

Part One

Centauri Incursion: Plus Sixty-Three Days

2203 - March

Prologue

Alpha Centauri Star System - Proxima B Proxima Colony – Northern Municipal District Forty-Six

The soldiers moved through the blackened bones of the colony with reckless abandon.

Private Connor Hawkins kept pace with Echo Section as they advanced through the hab-block ruins. Heavy boots crushed the remnants of this floor's collapsed ceiling, kicking up charred dust beneath the careless tread of the ten Albion troopers. The slivers of lumen strips crowning each of their pauldrons stabbed the darkness with bouncing tunnels of powdery light. The white of their armoured plate was marred with ash and blood.

"Echo-One. This is Alpha-One. We are in hard contact. Repeat, hard contact. Move yourselves!"

Interference warped Captain Bannon's voice over their helmet comms; Proxima Centauri's dying sun lashed the planet relentlessly with equipment-breaking radiation. Nothing had worked reliably since the Eighth Army of the United Nations of Earth had made planetfall. The squad picked up their already reckless pace.

"Copy Alpha-One. Echo is Oscar Mike and approaching rally point," Hawkins' section leader sent back with an impatient growl.

It was a forlorn hope that Sergeant Rixon's signal would reach their captain. None of the squad had missed the sound of heavy combat over the CommNet channel as Third Company of the Albion Eleventh Infantry, the so-called Luna Dogs, fought without them. The rest of the regiment was scattered throughout the colony's northern districts when the enemy struck. Echo Squad learned the hard way that the UNE no longer controlled the airspace when their dropship was knocked out of the skies en route to the rally point.

Echo-Six led them through the wreckage of the multi-level hab-stack that had once been home to over two hundred colonists. The lean recon-specialist barely slowed to check blind corners and empty stairwells. Ignoring the darkened hab-units of absent colonists that lined the passageway entirely. His PR80 pulse rifle snapped left and right like a malfunctioning automaton. Echo-One's gauntlet was pressed hard against the backplate of the scout, urging him onwards with greater speed.

Hawkins lingered at the back of their ragged formation. His visor's HUD was marred with splashes of crimson; intermittent IFF returns from dozens of UNE units engaged in combat across the colony scrolled down his vision. Enemy contact reports ghosting on and off his geolocator grid as his armour's sensor suite struggled to link reliably with the Command Net. Hawkins blink-clicked the distracting mess off his HUD.

Hawkins was one of nearly twelve thousand UNE soldiers deployed to the surface of Proxima B in response to an unprovoked attack on Earth's oldest extrasolar colony. Landing in the thin sliver of habitable space on the tidally locked planet barely forty-eight hours ago, they now fought for their lives under the perpetual twilight of Proxima B's night and day boundary. For all of Hawkins' training back on Earth, none of it helped make any sense of the disaster engulfing Eighth Army. What had started as a relief expedition had quickly degenerated into a desperate scramble for survival. None of them knew if the task force still held orbital supremacy above them. The command structure was fraying with depressing suddenness.

"Echo-Nine, you're fucking dawdling!" Corporal Gaz Miller snapped back at Hawkins. The veteran never missed the opportunity to chew out Echo Section's newest trooper even when the planet was going to shit all around them.

"Copy," Hawkins replied breathlessly. His wolfram plate growing heavier with every step closer to the fragile front Third Company had hastily thrown up. Just over a hundred Luna Dogs held the northern sector against the enemy flooding into the colony. The Gothicae Eighty-Ninth and Saturnine Tenth had already been routed. He shivered as he imagined the enemy bio-forms flooding that wide-open front. The same creatures that had almost overwhelmed their crash site.

"Exit point!" Echo-Six slammed one pauldron into the adjoining fire-blackened wall, the sealed doors miraculously remaining intact. The crash and rumble of a fierce infantry slugging match shook the broken walls around them.

Echo-Three stacked up on the opposite side to the scout. The assault-specialist's visored helmet did nothing to hide the eager snarl twisting his scarred mouth. The rest of the squad barely got positioned before the sergeant double-pumped his gauntlet. Hawkins didn't even have time to think – let alone be afraid – before he was pulled inexorably through the exit in Echo's wake.

Fate had chosen Proxima Colony's largest quad for Third Company's stand. Before fire and death descended upon the planet, this square had been the popular meeting point for the younger colonists. The recent influx of restaurant pods and AR-dominated bars – a new fad adopted from the Jovian colonies – was now nothing more than wreckage spilling out from the plaza's edges. The Landing Commemorative Fountain, which once dominated the centre of the expansive quad, had been reduced to a deep crater of scorched Proxima B soil and shattered marble. Stone that had been imported lightyears from Earth for a staggering cost.

The dozens of dead UNE soldiers scattered across the open square were new, too.

Hawkins froze as the storm of light smashed into him. His boots locked to the graphcrete as a wall of heat and noise enveloped the young Luna Dog. Energy rounds scorched the air between Third Company and the enemy-held northern side in a kaleidoscope of light and fire that shattered graphcrete, armour and flesh. Jagged amethyst spikes of plasma fire spat from empty windows and exposed walls of the surrounding buildings, intermingled with UNE pulser rounds of radiant sapphire. The relentless Proxima B winds snatched the smoke oozing from the cored-out wounds of dead Saturnine Fusiliers in the no-man's-land between the two forces.

A stunted lightning-spike of eye-searing brightness snapped Hawkins' world back into focus as it punched a nearby kneeling Luna Dog off her feet. Shattered chest plate vomiting oily smoke as the coppery taste of her burnt blood stung the back of Hawkins' throat. He gagged, throwing himself into the press of Albion troopers huddled in front of him. He was amongst Fox and Juliet Sections holding this low stretch of wall lining the quad's southern arcade. The repeated *booming* of recycling pulse rifles shook the walkway ceiling above Hawkins' helmet. Third Company squads were clumped dangerously close together, seeking every inch of cover beneath the colonnade.

Pushing himself back to his feet, he raced after Echo Squad. Ignoring the curses of the other Albion troopers, he stumbled and pushed his way through the press. His eyes fixed on the green status lights running down the backplates of Echo-Eight and Echo-Ten, moving to their assigned position in the defensive line. Catching up with his squad, Hawkins' HUD trilled warnings as he threw himself behind a chewed-up support pillar. It offered scant protection from the weight of small-arms fire lashing the thin line of UNE troopers.

"There's nothing on the scope!" Echo-Five scrambled behind the dead husk of a civilian roto-car. The tech-specialist knew better than any of the squad that the sensor suites built into their OTAS plate armour were next to useless on Proxima B. Ultraviolet radiation from the dying red dwarf forever locked on the horizon saturated this world mercilessly.

"Just fucking shoot them!" Corporal Miller bawled, firing his PR80. Fine dust jumped from the stunted wall with the kinetic discharge of his pulse rifle. The *crack-boom* joined the bedlam, rocking the square as if a thunderstorm had landed atop the company. Echo finally got into the fight.

Savagely outnumbered by a regiment-strength enemy, Third bought precious time with the currency of their lives for Colonel Rutledge to bring the rest of the Luna Dogs up to support their razor-thin bulwark. Time for the armoured divisions to deploy their mechanised walkers. For the fleet to recapture the skies.

Hawkins flinched as a screeching plasma round crunched into the opposite side of the pillar in an explosion of shattered rock and melted graphcrete. Needles of pain raked the soft tissue beneath his armoured form from the impact.

"They are pushing into the buildings on the right flank! Right flank!"

There was the merest hint of scarecrow figures moving amongst the dust-strewn shadows of the far side of the plaza. Their movements were jagged and unnatural. The PR80 in Hawkins's gauntlets was silent. The glowing full ammo counter on the rifle's receiver glared back at him accusingly. The vibration of its fully charged core growled in frustration, as if chafing at having remained unfired.

"Charlie moving to counter. Give us RG support!"

"Bravo, Delta, get your railguns on that building. Dropping marker now." Captain Rodrik Bannon orchestrated the Luna Dogs' defensive line from his perch in the walkway two levels above Hawkins.

Hawkins sank to his knees, chest plate pushed against the crumbling pillar, eyes drawn to the demi-squad of stranded Saturnine fusiliers begging for help in no man's land. Gone was the haughty, aloof attitude of the bluebloods from Saturn's orbital-states. None of the sneering contempt so readily shown to the rougher Luna Dogs on the troopship voyage from Sol. He couldn't hear their cries over the crashing noise of discharging pulse weapons, but their desperation drove a black spike into his heart. An amethyst bolt cracked into the back of the neck of one of the fusiliers, dropping the Saturnine like an automaton severed from its power core. The rest sought what little cover they could within the cratered fountain.

The Luna Dog to Hawkins' right cursed viciously as a ricochet smashed into his pauldron, shattering the wolfram plate into hot shards of molten metal that slashed madly through Echo, astonishingly missing all of them. Echo-Four snapped viciously like a wounded beast, cradling his PR80 in the one arm that still worked.

I am going to die.

Hawkins watched three Luna Dogs from Hotel Section crumble silently under the weight of enemy fire, not twenty metres from his position. He knew it was only a matter of time before he followed them. The thought had been growing insidiously inside Hawkins since the regiment had embarked from the Neptune staging area a month ago. They had come here to save the colonists. Regiments from Earth, Mars, Saturn and the Jovian colonies had travelled over four light-years to rescue them. But there was no one left alive to save. Hawkins tasted the musky texture of the planet's dust at the back of his mouth, clogging his throat so much that he couldn't breathe. His nose, lips and chin were covered in it – the only parts of his face exposed to the elements while wearing his OTAS and its visored helm. Atmospheric convection from the fiery 'day' side of the planet drove particles through the air on relentlessly brutal winds, creating a thick haze that fell across the battlefield. The skin of his face chafed raw by the painful lash of the uncaring wind.

Bright blood now soaked Echo-Four's arm, turning the storm-grey of his exposed bodyweave undersuit black as the limb hung lifelessly by the trooper's side. Swearing pain-filled curses, the Luna Dog continued to fight. Hawkins knew he should be fighting, too. All the long months of brutal training at Camp Avernus should have prepared him for this. To be a *soldier*. Muscle memory burned in place by the relentless, repetitive drills. Hours of lectures on squad tactics, combat formations and more. The knowledge was *there*.

His body just refused to move.

An energy round snapped at the air near his face. Static played across his jaw's exposed skin as the near miss electrified the air.

Rough hands took hold of the edge of his chest plate's gorget. Metal-encased fingers digging painfully into his neck as Hawkins was yanked back to his feet and slammed against the column.

"Get your bastard head in the game, Hawkins!" Miller screamed in his ear, their helmets crashing together as enemy fire snapped and hissed around the wolf-lean NCO. Amethyst plasma spikes strobed across their pale armour.

Hawkins had always hated corporal. The man leaked contempt like a failing fusion reactor. A veteran of a dozen actions, Miller had no time for the recent influx of recruits into the regiment — Hawkins among them.

“Bloody fight or I wi—”

The searing spike took Miller cruelly between neck and pauldron. Hawkins had the barest impression of a half-metre beam made of shards of light before it sank into Miller’s flesh. Burnt bodyweave and boiled blood showered Hawkins as the corporal was snatched backwards. Swatted casually aside by some spiteful god, Miller’s body was driven across the ground until his backplate crashed against the far wall in a clatter of lifeless limbs. Hawkins’ chest heaved, unable to tear his gaze from Echo’s corporal lying motionless. The man’s blood painted one side of Hawkins’ helmet unnoticed.

Third Company soldiers sprinted across his vision. Desperately racing to fill gaps in the line in a flash of snow-white armour as enemy fire carved a bloody toll through the stubborn Albion unit. But all Hawkins saw was Miller’s corpse. The corporal’s mouth was agape, as if in amazement that he had been hit. Hawkins couldn’t see the man’s eyes behind the blank stare of his helmet’s golden visor...so maybe he was blinking. Maybe Miller wasn’t dead but just wounded, and he would get up and shout at him to get into the fight. If he could be hit like that and get up, then maybe Hawkins had a chance.

A violet streak of light smacked into the hab-stack wall, raining flaming embers and debris over Miller’s still face, filling his exposed mouth with fragments of polyresins and graphcrete.

The corporal didn’t even twitch.

A sob escaped Hawkins’ mouth as he tore his gaze from the dead man.

“MAW support inbound,” Bannon announced their salvation over the CommNet. *“Just hold them, Luna Dogs.”*

Mechanised Assault Walkers. Eighth Army’s armoured contingent. Hawkins might have felt a flicker of hope at the support of sixty-ton, six-metre-high walking weapons platforms. Wielding particle cannons and Tempest railgun batteries, a squadron would decimate unsupported infantry in a close-quarters fight like this one.

The brief flicker of hope was quenched as a familiar drone vibrated the twilight sky.

“Incoming!”

Charlie-Leader tried to pull his squad back from the ingress they were making on the northeast flank. Caught in the open as they sought to exploit the enemy troops pinned down by Bravo and Delta’s heavy railguns. Those same RG208s now swinging their tri-barrels away from the hab-block and up at the trio of fighters lining up to strafe the Luna Dog’s held side of the quad. Even over the maddening cracks of energy weapons fire, Hawkins could now clearly make out the growing roar of their engines. Swooping down onto Third Company, radiated auroras haloed the six-wing foils elongating back behind each fighter.

“Cover!” a nearby Luna Dog NCO barked.

Luna Dogs scrambled out of the path of the attack run as the trio of fighters dived upon them like hunting eagles.

The polarised visor protecting Hawkins’ vision darkened automatically as an inferno hammered down from above, vaporising huge swaths of the quad in explosive impacts of violet lightning and chunks of molten shrapnel. The roto-car Echo-Five sheltered behind was incinerated, along with half the tech-specialist’s body. Oily smoke leaked from his charred mouth as his brain was flash-cooked in an instant. The Luna Dog was not even given the chance to scream through his melted lungs.

Overpressure smashed through the pillar, flinging Hawkins backwards. His armoured body punched clean through the wall behind him in a shower of dust and smoke. Damage alerts sang out for attention as he slammed hard into the ground. Wolfram plate cutting white streaks through the metal as debris cascaded off him. The world receded with a sharp clang as the back of his helmet bounced off the unyielding surface. Hawkins’ body felt like it had been dipped in ice as he blacked out for a fleeting moment. Numb to the blood-coloured alerts cascaded down his HUD. OTAS

integrity compromised. Multiple armour fractures detected. Numerous contusion alerts flashed across his bio-readings.

Hawkins dragged his helmet off, revealing bright grey eyes that blinked in confusion and pain as he lay prone in the deserted hab-unit. He ran a gauntlet over his short, bronze hair. Expecting his fingers to dig into the bloody shards of his skull, grunting when all he found was a painful lump already forming.

"Conn!"

Hawkins tried to move. Without the audio dampeners of his helmet protecting his hearing, the battle outside ratcheted up to another level of intensity. Another Luna Dog leapt through the hole his body had made in the wall. Dark shapes of Third Company troopers eclipsed the dusky Proxima light filtering into the hab behind her. She slid to his side, grabbing his head to pin it down, stopping him from moving around while she assessed the damage. The metal of her gauntlet was hot against the bare skin of his forehead.

"Conn, you are good, okay!" she reassured him after a cursory check of the fractures in his armour. The trooper had to shout so that he could hear her, even though she crouched right over him. "We've got to move, soldier!"

Despite the extra weight of his OTAS, she dragged him back to his feet. Her lean form belied the strength of her limbs as she pushed his PR80 back into his gauntlets. He stared uncertainly at the other Luna Dog.

You know her. His thoughts ran like syrup through his brain. The parts of her lean, narrow face that her helmet couldn't hide weren't pinched with terror like his. The familiar determination painted across her features triggered a memory in his abused mind. She was someone important to him...

"You've got a full charge." She slapped the side of his rifle, no hint of accusation in her voice. "Come on, they need us!"

She leapt back through the ragged hole without waiting to see if he would follow, PR80 spitting pulsers as she rejoined the fight.

The last place Hawkins wanted to go was back out into that hellhole. The smell of charred flesh and ionised air found him even in this long-abandoned hab-unit. The sounds of pulser volleys became more desperate as the Luna Dogs reeled from the enemy strafing run. The invaders' ground elements were pushing forward to take advantage of the outnumbered UNE forces now on the back foot. Tiny voices emanating from Hawkins' discarded helmet cried out for support over the CommNet.

Hawkins had taken his first shaky step back toward the battle when the horn sounded.

In all his short life, Hawkins had never heard a sound like it. So loud it drowned out the din of battling forces in the colony with its terrible call. His bones felt like glass shattering under the percussive sound despite the scant protection of the soot-covered walls. Vibrations lanced through his body, sending his stunned mind buckling under the onslaught. Gasping, Hawkins stumbled out of the hab-unit, terrified to see what caused such a sound as much as he was afraid of not knowing.

The great horn went on and on.

A red flare shot into the sky between the battling infantry at its signal. The crimson light pumped thick red smoke in its wake, carpeting the northern sector of the colony. Another flare shot out from the west, where the Selene Fifteenth and European Guard battled the invaders, screeching to the apex of its climb like a firework as it released more scarlet cargo. More appeared over the Martian-held power districts to the east. Around Hawkins, Echo Squad and the other UNE soldiers' fire slackened as they watched this display above them. The company almost taking a collective breath as they waited for what would come next.

Hawkins felt them before he saw them. As soldiers of Third Company recovered themselves from the acoustic assault, small vibrations vibrated up through Hawkins' blood-spattered armour and bodyweave from the broken ground underfoot. His eyes danced madly, seeking to pierce the thick wall of red smoke the enemy had thrown up before them.

"Fix bayonets!" came the cry down the line. The order echoed by Luna Dogs around Hawkins, depressing the button near the end of PR80 barrels. Ten inches of laser-cut steel flashed out with metallic snicks around him.

The horns stopped.

"What...?" Hawkins mumbled numbly.

Black shapes began to appear from amongst the red fog. Hundreds. Thousands. Stretching across the length of the quad and beyond. Running towards Third Company's position. Towards him. He could now hear them. The sounds of heavily armed killers charging in their thousands. To kill all of them.

"Standby to repulse!" Section leaders rallied their shell-shocked troops. Pulling the wounded back, leaving their dead where they fell.

The plaza rapidly filled with an oncoming tide of enemy soldiers, engulfing the few surviving Saturnine Fusiliers like a ravenous beast.

Hawkins finally saw who they had come to this distant planet to fight. Whom they had sworn to avenge themselves upon for the murder of thousands of colonists, he now saw the monstrous face of the enemy.

He dropped his fully-charged rifle and ran.