

Always the Last

"Through in teams. Hodgson, Cowell; clear floor 1. Kaleki, Gates, cover the rear. Move!"

Gates lazily doubled tapped his earpiece to confirm. This was the third building tonight. Same thing every time. Through in teams, Gates and Kaleki cover the rear. Another damned office block, same old drill. At least they were out of the rain.

Private First Class S.Gates slumped down next to the exit doors as soon as the last member of the recon team was out of sight up the stairwell. He smiled to himself – no work and a nice rest was fine by him.

"Shouldn't we be covering the rear?"Kaleki. Not a bad guy, but jumpy as hell. Always 'doing his duty'. Didn't know how to make the best of things."Kaleki, you see me not covering the rear? You see me charging off, guns blazing, like General Hiesman of the 33rd?"No..."Then sit down, shut up and stop dripping on me".

So far, so good. Reports of enemy activity in the sector had clearly been overestimated. That was fine with Gates. The fewer jellyheads he saw, the better. They'd seen some enemy corpses at the muster zone and that was more than enough for him. It wasn't that he was a coward exactly. It just happened that he'd always got by doing the least work possible. Pure luck. He always seemed to be at the back of the line, or just in time to take messages back to HQ before the rest of the unit went on a 15k training hike. Go figure.

Reaching behind the chestplate in his combat armour, he pulled out a crumpled pack of damp cigarettes. He fired up the tar-black tube and took a deep breath."Don't those give away our position?"Gates upgraded Kaleki from 'not bad' to 'pain in the neck'."Who to, genius? We're in the service entrance of a 20 story building and all the lights are on, beaming like a spotlight. If there were any of those jellyheads within 10 clicks of our position, which there ain't, you really think my one little light would make any difference?"

To his credit Kaleki didn't answer. Just stood there looking alert. These Maganum farm boys were all the same, so happy to be off the dull agri-world that they acted like boy-scouts all the time, desperate for any excitement.

He closed his eyes and took another puff. No excitement wanted here, no thank you. If the Reconquest carried on like this, Gates could learn to like it just fine.

Tap Tap Tap.

Tap Tap Tap.

Tap.

“Cut it out will you?” slobbered Gates, giving him an angry look. “What?” “Stop it with the tapping. If you’re that bored, go check the perimeter!” “I’m not doing anything!” “Sure, and I’m not smoking. Just go do it and stop bugging me!” Unslinging his rifle, Kaleki started off down the corridor. “Wasn’t doing anything. And you should be covering the rear!” “You be thorough now. Don’t want any of the nasty Scourge sneaking up on us do we?” “Bite me Gates”

On his own at last. He closed his eyes again, inhaled his smoke and listened to the rain rattle against the exit door. So much for an alien infested planet, he thought. The rain’s still wet, patrols still suck and the infantry still get lumped with the footslogging. But if you knew how to play things, you always ended up sitting down with a smoke. Oo-rah.

Tap TapTap.

“Kaleki, I swear...” Gates heard a distant crump and the lights went out. His eyes snapped open. This was past a joke. Outside the wind howled as the storm increased in intensity. Standing, he reached for his UM-3 but felt nothing but air. Panic started to set in. “Kaleki, what’s going on? What’s your position?” he rasped, tapping the radio. There was no reply. “Sergeant? Hodgson! Anyone, respond!”

There was a sudden gristly crack, then nothing but static. Falling to his hands and knees Gates floundered in the dark, pawing the damp floor desperately for his gun. The only light was a sickly yellow from the cigarette still clamped between his lips. Each new puddle gave no hope.

Tap Tap Tap.

Gates stared. It was louder this time, and more metallic. No, not totally metal. More like the click of a finger nail, or knuckles on a door. Whatever it was, it was inside. Here. With him. He crawled on all fours towards the exit. ‘Gotta get out of here’, he thought wildly. ‘Think up an excuse later Gates, just get the hell out’. His hand slipped on something wet and metallic, dumping him sideways into the wall and knocking the air out his lungs.

Frantic grabbing gave him a ray of hope. It was the butt of his rifle. Pulling it up to firing position, he checked the magazine for the first time since basic training. And couldn’t find it. Gates held it up close to his face, the pale yellow of the cigarette confirming his worst fear. The front of the gun was missing. Barrel was sheared through, the gnarled half that was left was covered in sticky mucus.

Tap. Tap.

He froze. It was right above him. The ruin of his weapon fell from his shaking hands. No running now.

Tap. Tap.

Brave for the first time in his life, Private S. Gates looked upward at the Razorworm hanging above him. Gawping open mouthed, the cigarette fell from his lips. In the closing darkness his world became jagged teeth, searing pain and silence.

Tap.

Short narrative piece – The Next Life

The wave gun fired again, vaporising the mouldy remains of an office desk and the wall behind it covered with notices. The Siren screamed in pain and frustration, slumping to the floor. Her right hand skittered away from her, magnum still grasped in the lifeless fingers. She dropped the second gun and clutched the stump to her, huddling against the far wall.

Shouldering its way through the hole in the wall, the 8 foot tall Firstborn let out a grating, guttural rasp; laughter, heard through the might of a Warsuit. “You have led me a merry dance woman; you honour your tribe. But no matter how much metal they put in you, you are still just a human”.

Advancing on her it drew its energy sword with a flourish. Raising it high, it prepared for the final strike.

The shot rang out, loud and percussive. Warning glyphs glowed bright in the Warsuit’s sensor suite, but it couldn’t move to activate the repair function. It couldn’t lower the sword to deliver the kill. It couldn’t move at all except for the eyes, which roved frantically across the screens desperate for some explanation.

Now there was a different sound, filtered back through the environment sensors. Soft, floating and dripping with scorn; laughter, from a human throat. The Siren stood up, brushing herself off with her left hand. It was only then that she seemed to notice her arm, ending in a neat, bloodless cut and white metal neuro-bundles. A look of fake shock crossed her features. “Do you know how much a new skin graft will cost?” she said, in a tone that suggested a spilt drink on a new rug.

With balletic poise she flipped under the outstretched sword and landed noiselessly in the corner of the room beside her missing hand. The magnum still clutched in the fingers was smoking.

“Though I must admit, I’ve wanted to try that for a while” she purred.

“Detachable arm plus idiot alien spike-ball equals too much fun to pass up. Straight shot, through and through. Took some calculation, but I was getting fed up of our little game.” She giggled now, holding the detached hand to the arm joint. With a slight click it reattached, and she spun the magnum round on her index finger for effect.

“Trouble is, under all that armour you’re flesh, spines, and nerves. One shot to the base of the skull and bye-bye nerve control. No nerve control, no movement. No movement, well...” She flipped again, this time hooking her legs over the outstretched sword arm to end upside-down staring straight into the optical sensor suite.

“...no anything. You can put a spiny dwarf in a metal can, but you’re still just a Shaltari” She cocked the hammer on her RXp-44 magnum, touching the barrel flush to the optical aperture. Its eyes widened further in silent, anguished protest.

“I’d say remember this in your next life” she whispered, “but you won’t have one”. She kissed the black voltaic glass and pulled the trigger.

Finally, here is our latest short story... we hope you enjoy!

“Abraxis, what’s our record for kills in a single volley?”“68, Master.”Ciaus let himself float through the neural net connecting his dormant body to the Menchit walker. All systems were performing well, and Abraxis – his AI – was ready for the hunt.“I think we can do better than that, don’t you? Give me a precision battle view with a movement-acquisition overlay”The questing tendrils of his mind ran through the battle walker, solidified into a 180-degree view of a wrecked urban plaza. The view was crystal clear despite the smog and dust of battle, with everything stationary tinged dark grey. Instantly bright blue movement flashes lit up in the grey; Scourge infantry dodging and weaving towards the static walker.“Abraxis, set firing triggers to mind impulse. Minigun triad. Give me a count;

Ascending, top right. And....begin”He lashed out with his mind, pinpoint three round bursts changing each moving blue blur to a blue smear before it melting into the immobile grey. The kill counter to the right of his vision ticked upwards rapidly. 19.20.21.22.23.24. “This is an inefficient use of the RX-20’s potential killing power, Master” chided the AI.25.25.

“Damn. Missed one. You put me off my aim.”“Apologies Master.”“Well it’s ruined now. Full cycle, scythe fire” he ordered, lazily switching to auto-targeting with a thought. The guns cycled up, spraying death left and right with lethal efficiency. Blurs that were once host warriors were obliterated. Where they had taken cover, rubble and flesh were churned up together. Where they were caught in the open, they simply evaporated; bodies burst open and turned to a thin red mist. “Further threats indicated. Western approach. My Master, these are unregistered hostiles. Searching Pantheon data banks for the most prudent course of action”“Abraxis, what is my first rule?”“But recent encounters with these hostiles suggest that even the application of the RX-666 is not sufficient—”

“The first rule?”“Everything burns, Master.”“Everything burns Abraxis.”Hulking shapes appeared on the movement scanners, three times the size of the previous enemy infantry. Even with his mind suspended in the neural connections of the walker, Caius felt their heavy footfalls. No matter. Everything burns. “Re-load all. Concentrated fire from the Miniguns. Hold Flamethrower until half effective distance. Let them come on.”The grey filter darkened as he saw them for the first time, hulking brutes with arms lashed to glowing blue cannons. They seemed to register his stare and paused in their thudding advance. Three of them, tri-eyed. They stopped in their tracks to regard him like a piece of meat to be devoured. Spittle dripping from un-human fangs, they charged at the walker, roaring and crushing the corpses of fallen scourge as they charged. I am no prey-thing to be discounted so easily brutes, thought Ciaus.

“Belay previous. Full auto, let fly all, empty the tank.” He snarled. “Let them taste the RX-666. Immolate them.”

Jets of liquid flame leapt from the walker towards the beasts. Super-heated fuel bathed them in fire. What had been bellows of hate turned to agonised grunts and wails of pain. Armour cracked and split, the alien meat inside turning black and boiling away inside its own shell. “Everything burns, Abraxis”In the flickering light of the destruction he had wrought, Caius smiled.

“We’ll wait for the flames to die down and echo-mark the location. They die very easily for large creatures, but Pantheon data banks should be updated non-the-less.”“Master, sensors indicate-”Before the AI could finish the dying flames erupted with blue light. Charged plasma impacted the right side of the hull, melting the flamethrower and

sending angry red warning flashes across Caius's vision. "Abraxis, report!" "Everrrrrything burns M-a--a--st--e-e-r-r" "Abraxis!"

Reaching out in the neural link Caius probed for the damage report.

RX-666 Flamethrower: Offline. Primary Gyroscopes: Offline. Secondary systems: attempting to compensate. Failed. Primary AI Core: heavy damage. Primary servos: Offline. Redundancies: Offline. Servos Failing.

Through a haze of red warnings and beating emergency klaxons, Caius could still make out the plaza. Heat blasted concrete and molten metal was spread over the streets, but even as the fires receded he could see something moving amongst the carnage. Caius pulsed urgent disbelief into the mind link. "They're still alive! Abraxis, How are they still alive? Respond!" "Eeeee...every....---every {ERROR} everythin-g....BURN BURNBURNssss - Everything burns Masssterrr"

Two of the beasts were rising from the heat. One had no eyes left, the red orbs cracked and burnt out. But still it rose, thick black tongue lolling out of its mouth as if tasting the air for the foe. The other had lost one eye, but in the guttering flames the remaining two shone blood red. Half its body and most of the snout were blackened to charcoal, and its left arms hung uselessly from stringy bundles of cooked muscle and sinew. It was the right arm that Caius focused on. It glowed bright and deadly, pulsing blue-white in the grey of his vision. The barrel spewed plasma. Everything was in motion. The Menchit toppled backwards and was sheared in half at the waist by the power of the charged weapon. The images in Caius's mind turned hazy and began to swim in and out of view. Red flashing sigils were everywhere, catastrophic damage to all systems indicated.

"EVERYTHING {ERROR-logic:-:designation ABRAXIS not found}
burnsmasterburnsmasterburns--"Abraxis, badly damaged, stuck in a logic loop.

He had to disconnect. If the walker died with his mind linked, he could no longer count on the fail-safes to get him out before complete system crash. Forcing an emergency severance, he blacked out for a few seconds, feeling his mind return to his human form.

The first thing he felt was the pain. Flooding his senses and nearly overwhelming him, even the stims in his body could not cope. His right leg was gone; his left, a bubbling, melted mess of flesh and metal. The next thing that hit him was the smell. The acrid stench of cooked, rancid meat, burning oil and molten plastics made him light headed and nauseated. The destruction of his walker and his own body melded into a fug that clung to him. The last thing he felt were globules of tar-black drool dropping on his face. His head lolled back in the command chair and his eyes bulged as he looked into the hungry crimson orbs staring down at him.

"Everything burns Master...{Error-pilot not found}"

Compliments of the UCM

"Come on! Move it move it!" Lieutenant Vinnig shouted, counting off the five remaining men as they passed him, before following them up the street towards a blue signal flare by an old bus. Taking cover before the rendezvous was not an option – this monster just stomped it flat or shot right through it.

The sounds of carnage echoed down the street after his squad. Risking a glimpse backwards, he saw plumes of fire and smoke fill the road. The charred remains of a Wolverine pin-wheeled into the ground floor of the building to his right and then exploded, causing glass to rain down over the squad. He ran and jumped over the remains of a civilian car, sliding into cover behind the bus. Tapping his short range comms to platoon level, signalled the legionaries in the office block on the left.

"We are in the killzone, repeat, we are in. Draw in the hunter". Panting for breath he looked at the wreckage of the street he had just come down. The gigantic frame of a scorpion walker rounded the corner and turned to face him, firing bursts of huge calibre death in every direction.

"Roger that Scout 1, we see him. Stay down sur" responded Sargent Heath. Rather him down there than me, he thought. Each footstep of the PHR construct rattled the windows and shook the walls like an earthquake. Looking into the nervous faces of his legionaries, Heath gave it to them short and sharp.

"I Ain't got no speech. It's one big ugly beast, but it's in the goddamned way, and that dog just ain't gonna hunt. It's dead, just don't know it yet. Phoenix missiles up front."

As one man, the UCM troopers stood to the windows, looking down at the white metal of the Hades walker.

"Aim for the head to kill the pilot. Give it to him boys!" he roared, kicking out the window-pane and firing on full automatic. His troops poured round after round into the forward segment of the scorpion. Gunfire burst harmlessly against the armoured shell like raindrops, but the missiles found their mark. Smoking trails arced one after another towards the sensor dome, ripping chunks from the beast and scrapping the oversized mandible miniguns.

The thing screeched and shivered like some ancient leviathan. Missile after missile slammed into it. With each impact its body shuddered closer to street level. The massive tail-gun slashed left and right looking for targets but could not elevate to the fourth floor to retaliate.

A final shot skewered straight through the body like a hunting spear, exploding into the street below.

The Hades finally came to rest, slumped against the still burning building where it had sent the scout vehicle moments earlier. Wild cheers erupted from the legionaries.

Hatches on the thing's back sprang open and black and white smoke began to leak out.

Vinnig's voice pinged in Heath's ear. "Scout one, can you confirm kill?"

"Well sur, it's either dead or it got real sleepy" came the response over the radio. "Intelligence suggested it would take more to put it down, hence the trap. Heath, get down there and confirm kill. If the pilot isn't dead, the walker isn't dead" "Roger that sur" fired back Heath, rolling his eyes. "Ok boys, squads 2 through 5 stay here. First squad, follow me. The elite of our military is all jumpy until we go flush the nasty bug away" Heath was followed by laughter as he and first squad abseiled out through the smashed glass towards the prone walker. They were half way down as the billowing smoke clouds from the machine reached the fourth floor and seemed to curl in through the open windows.

*****From his cover on the street Vinnig assessed his men. He was the furthest back, with his four remaining men scattered behind cover towards a monorail station at the end of the street. Only four left of the fifteen he'd started the drop with. Poor odds, but they had cost the enemy more than ten times their number. "Well done squad. Way point at the station for evac. I'll stay here to confirm then meet you in ten." "What about the package sir?" said corporal Sheedy, the weapons specialist. "Leave it Sheedy. Once we secure the city we can recover lost supplies. Time is more of a fact-" He was interrupted by screams over the radio. *****The first thing Heath noticed was the rain. A large, wet droplet hit his face and ran down his chin. Then he realised that the laughter from above had turned to screams.

Looking up he saw men tumbling out of the windows, caught in great plumes of black smog that had come from the Hades. Each man was scrabbling at his face, his chest – flailing as he fell as if caught in a pack of angry wasps. It was voracious, catching anyone who fell and turning them into red vapours and thin rain before they even reached the first floor. Heath gaped, open mouthed. Then the smog hit the static ropes, eating into them and sending first squad falling the last 15 metres to the ground. Heath slammed into the pavement, and felt bones snap. Blood flowed into his mouth. He'd bitten through his tongue. He rolled over and wretched up, wiping away the residue with the back of his glove. Pain throbbed and vibrated through his body and he stood up slowly, trying to make sense of his surroundings. First squad was dying all around him. To his right three men were dead from the fall. To his left others were writhing in the black smog. This close it looked like they were covered in tiny black ants, stripping and flensing them to the bone. But Heath's world was just the throbbing, grinding and pain. Too late he realised it wasn't in his head. The Hades was moving. Back on its six legs, it too was wrapped in smoke trails, but white instead of black. Wherever the smoke touched battle-damage re-grew, missile impacts healed and buckled armour smoothed

out. Only the mandible guns stayed broken, twisted out of all use, though this didn't reduce the PHR behemoth's killing power. Heath was sure that it looked at him – like a bored cat looks at a broken mouse – right before a gigantic front foot descended to grind him into the roadway.*****The praetorian Lieutenant could only watch the devastation. There was no point in using the comms – it was clear there was no-one left to radio. Vinnig realised it had been toying with them. Playing dead then attacking. It hadn't even fired its tail gun; it hadn't needed to. After taking out an armoured column the infantry were just a distraction. He narrowed his eyes. "Sheedy, take the rest of the squad and evac. I'll deal with this." "Sir, the proximity may-" "No more games. This ends. It ends. You have your orders" Sheedy hesitated, before saluting. "Yes sir. An honour, as always... On me!" With that he and the other Praetorians doubled timed towards the station, leaving Vinnig to face the beast as it advanced. The sting folded down onto its back as it came forward, and the mini guns were still beyond use.

It wants to step on us like cockroaches, he released. Squash us like ants. It's enjoying the game. So, it likes games does it? He thought. Let's try a new one!

Vinnig stood up, and un-hooked his flak jacket. Placing his SMG on the street, he took off his helmet, smoothed down his fatigues, stuck both hands in his pockets and sauntered out of cover towards the Scorpion walker. With each casual step he spoke in an even tone, sure the oncoming construct and its pilot could hear him. "I've never had that much hate for you. I thought one day we'd resolve our differences and retake the cradle worlds as brothers." It continued to advance on him, intent on crushing him to paste. Vinnig appeared unconcerned. "Post human, pre human. We're all human" It was almost on him now. "But you really are different. Un-human. Abhorrent." Towering above him, it slowed to raise the blood-slick foot that had ended Heath. "Let me remind you of your humanity" he said, pulling his hands from his pockets to reveal two remote detonators. The Hades tried to re-adjust, suddenly fearing the trap it was caught in. "Compliments of the UCM" said Vinnig, pressing the detonators. The bottom floors of the two buildings behind Vinnig imploded, precisely cutting supports and stanchions. Thousands of tons of office block fell right on top of the reeling beast and Praetorian lieutenant, who smiled all the way down.