

EXODUS CONFLICT

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Edited by Jodi Lynne Tahsler

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LITERARY AWARDS FOR EXODUS CONFLICT

2013 Next Generation Indie Book Awards Finalist in the sci-fi/fantasy category

(Award 01)



*Exodus Conflict receives honorable mention from the 2013 London Book Festival
in the science fiction category*

(Award 02)

Five stars from *Readers' Favorite*



Praise for Exodus Conflict from *Readers' Favorite*

“Exodus Conflict is a thrilling and suspenseful novel that is not only about the continued existence of two different species, but also a story about inner conflicts of Alex and Andrea . . . As the reader turns the pages, each layer of both struggles will be revealed in a well written plot which grips the reader and won't let go. Excellent read with plenty of action and emotion.”

-Bil Howard for *Readers' Favorite*-

“Michael J. Brooks' Exodus Conflict is a thoughtful look into a catastrophic future, where this planet can no longer sustain life.”

-Jack Magnus for *Readers' Favorite*-

“What did I like about Exodus Conflict? Everything!”

-Lorena Sanqui for *Readers' Favorite*-

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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“The only alternative to coexistence is codestruction.”

—Jawaharial Nehru—

“Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living beings and all of nature.”

—Albert Einstein—

PROLOGUE

Because of the ways of mankind, Earth was brought to the brink of catastrophe. Destructive wars between nations had left the world's infrastructure in shambles and billions of people's homes had been devastated—further impoverishing millions of men and women. Due to the avoidance of developing alternative fuel sources, diminishing natural resources had already led to the unbelievable rising cost of fuel and everyday necessities—making it difficult for the average person to survive. And years of environmental mistreatment had contaminated the skies and waters—killing crops and allowing sicknesses that had long died out to flourish in many communities.

The consequences of humanity's self-decimation brought forth the collapse of civilization. And though the fighting amongst warring nations had officially ceased—followed by a tenuous peace—there was no unified effort in the world's recovery. Each nation preferred to hoard their resources and fend for themselves, rather than help their fellow man, though the planet's greatest crisis affected not just one area but all of mankind and every living creature on Earth.

A great deal of hostility remained between the war-ravaged nations, and accusations continued to fly. “Who started the problem?” and “Who was responsible for the many deaths?” were debated with ferocity, as pundits pointed fingers. Such matters should be of little concern after the hardship that had befallen all of mankind, but people stubbornly clung to their animosity.

As time went by, the worldwide condition of the human race worsened. Nations slipped into economic turmoil. People suffered from starvation. Those who had previously lived lives of

stability became vagabonds on the streets. And with famine and new strains of illness and disease adding to humanity's mounting perils, it seemed the entire human race was reaching its apex.

These devastating times soon became known as The Great Crisis.

In order to preserve the existence of humanity, the nations of the world—whose post-war tensions had made any type of cooperation unlikely—were finally able to band together to create the Global Solutions Committee (GSC). The GSC assembled the world's greatest thinkers, scientists, and problem solvers; however, only provisional solutions to Earth's global affairs arose from the union. These so-called solutions only prolonged humanity's self-destruction.

After a year of the GSC's failed attempts to save humanity, many prosperous countries became Fourth World nations, and Earth's population decreased by a billion. Realizing that none of their solutions were working, the GSC initiated a deep space exploration project, desperate to sustain Earth and its people. The purpose of the project was to find a new homeworld within the Milky Way Galaxy. This *terra nova* had long existed and was simply waiting for humanity to make its way there.

Finally unified, the nations willingly made an effort to share their latest technology with one another to begin the development of a vessel capable of searching deep space. A special power cell created for the craft would eliminate the need for fuel, allowing the expedition to take as long as needed. Perhaps had nations worked together to fund and develop the cell years ago, Earth's skies would be pure. It took desperation to convince nations that it was time to make a true effort to develop an alternative to fossil fuel consumption. Nations had even claimed that the cell could be modified to power motor vehicles within a few years. But humanity would be on death row by then, if the expedition was a failure.

On the day of the vessel's completion, a crew assembled from various nations was sent into

the unknown with everyone's hopes resting on their shoulders. The crew's mission was to seek out a new world for mankind to inhabit, and once this new world had been found, mankind would be able to begin its exodus.

A year of exploring yielded success. The crew of Earth's vessel, the *Genesis*, came across what they were seeking: a new world for humankind to call home. It was a world that bore much similarity to their current homeworld and appeared to be the perfect planet to call Second Earth.

The crew of the *Genesis* thought this new world would be entirely for humanity's taking, but almost simultaneously, as Earth's vessel touched down on the planet, another craft landed. From this foreign craft emerged a race of people no one had ever imagined, and though this alien race could not communicate with the Earthlings, there was some understanding between them and Earth's explorers.

Together they bridged the communication gap—a task the *Genesis's* crew thought would take months, but this alien race was able to learn at an astonishing rate, a rate beyond that of any ordinary Earthling. In a mere three days, they were able to speak well enough in several human languages.

With the communication gap bridged, the *Genesis's* crew learned the aliens were called the Zull and that they were from a galaxy just outside the Milky Way. But their homeworld and people were in danger of extinction because of a series of severe climatic changes. Rising temperatures were causing crops and animals to perish. Thus, less food was produced each year—making starvation inevitable—and as the Zull waited for rains that hardly ever came, the land and oceans dried up. Their planet was slowly becoming a barren desert. It was dying. Therefore, the Zull also needed to make an exodus onto this new planet. So a settlement between humankind and the Zull had to be reached, but Earth's explorers did not have the authority to

negotiate on behalf of all humanity.

Using their highly advanced technology, the Zull assisted the *Genesis's* crew in transmitting a message back to the GSC. After the transmission was received, they immediately sent diplomats to assist the crew in establishing a dialogue between humankind and the alien race, and thanks to a new method of space propulsion called Hyper Stream Travel, the diplomats arrived in two weeks.

Hyper Stream Travel was developed by the GSC's deep space exploration project during the *Genesis's* crew's yearlong expedition. Apparently, the *Genesis's* propulsion system was only the prototype for a better, faster one. Even so, Hyper Stream Travel seemed beyond humanity's scientific capability, almost “extraterrestrial.” This drove conspiracy theorists to contrive a slew of possible explanations. Some of them believed governments had kept hidden alien technology from a previous extraterrestrial encounter, but only the GSC and the world's top leaders would know the secrets behind the Hyper Stream, unless they decided to go public someday.

When the diplomats arrived on Second Earth, everyone was sure that a settlement could be reached, but the Zull and the diplomats were not able to compromise. Each race had too many reservations about sharing the planet with each other. The Zull learned about humanity's poor treatment of their own world and feared such careless people would desecrate this one. Mankind had searched an entire year for this paradise amongst the stars and did not really want to partition its lands. Also, polls taken on Earth showed that the majority of the population felt uncomfortable intermingling with an alien race. Zull and humanity seemed incapable of casting aside their fears and doubts to live together on the world they *both* had discovered.

Weeks of failed talks between the GSC's diplomats and the Zull only served to anger the two races. Not long after peace negotiations ended, a declaration of war followed. Then Earth's

nations united their militaries to form the Earth United Front (EUF), a powerful coalition that would train soldiers in their respective nations and send them to fight alongside each other in the most important war in human history—not a world war but an interplanetary war—a war between two different worlds of people that would be fought on the planet needed for their salvation. And with both races building up their arsenal, constructing bases, and trying to establish territorial dominion over different Regions of the planet, it was clear that the Exodus Conflict over Second Earth had begun.

CHAPTER ONE

Second Earth

September 26. 1500 hours. A shuttle bound for Second Earth was about to leave the EUF's Reception Station, a satellite which orbited the current homeworld. There, deploying soldiers underwent a day's worth of deep space flight preparation, which included extensive briefings and Emergency Shuttle Evac training. The next day, all soldiers were grouped and placed on shuttles that would take them to Second Earth. But the shuttle now leaving the Reception Station was not only being used to transport soldiers; it was also being used to transport a well-known journalist assigned to war coverage named Alex Mercer.

Alex entered the passenger section, which was conjoined to the cockpit, forming a single compartment. *Geez, they were right when they told me it's cramped in here,* he thought. The aisle was insanely narrow, the compact seating didn't leave much elbow room, and the ceiling was low enough to rake the hair on his head. Alex had assumed the soldiers' warnings, about the shuttle's claustrophobic design, were lies meant to intimidate him, but then, he hadn't been expecting first-class.

Wondering if the male bunking area was more accommodating, he peeked into the rear cabin. To his dismay, Alex saw the flat-panel beds that aligned the walls looked about as comfortable as concrete. Lucky for him, he would have to put up with these annoying conditions for only two weeks.

I'm guessing there isn't much else to see. Might as well get comfortable. Besides the lower deck, which consisted of the pilot's quarters and cargo hold, there were no more areas where

passengers were allowed, so Alex took a seat and threw his two bags down beside him.

From where he was sitting, he could see the pilot tinkering with the controls on a panel of flickering lights in the front. *Not long before takeoff, maybe four or five minutes*, Alex anticipated.

As he waited to begin his journey, the twenty-seven-year-old journalist was overwhelmed by excitement and curiosity. *I wonder what's waiting for me when I get there*. He tried to picture the landscape—would it be wild and beautiful nature, or would the land be torn apart by war? And what were these Zull beings like? A soldier aboard the station had told Alex they were merciless creatures, ruthless bastards with no respect for anyone but themselves. But Alex knew people would say anything about what they fear. It was fear and hate that had driven the war for three years. Alex believed there had to be some way for Zull and humanity to overcome their animosity and live together on the new world.

He was hoping his venture would help him understand why the bloodshed was still taking place. So Alex wasn't making this journey to Second Earth simply because he felt compelled as a journalist to cover the most important war in humanity's history. He was also going there to learn. Alex wanted to find out why the war had been drawn out for three years, even though the simple solution of "coexistence" could end it tomorrow.

After finishing his systems check, the pilot turned to get a better view of his lone golden-brown-haired passenger.

Seeing that Alex was dressed in a casual T-shirt and blue jeans and had two days' growth of stubble on his face that made him look rugged, the pilot knew he wasn't a soldier of the Earth United Front but asked to make sure. "You a EUF soldier, Mr.?"

Alex shook his head from left to right. "Not me," he stated. "I'm a journalist."

“Wait a sec, aren't you the reporter I always see on NYN News?”

“Yep, that's me,” Alex sighed irritably. Sometimes being renown was a pain in the neck, especially on days when people kept approaching him to complement his work. There were even days when he couldn't walk into his local coffee shop without being bothered, most often by college kids wanting his advice on how to break into journalism during these tough economic times.

However, Alex completely understood why young aspiring journalists sought his advice. In the past, he had written stories and done investigative journalism for several news organizations. Now, he was a reporter for one of the most watched news networks in America, and he wrote articles for the network's website. Alex had expertise that anyone determined to get into his field could learn from.

“So, how is it being a television news reporter?” the pilot asked, making smalltalk.

“I can't speak for everyone, but I think it's awesome. I've been fortunate to be doing something I love. When you think about it, I've been fortunate to have a job at all.”

“You're right, you are fortunate. We both are. And though things in America are pretty bad, it, Britain, and other nations are paradises compared to the ones in the gutter right now.” The two men heard several voices, overflowing with enthusiasm, approach the shuttle. They started faint but grew louder as they got closer. “Must be the rest of my passengers,” the pilot concluded.

Thirty-four EUF soldiers, hyped about their second deployment, came bustling through the shuttle's entryway making a ruckus. Their rowdiness was so deafening that Alex wished he had brought earplugs.

“Hey, news boy,” a soldier standing over the journalist said, “we told ya it was gonna be tight in here. You didn't believe us, huh?”

Alex's face became stern. "News boy? That's Mr. Mercer to you, pal."

The soldier was a jackass when Alex met him inside the Reception Station, and he was still a jackass now. "Sounds like I'm getting on your nerves," the soldier said, with a smirk.

Alex was indeed reaching the boiling point. He was ready to wipe the smug look off this smart Alec's face.

"Alright, everyone standing needs to take a seat," the pilot demanded, trying to defuse the situation before it could get ugly.

"I hope you're ready, news boy," the soldier continued, ignoring the pilot. "Like I said before, the Zull are some ruthless bastards. You can't even begin to imagine how vicious they are." He leaned into Alex's face, coming nose to nose. "I bet you're pretty damn nervous, huh?"

"No, not really," the seasoned journalist responded calmly.

Not much scared Alex Mercer. As a war correspondent for New York Network (NYN) News, he had covered events of World War IV live from the battlefield. But traveling to a new planet and being thrust into the middle of a conflict with a foreign race was enough to make his palms sweat, though he did not want to admit it.

"Get comfy, everyone," the pilot advised. "This trip's about to get underway."

The soldier pestering Alex finally decided to leave him alone. "Later, news boy." He went to the back row and squeezed into a seat between two of his comrades.

A blinking message appeared on the shuttle's overhead screen: SYSTEM LAUNCH
AFFIRMED.

Alex fastened his seatbelt, remembering his safety briefing. *That's the confirmation message. The shuttle's about to launch into orbit.*

Alex felt like it took forever for him to get to this point. He started at the EUF shuttle station

located in Arizona's desert. Once his health was cleared, he and sixty American soldiers boarded a space craft that took them to the Reception Station. They docked along with other American ships and some from other nations as well. Once situated, everyone began the in-processing phase. The next day was full of preflight preparation and then assignment to an EUF headquarters. Now, here Alex was, about to travel into the depths of the Milky Way for the first time.

Most people would not be as calm as he was. But Alex had used his journalistic research skills to determine the pilot's age (forty-three) and extensive flight background, which included over a hundred deep space flights, so he felt confident that his voyage would take place smoothly.

The pilot flipped three switches on the control panel. "We're launching now," he informed his passengers.

The launch bay's hydraulic door raised, surrendering the shuttle to the infinite darkness of space. At minimum-burn, the aft thrusters propelled the craft across the bay's bridge and into a sea of stars. The journey to Second Earth had begun.

"Mr. Mercer, take a look-see out your starboard window," the pilot said. "Magnificent, isn't she?"

Alex looked out of the window and down at Earth, where humanity was assisting in its own rapid demise. When viewing Earth from space, one could almost forget the planet was going through its darkest hour; one could not see the gray clouds caused by environmental contamination or see the misery of the people. Nevertheless, Earth was indeed within the midst of a crisis, and this crisis threatened the entire planet Alex saw before his eyes, along with all of its inhabitants.

As the vessel sped away from Earth, the planet diminished in size until it finally disappeared from Alex's sight. He wondered if humanity would destroy themselves and the planet before they could undertake the mass migration or survive until the conflict with the Zull was resolved.

"I can't wait to get back into the fight," a soldier said to another, breaking Alex's chain of thought. The deployees had resumed their clamorous chatter.

"Hey," Alex said to the pilot, "do you mind if I sit up there with you?" Since a copilot was not required, the seat next to the pilot was vacant. "I was thinking we could seal the cockpit and both get a little peace and quiet."

"The only ones permitted to be up here are the people doing the flying," the pilot let Alex know, "but I guess it couldn't hurt."

"Thanks."

Alex grabbed his two bags and climbed to the front. With the pilot's permission, he palmed the oversized yellow button on the control panel, and a wall came down to divide the cockpit from the passenger section. The voices of all thirty-four overzealous soldiers could no longer be heard.

"Now that's much better," the pilot said.

"Definitely," Alex agreed.

To kill time, the journalist took a computer tablet from his bag to read the latest news he had downloaded.

The featured article speculated on the top five likely causes for mankind's obliteration. Number one was war. Number two was global pandemic. "I hate to think about the countless human beings who've died because of preventable diseases and wars that didn't have to happen." Alex, in disgust, tossed the tablet aside. His thoughts began to replay all the horrors he had

witnessed. “The things I’ve seen make me sick to my stomach. Hundreds lying dead in the streets because of sickness that could have been cured. Innocent women and children being mowed down by crossfire simply because they just so happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.” The expression on Alex's face personified his anger.

“Well, you know, Earth's population seemed to be growing kinda fast. But the wars and diseases that helped produce The Great Crisis wiped out a bunch of people. Some say, since the planet can’t sustain over a certain amount of people, maybe disease and war are a good thing,” the pilot said.

Alex's brow furrowed, his teeth clenched, and his nails dug into his palms as his hands became shivering fists. “Neither is a good thing, *especially* war.” He began to hear the bullets and the screaming children. He began seeing the women who had been violated, the brutal massacres, and the streets that became blood-rivers—memories that would forever be a part of him.

“You’re a pacifist, huh?”

“Kind of, and for a damn good reason,” Alex said. The outrage burning inside him went from a wildfire to a flicker as the horrid memories imploding his mind faded.

For Alex, suggesting that war could be a useful type of population control was unthinkable. His view was that most wars were an awful solution to global dissensions—a solution that only destroyed lives and caused grief when the tensions could have been solved another way.

Earth’s last two World Wars had definitely caused their share of death and grief, and those wars had certainly helped reduce the planet’s population greatly; they even made World Wars I and II look like nothing. But who knew: maybe another World War would annihilate the population completely—if the conflict on the new world didn’t accomplish the feat beforehand.

“You got a wife and kids, Mr. Mercer?” the pilot asked, curious to know.

“Me? No, haven’t met the right woman.”

“I have. Here, see for yourself.” The pilot handed Alex a photograph. The photo showed a woman in her mid-thirties holding the hand of a smiling blue-eyed seven-year-old girl. “That’s my wife and daughter. Beautiful, aren’t they?”

“They are.” Alex gave the photo back to the pilot.

“I’ve been busy running shuttles back and forth from Earth, flying soldiers home and bringing their replacements, so I haven’t been home lately. I knew I would stay occupied when I signed up to work as a transporter for the EUF, but I’ll be requesting my entitled two-week vacation in a couple of days.”

“That’s good. I’ve been intending to go to Delaware to visit my cousin, Jessica. She’s twenty-five, works as a lawyer. We don’t always get along, but I call her when I get time.”

“Try to maintain a good relationship with members of your family. Relationships are what gets us through these troublesome eras.”

Alex nodded his head in agreement. “I second that.”

The pilot activated the auto navigation system and reclined his seat. “I’m taking a nap. Enjoy the scenery while you can because when the shuttle goes into Hyper Stream Travel in about six minutes, everything’s gonna be nothing but a blur.” The pilot shut his eyes and fell asleep shortly thereafter.

Alex gazed into the black sea again. He had heard that rookie EUF soldiers being sent to Second Earth on their first deployment were frightened of space travel. Alex assumed this was because if a shuttle malfunctioned during space flight, its passengers would be forever lost to the never-ending void of space. They would die of starvation or suffocation. Maybe the thought of

such a slow death was why new EUF soldiers were frightened of adventuring into outer space for their very first time. But Alex felt relaxed within this dark encirclement. Space gave Alex a feeling of tranquility that he could rarely obtain on chaotic Earth.

After reveling in the calmness of space, Alex turned his head away from the window, lay back in his seat, and slept comfortably as the fuzzy blue haze of the Hyper Stream enveloped the craft.

On October 09 at 1515, Alex joined the pilot in the sealed off cockpit one last time, for atmospheric entry.

Turbulence jolted the craft, but a series of button presses and a slight change in vector settings stabilized its descent. As the shuttle dove onto the planet, Alex was greeted by a blue sky and vibrant sun. *This is it, Second Earth.*

Below, he saw a utopian valley. It was a wondrous place that had not been tainted by asphalt, concrete, steel structures, exhaust fumes, and toxic materials. Its pristine nature was something to behold, and Alex felt grateful to be one of the few who would see it this way.

While flying over another area of the planet, Alex saw the foundations of mankind's next cities amidst a treeless meadow. Though most of the planet had yet to be touched by the hands of mankind, three years worth of construction had taken place on Second Earth, and it was the EUF's mission to secure the planet and defend all construction sites from Zull attacks, as Earth's nations began colonization. Their mission was to also seek out and destroy the Zull's military factions, hidden amongst different Regions of the planet. The Zull forces' mission was to do the same. So the EUF and Zull attacked each other's construction sites and military bases, determined to not let the opposite race dominate the planet.

Since both races had ground satellites that kept their bases and city development sites

cloaked from each other's devices, they had to send scout teams on long search and find expeditions to locate them. And because it took days or months to come across a single base or construction site, the Exodus Conflict was a war where days or months would go by without a single firefight, but when battles did happen, they were vicious.

However, the EUF had a tougher time defending their territories than the Zull did. This was because the Zull had the uncanny ability to connect with their environment and take on its characteristics, allowing them to blend in with their surroundings to get the jump on EUF soldiers on guard. And after dealing with them, the Zull would go on to completely annihilate all structures within the EUF's vicinity: military bases and/or construction sites.

After a year and a half of blood-filled battles, the Zull's attacks on EUF construction sites and military bases declined substantially. Six months then went by without much conflict. This led the EUF to believe their enemy was on the verge of defeat, but a sudden upsurge in Zull attacks proved their theory wrong. The Zull started striking more fiercely and frequently than ever before. Second Earth then became no longer safe for noncombatants. So, about three months ago, all construction crews and land surveyors were sent home, leaving the EUF with only one task now: to scour the planet for Zull factions and exterminate them.

Throughout all of this conflict, though, one question has plagued the thoughts of a few EUF soldiers. That question was: if the EUF had satellites that could hide their bases from the Zull, wouldn't that mean they had some technology that could rival theirs? These few EUF soldiers began to think there was some truth to conspiracy theorists' claims that nations had acquired alien technology from a previous extraterrestrial encounter. Even the laser concentration weapons the EUF was using seemed a little ahead of humanity's time. But most EUF soldiers didn't buy into superstition.

Anxiously waiting for the shuttle to touchdown, Alex caught a glimpse of something flashing past his window. He thought it might have been a figment of his imagination, but he took another look to see if it wasn't.

Speechless, Alex's face became stone. The flying forms he saw were massive but barely visible. Whatever they were, they were real. "What in the world are they?"

Two transparent birds that appeared to have glowing threads coursing through them were tailing the craft.

"Don't get scared," the pilot told Alex. "I've seen these things a couple of times. They're friendly."

The birds waltzed across the sky effortlessly, keeping pace with the shuttle. Their eight-yard wing span and slanting eyes peering into the windows caused Alex a surreal moment. These birds certainly did not exist on Earth. As a matter of fact, many birds and other wildlife no longer existed on Earth at all. Their habitats had been destroyed in the desperate search for things mankind could not live without, such as fossil fuels.

"We'll be on the ground shortly," the pilot informed everyone over the intercom.

Somehow, the birds' vibrating bodies played a heavenly melody. Alex could have lost himself in its enchantment for hours, but as the shuttle made its way to the surface, the songbirds ended their duet and jettisoned into the blue. Seeming to feed off the rays of the sun, they became streaks of light as they headed toward the bright star's warm embrace.

Maybe they live there, Alex speculated. Maybe they did, and this celestial species of bird just paid the planet a visit every now and then.

The closer the shuttle came to the ground, the more its humming engines faded. The pilot steadied the craft thirty feet above a grassy field and brought her down slowly. When the shuttle

became stationary, Alex unbuckled his seatbelt, took hold of the side rail, and pulled himself up to stretch. Hours of sitting had made him stiff.

With a keen eye, Alex noticed there was not an EUF soldier in sight, nor were there any facilities. He only saw dense forest.

“Why are we in the middle of nowhere?” Alex asked the pilot.

“We're at the outskirts of the Forest Region. I got fifteen in the back who're gonna be stationed at the EUF's base here.”

Like the Zull, all of the EUF's factions were located in different Regions, and each faction had their own base of operations, which the EUF simply called HQs. The soldiers who would be serving with the faction in the Forest Region were lucky to have such a beautiful land to call home.

“What base am I going to?” Alex asked. He wished he had been told more about his arrangements, but the personnel at the Reception Station simply gave him a shuttle number and told him to have a nice flight.

“The base you're gonna be staying at is located in the nearby Desert Region, which is only a short drive from where we are,” the pilot answered Alex. “If everything's been worked out like it should, a soldier from your base is coming to take you the rest of the way.”

“Good.” Looking outside, all appeared to be peaceful. “I gotta say, for a war zone, it doesn't look too dangerous out there.”

“Don't be fooled by what you see,” the pilot warned Alex. “Second Earth is a battlefield that's as dangerous as hell.”

It may not seem like it, but he must be right.

The pilot pressed a button on the control panel. Alex's door dropped open and fell to the

ground, becoming a ramp. “It was nice meeting you, but this is where you get off.”

Alex grabbed his two bags and hoisted one over his shoulder. “I enjoyed the trip. Maybe we’ll meet again someday.”

He was now outside with the fifteen soldiers, standing amidst the splendor of Second Earth’s environment. It was warm and sunny, with a slight breeze in the air. Just the way he liked it.

Three vehicles rolled up to pick up the soldiers. Their commanding officer stepped out of one of them and welcomed his new men to the Forest Region. They saluted him, and then they jumped on board.

As the soldiers rode away, the pilot gave Alex a wave goodbye from his cockpit window. The shuttle then bolted into the sky, leaving Alex alone among the mountains, lakes, and miles of forest. While exhilarated by such beauty, he wondered if mankind had truly learned from its mistakes, or would this planet, too, inevitably be destined for ruin?

A soldier wearing a pair of EUF Desert Camouflage Fatigues (DCF) drove up in a Combat Rover (EUF off-road jeep) and parked beside Alex. He got out and walked up to him. “I’m Scott Myers, your escort. Just a formality, but I need to see your journalist credentials.”

Alex pulled a card from his shirt pocket and handed it to Scott.

He took the card, glimpsed at it, and gave it back to Alex. “Mercer? Hold on, I know you.” Scott had seen Alex on NYN News broadcasts. “That’s right, you’re that war correspondent for New York Network News.”

“Yeah, that’s me.”

Scott threw a duffle bag into Alex’s arms. In the bag were a protective vest and helmet. “Put those on,” he ordered. “Even though we’re inside the EUF’s territory within the Forest Region and the likelihood of Zull forces getting past our border is slim, anything’s possible. So, if we do

run into some trouble, you'll need them."

Alex did as told. "This vest is a nice fit."

"Good. Don't take it off until we reach our destination. I've learned from experience what a lifesaver that vest can be."

"You sound like you've been fighting a long time."

"I entered the war just two months ago, but I've already had more than one close encounter with death in that short amount of time. I'm lucky to be alive."

Scott and Alex boarded the Combat Rover and sped away on a dirt path.

It was unusual for Alex not to be surrounded by bustling city life. Instead, trees and the ravishing scenery of flourishing plant life encompassed him in a silence that would make anyone feel at ease. *I could stay in this wilderness forever*, he thought.

The sound of an explosion broke the silence, and Alex's brief period of peace was over.

"What the hell was that!?" he yelled, over the noise.

Scott slammed on the brakes, sending the vehicle to a screeching halt that nearly jerked Alex from his seat, as more explosions went off. "It sounds like a unit is engaged in combat against a couple of Zull scout teams, a few kilometers outside our territory's border," Scott answered.

"Zull scout teams? I'm guessing their purpose is to find EUF headquarters and do recon," Alex said, stating the obvious.

The shrieking roar of two fighter jets thundered overhead as they cut the clouds.

Scott tilted his head up at the sky and used a hand to shield his eyes from the blinding gleam of the sun. "Yep, I was right. I thought those sounded like Shrikes. They're flying toward the origin of those explosions."

Alex looked up at the EUF fighter jets.

They had blast cannons on their wings, sonic propulsion engines, and lightweight armored plating. The EUF had no aircraft as swift, maneuverable, and as lethal as these.

“Wherever that battle is, it’s one hell of a fight if they’re sending Shrikes,” Scott said, after the jets were out of viewing range.

Alex continued to hear explosions and see smoke rising beyond the distant mountains. He didn’t know which side was winning, but he did know lives were being lost and that the planet was reaping the repercussions of the battle.

Scott stepped on the accelerator. “I don’t wanna get behind schedule. We need to be on our way.”

The sounds of the explosions reminded Alex not to become too comfortable. Second Earth was a planet where two warring races were trying to annihilate each other, and he could easily be caught up in the conflict. As the shuttle pilot had warned him, Second Earth—despite its peaceful appearance—was a battlefield that was “as dangerous as hell.”

CHAPTER TWO

Cold Gray Eyes

Scott was now driving through the Desert Region, a place the exact opposite of the lush landscape where he had picked up Alex not so long ago.

Even here, the journalist was marveled by all he saw. Towering dunes replaced the mountains. Furry critters popped in and out of their burrows, alarmed by the chugging of the Rover's engine. Grains of sand became animated as whatever slithered beneath scoured their way across the desolate landscape. For a Region so dry and bare, it was full of wonder.

“Alex, you must be incredibly brave, or stupid,” Scott commented.

“Why is that?”

“Only a handful of journalists have made it back to Earth alive. Either they got caught in crossfire, killed by friendly fire, stepped on a mine, died in the wilderness, whatever. That’s why I say you’ve got guts.”

“Thanks, but how much longer do we have before we reach the base?”

“Not long at all. It's right there.” Scott pointed to an EUF headquarters several miles ahead of them.

The base Alex was being taken to was HQ One. The mission of the HQ One faction was to exterminate the Zull in the Desert Region and surrounding Regions as well. But since they had only thirteen units (combat teams), each one consisting of fifty troops, and only one air platoon, HQ One did not have the manpower other divisions had. Nevertheless, the soldiers and airmen of this faction were some of the finest. Alex was in good hands.

Scott stopped the vehicle in front of the thirty-foot-high wall that protected the base. “This is it, Alex.”

A soldier at the gate asked Scott for the proper password, and after receiving an answer of “Nightfall,” he spoke into his radio. “Bryant to watchtower, Private Myers from Unit Two is back. Open the gate.”

“Roger,” came over the radio, full of static, and the automated gate started to retract.

“I know it looks like crap, but it's home,” Scott said, once the base had been revealed.

HQ One wasn't what Alex had thought it would be. It was a scrappy concrete building surrounded by a couple of tents and munition sheds, but HQ One wasn't exclusive. All of the EUF's bases were like this. They had low-grade quarters, five or six bleak conference rooms, a mess hall, and an understaffed infirmary on a single floor. However, the bases had been drastically improved compared to the way they were at the start of the war. During that time, the soldiers barely had electricity and running water, but with patience and steel resolve, they were able to live with the below-standard conditions while enhancements were made. They fully understood that the EUF was at war and had to put together these installations fast.

Scott drove into Terminal B, through a well-lit surface tunnel. He made a hard left into the motor pool, parked the Rover in lot five, and hopped out in a hurry. “We need to get a move on.”

A female mechanic came to Scott's side. “Who's your new friend here?” she asked, toweeling her oil-smeared hands.

“Just another journalist.”

“First one in awhile. He gonna be hanging with you misfits?”

“Nah, I think Bryson's got him with Unit One.” Scott glanced at his watch. “Hey, I'm on a tight schedule. I gotta get him to where he needs to be.” Duty before pleasure; Scott would have

plenty of time to mingle with his lady-friend later.

“Okay. See ya tonight in my quarters?” She winked.

“Oh yeah, I’ll be there.”

She blew him a kiss and went about her business.

“Come on, Alex,” Scott said, “Commander Bryson’s expecting you.”

HQ One was a Joint Forces Base, meaning soldiers from at least two nations made up the army here. It happened to be comprised of British and American forces. A few other nations also lent a couple of their soldiers, so while walking through the windowless arched corridors with Scott Myers, Alex saw men and women of several different nationalities. This was perhaps the most positive outcome to emerge from the armed conflict with the Zull. Nations that were previously at war with each other—and still harbored deep seeds of resentment—were fighting together for a common cause.

However, there were soldiers who felt uneasy fighting side by side with soldiers from nations that played a role in the deaths of great numbers of people from their own nation. Earth’s previous wars had created scars for some, but the formation of the EUF had begun the healing process. The EUF gave Alex hope that maybe, just maybe, peaceful coexistence between the Zull and humanity could also be achieved. If all of these nations—that had fought each other during the last two major wars—could strike a truce, why not Zull and humanity?

The journalist continued to see more Joint Forces soldiers pass him by. “When I think about it, Scott, it’s kind of ironic.”

“What is, Alex?”

“After years of war, what unites the nations of Earth is a war.”

“Hey, it doesn’t matter how things work out, only that they do.” The private had almost

forgotten the next step in protocol for a new arrival. “Oh, that's right, you need to go to the infirmary for your checkup. We have to make sure you're fit to be out there when the fireworks start.”

“My health was okayed at the shuttle station on Earth.”

“Another health check is required upon arrival, just to make sure nothing was missed. It's procedure.”

“Fine,” Alex grumbled.

“The infirmary is through those doors. I'll be out here in the corridor.”

Entering the infirmary, Alex's senses were bombarded. He heard nurses and doctors conversing chaotically, saw patients being rolled in left and right, and the scent of sterilizing chemicals invaded his nostrils.

“Hey,” Alex said, trying to flag down a doctor, “I'm here for . . .”

“Not now! Can't you see I'm busy!?”

Alex backed away. “Yeah . . . sorry.”

Adding to the commotion, an aggravating scream irrupted from the patient wing—piercing everyone's eardrums.

“This way, come on!” said a male nurse to four others, moving at break-neck speed. “That didn't sound good!”

Alex stepped aside so they wouldn't run him over. *This place is a madhouse.*

Though the infirmary was perhaps the most polished and up-to-date facility inside HQ One, it was also the most disturbing.

“Can I help you?” a woman asked, throughout the jumble of voices and clicking of machinery.

Alex turned to his left. "I sure hope you can, ma'am."

The woman was around thirty years of age. She was sporting a white lab coat, thin oval glasses, and shoulder-length curly dark hair. She also had the face and physique of a cover girl and a beaming smile that would make patients feel safe. "Hello, I'm Dr. Linda McKinnon," she introduced herself, flashing her snow-white teeth.

"Hi, I'm Alex Mercer."

"The reporter for NYN News?"

"Yeah. I just got here. I was told to come in for a checkup."

"I can help you with that. I'll be with you shortly, okay?"

"Fine by me."

"Good. Don't go anywhere."

"I won't."

In high heels, the doctor glided across the square-tiled floor and around a corner to another part of the infirmary.

Alex saw a petite young soldier sitting by herself and decided to keep her company. He didn't know how long the doctor would keep him waiting.

This soldier had a ponytail of light-brunette hair. She wore no makeup and was not outstandingly gorgeous, but she was still noticeably pretty, and Alex thought this sweetheart seemed out of place in this military environment.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" Alex asked, joining her in the chairs at the front of the room.

The girl answered in a low, shy voice. "Not at all. I'm Christina Love."

"Where are you from, Christina?"

"North Carolina."

“You’re awfully young. How old are you?”

“I had my eighteenth birthday three months ago.”

Alex wondered why such a gentle-looking person had enlisted in the EUF. “What unit are you a part of, Christina?”

“I’m actually a trainee. I finished half of my training on Earth, and I’m currently finishing up the other half here on Second Earth. After I’m done, I’ll be assigned to a unit.”

“Be careful, war is no playground.”

“So I’ve been told. Have we met?” Christina locked her bright hazel eyes on Alex. “I recognize you. You’re Alex Mercer.” Christina was delighted to meet the famous journalist in person.

“That would be me,” Alex said, offering his hand. “Pleased to meet you.”

Not letting go of her grip on his hand, a strange expression passed over Christina’s face.

“You and I . . . are the same . . . I can feel it. I’m not alone!”

“What do you . . . ?”

Before Alex could finish asking his question, the doctor came back and motioned for him to come with her. “Alright, you’re up, Alex Mercer.”

“Don’t worry, I think we’ll meet again,” Christina assured him.

In the Patient Care section of the infirmary, Alex sat down and waited for Dr. McKinnon to begin his Health and Physical (H&P). “Being a doctor for a military base in a war zone, you see plenty of injured men and women, don’t you?” he asked conversationally.

“I do, even with ten doctors on staff,” she said, taking off her lab coat and unveiling the black dress underneath. “Some have minor injuries, like cuts and bruises. Some have not so minor injuries,” she said, adding, “really, really not so minor injuries.”

“I can imagine. You’ve seen some men and women die in this room, haven’t you?”

The doctor tossed her coat onto a table. “I have. It’s very heartbreaking to see people so young fighting to hold on to life. A lot of times, I’m the last person they lay their eyes on. But I take great pride in knowing I do everything I can to save people from dying.”

“You’re passionate about what you do and the role you play in people’s lives,” Alex commented. “You’re the kind of person I’d like to have as my doctor.”

“Thank you.” There was that smile again—so powerful, so comforting.

A medic rolled a stretcher through Patient Care’s opened doors. Alex watched as he took the two body bags on it through a set of automatic sliding doors and disappeared into a chilling mist.

The body bags caused Alex to shiver. “Deceased soldiers, I assume.”

Dr. McKinnon’s smile had faded, and she had closed her eyes—not wanting to see the bags as they passed. “You’re correct.” She reopened her eyes after hearing the doors clank shut and feeling the cold draft dissipate. “You would think I’d be used to seeing body bags, but I continue to get chills up and down my spine when I see them.”

“That’s understandable.” Alex looked at the sign posted over the automatic sliding doors: WARNING! FREEZING TEMPERATURES BEYOND THIS POINT! “Where was that medic going with those bodies?”

“He was taking them to Cryogenics. The bodies are stored inside conservation capsules and frozen, so the remains can stay preserved for the flight back to Earth, where a proper burial and funeral will take place.”

“Cryogenics doesn’t sound like a place I would want to be part of my tour.”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t want it to be either. Let’s go ahead and get you checked out.”

Once Alex’s health was cleared and it was confirmed that he did not carry any strain of

Earth's newest diseases (some communicable, some not), he returned to Patient Waiting to see if Christina was still there, but she was nowhere in sight. *I wonder what that girl meant when she said we were the same.*

* * *

Base commanders were the ones in charge. They created strategies and kept world leaders informed with progress reports. No one could argue that Eric Bryson, an African-American lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army, was not the perfect choice to be commander of the EUF's HQ One.

He had served with honor during the last two World Wars, and his bravery and leadership had led troops to victory on more than one occasion. He was definitely qualified for the job.

Scott entered the office of Commander Bryson and saluted. "The civilian journalist from Earth is ready to see you, Sir. He's outside your door."

"Send him in."

Scott opened the door and told Alex, "The commander is ready to see you."

The journalist walked in and saw a hefty man sitting at a desk, dressed in a military coat decorated with ribbons of valor. He was clean shaven from head to chin, and his bold face spoke of courage.

Behind his desk was a wall plastered with medals and certificates of achievement. But what mattered more to him than anything on that wall was the photographed portrait that hung above his window. The woman and the two children in it were his life, his reason for breathing. His wife, Sheila, and two eleven-year-old sons were what had sustained him throughout his long military career with the U.S. Army and now the EUF.

Alex went up to the commander's desk and began to introduce himself. "Hello, sir, I'm . . ."

Before Alex could finish, Bryson cut his introduction short. “Yes, I know who you are. Your dossier tells me everything about you.” Bryson read from a computer tablet. “You're originally from Phoenix, Arizona, which is where you spent most of your childhood. In your latter years, you worked for various news organizations. You got your major break in the profession by working as a journalist for NYN News, located in New York City, where you currently reside. And now you're here to cover this war from a firsthand perspective, but this isn't anything new for you, seeing as how you covered certain events of World War IV. Have I misstated anything, Mr. Mercer?”

“Sounds about right,” Alex answered with asperity. He was a bit angry because he was interrupted during his cordial greeting.

“Journalism *can* be dangerous. What made you choose it as a profession?”

“I have my reasons.”

“I can see you're not one for smalltalk,” Bryson said. “Well, neither am I. Let's get down to business.” He was always to the point and never liked wasting time.

Bryson opened a drawer of his desk and tossed Alex an I.D. badge.

“What's this for?” the journalist asked.

“That I.D. badge is the key to your room. If you're caught in the middle of a firefight and get killed, that badge is how we identify your body, if you haven't been blown to scraps.”

Alex clipped the I.D. to his shirt pocket. “Any areas of this facility I need to stay away from?”

“Areas that would be off limits to you can only be accessed by someone with a military I.D. So don't worry about accidentally straying into an area where you're not allowed.”

“Good. I guess I'll head to my quarters now,” Alex said.

“I think you should get acquainted with your assigned unit first.” Once again the commander had other ideas.

“My assigned unit?”

“Yes, the team of soldiers you’ll be allowed to accompany on missions, giving you the opportunity to cover this war from firsthand experience.”

“Where do I go to meet this team?” Alex asked.

“Your unit leader is awaiting you in Terminal C. Private Myers will point you in the right direction.” Bryson began organizing the papers on his desk, obviously dismissing him.

Alex looked up at the portrait of the two smiling boys and the fine-looking woman whose dark skin, full lips, and ebony eyes would leave an imprint in his mind for days to come. “She’s captivating.”

“No kidding,” Bryson said, overtly. He then resumed his work.

At 1710, Alex was wandering around Terminal C, looking for the leader of the unit he was assigned to. Alex cringed at the loud noises of vehicles being serviced and prepped for combat in the motor pool. *Where’s this guy I’m supposed to meet? It would’ve been nice if the commander had told me what he looks like.* Just then, a beautiful woman with a soft, creamy complexion approached Alex.

Her steps were graceful, like a model on the runway, and her stare was direct. She had light-blond hair that glistened like gold as it fell to her shoulders, and she appeared to be around the same age as Alex.

This woman was nothing short of mesmerizing. She had a jaw-dropping beauty that demanded attention, a beauty that could make eyes sore. At first glance, it was easy to assume this lovely young woman’s nature would be gentle and kind, but her cold, soul-piercing gray

eyes told a different story.

Could she be the soldier I'm looking for? Alex wondered.

Her DCF was neat and proper. The name patch above the right chest pocket and V-shaped rank above the left were perfectly aligned with each other, and the EUF flag patch was dead centered between, none of them even slightly off mark. She looked professional to a T. And Alex noticed her DCF, though slack, perfectly modeled her nice shape.

The woman put one hand on her hip and took a good look at Alex, trying to determine if this noncombatant would slow down her unit.

Alex didn't like the look on her face right now. It wasn't quite a frown, but almost. And her unblinking icy eyes were glaring holes through his pupils. It was the look of someone who *really* didn't want to be bothered with tag-along civilians.

After a few seconds, she decided he didn't look completely hopeless, but she told herself she'd watch him closely.

"I'm Unit One's leader, Lieutenant Andrea Blair," the woman introduced herself in an elegant British accent. "You must be Alex." The journalist extended his hand, but he was rebuffed; instead, Andrea rudely turned her back and quickly walked to what is known as a Multi-Terrain Assault Vehicle (MTAV). "Come with me, Mr. Mercer. You might as well join my two men and me on our intelligence gathering assignment. And please, do keep up."

Trailing Andrea, Alex contemplated her beauty. She was drop dead gorgeous, simply breathtaking. But she appeared to be all business, and her bright gray eyes were fixating, yet so emotionless . . . so . . . cold.

Andrea guided Alex to the MTAV's control room, where two members of her unit introduced themselves.

“The name's Bobby Dixon,” said a Tennessean in his late twenties with navy blue eyes and a crew cut.

“Hi, I'm Alex Mercer, NYN News journalist,” Alex responded, shaking the corporal's hand. “I'm sure you've seen me on TV before.”

The arrogant grin Bobby always carried on his face told Alex he was sure of his warrior skills. Alex hoped he could back up his confidence in the field.

“My fearsome comrade here is Sergeant First Class Tyrell Reese, a fella even I wouldn't wanna to go head-to-head with,” Bobby said, giving his friend the props he deserved.

The African-American Sergeant firmly shook Alex's hand. “I've seen you on the news a lot. Nice to meet you in person.”

Damn, that's some handshake, Alex thought, resisting the urge to massage his hand. It felt like he was gonna break my bones. Definitely looks like this guy could, if he wanted.

Tyrell's toned physique gave Alex the impression that Bobby was right; he was not someone to be messed with. But Alex couldn't know that not only was this Chicagoan a strong fighter; he was also a smart and calm, by the book individual who always thought things through. Tyrell Reese was a combination of intelligence and physical power, which made him one of Unit One's best.

“I'm sure we'll get along well,” Alex said.

Rolling amid the barren desert on auto drive, the MTAV's large wheels spun clouds of sand into the air and crushed rocks in its wake. This massive armored juggernaut was an unstoppable weapon of destruction. The word “tank” could not even describe it. It had the firepower to level a town.

Alex stood inside the spacious interior of this behemoth combat vehicle with his face pinned

to a circular window and his hands gripped across a rail. “Just how hot does it get out here?”

“The temperature is currently one hundred and twenty degrees and can become even hotter before the day is over,” Andrea informed him. “Of course, this extreme heat is nothing for a Zull. Their bodies, according to Global Research Center, adapt to weather conditions, just like cold-blooded animals.”

Alex glanced from the window occasionally at Andrea. He simply could not help it. There was something incredibly alluring about her. Perhaps it was her innocent face, which seemed to have the perfect symmetry. Or maybe it was her slim hourglass body. Whatever it was, Alex could not resist adoring the beauty of this gorgeous British soldier, but a glare from her cold gray eyes sent his stare back toward the window.

“I’m curious,” Alex started, “just how many Zull bases do we know the location of?”

“Over here, Alex,” Tyrell said, gesturing his hand, “see for yourself.” He turned on a monitor, and a three-dimensional holographic map emanated from its screen. “Those blue dots, scattered along the map, represent the bases of Zull factions that haven't been taken out yet. And we have no idea whether those are all that's left or not. All the EUF can do is continue to send units on search and find expeditions to see if there's more.

“Unit One has been on more of these missions than I can count.” Tyrell reminisced about many of the expeditions Unit One had embarked on. “We've discovered Zull bases underground, on the ocean, you name it.”

“Doesn't it get irritable scouring the planet for months, sometimes just to come across nothing?”

“It does, but the mobile living facilities we use aren't bad. And the time that a unit spends together helps strengthen their bond.”

Alex stared at the map. “So after a Zull faction's base is found, all the EUF has to do is launch an assault and take it over.”

Tyrell thought Alex was making it all sound too simple and decided to give him a reality check. “That's easier said than done, Mr. Mercer. It's not like we can just waltz up to a Zull faction's HQ and commandeer it.”

“I didn't think it was a piece of cake,” Alex retorted, letting the sergeant know he had common sense.

“It damn well isn't. Take a look.” Tyrell touched one of the blue dots, and the map zoomed in on it. “That Zull base is in the Jungle Region, and those red dots are the smaller forts and outposts that fortify the territory around that base. It takes time to get rid of ‘em. That's why it's not so easy to get to a Zull faction's HQ.”

“There's quite a few red dots.” Alex estimated maybe fifty or so.

“Yeah, the longer we don't know where a Zull faction is, the more time they have to build up the defenses around their territory, and the Zull set up shop pretty fast.”

Alex's eyes remained focused on the hologram. “So whose job is it to break through those forts and outposts, get to that base, and make sure that Zull faction is completely erased off the map?”

“The EUF's HQ Three is located in that Region, so it's their job,” Tyrell explained. “As a matter of fact, I bet they've got units staging assaults against those outposts even as we speak. It'll take time, but they'll eventually get to that Zull faction's base and take it over. Once they do, the Jungle Region will completely belong to us.”

“How long do you think it will take to accomplish that?”

“It takes three or more months to wipe out an entire Zull faction and claim their territory for

the EUF. And believe me, the ordeal is no picnic. I remember when units One, Two, and Three of HQ One spent about that much time in the Mountain Region, trying to take out the Zull faction there. We had to go through hell to get to their base. And one day, an operation went south. That's when Michael . . ." Tyrell paused, his thoughts wandering through the past.

Everyone instantly became silent. Alex even saw Andrea blink away a tear.

Noticing Alex's curious gaze, Andrea rubbed her eyes and stiffened. "Excuse me, Mr. Mercer, do you find me amusing or something? Or is it that you find me attractive? Whatever it is, I suggest you keep your damn eyeballs off me if you want to keep them."

Alex turned away, disliking her volatile tone. "Did I miss something here? Who's Michael?" he asked Tyrell.

"Sorry, I got off subject." Sergeant First Class Reese touched the blue dot again, and the map zoomed out.

The journalist, always observant, took another look at the holographic landscape. "I count thirty-five or more Zull bases but only fifteen for the EUF. How did we get *this* outnumbered?"

"Well, after we declared war on the Zull, it took three months for Earth's leaders to get the EUF established and figure out how it would operate. Then we started constructing bases and transporting troops, to prepare for the war ahead. But the Zull were much faster than us. By the time we created our first five factions, they had fifteen of their own ready to take us on, and their soldiers had far more advanced facilities to run operations out of."

"I didn't know the EUF was outdone from the start. Our world leaders seem to give the public only what they want them to hear. They act like things aren't as bad as they seem, when, in reality, everything doesn't seem to be going all that great." Alex knew this would make a good story. His excitement was kindled by the grim situation.

“Yeah, but now you're getting the truth. The Zull had us beat when it came to force development. And we believe the reason wasn't just because they had faster shuttles that enabled them to transport their construction materials, troops, and arsenal quicker than us. We're guessing they must have gotten back to Second Earth at least two months prior to the EUF, giving them a head start in this race to see who can establish military dominance the quickest.”

As Tyrell continued to explain, Alex learned that it took six months of Year One for the EUF to have twenty-five of their subpar bases up and running. In that same amount of time, the Zull had fifty highly advanced ones, and they had twice the amount of aircraft and combat vehicles that the EUF had on Second Earth. But even though the Zull and EUF were mostly building up their armies and staking out their territory during Year One, battles did happen as they developed their forces. The second year of war is when things really got intense.

The EUF would establish factions and try to occupy Regions before the Zull, as the Zull would do the same. The EUF would try to conquer the Zull's territory, and they would do the same. It was a back and forth struggle that continued till this very day.

“Overall, who would you say is winning this war, the Zull or EUF?” Alex inquired.

“We once had over forty factions, and there was a time during Year Two when it seemed like we had bested the Zull. For six months, we experienced very few attacks, but those six months were soon followed by a bunch of 'em. The Zull found the majority of our HQs and took 'em out, decreasing our number to fifteen. And even though we've dismantled a great deal of their factions too, I'd have to say the Zull are winning this war.”

“Not what I wanted to hear.”

“Do you want more bad news?” Tyrell asked.

“There's more?” Alex's tone was marked by disbelief.

“Unfortunately, there is. Do you see that green cube at the center of the map?”

“How could I miss it?” The green cube stood out among the blue dots.

“That represents the Zull’s primary fortress. We call it a fortress city. Though we’ve had difficulty attacking a Zull faction's base, their defenses are insubstantial compared to that main fortress.”

“Sounds like that place is no joke. How long do you think it took the Zull to build it?”

“We don’t believe it was built here, like their other bases,” Tyrell said. “We’re guessing that thing is one huge starship, and the Zull brought it with them to use as their main headquarters. But you’re right, that place is no joke. The fortress must be heavily armed at every corner, and we have absolutely no idea what’s in store for us if we go there, no data, nothing. But we do know all of the Zull factions' essential needs, from food to weapons, are made and distributed from there. That's one reason why the Zull have an advantage over the EUF. We have to transport our food, vehicles, weaponry, and medical supplies from our current homeworld, but they don't. They can resupply those things in no time. We've also learned that the materials the Zull use to build their bases now come from there as well.”

“So what the EUF needs to do is crush the Zull's main fortress.” Alex was learning fast.

“Right. By destroying it, we're cutting the head off the snake.”

“Can't the EUF just rush the damn place?”

“With only fifteen factions left, we're not strong enough. And if we did try such a stunt, you can bet that soldiers from several of the Zull's factions are gonna come join the thousands already there, to help 'em overpower us.”

Bobby Dixon inserted himself into the conversation. “Well, whatever we're gonna do about that place, we need to do it *soon*. Because the EUF's current plan of action, trying to eliminate all

the Zull factions we can find before going to the main stronghold, ain't good enough.”

“Why not?” Alex asked, curious for his take.

“The Zull are annihilating our forces and depleting our resources faster than we are theirs. So even if we manage, by some long shot, to find and take out the majority of their factions, before going to the main stronghold, I don't think the EUF would have much of an army left to attack with. The plan we're working with now just ain't getting us anywhere.”

“He's right,” Tyrell agreed. “The EUF hasn't been fighting with a winning strategy, and we're damn lucky the Zull haven't found our last fifteen HQs and disposed of their factions.”

Bobby rested his back against a wall of the MTAV. “Hopefully, Operation Scorpions' Nest will end this war for good.”

“Operation Scorpions' Nest? What's that?” Alex asked him.

“Because this war has dragged on long enough, the big wheels on Earth have been planning something huge. They call it Operation Scorpions' Nest, and I'm guessing it involves the destruction of that primary fortress.”

Tyrell clicked off the monitor. “I know we need some kind of master plan, because if we continue on the course we're on, I think the Zull will eventually beat us.”

Bobby hit the palm of his right hand with his left fist. “You got that right. The Zull are killing more of our guys than we can replace in a timely manner. That's why the EUF is on a big recruiting campaign. I know the option of nuclear armaments is off the table. There would be no use fighting for a planet that's been blown to hell. But if that option was open, we could win this thing a whole lot quicker.”

Alex knew that using nuclear armaments would not be good for the planet. “Quicker but not smarter. We don't know how the Zull would retaliate if we used something as mass-destructive

as a nuclear weapon. The Zull might strike back with something equal to or a whole lot worse than what we've got. And if they did, this war could escalate into an all-out massacre, wiping everyone out and severely damaging the planet.”

Tyrell reentered the conversation. “If Operation Scorpions' Nest works out, that will never happen, and we'll have finally claimed what's rightfully ours.”

Alex wondered why someone would think the planet rightfully belonged to the human race and not the Zull too, but he wisely kept silent.

Tyrell seated himself. “Our mission for today is to scout out a Zull outpost, to gather Intel for an attack.”

The journalist shifted his attention to Andrea. “Ms. Blair, you must be proud to be a unit leader. Someone must have seen a lot of potential to select you.”

“If you're trying to compliment me, shove it. Only weak imbeciles need other people's praise.”

Andrea was not making it easy for Alex to like her, but he continued to converse cordially. “As long as you and I are talking, Ms. Blair, it would be nice to know a little more about you.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but I'm not a topic of discussion. Now is there anything else you'd like to know, Mr. Mercer?”

“Yeah,” Alex said. He held a digital mic to Andrea's lips and pressed RECORD. He decided she was going to be his first interviewee. “I'd like to get your opinion on what you think makes the Zull any different from us.”

“Their superior physical strength, their rapid healing ability.”

“No, I'm saying: what makes our cause for fighting greater than theirs? Because of the arrogance and mistakes of mankind, the people of Earth need a new planet to inhabit and found

this one. Because rising temperatures are turning the Zull's homeworld into a crisp, the Zull also need a new planet to inhabit and found the same world as we. The Zull need this planet as much as we do. Why do we make them out to be the 'bad guys' and humankind out to be the 'good guys,' when, in fact, we're all fighting for the same thing, survival? The Zull's purpose for wanting this planet is no less worthy than ours, yet we see them as evil beings that don't deserve to live among us."

Andrea swatted the mic from her face, knocking it to the floor. "They're killers, Alex! These ruffians are nothing like us! They're murderers!" she said fiercely, obviously disagreeing.

"That's not the way I see it."

"Look, Mr. news reporter, you can't possibly understand . . ." Andrea's reply was cut off by the sound of an alarm.

"Andrea," Tyrell said, "the receiver is picking up an SOS signal. I think it's from members of Unit Six. They're engaging enemy soldiers close to our proximity and need assistance. Orders, ma'am?"

"We're it? There aren't any other units in the area who can help them?"

"None."

"Let's do it." Andrea attached a gun belt around her svelte waist. "Our conversation will have to be concluded another time," she said to Alex, poking him in the chest with a finger.

In eight minutes, the MTAV was at the coordinates of the emergency distress transmission.

"I trust you know how to use this," Andrea said to Alex, giving him a handgun.

"Yeah, I do."

Any journalist stupid enough to come to Second Earth was required by EUF Regulation to undergo a week of firearm's training. Though guns were not Alex's specialty, he was fully

capable of using one, if he *had* to.

Andrea put on some knee pads and turned to Alex with her game face on. “While we’re out there, pay close attention to your surroundings. Because of the Zull's ability to take on the characteristics of the environment around them, the soldiers we're about to face may very well blend in with all that sand out there.”

“Must be a hell of an ability to have.”

“It definitely makes them deadly. I've even seen one of these *creatures* turn their skin rock-solid just by touching a stone. I've seen others camouflage themselves by becoming as green as the forests. This entire planet is an asset to them.”

“I'll have to be very alert then.”

“Yes, you will.” Andrea saw that Bobby and Tyrell had on their combat gear and were ready to go. “You two grab an MR-61 Rifle, and set your blast level on maximum output,” she ordered, then proceeded to leave the vehicle. “If you’re coming, Alex, *move it*,” she said in an assertive tone.

As Alex and his new acquaintances walked across the desert, they came closer and closer to their destination, which was just outside the border of the EUF's territory in the Desert Region.

Tyrell, who was sweating bullets, noticed Alex was not annoyed by the hot weather. “This heat doesn’t bother you?”

“I’m used to it. I was a resident of Phoenix, Arizona, after all.” Alex looked at the arms Bobby and Tyrell were carrying and then looked at his own small handgun. “You two get the big kids' toys. That’s not fair.”

Bobby playfully slapped Alex on the back. “Sorry, buddy. We didn’t have another MR-61 for you, but you’ll be okay with what you’ve got. Besides, the K-14 handgun is the only weapon you

journalists have been trained on.”

A rush of wind blew past, and Tyrell used his hands to block a dusting of sand from his eyes. “If this wind picks up, we’ll have to put on our head gear. We don’t want this stuff in our eyes or our lungs.”

Andrea stopped and faced Alex. “We’re nearing the location of the distress signal. If you see a Zull soldier, armed or defenseless, do not hesitate to pull that trigger.”

“Kill without remorse, is that it?” Alex received only a frown from Andrea.

* * *

The fight was over when the team arrived at the battle site, and they found seven dead EUF soldiers shot to a bloodied pulp.

“These guys must have gone head-to-head with a Zull scout team while on border patrol duty,” Tyrell said. “We’ve seen a recent increase in the number of scout teams close to our territory here in the Desert Region, especially along our border. If the Zull keep up this kind of effort, I fear they might discover HQ One soon.”

“Earlier, there was some action near the border of the EUF’s territory in the Forest Region,” Alex stated. “I guess these Zull scout teams are really good at their job.”

Bobby looked down at the dead bodies. Not being there for his comrades irritated him. *Sorry we weren’t able to make it.* Even though he wasn’t there to witness the battle, he was sure that the EUF soldiers had given the Zull one hell of a fight before going down.

Andrea’s eyebrows arched, every muscle in her face contracted, and then her anger exploded. “Damn it! Damn those Zull!” Andrea pushed Alex in front of her, causing him to almost stumble to his knees. “Take a good look, Alex! This is what those bastard Zull do to us! What do you think of them now!? Do you still believe us humans aren’t better than them!?”

“My mind hasn’t changed!” Alex shot back. “I believe exactly what I believed ten minutes ago! We would've done the same to them! Wasn’t it you who told me to kill on sight, whether they’re armed or otherwise!”

“Stop being a soft-hearted moron and start . . . !”

Bobby found a survivor lying in the sand, but not one of theirs. “People, we got an injured Zull over here!”

For the first time, Alex came face-to-face with a Zull soldier in the flesh.

The Zull’s form was humanoid, but his skin was neither coarse or smooth, and its color was similar to the pale surface of Earth’s moon. The Zull also had a set of V-shaped ridges receding from his forehead to the tip end of his nose. More ridges originated at the edge of his chin and continued under his jaw, and he had no hair covering his head, a characteristic of Zull males.

Andrea removed the K-14 from her holster and slowly started to walk toward the injured Zull soldier. *He won’t be breathing much longer.*

Alex pulled a mini video camera from his duffle bag to film everything he saw. As the lens of the camera zoomed in on the dark pupils within the yellow sclera of the Zull’s eyes, Alex could see fear, the fear one knows when he is about to die at the hands of an enemy. “Andrea, don’t. He’s defenseless. He isn’t a threat. So why snuff out this Zull’s life for no reason?”

“Alex, this Zull bastard wouldn’t hesitate to shoot you in the back, given the opportunity! Besides, we cannot allow him to kill again!” Andrea pressed her gun against the armored plating covering the Zull soldier’s chest and depressed the trigger.

Feeling the blast penetrate his chest at point-blank range, the Zull let out an inhuman scream that echoed throughout the desert. Though the blast was terribly painful, it was quick. His pain did not last long; within seconds, he could no longer feel anything.

For Andrea, he was one less enemy to worry about. *Good riddance. One less piece of filth fouling up the planet.*

Birds were now circling the lifeless Zull soldier like crows who had found the carcass that would become their next meal. Every time these airborne scavengers opened their beaks to uncoil their split-tongue, their hellish hiss made Alex's heart pound, but Andrea remained unshaken. And when one of them flew directly in front of her face, its blood-red eyes met her cold, deadpan stare and fled, leaving some of its black feathers drifting in the wind.

Alex went over to the dead Zull first, and next he approached the slain EUF soldiers. To him, these two sensible, sentient races—who shared the same desire to see their people survive—were butchering each other for no reason. Humanity and the Zull had more in common than they wanted to admit. They all mourned their dead, they all breathed the same air, and they all had feelings and emotions. Looking at the dead bodies, Alex could not stand seeing this happen.

Andrea zigzagged the tip of her boot in the sand, rubbing off the blue Zull blood that stained it, and then she reactivated the safety on her weapon, reattached it to the holster on her belt, and made her way back to the MTAV without saying another word.

Alex could not believe how someone could be so emotionless after a point-blank kill. It was like Andrea had a heart of stone. He knew there had to be a reason for her behavior, though. No one just woke up one day with that type of attitude. Something must have happened to make her this way, but what? Alex was dying to know.

* * *

The MTAV returned to the entrance gate outside HQ One. Andrea and her men had called in a medical team (MT) to retrieve the bodies of the EUF soldiers and then successfully completed their probe of the enemy territory, gathering the necessary data for an attack.

A voice was heard over the MTAV's intercom. "This is watchtower. Password, please."

Andrea said, "Password: Angel Eyes." The gate opened, and the MTAV crossed into Terminal C.

While exiting the vehicle, Alex heard the sound of metal ping onto the terminal's steel floor. He looked around to find the source of the sound. Something caught his eye, and he stooped down and picked up a pendant. Engraved in it was the name *BLAIR*.

Bryson was waiting for Andrea in the terminal and met her as she was coming from the MTAV. "I was informed that you had come back from your mission. How did it go?"

"Here, Sir." Andrea gave the commander a data cube, which was three centimeters cubed. "All the reconnaissance data we obtained is stored there."

"Excellent." With the reconnaissance data in his hands, Bryson could begin formulating a strategy for HQ One's next assault. "Good work. I'll be seeing you tomorrow," he said, before walking off.

"Where are you off to?" Bobby asked Andrea.

"The indoor range. Join me if you'd like."

"I reckon I will."

Andrea commenced with firearm's practice at the range and shot every light beam through the head or heart of her holographic targets. *Zull scum, none of you deserve to live.* Anyone could see the hate in Andrea's eyes. For her, every hologram was a living, breathing Zull soldier. *Die, all of you.* It did not take long for Andrea's practice gun to be depleted of power, but she did not notice and continued to unconsciously pull the trigger—almost like she was in a trance. *I'll get you for what you did to him.*

Bobby snatched the gun from Andrea's hand. "Hey, gal, your weapon's dead. Must not have

had a full charge. You okay?"

"Yeah . . . I'm alright."

"You must've been doing some deep thinking."

"No, I'm just pissed off by what those Zull did to our men."

Bobby peeked at Andrea's score board. "Damn, thirty-four head shots and nineteen to the heart. Take it easy, doll."

"I was trying to release a little aggression."

"You mean a lot of aggression."

"I need to take a shower and grab a nap." Andrea spoke the command to end the session. The computer powered down, and Andrea left the area.

Tyrell passed her on his way to the range and gestured to get Bobby's attention. "She okay?"

"No telling. She seems to become more infuriated by the day."

"I understand how she feels," Tyrell said. "I was there; I saw what she had to go through a year ago."

"Yeah, but I'm afraid her anger might be getting the best of her, and leadership requires a clear head. You know that."

"Andrea's been leading Unit One pretty darn effectively for an entire year. I think she'll be fine."

"I hope you're right."

* * *

Andrea stepped into the four-wall shower in her quarters, and with the voice command of "on," water burst from the shower's nozzle. Her entire body sighed with relief as the water hit her face, trailed down her neck, and followed the shape of her frame.

Fatigued from a long day and tired of her strenuous life, Andrea dropped onto her knees on the sleek shower surface. The cool, soothing downpour of water cascaded over her back and drenched her hair. To Andrea, the sound of the falling water was a refreshing relief from the noise of gunfire and screams of the dying.

For an instant, it was as if time itself stopped. Thinking about the seven EUF soldiers who had died today caused memories to flood Andrea's mind—*painful* memories. Still on her knees, Andrea buried her face in her hands. Her heart swelled with grief, and tears streamed from her eyes. The hurt and pain bottled up inside was uncovered and exposed.

An ocean of tears joined the water washing over Andrea's body. Then there came a knock at the door. "Off," she said, causing the pouring water to cease. The knock was heard again. "Hold on!" she shouted, not wanting her privacy disturbed. It was the worst time for someone to drop by, uninvited.

Andrea stood up and ran her fingers through her soaked hair. "Dryer, on." Vents above the shower blew gusts of heat down. Once fully dried, she pulled back the curtain, stepped out, and wrapped herself in a silky teal robe.

Andrea opened the door and rolled her eyes. At her doorstep was none other than Alex Mercer, and she had seen enough of him for today.

"Sorry if I came at a bad time, Ms. Blair," Alex apologized, "but you dropped this earlier." He opened the palm of his hand to reveal the pendant he had picked up.

The beautiful Briton took it from him with no show of gratitude.

"I took a look at the picture inside," Alex said. "Sorry. Journalistic instincts. So, who is he, a relative or lover?"

"None of your damn business." The door closed, and the lights went off.

Alex thought about Andrea. Was that all she had to say? As Andrea lay awake in bed, she thought about Alex as well. She wondered if he was on Second Earth for primarily journalistic purposes, or did he have other motives? They were both trying to unravel the other's mysteries.

On his way from Andrea's room, Alex ran into Bobby Dixon, who had finished target practice and was coming from the range. "Where are you hurrying to, Alex?"

"Dinner."

"Mind if I join you?" Bobby asked.

"Not at all."

The mess hall was packed with soldiers. They were all laughing and sharing stories as they ate their evening meal.

A group of soldiers—all from the same unit—came in with gratification on their faces and took their place at a table.

"How many did you get, John?" one soldier asked another.

"I killed ten of those Zull."

"Ten? I got twelve," his companion boasted.

Waiting in the dinner line, Alex watched the soldiers prattle on about how many Zull they had killed and saw how pleased they were. But the Zull had loved ones; the Zull were parents. Alex could not understand how the deaths of others could cause someone to feel satisfaction. Maybe it was because humanity saw the Zull as simply "the enemy" and not as people.

Bobby tapped Alex on the shoulder. "Second Earth to Alex, you're next in line."

The journalist, deep in thought, had forgotten where he was. "Huh . . . oh, right."

The two chose their meals and seated themselves.

"Not bad," Alex admitted, stabbing a fork into his meatloaf. "The meat's a bit chewy,

though.” It was better than the rations he was forced to eat for two weeks on that shuttle. “Bobby, why did you sign up for the EUF?” Alex asked with a mouthful.

“I’m U.S. military, and anyone currently serving is sent to Second Earth, like it or not.”

“You enjoy the military?”

“I do. My father and grandfather were military. It’s kinda a tradition. I’m a thrill seeker, anyway. Life gets dull quick if you don’t keep it interesting.”

Bobby Dixon could not have described himself any better, because a thrill seeker he was. He loved to hunt game, hang glide, and mountain climb. He loved anything that involved risk. And there was never a fight he would run from or a dare he wouldn’t take. Bobby Dixon's idea of a good time included a few drinks, a bar brawl or two, and taking a woman home at the end of the night, which was not hard for him to do, using that Southern-boy charm.

“After the horrors I witnessed while reporting on Earth's last major war, I’d never want to be in the military,” Alex made known. “I’d never want to find myself fighting a senseless war.”

“You’re one of them antiwar types, aren’t you?”

“Not exactly. I believe war is sometimes necessary, but many wars aren't. Peace negotiations could often settle things, rather than the use of guns and tanks.”

“You don’t really think we can negotiate with the Zull, do you?” Bobby countered. “The GSC’s diplomats tried that, but after all was said and done, the Zull and the diplomats weren’t able to see eye to eye.”

“The talks between our peoples ended far too early. After just one week of back and forth negotiations, the Zull and the diplomats all became convinced that war was the only way to resolve the feud. I believe if peace talks had progressed longer, this war, which is causing many deaths for Zull and human, wouldn't have occurred. But it isn’t impossible to end this conflict

diplomatically and stop the senseless violence.”

“Keep dreaming. That isn’t gonna happen, and if you don’t open your eyes, stop feeling sweet for the enemy, and realize this is 'survival of the fittest,' you're not gonna live long. To the Zull, all your ‘can’t we live in peace’ talk is meaningless. They see that as a sign of weakness, and weakness only gets you to one place—the grave. If you aren’t ready to go there yet, you’d better toughen up.” Bobby tried to give Alex a dose of reality.

“My beliefs are part of who I am, and I believe we can end this thing peacefully.”

“I’m telling you, there’s no chance of that.”

“We’ll have to agree to disagree.”

“A world where two men can’t disagree and be friends is a world I wouldn’t wanna live in. You stand up for what you believe in and don’t back down to anyone. I like that.”

“Thanks.” After taking a couple of bites from their meals, Alex asked the question Bobby knew was coming. “So, what do you know about Andrea?”

“Not a whole lot.”

“Tell me what you do know.”

Bobby laid his fork down and wiped his mouth with a napkin. “I know her pop’s deceased. Her mom’s alive, though. And Andrea has a brother who’s ten, I think, and a sis in her teens.”

“What else?”

“I know that before joining the EUF, Andrea was a member of the British Vanguard.”

“British Vanguard? That's some special division of Britain’s military, right?”

“Yeah. They’re like Britain’s knights in shining armor. They operate in five-man strike teams, and they don’t kid around. The Vanguard has played major roles in many of Britain’s military operations, and they’ve often worked with the U.S. military to topple regimes and neutralize

threats to both countries. The Vanguard has done covert stuff the public will never know about, and they're top notch. You'd have to be out of your damn mind to wanna mess with them. That's all I know about her. She tells Tyrell more stuff than she tells me."

"They must be good friends."

"They are. Tyrell was a member of Unit One a year before I was, so they're tight. The only other thing I can tell you about Andrea is the obvious: she's quiet, keeps to herself, and she isn't all that cordial."

"That, I could tell. Is she always so cold?" Alex asked.

"What can I say? Andrea's not the tenderhearted type. She's a woman who's deeply devoted to her duty, and she isn't interested in making a whole lot of new friends, especially with new arrivals, like you."

"She isn't easy to get close to, is she?"

"True, but she's one hell of a companion to have in a firefight." Bobby reminisced about all the times Andrea had saved his neck. "She'll guard your back with all she's got. You may not like her attitude, but she's a good person.

"Just a head's up, many guys have tried to get her attention, but she gives them all the cold shoulder, and their hopes sink faster than a brick in water. So don't go getting your hopes high."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Admit it, you're interested in her."

"No way," Alex murmured, taking a sip of his drink and ignoring Bobby's claim.

"You can't fool me. You're taking a liking to her. But I don't blame you. She's one lovely dame."

Done with this conversation, Alex finished his meal and excused himself from the table.

“Thanks for the company, Bobby.”

“Anytime.”

The journalist left the mess hall and proceeded to his quarters.

At this hour of night, the corridors of HQ One were dimly lit. As Alex walked through the shadows, his thoughts were tangled. Alex sought to find an answer to why the Zull and mankind could not reconcile whatever differences they had and share this world. But he had not found that answer. Was it because many were like Andrea; did many humans feel too much anger to coincide? Or was it because the Zull could not tolerate sharing this world with a race of beings that were not their own? These were questions Alex would seek the answer to for as long as he remained on Second Earth.

As Alex swiped his ID card across the scanner on his door to unlock it, he felt like he was being watched. He heard a noise and turned to see someone darting down another dark corridor. It was the girl from the infirmary, Christina. Alex briefly wondered why she was there, but was too tired to focus.

Alex perused his quarters. The room was small, shabby, and furnished with a bed, desk, table, and sofa that all looked worse for wear, but the room was good enough for Alex.

The weary journalist slumped onto the sofa and removed a voice recorder from his duffle bag. For future reference, he initiated the recording sequence to document his experience thus far.

JOURNAL ENTRY 01:

On Second Earth, I've discovered a world of boundless beauty and wonder, a world where plant life flourishes and abundant wildlife roves freely. But I've also discovered that Second Earth is a world where, in my opinion, vicious battles are being waged for no reason. One would

think that two civilized societies could settle disputes without the use of violence.

Why Zull and humanity are killing each other baffles me, but what baffles me just as much is this woman, Andrea Blair. She has the mystifying beauty of an angel, but she's anything but angelic. She shows the enemy no mercy, she's rarely kind, and she's short spoken. Nonetheless, I see something more behind this cold demeanor. I see someone who may have been as kind and caring as me, in an earlier life.

END OF JOURNAL ENTRY 01

Feeling drowsy, Alex stopped the recording. Within seconds of closing his eyes, the device slipped from his hand and landed on the carpet.

Alex had a very exciting yet exhausting first day on Second Earth, but tomorrow would prove to be even more interesting.

About the Author

Michael J. Brooks holds a BA in art and an MFA. His first novel, **Exodus Conflict**, was a finalist of the 2013 Next Generation Indie Book Awards, in the sci-fi/fantasy category.

As he currently tries to balance his busy life in Washington, DC, he seeks to write science fiction novels which are not meant to be only entertainment but to address some of the most crucial issues of our time and explore the trials of being human. He hopes to create characters that people can relate to and stories that will have an impact on them long after they are finished reading one of his novels.

Learn more about Michael J. Brooks and the Exodus Conflict series at:

<http://www.exodusconflict.com/>

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