

COMMAND & CONQUER

# TWISTED INSURRECTION

PROJECT W.I.R.E.S.

VOLUME 1

WRITTEN BY SIV

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## Author's Note

Since I joined the Twisted Insurrection community mid-2017, I've done many write-ups on the game, from its fun missions to its elaborate list of soundtracks. To mark two years of being part of this awesome community, this will be my most ambitious contribution to TI thus far. As the campaign is getting redone, *Project W.I.R.E.S* is a spin-off novel to pay homage to the older campaign missions up to v0.7, so I hope you enjoy it.

~ Siv *"Knows Too Much"* Sarcast

Disclaimer: This written work contains strong language and depictions of violence. The Tiberium world isn't a light-hearted one.

Tiberium. Its emerald glow alluring as it is deadly. Its arrival shook the world to the core, sparking what would be known as the First Tiberium War. The Earth was split between the Global Defense Initiative(GDI), who sought to contain Tiberium, and the Brotherhood of Nod, who embraced Tiberium as their salvation.

As humanity fought over the green crystal, it continued to spread across the land, contaminating, corrupting, and evolving.

Three years of bloodshed have eroded the eagle's talons, while the scorpions continued to crawl out of the woodwork. The completion of the Orbital Ion Cannon would be the eagle's saving grace, a tool to end the war. That is, until the unthinkable happened.

Official reports stated that the Ion Cannon was test-fired without any safety overrides in place, and when it struck the White House and beheaded the United States government, that was the final nail in the coffin for GDI. Condemnation by the United Nations(UN) for this action led to funding and support being cut, with GDI bases and armies gradually being restructured, their assets returned to their respective nations.

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It has been eight years since the turn of the millennium. Most of GDI's bases have been disbanded. The UN had its hands full with Tiberium infestation now a global crisis, its spread left unchecked and unhindered. Meanwhile, support for Nod continued to grow, as Kane continued to weave his narrative of deception.

While GDI ceased to exist as an organization, a modicum of cells refused to disband, and continued to oppose Nod with every ounce of capacity they had. Once such cell was led by Colonel Owen, an individual who, through the actions of his motley band and himself, would set in motion the wheels of war yet again...

It is a twisted world, rife with insurrection.

## Phase 1: Post-War Melancholy

# Chapter 1: Anticipation

August 2010  
Pennsylvania

"First off, Mr. Owen, I must hand it to you. A job well done making it here in one piece," said Conan Steele as he lit up a cigarette from his pocket. His clean blue suit was inconspicuous enough to hide the bullet-proof lining within, and was in contrast with Colonel Owen, who was in full combat armour, wore fingerless gloves, and a beige beret with a gold eagle insignia. His jet black hair flowed down to his neck. They sat at a folding desk in a hastily converted command room, the walls lined with old posters, maps, and infographics about Tiberium.

"Disbandment takes a toll on a soldier," replied Colonel Owen calmly. His piercing black eyes briefly squinted at Steele, wondering what purpose this small talk served. While this meeting was a favourable outcome, they were pressed for time, especially since Owen's battalion, or what was left of it, narrowly avoided UN patrols on the way here. It wouldn't be long before the UN noticed that some of their patrols were unaccounted for.

"Of course, of course. Even so, you really wasted no time making a beeline here. It's no wonder you're called Colonel 'Arrowhead' Owen. We at Globotech could really use that kind of tactical prowess..."

"What are your terms, Steele?" Owen was getting impatient.

*..and quite the 'Arrowhead' in negotiations too, I see,* thought Steele. "Alright, to the meat of it, then. The UN is in no position to deal with neither the Tiberium crisis, nor the looming threat of Nod. Because we share a common goal of wanting Nod gone, Globotech is still looking for security forces for-"

"No, Steele," replied Owen firmly, "I said 'no' a year before, and my answer still stands. Even with all the security forces at your disposal, you do not have the means to oppose Nod on your own. My men are eager to fight for a cause. That's something your mercenaries don't have. You like to deal, Steele? Let's deal. You give my men what they need to take on Nod, and we'll take the heat off you, because they will come after you if they haven't already."



Steele merely smiled, a nod of acknowledgement masking his underestimation.

"Well, seems like you've done your homework, Colonel. Yes, Globotech is a corporation, and our security force's experience is nothing like the GDI veterans you command. You've fought Nod, you've killed Nod. Alright, we'll provide you with what you need, and you take the fight to them. We have a deal, then?"

Steele extended his hand to Owen, his blue sleeve having a white cuff at the end. Owen met it with his own hand, and they shook on it firmly.

"There's some paperwork involved but we'll get to that later. We look forward to working with you, Mr. Owen," said Steele with a light smile.

"Likewise, Mr. Steele."

"Now, on to the first task in our newfound partnership." Steele gathered some documents and a map on the table before continuing, "One of our shelter cities off the Chilean coast, Theta 17, is due to receive a shipment of food, weapons and other necessary equipment. Unfortunately, Nod, who has been trying to take over the city for some time, is crawling all over the city's exterior. A few patrols have been sent out, but none have made it back alive. The convoy is held up in Outpost T-17-1 some ways from the city. If you could personally oversee the mission of getting that convoy to safety, that would be a great boost for morale and rapport. Show the city that GDI is not out yet."

*Ah, already sending us on an errand... but he does have a point.*

"Chile? That's quite some ways from here."

"Already taken care of. Head to Harrisburg Air Force Base. It was one of the bases planned for disbandment, but we've managed to pull some strings. Take your men there. Your ride will be waiting. Here's a folder on the intel we've gathered that should help you. Also, we're not waiting for Nod to show up, so we will be packing up in..." Steele stopped to check his watch, "...an hour and ten minutes. I suggest you do the same. Good luck, Mr. Owen. I'll see you again in South America."

Owen nodded, got up and made his way out of the old barracks, the folder tucked under his right arm. Outside, some of his men were having a smoke break, while GT personnel were already loading up their supplies. As he paused to look around, Owen heard a familiar voice.

"So, how did it go, sir?" Owen turned to see Captain Samuel Harden, his right-hand man who had accompanied him on his supposed exodus.

"Ah, it's you, Captain. Mr. Steele has agreed to support our operations going forward, with a few terms, and an errand."

"An errand, sir?"

Owen handed the folder to Sam. "New mission. Take a look at this and tell me what you think. Make this a priority one. Tell Joe, too. Oh, and tell the men we'll be moving out in thirty minutes. Harrisburg Air Force Base."

"Aye, sir," replied Sam as he gave a quick salute, before heading off. Sam made his way towards the far end of the GT outpost. A makeshift motor pool was set up to park the M1 Abrams tanks and Humvees they procured. Some of them showed their age and wear, but all vehicles survived the journey here. Leaning against a tank, he flipped open the folder, holding up his tac light to illuminate the pages.

*Hmm, lots of trees outside of Theta 17. Heavy armour wouldn't do much good off-road. Guess we'll be going with Humvees,* thought Sam as he momentarily scratched his black hair.

"Well, well. Captain Samuel Harden. What brings you to my door?" came a muffled voice nearby. Sam looked up to see a stout man in GDI combat armour working on one of the tanks. A welding helmet covered his face. On his waist belt were several other tools.

"What is this 'door' you speak of, Joe?" replied Sam, looking up, "We're outside and under the stars."

"You recon folk are always so literal."

"Eh, it comes with the job. How are the Humvees doing?"

"Well, aside from one of these who needs an oil change, I'd say the rest are in pretty good shape. Gotta hand it to the Colonel, man. I've never seen armed personnel backing off so quickly from a speech."

"Yep, that was pretty ballsy of Owen. We're gonna need those Humvees pretty soon. though."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. We're going to Chile. Lots of vegetation offroad, and a lot of ground to cover."

"Interesting. We'll keep the tanks in reserve, then," said Joe as he removed his tool kit and helmet, revealing his full head of blonde hair, "Oh yeah, Sam, how about another go?"

"Here? Now?" replied a puzzled Sam.

"Yeah. What's the matter? You all tapped out on after that last trip?"

"I was the one at the front doing all the recon work so we wouldn't get spotted. I'm tapped out as hell."



"Oh come now. Joseph Harden the Combat Engineer can't possibly be a match for Samuel Harden the Recon Expert."

Sam chuckled. "Alright. One go."

He placed his folder, tac light, and his rifle on a flat surface of the hull, and the two faced off in front of the tank, assuming stances. Sam lunged at Joe, locking the two in a grapple. Just as Sam was winning out in the struggle, Joe lashed out for a trip. In a blink of an eye, Sam had his body forcefully thrown to the ground.

"Argh, I'm gonna feel that in the morning," exhaled Sam, as Joe pulled him up.

"It's not only about strength, but agility as well. Keep this in mind if you're facing stronger opponents. If you can't overpower them, outmaneuver them."

"You'll be in a vehicle most of the time, Joe. I doubt you'll have room or time to throw people about."

"What if you have to abandon your vehicle and you're without a weapon? Also, weapons themselves had a set range of efficacy. For anything closer than that, you can use your hands and feet."

"And this is why GDI will make a comeback," laughed Sam, "because we have a combat engineer who takes his hand-to-hand combat seriously. Those Nod bastards won't know what hit 'em."

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*Chile, 12 hours later*

"First official mission with Globotech. You guys excited?" asked Joe from the driver's seat as the Humvee bumped up and down the dirt road.

"As excited as I'll ever be for an escort mission," replied Owen.

Joe shrugged slightly as he pulled his eyes away from the rear view mirror and back to the road. He stole a glance at Sam's contorted smile in the co-driver's seat, holding back a snicker. *It's gonna be a looong ride*, thought Joe.

After what seemed like an hour, the convoy of Humvees eventually reached Outpost T-17-1, where a couple of guards clad in riot armour waved them into a clearing just beyond the main entrance. As the trio got down, they could already see the outpost being stripped. Globotech personnel were hauling essentials from what looked like modular living quarters and brought them to a few ordnance trucks parked at the center

of the outpost. The trucks resembled older flatbed designs except with covered roofs, and had four pairs of wheels. As they approached the trucks, they could hear someone by the center truck shouting orders to the men nearby. He had blonde hair up to his neck, dressed in civilian clothes with a ballistic vest over it, his hands ending in gloves.

“Remember to only take essentials! We’re not exactly coming back, but we don’t want dead weight either! Be careful with that, it’s data. Data is precious because you can’t replicate it.”

When he turned to face them, they saw he also wore blue-tinted glasses.

“Ah, our GDI delegates have arrived. Welcome, welcome. We could certainly use the extra help getting all of this stuff out of here, and in one piece, preferably. If only Nod didn’t set up a goddamn blockade to cut us off. Oh, where are my manners? I am Dr. Fredo Giraud. Scientist, engineer, soldier, at your service.”

“Wait, you’re an engineer, scientist *and* a soldier?” asked a confused Joe. *Also, he talks really fast, even for a Chilean*, he thought.

“Well, when your comrades are under attack, no matter what job you have, you pick up a rifle and defend them. That’s the shelter city life, amigo,” replied the doctor, before lowering his voice slightly, “Though, if you ask me, the more roles you take up, the more shit you get blamed for.”

“Good to meet you, Dr. Giraud. I’m Colonel Owen, and I’ll be overseeing this operation.” Owen stepped forward to exchange a handshake with the doctor, before turning to introduce the other two. “This is Captain Samuel Harden, our point man whom I trust to take you back safely, and Staff Sergeant Joseph Harden, who leads our combat engineer corps.”

“Ah, you two brothers?”

“Nah, we’re from different planets, I assure you. In fact, Joe over here’s been huffing so much motor oil, he’s in another star system altogether,” replied Sam, thumbing towards Joe’s general direction.

“Hah, and I can *still* throw your ass down.”

“Well, Mr. Combat Engineer, I actually have something that may interest you. Right this way.”

Fredo led the three towards one of the hexagonal shelters. Parked beside the multi-story building was an unusually blocky vehicle, which they discerned to be an armoured personnel carrier from the open rear hatch. Its size was noticeably bigger than a Humvee.

"Gentlemen," announced Fredo, "I give you the Armadillo. Our newest prototype APC. Less than 5 were built so far, and two are in this very outpost. Has a top speed of 80 km/h on land, possibly a third of that speed in water. Can comfortably transport up to 10 soldiers, maybe more uncomfortably, heh. It's main armament is a remote TOW missile turret on the top hull, which can be remotely fire from the interior. On top of that, it's built with light alloys for greatly reduced weight."

"That's a lot of hardware you're packing," whistled Joe, before he stopped and realized, "Wait a minute, did you say 'in water'?"

"Yeah, it's amphibious. Actually, correction, it *will* be amphibious after I make some design changes. We testing in the dunes of the Atacama Desert up north a few days ago. I was also going to test it out in the rivers, the delta, and eventually the ocean outside Theta 17, if only we could lift the Nod siege, that is."

"Any intel you have on the surrounding area? COO Steele mentioned a few patrols were sent out from the city, but none have made it back," remarked Owen.

"I've no clue, honestly," replied Fredo, "I arrived with the convoy yesterday, and since then, we've been working on tearing this place down. If Nod has somehow flanked us and taken the road section between here and the city, staying here will be too risky. They will eventually close in on us. However, since I'm from Theta City myself, I know a thing or two about the surrounding terrain. First, is that the vegetation offroad is thick, and makes for great ambush spots. Line of sight is limited, and bigger vehicles will have a hard time moving through. However, there may be some dirt roads we can use. Second, while Nod was able to somehow flank us, there's more than one route to the city other than the road itself, one of which is via the hills west of here. Hope that helps."

"That can help, actually," said Sam, "I'll scout ahead and see what I can find. When do you guys plan to move out?"

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## Chapter 2: In Flames

The Nod attack buggy pulled into the small outpost after making its patrol run, parking itself near the Hand of Nod. The design of the buggy was simple yet robust enough to require little maintenance and downtime, and multiple crews could cycle through them for continuous patrolling if needed. The gunner and driver jumped out, and went into the Hand for some post-patrol rest. Little did they know, they would never set foot in their buggy again.

A militant squad was making its rounds near the outpost, when one of them spotted something coming down the road. His eyes widened from within his helmet as he realized it was multiple 'things', and they weren't Nod.

"Incoming!" he shouted. The squad rushed behind a cannon turret near the outpost wall, the only point defense the outpost had. Before the turret could turn to face any target, two missiles streaked through the darkness and found their mark, shattering the quiet of the night, and the turret along with it.

Two blocky vehicles moved into the outpost, disgorging squads of soldiers as soon as they stopped. In turn, Nod militants rushed out of the barracks towards the vehicles parked nearby. Before they got close, a grenade sailed through the air and landed underneath one of them, turning the buggy into a shower of scrap metal and rubber.

The militants had numbers, but the intruders were better equipped. Some closed the distance with riot gear and shotguns, sending their targets flying backwards with each shot. The situation deteriorated into delirium by the second.

Within the Hand of Nod, more soldiers were scrambling to get equipped before rushing out to fight, as explosions rocked the structure. Others were trying to hail the main base.

*"This is Sat Outpost 1. We're under fire from enemy forces, and they seemed to be better prepared than we thought. Request backup immediately!"*

*"Sat Outpost 1, roger that. Moving units to assist."*

Just as the intruders were getting the upper hand, a cannon shell struck one of the Armadillos, the vehicle rocking from the impact. A black silhouette moved forward as the smoke cleared, taking the shape of an M2 Bradley light tank. It's coaxial machine gun sprayed at the advancing riot soldiers, sending red mists into the air as half of them fell to the ground. It's reloading cycle complete, the turret turned to fire at the APCs again, but two missiles struck the turret first, blowing it clean off.

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"Sir, we've lost contact with the outpost," reported the radio operator.

"Verdammt!" cursed Strauss as he reached for the blockade base's public address system, *"Attention, all units. Converge on Outpost Sat 1 und support our forces. I want zheir ASHES in a goddamn urn!"*

Shouts of fervour rang out from attack buggies as they pulled out of the base, each having a tank hunter clinging to the metal cage frame.

The three buggies sped down the dark road, a sea of trees rapidly moving past them on each side. Suddenly, from the corner of his right eye, the lead driver spotted a muzzle flash from the woods. In a clutch moment, he swerved to the left, the armour-piercing round whizzing past him. The second buggy was not so lucky. The armour-piercing round struck the front left wheel, taking it clean off. The buggy tumbled forwards, the tank hunter thrown off the metal cage he was clinging to. His body flew into a thick tree bark, the impact registering with an audible *crack*. The third buggy narrowly missed a collision with the second buggy's spinning, and screeched to a halt by the roadside.

The first tank hunter, still on his buggy, fired his rocket launcher at the muzzle flash's source, but his inability to aim on the speeding vehicle caused the rocket to strike a tall tree instead, sending leaves and branches everywhere. Some of the debris landed on an object below, and as the flaming foliage burned, they could see the illuminated image of a tank.

As the dazed gunner of the second buggy came to his senses, he was greeted with a sight of twisted metal and dirt, his body still strapped to the gunner seat. The driver in front of him lay motionless, showing no distinguishing signs between being dead and unconscious. After getting his bearings, he realized the side of his head was mere inches from the road. The gunner crawled out of his seat, and saw the M60 light machine gun hanging loosely from its pintle hinge.

With some pulling and torsion force, he wrestled the weapon free. Getting up to his feet, the gunner made his way off the road. He could see the other two buggies were firing at something in the woods. The two remaining tank hunters were already on the ground, moving towards whatever it was. A cannon shot rang out, finding its mark on the first buggy, destroying it instantly. Shortly after, the gunner saw the vehicle reverse out of the woods, taking the shape of a Vanguard tank. Its speed quickly put some distance between itself and the advancing tank hunters, the short cannon not getting caught in any trees, either.

Seeing as he had no chance against a tank, the gunner kept moving through the woods, hoping to spot more enemies. After a few minutes of trudging through vegetation, he saw Humvees blocking the road. Behind them, a vehicle convoy was making their way up a hill to the left.

Realizing what was going on, the gunner turned heel and ran through the forest, hoping the last buggy was still alive. Sure enough, it was still parked some ways off the road. The gunner looked back for a split second before sprinting across the road towards the buggy, shouting before he even reached them.

"They're going up the hill, around the left side. We have to warn the base NOW!"

~~~

*"Alright, seems like everything's good so far," said Sam from within the Armadillo APC, "The Guardians will be doing a sweep of the woods. There's a cannon turret which will need to be taken care of. Keep an eye out there. The woods are crawling with Nod patrols. After the cannon turret is down, have the rest of the convoy make a beeline for the city, over."*

*"Sounds like you've got everything planned, over," replied Joe from the other end.*

*"That's what good recon work can do, over."*

*"Roger that. You're not coming, Sam?"*

*"Not yet. I'll have to draw fire from the base's entrance to make 'em think we're here to fight."*

*"I copy. Come back in one piece, Sam. Joe out."*

Sam cut the comm link, and looked around the interior of the Armadillo. *Let's see what this baby can do*, he thought.

Up on the hill, Guardians were already combing the foliage for enemies. A breeze blew through the woods, causing the shadows to dance about.



"Come out, you Nod vermin," muttered one of the Guardians to himself. As if on cue, a small blue torch lit up 10 meters away from him. Before the Guardian could raise his weapon, a long flame jet engulfed him. He screamed and flailed about, his riot gear useless against the scorching heat. Similar streams of heat lit up the forest, and more screams ensued.

Gunfire broke out in response as GDI Rangers and GT Peacekeepers fired their weapons, struggling to find the enemy amidst the growing flames. A stray round hit a flamethrower's fuel tank, birthing a fireball in the woods and spreading flames around it.

"Goddamn, it's quickly becoming the Atacama Desert in here!" exclaimed Joe in the second Armadillo, *"Badger 1 and 2, move through the fire and see if you can spot the turret and take it out Iron 2, distract that turret, over."*

*"Iron 2, copy. Moving at full speed."*

*"Badger 1 solid copy."*

*"Badger 2 copy."*

The Humvees ploughed through the rising flames, the two Vanguard tank following behind. Just when there seemed to be no end in sight for the flames, they came to a wide clearing, when a shell whizzed inches above the first Humvee's windshield.

*"Badger 1 confirms sighting of enemy turret, eighty meters ahead."*

*"Iron 2, copy. Providing covering fire."*

Stepping on the gas, they moved at full speed to either side of the turret. Overwhelmed by the target saturation, the cannon operator froze before turning to aim at the left Humvee, but was too slow. Taking a shot from the front, the turret turned to face the Vanguard, but it already slinked back into the woods. The Humvees halted and grenadiers jumped out, making a beeline for the door.

The cannon operator heard a loud blast from below, followed by an inward *clung*. Panicking, he left the gun controls, drawing his sidearm, but his fate was sealed as a disc grenade landed near his feet.

*"Badger 2 confirms turret is out of action."*

*"Fan-fucking-tastic, Badger 2!"* exclaimed Joe, *"Badger Team, Iron 2, move to the next area. All elements, second cannon turret down. Push forward unless you wanna get burned alive over here."*

Badger 2 had its grenadiers loaded and ready to go, Badger 1 following some ways behind. They were pressed for time and needed to secure the other route. Badger 2 went full throttle towards the hill slope, disappearing behind it. As Badger 1 neared the slope, a huge explosion rang out, the sound being a mixture of cooked-off grenades and ignited fuel. Bits of charred metal from beyond the slope peppered Badger 1's windshield.

*"Shit. Badger 2, come in!"*

Dead silence. The only sound was a fire crackling somewhere beyond the slope.

*"Badger 1 to Iron 2. I've lost contact with Badger 2. Suggest we move forward to investigate. How far behind are you, over?"*

*"This Iron 2. We'll catch up in a bit, Badger 1. Sit tight."*

Suddenly, amidst the distant crackling of fire, the occupants of Badger 1 heard the familiar sound of tank treads getting nearer, and to their horror, realized it wasn't Iron 2.

A pair of blue torches peeked out of the slope, then a pair of moving treads, and finally a glass cockpit. Through the panes, they could see the driver at the controls, and the pyromaniacal grin he wore on his face.

"FLAME TAAANK!" screamed Badger 1's driver as he pulled the the gear in reverse.

A torrent of napalm bathed the area the Humvee occupied a split-second ago, the brush guard falling off. The gunner fired the .50 caliber machine gun at the cockpit, but the shots harmlessly pinged off the bulletproof glass. The flame tank was slightly slower than the Humvee reversing, but it began to pick up speed after it cleared the slope.

"You should have burned out years ago, GDI insects!" said driver as his fervor turned into an obsession. Everything save for the Humvee before him faded from view, every other sound drowning out into the background. Because of his tunnel-visioned senses, he did not see the muzzle flash out of the right corner, nor did he hear the shot being fired. The armour piercing shell ripped through the right fuel canister, a jet of napalm leaking out, followed by a loud explosion. Badger 1 was showered with charred metal and bulletproof glass.

As another fire began to spread before them, they heard a familiar voice as Iron 2 came into view from the left.

*"Kept you waiting, Badger 1?"*

*"Not a second later, Iron 2, I swear."*

*"Roger. Let's keep moving, before this entire forest burns down."*

~~~

The lone Nod attack buggy pulled back into the blockade base, next to the Hand of Nod where Strauss was still standing.

"What brings you back here? You're supposed to be out there cutting the enemy to bits!" demanded an impatient Strauss.

"Lieutenant Commander Strauss, I've located an enemy convoy moving through the hill north of here. They're trying to circle around us," reported the gunner who jumped off the metal cage frame.

"Are you certain of this?"

"Yes, sir. I've seen it with my own eyes. They've blocked off the road ahead with vehicles, and are going aro-"

An explosion erupted outside the base's main entrance. Strauss turned to see smoke coming from behind the walls, near the four cannon turrets.

"Well, what is that, then?" said Strauss, his thumb pointed towards the smoke. A second explosion came from the same direction.

"Well, uh, maybe they changed their minds, si-"

"GO! Bring me their heads!" bellowed Strauss.

The gunner nodded and jumped back on the buggy, as it moved out along with two reserve Bradleys to meet the attack.

"Nice, very nice. They're coming this way," said Sam as he eyeballed the buggy and Bradleys exit the base through the TOW's sights, "Get us out of here, Silver 2."

"Roger that. Silver 2 withdrawing," replied the Armadillo driver, speeding away from the woods and towards the foot of the hill.

~~~

Colonel Owen checked his watch. It's been just over an hour since they left the outpost. The inferno on the hill set them back significantly, but the two Vanguard tanks managed to reach the bottom of the slope and currently blocked the road leading to the blockade base. The surviving four Humvees (three GT, one GDI) were up ahead, clearing

the final stretch between here and the bridge leading to the city. Reports were coming in of Nod ambushes made up of rocket launchers and flamethrowers, costing them two Humvees already.

*I bloody well hope those Guardians are worth their salt, he thought.*

*"Raccoon 1, This is Badger 1. Nod resistance is thinning out. Suggest getting the convoy over before more show up."*

*"This is Raccoon 1. Copy that. Dr. Giraud, get those cargo trucks moving. We'll provide cover. Don't stop till you reach the city."*

*"Excelente, Raccoon 1. Alright, boys, let's move out!"*

The three cargo trucks picked up speed, Raccoon 1 following behind them. Along the way, they could see the charred remains of the two Humvees lost in the ambush. Gunfire was still ringing out in the woods, as GDI and GT soldiers continued smoking out pockets of Nod resistance. Finally, they reached the bridge, the looming visage of Theta 17 just beyond it.

*"Raccoon 1 to all units. Convoy is crossing bridge. Mop up and prepare to withdraw."*

~~~

"I can barely feel the heat," muttered Sam as Silver 2 zoomed through the roaring inferno. It passed the defunct turret, and Sam knew the slope downwards was just up ahead. The Bradleys were far behind, unable to match the Armadillo's speed. However, there was one thing that could.

As they neared the slope, the attack buggy jumped out of the fiery forest, somehow unscathed from the flames. Out of the rear hatch's narrow slit, Sam could see two distinct muzzle flashes coming from the buggy, as the rear armour was peppered with bullets.

*Goddamn. Persistent little bugger, aren't ya?*

Clearing the slope and hitting flat land once again, Silver 2 stepped on the gas, reaching top speed as fast as it could. However, the buggy still showed no signs of relenting. As they approached the bridge, out of nowhere, a TOW missile struck the base of the buggy. It careened over the bridge, hitting the dark depths below with a distant splash.

*"Seems like you could use some help there, Silver 2," came a familiar voice.*

*"Joe? You were supposed to withdraw!"*

*"Now now, is that any way to thank me?"*

*"That was a buggy. An annoying mosquito at best."*

*"Uh huh, sure, buddy," replied Joe as he signaled the driver to follow Sam, "One day, I won't be there to save your ass, then what are you gonna do, huh? You'll be twiddling your thumbs thinking 'Oh boy, I wish Joe were here'."*

The two Armadillos made their way across the bridge and into Theta 17. No sooner had they reached the other side, a series of explosions rang out behind them as the bridge's entire midsection fell into the river below.

"Whoa, I guess they really don't want Nod taking this city, huh?" remarked Joe.

The two Armadillos pulled into a depot near the city square. As Sam and Joe disembarked from their vehicles, they could see Dr. Giraud coming over.

"That's fine work there, fellows!" he exclaimed, "I'm not sure about COO Steele, but you guys definitely have my vote. By the way," he continued, putting an arm on the hull of the Armadillos, "How did she run?"

"Like a beauty," replied Sam.

"I need me one of these, if you can somehow arrange that," winked Joe.

"Well, wait till you see this baby once she goes full amphibious. By the way, drinks on me at the bar once we're done."

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## Chapter 3: Tungsten Souls

"Well done, Mr. Owen. Great maneuvering around that blockade. Every single transport made it out of there unscathed," said COO Conan Steele, a wide grin on his face. He was joined with Owen, Dr. Giraud, Sam and Joe Harden in a briefing room.

"Thank you, though it was due in a large part due to Sam's recon work that got us out of there with minimal casualties," replied Owen.

"Just doing my job, sir," replied Sam, "Those Armadillo APCs really helped, too."

"I'm waiting for you to send some of those my way, doc," winked Joe.

"It's a good thing we made it out of there too," said Giraud, "New reports just came in that our guard posts encountered Nod resistance in the forests southeast of Theta 17. These reports came in from survivors from those posts, who fled the area after their posts were burned to the ground. I wouldn't be surprised if one of them made it to the outpost we left. That could have easily been us, and for that, we are grateful."

"Seconded," continued Steele, "Since you risked your men as well in that operation, here's a little something, a token of our new partnership. It was one of the items in the shipment."

Steele gestured to Dr. Giraud, who nodded and brought out a blue folder and handed it to Owen. This one was labeled '[CLASSIFIED]' in red.

"We've been working on a walker system to quickly traverse areas with high Tiberium concentration," explained Giraud, "A working prototype was tested in some of the fields up north, and this data is based on those tests."

"Oooh, that sounds useful," remarked Joe as he peeked in from the left.

"That's a generous offer. Thank you, Mr. Steele. We'll put it to good use," replied Owen as he handed the folder to Joe, who absorbed himself in the folder's contents.

"I'm sure you guys will," said Steele, "I look forward to seeing GDI back in action as much as you guys."

Owen nodded in agreement. The meeting concluded soon after. The three GDI officers left GT's towering HQ building on the island. Watch towers lined the high ridges, with armouries, research towers and living quarters at the center. While the island itself had hastily erected defenses, the limited access routes to it greatly helped. To the northwest was a growing Tiberium field, walled off with a monitoring station behind it. Its other two access routes was a bridge to the north and a railway bridge to the west.

As the train pulled out of the station and zoomed through the tunnel, Sam, seated next to the colonel, spoke up in a whisper.



"I know that look, sir. You've been wearing it ever since we left the meeting."

Owen peeked out from the aisle seat, looking both ways.

"We're the only ones who got on, sir."

"You can never be too careful, Captain. Well, when I first talked with Steele at the outpost in Pennsylvania, he initially offered to recruit us as a security force, which I declined and promptly changed the terms. We keep Nod off their backs, and they keep us supplied. But, whatever they give us, they either expect something in return, or have an agenda. While they are a research corporation, you saw that island. They're rather resourceful, somehow, and we should be, too. We're in the process of reaching out to the GDI bases in the region, in hopes they'll join our cause. Also, all of this never leaves this train."

Sam nodded. Meanwhile, Joe continued to study the folder folder. Inside, were schematics depicting a bipedal walker, including spaces for oxygen storage and air filtration systems. The walker was about 1.5 times the height of a human, and though it was mostly built for traversing Tiberium fields, there were optional weapon hardpoints.

*Hmmm, I feel like I've seen this before, but I can't put my finger on it,* pondered Joe, resting a hand on his chin.

The train left the tunnel, making a stop at a few GT stations, before reaching the end of the line at Gamma 3. A fairly large shelter city, it housed base GD-3, the "D" denoting it belonged to GDI. The base was accessible via a few bridges. Towards the southwest of the GDI base was another GT research building, with its own dock and a great view of the river. The presence of both a GDI and GT base in the area not only provided safety assurance for the citizens, but a plethora of job opportunities as well. These factors amalgamated to create an atmosphere of rebuilding and renewal in Gamma 3.

"We've got a lot of work to do," said Owen as Sam drove them in a Humvee back to the base, "Joe, see what you can do with those walker schematics. Sam can provide some feedback possible recon variants."

"Sir, yes sir," replied Joe.

"Make some real badass toys for us, Joe."

As they pulled into the motor pool of the GDI base, an intelligence officer came running towards the vehicle.

"Colonel Owen, you need to see this, sir. It came in after one of the GDI bases who joined our communications network," he said with a sense of urgency, handing a folded

piece of paper to Owen as he got out of the Humvee. The colonel unfolded it, his eyes narrowing as he read it.

“Are you certain about this?” said Owen as he looked up.

“The frequency used is pretty old, sir, even pre-dating the new ones we switched to after our alliance with GT.”

“Trouble?” asked Sam. Owen merely handed the paper to him, then turned to the officer, asking for a report of the terrain and expected enemy forces. The officer nodded and hurried away. Sam’s eyes too frowned as he read the contents.

“This is not some Nod trick, is it?” he said, finally looking up.

“What’s in that paper and why is it doing weird stuff to your eyes? Come on, don’t leave me hanging here,” said Joe, his flippancy and humour unhindered even in the face of classified information.

“It’s a distress call,” replied Sam, his voice lowered to a whisper, “Does the name ‘General Sheppard’ ring any bells?”

As Joe’s eyes widened at the revelation, Sam turned again to Owen, “Well, then, you don’t need to ask me, sir. I’m volunteering for this one.”

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### *Outskirts of Mexico City*

*“This is Iron 1 checking in. Glad to be working with you again, Specter.”*

*“Roger that. Thanks for the help, guys.”*

The two Vanguard tanks led the convoy forwards till they reached a clearing. The hill before them split the path in two. Consulting his map, Sam identified the west path to follow the coast, while the east path would lead further into the hills.

Sheppard, a name well known within GDI’s chain of command. A master tactician and GDI’s first commander, he was able to get his pieces exactly where he wanted them on the board. The rapport he had with his men greatly aided in this. What’s more is that Owen was Sheppard’s aide during the war, so this was personal, and that’s why he sent in any reserve forces they could spare, even a couple of old M113 APCs.

Even GT recognized this opportunity, as they mobilized a squad of peacekeepers and Guardians, two medical Humvees to prepare for the worst, and the Vanguard tanks

from Theta 17's expeditionary force. Everyone was pumped up for the search, even if Mexico was crawling with Nod patrols.

Sam checked his bearings. The transmission originated from somewhere in the northeast. He noted the lack of rocks and terrain irregularities which made ground vehicles traverse faster, but the scorching heat would get to the men soon enough.

Sam trekked through the narrow pass, the rest of the convoy about 200 meters behind him. As his eyes scanned the surrounding hills, he spotted something peeking out from behind the ridge. At first, it was hard to see against the brown backdrop, but the silhouette of a solid shape stuck out after inspection with the binos. These observation posts had a design that was simple yet robust, making it easy to set up in cities and natural choke points. He encountered a dime a dozen of these during their skirmishes with Nod. This one in particular was nestled on the ridge, a 10-meter slope leading up to a plateau next to it.

*If there's one of those here, an outpost may be close by, he thought.*

Suddenly, Sam saw a figure emerge out of the post. *Oh no, a sentry!* Sam drew his silenced sniper rifle, no time to adjust the shot. A *\*tiup\** sounded as the shot landed on the sentry's left leg, causing him to drop to a knee. As he struggled to get back up, Sam lined up another shot. The second bullet whizzed through the air, and found its mark, piercing the guard's neck.

Sam quickly opened up his map again and traced a path up that plateau with his finger. It was going to be a spiral upwards, the best kind of natural defense, and someone was going to notice that sentry had not reported.

*"All units," he radioed in, "We're going to head up to that plateau to the east. Combat speed. Move out."* Voices of acknowledgement sounded as the convoy picked up speed.

Up ahead, Sam came across an upward slope and another observation post with a couple of infantry outside. Taking cover behind some shrubs by the right cliff's base, he dispatched both of them easily. An attack buggy sped from around the corner, and while it didn't spot Sam, it certainly spotted the two Vanguard's catching up to him. It couldn't even complete a reverse turn before an armour-piercing hit the right wheel and tore through the engine block, setting it ablaze. Sam emerged from the bush and continued onward.

They came to a fork in the path, one leading to the north, and the other to the southeast. As Sam instructed the convoy to take the latter path, he began to recollect what he saw on the map. The only access route to that plateau was the one they were coming from, and a bridge up ahead. *Bingo, if we reach that bridge, we'll have 'em cornered.* He kept some reservations, however, in case something nasty like a flame tank was up there. Spewing napalm downhill at them would be a messy sight.

They reached the bridge, or what was left of it. Pleased that things were going better than expected, Sam ordered the APCs to unload the squad at the base of the cliff, and have them charge upwards while keeping tactical spacing. Guardians and rifle infantry took the front while grenadiers followed behind. A line of black silhouettes emerged from the lip of the plateau, two of them sporting rocket launchers. Sam managed to take out one, before the second fired a rocket at one of the APCs. The high angle of fire struck the vehicle's top armour, stopping it dead in its tracks. The remaining Nod soldiers fired back as they retreated behind the plateau lip.

*"They're falling back. Press the advantage, charge up that hill. Clear a path for the armour!"* barked Sam through the radio. Heeding the call, they leapt out of cover with renewed vigour, the medics following behind to recover the wounded, hauling them to the medical Humvees at the bottom.

As the first of the GDI-GT squad breached the lip, they came under fire from the surviving Nod soldiers, now at a much better position. Even so, they did not have a sniper with them, and Sam picked them off by one.

Reduced to a modicum of their fighting strength, the Nod soldiers could not hold back the tide as riflemen, Guardians, and grenadiers emerged from the lip of the hill. Suddenly, the rattling of a machine gun sounded off, and three GDI riflemen slumped to the ground. A M2 Bradley slowly pulled out of a parking lot, its coaxial machine gun spraying more rounds at the advancing infantry.

*"Enemy armour! Take cover! Iron 1, we need you up here now!"*

*"Copy that. ETA 8 seconds. Sanitize the area of anti-tank weapons, will ya, Specter?"*

*"Roger that."*

Sam took cover behind a cannon turret alongside some GDI riflemen, assessing the situation. The Bradley was too far away for the grenadiers and Guardians to do any good, and now the remaining Nod infantry were slowly regrouping. Sam caught sight of the last

two tank hunters, one hiding behind a radar dome, and another behind the Bradley. Two shots later, both lay dead, sending the rest of the infantry into a panic.

*"Iron 1, coming in hot."*

The visage of a Vanguard tank emerged from the hill. The Bradley ceased its suppressive fire and aimed its cannon at the new threat. The two exchanged fire, and while the Vanguard's armour held up slightly better, it wasn't an Abrams. While the Bradley was distracted, Sam inched closer, hunkering down near a rock, as he fished out a satchel charge, thumbing in a short detonation time, before tossing it near the right track. The blast immobilized the Bradley, its crew dazed from the hit. Before they regained their bearings, a final shot from the Vanguard finished it off.

With that, the subsequent mop-up came swiftly. Sam gave the battle group some respite as he examined the outpost. It seemed like a recreational lookout point, later converted into an outpost by Nod. He also noticed that the cannon turret was already defunct, and it was not their doing. Aside from the cannon turret, the other thing that caught his eye was a radar towards the rear, which was also destroyed.

*Could Sheppard have come through here?*

By now, the surviving members were helping the wounded and the dead back into the M113s, which they would drop them off at the medical Humvees on the way down. Some were at the ridge's edge, keeping an eye out for approaching patrols. Sam figured that's what he should do too. He took out his binos to have a quick look.

The northeastern hills were a jagged mess. It was like a god raised the lands unevenly, just to make it harder to traverse. The initial scan didn't reveal much, but then his eyes came across an alcove of sorts in the hills. From this angle, he couldn't see the entire alcove, but he could make out some vague shapes against the backdrop of the tall ridges. Then, he saw it.

Camo netting was a thing of the past with the advent of more advanced scanning equipment, but they could still impair visual detection.

"I found 'em," said Sam, walking back to a Guardian, "Sergeant Cross, have the men loaded up in the APCs and head back down.

"Yes, captain!" replied the Guardian as he herded the men, "Alright, we're moving out! Double time it so the wounded can get some aid!"

The Vanguard's headed downhill first, followed by the APCs. As they made it back to the base of the slope where the Humvees were. Sam wished the bridge was not taken out, else they'd have a direct route to the survivors.

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*"Forward, men! For Sheppard!"* bellowed Sam into the radio.

*"For Sheppard!"* echoed the surviving GDI soldiers as the battle group stormed the outpost, their zeal rivaling even Nod fanaticism in the heat of the moment. With their backs to the hill, the Nod forces had nowhere to run. The rest of the troops got into range to assault the buildings, with Iron 2 supporting from behind. The Hand of Nod and the reactors next to it were swiftly destroyed with cannon fire and disc grenades. The speed of the outpost's downfall meant no Nod patrols were even hailed for backup, but Sam knew the explosions and gunfire would still alert nearby enemies. He also Iron 1, which he left some ways behind to guard the exit route, was next to a huge Nod base, and knew that a motley infantry squad and grenadiers accompanying Iron 1 wouldn't hold out when the counter-attack began.

Sam studied his map again as the men secured the area, making note of the final route they would take to Sheppard, when Sergeant Cross approached him.

"Captain, you should see this," said Cross, gesturing Sam to follow him. The two walked past the destroyed reactors, to where the other men were gathered. A slope led up the hill to the southeast. Interestingly, it was gradual enough for a vehicle to pass through.

"This is one hell of a find. It should take us directly behind where the Sheppard is. Tell the rest to hold here. I'll take point and report back," said Sam as he trekked up the hill.

To the southwest, he could see plateau they raided previously. Sam didn't need to check the map again, for he knew he was on the right track. He cautiously made his way towards the other end of the ridge. No Nod patrols in sight so far.

At last, he made it the other side of the hill, and sure enough, the familiar sight of camo nets assured him that he was at the right place. Sam waved at some of the personnel walking down below. One of the soldiers noticed, and soon that alcove in the hill was bustling like a small army of scurrying ants.



Sam found a slope and made his way down, identifying himself to the soldiers at the bottom. Then, he saw a man approach him from one of the Humvees. He had brown hair, and a face even the most rookie of GDI soldiers would recognize.

"Welcome, son," said the man.

"General Sheppard. It's good to see you alive and well, sir," said Sam, with a salute.

"I'm sure glad to see another GDI face, too. What's your name, son?"

"Captain Samuel Harden, 23rd Battalion."

"23rd? You one of Owen's boys?"

"Yep. He picked up your distress call. What's a General like yourself doing out here, sir?"

"About damn time. I went AWOL some time back when the UN ordered my regiment to disband. We've been laying low ever since. Recently, rumors surfaced about GDI activity in the South American continent. We tried to head south through the Mexican border, but we underestimated the Nod presence there. Anyway, we attacked a Nod outpost up on that plateau down southwest from here to send out a distress signal. We then withdrew here, blowing up the bridge behind us. We've been holed up here for a while. Nod patrols are all over the area. Oh yes, I have someone I'd like to introduce you to. Arguably, he's currently more important than I am," said Sheppard as he laughed, calling out to someone, "Dymitr!"

A man in civilian clothes with a bulletproof vest approached them. As he got closer, Sam could see that his figure was rather slender, with a head full of red hair.

"Hi, I am Dymitr Kasza, at your service," the man said as he extended a hand to Sam, who shook it.

"He's a weapons engineer from one of my bases. When I took after hearing the UN's disbandment order, I went looking for him."

"Ah, I happen to know of a certain someone you'll get along with just fine," replied Sam, allowing himself a little laugh.

As they talked, the soldiers were already taking down the camo nets. Sam counted three Humvees and one M113. When the final net came off, the captain blinked in disbelief.

"Sir, is that...?" asked Sam, unable to finish his question.

"Yes it is, son," replied the General as he turned to face the vehicle, "That is indeed a M270 MLRS. That's how we blew up the bridge."

"You were hiding *that* here?"

"It was salvaged from an older base I was in. It has about two salvos left. Let's put it to good use."

"Roger that, sir. I can see how you did a number on that Nod outpost," said Sam, as he collected his thoughts on what to do next. Having an MLRS opened up a ton of new options.

Cheers and shouts of triumph rang out as Sheppard's forces entered the remains of the Nod outpost. They synced up frequencies, the MLRS callsign being Lemur 1. Introductions were made, and though he tried to hide it, Sam could see that Sheppard was not pleased to see eagles mixed in with Globotech. The reunion was short-lived, however, as Sam caught sight of an explosion on the other side of the canyon. Through his binos, Sam spotted the fiery remains of Iron 1. Surviving GDI soldiers were scrambling for cover when a Nod flame tank emerged from the lip of the slope. It bathed everything below in napalm, the soldiers now walking flames, flailing about helplessly before collapsing to the ground. As the flame tank slowly descended down the slope, a Bradley and two M110 howitzers followed behind it.

"*Lemur 1... fire for effect,*" radioed Sam, ignoring the pit in his stomach as he relayed the coordinates. The M270's missile rack extended up before turning to face the hill, unleashing a salvo of rockets at the target location. The rockets blanketed the area with explosions, the fuel tank and ammo racks ignitions reducing the slope to a smouldering char, as if an old god had unleashed a firestorm on the land.

The final stretch of the mission boiled down to getting the convoy back to the coastline, while avoiding intercepting attack buggies and cycles. The large number of machine guns on the Humvees and M113s could easily pepper softskin vehicles, the Guardian's shotgun ammo easily shattering the attack cycles' cockpits in a tight spread. However, Nod was now well aware of their presence, and was funneling existing patrols into the area.

Finally, they reached the shoreline, but at a heavy cost. The outdated M113s had a hard time keeping up, and out of the 3 in total, only one survived, the obsolete armour torn apart by the agile attack cycles. The biggest loss was undoubtedly Iron 1, something which Sam felt even after the hovercrafts landed and whisked the convoy over the water.

"Thanks again, son," said Sheppard as he stood next to Sam, overlooking the vast blue ocean under the sun.

Sam nodded, "I'm sure you and Owen will have plenty of things to talk about when we get back."

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## Chapter 4: Viperbeat

General Sheppard's return sent waves of renewed hope among the surviving GDI ranks. The icing on the cake was that he managed to contact and bring other elements of his remnant forces into the fold. The most notable were the Crossbones, an elite tank battlegroup, the crown jewel being three functional X-66 Mammoth Tanks. As they were difficult to maintain due to their size, most Mammoth tanks fell into disrepair or were simply abandoned. Joe's eyeballs almost left their sockets in awe when he first saw them.

There were, however, some grievances.

"Come on, Owen. I told you they would come back to entice you," began Sheppard. They were both seated in the Colonel's office in GD-3. It wasn't the most cozy, but it did have windows.

"With all due respect, General, I went to them."

"That doesn't make it any better for crying out loud! They reeled you right in and caught you, like a fish on a hook."

"General, we had no choice. We can both agree that the UN's order to disband was both ludicrous and unnecessary."

"And I agree, but to make a deal with these arms dealers? Surely you could have done better than that."

"Really? Do tell, Sheppard. Maybe it was something I missed, because the last I checked, GDI was out of options."

"I managed to get Kasza, and you have that combat engineer and sharp recon guy of yours. We can rebuild GDI ourselves, Owen. We don't need the help of some posh megacorp who's gonna ask for something in return, and mark my words, they ALWAYS ask for something in return."

"What about logistics, Sheppard? We can't exactly move around as easily as we used to. Our trip here? Globotech arranged that. They have strings to pull, and in return, they ask that we take the fight to Nod."

The General fell silent. Owen leaned in from behind his desk and continued, "We may very well be one of the last GDI cells in the world able to stand up to Nod."

Sheppard picked up a small GDI flag on Owen's desk, briefly fiddling with it. "Well, I guess you're right on that one. We don't have much of a choice." He got up, and gave Owen a salute, to which Owen reciprocated.

"Just be careful with them," replied Sheppard as he headed for the door, "Don't let them pull a fast one on you."

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*6 months later...*

*June 2011*

The whirring of Chinook blades was the only thing Sam heard as he sat in the dark cargo hold, a few crates of ammunition and supplies keeping him company. The chopper was en route to Delta 20, another shelter city. A few miles from it was a GDI base, designated D-20 after the city's name. The presence of rivers running through the area meant that flat land suitable for a base had to be slightly further away from the city, and while such bases were usually for rapid city defense, D-20 had an additional role.

Development of the bipedal walker schematics provided by Globotech finally bore fruit with the help of Dr. Kasza, and Sam, being one of Owen's more experienced field operatives, was tasked with testing out the prototype himself. From the current test schedule, the walker was meant to enter service in a month, but they were under pressure from Owen to quickly push it to mass-production.

And Sam could understand why, for they had awakened the scorpion, and invoked its wrath.

Three months ago, numerous missiles were launched on small isolated European towns with devastating results. A media blackout was put in place, but photos and videos slowly made their way onto alternative news sites. They were clearly chemical weapons, specifically Tiberium-based weapons, as the aftermath left the town inhabitants horribly mutated, with hospitals of neighbouring towns buckling to treat survivors caught in the fringes of the blast areas. Days after this tragedy, the mask slipped, and Nod forces began openly taking over smaller nations. For those who openly supported or accepted the Brotherhood's sentiments, it was a peaceful takeover (supposedly at least), but nations more resistant to Nod propaganda became the grounds of fierce bloodbaths. Nod wasn't satisfied with just conquering them, they were made an example of. Just as Owen

predicted, the UN was in no capacity to do anything. The disbanded GDI armies who were returned to European nations were crushed with impunity from lack of centralized leadership and numbers.

A week later, the terror came here. Thetha-17 came under attack by waves of Nod forces. With the northeastern bridge destroyed, they attacked from the southeast and southwest roads. Sam theorized that the sightings of Nod soldiers in the nearby forests months ago meant they were looking for another way around, and he wished the local GT patrols smoked them out before they could do that. He also wondered what Dr. Giraud thought about this, as it was the Chilean's home shelter city.

Sam's mind jolted back to reality as he felt the Chinook rapidly slow down and twist into a descent.

*"This is Mule 3. We have touched down,"* came the pilot's voice on the speakers upon landing.

As the rear ramp lowered, the Sun peeked out from the horizon, prompting Sam to shield his eyes as the base's interior unfolded before him. A Tiberium Refinery was on the western end, with the harvester just leaving the side gate, and as it lowered, he could see the unmistakable crystalline glow in the distance. The barracks was on the northern corner, but was obscured from this side by the advanced guard tower at the base's center. He stepped out and acknowledged the engineers who saluted him before they went about unloading the supplies.

The usual ambience of a base filled the air of their conversation, like the lowering of gates and the rumbling of vehicle engines. Sam didn't take long to find what he was looking for. The war factory was situated near the front gate. Next to it were ten gantry cages arranged in a U-shape facing him. Each "cage" had a set of ladders, some suspended spare weapon mounts and other tools. Out of the ten cages, seven of them were occupied, each with a bipedal mech.

Named the "Kazuar" by Kasza, it was meant to be rapidly deployed for a multitude of roles, either responding to shifting battle lines, navigating in urban combat, or taking Tiberium fields. Ten prototypes were built for testing. The surrounding terrain was relatively flat save for a few hills, had medium levels of vegetation, and was dotted by a few Tiberium fields. Overall, an ideal place to put it through its paces.

The walker had a reverse-joint leg design, with its grey feet looking like giant shoes. The legs were connected to the body via a narrow torso. The body had a glass canopy, similar to the older Orca aircraft, and he could see some ladder steps on the side for pilots to get into. Each arm mounted a double-barrel heavy machine gun, with an ammo drum underneath. Towards the rear was another smaller glass canopy, and looking through it, he could see the rough outline of two seats next to each other.

"Ah, Captain Harden, good to see you again," came a familiar voice. Dymitr climbed down from one of the open Kazuar cockpits.

"Looks like you've been busy, Mr. Kasza," whistled Sam, taking another look at the machines tucked in their cages.

"Tak," replied Kasza, "And you were right. This person you mentioned when we first met. Quite an interesting guy. He's the one who painted some of the decals you see."

"Oh?" said Sam as he turned to admire some of the art painted on the machines. He didn't even hear the heavy footsteps getting louder behind him.

"You guys are talking about me, aren't you?" came a voice via loudspeakers behind them.

Sam turned to see another Kazuar, this one slightly different from the rest. Instead of heavy machine guns for weapons, it had a pair of gatling guns, and a shark mouth was spray-painted just below the canopy. A white "01" was painted on the side.

"There you are, Sam. I saw your chopper coming in for a landing."

"How come you get to play with the good stuff, Joe?" replied Sam.

"Kasza made a variant and had me try it out," chuckled Joe, "I call it the Kazuar Shredder. If it's successful, I may even design a separate model altogether."

"Huh, interesting," said Sam, raising an eyebrow, "So, the pressing question now is: Where's mine?"

"Ah, right this way," interjected Dymitr, gesturing Sam to follow him. After walking a few steps, he pointed to an idle Kazuar with an open canopy, the number "10" emblazoned on the side.

"Here it is. Cougar 10. Since its the newest model of the batch, it enjoys an updated auto-balancing system and user interface," Dymitr announced proudly, handing Sam the ignition key.

"Cougar, huh?" remarked Sam as he climbed into the cockpit. The interior shared many resemblances to an aircraft's cockpit. It had a comfy black leather seat, with twin control sticks and a screen on the dashboard, with another screen propped up above it. A series of coloured buttons lined the lower screen on both sides. Upon inserting the

ignition key and turning it, the dark interior lit up and the screens flashing on as the machine hummed to life. The bottom screen displayed hull integrity, engine status, and ammunition tickers. The top screen displayed feed from a forward camera below the nose.

“Alright, Sam, here’s the basic rundown,” said Dymitr through the still-open canopy, “The right stick is for turning and moving. The left stick is for torso twisting and pitching, while also having an index finger button to reset the torso’s position. Both sticks have thumb caps to cover the fire triggers. The foot pedal on your right is a speed boost. Finally, the button to close the canopy is on the left of your main screen, and the lock is just below it. Wouldn’t want anyone to manually try to force their way in with the external door handle in the middle of a fight, now would we? The upper screen is a rear-view camera for reversing. That’s about it. Take her out nice and easy.”

Sam wasn’t even aware of the thumb caps, and nodded to himself when flipping them open to reveal the red fire buttons. As the canopy closed, the outside sounds and engine humming toned down. Sam put on the headpiece, checked if communications were working, and eased the right stick forward. Sam was amazed with the walker’s balance when shifting feet, as it made a few steps forward. He turned the walker to the right, and walked out of the alcove, where Joe’s Shredder was waiting. The two headed out the main gate.

They passed abandoned farmlands to the northwest, occupied by GDI patrols as makeshift forward outposts, before approaching a bridge.

*“This is a good spot to test the throttle,”* said Joe over the radio, *“push the right stick forward, and press on the foot pedal.”*

And with that, Joe’s Shredder walked towards the bridge before picking up speed as it sprinted across. Sam followed suit, keeping an eye on the speed meter. The acceleration was slower compared to a Humvee, but the walker could reach a top speed of 53 km/h.

*“Pretty impressive eh, Sam? And that’s with the speed limiter on. While the walker is harder to handle at higher speeds, veteran pilots may get the hang of it,”* said Joe as he continued onward. Up ahead was a hill, which, according to Joe, was where Delta 20 resided on.

*“We’ll visit the city on our way back,”* continued Joe as he entered a tunnel cutting into the hill, *“but for now, we’ll head to a forward GDI post for a little...’live fire’ exercise.”*

*"Live fire exercise?"* asked a puzzled Sam as they moved through the tunnel, orange orbs dotting the ceiling, bright enough to not warrant the need for the Kazuars' headlights.

*"We encountered them about two weeks ago. These quadruped creatures were almost as big as M113s. The grunts on patrol called 'em 'Mantises', because they have a pair of bladed arms that can cut through body armour as if they were butterfly heads."*

*"I see. Tiberium lifeforms?"*

*"Possibly,"*

*"Sounds terrifying. Are you sure we're safe in here?"* asked Sam in a half-joke.

*"Just get 'em before you get swarmed and you'll be fine,"* replied Joe cheekily.

The tunnel curved to the right in a gradual bend, about a third of the way in. Eventually, it straightened out, the distant light at the end coming into view as they neared the northeastern exit, the road cutting straight through a forest. Around the exit was a makeshift barricade of sandbags on either side of the road, guarded by a few soldiers. A Humvee was parked by the sandbags, the gunner on the roof keeping an eye on the surroundings. Next to the Humvee was a tent, and two Kazuar walkers with the numbers "4" and "5," explaining the empty gantry cages back at the base. To the far left was a canyon, and a destroyed bridge above in the distance. To the far right was a river, the same one they crossed before entering the tunnel.

*With that bridge down, the only access route to shelter city Delta 20 was up a slope near the tunnel's southeastern entrance,* thought Sam.

*"Good morning, gentlemen,"* greeted Joe through the speakers, *"I trust you had an uneventful night."*

*"I wish, sir,"* replied one of the sentries as he pointed towards the barricade, *"See for yourself."*

Sam took a few steps forward, his eyes scanning the area ahead. The vegetation in the area was in patches instead of just a thick forest, so there wasn't much concealing what he was looking for. On the left side, at least 10 carcasses of some unfamiliar creature lay on the ground about 100 meters from the sandbags, some even dessicated to mere husks. Their bodies were brown with some black stripes, which Sam guessed to be camouflage among tall trees and shadows. They had long, thin legs, connecting below the main body in a bulbous mass of tissue. Their mouths, if Sam could call them that, were shaped like a pair of giant hooked scissors flipped vertically, and upon squinting his eyes a little, he could pick out the pairs of arms on either side of the mouth, ending in sharp blades.



*So that's what they look like.*

*"Feeling like going on patrol, Sam?" said Joe, "From what we've seen here, these creatures like to go in packs. The ones who came this way are probably scavenging for food. Now I'm no animal expert, but these attacks were consistent, so they weren't a lone pack. There could be a nest somewhere down the road. If we can take out that nest, we can explore further down the road."*

*"If there is a nest, it would certainly be a threat to the city. Let's see what we can find. It would be a good field test for these walkers too," replied Sam.*

*"Aha, now you're speaking my language, Sam!" exclaimed Joe, "Let's go!"*

*"Hold your horses, Sergeant Joe. You trying to take over my job?" A few laughs emanated from the men on guard as Sam continued, "We'll have one of the Kazuars here tag along with us. The other one can remain here."*

One of the soldiers nodded and made his way to Kazuar Number 4, closing the hatch and initiating the startup cycle.

*"This is Cougar 4 reporting in," came his voice on the radio.*

*"Alright, let's head out," replied Sam.*

The three Kazuars marched out of the outpost and to the north, with Sam in front, Joe's Shredder to his left, and Cougar 4 on the right.

*"Ugh, that's gonna stain," remarked Joe as he tried in vain to avoid a Mantis carass, his right foot crunching it like a hydraulic press, some of the putrefacted mush sticking to walker's the sole like a weak glue.*

*"Any sensors on this thing, Cougar 1?" asked Sam.*

*"Negative. We'll have to rely on visual line-of-sight. However, if we're going to use these to traverse Tiberium fields, I may draw up plans for biosensors later on."*

Because of the scattered vegetation, there was no definite path through the woods.

*"Halt," said Sam as he throttled down, "Do you have a zoom on this thing, Cougar 1?"*

*"Above you, Cougar 10. Fold 'em down," came Joe's reply.*

Sam looked above and saw a pair of binos attached to the ceiling via a segmented arm. He pulled it down to his eye level and adjusted the zoom knob.

The vegetation in the morning sun was a mix of yellow, brown and black lines, garnished by the green leaves. As he zoomed in to see past the trees in front of him, he noticed that some of the black lines to the left were moving, with no wind blowing.

They were distant, but there was definitely movement. Sam ordered the other two to maintain some space as he cautiously moved forward. 50 meters later, Sam neared a narrow pathway. Following it, he came near a hill, with a cave leading into the hillside some distance away. It was here that he discovered the source of the shifting black lines.

Guarding the entrance to the cave were two Mantises. Their bodies were balanced about their four legs. Sam could also see the legs connecting to the bulbous mass of tissue more clearly, what he guessed would be the thorax. Their arms seemed to be much smaller compared to the long legs, but he figured they were for tearing into prey once the first vicious bite was delivered from their jaws. Near the cave entrance was a small pile of human bodies. Another Mantis emerged from the cave, but this one was smaller than the other two, but had longer arms. It approached the pile of bodies before grabbing one and dragging it into the cave.

*Hmmm, smaller stature with longer arms. Could they be workers? The warriors guard the nest, while the workers sort out the food. Fascinating. Specialization of roles, just like ants,* thought Sam. Out of the corner of his right eye, a third warrior Mantis appeared, dragging another dead soldier. He zoomed in on the pile of bodies, trying to identify them. While the uniforms were a crumpled mess, the helmet was unmistakable.

*Nod militia helmets. This is bad. Very bad.*

*"Cougar 1, Cougar 4, I think I found the viper's nest,"* radioed Sam, *"But that's not all. It seems like they're having some minced Scorps for dinner."*

*"Damn, that's pretty close to the city, too,"* replied Joe, *"Shall we attack the nest?"*

*"We will, just not now. We'll head back to base, and have an armour div-"*

Sam froze. He just noticed one of the guards turning to approach him.

*"Cougar 10, what was that? Say again, Cougar 10,"* came Joe's voice again.

The Mantis stopped at 70 meters, trying to discern what the Kazuar was. Sam's thumbs slowly popped open the trigger caps, hoping that the creature would treat it as an inorganic object and move on. Suddenly, the Mantis let out an audible shriek and broke into a charge.

"Crap," gasped Sam as he thumbed down. The four barrels unleashed a flurry of lead at the Mantis, ripping apart bits of flesh from the creature's body and splattering the ground with green blood.

*"I guess we're fighting,"* said Joe.

*"Guess we are. Move up and surround the cave,"* replied Sam.

The second guard moved to engage them, when a loud rotary sound came behind Sam, as Joe's Shredder ripped through some of the vegetation on his left. In a split second, the second guard was eviscerated. Halting at 50 meters from the cave, they could see that the entrance was big enough to have one Kazuar walker move through.

*"Joe, move to the right and prepare to fire into the cave. Cougar 4 and myself will pick off any stragglers,"* he ordered.

*"Roger that. Moving into shredding position,"* replied Joe, already spinning up the barrels.

*"Copy. Let's squash some bugs,"* replied Cougar 4, his thumbs just above the triggers.

As the walkers got into position, they could hear faint shrieks from inside, and a low rumbling on the ground. Sam turned on his headlights to see some ways in, the edges of the beams illuminating the floor and walls. Then, as the rumbling got closer, the fringes of the light beams picked out faint shadows dancing in the darkness. These shadows began to grow, and suddenly manifested into a legion of sharp blades and legs.

"NOW!" yelled Sam, and Joe's dual gatling guns tore into the darkness, at a slight angle. The delay between the sighting and fire order caused two Mantises to avoid the deadly lead wall. Before Sam could fire, the creature deftly sidestepped to the right about its four legs before continuing its charge, darting forward in a terrifying burst of speed. He tried to reposition his torso and fired. The shots took some power out of the lunge, but the creature was too close. The upper jaw came down against the cockpit in an ear-splitting screech, leaving a thick scratch on the canopy. Thanks to the auto-balancer, the Kazuar's nose reverted to its upright position.

Sam backpedaled, turning his torso to the left and unleashing second burst. As the Mantis recoiled to strike again, its raised posture put its thorax right in line with the right machine guns. Lead ripped through the bulbous mass, instantly causing the Mantis to collapse and convulse, as if suddenly losing motor control.

Sam regained his composure and looked around. Cougar 4 just dispatched the second straggler while Joe continued his punishing barrage into the cave. Anything that

crossed the invisible wall of lead was instantly eviscerated. Some rounds even bounced off the cave's walls and struck the creatures further behind. A carcass pile was forming just before the entrance, limiting the movement of the creatures further within the cave, and the outflow of Mantises began to slow down.

*"I'll have to stop in about ten seconds to avoid overheating,"* said Joe, his thumbs still on the fire buttons.

*"Roger that,"* replied Sam, *"Cougar 4, we're pulling back. Cougar 1 will cover our retreat."*

The two Kazuars turned around and pulled back, picking up speed and trying to dart around the pockets of vegetation the best they could. Joe let go of the triggers and the lead barrage stopped, quickly turning around to bolt. Faint smoke trails emanated from the two gatling guns.

Eventually, The three managed to find their way back to the road, and reached the blockade safely, no bugs following them.

*"Well that was exhilarating, eh Sam?"* said Joe.

*"Roger, but we're not out of the woods yet."*

*"I thought we just got out of the woods."*

*"Don't you start. Anyway, Cougar 4, thanks for the assistance. Resume your post,"* said Sam as he neared the blockade, switching to the speakers, "Attention all units. We've located the nest of these creatures, but there were corpses of Nod soldiers as well. Keep alert. The bugs are the least of our concerns."

And with that, Sam headed back through the tunnel, Joe following behind. Two threats in close proximity to the city was more than he could chew, and he didn't even catch sight of the other one. This pocket of uncertainty hung over Sam's mind as possible contingency plans raced through his mind.

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## Chapter 5: Armour and Speed

While Sam didn't manage to attack the nest the first time, he returned in the next two days, with interest. Five Kazuars annihilated any ounce of defense the Mantises could muster. While Sam considered leading a force inside the cave to see how deep the nest ran, he couldn't afford such a luxury. Delta 20's sapper team led by Joe got to work placing explosives a few meters into the cave's entrance, the cave-in ensuring nothing got out of there.

Now that the way was clear, Sam could scout ahead. He followed the road through the forest, which lead eastward, a Tiberium field growing near it. Next to the field was a large black circular object, about the size of a war factory. The ground behind it was charred, as if it crashed.

*Part of a ship? No, those charred marks and displaced soil...a meteorite, perhaps?*

The road eventually intersected with a northbound route, forming a junction by the river. A junction that was walled off with turrets covering both routes, a harvester grazing in the Tiberium field.

Having spotted the base, a little more recon work revealed something interesting. Sam noticed that Chinooks periodically arrived to drop supplies, indicating the lack of local production means, meaning the base itself was relatively new.

*So I guess they did set up shop some time during the past two weeks, when the bugs first showed up. I wonder if the Tiberium harvesting caused a stir...*

Nod would be alerted to their presence eventually, especially with the weakened Mantis presence. When Sam requested for support, the only available units were from the Crossbones battle group. Leading the armoured strike force was Major Frank Rodgers, who happily agreed to assist them for some much-awaited payback, even fielding one of their prized Mammoth tanks.

Sam was amazed such vehicles still existed. These tanks became relics of the past war when Nod gained power and began a massive purge of GDI cells. Entire bases were

wiped out and the knowledge to produce these lost along with them. Despite being dated and requiring hefty maintenance, they were fearsome armoured beasts which still dwarfed GDI and GT's main battle tanks by a mile.

The next day dawned, the day of the operation. D-20's forces would be split up into three waves. A small wave would poke the Nod base via the eastern route before retreating and blowing the bridge behind them. The main wave would hit the base first, followed shortly from the Crossbones' attack. The auxiliary wave head by Sam would then move up to support the first wave once the turrets are down. The Nod base would be caught in a pincer formation, at least, that was the plan.

"I don't get it, Sam," said Joe as he fed fresh belts into the Shredder's right gatling gun, "Why split our forces into two waves instead of piling them into one gigantic steamrolling ball?"

"Because, Joe, it is best to keep some forces in reserve instead of putting all the eggs into a single basket. This is Nod we're talking about. They're a sneaky bunch. Always have been, always will be," replied Sam.

"Fair point, though I'd prefer to just roll right over them once and for all."

"And that's why I'm Captain and you're Sergeant, Joe."

"Well alrighty then, big boy Sam," laughed Joe, trying in vain to save face.

"I'll be overseeing the preparations. See you in the field," replied Sam, his face slightly darkening with regret as he left. He knew that remark bit in a little too deep.

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*"Rhino 1 to Bear 1. We're reaching the crossroads northwest of the Nod base,"* radioed the Grant from the Mammoth tank. The Crossbone strike team consisted of four Abrams tanks, two Humvees, and the Mammoth itself.

Visibility dulled and vegetation grew thicker as they turned into the road which would lead to the base. The Humvees were at the front, followed by the tanks, the Mammoth being in the middle. They took up both lanes of the road with some spacing between each vehicle. The viewports of the tanks meant they only had a frontal cone view with a secondary camera on the turret, and the lack of manpower meant the Humvees were the only ones with gunners.

Unfortunately, it was these factors coupled with a dash of overconfidence that led to their undoing.

The driver of the first Abrams tank suddenly saw a figure running out of the woods on his right, and the next instant, the viewport was bathed in flames, causing him to instinctively slow down. The front Humvee's gunner saw this and began blind-firing at the roadside, distracted and oblivious to the rocket hurling towards it from the side. As the Humvee erupted in flames, the remaining gunner was thrown into a panic as he tried to discern where the enemy was.

*"This is Rhino 1, we've been ambushed. Attempting to exit the forest,"* radioed Grant as the Mammoth tank attempted to push the Humvee wreckage aside. Just then, he heard screaming from the rear of the tank, a chill running down his spine at the thought of hearing it that loud from within the tank.

The screaming was stopped with an explosion in its place, followed by a loud hissing noise coming from directly above. Grant and his crew of looked up, and saw sparks flying as something begin to cut the hatch open. Grant's hand moved towards his sidearm.

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The main wave stopped at the outskirts of the woods, the Tiberium field in the distance. They were waiting for visual confirmation of the Crossbone strike team on the other side, and upon seeing them, would move at combat speed towards the southwest gate of the Nod base, which according to Sam's recon work, had two cannon turrets guarding it, same with the northwest gate. The leader of the charge was the commander of the Abrams tank Bear 1, and it had been 20 minutes since they received Rhino 1's message of reaching the crossroads.

Just as Bear 1 was about to enter the hatch to radio Sam, he spotted the visage of a tank exiting the woods up north, followed by another, and to his relief, the Mammoth tank right behind.

"Hell yeah, bout time we got this party started," he said to his crew as he closed the hatch, *"This is Bear 1, we have visual confirmation of the Crossbone strike team. Commencing assault on the Nod base, out."*

The wave of 4 Abrams tanks and 4 Kazuars began to pick up speed as they made haste towards the south gate, with Bear 1 in the rear to coordinate the attack. Cannon fire rang out as the tanks and turrets exchanged fire. As the defense line took fire, the gate lowered to reveal two attack cycles who sped towards the tanks.

*"Bikes coming in. Let's give them a warm welcome,"* radioed Cougar 7 as he opened fire. Flames erupted under the first bike and it skidded as its front wheel caught a few rounds. It flipped sideways like a fiery tumbleweed before coming to a halt, exploding in a ball of flames. The second bike, switching priorities to the Kazuars, stepped on the gas as it closed the distance with Cougar 6 on its left. It fired two rockets before speeding past the walker, the rockets landing square in the right arm.

The third Kazuar, Cougar 8, turned around to face the remaining bike, whom he guessed was making another pass. His quick thinking managed to dispatch the second bike before it could open fire, the glass canopy shattering and the pilot being thrown out of the bike.

As one of the cannon turrets fell, the south gate opened again. Four Scorpion light tanks rolled out, followed by a squad of five tank hunters behind.

*"This is Bear 3. Optics damaged, but we're still combat capable."*

*"Something's wrong. This is way too many units. The Crossbones should have drawn their fire by now,"* radioed Bear 1.

Cougar 8, the fourth Kazuar, was on the left flank. He glanced over to the Tiberium field. He didn't see any exchange of gunfire, but what he did see was the Crossbone strike team crossing the field, towards them. He counted four Abrams tanks and the Mammoth tank slightly behind.

*What? Why? That's not part of the plan,* he thought. He got his answer when a cannon shell ripped through the cockpit, killing him instantly.

*"Taking fire from the left! Has Nod outflanked us?"* radioed Bear 2 in confusion.

*"What the hell is going on over there?"* demanded Bear 1's tank commander as he instructed the gunner to turn towards the left, just in time to see the twin barrels of the Mammoth tank turning to face them.

*"Rhino 1, cease fire, that is a friendly!"*

No response came.

*"Cease fire, damn it!"*

His vision was filled with flames and smoke as two shells struck the tank, cooking off an ammo rack in the process.

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*"What's taking the first wave so long?"* wondered Sam as he checked his watch, seated in his Kazuar. It had been 30 minutes since the attack on the base commenced.

*"I don't like this. Feels like something went south, and I'm talking Mexican-border south,"* replied Joe, in his Shredder. They waited with Cougar 4 at the blockade just outside the tunnel. In front of them, 3 tanks were on standby.

Another 5 minutes passed by. Just on the horizon, Sam could see something appear on the road. Lowering his binos, he could see the outline of a GDI tank column, and zooming in on the turret, spotted the familiar insignia consisting of a skull and bones. Confused, Sam attempted to hail them.

*"Rhino 3, this is Cougar 10. Status Report. What happened at the Nod base?"*

No reply came.

*"Rhino 3, respond."*

Still no reply. The tank column drew closer to the blockade.

*"Something's off,"* remarked Joe.

The tanks fanned out to form a line of 3.

*"Rhino team, stand down!"*

*"Yep, definitely off,"* repeated Joe, spinning up his guns.

The Crossbone tanks opened fire on the barricade.

*"This is Bear 5. What are your orders, Cougar 10?"*

*"Bear 6 reporting main gun and optics damaged. Repeat, not combat effective!"*

Sam froze, his mind unable to process the ambush.

*"Cougar 10, your orders!"* repeated Bear 5 in desperation.

Sam finally recovered from his daze and gave the order. *"All units, return fire! Aim for the guns to disable them."*

*"Fuckin finally,"* said Joe as he throttled up, running to the left and disappearing into the woods. The Crossbone tank on the left flank turned to fire at him, but the shot missed wildly.

The defending tanks acknowledged with a returning barrage. It was tough fighting an enemy with the same armour they had, on top of being caught by surprise. However, Sam did notice something; the accuracy of the enemy was unusually low. Very few shots were on target, and the Crossbones were supposed to be hardened veterans.

*Which boils down to two possibilities: some form of hysteria, or hijacking,* he thought.

With Sam's coordination, the tank on the left was taken out of action, two cannon shells hitting the turret's side as it turned to face Joe, who was still nowhere to be seen. As Sam focused on the incoming enemies, he caught sight of some distant fast movers. As they overtook the Crossbone tanks, their visages took the form of three Scorpion tanks.

*"Scorps? What the hell is going on?!"* exclaimed Bear 5.

*"They were hijacked, and just dropped the mask,"* replied Sam, *"All units, do not hold back. Kazuars and grenadiers, focus on the light tanks. Bear team, take out the Abrams' guns."*

At this, Sam heard a loud whirring noise in the distance. Joe's Shredder stepped out of the woods behind the two tanks and shredded their engine vents, stopping them dead in their tracks.

*"All yours, Sam,"* he said, before backing into the woods again.

*"Joe, get your ass back here! You're not some ghillie boy!"* exclaimed Sam, before giving in and throttling up, *"Cougar 4, on me. We're supporting Cougar 1. The Scorpion tanks are down, but 2 out of 3 Crossbone tanks are still operational. Bear team, I want those tanks out of commission yesterday!"*

*"Roger. Cougar 4 rolling out."*

Just then, Sam heard a blast coming from the woods.

*"Shit, that was close. Well, I seem to have an RPG problem. Tank hunters entering the forest,"* said Joe calmly.

Sam made his way into the forest, with Cougar 4 behind him. As they approached Joe's location and the sound of his dual gatling guns, they spotted at least 4 dead bodies 40 meters away, with a lot of vegetation reduced to ribbons on the ground. Blasts were still ringing out as the remaining two tanks tried to shell him.

*"Boy, Sam, am I glad to see you,"* said Joe, his guns spinning down.

They pulled back slightly to avoid the cannon shells while picking off the advancing tank hunters. As the skirmish continued, Sam heard the distant sound of metal striking more metal, followed by a second similar sound, then the cannon fire stopped.

*"Bear 5, confirming both Crossbone tanks down."*

*"Fan-fucking-tastic, Bear 5. Keep an eye out for more Scorps on the horizon."*

Suddenly, Sam spotted another vehicle through the vegetation. The engine noises alone made it sound much heavier than the first three.

*Of course. The Mammoth tank.*

*"All units, Crossbone Mammoth tank in sight. Hold your fire. I will handle this one,"* said Sam as he opened the Kazuar canopy.

*"The hell are you doing, Sam?"* asked Joe.

*"Gonna take out the crew. Can't risk losing any more of our armour, especially against that thing. Watch my back."*

*"Man, that's so anti-climatic,"* remarked a disappointed Joe, as Sam undid his seatbelt, took off his headpiece, and jumped out.

He stepped through the tall dead trees, the ones not obliterated by Joe, and inched closer to the iron beast as it tried to push the three tank wrecks aside. Slithering out of the woods, he quickly jumped on the tank, when he noticed the giant hatch was welded clean off.

*So that's how they did it,* thought Sam, a better idea presenting itself. He reached for a flashbang and dropped it in. Though the tank stopped upon hearing the clanking of feet on the armour plating, it was too late for the crew to react, and as they were blinded by the flash, Sam picking them off with his pistol.

Jumping in and pushing the bodies aside, he immediately switched on the radio. *"This is Hawkeye, I've taken control of Rhino 1. Lets mop up the rest of 'em."*

Shouts and cheers were heard on the other channels.

*"Uh, Sam, you may not wanna celebrate yet,"* said Joe.

*"Cougar 4, confirming the fourth Crossbone Abrams tank moving in, with a squad of tank hunters."*

*"Copy that. I'll swing the turret around. Do not engage till I open fire,"* replied Sam, as he switched to the gunner seat, thankful that the spacious interior allowed him to move around easily, even with dead bodies about.

*Holy shit, even with hydraulics, this thing is a bitch to turn*, he cursed to himself, as Sam struggled to bring the turret around. The Crossbone tank and the tank hunters noticed this, and unleashed a volley of fire on it. The interior barely shook as multiple impacts registered on the rear armour.

*"You alright, Sam?!"* exclaimed Joe.

*"I'm fine. Wait for my shot. The armour can take it,"* replied Sam as he continued turning. A second volley of rockets hit the rear armour, and this time, Sam did not like the sound of the alarms that went off.

*"Fuck it,"* he heard Joe over the radio, and in his left periphery vision, he caught sight of bullets ripping through the tank hunters as the Shredder stepped out of the woods. His distracting came at a cost, for the last Crossbone tank turned its cannon towards him.

*"Oh no you don't,"* said Sam as he jammed his thumb on the fire button.

The two shells hit the tank's turret so hard, it actually bent the gun slightly downwards.

But, to Sam's horror, the gun still fired.

*"ARGHH!"* came Joe's scream of pain as the shell tore through the walker.

*"JOE!"* shouted Sam as he switched to the Tusk missiles. He switched targeting to manual, knowing full well the Crossbone tank's IFF would get in the way.

*"You won't fire again, asshole,"* he said with his teeth clenched as he launched a salvo. Four missiles hit the turret dead on. A fountain of fire spouted into the air as a shell cooked off, followed by the firecrackers of the machine gun rounds detonating. A few tank hunters ducked under the fire, but the Kazuars moving up quickly picked them off as they swept the area for hostiles. Sam almost jumped out of the hatch, sprinting towards the rising smoke in the woods. As he got closer, Sam could see the full extent of the damage.

The bent cannon didn't tear through the hull, but instead, ripped through the connecting torso, nearly cleaving the walker in two. Thankfully, the fuel tanks were in the rear hull, so there was no detonation. Sam tried to open the hatch with the external handle, but it was locked from the inside. He repeatedly banged his fists on the canopy, and saw Joe stir inside as he reached for the canopy button. When it slowly popped open, Sam tried to pull him out, causing Joe to wince in pain. A bottomless pit formed in Sam's stomach as he saw Joe's legs, or what was left of them, as they stained the walker's plating with bright crimson trails as Sam pulled him out.

*"F-fuckin' hell, they good me good,"* breathed Joe heavily, as he looked down at the knee stumps. Realizing he could do nothing to help him from here, Sam picked him up, and

ran as fast as his legs could carry him back to the blockade, where injured crew members and grenadiers were patching themselves up.

"MEDIC! I need a medic over here!" shouted Sam. A few soldiers rushed towards him.

"All we've got are bandages," said one of them calmly as he inspected Joe, "We can patch the wound, but we'll need to get him to the triage center."

"Well GET TO IT! And get a Humvee!" replied Sam as they rushed into the small tent. They sat him down on a makeshift sleeping bag, and got to work on bandaging the wound. Even after being wrapped up, the stumps soaked the bandages, as if they would slip off at any time.

The two ran out to start the vehicle parked next to the tent. Sam thanked the stars when he heard the engine roar to life, for it was the single most important vehicle right now.

The two got in the front while Sam set Joe down in the back. The driver hit the gas and the vehicle sped off as quickly as they could. The co-driver adjusted the dial as he picked up the radio.

*"Mink 3 coming in with a man down, I repeat, we have a man down. Requesting a blood transfusion, IV drip and morphine, ASAP!"*

As they cleared the tunnel, Sam noticed Joe's breathing was slowing down, and his eyes were flickering to a close.

"Hey, Joe. Joe! No sleeping. I need you to stay awake. That's an order, Sergeant!"

"Oh come on, Sam. I saved your ass twice. I earned this nap," replied Joe, falling into delirium as his consciousness began to slip.

"Joe...Joe? JOE! Stay with me, Joe!"

The co-driver was waving his arm out the window, shouting for people to clear the road as they approached the second bridge. Suddenly, Sam heard the faint screaming of jet engines in the skies behind. The sun was setting, but through the side window, he could see at least two aircraft coming in from the north. Their engines roared as the city and the woods below them were blanketed with thick clouds of green gas. Sam put a hand on his mouth, resisting the urge to retch as much as he could.

*Those Nod bastards, spat Sam.*

## Chapter 6: Transmissions

*July 2011*

The Nod war room consisted of a workstation with multiple screens, followed by several rows of chairs in front of it. A transmission hub, it was a place where officers could plan troop movements, monitor ongoing operations, and communicate with field commanders from different theatres. Initially, the room was staffed by numerous operators for those functions, but overtime, they were replaced by easily accessible subroutines. To officers, it was merely a place where they went to get a specific task done, before leaving.

To people like Brother Wires, it was a second home.

Part of the Black Hand's intelligence wing, Wires was tasked with procuring information necessary to further the Brotherhood's goals, and more often than not, such information was in the enemy's hands. His duties also involved testing new Nod prototypes, as the latest tech was always given to the Black Hand first. However, with Nod poised to emerge as the world's superpower, aside from his regular duties, Wires was tasked with a much greater role.

"There you are," boomed a low-pitched voice from behind. A figure dressed in full Confessor gear strode into the war room, "I take it you have something for me."

"Ah, Commander Abrax, yes, I do have many things," replied Wires, a wide smile forming on his face as he opened some tabs on the screen, "First off, we had some success against a particular GDI remnant force that still squirms and struggles. By carefully tracking their movements, I've managed to lay a nice little surprise for them. The little birdies are now far away from the vicinity of Delta 20, courtesy of a tiberium bombing. They seemed to be fielding some sort of new unit as well. Also, destroying the communications outpost was extra crispy, courtesy of the new Viper drones. They are good at making fried Yellows."

"Great work, Wires," replied Abrax, studying the pictures of the aftermath at Delta 20, "Continue your efforts in clipping the wings of these little birds. Now, about the project..."

Wires nodded, before turning to the screen again. "CABAL, display data on Project W.I.R.E.S."

A red faded face appeared on one of the side-screens, replying in a disembodied electronic voice, "Affirmative. Loading data of Project W.I.R.E.S."

The abbreviation W.I.R.E.S displayed itself on screen in big red letters, followed by the phrase "World Infusion, Reprogramming, Education, Subjugation."

"Hmmm, the steps do have some degree of practicality and merit to them," nodded Abrax, "Though I initially recall the project to be under the title of 'R.I.S.E'."

"All the better if it's catchy," replied Wires, smiling as he threw his arms up in a shrug.

"Just see to it that this plan goes through smoothly," replied Abrax as he turned to Wires, "The unrest within the Brotherhood is growing, and we cannot falter now. Some of our brothers forget that we, the Black Hand, exist to enforce Kane's will, even after his seclusion. Their wavering faith from his lack of appearances is merely an emotional fault. Also, what have you found about the militia forces?"

"Ah yes," replied Wires, the smile never leaving his face, "This militia seems to have an arsenal and reserve force of their own. This may be what turned the GDI remnants from birds on the run, to an annoying hawk with talons. However, upon analyzing their troop movements, GDI and this militia seem to function as two entities instead of one. This may be a weakness we can exploit."

"Interesting. See if you can find a fault that runs deep enough, and we may just undo their little alliance. Continue to find out more about them," replied Abrax as he turned away, "Meanwhile, there is work to be done. We have a world to take."

~~~End of Phase 1~~~

## Phase 2: Arming to Win



## Chapter 7: Black Hand

*3 months later...*

*October 2011*

*Brazil*

“Captain Strauss, incoming transmission. It’s on a Black Hand frequency,” reported one of the comm operators.

“Ah, so zhe Black Hand has arrived. Patch it through to me. I’ll take zhis directly,” replied Strauss as he left to enter his office. Upon entering his office, Strauss closed the door, and displayed the video transmission on his desk screen. On the other end, a gentleman greeted him with a wide grin.

*“Brother Strauss, my comrade. How goes your operation?”*

“Brother Wires. It is an honour. The entrances to the city are heavily defended, and I’ve pinpointed the location of three militia outposts in the city’s outskirts that serve as the bulk of the initial resistance. The closest one to our location has been taken out, with two still standing. Oh, and speaking of the militia, you’ll want to see this.”

Strauss uploaded an image to the shared screen. The image contained a white billboard by the roadside, the words “GLOBOTECH” emblazoned in giant blue letters.

“It turns out that our mystery militia are those glorified arms dealers, and they have taken sides. It also appears they have quite the reserve force at their disposal.”

*“Very good, Strauss. Despite your initial setbacks in Chile, this intel will serve us well. As a reward, I will aid you in taking the city, with some new toys. They should reach your location within the next nightfall. Prepare an assault force.”*

*“Will do. Thank you, Brother.”*

And with that, Wires nodded and cut the transmission. As an intelligence officer, he’d rather not intervene in major combat operations, but this would be an excellent opportunity to test out his new algorithm. He tapped into the Nod base’s radar array which housed geodata of the surrounding area. He took note of choke points and alternate routes, painting a portrait of Beta 10’s demise.

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The three heavy Chinook helicopters sailed through the dark sky. In the distance, they could see a familiar emerald glow, with giant black ants on wheels grazing the field with their mechanical mandibles. with a sprawling base just next to it. The southeast of the base overlooking a river was lined with trenches and laser turrets. The bits of metal on the banks were all that remained of the recent GDI hover squad who attempted an amphibious assault, and the charred bodies were the fate of any infantry unfortunate enough to enter the entrenched incinerators' range. The southern flank was the least defended, as hardly any attacks came from there.

The base's forward perimeter had moved up to encompass the now-destroyed outpost, with more Nod infantry and turrets guarding a tunnel entrance to the north. Among the theories created on the enemy's likely plans, the most plausible was a hard-and-fast frontal assault down the main road to the east. Most of Nod's defenses were focused there, but their light fortifications were repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt as the double onslaught was punishing. It is here where the new Nod Eclipse tanks gathered. Barely rushed out into the field two weeks ago, they were the result of rigorous research and testing on the Tachyon particle weaponized into a pulse cannon. Ironically, the first-generation Tachyon hardware and research was sold by Globotech to Nod years ago. Brother Wires smiled to think that the very same tech would now help seal the fate of these arms dealers. However, these weren't the "toys" Wires was referring to.

The three Chinooks touched down at the allocated helipads near the center of the base, the Nod insignias on their hulls bearing a fist at the center instead of the usual scorpion's tail. One by one, the cargo doors lowered. The first cargo hold disgorged a platoon of Black Hand combat and command personnel, serving as Wires' proxy. From the other two cargo holds, six Viper drones rolled out in a line. Built with a lightweight four-wheel frame for quickly traversing terrain, these drones sported a wide angle camera on each turret. While standard-issue Vipers mounted a pair of light lasers as their main armaments, these Black Hand prototypes were armed with far more potent Obelisk Fang lasers, and Wires was itching to test them out further here.

The Confessor relayed his battle plan to Strauss, denoting troop movements, attack lanes, and strike sequence, and the entire base mobilized to his will.

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"This is Outpost B-10-3. Engaging Nod attack wave. They're hitting us pretty hard over here."

The outpost officer was taken aback at the sudden impact of a large force. As the southern flank was the least attacked, Wires focused most of the base's offense there in his battle plan. A company of Scorpion light tanks quickly took down the base's main defenders consisting of Humvees and Vanguard tanks.

As they began to move forward into the base, four TOW missiles struck two unlucky Scorpions, taking them out of commission. Two Armadillos met the attack, and out of their rear hatches emerged bulky suits of armour. Armed with grenade launchers, these peppered the advancing tank line. The Scorpions did not relent, moving up and returning fire even as they took losses. As the tanks approached near-point blank range, they came to a halt, the incinerators following behind sprinting forward and bathing the powersuits in flames. The Globotech operators inside merely laughed as the fire engulfed their vision, confident that the suit's heat resistance would keep them safe. As they stepped forward, ready to pummel the advancing force with impunity, the curtain of fire pulled back to reveal a tank hunter gunline nestled between the tanks. The last thing the powersuit operators saw was a flurry of rockets flying through the air, and their world exploded in a blast.

"Adder here. We have the southern outpost. Our machinists are securing the armoury as we speak," reported a Black Hand officer as Nod forces fanned out to secure the area.

*"Very good. Gather more forces and strike across the bridge,"* replied Wires from the war room miles away.

Wires shifted focus to the northern flank, where an Eclipse squad of four began to hit the second outpost. He watched patiently, waiting for the main players to appear on stage. The northern flank had more vegetation and terrain bumps than the south, and Wires hoped that this coupled with the early morning hours would give the Eclipses a chance to slink away when needed.

Sure enough, in the distance toward the south, the lead Eclipse could see the visages of three M1 Abrams emerge from the road to Beta 10, along with two Humvees as support.

"The bears have arrived. Reel them in," radioed the lead Eclipse as they reversed away from the outpost, most of its defenders taken out. The Eclipses made their way back to the tunnel in reverse. A sabot round struck the lead Eclipse's front track, its reverse slowing to a crawl. A second round heavily dented the hemispherical front armour, and a third breached the hull, killing all crew members inside.

As the GDI response squad made their way closer to the tunnel, six dark shadows descended down the hill behind them. Almost immediately, screams rang out on the radio as the two rear Humvees burst into flames. As the rear Abrams turned its turret to the rear, three pairs of lasers focused on the gun's midsection, outright sawing it off and neutering the tank. The other two stopped, picking up on the commotion, but then found themselves within the crosshairs of the Eclipse tanks once again, and the fire exchange resumed. Three pairs of lasers began to burn a hole behind the second Abram's turret, breaching the plating and cooking off the ammo rack inside. The third Abrams panicked and tried to turn back, but no sooner had it made a 180, the Eclipse tanks sped forward as if on cue. Blue streaks filled the air as tachyon pulses repeatedly struck the tank's armour, till it eventually stopped moving.

Then, all was quiet.

"Razor 3, come in. Main gun disabled. Not combat effective. Razor 3, do you copy? Razor 1? Damn, is anyone still out there?!" exclaimed Razor 2's commander. The machine gunner scanned the surroundings with the M240's camera next to the hatch. Flattened trees dotted the rocky terrain, and the night vision filter flared up as he turned to face the burning vehicle remains behind him.

"Sir, incoming from the front!" reported the driver, as a beam melted his viewport, and he could feel searing heat above his head. Just then, the crew heard a series of low sparking noises. As they got louder, six glowing orange circles formed on the left side of the hull. They quickly began to move from left to right along the turret coupling, shorting out any equipment they came into contact with.

"Andrew, get us outta her-!" The commander's sentence erupted into a shriek as the glows turned into six lasers pouring into the main cabin. Panic overcame the driver as he heard the dissection of his fellow crewman over the radio. With the commander gone and his viewport melted, the driver was completely blind. Stabilizing his breath, he took out his sidearm, and undid the hatch. He crawled out onto the front hull, keeping an eye out for any movement. Not seeing anything in the dark, he clambered up the turret and tried to undo the hatch, but it was locked from the inside. He called out to the commander and the rest of the crew, but no response came. Their screams still echoed in his mind, and the driver, for the briefest moment, thought it best to not see what was inside.

Dazzling flashes and explosions in the distance caught his attention. Up the hill, the driver saw dark shapes taking the form of Nod vehicles converging on the northern outpost.

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Wires was grinning to himself again. His Swarm Protocol had worked, and while he admitted that toying with his prey ate away precious minutes, he now had proof that the protocol enabled a few Viper drones, coupled with a little distraction and chaos, to take down a mighty GDI tank, previously thought to be a formidable opponent.

He turned his attention back to the drones, exploring the ruined outpost through their cameras. A few Ratel APCs would be en route to deliver infantry squads and the machinists needed to destroy the armoury. As the Vipers approached a hill ridge, he could see the tall silhouettes of Beta 10 city. Their target was so close, yet so far. With all three outposts destroyed and their armouries rendered as non-threats, Globotech's response time was severely crippled, relying solely on the city's garrison and GDI forces within to counter-attack with. If Wires' initial plan went well, the main force would strike from the south and breach the city's defense lines there, while northern flank prepared their own assault to complete the pincer attack. His Black Hand Officers were briefed on this, and they were free to act so long as they succeeded in breaching the city. GDI fared better when entrenched, and from here on out, it would come down to sieging the city and wearing it down, which wasn't to his liking.

Wires left that thought in the back of his head as he turned the Viper cameras to eye more of Beta 10. As he scanned the city skyline, he caught sight of a familiar glow on the left, further up the ridge. He moved the six drones up to investigate, and before him, a Tiberium field flourished along the narrow ridge. He allowed himself to take in the sight of the field up close as he moved the Vipers through it. The Tiberium Radiation Index (TRI) sensors onboard registered dangerous levels for humans, and the sickly green wash enveloping this section of the ridge hinted as much.

The alluring crystalline glow made it hard to detect subtle movements within the field, and Wires was taken completely by surprise when a patch of Tiberium rapidly uprooted itself to reveal a quadruped beast underneath, the size of a large dog. A tusk on each side, It bared its rows of sharp teeth before launching the shards on its back at the closest Viper. The shards bit deep, but the drone was still functional. Wires quickly turned all of their lasers on the beast, instantly reducing it to cinders. Not even a Tiberian Fiend could survive 6 pairs of Obelisk Fangs.

Eventually leaving the glow of the Tiberium field the Vipers continued on along the ridge. Even if Wires couldn't see from here, he guessed that the ridge was rather steep. The hill served as an excellent barrier against vehicles, funneling them into easily

defensible routes. That's why Beta 10 was one of the most densely populated shelter cities in the region. Hills to the north, and rivers to the south. *A near-flawless terrain setup*, thought Wires.

The drones came across a section in the ridge where the terrain was rather uneven, and had an unusual amount of rock scattered about. *An ion lightning strike? No, a landslide.* Moving the drones in for a closer look, Wires could see a section where the ridge gave way, leaving a slope down into the valley below.

*Ah, it's as if Kane himself called down an ion bolt to leave an open passage right behind the city. Maybe the terrain isn't so flawless after all*, thought Wires to himself as he hailed a Black Hand officer. "Cobra, bring two Ratel APCs and a squad of Eclipse tanks from the northern reserve to these coordinates."

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The southern flank was finally broken. Not even the fortified cannon batteries could withstand Strike Team Adder's Scorpion blitz supported by coordinated infantry gunlines. The bridge was secure, allowing for more Nod reserves to arrive later on. As luck would have it, the southern defense line conveniently had a medical facility which the advancing Nod forces seized during the raid. Now, they were at the top of the hill some ways after the bridge, overlooking the massive sprawling basin below them that was Beta 10.

"All lead elements, commence assault down the hill with whatever you have. Push hard and leave them no respite," radioed Adder to his platoon leaders. The attack was rather uncalled for, as the assault on the bridge had taken its toll on the advancing Nod forces. The wounded Nod troops were hastily sent to the newly captured hospital while the able-bodied men hopped into the nearest Ratel APCs. The damaged vehicles had no one to tend to them, and instead charged down the hill with every ounce of energy they could muster. The more veteran crews were lucky to apply quick repairs before the attack order, but that was all they could manage.

From the hill crest, Adder surveyed the clash below with his night vision binos, smiling as the sudden thrust cut deep into the defense lines below. His inner gambler tingled with delight. Wires had given Adder the ability to throw real lives on the table, a thrill that no money or dice could ever match. However, Wires also taught Adder to be smart with his bets.

From the city limits on the distant right, a shower of missiles made their presence known on the battlefield. GDI had recalled a hover strike team to push back the Nod speartip. 15 minutes passed, and while the heated battle still raged on, it devolved into a stalemate. Nod forces gained no further ground as they stood over the now-destroyed defense perimeter, the only thing standing between them and the city were the GDI and Globotech forces re-routed to the southern flank.

25 minutes passed. Without warning, a shower of rockets tore through the Nod forces. Adder looked up to see the light silhouettes of Orca fighters flying above, circling to make another pass. The speartip was now blunt, and slowly losing ground.

“Confessor Adder, this is Sergeant Vaughn. Artillery ordnance has arrived,” came a voice on the radio. His bet paid off.

*Ah, music to my ears. You have held out well, my brothers. Longer than expected, even. Your sacrifice shall be remembered.*

Shortly before the assault, one of Adder’s recon officers pointed out two peculiar structures in the distance, just beyond the southern defense line. They were large and white, not resembling a factory or defense building. Upon closer inspection, the symbols on the sides pointed towards them being power generators of sorts, much larger than anything GDI or Nod has built.

“All lead elements, pull back to the hill. You have done well,” radioed in Adder, as the artillery units parked themselves by the hill crest, nodding to himself as the speartip began to recede. The Orca air strike was unexpected, but he was glad GDI showed their hand before he showed his.

The GDI infantry on the ground cheered as the sudden push was repelled, but their cries of victory were interrupted by a concentrated barrage. While the first few rounds scattered and hit the defending GDI units, the second barrage was dead on, striking the first large power plant. Before anyone knew what was going on, they heard an explosion larger than any artillery shell, and the city’s lights flickered as the power grid struggled to recover after losing half its capacity.

The second power plant fell, and the urban sectors went dark. From above, the Orca fighters returning to re-arm could see a mass of red and black descending on the city below.

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## Chapter 8: Advance

October 2011

His footsteps brisk and clanking against the metal steps as Sam quickly made his way to the top floor. The GDI Communications Center of Gamma 3 towered over all other buildings in the base, and its new conference room at the top floor was located close to the main radar dish for best results.

*Reaching out to Globotech and other bases would now be much easier*, he thought, knocking on the door and entering the room.

"Ah, Captain, welcome. Take a seat," said Colonel Owen from the other end of the room.

"Nice setup you got here," whistled Sam as he looked around. The walls were painted in a soft white coat. A long beige table took up most of the room's space, with four black chairs tucked on each side. On the table were three microphone pads spaced evenly from each other. At the other end were two wall-mounted screens side by side with their own speakers. Owen was next to it, plugging his Field Command Module into the system.

"Oh yes. The system is rather easy to use as well. This should help our operations immensely."

"By the way, Colonel, how is Beta 10 holding out?"

"From the report I received an hour ago, the city patrols encountered Nod forces in the outskirts of the city. Shortly after, one of the satellite armoury bases were attacked and went silent. The city's defenses are still intact, and they're mobilizing every asset they can."

Sam nodded as he took a seat at the other end, opposite of Owen. Beta 10 was one of the biggest Globotech-funded cities to date. During the First Tiberium War, GDI's strong presence in Brazil meant the region could still thrive without opposition, despite a few skirmishes here and there from Nod cells in Venezuela and Colombia. With little heat, the bases gradually shifted their focus from military to ecology. As the bases closed down per the disbandment order, Globotech moved in and easily took up that role, the low conflict zone being an attractive location for business. As their operations moved out to South America, Beta 10 rapidly grew in significance, becoming a hub city of sorts.



Steele even invited GDI to set up its own base there shortly after General Sheppard's rescue. Beta 10's biggest asset was a river running through it, providing a rich water supply. In addition, the waterfall just outside the southern entrance could produce hydroelectricity. A city with much promise.

The river and surrounding terrain also became a test site for GDI's first skimmer, the Dragonfly. Sam felt a slight relief knowing the large contingent of Dragonflies there would aid the defense of Beta 10. He would have used them to make ambushes to disrupt advancing forces, criss-crossing between rivers in their hit-and-run attacks.

His thoughts were interrupted when another knock came from the door. It slowly opened, and General Sheppard stepped in. He greeted Sam and Owen before heading for the seat next to the Colonel.

"Ah, General. You're right on time. We're just about to begin," remarked Owen, before dialing in. A few seconds later, he could hear a pick-up tone.

"Hello, Mr. Steele?" Looking at the right screen, Owen saw a few icons with the names 'COO Steele', 'ComC Room 1', and 'FredoG'.

*"Steele here. You're coming in loud and clear, Colonel."*

"Excellent. Joining me is Captain Samuel Harden and General Sheppard. We may now begin."

Sam uttered a brief "Hi" in response. Sheppard merely nodded.

*"Will do, Colonel,"* replied Steele, *"Joining me over here is Dr. Fredo Giraud. He'll be taking us through the majority of the briefing as it is his field of expertise. Doctor, if you will?"*

*"Yes, sir. Hello, Colonel Owen, Captain Harden, General Sheppard. Good to hear from you again,"* came Giraud's voice, *"We'll jump right into it. Two days ago, one of our surveillance aircraft was flying over central Peru, when it picked up what seems to be a Nod base overlooking an abandoned city. Here's the recon footage."*

The doctor shared his screen, opening up a number of screenshots. On the bottom left of the vid were minor details like altitude, temperature, flight speed, and recording time. Sam nodded in approval. The photo quality allowed him to pick out the number of defensive buildings the base had, but more importantly, the photos revealed a large wash of green just next to the base.

"That is a very big Tiberium field," remarked Owen.

*"Indeed it is,"* replied Giraud, *"We've codenamed the field 'Wellspring'. From the number of spreaders in the footage, it is the biggest field we've seen thus far."*

"They've got quite a set-up there, too. Seems like a raised ring around the area, save for a few entry points, almost like a natural fortress," continued Owen.

"Hang on, doc," interjected Sa, "What is that small blue blob in the green field?"

"Ah, *nothing gets by you, Detective Sam,*" replied Giraud, impressed, *"That's Tiberium Vinifera. A mutated form of the green Riparius strain you're familiar with. While more toxic and harmful compared to Riparius, it is also more valuable due to its higher density and rarity."*

*So that's why they want the field,* thought Owen.

"Unfortunately," continued Giraud, *"little else is known about it. The last we saw it was back in Europe, and Dr. Mobius was the only one researching it. Because he suddenly disappeared years ago, so did our last link to the blue crystal. This is a great opportunity to continue his research. We hope you'll be able to assist us in this matter."*

"What the doctor means is," continued Steele, *"Globotech requires the Vinifera samples for research, and GDI is in need of resources to get back on their feet. With the acquisition of this field, we can finally deal a crippling blow to Nod, and secure long-term growth for us both. Nod is battering themselves against Beta 10. They're distracted in their own frenzy. Now is the perfect time to strike, especially since it seems like a lightly defended harvesting base."*

"Understood, Steele," replied Owen calmly. While he grew tired of Steele's business jargon, the COO had a point. The call continued on with them discussing the details of the operation, before it was promptly ended.

"Well, gentlemen, looks like we have our work cut out," remarked Owen as he turned to Sheppard, who was silent during the entire meeting, "What's your input on this, General? You've been rather taciturn throughout the meeting."

"Well, you're running the show, Colonel, but anyway, to answer your question. The Tiberium field itself is on a raised plateau overlooking the abandoned city, with the base next to it. A good natural defense line and a great place to put down SAM sites. I'd say we hit the base from multiple sides. Bring artillery as well to soften up the defenses."

"I see. Lay siege to their defenses before steamrolling in. What about you, Sam?"

"Hmm, it seems like there are railway lines running through the city," remarked Sam as he eyeballed the various photos, "These blobs here in the northeast sector seem like Nod reactors. I bet they're using that station to bring supplies into the base. There's also a bridge to the northwest we can secure to avoid getting flanked, depending on which route we attack the base from. Since Nod can move its forces around via rail, we'll need to secure all routes into the city to cut off their supply and possibly retreat lines."

"Good observation, Sam," replied Sheppard, "We can send infantry in to secure the city first, then have armour show up for the assault on the base. I can send in Captain Frank Rodgers. The others respect him as a platoon commander, and I trust him with my own life. He can lead the armour brigade."

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*"Seagull 03 going down! Mayday! Mayday!"*

*"This is Seagull 06. We've lost our back rotor. Attempting autorotation."*

Stray rockets, and fire trails filled the night skies as the Chinook armada descended on the abandoned city. Dark silhouettes quickly took shape on the landscape ahead as the armada came in for a landing at a clearing near the city center.

Gunfire broke out even before the Chinooks touched down. Infantry and Kazuars walked out of the open ramps to meet the Nod forces head-on. The mechanized infantry strike team set up a perimeter around a tall skyscraper near the landing zone, where Sam set up shop on the ground floor.

"Alright, gentlemen, listen up," began Sam, "Bravo Lead, have your team secure the rail line to the southwest. Charlie Lead, your task is to take and hold the rail bridge to the north to stop Nod forces from flanking us. Once both those areas are sanitized and the city secured, we can bring our armour in to assault the base. I will lead Alpha team to secure the train station. We've also lost some birds on the way here. If you see any wreckages or hear distress calls, search for survivors, but your objectives take priority. The tracks are electrified, so watch your step. Any questions? No? Then move out. Let's drive Nod out of the city!"

With a resounding 'Sir, yes sir!', the respective leaders dissipated to resume command of their platoons. Sam's squad had their own Kazuars to hitch a ride with, which he was grateful for.

The Kazuars proved to be excellent urban fighting machines, their heavy machine guns easily shredding enemy infantry and buggies, the only real resistance coming from Nod Bradleys. Sam wished they had Vanguard tanks, or at the very least, Armdalio APCs to combat them, for their lighter weight would allow Chinooks to transport them effortlessly.

Advancing from one city block to the next, Alpha team finally reached an office building overlooking the train station just across the street. Standing between them and the station was a Bradley tank supported by an infantry platoon of riflemen and a couple of incinerators. The two Kazuars stepped out from behind the building to pepper the Bradley with fire, pinning the infantry where they were. Sniping the flame canisters on the backs of incinerators usually required Sam to aim carefully, but with them pressed to the ground, the canisters were glaring targets sticking out like sore thumbs. Panic spread

through the platoon as a small fire erupted. Pressured to move forward, the Bradley attempted to chase the two walkers knowing their heavy machine guns was less damaging than its own 75mm cannon. Picking up speed, the Bradley sped around the corner, the Kazuars already at the other end. As the gunner took aim, a flurry of disk grenades peppered the soft top armour from the opposite building. The Bradley's turret crumpled under the onslaught, and the explosion of its engine and fuel tank followed suit.

The Kazuars and grenadiers continued to advance on the turrets, who appeared to be guarding a train tunnel in the city's northeast corner. Meanwhile, Sam took a handful of riflemen and a medic to advance on the station. Reaching the nearest platform, he could see that the station's civilian architecture was heavily modified, or rather, torn down to allow passage of vehicles from the platform onto the street with ease.

After instructing the men with him to secure the station grounds, Sam quickly assessed how much damage was necessary. Blowing off sections of the track would be easier than destroying the entire station, and rebuilding them would be simpler as well. As he neared the end of the platform, Sam could see the tunnel outpost to the northeast, and taking a closer look via his sniper rifle's scope, he could see it was already under fire from the Kazuars and grenadiers. He walked towards the rail switch, figuring it would be easier to bend the tracks out of shape there. Dropping a satchel charge in the middle of the switch, he made his way back to the platform before detonating it.

*"Specter to Alpha Team, train station disabled,"* radioed Sam, after blowing up the switch on the other end, *"Move and secure the outpost outside the northeastern tunnel."*

*"This is Linx 1. Both turrets have been destroyed. Clearing out the last of the armed infantry. Also, we're getting a distress call on repeat, to the east. Seems like another downed bird, over."*

*"That far away? Roger. Heading to the outpost now. Specter out."*

As Sam neared the outpost, he could see the two disabled turrets, and about a dozen bodies of Nod soldiers strewn nearby. The reactors were also successfully shut off. Taking the base came at the cost of half the grenadiers and Linx 1 taking a hit, reducing its mobility to a limp. Upon reaching there, Sam too could hear the distress call, the tone of desperation and tumult in the background making him mildly uneasy.

*"This is Bravo 11. We're pinned down on a hill east of the city. Under attack by hostile creatures. We're being torn apart, can't hold out for much longer. Requesting immediate evac!"*

Bravo team? They're a little off course, aren't they? Thought Sam.

Ordering the rest of the Alpha team to hold position, Sam hitched a ride on Linx 2 to reach the survivors. While they had minor skirmish with Nod soldiers on the outskirts, the scorp were ill-equipped to deal with a vehicle, and were easily dispatched, the Kazuar's bulletproof cockpit shrugging off the rifle rounds. When they finally reached the crash site, the sight of the Chinook's intact hull was a sight for sore eyes. Unfortunately, that was the only good news.

The downed Chinook was facing a cave that led into the higher plateau. Through his night vision goggles, Sam could see a swarm of Mantises emerging from the cave, a few slumped to the ground as gunfire sounded off from the other side of the bird. As Sam reached the rear cargo hold, he saw a dead GDI soldier on the ground, and to his horror, the lower half of his body ended in a mess of blood and entrails. Another lay motionless by the doorway, a deep cut exposing the inside of his chest.

Linx 2 made its way around the hull, its heavy machine guns opening up at the pack closest to the Chinook. They saw the Kazuar too late, and let out an ear-piercing shriek as the ensuing bursts of lead ripped through them. Meanwhile, Sam got the other men out of the Chinook. One of them lost a leg, and was shouldered by two others as he desperately hobbled out of the cargo hold. Linx 2 continued to fall back while firing at any pursuing creatures, until they gave up and returned to the cave.

"Now, can you tell me why in the blazes are you off course this far?!" barked Sam to the surviving pilot as the soldiers helped the more severely wounded into the Kazuar's rear compartment.

"Well, sir, the anti-air fire from the city was too heavy. I figured if I took a detour and landed in the outskirts, we'd have a better chance," replied the pilot, knowing full well that was no excuse.

"So, you avoided landing in the city only to get eviscerated here. As a pilot, you are responsible for your payload, and don't you damn well forget it! We're already behind in our operation. Head back to the train station. The wounded will be treated there."

As the visage of the station came into view, reports from Bravo Lead and Charlie Lead came in. The southwest rail line was secured, with Bravo destroying a Nod outpost there and securing survivors from a downed bird nearby. Charlie, on the other hand, wasn't doing so well. They lost a third of their fighting strength in a flame tank ambush, and had to retreat. Sam redirected Bravo team to guard the station and the tunnel, while Alpha team would move in to assist Charlie in taking the bridge. Linx 1 was also left in the outpost, as its limping leg made it more useful as a stationary turret than anything else.

At last, Alpha team caught up to the remnants of Charlie team, who retreated a few blocks from the bridge. What remained of the team where a handful of riflemen, a couple of grenadiers, and one Kazuar walker. Apparently, there was another outpost standing between them and the bridge. A turret was the only point defense present, but the outpost did have a Hand of Nod. Sam figured the Kazuars could take on the infantry, but the turret and flame tank did pose a problem.

The Captain gathered his thoughts, taking stock of the terrain, enemy resistance, and his own forces. As a plan materialized, he approached Charlie Lead, to issue his orders.

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A Tank Hunter checked his sights as he stood by the outpost's wall. His comrades were scanning the dark city buildings in the distance. A Flame Tank was by the tracks, its engine still running with an audible hum. The wreck of a GDI walker was all that remained of the first attack, but reinforcements were already on the way. They just had to hold the outpost till then, after which they could finally retaliate and smoke the GDI intruders out of the city.

He shifted his weight to the other leg, the quiet making him uneasy. Ironically, for a Nod soldier, nothing bothered him more than an enemy he could not see, and wished they just hurried up with the inevitable second wave. His wish was granted.

One of the Nod soldiers pointed to the darkness, alerting his nearby comrades. Before the tank hunter could check it out through his sights, multiple bullet impacts kicked up dust clouds around them. Screams instantly rang out as three Nod soldiers fell to the ground. The rest hugged the dirt, while the others closer to the outpost dropped behind the sandbags and walls. Amidst the gunfire, the tank hunter could hear the sound of mechanical stomping, and it was getting closer. Craning his neck forwards, he counted four silhouettes of GDI walkers slipping into view from the right, with twinkling stars in the darkness showering their position with bullets. Bringing his rocket launcher up to eye-level, he zeroed in on the walker closest to him, and fired.

The haste of his aim threw the rocket off to the left, striking one the walker's right arm, blowing it clean off. The tank hunter rolled to the side, reaching for a rocket, but before he could load it in, a round whizzed through the air, piercing the left side of his skull.

The discharge of a cannon could be heard, momentarily drowning out the gunfire as the turret turned to meet the advancing walkers. Seeing the point defense firing back, the Flame Tank began to move as well.

*"This is Linx 2. Looks like we've got their attention."*

*"Roger,"* came Charlie Lead's voice, *"All walkers, fall back to the nav point."*

*"Linx 3, roger."*

*"Linx 4, copy."*

*"Linx 5, fal- agh, I'm hit!"*

A cannon shell ripped through Linx 5's right leg as he turned away, instantly toppling the walker. Realizing he couldn't get up, the pilot frantically undid his seat belt to make a hasty exit. Just then, he heard a rumbling engine approaching from the right side, his eyes widening in horror upon realizing what it was, before fire filled his entire vision.

Sam briefly clenched his teeth, for not even he could stomach the agonizing screams of being burnt alive. He turned his attention back to the turret, which was not more than ten meters from him, just behind a low wall. Dashing out from the bushes, he threw his last satchel charge at the base of the turret. Ducking behind the wall, Sam thumbed the detonator. He could feel the explosion's shockwave through the wall, as bits of metal and concrete flew everywhere.

He signalled to the bushes behind him, and Alpha Team rose up from them to move in. As grenadiers and riflemen exchanged fire with Nod infantry in front of outpost, Sam scanned the interior with his sniper's scope. Seeing a buggy moving up to support, Sam quickly dispatched the driver with a headshot. As the vehicle slowed down, the gunner panicked and fired blindly in front of him, hoping to hit his driver's killer. Unfortunately for him, this threw his comrades into confusion, before Sam ended the gunner's bullet tirade with another shot.

As the firefight died down with the last few scorps dispatched, Alpha Team moved in to secure the outpost. The Hand of Nod was cleared out, and those wounded in the firefight were placed here. As Sam stepped out of the Hand, he could see the Kazuar walkers returning from the city, satisfied in knowing the Flame Tank was lured away and dealt with.

He called in to give the all-clear and relayed the coordinates for the armour drop, citing the first wave's drop location. The ETA he got was twenty minutes. Sam opened up Linx 2's rear compartment, and with the help of a nearby soldier, they pulled out the



rectangular ammo crate stored there, and set it down by the Hand and popping it open. The crate contained an assortment of rifle magazines, disk grenades, and a satchel charge nestled in the corner, which Sam picked up almost immediately. He allowed a small laugh to escape as this was considered a “no expense spared” operation, remembering their tumultuous clash with Nod back at Delta 20.

While the rest could replenish their ammo reserves, the Kazuars were running low, and they had no spare drums, something they simply had to make do for now. As the other soldiers crowded around the crate, Sam walked towards the Nod buggy, still intact. Pulling out the dead soldiers, he stepped into the driver’s seat, which, surprisingly, wasn’t as cramped as he thought it would be. The engine roared to life as he turned the ignition key, and had a fair bit of fuel left to boot. Sam rallied Alpha Team to form a scout party to venture beyond the bridge, leaving Charlie to guard this end.

He felt a refreshing breeze as the buggy sped over the bridge, the railway track right at the center. The river below was a black void, its surface briefly highlighted by the shimmering reflections of the moon above.

*Joe would have loved this*, thought Sam as his eyes came up on the other end of the bridge. More tall silhouettes came into view on the right, with thick tree lines on the left. The track continued straight on as far as he could see. He drove along the tree line, scanning the buildings for any Nod activity. The scouting party made it across the bridge, and Sam ordered them to sweep the city blocks.

By now, Sam was at the city’s edge, when the green filter of his goggles caught a pair of lights, barely visible further down the tracks. Zooming in slightly, and the pair of lights illuminated the faint outline of a high-speed locomotive.

“Damn, not now”, cursed Sam. He didn’t want to blow up any more of these perfectly constructed tracks...but maybe he could minimize the collateral damage.

*Well, what the heck, maybe GDI could just ‘spare no expense’ at rebuilding them later*, he thought as he turned the buggy around.

“Alpha Team, clear the tracks. Oncoming train. Danger close! Head into the city and keep out of sight.”

As Sam gunned the engine at full speed, he could already see infantry sprinting towards a corner store as the bridge drew closer. Pulling over next to a section of a track, he tossed a satchel charge onto the track. Stopping behind the corner store, Sam could see



the train was much closer now. He frantically got the detonator out, and jammed his thumb down just as the locomotive shot past..

While the train was heavy, its hull was in no way equipped to deal with such magnitude. The blast lifted the locomotive's rear bogie half a meter above the tracks, careening over the bridge's edge and taking the second car with it. Metallic screeching filled the air as the automatic breaks kicked in to save the remaining cars, as more were swallowed by the ledge with loud splashes down below.

As the dust settled and silence followed, Sam peeked out to see the remaining four cars piled up in a loose concertina by the ledge. He ordered Alpha Team to search for survivors. The Kazuar switched to a high light beam and scanned the derailed cars for signs of movement, as riflemen encroached closer. While Sam wished he didn't have to deal with survivors, he was not about to massacre combatants with their hands up, and mobilized a portion of Charlie Team to herd and detain them. In the midst of this, a transmission came in.

*"Specter, this is Grizzly 1. The cavalry has arrived. We're approaching the LZ."*

*"Ah, Captain Rodgers. Glad you could join us."*

*"Roger that, Captain Harden. Weather was better than expected. Let's take that plateau."*

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## Chapter 9: Designing the Future

*November 2011*

The GDI technology center was the latest addition to the G-3 base. It even had its own helipad on the top floor. Owen figured that with the loss of Delta 20, GDI needed a new location for research and development, hoping to build more of these in the future.

Two weeks had passed since the battle for the Wellspring, and unfortunately, the fall of Beta 10. Contact from the city was lost shortly before the Wellspring was taken. On the flip side, GDI saw a huge boost to the resources coming in, and Globotech got the Vinifera samples they wanted. Coincidentally, Nod's aggressively advance abruptly stopped after Beta 10. Sam wasn't sure if taking the field had thrown a wrench in Nod's economy, or that Nod was planning something. It was always an eerie calm before the storm when it came to those sneaky Scorps.

While the Tech Center's floors consisted of various ballistics and chemistry labs, the ground floor was reserved for the vehicle lab, or the "chop shop" as it was affectionately referred to by the engineers. Despite its name, the ground floor was more orderly than the war factories and makeshift motor pools GDI had. Cables and tools weren't strewn on the floor, and the place was rather clean, not a single oil spill in sight. Sam made his way across the floor, past a tank hull noticeably bigger than an M1 Abrams, its turret missing. He stopped for a while to look around.

"Well, well," came a familiar voice. Sam turned to see a face emerging from behind the hull, "If it isn't Recon Boy, back from the field."

"That's correct, Chief Engineer Harden," replied Sam, as Joe stepped out from behind the hull, and before he even saw it, Sam could hear the faint squeaks of prosthetic legs, which never failed to give him disturbing flashbacks of that dreadful day.

"Hey, eyes up here, buddy," laughed Joe as he caught Sam spacing out.

"Yeah, yeah," waved Sam dismissively.

"Nice job at the Wellspring. I heard Nod's been rather quiet in these parts since then."

"Seems like it. They seemed to have run with their stinger between their legs. Can't say the same for Europe, though."

"I've no doubt there will be mop-up operations after, or as I call them, 'mop ops'."

"Well, considering how you're wiping the floor with them, I'd say it's an appropriate name," snickered Joe.

"...alright, I walked right into that one myself", came Sam's blank reply.

"Say, Sam, since we have a bit of time before the big meeting, I can show you what I've been working on. General Sheppard's gonna head over tomorrow to take a look, so consider today a sneak peak."

"Sounds interesting. Lead the way, then, Chief Engineer."

Joe relayed some instructions to a nearby technician before walking further into the vehicle lab. Up ahead, Sam could make out the shape of a bipedal walker. It was taller than a Kazuar, the cockpit being much closer to the hull. Each arm sported three gatling guns, and four more were above the cockpit.

"Remember when GDI got that walker tech from GT, which became the Kazuar?" asked Joe triumphantly.

"The part where you slept on it and Dr. Kazsa completed the first prototype? I remember," replied Sam.

"Hey now, you can't rush a genius. Anyway, my recent efforts will make the Kazuar look like a chicken with pea shooters. Meet the Scatterpack. While the Kazuar was meant for anti-infantry combat with some transport capability, this mean guy is meant to go full contact. It can take on light and fast vehicles, with infantry being plain overkill. The spinners on the top have their own tracking radar for swatting flies, too! Of course, a bigger arsenal and more spacious cockpit equals slower speed than the Kazuar, but its legs can still traverse rough terrain faster than tracked vehicles can."

"Yeah, about that, Joe," began Sam as he pointed to the guns, "You have three spinners on each arm, then another four on top. Where do you, uh, keep all the ammo, exactly?"

"Ah, good question. The belts feeding into the arm come from ammo racks in the lower torso. The four spinners on the top have their own backpack for ammo storage," replied Joe as he used a tool to unfasten an armour plate on the side, swinging it back to reveal a large empty ammo box inside, a feed chute leading up into the arm.

"And this holds and feeds the ammo to all three spinners?" asked Sam, his tone laced with doubt.

"Yes," replied Joe, "...in theory."

"In theory?"

"We did a test-firing with a single spinner yesterday, with satisfactory results. The test-firing of all three spinners will be done this evening. We'll know then."

"Well I'm sure as hell looking forward to the report on that one," replied Sam, "Just a humble suggestion from Recon Boy: fire selectors would be nice, along with a burst-fire

option for the pilot to juggle between spinners. Firing in sequence would allow them time to cool off. I'm sure that being Mr. Genius, working out a time sequence, factoring in the rate of fire and heat dissipation should be no problem for you."

"Come on, Sam, where's the fun in that? The only way to go is all barrels hot!"

"Yes, 'all barrels hot' is right. I don't wanna have all of them jam up at once. This thing is a bitch to reload as it is."

"Mmhhh," replied Joe dismissively, "Oh, one more thing," before prompting Sam to follow him further into the vehicle lab. They reached a square room on the left corner, a thick glass panel on one wall, and a door on the other. Through the glass, Sam could see a desk and computer located inside. On the door was a brass label that read "CHIEF ENG SGT J. HARDEN."

"Well, well, look at you. Got your own office too, eh?" remarked Sam, faking an excited tone.

"Hey, we've been on the run for years. YEARS, Sam. Finally feels good to catch a breather. This one's been a long time coming," replied Joe as he fished for a key and unlocked the door. As Joe logged into his computer, Sam glanced outside the window, and could see people working on either empty hulls or separate pieces of machinery. Taking a closer look at the window, Sam saw that it was noticeably thick, and he figured out why: the room drowned out most of the outside ambience.

"Here. It's going to be our biggest project to date."

Sam's attention snapped back to the screen. Joe was pointing to some schematics, with a diagram resembling a large cone structure with a small cannon perched on top.

"What am I looking at her-oh," asked Sam, before catching sight of the title at the top: ELECTROMAGNETIC PULSE(EMP) CANNON.

"Yep. It is what it says. This can be a solution for shelter cities to defend against Nod invaders, to slow them down while reinforcements arrive."

"Ah, it's a shame Beta 10 didn't have something like this."

"Which is why we'll be focusing 100% on this one after the Scatterpack's tests are done. Hopefully, we can get one up and running here so Gamma 3 feels a little safer."

"Sounds like you have your work cut out, Joe."

"That's true, else I'll die of boredom here while you're out there hunting Scorps."

"Better to die of boredom in here than to die out there, Joe."

"I mean, well, fair enough, I guess," shrugged Joe, as he turned his computer off before they headed outside.

"Oh yeah, Sam," said Joe as he put his arm on Sam's shoulder, "How about another round?"

"What, here?" asked a puzzled Sam.

"Yeah, we'll spar by the loading bays. Nothing's getting dropped off until tomorrow."

"I'll pass, man. I don't wanna beat up a cripple."

"Oh, is that how it is? Alright, then. Try me."

Sam raised an eyebrow, shrugged, and got into position. After a brief moment, Joe lunged forward. Sam, remembering their previous round, attempted to trip Joe, but failed to account for the prosthetic legs' density. Joe smiled smugly, trapping Sam's legs with his own before pushing Sam away, the resulting fall being slightly unpleasant.

"Jesus, man. That was a bit much," groaned Sam as he felt the back of his head.

"Sorry, maybe I went over the top," grinned Joe sheepishly as he helped Sam up, "I knew you would go for a trip, so I had to improvise. I would have to use a weapon to take you out where you lay, else you could easily kick me back as soon as I freed your legs. Anyway, we better get going. The next train out of Gamma 3 is in...yikes, 10 minutes!"

"Damn it, Joe!" replied Sam as he rushed to his Humvee parked by the Tech Center, frantically searching for his keys.

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C-2 was a Globotech base located just before Cobalt Island. It served as a secondary GT base, and was built along the road leading to the north. Today, it served as the venue for which GDI and GT would reach a critical consensus, one that, as GT claimed, would catapult their capabilities and rapport to greater heights.

"Globotech sure is quick when it comes to making deals," said Owen, as the train left the city limits of Gamma 3 and zoomed into a tunnel.

"Tell me about it. It's been barely two weeks since GDI took control of the Wellspring, and GT is already calling for a meeting. They seemed pretty ostentatious about it, too," said Sam.

"Sheppard, what's your take on the situation?" asked Owen, turning to the general, who was a seat away from him.

"Let's see," began Sheppard, scratching his grey hair, "GT knows we know have a surplus of resources now, and they're probably going to offer their research capabilities in exchange. They may even claim to offer some discounted rate just to sweeten the deal."

"Well, if I may," added Sam, "it seems like Globotech hasn't screwed us over thus far. Sure, they've sent us on some errands here and there, but at least they didn't throw us at Nod blindly, providing us with sufficient to carry out missions. While I too initially had my doubts, up to this point, I can't really say that they dealt us a bad hand."

The train left the tunnel, making a brief stop at C-2, a small outpost, before it finally pulled into C-1 station. As the doors slid open, Joe extended his left foot and strode gracefully onto the platform in a half-march, basking in the hot afternoon Sun, with the rest walking behind.

“Ah, it’s a good day for an agreement,” he said, taking in a breath of fresh air.

“Boy, aren’t you in a jovial mood today?” said Sam.

“He’s really pushing those prosthetics to their limits,” remarked Owen.

“Yeah, for someone who had both his legs blown off, he’s energetic as ever. We need more boys like him,” said Sheppard.

“Well, if this thing goes through, Joe will have a lot more on his plate. I wonder if his excitement will hold up then,” said Owen, and the three of them shared a laugh.

“Hey, what’s all the raucous ruckus over there? Y’all talkin’ about me?” said Joe as he turned to let them catch up.

“Heh, never change, Joe,” replied Sam, putting an arm on his brother’s shoulder as he caught up.

As they left the station, they were greeted by Dr. Fredo Giraud, who was waiting for them.

“Hey, doc. Good to see ya again,” greeted Joe warmly, “You waiting for a ride to the base, too?”

Fredo laughed. “Actually, you’re looking at him.”

“Is that so, doc?” said Sam, “I thought you’d already be there, doing some sort of paperwork before the meeting.”

“Oh, we finalized all of that yesterday. Plus, Steele sent me to pick you up.”

“Well, can’t argue with that,” replied Sam, “So, where’s our ride?”

Fredo ushered them to a parking lot near the station, where a Humvee and Armadillo APC was parked. Joe expected Fredo to stop at the Humvee, but when he opened up the Armadillo’s driver door, his eyes widened and he broke out into a small cheer as he ran to claim the co-driver’s seat as his own. Owen and Sheppard shrugged, and they entered the rear compartment, with Sam behind them. As they closed the hatch, they heard Joe’s voice on the localized intercom.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen. This is your co-pilot speaking. We will be taking off shortly.”

“I want my peanuts!” shouted Sam from the back, as the APC hummed to life, and turned towards the gate.

The station outpost was an extension of C-2, and while the base itself was a modest distance from the station, anyone would prefer a ride over walking in the scorching heat, plus the Armadillo had its own air conditioning.

Globotech's second base in the area, C-2 was positioned to guard the northeastern road leading into the canyons. The base was big enough to have its own armoury, weapons warehouse, and even a fusion plant. While taking up space equivalent to four GDI power plants, a single fusion plant could single handedly keep an entire base running.

There were three Globotech research centers in the area. One was located on Cobalt Island, another next to GDI's Gamma 3 base, and the third towered above them as the Armadillo drove further into the base, a Blue Earth fountain memorial located in front of it. Like its two other sisters, this research center was made up of the same hexagonal blocks GT used to build shelter homes. This intrigued Joe, wondering if GDI should adopt similar designs to rapidly set up forward bases should the need arise.

The vehicle parked near the entrance, and they made their way into the lobby. The heart of the building's modular arrangement had a glass spire housing two elevators, connecting to individual floor blocks making up the central wing, east wing, and west wing. At the base of the glass spire was a solid wall block emblazoned with a Globotech logo, and in front of it, a receptionist sat at her jet black desk. Fredo flashed his access card, to which the receptionist promptly nodded and handed guest passes to the GDI visitors.

The elevator doors opened into the fifth floor, and Fredo walked straight down the central wing, the rest following behind, till they came to a door labeled "Sapphire Meeting Room."

"Gosh, you guys and your blue names," remarked Joe cheekily, as Fredo shrugged and gave the door a knock before entering. Inside was a long oval table, with the far end of the room having a large glass window, its shutters pulled to the side. Through it, they could see a fraction of the sprawling canyons beyond. On the right side of the long table, where three individuals. They recognized the figure at the center as COO Steele. To Steele's right, was a gentleman the GDI entourage could not recognize, but was dressed in a similar fashion, donning a black suit, and blue tie. To Steele's left, was a lady dressed in blue office wear, her black hair neatly tied in a ponytail. Thin glasses rested on her nose.

"Ah, welcome, gentlemen", greeted Steele as he turned to introduce the other two, "This is COO Janus, my counterpart from the European branch."

“Good to finally meet our business partners in person,” said Janus in a Swedish accent.

“And this,” continued Steele, “is Kaska, one of Globotech’s secretaries. As we will be discussing an important agreement today, she will be capturing the minutes.”

“Pleasure to meet you all”, said the secretary in a soft voice.

“When are we gonna get a secretary, Colonel?” asked Joe, lightly elbowing Owen’s arm, and a wave of laughter echoed throughout the room.

“It is reassuring to hear someone with a sense of humor in these trying times,” remarked Janus with a smile as they settled down.

“I concur, Janus,” replied Steele, “Now, let us begin. We will be going over the research agreement between the Global Defense Initiative and Globotech. We hope to finalize the clauses of the agreement to begin preparations as soon as possible.

The GDI entourage nodded as they produced some papers, which were their copies of the agreement.

“GDI’s recent conquest of the Wellspring,” continued Steele, “was quite a lucrative victory, both securing additional resources including the Vinifera strain of Tiberium, while dealing a crippling blow to the Nod forces here. As such, this opens up more options to us. I trust that you’ve already gone through the clauses. Are there any concerns?”

“Thank you, Steele,” replied Owen, “First, we’ll begin with the item regarding technology sharing. Joe, would you like to cover that?”

“Ah, yes, Colonel,” said Joe, “Right, so according to this, Globotech will be sharing their advances in bipedal walker technology in exchange for GDI’s advances in vehicle armour. While we appreciate the early schematics which eventually led to the Kazuar walker, as of now, GDI is still in the process of replacing our current main battle tank, the M1 Abrams. We have some ideas, but we’ll still need to resolve some weight balance issues. However, I noticed that Globotech has a lack of field repair and recovery ability, which is important as you guys have better mobility than us. Hence, I suggest that GDI can provide that first, then, later on, once we’ve come up with a new tank design, we can send some of those over via a lend lease should GT be okay with that. I’ll even work with you guys to come up with a recovery vehicle that’s fast enough to keep up with your forces.”

“That will suffice,” replied Steele, “As our forces are usually in small pockets, we did not need specialized repair vehicles, but should we face a more formidable offensive from Nod, that will certainly come in handy. Thank you, Mr. Harden.”

“I’d like to raise a concern myself”, said Sheppard as he raised his hand, “Two, actually. First, It says here that GT will pull their forces away from the shelter cities in the South American bloc to form a mobile strike team to quickly move to meet any Nod



offensive. This also means GDI will be taking over the defense of shelter cities, spreading our forces thin. The second concern is that this mobile strike team has the prerogative to call for aid from nearby shelter cities should any Globotech assets or installations come under attack. Would you mind justifying these two points, Steele?

"Certainly," replied Steele, "For the first concern, taking over the defense of shelter cities will be a significant boost to GDI's image in the eyes of the local population, which GDI can use to recruit & replenish their garrison forces if the need arises. Now, onto the second concern. The prerogative of redirecting local GDI garrison forces to aid in countering a Nod offensive is to prevent an incident like Beta 10 from reoccurring."

"Are you telling me that if GT had control of the GDI forces in Beta 10, they could have prevented its downfall?" asked Sheppard, raising an eyebrow.

"That's not what I mean, general," replied Steele, calmly, "Beta 10 was a major hub, with other shelter cities located far away from it. There was little we could do. However, if multiple shelter cities are located close to each other, this will allow the MST to call in additional support from neighbouring cities to either drive back or even outflank Nod forces attempting to attack the city."

"Or GT assets and installations," added Sheppard, making sure that last detail wasn't missed.

"Or GT assets and installations, yes," echoed Steele.

Sheppard went quiet for a moment, the silence sublimating into tension. He let the heavy air hang over the room for a few seconds, before turning to Sam, seated next to him, "Captain, what do you think, since you've been in the field with GT before?"

"Well, General," replied Sam, attempting to gather his thoughts after that bout of heavy air, "It is true that GT vehicles possess higher speed compared to most of our counterparts, and a mobile strike force should be able to reach a location being attacked by Nod. As for redirecting local garrison forces, if done properly, it could cripple an offense, yes."

Sheppard nodded, before turning back to Steele, "No further questions on this one."

"Thank you, General," said Steele with a smile, "Next clause, anyone?"

"Yes," replied Owen, "The clause here that states that a portion of Tiberium Vinifera harvested will be transported from the Wellspring to Globotech research centers. Now, the base guarding the Wellspring is under General Sheppard. As transporting the crystals is not his concern, he will have them stored in a specific silo where they can be picked up. However, I must ask about the amount, as it seems too large for research and development."

"Certainly," nodded Steele, as he turned to Fredo, "Doctor Giraud, could you share some of your findings with us so far?"

"Yes, sir," replied Fredo as he began, "Preliminary tests on the first few Vinifera samples revealed that it is not only more toxic, but highly explosive as well, a trait not shared with the green Riparius strain. Granted, Vinifera does seem to spread much slower. Even so, we're doing our best to come up with a solution to these crystals overwhelming entire ecosystems. As such, we need more extensive testing to be done, which warrants more samples."

"I understand, doctor. I'm not familiar with the tests you conduct, since it apparently requires this much Vinifera, which I may add, is diverting away from GDI's war effort. However, I ask that you disclose your findings regularly to justify this amount. While Joe isn't a Tiberium expert, he is our Chief Engineer, which is the closest we have, so please work with him on this," came Owen's rebuttal. Joe and Fredo nodded in acknowledgement.

The meeting carried on for another hour. Kaska summarized the concerns brought up in great detail. By the tail end of the meeting, a revised version of the agreement was produced, and was promptly signed by Owen, Sheppard, Joe, Steele, and Fredo, with Janus and Sam acting as witnesses.

"We look forward to working with you closer," said Steele, "Now, on to more pressing matters. Janus, if you will?"

"Thank you, Steele. I'm sure you've heard of Nod's attacks in Europe. Well, they are worse than they sound. The missile attacks laden with Kane's experimental chemicals have turned numerous towns into wastelands, their inhabitants dead or worse. The European nations are fighting back, but they lack unity. Not even the United Nations, the very same body who ordered your disbandment, can muster any power in this situation. Steele may have already approached you with this, but since I'm here as the representative of the European bloc, I'd like to officially ask if you could partake in a joint military campaign. GT will provide relief efforts and Tiberium clean-up, while GDI takes the fight to Nod. It is possible that some disbanded GDI cells who've returned to Europe can still be salvaged. Steele's first wave will be leaving from here in a week's time. I know it's a short notice, but we hope you can join us. While we make a footing there, the bases here can continue their research and production to support their counterparts in the European bloc as needed. What do you say?"

"Yes, he did mention it, and I too have heard of Nod running rampant over there. I have approached and handpicked some willing members. I will personally lead the first wave, along with Captain Samuel Harden and Captain Frank Rodgers. General Sheppard and Sergeant Joseph Harden will stay here to oversee military and research operations respectively."

"What? Sam?" blurted out a confused Joe.

"Excellent," replied a satisfied Janus, "Looks like a full-scale war on our hands, and we have front row seats to the show. I will see you in Europe, gentlemen."

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*3 days later...*

"Since we're not an official army anymore, I can afford to be a bit informal", began Owen, as he stood at the podium before a few hundred seated men, with General Sheppard standing on his right, "It has been five years since we've been given the order to stand down. For me, standing down was never an option, especially when it was so obvious we had much to do. It was a gamble. Yet, you set your chips down with me, and for that, I cannot thank you enough. Even the rebuilding of this beautiful city would not have been possible without each and every one of you. Today, the United Nations is a mere shell of its former self, and I'm proud to say, that the eagle still stands tall!"

Owen paused as a round of applause rang through the crowd.

"As you may know, Nod has laid waste to the continent of Europe, the UN powerless to stand in their way. Therefore, the eagle will rise to the occasion, to meet the scorpion head on, as we've done before. In the days leading up to our operation, I'd like to recognize a couple of individuals in particular who have gone above and beyond, both in and out of combat. Our first recipient is one who, despite the injuries he sustained in battle, continued to serve in a different capacity, his spirit unwavering. In view of these qualities and his demonstrated leadership potential and dedicated service to the Global Defense Initiative, Joseph Harden is therefore, promoted from Staff to Master Sergeant."

With a big smile on his face, Joe walked up to the stage, donning his white hat and suit, a Purple Heart already pinned on his chest. The creaking of his prosthetic legs was drowned out by the applause. Owen passed the stripes to Sheppard, who gladly did the honours.

"Our second recipient is one who has stuck with me since the First Tiberium War. A skilled combatant, his acumen as sharp as his aim. Even when leading his men into battle, he was always at the forefront, taking great care of the lives under his command. In view of these qualities and his demonstrated leadership potential and dedicated service to the Global Defense Initiative, Samuel Harden is therefore, promoted from Captain to Major."

"You earned it, son," said Sheppard as he received the stripes from Owen.

"Thank you sir," replied Sam, beaming with pride, moving to stand next to Joe on stage after receiving his stripes.

"Good going, Recon Boy," whispered Joe.

"You too, Chief," replied Sam.

The ceremony concluded with a speech from General Sheppard, offering words of encouragement to those who would be leaving for Europe. Among the audience was Fredo, the only Globotech member present.

"But really, though," said Joe as he turned to Sam, "You could have told me you were going."

"Sorry, man. A lot has been going on, and it happened so fast. It just slipped my mind," replied Sam.

"I thought you were gonna take it easy for a bit. Kick back here."

"Heh, as if the Colonel would let me sit back here now that I'm a Major."

"Congratulations, you two," interrupted Fredo as the audience dispersed, "Surely a moment to remember."

"You don't have these ceremonies back at Globotech?" asked Joe.

"Si, we have corporate dinners. Doesn't quite have that oomph to it, though," laughed the doctor.

"Hey, guys. Smile. Gotta really immortalize this occasion here," came an approaching voice. They turned to see Captain Frank Rodgers, who also attended the ceremony, camera at the ready. Since Joe was the stout one, he ended up in the middle.

"Say 'Dead Scorps'."

"Dead Scorpsss!"

The camera flashed with an audible click.

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## Chapter 10: Storm

December 2011  
Martigues, France

*"Gosh, it's freezing in here,"* muttered Sam to himself as he savoured a swig of hot cocoa, the drink warming his gullet in the cold afternoon. He was still getting used to the new FCM(Field Command Module), given to him two weeks earlier upon his promotion. The conquest of the Wellspring allowed Owen to regain regiment strength, and the 23rd Battalion was given to Sam. The module resembled a large laptop encased in a robust briefcase cover, designed to be functional in the harshest conditions imaginable. It allowed him to monitor the 23rd's movements as a whole, and issue orders to field officers even when Sam was miles away.

Sam closed the module, suited up in his white tiger apparel, shouldered his rifle, and stepped out for a walk. GDI forces in the European theater landed on the southern beaches of France, where Globotech had already set up shop. The 23rd set up shop in the town of Maritgues. The first wave of chemical missile attacks struck heavily in Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. In response, the town was mostly abandoned with its population moving to the west.

The Etang de Berre began to steadily dry up during the First Tiberium War. The levels were low enough that bridges could be built to link one bank to the other. Heavy snow not only made for low visibility, but it allowed Fiends to better conceal themselves along the fringes of Tiberium fields. Some inexperienced scout parties already met a horrible end from a couple of ambushes.

"Major!" came a voice from behind. Sam turned to see a comms officer jogging up to him, "Word's coming in from the northern gate that there's someone there demanding to see General Sheppard."

"Sheppard?" replied a puzzled Sam. Regardless, he relayed a reply back before dismissing the officer.

Getting into his personal Humvee, he drove up to the northern reaches of the town. The more ruined buildings were torn down to make space for power plants and production facilities, while the intact buildings were refurbished for housing and storage.

Parking near the guard post, he hopped off and could see the commotion from here. A man with a big frame clad in thick winter wear was just beyond the gate, talking to the guards below the watchtower. As Sam got closer, he could see the man had a dark complexion, spoke with an English accent, and wore a patch covering his right eye.

"...bloody freezin' out ere, At least let's talk in that cozy shack you lot 'ave. It'd be way better than standin' out 'ere like a numpty all day," said the man to the guard.

"As I've said, this is a restricted area. No access without permission," replied the guard, clearly reaching the end of his nerve as he clutched his rifle.

"You lot want access? I'll give you some acce-"

"Alright, alright, what's goin' on here?" said Sam as he raised his grey goggles.

"Major!" said the guard as he turned for a salute.

"Major? So you're the big cheese 'round 'ere, eh?" replied the man, "I suppose you can take me to General Sheppard."

"And may I ask *why* you'd like to see him?" asked Sam.

"I'd gladly tell you, but can we go somewhere that's not gonna freeze me bollocks off, pre'ey please?"

Sam nodded, and ordered the guard to pat him down for weapons. Upon getting the all clear, the Major escorted the Briton to the guard's office just behind the striped barrier gate, or the 'shack' he referenced a while ago. They went into a small room, Sam closing the door, and setting the rifle down beside him.

"Now then," began Sam, "You can start by telling me your name and where you're from."

"Nigel Grant, at yer service. Right from the worst parts of England, I am."

"I see. I'm Major Samuel Harden. 23rd Battalion. So, what's the deal with you and Sheppard?"

"Our unit was ordered to disband, and after we did, word got 'round some time back there were still some rogue GDI blokes 'round, some of which were led by General Sheppard. Then, a week earlier, you guys showed up in France, and here I am."

"I see," nodded Sam, noting that Owen wasn't mentioned at all, "Who was your commanding officer?"

"Locke. A stubborn one, he is, and I can't blame him. That order from the UN was ridiculous."

"Locke? General Adam Locke?" replied Sam with a raised eyebrow, "He was always trying to fit square pegs into round holes."

"Right then, think of me as one of his carving knives to shape those square pegs to be round proper."

"Ah. Special Forces, I see. Well, if you have a code, I'll be happy to run that."

Nigel reached for his pocket, and pulled out a badge, taking the shape of a skull with white wings on the side. Below it, was an alphanumeric code reading 'SGNG51X'. Sam quickly scribbled it down and passed it to a guard outside.

"Well, while we're waiting for that, what have you been up to since the disbandment?" said Sam as he came back to sit down.

"Went back home for a bit, checked on how things were. When the missiles fell, UN was too bloody chicken to do anything, Ran a bit of guerilla ops against some Scorps, I did. They're more dug in than you think, Major. Europe's become too complacent to their propaganda over the years."

"You said you ran some ops against Nod. Got any locations we can use?"

"I do, yeah. Nod managed to take the towns not targeted by the missiles. Seems like they're doin' a bit o' recruitment."

They talked a bit more about the places Nigel's scouted out, when a knock came. Sam answered it, and received a piece of paper before closing the door and sitting back down.

"Well, the code seems to check out, but we've got nothing on your name, Mr. Grant."

"That's how ol' Locke preferred his operations, yeah."

"I can imagine. Anyway, General Sheppard wasn't part of the European force. Owen and I are heading this one, along with Globotech."

"Globotech? You guys teamin' up with those arms dealers?"

"Fraid so. Neither of us can take on Nod by ourselves, so we came to an agreement. Anyway, we're shorthanded as it is, and if you're one of Locke's guys, we could really use you."

"I'd be happy to take a stab at Nod once again. Just keep in mind that I do tend to go a bit off the book at times, just a 'eads up. If that's fine, I'm at your service."

"I understand. You being here may open up more options for us."

"That's an odd way of sayin' 'thank you', Major."

"Sorry, old Recon habit. We always think about options," replied Sam as he got up and shook Nigel's hand firmly.

As they left the shack, the wind was already picking up.

"Seems like we're in for quite a storm this evening," remarked Sam.

"Oh bugger! I almost forgot!" exclaimed Nigel, "I've got another guy out there. Mind if I bring him 'ere real quick? We're in the same unit."

"There's more of you? Seems like a Special Forces lottery today," laughed Sam as they brisk-walked to the gate. Nigel walked out of the entrance, and waved to the hills north of them.

"What's he doing now?" asked the puzzled guard as he turned to Sam, who promptly shrugged although he knew.

Two minutes passed by. The snowstorm drew closer, and visibility became thinner. Sam casually passed off a reminder to the guards to be extra vigilant. Nod didn't need a Lazarus field to stay hidden in this kind of weather. Just then, they saw a figure on the hill in the distance, running towards their position. He deftly skidded down the snowy slopes before sprinting towards the entrance.

"Oh no, more of these loons," groaned the guard. As the figure came closer, Sam could see he was shouldering a sniper rifle.

"There you are, ol' chap. Apologies for takin' long. You enjoyin' the wea'er?" chuckled Nigel.

"Are ya daft, man?! If ah was there for foive more minutes, ah woulda been a damn ice statue," said the man in a Scottish accent.

"And who might you be, sir? You're packing some heat there," remarked Sam.

"Dariel 'Deadeye' MacInnis, at yer service."

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## Chapter 11: Milestone

*May 2014*

*Northern Chile*

“How’s it looking, boys? What’s our ETA?” asked Joe, as he entered the spacious cockpit. In front of him, was a large slanted glass pane showing a clear sky ahead. Behind the controls were two pilots.

“We’re right on schedule, Sarge. Touchdown in 20 minutes,” replied the co-pilot on the right.

“Roger that. How’s she running?”

“Like a gentle humpback. Nothing like any Orca I’ve ever flown,” replied the pilot proudly. Joe nodded, took a moment to take in the view, before heading back into the dimly-lit cargo hold.

Three years have passed since GDI entered the European theater in Globotech’s joint campaign. While the research agreement was in full swing, both parties quickly realized the full extent of the damage there, and had to make drastic priority changes.

After a month into the conflict, the chief concern became logistics, especially for GDI’s heavier equipment. Chinooks could no longer cut it, especially for long-distance hauls. As such, plans for a new air transport were called for. GT graciously provided their gunship design as a basis, and work began immediately on the new aircraft. Owen himself personally requested Joe’s team to be involved. Everything else on his plate was shelved, including the tank prototype, Scatterpack, and EMP Cannon. Even worse, a third of the engineer corps was already sent to Europe for field repairs and maintenance.

Thirteen months of crunch-testing with the avionic techs, and the Orca dropship was born. It could carry more than twice the payload of a single Chinook. Joe’s relief was as immense as the Orca’s belly, as he could finally get back to his schedule. A year after, the improved tank he was working on went from a mere empty hull to a full-fledged war machine.

Named the “Goliath”, it was Joe’s attempt to replace the aging Mammoth tank, with maintenance becoming too cumbersome from the scarcity of spare parts. The Goliath shared similar parts with the M1 Abrams, making repairs easier, sporting double the firepower with two 120mm cannons mounted in an over-and-under fashion. While it had

better armour and firepower, some features had to be cut from the final design to maintain adequate speed, including a disk grenade launcher. Also, unlike the Mammoth tank, the Goliath had no anti-air capability, so that role fell on the shoulders of Dragonflies in the field.

Today, Joe found himself inside an Orca dropship, delivering the first few Goliath tanks as part of the lend lease with GT. While the lease outlined that GT pick them up themselves, he figured he'd do them a small favour..

*Eh, a bit of PR never hurt anyone, well, mostly, Joe thought, Besides, I'll need to head over there anyway. Hopefully that walker technology can help the Scatterpack's weight issues.*

Finally, the city of Gamma 11 came into view. It was the last shelter city along the Chilean coast before the Atacama Desert, and in close proximity to the ocean to boot. Gamma 11 was notable for its low readings on the TRI(Tiberium Radiation Index), based on the CAR categories developed by Dr. Fredo Griaud. "Cyan" denoted very low levels of radiation, and served as the ideal range for living conditions. "Amber" denoted moderate radiation, but still habitable. Most of Fredo's samples fell within this range. "Ruby" denoted areas with extreme Tiberium radiation, where enviro-gear is mandatory. Even then, prolonged operation in such zones is highly inadvisable.

Gamma 11 recorded mid-to-low Cyan levels on the TRI and was right next to the ocean, hence the nickname "Deep Blue" was born. The dropship's destination was a small island off the coast, connected to the mainland via a short bridge. Designated G-11, It housed the base's research center and a landing pad. A pair of large cannon installations were seen on the island, guarding the bridge.

*"Attention, all personnel,"* came the pilot's voice over the intercom, *"We will be touching down in G-11 shortly. Please remain seated till we've landed."* Joe, along with the other crew members, walked over to the seats along the sides, and strapped themselves in. The overhead lights came on, illuminating the ship's payload of four Goliath tanks, parked in two lanes.

The dropship did a 180 as it descended on the landing pad, the extended landing gear cushioning the touchdown and the whining engines gradually dying off.

"Alright, ladies. Man your tanks!" shouted Joe after unfastening the seatbelt, walking towards the rear ramp slowing opening up. As he jogged down the ramp, he could hear the tanks gunning their engines to life, which in turn sounded like smaller aircraft

starting up. Cargo hold personnel met up with the crewmen on the ground, gathering info on where to direct the tanks. One by one, the Goliaths crawled out of the Orca's belly, following the directions of the ground crewmen to their designated spots.

"Joe Harden?" came a voice to the left of the ramp. Joe turned to see one of the crewmen waving at him. His uniform had slightly different markings than the rest.

"Yep, that's me," replied Joe with a smile as he walked over. *Pretty small for welcoming committee.*

"Sergeant Malcolm Granger, 57th Combat Engineer Battalion. Or at least, I was. Now, I'm the crew chief here."

"The 57th? Weren't you guys relocated to South America during the First Tiberium War began?"

"That would be correct, sir. We were stationed in Brazil. Not much action, aside from some Nod skirmishes here and there, though that fell on the Infantry and armoured divisions to deal with."

"So how did a combat engineer like yourself wind up here?"

"Well, the 57th was due for relocation anyway due to low Nod activity around here, but then the disbandment order came, and I kid you not, a few days after the order reached us, a bunch of guys in suits appeared in the nearby town, said they were from a research corporation. They were looking to hire those with a military background. I found the offer odd, especially with the timing of it, but I took my chances, regardless. Globotech's benefits were quite attractive, too."

"Ah, so you guys got bought out by Globotech eh?"

"Well if you put it that way, it's going to sound bad. The uncertainty waiting back at home was what prompted most of us to do it, including me. So, some of us decided to join together. Speaking of which, how was GDI been working out for you since then?"

"We've been on the run for a bit, but we finally settled down. Got a promotion, too, though I have a feeling it was for something else," replied Joe as he tapped on his left leg.

"Holy shit," remarked Malcolm when he heard the mildly hollow sound of plastic.

"There you are, Joe!"

Joe and Malcolm turned to see Dr. Giraud approaching them in a mild jog.

"Doc? You've kept me waiting quite a bit. What happened?" asked Joe, trying to seem annoyed.

"My apologies. I had to welcome another entourage of guests. Shall we get moving?"

"Sure thing," replied Joe, "Thanks for keeping me company, Granger. You're one hell of a welcoming committee."

Malcolm nodded and gave a salute, before the two walked away.

“Sure thing. We have about an hour till the demonstration starts, so there’s plenty of time.”

The two headed towards the research building. Near the entrance, Joe could see three power suits exiting an Armadillo APC.

“You’ve got company, I see,” remarked Joe as they stepped into the lobby, bearing a similar resemblance to the lobby in

“Yep. That’s the Daedalus Team. They’re the ones carrying out the demo,” replied Fredo.

“Daedalus Team?”

“They’re our top research division. They report directly to the Board of Directors, so their work is usually classified until approved for mass production. If they’re here, it means the Board asked them to be here.”

“A research division shrouded in mystery. Interesting.”

The temporary office consisted of two cubicles on the opposite ends, with a table in the middle. Fredo walked over to the one on the left and got a second seat for Joe.

“Here,” said Fredo as he unlocked his computer and opened a minimized file, “These improved leg hydraulics should be what you’re looking for.”

“Ah, I see you’ve improved the bipedal legs for more load capacity and overall speed. Nice, very nice,” replied Joe as he studied the schematics on screen.

“While I appreciate the compliment, it was not I who did it.”

“Wait, you didn’t? Oh yeah, the Daedalus team. I’m still registering the fact that they’re a thing.”

“I wouldn’t blame you. Live demos are not part of their usual agenda.”

“Maybe they’re doing some PR, too.”

Fredo allowed himself a small laugh. Before continuing, “Also, one more thing. We’ve been experimenting with breaking down Tiberium into less harmful components. The most effective method so far is via harmonic resonance.”

Fredo opened up a video. In it, Joe could see the inside of a test chamber, among other display details like recording time, and a TRI indicator denoting high Cyan levels. The hazard symbols on the walls denoted that the chamber was meant to handle high-radiation chemicals. In the test chamber, was a giant curved dish, mounted on a turret ring. Next to it was what looked like a series of batteries, wired to the dish.

A minute later, blast shields were lowered to reveal a green Tiberium crystal cluster on the other end. A few minutes passed, and TRI of the chamber began to increase slightly. The dish turned to focus on the cluster, before an emitter slightly below the dish fired some shockwaves at it. The shockwaves reflected off the dish and hit the crystal cluster, shattering it into tiny fragments on the floor. The video then continued for a few more minutes where the TRI indicator gradually decreased.

"Nice, you're literally blowing it up with shockwaves," remarked Joe, intrigued by the emitter.

"Well, sonic waves to be specific, but yes," replied Fredo, "There's just one problem: The entire mechanism i.e the dish, the emitter, and the power cell, is very heavy. Hence, if we were to move it around, we need a chassis that can carry it, which is where your Goliaths come in."

"Ah, so that's why you needed 'em."

"Yep. I hope with this technology, we can finally reclaimed some of the areas lost to Tiberium."

The two talked a bit more, before heading back downstairs, to the building's auditorium. People were already taking their seats when they arrived. Joe could see that a dais marked the central speaking area, with a table and a laptop on it. Ten feet above the dais, were two big screens. To the right of the dais, were a group of three people talking. One man stood out from the group. He had black hair with grey spots, and a rather round face. He was dressed in a suit and blue tie, and was the only one donning a pin on his left collar, the shape of which Joe could not make out.

"Ah, that's Dr. Xander Orens," said Fredo, noticing Joe's gaze, "He's in charge of the demo today, showcasing some new tech they've been working on."

"You mean even you don't know?" asked a puzzled Joe.

"Daedalus likes their secrets. if I were to guess, it's probably related to the walker data he graciously provided me with."

Joe nodded approvingly, before turning his attention back to the doctor. His conversation with the two people ended, and he took center stage, briefly checking the mic near his collar.

"Greetings, Globotech," he began, "It's not every day I do these, but the Board has asked that I give a live showcase, so here it is. We have the X-O Powersuit, which has allowed us to tread into places no man can go, specifically, Tiberium-infested places. With that, Dr. Fredo was able to develop his CAR categories and give us a better understanding of the world we live in, because it's no longer just ours."

“So, where do we go from here?”

“The Powersuit itself has been proven to be quite robust, but it still needs a human, be it for exploration, or combat. What if we could take that element out of the equation? While I leave you with that thought, I ask that you turn your attention to the screens.”

On cue, the lights began to dim, and the screens came online. The left screen displayed a live camera feed of a forest, with some displays denoting speed, weapon status, along with environmental readings such as temperature, humidity, and the TRI. The right screen showed the same forest, but from above, and with a gray filter. A white text reading “UAV-01” was at the bottom right.

“As you can see,” continued Dr. Orens’ voice in the darkness, “We’ve set up these two units outside of Gamma 11. Their target is a mile away to the north. Let’s see if they can seek and destroy.”

The image of the right screen began to move as it traversed through the trees. A few minutes later, as it emerged from the forest, the second screen zoomed in, giving Joe a close-up look of this mysterious unit: A bipedal walker with reverse-jointed legs, but unlike the Kazuar, it had a lankier silhouette. A second walker followed behind shortly after.

Next, was a series of hills. The speed and stability while maneuvering through such uneven terrain was met with a nod of approval for Joe. He wasn’t even sure if the best Kazuar pilots could do that.

Then, the TRI began to spike as walkers approached a green Tiberium field. The sound of glass breaking accompanied their footsteps as they crushed the smaller crystals. The TRI peaked at high Rias as they passed by the blossom tree, which Joe found to be both interesting and scary.

At last, their target loomed in the distance: a derelict Nod Scorpion tank. The only thing between the walkers and the derelict tank were a few tall plates of metal, forming a wall about 15 feet in height and 30 feet wide. The walkers approached the tank, before momentarily stopping about a hundred meters from it.

“Now, for a little combat exercise,” continued Dr. Orens, “The walkers can’t actually see the tank, but the drone can.” As the UAV zoomed in on the area, what came

next was very quick. The derelict tank's hull was repeatedly bombarded through the wall, before its fuel tank burst into flames. Awe and gasp ran rampant through the crowd, before the two screens faded to black.

"Globotech, I give you, the protector, the explorer. The Sentinel," was the doctor's final sentence before applause rang out, the screens now displaying close-up pictures of the walker.

A question-and-answer session followed suit. Upon its conclusion, Orens headed for the exit, when heard a voice to his right. He turned to see a stout man in beige apparel, a gold eagle insignia on the right of his ballistic vest.

"Xander Orens. Now I remembe-!" exclaimed Joe.

"Sir, I must ask you to step away", interrupted a guard, putting himself between the two of them.

"It's alright," said the doctor as he dismissed the guard, "Ah, you're the GDI soldier sitting next to Dr. Giraud."

"You made a project bid against Dr. Mobius, didn't you?"

"Quite the sharp memory you have there. What's your name?"

"Master Sergeant Joseph Harden. Chief Engineer."

"Good to know GDI still has some men of caliber. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other matters to attend to." And with that, the doctor promptly disappeared behind the exit.

"You really like charging into things headfirst, eh?" said Fredo, who just caught up with him.

"Did you know that guy used to work for GDI?" asked Joe with a slight frown, his thumb towards the exit.

"No idea. You know him?"

"Both he and Dr. Mobius both submitted bids for a new project," began Joe, as they left the auditorium, "Dr. Mobius won because GDI had some of his 'Mobius Suits' produced. I've no idea what Dr. Orens submitted, but it was probably a first-gen Powersuit or somethin'. Oh yeah, speaking of that, you didn't design the Powersuit? I thought you did, man."

"I didn't design it. You give me too much credit, Joe," laughed Fredo as they reached the lobby, "But, I was involved in testing it. When are you leaving?"

"Let's see," replied Joe, briefly checking his watch, "The dropship should be good to go within an hour and a half, or so."

"Great. Let's go check out the town. Don't worry, you won't have to walk. I've got a ride this time."

"Any good bars, doc?"

"You know it."

"Count me in. I'll wait here."

As Joe waited at the lobby entrance, his mind reflected on the day's events.

*I get that they're helping us, but man, it seems more and more like GT profited the most out of that page in the history book. Mobius vanished into thin air, and now this Orens guy shows up working for GT. What's next?*

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## Chapter 12: Lines in the Sand

*September 2014*

*"Fan out and push forward. Watch your flanks and check your corners,"* radioed Adder as the Cadre agents systematically poured into the large clearing at the end of the tunnel. Gunfire was already starting to break out following shouts of panic and disarray in the cold dark underground.

After the fall of Beta 10 and its defending bases, Brother Wires helped himself to the data from the comm centers. While the GDI comm center didn't reveal much aside from a few other bases in the area, the Globotech comm center had something peculiar: communications with a source somewhere in Northern Chile, specifically, the Atacama Desert, the source being labeled as 'Supply DDepot', intentionally spelled with double Ds. Initially, he thought it was a mere outlier, but the GDI base he captured prior to Beta 10, essentially the field test of his Viper drones, had communications to a location close to the GT source. While Nod was previously occupied in the European theater, Commander Abrax finally gave him the resources he needed.

All of Nod's available intel pointed to that area being a wasteland, some parts even being completely overrun by Tiberium or Veinholes. Wires sent in a team to set up an outpost there, monitoring the area for weeks in secret, but all they found was a small GDI outpost, which they promptly left alone. On the fourth week, Wires finally got access to Nod's new Hornet patrol craft, the answer to GDI's Orca menace. They were not only fast, but cheap to produce.

Wires sent them on a wide-area search, using the coordinates as a reference, being careful to avoid the GDI outpost. One of the Hornets went dark somewhere in the east of the outpost. Someone didn't like that, because within a week, GDI patrols doubled in quantity and frequency. Even worse, they were fielding a new type of walker unit. While it was slow, the unit sported multiple rotary cannons, and could even shred airborne units with ease.

Wires sent Adder and two platoons of Black Hand Cadre agents to spearhead the search party. Interestingly, a disused railway line led to the east, through an abandoned city. While the line's official stop was in an eastern city (marked by a railway buffer stop), the track actually continued on through canyon. While there wasn't a soul in sight, the

canyon itself was teeming with Mantis swarms. Exploring the ridges of the canyons revealed a line of anti-air batteries. They fired EMP missiles, something never seen in the field before. Whatever they were guarding, Globotech wanted to make damn sure nobody would find it.

Making their way along the northern ridge of the canyon, they found what the EMP batteries were guarding: a Globotech outpost surrounding a railway tunnel into the mountains. Reinforcements were airlifted in now that the skies were clearer. The cadre platoons took the outpost by surprise, securing the entrance before moving in. What they found within the tunnel dwarfed any expectations Adder had.

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"This way, Dr. Orens," said a Peacekeeper in a hurried tone as he ushered the doctor and his three assistants down a corridor, white tube lights evenly spaced along the low ceiling. Occasionally, distant echoes of gunfire or explosions reached them. The comms of escorting infantry were constantly lit up with reports of Nod forces pushing deeper into the facility. They kept their focus on getting the scientists to the surface hatches. The vast supplies they lost could be replaced in time.

Ahead of the group were three Guardians taking point. Passing a branch on the left, they kept going until a T-junction appeared 40 meters ahead of them. If Dr. Orens' memory served him well, the western surface hatch should be down the right corridor. A Guardian ordered the rest to hold position while they checked the junction.

Their peeks around both corners were almost instantly met with a hail of gunfire.

"In here!" shouted the Peacekeeper as he herded the scientists into the earlier branch, covering the corner. He could see Guardians trading fire with what sounded like assault rifles, before a stream of orange and white engulfed two of them. The third rolled away just in time, before scrambling to his feet to reach the branch. Unfortunately, he would never make it.

A hail of lead peppered the corridor, striking his back. While the thick body armour protected him, a bullet caught his right leg and he fell forwards. Refusing to give up, he crawled as far as his two arms could take him. The Peacekeeper returned fire, keeping the bursts short to reduce random ricochets. To his surprise, the incoming gunfire stopped. The Peacekeeper quickly stepped out of the corner to help the Guardian, who was a mere 10 meters away. A small crimson trail was visible on the floor where the bullet struck his

leg. Just then, a dark figure emerged from the T-junction's left corner, a wide white grin and two red eyes on its face. A small blue flame flickered at the end of its weapon.

"Get up! Get up!" shouted the Peacekeeper as he grasped the Guardian's right hard, but before he could heave the downed soldier to his feet, the dark figure unleashed a stream of white and orange down the corridor. The Peacekeeper fell backwards as the heat seared through his body, the surrounding metal walls acting as a huge oven.

The agonizing screams died down a few seconds later.

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While combat continued to spread through the facility, the loading dock was rather quiet. The single track leading into the mountains split into the west and east loading areas, each further splitting into four lanes. A switching station was in the middle of this massive clearing, surrounded by thick walls. The entrance was also paved, indicating it was meant for vehicle access as well as trains. This road continued beyond the loading dock's giant gate and deeper into the facility, connecting most of the other areas. Adder already had reports of tanks being sighted, but oddly, they seemed to be entrenched in keeping his agents from advancing. The tanks were the least of their concerns, though.

Barricade after barricade was set up in some of the offroad entrances, the Guardians and Powersuits behind them putting up fierce resistance unlike any shelter city forces they've taken on thus far.

While the Cadre agents led by Adder were not of the common militant rabble, they found out very quickly that they were ill-equipped to fight in narrow metal corridors. The blackblast from rocket launchers and ricocheting bullets made them extremely dangerous to use. As for the flamethrowers, only the incinerators had enough fireproof clothing to withstand the heat, but the rest had to keep their distance.

Back at the loading dock, Adder went over the final steps of the operation. In less than ten minutes, the facility would cease to exist.

"Get to it, Saboteurs. I want the demo drones in place five minutes ago!" shouted Adder, when he turned to see an approaching incinerator amidst the bustle of the loading area. The incinerator was accompanied by two agents, holding four lab coats at gunpoint.

"Brother Tibson, I take it the western entrance is sealed? And what do you have here?" asked Adder curiously.

"Found some rats trying to escape. Seems like they were heading for the west hatch as well," said Tibson in a low voice.

"Interesting," replied Adder as he instructed the agents to line the scientists up against a nearby wall, "Our brothers along the west road are facing heavy resistance. Take your men and keep the enemy at bay for a little longer. We're almost done here."

Tibson nodded before his group headed for the giant gate.

Adder turned his attention to the scientists, getting a closer look at them. One name tag caught his attention: 'Dr. Xander Orens - Deadalus Dept Head'. The other three had meager positions of little interest.

"You there. Step forward," pointed Adder to Xander, "I take it you're the boss of your little entourage?"

"Yes," replied Xander calmly, trying to mask his panic, "These are my assistants."

"Alright, then, Dr. Orens. We're on a tight schedule so I'll make this quick: you are now the property of Nod. We don't take prisoners, but as per the Law of Expendability, if you cooperate and answer my questions truthfully, you may yet leave this place alive. It would be such a shame to lose such fine young talent," said Adder as he looked at the assistants still lined up against the wall, eyes darting about as panic began to set in, their backs soaked with sweat.

Xander swallowed hard and nodded. *He doesn't seem like a typical Nod zealot. I guess they put the smarter ones further up the command chain.*

"...and don't test me, doctor. I know a lying man when I see one," continued Adder as he turned back to Xander, "First question: what are you doing here?"

"We work here."

"You work here? Is this a research facility?"

"It's a hub. A research facility with its own small-scale factory and logistics, so that Globotech can mobilize assets when needed."

"It was quite a task finding this place. What are you hiding in here?"

"It's a location that's hard to reach, so we can carry out our research in sec-"

In a split second, Adder had his pistol in his hand, walked up to the assistant on the left, and pressed it against his temple. The assistant's mouth widened in terror as his face went white as his coat.

"No, no, no. WAIT!" exclaimed Xander.

"Wrong answer," replied Adder as he pulled the trigger.

"GERALD!" exclaimed one of the other assistants, as the lifeless body slumped to the ground.

"Strike one, doctor. Do *not* test me," replied Adder, wiping the blood spatter from his helmet.

"OKAY! Okay, yes, there is something," replied Xander.

"Oh?" said Adder, smiling from within his helmet, as he saw the demeanour of defeat in the doctor's eyes, "What is so valuable that you would sacrifice one of your own to keep it hidden?"

"I can take you there, but we must move fast. There is a large contingent of Globotech forces heading this way."

"From where?"

"The surrounding bases and shelter cities. GDI and Globotech signed an agreement. If any of GT assets come under attack, they have the right to request the assistance of local GDI forces, and considering the high value of this facility, they will pull every asset they can get."

*Hmmm, he doesn't seem to be lying on this one. Brother Wires will want to hear of this. What a good lab rat you are. With one death, you cough up every last detail in verbal diarrhea,* thought Adder.

"Very well," replied Adder, "Where is this lab of yours?"

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While the raised plateau ring around Wellspring Base made for a strong natural barrier, there wasn't much room for expansion. Repairing some of the damaged railway sections and making use of dormant locomotives, GDI rapidly expanded their infrastructure into the neighbouring city shortly after the massive Tiberium field was secured. Named GD-WS2, the sprawling urban base made use of various abandoned buildings in the city. The police station served as a barracks, the initial landing site of the invasion force was now an airstrip, and the nearby hangar now housed two A-10 Warthogs.

The makeshift air base came alive in the early hours of the morning as weapon crews fueled and refitted the parked aircraft there. A call came in for immediate assistance, and all aircraft were to scramble. Tanks were already being loaded and shipped out via the repaired railway lines and available dropships.

One by one, the four Orca VTOLs of “Team Wagtail” whined to life, as they left their helipads. The Warthogs were the last to take off, just after a dropship repurposed for mid-air refueling.

*“Saber 1 is in the air,” radioed the first Warthog pilot.*

*“Saber 2, up and away,” came in the second.*

*“Roger that,” replied Wellspring Command, “As this operation will be headed by Globotech, an in-flight briefing will commence shortly. Godspeed. Wellspring out.”*

*“Saber 1, copy. Don’t you find this a little weird, Razor?”*

*“Affirmative, T-Bone. No briefing beforehand, and it seems like every bird from the base is in the air. Considering the AO, you’d think the birds further down south could have handled it.”*

*“True. Unless, they were deployed, too.”*

Somewhere after the midpoint, the Warthogs and Orcas took turns to refuel, before the air tanker broke away. The Sun was already peeking out, the purple hue of the night slowly fading into orange.

*“Attention, all pilots. This is Captain Reynolds of Woodstar Base. I’ll coordinating today’s operation. One of Globotech’s bases in the Atacama Desert came under attack earlier this morning, and we suspect it to be a Nod infiltration team. The garrison and air patrols from Woodstar have already been scrambled. You are to provide close-air support and to ensure enemy forces do not leave the desert. Search and destroy. Reynolds out”*

The Warthogs and Orcas continued along their flight path, providing cover for the dropships as they dropped off their payload some ways from the AO.

*Something isn’t right, thought Saber 2, There’s enough armour here to take on an entire Nod stronghold, and then some.* His mind drifted back to reality as the radio crackled, with Captain Reynolds’ voice again.

*“Attention, Saber Team. We’ve discovered a Nod base perched on a plateau west of the AO. Proceed to the following coordinates and cover our boys on the ground.”*

Saber Team obliged and broke away from the flight path. The vast dunes of the Atacama desert stretched out below them, with Veinholes standing out as sprawling dark orange fields. As they approached their target area atop a plateau, the pilots could already see gunfire being exchanged in the distance.

*“Looks like they’ve started without us. Saber 1 confirming friendlies to the west. Locking attack vector.”*

The Warthogs carried two napalm bombs each, along with their GAU-8 Avenger rotary cannon. While meant to engage Nod vehicles, the bombs could still do a number on buildings in clusters.

The strafing run sent two waves of fire and debris in a line, dissecting the base like a giant scalpel.

*"Yeeha! Nothing like some tenderized Nod in the morning!"* exclaimed Saber 2, before multiple sharp beeps turned his face pale as a sheet, *"Incoming missile! MISSILE!"*

He tried to break right, but it was too late. His plane erupted into a ball of fire.

*"Saber 2's been hit. Zone is too hot. Pulling away,"* said Saber 1 as he broke off. His thoughts began to race. *Concealed SAMs? A Warthog doesn't go down that easily. More than one perhaps?*

Elsewhere, Team Wagtail found themselves filling in for the local air patrols recently shot down in the area.

*"They're down already? Shouldn't the AO be too hot for flying?"* radioed Wag 3.

*"From the report I received, they managed to take out a Nod Stinger before they went down. We're thinning 'em down, but at a cost,"* replied Wag 1, *"They came prepared. Approaching AO in two miles. Stay frosty and keep your eyes peeled."*

The canyon slowly came into view as they cleared the mountain. Black smoking patches on the ground were the only signs left of the recent firefight.

*"The area below is pretty messed up. Can't tell the wreckages apart from here,"* remarked Wag 3, *"Seems like they really did a number on the tunnel. The entrance is nothing but a track sticking out of the mountain-side. No sign of movement down there, too."*

*"Yeah, seems like they're long go- hold, I'm getting a report... seems like two Nod buggies approaching the western blockade. Probably a scouting party. We have orders to pursue,"* replied Wag 1.

*"They want us to go after the bait?"* asked Wag 2.

*"Seems like it. We'll pursue until the main force is located,"* replied Wag 1.

The Orcas sped towards the blockade at full speed.

*"Wag 1 spotted the two buggies. Looks like they didn't expect the blockade."*

*"They're sure making a run for it. Arming TOWs,"* replied Wag 2 as they neared the buggies. One of the gunners must have spotted the squadron, for they violently swerved to the left after the TOWs were fired, narrowly avoiding an explosive fate.

*"Both buggies are still operational and heading south,"* reported Wag 1.

*"What kind of driving is that? One almost toppled over,"* remarked Wag 4.

*"They're pretty agile. Let's close in on 'em to get a better shot."*

However, as they closed within 200 meters of their targets, muzzle flashes began to appear from the buggies.

*"They're shooting at us?"* asked Wag 3 in disbelief.

*"That's crazy!"* exclaimed Wag 2.

Wag 2's canopy caught a round, before more rounds embedded themselves on the left side.

*"Wag 2 here. My left engine's been hit. Still able to maintain altitude."*

*"Goddamn it! They're just buggies!"* shouted Wag 4.

The Orcas pulled back slightly, but still pursued the buggy along the railway track, till another report came in.

*"Team Wagtail, this is Reynolds. Shift to the west city. Nod forces have attacked the infantry stationed there, and have taken refuge within the buildings. A Globotech strike force is closing in on the city as we speak. Support them in driving Nod out of the city."*

*"Wag 1, copy. Finally, the main dish."*

As they flew closer to the city, Globotech infantry were already at the edge of the city, approaching under fire.

*"There it is!",* radioed Wag 1, *"Blue smoke and tracer rounds on two townhouses. Pick your targets and splash 'em."*

The rest acknowledged and acquired their targets. Though unguided, the TOW missiles made gaping holes in the already-decrepit buildings.

*"Shack on the target,"* said Wag 1 as they passed over.

*"Wag 2 spotting movement behind the buildings. Seems like a vehicle. Check the shadows."*

*"Roger that, Wag 2. All units, circle for a second pass. Eyes on the buildings."*



The squadron looped around, and they could see tiny silhouettes pulling back further into the city. Wag 4 spotted a vehicle caught under a pile of rubble from their first pass, frantically trying to dislodge itself.

*I've got you now*, he thought to himself as he aligned his vector and thumbed the fire button. To his dismay, a lock-on warning sounded. He was too close.

*"Oh shi-"* was his final words as they both met a fiery end head-on.

*"Missile warning! All units break!"* ordered Wag 1 as they scrambled. Wag 2's damaged engine didn't carry him that far, and two missiles finished him off.

*"Damn it! They still have Stingers! It's way too hot down there!"* exclaimed Wag 3.

*"Reynolds, permission to pull back and rearm while the ground forces clear out those Stingers. I'm not risking any more of my men,"* radioed Wag 1, trying his best to keep calm.

*"Wag 1, permission granted. Head to Woodstar for a quick resupply. We'll need you back in the air eventually."*

The Orcas pulled back from the city and reached the safe confines of the outpost. Since the local air patrols were already wiped out, the helipads were rather empty. Wag 1 and 3 landed and hopped out to inspect the damage, while crewmen rushed to rearm and refuel their aircraft.

*"Man, today's off to a weird start,"* said Wag 3 as he fished for a cigarette.

*"Stow the smokes, Wag 3. Wouldn't want this crew chief to be on your ass too,"* replied Wag 1. Wag 3 shrugged, and promptly put it back in his pack. *"But yeah, I get you. The captain's pulling in way too many resources, and I've never faced an enemy quite like this. They're agile, they're always on the move, and tend to knock out our air support first. Whoever who's at the helm, they sure know their stuff."*

*"Maybe it's an elite force. They snuck into the Globotech base, perhaps?"*

*"Aye. If it's an elite strike team, we're in for a hell of a day."*

The crew chief gave a thumbs up, signalling the completion of the rearming and refuelling. Wag 1 got back into his cockpit and hailed the Captain.

*"Wag 1 to Captain Reynolds, do you read me?"*

A long pause ensued.

*"This is Captain Reynolds. Go ahead, Wag 1."*

*"We're good to go. Is the enemy still in the city, sir?"*

*"The Nod Strike force has abandoned the city and is on the move again. They're heading towards the southern pass, along the fringes of a Veinhole. Infantry and GDI walkers are in*

*pursuit, though they're having minor trouble with Mantises. I need Wagtail in there for close air support once they make contact with the enemy."*

Wag 1 nodded and promptly started up his engines, Wag 3 following suit. "Captain," he continued as they lifted off, "if I may speak freely, something's off about this entire operation. There are way too many assets in the area, yet the Nod forces are always one step ahead of us. What are we dealing with here?"

"I understand your concern, Wag 1. However, the operation is headed by Globotech's Officer Steele. He enacted a mandate from a research agreement between us and them, and we're here at the behest of that mandate."

Wag 1's face contorted slightly at that bout of bureaucracy, but he realized he was messing with forces above his pay grade.

*"...understood, Captain. Wag 1 out."*

As the Orcas approached the Veinhole, they could see some Goliath tanks stopping by the fringes. Two tanks who wandered too close were already entangled by the fringe tendrils, the nearby infantry struggling to free them.

*"Man, that's one nasty mofo. If the Gollies weren't so tough and heavy, they'd already be torn apart,"* remarked Wag 3 as they flew over.

*"Seems like our boys are having a tough time crossing that narrow path. Veins on one side, and a cave full Mantises on the other. I only see infantry and walkers from his point on. Once we make contact with the enemy, deliver your payload, and break away."*

*"Solid copy. This is no place to get downed."*

*"There's the pass. I see gunfire down there. Arming TOWs."*

Scatterpacks rained lead on the Nod vehicles, but because said vehicles were nestled in uneven terrain pockets, only a fragment of the rounds found their mark.

*"Wag 1, firing."*

*"Wag 3, TOW away!"*

A Ratel and Scorpion went up flames as the TOWs struck hard, and on cue, both Orcas broke away.

No Stinger missiles came.

*"Looks like we got lucky, Wag 1."*

*"Roger that, Wag 3."*

As they came around, GDI forces advanced into the pass. As Wag 1 eyed the pass from above, he noticed they suffered no retaliation. No flames, no rockets.

*Did we finally get 'em? thought Wag 1.*

*"This is Sergeant Jerome of the GDI ground forces. Thanks for the support, Wagtail."*

*"Wag 3 here, pleasure's ours."*

*"Wag 1 here, much obliged. How's the situation down there?"*

*"Seems like we're coming up on more Nod vehicles, but they don't seem to be shooting back."*

*"Have they surrendered?" said Wag 1, knowing that was too good to be true.*

*"I'm not sure. Hold on a second. Yes, soldier, report!... what do you mean 'they're abandoned'? What Nod trickery is this?! Search the entire pass! Turn every damn stone!"*

Both pilots sat in their cockpits in stunned silence.

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## Chapter 13: One Mission

*November 2014*

Abrax stood behind a podium resembling Nod's emblem, in full Confessor gear. Brother Wires stood on his right. Before them, hundreds of Nod soldiers stood in anticipation of his speech.

"Brothers..."

His cold voice echoed through the Temple's hall with vigor.

"As a new year approaches, so does a new dawn. Across the globe, more are rallying to our call every day. Our support grows stronger, our faith unwavering. But now, an old foe rises again to challenge us. Remnants of GDI, who was thought of have withered and fractured years, now allies itself with the malicious corporation known as Globotech. They seek to undo Tiberium's gift in the world. But, even as this twisted chimera meanders about, our reach extends far beyond its talons. Brothers, I give you, the future."

The giant black screen behind Abrax flickered to life. On the right, a rotating green globe denoted all the territories conquered by Nod. On the left was a vertical abbreviation in red, which read "World Infusion, Reprogramming, Education, Subjugation."

"This is our future," continued Abrax, "This world is ours to take and to rule. Our greatest battle lies before us. We shall slay this chimera, and the world will be ours for the taking. We must not falter or waiver when our ascension, our birthright, is right within our grasp. Peace through power." On that last sentence, he raised both his hands, and the audience followed suit.

Fervour overtook the crowd as chants of "PEACE THROUGH POWER!" echoed throughout the hall.

Along the sides of the hall, a few Black Hand members stood in full gear. Two of them in particular watched the speech and spoke in hushed tones, their helmets masking their deep contempt.

"Look at him. He thinks he can speak for Kane."

"I wouldn't be surprised if he thought to replace Kane."

"Abrax hardly even shows his face. What's to say he's not a puppet?"

"You can hear it in his cold inhuman voice. Abrax is no longer one of us. He has long become a machine, and with Dr. Incandela at his disposal, I'm sure we'll see more of this to come."

"Project ReGenesis was a dark chapter in the Brotherhood's history, and it should stay in the past where it belongs."

"Agreed. The atrocities committed against our own brothers in the name of progress was vile and uncalled for. This is not Kane's will. But now, we bide our time."

~End of Phase 2~

# Project W.I.R.E.S Timeline(Vol 1)

## August 2010

- GDI brokered a deal with Globotech.
- GDI successfully escorted a Globotech convoy back to Theta 17.
- General Sheppard and Dymitr Kasza were located and recovered.

## March 2011

- Numerous Tiberium missiles were launched all over Europe. Nod began invading European countries.

## June 2011

- Samuel Harden visited Delta 20's base to oversee the Kazuar's progress.
- Nod forces attacked Delta 20, both the city and the base. City was Tiberium-bombed.

## October 2011

- A Nod strike force led by Wires and the Black Hand attacked Beta 10 city and the defending GDI and GT bases. City was conquered.
- Just before Beta 10 fell, Samuel Harden in turn led a GDI strike force to take the Wellspring, successfully taking the massive Tiberium harvesting base.

## November 2011

- Joseph Harden began work on the Scatterpack walker.
- GDI and Globotech signed a research agreement, and COO Janus requested assistance in the European theater to tackle the unchecked Nod threat there.
- Joseph Harden promoted from Staff Sergeant to Master Sergeant.
- Samuel Harden promoted from Captain to Major.

## December 2011

- GDI entered the European Theater.
- Samuel Harden met Nigel Grant and Dariel MacInnes in Martigues, France.

## December 2012

- Orca Dropship developed and entered service.

December 2013

- Joseph Harden develops the Goliath tank.

May 2014

- Joseph Harden oversees the delivery of Goliath tanks to Gamma 11, a research base just south of the Atacama Desert.
- Dr. Xander Orens of GT showcased his latest walker prototype, the Sentinel.

September 2014

- Wires sent in Adder and two Black Hand cadre platoons to locate the source of the signature, which was discovered to be GT's Daedalus Bunker.
- Daedalus Bunker attacked. Dr Orens and his team kidnapped. Facility destroyed with Demolition Drones causing a cave-in.
- GT used a clause in the research agreement to pull all available GDI assets nearby to stop Nod from getting away, but eventually failed to prevent their escape.