

# **OBSIDIAN'S WAR**

By M S Lawson

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Other books by this author

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Disgraced in all of Koala Bay (ebook, 2016)

The Zen of Being Grumpy (non-fiction published by Connor Court, 2013)

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*But he, that hath the steerage of my course, Direct my sail! On  
lusty gentlemen.*

Romeo on his way to meet Juliet

William Shakespeare 1595

## CHAPTER ONE

Private Gellibrand Bosworth Baines Plymouth Obsidian of three platoon B Company, Second Regiment of the Lighthold Sector Assault Infantry was sound asleep aboard the interstellar troop transporter Highreach, dreaming of women, when his platoon sergeant came to wake him. Gel, as he was to his friends, may have highly trained in cutting-edge weaponry and sensing systems resulting from centuries of technological advancements, but his sergeant's approach to rousing the soldier would have been familiar to a Roman legionnaire or a Greek Hoplite.

"Get up Obsidian, you lazy sod," said staff sergeant Sefton, flipping up the capsule's cover and shaking Gel. Being old school, the sergeant would have tipped the private onto the floor and dumped his mattress on top of him, but Gel was in a sleep capsule on the second tier of the bunk room's array of capsules. The sergeant had to make do with shaking.

"Wha.. Staff Sergeant?" Gel automatically looked at the display set on the bulkhead beside him. "Still half an hour to alarm."

"Not for you, we're making you a squad leader."

"But I don't wanna be a squad leader," protested Gel. "I've told you that. I don't wanna start worrying about what some other poor Salt should be doing." The Assault Infantry called each other Salts.

"Major Tatcha has told me you either accept the job or we're authorised to put you in the air lock and space you. Lieutenant Andris" (this was the platoon leader) "says he will personally work the override for the outer doors to open while you're inside."

"Isn't it against military law to murder privates for refusing promotions?"

The sergeant pushed his face up close to Obsidian's to glare at the private.

"The court of inquiry will find that there are extenuating circumstances, such as the private in question being aggravating." Gel had refused promotion several times. "You're squad leader, no argument, and senior squad leader too." The sergeant withdrew his face and jerked his thumb to indicate that Gel should get up. The other members of the platoon, in sleep capsules with translucent covers closed, as regulations demanded, slept on.

"Say, what? What's happened to Jim, Gus and Ella?" said Gel as he swung his legs over the side and grabbed his trousers.

"Squad Leaders James Guthrie and Gustav Graves had to be switched to other platoons to cover gaps," said Staff Sergeant Sefton. "Guthrie has been made brevet sergeant in C company. His promotion is deserved as you know. Squad leader Ella Hutchinson is still finding her way, as she admits. That leaves you, heaven help us all. You are older than the others and sometime make more sense – which doesn't say much for the others - and you've done the squad leader course."

The sergeant could have also added that Gel was somewhat taller than the platoon average, powerfully built and had more than held his own on all levels in the give and take of barrack rooms without making enemies. The others would not mess with him lightly. He was a natural choice for the vacant junior leader slot.

"I only did the course because you threatened me with field punishment if I didn't," said Gel putting on his socks.

“Did I?” The sergeant affected surprise. “You shouldn’t have such a good memory, Obsidian. Finish getting dressed and get to the ready room. The last-minute shuffle has upset things. Assistant squad leader Finney is the other promotion in three platoon, and Obsidian.” the sergeant lent in again.

“Yes sergeant?” said Gel, leaning back.

“If you didn’t want promotion you should have stayed away from the assault infantry.”

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The ball was a swanky, formal dinner with a retro theme including a live 1940s style big band. This band launched into the swing time classic, *A string of pearls*.

“Swing,” exclaimed Gellibrand Bosworth Baines Plymouth Obsidian. In keeping with the theme of the night, he wore a white coat with wide lapels, black bow tie and black pants. “Alison, let’s dance?”

“Not now, dear,” said Alison. “I want to work the room.”

“But this is a ball,” protested Gel. “People dance at balls not network. I want to dance with my fiancée. I’ve even been taking swing dancing lessons.”

“That’s nice dear,” said Alison, scanning the room. “But you’ll never get into the senate if I don’t get out there and make contacts.”

“Senate?” Gel was momentarily taken aback, then shrugged, “if you’re that interested in politics mother will buy you a senate seat after we’re married, and you can sit in that dreadful Senate building and have meetings.”

“I’m not talking about the planetary senate, Gel,” said Alison rounding on him. “I’m talking about the Imperial Senate on Earth.”

“Imperial senate?”

Gel’s blood ran cold. His mother had mentioned that he might go into politics, but he thought she had heeded his strong protests and dropped the idea. The vast family fortune could be used to back some other poor devil who actually liked being in meetings, giving speeches, having his picture taken and being interviewed. Gel detested the publicity that came with being heir to a vast fortune and actively avoided it. But if Alison was talking about aiming for the Imperial Senate Gel knew that his mother must be behind the idea. He also knew that what his mother wanted, she got.

“Why in all of Imperium would I want to get into that senate?” he said. “I don’t want to be in politics – I don’t want to start worrying about what some other poor citizen is doing.”

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The newly promoted senior squad leader assembled with the other B Company leaders in the ready room for Major Tatcha’s briefing, which included changes to the company hierarchy.

“Staff sergeant Sefton tells me you’ve graciously accepted promotion,” said Tatcha to Gel, smiling.

“He made me an offer I couldn’t refuse, sir, involving an airlock.”

“It’s sad what we’re reduced to in the assault infantry,” said Tatcha, still smiling.

“Very sad is it not, staff sergeant?”

“Yes sir, very sad sir. Privates should want to murder their mothers for a chance to become squad leader. Instead, they have to be forced to take it.”

“Sad, very sad.”

The major called them to order and went over the leadership changes which included a new lieutenant for the Heavy Weapons and Support (HWAS) platoon, a bewildered looking Lieutenant Hasten. Then he moved onto the mission bringing up a map of the region they were to be transported to from orbit.

“It’s our turn to go down the surface, the last formation of the expeditionary force to go, Ladies and Gentlemen, and we have a straight forward mission,” he said. “A good chance to shake down the changes just made. We’re going down in a trident formation of four transports, the three platoon transports spread out with HWAS at the rear to land just outside this town,” Tatcha pointed to a square on the map, “called Walter’s Find. Someone called Walter found whatever is being mined there, it seems, and that’s about as complicated as place names get on this planet. The town is nothing more than a mining settlement of a few buildings but its right on top of a mother lode of smart crystals used for the new AI systems.”

As the Major did not bother to explain but his audience knew Smart Crystals were a rare form of the very common tectosilicate crystals. When right impurities were added and the deposit left under pressure for a geological age, these crystals were transformed into material that delivered processing and neutral net power two generations above those of the old, clunky silicon chips, while being far easier to use than Quantum systems. As smart crystals were very difficult to fabricate in a reasonable time, the deposits were highly sought after. The lift crystals which supplied lift when an electric current was passed through them and were widely used in transport vehicles, were a form of cyclosilicates but also required unusual geological conditions to form.

“The sector government wants to show off to the Imperial administration,” the major continued, “bless all their pointy heads, with a fresh supply of these crystals and we are to secure that supply for him. There is a set of ruins behind the town and to the North which isn’t human, as far as we know, and, no I don’t know what that means either. The miners found it by accident and cleared away some of the jungle, but they were told not to do anything more until archaeologists have taken a look. That means we go down, occupy the town and secure the area, including this ruin whatever it is. We have also been told to leave it alone, although we will take a peek. Make sure it’s secure.

“As for opposition, there have been reports of militia from the Sylvan Republic to the East – again a tin pot place named after someone or other – in the area, but as Walter’s Find is some distance from the border our diplomats have agreed with those guys, the Sylvan militia will be staying away, we hope. If we come across any militia, we ask them nicely to leave. If they won’t leave voluntarily then we will insist, as only assault infantry can, that they must leave scaling up to lethal force if necessary. Questions?”

“Any fire support on offer, sir?” asked Lieutenant Andris.

“Good point,” said Tatcha. “Just our transports, I’m afraid, and no weapons heavier than the ones we already have in HWAS. Our forces are spread thin occupying the key points of Outpost 3” (this was the name of the planet) “and like I said the brass has assured us there’s no opposition in the area. We land just outside the town, check it out and then do a sweep. Our main problem will be the terrain – we’re landing in jungle – and the weather. Its pouring down, ladies and gentlemen, take your waterproofs.”

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Gel watched Alison make her way around the tables smiling, chatting and occasionally touching hands. As a tall, radiant beauty in a sky blue gown she drew eyes, both men and women, wherever she went. Powerful men were only too happy to network with her; powerful women wanted to meet her. As Gel watched an old goat whose wife happened to be away from their table grabbed Alison’s hand and kiss it. Alison laughed, withdrew her hand

then touched the man on the shoulder saying something to him before moving on. He was a member of the planet's senate.

Normally Gel would have just asked someone else to dance but his conversation with Alison had been so alarming that he decided to confront his mother instead. As it was a charity ball all the generations were there. He found his mother on a table at the other end of the room with a temporarily empty seat on one side of her which he occupied.

"Mother, what is this I hear about you plotting with Alison to get me into the Imperial Senate?"

"She told you did she," said his mother. She had been a spectacular beauty with a will of steel whose bid to catch Gel's father and the Obsidian fortune had succeeded. The beauty had faded - what was left still brought men around in droves - but the steel was as hard as ever. "I wondered when she would. Alison will do wonders in moulding you, in giving you a purpose in life."

"I have a purpose in life, mother," snapped Gel. "I'm a patent attorney. I like being a patent attorney, and I don't want to be in politics at all or be moulded."

His mother snorted. "You're an intern with that pokey little firm and you can do so much more with your life, Gel. As your father use to say, you're far too easy going. I've tolerated the patent attorney thing as it looks well on political pamphlets, along with science and law degrees."

"I didn't do any of it to look good in politics, mother. I did it because I wanted to."

"And that's what you should say to any interviewer," said Mrs Obsidian leaning towards him. "The family fortune has to be protected at the political level, and beyond that in our sector of space we have to start thinking of our future," she lowered her voice, "outside of the Imperium".

"Outside of the Empire?" spluttered Gel also lowering his voice. "Mother, what are you planning?"

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Gel's platoon assembled in the ready room, shrugging on their combat outfits including bullet proofs and the all-important digital tac helmet, with visor, then checked equipment and communications for the mission. Despite his change in rank Gel still had the Dart-Gun, his squad's heavy weapon. This looked something like an over-sized assault rifle with even larger sized magazine on top filled with explosive darts. It was fired while resting on the operator's shoulder like that of the World War II bazooka or their descendants such as the M72 Light Anti-Tank Weapon and Swedish AT4. Unlike those last two one-shot weapons, however, the Dart-Gun could keep firing both armour piercing and anti-personnel darts, interchangeable at the touch of a button. This all made the gun much heavier than the standard assault rifle, but Gel had the physique to cope with the weight and liked the weapon. He thought he could win a lot of arguments on the battlefield with it.

Private Milo Gilbert was making the usual nuisance of himself.

"We just land and walk around?" sneered Gilbert, a tall, pale man who seemed to have joined the Salts because no one else wanted him. "Why do we need the whole company? Why go at all?"

"What's the matter Milo?" said Gel. "You worried you won't have the chance to lead a death or glory charge against the local militia? You may still win that medal, awarded posthumously, and then staff sergeant Sefton can lead us to victory."

That part was added as the sergeant had come to check on preparations.

"No," said the sergeant. "The lieutenant will lead the platoon to victory. I'll make sure you achieve victory smartly and in accordance with proper military procedures."

“After Private Gilbert dies gloriously?” asked Gel, hopefully.

“Private Gilbert can choose to make the ultimate sacrifice if he wishes,” said Sefton. Gilbert sneered but stopped questioning the mission.

For the sergeant the byplay confirmed his opinion that his pick for senior squad leader would do very well. Gel had silenced Gilbert, a pain in the rear end, without screaming or unpleasantness. Screaming and barking orders had their place but not in such matters.

“Maybe we’ll take militia women prisoners?” said Private Theodore Turgenev.

“You can only hope,” said Alyssa Sampson, rolling her eyes. A medic, the only female in Gel’s squad and a favourite of his. “Maybe they’ll be so grateful you won’t have to pay for it.”

“I’m a guy,” said Turgenev. “I’m just looking to get what I can wherever.”

“We still going to try for the 14<sup>th</sup> level, senior squad leader?” said Private Carver to Gel. Barely out of school, Carver had his squad’s storm cannon, a distant descendent of the machine-guns used in Earth’s wars. He was also Gel’s wing man in a violent fantasy game.

“Nothing’s going to stop us taking the 14<sup>th</sup> level,” said Gel. “Just those demons and us after we get back from taking territory.”

“Yeah!” said Carver bumping fists with Gel.

The two transport pilots came in. One was a square-jawed heroic, male type and the other a red-haired sub-lieutenant female barely out of flight school who nodded at Alyssa.

“Time for the infantry to occupy a bunch of dirt,” said the male. “Follow us.”

“Red flight is so hot,” moaned Turgenev. He had the sense to moan quietly.

They filed through the access passage and down the ladder through their transport’s top hatch. Gel was near the back with the lifting android whose job was akin that of the pack mules of older conflicts on Earth. Called a Mule-Droid, although it was a blocky humanoid shape, the droid followed the platoon around carrying heavy stuff.

“Okay guys,” said the pilot, over the intercom. “Get ready for the best ride in the park. Full combat entry through atmos onto the planet surface. Lots of heat from re-entry; lots of shaking. Plenty of speed. You’ll love it.”

The transport ship’s bay doors swung open below them. Another of the company’s four platoon shuttles was almost touching Gel’s craft but, peering out of the porthole, he could see a sliver of the planet’s surface below them. What he could see was mostly cloud with blue ocean gleaming through tiny breaks.

The transports dropped.

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The band started another swing number, the ever popular *Sing Sing Sing* which echoed through Gel’s mind as they fell towards the planet’s surface.

*Sing, sing, sing, sing everybody start to sing..*

“You spend a few more years or so at that dreary little firm,” said Mrs Obsidian, “make senior associate, that shouldn’t be too difficult, maybe even partner then run for the Imperial senate. With the Obsidian name and money and Alison by your side ensuring you’ll get into news feeds everywhere it should be a shoo-in. We’ll hire a campaign manager from earth – several if you want, and a stylist.”

“I don’t want several, I don’t want any.” Arguing with his mother, Gel often thought, was like arguing with a brick wall. “And the stylist can get lost in space somewhere. Why don’t you put Alison in the Senate? She’s really into that stuff.”

“You’re just not seeing the bigger picture,” said his mother impatiently. “It’s not going to stop at the Senate. There’s the governorship here of course and then, when this sector of space is sufficiently developed, it will need someone with an instantly recognisable name, political clout and a track record in public service to guide it out of the Imperial shadow.”

“I’m to become a tin pot regional emperor?” Appalled, Gel had trouble keeping his voice down. “I’ll pass mother. The empire has rule of law, free trade, a big fleet and the Imperial Marines. Look what’s been happening in the Dimarch system. They threw away rule of law to bring in torture centres and very nasty prison camps, and they want to expand at our expense. A regiment of Imperial Marines will stop that.”

“We now have our own marines..”

“Assault infantry, mother.”

“.. we have our own army, and that army will have its own, strong ruler,” said Mrs Obsidian. “Someone who understands the issues, who can keep Dimarch out.”

“I’m hardly a strong ruler type, mother.”

“There’s no need to concern yourself over that. Alison and I will make sure there are people around you who can do the strong ruler thing.”

“You want me to be a strong ruler puppet. That doesn’t make sense, mother. Include me out of this. Get someone else.”

“Ungrateful boy,” chided his mother, “you don’t know what I’ve had to do to groom you for this role, in spite of your resistance.”

“What have you had to do that justifies me being grateful for the role of sub-Emperor?”

“Who do you think fixed the drink-driving charge?”

“Ancient history mother, and I would have just done the suspended-licence sentence.”

“Who do you think bought off that slut you were seeing before Alison?”

That stopped Gel. He felt himself go cold.

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The transport shook violently.

“I don’t feel so well,” said Private Carver.

“Hang in there, not long,” said Gel.

The front of the craft was glowing red.

Then Gel noticed that Alyssa was watching a screen in front of her, listening to the onscreen action through earphones. This was a breach of regulations, not that Gel cared but it was an excuse to tease his friend. He was close enough to tap her on the shoulder.

“You’re not watching one of your dramas are you, Alyssa?” he said, after she had taken out one of the earphones. “We’re supposed to be on a do or die mission here.”

Private Sampson sniffed. “We go down, grab some dirt and impress a hamlet by running around. If anyone gets hurt falling over themselves, call me, senior squad leader.” She said the last words with particular emphasis then put her earphone back in. Gel smiled.

“How come we’re not marines,” he heard someone say. “We’re dropping out of spaceships to land on planets. Isn’t that a marine role?”

“The Empire had a lock on that brand name,” said Private Carver. “We’re sector infantry. They couldn’t use mobile infantry, as that only goes with power suits, it seems. Storm troopers was suggested but that had some old movie association, so we got assault infantry.”

Then the transport was in thick, grey mist.

“Cloud cover, people,” said the pilot over comms. “Bad weather out there. We get to stay in the craft where its dry. Few more minutes.”

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The band had started another chorus.

*“Sing sing sing sing...”*

“You mean Lucy?” said Gel. “You bought off Lucy? I was in love with Lucy.”

“You thought you were in love with Lucy,” retorted Mrs Obsidian. “She was playing you from the moment she met you. When I contacted her, she started negotiating without turning a hair. And it cost a lot to get rid of her.”

For a moment Gel was at a loss for words. When he spoke it was in a low and quiet voice and with an intensity that his mother had not seen before. “How dare you interfere, mother.”

“It isn’t interference when you’re just playing your part,” protested Mrs Obsidian, taken aback by her son’s reaction. “She was expecting my call, and my money. She dumped you happily.”

Gel thought about this glaring at his mother who gestured at Alison, visible across the ballroom.

“I see Alison is doing the networking thing, as we agreed,” she said.

“Tell me, mother,” said Gel, eventually, an edge to his voice. “What is the worse thing I could do in your eyes. What would make you disinherit me, as you’ve been threatening to do since I can remember, and drop me out of these mad schemes entirely?”

His mother thought about this somewhat concerned about her son’s sudden intensity and shrugged. Gel had been rebellious before but the problem had been dealt with by minor concessions.

“I suppose you could enlist with those army people.”

“You mean the sector army, the assault infantry?”

“That’s right,” she said, with a wry, knowing smile, “you could enlist in the assault infantry.”

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The assault infantry platoon put on their combat helmets, pulled the visors down, donned their waterproof ponchos and checked weapons.

“You all know the deployment,” said the sergeant, “let’s do it right.”

“All craft,” said Major Tatcha over the command link. Gel’s new senior squad leader status meant that he was allowed to listen on the command link, provided he did not say anything. “I want to set down early. The town was told to expect us but no-one’s responding. Probably nothing but better safe..”

Suddenly they were through the cloud and very low over a green carpet of jungle stretching as far as Gel could see, in pouring rain.

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“I have to see Alison,” said Gel, standing up.

“Of course, dear,” said his mother, thinking that the storm had passed. “And do some dancing. I know I will.”

Gel looked for his fiancée among the tables where she had been a few second ago. Nothing. Then he noticed a splash of colour behind a row of giant pot plants – a decoration in keeping with the 40s theme – on the other side of the room. He circled around to get a better view, stopping beside a pillar with empty tables on either side. The diners were up dancing. The splash of colour was Alison’s dress. From what Gel could make out through the ferns she seemed to be talking earnestly with another man.

“Gel, hi, can I fill in for Alison on the dance floor,” said a voice behind him.

Startled, Gel whirled to see an old friend, Charlotte, very fetching in a green gown, had come up behind him. They had played together as children.

“Not just now,” said Gel with genuine regret. He liked Charlotte. “I have to wait for Alison here. But I’ll come and find you soon.”

“You do that,” said Charlotte. “I shall be angry if you don’t.” She pointed her finger at him in mock anger and then walked off.

The man Alison had been talking to emerged from behind the pot plants. He glanced around but did not see Gel who was now mostly hidden by the pillar, then looked at a message on his phone. Dressed to fit the 1940s formal theme of the night the man looked familiar to Gel although it took a few moments to place him. Of course, they had been at the same school, but the newcomer had been two years ahead of him. They had only spoken a couple of times, but Gel seemed to recollect being told not to have anything to do with the older student.

“Good looking, a womaniser and dangerous,” he had been told.

What had Alison to do with him? The man went off through the exit to the bathrooms.

Alison came out from behind the palms a few seconds later, waved at a couple of ball goers, stopped to chat briefly with another and then moved to the same set of doors. She looked around before leaving but also did not see Gel.

Suspicious suddenly aroused Gel walked quickly, pushing his way through the doors. The band had changed to the most famous swing number, Glenn Miller’s *In The Mood*.

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“Missile detected!” yelled someone over the command link.

“Put us down now!” shouted Lieutenant Andris from his front seat, “we’re sitting ducks up here.”

“There’s no place to land!” screamed the pilot.

“Just get us down,” yelled Andris. “Anything, now, or we’ll be shot down.”

“Second missile on screen!” yelled a pilot in one of the other transports, panic evident in his voice.

“Counter measures,” said the woman co-pilot of Gel’s transport.

Gel heard the thud of the canisters being ejected and the light as they flared. The rest of the platoon were looking around wide-eyed. Alyssa hurriedly stuck her earphones and device in a pocket.

“Third missile on screen!”

The alarm started blaring.

“It’s going sideways people,” yelled Sefton. “Brace positions. You know the drill.”

Gel leant forward, hugging the top of the seat in front of him.

His world exploded.

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The tune *In the Mood* seem to follow Gel. He couldn't see Alison or the other man in the momentarily deserted corridor leading to the rest rooms. He looked in the other direction to the kitchen entrance with staff hurrying to and fro. Another corridor lead off to the left and Gel thought he detected a faint whiff of Alison's scent. He walked on.

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The blast smashed the right fore part of the craft hull, ripping off part of the outer skin. Rain poured in. Several of Gel's platoon, including his computer game partner Carver, had time to scream before they disappeared into the night. The transport ploughed into the jungle canopy, Sefton yelling at the platoon to 'hold on'. Tree branches and fronds visible through the wrecked hull slid past. The transport stopped, tilted slowly then fell. More screams. The craft stopped again for a moment, caught by branches lower down, then plunged to land with a shattering crash in the mud and tangled undergrowth, leaning drunkenly on the remains of a tree.

Off to the right, the sky was lit up with a flash and the boom of an explosion. Gel thought that the explosion had occurred about where he would have expected the right hand transport, two platoon's craft, to be. Then he looked up through the hole ripped out of the fuselage and the gash in jungle canopy carved out by the ship to a grey sky, rain spattering on his visor, to see a Hunter Killer drone appear over the edge of the trees. Kept aloft by lift crystals, HK drones were typically armed with missiles and a mini gun – a distant descendant of the gatling gun. It could wipe out the whole platoon in seconds.

The Obsidian legacy kicked in. Gel's grandfather had carved an empire out of the swampy wilderness of a new planet, his father had created industries. Their descendant, almost without thinking, slapped the release on his seat belt, stood up, set his Dart-Gun to load an armour piercing rocket, and yelled "clear". The cross hairs on his sight showed a lock just as the HK's mini gun coughed into life and he fired. The rocket whooshed away at almost point blank range to hit the HK square on, exploding. It dropped. A single rocket fired by the drone shot off somewhere in the canopy to explode out of sight.

"Guys, whose wounded?" he said, moving down the aisle towards the lieutenant. That officer had given his last order. A jagged piece of fuselage had sliced into his head. The others, those that could move, were stirring in their seats. Then Gel realised the sergeant had not been barking orders. The HK's minigun had fired for just two seconds at the most but it had caught many salts sitting in first few rows, bullets punching through the standard bulletproof jackets. Then the sergeant's hand moved and he groaned. Still alive!

Gel looked around. Whoever planned this was being thorough and would want to finish the job, maybe with missiles. Then he recalled the explosion off to the right.

"Guys!" he screamed. "We've got to get out, now, and I mean now! Check for wounded. Carry them out. Grab packs and ammo and move!"

He checked those around the sergeant. Two had caught the full blast of the HK, another had copped a piece of fuselage. All dead. He thought to look in the cockpit to find the red haired co-pilot closing the eyes of her boss.

"Ma'am grab your side arm and survival pack and let's go. Whoever's done this hasn't finished."

Gel pulled the sergeant up into a fireman's lift and looked around. Those who were not moving or being helped out of their seat were clearly dead. Alyssa was checking bodies one by one feeling for pulses at the throat. She found one and worked him out of his seat. Gel

had a hand free to help haul the casualty. The flight officer came up to grab a side and they hauled him along.

“Any others, Alyssa?” asked Gel.

“The rest are gone,” she said.

“Back ramp’s not responding,” said Theodore Turgenev.

“Manual release at your right hand,” yelled Gel.

Theo ripped open the hatch and worked the lever. The ramp dropped into the mud and they filed out, just as another flash lit up the sky, about where the transport with Major Tatcha would have been, followed by a boom. The mule android -the all-purpose carrying droid issued to every platoon - was still seated at the rear of the plane, awaiting orders from Gel.

“Grab the supply packs there,” he said pointing. “Don’t strap up, just come with packs in hand.”

“Packs in hand,” repeated the android. His only conversation was to repeat what was said to him.

Then they were out squelching through mud, pushing through the jungle undergrowth, rain pouring down. Gel could see those ahead of him pause and turn back to look at him.

“Keep going!” he yelled. “Well away from the transport.”

They stumbled on through the mud and undergrowth before a missile hit the transport with a whump, the shock wave pushing Gel off his feet into a muddy tangle of bushes, the sergeant on his back.

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Gel tried the handle of one door in the corridor to find it locked. Then another. *In the Mood* echoed through the corridor which merged with a rain-soaked jungle on another planet. He paused at another door where he could hear voices murmuring. He paused, drew a deep breath then turned the handle and pushed open the door. Alison screamed.

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Gel flipped the sergeant’s body over so that his head rested on a tangle of plants and bushes, his body shielded from the worst of rain by two trees. He was still alive - just. Alyssa knelt beside him with her scanner – a device better than a whole radiology department of an information age hospital. She looked at the device’s screen, rain splattering over her and the device’s control face, then up at Gel and shook her head.

“Not long,” she mouthed.

The sergeant grabbed her arm.

“You will tell my family my last thoughts were of them?” he wheezed.

“Yes, staff sergeant, I will. I promise.”

“And Obsidian, you sod!” said the sergeant with some of his old energy, grabbing the front of the squad leader’s poncho and dragging him down.

“Yes, staff sergeant.”

“You refused those promotions because you didn’t want responsibility. Now you’ve been dropped right in it, haven’t you?”

“Yes sergeant.”

“It’s your job to lead the others out of this and I expect you to stop mucking around and do it you poor, misbegotten son of a whore.”

“Yes, staff sergeant.”

“Tell me one thing before you take over. When we met you told me you were a poor Obsidian, but you’re not, are you?”

Gel liked the staff sergeant and was not about to lie to him now.

“My grandfather was Baines Obsidian and my father Plymouth Obsidian,” he said. My sister and I expected to eventually split the entire thing between us.” Alyssa’s mouth dropped open, as did that of the flight sub lieutenant, and most of the rest of the platoon who had crowded around to find out what was happening with the sergeant. “But technically I wasn’t lying. I got disinherited.”

“Then what in all of creation are you doing in my platoon?”

“I was running away from my mother’s mad political schemes, which started with getting me into the Imperial Senate. She said the worst thing I could do in her eyes was to enlist in the assault infantry, so I did. That and I found that my fiancée was cheating on me.”

The sergeant chuckled. “Police, homicide detectives came round to see you I was told but didn’t take you away. Did you kill the guy you found with your fiancée?”

“They were asking about something else, and I didn’t do it.”

The sergeant chuckled, coughed painfully, and released Obsidian.

“Weapon, I want a weapon in my hands.”

Gel took out his sidearm, a nine millimetre pistol and pressed it into the staff sergeant’s hands.

The sergeant gripped it, smiled and muttered “Valhalla”. Then he seemed to be listening. “I hear music,” he said and died.

Then it hit Gellibrand Bosworth Baines Plymouth Obsidian that he was platoon commander, possibly even company commander, with the remnants of his platoon staring at him with expressions somewhere between shock and horror, in the middle of a rain soaked jungle with a well-organised, well-armed unknown enemy looking to kill the rest of them.

The sergeant had been right, he was really for it now.

## CHAPTER TWO

The tune *In the Mood* echoed from a ball room corridor, in Gel’s mind, into the jungle as rain poured down. He took a deep breath. He was still Baines Obsidian’s grandson, and his platoon, now just 12 effectives and four wounded, two seriously, was in an almighty mess. It was up to him to get them out.

“Great!” said private Gilbert. “We’re in deep shit and we’ve got a rich spoiled kid..”

“Gilbert!” snapped Gel. His voice had a parade ground edge that made the whole platoon stand straighter. Any doubt about who was in charge vanished. “Your comrades need you to hold it together and this isn’t helping! Can the complaints!”

“All right, all right,” muttered Gilbert then shut up.

“Guys,” said Gel, raising his voice. “For those who haven’t been keeping up with current events, our whole company just walked into a well-executed ambush.”

“The whole company?” said someone.

Another whump and shock wave from away to the West made them all dive to the ground.

“That was the HWAS platoon transport getting the same treatment as ours,” announced Gel as they stood up. “That’s about where the transport ’d be if they kept formation. I heard the other transports call ‘missile detected’ at the same time as ours. We had an HK in our faces almost the moment we stopped moving, and it was followed up by a direct hit from a tac missile. I’m betting all the transports, one after another, got one. I dunno

who's behind all of this but I'm going to take a wild guess here and say that it's not any local militia we were told wouldn't be here."

The platoon murmured.

"Dennehy, you've got your comms pack?"

"Yes, squad leader."

"You can get a signal out through this?" Gel pointed at the cloud cover above them.

"Voice only as I can't boost through the shuttle but sure. Need a line of sight."

"I'll take it. We've just managed to carve a big hole in the jungle canopy. We'll transmit through there. The first step, people, is to call this disaster in." The tension eased noticeably. There was a plan. "But the brass will want to know what's happened to Major Tatcha, not to mention everyone else in the company. Hutchinson?"

"Yes, squad leader." She was the only other squad leader to make it out of the transport.

"Take two people – better make it three - and hike hard for the major's transport. Whatever's left of it should be in line with us and we were all heading East. Then try to get to two platoon's transport. Come to think of it, their beacons should be on, but if they aren't transmitting don't try to turn them on. In fact, everyone stays in protected mode (this meant no external communications with the helmet electronics shielded from detection). "Do not use mobiles or personal com devices, not even to receive. Switch everything off now and keep it off."

The squad murmured and compiled.

"Hutchinson, as fast as you can. You're looking for survivors but, having made a real effort to wipe us out, our missile throwing friends are bound to come calling. They'll want to make sure the job has been done right. If you see anyone do not start shooting. You fade into the jungle and observe. Until we work out who or what the fuck we're dealing with no one is to engage. See hostiles, fade into the jungle. Observe, take pictures, report back." More murmuring.

"Are we staying here, squad leader?" asked one of the privates

"We came over a ridge – a ridge between us and the coast. Unless I'm mistaken, ma'am," this was addressed to the transport pilot, "we didn't get missile detections until we came over that ridge." The flight officer nodded. "Then we'll move over the ridge and whistle up a transport to come in low and radio silent for the wounded at least.

"Hightower, you, Pleasance and Gilbert check out where that missile just landed. I'm betting you'll find the wreck of the HWAS shuttle. Again, it's about looking for survivors, although equipment and supplies would be good, and we have to work fast. The rest of us 'll see what we can salvage from our own shuttle. Everyone remember to lock this position in your nav system and let's lock in a rally point over the ridge. Oh yeah, and don't mess with the wildlife if you can help it."

"Those spider monkey things?" said someone. These were little creatures that bore some resemblance to the monkeys of earth. They had re-emerged to chatter and run around the lower branches of the trees after the shock of the explosions.

"I was thinking more like that guy," said Gel pointing to a nearby tree. A large, python-like creature had wrapped itself around the trunk a little beyond man height and was now peering down at the remnants of three platoon to see if there was anything worth wrapping in its coils.

The platoon recoiled. Even the Mule-Synth took a step back. They had just been blown out of the sky and lost comrades, but a close-up view of a potentially person-killing snake was a new level of horror.

“Don’t kill it,” snapped Gel, seeing some of the platoon raise their assault rifles. “You’ll give away our position. Ignore those things and they’ll ignore you. Everyone get busy, and move fast.”

“After this is over,” said Alyssa Sampson, as the others moved away, “you and I are going to talk about who you really are, this murder investigation and about straying fiancées, and none of this not technically lying BS.”

“Alyssa, we just lost half the platoon,” said Gel, “But sure, later. I can promise you quite a story.”

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The first group to work out where Gel had got to was the last group he expected to hear from – the police. He was called in a conference room in the barracks administration block in the second week of his training to be confronted by two formidable looking detectives in business suits, one male and one female, and a scholarly-looking officer, a Major Adina, from the Assault Infantry advocate general’s office.

“Private Gellibrand Obsidian?” said the male. “I am detective inspector Burchill this is detective sergeant Regio. Come with us.”

“Where are we going?”

“We’re going to have a discussion down at police headquarters,” said the Inspector. “You should be familiar with the building. Its right next to Obsidian Tower.”

“It’s a fine building, Inspector, but why don’t we talk here?”

“In serious matters of this nature we conduct interviews in our own rooms.”

“I don’t see how I can be of help in any serious matter,” said Gel. “But I have no intention of going off base.” He had thought through various scenarios about how his mother could get him back into her clutches, and they mostly involved him first being lured off the Assault Infantry base.

“You’re not immune from arrest here,” said Major Adina.

“I’m not concerned about being arrested, sir,” said Gel. “I haven’t done anything – I don’t think anyway.”

“We can establish that in an interview at headquarters,” said the inspector, nodding.

“We can sort it out here,” said Gel. “I’m keen to get to the mess tonight. The chicken risotto they serve here is excellent and I’ll miss it if I go off base. You didn’t say I was under arrest.”

“At this stage you’re a person of interest in our investigation.”

“We always advise co-operation with the police in an investigation,” said Major Adina.

“I’m quite happy to answer any questions, sir. But unless I’m under arrest or the inspector has some form of a subpoena or court order requiring me to attend somewhere then I’m staying here to answer questions. For those last two you’d have to give me reasonable notice to comply, but you don’t have a court order do you inspector?”

“No,” the inspector conceded.

“Are you going to order me to go with him, major?”

“I’m not sure I can do that.”

“I don’t think you can either,” said Gel. “We’re chatting here, inspector. You’ll have interview recorders on you and that’s enough to make it official. Set up them up and we’ll start. I can’t imagine I know enough about whatever it is to keep you long.”

As the detectives set up their recorders with ill grace, Major Adina spoke to Gel.

“You seem to know more about the law than I do,” he said. “But your file doesn’t even mention a high school.”

Gel shrugged. “Picked it up, sir.”

“Gellibrand Obsidian has an honours degree in science and a law degree from Green University,” said the inspector.

The major’s jaw dropped.

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“Sky high one, this is beta-ground three, over.”

They had returned to the clearing caused by the shuttle’s crash land and the missile strike for Dennehy to set up his comm dish. The jungle did not have any of the trees with immensely thick trunks like in the old-growth forests on earth, just countless smaller trees with ferns that wrapped around the trunks, but there were more than enough of these trees to form a canopy that blocked out the planet’s sun, in the brief periods when it showed through the clouds. Apart from the spider monkey-things, there were the snakes that fed on the monkeys and, most loathed by those who fought there, several species of rats which seemed to thrive in the glutinous mud. The remnants of B Company condemned the area as a “muddy shit hole” at first sight, and never saw any reason to change their minds.

As it was still raining heavily the platoon had pulled down the hoods on their waterproof ponchos, which made them look like wraiths come to collect the souls of the fallen as they checked the wreckage of three platoon’s shuttle.

“Sky high one, this is beta-ground three, over.” Then Gel could hear Dennehy saying “Sky high one, we’ve got real problems here, we need to speak to an officer like right now. No, we can’t call back in ten minutes, you gotta get someone off their calls now... this is urgent.”

Gel took the comms headset. “This is senior squad leader Obsidian, who is this?”

“Hey, Gel, it’s Jennifer Kratz, are you guys having trouble?”

“The whole company has run into an ambush that’s what happened. Half of three platoon has gone.”

“When you say gone..”

“I mean as in dead Private Kratz! I want you to stand up at your station and yell, really scream, that B Company’s been ambushed, and they need to speak to an officer now.”

“Oh boy,” she said but did it.

That brought the battalion adjutant, a Captain Williamson, on the phone very quickly. He listened to Gel’s tale for a few moments, before asking “are you sure of this?”

“Sure?” snapped Gel. “Sir, Sergeant Sefton died a couple of minutes ago, telling me I was now platoon commander. The last I saw of Lieutenant Aldis he had half the shuttle’s fuselage sticking out of his skull. Do you think I’m making this up, sir? I have Flight Lieutenant Nilsen here, the transport co-pilot who’ll confirm what I just said.”

“Alright, alright, Squad Leader,” said the captain, “give me a second.” Gel heard him scream to the orderly room, “find the colonel now! He needs to get here! If he doesn’t pick up, make a ship PA announcement.” He turned back to Gel. “You’ve had no contact with major Tatcha?”

“No sir. I’ve sent parties to find what I expect to be wreckages. It could be that officers have made it out and just don’t have comms. But, sir, I have to say I’m not hopeful for anything but a few survivors.”

The captain sighed. “You will have to hold on to repeat all this to the colonel.”

“With respect, sir, we can’t stay on much longer at all at this location. Whoever is behind this is well armed, dangerous and organised. They’re going to want to inspect their handiwork up close. I’m surprised that they’re not already here. I’m sending what survivors I can find behind the ridge to our west – shuttles that come in low and radio silent should be

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