

Blood Rush

A story of hunters and hunted

“Squad Omega-Zero-One. Check for radio comm.” Talked the knight commander though their integrated radio.

Three soldiers signed back “*all clear*”. They were before him, standing up and holding to the roof of a dropship by some handles. All looks were concentrated on his cross-shaped visor. The squad was composed of an engineer, a Crozier, and a Black Friar.

“I’ll repeat why we are here. HQ was informed that someone infiltrated our border at the same time as someone else broke inside one of the command centres in Kaldstrøm. Now, how and who did it, our friends from the Hexas *forgot* to tell us. What should concern us, *for them*, is that we recover back the data chips or destroy them. In any case, we have been ordered to kill whoever may have seen the info. Understood?”

The soldiers unsheathed their knightly blades, weapons from another age, one marked their status as warriors of the Orders, and in unison: “By God we march, for God we fight!”

The aircraft trembled, and a red light on the back of the dropship turned green. One of the pilots’ voices announced the landing. The back’s access ramp lowered, letting inside a cold breeze.

The outside was a green sight: a small and flat square of light green lawn enclosed in a dark green forest. The squad moved out of the aircraft, its colours and insignias marking it as one of the Orders’ and it took position around, their weapons pointed to the surrounding forest. Sister Yvonne had climbed on the top of a large rock and stood there, her visor scanning the surroundings with the stance of a preying hawk. The lieutenant stared at her weapon, a missile launcher, large just enough for her to wield it.

She was his best trooper, and the one he could always rely on, no matter how impossible the odds. He thanked God once more she was his ally and not someone to fight against.

Another dropship landed, and the crew quickly disembarked their cargo: a large container that looked like a high-tech sarcophagus. They moved aside as they spotted the officer, saluting it. He returned the gesture.

He took off his coat a computer chip. As he placed it closer, on the surface was revealed a keyhole and a keyboard. He inserted the chip inside and digitized a secret code. In reply, the sarcophagus hissed, and its cargo was set free.

“Raise, and let your wings be free!” He shouted, his voice betraying his excitement.

A mechanised hand rose from it, followed by the rest of its chassis. A Seraph-class TAG stood off the container, its aura inspired both awe and dread in those present. In one hand stood an almost ridiculously large sword; in the other a giant-sized spitfire machine gun. He towered above them all, but its chassis made it look slenderer than expected from its tonnage.

“Seraph 44-56-S. Online and running. Ready to unleash blood and fire in His name.”

The lieutenant saluted it and smiled underneath. A machine like this was a rare sight even between them. *And usually the last thing any enemy would see*, he thought.

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A radio screech caught by surprise him. A fuzzy male voice asked: "Delta-Foxtrot-Alpha, are you receiving any reading from your... *sensor*?"

Wolfe looked at his hairy companion: it was a massive wolf-like creature not so different from him, except by the fact the first was born from human parents, while the other was an alien native of Dawn. He pressed his special sided radio and replied: "Yeah, he kinda has..." The alien was agitated, sniffing the air like it perceived the trace of something.

After a second of silence, came an annoyed reply by another male: "What the fuck does it mean? Be more specific, dog-face."

He barked back: "Come here and tell it in my face, or you are too scared of the *big bad wolf*?"

"What did you say, asshole?"

The first man cut off the conversation: "Corporal Delany, Corporal Perkins, are both looking to get us all killed, or what? We are behind enemy lines, if you two gentlemen forgot."

They both replied: "Yes, sir, sorry."

Something tapped on Wolfe's back, and he turned with his hand on his pistol.

"Woah, calm down, Perkins. You don't want to shoot one of yours, no?"

Before him, it was his lieutenant, his characteristic cowboy hat sprouting from a green forest camo cloak. He had his hands raised above his head.

"Sir, would you mind advising me when you approach me from behind? I already have enough problem as I am, I don't need a trial for killing my officer." The wolf-like soldier scratched his head with his claws.

"It's a personal challenge. If I still can get behind you without you to notice, it isn't yet the time for me to retire." He chuckled. "By the way, you shouldn't fall for Delany's insults. You are way superior to that empty head." Before the creature could reply, the officer said: "After all, how do you think he entered into the 5th?"

They both laughed, and Perkins felt his rage flow down. He could still hear the beast inside him asking for blood, but now his mind was lighter, and he focused it elsewhere.

"So, Wolfe, can you feel anything coming here?" The field officer checked his watch. "We are past five minutes the meeting time, and the deserters haven't showed themselves yet."

He called out his men on the radio. "Keep your eyes open. We are deep in enemy's territory and I'm not sure how long it will take them to track our small *breach*." Everyone in turn acknowledged the order and he closed the connection. "I really hope this is the worth the risk. I don't want to die for anything."

The creature closed his eyes and focused his senses.

Something was coming through the forest. Several steps, but Wolfe felt them weird: it was as if they were both heavy and light at the same time.

"Presences are coming from the forest on the other side of the church." He focused another time, hearing three sets of heavy steps. "Three hostiles, heavy armour... I guess?" He

unsheathed his heavy pistol, something that looked like a small hand cannon rather than a side weapon and whistled at his companion, an antipode like him, but feral in origin, to silence.

“What does it mean that you guess it?” Delany asked through the radio.

The lieutenant reprimanded him: “Delany, not now. The rest stay alert and wait for my command, roger?”

The other men hid themselves around in reply, concealed behind some containers and self-made covers. The meeting point was an abandoned church near the Ariadna-Panoceania border. *Close enough to ask for an extraction, but close enough also to create a diplomatic incident*, Perkins reflected.

“Sir, this smell of a trap.”

“Yes, I know, but this isn’t the time to discuss about it. Also, Panoceania isn’t as monolithic as their propaganda wish us to believe.”

“Yeah, religious fanatics that changes their mind. My gut is telling me to shoot them on sight.” He checked his gun.

“Stop thinking with your gun before than your head. And shut up. If half of what HQ received is true, I don’t want to be the one telling the colonel we fucked it up for a slip of the trigger.”

“It better be...” He pressed himself against the wall and throw a glance behind it. The figures were approaching, all well armoured and with cross insignias on their tabards. They carried no weapons, other than small side weapons sheathed in their holsters.

He whispered to his lieutenant: “Stun pistols. I smell the burnt rubber of their batteries’ covers.” He turned his head back. “They said they would come unarmed.”

The man scratched his head. “Considering their usual gear, you can kind of consider them unarmed.”

“I have no clue how you find a positive perspective in everything...”

“Guess why I’m in my thirties and alive as spec-op.”

The wolf-soldier tightened his grip around his gun. “First suspect movement, and I’m making a hole in their head.”

“Yes, ok, whatever... Just don’t do anything stupid till I order you so, roger?”

The *Devil Dog* growled in protest. The lieutenant signed other men to follow him and revealed their presence to the approaching soldiers.

“Sir, reporting in.”

Another armoured fellow presented himself before the lieutenant. He was wearing a full plated suit, and on its pauldrons were the Order Sergeants insignia. The officer saluted the man back.

“None at the HQ mentioned any additional forces other than of us for this mission. Who are you?”

He stood on attention. "We have been sent by the father-knight to retrieve the stolen info and confirm the traitors' death."

The officer tilted his head puzzled. "Excuse me?"

The soldier cuffed. "I mean... we are sent here..."

"When HQ intended to inform us that the data was stolen from... our own? Or rather, please, tell me... Am I supposed to discover something else HQ skipped to tell during the briefing? Like they are a Combined Army incursion force?"

"All the necessary info was delivered to you..."

"You tell me, if that is true... Because first sign of other *unnecessary info* that could have us all killed, and I'll make sure you would be redeployed on the fore front, am I clear?"

The lieutenant turned and stared at the Seraph checking its gear. "It's never easy, if they send us in, doesn't it?" He sighed.

The approaching men stopped where they stood and kept at least ten meters distant from the Ariadna's troopers, waiting for something. On the other side, all the Ariadna's men were tense, their guns at ready and eyes fixed for any sign of betrayal.

"So, you're the one that called us here?" The lieutenant came forward and pointed at their side guns. "You said you'd come unarmed!"

The PanOceanians kept quiet, watching one another. Radio clicks could be heard.

"Hey, you tell me now, or we're gonna pin you to the ground in three..." As the lieutenant pronounced the words, the troopers at his side aimed their weapons.

The leading man looked at the guns and replied: "You won't really expect us to come fully unarmed. We are traitors for our people and enemies to yours. We needed something to protect us, in any case." He glanced at the rifles pointed at them.

"I understand your motivations, so I hope you mind mine if I ask you to show me that you are the deserters we were waiting for."

The commanding knight went for something on his belt, but the Ariadnas tightened their grip on the guns, and he stopped. The field officer signed them not to shoot. Carefully, he took out a chip card and threw it to the lieutenant.

"What is this?"

"The proof of our treason." He pointed at the chip.

The officer checked the info contained and signed his men to lower their rifles. "If this is true..." He showed the chip. "We better move and extract you immediately. If I was in your compatriots, I'd try to kill you and whoever sees it."

He signed to follow him. They nodded with their heads and reached him it.

As they passed the church's back wall, they saw the bulking figure of Wolfe. His fur was a grey blue shade, a white grin exposing his sharp fangs, and his yellow irises transfixed them, so much they froze where they stood, their hands immediately on where their swords would have

been. Laughs rose from the Ariadna's soldiers, yet the lieutenant silenced them with a loud cough.

"Would you mind? He won't bite you... At least not for now."

All laughed again, the dog face included. The Panoceania's knights moved quickly further from him, their visors glancing him times to times. *At least, they didn't flee like their other kind, I must recognize it to them*, he thought.

He was focused on them, when his Antipode companion hissed a low hum, a warning only him could understand. It was the distinct language of their kind, simple yet capable of explain concepts in few but precious seconds. He directed his ears toward the direction pointed by his partner.

Someone was running, yet they made the ground rumble like they weighted a ton. An intuition flashed in his mind.

"All down! Hostile TAG!"

As soon as he ended his phrase, a large shadow landed upon a rock formation. It stood over the forest's trees' top, and the sunlight contrasted with its shape, resembling like an angel with its wing outspread. From it, a roar of high velocity rounds showered their position. A second too late and whatever was shooting at them would have scythed them like in a single salvo. The Ariadnians held their position and answered furiously. A lucky shot reached the enemy, its figure faltering in response.

It reacted and threw itself off the cliff. Another salvo was unleashed by his massive gun, now visible. It was an oversized spitfire machine gun. The shots caught corporal Delany when off the cover, the projectiles punching on his armour's plates so hard to send him unconscious.

He collapsed close to private Simmons, one of the squad's Grunt. He rose from his cover and cried: "Bastard!", then bursted his rifle on the TAG. The mechanical bipod was unaffected from the attack, all hits missed or pounced off the heavy plating. It continued its charge, riding on the ground with a speed unexpected for its tonnage.

The dog face extracted his knife and prepared himself to ambush the hostile, but his companion interpreted it as a charge, and let out a feral cry, revealing its position. Before he could quieten it, the enemy TAG reacted, charging in and with a single devastating blow, ripped open the Antipode with his huge sword.

The sight of his fallen kind, mixed with the smell of blood, Wolfe's inner beast surged, roaring for revenge. He took aim with his handgun and shot twice, the massive reactive projectiles puncturing the heavy plating with ease. Hissed and sudden flares exploded from the machine's junctures, and it kneeled, ceasing his carnage. Perkins panted; his blood was still hot from the adrenaline. He was about to get closer to it, to check if it was down, when the lieutenant shouted: "It's repairing itself! Light it, Simmons".

The Grunt threw his rifle away and picked up his flamethrower. It unleashed a torrent of flame on the immobile machine. Something burnt, followed by other explosions. Finally, the TAG's structure yielded, and it dropped on the ground immobile.

The Ariadna's soldiers cried in victory, when they were abruptly interrupted by one of the Panoceania's knights.

“Have you seen somewhere its *Auxbot*?” He asked at the Ariadna’s officer.

“An *aux*-what?” His expression was confused.

Before the knight could reply, a giant flame ruptured from the other side of the church. Someone threw itself on the ground, its body enveloped in flames. It cried for help in a female voice, while it was rolling on the dust, hoping to extinguish the flames, yet to those watching it was clear that was meaningless. She died seconds later in a horrifying cry. All were paralysed by the shock: they all recognised the private Beaumont’s voice. The lieutenant shook his head and called the rest of the squad on the radio.

“Private Christinsen, corporal Trueman, report, now!” Yet, he received only static as a response.

“Fuck!”

The Panoceanian pressed two fingers on the helmet and then glanced at them.

“Sorry to report, but one of my men confirmed three charred bodies, including the... *corpse* there.” He stood silent for an instant. “Do not worry. If the Seraph is deactivated, the peripheral will be as well.”

All soldiers flinched at the word *corpse*, tightening their grip on their weapons. Before it could escalate worse, their commanding officer stepped forward and grabbed the knights’ leader from its tabard.

“Couldn’t you tell us before of this *aux*-shit before? I just lost four members of my squad because of this piece of missing intel!”

The knight forced himself free from the grasp and stared back at him, his expression hidden behind the helmet.

“I’m sorry for your loss...” He lowered his head, to read the name on the uniform. “O’Brian, sir, but we assumed you were already knowledgeable of it.”

The lieutenant was red from rage on his face; Wolfe was waiting for the smallest sign to unleash his fury on them, but he received nothing. The officer took a deep breath to calm himself.

“You... Are right. We should have been informed better from HQ...”

They stared at one another, then the Panoceanian nodded and reached his other man. O’ Brian was angered but he turned back to check corporal Delany, that was being revived by their squad’s medic; Wolfe, though, wasn’t satisfied. His eyes were fixed of the private Beaumont’s remains. His fury was still running hot through his veins, and his feral heart was crying for blood.

Without his superior’s permission, he threw himself off his cover and rushed toward the direction the enemy TAG came from. *I’ll show them a true devil!*, he thought.

“Where the fuck are you going? Come fucking back, you idiot!” Yet, the *devil dog* was already rushing towards his prey.

The pilot’s video feed cut down and went static, signifying that the Seraph was destroyed.

“This doesn’t seem a working plan, sir. You just lost three hundred million of the faithfuls’.” The Order Sergeant was glancing over the Knight Commander’s shoulders, at the tablet monitor it was in his hands.

The officer turned toward the trooper; his hand was caressing the light shotgun at his side. The members of his team exchanged a look, preparing themselves to react at his order.

“I do understand your position and obligations to the Order, yet you should not forget your rank, Sergeant. I am the knight commander of this mission, so the orders are mine to give, and I have to report my action only to the father-knight and God itself. Have I made myself clear enough?”

The soldier stood on attention and saluted. “Yes, sir.”

The team’s member turned away from them and went back to their surveillance duty. The officer took a second look at the operative zone’s map.

He wasn’t expecting to lose his trump card so early; he gritted his teeth. Not everything, he noticed, was gone wrong: while on the left side, the hostiles were in advantage, on the other side, the Seraph’s peripheral had cleaned the enemy presence. There was a hole in their deployment, and he was going to take advantage of.

He rose on his feet. “Execute plan C-03. Sister Yvonne, take the lead and blast anything that comes in your sight.”

The Black Friar appeared out of her cover, on the upper floor inside a house’s ruin. She jumped off it and landed with grace, even though she carried her large missile launcher on her shoulders. She rose her head, and quickly grabbed her gun.

“Take cover, enemy hostile!” She cried out, while launching one set of two micro missiles’ shots. The officer and the rest of the team threw themselves to cover against the unknown threat. Their payloads exploded with a thundering sound, while large calibre rounds bounced on the ruins that they were hiding in. The knight risked a glance over his hiding spot, but not before masking his presence with his holographic device: he took the form of one of his Crosiers, one that was left back at the base. On a tall rock was standing a bulking Antipode, his gun spewing rapid shots on their position. Their attack had seemed to have no effect on the creature, but their gunner was taking aim, preparing for another hit.

Another set of rounds weathered the ruin, yet the black friar stood calm and concentrated on her prey. The missile launched roared, and the warheads hit straight in the middle of the enemy trooper’s bust. The explosion rumbled followed by a canine verse of pain. The lieutenant saw it standing still, but his torso was torn open, its inner limbs smoking. It tried to raise his arm, in a last spiteful attempt but fell unconscious down to the ground, followed by a splat of fractured bones and battered meat.

“Lord, the beast has been slain.” The female knight rose on her feet and went to reload her gun. Her hands moved with precision on the missile launcher, thought her visor was looking away, scanning around for other threats.

“Good... Very good, sister.” The knight’s commander rose over his hiding place but kept some steps of distance from her. “Squad Alpha, on the march, now! We will take them before they can redeploy.” He signed the Black Friar. “Sister Yvonne, take the lead. Plan C-03. Move!”

The squad assembled its formation and proceeded to rush through the right side of the church.

Lieutenant O'Brian swore Wolfe's name one last time on the radio. All the squad had heard the canine cry of pain. Wolfe didn't have many friends, but O'Brian was one of them. He muttered curses with his teeth tight.

"To all remaining men, regroup at my position. We are leaving. NOW!" He waved at his men. Their expression was full of rage, he knew they wished revenge for the three men dead. Yet, a costly underestimation was made, and he couldn't allow the enemy to press forward. *I have a mission to complete*, he thought while watching an approaching Panoceanian.

"So, what are you planning for us, O'Brian?" Asked the knight.

"You come with us, but..." He glanced at his other comrade, a few meters away, with his hand over his stun gun. "First wrong move and I can't promise my men won't slip their finger on their triggers. Beware then..."

The deserter signed with his head at his companion, and he removed his hand from the pistol. He put his hands over his head. "We have the best of intentions, so we shall follow your requests."

O'Brian sneered and turned away from him. "Doc, how is Delany?"

Their paramedic was mending the Minuteman's wounds, squeezing some bandages on his chest. "Some minor wounds, luckily. He is stabl..." Before she could finish her sentence, corporal Delany rose on his feet, not without her attempting to keep him down.

"I can walk my own!" He took his rifle in his arms. The paramedic was about to show her dissent, but the field officer stopped her.

"You two, together with Simmons, take our guest and bring them to extraction. I'll be taking the rear guard."

The Minuteman stepped forward. "Sir..."

"That's an order, corporal Delany." He glanced at the knights. "Keep your eyes on them, not me."

His men saluted him and gathered all their equipment. The lieutenant took from his tactical jacket a map of the operation area. He stared at it, then called someone at his radio: "This is Alpha, do you copy, Eagle One?"

A rough voice came out of it: "Here Eagle One, ready in position."

"Roger, reach point..." His finger moved on the map, and it reached a quadrant. "Point C-3 and cover our retreat. Expect heavy gunnery. Do you copy?"

"Yes, sir..." After a small pause. "What kind of heavy gunnery?"

"I don't know exactly what kind, but enough to overcome our... corporal Wolfe." He took a deep breath.

"The dog-face?"

"Yeah, Wolfe." Snarled the officer.

"I'll be more careful then. Over and out."

O'Brian took cover behind a metal panel and oversaw the situation. Everything about the mission felt like a trap, he thought. They had no idea how many hostiles were left, neither where they were. He kept an eye over his men leaving the area by taking a small road through the forest. He counted on Doc to bring them to extraction safely, yet he prayed that there weren't more ambushes waiting for them.

The info must be delivered, he thought.

"Alpha..." The trooper panted through the radio. "This is Eagle One, do you copy?"

"Yes, Eagle One. What is your status?" His expression betrayed his concern.

"They are on your position!"

O'Brian looked over his cover. A knight in black robes was peeking behind one of the church's corners, on her shoulder something that resembles a huge tube. It took just enough for him to understand it was facing a missile launcher and to throw himself to cover, that a salvo exploded on his previous location.

Debris and metal splinters flew in every direction. The lieutenant's sight was dazzled, numerous voices calling through the radio. He forced himself to sit.

"I'm alive, shut your mouths!"

He shook his head and squeezed his eyes. His sight went clearer.

"I'm sorry, sir, I haven't noticed them till they appeared." Barked anxiously the trooper. "They were moving way more silently that I was expecting!"

O'Brian chuckled. "Seemed HQ forgot to inform us of many things..."

The female voice of the paramedic broke through the conversation. "Sir, what is it happening? We hear a huge explosion!"

"One of the enemies has a missile launcher... Now I understand how they killed Wolfe."

The officer took his position back and he answered fire with his rifle. The knight in black robes took cover hiding behind the corner.

"We are moving back." Called the medic.

"No, the mission comes before all, even me."

"Sir, with all the due respect, we are not leaving you to die as well. We are coming back!"

"Of you take those knights away from here, we can save many more sons and daughters of Ariadna! Are you willing to let them die, for one man?"

She remained silent, while O'Brian kept the knights pinned behind their cover.

"I understand... Always in trouble..."

"Never in Hell" He saluted her through the radio.

The officer peaked with his rifle: the enemy was taking more terrain every second passing.

"Eagle-One, what's your status?" No reply. "Eagle-one?"

He tightened his grasp around the rifle. "I won't let any of you bastards do as you please..." He rose on his feet and released a storm of bullets out. "These are our lands!" He cried out loud.

The hostile troopers ducked in cover. He jumped of his and charged in, his knife out. "Your blood will soak this soil!" Another burst of his rifle covered his advance, but some dared to risk it: a combi rifle and a missile launcher appeared behind their hidings.

He tried to dodge the second, but the first gunner blocked his path with a small volley. Before the payload exploded in his face, the radio screeched: "Sir, EVAC is here! Mission complete!"

The sky above Kaldstrøm was white, clouds perpetually covering it, and occasional snowflakes were coming down on the city below. The light coming through the windows of the father-knight's office was soft, yet the atmosphere of the meeting inside it was anything else than easy.

"So, let me recap: you lost a Seraph-class TAG, plus the vital data you were sent to recover?"

The father-knight Andora's person was enormous, his figure enlarged by his heavy plating. His arms were tied over his white and black cape.

"My lord, we weren't expecting such heavy resistance from their part." The knight commander was on his knees, his head bow in reverence. He had still on his combat gear, being summoned as soon as he returned to the monastery.

"The Order Sergeants reported me the presence of one of their mutants, but it seems one of your team was able to hunt him down easily, doesn't she?"

"Yes, sister Yvonne is my top marksman, but I don't see..."

"Exactly, I don't see why then you weren't able to recover the date and hunt down our traitors." The father-knight turned, his glacial eyes staring down at his subject. "Seems you had all the support and skills needed for the mission."

He bit his tongue. He wished to add more to his cause, but he knew it wouldn't have changed the facts: he had failed his mission. "I am sorry, milord. I have let down you, and the Order."

"You did, but forgiveness is one of the Lord's virtues..."

The knight commander rose his head, a small hope of redemption lighting up.

"But you'll have to earn the Order's.

"Yes, my lord!" He rose on his feet, standing on attention.

The father-knight smiled. "I'll assign you and your team as security. The Hexas was *convinced* to tell us what their next target will be. Do not disappoint me, captain Friedrich."

The knight commander drew his sword. "By God we march, for God we fight!"