched his chest, arms folded across what had once been a gaping hole. "I can't help but feel something missing...something else...something odd."

"It is natural to feel a sense of loss in the aftermath of a serious trauma," Jean said. "You nearly died."

"I did die, for a while, there. Or at least that's what the docs said."

"Yes. Does that make you feel... separated? Distinct from the others on your team, and those around you?"

Buzz looked at the counselor, his eyes filled with a hollow emptiness. "It's not that... I keep asking, how did they fix me, I mean...the only thing I remember was looking down and seeing a gaping hole! I'm not a physician but what did they do to fix it...is it all real? I should be dead." He was quiet for a long time, slightly rocking back and forth, not willing to let his mind consider some of the more paranoid options that his brain kept whispering to him. Whatever they had done, whether it felt normal or not, he was alive.

"Our medical team has some of the best emergency medical therapies available..."

"It's more than that, doc," Buzz said in a hushed voice. "We both know it's more than that. Why won't anyone tell me what happened to Doc Allen?"

"Well, it's no secret," Jean replied. "Doctor White wanted to send him to an outside medical facility for a few more tests that we can't perform here. He wasn't feeling well after the mission, and we need to be especially careful with... with what you found out there."

“They’re keeping him quarantined,” Buzz said. “They’re keeping all of us separate from the rest of the staff. You can *feel* the way they all look at us, like we’re lepers or something...”

Jean’s instinct was to reach out and offer a reassuring hand, but she knew better than to try that here from what she’d read in Buzz’s file. Instead, she tried to put as much of that reassurance as she could into her voice.

“Doctor White has given all of the members of Alpha Team a thorough review, and you’ve all been given a clean bill of health. I’ve seen your files, and there’s nothing there that the medical staff isn’t telling you. They’re just being careful. Surely you can see the need for caution in this case, Buzz. The biological research team is still working out what happened to those wolves, and the possible connection to the sample that the team recovered from the mountain pool. I am certain that as soon as he has an answer, he’ll share it with you, with everyone on the team.”

Buzz looked at her. “Those wolves weren’t normal,” he said.

“We need to avoid jumping to conclusions, Buzz. Let the research team do its work.”

There was a slight buzz from behind Jean’s desk. “I guess we’re at our time, doc.”

“I’ll want to speak to you again, Buzz. We’re here to support you and your fellow team members.”

“Yeah,” he said, getting up quickly, wincing slightly as the motion tugged at the wounds still healing on his leg. “Well, Doc, nice talking to ya but I’m going to go shower... can’t seem to get that medical stink off of me.” Before Jean could say anything else he left, letting the door click shut behind him. For a long moment Jean’s eyes lingered on the door, then she said, “We may need to take him off the team, at least for now.”

“We don’t have anyone with even close to his knowledge of computer systems,” Garret’s voice came from the wall behind her. “In particular, his ability to quickly assimilate and comprehend the workings of an unfamiliar system.”

“That knowledge won’t be of any use if he breaks.”

“Mister Olloff is tougher than he appears.”

“I hope you’re right.” She turned her head as the indicator on her door flashed red; a moment later it opened.

“Come in, Jane,” Jean said, indicating the empty chair.

As he made his way back from Doctor Beauvais’s office, Buzz saw Vasily in the corridor ahead of him, heading into the men’s restroom. Instead of taking the shower he’d

planned, he abruptly turned into the barracks. His bunk was near the door, but he kept on going to the end of the row, yanking the privacy curtain out before he tossed himself onto the neat bunk. He laid there, his face turned toward the wall, shivering slightly.

Maybe this time he would have the courage to examine his wound.

* * * * *

Interlude: Base Priorities (April 29, 2008)

Four days passed, and while things were relatively quiet for Alpha Team in the aftermath of the Utah mission, the same could not be said for X-COM headquarters. There was an almost constant flurry of activity, as personnel and equipment were shuttled into the base. The surgical nurses whose absence nearly cost Buzz his life finally arrived, along with a half-dozen new scientists and engineers. For a few days, until everyone's schedules got settled, it was impossible to move through the base's passages without bumping into people.

Workstations and diagnostic units were installed in a new extension to the South Wing to improve X-COM's research capacity. Dr. Wagner was pleased, but one afternoon in a quiet hallway, Jane overheard Base Commander Hallorand expressing concern to Director Garret about the base's lack of defenses.

After his initial, almost miraculous recovery, Buzz spent the next few days convalescing. Occasionally he would pause, leaning against a doorjamb or the back of a chair, clutching his chest. It took a while for his full color to return, and there was a hint of something haunted in his eyes when he talked with one of the other members of his team.

On the fourth day after the mission to Utah the communicators of the Alpha Team members chimed, indicating the arrival of another e-mail from base command.

FROM: Kimberly Wagner, X-COM Research Chief
TO: Alpha Team
CC: Michael Garret, Jean Beauvais
RE: Project Update

I hope you have had time to rest over the last few days. I suspect we're going to need you at full strength before too long.

Per your suggestions we have been expanding our research capabilities. The new lab in the South Wing is almost finished, and while Dr. White has been complaining about having to share his medical facilities with our scientific staff, we have been able to make

some progress.

The program for the research of laser weapons technology is now fully active and moving forward. Dr. Sandesh has been given clearance to continue work on his prototype motion sensor, but priority has been given to the laser project. After consulting with Director Garret I assigned several of our biological and genetic scientists to studying the samples you brought back from the Utah mission. You heard about the unusual medical properties in the alien substance you recovered. The research team feels that this knowledge can greatly advance our medical technology, and eventually will lead to significant applications for our field teams.

At the moment our resources are fully engaged in current projects, so I do not have a list of new priorities for you this week. However, once we finish getting the new lab up and running, I will send you another report with more information.

Session 4 (May 5, 2008)

Chapter 10

Eleven hours.

That is how long the exhausted members of Alpha Team had spent in the swampy expanse of the Big Torch Key, one of the furthestmost of the Florida Keys. While the island was only about 25 miles east from the bustling metropolis of Key West, it might have been a million miles away from civilization as far as anyone was concerned. People lived there, but they were a different breed apart from regular Floridians, content in their isolation from the chaotic pace of modern life.

With Doctor Allen still off-base, a young German named Jürgen Ritter had been temporarily assigned to bolster Alpha Team's ranks. While a mechanical engineer by training, Jürgen had received medic training during his time in the *Bundeswehr*, so he carried the group's medical kit this time around.

The investigation was a bust almost from the start. The local eyewitnesses who had claimed to have seen the UFO turned out to be individuals of extremely dubious reliability, lacking erudition, education, and in some cases, teeth. The one thing that they had possessed, universally, was a knowledge of cable television, especially those popular shows about "flyin' saucers" and "them aliens that come down and abduct folks." Their own reports had apparently been colored by a unanimous desire to be featured on one or more of these programs. With a few simple questions, Catalina had been able to poke numerous holes in their spotty and often contradictory testimony.

Still, it was a lead, and the American naval air station at Key West *had* picked up some

unusual radar signals, so despite their misgivings Alpha Team had moved diligently to investigate. They found mudpits, snakes, and mosquitoes by the millions, but no signs of any alien activity. Buzz, still weakened from his ordeal in Utah, retired to the Skyranger after only an hour, but Jane, Catalina, Jürgen, and Vasily proceeded on foot, investigating the sites identified by the local witnesses. Radiation scans turned up negative. The only thing of note that they found was a crocodile that tried to take a bite out of Jane, but Vasily was able to kill it with a few well-placed shots. An examination of the creature found that it was a normal example of its species, with no indication that it had been affected by alien contamination like the wolves in the mountain valley in Utah. Still, Jürgen took blood and tissue samples, and they continued their sweep.

It is almost dark when the team returned to the Skyranger, covered in mud and sweat, exhausted, and ready for nothing more than a hot shower and a meal. This time Ken took it easier on them, and they were almost able to sleep over the rumbling jets of the transport, as it lifted off from Florida and turned back on course toward Nevada and the X-COM base.

“So I guess I’m a squaddie now,” Jürgen said.

“Eh?” Buzz asked.

“That’s what the guys back at base are calling people who have gone out on a mission,” Jürgen said.

“Not count if there no alien,” Vasily said, leaning back in his seat. He seemed a bit frustrated, unable to drift off and sleep as was his usual habit.

Jürgen looked disappointed, but Catalina reached out and tapped his leg. “Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll get a chance to squeeze off a few rounds soon enough.”

Jürgen reddened, a shade that deepened to his ears as Catalina held his eyes, smiled.

Ken Yushi’s voice came over the speaker in the crew compartment. “Hey, I’m getting something from HQ. Let me patch it in.”

A man’s voice hissed and crackled over the speaker. “...chance encounter. Six USAF F-22s, engaged the bogie over Arizona...”

Ken’s voice returned. “I’m getting more info from base on my screens. Looks like the bogie evaded, and the American fighters were unable to keep up with the contact. But one of them got lucky; we show a possible missile impact, the bogie lost altitude, dropped off our radar over the northern Mexican desert.”

“Oh, great,” Buzz said.

“That was... fourteen minutes ago. I’m getting coordinates now. Looks like we’ve got an intercept mission! Finally some real action!”

“We’re going in, then?” Jane asked

“That’s a roger,” Ken replied. “Hold on, this baby can go *fast*.”

“He sounds rather enthusiastic,” Jürgen said, then let out a small gasp as the engines roared, and the members of Alpha Team were pressed back in their seats by a sudden jolt of acceleration.

Vasily said, “How far away are we?”

“Checking coordinates... we’re currently over the Gulf, about fifteen minutes out from the Texas Border. New course... we’ll be at the site of last contact in about forty minutes.”

“Hopefully this will be less of a waste of time than talking to those people in Florida,” Catalina said.

It was difficult to talk over the surging engines, even with their headsets, so the companions sat quietly for a stretch of minutes. Jane checked her firearms, while Buzz took apart the armrest of his seat. Finally Ken came back on the speaker. “Entering Mexican airspace. I hope our credentials are good, they’re only ‘associate’ members of our consortium.”

Buzz was playing with his xPhone; as the Skyranger continued its rapid approach to the contact site, Jane looked over at him and said, “Getting anything good on that?”

He looked up, blinked. “Oh. No, you can follow the Skyranger’s course track on this.” At that the others all reached for their devices, and at Buzz’s direction, brought up a miniature topographic map that showed their course, heading for a blinking red point in the middle of the Chihuahuan Desert in northern Mexico. The Skyranger was drawing rapidly closer to the dot, the map zooming automatically as they approached.

After a few more minutes, the Skyranger was almost superimposed on the indicator. Ken reported, “Damn, I’m not picking up anything at the coordinates.” After a pause, he said, “Wait a minute, I’ve got a vapor trail. Taking us down for a closer look.” The Skyranger banked and began to descend. Another minute passed, then Ken voice returned. “Okay, I’ve got a visual. Looks like *something* crashed down there. Taking us down, hold on.”

The Skyranger’s engines shifted, the ship’s VTOL jets taking hold as the ship plummeted downward. Buzz clutched at his armrests; the one he’d partially disassembled came loose and clattered across the floor of the aircraft, drawing several sharp looks. He didn’t see them; his eyes were clenched shut.

The engines let out a final loud whine, then the ship jolted as it settled down. Vasily was up even before the door in the back of the craft started to cycle open, letting in a shaft of bright light from the setting sun. The others got up behind him, grimacing as overworked muscles protested.

The desert was not the lifeless, barren landscape one often saw in movies, but it was fairly bleak nevertheless. Scrub brush and other vegetation sprang from the stony soil, and they could see for miles across the landscape, which seemed to stretch almost endlessly as far as they could see, save to the north, where the faint outline of mountains could be seen on the horizon.

Dust swirled in the air, lifted by the wash of the Skyranger's engines. Vasily strode through it, his rifle at the ready.

"Looks like the crash is to the northeast, about two hundred meters," Catalina said, looking closely at the readout on her xPhone.

"This time, I'm staying in the back," Buzz muttered.

Vasily grunted. "Search area."

They spread out, Vasily in the lead as they made their way northeast. Once they had left the immediate environs of the Skyranger, they could make out the faint black plume to the northwest, indicating the likely site of the crash. A wadi ran across their path ahead, a dry bed that was probably a raging torrent in the brief rainy season in the late summer. Now, the cracked earth crunched beneath their feet as they made their way warily through the obstacle.

They had reached the top of the rise when Jürgen looked to the left, raising a hand to shade his eyes. "Did you see something move there..."

He didn't get a chance to finish, for as they all started to turn, a small gray humanoid creature stepped out behind a small boulder. It was barely three feet tall, its bulbous face dominated by huge black orbs of eyes. The alien—for it could be nothing else—left no doubt as to its intentions, as it lifted a handgun, pointed it at Jürgen, and fired a blast of crackling white energy at the stunned German.

* * * * *

Session 4 (May 5, 2008)

Chapter 11

“Get down!” Catalina yelled, colliding with Jürgen just as the alien gun fired. Both of them fell to the ground, and the energy bolt sizzled just over them.

“Take cover!” Vasily yelled, although there wasn’t much more than scattered brush and a few smaller rocks to offer protection in the immediate vicinity. Multiple guns fired, and little goutts of dirt flared up around the alien as bullets hit the ground and the boulder next to it. A string of bullets from Vasily’s rifle formed a track across the stone, ending in a shot that clipped the alien in the shoulder. It turned and aimed at Vasily, who threw himself aside. Another energy bolt sizzled through the air, narrowly missing him.

Jane, crouched behind a tangled scrub, lifted her rifle and took quick aim. The sniper rifle cracked, and the alien stumbled back. It remained standing for a moment, a trickle of green ooze trailing from the hole in its forehead, then it fell over backward.

Wary, the five members of Alpha Team got back to their feet and approached the alien. Vasily had his rifle trained on it, but the dead thing didn’t move.

“Damn... these things look like they are from the movies. Sorta spooky,” Buzz said.

Vasily bent down and pried the weapon out of the alien’s hand. It felt warm to his touch, and was made out of a material he’d never seen before. There was no indication of how it worked; he could see no switches or buttons, or even a visible trigger mechanism.

Before they could examine the creature in more detail, a loud noise drew their attention back in the direction of the crash. A thick black plume was rising into the air, and they could hear the crackle of flames even though they couldn’t see the crash from their position.

“Come on,” Vasily said, urging them forward again.

It took less than a minute for them to reach the crash site, even moving slowly, wary of another attack. The alien ship, which resembled the frustum-shaped crew pods from the Apollo missions, lay in a smoking trench that extended a good sixty feet behind the wreck. Smoke was billowing from rents in its hull, and from a hatch that stood open near the base of the trench ahead of them.

“We need to put out the fires,” Jürgen said. “The ship is being damaged.”

“Everything will be destroyed if we don’t get the fire out in there,” Buzz added.

“We don’t have extinguishers,” Catalina said.

“Look out!” Jane warned, as a figure emerged from the hatch. It was another of the gray aliens. This one was wounded, green and black streaks covering its bare torso, but it too had a firearm, which it lifted as it caught sight of the humans.



Both sides fired at once. The alien crumpled, hit by several rounds, while its shot clipped Vasily’s leg. The big Russian fell, grimacing in pain, clutching the limb where the energy blast had torn through his uniform and blackened his flesh. Jürgen and Catalina were at his side in a flash, while Jane and Buzz kept a close eye on the alien and its vessel. The creature appeared to be dead, or at least it didn’t move as they watched.

“Is he okay?” Jane asked, without looking away from her target.

“Just a flesh wound, he’ll be all right,” Jürgen said, treating Vasily’s injury with materials from his medical kit.

“We’d better get back from the ship, in case something inside decides to explode,” Catalina said. She and Jürgen helped Vasily to his feet, and helped carry him away from the burning alien vessel.

Vasily touched his communicator. “Alpha Team to Ranger. Contact, two hostiles, both dead. Definite not human. Have discovered wrecked vessel. Is on fire. Too big to transport to Main Base, over.”

Ken’s voice sounded in their ears. “Roger Alpha, I’ve been monitoring your channel. The recovery team is already en route, with a team of engineers and a helo big enough to lift a house. Local authorities have been instructed to keep the area clear; they’re selling it as a fragged up missile test. Your orders are to keep an eye on things until the recovery team arrives.”

“You want to go back to the ship?” Catalina asked Vasily. He shook his head, but picked a nearby rock and settled onto it, grimacing slightly as the movement strained his injured leg. The companions remained there and watched as the flames consuming the alien ship burned themselves out, while the sun set below the western horizon, and long shadows stretched out behind the watchers as night came to the desert.

* * * * *

Interlude: Base Priorities (May 6, 2008)

Two days after the Mexico mission, the members of Alpha Team got another e-mail from Dr. Wagner.

FROM: Kimberly Wagner, X-COM Research Chief
TO: Alpha Team
CC: Michael Garret, Jean Beauvais
RE: Project Update

You know, even looking down at the thing on the table, a part of me still can't believe it.

We're keeping the Sectoid corpses in cold storage in the new containment area of the laboratory. Preliminary studies indicate a creature with a significantly different physiology than ours. The research team is unanimous in stating that a more extensive examination is warranted. Our preliminary study has indicated that the creature should be vulnerable to a potent shock, and work on the new Stun Rod should allow us to capture a live alien in the future. However, the voltage necessary means that a tazer-type ranged weapon is not practical, and Dr. White found such profound differences in its blood and cell makeup that he is not sure that a tranquilizer is possible. Research will continue in this direction.

The physical sciences team reports that they believe that they are close to a breakthrough on the laser weapons project, and requests that it remain a priority. However, your findings at the crash site in Mexico have added several additional options for our research team. Because of the recent expansion of our research capacity, we can now prioritize two projects at the same time with minimal loss of efficiency.

Research Priorities

- Laser Weapons: Already in Progress.
- Motion Scanner: Dr. Sandesh continues his solitary work. He can be reassigned to another project, but he insists that he can produce a working model if given additional time.
- Heavy Weapons Platforms: currently a low-priority project; no progress to report at this time.
- Alien Medicine: medical staff indicates that data collected from our study of the alien substance recovered from the Utah mountains can be used to greatly improve our medical capabilities.
- Sectoid Autopsy: the biological sciences team is eager to begin a detailed examination of the alien life forms taken from the Mexico wreck.

Chief Engineer Thelon is recommending that we focus our efforts on understanding the alien technology. She has added the following priorities to the research list; please consider them in addition to those provided above.

- Alien Alloys: the alien ship was almost completely destroyed in the crash, but we can extract a lot of useful information from an analysis of its construction. Chief Thelon indicates that the ship was made from an alloy not native to Earth. She has asked that we do what we can to recover an intact ship, so that we can learn more about the alien control and power systems.
- Alien Handgun: the weapons carried by the Sectoids use some sort of energized plasma technology. These weapons are highly complex and cannot be replicated using our current technology. Preliminary tests have indicated that the power supply for the weapon is highly unstable. Until we understand their operation, we are recommending that all alien devices be kept in the secure labs.

Until we complete our current and future research projects, our options for manufacturing priorities remain unchanged. I have listed our current emphases below: please indicate if you wish to change the current order.

- **Research Capacity:** work on the new research lab is nearly complete. As long as this remains our top priority, the facility should be completed in the next few days.
- **Medical Capacity:** Dr. White has requested that we separate the sickbay from the research center, and create a separate lab for his team. This would require a significant investment of resources.
- **Manufacturing Capacity:** given the new discoveries, Chief Thelon has suggested that X-COM could benefit greatly from an emphasis in this area. New devices such as the laser weapons and medikits will have to be manufactured on-site, so added capacity will decrease delivery time. Because the new research lab has taken up most of the currently available space, additional excavation would have to take place in the East Wing to make room for a second workshop.
- **Base Defense:** Base Commander Hallorand continues to state his concern about the vulnerability of the X-COM base. At the moment the aliens appear to be unaware of our existence, but this will likely change as our operations ratchet up. Chief Thelon has noted the technical feasibility of creating a laser defense system, once our research into laser weapons technology is sufficiently advanced.

Interlude: Base Priorities (May 9, 2008)

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, JOAN BEAUVAIS
RE: Project Update and New Priorities

Good news: we have completed work on the laser weapons project. We now have plans for a prototype laser pistol that can be manufactured by our engineers. The weapon requires a power pack, but otherwise does not need ammunition to fire.

Our regular supply delivery has been delayed this week, but we have received a special shipment of six Avalanche heavy air-to-air missiles. These experimental weapons, designed and built by the European consortium MBDA, are 50 percent faster and have a longer range than the AIM-20 AMRAAM currently used by the US Air Force, and have a superior guidance system as well. Our hope is that these weapons will greatly improve our interceptors' combat effectiveness against alien ships.

Our new research lab is complete, and new scientists are already arriving to help staff it. In a coup we have recruited Dr. Steven Okwelume, a brilliant theoretical physicist from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I am certain that Dr. Okwelume's work will be very helpful in unlocking the secrets of alien technology.

Interlude: Jane (May 9-11, 2008)

Jane caught up to Stan White in the research lab, as he was preparing samples of sectoid blood for examination through the base's scanning electron microscope. She asked him about the medical projects and the alien autopsies mentioned in Doctor Wagner's report.

He considered a moment at Jane's questions. "Well, I do think that medical research should be given a priority. We're near a breakthrough on alien medicine, I can feel it. Doctor Allen has been a big help on analyzing the alien substance you found at the Utah site, and with the sectoid bodies now in our custody, I believe we can figure out how to make a practical field kit that utilizes the principles of cell regeneration that we've seen in the alien physiology. Once we can map the creature's genome—that will take time, mind you—then we may be able to develop some means of countering them. Sort of like the tranquilizer you had mentioned earlier, in the briefing."

"So if you're asking for my advice, I would recommend splitting our resources on the alien medicine and finishing our autopsies on the sectoid corpses. There's just so much we can learn. I know that the engineers and physical scientists want to get into that alien wreck you found, but I saw it when they brought it in, and honestly, I'm not sure how much they can learn from that."

As Jane turned to leave, the doctor added, "Oh, and if your team can put a word in with Mister Garret about getting us a separate medical lab, I know he will listen to you. These crowded quarters impair our efficiency."

"Thanks, Doc," she said. After pausing to make a few notations on her xPhone, she went looking for Grace Thelon Beluca.

* * *

Jane found Grace surrounded by a small cadre of engineers working on the hull of the alien spacecraft. She was trying to remove a small piece of the hull with an acetylene torch, without much success. She handed the torch to one of her assistants as she spotted Jane waiting nearby.

"I think we should make alien ship technology our top priority," she said, in response to Jane's questions about the Doctor Wagner's list of priorities. "True, there isn't much left to this wreck, but if we can successfully research the alien alloys, then we can use that as a building block once we acquire an intact vessel. And in practical terms, understanding this material can help our engineers develop more advanced tactical armor for the field units. That should really help your survivability on away missions."

As Jane steered the conversation to the alien weapons, she replied, "Well, those alien guns pack a punch, and no question. But the problem is the power source. Until we

figure out how it works, the alien guns are just too dangerous to use in field operations. My suspicion is that it's the same power supply that they use in their ships; we detected traces of the material in the wreck. We need to get an intact alien power supply, then we can work on the guns. Researching them now won't likely yield usable results for a long time. Besides, we have plans for the laser pistol complete, which we can put into production now."

She looked back at the ship, which fills most of the workshop. "But what I really need is more space. You gave the researchers a larger space, and given what we can accomplish here in the workshop, I would think that we deserve the same. Once we add a second workshop, we can focus our attention on turning out those laser pistols for your team."

"Thanks, Grace."

* * *

Base Chief Hallorand seemed to have his answer ready when Jane ran into him in the corridor.

"Base defense, I've made no secret about that as needing attention. I know Grace has been talking about a laser defense system some time in the future, but we have access to the best missile technology on Earth right now, and even a single battery could make the difference if we're attacked. It is inevitable that the aliens will notice our activities as we ratchet up our operations against them, and right now, our base is a sitting duck. Especially if Alpha is away at the time; our guards are good, military veterans to a man, but I saw the tests on those alien weapons you brought back, and there's no way we can stand up to those for long. I know that Director Garret is working on getting Beta Team up and running, but our member nations are being reluctant in sending the next cohort of men and women to us. I suppose it's a blessing in disguise; I'd hardly know where to put them, with all these new scientists arriving."

"The other department heads have made a good case for their particular priorities," Jane said. "I'm just trying to capture the 'Big Picture' so we can all be pulling together toward the same goals."

Hallorand nodded. "I understand where you're coming from. I believe that's why Director Garret and the others have asked Alpha to take such a large role in planning the base expansion, manufacturing, and research priorities. It's my job to focus on the operations side; I have to advocate for what I see as critical to mission success. I know that Grace, Stan, and Kim feel the same way about their areas. But as the team that actually goes out and fights the aliens, Alpha has to put it all together and make the tough decisions that will determine whether you live or die, come back with bloody wounds or alien artifacts that will help us turn the tide."

They were interrupted by the sudden blare of a klaxon that filled the base over the

intercom. Hallorand stiffened for a moment as he whipped out his communicator, then relaxed, if only slightly. "Thank god, it's just a drill," he said. "One day it won't be," he added to Jane, before he ran off, shouting orders to the men who appeared in the halls of the base as he went.

* * *

Jane spent a few more hours talking to others, researchers, engineers, and the base guards, but wasn't able to learn much more. The engineers were too busy working on the alien wreck to talk for very long. The hangar crew pointed out that the X-COM interceptors have hardpoints that allow the easy addition of new weapons. When she dropped by, they were busy mounting the new Avalanche missiles. The two aircraft, based on the advanced American F-22 airframe, looked sleek, deadly. How deadly they would turn out to be against alien ships remained to be seen.

Session 5 (May 12, 2008)

Chapter 12

Jane sat numbly in a chair in the lounge. She was staring at her xPhone, which showed a scene from the medical bay. Buzz had shown her how to patch the device into the base's security cameras. It probably wasn't an intended or authorized use for it, but at the moment, she wasn't particularly concerned with security regulations.

The screen showed Vasily lying on a bed, surrounded by a forest of dangling tubes, wires, and machines that occasionally chirped or flashed briefly, as if to remind everyone that their charge was still alive. He was still in a coma. Her gaze focused in on one of the drip lines. The bag fueling it was only about half-full, and she imagined that she could see a green tint to it, even over the limited resolution available from the xPhone's screen.

She shifted her thumb over the screen, and the image changed. There was Catalina, grimacing as a nurse assisted her as she struggled through a series of basic movements. She started to change it again, but stopped herself. She'd already looked into the morgue countless times. She didn't need to see the stainless steel tombs where Carson and Sandoval lay. She realized that she didn't even remember Sandoval's first name. The thought made her sit up, access the X-COM personnel directory through her xPhone. It took her a few moments to find it; Sandoval's file had already been moved to the inactive category.

Jaime, she read. *Jaime Sandoval*. She resolved not to forget it.

Leaning back again in the heavily padded chair, she switched the phone back to viewing mode. As Vasily's limp form reappeared on the screen, her mind wandered back of its own volition to two days ago, when the wild klaxon of the base alert siren had summoned the members of Alpha Team to Skyranger-1...

* * *

The Skyranger bucked as it flew through turbulent air over the Rocky Mountains, following the long track of peaks north toward the United States-Canadian border. The ship was flying heavy; not only was it weighed down with fuel, but every seat in the cargo compartment was full, even the two jump seats that pulled down from the wall over the long cylinder of the cryo-storage unit.

Stan White was there, looking a bit green. Across from him, next to Jane, James was talking eagerly with Catalina about the potential of the new medical discoveries that the research team was uncovering. Stan's medical research team had found that some of the complex molecule chains within the alien substance that they'd recovered from the Utah mission had the added property of accelerating the natural regenerative properties of a living organism.

"With sufficient research, we may be able to develop a battlefield application for the technology. A compact medikit that would make the stuff in our current battlefield kits obsolete," James was saying.

Jane didn't hear Catalina's response over the noise of the engines. She looked across at Carson and Sandoval, the new additions to the team. Brett Carson had come via the United States Army, a sergeant from the elite Rangers. Sandoval was from NATO, and looked to have been cut from the same cloth as Carson; both men were big, muscled, clean-cut, and dangerous-looking. They'd only been with Alpha a few days, and had only participated in a few training exercises with the team, but they seemed to know what they were doing.

She looked over at Vasily, who had one of the new stun rods propped up off the floor between his knees. The thing looked like an oversized cattle rod to Jane, but supposedly it would leave an alien helpless for up to an hour, if Grace and Stan were right about their claims.

Ken's voice came to them over their com units. "Have the bogey on my radar," he said. "Linking to Interceptor-1, I'll patch you through."

Another voice sounded in the tiny speakers in their ears. "...ceptor-1, thirty seconds to contact. Damn it, that bastard's moving fast. Weapons are hot. Hope these new missiles are all you said, Command."

"Wonder what kind of defensive weaponry this ship has?" Buzz asked.

“Flares and chaff not so good against alien blaster,” Vasily said.

The interceptor pilot came on the com channel again, his voice tense. “Target is shifting course. Evading... no, it’s turning... energy discharge! I’m taking fire... Launching missiles! It’s...”

The voice broke off into static. There was a long pause, then Ken’s voice came back onto the com. “We lost Interceptor-1, but he might have got a lick in before he bought it. Radar shows the alien heading away to the north, but losing speed and altitude.”

“Are we going to follow it?” Carson asked.

“That why they pay us,” Vasily replied.

“Wait, they’re paying us?” Catalina quipped, drawing out a weak but cathartic laugh from the group.

Ken reported back, “The alien ship is continuing to lose altitude. It’s passing over the border, now in Canadian airspace. It looks hurt, but seems to still be under control.” They heard a burst of static as Ken engaged an external channel, but after a few seconds he came back onto the shared comlink. “It looks like the alien is landing. Four Hornets from the Canadian Forces Air Command are en route, but we have been cleared to go in and recover the alien craft intact, if possible.”

“Our lucky day,” Buzz muttered; he started slightly as he realized that his throat mike had caught his words and broadcast them to the rest of the team.

“We’re heading down, hang on,” Ken said. The Skyranger continued to buck and shake as it descended through the rough air, its arc growing closer to vertical as the pilot switched the engines to VTOL mode.

“I’ll see if I can find us a landing,” Ken began, then the Skyranger jerked suddenly, slanting hard right, and the pilot yelled, “What the HELL? Somebody’s shooting at us!”

While Alpha Team held onto their armrests, the Skyranger lifted almost up to vertical, shooting back away from their initial approach vector. “Moving around to the south, I’m not getting paid for a combat drop here. I’ll try to put you down as close to the alien as possible.”

After a few more seconds of thrust, which in the back of the craft felt like being kicked hard in the seat, the Skyranger skewed back to level, and eased off into a more or less straight descent. “Okay, I’ve got a landing site,” Ken said. “The alien craft is northeast of the LZ.” The engines gave a last heavy surge, then the Skyranger came to a stop as it settled down. This time Sandoval and Carson, who were closest to the rear hatch, were the first ones up and out.

The air was cold enough to pack a punch. They were in a long canyon valley, the walls rising up sheer some fifty feet all around them. To the south, the canyon extended into a wide bowl maybe a half-mile across, while to the north, the canyon narrowed until it was maybe thirty or forty yards across, a relatively narrow corridor between the sheer walls to either side.

“Valley, is classic ambush,” Vasily pointed out.

Jane had her binoculars out and was scanning the area. “Smoke, northeast,” she reported.

Catalina had joined the two soldiers, who had moved out to secure the area ahead of the Skyranger. James was helping Buzz disembark; Stan was remaining inside for now, following them on the medical readout display that maintained a link to the biological sensors each of them wore.

Catalina caught a hint of movement further down the canyon, where the wreckage of what might have once been a hunter’s cabin could just be seen. “Is that one there?”

Sandoval fell into a crouch alongside one wall of the canyon. “Two of the sectoid aliens,” he reported, lifting his rifle to his shoulder.

“I see them,” Carson said. The Ranger knelt behind a boulder in the center of the canyon that gave him a clear range of fire; he too held his rifle at the ready. Jane, still behind the Ranger, started forward to find a firing position. “Targets are not moving in our direction, but they have to know we’re here, the Skyranger’s far from quiet.”

“No easy way around this direction,” James said.

“No easy way,” Vasily agreed, pulling out a grenade.

“Ready?” Sandoval whispered through his throat mike. Jane, moving into a slot in the canyon wall about twenty paces back from him, motioned with a thumb’s up.

“This our fall back—” Vasily began, but Catalina interrupted him with a shout. “Up above!”

They looked up in time to see a sectoid move into view along the top of the cliff ahead to the left, in a position that gave it a clear field of fire along the whole length of the canyon. There was a second one just visible among the rocks behind it.

But even as Catalina’s yell warned them of the ambush, the sectoid fired his weapon. The plasma bolt struck Carson in the face, and his head exploded into a cloud of red droplets, splattering Vasily and Catalina with gore before the Ranger’s carcass collapsed limply to the ground.

* * * * *

Session 5 (May 12, 2008)

Chapter 13

Jane rubbed her thumb over the screen of her xPhone. The image there had vanished; the device's power cell was depleted. But Jane didn't see it; in her mind, she was back in that canyon in the Canadian Rockies.

Gunfire exploded through the canyon, as the humans and aliens traded fire. The alien that had killed Carson fell as several bullets struck it; it collapsed backward and disappeared amongst the rocks at the top of the cliff. The second sectoid fired off a shot that narrowly missed Vasily, kicking up a tall fountain of earth where it slammed into the valley floor. The Russian shifted fire and blasted off the rest of his clip, sending the alien scurrying back into the cover of the rocks.

The two aliens further down the canyon had come forward to join the fight. One went down, hit by bullets from Jane and Sandoval, but the second fired its pistol. The shot hit the cliff face less than a foot ahead of Jane, showering her with an explosive burst of dust and stone shards. She fell onto her back, screaming as she clutched at her face.

James ran over to her, firing shots from his pistol as he ran. Buzz had fallen back behind the Skyranger, his own pistol out, looking for a clear shot.

The alien further down the canyon staggered as Sandoval clipped it with the last round of a three-round burst. But it didn't go down, and kept coming closer, firing off blasts from its handgun that slammed into Sandoval's cover, vaporizing huge segments of rock. The soldier dropped, covering his face with his hands as he vanished inside the roiling cloud of pulverized stone dust.

Vasily reloaded and fired several bursts at the sectoid up among the rocks. He cursed as his shots all missed. The alien rose up long enough to take a bead on Vasily, but before it could fire, it crumpled as a shot took it in the head.

Vasily looked over at Catalina, who smiled and blew off the tiny wisp of smoke rising from the barrel of her pistol. But then his eyes widened as he saw the wounded alien coming up behind her. She saw the danger in his eyes and spun to face it, but before she could take a shot or seek cover the alien shot her in the chest. Her scream died before she hit the ground.

The Russian looked at the alien. Its face was utterly unreadable; if it felt elation, anger, or even fear, he could not see it. He felt as though time had slowed around him as he lifted his gun, squeezed the trigger.

Nothing happened. The weapon had jammed.

He could hear yelling, screams of pain. Something surged over him, blocking out everything but a red flare of rage as he rushed up, the bulky handle of the stun rod coming into his hands as he unslung the cumbersome weapon from across his back. Something flashed by his face, missing him by scant inches, close enough that he could feel the heat from it. Then the alien was right in front of him. He stabbed the head of the rod into its gut. There was an angry hiss, a sizzling noise, and then it was down, prone and unmoving.

Everything came back to normal speed, the surge of input hitting his senses like a hammer. He glanced back at Catalina, who was moving, though weakly. Buzz was bent over her, fumbling with a bandage.

Vasily reached up and touched his communicator. In a voice that sounded distant from his own, he said, "Alpha Team to Skyranger, three casualties, repeat, three team members down."

* * * * *

Session 5 (May 12, 2008)

Chapter 14

Vasily and Sandoval kept an eye out for more aliens.

Stan White was crouched over Catalina, working quickly and efficiently. Her uniform was blackened from throat to navel, but she was conscious, gasping as Stan stabbed a needle into her arm. Buzz still knelt beside her. "Cat, you okay?" he asked.

Catalina coughed. "What... hit me?"

"A whole lot of alien fire, that's what!" the hacker exclaimed.

"Just felt like one big hit, like being punched," she coughed, "by electricity."

"Go see if Allen needs any help with Jane," Stan said, pushing the other man aside as he continued his work. Buzz rose and staggered off, eyes widening as they fixed on Carson's headless body.

James was pressing bandages over the cuts on Jane's face. "Ya need any help?" he asked as he approached, uncomfortable.

"Just stunned, a bit," she said.

"How many fingers?" James asked, holding up a hand.

"Three... no, two."

Stan came over to them. "Catalina's stable, but she's done for today. "Can you get Jane back to the ship?" he asked James.

"No, I'm fine, Jane insisted, pushing aside James's hand. "Mission to complete."

"Jane," James began, but he was cut off by a loud rumbling noise that seemed to echo from everywhere around them. "Earthquake?" James yelled.

"No," Vasily said. "Damn it, where is ship?"

"Northeast, Yushi said," Sandoval replied.

"Buzz, help Stan get Catalina back to the ship," James said, hurrying after Jane as she half walked, half staggered toward the other men.

"I'm picking up spiking energy readings from the northwest," Ken reported over their communicator links. "It looks like the aliens are conducting repairs on their ship, might be planning on getting out of here soon."

Stan and Buzz lifted Catalina as gently as they could between them. "Nobody would fault you if we cancelled the mission right now," Stan said.

Vasily double-checked his rifle to make sure that the action was free and working. "Doctor, make sure that stunned alien get in storage." He glanced at Sandoval. "We move out."

The four of them—Vasily, Jane, Sandoval, and James—headed into the canyon. The deep noises they'd heard before had stopped, but they could see the dark plume of smoke up ahead, although the shifting breeze obscured its immediate source. They paused briefly to check out the abandoned shack, but there was nothing there, nothing left but a wreckage of wood and stone that looked to have been unoccupied for years.

As they moved deeper into the canyon they saw a steep rise that offered a route to the top of the cliffs, more or less in the direction of the smoke column. Vasily and Sandoval started up, with James pausing to give Jane a hand. "Thanks," she said. She was pale, and looked worse with the bandages covering her face, but she pressed on ahead after

the others with single-minded determination. James followed behind her, careful not to slip on the treacherous slope.

When she reached the summit, she saw Vasily and Sandoval staring at the alien ship.

It was broad and sleek, a disk crunched into a slightly oblong oval, with a bulge in the center where the crew compartment was likely located. The smoke had obviously come from it, but was beginning to dissipate, with only trailing wisps coming from the hatch in the rear of the vehicle. As they watched, the alien ship quivered slightly, settling among the rocks.

The communicator sounded in their ears. "Our guest is resting comfortably," he said. "Catalina's okay. If any of you are experiencing problems, get your ass back here."

They shared a look, with the eyes of the men lingering on Jane. She shook her head, as if responding to the unspoken question.

There was a slight clatter of rocks behind them. Vasily and Sandoval turned together, their rifles coming up to ready. Buzz held up his hands. "Hey! Don't shoot!"

"You didn't have to come after us," Jane said.

"Hey, thought you might need a techie in there," he said, gesturing to the ship.

Vasily nodded. With a slight gesture to Sandoval, he walked over to the hatch, and pulled it fully open. After a quick look inside to make sure the immediate space beyond was clear, he stepped inside.

The others followed.

The interior of the ship was roomier than Vasily had expected. He couldn't see a great deal with the smoke that swirled through the air. Whatever it was burned his lungs, but he stifled the instinct to cough.

He glanced back to verify that Sandoval was behind him, then started carefully forward.

The ship's interior was basically a single long compartment, although there were bulges of unidentifiable machinery that subdivided the accessible space. As Vasily moved forward, he saw a sectoid near what had to be the front of the ship. There was a viewport there, and a series of control panels. The sectoid was working there, pushing buttons and pulling levers, and did not appear to know they were there.

Vasily thought about their briefing, and the necessity of capturing a live alien. He glanced at Sandoval, gestured. The two men spread out and crept forward.

Neither saw the other sectoid until it stepped out behind a bulky bank of machinery, lifted a handgun, and fired a blast of plasma energy into Sandoval's torso from three paces away. The soldier crumpled. Vasily spun, and unleashed a spray of automatic fire. Bullets pinged off of the alien machinery, the impacts creating plumes of hot gases and electrical flashes that engulfed the alien. Several of the bullets struck it was well, and it vanished back into the toxic fog, reeling.

Vasily could no longer see it, but he kept firing, shifting his aim forward to the alien pilot, which had turned to face him. It had a pistol as well, and even as Vasily pulled the trigger again, it fired a blast of white fire at him that exploded his perceptions in a haze of agony. He was barely aware of hitting the floor, then everything fell apart.

Vasily's shot had missed it, but the alien fell back against the console a moment later as Jane shot it through the chest. Behind her, James and Buzz were fighting their way through the smoke that was filling the ship's interior afresh, coughing as they fought the effects of the toxic vapors on their lungs.

Jane reached the fallen soldiers. One look was enough to tell her that Sandoval was done for, but as she knelt by Vasily, she saw that he was still breathing. She looked back, trying to see James, but her vision was obscured by the tendrils of smoke that thickened around them.

"Medic!" she yelled, coughing as the smoke filled her. "Medic!"

* * *

With a start, Jane returned to the present. She looked down at her xPhone. With its screen off, she could just see the outline of her face reflected in the glossy surface.

"Operative Swift?"

She jumped a little, startled by Chief Hallorand's voice. She looked up and saw the chief approaching in the company of two men she'd never seen before. They were dressed identically in black suits, with black ties, white shirts, dark glasses, and the just-visible telltale of a clear cord running from their collars to their right ears. In her work with the CIA she'd spent enough time with federal officials to recognize them at once. One was black, the other white, but they were cut from the same cloth.

Jane remained seated and tucked her xPhone into her pocket. "What can I do for you, chief?"

"These gentlemen are from the Department of Homeland Security. They are looking to talk with each of the members of Alpha Team."

"Special Agent Johnson," the first said.

“Special Agent Johnson,” the second echoed.

“No relation,” the first agent said. “We understand that you have collected some alien weapons technology.”

“Yes?”

“We are taking the weapons into the custody of the United States Government,” the first Johnson said. “Your administrator has agreed to cooperate fully,” the second added.

“I’ve always turned any alien artifacts collected on missions over to base research staff, for decontamination and storage,” Jane said. “I don’t have anything else in my possession.”

Neither agent betrayed so much of a flicker of reaction. “Do you know if any of your peers have kept any such items, ma’am?”

Jane shook her head. “I really have no idea, gentlemen. You can always ask them. Vasily might be a bit non-responsive, seeing as he’s in a coma right now. He was shot by an alien.” She stood abruptly. “If you’ll excuse me.”

She left the lounge, trying to ignore the quiet conversation between Hallorand and the agents behind her.

* * * * *

Interlude: Aftermath (Week of May 13-18, 2008)

On the afternoon of the second day after the Canadian Rockies mission, several e-mail messages circulated through the X-COM network.

FROM: Special Agent Inise Drake
TO: All X-COM Personnel
RE: New Security Measures

Due to recent computer breaches and subsequent questions about the effectiveness of X-COM security protocols, all alien weapons technology in X-COM custody shall be turned over to United States Homeland Security Personnel immediately. United Nations Liaison Garret has cosigned this order, which is available in file HV-K452 for your examination.

This order is mandatory for all personnel.

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, JOAN BEAUVAIS
RE: New Priorities

Per your recent suggestions, X-COM has embarked upon new research and manufacturing projects. Research Lab 1 has begun advanced work on the alien medical technology, while Lab 2 has commenced the autopsy on the Sectoid specimens you brought back from Utah.

Half of Chief Engineer Thelon Beluca's team has been assigned to assist in the preparation of a missile defense battery atop the X-COM base. Twenty MIM-104 "Patriot" missiles have been ordered and are en route. The remaining engineers have begun the construction of laser pistols in Workshop 1.

Next week I hope to have additional options available for research. Your capture of a mostly intact alien vessel, along with a live member of its crew, should open up new avenues of research for X-COM. I will report back to you as soon as our preliminary work on these projects is complete.

* * * * *

Interlude: Buzz Olloff (Week of May 13-18, 2008)

It had come to him in the shower: a clear image of the alien navigation control panel. Buzz sat in his bunk dripping wet, a towel loosely laying over his lap.

He was enthralled with the alien symbols he saw before him that felt like a pattern, like a new code that needed to be hacked. The adrenaline of the realization that he could decipher the symbols made his mind sharpen to a level of focus that not many could achieve.

He tapped the buttons on the on his xPhone. The little device had considerable power, and he'd been hacking it since a few minutes after he'd first gotten it. Over that time he'd improved its function considerably. He hoped it would be enough to run the three algorithms he had in mind simultaneously. He knew that the alien language could be deciphered, but he couldn't guess how many hours it would take. It was a risk to over clock a device as small as the handheld, but he was used to taking risks, and he didn't want to expose his work to the X-COM network, not yet.

As soon as the program was running, he got a tone indicating that he had a new e-mail. Switching the language program to the background, he opened it up to see a message from Joan Beauvais. It was addressed to the entire team, not just to him.

I hope this missive finds you well. The last mission was a rough one, I heard. I know that the whole X-COM team is doing all that it can to support you.

The recent declaration from Agent Drake is upsetting to everyone, but I urge calm. There are political issues behind this order that make for a very delicate situation. In the month that X-COM has been operational, there have been seventeen alien incursions worldwide. Our encounters with the Sectoid race have been the only ones that have actually resulted in the capture of alien specimens and technology. But despite those successes, a number of our coalition partners have begun to doubt the wisdom of spending a great deal of money and other resources on our organization, when the results have been so localized, and have not helped to protect the rest of the world.

Director Garret is trying to quickly scale up X-COM operations, but we are under multiple constraints of funding, time, staffing, and support. Do not share this around, but we are currently engaged in high-level meetings with the government of France to establish a second X-COM base that can provide coverage of the European theatre of operations. It is likely that I will be absent for some time to deal with these delicate negotiations.

In my absence, I hope that you will talk to Doctor Baron about any issues or concerns regarding your missions or other issues. Tense times lay ahead for us all, I fear.

Which brings us back to Agent Drake's new directive. In these circumstances, we cannot afford to alienate our primary sponsor and largest contributor, the United States government, and thus Director Garret was forced to comply with the new order, at least for now. Director Garret has asked me to tell you that he will protect X-COM's interests and do his best to guarantee the viability of our mission, going forward.

-JB

He shook his head. Maybe he shouldn't have hacked Inise Drake's account, or used her information from the Social Security Database to open up a credit card in her name. X-COM's network had supposedly been secure, with a potent firewall limiting access to the World Wide Web, but he'd gotten around that by the end of his second day here. Once he had Drake's personal information, he'd opened up one of his old hacks from back in the day, a backdoor into Vicky's Online Adult Novelties. Five thousand dollars of purchases, overnight delivery of course, a quick wipe to cover his tracks...

If she'd put some of the things he'd sent her to use, maybe she wouldn't be such a...
Ah well, in hindsight, maybe it had been juvenile. After seeing Drake's messages about security breaches, it looked like she hadn't taken the joke very well. Still, there was no chance—almost no chance—that they'd trace anything back to him. This wasn't his first

time he'd used the Internet and his hacking abilities to deliver a comeuppance to someone who deserved it.

The two feds had found the alien device he'd kept in his locker, but it didn't matter. He'd already stored the important data he'd need in a few places. And there was one database they'd never raid, no matter how many head-shrinkers they turned on him. With a smirk, he turned over and went to sleep, letting his xPhone do his work for now.

* * *

A few days passed. First Catalina returned to the duty rotation, then Vasily, still a bit tentative in the way he moved. Buzz was wary of the Russian at first, for he'd heard that he'd been treated using the new medical techniques derived from the alien biological technology. His own scars had healed completely, but he still rubbed at them sometimes, a gesture that had become almost subconscious.

Buzz's optimism was always short-lived, and multiple failures in decoding the language had depleted the best of his most useful algorithms. But he tossed and turned in his sleep every night since viewing the alien control panel. It had gotten so bad that Cat had threatened to strap him to the bed to keep him still so she could sleep. That unnerved him. The woman slept on the other side of the room, so he knew his thrashing must be disturbing them all.

He went to bed that night trying to think of anything else but aliens and code, hoping he would not disturb the others. But yet again, around midnight he awoke with a start. Images had pulled together in his head and he just knew why he had been unable to crack the language.

He jumped out of bed and flew, not so quietly, out of the room and headed for the computer in the community room. After agent Drake's email he hadn't dared tamper with the network settings on his xPhone. He pulled up all the pictures everyone had taken of the alien interior focusing on the different views of the control panel he had so voraciously tried to decipher...*it is not words at all!*

"It can't be." he said aloud. His mind sharpened and his fingers flew across the keyboard typing unnaturally fast. "Who would have thought that Google Earth would help in battling aliens!" He typed in the pattern he'd derived from the symbols depicted on the alien display, and zoomed to the points he had entered. He clicked back to the images of the alien control panel again, somewhat befuddled. Then he looked back to where Google Earth had stopped. "Shasta County, California. What in the hell is there?" His overlay on Google Earth pointed out critical sites, power stations, infrastructure, military bases. The rural part of northern California did not seem to have anything important, as far as he could determine. But he was sure that his instincts were right. He ran to wake up his companions.

Entering the barracks, he yelled, "Hey guys! Guys! It's not language! It's numbers!" He

shook the bunk beds, "It's numbers! Numbers, guys! Coordinates!" He smiled, pleased with himself.

Session 6 (May 19, 2008)

Chapter 15

A topographical map depicting northern California glowed on the huge viewscreen on the wall. The members of Alpha Team sat along with the X-COM department heads around the long conference table.

"Buzz's discovery regarding the alien navigational coordinates will help us in ultimately deciphering the alien language," Kim Wagner said.

"We're still not sure why the aliens are interested in Shasta County," Garret said. "There's not much there. Very rural area, a few farms, very small towns. Redding is the largest city in the region, and the coordinates are over a hundred miles from there. We've been in contact with the United States government, and they've confirmed that they don't have any covert facilities or other operations in the area."

"Would they tell us if they did?" Catalina mused.

"I don't know," Garret said. "But you are going to find out, Alpha."

"We have some new technologies for you this time," Wagner said. "The first laser pistol is ready. This is a test model, yes? Be careful with it."

"You break, you buy, huh," Vasily said.

"No, it gets confiscated," Cat said.

"Doctor Sandesh has also finished his prototype motion sensor," Wagner went on. "He expects a full report on its use in the field."

"I hope I don't have to say anything regarding letting these items out of your sight," Garret said. He turned to his left. "Doctor White, you have something to say about the new medical kit?"

Stan White looked up from the papers he was shuffling in front of him. "Hmm? Oh, yes. We have a prototype of the new field kit that I'd like you guys to field test. It uses the new technologies we've derived from the alien bio sample you recovered from Utah. It won't work miracles, but it should bring you back, provided you're treated in time."

"I can do that," James said.

Buzz leaned forward, his fingers white on the grips of his chair's armrests. "How did the lab rats fare?"

"Well, hopefully you won't grow another head, like the rats," Wagner said.

There was a shared look around the table. Buzz turned white.

"That was a joke," Wagner said, after a moment. There was a nervous chuckle around the table.

"Sehr komisch," James said.

"The new tech is in the secure storage facility off the alien containment lab. You should speak to Musa as well, refresh any damaged gear you might have. Stock up; we may be short on supplies for a while."

That got their attention. "Why short?" Vasily asked.

Garret's jaw tightened. "China is not the only consortium member that has been slow with payments. We are not producing results quickly enough for some of our members."

"Gya," Vasily said.

"It's not your job to worry about the budget. Just keep in mind, any alien tech you bring back, it helps our bottom line."

Wagner was even more blunt. "More dead aliens. Less incursions."

"What they want, gorviayiche famous movie?" Vasily asked. "Win war in week?"

"People are scared," Grace said. "And when they get scared..."

Garret nodded at her. "They do foolish things. We'll do our best to avoid that. If there's nothing else..."

"Just one last thing, Director," Cat said. "When will communications be opened up again?"

"I'll see what I can do, miss De Farrago. I am sorry that I cannot give you a more firm commitment."

"As long as we are not *all* sorry, Director."

Garret took a quick look around the table. “Dismissed.”

* * * * *

Session 6 (May 19, 2008)

Chapter 16

Their destination wasn't very far from X-COM's Nevada base, but it was dark by the time that the Skyranger began its descent over the rugged northern California landscape. The coordinates Buzz had isolated were in a fairly isolated area, with maybe a dozen small farms within fifty miles of the target site. Unfortunately, the aliens hadn't provided a time to go with the coordinates, or at least they hadn't been able to decipher one from the data they'd collected from the alien ship.

They'd established a search pattern that would take them in an expanding circle around the target coordinates, but before they even got within fifty miles of their intended landing zone, Ken's excited voice came over the intercom. “Just got the latest sat feed from base, guys. We have a bogey.”

As the members of Alpha Team exclaimed in surprise, the pilot continued, “Don't know how it got there, didn't pick anything up on the radar net, but there's definitely something there, an alien ship, at one of the local farmhouses. Setting a course.”

“Any sign of individual aliens?” Cat asked, as Vasily checked his rifle.

There was a slight pause. “Nothing on the feed,” Ken reported. “But it's not a very big ship, barely larger than the Ranger, maybe the same class as the ones you guys found in Canada.”

The team members shared a look. None of them had forgotten how that mission had turned out.

Another voice came over the communications net. “This is Doctor Wagner. I know you've seen the feed; capture of an intact alien ship is top priority. Good luck.”

Ken's voice came back. “Okay, there's no way they're not going to see us coming in, but I'll give them as little warning as I can. Be ready, down in sixty seconds, but you won't want to get up until I give the signal. Yushi out.”

The Skyranger's engines screamed, and the ship banked hard as Ken approached the target. He cut out the main engines and shifted to VTOL at the same time, and they

each felt their stomachs rise into their throats as the ship plummeted hard, only to be slammed back as the landing jets kicked in.

Catalina looked over at Buzz, who was holding the motion scanner in his lap. “How close does that thing need to be to detect anything?” she asked.

“Don’t really know. Maybe you should play with it. I think you would be better suited than me, especially since you have to be out front to use it.” He smiled, but swallowed hard and closed his eyes as the Skyranger leveled out, and dropped the last few feet, land hard enough to jolt his teeth together.

“Let’s go!” James said, moving into place behind Vasily as the Russian sprang out of his seat and moved with fluid motion to the rear hatch. Buzz got free with a bit more effort, with Jane stopping to help him pull free of his seat harness. He handed the motion sensor to Catalina, who looked it over curiously.

Vasily was out before the hatch had opened fully. Ken had put them down in the middle of a pasture about fifty meters away from the farmhouse. It was a two-story house done in the chalet style, almost like a rustic hunting lodge, with an unpaved road connecting the house to the world beyond. There was a large white SUV parked in front of the house, but no lights or other indicators that there were people at home. In the moonlight they could just make out an orchard beyond the house to the right, and a hill rising up beyond it to the left.

Before they could do more than take that first look around, however, they heard the sounds of the alien energy weapons coming from the orchard, and streaks of white fire as plasma bolts started flashing past them. Buzz, just coming out of the hatch in the rear of the Skyranger, was almost hit in the face, and he staggered back, dazed, as a second bolt hit the craft, sending up a blast of fiery sparks from the point of impact.

“Aliens!” James yelled, diving for cover. There wasn’t much to be had, but at least the thick grass of the pasture offered some concealment from the unseen alien snipers.

“Shoot back!” Vasily yelled. “Buzz! Get back in ship!” The Russian ran forward, firing from his hip as he ran. A plasma bolt narrowly missed him as he darted in front of the SUV and up against the front wall of the farmhouse.

Jane squeezed out of the hatch as Buzz tried to force his way back in. She ran around to the front of the Skyranger, where Ken was frantically gesturing behind the armored glass of the cockpit. A plasma bolt struck the ship’s hull, punching a hole six inches across in its skin. Jane ducked under the nose and fired the laser pistol in the direction of the muzzle flashes. The red beam tore a bright streak across the landscape for a moment, but it wasn’t clear if she’d hit anything. She *did* draw counterfire, as one shot narrow missed both her and the ship, while another struck the cockpit with a glancing hit, splashing energy across the glass with a black smear that obscured half of the canopy.

Vasily glanced around the edge of the house toward the orchard. He couldn't see the aliens, but they could apparently see him; a shot lanced out, and blasted away a hunk of stone the size of his head from the foundation. He quickly dropped back into cover, and reached for his belt, taking up a grenade.

His only warning was a faint skittering sound. He turned just in time to see another alien come around the far edge of the house. Before Vasily could so much as shout a warning, it turned and pointed its plasma pistol straight at his heart.

* * * * *

Session 6 (May 19, 2008)

Chapter 17

The alien had him dead to rights, Vasily knew, but he still reached for his rifle, hoping for a miracle that would cause the alien to miss at point-blank range.

The alien staggered back, dark smears of blood appearing from holes that appeared almost magically across its chest. Vasily looked up to see James running around the back of the SUV, his rifle flashing in his hand. The sectoid fell back out of view as the medic ran up to join Vasily against the wall, breathing heavily.

“Good job,” Vasily said. “Keep an eye out there,” he said, lifting the grenade. He waited for James's nod before he leaned out and tossed the grenade into the orchard, ducking back into cover before the device exploded.

The explosion rocked the orchard, and bits of dirt and wood rained out from amongst the trees. Vasily peered out around the corner again, his rifle ready, but didn't see any targets, until a squat gray form meandered forward out of the trees, moving awkwardly, as if drunk.

Vasily lifted his rifle, but a red beam bisected the alien's skull, and it crumpled.

Catalina circled around the edge of the pasture toward the far side of the orchard, her pistol at the ready. After making sure that James was ready to cover him, Vasily moved to join her, coming around the side of the house to approach from the other direction.

They found only two dead sectoids, the one that Jane had lasered, and another perforated by shrapnel from Vasily's grenade.

The Russian waved the others forward, while Catalina took out the motion sensor. The device made a quick clicking noise as she activated it, white pulses radiating outward on its small LCD screen.

“You detect anything?” Vasily asked quietly.

“Scanning,” Cat replied, circling slowly. She hesitated as she faced the northwest, where they could make out the outline of the hill beyond the farm.

“You hear that?” Jane asked, as she rejoined them. Buzz and James were a step behind her. “The one behind the house is dead,” James confirmed. “I didn’t see any others.”

“Quiet,” Vasily said. They all listened, and all heard what Jane had detected; a high-pitched whirl, a noise that sounded unlike anything that might have belonged in this desolate place. It came from atop the hill.

“Come on,” Vasily said, leading the way.

The hill was only about thirty feet high, its gently-sloping sides covered in thick grass that clung to their pants as they ascended. They saw the alien ship before they reached the summit, a familiar-looking oblong that was shrouded in shadow, its hull absorbing the faint moonlight.

There was a hatch in the rear of the vessel, which was slowly closing.

Vasily cursed in Russian. “Go, go!” He ran for the hatch, the others close behind. Vasily jammed his rifle into the mechanism of the hatch, arresting it half-open. He squeezed into the opening beyond, whipping out the stun rod as he went. Catalina was just a step behind him, her gun at the ready.

The inside of the ship might have been identical to the one they’d boarded in the Rockies mission, down to the complex alien machinery that subdivided the interior space. The two operatives saw what looked like a hint of movement up ahead, but they couldn’t clearly make out the alien.

“I not see—” Vasily began, but he was cut off as the entire ship began to tremble.

“What—” Cat hissed, stumbling against the adjacent wall.

“It taking off!” Vasily said, looking back at James, who was helping Buzz through the hatch. “Stop it taking off!” The Russian ran forward into the front compartment. He and the alien pilot spotted each other in the same instant, but Vasily was faster, stabbing the end of the stun rod into its face. With an electrical hiss, the alien staggered back and collapsed in a limp heap. Vasily gave it another poke for good measure, then started looking around at the controls, which were utterly unfamiliar. Whatever sequence the

pilot had indicated continued, for the entire ship began to shake, and bright lights began to shine out of one bank of machines, filling the compartment with a red glow.

Buzz came forward, looked over the control panel. "Can you work the system, shut it down?" James asked. The hacker was already at work, crouching and using a small tool to insert a probe into the alien control panel. He hooked it up to his xPhone, and started tapping at it as the display came to life.

"Buzz, do something, please," Jane said nervously, as they felt the ship surge under them.

"Um, is this supposed to be doing that?" Catalina asked, pointing to a glittering fluid that was seeping from one of the machines, forming a puddle that began to spread across the floor.

"This can't be good," James said.

Catalina hurried behind the machine that was leaking fluid, looking for some sort of mechanism to turn it off. "Whoa," she said, coming to a niche where a blue crystal, resting in some sort of armored cradle, was starting to shine with a bright glow. She held out her xPhone. "The power readings on this are off the charts," she said.

"Maybe we'd better leave it alone," James said.

Sparks flared from a panel on the far side of the ship. A dense and unpleasant fog started to fill the interior of the compartment.

"Buzz!" Vasily shouted.

"I'm working on it," he said, without looking up.

Giving the crystal a wide berth, Catalina was scanning the controls that ran along a bank of machinery on the left side of the niche. She paused at a prominent lever that was recessed into the panel near the floor. "I think this is a fuel dump," she said, pointing to the lever. "I can lose the fuel!"

"We're off the ground!" Jane yelled from the hatchway. "We're going up!"

"Buzz!" Vasily repeated.

Buzz's brow was furrowed as he entered commands on his xPhone. Red lights flashed across it. "Damn!"

"Sod it!" Catalina yelled, slamming the lever down.

The vibrations shaking the shift abruptly stopped, and it plummeted down fifteen feet. The impact of striking the hilltop knocked them all off their feet. Jane cried out as her ankle twisted, and Buzz knocked his forehead on the main control panel as he fell, stunning him.

“Everyone all right?” Vasily asked, groaning as his body resisted his commands to get back up.

“Look!” Catalina hissed. They all turned to where the glowing blue crystal had begun to quiver in its nook. As they watched, it crumpled in upon itself, vanishing in a micro-implosion with a faint huffing noise.

“What the hell?” James asked of no one in particular.

“All out, all out,” Vasily said. The five of them made their way out of the ship, which now lay at a slightly crooked angle atop the hillside, the ground crushed under the ship by its sudden descent.

Ken’s voice sounded in their ears. “How are you guys doing?”

Vasily touched his earpiece. “Everything secure. We got the ship.”

“We should do a through search of the area, the house,” Cat suggested.

Vasily nodded. “Ken, we searching perimeter. Looking for survivors, or clues about aliens.”

“Roger that, Alpha. I sent word to base, the salvage crew is en route to your position. Fortunately none of the Ranger’s critical systems were hit by the sectoids, but she’ll definitely need a fresh pain job. I’ll continue to monitor and let you know if we pick up anything on the radar.”

The members of Alpha Team made their way back down the hill, Catalina sweeping with the motion sensor, James supporting Jane with her bruised ankle. Vasily paused and glanced back at the ship, which sat their quiescent, faint wisps of smoke rising from the hatch. It was their third, now. He shook his head, then followed after the others.

* * * * *

Session 6 (May 19, 2008)

Chapter 18

They were tired, dirty, and all around worn when they exited the Skyranger into the cavernous interior of the base's underground hangar. Crews of technicians and scientists hurried forward to take custody of the alien technology they'd stashed in the aircraft's storage lockers. Most of it was coming back with the recovery crew, which was also working on securing the alien ship for transit.

They would also be bringing back bodies. They'd found the farm family in their search of the house, a middle-aged couple who'd been killed with plasma bolts at close range.

They were so exhausted that they didn't even complain about the decontamination sequence, a process which involved steam, radiation, and general unpleasantness for everyone involved.

As they were making their way back into the base proper, they encountered Agent Drake, coming out of the main lift.

"Look what the cat dragged in," the FBI agent said. "If it isn't Team Banzai."

"Agent Drake," James said.

"So, I heard you captured an alien ship. Impressive. A pity you couldn't stop the aliens from shooting up a farm family."

Vasily came forward, and stood in front of her, looming like a silent monolith. But if the American agent was intimidated, she didn't show it. "Well, I thought I smelled Russian," she said.

"Funny, I think I smell cow," Vasily replied. He pushed past her, heading back toward the base quarters. The others followed, but as they made their way through the lounge, they saw Garret waiting for them in the doorway to the briefing room. "Ah, good," he said, when he saw Vasily. "I know you're tired, but there's a few things we need to talk about. Come in, please."

Alpha Team followed him into the room. Doctor Wagner and Grace were already there, chatting over one of the control consoles. Both turned as the field operatives entered. Behind them, Agent Drake followed. "I hope your team will remember the terms of our agreement, mister Garret," she said, as the members of Alpha Team took their seats.

“We will honor our agreement, as long as the United States government holds up its end, Agent Drake,” Garret replied. He turned to Alpha. “You got the alien bird. Good work, team.”

“We’ve received a preliminary report from the field salvage team,” Doctor Wagner said. “It had multiple compartments built into the hull. We suspect that the alien ship was a probe vessel of some sort. The compartments, they seemed designed to preserve biological samples.”

“They are really abducting people?” Catalina asked. She didn’t see Jane shudder next to her, or the suddenly intent look that appeared on the other woman’s face.

“Cows, too,” James said. “We found several dead cows on the property, shot by the alien plasma guns.”

“Is exactly what we do, no?” Vasily added.

“I don’t know why they would kill everything, rather than take captives,” Garret said.

“They are alien,” Doctor Wagner said. “Their motives may not make sense to us.”

“Maybe,” Vasily said, frowning.

“Well, you’ve given us an alien power system to study,” Grace said. “Shame about the fuel, though.”

“Sorry, I think it was that or have it blow, with us inside,” Cat said.

“It is clear that they are studying us as intently as we are studying them,” Agent Drake said. “We need to do better.”

“We could, if we weren’t being disarmed, fighting the aliens with one hand tied behind our backs,” Cat shot back.

Drake crossed her arms and stared levelly at Catalina. “You’re not being disarmed, but my superiors believe it is a bad idea for one organization—with limited accountability—having a monopoly on access to alien technology.”

“What are you afraid of?” Vasily interjected. “You think X-COM going to declare war on U.S. or something? Bah!”

“We have to protect our interests, no matter the cost,” Drake shot back. “Don’t think this operation is the only one of its kind.”

Several members of the team leaned forward in their chairs, but Garret interrupted them. "Please, we gain nothing but squabbling," Garret said, holding out his hands reassuringly. "We are all ultimately on the same side here."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" Catalina said.

Garret ignored her interruption. "And we've won a victory here," he said.

"Victory," Vasily said, letting out a deep breath. "I have question."

"Yes, Vasily?" Garret said.

"Any sign of new coordinates like Buzz find in other ship? Any clue?"

"We haven't had a chance to study their navigational systems yet," Wagner said. "Buzz, we'd appreciate your help working with the decrypt team, after your recent success in that area."

"We'll be looking for your help with all of our ongoing projects," Garret said. "But that, and the rest of the debriefing, can wait until morning, I think."

* * * * *

Interlude: Mission Aftermath (May 20, 2008)

Dr Sandesh was in one of the research laboratories when Catalina found him. Assuming the lantern smile and her most affable air, she tugged down the neckline of her uniform for good measure and approached him. She placed the motion sensor on the bench in front of him and spoke brightly. Other than a slight twist of his lips when she entered the room, he did not react, looking down at the incomprehensible spread of machine parts covering the expanse of the worktable in front of him.

"Hi Doc, here's the motion sensor. Lucky me got to use it *and*, double the luck, to come and report to you." She stroked the fingers of one hand over the motion sensor, almost lovingly. "It seems to work wonderfully. We were fired upon as soon as we arrived, so I didn't get to test it as much as I'd have liked to."

A finger twined her own ponytail and the sheepish smile returned. "I *probably* need more practice to use it properly, and I'd love for you to explain to me how it works sometime, but do you want me to leave it here for now?"

Without looking up, he replied, "Yes, leave it there." Then the Egyptian scientist turned and left her standing there alone, walking into the supply room adjoining the lab.

“Huh,” Catalina said, after a moment.

Interlude: Base Priorities (May 20, 2008)

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, GRACE THELON BELUCA
RE: Research/Manufacturing Priorities

Per your recent suggestions, X-COM has embarked upon new research and manufacturing projects. Research Lab 1 has begun advanced work on the Alien Alloys, while Lab 2 has shifted to focus on Laser Rifles, pending reassignment if we elect to shift priorities in that area. Dr. Sandesh has requested that he be added to the Heavy Weapons Platform project, which has pattered along under minimum staffing levels for some time. He feels that he can add some new perspective to that project, and move the research forward.

The construction of the missile defense battery atop the X-COM base is nearly completed; the battery will be operational by the end of the week. The rest of Chief Engineer Thelon Beluca's team continues work on the Laser Pistols project and reports that they will have a second production model completed by the end of the week.

To summarize, here the current options, and our priorities:

Research Priorities

- Laser Weapons: Research complete. Laser pistols are under construction.
- Laser Rifle: A more powerful man-portable laser weapon. Research of this system will open up more powerful ship-mountable lasers, and ultimately a Laser Defense system for the X-COM base.
- Motion Scanner: Research complete.
- Heavy Weapons Platforms: no progress to report at this time.
- Alien Medicine: Research complete. Dr. White's lab will produce a regular supply of the new medikits each week. He reports that when the lab is involved in research projects, such as alien autopsies, the rate of production will slow.
- Sectoid Autopsy: Research complete.
- Alien Alloys: Being researched in Lab 1.

- Alien Handgun: Per our arrangement with the United States Government, two of the pistols captured during the Shasta mission have been retained for our research. However, until we capture some of the alien power source, research in this area will yield limited results.
- Sectoid Prisoner: While the alien language remains elusive, and the prisoner remains uncooperative, we hope that interrogation will yield useful results. Buzz's decryption of the alien number system offers hope for future progress in this area.
- Alien Navigation: A study of the control systems in the captured UFO may provide us with a better understanding of how the alien ships function.
- Alien Power Supply: The ship you captured on the Shasta mission had an intact reactor, but the fuel supply was lost. Preliminary study indicates that they use a unique power source which is kept on board their ships in a magnetic containment system. We believe that this is the same material that the aliens use (in much smaller quantities) to power their personal weapons. Capture of some of this material should be a high priority.

Manufacturing Priorities

- Research Capacity: Research Lab 2 is fully operational. We can expand our research capacity still further, but this will require drilling out new room space.
- Medical Capacity: Dr. White has requested that we separate the sickbay from the research center, and create a separate lab for his team. This would require a significant investment of resources.
- Manufacturing Capacity: Chief Thelon has suggested that X-COM could benefit greatly from the construction of a second workshop, especially once the Personal Armor technology becomes available.
- Base Defense: Missile Defense is under construction. Chief Thelon has noted the technical feasibility of creating a laser defense system, once our research into laser weapons technology is sufficiently advanced.
- Laser Pistol: Currently under construction.
- Motion Sensor: Additional copies may be constructed once field testing of the prototype is complete.
- Medikit: Doctor White's medical lab can construct a number of these kits each week without compromising our manufacturing capacity. If you wish to dedicate additional resources to the project, the kits can be produced at a faster rate.

* * *

Catalina sat in the recreation room, checking to see if her recent emails had left the outbox, when Dr Wagner's arrived. While reading it, Catalina's fingers drummed casually on the arm of her chair. Her head tilted thoughtfully for a moment, then she spoke so that anyone around could hear.

"..until we capture some of the alien power source, research in this area will yield limited results," she quoted. "Does that mean they need the power source to complete the work in the first place, or that any technology gained wouldn't be as it could be if we have some?" She tapped her finger on the later comment about the power source and sighed. "They want some of the fuel I managed to let go I suppose, the stuff that vanished as soon as I pulled that lever?"

She paused again and frowned. "I imagine that I must have lowered whatever magnetic field was holding it, that would make sense. The trouble is, aren't we going to need something that echoes the containment field, even if on a smaller scale, in order to bring some back? It doesn't look like it would fit in one of those poly bag things, but I'm no scientist."

"In which case, I suppose we'd better ask one." Catalina grinned, "Only this time maybe by email." Saying that, she composed a brief email to Dr Wagner on the two topics, using the xPhone, and sent it.

The response came quickly; it seemed that Dr. Wagner was working at her computer.

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: CATALINA DE FARRAGO
CC: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
RE: Alien Power Source

Very good questions, Ms. De Farrago. Regarding the alien weapons, our preliminary examinations have indicated that they use a small amount of the alien fuel that has been embedded in some sort of crystalline lattice. Our experiments have indicated that this material is both incredibly powerful and incredibly unstable; we need a supply of the raw fuel before we can understand how they work, and implement the proper safety protocols. Otherwise, an operative is as likely to blow his or her arm off as to blast an alien, through simple ignorance.

As for securing the fuel. Yes, you are right, in that the alien material appears to be contained in a magnetic bubble within the alien ships. The blue crystal you encountered appears to maintain the containment field around the fuel. When you deactivated the engine, the fuel imploded. Dr. Okwelume has theorized that this is a safety mechanism, to prevent an explosion that would destroy the ship. He also believes that the material may be a new element, one that cannot exist naturally within our universe. Be very careful discharging weapons near these magnetic containers!

If possible, try to capture an alien storage unit intact. We are already working on constructing our own storage unit for the clean-up team, which should allow us to transport the alien fuel to X-COM. However, until the material is fully researched, Class 5 safety protocols will be observed in all interactions with the alien material.

Interlude: Base Operations (May 25, 2008)

A couple of days after handing in the motion detector, Catalina headed back down to see Dr Sandesh. This time she adopted a casual smile and approached him at work in one of the machine shops, where he was watching an engineer grinding metal in a lathe. "Hi Doctor, I just popped down to ask a couple of questions about the detector, if I can. We really should know how to optimize its use in the field."

Without waiting for him to say anything, she went on, "Can you tell me what kind of a range you think it will have? I imagine that checking through barriers will have an impact but I wondered how close we'd need to be to pick up anything at all."

Sandesh did not look happy, and for a moment, Catalina thought he'd leave the room again. But after a brief pause, he answered her question. His accent was familiar, Oxford, maybe. "In tests it functioned clearly out to about 30 meters. After that, you start to get... duplicate feedback, ghosts, you would say? Barriers affect its function depending on the density of the material. It can detect through a wood or drywall barrier without difficulty, but a moderately thick layer of metal will block its function."

"The other thing is, is there some way it will be able to tell what it's sensing? I'm not sure how it works but would we be able to tell the difference between a human and a sectoid? Would the display be any different? If it is then we can test it on one another and try to work out how." She smiled wryly. "That's if you haven't already calibrated it to do so of course."

"Yes, I have already made improvements based on your report. It is all in the technical file. Size calibration is integrated in the production model, if not precisely. It should be able to tell a child—or one of the gray aliens—from a human adult, however."

The engineer finished his work, handing Sandesh a large, round mechanical assembly that looked like part of a turret. "Now, if you will excuse me, I have some tests to conduct." Without waiting for a reply, he headed back to his lab.

Mission Briefing: May 26, 2008

The briefing is fast and to the point. The members of Alpha Team were still a bit groggy, having been woken from a deep sleep at 4 in the morning.

Present was Liaison/Director Garret, Doctor Wagner, and Chief Engineer Thelon Beluca. When asked about Dr. White and Ken Yushi, Garret said that they were already prepping the Skyranger. There's no sign of Agent Drake; Catalina whispered a comment about her needing her beauty sleep.

"Okay, here's the situation," Garret said, looking the same as always, like a man who's never needed sleep in his life. "We've got an intervention mission at a research site in Australia. The Aussies are full consortium members, but this place... well, it's pretty 'off the radar'. We know they've been involved in some alien-related research, and they've shared some useful data with us on the alien operations in the Southern Hemisphere, but the Australian government has been reluctant in sharing details about exactly what they're working on at the site. We do know that it's a Class 5 rated biological containment facility; in plain English, that's the sort of place where work on Ebola or smallpox is carried out."

Doctor Wagner picks up the narrative. "There have been three known alien incursions into Australian territory since the start of the alien troubles. Three hours ago, we intercepted a coded burst from the site of the research base, some sort of distress call. All attempts to contact the base or respond to the message have failed. At first, the Australians were reluctant to elaborate about what was happening, but after some... *diplomatic* pressure, they've agreed that X-COM should be the ones to intervene, given our expertise in this area."

"Ken's prepping the Ranger with drop tanks; this is going to be an extreme-altitude boost, so dress warmly. Even with the tanks, it's going to be a one-way trip; we're already making arrangements for refuel and getting a hazard containment team on site, but they'll be a good six hours behind you. The Australian military has cordoned off the area, but they have orders not to move in unless the situation grows... dire."

"Questions? This is a high-profile mission, and if successful, we might be able to impress our consortium members that X-COM can help out beyond U.S. borders. Get your gear and get ready to boost."

Session 7 (May 26, 2008)

Chapter 19

“Everyone get a gas mask from the lockers,” Stan White said. “Word is that this is a potential biohazard site.”

The five members of Alpha Team were strapped into their jump seats in the Skyranger, wrapped in heavy coats over their armored X-COM uniforms. They wore oxygen masks; the Skyranger was taking a high-altitude approach over the globe to Australia, the craft brushing the edge of space as the planet rotated underneath it.

Stan was seated at the computer station nestled into the front of the Skyranger’s passenger compartment. He turned in his seat to face the members of the insertion team. “The message we received wasn’t one hundred percent clear, but this is a secure site, Class 5. Your uniforms are resistant to contagions and airborne agents; try not to get cut through, if you can help it.” He hit a button on his console. “Ken, what’s our ETA?”

The pilot’s voice came over the communications system. “We’re just crossing over New Zealand now. ETA 35 minutes.”

“I have a few of the new medikits,” James said. “If anyone gets a serious wound, this may be able to keep you going.”

“I will stay on board and measure your bio signs and the base outputs from here,” Stan added, turning back to his console. “Try not to get into trouble. The containment team is six hours behind us.”

“Is worrying,” Vasily said. “Aliens not seem any kind of poisonous so far.”

“I don’t know what you could find, we’re just being careful here, Vasily,” Stan said.

“If you see anyone in trouble, Stan, let me know over the com so I can use the medikit,” James said.

“Will do, Doctor Allen.” He nodded to the stun rods, which now had their own rack near the door. “Remember, we still want to try to get another one alive, if we can.”

“Would be interesting to try, yes,” Catalina said, loading her pistol.

“Try not to gun down last survivor in firefight,” Vasily said.

Ken’s voice sounded again. “Okay, I’m starting my approach. Buckle up, everyone.”

Stan ran through a test of his instruments. “Sensors... check. External detectors... check. X-COM team readouts... check.”

The ship’s engines roared, and it rattled as it shifted to VTOL mode. They were used to the fast descents by now, but it still felt more than a little uneasy to be plummeting almost straight down like a rock toward the ground below.

“Gah, I don’t think I’m ever going to get used to that shaking,” Cat said.

“Cripes, it’s really in the middle of nowhere,” Ken said. After a pause of a few seconds, he added, “The Base is silent and non-responsive to hails. I’m going to put down a few hundred yards outside the security perimeter. Hang on...”

The Skyranger tilted to the side, and after a few more seconds of fast descent, its pace slowed, and the whine of the engines intensified. “And we’re down!” Ken said, as the ship jolted slightly and the engines eased off.

They left the aircraft and entered a landscape that made the area around X-COM headquarters look verdant by comparison. There was a dirt road, but it was so faded that they had to look carefully to distinguish it from the surrounding landscape. They could see the squat form of the base in the distance, maybe a few hundred meters away, so they started in that direction.

They came to a security fence, but its function was somewhat superfluous as the rolling gate stood slightly open. They moved through it carefully in any case, unsure if the perimeter was electrified.

The structure itself was not unlike the one in Nevada; low, massive, recessed into the ground. The hatch in the front looked very thick, and it was slightly open.

“Someone get out?” Vasily asked, his voice someone muted under his gas mask.

“Or in?” Buzz asked. Catalina bent to examine the ground near the hatch. “Nothing,” she said. “Want me to check inside?”

“Let’s go together, Catalina,” Jane said.

“Good idea, best not all of us charge in,” Buzz muttered.

The hatch opened onto a steep set of stairs, almost a ladder, that deposited them in a long chamber with walls of steel plate. It appeared to take up the entirety of the structure, with what looked like an elevator set into the far wall.

The others followed Catalina and Jane down. “Lift. It work?” Vasily asked.

Catalina was already checking the control panel next to the heavy sliding doors. There was nothing as simple as a “down” button, just a numeric keypad. “Looks like it’s coded,” she said.

“Do you hear that?” Jane said. “Sounds like machinery, through the floor. Faint, though.”

Buzz said, “I can hack it, maybe.” At Vasily’s nod, he knelt beside it, looking for a point of access. There were a few screws on one side of the casing. A screwdriver appeared almost magically in his hand, and he started humming to himself as he went to work.

After a minute, he grunted. “I think I got it,” he said, as the steel doors slid open. A small elevator compartment, big enough to fit all five of them comfortably, was behind them. The panel on the inside indicated only one other floor, presumably somewhere below. Vasily waited until they were all clear, then pressed it. The doors slid shut, and after a long moment, the elevator started down. It descended for quite a ways, maybe a hundred feet, before the doors slid open to reveal another dimly lit steel corridor.

Catalina lifted the motion sensor, and did a sweep. Frowning, she looked down at the display. “Nothing. The walls might be too thick.”

Vasily headed forward, the others close behind. The corridor ended at another door, set with a large wheel in the center. Catalina leaned against the door, pressing her ear to the metal.

“Just machinery. Open it?”

Vasily nodded. James shifted his rifle. “Sure,” he said.

“Well, it’s that or turn back,” Buzz said, but Catalina was already turning the wheel. Gears in the door drew back, and the door opened. As she pulled on it, they could see that it was easily four inches thick.

The space beyond looked like an office at first glance, until the floors of steel plate and bare pipes in the ceiling gave it away. Faux wooden paneling had been affixed to the walls, and they could see a number of translucent doors, of glass or plastic, to either side. Another heavy steel door was recessed into the far wall. Three of the five light fixtures were dark, with one flickering, casting an unreal tinge to the scene.

Wary, they moved inside. Papers were scattered around the floor, as if hastily dropped by someone too preoccupied to pick them up. “Uh... that blood?” Buzz asked, pointing to a corner. James headed over to the splotch on the floor.

“Human blood, fresh,” he said.

Vasily pointed at a faint trail of droplets that ran across the room to one of the side doors. Lifting his rifle, he headed in that direction. The glass doors were clouded, so they couldn't see the room beyond, other than a vague shadow that could have been a desk, or just about anything. After glancing back to make sure the others were ready, he grabbed the catch where the door met the threshold. There was a faint hiss as the door slid open, revealing another office. The dark shadow resolved into a desk, covered with papers, with more spilled onto the floor next to it. But their attention was drawn to the limp form in the corner. The dead man was dressed like a guard, wearing a uniform generic enough to have been either military or private security.

James bent over the dead man. "He's been dead a while, maybe a day."

"Did he crawl here, or was he dragged?" Buzz asked.

James was examining his wounds more closely. "Gunshot wounds—doesn't look like a laser or plasma weapon."

Catalina sat on the edge of the desk, examining some of the papers. She paged through about a dozen, taking a few and folding them, putting them into the pouch at her belt.

They continued their search. The next room looked like some sort of medical lab, with various equipment and machinery scattered around its perimeter. In its center were a pair of metal tables, on which two corpses had been laid. These two had the look of administrative personnel; after a quick examination, James reported that one had had his neck broken, while the other had been stabbed six times by a sharp, unevenly shaped object.

"What was this place?" Jane asked no one in particular. "What were they doing here?"

"Is no good theorize," Vasily said. "We move. Do job."

They went to the last glass door, leaving the steel hatch for now. This one resisted Vasily's touch at the handle. "Locked," he said.

Catalina knelt beside it, and pulled out a few small tools. After a few seconds of poking at the mechanism, there was an electronic pop, and the mechanism clicked. The door slid open, revealing a wavering, bloody mess of a man holding a knife, which he used to lunge at the surprised Catalina.

* * * * *

Session 7 (May 26, 2008)

Chapter 20

Vasily kicked Catalina hard, knocking her out of the open doorway. The attacker's knife narrowly missed her, nearly coming out of the man's hand as it glanced hard off the threshold of the door.

The Russian slammed the butt of his rifle into the man's face, knocking him roughly back. The man fell back against a table a short distance into the room, and nearly fell.

The rest of the room appeared to be another lab, but it was difficult to make it out clearly, for an unpleasant fog of green smoke hung thick in the air, obscuring their view. But it wasn't enough to hide a second man who shambled forward. Like the first, he was in terrible shape; gory wounds covered his body, and a chunk of flesh the size of a deck of cards hung from a terrible gash along his jaw. He carried a metal wrench the size of a club, which he lifted as he approached.

"What the hell are they!" Catalina yelled, as Jane helped her to her feet.

"Humans?" James asked.

"Move!" Vasily yelled, thrusting them back behind them, away from the two men and the gas that was starting to swirl out through the open door. "MOVE!"

The first man had recovered, and started forward again, his knife still ready in his hand. Vasily lifted his rifle, and fired a burst into his chest. The bullets drove him back, and again he nearly fell, propped up tentatively against the desk. But he did not go down.

The second man reached the doorway, and now Vasily wasn't the only one firing. A dozen bullets and streams of coherent light from the laser pistols that Jane and Buzz carried smashed into him, turning his face into a gory mess of crimson. Even as he crumpled, the one Vasily had shot started forward again, stepping clumsily over his fallen companion, the knife twitching in his hand. Vasily grunted and slammed a fresh clip into his rifle, but before he could shoot again, Catalina stepped forward and leveled her pistol squarely at the center of the man's head. The gun barked, and the back of his head shot out over the wall next to the door. That finally seemed to be enough for him, and he collapsed in a messy heap.

"That... that was freaking creepy," Buzz said, while James bent to examine the bodies.

"Careful, doctor," Jane said.

Vasily grunted as he kicked the wreckage of the dead man in the doorway out of the way, then pushed the door shut again. It sealed with a click.

“Hope we don’t need to get in there again,” Jane said.

“I did not see other door,” Vasily said. He touched his finger to his earpiece, trying to raise the Skyranger above. “Static,” he said. “No contact.”

“We’re pretty far down,” Jane said.

“Are we safe here?” Buzz asked. “I mean if those guys... whatever did that to them, what if it gets us?”

“Hopefully our suits and masks are protecting us,” James said, as he straightened from examining the nearer of the two bodies. “And if not, we’ve already been exposed.”

Giving the body of the man she’d shot a wide berth, Catalina listened at the steel door that was the only unexplored route left to them. She put a finger to her lips. “Someone’s there, I think,” she said after a moment.

They set up a perimeter around the door. Once they were ready, Vasily nodded to Catalina, who operated the door mechanism and pulled it open.

The response was immediate, as a half-dozen shambling forms, men in just as bad shape as the ones they’d put down earlier, staggered through the open door. They were clad in varied outfits, two in workman’s coveralls, to a pair dressed in lab coats, and finally another soldier, his rifle dangling uselessly from a long strap. All of them bore obvious wounds, and one of the workmen had his head bent at a nasty angle, as if his neck had been broken. They charged into the barrage of fire from Alpha Team, crumpling from hits that would have killed most men immediately, only to struggle to get back up.

“Go for the heads!” Catalina yelled, as she fell back to reload.

Buzz paused to adjust the settings on the laser pistol. He didn’t even see the soldier who broke free of the pack and stepped toward him, ignoring the bullets that slammed into his torso, or the bright streak of energy from Jane’s pistol that tore a long black gouge along the side of his skull.

“Buzz! Move!” Vasily shouted.

Buzz looked up just in time to take a solid smack across the face. He fell, his gun clattering from his hand, but tethered to him via the pistol’s power cable. The soldier nearly fell onto him, but James drove him back with a blow from his rifle, and both he and Vasily pumped rounds into his head until he stopped moving. The others were tangled up around the doorway, blasted into almost unrecognizable mounds of flesh.

“What is wrong with you!” James yelled, helping Buzz to his feet. The hacker’s mask had been knocked ajar by the force of the blow, and a purplish bruise was already forming on the side of his head. “Anything moving that slow, just move back while the rest of us fire away.”

After carefully scanning the area beyond the door, Vasily stepped over the dead men into the room beyond. They found themselves in another laboratory, this one with medical diagrams affixed to the walls, showing details of human anatomy. There were more papers on the desks and scattered across the floor. Catalina picked up few sheets, and started scanning them. James used his xPhone to take pictures.

Catalina paused with an open folio that she pulled open. “Project Lazarus,” she said, drawing the attention of the others.

“Laz-a-rus,” Vasily said.

“Name mentioned a few times in these documents,” she said. “I’m not religious, but didn’t he get up and walk after dying?”

“That’s...” James began, but he trailed off, leaving it unsaid.

“Definitely a bad moniker with walking dead guys about,” Buzz said. He’d found a laptop computer in one of the desks, and was trying to get it working.

“X-COM been studying aliens for medical research,” Vasily said. “Maybe we not only ones.”

“I wonder if these guys got hold of some of the alien medical stuff and made a bollocks of it?” Cat asked.

“Huh,” Buzz said, looking at the computer. “Hey, gang!” he said. “It appears that there is something going on here.”

“Biggest understatement of the year,” Jane said.

“You want to be more specific?” James said.

“Don’t tell me, some major medical project?” Catalina said.

“They were definitely working on aliens here,” Buzz said. “It looks like they brought in three sectoids, held them for research... Anyway, there’s a log file here... it seems that the seals on the containment unit were opened recently from a remote location.”

“So the aliens escaped because someone from the outside took over the computer?” James asked.

“Bit odd, don’t you think?” Buzz replied.

“We need more answers,” Vasily said, his voice grim.

* * * * *

Interlude: Mission Aftermath and Base Priorities (May 27, 2008)

Project Lazarus.

When Alpha Team finally emerged from the Australian facility, there were still two hours to kill before the containment team and refueling tanker were scheduled to arrive. They spent most of that time in the decontamination unit erected by Stan White in the rear of the Skyranger. Buzz spent the rest of the time, and most of the nine-hour flight back to base, jacked into the computer, working on the Australian base logs. Most of them were damaged or encrypted, but by the time they returned to Nevada, he’d reconstructed a pretty good overview of what was going on at the base.

Project Lazarus was a project being conducted by a team of scientists, headed by the brilliant cell geneticist Doctor Ernst Lieber. The Australians captured a team of sectoid scouts during an early alien incursion, and brought them to an old World War II-era storage facility that had been converted into a nuclear research site in the waning days of the Cold War. The Project Lazarus scientists, in their work on the captive sectoids, discovered the remarkable regenerative powers of the alien species, and the similarities between alien and human DNA. Lieber believed that the alien biology could be used to give humans the ability to regrow damaged organs, and possibly even to reverse the progress of natural aging.

The project began modestly, with several key discoveries about the alien physiology. However, human applications proved elusive. Some of the scientists recommended sharing their information with other researchers, including the newly-established X-COM. However, a disturbing incident where a technician was caught trying to leave the base with a sample hidden in his boot led to a security crackdown. Recognizing the deadly potential of the research, Lieber began to institute more and more draconian security measures. The technician, held as a prisoner, was "volunteered" to serve as the first human test subject of the project. Using some alien technology taken from the captured alien ship, the scientists started growing a hybrid clone based on a sheep embryo, injecting it with alien and human DNA. The hybrid creature thus created was never intended to live, and in fact lacked any higher brain functions whatsoever. The researchers intended to induce the clone to produce hormones that could stimulate latent regenerative properties in human cells.

It was not clear from the records what went wrong. There were reports of scientists

growing ill, and hints that there might have been some sort of security breach in the latter days of the project. Lieber's reports became less frequent, and some of the other scientists commented in e-mails that he was becoming more and more erratic in his behavior. The technician test subject sickened and died, and there was a brief fragment of a report, the words on the screen dripping panic, about the "dead man" breaking out of the morgue and attacking two guards, strangling one with his own rifle strap before he was literally shot to pieces.

The last days of the base existed only in fragments of damaged files. Apparently some of the researchers tried to escape, only to be foiled by Lieber's lockdown protocols. Eventually one of the last surviving scientists managed to hack into a minor system, using it to get a message out into the communications array. The bypassing of the security protocols is what allowed X-COM to intercept the message.

That's where Alpha Team came into the picture.

* * *

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, GRACE THELON BELUCA
RE: New Research/Manufacturing Priorities

Research Lab 1 reports that work on the Alien Alloys is nearing completion. Lab 2 is continuing its work on Laser Rifles.

Chief Engineer Grace Thelon Beluca's team has begun construction of a new workshop in the East Wing of the base. Director Garret reports that he has used the influx of new funds from the captured alien weapons (per our agreement with the U.S. Government) to pay for the added infrastructure in the East wing, including a new barracks that will allow us to grow our staff as new facilities become available. However, this will result in some belt-tightening, as the X-COM budget is being strained by current geopolitical issues beyond our control.

Session 8 (June 2, 2008)

Chapter 21

The training exercise had involved a lot of sweat, hiking over the nearby mountains under the hot Nevada sun. The members of Alpha Team returned to their base tired and eager to get cleaned up, but as they made their way through the lounge they encountered three men clad in X-COM uniforms. One was familiar; Jürgen Ritter nodded to them as they entered. One of the others was a tall, good-looking man with

Spanish features and deeply tanned skin, while the last was a veritable giant of a man, a huge blond whose uniform looked to be straining a bit around his thick biceps. “Well now. What do we have here?” the tan one asked. He poked the big man with an elbow. “Hey, Sveinn, they don’t look so tough, eh?”

“Not so big, anyway,” the giant rumbled. He had a thick accent, something Nordic.

Vasily blinked. “We help you?”

“We’re Model B, new and improved,” the tanned fellow said with a smirk.

“Ah, hey there, guys,” Jürgen said. He made the introductions, identifying the tanned soldier as Eleazar Perez, the big Nord as Sveinn Ögmundsson. “We’re the second unit, apparently. Beta Team.”



“Second letter in the alphabet,” Catalina noted.

“Congratulations,” James said. “You’re all in for a treat.”

Eleazar saw Vasily looking up at Sveinn. “They grow ‘em big up in Iceland,” he laughed.

“Ha,” Sveinn said. “They need big man. I help.” He made a cracking noise with his fingers that sounded a little bit like bones snapping.

“So,” Eleazar said. “I hear that you guys are keeping a hundred Chinese workers busy at a bandage factory in Shanghai.”

“Yeah, I’m surprised we’re all still alive,” James said.

Catalina looked Sveinn up and down. Her eyes lingered on the pistol strapped to his hip. “Gosh, he has a big... weapon,” she said.

“Har, you like big guns?”

Cat smiled and waggled her eyebrows. “Me like,” she said.

“We’re here to show you old timers how it’s done,” Eleazar was saying.

“We’re supposed to get berths in the East Wing,” Jürgen said. “I’ve been off-base for a few weeks, they’ve done a lot of changes since then.”

Vasily jerked his thumb at the east door. “New barracks, down by firing range,” he said.

“Much obliged,” Eleazar said, facing Vasily. The two men looked at each other, neither flinching from the hard stares.

“Ah, have you seen two women?” Jürgen asked. “One African, the other... well, she was on American television, you might have seen her. At least, that’s all she told me. Seemed to think I should have known who she was...”

“Oh, what’s her name?” James asked.

“Alyssa.”

“Alyssa Milano?”

“No, not that one. She was on that show, where the people try not to get booted off? They do athletics, and the like?”

“So now we’re hiring actors?” James asked.

“I guess she was a soldier before. At least, she knew how to handle a gun.”

“Have you all met Agent Drake yet?” Buzz asked.

Eleazar shrugged. "All I met was some creepy guy in a suit and dark glasses. And some giant robots with attitude."

"Ha, big metal man, he smash up good. Real good," Sveinn said.

"Didn't he just?" Catalina said with a laugh.

"Anyway, I guess you guys need to take a shower or something," Eleazar said with a laugh. "Come on lads, let's go find our bunks. Nice meeting you, Alpha. You see the ladies, send them our way. I'm sure they'll ask about me." With a grin, he led Sveinn into the corridor that led to the East Wing.

Jürgen lingered a moment. "Don't mind them. Perez is okay, and Sveinn isn't as dumb as he looks, or sounds."

"No problem," James said. "I think you need an attitude to handle the pressure. Good luck with the new squad."

Their communicators buzzed quietly, and Director Garret's voice came over their earpieces. "Alpha, I know you've put in a long day, but we have a few matters that require attention. Please report to Briefing Room 1 in five minutes."

"Gah, I need a shower," Catalina said, pushing past the others, who were quick to follow.

The mood in the briefing room was serious, and there was a clear tension between the members of Alpha Team on one side of the long conference room table, and Agent Drake, who sat alone near Garret's spot at the head of the table, with two empty spaces between her and the X-COM department heads. The initial reports were delivered perfunctorily, with Kim and Grace giving updates on the base's ongoing research and manufacturing programs. The base was growing, with plans for new labs and workshops to expand capacity, while Stan talked about creating a new medical bay separate from the research facilities.

"We can only do so much with our current resources," Garret said. "Whatever we work on, something will inevitably be a low priority. We have to trust in our decisions."

"Organizational funds are tight," Kim said.

"As I recall, the United States government has been very generous of late," Agent Drake said.

"Bought with alien tech," Buzz muttered.

"Yes, and we're very appreciative, Agent Drake," Garret said.

Catalina leaned forward. "I thought we had a whole global coalition behind us? I am sure that if you inform the partners fully of what is being developed here, the funds will be there."

"Well, we've had some problems there, Agent De Farrago."

"Oh? What, may I ask?"

"The global political picture is complicated. China is still being cagey with our allocation. They're now behind on two monthly payments. They haven't left the consortium, but they are being stubborn."

"Maybe they're concerned that the United States is using X-COM to increase their own arsenal," Catalina suggested.

"We've also had reductions from India and Russia," Garret continued. "They feel that X-COM is not doing enough in Asia."

"They should be grateful that we're the only ones who are actually *doing* anything," Drake said.

"What they want us to do," Vasily asked "Get on bike, ride over? They need better radar men."

"Maybe if we could help out there?" Jane asked. "Not like our Australia mission could be considered a riveting success story."

"We are working with our partners," Garret said. "Our negotiations with the EU have proven fruitful. We've signed an agreement to allow us to establish a second X-COM base in France."

"Pfft," Catalina said.

"Base in France, huh," Vasily said. "Beta Team live there?"

"We're still working on assignments. Once Beta is finished, they may be redeployed. For now, they will be your backup."

"We'll have another Skyranger entering service shortly," Grace said. "Might save you some work."

'Yeah, maybe get a regular night's sleep now and again," Stan added.

"Will the big one fit in it?" Catalina asked.

Grace laughed. "Yeah, definitely going to have to put in a few boosters for him."

"The down side is that these initiatives have strained our budget," Garret said. "For the moment, we're going to put some austerity measures into place here."

"What?" Catalina asked.

"No more movie DVDs?" James added.

"Break out the Costco cards," Drake said.

"We're going to put everything we can into the field teams, of course. You will get first priority on all resources."

"We not want weaken base security!" Vasily said.

"No, Vasily, we're not going to stint on our defenses either. I am talking about non-essential supplies, limits on non-core research and manufacturing priorities, and cutbacks on extra gear."

"The United States government will continue to pay for any alien technology that you recover, of course," Drake said. "So think of that as an incentive program."

"I'm sure they will," Catalina said.

"On another topic," Garret said, "I've read your reports on the Australia mission. You did a good job under tough circumstances. Doctor White?"

Stan looked up from his notes. "I was saying earlier, that the data they had on the aliens was... remarkable."

"Didn't help them much," Catalina pointed out.

"I was thinking," Stan continued, "working with Doctor Wagner's team. That if we researched our Sectoid prisoners, I might be able to develop a scanner that reads alien brain waves."

Vasily blinked. "And... what that do?"

Drake, however, snorted. "Brain waves? That's beyond science fiction, now you're talking fantasy, Doctor."

"I know it sounds crazy," Stan persisted, "but it might help us to identify aliens we encounter, or their ships."

"We are working on plans for a device that we are calling a 'Hyperwave Decoder,'" Kim said. "We will keep you posted on our results."

“Are you suggesting adding it to the handheld scanners?” Catalina asked.

“I think we might be able to do better, Miss De Farrago,” Stan replied, “and integrate the tech into the new battle suits.”

“Great,” Grace said. “More feature creep. You’re killing me Stan, you know that?”

There were a few tentative smiles around the table, but they died quickly as an indicator flashed brightly on the main command console. Kim was there in a flash, opening the communications channel. The face of one of the communications technicians appeared on the screen. “Report,” she said.

“We’ve just gotten a feed that you’ll want to see, Doctor Wagner,” the technician said. “On channel one.”

Kim flicked a switch, and a moving cityscape appeared. The video looked like it was being shot from a helicopter, and the text in the corner indicated that the city shown was Phoenix. Multiple streams of smoke rose from the streets below.

“ALIEN ATTACK IN PROGRESS,” appeared across the bottom of the screen in bright yellow letters.

“Oh, my god,” Grace said.

“This is Caroline Thompson of KNXV-15,” a woman’s voice came over the speaker. “What you’re seeing is the site of the alien attack in south Phoenix, where a little more than ten minutes ago, an alien ship descended from the sky and started dropping pods along several streets... We’re getting confirmation of aliens on the ground, but we’re...”

The visual suddenly shifted hard, as if the helicopter had banked suddenly. The announcer’s voice grew more flustered. “What is it, John? Are you under attack? We...” There was a pause of about five seconds, as the video was replaced with a studio scene, the newscaster sitting at a desk with a look of barely-contained panic on her face. “We’re getting word that the military has ordered all air traffic out of the area. We’ll keep you apprised as the situation develops...”

Agent Drake had shot out of her chair, and retreated into a corner of the room, speaking into a cellular phone she’d whipped off her belt.

Kim muted the audio, and looked down at the secondary screens on the console, which were now filling with data. “It appears that local authorities are surrounding the are. The United States military is responding.”

““Why didn’t we have any warning of this attack?” Catalina asked.

"I don't know," Garret said. "Kim, get Ranger 1 prepped."

"Already working on it, Director," she said, tapping buttons on her screen.

"It's going to be hard for the government to deny this," Jane said. "Phoenix is the fifth-largest city in the country."

"Change in alien tactics," Vasily said. "I not like this."

"We'll worry about that later," Garret said. "Get suited up, and into Ranger 1. We'll work out the jurisdictional aspects while you're en route." He glanced over at Drake, who was talking quietly rapid-fire into the receiver of her phone.

"This one could get bloody," Stan said. No one offered any disagreement.

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Session 8 (June 2, 2008)

Chapter 22

The Skyranger's engines roared as Ken shifted the craft from horizontal to vertical flight. "Approaching the target area," the pilot's voice came over their communicators.

"I still say we should have come down outside the security cordon," James said.

"Time is of the essence," Catalina said. "And this saves us having to work out the jurisdictional aspects with the local constabulary."

"Don't forget our orders, we're to minimize civilian casualties," Jane said, checking again to make sure that the cord connecting her laser pistol to the power unit in the small of her back was secure.

The engines gave that change of pitch that announced that they were about to touch down. "I'm reading gunfire on the external pickups," Ken said. "Could be alien energy weapons fire as well, I'm not certain."

"This just get better and better," Vasily said. He was up seconds after the jolt indicated that they'd landed, and he was beside the hatch as it crept open.

The street looked like any business or industrial district in any American city, with perhaps a touch of distinctiveness from the Southwestern style evident in the trim on the buildings and the decorative motifs evident in the street signs and business names.

The two-lane street was fairly narrow, although the Skyranger had plenty of room to land astride the double yellow line running down its center. It was hot, the dry, penetrating heat common to Phoenix for most of the year. There was a helicopter in the street about half a block ahead, surrounded by the limp forms of what had to be bodies, but the street was otherwise devoid of both vehicles and people.

Scanning the street, Vasily waited until the entire squad had cleared the Skyranger, then he gestured them forward toward the copter. Once they were clear, the X-COM craft rose up into the air to take up an overwatch position; it was still too vulnerable to ground fire to risk here in the open. They hadn't gotten more than twenty paces, however, when a man appeared from further down the road ahead, running toward them.

"Help! Help!" he yelled.

Catalina had been glancing down at the motion sensor, but she looked up as the man drew nearer. None of them saw the hovering disk until a sizzling bolt of plasma energy blasted from a recessed driveway beyond the helicopter, striking the man in the side. He screamed once and collapsed.

"More of them!" Catalina yelled, taking cover in a doorway. Another plasma bolt followed her, blasting out a head-sized chunk of masonry. The second cyberdisc drifted down from a rooftop, sending out more blasts as it came.

"Cat! Get back!" Vasily yelled, as the doorway concealing Catalina dissolved into a fog of pulverized concrete. Jane and James had taken cover on the far side of the street behind a stone planter box, and they'd opened up, but their initial shots either missed or glanced harmlessly off the alien drones. Vasily headed toward Catalina's position, firing controlled bursts from his rifle as he went.

A high-pitched whine sounded from the nearer disk as Buzz drew a bright white line across its upper half with his laser pistol. It shifted toward him, but Jane pounded it with a direct hit with her laser a moment later, and it flipped over, exploding before it hit the ground. Debris rained down all around them, peppering the entire street and the surrounding buildings in a wide radius.

Catalina appeared out of the ruins of the doorway, coughing as she emerged from the eddying cloud of debris. Vasily grabbed her arm and drew her back with him further down the street, where an alleyway between two storefronts offered better cover.

Behind him the second cyberdisc appeared through the cloud of smoke rising from the wreckage of the first. Jane and James fired at it, but their shots missed. "Vasily, look out!" Jane yelled.

The Russian turned, but he couldn't do anything to avoid the plasma bolt that caught him the chest, knocking him back off his feet, landing hard in the gutter of the street.

* * * * *

Session 8 (June 2, 2008)

Chapter 23

“Will he be all right?” Catalina asked.

“He’s too stubborn to die,” James said, as he opened up the X-COM medikit and drew out a small object that looked like an implement of torture; a multi-pronged syringe, with three cylinders that each culminated in a long steel prong. “Let me worry about the Russian. I need you to use that thing,” he said, indicating the motion sensor riding in Cat’s hip, “to see if there are any more of them coming.”

Catalina nodded, and turned to join Jane in keeping watch along the street. The fire from the two destroyed cyberdiscs had faded away; there really wasn’t much left of the things after they exploded to burn for long. But the smoke hung in a pall over the street.

Vasily was propped up against the wall of the alley a few feet from where he’d fallen. James had run over to him as soon as Jane had destroyed the second alien drone, and with Cat had dragged the fallen Russian into cover. The shot had blasted the armor protecting his chest, and James could smell the familiar stink of charred flesh beneath that, but either Vasily had gotten luckier than Buzz had back in the Utah mountains, or X-COM’s armor had gotten better, for he was still conscious, and even able to cough as James turned back to him, armed with the medical device. James swore that the Russian’s eyes widened slightly as he got a good look at it.

“I... fine, Doctor,” he said, trying to get up. He managed to shift slightly, even that faint movement causing a lot of obvious pain.

James had to fight back a chuckle. “Just hold still,” he said.

He’d worked on the new medikits himself, and he’d seen them tested but it was still something else to plunge the three needles into Vasily’s body, to see the fluids start to glow slightly as they mixed, the alien compounds seeping into the injured man’s tissues and reprogramming them, accelerating his own regenerative powers by a factor of a hundred. James had practiced medicine for many years, and a part of him still couldn’t believe what he saw as the bleeding stopped, and bits of black char fell away to reveal smooth, pink flesh beneath.

Vasily grunted, then gasped, and blinked. “That...” he said, at a loss for words.

“Yeah. Can you get up?”

He accepted James’s hand, but once on his feet, he found that he could stand without support. “Situation?” he asked, reaching down to pick up his armored vest, which was now much the worse for wear.

“You know as much as I do. Let’s go ask Catalina and Jane what they’ve found.”

They didn’t have to go far; the two women were standing about forty feet down the street, almost to where the dead men—recognizable now as SWAT troopers—were scattered around the quiet helicopter. A man was visible inside the chopper, his forehead leaned against the plexiglass window, right where an alien blast had perforated it—and him. Buzz was poking around in the wreckage from the cyberdiscs, but they knew from their last encounter with them that he wasn’t likely to find much left behind.

“What is it?” Vasily asked. The building in front of them had a driveway that slanted down into what looked like a parking garage below. Catalina was working on the motion detector, adjusting the dials underneath the display.

“Not sure. Thing is acting up a bit,” Catalina said.

Vasily touched earpiece. “Ken, anything on sensor?”

Ken’s voice returned quickly. “I’ve tapped into the local law enforcement network, and I’m working on a local news channel chopper feed. Looks like another station’s defying the military ban on air traffic.”

Vasily swore and looked up. “We on TV?”

James bent and examined the bodies of the SWAT members. “Dead,” he said.

“Not sure, but it looks like some sectoids might have gone into the some of the buildings in your area,” Ken said.

“Some aliens in buildings,” Vasily said. “we may need sweep.”

“All right, let’s go,” James said.

Jane had started down the ramp into the garage; Buzz followed, with Vasily and then James after. A sedan lay askance at the bottom of the ramp, its hood crumpled where it had impacted a concrete support pillar. A few more dark shadows were visible within the garage, but the area near the entry looked otherwise deserted.

Catalina, lingering behind in the street, lifted the detector and cursed. “Wait!” she exclaimed, hurrying after them even as Jane lifted a hand at the bottom of the ramp,

motioning for those behind her to halt. “For fuck’s sake!” the British agent hissed, careful to keep her voice down.

Jane retreated from her position. “Get back,” she said. “Aliens.”

“I could have bloody well told you that!” Catalina said, indicating the sensor. “What happened to teamwork?”

But Jane didn’t get a chance to respond, as Buzz pointed and yelled, “Over there!” His warning was followed by a loud explosion as a car suddenly went up deeper in the garage, and a loud screech echoed off the cavernous walls in its wake.

“They know we here,” Vasily said. “Take cover!” he warned, even as plasma bolts started lancing out of the shadowy depths of the garage toward them.

* * * * *

Session 8 (June 2, 2008)

Chapter 24

“We have got to stop this running on ahead or we will die,” Catalina said.

The fight had been short and bloody. The sectoids had possessed the initial advantage, hiding in the shadowy half-light of the garage, while the members of Alpha had been backlit against the bright light of the street above. But Vasily had disrupted their attack with a thrown grenade, and with the others laying down a steady stream of fire, the Russian had circled around to the right, coming up behind a long concrete wall to take the survivors from behind. One of them lay unconscious on the cold floor of the garage, hit by the Russian’s stun rod; the others bled out on the floor.

Vasily had taken glancing hit to his right arm near the shoulder, which James was giving a quick examination. Buzz had suffered some scratches on his face from shards that had come from a near miss, but despite some grimaces he was more or less intact.

“Over here,” Jane said.

They continued deeper into the garage, to find another long row of parking spaces, with a brightly lit alcove with an elevator at the far end. They could all see at once what Jane had spotted, the scattered bodies obviously human, people who had tried in vain to escape from the aliens. James checked them anyway, hoping perhaps that their initial perceptions were wrong.

“Killed by plasma bolts,” he said.

If we want any hope of finding survivors, we need move fast,” Vasily said. Jane started toward the elevator, but he shook his head. “Take stairs,” he said, pointing to an almost invisible door to the right.

They made their way up into what looked like a service corridor. Two people lay in a bloody heap next to a door marked, “Emergency Exit.” While James checked the bodies, Catalina pushed on the door handle; it didn’t give. “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” she said.

The other end of the hallway opened onto a broad foyer next to the elevator. The air conditioned foyer was brightly lit, both by the natural sunlight that streamed in from the wall that connected to the street outside, and from dozens of lights in the ceiling panels. There was a number of businesses that opened onto the foyer, and at least a half-dozen bodies lying within view.

Catalina activated the sensor and panned it around. “Faint signal, there,” she said, pointing to a doorway on the far side of the foyer that appeared to lead into a Japanese restaurant

Ken’s voice sounded in their ears. “Team, news chopper is showing survivors coming out of the cordoned area, both north and east of your position. Army ETA is ten minutes, you almost done in there?”

“Not yet, Ken, we need move fast,” Vasily said. “Meet at our position in five minutes.”

“Roger that, Alpha.”

Jane and Catalina had moved up to the front entrance of the restaurant. The interior was dimly lit, a long dining room visible behind the front counter. A faintly charred odor hung in the air.

Vasily glanced over at Catalina, who tapped the motion sensor against the wall. “Damn it, I think I’m losing power. But the last signal was this way.”

“All right,” Vasily said, leading them inside.

The restaurant was bigger than it looked outside. It was mostly deserted, although they could see a body slumped into a booth to the left of the entry, and what looked like another lying on the floor near the bar along the far wall. There were several exits, one by the bar that seemed to lead into the kitchen, one leading to a narrow hall that probably accessed the restrooms, and a third in the back, down a short hall, that might have led to another exit, or to a banquet room or offices. Vasily gestured for James, Catalina, and Buzz to head in that direction, while he led Jane toward the kitchen.

The kitchen was orderly and clean, with a long stainless steel counter running down its center. The burning smell was coming from a wok sitting ajar on the stove. Jane started forward to turn it off. Vasily started toward the right, to check the rest of the room, but was interrupted as a woman in a red blouse and dark trousers stepped into view from the side, holding the biggest handgun Vasily had ever seen pointed squarely at his chest.

“Hold it!” she warned. “Who are you?”

Jane spun and started to lift her weapon, but stopped as soon as she saw the gun pointed at her partner. “Hey, woah! It okay. We army,” Vasily said.

“Army? Yeah, right. Nice Russian accent, ‘Army’.”

“We have I.D.”

“Oh, I’m sure you do.”

“We need to get you out of here,” Jane said. “for your own safety. This is a dangerous situation still.”

The woman snorted. “More aliens, you mean? There’s three of them in there,” she said, jerking her thumb at the room behind her. “They killed all the others.”

Vasily opened his mouth to respond, but before he could, they heard the familiar sizzling sound of plasma blasts, followed immediately by the louder crack of James’s rifle and Catalina’s pistol.

“Uh oh, they know you’re here,” the woman said. “Better go help your friends.”

Vasily was already running, Jane a step behind. “Watch her!” Vasily yelled over his shoulder at Jane. Emerging back into the main dining room of the restaurant, he looked at the back hall, where weapons flashes were lighting up the short hallway. He heard James yelling something, and saw Buzz, staggering back out of the hallway, blood oozing from a gash along the side of his head.

Vasily ran toward him, but before he could reach the hacker the wall ahead exploded outward. Buzz fell to the ground, and something hard struck Vasily square in the center of the forehead, and then everything went dark.

* * * * *

Session 8 (June 2, 2008)

Chapter 25

Vasily groaned as pain accompanied the return of consciousness. He blinked to see James kneeling over him. "Aliens?"

"All down."

"Everybody all right?"

"Buzz will have a headache for a while, but we're all otherwise intact."

Vasily grimaced as James lifted the tri-prong injector he'd used to deliver a second dose of alien bio-material. But the pain began to fade, accompanied by a surging lethargy that the Russian forced aside with a considerable effort. He didn't turn down the hand that James offered to help him up, though.

He glanced around the restaurant. "Where... where she go?" he asked, shooting a hard look at Jane.

"She just disappeared," Jane said.

"She got gun, she could commandeer Skyranger," Vasily said. "Ken even got gun?"

Their communicators buzzed. "I've landed just outside the main entrance to your building," Ken said. "We've got company coming here, a full platoon of soldiers coming up the street."

"We need to go," James said.

"Everything secure here?" Jane asked.

"We got what the aliens were carrying," Catalina said.

"No time," Vasily said.

They emerged from the main doors back into the street, the light and heat hitting them like two hammers. The Skyranger was there as promised, waiting for them, but so was a large group of soldiers, led by a man shouting orders who did not look pleased to see them.

"Somebody tell me what the sam hell is goin' on here?" he yelled, his voice tinged with more than a hint of the Deep South. "Who the hell are you people?"

“Somebody else best do talking,” Vasily said quietly.

Catalina stepped forward, gesturing subtly for James to accompany her. “Special Branch of FBI, fast response unit,” Catalina said, her British accent suddenly gone.

“So, where are you guys from?” James added, wiping blood off of his shoes.

The soldier, who wore the oak leaf of a lieutenant colonel, turned to Catalina. “FBI? Look, ma’am, I’m just a soldier, career army, but I’m no idiot. We just saw some freakin’ weird-ass bodies back there, and I got orders to clean me up this here whole district, which includes the—”

He was cut off by a subordinate, who ran up holding a portable radio. “Sir. Radio message coming in.”

“Well now, Jenkins, give it here,” the colonel said. “Sir, yes, it’s Randolph. We got us...” he paused for a moment, listening. “Yes, yes, that’s them. There’s these bodies... Sir. Ah, yes, sir. Whatever you say.”

He lowered the radio and looked at Catalina. “You’re free to go.”

“But sir,” one of the other soldiers started, only to be cut off by a hard look from the colonel. Catalina nodded, and walked past him to the Skyranger, the hatch opening to greet her. “Told you, Special Branch,” she said, climbing on board the aircraft. The others followed, while the colonel remained shouting orders behind them. They could still hear him, the soldiers backing away as Ken fired up the engines of the Skyranger, until the hatch finally closed, leaving the chaos of the street scene behind them.

* * * * *

Interlude: Base Priorities (June 3, 2008)

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, GRACE THELON BELUCA
RE: New Research/Manufacturing Priorities

Multiple breakthroughs!

Research Lab 1 reports that work on the Alien Alloys is complete. Once we figured out that an electrical current makes the material malleable, we were able to advance our analysis of the substance.

Research Lab 2 has produced a working Laser Rifle prototype. These weapons may now be manufactured in our Workshops.

Workshop 2 is coming online. We are still recruiting new engineers, and the shop will not be fully operational for another week, but you may wish to institute priorities now, so that they can hit the ground running.

Session 9 (June 9, 2008)

Chapter 26

“So, do you think we can master the sectoid language?” Jane asked.

“If they have language as we know it,” James noted.

“Perhaps,” Ama Ngunyi said. She was a short, dark-skinned woman, her hair cropped short around her head, a faint lilting tone to her words. “The ones you have captured have been uncommunicative, however.”

“Their body structures are very odd,” James said.

Catalina, sitting a short distance away on the couch in the lounge, said, “There is the option for mental communication, of course.”

The African woman nodded. “The researchers have considered that possibility. It offers intriguing possibilities for the language acquisition issue.”

“Is there any chance that the sectoids are communicating with each other through non-verbal means, like chemically, or other forms of energy?”

Ama shook her head. “We have not been able to detect any such communication, Miss Swift.”

The door to the outer hall slid open, and a tall, muscled blonde who looked like she’d stepped out of an *Elle* ad walked into the room. “Yo, Ama,” she said. “You missed the scrim.”

Ama turned toward the newcomer. “My apologies, Alyssa. I have been busy in the containment lab. Doctor White and I have been working with the alien captives.”

“Bah, the blonde said. “Give me some live ones.” She smiled at Jane and Catalina. “Zap, zap, right girls?” She made a mock pistol with her fingers and sighted down it. “I can almost outshoot that bastard Mexican.”

Vasily, taking a burrito out of the microwave, rolled his eyes and looked around for the magazine he'd been reading earlier.

"They stuff they got us doing here," Alyssa went on, "it's not much harder than the little stunts they had us doing on *Survivor*."

"What's that?" Cat asked.

"Ah, you never watch television? Or telly, I suppose you call it," she added, with a grin.

"I've never heard of the programme."

"Heh, the last eps drew 175 million worldwide, especially after those two guys died."

"I not think this show make it to my country," Vasily said, without looking up from his magazine.

"*Survivor Antarctica* was a global phenom!" Alyssa said.

Catalina shrugged. "I was probably out that night."

"Well. If you will excuse me," Ama said, "I have some work to do in the computer lab."

James stood as well. "I'll go with you. I want to check in at the medical lab and see if they are making more progress on more medikits." The two of them left, while Alyssa went on with her description of Beta Team's latest training exercise. After a few minutes, she got up and dug out a box of granola bars from the back of one of the cabinets. "Well, gotta go," she said. "Toodles, all."

"I never thought I'd meet anyone more full of themselves than I am," Catalina said, once she'd left.

"I hope she lasts," Jane said.

"World short on military volunteers now? Or she got super powers or something?"

James left Ama at the corridor that led into the base's South Wing; she headed to the computer lab, while he turned left into the medical bay. The medical staff was still sharing room with the base researchers, which made for some crowding issues, but Grace's engineers were working on setting up a newly-drilled area deeper in the complex that would give Stan and his team a dedicated space for their use. When it came to living space, the scientists and engineers had it even worse than Alpha Team, sharing a long barracks dormitory with beds that slept two or sometimes even three people in shifts. Plans were in the works for more barracks as well, but at the moment, priority was being given to projects that would directly affect the war effort against the aliens.

As James entered the lab, he saw that there was a commotion on the far side of the room, where a short hall led to the quarters used by the lab teams, and to the storerooms that had been pressed into service as overflow labs. Curious, he headed in that direction.

“Damn it,” Chief Hallorand was saying, increasingly agitated, “What’s the situation in there?”

Hallorand was surrounded by a crowd of scientists that James knew only casually, and Jürgen Ritter. A guard stood nearby, fingering his rifle nervously. “That thing, it just started shooting!” one of the scientists said. James saw with a start that one of the men was clutching a shoulder from which a bright red stain was spreading across his pristine white coat. “Let me see that,” James said, hurrying forward. “Medic!” he yelled back toward the lab.

“Maybe an EM pulse?” Jürgen suggested.

“Do you see an electromagnetic generator lying around here, Doctor Ritter?” Hallorand shot back. Noticing James, he said, “Allen. Good. We might need your team, I think.”

After turning over the injured scientist to the emergency nurse who’d run up at his call, bearing a white medical bag, James dug his communicator out of his pocket and slung the earpiece over his right ear. “Alpha, come to the second research lab, emergency!”

“Chief, you want us to go in there and ventilate the place?” the guard asked.

“Gods, no!” Jürgen said. “there are captives...”

“A robot’s holding prisoners. You gotta be kiddin’ me.”

“No, he is right,” the researcher with the injured arm said. “They are pinned in the back of the room. I saw Doctor Sandesh take a hit, he’s probably wounded...”

“A robot?” James asked.

“The prototype weapons platform,” Jürgen replied.

“What about it?” Catalina said, as she the others rushed up to join the cluster of people. All of the members of Alpha had their weapons, Jane flicking on the power unit to her laser pistol as she stepped up next to Hallorand.

“The weapons platform appears to have... malfunctioned,” Hallorand said.

“It tried to kill us all!” the wounded scientist exclaimed.

“What the hell were you doing testing it with live ammo?” Jürgen shot back. The researcher blinked. “All the weapons were deactivated,” he said.

“Oh goodie, where is Doctor S?” Catalina asked. “That was his pet project.”

“He’s in there,” James said.

“Anybody die?” Vasily asked.

“Someone was behind me,” the injured man said. “I think it was Doctor Gordon. He didn’t make it...”

“We got remote feed?” Hallorand asked, taking out his xPhone.

“Security grid in the room is offline,” the guard said.

“Okay, everyone get back,” Hallorand barked. “We’ll let Alpha sort this out. I don’t want a crossfire set up here.” He turned to the guard. “Set up a perimeter in the outer lab.” The man saluted, and started urging the scientists back.

Vasily and Catalina stepped up to the door that led into the secondary lab. “What kind of weapons this thing pack?” he asked.

The injured scientist, now on the far side of the hall, turned back to them. “It had a cannon, but we deactivated it... I saw the indicators myself...”

“It has a small caliber short-ranged cannon,” Jane said. “I saw the schematics during my work with Doctor Sandesh. In a close space like this one...”

Vasily shook his head. “Cannon, huh?”

Catalina checked the indicator panel next to the door mechanism. “The door is locked, hold on,” she said, taking out her small pouch of tools.

“Keycard not work?” Vasily asked.

“Locked out,” Catalina said. Buzz had started forward, but Catalina inserted a metal probe behind the access console, touched two places in rapid succession, and the door abruptly hissed open.

The lab was dark, with only a single flickering panel in the ceiling still shedding light. It was enough to see the body lying on the floor near the door, covered with blood.

They could also see the small object in the center of the room, a squat rectangle roughly the size of a banana box, with sloping, armored sides, and a contraption of sensors and other projections jutting out from its top. It let out hissing, beeping noises

as it rocked back and forth, and as it suddenly spun toward the door, they could see the menacing barrel of the cannon that jutted from its body.

Before they could do anything more than stare at it, it started shooting at them.

* * * * *

Session 9 (June 9, 2008)

Chapter 27

Vasily and Catalina dove forward, the Russian taking cover behind a stack of crates, while Catalina fell behind a computer console that was set up facing the center of the room. Sparks and metal shards showered around the door, and there was a sudden gout of steam as a round penetrated a thick metal pipe. But at least in the immediate moment, none of them were hit.

Catalina looked up in surprise as Buzz threw himself down next to her. The hacker looked almost as surprised. He started to get up, to get a look at the console, but Catalina jerked him back down. "Wait," she whispered.

"Buzz! You shut it down?" Vasily yelled, ducking lower as a cannon shell penetrated the crates he was hiding behind. Jane opened up from the doorway, her laser lancing a bright beam across the room. She hit the weapons platform but failed to destroy it, and was forced to duck back as the device sent several shells her way. Part of the door came off as a round clipped it, and the entire assembly creaked alarmingly as one of the hinges was struck.

James, crawling along the floor, reached forward and grabbed the fallen scientist. Careful to keep his head down, he pulled the man over the threshold, where a guard helped to drag him to safety.

"Let me get its attention," Catalina said to Buzz. She darted out from behind the console, running around the perimeter of the room, trying to get behind the weapons platform. The device sensed her and started turning its turret. Buzz rose carefully and started working on the console.

"Look out!" Vasily yelled. He lifted his rifle, but didn't have a shot; a miss could have easily struck Catalina. The British agent dove behind a row of crates just as the cannon lined up and fired, the shot hitting a line of shelves behind her and knocking it down with a loud clatter of metal parts and machinery.

The back of the HWP's turret began to glow, as Jane focused a steady beam of coherent light upon it. The device started to turn, but suddenly something inside it gave

way, and with a blast of smoke and sparks it abruptly stopped moving. It continued to hiss and roil and it lay there in the middle of the room.

Catalina started to get up, but Vasily stopped her with a raised hand. Warily, the Russian came forward, his rifle trained on the thing. Deactivated, it looked somehow smaller now.

A woman dressed in the scrubs of a surgical nurse leaned out behind the stacked crates and unused machinery in the back corner of the room. "Is it... dead now?"

Two men emerged from cover after her. "The device was never alive, my dear," Doctor Okwelume said. "A simple equipment malfunction."

Fadil Sandesh was less sanguine. "Ah, my device!" he exclaimed, standing over it like a man finding his dog struck by a car on the edge of a road. "Ruined!"

Buzz came over to him. "Wow, this looks bad," he said.

"Weeks of work, wrecked!" Sandesh exclaimed.

"Apologies, Doctor Sandesh, but it was them or it," Catalina said.

"Doctor, you forget yourself," Okwelume said. "These people saved our lives."

James came into the room, blood smeared on his hands. "We lost Gordon here. Took one right through the chest cavity."

Sandesh looked as though he'd been struck. "If you'd given me the resources I asked for... this would never have happened!" He stormed off.

"Engineers, never will understand them," Catalina muttered.

Chief Hallorand came in, accompanied by a pair of guards. "Damn it," he said. "Medical team is on its way down, to get the body." He scanned the room. "We've got a tough enough time without taking casualties here. What happened?"

"Better ask Doctor Sandesh," James said.

"Okay, we'll clean this up," Hallorand said. "Better report in. I don't want to be the one to tell Garret about this."

"I will submit my own report as well," Doctor Okwelume said. "I believe it is unfair to pillory Doctor Sandesh for this, until there is evidence."

Buzz had been working on the console during the exchange, and he muttered to himself, "Something is very wrong here."

Catalina, who was standing not far from the console, heard him. "What have you seen?"

"Look," he said, indicating the screen in front of him, where a complex scrawl of machine language had filled the display. "I can't read that," Catalina prompted.

"The security protocols were bypassed," he said.

"Sabotage?" Jane asked.

"Bypassed?" Hallorand added. "Deliberately?"

Vasily muttered angrily. "Reports not say, 'if you not give me more resources, then machine will flip out and kill man.'" He clenched his fists.

Buzz continued searching through the database. "Someone has tampered with the AI protocols, someone good with hiding his or her tracks."

"Can you find out who did it?" Hallorand asked.

Buzz looked up at him. He looked uncertain, but before he could respond, a voice interrupted over the base intercom. "Alpha Team, report to Briefing Room 1. We have an alien incursion in progress."

* * * * *

Session 9 (June 9, 2008)

Chapter 28

When they entered the briefing room, the others were clustered around the big monitor in the wall. Kim Wagner was reporting information as it arrived on her console, updating the track that was crawling across the map on the screen.

"What's the course now, Kim?" Garret asked. He had a phone on one ear, with a communications headset in the other, and looked like he was carrying on several conversations at once.

"The alien vessel is moving quickly over the Gulf of Mexico, heading north by northeast."

Garret glanced over his shoulder at the members of Alpha as they entered the room. "Radar's picked up an alien, small, moving fast," he said, before turning back to the screen.

"Over the eastern states?" Catalina asked, looking at the trajectory that continued to evolve on the map.

"At its current course, it looks like it will pass over Florida, maybe South Carolina," Kim said.

"Oh good, swamps," Buzz muttered.

"That trajectory takes it over some heavily populated areas," Catalina said.

"Rest assured, we will deal with it when it enters United States airspace," Agent Drake said.

The pilot Ken Yushi was sitting on the briefing room table behind the knot of people around the viewer. "I don't know, Agent. It's moving real fast," he said.

"Interceptor 1 is en route," Garret announced. "Time to intercept, Kim?"

Kim entered a few calculations into her control console. A new track, highlighted in green, appeared on the map. "At current course and speed, nineteen minutes."

"Shouldn't we be in the air?" Jane asked.

"Well, I think we should," Drake began, but she was cut off by Kim. "Wait! I am reading another track."

"What?" Garret said. "Another UFO?"

Kim bent over her console. "Yes," she finally said, after a few seconds. "Confirmed..."

"Course and speed?" Garret barked.

Kim looked up from her screen. "It's heading... it's heading right for us."

"Here!" Grace exclaimed.

There was a stir of exclamations around the table. "Director, I need to attend to the missile battery," Grace said.

"Go, Grace," Garret said. She was gone in a flash, running before the outer door had slid fully open.

“Excellent,” James said. “We can wait for ‘em here, no need to fly.”

“What bout other one?” Vasily asked.

“The other one is still on its course,” Kim said. The track of the second alien ship had appeared on the screen, its path pointing like a dagger toward the small blue square that represented the Nevada base. “Interceptor 1 will be in range in twelve minutes.”

“What about Interceptor 2?” Yushi asked.

“Still being repaired,” Garret said.

“Should we be heading after the first?” Catalina asked. “The second could be a decoy to distract us.”

“Or maybe first is decoy, to draw us out before they attack,” Vasily said. “Or maybe is just one big coincidence.”

“Who knows what the hell is going on in those little gray heads of theirs,” Drake said.

“Anyway, is this not why we have two teams?” Vasily asked.

“That’s what I was thinking,” Cat added.

“If we launch now, they’ll spot the base for sure,” Drake said.

“The second alien’s course is shifting,” Kim reported. “It is... what is the English expression, to go back and forth?”

“I think ‘zig zag’ is what you’re looking for, doc,” Yushi said.

Grace’s voice came over the intercom. “Grace here. The missile battery is armed and ready.”

“Kim, status? Is UFO 2 heading here, or not?” Garret asked.

“It is continuing to ‘zig zag’, almost like a search pattern.”

“Range to target?” Garret asked.

“Seventy miles,” Kim returned.

Garret activated his communicator. “Grace, what’s the range on the missile battery?”

“Forty-five miles, give or take.”

"Kim, range to UFO 2?"

"Fifty miles, and closing."

Garret placed his fists down on the table. "Then the question becomes, do we take the shot?" He looked up at the members of Alpha, who formed a line along the far side of the table.

"It not good if we can be stalemated like this," Vasily said.

"What are you doing, asking them?" Drake said. "Of course you take the shot!"

"Kim?" Garret asked.

"Forty-two miles."

"Enemy in range, but it's a long shot, chief," Grace's voice came over the speaker.

"They want us to reveal our position," Jane said.

"Oh, and your extensive experience tells you that, Swift," Drake snapped.

"If missiles keeping it messing about doing nothing, I say, keep missiles as deterrent," Vasily said.

"Kim?"

"UFO 1 is... forty-eight miles off. It's moving away."

"You blew your chance!" Drake hissed. "Now it will report back."

"Yeah, but it has nothing to report," Stan said.

On the eastern part of the map, the green line coming from the west had nearly bisected the red one coming up from the Gulf. "Interceptor 1 has engaged UFO 1!" Kim said.

There was a period of silence, as everyone there watched the lines running across the map, as though they could reveal what was happening in the skies hundreds of miles away. Finally, Kim bent over her console again. Letting out a held breath, she said, "Interceptor 1 has reported an Avalanche hit on UFO 1. The alien has gone down, is off our screens."

"Where did it go down?" James asked.

"The Florida Everglades."

“UFO 2?” Garret asked.

“Still heading away. American fighter jets are moving to intercept, but I doubt they’ll catch it, at the speed it’s moving.”

“Let’s get ready to launch to the Everglades,” Allen said. “We need to recover that one, at least.”

“Allen’s right,” Garret said. “Get to Skyranger 1. We’ll launch as soon as it’s clear that UFO 2 is clear and not coming back.”

* * * * *

Session 9 (June 9, 2008)

Chapter 29

A little over three hours later, the Skyranger was descending over Florida, its engines going all-out as Alpha Team raced to reach the alien crash site. They had triangulated the alien’s location as best they could using Interceptor 1’s data and the information collected by the American radar stations, but that still left a lot of potential ground to cover.

“It’s dark as hell down there,” Ken said from the cockpit. “I asked about waiting until morning, but I think HQ is afraid of another alien ship coming around to pick up the pieces. Hope you brought a flashlight.”

“You got that blaster figured out, Vasily?” James said, indicating the long snub of the laser rifle clipped into the rack beside the Russian’s drop seat.

“I figure it out,” he said. There had been a lot of discussion about who would use the rifle and the latest laser pistol to come out of Grace’s workshop, but Vasily had finally ended the debate by taking the pistol and its powerpack, and thrusting them into Catalina’s hands. “Mother of god, you like freaking kids,” he growled. “Who has skills to use, use,” he said, taking the rifle and its heavy backpack power unit.

The Skyranger switched to its hybrid flight configuration, drifting over the target site a few thousand feet above the tangled forest below. “Scanning,” Ken said, “Damn, they got a lot of trees down there. I’ve got a hot zone on IR... There’s a clearing, a few clicks south of the site. I’ll put us down there, hang on, this could get a bit bumpy.”

The descent was as promised, but at least they didn’t hit anything, and soon Ken had landed the Skyranger, its deck tilted at a slight angle as its struts dug into the uneven surface below. As the hatch opened, Vasily handed out powerful LED lights from one of

the lockers, which clipped onto their helmets for a bright source of illumination. James went around with a mechanical hypodermic unit, injecting each of them in turn with a formula that would offer some protection against the many known pathogens that infested the swamp. "Just try not to get wounded," he told them. "It may get... complicated."

Vasily was the first one out the hatch. The clearing was little more than a patch of raised ground that was surrounded on all side by spongy, mired terrain that extended as far as their lamps could reveal. The forest growth was dense, populated by the sounds of buzzing insects and the distant calls of larger things.

"We have long walk," Vasily said, once they were all clear. "Let's get going."

"Let me use the sensor," Catalina suggested, unlimbering the portable device.

"This is swamp," Vasily pointed out. "Motion sensor likely detect everything."

"I should be able to tell what is what, I think," Catalina said, activating the device and panning it around in a half-circle oriented to the north. After a few seconds, she signed, and said, "It seems there is too much around. But there's nothing man sized in range, I don't think."

They made their way into the swamp, their lamps forming bright spears that poked ahead of them as they moved. The ground was anything but firm, but they only had to go wading across one broad pool that never went further than waist-deep. They paused at the far side, Vasily grimacing as he cut a leech off his leg just above the top of his boot.

"This way," Catalina whispered over their communicators.

They moved forward, the two women scouting ahead, the men following with guns ready. The going was slightly easier on the far side of the pool, and the ground rose slightly as they continued, although the saturated soil still sucked at their boots with every step.

"Something here," Jane said, veering slightly off to the left. She prodded at something on the ground, only to stagger back as a cloud of noxious green gas seeped into the air from a cleft in the ground.

"Careful!" James said, hurrying forward to investigate. "Jane, come on over here, you look bad." He took out one of the compact medical kits from the bag at his hip.

"That gas again!" Buzz yelled, fumbling in his pack for his gas mask.

"You need to be more damn careful," Catalina said, checking the motion sensor again for any threats.

“What is that thing?” Vasily asked, carefully examining the object that lay in the cleft. The green gas was still seeping from it, a long cylindrical object that was half-buried in the mud. Catalina looked up and saw a pattern in the broken branches in the dense canopy above. “Looks like it fell from above,” she said.

Jane was breathing easier after James injected her with the contents of the medikit. “Be careful,” James said, “not too many of these left.”

“We mark it for cleanup crew, yes?” Vasily said, but Buzz had crawled forward, and giving the thin stream of leaking gas a wide berth, began examining the piece of alien debris.

After about a minute, there was a click. The others took a step back, but Buzz withdrew an object from the cylinder, a translucent tube that glowed faintly green. “Oh my god, this is heavy!” he exclaimed.

“What is it?” Catalina asked, as Buzz tried to get to his feet, his boots slipping on the slimy mud.

“Careful!” Vasily exclaimed. “Not drop in water!”

“Someone want to carry this?” Buzz said, clutching the cylinder awkwardly against his body.

“Don’t look at me, girlie here,” Catalina said.

Vasily slung his rifle and took it; Buzz winced as the Russian slung the heavy object over his shoulder with little apparent effort. “I carry back to Skyranger. You find way forward, yes?”

“Let’s not run off one at a time,” James said. “I’ll give Vas a hand carrying it.”

“I not be long, Skyranger is just over there. I think. You concentrate on finding path through swamp.”

An hour later found the five members of Alpha crouched behind a low berm of muddy ground and rotting plant matter that had gathered around the thick trunk of a fallen tree. Catalina had scouted out a viable path ahead through the swamp, although it had not been easy, with more murky pools and pits of clinging mud requiring careful attention to bypass safely. Now they watched in cover, at a spot just visible through the trees ahead.

“There’s the ship,” Catalina muttered. “But I swear I saw something moving up there.” Scanning the area through a pair of light-enhancing binoculars, she suddenly froze. “There,” she said, pointing to the northwest. “What the hell is that?”

“Huh? What we looking at? I not see,” Vasily said. Catalina passed him the binoculars. A dark, slender form appeared, half-visible through the tangled growth of the swamp.

Jane was looking at it through the scope of her sniper rifle. “It’s humanoid, but not human,” she said.

“It looked... part human, part snake.”

“Snake?” James asked. “You sure?”

“It has a sodding tail!” Catalina hissed.

Vasily stared though the binoculars. “It gone now. Maybe back inside ship.”

The Russian gestured, and they split into two groups, warily approaching the crashed ship from both flanks. Catalina and James moved around to the right, while Jane and Vasily moved left, with Buzz trailing behind. Catalina blended into the swamp, barely making a whisper as she crept forward, but James got his boot caught on some tangled growth, and stumbled into a bush that thrashed loudly before he could right himself. Ten paces ahead, Catalina heard him and froze.

She wasn’t the only one to hear him, as a long, sinuous form slithered forward out of the undergrowth ahead, emerging into view. Even in the darkness, they could see that it was an alien. It was nearly nine feet long, with humanoid arms jutting from a segmented, ophidian torso. A forked tongue probed from its fanged mouth, and a low hissing noise issued from it. It carried a snub-nosed, bulbous weapon, which it pointed at James, unleashing a series of plasma bursts that briefly transformed the darkness of the swamp into day, the energy blasts exploding into flashes of destruction as they struck the dense, tangled growth of the swamp. One vanished into the bush that James had gotten caught in, which exploded into a bright blaze of fire, enveloping the hapless medic within.

* * * * *

Session 9 (June 9, 2008)

Chapter 30

Catalina opened fire with her laser, but while she scored a hit, the beam merely drew a dark line across the snakeman’s torso, inflicting little apparent damage. She got its attention, and had to dive for cover behind a tree as the alien shifted its rifle in her

direction. Two shots lanced past the tree, but a third scored a direct hit, exploding the trunk in a cascade of wood splinters and knocking Catalina roughly to the ground.

Vasily roared as he emerged out of the swamp behind the snakeman, the stun rod in his hands, its tip flickering with electrical energy. The snakeman turned to shoot him, but he intercepted the sweeping barrel of its rifle with the bole of the staff, knocking it down and away before sweeping the weapon into the creature's face. There was an electrical surge as dancing blue tendrils of energy enveloped the creature's head, then it crumpled in a heap at the Russian's feet.

"GOT YOU!" Vasily yelled.

Jane and Buzz ran to help James and Catalina. The medic had gotten clear of the burning bush, suffering only some minor burns in the process. Catalina was a bit unsteady for a moment, but she quickly recovered, joining the others as they looked down at the stunned alien.

"Damn," James said, bending to examine it more closely. "Let's get this back to the ship and into cold storage." Vasily tried to lift it, but couldn't manage to raise more than half of its bulk from the mud. "Heavy," he panted.

"We've got to secure this alien," James insisted. "It's different than the other one, and new."

Catalina and Jane were looking over the crashed alien ship—from a respectable distance—with Catalina adjusting the controls on the motion sensor. The ship was a small scout, only slightly larger than the wreck they'd captured in the northern deserts of Mexico. This one, however, was more intact, its landing perhaps cushioned by the trees and sodden ground of the swamp. "Something, possibly inside," she reported, although the display on the device was hazy with interference from the alien wreck.

Vasily bound the alien with cables taken from his pack, fastening its jaw and binding its arms tightly to its torso. "Okay, is secure," he said. "If we find power supply in alien ship, I buy everyone drink, okay?"

"We can come back here and deal with the ship later," James said.

Catalina and Jane had edged forward. They found a hatch in the back of the alien craft, which was cracked slightly open. Vasily shrugged at James. "I think everyone keen to neutralize alien inside," he said, standing and joining them.

James sighed, and after giving the alien a quick check to verify that it was not going to revive in the immediate future, rose and followed them. "Bad choice, guys," he muttered to himself.

Vasily and Jane got the hatch fully open, and the Russian led the way inside. There was a cloying cloud of smoke in the air, and they wore their gas masks, giving them the look of aliens themselves as they moved forward into the main compartment. The ship was too small to offer much room to hide, and the snakeman pilot greeted them with a blast from a plasma pistol. Vasily was hit in the shoulder and fell back; laser fire from him and from Jane blasted through the crowded compartment. At that range, either side could hardly miss, but the odds were against the alien. Less than ten seconds after Vasily had first entered the ship, the alien lay sprawled across the controls, blackened streaks covering its body from a dozen hits. Vasily, on the other hand, could barely stand, grimacing as he tested a leg that had been struck by another of the plasma bolts.

"You're a bit messed up, big fella," Catalina said.

"I just fine," the Russian said, limping as he made his way back out of the ship. Buzz slipped in past him, moving forward to check out the ship's controls. He grimaced as he pulled the snakeman free of the command console, letting it slump to the floor of the ship.

James was there to meet Vasily as he came out of the ship. He attended to the injury in his shoulder, the worse of the two hits he'd taken. "Your wound doesn't look so hot," he said, opening up his medical satchel.

"Wound never do," he said, settling back against one wing of the alien craft.

"Power systems seem destroyed," Buzz's voice came over his communicator.

"How is ship?" Vasily asked.

"Well, the power source is down and it is not going to fly for a while."

"Then we go back to Skyranger now," Vasily said. He waited for James to finish applying a pressure bandage to his blackened shoulder, then pushed himself up to his feet, wavering slightly before stabilizing. "Come on, let's grab that alien and get back."

* * * * *

Interlude: Vasily (June 10, 2008)

"I can go now?"

The orderly nodded. "Yes, sir. Try to take it easy for a few days."

Vasily nodded, and began limping out of the medical wing, though he doubted there

would be any taking things easy in the near future. Things were moving fast, and troubling news seemed to come from every quarter.

The base was on edge; the stand-off with the alien saucer proved beyond a doubt that the aliens knew where to find X-Com, and worse, that they knew what kind of defenses the base had. The saucer's dancing in and out of missile range was too precise to be coincidental. Whole military bases had been annihilated by alien attacks; he wasn't sure how X-Com would fare, because he wasn't sure exactly what the aliens could bring to bear.

They still had hidden strengths, of that he was sure. His gloomy thoughts that the sectoids might simply be scouts seemed to be more and more likely; the confrontation with the massive snakeman and his high-bore alien weapon proved that much.

But then, what did this new change mean, he wondered as he limped into the cafeteria and stared at the chalked-up menu. Were the snakemen a form of vanguard? Or, a curious part of his mind wondered, were they literally something new the aliens had brought up? Were they making new soldiers out of snakes? They seemed so different from the sectoids, and a possible answer for the alien obsession for attacking and experimenting on animals and humans swam into focus.

They are trying to find the best way to kill us, and are using our own planet's animals to do it, he mused, buying a tuna sandwich from the subdued-looking chef. It was only a guess, but it felt right to him, felt appropriately sinister and menacing enough to be alien. Maybe he was wrong; but perhaps the inevitable autopsy of the dead snakeman would tell them more.

He limped out into the corridor, munching away to the sound of banging and drilling coming from the workshop to his right. The sheer scale of the dangers the agency was facing was only becoming clear, and deep down, Vasily wondered if the new weapons and equipment were doomed to come too late. He wandered away, industriously chewing, shaking his head.

And then, of course, the most worrying development of all, he thought, as he wandered past the lift guard posts and into the rec room. A saboteur. He had wondered if it had not been an agent of some rival organization or government, but after thinking about it, he had to admit that was a short-sighted guess. Such an agent would likely be there to gather information, and attracting attention to him or herself by sabotaging what was really a sideline project seemed rather counter-productive. But then, the alternative was that someone in X-Com really was working for the aliens, and that was unthinkable. Either by choice or by some kind of coercion, either possibility was terrifying.

Or, even more chilling... *they made their own little sectoids,* Vasily thought unhappily. *Can they make their own humans now too?*

He sighed, nodding and giving a half-hearted wave to the X-Com members in the rec

room as he marched on. One problem at a time; he was a soldier, a counter-insurgency unit, an expendable asset. The others could look for the saboteur; Buzz, Cat, Jane, it was their arena. For him, work was about killing the sectoids and now their big snakeman cousins, and possibly wringing the neck of the one betraying X-Com *after* they found out who it was.

But the snakemen were bigger, and scarier, and though bigger challenges called for more extravagant efforts, having the right gear helped too...

He had come to the training ground, where some members of Alpha and Beta teams were hanging around. He nodded in greeting, but he knew why he was there. He walked up to the big Icelander, Sveinn, and gestured at the insane rotary cannon by his side.

"Hey," Vasily asked, "You mind if I have a go?"

The big bruiser seemed only too happy to hand it over, with a slightly mocking grin as the Russian struggled with the weight. There was laughter from the onlookers, some polite, some raucous, as the recoil sent him tumbling to the floor. Grimacing, he picked himself up again. *If any of you are the traitor I would enjoy shredding you with this gun - just not right away*, he mused as he rubbed his shoulder and tried to grin along with everyone. Maybe it was time to upgrade his own firepower after all.

* * * * *

Interlude: Research Priorities (June 10, 2008)

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, GRACE THELON BELUCA
RE: New Research/Manufacturing Priorities

Research Lab 1 has reported successful interrogation of a sectoid prisoner.

The assessments made by several members of Alpha Team, along with our medical staff, turned out to be accurate. The aliens' primary means of communication is via some form of telepathy, augmented by subvocal noises generated in the throat. It appears that they can understand human speech, but direct dialog is limited to the most basic of concepts.

The knowledge gained from the prisoner, along with the data recovered from the Australia base, has opened up new potentials for our research. Our studies indicate that the aliens are organized into a quasi-caste system, with aliens designed for particular purposes within the alien hierarchy. How the new "snakemen" that you

encountered in the Everglades fits into this system remains to be seen. While we do not have enough information to decipher the alien telepathic communications, Doctor White believes that he can create a Visual Display Unit, or VDU, that can provide realtime information about aliens encountered in the field. Chief Beluca is already working to integrate Dr. White's schematics into the new Personal Armor, so when those suits come online, they will have this technology fully integrated.

We have also completed an analysis of the hovering disk fragments that you brought back from Phoenix. They are identical to those pieces you found in Utah. For now, we are classifying this alien machine a "cyberdisc". Capture of an intact specimen remains a priority.

Research Lab 2 reports progress on the alien navigation systems, but no breakthrough as of yet. Our scientists and engineers agree that once we better understand the alien navigation and power systems, we should be able to use that knowledge to construct advanced craft of our own. Lab 2 has been temporarily closed until the investigation into the events yesterday has been completed, but Base Commander Hallorand indicates that he will allow the research staff to return to this project as soon as possible.

Workshop 2 is now fully online. This workshop has a new electro-magnetic focused array that will allow us to build things using alien alloys. Ten new engineers have arrived in the last week to augment Chief Engineer Beluca's staff. For the moment, we're bunking the additional engineers with Beta Team in the new East Wing barracks.

Interlude: Catalina (June 12, 2008)

"No, we haven't given the project much of a priority, but that isn't the point is it?" Arm draped casually across the back of her chair, Catalina's eyes met those of the investigating officer evenly. "The malfunction wasn't in the machine itself, as soon as it was disabled Operative Olloff discovered that there was a deliberate sabotage of the AI. How would giving Doctor S more staff have prevented that? It might even have made it easier for the saboteur to disguise their actions."

"I can't tell you too much more than that." She uncrossed her legs and recrossed them in the other direction. "Four of us were in the recreation room when we were shouted over the com by Operative Allen. We headed to the lab and found the door locked. I've no idea how that happened but would speculate that the saboteur instigated it. Either way, I managed to override the lock and we ran in."

"The one scientist was on the floor, but we went right past. Operatives Kasprjak and Swift kept it busy while Operative Olloff attempted to get into its controls from a terminal, and I tried a similar approach on the machine." Catalina gave the officer a rueful smile. "Unfortunately it was moving around too much for me to get the panel open, and

Operative Olloff didn't manage to get into the AI before it was damaged too much. It was then Operative Olloff uncovered the sabotage, beyond that I've nothing to add."

Interview over, Catalina left the room and was half way down the corridor when she had a sudden thought. "Damn," she muttered to herself, "with the investigation going on we've not been updated on what that thing was we found in the swamps." Turning on her heels she returned to the workshops and poked her head around the door. "Hi there," she called to the nearest engineer with a friendly smile, "I was just wondering, has anyone taken a close look at what we brought in from the swamp? I'm a tad curious as to what something that heavy could be." She paused, clicked her fingers and spoke again. "Oh, is it also possible to get an idea on what manpower and what timescale you think you'd need to get another manufacturing workshop up and running?"

The engineer, who looked barely old enough to be out of college, let alone grad school, flushed. Catalina didn't recognize him; he had to be one of the new staff assigned to Workshop 2. "Oh, you mean the thing that fell off of the alien ship?" he said. "I'm not a researcher, but I heard Doctor Oka...Oku... well, the African guy? He was saying it had something to do with the alien propulsion systems."

"As for the workshop, I don't know for sure, a week, maybe two. They're really pushing us hard. I don't know where they're going to put the new staff; guess we're going to have to take shifts on the beds and showers."

Catalina turned up her smile to the next level of intensity. "Thanks, love," running her eyes over him one more time before leaving the workshop. She didn't wait to get back to her quarters, whipping her iPhone into her hand as she started quickly composing an e-mail.

Interlude: Buzz (June 14, 2008)

"Jackpot!"

Buzz looked around, hoping his enthusiasm had not been overheard, but the lounge was almost empty, with just a few technicians talking quietly around the microwave. He quickly logged out of the computer, keeping mental notes. He dare not keep any digital records at this point.

He was in a somewhat self-congratulatory mood as he returned to the barracks, but his smug smirk faded as he considered the next step. How should he share this new information? Certainly he trusted team Alpha, but if the wrong people found out...

"Oh Buzz, you got yourself into a mess now," he muttered. As he made his way to his locker, he saw a deck of cards sitting out on one of the bunks, and had an idea. He

pulled out his X-phone and began composing an e-mail.

*To: Team Alpha
From: Buzz
Subject: You might miss something!*

Time to take a break. Poker and fun. As long as you don't mind losing all your credits! Meet at the table at 10pm. Team Alpha only, I don't want too many folks to lose all their money. The first Russian there sets the ante. May the best man win!

He snickered at the last line. Jane and Cat were sure to be there! He pressed "send" and threw himself down onto his bunk, using the xPhone to access the security subroutine he'd started earlier. He'd need it sooner rather than later, it seemed...

Interlude: Base Operations (June 16, 2008)

The lights dimmed as the projector warmed up, casting a crystal-clear image against the far wall.

"As you can see, the alien navigational systems function with a speed and efficiency beyond any human-made computer," Doctor Okwelume said. His crisp Oxford accent accompanied the images, as he went on to describe the details of the research findings on the alien machines.

"As you can see," he said, bringing up a new image of a schematic diagram, "Once we complete our research into the alien shipboard systems, we believe that we can construct a flying craft more advanced than anything else in Earth's arsenal. With work complete on the alien alloys and navigation systems, we need only complete our work on their power systems to proceed."

"And their fuel source," a voice chimed in out of the darkness. Those present didn't need to see Agent Drake's face to know that she had a sour look on her face. "You aren't going to get very far without power."

"Of course," Doctor Okwelume conceded. "The fuel source is key, both to the ships, and to the alien weapons. That is the end of my prepared comments. I look forward to seeing the new priorities set by the Board."

After the lights came back on and the scientist departed, Director-Liaison Garret pulled the members of Alpha Team aside for a moment. "I just wanted to let you know, we have two interceptors stationed now at Dijon-Longvic Airbase in central France. They should give us at least partial coverage of European airspace. We've already broken ground on X-COM Base 2. Some of the techies are calling it the 'Maginot Hole'; not

sure we want to let that catch on, given the history."

He looked at the wall, although the projected image had long since faded. "You've done well, all of you, under difficult circumstances. We're in a race, and we don't even know the course, or where the finish line is."

He paused and touched his ear, where the small bulb of a communications device was just visible. "I'll be right there," he said. "Excuse me," he said to Alpha and departed, in something of a rush.

"What was that all about?" Jane asked.

Catalina shrugged. "So, Buzz, what's this about a poker game tonight?"

Interlude: Poker (June 14, 2008)

Author's Note: Thought I'd post the game in its entirety, as the players initially posted it to the game forum. -LB

VK

10 o'clock came around. In what might be a surprise to some, Vasily marched past the barracks and through the East Wing door into the rec room at almost precisely the stroke of the hour, moving up and taking a chair with nothing more than a nod to those already there.

"Ten credit ante, go up ten credits every twenty minutes, yes?"

CD

Ten past ten, timed *precisely* for when the deck had been shuffled, the dealer had the first card in their hand, and was *just* about to send it across the table, Catalina walked into the room, glided elegantly across the floor, and slid gracefully into a chair at the table.

Catalina winked at Buzz, and palm upright she beckoned with her fingers to the dealer. "Deal me in."

JA

Jim looked over his cards. "Back in my residency days, we used to play this when the ER was slow. Hope you guys know what you are doing, 'cause if not, I'll be walking out with your cash."

Jim grinned as he upped the ante. This was more fun than getting shot at by aliens, and certainly more fun than arguing over when to build the new medical lab. He'd been working hard in the existing lab to build more of those med-kits; without better armor, they'd be sure to need all the kits he and Stan and the technicians could make, next

time they ran into some snakemen. While he agreed that more manufacturing capacity was the right way to go now, he hadn't yet convinced the others that the next step was the new medical lab and improved armor for all of them. Maybe they'd listen better once he took all their money...

JS

Playing cards certainly lightened the mood some. Hopefully, it might even lighten the others of a few bucks. So far, everyone seemed to be holding their own.

Jane tossed in her matching bet and called. Vasily won that round. Next round Catalina, James and Vasily faced off at eighty over three jacks, a straight and two jacks, with James taking the pot. Buzz took the next round with Jane and Catalina each tossing in about 90. Buzz had a full house, fives over twos. It went back and forth for quite awhile, everyone was fairly evenly matched for the first couple hours, breaking even more or less.

There were periods of time where there was no cross-traffic from others and everyone was free to talk freely, as free as one could feel at X-COM.

CD

Okay, a few hands in, everything fairly even, so now it was time have some serious fun. Next hand up with a two pair, ten high. Looking at her cards she set a deliberate smile to her lips and looked up to face all of them across the table. Doc A looked pretty uneasy already, obviously not a good hand. Leave him a while. Vasily looked his same stoic self, determination creasing his brow. Jane and Buzz maintained the traditional poker face.

Round the table the bets went a couple of times she pursed her lips a little and smiled at her cards, as she pushed her credits forward. Catalina cast a glance around the table. "You know what this table needs?" she asked, to the air. "Some pretzels and beer. That is how you Americans do it, right?" There was a few moments' pause before Jane folded and stood up, announcing that she would fetch snacks and be back for the next hand. *Nice, so very, very nice.*

Around and around they went again. James folded but Buzz sat across from her looking quietly confident as he placed a bet. *Time for something... less subtle*, Catalina thought, as she kicked off her shoe, stretched out her leg, and ran her toes carefully up and down Buzz's calf. "Oh my, she exclaimed!" she chuckled as the man twitched and dropped his cards, and Jane wandered back in bearing snacks and looking curious. Cat gave the other woman a grateful wink as she sat down, with Buzz still fumbling to gather up his now-visible flush. *Ha, easy.*

Doc Allen was looking increasingly twitchy, but Vas sat with the permanently angry expression still in place. *Damn, what to do there?* What could you do against a man who would probably stoically ignore toes tickling his groin for the sake of the Mother Land?

BO

Cat had drastically changed Buzz's luck in the game. He didn't know whether to keep his legs crossed, widen them and suggest playing for something other than credits. In any case he had lost all his credits by the end of the next four hands and became merely a spectator. Bad luck but good timing.

It was about midnight and the minor sensor dampening program he had initiated should give them the privacy he needed, and, he hoped, would not be noticed for anything other than a glitch in the system. One never knew with security breaches, but he had already decided it was worth the risk.

He watched one more hand and then leaned forward, lowering his voice a bit. "Listen gang, I found something you all ought to know about." He waited until he thought they all were listening. "Someone has been messin' with the X-Com network, accessing files and such, probably the same person that accessed the HWP AI and inserted the new subroutine and made it go all haywire." He looked around the table, noticing they had stopped playing. "You gonna raise or call Vas?" They took the hint and got back to the game.

He continued as they played. "Whomever it is they are really good, they covered their tracks quite well. They accessed the HWP AI under the login of Doctor Sandesh from the terminal in Alien Containment. Could be him but I doubt it. Number one, the only ones with personal access to this lab are Doctor White, Doctor Wagner, and Base Commander Hallorand. Number two, Doctor Sandesh would have to be smart enough to cover his trail but not smart enough to use someone else's terminal login."

The game went on, but it was clear that the attention of the others was no longer on the cards. He fiddled with his xPhone and continued, "One thing might have come to our advantage. Whomever has been messing with the network has been downloading files on the research going on here; medical, ships, and alien stuff. But they are loading it to a personal data storage device. I don't know about you guys but they almost did an anal probe on me to make sure I did not have anything like that when I got here. Find someone with a device like that and it's a good chance that we find..."

He left the thought hanging.

Session 10 (June 16, 2008)

Chapter 31

In the lounge at X-COM headquarters, in the relative quiet just after midnight, the members of Alpha Team were gathered around the circular table, playing poker.

There was a long silence following Buzz's announcement about the saboteur who had almost killed Doctor Sandesh and a number of other researchers through the deliberate malfunction of the experimental HWP system. Finally, Vasily spoke.

"That not sound easy. Little data stick, well, little."

"Yeah," Buzz said, "I know, and it could look like anything, really."

"I had a data stick that looked like a toothbrush once," James said. "Got it in a promotion for Crest."

"How you propose security look for thing?" the Russian asked.

Catalina frowned, looking at her cards. "A search, perhaps, on the quiet," she said.

Vasily drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "Maybe nearly one hundred people in X-COM. I think you want find this by end of year, yes?"

"I did not even mess with recording or altering the trail," Buzz said, "So no one knows I am on to them."

"Can you lay any traps to help identify the login, Buzz?" James asked.

"What if they already have what they want?" Catalina said.

"Is closed network," Vasily said. "Remember? They not able to get out information without it knowing."

"Hence the stick," Catalina acknowledged. "When did this all begin, Buzz? Could you get a date?"

"I got the dates that the data was downloaded onto the portable device," Buzz said with a smile.

"When were they? We might be able to eliminate some," Catalina suggested. "if they arrived after the date of the first download, then it's not them."

Buzz's expression grew vacant for just a second as he accessed his memory. "There were at least three separate times," he said, "the first one about four weeks ago, and the latest five days ago, well, six now."

"Hmm, well, if no one else is in, I'll just take this," James said, reaching out to shift the pot of tokens toward him.

"Hey!" Vasily said in protest.

“What? You guys are folding, right?”

“I just waiting for my turn.”

Catalina rubbed her chin with one long finger. “Not the Beta team then, and keep your mitts off, Doc!”

James withdrew his hand. “Well then, Cat, you are up.”

“How would they get the data device off the base?” Jane asked.

“Maybe it someone who think leaving base will not be problem,” Vasily suggested.

Jane said, “So someone that can leave the base easily... that’s not good, it could even be Garret.”

Catalina glanced down at her cards. “I’ll see you, and raise you five.” The chips clinked together as she tossed them into the pot.

“It was curious that no weapon data was taken,” Buzz said, as Jane raised, adding her chips to the table.

Vasily opened his mouth to respond, but closed it as the side door opened, and Joan Beauvais walked into the room. “Ah, poker!” she said, seeing them.

“Well, hello,” Buzz said.

“Greetings, Doctor Beauvais,” Jane added.

“Yes. Poker,” Vasily said.

“Good to see you all getting along,” Joan said.

“Getting along?” Buzz said, indicating the pile of chips. “This is war!”

Joan laughed. “I just got back in. Gah, I love my home country, but the French can turn a simple agreement into the Napoleonic Code.”

“Pff, French,” Catalina muttered. “I’m sure the aesthetics of the base were the biggest issue, or the canteen menu.”

The psychologist smiled slightly. “It’s good to be back. I hope I didn’t miss too much?”

“Trouble with neighbors,” Vasily said, throwing chips into the pot.

“Well. I saw that Musa just got back as well, I promised him I’d bring him a bottle of good Bordeaux.”

Catalina looked up. “Ah, good, I need to ask him about something.”

“Good night, Alpha,” Joan said, taking her leave.

Catalina looked up, but waited until the door had shut fully behind Joan before speaking. “Back to the issue we were discussing,” she said, matching the earlier raises. As the cards were flipped over she smiled as her three queens beat James’s two pair, and the single pairs the others showed. “Do we do a search?”

“I not want to be party pooper but maybe telling security not bad idea,” Vasily said.

“Maybe, but we know how subtle the FBI bint can be.”

“Ech,” Vasily replied.

“I think we need outside help with this,” Buzz said, “but the question is, who do we trust to tell?”

“Garret,” Vasily said with a shrug. “Anyone who arrive after first login.”

“If what you think is correct,” Catalina said, “and the person needs to get off base, then it could be any of them.”

“I not know,” Vasily said.

“Was Musa away for the last download?” Catalina asked.

“I think so,” Vasily replied. “Also was Counselor Joan.”

“For some reason, I can’t imagine Drake as the saboteur,” Jane said.

“Can’t risk excluding her, she was here,” Catalina said. “Is there any way we can narrow down the list of personnel on base when the downloads occurred?”

“There should be entry and exit records for everyone in the base data store,” James said.

Catalina looked at Buzz. “Can you run a match?”

“I can, but if I do that, it will could let whoever it is know the hunt is on.”

“Whatever you decide, do fast, yes?” Vasily said.

They hushed as the door to the outer hall opened again, and two members of Beta Team entered the lounge. Eleazar Perez was chatting amiably with Ama Ngunyi, but he broke into a grin as he saw the members of Alpha around the table.

“That guy Musa, he’s okay,” he was saying to Ama as he entered the room. “He had some pirated videos, they were... hey now! If it isn’t Team A, playin’ some cards.”

“Hey there!” Jane said.

“We all poker monsters,” Vasily said.

“I believe they are occupied, Eleazar,” Ama said. “Now, you promised to show me this ‘Steven Segal’ movie?”

Eleazar waved his hands expressively. “Oh yeah, he’s the main man. There was this one movie, he took down a guy, lightning moves, almost as fast as me!” He took Ama’s arm as they left the lounge, heading for the new barracks in the east wing.

Buzz smiled to himself. “Ah, someone else can be a victim other than me,” he muttered under his breath.

Vasily laughed and shook his head. “They use Segal movie for Mexican special forces training, I hear.”

“That explains a lot,” Catalina said.

There was a general laugh around the table, but they quickly sobered as Vasily rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “You know, I have bad thought. What if it not just one? If they have two, hacker and courier...”

“The thought had occurred to me,” Catalina said.

“There’s too many ‘ifs’, that’s why I brought it to you guys,” Buzz said. “I think Drake is out too but we need to get someone involved.” He looked up and started noticeably; the others turned to see Inise Drake standing in the open doorway, a dark-skinned agent in a black suit looming like a shadow behind her.

“Well now,” she said. “Look who isn’t as thick as thieves.”

“Greetings,” Jane said, as Catalina raised the pot.

“Gambling. Why am I not surprised?”

“Nothing would ever surprise you, Agent Drake,” Catalina said, without looking up from her cards.

“Oh, I can be surprised. I’ve learned to expect things I am not expecting.”

“Like the Spanish Inquisition?” Catalina asked.

“You want something, Agent?” Vasily asked.

“No, nothing from you. Although I have to say, Homeland Security really liked that big new alien gun you brought back. I think we gave you... how much was it, Johnson?”

The big agent merely grunted and shrugged infinitesimally.

“Take good care of us and we might bring back some more goodies,” James offered, tossing his cards down.

“Indeed. Maybe next time we’ll throw in a cookie,” she said. “Enjoy your game.” She turned and headed toward the communications room, Agent Johnson following along behind her.

“An atmospheric dampening device, that one,” Catalina said.

“Strange to tell, I kind of like Agent Drake,” Vasily said. “Is like living in Cold War movie.”

Jane was watching after Johnson, as the door to the communications room slid shut. “Ever feel like he’s going to break out his forget ray, and put on black sunglasses?”

“Your country exists purely on pop culture references, Jane,” Catalina said. Once the door had fully shut, she leaned forward, and said, “So, decision time. Do we or do we not search?”

“Need to be careful,” Vasily said. “If Drake get wind, as I say, it all fall down.”

“Well, there’s three barracks here,” Catalina said. “Ours, the new one for Beta, and the one for the techies in the south wing.”

“Do we tell Garret, at least?” Vasily asked. “If we screw up, they will ask, ‘why you not tell someone like the boss?’”

“The real question is who do we trust,” Buzz added.

“I think we tell Hallorand,” James suggested. “If he’s in on it, we’re screwed anyway.”

“Am hoping Garret tell Hallorand,” Vasily said. “But yes, okay, Hallorand.”

“Why don’t we tell him directly?” James asked. “Like right now?”

“I suppose the only thing that can go truly wrong is the person gets away, but at least then we lose no more,” Catalina said.

“No,” Vasily said. “Thing that can go truly wrong is, person get away, security leak exposed, X-COM disbanded.”

* * * * *

Session 10 (June 16, 2008)

Chapter 32

Catalina winced. James said, “Hallorand won’t want that to happen, and will know how to handle the information.”

“Agreed,” Jane said. “Hallorand is the right person to tell.”

“Okay,” Vasily said. “Let’s go.”

“It’s the middle of the night,” Buzz pointed out. “Maybe he’s asleep?” He yawned, to punctuate the statement.

“It has been a long day,” Catalina admitted.

“All right, first thing in morning then,” Vasily said.

They quickly put away the chips and cards, and stood up, stretching and yawning a bit. “I need to check something in the lab,” James said, heading out into the main corridor. “I need to talk to Musa in the morning,” Jane said. “I put in an order for something special for Doctor Sandesh.”

“Thoughtful of you,” Catalina said, stifling another yawn.

The laboratories and workshops at X-COM headquarters never truly shut down, but the main lab was quiet in the early hours, with just four scientists working at individual stations around the room. James headed over to the medical display unit, and tapped the screen to wake it from sleep mode.

The medical tech on duty, one of the surgical nurses, came out of the supply room. She was in her late forties, her blonde hair tightly done up in a no-nonsense bun. “Burning the midnight oil, doc?” she said, noticing James. Distracted, didn’t reply, but as she came over to him, he looked up. “Sorry, deep in thought. What can I do for you?”

“Oh, just saying hello. Say, Doctor Allen, have you seen Doctor Sandesh? He complained of headaches earlier, said he couldn't sleep.”

“No. Where do you think he is?”

“I prepared him a draught, but I just came from the barracks, and he's not in his bunk.”

“Not in his bunk?”

“It's late, he's probably just off wandering. Sometimes it's hard to sleep in this place, you know. Sorry to bother you, doctor.”

“No problem. The base isn't that big, maybe I can try to find him. Where does he usually go when he's not sleeping or working?”

“He kind of keeps to himself. Sometimes he likes to find a quiet place to pray.”

“Not too many quiet places in this base. I'll see if I can find him.”

A few minutes later, James poked his head into the barracks. Buzz was stretched out on his bunk, though he was still awake; Vasily was sitting on the end of his, while Catalina and Jane were presumably behind the folding partition that divided the room by gender.

“Vas, you seen Sandesh? His team can't find him anywhere.”

“Uh, not here. I just get here.”

“He's not in his bunk.”

The Russian frowned. “He was not hurt, right?”

Catalina came in, holding her toiletries kit. “What?” she said, seeing the others.

“Doctor Sandesh apparently not around anywhere,” Vasily said.

“Where could he have gone?” Catalina asked.

“Not in bunk or in lab or in canteen?” Vasily asked James. When the doctor shook his head, he said, “Where else scientist go?”

“We can make sure he hasn't left the base at least, surely?” Catalina asked.

Jane came in, holding a book. “Something up?”

“Doctor Sandesh is missing,” Vasily said. “We need to spread out, search the base. Someone ask guards and in hangar. I will check the east wing.”

“I’ll go check the storage areas,” Jane said. The others followed, fanning out into different corridors as they moved further away from the barracks.

“Help you with something, ma’am?” the base guard outside the main lift asked, as Catalina fixed him with a lantern smile. “You wouldn’t have seen Doctor Sandesh anywhere, would you?”

The guard shook his head. “The Egyptian? No, nobody’s come through here tonight ‘cept for Drake and that agent, and they were leaving.”

“He must be hiding somewhere, I’ll find him,” she said, turning away from the guard with a wink. James caught up to her as she was heading out to the hangars. “Cat, before you go,” he said, hurrying to catch up.

“Yes?”

“Take one of these for our next mission. Insurance, in case I’m not available to use it.”

She frowned as she looked over the compact kit. “How do I use it?”

“It’s simple. For any puncture or energy wound, insert the prongs into the affected area, into living tissue, preferably. Then just hit the plungers.”

“Okay, I can manage that,” she said.

Doors slid open and shut in quick succession in an infrequently-used corridor used for storage. Jane remained in each room just long enough to verify that there was no place within where Sandesh could have been hiding, before moving on to the next one.

As Vasily headed down the corridor that led to the east wing of the base, he heard voices up ahead. Almost reflexively, he slowed down and listened.

“So, is it true what they say about stuntwomen?” Eleazar Perez said.

“I don’t know, what do they say?” returned a female voice, unfamiliar. As Vasily turned the corner, he saw its owner, standing next to Eleazar just outside the door to the tertiary barracks being used by Beta Team and the engineers assigned to the new Workshop Two. She was a curvy blonde, well-equipped with both muscles that showed a lot of work and a Hollywood smile that spread as she caught sight of the Russian. “Hello,” he said.

“They say,” Eleazar began, only to cut off as he saw Vasily. “Ah, it’s the Russian!”

“Yes. It is the Russian,” Vasily replied.

“Vosta... danya, whatever, man. Got any vodka?”

“Don’t mind him,” the woman said. “He’s an idiot. I’m Alyssa Sanders. You must be Vasily Kasprjak.”

“Hah,” Vasily said. “I look for Sandesh. You know? Odd Egyptian scientist man.”

“No, but I just woke up. El was watching this gods-awful movie.”

“Hey, don’t be dissing my main man!” Eleazar interjected. His eyes remained fixed on Vasily, though, with a hard look that suggested that he was unwelcome.

“Okay. Thank you both,” Vasily said. He started to leave, but Alyssa stepped in front of him. “I was thinking of heading over to the shooting range. Want to go with me?”

“Hey, you never want to shoot with me,” Eleazar protested.

“Yes,” she said, shooting a quick glance in his direction. “That’s right.”

“Eh, I wish I could, but... eh, okay. Need to get used to giant machine gun, hah.”

“I’ll bet you do,” Alyssa said.

“Bah, I’m going to bed,” Eleazar said, turning away in defeat.

Alyssa tucked her hand under Vasily’s arm as the pair made their way to the final corridor at the end of the east wing, where some of the engineers had set up a shielded practice range. A heavy tarp had been set up to muffle the noise, which Vasily pulled back to let Alyssa by. “How is life in Beta,” he began, but he was cut off as Alyssa let out a startled gasp. He followed her to see what had surprised her, then let out a harsh Russian curse. He quickly jumped over the low barrier that marked the start of the range, and bent over the limp form of Doctor Sandesh.

“Is he...” Alyssa asked.

Vasily looked up. “Please go to base corridor. Get Doctor Allen. He not dead. Not yet.”

“Right!” Alyssa said, and ran off.

* * * * *

Session 10 (June 16, 2008)

Chapter 33

The mood was somber as Doctor Sandesh was loaded onto a gurney for transport. The scientist was still in the same condition as he'd been when Vasily had found him, comatose and unresponsive. An IV had been inserted into his arm, and the nurses carefully buckled straps over Sandesh's arms and legs, to keep him from moving suddenly during transit.

"All right, let's get him to the med bay," Stan White said, bending to pick up his medical bag.

The corridor was fairly crowded, but the guards and staff that had gathered parted to let the gurney through.

"What was he doing at the weapons range?" Jane asked.

"He wasn't a violent man," Chief Hallorand said. "I don't think I've seen him even hold a weapon."

"Was he checking the target dummies' mechanics?" Catalina suggested.

"No, he had nothing to do with this work," Hallorand said. He turned to a guard. "I want this area cleared and secured," he said quietly. "Check the surveillance scans for this part of the base."

"There's nothing unusual added or missing in the weapons locker," Jane said. "None of the weapons have been fired recently, as far as I can tell."

"He wasn't shot," Hallorand said. "No obvious wounds at all, White said. And in any case, someone would have heard a shot, with the Beta barracks right around the corner. We had to institute a rule against using the range after eighteen hundred hours, too many complaints."

"I know this sound paranoid," Vasily said, "But since you do that research on alien language, alien containment been upgraded any?"

Hallorand frowned. "No, but it's the most secure location on base."

A guard came running up. "Sir!"

"What is it?" Hallorand asked.

"Sir! Something's wrong with the security tapes!"

“What?”

Vasily cursed, and Catalina said, “Why am I not surprised?”

The guard went on, “The comm tech, he said that someone had run a program, it interfered with the security recordings. He said it started in the lounge, about four hours ago.” Buzz groaned, but none of the others heard him as the guard continued, “It spread, and messed up the whole grid. We lost the whole night for most of the base!”

“Base security has been compromised,” James said.

“I agree,” Hallorand said. “I’ll notify Director Garret.”

He started to leave, but Buzz quickly stepped in front of him. “Chief... we better talk.”

“Can it wait, Buzz?”

The hacker swallowed nervously as all eyes turned to him. “No sir, I don’t think so,” he said.

Five minutes later, the members of Alpha Team were crowded around the compact desk in Chief Hallorand’s office. With the mood brewing in the office, it was feeling smaller by the minute.

“So you’re telling me *you* disabled the security system?” Hallorand all but yelled at Buzz. For once, the hacker didn’t flinch; perhaps the experience of being repeatedly shot at by strange alien species had hardened him somewhat. He seemed anything but confident, however.

“I... well, as I told you, someone has been hacking into the system and stealing files, I had all but traced them down.”

“Why didn’t you tell anyone? Me, or Director Garret, or Doctor Wagner?”

“Well, I just found it and wanted to talk with the team about it, without the chance of someone overhearing. We had decided to tell you in the morning, and then Doctor Sandesh went missing...”

Hallorand kneaded his brow with his fingers. “I suppose it is water under the bridge now. But in the future, when something like this happens, Buzz, you can *wake me up*...”

“I think Sandesh was a target,” Buzz said. “You might want to assign him some protection?”

"I've already stationed guards in the medical bay, and will double them," Hallorand said. "I have to report to Director Garret. I suspect he'll want to talk to you as well. Don't, ah, wander off, eh?"

Dismissed, the five of them paused in the hallway outside of Hallorand's office. "Question is," Catalina said, "was this a coincidence, or did someone else know that the security recordings were disabled?"

"If someone did modify my program, they're good," Buzz said. It was a simple program, but they would have had to access it this evening to manipulate it, and move fast."

Catalina shook her head. "If they did, then they know something is up."

"Wait, so it not you who turned off cameras?" Vasily asked.

"The program I wrote was to make everything a bit fuzzy so we could talk, not disable the entire system. It would surprise me if it 'went rogue' on its own, but I can't tell without getting into the system. Unfortunately, I might not have my usual access from now on."

"We... we missing something," Vasily said.

"Hold on," Catalina said. "We were in the lounge. No one came past us."

"Um, yes, people came past us," Jane pointed out. "You forget the Betas?"

"They came in, not out."

"So, that just narrow down to Beta team, all tech workers and whoever was sleeping at time?" Vasily asked.

"Sandesh could have come here before we started our game," James said. "All the nurses said was that he had a headache earlier."

Buzz sighed. "I am so tired I can't think straight."

"We should search now," Catalina suggested. "Check all of the rooms in the east wing."

"Search not easy if base lockdown," Vasily said.

"We should verify—" Catalina began, but she was interrupted by approach of Michael Garret down the corridor. The Director was coming straight toward them.

"Quite a night, I hear," Garret said.

"Is all gone bad," Vasily said.

“Well, it’s going to get a lot livelier. We’ve got a bogey.”

The mood inside the briefing room was full of the usual tension, with everyone focused on the big screen where Kim Wagner was tracking the alien ship’s progress. “What’s the current heading and speed?” Garret barked, as he preceded the tired members of Alpha Team into the room.

“Heading across the Pacific, looks like California. Southern California.”

“Time to intercept?”

“Three minutes.”

“American response?”

“We’re tracking six F-22s inbound,” Wagner said, indicating several green lines heading across the display. “But our interceptor is faster.”

“Shouldn’t we be heading to the hangar?” James asked.

“It’s still over the ocean,” Garret said. “If the interceptor hits, there won’t be anything left to find. You’re here in case...”

Wagner interrupted him with a raised hand, and touched the tiny feed in her left ear. “Interceptor-1 is taking fire!”

The room grew quiet for a moment. “Report,” Garret finally barked.

Wagner stared at the data scrawled across her screen. “Interceptor-1 has been destroyed. It didn’t even get within missile range.”

Grace stood in the back of the room, her arms folded close around her chest. “If our bird didn’t get close enough to shoot, with those avalanche missiles, the USAF won’t have a chance.”

“All right team, it looks like you’re up,” Garret said. “What’s the latest on the UFO course, Kim?”

“Its heading will take it across the Tehachapis, down into the Inland Empire, looks like.”

“At least it’s not heading for LA,” Grace said.

“All right,” Garret said, “Wherever it lands, I want you there, Alpha.” He activated his communicator. “Ken, we need the Ranger ready for immediate dustoff.”

"I got the alert, she'll be ready in two minutes," Ken's voice came over the room's speaker.

"We dismissed?" Vasily asked.

"You are. Get to your ship."

A little less than an hour later, the Skyranger blasted through the early morning sky, the rising sun behind them as they flew rapidly west. The ship jolted and bumped through turbulence as they passed through pockets of warming air.

They were ready, their armor and weapons double- and triple-checked, their gear stashed and ready close at hand. Ken gave them periodic reports over the intercom, which grew more grim with time.

"The bad guy has entered California airspace. Hope they brought their suntan lotion."

"Looks like the ship tore through the American welcome party. It's bigger than the earlier ships."

"Prepare for burn and descent. Coordinates indicate that the alien has descended within Riverside county."

"The alien has set down. It's... oh my god."

The members of Alpha Team looked up at the speaker. "What?" James said.

There was a brief pause before Ken spoke again. "The alien's landed at... Riverside Elementary School."

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Chapter 34

The ship's engines flared as the Skyranger streaked down out of the sky toward the school. The alien ship was big and obvious, an oblong bulge sitting on the edge of the schoolyard, a basketball hoop crushed by its landing jutting out from under its edge.

"We can't just go in guns blazing to this one, people," Catalina said. "There's the children to think of, and we have both the school and the ship to consider. We need a better plan of attack."

Vasily's face betrayed his mood. It was easy to follow his train of thought as he looked down at the weapon locked into its cradle beside him. The laser rifle prototype had gone back to the workshop for refinement following the field test in the Everglades. The three-barreled autocannon he'd been issued to replace it was even bulkier, capable of firing armor-piercing or explosive-tipped rounds. It wasn't exactly a discriminating weapon, however. Not to mention the grenades that were affixed to the harness slung across his chest.

"Govno," he cursed under his breath, the Russian curse made audible by the speakers built into his helmet. "One plan not cover this; could go lots of ways. If they start killing, we have to move fast. This turn into hostage situation, we screwed. They start using human shields..."

*"What of civilians?" he'd asked. The reply had been curt. "Kalinovskaya is a clear and open target. Even if there are civilians, **there are no civilians.** Understood?"*

What else could he have said? "Understood." For the Motherland.

He shook the memory away. "They start using human shields, we may have to fire anyway," he stated, his voice deep and blank and tinged with horror. "Not like we getting kids back if they captured. Maybe they here to kill and hurt, maybe they here because they want herd subjects for new experiment onto ship..."

He paused, and shook his head, as if to clear it. "I am wrong. Is simple plan. They attack what we value, we attack what they value. We cannot attack them in school, maybe we attack ship. They have no choice but defend it, ignore school."

"Man! What the hell are those?" Ken's voice came over the speaker, interrupting before anyone could respond to the Russian's declaration.

"Oh, that not good sign," Vasily said.

"What, Ken?" James said into his communicator.

"I'll pipe the feedback, give you a look." The members of Alpha took out their xPhones, and stared at the image that appeared on the screens of the portable devices. The thing looked a bit fuzzy, but they could see that it was roughly humanoid, clad in garments that masked the details of its form, with something looking like a cape dropping down over the back of its body. Its torso culminated in a dark orb that seemed to protrude from its torso; there were no legs that they could see, suggesting that the thing was levitated by some unfamiliar technology.

"Oh my," Catalina said.

"Looks like a dog-man," James said. "With a gun."

"A big gun," Catalina said.

"That's what we need," Buzz said, his voice tinged with a touch of hysteria. "Capes! X-Com capes!"

"Keep it together, Buzz," Jane said quietly.

"Scanner picked up a few of them wandering around by the school," Ken reported. "There's a ship parked right by it. No sign of any kids out, no humans at all." The members of Alpha Team took a last look at their xPhones, as the tactical details of the school and its surroundings were fed to them. The ship lurched and dropped heavily, Ken taking them in fast in an attempt to catch the aliens before they had much time to prepare for an assault.

Even so, the sizzle of plasma bolts filled the air as the members of Alpha disembarked in the middle of the avenue that fronted the school, just over a hundred meters from the front of the main building and the adjacent alien ship. There was a splash of energy as a bolt hit the Skyranger, then the crack of rifle fire and the hiss of lasers as the members of Alpha returned fire. Vasily, unencumbered by the bulk of the autocannon and its magazine, which he'd left on the ship, squeezed off a shot from his handgun and ran forward, ducking low behind a stone wall that formed a waist-high barrier between the school property and the street. The others used the Skyranger for cover, sending a steady stream of firepower at the aliens.

Three of the floating aliens approached, one from further down the street, another pair coming from the small parking lot in front of the school. One of the floaters collapsed as two laser beams converged on its chest, and a second jerked as several bullets struck its torso. That one lifted its plasma rifle and fired a shot that clipped Catalina in the leg, as she started to run after the Russian. The agent fell to the ground, but as James started toward her she yelled, "I'm all right! Keep firing!"

Vasily ran forward along the wall, ducking low. Two plasma bolts hit the wall, sending out shards of stone and dust, but both hits came behind him. The aliens continued to close, keeping up their fire. A second one went down as a laser burst sliced across its face. As the last one approached the wall, Vasily leapt up and over, dropping low to avoid the fire from his companions, the stun rod coming into his hand as he rolled under the alien. It fired, the plasma bolt blasting a geyser of powdered asphalt mere inches from the Russian's body as he thrust the weapon into the creature's body. There was an electrical surge, and the alien jerked back, collapsing to the pavement. He gave it another dose just to be sure, then gestured for his companions to follow.

"Secure position! I be back!" he said, taking up the stunned alien, dragging it back toward the Skyranger.

“Where are the kids?” James said, as they scanned the deserted schoolyard. The front doors of the building were open, and there were large windows in all the schoolrooms that faced the street, but there were no signs of any humans, living or dead.

“If I were a kid and saw these, I would have hidden,” Buzz said.

James treated Catalina’s leg with a medical kit, and she seemed otherwise fit to continue, just limping slightly as she moved forward. The entire area was strangely quiet; it was easy to forget that they were inside a city, with busy thoroughfares just a few blocks away.

“We should clear the building,” Buzz suggested.

Catalina and Jane had already taken out their motion sensors, and were sweeping the area. “Nothing at all anywhere,” Catalina said. “The hull of the ship may be blocking the signal, but it should read inside the school okay. There’s nothing moving within range.”

Vasily returned, having secured the alien in the Skyranger’s cryo-locker. He’d left the autocannon, but snapped a clip into his G-36, drawing back the action to chamber a round. “Okay. Here go,” he said.

They moved on ahead toward the ship, which loomed over them. This one was easily eight meters tall from its base to the top, the asphalt blacktop cracked from the weight of it. Buzz pointed out the main hatch, recessed into the ship’s hull facing the school. There was no indication that the aliens were waiting for them, but the five of them approached warily, alert to any firing port of self-defense mechanism that might have been waiting for them.

Vasily took up a covering position while Buzz attended to the hatch’s controls. With their experience in dealing with alien systems, it only took him a few seconds to operate the hatch. As the four parts of the door slid back into the ship, they saw a shallow ramp leading up into the interior.

And a floater, which lifted its plasma rifle so that its barrel pointed squarely at the center of Vasily’s forehead.

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Chapter 35

There was a sizzling hiss, then a flash of light as the beam from Catalina's laser bisected the alien's skull and drew a black streak down the interior of the alien ship on the far side. The alien stiffened and crumpled, and the members of Alpha moved forward, spreading out as they moved past the relatively narrow space of the entry gangway into a somewhat larger space beyond.

The room was shaped like the ship itself, ovoid with a domed ceiling that rose to about nine feet high at its apex. The walls curved down to form a number of recessed niches around the perimeter, and there was another of the segmented hatches visible on the far wall.

"What the hell is this?" Catalina said, warily approaching the nearest niche. There was a waxy oblong there, some sort of cocoon, maybe four feet long, bulging slightly in the center. "It's moving," she said, crouching beside it, and drawing her knife. "Cover me," she said, slicing a small opening in its substance. The material was heavy and waxy, but it gave before the blade. The agent sliced open a gash long enough for her to probe inside.

"Oh my god!" she exclaimed.

"What?" Buzz asked.

"The children," Catalina said, now ripping at the cocoon, drawing the enfolding material back to reveal the comatose form of a boy, his face pale and covered with traces of the alien material of the shroud.

James quickly knelt beside Catalina, and took some instruments out of his bag. "Damn," he said, his jaw clenched as he went to work.

"Oh god, oh god," Catalina repeated, as she drew back in horror.

"Well, we know where the kids are, now," Buzz said.

Jane freed another of the children, cutting a girl free of her cocoon, laying the child out carefully on the floor, using the deflated substance as a pillow for her head. "They're in a coma," James said. Catalina tapped her communicator. "Ken, we've kids here in a bad way." She picked up the child that Jane had freed, and started toward the exit.

"There may be more, and we should disable the ship first," Buzz suggested. Jane had moved toward the far side of the room where several more cocoons were visible, but

she hesitated as she passed the hatch, looking down at the motion sensor riding on her hip. “Floater coming,” she said.

Vasily had stood trembling with rage during the encounter, but now he moved forward in a blur of motion. He stepped up beside the hatch, his stun rod gripped tightly in his hand. The others moved to block the children, but their weapons were unnecessary. As soon as the hatch slid open, Vasily jabbed through it, the stun rod slamming into the alien’s torso hard enough to crack bone. The alien crumpled, its limbs twitching as the powerful electrical charge sizzled through its nervous system. Vasily jumped over it, smoothly swapping the rod for his rifle.

The room beyond was about half the size of the first, with a curved pillar connecting floor to ceiling in its center. The pillar supported some sort of medical station, its function made obvious by the limp child resting within, half-covered in the alien shrouding substance. Long needles protruded from the mechanism into the child’s neck, and Vasily growled as he approached, letting out a stream of Russian curses under his breath. He almost yanked them out, but thought better of it at the last minute, growling instead for James to come and help the child.

There was another hatch, which Catalina and Jane had moved to cover. It opened easily as Catalina brushed the controls, revealing the familiar outlines of an alien bridge. The control systems looked similar to those on the smaller ships they’d explored, and Buzz quickly went to work scanning the systems. Catalina pointed to another hatch, this one set into the curve where the wall met the floor, and which appeared to access a lower level of the ship. She used both her scanners and her ears on the door, and held up two fingers to alert the others that more enemies lurked below.

“They won’t be going anywhere,” Buzz said. “I’ve turned off the engines, but the main power systems are somewhere below.”

“Say when,” Catalina muttered, as Vasily and James came into the room. At Vasily’s nod, Catalina operated the control, and the hatch parted.

The hatch opened onto a steep ramp that led down into the bowels of the ship. The ceiling was much lower here, barely six feet, and much of the space was crowded with the ship’s power systems, including the massive bulk of its main engines. But it was immediately evident that they were not alone, as a floater appeared behind a bank of machinery and took a shot at Vasily.

The plasma bolt caught the Russian in the arm, drawing blood through his armor, but he ignored it, squeezing off a precise stream of automatic fire at the alien. Several shots flashed as ricocheted off the machinery, but most hit the alien, which staggered back from the force of the impacts. It somehow remained upright, and even lifted its plasma pistol to return fire, but Jane’s laser bored through its skull, and it fell.

“Where’s the other one?” Catalina asked, dropping down to the bottom of the ramp beside Vasily, scanning the area with her pistol at the ready.

Vasily started forward, the two women close behind. As he came around the ponderous bulk of the first engine mount, he saw the last floater, standing next to an alcove filled with glittering power crystals. Even as Vasily lifted his weapon, the alien pointed its pistol into the array and fired.

The explosion rocked the ship, which teetered for a brief moment, then settled back hard onto the blacktop in front of the school.

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Chapter 36

The noise and chaos in the street around Riverside Elementary School contrasted with the eerie silence that had reigned before, when X-COM had first arrived on the scene. Over two dozen fire, police, and recovery vehicles were crowded into the area directly in front of the school, and men in khaki with M-16s were helping the police keep back the hundreds of people who were gathering around the edges. The Skyranger sat slightly off to one side, protected by its own cordon of guards, but even with the alien ship sitting there in plain view, it still drew more than a few stares of its own.

Vasily sat on the running board of a fire engine, grimacing as a paramedic worked on a deep gash that ran across his skull. His face was darkened with black char, and his expression remained a thundercloud. A few feet away, Buzz sat alone, rubbing his fingers through his hair, muttering something under his breath.

James came over from one of the ambulances. “The children are stable, but we still don’t know what the aliens did to them,” he reported. “They’re being taken to a secure medical facility for treatment.”

Vasily nodded. “We done here,” he said. “Recovery team have to work with Americans on what to do with that,” he said, indicating the alien ship. He shrugged off the paramedic and stood, touching his communicator. He shook his head. “Broken. Tell Ken we ready to leave,” he said to James.

As James passed on the message, Vasily walked over to where Catalina and Jane were engaged in conversation with two men, one wearing the khakis of an army officer, the other dressed in the familiar black suit that indicated a member of one of the various American security agencies. The two women also looked somewhat the worse for

wear, although the engine housing had protected them from the worst of the explosion that had torn through the alien ship.

“We leaving,” he said.

“Wait a minute, we need to—” the man in the suit began.

“We leaving,” Vasily repeated, moving *through* the man, who had to step aside to avoid being trampled. Catalina offered a few more diplomatic reassurances, but she wasn’t far behind the others as they boarded the Skyranger. The military personnel pushed people back as its engines fired, but the aircraft’s engines didn’t provide much backblast, the highly focused jets pushing the ship into the sky like a rocket.

There wasn’t much conversation as the aircraft returned to X-COM HQ. All of them were exhausted, battered, and drained by what they had seen. “I feel sick,” Catalina said, and the words summed up the spirit of the team as the Skyranger arced over the desolate landscape below.

* * *

“I don’t know what’s wrong with him,” Stan White said. “Physically, he’s fine.”

“He doesn’t look fine,” James observed.

X-COM’s medical bay was an extension to one of its research labs, the beds just a few steps from the workstations where the base’s biological sciences team conducted their work. It was even more crowded with the members of Alpha Team crowded into Stan’s workspace. At the moment, only one of the beds was occupied, with the pale, comatose form of Doctor Fadil Sandesh.

“I’m telling you,” Stan went on, “I’ve checked every organ and system in his body. There’s no tissue trauma, no chemicals, no damage at all that showed up on any of our scans. It’s almost like his brain just decided to... shut down.”

“Could he be telepathically shut down by the aliens?” Jane asked.

Stan looked up, his face showing surprise. “What do you mean?”

“These aliens, could they be suppressing Doctor Sandesh to keep him under with some sort of telepathic ability?”

Stan looked thoughtful. He opened his mouth, but before he could speak, a voice from out in the lab interrupted him.

“Doctor White!”

They turned to one of the scientists—a middle-aged woman with her hair tightly bound up—working at one of the big diagnostic computers in the lab. “What is it?” Stan asked, heading over to her.

“Sir... the scans on these new aliens.. they’re... they’re human!”

“What?”

“The floaters... their physiology has been radically altered, but the DNA, it’s fundamentally human!”

The surgical nurse standing behind Doctor Sandesh’s bed looked a bit green. “You mean they... they made humans into those... things?”

“Christ, who have we been shooting?” Catalina asked.

Buzz frowned. “Well, they were shooting at us... still ain’t right,” he said.

I don’t think there’s much left of them that we could call human,” the scientist said.

“They didn’t have legs,” Catalina pointed out.

Stan stared at the researcher’s screen for a long minute. Then, abruptly, he turned and walked quickly back to the comatose Egyptian’s bed. “Hook up that new monitor, Garvis,” he said to the surgical nurse.

“The hyperwave?”

“Yes.” The pair worked together to shift a bulky device—it resembled a merging between a desktop computer and a microwave oven—on the shelf behind Doctor Sandesh’s head. After double-checking to verify that the shelf would hold the weight, Stan played out a lead and hooked the new machine into his diagnostic computer. The members of Alpha, unsure what was going on, watched him as he adjusted the settings both on the machine and his computer terminal; several of the researchers, likewise curious, had wandered over to observe.

“There’s some odd readings here,” Stan finally reported. He looked up at one of the researchers. “Try putting up a screen of low-intensity alpha waves from the portable generator, Doctor Harrison,” he said. The researcher hurried off and returned in a few seconds with a small machine that looked like a diving mask that had swallowed a softball. He flicked a switch on top of it, and a low hum filled the room.

Doctor Sandesh groaned, and blinked. “What... what... where am I?” he managed to say.

Stan leaned over him, checking his pupils with his penlight. "Doctor Sandesh, can you hear me?"

"Not... so... loud," the research managed. "Voices gone... whispering."

"All this time, we looking for someone try to kill Doctor Sandesh," Vasily said. "It possible Sandesh was saboteur, but he not know?"

Stan looked up at him, but again, before he could respond, he was interrupted again, this time from a scientist that ran into the room. "Doctor!" he yelled. "One of th sectoids... containment unit 2a! It's crashing!"

Stan cursed, pausing only to grab his bag before running after the man. A few of the Alphas started after him, but he yelled back, "Stay here! The lab is secure level 4!"

* * * * *

Session 11 (June 23, 2008)

Chapter 37

"We are going to have to completely redo our alien containment protocols," Stan was saying. "Traditional sedation apparently has no effect upon the mental powers of the aliens."

The mood in the briefing room was tense, as the implications of what had happened in the medical bay continued to sink in. In addition to the department heads and the members of Alpha Team, Inise Drake was there, a sour look on her face.

"They seem to be able to influence humans from a distance," James said. He was balancing a thick briefing book on his knees; they were all still trying to assimilate the data they'd collected on the dead sectoid. Stan hadn't been able to find a reason for its sudden and unexpected death; 'it just died,' as the observing scientist had commented. But none of them thought that its death at the same moment that Doctor Sandesh had recovered had been a coincidence."

"Wonderful, just wonderful," Catalina said.

"But you captured them," Joan Beauvais pointed out.

"Yes, apparently, they can be incapacitated with the stun rods. But we can't stun them twenty-four/seven."

"It seem to take time, too," Vasily suggested.

“How can we know that any of us are unaffected?” Agent Drake asked.

“Are you hearing voices, Agent Drake?” Buzz asked.

The FBI agent ignored him, and fixed her gaze on Stan. “We believe that only the one sectoid had these abilities,” he said.

“How can you know that?” she pressed. “You seem to have missed a great deal, Doctor. Almost as though you were deliberately missing key information...”

Stan rose up out of his chair. “What are you suggesting, agent?”

“All right, that enough,” Director Garret said, interrupting the increasingly angry exchange. After making sure that both Stan and Drake were done, he shifted his gaze to the far side of the table. “Alpha, what about these new aliens? Did you notice any unusual mental effects on your mission?”

Catalina shook her head slowly. “Nothing here.”

“Preliminary examination revealed some unusual differences in the sectoid that died,” Stan said. Now that his anger had passed, he just seemed drained. “Specifically brain related.”

Agent Drake was still bristling. “How could you miss that before?” Garret shot her a warning look, but Stan just shook his head.

“With all due respect, agent, we don’t know a lot about their physiology yet.”

“This some kind of ‘leader’ sectoid?” Vasily ventured.

“I was thinking that, Vas,” Catalina added.

Stan nodded. “That’s our theory,” he said, turning toward Vasily. “Now that we have an example, we should be able to modify the VDU on your helmets to detect them in the future.”

“What about the new aliens?” Joan asked. “I saw your report, that they are... human?”

“Not human any more,” Vasily said.

Doctor Wagner turned away from her computer. “Vasily is right. They are not human.” She pressed a button, and an image of one of the new floater aliens appeared. “The aliens, they take bits and pieces,” she said. “They appear to have advanced skills in the area of genetic manipulation.”

“That’s terrible!” Joan exclaimed. “Some part of them must remember what it was to be human...”

“We sure they captured human?” Vasily asked. “Maybe they grow these in tank, like clone.”

“From what we’ve learned thus far,” Stan said, “We suspect that they have been experimenting with human prisoners, manipulating their DNA. We’ll know more once we can research the captives you took. Though I have to say I agree with Doctor Wagner. From what we saw, there isn’t a lot left in them that could be considered human.”

Garret looked to the end of the table. “Commander Hallorand, what about those improvements to the containment lab?”

“I saw the specs that Doctor White submitted. Shouldn’t be too hard to modify our sensors, now that we know what to look for. We were working on adding the hyperwave decoder to our radar array in any case. We can just put a second generator in the lab.”

“At least the rest of us are safe,” Catalina said.

“None of us are safe, Miss De Farrago,” Agent Drake said. “Do not forget that. We live on the razor’s edge.”

“Wait, you fitting this to the radar? Spot brains on radar now?”

Grace looked up from her notepad. “Well, once an alien craft is detected, we can use it to scan for known alien types. We thought it might help to know what you’re facing.”

“What about the next time we encounter one of these telepathic sectoids on a mission?” Jane asked.

“So far we’ve been safe out in the field, at least as relates to telepathy,” James said. “Maybe it takes a while for aliens to attenuate to humans and exert control over them.”

“His mind power not save him from getting stun rod up ass,” Vasily said. Buzz snickered.

“The only thing we can really be sure of is that there’s a great deal we do not know about the alien capabilities,” Garret said.

“We still need to gain information,” Doctor Wagner agreed.

“And maybe some of the alien fuel, if you can avoid blowing it up, next time,” Drake interjected.

“The creature shot it deliberately,” Catalina observed.

“I still think it would be good to have an offensive weapon that would disable their telepathy,” Buzz said.

“A good idea,” Jane said. “I’m curious about it, I hope we can learn more through your research.”

“Agreed,” Doctor Wagner said.

“We will need to capture another live alien leader, I suspect,” Stan said. “And make sure it cannot kill itself. I will work with Grace on redesigning the containment facility to keep it alive.”

“What about rest of alien ship?” Vasily asked. “What about kids?”

“Well, at least we have some good news there,” Stan replied. “The children are responding well to treatment. Whatever the aliens injected them with, it appears to be temporary in its effects.”

The members of Alpha nodded; good news was rare enough to savor, of late.

The outer door opened, and a man dressed in the coveralls of one of the engineering staff came in. “Sir, sorry to interrupt.”

“We’re in the middle of a briefing,” Hallorand began.

“Sir, yes, I know, but I thought you’d want to see this.” He handed over a small object to the chief.

“Where was this found?” Hallorand asked.

“It was attached to one of the garbage cannisters, sir. We caught it as they were being loaded up for the weekly haul out.”

Hallorand held the object in his hand, staring down at it.

“Well, Commander, don’t keep us all in suspense,” Agent Drake said.

Hallorand tossed it onto the table. It slid across the smooth surface, coming to rest directly between the department heads and the members of Alpha Team. They recognized it from the plug on one end; it was a tiny USB flash drive.

“Well... look at that,” Buzz said.

* * * * *

Interlude: E-mail (June 24, 2008)

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, GRACE THELON BELUCA
RE: Flash Drive

A scan of the flash drive found in the trash system revealed encrypted data. Operative Olloff cracked the encryption in about five minutes, and reported that the encryption program was preloaded onto the drive; it does not appear that the person who uploaded the files is a computer expert. The encryption program itself is competent but not flashy, a simple compilation of about 30 lines of code; there are no indicators of who might have created it and none of the code itself was distinct enough for Buzz to recognize it. If anything, he stated that it was kept simple on purpose.

The drive contains research files from several recent projects, including the laser rifle and the motion sensor. The files are sufficiently detailed to allow a third party to replicate these devices without much difficulty. There are also some files on the captured alien scout ship which are less comprehensive.

A quick scan of the exterior of the device revealed no DNA traces or other physical evidence from the last user. The drive itself is a cheap but sturdy model, albeit with a high capacity, the sort you can buy for 50 dollars at any home electronics retailer. None of the files have any embedded information about who last accessed them; any metadata was stripped by the encryption program on the drive when the files were uploaded.

* * *

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, GRACE THELON BELUCA
RE: New Research/Manufacturing Priorities

Research Lab 1 reports that the preliminary autopsy on the new alien corpse has been completed. Preliminary use of the term "snakeman" has stuck, and will be our primary designation of this new species. Doctor White has uncovered additional alien antibodies within the snakeman bloodstream that he believes will result in further refinements to our medical technology in the near future. In addition, study of the alien corpse has identified a partial resistance to fire, including laser weapons. Keep this in mind should you encounter these creatures in the future engagements.

As you already know from Dr. Okwelume's report, Research Lab 2 has completed work on the Alien Navigation systems. Once we complete work on the alien power systems, and their fuel source, we should be able to use that knowledge to construct advanced craft of our own. Dr. Okwelume also reports that the device you found in the Everglades is a power coupling that should greatly accelerate research into the alien engine technology.

Workshop 3 is nearing completion. We estimated that it will be complete and online by the end of the week. New engineers are already starting to arrive to staff the new facility.

Workshop 1 reports completion of the first suit of Personal Armor using the Alien Alloys, and the completion of the second motion sensor that was begun last week. Based on your report of the action at the Riverside Elementary School, it would seem that the armor's first field test was a success.

* * *

FROM: MARK HALLORAND, X-COM BASE COMMANDER
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, KIM WAGNER, GRACE BELUCA
RE: Base Development

Work has begun on the upgrades to the alien containment facility, and should be complete in a few days. Fortunately, the hyperwave decoder had already been installed in our radar facility, making it easier to transfer the existing technology to another part of the base. Until upgrades are complete, all alien captives are being kept under constant redundant surveillance, and all personnel are directed to carry out operations in groups of at least three. Base guards have been posted in all populated areas.

Dr. Wagner has forwarded to me your write-ups about future base development, which include plans for up to five engineering workshops. Unfortunately, we are starting to run up against logistical restrictions at HQX. There is sufficient room in the East Wing for a single further base addition, but barracks and power limits make it difficult to place another lab/shop there. We are working on blueprints for a new West Wing addition that could site Doctor White's long-awaited medical lab, and possibly one or two further base additions.

So the short answer is yes, we can add a fourth and even a fifth workshop, but it would require drilling, an additional barracks, installation of a second reactor for power, and various other infrastructure requirements (e.g. plumbing, wiring, etc.). We do not have hard numbers for all of these additions, but assume a 3x time and cost factor when making your plans.

An easier solution, of course, lies in our new X-COM Europe facility. The site has a

smaller footprint, and we are focusing on hangar, radar, and communications installations at the moment, but we have set up infrastructure to support up to two additional labs/workshops at that site as well. X-COM 3 (Asia) is just in the planning stages right now, but we will include provision for site development in that project as well.

* * *

FROM: Cat.LeaveYourHatOn
TO: GRACE BELUCA
RE: Getting that damn fuel

Not sure whether we asked you this before, Grace, but do you think we're going to need some kind of portable containment field to grab some of that fuel? The thinking was that we could get the stuff given time to rig a portable power supply before moving the unit, but we lost the latest one because the hybrid aliens were prepared to commit hara-kiri to stop us.

Do you think there would be a way to collect a smaller amount from a damaged fuel cell? Or even a way to throw some kind of containment field around it to gather some residue? Sorry for sounding like third crewmember from the left in some old B-movie. I now have an image of someone dashing forward in slow motion, containment unit in hand, yelling "Nnnnnnnnnnnnnnn!" while trying to outrace a plasma bullet...

Anyway, opinion appreciated!

Cat

* * *

FROM: JANE SWIFT
TO: MARK HALLORAND, X-COM BASE COMMANDER
DATE: MAY 6, 2010
RE: Request for a Personal Day

A long while back, I promised my niece that I would take her to the next Narnia movie. I didn't know this assignment would be coming up.

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Trader opens tomorrow. I was wondering if I could have the day off, and I'd be right back by midnight. I promise not to disclose anything classified or do anything to compromise the mission. You can even send guards with me if you wish. She'll understand. It's happened before on other assignments. It also happens to be her birthday.

It would be appreciated.

* * *

FROM: GRACE BELUCA
TO: Cat.LeaveYourHatOn
RE: RE:Getting that damn fuel

We've addressed the containment issue using the intact storage system you captured on the alien scout ship from the Shasta mission. Since it requires some... *special* treatment, the system has been implemented for the engineers on the clean up crew. Just take care of the aliens; we'll take care of the rest.

* * *

FROM: MARK HALLORAND
TO: Cat.LeaveYourHatOn
CC: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM; MICHAEL GARRET; KIM WAGNER; GRACE BELUCA
RE: Base Development

We'll definitely need to assign engineers to the work of expanding into the new West Wing. Doctor White will be glad to hear of your interest in this project.

For the sake of convenience I've included the expansion requirements in the specs for Doctor White's medical facility that were listed in Doctor Wagner's weekly e-mail report. Just let us know how many engineers to assign to the project, and we'll take it from there. I think we can finish the medical lab without serious impact on our base infrastructure, but keep in mind that adding another research lab or workshop beyond that is going to be damned costly, both in time and expense.

* * *

FROM: Mark Hallorand, Base Commander
TO: Jane Swift
RE: Leave Request

I'm sorry, Jane. Director Garret has locked down the base for now, especially with this pending espionage issue. This is one area where Garret and Drake seem to be in full agreement. All leaves have been canceled until further notice.

* * * * *

Session 12 (June 30, 2008)

Chapter 38

The members of Alpha Team sat in various chairs scattered around the lounge, sipping coffee or accessing information on their xPhones. There wasn't much conversation, although there were the occasional glances—either at the briefing room door, or at the small bulb node in the ceiling corner, where they knew a security camera was watching. James was the only one absent; he was in New York, delivering a briefing on the recent alien autopsies to a group of United Nations scientists.

After a time, the door to the briefing room opened. Several members of the team had risen even before chief Hallorand appeared. "They're ready for you," he said.

The department heads, Director Garret, and Agent Drake were already there, engaged in intent conversation. "So in short, I think that this should be an American..." Drake was saying, but as the Alphas entered, she said, "Oh, look who's here."

"An American what?" Catalina asked, but Garret gestured for them to take their seats on the far side of the table. "Thank you for coming, Alpha. We were just discussing options." Drake merely pursed her lips, and said nothing more.

Once Hallorand had closed the door behind them, Doctor Wagner said, "I'm sure you've all seen Buzz's report on the device and its contents."

"We need to understand the motivations of the spy, to have a chance of catching him," Joan Beauvais said, leaning forward with her elbows on the table.

"It's a valid approach to learn what makes them tick," Catalina noted.

"Him?" Agent Drake asked. "Do you know something we don't, counselor?"

Garret raised a hand. "The fact is, we know next to nothing, so let's not assume anything."

"At least we found out the delivery mechanism, before any more data was lost," Grace said.

"And who is to say that they don't have a backup plan?" Drake interjected.

Garret turned to the members of Alpha Team. "Alpha, I heard that you were talking about some options that might help cut this Gordian knot."

Vasily nodded. "We do know some things." Once he had gotten everyone's attention, he continued, "First one. Spy is not saboteur. We figure out who that was."

"And quite the triumph of security *that* little adventure was," Drake said.

Ignoring her, Vasily went on, "Second. Stuff on thing. There was laser rifle on there, motion sensor. That kind of odd. Because that not alien. It just advanced."

"It has to be someone, or an agent for someone, who has something to gain from the data."

"You don't think the aliens want out technology?" Drake asked.

"The alien technology is superior to ours," Wagner pointed out.

"In some ways," Drake granted.

"Well, they have us beat in ships, weapons, space travel, power, biology, genetics, and medicine," Grace said.

"And there were files on the aliens stolen as well," Wagner noted.

"What I try to say," Vasily went on, "Spy not solely interested in aliens."

"I agree, Vasily," Garret said. "But what does that knowledge gain us?"

The Russian leaned back in his chair. "Kind of hoping someone make something of it."

"Foreign powers are also interested in advanced technology as well as aliens," Jane pointed out, "Just as much as major corporations."

"So you are thinking a foreign power is behind the spying," Garret said.

"It would make sense," Drake said. "You have more foreigners here than Americans, outnumber us about three to one, in fact."

"So open of you, Agent. It could be a corporation," Catalina said.

"You think that a business would put profit over the fate of the human race?" Joan asked.

Catalina sent the counselor a withering look. "Yes," she said, echoed by Jane almost in the same instant.

"In any case," Garret continued, "We have to decide how to proceed. We have the flash drive, but no clues from it. Despite Buzz's best efforts." He shifted his gaze to the hacker. "Buzz, you were saying something earlier about reformatting the device."

"Yeah," Buzz said, but before he could continue, Drake interrupted. "Any solution that involves the data leaving this facility is out, I'll say that right now."

"Take the good data off, put something on it that might even... well, a virus," he said with a smirk.

"Ah, yes," Drake returned. "The classic 'assume the enemy is a complete idiot' plan. Because they managed to penetrate the most heavily fortified secure base in the world, they'll never suspect a virus."

"Not one I make," Buzz said.

Drake opened her mouth for another counter, but Garret cut her off. "That's enough, Agent. We're just talking out options here."

"We might be able to scrape together a locator bug," Grace said, "But it would have to be of limited functionality to fit into that chassis."

"Where our trash go, anyway?" Vasily asked.

"Incinerator, after being screened for toxins," Drake said.

"So, between here and the incinerator, we have to assume it would be retrieved?" Catalina asked.

"Be kind of dumb otherwise, yah," Vasily said.

"Do we have a contractor who picks up our trash?" Jane asked.

"All links in the process are under secure protocols," Drake said.

"The incinerator is off base or on?" Catalina asked.

Drake seemed to be a bit off guard, in a neutral voice, she said, "I am not at liberty to discuss the details of United States government operations." Vasily smacked his forehead with his palm.

"It's off base, I know that," Stan said. "We don't have the facilities to process the stuff."

"I can assure you," Drake said, "That we are already investigating the matter, and will locate the breach, if in fact one exists in the trash disposal process."

"I suggest you be a little more open, Agent, or this discussion is pointless," Catalina said.

"At least consider the possibility that the contact is among the incinerator operations people," Jane added.

"Of course, we would have *never* thought of that. Thank you, Miss Swift."

"How many people we talking about here?" Vasily asked. "Just give us round number."

Drake rubbed her forehead briefly, before recognizing the gesture and abruptly lowering her hands back to her lap. "Did you think that it just took a few dozen people to support this facility? In all, there are maybe five thousand people that keep you fed, powered, supplied with those cheap DVDs you seem to like so much. You can rest assured that almost none of those know the true purpose of this base, and all those have been screened at the highest security clearance."

"Agent, you should at least keep us apprised of your findings," Garret said, in a voice that indicated that the debate was concluded.

"Of course, Liaison Garret."

"Okay. Other possibility that worry me," Vasily said.

"What, we don't have enough worries already?" Stan asked.

Catalina chuckled, but Vasily's smile was brief and grim. "Data stick encryption was easy, right?"

"I believe Buzz said that it was more or less off the shelf software, right, Buzz?" Garret asked.

Buzz nodded. "Yup."

Vasily lifted a hand and gestured with it as he went on. "But to pull this stuff off, whoever doing this probably better than that, right? How easy was data chip to find, on trashcan?"

"You're thinking it's a blind?" Catalina asked.

"Well, we probably never would have found it, if we hadn't been looking," Hallorand said. "You can be sure that we've searched every inch of everything that leaves this base, since then."

"Okay," Vasily grunted.

“Tracking is still a good idea, electronically and physically,” Catalina said.

“Agreed,” Garret said. “Buzz, work with Grace on this. We arranged for a ‘malfunction’ to one of the trash lifts to explain the delay in getting the regular delivery out, but any longer and our foe may get suspicious. I’d like to get the thing back in place where we found it by day’s end.”

“Assuming they haven’t missed it already,” Drake said, but her heart was no longer in it.

“Should be done fast, I’ll get right on it,” Buzz replied. He was already punching something into his xPhone.

“I’ll have my team get a tracker put together,” Grace said.

“Agent, we’ll expect Homeland Security to be ready to jump if something turns up,” Garret said.

“Oh, we’ll be ready,” Drake said.

“In the meantime, we’ll keep working the investigation from our end,” Garret said. “Any more questions? All right, dismissed.”

* * * * *

Session 12 (June 30, 2008)

Chapter 39

Doctor Okwelume was a tall, dark African, clad in a spotless white coat that came down to his knees. As Vasily entered the laboratory, he looked up from behind a table that was strewn with tools and equipment, including a pair of X-COM field helmets.

“Ah, yes, mister Russian,” he said. “Good that you are here.” He picked up one of the helmets, and thrust it at Vasily, who accepted it with polite interest. It was smaller than his usual one, probably sized for Jane or Catalina. The liner had been removed, allowing him to see a gleaming layer of metal affixed to the interior.

“This provide protection against alien mind attack?”

“It should. No guarantees, of course,” Okwelume said. “The difficulty was getting the beryllium to cling to the alien alloy. We still need to work on the one that you have. You can leave it now, or later, as you prefer.”

"I guess I manage," Vasily said. "I make tinfoil hat." He hefted the new helmet. "Not very heavy."

"The layer inside is very, very thin, no more than a few micrometres."

One of the surgical nurses stepped out from behind the fabric divider that partitioned off the medical bay. Seeing Vasily there, he asked, "When are they going to ease off on the lockdown? My family will get worried, if they don't hear from me."

"Wish I know. Aliens with mind power, you know? No chances taken."

"Indeed," Okwelume said. "After seeing what happened to Doctor Sandesh..."

A voice sounded over the intercom. "Alpha Team, report to the briefing room immediately. We have a bogey."

Taking the new helmet, Vasily headed back toward the main wing of the base.

Vasily was the last member of the team to arrive; he handed over the helmet to Jane as he took his seat. The department heads were in their usual places on the opposite side of the table, with Garret behind his computer at its head. "We've got a long trip for you lot," he said, once they were all there.

Catalina lounged against the wall. "Tahiti?"

"We've got a contact over northern Europe," Doctor Wagner said. "We've scrambled both interceptors from Europe 1 to meet it."

"Where exactly?" Catalina asked.

Doctor Wagner brought up a track on the screen behind her, which showed a bright red line trailing down from the Arctic, slicing over the top of Scandinavia before stabbing down into the North Sea, twisting in an unruly course that brought it back over land. "We established contact over northern Norway," she continued. "Since then, the alien has headed out over the North Sea, before turning south again, and crossing back over land."

"Denmark," Vasily said.

"We can't wait for the intercept," Garret said. "We need you in the air, in case we do manage to put it down."

"We all going on winter holiday," Vasily said.

"To see Santa," Catalina added dryly.

“Dress warmly,” Garret told them. “You’re going to do a high orbital insertion. You’ll be in zero G for up to thirty minutes. The Skyranger is rated for suborbital flight, but... well, this will be the inaugural voyage at that altitude.”

The members of Alpha shared a look that reflected the same lack of enthusiasm for the plan, but none of them offered complaint.

“Aye, sir,” Jane said.

“You’re shorthanded, with Allen still out, so be careful,” Garret said. “Beta is off investigating that landing report in the Yukon, but we just got a new recruit from India, he’s rated as a medic, so he gets the draw.”

“Rough mission for a rookie,” Catalina said.

“Was same for us,” Vasily observed.

“Get your gear. You leave in five minutes.”

* * *

A medical satchel floated down the aisle between the seats in the Skyranger’s cramped cargo compartment, tumbling slightly end-over-end as it made its way back toward the rear hatch. Arvin Bandopadhyay snared it out of the air, and tucked it under his arm. The newest member of the team looked a little green; with James Allen still off-base, he was filling in as the group’s medic for this mission. He was one of four recruits from South Asia who’d recently been assigned to X-COM, and was rated both in field medicine and mechanical engineering.

“Oooh, that’s neat,” Catalina said. She reached for her harness, started to leave it, then with a wide grin pulled free and sprang up toward the ceiling.

Ken Yushi’s voice came over the compartment speaker. “Welcome to outer space, ladies and gents,” he said. “Please avoid any projectile vomiting. You mess, you clean it up when we get back.”

“Buuuh,” Vasily said. “Why he have to mention vomit?”

“Oh my, we have to do this again!” Catalina said, flipping end-over-end in the air before drifting back toward her chair.

The end of Vasily’s autocannon had begun to rise up out of its niche; the Russian grabbed it and fastened it more securely.

“Welcome to the international space station,” Jane said. Buzz held onto the arms of his seat, his eyes closed, and Arvin looked hardly better, his jaw clenched as though will alone could keep his unruly stomach under control.

After a few minutes of weightlessness, Ken’s voice came over the com again. “We’re starting our descent. Strap in, everyone.”

“Awww,” Catalina said, securing herself back into her seat. A moment later, they were pressed into their harnesses as the ship’s braking thrusters fired, and it began a rapid descent. “Getting course feeds,” Ken told them. “The alien has changed course, and is heading west over the North Sea. It looks like it’s going to cut across Scotland, maybe.”

The ship banked slightly. “Our interceptors aren’t going to catch that thing,” Ken reported. “Damn, it’s going fast. The Brits launched a squadron, but they might as well be throwing rocks.”

“Looks like this might have been a wasted trip,” Jane said.

“Wait a minute,” Ken said, “the alien’s changed course again, heading south by southwest.”

“Ireland?” Catalina asked.

“Getting a report from our interceptors... they’ve launched Avalanches at extreme range. The alien ship is firing! Our ships are breaking off... The alien has changed course again... heading west... wait, I’m reading an energy surge! The alien ship is losing altitude. Either we got a lucky hit, or it’s planning on landing. Changing course to intercept.”

“Don’t tell me Stonehenge really was an alien landing site,” Catalina said.

“Bet it suddenly has landing lights,” Jane added.

“The alien is definitely slowing,” Ken said, “but it’s making a controlled landing. Getting coordinates.”

“Last time I went there it did,” Catalina replied to Jane, “but that might have been the mushrooms.”

After a few seconds, Ken reported, “Looks like a pretty quiet area... no, wait, there’s an abbey nearby, yes, it’s putting down near there.”

“What country?” Catalina asked. “Are we talking England?”

Buzz had his xPhone out, and was following their progress on it. “Ireland,” he said.

The sound of the engines reached a high roar, and its descent eased rapidly. They couldn't hear the cabin speaker, but Ken's voice still came to them over their earpieces. "I'm getting a signal from the hyperwave," he said. "It's snakes."

* * * * *

Session 12 (June 30, 2008)

Chapter 40

The landscape was lush, the greenery broken only by the squat forms of several stone buildings ahead of them, and the winding black line of an asphalt road that ran between them and the main highway a few miles to the south. They could see a few cars, parked in the grass just off the road, and a battered old truck that burned merrily, smoke rising from it in a black plume.

There was no time to enjoy the scene, however, as they were greeted by the sound of gunfire coming from the area of the buildings ahead.

"Fight already started," Vasily said, lumbering forward, the weight of the autocannon giving him an uneven, shambling gait. The others rushed after him as they disembarked, spreading out to give their enemies less of a target.

The familiar sound of plasma bolts was punctuated by the crack of a rifle. "Get back, you demons!" someone yelled, between the shots.

"Three targets!" Jane yelled, running along the left side of the road toward the voice. They could all see them, now, the deadly, alien outlines of snakemen, clad in harnesses, firing at the largest of the stone buildings, a church that might have dated from the middle ages from the look of it. As they watched, they saw several bolts slam into the threshold around the main entry, and a man emerge from the swirl of pulverized dust, a bolt-action rifle in his hands. He was clad in the black robe of a Catholic priest, and blood trailed down the side of his head from a gash in his forehead.

"The lord is my shepherd!" he yelled, snapping off a shot at one of the snakemen. The bullet struck its target, but had no apparent impact on the creature, who fired again, almost taking the man's head off before he could duck back into cover.

"Get back inside!" Vasily yelled, opening fire with his cannon. The minigun unleashed a spray of armor-piercing shells, knocking the first alien roughly back from the sheer force of the impacts. The other two returned fire, but Vasily was able to duck behind a boulder, the plasma bolts streaking past him.

The priest emerged from cover to shoot again, hitting his target again, and drawing a shot that disintegrated one of the stained glass windows set deep in casements around the perimeter of the church. Jane ran up to join him in the deep threshold of the entry, which was pocked now with gaping holes where the alien plasma bolts had hit. “Stay in cover, you idiot,” she said to him, as he reloaded his weapon.

“My dear, I was a veteran. I do not need to be—” But he was cut off as another bolt hit above them on the far side of the doorway, showering them with shards of stone.

“Stay behind me!” Jane commanded, firing off several shots from her laser. She hit the alien as well, the snakeman soldier now covered with various wounds. As if that wasn’t enough, the one that Vasily had shot was getting back up, hissing as it reached for its dropped weapon.

“Quite persistent, are they not?” the priest asked, leaning over Jane to fire his gun.

Catalina and Buzz had taken up positions behind a low stone wall that ran around the perimeter of the property, firing their lasers at the aliens. The snakemen responded with a barrage of plasma bolts that tore a wide gap in the barrier, sending the two humans diving for better cover. Arvin had tried to follow Jane to the front of the church, but one of the aliens had shot at him, forcing him to scramble for cover in the shallow ditch that ran alongside the road.

Vasily leaned out from his cover, sending another barrage of lead toward the aliens. One alien spun around and fell, but before he could shift his aim, a plasma bolt hit him in the shoulder, knocking him back. He had barely dragged himself back behind the boulder before another shot slammed into it, vaporizing a significant percentage of its mass. Vasily, grimacing, tried to lift his weapon, blood trailing down his arm from the nasty wound.

Jane and the priest had kept up their fire, and drew the attention of the snake that was keeping Catalina and Buzz pinned down. The line of black char that Jane drew across its torso with her laser didn’t seem to faze it much, but it got its attention. Its shot clipped Jane’s leg just above the knee, and cried out in pain, falling forward as the limb collapsed from under her. The priest grabbed her and pulled her back into the doorway, moments before the alien’s second shot sliced through the air where she’d been crouched.

Arvin rose up out of the ditch, his uniform streaked with mud. “No, stay there!” Jane yelled, but the medic either didn’t hear or heard too late. The plasma bolt caught him solidly on the side of his neck, just under his helmet, and then there was only a bright red spray, which vanished as what was left of the young Indian fell back into the ditch.

* * * * *

Session 12 (June 30, 2008)

Chapter 41

Humans and aliens exchanged fire at almost point-blank range, the snakemen absorbing wounds that would have killed several men as they continued to slide forward.

Jane shrugged off the support of the priest and pulled herself back up to the edge of the doorway, firing her laser pistol at the snakeman that had killed Arvin. The beam was starkly visible in the haze of dust and smoke that hung in the air, intersecting with the alien's ovoid skull. She wasn't the only one to hit it; a second bright beam sliced across its neck from the other direction, where Catalina had recovered and drawn a bead on it. The alien fell, but the last alien kept on coming, driving Jane back into cover with a spray of bright bolts from its weapon.

Vasily growled as he rose up, leveraging the barrel of the autocannon up onto what was left of the boulder. Barely able to stand, he used the stone as a prop as he activated the weapon, leaning into the recoil to keep it focused on its target. The snakeman turned toward him, but before it could fire its chest exploded into a gory green mess, and it fell over backwards, still jerking as Vasily's gun continued to unload into it. When he stopped, the weapon's ammunition depleted, it slid over onto the ground, the big Russian nearly following it.

Jane emerged from the wreckage of the doorway, limping heavily. The priest tried to help her, but she shrugged off his supporting arm, and made her way without help to the ditch where Arvin lay in a bloody mess. One look was enough to indicate that he was beyond any help. She muttered something under her breath, but turned around again at Buzz's yell.

"There's the ship!" he cried, pointing. They could just see it, the fading sunlight gleaming off the curving surface just visible between two hills that rose east of the abbey compound. A faint line of gray smoke rose up from behind it.

"Yes, we heard it land, made quite the announcement," the priest said.

"Where are the other people?" Buzz asked.

"The rest of the abbey staff are in the cellar of the main building," he replied.

Jane made her way into the ditch, almost falling as her injured leg slid on the muddy slope. But she got to Arvin's corpse, and recovered the satchel holding his medikits. She used the first one right there, grimacing as she pulled off the charred plate covering her leg and injected the substance directly into the battered flesh.

Catalina was doing the same for Vasily. As the alien medicines started to take effect, the Russian went over to the ditch. Jane unlatched Arvin's web belt, and handed it and the Indian's rifle to Vasily as she made her way back up to the road.

"Stay here," she said to the priest, falling into step behind Vasily as they made their way toward the alien ship.

The four of them made their way carefully beyond the cluster of buildings that made up the abbey complex. There was a gate through the wall surrounding the buildings, and then a faint path that wound off into the hills in the general direction of the alien craft. There were also familiar tracks, paths cut in the grass by the snakemen as they had made their way toward the abbey.

The ship was of a familiar sort, a large scout similar to the one they'd encountered in Shasta County. It lay in the dell between two hills like an egg, surrounded by a berm of loose earth stirred up by its rough impact. The hatch was in the same place, lying open and slightly askance, as the entire ship was tilted several degrees on its side. Nothing stirred as they approached.

"Remember, we need to capture fuel source," Vasily reminded them.

"I say lure them out of the control room this time," Buzz said quietly.

Catalina approached the hatch from the side, and carefully glanced inside. She pointed and raised a finger, wiggling her hand like a snake.

"It might be a pilot or some other specialist," Jane said. "Might be worth it to take it alive, if we can."

Vasily nodded, and unlimbered his stun rod. "Cover me," he said.

The interior of the ship was rather cluttered, with loose cables dangling from the ceiling and broken pieces of machinery jutting from once-smooth consoles. The alien ships had a much more organic form to them than anything made by humans, but it somehow made them seem more familiar to see gaping tears, hisses caused by escaping gasses, and sparks as power seeped out of damaged conduits.

The ship wasn't big enough to hide the alien pilot, and as Vasily pushed forward to the main compartment, it turned and fired its plasma pistol at him. The shot flashed past him and caught Catalina in the chest, knocking her down. Vasily lunged ahead before it could recover, swiping the pistol out of its hand with the end of the stun rod.

The alien didn't wait for him to finish it off; lunging forward, it slashed at the Russian with its claws, and tried to grab his arm in its jaws. Vasily shifted, and it got only a bite of the stun rod, hissing as it snapped down on the shaft of the weapon. Vasily slammed his shoulder into its torso and ripped the weapon free. It sizzled as he jabbed the head at

the snakeman's body, but the thing only smashed a claw across his face, knocking him sprawling into an adjacent console.

Buzz had gotten hold of Catalina's shoulders, and he dragged the injured woman clear of the ship. Jane, standing in the entry, lifted her laser pistol and lined up a shot, but she had to draw back as Vasily surged forward again, cracking the stun rod again into the snakeman's body.

"This thing not working!" he yelled, barely dodging another swipe.

"Get clear, I've got the shot!" Jane yelled. But the Russian kept at it, coming in again, swinging the stun rod like an axe. The snakeman deflected his thrust with a flung arm and then slammed him hard up against the console behind him, hard enough to crack the material with the front of his helmet.

Jane took aim with her pistol again, but before she could fire, the alien ducked behind a protruding mechanism, reaching for its dropped weapon. But even as it probed for the plasma pistol, Vasily leapt onto its back, yanking the stun rod around its throat, drawing it up. The snakeman hissed and bucked, reaching back with its long arms to claw at the Russian's body. But Vasily would not be dislodged, and as the snakeman struggled he dragged it roughly around, using his leverage to smash its head down onto the edge of the console, once, twice, three times.

"Ah... I think it's out," Jane said, as Vasily lifted the thing to bash it again.

The Russian released his captive and staggered back. The snakeman collapsed in a limp heap, trailing lines of green fluid from its cracked jaws.

Panting heavily, the Russian looked at Jane. "We... we need sweep rest of ship, else we not know if this secure or not."

Jane nodded; she'd already unlimbered her motion sensor, and started scanning the interior of the ship with it. "We may have the fuel supply, I don't think they dumped it," she said.

Vasily staggered back out of the ship. The priest was there, helping Buzz treat Catalina. Buzz was fumbling with one of the X-COM medikits, but the priest was doing well enough with a more mundane first aid kit.

"How she do?" Vasily asked.

"She's stable," the priest said. He raised an eyebrow as Buzz injected the contents of the medikit into her, but didn't do anything to interfere. Almost at once Catalina's breathing eased, although she remained unconscious. "You a doc, Father?" Buzz asked.

"I served as a medic, back in the war. Afghanistan."

Jane's voice came to them over the com, thick with static interference. "We have an intact alien power source," she reported.

Vasily activated his communicator. "Is good, Jane." He wiped his brow, looking around the scene, back at the abbey, where clouds of smoke continued to roil in the afternoon sky. "Is good."

* * * * *

Interlude: Aftermath (July 1, 2008)

The long trip back to Nevada was a fairly sedate one. Flying on vapors, Ken took the Skyrainger to Casement Aerodrome, at Baldonnel. The base had a military hospital attached where they could get their wounds treated. They met up with an X-COM tanker from Europe-1, and the next morning they were in the air. The British doctors were amazed at the quick recovery of the wounded team members; by the time that the ship started its descent over the Nevada desert, Catalina woke up and was even able to crack a few jokes. Stan White still insisted on bringing her out in a stretcher. "Special delivery, one cat," she mumbled, as the orderlies took her to the infirmary.

The alien power supply followed the next day, brought over by the recovery team along with several components taken intact from the alien ship. The power supply, which the scientists were calling Elerium-115, was kept in a special containment unit that had been prepared on a deeper level far under the populated areas of the base. Access to it was strictly limited.

The day following the mission was quiet, as X-COM's researchers and engineers worked on assimilating the new data that Alpha Team had recovered. But on the next day, the members of Alpha Team were summoned to the briefing room for an update on the flash drive. All of them but Catalina, who was still convalescing, reported to the summons. James had returned from his mission to New York, but he was quiet, distracted. Agent Drake had a sour look on her face as the field operatives filed into the briefing room, but she remained silent as Director Garret explained the results of the American operation with the flash drive.

"Due to the tracking device," he explained, "we were able to determine when the drive was recovered from the trash cannister. An inspector took it and handed it off to a supply clerk, who in turn took it from the incineration facility. Both men have been taken into custody. We followed the device to a location in Reno, a warehouse facility. The signal was lost there; this prompted Homeland Security to immediately raid the site."

"It turns out that the site was operated by a significant criminal enterprise; in addition to

the flash drive, which had been placed in an armored vault hidden on-site, we found sixteen kilograms of methamphetamine, eleven illegal guns, and about six hundred thousand dollars worth of stolen consumer electronics items. Two men fought back and were killed; another six were taken prisoner. The American Department of Homeland Security has already conducted preliminary questioning, and it appears that the six were low- to mid-level operatives for the cartel. Only one had any knowledge of the flash drive, and it seems that their role was limited to forwarding it to a third party, which another member of the group was going to meet in San Francisco in a few days. The criminal had no specific knowledge of when or where this meeting was going to take place. The Americans will conduct a more thorough interrogation later, but at the moment we doubt that we will gain further information from these individuals."

"The Defense Department inspector and the clerk admitted that this was the third flash drive that they'd shipped through this illicit system. They did not know any details about the organization for whom they provided the service, but admitted that they each received one hundred thousand dollars for each delivery that they processed. Most of that money has since been recovered by Homeland Security investigators."

* * *

The weekly e-mail update from Doctor Wagner followed on the heels of the briefing.

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, GRACE THELON BELUCA
RE: New Research/Manufacturing Priorities

We have several completed projects to report. Workshop 3 is fully staffed and is now online. Work has begun on the Medical Lab in the new West Wing. A second suit of Personal Armor has been finished, with the new beryllium lining. Theoretically, this should offer at least some protection against the alien mental powers.

Research Lab 1 reports that it has begun work on the Laser Cannon. Our pilots are happy to hear this; in recent engagements they have been seriously outgunned by the larger alien ships. Research Lab 2 has almost completed its work on the Floater Autopsy and should have its report in a few days. Doctor Sandesh has resumed work on the Heavy Weapons Platform and insists that he will have a working prototype soon, despite the setback of the sabotage incident.

Now that you have recovered an intact supply of the alien fuel, work on alien power systems can proceed quickly. Dr. Okwelume has reported that the device you found in the Everglades is a power coupling that should greatly accelerate research into the alien engine technology.

* * * * *

Interlude: Healing (July 1-5, 2008)

(Author's Note: the following section came entirely from player forum posts, which I put together into a narrative format.)

He was slow in healing. Or, rather, he was not healing fast enough. The alien medicines worked wonders, but he still ached, and weapon recoil sent painful shudders through his chest. The doctors had said it was incredible he had still been on his feet, let alone conscious. He had to 'take it easy', now, with nothing on his mandate but to recover, and compare scars with Beta Team once they got back from the Yukon.

But he was restless; he'd always be restless. They'd found an intact power source, at last, and it was only a matter of time before the aliens realized it. When they did, destruction of X-COM US would be high on their list, he was sure. The aliens had been prepared to sacrifice their lives to keep their technology out of the hands of humans; no doubt they wouldn't think twice about killing humans to do the same. That left him with the choices of either sitting still and worrying, or helping out around the base, and in light of their condition, the new medbay seemed like an even better investment than ever before. The drilling was slow, but there were ways to speed that up. Brutally direct ways, but no less effective for that.

Brutally direct, and explosive.

"You are a thug, Major. Not an ounce of subtlety. Kalinovskaya is news. You hear that? Supposed to be covert, and I am hearing it on the radio, reading it in the newspapers!"

It had been a long time since he'd blown anything up. For good reason.

"I - we achieve objective, sir."

"Your whole team dead, a civilian building leveled? You call that achievement? Get out. High-up wants your head and I'm half inclined to give it to them. Consider yourself reassigned."

Extreme situations always called for extreme measures, but even so, the teams he worked with seemed unlucky of late. The capture of insurgents in Kalinovskaya that had gone horribly wrong, leaving him no choice but to drop a building on friend and enemy alike; and now this, with Team Alpha engaging in a point-blank slugging match with alien forces to save a church, and wading through pain and horror to secure an alien ship. They'd come out alive... or most of them, and those only barely, and in one case, with one foot in the grave. That had been sheer luck, as frightening a thought as that was.

The last time he'd ordered men in a combat situation they'd all died... but here, was it

the absence of a command voice that was killing them? And if one of the civilian members of the squad should die, was it as much his fault for being silent?

That was a thought he couldn't deal with, not yet. Limping, he went in search of Chief Beluca to talk about blasting charges.

* * *

Cat was starting to feel a bit jumpy.

Sweet smiles for everyone that fussed over making her comfortable, particularly that *cute* nurse, with the eyes you could just *drown* in, and *ohhhh my* what an arse. There he was now! Catalina craned her head to watch him walk by, then lay back down after the brief entertainment with a sigh. Being confined to bed wasn't the most entertaining of options when there was no one else in there with you. *God I'm bored.*

Various medical charts were origami figures sitting around her bed, and she was playing with a cat's cradle that had once been the cord that supported them, when the Jane, Vasily, and James arrived. The beam of pleasure at the company was obvious, fading only briefly to a grimace of discomfort as she hitched herself up on the bed.

After a little small talk, the conversation turned to more practical concerns.

"Difficult one," Vasily was saying, leaning against a wall, black coffee in hand and covered with rock-dust. "We get alien power supply, but we not understand it yet. Emails seem to say, 'weapon research not going to get too far without it'."

"But we got projects still in middle of development," he grudgingly muttered. "How about this? We drop laser cannon research. Have team reassigned to alien power. Keep working on robot tank and autopsy, they nearly done. Robot tank come in handy, maybe in all kind of situations. Attack, fieldwork, all kind."

"Maybe if autopsy and robot tank projects finish up quick we get them to start work on alien handgun... or maybe laser cannon again, would be good if we not leave that too long. Laser defense net good idea, laser added to robot tank good idea... maybe we even get new alien-technology planes like they say, but we still not got any new weapons for them to shoot."

Taking out his xPhone, and juggling it with the coffee, he brought up the list of manufacturing projects. "Medlab, armor, laser rifle," he said. "Not like we got anything else to build, and hey, we can always give lasers to Beta team if we get anything new."

Jane nodded. "The pilots have been abuzz with chatter when they heard plans for the laser cannons were in progress. They'll be even more excited to hear that they might be getting advanced new ships too. I'm starting to wonder if we need a third research

lab for all the advanced research projects down the pipe. We'll deal with that later. Meanwhile, your ideas are sound, Vasily."

"I have to say I think the alien power source must take priority," Catalina noted, "from Kim's emails it looks like a several projects depend on it." She turned her head to where she had last seen Doctor Sandesh, then added quietly. "I'm not convinced about the platform, the thing could end up getting under our feet."

Reaching up, Catalina snagged the coffee from the big Russian's fingers. "I'd say keep half a team on laser cannons and drop the platform until the fuel is done. After all, it won't be much use until it has a laser cannon to fit to it." She took a sip of the coffee and grinned.

James nodded. "I can go along with most of the recommendations - except that I really want to get my hands on one of those laser pistols. We all outta have one. I've still been working on the medkits and we've got those down now - ya'll each outta have one for emergencies, but remember, if I'm up, let me do it - applying it is still a bit of an art, and non-docs won't usually get as much out of it as a trained professional like me." Jim grinned to let the group know he was kidding with the pompousness - a little, at least.

Vasily rolled his eyes and shook his head, looking a little miffed at the coffee-napping but apparently unwilling to snatch it back from a hospitalized woman. "If you cannot see value of extra team member who can take a few shots, I not sure what to say. But *you* can break news to Dr. Sandesh that we shelving his project *again*."

After a few moments looking a little irritated, he finally stormed off to the cafeteria, after Catalina took another triumphant sip. "I suppose you want milk, now, huh?" he called back from the doorway.

"No, milk takes the edge off the taste. Wouldn't mind some biscuits though!" Catalina called back, grinning mischievously. "As for the platform, if you insist you want it then fine. Something to hide behind wouldn't have gone amiss last mission, I just don't want it under my feet or turning on me when my back is turned." She paused a moment, took another sip, and the grin broadened. "Make the biscuits chocolate ones."

"How are they treating you, Catalina?" Jane asked.

"Wonderfully, especially that nurse there," Catalina grinned and indicated the male nurse, who didn't look up from his paperwork. "Of course it could be better, he could bend over a lot more often, but I have to recognise that he has a lot of duties for which he must remain upright and not be too demanding."

"I'll see if I can get you set up with a laptop," Jane said.

"Thanks. I may as well get on with reviewing those tapes and work logs. I can't see the detail on the phone. Hardly thrilling but it will help pass the time."

Vasily returned, bearing a few eatables from the cafeteria. He left the tray in the group's care, scowling for show.

"Here. Need you fit. Need you all fit," he adds ominously. "Word is, maybe we getting another field agent in Team Alpha. I think it time we shake up the way we do things. I talk to you all when you up and about, ok?"

Picking through the items on the bed, Catalina grabbed a pack of chocolate chip cookies with a triumphant grin, and blew a kiss up towards Vasily. "I should be up tomorrow, maybe the day after," she said, tearing the packet open. "But just come back and chat anytime." A biscuit was dipped in the coffee and then popped into her mouth. "Seriously, they're lovely but too busy here, I'm bored out of my mind." She licked a few stray crumbs delicately off her lips.

Jane grabbed an apple, and offered one to James. He shook his head. "I'm really more of a milk and cookies guy, when I'm in the mood for indulging - so fork over one of those cookies."

Catalina handed over the treat with a small pout. "Saw the B team come in after a run," she said. Dipping another biscuit, she glanced up at Vasily with a mischievous look. "You might be right about passing on the lasers, it seems they couldn't even handle a bear they met." Catalina winked at Jane. "You were right. The starlet's experience in looking good on whatever that television programme was didn't work for her in a combat situation."

"So! Any news on our infiltrator? That data stick didn't get itself onto the trash dumpster on its own, as the last I checked they couldn't walk." She glanced at Jane. "If you can push them on letting me have a laptop I hope to get some clues there. Plus what's this about a new team member?"

* * * * *

Interlude: Results (July 5, 2008)

Game note: this scene was played out on the forums, with me rolling the skill checks to resolve actions.

It was a busy week at X-COM HQX.

With Alpha Team drawing so many deadly missions, Beta Team got assigned to most of the "milk runs", such as investigations and site cleanup. But one of those milk runs turned deadly when a sectoid infiltration team turned up on one of their missions. In addition to some alien bodies and weapons wrapped in plastic that Beta recovered, they

brought back one member of their team on a stretcher, a young Thai named Sonthi. Even through the translucent wrapping of the body bag it was easy to see the fist-sized hole that had been blasted through his chest. The rest of the team underwent a lengthy debriefing and later one-on-one meetings with Counselor Beauvais.

Vasily applied his skill to the work of expanding the West Wing of X-COM. His creative and expert use of demolitions shaved precious days off the time it took to get the new part of the base open and ready for the installation crews.

(Vasily Kasprjak Demolitions roll: $12+9 = 21$, Moderate Success, +2 to base construction)

Jane helped the engineers adding the fixtures and other infrastructure to what would become the new Medical Lab. Motivated perhaps by the wounds that Alpha and Beta Teams had brought back from their missions, along with the stories Jane tells of their combat missions, the engineering team pulled double shifts and the new lab was ready ahead of schedule. It would take some time to transfer over all of the material and equipment from the current medical bay in Research Lab 1, but the engineering team was not needed to carry out that work.

(Jane Swift Craft Mechanical roll: $9 + 11 = 20$, Moderate Success, +2 to engineering work this week).

Research Lab 1 completed its report on the autopsy of the new alien race, the Floater. The Floater was a created species, genetically engineered to a degree far beyond human science, and then further altered by the integration of machinery into its body. The largest such device replaced the creature's legs, and granted it the levitation ability that gave it its name.

Doctor White submitted a report the next day, adding information on the Floater blood work. "Our study of the alien biochemistry continues," he said in the report. "We are working on a biological or chemical agent that will target the alien physiology. The work on the Floater indicates some potential methods that we can pursue. Already we've discovered a substance that acts as an irritant on alien respiratory and sensory systems. I've added this substance to the tear gas grenades stocked by Musa. The grenades should stun Snakemen and Floaters, but note that Sectoids wear breathing masks, and will not be affected."

Doctor Sandesh sent a message to the Alpha Team members, asking them to meet him in Research Lab 2. After what happened on their last visit, most of the Alphas brought their guns with them. But the lab was quiet save for the Egyptian scientist and two technicians, who were closing the last access panel of the Heavy Weapons Platform as the last members of Alpha entered.

The HWP looked similar to the one that had been destroyed before. A dark opening a few inches across in the front of the device stared menacingly.

"The prototype is ready for field testing," Sandesh explained. "The device has a fully independent AI program, and will respond to voice commands. It has been pre-programmed with all of your voice patterns; just approach it and give it orders to follow you, and it will remain linked to you until ordered to stop."

Sandesh hesitated for a moment before walking over to the machine, shooing away one of the techs. "I read all of your action reports, and I believe that the default gun that we were using for testing would have been... of limited utility against these new aliens. Therefore I have installed a rocket launcher in this model. The platform carries twelve sixty millimeter rockets with high explosive heads. They have considerable range and should prove quite effective against most alien species that you have faced thus far. However, be cautious, as the HWP's AI may target aliens without concern for allies that may be within the blast radius. Remember that the HWP may be manually ordered to remain back should this become an issue. The HWP is not equipped for close combat, so I do not recommend allowing it to engage in melee actions with aliens, especially if it has rockets remaining in the launcher."

Sandesh finished by describing a few of the more mundane systems of the HWP. He said that he was already working on plans for an improved model, capable of carrying a portable laser cannon along with heavier armor.

With a few raised eyebrows, Alpha Team took possession of its new "recruit".

The production of the HWP was not the last event of importance that week. While the others worked on base improvements, practiced tactics, or caught up on their reading, Catalina was deeply immersed in a complicated research project. She took the data that Buzz and Commander Hallorand had collected about the stolen files, and began painstakingly comparing them to various base personnel and computer access logs. The information was not as complete as it might have been, and the British agent spent many hours in frustration trying to tie the scattered and vague links together.

Finally, as midnight approached one night, she sat up suddenly, staring at the data on her screen. The current file was a log of computer access in the workshops and research labs, juxtaposed against a list of project assignments.

(Catalina De Farrago Search roll: 18 + 11 = 29, Complete Success)

"I have to be sure," she said to herself. She went to her bunk, and recovered a tube of UV-sensitive dust from her personal effects.

HQX never really slept, but the dead-of-night shift was noticeably quieter than the others. In the morning, the base woke with the sounds of the night shift meeting the first day shift in the mess hall in the South Wing. Catalina walked through the labs and the workshops, armed with a portable UV generator, and her Glock riding on her hip.

She finally caught up to her quarry in a dead-end service corridor. She drew her gun, wary of a trap, but her target was alone. The UV light flooded the tunnel, and showed up blue on his fingertips. He looked up, and she saw a look of resignation on his face. "I wondered how long it would take you to find me," he said. "There is no need for that," he says, indicating the gun. "I will go with you, quietly."

* * * * *

Interlude: Results, Part 2 (July 5, 2008)

Catalina nodded in acknowledgement of her quarry's words. "Doctor Okwelume," she said.

The resignation on the scientist's face, and what appeared to be relief in his expression, was not lost on Catalina. *Will he talk now, in a moment of weakness, before realization of his situation and self preservation make him more wary?* It was not the best of locations. Her eyes didn't leave Okwelume, but her ears and every other nerve ending tuned to her surroundings, and she made sure her own back was towards the nearest wall.

Carpe Diem. "So Steven, may I call you Steven?" Catalina motioned with the barrel of the gun purely to emphasize its existence, and the fact that it was pointing right at him. "Care to tell me *exactly* what this is all about? Who are you working on behalf of and why you feel the need to do so? I think you'll find I'm a *very* good listener."

Doctor Okwelume sighed, and leaned against the wall at his back. As he shifted, Catalina caught sight of something concealed in his lap, a small object that might have been a small laptop computer.

"Have you ever read the novels of Chinua Achebe?" He did not wait for a response, and as he continued, he barely seemed to notice that Catalina was there. "His stories describe a people that were complex, noble... well, noble insofar as any human society can be considered such. We had a culture, my Igbo, a language, a belief system, and all of the loves and hates and goods and bads that come with them."

"We were not unique to the process of colonialism. I won't presume to lecture *you* about the evils of British imperialism; I'm sure you got plenty of that in your primary school. In any case, I am one of those who believes that the history of colonization ended up consuming the colonizers as much as the colonized. Like us, the British were products of their own culture and beliefs. There were good men, bad men, and a vast mass that fell somewhere in between."

"Africa is one of the richest continents in terms of mineral wealth—did you know that? They say that there is enough uranium and oil under it to keep the Industrial Age going

for another four, five decades. Though perhaps it is better for the West that it learn now to stop its dependence on..."

He looked up, and suddenly smiled. "I am sorry, I am babbling. Ada always said I tended to run my mouth off. Everything that you need is here," he says, glancing down to the laptop. "All my contacts, and the different nations to whom I sold the information. The Chinese, the Indians, the Israelis. My price was steep; nothing less than the introduction of the twenty-first century to the Niger River delta. Sixteen hospitals, two modern oil refineries, a solar power plant, two water treatment facilities, two hundred schools..."

"I used to rationalize that I was doing what I did for the good of all humanity. Knowledge should not be concealed, especially in the face of this threat. Are we not all united against this new threat? Could not an alien invasion do what all of the empires and religions failed to do, bring humanity together? I am not so naive, now. I have learned a great deal."

He meet Catalina's eyes squarely. "Do not trust the Chinese. Not the people; their leaders. They have been treating secretly with the aliens."

"Please extend my apologies to your superiors. I must say, my time at X-COM has been among the most rewarding in my life. The sheer... *wonder* of the science that is done here. That is my one regret, that I will not see the transformation of human knowledge come to its fruition."

He sighed, and took out a pistol from under the laptop. He lifted it and placed the mouth of the gun under his chin.

Catalina had watched Okwelume impassively throughout the conversation, whatever thoughts were going on behind her eyes hidden. Except perhaps a subtle widening of the eyes when he spoke of China. Though she'd seen the laptop, she was startled when the gun appeared.

Catalina lunged forward, trying to cover the gap between them in a leap. Her free hand reached out ahead of her, swinging to knock the gun away if not grab it.

"Nooooo!"

There was a ear-shattering roar as the handgun discharged in the close space of the service passage. A hiss of hot metal zinged past Catalina's ear as the bullet ricocheted off the wall, then the ceiling, before missing her by a scant few inches.

Okwelume's gun went flying down the corridor. The doctor himself sagged to the floor, sobbing. Catalina quickly verified that he wasn't carrying another weapon.

Once sure that he was clean, Catalina reached for and took the computer. "I think we need to make sure you are looked after, Steven, that is no way out."

Pistol still trained on him, she signaled him to his feet. "I think we are likely to have company shortly, let's go."

* * * * *

Session 13 (July 7, 2008)

Chapter 42

"Doctor Okwelume, I not get it," Vasily said.

Catalina sat across from the Russian on the big round table in the lounge, swinging her legs under it. "It seems he was a patriot."

The door to the barracks corridor opened, and James stepped in. Jane turned in her chair and waved to him. "Hey doc, Catalina was just telling us the story."

Vasily nodded at James. "Bout time you get here. Ha."

"Yeah, that's one I'd like to hear," James said, heading over to the counter to pour himself a cup of coffee from the ever-full canister. "Buzz back yet?" he asked.

"No," Vasily said. "And bosses not saying when he be back, either."

"Every transaction he made was in developments for his country," Catalina went on. "There was no personal gain involved."

"Those are the most dangerous ones," James observed.

"Still, he was a traitor," Jane said. "Nice job catching him."

"I both rock and roll," Catalina said with a grin.

Vasily frowned, apparently unsettled. After a moment, Catalina's own smile faded. "It was the matter of China that concerned me," she said.

"My country have many treaties with China," Vasily said. "Co-operation. Finance, industry, technology... military."

"We are aware," Catalina began, but she went silent as the outer door opened. Doctor Wagner and Counselor Beauvais came into the room. "Bonjour," Joan said.

Vasily nodded to the two of them. "Hi," James said.

There was an awkward pause that lasted a few beats, then Joan said, "This is terrible, about Doctor Okwelume."

"He was... is... a brilliant man," Doctor Wagner added. "He left detailed notes, but his loss is a serious one to our research progress."

"How is he?" Catalina asked.

"He's sleeping," Joan reported. "Doctor White sedated him. He's being kept under watch in a locked room in the East wing."

Two more people came into the room from the outer corridor, Chief Hallorand and another man who looked diminutive next to the tall American. He couldn't have been more than a few inches over five feet tall, though he looked to be in good physical shape despite the steeply receding line of his hair. He blinked as he took in the scene, his eyes widening slightly as he saw the piano.

"Ah, our new arrival," Joan said.

"Gamma team?" James asked.

"No, he's one of yours," Hallorand said. "This is Doctor Moshe Yahav. Field science and engineering."

"Hello," he managed. "The more the merrier, I guess," James said, putting down his cup and coming over to shake the newcomer's hand. "I'm Jim, Doctor Jim Allen."

The others all introduced themselves. Once they'd gotten names straightened out, Hallorand said, "Right. Would you mind giving him a tour? I need to see to the base."

"I'll take him," Jane offered. "I needed to talk to Musa and swing by the labs anyway."

"I'll go with you, Chief," Joan said. "I have some questions about the new security protocols. She left with him and Doctor Wagner."

"Well, that was easy," James said, once the new recruit had followed Jane back through the outer door, the two chatting amiably. "You want to go shoot some guns, Vas?" he asked. The Russian grunted, tossing his own empty coffee cup into the trashcan at the end of the counter.

"Oooh, how masculine," Catalina said. "Can I watch?"

The firing range was occupied, as they could hear the noise of weapons fire even before they pulled back the sound-muffling curtain at the end of the corridor in the east wing that led to the area reserved for weapons practice. They turned the corner to find Eleazar Perez and Jürgen Ritter standing behind the lower barrier that marked off the range. The two Betas looked up as the three of them came into the room. "I still don't know why they give women guns," Eleazar said.

"Oh, I know why they do," Catalina said, with a wicked grin.

"To protect them from you," Vasily said.

Eleazar laughed. "A woman needs no protection from me." He loaded a fresh clip into his handgun. "Hey, Russian, want to make a bet?"

"What bet?"

"Three shots at the far many there. Best score wins."

"See, now that's why he doesn't give guns to a girl," Catalina said. "They'd beat him."

Vasily paused at the rack where the various guns were laid out.

"I win, you set me up with the Brit over there," Eleazar said. "You win, I'll set you up with Alyssa, from my team."

Vasily raised an eyebrow, and gave Cat a sidelong look. "Not an equal bet," she said. "He'd need three dates with her."

Eleazar laughed. "Well now, that would all depend on how well the first one went, eh?"

"Oh, if ours went *well*, the stakes would treble," Catalina returned.

"I guess we may as well see how well targets work, huh," Vasily said, taking down a Glock from the rack. He checked the action efficiently, loading a clip of rounds.

"That's the spirit, señor," Eleazar said. Vasily came up to the barrier, but gestured for Eleazar to shoot first.

The target dummies were set up to provide automated reports on impacts. They had been fashioned into more or less humanoid shapes, although they lacked legs, and their faces were only vague oblongs within a metallic shell. Eleazar fired, scoring three solid hits. The results were indicated on a small LED screen above the weapons rack.

"All yours," Eleazar said, stepping back.

Vasily took careful aim, and fired.

The first shot scored a glancing hit. Catalina sighed, but his second and third shots were dead on, and the number indicated on the scoreboard was one point higher than Eleazar's tally.

"Heh, you beat me fair and square, chief," Eleazar said. "I'll go tell Ally the good news. Later, chief." Still chuckling, he turned and left.

"Pff, you could have shot to lose," Catalina said, once he was gone. "You owe me one date."

* * * * *

Session 13 (July 7, 2008)

Chapter 43

They got the call late that afternoon, while eating together in the base mess hall. The five of them, including the Israeli scientist, made their way to the briefing room. They ran into Agent Drake on the way, coming from the direction of the lift.

"Our newest recruit?" the FBI agent asked, giving Moshe a weighing look.

"Yes," Vasily said. "Doctor Yahav, this is Agent Drake."

"A scientist, or so I hear. How *is* Mossad doing these days, Doctor Yahav?"

Yahav blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Never mind." She continued ahead of them toward the briefing room.

"Our hosts," Vasily explained. "We on U.S. soil out of sufferance sometime it seem."

"Let's go see what craziness we have in store this week," Catalina said, leading the way to the briefing room.

* * *

"The bogey is coming down on an arctic insertion course," Doctor Wagner told them, bringing a global map up onto the big wall screen. "Our best estimate is that it is heading for central Canada, or perhaps the Wisconsin-Minnesota region."

"Great, we're meeting Santa Claus," Jane said.

"I'm afraid you're not going to like this," Wagner continued, "but preliminary read on the hyperwave is snakemen."

"The ship doesn't appear to be heading for any heavily populated areas," Garret added. "Interceptors one and three are en route, but given our effectiveness against them thus far, we may not be able to shoot it down. I want your team ready to hit if it lands."

"Doctor Sandesh has the new Heavy Weapons Platform waiting for you in Hangar One," Wagner said. "I believe he has instructed you in its use."

"Don't look at me," Catalina said, "someone else can sort it out."

"All right," Garret said. "Get your gear. Ken will keep you posted on what we learn as it happens."

The members of Alpha stood. "Welcome to our world, Moshe," James said. "Best pray to whatever it is you pray to."

* * *

The air swirled with gusty flurries of snow as Skyranger-1 descended over a landscape blanketed in white. The roar of the ship's engines echoed over a landscape that was almost devoid of features, save for the squat forms of a farmhouse and several outbuildings that sat quiet and dark in the midst of the white fields.

That, and the glistening bulk of an alien spaceship that crouched in the yard in front of the farmhouse, looming over its roof by a good five meters.

The Skyranger landed a good hundred meters back from the alien ship, behind a low barbed-wire fence that was almost invisible in the flurry. Even as it settled the hatch in the rear began to open, and Catalina stepped out. The agent was clad in a suit of metallic armor that gave her an almost robotic appearance.

"God, I stand out like a beacon in this," she said to herself, looking at the pure white of the landscape. The alien alloys used in the construction of the new Personal Armor had a bluish tinge, and she suspected she would be quite easy to spot coming.

Jane got the cargo compartment slung under the Skyranger's belly open, and the low outline of the HWP emerged. "Focus on me," Jane commanded, and the machine gave a small chirp before it moved into formation a few paces behind her.

Vasily looked over at Moshe, who was the last to exit the ship. "The guns these bastards use are lethal. Keep you head down, don't get hit."

James was fiddling with the power setting on his laser pistol. "Lasers aren't a lot of good on the snakes, doc," Catalina told him.

“Oh? Should I grab an MP5 from the ship? Are those more effective?”

“Kind of,” Vasily said. “Spray of bullets gets through their skin. Some time.”

“Great,” James replied. “I think I’ll hang back and cover you guys.”

“Just watch the autofire when Vas and I pull stun rods,” Jane said. She moved forward, the HWP leaving tracks behind her as its treads cut across the snow.

“Jane, if you have that thing, you have to stay back,” Catalina told her.

“Right. No stun rod this time.”

“I not interested in stunning any this time,” Vasily said. “Gun them all down.”

Ken’s voice came through over their headsets. “Visibility is low, but the ship’s sensors are picking up some movement in the area of the farm.”

“Come on,” Vasily said. They set out, Catalina on point, the others following in a line with Jane and the HWP bringing up the rear.

They made their way across the field without incident, but as they neared a low stone wall that fenced off the yard behind the farmhouse, Catalina raised a hand in caution. The Visual Display Units on their helmets offered some magnification and resolution improvements, but those advantages were offset by the bad weather, the swirling snow absorbing everything in a blur of white. They could see the bulky form of the farmhouse, and the barn behind it to the left, but the alien ship was just a vague shadow in the distance.

Catalina gestured for them to remain there. She clambered over the wall and quickly moved across the field to the back of the farmhouse, crouched to minimize her outline against the stark white of the snow. The others knelt behind the wall, using it as cover as they scanned the area for signs of the aliens that Ken had indicated were nearby.

“There,” James said, pointing. “Two to the left.”

“I see them,” Catalina said, whispering over the comlink. She reached the back of the farmhouse and pressed against its back wall, pulling out a gas grenade.

The snakemen slithered through the snow, leaving long trails behind them as they emerged in the space between the house and the barn. As they approached the side of the building where Catalina waited, she pulled the pin on the grenade, leaned around the corner, and tossed it onto the ground between them.

The grenade exploded with a dull thump, engulfing both aliens in a cloud of greenish vapors. The wind caught up the gas and dissolved the cloud quickly, but it was clear that both aliens were affected, the two snakemen twisting and thrashing as the toxin affected their nervous systems. One fired its weapon, the plasma bolt streaking into the sky before it was lost amidst the flurries.

The members of Alpha Team responded with a barrage of their own. The lasers flared in bright streaks as the beams vaporized snow before slashing across the aliens' bodies. Vasily's autocannon spit out a less subtle barrage of shells that raised coughs of snow all around the aliens, along with greenish pops of alien blood. The HWP, coming around the end of the wall to get a bead on the targets, fired a rocket, the missile streaking across the battlefield, narrowly missing one of the snakemen before it hit the barn behind them and exploded. Bits of wood and other debris were flung across the area by the force of the blast, adding to the confusion.

The aliens recovered quickly from the stunning gas, but by the time they started shooting back, both were critically wounded. But even as the firefight continued with full force, another two snakemen came around the far side of the farmhouse. James spotted them and started to yell a warning, but before they could hear anything over the noise of the fight, Moshe was hit by a plasma bolt that clipped his shoulder, knocking him roughly over onto his back.

Catalina turned toward the reinforcements and hefted another grenade, but one of the aliens from the first group spotted her, and shot her in the back. The shot knocked her off her feet, and she landed on her face in a mound of snow. The alien that had struck her went down a moment later as Vasily zeroed in and delivered a stream of shells that carved its torso into a bloody mess. The one behind it was covered in wounds, but it managed a shot that sliced past the Russian, catching Jane with a glancing impact to the side of her helmet. Most of the energy of the bolt was discharged off into the air, but Jane hissed in pain as the side of her face sizzled with a surge of blistering heat, and she fell to the ground, her legs thrashing in the snow as she tried to pry off her damaged headgear.

With three Alphas down and three aliens still up and shooting, the situation seemed to have suddenly taken a very bad turn.

* * * * *

Session 13 (July 7, 2008)

Chapter 44

Explosions rocked the area around the farmhouse as the HWP kept up its barrage of rockets. The wounded snakeman to the left was flung to the ground from a direct hit,

and the miniature tank swiveled in place before starting forward toward the second pair. It launched a missile that took out the corner of the structure adjacent to them, showering the snakemen with bits of stone and wood. Some of the debris landed on Catalina, who crawled through the snow, coughing, trying to get clear. James knelt down next to Moshe, helping him with a medical kit. Vasily kept up his fire from his autocannon, steam now pouring off the barrels of the weapon, and the two snakemen began to draw back, firing their plasma rifles to cover their retreat. The HWP continued rolling forward after them, firing another missile that streaked out behind the farmhouse before exploding somewhere in the distance.

“Get tank back!” Vasily yelled, but Jane was in little shape to issue commands. Kneeling behind the wall, she finally got her helmet off, revealing ugly black marks along the side of her neck and across her brow where the explosive splash from the plasma bolt had seared her.

Vasily came over the wall and grabbed Catalina, helping her to her feet and all but pulling her back to where the group was gathered. “Doctor!” the Russian yelled, but Catalina shook him off. “I’m... I’m okay. I think the armor took the worst of it,” she said, standing on her own two feet, if a bit unsteadily.

A noise reached them over the sound of the wind, coming from the direction of the alien ship. “I think it getting ready to take off or something!” Vasily yelled, rushing forward after the HWP.

“Hold, Vas!” James yelled after him, but the Russian had already vanished around the edge of the farmhouse. Catalina was hurrying after him, and Jane was on her feet again, her long hair flaring out behind her as it escaped its bindings and got caught up in the wind. James helped Moshe to his feet, and the two followed after the others, following the tracks left by the weapons platform in the snow.

They found both it and Vasily in front of the alien ship, its curving form incongruous as it crouched in the midst of an empty vegetable garden. The tarp that had covered the garden jutted out from one of the alien vessel’s landing struts, flapping in the wind like a trailing cape. The HWP sat facing the ship’s hatch, inert now that its magazine of missiles was empty. A black streak marking the ship’s hull indicated that the tank had gotten in a hit, but there didn’t appear to be any serious damage.

Catalina held up the motion sensor. Signals flared on its small screen, but she couldn’t resolve them through the hull of the alien ship. “Some in there,” she reported.

Vasily touched his comlink. “We need to go into UFO,” he said. He scanned the group quickly, long enough to make sure that no one was about to fall over, then he headed for the hatch. Even without Buzz present, the process of forcing entry was by now almost routine, and after a few moments the slabs that made up the hatch parted and slid back into the body of the ship.

Vasily led them up the ramp into the interior. They emerged into a chamber that had a familiar layout, with recessed niches set into the walls, framed by protrusions that curved up from the floor and into the ceiling above. It looked much like the ship they'd boarded during the Riverside mission.

Except this time the niches held not entombed children, but instead a pair of snakemen, who emerged from the alcoves to the right and left as Vasily reached the top of the ramp.

Humans and aliens exchanged fire at close range. Vasily took a hit to his chest that was largely absorbed by his armor and the bulky harness of his autocannon. It threw his aim off slightly, but the spray of shells still chewed up the wall shielding the nearer alien, spraying it with fragments both of steel bullets and of the alien alloys that made up the hull of the ship.

Catalina appeared at the top of the ramp and dove to the side, splashing a laser beam across the torso of the other alien. Behind her Jane and Moshe came charging up the ramp, but before either could contribute to the close-quarters exchange the nearer alien fired its plasma rifle, missing Vasily but hitting the low roof over the heads of the two Alphas behind him. The shot obviously hit something important, for the segment of hull exploded, blasting both Jane and Moshe and filling the ramp with a stinging cloud of greenish-gray smoke.

Vasily staggered forward but kept up his fire, pounding the closer snakeman at point-blank range. The barrage tore the creature almost in half, and it fell to the ground in a messy heap, still twitching. Catalina slid into a niche just in time to avoid the second alien's first two shots, then she leaned out and blasted it with a shot from her laser pistol that cut a diagonal line squarely across the center of its skull. There was a brief flare as the beam vaporized its left eyeball, then it too fell. It tried to get back up, scratching at the armored floor with its claws, but she finished it with a persistent beam to the back of its neck before it could recover.

Jane and Moshe limped into the chamber, assisted by James, who'd avoided the worst of the blast. Checking them quickly, he sat both of them down in the niches flanking the entry, then dug out a medikit to get to work on Jane.

Vasily double-checked that the first alien was dead, not that there was much doubt given the mangled wreckage that was left. "Not many rounds left for this thing," he said, hefting the autocannon. "Allen! How we doing on med supplies?"

James didn't respond at first, injecting the potent mixture in the medikit into Jane's neck. "Allen?"

He finished what he was doing, then shook his head. "Sorry. We are low. Got six kits left, and I'd rather have a couple of spares." He took one of those out of his pouch and turned to help Moshe. Even as the injection began to take hold, Jane remained seated.

Her face and neck were covered with more burn scarring, and she squinted, blinking quickly as she tried to clear her vision.

Vasily frowned. "Jane, Moshe, maybe you go back to ship and..."

He was cut off as the ship began to vibrate. As the Alphas reached for whatever was nearby to steady themselves, there was a high-pitched whine, and a rumbling that seemed to come from the walls, ceiling, and floor all at once. Then they could feel the floor seeming to press up against them.

"Okay, too late for that," Vasily said. "We ready?" he asked, looking back at James.

"Go!" the doctor yelled, as he helped Moshe to his feet.

The ship continued to shake as its engines carried it upward. The Alphas made their way to the forward door, which opened to reveal the forward command area of the ship. The snakeman at the controls didn't see them until it was too late; by the time it turned, alerted to the presence of intruders, several weapons were pointed in its direction, and it absorbed several hits before it could so much as lift the plasma pistol hanging from a harness at its side.

"It's dead!" Vasily yelled, as the alien slumped down against the console, trailing a streak of garish green blood. "Now, uh, can someone make this thing land?"

A ear-splitting noise filled the chamber, and the ship begun to tilt to the side. "Quick?" Vasily added.

Catalina hurried over to the controls. James grabbed Moshe, who seemed like he wanted to fade into the curving wall. "Come on, you're the braniac," he said, thrusting the scientist forward.

"Come on, we make sure that engine room clear," Vasily said, tapping Jane on the shoulder. The two of them headed through the side hatch that opened onto the steep ramp that descended into the bowels of the ship.

The ship continued its banking turn, to the point where they had to grab hold of the console to keep from pitching over.

Jane's voice drifted up from below. "The alien engine seems to be fully functional, if you can get it to stabilize flying!" She appeared a moment later, pulling herself up the ramp.

"Hmm," Moshe said, looking over the controls as if he were studying a complex mathematical proof.

Jane staggered forward, taking up a position opposite Catalina along the bank of alien controls. She grabbed a V-shaped lever jutting from the console, and tried to shift it.

The response was immediate; the ship abruptly yawed, tilting back to horizontal before flipping over to an almost forty-five degree angle in the opposite direction. The members of Alpha cried out as they were flung about, and they could hear Vasily yelling as a loud clatter sounded from the engine room below.

“Dammit, Jane!” Catalina yelled.

“Okay... that wasn’t quite right,” Jane said, heaped up in the corner near the entry, tangled up in a confusion of arms and legs with James.

Moshe crept back up to the control panel. There was a sense of urgency now, as they could feel a sense almost approaching weightlessness, a sure sign that the ship was losing altitude fast. The Israeli scientist grabbed a series of controls, including another lever slick with the blood of the dead snakeman pilot.

Vasily appeared in the lower hatchway, missing his gun and his helmet, blood pouring from a gash in the side of his head. “If we crash, you see what this alien ship energy do? It take us all out, and probably anything we land on.”

“And half of the location,” Catalina agreed, dragging herself up by the end of the console. Slowly, the angle of the craft was straightening back toward horizontal, but Catalina noticed a display panel that seemed to be counting downward, very quickly. “Slow its descent!” she yelled. In response, Moshe started pushing other buttons, but it wasn’t immediately clear if they were having an effect.

Vasily got to where Catalina was holding on for dear life. “Crap. Uh, is that altitude?”

Moshe kept working, and had started talking to himself in Hebrew as he tried to arrest the ship’s descent. Something he did activated some sort of viewscreen, for a portion of the wall was suddenly transformed into a view of the Wisconsin landscape, including the farmhouse they’d left behind, and which was now rapidly growing larger as the ship plummeted toward it. They could see the squat form of the HWP sitting in front of the building, as if waiting for them to return.

Jane had finally gotten back to her feet, and she made her way up to stand beside Moshe. “I know you can do this,” she said.

“I just like to say,” Vasily began, “it been fun—”

He didn’t get a chance to finish, as the alien ship suddenly pitched forward, and the farmhouse suddenly filled the viewscreen, and everything exploded in a chaos of sound and violence.

* * * * *

Aftermath (July 8, 2008)

Joan Beauvais looked up as she heard a quiet rapping on her door. "Please come in."

The door opened, and Jane entered. She moved awkwardly, the body cast wrapped around her torso obvious under her jacket. Her right arm was bound tightly against her side by an elastic cord, and her face, while looking better than it had when they'd first brought her in on a stretcher from the crash site, was still a mottled landscape of swollen blues and blacks.

"Sit down, Jane."

Joan saw how even the simple movement to the chair caused a twinge of pain in the other woman, however she tried to hide it. "How are you, Dr. Beauvais?"

"Well, thank you. How are you, Jane?"

After a pause, Jane replied, "To be honest, I'm not sure. I've not heard from my brother's family in a week since they were moved; I nearly crashed the ship we were on, on the last mission; we just uncovered a traitor in our midst and to be honest I suspected him all along, but for the wrong reasons, so I didn't want to speak up, because they were unfounded. So where do you want to start?"

The counselor asked, "So let me guess, 'The butler did it?' scenario, so you didn't speak up?"

Jane smiled, "Exactly. Somehow his name came up right next to Sandesh on the suspect list and Sandesh was out, so he was next on the list. It was like jumping to conclusions without anything to base it on. I kept shaking off the feeling; but, it kept coming back to him. I'd hate to persecute a man based on nothing. Now the point is moot. It's like the feeling I had with the Riverside Elementary School. I somehow knew the aliens were there to take the children to metamorph them into more of their hybrids; but I simply could not say the words to my teammates or the medical staff back here. It was not until later when faced with the awful truth of the matter that I said anything. My indecision may be setting matters back."

The counselor corrected her, "Or it may be exercising self-control from going on wild-goose chases too. You can't be second guessing yourself all the time, Jane. It will lead to bad mistakes in the field and here."

"I suppose you're right, Dr. Beauvais."

The counselor added, "Learn to trust yourself; but, also learn to trust your caution, so you don't make worse mistakes."

“You’re right, of course. I suppose I should stop kicking myself too. I’m working with Buzz on the control layouts for those alien ships. Not like I’m expected to know how to fly an out-of-control alien ship on my first try.” She grinned mischievously, “I’ll see if I can do better next time.”

Joan didn’t say anything. After a few moments, Jane paused and sighed. “I hope I hear from my family soon.”

I’m sure they’ll contact you when it’s safe and they are settled.”

Jane asked, “Have you heard anything?”

“No, but, if I do, I’ll let you know. I promise.”

“Thank you, Dr. Beauvais. See you next week?”

“Yes. And remember, light duty until that cast comes off.”

Jane got to her feet, and again Joan could see the effort it cost her. “Don’t worry. I don’t think I’ll be running any marathons any time soon.”

Joan nodded, and Jane left. As the door closed behind her, a male voice sounded from the hidden speaker behind the desk. “Is she going to crack?”

“They’ve all had a tough time of it, Garret,” Joan replied. “This last mission... they nearly died, all of them, when that ship crashed. In fact, Grace says that if they had not hit the farmhouse, and had it there to partially absorb the impact, it is almost certain that none of them would have gotten out alive. Traumas like that take time to heal.”

“They are responding to the medical therapies. Stan says the team will be at full strength in a few days.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

There was a pause. “We don’t have a lot of options, Joan. Every attack that gets through undermines support of our operation from our consortium members. We need successes, not failures.”

“They’re not machines, Director. They’re people. Incredible people, but people nevertheless.”

“If we fail, a lot more than X-COM will lose out, doctor. I will expect your reports on the team by tomorrow morning.”

There was only a slight click to indicate that she was now alone—if she ever truly was in this place, Joan mused. Was someone watching her the way that she was watching Alpha Team, evaluating, writing reports on her stability and effectiveness?

She allowed herself a full minute of quiet, then she sighed and reached for the next file in the stack on her desk.

* * * * *

Interlude: Planning (July 8-9, 2008)

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, GRACE THELON BELUCA
RE: New Research/Manufacturing Priorities

We have several completed projects to report. The new Medical Lab is complete and all systems are online. Doctor White reports that weekly production of medikits will approximately double as a result.

Work on the alien power supply has proceeded well, despite the loss of the project lead, Doctor Okwelume. Doctor Okwelume left detailed notes on his organization of the project, and the use of the alien power coupling that you recovered from the Everglades mission has greatly speeded the work. The research team has already submitted a preliminary report on the alien fuel source. It is a new element, which they are calling Elerium-115.

The team estimates that at current staffing levels they should finish their work on the alien power systems by the end of the week. Chief Engineer Beluca has stated that once this project is complete, X-COM will be able to use the complete materials, power, and navigation plans to construct our own advanced craft based on alien techniques and technologies. She has also indicated that the alien power systems may eventually allow for the construction of more advanced Powered Armor for our X-COM field operatives.

* * * * *

So far, it had been ten minutes of ham fritters, coffee and Antarctic adventure stories in the X-COM cafeteria. Vasily wasn't sure how anyone could talk about Antarctica for ten minutes without mentioning penguins once, but that was because they weren't actually talking about Antarctica; they were talking about Alyssa Sanders. Or, rather, Alyssa Sanders was talking about Alyssa Sanders. As he'd never been to Antarctica, there wasn't much else to do but make the occasional intrigued noise.

So when the little vibrating buzz sounded from the xPhone sitting there near his plate, he couldn't help but glance down and skim-read the contents.

"... so what I had to do is dig the ice shelter and make the walls with just this trowel I'd made from - are you listening?"

"Eh?" He looked up, and blinked a bit, coming back to Earth. "Oh. Sorry, is the email from Wagner."

That admission earned him a carefully-modulated look of disappointment. "And what *Doctor Kimmy's* got to say is more interesting, huh?"

"What? No, no. I just looking -"

"Give it here," Alyssa demanded, motioning for the xPhone. Her eyes flicked across the screen, and a minute or two of expert tapping produced a message.

FROM: vasily.kasprjak001
TO: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
CC: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM, GRACE THELON BELUCA
RE: New Research/Manufacturing Priorities

Get cracking on that alien energy, finish up that laser cannon, build more armor, build more laser weapons, build more medical packs, and send some to Beta Team! They need some alien science love too.

She held the phone in front of his eyes. "There. That do?"

"Uh -"

"Good." He tentatively reached for the phone, but winced as she tapped the SEND button before handing it back, apparently unfazed. "By the way, you really need a more interesting user name than that. How about we go shoot something? I can tell you the rest of the story on the way."

In the privacy of his own head, he sighed a little. It wasn't exactly an ideal date. But as the only topics he could think of to talk about were murderous aliens, the possible double-dealing of the People's Republic of China and the worry that his own nation was involved somewhere—after all, hadn't they all signed the Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Co-operation?—maybe an hour or two of shooting some target dummies and listening to more survival adventures in freezing climes wasn't so bad.

"Sure. Okay." They got up, and Vasily slid the xPhone back into his pocket. What the other team members would make of that mail, he wasn't sure...

* * *

It had been a busy week. Thanks to good fortune and perhaps the improved suit of armor, Catalina had been the least damaged Alpha that the recovery team had finally managed to dig out of the wreckage of the alien ship. It was a miracle any of them were still alive; she'd overheard one of the medical techs saying that between the five of them they'd had thirty-seven broken bones. She herself had escaped with just a broken collarbone and some torn muscles, but Stan had set her up with an IV full of his miracle juice, which had put her back on her feet within twenty-four hours. With her fellow team members recovering from broken bones and internal injuries, she'd been left to her own devices.

She kept busy tying up the details on the matter of the leak. The aftermath of that affair had been oddly rewarding. The open gratitude of Hallorand and Garrett, both of whom had been relieved to have the matter closed so swiftly and with Doctor Okwelume still alive. The sincere, if somewhat saddened, congratulations of base staff, and the enthusiastic ones of some of her own team. But more than any of these, the obviously bitter taste if left in Drake's mouth as she was forced to acknowledge it.

But that was now done and over with, and sitting in the usual "feet up on table" position in the Recreation room, listening to the chatter of those around her, Catalina had to admit she was bored. There were other projects to work on, but what had seemed a fine way to occupy herself the week before now seemed just a little empty. She glanced down as the xPhone buzzed and pulled it out to look. A mischievous grin came across her face. It merely broadened as Vasily and Alyssa walked through the room on the way to the firing range. She wiggled the phone at him and her eyes danced. *Well, this should keep me occupied for a few minutes at least*, she thought. With a smirk on her face, Catalina sat and composed a response to the resourcing email.

FROM: cat.leaveyourhaton
TO: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
CC: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM, GRACE THELON BELUCA
RE: New Research/Manufacturing Priorities

I'm sure we all fully support Vasily in his desire to give alien science love to the Beta Team members. Focusing on the priorities in his email will no doubt produce the appropriate equipment to reinforce this cause to the full. Some Beta Team members have already expressed a desire to receive it and no doubt they will step forward quickly to take up the opportunity. I therefore throw my own opinion behind his suggestions and hope they achieve the desired result.

She pressed the send button with a flourish and while waiting for any potential response typed another.

FROM: Cat.LeaveYourHatOn
TO: GRACE BELUCA
RE: Any chance of something special?

Got to try out the new armour in the field, Grace, and it works a treat. Of course, being me I have to ask for a something little extra. Is there anyway you can work the camouflage you had on my old X-COM uniform into the new materials? It was damn useful when checking out the lay of the land around the aliens.

I know it's a long shot, but thought I would ask, as if you don't ask you generally don't get!

Cat

No response to the first. Catalina glanced at the entrance to the barracks corridor with another grin. *Maybe he'll want to give it in person.*

She didn't have to wait long for a reply to the second message; Grace was known for always being at work, and she was as likely to respond to an e-mail in the middle of the night as during the day.

FROM: GRACE BELUCA
TO: Cat.LeaveYourHatOn
RE: Any chance of something special?

Report to Workshop 3, and we'll see what we can do. –GTB

Relieved to have something to do, Catalina grinned again and headed off toward the workshop.

* * * * *

Interlude: Leave (July 9-14, 2008)

Author's Note: once again, these posts came from the players in the campaign, in response to the Garret e-mail below.

An unexpected message from Director Garret arrived in the xPhone inboxes of Alpha Team.

TO: ALPHA TEAM MEMBERS
FROM: Michael Garret
RE: Leave

I'm authorizing 72 hour leaves for members of Alpha Team. Leaves will be staggered so that at least two-thirds of the team is present at any given time. Beta Team will be on standby during the entire period that Alpha members are

off-base. You will be expected to keep your xPhones on standby while off-site, including the GPS locator system. Violation will result in immediate revocation of leave privileges.

* * *

"Leave! Yes!" Catalina punches the air as she reads the email. "72 hours. That's 5 hours transfer, 12 hour flight, 3 hours in airport lounge, in both directions," she ticks off her fingers one by one. "Damn, once I've done the obligatory visit to Mom and Dad that's only one evening."

"I need to spend some time in workshop three too." She snorted, "Sod it, who's for pairing up and hitting the nearest bar? Preferably someone who's handy with cards and can hold their own in a shots drinking contest." Slowly a grin formed. "How far are we from Vegas, exactly?"

* * *

Jim was reviewing the last five sets of alien autopsy results when the buzzer in the medical lab went off. The error tolerances on the med-kit chloroplast transducer had been exceeded again. He'd have to get one of the techs to fix this. He groaned. He still hadn't reviewed the research and manufacturing proposals floated by the various alpha team members. "Too freakin' much to do. I had more free time back when I worked the ER."

Jim sent off an email to two of the techs about the tolerances, and went back to the autopsy reports. If he didn't have time to weigh in on the manufacturing and research priorities, it wasn't the end of the world, the others in the group seemed to be making pretty good decisions.

* * *

No-one else had seemed in a hurry to take their leave off the base, and as he— like the British woman, apparently—had no-one to visit within a realistic distance, it made sense to take the same bus into the city while the rest of the team booked flights and made hopeful travel plans. It was still close to the base, should trouble break out; and being a tourist city, Vasily had originally assumed there would be no problems finding a place to stay. A country as tense as this one, he thought, was probably one that was staying at home. Even if the threat they were facing was nameless and not generally known, there was enough fear in the air for everyone to feel the urge to keep their heads down.

In that, he couldn't have been more wrong. The streets of Vegas by day were eerily silent, but the hotels and casinos of the place were mostly full. As those with families huddled in their houses, taking no chances, the desperate, the despairing, and the fatalistic had flocked to Vegas, gambling their way through the crisis. To someone who knew what was going on, it all seemed a little sad, a little bleak. The sight of it all cast

Doctor Okwelume's reported idealism—that alien invasion could imbue humanity with a sense of purpose—into stark relief.

Was it just the way the human race dealt with fear and worry, to push it aside? Could it be that when the chips were down and things fell apart, was the only rule Every Man For Himself? After so many wars, many of them global, was cynicism the order of the day now that the future of the human race as a whole might truthfully be at stake? Or was the age of information-technology and the power of world media settling the weight of guilt so heavily onto people's consciences that the mere thought of conflict wearied them?

He didn't know; but thoughts like that wearied *him*, he knew that. And they weren't worth sharing, at least not on a time of brief holiday. Besides, he would have been surprised if there was anyone in Alpha Team who hadn't had the same thoughts at some point. He brought his mind back to the first three things on the agenda; getting enough loose change together to make a call to the Russian Embassy in Washington, and...

"Keep eye out for Russian restaurant," he asked his travelling companion, as their bus ambled down Route 93. "And hat shop. I promise bring back a Vegas baseball cap for someone."

* * *

"Look, what do you want? This rat hole, which is worse than the barracks, and only has one bed, or a big room with a comfy sofa if not two beds, and space so we won't have to sit on one another's laps?" The atmosphere of anxiety in the city had taken Catalina by surprise. She wasn't sure why she hadn't expected it. but she hadn't. One of her earliest memories was of the strange elation her parents had exhibited when a great big wall had been knocked down. It was much later before she connected the event, but even then she could only understand the relieved jubilation subjectively. Life in post-Germanic unification Britain didn't exactly fit you to anticipate how a population under threat could act.

Still, as was her nature, she intended to make the most of it. Spending two nights in the seedy motel, heavily influenced by the Psycho period and looking like it hadn't been renovated since then either, wasn't going to cut it. So Catalina suggested they con their way into the Honeymoon suite of one of the larger hotels. Vasily hadn't liked the idea, so as they stood in the one dingy room they could find she gave it the hard sell. "I'll take the sofa if I can *at least* have a shower I don't have to share with a family of cockroaches."

It had perhaps been the unspecified rodent running along the curtain rail that convinced him, but Vasily agreed reluctantly. "Just stay quiet and leave it to me," Catalina told him.

The Russian stood silently in the lobby of the Luxor, while Catalina spoke to the frazzled-looking clerk at the front desk. "It's the throat cancer operation, you know. He really mustn't talk too much," she said, radiating embarrassed tension, while she had the desk clerk triple check for a booking that had never existed. Tears started as she went on, "It's our honeymoon, you know, and the doctors..." The combination, coming from a young woman with innocent blue eyes in a pretty sundress paid off with a far too inexperienced clerk and a harassed manager. A luxurious, if rather kitsch, room was theirs.

After unpacking her few belongings, purchasing a cheap, pre-paid mobile, and making a long call to a pre-arranged unlisted number, they tried a restaurant serving Russian cuisine on the recommendation of the desk clerk. The food wasn't authentic enough for Vasily, but it was the waiters in full Cossack style dress that had the biggest impact on him. Particularly when the friendly waitress queried his accent and discovered his origins. This led to a series of vodka shots, downed in rapid succession, and hence to a contest conducted with three Stetson-wearing fellows in the Luxor bar, both sporting baseball caps and "I Love Vegas!" t-shirts they had acquired somewhere along the way.

Afterwards neither were quite clear how, in their drunken stumbling and meandering, while singing a Russian folk song, they managed to make it back to the room. It was a very bleary-eyed Catalina who opened her eyes early the next afternoon, stared up at the ceiling from a position upside down on an armchair with her legs hooked over the seat back, and uttered the traditional litany. "Oh bugger, what *did* we do last night?"

* * *

Author's Note: Jane's backstory involved the death of her husband Samuel and a threat to her brother Mark from a smuggling syndicate.

Mark, Rebecca, and Samantha were settling into their new home in the new WITSEC town with double duty protection by a few X-COM agents lurking in the wings cooperating through FBI sources.

Once Vasily and Catalina staggered back into the base, looking somewhat the worse for wear for their trip, Jane used her 72 hour leave to visit them and they finally saw Shrek 4 and the latest Narnia movie as family. They all had a good time together.

There was an understood tension underneath it all, that something was going on that Jane couldn't talk about that was related to the recent attack on the family. They were all just glad to be alive and together for the short time that Jane had the 72 hour leave. The family knew to follow the WITSEC agents rules and the added security precautions that were in place on top of that.

The rest of the leave was a lot of fun for the four of them, with stories of Samantha's exploits, and reminiscing about Mark and Jane as kids, to Mark and Rebecca when they first met. A brief reference of Samuel brought a few tears to everyone's eyes; but

otherwise the topics were generally all very light and the rest of the 72 hours were all very pleasant until it was time for a Jane to go back. They told her to be careful with whatever it was that she was doing and to keep her head down; but, that they were proud of her no matter what.

Jane returned to base with a smile on her face and a pair of CDs of the soundtracks from Shrek 4 and Narnia that she picked up from a local store that her brother had gotten her as gifts.

* * * * *

Session 14 (July 14, 2008)

Chapter 45

The deck of the hangar was choked with smoke, flames, and corpses. The diminutive but deadly forms of the sectoids outnumbered the fallen humans, but that did not ease the ferocious expression that was fixed on Vasily Kasprjak's face like a storm cloud.

The Russian limped as he made his way forward, through the scattered wreckage of a cyberdisc, past the shouts of several techs as they sprayed fire retardant onto a burning mechanical loader. A slight breeze stirred the air, sliding into the complex through the massive wreckage of the blast doors. Doors that had been paired slabs of steel, four inches thick, and which now hung tentatively from their moorings like crumpled sheets of paper.

"How is she?" Vasily barked, scanning for any more signs of danger. He'd checked the entire level after the last sectoid had fallen, and this was the only hangar that had been breached, but he wasn't going to take anything for granted at this point.

"She's stable, but it was close... she was dead there, for a minute," James said, without looking up. He and the medical tech knelt over the bloody form of Jane, whose skin looked almost white against the dark colors of her armor. Her face was obscured by a portable respirator, which beeped as it pumped oxygen into her lungs. "We need to get her to the medical bay, right away. Where the hell is Stan?"

"I saw him helping with the casualties from the lift collapse," Catalina said. She turned to Vasily. "Communications are still down. And no contact with the surface."

Vasily nodded; he hadn't expected any better news.

The attack had been sudden, and had come with almost no warning. The alien ship had descended from orbit like the hammer of some vengeful god, appearing on X-COM's radar only a little over a hundred miles out, a bright streak as it penetrated the

atmosphere. There had been barely enough time to scramble the interceptors, but the alien had knocked them aside almost contemptuously. Both pilots had bailed out, but that was the last bit of good luck that they'd had.

The base missile defenses had exchanged fire with the alien. The last thing they'd seen before the sensors were lost was the alien veering off course. They wouldn't find out until later that it had been damaged and withdrawn, but that hadn't stopped it from dropping three assault pods that had descended onto the base. Its return fire had taken out the Patriot battery, the primary radar and communications array, and the building that warded the lift on the surface, essentially leaving them blind. The eight men manning the surface installations were killed instantly.

Catalina looked down at Jane. "She stepped in front of you, took fire while you were... out."

Vasily's expression darkened further. He still didn't know what had happened, but he could see the results right in front of him.

With the Betas off site on a mission, Alpha Team had rushed to help the base guards repel the alien assault. The blast doors on Hangar 3 had held long enough for them to rally there, just as the first cyberdiscs and sectoids had started pushing into the base. The critical exchange had lasted just seconds, as bullets, laser beams, and plasma bolts had filled the nearly empty hangar. An alien grenade had killed two guards and blasted Catalina and Buzz onto their backs, and shrapnel from an exploding cyberdisc had wounded several of them, but the aliens had taken heavy losses. Vasily had taken the lead as a knot of sectoids had fallen back across the hangar, forming a defensive position in front of one of the niches that held the machinery that had operated the blast doors.

And then, somehow, he'd just... stopped. It was as if someone had draped a blanket over his mind; dazed, he'd just stood there as the battle raged around him, able to perceive what was going on, but unable to react to it. He'd been a sitting duck, standing their lamely in the middle of the hangar, and the aliens had started to take advantage. He hadn't even been able to dodge or dive to the floor as a blast glanced off of his armored shoulder, and then another scored a more penetrating hit on his right hip. The pain certainly hadn't been muted by whatever strange effect had held him in its grasp.

And then Jane had run forward, firing her laser into the alien position, drawing their attention away from him. Vasily had only been able to watch as they shot her, once, twice, and then she was falling, blood splattering out on the steel plates of the floor around her.

Seeing that had somehow cut through the fog holding his mind like a sharp knife, and he'd found himself able to move. Screaming something incoherent, he'd poured rounds into the alien attackers, and hadn't stopped until his weapon stopped bucking, until the barrels spun empty, their feed of shells depleted. James had run forward under fire to

attend to Jane, while Vasily had made sure—very sure—that the aliens were no longer a threat.

“Vas?”

The Russian started; he’d been caught up in his musings, and hadn’t noticed Catalina coming up behind him. “What?”

“Doc says we need to get a gurney, or a stretcher, for Jane. We’ll need to—”

She trailed off as someone ran into the room behind them. It was Grace, her hair in unusual disarray, a pistol in her hand and black marks that might have been grease or burns along the entire left side of her coverall.

“Alphas!”

“What?” Vasily yelled. “More aliens?”

Grace’s expression told them the answer before she spoke. “They’ve breached the external venting... they’re in the ductwork!”

* * * * *

Session 14 (July 14, 2008)

Chapter 46

“Anything?”

“No... wait... no, it’s nothing.”

“Damn it, we need to know where they going!” Vasily said. “Grace say we may not get internal sensors back up before they can get into important parts of base!”

“I heard her too!” Catalina shot back, shaking the motion sensor at him. “I’m getting a lot of interference from the structure of the base. Do you think you can do better?”

“Here, let me take a look at it,” Buzz said, stepping diplomatically in between them. He took the sensor, and started making rapid adjustments to it.

Chief Hallorand and two base guards appeared at the next intersection. Hallorand had his handgun out, and he looked ready to use it. “Anything?” he asked.

Vasily started to shake his head, but Buzz interrupted him. “There,” he said, holding out the detector, so they could see the small dots moving along the edge of the screen.

“Where is that?” Vasily said, peering at it.

“Looks like the west wing,” Catalina said. “Not much there but... wait.”

Vasily came to the same conclusion at the same moment. “Medical,” he said, leading them quickly down the corridor. Hallorand and his men fell in behind. With James staying with Jane and most of the other guards protecting the scientists and researchers, that gave them six; not the best odds, but Vasily wasn’t particularly worried about that at the moment.

“You evac medical?” Vasily asked Hallorand.

“Janssen wouldn’t leave. She was working on some of the casualties from the lift collapse. I think the new Israeli doc was there as well. Harrison’s on duty there.”

Vasily grunted and tapped at his communicator, knowing it was useless. His leg still hurt, but he ignored it, picking up the pace until the others had to sprint to keep up. As he ran, he checked the action on the G36 he’d grabbed from one of the fallen guards in the hangar.

They reached the access corridor and ran toward the new connector that opened onto the west wing of the base. This part of the base was still new, the fixtures gleaming in the sedate glow of the emergency lights. The medical bay was the only part of the wing that had been finished, and so there was only one working door.

“Maybe we should—” Catalina began, but before she could finish, they heard familiar sounds from behind the door ahead of them. Gunfire—and plasma blasts.

“No time!” Vasily yelled, charging forward. The door’s automatic mechanism didn’t function, but the Russian hit the emergency release in mid-stride, and slammed his shoulder against the door to thrust it open.

The medical bay was an L-shaped chamber, with walls and floor covered in broad white tiles. To the left was a diagnostic center equipped with unusual gadgetry, while to the right was a recovery area with a long line of beds, culminating in a surgical bay that could be partitioned off with a sliding panel.

The room was a mess, and a scene of utter chaos. Most of the lighting panels were dark, with sparks shooting from wires that dangled down from the ceiling and from ruined equipment along the walls. A ventilation grate had come down from the ceiling, which explained the three cyberdiscs that were hovering in the middle of the room. One fired as Vasily stepped into the room, the blast streaking toward a crude barricade where a unit of shelving and a pair of wheeled carts had been hastily overturned to

provide cover. Doctor Yahav crouched behind the makeshift barrier, along with Harrison, who was lying on his back, firing his pistol until the moment that the plasma bolt clipped the side of his head.

“Yah!” Vasily yelled, darting to the side as he unleashed a spray of automatic fire at the alien drones. At that range he could hardly miss, but most of the bullets were deflected by their armored hulls, sending up sparks as they caromed off across the room. Two of the aliens swiveled to bring their weapons to bear, tracking his progress as he ran. They fired at the same time, but by some miracle the shots bracketed the big Russian, blasting into the wall behind him. Vasily fell to the floor, still firing, keeping the barrel of his gun trained on the aliens until the clip was empty. His momentum carried him forward almost to the end of the row of beds, and he rolled the rest of the way, a moment before one of aliens blasted the bed into a tangled wreckage.

More fire filled the room as the others followed Vasily into the room, spreading out to face the aliens once through the doorway. Catalina and Buzz both scored hits, and one of the cyberdiscs exploded, filling the room with shards and fire. That disrupted the other two for the moment, knocking them aside with concussive force, but they quickly recovered and returned fire. Catalina was struck with a glancing blow to the hip that knocked her back into the wall, off balance. She dove behind the barricade just as a second shot impacted the wall right where she’d been standing. Yahav started to help her, but she pushed him back. “Stay down!” she yelled.

Hallorand and his guards were the last into the room, and they added to the barrage of fire. The first cyberdisc tilted off its horizontal axis as 5.56mm rounds pinged off its body, then jerked as Hallorand blasted a hole in it with his .44. The alien started spinning, blasting off shots in every direction, randomly, exploding machinery and digging divots into the new wall panels.

Buzz had ducked back into the shelter of the entryway, so the other alien targeted Hallorand and his men. Its first shot blasted through the ceramic breastplate of one of the guards, and he fell onto his back, a line of smoke rising from the ruin of his chest. It shifted its aim toward Hallorand, but before it could fire, it was hit by a rapid-fire series of impacts from the side. Vasily, rising from behind the ruins of the bed, had switched to single shots, and was blasting bullet after bullet into the alien, doing little damage but throwing off its aim.

The alien started to turn toward him, but it absorbed more hits, from Hallorand and Catalina, and suddenly fell to the floor, smoke rising out of the rents in its body. “Take cover!” Hallorand yelled, dodging back to the door just before the alien erupted into a small fireball that blasted through the chamber. The other crippled cyberdisc was caught in the blast and was flung into the diagnostic center, where it too exploded.

* * * * *

Session 14 (July 14, 2008)

Chapter 47

The spray of hot water rushed over Vasily's face, trailing down his body to pool before draining away through the vents in the floor. He stood there, his hands pressed up against the cold tiles of the wall, letting the water pour into him. He closed his eyes, knowing what he'd see.

The shower was clean, antiseptic, but he could again smell the smoke that had hung in the room like a bank of thick fog. He couldn't see where he was going, and there was a loud ringing in his ears that muted the noise from the several fires that burned around the perimeter of the room.

He had come upon the body, barely recognizable, her lab coat now a blackened ruin, though not enough to hide the wound from the plasma bolt that had caught her just a few inches from the plastic badge that was affixed just below the collar. Irene Jannsen, the badge read. She'd been new to X-COM, just a few days since her arrival to bolster Stan on the base's medical team. He hadn't even had a chance to meet her.

With an aggressive shake of his head, he shut off the water and leaned out for the rack holding his towel. The movement sent a twinge of pain through his leg, a feeling that he quashed ruthlessly. He shouldn't be walking at all, he knew. It was getting weird, to see people on the brink of death up and about just a few days later.

He dried off and headed back into the outer part of the locker room. Buzz was there, shaving. He nodded to Vasily. The Russian pretended that he didn't see the other man's hand shake as he lifted the razor back up to his throat.

Vasily's hands didn't shake. But that didn't mean that the Russian was unaffected by everything that had happened. In particular, he kept thinking about the episode in the middle of the battle in the hangar, when he'd suddenly froze up, unable to do anything but watch as Jane had gotten shot up right in front of him.

When he finally got back to the barracks, he saw the former agent opening the door ahead of him. "Jane," he said, in greeting.

"Alive and walking," she said, with a smile, moving into the barracks ahead of him. She looked pale, and it was obvious that the strain of her near-death experience had left its mark on her.

Catalina came around the partition that separated the male and female parts of the barracks. "It's good to see you walking," she said. She looked up at Vasily, as he tossed his personal bag into his locker. "Are we going to take the fight to them?" she asked him.

“Don’t know. Will be told in briefing I guess.”

As if summoned by his words, the familiar alarm sound rang from the speakers in the ceiling above. “Alpha Team, report to the briefing room at once. Alpha Team, report to the briefing room at once.”

“Yeah, I heard you the first time,” Catalina said, heading back to her locker to get her jacket.

Vasily and the two women headed for the briefing room. As they entered the lounge, James and Buzz came in from the outer corridor and joined them. “What’s up?” James asked.

“Don’t know yet,” Vasily said, opening the door to the briefing room. Doctor Wagner and Grace were already there, and Agent Drake and Director Garret came in on the heels of the Alphas, moving quickly to their usual positions around the table. “Report,” Garret said.

“An alien ship just landed in the Rockies,” Wagner said. She put the detection track on the big screen as the others sat down, showing a red track that entered the atmosphere over eastern Montana, stabbing southward like a thin knife.

“Why didn’t we pick it up before?”

“We’re still working on getting our radar grid back up,” Grace said. “We hooked into the Americans’ network, but the aliens have played havoc with major installations in orbit and on the—”

Garret interrupted her with a raised hand. “Kim, where’s the ship?”

Wagner’s fingers danced over her keyboard, and the track sharpened to a point that formed a bright dot over southeastern Wyoming. “The alien ship has landed in a suburb of Cheyenne, Wyoming.”

“Urban again?” Catalina asked.

“It’s attacked a retail district,” Wagner said. “American fighters engaged the craft and were repulsed.” She pored over the data that streamed across her screen. “The hyperwave data reports... sectoids. Looks like another terror attack.”

“We’re going to have to hurry if we want to stop them,” Catalina said.

Garret activated the communicator on his console. “Ken, you got the Ranger ready to go?”

The voice that came back was overlaid with just a hint of static. “We’re still working on the repairs from the base attack,” Ken said. “I’ve got one of the strut assemblies torn down, going to need a few more hours—”

Garret didn’t let him finish. “We don’t have a few hours. Prepare to dust off in five minutes.”

“But sir...”

“Ken, can you or can’t you take off in five minutes?”

There was a momentary pause. “Ah... yes, sir. I’ll get you there. No guarantee on getting back, but yeah. I’ll have her ready.”

Garret looked up at the members of Alpha Team. “You heard the man.”

Vasily stood. “We go. Now.”

Ken was standing by the hatch of the Skyranger as the members of Alpha Team entered the hangar. Most of them were still buckling straps on their armor and checking weapons. “You sure about this?” the pilot asked.

“Not me,” James said. “I’d rather be safe than sorry.”

“A risk, or hundreds of civilian casualties?” Catalina asked.

“Well, I haven’t had a chance to run a full series of tests,” Ken said, boarding the craft ahead of them. He headed for the small hatch that led into the forward compartment.

“Doesn’t look like you will,” James said.

“We soldiers, this war,” Vasily said. “It pretty simple.”

“Okay then,” Ken said, popping the hatch.

They strapped themselves into their seats as the engines on the Skyranger began to cycle. Ken had already warmed them up, and it took only about twenty seconds before he had them at full power. The Skyranger trembled as the hatch behind them slowly lifted and latched shut.

“Hope you didn’t use up all your luck in Vegas,” Ken said over the intercom.

“Where does your mom live, Ken?” Catalina asked.

“My mom? Pasadena, why?”

“If it was there, then...”

“Right, right,” the pilot said. “Here we go. But if we don’t crash, you each owe me a coke.”

“I’ll buy you a case of cokes, Ken, if you get us there safely,” Jane said.

The engines roared, and the ship leapt forward, lifting into the air as soon as it had cleared the outer doors of the hangar.

“I always hate this part,” Buzz said, as the acceleration drove him back into his seat. The aircraft groaned as Ken pushed it to its limits. Catalina held onto the armrests of her seat and grimaced. Vasily checked to make sure his autocannon was secure in its restraint. “Simple shooting,” he said. “Not bother with tear gas, they got masks.”

They heard a rumbling noise that came from the belly of the ship, followed by a sound that resembled a garbage disposal with a fork stuck in it.

“I don’t think that’s supposed to—” Buzz began, but he was cut off as the compartment suddenly exploded with flame.

* * * * *

Session 14 (July 14, 2008)

Chapter 48

The Skyranger rocked as a burst conduit sprayed scorching flames through the cargo compartment. “Extinguisher!” Catalina yelled, while Vasily and Jane, sitting closest to the front, grabbed the portable units held in brackets near the front hatch and started spraying retardant in the general direction of the breach. For a moment it seemed a hopeless effort, but then the surge from the conduit abruptly ended, and the two of them were able to quickly douse the residual flames.

“Damn, our fire suppression system is out,” Ken’s voice came over the intercom. “Quick thinking there, Vas and Jane.”

Vasily tossed the fire extinguisher aside. “Empty, now.” He sagged against his seat, which was somewhat singed by the flames, but fortunately none of them seemed to have been seriously injured during the episode.

“Ken, how are we doing?” James asked.

“Ah... hmmm,” came the pilot’s voice. “Seem to be leaking fuel, we are.”

“Are you going to be able to get us to the target?” James asked.

“There is one thing, back is another, I imagine,” Catalina said.

“Well,” Ken said, “I’m more worried about the engines igniting the fuel, and exploding the ship in a massive fireball.”

“Oh, great,” Buzz said, closing his eyes as he leaned back in his seat.

“Uh, yeah. Let’s try to avoid that, Ken,” James said.

“Getting a feed from base. I’ll patch it through.”

Doctor Wagner’s voice replaced Ken’s on their headsets. “We have a view of the situation on the ground. The alien ship has landed atop one of the American retail outlets, some place called ‘All-Mart.’”

“What’s the news?” Catalina asked.

“It looks like they’re taking captives. Local law enforcement has cordoned off the area, but the SWAT team they sent in got all shot up. American Special Forces are moving in, but they won’t be on-site for at least fifty minutes.”

“And will be outclassed anyway,” Catalina said.

Ken’s voice came in as Wagner’s stopped. “ETA is fourteen minutes.”

“This is starting to feel familiar,” Vasily said, as he reached down to unlimber his autocannon.

The members of Alpha double-checked their weapons and armor as the Skyranger began its descent. The craft continued to wobble a bit as Ken dropped it toward the target area, but there was no catastrophic explosion, and as the pilot switched them to VTOL mode the Alphas unlatched themselves and got ready to disembark.

Vasily looked around at the others. “We all in the groove? Stay alive, keep moving, take cover.”

“Multiple fields of fire on each alien,” James added. “No charging in.”

Vasily nodded. “One more thing.”

“What, Vas?” Catalina asked.

“We see another one of them ‘Sectoid Leaders’ on the heads-up display, we take it alive if at all possible, yes?”

“Right, get a prisoner if we can,” James acknowledged. “I’ll keep you guys standing as long as I can.”

Vasily grunted as he lifted his autocannon, checking to make sure his stun rod was affixed to the side of the bulky ammunition holder slung across his back. “God, we need some better way to stun than sodding stun pole.”

The ship lurched, and the noise of the engines rose to the familiar high pitch just before landing.

“Only one prisoner, guys,” James said.

“One alive was all we want anyway,” Vasily said.

“Fine by me,” Catalina said.

“Got it,” Jane said, flipping the charge switch for her laser pistol into the active position.

The ship jostled as it touched down. The hatch opened onto a nearly deserted four-lane road, populated by deserted cars, several of which were burning. There were a few bodies in evidence, drifting in and out of view as the smoke from the fires trailed in a gathering breeze. Beyond a spacious parking lot they could see the looming form of the retail store. The alien ship, a larger and bulkier oblong than the ones they had assaulted before, had landed on top of the building, caving in part of the roof. It squatted on top of the structure like some sort of tumor. They could hear familiar sounds, the discharge of plasma weapons.

“God damn aliens have no idea of rules of road,” Vasily said. “This is clearly no parking zone.” He stepped forward as the hatch finished its descent. “Here we go!”

They started forward, but had barely gotten twenty paces away from the Skyranger when they detected movement in and around the empty cars in the parking lot. “Sectoids!” Jane yelled, taking cover behind a late-model Buick moments before the first plasma bolts started streaking through the air around them.

The rest of the team followed her example, moving into cover and returning fire. James ended up beside Catalina behind an SUV that shook as a bolt crashed into the passenger door on the opposite side of the vehicle. “It occurs to me that cars might not be the best cover, if those bolts hit a gas tank,” he said.

“Better than out there!” Catalina returned, rising up long enough to fire a shot from her laser. She cursed as she missed, the beam drawing a bright red line long the fender of a car behind the diminutive alien, then ducked back as the sectoid fired at her. Its bolt

hit the windshield and kept going through the driver's-side window, spraying both of them with shards of glass.

"You were saying?" James said.

Vasily opened fire with his autocannon, tearing apart two sectoids who'd moved into the open. But more of them appeared off to the left, forcing the Russian back into cover with a series of bolts that peppered the ground around his feet, sending up small goutts of molten asphalt. More aliens were appearing around their flanks, forming a half-circle that was closing in around them. Several appeared on the right flank, coming around a parked van into a position that gave them a clear shot at Jane.

"Jane, fall back!" Vasily warned. Catalina and James shifted to cover her as Jane rushed back, but one of the aliens, holding an odd-shaped gun with a bulbous knob at the rear, fired as she crossed the open ground between the Buick and the SUV protecting Cat and James. A small orb shot out on a slightly ballistic arc, hitting her on the left leg. The missile exploded with a deep thump, knocking Jane to the ground and enfolding her in a thick shroud of heavy, greasy smoke. The other alien, armed with a plasma pistol, lifted its weapon to fire, but dodged back into cover as Buzz shot it with his laser. The alien with the small launcher also drew back out of sight.

"Jane!" Catalina yelled, darting forward to grab her. James cursed and started after her, but paused as he saw two more sectoids appear from between two parked cars, charging straight toward the women. These didn't carry guns, but weapons that resembled small swords, except with blades that vibrated in a blur that made them almost invisible. "Look out!" he warned, firing his laser, hitting the first in the chest but failing to take it down.

Catalina saw them; she yelled at Jane, but the woman lay where she'd fallen, her eyes open, but her body stiff and unresponsive. The smoke around her had started to dissolve, but long wisps of it still trailed around her, clinging to her almost as though they were the claws of some monstrous creature. Catalina reached through them and grabbed her by the shoulders. She started pulling the stunned agent back into cover, but she'd barely gotten her three feet before she suddenly stiffened, dropping Jane as she swayed on her feet.

"Dammit, the ladies are sitting ducks!" Buzz yelled, as the aliens to the right popped back into view, and the two with vibroblades charged forward toward the helpless women.

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Chapter 49

The sectoid with the small launcher lifted its weapon to fire, but before it could shoot James blasted it with a shot that bored a brightly glowing line down the center of its helmet. The alien staggered back a few steps before crumpling to the ground. Its companion shot back, the plasma bolt hitting the SUV in the tire, exploding it and a good part of the wheel well, showering James with debris. The doctor fell hard onto his side, but kept shooting.

The nearer of the charging sectoids lifted its vibroblade as it closed the last few meters to the stunned women. It fixed on Catalina, who was still standing, but even as it started to swing it was flung backward as a dozen armor-piercing shells tore through its body. The second alien turned as Vasily stepped into view, but all it could do was die as Vasily blasted it with a sustained stream of fire that chewed it into meat.

The last alien had dropped as Buzz shot it a second time with his laser. Scanning the area for further threats, Vasily sidled closer to the others. "The hell was that?"

"Hold on, don't touch them!" James cautioned, grimacing as he dragged himself back to his feet behind the wreckage of the SUV. "Whatever they hit her with, it got Catalina when she touched Jane."

But Catalina was already starting to come out of it, blinking and almost falling before she stumbled back a step, then steadied herself with a hand against the back of the SUV. "What happened?"

"You were stunned," James said. "Looks like some sort of paralytic agent, by the look of it." The vapors had completely faded, but James was careful as he bent close to Jane. The fallen agent was still conscious, but her muscles had frozen into an awkward position, and it was clear from the strained look on her face that she was trying to fight off the effects. "Hold on," he said, reaching into his medical kit.

Vasily bent and picked up one of the alien swords. It appeared to be inert, now, and he couldn't see any mechanism that activated it. "Not seen one of these before," he said. "This not look good."

"You okay?" Buzz asked Catalina.

"Everything went black," she said. "Like... I don't know what."

A groan came from Jane as James injected her with the contents of an X-COM medikit. "What the hell?" she asked.

“Take it easy, don’t force it,” James said. “You were hit by a new alien weapon, but it looks like the effects are temporary.”

“That must be how they capture people,” Buzz suggested.

James looked up, saw that Vasily had a fresh black burn on his armor, along his side just under his left arm. “You need help, Vas?”

“Just shot of painkiller is good, anything. We still have alien ship to deal with.”

While James tended to him, Catalina and Buzz kept an eye out for more aliens. Jane sat on the blacktop, working the muscles in her legs and arms. When James had finished with his injection, Vasily said, “Jane, you with us?”

“Yes, I think so,” she said. She accepted a hand from James, who pulled her to her feet.

“Stay together,” James said. “Don’t want to be stunned when you’re alone.”

Catalina took point, scanning with her motion sensor. As they approached the front of the All-Mart, they could see through the shattered front windows that the alien ship had actually descended *into* the store, with as much of it protruding through the sagging roof as they’d seen above. Long struts descended from its body like legs, including one that dropped through an awning into a scattered display of patio furniture. There were more bodies inside, including a few people who’d apparently been killed by debris caused by the ship’s landing.

“There’s a hatch,” Buzz said, pointing to the base of the strut.

“I think there’s more of them inside,” Catalina said, holding up the sensor. “I’m picking up movement.”

“Careful with autofire,” Vasily said. “May be prisoners inside.”

Buzz worked the hatch, which split and recessed into the alien ship to reveal a steep ramp heading up.

The ascent remained close, with Vasily and James having to duck to avoid hitting the ceiling, until the ramp opened onto a small chamber. There was another hatch on the far wall, which Catalina approached, scanning first with the handheld device and then with an ear to the door.

“Two, maybe three,” she reported.

The Alphas took up position, and readied their weapons. At Vasily’s nod, Catalina worked the mechanism, and the door opened to reveal a larger, round chamber on the

far side. Alcoves lined the walls, some of which held cocooned human captives. The curve of the far wall contained alien machinery and a narrow opening that led to another room beyond. There were also sectoids, three of them, who turned as the door opened and drew their plasma pistols.

Using the doorway as cover, the Alphas unleashed a barrage of fire that tore into the aliens. One sectoid went down, lasered into a charred mess, while a second was blasted back against the console by a series of hits from Vasily's autocannon. Obviously dying, it managed to get off one shot, which caught the Russian in the shoulder and knocked him into Buzz. Both men fell to the floor. James grabbed Vasily and pulled him out of the line of fire, while Catalina and Jane fired at the last alien. One of them scored a glancing hit on the alien's arm, but it made it to one of the doors, which hissed open and then shut quickly behind it.

"Gya," Vasily said, as James helped him up. The plasma bolt hadn't penetrated his armor, leaving him just a little singed.

They made their way into the room, the women leading, checking the alcoves to make sure that no more aliens were lurking in wait. Catalina took out her knife and cut into one of the cocoons, confirming that they held live humans that had been captured by the aliens. Vasily headed to the door that the alien had used to escape, but when it opened, it revealed only an empty corridor.

"Leave them for now," Vasily said, as James joined Catalina in freeing the comatose prisoners. "We need hurry before they take off again." He looked around. "Where Buzz?" He tapped his communicator. "Buzz?"

Buzz's voice came from the narrow opening between the alien machinery. It led to a nook crowded with control banks and bulky components that occupied the space from the floor to the low ceiling. "Working on the ship's controls," he said. There was a deep thrum that seemed to come from beneath them, followed by a slight settling as the floor trembled once and then fell quiet.

"Buzz?" Vasily asked.

The hacker reappeared. "I shut down the engines for now, but the main control is elsewhere in the ship. I don't think it will take them long to override."

"All right," Vasily said. He nodded to Catalina. "We go left," he said. He went that way, while Jane led Buzz and James through the opposite doorway. "Keep the com channel open," Catalina said, as she hurried after the Russian down the corridor behind the door.

The corridor ended in another door that opened onto a long chamber dominated by the mechanisms of the alien ship's engines. "Where the hell they?" Vasily asked the air, peering into every nook and cranny as they made their way to the front of the

compartment, where another opening was visible that led into another chamber in the front of the ship. There was another exit opposite them that appeared to loop around to the entry chamber, and a shaft of light that rose from a recessed circle in the floor up to a contracted iris in the ceiling.

"This ship have an upstairs," Vasily said, pointing toward the beam of light.

James appeared in the far doorway, followed a moment later by Jane and Buzz. "Power sources," the doctor reported. "No more this way I can see."

Catalina scanned the room, moving the device first left, then right, and finally up toward the ceiling. "No more on this level," she said. "Some movement above... I think it's further back, more toward the center of the ship."

Vasily nodded. He stepped forward, into the ring of light. He wasn't quite surprised when he started to rise into the air. The iris in the ceiling above dilated as he approached, proving access to an upper level of the ship. He was ready for a fight, but the top of the lift was little more than an alcove, empty of anything except for a small doorway that led to another part of the ship. Vasily watched it until the others had made their way up, then gestured for Catalina to check it out. After a few seconds the door slid open, revealing a slightly larger room beyond. There were more instrument panels here, along with workstations that might have been for anything. They didn't linger long, just verifying that there were no aliens before moving to the larger door in the far wall.

Catalina barely had to look at her scanner. "They're in there," she said, indicating the doors.

They didn't need to talk more to prepare, taking up positions around the door. Once they were all ready, Catalina triggered the sensor that opened the door. It parted and drew open to reveal a sectoid standing there, holding a plasma pistol.

"Aza gaak!" it exclaimed, lifting the weapon to fire.

A blast of fire tore into it, and the alien crumpled. "Azza Gak yourself," Vasily said.

They didn't hesitate, moving into the large chamber beyond. It was instantly evident that the long, ovoid chamber was the control room. Panels along the wall showed scenes ranging from the exterior outside to what looked like a view of the Earth from space. Banks of control panels lined the walls, and a pair of large, bulky mechanisms rose up from the floor in the center of the room, glowing as lighted indicators flickered within translucent spheres.

There were sectoids, too, at least three of them in view, all of them armed. "Gaaak!" one yelled, while to the right, a second echoed, "AAAgak!" Both fired, but their shots missed the Alphas as they charged into the room. Their helmet displays classified the aliens as a navigator and engineer, respectively.

Vasily aimed at the navigator, but before he could pull the trigger, another alien appeared at the far side of the room. It held a pistol, but instead of taking aim it simply focused its eyes on the Russian, who staggered back as if struck. "Gya!" he yelled, shaking off the attempt to take control of his mind, succeeding where he'd failed in the hangar bay of X-COM headquarters. "That one at the back!" he yelled. "Want him alive!"

But at the moment, there didn't seem to be much they could do about the alien leader, who turned to the nearest control panel and started pushing buttons. Another alien engineer appeared behind the banks of machinery, adding its fire to the others, hitting both Vasily and Catalina with blasts that spun the Russian around and knocked the British agent off her feet. "Doc!" Catalina yelled, but James was already running toward her. Jane blasted the sectoid navigator between the eyes, burning an opening an inch across through the center of its skull. As it fell, she ran forward toward the leader, unlimbering her stun rod as she ran.

The engineers immediately shifted their fire toward her, but Vasily reacted before they could stop her. Pulling a grenade from his belt, he yelled, "Fire in the hole!" then tossed it roughly between the two alien engineers.

The explosion buffeted the Alphas, but the sectoids, caught by the full concussive force of the explosion, crumpled. Vasily ran forward to help Jane, grabbing his own stun rod, but before he could get to her another sectoid stepped out from between the banks of machinery and lunged at him with a vibroblade. The weapon bit into his armored leg and ripped through the layered armor, drawing a cry of pain as it cut deep into flesh and muscle. The Russian fell, but as the alien surged after him to finish the job he thrust the end of the rod into its face and triggered it. The alien jerked as electricity surged into it, and it fell back into the machinery, jittering there for a moment before it fell over.

Jane was nearly to the sectoid leader when the controls around it flashed, and the entire ship shuddered violently. The former CIA agent nearly lost her balance, but caught the edge of the control panel, grimacing at the wind was nearly knocked out of her by the impact. The alien looked up at her, and Jane screamed, clutching at her head.

"I thought you shut down the engines!" James yelled, as the rumbling from within the bowels of the ship continued.

"I think it may be some kind of auto-destruct!" Buzz yelled back, rushing to the nearest console. Lights were starting to flash there as well, although they couldn't make much sense of the alien indicators.

"Jane!" Vasily yelled, pulling himself to his feet through sheer will, even as blood continued to course down his savaged leg. He started forward, nearly collapsing with each step, but Jane beat him to it, lunging out blindly with her stun rod, clipping the alien on the shoulder. The alien leader staggered back, injured but not incapacitated. It

yelled, “Akkk gak! Gaaak!” It lifted its pistol, and fired a single shot even as Jane stabbed at it again.

The alien stiffened and crumpled. It missed Jane, but the bolt streaked past her and hit the console where Buzz was frantically trying to override the alien’s destruct command. The pulse of superheated plasma tore into a conduit jutting from the bottom of the console, and the entire assembly exploded. James was knocked over onto his back, but Buzz was flung into the air and landed in a burning heap.

“Buzz!” James yelled, coughing as he staggered to his feet, pushing through the acrid torrents of smoke rising from the ruined console toward his fallen companion. He could hear Vasily and Catalina yelling as well, but their voices faded into the background as the smoke parted around him and he saw Buzz lying in front of him.

“Doc,” the young man croaked. “I’m hurt, doc.”

“You’ll be fine,” James said, forcing his voice to remain level as he knelt beside Buzz, reaching for a medikit. With luck, the alien compounds would keep him alive long enough for them to get him out. At least the alien ship had stopped its rumbling; either Buzz had successfully overridden the sectoid leader’s destruct signal, or its destruction of the control console had somehow accomplished the same.

“Oh, god,” he heard Catalina say from over his shoulder. “Buzz, oh god,” He didn’t look up, injecting the contents of the medikit directly into Buzz’s heart. He’d already seen what she’d seen, what no alien wonder drug was going to cure. Both of Buzz’s legs ended in bloody messes above the knees, the wreckage of what had been there before scattered around, and most of the rest of him was a charred wreck, his uniform clinging to his burned body.

“Hang in there, Buzz,” James said, as he worked to save his friend’s life. But Buzz didn’t hear him; mercifully, he’d lost consciousness.

* * * * *

Interlude: Base Priorities (July 15-21, 2008)

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, GRACE THELON BELUCA
RE: New Research/Manufacturing Priorities

Repairs continue on HQX in the aftermath of the alien attack.

The Laser Cannon project has been completed, along with the work on the alien power supply.

We have now completed all of the work necessary for the development of new experimental aircraft. This work will be done off-site under the joint auspices of X-COM, the United States Department of Defense, and the European Joint Special Projects Agency. The project is code-named FIRESTORM and will develop a new interceptor that should help us face the larger alien craft with a chance of success.

The prisoners and new technologies that you captured on the Wyoming mission have opened up some new avenues for research. Of particular interest is the alien leader you captured. A review of the security logs from the base assault confirms that Vasily was affected by some sort of mental assault from the sectoid leader. While that leader died in the attack, we hope that an interrogation of the leader captured in the Wyoming mission will yield useful information about the alien mental abilities. That leader was also accessing some sort of communication device when it was captured.

* * *

In the aftermath of the Cheyenne mission, the members of Alpha Team spent most of their time apart, throwing themselves into their work supporting the various projects on base. A crew came down and emptied out Buzz's locker. They got word that he'd been transferred to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center for further treatment. James had passed on that Buzz had needed skin grafts for the fifty-five percent of his body that had been seriously burned in the explosion, and there was nothing even alien technology could do for his missing legs.

Jane spent her time in the labs, working with the engineers to improve the accuracy and firepower of the laser weapons. Grace's team had been working on the laser rifle ever since Vasily had returned the test prototype, and they'd been making steady process in addressing the difficult matters of weight and power density. Of particular concern for the former CIA agent was the issue of bulk and speed; the laser weapons, with their oversized firing chambers and tangled power cabling, were harder to bring to bear quickly than more conventional weapons. One morning Jane dragged the entire team down to one of the support levels of the base for a few rounds of paintball, delivering her points in a more visceral manner. It seemed to work; by the end of the week, Grace and Jane led the entire team to the weapons range for tests on upgraded prototypes.

Jane sighted down the length of the pistol, nodding as lights popped up on the inside of her VDU, silhouetting the target. The weapon flashed, and a bright red dot appeared on the chest of the targeting dummy as the laser beam superheated the armored surface.

"Good," she said. "A little lighter, and more accurate. How quickly can you upgrade all our existing pistols?"

The young engineer who'd been assigned as the project lead shook her head. "I'm

afraid that the upgrade relies on some pretty difficult electronics both inside the gun and in your helmets. We can do it, but it's not going to be easy."

"Here, try this one," Grace said. The laser rifle made the pistols look sleek and tiny by comparison, and the backpack power unit was easily twice the size, but it was far more efficient than the prototype that Vasily had tested before. Jane strapped the unit on and powered up the gun, nodding as the indicators atop the barrel quickly cycled from red to yellow to green.

She sighted and fired. This time the effect was more dramatic, as the beam lanced through the targeting dummy; when she released the trigger a second later, its upper half slid downward along the diagonal cut she'd made in its torso, clattering to the floor.

"Works for me," Jane said, with a grin.

* * *

Catalina had also worked with Grace, but in Workshop 2, where the armor team was fully engaged. A great deal of effort had gone into working on the surface of the Personal Armor to improve its effectiveness in circumstances requiring stealth. An examination of the most effective patina on the alloy, to minimize shine and allow the surface to subtly reflect the environment around it, had been productive, with Catalina's training and expertise working to identify flaws. That had been followed by hours at a time stress testing the armor for small sounds made when moving while wearing it. Some attention had gone into how well the heat signature of the person wearing it could be suppressed. Given what they had seen so far, there was no reason to doubt that future encounters might reveal creatures able to see in the infrared spectrum.

"Damn it," Grace said as she slipped, and the heavy spray gun traced a long line of slick black onto the floor of the workshop.

"Problem?" Catalina asked, from where she was overseeing another tech complete modifications to an X-COM armored helmet.

Grace put down her gun and pulled up the mask protecting her face. "It's this composite material. It doesn't want to bond to the alien alloys, and it's not spreading evenly over the armor. The suggestions you've given this week have been helpful, and I think this improved suit will help you blend into the shadows better, but I'm afraid that you're just going to have to live with being a bit less stealthy than you're used to. And I don't think that any of this is going to help with the new Powered Armor design, but maybe we're getting a bit ahead of ourselves."

"Whatever you can do, Grace," Cat said. "Every little bit helps."

* * *

The email from Cat had been annoying, but he was frankly too busy to post a reply just yet. Or ever, perhaps.

Vasily had to admit, he couldn't make head nor tail of the base blueprints. He was a soldier, not an architect. And he'd never been one to rely purely on maps anyhow; no matter how detailed a map, it didn't compare to getting the lay of the land yourself.

Unfortunately, 'the land' was a network of cramped air vents between the surface and the base. The only consolation was that at least he wouldn't be alone in there...

* * *

The Mexican frowned at the boxy device, getting the measure of it. "So what's this thing key off?"

"Micro changes in air density," Jürgen replied, adjusting the motion-sensor and handing it back to Eleazar. "How effective has it been in the field?"

"It not bad," Vasily replied to the German scientist, checking the safety on his Glock. There would be no fitting a laser powerpack in these vents. "It given us some good forward intel sometimes. Would have to talk to Catalina and Jane about it if you want details."

"Hey, man, no need to ask twice," grinned the Mexican. "There any chance of letting us have one of these toys any time soon?"

Ritter and Perez were his comrades for this one. Catalina and Jane were busy with their new weapons and armor innovations. Allen never seemed to leave the medical bay, Ama and Alyssa were busy helping with the hangar repair work, and Sveinn was on guard duty - not that he would have been able to fit inside the air vents anyway, especially not with the gigantic cannon that seemed to be his only weapon of choice. "I like to keep this handy... for close encounters," he'd said of the cannon when asked. There had been no arguing with that.

Perez had clearly warmed to the role of element leader in his time in X-COM, even insisting on giving a short speech before the three of them began the sweep. "We're all strung out of shape, but stay frosty, and alert. We can't afford to let one of those bastards in here."

"Unless they start coming out of the gotterdammen walls, we should be fine," Ritter had observed.

It was not, all in all, a pleasant job. Climbing up and crawling through the vents was awkward work, and it was too easy to run out of room unless one was careful how you moved. It was dark, and hot ("Yeah man, but its a dry heat!" Perez had cheerfully exclaimed) and the possibility of finding a stray sectoid saboteur, an alien bomb, or any

other kind of horror led the imagination to run wild in the darkness.

Sweeping the vents and making sure they were clean of alien presence wasn't his only reason for being here, mind. As he shined the flashlight around, he built up a mental map of how the tunnels linked, which parts led to what rooms, the places where fans and filters could hopefully deal with alien gas introduced into the system, where the choke-points were, the junctions, the spots that would make good sites for sensor packages and tripwire defenses, and the exploitable corners. Simply sealing the vents off from the base was not an option - too much danger of asphyxiating the place, who knew what could happen - and a door would probably not last long against the alien weaponry. So, the only real answer was to make the lives of anyone trying to gain access into the base through the vent network as miserable and difficult as possible.

It hadn't been more than fifteen minutes before Vasily heard the distant shouts of Perez, trying to check on his partner's location. "Jürgen? Jürgen?" Yes, he had thought, *that is the feeling of disorientation I wish to inspire in intruders*. It had been a good half-hour more before they completed their allotted sweeps, and another ten to find each other again. "It's the acoustics," Ritter explained sheepishly once all three men were actually facing each other. "In this tight space, no one can hear where you are screaming from."

The afternoon shift had already been replaced by the evening teams when Vasily finally emerged from the crowded air vent. The muscles in his back were on fire, and his coverall was both torn and covered in grease and dirt, but there was a smile on his face. Behind him, the curses of the engineers still working in the vents filtered out of the opening. The scientists working nearby looked up and wrinkled their noses.

"I not know much about mechanics or engineering," he said, as he tossed his demolitions bag onto the ground, "But I can say this very clear; no alien is getting through those vents that easy again."

* * *

Author's Note: Here were the skill rolls that contributed to the results above (I adjudicated all attempts using an online random number generator).

Catalina, Hide (15 ranks): roll 13 (28, complete success, but in a skill secondary to the task). Result: upgrade to Personal Armor: +2 Hide. Upgrading additional suits will require 4 engineer/weeks to complete (so 4 engineers can complete a suit mod in a week).

Jane, Craft (Mechanical) (11 ranks): roll 9 (20, moderate success). Result: laser pistols gain +1 to hit, but require 3 engineer/weeks to upgrade each weapon.

Vasily, Tactics (5 ranks): roll 20 (25, complete success). Result: improved security installed in X-COM vent system.

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Chapter 50

Catalina was at her usual place in the lounge, her feet perched high up on the table. James was putting some dishes back into the cupboard when Vasily came in and grabbed a soda from the machine. “Unless you want to do another of your tactics exercises,” the doctor said, with a look at Vasily, “I’ll go check on the medical kit production.” He started toward the door, but it opened ahead of him, and Eleazar Perez came into the room.

Hey, Alphas. How’s it hanging?”

“Hey, bro!” James replied. “What up?”

The swarthy Latino grinned. “Heard you got Grace to fix us up some of those fancy ray guns you guys been playing with.” He mimed a gun with his thumb and forefinger. “I’m looking forward to roasting some squishies, man.”

Vasily leaned back against the counter as he drained the last of his soda. “Something like that,” he said.

“For you guys, only our best leftovers,” James added.

Without looking up from her magazine, Catalina said, “It was the least we could do, but you can thank us profusely if you wish.”

“Word of advice,” Vasily said, crumpling the can before feeding it into the recycling bin. “Not so good against the snakes. But for everything else, great.”

Eleazar seemed unconcerned. “Yeah, well, I need me some new boots. So bring them snakies on.”

Vasily’s chuckle was dry. As James took his leave, Eleazar crossed over to the mini fridge and helped himself to a bottle of water. “Anyway, promised Alyssa I’d help her tack out her new stealth rig. You blew your chance, Russkie.” After taking a swig from the bottle, he headed for the door. “Later, Alphas. Vaya con dios.”

Catalina waved after him with her fingers as the door slid shut behind him. “Not upset, are you?” she asked Vasily, an eyebrow raised.

“Eh?”

“Miss Personality and the Latino?”

“Eh,” Vasily repeated, waving his hand in a vague gesture. “Not my type.”

“Here, console yourself and check this out,” she said, drawing the laser pistol hanging in its bulky harness at her hip, and sliding it across the table toward him. He picked it up, grunting as he evaluated its lighter weight and improved targeting system.

Both looked up as Chief Hallorand came into the room. “Oh, hey there. Cat, Vasily.”

“Hello,” Vasily said.

“Hey, when you see the others, could you let them know that Garret’s called a briefing in fifteen. I don’t want to spoil the surprise, but I hope you like croissants.”

“Hmm,” Catalina said, after he’d left. Vasily slid the weapon back toward her. “Guess we better go and find,” he said.

It took them a while to track down all of the members of Alpha Team, with Cat finally resorting to her iPhone to page Moshe Yahav. They were a few minutes late when they trailed into the room with the Israeli scientist in tow. Jane and James were already there.

“You’re late,” Agent Drake said.

“I hope you all have been practicing your French,” Joan Beauvais said, smiling from her seat at the end of the table.

“We go to X-COM Europe?” Vasily asked, as he took his own seat.

“Yes,” Garret said.

“Don’t worry, it’s not a permanent reassignment,” Doctor Wagner added.

“Oh, good,” Vasily said. “Because I would miss the luxury accommodation here.”

“The base is almost ready to come online,” Garret said. “The first defense personnel are already there. Scientists and engineers will follow.”

“You are going to be our liaisons and ensure that the base operations are set up properly,” Drake said.

“Think of yourselves as our envoys,” Garret said.

“Yes, that means to try to avoid blowing things up,” Joan added.

“Vas and Cat, diplomats extraordinaire,” James said.

“I make a remarkably friendly envoy,” Catalina said.

“You’ll meet our representative there, Jacques Nemot.”

Ken Yushi looked up from his tablet computer from his perch at the end of the table, opposite Joan. “Man, we’re looking at another long ride,” he said.

“Yes, but this time you can sleep through most of it, and you’re not facing a pitched battle at the other end,” Wagner said.

The pilot grinned. “Heh, you’ve never been in the Paris rush hour, Doc.”

“All right,” Garret said. “Ken, make sure that the Skyranger’s ready for the long flight. Alphas, get your gear and meet him in Hangar One. Dismissed.”

* * * * *

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Chapter 51

It was almost nine hours later when the Skyranger began its descent toward Dijon-Longvic Airbase, where X-COM’s European air contingent—two advanced interceptor craft—was stationed. The hangars at X-COM Europe weren’t completed yet, so they had to transfer to a wheeled APC for the forty minute drive to the new base. The ride started smooth as they made their way west, then culminated in an increasingly rough ride as the quality of the roads quickly deteriorated. Finally, after they began to feel the bruises start to rise on their backsides, the vehicle rolled to a stop. Vasily grunted and rose to the hatch in the rear of the APC, which dropped open to reveal a green, hilly landscape overlaid with the brilliant sunshine of a bright morning.

“France in springtime, mmm,” Catalina said, taking a deep breath as she stepped toward the open hatch.

James fumbled with his medical satchel, which had gotten stuck on a protrusion under his seat. “Where’s my foie gras?” he asked, still a bit grumpy from the lack of sleep on the flight over.

Catalina, on the other hand, managed to look refreshed. “Still in the goose?” she said brightly, letting out a slight laugh at the doctor’s scowl. Behind him, Moshe banged his head on the low ceiling of the APC, and muttered a curse in Hebrew as he gathered his gear and followed after the others.

As the Alphas filed out of the APC, they got a good look at the surrounding landscape. The low hills surrounded them and rose to a respectable height in the distance, where the scattered trees thickened into more substantial forests. They could see the battered dirt track snaking through the hills behind them, with dust raised by the APC's passage still floating in the air. Ahead of the armored vehicle, the road ended in front of a small wooden building, the ideal picture of a rustic French farm cottage. There were no power lines or phone cables that they could see, but the long outline of a propane tank was visible on the far side of the building, and the bottom of a video camera housing was just visible under the eaves that jutted out over the cottage's front porch.

A man in the familiar X-COM uniform emerged from the house to greet them. He was accompanied by a huge dog, a mastiff whose shoulder was nearly at the level of the man's armpit. The dog merely eyed them silently as they approached.

"Uh, bonjoor?" Vasily offered in greeting.

"Hey there, Alpha," the guard said.

"Je mapple Catalina, et vous?" Catalina asked.

The guard chuckled. "I'm from Kansas City, lady." He jerked a thumb back toward the house. "They're expecting you."

Vasily looked up at the old house. "I think there some kind of mix-up in the blueprints."

"Heh," the guard said. "Elevator's inside."

Inside, the cottage looked as rustic as its exterior. But instead of leading to a back bedroom, the large sliding wooden doors against the back wall of the front room revealed the elevator, its doors open and waiting for them. There was only one button inside, but before any of them could press it, the doors closed and the small chamber began its descent. The Alphas completed the twenty-second ride in silence, sharing a few wary looks as the elevator slowed and finally stopped, the doors parting to reveal a slightly shadowed corridor that extended to the left and right. There was a man waiting for them, a Gallic copy of Garret, down to the black suit.

"Bonjour," he said. "I am Jacques Nemot. Welcome to X-COM Europe."

"Hiya," Jane said.

"Merci," Catalina added.

"It is a pleasure to have the legendary Alpha Squad here on French soil," Nemot continued. "We have heard a great deal about your exploits."

"We are charmed to be here," Catalina said.

"I am certain that the day of the alien defeat is soon at hand." He gestured with a hand toward the corridor to their left. "Come, let me show you the base."

"You are more certain that we, monsieur Nemot," James said.

If the French administrator was affected by the doctor's comment, he gave no sign. "It is our hope that this facility will greatly aid us in our case," he said, pausing at a large steel door with a security keypad set into the wall next to it. Ahead, the corridor ended in an area that was obviously under construction; even before noting the warning signs, they could see the tools and heavy machinery scattered about. Nemot saw their notice and said, "As you can see, we still have a bit of final work to do." He tapped in a code on the panel. "This will be the first of our new research laboratories."

As the door slid open with a thick hiss, Nemot gestured them forward. "If you would, Doctor Allen?"

The lab was likewise unfinished, but they could see the potential in it; several banks of heavy equipment had already been installed, including both devices familiar from the X-COM facility in Nevada and some other machinery that looked new. It was spacious, easily half again the size of the largest lab at X-COM HQX. There was a diagnostic array mostly complete in the center of the room, with a half-dozen bulky sensors arranged on adjustable metal arms around a slightly raised metallic pad. A dozen large LCD screens, each a good six feet across, were set into the walls just below the ceiling, angled so that anyone in the room would have a clear view of all of them. The only thing powered in the room at the moment were the emergency lights on each end of the room, but they could almost imagine it full of people and activity.

"Impressive," James said.

"Kind of... bigger," Vasily added.

Moshe had gone over to the scanner array, and was poking around at the heavy instruments. "Very advanced," he reported, continuing his examination.

Nemot had waited in the doorway. "Hopefully, this facility will contribute a great deal of information to our knowledge base," he said. "Come, let me show you the rest."

"There is so much packed in back at home," Catalina observed, as Nemot led them back to the elevator and then down the corridor in the other direction. "We wanted to create a facility where our brightest minds could work in comfort," the Frenchman said. They passed the entrance to a barracks, which Nemot let them briefly look into. The décor was much less Spartan than back in Nevada, with wood paneling and soft red carpeting offsetting the military-style bunks that ran in orderly rows down the length of the room. There was easily enough space to sleep twenty comfortably.

“How are the defenses here?” James asked, as Nemot continued leading them on their tour. They passed several storerooms, and Nemot showed them a communications center that, like the laboratory, was currently dark and unused.

“Our proximity to the air force base is our primary defense,” Nemot replied. “In addition to the Armée d’air, the two interceptors that X-COM has given us will have to do until your new experimental craft is ready.”

“The Firestorm?” Jane asked.

Nemot nodded. “Ah, yes. A very evocative name. I hope you can press the urgency of our case, and get the second such craft, at least, assigned here on a permanent basis.”

“Is possible they not know of this place yet,” Vasily said, looking up at the ceiling. “Maybe we have new craft by the time this base really working.”

“We’ll keep our fingers crossed,” James said.

“Come, let me show you the temporary crew quarters,” Nemot said, bringing them to the end of the corridor. The open door led into a lounge slightly bigger than the one in Nevada, with a full kitchen set up along the far wall. Comfortable-looking chairs were arranged around the perimeter of the room, and there were two tables that could each seat a dozen people for dining. Two doors to their left obviously led to restrooms, while another to the right was marked, “L’office.” There were two men in guard uniforms seated at one of the tables, who looked up as the Alphas entered.

“Hullo, boys,” Catalina said to them.

“Hey, you guys are from the States, right?” one of them asked.

“Define ‘from’,” Vasily said.

The guard who had spoken grinned. “Sorry, I meant US X-COM.”

“We from there,” Vasily said, walking over to them. “What up?”

“Not many comforts, as yet,” Nemot said. There was a buzzing at his hip; he took out a small communications unit, and frowned down at it. “Excuse me, I need to take this. If you wouldn’t mind waiting here, thank you.”

The Alphas joined the guards, who seemed pleased to see new faces, and particularly the members of Alpha Team. “We’ve heard a lot about you guys,” one of the guards said.

“Did not realize we talked about,” Vasily said. James headed over to the kitchen, and started poking around the stainless-steel appliances. Here too it looked like the work

was incomplete, but there was a working range and twin ovens, a massive refrigerator, and even a gleaming espresso machine. The second guard, who came over to get a Coke from the fridge, saw him looking at it and smiled. “Damned if I know how it works,” he said.

“It’s nice to visit and check this place out,” Jane said.

“Yeah, it’s small, but we’re growing,” the first guard said.

“It’ll be as impressive as the US base soon, I’m sure,” Catalina said.

The second guard returned with his drink. “Mike, don’t keep the pretty ladies all to yourself,” he said, smiling as he reclaimed his seat. “Name’s Derek,” he said, offering a hand to Catalina.

“Is not as... boxy? As X-COM US,” Vasily said, looking around at the décor. He started to say something else, but was cut off by an odd, high-pitched whine that seemed to come through the ceiling tiles. “That normal?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t sound good,” Mike said. He started to get up, but before he or any of the others could do anything to react, a massive explosion shook the base, and then everything went black as the room collapsed onto them.

* * * * *

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Chapter 52

The darkness receded by degrees, accompanied by waves of pain. Vasily blinked, and realized that he was lying face-down, the heavy weight of debris pressing down against his legs and back. For a moment he felt a twinge of panic at being trapped here, crushed under the weight of the collapsed ceiling, but when he stirred, the material fell away and he could move.

The room was dark; the emergency lights either weren’t working or had been dislodged by the partial collapse. There was a dim glow that Vasily recognized as Catalina’s iPhone, its screen turned up to maximum brightness. Vasily could just make out the pale skin of her face in that glow.

“Mike?” A voice came, from a pile of wreckage where the table had been moments before. “Mike? Speak to me!”

“Doc?” Vasily asked, as he staggered to his feet. “Everyone okay?”

James was already crouched over Moshe, checking the scientist's pulse. As the Israeli groaned, he got up—more than a bit unsteady himself—and made his way toward the fallen guard. As he moved around the table, which had been crushed by a fallen beam, he saw Mike, with Derek, the other guard, crouched over him.

“Where is Nemot,” Catalina said, groaning as she looked around. Jane was digging through her gear, and finally located a small LED lamp, which she switched on, scanning the room with its beam. The partial collapse of the ceiling had been worst around the table; the area near the door to the outer corridor was mostly clear, with just some ceiling panels scattered around the floor with the odd metal fitting here and there. Bits of wiring and piping jutted from the ceiling, and in the kitchenette area two beams stabbed down almost to the floor, like claws.

“We under attack?” Vasily asked. “Surely base sensors pick it up...”

“I don't know,” Derek said, rising to his feet as James checked the fallen guard. “I'd better check. You all wait here.” But before he could move to the door, James shook his head. “He's gone.”

“We all go together,” Vasily said. He took his laser pistol out of its holster at his hip, checked the connector to the power unit snuggled in the small of his back, and activated it. The hum as the weapon powered seemed ominously loud. The others checked their pistols as well. Jane was the only one of them who had a heavier weapon, the more compact laser rifle that Grace's technicians had upgraded earlier. She unfolded the weapon and charged it up as they made their way to the door.

The outer corridor was as dark as the lounge had been. Dust floated in the air, sparkling in the light of Jane's lamp. The corridor seemed more or less intact, at least until they came to the elevator. The doors had bent outward, as if kicked from the other side by a giant, and they could see the rubble that choked the shaft.

“Another way up?” Vasily asked.

“There's an access ladder,” the guard said. “We can get to it through the storeroom.” He started back toward it, but Catalina held up a hand. “Where is Nemot?”

“I don't know,” the guard said. “Maybe he went into the one of the other rooms?”

They searched, quickly, but the rest of the base was deserted. “Maybe he went up topside,” the guard said. “We'd better join him before the rest of this place collapses.”

They started after him, but Catalina paused, tugging on Vasily's sleeve. “Nemot gets a call, he leaves, and now...?”

“One thing at a time,” Vasily said. “First we get out.”

The guard took them to the storeroom, which was cluttered with crates marked in French, and showed them the panel that opened onto a maintenance crawlspace. The ladder was there as well, and the shaft appeared to be clear, ascending into the darkness as far as Jane's light extended. The guard started to step forward, but Vasily cut in front of him, making his way up the shaft. The others followed behind.

The shaft ascended a good sixty feet before depositing them in a small antechamber. A hatch, dangling slightly ajar, provided access to the elevator shaft, but one look told them that the shaft had completely collapsed. Jane shone the light upward, but saw only a tangle of broken beams and rubble. The guard directed them to another hatch that he got open with some difficulty, revealing a narrow staircase leading up.

"This leads up to the back of the house," the guard said. Vasily started up, but they didn't get very far before they came to another collapse, with sheets of metal crumpled at the top of the stairs. They could just make out a faint glimmer of light through the tangle of metal, obscured by thick eddies of smoke and dust that filtered through the wreckage.

"Aw, man," Derek said, as he got a look at the wreckage over Vasily's shoulder.

"We could use our lasers, cut our way out," Jane said.

"If you can make a hole, I might squeeze through," Catalina said.

Vasily nodded. "Then we make hole." He shifted back enough to let Jane and Moshe come forward beside him on the stairs. The three of them lifted their lasers, and started carefully cutting through the metal barrier. The three beams tore through the heavy metal, and a large piece fell away, clattering loudly on the stairs. "Careful now," Vasily said. "Do not want it to collapse more."

They continued working, cutting away a large enough swath to let someone squeeze through. Vasily came forward and carefully pulled free a large piece of metal, and Catalina slipped forward, ducking low to squeeze through the gap. She wiggled forward through the opening, and quickly vanished. "Looks like the cellar of that cottage," she said. "There's a lot of debris, looks like the entire place has collapsed."

Vasily grunted as he pushed against the metal, trying to widen the opening further. "You go, Derek," he said. "Then Moshe and Jane."

The others moved into the opening, one after the other. They could hear Catalina on the far side, helping those get through.

Moshe staggered to his feet as he escaped the narrow tunnel—it was quite claustrophobic—and was helped clear by Derek. Catalina remained crouched by the

opening, encouraging the next person through. He could hear Jane grunting as she slid forward through the tight passage, and shivered.

“Is there a way out?” the scientist asked. From what he could see, the cellar was a total loss, with beams and wreckage crowding down upon them from above. The light they’d seen earlier filtered through cracks in the debris, but none of them looked large enough to accommodate a sparrow, let alone any of them.

“The stairs were over here,” the guard replied. He ducked under a low beam, and disappeared. “Hey! I can see daylight!”

Moshe glanced back and saw Catalina helping Jane. The bulky power pack of the rifle was giving her some trouble in the cramped space, so she slid out of it and pushed it forward to Catalina before crawling after. “Wait up!” he said, moving forward after the guard.

Derek was already on the stairs, grunting as he pushed at a heavy steel door, set almost horizontal like a hatchway, at the top. Moshe moved to help him, and together the two were able to get it clear, something heavy on the other side scraping as it slid away. The two men staggered forward, into daylight. The smoke was thicker here, and as Moshe looked around, his first thought was that he’d stumbled into a warzone. The cottage was a burning wreckage, and the ground for a wide radius was scorched black. The APC that had brought them had been flung aside, and now rested on its back against a nearby hill.

But he didn’t have a chance for a second thought, as a bright flash shot past him, striking Derek solidly in the back. The guard was flung forward and fell hard onto the ground. Moshe was frozen, standing there staring at the body, for what seemed like forever, but was barely a second. He started to reach for his laser, to open his mouth to shout a warning, but before he could complete either action a plasma bolt struck him in the back of the head.

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Chapter 53

“Hold on... wait!” Catalina said, but it was clear that Moshe hadn’t heard her, as he followed the guard Derek under the protruding beam at the back of the cellar. Stifling a curse, she finished pulling Jane free of the tight passage through the rubble staircase. “Help James and Vas through,” she said, then hurried after the pair.

The space under the fallen beam was a tight fit, but easy after the truly confined crawlspace she'd just navigated a few minutes ago. She got through just as the steel door at the top of the cellar steps creaked open, and Derek and Moshe emerged into the daylight above.

She headed up the steps, a slight nagging feeling of unease tickling in the back of her mind. It became a cold pit in her gut as Derek was shot down, and then, a scant heartbeat later, Moshe was hit, his head exploding like a ripe melon hit by a sledgehammer. Catalina could only watch as the headless body stood there for a moment, before collapsing into a limp heap.

Another plasma bolt struck the doorframe, exploding in a coruscating fountain of bright energy. Catalina cursed and ducked down, drawing out her laser pistol. "Attack!" she yelled. She could hear Jane and the others behind, on the far side of the fallen beam, but for the moment, she was alone.

Keeping her head low, she crept forward and peeked a look over the threshold of the doorway. She caught a glimpse of the small, familiar gray forms coming down over the hills on the far side of the dell, but her gaze was drawn to the small oblong object that was rolling to a stop just a few feet ahead, between the bodies of the dead guard and X-COM scientist.

Catalina let out a strangled sound and dropped off the stairs, pressing up against the cellar wall, her arms clenched over her head like a shield. The explosion followed an instant later, shaking the building as a surge of hot plasma slammed down through the open doorway, close enough so that she could feel the scorching heat on her arms and down the back of her neck. Bits of masonry and shards of wood glanced off her arms and onto her back, but the remnants of the building, mercifully, held up, although the tangle of ruined beams groaned loudly as they shifted from the force of the blast.

Jane popped through the tight opening under that wreckage, followed a second later by Vasily. "Doctor Yahav up there?" he yelled, pointing to the open doorway, which was wreathed now in swirling smoke.

"Up there, everyone is down and aliens all over!" Catalina returned, shaking the debris clear from her body as she stood.

"What kind of alien?" Vasily asked.

"Sectoid. I only saw a few, but they have grenades..."

"We stay here, they drop building on us," the Russian said. He made his way to the base of the stairs, checking the charge on his pistol. Behind him, Jane did the same with her rifle, a grim look on her face. "All at once?" she asked.

Vasily nodded. He glanced back at James, who was just coming through the opening under the beam, which seemed slightly smaller, now. Catalina coughed as she tried to work the dust free from her lungs.

“Ready?” Vasily asked, looking around at them. He barely waited for their nods before he yelled, “Go!” and charged up the stairs, the others close behind.

They emerged in the midst of a deadly crossfire. The wreckage of the cottage behind them barely offered cover, with most of the building’s structure either scattered around the clearing or collapsed onto itself, sagging into the cellar below. Sectoids were visible all around, on the low hills to the west, north, and east, and they fired, bright bolts of plasma streaking through the air toward the humans. “Spread out!” Vasily yelled, darting forward as plasma bolts exploded around his feet. He lifted his pistol and lasered the nearest alien, drawing a black line across its torso. The alien staggered back but was able to return fire, hitting Vasily with a blast that hit him hard on the arm, spinning him around and knocking him to the ground.

“Vas!” Catalina yelled. She started toward him, but the Russian gestured her to stay back, crawling forward to the remnants of the low stone wall that surrounded the property. She looked at the burning APC, but one glance was enough to tell her that the overturned vehicle was going nowhere ever again. She dove into a dip in the blackened ground next to the road, chased by bolts that shot up geysers of earth around the lip of the hole, all around her.

Jane ducked into the lee of the wrecked building, firing off blasts from her laser rifle. She shot an alien that was taking aim at James, and as the sectoid fell she followed him as he ran across the road, the two of them taking cover behind a mound of earth dominated by an old tree stump, dead roots sticking out in every direction around its base. The doctor nearly had his head taken off by a plasma bolt, and he returned fire, forcing the sectoid back into cover amongst the rocks along one of the adjacent hilltops.

“We’re going to get annihilated if we stay here!” he yelled, trying to make himself smaller as another bolt impacted the stump, vaporizing a good hunk of it. Jane fired, dropping her second sectoid, but there were still several more visible on that flank. With the aliens all around them, there was no place they could hide that would give them cover against all of the alien attacks.

A sectoid came around the end of the wall, but was shot in the head by Vasily before it could take aim. The Russian covered his ear with his other hand, trying to listen over the sounds of the battle. “Ken!” he yelled into his communicator. “You receiving?” He snarled as static came over the connection, then heard a faint voice that faded in and out through the distortion. “...some sort of jammi... I ...der attack! ...try to set down to the east...”

“Ken!” Vasily yelled, but the static deepened, and the pilot’s voice did not return. But the others had heard him as well. “Regroup!” Catalina yelled, jumping up from her tenuous

shelter and dashing toward Jane and James's position. Several aliens shot at her, but the bolts narrowly missed, in one case streaking by close enough to incinerate several strands of her hair.

Vasily sprang up and followed her, staying as low as he could to gain what limited protection he could get from the wall. Ahead of him a segment as long as his arm exploded, but he kept going, vanishing for a second into the swirling cloud of pulverized stone dust. James and Catalina were charging down the road, while Jane remained behind, providing covering fire. An alien fell to Vasily's right and slid down the tangled slope of the hill, while up ahead, another threw a grenade that dropped well short of the two fleeing Alphas, but still had enough power to knock both of them prone as it detonated. For a moment Vasily lost them in the shower of debris caused by the plasma explosion, then it cleared enough for him to see James helping Catalina to her feet, both of them more than a little dazed from the force of the blast.

Vasily ran after them, not looking back. Clods of earth continued to land all around him, as he ran past the crater that had been created by the alien grenade. He could hear the sound of Jane's laser behind, the noise overshadowed by the constant barrage of plasma bolts. "Jane!" he yelled over his shoulder. "We moving out!"

The road wound ahead, through the low hills that formed berms to either side of them. Vasily saw a sectoid crest one of the hills to the right, and even as he shouted a warning, another appeared to the left, while shots continued to streak after them from behind.

This is a damned shooting gallery, he thought, firing on the run, knowing he had almost no chance of hitting anything. To his surprise, the alien to the right suddenly exploded in a bright flash of light. Ahead, James and Catalina stopped and spun in surprise, weapons at the ready. That alien was no longer a threat, but before the two of them could start running again, the alien on the far side of the road fired. The plasma bolt hit James in the small of his back, and he cried out as the force of the impact knocked him roughly to the ground. Catalina caught his arm and dragged him off to the side of the road, toward a cluster of rocks at the base of the hill that offered at least some possibility of cover. She fired at the alien, but the laser beam didn't come anywhere close to it. Vasily's shot came closer, close enough to send the sectoid scurrying into cover.

Vasily ran up and helped Catalina manhandle James over the last ten feet, pulling the medic into the shelter of the rocks. The Russian crouched behind them and looked for more targets while Catalina dug into James's satchel, looking for something to treat his wound. The doctor groaned weakly, only partially conscious, but his hand closed reflexively over the pouch holding the medikit. Catalina pulled his hand free and took out the tri-pronged device. "Damned if this doesn't look worse than those blasters," she said, gently rolling the doctor onto his side. The blast had struck the power unit to his laser pistol, and she had to gingerly pull free the smoking wreckage free to inject him

with the contents of the medikit. Some of his flesh came away with the hot metal. *At least it didn't explode*, she thought, stabbing the injectors into his back.

"Where is Jane?" Vasily growled, firing at an alien coming up the road behind them. He tried to raise her on his com unit, but the tiny speakers still only fed static. He started to get up, but the alien on the far hill shot the rocks directly ahead of him. He fell back onto Catalina, blinded by dust and stinging shards of rock. "Gaaa!"

"Watch it!" Catalina yelled, trying to shelter James as she fell forward, off balance. She reached back to stabilize the Russian, who blinked, trying to clear his vision enough to see. The debris from the shattered rocks swirled around them for a moment, then dissipated. When it cleared, Vasily and Catalina could see the sectoid, which had closed to within forty meters of their position. They were close enough to see its gray eyes under its clear helmet, and definitely close enough to see it take a grenade from its belt, activate it, and raise its arm to throw.

* * * * *

Session 15 (July 21, 2008)

Chapter 54

Vasily tried to get his laser up, knowing it was too late.

But even as the sectoid began its throwing motion, a bright line flared across its body, starting in the middle of its torso and sliding down until it ended at its right hip. The alien's body came apart and it crumpled, the grenade falling to the ground next to it. Vasily and Catalina turned away, ducking to cover James before the grenade exploded in a shower of white-hot plasma. The Alphas could feel the surge of heat, followed by a clatter of burning earth that sizzled as it landed around them.

"We have to get out of here," Catalina said. "Help me with the doc."

"I'm all right," James said, fully conscious now as the alien medicines in the medikit worked their way through his body. He grimaced as he rose, but he could stand on his own.

Jane arrived, limping noticeably. "The sectoids in the immediate vicinity of the house are either dead or they've fallen back into the hills," she reported.

"Are you okay?" James asked.

"I can walk, let's get out of here," she replied.

“Ken say he landing to east,” Vasily said. “We keep moving.”

“Wait!” Catalina said. “Let me check the lay of the land, for god’s sake.”

Vasily nodded. “Then hurry.”

While the other three moved down the road, slowly due to the beating they’d taken, Catalina went on ahead. The road bent to the left, slipping around the base of a squat ridge that jutted from the landscape like a row of knuckles. The agent veered off the track toward a low point between two of those protrusions, scamping up to get a vantage over the road ahead.

It took her about a minute to reach the top, after nearly losing her footing twice on the steep, crumbling ascent. But from the crest, she got a decent view of the dirt road, which met a two-lane, paved highway that headed off to the left and right as far as she could see.

She could also see the barricade that had been set up where the dirt track met the paved road. Two large SUVs had parked across the intersection, and Catalina could see at least a half-dozen armed men in dark uniforms gathered there, keeping a close watch out.

“Oh, crap,” she said.



A noise drew her attention up, and she saw a familiar shape streak over the hills from the north, turning over the road before slowing and descending into a copse of woods to the east, on the far side of the road. Smoke trailed from the rear of the Skyranger, and lingered in the air as the vehicle disappeared from view. Looking down, Catalina saw the men below pointing and gesturing; several of them started in that direction.

Grimacing, Catalina headed back down to join the others. They hastened as they saw her approaching. "That Skyranger I hear?" Vasily asked.

"The Ranger is in trouble, and it's humans, there's a roadblock around the bend."

"Can we go around?" James asked. But before Catalina say more, they all heard the sounds of gunfire ahead.

"Come on," Vasily said, heading forward.

"I'll provide cover," Jane said, heading up to the position that Catalina had vacated. Her movements were more jerky, now, but she slung her rifle across her back and attacked the slope, all but dragging her injured leg behind her.

Vasily had already moved to the edge of the bend in the road. He slid into the brush alongside the way, staying close to the cliff and the shelter it offered. Catalina and James followed behind. "Better stay back, doc," Catalina said, gesturing to his empty hands. "Unless you're planning on throwing rocks."

James's expression bristled, but he nodded.

Vasily's route of approach gave him good cover, but the men behind the barricaded SUVs either had good eyes or detection gear, for they opened fire as soon as he came clear around the curve, peppering the rocks with bullets. The Russian fired his laser and then ducked back into cover, a moment before a 'whump' of a grenade launcher fired, and a segment of cliff face exploded out in a shower of debris. The grenadier ducked back behind his vehicle to reload, but the moment he stood again to aim a bright beam intersected his helmet, and he crumpled.

Catalina darted across the road, drawing fire. She dove behind a clump of boulders moments before they rattled with the impact of a dozen armor-piercing bullets. Vasily took advantage of the distraction to lean out and fire. His laser beam tore across the back hatch of one of the SUVs, drawing a red line down the vehicle before it found his intended target.

The black vehicle exploded as its fuel tank was hit, rising up a few feet off the ground before it slammed hard back into the roadway. The men who'd been sheltering behind it were either caught in the blast or thrown roughly back; those still moving were not quick to get up. One of the men behind the other vehicle leaned out from around the

front bumper to fire, but Jane's laser beam pierced his shoulder, cutting through his armored vest and slicing deep into the flesh beneath. He fell, screaming.

Catalina got up, biting her lip; one of the bullets had hit her in the side. But even the automatic rifles of their opponents were far less deadly than the alien blasters, and the armored fabric of her X-COM uniform had held up, spreading the impact energy of the bullet and keeping it from penetrating. She scanned for a target and glanced over at Vasily; he pointed to the remaining SUV and held up one finger. She nodded and started forward, but the man broke from cover, dashing down the road toward the woods. He didn't make it very far, as Jane's laser sliced down his back. The man staggered forward a few steps, and fell limply to the hard pavement.

Vasily stood from cover. "Either someone not been reading their X-COM training manual, or these guys really stupid," he said. He headed forward, giving the still-burning SUV a wide berth. He paused at one of the fallen men, and picked up his weapon. "M4 Spectre. Laser sight. They not messing around." He tossed the weapon to James, who caught it and held it at the ready.

"A few of them went into that forest," Catalina said.

"Then we—" Vasily began, but he stopped as a high-pitched whine sounded in their ears. "Alpha! Come in!"

"We're here, Ken, but we've got trouble!" Catalina said.

"They're jamming the signal all to hell and back, but I've got it, for now! I've landed east of your position... but be advised, sectoids are approaching your position from the north!"

"Move!" Catalina yelled, heading across the road to the woods. There was no barrier there, but the ground sloped up slightly, slowing her. James ran after her, but Vasily lingered behind, looking back to the west, where Jane was sliding down the steep slope from the ridge.

Catalina plunged into the woods. She'd gone barely fifty yards when the trees thinned out, and she could make out the shape of the Skyranger in a clearing up ahead. "Vas!" Catalina yelled, into her comlink.

The Russian held his position until Jane passed him; only then did he follow behind. One of the burned enemy agents, down but still alive, tried to draw a pistol; Vasily killed him with a quick pulse from his laser. Jane started to turn, but he yelled, "I do rearguard, not you, now get in Skyranger!"

Catalina reached the Skyranger, just as the hatch was starting to open. There was no sign of the French agents. "Ken!" she yelled. "Fire her up!" She turned to help James, who was going on sheer adrenaline now, and faltering. She heard the discharge of

plasma guns back from the direction of the road, and cursed. She took a few steps in that direction, but halted as Ken's voice came over the comlink again.

"We've got fighters coming in and I doubt they're friendly," he said. "Let's go!"

There was an explosion in the trees, and Catalina almost ran back, but then she saw Vasily, running toward her, Jane's arm across his shoulders, the Russian all but carrying her. The engines of the Skyranger fired, rising in pitch as the aircraft shuddered. Back toward the road, Catalina thought she caught sight of a small green form moving in the woods, coming closer.

"Get in!" Vasily yelled, all but throwing Jane into the ship as he reached it. Grabbing hold of the closing hatch, he pulled himself in after it, slumping onto the floor of the passenger compartment. All he could do was lie there as the Skyranger surged into the sky, almost immediately banking into a high-velocity turn that was followed by a full blast of the aft engines, driving them back into the rear bulkhead.

"Fighters," Vasily said. "How the hell they know?" He helped Jane into the nearest seat, then pulled himself to the next vacant one, grunting as he sank into it.

"They were human, humans!" Catalina exclaimed, doing the same across from him.

"Yes!" Vasily retorted. "We notice!"

"Damn the bloody French," Catalina muttered.

"Better get strapped in," Ken said over the intercom. "I'm going to try to avoid those fighters." They barely had a chance to buckle the straps of the seat harnesses before the Skyranger jerked to the side, rocking up in a steep angle that had their hearts driving down into their guts.

"Who they?" Vasily asked. "Bastards in black?"

"I didn't stop for polite con—" Catalina began, only to cut off as the ship rolled and banked again, slamming their heads roughly into the rests. "Hang on, we got a missile lock!" Ken announced, before another roll even more violent than the first.

"Geeeh," Vasily said. The Skyranger bucked, as if kicked from behind, then smoothed out.

"That seems to have done it," Ken told them. "They're not following. Everybody okay back there?"

"Okay," James muttered. "Well, depends on how you define, 'okay.'"

Vasily touched his communicator. "Just about. What Ranger status?"

“We’re good,” Ken replied. Hang on, Kim is calling from HQ. I’ll patch her through... Go ahead, Doc.”

Doctor Wagner’s voice came in clearly over the intercom. “Hope you’re all okay. Interceptors Five and Six were destroyed on the ground.”

Vasily looked up. “It was trap.”

“Any assessment so far?” James asked.

“The French ambassador to the UN is on right now, announcing that his country has signed a separate accord with the aliens.”

“We have traitors,” Catalina said.

“Accord?” James asked. “What kind of accord?”

Wagner’s voice continued; it was clear she was reading something. “French airspace and territory are now closed to all belligerent craft.’ It’s bedlam in the General Session right now.”

“History repeats itself,” Catalina said.

“Ken,” Vasily said. “Tell me got enough fuel to get somewhere.”

“We can get to Britain, refuel there,” the pilot said.

Wagner spoke again. “Come back to base, team. This... this changes a great deal.”

The members of Alpha shared a look, but none of them offered any disagreement.

* * * * *

Mission Aftermath (July 23, 2008)

"All right, we've got the feed... all right... we're sending you, live, to Gillian St. John, who is at the border crossing in Strasbourg. Gillian? Gillian?"

"I'm here, Olivia. This is... excuse me... yes, Terry, let's get back from the crowd a bit... Olivia, this is Gillian St. John of the BBC World Service, at the border crossing between France and Germany. As you can see, it's a bit chaotic right now, although it's quieter now that it was a few hours ago. Local authorities estimated that a hundred thousand people have left in the last fifteen hours, since the French announcement at the United

Nations... The Bundeswehr has set up an armored infantry battalion here around dawn... Terry, show those tanks... as you can see, they're watching, but not doing anything to interrupt the flow of refugees."

"And Gillian, are the French forces trying to stop the exodus?"

"No, no, Olivia, they don't seem to be, but they aren't letting anyone in the other way, no one is being allowed into France."

"That's consistent with what we've heard. Gillian, what about these people, leaving their home country? What are they saying?"

"Well, Olivia, I've talked to a few dozen people, and they are feeling pretty overwhelmed, obviously. One man said that the Free French are already fighting the invaders, but for the most part, it's been pretty muted on all sides. As you know, President Auguste Laval stated this morning that his goal was to, let's see, I have the copy here... 'To quickly bring France back into the community of nations, once the rest of the world learns to embrace peace, as we have...' I don't know, Olivia, but thus far, we haven't heard much else."

"Thank you, Gillian. Stay tuned to the BBC for the latest on this situation."

* * *

Catalina was returning from the communications center, trying to get the latest on the overseas situation, when she overheard an argument. Only later, after she'd recounted the exchange to the other members of Alpha, did she wonder if the door to the briefing room had been left open on purpose.

"She's a security risk, Garret, and if you can't see that, you're a fool."

"Counselor Beauvais has already rejected the actions of her home government, as have the other two X-COM staffers who are of French origin."

"That's not good enough..."

"It will have to be, Agent Drake. X-COM is under United Nations sponsorship, and is not an agency of the United States government."

"I don't know if you are just an idealist, or naive, Garret. Jane Swift isn't going to be the only one asking these questions. If you..."

"Agent Drake, tensions are high all around. I don't need you or anyone else inflaming them further by promoting some sort of pogrom within our organization."

"It will come to a head, whether or not I do anything. And *my* government isn't going to

sit around while a major country—a nuclear power, need I remind you—goes over to the aliens."

"Agent Drake, what are you—"

"Just think about what I said."

The door slammed open, and Drake stalked out. She shot Catalina a dark look as she left, but didn't say anything further.

* * *

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, GRACE THELON BELUCA
RE: New Research/Manufacturing Priorities

Well, it looks like we won't have the new labs and workshops coming on line at X-COM Europe after all. But we still have to go on.

Work on the Laser Defense research is going well. Grace is getting her crews ready to install the new system once it is ready.

The interrogation of the Sectoid Leader you captured has yielded copious amounts of information. We are still assimilating the knowledge that we have deciphered regarding the alien mental abilities. However, we have already added a great deal to our knowledge about the Sectoid race, and more importantly, the origins of the alien threat.

Grace reports that the first Laser Heavy Weapons Platform has been completed, and is ready for field use.

* * *

Shortly after getting Dr. Wagner's e-mail, the members of Alpha Team got another chime from their xPhones.

FROM: GRACE THELON BELUCA, X-COM CHIEF ENGINEER
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, KIM WAGNER
RE: Proposal

Guys, I have a proposal for you to consider before you set allocations for this week.

After the disaster in France, and the attack on our base, it's clear that we are going to have to deal with increased pressure on our HQX facility. That means self-reliance may become a necessity.

In working with some of the physical sciences research team, and Chief Hallorand, I've drawn up plans for an Elerium-based reactor for our facility, cannibalizing parts from the recently captured alien craft. This reactor would be located near the Elerium storage facility, currently located on Sub-Level 2D approximately 150 meters below HQX's main level.

You'll note that the plans I am submitting require the full commitment of the entire engineering staff, and all of the physical sciences research team until the project is complete. This is a serious commitment of our resources, I know. But the benefits are significant. I am projecting an increase in power output that will fully operate our Laser Defense systems at top capacity, as well as an increase in research and manufacturing efficiencies by twenty percent.

I have another request that I believe is essential to the success of this project. Doctor Okwelume is the most knowledgeable person we have when it comes to the alien power systems. I need him; we need his expertise. You can implement whatever security you feel is necessary, but without his help, this project will take longer, and may not be a success. I feel that if Dr. Okwelume agrees to help, and Alpha members contribute their expertise, we may be able to finish the project within a week, working 3 shifts 24/7.

This would require a steady supply of Elerium-115 to fuel the reactor. Currently our storage facility is at 58% capacity, and we're planning on adding more capacity using the damaged storage units you captured from the alien wreck in Wisconsin. I don't anticipate the reactor needing much Elerium (a little goes a VERY long way with that stuff), but keep in mind that it will also be needed for the new interceptors, and the Powered Armor (assuming you ever get around to that!). But at worst case, if we run out of fuel, we're back to our usual resources.

I appreciate your attention to this proposal. I know it is radical, but desperate times, etc. etc.

Thanks, Grace

* * * * *

Interlude: Base Operations (July 24, 2008)

The talk in the common-room was grim.

"... think maybe she right, US got plenty to worry about," Vasily commented. "France over Atlantic, China over Pacific if Doc Ok speak it right. That two nuclear powers, two big members of UN Security Council."

He huffed, irritated. "I guess aliens taking great care over choosing allies in this one. It all feel... strategic."

Jane agreed, "Vasily is right on target here. Two nuclear powers is enough of a threat without us looking for a witchhunt. It proved disastrous with the internment camps in World War II and the tribunals of the McCarthy era. We need to focus on what allies we have remaining, not who we can further alienate next. We do whatever is necessary to survive this mess. I intend on keeping my appointment with Dr. Beauvais."

"Divide and conquer, classic tactics," Catalina offered. "France capitulating is going to throw the whole of Europe into disarray. Trying to absorb refugees alone is going to strain the EU. Then there's the strike capability, China is a threat but the French have a large submarine based arsenal, some 200 missiles. According to my *research*, I think a French ICBM launched from, say, the coast of Brest could happily reach Washington DC."

The British agent shook her head. "The same sources estimate China only has about 20 ICBMs capable of targeting the US. The Chinese have been a threat for a while but France? I can't imagine the US ever considering them a true threat, but that's a factor of ten increase. This new front has to be making a few backsides twitchy." Catalina looked at the door. "If Drake is anything to go by, the US already has plans."

"Eh, people with rank usually can count," Vasily said dismissively. "Witchhunt may be bad, but this talk of 'clones'...? All we got is hope that aliens don't want to totally destroy planet."

He paused. "Better hope Pentagon feels same way too."

He paused again, longer this time. "So, ah... this 'reactor' idea? Probably pay for itself in time? They keep sending big UFOs at us, we fill stores back up."

The Russian rubbed his chin. "All count on Doc Ok, though." He looked at the British woman. "You talk to him. A bit. You see his stuff. What your opinion on this guy?"

Face creased a little in a thoughtful frown, Catalina looked up for a moment then focused back on the Russian. "He's a patriot, you know how it goes? One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. One man's dictator is another's political savior. It's more the direction that you look at someone from than the person themselves in some cases. He may have betrayed a trust, but he did it for a cause and for altruistic reasons." Catalina shook her head a little. "I don't know the man intimately, but I'd say no one could fail to see that Africa would be vulnerable here. If the French have made a treaty, how long before some power hungry African politician finds it a way to rule the continent? He's an intelligent man, he has to see that defeating the aliens takes priority now, and he'll be useful. So for me, I say let him out and use him."

"Besides, the reactor is just the first. You talk about strategy, but as far as I see there are two things we need to do." Catalina held up the forefinger on her left hand. "We need to know that if it all goes pearshaped, and someone starts throwing missiles, that we can keep on fighting. For that we need self-sufficiency and the reactor is a big part of that." She held up a second finger. "Our best chance of stopping a world war is to get the little bastards before it happens, and take the fight to them. Defense and sufficiency first, we need the reactor and the laser system badly, but after that we talk to the captive engineer and we *get* a ship that can take us to them."

Catalina looked at the two fingers and with a hard grin gestured. "Remember Agincourt, you sodding frog eaters. We still have our fingers!"

Jane nodded. "Sounds like your points are on target," she said. She started to say something else, but was interrupted by the familiar ping of her xPhone. Frowning, she took it out and looked at the device; across from her, Catalina and Vasily were doing the same.

FROM: Special Agent Inise Drake
TO: Alpha Team Members
RE: Traitors

I know that we haven't always seen eye to eye in the past.

But the fact remains, that we cannot afford to be gentle with those that would betray humanity by their actions, whatever the motivation.

I understand that Grace has asked for the release of Doctor Steven Okwelume to help in her reactor project. While I appreciate the need for the reactor, and support the project, I do not think that her request is logical. I have repeatedly asked for Dr. Okwelume to be transferred to an American facility where he can be properly interrogated. He has information that may be of vital use in the War For Humanity and we must access that information to save lives. Garret is a good leader but naive; he balks at making the tough choices. With your support, I believe that he will accept the necessity of this step.

We're fighting for survival, here. I know that each of you understand this, better than most.

"What?" An exclamation followed by a profanity in some Mediterranean language burst from Catalina. "Guantanamo Bay all over again? Not a chance. No way will I see him handed over to the US for *interrogation*. I'll bet he'd end up in the nice little research laboratory where they are conducting that behind the scenes research for the Department of Homeland Security." She read on. "Nor do I like that 'War for Humanity' comment. Does anybody else have a twitchy feeling about this?"

“We could keep 24/7 guards on Doctor Ok while he's working,” Jane said, “and have people triple check his work to be sure he's not doing anything to sabotage the reactor. If that will suffice for Agent Drake for now, perhaps we can transfer him later when this project is done. We need him if we're going to complete this project in a week's time.”

Vasily's eyes lingered on his xPhone, narrowed and thoughtful.

"It is not a war for humanity?" he asked. "Then what is it?"

* * * * *

Session 16 (August 4, 2008)

Chapter 55

The cell had been situated on a little-used sublevel of the base, originally intended for maintenance access. As they descended a narrow staircase, Jane, James, and Vasily could see where cables had been hastily rigged to provide power. They followed the cabling to a door that was likewise new, warded by two alert guards. The guards were polite but thorough, verifying the IDs of the Alphas before letting them through. Beyond was a foyer where another guard kept watch, and to their surprise, they found Eleazar Perez there as well.

“What are you doing here?” James blurted.

“Thought I'd see the traitor for myself,” the Beta replied, his lips curling into a sneer. “What we should do, is take him up to 20,000 feet and push him out the door.”

“We don't have the luxury of that at the moment, Eleazar,” Jane said.

“Well, you want to talk to him go right ahead, but I'm outta here,” Eleazar said. With a nod to the guard, who opened the door for him, the Beta left.

The Alphas shared a look. “Ready for this?” James asked. “Don't let the bastard off easy.”

“Keep your distance, please,” the guard said, as they headed toward the interior door. “You can talk through the door, just don't mess with it.”

They continued into a small chamber dominated by the cell holding the African scientist. The cell had been constructed out of armored glass, giving him no privacy. A cot, chair, sink, and a simple toilet were the only fixtures. A camera observed from high in a corner.

Doctor Okwelume rose slowly from his bunk, and came to the armored-glass door of his cell. He looked like he had aged a decade in just a few days. "I understand that you want my assistance on the reactor project," he said.

"That is what Beluca want," Vasily said.

"And what is it that you want, Vasily?"

The Russian said nothing, his jaw tightening. "Doctor, what can you tell us?" James asked.

"I have shared everything that I know with your interrogators," Okwelume said. "I am happy to dedicate my knowledge to X-COM; I bear no animus for this body, nor any love for the aliens."

"I'm glad to hear that," James said with a nod, "as the aliens appear to be trying to kill us all."

"If you allow me to work on the project, I will submit to whatever security protocols you see fit to impose."

"When we can get the okay, we'd like to begin," Jane said.

"What did mister Perez want?" James asked.

Okwelume shrugged. "He wanted to know the motives for my actions. Or so he said; he did not seem pleased when I told him again what I told agent De Farrago, and the men who interrogated me."

"Tell us again what happened," James said. "I'd like to hear it from you."

Okwelume sighed. "Very well. I worked with an outside agent. I believe he was Chinese, although I may be mistaken. He worked out the details of my data sharing... ah, my treason, that is."

"Why did you work with the agent?" James asked.

"Two reasons. First, I believed... believe, that is, that the knowledge being researched here must be shared with all nations. Second, I arranged for investment to be channeled into the area of the Niger delta where I grew up. There is amazing poverty there."

The African drew back and sat on the chair before continuing. "The delivery system was trivial to arrange. My contact provided the flash drives, and the recovery process. They kept their word. The hospitals, schools, refinery, and solar power station are already being built."

“Well, it was a win-win then,” James said, a bit of an edge to his words.

“Who got the data?” Jane asked.

“The Israelis, Chinese, and Indians received the data directly; there may have been others. From what I understand, much of it is on the Internet now.”

Vasily looked down at the floor, and shook his head.

“I cannot apologize for what I did, but I will make it up to you, if you wish me to work on the reactor project. If you do not trust me enough, I understand.”

“So what we need from you is simple, and you seem to have agreed to it already, to work on the reactor,” Jane said.

“I will do what I can,” Okwelume said.

“We are concerned you would just repeat the exercise with the reactor project,” James pointed out. “And that would let the aliens know exactly what to expect.”

“And is not that simple,” Vasily added. “Americans want to take you into custody.”

“I understand.”

“What?” Vasily pressed. “What do you understand.”

“They want to... what is the expression... put the water on the board?”

The Alphas shared a look. “I understand that they wish to subject me to their usual methods,” Okwelume continued. “I suppose that if I were in your situation, I would do the same.”

“They are vague, but the vagueness speaks volumes,” Jane said.

“And what do you think about that?” Vasily asked. “You okay with that?”

Okwelume laughed, but it was a bitter sound. “You think I am eager to undergo torture? I am not. But I knew there would be consequences when I took my actions.”

“Can you promise not to provide any more information outside of X-COM without authorization?” James asked.

“I will cooperate with whatever restrictions you deem necessary. I don’t imagine they’d let me access a computer with outside contact in any case.”

“That isn’t what I asked you, Doctor.”

“I am sorry. I cannot make that promise, Doctor Allen. I must act as my conscience directs.”

“Enjoy your trip, then,” James said, jerking back and turning away from the cell.

“Let me put it to you like this,” Vasily said. “France already surrendered to aliens. How long you think it be before some African warlord sees aliens as path to control of country, even whole continent?”

“Not long at all, I imagine. I am fully aware of the historical problems of my people, Vasily. I suspect some Africans would welcome an alien invasion, as long as they brought food and protection. But that does not obviate my concerns. There are things about this organization that are noble. But surely you can see that there are also things about it that are... troubling.”

“All right,” Vasily said, letting out a breath. “We will let you know.”

“I will await your decision, either way,” Okwelume said. He laid back on his cot, and took out a dogeared copy of a book.

“He’s not a team player, guys,” James said, once they were back out in the corridor. “We gotta let him go.”

“We not talk about that here,” Vasily said. They didn’t talk more as they made their way back up toward the main level of the base.

In her office, Agent Drake watched them go on her monitor. On the right side of her screen, a second window showed Okwelume’s cell, where the doctor lay reading. After a moment, the FBI agent frowned, and reached for her phone.

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Session 16 (August 4, 2008)

Chapter 56

Author’s note: As I noted in the Introduction, I dropped or modified a few characters whose players only appeared for a few sessions of the campaign. “Moshe Yahav” was one of these (his player only showed up for two games); the new character who arrives in this post was another. Initially the new character who arrives in this session was a player character, but I’ve replaced her with a character that I ran in my own playthrough

of the X-COM campaign, in Mulu's Sunday morning run. I've adjusted the PC dialogue to accommodate the changes, and made a few tweaks to the plot as well.

When Catalina emerged from the Royal Air Force BAe 125 and stepped down onto the tarmac of Creech Air Force Base, she was surprised to find Inise Drake and another woman waiting for her.

She didn't get along with her American counterpart in the best of times, but having just spend the last four days dealing with the aftermath of the France fiasco—including a brief sixteen-hour foray into Bayeaux to meet with representatives of the nascent French resistance—she was not at all pleased to see Drake at all.

“Long trip?” Drake asked.

Catalina bit back a biting comment; if Drake was going to play nice, damned if she'd give her the satisfaction of losing *her* cool. “Oh, nothing too bad,” she said. “Is there something I can do for you, agent?”

Drake's expression suggested that perhaps Catalina had laid on the sweet a bit *too* thick. But after a moment, she shook her head and said, “This is Cecilia Sharp of the FBI, attached to the Special Extraterrestrial Unit of the Department of Homeland Security. She's going to be a new addition to Alpha. I have to be back in Washington by six o'clock, and thought you could take her on to HQX, get her set up.”

Catalina raised an eyebrow, and gave the other woman a more thorough look. She looked young, *was* young, but there was a certain hardness in her eyes that suggested that she'd experienced more than her age would suggest. Like Drake, she looked as though she didn't have a spare kilo of unnecessary body fat on her lithe frame. Unlike the agent she'd let her black hair grow long, but it was tied back in a tight bun, without a single stray lock dangling free.

“Want to make sure you Yanks are a majority on Alpha, eh, agent?” Catalina asked. “Have to keep we foreigners from gumming up the works.”

“You said it, not me,” Drake said. “I have to go. Agent Sharp, I trust that you can find your own way from here.”

“Yes, Agent,” the woman said. She picked up a small backpack lying by her feet, then had to hurry to keep up with Catalina, who was already heading for the big all-terrain vehicle waiting beside the hangar.

The younger woman didn't try to make small talk, which was fine from Catalina's perspective. The ride was as uncomfortable as it had been the first time, but despite herself, Catalina found herself drifting, and finally slipped away into sleep.

She woke suddenly, with a stabbing twinge in her back as a reminder of her nap. The vehicle had come to a stop. She felt anything but refreshed, but as she looked up to see Sharp looking at her, she stopped herself from knuckling her back and grimacing. "Come on," she said, stepping out into the warmth of a Nevada evening. The sun had set during the ride, but the evening breeze hadn't yet started up, and the ground continued to radiate the heat it had soaked up during the long day.

The topside facility looked deserted, as always. They entered the ramshackle building, and showed their IDs to the guard on duty there. Catalina led the way to the lift. "Here we go," she said, triggering the control that started the platform's rapid descent.

The simple statement seemed to have eased the tension between the two of them a fraction. "I'm not entirely sure what I'm going to be doing here," Cecilia said.

"Fight aliens, save the planet, stay alive," Catalina said. "And make coffee," she added, with a slight twitch of a smile.

Cecilia looked over at her, and her own mouth twitched. "Milk and sugar?"

The lift groaned to a stop, and Catalina lifted the mesh barrier. "Just don't offer it to the Mexican, he'll want it delivered in bed." She turned as Hallorand walked up to them, and offered a lazy salute. "Hey, chief. Miss me?"

Cecilia's salute was crisper, and she came to attention when she gave it, leading Catalina to wonder if she was former military. "Special Agent Sharp reporting, sir," she said.

"At ease, agent," the chief said, offering her his hand. After a moment, she took it. "Good to have you on board. I was just heading to the hangar to meet with the engineering team working on the upgrades for our new aircraft. If we ever get the damned thing built."

"The Firestorm?" Catalina asked. "I was starting to wonder if the thing really existed."

"Well, once it's done, it may give us a fighting chance in the skies against those alien bastards. Anyway, I'm late. Catalina. Agent Sharp."

"Come on, let's show you the facilities," Catalina said, taking her down the corridor toward the lounge.

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Session 16 (August 4, 2008)

Chapter 57

Catalina was feeling more nearly human again as she sat with her teammates at a small table in the base kitchen. Her back still twinged annoyingly, but at least she didn't feel like she was going to fall on her face at any moment. "So, what do you think of Drake's new spy?"

"She seemed nice enough," Jane said.

"You have idea already?" Vasily grunted.

"Not sure, but damned if I'm not going to find out. Her personnel files are encrypted, of course, but we'll see about that. Wish we still had Buzz here."

"We're supposed to have a drill tomorrow," James said. He looked annoyed at being taken away from his work in the lab. "Team-building exercise or somesuch."

"Lovely," Catalina said. "Oh, how I missed this place." She shot a quick glance around before continuing. "I heard you spoke to Okwelume."

Vasily nodded. James's expression darkened. "I say let him go," the doctor said. "He won't make any commitments not to pull the same stunt again."

"Well, what did you offer him?"

"Offer him?" Vasily asked. "What could we offer him?"

"How about a little of what he wants, help for Africa?" Catalina returned.

"I not even sure Garret can promise that," Vasily said.

"We can't honestly offer or promise him anything," Jane pointed out, "and he wasn't promising anything either."

"So did anyone talk to Garret about the possibility of an offer?" Catalina asked. "I mean, what *did* you say to him?"

The other three Alphas shared a look, and Catalina let out an exasperated breath. "Do you know what would bring Okwelume over? Any idea at all?"

Vasily's look matched her own. "No."

"We offered him not to suffer the tender attentions of the CIA," James said.

“Would you like to try talking to him?” Jane said. “You seemed to get on better with him, and you were the one to find him out.”

“He prepared to work on reactor even if we do give him to CIA after,” Vasily said.

“Wonderful,” Catalina replied. “Do what we ask, and we might be nice to you and not turn you over to the nasty people at Homeland Security. That worked.”

“That’s what he said,” James said. “But we should expect him to do whatever he thinks best, including acting as a spy. I don’t think it’s worth it.”

“No promises he won’t sell out to the more unsavory nations,” Catalina said.

“Right,” James said.

“And you offered no reason for loyalty other than not letting him get tortured?”

“What you expect?” Vasily said. “We got nothing else to offer. Nothing. We grunts with zero political pull.”

“We need a starting point, th—” She was cut off as their xPhones all buzzed at the same time, followed a second later by the base intercom. “Alpha Team,” Garret’s voice said, “report to Briefing Room 1.”

“Shit,” Catalina said.

They met Cecilia Sharp on the way; the new agent fell in with them, questions obvious on her face, although she didn’t ask anything. She was carrying a bulky bundle; she’d spent the morning being fitted for Personal Armor in one of Grace’s workshops.

Grace and Stan arrived just ahead of the Alphas; Doctor Wagner and Liaison Garret were already in the briefing room. There was a live track upon the big screen.

“We’re tracking another bogie coming down over northern Canada,” Wagner said, while the newcomers found their seats around the table. “Too far for an intercept, at its original speed, but while we were monitoring, it looked like the alien had... engine trouble.”

A lot of eyebrows went up around the table. “That... new,” Vasily said.

“They went down over Alberta, an area only lightly populated. Hyperwave indicates floaters.”

“Hopefully not too difficult a mission,” Stan said, with a quick glance at Cecilia.

“Great, my favorite aliens,” James said.

Vasily nodded. “We can take floaters.”

“Lasers have a chance,” Catalina said.

“The weather is good, for once,” Wagner went on. “No big snowstorms yet.”

“At least we shouldn’t freeze our butts off,” James noted.

Garret turned to Cecilia. “I’m sorry we don’t have time for a more formal orientation,” he told the agent. “But we learn on the job around here. Alphas, get the agent here up to speed ASAP. Ken’s prepping the Ranger. You dust off in ten.”

As the Alphas stood, Wagner told them, “Capture the ship intact, if possible. Our new Elerium storage area is ready, we’d like to fill it up.”

“We’ll talk about... the other matter, when you return,” Garret said.

Grace came out with them, as the team headed toward the barracks to gear up. “Doctor Sandesh has the second HWP in the hangar bay,” the engineer said. “This one should perform somewhat better than the last.” She paused outside the entrance to the barracks. “Teach them a lesson for France, Alpha,” she said, then hurried on her way.

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Session 16 (August 4, 2008)

Chapter 58

The Skyranger bucked and jolted its way across the Rockies into Canadian airspace. In the rear compartment, the members of Alpha waited, feeling the familiar tension of anticipation as the roar of the engines changed slightly in pitch, and the craft began its descent.

Across from Vasily, Cecilia sat in her jumpseat, checking her newly-issued laser pistol. She frowned at the weapon, as if displeased with it. She also had a more traditional Glock strapped to her left hip, and an M4 was secured in the brace next to her seat. She looked up at Vasily, saw his interest, and raised an eyebrow.

“This going to be like nothing you seen so far I guess,” he said.

“I don’t know, I’ve seen a lot,” she replied, grimacing as a sudden jolt banged her head against the side of the seat. “I’m told you were special forces.”

“Ya. Still. Just... follow our lead. You got question, ask.”

Cecilia nodded. Vasily went on, “Lot of stuff we do not just about killing aliens. It about stealing their stuff. Guns, ships. Alien fuel something we not able to create in lab, they say. So we take it from them.”

Ken’s voice came over the intercom. “Interceptor three reports that bogie has not changed position. Looks like it’s just waiting for us. ETA, six minutes.”

“Could we have a trap here?” Catalina asked. The members of Alpha shared a look, but no one said anything. It didn’t matter, since they were going in either way.

“Everyone be sharp,” Vasily replied.

The Skyranger continued its rapid descent. “Getting some recon info,” Ken reported. “Looks like a cow pasture. Wait... yeah, we’re picking up floater activity. They’re out and about, so be alert. Going to put us down a short ways away. Lock and load, down in two minutes.”

The Skyranger banked, and Cecilia, who’d started to unbuckle, was thrown roughly back into her seat. “You get used to it after a while,” Jane said. “Might want to pop on that helmet, initialize the VDU—visual display unit. It’s lined to help protect you from alien mind attacks, and the VDU will help distinguish the different types of aliens.”

“Mind attacks. Wonderful,” Cecilia said, but she put the helmet on, and fiddled with the display controls along the chin bar.

“We try to stay together, getting interlocking fields of fire on one alien at a time,” James said, as he slid his own helmet on. “We don’t want to engage multiple aliens at once if we can help it.”

“Floaters,” Vasily added, “they things made of creature parts and alien surgery. They float. Aim for chest.”

“I read the briefing materials,” Cecilia said.

“Just remember, a briefing’s different from meeting a live alien,” James said.

“Sometimes we try to take ones alive,” Vasily said. “If you hear, ‘hold fire,’ we move in with stun prods.” The Russian unclipped his autocannon and loaded a string of explosive-tipped rounds. He shifted his weight easily as the Skyranger completed a turn and dropped heavily, its engines switching to vertical flight mode. The others prepared as well. Cecilia swallowed, but her fingers were steady as she worked the action on her carbine.

“So we’re taking prisoners today?” she asked.

“Depend,” Vasily said. “We see interesting alien, we take it. We seen floaters before, though, have some at HQ already. So only if it particularly interesting floater.”

“Here,” Jane said, offering Cecilia her stun rod. “I’m better at long range, anyway. Just hit the actuator and whack them with it. There’s a clip on the back of your armor that can hold it until you need it.”

Cecilia took it. “Ah, thanks,” she said.

The Skyranger abruptly jolted as it landed, and the rear hatch dropped open. They were greeted by a chill breeze, a stale landscape in white and brown, and the sounds of weapons fire to the south. Vasily was the first out, and he paused to flick the distance-view on his VDU, scanning the area.

“They killing cows. Where is everyone? VDU identify two alien medics.”

The rest of the Alphas filed out of the aircraft, and they spread out, looking to the south. The meadow was fringed by gentle hills to the north and east, with a scattered woodlands off to the west. The land rose in gentle ripples ahead, leaving shallow dells that were thick with dead brush and banks of snow. They could see the bulky shape of the alien ship to the south in the distance, a faint wisp of gray smoke rising from one side.

Chatter quickly filled their main communications channel. “I see at least three,” Catalina said, looking left.

“Six to eight to the right,” James reported a moment later.

“Make that five,” Catalina said.

“No freaking cover,” Vasily said. He turned back as Jane opened the cargo compartment slung under the Skyranger, and the HWP rolled out. This version looked bulkier, the laser assembly adding wide bulges to the turret, but the entire thing was still less than half the size of even the tiny ZAZ-965s that Vasily remembered from the streets of Leningrad in his youth.

Catalina had her motion sensor out, and was scanning. “Let’s make that rather a lot,” she said. “South, southwest, southeast, looks like several groups, moving this way.”

Vasily saw that most of the ripples in the landscape moved west-east, offering at least some modicum of shelter despite the fact that the rises barely came up to his waist. It was better than where they were, however, where only the Skyranger offered shelter—and a big target. “Move to east,” Vasily said. “Go!”

They headed in that direction, letting the HWP roll ahead of them. They came upon the carcass of a cow, its body blasted by plasma burns, its head hanging from its neck by a few strands of blasted flesh. They could all see Catalina's floaters now, partially hidden behind the next rise, moving slowly in their direction. The scattered gunfire continued to the southwest, but the aliens there didn't appear to be shooting at them.

Vasily glanced at his teammates, who'd all dropped into low crouches or fallen prone. He drew out a gas grenade, and hurled it toward the largest cluster of aliens. The dark missile arced across the landscape, coming down right between three of the aliens. It exploded with a thump, enveloping all three in a murky cloud of green mist. A few meters away, a second grenade thrown by Jane caught another floater in the acrid gas, stunning it.

"Let them have it!" James yelled, as both the Alphas and the aliens opened fire.

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Session 16 (August 4, 2008)

Chapter 59

"That was a new type," Catalina said, looking down at the corpse. "Might have been a good idea to capture it."

Vasily looked at the floater, and the mess that had fallen from the blackened cuts in its body. His VDU still identified it as "floater medic." "I not shedding any tears," he said.

The Alphas made their way warily across the charnel ground that had been a quiet cow pasture just a few hours before. Floater bodies, and pieces of them—Vasily's explosive rounds had been very effective—were scattered about. The HWP rolled along behind them, its turret scanning back and forth for targets.

The fight had been quick and decisive. Once the firefight had started, the different groups of floaters had been quick to converge on them. But the gas grenades had disrupted the first group, who'd barely gotten off a handful of wild shots before they were cut down. The other groups had started shooting from further away, but again Alpha had the advantage, able to use the landscape for cover in a way that the bulky floaters could not. Doctor Sandesh's promises about the improved targeting systems in the HWP had also proven true; the little tank had cut down several aliens with precise pulses from its laser.

Now the alien ship loomed over them. This one was even bigger than the cruiser they had encountered at the All-Mart, with large bulges jutting out from its ovoid form.

"Maybe there's more inside," Cecilia said.

"Usually is," Catalina said. They found the entry, sitting at a slight angle; the entire ship had settled slightly off-kilter. Up close, they could see the damage that had crippled it; an entire engine nacelle had fractured, the alien hull trailing tubes and wires where the damage had occurred. There wasn't enough of an opening to force entry, and in any case, they were wary of the harsh fumes that rose from the nasty wound.

"We go in, we go in hard," Vasily said. "Tear gas, the works. We set?"

Catalina was still working the door controls. "Seems jammed... ah, there," she said, as the door split and retracted into the hull of the ship. The familiar ramp led up into the alien ship, but she only had time to catch a glimpse of the floater hovering near the top before it blasted her with a plasma bolt in the chest. The impact knocked her off her feet, and she landed hard on her back. "Damn!" she yelled, as Cecilia and Jane quickly dragged her clear. She grimaced, but looked intact; her armor had absorbed most of the force of the shot. "They're prepared," she managed, as the two pulled her to her feet, out of the line of fire from the hatchway.

"You think?" James asked, breaking out a medikit as he rushed over to her.

Vasily tossed a gas grenade up the ramp, and followed it with a stream of explosive shells that flashed in the mist like firecrackers. Another plasma bolt came down from above but went wide, striking the threshold of the doorway as Vasily ducked back into cover. Cecilia came up to the other side, and at Vasily's nod leaned around the edge of the open doorway, her M4 in firing position at her shoulder.

The gas was clearing, and she could see the limp form of the floater lying at the top of the ramp. "Looks clear," she said. "Going in?"

Vasily looked over at Catalina. "I'm fine," she said. "Thanks, doc," she said, letting out a deep breath as the contents of the medikit worked their way through her body.

"All right," Vasily said. "Let tank go up first." Cecilia stepped aside for the HWP, which rolled up the ramp, its treads trampling the remnants of the floater as it made its way into the antechamber at the top. Behind it, Cecilia and then Vasily moved warily into the room, followed by the others.

The ship seemed to be laid out like a long cylinder laid upon its side. From the chamber, they could see a long passage that led deeper into the ship ahead. It was marked by regular niches that were occupied by bulging sacks of organic matter that pulsed and twitched with movement inside.

"The hell?" Vasily asked.

"What's this stuff?" Catalina said, warily approaching the nearest niche. "Cows?"

“Watch corners,” Vasily warned. As they moved further into the passage, they could see that some of the niches were larger than the others, and a faint glow shone from one of those. “That is lift,” he said, pointing ahead.

From further down the corridor, beyond the lift, he caught a hint of movement. He raised his weapon and started to shout a warning, but a small orb shot out of the darkness, striking him in the gut. There was a slight concussive pulse followed by a puff of vapors that closed in around him like a fist, and he stiffened, his muscles freezing. The HWP fired, but it wasn't clear if it had scored a hit.

“Vas?” Catalina asked. They all turned to see the Russian topple over. James rushed over to him. “Bah,” he said, recognizing the effects of the alien stun weapon. “Cat, any incoming? How much time do I have?” He took out a stimulant and stabbed the ampule into Vasily's neck, but they hadn't yet developed an effective antidote to the alien small launcher; it just took a few minutes for the effects to wear off. “Just hold on a sec, big guy,” he said, as Vasily's body clenched with his efforts to fight off the alien weapon.

The agent moved forward, the HWP rolling along behind, Jane and Cecilia not far behind. They passed the lift and another large annex that held some bizarre-looking alien equipment, a cross between a construction yard and an operating room. Thankfully, there were no bodies there. Neither held the alien that had attacked Vasily, so they kept forward to the end of the passage, where it opened onto another larger area. Catalina sidled up to the edge of the wall, and after glancing back at the other two women to confirm they were ready, leaned around the corner, scanning the room with her laser at the ready.

The chamber was occupied by pillars that rose organically from the floor to the ceiling, each supporting banks of alien machinery that seemed to be built into their structure. The area was dark, and Jane turned on her LED, the bright beam stabbing into the shadowy corners of the room.

“Movement! Behind that panel!” Cecilia yelled. Fire erupted from her rifle as she poured rounds in that direction, the bullets flickering as they crashed into alien machinery. Jane's light swung around, and caught a dark form as it ducked behind one of the pillars. There was a soft cough, followed by an explosion of vapors as one of the shock bombs hit the wall between Jane and Catalina. “Fall back!” the British agent warned, darting back into the passageway. Jane followed behind her, moving a bit stiffly from the effects of the near-miss.

“Help!” James yelled. Catalina looked back to see the first of a half-dozen floaters emerge from the lift. They were already shooting at James, who dove into the nearest niche, and before she could react one of them turned toward her, lifting its plasma rifle, the faintly glowing barrel pointed, it seemed to her, right between her eyes.

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Chapter 60

There was a bright flash, and Catalina flinched, thinking that her number had finally come up. But then the floater crumpled, half of its face shearing off and sliding to the floor in a mess of blood and gore. The HWP rolled past her, already engaging a second target, streaming a beam of laser light that clipped an alien in the side before drawing a bright line across the back of the alcove.

Catalina darted into the nearest niche just ahead of a plasma bolt. She fired her laser, but in the wild confusion of the close-quarters battle, it was hard to see if she was hitting anything. Sparks and dust erupted from the walls, and the glow from the lift cast everything in a hazy, unreal light. There was an explosion somewhere nearby, between her and the aliens, and something hot and sticky oozed over her as the organic sac within the niche ruptured. Fighting the urge to be sick, she clung to her perch along the lip of the niche. There was a yell behind her, and she looked back to see Jane crouched over Cecilia, who'd gone down, stunned or worse. Jane was firing back into the room they'd just left.

And then the familiar sound of Vasily's autocannon started up, and the already chaotic scene was punctuated by the violence of dozens of microexplosions. Most struck the walls and ceiling, but Catalina caught a glimpse of a cloaked form coming apart. She saw another floater stir within the glow of the lift, something in its hand. She aimed and fired without thinking, and the alien fell back. A moment later another explosion shook the entire area, but when the ringing in her ears stopped, she realized that the battle was over.

She looked back and saw that Jane had pulled Cecilia into cover in another niche. "She's just stunned," she said. "I got the alien, check on Vas and James!"

Catalina nodded, and rose. She hurried forward, belatedly remembering to warn the men that she was coming. She passed the HWP, which continued scanning for threats. It had taken at least one hit, with black streaks from plasma burns scarring one side of its chassis. She made her way through the swirling smoke to find Vasily sitting sagged up against the wall, his autocannon propped up in his lap. James had been marked with plasma burns along his left hip, but other than a slight limp he seemed to be okay.

"Gods, Cat, what happened to you?" he asked. "Are the others okay?"

Catalina tried not to think about the goup that was smeared all down her back and side, and caked in her hair under her helmet. "Yeah, Cecilia got stunned, but I think she'll be all right. Are you okay to move, Vasily?"

The Russian grimaced, but he was able to get to his feet without help. "Nice try," he muttered, in the general direction of the aliens.

"Some warning there, Cat," James said, as the three of them made their way to Jane and Cecilia. The tank followed behind.

"We should have left someone to watch the lift," she acknowledged. They emerged from the smoke to see Cecilia propped up against the wall of the niche. "Where is Jane?" James asked. "We need to stay together."

"Back to regroup?" Catalina asked, while Vasily tried to raise Jane on his communicator.

"No, let's just let Jane wander around on her own," James said. "I'm sure it'll be fun."

"I think she went on ahead," Cecilia said. "I could go and try to find her."

"I'm right here," Jane said, reappearing at the end of the passage. "I was checking to make sure the alien medic was dead, and I saw a panel that looked like it had been blasted open when the ship crashed. It looks like the Elerium power supplies are in the chamber below. There's a lot of damage."

"How about staying with us in the first place!" James exclaimed, clearly losing his temper. Jane's expression darkened, but Vasily stepped between them. "Hey! Yelling can wait until after mission. We sweep this level, then move up, yes?"

They moved forward to the hatch Jane had located, which provided access to the ship's engine room. The damage was considerable, and they found a floater lying dead in one corner of the room. Two of the three Elerium cells were dark and powerless. The third was glowing with the stored material, but hissing flares of blue mist were rising from it, and they were careful to give it a wide berth.

"Maybe cleanup crew can get it safely," Vasily suggested. Cecilia and Jane found a control panel and were trying to access the ship's systems, but before they could accomplish anything there was a faint rumbling tremor that shook the ship.

"Gah, what are you doing?" Vasily asked.

"It wasn't us," Cecilia said. "We're locked out here; it looks like the controls have been routed from somewhere else in the ship."

"Damn, they taking off!" Vasily said. "We need to find control room!"

They retraced their steps, moving back to the entry level and the lift. The bodies were as they'd left them. The lift area had been heavily damaged in the firefight, but the lift itself still worked, catching them up one by one and carrying them up through the spiral

opening to the upper level. Vasily ordered the damaged HWP to stand watch below, and followed the others up.

The lift deposited them at an intersection, where four passages led off in the cardinal directions. Catalina was already scanning, and she pointed them to the north, back toward the front of the ship. They passed several doors, but she pointed at the end of the passage, which culminated in another set of doors large enough to accommodate several man-sized creatures at once.

“In there,” she said, moving to the side. “Ready?” She took her last gas grenade from her belt, and primed it. Cecilia moved opposite her, and readied her rifle. She nodded.

The door opened swiftly as Catalina touched its sensor, revealing a long oval of a chamber crowded with alien control machinery. There were aliens as well, at least three of them, who turned and lifted weapons as the door opened. Catalina’s grenade exploded next to one panel, enveloping two of the aliens in the stun gas. Cecilia opened up with her rifle, but she was hit by a plasma bolt a moment later, blasting her forearm and sending the M4 flying. She let out a cry of pain and collapsed backwards, clutching the injured limb.

“Go!” Vasily yelled, dodging past James and rushing into the room. Jane was on his heels, but before she could line up a shot a bolt streaked past her from behind, striking a protruding panel along the wall to her left. “Behind us!” she yelled, swiveling and lifting her laser rifle to line up a shot.

James let out a curse and fired at the floaters coming up the hall behind them, protecting Cecilia with his body. The injured agent reached down with her good hand and drew her Glock, firing from under the doctor, squeezing off half a clip in rapid order. The floater in front staggered as several bullets struck it, but kept coming.

Caught again in a crossfire, Catalina added her own fire to the barrage. She shot the floater Cecilia had wounded, but as it crumpled, the one behind it shot her with its plasma rifle. The bolt slammed into her gut with the force of a sledgehammer, and she collapsed, gasping for breath and spitting up blood. The alien kept shooting, but its shots exploded harmlessly against the walls, and a moment later it fell, a bright hole drilled through its face by Jane’s laser.

A floater soldier crumpled, half its torso blasted away by Vasily’s autocannon. “Do not kill the leader!” he yelled, dropping the heavy weapon and drawing out his stun rod. As the cloud from the gas grenade cleared, he rushed forward. An alien drifted forward, still dazed, but it lifted its plasma pistol as Vasily loomed over it. It didn’t get a chance to fire, as the Russian knocked its weapon away, then blasted it with a thrust from the stun rod. He hurried forward to where he’d seen the leader, wary of another ambush, but then caught sight of the alien lying limp against the forward control panel. Blood trickled from the bullet hole in the middle of its forehead. “Bah,” the Russian said.

Catalina got back to her feet, still looking very unsteady, with a trickle of blood running down her chin. She looked at the back of her hand, where more blood was smeared. "Dammit," she said.

"Hold on just a second," James said to her, as he injected a medikit into Cecilia's arm. "Try not to move it. The arm's broken, and the burns are very serious. This should keep you together until we can get you back to HQ." The agent nodded, and leaned her head back against the wall, clenching her jaw against the pain.

"Hey, guys. We airborne at moment?" Vasily asked.

"I think we would have noticed that," Jane said.

Catalina came forward, ignoring James's protest behind her, and joined Vasily in front of the control console. "We need their intelligence." She looked over the controls. "I don't know what most of this means, but this one's familiar. On button, off button." She pressed the latter, and the ship seemed to sag around them, the power indicators draining down until they were all black.

"Come on, Cat, you're about to fall over," James said. He propped her against the console, and examined the nasty wound in her belly, another medikit in hand.

Jane activated her comm unit. "Ken? We've secured the ship. Call in the clean up crew, and prep the party gear."

"We still have a few rooms need to check," Vasily said. He returned to his cannon, and picked it up. He came up to Cecilia, sitting by the door, who looked up at him.

"Is it always... like this?" she asked.

Vasily nodded. "This one... not bad." He looked back at James and Catalina, then back down at Cecilia. She nodded, then extended her good hand. He helped her to her feet. Once she was steady, she drew her Glock. "I got your back."

Vasily nodded again, and headed back to clear the rest of the ship.

* * * * *

Interlude: Priorities (August 5-11, 2009)

"Hey there, Jarvis. Feeling better, I hope? Look, I'm really sorry, that's *never* happened to me before."

The engineer accepted Catalina's apologies, and insisted that he was fine, really.

Although the immobilizing foam cast he wore made further declarations impossible.

The doc said his broken legs and cracked ribs would heal in about a week. Lucky for him that Catalina had fallen on him in the most advanced medical facility in the world. The damage done to the reactor housing was likewise not critical, but it looked to set back the project a good day if not more.

Catalina De Farrago: Climb +6, Balance +9, roll: 1 (automatic failure). Result: -1 engineer/week on reactor project (and one engineer out of commission until next week)

Almost as soon as the semi-conscious engineer was carted away to the medical wing, along with the bruised Catalina, Jane intervened at the damaged housing. It looked like Catalina's fall had dented an important juncture box, putting pressure on a critical fiberoptic control line. In a flash of inspiration, Jane was able to use her laser rifle on low power to heat the housing, and using a multitool she was able to correct the dent.

Jane Swift: Craft Mechanical +12, roll: 19 (31) (major success). Result: +2 engineer/weeks on reactor project

A few days after the accident, Grace Thelon Beluca stood in the control room, which was crowded with most of the engineering staff (minus Jarvis), the X-COM leadership, and Alpha Team. She grinned as she pulled down the heavy lever on the main junction box.

There was a flicker of the lights, and a distant noise. "Don't worry, it'll take a few minutes to come online," Grace said. She frowned as the flickers continued for a few seconds longer, and then the lights came back on, and the control board showed green all across, including the new indicator marked, "Laser Defense 1".

"We're in business," the Chief Engineer says, flashing a wide grin.

* * *

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, GRACE THELON BELUCA, AGENT INISE DRAKE
RE: Research/Manufacturing Progress Report

Chief Engineer Thelon Beluca is reluctantly reporting that the reactor project is behind schedule. Her engineering team is working triple shifts and we hope to have the new reactor online by the end of the week.

On the positive side, Grace has announced that the new Laser Defense battery is online and functional. It is running on auxiliary power for the moment, but once the reactor is completed, we will be able to maintain the defensive array at full power.

We've received a report from Buzz Olloff, who has been reassigned to X-COM's Advanced Prototypes Development, a project we're working on in conjunction with our American hosts. The report indicates that the FIRESTORM craft has been completed, and has successfully completed its initial test flight. We should be receiving the prototype within the next few weeks. Mr. Olloff will be remaining at the American aerospace design facility for a few weeks longer, to contribute to our second advanced craft design, code-named LIGHTNING. This craft will be an improvement over our light assault carrier, the Skyranger, utilizing both alien alloys and alien ship components in its construction. Like the Firestorm, this craft will also rely on Elerium-115 for its fuel source.

The research team reports that work on the alien light plasma weapons has been finished, and those weapons can now be assigned to X-COM field units for use against the aliens. As research into alien weapons is completed, captured weapons may be kept for use by X-COM field teams. Please continue to bring back extra copies of alien weapons; those that are not assigned to other units will continue to be delivered to the Americans. This is not a trivial exchange; the Americans funded 75% of the costs of the Firestorm project, which included providing the construction and test facilities, and their help will be essential going forward. Keeping the Americans supplied with these weapons will be critical in maintaining a positive cash balance moving forward, especially with the loss of the French contribution to the consortium budget. All weapons that are not currently being used by field team personnel should be returned to the appropriate storage lockers.

* * *

FROM: STAN WHITE
TO: JAMES ALLEN, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM; GRACE THELON BELUCA
RE: Medical Priorities

James:

First off, I'd like to thank you for your help in the medical lab these last weeks. We're making progress, and I know that Alpha has made good use of the new medikits.

Our study of the alien life forms (both living and dead) has opened up new avenues of medical research. We are continuing our work on a bioweapon that will work on alien physiology. Based on your reports on how the stun gas worked on the floaters and snakemen, we anticipate having useful results before too long.

Here are the projects that I believe we can complete, with the proper support.

- Advanced Medikit 2: With continued work we can make the standard medikit even more effective. This is the least "expensive" option in terms of resources,

and I project that with our full biological research team assigned to it, we can have results in as little as a week.

- Advanced Surgical Kit: I've taken your reports on battlefield medical treatment and built an advanced field intervention kit that can resuscitate a dying soldier. It still needs some tests and additional work before it's ready for full production.
- Elerium-powered Biogenesis Unit: Taking a cue from Grace's fancy reactor project, I've drawn up plans for an advanced device that we can use for our medical projects based on alien tech. This will require you to twist some elbows to release a quantity of that precious Elerium, but I project that the Unit will increase medikit production by 50-75%, and may possibly have other benefits as well. This project will be time consuming and require both researchers and manufacturers to make it happen, but I'm confident that it will provide results.

We've also been working on the advanced nanotechnology prototypes that Doctor Yahav had left unfinished, and hope to have additional useful medical applications in the field soon. His loss is a blow to our medical program, but we'll have to soldier on just like the other teams.

I also have some ideas for a serum that may allow us to tap into the regenerative powers of the alien DNA. This is a long-term project but any assistance you can provide, to this or any of the projects above, may be incredibly vital.

* * *

Jim read the note from Stan, getting visibly excited as he did so. The suspicions the team had about the possibility of resuscitating near-dead soldiers were right! It was only a matter of scaling the medikits up, using the high-speed microdispersal technology that was already present, albeit in a rudimentary way, in the existing medikits.

Jim typed quickly, then hit send:

FROM: DR. JAMES ALLEN
TO: STAN WHITE
CC: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
Re: Medical Priorities - response

I'll consult with the rest of the team before getting you an official reply. My initial take is to prioritize the advanced surgical unit, then the advanced version 2 medikits. If the impact on advanced surgical kit availability time is very low, we could go with th advanced v2 medikit first. This is the key issue - is the infrastructure required for the surgical kit independent of any work on the medikit?

* * *

The alarm klaxon sounded at two in the morning, shattering the uneasy sleep of Alpha Team in their bunks. As the veteran operatives surged out of their beds and lunged for their lockers, the intercom hissed, drawing their attention. The voice of the tech on the intercom was calm but intense.

"ALIEN CRAFT INCOMING. TARGET TRAJECTORY INDICATES DESTINATION IS HQX. TIME TO INTERCEPT 3 MINUTES. ALL PERSONNEL TO ACTION STATIONS. THIS IS NOT A DRILL."

They'd barely had time to throw on clothes and grab their weapons before the entire base shook, a trembling that pulsed through the ground like an earthquake. "What was that?" Jane asked, but none of them had any answers, could do nothing but follow Vasily to the briefing room.

Garret wasn't there yet, but Grace and Doctor Wagner were huddled together over the smaller screen jutting from the wall display panel. The two women looked up as the Alphas entered, and Grace's face broke into a wide grin.

"Looks like the Laser Defense Array works," she said.

* * *

Interlude: Transfer Orders (August 18, 2009)

Sgt. Hadrian L. Jones, USMC, hastily brushed grit and sand of the Mohave off his BDUs as he trotted up to HQ. Inside, a clerk pointed him to a chair outside Colonel Hernandez's office. The message had said *Report ASAP*, but in typical military fashion, it had meant, *hurry up and wait*.

As he sat, he mentally reviewed the squad's performance in the exercise vs. the OPFOR units. While his recon element had executed their spotting mission as planned, the parent battalion had taken a drubbing. Those Blackhorse guys were good, no question about it. The Colonel would be tearing the major a new one, that was certain, but the whole point of the exercises was to find and fix problems and keep folks from getting complacent. In that respect, mission definitely accomplished. A buzzer sounded and the clerk motioned him towards the CO's door.

Hadrian marched in, came to attention and offered a crisp salute, which the Colonel acknowledged as he glanced up from a stack of files on his desk. "At ease, Sergeant Jones, and take a seat," he ordered as he opened and looked over a dossier. "A-1 job in the exercise, glad to see at least a few marines get the better of the army." He scanned the open file again.

“How long have we known each other Hadrian?” the Colonel queried disarmingly.

Jones smiled thinly. “15 years sir, since that tour in Afghanistan. You were fresh out of Annapolis, a newly minted butter-bar.”

Hernandez nodded, “I learned a lot from you in those six months. Seems like a life time ago now doesn't it?”

“Indeed it does, sir.”

The Colonel studied the dossier for a moment and fixed his gaze on Jones. “Hadrian, your current enlistment is up another couple months, you'll have your 20 years in then, as you've not re-upped are you planning on taking early retirement?”

Hadrian pondered a moment. “Well sir, as we've been busy with the exercises here, I've not really had time to give it much thought. However, the Corps is my home, and I'm satisfied with my work and the chance to serve my country, so I'll likely file the papers when we get back to our regular base in Okinawa at the end of the month. Assuming the Corps still wants me.”

Hernandez visibly relaxed. “Glad to hear that Hadrian, would hate to lose a man of your talent and experience. It also makes what I have to tell you next much easier.”

He paused for a moment before continuing. “Hadrian, the Corps is changing, the world is changing and the enemy is changing. I assume you've heard and seen the reports of these alien attacks as well as our counterattacks?”

Hadrian nodded slowly.

The Colonel continued, “The US is part of an international response force known as X-COM. I've been ordered to submit likely candidates for screening for this group. I've chosen to second you from RECON group for this assignment. I'm afraid I can't tell you anything further. You are to report to helo pad one at zero dark thirty for immediate transport. Your status and assignment are classified, you are to answer no questions nor inform anyone of your mission status. You are allowed one duffel bag for personal items, all other gear and furnishings will be provided. Is that clear?”

“Yes sir!”

“Very well, Sergeant Jones, that is all. You are dismissed. Semper Fi!”

Hadrian stood to attention, saluted, wheeled, and marched out of the office back into the summer heat.

Twelve hours later, he sat crouched in a helo winging through the dark desert skies

eastward. He wondered what the new posting would entail. He knew nothing about aliens, or even much science for that matter. He did know about scouting and killing though, and whenever and wherever there was war, those services were always needed.

* * * * *

Session 17 (August 18, 2008)

Chapter 61

Hadrian had barely hopped down from the helicopter before it surged back into the sky, its engines roaring as it vanished into the night sky. *Someone's in a rush*, he thought, as he hefted his duffle and looked around.

"Over here, trooper!" came a voice from the darkness. It had been dark inside the helo, but not this dark, and after a moment the marine's eyes had adjusted enough to see the faint outline of the building a short distance away. The man in front of it was only a vague form. The air was dry, and there was a faint smell on the breeze, a stink of burning and violence that he knew all too well.

"Hold up, chief," the voice said as he approached the building. "You're Jones?"

Hadrian nodded, before realizing that the man likely couldn't see him any better than he could see the other. "Sergeant Hadrian Jones," he said.

"Right. Step up to the door, look into the little opening in the center." Hadrian did as directed. A bright light flickered in his eyes, blinding him for a moment. The door unlatched and began to slide open with the ponderous motion that came from a considerable thickness of plate steel.

"Guess it is you," the guard said. "Go right in."

He went inside. It was even darker inside than outside, but as the door closed behind him, a lamp flickered on the wall. The interior of the building was a single large room, with an open-sided elevator assembly in the center.

"Proceed to the lift," came a voice from somewhere.

Again he obeyed, and rode the lift down in silence, counting off the faint markings that indicated distance. He'd counted fifteen before the lift grinded to a stop. When the lift grate didn't open on its own, he pulled it up, the counterweight holding it in place as he disembarked from the lift into a room not much larger than the one above. There was a door to his right, but a voice drew him in the other direction, to a hallway leading off the

chamber that was more brightly lit with lamps set into panels in the ceiling. “Sergeant Jones? Over here, if you please.”

The speaker looked to be about a decade older than Hadrian, though he obviously had kept himself in good shape. The Marine didn’t recognize his uniform, but the insignia seemed to indicate a high rank. “Sir.”

“I’m Hallorand, base chief. Welcome to X-COM, Marine.”

Hadrian presented his orders. “That’s all right, Marine, you can keep those,” Hallorand said. “We already know more about you than your mother and Uncle Sam combined. I myself did a stint back in Gulf 1. Semper Fi.”

“Semper Fi,” Hadrian echoed reflexively, still wondering just what he’d gotten himself into.

“Did they brief you on what you’re going to find here?”

“No sir.”

“Well then. You’re in for a treat,” he said, his voice dry. “I’ll leave it to Garret to give you the whole spiel, but let’s just say that the guy who wrote the Corps anthem never had *this* stuff in mind.” He led Hadrian down the hall, past a pair of guards armed with G-36 assault rifles. A woman approached, clad in a coverall that fitted to her body in a very... *effective* way.

“Ah, Grace,” Hallorand said in greeting.

“This the new guy?” the woman asked.

“Yes, a Marine.”

Grace looked him over. “Hmm.” She held up a small object. “Sergeant, could you say your name, please?”

“Hadrian L. Jones.” The device beeped. Grace did something with the touchscreen. “Right. Voice print initialized.” She handed , then handed it to him. It looked like a simple media player or cellular telephone. “This here is your communicator. Don’t lose it. It’s like an iPhone, on steroids.”

Hadrian nodded. Grace handed him another item that was more familiar. “And this is your ID. It gives you sovereign authority in all consortium nations.”

He raised an eyebrow, but she didn’t look like she was joking. “Be careful waving it around. Your average beat cop isn’t going to know what the hell X-COM is.” She looked at Hallorand. “He up to speed on the mission brief?”

“Apparently not.”

“Gah. Well, I don’t have time. Get him in to Alpha.” She looked back at Hadrian. “Excuse me, welcome aboard and all that.” Without waiting for a reply, she shot past, and was halfway down the hall before he could so much as blink.

“She’s always like that,” Hallorand said. “All right, come on, Sergeant. I’ll introduce you to the other members of your team.”

Ten minutes later, Hadrian’s confusion had only deepened. Apparently, his “team” included three women, one of whom was British, and a *Russian*? He greeted them mechanically, trying to remember everything they said and did, but he had to admit that most of what he was seeing and hearing made little or no sense to him.

The tour of the base didn’t clear up many of those questions. The basic features, like the workshops and the target range, were generally familiar, but the tech there was far beyond anything he’d seen on a U.S. facility.

He briefly met the leader of the facility, a no-nonsense figure in a black suit. “My name is Michael Garret,” he said to Hadrian, pausing in one of the corridors to speak to him. It looked like he was in a hurry. “I... well, I help coordinate things here. Glad to have you aboard. I’m sorry we didn’t have time for a formal orientation. We’ve lost some personnel lately. Nothing sinister, just transfers.”

“I see,” Hadrian said.

“We’re trying to keep a boat floating with a thimble and a roll of tape. From your service record, I know you understand, sergeant. And I’m sure you can hit the ground running. Vasily, Jane, Cat. Good to see you. There will be a briefing at 1500.” For some reason, Garret’s eyes lingered on the Russian for a moment, before he turned back to Hadrian. “I’m sorry, I cannot stay. Welcome aboard, sergeant. Alpha Team here will get you up to speed.”

“Yes, sir,” Hadrian said, but Garret was already moving.

He knew little more two hours later, as he made his way from the barracks to where the briefing room was situated just off the lounge. He’d made sure to remember that; he knew that first impressions went a long way in bureaucratic organizations. And for all its fancy tech and military trappings, he was getting the idea that X-COM was very much one of those. For someone used to the structure of the Marines, this operation seemed one small step removed from chaos.

He headed to the briefing room ten minutes early, but he was still almost the last to arrive. He recognized the engineer and base chief, but there were two women he hadn’t met before, a short-haired brunette in a suit sitting next to Garret, and a tall,

leggy blonde standing by the huge console on the left wall. A black man and a nice-looking woman with very long hair sat at the end of the table. The Russian and one of the American women were seated along the table to the right, so he headed over to join them.

“Sergeant Jones,” the blonde said. There was just a hint of an accent that Hadrian recognized from his stint in Germany. “I am Kimberly Wagner, research head for X-COM.”

“Ma’am.”

Garret indicated the woman to his left. “This is Agent Drake, liaison for the U.S. Government. I believe you met Grace already.”

The engineer shot him a mock salute. “Chief engineer.”

“Next down is Stan White, our resident doc, and Joan Beauvais, psychological counseling.”

“I’m sure we’ll talk more at length later, Sergeant Jones,” the shrink said, which immediately raised quiet alarms in Hadrian’s head. For now, though, he moved to his seat and sat down.

Garret looked at his watch, then shifted his gaze to the Russian again, with that heavy, considering look Hadrian had recognized in the hallway before. “Tell me, Vasily. Are you comfortable with what X-COM is doing?”

The Russian held up to the attention well enough, Hadrian thought, as all eyes in the room focused on him. “Yah, I think. All of what I know that X-COM do, anyway.”

The shrink leaned forward. “I am sure that he...” she began, but was cut off by Agent Drake. “Wait for everyone.” The look *she* sent at the Russian was utterly ambiguous, Hadrian thought, and he started to wonder what he’d gotten himself into here.

They didn’t have to wait long, as Jane and Catalina came into the room, chatting with a young Asian man dressed in what Hadrian recognized as a flight suit. “Ken Yushi, our pilot,” Garret said in introduction. “This is Hadrian Jones, our newest recruit, courtesy of the United States Marine Corps.”

“Ken’s a flyboy, and you know how *they* are,” Catalina said with a grin.

Hadrian nodded noncommittally.

“All right,” Garret said. “Allen’s going to be sitting this one out, so we can get started.” He waited until the newcomers had taken the last seats at the table before continuing.

“We’re here because of new information that we’ve picked up from our intelligence connections.”

Agent Drake shifted her intense look at Hadrian. “Sergeant, as of right now, you have Top Secret clearance. You were vetted by Homeland Security, but nothing said here leaves this room. Understood?”

Hadrian nodded, but Drake did not ease up. “Is that how you typically respond to your superiors, sergeant?”

“Agent Drake, if I could continue,” Garret began.

Her eyes did not shy from Hadrian’s. “Have you forgotten Okwelume already?” she asked. Hadrian did not understand the reference, but he could sense how the mood in the room subtly shifted.

“I understand, ma’am,” Hadrian said.

“Kim, the pictures, please,” Garret said. Wagner hit something on her control console, a high-resolution video appeared on the big wall screen. It showed what looked like an alien ship—even Hadrian could tell that—flying low over white mountains.

“We picked this up almost by accident,” Wagner said. “As you probably know, we’ve lost all satellite activity since early on in the alien incursion. These pictures were taken by an automated recon drone.”

“Where is that?” Catalina said, as they saw the camera overshoot, then briefly scan back to catch a glimpse of the ship descending out of view. They briefly caught sight of something metal below, glinting off the sunlight, then it was gone.

“The Ural Mountains,” Garret said. Several sets of eyes shifted toward the Russian. To Hadrian, it looked like he stiffened slightly, but he betrayed no other reaction. “According to our intelligence, it’s an OSNAZ facility.”

“Russian Special Forces,” Drake said.

“We’re quite aware who they are, Agent,” Catalina said.

“...they... attacked it?” Vasily asked. “What happen?”

“It was not an attack,” Wagner said. “In fact, from our contacts in the Russian government, the site does not exist at all.”

Catalina swore something under her breath.

“No,” Vasily said. “That... that is wrong. Some other freaking mountains.” Catalina patted him lightly on the arm.

“It could be a black operation, beyond the government’s knowledge,” Garret said. “Whatever it is, we need to find out what they are doing. We cannot allow Russia to follow the path of France.”

“If Russia goes, it’ll take half of Asia with it,” Drake said.

Vasily exploded with a string of Russian curses. “We not going to freaking follow—”

“Vasily, we’d understand if you prefer not to go on this mission,” Garret said.

The Russian’s look might have etched glass. “I going.”

“Look at it this way,” Drake said. “If OSNAZ has gone rogue, you’d be doing you country a favor by putting a bullet in it.”

“Agent Drake,” Garret said.

But Vasily might not have even heard her, by the look on his face. “I going,” he repeated, his jaw tightening.

* * * * *

Session 17 (August 18, 2008)

Chapter 62

The briefing hadn’t ended well, to Hadrian’s thinking. Wagner had briefed them on what they knew of the base, but it was thin, real thin. The engineer said something about a dampener on their aircraft they would use for their insertion, which should allow them to approach the base undetected. When it came to mission parameters, “should” was not a word that the Marine liked to hear.

Of more concern was the Russian. Hadrian *really* didn’t like working with unknown quantities on a mission, and here he was saddled with a whole team of them. But he knew how to follow orders.

Those orders were simple enough. They were to recon the Russian base, penetrate its security, determine whether there was an alien connection, and if so, take action to neutralize it. It wasn’t the most suicidal mission Hadrian had ever been given, but at the moment, it seemed to be right up there near the top of the list.

After the briefing, they were ordered to report to Workshop Three for mission prep. Hadrian arrived to find Cecilia Sharp fastened spread-eagled into what looked like some sort of torture contraption. Grace was supervising three technicians who were grafting pieces of body armor onto her. They'd already covered her legs, hips, and back, and as he watched, two men almost as big as he was hefted a breastplate that looked like it weighed a few hundred pounds. He could see the other components, the bulky arm units and a helmet with a glossy silver visor, waiting on a table adjacent to the rig.

"How's she going to be able to move in that?"

"The armor is powered," a voice said behind him. He turned to see Jane Swift standing there, looking past him at the work being done on the agent. "It's fully articulated with electroactive polymer units in the legs and arms. I worked on those some, amazing tech, really. There's an Elerium-115 reactor in the back unit, of all things. The outer layer is made up of alien alloys and a lot lighter than it looks."

Hadrian looked at it dubiously. Grace caught his eye, and made a gesture to one of the other engineers. "Right over here, sergeant. We've got your suit of Personal Armor ready for fitting."

He was leery of something along the lines of the powered armor, but the suit they fitted him with was not that dissimilar to the Interceptor armor he was familiar with. It was slightly bulkier, with full-body protection, but Jane had been right about the weight of the material; even with the full rig he felt lighter than even the basic Interceptor vest with its ceramic inserts. The engineer helped him, making adjustments so that the suit fit him better, and explained the basic functioning of the Visual Display Unit in his helmet.

By the time he was ready, Cecilia was fully rigged up, and Grace was helping with adjustments to the suit, working with an xPhone connected to the armor by a thin cable. The others were gathered around a table where weapons were being taken out of protective cases by another pair of techs. Hadrian moved to join them, conscious of the bulky tread of his boots—also armored—on the plate steel floor.

The weapons looked like something out of a science fiction movie. Vasily gauged his look and said, "I think we figure out alien weapon technology recently. Is kind of step forward. They did tell you about aliens, right?"

"Not exactly," the Marine replied.

"Well, we shoot the bastards," Vasily said to Hadrian.

Catalina had picked up one of the weapons, a pistol that had several small bulges in the haft and along the action. "Hopefully these plasma weapons will dent the snakemen a little more."

Jane held up her xPhone, which showed an image from the security camera in the alien containment lab. “So that’s them?” he asked.

Vasily glanced at Jane’s phone. “That the smallest kind. But yah, that them.”

“More than one kind, I take it then?” Hadrian asked.

“Three we know of,” Catalina said.

Jane handed out their medikits, which fit into snap pouches that had been attached to their armor at the left hip. She briefly explained to Hadrian how they worked. “We have a medic, Doctor Allen, who usually goes with us,” she said. “but he’s not trained for infiltration missions like the rest of us.”

“Don’t know how stealthy we’re going to be,” he commented, glancing back at Cecilia, who was plugging the lead from her laser pistol into a socket in the waist of her armor.

“Here,” Vasily said, handing one of the plasma pistols to Hadrian. “Just like regular pistol. Aim and shoot. You get used to weight.”

“This our primary weapon, then?” he asked, hefting the gun and looking down its length. The build of it make holding it a bit awkward, and the simple sights had apparently been glued on to the top.

“Depends,” Catalina said. “Snakies don’t mind the lasers much.” She smiled as she lifted one of the improved laser pistols. “Light,” she said, duplicating Hadrian’s action as she sighted down its length. The new software in her VDU activated, showing a bright point on her image screen that matched what the pistol was pointing at. “Very nice,” she said to herself. She took one of the plasma pistols as well, affixing its holster—another jury-rig—on her belt opposite the laser.

“We use more standard weapons, too,” Vasily said. “Musa, he can get you just about any kind of gun you want. These... these pack a good punch, though.”

A voice hissed over their communicators. “Hey kids, I got the bus all ready to go, when you’re ready,” Ken told them.

“That’s our cue,” Catalina said.

“Come on, I show you where armory is,” Vasily said to Hadrian.

* * * * *

Session 17 (August 18, 2008)

Chapter 63

Hadrian had to admit, the ride was impressive.

The engines roared as the Skyranger began its descent. The brief experience of weightlessness had been something, but greater than that was the sensation of speed, of the aircraft hurtling through space like a rocket, nothing like the ponderous C-130 or even the hybrid V-22. Hadrian had no idea of how fast they were going, but he knew that they were traveling over a very large chunk of the Earth in less than seven hours.

With their communicators they could have talked over the noise of the engines, but there was little chatter. There had been a brief communication from headquarters, with Doctor Wagner's Germanic tones whispering into the tiny speaker in his ear as though the woman was leaning close up to him.

"We're confident that the dampening field will confound the base radar," she had told them, "but we're not going to push our luck too much. First objective is to find the controls for the base's radar and communications array. If you can find the main dish, you should be able to tap into their comms with your xPhones. From there, you'll have to decide how to proceed. Collect as much information as possible, but remember, we cannot tolerate a covert alien presence in any consortium nation."

Hadrian had thought about trying to get some sleep, but ultimately decided against it. He took out his xPhone and began reading up on X-COM, but was interrupted a few hours into the flight when Vasily had leaned over toward him.

"Okay. Here is short version," the Russian had said. "The little white ones, just shoot them. The red ones that float, shoot or tear gas, either is good." He pointed to the gray orbs hanging from Hadrian's belt, the grenades that Musa had given him, along with an M4 and a Glock pistol that he'd tucked into the small of his back.

"The big snake men," the Russian went on, "tear gas, and if you cannot hit, just spray bullets. We meet something new... pray to God."

"And snakes aren't affected much by lasers?"

Vasily shook his head. "Shoot laser if that all you got, but bullets and plasma and tear gas versus snakes, preferable."

That had been the end of the conversation. Vasily had closed his eyes and leaned back in his seat, but Hadrian was almost certain that he wasn't sleeping. He wondered what he would have felt if they'd ordered him to raid Camp Pendleton.

He got immersed in his reading for a while, until the change in pitch of the engines, accompanied by the feeling of dropping that never ceased to send a chill down his back, announced the start of their descent. "We're coming up on approach," Ken said over the intercom. "We'll be coming in low, so stay buckled in until we land. Keep you comms on local contact only. Don't contact the Ranger unless you have an emergency."

The pilot didn't lie; the approach was a violent one, with the aircraft darting nimbly back and forth, at one point tilting almost on its side before banking into a hard turn. Fortunately, none of them appeared to be the sort who got airsick. Finally the floor seemed to drop out from under them, and the Skyranger plummeted down; Hadrian found his hands fisting on the armrests despite himself.

"I'm ready power signatures to the north and northeast. Going to set down on an ice shelf about two clicks from the base. Visibility is... bad. But that should help you."

The engines roared again and they were driven into their seats again, seemingly moments before a jarring halt announced an end to their momentum. "We're down," Ken said. "Good luck, team."

The hatch opened onto a blinding sea of white. The harsh wind blew wafts of snow into the rear compartment of the Skyranger even before the opening was wide enough for them to disembark. Catalina was the first out, scanning the area. "Wow, really is bad," she said. She trudged out a few feet, and almost vanished into the snow. "Watch your footing, can't even see any edges," she said.

Hadrian and Vasily followed her out. "And our plan is?" the Marine asked.

"Guess we need lay of land," Vasily said. Catalina moved to the northeast, slipping off of the ice shelf into a cleft between two steep walls of ice-clad rock. There was some shelter there from the driving wind, so as soon as she gestured, the others followed her there.

"There's a pretty steep ascent to the north," she told them. "I'll scout ahead."

Vasily nodded. "Try to keep radio to minimum."

She clapped him on the shoulder and headed out. Their suits of armor were hardly suited to winter camouflage, but the swirling snow made it moot, as it obscured her fully before she'd gone more than ten meters.

Catalina kept one eye on her VDU as she made her way forward; the software in the headset couldn't see through the snow, but it did superimpose the power readings that the Skyranger had taken during its descent. The landscape was more than a bit treacherous, but she was sure-footed, and she was able to navigate her way forward with only a few minor diversions.

Up ahead, a tall ridge materialized out of the snow. The power readings came from its summit, and as she stared up, she could just make out the dark line that was too straight to be natural. "Found it," she whispered.

She slowly made her way forward. The ridge rose up in steps formed for a giant, the cliff ahead of her rising almost ten meters to the first tier. She started to turn around to return, but caught sight of a narrow ascent, a ledge that ran up the face of the cliff like a ramp. She drew her laser and thumbed the power button as she made her way forward, intent on seeing if the path led all the way up to the summit of the ridge.

She had nearly reached the top when she heard a noise over the wind, and froze. The noise drew nearer, and resolved into the sound of boots crunching on the icy rock.

She pressed herself up against the rock face, silent.

The sound of the boots stopped. She could see the lip at the top of the cliff, where the path culminated, but not beyond that. She tensed, and shifted as if to start back down the path.

And froze again, as she heard voices, speaking in Russian, close enough that she thought she could reach out and touch their owners. They were right above her, and as she looked around, she realized that if they took one step forward, they could not fail to see her, standing on the path that now seemed treacherous and steep, utterly exposed and unable to escape without certain detection.

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Session 17 (August 18, 2008)

Chapter 64

The voices continued for a moment, the words muted by the noise of the wind. Cat remained frozen there, willing herself to silence as the seconds stretched into a minute. Then the footsteps resumed, walking away, along the summit of the cliff, until they had faded from her hearing. She waited another twenty heartbeats before retracing her steps down the cliff face, and another twenty before she headed back to where the others were waiting.

They were right where she had left them. "Everything okay?" Vasily asked her.

"Company up ahead, but human."

"No way past?" the Russian asked.

Catalina shook her head. “The base is atop a bluff. There’s a path up there, but there’s no way you’d make it up without the guards seeing you.”

“How about we climb?”

“I have climbing gear,” Jane said.

“I think I can find us a place far enough away from the path that the guards might not notice,” Catalina said. She gestured for them to follow her, and started forward again into the blinding snow.

The approach took a good half-hour, in part because of their concern about avoiding detection. They saw no sensors or alarm devices, but that didn’t necessarily mean that they did not exist. Their VDUs remained blank, save for the power readings in the distance. This time they headed in a more northerly direction, toward the second power source, away from the structure of the base that Catalina had detected. They ended up at a rough cliff face that rose a good twelve meters above them, its summit just a rough outline, a jumble of protruding rock and built-up snow.

Vasily took out a line of rope and a small folding grapnel from his pack. Climbing gear was one area where they appeared to be overequipped; in addition to him, Jane, Cecilia, and Catalina all carried mountaineering kits. Vasily took the lead, aware of the irony that his training in OSNAZ had specifically prepared him for this as he swung the grapnel and hurled it up the cliff. It caught and he started up, but he’d barely gotten three feet off the ground when the ice he’d snagged gave way, and he slammed hard onto his back.

“Gah,” he said.

“You okay?” Catalina asked, as Cecilia reached down and yanked him to his feet. He came up quickly, a bit surprised by the strength in the woman’s armor-enhanced grip. The Russian scowled and waved Catalina toward the cliff face.

The British agent took up the rope and attempted another toss, but this time the grapnel failed to catch altogether and dropped back to the ground. Growling with impatience, Vasily took it up and gave it another attempt. This time the grapnel seemed to stick cleanly, and the rope held while he scampered up to the top of the cliff. Once he was up and able to securely anchor the rope the others were able to follow quickly, Hadrian bringing up the rear barely five minutes after he’d started his ascent. While Vasily pulled up the rope, Catalina probed ahead, alert for any sign of the guards she’d detected earlier. She didn’t get very far before she saw the source of one of the power readings, a massive dish that rose up out of a large mound that was too regular to be natural. Still careful, she crept forward. There was a snow-covered ramp that led up to the top of the mound; near it she could see the familiar dullness of exposed metal. Looking more closely for a door or other access point, she found only a pair of vent

outlets that were too small for access, even if they could get through the armored steel covers.

Hadrian and Jane had taken up a position amongst some rocks that provided an overlook to the east. The outline of the base was visible there through occasional gaps in the snow; it was shaped like a giant “U”, with the open end facing toward them. Jane tapped the Marine’s shoulder and pointed; he nodded as he recognized the two dark shadows moving along the ridge near the base.

Cecilia and Vasily joined Catalina at the mound. Cecilia remained back, her bulky armor making it more difficult to remain unseen. Catalina and Vasily crept up the ramp to the top of the mound, where there was a bulky metallic frame half-buried in the snow below the radar dish. Vasily knelt over it, brushing away snow until he found an access panel. The panel was locked, but a few seconds from Catalina’s laser pistol provided entry. The Russian took out his xPhone, and after a moment found a port where he could connect the device. The software on the phone immediately went to work, and within a few seconds, Russian characters started running in columns down the handheld device’s screen.

“They’re coming this way,” Jane said to Hadrian, watching the approaching guards. Both of them readied their weapons, but suddenly the pair turned and ran to the south, away from them.

Jane looked at Hadrian; the Marine shrugged, but a moment later they heard a loud noise in the sky, followed by a light that appeared within the storm, growing rapidly brighter. Above Catalina and Vasily, the dish suddenly creaked into motion, swiveling toward the south. Catalina moved into the cover provided by the console, while below, Cecilia concealed herself in the lee of the ramp.

The sound and light resolved into the familiar lines of an alien small scout, which descended out of the storm toward the base. Within the area bounded by the rugged outlines of the facility, a pair of horizontal doors groaned and wheeled open, revealing an open space below. The alien ship descended, and as soon as it moved past the doors, they started to close.

Meanwhile, Vasily, crouched low next to the console, shielding the display with his hands, tried to make sense of the information that he was intercepting. He tensed as he found a folder, opened it, scanned the contents. “Idiots,” he muttered, under his breath.

“What?” Catalina asked.

The display on the xPhone suddenly went blank; Vasily checked, and confirmed that the signal coming from the relay was dead.

“Come on. We got to find others. Tell when we find them. Move quick.”

Cecilia fell in behind them as they moved toward the crest overlooking the base where Jane and Hadrian had taken cover. “Any luck?” Jane asked.

“I got transmission from dish.”

“And?” Catalina asked. “Useful?”

“Stupid idiots working behind Moscow’s back. Getting... something in return for working with aliens. They receiving alien visitor, now.”

“Well, what do we do?” Catalina asked. “I figure this is your call.”

“We need to get this back to X-COM. And this place... need to die.”

“It’s a long way back to HQX,” Cecilia said. “And any signal we tried to send from here, they’d probably pick up.”

Vasily’s expression was dark. “I... we need take this place now. I want this ‘special visitor.’ You with me?”

Catalina nodded. “Yes, Vasily, always,” Jane said.

Vasily turned to Hadrian. After a moment, the Marine nodded.

“We’ve got company,” Cecilia said.

They looked up to see that the guards had returned, and were approaching their position, moving quickly.

“Maybe they figured out what you did to the comm array?” Catalina suggested.

“They certainly seem irate,” Cecilia said, checking her laser.

“We do quickly, as quietly as possible,” Vasily said, laying down his autocannon and unlimbering his stun rod.

But the Russians must have seen some movement in the rocks, for they suddenly stopped, and lifted their automatic rifles. One reached for a small device at his belt, but even as he lifted it to his face, a bolt of plasma from Hadrian’s gun blasted it into fragments. The guard collapsed, clutching his ravaged hand.

The second guard cried out, but his shout died as a bright line lanced across his throat. He fell over, dead or dying. The other guard lasted just a heartbeat longer, as Catalina pulsed a beam from her laser into his head. The entire exchange had taken barely two seconds.

“Nice shot,” Cecilia said to Hadrian, who merely nodded and re-holstered the alien weapon.

“Good!” Vasily said, picking up his gun and charging forward toward the hangar doors. They were as he feared, reinforced steel, but the point where the two doors came together was the weak point. He reached for the demolitions kit he carried, trying to judge whether the plastic explosives he carried would be enough.

“Suggest we get these bodies out of the way,” Hadrian said.

“On it,” Cecilia said. With her augmented strength, it was a simple matter to grab hold of both guards, dragging them to an out of the way space behind the rocks.

“They’ll be missed soon, even if nobody heard that,” Catalina pointed out. Vasily didn’t look up, kneeling beside the doors, placing the explosives. He set out half of the charges in the kit, then after a moment’s hesitation put down the other half, connecting the detonators and setting the delay for fifteen seconds.

“Might be wise to kill their sat dish as well,” Hadrian said, as he came forward to join them.

“I use everything we got,” Vasily said. He made the final connection.

“Maybe I can take it out with this,” Catalina said, lifting her laser. The moment of distraction was costly, as Vasily triggered the delay, and immediately surged up, charging back toward the nearby wall. Hadrian was just a step behind him, and Jane and Cecilia, still covering up the signs of the brief firefight, saw and threw themselves down to the ground.

It wasn't much of a hesitation, but it was enough. Catalina had barely made the corner when the explosives detonated, hurling hot air and shrapnel in her direction. Though her torso was out of the main blast, Catalina's left leg was trailing as the blast hit.

The force of the blast simultaneously knocked her off her feet and twisted her around. She had enough time to swear loudly before the momentum spun her into the wall. The curse became a shriek as her lower leg reached an unnatural angle, and then silenced as her helmet connected with the wall. She fell to the ground, and lay still.

Author’s Note: When a player has to miss a session in my campaign, they have to accept that something unpleasant might happen to their character in the interim!

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Session 18 (August 25, 2008)

Chapter 65

Consciousness came flooding back in a hot wave that spread from a point in her chest, fiery tendrils pushing back the chill that suffused her body. Catalina blinked, and looked down to see the metallic length of an X-COM medikit jutting from her chest. Her companions were crouched over her, worried looks on their faces.

“You okay?” Jane asked, as she injected the last of the medikit’s contents into her, then pulled it out and tossed it aside.

“My... my leg.” She wasn’t able to get up, but she could feel it now, and as she shifted it reminded her of the pain. “Broken, I think.”

“We need to abort,” Jane said.

“The mission is more important than any one of us,” Cecilia said.

They looked to Vasily; the Russian’s expression, for once, betrayed the conflict that was normally kept concealed under his grim exterior. But it was Catalina who leaned forward, grimacing at the pain, and pushed at him. “Go!” she said, hoarsely. “They know we’re here now, you have to stop them before the alien gets away!”

“We can’t just leave you,” Jane said. “Maybe I can stay, get you back to the Ranger...”

Catalina shook her head. “You’re already outnumbered, and Cecilia’s right. I’ve got another medikit, my laser’s got a full charge, and the armor’s got thermal lining... I’ll be fine. Consider it covering your retreat. Now go!”

Vasily growled something and rose, hurrying back to the doors. They were mostly intact, although the far one had been jolted off its tracks by the force of the blast, and a corner of it been blasted inward, leaving an opening easily large enough for one of them to slip through. Vasily hooked his grapnel on one of the protrusions and kicked the rope into the space below. He could hear the alarms blaring from below, but didn’t hesitate. He snapped a descender onto the line and then jumped, the free play on the rope letting him plummet a good ten feet before the descender began to take up the friction of his descent. Even then it barely slowed him, and he covered the entire drop in just over a second, slamming onto the concrete floor twenty meters below with enough force to send a hard jolt up both of his legs.

Above him, more ropes were dropped through the gap, but he wasn’t alone. The room was a hangar, crowded with a pair of Kamov Ka-60 transport helicopters and the far sleeker outline of the alien scout ship. Smoke from the explosion drifted through the air.

But of more immediate concern were the half-dozen soldiers who started shooting at him even before he'd touched down.

Dozens of 5.45mm bullets filled the air around Vasily as he darted toward the nearer of the two helicopters. He felt several stings as he took hits to his legs, arms, and torso, but his armor held up, and nothing penetrated to something vital. He let out a roar as he brought his autocannon up, the barrels spinning up before rounds started exploding out of the barrel. Two soldiers crumpled, torn into shreds. He reached the helicopter and ducked behind the landing gear assembly just as a rifle grenade streaked past and hit the wall behind him, erupting in a cloud of heat and smoke and metal shards. He felt a more persistent stinging pain in the back of his neck, but ignored it as another soldier came into view, fire flashing from the barrel of his AK-104 carbine as he poured rounds into Vasily's hiding place. Sparks flashed from the helo's hull, and something caromed off the side of his helmet, but that didn't affect his aim, and a quick burst put the man down. Several others were shooting at him from various points in the hangar, but they were hanging back, using cover, working to flank him. More men kept arriving, their shouts barely audible over the chaotic sounds of battle that filled the hangar.

He heard a noise above and looked up to see Cecilia descending, her armor giving her an almost robotic appearance. She was drawing fire, and Vasily could see the flashes as rounds rebounded from the armor. She was operating the descender with one hand, the other holding her laser, pulsing out beams of energy that drew black slashes along the walls of the hangar. She didn't hit any of the guards that Vasily could see, but the wild fire drove them back into cover, giving him a brief respite.

He took advantage of that opportunity to throw a grenade into the densest cluster of soldiers. It exploded with a thick *thump*, and he could hear cries of pain and shouts in Russian that were all too familiar to him. He ignored them and moved around the back of the helicopter, looking for targets. He saw a soldier dart out from cover at the same time that the man saw him; the other man was faster with his lighter weapon, but before he could pull the trigger a bright beam sliced across his face, and he fell, screaming.

He heard Cecilia's landing; the heavy thump reverberated through the floor. Hadrian and Jane were both coming down now, the Marine descending almost as quickly as he had before. The surge of new defenders responding to the attack had ended, and the fire coming at them had faded to a few sporadic bursts. Cecilia moved ponderously forward, ignoring the bullets that bounced off her armor. A soldier rose up from behind the alien ship, aiming the grenade launcher slung under his rifle at her, but Jane cut him down before he could fire. Two more men tried to fall back toward one of the exits, but Hadrian shot the first, and Cecilia took down the other from behind with a laser beam that sliced across his back, cutting through cloth and flesh and muscle before savaging the organs underneath.

There were a few fires actively burning in the hangar, now, and Vasily looked warily around for fuel stores, ammunition, or anything else that was likely to explode. A large window along the far wall had shattered, and he could see a control room beyond,

empty save for a few bodies slumped over control panels. Two corridors led out from the hangar, and he started toward the one where most of the soldiers had seemed to originate. A deep, sonorous alarm sounded in the background, its beat hammering in the back of Vasily's skull.

"You all right?" Jane asked him.

"Fine. Is okay," he said. He led them forward, stepping over a few bodies on his way to the corridor. The others fell in behind him.

They came to an open door that led into the control room. They took a quick look inside, but the monitors were all dead, the power to the panels cut. Vasily picked up a headset left discarded on one of the panels, but it was quiet, without even static to indicate that it had ever worked. They scanned the walls and ceiling, but if there were cameras observing them, they were well hidden.

Vasily didn't let them linger; within thirty seconds they were back in the corridor ahead, weapons raised and ready, leapfrogging as they came to doors that opened to reveal storerooms, or otherwise empty and unremarkable spaces. In one room they found rows of crates stamped with Cyrillic markings. Vasily gave them a grunt and moved on. "What is it?" Cecilia asked.

Jane, who understood Russian, scanned the room with the camera on her iPhone. "Weapons. Lots of them. Looks like assault rifles, mortars, grenade and SAM launchers, maybe more in the back."

The hallway came to a bend and continued at a sharp ninety-degree angle to the left. There was a large open door there, beyond which they could see a barracks of some sort. They glanced inside to see that the barracks was also empty, with some scattered magazines, clothes, and other detritus on the floor indicating a hasty exit. A weapons rack had been knocked over, scattering a few rifles and clips of ammunition that hadn't been claimed. There were a dozen beds in all, stacked in rows two high along the far wall. There was a television monitor hanging on the wall that showed only grainy static, and the alarm continued to sound over it all, forcing them to speak loudly to be heard.

"We better—" Vasily began, turning back toward the outer corridor, but he was cut off as a bright bolt shot between Hadrian and Cecilia, hitting the wall behind them with a explosive blast of plasma energy.

"Take cover!" the Marine yelled, darting back behind the corner. Vasily pushed Jane ahead of him, through the door into the barracks, while he and Cecilia turned their weapons down the hallway, firing toward the source of the shot.

That failed to stop whoever was shooting, as a second bolt streaked down the hall. It hit Vasily in the shoulder, driving him back. He nearly fell, but Jane leaned out and steadied him, pulling him toward the cover of the doorway.

“Gya! Alien weapons!” he warned, trying to keep a hold on his autocannon without falling over.

“There!” Cecilia yelled, as two enemies moved into view, walking down the long hallway toward their position. She aimed her laser, locked on, and fired off a long burst, striking her target in the chest.

But this time, the Russian didn’t go down. The two of them were clad in big suits of heavy armor that covered their bodies from head to toe, and the laser beam flashed against the chest of the OSNAZ trooper, leaving a black scar but failing to penetrate. Their own plasma rifles unleashed bolts of energy that streaked up the hallway. The first shot missed Cecilia’s head by inches, but the second hit her in the gut, slamming into her like a sledgehammer, dropping her to one knee.

“Uuugh!” she cried, as the two armored troopers continued toward them, and the ground trembled with their coming.

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Chapter 66

“Get into cover!” Hadrian yelled, firing a long burst from his M4 to cover Cecilia as she rose and staggered toward the relative shelter of the corner. On the opposite side of the hallway, Jane leaned out from the barracks doorway. She drew a bead with her laser rifle, and fired a pulse that struck one of the armored troopers in the faceplate. For a moment it looked like she might have had him, but he dodged ponderously aside, slamming into the side of the hallway with enough force to dent the metal plating covering the wall. His companion returned fire, and the plasma bolt struck the threshold of the doorway scant inches in front of Jane’s face. She fell, her weapon clattering out of her hands as she hit the floor.

“Jane!” Cecilia yelled. She started to turn around, but Vasily stopped her with a raised hand. “Hold your position!” he yelled, grabbing onto Jane’s leg and dragging her into the barracks. The OSNAZ troopers continued to close, moving ponderously in their bulky suits. Cecilia threw a gas grenade down the passage, which exploded into a cloud of silvery-green mist. But it obscured the enemy troopers only for a moment; they could hear their heavy tread moments before their armored bodies materialized out of the bank of swirling gas. Cecilia lasered the one she’d hit before, but again the shot seemed to have little or no effect. She only barely got back behind the corner before the return fire, one bolt just clipping her arm but doing little more than scorch her armor.

The armored soldiers continued their approach; they were just fifteen meters away, now.

“Try different weapons! Lasers not doing much!” Vasily shouted. Hadrian had already come to the same conclusion; he dropped his empty rifle and drew out the alien plasma pistol. He leaned out of cover just long enough to shoot the nearer of the two troopers, but again the man failed to go down, and Hadrian had to dart back to avoid a shot that clipped the edge of his shelter, the energetic plasma exploding in a spray of white fire.

“Hadrian!” Vasily yelled. As the Marine looked up, he saw that the Russian was holding his stun rod. Hadrian nodded in understanding. “Fall back!” he yelled to Cecilia.

“But Jane and Vasily...”

“Fall back!” He grabbed her shoulder and pushed, but in her armor, he might as well been trying to move a humvee. She got the idea, though, and joined him in retreating down the hall toward the rooms they’d passed earlier. They could hear the approach of the OSNAZ armored troopers before they could see them, and as the first appeared around the corner, both Hadrian and Cecilia shot him. This time they seemed to faze him, and he sagged to the side, favoring the leg that Hadrian had blasted twice now. But he could still shoot back, and once again he hit Cecilia, the plasma bolt flashing brightly as it exploded against her shoulder. The only thing keeping her up was her armor, but it was obvious that she couldn’t take much more punishment.

The second trooper appeared, but before he could get a bead on the embattled Alphas, Vasily exploded out of the barracks. The OSNAZ soldier spun around, but too slowly, and Vasily sliced down with his stun rod, spinning the trooper’s rifle out of his grip. He followed up with a thrust that hit the trooper in the chest, the stun rod hissing as it discharged a powerful jolt of electricity into its target. The Russian let out a cry of pain, but he remained standing. He reached down to his hip, and grabbed a hilt that lay flush against the armored plate protecting his leg. With a click, a familiar-looking edged weapon came into the trooper’s hand; it began to whine as the power unit began vibrating the short but deadly blade at a violent frequency. Vasily knew from experience that it would cut through armor and flesh with equal facility.

He wasn’t going to give the trooper a chance to regain the initiative. He surged forward, coming at the flank opposite the vibroblade. But with his feet planted, the trooper pivoted quickly, too quickly, and the vibroblade clashed with the stun rod. It was Vasily who gave ground, and the trooper followed, slicing his weapon down, straight toward the surprised Russian’s head.

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Chapter 67

There was no time to evade; Vasily brought the stun rod up to intercept the strike. The vibroblade struck it and kept going; the alien metal slicing through the carbon fiber shaft of the X-COM weapon with ease. But he was able to slow the trooper's attack just long enough; as he fell back, the tip of the blade merely scraped across his chest rather than cleaving his skull in two.

The other trooper had turned reflexively at Vasily's attack, and as the pair sparred he brought his plasma rifle up to uneven the odds. But while Cecilia and Hadrian hadn't been able to hurt him seriously thus far, it proved to be a mistake to discount them fully. Cecilia took careful aim and pulsed her laser at the damaged point of the trooper's armor, where Hadrian's plasma bolts had cratered the protection covering his leg. She was rewarded by a lurch as the armor fused, throwing off the trooper's aim. Hadrian shot him in the small of his back, and as the trooper cried out, caught now and unable to react to either threat, the Marine rushed forward, firing bolt after bolt that pounded into the Russian's back until he finally toppled forward, smoke rising from his pulverized torso.

Vasily dodged another swing of the vibroblade. The OSNAZ man was far better protected and stronger, his physical prowess likely augmented by his armor in a manner similar to Cecilia, but that same suit made him just a bit slower, and the X-COM agent took full advantage. He lured the enemy in with an attack that invited a counter, but when it came, Vasily was moving past the trooper, coming past his vulnerable flank. He drove down with the ruined half of the stun rod, thrusting it down with his full strength into the back of the soldier's knee. The joint, articulated to move forward, couldn't hold, and the trooper fell forward, landing awkwardly on his face. He still wasn't seriously hurt, and he immediately tried to get up, but Vasily jumped onto his back, drew his pistol, and pressed the barrel into the back of the man's neck, just under the lip of his helmet.

One shot, and the man fell limp.

They found Jane conscious but battered, an empty medikit lying next to her. Her helmet was ruined, the faceplate cracked and blackened, but other than some charred skin running in a swath along the side of her face, she seemed able to move once the alien medicines had run their course. Vasily took out his own medikit, reluctantly, it seemed.

"I not feeling too good. Anyone else?"

"Go ahead," Cecilia said. She looked worse off than Vasily, with the battering her armor had taken, but it had absorbed more of the enemy firepower than the lighter suits that

the others wore. "I'll stand guard. I might be the only one here who can go toe-to-toe with them for an extended time right now."

Hadrian picked his rifle, but he cursed as he loaded a fresh clip and chambered the first round. "These weapons aren't doing much to them," he said.

Vasily poked at one of the armored bodies lying on the ground. "They getting this stuff from aliens, I guess." Jane bent to look at one of them more closely. She took out her xPhone and snapped a few images.

"Come on, can't wait around," Vasily said.

They followed the hall to its end, where the enemy troopers had originated. There was a small security station set up there, with a computer and a number of computer monitors set up atop a steel slab desk. An armored door was set in a recessed threshold in the wall to the right, while to the left another corridor likely led back in the direction of the hangar.

Vasily walked over to the workstation. One of the monitors was still active, but there was a security block in place. "Is usually Catalina handle this," he said. On a whim, he entered a standard OSNAZ clearance code, and was surprised when the screen came to life. He couldn't access most of the folders, but he was able to bring up a schematic of the base.

"There is other level," he said. "Lab... command center. Behind door. Maybe is where elite troopers were guarding." He tried to find a command to open the door, but all of the active systems were locked down.

"I have a breaching charge," Cecilia said, opening a compartment in her armor.

"Maybe one of the dead guys has a passkey?" Hadrian suggested.

"No time," Vasily said, nodding at Cecilia. She rigged the door with quick efficiency, and fell back, triggering the charge once they were all clear.

The charge went off with a loud thump. It didn't blow down the door—it would have taken a much bigger boom to do that—but it wrecked the locking mechanism. With Cecilia's augmented strength, she was able to pry it open enough for them to fit through.

The door led to a landing that had an elevator and a set of stairs that led down to the base's lower level. They didn't even bother with the elevator, taking the stairs down four flights to another corridor that led deeper into the base. After about twenty meters they came to another door on the side of the hallway, marked with Cyrillic characters that indicated that this was the base's laboratory. The door was locked, but it wasn't as

heavily armored as the one above; Cecilia's laser cut through the lock in a matter of seconds.

"This look... familiar," Vasily said, as they stepped inside.

The room was in fact very similar to the sterile labs back at X-COM HQ. Although some of the specific machinery was different, and often bulkier, it was immediately obvious that a lot of it was alien-inspired technology. Only a handful of the dozen or so computer screens scattered around the room were active, and those were all locked down, but LEDs shone on most of the equipment, indicating that they were powered down but ready to jump back to life with the proper command.

The same could not be said for the three men lying dead in the middle of the floor. Clad in white coats, they'd each been shot in the head.

"Why would they kill the scientists?" Cecilia asked.

"Thy know too much," Vasily said. He stepped up to a bulky apparatus that looked like a huge metal claw poised over a metal pad, its four long arms bending down from the ceiling around the central point. There was a small LCD set into the huge panel next to it, surrounded by rows of blinking indicators that made no sense to him. "Bio-regenerative system active," he said, reading the characters on the screen. "What are they doing here?" he muttered.

Cecilia poked her head into what looked like an office behind the main lab. "Computer in here, I'll check it out."

Hadrian kept his eyes on the door. "Let's not linger all day, sure to be response team coming."

Jane was taking video of the room with her xPhone. "I might be able to interface my xPhone with the units here," she said. "If I can download their files..."

Vasily nodded. "Be quick. Cecilia?" he called.

"The computer's locked down, but I've got the hard drive," she called back from the office. She appeared for a moment in the doorway. "There's some sort of tech locker in here," she said, excitement shading her voice. "It's locked up, but I think I can force it." She held up her laser, and turned back.

"Careful!" he yelled, but she was already gone. Frowning, he started after her. Behind him, Jane was jacking her phone into an Ethernet port in one of the consoles, while Hadrian remained near the door, keeping an eye on the corridor outside.

There was a sudden flash, and a loud hissing noise. Vasily saw Cecilia as a blur in the doorway of the office as the young woman was flung across the room. She hit the far

wall of the office with enough force to crack the insulated wall plate. Surges of electricity flared around her and grew rather than faded. She screamed as they coursed from the overloaded power systems of her armor, as the energy of ten grams of Elerium-115 coursed through her body.

Vasily ran forward, but before he could reach the office there was a bright white eruption of light, and then he was flying backward, his senses overloaded until he hit something hard, and fell back into oblivion.

* * * * *

Author's Note: Electrical traps are extremely deadly in NWN. This was the first mission that had a lot of traps and similar situations, where Catalina's absence that week was really felt.

After Action Report (August 26, 2008)

After Action Report: Russian Base Infiltration

Sgt Hadrian L. Jones

Alpha Team – X-Com

Alpha team successfully inserted undetected on the outskirts of objective. Scouts led the team to the perimeter and approached the base to assess the situation. After detection of sentries, team elected to withdraw and seek out alternative route to base. Alien craft detected and entered Russian facility, after which time firefight broke out, sentries were neutralized, element of surprise was lost.

To speed penetration of the base, team decided to breach the hangar elevator deck plate with explosives and repel down into the facility. One team member was caught in the explosion and seriously injured.

More base security was encountered almost immediately and a series of running firefights took place in and around the lower hanger bay and adjoining facilities.

While most of the security personnel were conventionally armed, a few specialists were equipped with alien arms and armor and put up a very determined resistance, causing serious injuries to every member of the team. Our alien med kits helped stabilize the wounded and the team pressed on deeper into the base, going down to the second level.

The team broke into the lab area on the second level, and found dead Russian scientists, each killed by a bullet to the back of the head. The team searched the lab and adjoining offices. Unfortunately, one team member triggered a defensive device

and was killed. Other team members were seriously injured, including Kasprjak, who was briefly knocked unconscious by the explosion.

Surprise lost, further progress impractical, most of the team wounded and one member incapacitated, it was decided to scrub the mission and return with what information we had gathered, rather than attempt what was deemed impossible.

Alpha team exited the base fairly quickly without meeting further resistance on the ground. An alternative route to the surface was located and air elements arrived to extract us almost immediately.

Enemy interceptors pursued and attempted to engage, but were successfully evaded without sustaining further injuries.

Intel Notes:

1. Partial data downloads from enemy base computers turned over to research staff.

Tactical Notes:

1. Recommend review and revision of recon procedures to minimize premature contacts and detections.

2. Recommend team adopt planning and tactics review once recon stage is completed.

3. Recommend cross training in dealing with defensive devices and tools for detecting/neutralizing such.

4. Recommend expanded EMT training and additional medical kits be allocated.

** * **

Session 19 (September 1, 2008)

Chapter 68

Vasily kept to himself for a few days after the mission.

The post-mission debrief hadn't gone well. Catalina was still in Medical getting her leg almost entirely rebuilt, while the rest of the Alphas were in little better shape after the restless trip back on the Skyranger. Grace had almost been in tears over what had happened to Cecilia; she obviously blamed herself for the override and explosion of the agent's armor, and since then the chief engineer had been driving her team into the

ground trying to resolve the problem and improve the design so it could go forward into production.

They'd gotten word a day after their return from Russia that their actions had set off a major storm within the Russian government. Three high officials in the Security Services had abruptly vanished, and Moscow publicly denied that the base had ever existed. They weren't able to get another stealth drone back over the site for three days, and all it spotted was a gaping hole in the ground where the base had stood. There were quiet rumblings that some sort of coup had been narrowly averted.

Each of the surviving Alphas dealt with their loss in their own way. Jane tried to bring them together, starting conversations in the lounge and in the galley whenever a few of them happened to be together, talking about the research program, tactics, or just small talk about their lives before they'd come here. Hadrian agreed about the need to improve their tactics, but he spent most of his time in the barracks with a tablet computer he'd borrowed from the research lab, catching up on the technologies and techniques of X-COM. James Allen was nowhere to be seen; the doctor practically lived in the research lab these days. Vasily avoided the conversations, once cutting off Jane with a simple declaration, "We need alien rifles."

Vasily, looking for something to keep his thoughts and hands active, gravitated toward the hangar deck, where major retrofitting work was being done to ready Hangar Bay 2 for the impending arrival of the Firestorm craft. The hardest part was working a viable—and safe—conduit from the Elerium-115 storage facility that could transport the alien matter into the storage unit on the interceptor. It required a lot of crawling through cramped access spaces and lengthy spans installing pipework and wiring, work that was draining both physically and mentally. Vasily did twice as much work as any of the engineers but did not complain, often going four or five hours without uttering more than monosyllabic acknowledgements.

He was coming back from one such session, his coveralls stained with sweat and dirt and grease, thoroughly worn out, when he encountered Grace coming in the opposite direction. The engineer started as they nearly collided.

"Oh, sorry," she said, looking distracted. She was wearing an X-COM uniform instead of her typical coverall, and instead of her toolbelt she carried only a small valise on her hip, from which an ultraportable computer protruded.

"Going for a trip?" Vasily asked.

"Yes, I'm heading off to the research command to get a report on the progress of the Lightning project," she said. "The sequel to Firestorm."

"Yah, the new S kyranger," Vasily nodded.

“Don’t forget, you promised to report to Workshop 2 for a fitting for the newest Powered Armor suit,” Grace said.

“I not forget. Hope this one works better than last one.”

He regretted the careless statement as soon as he’d said it, but the damage was done; Grace flinched visibly, and Vasily silently berated himself. He needed some rest, and a shower, badly.

There was a brief, awkward pause. “Well, come back soon,” he finally said, moving past her back toward the crew quarters. Behind him, the doors to the hangar slid closed again.

Vasily moved past the lift, toward the crew quarters. One of the guards on duty nodded to him; the Russian had earned his reputation with the security personnel. He nodded back, and activated the door that led to the lounge. There was a hiss and the door slid open, but then a strange feeling swept over him. The hairs on his arms stood up, and he felt a sudden disorientation that had him leaning hard on the threshold of the doorway.

For a moment, he thought he was ill, but as he glanced back he saw that the guards had felt it too. He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could speak, everything suddenly went black around him as the lights abruptly died.

* * * * *

Session 19 (September 1, 2008)

Chapter 69

“What the hell was that?” one of the guards said, his voice more than a bit tense in the darkness. There was a shuffling of booted feet.

“Wait for emergency lights,” Vasily said, sounding calmer than he felt. Looking into the lounge, he saw it was more than the lights; *everything* was out, even the LEDs on the portable electronics. He reached into a pocket and took out his communicator, but he knew even before he tapped its power switch that it would be dead as well.

He felt an absurd sense of relief when one of the emergency lamps flared on. It cast only a dim glow compared to the regular lights, but it was reassuring to be able to see. He turned to the guards. “One of you see if Musa has portable lights that work,” he said. “I go see if bosses know what happened.” *And to get my guns*, he added, mentally.

He had to manually release door connecting the lounge to the barracks hall. Jane and Hadrian were there, putting on their armor. “We know what going on?” he asked.

“Power failure,” Hadrian said, sliding his arms into the torso unit and snapping its fasteners into place. Vasily went straight to his locker and took out his plasma pistol. He was momentarily grateful that Drake hadn’t won in her demand to have all the weapons lockers fitted with electronic locks equipped with biometric sensors. He added the web belt with the holster and clipped a small LED flashlight to it. After a momentary pause, he added a fragmentation grenade.

“Comms are down too,” Jane said, picking up her laser rifle. Thankfully, the indicator glowed as she activated the weapon’s power feed. Hadrian helped her get the heavy power pack slung across her back.

“What about Beta?” Vasily asked.

“They’re out on an overnight, remember?” Jane said, and Vasily bit off a curse; he’d forgotten. Still growling to himself, he headed back to the lounge, the others close behind.

As they came in through the barracks hall, Garret and Drake arrived from the outer corridor, the agent holding her handgun at the ready. “We have to assume this is an attack,” Drake was saying.

“Agreed,” Garret said. “We’ll see what Communications can tell us, if anything.”

“Damned electronics!” Drake hissed. Vasily followed them into the communications center, where two techs were trying without much apparent success to get their systems working again. Other than the emergency lights, nothing in the room appeared to be working.

“Report,” Garret ordered.

“Sir. Got a weird reading from upstairs, then everything went dead. Felt like a static shock, almost.”

“Or an EM pulse,” Hallorand said, as he stepped into the room between Jane and Hadrian.

“An EM pulse shouldn’t be able to penetrate this far underground,” Drake said. “Maybe it’s a systems failure—”

“That wouldn’t affect our personal devices,” Jane pointed out.

“Well maybe it—” Drake began. At the same time, Hallorand said, “Who knows what the aliens—”

Garret cut them both off. "Let's focus only what we know, and worry about what ifs later. Security sensors?"

"Offline," the technician said.

"They got into ducts last time," Vasily said. "Best cover lift and hangar, maybe."

"Lift's power is negative," Hallorand began, but then they heard a shout through the open door leading into the outer hallway. "Sir! I heard something in the lift!" came the voice of one of the guards.

Garret met Vasily's eye, and nodded. The three Alphas hurried out through the lounge, with Hallorand and Drake not far behind. Vasily was the first through the door into the outer corridor. He arrived just in time for an explosion that blasted out from within the lift shaft, tearing the protective gate off its hinges, and hurling it across the room. The two guards were flung back off their feet, and Vasily staggered back into Hadrian, knocking them both into the threshold of the doorway.

Vasily blinked, and nodded in thanks to the Marine as he steadied himself. The emergency light in the lift bay was down, and the light from the corridor gleamed on bits of dust swirling in the air. The Russian took a tentative step forward. The two guards were stunned but conscious, coughing as the dust raised from the blast settled.

Hadrian drew out an electroflare from one of the leg pouches in his armor. Twisting to activate it, he tossed it into the lift bay. The bright glow filled the room, and shone up into the dark shaft. There was movement there, which Vasily recognized even before the first purple form drifted into view.

"Floaters!" Hallorand yelled, just as the aliens started shooting.

* * * * *

Session 19 (September 1, 2008)

Chapter 70

Plasma bolts shot from the lift shaft as more floaters drifted into view. A blast caught one of the guards in the chest just as he was getting up, and he crumpled, bullets from his assault rifle spraying out wildly as he fell. Another bolt clipped the top of the doorway where Vasily and Hadrian were standing, the plasma exploding in a spray of white-hot fire.

“Fire in the hole!” Vasily yelled, hurling his grenade as he charged across the corridor to the shelter of the side hall that led to Musa’s armory and Storage Bay 1. A plasma bolt streaked past him, and another followed him into cover, slamming into the corner and dislodging a spray of metal shards and masonry. The surviving guard was already there, his hands shaking as he fought to unjam the mechanism of his weapon.

The grenade landed just outside the base of the shaft, and exploded under a pair of floaters. The explosion lifted both of them toward the ceiling, and they slowly drifted down, perforated by shrapnel.

“More of them!” Hallorand yelled, as three more floaters appeared out of the lift. The base chief stood over Hadrian, who was kneeling in the shelter of the doorway, firing with calm deliberation. A floater dropped, two neat holes blasted into its chest.

Vasily leaned out of cover, and fired a shot of his own that exploded harmlessly off one of the lift struts. His eyes narrowed as he studied the foe. “Take one alive, these different!” he yelled. He ducked back as a plasma bolt shot past his position. The guard replaced him, spraying a burst of rounds until another bolt caught him squarely in the face.

“Die, you bastards!” Inise Drake yelled, as she pushed past Hallorand and burst into the corridor, firing shots from her handgun. She scored a hit, punching a bullet hole into the floater’s chest that then exploded from inside, tearing a fist-sized hole in its body. The creature let out an agonized sound but fired back, its shot missing Drake by inches. Another hit the wall near Hadrian and Hallorand, sending both men ducking back into cover. Jane emerged with her laser rifle lifted to her shoulder, and drilled the floater with a perfectly aimed shot that drilled a hole through its skull.

Alien bodies and body parts littered the floor around the base of the lift, and the surge abruptly ended. One floater drifted around behind the lift, trailing ugly splatters of fluid from wounds in its chest and arms. Vasily lifted his gun, and yelled, “Not kill, not kill!” but too late; Drake’s hand cannon fired once more, and the alien’s head popped like a balloon. “Grah!” the Russian yelled. He bent to tend to the fallen guard, but one look was enough to tell him it was useless.

Hadrian and Jane came forward warily, alert for any aliens that might be shamming.

“Damn it, they got Brooks and Rogers,” Hallorand said, his own uniform streaked with black lines where streaks of plasma from the near-miss had struck him. The Marine started checking the bodies. “Can we lock the lift down?” Jane asked.

“It should have sealed automatically,” Hallorand said. “The automatic systems must have failed. It looks like they’ve blown the top of the lift, and are using their levitation ability to drift down. Hell, there could be an army up there.”

“They attack other parts of base before,” Vasily said. “We need check medbay and engineering.”

“No way in,” Hallorand said. “The base should have locked down as soon as the power went down.” He shook his head. “No way an EM pulse should have penetrated all the way down here.”

The door to the south wing groaned open, and two more guards appeared, accompanied by James Allen. The doctor started toward the fallen men, but stopped when he saw that there was nothing left for him to do.

Garret appeared in the doorway, a grim look on his face. “We’ve gotten partial backup sensors online. Should have power back up in a few minutes. There are no alien ships topside, but beyond that, we can’t tell much.”

“Where’d they come from, then?” Hallorand asked.

“I don’t know,” Garret said.

“We need to sweep the base,” James said, echoing Vasily’s earlier comment.

Garret nodded. “We’ll have the doors open in a few moments.”

“Let’s check medbay and engineering first,” Jane said, “then hangar, protect personnel first.”

The lights came on in a few minutes as promised, but the main computer and their communications systems remained inactive as the Alphas coordinated with Hallorand’s men in securing the base. They found no signs of other alien intrusions, and manual checks of the venting systems and sublevel access points proved clear. The scientists and engineers were nervous but secure. They found Catalina with a pistol in the medical bay, limping badly as she protected the medical staff in the supply closet behind her. “What the hell happened?” she asked. “Little green men?”

“Red floating men,” Vasily said.

“Damn, I miss all the fun,” Catalina said, grimacing as she leaned back against the nearest bed. “Glad I didn’t let them take my little friend here,” she said, tapping her gun against her hip. “Save a few for me, eh?”

As they made their way back to the communications center, they heard some static hiss out over their communicators, with a few barely distinguishable words in between the white noise. Drake was there to meet them at the door to the communications room. “The hangar is clear,” she said. “but we have other problems.”

“Great,” Jane said.

“We’re reading something up above. Something... big. There’s no alien tech, no ship, no drop pods. Whatever it is, it’s organic.”

“Wha?” Vasily said, as Hadrian echoed, “Organic?”

“Yes. At least, it’s showing green on the boards.”

“Like... flying whale, or something?” Vasily asked.

“Well now. I suppose you will have to find out.”

Vasily scowled. “I love you too.”

“Stay in communication... if the damned things work,” Drake said. “And watch your backs.”

Hallorand came in. “The lift is still down, but we’ve cleared the access to the stairs.”

“Wonderful,” Vasily said.

“I’ll send Zhang and Kolkowski up with you,” Hallorand said. “We still haven’t heard anything from the guards that were on duty above when this hit.” By the look on his face, he didn’t expect to hear anything good anytime soon.

They paused just long enough to get the rest of their gear. Vasily put on his Personal Armor, and James joined them, packing a satchel full of several of the latest generation of medikits. Just ten minutes had passed since the end of the attack before the Alphas were on their way up to the surface, moving in silence up the tight, narrow staircases that folded back in on themselves as they made their way up landing after landing. By the time that they got to the heavy door that led up to the interior of the surface installation, their legs were throbbing from the strain of it.

Vasily glanced back to make sure that the others were ready, then he tugged the manual release and pulled back the heavy steel door.

The interior of the room was dark, with the regular lamps still nonfunctional. The glow of the emergency lighting was enough for them to see that the upper part of the lift had been breached; dark scoring marked the columns where the entry grate had been secured before. As they moved around the lift they could see that the door leading outside was also missing, almost as though it had been simply yanked out of its moorings. There was no sign of the guards that were supposed to be on duty, not even any blood, human or alien.

It was dark outside, the sky a huge expanse of deepening purple as night settled in on the desert. There was still enough of a glow on the horizon for them to see the

landscape around them, and to mark the piece of machinery, roughly the size and shape of a standing child, stuck into the ground about thirty meters in front of the building. Between them and it were the missing guards, or at least parts of them; one man was missing his head, and both of his legs ended in bloody stumps just above the knees. The second... there were just *pieces* of him left, none of them much larger than a backpack.

For a long moment, the six of them just stood there, silent. "My god," Kolkowski finally said, in little more than a whisper.

"Shhh," Vasily said, creeping forward up the recessed staircase, scanning the empty desert. There was no place that an alien, big or small, could have hidden, except for...

He turned, and looked back just as the alien came around the edge of the building. It looked... no, there was nothing that came to mind, nothing terrestrial that Vasily could think of that would be even close to a basis for comparison. It was a *monster*, bipedal but otherwise nothing close to human, a bulging thing of muscles and fur and bony ridges. It walked hunched over, its body compressed like a spring, but even so it stood almost three meters tall. Its arms jutted from its body, trailing down to claws that nearly scratched the ground as it walked. Its face, which Vasily saw as it turned toward him, was a horror in and of itself, a feral visage flanked by curling horns, and jaws that looked big enough to accommodate a human without much effort. Hot slaver trailed between teeth like broad daggers as those jaws opened, and it issued a deep, guttural noise that Vasily felt in his bones, even fifteen meters away.

The others turned and saw it, and felt the sheer primeval impact of it.

Then the thing roared, and charged at them.



* * * * *

Session 19 (September 1, 2008)

Chapter 71

“Shoot it, SHOOT IT!”

It wasn't clear who yelled, or all of them, for their cries were drowned out by the sound of gunfire as the alien monstrosity surged toward them. Bullets, laser beams, and plasma bolts slammed into the alien, which moved with an uncanny speed that caught them all by surprise.

The creature sprang forward, leaping up onto the edge of the building's roof, digging in its hind claws before it jumped again, its momentum carrying it into the midst of the X-COM team.

Vasily was struck solidly in the chest, and went flying, tumbling head over heels before striking the ground and tumbling to a rough halt some ten meters back from where he'd been standing. Zhang screamed as he was crushed under the creature's bulk, and both Jane and James were knocked off their feet.

Hadrian and Kolkowski had avoided being hit in the initial rush, and both unleashed fire into the monster at point-blank range. Hadrian fired his pistol into the joint where its right leg met its body, the plasma bolt thumping into its matted hide with little of the explosive force that the weapon usually evidenced. The creature obviously felt it, but it turned and lashed out with a claw. The Marine dropped into the stairwell and ducked, narrowly avoiding the sweep that gouged out runnels of stone and metal as the claws scored the ground around the stairs.

As the creature turned away, Kolkowski fired his G-36 into its backside, but the bullets merely bounced off its hide. The guard yelled and drew out a stun rod, flicking its power switch and stabbing it hard into the creature's rear. The jolt got the thing's attention, and as it spun around to face its tormentor, nearly taking off Hadrian's face with one of its huge feet as the Marine peeked up from his shelter, looking for a shot. Kolkowski tried to thrust the stun rod into its face, but the creature was faster, seizing him in one huge claw, lifting him off his feet. It grabbed onto the arm holding the stun rod with his other claw, and with a yank tore the limb off at the shoulder. Kolkowski screamed, but that didn't last long as it stuffed his head into its maw and bit down, severing his neck.

A blast of plasma flared against the back of the creature's head as James shot it. The alien turned, tossing Kolkowski's body aside, roaring and flashing its bloody teeth at the doctor. Jane fired her laser rifle, the beam slicing across its head. The alien roared again, this time in pain, but she kept the weapon on target, and as it pulsed across its face one of its eyes swelled and exploded, leaving a trail of bubbling fluid running down its face.

The alien took a step toward them, stepping across the stairwell, but it staggered as a stream of armor-piercing rounds from his autocannon slammed into it from the left. Vasily kept firing, and the alien lifted its arms to protect its face as it turned toward him. Hadrian popped up and slapped something onto its heel just as it fell into a crouch and leapt forward toward the Russian. It closed the distance between them in a flash, but as lunged to strike its right foot exploded with a dull thump. The alien screamed and toppled over, striking Vasily a glancing blow that nevertheless still flipped him over, driving him once more into the ground. He managed to roll away from the creature's violent thrashings.

Energy blasts continued to hit the alien as it dug into the ground with its claws and pulled itself up. Even with a crippled foot and one eye destroyed it still seemed ferociously menacing, and it kept coming, creeping after Vasily rather than charging, leaving a bloody trail of mess behind it on the barren ground. Vasily wisely chose to fall back. His gun had been damaged, the ammo feed fouled by the latest impact, and he slipped out of the heavy harness as he retreated, letting it fall to the ground as he drew

out his plasma pistol and started firing at the creature's face. Jane, James, and Hadrian kept shooting as well, but the alien kept on coming, closing the distance between them.

"Back inside!" Vasily yelled. He turned and started running now in earnest, but the alien, perhaps sensing that its quarry was about to escape it, surged forward, jamming its ruined foot into the ground, then springing off its good one into the fleeing Russian. Vasily went down, and the creature rose triumphantly over him, lifting its claws into the air, forming them into fists like iron hammers.

The other Alphas spun and abandoned their retreat, coming back toward the alien, firing as they came. Plasma bolts exploded around its head, forming a cloud of white fire through which Jane's laser pulsed eager lances of heat. The alien's claws came down, slammed into Vasily's chest. They came up again, but before it could finish the Russian off, Hadrian, now almost within its reach, lifted his pistol and fired a shot that vanished into the dark socket of its ruined eye. The creature rose to its full height, claws clutching at the air, then it tumbled over backwards, landing with enough impact to shake the ground under their feet.

Jane and Hadrian rushed forward to make sure of it, while James bent over Vasily, a medikit already in hand. The Russian groaned, conscious but spitting blood as his broken ribs poked into his lungs. "That... hurt..." he managed, as James shook his head and stabbed the medikit into his chest.

* * * * *

Session 19 (September 1, 2008)

Chapter 72

"It looks like they came on foot over the desert, from the northeast," Hallorand said. He activated graphics that appeared on the map displayed on the big LCD as he gave his report. "Nothing there but empty desert for about 200 miles. We haven't found where they landed, yet, but we're still scouting out possible sites."

"Couldn't you just follow the tracks left by that big bastard?" Hadrian asked.

"We're on it, but it's some rough country out there," Hallorand said.

"Of more concern is how they got inside our detection perimeter," Wagner said. "Our preliminary analysis indicates that the floaters had some sort of integrated device that seems like it was designed to confound our sensors."

"Okay, that not good," Vasily said. He was still a bit weak, but he'd insisted on sitting in on the briefing, even if he could barely remain upright in his chair.

“Now that we know about it, we should be able to counter,” Wagner said. “But it shows they are still a step ahead of us.”

“They brought that EM generator all that way,” Jane said. “Caught us completely by surprise.”

“Our systems were hardened, but that pulse was... nasty,” Hallorand said in agreement. “From what we’ve heard, Reno and Las Vegas are still completely dark.”

“Well, we will definitely need to secure all of our systems against another burst like that,” Garret said.

“And a new alien species to add to our list,” James noted.

“I saw it on the camera as they brought it in,” Garret said.

“What’s next?” Drake snorted. “Dragons and trolls?”

Wagner brought up a picture of the carcass on the monitor, its body making the autopsy bay seem cramped and crowded. “It is probably another genetically engineered creature. Looks like it was designed for close fighting. Tough, fast.”

“Not fast enough for Alpha,” Garret said.

“Yes, well, I’d be more worried about how the aliens could infiltrate and break our security at will,” Drake said.

“Hopefully we’ll know more by morning,” Garret said. “I’ve got the interceptors on alternating CAP duties until the main sensor array is back online. USAF has agreed to scan the desert for us.”

“Did seem small force if they intend to take out all of base,” Vasily said. “Am wondering if this was just... test of new creature.”

“From what I’ve seen of the alien devices,” Wagner said, “They couldn’t have hidden any more than that from our sensors.”

“Vasily has a point,” Garret said. “They certainly seem able to adapt.”

“We shall just have to adapt faster, then,” Drake said, a grim thought that held them as they stared at the monstrous thing up on the monitor, even in death dwarfing the white-clad researchers that moved around it, beginning the work of learning more about what they faced.

* * *

The Alphas didn't get much sleep that night, charged up from the battle above and the implications of the latest alien gambit. Several of them met up in the firing range, where they practiced some more with the new plasma pistols, getting over some of the awkwardness of the alien weapons. When they reunited in the briefing room at 0800, they found the department heads already there.

"Good morning," Garret said in greeting as the Alphas filed in. "We were just going over what we've learned."

He nodded to Doctor Wagner, who continued her report. "The aliens came overland, from a landing site approximately seventy-five miles northeast of here. As we noted earlier, the floaters were upgraded with an integrated device that sent out a jamming field effective against our sensors. We can compensate, now that we know about the technology."

She nodded to Stan White, who stood and brought up a picture of the big alien they'd killed topside on the monitor. "Wait, where's James?" Jane asked.

"He left two hours ago," Garret said. "Doctor White, maybe you can best explain."

Stan nodded. "We got this, last night, from Buzz Olloff, at the Advanced Aerospace Design Center. Buzz has been working on the software for the Lightning project, and we sent him the Russian hard drive to see if he could help out on the decryption."

He typed in a few keys on the control screen, and an e-mail popped upon the large LCD.

FROM: Buzz Olloff
TO: Michael Garret
CC: Kim Wagner
RE: Russian Hard Drive

Russian cryptography isn't what it used to be. There was some Cold War stuff, I could tell you some stories... Anyway. I broke the encryption and am attaching some of the files. Some, because apparently there was a security program that started to wipe the drive once it was tampered with. Whoever yanked this must have really had ten thumbs. Well, I got some good stuff, blueprints, schematics, experiment writeups, yadda yadda. I ran it through a translator for you, and attached the originals as well. I couldn't make head nor tails out of most of it, but show it to the Doc, he'll probably like it.

"The files we got included information about Russian experiments on using energy fields and alien DNA to stimulate cellular regeneration in humans," Stan explained.

"We found device marked like that in base," Vasily said.

Stan nodded. “Apparently some of the experiments led to some nasty side effects, but there were also some remarkable breakthroughs. It is likely that the OSNAZ agents that you encountered had been ‘enhanced’ through these processes, which would help explain why they were so difficult to kill. While stronger safety protocols than those used by the Russians would be in order, our researchers may be able to use this data to begin work on regenerative serums that can eventually be used by X-COM field units.”

“That would be useful,” Jane said.

“Indeed,” Stan replied. “There are a ton of useful applications, this could advance medical science by—”

“Suffice it to say that we’re moving on this to get some useful field applications,” Garret interrupted. “Doctor Allen’s hasty departure is for a meeting at the American National Institutes of Health in Maryland; there’s a team of scientists from the United States and the European Union there already, working on several projects derived from alien science.”

“How long will he be gone?” Jane asked.

“Hopefully, just a few days,” Stan said.

“Doctor White, for now, please continue with your briefing,” Garret said.

Stan nodded and brought the image of the big alien back up on the screen. “Our preliminary analysis indicates that they’re definitely an engineered species,” he explained, bringing up a column of data that didn’t mean a whole lot to the Alphas. They already knew what the thing could do. “Built for combat. Fast, armored, and deadly. We’re calling them ‘reapers’ for now.”

“How droll,” Agent Drake said. By the look on her face as she sipped her coffee, she hadn’t gotten any sleep last night either.

Garret turned to her. “Agent Drake, your update?”

“I was going to report on this last night... before. A source has provided a lead on a possible alien activity on U.S. soil. We’ve set up a cordon... quietly... around an industrial park outside of Dallas. The place is dead; business dried up in the crash of ’08. Not much there now save for rotting buildings, mostly.”

“What kind of ‘activity,’ you think?” Vasily asked.

“That’s why you’re here, Vasily,” Drake said without missing a beat. “To find out the answers to those questions.”

“The neighborhood is putting out a lot of energy for an ‘inactive’ region,” Wagner said. She brought up a map of the southern United States, which rapidly zoomed in until they could see Dallas, and then closer, until they could see the buildings of the target zone in detail. “This is an old satellite image,” she explained. “Our preliminary scans indicate that *something* is going on there.”

“Anyway,” Drake went on, after a look at Garret, “We’ve agreed to let X-COM take the lead in this investigation.”

“If there is activity related to the aliens going on there, we need to find out, and learn what we can.”

“Any indication of what kind of aliens?” Hadrian asked.

“Hyperwave decoder shows nothing,” Wagner said. “Although if they have jammers now...”

“Assume it could be anything,” Garret said.

“Right,” the Marine acknowledged.

“Last night’s attack notwithstanding, the aliens have been too quiet of late,” Garret said. “They’re up to something, and we need to know what it is, before it happens. We’ve been playing catch up too much of late.”

“The area should be clear of civilians,” Wagner said. “If you do run into anyone, try to scare them out. We don’t want collateral damage.”

“Any human collaborators likely?” James asked.

“I would have said no,” Garret said, “before France.”

The Alphas shared a look, and nodded in understanding. “You depart at 1200 hours,” Garret said.

“Why the delay?” Hadrian asked.

Garret shifted his gaze to Vasily. “Before you depart, you have an appointment in Workshop 2.”

* * * * *

Session 19 (September 1, 2008)

Chapter 73

"Feel kind of loose," Vasily said. "Rattles."

"We can fix that, Mister Kasprjak. Hold on."

A series of whirs and clanks followed, as the technicians tightened bolts and straps, while another made adjustments at the console the suit is plugged into. "Is that any better?"

The Russian made a fist inside the mechanised gauntlet, and took a few experimental steps. "It feel like elephant sitting on me," he complained, beginning to sweat. He couldn't imagine running and fighting while carrying weapons and gear in a getup like this...

"How about now?"

...and suddenly the crushing weight was gone, as the generator on the back of the suit began to hum. He took a couple more steps, bounced on his feet a couple of times, and nodded.

"Better."

Jane looked him up and down as he walked over to her. She'd put a lot of extra work on the suit project over the last week, and she nodded as he came to a stop in front of her. He was normally just a few inches taller than her, but the armor gave him a slight boost, and she had to crane her head back to meet his eyes. "Looks good on you," she said.

In the hangar bay, Hadrian was the first to arrive, and was greeted warmly by Doctor Sandesh, who was trailed by the latest incarnation of the Heavy Weapons Platform. The Marine eyed the contraption dubiously. While he hadn't been with them on the Canada mission, he'd read the mission files, and the report on the sabotage of the prototype platform in Research Lab 2. The HWP looked a little different than the HWP that Alpha had brought with them to Canada, with new bolsters along the sides of the turret, surrounding the bulky laser assembly, and a new bulge in the front that glowed slightly red, almost like an unblinking eye.

"It's all tuned up and ready to go," Sandesh said, pleased to show off his creation. "You have been briefed on their use, correct? I can initialize your voice patterns on the device, and it will follow your commands."

"It any good?" Hadrian asked, his expression betraying his wariness of the machine.

“The laser is lethal, with increased penetration over the last model. Targeting is precise.” He went on to explain various features his team had upgraded. Hadrian listened, but he was relieved when the hangar door opened, and the other Alphas filed into the hangar.

It was a diminished company. Vasily was clad in the new powered armor, its weight causing the floor tiles to tremble with each step he took. Hadrian was happy to leave it to the Russian. His own training had focused on speed and stealth in the tactical environment, neither of which seemed to be a priority of the new suit. Jane wore the same Personal Armor he did, and carried an extra weapon, which she held out to Hadrian as she approached.

The Marine took it a bit reluctantly; the alien weapons made him a bit uneasy, as he didn't like a weapon he couldn't field-strip and repair on his own. From what little he'd been able to understand of the briefing materials on the new tech, trying that with the alien guns would likely leave him scattered about in tiny pieces. “New gun?” he asked.

“These were what the floater infiltrators were using,” she explained. “We've encountered a few samples before. They're calling them 'plasma rifles,' although really they're just a slightly upsized version of the pistol. They look ugly as sin and aren't well-balanced, but they'll deliver a more focused blast with about fifteen percent more stopping power, and more accuracy at longer distances. The only down side is the faster ammo consumption; you'll get about fifteen shots before you deplete the cell.”

“Well, I think I prefer my trusty M4 for long-distance engagements,” Hadrian said.

“Regular gun not stop alien sometimes,” Vasily said. Hadrian saw that he had one of the weapons fastened to the hip of his armor, in addition to his heavy autocannon. “You expecting trouble on this mission?” he asked.

“Always expect trouble,” Vasily returned. Behind him the hangar door slid open again, and they turned to see Catalina coming toward them. She was dressed in her field kit, including her stealth-blackened Personal Armor, and was trying her best to conceal a slight limp.

“No way I'm letting you leave without me,” she said, with a slight grimace as she caught up to them. Vasily nodded in approval, then looked over her shoulder as one of the surgical nurses, still clad in scrubs, burst into the hangar behind her.

“Miss De Farrago!” the nurse exclaimed. “Someone tied Garrison to the surgical bed! Gagged him, too!”

“Hmm,” Hadrian said, his expression sere.

“Must be some sort of terrorist flitting around,” Catalina said deadpan.

The nurse frowned. "Shouldn't you be in bed?" he said.

"Well, you've got a prescription pad, doc, and I've got a plasma gun," she said. "So I guess I get to do what I want."

"We bring her back safe and sound," Vasily said. "We only going to Dallas."

Hadrian raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. They turned to the Skyranger, and the mission ahead.

* * * * *

Session 20 (September 8, 2008)

Chapter 74

"I knew a girl from Dallas," Ken said over the intercom, as the Skyranger banked into a wide turn and began its descent. "She left me for an Air Force pilot."

"Don't you traditionally shoot presidents there?" Catalina asked, flinching as a sudden jolt bumped her head against the back of her seat rest. It was just turbulence, not an attack, but it didn't help the mood in the passenger compartment of the aircraft.

Hadrian had spent the flight working on his xPhone. "I haven't been able to access any blueprints for the target area," he reported. "No records from the entire district. Computer database is blank."

"There's a surprise," Catalina said.

"Don't suppose we could visit city hall and look up the paper versions first?"

"Sheesh, Hadrian. Let's go sit in the reading room while they look them up for us. I'm sure the aliens won't do anything nefarious while we wait."

"Fine, blind recon by fire it is then."

"Getting some scanner readings from the site," Ken reported. "Some weird power readings. We'll be on site in ten minutes, I'll try to localize."

They continued their approach for several more minutes before Ken's voice returned over the intercom. "Getting a ping on the Hyperwave Decoder. Sending to HQX... Database confirms. Floaters, and one other signature, not clear. Almost certainly another alien type."

“Not clear’?” Vasily asked.

“My guess is reaper,” Jane said. “The med techs said that since they hadn’t finished the autopsy on our big friend yet, they don’t have a hard signature for the hyperwave.”

“Okay, I think I’ve localized the power signatures,” Ken reported. “Looks like two signatures, fairly close together. I’ll set you down near them. Hang on...”

The ship banked hard, dropping rapidly in the familiar but still gut-wrenching sensation that they’d gotten used to with Ken’s flying. When the engines fired to slow their descent, they were ready, and as soon as the aircraft touched down they were up and heading for the hatch.

“Energy sigs are to the east and northeast of our current position,” Ken said. “I’ll dust off and wait for your signal from the designated holding position.”

They filed out of the Skyranger to see a quiet, run-down industrial district sprawled out around them. The buildings were old shells, mostly sprawling warehouses that took up most of a block, nearly all of them streaked with visible rust, water damage, or both. They could see a few tall, round buildings in the distance, probably storage tanks for oil or other liquids, and the vague outlines of the Dallas skyline off in the distance to the north.

Ken had put them down in the middle of a street, the asphalt cracked and battered by the passage of heavy trucks. Once Sandesh’s improved HWP had slid down out of its compartment in the Skyranger’s belly, the pilot took it back up into the sky, dust flying wildly around them as the aircraft rose steeply and jettied off to the south. Up ahead they could see a tiny building, perhaps a security shack or storage shed of some sort. The wreck of an old pickup truck was lying next to it. Long chain-link fences topped with razor wire ran along both sides of the road, although the security gates that had controlled access to the warehouses had been broken open, and most of them stood open

“Anything on motion detector?” Vasily asked.

Catalina finished her sweep. “Something small to the northwest. Coming closer.”

They lifted their weapons, only to lower them again when a bird fluttered over the top of one of the warehouses. As it caught sight of them it veered off, disappearing to the west.

“All right,” Vasily said. He glanced back at the HWP, which had just sat there since disembarking. “Stay close, shoot what we shoot at,” he directed. He led them forward, the four of them scanning the deserted neighborhood warily as they made their way to

the north. The HWP trundled along behind them, leaving a small plume of dust in its wake.

They stopped in front of the security hut, which looked as ramshackle as the surrounding warehouses. It had a small access window in the front blocked by metal shutters that had rusted solid, but on examining the door Catalina found that the lock had been hammered out. She listened at the door for a few seconds, then pushed it open with the barrel of her pistol. The interior of the hut was a mess, with everything down to the fixtures on the walls torn out and dangling remnants of wire that had been pulled for its metal content. A few heavy metal filing cabinets had been left behind, but were tipped over, the drawers yanked out and stacked in a pile in the middle of the floor. Someone had cut the security desk in half and stacked the pieces end-on-end against the back wall.

“Empty,” she reported.

“Did you hear that?” Jane said, turning toward the big warehouse to the southeast, behind the security fence. The others spun in time to see a reaper emerge from around the corner of the building. It lifted its head, as if tasting the air, then it swiveled toward them. A second one appeared behind the first, and let out a low snuffling sound that carried clearly to them even across eighty meters of open space.

Before the Alphas could do anything but lift their weapons, both creatures lowered their heads and charged.

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Session 20 (September 8, 2008)

Chapter 75

The Alphas opened fire, but their initial shots failed to do much; striking the chain-link fence, the plasma blasts exploded prematurely and left gaping holes but little more. The HWP's laser beam did somewhat better, lancing through the fence and slicing across the flank of the first reaper, leaving an ugly black scar but failing to stop or even slow the oncoming monstrosity. Hadrian fell into a crouch and fired short bursts from his M4, but the bullets might have been spitwads for all the effect they had on the reaper.

The pair reached the fence and kept coming; the chain links barely slowed them as they tore through it and left a cluttered wreckage in their wake. The Alphas were scoring hits, now, as Jane clipped the lead creature on the shoulder with a plasma bolt that exploded in a nimbus of white fire and alien blood. Vasily's explosive-tipped rounds

pattered across its chest, and Catalina hit it on the meat of its left thigh, but still the alien kept coming, the other one just a long stride behind it.

“Into the building!” Vasily yelled, standing at the door, pouring more rounds into the alien as it bore down on them. The others darted in around him, and as the alien lunged he slid inside. He saw the HWP fire one last pulse from its laser cannon before a long claw slapped the machine aside, knocking it end-over-end as though it had been a toy. Hadrian started to shoulder the door shut, but then the whole building heeled over, as though it had been kicked by a giant. The door was flung back open, and both Hadrian and Vasily were knocked to the ground. The reaper’s arm thrust through the door as its outline filled the frame, the claws clutching at the fallen Alphas. Vasily and Hadrian tried to get out of its way, but the probing claws found Vasily and dragged him down, seeking a secure grip as he struggled to get free.

“Blast it!” Catalina yelled, firing her plasma pistol into the doorway, filling it with white fire. Jane stepped forward and aimed her plasma rifle point-blank at the alien’s probing arm, shooting it in the elbow. The alien roared and jerked back, knocking Hadrian into the wall before it withdrew fully.

But the aliens weren’t giving up, and the whole building shook now as the reapers came at them in earnest. Daylight shone into the tiny building as great rents opened in the walls and ceiling, and the whole structure started to lean as it came apart. Reaper claws were replaced by the unholy visages of the creatures as they pushed their way inside, and the Alphas unleashed their full firepower to greet them. At that range they could hardly miss. Hadrian thrust the barrel of his carbine almost into a reaper’s snarling jaws and fired a complete magazine at full-auto, the bullets caroming off its teeth and battering at the slightly softer flesh on the inside of its mouth. The alien roared in fury and redoubled its efforts to get in, and the entire front left corner of the building collapsed under it. It lunged at Hadrian, who leapt back and ducked behind the ruins of the filing cabinets where the others had taken shelter behind him. Multiple plasma bolts wreathed its head and upper body in streamers of superheated ionized gas, and the scent of charred meat filled the air inside the remnants of the hut. Vasily screamed something unintelligible as he poured fire from his autocannon, the barrels of his gun beginning to glow as he kept firing, the recoil driving him against the back wall.

The entire building collapsed, the slat roof crumpling onto them in pieces, coming apart under the continuing reaper assault. A huge slab of it was flung aside as the first reaper lunged forward, oozing blood now from the terrible wounds it had absorbed, half its face a blasted wreckage. Jane shot it in the throat, the backblast seeping from the sides of its jaws, and it fell, crushing the file cabinets and knocking Catalina roughly over onto her side. For a moment they were blinded by the swirling cloud of dust and smoke that wreathed the dying creature, then the second reaper suddenly loomed over them. They kept firing, even Catalina, on the floor, screaming as she fired shot after shot into the alien. It lunged forward, and punched Vasily through the back of the building, the only wall left standing. The others glanced at the hole with incredulity; the thing had batted the armored Russian through the fiberboard as though he’d weighed nothing.

The alien kept on attacking, sweeping a claw at Jane, who ducked just in time to avoid a pulverizing blow that scattered the fragments of the wrecked desk, one half flipping up and over before vanishing over a fence a good twenty meters distant. She fired back, the plasma bolt savaging its elbow joint. It lunged forward to take a bite out of her face, but before it could seize her, Hadrian reared up behind the remnants of their barricade and thrust the barrel of his plasma rifle into the hollow under the reaper's protruding ribs. He fired, the weapon making a dull thump as the plasma bolt bore a hole into its chest cavity before exploding. The reaper tottered for a moment, a weak groan hissing from its jaws before it toppled over onto its back. Hadrian reached down and helped Catalina to her feet; behind them, the back wall of the hut finally gave out, and fell over, leaving nothing but scattered wreckage and two huge alien corpses where a building had stood just moments before.

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Session 20 (September 8, 2008)

Chapter 76

“Good grief, *those* were the slashing rippy things?” Catalina asked, her hands trembling as she reloaded her pistol.

“Welcome to reapers,” Jane said. She was helping Vasily, who'd landed on his back a good ten paces from where the reaper had struck him. His heavy armor had kept him together, but he let out a deep breath of relief as Jane poked the contents of a medikit into him through one of the access ports that Grace had built into the powered armor.

“Vasily, I'm going to need your help over here,” Hadrian called. The Russian, nodding in thanks to Jane, walked over to where the Marine was attending to the damaged HWP. The portable tank had landed on its side after being flung aside by the charging reaper, but remarkably it appeared to still be functional. With the bolstered strength granted by his armor, Vasily was able to help Hadrian right the platform. The Marine jimmed open the bent access port in the rear of the machine, and went to work with the small tool kit he carried.

“Lets go see where they come from,” Vasily said. He looked back at Hadrian, who shrugged. “It seems to be working, but I wouldn't put money on how long.”

The battered tank rattled and creaked as it trundled along behind them to the southeast, toward the building from which the reapers had emerged. It didn't take long to reach it, and to make their way around to the far side where two doors, a regular one next to a roll-up metal door, were situated.

A quick examination indicated that both doors, while they looked as battered as the rest of the complex, had been used recently and maintained. The smaller door had a new lock on it, but it Catalina was able to cut it open with just a few pulses from her laser pistol. Vasily ordered the laser tank to remain outside and keep watch, and they went inside.

Most of the warehouse's interior was a single large room, cluttered with the framework of storage units that had probably once held pallets of materials. A few side rooms were visible off to the left on the far side of the structure, but their attention was drawn to a large machine set up in the middle of the space, from which a loud hum rose.

"That worry me," Vasily said.

"Want me to take a look at it?" Catalina asked.

"Just figure if it is bomb or something," Vasily grunted.

"Looks like a generator, but I'll be careful," the British agent replied, moving over to take a look.

She gave the device a careful assay, pacing around it before moving in closer. It looked like a diesel generator, a big one, but there was no fuel tank that Catalina could see, just thick cables that ran into a hole in the floor. She was very wary around the control panel, which was unlabeled and had just a few small switches and glowing indicator lights. She took out her xPhone and took a quick reading. "It's being shunted off somewhere else, and it looks like it would run a lot of houses, maybe one of your city blocks."

Jane had moved over toward the side rooms, which might have been small offices or specialized storage units, their doors open. As she approached the last one in the row, she caught a glimpse of movement that might have been a trick of the light, or something more. She adjusted her VDU to improve low-light visibility, and sidled forward.

The room—it did look like an office, but with a thick film of dust over everything—looked deserted. There was a space on the desk where a computer might have sat once, but everything of value looked to have been scavenged long before. Jane stepped forward, frowning as she dragged a finger over the desk, leaving a trail through the dust.

A woman stepped out from behind the door, and pointed a very big pistol at the side of her head. "Who the hell are you?" she asked, drawing the hammer of her weapon back with a loud click.

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Session 20 (September 8, 2008)

Chapter 77

"It's okay," Jane said. "We're humans."

Back in the outer room, the other Alphas looked up as Jane's words were carried over the open comlink. "Jones!" Vasily hissed, hurrying over toward the little room where Jane had disappeared.

"Tell your friends to stay where they are," the woman said.

"I'm all right, just hold it a sec," Jane said, raising her voice to carry; no sense in letting the woman know they were linked. The others stopped outside the door, weapons ready.

"Take off the helmet," the woman commanded. The barrel of her handgun hadn't wavered a millimeter. "Let me see. No sudden moves."

Jane put her gun down on the desk, and reached up, taking off her helmet, which hissed slightly as the pressurized seal was broken.

"Well, that just proves you're not one of them, not that you're not with them," the woman said. "What are you doing here?"

"We could ask you the same thing," Catalina said. She'd crept up to the doorway, and now held her plasma pistol trained on the woman.

"Bastards trapped me in here," the woman said. "I was just poking around a bit."

"Looking around, eh?" Catalina asked.

The woman's eyes ran up and down Catalina's frame, and lingered on the insignia stenciled onto her chestplate. "Ah. X-COM, I presume?"

Jane said, "My name's Jane."

"Vala," the woman said.

"How are you, Vala?" Jane asked.

"Well, Jane, I've spent the last five hours trapped in an alien infested warehouse, how are you?"

"We're investigating," Jane said.

“And have you found anything?”

“Enough,” Catalina said.

“You find out what the aliens are using all that power for?”

“Not yet, but our question still stands. What are you doing here?”

The woman lowered her gun, and tucked it into a holster on her hip. “Let’s just say that X-COM isn’t the only organization concerned about the alien threat.”

“Phoenix,” Vasily said, snapping his fingers.

“Ah,” Vala said. “I thought I recognized you. The Japanese restaurant. We’ve come a long way since then, no?”

Catalina folded her arms. “Oh. Her.”

“Who do you represent?” Jane asked. She moved back a step, careful not to make any abrupt moves toward her weapon.

“My employers aren’t looking for attention,” Vala said.

“A pity they now have it,” Catalina returned.

“They are very concerned that what happened to France doesn’t happen here. And you should be as well. There’s something going on in this complex, something that certain people don’t want you to know about. And if they learn that you’re here, they might just decide to blow it all to hell to keep you from finding it.”

Vasily grunted. “We working on it.”

“We won’t find out while we are standing here,” Catalina said.

“What can we refer to your group as then?” Jane asked. “Allies, perhaps?”

Vala’s lips twisted into a smirk. “Allies. Well, we’ll see.” She headed for the door. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment. My bladder, eh? You ladies understand. Five freaking hours.”

As she headed out into the larger room, Catalina stepped close to Jane. “Sheesh, Jane, a little caution, eh?”

“I’d like to see if she’s willing to work with us, or if we are on opposite sides.”

“Oh, and you can tell by what she answers that she’s a noble, upstanding individual.”

“I think we can use all the help we can get.”

“And an enemy of an enemy is our friend? Let’s wait until we know more before being too friendly.”

Jane put her helmet back on, and took up her plasma rifle while Catalina turned back toward the door.

Vala arched her back as she walked toward Vasily. “Nice armor,” she said.

“It work.”

“By now, they know you’re here. I wouldn’t dawdle.” She reached down toward her belt. “Oh, and say hello to Inise for me.” She touched something on her belt, and suddenly disappeared.

“Hold i—” Vasily began, lifting his gun, but he blinked and looked where she had been standing, which was now empty air.

“Silent mode now,” Catalina said from the doorway, “that’s clever kit, and we don’t know where she is.”

“Nice girl,” Hadrian said. “You know her, Vasily?”

“I not ‘know.’ She was... ‘investigating’ in one of our previous operational areas. Before you join team.”

“What are we going to do about that?” Catalina asked, nodding in the direction of the generator.

Vasily started to turn toward it, but before he could speak, they all heard sounds coming from the slightly open door leading outside. Guttural noises, snorts, the lumbering step of something big, followed quickly by the noise of the HWP firing, then a massive slam, then silence.

“Sounds like we have more reapers,” Hadrian said, lifting his plasma rifle as he retreated from the doorway. A shadow fell over the doorway. “At the door, get ready,” the Marine said.

“Spread out!” Vasily warned, spinning up the barrels of his autocannon, the high-pitched whine sounding overly loud in the cavernous confines of the warehouse.

The shadow withdrew from the door, and they shared a quick look, all they had time to do before the metal rollup door shuddered from a heavy impact. The metal dented

heavily inward, and again, before it began to tear. Rents of sunlight filtered in, forming long trails along the floor. The Alphas held their fire until the entire door broke free and caved into the room, a reaper following in its wake, stumbling over the wreckage of tortured metal. Moving incredibly fast, the creature surged forward to attack.

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Session 20 (September 8, 2008)

Chapter 78

Plasma bolts slammed into the reaper, followed by a patter of explosive-tipped rounds from Vasily's autocannon. The combined barrage staggered the alien, but it recovered quickly, and sprang at Catalina, who happened to draw its attention. The agent tried to dive out of its path, but a long claw swiped her hard across the hip, and she was flung roughly aside, spinning twice in midair before slamming into a rack of empty shelving. The collision brought the entire assembly down onto her, and she lay there in the wreckage, groaning.

Hadrian yelled and fired, trying to draw it, but it focused on Vasily, whose cannon continued to spew out a stream of fire as it poured projectiles into the alien's body. The reaper came on through that storm of metal, ignoring the blasts that dug tiny pits into its dense body. But it had a harder time ignoring the direct hit that Jane scored on its left knee with her plasma rifle. Even as it lunged at the Russian the joint gave way, and it toppled forward, off balance. Vasily sprang back, narrowly avoiding the sweeping claws. The alien roared, thrashing on the concrete floor as it tried to get up, but the Alphas surrounded it, blasting the creature until it collapsed in a bloody heap.

The barrels of Vasily's autocannon spun slowly to a stop, their ammunition feed depleted. Jane moved quickly to help Catalina, while Hadrian moved cautiously to the door to verify that no further threats lurked outside.

"Time to move," Vasily said. "We need to find other power signature, probably where this lead," he said, indicating the cables running into the floor. "You all right?" he asked Catalina, who was limping but seemed otherwise intact. "Just need to catch my breath," she said.

"You think you able to stop generator?" he asked.

"I can try," she said, moving over to it.

"Is that 'yes'? If not definite 'yes', I worry."

"Let me have a look!"

“You already have look!”

Catalina bent over the generator’s control panel. “Look, there’s no simple ‘off’ switch here, it’s a complicated access system. It might take a while.”

“How we all doing on ammo?” Vasily asked, shrugging out of the harness that supported his autocannon and its ammunition supply, letting the heavy assembly drop to the floor of the warehouse. He drew his plasma pistol and powered it up.

“Doing okay,” Hadrian said from the door. Indeed, with his plasma rifle, slung M4, and the automatic pistol tucked into the small of his back, he looked like a small armory in and of himself.

“Three full cells left,” Jane added, swapping out a fresh one as they waited for Catalina.

The agent held her tongue between her teeth as she poked at the generator’s systems for a minute, then two. Finally she took a step back, and drew out her laser pistol, firing a long burst into the access panel. The reactor shuddered, then ground to a halt.

“There we go,” she said.

Vasily, who’d braced himself for the inevitable explosion, looked up with a raised eyebrow. “Okay... we best move fast then. They know we coming now for sure.”

They made their way back outside, blinking against the bright sunlight before their helmet visors darkened in response. They found the HWP there, clearly done for the day, its turret crumpled into a barely recognizable lump, with bits and pieces of ripped metal scattered around it. They headed north, toward the location of the second power signature. The signal had dimmed once Catalina had cut the power, but their VDUs preserved the coordinates, flashing on a digital overlay superimposed on their field of view.

They didn’t have to search for the right warehouse, assuming that it was the one with a half-dozen floaters lingering around the entrance. The Alphas lingered at the corner of the next building over, working on their plan of attack. “I could move back to that warehouse there,” Hadrian said. “Take some long range shots, draw them into an ambush from you folks here.”

Vasily nodded. “Is fine, just not get shot doing it.”

The Marine smiled, only slightly, and headed back at a trot. He crossed the deserted street and vanished around the corner of the building he’d marked. Vasily took out a gas grenade, and nodded to Catalina, who’d crept up to the very edge of the corner that faced onto the floater warehouse, holding her motion detector out in that direction.

They only had to wait about a minute before the familiar bark of Hadrian's rifle sounded from behind the far building. The response came quickly; plasma bolts streaked past their hiding place, blasting into the warehouse. They couldn't see if any of the shots hit Hadrian, but after a moment they heard more gunshots, which died out as the alien barrage intensified.

"They're coming," Catalina whispered. "Thirty meters and closing."

Vasily tapped her shoulder and gestured for them to fall back from the corner. The warehouse itself was sealed up tight, but it had a slightly recessed driveway to allow trucks to make and pickup deliveries directly into the warehouse. They used that edge to take cover, and wait.

More plasma bolts streaked past, although no more return fire came from Hadrian. Catalina hissed at Vasily and Jane and lifted her plasma pistol just as the first floater came into view, drifting two feet above the faded concrete. Vasily gestured for them to hold their fire as two more floaters appeared, then another pair. As soon as those last two were visible Vasily popped up and tossed his grenade, which burst into a cloud of gas that enveloped all of the floaters in its radius.

The Alphas fired even as the cloud started to dissipate, and at the relatively close range they could hardly miss. Two floaters went down at once, and the other three milled about, stunned by the gas, firing a bolt or two that came nowhere near their attackers. One crumpled as Jane pumped a plasma bolt into its head, and another spun around as Vasily and Catalina tore burning holes into it with their plasma pistols.

Focused on their ambush, none of them noticed the last alien that came around the other side of the building, behind them. It lifted its plasma rifle and fired, the shot hitting Jane in the back from behind. She screamed and fell, burning white fire burning into her armor.

"Behind!" Catalina yelled needlessly, as the alien continued firing, while the last one in the ambushed group recovered enough to grab a grenade and toss it at them. The oblong orb bounced and landed two feet ahead of Vasily, who stared at it with wide eyes.

* * * * *

Session 20 (September 8, 2008)

Chapter 79

“DOWN!” Vasily yelled, instinct overruling through as he lunged out and slapped the alien grenade, sending it skittering across the blacktop. He dropped below the lip of the driveway at the same instant that it exploded, the concussive force knocking both him and Catalina prone despite the protection of the concrete barrier. He quickly blinked and started to rise, only to flinch as a plasma bolt exploded against the concrete a scant foot in front of his face.

He looked up and saw the floater that had shot Jane, closer now, barely twenty meters away. The barrel of its plasma rifle looked as big as a gaping chasm as it pointed it at Vasily, a bright glow forming as another plasma bolt was created, the alien weapon’s Elerium crystal amplifying its power to a deadly level. Vasily felt as though his arm was frozen in thick syrup as he lifted weapon to fire, knowing it was too late.

But even as the glow of the alien’s rifle flared bright, it jerked roughly to the side. The plasma bolt streaked uselessly into the air. Vasily glanced over to see Hadrian approaching across the open street, his rifle at his shoulder, firing perfectly aimed shots into the floater’s body. The alien tried to turn to face him, but a bullet shattered its arm, and the plasma rifle fell to the ground. The floater tried to escape, but a few more cracks of the rifle and it settled to the ground, blood oozing out of rents in its body.

Vasily pulled himself to his feet and scanned the battlefield. The last alien from the group they’d ambushed was gone, but the other four were all dead. Catalina was helping Jane to her feet, having already used her medikit to stabilize the wounded agent. Vasily’s ears rung a bit, but he wasn’t seriously hurt; the powered armor worked as advertised.

“You okay?” he asked Jane.

“A bit hurt, but I can go on,” she replied.

“More weapons here, if you need them,” Catalina said, pointing to the plasma rifles left by the aliens. She recovered the one that the alien Hadrian had killed had dropped, checking it to make sure that the containment cell was intact.

“Do we have any more medikits?” Jane asked.

Hadrian shook his head, but Vasily said, “Have one. Do you need it?”

Jane shook her head. “I just hope we’re not walking into a trap.”

“Longer we dawdle, longer they have to sort trap out,” Vasily said.

After scanning the area to verify that the aliens weren't waiting for them outside the warehouse, they approached their target. The building was much like the others, if slightly larger. It too showed the subtle signs of recent repair, although a casual look showed the same rust-stained sheet metal, the same streaks of water damage under the eaves high above. When they got closer, however, they saw that the doors were crafted of heavy plate steel. Catalina went to work on it, taking out her burglar's tools while the others covered.

“Security system” she reported. “Pretty good, but I'm better. Just a moment...”

“Okay,” Vasily told the others. “ID targets before you shoot. We want prisoners. We want know what is going on here. Medics, leaders, anything new. Do not shoot them.”

“I've no stunner,” Hadrian said.

“We get you one. For now, cover me and Jane.”

“Ready,” Catalina said. “Say when.”

“When!” Vasily yelled. Catalina kicked the door open, and the Russian darted through, into the cavernous interior of the warehouse.

The booby trap was located in the floor, just a few steps inside the door. It unleashed a tremendous jolt of electrical energy from a series of capacitors, a flare that enveloped Vasily in tendrils of blazing power. The backblast flashed into the walls and door, slicing the other Alphas as it discharged.

Vasily screamed and stiffened as the power coursed through him, overloading the circuits in his armor, which twitched and jerked of their own accord. His problems became more serious a moment later as the trap was followed by a thunderous barrage of fire, from deeper within the warehouse, which enveloped him in a blazing wreath of plasma explosions that surrounded his entire body inside a halo of deadly white flame.

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Session 20 (September 8, 2008)

Chapter 80

Grace Thelon Beluca had taken the lessons learned from Cecilia Sharp's death to heart, and she hadn't rested until her team had figured out how to fix the vulnerability in their Powered Armor to electrical overloads.

That attention to detail saved Vasily's life. His armor had absorbed most of the electrical burst, but even so it hadn't been pleasant. As he staggered back, dazed, blinded by the plasma bursts that hammered into him, the systems in the armor automatically cycled, the backups taking over for the burned-out primaries. And within its protective sheath in the small of his back, the Elerium-115 power core rested securely, pouring out the incredible quantities of energy needed by the armor on demand.

With Vasily overwhelmed, his companions quickly responded to the alien ambush. Hadrian threw a grenade at a row of crates from which a volley of alien fire was coming; the bomb bounced off the far wall before landing directly behind the crates, followed a moment later by an explosion that shredded the two floaters there. To the right, Jane darted forward into the interior, firing at another two floaters, clipping one on the shoulder and spinning it around. The other took aim at her but was blasted in the chest by Catalina, who remained in the cover of the doorway, selecting her targets with care.

The interior of the warehouse was dominated by a massive structure that extended from one side of the building to the other, but they paid it little heed at the moment, focused on dealing with the alien defenders. One of the floaters blasted by Hadrian's grenade was still up and able to fire, its shot narrowly missing Vasily and Hadrian both before punching into the warehouse's wall. The Marine fell into a crouch and snapped off a few rounds, one of which pinged off the side of the alien's head, dropping it. On the far side Jane ducked behind the cover of a metal pylon just as the aliens facing her laid down a series of blasts that flared as they struck the bare steel. Jane ducked back as far as she could as tendrils of plasma seared her armor and faceplate. Catalina kept shooting, and as soon as the aliens shifted to deal with her Jane ducked out long enough to finish the one she'd wounded with a second shot that punched a fist-sized hole through its torso.

Vasily let out a deep-throated growl as he staggered forward, the armor responding again as he regained control of his limbs and senses. A bolt of plasma exploded right in front of him, and he looked up to see a floater perched atop the long cylindrical structure that dominated the warehouse, crammed in almost under the warehouse roof some twenty meters above. The alien fired again, but Vasily was already moving, the bolt streaking down to impact the ground where he'd just been standing. His growl became a roar as he unleashed a barrage of shots that streaked at the alien, punching holes in

the warehouse roof that bracketed the floater soldier. The two foes exchanged several misses like that until Vasily finally stopped, aimed, and pulsed out a shot that caught the alien right between the eyes. It fell back and toppled off of the cylinder, landing somewhere on the far side of the warehouse beyond his view.

The battle was over, save for the harsh cough of Hadrian's rifle as the Marine made sure of one of his fallen foes. Vasily's armor looked as though it had been through a cataclysm; black burn marks streaked the gray plating, and several of the joints ground where they'd been damaged by the punishment the suit had absorbed. But inside the Russian was intact, if somewhat the worse for wear, and there was no doubt that any of the others would be sprawled dead on the floor of the warehouse if any of them had withstood that level of attack.

"Everyone okay?" he asked. The others all chimed that they were, but any other discussion tapered off as their eyes were drawn to the massive thing that filled the interior of the warehouse.

It was a big cylinder, tapering at the ends, extending to the very edge of the warehouse to each side and rising to just a few meters short of the ceiling. It had to have been almost a hundred meters long, and by the look of the heavy machinery that was jumbled into the corners and along the edges of the cavernous space, it had been assembled here. Even now it had an unfinished look to it; the exterior dull and undecorated with paint or insignia of any sort. A ladder rose up the side of it off to the right, near one end, to what looked like an entry of some sort.

"What the hell is that?" Vasily asked, trying to make sense of the whole.

"It's a ship," Jane said, an odd tilt to her voice. "A space ship."

The others looked at her dubiously, but none of them could offer a challenge to her identification. "Guess we know what they were up to," Catalina said.

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Session 20 (September 8, 2008)

Chapter 81

"Should be an interesting briefing," Catalina said, shooting a wry smile at Vasily, who merely grunted as he held open the door for her and Jane.

They felt human again, or at least close to it, washed and fed if not rested. They'd gotten back late from Dallas, well after midnight, and it was still early in the morning in

Nevada, although it was hard to keep track of time this far underground and the chaotic schedules that HQX kept.

The briefing was just the department heads and Alphas. Drake was there, and she met them with a hard look as they took their seats.

“So, we met somebody,” Catalina said. “Someone we had met before, only now she has a name.”

“Yes?” Garret asked.

“Enough playing games,” Drake hissed. “If you have something to share, just say it.”

Catalina’s look said that she was enjoying the chance to torment Drake. “A ‘friend’ of Agent Drake, referred to her by first name. We found her in Dallas locked in a room.”

“Vala,” Jane said. “Said her name was Vala.”

“Vala was there?” Garret asked, looking at Drake.

“She claimed to be involved with other... agency investigating aliens,” Vasily said.

Drake let out a heavy sigh. “So. You’ve met my sister.”

“Not first time we...” Vasily was saying, but he trailed off at Drake’s words.

“The plot thickens,” Catalina said, her lips twisting.

“Yes. Her name is Vala Night,” Drake said. “She’s a sellout. Country and service weren’t good enough for her, no, she took her talents to the private sector.”

Catalina leaned forward in her seat and put her elbows on the table. “See, we were wondering how your department was going to feel about the fact that we found a potentially interstellar spaceship based on American design.”

Drake’s eyes narrowed, but Catalina kept pressing. “Did you know you were in a glass house when you started throwing bricks the other day, Agent Drake?”

“I am not responsible for the actions of my... sister,” the other woman returned.

“I think an apology might be nice, considering remarks made in recent conversations.”

“I have nothing to apologize for. You Alphas have been reckless, and even dangerous, in your behavior.”

Catalina opened her mouth to respond, but Vasily rose from his chair, and cut her off. "Enough, both! Can we not talk about important things now?"

The two women subsided, although the look between them could have ignited a match. Doctor Wagner brought up an image of the ship in the warehouse on the big screen. "We've been looking at the blueprints you brought back," she said. "Apparently they've been working on a ship design that had been abandoned a few years back, during the post-9/11 budget cuts."

"Who is 'they'?" Vasily asked. "Cannot believe aliens just decide to do this."

"We hope to have more information about what the aliens were trying to accomplish once we've had a chance to study the data you brought back," Garret said, "We're also working on the collaboration angle and will have more to report soon, hopefully." He looked at Wagner, who nodded.

"We'll find the traitors and deal with them," Drake said.

Grace, leaning back against the table, looking at the display, nodded to herself. "Actually, it makes sense, in a way. All of the alien ships we've encountered thus far, they are system vessels, nothing more. No way they could make a distance beyond our solar system."

"The report from the captured alien navigator indicates the same," Wagner said. "Our latest assumption is that the aliens are operating from a base somewhere *inside* our solar system."

"Could it be a larger ship?" Catalina asked.

"We don't know," Wagner returned. "We have very little capability to scan the system right now. We lost Hubble, along with every other Earth-orbit satellite, during week one of the invasion."

"We need to decide what we're going to do with this information," Garret said.

"There's something else," Wagner said. "From the files on the navigator interrogation." Once all eyes had shifted to her, she brought up an image of the planet, with glowing traces indicating the tracks of alien ships that had been detected by X-COM or other global agencies. "Between what the creature told us, and what we've been studying in the tracking data, we think we're getting closer to locating a terrestrial alien base." She pressed some keys and highlighted several of the traces. "There's been an active pattern of alien activity over the southern hemisphere."

"Now we talking," Vasily said.

“Any chance the new data from the captured ship will help us get there?” Catalina asked.

“We won’t know for sure until we analyze all the data, agent De Farrago,” Garret said. “Thus far, we’ve assumed that they have bases on Earth, but without satellite cover, and limited ability to challenge the aliens in the air, we haven’t been able to pinpoint one.”

“Try China, or France,” Drake said.

“Uh, not in southern hemisphere, I pretty sure, Agent,” Vasily said.

“Anything in their biology indicate favored environs or climates?” Hadrian asked.

“Some of them seem to like warmer ones,” Jane noted.

“Might help narrow down areas for native environ bases here on Earth,” the Marine concluded.

“A good idea,” Garret said.

“But thus far,” Wagner said, “the alien species we’ve found seem to come in a broad range. They seem to be highly adaptable.”

“Mmm, they may not go outside,” Catalina said.

“If there’s anything I’ve learned about this threat, is that we can’t expect them to be predictable,” Garret said. “Thus far, the aliens have shown us plenty of surprises.”

The others shared a long look around the table, but no one disagreed.

* * * * *

Interlude: Aftermath (September 9, 2008)

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, GRACE THELON BELUCA, AGENT INISE DRAKE
RE: Research/Manufacturing Progress Report

We have reviewed the preliminary information from the Dallas warehouse site and the data downloaded by Agent De Farrago. There are indications that the aliens were working with terrestrial corporate interests in the construction of the interstellar ship, including at least four registered American firms. We are sharing our information with

Agent Drake and are cooperating with the American authorities in the investigation.

Our current Elerium-115 storage facility is 14.5% full. Securing additional Elerium supplies should be a priority for field teams.

Interrogation of the captured Floater Navigator has been completed. The alien has revealed information about the origins of the alien menace.

Furthermore, we have confirmed that the aliens are supplying a base in the southern hemisphere. We are planning a sortie to intercept an alien supply ship, both to gather more information about the base, and to replenish our supplies of Elerium-115. Until this mission is ready, all off-base leaves are temporarily canceled.

Medical Lab 1 reports that work on the Reaper Autopsy has been completed.

Work on Research Lab 3 progresses well despite the infrastructure challenges. Chief Engineer Thelon reports anticipated completion in approximately one week. We have already begun vetting scientific staff for the new facility.

* * *

The briefing room was crowded. Not only were Drake, Garret, Grace, and Docs Wagner and White present, but several of the X-COM pilots were standing along the back wall, along with most of the Betas and a few engineers that were veteran members of the ship salvage unit, or the "clean up crew," as they were commonly known to the field operatives.

There was a small din of conversation that Garret quieted with a raised hand.

"All right. You know this has been coming. The info we've extracted from the Floater navigator that Alpha captured has given us a lead on one of the alien supply routes, including times and trajectories. We're going to stage a little intercept. We know that the aliens are pretty protective of their supply ships, so this is going to be a snatch-and-grab."

At a nod from Garret, Doctor Wagner brought up a map of South America. A bright hashed trail came down from the Pacific Ocean and clipped the southern tip of the continent before moving further south. As Wagner hit keys on the console three more tracks popped up, rising from HQX on an intercept course.

"We're going to catch the supply ship here," she said, indicating a spot on the map. "Karver in Firestorm 1 is going to take out the ship's main engines, force it to land. Then Alpha Team in Skyranger 1 will hit the ground running, neutralize any surviving aliens, secure the Elerium and the ship's data core. Beta Team along with our recovery crew will be on their heels, and will transfer the Elerium supplies to our storage units in Skyranger 2 before the aliens can mount a defense. Firestorm 1 will fly CAP during the

extraction, but we'll have to be fast, as we can expect a response quickly."

"Why not just follow the ship to the base, and take it out at the same time?" Perez asked.

"Good question," Garret acknowledged. "And the simple answer is, that we're not ready yet to take on an alien base. There's too much we don't know, but thanks to Alpha's work in bringing us high-ranking aliens to interrogate, we hope to have a plan of attack soon. And we have a few other surprises we're working on as well."

"Any other questions?"

"After alien ship secure, what Alpha do then?" Vasily asked. "We put perimeter around crashed ship? We just bug out?"

"Once the ship is secure and all aliens are neutralized, return to the Skyranger and prepare to dust off," Garret replied. "Skyranger 1 does not have any provision for storage of Elerium in any case, so leave that to the recovery team. Beta will provide security for them."

Jane raised her hand. "How much warning will we get from the Hyperwave sensors of what type of aliens will we be facing before we land and are in the thick of it?"

Garret looked at Doctor Wagner. "About five minutes," she replied.

"All right," Garret said. "The mission will commence in approximately four hours, and I need each and every one of you to be ready. Alpha, be ready at 1320 hours; Skyranger 1 will lift off at 1340."

He scanned the room, meeting the eyes of everyone present. "We need that Elerium, people. The outcome of this war might depend upon it. Dismissed."

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Session 21 (September 15, 2008)

Chapter 82

The primary hangar deck at HQX had been transformed into an armory, with both Skyrangers lined up facing the huge blast doors that led to the access shaft to the surface. Musa had pulled out all the stops, rolling out racks that held every weapon and piece of technical gear in X-COM's considerable arsenal. Hadrian and Jane were clad in new stealth-modified Personal Armor that Grace had upgraded to match Catalina's,

while Vasily was looking over a Predator missile launcher, a one-shot weapon armed with a blast warhead.

On the far side of the hangar, the Betas were busy checking their gear as well. “Man, Beta’s locked and loaded and ready to kick some ass!” Eleazar Perez yelled, noisily slamming a clip into his G36 and slapping the chest of his Personal Armor. Alyssa Sanders rolled her eyes as she adjusted the sling holster holding her laser pistol, while Jürgen Ritter, standing across from her, fiddled with the settings on a motion sensor.

“I hope you can secure the Elerium supplies for us,” he said to the Alphas. “The storage unit is down to ten percent.”

Their eyes were drawn to Skyranger 2, where a pair of Grace’s engineers were loading the containment units for the Elerium, long, bulky cylinders that looked almost like steel coffins. It would be Beta’s job to escort the engineering team that would go into the alien ship and extract the Elerium, once Alpha had neutralized the alien defenders.

If everything went according to plan.

Hallorand came into the hangar, nodding to both of the strike teams. “Better get loaded up, Alpha,” he said. “We’re five minutes out.”

The Alphas filed into their aircraft, knowing their roles and their places now, without any need for chatter as they stored their weapons. They could hear the whirring noise under their feet as the doors of the cargo compartment holding their HWP cycled closed. That was followed by the familiar sounds of the Skyranger’s startup sequence.

Ken’s voice came over the intercom as they strapped themselves into their seats. “Here we go, Elerium Express is leaving the station.” The engines on the Skyranger began to pulse, the hull of the aircraft trembling as they rose to full power. “No subtlety this time,” Ken went on, “We’re going to be flying on full burners, and even then Firestorm 1’s going to leave us in the dust. Damn, that ship is fast.”

“So, everyone clear on tactics?” Catalina asked, as the ship headed toward the rendezvous point.

“Why don’t you recap,” James said. “All I remember is that we are trying to stay within overwatch range of each other.”

Catalina nodded at the doctor. “Move fast as a close unit, sweep and clear. Hell, my old Tactics and Maneuvers lecturer would never believe me saying it.”

“Close unit, check,” James said. He started humming “We Are Family” under his breath, but loudly enough to be picked up in their com units. Jane blinked at him then chuckled.

“We not much time for mess about,” Vasily said. “If they sabotage Elerium—and they done that before—mission failed. We got to give them no time to think.”

“Fast, even if we risk losses, eh?” James asked.

“Whatever we do, we risk losses,” the Russian replied. “Be fast. But be smart.”

“If we stay together as a group and not split we can concentrate fire, and be easy for you to find us, too,” Catalina said, nodding meaningfully at the satchel full of X-COM medikits that James carried.

Ken’s voice came in over the intercom. “We’re getting an action report from Firestorm 1,” he reported. “Enemy is in sight.”

“Okay, let see if we just go home now anyway,” Vasily said. They all looked up at the speaker, as if willing it to provide good news.

“Craft is engaging,” Ken reported, followed by a long pause. When he spoke again, his voice was jubilant. “Ha! Direct hit, she’s going down, slowly.”

While the Alphas let out a collective breath, the pilot continued, “Looks like some forest, hills, nothing we can’t handle.”

The Skyranger banked left, and the aircraft began a gradual descent. After another minute, Ken reported, “Getting a sig on the hyperwave...” He let out a held breath, and then laughed. “Boys and girls, we got Sectoids.”

Vasily’s smile was grim. “Lasers?” Jane asked.

“Plasma, still more damage,” Catalina replied.

“It’s almost too easy,” Ken said. “ETA in 3 mins... Hm. That’s odd.”

“Uh oh,” Catalina said.

“What is it, Ken?” Jane asked.

“Thought I had something else on the decoder, but it’s gone now. Probably a glitch.”

The Alphas shared a look. “Ken, we don’t want unexpected company while we’re in there,” James said.

“I hear you, Alpha, but my scope’s clean now, showing only sectoids. If I get anything else, you’ll be the first to know. Setting you down a few hundred yards south of the supply ship. Good hunting.”

“Be wary folks, that sounds like something that we haven’t met might be there,” Catalina warned. The Alphas were getting up even as the Skyranger shifted to VTOL mode, balancing easily even as the aircraft shifted under them, unlocking their weapons from the racks and lining up in a row next to the hatch.

“Okay, be smart, then,” Vasily said. “We see something new, we stun, we not shoot. Okay? We here for Elerium, but if we can get bonus...”

The Skyranger trembled as its landing gear touched down. “Okay, we’re down!” Ken reported. “Careful, I’ve got readings close by, outside the enemy ship.”

The hatch popped and the Alphas filed out, scanning the area. The cargo compartment under the belly of the Skyranger cracked open and the HWP slid out, scanning for targets. They didn’t have to wait long; Vasily and Catalina were attending to the HWP when the first sectoid rose up over a low rise north of their position, its plasma pistol pointed in their direction. It didn’t get a chance to shoot, as Hadrian dropped it with a shot from his rifle, but within ten seconds a half-dozen others came into view, firing as soon as they had cleared the crests of the adjoining hills.

“Hey!” Ken yelled, as a plasma bolt exploded against the front of the Skyranger, blackening the cockpit canopy of the craft. More shots landed in the midst of the Alphas, who quickly returned fire. Despite the advantage of height and position, surrounding the Alphas in a half-crescent, the sectoids could not stand up to the quantity or accuracy of the fire from the human defenders. Less than twenty seconds after the first sectoid had appeared, none were left standing, and only Hadrian had been hit, a blast to his arm that James tended with a medikit.

“Just a flesh wound,” he reported, squeezing the contents of the kit into the Marine’s blackened arm. Hadrian wrapped a cord around the flap of armor that had been torn free from the impact, and hefted his rifle, falling into position behind Catalina and Vasily as they headed north toward the crashed alien ship.

It was big, a fat orb settled into an empty meadow, the crushed forms of several trees lying strewn in its wake. Smoke and dust rose from around it, and they could see the blackened wreckage where the Firestorm had crippled its engines, but the ship was by and large intact. Thus far, everything was going exactly according to plan.

The access hatch in the rear of the ship lay open, and was big enough to accommodate all of them, even the HWP. They made their way forward through one of the familiar entryways, complete with recessed niches, which they carefully scanned for hidden enemies before moving forward. The ship felt deserted, but they knew better than to take anything from granted inside an alien vessel.

Two corridors branched off from the entry, leading deeper into the ship. They flanked a four-panel door that opened as they approached, revealing a long, hourglass-shaped chamber that contained the massive, familiar apparatus of the alien ship’s engines. A

miasma of smoky haze filled the room, and the Alphas switched on the breathing filters on their helmets as they moved forward, scanning for movement.

“We need to secure this location, see if the fuel supply is intact,” Jane suggested, pushing on ahead.

“This look... like...” Vasily began, but trailed off an odd sensation swept over them, a brief spell of dizziness that left them staggered and unfocused. Catalina clutched at her head, and muttered, “Oh, christ.” Vasily leaned heavily against a bank of alien machinery, while Hadrian’s eyes darted left and right, looking for targets.

“Everyone okay?” James asked.

“I just... I didn’t know who or where I was for a moment there,” Catalina said.

“Still feeling a bit dizzy,” Hadrian reported.

Jane called from up ahead. “There’s Elerium cells up here, intact,” she reported, “And one of those glowy lifts, it seems to head up to another level of the ship.”

“That good, we...” Vasily began, but he was again cut off as a series of clicks came from the motion detector in Catalina’s hand. She held up the device and looked at its screen, confirming what each of them knew it said.

“Incoming,” she said.

Being caught in a vise in a long chamber with multiple exits that was full of alien machinery was not an ideal tactical situation, but with their need to protect the Elerium, there was nothing to do but set up a hasty defense.

The door behind them opened a moment later and a small pack of sectoids burst through. They were greeted by a bright pulse from the HWP that cut the first alien almost in half. It fell to the ground, twitching, while the others returned fire. Plasma bolts streaked down the length of the room. One hit the HWP, sending up a bright fountain of white fire and flickering sparks, while others hit banks of machinery, flashing brightly in the smoky haze. The Alphas shot back, cutting down the aliens even as they pushed forward, charging ahead with almost suicidal abandon. The last one got almost to the burning tank before Hadrian punched a hole in its chest with his rifle, but even as it fell its hand kept spasming as it tried to get off another shot.

Vasily let out a held breath. The aliens had been coming right toward them, almost as if... He glanced over his shoulder, at the brightly glowing crystalline matrix that held Elerium-115 stored within. “He was going to—”

Catalina nodded. “Defense needed. They were heading in here to take out the Elerium.”

“Is the floor clear now?” Jane asked.

Catalina glanced down at the motion detector. “I’m not picking anything else up, but the hulls of these ships blocks the signals after a relatively short distance.”

“We cannot leave lift unguarded,” Vasily said. “Two people, check rest of this level, fast.”

“Go ahead,” James said to Hadrian and Catalina. “I’ll stay with Vas. Jane, keep an eye on the outer door and warn us if you see someone heading our way.”

Jane nodded. “Signal before you come back, I’ll shoot anything moving that doesn’t signal first.”

Hadrian and Catalina moved back out into the entry, quickly scanning the side corridors before heading into the closer. Behind her, James poked at the HWP, which was still operational if heavily damaged. Vasily kept an eye on the lift, but as he stared at the glowing shaft, he felt his head start to swim again. He staggered, almost falling against the wall. “Whugh?” he said, before he heard a loud, crystal clear voice filling his mind, reverberating against the inside of his skull.

MUST. SHOOT. ELERIUM. it said.

Vasily reached down and drew his plasma pistol. Slowly, as if in a dream, he lifted the weapon, until the barrel pointed directly at the bright core of the alien power source.

* * * * *

Session 21 (September 15, 2008)

Chapter 83

James looked up, and saw Vasily pointing his pistol at the Elerium storage crystal. “VAS!” he yelled, jumping up.

“Nrggh!” the Russian groaned, his finger twitching on the trigger, his jaw clenching as he struggled against the assault on his mind. Finally with a grunt he jerked aside, tossing the pistol away, and staggered back.

“What the?” James blurted, as he ran up to Vasily.

“Voice in head,” he said.

“What kind of voice? Is it saying, ‘blow up Elerium?’ or is it saying, ‘don’t miss next week’s episode of Big Brother 25?’”

“Yah, first,” he said, breathing deeply now. He reached up and grabbed the latches securing his helmet to his armor, but James slapped his hands away. “Keep the helmet on!” the doctor yelled at him.

“Yah, I know,” Vasily said, lowering his hands. “Sevno poya, enough, I get it,” he said, shaking off the doctor’s hands. The two men turned as Catalina returned.

“All clear as far as I can see,” she reported. “Hadrian’s watching what might another exit. What’s the matter?”

“Okay,” Vasily said. “Get Hadrian back here. We going up in lift.”

“Cat, Vas is hearing voices. In his head,” James explained.

Vasily triggered his comlink. “Jane! Hadrian! If you not fighting, need you in center room.”

As they formed up around the lift, Catalina swept the motion sensor along the length of the ceiling. “Any aliens around?” James asked.

“Lot of interference,” she said. “There is movement upstairs, but I can’t tell more.”

“What’s this about mind powers?” Jane asked, as she rejoined the group from her watch position at the door. Hadrian followed just behind her.

“Something going on,” Vasily said. “But was not like sectoid psychic. I remember what that like.”

“Let’s sweep the rest of the ship,” James said. “Question is, anyone stay here to guard?”

Vasily grunted and nodded toward the tank. James nodded. “Shouldn’t leave a human here alone,” he agreed.

Vasily stepped into the lift, and felt the familiar but odd sensation of floating as the alien system carried him up to the iris in the ceiling. He pointed the barrel of his autocannon up at it, but no aliens were waiting as the opening twisted and he was lifted into the room above. The chamber was roughly shaped like a pentagram, with two passages that led to other parts of the ship. “Come on up if you coming up,” he yelled down to the others. Catalina was already coming up behind him, sweeping again with her motion sensor before she even stepped clear of the levitation beam.

“That way,” she said, indicating one of the passages. “I got one, a disc,” she said, taking up a firing position that didn’t expose her to direct fire from the corridor.

“They must know we’re here,” James said, as he emerged from the lift. “Let’s not walk into an ambush.” Hadrian came up after him, hovering for a moment within the beam before he could get oriented enough to step free.

Suddenly, the entire ship shook, and the floor under their feet lurched a few degrees to the side as the alien craft resettled at a slight list. A gout of hot gas, smoke, and noise surged through the opening in the floor.

“Wuh?” Vasily asked, nearly stumbling into the Marine. James fell to the floor, grunting as his pistol was jammed hard into his gut under his weight.

“One of the engines overloaded!” Jane yelled up. “One of the Elerium cells, it just... imploded! The other one is stable, I think!”

Catalina clutched her head and screamed, breaking from cover and rushing blindly into the back corner of the room, where she cowered in a tiny ball. Vasily started to turn toward her, but before he could speak, or take as much as a step, a strange lassitude descended upon him. He felt as though he was watching from outside his body as he brought up the heavy autocannon, the barrels beginning to spin as the ammunition mechanism clinked the first of a hundred armor-piercing rounds into place.

He pointed the weapon straight at Hadrian, and opened fire.

* * * * *

Session 21 (September 15, 2008)

Chapter 84

Hadrian dove for cover, but he couldn’t fully avoid the point-blank barrage from Vasily’s autocannon, and several rounds exploded against his side before he could get clear. He was flipped over and flung roughly aside, landing hard against the wall of the room before falling, as rounds exploded along the wall directly above him, showering him with fragments and bits of hot shrapnel.

Catalina screamed again and clutched her hands over her head, shaking back and forth as she cringed deeper into the corner. Vasily started tracking the autocannon back toward her, but James kicked him hard in the back of the knees. The actuated joints in his heavy armor absorbed the force of the kick, but the weight of his gun and the bucking recoil from the ongoing stream of fire conspired to knock him off balance, and

he fell forward, the weapon bouncing out of his grip as he landed awkwardly with one arm pinned under his body.

A moment of relative quiet followed, once the blasting cacophony of the cannon had silenced. Vasily lay where he'd fallen, groaning. Catalina, sobbing, looked down at her hands, which shook as lucidity gradually returned to her eyes. "Bloody hell!" she exclaimed, looking over at Hadrian, who grimaced as he rolled onto his side, clutching at the bloody rents where Vasily's rounds had torn through his armor.

"Vas, snap out of it!" James said, getting slowly to his feet, giving the Russian a wary berth. But Vasily just laid where he'd fallen, and made no move toward his weapon, which remained attached to him by the flexible ammunition feed belt.

"I... I am all right," he finally ventured. James hurried over to Hadrian, who remained where he was, covering his wounds with a bloody hand. His armor had kept his body cavity from being ventilated, but it was clear that he'd taken a beating from his comrade's fire.

"What... the hell... what that?" the Marine asked, as James tended to him with a medikit.

Jane's voice hissed over their comlinks. "Are you guys okay up there?"

"We're..." James began, but he was cut off by a yell from Catalina. "Vas, look out!" she cried, as a cyberdisc appeared in the mouth of one of the passages. It fired its plasma weapon at Vasily, who was already moving, rolling onto his back, his autocannon coming into his hands as he flipped over. The alien plasma bolt hit the floor between his legs, splashing them with hot plasma, but then the cyberdisc erupted in a hot echoing surge as Catalina shot it with her plasma pistol. The alien emitted a high-pitched whine, then jerked back as Vasily poured a stream of rounds at it. Only a few of the explosive-tipped shells hit, and most of those failed to penetrate its armor, but the impacts flipped it back into the corridor, where it bounced off a wall before settling awkwardly again on its correct axis. It started to turn again, to bring its weapon to bear once more, but before it could shoot Catalina hit it again, and the thing exploded in a storm of metal shards that filled the passage and clattered out into the room where the Alphas waited.

The actuators of Vasily's armor groaned as he rose to his feet. His faceplate was partially obscured by black char, but his expression behind it was pure violence. "Vasily, wait!" Catalina yelled, as he started toward the passage where the disc had emerged.

"No time to wait," Vasily said, without turning or stopping. "Give alien chance to invade minds again, maybe do something worse," he added, and this time he did glance aside, where James was still tending to Hadrian. "You going to *pay* for this," he added under his breath, as he moved into the passageway. He ignored the recessed doorways to

either side and continued straight toward the wider door at the far end, and what was hopefully the ship's command center.

Catalina glanced back at James. "Go," the doctor said, tossing the empty medikit away and taking out a second. Hadrian tried to get up, but James held him down, an easy task given his condition.

Catalina turned and hurried after Vasily, who was almost to the far door. It hissed open at his approach, revealing a familiar-looking chamber, accounted with control panels and alien machinery, along with long viewing panels that were currently dead, showing only the curving form of the alien ship's hull behind them.

A pair of sectoids turned from a panel near the door, their plasma pistols jerking up toward Vasily. Both crumpled in a flash of bloody puffs as Vasily poured a stream of explosive metal into their bodies. The alien controls flared and sizzled as the rounds chewed it up, and a stream of green gas fired into the room from a severed conduit.

Vasily caught a hint of movement out of the corner of his eye, and turned, already jamming the trigger for another barrage.

The creature standing there was almost close enough to reach out and touch. It wasn't a sectoid, but it was impossible to tell more than that, for it was cloaked in a long brown cowed robe that was draped loosely over its slender frame. It was almost as tall as Vasily, and as the Russian stared into the dark depths of its cowl he felt himself being drawn in to an endless chasm, one that swallowed up everything, all light, sound, and sensation, leaving him utterly helpless within. He wasn't even aware of the autocannon falling from his hands, or falling to his knees before the alien creature, or the alien lifting one shrouded hand, the folds of the robes falling away to reveal a small plasma gun that it pointed toward the center of the Russian's faceplate.

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Session 21 (September 15, 2008)

Chapter 85

Catalina burst into the room to see Vasily on his knees before a robed alien. The alien held a gun pointed toward the Russian's head, and as it looked up at her she fired reflexively. The plasma bolt missed its target, but splashed off of the wall next to the alien. Hot gases splashed over its robes, which did not catch fire, but the creature drew back, an unholy wail coming from within the dark depths of its cowl.

Catalina shifted her aim to put a blast right in the center of that darkness, but before she could shoot she felt a hammer slam into the confines of her mind. She screamed and

fell to the ground, her pistol clattering away uselessly as the back of her head clanged hard against the dense alien material of the floor. She felt as though every nerve ending in her body was on fire, and her hands clawed at the ground as her back arched, the muscles twitching beyond her control.

Vasily felt as though a switch had gone off in his head, as clarity returned in an instant. He looked up to see the robed alien focused on something behind him. He didn't hesitate, lurching up, the stun rod coming into his hands almost like a magician's trick wand. He activated the trigger and stabbed the end into the creature in one motion, roaring as he charged forward, the alien twitching on the end of the rod as the electrical charge coursed into it. They didn't stop until they hit the far wall, and Vasily could hear the audible crunch of the alien's bones as they hit. The thing crumpled under him, but he gave it a few extra whacks for good measure, until he could see the wisps of smoke rising from its garment where he'd hit it repeatedly with the stun rod.

"Uhhhh," Catalina said, groaning from the floor behind them. After one more wary look at the limp thing at his feet, he turned and walked back over to her. She was conscious and lucid, although it was obvious from the way she moved that she was still in a lot of pain.

"You okay?" he asked, offering a hand. She took it, and let herself be helped to her feet. "Yeah, but that *hurt*," she said, bending to pick up her pistol. "What the hell *is* that thing?" she said, indicating the fallen alien.

Vasily shrugged. "New alien."

A hissing static sounded over their com units; Vasily could just make out Jane's voice. He activated his. "Is all... okay, Jane. Is all okay," he said.

James appeared in the doorway, supporting Hadrian, who seemed pale if mostly intact, with a pressure bandage jammed into the ruined space in his armor. "Are we clear?" the doctor asked.

Catalina checked her motion sensor. "Looks like it, but we passed a few rooms, better check the rest of the ship before we send the all-clear."

It was only about ten minutes later when the first of the Betas stepped into the cluttered wreckage of the alien engine room. "Clean up, Aisle 1!" Perez yelled, laughing.

"Is everything all right?" Jürgen Ritter asked, waving a hand in a vain effort to clear away the lingering smoke that still rose off of the ruined alien engine, filling the room faster than it could seep out through the open doorway.

"Everything's okay," Jane said, greeting them as they came in. "The others are up above." She tapped her comlink. "Beta's here," she announced. "Welcome to the party," she told them.

“Aliens clear?” Ama Ngunyi asked, grimacing as she looked at the sectoid bodies scattered across the room. The floor was slick with their blood, which gathered in a small pool in one corner where the slight list in the surface drew the viscid substance.

“Lot of dead ones,” Sveinn Ögmundsson said. The big Icelander looked a bit disappointed.

Jürgen turned back to the entry and activated his comlink. “Engineering team, Ritter here. Looks like Alpha has secured the ship.”

The lift port opened, and the other Alphas descended from above. “Man, you guys made a mess,” Alyssa Sanders said, shaking her head as she checked the bottom of a boot slick with sectoid intestines.

“You guys didn’t leave us any to play with!” Eleazar said, as Vasily clomped forward, the unconscious robed alien bound and slung over his shoulder.

“This lot not play nice,” he said.

“What you got there?”

“Found a new one that does a good job giving you the heebie jeebies,” James said.

“The engineering team can take custody of that,” Jürgen said, as Vasily paused at the exit. “They’re bringing in carts for the Elerium extraction.”

“Hey man, don’t forget your tin can!” Eleazar yelled after them. Vasily didn’t turn, just dropped the alien at Jürgen’s feet and headed out the door. The others followed behind; as they left they could hear Eleazar shouting out orders to set up a security perimeter, collect what intel they could, and loot everything that wasn’t nailed down. Catalina paused to tell Jürgen what they’d found in the control room above, and then hurried after the others.

They passed the engineering team as they left the ship, six men and women in biosuits escorting two powered carts laden with tools and the bulky Elerium extraction units. As soon as they had exited the outer door and stepped out into the clear air of the day Vasily punched the seals on his helmet and yanked it off his head. He stood there for a moment and just breathed, deeply, looking off toward the gray mountains in the distance.

Finally, he turned to his companions. “Hadrian—” he began.

“Don’t sweat it,” the Marine said. Vasily frowned and opened his mouth to say something else, but he was cut off as their com units buzzed loudly. Now that they

were clear of the interference present inside the alien ship, Ken's voice was crystal clear in their ears.

"Did Beta get in there all right? Tell them to hurry, Firestorm's indicating three enemy cruisers are headed our way. ETA 18 minutes!"

"Hear that, Beta?" Catalina said. There was a slight pause, then they heard Sveinn's voice, clicking as the signal struggled to make its way through ship's hull. "Ya, ya, we make with the hurry, got it."

"Do we stay, or do we go?" Catalina asked.

"What more can we do?" Vasily said. "Good luck," he said through the comlink.

"Brainiacs here, loading fuel," Sveinn returned. "We be out, ten minutes."

"Roger that," Ken said. "We... what the hell?"

The Alphas all looked up together. "Now what?" Jane asked.

"Ken?" Vasily asked.

"Firestorm, confirm that... where the hell did he come from?"

"Ken!"

"I've got a small ship... crap, it got inside our perimeter somehow, it's landing to the west of the crash site."

"If they get inside ship while tech team still inside, it massacre in making," Vasily said, hefting his autocannon.

"Crap!" Ken reported. "I'm reading snakes on the decoder."

"Beta not equip to handle snakemen."

"They have landed and are approaching from the west," Ken reported.

"Got 'em," Catalina said, looking down at her motion sensor.

"Let's go," Jane said.

"On me," Vasily growled, lifting his weapon and heading toward the line of trees to the west.

* * * * *

Session 21 (September 15, 2008)

Chapter 86

Stan White looked fully absorbed as he bent over the eyepiece of the microscope. “This alien... its brain chemistry is... it’s incredible.”

James grunted something, but his thoughts were elsewhere as he stared up at the image of the comatose alien on the huge wall screen. The rest of the team assigned to HQX’s biological sciences research laboratory milled about excitedly, a quiet murmur of talk filling the room that James found himself tuning out by reflex.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Stan went on. “Its brain is four times denser than a human’s.”

That did catch James’s attention. “Denser? How is that possible? Non-water based chemistry?”

“I suspect that this creature is going to redefine a lot of our assumptions in the field of biology,” Stan said. “I think I’m going to have them turn up the sedation, just to be safe.”

“Yeah, don’t let that one regain full consciousness. It... it did some nasty things to us, in the ship raid.”

Stan looked at him with understanding. “Rough one, I heard.”

“We barely got out of there before the aliens came down on the site like a ton of bricks. I think our new guest is important to them, Stan.”

“Might want to talk to counselor Beauvous...”

“I want to be in on the research team for this one, Stan.”

The older doctor sighed and nodded. “Of course.”

In the lounge, the door to the barracks wing opened and Alyssa and Sveinn came in, the big Icelander stepping aside to let the smaller American woman through before him. Catalina, Vasily, and Jane looked up from the table where they’d been sitting. “How’s Perez?” Jane asked.

“He’s got a concussion,” Alyssa said. “Can you believe it? After all that, Perez gets hit by a storage box that wasn’t secured properly.”

“Oh well, as long as it hit his head, he going to be just fine,” Vasily said.

Catalina let out a soft chuckle. “Not going to be anything he’d use often,” she said.

“Boring mission,” Sveinn said. “Bring my best gun for nothing. Ol’ gal, she gets lonely.”

“I heard you kept a bunch of snakemen off our backs,” Alyssa said.

“Not so many,” Vasily said. After the horror of fighting the robed alien, the snakemen had almost been a relief for the Russian. Their hides had been as tough as ever, but they’d had plenty of gas grenades, and the trees had offered at least some cover from the aliens’ plasma rifles. They’d taken some wounds in the firefight, but had dished out far worse. By the time that the aliens were all down, Beta had successfully extracted the research team and retired to Skyranger 2; Alpha made it to their ship a scant two minutes ahead of the alien cruisers, which had obliterated the entire site with a plasma barrage.

“How much Elerium did we get?” Catalina asked.

“Well, only one of the storage units was intact,” Alyssa began.

“We lose some. But I get impression cleanup crew took all that left?”

“Hallorand said he hoped it might be enough to keep us going for a few months,” Alyssa said. She leaned on the edge of the counter for a moment. “For all the big guy’s bravado, it looked pretty dicey in there. Glad you guys were there to take the brunt of it.”

“Glad we could help,” Jane said. “Say hi to Perez for us.”

“Will do,” Alyssa said. “Come on, Sveinn, I need you to bully the cook into giving us some real coffee. Later, Alphas. Vasily.”

They left, the outer door sliding shut behind them with a soft clang. Vasily looked across the table at Catalina, whose gaze had lingered on him. “What?”

“Did I say anything?” Catalina asked, returning to her newspaper.

* * *

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, GRACE THELON BELUCA, AGENT INISE DRAKE
RE: Research/Manufacturing Progress Report

Good job on the supply ship raid. The Elerium-115 storage unit is now 73% full, which

should be enough to support X-COM operations in the near future. We have also supplied the United States Department of Defense with a small quantity of Elerium, in exchange for their work on the Lightning craft. They are also constructing a second Firestorm interceptor for our use, so keep that Elerium coming.

Interrogation of the captured aliens continues. The Snakeman Leader and Navigator are proving to be a challenge, but we are coming to suspect that they might have knowledge of the alien base in the Southern Hemisphere. Between their knowledge and the data we were able to recover from the alien supply ship, we hope to have a target in the near future. Doctor White informs us that he intends to have a "surprise" ready for the aliens by the time that we have identified the location of the enemy base.

Thus far, we have not begun studying the new alien type that you recovered from the supply ship. We are calling this creature an "Ethereal." Based on your experience with mental attacks during the mission, Doctor White agrees that we should improve our security measures before letting the creature regain consciousness.

Work on the Plasma Cannon is complete, and we can now equip our craft with them. Our Firestorm is already being fitted for the prototype of the new weapon, which has approximately 150% of the range and 180% of the stopping power of the prior Laser Cannon. Doctor Sandesh has already submitted blueprints for a Plasma Tank, and we can also construct a Plasma Defense for the base.

Research Lab 3 is now online. Work was completed ahead of schedule and our engineering teams were able to handle your request to apply the adaptive stealth coating to two of your Personal Armor suits. We have vetted the new research staff and while quarters may be a bit crowded in the South Wing for a while, Team 3 is ready to begin work on new projects.

* * * * *

Interlude: Total War (September 19, 2008)

Most of the alien ships that had been encountered thus far had had a certain sleek elegance to them. With their Elerium-powered antigravity drives, the ships did not need wings or bulky thrust units. For all their size, they were almost graceful.

Not this one.

The monstrosity that descended from orbit was a bulging, awkward hulk. It formed a bright streak over the Atlantic Ocean as it entered the atmosphere, visible in the early morning sky from Cuba to South Carolina.

After steadying its course somewhat, it headed for New York City.

The Americans had not been idle in their preparations. Two Firestorm-Bs with conventional engines and forty F-35As armed with pulse-laser cannons greeted the alien ship. It punched through them almost effortlessly. Thirty-four fighters were lost.

Twenty nuclear-tipped surface-to-air missiles rose to greet the battleship as it crossed New Jersey. The ship was equipped with some sort of repulsor array, knocking the missiles out of the air while they were still dozens of kilometers distant. Only two of the missiles got close enough to detonate. The atomic blasts caused the ship to wobble, but weren't enough to stop it.

The battleship's main cannon made short work of the human city. Four fusion blasts bracketed Manhattan Island, leaving the core of the city a blazing wreckage, and the surrounding boroughs a smoldering wasteland.

The ship pulled away from the devastation it created, and started east, flying a high arc over the Atlantic. On its way to Europe, it was hit by a swarm of SLBMs from two British missile submarines, again with little effect. More interceptors engaged as the ship crossed over Iceland, including two X-COM fighters. Firestorm-1 was not with them, as its innards were lying strewn across the hangar bay at HQX as its new plasma cannon was being installed. In any case, it is doubtful that its presence would have made a difference. All fighters were lost without noticeable damage to the alien battleship.

The ship fired a pair of fusion bolts that vaporized 90% of London. It slid east, giving France a comfortable berth before coming down over the Low Countries and into Germany. German land-based laser batteries blasted the ship as it flew over the border, but again there was no apparent effect. The ship ignored the defenses, firing a last blast of its main cannon at the city of Frankfurt. The fusion bolt exploded directly over Saint Bartholomeus's Cathedral, and destroyed most of the city core.

The alien ship turned ponderously, and began to ascend once more into orbit.

Initial casualty estimates were in the millions.

* * *

Interlude: Reactions (September 19-20, 2008)

During the alien attack, the leaders of X-COM were busy, very busy, but for the members of Alpha Team, there was little more that they could do than watch.

"Oh my God," Catalina said. Watching with horror she winced at the sight of New York, but then the news switched to London. Catalina's mouth dropped open and all the color drained from her face. After a few moments of stunned silence she mouthed two words

faintly. "Mom. Dad."

Drawing a ragged breath she stood up unsteadily. Pulling her xPhone out of her pocket she wandered away from the others slightly. Pushing buttons, trying to dial one number after another, pacing out small circles in the centre of the room, with increasing frustration. Eventually she threw the xPhone against the nearest wall and ran out of the room. Jane followed her, tried to offer some consolation. "My parents worked in Tower One the day the airplane hit one floor below their office," she said. "I hope you find your parents. If you ever feel like talking, I'm a good listener..." But Catalina showed no sign of having heard Jane at all as she continued to half run, half walk down the corridor. Glancing around angrily and obviously looking for someone as she did so.

"Where's Garrett? Wagner? Anybody, even Drake," she snapped at the first guard she encountered, all trace of the flirt gone and the flash and fire of part Mediterranean heritage very obvious. "I want to speak to someone who can authorize communications *now*."

Back in the lounge, Hadrian and Vasily remained, watching the unfolding news reports stone-faced, waiting for a summons that never came. The size and the blatant power of the massive alien ship was mind-numbing. How could they ever hope to counter something like that?

Hadrian felt a chill as he watched the reports on the progress of the alien ship. New York, London and Frankfurt gone; was there any rhyme or reason to the targets? New York... well, it was the location of the UN HQ, so one potential global center of coordination, and the largest global financial center. London... in addition to being the UK's capital, was the second largest global financial center. The Marine wondered how much of the Brit leadership had managed to evacuated before the attack. With the few hours notice, he figured most of the key leaders had likely been able to escape.

Frankfurt... hmm, the second largest European continental financial center behind Paris—which obviously wasn't going to be a target—and the largest transportation hub in central Europe.

At first glance it seemed the aliens were bent on causing the economic collapse of the West. The resulting unrest and chaos in democratic states would bring extreme public pressure to bear on allied Western governments to seek terms with the intruders.

What was equally disturbing was the fact the aliens had not completed their sweep by targeting Tokyo, the third largest global financial center. Had the Japanese secretly sold out already, or had the aliens been advised by their human allies that the Japanese—and other Asians—would cravenly fall into line once they saw the devastation wreaked on the West?

Well these were all issues outside of his pay grade, so all he could do was carry out his role in the missions handed down.

Hopefully, the guys in charge knew what they were doing.

He glanced over at Vasily; the Russian hadn't so much as blinked, merely stared at the display screen in an expression that Hadrian recognized by now as pure, impotent rage. Vasily seemed to sense his attention, for he suddenly shot up, and without so much as a word headed off toward the outer door.

* * *

Everywhere in the base, display units were tuned to the news feed coming in from the major international news networks. Vasily could not escape them.

"... relief efforts have emergency services on both sides of the Atlantic overwhelmed..."

He didn't even understand why. Oh, he grasped the *why*. It could be a coincidence, but then they'd fought alien attacks and stolen technology, ships and more and the aliens had only sent token forces their way, yet as soon as one of the 'Ethereals' was in their cells, this monster had come and called fire down upon the human race. It wasn't hard to riddle out the meaning of that. There was a very good chance that X-COM had finally found out just how far the aliens could be pushed.

No, what he didn't see was why New York, why London, and why not X-COM HQ. If the aliens had such massive power... why was X-COM still alive? Were the aliens unwilling to destroy one of their own with the base? But then, why had they not unleashed this giant earlier, and terrified the Earth into submission?

It was a grim thought, but a detached one, he knew. Even watching the television, the footage of the smoldering wastelands that had been three cities, he knew it was not truly sinking in. There were quite a few team members who would be reeling now, and mourning later. And more than a few who would be thanking God that it was not their people who'd suffered.

Which gave rise to the other question that nagged him, as he looked around at the other faces; the shocked, the angry, the terrified.

How could they even continue, now? Or, how, without open revolt from the staff?

He heard familiar voices ahead, and paused.

"What do you mean, I can't?" Catalina yelled. The voice came from around the corner ahead, and Vasily couldn't see her, but he could clearly imagine the way she stood, fists clenched at her sides, the hard fire burning in her eyes. "These are my *parents* I am talking about."

The other voice, even now controlled, though Vasily could sense the strain that underlay

that rigid edge. "Exactly what I say, you cannot attempt to contact them," Garrett said. "It's simply not possible. General lines into Britain are jammed. We've received a report from GCHQ Cheltenham but it's brief. They had 45 minutes warning of the heading and reported that evacuation procedures were initialized for all key personnel."

"You have to be able to find out more now!" Catalina returned. "It's been nearly an hour since the attack. What of the Service, does the Director know nothing? There *must* be more."

"Nothing. A state of martial law has been declared, that much we know, and the Armed Forces mobilized in anticipation of any assault by French forces. Lines are clogged with localized traffic concerning deployment of troops and aid. GCHQ reported the Prime Minister and Cabinet reached safety, but that was before London was hit. There's a list of staff but neither the Director or the General Officer Commanding of London District are amongst them. Until they contact us there is nothing we can do."

Vasily could hear Garret's footsteps as he walked away, then the growl from Catalina, and a thump that had to be her hitting the wall. He almost went forward then, but he didn't have the words, didn't have anything but his own unfocused rage. What could he tell her, what could he do for her?

He heard something else, a deep sob that hit him like a knife, then her own footsteps, heading in the opposite direction, away from where he stood. He lingered a moment longer, then turned and headed back to the barracks.

* * *

Interlude: Briefing (September 20, 2008)

The mood was grim as Garret called the team together in Briefing Room 1. Doctor Wagner had schematics and a world map called up on the big monitor screen. Special Agent Drake was not present.

"The alien base is located in Antarctica," Garret said, once all of the Alphas were present and the door secured. "It's a major resupply base for their ships, which apparently have a more limited range than we thought."

He nodded to Wagner, who brought up different images on the screen; even those without medical experience recognized the twisting helices and biological data. "Doctor White is completing his test models," Garret continued. "What we're about to tell you does not leave this room."

After a slight pause, he said, "What he's been working on is a nerve gas targeted at alien physiology. If all goes as plan, it will have catastrophic impact on the aliens'

unique biology, without significant effect on human beings. Lab tests have been promising, but don't tell us enough about how it will work in the field. We've been looking at a way to test it without endangering Earth; this Antarctic base may be just the thing."

"If it works the way we project, it just might turn the tide of the war," Wagner said.

"Our prisoners, especially the snakeman leader, have been very helpful in explaining more about the alien civilization," Garret continued. "Everything we learn makes our situation appear more grim."

Wagner brought up another report on the big screen.

"We hope to gain more insight once we finish work on this new alien, the 'ethereal'," she said. "Thus far it has resisted interrogation, but we intend to keep working on it until we learn what we have to know."

"Preparations for the base attack are being made as we speak," Garret continued. "The new Lightning craft will arrive tomorrow, and we've already been preparing a module to accept the gas that will be deployed from Firestorm-1. Our captives have revealed that the bases are heavily defended, but we've learned a lot about the aliens and their systems, and it's time to give them a surprise or two for once. In addition to deploying the gas, Firestorm-1 will take out their communications and sensor array. And the biggest surprise for them will be when their battleship lands to resupply."

He paused for a moment to let that sink in. "That's right. We can't shoot it down, but once it's docked for supplies, we're going to have a little surprise waiting for that damned ship. That last navigator you captured spilled the protocols for their ship refueling missions, so the Lightning is going to pretend to be their comm array, and send an all-clear signal once you've taken the base and have set up the ambush."

"I know you've all been watching the news reports. The entire human race has taken a hit, and there's damned little that the nations of the world can do about it. So it's up to us. Don't let us down."

* * *

Interlude: Briefing (September 20, 2008)

Alpha Team was in the middle of a drill in preparation for the base assault mission when the call came down over the base intercom.

"Prep for incoming casualties!"

The Alphas joined the medical teams as they rushed to Hangar 2. Skyranger 2 looked like it had been in a war zone, with ugly black streaks covering its hull; black smoke trailed from one engine housing.

The medics boarded the ship even before it settles fully to a halt. Perez was brought out first, a pad sodden in red blood pressed into the socket where his right arm used to be. Ama Ngunyi was brought out on a stretcher, her entire body wrapped in a translucent stasis sheath that could not hide the blackened wreck of her chest. Jürgen Ritter looked dazed, his face streaked with soot. A medic escorted him gently to the medical bay.

An hour later, Alyssa Sanders recounted what happened in the briefing room. The members of Alpha Team lingered in the background during the debrief.

"We didn't get a lot from the Ranger 2 combat recorders; the ship's computer was fried by one of those plasma bolts," Grace said, as she worked the controls on the command console in the briefing room. Garret prodded Alyssa to fill in the gaps.

"They attacked us just a few moments after we were all out of the ship," Alyssa said. "Ama took a hit in the chest that went through her Personal Armor like tissue; Jürgen was able to drag her back into the ship while we set up a perimeter."

"They were big, green... bright green all over, their skin, or a suit of some sort. Our lasers and bullets did nothing, at least, I didn't see any of them bleeding. If they even have blood. Purple faces, I remember, like masks, like Halloween masks..."

She trailed off. Beauvais shook her head, but Garret prodded her gently again to resume her narrative. "They would have gotten us all, but for Svienn. He charged them... he poured a full belt from that cannon of his into one, but it didn't even flinch... He attacked it in close combat, yelling for us to get out... They fell on him, all of them... They took him in their hands... They tore his arms off, and then the one he'd shot grabbed his head..."

The woman's eyes were haunted as she looks up. "There were only three of them. Three..."

Garret made a quiet gesture, and one of the medtechs took the woman off to the medical bay.

* * * * *

Session 22 (September 22, 2008)

Chapter 87

Mehwash Ranma stared down at the yellow piece of paper in her hand, the one that had changed her life.

YOU ARE ORDERED AT ONCE TO REPORT TO REPORT TO X-COM, CURRENTLY LOCATED IN THE U.S. THERE YOU WILL SERVE ON A TEAM OF MULTI-NATIONAL OPERATIVES. REPORT TO BASE CHIEF HALLORAND UPON ARRIVAL.

There hadn't been a chance for discussion, or compromise. No opportunity to complain, or even get more information. She had returned to her dormitory after a night out with her friends in Pune. Some men from the army had been waiting for her. Her things had been packed in a duffel. Her orders had been shoved into her hand. An hour later, she'd been on a plane to America.

Mehwash wondered what her parents had been told. Her father would hate her even more, probably. How angry he had been, when in the middle of her medical studies, she'd run off to join the IMS. At the time she'd thought it was a good idea. It was either that, or she be pressured to marry Vikram Singh. A fat bore of a man. It did not matter to her traditional parents that Mehwash was considered one of the highest scorers in the national Medical Aptitude exams. If she hadn't joined the army, her budding medical career would have quickly been over.

At 24, she had seen much suffering. Several years in the UN had taken her around the world. She wasn't yet a doctor, but she had treated many patients. Nothing like the injuries and pain she had heard about from The War though. She remembered being afraid.

But that had been before Miami. Before her life had changed.

She looked down at the equipment case they'd given her, the suit of armor. They had sat there on the locker since they'd come back. Jane had had to help her out of the armor; her hands had fumbled clumsily on the straps, slick with blood. Alien blood. Catalina's blood. While getting out of the armor she'd dropped her gun, the alien plasma weapon she'd been given to defend herself. It had slipped from its holster, the butt caught on a strap. The gun had bounced twice, then landed near the wall. It did not fire. She had picked it up by the hilt with two fingers, laid it on the table, and quickly backed away.

When she had joined the Indian Army's medical service to escape a marriage she wanted no part of, she had been required to do some basic firearms training, like any

other soldier. But that didn't change the fact that she had been a woman in an army still segregated by sex. No one had expected her to see any real combat.

She did her training, and got her patch. That was years ago, and she hadn't touched a weapon since.

Until Miami. The day Mary Ranma had become a soldier in every sense of the word.

The room was little more than a cell, a fold-down cot, tiny table and chair, a locker and a sink so small that she could barely wash both hands in it at once. But she was grateful for the privacy. She couldn't bear being in the barracks with the others right now, even if being apart from them left her an outsider.

She hadn't looked at her communicator, sitting on the table next to the gun. It no doubt contained a schedule of things that she was supposed to be doing. She'd expected someone to come for her when she didn't appear, but no one had. Maybe they had figured out that this was all some big mistake.

She laid down on the cot, and closed her eyes. The memories came, she couldn't escape them, but she refused to get up, just laid there, thinking back on the events that had brought her to this place.

* * *

They had been polite enough when she'd arrived, if a bit rushed. They told her that things would seem strange at first, but that it would get easier with time. They told her a lot of things, but none of it answered any of her questions. She'd really wanted some time and quiet to get her bearings, catch up on the rest she'd lost since she'd been yanked out of her life back in Pune. But it had only just begun.

"You not come to us at good time," the Russian had said to her. In hindsight, that had been the only thing she'd understood in that initial whirlwind of activity. Jane had offered to show her around the facility, and had helped her get her few possessions settled in the tiny room she'd been assigned. At first the place had seemed outrageously spartan, but since then she'd learned that the private room had been quite a boon in the crowded base.

She'd wanted time to get adjusted, but time was not something that X-COM had in quantities. She'd barely woken from a troubled sleep, her body still adjusting to the craziness of relocating halfway around the world, when Jane had reappeared to escort her to a fitting of her Personal Armor. She met at least a dozen people, names and faces blurring together in her mind. That had been followed by tests, the issuance of her ID and communicator, then more tests, an hour in a laboratory like something out of a movie, medical gear the likes of which she'd never seen in her life, and finally a trip to the armory, and her last acquisition, the weapon that now sat on her table, fat and ugly and deadly.

There had only been one chance for her to take charge of her own fate on that second day. She'd found the Director in the briefing room, talking with two women, whose names she couldn't remember. The one in the suit smirked as she'd come in, and she'd almost turned around and left, but Garret had smiled and gestured for her to come in.

"I'm sorry for the abrupt start to your tour here," Garret had said. "As you can see, things are a bit chaotic here."

"Listen," she had told him. "There is something you should know."

"Yes?"

"This is all a mistake. I do not belong here."

Garret's expression had been... sympathetic? Resigned? Grim? "The decision was made by those with authority. None of us chose this, Doctor."

"I've been in the Army for years. Trained. But... I've never been in an active unit. I'm a woman."

The woman in the suit snorted. "I'd noticed. And you're not the only one here."

Garret was more understanding, but there was no yield in his eyes. "You're a doctor, and a human being. We are at war, doctor. You've seen what they did to London. We have to stop these creatures before they do the same to New Delhi."

She had opened her mouth to protest, to offer one last argument, but what could be said to that?

"The members of your team will bring you up to date. Stay alert and learn. I've read your file. You're no stranger to tough situations."

Stay alert, and learn. Good advice, perhaps, but there had been no more time; the alert had sounded a little less than one hour later. At the time, she hadn't understood what it meant.

Now she knew.

* * * * *

Session 22 (September 22, 2008)

Chapter 88

The Miami mission had started the same way that Mary's arrival at X-COM had: with chaos.

Jane found her as the alarm had blared from the speakers in the walls. People were running around, some of them only half-dressed, tugging on clothes as they ran. Jane was clad in a bulky suit of armor that emitted a low hum as she moved. She barely had time to grab her own gear before Jane was pulling her along. Others moved out of the way for them, she noticed.

Mary had been out of breath by the time that they got to the hangar, and saw the ship. It looked like a giant bug, and she didn't notice the open hatch in the back until Jane half led, half dragged her over to it. She didn't learn the name of the ship—*Lightning*—until later, or that this was the craft's first operational mission.

In this case, ignorance was probably for the best.

For all the speed with which she'd been hustled here, she and Jane were the last to arrive. The others were fully armored and strapped in. The hatch was closing behind them even as she stood there, and one of the men, the other doctor, got up and helped her get into the bulky harness. Jane helped her get her gear stashed away, into the racks built into, under, and above the padded jump seats.

And then they were blasting off—quite literally, with the force of the aircraft's acceleration driving her back into her seat with enough pressure to make it difficult to draw breath.

"Wow, this is cool," Jane said. Mary thought the experience anything but "cool." She dropped her helmet, and nearly lost it, jabbing her foot into it so it didn't fly about the cabin.

"Is... different, I give it that," Vasily said.

Mary could barely hear them over the noise of the ship's engines. Vasily pointed to the earpiece he wore, and Jane helped her get her own communicator fitted. "You going to have to learn on the job," the Russian said. "Keep head down, stick to corners, is all classic army stuff. But expect unexpected and if we say do something, is not just suggestion."

Catalina was fiddling with a small handheld device that looked sort of like a portable vacuum cleaner with a display attached to it. Her expression as she looked at Mary

was anything but encouraging. "Should almost double the range with this," she said to the others. "And it will be more accurate on IDing targets."

"Terror strike, been long time since this happen," Vasily said. "Street fighting. Civilians. Will be messy."

"Kill anything that moves, except, ah, us," James said.

"What?" Vasily interjected. "No. Not kill anything moves. Is Miami. I gather is pretty crowded city?"

"Not by now, I bet," Catalina said.

"Bunch of Cubans and drug dealers," James said.

The voice of the pilot came over the intercom. "Okay team, we're flying at top speed, 2600 miles per hour. We're going to be there before you know it. Patching through coms to HQX..."

The voice that followed a moment later was a woman's. "Wagner here," she said. "Hyperwave decoder reads snakemen, and something else."

"Snakemen?" Mary asked.

"Not getting a clear differentiation on the signal," the woman on the speaker said. "The aliens may be blocking."

"Did you get a chance to read the files you were sent on your xPhone, Doctor?" Catalina asked.

"Well... I skimmed, sort of."

"They kind of big snake men," Vasily said, with a shrug.

"They're hard to kill," James added. "Make sure your plasma weapons are ready to go, Mary."

Mary looked down at the plasma gun hanging in a harness from the rack next to her seat. She still hadn't had a chance to fire the weapon, even in practice, although the engineering staff had explained how it worked. She closed her eyes and let out a tinny moan, but the woman on the intercom kept speaking, adding nothing but bad news.

"The aliens have set down six terror pods," she said. "Centered on the area around Broad Street and 12th downtown."

"Six pods!" James exclaimed. "Yikes. How many aliens is that? Six times six?"

"I'm betting that it's like previous invaded cities," Jane said. "All-Mart comes to mind... civilians huddled in buildings trying to avoid being killed."

"We're not getting a lot of useful data from the city," Wagner added. "Looks like a mess from top to bottom. We need this, Alpha. Garret didn't want to say anything in front of Drake, but you should know. There are elements in the American government that have been questioning the decision to continue the fight against the aliens. They see X-COM's presence here as the reason that New York was vaporized."

"Going to do the same as the French, roll over and offer the belly up?" Catalina said, her voice harsh.

Wagner's voice was broken up by hisses of static. "We're... You're entering an electric... Losing our comm... We'll pick you up when you..."

"Damn it, the relays are bugged again," Ken broke in. "Wish they hadn't killed all our comm satellites."

They continued on in silence after that. Jane helped Mary check her armor, making sure that everything was securely fashioned. She gave her some pointers on her weapon, but all Mary kept hearing was "aliens," over and over again.

"Save the humans, kill the aliens, typical priority list," Jane told her, in a voice that was perhaps meant to be reassuring. "We stun any new aliens for study, so listen to Vasily's orders on what to shoot and what not to shoot."

Mary gulped. She reached down and picked up her helmet. "Are we going to see aliens, then?"

"Yes," Vasily said. "Yes, we are."

The ship lurched, and Mary almost dropped her helmet again. "We're approaching Miami," Ken said over the intercom. "Firestorm-1 has set up cover over the city, but it looks like the alien ship bugged out after dropping the pods. I'm reading alien contacts in several places; U.S. Army and National Guard units are deploying. I've got a parking lot nearby one contact site where we can set down. Get ready for touchdown in 90 seconds."

The Alphas began quick and efficient preparations. Mary wasn't sure how they kept their footing with the ship lurching and shifting under them, the quick descent causing her stomach to feel like it was trying to rise up into her chest. She swallowed and kept in her seat.

The Russian loomed over her, strapping on a ferocious looking assembly that included a three-barreled cannon as big as her leg, linked by a flexible belt to a backpack that

presumably held a lot of bullets. He was dressed in armor like Jane's, that made her own bulky suit seem practically svelte by comparison. He looked down at her. "Do not worry. Stick with us."

"Close up and personal," Catalina said. She seemed particularly grim as she checked her own weapons, like some black-clad goddess of death.

The ship jolted once roughly and then settled. "We're down!" Ken announced, as the hatch in the rear of the craft split and swung open. Mary could smell smoke, and heard a chaotic welter of sounds from the city outside. Someone screamed, a woman by the sound of it.

"Go, go, go!" Vasily urged, leading the way, turning to one side as he exited, Catalina fast on his heels. Jane and Hadrian turned the other way, quickly fanning out with their weapons scanning the area for threats. The two groups moved around the edges of the Lightning and quickly disappeared from view.

Mary was just getting out of her seat when she heard gunfire from outside, and the yells of her teammates.

"Snakes!"

"Got one! Two!"

James had lingered for a moment with her, but as soon as the first shots had cracked out—the sizzling cough of the plasma guns different than the sharp barks of normal firearms—he darted out through the hatch, hitting the ground running and quickly disappearing around the sides of the craft.

"I need to dust off here, Doctor Ranma," Ken's voice came over the intercom.

Her heart pounding, Mary followed after the others.

Dust and smoke swirled in the air, and she could smell the acrid tang of burning flesh even through the air filters on her helmet. They were in a nearly deserted parking lot, with several two-story apartment buildings rising up around them.

As she came around the front of the aircraft she saw the others, in cover in the lee of the nearest building. There was a body lying in the street, so obviously alien that she stared at it, mesmerized.

She was buffeted from behind as the Lightning lifted off into the air, clouds of dust and bits of debris enveloping her and briefly obscuring her vision. She could still see the other members of Alpha, each of them outlined by a thin green glow by the Visual Display Unit in her helmet. She resolved to stay close to Vasily, and hurried after him.

As they approached another intersection, they saw people running ahead, fleeing in panic. The Alphas moved quickly in that direction. There was a massive thump that hit Mary like a punch in the chest, and she blinked, staring at a crater in the middle of the intersection that had not been there a moment before. A car that had been left abandoned on the intersection had been flung onto its side, smoke rising from its undercarriage.

“Incoming!” Vasily warned. “On the left!” He stepped around the front of a small market that sat on the corner of the intersection, all of its windows blown out. Ducking into the cover of the front doorway, his autocannon spit rounds down the street. Catalina and Hadrian quickly darted out into the street, ducking low behind the cover of the overturned car. A bolt of plasma shot out at them, hitting the front of the car and exploding in a bright halo of light and fire.

Mary felt paralyzed. She didn’t want to see what was coming up the street. She moved closer to Vasily, but remained in the lee of the market building. There was an explosion not to far away, and she flinched. A helicopter streaked overhead, trailing fire.

And then she looked up, across the street, just in time to see another alien emerge from the mouth of an alley almost directly in front of her. The thing was a creature of nightmare, with the head and long body of a snake, only a snake that sprouted arms that clutched a deadly-looking rifle in its hands.

“An alien! Right over there!” she yelled, as the thing lifted its weapon, and pointed it right at her.

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Session 22 (September 22, 2008)

Chapter 89

The plasma bolt struck the wall about two feet from Mary’s head, punching a hole a foot across in the thick masonry. She let out a keening cry, and started to run forward, though there was no cover to be had. A second shot hit a mailbox in her path, and it exploded, showering her with shards of metal and burning pieces of paper. She screamed and dove forward, falling into the doorway of the market almost on top of Vasily.

“What’s happening?” she yelled.

“Draw gun! Shoot back!” he yelled back. He had his hands full already, she saw, with big chunks of the doorway blasted black and charred by hits from the snakemen coming

up the street. There were two there, both already wounded, and one staggered again as Vasily blasted it with a stream of shells from his autocannon.

With her back to Vasily, Mary staggered to her feet. The snakeman was still there, shooting now at Jane, who'd taken cover behind a low wall behind the market. Mary drew her gun and fired, closing her eyes as she shot blindly in the general direction of the snakeman.

There was a huge roar, and another explosion shook the ground and the building she was hiding in. She opened her eyes to see that the alien she'd shot at was down, although it was highly unlikely that any of her wild shots had inflicted the precise impacts that had torn gaping holes in its throat and chest. Jane ran up, and Vasily stepped into the street. Mary looked past him and saw that the two aliens there had been obliterated, along with most of the buildings to either side of the street.

"If we're not careful, the Air Force is going to blow us up as well as the aliens," Jane said.

"Hell. We better move fast," Vasily said. "Catalina?"

The British woman was already scanning with her portable device. "Another group to the north, a few streets over, looks like," she said. "One definite snakeman, no ID on others."

Vasily led them forward at a run, his armored boots leaving small impressions in the asphalt of the street behind him. Mary followed with the others, who scanned the buildings and alleys they passed, alert for any more surprises. Everyone seemed to know what to do, except Mary, who held onto her gun with fingers that were white inside of the heavy gloves.

Once again they heard the screams before they got to the intersection. A big car accident had created a tangled mess there, and there was an ambulance there, its lights flashing. People were running past, darting through the mess of burning cars. "Run!" A man yelled. "More of them!" A moment later, a plasma bolt hit him in the back, and he fell, his screams quickly dying as the white burst enfolded him.

Vasily ran ahead, and was hit by another bolt that slammed into his chest and drove him back a step. He turned and unleashed a blast from his gun. Around him the other Alphas took cover and also returned fire. Catalina yelled at the fleeing survivors, directing them behind her, into the street they'd just cleared. A paramedic ran over to the fallen man who'd just been shot, but he barely took a look at the body before rushing up to help someone else who was lying in a doorway, half his face covered in a sheen of blood.

The firefight was wild, chaotic, and quick, with the plasma bolts exploding all around them. Vasily ducked behind the ambulance as several shots punched into it, but he

reappeared around the far side to blast the snakemen with another stream of shells. The three snakemen in this group didn't last long, and within twenty seconds of their arrival at the intersection all three were down, smoking black holes gaping in their anatomy. The Alphas helped the last of the survivors get clear. Mary helped the paramedic with the injured man, the familiar effort allowing her to regain some small vestige of self-control.

Vasily came up behind her as the paramedic and the wounded man headed off down the street after the others. He looked frightful, his heavy armor blackened and... "Oh, you're wounded," she said, digging into the satchel at her side that held her medical gear.

"Ya, it kind of happen," he said. "Just shoot it with X-COM medikit."

She had been briefed on X-COM's advanced medicines, although the idea of just stabbing unknown substances into a bleeding wound seemed counterintuitive to her. Still, she took out the odd device and started to unwrap it, before Vasily pushed her aside.

A man had emerged from one of the buildings adjoining the intersection. He was middle-aged, clad in sweatpants and a white T-shirt soaked with blood. He looked sick, his skin gray and slick with sweat, and he clutched his bulging gut with both hands as he staggered into the street.

Catalina was closest to him, and she hurried forward to catch him as he lurched toward her. But instead of falling into her grasp, he suddenly grabbed onto her, embracing her in a surprisingly strong hold, moaning as he pressed his slobbering jaws against the faceplate of her helmet.

"What the!" she exclaimed, trying unsuccessfully to dislodge him. She reached for her plasma pistol, but the sick man knocked it away, pinning her arm as he reached up and yanked hard at her helmet, pulling it askew.

"Hey!" Vasily shouted, starting forward toward them. "Calm down, you..."

There was a gunshot, and the man crumpled. Hadrian stood there behind them, his Glock smoking in his hand.

"You killed him!" Mary exclaimed in horror. She started toward the fallen man, but Vasily stopped her with an outstretched arm.

"He tried to bite me!" Catalina exclaimed.

"You okay, Cat?" James asked. He warily approached the body, which shifted slightly. "He's still alive—" he began, but stopped in his tracks as the man's gut suddenly swelled and burst in a vile, bloody mess.

“What the hell?” Vasily yelled.

They all started in surprise as something came out of the wreckage of what had been the man’s torso. It sprang up, lashing at Catalina, who fell back in alarm. Whatever it was—all they could see was a twisting, sinuous mass of coiling limbs and chitinous flesh, covered in gore—it grabbed onto the British agent’s arm and pulled itself up as she tried to break free. She screamed and swung at it with her other hand, trying to dislodge it. She turned into James, who hit it solidly with his plasma rifle, knocking it free. It flipped end over end and landed in the street, letting out a terrible hissing noise.

Then it exploded as a plasma bolt caught it solidly in the center of its mass.

The others turned to Mary, who stood there shaking, wisps of steam rising from the barrel of her pistol.

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Session 22 (September 22, 2008)

Chapter 90

“What the hell was that thing?” Jane asked, as they made their way quickly down another city street strewn with wreckage. Most of the damage here had been wrought by panicked residents rather than the aliens, with an SUV piled up onto the back of a smashed Honda, opposite a broken hydrant that sent a constant plume of water up into the air.

“We not seen anything like this before,” Vasily said, leading them again as they hurried to their next destination. Ken had reported that the Americans were quickly cordoning off the areas of the city where the alien pods had struck, and that police and military units had already neutralized several groups of snakemen after suffering heavy losses. Shortly after their confrontation with the infected man and the strange monster that had inhabited its body, the pilot had forwarded an intercepted signal about an alien sighting in the parking garage of a nearby mall that was just four blocks from their position.

“You okay, Cat?” James asked again, as they crossed another deserted intersection and saw the glitzy exterior of the mall another block ahead.

“Yeah, luckily that thing didn’t get a good grip on me,” she said. “Just a few scratches.” But she blinked and leaned against a wall as they came to the end of the block, feeling a bit dizzy.

The mall was all but empty, with just deserted cars scattered about the street. They could see the entrance to the parking garage, which extended under the structure; there was a police car in front of it, its lights flashing. The policeman looked to be barely out of college, and his expression on seeing them was a mixture of confusion and relief.

“What situation?” Vasily asked.

“You guys military? Man, I’m glad to see you. I got a report that there was something here, I thought I saw it, went down into the garage. What the hell... aliens, man!”

“Snakeman?” Jane asked.

“Man, I’m not sure what it was. You guys going in there?”

The Alphas exchanged a quick look. “Yeah, we going in there,” Vasily said.

The parking garage was dark, with all but the emergency lights deactivated, leaving the entire area cloaked in deep shadows. Most of the shoppers apparently hadn’t had a chance to get down here to recover their cars during the evacuation; rows and rows of vehicles filled the place in orderly ranks. The booths where people paid their parking fees upon exiting were empty.

Jane and Vasily turned on the LED lights mounted on their powered armor, the bright beams driving deep into the darkness.

“Catalina?” Vasily asked. “Catalina?”

“Oh? Sorry. Yeah, I’m getting something... moving... fast...”

They heard a skittering noise, and something flashed across their view to the right. When they turned that way, however, all they saw was another row of cars.

“I don’t like this,” Mary said.

Vasily unlimbered his stun rod. “I want to try stun, if this new alien,” he said.

They made their way deeper into the garage, slowing as they entered the radius of one of the emergency lights, moving faster in the darkened spaces in between.

“Catalina...”

“I... I’m not sure. It’s here...”

“Where the hell are you?” Vasily muttered. He didn’t see the dark form that crept between two SUVs to his right. As he turned away, it rose up out from the shadows,

looming over him, a massive thing of claws and angles and dark slickness that oozed along its armored body.

Mary, turning back toward him, saw it, and screamed.

Vasily spun around, but the creature seized him in its claws, and flung him across the garage. He hit a concrete pylon six feet off the ground, hard enough to crack the material, then fell hard onto a sedan, crushing its roof under his weight.

The alien let out a deafening screech, and surged into the ranks of the other Alphas, tearing and sweeping.



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Chapter 91

Jane brought her plasma rifle up quickly, but before she could shoot the alien slammed her with a claw, driving her armored body into the back of a car with enough force to crumple the bumper and deeply indent the trunk. It loomed over her, slamming down the other claw, bracketing her neck and pinning her there. Catalina, standing not three feet away, saw something in its hand shoot out between the claws and stab at her armored torso, a tendril that slashed against the breastplate of her heavy armor but failed to penetrate.

She did all she could do, shooting the alien point-blank in the side. The plasma bolt hit and flashed brightly, but the alien barely seemed to notice.

Hadrian's carbine and James's plasma rifle both discharged, filling the garage with light and noise, but doing little more to harm the creature. But it flung Jane aside, knocking her into Hadrian and sending both of them rolling to the ground. The thing turned toward Catalina, and for a moment the agent froze, looking at certain death looming over her. But oddly, it didn't even pause, turning past her toward James, who shot it again, the bolt splashing across its chest. It lunged at the doctor, who almost fell as he tried in vain to escape its assault.

With a roar, Vasily leapt into the alien from behind, the sheer impact of five hundred pounds of Russian and armor knocking it off its course. The human and alien staggered back together, Vasily jamming his stun rod into it, looking for some vulnerability in its chitinous body. The weapon flashed, but appeared to have no effect on the creature, which slashed at Vasily with its long claws.

"Vas, watch its claws!" Catalina warned. "Something bad!"

The Russian held his own for about two seconds, then the alien caught him with a solid blow that lifted him off his feet and drove him back two paces. Again it pursued, lunging with a blow that might have taken his head off, had it connected. As it was, he barely got out of the way, and still took a grazing hit across the shoulders that nearly put him on his face.

"Shoot it!" He yelled. "SHOOT IT IN HEAD!"

The other Alphas responded, driving at the creature from all sides. Catalina jumped up onto the hood of a big Oldsmobile, putting her at just about eye-level with the creature. She fired at the spot where its head met its body, the plasma forming a wreath around its neck as it exploded. That was followed by shots from Jane, Hadrian, and James, who all shot at roughly the same spot, until they could barely see for the bright pulse of

superheated gas that formed a plume over its head. Mary shot at it as well, but her blast went wide, sending down an echoing plume from the roof over its head.

Through it all the alien kept attacking, but Vasily held his ground. He lunged again with his stun rod, trying to use it to keep the alien at bay, but it knocked the weapon flying with a sweep of its claws, almost taking off the Russian's arm in the bargain. Vasily growled and reached for his pistol, but the alien lurched in and seized his head in one massive claw. The thing bore down, crushing him under its weight, driving him to his knees. Vasily could hear the alien alloys cracking under the pressure, and his VDU scrambled and died. Something sloshed against his faceplate, slapping hard against the rigid plastic, which mercifully held up against the abuse.

It lasted for maybe a second or two, which felt like an eternity. Then there was a bright flash and the pressure eased. He tore free from the grip of the alien's claw and fell onto his back, breathing heavily.

"Are you all right?" he heard Mary asking.

"No, no..." he said, taking a long, shuddering breath. He pulled himself up enough to see what was going on. There was an oily slick covering his faceplate, with the stink of it seeping through the cracks in his helmet. Grimacing in revulsion, he pulled it off and greedily drank in a deep breath of fresher air.

The monster lay unmoving on the floor in front of him, its head a charred wreck, blasted into char from the point-blank fire of the other Alphas. The stench rising from it was terrific. Everyone seemed okay, although Jane was still a bit unsteady, and Catalina was leaning against a car, the visor on her own helmet up.

"Um, you don't look so hot," Jane said to her.

"I don't feel... uugh," she said, clutching her stomach and bending low. She voided the contents of her stomach.

"Did it get you?" James asked, taking out a syringe of antibiotics.

Catalina shook her head. "No... no, it didn't... it didn't touch me." She looked pale, and her hands shook as James injected the contents of the syringe into her arm.

Mary was helping Vasily, and applied the medikit she'd offered earlier, injecting it into one of the access ports built into his armor. The Russian felt like he'd been wrestling with a bear, but he forced himself to get up, grimacing anew as a fresh barrage of aches and pains asserted themselves. "Sky—Lightning, come in, Lightning," he said, activating his communicator.

He could barely hear the pilot's voice; likely the structure above them interfered with the signal. "Come in, Alpha? Reading you."

“Ken, We got alien, it new kind. Dead now.” He looked over at Catalina, who was still being helped by James. “I think we need medical evac here, over.”

“Roger that. Can you get to the roof? I don’t think I can get into the street there.”

“Meet you there,” Vasily said.

“Elevator over there,” Hadrian said, pointing to one of the walls nearby. “I’ll check and see if the power’s still up, or if there’s stairs nearby.”

James had followed up his treatment of Catalina with a medikit, but the agent looked worse, and nearly fell as she tried to stand up. “Uuuhh…”

“We need to get up to the roof, Ken pick us up there,” Vasily said. “We can get you to base, or closer medical facility if needed.”

James stepped in and grabbed onto Catalina. “Hey, not the time for a cuddle, doc,” she said, but she nearly collapsed, and Jane had to step in and take her other arm.

“It’s working!” Hadrian yelled from the open elevator. He held it for them as they hurried up, James and Jane all but carrying Catalina between them. Vasily came last, but hesitated as the others packed into the elevator.

“Vas?” James asked.

“You go, I think I too heavy,” he said. “I take stairs, meet you up top.”

They met again in the stairwell a minute later in any case, as the elevator did not go all the way up to the roof. The mall itself was deserted, with discarded shopping bags, dropped food, and other signs of an hasty exit. The door at the top of the stairs was locked, but one blow from Vasily’s strength-augmented arm burst the lock, and they emerged onto the rooftop of the mall.

The Lightning was visible above them, circling down toward a marked-out landing pad a short distance away. They started in that direction, but had barely covered twenty feet before Catalina groaned and bent forward, spewing out a mixture of puke and blood that splattered on the floor in front of her. She let out a sharp cry and doubled over. “Feel… hot,” she managed to say.

“Can’t you carry her to the aircraft?” Mary asked.

“She’s going into shock,” James said, quickly digging into his medical bag. “She won’t make it to a hospital, I have to treat her now.”

“She’s running a fever,” Jane said, carefully removing her helmet. She pulled clear, giving Mary room to kneel on the other side of the fallen agent, opposite James.

“Help me get this breastplate off,” James said. Once the bulky armor was clear, he took Catalina’s knife and efficiently cut away part of her uniform, revealing a noticeably swollen abdomen. As they watched, they saw something pulse out, as though someone were punching her from inside.

“Stomach,” Catalina moaned, between dry heaves that left her lips and chin speckled with blood.

“Hold her down!” James ordered. As Jane took hold of her shoulders, he met Mary’s eyes. “We have to do something now,” the Indian doctor said.

“Aughhh!” Catalina screamed. “Hurts.”

“The hell?” Vasily asked, unable to clearly see what was going on. “What we do? Get her back to... we got time?”

“No,” Mary said. “We should get that out of her right now.” This time, there was no hesitation in her voice.

James looked at her again, and nodded. His surgical kit was laid out beside them on the rooftop. “Go ahead. I’ll support.”

Mary picked up a scalpel, and after taking a deep breath, cut Catalina’s belly wide open.

* * * * *

Session 22 (September 22, 2008)

Chapter 92

Catalina lay intubated and sedated in a quarantine bed in the medical lab at HQX, the soft ping of a heartbeat monitor accompanying the gentle whoosh of the machine that aided her breathing. From behind a panel of molded plastic Vasily stood watching her, a grim look on his face.

“Is she going to be all right?”

Vasily turned to see Ama Ngunyi, who still looked rather the worse for wear for her own recent experience with alien weaponry. The African woman walked with a noticeable limp, and she carried a small medical monitoring unit clipped to the collar of her tunic, which was only slightly more substantial than a surgical gown.

Vasily grunted. "Doctor say so. Nothing permanently damaged, at least not beyond our new medical technology."

"I will keep watch, if you like."

He grunted again, but did not leave his vantage. The two watched together in silence, for a few moments. "Where other Beta Team members?" he finally asked. "They check out already, or..."

"They took Perez," Ama said. "They treated him, but he just... his eyes, they were dead. He and Svienn were good friends. No one should have to watch that done to anyone.... What they did to him..."

"That... hm. Beta going to be okay?"

"I don't know. Not much left of us. With Svienn, and now Alyssa..."

Vasily shifted slightly. "What?"

Ama's eyes widened. "They... they didn't tell you?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, gods, I'm sorry. I know you and she..."

"What?" he repeated, with more intensity as he turned to face her. She looked away, across the lab, not meeting his eyes.

"This place. So much sadness here," she said. "It was right around when you were leaving on your mission. She... she put a gun to her chin, and pulled the trigger. I'm so sorry. I thought they would have told you."

Vasily blinked. He was saved from having to say anything by his communicator buzzing in his pocket. He opened it up to see a short e-mail from Garret.

FROM: MICHAEL GARRET, X-COM DIRECTOR-LIAISON
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM

We just intercepted an alien communication, and I thought you should know. The alien battleship is returning to Earth, and will be stopping at the Antarctica base in 78 hours. The mission is a go, team.

Vasily looked at Ama, who was still waiting there, a sympathetic expression on her face. He glanced back at Catalina one last time. "Excuse me," he said, heading back toward the base, and the preparations that would have to be made.

* * * * *

Session 23 (September 29, 2008)

Chapter 93

The lights in the room were dim, as everyone in the room focused on the images that Doctor Wagner brought up in succession on the large LCD unit on the wall. There was a general air of revulsion as the video taken during the creature they'd battled during the Miami mission appeared on the screen. Catalina, still looking pale but determined, involuntarily ran a hand over her belly, which was still tender despite the accelerated healing she'd undergone over the last few days. Mary had aided James on the project, and what they had found had only raised more disturbing questions about the aliens.

"This new alien represents a threat that could potentially rival even the alien battleship," Wagner was saying. "At the moment, we're calling it a 'chryssalid.' On the plus side, it looks like the American quarantine of Miami is holding, and no new cases have been reported. Our biological research team has made it a top priority to develop countermeasures for the creature's implantation attack."

She shifted the screen to another familiar and equally disturbing image. "We have completed our preliminary study of the psionic alien prisoner, code named 'Ethereal.' The creature has an incredibly developed brain, but its abilities for independent thought are somewhat atrophied for a being of its potential intelligence. Still, they look to be leaders of sorts of the aliens, or at least lieutenants for some greater authority within the alien hierarchy."

The image shifted to a more neutral schematic, a blueprint for a new facility within the X-COM headquarters. "Doctor White has submitted an audacious proposal, in conjunction with Counselor Beauvais and the Biological Sciences research team. Doctor White?"

Stan rose. "We believe that X-COM can use the Ethereal leader and the data we've collected from it to build a Psi-Lab on site that will allow us to train our operatives in psionic warfare. While the immediate benefits would be to improve our mental defenses against the alien psi attacks, the idea is that eventually, X-COM agents might be able to access the latent psi talents that all human beings possess, to some degree." Seeing the looks around the table, he held up his hands. "I know, I know; believe me, I understand your skepticism. While some of these theories reek more of science fiction than what we understand as real science, we are forced to give them credence by the simple fact of what the aliens have shown us is possible. Constructing the Psi-Lab will require a major effort; a full research team in addition to an estimated 60 engineer-weeks of manufacturing resources."

“Thank you, Stan,” Garret said, stepping in quickly before anyone else could speak. “I know you have questions, but they’ll have to wait for now. We have a more immediate concern. Kim?”

Doctor Wagner returned to the monitor and brought up the global map. Bright lines sprang into being across it, tracking data and mission information that culminated in a meeting point not far from the South Pole.

“If the information gained from the alien prisoners is accurate,” she told them, “the alien battleship should reenter Earth orbit in eleven hours. Six of those hours will be spent with you boosting at high speed in the Lightning to Antarctica.”

“You will need to hit the base fast, and hit it hard,” Garret said. “The Lightning has been readied to imitate the alien communications.”

Grace looked tired; she and her team had hardly slept over the last two days. “Aliens won’t know anything is wrong, if it works.”

“Stan?” Garret asked.

“The nerve agent is ready,” Stan replied. “The gas should neutralize their defenses, and their resistance.”

“Who is deploying the nerve gas?” Jane asked.

“Firestorm-1,” Garret said.

Wagner nodded. “The ship will hit the enemy base first, and deploy the gas. We’ve used the alien intel to mask its signature, so it will appear to the aliens to be a small scout ship.”

“So the air filters on our helmets will protect us?” Jane asked.

“Air filters wouldn’t help you against this stuff,” Grace said.

“I thought it was non-toxic to humans?” Catalina said.

“In tests, symptoms were... minor,” Stan said. “But it’s moot, as it breaks down in atmosphere in just a few minutes.”

“Taking most of them with it, we hope?” Catalina said.

“Stan, just exactly what will the gas do to those aliens?” Joan Beauvais asked.

“It should leave them helpless, almost like a seizure.”

“For how long?” Hadrian asked.

“If everything works as planned, until they die, sergeant,” Stan replied.

“So we shoot them while they are down?” James asked.

“What is primary objective of the mission?” Jane prompted.

“Destroy battleship,” Vasily said.

Garret nodded. “Capture whatever intel you can find. If there’s a chance, we’ll send in a retrieval team to get whatever Elerium we can, but if not... your instructions are to leave nothing behind that they can use. We have to assume that once we hit the battleship, we’ll provoke a response.”

“Is the plasma base defense operational?” Catalina asked.

“Ah... sort of,” Grace said.

“What does that mean?” Agent Drake shot back. “Either it works, or it doesn’t!”

“Well, it’s been a rushed week,” Grace said. “In all honesty we’ve skipped a lot of the safety protocols to get it online in time for this mission.”

“I have a question,” Mary said, the first words she’d spoken since the start of the briefing.

“Yes, Doctor Ranma?” Garret asked.

“What is the point of a ground assault on an opponent we know can destroy us from above? Will our incursion doom another city to destruction?”

Garret leaned into the table in front of him, resting both hands on its edge. “It might,” he finally acknowledged. “But if we are successful and luring the battleship in, we might be able to stay ahead of them.”

“According to our intel,” Wagner added, “they only have the one battleship. At least for now.”

“The only other option is to wait for them to take us out,” Garret said. “Even the plasma defense likely wouldn’t stop that battleship.”

“So how do we destroy it?” Jane asked. “Even nuclear weapons barely scratched it.”

Grace leaned forward. "The battleship will think that everything is all right, if the Lightning's new comm array does its job."

"Right," Garret said. "You secure the base, let it land, and when they open the door, rush in and take it out. An explosive charge on one of the Elerium storage units should set off a chain reaction that will destroy the ship from within."

"As simple as that," Drake said. "Won't the ship be heavily garrisoned?"

"Any way of gassing the ship too?" Hadrian asked.

"I can't think of any way to get the stuff inside," Stan said.

"So you don't have any grenades or portable cannisters of the gas?" the Marine persisted.

Stan looked a bit embarrassed. "We've had some difficulties...ah, keeping the stuff stable," he admitted. "Most of what's going on the Firestorm will be the containment and dispersal unit. And the... ah, backup."

"Backup?" James asked.

"Firestorm-1 will be carrying a fusion bomb as a backup," Garret said. "If you are unable to penetrate the alien ship, the bomb may be able to cripple it enough to keep it from taking off."

"Better not to fail," Drake said.

The Alphas shared a grim look from their side of the table.

"What is stopping base from sending distress call?" Vasily asked. "We got jamming, or something? Or we relying on gas?"

"The Lightning can jam their signal," Grace explained, "but only for a few minutes. The gas has to work, or the mission is off."

"Seems like an awful lot of ifs," Drake interjected, "and things that can go wrong."

"We have no choice," Garret said. "We don't know why that battleship skipped us the first time around, but we can't count on a second pass. If we don't take out that ship..." He trailed off for a moment. "I wish we had more to give you, Alpha. This is on your shoulders, now. We will need you to adapt, and do what is necessary."

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Session 23 (September 29, 2008)

Chapter 94

The base bustled with activity; there was still a lot to do, and only a few hours to get everything done before the scheduled launch of the X-COM assault force. Hadrian reported to Grace's workshop for the final adjustments to the new suit of powered armor, while James packed up the latest set of improved medikits to come out of Stan's production line. Vasily made a stop at the armory, where he made a quick farewell.

"I going to miss the minigun, Musa," he said, as the big African packed the weapon and its ammunition magazine into a storage locker.

"Ah, I find good home for it," he said. "You need more gas grenades?"

"I have plenty," he said. "Better keep handy for other Alphas, though." He left Musa to return to the physical sciences workshop, where one of the researchers waved him over.

"Been expecting you," he said, opening a sealed case that hissed as air poured into the vacuum that had been inside. "Try not to lose it, this is the only specimen of this model that we've recovered."

Vasily reached into the container and took out the heavy plasma cannon. It was big and bulky, and a few pounds heavier than even the autocannon. It would be cumbersome, no doubt, but the powered armor would help with that, and there was no bulky backpack full of bullets to lug around. The weapon used the same Elerium cartridges as the other alien plasma weapons, although the cannon could only manage ten shots before depleting a power cell. Each of those shots, however, would pack a punch.

"Now I am ready," he said.

The Alphas met up in the staging area and made their way to the hangar, where the Lightning waited for them. With Vasily, Jane, and now Hadrian clad in the powered armor, the floor under their feet literally shook with their coming. The Alphas had upgraded their weapons, with most of the team members swapping out their plasma pistols for the heavier rifles that they'd captured in their last two missions. The supply of power cells with their tiny shielded cores of Elerium-115 had not caught up with the supply of weapons, but they'd shared around what they had, and several of them still carried hand lasers or more conventional firearms as backups. Grenades dangled in strings from the mesh belts strung across their armored bodies, and emergency medical kits hung in easy-to-reach places.

Doctor Sandesh was waiting for them in the hangar bay, a new HWP idling at his side. This one had a new layer of sleek, improved armor plating covering its body, and a new turret with a weapon and sensor array that resembled a crouched insect.

“These things just keep getting scarier,” Vasily observed.

“This is the finest implementation of portable AI wedded to supreme destructive force,” the Egyptian scientist declaimed. “Do take care of it, please!”

“Well, we try bring it back in one piece,” Vasily said. “Focus on me,” he said to the platform, initializing its voice command sequence. The platform obeyed his orders and rolled up into the small cargo hold slung under the Lightning’s belly, sitting their mutely as the outer doors swung shut. With that taken care of, the Russian followed the others up the ramp into the interior of the aircraft.

“All aboard for the Antarctic Express,” Ken said to them, as they quickly stashed their gear and strapped into their seats. The Lightning rumbled as Ken quickly brought the engines up to full power, then they felt the familiar but still unsettling lifting sensation as the aircraft rose quickly up into the air, then tilted back as they blasted away toward their destination, and what they hoped would be the turning point in the war against the alien invaders of Earth.

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Session 23 (September 29, 2008)

Chapter 95

“We’re clear, no alien intercepts,” Stan’s voice came to them via the tiny speakers in their helmets. “We’re about to begin our run. The gas bomb reads green on all readouts... wait a minute... no, it’s fine. We’re go, deployment in 25 seconds.”

Vasily frowned as the Lightning jolted slightly under them. They were standing facing the hatch, forming a row, holding onto the straps that dangled down from the brace above. Ken’s voice followed Stan’s on their comms. “We’re heading in after them,” the pilot reported. “I’ll drop you down in front of the base, then I’ll find a nice hidden little spot to park the Lightning. Activating Grace’s array... gods, I hope this works.”

“So do we, Ken, so do we,” James muttered.

There was a pause. The Alphas checked their weapons and waited. Finally, after what seemed like minutes, Stan said, “The bomb’s away, direct hit, we’re clear... you’re good to go, Alpha!”

“Right, here we go!” Ken yelled, loud enough for them to hear him even without the communicators. The Lightning arced downward, and they streaked toward their destination. They tightened their grips on the straps as the floor under them suddenly pressed hard upward, and the front of the craft rose up before the entire vessel settled down with a crunch. “We’re down!” Ken reported, but the Alphas were already disembarking, moving out into a field of pure white as far as they could see in every direction. They could just make out the shadowy outlines of ridges and other terrain features, but it was all lost in the blinding haze of snow that filled the air and blew around them in a blistering wind that lashed at them like a whip.

The Lightning was already rising back into the air, leaving the HWP lying in the snow where it had rolled out of the aircraft’s cargo compartment. It hummed as its systems activated, and it lurched into motion, its tracks digging parallel tracks in the snow.

“Where base?” Vasily asked. “Can see nothing.” He tapped his helmet, but the storm, or some other source of interference, was apparently wreaking havoc on their sensors, as the VDUs failed to add any clarity to the scene, the bright green lines of the heads up display skewing and shifting as the suits tried to compensate.

James apparently knew something they didn’t; the doctor was moving across the snowfield toward a vague dark line that might have been anything. “Come on, move it!” he urged. They started after him, but the HWP suddenly swiveled its turret and chirped a warning.

A bright flash erupted ahead of them, and a stream of plasma flared as it caught James on the shoulder. The doctor staggered back and dove to the ground a moment before a second blast streaked over him, vanishing into the storm. The source of the attack became clear a moment later, as the attackers drew closer.

“Discs!” Catalina yelled, but they could all see them now, three of them, hovering a bit unevenly in the harsh winds, firing plasma bolts that streaked through their ranks. The Alphas returned fire, laying down covering fire as Mary rushed over to James, who rose to one knee and shot a blast from his own rifle that streaked past its target and exploded against the ridge behind.

The HWP powered up its cannon and fired a bright streak of plasma energy that shot narrowly past Catalina before impacting the lead disc in a bright explosion that was augmented a moment later as the alien machine detonated. “Careful!” Vasily yelled, as he fired a bolt from his plasma cannon at another cyberdisc. “Not stand in way of tank!”

Catalina nodded and darted to the side, a fortuitous move as a plasma bolt geysered into the ground where she’d been standing. The two remaining cyberdiscs continued to close, firing as they came, but they quickly succumbed to the sheer volume of firepower that Alpha put out. The only additional casualty was the HWP, which had suffered a glancing hit that seemed to have been mostly absorbed by its layered armor. James was not seriously hurt, so after a quick check to make sure there were no more of the

discs lurking about, they made their way forward to the entry that the doctor had spotted earlier.

The dark line in the storm resolved into another ridge, a mass of ice and rock that rose up out of the ground ahead of them, a good ten meters high. As they drew closer they could all see the gaping opening ahead of them, a tunnel that vanished into darkness below.

“Should we send the robot first?” Mary asked, staring into the tunnel.

“Is not exactly too smart if no one around,” Vasily said.

“Yeah, it’s semi-autonomous, not autonomous,” Jane said, as she replaced the depleted plasma cell in her rifle with a fresh one.

“Looks like the bomb worked,” Catalina said. “No welcoming committee, save for the discs.”

“Forgot about them,” Vasily said. “Come on.” He led them forward, into the shaft. The chaos of the storm receded behind them, replaced by a quiet, seeping cold that they could feel even through the insulation in their armor. White plumes rose from the exhaust ports in their air filtration units. They switched on their lamps, but as they descended they could see light ahead. After about fifty meters the shaft deposited them in a broad natural cavern, one lit with vaguely phosphorescent patches along the walls, glistening on the ice with a pale radiance that brightened the way ahead.

“There,” Jane said, spotting the first body.

The snakeman lay in a frozen heap, covered in a slick of ice and green goop. It was covered in wounds, its segmented body covered in deep gashes. Another alien lay a few meters further in, this one a sectoid that lay slumped against a boulder, looking like it had just laid down and decided to go to sleep.

“Looks like an exit back there,” Catalina said, shining her light attached to her motion detector toward the back of the cavern. It glinted on something, just as the screen on the detector flashed; movement.

“Hostiles spotted!” Hadrian said, falling into a crouch, cursing as the mechanism on his rifle jammed.

Jane and Vasily came forward, adding the glow of their helmet lights to Catalina’s handheld. The light revealed more enemies lurking near the back of the cavern, at least a dozen sectoids. As the diminutive aliens shuffled forward, they could see that the aliens were in bad shape; dark fluid was frozen to their heads where it had oozed from their eyes, ears, and nostrils, and they moved with frozen, jerky movements. They carried a variety of weapons, vibroblades, mostly, although several held what looked

like metal tools, and one even carried a hunk of rock that was slick with frozen green blood. That one had a plasma pistol fixed to its belt, but the creature made no move for the weapon, instead lifting the bloody rock as it caught sight of the human intruders.

As one the aliens screamed, and charged forward at the surprised Alphas.

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Session 23 (September 29, 2008)

Chapter 96

Plasma bolts slammed into the aliens, exploding bodies and searing frozen flesh with hot plumes of flaring gas. The barrage was inexorable, but somehow the alien charge survived it, and more than half of the aliens surged through, even though several bore wounds that should have killed or crippled them. Mary screamed as a sectoid lashed at her, steam rising from its vibroblade as it glanced hard off of the armored plate protecting her chest. The Indian doctor was caught apart from the others as the sheer violence of the alien rush drove the Alphas back.

Hadrian tossed his jammed rifle aside and unlimbered his plasma pistol, but before he could shoot one of the aliens sprang at him, stabbing with its vibroblade. The Marine dodged back, the alien in pursuit, until the cavern wall loomed up behind him. He shifted to the side, slamming the alien hard in the juncture where its head met its neck. The alien staggered forward into the wall, the vibroblade carving a deep arc in the ice. The blow had to have broken its neck, but somehow it managed to turn and come at Hadrian again before he could recover and fire. It lunged, but even as the blade carved into his heavy armor a blast of plasma energy slammed into the alien's arm, separating it at the elbow. The arm and blade went flying, but the alien kept on attack, slamming ineffectively at the Marine's body with its other hand. Hadrian kicked it in the chest, knocking it over onto its back, and finished it for good with a blast to the heart. He looked at Catalina, who'd shot away its weapon, and nodded thanks.

The HWP vaporized a charging sectoid, but was then overrun by two of the aliens, smashing at its turret with their weapons. The one with the rock wasn't accomplishing much, but its cohort had a vibroblade, which it used to shear away the armor plate protecting the turret, savaging the machine's innards. Vasily blasted the alien off it, the heavy cannon exploding the alien's skull like a melon. The other alien shrieked and flung itself at the Russian.

"Mary, get out of there!" Jane yelled. She tried to get to the doctor, but was cut off by another sectoid, armed with a heavy spanner made out of alien metal. The weapon clunked against her powered armor, doing no damage, but it blocked her path, another blow to her knee knocking off her balance as she tried to bully her way past it. Still she

focused on Mary, firing her plasma rifle into the alien, eyes widening as it shrugged off a hit that had punched a fist-sized blackened hole in the side of its torso. It hit Mary again, slicing through her armor as it jammed its weapon into her body with violent, vicious thrusts. The doctor stumbled and fell down. The alien sprang on top of her, looking almost comical at a fraction of her size, save for the fact that it seemed to be unstoppable as it lifted its blade for another strike.

Jane yelled out something as she swept forward, her own vibroblade glowing brightly in her hand. The alien turned to face her, but she dodged its clumsy swing and sliced down, the insanely keen edge slicing neatly through the sectoid's skull. Half its head fell away, its brains spattering both women as the alien finally went down, its weapon clattering uselessly to the ground, where the heat of it caused the ice there to hiss and steam.

The last few aliens were down, some still struggling as James and Catalina fired a last few shots to make certain. The entire exchange had taken just a few seconds, but the Alphas felt like they'd been through a long battle. Mary gasped for breath as Jane helped her to a sitting position. She was bleeding from multiple gashes where the alien attacks had penetrated her armor, but she was able to administer a medikit to herself with the other woman's help.

"Looks like the gas didn't exactly work as advertised," Catalina said, giving the nearest body a decent berth as she moved to check the others. Several of the sectoid corpses continued to twitch, and most had been blasted to pieces.

"Tank totalled," Vasily reported, poking at the wreckage.

"I'm almost out of ammo," James said.

"That one over here had pistol," the Russian said, with a gesture. James recovered the weapon and extracted the power cell, frowning at the charge indicator. "You okay?" he said to Mary, who was standing again, if a bit unsteadily. She grimaced, wiping blood from her armored gloves, but nodded.

"Keep moving?" Catalina asked, pointing at the exit at the back of the room.

Vasily nodded, and they moved out, the British agent taking the lead, taking them deeper into the complex. The next room also looked natural, and the next, large caverns of stone and ice illuminated by the same odd glowing patches along the walls. The rooms were empty, put to no use by the aliens that they could see, although there was enough space to accommodate a hundred aliens, had they wanted to.

Finally, Catalina led them to another tunnel that was entirely worked stone, although still slick with a faint sheen of condensed ice. "I think it's getting a little warmer," she said, running a hand along the nearest wall. It was smooth, as though it had been bored cleanly through the rock.

“Careful,” Vasily said. “We not know if gas get this far in, or what it do to aliens if it did.”

The tunnel opened onto a larger chamber. While the passage had been a smooth bore, this place was a chaotic mess of angles and odd formations, some of which appeared to be natural parts of the surrounding stone, while others were distinct in color and texture, as though they’d been formed elsewhere and somehow transported to this subterranean vault deep under the Antarctic surface. Most of the surfaces glistened with moisture, and while there were a few crystals of ice visible, the air was noticeably warmer here, wisps of steam rising from their armored bodies as they entered the place.

“Catalina?” Vasily asked.

“Something’s moving in here,” Catalina said. “I’m not able to lock down the signal, though.”

“Careful, careful,” he said, easing forward warily. The others followed, their boots squelching on matter that was perhaps best not identified.

The cavern went back quite a ways. There were crevices in the rock that might have been exits, but when they shone their lights into them, none of them proved to penetrate back further than a few meters. Up ahead they could see a raised stone shelf, a platform that rose above the surrounding level of the chamber.

“What the hell is that?” Jane said.

They could all see it, a pink globule of alien matter that seemed to hover in the air above the platform, glistening in the light of their lamps. It bulged slightly and seemed to quiver as they approached, as if alive.

“Whatever it is, I don’t like the looks of it,” Catalina said.

“Shoot it?” James suggested.

“How do we know it’s hostile?” Mary asked.

“Watch out!” Jane warned, as the thing pulsed violently, caught in a spasm that passed from its base to the top, where a gap opened, and it discharged a gout of fluid across the room toward the Alphas. Most of it splattered directly on Vasily, who stumbled back, the alien matter sizzling as it bored into his helmet, shoulder, and breastplate.

“Aaa!” the Russian exclaimed, as an ugly cloud of yellow smoke enveloped him.

Weapons discharged as the Alphas opened fire; both Hadrian and Catalina struck the alien organism, which emitted geysers of the noxious substance as the bolts punctured its body. Mary and James tried to help Vasily, who was trying unsuccessfully to wipe

the caustic alien substance from his armor, and was only managing to damage his gloves in the process.

With all of them distracted, no one spotted the dark shadow moving through the rock formations until it was almost on top of them.

“Look out!” Catalina yelled, too late. Hadrian turned just as the chryssalid broke through a lattice of purple stone and sprang into their midst. It slapped the plasma rifle out of his hands, and slashed into him with its claws, flinging the hapless soldier halfway across the room.

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Catalina fought a surge of terror as the alien monstrosity slammed down Hadrian and loomed over her, a memory of what the things had done to her before warring against her control. A voice in the back of her mind screamed at her to drop her weapon and run, but she somehow overcame it, lifting her weapon and firing it into the alien’s torso.

The alien turned, and as she looked up into its face she could see that the chryssalid was in bad shape. Its eyes were covered by a nasty film, and a black froth ran from its jaws and trailed down its chest, glistening in a half-frozen mass. Its movements was as powerful as she remembered, but clumsy, and she was able to leap back as it lunged at her, those deadly claws, and the implantation tentacle between them, seeking her flesh.

She was struck hard, a glancing blow, and felt a stabbing pain follow as her shoulder impacted the floor. She skidded and rolled with it, coming back up onto her feet as the chryssalid stumbled after her. It swung again, missing her by a good two feet, its claws tearing apart a slender stone pillar, spattering her with shards. She ran back, getting clear before she could recover.

Unfortunately, it fixed on the next closest adversary, which happened to be Mary.

“Leave me alone!” the Indian doctor yelled, as the chryssalid lurched toward her. The two collided hard, an impact that the human caught the worst of, falling over onto her back, bits of stone crunching under her armor. The chryssalid reared up, lifting its claws like long daggers, knocking aside Jane, who’d lifted her rifle but who was flung aside before she could pull the trigger. The thing let out a monstrous, agonized hiss, and lunged, the claws coming down toward the center of Mary’s torso.

Vasily slammed into the thing from the side, and this time it was the alien that gave way, as the Russian, augmented by several hundred pounds of human and alien technology, drove the two of them into a formation of mushroom-shaped green and purple rocks. The little forest was crushed under their impact, and the chryssalid roared again as it reared up, lashing blindly at its attacker. It caught him across his faceplate with an armored elbow, and Vasily was knocked onto his backside, groaning as the back of his helmet slammed hard against the cold stone. The alien stumbled as it fought to get back to its feet, crushing the remains of the stone formation under its flailing limbs. Plasma bolts blasted into it as the Alphas unleashed their full firepower into its body. Jane dragged Mary clear and then pulsed several shots from her plasma rifle across the alien's back. Vasily took advantage of the barrage to roll over and crawl clear, toward the heavy plasma cannon he'd dropped earlier.

The alien roared as more shots tore into it. James emptied his plasma rifle, then bent to help Vasily to his feet. He hefted the plasma cannon and turned in time to see the alien emerge from the glowing wreath of plasma that had churned its torso into a gory mess. One arm dangled from a few twining sinews from its shoulder socket, and part of its face had been blasted away, including one eye and part of its jaws. It could barely walk, but some instinct drove it forward, its remaining claw stabbing out toward Vasily. The Russian held his ground until it was nearly on top of him, then he fired the cannon. The plasma bolt struck the alien in the chest, reversing its momentum and flinging it backward, until it struck the wall of the cavern. With a final gurgling hiss it collapsed, its remaining limbs twitching once more before it fell still.

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Chapter 98

"You sure you okay, there, chief?" James asked.

"Fine," Vasily said.

"Cause that spitter thing made hell of your armor."

Vasily didn't need to look down to see the gaping holes in his breastplate and helmet; he'd already seen them, openings large enough to stick a finger through, or in one case, an entire fist. Thankfully the damage hadn't crippled the armor, because without the mechanisms that drove power to the arms and legs, he'd have no choice but to ditch the whole suit. But if an alien got lucky with a plasma weapon it could really ruin his day.

“Fine,” he repeated. He heard a sound that had him spinning around, back toward the communications console that Catalina had been trying to crack. “Gunshot!” he yelled, charging forward into the small room they’d discovered in the depths of the alien base.

The first thing he saw was that much of the room was on fire; Catalina was staggering back, coughing as smoke wreathed her head and shoulders. Vasily tried to grab her, but the British agent suddenly stopped and reversed herself. “Dammit, my phone!” she exclaimed, darting back into the flames, grabbing something from the console. Even then Vasily had to physically grab her and drag her clear, leaving the flames flaring and sputtering in the wreckage of the control room.

“How’d that happen, Cat?” James asked her, as she shook her head at the blackened remains of her xPhone.

“I jacked in, and found a signal coming in, looked like it was coming from space. I was trying to hack the security, see if I could pinpoint the source, when the console went up.”

“Clever aliens,” Vasily said. He activated his communicator. “Jane, Hadrian, you clear rest of base?”

He got his answer when Hadrian appeared in the doorway. “Found a few more aliens in some of the back rooms,” he said. “They were pretty messed up, didn’t put up much of a fight. What happened here?”

“Alien security. We need to—”

He was interrupted as the floor started to shake. The rumblings grew more intense, the walls joining in, until the entire base was trembling around them. It lasted for a good thirty seconds, until the shaking abruptly stopped.

Mary appeared in the doorway. “Oh! What’s going on?”

The Alphas shared a knowing look. “Time to say hi to the battleship, eh?” James said.

They made their way back to the surface, checking their gear and weapons one final time. “Anyone have any plasma ammo to share?” James asked. “I’m almost out.”

“Not me, I’m down to nothing,” Catalina said. She’d already taken out her laser, and was charging it up, double checking the power lead to make sure that it hadn’t gotten loose in all the knocking around she’d undergone.

“Eighteen shots left,” Jane said.

“Thirty-three,” Hadrian said.

They passed the remains of the HWP, surrounded by the mangled remains of the sectoids. "Sandesh is going to be pissed," Catalina remarked.

The air grew noticeable warmer as they approached the tunnel entrance; water was flowing freely down the ice walls, forming puddles that they splashed through on their way up. "I think it outside," Vasily said.

"So here goes nothing?" Catalina said.

"Yah," Vasily returned. "We all ready?" He glanced back at the others, who were still talking about their ammunition supply. Shaking his head, the Russian led them out of the tunnel and back out into the rough Antarctic weather.

His first thought was that they had been underground longer than he'd thought, and night had fallen. But then, as he stared up into the shadowy half-light, he realized that what he was seeing was the bulk of the alien warship.

The ship was... *huge* did not begin to describe it. It loomed over them like a crouching giant, supported by massive pylons that spread out from its center like splayed legs. He could see one of those landing struts about fifty meters ahead; it was as thick around as two railcars laid side-by-side, the ice around it forming a crushed berm from the weight of the ship. A dense mist had risen, which he realized had to have come from the energy released by the ship on its landing, which had vaporized a layer of the ice under it. The ground was treacherous, the footing growing more unsteady as the moisture recondensed and formed a new layer of ice, but his heavy footfalls crunched it under his boots, and he was able to make his way forward.

"Wow," someone said behind him.

As he drew closer, he could make out the outline of the ramp that led up into the ship. A dim glow was visible from within, but no aliens had presented themselves as of yet. "Here go," he said. He activated his communicator, trying to raise the Lightning, but all of the channels save for the local link to the other Alphas were dead. He hoped that it was just normal interference from the ship, and that the aliens weren't waiting for them, setting a trap.

Well, it wouldn't be the first trap that Alpha had sprung.

"On your tail, Vas," Catalina said behind him. The others were having a bit of difficulty managing on the ice, but they followed, strung out in a line that lengthened behind Vasily.

"Losing initiative," Catalina said, looking back as they approached the ramp.

“Come on, we need go,” Vasily urged, his boots clanking on the alien material as he transitioned from the ice to the ramp. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure the others were catching up, then started up the ramp, into the ship.

The ramp deposited them into a broad chamber that was very much reminiscent of the architecture of the other alien vessels they had explored, only much bigger. The entry consisted of a large central space bordered by tall arching pillars that melded into the floor, walls, and ceiling. Between those pillars were nodes that contained the familiar recessed alcoves that the aliens used for biological storage; these appeared to be empty at the moment, although they could not see the full extent of them from the entrance.

There were several exits evident, open passages and several of the narrow iris-doors around the perimeter of the place. One of those doors flared open as they entered, and a hulking alien stepped into the chamber.

It was a new alien, one that they knew from the accounts of Beta Team. It stood taller than even Vasily by a full foot, with a bulky frame that seemed almost to bulge with muscle. It was clad in a bright green bodysuit that covered it from head to toe, with only the purple oblong of its face visible. That face was vaguely human in form, but the solid red orbs of its eyes were anything but. It carried a heavy plasma cannon that it lifted and fired, the incandescent bolt narrowly missing Vasily as he moved forward.

“Cover!” Jane yelled, darting toward the nearest pillar. “Run for cover!”

The remaining Alphas were coming up the ramp, firing as they ran. Plasma bolts splashed into the doorway around the muton, and one clipped its armored shoulder, flashing brightly as it exploded. But as it cleared, they could see that while the bolt had left an ugly black smear, it didn’t look like it had done much more.

Mary appeared at the top of the ramp, looking a bit disoriented. The alien shot again, and once again it narrowly missed Vasily, who was running full-out across the room toward one of the niches, giving the muton a difficult target. The bolt streaked past the Russian and hit Mary a glancing blow to the shoulder that flung her around, knocking her roughly to her knees.

“Cover, Mary!” Jane yelled, firing and hitting the alien squarely in the center of its chest. She got its attention; the alien shifted and shot at her, the plasma bolt exploding into the pillar a split second after Jane ducked her head back behind its cover. The impact blasted a hole in the structure of the pillar, showering Jane with shards and fire, nearly knocking her off her feet as well.

Catalina ran after Vasily, keeping her head low, although the muton was not looking her way. She had nearly reached one of the alcoves when a doorway recessed in its depths split apart, and another muton stepped through, ducking to fit through the low opening.

“Gah!” Catalina exclaimed. She tried to dodge and fire all at once. It was almost impossible to miss at that range, but all her laser did was draw a slightly discolored streak across its torso. The muton merely stepped forward, sweeping one of its huge arms across her path. Its fist smacked into her chest and launched her like a catapult stone into the nearest wall. She hit with a sickening crunch, and crumpled in a limp heap, unmoving.

Vasily heard Catalina's cry, and turned to see the alien standing not ten feet away, and the British agent falling to the ground. “Oh hell,” he said, as the alien turned toward him, and pointed the business end of a plasma rifle directly at him.

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A grenade exploded at the muton's feet, enveloping it in a cloying cloud of nasty green gas. Vasily hurled himself aside just as a bright bolt blasted from within the gas. The plasma clipped his arm, but most of the discharge trailed past him. Grimacing against the pain that shot up the wounded limb, he staggered against a pillar and lifted his cannon.

He was just in time, as the dark outline of the muton materialized from within the gas right in front of him. Both shot at the same time. Vasily was flung back against the pillar as the plasma bolt slammed into his armored chest. He felt hot needles of fire and screamed as plasma sizzled through the holes in the armor and seared his skin.

His own shot blasted into the alien's gun, which exploded in a fiery burst of plasma and metal shards. The alien was briefly obscured within a violent white haze, but then it emerged with arms outstretched, charging toward Vasily before he could recover enough to fire again.

The Russian's companions had their own problems, and could not immediately come to his aid. Jane had fallen back into deeper cover, the pillar she'd hidden behind penetrated in several places where the first muton's plasma cannon had perforated it. Hadrian threw a second gas grenade at it, but the missile bounced and tumbled between its legs before exploding, catching it only on the edge of the toxic gas cloud. In any case it had as little effect as the first had, and the alien forced him to take cover with a shot that narrowly missed taking his head off his shoulders.

James had been the last one up the ramp, and he pulled Mary to cover before unlimbering his rifle. But before he could shoot, he saw Catalina get manhandled by the

alien, and he charged across the room to help her. The alien that had taken her down was distracted with Vasily, but the other one turned toward the motion and fired. The plasma bolt exploded at his feet along the top of the ramp, hitting him with a blast of warmth as the superheated gas enveloped his legs. He wasn't seriously hurt, but the concussive force of the explosion took his feet out from under him, and he fell awkwardly onto the icy surface of the ramp. Unable to stop gravity from taking hold, he slid down the icy ramp, finally landing face-first in a drift of slushy snow at its base.

Vasily had his plasma gun knocked from his grasp before he could bring it to bear, and then he and the alien were engaged in a violent close-quarters fight. He didn't have a chance to go for his stun rod, and narrowly avoided the alien's grab at his throat, falling back against the awkward angle of the pillar. He snarled and formed a knife-edge with his armored hand, chopping at the alien's elbow. The blow would have crippled a human's arm, even without the augmented strength granted by his armor, but the alien's expression didn't change as it smashed Vasily with a backhanded strike that cracked his faceplate and drove him into the nearby alcove. It didn't give him a chance to recover, reaching in after him.

"Vasily's in trouble!" Jane yelled, firing another shot at the muton with the plasma cannon, then ducking back as the return shot carved another gaping hole in the wall giving her and Hadrian cover. The muton's green suit was pocked now with black smears and divots where it had taken several direct hits, but if it was seriously wounded, it didn't show it.

"It's got to reload some time," Hadrian returned, sliding a fresh energy cell into his rifle—his last—and triggering the charge mechanism. "I'll draw its fire... go for the face!" As soon as the indicator blinked ready, he darted out from cover, firing a blast that exploded against the alien's hip. As before, it seemed rooted to the ground, the solid impact not even forcing it to shift its stance. The alien fired, and Hadrian dove forward, the plasma bolt flashing over him so close that he could feel the heat of it as it streaked by. The Marine came up into a crouch, and saw the alien lower its gun, opening the breach the way he'd seen Vasily do with his own copy of the alien heavy weapon.

A white flare erupted from the center of the alien's face as it slid a fresh Elerium cell into the gun. That did discomfit the alien some, and it actually took a step back as it waved a hand through the plasma cloud, dissipating it. Hadrian couldn't see how it could have actually survived that hit, but it started to close its weapon again.

But even as the alien finished reloading, the Marine glanced left, and saw a more immediate problem.

Vasily managed somehow to get his legs set under him, and as the muton reached for him he roared and pushed off, driving into the alien with the force of his own weight, the armor, and the strength of its actuators driving him forward. The combined impact should have knocked the alien off its feet, but it merely shifted a step back and clamped onto him with its beefy arms, taking hold of him like a wrestler. Vasily found himself

lifted off his feet, all but helpless in the alien's monstrous grasp. He tried to dislodge himself with a strike at the alien's face, but the blow was feeble, and he wasn't able to manage another as it crushed him against its body, its left arm coming down over his shoulder, its right coming up under his arm on the other side, the two meeting in the center of his back. He could hear the servos in his armor cracking as the embrace applied pressure to the joint of his right arm, and he could feel a numbness start to spread through his torso as the stress intensified. He managed to turn his head to look directly into the alien's face, still expressionless as it was slowly killing him.

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Chapter 100

"Go... to... hell!" Vasily managed, fighting for each breath as he spat defiance at the alien crushing him in a deadly bearhug.

He caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye, but he didn't see Hadrian charge up right behind the muton, and jam the barrel of his rifle into the small of its back. The Marine triggered the weapon, which punched a hole in the green suit, a bright flare of plasma surging out around the barrel. The alien jerked, and Hadrian fired again, slamming the gun deeper into the opening he'd bored.

The muton tossed Vasily aside like a discarded toy, and whirled on Hadrian, sweeping with one powerful arm. The Marine ducked under the blow and side-stepped, matching the alien's rotation, and keeping the blackened opening in its back in clear view. The alien tried to match him but could not, and as Hadrian fired one last shot the monstrous thing fell, its insides bored out by the white-hot plasma.

It fell at almost the exact moment as the other muton. Half-blinded by Jane's earlier shot to its face, it unleashed an almost random barrage of plasma bolts at anything moving. It missed Jane, who was still secure in her shielded position, even if the hull of the alien ship around her was starting to resemble a hunk of Swiss cheese. It nearly perforated James as the doctor came back up the ramp, and he nearly slid down it again as he dove for cover. But that gave Jane a chance for one more carefully aimed shot, and even as Hadrian felled his opponent she finished it with a second shot that vaporized one eye and send a stream of plasma into what served it for a brain. The alien settled to the floor with a thud, its heavy cannon clattering at its feet.

In the end, no one was killed, although it was a close thing. Catalina was unconscious but alive, and she responded to the injection of a medikit from James, although it was clear that it hurt her every time she moved. Vasily's shoulder had been dislocated; he opened up his armor just long enough for Hadrian to help him pop it back into its socket,

then he strapped himself back in. The range of motion of his right arm was limited, the joint damaged by the beating the muton had put on him, but he could still move and shoot.

“You know how to build them, Grace,” he said to himself. His visor was more or less kaput, though, and after a few useless attempts to reboot his VDU he finally yanked the whole thing off and tossed it into a corner.

“We need to keep moving,” he told the others. “Ship has more than two aliens on it.”

“Christ, Vas, we’re beat all to hell,” James said, as he helped Mary apply a medikit to her own wounds. Jane and Hadrian kept watch, while Catalina looked down at the corpse of one of the mutons.

“We still have job,” the Russian returned.

“These are what got Beta, then?” Catalina asked, shuddering as she looked down at the monstrous thing. Even dead it looked imposing, almost completely intact except for the hole in its back. “My laser barely scratched it.”

“Big green gorilla,” Vasily said. “They fit description. But plasma do for them all the same. They can be killed.”

“Not easily,” James muttered, glancing back at the fallen creatures one last time as Vasily led them toward the exit that the first muton had been guarding. Hadrian scrounged the partially-depleted energy cell from its cannon, and fell in behind Vasily and Jane, moving deeper into the alien battleship.

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“Well, I think they know we’re here, now,” Catalina said dryly, as she rubbed at a black streak that a plasma bolt had burned into the armor covering her hip. She grimaced as bits of metal flaked off, the aramid fabric underneath it in hardly better condition.

The others moved through the room, checking the bodies of the nearly dozen sectoids that were scattered about the place. Their VDUs had identified most of the aliens as technicians, although there was a soldier near the door, wisps of smoke still rising from the wreckage of its face, and a medic near the bank of machinery in the back. That one had almost caught Catalina by surprise, but Jane had killed it with a shot to the neck before it could incapacitate her with the small launcher it carried.

“How big is this ship?” Jane asked, as she looked over one of the control panels. They had already traversed three levels and at over a dozen rooms, most of them filled with heavy machinery that they did not recognize. The interior of the ship was like a maze, with corridors that bent back on themselves, isolated chambers that dead-ended in blank walls, and lifts that rose or descended in an almost random arrangement.

Resistance had been heavy, although most of the aliens had been sectoids, with a few cyberdiscs sifted through for flavor. There had thankfully been no more mutons, and none of the aliens had been able to do more than slow down Alpha Team.

Hadrian glanced through a doorway on the far side of the room. "Another lift up through here," he reported.

"We must be nearing top," Vasily said.

"I can hear the little buggers," Catalina said, turning her head back and forth. She suddenly spun around, staring wide-eyed at a blank wall. "Thought I saw... something..." she muttered.

Suddenly, Mary clutched at her head and wailed. The others whirled in surprise and alarm. The Indian doctor stumbled to the side of the room, shaking off the hand of support that James tried to offer her. "I want to go home!" she screamed. "I want to go home!"

"What the hell?" Vasily asked, as Jane and James tried to calm her. Mary recoiled from them, huddling in a corner of the room. "Please, I don't belong here. Please!" James got past her as Jane grabbed onto her arms, the doctor applying a hypo to her throat. "Something's doing this," he said to the others.

"It's here, I know it is," Catalina muttered, moving along the wall. Hadrian spun suddenly, bringing up his rifle as he scanned the room with the lift. There was nothing there; the room was empty.

While James worked on Mary, and Hadrian and Catalina jumped at shadows, Jane drew back into the center of the room. She turned, slowly, an odd look on her face. Vasily was watching James and Mary, and didn't notice what was wrong until it was too late. Jane suddenly spun around, yelled, and fired her rifle. Not at Vasily, but at Catalina, who turned at the noise, and took the full force of the plasma bolt to the chest, right below her neck. The bolt exploded in a geyser of hot flame, and Catalina fell to the ground, blood spurting from the blasted wreckage of her throat.

"Wha the—" Vasily said, unable to do anything more but watch as Catalina fell. "Dammit, no!" he yelled, lashing out, knocking the gun from Jane's suddenly limp hands. James ran over to the fallen Brit, whose legs twitched as blood continued to pool from her throat, and spurted from her lips as a strangled hiss. By the time the doctor fell to his knees next to her, both the movement and the sound had ceased. He grabbed a medikit and stabbed it into her as close to the wound as he could, then attached a medical probes to her chest and skull, fixing the readout where he could see it.

"Catalina?" Mary sobbed from the corner. "Catalina?"

Hadrian had come back in, but Vasily pointed to Jane. "Watch her!" he ordered, coming forward until he was standing over James and Catalina. "Doctor?"

James looked at the monitor, his hands covered in blood. "She's dead," he said, without looking up.

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Chapter 101

"What?" Vasily said.

Moving swiftly, James unhooked his pack and laid it next to him. He dragged out a long black case, which opened to reveal several dozen tools and other components compactly arranged in individual sleeves. "I need Mary," he said to Vasily, again without looking up as he quickly started drawing out items from the kit and setting them up where he could get to them quickly.

Vasily hesitated, and James did look up then, fixing him with a hard look. "I have three to five minutes before permanent brain damage sets in," he told the Russian. "Bring Mary here, now!"

Vasily nodded and complied, hurrying over to where the Indian doctor was just getting back to her feet, still looking dazed. He grabbed her and pulled her over to where James was cutting away Catalina's torso armor, revealing the full extent of her bloody wound.

"Cat, I'm sorry! Cat!" Jane cried. She started toward the fallen woman, but Hadrian grabbed her before she could get in the way of James and Mary.

"The jugular vein and right common carotid artery have been perforated, but are still mostly intact," James said to Mary, who looked down at Catalina in horror. "I need you to seal the cuts... Doctor Ranma!"

She looked at him in horror. "You cannot expect me to do a vascular repair here, now!"

"If we don't seal those vessels, nothing else we do will matter," James told her. "I need to clear access to the lungs so we can attempt resuscitation. You can do this, Mary. You have to do this."

Mary started, and took the tools that James offered. "Yes. Yes," she said, going to work on the bloody mess of a wound.

James worked from the other side, moving quickly. The two of them spoke quietly as they worked, their hands darting back and forth in the narrow space. All Vasily, Jane, and Hadrian could do was watch as they fought against the ticking seconds, while Catalina's brain rapidly starved from oxygen deprivation. Finally James drew back enough for them to see the chaotic jumble of tubes and wires jutting from Catalina's neck. "As soon as I jolt the heart, get ready to inject that medikit directly into the artery," he told Mary.

"Ready," she said.

"Clear," James said, activating the portable defibrillator. Catalina jolted slightly, but didn't stir. "Again," he said, giving her another jolt. "I've got a pulse."

"Injecting," Mary returned. "Some leakage," she reported. James tensed, but after a second she added, "Repairs are holding."

"Is she going to..." Vasily asked.

James looked down at the ruins of the woman. Her chest rose and fell as a tiny portable device the size of a paperback book pumped air into her lungs through the tubes that James had installed. "We need to get her back to HQX," he said. "Ideally she shouldn't even be moved, but..."

"Do the best you can, doctor," Vasily told him. He looked at Hadrian, who nodded. "Vasily, you're not—" James began.

"We still have job to do," he interrupted. "If this ship not stopped, millions more die. You get her ready. Jane, stay with doctors."

"I... no, you'll need me."

"And if other alien come up from below?"

"We've got guns," James said, without looking up. "And that ethereal, or whatever the hell it is, can apparently hit us wherever we are."

Vasily paused. "Two of us against whatever's upstairs isn't good odds," Hadrian pointed out.

"I can do this," Jane said quietly. "I need to do this."

Vasily nodded. "Come on," he said. He gestured to Hadrian, who led them toward the lift he'd spotted earlier.

“See if you can find something to use as a stretcher,” James told Mary, as the other three Alphas headed up the next level of the alien ship.

With Vasily and Jane covering, Hadrian stepped into the lift. The bright glow surrounded him, and the alien antigravity technology pushed him up toward the iris in the ceiling, which opened automatically to allow him passage to the upper level. As he passed through, he felt something hard kick him in the back, and felt a gout of hot gas sear his neck through the layered armor protecting him. He lunged out of the lift field, which grew progressively weaker just above the level transition, and spun to see a sectoid there, hefting a plasma rifle. The alien shot again, but Hadrian had kept moving, and the shot narrowly cleared him as he triggered his own weapon, firing a blast that hit the sectoid in the center of its torso. The alien toppled over onto its back, killed instantly by the plasma burst.

Vasily came up next, followed by Jane. Hadrian checked the body, and swiped the power cell from its gun, adding it to the collection of full and partially-full cells he carried in the pouches dangling from his armor. He then moved to join Vasily, who'd crossed to the far side of the room, where a wide, arched opening led into another room beyond.

That chamber was almost identical to the one they'd just left, except that instead of a lift it was dominated by odd translucent cylinders that rose from the floor to the ceiling around its perimeter. The cylinders were filled with fluid through which small rising bubbles could be seen, but their purpose was a mystery to the three humans. Oval panels set into the walls flickered with shifting patterns of colored light, adding to the unreality of the scene.

“Come on,” Vasily urged, leading them to a door visible on the far side of the room. It hissed open as they approached, but only to reveal several sectoids armed with vibroblades. The creatures hissed and charged, even as the Alphas opened fire.

Vasily cursed as he shot too quickly, and his plasma bolt streaked past the head of his target to explode against the frame of the door. The alien lunged at him, and he reflexively brought his weapon up to block. There was a flare of gas and a sick crunch as the alien sword cut into the bulky assembly of the cannon. Vasily twisted and dragged the sectoid off-balance, then smashed the heavy end of the cannon into its face. The sectoid fell onto its back, thrashing as wisps of gray smoke trailed from the cracks in its shattered faceplate.

The other sectoid didn't even get close enough to attack, as Hadrian and Jane cut it down with a pair of direct hits. Vasily turned back to the doorway, which opened onto a long corridor reinforced with curving metallic buttresses. There was a sectoid standing there, maybe five meters beyond the door.

For a moment, he just stared at the creature. It was carrying a weapon almost as large as it was, a cumbersome device with a ridiculously broad barrel atop a curved, sinuous grip. The weapon must have been lighter than it looked, for the sectoid held it on its

shoulder without apparent difficulty. The dark opening that faced Vasily looked like a cave mouth as the alien pointed it at him.

That sight jolted Vasily like a dash of cold water, and he reached behind his back to grab his pistol. At the same time, he shouted a warning at his companions, knowing that he was too late. Time seemed to slow as an oblong white missile, shaped almost like an American football, shot from the alien launcher and streaked toward Vasily. To his amazement, it looked like the bullet *steered* toward him, arching in its flight as it streaked through the doorway. Vasily jerked back, and the missile passed literally inches in front of his face, leaving behind a faint odor of burned meat. His head turned to follow its path, and saw it continue to turn as it passed through the arch on the far side of the room, narrowly missing one of the fluid cylinders. It passed out of view as it was heading toward the wall in the lift room, the turning radius of the guided missile obviously insufficient to allow for an easy reversal of its course.

Some instinct he couldn't fathom had him close his eyes, a split second before everything exploded in a raging supernova of searing destruction.

* * * * *

Session 23 (September 29, 2008)

Chapter 102

Pain. It greeted him warmly, searing everywhere. He tasted blood, and smoke, and could feel the heat even before he heard the sound of the fires, the angry crackle all too familiar from demolitions missions in the past.

He opened his eyes, but couldn't see more than smoke. He was lying on his back, he realized, the awareness of his body coming belatedly through the haze of pain. He reached up with difficulty, the joints of his armor resisting the effort, and pulled off his helmet. His ears were ringing, drowning out everything but the busy noises of the fires all around him.

"Gyah!" he exclaimed, as he tried to fight his way up. The best he managed was to prop himself up on the one arm that seemed a little easier to move than the other. He was in the corridor outside of the room with the tubes, or at least he thought he was; looking back through the doorway, all he could see was fire and rubble. He glanced back the other way, and saw the sectoid with the launcher lying on its back, a jagged piece of metal the size of a banana protruding from the middle of its face.

Coughing, fighting through the pain that accompanied every movement, Vasily was able to pull himself up to his knees. The armor whirred and clicked but obeyed his commands, for the most part. He crawled forward to the doorway, and looked into the

room beyond. The place was wrecked, that was pretty damned obvious. He saw Hadrian propped up against the inside threshold of the doorway. The Marine was conscious, but Vasily saw at once that his right arm was stuck at an unnatural angle, the heavy armor cracked and twisted.

“Broken,” he said. “What happened?”

“We got hit by...” he began, then realized he had no idea what the alien weapon had been. “Jane?”

Hadrian jerked his head, and Vasily saw Jane lying along the opposite side of the room. Mary was there, tending to her, intent on her work. Vasily dug into the medical satchel each of them carried for emergencies, in case one of the doctors couldn’t make it to them in the press of battle. He was relieved to find the single medikit there intact, and after fumbling a bit with his gloves he was able to stab it through one of the holes in his armor.

“Used mine already,” Hadrian said.

“We’ll see if Mary has another for you,” Vasily said. He tried to stand, and was a little surprised to find that he could. He helped Hadrian to his feet, the Marine grunting in obvious pain as the motion jolted his broken arm. Then he walked over to Mary and Jane.

“Is she all right?” he asked.

“She’s breathing,” Mary said. “I injected her with a medikit; it should help. You shouldn’t be moving, you probably have internal injuries. We felt the blast below; it shook the whole ship, tore a hole ten feet across in the floor, but the lift still works. Is Hadrian...”

“Broken arm.”

“Watch her for a moment while I...”

As she got to her feet, Vasily interrupted her. “Give me your plasma pistol.”

“What?”

“I lost mine. We still need find bridge.”

“Vasily, you’re in no condition to fight, none of us are—”

“We not finish ship, many more than us die,” he said, turning away, and moving toward the door. Behind him, he heard Jane groaning, but he didn’t look back. Hadrian stayed put just long enough for Mary to inject the contents of a medikit into his shattered arm,

then he fell in behind the Russian. By some miracle he'd held onto his plasma rifle, which he carried in his good hand.

"Help Jane, get down to others, get ready to go," Vasily told Mary.

"Vasily—"

"Go." He turned and headed back into the corridor, limping slightly. He bent to recover his helmet and replant it onto his head, although it was doubtful what protection it offered in its current condition.

The corridor seemed to bisect the entire level of the ship. They passed a few unremarkable side-chambers, checking only to verify that no aliens were lurking within before they pressed onward. Then they came to a large door that opened onto another big room, one whose purpose was immediately obvious.

"That is one big gun," Hadrian commented.

The room was shaped like a disk, with massive banks of machinery built into the walls. It looked like the entire chamber was designed to rotate on its axis, like a big turret. The alien cannon filled almost all of the rest of the space, its barrel easily a full meter across and over ten meters long. There was an aperture port built into the ceiling near where the barrel ended, the opening currently closed. For a moment the two men just stared up at the cannon, realizing that they were looking at the weapon that had destroyed three of the world's leading cities. Then Vasily started forward, Hadrian just behind him.

"No ammunition stores," Hadrian said. "They must bring the shells, or whatever it shoots, up from a lower level." He nodded to large mechanism connecting the breech of the gun to the mount in the floor.

Vasily grunted, making his way over to the gun. He looked over the mechanisms for a moment, then opened one of the compartments in his armor and drew out a small package, slightly smaller than a paperback book.

Behind them, the door opened again, and both men spun around, guns at the ready. But instead of aliens, it was just Jane, who confronted them a bit unsteadily. Her armor was blackened with soot and plasma burns, and she too had lost her faceplate, showing a face caked with dried blood and more burns. But her expression was determined, and indicated that she would not be retreating.

Vasily nodded in acknowledgement. "Watch corridor," he said to her and Hadrian, taking up his device and opening a small panel on its front. He quickly punched in a code, and slid the package into an open port up near the breech of the cannon.

"Better save one of those for the Elerium," Hadrian suggested, as they quickly made their way back out into the corridor.

“Not risk gun remaining intact if we fail,” Vasily said.

“And if the explosion manages to detonate the ammo?”

“Then mission complete.”

They continued down the connecting passage, which curved around to the left ahead of them. The door to the cannon room closed behind them, but they could feel the heavy thump when the explosives detonated. They passed another pair of smaller doors, but Vasily focused on another set further ahead, a wider set that opened onto the space on the inward edge of the curve. But as he started toward them, he felt a sudden intense sensation of vertigo. The corridor seemed to stretch and elongate until it formed a twisting tube, the doors distorting into a gaping mouth that opened to reveal tongues of bright flame.

“Aaaah!” he yelled, almost falling as his elbow jarred against the wall. The ground bucked under his feet, and he couldn’t quite manage to steady himself. Behind him, Hadrian and Jane were also having trouble. The doors continued to spit fire, and bright flashes were exploding around them. Something kicked him in the leg, and he fell to one knee, his pistol skittering out of his grasp as he tried to steady himself.

“Get... out... of... my... mind!” he yelled, as plasma explosions continued to erupt all around them.

* * * * *

Session 23 (September 29, 2008)

Chapter 103

Heat rushed through the open visor of Vasily’s helmet, searing his flesh. He raised an arm to protect his face, but felt impacts on his chest and shoulder, and could smell the acrid tang of burning flesh. *His* flesh.

He closed his eyes; he couldn’t trust them, although the darkness only slightly helped the swirling disorientation he felt. He reached down to his belt, to his right side, where he carried his explosive grenades. His hand closed on one, and he yanked it free, triggering the delay and hurling it blindly ahead. He could hear it pinging off the walls over the sound of the plasma blasts, then there was a loud roar, and alien screams.

He opened his eyes, blinked. The corridor had returned to normal, although streaked with black plasma burns. Several sectoids were down, and as he watched another, tottering, collapsed as a plasma bolt sheared off half of its skull. Jane and Hadrian were

both firing, and as Vasily watched the last sectoid still standing withdrew back through the doors.

Without conscious thought Vasily found himself back on his feet, pausing only to recover his dropped pistol before he charged down the corridor. The door refused to open, but with a single shot he destroyed the locking mechanism, and the portals slid open. A sectoid was there, lifted its pistol to shoot at him, but Vasily shot it out of its hands with a lucky snap shot. The alien turned to flee, but was cut down from behind as Jane blasted it.

The alien bridge was crammed full of alien navigational gear, command consoles, and display screens. Vasily saw more movement behind a bank of machinery and didn't hesitate, arcing another grenade that exploded to another cacophony of fire and alien screams. Hadrian and Jane pushed forward, shooting another alien that staggered out of cover, trails of green alien blood slipping down its chest. There was another shot as Hadrian made sure of a last foe, and then, quiet.

"No Ethereal," Jane reported. She went over to one of the consoles, where bright indicators flickered and flashed, and started fiddling with the controls.

"No Elerium, either," Hadrian said.

"See if you can find schematic of ship," Vasily said. His attention was drawn to a large console toward the front of the room. It was projecting a three-dimensional hologram of the entire planet, hovering over the unit like a ghost. But before he could look at it more closely, he heard Jane exclaim to his left, "Communications console here! I've got the signal from the Lightning..."

He joined her just as Ken's voice came through the console. "Alpha, is that you? Where the hell are you guys?"

"Lightning!" Vasily said. "We in battleship."

"What the hell! I've been trying to reach you for over an hour!"

"We been in here for hour? Well... it big ship."

"Okay, we've got sixteen alien ships headed our way. Like, *really* fast. I've been sending Grace my scans, and she doesn't think that the nuke the Firestorm-1 is carrying will even scratch that ship. You've got to take it out from the inside. You've got to find the Elerium power source and set it to blow, ASAP!"

Vasily looked to Jane. "Go get others ready to go," he told her. Glancing over at Hadrian, who was working at another console, Vasily asked, "Hadrian?"

"Not sure I can make sense of this," the Marine said.

“Most alien ships, Elerium on ground floor, with engines,” Vasily said. “Let’s go!”

They made their way back to where they’d left James and Catalina. The doctor had a new wound on his left hip, and two more sectoids lay dead on the floor, but Catalina was alive, and stable for the moment. Jane and Mary took up the stretcher they’d rigged for her, and followed James, the doctor limping heavily, back down toward the lower levels of the ship.

Vasily ran behind them, tapping his communicator. “Ken? Ken? Gah, communications still blocked.” As they made their way back to the front of the ship, Vasily stopped Jane. “We need to find engine room. Take others, get in Lightning.”

“We won’t leave you behind.”

“If we not find Elerium, nothing left behind,” Vasily said. “Go!”

He and Hadrian made their way back into the bowels of the ship, navigating a ramp that they had missed before, one that led deeper inside the ship. They had to force another door, but were rewarded with the sleek shape of the alien ship’s massive engines, and at the end of the room, the flickering blue light of its Elerium crystals.

“This is going to blow sky high,” Vasily said, as he took out the last of his charges. “Better get to exit.”

“I’ll cover you,” Hadrian said. Vasily set the charge right on the power regulator for the Elerium array, and set the timer to four minutes. “Go!” he yelled, following the Marine back toward the front of the ship.

As they emerged from the ship, the icy cold hit them like a hammer. Vasily saw the others below, in the shelter of the ridge. He also saw the Lightning zoom by, bright flashes of plasma energy exploding around it. He and Hadrian ran toward the ship while the others came from the side, converging on it as Ken set the vessel down. A dark shape appeared in the sky, but suddenly exploded in a violent flare; Vasily caught a faint glimpse of the Firestorm’s outline before it vanished back into the storm.

The aircraft had barely settled long enough for them to jump inside before Ken took it back up into the sky, climbing at a steep angle. James and Mary held onto Catalina and each other, while the others grabbed onto the seats as best they could; there was no time to strap in. The Lightning bucked and jerked as it took fire, but held together as they were pressed down by the force of the vessel’s acceleration. After a few more seconds the pressure eased enough for them to get into their seats and buckle in, while James and Jane worked together to get Catalina fastened into hers.

They finished just in time, as the aircraft suddenly bucked wildly, as though it had been smacked hard from behind. A massive rumbling shook the ship, a crazy burst of turbulence that finally eased, leaving them all breathing heavily.

Ken's voice came over the intercom. "Everyone okay? Man, I wish you could see what I'm seeing right now. The aliens are breaking off pursuit... there's a huge fireball over the alien base... We put the hurt on those bastards!"

There was a collective sigh of quiet relief. "But... what happens next?" Mary asked.

Vasily turned to her. His armor was blasted and broken, his face blackened and burned, oozing blood where the skin had cracked. Somehow the upper half of his right ear had been mostly torn away, and it dangled on a few shreds of flesh. The entire assembly encasing his right arm was bent and ruined, and almost immobile. Dozens of small holes still penetrated his chestplate on and around his right shoulder, and a mixture of soot, blood, grease, and alien gore covered his legs almost up his waist.

"Next?" he said, leaning back in his chair. "Next we do all over again."

* * * * *

Interlude: Aftermath (September 30, 2008)

The alien response was swift and strong, as expected.

Nine alien craft, including two heavy cruisers, descended from orbit toward HQX. With Firestorm-1 damaged, and American airpower still decimated, the initial intercept was weak. Two X-COM interceptors and ten F-35s were driven off, after downing only one of the smaller alien ships.

The aliens gathered in formation outside of laser range and prepared for a bombing run.

Then the plasma battery opened up.

The lead cruiser was holed in the first barrage. It wobbled and then plummeted to the ground, slamming into the Nevada desert 25 miles from HQX. The aliens held their formation and tried to press their attack, but the plasma cannons recharged quickly, and the second barrage took the second cruiser directly in the bridge. The entire ship exploded in a fireball that lit up the night sky.

That was enough for the rest of the alien formation, which scattered and retreated. One got into the edge of laser range, and the base's secondary battery left it trailing smoke and limping. The American fighters pounced upon it, and ensured that it did not escape.

X-COM teams were dispatched to check out the wreckage of the first cruiser, but there were no alien survivors.

* * * * *

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, GRACE THELON BELUCA, AGENT INISE DRAKE
RE: Research/Manufacturing Progress Report

Good work on the base attack mission. The destruction of the alien battleship has given us a big step forward vis-a-vis the alien threat. Unfortunately, we were unable to capture the battleship commander or the ship's data logs, which might have shed more information on the aliens' plans. Our engineers are working to try to extract useful data from your helmet recorders. Based on what you've told us in your mission logs, we are acting under the assumption that the main alien base is on a planetary body, moon, or asteroid located within the solar system. We have eliminated our own Moon as an option, but that leaves a number of likely candidates.

Unfortunately, the unusual side effects of the nerve agent have forced us to sideline this weapon for now. Based on the data you brought back, Doctor White says that the toxin is currently too unstable and unpredictable for widespread use, especially in human-populated areas, until research can be further advanced.

We have completed our work on the Chryssalid corpse. Our Biological Sciences research team is working on a countermeasure to neutralize the creature's implantation attack.

We may initiate a major project: the Psi-Lab. Constructing the Psi-Lab will require a full research team in addition to an estimated 60 engineer-weeks of manufacturing resources.

Preliminary study of the crystals that you found in the alien base indicate that the substance is capable of outputting incredible amounts of heat when subjected to magnetic fields. This could open up a whole new line of study into a power source independent of Elerium-115. Grace has suggested that one immediate benefit might be the creation of an even more advanced type of Powered Armor using the new technology. She says that she will submit a proposal to Research as soon as she has completed her study.

Note that we encountered two new alien types on this mission. If you can bring back carcasses or live versions of these alien races, which we are labeling "Muton" and "Celatid", we can study them further in our research program.

* * * * *

Session 24 (October 6, 2008)

Chapter 104

Dust and hot air hissed from the exhaust vents of the Lightning as it settled down onto the landing pad in HQX's main hangar. Teams of men and women, dressed in the uniforms that identified their assignment, rushed into action: biological containment crews to deal with dead aliens, or living captives in stasis; engineers to grab tech and take custody of heavy weaponry; and finally armor-clad security officers to make sure that there were no unexpected surprises.

The teams worked with the efficiency of trained veterans who knew the drill. In the crowded space none of them bumped into or dislodged the others, and a subtle space opened around the Alphas as they emerged from the belly of the aircraft.

They were battered and blackened, their armor smeared with the impact burns from plasma bolts, and in more than one case they moved with a limp, or favored an arm pressed up close against their bodies. Stan White's medical team was there with motorized gurneys, but to a man the Alphas shrugged them off. Even Mary, who could barely walk, and was being helped forward by Jane, whose powered armor wheezed and clanked as she moved.

Vasily dropped his plasma cannon—a new one, taken off an alien leader—onto a rolling cart with a loud clank. Hallorand was standing there, a grim look on his face. “Rough one?”

“They all rough,” Vasily said. But as he looked back at his battered team, he added, “Eight dozen. At least.”

“We saw the visuals on what happened downtown. It looked like a freaking nuke went off.”

“That... new weapon,” Vasily said, nodding toward Hadrian, who was carrying the alien blaster launcher in both hands. The Marine started to toss it onto the cart, but two techs intercepted him, carefully taking the weapon. “Got a new toy for you to examine,” he said. The techs treated it like an archeologist discovering a rare artifact, carefully rolling it into a padded plastic sheath before placing it in a secure storage canister. From there, it would go to the labs for a complete workup. “Leave huge smoking crater in street,” Vasily said. “If not for suits, we all be overcooked sausage. It almost kill Mary anyway.”

“Heard that the Army took heavy casualties,” Hallorand said.

“As did the police,” Hadrian said.

“They hung in there,” James said. “No one ran, at least not that I saw. They were outgunned, but they didn’t run.”

“All right, get yourselves down to Medical,” Hallorand said. “Stan’s expecting you there.”

A few hours later, most of the Alphas had gathered in the lounge. They still looked battered, with fresh bandages covering wounds that still needed to heal, miraculous alien medicines notwithstanding. They sat together in relatively silence, while a woman’s voice came over the television monitor.

“...and the reports are that casualties will be in the thousands before the count is finished. However, it could have been much worse.” An image of New York after the alien bombing appeared on the screen, before the newscast returned to scenes of disaster response teams working as the fought the blazes still going in Los Angeles.

“Could have been millions if the alien battleship was still flying,” Catalina said.

“We have reports that government special combat teams helped out, striking down the alien attackers.”

“They still don’t want to use our name, eh?” James commented.

“The attack began with the aliens deploying numerous assault pods throughout the LA basin. We have pictures here from Burbank Airport, where the aliens known as ‘floaters’ deployed from a pair of pods dropped by an alien cruiser. More floaters, along with the devastating aliens called ‘reapers,’ landed on I-5 nearby. We have these still images taken by survivors from the scene, which indicates the ferocity of the alien attack.”

“Hey, Vas, is that you in that pic?” Jane asked, pointing at the screen. The Russian grunted, but didn’t look up.

“And then, of course, there was the desperate scene at City Hall. The aliens landed the largest force there, where they engaged city police units and elements of the 160th National Guard Battalion. This is also where the aliens detonated their terror weapon.” The scene changed again, showing images of the destruction on Spring Street, flames flickering around the edges of the crater. The building itself was still mostly intact, although every window had been shattered, and part of the front portico had collapsed. The Alphas didn’t need to look up; they’d been there.

“It is now clear that this attack was part of a broader alien attack. We’ll have more on the attacks in Mazatlan, Dublin, and Toronto after a short break, and we’ll stay on our

main story, Los Angeles Terror, throughout the day. This is Alicia Thomson, KCAL news.”

The display turned to a scene that might have been an echo of the dark images from the news report. “Do you suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder?” a reassuring male voice said. “If so, then ALGOREX may be what the doctor...”

James tossed down the remote. “Heard that the Toronto attack was sectoids. The Canadians were able to take them out before the aliens could cause too much damage.”

“Sectoids versus Canadians,” Vasily said. “I guess that sounds pretty even.”

“Doc Wagner said that we got the worst of it,” Catalina said. “British Tornados downed a pair of alien ships just outside Dublin, but a few pods got through. Some casualties, and damage to the inner city.”

“Go Brits,” Jane said.

“Any word from Beta?”

“Still down in Mexico, I heard one of the com techs say,” Catalina said. “Their military response wasn’t as fast, and last I heard they were trying to track down a few aliens that they lost in the back alleys behind the Centro Histórico.”

“I guess they got some new recruits,” Vasily said, which killed the conversation.

The outer door opened, and Mary came in, shadowed by a medical tech. The Indian woman looked tired, and the tech’s presence seemed to be more than just cautionary, but she managed a slight smile as she saw the others.

“So... am I a soldier yet?” she asked them.

“As much of one as I was,” Catalina said, getting up for a refill of her coffee.

Vasily glanced up. “You break down and cry yet? No? Then I guess you pass.”

* * * * *

Session 24 (October 6, 2008)

Chapter 105

The incident took place in the physical sciences research lab, and in hindsight showed just how close all of them were to cracking under the strain.

Several of the Alphas had been there, working with the scientists and research technicians on the latest projects. Agent Drake came in almost at the same time as a young researcher, who was carrying a bulky alien launcher, its already bulbous form further complicated by the leads and cables that the research team had attached to it.

“Hey, don’t wave that thing around in here!” Drake hissed, stepping back to avoid the eager young scientist as he rushed forward into the room. There was danger in her eyes, but he ignored her, facing the gathered members of the various X-COM departments who were present.

“I believe the expression is, Eureka!” the researcher exclaimed, holding up the launcher as everyone in the room turned to watch.

Grace looked up from where she, Vasily, and a gray-haired Brazilian scientist had been cloistered over one of the captured alien heavy plasma guns. “You figured out the stun launcher?”

“Yes! It was really quite simple. You had to route the positive feedback through the capacitor, instead of the insulating film.” He grinned, suddenly looking like the twenty-five year old that he was.

Vasily had come forward, curious, but Drake had beat him to it. “Oh, naturally,” she said. “Let me see.”

The eager young researcher handed over the launcher. “The bombs discharge a cloud of material that briefly suppresses the neurons of the target,” he explained, as Drake looked into the firing chamber. “There is no lasting effect, as far as we can tell, but it...” He broke off as Drake flipped the arming lever, and pointed the weapon toward Vasily.

“Hey,” Vasily said. “Don’t make me come and...”

He didn’t get a chance to finish, as Drake fired the weapon. At that close range the bomb smacked into Vasily’s chest with a solid thump, and the gas cloud formed a dark nimbus around him, briefly enveloping him and hiding him from view as panicked scientists scattered around him.

“Wow, it really does work,” Drake said, handing the weapon back into the arms of the stunned researcher. “Nice work, doctor,” she said, as she spun around and walked out of the lab.

Vasily remained there, slightly bent, frozen in an upright position. Several people had started to come to his aid, but Grace held them back. “Wait! Don’t go near until the cloud has fully dissipated! She gestured to a technician, who turned up the air blowers, and the vapors came apart as they drifted upward.

Catalina had been near the back of the room, working on VDU adjustments with one of the computer science techs, but she saw the entire exchange. She strode forward, her face twisted into a deadly fury, her hand twitching on the hilt of her pistol. “You bitch,” she hissed toward the door. She rounded on the nearest scientist, who drew back at her expression. “She has so got to suffer,” she said. She walked over to Vasily, who still hadn’t moved. Grace sent one of the techs running for Stan or one of the medical staff, and snapped her fingers in front of his face. “Vas?” she said, gently tapping his face.

“Quite effective, it seems,” the red-faced researcher muttered under his breath.

Stan White and Chief Hallorand arrived together a few minutes later, and by then Vasily could move enough to drink the glass of water that Grace offered, although his limbs were still too stiff for him to move easily. “I show her freaking stun gun,” he muttered, as Stan checked his pupils and stuck a probe into his arm. “What happened?” the doctor asked. “Accident?”

“Accident, my ass,” Catalina said. “Where’s Drake?”

“I saw her in the corridor near the lift,” Hallorand said. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say she was... laughing?”

Catalina’s anger hadn’t eased; if anything, it had banked to a fiery pitch. “Your Agent could be on the verge of losing international cooperation,” she said.

“Do you want me to track her on base security?” Hallorand asked.

Vasily waved a hand. “Nah, fine,” he said. “She better shoot to kill next time, is all I saying.”

“I think I want to lodge an incident. She just used a weapon on Vasily. That’s not the act of a woman who should be in control here.”

“She shot him?” Hallorand asked in disbelief.

“Forget it, Cat!” Vasily said, grimacing as Stan prodded him again. “Was just... just joke.”

“She used a stun weapon without knowing precisely what it would do,” Catalina said. “Using an alien weapon on a member of the team is no joke.”

Hallorand frowned. “Hmm. I’ll let Garret know.”

“Stupid bitch. She had no idea what would happen.”

“I said, let it go!” Vasily said, biting off a Russian curse. He stood, shaking off Stan’s attentions, and walked out of the lab, still moving a bit stiffly. The young researcher, still holding the stun launcher, tried to apologize, but Vasily merely grunted and left.

Grace ran a hand through her hair. “Well, I guess I’d better get back to the workshop,” she said.

“Thanks, Grace,” Catalina said absently, as people started to clear the lab, and Hallorand started taking statements. “What a team,” the British agent muttered, and headed for the door after Vasily.

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Interlude: Base Priorities (October 7-13, 2008)

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, GRACE THELON BELUCA, AGENT INISE DRAKE
RE: Research/Manufacturing Progress Report

We have completed our analysis of the data you recovered from the Antarctica base computer. We have not been able to fully decipher all of the alien files, but we have learned that the source of the alien transmission was a base on Mars.

Our aerospace team has already begun work on a highly classified project: an advanced craft capable of space flight. We will share more information on this later, but suffice it to say that even the existence of this project, code-named AVENGER, is top-secret.

The Biological Sciences research team reports that work is proceeding on the anti-Chryssalid countermeasure. With the help of Doctors Ranma and Allen, they have produced a prototype serum that kills and eventually dissolves the implanted alien embryo. There are still some minor side effects, including muscle stiffness and some lingering weakness, but those fade in about five minutes. The serum should be 100 percent effective at removing an implanted embryo.

Construction of the Psi-Lab is nearly complete. Building has advanced ahead of schedule. Thanks are due to Jane for her help on getting the project started. As soon as we have calibrated all of the new instruments, we will begin testing subjects for psionic aptitude. Alpha Team will be first on the list. Once basic aptitude has been classified, then we can begin setting up a training regimen. Grace is working on plans for a Psi Amp that will allow individuals with high Psi ratings to conduct mental attacks in a manner similar to that evidenced by alien leaders.

We have completed work on the alien Stun Launcher. Work on the Blaster Launcher is progressing very quickly.

Grace has submitted her blueprints for the new Experimental Heavy Armor. This suit is cumbersome but it provides superior protection against almost all forms of attack. This would be a major project and Grace estimates at least 30 engineer/weeks to complete construction of a prototype suit.

Finally, the alien containment laboratory reports that interrogation of the Floater Medic yielded some information that can help us to improve the efficiency of our medical processes.

* * *

Author's Note: Needless to say, the "Drake incident" spawned a lot of forum posts. I put the following together from the player posts that followed the October 6 session.

The strains of Bach went on for a while longer. The hitting of the piano keys seemed to grow harder and harder, as the melody progressed, and after a few minutes Catalina just slammed the lid down and stood up.

"I don't understand you, I just don't understand you at all." Catalina's voice was shaking with anger as she railed on those left in the room. "People just sat and passed the time of day while Vas stood there stunned. Now you're just going to let her get away with it." She gestured in Jane's direction. "At least Jane backed me up over the need to do something about this, but you just ignore it!"

"This is a member of your team, for Christ's sake. Who knows what could have happened. At that range the thing could have done permanent damage." Her fist slammed down on the top of the piano, as Catalina raged. "That woman has been nothing but a pain in the arse since we got here and now this? An unprovoked attack on a member of your team, someone who has stood in the line of fire with you and done what they could to save your skin. Somebody maybe you owe your life to. Doesn't that mean anything?"

An irritated sigh from Vasily finally fills the long silence. "Okay, I deal with Drake. Okay? I big boy now. Is not big deal... not like I not been shot with one of those things

before," he adds, possibly to try and save some face after such a potentially humiliating episode.

"Still." And here, the Russian's brow creases in consternation. "Not a word from anyone else... it surprise me, you know. So I want to say this."

"Maybe I not like you. Is fine. We all pretty different, huh? If we had meet outside of war, on street, in cafe... maybe we not have much to say. In years to come, if we survive, I not see us meeting up much to have a drink and talk about the old days."

"But you know what?" Vasily raises his eyebrows, and shrugs dismissively. "That mean nothing. This is hard job, the hardest. Let make no bone about it, we go into Hell, and we go there to fight monsters. Our bodies, our minds, all beaten and bruised. This job already killed some, broken others. Hard professionals, too."

He folds his arms, rests against the doorjamb. "But, we all still alive. When I first see Alpha Team, I not think we ready, but we all still here, and you new people, you got with the program fast. We all still on the level, up here," He taps his forehead, for emphasis, "And that say none of you weak. I may not like you, sure. Maybe you care about that, maybe you don't. But you all have my respect, no question."

Vasily finishes, and looks around at the Team. "What you say to that?"

James looked up as Vasily, anger now clouding his face as well. "What are you talking about, Vas? Did I miss something? Yeah, I heard about it, old battle-irons wasted you with a stunner when you weren't looking. I wasn't there, and I didn't say anything because you said you'd deal with it. So next time you want some backup, just let me know, cause I got your back a lot more than I've got hers. I've risked my life to patch you up before, and expect I will again."

Jim's expression softens, and he takes on a more philosophical look. "As for the rest of it... truth. All these interpersonal squabbles, annoying as they are, they pale in comparison to what we are fighting. An alien invasion, inimical to humanity. We need to hang together if we are gonna make it. Cause scary as it is, I'm starting to think we—yep, alpha team—are humanity's last, best hope."

Jane nodded, but didn't say anything. She'd already pulled Vasily aside privately, to offer her support. "Please know that you have my full support, and I'm sure you have the full support of the entire team," she'd told him. "She humiliated us as much as you that night."

Catalina's anger had drained somewhat as she watched the exchange between Vasily and James. She turned to the Russian. "If it had been the other way around? Would you have stepped in to help out?" She raised her arms and let them fall helplessly. "I'd kind of like to think someone would, you know? The bitch could as easily have gone for me as for you, in fact I'm surprised she didn't, except for one factor."

"Supposing you did step in, would that have been insulting my own abilities in any way? You weren't in any position to help yourself when I went after her." Catalina flopped back down on the piano stool. "Yeah, you're a big boy, but isn't that what we're supposed to do? Help one another when we can't help ourselves?"

"You forget one thing she didn't. She's female and, notably, you're a man. You hit her and what does it look like? If I were to do it then there's an even playing field." She gave a hollow laugh. "Some of you would probably enjoy watching a cat fight. So she's crafty and aims for the one who couldn't punch her in the face if the gun failed."

"Maybe I have higher expectations, think I owe enough to you all to want to jump in against all comers. Hope that fighting alongside one another like this would make us friends?" Catalina shook her head and raising the lid on the piano turned back to the keys. "Me I would like to get together for a few bevvies once in a while, assuming we survive this. If we don't win I'd have hoped you'd join me in a resistance cell, perhaps, and continue the fight."

"I thought what we'd gone through, what we've achieved, would have got us past the differences in our personalities by now, would have brought us closer." She shrugged and started to play Bach once more. "Business as usual I suppose, on with saving the world, but if Drake shows her face again I reserve the right to punch it."

Vasily stepped forward, and gently lowered the lid back over the keys, interrupting her playing. "You got some funny ideas about not being able to hit people," he began, "not to mention about the man who has stood in the front line and taken all that could be thrown at him day in, day out. You think I would do any less, now? Should X-COM die and yet we somehow live, I do not think any of us quit the fight."

"But then... maybe the fact that none of us really come together is good, in a way. I know there must be some reason we all survive this long, head as well as body. Maybe having hard heart is what has kept us going." He manages to look a little sad, even regretful. "Maybe is just one of those things."

With that, he turned and left the room.

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Session 25 (October 20, 2008)

Chapter 106

Author's Note: We didn't have a session on October 13.

It was a slow week, a respite of sorts. It was almost as if the aliens had all gone on vacation.

Alpha spent the days after the Los Angeles mission waiting for the other shoe to drop. But other than a few incursions by small craft in the Eastern Hemisphere that came and went before an intercept was possible, the board was quiet. Intel did pick up some coded transmissions between Mars and locations in France and China, but X-COM's code crackers weren't able to provide any useful data.

It was no surprise at all when China withdrew from the international consortium and announced a separate treaty with the aliens.

Everyone knew that events were building to something, but X-COM took full advantage of the lull. In the secret U.S. DoD aerospace facility, the shell of the AVENGER craft began to take form, while at HQX, research and manufacturing projects were completed, and new ones started, to ensure that when things heated up again, X-COM would be ready to respond.

The members of Alpha put their time in on the various projects, and even fit in a few training exercises to keep their skills sharp. But they had no assignments the Saturday morning that found them gathered in the small dining area just off the kitchen. The morning breakfast shift had just ended, and they were alone except for the cook, who was collecting plates and utensils for transport to the kitchen. He shot the Alphas a curious look as they lingered over their coffee, but said nothing.

Catalina grabbed her xPhone the instant it buzzed. "Now or never then?"

Vasily looked down at his own phone, which has buzzed at the same time, along with the rest of them. "Guess so," he said.

Counselor Beauvais's voice sounded from the speaker set into the ceiling. "Alpha Team, report to Medical Lab 1, please."

"Now it's official," Catalina said, crumpling her empty cup and tossing it into the recycling bin. Behind her, Jane and Mary rose from their table, the Indian doctor figeting, nervous.

"Well, let's go," James said.

They met Hallorand coming out of the medical lab. “Hey, Alpha.”

“Chief,” Vasily said, with a nod.

Hallorand gave them a quick looking-over. “So, it’s the head shrinkers, eh?”

“Yeah, that or the alien head-hunters,” James said.

“I saw those chairs they brought in,” Hallorand said. “Man, I’m glad I’m not you.”

“What are they going to do to us?” Mary asked.

Hallorand tucked his thumbs into his pockets. “Well... you ever go to one of those dentists, the ones that have the 20 year old magazines in the waiting room? Well, that new lab, it feels like that.”

“Chief,” James said, “If we do get some alien psi-powers, gonna use ‘em on you for practice. Just sayin’.”

“Well, best of luck. They say everyone will have to be tested, but at least we’re not first. Especially since they ran a power conduit in there bigger than the one for Workshop 3.” He slipped past them and headed back down the corridor toward the kitchen. “If you come back with funky powers, just remember I knew you when.”

“Uh, thank you, chief,” Vasily said. He turned back toward the door to the medical lab, and hesitated, just for a moment.

“Time to have our heads shrunk for real,” Jane said, pushing past him, triggering the door mechanism. “Come on, let’s have some fun.”

The others followed.

The medical lab was quiet; there hadn’t been any more accidents that week, and without any missions, none of the field teams had sent people to the infirmary. The bulky machinery that put together the components for the X-COM medikits gurgled and whirred against one wall, and one of the surgical nurses, who was reorganizing the supply cabinets, looked up and nodded as they entered.

“Back here!” Counselor Beauvais’s voice came, through the storage room. The Alphas went through there, to the new doorway that had been installed unobtrusively on the far side of the racks of medical supplies. The door was open, and they could see a brightly lit room beyond.

They went through the door into a place that was... *different* wasn’t quite enough of a word. The machinery was vaguely familiar, at least in that they recognized the huge

wall monitors, the banks of computer consoles, and the power conduits with LED indicators blinking happily. But there was something ominous in the three massive chair assemblies in the center of the room, which looked like a dentist's chair melded with heavy machinery into some sort of Frankenstein's creation. Maybe it was the apparatus of tubes, wires, and bulbous metal contraptions that hung from the ceiling, directly over the chairs. A faint hum punctuated by unpleasant clicks and whirls issued from that lurking monstrosity, which looked almost poised to collapse onto the poor unfortunates sitting in the chairs.

"Wow, those chairs look... scary," James said.

They were so absorbed by the scenery that they didn't notice Joan until she stepped out from a control bank along one wall of the room. "Greetings, Alpha," she said. "You're all here? Good."

Stan White was there as well, kneeling on the hard tiles as he checked feeds that stretched from what looked like a medical diagnostic console. The cables meandered haphazardly across the floor before connecting with jacks in the base of the chairs. The doctor rose from his work as they entered, and shot them an almost apologetic smile before glancing over at the counselor. "I hope this works," he said.

"We followed the schematics precisely," Joan said.

"That's not what I meant. I mean, maybe there are things that humans aren't supposed to..." he trailed off.

"It will be all right," Joan said. "Go ahead, three of you, take seats over there."

There was a pause. "If anyone is going to be fried," Jane finally said, "I'll volunteer first."

"Sounds good to me, Jane," James said.

Joan walked over to the chairs, and started pulling back some of the wires and cables that seemed to sprout from every surface of the chair assembly. "Don't worry about the restraints," she said, as she helped Jane into the chair. "They are there for your own safety."

After a muttered curse, James came forward, and got into the second chair. Stan helped him. James started to make a joke, but coughed as Stan snapped iron bands around his wrists and ankles.

Catalina moved over to one of the consoles, watching as indicators appeared showing the vital signs of Jane and James. "I wonder what this does," she said, hovering her finger over a button.

"Hey!" Vasily said, as Joan helped him into the third chair. "Press nothing!"

"If it's any consolation, I was tested earlier," Joan said. "I insisted on being first. In fact, I..." she trailed off, and grabbed her throat as a strangled sound issued from her chest. Her eyes bulged, and she leaned against the chair. The others stared at her in stunned silence, but after just a second recovered and smiled at them. "Just kidding."

Vasily let out a breath; the restraints had strained against the sudden tension he'd put on them. "Ahaha," he said, as he forced himself to relax.

"Oh, you're a riot, doc," Stan said.

"Really, it's safe," she assured them. "The energy wavelength is less than that used by a cell phone."

"I don't use cells either," Hadrian muttered. The Marine had remained near the door, watching the proceedings suspiciously.

Joan adjusted a series of small metallic panels that dropped from the top of the chairs, flanking the heads of the first three subjects. She pulled out a panel on an extensible arm and began entering commands. The array above the chairs began to hum more aggressively, and flickers of colored light began to show as indicators began to glow. "Just let your minds go blank," Joan told them. "You don't need to do anything. Vasily, we'll do you first. Just relax."

Vasily looked anything but a man with a blank mind, his hands white on the rests of the chair. There was a faint flicker of color in the air around his head, and an almost inaudible ping from the machinery, then Joan looked at her screen and smiled. "Hmm, not bad," she said. "Definitely on the higher end of the human range."

SERVER : [DM] Vasily Kasprjak has a Psi Potential score of 72

"What are you doing to them?" Mary asked.

"We're only scanning, Mary," Joan said, offering a reassuring smile as she saved the data from the scan.

"Get with the programme, Mary," Catalina said. But she frowned as she glanced up at the heavy array looming over her companions in the chairs.

Vasily frowned as Stan came up and unhooked the restraints. "That all? But I not feel anything."

"This is just a diagnostic," Stan said. "The hard work... that will come later."

Joan had already turned to Jane, shifting the console to follow her. "Okay, Jane." The former CIA agent rested calmly in the chair, breathing quietly. Joan activated her panel,

ran through the sequence again. “Impressive,” she said. “That’s higher than... well. It’s very good.”

SERVER : [DM] Jane Swift has a Psi Potential score of 98

“And Doctor Allen,” Joan said. The operation went as quickly as it had for the others, but Joan frowned as she looked at her console. “Is this... is this right?”

Stan came over to take a look. “Man. We’re going to have to raise the top end of the scale.”

SERVER : [DM] James Allen has a Psi Potential score of 108

“All of you scored well,” Joan said, as she reinitialized the scanner for the next round of tests. “You will respond well to further training.”

Catalina looked at Vasily, who rubbed his wrists as he walked away from the chair. “What am I thinking, Vas?” she asked him, with a grin.

The Russian turned to her. “You were thinking, ‘It my turn next.’”

“That’s just a good guess,” Catalina said, sticking out her tongue at him.

Mary had not taken her eyes off the chairs since entering the room. “Um... I am not feeling so well. Perhaps I should go lay down, come back later.”

Joan came over to her, took her arm. “It’s all right. It won’t hurt you. We didn’t do anything to them, just scanned their existing potential. With training... well, we’ll see.”

She and Stan got the other three into the chairs, and set up the sensors as they had before. The operations passed quickly. Joan scanned Catalina first. “Hmm,” she said, looking at the results. “Well. Perhaps with training...”

SERVER : [DM] Catalina De Farrago has a Psi Potential score of 41

“Told you, nothing gets in here,” Catalina said.

“Well, it’s not a race,” she said, although she shot a concerned look at Stan as he unfastened Catalina’s restraints.

They turned to Mary next, who sat in the chair with wide eyes, her hands fisting against the restraints. Joan finished the test quickly, and smiled at Mary when she was finished. “Ah, you might give James a run for his money,” she said.

SERVER : [DM] Mary Ranma has a Psi Potential score of 103

“Okay, I’m ready,” Mary said.

“I think they do it already,” Vasily said.

“Told you,” Stan said to Joan, as he helped the Indian doctor from her chair. “Doctors just tend to have the talent.”

They finished with Hadrian, who’d sat stonily in the chair while the others were tested. His results got a raised eyebrow from Joan, and Stan came over to look at the panel. “What? A Marine scored that high?”

SERVER : [DM] Hadrian Jones has a Psi Potential score of 100

“We done here?” Hadrian asked. As soon as Stan released his clamps, he got up and left.

“I will be contacting you with a schedule for the training,” Joan told them. “You will all be spending time here.”

“Can’t see it doing much good, counselor,” Catalina said. She was disappointed that her results hadn’t matched her companions. “Whatever it takes just isn’t there.”

“Everything is half talent, half effort,” Vasily said.

“You’d be surprised,” Joan said. “Thank you for your time. Check your in box for your training assignments.”

“Oh, James, Mary, if you wouldn’t mind stopping by the medical lab on the way out. We finished those field surgical kits you ordered, and we have the first samples of the new regenerative serum. Your work on those was quite remarkable, Mary.”

The Alphas filed out of the lab, leaving Joan alone. She remained at her control console for a moment longer, studying the results of the tests. She looked at them for a full minute, then let out a small sigh before closing the file, and touched the “Send” button.

* * *

Author’s Note: the Psi Potential Widget made rolls for the PCs, and reported the results to the DM. The roll was basically a d% to get a 1-100 result, then it added a bonus based on the subject’s INT, WIS, and CHA modifiers. If I remember correctly, the formula was $d\% + 3(INT \text{ mod}) + 5(WIS \text{ mod}) + 3(CHA \text{ mod})$. I handed out amulets with benefits based on the result; anything above 50 gave a small bonus to Will saves, while results above 125 gave limited-use mental powers, like 1/day Fear or Confusion spells for use on the aliens. After this session, we integrated Psi Training into the forum game, with players getting a chance to improve their character’s Psi score on a weekly basis. And high scores enabled PCs to use the Psi Amp... but more about that later.

Vanya Mia was disappointed; I think she wanted to have Cat get into trouble using psychic powers.

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Session 25 (October 20, 2008)

Chapter 107

“Wonder how ‘training’ going to go,” Vasily said, as he and Catalina made their way to the briefing room.

“Don’t ask me,” Catalina said. “You’re the one with super powers. Go on, what am I thinking now?”

Vasily glanced at her. “I wish I had super powers.”

“Would have been damn useful against the little sods, but it’s you who’ll all have to take the hits.”

“Ah, the doctors will be hitting them with minds. Rest of us, we do fine with the guns.”

They ran into James, coming from the armory. He was wearing one of the padded undersuits that went with the newly upgraded suits of Powered Armor that Grace was producing in her workshops. “Ah, they build you some proper armor?” Vasily asked him. “Wearing that blue stuff is like wearing big sign, ‘Hey aliens, shoot me.’”

“Ha ha,” James said. “Lucky for you we got a new supply of the improved medikits, so when you trip over your own big feet, we can patch you up.”

The conversation ended as they entered the briefing room. The department heads were all there, as was Agent Drake, whose expression might have been carved in ice for all the warmth it had in it. Jane and Hadrian arrived right behind the others, and took their seats as Garret stood at the table’s head, a grim look on his face.

“The slow spell has come to an end,” he reported. “We have a mission for you.”

The door hissed open again and Mary stepped in. Garret fixed her with a hard look. “Doctor Ranma. Good of you to join us.”

“Oh, was a meeting called?” she said, as she took her seat. “I apologize.”

The Director leaned forward and grabbed onto the edges of the table with his hands. “First off, I understand that there has been some acrimony over an... incident. Agent

Drake has been reprimanded for the unauthorized weapons test. I consider the matter closed.”

Drake’s jaw tightened, but she didn’t respond.

Vasily shrugged. “Is all good. You want us shake hands?”

“What I’d like,” Garret said, “Is for everyone to focus on the objective. We’re entering the end game here, people. Doctor Wagner?”

Wagner activated the big screen, bringing up a view of the Earth, a slowly-spinning globe overlaid with various data and indicators that flashed red or green. “We have intercepted some intelligence regarding the alien activities in southeast Asia,” she said.

Garret said, “Using the info you captured from the alien battle computers on your last missions, we’ve been able to decrypt some of their communications. We know that the aliens are based on Mars.”

“Alien activity has been way down, worldwide,” Wagner continued. “Other than a few small ships landing in France and China, we have had almost no activity on the world map.”

“They have not spent this time idle. According to the engineer you captured, they are constructing another battleship on Mars. Grace?”

The engineer looked up from her portable computer. “We don’t know a lot about it. But from what the prisoner said, it looks like this one will be about three times the mass of the one you destroyed in Antarctica.”

“We have to be ready before them,” Catalina said.

Wagner nodded. “The Avenger craft will be ready in a few weeks. We’re doing all that we can to accelerate its construction.”

“But we can’t strike until we know more,” Garret said. “We need information. And specifically, alien commanders. We need to know *exactly* where the base is located, how it is defended, and how to penetrate those defenses.”

“We were thinking that we’d need to attack a base here on Earth,” Wagner said. “To capture a commander.”

“Tough mission, that,” Ken Yushi said, from his seat in the back of the room.

“Yes,” Garret said. “That is why this new intelligence is so vital.” He nodded to Wagner, who highlighted a glowing red track that descended from space, intersecting with the

Earth. "We've learned that an alien commander is going to be coming to Earth, very soon."

Catalina blinked. "Are we going to France or China?"

"Neither," Garret said. "The commander is heading to China, and best of all, he'll be flying in a Medium Scout Ship. The plan is that the Commander does not make it to his destination."

"His destination is our Alien Containment lab," Drake said.

"We're going to have the Lightning waiting for the ship when it enters orbit," Wagner said. "We've fitted the ship with a missile that should dampen the alien's engines. You will disable the alien ship, force it to land, and seize the commander."

"If our information is correct," Garret said, "The alien will be entering Earth orbit in eleven hours."

The course I've plotted will have us there in nine," Ken said. "Plenty of time."

"The mission is straightforward," Garret said. "Ken will force the alien down. You take the commander."

"No shooting the commander, obviously," Jane said.

"Your VDUs will indicate which alien is the commander," Wagner said.

"We know the typical crew compliment of such a ship?" Hadrian asked.

Wagner brought up a schematic on the screen. The ship was familiar, a design they'd encountered several times on past missions. "The medium scouts generally only contain four to six aliens."

Vasily stood. "Engineering crew better get on with installing new five-star room in alien containment, then."

"Good luck," Garret said. "If this fails, our situation gets a lot more complicated."

"Yeah," Drake added. "If it fails, start studying Chinese."

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Session 25 (October 20, 2008)

Chapter 108

As was so often the case, things didn't go quite according to plan.

The Lightning arrived on position slightly ahead of the planned time, and the alien ship appeared on the radar exactly on schedule. That was when they had the first surprise, as Ken reported over the intercom.

"Looks like a large scout, rather than a medium," he told the Alphas. "But nothing we can't handle. Moving to intercept."

The alien tried to evade, but by the time that it detected the Lightning, it was too late. The missile worked perfectly, scoring a hit that damaged the alien ship's main engines. The Lightning followed it down, but shortly after that they had their second unexpected problem.

They'd plotted the intercept as the alien came into orbit over the southern hemisphere, en route to China. The plan had been to force the alien down somewhere over Australia. But either because the ship was larger or the missile hadn't done enough damage, the alien's descent was slower than expected, and it veered off course, forcing Ken to goose the Lightning's engines to keep up.

"Looks like an overshoot... we're going to be over water in a minute..."

The Alphas shared a look; an ocean recovery was not something they were prepared for. But they got a reprieve; as the alien ship approached sea level the outline of the Great Barrier Reef became visible, and the alien headed for a small island, one of the hundreds that dotted the length of the reef system.

"Nothing in the neighborhood," Ken reported, as they followed the alien ship down. "No need to watch your fire, except with mister VIP."

The Alphas started preparations, as the ship tilted and descended rapidly. Catalina had some problem loading the stun launcher, but with Hadrian's help she was able to get the bulky clip of oblong missiles fitted into the compartment in the base of the weapon.

"Everybody get ready to call out when you see the commander," Jane said.

"Truthfully, they all look the same to me," Mary said. "Is that racist?"

"Just check your VDU, Mary," Jane said.

“Right, the VDU should tell you which one is the commander,” James said. He tapped the visor of his helmet, which glowed faintly green with the visual overlay. In his new armor, he looked imposing; with most of them clad in the heavy powered suits, even the generous internal bay of the Lightning felt a bit crowded.

The engine noises changed and they could feel their momentum shifting as Ken switched the Lightning over to VTOL mode. “Alien is on a sandbar NE of our position, about 200 meters,” Ken reported.

The aircraft rocked and then set down with a hollow thud. “Let’s go, kids,” James said, as the outer hatch cycled.

The disembarked onto a pristine bar of soft white sand, part of an island that barely rose out of the gentle blue expanse that stretched to the horizon in every direction. There was some lush greenery visible on the far side of the island, but where they were was merely sandbars, with only the occasional bit of driftwood to break the curving lines of beach.

“Over there,” Catalina said. The alien ship was clearly visible in the direction Ken had indicated, half-buried in a lagoon fronted by a broad curve of sand.

“No much cover,” Vasily said. “Slow, careful of water.”

They started forward, leaving deep marks in the sandbar. The fine sand would have forced them to a slow pace in any case, but they moved warily, checking for any signs of aliens. Catalina panned the motion sensor back and forth. “Nothing showing,” she said. “At least not at this range.”

“My brother Vinod dived here once,” Mary said.

“Something doesn’t feel right,” James said.

“What?” Vasily asked.

“I don’t know. Just... just a feeling.”

“Nothing showing,” Jane said, peering at the alien ship through the scope attached to her rifle.

“We need to get that commander,” Vasily began. “Keep an eye out for...”

But he was cut off as the water around the edges of the lagoon erupted, and six bulky green forms rose up into view, forming a broad half-circle facing the Alphas. Each of the six carried a heavy plasma cannon.

“It trap!” Vasily yelled, even as the first volley of energy bolts streaked into them.

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Session 25 (October 20, 2008)

Chapter 109

There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. With the two groups separated by maybe twenty meters of water and sand, it was almost impossible to miss.

But the Alphas were ready, and even as the mutons started shooting, their return fire was slamming into the half-ring of green bodies. Both sides had heavy weaponry, but both likewise had the best possible protection their side offered, the Alphas with Grace's latest generation of powered armor, the mutons their genetically-engineered hides overlaid with the bright green suits of flexible alien alloys.

Mary was knocked off her feet by a pair of blasts that bracketed her shoulders; she landed with a splash in a shallow pool of water. Jane was at her side in moments, but even as she reached for the Indian doctor, another plasma bolt exploded against her side, almost knocking her onto her fallen companion. Jane reached out and grabbed the doctor's shoulder. "Mary, back up!"

"Fall back to the Lightning!" Vasily yelled over the chatter of his autocannon as he bored armor-piercing shells into the chest of the nearest muton. The alien simply absorbed the blasts, but several rounds struck its cannon, rendering it inoperable. The alien dropped the useless gun and reached down to its hip; the green suit split to reveal a fat vibroblade, which began to hum as soon as it grasped the hilt.

Catalina fired the stun launcher, scoring a direct hit on one of the mutons. The alien absorbed the full effect of the discharge, but it merely swayed for a few seconds, slightly dazed, before it resumed firing. The stun bomb had some minor lingering effect, throwing off the alien's aim; its first two shots went high, the heavy cannon jerking unsteadily in the muton's hands.

Catalina loaded another bomb into the firing mechanism, but another muton blasted her in the hip, and she was spun around by the impact, falling into the sand, the launcher flying out of her grasp to land a few feet away. "Argh!" she yelled, reaching for her plasma pistol.

The alien lowered its aim to finish her off, but before it could fire again it was blasted by a bolt from Hadrian's plasma cannon. The bolt impacted it in the forehead, and for a moment its face was enveloped in a white-hot cloud of superheated gas. When the explosion faded the alien's head was a blackened mess of char, and yet somehow the alien not only stayed standing, but it kept shooting. Fortunately its blind shots missed

the Alphas, although one blast cleared Vasily's head by scant inches, sizzling as it flashed past him.

The Alphas gave ground, Jane helping Mary to her feet, while James did the same for Catalina. Plasma bolts struck Hadrian and Vasily, but the heavily armored soldiers withstood the impacts, grunting as the heat of the explosions seared them through both through the armored plates and the insulated suits they wore under them. Mary drew out her pistol and tried to draw a bead on an alien, her armor grinding as she tried to steady herself.

"Mary, stay behind us!" Hadrian yelled at her, blasting a muton as it shifted its aim back toward her. Once again he hit, boring a black hole into the emerald armor covering its chest. Once again the alien remained standing, and it fired back, striking the Marine in the leg, knocking him down roughly to one knee. Hadrian snarled and shot the muton almost on top of the initial point of impact, driving the hot plasma into its body cavity, a bright flare that finally took it out.

James was hit in the shoulder, and both he and Catalina fell, the doctor's heavy armor gouging a deep pit in the soft sand. He lined up a shot from his back, and struck the alien that had shot him in the groin. The mutons seemed to have no vulnerable parts of their anatomy, however, and the alien fired again, its shot striking the sand near James's head, close enough to flash over the visor of his helmet, leaving one side of it streaked with black.

Vasily continued to pour rounds into the alien closing on him, the bullets carving gouges in its armored torso. It kept on coming, but the loose sand slowed it, and the sheer force of Vasily's barrage kept it from finding stable footing. It got to within five paces before it faltered, stumbling to one knee, still clutching the deadly vibroblade in its hand. Vasily screamed at it as he unleashed the last rounds in his magazine at it, the barrels of his cannon glowing bright red as smoke hissed from the mechanism of the weapon. He slammed the release and dropped the weapon, unholstering his plasma pistol in the same motion, looking for the next target.

But the battle was already done. The mutons had absorbed a massive amount of firepower, but even they could only absorb so much punishment. Two others had discharged their power cells fully, and instead of stopping to reload, had simply started moving forward, taking out vibroblades as they'd come. They fell only seconds after Vasily's foe finally toppled forward, their bodies blasted into wreckage by the firepower of the Alphas.

"Reload!" Vasily yelled, as Hadrian, beside him, calmly did just that. "Stay sharp."

Catalina grimaced as she rose, rubbing at her charred flank. "Any other funny feelings, doc?" she asked James, who took off his helmet and reached for his medical satchel as he rolled over into an awkward crouch. His heavy armor had already dug a small trench in the sand, and more of it went flying as he moved.

"I feel like you're thinking naughty thoughts," James returned.

"Trust me, only ones concerning burying six feet under," Catalina said, extending a hand to help him to his feet. Jane was helping Mary, who'd absorbed the most punishment during the brief battle, but seemed to be intact. Her armor groaned as she moved, but there was nothing they could do about that now.

"Allen?" Vasily asked. "You sense anything?"

James shook his head. "Nothing right now, I guess."

"Come on," Vasily said. "They probably trying to fix engines right now." He started trudging through the sand toward the damaged ship. Hadrian followed after him.

The ship hadn't moved since their arrival, and the gentle surges within the lagoon continued to wash over its half-buried hull. Vasily poked at a long gash in the ship's side, while Hadrian moved to the hatch at the rear of the craft. Vasily started after him, as the Marine worked the mechanism and opened the doorway.

The interior of the large scout was a familiar format, and Hadrian could see directly down the main corridor, which was flanked by bulky pods that seemed to be attached directly to the interior of the hull. Their purpose was obvious as the pods were open, revealing recesses roughly the shape and size of a muton soldier. The main compartment of the craft had been streamlined to make room for the pods, and even from the entry Hadrian could see the bright glow of the Elerium storage pods forward, in between a pair of consoles that jutted out into the central space, like claws.

In the narrow space that led into the control compartment, he could see the pilot, a sectoid, which jerked as it lifted its plasma pistol, not at Hadrian, but at the source of the blue glow.

"Oh, sh—" Hadrian began, lifting his weapon, knowing it was too late even before the alien fired.

The explosion flashed around him, flaring down the central corridor of the ship, shooting him out the open hatch like a bullet from the barrel of a gun.

* * * * *

Session 25 (October 20, 2008)

Chapter 110

Hadrian Jones heard someone calling his name. The awareness was unwelcome, for it brought with it a wave of pain that started in the small of his back and radiated upward, eventually meeting up with a separate tendril of agony that trailed down from the base of his skull.

“Jones!”

He blinked, and found that he was staring up into the sky. It was blue, startlingly so, clear of clouds for as far as he could see. Someone had taken off his visor, and he could smell the unpleasant ozone of burned plastic underlaid with the more pedestrian stink of roasted flesh. He tried to move, but could only fumble his arm, accompanied by a noise of grinding actuators.

Vasily stepped into view, looking down at him. “How you... how you survive that?” he asked.

Hadrian tried to shrug, but it didn’t accomplish anything but to stir up the pain in new ways. “God likes me,” he managed.

“Doctor?” Vasily asked.

“I’ve done all I can here.” Hadrian could hear James’s voice, although he couldn’t see him through the opening in his visor. “His vitals are stable, he should be okay to move.”

“Hold on there, we’ll get you a stretcher,” Vasily said.

Hadrian shook his head, again not something he could easily manage in the blasted suit. “Help me up,” he said.

After a slight pause, Vasily nodded, and grabbed onto the Marine’s armor, lifting him to his feet. Hadrian saw that Vasily’s suit had taken a beating as well, with black flash-burns covering him from hips to helmet. He looked past the Russian at the alien ship, which was now a good sixty yards away. The ship was now little more than a blasted hulk that continued to pour a stream of ugly black smoke into the sky.

“No commander?” Hadrian asked.

“It looks like it was a trap, all of it,” Catalina said.

“We’d better get out of here,” James said. “Once they figure out it didn’t work, they may decide to follow up.”

“Did you see anything inside ship?” Vasily asked. “Before it blow?”

“Just pods, a lot of pods. For mutons, looked like.”

“Must be how they got so many onto such a small ship,” Jane said.

“We’d better tell Drake her intel sucks,” James said. He fell in on one side of Hadrian, while Vasily took his arm on the other side. The Marine was in no shape to protest; he could barely move at all in his crippled armor.

“So, would this be a win, loss, or, um, draw?” Mary asked.

Vasily glanced back at the ship, which continued to burn. “Depend how you count it,” he said.

“We survived, so it’s a win in my book,” Hadrian said, as they returned to the Lightning.

* * * * *

Interlude: Preparation (October 21-28, 2008)

The e-mail arrived the morning after the Alphas’ return from the busted Australian mission.

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, GRACE THELON BELUCA, AGENT INISE DRAKE
RE: Research/Manufacturing Progress Report

Again our work continues on schedule, and all current projects have been completed. The alien ambush at the Great Barrier Reef has forced our hand; we now must continue with our original project of securing an alien commander through an all-out attack on an enemy base. By decrypting the captured alien navigation data from the last few alien ships, we have identified a primary base in the mountains of western China. All that we have learned about the aliens suggests that a commander will be found within this facility. Expect intense resistance. Any Chinese forces encountered in the region must be considered alien allies and should be terminated.

* * *

HQX was engulfed in a flurry of activity as the date for the base attack raid drew nearer. Security is ratcheted up to its highest level ever, and tensions are tight. When a few physicists in the research labs get into a fistfight over a disputed centrifuge, you know that tensions are tight.

Alpha Team's every waking minute was scripted. Joan Beauvais implemented a new training regimen, based on the data recovered from the Antarctica base computer and the latest data from the Ethereal analysis team. The counselor was patient but uncompromising; more than one member of Alpha Team stalked from the banks of testing apparatus and training devices in frustration, only to find the only door leading out of the lab sealed and unresponsive. For two hours each day, the members of Alpha Team worked at developing their latent mental abilities. The results were impressive, as all of the team members showed improvement—in some cases dramatic improvement—since the last round of Psi tests.

Finally the day arrived. Alpha Team's gear was laid out on a long table in one of the research labs. The new advanced interface for the medical production unit was put to hard use; 25 medikits were produced. Mary's work synthesizing the regeneration serum resulted in 5 doses, lying innocently next to the medikits in portable injectors. Jane's work on the HWP team resulted in two repair kits, sitting in squat, folding cases. Vasily and Cat spent days sequestered in an unused lab, poring over the alien grenade. The clean-up teams brought several cases full of junked components taken from the multiple alien ships that Alpha had claimed. Curses had been overheard coming from the room in several languages over the week, but by its end, the pair had three working alien grenades, in addition to the intact sample that was originally provided to the research team for study.

Author's Note: All skill rolls passed, +100xp to Jane, Mary, Vasily, and Cat.

Even as the Alphas started to arrive, more technicians and researchers continued to bring more gear to the table. Mary opened a sealed case containing a hypo filled with the Chryssalid countermeasure, which—if it worked as advertised—would kill an injected parasite before it could “hatch”. Cat's armor had been fitted with a special harness to carry the bulky Blaster Launcher, with several snub rounds loaded inside. Doctor Sandesh delivered a new Plasma Tank, and as the team gathered in the hangar to board the Lightning, he hurries into the room with a second HWP trailing behind him, a new configuration, lack a turret but with an odd bulge at the top where the weapons array should be.

"This one is special for your trip," he told them. "It has the full AI suite and will follow you on command, but it has no weapons. Or rather, only one; an atomic warhead. It is set to a 10-minute delay, which can be altered by any of you via voice-print recognition. Once you have captured the alien commander and are ready to depart, activate the countdown and leave... swiftly."

NOTE: In case you are interested, here were the group's Psi rolls for this week. They also completed a research project to boost everyone's scores.

*Will save vs. DC15 (+1 per point >14 on roll)
+1 to roll for in-character posting.
Advanced Psi Research: +5 to all Psi Training scores.*

*Jane: roll (16 +11 +1) +5 = +19 bonus
Cat: roll (12 +6 +1) +5 = +10 bonus
Vasily: roll (4 +5 +1) +5 = +5 bonus
Mary: roll (20 +12) +5 = +23 bonus
James: roll (8 +12) +5 = +11 bonus
Hadrian: roll (11 +9) +5 = +11 bonus*

* * * * *

Session 26 (October 27, 2008)

Chapter 111

Doctor Wagner's voice came to them over the speakers in their helmets, as a technician double-checked the harnesses holding the Alphas and their weapons in place. Between the operatives in their heavy armor, the extra gear they were carrying, and the two HWPs, the Lightning's passenger and cargo compartments were packed full. And that was with one seat empty; James had taken sick with a nasty case of flu the day before. That hadn't stopped him from the mission prep, but during armoring he'd collapsed, tearing two muscles in his rotator cuff. He would be fine in a few days, but it had been an inauspicious start to the mission, and there hadn't been time to get someone else fitted and briefed in time for the launch. Delay, in this case, hadn't even been an option.

"All right," Wagner told them. "The base is located in the mountains of southwestern China, about 125 miles from Tibet." They'd all gone through the briefings, had pored over satellite pictures taken from before the alien invasion, but it was still reassuring to hear the German scientist's calm voice relay their objectives once more. "It's going to be cold, and rough ground, but not many bystanders."

"Now you tell us," Catalina said, grimacing slightly as the tech tugged on the harness that all but locked her into the jump chair. There was a quick-release catch, but it would be of little use if an alien plasma cannon hit the Lightning. "Could have put on thermals," she said, forcing levity into her voice.

"Your armor will protect you adequately against the elements," Wagner said.

"Is good chance this is oldest alien base on planet," Vasily said, as the aircraft's engines powered up, the familiar whine vibrating through the seats until they could feel it in their bones. "They had lot of time to make secure."

Catalina sighed. Wagner's voice was replaced by Garret's, his tone firm and decisive. "The mission is simple. The main objective is the Base Commander, to be taken alive. Secondary objective is to obliterate the base. You'll be bringing the best Earth has to offer. Give them hell."

The Lightning's engines roared to full power, and the craft lifted into the air, tilting forward as soon as Ken had cleared the hangar entrance, blasting off into the predawn sky over HQX.

They took an arctic insertion route, rising up high above the curve of the Earth, crossing down across Russia before approaching Chinese airspace. The aircraft's velocity approached that of a spacecraft, its Elerium-powered engines giving the Lightning a sustained rate of acceleration that a normal craft could not have managed, its hull of alien alloys allowing it to maintain that speed without breaking up. It was neither a smooth nor a quiet ride, and there was little conversation among the Alphas as they made their way into hostile territory.

"We're about to go into radio silence," Ken said, while they were still somewhere over the Arctic Ocean. "We've got a final message from HQ, patching it in."

"Wagner here, team. Alien activity still shows black across the board, no signatures, no ships. Ken will ping with the hyperwave once you get close; hopefully you should have at least some idea what you're up against."

"They're not expecting us, are they?" Catalina asked.

There was a brief delay as the message, traveling at the speed of light, made it across the hidden relay stations to HQX. "We don't know what to expect, Agent De Farrago. But we know that they like to surprise us."

There was another brief pause, and when Wagner resumed, her voice had changed slightly, an uncharacteristic hint of feeling creeping into her tone. "Remember what's at stake. We can handle not destroying the base, if we get the commander. If this mission fails, we may have no choice but to launch blind against the Mars base. And that would turn a one in a hundred into a one in a million shot."

Ken's voice chimed in over the comm. "And since Alpha's the 'one' I think that's a bad bet."

"Yes, thank you, Ken," Wagner said. "You're crossing the horizon from the last relay station; we're losing the tightband connection. Good luck, Alpha. Everyone, and I mean *everyone*, is counting on you."

Her voice faded, and Ken's returned. "Okay. We're going to be taking it down to the deck, coming down over Siberia, then down through the central Asian steppes to the target. Stay strapped in; when I say, 'on the deck,' I mean it."

Mary began, "What does 'on the deck'..." but was cut off as the floor dropped out from under them, and the Lightning plummeted toward the Earth.

The descent was followed by a series of jerks and twists as the Lightning followed an erratic course southward, with Ken taking them low across a landscape that they, perhaps mercifully, could not see. By the time they approached the landing zone, and the colored yellow indicator flashed in the passenger cabin, even Vasily looked a little green.

"Coming up on final approach," Ken said. "We'll be there in eight minutes."

Vasily led them in an ammo check, a final pass of gear that had been checked and rechecked in Nevada, until every round and power cell had been accounted for. But it helped to steady them, as Ken continued their rapid approach to the target area.

"Showing a peak energy signature to the south," Ken reported. "Pinging Hyperwave Decoder... Damn, base is shielded, not getting... wait... got a match. Looks like mutons."

"Grah, mutons," Vasily said. His hand tapped the butt of the plasma cannon strapped in next to his seat; he'd finally given up his autocannon for the more reliable firepower of the alien weapon.

"You know," Catalina began, "I'm not sure what to do about..."

She was cut off as the Lightning jerked hard to the right, as though it had been kicked hard by a giant. The Alphas were jerked hard against their harnesses as the entire aircraft tilted over hard to the right, sirens sounding as something hard and fundamental *cracked*, and then a blinding surge of cold air was streaming through the compartment, accompanied by a rush of sound and chaos that sounded like the end of everything.

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Session 26 (October 27, 2008)

Chapter 112

Outside air rushed into the Lightning as the craft veered roughly to the side.

“KEN!” Vasily yelled into his communicator. The other Alphas could do nothing but hold on, as they bounced back and forth in their harnesses.

The aircraft’s tilt extended to almost ninety degrees, then it eased back, with a reassuring pressure under them as it gained more altitude. Ken’s voice hissed over their helmet speakers. “We’re all right... we’re still here.”

“They have missiles or something?” Vasily asked.

“One of those blaster shells, I think. Just missed us... Better watch it down there... going down... engines are Red, but I’ll put you down intact.”

The Lightning switched to VTOL mode, and again they were descending. They could just make out the line of a mountain through the gash in the hull, then the green of trees, and then they were down, snow blowing up around the aircraft to obscure their view.

“Base is south... good luck, team!” Ken told them, as the Lightning’s engines abruptly sputtered and died.

“If they shot at us, they knew we’re coming,” Catalina said, as they filed out of the damaged craft. Ken emerged from the cockpit, a laser pistol at his hip, and headed for the damaged engines.

“Can you actually fix these?” James asked.

“I’d rather Grace was here, but since she’s not, I’ll have to give it my best,” Ken said. “Don’t take too long, eh? Intel says there’s no PLA installations within a hundred miles, and the Lightning’s systems are cloaked, but I don’t like the idea of spending the night alone out here.”

“We be as quick as can be,” Vasily said. He turned and saw that Jane and Hadrian had gotten the two HWP’s out of their bay in the Lightning’s belly. His eyes lingered on the distended bulge of the one carrying the bomb. “Move out, spread out,” he said. He gestured for Catalina to take point, the agent moving forward into the trees, her plasma pistol held close against her hip in one hand, her motion sensor in the other.

They headed into the forest, the HWP’s driving a path through the shallow snow. They’d covered only a few hundred meters of ground from the Lightning when the plasma tank chirped, and a charging indicator in the back of the vehicle’s turret began to glow.

“Plasma tank seen something I think,” Vasily said.

They moved forward and found Catalina waiting for them behind a low rise. They left the tanks in place and moved up to join her, crouching behind a line of boulders covered with a light dusting of fresh snow.

“Muton, there,” Catalina said, gesturing toward a point between the trees ahead.

Vasily activated the zoom on his VDU. “Yah, I see,” he said.

“Two,” Catalina said, nodding to the right, where the ground rose in a gentle slope to a hilltop summit maybe forty or fifty yards higher than their current vantage.

“Any way around?” Hadrian asked.

Catalina shook her head. “The ground is much rougher to the sides. The tanks would not make it even if we could. And it definitely looks like they’re guarding something up there.”

“I say we go up here,” Vasily said. He looked to either side, evaluating, and nodded. “This good cover. Catalina, Hadrian, you stay here, set up for cover. Others go around those trees to left. Once we start shooting, send up plasma tank.”

“Careful,” Catalina told him.

Vasily, Mary, and Jane fell back and moved into the cover of the trees, approaching the hill from the left. Vasily put Jane into a position where she could cover the entire rise with her rifle, then he crept forward toward the closer of the two mutons, ordering Mary to stay low and back behind him. As the ascent grew steeper they could periodically catch glimpses of the green suits of the mutons, standing out garishly against the whites, grays, and browns of the hillside.

“Why don’t they attack?” Mary whispered. “I can’t believe they didn’t see us land.”

Vasily shushed her—there was no guarantee that the aliens couldn’t intercept even their short-range suit comms—and gestured toward a boulder slightly ahead and to the right. He went straight ahead, creeping up behind a fallen tree, unlimbering his heavy plasma, his eyes fixed on the nearest muton, which had remained where it had been since they’d first spotted it, staring vacantly down the hill, ignoring the Russian who was now within fifty meters of its position.

“Now you get surprise,” he muttered, aiming down the sights Grace had installed on the alien-built weapon. He could feel the power building within the gun, and closed his eyes a moment before the bright burst of plasma streaked out. It caught the muton in the hip, punching a hole in its armored body, but he wasn’t surprised when it not only remained standing, but turned toward him, lifting its own cannon.

But before it could shoot, a volley of fire from the other Alphas blasted up the slope. Two bright plasma bursts enveloped the muton, knocking it down but not out, the alien fumbling as it tried to both hold onto its weapon and recover its footing. The second alien that Catalina had spotted was firing toward her and Hadrian’s position, but Vasily

doubted it would get a hit in the good cover they had. Then he heard the mechanical sounds of the plasma HWP, a moment before it added its own firepower to the battle, firing a blast that exploded a tree a scant four feet from the second muton. The alien shifted fire toward the tank, but staggered as a blast that had to have come from Hadrian's gun slammed into its chest.

Vasily shot the first muton again, but it still managed to rise into a crouch. It lifted its cannon—amazingly, in one hand—and fired, not at Vasily, but at Mary, who was shooting wildly with her plasma pistol. She saw it and tried to duck back into cover, but the plasma bolt caught her high on the shoulder, knocking her roughly over onto her back. She bounced on the rocks and slid a good five feet before landing in a drift, dazed. As Vasily shot the alien yet again, he glanced back to see her try to get up, exposing herself again to the alien's line of sight. A shower of wooden splinters exploded ahead of him as the alien blasted the log sheltering him, but the shot failed to penetrate to him.

"Move back down hill!" Vasily yelled at Mary, rising up just enough to squeeze off another shot at the muton. He cursed as the shot missed, transforming a patch of snow into superheated steam. He ducked back before the alien could return fire, but it didn't get a chance, as a plasma bolt caught it under the chin, and it finally went down, its head barely attached to its body.

The second muton was likewise in bad shape; it had scored a hit on the HWP, which had stopped, but was continuing to fire. The distraction cost the alien, as Catalina and Hadrian continued to pour fire into it, blasting slowly and gradually through its armor. Hadrian finally scored a hit that penetrated its side, flashing white-hot plasma into its chest cavity, searing the only slightly more vulnerable organs beneath. The alien started to turn, lifting its gun toward the new target, but couldn't manage it. It fell over heavily to the side. Hadrian kept it in his sights, intending to make sure of it, but before he could shoot Catalina looked past him, toward the right flank of the hill, and saw something that made her eyes widen.

"Launcher!" she yelled, but too late, as the muton fired the bulky weapon from its shoulder, the guided fusion bomb streaking through the trees to where Catalina and Hadrian were kneeling, before it exploded with the brilliant white flash of a small supernova.



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Session 26 (October 27, 2008)

Chapter 113

Hadrian blinked. Awareness came in a rush, along with an odd and generally unpleasant sensation, sort of like the way a leg felt when you'd been sitting on it for a while, only more intense and diffuse. The Marine looked up to see Mary leaning over him, a hypo in her hand.

“Hold still a moment. I've injected you with a dose of regenerative serum, and it may take your body a while to get used to the effects.”

Hadrian nodded. He let Mary help him sit up, then just watched as she ran over to help Vasily with Catalina. At first he wasn't sure where he was, but then he recognized some of the surrounding features that told him he was still near the base of the hill where he and Catalina had been when the blaster round had struck nearby. He remembered

diving behind the low rise as the missile had streaked toward them; that rise was gone now, replaced by a crater from which the broken black spires of tree trunks jutted at odd angles. The explosion had thrown him and Catalina back a good fifteen feet. That was two explosions he'd survived now, and he had no desire to push his luck.

The thought of an explosion drew his attention to the right, where the bomb tank lay against the bole of a damaged tree. It had been flipped over like a child's toy by the force of the explosion. Jane was working on it now, using one of the new auto-repair kits that Grace had developed. It didn't look like a good bet; he'd seen crumpled soda cans in better shape. At least the atomic warhead hadn't gone off; that would have *really* ruined their day.

Hadrian tried to get up, found he could. His armor was intact, although it squeaked slightly whenever he tried to move his right arm. He suspected that the concussive force of the blast would have killed him instantly, had it not protected him. He looked around for his plasma cannon, but couldn't find it. No big matter; the other mutons had been carrying them as well, and while they wouldn't have Grace's add-on sights or the convenient carrying strap, they'd work just fine.

He ordered his suit's computer to complete a full diagnostic and walked over to where Vasily and Mary were helping a groaning Catalina to her feet. The British agent had taken less of a hit than he had, at least by the state of her armor. There was an empty medikit lying on the ground next to her, and from the look on her face, she'd gotten a jolt of the regen juice as well. Hadrian still felt like little ants were crawling just inside his skin all over his body, but otherwise he was feeling much more steady than he had just a minute earlier.

Vasily nodded as he joined them. "Well, the good news is the regen serum works," Mary reported. "Field tested. The bad news is we're out."

"Well, hurrah," Vasily said.

"What about the tank?" Hadrian asked, nodding at the disabled HWP.

"We not need tank, if we can just get warhead, maybe we can detonate ourself."

"I'll see if I can help Jane," Catalina said.

"Hey, Catalina?" Vasily interjected. "How about stunning those specialists, huh?"

She grimaced. "He was targeting as I saw him, Vas."

Vasily glanced back up the hill. "Gya. Crazy way to wage war."

A loud clatter drew their attention back to Jane, who was levering the bomb tank back onto its tracks. It moved forward in a jerking fit, letting out both a loud noise and a trailing vent of black smoke.

“Fixed,” Jane said, as the others looked on the battered vehicle dubiously.

“Really need to keep that guy well back and out of the line of fire,” Hadrian said.

“If they didn’t know we were coming, they do now?” Catalina noted.

“Eh, what you gonna do, huh?” Vasily said. “We good to move?”

They turned back toward the hill, but before they could take so much as a single step, a loud, piercing—and familiar—cry sounded from ahead, up the slope.

“Chryssalid!” Catalina and Vasily warned almost at the same instant, even as a second loud cry echoed the first, this one coming from the south, around the flank of the hill. A dark form appeared in the trees ahead of them, and the plasma tank fired a blast, the bolt striking the ground at the charging creature’s feet, erupting in a brilliant white flare that enveloped the thing. It didn’t so much as faze the alien, which kept on coming, until, still a good ten meters away, it sprang high into the air, arcing down toward the surprised Alphas.

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Session 26 (October 27, 2008)

Chapter 114

Vasily brought his plasma cannon up, but it was too late, as the chryssalid filled the view from the vision port in his helmet. A white flash erupted against its side as someone got off a shot, but it didn’t distract the alien in the least, as it extended itself in mid-leap, lashing out with a powerful sweep of its claws that knocked Vasily from his feet and launched him flying into a heap of rubble piled at the edge of the crater from the earlier blaster launcher strike. He hit hard enough that he saw stars flash even within the protective shelter of his powered suit, but he immediately started fighting to get up, even as loose rocks and mud scattered under his feet.

The others fell back as quickly as they could, unleashing fire at point-blank range into the alien. Hadrian ducked under another lunge of its claws, firing his old holdout gun, a Glock slugthrower, into its body. He fired off an entire clip without apparent effect, and as the alien swept around he dove forward, only to be hit and knocked sprawling over the lip of the crater, tumbling head over heels into the still-glowing mess of hot rubble at its bottom.

The alien reared up as a bolt from the plasma tank exploded against its back, but its focus was quickly drawn back as both Jane and Catalina blasted it. It sprang forward and lunged at Jane; Mary leapt screaming out of its path, narrowly avoiding getting trampled in its rush. The former CIA agent held her ground and calmly fired again, hitting the alien in the face. She paid the price for her efforts a moment later as the alien picked her up and hurled her backward. She struck the bomb tank and flipped, slamming into a tree with enough force to crack the trunk. She hung there for a moment, then dropped to the ground, landing face-first in a mush of melted snow and mud.

The alien spun to face Catalina, but before either she or it could attack, it staggered forward as Vasily leapt onto its back. "Get the other one!" he yelled at her as the alien violently swung around, trying to grab or dislodge its undesired passenger. With the weight of his armor Vasily topped five hundred pounds, but the alien still managed to hop aside, twisting and finally flopping over onto its back, trying to tear the Russian free. With a roar Vasily took its momentum and flipped the thing over him, slamming it to the ground. The alien was up before he could exploit the move, pounding its claws into his gut with enough force to buckle the heavy armor protecting his torso. Vasily fell back, and that was enough of an opening for it to spring onto him, driving him down under its body as it tore at his armor with its razor-sharp claws. Vasily punched at its body, trying to get a hold, to push it off him, but in vain. The alien, frustrated in its efforts to get through the armor, reached down and grabbed onto Vasily's head with both of its claws. It crunched down with its full strength and twisted. Metal popped and groaned as the fittings gave way under the pressure, and Vasily screamed as his neck quickly approached the point where it would snap like a twig.

It was hard for Catalina to turn from the raging battle, but she did so, running away from the deadly grapple between Vasily and the alien. As she got clear, she saw the blur of motion coming around the far side of the hill, an onrushing form that could only be the second chryssalid. She knew what Vasily had meant, knew that she had only one thing that could stop the monster.

She didn't know whether the damned thing would even work; she'd been knocked onto it when she'd been hit by a fusion shell just a few minutes ago, and hadn't had any time to run a diagnostic on her suit's functions. But she activated the servo that Grace had installed, and with a whirr the heavy launcher swung up from across her back, the grip snapping into position where she could reach up and grab it. A new targeting reticule appeared across her VDU, one that superimposed the outline of the charging alien. A red indicator flashed in the corner of her viewscreen, indicating that the launcher was ready to fire.

If it didn't explode in the tube and kill her instantly.

There was no time to think; the alien was close and closing fast, already within the safe distance that Grace had warned them about, but there was no other solution. Even as

the alien appeared between the nearest line of trees ahead, she fired. The bomb didn't have too far to go, arming as it left the barrel of the launcher, streaking through the air like a silvery football. Everything seemed to slow down around her, with most of her focus on the missile, which covered the sixty meters separating her and the alien in a heartbeat that seemed to last a minute. She clearly saw the chryssalid duck the missile, which shot past it, and even started to *turn* before it impacted a boulder. A disconnected part of her mind noted the range on her VDU, sixty-eight meters.

Then the bomb exploded.

Catalina's vision filters darkened her visor, keeping her from being blinded, but that was the least of her worries as she was flung over onto her back by the concussive force of the blast. She didn't see the chryssalid being vaporized by the explosion, or her companions behind her being knocked down, throwing them to the ground with admittedly less force than she'd withstood. Ironically it was Vasily who was least affected, even helped as the shockwave accomplished what he'd been unable to do, knocking the chryssalid off him. The alien rolled heavily on its back, letting out a piercing shriek.

Vasily, battered and more than a little stunned, fumbled for his plasma pistol, but once again the alien was faster. Even as the reverberations from the blaster explosion echoed off the surrounding hills, the chryssalid twisted its body and lunged back to its feet. No sooner had it reoriented than it flung itself at Vasily again, claws outstretched. The wounded Russian tried to roll away from it, but the alien kept on coming, smashing him with powerful blows from its claws, as if it had given up on subtlety and now intended to pound him into paste through raw strength. Finally Vasily came up against the trunk of a tree, and with nowhere left to roll, the alien drew up both of its claws, fixing on the image of itself reflected in the Russian's visor.

But before it could strike, the chryssalid felt something hard poke into the back of its neck, right under the outer ridge of bone from its armored skull. Before it could react, before it could so much as register the threat, Hadrian discharged Vasily's dropped plasma cannon, firing a pulse of white-hot energy into the alien monstrosity. The backblast knocked the Marine off his feet, but the alien had a much worse time of it, the plasma severing its spine and driving tendrils of angry fire into its brain. The chryssalid spun and flung itself into the air, twisting in a violent paroxysm that ended with it landing in a wild tangle of arms and legs, smoke rising from the ugly opening in the back of its head. It twitched, flinched, and finally died as Vasily pulsed a bolt from his plasma pistol through its left eye.

"Hate you," he said, unleashing a string of Russian curses at the dead monster.

* * * * *

Session 26 (October 27, 2008)

Chapter 115

It was a bruised and battered Alpha Team that made its way through the dark shaft into the alien base. Behind them the two crippled HWP's rattled and creaked as they tried to keep up. The Alphas themselves rattled and creaked only slightly less. None of them had been successfully implanted by the chryssalids, but they'd absorbed a pounding, and Mary had depleted half of her stock of medikits in the aftermath of those initial fights, in addition to her stock of the experimental regenerative serum.

Their helmet lights shone bright beams into the base interior, as their cameras recorded the scene. The initial construction seemed familiar, even mundane, although the lighting was dim and colored everything with a deep violet tinge. The walls, ceiling, and floor were made of long panels of material that weren't quite plastic, weren't quite metal, joined in almost invisible seams. Their sensors indicated a number of unpleasant substances in the air, but thus far it was nothing that their suit filters couldn't handle.

They entered a long chamber fitted out with about a dozen large oblong vats, connected to the walls with various odd cable and tube linkages. The vats had segmented doors in the front that provided access to the interior, and as they entered, they could see one that was open. A dark shape materialized from within and shuffled forward toward them. Five weapons came up immediately, but their lights revealed not an alien, but a cow.

A two-headed cow, that lowed miserably as it spotted them.

"... the hell..." Vasily said.

"Sacrilige!" Mary hissed. "They will pay for that!"

"Keep moving, yes?" Vasily said. "Unless we put it out of misery, sheesh."

The mutated cow came closer, both heads mooing now, until Jane lifted her rifle and ended it with a pair of shots that pierced its skull and drove it to the ground. The Alphas moved on, giving the rest of the vats a wide berth, and entered another corridor that opened into another chamber ahead. Catalina frowned as she worked the motion sensor. The unfamiliar construction of the alien base was causing havoc with her readings, but as they approached the chamber she held up a hand, bringing them to a halt. She turned off her helmet lamp and crept forward until she could look into the room without exposing herself to fire, and took one quick look before retracing her steps to rejoin the others.

"Mutons," she said. "Four of them. Shall I use the last shell in the blaster launcher?"

Vasily shook his head. "Nah, is only four." He nodded to Hadrian, who'd replaced his lost plasma cannon with one taken off the dead guards above. Both men took grenades from their belts, and moved forward. As soon as they caught sight of the hulking green forms on the far side of the room they threw the grenades together, opening fire with their heavy plasmas even before the missiles burst into clouds of stunning gas. They knew from past experience that the mutons were barely fazed by the stun grenades, but the gas obscured their vision, and their initial return fire was wild and blind, missing the Alphas as they spread out and kept shooting. Vasily and Hadrian focused in on the alien muzzle flashes, and white explosions of plasma erupted as their bolts hit alien hides.

"Come and get it, gorillas!" Vasily yelled, keeping up his fire as the mutons started forward, shooting as they came. Jane came forward into the room, the HWP's trailing behind her. A wild bolt clipped her arm and nearly flipped her around, but she quickly recovered and shot back, shooting the muton who had hit her on the hip.

"Jane, get the bomb back!" Catalina yelled, as the battered HWP kept rolling forward, into the room. The four mutons were clear of the gas now, but their shots were still erratic, exploding in bright puffs against the wall behind the Alphas. One of them lowered its weapon and drew out a vibroblade, its high-pitched whine audible even across the room and the noise of the firefight.

Jane yelled at the tank, but it kept on moving forward, at least until one of the mutons fired a plasma burst into it. The entire front end of the tank came apart in a mess of metal shards and flame, and it keeled over, the heavy bulge on its top clunking loudly as it hit the floor. The other HWP fired a plasma blast that struck a muton in the torso, but then its turret suddenly exploded, apparently of its own volition, showering the Alphas with sparks and streamers of fire.

"Keep shooting!" Vasily yelled, darting to the side, drawing fire after him. The alien with the vibroblade came after him, but Hadrian pummeled it with a shot that tore away half of its neck, and it fell, struggling as black fluids jetted from the nasty wound. A second went down a moment later as Catalina and Jane both hit it. The last two kept firing until their plasma cannons fully depleted their energy cells, then they drew out vibroblades and surged forward. They ran into a brutal crossfire from the Alphas, but even then nearly made it to melee range, the last one falling to the ground a scant two feet in front of Hadrian.

"Good shooting, mister Jones," Mary said, as Hadrian reloaded his cannon with a fresh power cell. They'd taken a few hits in the exchange, but none of them were seriously hurt. The same could not be said for the HWP's, however.

"Crazy tank," Vasily said, as he came to the destroyed bomb tank. He bent over it for a moment, checking the integrity of its cargo, the atomic explosive that Grace had prepared for them. It seemed to be intact, its armored shell unbroken, at least to casual

examination. With a grunt he lifted the wrecked chassis up, and saw the faint LED indicators on the bomb's side were still lit.

"Going to carry it the rest of the way?" Catalina asked.

Vasily grunted, and started working on the releases that fastened the bomb to the tank. It took some doing, but he finally got it free. Grace had prepared a rude harness for them for just such an eventuality, but it took a few minutes to get it hooked up to his satisfaction. Not that he could be truly satisfied with an atomic bomb strapped to his back.

Hadrian had taken advantage of the delay to scout out the rest of the room. "Lift over there," he said, indicating where the mutons had been standing guard. "Looks like it leads to a lower level."

"Plasma tank's a bust," Jane said, putting away her tools. "It must have taken damage during the last fight, broke the power coils or something. When it powered up its cannon, it overloaded."

"All right. We still need to find commander," Vasily said, leading them toward the lift.

The next level of the base was very different from the last, and definitely more "alien." The chamber at the bottom of the lift was similar to those above, but the exits led them into rooms that were populated with an eclectic collection of alien growths, multicolored flora that vaguely resembled terrestrial spores and fungi. The floor became a spongy, textured substance more like flesh than dirt, and the temperature rose quickly, until they could feel the heat even through the heavy insulation of their suits.

"We're not in Kansas anymore," Jane said, wiping moisture from her visor.

"This some kind of greenhouse?" Vasily asked, carefully avoiding a bulging ovoid sack that dangled from the ceiling. The pod rippled slightly as he moved away.

"This isn't soil," Catalina said, bending to examine the floor more closely.

"This isn't a science field trip," Hadrian said, checking his plasma cannon.

Mary had taken out a small medical scanner, and was looking at the readouts. "This air might be a problem," she told the others. "We can't stay here long."

The rooms were connected by short tunnels, the whole forming a complex that seemed to go on for quite a ways. "Mary, can you sense that thing?" Catalina asked. "The commander?"

“Um... Yes. No. I think so. I don't know. I'll try...” she put away the scanner and furrowed her brow, concentrating. Meanwhile, Catalina moved to the closest of the tunnel exits, scanning with the motion sensor.

“Anything?” Jane asked Mary.

The Indian doctor started to shake her head, but then she lifted a hand. “Wait... I sense something...”

“Maybe you need take helmet off,” Vasily suggested. “They insulate these helmets against alien mind power. Maybe it work both ways.”

“A mind...” Mary said. Her eyes widened. “It senses me!”

“Gya!” Vasily exclaimed. “Better not take off helmet, then.”

Catalina moved to the second exit, and paused. “I'm getting something!” she warned. “Half a dozen and... small?”

“Sectoids?” Vasily asked her.

Catalina shook her head. “Not sure. Signal is... erratic.” She breathed heavily. “Is it getting hotter in here?”

Jane checked one of the sensors embedded in her armor. “Air temperature is 112F and rising.”

“Get ready!” Vasily warned, as he and the other Alphas formed a defensive half-circle facing the exit. “How far?” he asked Catalina, who continued to study the sensor.

“Close... there!”

They lifted their weapons, but no sectoids, or anything else, materialized in the tunnel opening. For a moment they stood, quiet, waiting for the enemy to show itself.

“Catalina—” Vasily began.

“There!” Jane warned, pointing to the wall. Something was coming *through* it, an amorphous, slightly glowing... *blob* was the best description, some sort of amoeboid thing that was clearly alive, passing through the substance of the wall as it moved in jerky pulses forward. Its hide was an unpleasant mottled purple, slick with some sort of oily secretion that trailed behind it as it moved. The opening it left began to slowly seal itself closed once the creature was fully through, but more were starting to appear nearby, all moving toward the nearest human.

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Session 26 (October 27, 2008)

Chapter 116

The Alphas found themselves confronting yet another alien species in the depths of the alien base. In some ways the silacoids were the strangest yet, amoebic blobs that pulsed forward across the floor to attack.

Jane fired her plasma rifle, scoring a direct hit on the nearest blob that engulfed it in a corona of white-hot plasma. But the burst cleared to reveal that the creature was virtually unharmed, and it lunged at her, extending a pseudopod that smacked her hard on her left leg just above the knee. The agent staggered back, clutching at the wounded limb.

“Gah, it’s hot!” she warned, unnecessarily; they could all see the bright glow of her armor where the alien had smacked her. And they could all feel the sudden spike in temperature as heat radiated from the aliens like coal in a furnace.

More blasts streaked into the aliens, but while the plasma bolts had a certain kinetic impact, it was clear that the heat they delivered was of no hindrance to the creatures. Hadrian whipped out his slug-thrower and emptied a clip at the nearest alien, but the silacoid merely absorbed the bullets, the force of them slowing it for only a few seconds. Mary tried to run, but the nearest alien extended itself into a long tendril that caught her on the back of her ankle, taking her down. The alien surged forward to crush her, but Catalina and Vasily were there in an instant, Catalina pulling her up while Vasily blasted it with a point-blank shot from his cannon. The force of the blast smacked the alien back a half-step, but it quickly recovered and came in again.

“Come on people, run from them, they not fast!” Vasily exclaimed, as Jane and Hadrian fell back, shooting as they went. “What is this walking-away-from-burning-puddle-thing?”

They made their way to the far exit, the aliens literally in hot pursuit. The silacoids moved slower than the humans, but apparently solid walls did little to hinder them.

“Now what?” Jane asked, grimacing as she put weight on her injured leg. Sweat was visible covering her face through the dark plastic of her visor.

“Keep moving!” Vasily yelled, leading them toward another of the side-chambers. The aliens kept following. Hadrian paused at the entry and took an alien grenade from his belt. Triggering it, he rolled it across the floor toward the nearest silacoid; the bomb collided with the alien, which pulsed over it, smothering it a moment before detonation.

The alien—or rather, pieces of it—went flying across the room. Hadrian and Vasily were struck by bits of it, which hissed and sizzled as it struck their armor. The Russian grunted and tore a piece of it from his helmet, before the sheer heat of it could damage the alien alloys. It continued to smoke as he dropped it onto the ground.

The other aliens kept coming, but with a confirmed technique for dealing with them, the advantage passed back to the Alphas. Vasily ordered the others on ahead and lured two more silacoids after him with a second grenade, springing out of their path with the things almost on top of him. This time the grenade went off with only part of it embedded in one of the aliens' bodies; the force of the blast knocked Vasily onto his back, but both aliens were destroyed as violently as the first.

The last of the aliens almost got to Vasily before he could get up, but Jane lunged at it with a vibroblade. The alien pulsed and shifted in mid-lunge, but Jane met it with the alien steel, cutting a deep swath in its body. It surged and smacked her again, knocking her down, but again the other Alphas were quick to intervene, blasting the alien with a point-blank barrage of firepower that transformed it into a sizzling puddle. Mary helped Jane to her feet, while Vasily tried to blink away the sweat pouring down his face. "This just a great place to be, huh," he said. "Can see why the Chinese signed treaty. They want aliens to build theme park."

"Nothing in range," Catalina said, scanning with her motion sensor.

"The one we're seeking," Mary said. "He's here somewhere."

They made their way forward again through the alien complex, encountering more unfamiliar plants and other growths. Jane recorded it all on her helmet camera, but they didn't stop to explore the side-chambers, moving steadily forward toward their eventual destination.

Finally they saw something different up ahead; the scattered growths faded away, and the spongy quasi-floor gave way to more regular construction. There was a large set of doors visible in the back of the chamber, but there wasn't time to look around; a large party of a dozen mutons were waiting for them.

Including one holding a blaster launcher, which it lifted to its shoulder as the Alphas spotted it.

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Session 26 (October 27, 2008)

Chapter 117

The blaster bomb streaked toward its target, detonating in an explosion of coruscating white fusion fire. Its targets were either vaporized, if they were close to the blast, or burned to a crisp and tossed roughly aside, if they were not. There were no survivors.

Catalina lowered the now-empty launcher and blinked.

“Ah... nice shot?” Vasily said.

The bomb had dented the floor and ceiling, and had ripped the doors in the back of the room off their hinges, revealing a short corridor that culminated in another of the anti-gravity lifts. They made their way cautiously forward, the superheated alien material sticking slightly to their boots as they passed through the radius of the blast zone. Blackened smears decorated the corridor, but the lift itself seemed to be intact, ascending to one of the familiar alien iris-doors above.

“It’s close,” Mary said. “I can feel it.”

Vasily stepped into the lift, with Hadrian just a step behind. The lift was large enough for several of them to ascend at once, and the others followed. The iris opened as Vasily approached, opening onto a huge chamber above.

The place was obviously some sort of control room, with machinery, control panels, and display screens all around the perimeter. A holographic depiction of the Earth hovered in the air, eight feet across. There were mutons as well, several of them, armed with plasma guns that they started firing as soon as Vasily appeared.

The alien commander was instantly discernible from the others. The creature was a muton, at least in general physical appearance, but its bodysuit was a garish mix of orange and gold, covering a body that was significantly bulkier than that of its more conventional peers, and it wore a metallic helmet that stretched over an obviously distended skull. It let out a feral roar as it saw the Alphas, who staggered under a pulse of raw mental energy. Vasily took a plasma bolt to the shoulder, while Hadrian took another in the back, but the aliens weren’t using the big cannons, and their battered powered armor held. Jane and Mary opened fire as they reached the top of the lift, while Vasily and Hadrian stepped forward. Vasily blasted one of the mutons in the chest with his cannon, then tossed it down and unlimbered his stun rod, confronting the commander.

“Okay, pal. You and me. Human race. Let’s do it.”

He rushed forward, narrowly avoiding a plasma bolt that streaked inches past his head. Jane blasted the muton who'd fired it a moment later, and the alien collapsed behind a control panel, smoke rising from its savaged leg. Hadrian followed Vasily, firing as he went, and another muton fell, its face a blackened mess.

The commander reached back and hefted what looked like a steel rod, easily six feet long. The rod started to blur as the alien activated a stud in its base, and as Vasily lunged at him it swung the weapon like a club, smashing him across the body. The Russian went down hard, sparks hissing from his dented breastplate. The commander turned toward him, but was briefly distracted by a bright flash of white plasma that scorched his armor, but did little apparent damage.

Hadrian glanced over his shoulder. "Jane, don't shoot the commander!" he yelled into his helmet comm, charging at the huge muton from behind. He stabbed his own stun rod into its side. There was a hiss of electrical discharge but the alien seemed unaffected, spinning and slashing its rod at the Marine. Hadrian dodged and stabbed it again, driving the rod into its armpit, but the alien kept turning, and smashed him with a cross that flipped him over onto his back.

Vasily was having trouble getting up; his armor had been damaged to the point where it was reluctant to obey his commands. "Cat, stun this guy? You still alive?"

On command, a stun bomb exploded against the commander's chest, enveloping it in vapors. But once again the alien seemed unaffected, stepping through the swirling gas without hesitation. It lowered its rod and pointed it at the Alphas still lingering near the lift; a bright beam of white light pulsed from the end of it, and there was a flash that left Catalina and Mary on their backs, dazed. Jane, a few paces distant, had the muton in her sights, but held her fire. The rest of the aliens were out of the fight, leaving them alone with the commander.

Vasily rose, staggering as the actuators in the left leg of his armored suit whined and bucked. Hadrian had rolled out of the alien's reach, and was getting up as well. "Stun rod doesn't do anything to him," he said.

"Hell it doesn't," Vasily said. "Keep trying!"

The two came forward again, flanking the alien between them. Vasily slammed his rod into the alien's chest, but it countered with a jab of its rod that drove the Russian back and nearly took him off his feet again. Through some last desperate reserve of effort Vasily surged forward again, meeting the alien's swing with a parry that nearly tore his stun rod in two. He thrust his weapon at the alien's face, and actually scored along the side of its helmet, but the alien merely reached out and grabbed hold of his wrist, smashing down with the rod in its other hand. The first blow crumpled the armor plate protecting Vasily's shoulder. The second pounded him in the side of his head, denting his helmet and tearing away the visor.

Hadrian, meanwhile, was stabbing the alien in the back, the neck, the legs, counting off with each hit. Mary shot the commander with her plasma pistol, but it barely heeded the hit, and Jane put a hand on her arm, lowering the weapon. "Mary, can you do something with your mind?"

The Indian doctor shook her head. "I'll... I'll try." She closed her eyes and focused on the alien, groaning as the sheer power of its rage surged over her.

"Six! Seven! Eight!" Hadrian yelled.

"I get it, he tough!" Vasily yelled back. He tried to tear free, but the alien spun him around, knocking Hadrian down. Its iron grip on the Russian didn't soften in the least, and the alien bent him down to his knees, lifting its rod again. It might have killed him had it struck him on the head once more, but he brought his free arm up, taking the blow but breaking his arm in the process.

Catalina looked on helplessly as the alien battered Vasily. She drew her plasma pistol, but hesitated, unsure what, if anything, she could do to stop it.

Hadrian did not hesitate; he got up again and lifted his plasma cannon. Vasily saw him and yelled, "Not shoot him!" even as the alien jerked him roughly by his pinned wrist, almost breaking that arm as well. The alien pointed its rod at Hadrian, but the Marine stepped into it and knocked it aside even as it discharged another stream of energy that exploded a console ten paces behind him. The muton snapped the weapon across Hadrian's face, but there wasn't as much force behind the swing, and he took the blow, coming up almost close enough to touch it. Vasily groaned and pulled with every bit of leverage he could still manage, dragging the alien slightly off balance, pulling its face down even as Hadrian thrust the barrel of his plasma cannon into its helmet and pulled the trigger.

There was a violent explosion and all three combatants were separated and knocked down. The others were running forward, not expecting to find anything left, but the alien commander was still intact, although the left part of its helmet had been blasted away, leaving its face blackened and ruined.

"Oh my god," Catalina said.

"Use a kit on him now," Hadrian said, getting up painfully. Mary ran over to Vasily, but he pushed her away, standing unsteadily. "We run out of kits, remember!" he yelled.

Hadrian reached into the satchel at his belt, the one that all of them carried. "I have one," he said, taking out the last precious injector carrying alien biotic material. He bent down and stabbed it into the alien's thick neck.

“Is it going to live?” Catalina asked. Mary knelt next to the alien commander, while Hadrian took out restraints to secure its hands and feet. “I don’t know,” Mary said, after a moment. “It’s alive, for now.”

Catalina limped over to Vasily. “Can we get out of here? They had time to call reinforcements.”

Vasily painfully unlimbered the atomic bomb, and laid it in the floor. It only took a few seconds to arm the device and activate the timer. “Time to go,” he said.

“What about him?” Jane asked, pointing at the unconscious alien.

Vasily nodded at Hadrian, who helped him get the alien to its feet. With Vasily favoring his crippled arm, the two carried him between them, grunting under its weight. They made their way back to the lift, as a timer appeared in the lower right-hand corner of the VDUs of those whose visors were still working. The digits slowly counted down as they made their way down the lift, then back out through the complex. Vasily and Hadrian were moving slowly, both because of the awkward weight of the commander and the damage the two had suffered to their powered armor and their bodies. By the time that they made their way back to the first level of the base, the counter was ticking toward eight minutes left.

“Guess we better hope Lightning still fly, huh?” Vasily said, as Catalina and Jane cleared the way ahead. They encountered one wounded muton who got an inaccurate shot off before the women finished it off with a pair of plasma bolts. The rest of the base was empty, and they let out a relieved sigh as they saw the light of the shaft leading back up ahead of them.

“Ken, fire her up!” Catalina said, as soon as they’d cleared the entrance, and their comm units were clear of interference.

“What’s up!” the pilot’s voice came back to them. Their timers had passed six minutes, and continued to pulse downward.

“Bomb live!” Catalina said. “We’re coming!”

“Damn it, I could have used some notice!” the pilot shot back.

“Get stasis chamber ready too,” Vasily said. “We got commander, but he kind of half-dead.”

They hurried down the hill and back through the forest. They had a few hundred meters to cover, and all of them were helping each other now, with everyone but Mary carrying part of the commander. By the time that they saw the Lightning ahead through the trees, the clock had ticked down to less than two minutes.

“Is Lightning fly?” Vasily asked, as they approached. The rear hatch was open, and they could see parts scattered along the length of the wing, the engine housing cracked open. The damage that the ship had suffered earlier was emphasized from their current perspective.

“Working on it!” Ken’s voice came over their headsets. A high-pitched whine came from the ship.

They boarded the craft. Vasily cracked the stasis unit open, which seemed tiny in contrast to the bulk of the alien commander. “Oof, this one is fat,” he said, trying to wedge the muton into the compartment. “Fatter than Allen.” With Catalina’s help they were able to get the thing fully inside, and then closed the chamber, which hissed as it sealed shut. In the meantime Hadrian and Jane were struggling with the exit hatch, which had been damaged and didn’t fit cleanly into its mounting, the hydraulic systems that normally managed it inoperable.

An alarm sounded in the passenger compartment and pulsed twice before dying. “Ken!” Vasily yelled.

They could hear the pilot’s curses through the cockpit hatch. “Damn it! Hold on... overriding safeties...”

“Safety be damned, it’s going to be really unsafe here in two minutes,” Catalina said.

“Okay, here we go...” Ken said. The engines started revving up, although the sound coming from the one on the right side of the craft sounded anything but healthy. Cursing, Hadrian closed the rear hatch as much as it would go and then jammed the barrel of his handgun into the gap, hopefully wedging it shut. The Alphas got into their seats, but Jane flinched back as sparks erupted from a console near her position.

“To hell with it!” Ken yelled. “Firing main thrusters, hope we don’t explode!”

The ship lurched into the air, the entire Lightning wobbling like a toy boat in a whirlpool. A conduit near the damaged console exploded outward, and flames flickered into the compartment. Jane grabbed a fire extinguisher and blasted the conduit, then was almost flung out the back as the ship shot forward roughly. Hadrian and Mary were able to catch her before she was knocked into Hadrian’s jury-rigged hatch.

“Gyaa, come on, alien plane, we not want to die!” Vasily exclaimed. The engines roared as the Lightning continued its erratic flight. Through the gap in the hatch they could see the landscape shooting past, not far below them.

“Just... gah, just out of China Ken, just out of China!” Catalina yelled, as the counter clicked down to single digits, and then down...

The Lightning was jolted under them, as though it had been kicked by a giant. For a single terrifying moment they could feel it tilt downward, then Ken corrected, and they again surged up into the sky. The aircraft continued to buck and rattle for another fifteen seconds, and then the turbulence eased, and they continued on a more or less level flight plan.

“Okay,” Ken reported. “We’re clear.”

The Alphas let out a collective sigh of relief. “Setting course back to base,” Ken reported. “What signal should I send to HQX?”

Vasily looked at the others. “Mission accomplished,” he said, then he promptly leaned back and passed out.

* * * * *

Interlude: Aftermath (October 28-- , 2008)

FROM: DR. KIMBERLY WAGNER, X-COM RESEARCH LEAD
TO: MEMBERS, ALPHA TEAM
CC: MICHAEL GARRET, GRACE THELON BELUCA, AGENT INISE DRAKE
RE: Research/Manufacturing Progress Report

The base attack mission had its hiccups, but we got what we needed. Research of the Muton Commander should be given top priority. The Avenger experimental craft has been completed and is undergoing preliminary flight testing.

There is only one thing keeping us from launching the final mission to attack the alien Mars base. Our Elerium-115 supplies have been dwindling in recent weeks, and due to the decline in alien activity we have not been able to replenish our supply. We will need an infusion of new Elerium before we can launch our attack. Expect a new briefing soon as we explore our alternatives; until then, all Elerium-based activities and projects are on standby mode. Research and manufacturing activities will not be affected unless our supply of Elerium drops to a level insufficient to power our main reactor.

* * *

Author’s Note: there were a lot of great player posts on the research and manufacturing priorities this week. They are all in the original thread over at Neverwinter Connections, but for the sake of keeping the story posting manageable I just selected these two, from Smart_Alec and Jenniza. They focus on the progress on the Experimental Heavy Armor project.

* * *

"When you're ready, Mr. Kasprjak."

It was a strange feeling, but as time went on, an amazing one, too. The weight was negligible, as he'd come to expect from the powered suits, but there was more to this. The exoskeleton was stiff and unresponsive to start with, making Vasily feel as if he was walking underwater, but Grace and her chirpy techs explained that as the suit's computer gradually adjusted to his movements, it would improve.

And, hour by hour, it did. As he stomped around the lab, flexing his arms, twisting from side to side, bending back and forth - and as Jane and the technicians gradually fitted and welded new plates to what slowly became a suit of armour, there came a feeling not just of freedom, but of power. By the time the legs were complete, he was leaping three feet off the floor; as the welding efforts reached his chest, he was lifting fifty kilograms with each arm, over and over, as easily as if the dumbbells were bags of groceries. There was no weight, no strain - almost an out-of-body experience, if not for the fact that it was under his control. The physical strength of the Muton Commander had been immense, and he'd looked back and realized he'd been lucky to hold his own for as long as he had as it had beaten him bloody. He'd been saved from death at the inhuman slab of muscle's hands only by Mary's mind powers and Hadrian's pinpoint shooting. Next time, if there was a next time, things would not be so uneven.

By the time the helmet was being fashioned and the suit was decoupled from the external power source, he was pulling handstands up against the wall, to the surprise of those who'd dropped by to watch. It was the first time in a long time, he realized, lifted off the floor by power-assisted limbs, that he'd seen everyone in a room smile: the technicians, the spectators, and of course, himself.

* * *

The high hadn't quite worn off as he marched to the barracks shower block, determined not to attend the day's psi-training session covered in sweat, when he almost walked into a familiar face at the rec room door; Agents Drake, Johnson and Johnson loomed in the doorway, intent on the lift. Both sides stopped and took stock of who they faced, wearing mutual cool stares and disapproving sneers.

He stepped back to let them pass, but she merely took a few steps through before turning to face him, folding her arms, letting the Johnsons pass on behind her, waiting for an apology, or possibly just trying to think of an appropriate remark. He broke the silence first.

"Cataleena say I can't hit you."

Drake raised an unimpressed eyebrow. "And she'd be right, Crackerja- hey! Y- mmf!"

So he kissed her instead.

It took her by surprise, that was for sure. She'd not expected him to do anything, or simply hadn't expected a grab-and-hold like this one. He didn't know what inspired it - an unusually whimsical mood, perhaps - but the outraged, off-balance expression on her face for those few moments afterwards was truly hilarious, with the backhand she lay across his jaw before stalking off forming the literal punchline. Judging from the looks the Chief and the lift guards were giving him, they were probably inclined to agree, and though Drake's two shadows were unreadable as ever, they left without remark, which was an answer in itself, in a way.

Allowing himself a self-satisfied moment of triumph, Vasily walked through the open door, Vasily strolled into the rec room.

* * *

It was, therefore, a relaxed and upbeat Vasily Kasprjak who came to the psi-lab that day, wandering over to the chair with a spring in his step and accepting the headgear without his usual grimace.

"Okay," he asserted. "Hit me with your best shot."

Frankly, at that moment, he felt like he could tear Mars down from the sky by himself.

* * *

Once Vasily left after the initial series of tests, Jane huddled the team around some schematics she'd been working on.

One of the engineers looked at them, "Are you sure about this?"

Jane grinned, "I've had worse hair-brained ideas."

Another looked at Jane, "Yeah, but are you sure he'd go for this?"

A bunch of engineers began to debate.

"He'd have to be nuts to try this"

"I don't know, think about the possibilities."

"But think about the risks."

"What if he pukes?"

"That man has the constitution of a bull elephant."

"Can he control the systems?"

"With training, I suppose."

"But can we even build it?"

"We won't know until we try."

Grace wrapped it up, "Then we proceed with the plans to add flight systems to the Experimental Heavy Armor."

* * *

After the frenetic buildup to the base attack mission, the aftermath came as a bit of an anticlimax.

The interrogation of the Muton Commander went well enough, although Cat's attempts to analyze the alien's language led to some dead-ends for the research team. Overall the research was frustrating and intense, although by the end of the week, the biological sciences team was sending coordinates to the physical sciences team. Work began on planning for the Mars mission.

(Cat: roll of 3 on Linguistics skill, no benefit)

Work was also started on the second-generation of the regen serum. Early results met expectations, but there was a setback as Mary accidentally deletes a whole directory of important files on one of the research workstations. The work continued, and the problem was eventually overcome as the techs were able to recover a partial backup off the mainframe, but the project ended up well behind schedule after the first week of work.

(Mary: roll of 1 on Biology skill, -2 researcher/weeks on project)

The Experimental Heavy Armor project, on the other hand, went better than expected. Jane was able to solve a tricky problem with the joint actuators, which helped to free up some engineers to help work on producing more medikits. The "flying" upgrade was more doubtful, although an emergency thrust-augmented hydraulic boost system is installed that would allow Vasily to make prodigious leaps—if he didn't lose control and slam into a rock face at 100kph.

(While there was flying armor in the original X-COM, it didn't really fit that well into the NWN engine.)

Two units of Regen Serum and seven extra medikits were produced, and both lines were primed for full output before the Mars mission is launched. The regen project was prepared with the new information from the Serum 2 research, so that future

manufacturing of the serum lines could produce the upgraded product, if that research was completed on time.

(Jane: roll of 13 on Craft Mechanical, +17, for a Complete Success result)

(James: roll of 14 on Craft Pharma, +14, for a Major Success result)

After the impressive results from the previous week's training, the following week in the Psi Lab resulted more in frustration than celebration. However, Doctor Allen continued his streak of remarkable progress on the psi training assessments.

*Will save vs. DC15 (+1 per point >14 on roll)
+1 to roll for IC posting.*

Jane: roll (1 + 11 + 1) +0 bonus

Cat: roll (3 + 6 + 1) = +0 bonus

Vasily: roll (7 + 5) = +0 bonus

Mary: roll (3 + 12 +1) = +2 bonus

James: roll (15 + 12 +1) = +14 bonus

Hadrian: roll (13 + 9 - 1) = +7 bonus

* * * * *

Session 27 (November 3, 2008)

Chapter 118

The Alphas arrived at Briefing Room 1 as a group, and once again found the department heads waiting for them. James Allen was the last to arrive; he'd only just been released from sick bay that morning, and he still looked a bit tired, his shoulder still in a protective sheath in the aftermath of his surgery. Stan White had cleared him for duty, however, and he nodded at Garret as he came in and closed the door behind him. Agent Drake sat with her jaw clenched, looking down at her lap.

"We have a mission for you," Garret said, as the team members took their seats.

"Doctor Wagner?"

The German scientist brought up a schematic on the big screen that was already familiar to them. "The Avenger craft has passed flight tests and is en route. It should be here within a few hours."

"Man, I can't wait to get my hands on that baby," Ken Yushi said, smiling.

"That is good news," Catalina said.

Wagner pursed her lips. "However, we have a serious problem. Our Elerium-115 supplies have dropped to a dangerously low amount."

Grace looked down at the datapad on the table in front of her. "We have enough to power our reactor, and maintain basic operations, but not even close to enough to get to Mars and back."

"So we need to go on a smash and grab?" Catalina asked.

"The problem," Garret interjected, "Is that alien activity on Earth has dropped to almost nil in recent weeks. No ships, not even the little scouts."

"Makes you wonder what they are waiting for," Catalina said.

"It would appear that they've drawn back in anticipation of that big new ship they're building," Joan Beauvais suggested.

"Maybe they just starving us on purpose," Vasily said.

"Based on the information gleaned from the alien base commander," Garret told them, "Our best estimate is that the aliens will have their new battle fleet ready in a matter of weeks."

"So where do we get the Elerium?" James asked.

"So glad you asked," Wagner said. She tapped keys on her console, and an image popped up, a little grainy. It showed a pair of mutons and two humans in armor and masks, in front of a stone wall. The edge of the picture showed some sort of conveyance, apparently floating over the ground. They could just make out a pair of glowing blue crystals mounted on the bed of the lift-truck.

Wagner said, "This image was taken a few days ago, in southern France."

"This is some sort of storage facility?" Catalina asked.

"Bank and Trust of Elerium Deposits of Alien Express?" Jane added.

"It's at the site of an old castle in the Alps," Wagner continued. "Apparently it's been... refurbished."

"We know that the aliens have been working with their human clients, mostly in France and China," Garret said.

"Gotta feed the allies," Hadrian noted.

“Cheese-eating surrender monkeys,” James said. Joan turned a bit crimson, and looked away, while Vasily shook his head.

“Our best guess is that the aliens are establishing a stockpile of fuel for use once their fleet arrives,” Grace said. “The stuff is hard to transport, and larger quantities become unstable, require progressively greater shielding. I imagine that they wouldn’t want to load up their big ships with too much of it.”

Mary raised her hand. “Yes, Mary?” Garret asked.

“How do we know this isn’t a trap, like Australia?”

“That’s a good question,” Garret said.

“The Alps are beautiful this time of year, so we’d lose nothing for paying a visit,” Catalina said.

Wagner glanced at Drake for a moment. “We have reason to believe that this source is a good one.” Drake looked up, and for a moment seemed about to speak, but then tightened her jaw and looked back down at the table.

“The source is someone... with whom you’ve had dealings in the past,” Garret said.

“Your sister?” Jane said, looking across at Drake.

Drake looked up at her in surprise. “You knew about this?”

“I guessed.”

“Wonderful,” Hadrian said.

“We all remember her,” Catalina said.

“Look,” Garret said. “Just because she’s not with a government doesn’t mean that she’s not trustworthy. Her... organization has given us good data in the past.”

“Who *is* this woman?” Mary asked.

Drake abruptly stood up. “If you’ll excuse me, Director Garret,” she said, and turned and walked out of the room before anyone could react. Garret looked after her and shook his head before turning back to the Alphas.

“Vala knight works for a consortium of business interests that initially formed to exploit the new opportunities presented by the alien contact. Once it became clear that the aliens’ interests were more... comprehensive, they shifted their efforts to learning more about the alien threat.”

“And now are good guys?” Catalina asked, rolling her eyes.

“What’s the name of the organization?” Jane asked. “We have a right to know that, at least.”

“Let me guess,” James said. “CHAOS?”

“Nothing so prosaic,” Garret replied. “Their official name is Global Earth Enterprises.”

“Some have suggested they are even older,” Joan added.

“Augh, not this business again, doctor Beauvais,” Wagner said.

Catalina glanced between the two women. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

“Older?” James asked. “Like the Freemasons, that kind of older?”

“Can we focus on the matter at hand?” Garret said, cutting them all off. “Grace? The new unit?”

Reaching under the table, Grace hefted a bulky cylindrical contraption and put it on the table, straining to do so. “This is one of our latest creations,” she said, as the others leaned forward to get a better look. “We call it the Portable Elerium Containment Unit. It’s heavy, but the Elerium itself is virtually weightless.”

“Oh, so you got that to work?” Catalina said. “Neat.”

“Kind of... small,” Vasily said. “How many of those crystals we going to fit in one?”

“One for sure,” Grace said. “Maybe two. We’re still working on some of the software for the containment matrix.” She dragged the thing back; by the effort she put into it, it looked to weigh about fifty pounds.

“There are three of them in the secure lab,” Wagner said. “Right, this is just the prototype,” Grace added.

“Okay,” Garret said. “The mission. Kim?”

Wagner brought up a new set of schematics. “The castle itself dates back to the early Renaissance, but it’s been rebuilt twice, and expanded. We have determined a landing spot in the nearby mountains. If our research is correct, Ken can bring the Lightning in from Switzerland undetected.”

“Flying in mountains is easy,” Ken said. “If you’re as good as me.”

“Take it up the Mont Blanc Tunnel,” Catalina said, with a grin at Ken.

“There is a major military installation about sixty kilometers away. This will be a stealth mission. Get in, grab the Elerium, get out.”

“As stealth as we get, anyway,” Vasily said.

“How is the site defended?” James asked.

Wagner brought the surveillance photo back up. “Looks like armored commandoes and mutons, at least,” she said.

“Great, mutons again,” James replied.

“Expect the human forces to be using alien tech,” Grace said.

“We’ve got the mission set up for an early morning insertion,” Garret said. “You have four hours until takeoff; I’d recommend using that time to get ready. Any more questions?” After meeting the eyes of each of them in turn, he said, “All right. Good luck, Alpha.”

* * * * *

Session 27 (November 3, 2008)

Chapter 119

“We’re coming up on our final approach,” Ken reported. “Down in five minutes. LZ looks clean, and I haven’t picked up any radar pings.”

The Alphas stood in a row, ready for deployment, hanging onto the straps that descended from the roof of the compartment. They’d already had quite a ride, as Ken had taken the Lightning in low from Switzerland, darting the ship nimbly back and forth through the high peaks and tight canyons of the Alps.

Vasily shifted as the aircraft banked hard, and nearly knocked James down. “Hey, watch it, chief,” the doctor said.

Vasily muttered something and righted himself. In the new experimental armor, with two of the portable Elerium containment unit fixed to his back, he looked like some sort of bulky insect. But with his strength augmented by the boost systems in the armor, he was the one best able to deal with the heavy cylinders. Hadrian carried the third one, riding above the bulge in his back that carried his suit’s power systems.

The Lightning's momentum shifted as Ken engaged the VTOL systems, and within thirty seconds they felt the craft's landing struts touch down. The rear hatch opened, and they filed out to find themselves in a rocky meadow sandwiched between two dark, tall peaks. The Alphas exited and spread out as Ken launched the Lightning back into the air; he would await their signal from a more secure location deeper in the mountains.

Mary walked over to the edge of the meadow, where a cluster of stone buildings could be seen in a dell situated down a sharp slope about a half-kilometer below them. "What lovely country," she said.

"Mary, you should stay behind the front line," Hadrian told her.

"I just wanted to look around."

"This is not a tour," the Marine said. Activating the magnifier in his VDU, he scanned the area below.

"Cliffs too steep, need to go around," Catalina said, indicating a path that appeared to lead down into the village below.

Vasily looked down into the dell, which appeared to be deserted. There was no sign of occupancy, no vehicles, no power signatures strong enough to show up on their sensors. He nodded for Catalina to investigate, while he gestured for the others to move into positions where they could monitor without being seen from below.

Catalina made her way slowly down the trail, keeping to cover as much as possible. She reached the dell without incident, and was able to move faster as the path leveled out, and she approached the nearest of the buildings. They looked old and neglected, but their windows and doors were all intact.

She was still about fifty meters off when a voice interrupted her. "Hsst! Hold up!" She turned to see Vala Night emerge from a position of concealment among the rocks. The agent was clad in a dark body suit that was bulky enough to conceal armor or any manner of equipment under it. Her bright red hair was tied up under a beret that tilted at a rakish angle across her brow. "I have to admit, you're good, Agent DeFarrago," she said. "I almost didn't see you." She gestured toward the buildings. "The entire village is rigged. We're safe here, but we shouldn't linger."

Catalina waved up to the others. They'd agreed to keep radio silence as much as possible, even with the tightband units their suits used. It took about ten minutes for the others to make their way down.

"Hello, I'm Mary," Mary said.

“Charmed,” Vala said, already turning toward a faint path that they could just see rising out of the dell. “Watch your step,” she said. “They’ve put in sonic mines all over the approaches. There’s one right there, can you see it.”

Vasily turned up his visual scanners, and did see the faint telltale, an almost imperceptible energy signature. Without having it pointed out, he suspected he never would have seen it until he’d stepped close enough to activate its proximity sensor.

“Wonderful,” Hadrian said.

“They seem to be relying more on sensors and remotes rather than patrols,” Vala told them, “But that could change.”

“Can you mark their locations?” Jane asked.

“That would save us time and bother,” Hadrian said.

“Believe me, I’ve tried,” Vala said. “For every one I see... well, let’s just say we should all be very, very careful. I believe I’ve found a way through the mountains that can bring us up onto the castle undetected. This way. And no noise if you can help it. Put your phones on ‘vibrate’.”

“Lead on,” Hadrian said.

She led them up the trail, which grew rougher as they left the abandoned village behind them. They ascended to a ridge that they quickly passed along to another path that led to a wooded vale below. Vala paused there. “This is an old game trail,” she told them. “Who knows what sort of games one might find around here, eh, Kasprjak?”

“I defer to your experience,” the Russian said.

“This looks like the easiest route,” she continued, indicating the trail. “But there are motion sensors all along the base of this ridge. There’s another way, not quite as easy. But it might be less trouble.”

“At X-COM, we all about the hard way,” Vasily commented.

“Glad I’m not afraid of heights,” James commented. The path that Vala had led them to ran along the edge of a cliff, with a nearly-sheer mountain to one side and a fifty-meter drop to the other. The agent was in the lead, moving with perfect balance along the ledge, which ranged from two meters across to as little as half that in a few places. Vasily and Hadrian had the hardest time, their bulky suits and the heavy burdens they carried throwing off their center of gravity enough to make negotiating tight spaces a dicey business. But they all made it across safely, and soon they were making their way back down into the vale they’d seen earlier. There was no path here, not even a hint of a trail, but they were able to make it to a jutting outcrop that overlooked a straight

drop of maybe twenty meters to the valley floor below. To their left there was a cleft that seemed to offer a more navigable route down, but Vala shook her head as Hadrian took a look in that direction.

“Motion sensor down there,” she said. “Scouted it earlier. No way to get close enough without setting it off.”

Catalina took a rope from one of the compartments built into her armor. “Ah, good,” Vala said. “I was worried about our ankles there for a moment. Here. Tie it to the rock, or to the Russian, and lower me down.”

Catalina secured the end of the rope, rigging it to facilitate a quick abseil down the line. Vala slipped over the edge and shimmied down the rope without apparent effort.

Jane followed Vala down with equal ease. Hadrian followed, but Mary hesitated at the rope. “Come on, Vas, you could carry Mary down.”

“I can make it,” the Indian doctor said. “I passed physical training, like everyone else.”

Catalina handed her the line. “Look, just pass it around behind your backside and wrap it around your arm for control.”

Mary dropped down and slid awkwardly down the line. She was going fast when she landed, but Hadrian and Jane were there to catch her and help her down.

“Is like I say,” Vasily said, taking the rope. “We all about the hard way.”

Catalina was the last to go, and she shifted the rigging of the rope to allow her to unravel it with a sharp tug once she was down. But as she started down, she slipped on the edge. Her legs shot out from under her, and her desperate grab for the rope missed, the line jerking out of her grasp as her faceplate scraped against the outcrop and then she was falling, plummeting down toward the ground twenty meters below.

Author’s Note: Vanya Mia had a gift for rolling “1”s on skill checks, I think she managed 3 or 4 of them over the course of the campaign.

* * * * *

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Chapter 120

Vasily turned and tried to catch the falling agent, but he was a shade too slow. Catalina landed feet first and crumpled, falling into Vasily’s grasp and nearly knocking him down. He held her up as her face twisted in pain.

“For crying out loud,” James said, hurrying over to her. He took out his first aid kit, and helped Vasily lay her up against the closest rocks.

“Gah, damn surface,” Catalina said, smacking the rocks with her fist as James examined her leg.

“You okay, Cat?” Jane asked.

“That hurt... my ankle...”

James tested her right foot, easing as Catalina flinched. “It’s not broken, but it’s a very bad sprain.” He eased her boot off, and took out one of the X-COM medikits. He injected that and a syringe of more conventional painkiller into the injury, then quickly put a pressure wrap on it before carefully putting the swelling foot back into her boot. “It’s going to smart later, but you should be able to put weight on it now.”

“Man, they might as well have sent a bunch of circus clowns,” Vala muttered under her breath. “Come on, we’ve got to get moving.”

“I’m starting to dislike her,” Mary said to Jane, as they picked up their gear and started out again. Vasily helped Catalina back to her feet. “You learn lesson now, yes? If in doubt, always tie rope to Russian.”

Vala led them into the woods, and within twenty paces the trees swallowed up the Alphas, leaving no trace of their passing.

* * *

“Look up top,” Vala whispered. “Battlements, near the right.”

Vasily shifted his gaze, his optics zooming the view until he was focused on the spot that the agent had indicated. “Plasma cannon?” he asked.

“It’s not manned, runs off of the sensor array,” Vala said. “But the sensors run along the entire base of this hill.”

“I might be able to disable one, open a gap,” Catalina said. She looked up as Hadrian and Jane reappeared, hurrying quickly to the vantage where the others were watching the castle below. “The tank is still there,” Hadrian reported. “Five guards, four humans, one muton.” Vasily updated them on what they’d seen here, facing the rear of the castle.

“We set off the alarms, we’ve got a world of trouble,” Vala said.

“Your choice, do I make the try?” Catalina asked.

Vala shrugged. "You're the heroes. I just work here."

"Go for it," Hadrian said.

"Is what we bring you for, hah," Vasily said.

Catalina nodded and made her way down the slope. She paused just out of the range of the line of sensors, then knelt and carefully shimmied down to a low rise where a boulder jutted up under the roots of an ancient tree. A sensor lay below the barrier, a tiny metallic flange that was just visible sticking out of the soil. Catalina crawled up onto the boulder, stared at the thing for a moment, then slowly began to lean out toward the exposed sensor.

"If she's detected, that cannon will crisp her before we can do anything," Jane said.

Catalina had reached the sensor, and she was delicately prodding at it with a tiny tool held in her fully-extended fingers. "Nasty little sod," she whispered, ignoring the twitching of her ankle as she held herself precariously balanced on the edge of the boulder.

There was an audible click.

"Got you," she whispered.

The Alphas made their way cautiously down the slope, staying in the narrow band of space that Catalina indicated. "I've bypassed the feed, but they'll probably figure it out eventually," she told the others.

"Nice work," Vala granted.

"She no ordinary circus clown," Vasily said.

"Careful," Hadrian said. "Could be a secondary or even tertiary one."

Vala nodded at the Marine. "Suspicious, even a bit paranoid. I like him."

They made their way forward, until the bulk of the castle loomed over them. There were no doors on the ground level on this side of the structure, and the windows were all high, narrow, and protected by bars, but there was a narrow balcony six meters up, with a recessed door just visible. The Alphas started toward it, moving slowly in single file, but they'd only just gotten into the shadow of the wall when they heard a deep *CLICK* that froze them.

They turned back toward Vala, who was looking down at the metallic plate just visible under her right foot.

“Oh, damn it all,” the agent said.

* * * * *

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Chapter 121

“Keep still,” Catalina said, kneeling beside the immobilized Vala Night.

“Um... yeah?” the agent replied, although there was an obvious strain in her voice. The sonic mine had been set with a pressure trigger rather than a proximity sensor, so at least it hadn’t detonated, but that had also meant that their sensors hadn’t detected it until Vala had literally stepped on it and armed the device.

“Can’t get at the mechanism,” Catalina said.

“Well, I didn’t really like that leg anyway,” Vala said dryly.

“Think you might have to stay there for a while,” Catalina said. “Maybe we can dig around it, expose more of—”

“The mission is more important,” Vala said. She pointed toward the balcony. “The door up there’s going to be rigged, but it’s a better shot than the front door by a long shot. If you can get up there... well, it’s up to you heroes from here on out.”

Catalina nodded and carefully stepped back toward the others, who’d watched from a few meters away. “We’ll be back when we can afford to take time to move it carefully.”

“As soon as I hear shooting, I’m making a jump for it,” Vala said.

They made their way along the wall until they were under the balcony, which jutted out only slightly from the wall, maybe a half-meter. There were no merlons, ironwork, or other features visible, and Catalina frowned as she looked up at it. “I can try a throw,” she said. “Nothing I can see to hook onto, though. Maybe if I can loop the rope over, draw it down the far side.”

“Might have better idea. Hand me rope,” Vasily said. The Russian took the coil, flipped a dial on his cuff, and sprang into the air. Jets of hyper-compressed air shot from the vents in the small of his back and along the back of his thighs, and his leap carried him straight up six meters, landing him on the edge of the balcony with inches to spare.

“It works!” Jane said, remembering at the last moment to keep her voice low.

“That wasn’t exactly quiet,” Hadrian said, glancing around the edges of the castle while Vasily lowered the rope. “Our burglar should go first,” he said, nodding Catalina toward the line.

Climbing up a rope was always more challenging than rappeling down, but with Vasily’s strength-augmented help from above, the transfer of the team from the ground to the balcony was completed without incident. By the time that Hadrian was pulled over the edge the space on the balcony was quite crowded, but Catalina had found and disarmed the sensor on the steel door that led inside. “They might have detected the broken circuit, we need speed,” she said, overriding the electric lock and pushing the door open.

They made their way inside, doing their best to remain quiet, which was more than a little difficult in sixty kilos of powered armor, weapons, and gear. Catalina took the lead, scouting ahead down the corridor behind the door.

The interior of the castle was an odd juxtaposition of old and modern, the ancient stone blocks of the walls marked both with sconces for torches and fixtures for electric lights. Catalina saw that all of the interior doors had electric locking mechanisms, with keycard ports set into the wall next to the handles. She made her way down the hall, pausing at the first intersection. She heard voices, and waved to the others to stay back.

Easing forward, her plasma pistol in her hand, she subtly twisted the gain on her audio pickups. They were speaking French, but she was fluent, and didn’t need the translation software installed in her suit computer to decipher what they were saying.

“So, you see that new alien?”

“Man, ugly as sin.” The second speaker laughed, a hard guttural sound. “Don’t know what rock they dragged that one out from under.”

“I wonder if they’re going to give us leave this time. I swear, I think I’ve been on shift for a month now.”

Catalina leaned slowly forward, looked around the corner. The side passage ended in an open doorway about ten paces ahead, with a small foyer beyond. She couldn’t see the speakers, but as she watched a cloud of smoke trailed into view, dissipating in the air. She raised a hand and held up two fingers, then gestured toward the corridor ahead. The Alphas came forward slowly, and for the most part quietly, although to Catalina’s ears, the faint whine of their suits’ servos and the crunch of their feet on the floor sounded like shouts. She leaned back and took out her motion sensor, shutting off the speaker. By the time that the others had reached her, she had a fairly good picture.

She slipped forward to verify that the guards were still there; they were talking more in low voices, and the occasional puffs of smoke suggested that they hadn’t changed

position. Vasily lifted his gun, and James moved his finger across his throat, but she shook her head and gestured toward the corridor ahead. Vasily nodded and sent Jane across, the former CIA agent creeping slowly forward. The others followed one by one, until all of them save for Catalina and Vasily were past. The Russian tapped Catalina on the shoulder and started forward, but froze in mid-step as Catalina pressed her hand to his chest. She was right at the edge of the corner, listening.

“Did you hear something?”

* * * * *

Session 27 (November 3, 2008)

Chapter 122

Catalina didn't dare take a look around the corner, but the voice had been closer; she could imagine the French guard standing in the doorway of the foyer, looking down the hallway. She saw Hadrian a short distance down the corridor on the far side of the intersection, hefting his plasma cannon. He started to move back toward her, but she froze him with a small gesture.

“Nah. Sensors would let us know if there was trouble.”

“Yeah, right.”

“So you see that new cherie down in Accounting?”

The voices moved off, but Catalina waited a full minute before risking a look. The hallway and room beyond were clear. She motioned Vasily forward, and followed him, rejoining the others further down the corridor.

“You have any way of sensing the stuff we're looking for?” Hadrian asked.

Catalina shook her head. “No, but I've got a solitary signal on this floor, twenty-three meters northwest, looks like the corner of the building. In addition to those guards we just missed, I picked up another group, maybe nine meters ahead and five down. I think some of the ones downstairs may be aliens.”

“The one guy, down this way.” Vasily asked. “You think we can take him silent?”

Catalina nodded, drew her vibroblade, and started forward.

The corridor continued along the back wall of the castle, the wall to her left broken by the occasional slit window paned with armored glass and protected by steel bars to

boot. After about twenty steps the hallway turned to the right, but at the turn an arched entry opened onto a large chamber that was obviously some sort of library or records-room. She caught a hint of movement in the stacks along the left side of the room, and headed that way, silent despite the considerable bulk and weight of her armor. *I owe Grace dinner for those stealth-mods*, she thought, creeping up past one row of freestanding shelves, then slowly up to the next.

The man had his back to her, poking through a shelf crowded with white file boxes with hand-lettered index markings in French and English. He was dressed in plain blue coveralls, and did not appear to be armed. One of the boxes was open in front of him, and he was taking out ledger books, looking through them briefly, and putting them back. "Now, where did I leave that book?" he muttered to himself. The first indication he had that he wasn't alone came when Catalina reached around him and pressed the blade of her knife to his throat.

"Quiet," she hissed, in French.

"Aaah," the man said. "What do you want?" He started to turn as the other Alphas came in, but Catalina held him close, and pressed him against the wall. "Look, I'm not a soldier," he managed. "I'm just a technician!"

"Information is what technicians have," Catalina returned. James came forward and lifted the barrel of his plasma rifle to the man's head. He swallowed, and Catalina saw that he recognized the weapon.

"You... you're not aliens, are you?"

"Checked last time I took a shower, and no," Catalina said.

Vasily came forward so that the man could see him, and removed his helmet. "Oh, this is not my day," the technician said. He closed his eyes. "Don't hurt me, I don't know anything!" he said.

"Fastest route to the Elerium store," Catalina said.

The technician blinked. "Elerium? Ah... um, what's that?"

Catalina narrowed her eyes. "Crystals, blue ones, where are they?"

"Um, yeah, I don't know anything about those."

"He's lying," Mary said.

They turned to her. "I can tell," she said. Out of the technician's view, Catalina tapped her head with a finger, and Mary nodded.

“You know where they are, or suddenly you’re not very useful any more,” Catalina said.

“You want to live, right, we just want information,” Jane added. Her French wasn’t quite up to Catalina’s but the man got the message. “Please, just let me go,” he moaned. “I haven’t hurt anyone.”

Catalina nodded to Mary. “She says you’re lying, and she would know. Last chance, fella.”

James activated the power feed on his rifle; the weapon hummed, and a faint glow flickered along the weapon’s conduits.

“All right, all right! I’ll tell you. Just... just put that down.” When neither the knife nor the rifle budged, he quickly added, “The alien power source is in the secret base. Underground, underneath us.”

“And we get there how?” Catalina prodded.

“It’s accessed by a lift in the cellar. I don’t know the access code for the lift, though.”

“Lie,” Mary said. “He knows the code.”

Catalina translated what she’d said, and moved the knife a bit, scraping his flesh. “I’m getting irritable, and my hands shake when I’m irritable,” she told him.

“Aah, all right!” he said. “The code is six three six two six.”

Jane looked at Mary. “Is that correct?”

“That is the code.”

The technician blinked at her. “How... how do you know?”

“She’s gifted,” Catalina said. “And the lift is where?”

The technician visibly deflated. “The stairs down to the ground floor are just off the south corridor. The stairs to the cellar are on the far side of the castle, there’s a long corridor that connects them.”

“Any traps to warn us about?” Jane asked.

“Well... there are security systems, yes.”

“Is there an override?” Catalina asked him.

“Umm...” he opened his mouth, looked at Mary. “Here, take it,” he said, handing over a keycard. “What... what are you going to do to me?”

“Anything else we need to know that could save your life?” Jane asked.

“I told you everything! I’m not an alien! I hate them! I had to do what they said, I was just following orders!”

Vasily shrugged and clonked the technician on the back of the head with a metal-clad fist. He crumpled, and would have fallen had Catalina not held him up. Catalina tied him up and stuffed a wad torn from his shirt into his mouth, then stashed him behind one of the shelving units where he wouldn’t easily be seen.

“Let’s go,” Vasily said.

Author’s Note: we broke for the night at that point, and picked up the infiltration mission the following week.

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Session 28 (November 10, 2008)

Chapter 123

The ambiance of the room contrasted with what transpired inside. The décor was decidedly nineteenth-century, with walls of seasoned wood paneling and accoutrements of wrought iron, including a decorative chandelier that dangled from the ceiling. The floor was covered with decorative carpets, some of which had been hastily pulled aside to make way for the more modern elements that had been installed, including several tables loaded with computer components and other electronic machinery born out of the cleverness of humankind.

But the oblong device in the center of the room, roughly the size of a wheelbarrow, was obviously not man-made. A bright glow radiated from the center of the alien object, and in the air above, a translucent holographic figure, enigmatic and unidentifiable in a brown robe that shrouded its form, hovered and addressed those gathered. Those included five humans, three dressed in lab coats, one in a military-style uniform, and one in a technician’s coverall, and two mutons, who stood immobile and implacable, heavy plasma cannons cradled in their beefy arms.

“It is not sufficient,” the hologram said, its voice filling the room from the projector’s speakers. “All must be in readiness for the Return.”

“We have done everything that you have asked,” one of the scientists replied, his brow glistening with sweat.

“The human forces will be crushed,” the alien said. “This X-COM that has been such a thorn will be purged from your planet. Serve us well, and you shall be spared.”

One of the military-types stepped forward. “Look, all we want is peace.”

“Peace... yes. You shall have that. Once the Return is complete, a new order, a new stability, will come to this planet.”

The lead scientist stepped forward. “I think we can all agree...”

The alien cut him off. “Your consent is not necessary. Only compliance.” The glow faded, and the hologram disappeared.

“The signal’s ended, sir,” the technician said.

“Yes, yes, I can see that,” the military man said. “Come on,” he said to the scientists. “We need to go back to Paris, at once.”

The mutons fell in behind the humans as they departed, leaving on the technician, who resumed working at his computer station. He didn’t notice the shadow that drew back from the open archway at the far side of the room, which led to the hall that accessed the rest of the castle.

Catalina was silent until she’d rounded the corner and retreated down the hall to where the rest of Alpha Team waited. She kept her voice to a whisper as she quickly related what she’d seen and heard.

“I think we can get to the lift room,” she told them, when she’d finished. “There’s only one technician left in the great hall, and he doesn’t seem that focused on the corridor. I didn’t see any more guards between here and the stairs to the cellar.”

“We’ll need to move quickly, before they find that guy we left upstairs,” Hadrian said.

“Or Vala,” Jane added.

Catalina nodded, and looked at Vasily. “Did not expect to get this far without fight,” the Russian admitted. He gestured for Catalina to lead them on.

Once again Catalina thought the heavy clod of the armored soldiers sounded deafening in the confines of the passage, but she watched the technician closely as her companions filed past, and the Frenchman didn’t so much as look up. Once they were all through she hurried back to the front of the group, where they’d paused before another door at the end of the hallway. There was another small card reader recessed

into the jam. Catalina smiled and took out the keycard she'd lifted off the technician earlier, and slid it through the reader. Beyond was the staircase leading down to the cellar, exactly as the technician had described.

They made their way down, Catalina still in the lead. "Clear," she said softly, once she'd scanned the landing at the base of the stairs. She quickly checked both of the doors there; both led to storerooms, but the one on the left had another corridor exiting from its far side. Catalina led them in that direction, and saw that the new passage bent to the right after about ten paces. She was almost at the bend before she heard voices, and froze. She leaned up against the wall, and turned the gain on her helmet's audio sensors to maximum.

"Hey, all I do is follow orders," someone was saying.

"Wait, did you hear something?" another asked. Catalina held up a hand, showing two fingers, and James forwarded the signal to the rest of the group behind him. She listened intently for the sound of footsteps, of someone approaching, but there was only a long silence.

"Hmm, thought I heard something."

"It's those aliens, they have you jumping at shadows."

"Weird stuff. You have any... side effects, from those injections?"

"We weren't supposed to talk about that."

"Bah. They want to pump us full of alien gunk, that's bad enough."

"Look, we need to get up there. We can talk about this later."

"Right."

Catalina signaled as the footsteps she'd been awaiting sounded, very close, approaching the bend. She knew better than to try to retreat, and simply crouched low, giving her companions a good angle of fire. But as she slowly lifted her plasma pistol, she realized something was wrong.

The footsteps of the approaching guards wasn't a solid clip, but a heavy, plodding thod.

There was no time to offer a warning, as the two French agents appeared around the bend in the corridor--clad not in uniforms or even human-made body armor, but in powered suits, suits very similar to those they'd encountered once before, in the Russian base. The guards carried plasma guns, but they were in holsters at their hips.

The armored troopers had just an instant to recognize the danger, and one yelled, "Ambush!" before the air was filled with the brilliant flash of plasma explosions. Both guards were blasted back into the wall, but instead of going down, both recovered quickly, and drew out their weapons.

"Go for help!" one of the troopers yelled, firing a blast from his gun that struck James on the shoulder. The doctor staggered and fell into a pile of crates that collapsed under his weight. The trooper shifted his aim toward Catalina, who was crouched just a few steps ahead of him, but before he could get off another shot two heavy bolts from Vasily's and Hadrian's cannons bored into his chest, and he fell, smoke rising from the charred holes in his breastplate.

Catalina was already up and running, chasing after the fleeing agent. She could hear him shouting into a communications device as he darted around the next bend in the passage. "We are under attack! Executing order Alpha!"

Catalina yelled into her own comlink, the need for radio silence gone now. "Stop him! Fast, before they blow it!" She could hear the other Alphas behind her, but she was alone as she rounded the bend after the enemy trooper.

Around the corner the passage continued straight ahead for a good thirty meters, culminating in a large door. There was another door about halfway down the hall to the right, and the enemy agent was there, trying to operate the security lock. Even from where she was standing Catalina could see the LED indicator flash red; probably an automatic lockdown from the alert. He cursed, smacking the sensor with enough force to knock its mounting.

The trooper either heard her or sensed her, for he suddenly spun to face her, lifting the barrel of his plasma gun. "To the hells with you!" he yelled, as he opened fire. Catalina dove to the side, but the bolt caught her on the hip, and the force of the impact knocked her down.

She looked up to see that the door at the end of the corridor had opened, and a half-dozen guards had appeared, rushing forward. The newcomers were clad in more traditional body armor, but their guns were obviously of alien make, as they unleashed a barrage of plasma bolts at the fallen Alpha.

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Catalina's hand shot forward, and a grenade slid down the floor of the passage, spinning past the armored trooper before exploding in a cloud of greasy green smoke. The stun gas, designed to incapacitate aliens, wouldn't do much to hurt the French agents, but it would distract them, and block their line of sight, at least for a few seconds.

She rolled to the side even as plasma blasts started exploding all around her, as the French fire struck the wall behind her and the floor in front of her. She managed to get up into a crouch before the armored trooper shot her in the chest. Her armor held, but the force of the blast knocked her roughly back into the wall, and she gasped as searing flickers of white flame pulsed against the helmet seal protecting her neck.

The French agent's lips twisted into a grim smile, but it was quickly erased as Jane leaned around the corner and fired a bolt from her plasma rifle that exploded against the agent's shoulder, spinning him half around. He held onto his gun, but as he lifted it to fire again Vasily and Hadrian barreled around the corner, firing as they came. Vasily's shot narrowly missed, exploding against the sealed door, but Hadrian shot the trooper in the forehead, punching a hole in his reflective visor that dropped him like a bag of rocks.

More fire was coming up the corridor as the French reinforcements kept shooting through the cloud of gas from Catalina's grenade. The dense green mists were already dissipating, and both Vasily and Hadrian were hit, glancing impacts that briefly wreathed the men in halos of white flame. But their return fire, in turn, was devastating. The lighter armor worn by the French agents couldn't withstand the powerful bolts from the Alphas' cannons, and within a few seconds, four men were lying on the floor, their bodies charred by blackened wounds. The last two guards tried to fall back, but Hadrian threw a grenade after them, and in the aftermath of the explosion, no more shots came toward them.

Jane followed Hadrian and Vasily down the corridor, while James tended to Catalina, who was more stunned than seriously hurt, thanks to her armor. He injected her with the contents of an X-COM medikit, then they hurried to catch up with the others.

The room at the end of the passage was an office of some sort, much of it a wreck now in the aftermath of the brief firefight. Hadrian was checking the bodies of the French agents, while Vasily checked out an adjoining room that appeared to be empty. Jane had found a working console, and she gestured for Catalina to join her as she tried to access it.

"Looks like it needs an encrypted login," Jane said.

“Not sure what I’ll be able to get,” Catalina said, but she took out her xPhone and jacked it into the console. “Locked down” she said, as a message in French appeared on the screen.

Vasily reappeared. “Lift in here!” he said. “Need someone to get door open!”

“Going,” Catalina said, turning on an automatic decryption program on her xPhone, and gesturing for Jane to keep an eye on it. She followed Vasily into the back room, ignoring the few pieces of mundane furniture in favor of the armored doors. There was an access panel there, but Catalina wasn’t surprised when the technician’s access card failed to activate it.

“Damn,” she said. She got out a tool and got to work on the panel, but it quickly became obvious that she was being locked out from another location. “Tough, really tough,” she said. “Explosives?”

Vasily looked at the lift. “Will lift work if we blow door?”

Hadrian popped back into the room from the corridor. “Need to hurry, we’ll have more company soon,” he said, taking up a position in the doorway leading back out.

Vasily took out several small demolition charges from the compartments in his armor, placing them along the edges of the lift doors as Catalina directed. “Back!” the Russian said. They drew back hastily before the charges exploded, briefly filling the room with a gout of smoke. James lingered too close, and let out a cry of pain as a shard of metal struck him in the arm, piercing the flexible coupling protecting his elbow. Mary went to help him.

“Not say I not warn you,” Vasily said, shaking his head.

“I’m fine,” James said, grimacing as Mary pulled the bloody piece of metal out of his arm.

The doors were still closed, but Vasily applied his augmented strength to them. The door on the left refused to budge, but the one on the right groaned as the mechanisms holding it gave way, and the door finally slid open to reveal an eight-by-eight chamber within.

“Can you get it?” Vasily asked, as the Alphas filed inside. Catalina looked at the numeric keypad inside the door, which had a five-digit LED readout above it.

“Coded,” she said.

“Six-three-six-two-six,” Vasily said.

“Hopefully that isn’t the self-destruct code,” James said.

Catalina entered the code, and to her surprise, the lift started to descend. They stood cramped into the interior of the lift, waiting. Jane handed Catalina her xPhone; the agent nodded in thanks and tucked it back into her pocket.

Another set of doors appeared as the lift reached the end of its journey. There was a hiss and they slid open, revealing a broad corridor ahead of them. The strident pulses of an alarm klaxon filled the air.

Also waiting was a remote-operated plasma cannon, its barrel glowing. Even as the doors clanged fully open it fired, unleashing a stream of blazing energy at the surprised Alphas.

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Chapter 125

Catalina hurled herself forward and aside, clearing the lift and rolling as she hit the floor. Behind her, the bolt from the plasma cannon exploded in a white inferno, filling the lift compartment. The British agent could hear her companions’ cries of pain over her comlink, but she focused on the cannon, which was already starting to glow again as it charged up for another shot. She drew a bead on the tiny LEDs on its control console, and fired.

The remote cannon exploded, streams of plasma filling the passage as bits of metal pinged angrily off the walls. Catalina got up as the Alphas emerged from the lift, their armor blackened but otherwise intact. Hadrian was being helped by Mary and James; the Marine had been directly in the path of the cannon’s shot. A medikit restored him enough for them to move out; all were cognizant of the passing seconds now that the enemy knew they were here.

They pressed on, moving quickly. They came to another door, this one a more typical construction of tempered aluminum. It was secured by another electronic lock, but this time they didn’t bother stopping to place charges; a pair of heavy plasma bolts blew it off its hinges. They were greeted by weapons fire, but the three Frenchmen inside couldn’t withstand the firepower of the Alphas.

“Ammo check, anyone need some?” Jane asked, while Hadrian bent to check the bodies.

“Am good,” Vasily said, as he loaded a fresh power cell into his cannon. Catalina slid behind a console where one of the dead men, an officer of some sort by his uniform, had been working when they’d blasted the door.

“You in?” Vasily asked, coming over to her.

Catalina’s hands flew over the computer keyboard. A map of the complex appeared on the screen. “Hangar here,” she told him. “Looks like a big power signature here.”

“Door here,” Vasily said, pointing to the grid. “You open it?”

“I’ll try to override the lockdown,” she said, sticking her tongue between her teeth as she went to work.

* * *

The heavy pressure doors let out a ponderous hiss as the locking mechanisms retracted, and they parted, the heavy steel slabs sliding on their hidden rails into the surrounding walls. The hangar beyond the doors was spacious enough to accommodate two aircraft the size of the Lightning with room to spare, although part of it was taken up by a bulky apparatus of tubes and cylinders that was obviously of alien origin. A single alien scout ship sat on the landing pad, a sleek ellipsoid resting on a triad of extended struts.

The hangar was also occupied by aliens, three mutons that opened fire with their plasma cannons as soon as the doors opened. The Alphas returned fire from the cover of the doorway, and with the mutons just standing there, not even bothering to move behind the cover of the alien scout, they took several hits in the initial exchange. The mutons proved as tough as ever, though, and continued their barrage. James was clipped on the shoulder as he leaned out from cover to take a shot, and he fell to the floor, fumbling before Hadrian grabbed hold of his arm and dragged him out of the line of fire. But with the humans in a good position and the mutons exposed, it seemed like there could only be one outcome.

Vasily heard it first, a jarring mechanical noise, like heavy machinery, drawing closer. It was accompanied by a rhythmic thumping that he could feel through the steel plates covering the floor, like the tread of an approaching giant.

Catalina, across from him on the far side of the doorway, felt it too. “What is that?” she yelled, the shout all but lost over the sound of exploding plasma bursts.

Vasily leaned out for a look, just in time to see a robotic monstrosity stride into the room. It looked like something out of a movie, a bipedal construct that strode forward on nine-foot-long, bird-like limbs that jutted from the sides of its body. The ground shook at its coming, and Vasily guessed that it had to weigh thousands of pounds, the thick floor plates groaning from the strain of its passage. Its body was segmented and every inch

of it seemed to be covered in overlapping layers of armor, including the turret that jutted out from under the front of its body, from which a pair of ugly barrels protruded.

There was a flash as a plasma bolt exploded against the side of the alien walking tank, but the shot had no effect, as far as Vasily could see. What he did see was a bright green glow that erupted from within the mech's turret.

"Down!" he yelled, ducking back behind the dense steel threshold of the hangar door. The flare that followed nearly blinded him, but he recovered in time to see a bright green beam cutting *through* the wall just above his head. It drew a line across Jane's torso, and Vasily could see it penetrating through the thick armor of her breastplate like a stream of boiling water through a block of ice. Reflexively he lunged and tackled her. His suit's warning systems blared an alarm as the alien laser sliced across his back, then both were down. Looking up over his shoulder, he saw the beam keep going another foot before it died, leaving an ugly glowing slash in the wall. The foot thick, reinforced plate steel-over-concrete wall.

He expected it, but even so, when he felt the thud of the alien mech's steps again, his heart sank.

It was coming for them.

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Session 28 (November 10, 2008)

Chapter 126

Vasily grabbed Jane's arm, grunted as he tried to pull her up. He couldn't see how far through her armor the laser had cut, and for a moment he feared that he was trying to heft a dead woman. But then her helmet shifted, and she reached out with her other arm and took hold of his, and together they were able to get her back on her feet.

Then they both almost went down again as something slammed into Vasily's back. He felt as though he'd been kicked by a mule, and he glanced over his shoulder to see the muton who'd shot him coming through the hangar door. The barrel of its plasma cannon began to glow as it powered up for another shot.

It never got a chance to fire, as Hadrian blasted it with a point-blank shot from his own cannon. The muton, its armored suit already heavily damaged from the pounding it had absorbed, staggered back a step and fell to the ground.

A second muton followed almost immediately on the heels of the first, and Hadrian had to dodge back as it fired a streaking bolt past his head that exploded against the wall of

the room. Vasily reached for his gun, but Catalina and James bracketed it with a pair of shots that knocked it off its feet. The alien continued to struggle, but it was clear that for now at least, it was out of the fight.

But over the sounds of the gunfire Vasily could still hear the heavy THUMP of the alien mech's approach. Wafting swirls of smoke from the multiple plasma explosions obscured the hangar, but he knew that the thing was close, and getting closer.

"Fall back!" he yelled, all but dragging Jane after him as he retreated along the wall of the room toward the small control room where Catalina had overridden the door controls just a few minutes before. Mary took her and helped her into that dubious shelter. On the far side of the room, Hadrian, James and Catalina likewise made their way back, toward the doorway of a storeroom they'd cleared earlier. That side of the room was cluttered with a few loose objects: storage drums, a few wheeled toolbenches, and a powered lift truck burdened with a pallet of black steel canisters.

Vasily saw the green glow before he saw the alien, and saw where it was aiming. "Down, Cat!" he yelled, even as the mech cut loose with its laser.

The beam sliced across the room as Catalina dove behind the lift truck. Vasily saw it clip her arm, just for an instant, and then she was clear. The laser tracked after her, slicing across the contents of the lift truck, and for a moment he felt a cold fear that the canisters held explosive material.. But there was no explosion, only a heavy thud as the top of one of the canisters dropped to the floor, sheared off by the laser beam. Catalina crept back into view behind the lift truck, scrabbling desperately across the floor. Vasily could see that she'd dropped her pistol, and was favoring her injured arm, which hung limply at her side.

"Over here!" Vasily yelled, as he blasted the alien mech with his cannon. He scored a direct hit; he'd been aiming for the juncture where its leg met its body, but the shot merely exploded against a sheet of armor plating. The alien responded, its turret swinging around toward him, the green glow already visible in the mouths of the recessed barrels.

He didn't wait around to see what would happen; he turned and dove into the control room. Mary and Jane were already there, and they ducked behind the control console as he came in, landing hard and awkwardly on the floor. A green light filled his visor as the alien laser blasted through the armored plastic of the control booth, slicing through the console as though it was made of paper. Sparks flashed and vaporized streamers of material erupted over the heads of Jane and Vasily, who very quickly separated as the beam sliced down to the level of the floor between them. Mary screamed and threw herself to the floor, narrowly avoiding the deadly path of the beam. In its wake, the metal it had cut glowed cherry red.

The beam finally flickered out, and Vasily could hear more plasma explosions from the room beyond. He rose up to see the alien mech pivoting back toward the others. It

stepped forward, crushing the hapless wounded muton under it. Hadrian and James each fired one more time from the doorway of the storeroom, both scoring hits, but without any apparent effect.

Then Catalina reared up from behind a row of storage drums, her laser pistol in her hand. The beam looked puny indeed as she flashed it across the front of the alien machine, but while it clearly hadn't penetrated anything vital, the alien jerked as it took aim at the British agent. Catalina ducked, but she needn't have, as the beam sliced a good four feet above her head, cutting a long diagonal slash across the far wall of the room.

Vasily got a sudden intuition, and leaned out from the doorway of the control room. "Hit it hard!" he yelled into his comm unit, putting his own words into action as he fired again, aiming for the same joint in the alien machine's body. Again he hit the body but missed his specific target, but a moment later the alien twitched as Hadrian blasted it just behind and above the turret, causing a secondary eruption of sparks and smoke as the white-hot plasma seared the alien's internal components.

The Alphas kept on shooting, and the alien fired back, the brilliant green rays slicing across the room. Its shots were wild, though, cutting almost random gashes in the walls. Hadrian and James were forced back into cover as the alien sliced a wide line across the threshold of the storeroom, but that was the closest it got to another hit, and meanwhile Vasily and Jane were pummeling its left side with precise fire. Vasily's third shot finally hit the joint he'd been targeting, and as the alien turned back toward them it moved stiffly, its left leg dragging. It got off one more wild shot that barely missed Jane's head, then Hadrian and James bracketed it with a fresh barrage that penetrated into the thing's interior, and with a final wild eruption of light, smoke, and fire it toppled over with a massive thud.

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Session 28 (November 10, 2008)

Chapter 127

They found the Elerium storage crystals in a small room just off the hangar. The place looked almost like a segment of an alien base that had been grafted onto the human facility, but the main interest of the Alphas was the four brightly glowing crystals that rested in recessed niches along the walls. Vasily and Hadrian went right to work hooking up Grace's containment units.

Out in the hangar, Jane was trying to figure out the intricacies of the alien scout ship. They'd all had extensive experience with the alien control systems, and Jane was a trained pilot, but they'd never actually flown one of the alien vessels, if you didn't count

the brief and less-than-successful Wisconsin flight that had ended with the spectacular farmhouse crash.

Their supplies of medikits exhausted, they'd had to rely on more traditional first aid for Jane and Catalina. Jane's armor had absorbed most of the alien laser beam, although she had second-degree burns across a big swath of her torso, and she would be in a world of hurt once the painkillers Mary had given her wore off. Catalina was still mobile, but her right arm was bound against her body, and she was having a tough time trying to override the console controlling the outer doors with just one hand.

She was so concentrated on the task, that she didn't notice the familiar chirrup at first. But when she finally registered the sound, she looked down with horror at the motion sensor clipped to her hip. The device's screen was full of bright white indicators, which started to spread out as they drew closer.

"Incoming!" she yelled. She turned and ran to the inner doors, the one that connected the hangar to the rest of the complex. She tried to activate the controls, but the doors, heavily damaged in the fight with the alien mech, failed to close. Glancing down at the motion sensor, she saw that the device's computer had updated the screen with an estimate of the approaching force.

Seventeen aliens, class muton. Twenty-two humans, class armored soldier.

"Shit..."

Vasily and Hadrian appeared, carrying the heavy cylinders, their charge indicator LEDs glowing brightly. "A small army," she said.

"Let's use the ship," James said. They had to take care to fit through the small hatch, and were even more crowded inside, but ultimately all were inside the alien scout. The ship shuddered as Jane powered the main engines.

"What about the hangar doors?" James asked.

"I couldn't get them open!" Catalina said. She moved forward until she was almost perched atop Jane's shoulder, scanning the alien controls. "There must be an override in here somewhere..." Her eyes lingered on a familiar symbol above a small button on the panel.

"I get it," Vasily said, reaching for the compartment in his armor that held his demolitions supplies.

The entire ship wobbled as Catalina stabbed the button. Through the viewscreen they saw a bright flash and felt a concussive blast that jolted the ship roughly back; Jane was barely able to keep it from slamming into the rear wall of the hangar. A cloud of smoke

swirled ahead of them, and when it cleared, they could see a broad gap where the doors had stood.

“Blast cannon,” Catalina said.

They were greeted by another familiar sound, as plasma explosions started pinging off the hull of the ship. “Go go go!” James yelled, echoed by Hadrian’s, “Get us out of here!” Jane pushed down on the controls, and the ship glided forward. It ascended at a steep arc, and then they saw empty sky above, as they erupted into the open air.

“Hey hey hey, we’re flying!” Jane exclaimed, but they didn’t get much of a chance to celebrate their escape, as the entire ship suddenly jerked wildly to the side, and their sharp ascent suddenly became a just-as-sharp descent, as the view of the sky was replaced by an image of the rapidly-approaching ground below.

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Session 28 (November 10, 2008)

Chapter 128

Jane’s face twisted into a grimace as she fought the controls of the alien ship, trying to arrest their descent. The ship wobbled and struggled, but it leveled off, and they streaked out over the rough mountain landscape, giving up altitude with each kilometer they managed.

“Got a hull breach back here!” Hadrian yelled from the passenger compartment. Catalina tried to get a communications link open, and was rewarded as Ken Yushi’s voice sounded over the ship’s speakers. “Alpha! Where are you? Alpha, come in!”

“We’re in an alien vessel!” Catalina said. She turned to Jane. “Where are we?”

“A few clicks south of the base.” Jane frowned at the line of mountains that seemed to stretch out like a barrier ahead of them. “We’re not going to make it much farther.”

“You got that, Ken?” Catalina asked.

“I’m reading you... I had to take off, there are Frenchies landing all over the place!”

“We’ve been hit, we’re losing altitude,” Catalina said. “Can you give us new coordinates for a rendezvous?”

There was a brief pause. “Sending coordinates. Nice little valley over the Swiss border. Can you make it?”

Catalina looked down at Jane, who hadn't taken her eyes off the alien readout screen. "I'll do my best."

The ship streaked forward over the rough landscape, jolting every few moments. Catalina looked back at Vasily. "Guess Vala on her own," the Russian said.

"I've a feeling she copes."

The next few minutes passed slowly. Jane wove the alien scout through the line of peaks, but every one they passed gave way to more ahead, rising ever higher above them. They crossed one ridge barely twenty meters above the level of the treetops, and continued to lose altitude as the ship struggled onward.

"Coming up on the coordinates," Jane finally said. She banked around a peak that rose up ahead of them, then brought the ship down into a meadow where the Lightning waited for them. The landing was not too rough, and they quickly transferred to the waiting X-COM craft. Vasily lingered just long enough to toss a demolitions charge into the open hatch of the alien ship. Ken had the ship rising into the air even before he was buckled in.

"We clear?" James asked.

"A few of the French interceptors tried to follow," Ken reported, "But we had a surprise waiting for them, in the form of Firestorm-2."

Vasily's eyes were drawn to the three racks holding the Elerium canisters. The LEDs along their sides pulsed steadily, indicating that each of the containers was full, their contents stable. "Next stop, Mars," he said. The Alphas shared a look, but there was no conversation as the Lightning streaked into the darkening sky, on its way back to HQX.

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Session 28 (November 10, 2008)

Chapter 129

The Alphas didn't get much of a chance to rest when they disembarked from the Lightning, seven hours after they'd lifted off from the base in France. Battered, burned, and overall exhausted, they nevertheless exited the craft under their own power, a certain pride in their eyes as the unit teams rushed forward. The engineering team had pride of place, as they accepted the three heavy containment vessels that held the precious Elerium-115. Stan's medical teams were quick on their heels, though, helping

the injured Alphas. The medicos knew better by now than to bring gurneys to the hangar deck, but some of the Alphas looked like they could have used them.

Vasily laid his plasma cannon down on a rolling cart that sagged under its weight. His eyes were on the last figure waiting near the hangar exit. Catalina saw as well, and she shook of the medic trying to ease off the pressure bandage covering her right arm, and came forward to stand beside him.

“Agent Drake,” Catalina said.

“Don’t get too cozy,” Drake said. “Get cleaned up, get your wounds treated. Briefing in thirty minutes.”

She turned and walked away. Mary shuffled up to join them. “She can’t be serious,” she said, running a hand through her lustrous black hair, now sodden with sweat, dirt, and ash.

“I not know her to be unserious. Ever.”

The Alphas were clean and in fresh clothes when they arrived at the briefing room, but they otherwise looked like candidates for intensive care, with bandages visible on most of them. They arrived in the midst of an argument, which continued unabated as the tired X-COM operatives shuffled into the room.

“I’m telling you, seven weeks is too long,” Drake was saying, punctuating her statement by slamming her fist onto the table in front of her.

“We can’t change the rules of physics, agent Drake!” Grace countered.

Garret turned as the Alphas entered. “Ah, good, Alpha. Sorry to keep you from your rest, but we have to make some decisions. And they are likely going to affect you.”

“Likely?” Doctor Wagner asked.

Counselor Beauvais spoke up from the far end of the table. “They should have more of a say than anyone else at this table.” Drake glared at her, but Joan met her gaze without flinching.

“The cryo units are ready,” Stan White said. “That won’t be the issue. Seven days or seven weeks... but any longer than that, and we could have tissue damage.”

“Have they been tested?” Joan asked.

“Sure,” Stan said.

“Yes, I saw the rabbits,” Drake said.

The Alphas shared a dubious look, but Garret held up a hand to forestall them. "Here's the situation. We now have enough Elerium to get to Mars and back. The Avenger tests out."

"Still haven't done a test outside of atmo," Ken Yushi said.

"Sure," Drake shot back. "Send our one copy of the ship out on a joyride..."

"This is a war, not a flight test program," James said. "We have to take some chances if we want to win."

"Please, everyone," Garret said, cutting off the incipient argument. "Mars is not at its closest right now, but we can't wait. All of our intel suggests that the alien dreadnought will be completed in a matter of months."

"If not sooner," Drake added, under her breath, but loud enough so that everyone at the table could hear her. Garret glanced at her, but continued, "The commander..."

Drake cut him off with a slap of her palm on the table. "Did you ever stop to think that maybe it was lying? Christ, Garret, do you know what's at stake here if you're wrong?"

Garret's expression didn't change. "I think we all know what's stake, Inise."

Vasily rose half up out of his chair. "Please, what is problem?"

"Yeah, fill us in, please," Jane said, "since we're next on the list of rabbits."

"Doctor Wagner," Garret said. "Can you bring up the map?"

Wagner touched her screen, and a map of the solar system appeared on the big screen, with a series of dotted lines connecting Earth and Mars. "Here is the problem," Wagner said, highlighting one of the trajectories. "With a small margin of error, we can arrange for a successful flight of seven weeks each way. Forty-seven days, to be exact. As Stan noted, we would keep you in cryonic storage for most of the flight."

"Preserve muscle mass that way," James said, nodding.

"Necessary to keep you healthy," Stan said. "The Avenger's a marvel, but its life support systems can't sustain eight people for that long in such a crowded space."

"Plus you get to avoid the pleasant sensation of high-G burns at both ends," Ken added. "Man, I am not looking forward to that."

"So what is problem?" Vasily repeated.

“The problem is the timeline,” Garret responded. “Our interrogation of the alien commander indicated that the alien dreadnought would be ready for launch within a window of forty-one to fifty-three days.”

“If he wasn’t lying,” Drake reminded them.

“Ech,” Vasily said, “But... you saying there is way to get there faster?”

“We could go with a more powerful burn,” Wagner said. “Accelerate to 3.4 Gs, double the length time that the engines fire.”

“I need this in dumb soldier talk,” Vasily said.

“One way trip,” James said. “She’s talking about a one-way trip.”

Vasily blinked. “It means you fly faster if you burn up all your fuel on the way there, you big Russian,” Drake said.

Wagner nodded. “If you fire at a full burn for sixteen hours at the start and finish of the trip, travel time is reduced to thirty-two days.”

“You could find fuel there,” Grace said. “I could rig up an Elerium injection matrix, plug and play.”

There was a moment of silence around the table. “This is a decision that cannot be made for you,” Garret said.

“I’m in,” James said. “One way mission or not, this is our only chance.”

“I half thought we’d be in for a one way trip anyway,” Catalina said. “Queen and country and all that, never was truer, really. I’m in.”

“Earlier’s better, greater chance of surprise,” Hadrian said.

“Well, if we face facts,” Vasily said. “We going further than any human ever gone before, into base of most hostile, dangerous things we ever known. Is kind of likely we going to die there, so guess it not a problem if we go fast.”

Garret nodded. “We launch in three days. It will take that long to prep the ship. In the interim, we’re going all out, a last-ditch effort on research, manufacturing, everything. Alpha, you’re in for seven hours of sack time, and then check your schedules. Every hour of the next three days is spoken for. As of now, everything in X-COM goes to the support of this mission. Any more questions? All right. This is it, people. Dismissed.”

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Session 29 (November 17, 2008)

Chapter 130

Within the cargo compartment of the Avenger, there was utter silence. The seven cylinders arranged at a sixty-degree angle in a “U” formation dominated the available space, while every other inch seemed to be taken up with racks of gear and banks of heavy machinery that gave the tiny compartment the look of some mad scientist’s dungeon. Other than the tiny LEDs that flickered on the sides of the cylinders, the compartment was dark. A rime of ice crystals covered the small windows of armored glass visible on each of the cylinders, obscuring the faces of the men and women inside.

A black display screen flared to life, covered with columns of scrolling data. A line of white lamps came alive along the ceiling a moment later, accompanied by a faint rumbling noise, like an avalanche heard from a great distance away. A hiss came from one of the cryonic pods, then another, and then the room was filled with noise, as an alarm klaxon sounded, and the white light was joined by a red strobe that sent violent red pulses through the crowded space.

The cylinders slid open, accompanied by plumes of air that flared visibly as they crossed dramatic gradients of temperature. Added to those were the exhalations of the Alphas, who groaned as they stirred back to consciousness.

Vasily grabbed onto the edge of his pod, ignoring the bits of skin that clung to the icy metal. “What is wrong?” he asked, as he tried to get up. “He grabbed his communicator and jabbed it into his ear. “Ken? What is status?”

“Sitrep?” Hadrian echoed, pulling himself up out of the cryonic chamber.

“Not know yet.”

Vasily got up out of the unit, but nearly fell onto his face when his legs buckled under him. “Take it slow, everyone,” Mary warned them from her own unit. “Give your muscles a chance to remember what they’re for.”

Ken’s voice came from a speaker near the ceiling, drawing their attention. “Welcome back, sleepyheads. Better hang on, we’re going to have a bumpy ride in a minute.”

“Are we... are we there?” Catalina asked, still groggy.

Jane leaned over and touched the controls of the display unit. An image appeared on the screen, the massive red orb of Mars, looking close enough almost to touch. “We’re there,” she said.

“What’s wrong with James’s pod?” Catalina asked. They all turned toward the one unit that hadn’t opened, and Mary, still clinging to her cylinder as she gingerly tested her legs, quickly crossed over to it, opening the small display unit built into its side. She tapped the tiny buttons, and frowned.

Vasily staggered over to her. “What... he okay?”

“I can’t bring him out. He’s alive, but the controls are frozen.”

“That’s not good,” Catalina said. She joined Hadrian and Jane, who were already slipping into their armored suits, but stumbled and nearly fell as the ship lurched under them. All of them looked up toward the speaker unit.

“The aliens seem to have noticed we’re here,” Ken said.

There was nothing they could do but get ready. The rumbling continued, as Ken altered his trajectory and the Avenger continued its rapid descent toward the Martian surface. Two alien cruisers had appeared in far orbit near Phobos, and were moving to intercept, but the X-COM craft was faster, and it tore through the thin Martian atmosphere like a bullet. Mary was unable to fix the problem with James’s cryo pod, and they had no choice but to leave him inside, and hope that they could recover him later. She left the onboard computer running a full diagnostic, but it looked like it was going to take more time than they had.

The ride got rougher as they descended, and the Alphas were shaken about despite the restraining cords attached to their armor. They checked each others’ suits as best they could, and waited. “Not reading any ship activity from the planet’s surface,” Ken said. “They must be building the dreadnought somewhere underground.”

“We coming in a bit fast, yes?” Vasily asked, as the ship continued to buck under them.

“We’ve got those cruisers on our tail,” Ken said. “It’s fine, she can take it. Okay, there’s our target.” They looked at the display screen, which was still set to show what the pilot was seeing; in this case, it was a large cliff mass that rose up from the surface ahead. “I’ll set you down right on the front doorstep,” Ken said, “Then I’ll draw off those cruisers.”

They felt themselves press hard against the restraining cords as Ken fired the braking thrusters. “Ah, looks like they’ve got a welcoming committee,” the pilot said. He zoomed the display screen, and the base of the cliff jumped into sharp focus. They could see the dark opening there now, but also the small gray forms of sectoids, accompanied by the familiar glimmering shapes of cyberdisks.

“Get ready!” the pilot said, as the alien group drew steadily closer. “Down in thirty seconds, sorry for the drop and run!”

Vasily hit the power feed on his cannon. "We could use warmup," he said. The ramp at the back of the ship began to open, and they could see the red sky of Mars, followed by the crumbling red soil below as the ship touched down. Dust and dirt flared around them as they filed out, fast, and then the Avenger was lifting back into the sky. Bright flashes flared around it as it ascended.

"We're under fire!" someone yelled, as the glowing streaks of plasma bolts started to flash past them. Vasily took one last look up into the sky, just in time to see the weak light from the distant sun flash off a squat oblong missile that shot up after the Earth spacecraft. He had just enough time to feel a cold feeling clench in his gut before the blaster bomb exploded into a bright fireball that blinded him in the scant instant before the concussive force threw him, along with all of the other Alphas, down to the ground.

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Session 29 (November 17, 2008)

Chapter 131

Vasily's ears were ringing as he pulled himself up. He was dimly aware of flashes all around him, and bright streaks as plasma bolts streaked past. His eyes focused on the plasma cannon lying at his feet, and he bent to pick it up. Something kicked hard against his shoulder, and he felt a surge of heat against his neck, but the experimental heavy armor held up against the impact, and within a few moments the heat dissipated.

He lifted the cannon, scanning the landscape ahead. The mass of sectoids and cyberdisks were still a good hundred meters off, if drawing closer, but he ignored them, searching for a specific foe.

"Magnify, four times," he said, and his VDU responded, focusing in on what he thought he'd seen, toward the back of the enemy line.

The sectoid specialist was reloading the bulky blaster launcher; as Vasily watched, the alien snapped the chamber in the rear of the weapon closed and lifted it to its shoulder. The Russian lifted his cannon, already feeling a sense of dread as he took aim, knowing he'd never get the shot off before the sectoid, especially since the alien only had to point the blaster bomb in their general direction...

But even as the alien popped up in his sights, there was a flash, and its head exploded. Vasily glanced over at Jane, who was on one knee, her plasma rifle with its long-range sights at her shoulder. But before she could fire again, two plasma bolts slammed into her chest, and she was flung over onto her back once again, wisps of superheated gas rising from the black smears on her armor.

Vasily opened fire, hitting the closest cyberdisk. The plasma cannon bored a hole in the hull of the alien machine, which spun wildly for a few seconds before exploding.

A grenade arced over the battlefield, flying some eighty meters before it landed, bounced high once, and then exploded in the midst of a cluster of sectoids. The aliens were flung in every direction, and Vasily blinked in surprise before he remembered that both gravity and air resistance here were a small fraction of what they were on Earth. Then there was no time for any thought, only a blaze of plasma bolts and bright flashes that seemed starkly bright against the dull reddish landscape.

The entire battle lasted barely a minute. Vasily looked over the landscape of broken metal and blackened alien bodies as he loaded a fresh cell into his cannon.

Catalina trudged over to the alien specialist, and picked up the blaster launcher. "Still functional," she reported, after checking its mechanism.

"Did anyone see what happened to the Avenger?" Mary asked. "I'm not getting anything on my radio."

"All I saw was a bright flash," Jane replied. "Still, if it had been destroyed, wouldn't we see the wreckage?"

"Not if it made it over those hills before going down," Hadrian said, pointing at the ridges along the far horizon.

Vasily looked back at the members of the team. All of them bore black marks on their armor, either from the airburst from the alien blaster launcher, or from hits sustained in the subsequent battle. But thus far, they all seemed to be intact. Mary was tracking their bio readouts on her VDU, and had an extra control pad to meter the injection of the medikit material into the bloodstreams of the team members. Vasily felt a slight flush as the alien biomaterial worked its way through his system, purging pain and weariness, but leaving him feeling a bit jumpy.

"Either way, we can do nothing about it now," he said. He pointed to the cave mouth that the aliens had been guarding. "Mission that way."

The cave became a ramp that descended deep under the Martian surface; their VDUs indicated that they'd covered a good two hundred meters before it began to level out, and another fifty before it opened onto a cavernous interior. The place seemed to be of natural origin, or at least it looked that way, with irregular walls, and a ceiling that varied in height from as low as three meters to as high as ten at its apex above them. Natural pillars linked floor and ceiling, in some cases thickening to subdivide the cavern into distinct chambers. The place seemed eerily empty. The Alphas made their way deeper into the complex, their lamps brightening a circle around them. Their helmet beams probed into the side tunnels they passed, but none of them seemed to go anywhere, at least as far as they could see.

They came to a natural staircase that descended along several broad tiers to a gallery ringed by a small forest of pillars that ascended to a broad dome some twelve meters above. Faintly luminescent specks were visible on a number of the pillars, but there was no clue as to whether they were caused by organic entities or just some sort of chemical reaction. Catalina, scouting along the edge of the chamber, pointed toward a dark opening. "Looks like a tunnel there," she said. She took a step in that direction, but stopped as the motion sensor on her hip clicked softly. It worked much less effectively here, as the minute distortions in air displacement that it detected were almost invisible in the thin Martian atmosphere, and she immediately realized that for her to get a signal here, the movement had to be close...

"Aliens!" she warned, but even as she moved the others saw the sinuous forms that slithered out from between the pillars, plasma rifles in their hands.

"Cover!" Vasily yelled, as both the snakemen and the Alphas opened fire.

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Session 29 (November 17, 2008)

Chapter 132

The natural beauty of the underground grotto was transformed into a shooting gallery as the Alphas engaged a small horde of snakemen.

Vasily blasted a snakeman at close range, the plasma bolt punching through its torso. As the alien fell, Vasily darted behind a nearby pillar, plasma explosions chasing him as he ducked behind the stone. "Snakemen!" he yelled. "Not seen you guys in ages!"

He looked across the room, where his companions were likewise seeking cover. All except Mary, who was shooting one of the aliens...and who seemed to be oblivious to another that was just emerging from around the far side of the pillar to her left.

"Cover, Mary!" he yelled, firing a shot that narrowly missed, streaking past the alien's shoulder. The Indian doctor let out a small shriek of surprise and darted back, grimacing as a plasma bolt clipped her thigh, staggering her but not really hurting her badly through her armor. She ducked back behind another pillar near the staircase; the aliens followed, but before they could get an angle they came under fire from Jane and Hadrian, who in turn forced the aliens to retreat back to cover. The Marine tossed a gas grenade that filled the air between two of the pillars with a bright burst of green smoke, obscuring several of the aliens.

Vasily heard Catalina's shout of alarm, and moved around the far side of the pillar's thick base. The British agent was trapped in a tight crevice in the cavern wall, darting

out to snap-fire bolts from her plasma pistol at the two snakemen keeping her pinned down. One saw Vasily and shifted to face him, only to crumple as the Russian fired a bolt that clipped the side of its head. The other one nearly caught him in the face, but he dodged back, and the bolt hit the pillar, spraying him with hot plasma but doing little real damage. The alien slithered after him, but was distracted as Catalina emerged and shot it in the side. Her pistol didn't hurt it too seriously, but as it turned to face her again Vasily reemerged and blasted it, his cannon burning a hole in its torso. The alien collapsed, still twitching, and continued to gyrate until Vasily finished it with one more shot to the head.

"You okay?" he asked Catalina, as she stepped clear.

"Okay. Thanks."

The two of them moved around the perimeter of the room, staying close to the cover of the pillars. The fight was almost over; only two snakes were left, pinned down by the accurate fire of Jane and Hadrian. They didn't spot Catalina and Vasily until the Alphas were almost on top of them, and they didn't even get a shot off as the pair blasted them from behind.

"Clear!" Vasily shouted, and Jane and Hadrian emerged from their cover, the Marine flashing a thumbs-up sign.

None of them saw the dark form that crept down from the ceiling, or the second shadow that rose up near the top of the stairs. That one slipped across the edge of the landing that overlooked the grotto, until it crouched almost directly above Mary, who was leaning against the pillar as she checked her injured leg.

Catalina sensed the faint hint of movement as the alien lowered its body into position for a springing attack. Her eyes widened as she caught sight of the thing an instant before it lunged. "Chryssalid!" she shouted. She lifted her plasma pistol, but before she could fire, the other creature sprang down from the pillar above. It landed a few paces behind her, and even as her mind registered its presence, it lashed out with its claws, knocking her flying a good five meters, until her legs clipped the edge of one of the pillars, and she flipped over wildly until her back cracked hard against the wall, and she fell in a limp heap to the ground.

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Session 29 (November 17, 2008)

Chapter 133

The other Alphas stared in surprise at the alien that had dealt so handily with Catalina, but they were quick to respond. Hadrian actually got a shot off, his plasma bolt exploding against the alien's torso, but that didn't stop it as it surged forward, grabbing Vasily and charging forward until it slammed him against the thick mass of a pillar four paces further back. The impact caused the entire column to shake, and bits of stone flaked off, tumbling down from the ceiling like hail. Vasily growled and felt a hot pain erupt in his back, but he'd held onto his gun, and as the alien's jaws snapped at his faceplate he pulled the trigger. The white burst flared up between them, half blinding him, the heat searing him even through the layered insulation of his armor. But the alien felt it a lot worse, falling back as the connection between them was broken. Vasily slammed the weapon across its brow, knocking the alien back another step. "So much for scary terror weapon, huh!" he yelled at it. The alien shrieked and lunged at him again, but Vasily fell onto his rump, and the alien's claws tore into the stone of the pillar, narrowly missing him. He poked the barrel of his cannon into its gut and fired again.

Jane and Hadrian had started to come to the Russian's aid, but Mary's scream had turned them around. The second chryssalid was on top of her, its claws tearing into her armor. Mary screamed as it pinned her under its weight, all but helpless to do so much as squirm. Hadrian and Jane blasted the thing, the bolts punching into its chitinous body, but it refused to release its grip. Only when Hadrian approached to almost point-blank range, still firing, did it rise up, lunging at him, its claws tearing toward his face. The Marine dodged back but was clipped by that wild swing, the glancing hit still strong enough to knock him roughly to the ground. The alien sprang at him, but like Vasily the tough soldier had kept his grip on his gun, and he let the chryssalid impale itself on the barrel before he fired. The explosion seared Hadrian, but it knocked the alien over onto its back, where it lay there in a smoking and chittering heap.

Vasily got up under the burned-out husk of the other creature, kicking it aside as he rose to his feet. He started toward Catalina, but the British agent was already on her feet, still unsteady as the dose of regenerative serum she'd taken did its work. She waved him off, and he headed back over to where Jane was helping Mary up. The Indian doctor was conscious, but her face was a rictus of pain through the clear plastic of her faceplate.

"Aaaggh," she said, as she fumbled at one of the cargo compartments in her armor.

"I think Mary is infected," Jane said.

"That not good," Vasily said, kneeling next to the injured doctor as she drew out the vial of countermeasure she herself had helped create. She waved off Vasily's hand and

flipped open the access port beneath the chest plate of her armor. The vial slid into the slot, and as she closed it there was a slight hiss, and she stiffened. The others watched and waited as she lay there against the pillar, breathing deeply.

"I... I'll be okay," she said. "I feel sick, but I'll make it."

"It looks like the self-sealing features of the armor dealt with the gash," Jane told her. "When we stop, I can try to make more permanent repairs."

"I'll be all right," Mary insisted, allowing Vasily and Jane to help her to her feet.

"Okay, no need to run forward all time, can be rearguard for a bit if you want," Vasily said. "Okay?"

"I... I just want to help," she managed.

"You helping just fine. Catalina, that passage you find, it lead forward?"

The agent nodded. "Looks like it."

"All right. Let's move out."

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Session 30 (November 24, 2008)

Chapter 134

Jim rubbed his eyes and coughed as the hood of the cryo unit lifted up. There was some kind of foul smell coming from the bottom of the unit, and he couldn't feel his feet very well. He was also having trouble opening his eyes fully. *Cryo sucks. Last time I'm going into one of these - except for the way home, if we make it.*

He rested his head back on the base of the unit, and kept on rubbing his eyes until they teared up. After about a minute, he was able to open them and actually see. As soon as he did, he closed them again fast. His feet didn't look so good. There was something else wrong, something... missing. He tried to yell, instead croaking weakly, "Hey, where is everyone?! Anyone there?" He tried to get up, but it took him a few minutes before he was able to pull himself together enough to crawl out of the cryo unit.

The ship was vibrating under him; they were still flying. The other six units were all empty, and the Alphas' gear was gone, most of it anyway, he thought, as he looked at his suit of powered armor sitting alone in its rack. He picked up his communicator, and inserted it into his ear. "Ken's what's going on?"

“Doc, that you? Glad to see you finally came out of it. I’m, ah, a bit busy up here, got two cruisers on my tail, and the Avenger’s not exactly in top shape.”

“What happened with the others.”

“They’re already dirtside. Are you okay? Can you manage?”

James was already fumbling with the straps holding the armor to the rack. “Yeah, I can manage,” he said, although his fingers felt thick and unresponsive, and his feet still hurt like hell.

“All right, I’ll circle back around to the base entrance. I can give you ten, maybe fifteen seconds to offload. Sorry, doc, but it’s the best I can do.”

James was already busy getting into his gear. Adrenaline allowed him to put on his powered armor, and get the rest of his gear in place, and before he knew it, the hatch opened. He jumped even as the ship settled, and sprinted for the dark opening in the cliff face that he assumed was the base entrance. The Avenger streaked back into the sky behind him. There were bodies all over the place, blackened sectoid corpses that were already covered with a layer of the red Martian dust. As he stepped into the shadow of the cave mouth, he felt a rumbling under his feet. He glanced back, and saw that one of the alien ships had landed, and he didn’t need to jack up the magnification on his VDU to recognize the familiar forms of muton soldiers, disembarking from the hatch in the rear of the alien craft.

The sight gave him a strong impetus to get moving. The darkness deepened as he made his way deeper into the cave, still limping slightly as his feet slowly recovered from the damage they’d taken in the cryo unit. He’d injected the contents of a medikit shortly after waking, and it was helping, but he suspected that he’d suffered significant tissue damage. He nearly stumbled as the tunnel began to slope downward, but at least it helped him maintain momentum as he continued forward, his plasma rifle cradled in his arms, charged and ready.

At least it was easy to follow his comrades’ path. He didn’t hear their radio chatter, but one he saw the breadth of the underground complex, suspected that the interference from the material would block the signal until he was close. He passed through what looked like an ambush site in a deep grotto, full of the corpses of snakemen and the ugly insectoid forms of a pair of chyrssalids. He gave those a wide berth, even though it was clear that they’d been blasted by heavy plasma fire.

He found a passage that opened onto an even larger underground space. This one was more than a bit startling; the place was full of buildings that looked to have been sculpted out of the raw stone, forming impressive structures that formed arcs and curves, blending in with the natural shape of the cavern. The places were all empty, as far as he could see, although he found more bodies, a spread of maybe two dozen

sectoids first, and then, atop a rise, a row of ugly splotches that he didn't recognize immediately, until he remembered the Antarctica mission, and the floating blobs that shot acid. Celatids, the X-COM team had named them. It would have been a tough fight, by the looks of it, there had been at least five of the things.

He caught a hint of movement from the far end of the cavern, back the way he had come. He didn't linger to see what it was, and hurried forward, where his LED beams indicated a twisting staircase that descended like a corkscrew into the ground.

The stairs descended for quite a ways, and transitioned from rough-hewn steps cut into the stone into more a more regular, deliberate construction. By the time that his lamps indicated the base of the stairs, the walls and ceiling around him resembled the construction of the alien bases they'd invaded Earthside. He entered a chamber at the base of the steps, and headed for the sole exit, a tall iris-door that twisted open at his approach.

He passed through several small rooms, and started to think he'd made a wrong turn somewhere before he came upon the dead ethereal. The alien looked... deflated, covered in the dark shroud of its robe, part of it scorched black from plasma burns. The wall behind it was splattered with smears of blood.

He went through the door next to the dead alien, and immediately his communicator came to life, hissing with static, but with the voices of the Alphas clearly audible in the background.

"Cover! Take cover!"

"Watch out, on your flank!"

"Get her out of there! Get her out!"

James ran forward. He couldn't see where the voices were coming from, of course, but the communications link grew stronger as he rushed through the complex, and after a few moments he could hear the sounds of weapons fire, the familiar sounds of plasma bursts.

He entered a room with an open doorway on its far side; the sounds of battle came from its other side, along with a haze of gray smoke. He ran for the door, and was nearly impaled by a brilliant green blast that lanced through the opening, slicing across the room for less than a second, but long enough to leave a glowing afterimage on his vision. He blinked and made his way warily toward the door. Looking back over his shoulder, he could see the dark track that the beam had made in the far wall, and the smooth gash in the threshold of the door that the alien laser had cut before it had blinked out.

He leaned out to take a look, and nearly fell as a massive explosion shook the room. Smoke and debris shot out past him.

He didn't hesitate further, and plunged through the doorway into the room. The smoke was thick and swirling, and he couldn't see more than a few feet in front of his face. He could hear his teammates on the comlink, however, and knew that Catalina was down, and in bad shape.

Vasily's bulky form materialized out of the smoke; the Russian's gun came up before he recognized the other. "Allen!"

"Where is Cat?"

"Here!"

He knelt beside the prone form of the British agent. He could see what had happened at once. The beam had struck her just above the left hip, and had sliced diagonally upward across her torso, ending just below her heart. It looked like it had penetrated through her armor, but he couldn't see the extent of the tissue damage, and he didn't dare remove the suit to get at the wound. He settled for unfastening the chest plate; it was all but ruined anyway. He handed it to Vasily, who watched as he dug into his pack for his surgical intervention kit.

"How is she?" Vasily asked.

"She's dead, is what she is," he said, without looking up.

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"Dead?"

"Yes, and she'll stay that way, if I can't get to work." He tore the kit open, and spread its components out next to the body. "There are mutons behind me," he told the Russian as he worked. "They were chasing me down here, we don't have much time."

"How many?"

He didn't look up. "Many."

"One thing at a time," Vasily said. "Can you... help her?"

“Give me a sec,” he said. The intervention kit represented the pinnacle of their medical technology, and he’d worked on each of its components himself. But it was still experimental, and the conditions here were hardly ideal. He paused just long enough to hook up his monitor to the biofeedback unit in her armor, then went to work.

Hadrian materialized out of the smoke. “Alien robot’s kaput,” he said. “Looks like the blast took out those ethereals in the back as well. Jane’s keeping an eye on the door.”

“Allen says many mutons behind us,” Vasily said. “Can you do something about that?”

The Marine nodded and headed back into the smoke.

“Doc?”

James ignored him as he worked. The armor and the insulated suit under it had absorbed most of the energy of the alien laser, but her body was covered with full-thickness third degree burns, and he didn’t need to cut to know the condition of the organs underneath. But her heart and lungs were probably intact, and he forced himself not to look at the silent EKG monitor as he injected first a dose of regenerative serum, then thickly smeared the burned area with the gelatinous intervention fluid. That would get to work right away on the tissues, but he went ahead and inserted the long nanite probe directly into her body cavity, taping the control unit into place against her suit. That wouldn’t start until he’d gotten her heart going again, but that was getting ahead of himself.

“We’ll need to seal this up,” he said. “Pressure’s higher down here than outside, but it’s still not healthy. Where’s Doctor Ranma?”

“Mary!” Vasily yelled. He turned to head off into the smoke, but before he could leave the Indian doctor appeared, dragging one leg behind her. Sparks hissed from the crippled knee joint of the armor, and it was obvious even through her faceplate that she was in a great deal of pain. “Sorry,” she said. “Is she…”

James laid a plastic sheet over the wound; the material automatically began to tighten, sealing the entire area he’d worked on, the plastic melding to the fabric of her pressure suit. “We’ll know in a moment,” he said, activating a defibrillation patch, and touching it to her chest. The tiny unit jolted her, but there was no change in her cardiogram.

“Help me,” she said to Vasily, who assisted her in kneeling next to him. “Have you injected the nanites?”

“Done,” he said, charging the unit again. The portables had enough juice for ten jolts, but he was conservative, increasing the voltage only slightly before applying it again. This time, Catalina stirred, sucking in a violent breath that came out in a groan of pain.

“Oooh, that hurts,” she managed.

“Don’t move right away,” James said. He checked the seals on his impromptu bandage, making sure it had restored the integrity of her suit, and that there were no pressure leaks that could be fatal later on. There was a rumbling behind them, and Vasily turned, his plasma cannon held at the ready.

Hadrian reappeared. “Time to go,” he said.

James and Mary shared a look. “Come on,” he said, taking Catalina from one side, while Mary lifted from the other. They lifted her to her feet, and each took one arm across their shoulders, carrying her between them. They crossed the room, to where Jane was warding the exit on the far side. There was a pile of wreckage in the center of the room, still on fire, with just enough of it left for James to recognize the mechanical bulk of a sectopod. It was the same type of alien mech that they’d confronted in the hangar under the French base. James remembered how its laser had sliced through the steel doors of the hangar, and shuddered at the thought of how close he’d come to ending up like Catalina.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I couldn’t move,” Catalina said. “Couldn’t...” she trailed off, coughing weakly.

“Ethereals,” Mary said.

The door was both larger and more substantial than the others they’d encountered thus far. But it opened when Jane operated the recessed trigger mechanism, the iris slowly retracting until a circle a full three meters across stood before them. Jane moved through first, the doctors carrying Catalina after her, then Vasily and Hadrian bringing up the rear.

“Hold on,” Catalina said, stirring. “Move me to the door controls on this side.”

James and Mary complied, holding her up while she worked on the alien access panel. She prodded at it with her tools, and the panels of the door twisted shut. “Shoot it now,” she told them. For a moment James and Mary just blinked at her, then she shook her head, took Mary’s pistol, and fired a plasma bolt into the mechanism. The panel exploded. James helped Catalina back, but she shrugged him off. “I think... I think I can manage,” she said, grimacing as she took a few tentative steps away. Mary was in little better shape; although a medikit had eased some of the pain of her wounded leg, the damaged actuator in her armor meant that the best she could manage was an awkward limp.

They headed deeper into the complex, with Jane taking Catalina’s position as scout. There were several corridors to choose from, so they steered toward the largest, a long cylinder bolstered by curving alien buttresses every fifteen paces. The passage curved

to the right and then forked. They chose one path at random after a quick scan from Catalina's sensor proved inconclusive.

The tunnel started to twist back in upon itself, then deposited them into a broad circular chamber. For a moment the Alphas merely stared in surprise; the place was certainly eye-catching.

Plumes of gas issued from vents in the walls, creating a thin fog in the air that slightly obscured their vision. That wasn't enough to fully conceal the bulbous pods that lined the perimeter of the room in two offset tiers, the upper level accessible via a tiny ledge that circled the room at about four meters above the floor. The center of the room contained a narrow shaft, maybe two meters across, lined with curved protrusions that almost resembled teeth. There was a freestanding panel adjacent to the shaft, familiar enough to possibly be some sort of alien control mechanism.

Jane was already halfway to the panel. Catalina stared up at the pods, a dark sense of foreboding rising in her gut even before the sensor unit riding on her hip started to click. "Hatching pods," she said.

The space between the pods came alive as dark forms shifted and emerged into view. Chryssalids, nearly a dozen of them, hissing challenges as they came into view.

"OUT!" Catalina yelled, too late as the aliens surged forward from their perches, and sprang at the intruders.

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Jane turned and ran back toward the entry, as Vasily and Hadrian fell back before her, cannons ready to cover her retreat. Looking between them, Jane saw Catalina lift the snub-nosed blaster launcher, the dark opening of its barrel seemingly pointed right at her. She dove forward even as the British agent triggered the device, and the football-shaped missile flashed across the room, narrowly missing a charging chryssalid before impacting the far wall, where it exploded.

Shrieks erupted but were cut off as the fireball filled the room, blasting aliens to pieces. Vasily and Hadrian were flung from their feet, landing hard on their backs, while Jane was caught up and hurled against the far wall of the passage, clipping James's legs out from under him as she flew.

Hadrian was the first to recover, coming up into a crouch, his cannon at the ready. But there was no need for it; none of the aliens emerged from the maelstrom of smoke and fire that filled the room.

“Next time try to aim it at the aliens, not us,” James grouched, as he slowly got to his feet. Mary was already helping Jane, who was battered but otherwise intact.

“Aliens not complaining,” Vasily said, as he got up. “It work!”

They retreated back to the last fork, and resumed their forward progress through the alien base. They entered a room at the same time as a quartet of silent ethereals. The aliens attacked with a wave of psionic energy, but even as the Alphas staggered under the impact of the sudden assault upon their minds, they could each feel an invisible barrier spring up, and the surge of disorientation and pain retreated. The aliens didn't get a chance to adjust their tactics, as a quick barrage of plasma bolts and a pair of explosive grenades left their smoking carcasses lying on the floor.

Vasily looked back at Mary. “That you?”

She nodded. “The psi amp. I got it to work, finally.”

“Good job.” He led them to the doorway that the ethereals had warded, and looked through into the room beyond. “Hmm. Some sort of control room?” He led them into the room, which looked like an enlarged version of the bridge of one of the larger alien ships. Curving panels arced around the edges of the room and around the tall banks of machinery in its center, alien technology that included both familiar devices and things they had never seen before. There were two other exits besides the one they'd come in through, warded by more of the thick alien iris-doors.

Vasily glanced toward the nearest control station. “Catalina, can you...”

Her was interrupted by a twinge in his mind, an odd twisting sensation that had him blinking and raising a hand reflexively to his helmet. Looking around, he saw that the others were feeling it too.

“I feel something... powerful,” James said, while Mary let out a small shriek and clutched at her helmet with both hands. “Never!” she shouted.

“What's that?” Catalina said, looking around fearfully, her pistol in her hand.

HUMANS.

They all looked around anxiously for the speaker, before realizing that the word had echoed within their minds. The thought did not offer much consolation.

YOU KNOW NOT WHAT YOU DO.

YOU SEEK TO DESTROY THAT WHICH YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND.

“I only guy hearing this?” Vasily asked.

“We all are, I think,” James said.

YOU ARE US. WE ARE YOU.

“What’s it talking about?” Vasily asked.

YIELD. JOIN THE UNITY. IT WILL HAPPEN SOON ENOUGH. END THIS SUFFERING.

“It’s been in my mind,” Mary said, shaking her head, as if that would keep the alien presence at bay.

“Tell it to go and fuck itself then,” Catalina growled.

WE ARE GOING TO END THE SUFFERING. WHEN WE SEEDED YOUR WORLD. SO MANY LIFE GENERATIONS AGO. WE KNEW WE WOULD RETURN.

The Alphas waited nervously. “What the hell...” Jane began.

She didn’t get a chance to finish, as the large door in the fall wall of the chamber began to spiral open. It revealed a massive, tube-like corridor beyond, through which a coruscating green light radiated. As the opening widened, they could see four creatures on its far side. They looked somewhat like ethereals, only each stood a good three meters tall, and their skulls were distended, oblong orbs easily half again the size of a human’s. The aliens’ eyes were pure black orbs that shone as they fixed onto the Alphas.

YOU CANNOT RESIST, the alien voice in their heads said, and then they were hit by a devastating wave of mental force, a surge of psionic energy that slammed into them with the force of a jackhammer. The Alphas screamed and staggered, stumbling as their brains overloaded with the sudden assault of stimuli.

They couldn’t even see the elder ethereals as the aliens shambled forward to claim them.

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Even with the psi-amp running at full power, Mary could barely see through the blue haze that swam in washes over her vision. So she closed her eyes, and tried to focus her nascent mental talents upon the attack.

She could sense the four aliens, but they were just puppets on strings, she saw, connected by an invisible thread to the presence that had spoken in their minds earlier. That entity flared like a small sun in her mind's eye. It was close, surrounded by webs of power, ancient, mighty. Even with that brief contact she was nearly overwhelmed by it, and had to fight off the sudden impulse to throw herself down and abase herself before the power of the alien mind.

BRING THEM INTO THE ONE, it shouted into her mind.

"SILENCE!" she screamed, lifting her gun, firing it blindly at the approaching aliens. Her first shot streaked high and blasted into the threshold of the door, and her second missed even more wildly, the plasma bolt failing to come within even two meters of the closest alien. However, it did strike a glowing blue conduit to the left of the door, which hissed and sparked for an instant before exploding in a bright rush of flame and energy.

The explosion washed over the Alphas, almost knocking them down, but it also disrupted the alien mental assault. Hadrian, slumped against an alien machine, was able to trigger an alien grenade and bounce it into the midst of the approaching aliens. The explosion lifted all four into the air and hurled them across the room. Only one got up, and that one crumpled as James shot it in the face.

"Where... is... it?" Vasily managed, groaning as he pulled himself slowly to his feet.

"There!" Mary shouted, pointing at the open doorway. The iris-door had started to close, but the mechanism locked up, alien metal groaning as the damaged panels ground against each other. Vasily headed in that direction, half-staggering, but not pausing except to lift himself through the half-opened door. The others followed behind.

SO YOU REJECT THE UNITY. THEN YOU SHALL BE ENDED.

"Eesh," Vasily said, moving up the tunnel, which rose slightly, a ramp that opened onto a larger chamber up above.

The place was lit by a penetrating green glow that issued from the walls. Huge translucent cylinders descended from the ceiling, gurling with fluid inside before they dropped into a shallow pool that dominated the rear half of the room. Resting inside

that pool was *something*, a big heap of undulating tissue that could only be described as a massive alien brain.

For a moment, all they could do was stare at it.

“Think we need to kill that,” Hadrian finally said.

“You going to pay for invading our planet!” Vasily yelled, lifting his plasma cannon. The bright bolt of superheated gas pulsed out toward the alien brain, but as it crossed the center of the room it exploded in mid-flight, the streaks of plasma flashing against a translucent blue barrier that reverberated for a moment before again becoming invisible.

The other Alphas joined in the barrage, unleashing the full power of their weapons at the alien. The brain’s force field absorbed them all without so much as a crack in the energy barrier, and when the smoke of the plasma explosions cleared, they could see the mass of it in its pool, unharmed.

“Shit, it didn’t work,” Catalina said.

MY POWER IS BEYOND YOUR WEAPONS.

“Any explosives?” Hadrian asked.

“If it withstand that barrage, nothing we have going to get through,” Vasily said.

“Why isn’t it attacking us?” Jane asked.

“I think...” Mary trailed off, an unfocused look on her face. “I think it can only act through intermediaries... not directly against us...”

What you want, huh?” Vasily shouted at it. “Why you do this?”

ALL MUST JOIN THE UNITY. IT WILL HAPPEN.

James heard something behind them, and turned to see a group of green-skinned aliens heading up the ramp. “Mutons!” he yelled.

As the Alphas turned and both sides opened fire, the voice of the alien mind continued to roil through their consciousness.

DO NOT STRUGGLE SO. YOU WILL BE BUT THE LATEST. SO MANY WORLDS HAVE ALREADY BEEN BROUGHT INTO US.

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The Alphas dodged into cover behind the corners where the sloping passage entered the brain-chamber, and fired down into the alien ranks. There were at least a dozen of the hulking aliens in their green suits, and while several of them provided covering fire with their heavy cannons, the rest formed up into a wedge and started up the ramp. They carried huge vibroblades, almost lances, their heads blazing red with heat as their Elerium power cells shook the shafts of alien metal at a high frequency. Those blades would cut through even heavy armor with little problem, the Alphas knew.

The Alphas' fire was accurate, and several of the leading mutons took direct hits in the first exchange. But none of the aliens so much as flinched, the flaring explosions clearing to reveal black smears on their armor, but little else.

"We need to get out of here!" James yelled. The doctor fired and ducked back into cover just as a plasma bolt hit the wall near him, punching out a segment of the corner as big as his head.

Jane found a small access panel a short distance back from the entry, and slung her rifle as she headed over to it. "Cat, help me, you're better at this," she said.

"Go on!" Vasily yelled at the British agent. He stepped out into view, drawing fire. A plasma bolt clipped his arm, and he grimaced, but held his ground. He took an alien grenade from his belt, triggered it, and rolled it down the ramp. Behind him, Catalina ran across the room to where Jane was trying to access the alien computer systems.

The grenade missed the lead alien, but it struck the foot of the one behind it to the left, and exploded. The explosive force of the blast lifted the muton into the air and then slammed it hard into the ground. Its companions were flung aside, and three of them fell. For a moment the alien ranks were obscured by a gray haze of smoke, but then a muton materialized out of the fog, followed by another, and then the rest of the aliens, reforming their ranks as they resumed their march forward.

"More grenades?" Vasily asked, looking at Hadrian, but the Marine shook his head. "I'm out!" Neither man bothered with the gas grenades they carried; against the mutons they would have little effect.

"They're not going down!" James yelled, as he scored another hit on the lead muton. The alien's body was covered with black smears now, and its armored hide had been penetrated in several places, but still it kept coming, moving in unison with its companions, step by step closing the range.

"Catalina!" Vasily yelled.

The agent smacked her hand against the wall above the alien console. "I'm locked out!" she shouted back. The alien symbols flashed across the display.

Mary leaned in, and pressed several of the symbols, and to Catalina's surprise, the control panel came to life. "It works both ways," the Indian doctor said, tapping the side of her helmet.

There was no time to discuss the matter; the aliens had covered more than half the distance up the ramp, and the others were following behind the vanguard, firing as they came. Vasily and Hadrian blasted the lead muton with their plasma cannons, and the alien finally fell, its body all but torn apart. Even then it kept crawling forward, dragging itself forward with the one arm that it was able to move. The other six aliens closed ranks and resumed their march.

"We have problem!" Vasily shouted, rushing over to where the women were gathered around the console.

"Can't access any of their primary systems from here," Catalina said, her fingers dancing over the odd controls of the alien panel. "Here!" she said, activating something, and a small opening in the wall appeared, revealing a narrow passage beyond.

"I don't know about this," Mary said, but Vasily yelled, "No time! Go!"

Jane unlimbered her rifle and darted into the tunnel, the other Alphas close behind. Hadrian brought up the rear, firing blasts at the mutons until his energy cell was depleted, then he turned and ran after them.

The tunnel was crowded with conduits that pulsed blue and alien machines that they could not identify, and was barely big enough for them to fit in their bulky armor. But it sloped steadily downward, and the tight squeeze at least suggested that the mutons would have a difficult time following them. They passed several side-passages that were even smaller, probably intended for sectoid technicians, and finally came to another access door that Catalina was able to trigger, the wall splitting apart like a blinking eye to reveal another chamber beyond.

They were in another control room, much smaller than the one they had left earlier, with only about six control panels clustered around a pillar that supported a number of staggered display units. They weren't alone; several sectoids were at the panels, but the aliens didn't even look up, even when the Alphas started shooting.

Catalina went immediately to the nearest panel, pushing aside the carcass of the dead alien technician slumped across the controls. The room had two visible doors, and Vasily gestured for Hadrian and Jane to secure them. The Russian stepped forward and looked over Catalina's shoulder. "What they working on?"

Catalina frowned at the alien controls, focusing on her VDU as her computer translated the symbols that flashed there. She pressed one of them, and an image materialized on the display above.

The space it showed was cavernous, massive, so huge that wisps of cloud formed near its ceiling. They could see movement, but the aliens looked like ants, tiny specks moving across the huge structure that filled the chamber. Huge machines attached to control arms arched down from the walls, enfolding the structure like caressing fingers. Other machines rolled into access ports in the alien construction, laden with cargo. The display didn't carry sound, but they could almost hear the din of furious activity through the visuals alone.

"What are they doing?" Mary asked, hanging back as she stared at the display.

"Alien battleship," Vasily said. "They preparing to launch." He looked down at Catalina. "How long?"

The agent's expression grew even more focused as she worked the alien controls. Symbols flashed on her panel, and were echoed in one corner of the display above. For a long moment she could only stare at the translation that appeared on her VDU.

"Cat?"

"Fifty-one minutes," she said, looking up at them in horror. "Fifty-one minutes."

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For a moment the Alphas could only stand there and watch the alien ship being loaded for its mission of destruction. This one looked even bigger than the last dreadnought that had blasted three Earth cities off the face of the planet. Catalina pressed a control on the alien panel. The view shifted and zoomed, and they saw a ramp extend out from the wall to a panel that opened in the side of the alien battleship. Even as the ramp connected to the ship rank upon rank of aliens began trudging forward. They recognized most of the aliens they'd faced thus far. Sectoids, cyberdisks, snakemen, mutons... even the mechanized forms of a dozen sectopods, they kept coming, an unbroken stream that flowed into the alien vessel.

Catalina shifted the view again, and they could see another familiar sight that chilled their bones: a conveyor that was carrying the silvery orbs of fusion bombs, each powerful enough to destroy a city.

“We have to stop it,” Jane said.

“Where is it?” Vasily said. “Where!” he yelled, shaking Catalina’s shoulder.

Catalina shrugged him off and bent over the controls. Alien symbols flashed across the control panel. “The base is huge! The hangar... it’s nowhere near here...”

“There has to be a way we can stop it,” James said. “You can’t do anything from these controls?”

“These controls only access secondary functions,” Catalina said, smacking the console in frustration. “Do you want to try?”

“Mary?” Jane asked, as the doctor flinched, and took an involuntary step back. “What is it?”

She didn’t have to respond, as the voice of the alien brain echoed again in their minds. MY CHILDREN. COME TO ME.

“More aliens coming?” Hadrian asked. “How many?”

Mary’s face was pale as she stared at her companions. “All of them.”

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Catalina stepped back up to the control console, and started entering commands. The image of the alien battleship disappeared, and was replaced by a multilayered schematic, overlaid with shifting patterns of alien symbols.

“We can’t stay here. We have to try to stop them!” James repeated.

“What’s the plan?” Hadrian asked.

“Power...” Catalina muttered to herself, as the display zoomed closer, through more layers of diagrams and symbols.

Vasily paced back and forth. “I not think we have plan right now. Wait, what are you doing, Catalina?”

Catalina zoomed the display onto a bright blue point, connected to the complex web through a series of bright lines. "This entire base, it's built on a huge complex of Elerium crystals. The power flows are massive..."

"Can we blow the power plant?" Jane asked.

Catalina stared at the diagram. "Record visual," she said to her suit computer, zooming out the alien screen out slowly, then fixing on it for a last moment. "Come on," she said to the others, leading them to one of the exits. At her touch the door spun open, revealing a long passage beyond.

And a dozen sectoids, armed ones this time, who opened fire as soon as the door opened.

Vasily grabbed Catalina and yanked her out of the doorway, a scant instant before multiple plasma bolts streaked through the air where she'd been standing. Hadrian replaced her, leaning around the edge of the door to fire into the alien ranks. Jane did the same from the other side, and every shot they fired blasted a sectoid, the air thickening with smoke from the plasma bursts until the Alphas had to use the muzzle flashes from their guns to guide their aim. The exchange lasted maybe all of fifteen seconds, and it ended with Hadrian striding into the whirling smoke, looking for a moving target, and finding none. "Let's go," he said, loading a fresh energy cell into his cannon.

Catalina directed their course, staring at the grid superimposed on her VDU, directing them through the network of corridors. At one intersection they were confronted with a dozen snakemen, but the Alphas stopped only long enough to bracket them with gas grenades, rushing through the dazed aliens before they could recover. They were each aware of the ticking clock counting down, and that kept them moving. Jane helped Mary, whose damaged leg was holding her back, but none of them stopped even for a moment.

Catalina felt her own strength flagging, but she bit down hard on her lip and dug deep, driving herself forward. The alien medicines that had brought her back had repaired her body, but there was only so much even they could do. Focused on the grid, she pointed to a bend in the corridor ahead. "There!" she said, pointing. James moved ahead of her, and he stepped around the corner to see another large doorway ahead.

He also saw the sectopod standing guard, flanked by a half-dozen mutons, including one carrying a very familiar and very dangerous weapon.

"Gaaah!" he yelled. He stopped, turned, and dove back for the corner. There was a bright green flare, which sliced across his path, drawing a line across his body. The alien laser touched him for only a fraction of a second, but he could feel the surge of heat along his hip, and the subsequent flash of pain as his muscles were roasted by the beam. He landed awkwardly on a leg that failed to respond to his orders, but his

momentum carried him forward, and he slid around the corner in front of the rest of the surprised Alphas. They'd seen the beam, which had gouged the far wall of the corridor, knew was waiting around the bend. But they hadn't seen the other threat he'd spotted.

"One's got a launcher!" he yelled, even as the heavy clop of the sectopod echoed through the corridor.

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The Alphas drew back, readying their weapons. Vasily helped James to his feet, supported him as the doctor tried to ignore the crippling pain of his injured hip. They shared a look; both knew their chances. But James took his plasma rifle back as Vasily handed it to him, and together they turned back to the corridor, waiting for the inevitable alien surge.

Jane let go of Mary, leaning her against the wall of the passage so she could ready her own weapon. Mary had heard James's warning, and she felt a cold chill in her gut, but she forced through her fear, closed her eyes, and activated the psi amp.

The aliens appeared as faint golden outlines to her perceptions, all save the sectopod, which resolved as an ugly shadow that was darker than the surrounding black. It was close and getting closer, but she ignored it, focusing on the mutons until she found what she wanted.

It only took a slight tweak, a bit of pressure, but it still felt like trying to grasp an eel with her bare hands. There was no time to warn her companions, she just did it.

A wall of flame exploded down the corridor, sweeping around the bend, flinging the Alphas onto their backs. It was followed by a dense cloud of thick, blinding smoke, which swirled around them as they staggered back up, those least battered helping the others to their feet.

Vasily stumbled forward through the smoke and flames. As he rounded the corner he came to the wrecked outline of the sectopod. One leg of the alien mech had been sheared off by the blast, and flames shot from openings in its body, but it was still moving, sparks flying and metal grinding as it tried in vain to get up. Vasily barely paused to fire a plasma bolt into a broken gap in its armor before continuing forward. It took him a while to get through the next stretch of passage; the metal plates covering the walls and floor had buckled, and a good eight-meter stretch had been nearly

vaporized, leaving a slightly glowing crater that the Russian dutifully crunched through before reemerging on the far side. He could hear his name being called, although thick static over the communicator masked the identity of the speaker. He kept going, past the bodies of the dead mutons, past the wreckage of the alien door, blasted off its moorings, the spiral plates jutting inward like broken teeth. One came off as he pushed past it, clattering as it landed on the floor.

There were more aliens on the far side of the door, all dead. He passed a sectoid that had a metal wedge at least a foot long jutting from the wrecked faceplate of its helmet. Still he continued, until the smoke began to clear, and he found himself staring out over a vast open chamber.

The place was vertically organized in several stacked tiers, accessible via narrow catwalks that looked more than a little treacherous, sized more toward sectoids than to armored humans. Dozens if not hundreds of niches were visible along the walls, most of which held the brilliant blue radiance of an Elerium storage crystal. Vasily registered those in the back of his mind; his attention was drawn to the impressive sight in the center of the chamber.

There, suspended in the open space by dozens of silver struts, was a huge irregular crystal. Shaped like a dagger, the crystal had to be at least six meters tall, and was as thick as a full meter across at its core, tapering almost to points at its ends. The glow from within it made the brightness of the smaller crystals seem pale by comparison, and the vision filters on his VDU automatically kicked in to compensate, dimming the crystal until it was just a gray outline on his visor.

He heard the others come up from behind him, take it in. Meanwhile, he reached into the cargo compartment in his armor, and took out the demolition charge within.

“Get ready to run,” he said, though the looks the others sent him told him that they understood what he had, that time had all but run out.

“This way, there’s another door over here,” Catalina said, leading them around the edge of the room. Hadrian lingered behind, moving over to one of the smaller crystals, while Vasily moved forward to the edge of the central shaft. He carefully made his way down to the next-lower tier, looking for a way to get close to the huge central crystal. Short of climbing out onto the struts, however, there was no easy way to access it, and he decided it would be better not to use his jump packs to try to leap over to it. Instead he looked at where the struts anchored, and found that each was surrounded by a matrix of six smaller crystals, all pulsing with energy as they either fed or were fed by the central shaft. He went to work there, rigging charges, making his way around the entire tier until his kit was empty. He’d initially set the charges for twenty minutes, but as he held the master control in his hand, he sighed, and turned it down to five minutes. He waited until he was back up to the main tier, and then triggered the control, tossing the device into the chasm behind him. Hadrian and Jane were waiting in the open doorway; the others had gone on ahead.

“Go!” he yelled.

They ran, for what it was worth. The corridor twisted, took them through an empty room, then into another passage. They caught up to the others quickly; they weren't moving very fast, with James supporting Mary, or perhaps the other way around, and Catalina barely able to keep from toppling over. The British agent kept them moving, however, following the twists and turns that flashed on her VDU. Doors closed behind them, but Vasily knew it was an empty gesture at best. From what he'd seen of Elerium explosions in the past, there wouldn't be much left once that master array went up.

“Where we going?” he shouted, as they came to an intersection, and Catalina took them to the right without stopping. She didn't get a chance to respond to the question, as the ground started to rumble under their feet, the very fundamentals of the base trembling under their feet.

Vasily frowned and looked at the timer in the corner of his VDU; only two minutes had passed, not long enough. “Too soon!” he said.

“The ship!” James said. “It must be lifting off!”

They hurried down the long tunnel. This part of the base did not seem to be powered; their lamps were the only illumination as they made their way down the length of the passage to an armored door at its end. Catalina was the first to reach it, and by the time the others had all caught up she had overridden the controls. The layered panels opened slowly, revealing a cavernous shaft, maybe twenty meters across, which rose up into the darkness above them. The chamber was deserted, with even the fittings in the walls for machinery and conduits gaping empty.

Catalina stared up the shaft, clenching her fists at her side. “Damn! This came up on the map as an ancillary hangar; I'd hoped there would be a ship here, or a lift, something!”

Mary leaned against the wall of the hangar, her eyes closed, her brow furrowed.

“Now what?” Hadrian asked. The rumbling had continued, and now it deepened, bits of stone dropping from the walls of the shaft, clattering noisily as they spattered on the deck at their feet. There was another sound as well, a faint, echoing shriek, originating from the long tunnel behind them.

“Company coming,” Jane said.

Vasily opened the barrel of his cannon, tossing the half-discharged cell aside, dropping a new one into place. He said nothing, merely turned to face the dark tunnel. In the corner of his VDU, the seconds continued to tick down, passing to double digits as the timer dropped to under a minute.

“It’s been good serving with you,” Jane said, stepping forward to join him.

* * * * *

Session 30 (November 24, 2008)

Chapter 142

Suddenly a massive explosion drew their attention back behind them, up into the darkness of the shaft. The Alphas fell back against the walls as a huge slab of metal came crashing down, accompanied by a shower of stone that send up a wild cascade of dust and debris. Catalina was knocked from her feet, and James almost had his head taken off by a broken metal strut that shot from the wreckage and bounced hard off the wall of the chamber before settling to the floor. For a moment they couldn’t see anything, even each other, as the cloud of dust swirled around them.

Then, out of the cloud, they heard the familiar whine of engines, and the Avenger appeared, its VTOL jets firing to arrest its descent. They caught a momentary glance of Ken in the cockpit, then the ship began to turn, the hatch in its rear opening as the pilot furiously worked to keep it stable in the relatively cramped confines of the shaft.

“Move, MOVE!” Vasily yelled, pushing the others forward. He all but threw Mary and Catalina into the open hatch, then boosted James, who in turn helped pull Jane up, then Hadrian.

A jagged metal spar jutting from the rubble scraped off the Avenger’s belly, and the ship jolted to the side, nearly knocking James from his precarious perch. Ken fired the jets to compensate, and the ship rose into the air, with Vasily now alone in the hangar below. A white flash exploded in the rubble behind him, followed by the bright streaks of plasma trails as a shot flashed past him, then another.

“Ken! Vasily’s still down there! Go back down!” Catalina yelled.

The pilot screamed something back, but they couldn’t hear over the violent rumbling that now suffused the shaft, which seemed to be shaking itself apart. The Avenger’s engines whined as Ken struggled to compensate.

Vasily glanced back, long enough to see the alien forms materializing out of the darkness, their features brightened by the flashes coming from the barrels of their guns. Mutons, and behind them, another hulking, mechanical form...

Vasily looked back up, fixed on the hatch, and fired his jets. He shot up into the air, and for a moment, the hatch seemed to yawn like the bright opening at the end of a tunnel.

But the turbulence in the shaft grabbed the Avenger and shifted it, and the Russian slammed hard into the rear hull of the craft, hard enough to stun him. He was falling... and then he clipped the extended edge of the hatch. He balanced there for an instant, precariously, but gravity took hold, and he started slipping over the edge.

He blindly reached out for something, anything, to arrest his fall.

A hand seized on his, and he was held.

“GO!” he heard, and then his full focus was on holding onto the hand anchoring him, as the Avenger’s engines blasted on full, and the ship ascended up into the shaft. He looked up, and saw it was James holding him, the doctor’s other arm looped through the supporting strut of the hatch. Then other hands were reaching for him, pulling him inside the ship. The Avenger jolted as something struck it, then he caught a glimpse of jagged stone, almost close enough to reach out and touch, and then they were through, and the familiar red skies of Mars were there, stretching out almost to infinity.

The Avenger continued to turn as it rose into the air, and Vasily’s heart froze as he saw the alien battleship, also rising out of the landscape, ascending above a massive crater, maybe a few kilometers distant. The ship seemed to defy gravity itself as it fully cleared the level of the ground, slowly lifting into the air like the fist of some defiant god.

In the corner of his VDU, the last digits clicked down to zero.

His first thought was, *It did not work*. Nothing happened; the Avenger continued to rise, as did the alien ship, now high enough that he could see the far side of the crater underneath its rising bulk. A wild image of the Avenger crashing into it popped into his mind, but it was crazy; even a suicide attack would do nothing to stop such a monstrosity.

Then, the ground rose up.

The Avenger jerked forward, and the Alphas cried out as the ship was nearly flipped over, spinning in the air. They felt a moment of terrible vertigo as they felt themselves falling, then the disorienting spin eased, and the ship leveled out again.

Clinging to the straps holding him, Vasily crawled back toward the still-open hatch. He had to know.

The battleship was there, hovering in the sky. Underneath it, the ground bucked and roiled, a new landscape being formed before his eyes. And then a light appeared at the base of the crater, a flash like the glow of a new sun. It stabbed up into the air, piercing the alien battleship, driving through it, up into the sky. For a moment it lingered, a bright marker visible throughout the Solar System, then it flared out and died. It was as if it had been keeping the battleship aloft, for as the spear of light died, the alien ship fell, plummeting back into the crater. Vasily didn’t see it hit, for the hatch closed as the

Avenger straightened and shot up into the sky, rising on full thrusters back into orbit. Leaning back, tears sliding down his cheeks, he closed his eyes and listened to the sounds of its death.

* * * * *

Session 30 (November 24, 2008)

Chapter 143

The Alphas sat where they'd fallen, just simply *breathing*, overwhelmed. At least until Ken's voice sounded over the intercom.

"Um... we still got a problem, guys."

They looked up at the speaker. "What is it, Ken?" James asked.

"Well, evading that cruiser, I sort of used up all our fuel. We're down to zero-point-five percent of our Elerium supplies. We won't even get back into orbit, I'm afraid."

"Did you guys get any?" Catalina asked.

Hadrian reached over and picked up the containment unit he'd jammed into one of the empty armor racks when he'd boarded. "Filled up."

Catalina sagged in relief. "Let's get it in place."

They inserted the canister into its rack, and hooked up the power leads that Grace had installed. "Wow, you're lucky it didn't blow," Ken said, as the display panel brought up the status of the unit. "It's reading at one hundred and seventeen percent!"

"Is it enough for us to get back?" Catalina asked.

"Should be. But I've got more bad news. The computer was able to override the glitch that screwed up Allen's cryo unit, but it sort of blew out the whole system doing it."

The Alphas looked around the interior compartment of the Avenger, which suddenly looked a lot more cramped than it had just moments ago. "So I guess we're going to be real good friends on the way home," James said.

"Guess I'd better break out the emergency rations," Catalina said, groaning as she pulled herself out of her armor. Leaving the broken wreckage lying at her feet, she crawled over the now-useless cryo unit to the locker holding their supplies. She was

able to get it open with a few tugs, but as she stared into it, her face fell. “Crap,” she said. “Oh, crap.”

“What’s the matter?” James asked.

She dug into the compact locker, scattering packets of food concentrate. Defeated, she lifted one so they could see it. “When we get back, I’m going to kill whoever packed these,” she said.

James peered at the label of the packet. “Don’t like split pea soup?”

Mary looked up from where Vasily was helping her out of her crippled suit. “Oh! I love split pea soup! It’s one of my favorites!”

“Yeah, well, we have two hundred packets of it in this locker,” Catalina said dryly.

James shot Vasily a look. “I have a feeling this is going to be a long trip.”

* * * * *

Session 30 (November 24, 2008)

Chapter 144

Thirty days after blasting off from Cydonia, the Avenger descended from orbit around the Earth, entering the atmosphere of the blue planet. With the spacecraft low on fuel, Ken took them in on a straightforward descent, the ship streaking through the atmosphere over the northern Pacific, coming down toward the west coast of the United States. They’d been sent coordinates for landing, not at HQX, but at San Francisco.

“Looks like we’ve got a bit of a welcoming committee,” Ken said, as he guided the Avenger to a landing site located within the Presidio. A series of white temporary buildings had been erected there, and as the ship landed in their midst, settling onto a pad of reinforced concrete, mechanical arms extended a plastic tarp over the entire site.

The hatch opened to reveal a familiar face, if one obscured within the transparent hood of a biological containment suit. “Well, look who’s back!” Grace said. “I know you’re eager to be out and about, but we’ve got decontamination set up for you first. After that, I think there’s some other folks who want to talk to you.”

“Lead the way,” Catalina said.

The decontamination process was through but quick, taking less than an hour altogether. They were given fresh clothes, and were directed by armed security

personnel to a door that led to a grassy park, an open space surrounded by low buildings, with the towering majesty of the Golden Gate Bridge visible in the background. Hundreds of people were visible, and they broke into applause as the Alphas appeared. The ground rose into a low hill opposite them, where a footpath turned into a stone staircase that led up to a paved area above. A number of people were waiting for them there, but before they could head in that direction, three people stepped forward to greet them.

“I suppose we should get our chance to congratulate the heroes, while we still can,” Doctor Wagner said.

“Yes, I suppose there will be a line, shortly,” Joan Beauvais agreed.

“You guys did it too,” James said, once they had exchanged hugs and tears. “You made this possible.”

“Good job, team,” Chief Hallorand said, with a grin. He glanced over his shoulder up the hill. “I guess you’d better not keep *them* waiting.”

They headed out on the path. Most of the crowd gave them space, but the applause only intensified. A few familiar faces were visible as they made their way across the lawn. Catalina stopped before one of them.

“Hey there, Cat,” Jürgen Ritter said.

Catalina reached up to pat his cheek, and gave him a brief kiss. “They didn’t go for nothing,” she whispered.

“Thank you,” he said, his eyes wet.

Jane spotted someone else they knew. “Hey, Vala, good to see you made it,” she said.

The agent’s smile was wry. “Well, I’ve got a bit of a limp.” She blinked in surprise as Jane hugged her, then laughed and returned the gesture.

Another familiar face was waiting for them at the base of the steps. Agent Drake’s lips tightened as she regarded the Alphas. “Well. I suppose you did it, after all.”

“You told us to, remember?” Vasily said. Jane hugged her as well, but the most she got out of Drake was a slight grimace that might have been something close to a smile.

“Who’re the nobs?” Catalina asked, looking up at the people gathered along the paved area at the top of the steps. Several stood apart from the rest, waiting patiently for them to approach.

“Hey, is that the American president over there?” Mary asked.

They made their way up the steps, facing the VIPs, who were arranged in a rough half-circle facing them. This close they were instantly recognizable, as they included several of the most famous leaders of the human race. The noise of the crowd died out as the Alphas reached the top of the steps, and one of the waiting leaders stepped forward to address them, and those gathered.

“Members of X-COM,” President Barack Obama said, “On behalf of the people of Earth, we owe you a debt of gratitude that we can never repay.”

There was a surge of applause and cheering at that, which the President let continue for a few moments, before he raised a hand. Again the din silenced, and he continued, “We’ve got a lot of hard work ahead of us, to be sure. We’ve got to rebuild our cities.”

Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon added, “If there’s one thing this attack has done for us, it has united us as one people, one race. The human race.”

Obama nodded in agreement. “Yes. Together, we will rebuild our shattered planet.”

“Except for the French,” James added, under his voice.

General Graves, standing in the front rank of dignitaries, echoed the doctor’s comment, shouting, “Yeah, and if those Chinese and Frenchies don’t like it, well, we’ve got the Elerium!”

The Secretary-General rubbed his forehead. “Ah... yes.”

President Obama came forward and shook the hands of each of the Alphas in turn. “Good work,” he said, as he took James’s hand, at the end of the line.

“Thank you, mister President. And keep up your good work.”

“You know,” he said to James, “My surgeon general was in New York when the bombs hit. I’ll be speaking to you, Doctor Allen.”

“I’ll look forward to that conversation, mister President. Medicine is going to be revolutionized by the alien advances.”

Another of the leaders came forward, a sad and heavy look on his face. “Agent De Farrago,” he said.

“Minister Miliband,” she said. “You got the short straw, sir?”

“I was about all that was left, sadly. We’re going to see something new; not quite the UN, something... well, we’re still working it out. Britain’s going to need a seat at the table. I hope I can count on your support.”

“As long as I don’t have to get my fingernails broken, sir, then yes.”

“Wonderful.”

The Secretary-General came up to Mary Ramna. “Doctor Ranma,” he said.

“Yes sir,” Mary replied.

“We’re going to be putting together a new world agency dedicated to dealing with the aftermath of the alien invasion. Health issues, biological impacts, environmental problems. It seems that you would have a unique perspective on that.”

“Oh, me? Thank you, sir!”

General Graves quietly pulled Hadrian aside from the group. “Well, Marine, no need for sappy stories here, right?”

“Sir,” Hadrian replied.

“We’re going to need good men, going forward. And damned if we aren’t going to have to redo our entire war manual. I need a man who can coordinate between these here alien experts and our boots on the ground.” Hadrian only nodded, so the general continued, “We’ve got a big job left ahead of us, as you know. So, Marine, can Uncle Sam count on you?”

“I’m not really a desk jockey, sir,” Hadrian offered cautiously.

Graves laughed. “Desk jockey? Hell, son, you’re going to be my man on the front lines! Unless you think that those Frenchies and Red Chinese are just going to clap their hands and say all’s forgiven?”

“I see,” Hadrian said.

“And I’ll be that there’s still an alien or two out there waiting to be found. You’re going to train our boys to deal with them.”

“Wherever the Corps sends me, I’ll go, sir.”

Graves shook his hand. “That’s what I wanted to hear, son.”

“Semper Fi,” Hadrian said.

Jane turned around as Vala Night came up behind her. “So, Jane. Seems you might be out of a job soon. I happen to know some people who are very interested in

someone with a can-do attitude, and a creative approach to problem solving. And governments can't solve every problem, of course."

Agent Drake walked up next to her sister; that close, the familiar similarity was evident. "If you would prefer to stay with the United States government, miss Swift, we'd be glad to have you as well."

"Bah," Vala said. "Those starched suits are no fun. My organization pays well, and you get to do a lot of good."

"You may not like me," Drake said, "but don't turn down a chance to help a lot of people. We could use someone with your expertise."

"Who said I don't like you, Inise," Jane said, with a smile. "I'll talk to you later, both of you."

Both women nodded, sharing a quick and not entirely friendly look at the identical gesture. But they withdrew, talking in low voices.

Vasily watched each of the side conversations. When his turn came, and he heard the voice clear behind him, he turned to see Michael Garret standing there, dressed in the same eternal black suit. "Vasily."

"Director."

"You know, this has been an... interesting... few months."

Vasily nodded in wry agreement.

"But I think I'm done. I'm resigning as head of X-COM."

The others had turned to listen. "Oh, sorry to hear," Vasily said.

"You... all of you... you'll continue to be a part of our organization, even as you go on to new opportunities. But we'll need someone to take up the reins. X-COM needs to continue to exist. If only to keep planning ahead. We need a man who can lead. A man who can do things... unconventionally, at times."

"Who can snore boldly where no one has snored before," Catalina said.

Neither Garret nor Vasily betrayed any reaction at the comment. "In short, Vasily, it's your job, if you want it," Garret said.

"Go for it, Vas, they need someone with an arse that looks as good in a pair of combats as yours does," Catalina said.

“Vas, you are the man for this!” James added.

“Hah. Well,” the Russian said. “We see how that go. Okay.”

“Vasily the head of X-COM?” Mary said. “Oh no, more pushups, more crunches. Please let me go home now.”

They all laughed, and kept smiling as the President spoke up. “We’ve all come a long way,” he said. “The world has changed, no doubt about it. We can no longer be secure in our uniqueness. We are part of a universe that has just gotten a lot larger.”

He met each of their eyes in turn as he continued, “We survived this round, but we’re going to have to face the unknown, and a future where old assumptions may no longer apply. But with people like those gathered here, I know we will face it successfully. Tomorrow is going to be a tough day. We cannot afford to be divided any longer. But let for now, let us enjoy the victory that X-COM, and Alpha Team, has brought for us.”

The applause was thunderous, and for a moment the Alphas just stood there and experienced it. They each knew that Obama had been right, that the road ahead would be a difficult one for them, and for Earth. But as they stood there under the bright sunlight and the open skies above, they knew that the future at least offered hope.

* * * * *

Aftermath (November 25, 2008)

Author’s Note: the following are the aftermath posts created by the players. I made only a few small edits for grammar/formatting.

JANE

As everyone left for their victory dinner, their exciting new careers, and then to lead the way in rebuilding a brave new world... Jane received a phone call. She did not see the blow to the back of the head as she took the call in the other area. Nor did she know where she was being taken to.

What she could only surmise might be hours later, she groggily gathered her surroundings. She smelled oil and heard engine sounds and felt the slight motion of water, like she was on a freighter at sea or something.

“Ah, you’re awake, Agent Swift,” came a voice with a Chinese accent. That answered the next question. “I suppose you’re wondering why we went to this much trouble?”

Jane laughed at him, “You’ll get nothing from me.”

The man looked at her seriously, "You set off a nuclear device in our country killing five thousand, two hundred and thirty six people. We're going to kill you that many times and bring you back to life. I'm told the experience will probably drive you insane." He turned to some men bringing equipment into the room, and said, "Let's get started."

Author's Note: Jane's player was leaving our campaign group at this point, and decided to post a dark ending for her character.

JAMES

President Obama's voice came clearly over the communicator. "Jim, I'd like to offer you the position of Surgeon General, pending Senate confirmation after Miriam's resignation takes effect. I know firsthand your expertise in the area of the new alien medical advances will come in very handy as we figure out how to help Americans without tipping Medicare and Medicaid completely over the edge."

"Mr. President, I'm honored to be asked to serve in this capacity. Will I be involved in the formulation of the overall health care policy program?"

There was a bit of static as the President replied, "Not only will you be involved, Jim, but I expect you will be a key architect. As you know, Hillary is very interested in this area as well, but given her responsibilities over at State, well, I don't think she'll have much time to focus on this very important area."

"Thanks again for the confidence, Mr. President. I do need to think about it; all I've done for the past several months is remain holed up at the X-Com base. How should I be in touch?"

"Jim, I'm going to put Rahm on the phone, and he'll work out logistics with you and respond to any more questions. We will need to get some information for the confirmation process. I'm hoping I can count on you - we have a lot of work to do to improve America's health care, and I'm confident you are the one to lead the effort."

VASILY

There was a party. Nothing in the history of human civilization deserved a party more, maybe.

It came after the eight team members on board Avenger-1 had the chance to get a much-needed shower, a few breaths of fresh air, and after a short but loud press conference and a very welcome, non-pea-based dinner reception. Considering the security laid down by SWAT and the dark-suited agents entrusted with the safety of the various representatives of national governments, it was odd to reflect that Alpha Team

were some of the few people attending who weren't carrying any weapons. It made a refreshing change.

At some time during his shower, the Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti had finally dropped him a line, the first since his arrival in America. He'd caught up with some of the news reports around the globe, and had scoffed amusedly at RTVi's enthusiastic but fact-light furor over the 'Russian-led' special forces team that had secured Earth's future. Even so, the FSB's line didn't entirely surprise him. Good to hear on successful assignment, hero of the Federation... glorious retirement offered, with a teaching post at a military college or training center of his choice. The grim memory of storming a base in the Urals and gunning down his fellow countrymen hadn't faded yet; not for him, and, apparently, not for the officers among the spetznaz. OSNAZ had no place for heroes, especially those who broke ranks.

He'd sent back the politest 'screw you' he could manage, just before dessert. He'd protect the motherland in his own way from now on.

The satisfaction he got from that still hadn't left him by the time the party rolled around... or maybe that was just the kind of natural high you had from watching people enjoy themselves. It *had* been a long time. He didn't catch a glimpse of Hadrian or Jane - perhaps they were talking to their respective superiors, or he simply couldn't see them in the press of the crowd - but he could see Mary hanging near the President's table, James at the bar telling a story to some admiring folks, Catalina cutting up the dance floor... it made a great picture, and he felt good about it. Maybe it wasn't quite his scene, but it was good, even if he felt most comfortable standing and watching.

For a moment, one melancholy moment, those faces he knew he wouldn't see here hung at the edge of his thoughts. The nameless workers, soldiers and others he'd not really paid attention to, sure, but mainly the dead; those he'd known, and those he hadn't. There'd been no time to introspect at the height of the conflict, but now... now, they all deserved a thought, at least one thought. He hoped that even if X-COM's actions couldn't give the Alien War meaning, they could at least give it closure, and that it would satisfy. He knocked his drink back in a silent toast, and stared at the far wall across the heads of the crowd.

"So. Director, eh?" queried a voice at his elbow, breaking his reverie. He gave an affirmative grunt as Agent Drake - Inise, even - took up position at his side.

She looked a little out of place, wearing the same dark suit as the other Presidential agents in the room, but then she had an excuse; she was working, not partying, and in that capacity it was hard not to think of her as anyone else but *Agent Drake*. Still, she had a drink in her hand - a fruit juice, most like - as a small concession to the party atmosphere.

They stood there, for a few moments. She wasn't looking at him; no, she watched the crowd, standing at the edge, her eyes picking out faces, much as he had done - much

as he was doing, in fact. He bobbed his head in time with the music, a little self-consciously. She drummed her fingers on the side of her glass, apparently lost in her own thoughts.

"How was—"

"You think—"

The two lines of conversation smacked into each other like a countermarch gone wrong, and the confusion that followed them stifled any others that came to mind. After a few anticlimactic moments, she gave a quiet, barely-audible sigh, drained her own glass and gave him a simple nod. "I'll see you later," she shrugged, making to fade back into the background.

"Hey!" he called out, on impulse. She half-turned, watching him almost warily.

Ah, what the hell. The consequences couldn't possibly be any worse than an alien invasion, and he'd already lived through *that*.

"I know we all really busy, but you think you can get any free time next week?"

That earned him a raised eyebrow, and another few moments of her attention as she mulled his words over.

"I'll call you," she promised at last, giving him the ghost of a smile before disappearing into the throng.

Well, that was something.

He gave his empty glass a smirk, nodding to himself, drifting from what had been done to what he had yet to do. Given the political situation, the humanitarian situation, the *intergalactic* situation, the scarcity of Elerium on Earth, the heavy load of work and responsibility that was likely waiting for him in Garret's former office and the nagging, paranoid feeling that in some way, this wasn't the end... he had a feeling there wasn't a soul that didn't understand that a guy, even a soldier or an official or a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders, had to make his own good times where he could.

HADRIAN

Hadrian hated formal receptions. They were usually filled with people he didn't know, or want to know, trying to chat him up about things they were totally clueless about and wouldn't understand, even if he did answer them directly. Of course, given the hosts, he couldn't blow it off, so he dutifully showed up in his dress blues and smiled politely as he parried the shower of inane comments and questions from the hordes before dinner. He caught occasional glimpses of the other team members through the crowd, and they

seemed, likewise, fully engaged by well wishers and glad handlers. He sat through the speeches during dinner, lost in his own thoughts and plans about his coming assignment. As soon as the last speaker sat down and the dancing and mingling took over, Hadrian slipped away and walked briskly back to X-COM central.

Though the brass was partying that night, it was business as usual and the night shift staff of techs and non-com's were hard at it. Some of them took double-takes and joked on seeing him decked out in his blues and ribbons. Ignoring the banter, he made his way back to the barracks, changed back into his fatigues, and carefully stashed his blues into a garment bag hanging in his locker. Next, he strolled over to the mess hall, grabbed a couple of bottles of beer and a pizza, and parked himself at a corner table to enjoy his own private banquet.

Over his dinner, he flipped open his xPhone and dictated three emails. The first went to Director of X-COM, a smile flickered that was Vas now, formally giving notice of his return to duty with the Corps and outlining some ideas for cross-training and seconding of Corps personnel to X-COM. The second one he cc'ed to his fellow Alpha Team members thanking them for their work, wishing them well in their next assignment and leaving them a personal contact number, should they need to get a hold of him for any reason. The last went to General Graves containing a list of men he wanted for his program, a brief schedule of training seminars and exercises, and notice he was taking thirty days of his accumulated leave, starting at midnight, before formally taking up his new post.

The meal and messages finished, Hadrian ambled back to the barracks. He cleaned out his locker and foot locker, easily fitting his few personal things and uniforms into his duffle bag. Turning his attention to his X-COM gear, he carefully stripped, cleaned and reassembled each of his issued weapons and armor. Leaving his bag on his bunk, he hauled his X-COM equipment back to the quartermaster and checked everything back in. Next, he stopped at the OOD and requested private air transport in an hour to Denver. There was some grumbling, but given his status, it was promptly arranged.

Collecting his bags, Hadrian settled into a stuffed chair in the lounge to await his flight. He slowly flipped open his xPhone and dialed in a number from memory. After a couple of rings a gruff voice answered.

“Jones residence.”

Hadrian paused slightly before responding.

“Good evening sir, this is Hadrian. I'll be flying into Denver in a couple of hours.”

After a brief delay the other voice responded.

“Very well, we'll be expecting you.”

There was a click.

Hadrian closed the call window and clicked open his Clausewitz's *On War* and settled down to wait.

CATALINA

“Special Forces Officer Saves The Planet.” Catalina read out loud the front page headline from the *Daily Mail* to the smiling receptionist behind the desk in the waiting area. “A little more interesting than ‘Threat Of Invasion Thwarted’ from the *Times*, don’t you think? I rather like this one though.” She picked up the copy of the *Sun* with the front page declaring “Cat Scratches Aliens,” accompanied by the same pictures from the press conference and of her in full uniform taken at the graduation from Sandhurst presented by the other newspapers, but they had also obtained a second one of her rather scantily dressed in a cat costume. “So, boys, you’ve got a lot to do to impress this alien-busting beauty if you want her to check out your emerging threat,” she said, quoting herself from the article, and looked up as the receptionist’s intercom buzzed.

“The country needs a hero right now,” the Prime Minister’s secretary had told her, in response to a quiet question concerning public profile during a hastily snatched briefing, then proceeded to outline the cover story of her involvement as a Special Forces Systems Expert, playing on her former education. So she had revelled in the limelight at the press conference, then basked in the attention late, danced the night away at the party, and at one point or another dragged just about every male X-COM member onto the floor, including a reluctant Vasily and a much less hesitant James. The following morning saw her packing her things and hastening to fulfill the final part of her orders: report to GCHQ in Cheltenham, the temporary home of SIS, for a full debriefing and new orders.

Making her general goodbyes as swiftly as possible to the team in general, with several repetitions of a “No peace for the wicked” answer to questions over the hasty departure, Catalina sought out the members of Alpha team. Fairly emotional exchanges of contact details and farewells took place with James and Mary, and she left instructions to pass on best wishes to Jane with Mary. A more restrained, but no less intense, exchange took place with Vasily during which formal contact information was established. She finally left the base at midday, on the first stage of her journey home to England. A bare forty-eight hours from landing in California saw Catalina in front of the Director of SIS with her report on his desk.

Catalina sat quietly as he leafed through the pages and then looked up at her impassively. “Quite a challenging mission, it seems, and satisfying result all round.”

“Yes, sir,” came her respectful reply. The Prime Minister had been one thing, but *this* was C.

“Mister Milliband wants a foot in the camp. We’ve given some thought to the rank that should be assigned to this and reached the conclusion that it should be above your current level.”

Catalina’s twitched imperceptibly at the words but she answered evenly, “That’s probably correct, sir.”

The Director’s expression didn’t change. “Hence I think promotion to Senior Operational Officer is probably called for, given the circumstances, Agent De Farrago.”

Stamping down on any open expression of elation, Catalina answered in similarly even tones. “Thank you, sir.”

“I’m told some form of public ceremony and honours award from His Majesty is pending. The most will need to be made from this in the interest of morale, but we still have some tidying up to do. The Commission is keen that we keep this as ‘in house’ as possible. Your current exposure is a complication, but nothing we haven’t overcome previously.” The Director closed the report and clasped his hands on the desk in front of him. “France awaits you, Agent, dismissed.”

* * * * *

Epilogue

The command center at the signals monitoring center at the Arecibo Observatory was almost empty; most of the staff was still celebrating in the village at the base of the hill. David Foster was enjoying a first-class sulk, wishing he was down there with them. Angelina was down there, no doubt, fending off the advances of that slick bastard Eduardo, from the NSA’s team. Thus far she’d resisted, but in the general mood of revelry and relief that had followed the successful return of the Mars mission, who knew what could happen?

“It’s not fair,” he said.

“Mm hm,” Gustav Prieto said, without looking up from his comic book.

“I mean, we won the war,” David added. This time Gustav didn’t even bother to respond, and after a moment, David pushed off from his chair and got up.

“I’m going to get a Coke from the machine. Do you want—“

He was interrupted by a ping from his monitoring station. Dropping back into his seat, he swirled his mouse to deactivate his screen saver, and looked at the data scrolling down his screen.

“Getting something,” he said. “That’s odd.”

Gustav Prieto finally lifted his eyes. “That statement is never followed by anything pleasant,” he said. When David didn’t respond, or look up from his screen, the other scientist sighed heavily and got up, moving to where he could look over the other man’s shoulder.

“It’s just background,” he said, after one look at the pattern displayed on the screen.

“No, wait, I think it’s a signal,” David insisted. “Look, the pattern waveform here is way too focused.”

“Point of origin?”

“Can’t tell. The source... it... it’s just *there*.”

“What do you mean? You can’t even ID the general direction? How can that be?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s something different, a tachyon beam, or something.”

Gustav snorted. He started to say, “Science fiction,” but he bit off the words unspoken. Too many things that would have been considered ‘science fiction’ a year ago had become very real.

“Within our solar system, or from outside?” he persisted. “Mars, maybe?”

“I told you, I can’t tell. The signal just appears, I don’t even have anything to base a plot from.”

“Pattern?”

“Computer’s not seeing anything right off. It doesn’t match any of the alien signals in our database.”

“Well, that’s a relief, anyway. What about the target destination?”

David hit some keys, and Gustav shook his head as a new field of data appeared. “No, look. Doesn’t even come close to any land masses. Not a signal, unless somebody’s trying to contact somebody living under the Earth’s oceans. Unless the signal’s a message to the whales, it’s nothing.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” David said, as Gustav went back to his chair and picked up his comic book.

“Nice try, though. Figured if you couldn’t go down to the party, you’d make them come up here, eh?”

“Heh, maybe,” David replied, with a smile. He hit ‘Save’, and then closed the file, and went to get his Coke.

THE END...?