

The shot, when it came, sounded like nothing more than a packing crate being dropped. It banged out against the walls and over the metal deck plates before fading to an echo, and then nothing.

By ship's time it was pre-dawn, so the chamber was dark. The men were still in bed—a couple muttered and turned over, but most did not even stir.

Only one seemed to find something amiss. He lay on a bare mattress, fingers interlaced across his chest, which rose and fell as if he were asleep. But at the sound of the shot his eyes sprang open. It had come from the bunk immediately below his own, so he was close enough to hear the wet splattering that followed the report.

It was a sound he knew could only be made by brain matter being ejected at high speed.

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Gunnery Sergeant Nathan Early of Gopher Company, 22nd Division Dominion Marine Corps, stood at half-hearted attention, his feet bare on the metal grilles of the deck.

To his left and right stretched ranks of men, red-eyed and sleepy, their shoulders slumped with fatigue. Few managed to keep their eyes forward. A couple were scratching their heads and yawning. In the crew quarter hall of the rearward barracks of the Dominion battle cruiser *Thunderfoot*, the men of Gopher awaited inspection.

They occupied a small assembly area, while at their backs a forest of bunk bed towers climbed to the ceiling. Each tower was five berths high, and regulation width for each sleeping berth was two feet and ten inches. According to the Quartermaster Corps of the Dominion Navy this was the ideal size, because it allowed medium-haul vessels to carry a full company of Dominion Marines in a single refitted cargo bay. According to Sergeant Nathan Early, two feet ten inches was 'just enough room to be buried, long as you got your gut sucked in'.

Now, Early stood as straight as he could even though his toes ached with cold. The assembly was earlier than usual, and with the morning's turn of events he had not had time to pull on his boots.

"Well!" bawled a voice, "What a pitiful sight we are to-day!"

Gopher Company shuffled to attention. Early balled his hands into fists and jammed them down by his sides, thrusting his chin towards the ceiling just as a massive pink face loomed into his vision.

"Good mornin' to you, Sergeant," said the face. It had thick, brutish lips and a high forehead, and when the muscles beneath the skin worked, lines spread out from the corners of the eyes like tiny nets.

"Good morning, Colonel Pyrrhus!" Early yelled.

"How did you sleep?"

"Well, sir! And you, sir?"

"Like a righteous man, Sergeant," Colonel Lucius Pyrrhus smiled, and the teeth were the color of coffee, or cigars, or both, "Ah only wish ah could say the same for you boys down here."

Early lowered his voice, "Yes, sir. Been a rough night, sir."

"Mmm."

Colonel Pyrrhus straightened, until he stood a full head taller than Early. He took a couple of steps and glanced along the line of Marines.

"Ah understand, Sergeant, that you were the one first found the body."

"Yes, sir," said Early, "Bunk below mine."

“He still there?”

“Most of him, sir.”

Pyrrhus smiled again. A gold molar winked in the side of his mouth.

“That’s clever, Sergeant. Ah am inclined this mornin’ to cut you some slack for your cleverness. Also for your men turnin’ out in such a state as this.”

Pyrrhus swept his gaze over the disheveled Marines, and down to the Sergeant’s bare feet. Early gave no reply.

“Ah ain’t completely without empathy,” said the Colonel.

Pyrrhus suddenly moved away down the line and Early had to hurry to catch up, his bare feet smacking on the steel grate floor. When he arrived at the Colonel’s shoulder, he was already talking.

“What was the boy’s name?”

“Udell, sir. Corporal Jacob Francis.”

Pyrrhus sighed and shook his head, “Helluva thing to happen right now, Sergeant.”

“Yes, sir,” said Early.

“It’s gonna put a thick wrinkle in our preparations. The desk hounds are swarmin’. Ah don’t know if I can keep ‘em out this time.”

The sleepy men in the line stiffened as Pyrrhus passed, backs snapping straight.

Sergeant Early chose his words with caution, “They could... get the drop aborted, sir?”

The Colonel tossed his head back and gave a laugh – a smoky, mirthless noise.

“Nice try, Sergeant, but no. You and these ladies,” he waved a hand at the square-jawed faces that slipped past one after another, “Have a show to attend. Ah would hate to see you miss the opening number.”

Early drew a deep breath through his nose.

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, and Nate...”

Colonel Pyrrhus stopped dead, and Early caught himself a few inches short of crashing into the Colonel’s back. As Pyrrhus turned, Early jumped to attention.

“Yes, sir?”

“Ah gotta ask you,” Pyrrhus lowered his voice to a whisper, which smelled strongly of burning tobacco, “Any idea how the boy came by a weapon?”

Early tensed the muscles in his back.

“No idea, sir,” he said.

“Aw, come on, Nate. You found the boy. He didn’t have it on him?”

Sergeant Early gazed into the Colonel's eyes. He saw the age lines that gathered at the edges, and the grey in the eyebrows. But the pupils themselves were black; the deep black of vacuum space, and Early could have sworn he felt a strange gravity pulling at him as he stared.

"No, sir."

Pyrrhus cracked his pungent smile again.

"Have it your way, Sergeant," he said, "It's a strange thing, but ah have seen stranger. Ah'll stall the bureaucrats till you have a chance t'get copacetic. Maybe you can enlighten 'em, Nate, on how things are in the Corps."

"Yes, sir," said Early, blankly, and then he added, "Semper Suicide, sir."

Colonel Pyrrhus recoiled. The smile faltered, and he regarded Early as if from a very great distance. Early's right hand made a fist at his side. When the smile returned it was different somehow, ghoulish, and the Colonel sounded gleeful as he shouted over the heads of the assembled Marines.

"Ah doubt very much that Corporal Udell's passing has hurt the combat effectiveness of this Company! Drop is at 1100!"

Pyrrhus leaned in close to Early and whispered again.

"You want any of these boys comin' back, ah suggest you help 'em shake off their mood."

Sergeant Early flung a hand at his forehead in salute, the fingers mottled red and white where he had buried them in his palm.

"Yes, sir!" he shouted.

"Company!" roared Colonel Lucius Pyrrhus, "Dis-missed!"

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On the afterdeck of the *Thunderfoot*, in an area of glass cubicles and scalding fluorescent lights which was set aside for auxiliary personnel, Warrant Officer Erskine G. Randolph kept an office.

It was small and grey, with a couple of filing units thrust up against the walls. A spindly metal chair hunched behind a desk, upon which sat a single data reader. Perching on the forward two inches of his seat, as he always did, Randolph pushed his glasses up his nose and squinted.

Letters raced by on the display screen like sparkling green insects, forming themselves into neat ranks before being wiped and replaced by the next swarm. Randolph's eyes were flitting back and forth, and his mouth was opening, slowly, growing wider with every line.

Finally he thumped his small fist down on the desktop.

"We shall *see*, Colonel..." he hissed, pushing the chair back with a squeal, "Who is bound by *procedure*."

And he rushed out of the office.

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There was one window in the barracks – a fifty-foot pane of double thick glass stretching floor to ceiling – and it gave the men of Gopher a view from the belly of the *Thunderfoot*. Most days the window was filled with bottomless black space, the stars smeared into long streaks by the speed of the vessel's transit.

But currently the stars were still, and a fiery orange planetoid loomed up huge and silent from the void.

Sergeant Early stood with one hand splayed upon the glass, which was cold to the touch. He stared through his own reflection at the roiling reddish clouds, and the mountainous ridges that criss-crossed the surface like old scars.

“What’s down there, anyways?”

Early glanced up, bringing the reflection into focus.

Sergeant Early was thin-faced, with a fall of black hair and a few days dark stubble in the hollows of his cheeks. The man standing off his right shoulder was none of these things.

Private Johnson Rutherford Dukes was clean-shaven, head and jaw. He weighed as much unstrapped as Early did suited in full combat armor, and his eyes squinted out of his face like two marbles pressed into a side of pork.

“It’d be against regulations to tell you that, Private,” said Early, “Also, I ain’t got the first idea.”

Dukes took a step forward.

“Looks hot,” he said.

“Sure does.”

“Nothin’ worse than tryin’ to fight in the heat.”

“Last mission, you said there was nothin’ worse than fightin’ in the cold.”

Early watched out of the corner of his eye as the enormous Private stared thoughtfully, head cocked, and crossed his pale, meaty arms.

“What I mean is, what’s down there that’s worth fightin’ for?”

“I already said, Johnny, they ain’t told me. A whole mess of Zerg, if history’s anythin’ to go by.”

“Ah, hell. Nothin’ worse than havin’ to fight the...”

“I know.”

Dukes sighed, “Well. Semper Suicide, right?”

Sergeant Early turned from the window. Dukes was looking sidelong at him.

“Sure, Johnny,” Early said, though his chest suddenly felt tight, “Now you get on back to work. We only got a couple hours.”

Dukes nodded and threw a resigned sort of salute, “Alright, Nate.”

He padded away, and Early rounded on the window again. The edges of the planetoid looked blurred, as if the burnished red atmosphere was bleeding off into the vacuum.

Early knew that the *Thunderfoot* had entered a stable equatorial orbit, and gravity on board the vessel was normalized. But he could not escape the familiar feeling which gripped him – a feeling of vertigo, as if he stood looking over the edge of a precipice, and between him and the ground below was a very long way to fall.

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The end of the cigar blazed orange, and Colonel Lucius Pyrrhus blew a cloud of smoke which was quickly drawn away into a ventilation grate. He flashed his wide, brown grin.

“Ah am in no mood for an ideological debate, Mister Randolph,” he said.

Randolph cleared his throat. He was not imposing in title or in physical stature, but he was not afraid of the Colonel. Indeed, Erskine Randolph was acknowledged by most officers of the Dominion Navy as the second greatest terror lurking in deep space, after the Zerg.

“Captain Randolph,” he replied, narrowing his eyes, “I am a logistical officer, but my equivalent rank is that of Captain.”

Pyrrhus took the cigar between his knuckles.

“Is that so?”

They were walking side-by-side down a corridor, through alternating strips of fluorescent light and shadow. Pyrrhus took long, easy strides. Randolph’s head barely reached the Colonel’s shoulders, but thrusting it forward, shoulders hunched, he gave the impression of an angry, hovering wasp.

“How you address me does not matter,” continued Randolph, “I answer to the Navy, not to you. And I will decide what *procedure* is applicable when it comes to matters of internal discipline.”

Pyrrhus flicked ash flakes off the cigar, and they swirled in his wake.

“Now, Mister Randolph. When it comes to internal discipline, the Corps got it in *spades*.”

Blood rushed into Randolph’s face. His nostrils widened and he pushed his glasses up.

“This is *precisely* what I am talking about. Insularity. Secrecy. Vigilantism. We are all subject to the laws of the Dominion, Pyrrhus, your men included. In fact, I would say them more than most.”

Colonel Pyrrhus halted. Randolph skittered to a stop and turned, and they faced one another.

“Ah get it, Mister Randolph,” the Colonel said, “You ain’t got love in your heart for the Dominion Marine Corps, and for her proud tradition bindin’ penal servitude to military service. You cain’t get your head around the concept.”

“Colonel, you are absolutely correct.”

Pyrrhus laughed. He snatched the cigar from his teeth, and a string of humorless barks echoed up and down the corridor.

“Ah wonder, Mister Randolph, whether you have ever seen the Zerg? In the crawlin’ flesh, ah mean?”

“I have not.”

“And have you had brushes with the Protoss Empire? Not for diplomatic purposes, mind you. Ah’m talkin’ in their full war aspect – blades aglow, skies full o’ lightnin’?”

Randolph gave a dispassionate shrug, “My duties do not require it.”

“Well then,” said Pyrrhus, “You maybe don’t know the scary universe that’s out there. Ah personally think we need the biggest, baddest specimens we can get to stand against it.”

“You are referring to your cargo hold full of sociopaths and criminals. Sentenced to serve until such time as they are lost or killed in action.”

Colonel Pyrrhus grinned again, and winked, “That’s them.”

Randolph raised his scrawny hands high, close as he could to Pyrrhus’ face, and began counting off on the fingers.

“You lock them up, twenty hours a day, in a communal barracks cum cell block. You keep them constantly in transit. You deploy them in ferocious environments, against hopeless odds. You feed them stimulants to make them fight longer, harder, more recklessly. You spend their lives like ammunition. And you don’t think this renders them... volatile?”

“Ah would have thought that was the idea,” replied Pyrrhus, “They’re feisty boys, no doubt about it. But with the right handlin’...”

“Which brings me to ask, Colonel,” Randolph’s voice cut across the Colonel’s, “How did that man come by a weapon?”

The cigar, which Colonel Pyrrhus had stuffed back into his mouth, wilted with the grin that held it upright. A few specks of ash fell from the burning end onto the Colonel’s uniform. Randolph’s expression did not change, but his eyes hardened.

“Come,” he said, snapping his heels together, “We are wasting time.”

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Sergeant Early walked a circle around the hulking blue carapace of his armor. He looked over the intake valves, the reactor exhausts on the shoulderblades. From the front he took in the breastplate, which was bent and gouged but still showed unit markings brightly painted and visible.

Finally he said, “Not bad, Private.”

“Thanks, Nate,” replied the Marine at his side, “You got a sweet rig here. Ain’t hardly anythin’ needs fixin’. Remind me again how come y’don’t keep her down in the hold, like everybody else?”

Early laid a hand on an armor-plated arm and ran his fingers gently down its length.

“I dunno, Tom,” he passed over the mechanized gauntlets and brushed the exposed gears of an articulated hip. His touch lingered on a curving panel on the outside thigh. He stroked the metal lovingly.

“I just like keepin’ her close is all,” he said.

The face of the Marine, which was tiger-striped with grease, cracked into a grin.

“You always were one a’ them sympathetic types, Nate.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Early gave the armored leg one last bracing slap, and moved away.

He was crossing the floor of the service hangar that adjoined the barracks. It opened onto the crew quarters via a large bay door, and Early stepped over the threshold and looked around. The assembly area was choked with crates and canvas, piled haphazardly, and groups of Marines passing by to throw their own gear onto the heap.

“Hey, Sarge!” shouted a voice, “Nearly showtime, Sarge? When d’you think they gonna kick open the Box?”

Early turned. A lone Marine was standing atop one of the bunk towers, grinning like a demon and pointing across the hall toward a heavy door outlined in yellow and black. A single word was stenciled on a bulkhead: ‘Armory’.

“I’m gettin’ the *itch*, Sarge! Better hurry up an’ gimme somethin’ to shoot!”

“Watch your step, Wally,” Early called in reply, “You fall down, break a leg, the Corps’ll make you pay for the new one they sew on.”

A few of the men snorted with laughter. Some shook their heads, others simply stared at the man perched on the bunk tower.

Someone muttered, “Goddammit, Featherstone.”

Private Wallis Featherstone cackled with laughter and began to hop from one foot to the other. He had a hard brush of blond hair and twitching veins in his neck and shoulders. A thick red scar on his cheek pulled at one corner of the mouth, rendering his smile somehow obscene.

“Ain’t long now!” he cried, “Just point me at them bugs, Sarge! Watch me light ‘em up!”

Sergeant Early sighed. As he turned away he called out, “You’ll get your weapon right before the drop, Wally. Same as the rest of us.”

“Aw, come on now, Sarge!” shrieked Featherstone, “Hows about I get mine a little *early*? Like Corporal Udell down there!”

Early, who was crossing the assembly area towards the mess, stopped in his tracks. He turned slowly. Featherstone was capering between towers, leaping the aisle from one bunk to another.

“Guess maybe Jake loved the Corps too much, Sarge, huh? Sem-per Su-icide!”

His shouts echoing to the high ceiling, Featherstone landed in a crouch. He straightened. Early watched as he took two stiff fingers, thrust them into his mouth and cocked his thumb.

“*Blam!*” he roared, jerked his head back theatrically, and fell like a toppled tree onto the mattress and out of sight.

A heavy silence descended on the barracks, so that the Marines could hear Featherstone laughing breathlessly to himself.

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The security officer manning the barracks entrance checkpoint threw a salute across his furrowed eyebrows, and punched a button. Sirens sounded, orange lights flashed, and the wide cargo bay door began to open with a groan.

“Obliged,” nodded Colonel Pyrrhus.

Beyond the door lay a small chamber and an identical door. The Colonel and Randolph walked inside and waited, while the klaxons blared again and the door behind them began to close.

“So, Mister Randolph,” said Pyrrhus, “You got a couple hours to kill. If ah leave you down here, are you gonna stay outta trouble for me?”

Rocking on the balls of his feet, Randolph laughed, “I shall cause whatever trouble I choose, Colonel. I am a Naval Investigative Officer, and this is a suspicious incident.”

“Oh, ah think you misunderstand me.”

The first door thumped back into position and half-ton bolts slammed home to secure it. In front of them, the second door whined as it was dragged upwards. Colonel Pyrrhus turned to his companion.

“The barracks has to stay secured when me or another senior officer ain’t inside,” he said with another warm, brown smile, “If there’s trouble, it ain’t gonna be you that’s causin’ it.”

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Sergeant Early was headed for the mess when he heard a crash and a single loud curse word. He turned.

In a far corner beyond the long steel tables, a square machine hunkered. Its front was luminous blue, and the words 'Soup, Stimm, Spirits' flashed across in dynamic red letters.

Standing defiantly in front of the machine with shoulders set was Johnson Rutherford Dukes.

The men huddled around the tables were jerking their thumbs at Dukes and guffawing. Early weaved his way between them and approached from behind.

"Problem, Johnny?"

"I was gonna get some soup, but this thing's got it in fer me," spat Dukes.

Early sighed, "Gimme your card."

Without taking his eyes off the vending unit, Dukes held up the little silver slip of metal that was clutched in his frankfurter fingers. Early took it and nudged Dukes out of the way.

"I swear, Johnny," he said, "If it weren't for me, you wouldn't eat."

Early eased the ration card into a slot beside the blue panel. Immediately there was a beep, and an array of shimmering holographic symbols fanned out.

"That's jus' what I did," grumbled Dukes, pointing, "An' this piece of sh..."

"I told you," interrupted Early, waving his hand so that the shapes began to scroll, "You gotta do it gentle like. Now, you wanted soup?"

"I changed my mind. Get me a fifth of grain."

Early turned and inclined his head, "Wrong answer, Johnny."

Beneath the shelf of his brow, Dukes' small eyes began at once to shine.

"You can't stop me," he moaned, "It's been a gloomy day, and if I want a drink..."

He reached for the card and the control panel, but Early stepped in front of both.

"Get loaded now, Private, and you won't have time to shake it off. Only good you'll do is if we feed you to the bugs to make 'em sleepy."

Dukes' face screwed up angrily for a moment, his jaw grinding audibly left and right. But Early held his gaze, and Dukes' plaintive hand fell.

"Alright, Nate," he mumbled.

"Good. Now what kinda soup you want?"

"Chicken."

"Alright then."

Corporal Early jabbed his thumb at a shape in the holographic display, and the machine gave a clunk. A small section of the blue panel opened, and steaming liquid began to squirt into a styrene cup.

"This is what you need, Johnny," said Early, "If you wanna grow up big and strong."

Dukes pouted as he took the cup of soup, "If I get any bigger, they'll just find bigger bugs or spooks for me to fight. You know how it goes, Sarge, Semper Suici..."

But before he could finish, an alarm sounded.

Early stepped around Private Dukes. He moved forward and arched his neck towards the huge cargo bay door, which had begun very slowly to retract.

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Erskine Randolph stood unmoving as the door rose. His tongue slid over the front of his teeth, and his gaze flickered left and right. He saw the assembly area, the bunk towers beyond like an unfinished scaffold. Everywhere Marines were staring, holding playing cards or duffel bags or with forks part way towards their mouths. The postures were wary. The eyes were as black and empty as gun barrels.

Colonel Pyrrhus cleared his throat, "Mister Randolph, ah would like you to meet Gopher Company, 22nd Division Dominion Marine Corps. They are glad to make your acquaintance."

Randolph took a couple of steps.

"Ah am sorry," said Colonel Pyrrhus at his back, "Mister Randolph, ah have a briefing to attend upstairs. But you proceed, by all means. They'll let you know when your time's up."

He gave a very shallow bow.

Randolph had already crossed the threshold of the security chamber, and stood overshadowed by a couple of stacked packing crates.

"You sure you're gonna be alright down here?" asked Pyrrhus.

"I will be fine, Colonel," croaked Randolph, and he pushed his glasses up his nose.

"Positive? If you like we can head on up to mah office, talk there a little while..."

"I will be *fine*."

The words escaped as a defiant hiss. Colonel Pyrrhus swallowed the rest of his sentence and grinned, as if he enjoyed the taste of it.

"Well, alright then. Ah do hope you get to the bottom of all this."

And with a single barked order, the security door began to lower.

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Sergeant Early studied the little man entering the cargo bay. He wore a high-collared Navy uniform, and the fluorescent lights painted a shiny stripe across his bald head. He inched forward like a creature poking its head of out a burrow.

Early glanced briefly at the Colonel, who continued to smile until he was swallowed up by the cargo bay door.

"Who in the hell's that?" asked Dukes.

"Don't know," replied Early, "But I can guess what he's here for."

Dukes made a noise through his nose, and drained half of his soup in one gulp.

Early hurried between the brushed steel tables and into the assembly area. A small crowd had already gathered and Early caught sight of the officer, walled in by a mass of flesh.

“... no information at all about your mission. You would best direct your inquiries to a tactical officer. My remit is strictly administrative and juridical, and I am...”

“You git them Navy bulletins though, right?” asked a voice, “You got clearance. Jus’ gimme one good reason why we’re droppin’ on this rock, an’ I’ll...”

“Enough,” interrupted Sergeant Early, pushing through the knot of men. At the sight of the Sergeant they each took a step back and cast their eyes toward the floor. Randolph simply looked at the newcomer and squinted.

“Gunnery Sergeant Nathaniel Early, sir,” Early said, and he extended a hand.

Early was shorter than most of the Marines in the outfit, but he still had six inches on Randolph. When the little man took his hand, Early felt curiously like he was holding a bundle of dry twigs.

“You are ranking officer here?”

“Ranking non-com, sir. The Colonel seems to have left you hangin’.”

Randolph whirled around to look at the entrance door. A couple of the Marines laughed.

“Indeed,” said Randolph, turning back to Early, “Sergeant, I am here to investigate the suspicious death of Corporal Jacob Udell.”

Early did not flinch. He said, “Thought you might be.”

With a sweep of his eyes, Early dismissed the gathered Marines. They slouched off, muttering to one another.

“You want anythin’ fore we get started, sir?” said Early, gesturing towards the mess, “Coffee, somethin’ to eat, maybe?”

“I did not come down here to *eat* with you, Sergeant.”

Early had half turned towards the canteen, but Randolph took an angry step forward.

“I came to examine how a penal soldier of the Dominion Marine Corps shot himself dead in his own bunk, six hours before the commencement of a mission. Sergeant, I wish to know how that boy came by a weapon.”

They stared at one another for a long time. Randolph’s lips were pressed together, bleached white, and his eyes were hard behind the flashing glasses. Early watched a bead of sweat rolling slowly out of sight on the far side of the bald head. He sighed.

“Well then, sir,” Early said, “I guess maybe you oughta meet him.”

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Corporal Jacob Francis Udell lay on his back, boots laced, fatigue trousers pulled high and belted. He wore a DMC tee shirt of plain grey, and one of his hands was laid over the winged globe insignia printed on the chest.

If not for the lopsided pile of shredded flesh and bone fragments above his collar, he could simply have been asleep. On the rear wall at the head of the bed, a pinkish-grey stain bloomed like a flower.

Randolph stood beside the body, and his nose twitched.

“No cleanup crew from the medical bay?” he asked.

“Not this close to a drop, sir,” said Early, “They’ll most likely bag him while we’re gone.”

Randolph shook his head disbelievingly. Exhaling, he doubled over and thrust his upper body into the sleeping berth.

Early watched close as Randolph bent to within an inch of the pulpy mess and inhaled. His eyes closed behind his spectacles, as if he was smelling a bouquet.

A moment later he had extricated himself and stood looking up into Early’s chin.

“Corporal, where is the gun?”

“Come again, sir?”

Thin eyebrows quivering behind the spectacle frames, Randolph made an impatient noise.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said, and thrust a finger at the remains of Udell’s cranium, “One round, medium caliber, a solid slug. A sidearm, possibly. The barrel placed against the roof of the deceased’s mouth. I can still smell the gunpowder on his breath.”

“Sir, you know the rules. If we ain’t been given somethin’ constructive to point ‘em at, the guns stay locked in the Box.”

Early jerked his head across the chamber, towards the door with the yellow and black stripes. Randolph followed the gesture. He saw the word ‘Armory’ stenciled, with a wiry blond Marine standing in front as if before an altar. The man caught Randolph’s eye – he grinned and nestled two cocked pistol fingers under his chin.

Randolph swallowed, “I understand yours is the bunk above Corporal Udell’s, Sergeant. You were first to find him. Are you saying that the weapon vanished from the boy’s hand?”

“Yes, sir. Damnedest thing, sir.”

Muscles tautened in Randolph’s neck, and he raised his voice to a more piercing register.

“Sergeant, I do not care about Corporal Udell. I care about the principle. Has it not occurred to you that this man could easily have turned that pistol on someone *other* than himself?”

Early looked into Randolph’s eyes for a long few seconds, and then smiled sadly.

“Sir, he shoots somebody down here, them upstairs ain’t even gonna hear it.”

Randolph bristled.

“I will need to interview more of Corporal Udell’s close associates,” he said, swiveling angrily on the spot, and his eyes alighted on the closest neighboring bunk, “Who sleeps here?”

“That would be...” Early considered for a moment, “Private Dukes, sir. Hold on a second, I’ll get him.”

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The operations room of the *Thunderfoot* was large and dark, illuminated by the wash of blue light from a hundred control consoles and data screens. Colonel Pyrrhus stood gripping the edge of a holographic map table. Each of his knuckles was the size of a mountain in the display.

“Our intention is to put Gopher down here,” said the Captain, indicating a shimmering blue valley, “Two miles south of the ridge. Bingo Company and Scarlet Company will already be down by the time your boys hit dirt, but further north.”

Colonel Pyrrhus was not listening. There were bright blue arrows snaking over the hill formations, following the geography, but as they crested a high ridge patches of red began to blossom beneath them.

“According to our intel, they ought to expect resistance here,” the Captain swept his finger over one of the blossoms, “Here, here, and... well, Colonel, looks like they’re going to be busy. It’s a carpet down there.”

The blue arrows were now almost invisible against a sea of red. The Captain punched some keys and the tactical markers faded, leaving the hills bare again.

“We’re currently in low orbit, drop zone is about two hours away. Are your men ready, Colonel?”

Colonel Pyrrhus looked up from the map without releasing his grip on the table.

“Captain, ah have tamped down the powder,” he said with slow relish, “You just show me where to point the gun.”

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Private Dukes stood rigid in front of his bunk, avoiding eye contact with Randolph by staring straight over the top of his head.

“Private?” Randolph’s voice was crisp.

“Sir.”

“Did you know the deceased well?”

Dukes’ fleshy face screwed up, as if a bright light had just been turned upon him. He glanced at Sergeant Early, who stood leaning against the bunk ladder behind Randolph’s back.

Early raised his head half an inch, and then lowered it.

“Yes, sir,” said Dukes, “Yes I did.”

“How long had you served with Private Udell?”

“Erm... don’t know as I could tell you, sir,” Dukes replied, and he paused for a moment, then added, matter-of-factly, “They don’t give us clocks.”

Early snorted, and Randolph shot an angry backward glance before continuing.

“In fact, you and Corporal Udell served four years together.”

“Did we, sir?”

“Yes, Private.”

“Felt like longer.”

Early clapped one hand over his mouth to stifle a laugh.

“I have heard,” continued Randolph, “That most men serve in the Dominion Marine Corps for no more than a year and a half. Is that true?”

Dukes looked down at the little man, saw the bright, needling eyes and looked away again.

“Wouldn’t know, sir.”

“It *is* true, Private. Marines in active service do not typically survive past their fifth deployment. Indeed, the 22nd has seen more battle casualties in the last ten years than other unit in this sector.”

Early slowly removed his hand from his mouth. He was no longer smiling.

“Didn’t know that either, sir,” mumbled Dukes.

“I see. Well, now you know why the 22nd Marine Division takes as its motto a grim distortion of a Latinate phrase – one which has been used by ship-borne soldiers for centuries.”

“Er...” said Dukes, and he frowned as Early’s face grew suddenly dark, “Beg your pardon, sir?”

Randolph took a small step forward and hissed up at Dukes, like a snake angry at being stepped on.

“*Semper Suicide*, Private.”

Dukes gulped, his fist-sized Adam’s apple jerking up and down. He cast frightened eyes at Early, who laid a finger across his lips. Randolph was still advancing.

“Jacob Francis Udell was a convicted murderer,” he whispered, “Did you know that?”

“We... kinda try not to talk about what we’re in for, sir.”

Randolph stood directly under the balcony of Dukes’ chin, “Private, I shall leave it to the cranks and perverts to worry about Corporal Udell’s feelings. His *psychological profile*, the thread that finally snapped inside whatever passed for his *mind*.”

Randolph shot a thumb at the corpse.

“But men like Udell – men like yourself and Sergeant Early – are dangerous, and we are responsible for keeping you leashed. Despite what your Colonel thinks, I take that responsibility very seriously. Now I will ask you once, Private. *How did Corporal Udell come by a weapon?*”

There was a claustrophobic silence.

Dukes felt sweat stinging his eyes and he blinked. His hands opened and closed. He looked to Sergeant Early, whose face was ashen. Dukes gulped and opened his mouth, but Early stepped forward before he could speak.

“Sir, Johnny ain’t...”

But before he could say another word, the white fluorescents were replaced by blazing red.

“*All hands, all decks. ETA to drop zone is thirty minutes. Storms are as clear as they’re gonna get. Gopher, if you’re planning on breathing down there, you boys better get suited. The Box opens in twenty.*”

As soon as the voice came over the PA there was a great thunder of feet, men jostling and scrambling from bunks and mess tables. When the announcer mentioned the Box, they all cheered and whooped. Randolph whirled around.

Sergeant Early was standing directly in front of him, “Time’s up, sir. Don’t take no offence, but when that twenty minutes ticks over, it’d be best if you weren’t still hangin’ around.”

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Forty miles above the surface of the planet, the *Thunderfoot* hung in the outer atmosphere like a massive, silent predator.

The hull of the vessel hummed with lights and the giant afterburner engines throbbed. She had entered her final approach, and squadrons of strike fighters swooped out of the launch bays in her belly to streak away towards the surface.

Propulsion systems operating at bare minimum power, the *Thunderfoot* held her trim. Finally, when the last swarm of fighters had been disgorged into the atmosphere, she yawed ponderously to one side.

A long string of ships, snub-nosed and slow moving, fell away from her rear decks. They floated for a second alongside her, like pieces of debris, before their engines winked to life.

One by one, the dropships turned for the surface.

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Colonel Lucius Pyrrhus was watching through the enormous bay window in the rearward barracks. Behind him the chamber was empty and silent, except for a small knot of men in black uniforms crossing the assembly area.

One held a small box containing personal effects. The other two carried between them the body of Corporal Jacob Francis Udell, zipped up in a black rubber bag.

In the vista from the window the dropships appeared, launched from an embarkation deck below the barracks. Before they were a mile out they had entered a rough arrowhead formation, and after a minute they appeared as little more than square silhouettes against the furnace orange planetoid.

Pyrrhus heard the entrance door shuddering open behind him. As soon as it climbed high enough the cleanup crew ducked underneath.

In the knuckles of one hand Pyrrhus held a thick cigar, burned down to a nub, and he raised it to his lips and dragged.

“Colonel!”

One of the men gripping the black rubber bag was shouting, but Pyrrhus took no notice. He pursed his lips and expelled a cloud of blue smoke.

“Colonel, you comin’?”

Through the billowing cigar fumes, through the pane of double thick glass, the dropships were just visible in the distance. Twenty or thirty in all, they now appeared as a convoy of black specks. Pyrrhus knew that they were moving at entry speed, plummeting faster than stones. But from where he stood their progress seemed infinitely, mournfully slow – a long funeral train rolling slowly toward the pyre.

“Colonel, we gotta go,” called the cleanup man, “This sumbitch is heavy.”

“Ah hear you, son, don’t rush me. Occasions don’t come much more solemn than this.”

His wide, brown smile was reflected briefly in the window glass. Then, as Pyrrhus turned, he flicked the spent cigar away. It sputtered and flared before being ground out on the deck plates.

“Alright,” said the Colonel, “Ah’m ready.”

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Erskine Randolph sat hunched over the data reader in his office, scanning the flickering dispatches with an air of desperation.

According to officials, the drop been carried off flawlessly. Four hundred men of the 22nd Marine Division had been eased into the gap between two major atmospheric storm fronts, and would shortly be coming in to land.

To Randolph's chagrin, there had been no incident reports, no fatal accidents, and no suspicious behavior of any kind. The *Thunderfoot* would remain in orbit to provide the 22nd with air cover, and her administrative personnel would return to their normal duties.

Randolph's glasses were hanging at the very end of his nose, but he did not push them up. His eyes were wide and unblinking. His jaw ached from clenching his teeth. It took several minutes and a few hundred flashing messages before something caught his attention.

He raised himself an inch or two off the chair.

*Attn: Randolph, Erskine G.
Warrant Officer, Second Class
From: Col. L. Pyrrhus, Commander 22nd Division DMC*

Message begins:

PFC Jacob Francis Udell, serial 225199673, remains to be cremated, ashes jettisoned.

Awarded honorable discharge (posthumous). Absolved of his crime through faithful and valorous military service.

Write the boy's mother, Mister Randolph, if you can find her.

Message ends.

Randolph scanned down the lines, his eyes glassy with horror. When he was finished he sprang to his feet, and the spindly metal chair clattered to the floor.

He mouthed wordlessly. He pointed a shaking finger at the data reader, and cocked the other hand as if he was about to lash out with it. His whole body trembled with rage.

Finally, Randolph sighed. He bent and retrieved the chair, and sat down heavily. The dispatch from Colonel Pyrrhus had vanished, wiped and replaced by more scuttling green letters.

Feebly pushing his glasses higher on his nose, Erskine Randolph reached out and flicked the data reader off.

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Noxious gases and chunks of ice streamed off the hull of the dropship *Colette* as she descended through the planet's stratosphere.

Inside the crew compartment it was warm, there were deep shadows and sprays of crimson from the warning lights, and the engines caused the cabin to throb like a great, metal heart. The recycled air smelled faintly of sweat and ozone.

Sergeant Nathan Early was strapped into a jumpseat on one wall. His visor was retracted, his hollow-cheeked face sunk deep inside the ovoid rim of his armored collar.

With him in the cabin were two-dozen men, each armored identically and wearing the same deathly grey expression.

"Sarge!"

The Marine directly opposite Early was leaning forward. His bulk took up two full jumpseats. Unable to fit beneath a single overhead restraint, he had stretched two seatbelts across his armored midsection and fastened them with a granny knot.

"What is it, Johnny?" said Early, looking up.

“You think...” Private Dukes hesitated. His heavy face collected shadows, “You think they’ve packed Jake off yet?”

“Guaranteed!” shouted Early in reply.

Dukes looked away, shifting uncomfortably. Down the line Marines were smoking or stuffing unpackaged rations into their mouths. One or two had fallen asleep.

“Nate!” Dukes called again, straining against his seatbelt.

“Yeah?”

“I been wonderin’...” Dukes’ mouth worked silently for a moment, framing the right words, “How come Jake did... what he did?”

Early was clutching the overhead restraint with both hands. He studied Dukes.

“You know that feelin’ you get, Johnny, when you’re fightin’ in the heat?”

“Well... yeah.”

“And when you’re fightin’ in the cold, you said, you sometimes get the same feelin’?”

“Yeah.”

“Like you wanna rip the head off somethin’, but it’s a thing you can’t see or grab hold of? Like you can’t stand bein’ in your own skin any longer, not even for a second?”

Dukes sat back. His armor-plated shoulders sagged visibly, and he took a long time to reply.

“Yeah,” he said, “I guess I know that.”

His eyes glinted faintly in the glow from the fluorescent markers on his breastplate.

“Well, Johnny,” Early said, lowering his voice until it was almost lost to the din of the engines, “I think Jake had that feelin’, only it wasn’t nothin’ to do with the weather.”

Dukes stared. His gauntleted hands were clasped on his knees. His face fell to gaze at the deck, and it was still bowed when he spoke again.

“And Nate?”

“Yeah?”

“How’d Jake get a gun?”

A long moment passed, filled with the numb drone of the dropship engine, the tremble of velocity in the walls and floor as the *Colette* rocketed through clouds. The planet’s surface, scarred and pitted with craters and jagged rock spires, was already looming up out of the fog.

Early waited until Dukes looked up again. Then he said:

“He asked me, Johnny.”

And taking one hand from the restraint, Early reached for his right leg, where he punched a release switch. A panel of armor slid back revealing a small compartment, and Early drew out something silver.

It was a revolver. Not a standard Marine Corps sidearm, which would be stowed at the rear of the dropship where the Marines had slung their rifles. This was a long-nosed, old-fashioned weapon, with a chunky, polished frame and an ornate curling stock that looked as though it was made of wood.

Dukes goggled at it, open-mouthed.

“Sarge, are you tellin’ me that...”

“I ain’t tellin’ you a thing, Johnny,” said Early, holding the revolver up. He reached down to the thigh compartment again, and began taking jacketed slugs from a custom-fitted holder. With a flick of his wrist, the cylinder swung free.

“Jake... got wind of this drop,” said Early, slipping rounds into the chambers one by one, “What the Colonel was puttin’ us up against. He didn’t want to breathe his last in the belly of some bug. He was tired, and he came an’ he asked me for a way out. So...”

Early looked at Dukes from the other side of the revolver barrel. Dukes mouthed the two words, clearly enough for Early to see.

“You got it,” Early replied, pushing home a sixth and final round.

Suddenly, the cabin lurched. The engines roared with their final re-entry burn, the dropship trembled under the stress of the deceleration. A voice crackled through the passenger cabin.

“Hold on, gentlemen. Thirty seconds.”

Up and down the rows of jumpseats, Marines braced themselves for the impact. But Dukes was still looking across the cabin at Early, and the Sergeant was holding the silver revolver.

“We ain’t angels, Johnny,” he said, “But that don’t make us devils. And I think if we stick around long enough in a job like this, we deserve a little peace.”

Early gestured at the collar of Dukes’ armor. Throughout the cabin Marines were activating their visors, chromed glare shields swooping down to hide their faces. Dukes fumbled for his own and hit the switch.

Through the haze of a light filter, he saw Early smile. Then the Sergeant punched his own helmet activator, and with his free hand he pointed to his breastplate. Beneath the collar were two words scrawled in white marker – the motto of the 22nd Division of the Dominion Marine Corps.

Dukes read, *Semper Suicide*.

And as the dropship *Colette* screamed through the final few seconds of her descent, Sergeant Early span the cylinder. He whipped the revolver sideways, and it shut with a snap.

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