

DAN ABNETT



EMBEDDED



"Abnett is brilliant!" - SFX

Cover: Larry Rostant at Artist Partners

Praise for DAN ABNETT

“Dan Abnett is the master of war.”

SFX

“*Embedded* is a nail-biting, seat-of-the-pants ride – which also has serious things to say about war and the news media – by a master of the adventure novel.”

Eric Brown

“Rips across the page like a blast wave from a barrage of low orbit launched kinetic impactors. Abnett makes hard bitten, high concept mil-fic fun again.”

John Birmingham

“If there’s one thing Abnett does well, it’s write a kick-butt action sequence.”

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“With a firm grasp of character and a superior ability to convey action... Abnett delivers a great, readable science fiction novel and earns his comparisons to an SF Bernard Cornwell.”

Wertzone

“The cinematic scope and dizzying vision we’re shown puts most of the recent SF movie epics into deep shade. Dan Abnett entertains from the ground up.”

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Mark Charan Newton

an excerpt from
EMBEDDED
by Dan Abnett

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ONE

The digital brooch at the throat of his regulation unitard read *Fanciman, Major Gene Gillard, S.O.M.D.*, but from the handshake and greeting it was clear that the major affected a more mannered pronunciation of his surname, something along the lines of *Funsmun*.

He suggested the chair Falk should occupy with a *su casa* wave, then resumed his seat at the desk. As he sat down, he pinched the thighs of his unitard to hoist up the slack in the legs.

“When did you get here?” he asked.

“Last night,” Falk replied. “I came in by spinrad a month ago, but I’ve been in acclimation out on the Cape for twenty days.”

“You won’t have seen much of Eighty-Six yet, then. You’ll discover it’s fine country, Mr Falk. Beautiful country.”

“Country worth fighting over?” Falk asked. He meant it lightly.

Major Fanciman favoured him with an expression

of distaste, as though Falk had just skilfully farted the first few bars of the Settlement Anthem.

“Did I say something wrong?” asked Falk.

Fanciman prepared and lit a smile, slowly and expertly, like it was a Corona Grande.

“We are very conscious of vocabulary, Mr Falk. The word you used has negative connotations. It’s, uhm, sensitivity-adverse. I’m not blaming you, God knows. You only just got here, and you haven’t had time to digest all of our guideline document packet.”

“Sorry,” Falk lied. There hadn’t been much else to do during the adjustment quarantine. The guidelines had run to several hundred thousand words, and had been remarkably informative. They had made it abundantly clear to Falk just how much stonewalling was going on.

Major Fanciman was keeping his smile alight, tending it to make sure it didn’t go out.

“There is a message, Mr Falk,” he said, “and we like to stay on it. We like all our sponsored correspondents to stay on it too. We are a mature species, and we no longer find it necessary to resort to crude practices such as fighting.”

Falk leaned forward slightly.

“I understand, Major,” he said, “but isn’t this entire situation military in nature?”

“Undeniably. We have five brigades of the Settlement Office Military Directorate boots dusty here in Shaverton itself. Their role is entirely one of safeguard. Public safeguard.”

“But let’s just say,” said Falk, “if the public was

placed in immediate threat, their role of safeguard might require the SOMD to use its weapons?"

"True."

"And wouldn't that be fighting?"

"I can see why you came so highly recommended," Fanciman said, opening a file on his desk. "Probing questions. Incisive. Agile mind. I like it."

"Oh good," said Falk.

"Where are you staying, sir?" asked the driver who Major Fanciman had summoned for Falk.

"Doesn't matter. Where can you get a drink?"

"A bar?" the driver replied with a little halt in his voice that suggested he thought there might be a trick in the question.

"Where do *you* get a drink?" Falk asked.

"The mess, or the Cape Club sometimes."

"Either will be fine," Falk smiled. He closed the vehicle door and grinned at the driver encouragingly.

"They're both serving," the driver replied. He seemed uncomfortable.

"Good. I don't want to go to a bar that isn't serving," Falk said.

"No, I mean they're both reserved for serving personnel. You people use the Embassy or the Holiday Inn or the GEO."

"Me people?" asked Falk.

"Press," said the driver. "There's a list of clubs and bars that correspondents can use, provided you've got accreditation."

Falk had accreditation. It was one of the few things he was certain of. Most of everything else was a fuzz. It was hard to peg time of day. His body wasn't telling him. He reflected that he hadn't had a steady diurnal rhythm in about five years, and the stay on Fiwol with its frantic, twenty-minute days had utterly fucked his bioclock.

It looked like it was late afternoon. The sky over Shaverton's glass masts, blocks and pylons looked like a late afternoon sky. It was the colour of lemon Turkish Delight with an icing sugar dust of clouds.

He didn't know how long the day/night cycle was on Eighty-Six. It wasn't that he'd rushed his presearch, he just wasn't much interested in the physical ecosystem. He'd learn that by living in it. During acclimation, and the trip in-system on the gradually decelerating spinrad driver, he'd studied the political, military and social content of the briefing packet, and any other documents he could access. The SO was doing a more than usually extravagant job of redacting material and neutering news outlets, even the big networks and authorised broadcasters.

His meeting with Major Fanciman had been designed to deliver a specific message. The message was: Lex Falk, you are an acclaimed correspondent with several agency awards to your name and a reputation for hard facts and penetrating coverage, therefore the SO is very pleased to welcome you to Settlement Eighty-Six, and to validate your accreditation. Having you here proves to the public back

home that, despite reports of open conflict, the Settlement Office has nothing to conceal on Eighty-Six, and your reportage will be received as unvarnished and credible.

You will, of course, report only what we permit you to report.

That had been pretty much it. Fanciman had told him all of that without expressly using any of those actual words. Falk needed to understand it, and needed to make it clear he understood it. If necessary, the message could be reinforced through further meetings with SO execs more senior than Fanciman. If really necessary, an accommodation might be reached where the SO surrendered some juicy nugget to Falk, something that would lend any correspondence he filed the bat-squeak of raw truth. One hand washes the other.

Falk sat back in the bodymould seat as the driver turned west onto Equestrian and accelerated towards the hazy megastructure of the Terminal. It amused him to think that the Settlement Office had precisely fuck all idea how uninterested he was in any of it. He was bone-light and lagged from too many years riding drivers, he was having trouble finding anything he actually engaged with any more, and he'd only agreed to the Eighty-Six commission because the fee-with-expenses was generous by any network standards, and the whole thing smelled just like another Pulitzer. He had issues. He had a few things he should have taken care of long since, things he couldn't really work up the enthusiasm to

tackle head-on. He had a vague plan (which he'd share with anybody who asked because it made him sound layered) of going home, rebuilding his health and leasing some place on the ocean for a year while he switched gears and wrote That Novel. The addendum he didn't share was that he was no longer sure what That Novel was about, or that the prospect really didn't get him all that fucking thrilled, though living beside the ocean sounded nice.

Falk hadn't warmed to Eighty-Six much. The climate of the Shaverton region, at whatever time of whatever year it was, nudged at the comfort limits of hot and humid. It was one of those places – and Falk had been to a few – that wasn't a natural fit for occupation. It was a tiny margin of variation, almost a nuance thing, but just because the atmosphere wasn't technically inimical to human life, it didn't naturally follow that people ought to live there. Outdoors, it was too hot in an odd way, and too bright. There was an odd saturation to colours.

Indoors, everything was too cold. Everything smelled of air-con and a ubiquitous, lemon-scented twang of Insect-Aside.

The driver took him to the GEO. It was the name of both the corp and the serious glass mast the corp occupied in the land skirts of the massive Terminal. From the executive offices, employees of Geoplanitia Enabling Operator could see the heavy-hipped ferries banging up and down out of the arrestor silos

on the Cape, serving the vast drivers lurking invisibly, upstairs at the edge of space.

There was a bar in the basement, flushed with sickly lighting, piped music and a funk of bug spray, and fitted out with Early Settlement Era furniture, undoubtedly repro, woven from wicker-effect polymer lattice. The place made up in business what it lacked in soul. There were distinct currents separating the crowd: non-local correspondents and affiliates, sorted by old acquaintance or network loyalty; GEO employees; locals work-ing the room, shilling everything from sources to sex in order to leverage a little network expense account action.

Falk got talking to a GEO exec at the rail of the marble-effect bar. The exec was ordering a tray of drinks. It was a colleague's birthday. As the barman filled the order, a casual question or two got the exec to admit that the mood was downtrend among GEO staffers. The dispute (even after two beer-effect drinks, the exec was on-message enough not to refer to the situation as a "war" or even a "conflict") was having non-advantageous outcomes for the corporation. Development contracts were overrunning or remaining unfulfilled, SO grants were being withheld and GEO's share price had dipped badly on the home market because of public perception. GEO had substantial holdings on Eighty-Six.

"Our share value is in the shitter," the exec said, "and our corporate rep is floating there right beside it. The public thinks we're driving this dispute through corporate greed. It's like Sixty all over again."

“Except,” said Falk, “this isn’t a big post-global company taking the blame for what turned out to be fundamentalists terror-bombing settlement pharms.”

“Fuck you know about it?” the exec asked.

“I was there.”

“On Sixty?”

“At the end, yeah.”

The exec nodded, and folded his mouth down in a shape that indicated he was quite impressed.

“Big pharm got the blame on Sixty until it finally came out that there was some pretty nasty activism going on. That’s not the case here, is it? This dispute has been triggered by the aggressive policies of corps like GEO. Please don’t compare it to Sixty unless you know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

The exec offered to buy Falk a drink and took him to meet his colleagues. They were a sallow bunch who plainly spent too much time indoors in the tailored environment of their corporate glass mast. Falk had never understood that. He looked like shit because he spent too much time aboard drivers where there was no outside to step into. But if you’ve gone to live and work on another planet for a five- or ten-year rotation, or forever, why the fuck didn’t you ever go outside? Why the fuck do you stay inside your mast? You might as well be on a driver. You might as well have stayed in Beijing.

They wanted to know about Sixty. He gave them a short but embellished version, romanticising his own hardline newsman cred. They all oohed and

aahed in all the right places, like they knew from bullshit. They all nodded sagely at his tough yet sentimental verdicts.

Three of them were due to leave in a week, six years shy of their contracted finish. Two more were going the following month. There were, he learned, whole floors of the mast unoccupied. Some had emptied since the start of the dispute, as GEO reposted staff to other, less controversial settlements. Others had never been filled. The GEO glass mast had been standing for just twenty years. There was a real possibility that it would be closed and sold off before the corporation that had paid for its construction had properly inhabited it.

Falk listened to them rabbit. It was automatic, just warming up his journo muscles. They weren't saying much that was interesting beyond the state of the mast. They were worried about their futures, about their careers. They were fretting about where they might get posted, and what the bad press was doing to their stocks and bonuses.

His Scotch-effect drink was crappy but welcome after the abstinence of transit and acclimation. He got a little buzz cooking and felt good about himself. He arranged his face so it looked like he was interested.

He kept an eye on a nearby table where some network boys had clustered. One of the faces looked familiar, like a very old, careworn version of a man he had once known, an older brother, a father.

"Falk? Is that you?"

He recognised her voice, but not her face when he turned to look at it. She was carrying a lot of mass, even more than she had when he'd last seen her. Like her voice, her smile hadn't changed.

"Cleesh."

He got up and hugged her. His hands didn't meet. She smelled of nutrition bars and the sugar-plastic aftertaste of diet control packs. There were little flesh-match patches covering the constellations of surgical plug excisions dotting her scalp, the side of her throat and her slabby upper arms where they showed beyond the sleeves of her *Cola* tee.

Falk hadn't seen her since Seventy-Seven, and even then only on screen.

"How are you?" he asked.

"I'm wealthy. Really wealthy," she laughed.

"Look at you. You unhooked."

"Had to," she replied, looking him up and down. "Doctors said I had to. Can't circle forever. Freeks® you up. I needed grav time."

"But circling's what you do, Cleesh," he said.

"I know. I'm not an in-person person. But it was that or die, so I thought I'd spend a little time in the company of normal gravity, drop a gazillion sizes, make sure I don't go cardio-pop."

She eyed him head to toe again and grinned.

"Look at you, though, Falk. You're like a bird. We're like the pedia entry for sublime and ridiculous."

"Hey, I'm at my fucking physical peak," he objected.

"You look like shit. But shit that I'm pleased to see," she replied. "Buy me a drink."

He'd known her for years, but the core of their relationship was a sixteen month assignment to Seventy-Seven. Cleesh was a data wet nurse, feeding, supplying and managing the newlines from a can station circling at twenty-nine miles. She was the most able and clued-in editor-engineer he'd ever worked with. They'd become friends, but he'd never met her in the flesh. She never unhooked from the plug network and left her no-grav home. Prolonged no-grav fucked you up, sooner or later. It made you bone-light or flesh-heavy, sometimes both. No matter how well sunlight, clean air, fresh water and food were simulated, they were still simulated, and it poisoned you eventually. Diabetes, SAD, muscle wastage, organ failure, obesity, eczema, there was always some kind of price.

They talked. He became aware of how twig-scrawny his wrists were compared to hers. Perhaps he had been riding the drivers too long.

"You're here to cover the thing that isn't a war?" she asked.

"Of course."

"You got an in? They're freeking® tight about the press free-associating with servicemen."

"I've got a hot ticket pass," he said. He took a sip of his Scotch-effect. "Settlement Office accreditation. Access."

"Of course you have," she smiled. It was the

friendly, reassuring smile he'd seen via hi-res boxes a million times.

"They've arranged some visits for me. I saw some SOMD deserter." He brushed his palms together, lit up the tiny screen of his celf and opened the document Fanciman had posted him.

"Two days' time, a look at Mitre Sands, then a visit to Marblehead." He showed her the celf's little display in the cup of his hand.

Cleesh pursed her lips and wobbled her head from side to side.

"What?" he asked.

"That'll just be handled PR stuff. Mitre Sands is a pretend camp they use to show everyone."

"It's not pretend."

Cleesh was drinking a tall glass of NoCal-Cola. She turned the glass by the rim with her thumb and fingers like she was cracking a safe.

"Okay, but it's a stores dump, dressed up to make people feel like they're visiting something authentic. Marblehead, that was hot, just not any more. It's tourism, Falk. They'll show you a wall with hard-round holes in it. They show it to everyone. Four days' time, you'll be sitting here telling me how they showed you the wall with the hard-round holes in it."

"That's always how it works," he replied. "You follow their tours around at the beginning while you find your feet, then you give the guide the slip. You know that."

"Tougher here," she said. "Freeking® tough."

"You've come here to report?"

"Yeah. Makes a change. I thought, if Falk can do it, how hard can it be? They're not letting anyone close to the good stuff. There's a lot of people doing a lot of graft on the down low to get access."

"A lot of people including you?"

"But of course."

"Have you got something, Cleesh?"

She gave him her stern look.

"I've been here three months, Falk. I've worked something out and it could be good. It's almost in the bag. I might share it with you, except you'll probably be here three minutes and get something better."

"Come on, Cleesh."

"Be patient. Work your magic. What I've got isn't guaranteed or anything. And if it boils over, it could get me rescinded forever."

"It's that dodgy?"

She shrugged. "I will spend the rest of my years teaching elementary ling to grade school settle-mentees. Or in jail."

"Give me something," he said. "What do you know? Is the Bloc really involved in this, or is it just a corporate shooting match?"

She dropped her voice and leaned forward.

"It might actually be the Bloc this time, Falk," she said.

TWO

He was a good boy. He stayed in Shaverton for the next two days, and didn't step off. He walked boulevards that were so prosaically planned their designer's lack of imagination was as plain as the rows of palm-effect trees. He drank iced tea and NoCal-Cola under the glare shades of terrace diners, and watched the flitters and bugs droning through the sunlight. The biggest bugs were known as blurds. They were about the size of sparrows, and extremely common. They fluttered about like delicate pieces of folded paper engineering.

On the second day, he had lunch with Cleesh at a ProFood outlet on the north end of the Cape road. They sat near a big plastic statue of Booster Rooster. She brought a couple of people with her: a woman called Sylvane who was a stringer from NetWorth, and a nondescript man that Cleesh claimed worked for SO Logistics. Falk wondered if the man was her contact, and tried to open him up a little, but he was singularly dull and unforthcoming, and spent most

of the time talking to Sylvane about import tariffs.

"You know they named Seventy-Seven?" Cleesh asked Falk.

"Officially? I hadn't heard that."

"Yup. They called it *Fronteria*."

"That makes it what? A settlement? A full state?"

"A full state."

"Wow."

"One hundred and thirteenth state of the Union," she said.

"It'll always be Seventy-Seven to me," he said. "Who the fuck thought of *Fronteria*?"

"I know," she agreed, "it's a freeking® awful name, right?"

"What's with this 'freeking' thing?" he asked, putting down his wrap.

"Sponsored expletive," said Sylvane.

"It's what?"

Sylvane was good-looking enough, but it was camera-ready attractive. There was no depth to her appeal. It was all shopped and cosmetic.

"The SO wants to control bad language on all broadcasts," Sylvane said, "especially if stuff is going to the US networks free-feed. They were going to patch in a bleep-mask to cover any cussing."

"Then NoCal-Cola stepped up and offered to sponsor an expletive for use in the zone," said Cleesh. "Freek®. Like in NoCal Freek®, the lime-flavoured hi-caff one. Didn't they offer to patch you when you got here?"

"No," said Falk.

"I told you he was special," Cleesh said to the others.

"They actually plugged it into you?" Falk asked, uneasy.

"Ling patch," said Cleesh. "It's a permit requirement for anyone from Associated or the indies. Keeping it clean across the networks."

"That's how you're making that little sound at the end of the word?" Falk asked.

"It's freeking® amazing, isn't it?" said Cleesh, doing it deliberately, with relish. "I spent the first few days swearing my freeking® ass off, and I can't say freek® all except the sponsored word."

"None of you can actually curse any more?" Falk asked, laughing.

"Nope," Cleesh replied. Sylvane shook her head.

"Say *fuck!*" he demanded.

"Freek®!" said Cleesh.

"I don't want to," said Sylvane.

"No one patched me," said the man from Logistics. "I think harsh language is the mark of a limited imagination."

"Screw that," said Falk. "Whatever happened to free speech?"

"This is free speech," said Cleesh. "I didn't have to pay for the patch."

"I meant your constitutional right as a citizen of the United States," said Falk.

"That's what I'm freeking® talking about, baby," she said.

On the morning of his first arranged tour, he was required to report to the depot at Camp Lasky on Shaverton's south shore two hours before dawn. He got transport down and arrived in good time, but he felt like crap. He couldn't sync to the day/night cycle. Lag had got him. He was wide awake in the middle of the night, and hungry for something he couldn't specifically identify. He had spent too much of the previous evening sinking Scotch-effect at the GEO bar in an attempt to feel drowsy while trying to talk Sylvane into bed. The latter was a purely academic exercise. He didn't especially want to sleep with her. He wanted to sleep with somebody. He wasn't that fussy. It was part of his hunger. He let her say the no he was expecting, and told himself it was useful sparing to get himself back in the ring.

Wake-up felt disgustingly early. Falk felt as though someone had folded the night in half. He'd managed to catch about half an hour's sleep in the end, and his head was raw from too much Scotch-effect. It never got much better, despite some pills and a bottle of water.

The transport dropped him and two other correspondents at the gate, under the blue-white floods. Blurds were battering themselves insensible against the mesh covers on the lamps.

The other two correspondents looked refreshed and well equipped. He felt shoddy and rough. He wondered if they could smell his breath. Fuck them if they could.

Two SOMD shaveheads in tundra-pattern kit

checked their credentials and let them in through the barrier to a waiting area beside the loading docks. A female warrant officer called Tedders came to find them. She checked their credentials again, and made them bag their cell plugs and any other transmitting devices. The poly bags, labelled and signed for, went into lockers.

“You’re going to be embedded for the sweep tour from Mitre Sands,” she said. “We can’t have an unsecured live signal coming off any of you.” One of the other two produced a pen tablet and asked her if that was okay. She spent a moment checking it over. She was small and robust, with sleeves folded up to her elbows and her hair in a tight bun as small and hard as a grenade.

“How are you today, sir?” she asked when it was Falk’s turn to be swept.

“I’m wealthy, thank you,” he replied. He got his game face on, notched up the charm.

“Good to hear,” she said. There was a look in her eyes, the way she regarded him, that suggested he was special-handling cargo she’d had notice of.

“You’ve been told to expect me, haven’t you?” he asked.

“I do my job, sir. I read my presearch. I see I’m going to be hosting a guy who’s got press awards over his fireplace, I take it seriously.”

“I don’t bite,” he said.

“I don’t get bitten,” she replied. Her smile was firm, non-negotiable. Then her expression changed slightly, became more agreeable. “Sit out the debrief

if you like. I'm sure we won't be telling the likes of you anything new."

"The likes of me would like to hear it anyway," he said. "It's part of the embedding experience. Besides, I don't want them resenting me for getting special treatment."

He nodded his head in the direction of the other two correspondents.

"Okay then," Tedders said.

Four other agency reps had already assembled in the office space behind the waiting area. Like the two who'd come in with Falk, they looked packet-fresh and eager. He wanted tea, maybe some variety of baked goods, and twenty minutes by himself in a clean latrine. He felt like an old, notorious uncle who'd turned up at a wedding.

"Major Selton," Tedders announced. Selton stepped up, fronting the room. She was a she too, a long-wheelbase Amazon compared to the portable, compact Tedders. Her fatigues had creases that could draw blood. Her hair was a black lawn, mown short. The overhead lights, unflatteringly hard, glinted off the digital brooch at her throat.

"Welcome to Lasky," she said, "I hope you're all good and wealthy this morning. The SOMD wants to make your visit comfortable and safe, but I want to make sure you've all signed your permission waivers. My colleague, Warrant Officer Tedders, will have been through the prechecks, but I want to stress again that if you're carrying anything that transmits, you need to turn it in now. All our

connections need to be secure. If you don't know, if you're uncertain, be safe and ask."

She moved closer to the large wall box, and the proximity of her brooch woke it up. A test pattern colour card came up first, then the SOMD crest logo against a blue background. She was still talking.

"Settlement Eighty-Six was first developed one hundred ten years ago during the Second Expansion. It has always been a high-productivity location, with specialisms that include agriculture, mineral sourcing, bulk manufacture and orbital assembly. Notable in-system resources include Eighty-Six's second moon, 86/b, locally known as 'Fred'. Page three of your packs. Fred has the third highest concentration of extro-transition elements in settled territory."

The wall box opened a complex, rotating plan of Eighty-Six and the mechanism of the stellar system that supported it. Fred was highlighted.

"Forty-four years ago," Selton continued, "the Settlement Office formally declared all Northern Territories of Eighty-Six as the jurisdiction of the United Status, acknowledging the US's claims of sustained investment in, and support of, the Northern Territory settlements. This was ratified two years later. Nineteen small territorial parcels in the southern and subpolar zones remain outside United Status dominion. Seven are independent commercial outsearch stations. The others are agricultural fiefs of the Central Bloc."

Topographs and geopolitical sat-maps of Eighty-Six rolled across the wall box, with little hot, bright

data-markers appearing and disappearing very fast, each one shooting a tag spear down to some surface detail before it vanished. Selton slowed the map rotation with a hand stroke.

"The Northern Territories appealed for full statehood a decade ago. We're in work with the usual long, slow programme of discovery and interest-conflict assessment. The SO has supported the claim, and expects that Eighty-Six will be approved for full state status within five years."

"Presumably unless this war gets in the way?" asked a correspondent in the front row.

Oooh! Don't interrupt her! Falk winced. *And don't say war!*

Selton didn't miss a beat. She looked at the correspondent, a girl in a puffy, green litex hiking jacket, and fired off a ground-to-air laser-led public relations smile. Falk felt the girl incinerate.

"The situation here on Eighty-Six may force a revision of that estimate," Selton said smoothly. "It does not, however, have direct relevance to the pending statehood process."

"But surely—" the girl continued.

Fuck me, learn to drop it! Falk thought. *In God's name, stop baiting her!*

He stuck his hand up.

"That will make Eighty-Six the what?" he asked. "The one hundred and fourteenth state of the Union?"

"One-fourteen or one-fifteen," Selton replied, acknowledging him with an agreeable smile. "It

depends whether Sixty-Six fast-tracks its statehood legislation or not.”

“What will Eighty-Six be called?” Falk asked.

“We don’t know. That hasn’t yet been decided.”

“But formal naming usually accompanies the declaration of statehood.”

“Of course. I mean, we’re not in the loop. I believe some names are being audience-tested for a shortlist. That’s not my bailiwick. You’d have to ask the SO direct.”

“Thanks,” said Falk, and pretended to make a note. The girl in the green hiker definitely owed him big for easing the heat off her.

“We expect to be out for about fourteen hours today. The weather’s looking clear along the seaboard, so we should make good time into the mountain zone. We transfer from hopster to ground roller for the last leg. I’m going to buddy each one of you up with a member of the sweep unit. You can ask them questions, but you will, and I stress will, follow their instructions at all times. This is a potential firezone, so there is a present danger of death. Follow instructions. Do not deviate. We do not expect trouble, but if trouble starts, we cannot have you making it worse.”

“Don’t mention it,” Falk said.

The girl in the green hiker looked at him.

“Mention what?” she asked.

“Me taking that bullet for you.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked. She

clearly wasn't amused or impressed. Irritation creases bunched at the bridge of her nose.

They were outside, doing up their jackets and spraying on Insect-Aside, waiting for the unit. The sun was coming up.

"Selton was going to scorch you," said Falk.

"I asked a legitimate question," the girl replied.

"That was what it was, was it?" He laughed.

"Who the fuck are you?" she asked.

"Falk," he said.

"I know what the fuck I'm doing, *Falk*," she said.

"How many days of subtlety school did you miss, growing up?" he asked.

"Fuck!" she said, backing away. "I don't know what this is. Are you coming on to me? You're being weird."

She walked away.

"Smooth," said Tedders. She was standing right there beside him.

"Some people don't know when you're doing them a favour," he said.

"I hear you," said Tedders.

"Who is she?" he asked. She consulted her celf.

"Noma Berlin. Affiliated Dispersal. Says she's got a short-term contract with Data-Scatter."

"Rookie," he murmured.

"She's young, she'll learn," said Tedders.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Falk asked.

"The 'she'll learn' part?" asked Tedders. "Or the 'she's young' part?"

He shook his head like it was all a joke and he

didn't care. The compact, portable smile didn't leave Tedders' lips.

"Are you coming with us, Tedders?" he asked.

"Today?" she replied. "No. Thank fuck."

Selton called everyone to order. The rising sun was already notching the heat up, and the air was swirling with tiny bugs. She ran through a few more pointers, took a question or two and then led them across to the hangars.

In the interval since the brief, she'd strapped on body armour plates and a torso harness the colour of putty. There was some kind of short-action sidearm holster-packed on her left hip.

The hangars were vast, airy spaces out of the heat. A row of big, matt-grey transport hopters sat facing the north doors. C440s, bleeding-edge machines, intended to impress. The blades of their turbofans were neatly folded like the buds of photonastic flowers waiting for the sun.

Beside each hopter, groups of SOMD servicemen were suiting up from kit sets laid out on the deck in identical patterns. They were all big guys, even the ones that were girls. They wore the same style tundra-pattern field dress and armour harness rigs as Selton. They were intimidatingly clean and precise. Each kit layout included a principal weapon, reverentially resting on a ground sheet. The most common issue was the heavy, black M3A Hardlaser (beam) Emitter, known as the pipe or piper, though some mission specialists carried more compact PAP

20s loading 2mil SOMD Standard Caseless in stock-lock clips. Falk could smell gun oil and anti-dust lube.

“Falk?”

One of the specialists had approached him. He was seriously tall, and bulked out by his harness plates. The high and tight made his head seem over-large.

“You Falk?” he asked.

“Yes.”

The specialist held out his hand.

“Renn Lukes, payload specialist. I’m going to be your buddy.”

THREE

The hopters blatted downcountry, low and determined, riding the rush of their howling chop-wash.

Through the open side door, Falk watched their shadow chasing them across the terrain, matching them in a perfect parallel trajectory, sometimes big, as volcanic crags thrust up, sometimes flickering in the salt-gorse, sometimes abruptly small and distant as low dune basins dropped away.

Lukes re-checked Falk's harness.

"Don't want you falling out," he said. His voice, half-drowned by the fan-jets, echoed itself with a tinny delay via the com-plug in Falk's left ear. The payload specialist's voice was being chased by its own fuzzy shadow, just like the hopter.

There were eight other SOMD servicemen in the hold space, and two other correspondents. One was a technology reporter from thInc, a bearded little nuisance called Jeanot. The other was green hiker girl.

Lukes finished another stow check, and crossed

the deck with the spread gait of a man inured to swell and pitch. He used overhead grip rails with unconscious ease, strap-hanging like a commuter.

"What can I tell you?" he asked.

Falk shrugged.

Lukes buckled in beside him.

"Major Selton says we should answer all your questions, demonstrate practice, give you the talk-around."

"That's why we're here," said Falk.

Lukes smiled and pinched his fingers and thumb together gently like they were an adjustable wrench.

"You don't have to shout," he said. "I can hear you fine."

"Sorry."

"You want to know about the bird?" Lukes offered. "Standard SOMD gunship and workhorse. We call them Boomers."

"C440 Avery Boreal," Jeanot cut in from his seat nearby. "Quad-engined utility and assault lifters, affectionately known as 'Boomers' or 'Boombirds', a basic retool of the long-serving C400 platform with new-generation instrumentation packages and dermetic-weave six-ply fuselage sheathing. Fabricated by GEO and Lowmann-Escaper Systems under licence from Avery Daimler Eiser. Forty thousand pound capacity. Top speed two hundred seventy-five knots."

Lukes laughed heartily.

"There's almost no point you being here," Falk said to Jeanot.

"You know your stuff," said Lukes, still amused.

"Test me," Jeanot laughed back. "What else do you want to know? Range is nine-thirty nmi, rate of climb is twenty-two hundred feet per minute, disc loading is sixteen pounds per square foot. All home-standard figures, of course. This is the Egress variant with the boosted—"

"No," said Falk.

They both looked at him.

"It's the Echo version. Those aren't Lycoming plants. The nacelles are too bulked up. They're T490 Northrop cold fusion units."

"Good eye," said Lukes, laughing again.

"Good engines," said Falk.

"You were hiding your inner nerd," chuckled Lukes.

"Unlike some," said Falk. He returned Jeanot's toxic glare and mouthed *fuck you*.

Outside, it was hard to see far. The sky was the colour and texture of steel wool, and it felt like they were swathed in dusty heat. You could see how hot the day was, how close.

You could see how dreary and endless the land was under the skipping, flickering shadow in mindless pursuit.

They set down at Mitre Sands, on a mesa above the camp strip. As the jets whined down to rotor stall, they de-bussed with their heads down.

Scarves of dust trailed the air. The sky was diffused heat and sour light, too hot, too bland. Falk

slipped out his glares and put them on. He keyed the *snapshot* function on the left arm so that he could blink-record photo notes as and when.

The light felt abrasive on his face. There was a prickle of storm static that he could taste on top of the grit in his mouth. The sky over the flat hill was simultaneously too big and too close. It was intimidating them with a ski mask on. He wanted to cough and spit to clear the dust from his throat, but felt self-conscious. Spitting somehow seemed too provocative and disrespectful. Falk decided it was the bullying sky he was cowed by, not the virile SOMD servicemen.

Desert blurds, white as bleached bone and as big as his hand, chittered by. He brushed himself down, hoisted his carrypack, and blinked off a few of shots while everybody caught up. He got a couple of nice snaps of the boomers parked in a row, and two of green hiker girl bending over to do up her laces. The saved images stayed on the inside of his glare lenses for a moment before fading.

They went down the slope into the camp. It was a village of crate-and-create box huts and reflatable hardskin store domes. Dust blow had scuffed all the surface paint. SOMD staffers were waiting to greet them. Falk could see a row of Fargos and other roller rides parked beyond the genny shed and the uplink masts. At the defensive points of the camp strip, SOMD gunners manned autohunt gun carriages. Falk watched one reposition, plodding on its stocky tortoise legs. The fat muzzle shrouds of its four mated

pipers had been painted white to reduce their profile against the sky.

Selton went to meet the camp rep and they started to chat. Another officer directed the media party and their SOMD buddies towards a sideless aluminium frame hut where materiel boxes were stacked under netting.

"Time to plate you," Lukes said to Falk. "What do you wear? A thirty-six?"

"Forty, forty-two," said Falk. Did Lukes think he was some kind of shrimp?

Lukes looked at him. "Maybe we start with a thirty-eight. It's got to fit tight, or it won't stop a freeking® thing."

The servicemen started to unpack body armour and torso rigs from the boxes. The kit was putty coloured the same as theirs, but it had "PRESS" printed in giant block white across the chests and shoulder blades. Falk wondered if they should have just cut to the chase and printed on the words "aim here" instead. Lukes helped him strap up.

"Marblehead really a firezone, or is this to lend authentic flavour?" Falk asked as he adjusted the waist fasteners.

"It can be lively," Lukes replied. "Probably won't be, but returning media observers to Lasky with sucking chest wounds because we didn't insist they wear rigs doesn't play well."

"Has that happened?"

"No, because we insist they wear rigs."

"You're US, right?"

Lukes nodded.

"How far into your SO attachment are you?"

"Year two of a four-year tour. Most of us are US, but there's a great Chinese brigade up at Thompson Ten."

"I wondered if we would get any Bloc forces in our escort."

Lukes grinned.

"It's always a possibility," he said.

"But?"

"The possibility is technical. In practice, certain unspoken policies apply."

"Bloc forces on SO attachment would not supply cover for US media on Eighty-Six?"

"I said the policies were unspoken. I don't make them. I don't speak them."

"Is this a fight against Bloc forces?" Falk asked.

Lukes took back the gloves he'd just passed to Falk and exchanged them for a smaller pair.

"Anti-corporate paramilitary forces are staging armed resistance to the territorial interests of the United States," he said. "The Settlement Office Military Directorate has been engaged to police and contain the dispute."

"That sounds like something you read off a prompter."

"Ain't it a bitch when the truth comes as no surprise?" Lukes replied. He slapped Falk on the back. "You're done."

Falk flexed his shoulders and circled his arms.

"Good," he said. "I told you. Forty-two."

“That’s a thirty-six,” said Lukes.

The rollers had their engines running ready, throbbing idle revs into the morning heat. Most of the rides were big six-wheel Fargo models spray-jobbed with tundra paint mottle, but there were two small Smartkart All-ways that would act as follow cars. Lukes led Falk to the front Fargo and showed him his seat. The specialist was carrying his M3A on a mesh sling over his right shoulder. The weapon seemed to sport an unnecessarily complex cluster of tactical optics on the top rail. The muzzle shroud covering the emitter’s tube looked grotesquely wide, like a section of black plastic drainpipe.

Falk discovered he had been placed behind Major Selton, who was strapped into the centreline command seat.

“The general wisdom seems to be that the paramilitaries are landgrabbers,” he remarked.

“It’s a time-worn story, and Eighty-Six isn’t the first settlement to experience the problem,” she replied. “It won’t be the last.”

“What is it? Independence? Rejection of US dominion? Territorial ethics? Legal right to worship?”

“That’s quite a list,” she said over her shoulder, busy listening to her com-plug while she addressed her drop-down tactical display.

“It could be longer,” said Falk. “A source told me that the Reserve Bank had reneged on the agreed scale for parcel subsidies for first- and second-

generation settlers.”

“Not true,” she said.

“I also heard that mineral rights had been revised and cut to a one hundred and one year review.”

“That is true,” she said, “but hardly material. The chances of any parcel tenant losing their mineral rights after review is very small. The review period has really just been reset to assist with the SO’s ongoing resource audit. The only circumstances in which a parcel tenant would forfeit their mineral rights at point of review would be if the lode involved fell within the remit of a Strategic Significance Order.”

“Well, I also heard—” he began.

“How long does this list get, Mr Falk?” she asked him, smiling. “Just so I can block out my afternoon.”

He held her look.

“I guess it’ll get longer and longer all the while the specific nature of the dispute remains vague. Speculation grows wild, especially since this is the first full-scale shooting war to take place post-globally since settlement began. That comes with the words big deal stamped on it.”

“If this is what a full-scale shooting war looks like,” said Selton, “we haven’t got much to worry about. This is a minor armed dispute. I don’t think it’s the big story you think it is. We’ve got it contained. It’ll be over in a couple of months.”

“You don’t think it’s the big story I think it is, or you don’t think it’s the big story us media types think it is?”

"I meant the latter, Mr Falk," she replied. "Why, is your imagination particularly feverish?"

Something crackled in her ear. She signalled the driver up front and they started to roll. The Fargo immediately began to lurch and rumble over the rough terrain. It felt and sounded like every single one of the fat tyres had blown and shredded.

"Everyone always wonders about the Central Bloc," Falk said.

Selton shot him a glance. He couldn't tell if it was a nervous look or a pitying one.

"The Cold War's been cold for nearly three hundred years, Falk. As we move out and expand, all it ever does is get colder and colder. Hard space sucks all the warmth out of it. We were at close quarters when it started, sharing one world, and still it started cold. It must be approaching heat death by now."

"Poetic. Can I quote you?"

"Sure. We've put plenty of space between us, Falk. Literally. The US, the Bloc, the Chinese, everyone's got room to breathe, to develop. No one's treading on anyone else's toes any more. No one gets to seem like a bad neighbour. There's no reason for war, cold or otherwise."

"But you'd agree," said Falk, "if we suddenly found one, that would be a huge hairy deal?"

"None hairier," she replied, flashing her eyebrows at him. "But that is not the situation on Eighty-Six. It's a local settlement dispute with disaffected paramilitaries."

“Where do the paramilitaries get their arms from?” asked green hiker girl from the bucket seat behind Falk. Falk hadn’t realised she’d been listening.

Selton said something in reply, then turned to check something on her display’s terrain scanner.

“What did she say?” green hiker girl asked over the thunder of the engines.

“I think she said ‘that’s not material,’” Falk replied.

FOUR

A short distance out of Mitre Sands, on the open track, the Fargos rose up on their suspension and went what Lukes called “long-legged”. Lifting the hull and broadening the chassis frame made for superior clearance and weight distribution, and the extended footprint boosted stability. The ride got appreciably smoother.

Through the dust-worn side window, Falk watched the All-ways riding out wide alongside them across the stone scrub, lifting plumes of dust like foam wakes. The chase cars were light and fast. Sunlight flashed off the glares of the shavehead manning the heavy-gauge pintle mount.

Mountains sulked to the west of them like a grey barn wall. For an hour, the cloudcover came and went like time-lapse footage: cloud boil, sharp sun breaks, cloud boil again. Over the shared com system, Selton drew their attention to a pair of the big, rare tundra grazers, turning on the thermals, but Falk didn't get to the window in time and all he saw were sun dogs.

He was uncomfortable in his seat. It was tight, and the hard form-mould transmitted every bump and vibration to his ass. His back and his right hip began to ache.

Green hiker girl was writing something on a clutch tablet.

"This your first zone posting?" he asked her, trying to reboot things.

"I'm thirty-one," she replied.

He gave her "quizzical".

"Are we playing Respond To One Question With The Answer To Another?" he asked.

"I'm not playing anything with you, period," she replied. She returned to her work.

"The longer I spend with you," he said, "the more I sense I'm getting to know the real you."

She looked up at him again. He considered himself thick-skinned, but the contempt in her eyes came as a surprise.

"I have a horrible feeling," she said, "that someone once told you that you were charming, and you believed them."

Marblehead was an ore town that had been seeded about fifty years before. The first-gen pop, according to Selton, had been mostly Chinese and Portuguese, though that had diluted as the town's prosperity had grown. The place had secured major contracts to supply ore for the construction industry, mainly blue metal aggregate for precast concrete mixes, though it also quarried quality materials for facing and

dressing. The extractors of Marblehead had made a significant contribution to the rise of Shaverton.

Marblehead had been one of the flashpoints in the early phase of the dispute. Production had cut back as the SOMD restricted transport and conveyance. A lot of the pop had drained out in the previous nine months.

Selton told them that the op profile was to meet with a Forward Patrol Group, conduct a security appraisal and then extract before nightfall. Falk was pretty sure that was just a bunch of rugged-sounding terms that actually meant a pretend wargame exercise with added show-and-tell.

Approaching the town, now driving on a hardpan roadway, they dropped their profile again, and ran low. The All-ways tucked in close. One zipped ahead, taking point.

“Stay buttoned up,” Selton said into her mic. Their speed had decreased. “Authority given for weapons live. Commence standard sweep and target sampling.”

There was a disconcerting noise of motor gearing in the roof above them. The autohunt turret mount on the Fargo’s cabin top activated and began to traverse.

They entered a long incline, a winding ribbon road that followed the side of a valley down to the town limits. The place looked nondescript, dirty and dead, not so much a township as row after row of ugly precast buildings dumped on waste ground waiting to be shipped out on flatbeds to permanent

homes. Places were shuttered and boarded, screened by chainlink and mesh sheeting, painted with pollution, stained by sunlight and finished off with the fine detail of graffiti scrawled by the bored, the indolent, the dispossessed, the township youth, the out-of-a-job migrants, the contract-less miners. East of the town were the vast land scars of the open-cast mines and the quarries, lunar landscapes of step-sided pits like negative spaces created by pressing ziggurats tip-down into soft clay. Each pit was big enough to hold the town itself. Spoil heaps and outfill had formed new mountains. Rusty orange bulk excavators, dump trucks and mass conveyer assemblies made it look like a sand box abandoned by children for fear of rain. The quarries were barer, their sides scraped back to pale, grained rock, like exposed bone.

North of the town lay the precast plants, the curing works and the functionally ugly blast furnaces used to process byproduct. Near to these monstrosities sprawled the loading docks and the immense shipping parks where bulk roadliners that hadn't made the coast highway run regularly for almost two years slumbered under grimy weather wraps.

"Seems delightful," said Falk.

"I've been looking to summer here," said Lukes.

They reached the edge of town and followed the road through three or more sets of wire gates that were wide open and seemed to have no purpose beyond the sculptural. Fuel drums weighted with set concrete dotted the roadlane, along with other trash

like fence posts and some buckled signage, a makeshift slalom course to slow the advance of anything short of an MBT. The convoy steered around the obstructions, keeping line, bleeding little speed.

“Where is everyone?” asked Jeanot, peering out and recording footage with a tablet.

“There’s a curfew,” replied Selton, her attention primarily focused on her displays.

“It’s late morning,” said green hiker girl.

“It’s a strict curfew,” said Falk.

Something on Selton’s display pinged. For a second, Falk felt himself tense up instinctively.

“Contact signal,” said Selton, and typed something into a text pane.

Fucking dope, Falk admonished himself. *You actually bought into it.*

The FPG was coming out to meet them.

The members of the Forward Patrol Group were driving in Fargos of their own, and they had a fat, armoured Longpig gunbus as the centrepiece of their motorcade. The vehicles, and the SOMD troopers riding in them, were caked in air-blown dirt. Their kit was a little bit more personalised and non-reg than the *fresh-on-this-morning* look being worked by Selton and her unit. Their rollers came to a halt, engines running, in a little fan behind the rumbling self-propelled, laid out like playing cards wiped across a table. Troopers with pipers and RPG thumpers dismounted and locked off the thoroughfare,

shoulders tight to stocks, cheeks to top rails, eyes to optics, fingers resting ready on trigger guards. The gunbus, twice the size of a Fargo, reminded Falk of some creature from a bestiary, a traveller's excited fabulation of a rhinoceros or a warthog. It was broad and fat, lethargic and ill-tempered. It sat heavily on its broad treads with anti-rocket armour skirts hanging down around its wheel hubs. It was almost black with grime. The M190 howitzer slanted at the sky like a unicorn's horn, vulgarly big, rendered preposterous by the massive, fluted, vented muzzle brake at the end of the barrel. The brake lent the whole machine an unpleasant fetishistic air.

The commander of the column was an SOMD major called LaRue. He and Selton chatted for a while, then he ambled over to greet the media crew. He seemed real to Falk, genuine. Falk wondered if he might actually have cynically overestimated the show-and-tell factor. He got the tingle of tension back, the feeling that he was actually in some fucker's crosshairs after all. LaRue looked like someone who'd been leading an FPG in the field for six weeks. He spoke like it. His body language was unmannered and tired. There was nothing scripted or autocued about what he said.

He told them that the FPG was about to conduct a room-by-room of Number Two Blast Furnace, following a tip-off from one of the labour watch teams. A forced entry overnight had lit a red light on the site foreman's security display. Selton's unit and the correspondents were welcome to accompany the

FPG for the duration of the operation, provided that they followed FPG instructions explicitly and didn't get in what LaRue gently described as "the fucking way".

Unpatched, thought Falk. Unreconstructed.

Dropping the pitch of his voice, LaRue issued a bald statement about the risks. Shots might be fired. There might be full-on contact. Their lives would be in danger, despite the body-plate and the SOMD presence. Even if they followed every syllable, every letter of the instructions, there was still a chance that any one of them could get scorched. LaRue wanted them to know that. He didn't want anyone operating under the illusion that this wasn't the real deal. The real fucking deal, as he put it.

Anyone could duck out, no problem. They could stay under guard with the rollers, or be taken to a strongpoint to wait for the others. No one would be judged.

"Think about it for a minute," he said. "To be honest, I'd be happier if none of you came. It makes our job easier. But I will accommodate you. Think about it, then have a word with my staff sergeant here if you want to be included."

Falk felt an odd heat rising inside him. Tension and fear, a blend he hadn't tasted in a long time. Of course he was going to get himself included. Things had just got interesting. The most interesting thing of all was his unbidden response. He was excited. He was scared. He felt cynicism peeling off him like onion skin. He didn't want to get shot. Now there

was a chance he could. He felt sore from the ride, nauseous from the night before and sick with trepidation. He was amazed at how upbeat these crappy physiological responses made him feel.

“Oh, there’s something I want to show you,” LaRue added. “Crazy. You’ll love it. It’ll give you a little perspective while you’re making up your minds.”

Escorted by a bunch of troopers carrying their primary weapons ready across their chests, LaRue walked the media correspondents a little way back down the roadway, and then off onto the dirt, into the yard behind a derelict construction works.

“There,” he said. He said it with pride, like he was a breeder parading a prize-winning steer, or the patriarch at a bris.

He was showing them a wall. It was peppered with hard-round holes from small-arms fire.

“Un-freaking-believable,” murmured Falk.



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