

First Night

He stumbled again, nearly losing his footing. His vision swam as the pain threatened to take over. He tossed his helmet aside, needing to breathe. His rifle felt like an incredible weight in his right hand, but he pushed back the pain and refused to loosen his grip.

Walter was dimly aware that he was leaving a blood trail. He was also aware that there were other predators out there- the carnivorous fauna and the deadly feeding plants of Venus were not to be trifled with at the best of times.

Then came the unmistakable sound of snapping branches, and Walter froze. He tensed his arms and painfully drew his Panzerknacker into his shoulder. Adrenaline peaked in his system again, and he backed slowly into the undergrowth, trying to identify the source of the sound. He imagined it pacing itself, tracking, and hunting. Hunting him.

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'Soldaten, Achtung!'

Nine pairs of booted feet snapped together. Unteroffizier Karl Gellert strode down the line, dribbling smoke from his nostrils as he drew on the cigarette. He was pleased to see the squad were all wearing their armour fastened correctly and their equipment was stowed in their belt pouches and packs.

He froze and stabbed one of his troopers in the breastplate with his finger. He locked his flinty gaze onto the green eyes of the young soldier, Reinhold Gollwitzer.

'You're caught in a trapper vine. What do you do?'

The young man swallowed.

'Tuck into a ball and pull out my knife. Cut all vines from the feet first and prepare to drop and roll once they're all cut.'

Karl stared a moment longer, just enough to make the young man shiver. Then he nodded.

'You,' he pointed to another soldier, who held his MG-40 tightly against his leg, 'you hear a Devilcat howl. Where is it?'

This man returned the stare levelly. Josef Lindenblatt had seen his fair share of jungle.

'Main branches, probably, at least ten metres up. Likely to be at least two hundred metres away.'

Karl grinned and stepped back.

'First night patrol. I know some of you have not ventured out into the night since you have joined us. It is a thing to be feared, and to be respected. Venus goes dark for one thousand, four hundred hours; the jungle does not forgive easily.'

He paused and let the words hang in the air before he cracked a smile. He continued.

'However, it has also failed to kill me over five nights in a row, so there is *some* hope you will survive.'

Nervous laughter was the response. Some of the more veteran soldiers grinned.

'I will say this: remember your training. Remember the jungle is only your ally if you know her well. Listen to your orders. That is all.'

Gellert crushed the stub of his cigarette under his heel and pointed at the transport waiting behind them. The aircraft proudly displayed the gleaming cog of Bauhaus in bronze, with the roaring bear of House Bernheim picked out in black in the centre.

He ran his eye lovingly over the belly of the beast, taking in the carbon scoring around the engines, the small marks of ever-present rust on jungle craft, the oil leaks and scratches on the stubby landing gear. The body of the craft was a fat tube that his soldiers stepped into one at a time, with a long boom tail and a wide bulge at the cockpit end. Pilots appreciated the extra vision, but Karl felt too exposed whenever he had to visit the cockpit.

The last man to enter the aircraft paused. He had his face shield on already, but Karl didn't have to read the subdued lettering of *DANZER* on his shoulder pad to know his old friend.

'First night patrol.' The words hung in the air.

'I know, Walter.'

'You know what they say.'

'I do.'

They shared a slow nod before boarding.

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Walter gritted his teeth and levelled the Panzerknacker rifle, willing his hands to stop shaking. He strangled his breathing and listened to the teeming life of the jungle. He had been swallowed by spiny bracken, but any good hunter would still find him with enough time. He needed a chance to stop the bleeding, but he couldn't let his guard down long enough to do so.

The bushes had gone quiet, and Walter nearly willed his heart to stop so that he could hear. He was convinced that the hunter was within metres of him.

There came a thud. The mists gradually revealed an indistinct form, and Walter carefully swung the weapon's barrel around to point at the target. Something seemed ...off about the creature's shape. It swam through the foggy clearing, slowly resolving into long shoulder pads, a boxy weapon and... a spiked helm.

He instinctively applied his safety catch. The other man appeared to be another Hussar. It had to be from his squad- nobody else was due to come out here. The fate of their radio left him in no doubt about the possibility of any rescue force.

The Hussar stepped cautiously, nervously across the clearing. Walter could practically read his inexperience from the movement. He didn't dip his toe through the grass and roll his foot to deaden the noise. He didn't tuck his elbows in to avoid scratching against the leaves. He walked through the

clear space instead of staying close to the bushes- it was almost as though he thought being able to see further would protect him.

For a long moment Walter considered letting the young man walk past to act as bait for the hunter. He quashed it- another gun and pair of eyes were better than nothing, and at least it would allow him a chance for medical treatment.

He stepped forward smoothly, his weapon levelled, and waited until the young Hussar froze. The young man looked at him and slowly took his hand off the trigger grip of his own weapon, raising both arms into the air. Walter shook his head and waved the young man over to him.

'Gollwitzer. Of course you'd live. The luck of the young, Ja?'

The young man swallowed. His eyes were near bursting through the visor and his hands shook. He looked at Walter but didn't speak. Walter directed him.

'Crouch down. Keep your weapon trained in that direction. I've got something I need to do.'

As he removed his right shoulder pad and pulled out a bandage, Walter began to hope again.

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Karl preferred to sit in the back and study his map than watch from the cockpit. His thin finger traced their patrol area – east of Bernheim, past the productive farmland in the valleys of the Ring of Fire. The deep ravines and thick jungle made the area inhospitable, and several people had gone missing from explorer expeditions over the last few weeks. The transport would drop them off in what cleared area it could find, and leave them for a period of fifty hours before returning to collect them. Everything that happened in between the drop-off and pick-up was up to the Unteroffizier in charge.

Of course, Bauhaus was not the sort of corporation to leave its soldier citizens in the dark jungle to die alone. They had a long-range radio pack, signal lights and flares, plenty of provisions to last the patrol and training to survive the jungle. They also knew the way to the nearest farming settlements, and those settlements knew they were out there.

Still, Karl felt conflicting dread and thrill to be left to his own devices. He revelled in the chance to earn glory for his house and corporation. It was not unheard of for the actions of small patrols to earn their commanders the notice of the nobility, which could enhance his career considerably.

«Unteroffizier Gellert to the cockpit.»

Karl looked up from the map and quietly unbuckled his harness. Walter held his gaze for a long moment before he stumbled his way up the narrow passage between the seats.

He slid open the narrow door and looked into the cockpit. The lights on the various dials were muted to allow the pilots to see. Outside, there was a smattering of stars across the velvet sky. Civilisation was unable to penetrate this far into the jungle, and the craft had its running lights off to preserve their security.

The cockpit was shaped like a stretched bubble, bulging on both sides and narrow in the middle where the door was. The two pilots sat in swivelling chairs, one in the centre of each bulge. One of them turned to face him- a tall but slim woman wearing a light blue-grey flight suit, washed with a soft red glow from the instrument panels. Her head was shrouded in a helmet, the dark visor stowed away.

Karl eyed the shape of her chin appreciatively, the only visible skin he could find. She spoke with a soft, Franco-accented voice.

'We are now leaving the civilised areas. It will be another two minutes before we touch down. Do you 'ave a preferred landing point?'

Gellert leaned in close to the pilot as they bent over the map. She smelled ...clean, delicate. Not like Karl. Not like his Hussars.

'Primary point here. The rivers should be low, so we may find an exposed gravel bed to drop onto. Secondary point,' he moved his finger slightly, 'here. We can drop onto the cliff tops and abseil to the valley floor, and then walk out.' She nodded.

'We 'ave flown this area in daytime. The primary point will work for us.' She motioned to her co-pilot and Karl felt the floor underneath him get heavy- the craft was banking towards their destination.

'You will be on the ground in two minutes.'

Karl turned to go. He was about to step through the door when he felt a tug on his arm. He glanced at the pilot again.

'Good luck.' She said, purposefully. It sounded like a prayer. He nodded, tight-lipped, and headed rearward.

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Walter rolled his shoulder painfully, testing that the bandage was holding firm. The sticky film he had spread over the wound was doing its job, ensuring that no more blood would leak from the wound. The outer cloth chafed slightly under his armour, and there was a wonderful warm feeling from the painkiller that *nearly* supplanted the agony of the wound.

'What now?' Gollwitzer's nerves had not improved.

'Now? Now we find our team. Come on.'

Walter tucked his weapon under his arm and scanned the gloomy mist. All around them, there were dots of dull glow as the various plants adapted to the Venusian night. He paused and plucked one stem, covered in tiny points of luminescence.

'You see this?' The younger man nodded.

'What is it?'

'What?'

'What is this plant?'

Reinhold Gollwitzer looked at him incredulously.

'I don't know. I'm not a botanist. I'm a soldier.'

'Not that. What is the plant doing?'

'It is glowing. Why are we waiting? We should be-'

'Yes, it is glowing. Why does it do that?'

'We need to move! We-' Walter held a finger to his lips and the younger man stopped. Reinhold composed himself and started again.

'It is trying to attract food. Insects, probably.'

'Very good. Why do they glow?'

'It is night time. There is no sun to feed the plants, so it has to attract its food.'

Walter stooped and waved it near the ground. The glow increased slightly over one patch of ground.

'What about now?'

'It glows brighter around prey.'

'You only know that because hundreds of years of Bauhaus botanists, explorers and soldiers have taken to the jungle at night. They lived, they returned and they reported what they saw. Now you get to do the same. We will live, we will return and we will report what we have seen.' He held the gaze of the younger man, ensuring his words were getting through.

'Now, let's use what those who have gone before have taught us and we will find our kameraden.'

'What, how?'

'This little plant hunts insects, so it reacts to insects. Other plants prefer blood. Where we find the larger meat eating plants glowing brightest is where we find the living.'

'With respect, Danzer, that means going near the plants that want to eat *us*.'

'You're very perceptive, Gollwitzer. You'll go far.' Walter turned back to the jungle and grinned. The younger man nodded and swallowed.

Reinhold seemed a little more settled with a plan in his head. Walter didn't share the unease that gnawed in the pit of his own stomach- it would not help to upset the youngster. He couldn't shake the thought in his head, though...

The hunters will also be looking for prey. And they could follow the exact same signs the Hussars did.

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Karl felt the aircraft circle once, then twice before they gently started to descend. His stomach attempted to gain access to his throat for a moment, before he got very heavy and the craft shuddered on its landing skids. The hatches snapped open.

One at a time, his Hussars slapped their restraint release catches and filed out of the aircraft. They hit the dirt of the Venusian jungle and disappeared into the gloom, occupying their strenuously rehearsed positions around the clearing. Karl waited for his turn then did the same, feeling the damp spongy dirt under his feet. The cool of the cabin was replaced by the foetid hot breath of the Jungle. This early in night, it still held the accumulated warmth of fourteen hundred hours of continuous sunlight. It would be cold and clammy come daybreak, in around sixty day's time, but for now they would have to manage their water intake carefully.

He jogged to his position and crouched, eyes adjusting to the dark gloom of the night. The Dragonfly transport was a large dark shape that he felt, rather than saw, looming over them. Karl felt the hot wash of the engines and the deafening roar of the down blast. The bushes and grass jerked and snapped in waves.

Karl waited a moment longer, and then looked across the tail of the aircraft at Walter. The other man gave him the thumbs up- all their troops were on the ground. Karl gave the same signal to the unseen pilot in the cockpit and a moment later the pitch of the engines changed. Like a great weight off their shoulders, the noise and blast lessened as it lifted off. A moment later, the Dragonfly was a small noise in the distance, akin to its namesake.

The Hussars waited in silence for a long moment, letting their ears and eyes adjust to the dark jungle. The clearing they crouched in was gravelly, with a swiftly flowing stream off to one side. The ground was covered in small bushes and shrubs, along with tufts of long grass and bare dirt. As Karl's eyes adjusted to the gloom, the dense black around him peeled back to reveal the implied presence of large trees, with branches as thick as the Dragonfly. The trees were draped in vines and the branches quickly crowded out the sky.

After a long moment, the jungle began to sing to them again. There were chirps, bird calls and the steady burble of water, with the occasional rustle and sigh of wind through the canopy. Karl looked around at his troops, and he could see a couple of heads darting around to spot the source of the steady patter in the trees. He chuckled to himself- the dripping of moisture from the Jungle canopy was a constant companion in this place. It would take a long time before the young Hussars would be able to tell the difference between drips and the sounds of movement.

He looked at his map and confirmed their direction, then gave the signal to move out. Despite their youth, Gellert was pleased to see them obey their drills seamlessly. He took great pride in how well he had trained them, just as a factory worker or an artist might admire their own handiwork. Bauhaus produced precision and Karl had no intent to allow that reputation to falter.

The patrol moved as a snake, in a rough trail as they headed into the trees. The soldiers fought back their instinct to walk close to their friends and instead spread out enough that they could cover the ground and not make a bigger target.

It took another hour for the younger Hussars to relax into their routine. The night jungle was slowly becoming familiar to them, although the distant call of animals and large birds of prey would still attract nervous glances. The veterans amongst them grinned quietly behind their face shields- they remembered being in the same position, and there was no other cure for inexperience than to learn the jungle's ways first-hand.

Karl paused the patrol and signalled for them to take a quick drink. The soldiers silently sank into cover and watched the foliage around them as they pulled drinking tubes into their mouths and sipped. He went forward to his two Aufklärer – the scouts – and motioned for his second-in-command to join him.

The Unteroffizier stopped and knelt next to the Aufklärer, pulling out his map. As he stopped moving he could feel a warm fog settle over his body- Bauhaus jungle armour was designed to keep air flowing over the wearer using the motion of their bodies.

'We are currently here,' he pointed on the map using the tip of his bayonet, 'and we are headed this way. We should find an old trail here somewhere, possibly a fauna route. You know how the jungle changes, ja?'

There were nods. Maps were rarely reflected by what they saw on the ground if it had anything to do with the plants, waterways or buildings, as the jungle was always changing. The only thing they could rely on was the shape of the ground, hidden as it was under layers of foliage.

'We should get to another stream, around here, within another couple of hours. Keep your eyes open.' There were grunts of agreement. Karl stood, and then noticed something.

'Dobberstein, your hands are shaking.' The man's discipline kicked in and the motion ceased. Lorenz Dobberstein had seen two Venusian nights already in his career after initially being stationed on Mars.

'I apologise, Unteroffizier.'

Karl looked at the man for a moment.

'You know, most of us never fully learn the ways of the jungle. Every time out is just like your first. Fear is natural, don't deny that it is there.'

He looked around to the other Aufklärer, Theodor Weinbuch. Where Lorenz was tall and broad, blond and blue-eyed Theodor was thin, wiry and short. Under his helmet the man's curly black hair and cheeky grin were usually a welcome sight around the barracks, and the man could procure a range of hard to find items of questionable legality.

'You've both been here before. We have some young pups that need to be shown how a Bernstein soldier moves, how we live in the jungle. Remember they will be watching.'

Weinbuch gave him the thumbs-up. They moved off again. Trees loomed out of the dark ahead and faded into the background behind them.

Of course, the trail wasn't there. They proceeded anyway, looking for any changes in the ground that might indicate a path. However, after half an hour's travel with no sign, Karl halted the patrol and made a quick note on his map.

'Urk!'

He froze- that was definitely one of his soldiers. Karl stuffed the map away and got up. He jogged carefully towards the sound.

Willi Kroehne, their medic, was already there. He rapidly conveyed the situation.

'Streit is missing. He stepped that way to urinate.'

Gellert snapped out some quick orders to his troops, placing them down around the spot to cover for enemy. A couple of the soldiers were summoned to the middle to help.

'Streit?'

'Arugh!' The return sound was muffled. Karl homed in on it, his helpers in tow. He strode forward and almost missed something. He stopped and checked the shape of the leaves on a particular bush, then swept back some long grass.

His eyes revealed a light-coloured fleshy leaf, much larger than a man's footprint, covering a patch of ground. He didn't hesitate to pull out his knife and slash it open. A foul stench issued, making the others step back.

'That vine, there! I need ten metres.'

One of the soldiers raced to slice off the required length with his bayonet. Karl made a couple more slashes, tearing strips off the massive leaf. He was careful not to get any of the sticky liquid on his hands.

'*Quickly!*' He hissed.

The vine was brought to him and he lowered it into the dark hole under the shredded leaf.

'Streit! Grab on!' The makeshift rope played out into the hole and for several eternities it remained slack. Karl moved it around.

'The rope, Streit! Feel for it!'

There was a snag, and Karl tugged. There was a weak tug in response.

'Quick, get on. Ready? Pull!'

Three more pairs of hands grabbed the vine. They heaved in unison, feeling the slack disappear and taking the strain of the soldier's weight. They could only hope Franz Streit wasn't too disoriented or injured, and could hold on as well. The weight remained for a moment, then eased off.

There was a slithering sound as Franz reappeared above ground. He immediately coughed and spluttered, rolling on the dirt. Kroehne raced forward, medi-kit in hand, and tended to the man.

'On your hands and knees. Sit still, I know it burns.' He looked up at the Hussars that held the vine. 'I need the sap. Same type of vine. As much as you can manage, start dribbling it over him.' Karl stepped back and let his medic work.

Gellert stepped back and looked at the plant. It was a Pitcher Plant, a large carnivorous bush that trapped victims. Franz must have stepped too close to it before unzipping his pants, and fell in. Pitcher plants build a large sac underground, full of sticky, foul-smelling acid. Once a man placed any weight on the covering leaf, they would fall in and the sac would pinch shut. Without help, the smooth sides doomed them to perish as they were slowly dissolved by the acid.

'Walter.' Summoned, his second appeared from the gloom.

'I want everyone to see this. Bring the Soldaten here one at a time and show them what a pitcher looks like at night.'

Walter nodded and disappeared. Karl turned back to Franz and Willi, the other two men now dripping the vine sap on the stricken soldier. The vines were adapted to the pitcher's acid, and their sap would neutralise it. Franz was still coughing and gagging as his lungs cleared of the noxious substance.

Gellert shrugged at the man's plight as Willi tended to him- he would live. He turned and started to walk his perimeter, checking on the other soldiers. His hands trembled a little as the adrenaline left his system, but he didn't feel the same fear of the jungle as he saw in his soldiers before. Despite his words to the Aufklärer earlier, he almost felt at home in the misty dark.

'How is he?' Josef's deep voice rumbled out of a bush. The big man had his MG-40 slowly scanning the trees as he sat.

'He stinks.'

The two men shared a quiet chuckle. Franz would be uncomfortable, but otherwise fine after his brush with death. It would probably be good for the young man- he would be careful next time.

'Another walk in the fields, Lindenblatt?'

'Ja, herr Unteroffizier.' Karl appreciated the other man's presence. Only he and Walter had survived the disastrous raid on the Capitol camp a year ago from their original squad. However, no matter how well he knew the man and how close they came to being friends, Karl was still the Unteroffizier and they were still the Soldaten. He was no nobleman, but even small distinctions mattered to a Bauhaus.

'How far are those trees, herr Unteroffizier?'

Karl looked up and squinted.

'I'd say thirty metres.'

'I bow to your knowledge. I would have said twenty.'

Karl grinned.

'Let's see.'

He picked up a small stone and aimed carefully. Pulling back his arm, he sent it flying with a snap of his wrist. The rock flew wide.

'Hmm, looks short. I'll try again.'

He threw another stone. This time it hit the tree at about head-height with a soft thud. Karl was about to congratulate Josef on his judgement when the stone fell and made a very distinctive sound- impact on metal. Karl frowned and levelled his Panzerknacker.

'Watch my back. I'm going forward.'

Lindenblatt instinctively tensed and carefully scanned the jungle. Karl crouched and flowed forward, snaking from cover to cover. He reached the base of the tree and looked at where his stone landed.

There, in a neat pile, was a set of stained bone-white armour. Next to it was a set of belt pouches and a Panzerknacker. Laid reverently on top of it all was a distinctive helmet shaped like a stylised skull with high cheekbones and a narrow, proud chin.

This was the armour of a Venusian Ranger, the elite of his corporation. The only thing missing was the occupant.

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Walter took the lead as they approached the larger, brighter lights. Through long experience and training, he could tell that he was approaching something that wanted to eat him... it was all about paying attention to the smaller signs. The ground wasn't choked with shrubs, which made walking easier. There was a faint, sweet aroma that reminded him of cooking food, but it was not as heavy a musk as the anaesthetic scent of a Black Lotus.

He paused as the hanging vines of the tree above became thicker. In this light it was hard to tell if they were trapper vines or the more benign sort, so he left them be. Even if they were just hookvines or seeders, all dangerous, uncomfortable or inconvenient in their own way but not deadly, he had no desire to get too close to whatever was trying to entice them.

They began to circle the vines, sweeping their gaze back and forth to cover their path. Walter appreciated that the youth was looking in the same direction that his weapon was pointing- he was remaining disciplined.

Walter noticed something and paused. Reinhold did the same a pace behind him. He looked where the veteran was pointing.

In the gloom, they could just make out a dark shape held off the ground and slowly moving upwards. Walter knew of only one thing in this part of the jungle that would do that. He hesitated.

'Do you think that's one of us?' Reinhold asked, gesturing to the dark shape.

'I don't know.'

'Well, should we ...help?'

They stood there a moment longer. The trapper vines were pulling up their prey slowly. If it were struggling, they would be faster. Either way, if they waited much longer it would no longer be a question.

'Your grapple, hook it to me. Tie it there.' Reinhold wound his small steel cable around Walter's belt and secured the other end. Walter placed his rifle down and drew his bayonet.

He looked at the vines, estimated his run. He began breathing deeply. He shifted his weight and spun the knife in his palm.

Now or never.

He ran straight for the dark shape. He nearly ran into a vine and slashed it in half, not caring if it were a trapper or not. Some of the other vines began to squirm as they sensed movement. He cut them too.

Walter reached the dark shape quickly. It must have been on the edge of the trapper's reach. He swung his knife at the first vine and recognised the boots- this was a Hussar. He swung again, another snap. The other tendrils looped and gripped the figure. Walter swung again and again. The vines creaked and the Hussar nearly came free.

As the still figure began to fall, the vines wriggled and snatched at him. Triggered by movement, Walter saw the other man begin to rise quickly. He grabbed on, and was carried upwards as well. He kept slicing, but every time they nearly tumbled out, more vines wound their way around the two. He swung faster and faster, severing the green ropes left and right. He felt the line on his belt become taut and looked up to pick out the gaping maw of the creature at the centre of the tree.

Neither a pure plant nor quite an animal, it sported a large, woody beak. If it got a hold of them it would bite down, eventually busting through their armour and tearing them apart. Walter wasn't ready to be lunch just yet.

He tucked his legs around the other man and pulled his bayonet out as well. Armed with two of the blades, he cut frantically to free them. Their ascent slowed, telling him they were almost in biting distance. He cut again and again.

The world tilted. He was upside down.

Walter summoned the strength to rise up and slash at the vines holding their legs. He went into freefall.

He landed on his back and felt the air push out of his lungs. His shoulder was on fire again, now that he noticed. He coughed and tried to rise up.

Something grabbed him, and he tried to slash at it. His arms and lungs conspired to stop him. Walter went limp and waited, conserving his strength for another bout of combat with the vines.

Then suddenly, they let go. He found himself leaning against a tree, while Reinhold dashed back in to retrieve the other man. He relaxed and dropped the knives. He had just about recovered enough to breathe again when he caught his first proper glimpse of the man he rescued.

'Seyffardt.' Reinhold's voice was a whisper.

'Ja. It was.'

The Hussar's body was still, peaceful. Walter reached out, wincing as he closed Wilhelm Seyffardt's eyes. The silence was deafening.

Wilhelm had been hit square on the chest. It looked like a plasma bolt had burned through the breastplate and made a mess of his chest. Walter and Reinhold could see charred ribs poking out.

'Horrible way to go.' It was all Reinhold could manage.

'Wonderful way to go,' replied Walter, 'he fell in battle, to a single shot and facing the foe. What, would you prefer to die old and frail in your bed?'

Silence was the only reply.

'Come on,' Walter said, 'we have made enough noise. We need to move.'

They knelt beside him and methodically stripped the body of anything useful. His MG-40 was ruined, the receiver slagged by the same shot that killed him, but his ammunition was useful. In true Bauhaus style, their rifles fired the same rounds as the machine gun, although it was a pity that their fallen comrade didn't have any grenades on him. Walter pocketed his painkillers quickly, mindful of the ache in his shoulder- it wouldn't help Reinhold's confidence to see weakness in his seniors. He put the dead man's helmet on, but the face shield wouldn't latch shut.

A distinct sound made Walter's head snap up. His eyes penetrated the night as far as they could, and he noticed the faintest signs of movement on the other side of the trapper tree. He couldn't make out what it was, but it was big- clearly not a Hussar. He heard the noise again- a faint, chittering whisper.

He breathed slowly, silently. His left hand grabbed Reinhold and stilled him. His right hand felt for his weapon.

There was another sound, further away to the right. The movement ceased, as did the new sound. His heart thudded in his chest as his right hand scrabbled frantically for the rifle.

They heard a fizzling crack, and a bolt of fire speared across their front. Answering it, a burst of wet-sounding machine-gun fire sprayed the trees from the direction the big shape had gone. Whatever was out here hunting them, it was clearly hunting something else as well.

Walter grabbed Reinhold by the armour and dragged him off into the bushes. They made their escape.

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They stood in a tight circle. Nobody wanted to touch it.

'Who was he?' Willi asked.

'I think it's more important to know why the armour is laid out like this.' Walter squatted, as though being closer to it would reveal its secrets.

'Ja. Did he remove it for some reason and not come back? He can't have been in a hurry.'

'That's if he was alive when it was removed.'

Karl looked around. There was a swiftly-flowing stream a couple of metres away. He noted the location on the map.

'There is little else we can do. When we return, we can get a team of investigators to answer all these questions.' He turned to Willi.

'How is Streit? Is he ready to travel yet?'

Willi nodded, and Karl snatched up his rifle, breaking the reverie. The Hussars grouped around the armour pile hesitated before doing the same. Walter lingered a moment longer, fascinated.

He was turning to go himself when something caught his eye. He looked, but only saw the trees. Then he noticed one small branch waving lazily, as though it had been pushed by something. There were any number of other possible explanations for such a sight, but it still set his senses on alert.

By the time he got back to the patrol, Karl had finished briefing his Aufklärer. As they stepped off into the darkness, Walter squatted next to his leader.

'Herr Unteroffizier, I get the feeling that we are not the only ones in this jungle.'

'Something to report, or is it just a feeling, old friend?'

Walter shrugged. Karl nodded.

'I feel something too, Danzer. That armour... it is almost as though it is waiting for someone, or some thing. I'm not sure what, though. Come, we need to keep moving.'

Walter returned to his position.

The squad moved up the stream for another half an hour before Karl called them all to a brief halt. It seemed that the water may join up with the river at their landing site, and Karl wanted to check out the junction. Anyone operating in the wild jungles needed reference points, particularly at night. A stream or river was a good one, as someone could just follow the water without needing a map to navigate by. If anyone else were in the jungles, it was entirely likely they would use the junction for that purpose. They set off away from the stream, making a more direct path to their destination.

After a few minutes, one of the scouts snapped his hand up to signal a halt. The formation instinctively sunk to a knee, all but disappearing into the undergrowth. Karl moved up to the Aufklärer, noting that ahead the trees took over and there were fewer bushes and vines scattered around their roots.

'Signs of battle, herr Unteroffizier?'

Karl followed the man's gaze and saw a tree, pockmarked by bullet impacts. There was something not quite right about the scene, though. He waved the squad forward, placing his machine guns in position to cover the area before he went forward with his Aufklärer. The squad tensed.

As they approached, Karl noticed that the tree seemed to be dying. The wounds inflicted on it were dripping a blue-black ichor that he was careful not to touch. The ground that it dripped on seemed to recoil from it, roots dying and soil drying up.

Several of the trees had similar markings on them. Whatever had fired had clearly shot at a moving target, or had been fired without any care to aiming.

'Herr Unteroffizier, here.' Theodor was on the far side of another tree. As they approached, Karl noted with some relief that he could identify it.

'That's a burn... plasma rifle, I would say. Must be fairly recent... nothing has grown over it yet.'

They moved around and pieced together the scene. It seemed that a running battle had taken place between two groups. Karl couldn't say who it was, but he had his suspicions.

The nearest holdings of House Bernheim were growing houses that were experimenting with new crops. The site was placed well away from actual production areas to prevent any cross-contamination that might ruin the laboratory's results, although that made it more vulnerable. It wouldn't surprise Karl if it were any of their corporate rivals here to steal the results of the research, or destroy the site to prevent Bauhaus from improving their products. The Capitolians, in particular, were competitors for food exports with their farms on Mars.

He still worried about the strange weapon, though. It was one thing to deploy destruction or espionage raids on research stations- that was a common business. It was far less common to take to the raids with experimental weapons.

Karl logged the location and made notes on his map. The patrol continued.

As they were about to leave, instinct caused Walter to snap his head around. He spotted a curl of mist, as though someone had moved through it a moment ago. His hands and feet chilled and the hair stood up on the back of his neck.

* * * * *

Walter and Reinhold burst through the bracken and collapsed in a small hollow. The younger man was heaving with every breath, and Walter had to drag him up again. He pushed the young Hussar against the side of the hollow, forcing his rifle into his hands. After a moment, Reinhold's breathing slowed a little and he began scanning the jungle again.

Walter was about to move over to the other side to cover that direction when he stopped dead.

There at the bottom of the hollow was another Hussar. He was sitting up in some sort of eerie facsimile of life, but as still as a statue. Walter reached out with the butt of his rifle and nudged the man. The only reaction was a small whimper.

Walter looked him over. It was Franz Stein, he guessed, although the amount of mud on him made it difficult to confirm. He was propped up against the wall of the hollow, sitting erect. He was one of the two shotgun-bearing Hussars in the squad, and Walter nervously eyed the Haegulsturm laid across his thighs.

'Stein? What has happened?'

Franz just sat there, not moving.

'Stein? Are you okay? Can you speak?'

No response. Walter moved in front of him, looking for his eyes under the face shield.

'Franz?'

Reinhold joined him, waving a hand in front of Franz's face. The younger man reached down and picked up the shotgun.

'If you can't use this, Kamrade, we need it.'

Walter looked at the younger man and nodded. Reinhold's voice cracked a little

'I've never seen him like this. He's the last one I would suspect of having a mental deficiency.'

Walter stood.

'It is not a defect. Combat causes stresses our minds are not built to sustain. After the night we have been through, I am surprised that more of us aren't failing.' He turned back to the catatonic soldier.

'The problem is, whatever is out there will make mincemeat of him. Do we have the time to let him recover?'

'Will he?'

Walter shook his head.

'Cardinal knows. He will slow us down, though. That's if he moves at all.'

'We have to keep moving.' Reinhold said it as though it were dogma, etched into the wall of a great cathedral. Walter couldn't argue the point.

'We can't leave him, he'll die.'

'If we take him, we might all die.'

Walter stepped to Franz's side and nudged him. He didn't move, but he didn't resist Walter moving his arms. On some level, he seemed to accept that they were friends. He pulled the dirty-armoured young man to his feet, and Franz stood in the same statuesque manner.

'So, do we walk him all the way home?'

'Who says we're going home?'

Walter looked around and seized on a length of vine. It was as thick as his thumb and very flexible. He tied it around Franz's belt.

'We can lead him.'

'Like an animal, Danzer?'

'The very same. Just until he recovers enough to use a weapon.'

'What if we get shot at?'

Walter swallowed.

'Then he will have to recover on his own, and very quickly.'

Reinhold nodded.

'We have to keep moving.' He intoned.

'Ja, we have to keep moving,' Walter replied, 'we have to keep moving.'

* * * * *

They all heard the sound.

It was a fizzling crack, like fireworks. The blue-white glow on the leaves around them spoke of the muzzle flash and impact, about five hundred metres to their north-west.

Karl and the other veterans quickly identified the sound as a plasma rifle, even as their bodies reacted to training and threw them into cover. The Aufklärer moved together to seek the source of the fire, even if the Hussars weren't the target. The two MG-40 armed soldiers pushed out to the flanks to provide covering fire, and the remainder of the squad fanned out to cover all other directions.

In the jungle, it paid not to get fixed on one direction. Even if you thought you knew the direction the enemy were coming from, the close vegetation meant that the enemy could walk right past you without noticing.

They were reacting to training, something that they had done many times before. However, their collective jungle training was done during the previous two standard months of daylight.

Theodor and Lorenz moved in the direction of the sound. Each would move, then drop into a crouch amongst the undergrowth and snap their Panzerknacker up to firing position. Then the other would move forward again and the pattern would repeat, like a well-oiled machine.

Theodor scuttled forward, dropping and snaking up to the bole of a medium-sized tree. On seeing his comrade's rifle pointed again, Lorenz moved. He dropped into a small furrow between rocks and slithered through a hole in the bushes to find a good covering position. When he raised himself into a kneeling position, he realised that he couldn't see Theodor. He had also lost his landmarks in the jungle, and didn't know where the squad was.

Lorenz searched frantically for a moment to locate anything familiar. The last thing he wanted was to be stuck in the jungle on his own. He fixed on a tree that he had seen with a Y-shaped fork and a couple of lighter-coloured patches halfway up the trunk. He was sure he had passed that tree and slowly started to move in that direction, back to the squad.

Theodor saw where Lorenz had popped up, and then saw the other man move further away from him. Theodor waved to gain his attention, but Lorenz didn't see him. He swore and darted up to another tree, trying to cover his fellow Aufklärer until he regained his position.

Lorenz didn't turn around, though. He kept moving, walking in a careful crouch just above the bushes and grass, walking away from the squad.

Walking towards the gunshot.

Theodor moved again, trying to keep his friend covered.

Karl signalled his troops, trying to find his Aufklärer. They had disappeared into a bank of thick bushes and rocks, losing visual contact in the darkened jungle. They hadn't heard another shot, but he couldn't afford to take the risk that his scouts wouldn't get picked off by whatever was out there.

He signalled the squad to move. The Hussars rose, weapons held into their shoulders and pointed into the jungle. Karl hoped that they would confirm their targets before firing- in the dark it was too easy to see a figure moving but not see them well enough to know they were friends.

The squad crept forward, moving through a copse of trees and a pile of rocks. Still no signs.

They continued the advance.

He felt the tension like a bolt up his spine as Josef signalled a halt. He followed the man's pointing finger to see a figure crouched by the bole of a tree. He signalled the squad to fan out and provide cover again, and then went forward to see who it was.

Lorenz was squatted there, furtively looking in a couple of directions. He snapped his head around as Karl approached, then relaxed a little.

'Dobberstein, report.'

'Herr... he's...'

'Report.'

'Herr Unteroffizier, it's Weinbuch. He's... he's gone.'

He showed Karl a rifle and an empty helmet.

* * * * *

Reinhold crept up to the edge of the hollow and peeked above. He signalled back that it was clear, and Walter pulled the unprotesting Franz behind him. Reinhold advanced, the shotgun in his hands slowly pushing through the bracken.

They made their way south, at least as close to south as Walter could determine. He checked behind them frequently, but there were no more signs of movement. He hoped fervently that whatever forces were fighting out there were not concerned with the small band of Hussars.

The bracken gave way to more open ground. Walter's nose curled as he smelled the acrid stench of fuel. As they proceeded, a standing figure appeared out of the mist, then another and another. Soon it seemed that they were confronted with a platoon or more of the things, standing there silently.

Walter saw Reinhold raise his shotgun into his shoulder and he heard the safety click off.

Walter dropped the vine and dashed forward, reaching for Reinhold's trigger finger.

'Don't fire!' He hissed, 'they're not targets!'

Reinhold paused for a moment, and slowly lowered his weapon.

'They're Butane Ferns. They drop their leaves as dusk approaches.'

Walter brought the unresponsive Franz with them, and they inspected the objects. They were the thick trunks of fern trees, about the height of a man, and indeed their fronds were scattered on the ground around them. The stink of petrol was stronger than ever.

'Right now they're releasing the hydrocarbons from their sap. They're very flammable when refined; this patch would have been worth a lot of money.'

Reinhold looked at him.

'Do you think this is what they were protecting?'

Walter shook his head.

'They need to be harvested, in the daytime. This lot is worthless now. Their spores will land somewhere else and sprout before dawn.'

They moved on through the patch, feeling the sludge of the decaying ferns beneath their feet. On the far side, the quiet burble of a stream greeted them. Walter heard a noise and turned to Franz.

The man was whispering, quietly, stutteringly, mouthing something as much as speaking it. Walter leaned closer to hear.

It was a prayer.

A prayer for protection.

Franz seemed to find his voice, and the whispering became a quiet intonation of the same prayer. The hackles raised along Walter's neck. He felt the vine go slack and watched Franz walk ahead of him. The affected Hussar seemed to wander, then threw a look over his shoulder and ran.

Reinhold tried to grab the vine and restrain him, but Walter's instincts told him something else. He spun and looked in the direction Franz had, his weapon coming up into his shoulder. He naturally eased himself up to the trunk of a Butane Fern, scanning for threats.

The mist swirled. There was a squelch of footsteps on the other side of the patch. Walter briefly entertained the idea that more of the squad had found them, but somehow he didn't believe it. The mist swirled.

There was a faint purple glow amongst the trees- not enough to really spot the source, but enough to notice the colour. It vaguely nauseated him. A dark shape loomed over the patch, closer to three metres tall than two. There was a faint creak, every tiny sound coming to Walter's breathless ears.

The figure paused, a quiet shadow. It turned one way and the other, every movement bringing a faint whine and the occasional creak. It made a deliberate sound, a chittering squawk. Walter had seen enough.

His heart pounded in his ears as he sunk to the bottom of the fern. He picked his way as silently and carefully as he could through the muck. He didn't dare look back.

Walter moved from trunk to trunk. He cleared the Butane patch and increased his pace, nearly running into Reinhold.

'Danzer, I found him, he's-'

Walter frantically signalled for silence. Reinhold trailed off, and his head turned to look at something. Walter spun, bringing his weapon up. The Hussars dropped to a knee and aimed.

The dark figure was moving faster now, as though following something. Their safeties clicked off.

An armoured shell appeared from behind a tree. The purple glow came from a series of runes around the edges of it. Reinhold fired, rapidly squeezing his trigger to send a roaring hail of pellets into the area.

There was an unearthly screech, and the hulking shape vanished into the mists. Walter and Reinhold sprinted to new positions, and they heard it moving to their right.

'Mein gott, it's fast!' Walter paid the comment no mind and snapped off a burst of shots, trying to force it away from them. He dashed to the right, the same direction as the movement. They had to keep it off guard.

Reinhold pulled out his Panzerknacker and held one weapon in each hand, firing off shots at random to cover Walter. Walter sent a short burst into each gap in the trunks, methodically covering the space in front of him with deadly fire.

The last burst drew an animal scream and a shower of sparks. Both Hussars concentrated their fire there, trying to hit it again, but in vain. The scream became an angry bellow.

There was a whine and the chunky, wet sounds of the machine-gun fire they had heard before. They dived behind cover, the air suddenly filled with nightmarish things that didn't quite seem to be bullets. Walter waved to the younger Hussar.

'Move, that way!' He pointed to the river. Reinhold fell back, needing no prompting to put distance between himself and the threat. He raced to a tree and spun, his rifle cracking shots into the ferns.

As soon as he heard the covering fire, Walter was sprinting. He nearly fell over the bank of the stream, an erosion gully about chest-deep. He spun and fumbled a grenade out of his pouch to jam into the Panzerknacker, estimating the range and letting it fly.

The foe loosed another long burst of the slopping fire, and Reinhold ducked behind the tree, pieces of bark and leaf showering him. An explosion thumped in the middle of the patch, a distant trunk shattering. Walter reloaded and fired again, two ferns shuddering and falling, seemingly in slow motion. He followed the grenade with sporadic bullets from the rifle as he fumbled for another round.

Reinhold landed further up the stream, spinning and adding his fire to the cacophony. Walter's fingers snagged the next round and he jammed it into the breech. He aimed and fired, this time further to the right.

The round landed with a plop, then nothing. Walter swore, the round clearly being faulty. He grabbed for another grenade when a blazing orange-white light filled his vision. The fire quickly took hold, the volatile compounds in the decaying ferns spreading the blaze. Soon the whole patch seemed to be alight. The animal roar came again, competing with the sizzling fire.

Walter looked down at his grenade pouch. He had grabbed an illumination flare instead of a grenade.

'Let's go!'

Reinhold didn't need encouragement. The two ran from the blaze, trying to put as much distance between themselves and the beast as possible. They spotted Franz wandering in the gravel by the riverbed, and Walter grabbed him by the vine. They crossed the stream, dragging Franz over to the far bank. Walter changed direction and headed North, towards the junction Gellert had been leading them to earlier.

* * * * *

'They took him they took him they took him-'

Karl hit the man over the back of his helmet.

'Compose yourself, Hussar.'

Lorenz shook.

'He was right here. *Right here*. I got disoriented, then I saw him, and moved back...'

'Yes?'

'He put his weapon down for a moment to signal me, and ...something grabbed him.'

'Something?'

'I didn't see. A dark arm around his neck, and then he was dragged behind the tree. When I got here, there was no sign of him.'

Karl turned. Walter and Willi were crouched nearby, within earshot. Karl jogged over to them, crouching down.

'We have a Hussar missing. We will find him. Get the men in a line. We're going that way.'

Walter hesitated.

'Something wrong, Trooper Danzer?'

'Herr Unteroffizier... we... how would you like me to arrange the men? If it were a trap being set for us?'

'With their weapons up and ready to engage the foe. This is Bauhaus jungle. If they seek to trap us, we will kill them.'

Walter nodded slowly and disappeared. Karl fumed quietly. *The nerve! To take one of my troopers!*

The Hussars were quickly arrayed in a line abreast, weapons at the ready. They advanced, slowly moving from the low bushes and rocks into a vine-entangled cluster of trees. They drew in instinctively, staying close enough to see the next two men in line as they pushed through the vegetation.

The trees slowly grew taller and taller, the trunks and lower branches thickening. Each new tree they came across made Karl feel like he was shrinking. His fury began to give way to a hollow ache in his belly and a furrowed brow as they advanced without any sign of their missing soldier. He glanced at the map as they advanced. They were moving away from the stream.

The trees abruptly stopped, and a series of long, grass-like plants filled a large clearing that Karl couldn't yet see the other side of. The tight line of Hussars advanced through the trees and into the waving leaves.

Karl paused as he realised that the man to his right had done the same. Along the line, the tense Hussars halted and dropped into the undergrowth. A moment later, Karl heard careful footsteps and Willi approached him.

The medic didn't say a word, but opened his hand and placed something into Karl's. He looked down at the object, a piece of cloth like a bag but too shallow. He turned it over and held it up to the dim starlight.

It was a Beret, scarlet like freshly spilled blood. His lips curled back and he called his radio operator over through clenched teeth.

Walter heard a creak, then a faint tapping in the treetops. Then he heard a similar sound from another tree. Dread clutched at his joints, he opened his mouth to shout a warning, and time ground to a halt.

He knew, in that instant, that he was too late.

* * * * *

Walter's hands were shaking, and he gripped the rifle tighter to eliminate it. Reinhold had fallen back into a patrol stance, the weapon in his hands tracking the uncaring jungle to their rear. Franz walked between them without his impromptu leash, his empty hands shuddering, his now-soundless prayers setting fire to Walter's nerves.

They had changed direction several times, just in case the monster from the Butane patch picked up their trail, or scent, or whatever it used to find its quarry. They had crossed the stream twice, and were headed for the junction once more.

Walter had developed a quiet longing for more grenades, particularly the special issue ones that he'd heard of but never seen. He couldn't shake the feeling, as though he could just call up HQ and get a shipment out. He craved the incendiary grenades, airbursting shells that blanketed a small area in burning fluid. Flechette grenades, akin to a giant shotgun and filled with steel darts instead of pellets, had a strong appeal as well.

Walter was deep in contemplation as to how he could acquire some of these grenades when he noticed the man. He halted and trained his weapon on him, Reinhold coming up on his left. The other Hussar noticed the figure and looked at Walter for some guidance.

Walter waved him forward. Reinhold stalked a few paces forward and halted, sweeping the jungle for any other signs of movement. As he paused, Walter moved forward, the trembling Franz following him.

He noticed as he got closer the man was larger than the Hussars, clad in a suit of thick armour. It was painted in dark-toned camouflage. He was lying propped against a rock, facing away from them, his left leg a shattered mess and his lips stained with blood. It was hard to tell if he was alive or dead.

Walter approached and pressed the barrel of his rifle against the man's cheek. The man jerked as if touched by a live wire, causing Walter to nearly pulled the trigger.

Reinhold circled behind him, checking the area for traps or other soldiers.

The prone figure wasn't armed. The armour had a number of cracked plates, and his breathing seemed to be laboured. Walter and the stricken soldier stared at each other for a very long moment. Then the soldier spoke, with a strange accent and in broken Bauhausian.

'You. All are dead.'

* * * * *

Walter felt helpless as he heard the first of the weapons fire. A fizzling crack and a spear of blue-white caught Peter Beutler, their radio man, square in the back. His radio burst into a strange white flame, and Peter scrabbled at the straps to remove it when another shot caught him in the neck. The radio exploded in a shower of sparks and dense black smoke.

His world spun freely as he looked up. From the treetops a hail of plasma fire rained down on them, vaporising the low scrub where it hit. The after-images danced across his eyes and trails of smoke hung in the air.

He sought targets, but the flashes seemed to come from everywhere at once. They splattered all around the tightly-packed Hussars, who dove for cover.

'Return fire!' Walter unleashed his weapon into the trees, not caring if he hit anything. They had to fight their way out of this ambush.

Around him, Hussars took up the call and began firing into the trees as well. The plasma fire slackened. He saw Willi take a hit that splashed across his breastplate, but he was still moving when he hit the ground.

Lorenz scampered over to a rock for cover. As soon as he disappeared behind the rock, it and everything around it disappeared in an instant. Walter felt the blast wave like a punch, whipping through his body and stealing his breath. Black smoke obscured what little vision they had. All he could see was the occasional bright flare as the fire from above continued.

He staggered, gagging and retching. Walter tried to see where Karl had gone- the squad needed direction if it was to survive. He couldn't see him anywhere, and they were out of time.

'This way!' He bellowed, waving and charging out of the smoke. He wasn't sure if any of the squad were following him, but he knew they had to get out of the killing zone. He picked a direction and ran.

He dove over a large tree root and into cover. He turned, looking for his fellow troopers, but only one seemed to have followed him. Josef set up the MG-40 and fired short, controlled bursts of fire into the upper branches. The machine gun drew return fire from the unseen assailants.

'Come on,' Walter yelled in Josef's ear, 'only the dead lie still!'

Josef burst out of cover and began running. Walter was a short step behind him, but it was enough to see what happened next- the light from a burst of plasma fire glinted off a small metal object with three pins on it. Walter swung the butt of his rifle, knocking Josef off course and narrowly missing the mine. They both tumbled to the ground and lay there for a moment, looking at the trigger pins and the certain death they had just avoided. Then, there was a thud as something fell out of the tree above them.

It was a grenade.

Josef bolted away behind the biggest tree he could find. Walter scrambled and vaulted behind a fallen log, the blast just catching him as he cleared it. There was a sharp bite in his right shoulder as the pressure wave sent him off balance, and he tumbled down the slope.

His vision swam, and went dark.

* * * * *

'Who are you?'

The wounded soldier chuckled and said something in Basic. Walter, having never been off-world, couldn't pick up more than the occasional word. He jabbed the man's cheekbone with the Panzerknacker, causing a momentary wince.

Walter recognised the shape of the armour. All of his previous battles had been fought against Capitol and Mishima, but intensive recognition training from his corporation still allowed him to positively identify this one. He was an Imperial, and special forces from the look of the armour.

'I'll ask again. Who. Are. You?'

The man moved his fingers slowly, crawling across the ground and behind his back. His face twisted in agonising concentration. He pulled them out and then let his hand open, exhausted, for Walter to see.

In his hand was a small metal disc. Walter snatched it away and nodded for Reinhold to cover the man. He stepped back a couple of paces and slowly lowered his eyes from the soldier. The wounded man looked at him patiently.

The disc contained a small icon of the Imperial Corporation's logo. Around the edge were a series of words that he guessed were in Basic, Mishiman, Brotherhood, and Bauhaus. He read the words 'Imperial Blood Beret, James Stirling, 557965123. On the flip side of the disc were pertinent details written in the same mix of languages- blood group, genotypes and the details of the Imperial Office of Recovery if this disc were found on a body.

'Imperial. That is already clear.'

The Blood Beret returned a level stare. Reinhold finished his search of the area.

'There are no more enemy here, Danzer,' he said warily, 'and I could not find a weapon from this one.'

Walter nodded, holding his stare with the Imperial.

'Why are you here?'

Stirling hesitated for a moment, as if choosing an answer.

'Me soldier, Kamrade. Not know. Just soldier.'

'Just dead,' Reinhold added.

'Maybe,' Stirling said without missing a beat, 'maybe you. Just wait. Darkness here comes.'

Walter shot Reinhold a withering look and jabbed the man in the face with his rifle again. The Imperial barely reacted this time, just his eyes flicking back to meet Walter's.

'You seen?'

Walter didn't react.

'You, here. Mission?' He kept his speech as slow and deliberate as possible.

'Washing,' replied Stirling.

Walter squatted there for a moment and looked at Reinhold. Then he reared back to smack the man with his rifle- he wasn't in the mood for a joke. Stirling interrupted, his eyes going wide.

'Yes, true! Washing! Clearing! Polishing!'

Walter paused. 'A sweep?'

The man closed his eyes in gratitude. 'Yes, sweep.'

'Sweep for what?'

'Darkness. Horde.'

It felt like talking to a child. Nonetheless, Walter's stomach went cold at the mention of the enemy of mankind. It seemed to make sense to him, after their encounter in the Butane patch.

'The Dark Legion? How many? Where?'

'Jungle. New castle. Followed. Day.'

Reinhold looked at Walter. 'The Legion have a new, what, *castle* here somewhere?' Walter shushed him. He lowered his rifle and pointed at the Blood Beret.

'Your support. Where?' The Imperial looked at him, confused. Walter showed him a medical kit, to a blank look, then mimed an aircraft landing and soldiers getting in, and then pretended to speak on a radio. Stirling's eyes lit up at the radio part.

'Where?'

Stirling pointed with his eyes, along the stream they had been following.

'One kilometre.'

Walter looked and nodded. He got up and turned to leave.

'Wait! Help! Call help?'

When Walter looked back at Stirling, he saw genuine fear in the man's eyes. The Imperial soldier kept frantically babbling in his broken Bauhaus.

'Help? Help or kill. Kill me. Kill head. Dead head, Darkness can't use.'

'What does that mean?' Reinhold looked at Walter, then at Stirling.

'The Dark Legion,' Walter said slowly, 'What do you know about their troops?'

Reinhold shrugged. Walter continued.

'I thought so. They look like shattered men, like fallen warriors. I've never seen one, but you hear stories of men attacked by their fallen Kameraden. This Imperial seems to think that if we destroy his head, the Legion won't use his body.'

Reinholder stared.

'Is that true?'

It was Walter's turn to shrug. He started walking towards the stream. Stirling let out a panicked cry, and Walter wondered if being turned into a Legionnaire was the only thing the man really feared. He set off down the slope, visions of the Imperial ambush playing in his head.

'Danzer, are we leaving him?'

Walter didn't answer.

'What if The Dark Legion get him? What if they turn him into one of them?' The younger man looked from the frightened Blood Beret to the departing Walter and back again. 'What if it's true?'

'Then I guess he'll know for sure,' said Walter, not turning around, 'we're wasting time. We need to keep moving.'

Reinhold couldn't look at Stirling anymore. He hurried after Walter, disappearing into the night.

The Blood Beret's whimpering cry faded into the background.

* * * * *

Karl jerked upright. He swung the face shield away from his face and spat out a blob of thick blood. The jungle around him was quiet, the muted chirping of insects and patter of water drops seeming very far away.

He flexed his arms and legs, he moved his fingers and toes. Everything seemed to still be there. His hearing was slowly returning, as though he were coming up from underwater. There was a high-pitched ringing in his ears. He looked around, trying to take stock of the situation.

The dark jungle didn't give him many clues. Karl couldn't hear any movement, and couldn't see any sign of people moving, be they friendly or enemy. He wasn't sure where he was, but clearly the blast or instinct had carried him far enough away from the Imperial ambush to not be found.

An involuntary snarl formed on his face. *Imperia!* Those bastards, their whole corporation was formed on taking what it could. They grasped too far and brought the Dark Legion into being. Now they were grasping at his homelands here on Venus, snatching at the lives of his men. *My men...*

Karl hoped that at least some of them had survived. The last thing he could clearly make out was Peter and their radio catching fire before the blast happened.

Karl removed his helmet and inspected the damage he had sustained. His neck was peppered with small fragments of something hard, and he picked them out slowly. An open wound in the jungle invited infection, a far surer killer than any gun.

His left shoulderpad was a ruin, blackened and torn. Whatever force it took the brunt of undoubtedly would have killed him, but for the armour. His breastplate was loose, and he found that the buckles and straps on his left side were frayed and torn. He removed it, suddenly feeling very light.

He looked around as he applied the wound sealant, seeking his weapon. It was not in sight, although finding anything that size amongst the grass and mud was a difficult task. At least he still had his bayonet.

Karl got up and tested his footing. Everything appeared to be undamaged, and he set out moving.

It was a few minutes before he realised that he wasn't sure where he was going. Should he move to their drop-off point to regroup? Should he search the area for his Hussars? Should he go into hiding and try to learn more about the Imperials?

While he thought, he kept moving. His path led him through the trees, and back out into more open areas. He waded through waist-high grasses, twisting his body to avoid making too much noise.

He stopped abruptly as he realised that he had found the stream. He checked his map quickly- it appeared that this was the stream they were following earlier.

If he turned right, it would lead him back the way the patrol had come. Back to where they had found the pitcher, the armour...

If he turned left, he would be headed towards their objective, and the most likely place his Hussars might try to regroup.

He stood there as a slight breeze cut through the oppressive humidity. He listened to his jungle singing to him. It felt as though it were waiting for him. *Waiting for me...* Something else was also waiting for him, he realised. He was faster, quieter, more dangerous if he were alone.

Alone...

He breathed in. As a Bauhauser, the thought of being alone should terrify him. Instead it thrilled him.

The jungle smelled welcoming. *My jungle.*

He turned and followed the creek.

* * * * *

Walter was so deeply absorbed in counting his paces that he nearly jumped when Franz's hand tapped him on the shoulder. He made a quick mental note that they had moved about four hundred metres, then turned to look at his comrade.

Franz was pointing to something off to their left. Walter and Reinhold instinctively paused and held their breath, listening. Something was moving out there. They heard muffled speech.

Walter looked at Franz carefully, assessing him. He seemed to be alert again, although he wasn't speaking. He motioned for Reinhold to give the Hussar his shotgun back.

The movement seemed to be coming closer. The three Hussars raised their weapons and their safeties clicked off. As they did, the movement suddenly ceased. Walter began to take up pressure on the trigger, aiming for the area the sound was coming from.

'Achtung! Something there!' The voice whispering in front of them was clearly Bauhaus.

Walter's trigger finger relaxed. He carefully waved the other two to stand down.

'Welcome, Hussars,' he said, *'over here, by the stream.'*

There were more sounds of movement, and a couple of men appeared out of the bushes. Josef and Willi greeted them enthusiastically.

Josef was missing his helmet, and his face was streaked with grime. He grinned uncontrollably at seeing his comrades. Willi was wearing his breastplate slung across his back, his undersuit open and a white salve visible on his chest. Walter pointed at it, and Willi showed his breastplate. The armour was blackened and corroded from the plasma blast he had taken.

'The accursed heat, Danzer,' said Willi, 'the armour saved me, but the heat, it still got through.'

He pulled his undersuit open a little more and showed his chest. Angry red blisters appeared there.

'I couldn't keep wearing the plate, it would have torn this all open.'

'Ja, you are lucky, my friend. I need you to have a good look at Streit for me. He took a hit to the head, and is a little ...confused.'

Willi nodded as he picked up the subtext. He took the young soldier aside. Josef and Walter locked eyes and grasped hands in a firm shake.

'Thankyou, Danzer. I would not be here if you hadn't-'

'Think nothing of it, Lindenblatt. No man stands alone in Bauhaus.'

Walter ensured that they were arrayed to provide defence in all directions, and then they told their comrades what they had seen. Seyffardt taken by the vines, the Imperials and the creature shooting at each other. The Butane patch and the monster. Finding Stirling and their new mission to get to the radio.

'You have been busy, Danzer,' said Willi, 'We have just walked in circles. I think Lindenblatt has a heavy left foot.'

'Careful, Kroehne, or I might show you how heavy it is!' Josef grinned as he held up one massive boot. He turned to Walter.

'So you think we can get this radio to work?'

'Ja! It will be easy,' interjected Reinhold, 'I can work electrics. It was to be my trade.'

Walter nodded. 'Impressive, we have a worker here. Just needed to get through to your eighteenth birthday, Ja?'

Reinhold looked down, his cheeks turning scarlet under his face shield. Being tall for his age usually hid the fact that he was still just sixteen.

'It's alright, Gollwitzer. We have all been young before. I'm sure we will make it through. You'll be back in the city and drinking beer again in no time.'

'I could do with a beer.' Franz Streit's voice was quiet, but Walter's heart leapt to hear it.

'Come on, we need to move. When we get back, I'll buy!'

Looking far more like a squad than before, the Hussars filed out into the undergrowth.

* * * * *

Razack felt the movement of its body, coming in small whines and pulses. It felt the black fluids of its being flood through the lines that fed the motors.

It looked around the area, seeking the prey. Behind it was the great blurred bright smear of the smouldering fire from earlier. Ahead, it could see very little apart from the jungle and the stream.

It chittered a question to its twin, Howlich. The machine code came naturally, soothingly. The reply came in the same language: *to the north*.

Razack leapt off the ground and onto a tree branch. The branch was large and thick, but it still shuddered a little under his weight. He raced along it, leaping onto another branch from a second tree. Smooth footsteps carried him across the tree's span and out the other side, following the branch as it tapered out.

Soon its weight was too much for the reduced thickness of the branch, and bent under its weight. Razack was lowered slowly to the ground. It kept moving north.

It heard its twin once more.

Prey.

It licked rubbery, blue lips with a cracked tongue.

I am coming, it replied.

* * * * *

Walter halted his party when they were approximately two hundred metres from the location. He didn't want to take chances with the distance and accidentally stumble onto more Imperials; or worse, another monster. He told them to stay very alert, and the five of them advanced through the undergrowth in a tight line.

They trod carefully, as silently as they could. They had their weapons up to their shoulders, safeties off, trained on the area in front of them. Every so often, a rifle would point up at the trees above them, checking for more enemy waiting in ambush.

The terrain transitioned from the sharp folds of earth around the stream, through grasses to another treeline. They proceeded through the trees, the branches large and thick like the ones before.

Walter noticed a small light up ahead. He pointed at it, and the squad smoothly dropped into cover. Walter stalked forward to a tree and leaned against the trunk.

It was hard to tell exactly what it was at this distance, but the light was definitely not a part of the jungle. It seemed too definite, too bright. As Walter peered through the gloom, it seemed that it belonged to a dark green box. Small vines seemed to resolve themselves into wires and cables, which trailed off into the jungle canopy, no doubt headed to some sort of antenna.

It seemed that the radio was here, and not too far off the distance Stirling had said. Walter had not expected it to be unguarded- there had to be more Blood Berets around here somewhere. From what he recalled, some Mishima or Cybertronic forces might operate alone or in pairs, but Imperial forces would be organised as squads, like Bauhaus ones.

There was always the possibility that the others had been killed fighting the Dark Legion monster (*or monsters*, he mused). He wasn't prepared to take that chance.

The radio was located in something of a clearing, with only small vines and ankle-length grass in the gap between trees. If he approached the radio, there were any number of covered positions that could fire on him.

He returned to the others.

'Lindenblatt, I need you to cover us from here. Kroehne, Streit, you protect him, your shotguns won't help us going forward.' He imagined the effects of the shotgun pellets fired at longer ranges. The fire would blanket the whole clearing, hitting friend and foe alike.

'Gollwitzer, you and I will move up and try to get that radio working.'

The Hussars nodded, and took up their positions. Once Josef was in place, Walter and Reinhold moved forward as slowly and carefully as they could. As they got closer, Walter confirmed that it was a radio. He started looking very carefully for any signs of traps, mines or enemy around the device.

'Halt.'

He whipped around, seeking the source of the voice. Across the clearing, just at the edge of vision, he saw a large figure in dark armour. It strode forward, pushing another man in front of him.

Walter had his weapon into his shoulder, pointed straight at the soldier. As they approached, he was able to make out more detail- it was the same style and colour of armour as Stirling had been wearing. The man had a Plasma Carbine tucked under his left shoulder, pointed straight at them and unwavering. His right hand held a large, ugly pistol to the back of his captive's head.

The captive quickly turned out to be Theodor, looking ashamed. He was unarmed, unhelmeted and had his wrists bound in front of him. Walter locked eyes with the Blood Beret, who was without his signature headwear. He had his face painted with similar colours to his armour, making his white teeth and eyes stand out. The camouflage paint ended at his hairline, where an impeccably combed, neat blonde head of hair looked entirely at odds with the rest of his nature.

'Hussars, is that all they sent? I'm surprised you're not all dead yet.' The man spoke in slightly accented but impeccable Bauhaus. Walter replied for them.

'And you are?'

'Charles Fieldhausen, Blood Beret, Imperial. Also the last remaining hope that you're going to live through this night.'

Walter's eyes narrowed.

'So you go for a walk in our jungle and kill some of our men, then come here and tell us that you're going to save us. I am unimpressed.'

Fieldhausen snorted.

'I've lost men to these things. Do you even know what the Dark Legion is?'

'A child knows. Do not frighten us with children's nightmares.'

'These are not children's nightmares. We have been tracking these creatures for days. We finally caught them here when you showed up and spoiled our ambush.'

Walter paused, unsure.

'I've seen these monsters. I've also seen your men killed by them. Why should we think that you can stop them? What can you give us that we can't do for ourselves?'

'Two Hussars against the Legion? Even if I armed this whelp here,' his pistol tapped Theodor on the back of the head, making him wince, 'you are not exactly an army.'

Walter jerked his head towards the radio.

'Then why don't you let us call for help?'

The Blood Beret's eyes flicked to the radio and back to Walter's. There was a long pause.

'Feel free to try. We can't raise anyone.'

Walter nodded slowly. He kept his rifle level, but took his eye away from the sights.

'Gollwitzer, do your best. Twenty-two point five Megahertz is the repeater's emergency frequency.'

The younger man hastened over to the radio and started trying to decipher the dials. Walter turned back to the Imperial.

'So are you offering to help us or not? It occurs to me that the first helpful thing you can do is-'

There was a scream, and a sheet of blue-white flame erupted from behind Walter. It engulfed the bushes that had been Josef's covering position.

Fielhausen swore and shoved Theodor aside. He jammed the pistol back into his holster and glared at Walter.

'Out of time. Well, good luck then *Kamerad*. I'm going out with my face to the foe.'

He screamed a war cry in basic, and began sprinting into the jungle. He fired the plasma carbine from the hip, blazing white bolts spearing into and through the jungle.

The Imperial quickly disappeared from view, the noise of his charge joined by answering fire from somewhere out in the vegetation.

Walter raced over to Theodor and cut his bonds. The younger Hussar gave him a nod, and Walter directed him to help Reinhold. Their main concern was reporting what was happening to HQ- even if they all died, someone had to know what was happening here.

Walter, however, had eyes only for the flames that had consumed his friends. He darted from cover to cover, dropping in behind a fallen log and dodging around large gnarled tree roots.

He got halfway to the burning bush when there was a primal scream that stopped Walter dead. Looking over to his right, he saw a terribly familiar faint purple glow. The source wasn't obvious just yet- it was as though the leaves in all directions had started to glow in sympathy with this monster.

He whipped his Panzerknacker into the ready position and scanned for a target. There was still the occasional howl of fire further out in the jungle, but Walter was certain this creature wasn't the one in combat with the Blood Beret.

He heard a scrabbling sound nearby, and chanced a look down. He saw Willi, his face a horrifying mess of bubbling skin, slowly dragging himself over the ground towards Walter. He immediately forgot the threat from the monster and raced to help.

'Kroehne... Willi...'

The medic threw his arm forward, hurling Josef's MG-40 at his feet. He let out a gasping rattle and lay still. Walter found the ammunition pouches clutched in Willi's other hand. He reached down and placed one gloved hand on his friend's back.

'Rest, brother.' He would mourn later. He picked up the machine-gun and checked its state of readiness.

The howl came again. This time it stood in the clearing, just at the edge of the trees, no more than fifty metres away. Walter's breath caught in his throat and he moved, as slowly as he could manage, back into cover.

Now that he could see it properly, he was terrified. The creature was as tall as he had seen it before, and the visage was dominated by a large, armoured shell. It had a head that seemed to sit in the middle of the shell, with large bony protrusions on either side. The creature's hands and face were leathery, alien, and it leered into the jungle over wickedly sharp teeth. The rest of the armoured body was dark and seemed slightly rusted. In its hands it carried a gun about as big as Walter, pointing it left and right around the trees. He noted a bayonet the length of a human arm on the end.

There came a more human bellow, and Walter saw Franz stride from the bushes, walking towards the monster. His armour was blackened, and his left arm ended in a mess of flesh around the elbow. He had an intense but steady stride. His shotgun was levelled in the other hand, and it boomed, spraying pellets across the trees.

He barely broke his stride as the shotgun kicked. He re-aligned and fired again, and again, and again. Every shot was a few paces closer to the monster. His fourth shot started to draw sparks where the pellets impacted the creature's armour. It snarled at him and advanced.

Walter was transfixed by the machine-like advance of the wounded Hussar, but the monster's reaction got him moving again. He steadied the MG-40 and lined up the sights, anticipating how quickly it would move. His first burst went wide, and the creature ignored it. It caught a shotgun blast to the leg and ignored that too, rearing back and parting Franz's head from his shoulders with one sweep.

Walter fired again and again, letting short bursts of the machine-gun fly at the monster. It skittered into the bushes with that strange whirring sound he remembered from the Butane patch. There was a whine, and he felt the impact of fire on the tree root he was hiding behind. It was wide to his right, and he noticed acrid smoke rising from the wood as some sort of acid ate its way through.

Walter fired another burst, moved to the left and fired another. He darted back to the right after the third burst, the return fire deceived about his direction. He saw the creature's hiding place as he changed position, behind a tree. He adopted a firing position.

Willing his heart and lungs to pause, he lined up the shot. Hatred filled his chest. He sighted on the creature's head, the only unarmoured part he could identify. It was standing still, and he breathed out, tightening his grip on the weapon. He squeezed the trigger.

The creature jerked spasmodically as a train of bullets tore into and dissolved its face. The armoured form toppled over backwards and seemed to be trying to crawl away. Walter tucked the MG-40 under his arm and walked forward, keeping the fire up and using the tracer rounds to keep it on target. He kept the trigger depressed as he advanced, rending the creature and its armour into scrap.

The weapon ceased suddenly, and Walter realised that the ammunition hopper was empty. There was a sudden silence in the jungle, and he was surrounded by clouds of cordite vapour, hanging thick

in the air. His lungs heaved for air, and his heart beat pounded in his ears. His grip slackened and the barrel drooped towards the ground.

'Danzer!'

Walter's head whipped around and time froze. Running at full speed towards him was another of the monsters, its gaze fixed on him. The terrible gun was pointed his way, the massive bayonet aimed right between his eyes. Blue fire from the pilot light of what he assumed to be a flamethrower danced about the barrel.

This creature had a look of fury etched upon it. Yellow and black eyes sought his blood. Thick, rubbery lips peeled back from pointed teeth. Every footfall seemed to shake the earth. Sparks spattered off its armour from Theodor's ineffective cover fire.

On the creature's right shoulder, he noticed a head impaled on a spike. The face was painted in camouflage, and an impeccably kept mat of blonde hair seemed at odds with the death scream frozen on Fieldhausen's face.

Walter dropped the MG-40. There was no time to reload it. He knew his death was coming, but he drew his bayonet nonetheless. He braced, setting his feet. He reared his hand back to deliver his last blow to the enemy.

The creature seemed to cough, and it stumbled. Another cough and it tripped, and Walter's face was sprayed with black fluids. It crashed to the ground, momentum driving it forwards. Walter dodged out of the way as it came to rest.

The creature was still moving, arms flailing like a crab left on its back. It flipped over, now lying face up, and reached for something to steady itself.

Walter heard the throaty cough of a grenade launcher. He threw himself out of the way, flat to the dirt.

He felt the bass beat of the explosion, winding him and causing his ears to ring. He lay still for a long moment as his senses returned.

Theodor moved past him quickly, shoulders tight and head held to the sights of his weapon. He returned a moment later, offering Walter a hand. Walter took it, rising unsteadily to his feet.

Theodor was speaking, but Walter couldn't hear him. He staggered over to the ruined corpse.

Its shell was torn open, again reminding Walter of a crab. Fluid lines and small gears were ripped and twisted- it looked more like a machine than a creature. The grenade had blown the legs from it. The face was frozen into a terrifying roar, with one eye and part of the skull missing from an exit wound. Walter instinctively began wiping more of the black fluid from his face.

'...you should have seen it, Danzer!'

Walter looked at Theodor. His hearing was returning.

'WHAT?'

Theodor was pointing madly, talking with his hands.

'The Ranger! What a shot!'

Walter's brow furrowed in confusion. Theodor crouched by the monster.

'These things are Praetorian Stalkers. I saw footage of one on Mars. Some living creature put into a mechanical body- like a Panzersuit.'

'Ranger?'

Theodor looked confused for a moment, and then went back to babbling excitedly.

'Up in the trees, he was! A real Venusian Ranger! He shot this one down!'

'That wasn't you, Weinbuch?'

'Nein, my shots had no effect. But that Ranger... he was firing something different, like some sort of miniature rocket. Went right in!'

Walter looked around. Reinhold was standing off to one side, looking lost.

'Have you fixed the radio yet?' Walter tried to steady his hands as he spoke.

'Ja, Danzer. I was about to make the call when this all happened.' He gestured to the scene of carnage.

'Alright,' Walter tossed the empty machine gun and ammunition to Reinhold and retrieved his own rifle, 'let's call for a pickup.'

Reinhold keyed the radio to transmit and handed the mouthpiece to Walter. He sat there for a moment and decided how to sum up the situation.

'Command, this is patrol one.'

There was a long moment of static.

«Proceed.»

'This patrol has been in combat. Heavy casualties. Incursions of Imperial special forces and the Dark legion both defeated locally. Reports of a Legion base in the sector. Gellert is missing, Danzer is now in command.'

The pause at the other end seemed to go on forever.

«Patrol one, confirm your location.»

Walter gave them as precise a position as possible. The radio operator quizzed his last statement, gathering more detail on some points. After a few minutes, a stern, cultured voice replaced him, clearly some sort of nobleman.

«Patrol one, who is this?»

'Trooper Danzer, excellency.' Walter's genuflection came instinctively.

«You have assumed command?»

'Ja, herr excellency.'

«And you have faced both Imperial special forces and Stalkers of the Dark Legion?»

Walter felt like he was going around in circles.

'Ja, excellency, and they are all dead. We don't know if there are more in the area, though.'

«Well done, *Unteroffizier* Danzer. We will debrief you on your return. A transport is on its way.»

Walter dropped the mouthpiece.

'Unteroffizier? Congratulations, herr Unteroffizier.'

Walter waved Reinhold away, and then sank onto a log. He was shaking. He looked at the carnage littering the clearing- the Imperial's head, the two stalkers, the acidic sludge of the weapon impacts, the smouldering bushes. He removed his helmet and cradled it in his lap, laying his rifle against his seat.

'Weinbuch, Gollwitzer. Get our kameraden and lay them out. I want them ready for repatriation to Bernheim.'

'Jawhol, herr Unteroffizier,' They chorused. The two Hussars set to their grim work.

A small movement in the trees above them caught Walter's attention. He was about to snatch up his weapon when he saw the figure crouched there.

The armour was once white, but now was dirty and stained with time in the jungle. The mask was a stylised skull. The soldier wore a cloak that made it disappear into the jungle.

Walter didn't need to see the man's face, or read a name on the armour, to know his old friend. The way he moved, the way he stood, the way they shared a nod. It saddened him that this might be their last meeting.

He rubbed his eyes, and Karl was gone.