

HELLWORLD

TWILIGHT OF THE EMPIRE
BOOK 3

SIMON R. GREEN



Hellworld

Twilight of the Empire, Book 3

Simon R. Green



Contents

[CHAPTER ONE Broken Men](#)

[CHAPTER TWO In the Forest of the Night](#)

[CHAPTER THREE The City](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR The Alien](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE The Prey](#)

[CHAPTER SIX The Hunt](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN The Sleep of Reason](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT Aftermath](#)

[About the Author](#)

The sleep of reason brings forth monsters.

Broken Men

The starship *Devastation* dropped out of hyperspace and moved into orbit around Wolf IV. The planet's surface was hidden from view by the swirling atmosphere. It looked much like any other planet; a drop of spit against the darkness. The ship's sensor spikes shimmered briefly as it scanned Wolf IV, and then the cargo-bay doors swung open. A slender Navy pinnacle emerged, sleek and silver, and drifted away from the huge bulk of the starship. The pinnacle fell into its own orbit, and the *Devastation* disappeared back into hyperspace. The pinnacle slowly circled the storm-shrouded planet, a gleaming silver needle against the star-speckled night.

Captain Hunter gnawed at the insides of his cheeks as he ran his hands over the control panels. It looked like he was going to have to pilot the ship down after all. This far out, the onboard computers were all but useless. They didn't have enough information to work with. Hunter shrugged. What the hell; it had been a long time since he'd had to fly a ship by the seat of his pants, but some things you never forget. Particularly if your life depends on them.

For a moment, the old overpowering uncertainty was suddenly back with him; the familiar panic of not being able to choose between alternatives for fear of doing the wrong thing. His breathing and heartbeat speeded up, and then slowed again as he fought grimly for control. He'd done this before, he could do it again. He ran through the standard instrument checks, losing himself in routine. The control panels blazed with steady, comforting lights. He checked that the pinnacle's orbit was still stable, and then released the sensor drones. Hunter watched them fall towards the planet on his viewscreen. The sensor probes had better tell him what he needed to know the first time; the odds were he wouldn't get a chance to launch a second series. It wouldn't be long now before the pinnacle's orbit began to decay, and then he'd have to power up the engines, ready or not. The ship's batteries only had so much power, and he was going to need most of it for the landing.

Captain Scott Hunter was an average-looking man in his late twenties. Average height, average build, perhaps a little leaner than most. Dark hair, and darker eyes. There were never more than 500 Captains of the Imperial Fleet; the best of the best. At least, that was the official version. In reality, the only way to become a Captain was through money, power, or family influence. Hunter was a Captain because his father had been one, and his father before him. Scott Hunter, however, was one of the few who'd earned his position by virtue of training and ability. Which made it even harder to understand why he'd panicked during a rebel encounter above one of the Rim worlds, and lost his ship and half his crew as a result.

If he had died in the encounter, no one would have censured his behaviour. He would have been posthumously promoted to Admiral, and his Clan would have honoured his memory. But he'd survived, and so had enough of his officers to point the finger of blame. He could have resigned his commission, but he'd had enough pride left that he couldn't do that and shame his family. High Command asked him to explain his conduct, but he couldn't do that either. He didn't understand it himself. In the end, he was told he could either volunteer for the Hell Squads, or be cashiered. He chose the Hell Squads.

It wasn't much of a choice.

The pinnacle's drones hurtled down through the turbulent atmosphere, absorbing what punishment they could and ignoring the rest. The probes weren't expected to last long anyway. Their sensor spikes glowed crimson from the increasing heat, but did not wilt. Information flowed back to the pinnacle's computers in a steady stream as the drones fell endlessly through the thickening atmosphere.

Hunter tried to ease himself into a slightly more comfortable position in his crash webbing. He'd never cared much for webbing. There was no doubt it offered extra protection during rough landings, but he could never get his balance right. He'd never been any good in a hammock, either. He scowled unhappily, and clung surreptitiously to the control panels with one hand, while the other channelled incoming data through the navigational computers. He glanced across at his co-pilot.

"Get ready for data flow. I'm patching in our comm implants."

"Understood, Captain. Ready when you are." The Investigator's voice was calm and even, but then it always was.

Investigator Krystel was a striking-looking woman. She was barely into her mid-twenties, but her eyes were much older. She was tall and lithely muscular, and her sleek dark hair was pulled back into a tight bun, accentuating her high-boned face without softening the harsh lines. Her occasional lovers thought her handsome rather than pretty. Krystel rarely thought about it. She was an Investigator, trained by the Empire since childhood to be loyal, efficient and deadly. Her job was to study newly discovered alien species and determine how much of a threat they might pose to the Empire. Depending on her findings, the aliens would then either be enslaved or exterminated. There was never any third option. Investigators were cold, calculating killing machines. Unofficially, they were often used as assassins in inter-Clan feuds.

Hunter wasn't sure how he felt about Krystel. He'd never worked with an Investigator before. Her training and experience would make her invaluable when it came to keeping the Squad alive on the new planet, but he didn't know if he could trust her. There were those who claimed Investigators were as inhuman as the aliens they studied. Because of who and what they were, Investigators were allowed a hell of a lot of leeway in the Empire. Hunter didn't even want to think what Krystel must have done to merit being banished to the Hell Squads. He didn't think he'd ask. Investigators weren't known for their openness. There was a soundless chime in his head, and he closed his eyes and leaned back in his webbing as the ship's computers patched him in with the probes.

Bright flashes of light and color filled his eyes, and wind and static roared in his ears. The comm implant tied directly into his optic and auditory nerves so that he could see and hear firsthand what the probes were picking up, but it took time before he and the computers could sort out the useful information from the garbage. Hunter's mind meshed with the computers, and his thoughts flowed among the surging information at inhuman speed, sifting and examining the rush of raw data. Brief glimpses of cloud and sky were interspersed with drop velocities and wind speeds. Weather projections were crowded out by flashes of sea and land impossibly far below. Shifting landing probabilities flared and guttered like candles in a wind. Hunter concentrated, shutting out everything but the bare essentials. The computers were recording everything, and he could replay the rest later.

He sensed the Investigator beside him in the computer net; a cold, sharp image that reminded him of a sword's cutting edge. He wondered fleetingly what he looked like to her, and then concentrated on the probes as they fell past the cloud layers and started showing him detailed views of the land mass below. At first, they formed a confusing mosaic of overlapping images, but Hunter quickly relearned the knack of concentrating on each image for the split second it took to register, and then passing on to the next.

Wolf IV had one huge continent surrounded by storm-tossed oceans. The land was composed of endless shades of green and brown and grey, stained here and there with ugly patches of yellow. There were towering mountain ranges and vast lakes. Volcanic activity filled the air with ash, and molten lava burned crimson and scarlet against the broken earth, like so many livid wounds in the planet's surface. There were large areas of woodland and jungle, though the colors were all wrong, and huge stretches of open grassland. Hunter focused in on one of the larger open areas. It looked as good a place as any to land, and better than most.

"Not a very hospitable world, Captain." The Investigator's voice was sharp and clear in his ear, rising easily over the probes' input.

"I've seen worse," said Hunter. "Not often, I'll admit, but then it's not as if we have a choice in the matter. Hang on to your webbing, Investigator. I'm taking us down. Probe seventeen, sector four. See it?"

"Looks good to me, Captain."

Hunter shut down his comm implant, and surfaced abruptly from the computer net. The dully lit control deck replaced the probes' visions as his eyesight returned to normal. He rubbed tiredly at his eyes. The landing site had looked good. It wouldn't have hurt his confidence any if Krystel had sounded a little more enthusiastic, but perhaps that was expecting too much from an Investigator. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. Direct input always gave him a headache. It was purely psychosomatic, but the pain felt real enough. He opened his eyes and stretched uncomfortably, careful of his balance in the webbing. After the sweeping views the probes had shown him, the control deck seemed more cramped and confined than ever.

Hunter and the Investigator lay in their crash webbing in the middle of a solid steel coffin. Dark, featureless walls surrounded them on all sides, with barely enough room for them both to stand upright. Presumably the designer's idea was that if the pinnacle crashed on landing, all you had to do was bury it where it fell. Hunter pushed the thought firmly to one side and ran his hands over the control panels again. The main engines sent a low, throbbing note through the superstructure, and the pinnacle began its long fall towards the planet.

The ship shook and shuddered violently as it entered the turbulent atmosphere, held on course only by the unrelenting thrust of the engines. Hunter swung from side to side in his webbing, but his hands were sure and steady on the controls. There was no trace now of the treacherous panic that at times overwhelmed him, and he ran confidently through the routines as old skills and memories came back to him. He tapped into the navigational computers through his comm implant, and the ship came alive around him. The pinnacle's sensors murmured at the back of his mind, feeding him a steady flow of information, enabling him to anticipate and outmanoeuvre the worst batterings of the storm winds. Down below, the probes were dying one by one, burning up in the atmosphere or shattered by the

storms. Hunter watched sympathetically as, one after another, their lights went out on the control panels. They'd been useful, but he didn't need them anymore. They'd served their purpose.

Outside the pinnacle, the winds shrieked and howled. Warning lights flared on the control panels. The pinnacle had lost some of its sensor spines, and the outer hull was breached somewhere back of the stem. Hunter keyed in the auxiliary systems for more power to the engines, and hoped they'd last long enough to get the ship down. It was going to be a near thing. He patched briefly into the probes again, but most of them were gone now. The few remaining drones hurtled towards the ground like shining meteors. Hunter braced himself instinctively as the ground rushed up towards him, and winced as one by one their transmissions suddenly shut down. He dropped out of direct input and studied the control panels. He'd have to rely on what was left of the pinnacle's sensors to get him down now. Assuming they lasted long enough. He patched into them again via the navigational computers, and quickly located the wide-open space he'd chosen earlier. The details were blurred now by the pinnacle's speed, but it didn't look anywhere near as inviting as it had from orbit. Desolate bloody area, in fact. Still, it would have to do. There wasn't time to choose another one. The ship lurched wildly as the winds hit it from a new angle, and Hunter fought to keep the descent steady. There was a shriek of tortured metal as another of the pinnacle's sensor spines was ripped away.

"Attention in the rear! Brace yourselves!" Hunter yelled through his comm implant. "We're going in!"

He split his attention between the sensors and the controls, and fought to keep his feel of the ship alive. It wasn't enough to just work the controls; he needed to feel the ship as a part of himself and react accordingly, his instincts making decisions faster than his mind ever could. And then the ground came leaping up to meet him, and the pinnacle hit hard, shaking and jarring the cabin. The landing gear howled as it strove to absorb the impact, and then everything was suddenly still and quiet. Hunter and the Investigator hung limply in their crash webbing. The control deck lights faded and then brightened again. Hunter waited for his heart and breathing to slow down a little, then reached out a shaking hand and hit the disconnects, powering down the engines. Might as well hang on to whatever power they had left. He sat up slowly and looked around him. The ship seemed to have come through intact, and the Investigator looked as calm and unshakable as ever.

"All right," Hunter said hoarsely. "Systems checks and damage reports. Give me the bad news, Investigator."

"Outer hull breached in three, four places," said Krystel, studying her panels. "Inner skin still secure, air pressure steady. Landing gear... battered but intact. The sensors are out. We lost too many spines on the way down. Apart from that, systems are running at eighty percent efficiency."

"One of my better landings," said Hunter. "Switch to the backup sensors. See what they have to tell us."

Krystel nodded, and her hands moved surely over the panels before her. Hunter patched into the comm net again. At first, there was only static, and then the outside scene filled his eyes. A patchy fog seethed around the pinnacle, milky and luminous in the ship's outer lights. Beyond the light there was only darkness, an endless, unrelieved gloom without moon or

stars. For as far as the sensors could show, the pinnacle stood alone on an empty plain. Hunter dropped out of the comm net and sat thoughtfully in silence for a moment. It should be light soon. Perhaps their new home would look more attractive in the daylight. It could have looked a lot worse. Somehow, the thought didn't cheer him as much as he'd hoped. He looked across at Krystel. The Investigator was rerunning the records from the probes on the main viewscreen, and making extensive use of the fast-forward and the freeze frame. Hunter decided to leave her to it. He leaned back in his webbing and activated his comm implant.

"This is the Captain. We're down, and more or less intact. Everyone all right in the rear?"

"We're all fine, Captain. Just fine." The warm and reassuring voice belonged to Dr. Graham Williams. Hunter had met him briefly before the drop. Dr. Williams had an impressive record, a confident manner, and a firm handshake. Hunter didn't trust him. The man smiled too much. "The trip down was a trifle bumpy, but nothing the crash webbing couldn't handle. What does our new home look like, Captain?"

"Bleak," said Hunter. "Esper DeChance, run a standard scan of the area. If there's any living thing within a half-mile radius, I want to know about it right now."

There was a brief pause, and then the telepath's voice murmured calmly in his ear. "There's nothing out there, Captain. Not even any plant life. From the feel of it, you've dropped us right in the middle of nowhere."

"I've just had a great idea, Captain." That was one of the marines, Russel Corbie. His voice was sharp and hurried. "Let's turn this crate around and tell the Empire the whole damned planet was closed for renovations."

"Sorry, Corbie," said Hunter, smiling in spite of himself. "We pretty much drained the ship's batteries just getting down here. There's no way she'll ever be lifting into orbit again."

"So we're stuck here," said Corbie. "Great. Just bloody marvellous. I should have deserted when I had the chance."

"You did," said Hunter. "That's how you ended up in the Hell Squads."

"Besides," said Lindholm, the other marine, "even if we got upstairs again, what good would it do us? You don't suppose the *Devastation* is still there waiting for us, do you? She's long gone, Russ. We're on our own now. Just like they said."

The marine's words seemed to echo ominously. No one else said anything. The quiet seemed strange, almost eerie, after the chaos of the trip down. Now there was only the slow ticking of the cooling metal hull, and the occasional quiet murmur from the computers as the Investigator studied the main viewscreen. Hunter stretched slowly in his webbing, scowling unhappily as he tried to get a grip on what he should do first. There were any number of things he should be doing, but now that the moment had come he found he was strangely reluctant to act, as though by committing himself to any one action, the marooning of the pinnacle would suddenly become fixed and real.

Hunter had had a lot of time to get used to the idea of being abandoned on Wolf IV, but somehow it had never seemed real before. Even on the morning before the drop, he'd still been half expecting a reprieve, or a standby, or something to happen that would mean he didn't have to go. But there was no reprieve, and deep down he'd known there wouldn't be. His Clan had turned its back on him. As far as they were concerned, he was already dead. Hunter bit his lower lip as the implications came home to him with new force.

There wasn't going to be any backup. The only high tech the Squad had was what they'd

brought with them, and that would last only as long as the energy crystals that powered it. If anything went wrong, there was no one they could call on for help. They were alone on Wolf IV. The first colonists wouldn't be on their way for months, even assuming Wolf IV checked out as habitable. Long before then, the Hell Squad would either become completely self-sufficient, or they would all die.

On the other hand, there was no one here to interfere, either. For the first time in his career, Hunter had a completely free hand. On Wolf IV, there were no stupid rules and regulations to work around, no more having to bow and scrape to fools in high office. Hunter felt a little of the tension go out of him. He could cope. He always had, in the past. And the blind, unreasoning panic that had robbed him of his career and his future was just another obstacle he'd learn to overcome in the days ahead. He believed that, with all his heart. He had to. The alternative was unthinkable. He cut that line of thought short. He'd known what he was getting into when he volunteered.

The Hell Squads were one-way planet scouts. They landed on newly discovered worlds, searched out the good and bad points, and decided whether or not the place was colonizable. And learned how to stay alive while they were doing it. The Squads had a high mortality rate, which was why they were made up of people who wouldn't be missed. The expendable. The losers. The failures, the rebels, the outcasts, and the damned. Broken men and forsaken heroes. The people who never fitted in. Whatever happened on the world they went to, there was no way back. The new world was their home, and would be for the rest of their lives.

Hunter turned to Krystel, who was scowling at one of her monitor screens. "Tell me the bad news, Investigator."

"A lot of the details are still unclear, Captain, but I think I've got the general picture. There's been a lot of volcanic activity around here in the recent past, and it's still going on in some places. The air is full of floating ash, but it's breathable. It's too early yet to start worrying about long-term effects on the lungs, but it might be advisable to rig up some kind of masks or filters before entering the worst areas. Apart from that, all in all the signs look good. Air, gravity, and temperature are all within acceptable limits, as promised. Not a particularly pleasant world, but habitable."

"What can you tell me about the immediate vicinity?" said Hunter, frowning. "Anything to worry about there?"

"Hard to say, Captain. The sun won't be up for another hour or so, and there's some heavy mists. This planet has three moons, but none of them are big enough to shed much light. We'll have to wait till morning, and then go outside and look for ourselves."

"That isn't proper procedure," said the marine Corbie quickly, his voice breaking in through the comm net. "First man out is a volunteer job; always has been. And I want to make it very clear that I am not volunteering. First rule of life in the Service: never volunteer for anything. Right, Sven?"

"Right," said Lindholm.

"Keep the noise down," said Hunter. "I'm going to be the first man out."

He shook his head ruefully as the others fell silent. He should have made sure he was out of the comm net before discussing the situation with the Investigator. Not that Corbie's attitude had been much of a surprise. He'd better keep an eye on that one. He was going to be trouble. Hunter sighed, and clambered awkwardly out of his webbing. Might as well take

a look now. He'd feel better once he was actually doing something. There was just room enough to stand up straight without banging his head on the overhead, and a few steps brought him to the arms locker. Krystel got out of her webbing to help him, and the two of them manoeuvred carefully in the confined space of the control deck.

First man out meant a full field kit. The steelmesh tunic went on first. Heavy enough to stop or turn a blade, but still light enough to let him move quickly and easily when he had to. Next came the gun and holster. Hunter felt a little easier with the disrupter on his right hip. The familiar weight was a comfort. The sword and its scabbard went on his left hip. The disrupter was a far more powerful weapon, but the sword was more reliable. The gun's energy crystal took two minutes to recharge between each shot. A sword never needs recharging. Next came a leather bandolier that crossed his chest, carrying half a dozen concussion grenades. Nasty things, particularly in a confined space. Hunter had always found them very useful. And finally, he snapped a force shield bracelet round his left wrist. He was now ready to face whatever the planet had to offer. In theory, anyway.

He rocked back and forth on his heels, getting used to the change in his weight. It had been a long time since he'd had to wear full field kit. Normally a Captain stayed safely in orbit, while his shock troops got on with the rough stuff down below. *Rank hath its privileges*. Hunter smiled briefly, and shifted the heavy bandolier into a more comfortable position. *How are the mighty fallen ...* Still, he'd always intended to be first man out on the new planet. Willingly or not, he'd come a long way to see his new home, and it was a moment he didn't intend to share with anyone else. He nodded briefly to the Investigator, and turned round to face the airlock door. Krystel leant over the control panels, and the heavy metal door hissed open. Hunter stepped carefully into the airlock, and the door closed firmly behind him.

The closet-sized airlock was even more claustrophobic than the control deck, but Hunter didn't give a damn. Now that the moment had come to actually face the unknown, he felt suddenly reluctant to go through with it. A familiar panic gnawed at his nerves, threatening to break free. Once the airlock door opened and he stepped outside, he would be face to face with the world he would never leave. While he was on board the pinnace, he could still pretend ...

The outer door swung open. Thin streamers of mist entered the airlock, bringing the night chill with them. Hunter raised his chin. Once outside, he'd be the first man ever to set foot on Wolf IV. The history books would know his name. Hunter sniffed. Stuff the history books. He took a deep breath and stepped gingerly out into the new world.

The great hull of the pinnace loomed above him, brilliant in its coat of lights. Mists swirled all around the ship, thick and silver-grey, diffusing the ship's lights before they were swallowed up by the night. Hunter moved slowly away from the airlock, fighting an urge to stick close to the ship for security. The air was bitter cold, and something in it irritated his throat. He coughed several times to clear it. The sound was dull and muted. The ground crunched under his feet, and he knelt down to study it. It was hard to the touch, but cracked and broken from the pinnace's weight. Pumice stone, perhaps; hardened lava from the volcanoes. Hunter shrugged and straightened up again. He knew he should move further away from the ship, but he couldn't quite bring himself to do that yet. The gloom beyond the ship's lights was utterly dark, and intimidating. He let his hands rest on his gunbelt, and activated his comm implant.

“Captain to pinnacle. Do you read me?”

“Yes, Captain. Loud and clear.” Krystel’s calm voice in his ear was infinitely reassuring.

“Anything to report?”

“Not a thing. I can’t see for any distance, but the area seems deserted. No trace of anything but rock and mists. I’ll try again later, when the sun comes up. How long is that?”

“One hour twenty-three minutes. What does it feel like out there, Captain?”

“Cold,” said Hunter. “Cold... and lonely. I’m coming back in.”

He took one last look around. Everything seemed still and silent, but suddenly his hackles rose and his hand dropped to his gun. Nothing had changed, but in that instant Hunter knew without a shadow of a doubt that there was something out there in the night, watching him. There couldn’t be. The sensors and the esper had assured him the area was deserted. Hunter trusted both of them implicitly, yet all of his instincts told him he was being watched. He licked his dry lips, and then deliberately turned his back on the darkness. It was nerves, that was all. Just nerves. He stepped back into the airlock, and the door swung shut behind him.

Dawn rose unhurriedly above the featureless horizon, tinting the remaining mists an unhealthy yellow. The mists had begun to disappear the moment the sun showed itself, and the last stubborn remnants were now slowly fading away to nothing. The silver sun was painfully bright and cast sharp-edged shadows. Everything seemed unusually distinct, though everywhere the natural colors were muted and faded by the intensity of the light. The sky was pale green in colour, apparently from dust clouds high up in the atmosphere. The pinnacle stood alone on the open ground, a gleaming silver needle on the cracked and broken plain. There was a dark smudge on the horizon, which the ship’s probes had identified as a forest. It was too far away to show up in any detail on the pinnacle’s sensors.

The ship’s airlock stood open, with the two marines standing guard beside it. In reality, the ship’s sensors would sound a warning long before either man could spot a threat, but the Captain didn’t believe in his men sitting around idle. The marines didn’t mind, much. The open plain was far more interesting than the cramped confines of the pinnacle. Not far away, Dr. Williams was prising free some samples of the crumbling ground and dropping them into a specimen bag. All three men worked hard at seeming calm and at ease, but each of them had a barely suppressed air of jumpiness that showed itself in abrupt, sudden movements.

Russel Corbie leaned against the pinnacle hull and wondered how long it would be till the next meal. Breakfast had been one protein cube and a glass of distilled water, neither of which you’d call filling. He’d eaten better in the military prison. He looked around him, but there was still nothing much to see. The open plain was bleak and barren and eerily silent. Corbie smiled sourly. On the way down, his heart had hammered frantically at the thought of the horrible creatures that might be lying in wait for him here, but so far his first day on Wolf IV had been unrelievedly boring. Still, he wasn’t exactly unhappy. Given the choice between boredom and hideous monsters, he’d go for the tedium any day.

Corbie was a small, solidly built man in his mid-twenties. His sharp-edged features and dark uniform gave him an uncanny resemblance to the bird of prey he was named after. His face was habitually dour, and his eyes were wary. His uniform was dirty and sloppy, and looked like several people had slept in it.

There’s one like Corbie in every outfit. He knows everyone, has contacts everywhere, and

can get you anything. For a price. The Empire doesn't care for such people. Corbie had been in a military prison and resigned to staying there for some time, when the chance came to volunteer for the Hell Squads. At the time, it had seemed like a good idea.

Sven Lindholm was a complete contrast to Corbie. He was tall and muscular, in his mid-thirties, with broad shoulders and an intimidatingly flat stomach. His uniform was perfectly cut and immaculate. His pale blue eyes and short corn-yellow hair gave him a calm, sleepy look that fooled nobody. He wore his sword and gun with the casual grace of long acquaintance, and his hands never moved far from either. Lindholm was a fighter, and looked it.

Corbie sighed again, and Lindholm looked at him, amused. "What is it now, Russ?"

"Nothing. Just thinking."

"Something gloomy, no doubt. I've never known anyone with such a talent for finding things to worry about. Look on the bright side, Russ. We've been here almost three hours, and so far absolutely nothing has tried to kill us. This place is deserted; there's not even a bird in the sky."

"Yeah," said Corbie. "Suspicious, that."

"There's no pleasing you, is there?" said Lindholm. "Would you have preferred it if we'd stepped out of the pinnacle and found ourselves face to face with something large and obnoxious with hundreds of teeth?"

"I don't know. Maybe. At least we'd have known where we were, then. This place *feels* wrong. You can't tell me you haven't felt it too, Sven. It isn't natural for an open space like this to be so deserted. I mean, it's not like we're in the middle of a desert. You saw the probes' memories; apart from a few extra volcanoes and the odd patch of stormy weather, this world is practically Earth normal. So where the hell is everything? This kind of planet should be swarming with life."

"Will you cut it out?" said Lindholm. "I'm starting to feel nervous now."

"Good," said Corbie. "I'd hate to feel this worried on my own." He stared at the ground thoughtfully, and hit it a few times with the heel of his boot. The ground cracked and split apart. "Look at this, Sven. Bone-dry. Sucked clean of every last drop of moisture. Can't be because of the day's heat. The sun's up and it's still bloody freezing." He studied the view again, and scowled unhappily. "I don't know; I wasn't expecting a garden planet, but this place gives me the creeps."

"I shouldn't worry about it," said Lindholm. "You'll get used to it, as the years go by."

"You're a real comfort, Sven."

"What are friends for?"

They stood together in silence for a while, studying the featureless plain. The sound of Dr. Williams digging came clearly to them on the quiet.

"What do you think of our Captain?" said Lindholm, as much to keep Corbie from brooding as anything. He already had his own opinion of the Captain.

Corbie's scowl deepened. "All the Captains we could have got, and we had to end up with Scott Hunter. I did a little research on him before we left the *Devastation*. The man is hardworking, a bit of a martinet, and too damned honest for everyone's good. Volunteered for patrol duty out in the Rim worlds, and distinguished himself in four major battles. Could have made Admiral eventually, if he hadn't screwed up. Always assuming he could have

learned to keep his opinions to himself, and kiss the right butts.”

Lindholm nodded slowly. “We could have done worse.”

“Are you kidding?” Corbie shook his head dolefully. “I know his sort. Honest, courageous, and a bloody hero to boot, I’ll bet. You can’t trust heroes. They’ll get you killed one way or another, chasing after their bloody ideals.”

“You’re a fine one to talk,” said Lindholm. “I was there the time you led that charge against the Blood Runners, out in the Obeah Systems, remember?”

Corbie shrugged. “I was drunk.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have that problem here. The nearest bar is light-years away.”

“Don’t remind me. I’ll have to put some thought into building a still.”

“We could have drawn a worse hand,” said Lindholm. “It’s a dismal-looking place, no doubt about it, but at least it’s not another Grendel or Shub.”

“As far as we know,” said Corbie darkly.

“Cut it out, Russ.” Lindholm glanced over at Dr. Williams, and lowered his voice. “What do you know about the rest of our Squad? The way I heard it, the esper got caught making a run for the rebel planet, Mistworld, but I couldn’t find out a thing about the doctor, or the Investigator.”

“Don’t look at me,” said Corbie. “I’ve never even met an Investigator before. I don’t normally travel in such high company. The esper’s no one special, as far as I know. Just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and trusted the wrong man. Not bad-looking, though, in a spooky kind of way.”

Lindholm snorted. “Forget it, Russ. The Captain won’t stand for any tomfoolery. Beats me how you can think about sex at a time like this, anyway.”

Corbie shrugged. “I have a reputation to live down to.”

“What about the doctor?” said Lindholm. “Why is he here?”

“Ah, the good doctor; a mystery man indeed...”

“All right,” said Lindholm patiently. “What have you heard?”

“Nothing definite, but the word was that he was involved in some kind of scandal to do with the adjusted men. Forbidden augmentations, that sort of thing.”

Lindholm whistled softly. “If that’s the case, he’s lucky to be alive. The Empire’s been really tight over that kind of thing since the Hadenman rebellion.”

“Right. Those killer cyborgs threw a scare into everyone. Anyway, as I understand it, Williams was given a straight choice: volunteer for the Hell Squads or end up as spare parts in a body bank.”

“And I was thinking we were lucky to have a doctor in the Squad,” said Lindholm. “Still, it could have been worse. He could have been a clonelegger.”

“Will you stop saying it could have been worse! It’s bad enough as it is. All the Squads I could have been in, and what do I end up with: Captain Pureheart, a Mad Doctor, and a flaming Investigator. I don’t even want to think what she did to end up here. Those people are as inhuman as the things they kill.”

“At least she’s on our side,” said Lindholm. Corbie looked at him. “Investigators aren’t on anybody’s side.”

The pinnacle control deck looked even gloomier than usual with the control panels dead.

The single overhead light only showed up the darkness of the shadows. Captain Hunter and Investigator Krystal lay still in their crash webbing, and their eyes saw only light. Patched into the onboard computers through their comm implants, the probes' recordings filled their eyes and ears to the exclusion of the real world.

Hunter concentrated on the scene before him. With direct input, it was only too easy to become lost in the sound and fury of the probes' memories and forget the real world and its imperatives. He fast-forwarded relentlessly, pausing only when the computers pointed out scenes of importance or possible significance. He felt guilty at leaving the real work to the computers, but he needed an overview of the situation as quickly as possible. There were decisions he had to make, and they were already starting to pile up. When he had a chance he'd study the records in real time, weighing and evaluating every detail, but right now all he wanted was information on possible threats and dangers. Everything else could wait. Scene after scene flashed before his eyes, and Hunter's scowl deepened as Wolf IV reluctantly gave up its secrets.

In the north, volcanoes threw molten fire into the sky. The lava burned a deep and sullen red, and ashes fell like rain. There were vast plains of cooling ash, and all around the land was baked dry and brittle. A planet as old as Wolf IV was supposed to be should have left its volcanic stage behind centuries ago, but instead a long chain of smoking volcanoes studded the north of the single great continent, like so many warning balefires.

The oceans were racked by endless storms, and among the mountainous, churning waves, huge creatures fought a never-ending battle for survival. It was difficult to judge their exact size from a distance, even seen against the height of the waves, but the sheer ponderousness of the creatures' movements hinted at appallingly vast dimensions. Hunter didn't even want to think what the damned things would weigh on land. It was clear that in the future all travelling would have to be by land and air; no ship would survive an ocean voyage. Some of the creatures rending and tearing each other looked to be almost as big as the *Devastation*.

Huge areas of forest filled the centre of the continent; solid masses of dirty yellow vegetation. The probes didn't show much in the way of detail, but trees were usually a good sign for a colonist. You could do a lot with wood. Hunter smiled for the first time as the probes' memories moved on to show him large areas of open grassland in the south. Even so he kept a firm grip on his enthusiasm. First rule of the Hell Squads: never take anything for granted. On an alien world, nothing is necessarily what it seems. All right, from a distance it looked like ordinary, everyday grass, although the colour was a bit vile. But on Scarab, the long grass had turned out to be carnivorous. On Loki, the grass had an acid-based sap and spread like plague in the night. Everything on a new planet had to be treated as potentially dangerous, until proved otherwise by exhaustive testing. And then the scene changed again as a new probe's memories patched in, and Hunter's heart missed a beat. He hit the freeze frame, fixing the image in place, and swallowed with a suddenly dry throat.

"Investigator," he said finally through his comm implant, "Patch into probe seven. I've found something."

There were structures of stone and glass and gleaming metal. Jagged-edged turrets erupted from asymmetrical buildings. Strange lights blazed in the windows of huge stone monoliths. Low domes glimmered with pearl-like translucency. In the centre of everything, a spiked tower of gleaming copper reached up to touch the sky. And everywhere, hanging lightly

between the oppressive shapes and buildings, were frothy strands of gossamer walkways.

"It's a city," said Hunter, his voice awed and hushed.

"Looks like it," said Krystel. "Roughly circular, four miles in diameter. No signs of life forms as yet."

"I've got the computers checking for similar sightings."

"They won't find any. We're pretty much near the end of the recordings. If there were any other cities like this, we'd have come across them long before now."

"Switch to the viewscreen," said Hunter. "I want full computer analysis of the recording. This has top priority until I tell you otherwise."

"Aye, Captain."

The alien city disappeared from Hunter's eyes, and the control deck reappeared around him. After the haunting, mysterious views of the city, the Spartan Empire fittings had a comforting familiarity. The Investigator was already bent over the control panels, calling up more data. Hunter leaned back carefully in his webbing, and studied the alien city on the viewscreen. Now that the first flush of excitement had died down, he found that his skin was crawling, and he had to keep fighting down an urge to look away. The shapes of the structures were ugly, twisted ... *wrong*, somehow. They made no sense. There was something actually unnerving about the alien shapes and angles. Whatever theories of architecture had produced the city, they followed no human patterns of logic or aesthetics.

"How far away from us is it?" he asked, and was relieved to note that his voice sounded somewhat calmer.

"Fourteen, fifteen miles. Walking distance. We could be there in a day."

Hunter looked sideways at Krystel, but didn't say anything. She might see fifteen miles as walking distance, but he sure as hell didn't. Fifteen miles? He scowled unhappily. He hadn't walked that far since Basic Training. And he'd hated it then. He shrugged, and turned his attention back to the viewscreen. Something about the alien city nagged at him. It only took him a moment to realise what. The labyrinth of twisting streets appeared to be completely empty. Nothing moved in the city. Hunter studied the viewscreen for a long time, and then activated his comm implant.

"Esper DeChance, this is the Captain. Please join me on the control deck immediately."

"Aye, Captain. On my way."

Hunter shut down his comm unit, and looked at the Investigator. "No life, no movement. Nobody's home. What do you make of it?"

"Too early to tell, Captain." Krystel drew a slender, villainous-looking cigar from her sleeve pocket, and took her time about lighting it. "The city could be deserted for any number of reasons, few of them good. And anything alien is always potentially dangerous." She looked at Hunter. "Strictly speaking, we ought to report this immediately to the Empire."

"But if we do that," said Hunter, "we'll have to wait till they send in an official Investigatory team. And that could mean a long delay before they send us any colonists... or the extra equipment that comes with the colonists. And we need that equipment."

"Yes," said Krystel. "There is that. There's only one choice open to us, Captain. We need more information, so we're going to have to go there and take a look for ourselves. We need to know what happened to the city's inhabitants, and why. If there's anything on this planet deadly enough to wipe out an entire city's population, we'd better find out all we can about

it, before it comes looking for us.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” said Hunter. “That’s why I’ve sent for the esper.”

Krystal sniffed, and studied the glowing end of her cigar. “Telepathic evidence is subjective, and therefore unreliable.”

“Espers have their uses. And I’ll trust a human mind over a computer any day.”

The door behind them hissed open, and the esper Megan DeChance stepped onto the control deck. She was a short, wraithlike woman in her late thirties, with long silver-blond hair. Her eyes were green and very steady, and like the rest of her face, gave nothing at all away. She nodded once to Hunter and ignored the Investigator. Hunter’s heart sank. Traditionally, espers and Investigators didn’t get along. By virtue of their telepathy and empathy, espers tended to be fanatically pro-life. Investigators weren’t.

“Right, esper,” said Hunter briskly. “I want a full scan of the immediate area, twenty-mile radius. Never mind plant or animal life; I’m interested in intelligent life forms.”

DeChance raised an eyebrow but said nothing. She sat cross-legged on the deck between the two webbings, arranged herself comfortably, and closed her eyes. She sent her thoughts up and out, and her mind spread across the world like ripples on a pond. The Hell Squad were bright sparks in and around the pinnacle. Everywhere else was dark. She spread out further, and the world blossomed before her. Lives shone in the darkness like flaring torches and guttering candles, but none of them burned with the steady intensity of the intelligent mind.

And yet there was something strange, right on the edge of her perception. Its light was strong but muted, and curiously indistinct. DeChance studied it warily. In a slow, creeping way it seemed to be aware of her. The esper started to back away, but even as she broke the contact, the light suddenly flared up into an awful brilliance. It burned in hideous colours, and it knew where she was. DeChance pulled the darkness around her like a cloak. Something new was abroad in the night, something huge and powerful. There were other things in the darkness too, and one by one they were waking up. Their lights grew bright and awful, and DeChance pulled back her esp, folding it in upon itself, and locking it safely away inside her mind again. She opened her eyes, and looked shakily at Captain Hunter.

“There’s something out there, Captain. It’s not like anything I’ve ever encountered before. It’s big, very old, and very powerful.”

“Dangerous?” said the Investigator.

“I don’t know,” said DeChance. “Probably. And it’s not alone.”

For a long moment, nobody said anything. Hunter felt a chill run up his spine as he realised just how shaken the esper was.

“All right,” he said finally. “Thank you, esper; that will be all. Please join the others outside. We’ll be out shortly. Dismissed.”

DeChance nodded and left. Hunter and Krystal looked at each other.

“It has to be the city,” said Krystal. “We’ve got to go there, Captain.”

“Yes. You’ve more ... experience with aliens than I have, Investigator. Assuming we do find something there, what’s the best procedure?”

Krystal grinned around her cigar. “Find it. Trap it. Kill it. And burn the body afterwards, just to be sure.”

Dr. Williams sat quietly in the shadow of the pinnacle, hugging his knees to his chest and staring out at his new world. All in all it looked decidedly bleak and barren, and the endless quiet was getting on his nerves. Still, he was lucky to be in the Hell Squad, and he knew it. The Empire had been able to prove half the charges they'd made against him ... but they hadn't. His money and influence had seen to that. For a time.

He thought he'd get away with a few years' confinement in some comfortable open prison or perhaps just a fine and a public admonition. But in the end, too many people decided they couldn't risk the truth coming out at a trial. So they pulled a few strings, and Dr. Williams found himself heading out towards the edge of the Empire and some nice anonymous Hell Squad planet, where his secrets could be buried with him.

It had all been very neatly done. Men he'd trusted for years had betrayed him, under the pressure of massive bribes and death threats, and suddenly he'd stood alone. He could either go with the Hell Squad or be shot in the back while trying to escape. Williams had screamed and raged and threatened, but little good it had done him. He hugged his knees tightly and glared out over the open plain.

Graham Williams was a tall, slender, handsome man in his late fifties, who looked thirty years younger. His skin was fresh and glowing, and his thick curly hair was jet-black. He had a doctor's warm, professional smile and a pleasant manner. Half his organs, most of his skin, and all of his hair had come from other people. The donors had all been anonymous, of course. Body snatchers rarely bother to learn the names of their victims.

Williams also had a great many personal augmentations that the Empire hadn't found out about in the short time they'd held him. Unfortunately, they were only of limited use to him now. The implanted energy crystals that ran the devices had strictly limited life spans. Once they were drained of power, all the high tech in his body would be just so much useless junk. He'd have to make the crystals last until he could acquire some more.

He smiled suddenly. That was in the future. For the moment, though the others might not realise it, he was the most powerful man in the Squad. Let the Captain enjoy his moment in charge. He'd find out the truth soon enough. Williams' smile widened as retractable steel claws appeared at the fingertips of his right hand and then disappeared again.

He looked down at the soil samples he'd gathered, lying in a neat row in their little bags, spread out on the ground before him. He'd taken the samples as much to keep busy as anything, but you never knew your luck. There were often riches to be found in the soil, for those who knew where to look. There was money to be made on this planet somewhere, and he had no intention of missing out on any of it. The pinnacle's diagnostic equipment was primitive, to say the least, but it would do the job. Williams frowned, and hugged his knees a little tighter. It wasn't at all what he was used to. His surgery had been known throughout the Empire; said by many to be the greatest since the fabled laboratories of lost Haden itself. All gone now, of course. Destroyed, by him, so that its secrets couldn't be used against him.

After the rebellion of the cyborg Hadenmen, the Empire had banned most forms of human augmentation. But there were always those willing to pay highly for forbidden delights. Most of the banned devices had been fairly harmless anyway, as long as they were used sensibly. With restraint. He'd just provided a service, that was all. If he hadn't done it, someone else would have. All right, some of his patients had died, on the table and afterwards. But they knew the risks when they came to him. And most had lived, and lived well, through the extr

senses and devices he'd given them.

They all came to him; the rich, the titled, the jaded, and the decadent. All those with hidden needs and darker appetites. And to each he gave what they asked for, and charged accordingly. His prices were high, but they could afford it. Besides, he had his own needs, too.

It was the Empire's fault he'd become what he was. He'd made his name and his reputation with his work on the Wampyr, the adjusted men. They were to have been the Empire's new shock troops, strong and awful and ruthlessly efficient, but someone High Up got scared of their potential, and the Empress herself closed the project down. Williams had refused to give up his life's work. He went underground, and he went private. And his triumphs with the Wampyr were nothing to what he might have achieved if the Empire hadn't caught up with him.

He should never have relied so much on the body snatchers.

But that was all behind him now. He had a new life and new opportunities. Doctors were always in short supply on colony worlds. One way or another, he would become a man of wealth and standing again. And some way, somehow, he'd use that wealth and power to get off this stinking dirtball and back into the Empire. And then they'd pay. Then they'd all pay, for what they'd done to him.

Outside the airlock, Corbie glared at Megan DeChance.

"A city? An alien city? I don't believe it. I just don't bloody believe it! All the planets the Empire had to choose from and they had to drop us on a world that's already inhabited! I mean, don't they check for things like that first?"

"No," said Lindholm. "That's our job. It may not turn out too badly, Russ. There's a lot that aliens could teach us about this planet, things we need to know. I'm willing to be friendly if they are."

"It's not very likely, Sven," said Corbie. "You know the Empire's attitude to aliens. They get put in their place, or they get put in the ground. No other choice available."

"This is a new world," said Lindholm. "Things could be different here."

Corbie sniffed. "Try telling that to the Investigator."

"I'm afraid it's not that simple," said DeChance quietly. "According to the probes, there aren't any other cities. And this one appears to be deserted."

"Wait a minute," said Corbie. "You mean there's nobody there?"

"There's something there," said DeChance. "I felt its presence."

The two marines waited for her to continue, and then realised she'd said all she was going to. Corbie kicked disgustedly at the ground.

"Mysteries. I hate bloody mysteries."

"I doubt it's anything we can't handle."

The marines looked round sharply as Williams came over to join them. He smiled at them warmly, and nodded to the esper.

"I'm sorry if I interrupted you. I didn't mean to intrude ..."

"No, that's all right, Doc," said Lindholm. "This concerns you as well. Seems there's an abandoned alien city not far from where we've parked."

"Fascinating," said Williams. "I do hope we're going to explore it."

“Great,” muttered Corbie. “Another bloody hero.”

Williams ignored him and concentrated his charm on Lindholm and the esper. “What do you make of our new home, my friends?”

“A little on the desolate side,” said Lindholm. “I’ve seen livelier cemeteries.”

“It’s not very attractive, I’ll admit,” said Williams calmly. “But I wouldn’t write it off just yet. There may be hidden virtues. Geology isn’t my strong suit, but if I’ve read the signs correctly, the ship’s computers just might find these soil samples very interesting.”

He patted the satchel he was carrying. Corbie looked at him with new interest.

“Are you saying there might be something here worth digging for? Gold, precious stones; things like that?”

“That sort of thing, yes,” said Williams. “I think a few test drillings might well turn up something to our mutual advantage.”

“Jewels are fine,” said Lindholm. “But you can’t eat them. For a long time to come, our only interest in the soil is going to be how well it supports our crops. The ship’s rations will run out in a few months, and that’s if we’re careful. After that, we’re on our own. Presumably there are plants and animals here somewhere that will prove safe to eat, but we’ll always need our own crops to supply us with vitamins and trace elements. First things first, Doctor.”

“You’ve been studying up on this,” said Corbie.

“I thought one of us should,” said Lindholm.

“I shouldn’t worry too much about the crops,” said Williams. “The volcanoes might look rather dramatic, but they help to produce good soil. All that pumice stone is full of phosphates, lime, and potash. Just add the right nitrates, and food should come leaping up out of the ground in no time.”

“Unfortunately, there are complications,” said DeChance. “Have you come across any sign of life yet, Doctor?”

“No,” said Williams. “Is that significant?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” said Corbie darkly.

“Don’t mind him,” said Lindholm. “He thinks they’re all hiding from him. And if I was an alien getting my first glimpse of Corbie, I’d think about hiding too.”

“I’m surprised the Captain hasn’t joined us yet,” said Williams casually. “I thought he’d be eager to set about taking in his new territory. That is what military types like to do, after all. Or do we have a Captain who doesn’t like to get his hands dirty?”

“He seems solid enough,” said Lindholm, frowning.

“And he can take all the time he likes about coming out, as far as I’m concerned,” said Corbie. “It’s nice and peaceful out here without him. Who needs some officer type yelling orders? That’s one of the few good things about being in a Hell Squad; no more dumb rules and regulations.”

“The Captain’s in charge of the Squad,” said Williams. “He still gives the orders.”

“Yeah, but that’s different,” said Corbie. “What I’m talking about is no more having to salute, no more surprise inspections; no standing guard in the rain because your boots aren’t shiny enough, or slaving all day over make-work designed to keep the lower orders busy. I’ve had a bellyful of that in my time. And besides ... just suppose I did decide I wasn’t going to obey an order; what could Hunter do about it? There aren’t any Guards or Military Police here to back him up. There’s just him....”

“Wrong,” said Investigator Krystel.

They all looked round quickly, to discover Krystel and Captain Hunter standing just outside the open airlock. Corbie couldn't help noticing they both had hands resting near their disrupters. He smiled uneasily, and stood very still.

“The Captain is in command here,” said Krystel. “You do as he says, or I'll hurt you, marine. We're still citizens of the Empire, with all the responsibilities that entails.”

“Oh sure,” said Corbie quickly. “Anything you say, Investigator.”

“I gather some of you are interested in mineral rights,” said Hunter. “Jewels, precious metals, and the like. If I were you, I should bear in mind that very few colonists ever strike rich. They're too busy working every hour God sends just to keep their heads above water. No, people; it's much more likely you'll get yourself killed doing something stupid, because you were daydreaming about gold mines instead of keeping your mind on the job. For the time being, just concentrate on keeping yourself and the rest of the Squad alive. Now then, since you've all had a nice little rest, I think it's time for a spot of healthy exercise. Some fifteen miles from here is a deserted alien city. We're going to go and take a look at it. On foot, with full field kit and standard backpacks. We start in thirty minutes.”

“On foot?” said Williams. “Why not fly there in the pinnacle? There's more than enough power in the batteries.”

“That's right, there is,” said Hunter. “And that's where it's staying, until we have an emergency that justifies using it. I'm certainly not wasting it on a joy ride. Besides, I think it's better that we take our time approaching the city. This world is still new to us; if we're going to make mistakes, let's make them where it doesn't matter. Oh, and people, keep your eyes open and your heads down. This is a reconnaissance mission, not an attack force.”

“But what about the pinnacle itself?” asked Williams. “Is it wise to just go off and leave it unguarded? Anything could happen to it while we were gone. And if anything were to happen to the equipment stored on board...”

“Dr. Williams,” said Hunter pleasantly, “that's enough. I'm the Captain; I don't have to explain myself to you. And I don't take kindly to having my orders questioned all the time. You must learn to trust me, Doctor, and obey my orders implicitly. Because if you don't, I'll let the Investigator have you. The pinnacle will be perfectly safe in our absence. Isn't that right, Investigator?”

“Right,” said Krystel indistinctly, relighting her cigar. She puffed at it a few times to make sure she'd got it just the way she wanted, then fixed Williams with a cold stare. “We'll activate the force screen before we go, and the computers will be on battle readiness until we return. All told, the ship will probably be safer than we will.”

“You got that right,” said Corbie. “If we're going up against aliens, I want hazard pay.”

“Technically speaking, we shouldn't really call them aliens,” said Dr. Williams. “This is their world, after all. If anyone's alien here, it's us.”

The Investigator chuckled quietly. “Wrong, Doctor. Aliens are aliens, no matter where you find them.”

“And the only good alien is a dead alien,” said Corbie. “Right, Investigator?”

Krystel smiled. “Right, marine.”

“How can you justify that?” said DeChance heatedly. “Everything that lives has some common ground. We share the same thoughts, the same feelings, the same hopes and

needs....”

“You ever met an alien?” asked Krystel.

“No, but...”

“Not many have.” Krystel drew on her cigar, blew a perfect smoke ring, and stared at it for a long moment. “Alien isn’t just a noun, esper; it’s an adjective. Alien; as in strange, different, inhuman. Unnatural. There’s no room for the alien inside the Empire, and this planet’s been part of the Empire from the moment an Imperial ship discovered it. That’s Empire law.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way here,” said Lindholm slowly. “If we could contact the alien peacefully, make some kind of alliance ...”

“The Empire would find out eventually,” said Hunter. “And then they’d put a stop to it.”

“But why?” said DeChance. “Why would they care?”

“Because aliens represent the unknown,” said Corbie. “And the Empire’s afraid of the unknown. Simple as that. Not too surprising, really. The unknown is always threatening to those in power.”

“Sometimes they have reason to be afraid,” said Krystel. “I was there on Grendel, when the Sleepers awoke.”

For a long time no one said anything.

“I thought no one got out of there alive,” said Lindholm finally.

Krystel smiled humourlessly. “I was lucky.”

“I think that’s enough chatting for one day,” said Hunter. “Get your gear together, people. Keep it simple, the bare minimum. Remember, you’ve got to carry it, and we might have to travel in a hurry. Report back here in thirty minutes, ready to leave. Don’t be late, or we’ll go without you. Now move it.”

The Squad turned as one and filed quickly back into the pinnace. At the rear, hanging back, Corbie looked at Lindholm.

“An alien city,” he said quietly. “You ever seen an alien, Sven?”

“Can’t say I have,” said Lindholm. “That’s what Investigators are for. I met a Wampyr once, on Golgotha. He was pretty strange, but not actually alien. How about you? You ever met an alien?”

“Not yet.” Corbie frowned unhappily. “I just hope our Investigator has enough sense not to get us in over our heads. We’re a long way from help.”

In the Forest of the Night

The silver sun rode high on the pale green sky. The world lay stark and bare under the brilliant light, and no sound broke the silence. The mists were gone, dispersed by the rising sun, but the day was no warmer. The Hell Squad moved warily through the quiet morning, walking in single file, their hands never far from their gunbelts. Hunter led the way, alert for any sign of movement on the open plain, but for as far as he could see there wasn't a trace of life anywhere. There were no animals, no birds in the sky, not even an insect. The continuing silence was eerie and disquieting. The soft sound of the Squad's boots on the plain was quickly swallowed up by the quiet, and there wasn't even a murmur of wind.

Hunter hefted his backpack into a slightly more comfortable position and tried not to think about the miles of hard open ground that lay between him and the alien city. His legs ached, his back was killing him, and there was still another nine, ten miles to go. And what was worse, his feeling of being watched was back again. He'd been free of it for a while, but once they'd left the pinnace behind, the feeling had come back even stronger. Hunter scowled. He'd never felt this worried before, not even when he was heading into battle. Not even during the bad times; the times he'd panicked for no good reason. He swallowed hard. He felt light-headed and his hands were shaking. He could feel the beginnings of panic stirring within him.

Not now. Please, not now!

He fought the panic fiercely, refusing to give in to it, and slowly it subsided again. Hunter breathed more easily, but he wasn't fooled. He knew it would be back again, the moment he weakened. Hairs prickled on the back of his neck. The feeling of being watched was as strong as ever. Hunter kept wanting to stop and look around him, but he didn't. He didn't want to look jumpy in front of the others.

He raised his hands to his mouth and blew on them. The morning was several hours old, but it was still barely above freezing. Hunter rubbed his hands together, wishing the Empire had included winter clothing in its list of essential supplies. The heating elements in his uniform could only do so much. Right now he'd have traded his disrupter for a good pair of thick gloves.

The forest drew slowly closer, and Hunter studied it dispassionately. It looked as if they were nearly upon it, but distances were deceiving in the overbright light. They'd been approaching the forest boundary for the best part of an hour, but only now was it starting to give up its secrets. Hunter frowned. What little he could make out wasn't exactly encouraging. The huge trees were packed close together and soared up into the sky. The wide trunks were iron-black, gnarled and whorled, and the foliage was a dark, bitter yellow. The leaves were all different shapes and sizes, and the twisted branches drooped down to the ground as often as not.

The ground approaching the forest was cracked and broken, and clumps of spiky grass sprouted up from the crevices. The grass grew thicker and more abundant as the Squad finally drew near the forest boundary, some of it rising to almost two feet in places. Hunter called a

sample content of Hellworld (Ace science fiction)

- [**read online Shelley: Selected Poetry \(Poetry Library, Penguin\)**](#)
- [download Darkness, Take My Hand \(Patrick Kenzie/Angela Gennaro Novels\)](#)
- [click The Last Tsar: The Life and Death of Nicholas II](#)
- [Honor Bound \(Honor Series, Book 2\) online](#)
- [read Attention, Representation, and Human Performance: Integration of Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation](#)
- [Berlin Street Style: A Guide to Urban Chic here](#)

- <http://honareavalmusic.com/?books/Shelley--Selected-Poetry--Poetry-Library--Penguin-.pdf>
- <http://www.rap-wallpapers.com/?library/American-Philosophy--The-Basics.pdf>
- <http://honareavalmusic.com/?books/The-Last-Tsar--The-Life-and-Death-of-Nicholas-II.pdf>
- <http://www.freightunlocked.co.uk/lib/Honor-Bound--Honor-Series--Book-2-.pdf>
- <http://www.mmastyles.com/books/SAS-Urban-Survival-Handbook.pdf>
- <http://qolorea.com/library/Infinityglass--An-Hourglass-Novel.pdf>