

PROLOGUE

—From the Ashes—

Remnants of Biological Materials Storage Facility C-5, Outskirts of Vivedd April 13thth, 2981

“Holy shit, I can’t see three feet in front of me,” Mike called out over SquadCOM, “I mean, honestly, would it hurt to install some optics in this gear so we can actually see in this biological wasteland? It’s like trying to see through a pile of cow shit!”

“Just calm down and head back, your visor must be faulty, we can see fine,” Rob, his squad leader said, “We’ll meet up later, back at the barracks.”

“Fine by me, see ya guys later,” Mike replied, and he ran toward where they had come from, vanishing into the haze.

To anyone except those in functional HAZMATCOM gear, the area looked as if it had died, rotted, then frozen in time. Everywhere a thick green fog clung in the air; fallout from when BMSF C-5 got destroyed two hours prior. All the vegetation looked long dead, and for the most part, badly mutated. It was best described as stepping into a nightmare, letting it rot, and then trying to get back out. The now four-person squad, however, could see fine. Optical enhancers built into their visors analyzed the visual conditions and used algorithms to enhance and correct their view of the area, making it easier for them to see. It was akin to looking through an old clouded lens, then replacing it with a new one.

The four that remained, however, all wore this equipment. HAZMATCOM gear, Hazardous Materials Combat gear, was a heavily modified version of standard HAZMAT gear, streamlined for combat in toxic environments. Even when streamlined however, the suits were bulky and difficult to move in; making them something soldiers dreaded using. Today, though, it was a necessity. In addition, the squad was armed with no less than the latest in heavy assault rifles, the highly adaptable and modular HR5. Firing .30 calibre rounds from an eighty round twin-drum magazine, with a rifled barrel to increase accuracy, the HR5 was deadly accurate at ranges of approximately one hundred meters.

As the four man squad moved deeper into the toxic forest, rifles raised, Rob activated his COM and said, “Stay alert, there may be Jekotian soldiers in HAZMAT gear waiting for us, don’t let them take us by surprise. Those bastards have a tendency to survive in places like this.” Two seconds later, three status lights briefly burned green in his heads-up-display; acknowledgement of orders from the others.

Five minutes later, Rick, who was on point, signalled for them to stop.

“I think I found the remains of C-5, who’s got the scanner,” Rick called out. Rob turned to Alex, their tech specialist, and signalled for her to join Rick and verify the structure. A few moments later, the scanner verified the structure, with a positive ID on BMSF C-5.

“It’s a match sir, or at least what’s left of it is,” Alex said, as she strolled back over.

“Ok, deploy a motion sensor here, were moving on,” Rob replied.

Less than a minute later, the motion sensor was deployed and they moved deeper into the forest, taking care not to step on anything mutated. Suddenly, Kay, their medic, let out a loud scream. Adrenaline filled Rick as he hurried in her direction, releasing the safety on his rifle as he ran. Status indicators in his HUD winked on, and diagnostics streamed across his vision. Checking his ammo indicator, he cycled the bolt and levelled his rifle as he came to where Kay stood. She stood motionless, staring ahead, oblivious of his presence. Behind him, he heard the rest of the squad coming to a stop. Moving closer, trying to see what Kay was staring at, he nearly vomited in his helmet.

A three meter high pile of corpses, some torn open by shrapnel embedded in the body, was sitting on the forest floor, leaning against a tree. Body parts were strewn everywhere, and lacerated corpses spilled their organs onto the ground.

"My god, what the hell happened here," Alex asked, "It looks like they went through a sawmill." Stepping closer, she pulled out the scanner to check for any Brenodi IFF tags. "Nothing, sir, they're all Jekotian."

"Ok, mark them for recovery. When we're done, I want these corpses decontaminated, searched, and examined, they may have something of use, or at least shed light on what occurred here," Rob said. "Move out, we're going deeper."

"With all due respect, sir, this area is hardly secure," Alex began, "we should secure—" Alex was abruptly cut off, followed by a scream. As the once dead corpses around them started convulsing, four Jekotian soldiers attacked her from behind. She started firing at them, and as Rick raised his rifle, Rob yelled,

"HOLD YOUR FIRE! She's still in there!" Moments later, the gunfire stopped, and her bio-signs flat-lined in his HUD.

"Shit, they got her, OPEN FIRE," Rob yelled, raising his rifle. In less than a second, Rick and Kay's fire joined his, creating a lethal barrage of lithium-trinitite. The Jekotians body armour absorbed the majority of the rounds, but they staggered back, unable to stand their ground, before crumpling, dead.

"Fall back, fall back to Rally Point Charlie," Rob yelled over SquadCOM, turning back towards the demolished storage facility, breaking into a sprint. Glancing back, he saw Kay and Rick following, and behind them, the convulsing corpses starting to stand. *What the hell are we up against, fucking undead?*, Rob asked himself. Nearing the rally point, Rob signalled his squad to take shelter inside the facility.

"Stay quiet, they may pass us," he told them.

"Who may pass us," Kay asked, slightly panicked.

"Those corpses, their not corpses anymore," he answered back, "so shut up and stay quiet. I don't want you making noise and alerting them to our position."

For what felt like minutes, they stood sheltered inside the weakened structure, listening waiting, fearing. As Rob moved to a back door, hoping for his squad to make an escape, it flew off its hinges narrowly missing him. The door struck a damaged wall crumbling it, and the remains of the facility started to cave in.

"RUN," he yelled at Kay and Rick, heading out the way they came in, as the structure collapsed. Moments after they got outside, he realized they were surrounded.

"Stagger your fire, take turns reloading, don't let them overrun us," Kay shouted.

For minutes they held their ground, kneeling with their rifles raised, staggering their fire so only one reloaded at a time. The Jekotians staggered with each bullet impact, being pushed back.

Suddenly, without warning, a tree came crashing down behind them. Rob screamed in pain, his leg pinned by one of the trees great limbs.

"Leave me, go, there's no time. Take the beacon, I'll contact HIGHCOM and authorize an orbital strike, use encryption Zulu Echo for clearance," Rob told Kay, handing her the small but powerful device. She took it and pocketed it.

"But--"

"GO," he yelled at her, "leave me and go!" Kay winced and complied. She knew he was right, but he was her brother, she couldn't bring herself to leave him.

Rick grabbed her by the arm and pulled her away, running deeper into the forest as tears welled in her eyes. Behind them, they heard gunfire, followed by the explosion of a grenade; Rob's final stand.

They moved toward the extraction point, the same place the dropship dropped off their squad, roughly a kilometre away. *If Mike was too late to catch the dropship, he may be there, he may help us,* Kay thought. As they ran, they occasionally paused to shoot their pursuers, and then the final nail was hammered into their coffin. Passing under a tree, firing behind them, a Jekotian dropped down from high in the branches. The soldier reached forward before either could react, and snapped Rick's neck. He quickly met his end with a ten round burst to the head from Kay's rifle.

Alone and panicking, she broke into a sprint toward the extraction point, rifle slung across her back. Feedback from the motion detector told her that roughly eleven unidentified contacts were behind her. After running for five minutes, throwing the occasional grenade towards her pursuers, she stopped, unable to run. She toggled the bio-signs on her HUD, and saw that she had pulled a muscle in her left leg. *I guess I didn't feel till now because of the adrenaline,* she mused. Activating her ranged COM gear, she set the encryption channel to Zulu Echo, and recorded a message for HIGHCOM, "This is Private First Class Kay Delphi. Jekotian forces in the region have experienced reanimation when in contact with biological fallout in the vicinity of BMSF C-5. Requesting an orbital strike in my area, coordinates are attached, beacon is transmitting." Seconds later, she received a reply; "Affirmative. I'm passing the recording to RAILCOM, you have ten minutes to get out of there." She was about to try to walk again, to get away from the strike zone, but then, without warning, someone grabbed her from behind. Kay was only five foot eight, and whoever had her easily lifted her off the ground. Then it reached around and grabbed her by the neck, turning her so they could see each others faces.

"Who, who are you," she asked, stuttering. He replied with a grunt, and as she looked into his eyes, she saw a feral ferocity, like that of a wild animal. He wasn't Jekotian, he wasn't even human, and behind him, more of them appeared. He raised his fist, as if to finish her, and she prepared herself. *This is the end, beaten to death, helpless, by some monstrosity,* she thought to herself. He dropped her, staggering back and screaming like something possessed. All of them did, as if they had been hit by severe disorientation and pain. Taking advantage of the opening, she drew her pistol from its holster and raised it, ready to fire at the one that dropped her. Before she could take aim, he recovered, wrenching the pistol from her grip.

“Who the hell are you,” she screamed at him, “What do you want from me!” He merely laughed, drawing a knife from his belt.

“Hey Mickey, what should we do with this one?” he called out.

“Kill her, were done here,” someone called back.

As he turned away, Kay glimpsed an insignia and lettering on his shoulder; ‘Our Lives for Jekotia,’ wrapped around a twin-headed phoenix, wings spread. As a final act of defiance, she unholstered her smaller .246 magnum and brought it up to his head. Feeling the movement, he turned back to her and said, “And what do you think your doing.” She merely replied with a grin, and pulled the trigger. As the one named Mickey shouted in alarm and levelled a rifle at her, a sonic boom roared from the sky once, twice, three times, and the surrounding forest was torn apart.