



IN THE BEGINNING

At the edge of darkness something stirred. No living being witnessed the arrival of the Machines when they emerged from the intergalactic rift. Immense ships battered and scarred, slowly advanced to the edge of the Milky Way galaxy, searching for new homes.

The luckiest of the hulks managed to crash land on mineral rich planets and moons. The rebuilding program commenced. Surviving mechanical systems were quickly retooled to burrow into the surface, beginning the construction of massive Machine production complexes. Decades passed before the first of the hordes emerged.

The newly energized Machine empire grew quickly at first. The widely dispersed planets along the outer rim contained few intelligent life forms; these were quickly and quietly overwhelmed.

Only the combined might of the interstellar races stood a chance at resisting this Legion of Steel. Eleven of the most advanced and powerful races, the Galactics, began to negotiate a defence pact. Once the terms of the pact were solidified, less advanced races possessing interstellar military capability were approached and offered the opportunity to join.

Eventually, other less advanced races whose home worlds lay in the path of Machine conquest were offered membership into the *Interstellar League for Mutual Home World Defense from Extragalactics*; or as the humans called it, *The League of Aliens*. In return for supplying troops and resources, these species would be taught advanced technologies and science. Humanity was sceptical of the League's Envoy. Two diplomats from each country were brought to the front lines to witness the encroaching Legions of Steel. When the diplomats returned from space with warnings of dire consequences should Earth refuse to join, nationalist objections were quashed and the United Nations of Earth (UNE) was formed.

Earth's technology was quickly upgraded as human scientists acquired knowledge of the alien theories and science. Understanding of the principles led to breakthroughs allowing them to develop new applications, even impressing the Galactics.

Earth mobilized for war.

Inexperience proved costly to the UNE in the initial battles against the Legions of Steel. Eventually however, the UNE produced an elite response force recognized for its prowess and aggressiveness in combat. Given humanity's warlike past this was not surprising.

During the next three years, it became apparent that the League was fighting a losing battle, bogged down in a war of attrition. The Legions of Steel could replace losses far quicker than the League's races could replace their fallen soldiers. It became painfully obvious that it was time for a change in strategy.

OPERATION PLANETSTORM

A bold plan was devised to turn the tide of the war: Operation Planetstorm. The League would mount an all-out offensive against the Machine blockade, punching a hole and enabling the *Stormfleet* to break through. This massive push would land as many soldiers as possible on the surface of the Machine manufacturing planets. The elite ground troops were tasked to destroy the Machine production facilities and ultimately the Matrix Entity, who controlled the Machine Empire.

Operation Planetstorm was a success. Earth had several ships in the Stormfleet and was tasked with the destruction of two Machine planet bases codenamed Red and Blue planet: Tutken and Permotus. Experience paid off. Both human missions successfully landed on the planets. While larger battles raged on the surfaces of each, UNE commandos made their way into the underground production facilities. Only the complete destruction of the complex's Overlord Computer could shut down the facility, denying the Machines valuable production capacity. Commandos then needed to battle their way back to the surface against overwhelming Machine forces if they planned to leave the planet alive.

With the original target planets liberated came the long struggle to push back the Machines to their point of origin, the Galactic Rift. It would be an arduous and prolonged engagement and would take decades before the operation could truly be called a success.

The League of Alien forces did succeed at pushing the enemy back, but the Legions army was never completely eradicated and at least one Overlord Computer still existed in LOA controlled space. Confined to the periphery however, the core planets and League of Aliens saw these meager Machine forces as simply a nuisance. Something left to a youngling race to take care of. Something for the Humans. On the edge of known space one thing was clearly apparent to the UNE; the Machines had not given up and they certainly were not going to go silently into that good night, for on the edge of darkness, something stirred.

TR698543

For over a hundred years, Humanity and their allies have fought the Legions of Steel, holding the line against an implacable foe. 100 years since UNE forces at Tutken and Permotus landed like a steel rain in Operation Planetstorm and purged those worlds of the enemy. 100 years since alien allies and enemies learned that *"Earth Dogs die hard."*

Make no mistake, the cost has been high. Worlds have been burned and shattered while famous units now exist only as names on monuments. Factional rivalries in the League of Aliens have weakened the resolve that unified races in the drive to push the Legions of Steel from the Milky Way Galaxy. League home worlds and colonies have been safe for decades.

The past century has seen the Legions of Steel hammered to scrap on hundreds of worlds in dozens of systems by the combined forces of the UNE, Fantasians, Infranites and League of Aliens. The population of the core worlds mistake the promise of victory as a certainty and conflict in the fringe colonies are as usual, out of sight, out of mind. Meanwhile while the Black Empire fights its own battles against the Matrix Entity and even the LOA. A constant threat whose true motives are hidden behind a curtain of secrecy.

After decades of fighting, the field of battle was narrowed to a single planet, TR698543. The privilege of containing the Legions of Steel to the Periphery, yielded Earth its third colony, New Perth, in the Bogan system. To help secure the frontier and safeguard its' new world, a front had to be established. A planet laying between the humans and the Legions of Steel was chosen as the line in the sand. On the edge of known space and with only its alpha numerical designation TR698543, it lay in the hands of the Machines. It was a place between hell and nothingness.

OPERATION FOX HAVEN

The Machines were forced back onto their heels but not defeated. TR698543 was staunchly held by robotic forces led by an insidious Charlie Class Overlord: Sierra Foxtrot. Despite extensive planning, it took six months and numerous attempts to eliminate the Overlord. The assault started with a series of orbital drops directly onto Machine major bases. Command nodes were given priority over all other targets, production centres were secondary targets. Dozens of commando insertion pods dropped on targets considered to have a high chance of containing the planetary Overlord. Like the original Planetstorm, the UNE plan was to decapitate Machine leadership, followed by shattering production and logistics chains, before mopping up the isolated combat units.

While the UNE had learned in hundreds of battles, so had the Machines. Aware of the preferred strategy of the Humans, Overlord Sierra Foxtrot had prepared decoys and backups against the certainty it would be the primary target. Unlike most Overlords, this one had prepared for defeat, and set in motion a long term strategy that would take the humans unaware.

It took advantage of the prehistoric orbital bombardment that had occurred on the planet and built small installations where enemy sensors would be overwhelmed by the metallic masses of the projectiles used to shatter the bedrock. The Overlord also utilized the vast amounts of refined alloys available by mining the objects.

Sierra Foxtrot was cut off from communication with other Overlords, but it was aware that the tide had turned against the Matrix Entity. It was possible that it was the last surviving one in this galaxy, on a planet soon to be overrun with organic intelligences. It was only a matter of time before the humans found and terminated its' functions.

Over the six months it took the commandos to locate and eliminate the Overlord, it had subtly diverted command and heavy units deep into the shattered wastes. Large formations broke down into smaller hordes, launching terror raids to attract the attention of the UNE, sacrificed to misdirect the humans forces. Meanwhile, the Overlord had subsystem

Lieutenants constructed with sufficient command and control to maintain production facilities and their defences. With enough time and resources, any of these Lieutenants would be capable of bootstrapping itself to Overlord status.

For six months, the Charlie class Overlord played a game of cat and mouse, stalling for time. Its final ploy was a tenacious defence of its home complex, expending most of what the humans thought were its reserves. Its final action was to update the Lieutenants with the full plan and timetable, initiating the next phase. A phase that would take 20 years to culminate.

The Human and coalition forces finally triumphed on the eve of the solar calendar of May 18, 2125. The enemy was believed to be all but eliminated with limited skirmishes landside and in the Kuiper Belt.

COOBER PEDY

The UNE quickly set up its base of operations upon occupation and named this desolate desert planet Coober Pedy. During the first 20 years the UNE held the Bogan system, Coober Pedy was never considered a site for full scale colonization. The harsh and barren landscape had very few regions suitable for agriculture. The shattered crust meant very few places had adequate water resources, or topsoil, to support large population centres. Instead, settlements sprouted around micro-biomes, or sites where artesian springs provided small, but regular water supplies.

There were other reasons this planet held interest to the UNE. With the planet secure, evidence of peculiarities surfaced regarding the planet's origins. Obviously, it had been subject of a fierce battle in millennia past. Scientists and technicians from Earth and some of its allies were dispatched to observe and record aspects of the planet's composition and fauna. Secretly, they were looking much closer at anomalies that defied explanation. The "scientist" numbers grew while this covert activity intensified. This did not escape notice from the Black Empire, a bordering Imperial state, and soon spies and political intrigue flourished on this remote planet. While fighting was still occurring in the surrounding Kuiper Belt, there was relative peace on Coober Pedy for almost 20 years.

For both security and scientific exploration, the UNE maintained a strong presence on the planet during this period, continually searching for intact Machine installations or concentrations and determined to prevent a Legion resurgence. A single spaceport was built to supply both the military and civilian contractors assigned to Coober Pedy. This was also the site of the only large urban settlement, Darwin. At its height, Darwin had a population of twenty thousand full time residents: men, women and children. Neighbouring it was Base Monash, home to most of the planet's military.

MACHINE RESURGANCE

Twenty years passed without major incident until the evening of June 23, 2145, when what would become known as the 10 Day War, started with the night sky of Darwin being filled with the light of hundreds of missiles streaking to their targets. Fresh Legion armies poured out of hidden bases. Infiltration hordes struck at communication arrays and power installations. Widely scattered Machines reformed into cohorts large enough to overwhelm fire bases and listening posts. In a few frantic days, the UNE forces were separated into pockets and prevented from regrouping into formations large enough to break through the swarms of Machines.

Surface to orbit missiles leapt to space and tore at the stationed starships. The missile strikes had targeted only ships capable of orbital bombardment or support; a scattering of small merchant ships and troop transports escaped untouched. The next wave of launches wiped out the survey and recon satellites, further crippling ground side responses to the Legion offensive. Military platforms in orbit came under fire from railguns on the surface, leaving them barely functional and defenceless against the third wave of launches.

The third wave carried infiltration and assault hordes as well as decoys. Upon reaching orbit, the Machines boarded the UNE stations, taking them in a day of fierce fighting, before turning their defence batteries against UNE positions on the planet.

In order to sow the maximum confusion in the human population, packs of Runaways were used to turn UNE garrisons against civilian settlements and camps. Civilian equipment was hijacked in turn and used to ambush units sent to relieve the settlers. On New Perth, small numbers of Machines that had gone to ground decades ago remerged, activated by the

rebuilt Overlord, and struck at communications and intelligence installations.

The result was a system wide panic creating the assumption that the Legions planned a full assault on New Perth with the intent to take the system. The intricate planning and manoeuvres of the Legion armies indicated that the Overlord had survived. A week after the offensive began, the UNE military and civilian leaders made the painful decision to evacuate as many troops and settlers from the planet as could be loaded onto the surviving ships before the “expected” Legion naval forces arrived.

At this point, considering the size of the Legion forces on Coober Pedy with an active Overlord, retreating to New Perth and regrouping seemed like the obvious choice. If there were more Legion held systems with operational Overlords hidden in the uncharted space beyond the galactic rim, humanity lacked the strength to fight on two worlds. Any reinforcements from the core worlds were months away. The Fantasian and Infranite garrisons at Bogan's companion star, Henderson, were staffed with skeleton crews and could provide little aid.

What followed was three stressful days of non-stop shuttle and drop ship flights to orbit. Due to the threat of missile or railgun strikes, the surviving human ships had retreated to the high orbits, barely out of range of the Machine assault shuttles. All equipment and stores other than those needed for life support, or personal weapons, was to be abandoned in place. PBA was taken, vehicles parked and scrambled when possible.

The Machines seemed unable to swamp the spaceport's perimeter which was heavily reinforced with bunkers, tanks and other armoured fighting vehicles. Dug in, the human crews faced Archfiends attempting breakthroughs, Dreadbot support artillery and Runaway/Stalkers Packs which scouted for weak points in the UNE defences.

If the Legions of Steel couldn't take the spaceport, they still managed to block retreating convoys from reaching it. Many attempts to air lift personnel met with failure as aircraft and drop ships were shot down overflying the ring of steel tightening around the spaceport.

As the third day drew to a close, sixty percent of the human population had been lifted to orbit. This still left over ten thousand civilians and soldiers trapped behind Legion lines. Planetary command was forced to make the difficult choice to abandon the remaining population. Higher up the echelons of the UNE Armed Forces, political intrusion had sealed the remaining survivors fates. Whether from pressure from the League of Aliens or veiled threats from the Black Empire, the orders came down. Leave and leave now.

Colonel Rooker of the 1st Provisional UNE Powered Infantry Battalion and last remaining superior officer on the planet had good cause to doubt the reasons for the decision to abandon the planet. During the early days of the Machine assault, he realized that the Machines had been using a shock and awe strategy. There was no way the Legion would be able to sustain the intensity of combat more than a few weeks this theory was further backed up with intelligence from recon units trapped in the field. The brave squad of Recce troops had tracked a Machine column to its primary base and managed to infiltrate the complex. Three survived to make a report: the base was stripped of combat units and supplies, there were no Legion reinforcements.

Nearly four hundred troops of the 2nd Naval Powered Infantry Regiment refused the order to board the final flights and leave the planet. Led by Colonel Rooker, these men and women decided it was their duty to stay and offer what aid they could to the refugees still scattered across Coober Pedy. While the final shuttles lifted off half empty, Rooker and his force of volunteers took control of as many vehicles as they could crew. Acting in unison, they proceeded to punch their armoured column through the encircling Machines and escaped into the relative safety of the outback. From the oldest UNE fighting formation, and home of the moniker *Earth Dogs Die Hard*, Rooker's Raiders were born.

THE ABANDONED

The column was a mixture of support and combat vehicles, including several mobile hospitals, a field kitchen, AFVs and two tank platoons. Powered by fusion reactors, the vehicles had nearly unlimited range, but lacked consumables. Rooker's first step was a run three thousand kilometres to a remote firebase located on a rocky plateau, whose garrison had been cut off from the spaceport.

They made the trek in just over a week of nearly nonstop driving across the unforgiving terrain. During the journey small

refugee convoys, in a variety of vehicles, managed to rendezvous with Rooker's troops. The column's size was nearly doubled by the time they reached Firebase Gamma.

The garrison of Gamma had been among the units written off by Command, along with the staff of several research facilities. During the weeklong siege preceding the Raiders arrival, the scientists and technicians joined the troops in defending the plateau base. Those without weapons took over the support roles of the encampment, freeing the troops for combat.

The few human outposts that were still holding out did their best to monitor Legion command and control frequencies. While they were unable to decrypt Machine transmissions, they were able to roughly locate centres of activity. It was determined that, at this point, communications lacked the upper hierarchy of signals that were the signature of an Overlord. Further analysis revealed repeated sequences tied to specific maneuvers in the field, preplanned tactical responses as opposed to an evolving strategy.

To Rooker and his command group, it seemed clear – the planetary Overlord that led the initial assault of the 10 Day War was either destroyed or was no longer on the planet. Controlling intelligence was limited to Horde level formations. This explained why some outposts, the most recent, had been ignored during the offensive, and why the Machines were ineffective in intercepting many of the escaping convoys.

The initial weeks of what were being called the Abandonment saw Rooker targeting and shattering any large enemy formations in the vicinity of Firebase Gamma. Not only did this distract the Machines from engaging and eliminating Humans who had not yet reached safety, it allowed the commanders to witness firsthand the lack of oversight and coordination the Legion cohorts truly had. The next stage of Major Rooker's campaign was concerned with consolidating the scattered units and groups still scattered across the landscape and finding them defensible refuge.

In the meantime, every effort was made to fortify the few bases held by the humans. Luckily, among the troops who refused to evacuate were a unit of Pioneers from HQ Company, 18th Powered Infantry Regiment. They, with the aid of civilian construction specialists, were able to rapidly construct additional defences and shelter for most of the refugees. Rooker assigned specialist troops to train and work with civilians with the appropriate skill sets, integrating them with their military counterparts.

Several times, Rooker led missions to salvage supplies from both the spaceport, and abandoned outposts. Food, medical supplies, vehicles, and munitions were stockpiled in the fortified camps. These operations further underscored the lack of overall command among the Legions. Analysts determined basic patterns to Machine reactions, looking for ways to get inside the command and control loop, to maximize the effectiveness of human raids. The lack of mutual support between most Machine hordes allowed the humans to concentrate their own mobile force against small concentrations of the Machine and defeat them piecemeal.

As the Machines were thinned out, and the civilians were able to take over specialist roles, Rooker was able to direct attacks against located Legion production centres, reducing their ability to resupply and repair. Armoured columns continued to be used against concentrations of Legion forces, targeting command and heavy units before retreating, and attempting to lure hordes and packs into traps and kill zones. On paper, the Machines had sufficient forces to overwhelm the human bases, but lacking an Overlord to direct them, packs and hordes failed to coordinate their attacks effectively.

The fighting was not one sided, many died or went missing before they found safety. It was obvious that the humans would lose a battle of attrition, or if the Machines were able to mass enough units against the fortified refuges, as they did at Stonefall Base.

Within 18 months Rooker and his raiders eliminated all imminent threat of the machines. Only then did the politics of the League of Aliens allow UNE command to go back to the planet.

As the fresh troops arrived, those left behind had dubbed the world Abandon. The decision of what to do with Rooker and his troops was fiercely debated. Some officials called for court martials, arguing their refusal to evacuate constituted mutiny or desertion, while others preferred to consider the personnel AWOL instead and were willing to offer an amnesty.

Rooker and his troops did not care. They would never be part of the UNE again. In response, the survivors of the Four Hundred began to withdraw with their equipment and caravans of civilians into the badlands. Using hard won knowledge of the planet, they outfit hidden bases and over the next 80 years grew into an independent Human colony of sorts, know

only as Outlanders to the rest of civilized space.

Unable to quietly round up and relocate the Outlanders and unwilling to deal with the possible political fallout of forcing the Outlanders off the world they had fought for, the UNE tacitly accepted autonomy for the Outlanders, while making Abandon a UNE possession. In essence, Abandon became a military reserve, under martial law except for the Outlanders. This solution also helped reduce the objections of members of the LoA and Black Empire to the “unregulated expansion” of the Terran humans.

By this time, the conflict on Abandon had achieved the reputation of being similar to the conflicts in Afghanistan for the Americans And Russians. Its’ terrain makes monitoring enemy movement and concentrations nearly impossible, and complete pacification or extermination seem like a fantasy. Like Afghanistan, combat tends to be small unit skirmishes against infiltrators and raids, with both humans and Machines resorting to traps and ambushes. The Abandonment itself echoes Elphinstone's disastrous retreat from Kabul in the 18th century , when an entire military column, along with civilians, was tricked into leaving a fortified base in favour of an escape attempt through inhospitable mountains.

As in Afghanistan, on Abandon, it was a dangerous assumption to think diminishing enemy action meant anything other than renewed fighting in the near future.

Despite this, the UNE agreed to a mandate from the other races that possession of Abandon was contingent upon humanity eradicating all Legion presence. As opposed to earlier efforts, this time the UNE decided against maintaining one major base holding the majority of forces; instead, a series of smaller, but still substantial, bases were placed to control much of the equatorial region. Intended to support a network of smaller fire bases and observation posts, these bases took a page from the Outlander settlements.

Surrounded by minefields and automated turrets, these bases included substantial artillery assets and a squadron of drop ships to support the smaller bases within range. Each was stocked and equipped to withstand a siege, with rapid response teams permanently assigned.

Despite adapting operations to account for Sierra Foxtrot's innovative tactics, the Overlord was still able to sucker punch the UNE.

The discovery of a newly functional Machine production centre by a routine patrol triggered a vicious response from the Legion. Base Bishop was overrun by the Machine offensive, creating a major gap in the UNE's coverage of the planet. Reports from groups of Outlanders indicated force concentrations in the blind zone preparing to assault Bases Puller and Currie. It was quickly made clear that the attack was not an isolated force, but represented years of production, with the potential for large reserves. The Machines had to be prevented from leaving Abandon and breaking out of the system, no matter the cost.

All available forces were dispatched from New Perth to reinforce the garrisons on Abandon, with more substantial forces routed from the core systems. Operation Anvil had begun. UNE forces on planet went to full alert awaiting the reinforcements. Luckily for the garrison units, the 2nd Commando Battalion of New Perth were undertaking a training exercise on the planet.

Troop transports from New Perth along with their escorts were intercepted by Sierra Foxtrot’s hidden naval forces. New Perth’s ships, effectively cut off from Abandon, fought viciously in the out rim of the system. The troops holed up planet side had the choice between waiting for the onslaught of the Machine forces or trying to break out of the blockade. There was a third option for the trapped UNE troopers; send in the Commandos.

Fin