
Chapter Samples for Into the Stars

By James Rosone

Chapter Two

Piracy Problems

CMS Dolly

Mars Belt Sector

The M-337 mining drone stabilized its position near the giant asteroid, releasing a couple of short puffs of gas. As the drone completed a final adjustment, the operator on the ship activated its cutting laser one last time, slicing into the chunk of ice to cut it free from the floating rock.

“Careful, Hank. That’s a big piece of ice,” Joshee said.

Is it just me, or does his Indian accent come out more when he’s stressed? Hank asked himself.

He kept his eyes on the monitor. “Get the grappler ready,” he ordered. “I’ve almost got it free.” A bead of sweat ran down the side of his face. Hank’s left hand moved up to brush the perspiration away, only to slap the face shield of his helmet.

Joshee snickered. “Forgot to put your do-rag on?” he asked jokingly.

Hank shook his head in frustration. “Yeah. I guess I was in too much of a hurry to get suited up.”

“You know, maybe it’s time to invest in a newer ship that doesn’t require us to be in these damn EVA suits when we mine,” Joshee suggested.

Hank ignored the comment. “The ice is free, Joshee. Activate the grappler and let’s get that piece pulled into the hauler.”

“Firing...good hit. Retracting the cable now,” Joshee confirmed. Then he proceeded to give instructions to their synthetic humanoid worker. “Lola, when the ice reaches the loader, size it down with the cutter so it’ll fit in the hauler. Then I need you to bring it back to the ship so it can be unloaded. Repeat the process until you’ve got that entire ice block on the ship.”

“Yes, Grand Lord Exalted,” the humanoid replied in its emotionless tone.

“Holy crap, Joshee. You can’t keep having Lola calling you that. It’s ridiculous,” Hank chided.

Joshee let out a guttural laugh. “Oh, fine, party pooper. I’ll change it when we’re done. I just wanted to see what you’d say to my new title.”

Hank just snorted.

“How long do you think it’ll take her to cut that block down and start bringing it back?” Joshee asked.

“Long enough for you to get those other blocks moved into the refiner. Where is Jorge? He’s falling behind,” Hank asked, annoyed.

Joshee floated across the cargo hold past the open bay doors to the far side of the room. His hands grabbed for the pull bars near the large refiner. “He said something about needing an urgent bio break. Something about my cooking didn’t sit well with him,” Joshee explained. “I’ll get the next set of blocks going until he gets back. Then we can go in and grab some food ourselves.”

Hank chuckled. “I like your cooking, Joshee, but we should let our actual cook do the cooking when we’re in the Belt. Sometimes your stuff is a bit spicy.”

“You all said you wanted it hot.”

“Hot, yes—not Indian hot,” Hank countered. “There’s a distinct difference.”

Joshee used one of the mechanical arms in the bay to grab one of the one-square-meter blocks of ice Lola had brought in earlier in the day. The mechanical arm gripped the block and placed it in one of the large vats anchored along the inner wall of the cargo hold. Each of the six tanks could hold roughly thirty square meters of ice. Over the next few hours, the ice would be superheated and melted down. During that process, the water would be stripped of any minerals of value such as strontium clathrates or other essential isotopes. The remaining liquid would be loaded into storage vats until they returned to the Mars Orbital Station, better known as MOS—at least until BlueOrigin finished their processing facility located halfway between the MOS and the Belt.

It was a bit of a long and tedious process, but ice mining was a very lucrative business. Not a lot of people liked this type of mining, but the ones that went into it typically did well, so long as they were able to find a steady source of ice.

“Come on, Hank. Let’s go eat.” Joshee motioned for them to head back into the pressurized section of the ship.

Hank nodded. “Let me tell the drone to go find the next chunk of ice for us. That way, it’ll be ready for us when we get back from our break.”

Joshee tipped his head in agreement and turned around to make his way toward the airlock at the other end of the cavernous cargo bay. It was the downside to using the older ship—to operate the control arm, the hauler, or the mining drone, they needed to use the workstations in the cargo hold. The internal part of the ship wasn’t very big. Space was limited, and they didn’t have a separate workstation with the same functions as the ones in the much larger cargo hold.

The ship felt much larger than it was when the bay was sealed and pressurized, but when they had equipment outside the ship, they almost always left the bay doors open. It took a while to pressurize and depressurize the cavernous room, so they only did it when they were going to move to a new location.

When he was done with the drone, Hank turned to follow his friend Joshee. The guy had already reached the airlock and was waiting for him. He had a look on his face like he was about to tell him again that this ship was a hunk of junk and that they should upgrade to a newer ship, but he held his tongue this time.

Maybe he’s right, Hank thought.

“What do you think of the new kid?” Joshee asked as they both floated into the airlock.

Joshee closed the door behind Hank and sealed it while Hank worked to repressurize the compartment they were in so they could gain entry to the rest of the ship.

“He’s green, but I think we can teach him to be a good space miner,” Hank muttered as he tapped on a couple of keys. There was a loud hissing noise as the compartment flooded with oxygen.

The light near the door changed from red to green, and Hank pulled up on the lever, opening the entrance to the corridor that led them further into the ship. The two of them used the pull bars interspersed throughout the hallway to pull and push themselves forward as they traversed their way through the ship. Eventually, they made their way to the cantina, where their cook, Ivan, had just finished preparing some food for the crew of seven.

The cantina also functioned as their dayroom and locker room. Along one of the walls, the crew had a wall locker, where their EVA suits were stored. They also had a TV and a couple of computer terminals. With no gravity on the ship, there wasn’t a need for tables and chairs. People just floated around as they ate their food, watched TV, or played a video game.

The radio communicator attached to Hank's sweater chirped. "Hank, it's Eric. Can you ask Ivan if he'd bring me some food from the cantina?"

Hank tapped the sensor on his communicator. "I just got to the cantina, Eric. I'll bring it up myself once I've eaten. Give me fifteen minutes," Hank replied.

Ivan handed Hank a prepared container of food to eat. "Any word on when we'll be headed back to the MOS?" the cook asked. "We're starting to run a little low on consumables."

Hank's left eyebrow rose. "Really? We've only been gone for five weeks."

Ivan shook his head. "Hey, it took us two weeks to get here," he countered. "It'll take us at least two weeks to get home. I've only got roughly four weeks' worth of food."

"Then we've got enough for at least two more weeks of mining," Hank insisted.

"Did you guys find another good chunk today?" Ivan asked.

Joshee nodded. "We sure did. Hank here found two large chunks. We're nearly done with the first one. Lola is cutting up the second one and bringing it back."

"Sweet. Looks like this should be a good payday, then," Ivan commented.

"It should be indeed. Pack up a container for Eric, will you? I'll take it up to him in a few minutes," Hank directed.

"Sure thing," Ivan replied.

Hank ate his meal hastily. Just as he was getting ready to bring food to Eric on the bridge, his communicator chirped. "Hank! I'm showing a contact heading toward us!"

Hank shook his head. "Hey, calm down, Eric. This is nothing to be worried about. Look at the display and tell me what kind of contact it is."

Hank floated out of the cantina and toward the bridge as he waited for Eric to reply. This was Eric's first time alone on the bridge monitoring the area, and his inexperience was showing. Hank's wife had twisted his arm to get Hank to hire him—the kid was related to a friend of hers and in need of a job. Bridge duty was the safest job he could think of until they got him trained up in space mining.

"Um, I...I don't know," Eric stammered before adding, "It doesn't have one of those transponder thingies on it you told me to look for. It just showed up on the radar screen and looks to be heading toward us."

"What do you mean it doesn't have a transponder code? All ships have a transponder code. It's how we tell what kind of ship they are and who they belong to."

“I’m telling you, Hank, it doesn’t have a transponder code,” retorted the young man, annoyed that Hank didn’t believe him.

Hank shook his head angrily. “I’m almost there. This had better not be a joke, Eric, or I’m going to be pissed. I’ve got better things to be doing.”

Hank grabbed at the bars spaced throughout the corridors, pulling himself as he floated through the vessel. After making his way from the midsection of the ship, he finally arrived at the ladder section that would take him up to the bridge.

For a ship’s nerve center, the bridge wasn’t anything fancy to look at. It had chairs for the pilot and copilot, another for the radar and communications officer and that was it. Just behind the bridge was a room with additional chairs for the rest of the crew when the ship was in transit. Unlike on a warship, the bridge was ringed with windows, allowing them to see out.

Maneuvering over to the radar screen, Hank motioned for the kid to move so he could take a seat. He hurriedly scanned the monitor; the radar was making sweeps of the area around them, and sure enough, the ship Eric had found didn’t have a transponder code.

What the hell? Hank asked himself. Every ship he’d seen had a transponder. The unique ship code identified which country the ship was from and what type it was.

“See? I told you it didn’t have any identification,” Eric said, feeling vindicated.

“Yeah, yeah.”

Hank reached over for the headset and put it on. “Unidentified ship, this is the Republic mining ship *Dolly*. Please identify yourself.”

A moment went by without any response to his hails. Hank changed to a wideband network, hoping that if his message was transmitted across more frequencies, these guys might hear him.

Maybe they’re operating on a different channel than us...

Hank tried hailing them again. They were now approaching 230 kilometers and still closing on their position.

“See if you can use the camera, Hank,” the kid offered.

Damn. Why didn’t I think of that?

Panning the lens toward the ship, Hank zoomed in as much as the camera would allow. When he saw it, his heart skipped a beat. A sense of panic washed over him.

That’s no friendly ship, he realized.

Hank reached for the handset that would connect him to the ship's onboard speaker system. "This is the captain. We've got a possible pirate ship heading in our direction," he announced. "I need everyone to secure what you're doing. Close the outer cargo hold immediately. I'm initiating an engine restart. Once we can get going, we're moving." They'd come back for the hauler and the mining drone if they managed to get away.

Pushing himself out of the radar/coms chair, Hank grabbed at the pull bars and moved about the bridge until he was able to spin himself into the pilot seat. Once seated, he proceeded to strap himself in as he started spinning up the engines.

The readout on the monitor told him he'd have his maneuvering thrusters ready in sixty seconds. It'd take another three minutes to get the main engines ready to engage.

Joshee joined him on the bridge along with Ivan, their cook. Ivan had spent a handful of years in the Republic Navy, and he operated their lone self-defense weapon. Joshee and Ivan took one look at the camera and the radar screen and clearly knew they were in trouble because they went speeding into action.

Hank turned to Joshee. "Get on the radio and send a distress message to any Republic ships in the area," he directed. "Make sure the MOS knows we're in trouble and send them our exact location."

"Everyone, get your helmets back on and hook your EVA suits up," Ivan said. "This could turn ugly, guys." He swiftly followed his own orders, reattaching his helmet and fastening the life support hose to his suit.

"Get that gun spun up and ready, Ivan," Hank exclaimed. "I'm about to initiate our engines and get us out of this place." As he spoke, he began using the maneuvering thrusters.

In another minute, the engines would be spun up and ready. Once they got out of the Belt, he'd run the engines up to full speed and try to outrun these guys.

"On it, boss."

Ivan flicked a couple of switches, activating their lone self-defense weapon. It was a single-barreled 20mm autocannon. At Ivan's behest, Hank had installed the autocannon a few years ago, on the off chance they encountered a pirate. They'd mounted it on top of the ship, near the crew compartment behind the bridge. That way, Ivan could quickly reload the magazine when it ran out of ammo.

The next sixty seconds went by in a blur as everyone performed their individual duties. They'd run through a few drills like this in the past. Judging by how long it was taking them to complete a few of their tasks, they probably needed to practice more often.

"They still aren't responding to our hails," Joshee said to Hank.

Now that they'd cleared a couple of the large asteroids, Hank gave the ship a bit more speed. However, they still had a few dozen more to get around before he could really open up the engines.

"Should I fire a warning shot?" Ivan asked.

"Everyone, seal your EVA suits up, get your helmets on, and strap in. We're going to make a run for it!" shouted Hank over the loudspeaker.

"Hey! Should I shoot, Hank?" Ivan asked again, louder this time.

"Yes. Fire a shot across its bow and see if that wakes them up," Hank responded hurriedly. He was busily steering them around another floating rock.

A second later, Ivan fired off two rounds. The 20mm slugs zipped right in front of the approaching vessel. They missed, but that was the intent—to let the other ship know they could defend themselves and hope it didn't come down to that.

Suddenly, the radio crackled, and a voice with a distinctly Irish accent spoke. "This is Captain Liam of the *Gaelic*. Stand down and prepare to be boarded. If you cooperate, no one will get hurt. If you fire on us again, we will return fire."

The individuals on the bridge all looked nervously at each other.

"Who the hell is that?" Joshee asked. "I've never heard of a Captain Liam or the *Gaelic*."

"Hang on, guys, I'm about to go full throttle on the thrusters," Hank announced. The ship swiftly picked up speed as he ramped up the power to the engines.

They were just opening up some distance between them and the pirate ship when Ivan shouted, "He's firing!"

The ship shook and rattled as it took a couple of hits. Alarm bells rang, and a series of red warning lights blinked on Hank's computer display.

"We've been hit. They're going after our engines!" Joshee yelled frantically.

"Return fire, Ivan. Try to take 'em out!" Hank bellowed. He tried to position one of the asteroids between them and the pirate ship. Chunks of rock broke off as a few of the railgun projectiles slammed into it instead of their ship.

Ivan depressed the trigger, firing half a dozen more slugs at the pirate ship. Hank knew he'd be aiming for the centerline of the vehicle in hopes of hitting something important. It was also easier to hit a larger target than a smaller one.

A couple of chunks of metal broke off from the pirate vessel. The ship executed evasive maneuvers to avoid the strings of slugs Hank's ship was sending their way. Ivan fired another dozen shots at the ship, and Hank hoped like hell that the pilot of the pirate ship would decide to break off its attack and go find someone else to prey on.

The pirate ship took a couple more hits. Ivan depressed the trigger to send another volley.

Click, click, click.

"I'm out of ammo. I've got to change out the magazine!" Ivan shouted as he unstrapped himself and floated out of his seat. He made his way over to the magrail's magazine, pulled the hundred-round magazine out and reached for a fresh one to attach in its place.

Joshee, who'd been watching the pirate ship, yelled, "Hurry up, Ivan! He's firing again. Brace for impact!"

Hank tried to turn the mining barge to the right with his emergency maneuver thrusters. He desperately tried to dodge the slugs being thrown at them as he applied power to their engines. This time, several objects ripped right through the hull of the mining vessel and into the crew compartment behind the bridge.

The bridge began a violent decompression. Air swirled out of the three-centimeter holes being punched through their home. As Hank turned to look back, geysers of frozen blood erupted from the puncture holes in several of his friends' environmental suits. The magrail projectiles tore right through their bodies like a hot knife through butter.

Seconds later, the bridge section around Hank sparked and flashed as more projectiles ripped through the area around him. One of the slugs tore through the side panel of the *Dolly* and severed his right arm and left leg as it continued through the ship. It took only a fraction of a second for Hank's suit to lose oxygen pressure. He died before his brain had a chance to register any pain.

With the crew dead and the ship disabled, the CMS *Dolly* went into a drift. Power on board the vessel flickered for a moment before it eventually turned off.

A short while later, a boarding crew took control of the ship. The pirates went to work stripping the ship of its cargo and anything else of value. Once they had taken what they wanted, they towed the vessel back to their lair using a tractor beam. They'd add it to the collection of ships

they'd stolen, which they would either turn into pirate ships or use for scrap. With virtually no military or police force to monitor the Belt, piracy was becoming a booming industry.

Captain Liam Patrick looked at the list of what they'd just captured from the mining ship. There were a few tons of water and other refined isotopes and minerals. It didn't sound like much, but this haul would probably net them a good twenty or thirty million, plus an ice mining barge—something they didn't encounter often.

Turning to look at his first officer, Liam asked, "How bad is the damage?"

David shrugged his shoulders. "Could've been worse, Captain. If we keep running into armed mining barges, we may want to slap some armor plates on the *Gaelic*. Otherwise, one of these days, these miners are going to get lucky."

Liam let out a deep sigh. He hated this part of the job. Not the stealing—there was plenty of ore and ice out here in the Belt to make a person rich. He hated the killing. Most miners would give up their goods and fly away with their lives. Occasionally, like today, they'd run across a crew that opted to fight. It always ended the same way—with the mining crew dead and their families left to wonder what had happened.

This world we're building needs to atone for what we're doing to make it possible, Liam thought.

Chapter Nine

Lunar Assault

Lunar Orbit – Training Range X-Ray

Bravo Company, 2nd Delta Battalion

1st Special Forces Group

Standing on the flight deck of the RNS *Voyager*, Master Sergeant Brian Royce looked at the soldiers in his platoon. Half of them were green cherries, fresh from the schoolhouse. Hell, he remembered training them at Fort Benning. Now, they were preparing for their last training exercise before they shipped out.

One of the squad leaders walked up to him. “Master Sergeant, the men are ready.”

Royce looked at Staff Sergeant Perry. “All right, tell ’em to load up. Oh, and Perry—keep an eye on those new M90s. This is the first time we’ll be using them in a live-fire exercise.”

The M90 was the newest Special Forces weapon. It was a squad automatic weapon, or SAW. Instead of shooting projectiles like a railgun or a propellant-powered projectile like the older military weapons, the M90 was a blaster. It fired electrically charged blaster bolts at an incredible rate of speed. Each squad had a single soldier equipped with the rifle. If the Deltas liked using them and they proved to be effective, then Big Army would look to integrate them into all the Republic Army battalions to beef up the firepower of the ground forces.

Perry nodded and turned around to order his squad to load up. Once his squad started heading toward the Osprey, the rest of the platoon followed suit.

“Master Sergeant, I’m going to ride with Third and Fourth Squad,” called out Lieutenant Crocker.

“Sounds good, LT. See you down on the surface,” Master Sergeant Royce replied before following the last of the soldiers into the back of the Osprey.

Once he climbed in, the crew chief closed the door, allowing it to seal and pressurize the cabin. Sitting on the last seat next to the door, Royce attached the five-point harness to himself, pulling it tight, then looked at the others. They all appeared to be fastened in and ready.

A couple of minutes later, the Osprey started to get in position. It was being moved into one of the launch tubes near the front of the hangar deck and the ship. This process didn’t take too

long, especially since the ship had been positioned near the launch tubes before being loaded with its human cargo.

As the ship was moved into place, Royce heard a series of clicking noises. Then the Osprey levitated inside the magnetic launch tube as it prepared to be shot out of the mothership.

“Prepare to launch,” came a voice inside their helmets from the pilot.

Master Sergeant Brian Royce craned his neck to the left and looked at the row of troopers. The tension inside the troop compartment was almost palpable. He fixed each trooper with his eyes and gave them a short nod, and they did the same, letting him know they were ready.

The lights inside the ship suddenly turned from an ambient white to a soft blue as the ship jerked.

“Launching!” announced the pilot, excitement in his voice.

Royce heard a loud swooshing noise as the shuttle was forcefully pushed out of the magnetic launch tube. The lights illuminating the runway whipped past them at an alarming rate. Seconds later, they were shot out of the *Voyager* and into the darkness of space. The artificial gravity of the mothership was gone in an instant, and the Deltas felt the weightlessness of zero g return. The pilots applied more power to the thrusters, angling the Osprey toward the lunar surface.

The tight turn and the increase in speed meant their bodies were now being slammed with seven g-forces. A few of the soldiers grunted audibly at the increased pressure on their bodies. Their mechanical combat suits kicked in, applying pressure to their legs and waist, pushing more blood up to their heart and their heads to keep them from passing out.

“Hang on, guys. We’re seven minutes out from the DZ. I’m going to angle us into a couple of canyons and craters to evade the base’s radar systems,” the pilot informed them.

The Osprey angled steeper for the lunar surface as it picked up in speed. The g-force monitor in the soldiers’ HUD was now showing nine g’s. A few jarring minutes later, the Osprey pulled up hard, leveling them out just a few meters above the surface. Then it popped up briefly before it dove down into a large crater. The ship did this a few more times as the pilot deftly maneuvered them, staying close to the surface. This type of nap-of-the-ground flying was what pilots lived for. It also caused some soldiers to vomit in their helmets if they weren’t prepared.

“Five minutes!” barked the pilot, tension and stress in his voice.

Royce used his neurolink to communicate with his platoon. *Listen up, Deltas. The opposition for this training mission may be synthetics, but they’ve been programmed to fight and defend this*

position hard. They'll be using blasters set to stun, so if you get hit, it's going to hurt like hell, but it won't kill you. This is about as real a scenario as we're going to get. Don't think of these defenders as Synths. Think of them as the Asian Alliance or some alien race.

Sensing their excitement rising in anticipation of what was about to happen, Royce reiterated their primary objectives.

The RASs will be hitting Objective Yellow twenty mikes after we drop. That means we'll have minimal time to disable the point defense weapons. If we fail, their landing craft won't make it to the surface. Once we take those guns out, we need to storm the command center below the surface next. Hooah!

Hooah, came the reply from his troopers.

He continued, *I want First Squad to lay down suppressive fire while Second Squad bounds forward. The lieutenant and Third and Fourth Squads are on the other bird. They'll flank to the left and right.*

Staff Sergeant Perry will be in command of First and Second Squads once the action starts. I'll be with Third Squad while the LT is with Fourth Squad.

Remember, use your magrails for the assault. When we reach the structure, switch to blasters. If I see one of you guys fire a magrail inside the facility, I'll have you pulling guard duty in the Belt for the next year! Understood?

Hooah! came the reply.

"Three minutes!" shouted the pilot in their helmets.

The Osprey darted from one side to the other as the pilot did his best to evade simulated enemy ground fire from the surface. This would be their last real training exercise before the *Voyager* left for a completely new planet. Royce wanted to make the most of this exercise for his men.

The Deltas carrying out this initial assault were coming in from a different angle than the regular Army grunts. Their objective was simple: take out the lunar defenses and the command-and-control bunker so the main body of infantry soldiers could land and assault the base itself.

"Two minutes!"

Readying himself, Royce looked at his rifle, making sure he had it on the right settings. *Magrail...*

The M85 assault rifle was a real beauty. It was the standard infantry assault rifle of the regular Army and Special Forces. The rifle had three weapon capabilities built into a single frame. The

first was the magnetic railgun, or magrail. It fired a standard 5.56mm projectile with a three-hundred-round magazine. The magazine had a nifty counter on either side that let the soldiers know how many rounds they had left—an important thing to know in a gunfight. They primarily used the magrail setting when they wanted to shoot at something over a great distance or needed to punch through heavy armor or another solid defense.

The rifle also incorporated a newly miniaturized laser blaster. This was a new weapon that hadn't been in military service for more than a few years when it had been integrated into this new assault rifle. The blaster had a powerpack that could provide two hundred shots before it needed to be swapped out with a new one, so it had some limitations. It also wasn't very effective beyond a thousand meters. The Deltas typically carried three magazines each for the blaster and the magrail.

To top it off as the ultimate infantry combat assault rifle, the new system integrated a third weapon that fired a 20mm high-explosive smart munition. It was kind of like the older M203 and M320 40mm grenade launcher on the infantry rifles the military had used in the past. The 20mm grenade gun used a six-round magazine. The AI targeting computer on the rifle could preprogram the smart munition to explode on impact or as an airburst over a cluster of enemy soldiers. It was a truly badass weapon and beloved by the infantry and Special Forces alike.

The M85 truly was the ultimate multipurpose rifle for both planetary and space operations. When it had come out five years ago, it had quickly become the primary weapon of the Republic Army and the Delta battalions.

The Osprey leveled out in one of the shallow trenches on the moon as it slowed down. Then the rear hatch opened up to the blackness of space, allowing the Deltas to see out. The light inside the shuttle had shifted from a soft blue to a dull red.

Unlatching himself from the seat, Royce felt his body start to float momentarily. He activated the magnets in his boots, which instantly attached themselves to the floor of the bay. He waved for the others to do the same.

Royce walked toward the rear of the ramp, the metallic clicking from his boots the only noise in the cargo bay. Moments later, the rest of the platoon did likewise. If they didn't use magnetized boots, they'd have a hard time trying to stay upright or move about in a coordinated manner in the cargo hold. The specially designed space boots allowed them to walk normally in zero g.

The crew chief for the Osprey stood near the ramp. When he saw they were lined up and ready, he sent a quick message to the pilots. The shuttle turned briefly and then rose in altitude. They were no longer skimming the surface. They'd risen just high enough to allow them to safely jump, given the speeds they were moving at.

Looking at his own map, Royce saw they were approaching the drop zone. He needed to get ready to go. Moving toward the edge of the ramp, he saw the lunar surface whipping past below them at a decent clip. Taking a deep breath, he took a couple of steps forward and jumped. His body, encased in his exoskeleton combat suit, began a rapid descent to the lunar surface not more than thirty meters from the ship.

In a matter of seconds, he was on the ground, landing in a controlled fall that would be impossible on Earth. His combat suit absorbed much of the impact. Once on the ground, he had his rifle at the low ready, barking out orders to his platoon to get a move on.

Looking toward where their objective was, he spotted a slight rise in the terrain, just like the recon photos had shown. He took off at a quick trot with his squads following behind him. It was hard to keep from bouncing on the lunar surface given the lower gravitational pull.

“Master Sergeant, I’m going to get our heavy weapons set up on that crest,” called out Staff Sergeant Perry.

Royce turned to look at the crest he was pointing to and nodded. “Good call. Get it done, Staff Sergeant.”

As Royce approached the rise in the terrain, his AI-assisted heads-up display, or HUD, began to compose a three-dimensional map and lay of the ground around and in front of him. It also populated with every person in his platoon. When he reached the rise in the terrain, he poked his head above it, allowing the HUD’s sensors to locate their objective and the enemy soldiers defending it.

Moments later, dozens of red marks appeared on the map, letting him know where the enemy soldiers were in relation to him and his soldiers. Through his neurolink, he started passing out assignments to his squad leaders, making sure they knew where the enemy was and how they needed to carry out their assault.

Within a few minutes of landing on the surface, his four squads had reached their assault positions. Staff Sergeant Perry had their heavy weapons set up and sighted in on the base. The

crews had just sent him a quick note letting him know the .50-caliber magrail guns and the 20mm pulse beam blasters were ready to open up when Royce or the lieutenant gave the order.

Royce looked over to where the lieutenant was. Through their neurolink, he said, *The platoon's ready, sir.*

Lieutenant Crocker, their platoon leader, was new to their platoon. He'd just transferred to their company a month ago, and this was his first live-fire training exercise with them.

Lead the way, Sergeant. Let's do this, Lieutenant Crocker replied, clearly excited and ready to start.

All squads—attack now! Royce shouted over the neurolink, giving them all a good kick in the butt to move.

The platoon's two heavy magrails and two heavy blaster guns opened up on the unsuspecting guard towers and perimeter of the base. The .50-caliber slugs tore right through the towers, ripping them to shreds. The blue flickers of light from the blasters hit the fortified bunkers and sentry positions with lightning speed and precision, blowing them to pieces. Royce had designed this part of the assault to be the distraction. The goal was to focus the enemy's attention on his heavy guns while his other two squads advanced on the flanks.

With the covering fire initiated, Second Squad charged forward, bounding from one covered position to another as they carried out a direct frontal assault. This was again part of the distraction. Racing from one covered position to another, firing as they went, Second Squad kept the defenders firmly focused on them. Meanwhile, Sergeant Royce moved with Third Squad on the left flank while Lieutenant Crocker advanced with Fourth Squad on the right.

They bounced ever so slightly on the surface as they ran, with Royce doing his best to keep up with his squad. The younger Deltas were fully exploiting their youth and the abilities of their exoskeleton combat suits. As they approached the enemy's exposed flank, Royce's HUD spotted a Synth defender in a bunker, turning to shoot at them with one of the heavy weapons.

Seeing the threat before anyone else, Royce raised his rifle to engage it. The HUD placed a targeting reticle over the Synth, waiting for Royce to pull the trigger. The enemy Synth must have spotted his targeting laser because it ducked, probably moving to another position somewhere along the trench line.

Royce kept his rifle pointed in that general direction, letting the targeting radar on the helmet work to locate the Synth when he inevitably popped up again. A couple of seconds later, he was

rewarded with a target to shoot. The Synth had popped up twenty meters further away with that same heavy-caliber weapon. Just as it was gearing up to fire on his guys, Royce's targeting reticle turned green, letting him know his HUD had synced with his rifle and he had a lock. He squeezed the trigger a couple of times, sending several magrail projectiles at the Synth's position. Seconds later, it was ripped apart by his slugs.

Planting his foot on the porous lunar surface, Royce pushed off hard, using the reduced gravity to hurl himself forward at a quick pace, closing the distance to the enemy lines. His squadmates were running with their rifles raised, using the AI-assisted HUD to help them neutralize the defenders as quickly as they could be identified. In moments, the squad had overrun the enemy positions and were inside their perimeter.

One of his soldiers ran toward the base of the enormous orbital defensive weapon and attached two large high-explosive charges to the side of it. The man set a detonator on the devices and then ran to join his comrades further away as they focused on fighting the reinforcements that continued to arrive from the hidden parts of the base.

A Synth defender surprised Royce and a couple of his squadmates by suddenly popping out of a fighting hole covered in loose dust and gravel from the moon's surface. It managed to shoot two of his guys before they took it out. Royce scolded himself for letting two of his guys get taken out of the exercise like that.

I'll have to look back at the video and figure out who missed that defender...

The squad leader on the right flank sent him a quick NL message, letting him know they had attached their own explosives to the orbital gun and were ready to detonate. Royce sent a fast reply to do it, then told his own squad to blow their charges as well.

Moments later, there was a bright flash as the charges went off. In that instant, both the orbital defensive weapons for the base were taken offline. Once the flash subsided, Royce looked up just in time to see several dozen landing craft descending rapidly on the base from orbit, right on time.

When the first wave of two hundred Republic Army soldiers landed, the newly arrived infantry went to work capturing the parts of the base that were above ground. Royce's Delta platoon had moved in on the building that would lead them down to the subterranean levels of the facility, where the command-and-control bunker was located. As they prepared to breach, the second wave of infantry arrived, bringing with them several of their Mechs and a few tanks. The heavy weapons would make short work of the remaining enemy defenses.

Royce's team had lined themselves up against the side of the building they needed to get inside. Once Royce saw they were ready, he signaled for them to breach.

A bright flash erupted along the edges of the airlock door, and then a violent depressurization occurred as the door blew out into space along with a couple of Synths and other contents from the room. They shot the Synths that flew out of the room, making sure they were neutralized.

The group of Deltas waited just a moment for the depressurization to finish before they rushed into the building, clearing the room of possible holdouts. Synths didn't need oxygen to breathe, so there could still be a few defenders inside.

With their blasters at the ready, they ran into the room as best they could in the low-gravity environment of the lunar surface. No sooner had they rushed in than two Synth defenders opened fire on them with their blasters. One of Royce's guys got hit, his body shaking from the stun before he slumped to the ground. He was out for the remainder of the exercise.

While his squad got their charges ready on the next airlock door, Royce took a moment to look at the readout of his platoon. He saw he'd sustained nine casualties since the start of the assault. Other than the troops that were down, everyone else seemed fine. Their biomechanical suits were operating normally: oxygen levels were optimal, power packs and weapons were good. Everything appeared to be going according to the plan, minus the casualties.

"Stand by for breach!" barked one of the junior sergeants as he moved to the side of the wall.

The other soldiers in the squad moved to the side except one. He had his rifle aimed at the door, ready to shoot whoever was on the other side when the door was blown open.

"Breaching!" yelled the sergeant.

Boom.

The door blew backward into the room they were in. The Delta aiming at the door didn't quite get out of the way in time as the door flew off-angle and right at him. It slammed into his body and threw him backward several meters until he thudded against the opposite wall.

Slumping to the ground, the soldier started to panic as the front glass of his helmet cracked and started venting oxygen. He let out a sharp yelp as a piece of metal sliced through his EVA suit and into his left thigh. That rip in his suit also started venting oxygen on him, further adding to his horror.

Royce switched over to the man's suit and his vitals. He quickly saw the problem and moved over to check on him. Two of his soldiers tried to help the wounded guy, but Royce yelled, "Stand down!" He wanted the injured Delta to work on sealing the leaks himself.

The rest of the squad proceeded to clear the next level while Royce stayed near the wounded soldier as he applied a quick sealant to the crack on his visor. He then pulled the piece of metal out of his thigh with a yell. With the metal removed, the soldier slapped a patch on the puncture in his EVA suit. Once he'd stopped the oxygen bleed, his suit repressurized itself. The soldier then released an injection of biomedical nanites into his bloodstream to stop the bleeding in his leg.

Leaning down to the wounded Delta, Royce held out his hand and helped him up, pulling the man close to him so their face masks were right in front of each other. "I hope you understand why I had you fix yourself up, soldier," he said sternly.

The young trooper looked at him and nodded. "To prove that I could treat myself and the others could as well."

Royce nodded in satisfaction. "Exactly. We're not RA, we're Special Forces. That means unless you're really effed up, you need to be able to take care of yourself. In the vacuum of space, you have to make split-second decisions that'll save your life and the lives of those around you. There isn't any wiggle room out here. If you mess up, you could end up dead—or worse, your squad or platoon could end up dead. Is that understood?"

"Hooah, Sergeant," came the quick reply.

"Good. Now go catch up to your squad, and let's finish clearing this objective."

Two hours later, the Osprey that had brought them to the lunar surface settled on the ground, not far from their positions. Sergeant Royce yelled out for everyone to load up. It was time to head back to the *Voyager* and write up their after-action review of the exercise.

They had accomplished their objective, sustaining thirteen casualties out of forty-eight soldiers. Now it was time to evaluate what had happened and examine what had gone right, what had gone wrong, and what could have gone better.

You train as you fight, and you fight as you train, Royce said to himself. It was important to study everything about these training exercises, so when the real deal happened, they'd be ready, and it would be like second nature.

Walking into the *Voyager*'s medbay, Master Sergeant Royce made his way over to his injured trooper. "How's he looking, Doc?"

Looking up at him, the doc grunted. “He’ll live. I just gave him another injection of nanites. It’ll ensure he doesn’t come down with an infection and finish healing up the wound.”

“Didn’t that first injection do that?” asked the young soldier with a curious look on his face.

The doctor snickered at the question. “No, son. The first injection kept you alive, soldier. The medical infusion in your EVA suit doesn’t pack enough nanites to fix you up to one hundred percent. It’s just supposed to get you back in the fight and keep you alive long enough to make it back to the ship or a hospital unit.”

“You hear that, Hawkins? Don’t go taking a chest full of bullets or shrapnel. This thing might not be able to bring you back from the dead,” Royce joked good-naturedly with his trooper.

“Give it a few more years or a decade, Master Sergeant, and this stuff will be able to do a lot more than it already can. As it is, it’s able to cure nearly any known ailment the human body faces, to include cancer. Hell, they say in time, this thing’ll be able to keep you alive well into your two hundreds or more, if you can believe that,” the doctor said before he moved on to another task.

“When you’re done here, Hawkins, report back to your squad leader,” Royce ordered. “I want you to review what happened and why you got injured. Let’s make sure that doesn’t happen again. Next time you may not be so lucky, OK?”

The young soldier nodded. Royce then left to go check on the rest of his platoon and see if the captain had any additional orders for them.

Walking up to the captain’s office, Royce rapped his knuckles on the door frame. The captain looked up, then motioned for him to come in and take a seat. “I reviewed the video from the exercise and your notes. The platoon did well,” he said. “Actually, the platoon did better than I thought they would. That objective had more than six hundred defenders. The battalion commander was impressed as well. Do *you* believe the platoon is ready should we have to execute a mission like this for real?”

Royce paused for a moment to consider his answer. “That’s hard to say, sir. To be fair, an assault like this has never been done outside of a training scenario. I’d like to think we’d handle it fine—but until the enemy votes and the bullets fly, it’s hard to know.”

“I agree. Which is why we continue to train over and over again. I’m honestly not sure if the Europeans or the Asian Alliance practice this kind of stuff. But should hostilities break out after the SET ends, we’ll be ready.”

Royce nodded. “Sir, since the Alpha Centauri mission isn’t happening, any word on where we may be going next?”

The captain looked up at him. “No idea. All I’ve been told is we’ll be shipping out on the *Voyager* in a month. We’ll receive our new orders and mission once we’re on our way.”