

Ambush

-By Master Gunnery Sergeant Fenix

As they enter the kill zone, I focus my aim. We are taught to concentrate our fire upon the foremost position. There are twelve of them and one floating probe; I can vaguely distinguish the outline of their shimmering bodies against the foliage. The hovering orb, looking for us, zig zags in front of them. We have placed antipersonnel mines on the other side of the path where they will be forced to take cover. Our chemical grenades will expose the cloaking of their chameleon suits. The vapor will also incapacitate their probe. Before we learned to steal and use these, the probes were responsible for wiping out dozens of us.

I am waiting for Remmy to initiate the ambush. She will not engage until the entire squad has entered our field of fire. Two three-man security elements have been placed both in front and behind the point of contact; they will cover our withdrawal and prevent any chance of escape. Our secondary target is the team leader (positioned usually in the center of the patrol); we kill the point man first every time, to demoralize their units.

My hand grips the slugthrower in cold anticipation. I begin to hear the music, the beats and lyrics of our artistic vanguard. It was often played through the speakers and earpieces during the third evolution of my training. The music is always with me now; it is getting louder; my favorite battle hymns repeating in the jukebox of my mind. A rigid

quiet take to our ranks as we prepare to launch the ambush. The chirping of insects has ceased. There is only silence; the music.

Chem-grenade. Muffled explosion. Yellow dust clings to humanoid figures now exposed to the naked eye. The floating probe shuts down, dropping to the earth as the vapor ends its cognizance. I squeeze the trigger and my slugthrower bucks with recoil. I fire three times at the point man and watch him drop. Thumbing the selector switch to automatic, I swivel to the left. *BAP BAP BAP BAP, BAP BAP BAP BAP*, hammering bursts of bullets fly into the enemy squad. Four of them lay dead on the path; the others have sought cover behind the embankment on the other side of the trail. They have taken cover where we wanted them to, in the only place available and right where we planted the mines.

We continue to fire upon their position, pinning them down. The gunfire is exhilarating. I feel like I'm in a holo-flick- the bright flashing entertainment from before when I lived in Mechanopolis. From before I chose to run away and join the Anti-Heroes, before I changed, and before I knew what it was like to grow my own food or kill my own meat. I miss the holo-flicks, but I don't miss Mechanopolis, I want to see it burn.

I am still firing. One of them on the ground is wounded and attempting to crawl over to the embankment. I am shooting into his ribcage, walking the shots up his torso. Sparks, electrical charges and chunks of white-yellow muscle tissue fly from bursting wounds. He twitches with each impact, and I soon realize that he is no longer moving of his own accord.

“Blow the APMs!” Remmy shouts from the left side of our formation.

I shoot off the rest of my clip and begin to reload. I’ve not yet noticed that Kleng is dead. It is his responsibility to blow the APMs, and when Remmy shouts again I look to my right. Kleng is crumpled over his slugthrower. The top of his head is gone. Red-pinkish globs of brain are bubbling down his ears and face. For a moment my thoughts are frozen. The bloody mass of what used to be my friend illuminated in some peeled stop-frame of my sizzling memory. I am no longer firing, shaking and with clinched jaw, I slide my hand beneath his chest to retrieve the remote. The enemy is returning fire onto our position, dirt and debris are kicked up all around me. I raise my eyes and see the blue plasma bolts of Remmy’s pulse rifle spewing down onto the pathway. She is the only one among us qualified to use the co-opted weapon, and she is very qualified. Screams follow her surgically placed bursts of fire.

“Blow the APM’s goddamn it!” someone yells from our ranks.

I remove the safety and click twice. The explosion surmounts the cackle of small arms fire with a heavy *kaboom*. The return fire has stopped. Someone on our team is still shooting. A pathetic moaning sound comes from the ditch on the other side of the trail. Something mechanical chokes and whines. One of them over there is calling for a medic. Remmy orders us to cease fire. She looks down the skirmish line to meet eyes with me. She sees the bubbling mess of what used to be Kleng and the remote in my hand. Her smile is one of resolve.

Using hand signals she orders Qadir and Arcas into the kill zone. They attempt to do so with slugthrowers ready but she orders them to use grenades; Arcas produces one. Pulling the pin he lobs it into the ditch. It explodes. More of the same moaning, electric whirring. He tosses another. It explodes and the moaning stops, the electric whirring sputters out. Qadir draws his sidearm, places a bullet in the disabled probe, and continues to approach. He jumps over the embankment. Two shots are fired, and he calls “All Clear.”

Quickly, we emerge from the tree line to check bodies. I am not thinking with collected insight; the training has taken over. I reach to my belt and remove my survival blade. I approach a mangled corpse, lift the arm, and chop just below the wrist. Circuitry hisses and the smell of burnt blood nauseates me. The hand comes off smoothly. Retrieving the fallen enemy’s pulse rifle, I stuff the severed hand into my cryo-case.

We’d seen their transport jet insert them behind the ridgeline. They were a long-range patrol on recon sweep. The Mechanopolitan High Command has no idea where we have relocated to after their assault destroyed Alpha Camp, these twelve were sent in to find out. Luckily, we found them before they pushed any deeper into the Outlands. From their bodies we obtain flares, GPS compasses, survival blades, poncho liners, medical supplies, boots, load bearing equipment, spotting scopes, side arms, plasma grenades, a digital communicator complete with decoded signal operating instructions, and twelve pulse rifles. Their pulse rifles are personally coded to function only when used by the owner. The code recognition is done through palm identification. It is for this reason that we take

their hands. You can usually tell which hand is a soldier's shooting hand because he is often times still clutching his weapon, even in death. But in the event of confusion, we take both. Our armory staff then deprograms the rifles and hotwires the inner circuitry to fit one of our palms. It's a messy ordeal, but very much so worth it. As I was once told by a Gunnery Sergeant, everything we steal can be shot the other way. Our antique slugthrowers are effective projectile weapons, but we can't keep raiding the museums, it's too risky; it was a small miracle in the first place that our craftsmen figured out how to melt down the metal and recreate the archaic ammunition. We pick up our spent cartridges, pocketing them so they can be reloaded later back at camp.

We are not too far from Bravo camp and so we will carry our dead. Had we been further out, we'd have buried them in the field. We lost two good fighters this evening. It is somewhat expected, considering the mismatch in weaponry. We are told it won't always be this way, but as of now we are outgunned- fighting a war with weapons that are a thousand years old. You could say we are underdogs, but that would be an understatement.

Remmy orders "Bear" Bowski to carry Kleng's body. I step forward and volunteer to help. Kleng and I went through all three evolutions together, I feel obligated to his memory. Carrying his body along with a pulse rifle, a slug thrower, and my battlepack is torturous. We trudge through the moss-draped woods.

I feel badly about not having seen him die. The ambush started, I was shooting, I looked over, and he was gone...bubbling and bloody. I am wishing I'd gotten to know

him better, but I tell myself it's ok. It is as we recite during our burials, when we say goodbye and remember the oaths- There is no death, only a changing of worlds.