

# Half-Life

*by Francesco Poli*

*“For richer or for poorer, my faith in what I was doing, never faltered, was never tainted with visions of failure and I am, committed, more than ever, to follow my dreams.”*

This novel is dedicated to ***Derek Kevin Smart***

*See you among the stars...*

# 1. FADE TO WHITE

Black Mesa Research Center, Black Mesa, Mexico

July 12, 2002

08:33 AM

“Alpha team, report status. Over.” The radio crackled on, then “Status is negative, sir. Over.” The man got instantly upset. That should have not happened. “Repeat, Alpha.”

“Alpha, reporting negative. Primary target can not be acquired, over.” The man began to get visibly nervous. “Damn it Alpha! Check again!”

The man was being more and more nervous by the moment, as he walked in circles inside the nearly featureless gray room. Secrecy be damned! He shouldn’t have come this far just to make sure everything was OK. He should have just charged in, guns blazing, as usual. And who cares if a few eggheads ever got in the way? The ends, first of all.

Then the methods.

“Ssir, you should calm down. Nothing can possibly go wrong now.”

The skinny, pale and well-dressed figure was talking to him from a corner with his usual calm, reassuring, slightly hissing voice. And the figure was right. Nothing could have gone wrong. He inhaled deeply, exhaled and then settled down as the radio crackled on again.

“Alpha reporting, negative. Over.” The big man stood immediately and swore badly, throwing then the radio on the floor, putting a dent in it and bending the antenna.

“Ssir, may I suggesst...?” The large man looked coldly at the skinny figure “They may have hidden it, or set it somewhere else by missstake. If we set a recaller there, I could get in and out just before zero hour. The material is bound to be there at that time.”

The man scowled; thought for a minute, inhaled and exhaled heavily again, then nodded. “Not many more options, are there?” Although angry, he realized that leaving any option untried could bring the anger of his superiors. He was in charge of the operation, and his was the fault if he screwed up.

And already he had screwed up once.

He bent and picked up the barely working radio. “Alpha, this is Hot Dog. Barter up. Over.” “Alpha, bartering up.” One minute passed, as the two figure packed up their tools, then the confirmation “Alpha, bartered up. Moving to extraction point. Over and out.”

“Well, G, it’s back home the normal way for us this time.” The big man, still quite nervous, and the quiet, skinny, shadowy figure exited the room and entered the train station unseen.

\*

\*BEEEEEP\* *“Warning: hemorrhagy detected.”* \*BOOOOOP\* *“Morphine administered.”*

That was bad. And he felt it. That thing had really put up a fight, and unless he found some medical supplies, his hemorrhagy was only going to worsen. But how could he find medical assistance for a human being in a place like this? He was lucky that the suit could surrogate the functions of his now broken left leg - but that will undoubtedly slow him down.

And the painkillers won't last forever.

He looked down below. It was a two story fall, but he was sure to survive. He floated, gently enough, down to the purplish surface, and touched down without a scratch. His quarry couldn't have gone very far, and the opening in what seemed like a cave was the logical place to begin searches...

The sound of a bell ringing from above caught his attention, and he saw another of the ships, again appearing straight out of nowhere. Strange sound, but that wouldn't have made the ship less deadly. Its laser cannon muzzle began glowing, a deep purple mass forming in front of it, mass which soon would have turned into an anti-matter projectile. There was no time: he ran forwards as fast as his condition allowed to, and dived behind a rock mere seconds before it was turned to dust by the energy blast.

The ship had passed him, though, and he knew he had about six to ten seconds to get inside before it could turn, charge up, and fire again. There was no time to lose: he ran towards the opening, getting under cover just before the ship had fired, the blast barely missing him. He switched on the floodlight, quickly scanning the entire room for hostiles.

No one was inside. Then the ground shook; dust of the unknown material that made up the cavern came down from above, and he moved as second too late as the entire roof crumbled, one of the rocks hitting him and forcing him to the ground.

He tried to stand, but his legs were completely oblivious to his orders. He could look above as he saw another one of the ships, this one strangely hovering above his position, a much larger than normal cannon glowing in an eerie green. He had never seen things like that...

Distorted laughters from all around him made him know that he was surrounded. Five, no, ten, no, over twenty of them surrounded him, their disgusting green skin and single red eye betraying their nature as living beings, hidden as they were under near full-body metallic armors.

Then another blast. Pain was much beyond tolerable as he looked to his right arm to see it wasn't there anymore; blood, instead, was splattered almost everywhere, his MP5 now a contorted and fused piece of black metal.

\*BEEEEEP\* \*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* *“Warning: Major fracture detect. User death imminent.”*

He could barely understand that he was shrieking out very loudly. But then, his sight turned to blood red and he couldn't hear anything anymore...

\*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* \*DRRRRRRRINNnnn\* “Come on, Gordon! You’re late!”

Gordon Freeman woke up by abruptly on his bed.

He was sweating, his heart pounding as he sat, trying to calm down from the fading images of his nightmare still sweeping in front of his eyes.

His right arm was still in position. His legs were still working. He wasn’t bleeding.

And he was in his room, alone, as usual.

It was not the first time he had this kind of nightmare. So real they were, he could swear he was actually there a few moments ago...

“Come on, Gordon! You’re late!”

He slapped his palm on the alarm clock with automated wake up message, still dizzied. The fog of sleep slowly clearing, he glanced at the time. It was 8:40 AM. He was about to lay down again as he realized that today wasn’t Sunday.

And that he had to be in Anomalous Materials... well, about twenty minutes ago!

Hit hard by the realization, he quickly stood and rushed to his bathroom; after quickly washing his theet - hygiene, before all - he returned back to dress.

He couldn’t find his tie, so he decided to skip for today.

His chemise had a stain, but he figured that after all his dressing wouldn’t matter when he got to work.

And he could not even find one pair of matching socks, so he had to fit with two different ones. He was almost forgetting his glasses as he ran out of the room.

The dormitories train station was less than two minutes running from his room, and from there, a ten minutes ride to the Anomalous Materials Test Labs.

He ran through the nearly empty corridors, unsurprising since everybody would have been already at work at this time except the night shift guards.

The train station was a large room where dozens of tracks ran both on the roof and on the floor. His was the one for Sector C, and was the closest to the entrance. He slid his security pass into its slit on the train, and hastily climbed aboard. Sensing no more passengers in queue, the train slowly started towards its destination as the soothing, although annoying, automated pre-recorded speech kicked in:

“Good morning, and welcome to the Black Mesa transit system. This automated train is provided for the security and convenience of the Black Mesa facility personnel. This train is inbound from Level 3 Dormitories to...”

\*

“Subject: Gordon Freeman, male, age 27. Education: Ph.D., MIT, Theoretical Physicsss. Position: Research Associate. Assignment: Anomalous Materialss Laboratory...”

“Get to the point G. Why do you think this egghead is in any way important to us or to the agency?”

“Well, sir, our intelligence says that he has some... peculiar characteristics, shall we say?”

\*

Gordon sat in the train, oblivious of his surroundings as the train descended through one of the caverns that made up this section of the complex, while the train message system went on and on, seemingly forever, about how the compound was kept at a comfortable heat at all times, which was hardly true, about all the security measures, most of which were so secure their details were classified, and about the HEV decathlon that had to take place that night.

Strange. It had taken place the night before, and had been the main reason for Gordon waking up late. The people who had to change the message must have been in his same condition.

The train suddenly came to a halt: a shuttle appeared in the train's path, a load of crates in tow. Gordon sighed: those shuttles took strangely long to move; he always wondered why they couldn't take faster ones. After all, it's not that they didn't have the money.

Nevertheless, his wasn't the only train delayed by the shipment; across the shuttle's path there was another train, almost empty as his...

He stood, curious, trying to see who could be moving that way at this hour. One distinct, well dressed guy was... pointing at him? No, the trains were too far to distinguish things too clearly, and his dizziness from the abrupt awakening didn't make matters any easier.

Gordon dismissed his paranoia, hoping that the dizziness wouldn't turn into yet another splitting headache, and returned to his seat a moment before the shuttle had cleared the trains' paths, which both began moving.

\*

D looked at the person G had pointed as the two trains came closer.

“It's HIM? No, I can't believe it. There's no reason for them to...”

“Yet our latest intelligence hints all to this man.”

D looked again at the man. It was far, but he could see clearly enough. It was a scientist, and a quite mellow looking one. Undoubtedly capable of aborting a weapon experiment if a fly got in the test chamber... No. Surely incapable of even doing a weapon experiment at all.

“*Hints*, you say? And you know how reliable our intelligence is when they *hint* that something may be right! Already forgot the incident four years ago? Our intelligence had *hinted* that this man was harmless, and we almost lost an entire squad!”

“I... Sorry, ssir.”

“Anyway, you really sure that our ‘toy’ will be in the materials storage by the time?”

How many times had he asked him? Ten? Twenty? And his answer had never changed.

“Yes, ssir.”

“Hmph. You know, G, someday I’ll have to get you a better translator, I’m quite tired of your hissing around.”

G readjusted his tie and straightened his grip on his briefcase as the train moved towards its destination. It was going to be a tough day for both of them.

But especially tough for someone else...

## 2. ANOMALOUS MATERIALS

“...Now arriving at: Sector C Test Labs...”

Gordon was impatient of getting to work; he had been in the complex for less than two months and already had two late arrivals. That was something the higher-ups did not like.

Security was extremely strict in there: although one could board a train nearly hassle-free, you couldn't get off on your own as you had to wait for one of the security guards to let you out. This was probably made to fool wannabe intruders... But who the hell could even get into the complex? It was 'trespassers shot on sight' for over ten kilometers around the facility.

“‘Morning, Mr. Freeman! Looks like you're running late!” greeted Alex, the guard on duty that morning, after taking and scanning his ID from the preposted slit in the train.

“Assume the position...” Gordon removed his glasses as the retinal scanner beam moved up and down over his green eyes.

“You'd better move, Gordon. They seem to be quite pissed down in the test chamber.”  
Not surprising. “Don't tell me...”

Gordon climbed down the train as Alex pressed the 'return' button on the console, and entered the Sector C Anomalous Materials Test Labs entrance still running.

He had really better hurry.

Once inside he greeted Wallace, the front desk guard, who seemingly had problems with the computer system - when he doesn't? - but he had no time to waste; he went for the changing room, again empty as everybody was at work already, and from there, after stripping and hastily storing his clothes in his locker, to the HEV containment room.

In the room were three transparent cylinders, each one controlled by a buttons, which monitor, recharge and maintain one HEV while unused. Only one of them was still full: the orange-and-black colored one.

Gordon didn't know why, but nobody seemed to like that color. They said that it brought 'bad luck' and all that superstitious stuff.

But Gordon was a scientist: he never cared for superstitions, and he pressed the activation button. The glass lifted and the cylinder opened, as the HEV inside began startup procedures by releasing its safety clamps. Actually, releasing the clamps meant that the suit would crumble into a heap on the floor, but that would allow Gordon to actually slip inside.

As soon as the on-board computer detected his presence, the clamps shut around him, making him as comfortable as possible. A tingle on his forefingers, sign that the suit was scanning his fingerprints, then the synthesized voice, which he found out that curiously was always of the opposite gender of the user, greeted him.

“Welcome, user Gordon Freeman, to the HEV Mark 4, protective system for use in hazardous environments conditions...” He felt the usual tingle on his face, as the standard transparent energy shield covered almost perfectly all of his face but the mouth, to let him use it, and glasses, projecting an HUD just in front of them.

The suit came with a powerful armor, much more powerful than looks could lead to think, and an integrated shielding which covered all the armor and his head, which was left free of cumbersome, and, word was, optional and expensive, helmets. The armor and shield status indicated yellow, then, as the voice talked on, they went green, indicating nominal status. His health, shown in percentage, was full.

“...Have a very safe day.”

From that moment on, the suit was fully active, and he could finally move.

He ran out of the changing rooms, the suit's nearly invisible and almost soundless servos helping him to a much higher speed he had been capable of on his own strength - another plus, as he had still very little time to spare right now.

As he descended the elevator to the test chamber, from one of the speakers came a short jingle, then an horribly synthesized male voice croaked

“Doctor Freeman to Anomalous Materials test lab immediately.”

They must be really upset down there to call him on the comm system.

He quickly got out of the elevator and ran past the analyzer's secondary computers and laser pipe feeders, waving the occasional 'hello' to his friends; he was almost at the door when a computer console blew in pieces and took fire just a few meters from him.

“It's about to go critical!” Laidlaw, the nearest person to the accident, cried as Gordon grabbed an extinguisher and sprayed the flames in a single fluid motion, the suit aiding him by counteracting the weight shock from the sudden pickup. Laidlaw calmed as he approached the console and rapidly studied the damage. “Must be yet another malfunction. Thanks Gordon.”

“No problems, Jack. See you later.” Gordon didn't alarm; it sure wasn't the first thing going bad he had seen since he began working here; equipment this advanced was bound to have malfunctions sooner or later - much more sooner than later, apparently.

He set the extinguisher back in its charge station, then entered the test chamber control room just in time to hear his colleagues worry.

“...If he doesn't make it within ten minutes, they might consider firing or... Oh, Gordon! There you are; we were getting preoccupied down here!”

“At last! Is everything alright?”

“Yes... Sorry, Joshua, Micheal, everybody... my alarm clock decided to stop working right this morning, and...”

“Damn right, Gordon, they don't make these things as they used to. That's OK, don't worry.” The group of four, relieved, returned to their seats, except Sanders that remained to talk to Gordon.



“Anyway, there’s really no time to lose in chit chat; today we will be deviating a bit from standard procedures as this is the purest sample of Etherthel we’ve ever got our hands on, and we can’t risk leaving the slightest bit of detail behind!”

Wow! Etherthel! He had heard of it, and of its incredible (and mysterious) properties, but never ever got a chance to even see it.

“Deviating a bit... You mean we’re going for the overcharge?” “Hmmm, yes, between the other things. Don’t worry; your suit will keep comfortable through all this, as usual. Now, to the test chamber! We really don’t have time to lose!”

Sanders went for the retinal scanner for the door opposite the entrance, the scanner whirred happily and the door opened.

Gordon, still excited, entered and descended the stairs to the test chamber elevator.

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“What are you doing here? You’re not authorized!”

“Sorry, I...”

The guard waved his gun at the man.

“Turn your back against the wall, hands where I can see them!”

“Ok, officer...”

As the guard got closer, the man slammed his briefcase on the guards’ gun, knocking it back, and then on the surprised man’s neck, instantly breaking it.

“Love that ssound.”

The man readjusted his tie, and went to the stored materials. He checked thoroughly the ID tags on the storage; he was about halfway through when he heard footsteps coming from just outside of the room.

“... Yeah, sounds like an easy job. Why must we guard those things in four, as I said, is beyond me. It’s not that they’re going to spruce up legs and walk away anytime soon!”

Three were a bit too many. G quickly scanned the rest of the labels, and grabbed delightfully one of the cases.

“With all the stuff in there, it’s a miracle we haven’t all blown up already.”

As one of the guards began to enter his code on the door’s keypad, he pressed a button on a hand remote and an orange spheric field appeared in front of him. He dived in, the sphere disappearing mere instants before three Black Mesa guards walked into the room.

“...Don’t forget that Bennet has screwed up yet again!” “Yeah, bet he’ll get fired one day or another. The higher ups don’t like mistakes, especially - hey, what the...?”

\*

“...Gordon doesn’t need to hear this! He’s a trained professional and...” The door hissed open, and the two stopped bickering as Freeman stepped in the test room antechamber. The room was but a small maintenance shed, with a few secondary monitors and two people stationed there at all times in case of emergencies.

“Ah, you’re here, Gordon. Come on, let’s let him in.”

Two simultaneous retina scans later, the large, super reinforced door, slowly whirled open only to shut silently as Gordon walked past. It was just yet another security measure, but the equipment in the room ahead more than justified its need.

The test chamber was a scientist’s dream come true: the enormous analyzer beam emitter stood in the center of the room, coming down from the roof which was well over ten meters of height from the floor, and was almost half as wide.

It was a sight to behold when fully operative; and Gordon always found the lightshow of the analyzer fascinating, almost a living entity of its own as computer technology beyond anything imaginable perused the underlying material with unbelievable accuracy.

The enormous apparatus was not in function at the time, of course; an almost eerie red glow shrouded the chamber, together with the analyzer’s console and materials elevator.

A screeching noise caught Gordon’s attention to above and behind him, noise that then converted into Sanders’ voice, talking from the control room hidden behind a reinforced anti rad screen.

“Testing? Testing? OK, Gordon, Micheal has just received a call saying that there have been some problems down in the material storage room, and we’ll have a ten minute delay or so. So, while we’re waiting, we thought we might as well warm up the analyzer. Beginning standard procedure when you’re ready.”

Gordon sat at the console and began the initialization procedure. It was, at least for a scientist of his preparation, amazingly easy: just press a few buttons in the right sequence and wait for the corresponding gauges to get to green.

And he did just that, as Sanders gave his usual reports. Everything was fine and nominal...

Yet, something wasn’t right. He didn’t know what it was; it began slowly at the back of his mind, then crept its way to his rational hemisphere.

The word ‘Etherthel’ seemed to echo in his mind.

Etherthel.

Etherthel.

Etherthel...

“Is something wrong, Gordon?”

“Ehm, no, nothing at all. Sorry.” But he was lying; he had stopped, because he felt gripped in fear.

Fear of what, he did not know.

Etherthel.  
Etherthel.  
Etherthel!

The voice was definitely not an echo. It was almost growing in strength.

He continued, uneasy, the procedure as the enormous apparatus slowly began to show signs of life. But the voice didn't stop, until the protonic charge tester's overhead capacitors' rotors began to spin to life.

As it had come, it had gone. But still, what the hell was going on with him? It was like some kind of omen, some sort of 'sixth sense', telling him to... to stay clear of Etherthel. But why? And why had it stopped with the rotors? Gordon couldn't find any kind of rational answer. And no rational answer means no fact; for he was a scientist:

'If you can prove it, it's true. If you can't, it's not.'

That was the way he worked; that was the way everything worked.  
He kept repeating the motto in his mind, as Walter continued to give his usual reports and the machine came slowly to full power.

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"No time to lose, G. Let's begin."

The case was set in the enormous apparatus. Ten minutes, and it would be the beginning for the end of all their problems.

"Beginning destabilization in three... two... one."

The overhead wheel began rotating...

\*

About ten minutes had passed, and no sign of the material yet. Gordon had calmed down from his sudden attack of paranoia, but he still didn't feel completely right about this; the machinery couldn't operate for too long, even if below overcharge.

He looked again at the machine. The sight, even through his worries, was as always wonderful: the three oval and near flat surfaces that were the overhead capacitors were rotating at about one hundred RPMs, as the large protonic charge tester streaked wildly in a multicolored beam towards the scan focus, which was also about to be hit by the main blue analyzer beam, with an effect both marveling and dizzying.

The noise in the room was high, due to the rotors' high speeds, yet he could still hear Sanders' reports.

"...Overhead capacitors operating at ninety-nine percent and..."

Gordon heard the intercom buzz on the loudspeaker, which turned off, then, after a few seconds, back on: "Good news, Gordon. Looks like they sorted out the mess down in storage. The sample should be arriving soon."

That was good. He wanted to be done with this thing as soon as possible. Believing in those kinds of 'sixth senses' or not, he didn't like what he had felt. The tester was now just beyond full charge, and in less than a minute it would reach overcharge.

An hard condition to explain, he remembered, trying to overcome the last of his worries; it was something vaguely like 'overcharging' those old PCs back in the late nineties: you could have them run faster and better - but if you weren't careful, they could burn up, taking the rest of the PC with them.

Suddenly, the four lights inscribing the material elevator's safety cage began blinking. "The sample seems to have arrived, Gordon. Let's try to make this as quick as possible." Even Sanders' voice sounded a bit worried. Gordon wondered what the others in the control room felt about all this... But he knew the answer: it was just paranoia, and they were feeling as he should be, perfectly safe and normal as everything was.

The cage dropped down, going actually below the floor, just after the elevator came to a full stop in the chamber, holding the safety cart and the Etherthel sample. The enormous apparatus reached overcharge, and the overhead rotors, now useless, stopped; and the chanting began again.

The Etherthel could have been defined as beautiful; pyramid-shaped, glowing softly and smoothly, as it sat, almost impatient to get analyzed, on the safety cart's grabbing arm. But for Gordon, it could have been the anti-Christ made material. He was simply rattling with fear, as he tried to approach the cart. Just a push, a push into the analyzer, and he could steer clear of it. Forever, clear of it.

He took one more step. "Gordon? What is going on with you today? Too many women in your mind?"

"N-n-n-o... J-just..."

He took a very deep breath and charged through his fears, his mind almost numb from the torture, grabbing the cart's handles, eyes still shut, as he pushed it towards the analyzer beam. Sanders' voice broke momentarily his concentration:

"Gordon, we... No. No, that's nothing. That's well within the limits. Go on."

With a nearly inhuman determination, he kept going and the material finally contacted the beam.

He quickly took several steps backwards, still unnaturally fearful, as he looked at the analyzer. Strange; the beam was supposed to hit the material, instead it was circling it and was hitting directly the floor below the focus. Strange kind of analysis; he was never instructed in something like this.

"Wait a minute, Gordon, what the...? Oh, my God!"

Gordon's fears and thoughts were broken as the analyzer beam instantly reversed its flow and hit one of the overhead capacitors, collapsing in a streak of multicolored sparks with a deafening explosion.

"NO! We must revert..."

"Shutdown! SHUTDOWN!"

"Can't shutdown?"

"What do you mean, can't shutdown? Emergency procedures NOW!"

The people in the control room were obviously in a frenzy. Gordon was confused, unable to react, and the ground began shaking.

"Attempt shutdown! Again! AGAIN!"

Something was definitely wrong, as even the comm system creaked in:

*"Mass system failure in Sector C! Repeat: mass system failure in Sectooooorrrr Seeeeeeeee..."*

The voice slowed down considerably, then it interrupted.

The shakings worsened; Gordon fell and hit his head on the control console, his confused state getting the coupe de grace as his vision blurred. He still could see beams of green light flowing freely through the space from the Etherthel sample, bouncing on the walls seemingly randomly.

"My God... What the hell is going on in here...?"

One of the beams blew right through the control room shielding. The shrieks of the people up there were barely audible over the sound of the machinery exploding upon contact with the beams. Both the remaining overhead capacitors had already blown up when the beams seemed to have found some kind of pattern; they rebounded again on the walls, missing him by a mere centimeter, and hit the sample again, machinery still exploding all around the room.

Moments later, most of the beams were reflecting on the sample as a large green sphere formed just above it, growing larger by the second.

The explosions faded out of Gordon's mind, and the only thing he could see was the sphere.

It was mesmerizing, almost as if...

Then, Gordon's confused view was complete darkness.

✱

Gordon was looking at the purple streaked sky. It was wonderful, yet, on what place on the Earth was he? He looked around; he was laying in a garden of some sort; or at least so he thought. Everything was seemingly covered in a strange, soft looking, purple goo. He soon recognized that he was immersed in a shallow depression in the ground, filled in more goo.

Far away, he thought he heard a dog barking. Even stranger.

He reached down in the puddle of goo to help himself stand up, resulting in a purple left glove. His suit's HUD was showing a biohazard symbol, meaning the air outside was toxic and that the suit's purifier was on. He listened to his breathing, which sounded unnaturally heavy, and had confirmation.

How long had he been there?

How long could he remain there before the purifier gave up the ghost and he was left to breathe whatever unbreathable gasses that formed the atmosphere

“And especially, where the hell is here?”

He turned to look better at his surroundings.

The place was distant to each and every things he had ever seen, yet seemed familiar to him... As if it was from an old dream - but he couldn't remember exactly.

He approached one of the walls encircling the garden. The goo wasn't liquid, as the pool he was immersed before was, but solid. Very solid. He punched it lightly, and saw no effect. Whatever it was, it had the consistency of rock.

“Great, Gordon. Now what?” A green glow at his eye's tails attracted him, and he turned to see a green sphere floating about a meter above ground. Strange.

He reached for it and it exploded; then it was darkness again.

\*

Gordon woke in a a cave, or at least what he thought was a cave, since it was nearly pitch black in there.

The biohazard sign still hadn't dropped.

He stood up only to hear noises coming from his left. Was there somekind of atmosphere here then? He listened as they grew in intensity, and soon recognized them for some kind of distorted laughter.

Then, a creature fully covered in metal appeared, almost suddenly, in front of him and punched him back to the floor.

As Gordon, confused and scared, tried to focus on what the thing was, the beast lowered his arms to the floor, fingertips almost touching the nearly invisible ground.

An electrical charge began flowing from the ground to the creature, that quickly raised his arms, the charge growing in intensity, and pointed his fingers at Gordon. The electricity discharge went straight through him, or at least that is what seemed as darkness surrounded him again.

### 3. UNFORESEEN CONSEQUENCES

The chamber laid in ruins: the overhead wheel had collapsed in three parts over the floor and the entire destabilization hub was totally unusable as a large hole exposed the wrecked mechanisms inside.

One of the slaves had appeared. G rushed out of the control room to dispose of the thing before it had time to charge up; yet, before he had entered the wrecked chamber, one of the military preceded him and stopped the slave cold with a point blank double barrel shot.

D, just out of the trance from seeing the disaster, rushed out of the control room above and charged into the destabilizer chamber.

He didn't exactly seem to be happy - and G could understand why.

"Now, G, you explain me what happened. And you'd better be damn convincing!"

"Sir, I did my parts correctly! How could I know that the destabilizer did not..."

"No excuses, G! There's only one reason why all this happened: the material you brought back was NOT Etherthel."

D grabbed G by the neck, and lifted him up.

"This is going to be your first, and LAST mistake, G! You know how the superiors will feel about all this!"

G was dropped quite abruptly to the ground, making him drop his briefcase. His face expressed pain as he quickly grabbed it back.

"Now we must just hope that the Ethertel sample is still intact back in Sector C, or we'll have to resort to plan B to take big N down... And you'd better never know what plan B is about."

D pulled out a radio from one of his mimetic suit's pockets.

"Tango, status. Over."

Nothing but static. The man was again visibly upset as his face got red in anger.

"Tango, status. Come in, Tango! Come in RIGHT NOW!"

More static, then a scared voice came in.

"Tango recon one reporting sir! Situation is critical, we have dimensional breach, repeat, dimensional breach! Resonance cascade type four, epicenter Anomalous Materials test labs. Current size is 1.4 hundred meters, failing at..."

The signal became weaker then completely disappeared as D's fist clenched the radio more and more tightly, and finally crushed it. Furious beyond imaginable, he then approached G, who had just recomposed himself.

G looked for a brief instant into D's anger filled eyes then was sent back to the floor by a punch in his guts.

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The distant sound of an alarm echoed in Gordon's mind. Everything was black around him.

"Is this hell, at last...?"

He didn't want to open his eyes. Maybe if he didn't do so, everything would return to normal. Maybe if he didn't do so, he would find out that he had been only dreaming all along.

The alarm slowly became stronger, but it was only when a bolt of electricity hit the floor just a few paces from him that he realized that the sound was coming from the test room - the room he was in.

Slowly regaining consciousness, Gordon stood. More bolts creaked around the chamber. This was definitely not a dream, and even if it was, it was too real not to do something. Because if he stayed in there any longer, he was sure to die. Almost mindlessly, as if guided by pure instinct, he dashed to the chamber's exit, again being missed by another bolt by mere centimeters.

The antechamber had been blown apart, both of his friends lying in a pool of blood. They were obviously trying to escape, but the blast had caught them. There was no time to mourn. If he remained there, he was bound to the same fate.

He tried to open the door, but all the fissures were too thin for his large fingers. Searching rapidly with his eyes the small room for anything to make lever with, he spotted a toolbox.

He crossed the room to reach it, yet another beam hitting the floor just outside the room. Inside the toolbox were a few screwdrivers, some tapes, some screws... And a crowbar!

*"New utensil acquired: crowbar. Pocket 1 adapted and ready."*

One of the many nice features of his suit.

He crossed the room again and broke open the door, shutting it back behind him.

The small corridor beyond was lit only by the red emergency lights, yet most of the walls were in good shape. The alarm sound still raged on.

He crossed the small corridor to the elevator and pressed the call button.

No answer.

A quick thought, and the suit responded to the command by automatically placing the crowbar back in his hands to force the elevator doors open.

He glanced inside, and, seeing no sign of the elevator itself not above nor below, decided to go for the emergency stairs.

A second thought, and the crowbar was back in its pocket, invisible from any external looker.

Gordon thought briefly back at when he first used the suit, how all and every function felt a technical wonder in itself.

Now the suit was all he had to survive.

Ironic, he thought as he climbed out of the shaft, the alarm still raging on and some cement dust coming down from the battered walls: the suit was supposed to help people travel in hazardous conditions but common knowledge was that it had never been tested outside a laboratory.



Gordon dismissed the thoughts as he climbed up to the next corridor. The roof had almost collapsed, and a few large slabs of reinforced cement were one the floor, the emergency lights completely destroyed. A green bolt streaked a few meters in front of him, hitting something hidden by the walls, sparks flying everywhere.

The control room was just ahead, and the green beams were obviously still plaguing it, hitting the remnants of machinery from time to time.

Preparing for a run-through, he briefly considered stopping to check what had remained of his friends. Then, the images of the two people he saw just five minutes before flashed in his eyes; suppressing a need to puke, he realized only now how he didn't actually feel anything then.

But it was different now; instinct had done its part and conscient thoughts would make Gordon pass out if he saw anything like that again.

So he went back to the run-through. He waited for a pause in the beams' strikes, and gave all he had, the suit again aiding him. He made it barely in time, another beam hitting just where he had been a mere two seconds before. He rushed out of the door, never turning.

Laidlaw was just beyond the egree, ducking behind a pipe, fearful that the beams would hit him.

"Gordon? Gordon! You're alive. Thank God for that hazard suit!" Laidlaw seemed agitated, yet excited.

"Jack... What happened?"

"We've had a resonance cascade, Gordon! A resonance cascade! Just as I had predicted, all along! Damn administrator, he just would not listen..."

Gordon pondered for a few seconds on the possibility as Laidlaw talked, excited as a little kid.

"Resonance cascade? That's... that's impossible! You can't *create* a resonance cascade, and surely not one capable of destroying an entire room, especially one as protected as the test chamber, along with the control room!"

"But we did! Oh, and..." Laidlaw seemed to realize his excitement was to be very short lived, as his expression saddened. "... its effect weren't limited to just those rooms..."

It was only then that Gordon realized the destruction had taken an heavy toll here too: computers in the entire corridor had collapsed to the ground, and a terminal to the central computer was shattered.

Behind one collapsed data bank, he could see legs. He tried to approach them, but Laidlaw stopped him. "You'd better not see what's there. The sight is not exactly pretty."

Damn. "Are there any survivors around here?"

"None that I'm aware of. I've already look around the place and..." Laidlaw made a pause "I found no one. I was about to leave, but I wanted to try and see if there was anyone still inside the test chamber going up.

“The elevator’s still working? Good. Because there are no survivors inside there also. Have you called for help?”

“Impossible. All terminals are offline or destroyed, and the phone line is cut. We are stranded down here.”

“Then, what are we waiting for? We’d better be going.”

“But...”

“There’s no time to mourn the dead. Unless we can get out of here before the structural damage worsens, *we’ll* become casualties too!”

Laidlaw looked confused as he reflected for a moment. “I... I guess you’re right. Lead the way.”

Gordon and he crossed the room silently, and entered the still working elevator. After they pressed the button, nothing but the alarm and a low screech sound could be heard in the room.

\*

“Again you’ve proven a failure, D. Tell us, why should we give you another possibility?”

The big man was obviously at discomfort. Even though the transmission was through a small monitor, his superiors’ tone was clear; he was not going to walk away easily.

“I... I have another plan! There’s a GRS in the science team. He will be our key to Xen.”

“A GRS. Fighting our mistakes with the enemy’s is...” there was a brief pause in the speech. D was holding his breath. “No, we understand what your plan is. We’ll consider this option. Good-bye.” The connection was closed, and D was alone.

He silently waited on his knees, eyes closed, face down, his death.

\*

The duo stepped out of the elevator after the brief ride. A shadow to his left warned them; “At least somebody is alive here!” Laidlaw moved forward to greet the survivor. Gordon followed just a moment after Laidlaw had been punched to the ground.

*\*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* “Warning: unknown hostile biological entity detected within thirty meters. Entity signature not matched. Extreme prejudice advised.”*

Its head was formless and yellow, with no eyes. Its clothes, because it was clothed, were heavily drenched in dried blood and other - brain? - parts. Its lower part could have been mistaken for human, had at least its arms not been long as the rest of its body, and ending with three sharp razors just relaxing from the crude punch that grounded Laidlaw.

The creature staggered slowly but firmly towards Gordon, preparing to attack his next prey. Gordon looked down at Laidlaw, who still looked alive, then back at the creature.

What should he do now? His thoughts were broken as sounds of gun shots echoed in the corridor.

The creature turned, with a surprising agility, to face the new threat. Its back, exposed, was even more disgusting, as it was completely torn open showing the internal organs, which for some mysterious reason didn't fall out and on the floor.

"Bring 'em on!" Barney Wallace, the front desk guard, was firing away at the creature as it slowly walked to him. Four, five, six shots straight in what could have been the creature's head with deadly accuracy, and no result.

Seven, eight... Then a click.

And another one.

And yet another one.

Watching the scene almost out of his mind, Gordon found the crowbar in his hands. What the hell was it doing there? He didn't need it, so he commanded to put it back. But nothing happened.

He was about to try and put it down physically, when he realized he was moving. Slowly, very slowly, but definitely moving towards the creature, who was now being kicked by the security guard, although with nearly no result. His vision was blurred as he approached the thing. He thought he saw the guard say something, but he couldn't hear it. He couldn't hear anything at all.

In front of him the crowbar was being slowly raised by his out-of-control arms, and then lowered rapidly on the thing's head. Then again, and again, and again. Faster, faster, and even faster.

Until his perception of time returned to normal, and an headless monster was lying in a puddle of disgusting yellowish goo, some of which was splattered on the guard, on his suit, and on the crowbar.

"I... Uh... Woah... A-a-and I thought you couldn't hit a fly if your life depended on it..."

Gordon was breathing like an exhaust engine as his sight bounced from the body to the crowbar, as another man, dressed in the standard lab coat, entered from the left.

"Well, don't just stand there, let's help your friend. There's a lot we need to discuss."

\*

Nothing around. And no one.

Only rubble, devastation, and the alarm sounding.

*"Open your eyes! Come on, wake up!"*

Was there a voice? No. There was only...

\*

“... Impossible. Ventilation is separate in each sector.”

Laidlaw was badly hurt; the monster's punch was much stronger than it seemed: his right arm was now almost unusable and there were contusions all over his chest. But he was going to recover, his arm and wounds bandaged by one of the few survivors in the front desk section. Because, creatures apart, the damage had extended even that far. Gordon tried to guess what could have happened, but he found no logical reason - apart the one that saw Etherthel capable of creating a resonance cascade.

But that was out of question; Etherthel had been analyzed before, and no resonance cascade had ever formed. Which left the question unanswered

“Try crossreference with the sewers then. There's got to be a way!”

He had met the survivors, as said; there were only five: captain Wallace the desk guard, lieutenant Jameson the front door guard, doctor Wood and doctor Coomer from Material Monitoring, which was the first thing from the entrance, and doctor Brenson, which had come from sector D offices on a commission.

They were already trying to find any other survivor, but they had met the creature - whatever that were - just as Gordon and Laidlaw did, giving them much more pressing matters. Once their problem had been taken care of by Gordon, and Laidlaw was safe, they had split again and tried to find any more survivors.

“Hmmm... But yes! That's the way, with all the things going on I was almost forgetting!”

There were no more. For as far as they could go, which wasn't much since this part of the sector was mostly made up of solid cement which after the accidents had crumbled, causing many corridors to become impassable without heavy machinery aiding the rubble removal, and also, most of the deaths.

Over thirty people had lost their lives in the accident, including the six down in the still inaccessible test chamber. The changing room had been transformed into a morgue, with each of the body identified, if possible, and put in a decent posture, again if possible, for the funerals which will take place inevitably in a few days.

“Damn my distraction... Let me see the sewer map!”

But, as much as they wanted, it wasn't over yet. They were still stranded down there. The train track was completely out of order; and even if it was, the small metal bridge that connected the front door to the train itself had fallen down, and it was a fifty meters fall if one couldn't do the fifteen meters jump - which was obviously impossible.

With nearly all the useful equipment broken beyond repair or simply malfunctioning, they could not contact the rest of the facility.

And everybody knew that each sector is kept as strictly separated from each other as possible, to prevent people to know more than they were supposed to and all those paranoia things in effort inside every top-priority classified installation.

Regular contact with each section was maintained by the supervisors, of course. But an emergency plan required a sector to never answer radio calls for over 24 hours. And with all the pranks being made between radio operators, it was probable that it would have occurred well over two days for any kind of expedition to be mounted.

Which meant, in a few words, that they were doomed unless they could find any kind of link to another sector, because while they could survive for say 12 hours, they simply had not the supplies or the food - and especially water - to sustain more.

“Not here... Not here... No, it’s not here. But there must be another map...”

So far they had tried to cross-reference sector D with sector C; since the former was but the office section of the Anomalous Materials lab, they weren’t particularly separated.

But they still had to find a way to get there. So far, nothing; the only on foot route was blocked, and with the train offline, their hopes were thinning down by the moment...

“Ah, yes! Here it is!”

Brenson, being from sector D, knew it much better than the others. And he had just given the only hope they had thus far...

“If memory doesn’t fail me, this is a maintenance elevator that goes from the sewers to the maintenance shed in sector D. From there, we can access the office complex!”

“And that would mean... going down in the sewers?” Gordon didn’t exactly like the idea.

“Sorry, Gordon. If you really don’t want to, well, I think we can...”

“No, no, nothing like that, Harold. I volunteered, and I’m going even if it was through hell. I’m not going to leave you down here. I just wanted to know... Where’s the access port?”

“Hmmm... Good question; let’s check”

“No need to.” Doctor Wood interrupted the dialogue. “It’s in the restrooms back in the... morgue.”

“Well, we’re all set, aren’t we? I’d better get going as soon as it is possible. Can you print the maps?”

““Course, we can Gordon.” Barney pressed a few buttons, and out of a slit just below the monitor slowly came out three sheets of paper.

“Wait a second... Print the ventilation schematics also. We don’t know in what shape is sector D and we’d better not leave any detail behind.”

Another button pressed, and another sheet of paper came out. Gordon picked up all four, then, silently, he made way towards the changing room, the group of six following.

Trying not to look at all the bodies there, he entered the restrooms and immediately spotted the hatch. It was hidden behind a closet, or rather, it had been hidden behind a closet, because with the earthquakes et al it had fallen down, breaking the sanitaries and setting a thin layer of water on the floor - layer that was already regressing, because flowing water had been cut some time ago.

Gordon pushed away the closet, and pulled out his still dirty crowbar; he shaked to try to clean it a bit, but to no avail; he resigned and forced the hatch open.

The group was silent behind him. Then, Wallace moved forward and handed him a gun with two spare clips.

“You’ll need these, Gordon. I don’t know what those creatures are, but who knows what’s down there?”

“I... You’re right, Barney. Goodbye, guys.”

“Goodbye, Gordon.”

““Bye!”

“Goodbye? You mean ‘see you later’!”

“That’s right. See you later!”

“Good luck, Gordon!”

Good luck. Strange thing to hear from a scientist like doctor Coomer. Gordon turned to enter the hatch, but was stopped by Brenson again

“Oh, and Gordon! I almost forgot, again... Damn memory... If you can’t get an outside line from sector D, get to the surface! There’s an elevator in the warehouse section that will take you up there. You’ll surely be able to contact someone from there. See you later, again!”

Gordon turned again, and this time didn’t stop, as he heard the hatch get shut behind him, his suit’s breastlight soon becoming the only source of light in the small, dank corridor. He began moving; the sooner he got out of there, the sooner this nightmare was over.

Yet, apart from the cause of this mess, only two questions remained:

What was the creature that attacked them before?

And especially, where had it come from?

With no answer in his hands, Gordon continued down the corridor, hoping to be alone in this place...

\*

Death had not come. That meant he had another chance.

Plan B was indeed good. Much better than plan A - but also much, much more risky because it required capturing one of the most dangerous of their enemies' agents, a GRS.

And a 'virgin' one, too.

The most dangerous GRS, as the most dangerous men, was the unpredictable one. And a 'virgin' GRS was undoubtedly unpredictable.

D stood, and began the preparations by keying his brand-new radio.

"Hot Dog to Score Six." He paused a bit. That was an heavy order to issue. But it was required.

"Hot Dog to Score Six. Begin shock procedure nine-nine codeword six-one-oh-six. Repeat, Score Six: shock procedure nine-nine, codeword six-one-oh-six. Over."

Several "Yes SIR!" overlapped over D's radio.

It wouldn't be long before they were in position...

\*

Gordon had been walking in the dark, smelly, cramped maze of tunnels and pipes that formed the sewer system maintenance part for less than a dozen of minutes; but time didn't help him sort out his thoughts.

Thoughts about the alleged resonance cascade; thoughts about the creature; thoughts, especially, about the gun he was wielding almost reverentially in his hand.

As for every useful tool or potential weapon, the suit had recognized the gun, set up a pocket and prepared the ammo storage unit, which allowed him to carry just one physical clip around, and refilling it almost instantly by reinserting it in the corresponding hole in his belt.

Another one of the marvelous features of the HEV, he remembered thinking three months ago during training. He briefly wondered how his trainer was doing at this time, but he dismissed the thought as he got back to more pressing matters.

What he had in hand was an handy and accurate Glock 23. Marketed first in 1982, and selected as sidearm of choice for the FBI in 1997, the Glock 23 was a weapon of fairly advanced conception for the time, easy to disassemble being composed of 31 parts plus the clip.

It used standard 9mm Parabellum rounds, of which Gordon had about thirty in his storage unit.

The problem was, how did he know all that? He had never ever held a gun in his hand before HEV training, which required basic weapon handling.

In fact, he thought as the HEV indicated to turn at the next corner, he didn't even know that guns could be disassembled, as he couldn't even guess an use for that.

*\*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* "Warning: Hostile entity detected within thirty meters. Entity signature matching hostile unknown biological entity. Extreme prejudice advised."*

On the left side appeared a rotating sketch of the monster he had met less than half an hour before.

Gordon was briefly surprised that the suit had actually recognized the threat: must have been yet another feature of the suit. But he had no time to find out more; just in front of him appeared another of those horrors. It was eerily similar to the last one, except it was slightly taller and a bit more muscly - not surprising, even monsters can't be identical one to the other.

Before Gordon could even begin to think about what to do, his gun was trained on the creature's head the entire clip was emptied against it.

The creature staggered; then went down and stayed down, seventeen bullet holes in its yellow head.

He looked yet again at the monster, then at his weapon, as he found himself reloading it, his arms completely oblivious to his commands.

After it had been returned to its pocket, he could move his arms normally again.

Just like nothing had happened.

Gordon watched the creature silently. Then he sat down on the floor, and watched the ceiling, shaking his head slowly.

So many strange things were happening. And not just the resonance cascade and all this disaster. Not even the monsters.

It was a different thing.

A feeling.

A strange feeling.

An impossible feeling.

Or rather, an impossible lack of feeling.

He stared blankly at the motionless body. It was dead.

"My God, dead!"

Even his voice was cold and emotionless, as he was. And that was the problem. He was emotionless. But he had narrowly escaped death! And more than once! He should be afraid, afraid as he was when he was younger, afraid of death. Afraid of refusal. Even afraid of the dark, unless he was in his room and in his bed!

Instead, he was cold. And emotionless. And... and uninterested. He had already noticed that before, but didn't give it that much of attention; he thought that his complete lack of interest in vivisectioning the monster, which was what the few survivors did just before trying to find a way out, was due to his lack of stomach. Instead, he remembered, it wasn't just that. It was something different. Something strange. Something... unnatural.

Fact was, he didn't feel sorry for the creature. Actually, he didn't even remember how he had killed it, as he had killed its 'brother' before. He had just done it.

He tried to rationalize. He was a scientist; it was not his duty do despair in front of seemingly illogical facts, but to prove the scientific reasons behind them.

First option: his suit was aiding him.



No, absolutely impossible. All the suits were identical - and his weapon proficiency score back in training proved that; it was the lowest acceptable, and he still thought his trainer somehow cheated on it to let him pass.

Second option: he suffered of some kind of 'split personality' problem

The most difficult to accept, both emotionally and scientifically. But it was undoubtedly the closest thing to truth.

It was really like part of him was under the influence of a completely different being. A being that could control his feelings, his perceptions. His body.

A being that wasn't fond of science, that wasn't curious about the great mysteries of the world and of the universe.

It was a being that cared only about killing. And that knew very well how to do just that.

He moved his stare from the ceiling to his hands. For a long moment, he sincerely expected them to have changed - but even if they really had, he couldn't have seen them under the suit's black and orange gloves.

He tried to put his head into his hands, the reactive forcefield actually preventing contact of the gloves with his face; and remained thoughtless for a few minutes.

Finally, he realized he had begun to sigh. The suit was trying to wipe his tears before they could corrupt too much his HUD.

He slowly recomposed himself, still sighing, and checked back at his map. It was useless, and he knew, as the suit had already plotted the best course through the place, plus as many alternate routes it could find.

But he noticed that on the HUD had appeared a phrase:

*"Why does a robot always take the long route? To avoid short circuits!"*

Gordon chuckled. Then he laughed hard; but not because it was fun.

He laughed because the suit's software had found out that he was sad, and was trying to cheer him up - by telling stupid jokes.

He stood again, resolved to have a nice and long talk with the suit software's programmer, and, stepping carefully over the body, set off through the dark tunnels, his breastlight once again the only source of light.

\*

"Sir? I must respectfully object to this decision. It's unnecessarily risky, and..."

D was serious, too serious. Usually he would have been quite pissed by G's comments; but he was in no mood for outbursts. He had to keep composed, for it was the only way to succeed in the delicate operation.

“I know G. I know. But you know that we don’t have any more possibilities. This is our last chance.”

‘YOUR last chance’, G thought while replaying the whole plan in his mind.

There was something that didn’t work in this plan, he felt it.  
But the Lord be damned if he could focus it.

\*

*\*BEEEEEP\* “Warning: breastlight power below 5 percent. Estimated battery life: ten minutes before recharge necessary.”*

The light was charged by a dynamo, but to be remain charged it required him to move faster than he was right now. He turned it off, though; he was about to enter the sewage control section of the sewers - beyond which lied the Sector D maintenance elevator - and already he could see light coming through the next corner.

The chamber was looked like somekind of flow control room, with a chainlink bridge suspended five or six meters above a current of bubbling, slow-flowing unpleasantness. Most of the light in the room was coming from an overhead neon lamp, but the apparatus set about midway through the bridge was also lit in a bright green light.

He stepped forward, the suit’s boots clanking noisily on the thick, steel net of the twenty meters long bridge, the noise amplified and echoed by the hollow steel structure forming the room.

Behind him, a loud thunk!

Gordon turned quickly, his gun appearing almost magically in his hands.  
Nothing was there, and the gun returned to its pocket.

He was still at discomfort with what he ended up of naming his evil part; but he figured that it didn’t have anything to gain by getting Gordon killed - and that it would keep him protected.

Or at least, that was what he hoped.

He turned, facing again the middle of the bridge and began crossing it.  
He was about two meters from the apparatus when he noticed that the green light wasn’t coming really from it, but from some kind of electrical fuzz near it.

Wondering if it was damaged, he approached it: the electrical activity was increasing visibly; small green bolts were flowing through the air from a point about ten centimeters above his eye level.

Gordon reached out, and the activity frenzied; he was repulsed to the floor an instant later, the suit lamenting.

*\*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* “Warning: severe electrical shock received. Gyroscopes malfunction - readjustment in progress.” \*BOOP\* \*BOOP\* “Reactive shielding at ninety percent. Gyroscopes readjustment successful. Damage negligible.”*

Wow! It must have been quite a strong electrical field to drop his shields' power by ten percent. Gordon lifted himself again and watched, puzzled, as the beams continued to flow freely, only to find some kind of pattern in the air; they had grown in number and speed over the last few seconds, until they were describing a small green sphere, crackling and fuzzing in the middle of the air.

The sphere exploded, and Gordon's sight was once again blackness.

\*

"Y-y-yes, yes... Yes. It could be done... It CAN be done! But... but it will be risky!"  
The scientist's voice was shaky, but sure; science prevailed the gun trained on his head.

"Correct answer, fella. I like reasonable people."

"Alpha leader, quit mouthing around and get your people back to sector D. And I mean now."

D's voice was calm, a menacing type of calm.  
The team Alpha element leader turned, saluted and went quickly outside to the Lambda courtyard.

"OK, guys! You know the orders, let's do it. All aboard!"

The sound of thirty pairs of boots clanking on the metallic surface was covered by the roaring of an F-16 flying CAP over the site.

The thirty men had neatly split in two groups and were climbing aboard the two Chinooks, both inbound to sector D.

He boarded the second one, as his mind chanting a victory song. He needed luck - because they had failed last time. And because it was to be their first, and last time.  
'Four years ago will have been just a bad dream as soon as we finish here. This time, we won't fail!'

\*

Gordon's sight returned to normal after the brief blinding, and in front of him was a very short, flat, almost deformed two legged being.  
He couldn't make head or tails of it, literally; it could have been watching him - if it could at all, that is - as it might have been turned to the other side. Whatever of the two, it turned, showing the multitentacled part over the singletentacled one.

*\*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* "Warning: unknown biological entity detected within thirty meters. Entity signature not matched. Caution advised."*

The being seemed almost to look at Gordon, although he couldn't see its eyes; then it began growling feebly, almost like a dog.

Gordon tried to approach the creature; its growling increased in tone. The thing was somewhat cute, and he hoped for one that this one wouldn't try to kill him.

Then he found his gun in his hand, trained on the being, an instant before it attacked.

Gordon sidestepped the being's jump, which ended with a noisily thud on the catwalk; Gordon rolled, turned, and began firing at the centre of the tentacles the instant the creature had recovered and turned again to attack.

He was about at half clip when the creature retreated. He stopped firing, not sure if it was his own choice or not; but no sooner that the being had run across a few meters, it turned once more, then it spat.

The green glob described an arc through the air, hitting the spot Gordon had resided mere seconds before he had raised and moved. The being charged for another spit, but was stopped cold as Gordon discharged the rest of the clip in the being's mouth.

The creature weaved, growled feebly like an hurt puppy, then flattened on the ground, motionless.

Gordon reloaded, and the gun returned to its place.

It had happened again. An unknown threat had appeared, and he had dispatched of it without even knowing what he was actually doing. And after the fight, the coldness and the utter lack of interest on the body.

But this time, Gordon wanted to go against his feelings. he approached the creature, with his complete - and unnatural - disinterest making him want to turn around and go away, and began to turn it over.

'No genital organs', he thought just before the bottom of the creature was in shown 'nor exposed body parts'. Just solid skin, and two small, compact, clawed legs.

How he knew those things, though, was completely beyond him.

He stood, the unnatural disinterest getting at last the upper hand; he was trying to rummage through his mind to find more about this creature... It was a nearly inexplicable sensation, to be curios about something already known.

The conflicting thoughts almost driving him crazy, he quit, turned and made way to the other side of the room.

He stepped just beyond the control terminal, and felt the floor beginning to give way under his feet. Stepping back, he crouched to examine closely the grating; the spot where the creature's spit had landed after missing him was completely melted, and the hole was slowly enlarging as the acid spread through the iron.

He stood, again unnaturally uninterested by these facts, and inhaled deeply, the fetid smell finding new ways inside his lungs.

He cursed himself for his last action, and quickly exited the room to the opposite side he entered: the service elevator had to be in the next room.

## 4. OFFICE COMPLEX

Gordon stepped out of the cargo elevator to find himself in hell.

Large part of the maintenance room walls had been blown apart, and he could see outside where everything was in ruins; most of the ceiling's backpanels had given way to show the multitude of cables they had been hiding - some of which were dangling above the floor and crackling, cut in half, extremely high voltages still running through them.

Most of the walls outside weren't as badly damaged as this one was, although a few did show sign of structural damage.

Most of them instead showed visible signs of firefights, and many presented also still fresh splotches of blood which trailed to the floor to its late owners.

Tables were upturned, to make a crude barrier, as were file cabinets and even a few blackboards.

The only source of light were the emergency lights, and the silent alarm lights.

Everything was like shrouded in a red mist.

Gordon had come out from just behind the barricade. The scene was utterly silent, except for the sound of his boots calpesteing the floor, and wood shards and blood with it.

There were about a dozen of people behind the barricade; some were scientists still in their white lab coat, and some were from security, guns still in their hands. Gordon bent to examine one of them, and realized that most hadn't been shot or clawed through, but scorched.

The burns were on the body's belly and face.

\*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* *"Warning: unknown biological entity detected within thirty meters. Entity signature not matched. Caution advised."*

"GRGZXDIEXZED"

From behind him, came distorted and muttered words. He picked up the guard's still loaded combat shotgun and turned.

He gaped.

He had seen it before - but where? The being lowered his arms, his fingers almost touching the floor as a low crackle became louder when they lifted. A green field of electricity was stirring from each of the beast's fingers to the floor, and before Gordon could react, the being had lifted his arms completely and pointed them to him, who was slammed on the floor by an explosion just in front of his suit's breast.

\*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* *"Warning: extreme electrical shock received. Gyroscopes malfunction - re-adjustment in progress."* \*BOOP\* \*BOOP\* *"Reactive shielding at sixty percent, holding."* \*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* *"Entity classification: hostile. Extreme prejudice advised. Gyroscopes readjustment successful. Damage negligible."*

The being charged on, then began to lower his arms again. But this time, Gordon turned a switch on the shotgun he was still holding, and squeezed the trigger: several spent shells flew out of the barrel and deposited clinking on the floor as the weapon's automatic mode sprayed the being with lead. The being blooded green blood, and it collapsed, its chest blown open.

Then Gordon reloaded, and found the shotgun back in its pocket.

And that made four times. But this time he was tired.

Tired of his impossible knowledge of weapons and enemies.

Tired of not knowing why he didn't want to know what the being was, nor how he knew that he had fired a Smith & Wesson CAWS 12-gauge combat shotgun. This time, it wasn't just despair; it was anger. He wanted to know why he knew, and why he didn't want to know.

Someone had a lot to answer to him. But who?

"I know who..."

He angrily pushed away the crude barricade. He just realized who might be the one to talk to.

\*

"Alpha leader, we got a few secondaries." "Good, Alpha three. Make it clean." "Copy that, over and out."

One hour in sector D, and they were already deeply entrenched, with a bridgehead in the warehouse.

That was good, because enemy infestation was going to raise as big N realized what was going on.

He just hoped that D knew what he was doing. He knew they had given almost all they could - but a GRS?

He dismissed the thought - his place was not to question the plan, just to execute it. And for that plan to succeed, sectors D and C were to be cleaned out.

\*

Bodies of other extraterrestrial thunder-shooting beings, as well as of other people, were just outside of the barricade.

Gordon ignored them, still angry. He made way to a second corridor, still ignoring the obvious signs of gunfights, and crouching under another severed cable, this one also dancing wildly as if possessed by the extremely high voltage running through it.

He knew who he was looking for - but it was only when he reached his destination that he wondered how could have he survived. Because he did.

Behind the upturned desk, above various papers dirty of blood, lied a body, still lamenting. He was a mess, as were the others, but was still breathing. As soon as Gordon approached, he recognized him.

"Gordon... Oh, Gordon..." he obviously finding it hard to breathe and to talk.

“What the hell you’ve done to me, bastard? You’d better talk!” Gordon was still angry, but soon the realization that he might not know what was going on hit him.

“...Gordon... I’m so sorry... So terribly sorry... They shouldn’t... I shouldn’t...”

Could he really know then?

“Tell, me Kleiner! Tell me! I need to know what the hell is going on with me! And you know, don’t you?”

Gordon was again furious, as John Kleiner, still breathing heavily, touched his chest wound.

“...I do... ..But?... How could... I should be... Ought to be... No... There’s no time to explain, Gordon... No time... Sorry...”

The man was obviously confused, and it was only when he turned his head that Gordon saw the scorch on his temple, surely the cause for his mental state.

“Curse myself... Cursed forever... You were the best... You are the best ones... But I... No... I...”  
The man paused. “Find her... Find her, and tell her I still love her, as I love you Gordon...”

The man put an hand over Gordon’s arm “My...”

Kleiner exhaled, and never inhaled again.

Gordon stood, and looked down, his anger gone. A wave of sorrow hit him, suddenly, and he sat down on the floor, again, to reflect.

Jonathan Kleiner was not only his university professor in Theoretical Physics, but also a good friend. He was different from the other professors, all out for the money and uncaring about their students’ fate, as he taught and studied physics with a passion Gordon could only admire.

He had been a standing point throughout his university life. Many were the good students in his classes; but he never declined the fact that Gordon was one of his favorites.

Gordon remembered how sad he felt when Kleiner was reported dead. His graduation was completely dedicated to him; until a few months ago, with Materas’ call and his enlisting in the Black Mesa science personnel. Only then did he know Kleiner’s fate in sector C’s science team, and he remembered that the first thing he had done was to visit him and to catch up on old times.

How happy he felt, for a friend found again...

On the fogged HUD appeared the phrase ‘A man enters in a cafe’: **SPLASH!**

\*

...Darkness. There was only darkness... No. It wasn’t true. There was a voice.

“...How long... How long have I been here?”

Whose was this one?

*“Too long. It is time to move.”*

This was his, undoubtedly.

*\*BOOP\* \*BOOP\* “HEV sleep mode deactivated. Secondary functions reinitialized successfully. Have a very safe morning.”*

As the male synthesized timbre spoke, the darkness cleared. There was blood then, but even that cleared, and the walls began moving.

“Where am I going?”

*“You already know where. You must find the one person.”*

“But... Now? Here? And even if I do, what then? What must I do? Tell me, please!”

*“Just keep on with me. You’ll understand.”*

The voice faded, as the now-conscious brain began to recognize what was happening. The destination was unclear, as unclear were the motives.

There was only one way to find out.

\*

Almost one hour had come and gone when Gordon left the office. His original mission returning to the top of his to-do list, he summarized his meditations with more questions than answers.

Klenier said he knew what he did to him... and to this woman, whoever might she be. This fact, strangely, wasn’t surprising for him... But since Gordon had been knowing quite a few things too many, who could say?

What was more strange, is how Kleiner survived. Gordon had examined the body closely, and the scorch on its temple wasn’t actually a burn, but instead an hemorrhage. Not a cerebral hemorrhage - just a small superficial livid, expanded from two, small points. The two syringes he had found while searching the office for clues were empty, but used. What the hell had been Kleiner doing all the way through? What did he do to him? And more importantly, what were all these strange creatures roaming around the complex?

This had begun to sound like some old sci-fi movies he saw back when he was younger. He never liked sci-fi; he much preferred real science - although the very suit he was wearing could be considered science fiction by most.

Gordon sighed, and with nothing more to go on, he set out towards the warehouse, his suit still aiding him to find his way around. Because, he had found out, that there was no way to contact the rest of the complex from here; the computers were working and they were showing that the main connection to the rest of the complex had been severed, as sector D had been hit pretty badly too. And the backup connection didn’t respond, as if it wasn’t there.

Surface was to be his only hope.



The office block was silent, again, except for his footsteps and the occasional, malfunctioning, apparatus. The slaughter might have been complete; but Gordon hoped that a few scientists were hiding in fear inside one of the small offices, fearing that he might be another one of the monsters.

Damage had been lighter in that part, but as he got closer to the warehouse area, he noticed that damage got much more extensive. Checking the map, he saw that this section was actually closer to the test lab.

Checking better, he noticed that sections with higher damage were encircled into a semicircle, with the center pointing towards the test lab. It was like the resonance cascade actually engulfed the areas with a spherical pattern, damaging everything heavily; then it sort of died out, leaving minimal structural damage.

He crossed another semi-destroyed and silent room, also shrouded in an yellowish mist as the dust from the fallen cement shined through the emergency lights, to approach the stairs up; from there he should eventually find a vehicle-only access for the warehouse, although he hoped there was an on-foot access too.

The instant he set foot on the first step, he heard something above.

It was distinctively non-human, a growl he had never heard.

It was feeble, and it increased slightly.

He climbed a few more steps, and looked above again. Up he could see the landing for the next floor, and a small, podlike yellow thing was being projected to the floor below.

It was too late when Gordon realized the thing had claws, and the entire lower surface was a sharply-theeted mouth.

Gordon ducked as a last ditch effort; but it was useless, as the being bounced millimeters before touching his head, producing a screeching noise, followed by a feeble scream.

*\*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* "Warning: unknown hostile biological entity detected within thirty meters. Entity signature not matched. Extreme prejudice advised." \*BOOP\* \*BOOP\* "Reactive shielding damage: negligible"*

The creature's bottom was in view; it was scorched quite badly from the contact with the HEV's heavy shielding, and the little beast was screeching and writhing.

Yet it somehow flipped over, and screaming feebly it returned to the attack - only to be stopped cold with a shot from Gordon's pistol.

Five times... No. This one was different. He approached and picked up the small being, because he was curious about *something*.

But it was not its origin, but its similarity with the head of the monsters back down in sector C.

Gordon dropped abruptly the small being. No, apart from that, he was again unnaturally uncaring; but he decided to stick to his mission as he climbed the stairs to the first floor landing to hear a bubbling noise coming from his right.

In a corner, within a large pool of blood, lied a scientist. Only his head was yellow, and pulsating as were his arms, slowly and disgustingly, but visibly...

\*

“How is the plan going, D?”

“Fairly good. We are already well underway.”

“Good. We especially look forward to this kind of experiment...”

The connection closed, but D this time wasn't alone.

G ran to him; he was visibly preoccupied.

“Sir? Sir! We might have one more problem we never posed ourselvesss.”

“What now, G?” Contrary to his normal attitude, D wanted to hear everything everybody wanted to say on this plan.

He wanted everybody's opinion, because he had learned the hard way that ignoring even the slightest detail or the most improbable of problems could very well mean another failure - and his death. G, strangely, had hardly talked until now.

“How can we know what exactly that the GRS will be in its standard outfit?”

The realization hit D hard. That was one major problem he didn't think of. He couldn't get a GRS if he couldn't recognize it. And since most of his plan was about what to do after acquiring the GRS...

“...You're right.” D thought for a minute. There was one solution... But not a pretty one.

G was almost smiling as he talked “May I suggesst...”

D leaned closer to hear what G had to say...

\*

The garden was so quiet this hour of the day. None of the night creatures could be heard. The figure stepped slowly, looking around blankly.

*“You like it, don't you?”*

“I'd say I do. But I don't. And you know why.”

There was a pause, then the voice continued.

*“I'm sorry. But you know there was no other way. It was this, or death.”*

“That doesn't make things easier. Two is too many. Always too many.”

*“Two is the perfect number. Always the perfect number. You'll never be alone, with me.”*

“And if I want to?”

*“You’ll never want to. Trust me.”*

The figure crouched, tears flowed from the still blank-staring eyes.

\*

Gordon felt sick, as purple and yellow goo trickled down the hideous pulsing yellow thing, staining the labcoat over the blood.

Suddenly, its left arm began to pulse faster. At the height of the shoulder the meat exploded in a puddle of blood and goo, to reveal the bone, strangely dark. More small explosions and disgusting noises, until even the hand bone was fully uncovered, showing the finger bones had doubled over, and when extended were disgustingly long and thin.

The other arm began the same fate, but before it could complete, an entire 9mm clip was emptied in the being’s head.

There was no cry, but the mutation slowed and then stopped, as the being laid motionless.

Overcoming the sense of disgust, Gordon approached the body. He felt, for the second time that morning, curious about something.

“At last!” he whispered to no one; although his excitement was short lived as he braced himself and tried to remove the zombie’s head. He couldn’t do that; whatever had happened must have fused the small creature to a human being completely.

What the hell was going on around here? He took out his crowbar for a crude inspection of the internal organs, as the suit helped him by injecting an antiemetic.

He didn’t have a vast knowledge of the human body, but the inside seemed almost normal - weren’t for the small, yellow worms that were still crawling around.

The sight was too much, and Gordon stood, his disgust almost surpassing the antiemetic’s effect. He closed his eyes, trying to cancel the hideous sight from his brain.

He failed; but as he reopened his eyes, he saw a sign with an arrow pointing to his left. The sign said ‘Sector D Warehouse’.

His mission had to be completed. More lives than his were at stake. Recomforted, albeit very slightly, by the thought, he set in motion towards the room the sign was pointing at.

More wreckage was inside; this section was the closest to sector C. He stumbled across a few more bodies, a slight relief setting in when he saw that those were not infested - whatever these yellow head-things were, there weren’t many of them.

And that was good.

He just hoped he didn't find more 'brothers' to the other beings he had met.

Gordon exited the devastated corridor to yet another flight of stairs; this, the map said, was the last. He climbed to the halfway landing, but as he turned he noticed a man in a whitish, non laboratory suit on the top landing.

"Hey!"

Gordon called to the man, but eye contact lasted just a brief moment before the man ran away from the landing. Gordon rushed up the stairs, chasing. He entered the landing door a few precious seconds after the man, only to find the second set of doors locked, the sound of other footsteps dying fast.

In a last ditch effort, he shot the door's lock away and pushed, but the door did not give way. He backed up and rammed the door, which held. He repeated, once, twice, trice but the door was still in place.

Exhausted, he set down.

A crackling noise, then a short jingle, and an horribly synthesized voice talked:

*"Warning: Unauthorized access tentative in sector D office complex. Lethal defensive action activated."*

Behind Gordon, a ceiling panel opened; but it was only when the automated turret came dawn and began to spin up that he turned.

\*

"...I love you."

*"As I do."*

That was useless, and they knew.

"We tried this for so many times, now... But you know that it will never happen..."

*"It will. Why should it not?"*

"I am... I am a monster. What can a monster do against perfection?"

*"Everything. Just find the One Person, and you'll see."*

"I've already seen. No interest. Not even friendship. Nothing. Nothing at all."

*"Things have changed, and you know. You have changed. More than once, as everything has."*

The figure was then silent as it moved through the ravaged corridor.

\*

"No sign from her?"

“None, ma’am. Sorry.”

The elder woman scowled. Things were going according to the plans, except for those two wild-cards.

He was dead, that was for sure, but the woman... No activity detected from her for over one hour. Bad sign. She turned to look in another monitor, and pressed the comlink button

“How is it going?”

“Perfectly, ma’am. Another two hours, and we’ll begin preliminary operativeness procedures. We expect full functionality within twelve hours tops.”

“Try to make them six. We need it before they get in too far.”

“Yes, ma’am!” The communication closed, and the woman returned to her thoughts.

✱

*“Enemy activity in this sector is still unknown. Stay alert people.”*

Echo squad’s was the most difficult job, scouting the outer perimeter for hostiles. A few of them had even pushed quite far into the unknown territory that were the remnants of the office complex, and were installing the first of the anti assault devices that in time will allow them to conquer the entire sector.

For some, it was like chess; sacrifice a pawn to get the king, confuse the opponent and all that crap. But in truth, he knew that it was just a matter of picking the right position to hammer the enemy - a position that wasn’t always behind and above it.

*“Squad! I’ve got one! Reporting unknown biological freak on first floor stair access! What the hell is that thing? Briefings’ never talked of an orange and black gun-toting man-like creature!”*

The Alpha leader sighed. He was right; no one in his team had ever seen an HEV, and the color orange was rare between them.

“Alpha leader to Echo Five, report in, over.”

*“Echo five here, sir! Rendezvoused with unknown being presumed hostile at...”*

“I know, Echo five. I’ve got ears. What you had was an HEV mark 4, probably with some egg-head inside trying to play superhero. What are you waiting to give him a lesson? Over and out.”

That should keep him occupied.

*“What the...? I’ve got...”* An enormous electricity bolt crackled through the radio.

*“Fire! Fire! FIRE!”*

*“Echo seven is down! Structural damage! Structural damage!”*

Several gunshots followed. He put his head in his hands after he remembered where Echo seven and eight were posted, as the first effects were beginning to show even up here.

Things were going to get tougher now.

\*

The chaingun spun down the instant it finished spinning up. But it didn't retire; it just laid motionlessly, hanging from above. Suddenly, Gordon couldn't see anything anymore; probably a power failure of some sort. He thanked heaven for the help as he turned on the now recharged headlight.

He tried again for the door; but unfortunately, nothing changed. He'll have to find an alternate route.

The instant he thought of the alternate route, the suit's HUD presented him with a map of his current surroundings, with his destination blinking in red, his position in orange, and two routes in two different colors. He had got the hang of nearly everything by now, so Gordon wasn't particularly amazed by this, incredible, feature; nevertheless, discarding the red course which he had followed to here, he went for the green one.

The course developed from downstairs, through a few corridors and into the ventilation tunnels. 'Well', he thought, 'at least those won't smell...' and he descended the stairs.

The office complex was even more silent than before; the power failure had shut down all the damaged equipment, and his footsteps echoed as he descended the stairs, still aware for any unseen horror.

He carefully avoided to light the dead soon-to-be zombie as he reached the landing, and looked around to see find the door.

Red and nearly featureless, except for a glass window inset, there it was just in front of another body. He stepped inside, and found the gun in his gun.

He stopped and listened: no sounds, except his breathing. He took a few steps, and listened again.

Still nothing.

He relaxed as far as his 'evil part' would allow him, and followed, gun still in hand, the HEV's directions as they turned and twisted through the dark corridors. His light swayed left and right, lightning from time to time a devastated wall, a pool of blood - or a body.

He turned the last corner before the route crossed a large room. One of the monsters was there, its back turned.

*\*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* "Warning: Hostile entity detected within thirty meters. Entity signature matching hostile unknown biological entity. Extreme prejudice advised."*

He wasn't the slightest bit surprised, as he was on full alert from the beginning. He fired quickly the entire clip before the beast could even realize who was attacking it - but halfway through, the trigger just produced a 'click!'

*“Ammunition depleted”*

He should have known...

As the beast turned, obviously quite pissed, Gordon felt frozen in terror, and was unable to react as the thing crossed the short distance.

Still no reaction from him. Had his ‘evil part’ left?

With its left claw, the beast swiftly scratched Gordon, who stumbled back but did not fall.

*\*BOOP\* \*BOOP\* “Reactive shielding at fifty five percent, holding.”*

The being prepared its right claw for the next hit, but was stopped as its only eye, about the middle of its face, was hit with impressive strength.

A shower of green goo was what Gordon got, as he realized that his crowbar was in his hand.

The being cried, a disgustingly distorted cry, as the hemorrhage of goo going on and on under Gordon’s unnaturally blank stare, until it was on the floor, writhing.

The writhing slowed, then stopped; and the being laid motionless in a pool of green goo.

Still pitiless, Gordon glanced the body. Again, his ‘evil part’ had done it... He wished he could talk to it, wished he could tell it when to stay put or when and how and if to attack.

But most importantly, he wanted to ask it what the hell it was doing inside his head.

Still somewhat confused, Gordon approached the door. It was strangely large, different from the others in the complex, and with a much larger handle. He turned it, and pulled the door open as the cold breeze from the room beyond made him shiver. The suit’s climate system immediately adapted to the low temperature, and Gordon reluctantly entered the storage cell.

\*

“I’ve lost contact, sir. There’s no sign of him, over”

“Leave it be, Echo five. Finish your mission and return to base. Over and out.”

An HEV. Yes, he had been scared by an HEV. Talk about being nervous...

He crouched, and set down on the wall, ten centimeters from the ground, a small, roughly rectangular object with a large lens in the middle. The object clamped and began to emit a sound. The lens refocused, and the sound pitched up, until a beeping noise confirmed the laser-activated wall mine was in place, just below its twin at about man’s height.

If the infrared beam was interrupted by something living, BOOM! It became something dead.

He walked through the corridor, scanning with his MP5’s flashlight for hostiles. His hand-held scanner, in his left hand, was clear but with all the things going on lately, who could have known?

His job was scouting ahead for any enemy force, and then reporting back ASAP, leaving traps in key places. He had done his job for now, having just ran out of laser trip mines, so he was

returning to base for debriefing and rearming. But, even if he was quite an expert scout, his enemy wasn't a conventional force, so he was still alert for anything that could have escaped him.

He sliced the corner, nothing showing in front of him nor on his...

A small red blip, right in front of him, lasting a mere fraction of second, then nothing again. A malfunction? No, these things were state of the art.

He turned off the flashlight and stood still, listening expertly to any sound and scanning his surroundings thoroughly with his other senses. Except for a low buzz from the tripmines, and his low breath, nothing could be heard. If there was someone or something, it was really good at hiding.

A metallic clanking noise, a few meters ahead, attracted his attention. It was immediately followed by several similar but less loud sounds. He turned on the flashlight and pointed it at the source of the sound, then immediately forwards to spot a blue-something running.

"Squad! We've got hostiles!" He charged forward, tripped over something spherical.

An explosion, then nothing.



## 5. "WE'VE GOT HOSTILES"

"What will it be then, sir?"

The choice was definitely an hard one to do; but it's not that there were many others. Still, he looked thoughtful for a moment, as if trying to find some kind of last resort...

One that would allow to do both things at once. But he had already thought for almost ten hours, and there were none.

None, at least, requiring less than the time they had - time which was definitely running out.

He made a deep breath, then "Authorize the strike, and release the news." The man signed the paper, then applied a blue seal on it.

Ground zeroing Black Mesa... It wasn't exactly what he wanted, but it was as close as they could come to. The main plot was a takeover, of course, but with this apparent outbreak of monsters of some sort such an option couldn't be taken into account.

And although monster outbreak containment and takeover were the two best goals, destroying the facility would accomplish two other goals, neither of which could be really considered as second rate - unless directly confronted with the first two.

Then, the man dismissed the thoughts; he was busy, and the most pressing of his businesses at hand was to write a convincing speech to give tomorrow morning at the press conference.

It was going to be tough job.

\*

The grenade had missed. Well, almost, missed... But still a miss - hadn't been for the man's stupidity.

"Again. Failure." the figure looked down, visibly depressed. "I can't even throw a grenade right... How can you say that the One Person can..."

*"Stop complaining! We have simply no time for this." the voice was very firm. "You have a mission! And an important and vital one. And, neither you nor I have time for useless and completely undeserved self commiseration! You did what you needed to do, and it worked. That is all."*

"But I..." One single breath, and it was acceptance. "No, you're... right. We'd better be going."

Stumbling slightly through the darkened corridor, the figure continued along its path.

\*

First impression is always wrong. Gordon had been inside the storage cell for little more than five minutes, and he could feel even through the suit's heating system that it was definitely freezing cold in there, at least minus fifty degrees.

The floor was covered with a thin layer of ice, formed from the pool of water dripping down a broken pipe; his footsteps, along with the dripping and the low whirring of the refrigerators, were the only distinct noises in the room. Or rather in the complex of rooms, since Gordon soon realized that the cell was quite large and split into various sub cells, connected by short corridors. The plan was a square; three cells each side, and in the center, the large refrigeration unit.

The only good thing was that this section had still power - unsurprising, given the fact that anything stored here would probably be quite susceptible to heat variation - and he could keep his breastlight off.

He was in the rightmost wing of cells, in the first one which contained various pieces of meat hanging from long metal hooks, hung to the ceiling; he briefly inspected the meat: it was unnaturally white, and yet showed no sign of temperature effects.

It was definitely intriguing, but there was no time for that; he had far more important things to do.

He moved northward, through another room again filled with various species of meat, which had in common only the fact they didn't seem to come from any animal he knew.

The ventilation access was just one room ahead and one left.

Suddenly, he heard something. He stopped cold, to listen better: apart from the now distant dripping and over the still low whirring, there was... Again. There was definitely something. It wasn't rhythmical nor constant, and it sounded like some kind of... snapping, like if someone was flipping up and down a large, hard-to-move differential switch?

No, it wasn't that mechanical. It felt more... living.

He took several, cautious, steps forwards. Again the sound. This time he could hear something different, though.

Something that left an aftertaste of disgust: salivation.

He entered the last room of this side, before the corridor switched to the left and circled back to the entrance, to see four to five people bending over something, almost in a heap. What the hell were they doing here?

"Er, sorry?"

He called out. Only one of them raised and turned, allowing Gordon to see what he was crouched on.

*\*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* "Warning: Hostile entities detected within thirty meters. Entities signature matching hostile unknown biological entity. \*BOOP\* \*BOOP\* "Warning: uneven odds. Caution advised."*

It was a body.

The body of a security guard, still dressed in his blue uniform... Well, partly dressed since most of his abdomen had been ripped open and staining both the uniform and the floor blood red.

And the creatures, which only now Gordon recognized by the yellow head as one of the monsters, were eating it.

Through his sickness, Gordon noticed that his crowbar was in his hands. He looked at it.

It was going to happen again. He glanced again at the monster that was stumbling towards him, then again at the body.

This time he won't protest.

This time he wanted it to happen... to bring justice to that poor man.

He moved forward; it felt that his legs were responding to his own will, but he knew they weren't. He was less than a meter from the creature, and well within reach of its hands.

The creature tried to hit him, but it missed, as Gordon elegantly avoided the hit without stopping, as if he knew all along what was going to happen.

But Gordon didn't. The group of monsters was to his left now, and it wasn't coming closer. He was walking away from them, and for the first time today he wished he wasn't doing that.

He wanted to kill them.

He wanted to...

'My God...' Gordon thought as his body went on its way, oblivious to his commands. Was he becoming like that? Was he becoming a bloodlust monster as it was this... part of himself, this part oblivious to his rational commands yet that was now moving his limbs of its own will?

The straight end of the crowbar was inserted into a small gap between the grating just above him and the wall. A grate?

Of course, his mission... With a slight movement, the crowbar acted as lever and the grating fell to the ground. With a truly athletic move, he jumped and climbed inside.

After a few meters crawling, he stopped, still on all fours inside the cramped ventilation shaft.

That was it. No bullets flying. No bloody fight. No more bodies on the floor.

He was almost about to turn around, but he soon realized that it was a pretty stupid thing to do. If not even his evil part could do it, what chance could he stand?

There was, as ever, so much to think of. So much... Was his 'evil part' beginning to fear? Or was it just because it wanted to conserve ammunition? Or...

But the tunnel ahead reminded him of his mission.

'After everything will be over', he thought, 'I'm in for a looong chat with a psychiatrist'.

With that proposal, he began to crawl forwards.

\*

“Ten - HUT!”

The entire squadron rushed to line and was fully to attention after little more than ten seconds. The man, whose grades identified him as a general, glanced from one end of the line to the other, filled with pride.

“OK, boys and girls. You all know why we are here, and you know I won’t bother you with overly long briefings. Our mission is simple: get inside bunker A-14, place the charges, and get out - while making no prisoners, asking no questions and giving no answer. Is that understood?”

The “YESSIR!” was unanimous.

“OK. Good.” the man made a brief pause, as he began to pace, nervous, face down.

“Look people...” he breathed, obviously bothered by something. “There’s... one thing I want to say.” he stopped pacing, and raised his face to again glance from one end of the line to the other.

“Play this one safe - *very* safe. We’ve got extremely heavy hostility down there, *some* of which are a rogue agencies with twilight zone technology, aliens, and possibly more failed projects you can lob a grenade at.”

None of the people in the line blinked.

“So, I expect our motto for this mission to be stuff like ‘No one needs dead heroes’, ‘no dirty harrys’ and all that ‘be careful’ things. Is that understood?”

Again, the “YESSIR!” was unanimous.

“Good. Let’s do it.”

He waved and, ordinally, the over thirty people climbed into their assigned Chinooks.

The man boarded last, looking at the sky, and mumbling “And may God help us...”

\*

‘Why the hell did I wake up this morning?’ The phrase was so cliché’d; but it was truly what Gordon thought. Even though he had tried to dismiss all of his questions, and more than once, it was obvious it was an impossible thing to do.

So, he more or less gave up and tried summarizing all the events; but there were still holes too many and too large for him to fill, such as the reason for his sudden fear of Ethertel all the way back in the test chamber...

Yes, the test chamber, where all of his problems had begun. Was his ‘evil part’ in any way related to Ethertel? He was beginning to think so. Still, too many things didn’t make a single bit of sense; and so he tried again to concentrate on his task - and on his current problem.

Checking back his map, he noticed that not too far from his current position was what looked like a connecting room, which he had to cross to get to another part of the ventilation system.

The problem was simple: what is in that room? For all he knew, there could be a large still working fan intent to chew him to tiny bits.

And his fear were justified by the rhythmical, echoing whirring noise he had been hearing from the moment he climbed inside.

Turning to crawl through another part of the shaft, Gordon tried to get into a sitting position to light the way forward with his breastlight. He couldn't see for more than a few meters ahead; and to that point, there was nothing strange.

He went on, cursing the suit designers: couldn't they make an headlight instead?

*\*BEEEEEEEEEP\* "Headlight available only with the optional PV390 helmet."*

He stifled a chuckle; he should've expected that answer. He cradled further down the small tunnel. Without a true light, he couldn't see anything; but that was a blessing, as he really didn't want to know what he was touching when under his gloves he could feel something soft instead of the usual hard steel.

The echoing noise was growing louder as he turned another time, this tunnel actually being very slightly lit by a light coming at the next intersection. He seriously hoped to be able to get through this in one piece.

Then another noise.

This one was different, much closer even to the background noise which was apparently coming from all around him. Gordon stopped, as it repeated another time, then again and again; it was definitely coming from just ahead. He tried to light his surroundings with the breastlight, but the instant he worked himself into a position to light little more than one meter ahead, his view was filled with what looked like a mouth; it was slobbering, drooling what looked like yellow goo little more than a few centimeters from his eyes, biting away at his shield.

And inside the mouth...

He didn't even have time to be scared nor disgusted, as he ripped it away with both hands and threw it in front of him.

Closing his eyes, he tried to erase the hideous entrails of the monstrous creature. The sight was simply disgusting, but it was only when the sound, that now he recognized as the low screeching noise typical of those pods, repeated.

The thing wasn't dead yet.

It jumped again, and Gordon, by reflex, looked hopelessly away.

Yet, there was no contact; and the thing's screeching had stopped.

Then, after a moment, he felt that his right hand was gripping something. Something heavy.

Looking at it, he saw through the reflections of his breastlight that he was holding the crowbar, the flat edge pointed away. And on it...

Disgusted, he shook the unwelcome guest behind him, which left another layer of yellowish goo over the now-dried last one, and set back to his mission.

At least, if he concentrated on something he won't have to think about all the disgusting things, at all the creatures and all the problems he has seen and had in the last few hours... If he was able to.

He crawled forward, then turned at the next corner and looked inside the room. Wherever the noise was coming from, it wasn't from here. One good news at least.

He carefully turned around, and climbed down from the pipe, dropping abruptly to the floor and cracking something below his feet..

He looked down to see what it was.

\*

*"Sir, we lost contact with Echo nine!"*

"I can hear, Echo three, thank you."

He was nervous. Way too nervous - but he had reasons. Already two people lost, and the end was nowhere in sight.

"Bravo, what's your status?"

*"All clear, sir!"*

As it was ten minutes earlier. Their mission was the most important for the time being, since it was going to be nearly impossible to do anything but getting ambushed without power in the entire sector; so, the only chance were the backup generators - but those were very far from secured position.

Secured... With Echo nine's death in cleared territory, how could they say what was secured and what wasn't? So far, they could only hope.

*"Bravo one reporting primary target in visual range."*

"Good. Make it quick, Bravo!"

"Piece of cake, HQ. Pull the switch, and... Off with the magic!"

Damn Bravo two. Young, inexperienced and eager for blood... It's going to cost him dearly one day unless he changes that attitude very soon.

*“Sir, Bravo leader reporting mission accomplished. Returning to...”*

*“SHIT! What the hell is that?”* Several MP5 bursts could be heard over the radio, then the unmistakable sound of a slave charging up cut it.

*“Bravo leader down! Bravo leader down! Eat lead, you freak!”* More shots, this time from a shotgun on full auto.

*“Return to base, return to base! Do it NOW!”*

More gunshots, then another charge-up. A distorted laughter, footsteps moving away, then, silence.

That made four people lost. Damn it all to hell.

\*

Bones. The floor was littered with bones, like the one he had crushed.

And the most terrifying fact, is that they looked eerily like human bones.

The room, apart from that, looked pretty normal; several ventilation shafts running from ceiling to floor and from wall to wall, intersecting and or circling each other. His tunnel was at the other side of where he had entered, and it was even open.

Strange... No, it wasn't strange. Whatever is using this place as a boneyard, literally, must have come from somewhere. Now, he could only hope it wasn't where he must be going.

*\*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* “Warning: unknown biological entity detected within thirty meters. Entity signature not matched. Caution advised.”*

Oh no! He turned on his breastlight, although it was nearly useless since a red lamp was lighting the room, and swiped around, above, below, behind him...

Nothing. His shotgun, which only now he realizes was at the ready, had been swiping the room together with his light; then his hands somewhat relaxed. A suit error? That would be very strange... But what hasn't been that day? Still sweeping the room with both his tools, Gordon stepped towards his destination as he felt something tingle at the bottom of his right leg.

He tried to look, but he couldn't, as the world went upside down.

\*

So different it felt from what one could imagine. But how could you say what death could feel like?

*“Is this... This is hell, isn't it? At long last...”*

*“No. You're not dead.”*

“But I am! I couldn’t have survived...”

“You... Well, you did.”

“Who are you? And where am I?”

“I am...” there was a definite and long pause in the voice “I am yourself.”

“You? Me? But I... What is this, some kind of perverted joke? I’m not enjoying it! Stop it!”

“Calm down! It’s... It’s all right.”

“It’s not! Why is everything green? What are all those bubbles? Why can’t I move? I want to get out of here! I want...”

“Calm down! Calm down! You see, I...”

“I want answers! And I want them now!”

“Alright then. All right. You’ll get your answers. Just stay calm, OK?”

\*

“This is probably the most senseless task I’m ever allowing you to do, G!”

“There is no other choice, ssir. And, it is less risky than the method you suggested.”

“Well, that I’ve got to give. Still, it’s not exactly safe to try and capture a...”

The radio crackled on: “Sir! Contact! Squad, go get... Goddamn! What the hell is that thing?”

Several strange shots, each followed by what seemed like a small cry preceded a much longer and human one.

Just their luck. They had expect that those kind of things should have mutated or changed over all those years, but at least D hoped it would still be as near-harmless as it had been.

“Gamma 3 down! Squad, get that freak now!”

D was very tense as several more gunshots, this time unmistakably from human weapons, filled the radio, mixed with those strange shots and small cries. When were they going to use the neutralizer?

“Gamma 4, move left and use suppressing fire! Gamma 2, cover me! I’m going in!”

And it all boiled down to this. If it worked, they were almost all set. If, it worked...

“I can’t hold it for long! It’s...”

The radio was briefly filled with static. That meant either success, or failure; D was nearly holding his breath, and looked at G which was, as his usual, very relaxed. How could a person be so



calm while being in the middle of a storm? But D already knew the answer; no person at all could.

The static subsided, and broken up, unintelligible words could be heard over the radio.

*“M.....is.....get.....red.”*

“Repeat, Gamma!”

*“R...ing! M..ion is accomplished! Target acquired.”* the words had finally made sense, and they spoke good news. D relaxed; they were the first good news of the day.

\*

Bending slightly to look to his relative down, he was able to see what had captured him; and the sight wasn't pleasant. Whatever it was, it was big, red, roughly cylindrical and with a mouth bigger than his head. Not to mention its tongue.

It was that, in fact, which was holding Gordon upside down by the right foot, and the slurping and gnashing sounds left little to nothing to imagination as what would happen when it had him cross the three or so meters that separated its mouth from his leg.

The only thing he could hope was for the 'evil part' to do something. But the distance was closing rapidly, and nothing had happened.

Then, the realization. Why couldn't he... He began swinging himself, rhythmically forwards then backwards, as the mouth came closer and closer.

Then, half a meter from it, he was swinging strongly enough to put both his hands on the ceiling, making lever and putting all of his weight, and more as the suit helped him, on his right foot.

The snapping noise he heard signaled it was enough. Unfortunately for Gordon, gravity realized not a moment too soon what had happened, and took its course making him fall down hard..

*\*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* “Warning: Gravitational shock received. Damage sustained: negligible”*

The fall was hard, but at least he was all in one piece. Kicking away with his left foot the remaining piece of the monstrosity from his right foot, he looked at it once more. It was crying, and trickling purple blood to a pool right in front of him.

Then something else came down...

He tried not to look as the being's internal organs splattered one after another on the floor, and stood. He looked at the disgusting heap in front of him.

Cold and emotionless, except for a slight nausea.

Picking up his shotgun, which he had dropped, he entered the next tunnel, trying yet again to keep his mind devoid of any thoughts. But yet again he failed; the questions were still too many.

Why had the 'evil part' not reacted? Was it still there, or had it abandoned him? No, it hadn't. He had felt the same unnatural uninterest as soon as everything was over. But still, if it was there, why hadn't it reacted? Was it dependable? Or will the next monster kill him without leaving him a chance?

So many doubts, so many things he couldn't understand, so much nonsense. He thought, as he moved through the tunnels, that it wasn't the right thing to do, to ignore them.

But the ends justified the means...

'Or do they?'

Of course they did! What the hell is he saying? Human lives are much, much more worth than any scientific discovery! But were they worth much more than the lives of unknown beings, lives which he was claiming out of 'self defense'?

He turned the last corner, surprised to see it brightly lit. Outside there was visibly light; he crawled to the end and dropped down to the floor.

Standing, still briefly dazed, he looked around; it was a silent corridor, one as many others were. But in front of him, a sign: 'Warehouse access', pointing to his left, direction which was confirmed by the map.

He'd better get moving.

\*

The green was slowly clearing, and the outside could finally be seen...

"NO!" the voice raged in the empty, dark room, as the figure realized it hadn't stopped moving.

"No... Stop the memories, please... Stop them!"

*"I can't do anything about them, and you know. I'm sorry."*

"I-I... Damn, y-you could at least avoid letting me sleep when I'm moving!"

*"Yes... You're right. I'm sorry."* The voice sounded really ashamed "Let's go on."

\*

The radio crackled. *"Sir, we have received..."*

"I KNOW, damnit!" D was obviously very angry as he walked in circles inside the room, thinking about what he should do now. Even with their success, their team was way too broken up to stand a chance against *that* for long.

"Sir, we should proceed with the plan! We can complete it much before the..."

But D wasn't listening, and he ran out of the room. G didn't follow; he knew what he was going to do. And that would be useless.

The skinny figure stood, again looking at the five soldiers guarding the large cylinder. Inside, one very deadly non human living being.

And soon, inside another, similiar, cylinder there will be one very deadly human living being.

Just a couple more hours...

\*

The number of problems had raised with the latest happenings. But they were just the tip of the iceberg: Ethertel, the resonance cascade, the monsters... And his 'evil part'.

Again the evil part. Should he begin to call it with some real name? Because, reliable or not, it was really a different part of his head, and...

"God DAMN!"

He almost cried out loud. What the hell was he doing? Calling something that did *not* exist with a name, any name was a stupid thing to do. And he should stop even naming him 'evil part'.

Because it was obvious it was just himself.

Just himself reacting by reflex, and not even realizing it.

"It's just my reflexes and I'm not realizing it. It's just my reflexes and I'm not realizing it..."

He repeated the phrase over and over, the he stopped: he wasn't convinced at all; he'd better go on as before and resume his mission. Things were going to get slightly easier now, since he had found an ammo storeroom right on his path, and, unguarded, he had taken as much as he could find, which wasn't much: a hundred or so both of 9 mm for his gun and of 12 gauge shells for his shotgun, and five grenades, which were residing into another of the suit's pockets.

He was much closer to the warehouse now, and the green path came almost to an end in a very large room just behind a corridor a few meters ahead. Jogging through the remaining space, he opened the door, quietly, and glanced inside; empty.

This corridor was much wider than the others; in fact, it didn't seem to be a normal corridor at all. The walls were made up of crude, concrete unlike all the others, and there was a mobile elevator cart, left unattended in the middle of it with a crate still loaded; in front of it on both sides, two large metal doors.

He approached the doors, almost excited, and read 'Warehouse access B' over the leftmost one.

He felt really relieved as he pressed the green 'open' button beside it, and finally stepped inside. This room seemed to be large, yet he couldn't see the walls at all since crates were blocking his sight in every direction; but in front of him was a grey cement column, holding several signs. Quickly scanning them, and found one pointing to the right which said 'Surface access'.

"At last..."

To his right was a short path of crates, which led to a large metal elevator, overlooking another storage room, this time much less filled.

It would have been a six meters jump to the floor, and the platform was vehicle-only, so he searched for another way down; close to the elevator was another small opening, which led to another metal platform: following it to his left, he could see it turned the corner of the room, then stopped as a long metal ladder descended right to the floor.

He was about to step on it when he heard voices coming from below.

\*

“Ma’am! We might have intruders in the Lambda complex. They seem to...”

“I already know. We will deal with them later.”

Dismissing the agent with a gesture, the elder woman pressed again the comlink button.

“Status?”

“Good, ma’am. Unit one is fully functional, and in three to four hours we expect vocal synthesizing and...”

“We don’t have that time! Send it in now.”

“As you wish, ma’am.”

The connection closed, and she smiled, something that she quite rarely did. But it was only for the means destiny forced her to choose: using a mistake to re-capture another mistake and use it to correct someone else’s mistake. She wished it could have been easier... But she knew that only the woman could actually solve this problem.

If she was still alive.

And willing to cooperate.

\*

Looking down below, he could see two scientists, in their ordinary white labcoat, running from the ladder towards another person, dressed in an again whitish but definitely different suit.

“Thank God you’re here!”

“We’re not the only survivors here! You must bring others!”

“There are several wounded! Bring a medical squad also!”

The two were in a frenzy as they talked, but that was understandable.  
Rescue had arrived!

His odyssey was about to end. For a brief instant he wondered if it was going to be a good thing or not; then his thoughts were cut as sound of an automatic submachine gun firing echoed in the room.

He stepped towards the edge of the platform, to look down better and take aim: they were obviously under attack!

What he saw was at least terrifying; the man with white suit, which now Gordon identified as a soldier, had fired upon the scientists and they were lying in a pool of blood at his feet.

He was frozen, unsure if it was shock or terror or sadness or anything; but he remained frozen. The soldier, in the meantime, walked lazily towards the ladder, as Gordon - barely aware of it - was, as quickly and silently as the metal platform allowed.

Still mesmerized, he looked down, surprising the soldier who had already begun climbing the ladder; he raised his gun, still clinging to the metal steps, and fired off a few bullets before he was sent abruptly to the floor by the large orange and black mass, which landed over him.

Gordon was furious. Extremely furious. He didn't know what was the reason for the fury, and he didn't care; he had thrown himself over the man and had landed on him; then, he took a few steps ahead only to turn around.

The man was still alive, and, dizzied, looked up only to immediately raise his submachine gun again and fire at Gordon, while walking backwards towards the nearest pile of crates.

*\*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* "Hostile human life form detected." \*BOOP\* \*BOOP\* "Shielding strength is dropping."*

Unsurprising, since Gordon was charging through the fire.

"Die, you stupid freak!"

The man's words, even if covered by both the mask and the bullets sound were clear.

Thirty bullets fired so far. Gordon was counting them, somehow.

Gordon came closer, and the man's back was now nearly at the pile of crates. The suit lamented something, but he didn't listen.

Forty bullets fired so far.

Gordon had his crowbar in hand, and his eyes were filled with rage. The man had tripped over, and nearly fell to the floor, his last burst missing Gordon.

Fifty bullets, and a click. Out of ammo.

"EEYAAAAGH!"

The soldier, panicked, threw all he could in a punch aimed at Gordon's face. Without blinking, he blocked it, almost breaking the man's arm, with the crowbar.

Kicks followed the punch, effortlessly. Then, Gordon kicked as hard as he could in the man's groin, breaking his cup and sending him on the floor.

“UUNGghhh... Help... For God's sake... Help!”

The man was shouting, in pain, at someone, probably on a radio. But Gordon didn't care, as he picked up the man by the suit with almost unnatural strength, slamming him on a pile of crates, still holding him.

He removed the man's helmet and anti-toxin mask, and revealed a panting, sweating, almost tearing face.

“Don't... Don't kill me... Please...”

Gordon dropped him, and he laid there, still breathing heavily as Gordon walked away.

“Thank you... Thank you... Thank you...”

Then, with an almost bestial roar, Gordon charged him hit him on the head once, twice, trice.

Then another roar, and again: four, five, six, eight, nine... He staggered, but gave the tenth.

He then retreated from the bloody mess that now was the soldier; the body's face was disfigured, its braincase irremediably broken.

He stumbled as he walked backwards, his gaze fixed on the hideous sight; he dropped his crow-bar, then dropped down to the floor himself, unconscious.

\*

“Be warned that this is one difficult operation, and that we...”

“...Can't guarantee the results, I know! You've said that dozens of times! Just get on with it!”

D was impatient, as was usual with him; the operation was difficult, he knew that, but he knew also it wouldn't take much more than ten minutes - plus post-conditioning.

The large cylinder was flooded with biosuppressing gel, freezing the creature; only its head was spared, as it was needed for the operation. Climbing a few steps, the doctor opened the top plate, and, after an heavy breath heavily through the mask, picked up its pencil to begin marking the beast's cranium for headcase removal.

He looked at both D and G, who stared back through the thick glass, cold.

Then he went on; picking up the scalpel, he gently cut through the brownish skin over the pencil's path; then, his hands slightly trembling, he changed to the laser bone cutter, and followed the same path, now slightly beginning to bleed its usual yellowish blood.

One last glance at D and G, still staring coldly, then he grabbed with both hands and took out the headcase, placed it into a container, and raised his hands to pick up the electrodes. “This will

hurt...” he whispered, as if the creature could actually hear him, then the electrodes were placed expertly over the foremost and central lobes of the creature’s brain.

One second later, and all of its nerves were stimulated simultaneously, making the being twitch its eyes and third hand, even though it couldn’t actually wake up. But it was suffering, and that was sure; he’d better hurry, before its brain decided to give up

Picking up a small device, he attached it to the exposed synapsis that he knew led directly to its vision, then, typing a few commands on a keyboard to his right, he verified, surprised, that it was already functional; the operation successful, he removed the electrodes and began to replace the headcase.

“So...?” D’s voice boomed again through the loudspeakers

“It’s done, and it should be working. I hope.”

“It’d better. Patch him up and send it to... re-education.”

D was smiling, while G remained cold.

\*

“Why are we here?”

*“We must get through this place to reach the One Person. Just keep listening to me.”*

“I won’t.” The figure stopped cold.

*“No, please... You simply don’t understand how...”*

“I DO understand. I understand what you’re trying to force me to do. I’m no hero - and I’m not going all the way there to save the day. Not after all that.”

*“Then what are you going to do?”*

“Well...” Smiling an hopeless smile, the figure watched the grenade which it was holding.

“It’s so simple... A gesture with my arm. I wonder how many muscles would it take to die?” There was silence for a long minute, but no action was taken.

*“What you are waiting for, then?”*

“I... I... You are keeping me from doing it, aren’t you?”

*“I’m not. And you know it. Let’s go.”*

\*

\*BEEP\* \*BOOP\* \*BEEP\* “User Gordon Freeman, please resume standard functions.”

*\*BEEP\* \*BOOP\* \*BEEP\* "User Gordon Freeman, please resume standard functions."*

Over and over in his mind were repeating those strange phrases... What did they mean? 'Resume standard functions'? Well, he was already doing that... He was in his bed, sleeping the night away... Last night there had been the HEV Decathlon, and he couldn't miss that; he only hoped he could squeeze a few more minutes of sleep in before he had to go to work tomorrow morning.

Ah, sleep. Everything is so wonderful, when you're in your comfortable bed...

Wait a minute: comfortable?

It felt like there was solid concrete right below him!

*\*BEEP\* \*BOOP\* \*BEEP\* "User Gordon Freeman, please resume standard functions!"*

Again the phrase. But this time it was different: it sounded almost... scared.

Hesitantly, he opened his eyes, then shut them back, as light dazzled him. Slowly, he opened them again, and he realized what was happening. Above him was the cavern roof, blown open just minutes before by the strange spaceship, which luckily wasn't there anymore.

He tried to move his legs, and he couldn't.

He looked to his right arm, and it wasn't there.

He looked around him, and everything was covered by blood - his blood.

And bodies all around him... Then something was applied to his face, and he woke up.

*\*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* "Hostile human life forms detected." \*BOOP\* \*BOOP\* "Extremely uneven odds. Engagement not recommended!"*

How long had he been down?

*"User Gordon Freeman not responding for: six minutes, fifteen seconds."*

As expected. Oh well, what was the suit saying?

The sound of quite a lot of people stepping over metal caught his attention. Three... Four... Six... Ten soldiers, all walking on another catwalk above him!

He picked up his crowbar, and ran, ducking behind a crate as bullets flew towards him by the dozen. Spotting a door a few meters ahead, he decided to go through. More bullets flew towards him, followed by an explosion.

*\*BEEP\* \*BEEP\* "Warning: shield status is fifteen percent, holding."*

Uh-oh! He glanced back, now almost at the door, to see that the soldiers were literally charging towards him, and that another grenade was about to reach the floor.



Without actually a thought, he crashed his crowbar, still at the ready, in what he then recognized as a fire door emergency control button, starting the door to close, then dived below it instants before it closed. The explosion from the second grenade echoed behind him as he realized he had stepped right into a trap.

\*

*“Huh? Shit! Squad, we got more hostiles!”*

“Uh-oh! Now what?”

*“You’ve got nine more grenades; use them.”*

Grenade in hand, pull the ring, throw.

Grenade in hand, pull the ring, throw.

Grenade in hand, pull the ring, throw...

*“Grenades! Grenades!”*

*“Take cover!”*

Three explosions, each one about one second from the other.

*“Damn... MEDIC! I need a medic over here!”*

*“Fire! Fire!”*

The soldiers over the radio were obviously in a frenzy.

“Wow! I... I got one?”

*“Continue bombing.”*

*“Squad, let’s split up! Four with me, the rest demo that door and kick that twerp’s ass!”*

“Oh no! They’re going to blow it up! That guy’s never going to survive all those soldiers!”

*“Continue bombing! If you stop now, you will be the one not to survive! They’re about to come up!”*

Grenade in hand, pull the ring, throw.

Grenade in hand, pull the ring, throw.

Grenade in hand, pull the ring, throw...

\*

A trap then. Well, why it was a trap, Gordon simply didn’t have the time to even think about; anyway, there were several crates stacked in this long corridor, and on some of them there were small black rectangular objectes, all identical, on the side pointing towards the opposite wall.

He approached, to examine better one of them; it had some kind of large lens, which Gordon soon recognized somehow as some kind of laser beam emitter.

“Breda 1999-B laser-activated mine; calibrates its laser beam on a distance through simple measurement procedures, then detonates if the distance becomes shorter or longer.”

Again... But the thudding behind him let him no choices: pass the trap, or...

“Fight them!”

Why couldn't he? He was, after all, completely capable of... No, he wasn't. He had just passed out after brutally killing one of them - and that was only the latest sign of the unreliability of his unnatural fighting abilities. He'd better take no chances; the odds were simply too bad. He crouched in front of the first crate and crawled forwards, bare centimeters below the beam.

Damn! In front of him there was another one of them, but that was impossible to crawl under since it had been placed way too low; he looked above, and found that he could stand up - although in a very narrow space.

Slowly, pondering every slight movement, he fit purely by centimeters through the invisible beams. He wished he had some kind of chalk dust, or infrared option... But he hadn't, so he had to do it by instinct.

Over the low mine there was another, at about head height. He slightly bowed, still careful not to touch the beam behind him with his butt, and walked both under a beam and over its twin below it. Still carefully, he pushed the rest of himself to the other side.

Whew! That was half of the corridor clear.

The thumpings had stopped; this meant that the soldiers were either coming through a different route, or that they were waiting for demo charges to be delivered. Either way, no good news.

The next beam was too high to be climbed over, so he had to crouch; but space between that and the previous was really thin. He turned to his right, facing a crate, and tried to go down as straight as he could, missing the two beams with his shoulders by mere millimeters.

“Slow...”

He had to bank slightly to the left to fit his shoulders through.

“Slow...”

Back on his hands and knees, his face almost sweating he slowly made his way below the beam.

Looking up and forward, he couldn't see any more of them; which meant he was clear.

Whew - that was *not* nice. Then, a warning beep behind him. Had the soldiers gone to plan B?

Another warning beep. He ran forwards, tripping another mine hidden by the crates and almost panicking as the entire room transformed into a raging inferno.

\*

The explosion, even from here, sounded obviously tremendous; the soldiers must've blown up something big inside that room.

And there was no way the man could've survived it. Another failure accounted.

"He's... He's dead?"

*"If he is, there's no time to mourn. Resume the mission."*

"But... It's so... wrong..."

The figure's voice sounded distant.

*"Yes, it... it is. But, anyway, there's nothing more you can do."*

"You're... right." the figure breathed once, and tried, failing, to relax as it began running again. "I still wonder how an HEV got here. There aren't supposed to be any in this sector - except mine."

*"And an orange and black one... You're right; that's strange. But anyway, he's beyond help, so you'd better go on. Once you get rid of our unwelcomed guests, the surface isn't far."*

"And after I get to the surface, what will we do?"

There was a moment's pause.

*"You'll... find out."*

\*

\*BOOP\* \*BOOP\* *"Warning: reactive shielding down. Please find the nearest HEV charging station available. Armor integrity: one hundred percent."*

As if he hadn't any more problems. Shaking his head clear of concrete dust, he stood, the taste of blood in his mouth. Without the shield, he was nearly defenseless; and while the armor could still take a beating, one well aimed shot to his head and goodbye doctor Freeman.

He looked back; well, at least the second fire door, activated by the simultaneous explosions of 7 laser tripmines and a demolition charge which also blew him forwards, will delay the soldiers for a little bit more.

Enough, he hoped, to escape. But escape where? So many problems, again... He'd better stick with the first part - because it was definitely the most pressing one.

He checked briefly the corridor he now was in. The roof and floor at this end were scorched and cracked, due to the explosion, but it was nearly devoid of anything else - nearly, because of what seemed a camera tripod in one corner. Oh well; this was a warehouse after all, so he should expect to find nearly anything here.

He glanced down to the opposite end; the path was much less filled with crates, but he expected it to be at least as deadly. Examining the walls revealed no mines, apparently, so he walked forwards, still cautious.

He was about midway through this corridor, when he heard a short beeping noise. Uh-oh!

A whirring noise, and he could hear dozens of bullets flying towards him. Just his luck. He ran forwards, and was missed by millimeters by the bullets as he dived down, between two low crates, and laid flat on his belly to hear the firing stopping and getting replaced by low, rhythmic beeping noises coming from both ends of the corridors.

Raising slightly and peeking from the edge of the crate towards the end, he saw another of those camera tripods, with something on it that might have looked like a camera from this distance, but that it was moving left and right quickly.

“PP-39 motion tracking 9mm gun cams, with remote motion activator and optional grenade launching equipment, not currently installed. “

Nice. Now what? He looked at the floor, nervously exhaling rhythmically as he was thinking of a plan.

Running through them was out, without any shield.

Maybe he could blow them up with a few shotgun shells? Possible - but only after he'd been chewed up by the guns' bullets, since he had to expose to do that.

And that without taking in account the kinetic power loss due distance and the pellet spread...

Such technical words. He knew, of course, what was kinetic power loss, though he couldn't guess of what; but he wondered what a pellet could've been.

Then he removed the safety pin from a grenade, and throwing it over the crate with impressive force.

“Huh?”

Unreliable or not, the 'evil part' had obviously taken over this in time, as he simply hadn't thought of using grenades.

The beeping sound interrupted, as bullets once again filled the air, targeting the explosive device. Gordon laid as low as possible, as the grenade exploded.

\*

*“Sir, we lost contact with the blue HEVed one.”*

“Keep checking. Whoever it was, it wasn't an egghead.”

*“And the guy in the orange suit? Is he one of them too, sir?”*

That would've been absurd... But then, even the man's skills were.

Because it doesn't take just luck to survive a demo pack blowing up and detonating a corridor filled with laser activated mines: for doing that, he should've been at the opposite end of the corridor from the demo pack.

And crossing it definitely required skill. And not just a little.

"Take him to the surface for questioning."

With a little luck, they might still catch him cowering between those two crates, as he had been last time he had checked the guncams' visual transmission.

\*

The beeping resumed, mixed this time with a trail of smoke coming from the end of the corridor.

He peeked over the side of the crate, and saw a large dent on the floor a couple of meters from the guncam, which was still active and scanning. The grenade had missed, and it was blown up by bullets. Damn it!

Then he found another one in his hands. But this time, he stood, exposing himself to the guncams, threw, then went flat down again mere milliseconds before the stream of bullets passed buzzing over him.

Another explosion, bigger than the first one, and another trail of smoke.

Again he peeked over, nearly without hope, but this time the guncam was covered with the dark black smoke.

Then the smoke cleared, and he could see the guncam had changed into a pile of metal.

"YES!" He was cheerful, as he found himself turning and getting ready for the third launch, this time towards the guncam at the beginning of the corridor.

One tiny clink for the pin touching ground, then bullets flying for a splitsecond, an explosion and then silence and smoke. Two to zero for him.

"Hehehehe... Come get many!" No, it wasn't that the phrase... "Come get any?" No. "Come get none? Bah."

He dismissed the thoughts, still somewhat excited, and resumed walking through the corridor.

He was invincible now. He could go through anything. Everything!

\*

*"Take cover! Detonation in five."*

Those bastards... Casualties had increased to eight; one splattered by the egghead in orange suit, and three who got surprised by the one in the blue suit as it had begun to throw grenades.

And with their luck, the five or so that had run off towards the bomber to check what it had between the legs would've turned up another guy.

How the hell were they supposed to find their target, he had no more ideas.

A large explosion over the radio; "*Move in! Move in!*" Gunbursts, meaning the intruder was in sight.

How the hell could he have survived even *that*? After getting unscathed through enough explosive to take down a tank, he had even been able to take down both turrets. One moment, the gun-cams were sending at their standard one picture per second, the next nothing.

Never underestimate an egghead... He almost hoped that guy was in truth a gal with fake moustaches and beard. It would've made things so much easier...

Ah, damn it all to hell, and back and again.

\*

The fire door had blown open, and he had ran, scared. He was now climbing, hastily, another flight of stairs. And to hell with his courage!

He didn't exactly know where he was going to, as the maps he had been given didn't go through the warehouse in enough detail that the suit could plot a course through it.

But the elevator to the surface was shown, and it was close.

Turning around and climbing the next staircase, he found it was the last; a short corridor led to another of those clinky metal platforms, hugging the wall of a large room, about six meters above it.

Looking inside, he saw smoke and rubble to the side he was just coming away from, and at the opposite, the soldier he had slaughtered before; although the other bodies were a mystery, it was without doubt the same room he had been in.

But there was no time for thoughts; the sound of boots behind him was getting closer by the second. He dashed forward, the sound of clinking metal echoing in the room as he crossed the platform and entered the closest, and only, door.

Three corridors parted from that room... Which one should he take?

The boots behind him were now over metal; they were close!

He dashed in the left corridor, taking out the map only after he was already far in it.

Wrong direction... No, it was right! Or not? Too much apprehension to study the plan calmly, and the sound of a door bursting open behind him didn't help.

He ran again, turning right at the first intersection, completely at random, then avoided a crate by circling at and shouldered open the safety door at the end of this corridor. Gunfire erupted from behind him, barely interrupting as its target went out of sight.

But Gordon was trapped. There was no way down from the metal platform he now was on, as the twelve meters section connecting him to the ladder had been for some reason blown up, and was lying at least ten meters below.

No more gunfire; the soldiers probably knew he was trapped and they were coming for him..

Trapped...? He looked again down, over the railing. Then he climbed over it, took aim and jumped. This was going to hurt someone quite a lot.

**\*\*\*TO BE CONTINUED...\*\*\***