

Mike MacDee

INFERNO

A horror novella based on Id Software's DOOM

3rd Edition

Special thanks to Steven Johnson, for inspiring me to keep improving.

The following transcript was compiled from my emails to colleague Michael Delgado, and the written and audio logs of the ill-fated Inferno Team. All documents have been arranged in chronological order, or my best approximation thereof. In the event of my death or disappearance, this document is to be released to the media outlets listed in the appendix.

- D. Carver

MESSAGE FROM: d.carver@outpost9.gov
SUBJECT: a small favor

Greetings and salutations from the malebolge! You're probably wondering why I wasn't present at your bachelor party this past weekend. It would seem what was intended as a simple two-day mineral study has become a week-long sightseeing tour. The team and I were all set to begin our spiral back to earth -- the slipgate had vivisected space-time and Private Burns was in the process of stepping into the rift even! -- when our good friend Captain Elliot received additional orders from Outpost 9. To be brief, we spent the entire weekend in the desolate nightmare trenches of Inferno, and it looks like we won't be coming home until this Friday at the earliest. I'm sure you're having a good chuckle over that, after my last (admittedly neurotic) letter about my fears that the great bloody fog of this realm was following my team and wishing all the torments of hell upon us. I can't disclose much at present, but our new orders have marched us northeast to a landmark of particular interest to the directors. A last-minute "as long as you're still there" errand to them. The worst sort of overtime to us humble assets.

They're aptly named, descents: after Orpheus's own, which, like ours, resulted in little gain besides a tour of hell's halls. We're lucky to find any new information about this realm's environment (or lack thereof), any specimens living or dead, or any human artifacts of even the slightest importance. I always promise myself I'll never go on another descent again, but I can't seem to say no. Perhaps the optimist in me still believes I'll learn something worthwhile out here.

Ah, my complaints finally bring me back on track. I have a small favor to ask of you, for morbid curiosity's sake more than anything, though it may prove useful later if my little theory is correct. The favor I ask is this: could you possibly locate and email to me any documentation of military operations conducted in the E3 quadrant that used *two* ATRVs? The after-action report will do, if it still exists. I'm sending you the vehicle serial numbers if it helps. This request may require that you dig up information which is slightly classified, but I'm not entirely sure, and I will need the data regardless. I'd be most grateful to you if you could do this for me.

Hope to see you soon. I'm off to bed. If nothing else, the eerie howling of Inferno's air serves well as a lullaby.

David

MESSAGE FROM: d.carver@outpost9.gov
SUBJECT: RE: document you wanted

Fantastic, Michael! I'll give this a good read and compare it with what I've found here. If I'm not mistaken, our little bonus excursion has unearthed something of historical importance!

I mentioned a landmark of interest in my last letter. This landmark appears to be the lost Plutonia Labs research facility: there's little left of the place besides charred asphalt and a few crumbling walls. Much of it has collapsed into the chasm by which it perched, taking some of the chasm wall with it on its way down.

As for the ATRV's I mentioned, we found them parked by the slough in worn but operable condition, with an entire portable base setup stored between the two of them -- the base accommodates the number of people (6) comprising Inferno Team. The artifact I found at the 'Labs -- despite being many miles from the ATRVs -- suggests that Inferno Team may have indeed accomplished their mission!

Please tell no one else about this except your lovely director, Vanessa, for the time being. I'll write you again as soon as I finish looking over my treasures. I'll have plenty of time: the marines have little use for me at present.

David

ORIGINAL MESSAGE FROM m.delgado@uachq.gov:

Asked Ol' Ed about it and he helped me dig it out of the Pit. Op codenamed "Inferno" from six months ago, supposedly the first organized military insertion into the demon realm. Something of a quiet legend around here with senior staff. First time I seen Ol' Ed without a smile on his face, like remembering the op pulled the drain plug on his soul. Envelope still crisp like it hasn't been touched since filed away. Contains print and digital copy of the report (attached). Didn't read it.

Fill me in when you get back. Got to clean up Tom's mess again (what's new).

After Action Report for Operation: Inferno

Maj. Carl Urich, US Marine Corps

Filed July 20, 2600

Date of Execution:

July 12, 2600

Sponsors:

Union Aerospace Corporation

United States Marine Corps

Plutonia Labs (UAC Space Tech Research Sub-Division)

Classification:

For Official Use Only

Scenario:

Search-and-Retrieve

Location:

Uncharted realm codenamed "Inferno"

Participants:

United States Marine Corps

Plutonia Labs

Number of Participants:

Marines 4

Scientists 2

Operation Overview

Plutonia Labs HQ contacted UAC top brass in January of the year 2600 with proposal for device referred to as "quantum accelerator". Purpose of accelerator to detect and seal Inferno portals of any size, preventing further holocausts like those which took place on Phobos and Deimos (caused by similar technology also engineered by Plutonia Labs). Plutonia Labs in dire need of funds as accelerator only existed in blueprint form. Project greenlit by CEO Romero; facility heavily guarded by 2 marine companies during project development.

Working prototype created by February. Chief Engineer Thomas Mohrig emailed video footage of accelerator detecting and closing slippgate portals roughly two meters in diameter. Would know if the device was capable of sealing portals of Infernal origin by the end of the week.

Plutonia Lab subject to demonic assault on February 27, but human casualties minimal thanks to heavily armed security force. Invader portal easily closed by accelerator, allowing only a handful of hellspawn through, which were dispatched by marines. Tremendous victory for humankind. Mohrig promised mass production of quantum accelerators within next few months.

Contact lost with Plutonia Labs on July 3.

Investigation revealed entire Plutonia Labs facility gone, landscape peppered with partially devoured human remains and staggering numbers of demon corpses suggesting invasion of massive scale. Quantum accelerator also lost to the demon hordes.

On July 7, Mohrig discovered wandering beach near Bandon, Oregon. Could not give legible account of what happened to Plutonia Labs and his fellow scientists, nor how he escaped Inferno. Mohrig's health diminished considerably from shock and exhaustion, but was able to oversee development of Infernal Positioning System prototype before finally dying of exhaustion.

Quantum accelerator had been equipped to self-destruct if left unmanned for 48 hours, to guard against this sort of catastrophe; however, reliability of this emergency system in doubt. Device considered weapon of mass destruction in the hands of demon mastermind.

Col. Warren and Dr. Brennan assembled "Inferno" special operations team from ranks of Plutonia Labs and US Marine Corps. Marines and scientists hand-picked for team's ranks based on experience with demonic threat.

Purpose of operation:

- 1- Enter demon realm and establish a defensible base of operations.
- 2- Locate and secure Plutonia Labs facility.
- 3- Recover all data pertaining to quantum accelerator project.
- 4- Ensure quantum accelerator no longer poses a threat to earth.
- 5- Erect quantum beacon at Plutonia Labs to mark position for extraction team.

Inferno Team supplied with 1 month's water and rations based on IPS dipper probe readings of drop zone and estimated distance to lost facility. Outpost 3 slipgate portal sustained at 1 cm diameter until time of deployment. Mohrig confirmed previous reports from "Doomed Marine" that Inferno's air is thin but breathable, gravity light but very close to that of earth's moon. Inferno Team members fully outfitted with all-purpose envirosuits modified with kevlar, ceramic plating, lightweight AC units and terrain jumpers. Equipment included grappling guns, demolition charges, M9 Adaptive Combat Rifles, Beretta 9mm pistols, one RPG-7, one "BFG 9000" Adaptive Blast Frequency Cannon, two automated sentry guns, and two all-terrain rovers.

Inferno Team sent through Outpost 3 slipgate on July 12, 2600; slipgate portal returned to first frequency and remained open at 1 cm diameter to allow satellite communication between Inferno Team and Outpost 3, courtesy of UAC cell transmission towers to be erected on other side. Extraction team sent through daily until August 11, failing each time to detect Inferno Team beacon. All members considered MIA, and operation considered failure. Steps now being taken to produce more efficient "descent" missions to combat growing cosmic menace.

MESSAGE FROM: d.carver@outpost9.gov
SUBJECT: immediate extraction please

Michael, I have more favors to ask you, and they are very important. I'm afraid they must also be attended post-haste, before they sever our contact with earth.

The first is that you get us out of Inferno. It seems that, despite our reports that field scout Cpl. Richards is missing in action, and has been for several hours, the directors insist that we continue to explore the ruins of the former Plutonia Labs facility. Captain Elliot declined most vehemently and demanded our extraction, but it appears we are out of luck. The directors want more data, but that may take the sacrifice of several teams at this rate. And I think they know it. In fact, I'm beginning to worry that they intend to abandon us here!

Do not speak to Vanessa. I'm afraid she may be "in bed" with our directors, for lack of a classier phrase. I need you and your friend Major Saunders to get down to Outpost 9 with whatever excuse you can think of and get them to open an earth-portal -- we have erected a quantum beacon at our current location, so the portal should appear within a mile radius. If you are my friend and you truly love me you will do this at any cost.

The second favor is that you take what I've found and share it only with the people you trust most, preferably those who are not UAC personnel. It is the contents of the Inferno Team captain's personal log, supplied to us by none other than the "Doomed Marine" whose reputation I needn't review for you. All I can say is it's not quite that "worthwhile something" I had hoped to find here.

Please hurry, for god's sake. If I must die, I'd much prefer to die on earth and not in this dreadful plane of nightmares.

David

Inferno Team Mission Log Transcript

[Logs Recorded by Inferno Team captain, hereon referred to as "Chief"]

During the audio log transcripts, sounds overheard in the background are listed in brackets, and compiler's notes in italics. Quotation marks indicate discernible spoken words by the Inferno Team members. The names of identified speakers are typed in all-caps.

AUDIO LOG 1

[Log begins with a sudden burst of sound: commotion of many people running about, speaking to one another very quickly. Keyboards clackity-clack rapidly, trying to keep up. Sounds of occasional laughter nearby, usually from a husky female voice. In the background electric generators hum like whales; gentle rustling and the warbling of birds suggest an outdoor locale.]

NOTE: Inferno Team's insertion point was Outpost 6 in the jungle outskirts of Tapachula, Chiapas.

ADAMS: "--sure to keep your ass covered around Ellison, Slim. He ain't been laid all year and he's liable to go caveman."

ELLISON: [snorts] "Thanks, Retch."

ADAMS: "You, too, Olsen. He's desperate."

ELLISON: "One of us ain't gonna survive this field trip."

CHIEF: [clears throat with great baritone voice, then talks aside] "Alright, shaddap!" [moment of silence] "Radio test. Roll call, clockwise. Ladies first."

PARKER: [speaks nervously, like a new intern] "Um, Doctor Michelle Parker of Plutonia Labs Outpost Two--"

CHIEF: "Just names, Slim. Next."

PARKER: "Oh..."

OLSEN: [middle-aged male voice soft as a pillow] "Doctor Joss Olsen."

BORG: [speaks as though carved from granite] "Sergeant Eric Borg! Sir!"

ADAMS: "Private Gretchen Adams, Sirr-ah! And proud you don't consider me a lady, Sirr-ah!"

ELLISON: "Private Mitch Ellison, Sirrr-uh!"

[Everyone confirms their radios work.]

CHIEF: "I'd like to welcome you all to the first Anti-Alien Special Forces Squadron. You were chosen for this unit because anyone else from your respective divisions would shit and piss himself with terror at the sight of a death head or a shit-imp. Even Slim, here, knows how to keep her cool around eldritch abominations. The eggheads brought us hell on earth, and it's up to us to show its ugly ass to the door. When we return to earth, we will officially be the baddest mother fuckers who ever lived."

["Hoorah" from Ellison and Adams.]

CHIEF: "Starting right now, you fear no hellspawn. Starting right now, you fear *me* and *shit else*. Do your jobs, piss when appropriate, and don't make me wish I'd left you at home. Everyone get seated: Adams, Parker, and me in Hobbes; Ellison, Borg, and Olsen in Calvin. Doctors drive to keep the marines' hands free to shoot. Senior marines take the passenger seats. Kids guard from the back seats. Move."

NOTE: Calvin and Hobbes were the nicknames of the modified ATRV's piloted by Inferno Team: six-wheeled lunar rovers with armored chassis. Both seated up to three people and carried a variety of equipment for navigating treacherous terrain and carrying heavy loads. Hobbes was outfitted with an M397 minigun.

[New sounds join the ambiance: boots trodding on grass, metallic snaps and clicks of rifles locking and loading, the groan of heavy bodies against leather seats, seat belts whining and snapping into place. Nearby Adams squeals with glee as she checks the heavy steel parts of the minigun mount.]

CHIEF: "Mission log, first entry. The time is nine-forty-four pm, July twelfth, year twenty-six hundred. Inferno Team preparing to embark on voyage into the unknown. Will record--" [to Chief's left comes the metal snap of a seat belt unbuckling, then frantic rustling, then sound of retching] "And we already have a casualty."

[Coughing. Ellison laughs, asks if Dr. Parker is okay. Another cough, embarrassed muttering. More laughter.]

ELLISON: "Some of us're more excited about skippin' 'cross the cosmos than others."

ADAMS: "Reckon so. Doc Olsen got an iron stomach, here. You been to Inferno once, right?"

OLSEN: "Ah...a very brief and very *improvised* trip while running quantum accelerator tests."

ADAMS: "Regular Allan Quarterman, aintcha?"

[Olsen chuckles. Seat belt buckling as Dr. Parker mumbles.]

PARKER: "--so sorry. I'm okay."

ELLISON: "First time, Sweetheart? Don't worry, we're all virgins."

ADAMS: "Especially Ellison."

CHIEF: [aside] "Try to keep it down when we jump, troops." [to mic] "Inferno Team preparing to embark. Will record progress in audio log for Sweet Home to review on team's return."

ELLISON: [ghastly voice] "*If* they return, that is. Hahahahaaa..."

[Disgusted sigh from Dr. Parker. Brief crackle of radio static, followed by a hard, humorless voice presumably belonging to Colonel Warren.]

WARREN: "Inferno Team, this is Sweet Home again. Final transmission before insertion. How'd the radio check go?"

CHIEF: "Radios are beaut. All equipment loaded and checked twice like Santa Claus. Calvin and Hobbes finally behaving. It was a battery problem after all. Purrin' like pussies now. Should carry us over any terrain without complaint."

WARREN: "Envirosuit report."

CHIEF: "Snug. Nominal. Passed the water test with flyin' colors. Terrain jumpers didn't need adjustment after all. Been climbin' trees like monkeys all morning."

WARREN: "Portable base dry run time."

CHIEF: "Three minutes and seventeen seconds."

WARREN: [wryly] "New record?"

CHIEF: "Best these lazy sonsabitches can do."

WARREN: "Sergeant, armaments report."

BORG: "Sentry guns A-OK. No room for the charges. Hafta leave 'em behind, but no loss. Rifles an' sidearms accounted for and functional."

WARREN: "I assume the Chief brought his bear-killer."

[Snap of a large revolver cylinder locking into place.]

BORG: "Affirmative. He's makin' love to it now. Minigun bathed an' breakfasted an' eager to find some chew toys. BFG faulty: didn't blow up in my hands."

WARREN: "Very funny. The eggheads don't usually worry so much about the grunts using their toys, so show a little respect."

BORG: "Tested BFG again durin' final equipment check. Got the tracker fixed. Now consistently Cajun-grills all targets in range."

ADAMS: "We're also missing one jeep. On an unrelated note."

WARREN: "Roger. All systems are go then. Anyone's having second thoughts, now's the time to opt out."

[Ellison asks Dr. Parker how she feels. Adams giggles like a child.]

CHIEF: "All members ready and willing, Sweet Home."

WARREN: "Okay. We're running behind, so let's make this nice and neat. Stand by."

[One minute of murmuring, buckles fastening, straps whining, metal on metal, chuckling. The generators begin to hum louder, rattling the recorder. Unintelligible words of solace from Dr. Olsen, likely directed at Dr. Parker. A stern order shouted from the distance.]

CHIEF: "Okay. Drivers, start your engines."

TEXT LOG 1

They want me to record my observations during my down time, for my psych evaluation. They're not gonna like most of 'em.

My children have been growing up without me while the Corps keeps extending my tour of duty. Zach is four now and I've only ever seen him through internet video conference. Toni will be in high school before I get back. My wife Sophie cries every time I talk to her now, calls the Corps dirty names. Sometimes directs her insults at me for enlisting in the first place, as if I knew I was gonna see action at all, let alone be stuck fighting in the same useless war for twelve years, followed by several months of guarding Dr Mohrig's crazy ass from small-scale hellspawn invasions.

Sunsabitches finally told me my tour was ending. I was relieved from hellspawn guard duty by some smug young cocksucker and sat on the reserves for a week. Sophie couldn't stop crying and laughing when I told her I was finally coming home, and neither could my dumb ass. I'd booked the next three months with family excursions and alone time with the wife. I was at the goddamn airport, getting on the goddamn plane back to the goddamn USA when they called me

with the Inferno Team assignment. They said the guy they originally wanted had died to a suicide bomber with a dozen others. Said it was my last mission for really-real this time. Maybe until the *next* final mission the UAC cooks up for me.

Sophie hung up on me the last time I called home.

You assholes wanted me to hold nothing back, so that's what you're getting. I shouldn't be here. The Corps took me in the beginning because I was a young smart-ass full of vitality and full of love for the red, white and blue, even though I should've hated Uncle Sam for what he did to my Cherokee ancestors. That young smart-ass has been gone a long time: my trannie's worn out, my suspension's on the verge of snapping, and my oil hasn't been changed since the start of the war. And now you idiots want me to lead a convoy to another goddamn world -- one that apparently wants to destroy us. Why not someone younger and not nearly as burnt out? Save your "war hero" bullshit. Heroes don't wake up screaming from dreams of jungles too dark and too thick to tell friend from foe 'til they got their bayonet in your guts.

I always told my marines to leave photos of loved ones at home: they just make you miss and worry and hate. Easier to keep your wits about you when your mind isn't cluttered with distractions. That's why I never used my favorite pics of Sophie and the kids as my PDA wallpaper; never even wanted to see, hear, or think of them except during those rare video calls. Turned out I may as well have brought the family album, because Dr. Parker is a spitting image of Sophie. Her skin's the same medium African-brown, her eyes the same striking hazel. Even wears her hair in the same little ponytail at the base of the neck. Her voice isn't as husky as Sophie's; she sounds more like a teenager. She's younger, too: same age as Adams, early twenties, but *not* dumb enough to get a face tattoo (Adams has some kinda tribal symbol under her right eye, probably has no clue what the fuck it means).

TL;DR: Next time you wanna throw a squadron ass-first into Hell, pick somebody who wants to go, and don't threaten his pension if he says "No thanks." End of rant.

This place stinks like a crypt in Florida: the air's moist, swampy, and heavy on the lungs, but just barely breathable. There's a thin red mist in the air that coats the distant landscape in a bloody haze, and the sky is eternally overcast, though everything's lit with a perpetual dusk that makes every shadow long and black. We can see traces of green towers peeking outta the "clouds" far above us. Inferno's surface is on the inside of the planet, not the outside. That's what it looks like, anyway. The wind mocks us with the smell of death and the gibbering cries of I don't care what as long as it stays miles away from us.

Calvin and Hobbes got a lot of mileage the moment we "touched down" on Inferno soil. Dipper probe went through the portal ahead of us to check for bogeys: it startled a pack o' shit-imps just on the other side, which started knocking the hell out of it. I gave the go-ahead and we tore ass through the portal, scattered the shit-imps like chaff. We encircled the survivors and corralled them back into a group so Adams could splatter them with Hobbes's minigun. First ten minutes in Hell and the entire front of both rovers is already painted with entrails. Probe's a loss.

Probes. That's another thing. I can understand why a one-way slipgate can't drop us at the same position every time it opens: there's no slipgate on the other end to receive the call (or quantum beacon, which burns out fast and is shit for accuracy), and they don't want the forces of Hell to get their hands on the tech. But if our tech's advanced enough to instantly whisk us to other planets, why can't they make a dipper probe that can take a clear goddamned picture? We'd know exactly where Plutonia Labs is and could head straight for it, without wasting so much time scanning useless terrain.

EDIT: Doc Parker says the red mist in the air and the slipgate portal itself both disrupt radio waves, and it's the lag that messes up the terrain scan quality. The eggheads figured out how to send live feeds back to earth using a cell network: the docs will be erecting a souped-up cell tower every mile or so, and our signals follow the chain of towers all the way back to the open slipgate for earth to receive with relative clarity. Hence why we're doing the scans ourselves in real-time. The more you know.

Our insertion point was a valley in the middle of a grass-less highland of deep brown dirt. The highlands are surrounded by giant black mountains in the far distance, one or two wearing toupees of what could be magma or smoldering red brick. Inferno's concept of "nature" goes to shit from there. The trees dotting the highlands twist and screw toward the sky as if they died in horrible pain, and the trunks are covered in awful barbs. Some ungodly quivering fleshy mass was oozing into the valley from one end like an intestinal flood. We steered clear of it, just in case the flesh-valley it originated from (on the other side of the hills) was alive enough to eat the rovers.

Inferno Positioning System worked perfectly, or as perfectly as the clunky piece of shit can -- it's linked to the Outpost computers on earth, so it's about as clear as our radio contact, which is to say "static city." It gives us a rough digital terrain scan, and if you read it right you can make out what's a natural structure versus what's man- or demon-made. Theoretically. And theoretically man-made materials are flagged as the brightest objects, to aid us in locating the Plutonia Labs facility. We're doing a perimeter check on the skirt of the valley, searching the region for any structures that look promising. I dunno how the eggheads figure we're close enough to the facility for the IPS to spot it, but Sweet Home says they know what they're doing, and that it hurts their feelings when their judgment is questioned, so I should shut up.

UPDATE: Perimeter check just expanded to avoid a murder of death heads passing through the valley. IPS flags those for us, too, which is just dandy. Demonic possession is hell on morale, from what I understand.

AUDIO LOG 2

[Boots crunch on soil as Chief walks for several moments, drawing closer to arguing voices: Ellison is recognized first, as he speaks loudly in alarm. Borg's snarls are finally heard after the first discernible words.]

ELLISON: [unintelligible] "--kneelin' like he was gettin' a drink."

BORG: "From a lake o' *boilin' water*?"

ELLISON: "He was *right there!*"

BORG: "'Regroup in five minutes' means exactly what it sounds like. You wander off again, you'll be wearin' yer testicles for dog tags. Understand me, Caveman?"

ELLISON: "Yes, Sir! But I'm not makin' it up!"

CHIEF: "What exactly are you not making up, Private?"

ELLISON: "Chief! Sighted someone across the water hole."

BORG: "No humans on this side o' the universe but us, Caveman. The demons don't use zombies 'cept in stolen human settlements."

ELLISON: "He was gone when I got over the hill, Chief, and he wasn't possessed! He was *human!*"

[Gruff sigh from Borg, then silence for two minutes except for the wind, the occasional grind of boots shifting, and a periodic howl in the far distance. Three steps as Chief presumably moves closer to the lake, then stops. Chief shouts a greeting and waits. There's no reply. He repeats himself, with similar results. Silence for another fifteen seconds.]

CHIEF: "Whatever he is, he's gone now. Load up. Movin' on."

ELLISON: [pauses] "Yes, Chief."

[One minute of nothing but footsteps returning to the rovers.]

PARKER: "What is it, Chief?"

CHIEF: "Ellison discovered a human colony. We asked to speak to their chief, but they were rude bastards, so we shot 'em."

[Adams giggles. Ellison mutters something about a "long fucking trip". Leathery groan as the team members return to their seats.]

PARKER: "Sergeant."

BORG: "Yeah, Slim?"

PARKER: "How do you know zombies are only found in...uh, 'stolen' human settlements?"

ELLISON: "The Doomed Marine said so in one o' his reports. I saw him across the lake just now."

ADAMS: "Get the fuck out! You *saw* him?"

ELLISON: "In the flesh."

ADAMS: "The fucker's *dead!*"

PARKER: "Forgive me if I'm a little lost."

BORG: [clears his throat] "The Doomed Marine is a sort of legend among UAC and military personnel. Supposedly he was involved in that shitstorm on Mars last year. He's been livin' here in Inferno ever since. Probably part-demon now from eatin' so much demon steak."

ADAMS: "Ugh..."

PARKER: "This is the first I've heard of him."

BORG: "Don't get outta the lab much, huh, Slim?"

[Muttered confirmation from Parker, laugh from Ellison. Grinding, chattering hard drive suggests the IPS in use, scanning the landscape around the ATRVs.]

BORG: "Back when that nut Mohrig was developin' the quantum accelerator, the Doomed Marine started tossin' recon reports through the portals, or leavin' em for dipper probes to find. That's how we know about the air, gravity, environmental hazards, demon species, what plants and critters are edible, how to treat the water before drinkin', and everythin' else. He's been quiet for the last two months, so we assumed the demons finally got 'im. Doesn't stop idiots like Caveman from seein' him, though."

ELLISON: "No, Sir."

PARKER: "I can't imagine being stuck in this awful place for that long!"

BORG: "He ain't stuck. They say he stayed of his own accord. Must be like any other war: even when the troops come home, they just wanna go back. Back to what's become familiar to 'em."

CHIEF: "Speak for yourself. Story Time over?"

BORG: "Yes, Chief."

CHIEF: "Sweet Home, this is Inferno Team. Come in, over."

WARREN: [on radio] "This is Sweet Home, Inferno T-- [grinding radio static] --head. Over."

CHIEF: "IPS picked up a structure due north of our position. Have the eggheads help confirm whether it's our target. Over."

[Radio silence for a few moments.]

WARREN: "Negative. Does not match scan density level of human structures. Over."

CHIEF: "Well, that's where we're headed anyway. Elevation's high. Might get better readings up there. Over."

WARREN: "Ten-nine, Inferno Team. Got as far as 'elevation high.' Over."

CHIEF: [irritated groan] "I said the high elevation will make the terrain scans worth a shit. We're surrounded by mountains here, and Hell's internet service sucks. Over."

WARREN: "Ten-ten. Proceed with caution. Out."

CHIEF: "Start yer engines, boys and girls. ETA is forty minutes."

ADAMS: "Use yer Indian powers, Chief. The wind'll tell ya where the 'Labs are. I don't wanna eat demon steak!"

CHIEF: "The wind says to tie your dumb white ass to the fender and drag it to our next stop. I'm not gonna listen, 'cos I'm a swell guy."

ADAMS: "Thanks, Chief..."

TEXT LOG 2

We named the structure Hell Keep. It is a small, makeshift fort that twists and tunnels through the middle of the craggy mountain that serves as its foundation. Turns out it's the only way to pass the steep mountain range blocking our progress: we had to drive for an hour along the narrow beach of a boiling ocean to reach it.

The only way in from our side was the courtyard entrance, a house of smoldering red brick poking out of the side of the mountain. The courtyard is about the size of a baseball field and paved with a kind of fleshy soil that turns my stomach to walk on. The front gate is decorated with skulls that are almost human, but not quite. The courtyard was sparsely populated with shit-imps and a couple of floaters. Facing a floater is the worst -- the way it seems to grin at you with a mouth like a great white shark, and the way it stares into your soul with that doll-like green eye. The way it swims through the air, flaunting what an unnatural abomination it is. Borg wanted to BFG the horrible things, but I splattered 'em like tomatoes with the minigun to save battery power.

The kids (Adams, Ellison) dispatched theimps with small arms fire, and surprised me with how well they worked together: one would get an imp's attention and draw its fire while the other flanked it and capped it in the head. They went back and forth like that 'til the courtyard was cleared. I was about to commend them when Ellison made some stupid Jurassic Park comment and got Adams giggling again. Maybe they're idiot savants.

From the front gate, the fortress tunnels through the mountain in two directions, and the architect didn't bother paving the craggy walls. We knew the tunnels were just big enough for the rovers (if we removed Hobbes's minigun mount), but we parked them outside and continued on foot to secure the fort: the doctors were behind myself and Ellison, with Borg and Adams taking up the rear. At any sign of bogeys on either side of us, the docs would hug the walls to let the marines through.

We took the right path first, with Ellison taking point, and came to another outdoor courtyard, this one paved with ash-colored gravel. A pack of pink, slobbering bulldog demons was waiting for us there -- dumbest creatures that ever lived, next to Ellison and Adams. They just keep coming at you no matter how many pieces you shoot off. Across the courtyard was the door to a long, winding, brick-paved tunnel that led to a sort of ritual room about thirty feet in diameter, with four jade pedestals arranged in a diamond at the center. Another door led out the other side of the mountain, to a lovely view of more damned barren highlands, more damned ugly mountains, and a damned ugly brown river weaving between them.

Human remains were arranged lovingly on the pedestals. One was a bleached skull. I won't go into the rest, except that we cleared them off and buried them in the gravel courtyard.

Sweet Home said the remains could be a sign that we're close to Plutonia Labs. I hope that's the case, and that we'll be going home soon: Parker keeps trying to make conversation with me to ease her nerves, and I can't look at her without thinking of Sophie and the kids and a long vacation in our Colorado cabin. I think I'll assign her to Borg's rover from now on.

The left path from the entrance led back outside, where a crumbling stone bridge curved across a lagoon of murky red death-stench water, to a cave opening in the side of the mountain. We debated whether to risk crossing it. Ellison tapped his foot on the first segment of bridge and heard solid thumps. He smugly assured us it was fine, like he'd just performed a scientific test he was super proud of.

The moment he stepped onto the bridge he fell right through it, ten feet down into the waist-deep mire. For about five minutes we couldn't stop laughing. His dry-heaving and childish whining about the smell made us laugh harder.

Adams, being the lightest and the dumbest of the marines, volunteered to run across the bridge and check the cave. I gave her the okay as long as she came back at the first sign of trouble. She leapt over Ellison's hole and started tearing ass across the bridge like she was in a decathlon, the damned bridge collapsing under her feet at every step. The crazy bitch made it across, but she was going so fast she couldn't slow down before she tumbled right into the cave, out of our sight.

Silence for about one second. Then her voice shrieking a battle cry and her ACR barking on full auto, lighting up the cave entrance with a yellow strobe light. Then out came Adams just as fast as she'd went in, leaping off the cave ledge and into the murk with a thick splash. Three shit-imps came out after her, the first getting shoved into the "water" by his clumsy buddies.

Borg and Ellison laid down heavy suppression fire on the cave entrance while I slogged across the lagoon toward Adams, imp fireballs sailing over my head and scorching my face with hot gusts of air. Meanwhile Adams was duking it out with her shit-imp, punching it and cussing at it like it was one of her brothers -- she'd engaged her helmet to protect her face, so maybe she's smarter than I thought.

I put one round between the demon's eyes and dropped it in the murk. Adams's helmet retracted and she whined about my stealing her kills. I told her if she plays with her food, someone else is gonna eat it for her. Maybe she'll go for the kill from now on instead of fucking around and trying to prove herself.

After clearing out the cave, Hell Keep became our new base. It has a fantastic view of the surrounding landscape and our IPS readings are much clearer than when we first landed. We erected our sentry guns at both entrances, and parked the rovers in the gravel courtyard, where we set up our portable base facilities and are now having a barbeque. No joke.

We have a month's rations and water stored in the rovers, but Doc Olsen got visibly excited when he saw those bulldog carcasses, and asked Parker to keep them cold with the fire extinguisher while he set up the skillet. Among Olsen's pet projects is the study of Inferno's animal and plant life, and he'd prepared bulldog once before for a company of hungry marines. His dad was a hunter, so he learned how to clean and cook wild game when he was a kid. It shows, because that crazy viking is one hell of a chef: demon steak ain't as bad as we'd thought, though it's the gamey-est meat I ever tasted.

Adams settled for rations, and adamantly refused to eat with us. The suggestion of eating demon meat made her physically ill. Borg almost ordered her to partake, to discipline her for calling her captain a kill-stealer. Borg never much cared for whiny young recruits.

I guess I don't, either, but I can't be bothered to care anymore.

Doc Parker has been playing with the IPS for the last two hours with nothing noteworthy to report. I'm having Borg relay Parker's reports to me so I don't have to look at her.

AUDIO LOG 3

[Opens with crackling static on the earth radio band and the whine-and-chatter of Hobbes's minigun mount firing in long bursts.]

BORG: [nearby] "--let that shit rain all over the rovers! I just cleaned those things, goddammit!"

ELLISON: [distant, unintelligible]

BORG: "Cos you're a lousy shot, Caveman! If ya can't hit it, push it back so it don't come within shock range! Those things can zap a grown man dead at ten meters!"

CHIEF: "Ten-nine, Sweet Home. We're sweeping some of the local pigeons off our roof. We got the coordinates, but say that last bit again. Over."

WARREN: [static] "--straightest course to target area is through the slough northwest of your position by about nine kilometers. Should be obvious on the map when it renders: it's where the river seeps into the surrounding landscape. It's the only path across the river within a *hundred* kilometers. Even then, the marshy terrain might swallow the rovers. Over."

CHIEF: "Did the eggheads just find out they gave us *Some-Terrain Roving Vehicles*?" [Warren chuckles humorlessly] "We'll walk if we have to. These lazy sunsabitches could use the exercise. Over."

WARREN: "The target of interest is pretty small on our scan, but it's just on the edge of the map. Should see more of it when you cross the slough. Over."

CHIEF: "You're sure it's human this time?"

PARKER: "Your transmission is still rendering, Sweet Home. Please hold."

[Minigun fire for a few moments, Ellison cheering. The IPS grinding away.]

PARKER: "I've marked the area on our map, Sweet Home. It's human, all right. Uh, that is, according to Mohrig's scan key. Scan shows it's white, so that ought to mean earth metals." [pause] "Uh, over."

WARREN: [static] "--having some technical difficulties over here. Contact us again when y--" [long hiss of static] "Proceed with caution. Out."

[Chief grumbles something under his breath.]

ELLISON: "Bogeys splattered, Chief!"

BORG: "And it only took him half a goddamned belt of ammo."

ELLISON: "Aw, c'mon, Sergeant--"

AUDIO LOG 4

[Opens with roaring engines in the foreground, echoing and fading as the ATRVs slowly drive inside the 'Keep. As the engines fade, the background noise becomes apparent: general hustle and bustle of Inferno Team, and a distant chorus of hideous calls that bridge the gap between whale, bird, and ghost.]

CHIEF: [aside] "--moving! Adams, strike that tent in the next ten seconds or I'm leaving you outside! Move it!" [to mic] "Mission log update. Mass migration of death heads in progress, bound for our position. Team and equipment being moved to the altar room until it passes. Assuming they don't already know we're here, they shouldn't notice our presence. Otherwise we may need additional support. More as it develops."

BORG: "Rovers are inside, Chief."

CHIEF: "Good. Help the kids strike the base."

BORG: "Dammit, Adams!"

ADAMS: "I know how ta do it, Sir! The damn thing's stuck on--"

AUDIO LOG 5

[Calls of the migrating death heads still audible, but muffled by the walls of the 'Keep. No other sounds in the background -- Inferno Team is quiet, possibly resting.]

PARKER: [softly, nearby] "--think we're being punished?"

CHIEF: [inquisitive grunt] "Say again, Slim."

PARKER: "Do you think God is punishing us? With this...with the invasion. Cashing in all the terrible, selfish things we've done as a species."

CHIEF: [laughs] "I thought scientists were logical people. No room for spiritualism."

PARKER: "We can believe in God and be scientists at the same time. It's not that weird."

CHIEF: "Slim, I've already been punished with endless war for the last twelve years. If that's God's work, I'd sure as hell love to know what I did to piss him off."

[Silence for a minute, then a long sigh from Chief.]

CHIEF: "Fuck it. Forgot what I was gonna say now."

PARKER: "What--? Oh! Oh, you were recor--"

TEXT LOG 3

Even dreams are twisted and ugly here. I couldn't tell you if it was the bloody mist, or the constant howling wind, or the fact that I've been surrounded by nightmare landscape for going on three days.

Tried four times to get to sleep. Every time I went under I'd see two apple-red, snake-like eyes staring into my soul from the darkness -- a gaze I can feel physically holding me like it'd wrapped me in chains.

The fourth time I only *felt* their gaze. What I actually saw was Sophie, naked and writhing in ecstasy as two sweaty men (or man-like *things*) crawled all over her, kissing and licking every inch of her. She was young and slim again like Doc Parker.

Ugly things were said last time I talked to Sophie, when she hung up on me. I got furious with her indignant attitude about the Inferno assignment, like I'd done it to fuck with her. I accused her of things, and she hung up. No denial, no argument, just hung up. She couldn't deny it just a little to ease my mind, so I could write it all off as me offending her with my lack of faith.

Maybe she wanted my doubts to needle me. Except she knows it would distract me, and that a distracted marine is a very bad thing. Or maybe she doesn't know, or just doesn't care. Maybe after twelve years she can live without me just fine.

I don't need this shit muddling my brain.

AUDIO LOG 6

[Opens with the roaring ATRV engines and occasional chatter between the marines and doctors.]

ADAMS: [Sings an unidentified country song, her voice shaking from the bumpy ride.]

WARREN: "We read you, Inferno Team. Go ahead. Over."

CHIEF: "We've descended the mountain on the morning of Day Four, after the last trace of death head migration was off our radar. Now heading northwest to the slough. Over."

[Whirring wheels and squealing Adams as Hobbes goes briefly airborne, then touches ground again with a rough thud.]

ADAMS: "I think I like Olsen's driving better, Chief!"

CHIEF: "Try to avoid the Dukes o' Hazzard Stunt Course route from now on, Doc."

OLSEN: [laughing] "Sorry, Chief."

CHIEF: "Crazy-ass viking."

[Adams resumes singing.]

WARREN: "Drive safe, Inferno Team. Check in again when you reach the slough. Out."

TEXT LOG 4

Taking five to rest. Everyone's a little shaken after our last encounter.

IPS can track the energy signature of a death head, which is why it can tell us whenever they're in our vicinity. It can't do the same for *fleshy* hellspawn types. A herd of bulldogs, for example.

We were traveling single-file with Hobbes in front. The rovers clock in at 80 mph so we were making good time when we came to the hill. Hobbes went right up the hill with no trouble, and came down the other side...right in the midst of fifty bulldogs, if I had to hazard a guess. Adams and I immediately opened up on them, parting the herd like Moses. Calvin came through behind us as it started to close up again -- came out of the herd with three bulldogs clinging to the rear fender and the other forty-seven hot on its tail, snarling and slaving.

Bastards were only half as fast as the rovers, but the terrain got disagreeable at that point: we'd get about a block ahead of the stampede, then they were drooling on our tires again as we slowed down to make a turn or dodge around a fallen tree, or else risk rolling the rovers. A pack of shit-imps must've spotted us from the top of the hills because now and then starbursts would sail over our heads or explode against the chassis. I sighted one long enough to put a trilogy of lead into one of its arteries, but the rest vanished too quick.

Then over my right shoulder came a bang so loud I could feel it shove the rover as if hurrying us along; looked behind us just in time to see a rainstorm of demon giblets and a black mushroom cloud rising into the air. In Calvin's backseat I saw Ellison loading the RPG-7 with another rocket. The herd was down to about thirty strong and a couple of them were starting to wise up, turn tail and run. The second rocket scattered the herd long enough for us to put three blocks between us and them.

Naturally that's when we came to the steep incline and fucked ourselves.

Hobbes went down at an angle, skidding down the hill in a dust storm of ash-colored soil; we hit the bottom sideways and rolled. I may have blacked out, and my lungs had collapsed and left me coughing, my nostrils choked with a soiled ash scent. Olsen was conscious but in shock, staring

at the steering wheel. Took me what felt like an hour to realize Hobbes was lying on its side (my side specifically), and Adams and the minigun were gone. When we heard Calvin's engine roaring down the incline and the snarling herd not far behind it, me and Olsen both scrambled to unfasten our belts. I'd expected Olsen to be whining or trembling, but he's fit and tough for an egghead -- he bounded out of that rover as if he rolled them all the time back home.

I know what happened next, but the order of events is foggy. I remember Calvin landed better than we did (on all fours, ironically *unlike* the one we'd named after the cat), and Parker expertly skidded into a J-turn behind the crashed Hobbes. I remember Ellison helping me and Olsen to upright Hobbes as fast as we could, soiling our envirosuits with terror as the herd's snarls grew deafening.

I remember spotting the minigun turret half-buried in a pile of ash gravel twenty-five feet away, with the barrels pointing toward the direction of the herd, which we could still hear but didn't yet see.

I remember watching Adams -- on her back about fifteen feet from the turret -- wrestle with a stray bulldog that had approached us from behind, before drawing her sidearm and putting four bullets in its throat.

I remember seeing Borg jump out of Calvin with the BFG 9000 in his arms -- damned thing looks like an M60 machine gun with a white air conditioning unit in place of the barrel, covered in vents and glowing green on the inside like a fancy computer tower. I remember wondering how it could be a real weapon and not a prop made by somebody's kids, even after having used one myself. I remember wondering how Borg could configure it with inhumanly steady hands while mine were already shaking so badly that a revolver reload was out of the question.

Borg's the best man I ever served with. The thought of losing him turns my stomach sideways. He seemed disappointed when I ordered him to hand over the weapon and move the team behind the blast zone. The herd was just coming over the top of the incline when I locked the BFG's gyro-mount arm over my right shoulder and switched it from "pulse" to "overdrive."

I took three paces back from the base of the incline and waited for the rovers to get about a block away; waited for the first row of the bulldog legion to touch down at my level before I squeezed the trigger.

They got two steps closer while the weapon hummed, building up its charge and marking every human-sized target in its line of sight. Then it sneezed out a small green supernova that vaporized the bulldog immediately in front of me -- blasting it to a ghastly cloud of red vapor -- before branching out into a forty-tentacled electric horror. The tendrils thrashed into the herd's ranks and deep-fried any living thing they touched like I'd just opened the Arc of the Covenant on them. Most of the dumb animals were reduced to blackened, crumbling husks before their comrades realized what'd happened; by the time they did, there was only seven of them left standing.

I chucked the BFG and finished six of them with my bear killer -- loaded with magnum hollow points that didn't leave much of their skulls behind. The last one scrambled back up the incline and just made it to the top before Borg chopped it down with his ACR.

No casualties on our end, though Adams is pretty banged up: she'd used her terrain-jumpers to fly clear of the rover at the last second, and came away with a dislocated left shoulder and five stitches for the gash on her forehead. The docs unloaded a stimpack on her, so she should heal up pretty quick -- at least long enough to last the rest of the mission. She'll crash hard when that shit wears off.

I scolded Doc Parker for reaching for the "berserk" pack first, almost wasting it on non-lethal injuries. Adams is energetic enough as it is.

Turret mount is a loss, but the minigun is still functional. Borg configured it for infantry use: swapped for the short barrels and a double-drum magazine. It's his now, to make up for my stealing his BFG glory.

Glory. Guess that's why the idiots back home feed me that "war hero" bullshit: all the times I put my head in the lion's mouth to keep my troops from being swallowed. My last military psychologist said I have a death wish, which is moronic: I wanna live to see my kids again more than anything. Maybe I'm always trying to do my troops a favor, knowing they got families to miss, too.

We set up camp on the edge of the slough just a few minutes ago. The rancid brown river dies off here and bleeds into a soggy spread of marshland several miles across at the skinniest point. The barbed "agony trees" are thick here, standing on their roots at about thirty feet tall, and even uglier when they got vegetation: olive green ropes of moss dangle from the boughs and into the water like jellyfish tentacles. The boughs are thick with mossy tufts: anything could be watching us from up there and we wouldn't be able to see it 'til it dropped onto our heads.

We're waiting for the IPS scan to show a larger picture of the target area before we go slogging across.

AUDIO LOG 7

PARKER: "--just rendered now. Sweet Home, this is Inferno Team. Do you read? Over."

WARREN: "Loud 'n clear, Inferno Team. Go ahead. Over."

PARKER: "Are you looking at the target area now? Over."

[Silence for ten seconds.]

PARKER: "Sweet Home, are you there?"

WARREN: "Yes, we're here. We've steered you wrong, it looks like. That area is too small and scattered to be Plutonia Labs. Possible software corruption. The eggheads are trying to fix it at present. I advise you plot a new course and not risk losing the rovers. Over."

[Background noise: ATRV engine straining itself, the tires grinding against swamp mud. Borg is yelling instructions at Olsen.]

CHIEF: "Thanks anyway, Sweet Home. Hobbes is currently stuck in the mire at the shallowest point we could find. Looks like we'll be wading across on foot. Over."

WARREN: "Negative. Alter course and head due east. Contact us again in an hour. Out."

PARKER: "Wait, Sweet Home. This can't be a glitch in the software: it's showing earth materials beyond a doubt. The pattern suggests...It *looks* like a *campsite*."

CHIEF: [scoffs] "Slim, Plutonia Labs didn't have any portable base units, and there've been no organized expeditions before us."

PARKER: "Look for yourself, Chief. That is a campsite, I'm sure of it. Or *former* campsite." [to mic] "Whether or not it's Plutonia Labs, we should investigate anyway. Over."

[Radio silence for another minute as the ATRV whines away in the background. Chief and Parker mumble to each other, Chief in affirmation.]

CHIEF: "Sweet Home, she could be right. If the outer masses are tents, they're arranged defensively. The largest mass could be an ATRV tilted at an angle. Confirm, over."

[Radio silence. Chief repeats himself; gives up after a full minute of no reply, grumbling about "bargain-bin tech." Parker's voice fades into background as she continues calling Sweet Home.]

CHIEF: [shouting] "Ellison! Adams! Bring Calvin up to the edge and hook the winch to Hobbes's rear fender."

[Two minutes of ATRV noise: Calvin adds his engine to the mix as it draws closer and idly purrs. Parker shouts for Chief from a short distance away.]

CHIEF: "Put 'im in reverse and get ready to drag Hobbes outta that muck. Wait 'til Ellison gives you the signal before you start backing up. Don't need both o' you idiots eating all our stimpacks."

ADAMS: "You can have 'em, Chief. They go straight to my hips. Aheheh."

[Parker shouts louder, her voice shaking in alarm. Ten seconds of moist boot-steps as Chief swiftly approaches her.]

PARKER: [much closer now, mumbling too low for the mic to hear]

CHIEF: "They'll find out sooner or later, whatever the problem is. Calm down and speak clearly."

PARKER: "They cut me off."

CHIEF: [silent for a moment] "Whaddaya mean?"

PARKER: "Look at the IPS!"

CHIEF: "I see the damn IPS, Slim. Fix it if it's on the fritz."

PARKER: [voice trembling] "I can't fix what isn't broken, Chief! The IPS is fine! There's just no signal! They've closed the slipgate! We have *no contact* with earth!"

[Ellison shouts an exclamation in the distance, and the ATRVs go silent. The background noise is filled with sloshing as the rest of the team assembles around Parker's station.]

CHIEF: "Calm down, Slim. They've been having tech issues since the start of this op. They could be doing maintenance."

PARKER: "They would've said something about a shutdown for maintenance! or told me to stand by, or *something!*"

ADAMS: "What's up, now?"

CHIEF: "Technical issues on earth. Nothing new."

ELLISON: "*We lost contact?*"

CHIEF: "That's enough. Slipgate goes offline and within seconds all o' you start acting like sniveling children!"

PARKER: "They have no reason to shut down the--!"

CHIEF: "Quiet! That's an order!"

[Everyone is silent for several moments. Someone snuffles.]

BORG: "Move forward, Chief? Or back to Hell Keep?"

CHIEF: "One thing at a time. You grunts get back to work un-stuck'ing my RV and let *us* worry about slipgate-related mishaps." [a beat] "*Move!*"

TEXT LOG 5

We're giving Sweet Home another hour to reconnect before we head out on our own, toward the "campsite." We struck our portable base and hid the rovers under a sheet of vegetation, to reduce the chances we'll be spotted from the air. The kids, and even Borg (though he seems unaware of it), jump at the slightest howl in the air now. Doc Olsen is a weird egghead: sharpening that serrated cleaning knife of his, humming some old tune to himself when he isn't telling the other marines about life in Oslo. Could be his way of calming his nerves; could be he isn't bothered at all by being on this godawful planet.

Don't much feel like talking lately, so I'll probably stick to the written log for awhile. I'm afraid if I get to talking, I'll start talking about the family, or those damned red eyes that watch me in my dreams.

Doc Parker doesn't talk much, either. She sits with her chin on her knees, staring out into the swamp with moist, foggy eyes. Nothing I say eases her mind. Could just as well have come with Sophie -- she shuts me out, too, when she's upset about the tiniest things. The eggheads take down the slipgate for maintenance and she thinks it's the end of the goddamned world.

I'll give Col. Warren an earful next time I talk to him, though. I served with him; he knows better than to leave his troops hanging with no warning. We better get some kind of hazard pay after this.

TEXT LOG 6

Still in "earth blackout." Gearing up and moving out. Everyone's carrying a few days' food and water with their standard gear, and Parker's carrying one of the sentry guns. We left the camping gear with the rovers -- we'll sleep in shifts under the crimson sky for the time being. Borg looks like an action movie hero: minigun in his hands, BFG slung over his back.

Wind isn't howling at us. Taking it as a good omen.

AUDIO LOG 8

[Opens on chaos: splashing and sloshing of swamp water and the voices of Inferno Team yelling and babbling over each other while Olsen howls and snarls in agony.]

CHIEF: "--dammit, hold him steady!"

BORG: "Gimme the bullet, Slim. Privates, quit fuckin' around and *hold* him!"

ELLISON: "He's *strong*, Sir--!"

BORG: "Bite down on this, Doc. Easy does it..."

CHIEF: "Hurry up with that goddamned shot, Slim!"

PARKER: "I'm *not* giving him a full dose! The wound isn't severe enough! It's *too dangerous!*"

CHIEF: "Maybe you got all the time in Hell to argue, but the rest of us don't! The rest of us came here to do a job, and I won't have any member of this team slowing us up! Give him the shot! That's a goddamned order!"

BORG: "Ow! Ow! Give it to him already! He's biting--!" [Borg joins Olsen's pain-wracked snarls]

PARKER: "Chief, he could go into cardiac arrest. And if not, once the withdrawal sets in--"

CHIEF: "You listen to me, Doctor: either you give him the shot or I cap him and leave him right here!"

[Parker is silent a moment, then mutters confirmation. Olsen's snarls begin to calm slightly.]

CHIEF: "Dammit, Olsen, quit hittin' my microph--"

TEXT LOG 7

I hate this planet.

Not because of the ugly, dangerous environment, or the ugly, dangerous natives, or the stench in the air that seems to grow new layers every day we spend on this horrible rock -- though none of those points help brighten my opinion of the place.

It's the "awareness" of Inferno that I hate most. I can't think of a better word for it. It watches us while we sleep. It invades our dreams, especially mine: taunting me with images of Sophie and the children. And everywhere we go, the planet always seems to know where we're going, and moves every nearby hazard right in our path. The tomato-eyes seem angrier every time I see them, like the planet is mad that it hasn't killed us yet.

Borg took point and we waded through the marsh single-file, again with the docs in the middle. The shit-water of the slough came to the middle of our thighs at the shallowest, and the red mist in the air tinted it to look like fresh blood. We waded for an hour before we found ourselves in the heart of the marshland, where the trees were so numerous and so dense (some of them twisted obscenely together like nightmarish dancers) that they formed a sort of maze curtained with dangling vines. Borg had to cut a path through the vines with his machete in several areas;

even then, between the vines, the red mist, and the dim light due to the thickness of the boughs overhead, it was easy to get lost. The vines seemed to grow back the minute we turned away.

Several whispered arguments were had over which direction we were headed -- everyone thought they recognized a helpful landmark that proved them right. Borg finally started hacking roman numerals into the tree trunks, and that helped us get back on track, but we lost a half-hour walking in circles.

The only sounds were the murmur of the blood-water as we waded to our destination, and the usual howls from far away. Ghostly jungle sounds echoed in the back of my mind -- chirps and caws of birds, buzzes and clicks of bugs, rustling in the trees overhead -- as if to correct the dead calmness of the slough. *Jungles and swamps don't sound like this. They're teeming with life. Filthy with it. Obscene with it. There's no life here.* I'm not sure why it bothered me so much, to the point where my heart was kicking me in the throat and the chatter of dead soldiers from old earth battles faded in and out of the air -- guys I'd fought with in proper jungles and proper swamps not filled with blood-red mist. My brain was trying to configure unnatural things to make them more natural and it just made it harder for me to breathe. Stupid thing to panic about. Perfect time to panic about it.

Borg stopped and held up his hand with a clenched fist. Everyone halted and waited quietly while my sergeant stared out into the marsh, at the shotgun scatter of trees ahead of us. He stood perfectly still, staring, for about a minute. We did the same.

Finally I moved up to the front of the line and asked what the trouble was.

"Chatter," he said. "Straight ahead."

"Human?" I said, damning my voice for shaking slightly.

Borg said he wasn't sure, but it was dead ahead and moving toward us. The marsh before us was as lifeless as ever, but there were ripples in the water less than fifty yards ahead -- the extra-damp air thickened the mist into a solid red wall beyond that point, so we couldn't make out what the disturbance was.

I ordered everyone to disperse in threes, seal their helmets, and get eye-deep in the water under the tree clusters northeast and northwest of where Borg stood -- the clusters were fifteen feet apart and draped enough in vines to conceal our heads completely. The envirosuits were air-tight once sealed, and allowed us to talk freely via radio band without being heard.

Ellison and Olsen were with me at the left tree cluster; Borg took the girls to the right cluster. Everyone was in position and submerged within ten seconds. Another twelve seconds passed before the shapes materialized in the distance.

The green, burning eye sockets appeared in the mist first; one pair, then three, then five by the time the first two were close enough to identify as former humans armed with Winchester shotguns, their envirosuit helmets off, their mouths and breastplates smeared brown-red with old

blood, probably from the last people they'd cannibalized. They were scanning the marsh as they approached us in a disorganized group -- Borg observed that the two on the outside were armed with ACRs.

Parker chimed in: "Sergeant, I thought you said former humans were only stationed at stolen human settlements."

"Well, these ones aren't," I said. "The ACRs are top priority: they'll shred us at this distance. The shotguns won't be a problem if we keep outta close range."

The shotgunners were moving at a sluggish pace: their path was taking them between our tree clusters. The ACR zombies were breaking off from the squad and spreading out, falling behind the shotgunners by five paces and circling around our hiding places, unwittingly flanking us.

If any one of them noticed us, we'd have nowhere to go for cover -- they'd cut us all to ribbons.

I had trouble talking for a moment, trying to force words out of a dry, narrow throat. "Senior marines take the ACRs quietly after they pass. Then I'll give the word for the kids to drop the three duck-hunters. Give Ellison the minigun. Drop 'em before they turn around."

Borg muttered a curse, probably because he's been itching to use the big guns himself since Day One. I shouldered my ACR and got my combat knife ready, moving slowly and gator-like to the outside of my cluster until I saw my ACR zombie, slogging in my general direction thirty feet away. In life he'd been a jarhead of Ellison's age: twenty-odd years, white, broad-shouldered, wide jowls. "Martel" branded on his breastplate. I made a note to look him up when we get back to earth, after I finish shining my boots on Col. Warren's asshole.

Twenty feet away he reminded me of the young guys whose chatter I kept hearing in the air -- my war memories leaking out of my head. My throat closed tight and cut all the air off.

Ten feet away -- and that's as close as he ever came -- I got a good look at his profile and remembered an enemy soldier with similar nose and lips, roughly the same age. I'd killed him the same way in a slightly drier climate. I remembered how he'd shuddered and whimpered as he died in my arms, covering me in the smell of his shit.

"Tango down," said Borg. Hadn't heard anything before that apart from the zombies sloshing past -- the first ACR zombie was down and nobody missed him.

My zombie had passed me by three paces. I tried to slither out of my hiding place, to position myself behind him.

My brain sent all the commands, but nothing moved. I just stared at the demon as it walked further away, now fifteen feet, still alive, still fully armed. I was vaguely aware that someone, maybe Olsen, was speaking to me on the radio. It did jack shit: my every muscle was made of concrete. I was a useless statue squatting in the murk, wishing to god my dead squad mates would stop talking to me from the past.

The shotgunners had halted and were chattering in demon-gibberish. They must've finally noticed the water wasn't as calm as it ought to be. Stupid easy kills, all of them, and I was blowing our chance at surprise.

A helmet drifted out from somewhere behind me, making a b-line for my quarry. Doc Olsen -- spent his goddamned childhood catching and killing game in the woods -- rose out of the water behind the ACR zombie without making a sound, his serrated cleaning knife in his right hand.

But he's a hunter, not a marine. He grabbed him sloppy. There was a grunt, and loud sloshing, and then the shotgunners were spinning around with their barrels up as they spread apart from each other.

The slough erupted into a flashing, banging rave as Borg, Ellison and Adams opened fire on the shotgunners. I saw one jitter and go down in the corner of my eye while the other two scattered. Olsen's zombie had dropped his ACR and broken away from him: he was spinning around with his sidearm in his hand and Olsen's knife buried in his gouting neck, gurgling furious demon gibberish at him. My muscles only started working again after the sonofabitch put two slugs in Olsen's gut. Then I sprung out from the vines like a monkey, bringing my blazing ARC up and cutting a bloody line across the zombie's chest. He fired two more shots into the water before he collapsed.

Sloppy fucking burnout, that's what I am. My eyes went to the staggering, bleeding Olsen and not where they should've gone: to the bogey ahead of me, next to the tree, who put a buckshot wad square into my breastplate and knocked me back against a cheese-grater tree trunk -- didn't penetrate, but felt like I'd been kicked by a mule.

He'd accidentally saved me from the floater that'd come through the treetops over my head, which was now bobbing for humans in the mire within kicking distance in front of me. Up close it was a six-foot-wide ball of blood-red cauliflower. Never let one get that close before. I staggered backward around the tree as the floater flopped around in the water, biting stupidly at nothing. Dropped my ACR, drew my sidearm and put the tree between me and the shotgunner who was still firing at me, peppering the trunk with buckshot. I put three baseball-sized holes in the floater's side, and two more through its face when it rolled over to hiss at me.

The shotgunner was reloading when an invisible chainsaw ate through his cover and perforated his torso -- Ellison putting the minigun to work. When the zombie staggered into the open I removed his head with the last of my hollow points, leaving only the bottom jaw behind. Hands shook too badly for a reload, so I holstered it and fished my ACR out of the murk and reloaded it.

Olsen was leaning against a tree, bleeding badly from his midsection. I shouted for Parker to help him and two more goddamned floaters responded, descending from above the trees -- the second one grinned right at me, and a face-full of lead didn't stop it from yawning wide and spitting a bolt of lightning over my head, blowing the tree closest to me in half. Parker narrowly dragged Olsen out of the trunk's path as its toppled and crashed into the water. Two more bursts

from the minigun painted the surrounding trees in purple floater guts. Ellison's aim had improved damned fast.

We gathered around Olsen with our sights pointed skyward, watching the shadows dancing in the tree boughs -- we got a rare glimpse of a floater's bloated body hovering past the gaps in the treetops, but couldn't determine their numbers. Parker stabilize Olsen enough to move him, but he was already dead-pale from blood loss and groaning in agony as his endorphins wore off.

They always remove the bullets in the movies. That's because Hollywood writers are morons who want their heroes to bleed to death.

I don't remember how long we waited for the shadows to stop moving up there. The damn bloated things are so quiet, unlike the death heads -- if we hadn't seen their dead green doll-eyes peeking down through the boughs for a glimpse of us, we wouldn't know they were there at all. Necessity soon demanded we risk moving forward, floaters or no, with Parker and Ellison acting as Olsen's crutches.

It got to be too much for him, and we were making terrible time with him slowing us down, so we had to stop again and stitch him up on the spot. I ordered him a "berserk" shot to speed up his healing -- full dose, against Doc Parker's protests. Thirty minutes later the bleeding stopped, and he'd healed enough to keep up with us.

Once we were on dry land and at least a mile away from the scene of the skirmish, we looked back and saw a crimson tornado slowly forming above the slough, towering over a mile into the bloody sky. It funneled down through the trees and into the general area where we'd fought the former humans, but somehow didn't uproot the trees -- it barely made them sway, in fact. I'll never forget the sight of that godawful storm for as long as I live, and all because I was stupid enough to use the rangefinder to get a closer look at it.

Red floater-demons tend to resemble a tornado when they number in the trillions, and circle a food source like buzzards.

We traveled until we couldn't see any trace of the "storm." We're now parked on a hill with a scenic view of an ugly canyon instead. It's quiet here, and it's dry. Doc Parker says (if memory serves) our mystery campsite is just over the mountain northwest of us.

Parker isn't speaking to me at all at this point, on account of my "berserk" stimulant prescription, but given a choice of "dead" and "crazy," Olsen seems satisfied with "crazy." He's a bundle of energy now: laughs at nothing in particular and can't seem to sit still for three seconds. Exaggerates his every movement and gesture to burn it off. He ate like a horse tonight, and our rations won't support his new calorie intake. But he promises to cook up some demon steak for us later. He's earned an extra helping at dinner anyhow. Being a soldier when I couldn't.

UPDATE: Borg asked about my freeze-up. I was dodgy answering. I don't know what to say to him. Olsen won't spill a word of it to anyone -- claims he doesn't remember what happened. Then he gives me this knowing look when the subject changes.

UPDATE 2: Now Adams claims to have seen the Doomed Marine, watching us with a viewfinder from a mountaintop. If it's true, why's the asshole so shy?

AUDIO LOG 9

[Opens to occasional crunching of boots on soil, Ellison and Borg muttering to each other too far away for the mic to pick up. Adams sings halfheartedly to herself somewhere nearby.]

OLSEN: [breathing unsteadily, voice shaking slightly] "--few weeks old, I would guess."

CHIEF: "Date's the same as ours."

OLSEN: "Ah...yeah, yeah it is. From the same batch, no doubt."

CHIEF: "It's just damned weird...You feeling all right, Doc?"

OLSEN: [giddy sigh, clears throat] "Ah...I don't know yet. Might just be crashing finally. Feel wiped."

[Clink of a tin can bouncing down a mountainside. Two dull pats, likely Chief's hand on Olsen's shoulder. Boots crunching for several seconds as Chief approaches Borg and Ellison, who stop talking just as they're close enough to the mic to hear.]

CHIEF: "Anything?"

BORG: [exasperated sigh] "Yeah, we got the serial number. In fact, we got whatever we need to confirm whose rover this is, and when it was sent here, and why...but unless Sweet Home gets in touch with us again, I dunno who we're gonna ask."

CHIEF: [bitter laugh] "Maybe our Doomed Marine knows. Ask him in sign language next time one o' you catches him spying on us."

ELLISON: "It's been stripped bare, Chief. Could maybe borrow some parts from our rovers and carry 'em back here. Then me 'n Adams could get this crate moving again in an hour or two."

CHIEF: "Not if that demon tornado is still there. I'll think it over. Everyone get some rest in the meantime. We got some nice shade here anyway."

PARKER: "Adams and Ellison might be right, Chief. The 'Marine must've left this stuff for us."

CHIEF: "If that loon was still alive, he'd have made contact with us. He'd team up with us and help accomplish our mission. He'd do more than leave us Secret Santa packages, I know *that* much." [silence as no one argues] "Slim, see what you can do for Olsen."

TEXT LOG 8

Four tents: two shredded to bits, two sliced open but usable, all four browned with old bloodstains. The ATRV was stripped for parts, including the battery. No bodies anywhere. In contrast to the devastation, a neat bundle of rations, water, medical supplies, and two bed rolls was waiting for us right in the middle of the campsite -- the general consensus is that they're courtesy of the Doomed Marine. Don't know if he's the one who looted the camp, but whatever wiped it out won't be coming back. Nothing to come back for.

The camp ruins sit on a cliff extending off the side of an ash-black mountain. A tripod (for what, I don't know) is perched on the cliff edge; over the edge there's a long, steep incline littered with empty ration cans and a few water bottles, with a house-sized blood-red pond at the very bottom. The view is about as pleasant as it gets around here: black mesas tower on the horizon, shrouded in the red mist I've grown accustomed to.

There's nothing here to indicate who this camp belonged to or what they were doing here. The expiration date on the cans is the same as ours; the scraps inside rock-hard, several weeks stale.

Whoever camped here was an organized military team. It's a Marine Corps portable base. The ATRV is Marine Corps issue. And they came here before us -- before Inferno Team, officially recognized as the first organized military insertion into Inferno -- and not after, as a support unit.

Why tell us we're the first? And how many others came in before us? Was our "care package" assembled from this camp's supplies, or from *another* camp?

And what the hell were they doing here?

TEXT LOG 9

I still haven't talked to anyone about the presence haunting my dreams. I'm worried they'll think I'm cracking. Hierarchy will collapse if I can't hold the team's confidence, and any amount of disorder will get somebody killed, like it almost did Olsen. I just wish I could tell if the visions are Inferno's doing, or if I'm going Section 8.

I saw Sophie writhing around inside Borg's bed roll like a snake, licking his face and grinding her haunches against him while she moaned and panted. I was awake when I saw it. I'm not sure how long I watched, but it scared Borg when he woke suddenly and asked me if I needed something.

Sophie was still there, writhing on top of him, when I told him no. He didn't seem to notice.

I'm relieved to find that the others might be having similar dreams. They have sleepless bags under their eyes and I catch them talking about their home lives now -- all of a sudden it's a topic of interest for everyone. Olsen's hunting trips in Norway. The bartender Borg's been meaning to propose to for twenty years. Parker's four sisters, for whom she's the mediator and therapist -- on earth she gets neurotic phonecalls from them every day, about a minute apart, usually about how one of the other three is interfering with the caller's personal life. Ellison talks about his nephew, who's like a little brother to him. Adams hasn't called her dad in ten years, and they fight whenever she does. Both the kids talk about whatever dumbasses they were banging back home; I'm damned certain those two are fucking like rabbits whenever it's someone else's watch. I know for fact I saw Adams sneak into Ellison's tent last time I relieved her. Don't know what's gotten into them.

I don't talk. I talked a little the last time Parker tried to get me to open up, but I was short with her. She asked if it was something she'd said that had offended me, and started apologizing for getting so cross with me over my decisions as team captain.

"You remind me of someone I'd rather not think about right now," was all I said to her. She seemed to get the message.

Ellison called me off my watch so I could sleep. I'm afraid to close my eyes. What I see when I'm awake is bad enough. I spent my entire shift watching the blood pond at the bottom of the cliff: watching Toni, Wesley, and Zach splashing each other, squealing and giggling. They were all impossibly the same age, and I didn't care. Hell's legions could've marched into our camp and I wouldn't have noticed.

Still no response from earth. IPS is still a glorified paperweight.

TEXT LOG 10

No more berserk shots from now on. I shoulda capped Olsen in the slough and left him.

We've been resting for two days. Every hour Olsen seemed to get worse: he'd stripped off his envirosuit at one point and walked around the camp in undershirt and boxers (damned sure Adams has been fucking his hyperactive ass, too), kept scratching his neck where Doc Parker had given him the shot 'til the skin was raw. Moaned constantly and shook like a junky, whimpering about needing another shot. When he wasn't begging for another shot he was pacing endlessly, or sitting on the edge of the cliff, staring at nothing, panting like a dog.

Whined that his wound was opening again; that he was dying. Parker kept telling him another shot could kill him, and that he was just feeling the withdrawal symptoms. He'd be back to normal in a few days. We all try to be civil and patient with him: they call it "berserk" for a lot of reasons, mostly because it leaves the user with the strength of an ox and the temper of a box of dynamite.

Olsen's already worryingly big, fit, and nutty for an egghead without super-steroids being a factor. Parker says he'll be fine in a couple more days. I can't wait that long.

TEXT LOG 11

Losing my temper with everyone today.

I argued with Sophie about putting her on radio / IPS duty, to try and re-establish contact with earth. She refused her orders and opted instead to argue the futility of it. She insists Sweet Home deliberately cut us off when we found the campsite, but she can't give any logical reason why they wouldn't want it found. Said I should get my head out of the sand. Lost my cool and slapped her, almost bowled her over.

Tired of the bitch challenging my every order. Naysaying and pessimism won't get us off this planet, and it sure as hell won't accomplish the job we came here to do. Focusing on the mission will keep our minds occupied. I feel like I'm the only one who believes this.

Borg's been worried about my neurotic tics, and about how I treated Doc Parker. Said I've had to make a lot of tough decisions in a short time, and offered to take command of the team for awhile so I can get some rest. I don't know if it was the polite suggestion that I be relieved of command, or the memory of him sleeping with my wife the previous day like it was nothing, but I was short with him. Had to have some private conferences to patch things up with my sergeant and my new chief science officer (now that Olsen is a jittery freak who seems to want to kill or fuck anything and everything).

I made it clear to Borg how much I depend on him as my right hand, and my voice of reason. Said that I would continue leading the team for now, but that if it comes to it, there's nobody I'd rather have in charge than him.

Sophie knows I'm sorry for hitting her, but she won't be speaking to me for the rest of the day. Guess I don't blame her.

TEXT LOG 12

Managed to make Parker laugh a little this morning. She's slowly getting talkative again, but she won't tell me what she and Olsen were quietly arguing about earlier. Thought he might've stolen the other berserk shots, because the pack was empty. Parker said she'd put them somewhere safe, where Olsen couldn't get at them.

She didn't make eye contact when she said it.

I understand those two have been part of the same science team at Outpost Two for five years. That makes them bosom nerd buddies, so I wouldn't put it past Parker to dote on him when he's sick.

Went to the mountaintop with the rangefinder and did some terrain scouting. Further north there's a structure just visible through the mist, much larger than Hell Keep. Could be Plutonia Labs. We're going to discuss whether to backtrack for the rest of our supplies, maybe try to Jerry-rig the dead ATRV; or move ahead on foot with what we have.

UPDATE: Olsen energetic again. That Parker bitch is hopeless.

AUDIO LOG 10

[Periodic crunching boots, metallic sounds of firearms being locked and loaded. Parker and Adams talk in the background.]

ADAMS: "--joint's been givin' me hell all day..."

PARKER: "That should reduce the swelling in a few minutes. You'll be fine 'til we meet up again."

ADAMS: "Thanks, Doc."

CHIEF: [aside] "Leave me the BFG and a few cells. That'll be enough to stop anything I meet. You all have your orders, so move out when ready." [to mic] "We're preparing an assault on the northern compound sighted from the mountaintop. The southern skies are calm and clear -- or as clear as they're gonna get -- so Borg and the kids are backtracking to collect what we need from the rovers. I'm scouting ahead with the docs to get a better look at the compound. We all meet back at the camp in six hours."

BORG: [distant muttering] "--finally get to *shoot* a heavy weapon this time. The *docs* will get to shoot the big guns before *I* do, just you wait 'n see..."

[Rustling and grinding of boots on the ground. A few more muttered words, then footsteps as Ellison and Adams move away, their voices fading as they chatter tenderly. Borg and Chief wish each other luck.]

TEXT LOG 13

Five fucking minutes. That's how long I was away from them.

We'd come to a small mountain range a good long ways from the compound and stopped for a brief rest on the side of the tallest mountain, on account of Olsen's griping (I think he's playing it up, now that he knows Parker will help him). I'd gone up to the mountaintop to use the rangefinder again and check for bogeys in the area. Partly I just didn't want to listen to the junky beg again.

I came back down at Parker's first scream and found a red-faced Olsen pinning her to the dirt, veins bulging out of his neck, trying to tear her out of her envirosuit and threatening to fuck her to death. I guess she'd finally said 'no.'

He was too fast with all that junk in his system: locked his hand around Parker's throat the moment he saw me approach, a split-second before I had my revolver pointed at his face.

I told him to let her go and back away. "I just want a shot," he sort of laughed, like it was all innocent fun.

"I'll give you one right now," I said. "Right between the fuckin' eyes if you don't let her go." I'd stopped about two full paces away from him. I wouldn't miss.

"I'll rip her throat out if you do, Chief. Think about it."

Parker choked out, "Don't you *dare* kill him! He's not himself! I *told* you not to give him a full dose!"

"And you been giving him little ones behind my back. But it's still all *my* fault, isn't that right?"

Parker didn't reply.

Olsen and me stared at each other for a long time, not moving a muscle. His hand tightened on Parker's throat so her voice came out in tiny chirps. "Please don't kill him. He's my friend."

Finally I told him: "Here's how this'll go, Olsen. You have five seconds. If you let her go before five, you have my word as an officer that I won't kill you. Then Slim can give you something to ease your pain a little."

I got to four before he released her. He let her crawl out from under him, still giving me that odd, childish smile.

I planted my boot in his face and sent him rolling down the mountain.

Parker had just stared imminent rape and death in the face. So what did she do? She cursed me for a neanderthal, and then slid down the mountain after her colleague. I walked to the edge and saw her mollycoddling him while he laid in a fetal position, hands over his face, entire body shaking with sobs. He mewled apologies endlessly to no one in particular. Couldn't hear what she was saying to him.

We still had several miles to go before I could scout the compound in person -- in the rangefinder it always appeared deserted. I told Parker I was moving on, and she could either tag along with the guy who'd protect her, or take her chances with the wild man. I walked alone for a while, with only her angry curses as company. But a half-hour later I looked back and saw her angrily following my trail, wiping furious tears from her eyes.

"You give him the shot?" I asked when she finally caught up.

"No," she said flatly.

We haven't spoken since.

TEXT LOG 14

Closet. Jade marble closet. No light.

Walls embroidered with skull designs.

No light but for the PDA screen. One wall white metal. Must be the door. No way to open from this side. No knobs or hinges or anything.

Thought I heard Borg shrieking somewhere in the distance, but it couldn't be Borg. Most fearless marine I ever knew. It's beyond him to scream like that.

Fucked up this time. Didn't think they saw me, but I got too close. Goddamned zombie patrol found me. I jumped one and wrestled for his weapon. Tried to be quiet. Clumsy and stupid is all I am. Broke his neck, but by then I was prone with the dead sumbitch on top of me, and six more bastards surrounding me, shouting gibberish at me with their guns in my face. Didn't fight or try to flee or anything. Too dizzy with jungle battles and deafening sounds of screaming, dying squad-mates. I laid there with my hands out, howling like a baby.

Zombie gibberish outside my door. I know the voice.

Ellison talking demon-speak. He'd been screaming, too, before Borg.

They took my guns and dragged me inside, through I don't know how many winding mazes of slime-green corridors and wood-paneled ossuaries overflowing with inhuman skulls, to a room with pulsating flesh-pillars rising out of the ground and walls lined with bloody human remains stuck on pikes. They ttook sme tto sss

the lord of the house is the devil himself

sneering goat-face and all

his hands burned so hot and they touched my head and squeezed and burned and i just started crying and wailing like an infant. he showed me the labs, crawling with gibbering former humans. they worshiped the flabby thing that lorded over them, that colossal quivering mound of lard, lounging caesar-like on a throne of steel. it flailed and squealed at the workers with short dinosaur talons. then it looked at me and it seemed to smile with its tiny face and i saw the eyes, those goddamned red serpent eyes from my dreams, and its droning laugh rattled the walls of my skull and i woke up in here, in the dark, alone.

gonna die a useless burnout in a tiny cell in some forgotten corner of hell

my kids will never know what happened to daddy

AUDIO LOG 11

[Air is filled with a constant droning, almost like a chant -- either the wind howling through the halls or some unnatural presence inside the compound. Every few moments something screeches or howls in the distance. Crackling of wall-torches is faintly noticeable at many points as Chief passes them. Chief and Parker are panting as if from a vigorous run.]

PARKER: "Here!"

CHIEF: "You sure?"

PARKER: "Yes!"

[Their feet clomp on marble floor tiles as they swiftly walk. There's a loud screech, and a shout of alarm from Parker. Chief shouts for her to "get the fuck down" -- a rough thud, possibly Parker falling down from being shoved -- then the rapid zapping of the BFG on pulse mode firing a salvo of energy bolts. The screech weakly fades, and all is silent except for the droning for half a minute.]

CHIEF: [weakly] "Jesus Christ..."

PARKER: "Don't look at them."

CHIEF: "Are they all eggheads? What the fuck have they been *doing* to them...?"

PARKER: "He's here, Chief. Come see."

[Footsteps on marble for a minute as Chief draws slowly closer to someone weakly wheezing.]

PARKER: "Are you recording?"

CHIEF: "Yes, goddammit!"

PARKER: "Doctor? It's me again."

[The wheezing voice laughs weakly, mumbles something unintelligible.]

CHIEF: [horrified, awestruck] "How's he still alive without his...?"

PARKER: "Tell Chief who you are, for the record."

[Wheezing voice is barely intelligible: laughs and identifies itself as "Ambassador Mohrig."]

PARKER: "You're Dr. Thomas Mohrig?"

MOHRIG: [struggles to speak] "Yes...chief engineer of...Plutonia Labs...UAC space research..."

PARKER: "Let's get you down from there. Chief, help me remove these stakes."

MOHRIG: "Don't...There's no point...She never lets me go..." [laughs] "I'm her nightly reading..."

CHIEF: "Doctor--"

MOHRIG: "P-Punishes me if I resist..." [half-sobs] "'Be good for Mommy or she'll take another piece away...!' She'll take my tongue next, for talking to you...My only release is death. She won't kill me, and She Herself can't be killed...She is *everywhere* these days..."

CHIEF: "We can 'release' you right now, if you tell us where to find Plutonia Labs. Just give us a dir--"

PARKER: "Dr. Mohrig, you were officially declared dead on earth. There was no record of a return trip to Inferno."

[Mohrig laughs weakly, starts coughing.]

PARKER: "Dr. Mohrig, please! How did you get here? How did these other engineers come to Inferno?"

MOHRIG: "How...did *you* get here?"

PARKER: "We were deployed on a military operation."

MOHRIG: [amused half-laugh, half-cough] "You were *delivered*. Not deployed. First Class, no less..."

PARKER: "I don't unders--"

CHIEF: "Nevermind how *anybody* got here. How do we get to Plutonia Labs? We were sent for the quantum accelerator."

[Mohrig laughs harder, goes into a wet coughing fit.]

PARKER: "Dr. Mohrig, please explain--!"

CHIEF: [aside] "Sophie, shuddup! It doesn't matter!"

MOHRIG: [chuckles] "For what it's worth, Chief...the 'Lab doesn't matter, either."

CHIEF: "It matters to me. The accelerator is the only reason I'm here."

MOHRIG: [painful laughing as he speaks] "*I'm* the only reason you're here! You *have* no assignment! You're just one tiny part of *my* assignment!"

[Mohrig pants, exhausted from trying to speak too much.]

MOHRIG: [dreamily] "Such a fine idea at the time, but ohh, they didn't *tell* brilliant, trusting Dr. Mohrig about the treaty details...So here I am, basking in my reward for forging the pact, obedient corporate slave that I am..." [laughs weakly] "She shares such petty things in return, like the Conquistadors did the Indians. We're so easily amused by useless cosmic wonders... Such a doomed, stupid little race are we..."

CHIEF: "This is a waste of time."

PARKER: [aghast] "Are...? You're talking about a *trade*?"

CHIEF: "He's a babbling lunatic and he's useless. Let's go."

MOHRIG: "The 'Labs are somewhere north of here, in the ash dunes....That's where She hoards Her presents like a greedy human child." [coughing] "Two to my temple should do the trick...if you don't mind..."

CHIEF: "I'll do you one, better, Doc."

TEXT LOG 14

It's been a few days since I've had the courage to revisit the pandemonium back at the demon compound.

The gunfire was what woke me. Just a few shots, then silence. Something in the distance howled what might've been Borg again.

Groan of one cell door opening, then another. Heavy, deranged panting getting louder.

My door opened, blinding me for a minute as the light assaulted my eyes. When they adjusted, the blurry silhouette in the doorway morphed into Doc Olsen. His hands and his chin were coated with fresh blood. Whatever he'd killed, he'd eaten it, too. His face was drenched in sweat and his eyes were dilated and glassy -- he was high as a kite, liquid rage rushing through his veins from the shot the bitch had left for him.

He gave me that weird smile of his as he recognized me. I smiled back.

I felt the heel of his boot in my face before I blacked out again.

Woke to the stench of blood the second time I came around. Woke up gagging on it. Head swimming from a concussion. Then details flooded me all at once in no particular order.

My cell door was still open. A human heart was sitting in my lap. It wasn't mine. My envirosuit was painted in blood. The bulldog was shoving its way through the cell door and drooling on my boots.

I grabbed its horns when it lunged on me and wrapped my legs around its neck, squeezing my thighs like a vice and straining to steer its snapping bear-trap jaws out of my face. We might've wrestled for an hour. Eventually its thrashing became sluggish, and then stopped altogether.

I shoved it off of me and bounded out of the cell so fast I smashed into the wall across the corridor and tripped over the zombie corpse Olsen had left behind -- a gaping bloody chasm in the middle of its chest, its throat yawning wide where the doctor had ripped out his Adam's apple.

He'd been sporting, the cheeky viking: left the zombie's sidearm and spare mags. First thing I did was check that it was loaded, chamber a round, and unload that round into the unconscious bulldog's skull.

I thought only my memory of the compound was an incoherent mess, but the place was actually *built* that way. Every twisting hallway or staircase led to an ugly green-tiled or wood-paneled room, which connected to several more twisting hallways or staircases, which either led back the way I came or to more rooms with more halls and staircases. And every room had lesser demons lounging or snacking in the shadows. It'd been designed with childhood nightmares in mind: those hideous dreamscapes where every turn is a wrong turn, and the monsters always know where you are, and you can't get away from them because you keep going in circles.

Gunshots again, and panicked screaming. The halls made following them a dizzy nightmare. I met a former human toting a shotgun and squeezed off two shots, nailing him in the forehead. Looted the corpse, but he didn't have any shells on him except however many were in the gun.

After another minute's bumbling in circles, I rounded a corner and nearly caught a shit-imp fireball square in the chest from the opposite end of a dark, green-marble hallway lined with deep alcoves. Three shit-imps were at the far end, popping in and out of view to screech or beat

their chests. Halfway up the hallway, Parker was leaning out of one alcove to take potshots at them, missing every time -- her hands were trembling uselessly and reducing her shooting to plug-and-pray. The imps were taunting her, not committed to taking her down. That would change once she ran out of ammo: then they would eat her live flesh while she squirmed in burning agony.

Behind her, creeping along her side of the corridor where she couldn't see, was an ACR-toting former human. It was three steps away from putting the barrel to her head and painting the wall with her face.

I swept into the hallway and pumped a wad of buckshot in the zombie's back: it gurgled and pitched forward onto the floor, writhing and snarling in agony. Parker leapt back and screamed again, emptying the rest of her magazine into the zombie's back while I charged down the corridor, screaming like a gorilla and unloading the shotgun at the imp posse (it had five shells, it turned out). First imp went down immediately with its face shredded. Second and third got peppered with shot and tried to flee; they died swallowing two pills each from the sidearm.

Parker was sobbing when I came back, hands to her mouth. She looked at me with tears of guilt streaming down her cheeks.

The former human that lie bleeding at our feet had Private Adams's face -- tattoo and all. The green light in the bloody eye sockets was going out.

Doc Parker said two zombies had come to her cell to drag her through the compound, but the imp posse had a snit with them -- they must've been hungry. She'd slipped away during their tussle. She'd heard Olsen's animal howls then as he joined the fight, and at that point thinking about the sounds made her convulse.

She'd stumbled across a lot of terrible things while trying to find her way around. Between us we had only two pistols, a dozen rounds, and no medical supplies, but the things she had to show me were too urgent to wait.

She showed me where they'd been planning to take her, and eventually me: a short flight of steps led up to a long, wood-paneled courtyard with a skull altar at the far end. Levitating twenty feet above the middle of the courtyard was a massive monolith of jade marble, a hideous demonic face carved into the side facing the steps. A pentagram-like symbol had been painted around the face in blood. Private Ellison -- his eyes glowing from the death head living inside him -- stood at the top of the steps on guard duty, clutching my minigun in his arms. He was watching the spectacle in the courtyard, and didn't notice our stealthy approach from the shadows.

Borg stood underneath the monolith, his wrists chained to the two red pedestals on either side of him. He was shuddering violently, spine arched back, teeth gritting in a seizure-grimace, eyes boiling in their sockets and spilling down his cheeks in gory tears. He'd be a zombie in a matter of moments. Behind him towered the goat-faced baron of the compound, eyes to the sky, hands burning with green hellfire, arms raised as if offering my sergeant to some unholy higher power.

I hadn't noticed all the shit-imps cowering reverently along the walls until *after* I blew my cover: howling a battle cry at the top of my lungs; bounding up the steps and grabbing Ellison before he could turn around; grabbing his weapon and blanketing the courtyard with hot lead while he struggled to push me away. Borg danced a bloody cha-cha all the way to the ground, along with several of the imps I hadn't been paying attention to. The minigun whined empty after only peppering the braying hell baron's mighty chest a bit.

Ellison caught two Imp fireballs for me, right in the chest and shoulders: they burst like firecrackers and singed my arm hair off. My sidearm spat two slugs into Ellison at point blank as Parker dragged me away, screaming for me to run. That damned goat-god was bleeding, but unfazed. All I'd done was piss him off -- him and the entire screeching mob of hell-monkeys that was now pouring through the halls after us.

The lard beast was angry too. I could see its tomato eyes glaring at me every time I blinked. I could feel its angry screams inside my skull, while I was already suffering lapses of dizziness from the concussion. Parker had to run alongside me to keep me from tripping over my own feet.

"This way," she kept saying. She wasn't looking for the exit like a sane person would. She said I had to see Dr. Mohrig. I didn't want a doctor. All I wanted was out, and maybe my BFG, if that wasn't too much to ask.

Sometimes prayers are answered in the form of mean-spirited jokes.

We ran through a long, narrow, white-walled, gravel-floored room that served as a checkpoint of some kind: in the middle of the room was a yawning wooden gate with stout guard towers squatting on either side, manned with angry fire-tossing shit-imps that I somehow managed to take down in spite of my dizzy haze.

I fell as we reached the gate. Parker strained to make me stand, begged me to keep moving. She was staring behind me, back the way we came: the screeches and hollers of a dozen shit-imps were getting louder.

We both froze at the new sound: slow, deliberate crunch of boots on the gravel, approaching us from the other side of the gate. I recognized the heavy, animal-like panting. I looked up and steadied my sloshing brain enough to make out Doc Olsen's curious smile twelve feet away, and the purring BFG 9000 pointing right at my head.

"Found your toy, Chief," he said with a tiny laugh, shaking the BFG in his hands.

"Thanks, Doc," I said, not moving. "I'll take it from here. Company of shit-imps right on our asses."

"I know. I can hear them." He clenched his teeth when he spoke, and his smile got mean. "I heard the ones that found me where you left me, too. They dragged me all over that mountain before I was able to take that last dose and defend myself." A giggle. "Imp tastes like overcooked duck, if you were wondering."

Nobody moved. Beyond the gate, light from outside was visible, pouring in from 'round the left corner: I noticed the shadow that suddenly blotted it out in my peripheral vision, but I kept my eyes focused on the BFG.

"Joss," said Parker.

"Yes, Michelle?" He was smiling politely at her now.

Parker swallowed and spoke louder than necessary. She saw the shadow too, and whatever the source was, it was coming around the corner. "Doctor, we all want to get out of here in one piece! Please put the weapon down!"

"We're not getting out of here," Olsen said. He started huffing more heavily as his blood pressure rose. "We were abandoned here, and we have to make the best of it! Acting civilized won't help us survive here. We have to become like the animals around us, just like in the woods. Survival of the fittest. You already know that, or you wouldn't have left me behind."

"Mission comes first," I said, trying to stand and failing. Playing up my weakness. Olsen relished it. Didn't notice the hell baron's hooves tapping on the gravel behind him -- the imps were closer now and drowning it out with their screeching.

"Please," said Parker. "They're coming! Animals or not, we'll have a better chance of survival if we work *together!*"

"What do I need you for?" he laughed, nodding to me. "He's been wanting to get rid of me since the slough."

He trained the barrel on Parker next, and she jumped. "And you're a common rat who'll do or say whatever gets you out of trouble. You're with him, now, not me. And I don't need anyone's help to survive the wilderness."

"So what're you waiting for?" I said. "Vaporize us already, if you're gonna do it."

His eyes moved erratically to the hall behind us, then back to me. "Thought I might leave you to them for a bit first."

"Do it now," I said, trying to stand again; the goat-god was three steps behind him and moving faster, its hands starting to light up the room with their glow. "But back up a few paces and make sure the blast kills me first. 'Cos if I don't go right away, I'll damn sure kill you myself!"

Olsen was looking at Parker, his smile gone. She'd given it away with her eyes before the devil's soul-nauseating presence flooded the room.

The crazy viking squeezed the trigger as he whirled around, meeting the charging goat-god face-to-face. It grabbed the weapon with one claw and forced it upward, where it discharged into the

ceiling and rained cobblestone, ash, and chunks of hell-brick down onto our heads. The baron brayed long and loud and buried its other claw into Olsen's abdomen, spilling his intestines with a flick of its wrist. At the same time Olsen was howling like a beast, himself: he dropped the BFG and buried his fingers into the monster's throat.

I leapt onto the BFG while they danced a snarling tango back and forth, painting the walls and the gravel with gouts of deep red. I turned the barrel on the hallway behind us just as the shit-imp mob came flooding out. Every one of them flew apart in crumbling hunks of charcoal as they ran toward us, nearly smothering us with the harsh smell of burnt flesh and ozone. I spun around and sent another shot through the gate as a second mob of demons started trickling through, trying to flank us. The tentacled plasma ball bowled right through them and stained the walls red with their vaporized entrails. Parker made sure to scramble behind me each time the beast hummed in my arms.

Now only echoes remained of all the screeching and snarling. To my left, the hell baron stood wobbling against the wall, its skin a sickly pink, one burning hand to its bleeding throat. The doc was sitting on his knees at its hooves, his entrails in his lap, the goat-god's esophagus in his right hand. His left arm was gone. He was staring dumbly at the floor, wheezing wetly as the junk flooded out of his system with everything else.

The hell baron fixed its glowing eyes on me and took an awkward step forward, gurgling furiously. The BFG hummed again and reduced both monsters to an ash silhouette on the wall.

The beasties avoided us for the most part after that, those few who were left. We scavenged any supplies we could (more BFG cells and our lost food most importantly). The stragglers who tried to start trouble with us were quick to leave Inferno in a cloud of ash.

We talked with Dr. Mohrig, or what was left of him. They'd cut so many pieces off it's a miracle Parker could recognize him, and staked him to a pillar in a blood-drenched room full of pillars -- each of which had its own maimed, twitching human engineer racked up on it. I think there must've been at least thirty. Mohrig was the only one who could talk, and he babbled a lot of nonsense. Did give us one useful bit of intel, though: we know where Plutonia Labs is, and the quantum accelerator. That's our next stop.

The eyes assaulted my mind when I vaporized Mohrig and the rest of the butchered engineers. They were furious. They twisted my guts until I ran out of things to puke up. They flooded my aching head with violent fantasies about my children. I can't write about it.

I won't.

When it finally stopped I was sitting on my ass, sobbing. That was hours ago. We're far, far away from that terrible place now, and not missing it one bit. Sophie treated my head and now I can think straight again, for the most part.

She won't stop arguing or crying about every little thing. How many times has she tripped me up already? Invades my thoughts every minute of the day, won't tell me who she's sleeping with

while I'm away, and that's not enough for her. Has to badger me about my every decision, like anyone else who's never had to lead a fucking company in a time of war.

AUDIO LOG 12

[Gentle wind from a mountaintop. The usual howls are more distant than before.]

CHIEF: "Mission log up--"

PARKER: "--have done something."

CHIEF: [long, tired sigh] "What do you want, Slim? An impromptu funeral service? Some of 'em don't have anything left to *bury!*"

PARKER: "We laid waste to that horrible place! We could've taken the time to do *something!* They were our *friends*, for Christ's sake!"

CHIEF: [shouting, furious] "Whaddaya think, they're *dogs* to me? You think I don't want 'em commemorated for what they went through? You think I *wanted* Olsen dead?"

PARKER: "I *know* you wanted him dead! 'I'll cap him in the head and leave him here,' remember? All because he was slowing us down!"

CHIEF: "He was crazy, Slim. If it hadn't been him, it'd have been us."

PARKER: [sobs] "I had thanksgiving dinner at his *house!*" [sobs] "He was my *friend*, you *callous piece of shit!*"

[Brief silence except for the wind and Parker's sobs.]

CHIEF: "We are in a *war zone*. We don't have *time* for funerals. We worry about that shit when we get back *home*."

PARKER: [disgusted, unintelligible]

CHIEF: "The sooner we finish our mission, the sooner we get home. Worry about funerals once we're back on earth."

PARKER: [screaming] "We're not *going* back to earth! We're the UAC's *currency!*"

CHIEF: "I've had my fill o' your whining, you little slut! When we take the 'Labs we'll contact Sweet Home from there, and tell 'em we got the accelerator!"

PARKER: "They don't *want* the accelerator! They want whatever the demons are giving them in exchange for our *lives!*"

CHIEF: "Typical Corps bullshit: gotta do everything ourselves, 'cos nobody ever has our backs!"

PARKER: "Will you *listen to me?* You're walking us into a *deathtrap!*"

CHIEF: "I'm *taking us home!*"

PARKER: "I'm *sorry* you miss your family, I *really* am, but you've got your head buried so deep in the sand that I refuse to be a part of any--!"

[Violent scraping of boots on soil and rock. Parker shrieks something unintelligible -- cut off by a single gunshot. More scraping, a heavy slump. Trickling and spattering on the rocks for a full minute like from a broken watermelon, slowly dying into a near-imperceptible drip. Chief sniffs, takes several deep, shaky breaths and says nothing for another minute.]

CHIEF: [speaks slowly, absentmindedly] "Plutonia Labs not visible with the viewfinder yet. Will know the ETA once it's in sight."

TEXT LOG 15

First good night's sleep since this operation began. Head's clear of all distractions.

I buried the last of them in the desert.

AUDIO LOG 13

[Opens in mid-conversation, with low howl of desert wind in the background. After comparison with Phobos Incident audio logs, Chief's conversation partner identified as "Sarge," the author of the Phobos Incident file.]

SARGE: [speaks in a hollow, weary voice] "--see the eyes, too, whenever I'm in its territory. It's sorta like when an airbase picks up unidentified aircraft on radar and warns the pilot to fuck off. You get used to it after awhile."

CHIEF: "So we assassinate this thing, and then what?"

SARGE: "The Mastermind uses telepathy to invade your mind. It does the same with every living thing under its control, using it as a sort of radio frequency for commanding its troops. No more Mastermind, no more orders. Legion falls into disarray, wrecks any plans it has for an

organized earth invasion. Makes the rest easy pickings for earth forces, assuming the demons don't just lose interest and start fighting each other."

[A few moments of tense silence as the two men eat from their rations.]

CHIEF: "Why didn't you meet up with us all this time? We got your care packages, but we coulda used your *help*."

SARGE: [grunts, chews in silence for awhile] "Tried that with the other teams. I became good buddies with the first team, 'til I figured out they were sacrificial gifts to the Mastermind. They couldn't believe they weren't going home: they were so deep in denial that eventually I had guns pointing at my head when I tried to convince them. One marine was an ordained minister. He got them believing I was a demon sent to lead them astray."

[Silent chewing for a moment, then Sarge swallows.]

SARGE: "He hunted me halfway across the planet before I finally had to kill him...The teams after that were either no different, or already dead when I found 'em."

CHIEF: "They were all...All of 'em sacrificial lambs, like us?"

SARGE: [mutters affirmative] "Like you, Dr. Mohrig, the quantum accelerator, and everyone at Plutonia Labs HQ. They're probably already gearing up a new team to flush down this cosmic toilet. I'm sorry it took so long to approach you. Hoped more of you woulda made it out of that fortress."

CHIEF: "It doesn't make sense."

SARGE: "Makes perfect sense. UAC finds out there's a world fulla hellspawn that want our slipgate tech, and are willing to invade and conquer to get it. CEOs think with their bank accounts, figuring they can trade their technology and workers in exchange for unearthly assets that they could market for big bucks. A monopoly on supernatural consumer goods. Maybe they figure it'll convince 'em not to invade, or only invade areas the UAC wants invaded. Whatever reason they got for doing it, they're too profit-minded to consider what a terrible idea it is to give teleporters and spaceships and advanced weaponry to a prison full of monsters...monsters which were probably exiled here from somewhere else and looking to jump bail."

CHIEF: "Like what, the Australia of the cosmos?"

SARGE: "Just my bullshit theory. They're damned anxious to go somewhere else, that's all I know. And the Mastermind is building an army. Building new weapons and testing them on rival hellspawn, taking over their territories. It rules half the globe, last I checked."

CHIEF: "Everyone thinks you're dead."

SARGE: "UAC already knows better. Another reason I kept my distance. I didn't know you weren't sent here to cap my ass." [bitter laugh] "That's what the *third* group came for. Enjoyed playing *Chato's Land* with 'em. Maybe a little too much..."

CHIEF: "You still gave us a share of your supplies."

SARGE: [gulping from water bottle] "I'm a good neighbor."

CHIEF: "Blows my mind that you'd never go home."

SARGE: "Did go home once. Not long."

CHIEF: "Yeah, but...why *stay* here? I mean...*why*?"

[Sarge chews for a minute, listening to the wind.]

SARGE: "Tired of starting my life over. I started over when I joined the Corps. I started over when I got shipped to Mars. I started over when I decided to come here."

[Clink of a ration can being tossed onto a trash pile; Sarge chews and swallows.]

SARGE: "It's scary starting your life over, 'cos you're wiping the slate clean. Nothing's familiar at first. Sometimes it never is. This place is Hell, but it's familiar. And I have a *purpose* here. Went through my life on earth wondering why the hell I was alive."

[The snap and slide of a pistol chambering its first round, the the click of the safety.]

SARGE: "Important to have a purpose in life."

CHIEF: [after a pause] "I don't think I could do it. Live here. Not without losing my marbles."

SARGE: "Never become a full resident. Keep your humanity on speed dial. Start to act too much like these animals and you become one, yourself. No going back from that. Seen it happen."

CHIEF: "Yeah...me, too."

[Hiss of an electric furnace powering off. Rustling as the two men stand and gear up.]

CHIEF: "Let's go kill this bitch. I got three beautiful babies waiting for me back home. You got anybody?"

SARGE: "Everyone I cared about is buried on one planet or another. You must love 'em a lot to go through all this for 'em."

CHIEF: "There isn't a thing in this universe I wouldn't do or kill for my children, Sarge."

SARGE: [humorless laugh] "Yeah...I bet."

[Recorder runs a few moments longer before Chief finally shuts it off.]

TEXT LOG 16

The Doomed Marine has been keeping Inferno Team in his peripheral since our first day, when he wasn't busy doing his own thing. After all this time, with all my allies dead and gone, he finally approached me while I was trekking across the desert. We talked awhile, shared rations, shared stories of war in Hell. He knows how to get back to earth, and offered to share that with me...if I do a favor for him.

He knows what I did to Parker. He hasn't said so, but he knows. It's in the things he says sometimes, and the way he says them. Like he's testing my reactions. Looking for signs of guilt.

He won't find any. She gave up. I did her a favor like I did Olsen and Borg a favor. I don't give up. Not to hellspawn legions, not to nosy-ass Hell Marines.

His story is full of holes. How could *one* flabby red-eyed monster be powerful enough to magically control *every demon in the world* with its *mind*? And that conspiracy theory sure sounds familiar, doesn't it? Same senseless bullshit the idiot doctors were trying to feed me. The guy stalked us from the moment of deployment: he's got stockpiles of supplies and gizmos all over Inferno, so who's to say he doesn't have a long-range mic? Who's to say he couldn't have heard my every conversation? It makes no sense! How could earth be cutting deals with the hellspawn *and* fighting them at the same time?

Whatever he wants in Plutonia Labs, he needs my help getting it. Who knows what the hell they've been developing in those labs. I figure it won't hurt to play along until I figure it out, and make a judgment call when the time comes. For the moment, we need each other. I pretended to believe everything the shifty motherfucker said. Dunno when (or *if*) he'll make good on his end of the bargain, but at least I can use him to do what I came here to do at long last.

I miss the smell of grass and the sounds of birds. The cool kiss of a breeze. Blue sky. Trivial shit earth people never pay attention to. Soon as I get back I'm savoring all of it, and I'll savor it with my little babies. Not alone, and not from a cell.

Everyone on earth who knows he exists, thinks he's dead anyway.

TEXT LOG 17

Sitting tight for the moment with pre-op butterflies.

Plutonia Labs sits on the edge of a brick-red canyon in the middle of the dunes. Viewfinder showed the entire facility was intact -- even the asphalt of the parking lot and warehouse sector driveways -- and protected from the sky by an ever-circling cloud of grinning red floaters. We approached the facility from the bottom of the canyon, where the exposed basement levels stick out of the rocky canyon wall like the guts of a slaughtered animal. The floaters can't see us in the shadows when we hug the facility's side of the canyon.

The 'Marine did a few recon missions a week ago and mapped out the interior: the cargo elevator visits every floor of the basement levels several times a day. Dunno what those zombies are doing in there, but I can see them scurrying around like bees in a hive.

Elevator's coming down to our level. Showtime in sixty seconds.

TEXT LOG 18

He fought damn well. We went over each scene so many times that the real thing was almost a dull routine. Hell Patrol never knew what hit them: we swept into the bottom basement level and tapped every former human twice in the head with our ACRs. Twenty casualties for the demons just on the way to the elevator. It was big enough to fit one of the rovers in, minigun turret and all.

We reloaded on the way up to the main lab. I had the BFG on my back, and the 'Marine was toting all the spare ACR mags and my sentry gun. When we planned it he'd said that I had earned the honor of doing the dirty deed. Seems strange, since he's been fighting the damn thing longer than me, but I'd be lying if I said the thought didn't excite me a little.

The elevator door rattled open on a dull white corridor just as two zombie engineers scurried by. 'Marine tapped them in the heads while I hit the 'stop' switch to freeze the elevator.

Left down the corridor, then right, straight ahead to the first three-way intersection -- gunning down a pair of shotgun zombies as they rounded the far end of the hall -- then left again to the pneumatic double-doors. They were sealed, and behind their small glass windows the lab flashed and flickered. It was a riot of demon-speak in there, and now and again the skull-rattling voice of the Mastermind shook the doors in their frames -- it spoke in a horrible mix of audible and mental drones and screeches. From behind all the noise came the low bass hum of the quantum accelerator warming up for another test.

I handed 'Marine my ACR and primed the BFG for overdrive on human-sized targets; 'Marine slung my rifle over his shoulder and erected the sentry gun to guard the direction the shotgunners had come from, while he took a defensive position facing the way we'd come. The demons infesting the lab couldn't hear our shots earlier, but the hallways were already starting to fill with footsteps and gibbering voices.

I took a deep breath and stepped through the lab doors.

The 'Marine had seen it all before, during his recon -- before he'd had the equipment he needed, which I supplied him with -- and so had I, when the hell baron showed it to me in the demon compound. The lab was octagonal and as wide as a house. There was a staircase in each of the furthest corners, each one winding up to the catwalks skirting the walls fifteen feet overhead. The walls were khaki metal panels, many of those panels missing or lain to the side to let the electrical guts of the lab hang out obscenely. The catwalks had computer consoles glowing on every wall; the main floor had back-to-back supercomputers set up along its walls every ten feet, and a protective partition in the far back where the accelerator operators would stand during operation.

In the middle of the main floor was the stout, circular quantum accelerator stage: as awesome as the UAC had made it out to be, the gizmo itself was just a humming, spinning gyroscope, its largest ring about as wide as a kiddie pool and glowing with soft white light.

I wish he'd warned me about the stink: stale sweat and other bodily odors, burnt rubber, rotten meat and old blood. Every level of the lab was cluttered with discarded papers, dangling wires, carelessly dropped tools and trash, and the ancient, bloody remains of UAC security personnel the demons hadn't bothered eating or removing. The catwalks and main floor were crawling with green-eyed, gibberish-babbling former humans in engineer jumpsuits. They scurried like cockroaches as they obeyed whatever incoherent commands their insane leader was shrieking at them.

The bloated lard-beast from my vision was there, commanding the zombies from the ceiling thirty feet overhead. She'd had cosmetic surgery since I saw her flabby ass last, and modified herself with six home-made cybernetic spider-legs, their robotic veins and tendons visible at every oily, rubber-rimmed joint. She squatted up there like a gorged tarantula, not bothering to move a muscle as she screeched and droned. Her size made my heart leap into my throat: legs and all, she was as big as a monster truck.

I'd already squeezed the trigger when I stepped through the lab doors, and took in most of these details just before the first shot went off and wiped out the left half of the laboratory. Every lightning tendril had a target: zombie engineers howled and flailed as they blackened and disintegrated. Mainframes and consoles cracked and erupted in white flashes of fire from within before they melted in on themselves.

Mastermind was shrieking in fury. I barely heard the sentry gun as it barked at the next team of zombies that rounded the corner. I heard 'Marine's ACR chattering at a second team coming from the other direction.

I squeezed off another shot and leveled the right half of the lab. A handful of engineers escaped the weapon's wrath only to be set on fire by the mainframes as they burst like giant cherry bombs. The lab shook in its foundation and the right catwalk warped and collapsed, crushing two more former humans into a bloody pulp. I was already coughing my lungs out from the stench of charred flesh and ozone.

The 'Marine's barrage was hammering on my eardrums now, so I barely heard the scuttle-stomping overhead. I squeezed the trigger again before I turned the barrel upward and stared directly into the furious, fist-sized, blood-red eyes that'd terrorized my sleep from the beginning, her sneering piranha-mouth close enough to kiss me on the forehead. Her brand new front legs were rearing back to pulp me where I stood when the BFG went off in her face.

It took less than a second for that little green nova to peel her like an onion. Skin and muscle boiled and tore away; skull eroded to dust from the center out; brain jellied and boiled into noxious vapor. Best of all those hideous red snake-eyes blackened, shriveled, and burnt away like tomatoes under a blowtorch. I felt her psychic shriek of agony disintegrate with the rest of her. Then I puked, taking in one too many lungfuls of the bitch's aerosolized corpse.

The assault had lasted no more than eleven seconds. I took one last look at the accelerator, spat, and erased it with the last of my power cells. Mission accomplished. Col. Warren can kiss my ass.

Weren't many former humans left after that massacre. Only one security squad was left, and we tricked them into shooting *each other* in the cubicle offices! 'Marine insists there's nothing in the 'Labs that interests him: what he wants is to level the place and tip it into the canyon, so it can never be used again. He stationed me on the surface level of the facility with my pet sentry gun, with "orders" to watch-dog the front entrance from the circular command center.

The 'Marine had two army satchels filled with semtex charges -- I don't know if he made them himself or got them off one of the other teams. We did a radio check so we could chatter occasionally from across the facility while he ran his little bomb errands on each of the basement levels.

"I gotta rig charges in some security-heavy areas," he'd said before we separated. "I took all the security systems offline, but I left the cameras running so you can see I'm not abandoning you." Here he pointed to the camera monitors lining the back wall.

"Never figured you would," I said, smiling.

That humorless laugh of his again. "Also locked down the north and east entrances. Only way in here now is the front door and the elevator. Keep me updated on anything you see up here that looks like trouble. And don't touch any of the consoles while I'm downstairs."

He nodded to one console on the north wall, which featured an especially large black switch set in a deep red panel. "That'll lock down all the quarantine doors. We'll close them after all the charges are set, in case something wanders in and tries to follow us back to the canyon." He looked at me. "*After*, and not before. I gotta set charges in the restricted labs where they don't have air ducts. Understand?"

I told him I wasn't a toddler, and I wouldn't touch anything. He was out of the control room and headed down the elevator shaft before I could ask about his end of the bargain.

We chatter now and then while he works, about trivial shit. We talked about our families back on earth (what little family he had is dead now), and how we joined the Corps in the first place. He eventually got around to sharing his big secret for getting back to earth, and it sounds too simple to be true.

He watches his PDA internet connection. That's it. When he connects, that means there's a slippage somewhere in Inferno -- the strength of the signal tells him roughly how far away, and he climbs to higher ground and uses the rangefinder -- which I currently possess -- to locate the portal. After all the tech issues Sweet Home put us through, it actually makes sense.

I admit I actually thought twice about killing him. If only he hadn't started asking about my former teammates: who they were, what they were like, what experience they had with hellspawn that landed them on the party list.

He's on his way down to the restricted labs now, asking about the doctors. I'm sitting next to the big red switch, watching the monitors in those areas. I can see the frames of the quarantine doors at the hall junctions. Figure I'll wait 'til he's busy setting the charges to seal him in and smother him.

At least this way I don't gotta dirty my hands. Still turns my stomach to do it to a fellow marine, but he'll have me caged up by his next earth contact if I don't do it to him, first.

Twelve years away from my nest is long enough.

TEXT LOG 19

I gave him a chance.

He was a good, tough marine, but he was exhausted when I met him. He tried to keep his eye on me when we camped together that night. He was asleep the moment his head went down, and he stayed asleep for twelve hours or more. Didn't miss his PDA when I swiped it and stole a look at his mission logs. I knew I'd seen two come out of that demon compound. Never asked him what happened to his partner.

I thought about killing him right there, while he slept. I didn't for a lot of reasons. I needed his help. I had reasonable doubt that maybe he wasn't a monster after all. I don't know if I'd have turned his ass in as soon as I was back on earth; don't even have plans to go back. I had a tiny glint of hope that maybe his conscience would come around, and that his desperation hadn't erased all traces of it.

So I kept a few things from him, as a test of character. Deal with enough untrustworthy humans in Hell and you develop a knack for forcing their hand.

I told him the Mastermind controlled the floaters and forced them to work as guard dogs, and that they'd disperse when she was dead. Which was all true.

I didn't tell him that the bitch has been cloning herself, to spread her consciousness across Inferno during her campaign: stationing the greater clones at sites of military importance, and putting the smaller, weaker "baby" clones in charge of battalions. I didn't tell him I'd already assassinated three of the greater clones to date, or that each one used clouds of floaters as living security systems. I didn't tell him how hungry the floaters were upon release, and that they'd immediately start eating each other, and any living thing they saw on the ground below them.

And I didn't tell him that the control room had a retractable canopy for a roof, for making long-distance satellite calls; nor that the canopy switch was very clearly labeled on the console before I tore off the label and called it a "quarantine" lock.

Several floors above me I could hear the heavy groan of the canopy, and imagined it slowly yawning beneath a gory thunderstorm of frenzied floater-demons. I heard the sentry gun emptying its magazine over the course of a full minute, and an ACR firing wildly on full auto for about three seconds. Then it was quiet, for the most part.

I gave him a chance to take the high road. He failed the test.

Got the charges set in under an hour, going from the upper floors to the lowest basement level. Wasted no time putting as much distance between me and the 'Labs as I could before blowing it further into hell. Was a hell of a sight, watching that giant concrete spark plug tearing itself out of the canyon wall, twisting as it doubled over and came crashing down to the bottom of the canyon in an avalanche of rock, steel, and fire.

I came back a week later, when the last of the floaters had gone, to sift through the debris and hopefully salvage Inferno Team's BFG 9000. Haven't found it yet, so I'm sitting on a heap of scrap metal at the bottom of the canyon as I write, enjoying a cool breeze and a light lunch. Luck is a funny thing, however: Chief is here in the form of a cracked PDA and a few traces of his sentry gun. Maybe his voyage into Inferno won't have been such a waste after all.

I don't know what you'll tell Chief's kids, whoever you are. I guess you can tell them that he fought for them -- and them alone -- for twelve long, hard years. Try not to blame your dad for what he became. If anyone, blame the UAC.

The Mastermind still has plenty of spare bodies lurking in Hell's darkest corners, so I still have a job to do. I won't email this mission log at the next slipgate -- first UAC pencil-pusher who finds it will likely delete it. Best thing to do is leave this someplace where the next herd of sacrificial lambs can find it. Maybe now they'll listen, and warn the rest of the planet about the UAC's treachery, and the severity of the demonic threat. Then again, maybe I'm a naive sap.

Expect to hear from me again sometime, Earth. "Doomed Marine" out.

The folly of this document has become clear to me, as I look out my apartment window at the burning pandemonium that was once my neighborhood. I can barely see the streets through all the smoke, and what little I can see is as indescribable as the ungodly sounds -- those of civilization collapsing on itself. The news stations show the same: skyscrapers burn like giant torches, the sky is overcast with smoke and ash, people run and scream in the streets as their wildest nightmares burn them with hellfire. My neighbors are screaming in the hall outside even as I write this, and something otherworldly is screaming with them.

I assembled this document to protect myself against the UAC and its agents. It was all for naught, as the UAC will now collapse along with everything else -- they'll be the first course at the Banquet of Hell.

Humanity has an incredible ability to adapt and overcome. Maybe whoever overcomes this "hell on earth" will find this document someday, and perhaps learn from it.

God help us all.

- D. Carver

###