

# **DEAD HEADS**

By J. E. Ellis

The first time I saw a Dead Head I almost crapped my pants.

That wouldn't have been a good start for 32<sup>nd</sup> Cav's newest PFC, standing on the troop insertion deck of CHSS Graegle, prepping his armor for his first drop.

I can still recall the anxiety that had twisted my gut. The see-through red skull wrapped around Jaworsky's head like a holographic jack-o-lantern couldn't be real, could it? "You see that?" I asked to anyone in earshot.

"See what?" Corporal Chen looked up from her partly reassembled C-12.

"Jaworsky. He's...."

Chen looked down the line at Second Squad's SAW gunner. "Yeah, he is kinda cute," she leered. "But I didn't think you leaned that way, Duchesne." The rest of First Squad had a good laugh, whistling and waving at a confused Jaworsky.

Even fresh out of boot, three years and four promotions ago, I wasn't that green. I kept my mouth shut – stifled the protests that would earn me a wrap-around overcoat and a sedative cocktail.

I focused on getting into my Shafter-Koenig Mark III Field Combat Armor despite my trembling hands, but every time I caught sight of Jaworsky, the fleshless head seemed to stare right at me.

Three hours later, I was hunkered at the bottom of a turquoise dune on Hag'dai with First Squad. Yellow-white bolts from an Ilkij mobile weapons platform's main gun burned the air, pounded our helmeted heads with overpressure and methodically turned the sand above us to indigo glass.

I looked to the left; a hundred meters east, Second Squad was spread across another purple ridge. Two soldiers scabbled up the shifting grit to bring the Randal minigun to bear on the MWP; the rest covered them.

Beyond Second, a trio of Ilkij hunter-killers popped up and fired.

Argent flashes blanketed their position; the Randal gunners became smoking smears on the slope. I watched Jaworsky -- the skull now around his helmet -- open up with the LR-40. 13.3-millimeter armor-

piercing shells went downrange at 180 rounds a minute, and shredded one of the HKs into silver confetti. The other two converged their fire on his position.

The skull disappeared the same instant Jaworsky did.

After my third “sighting,” I named them Dead Heads. When I saw a translucent red skull around a guy’s head meant he would soon be KIA. No exceptions.

I also found ways to be far away from that soldier when the piss hit the pot, because he wouldn’t be the only one to get fragged. The Ilkij were generally bad shots; “spray and pray” was their standard form of attack. Of course, when you shoot energy bolts in the megajoule range, you don’t need to be discriminating.

Then came number eight. In a passageway on the Graegle with brand-new sergeant’s stripes on my shoulders, I nodded to a Navy Sensor Operator on his way the bridge. A misty red skull rested comfortably on his unknowing head.

We were in orbit above Secundus, the 32<sup>nd</sup> prepping for a hot drop. I rode First Platoon mercilessly to be first out of the carrier. No matter how heavy the resistance would be on the ground, I knew it would be worse up here.

We hit dirt and the Ilkij were gone. Command ordered pick-up, but I managed to delay the ascender that Alpha Company loaded into long enough to not be aboard the carrier when the enemy hit.

They focused on the Graegle. They ignored all the other ships in the task force and suffered heavy casualties for it. But in the end, they turned the carrier into a molten rainfall that kept the tawny plains of Secundus’ northern continent smoldering for weeks.

I couldn’t deny any longer the connection between seeing a Dead Head and the inevitable Ilkij firestorm. It couldn’t be simple coincidence. Maybe the enemy could tap into whatever plane of reality existed where Fate or Kismet could be seen, to discover which sorry grunt was about to get his ticket punched, then made sure it happened.

Maybe it was a strange new targeting system. But that didn’t make sense. Most of the time a skull appeared around a guy just trying to do his job. Twice a Dead Head had settled on an officer; neither time

was it anyone high up enough on the food chain to be called an important target. Even the instance with the Graegle couldn't be called an effective strike. The top brass had been aboard the cruiser LaFleur at the time, which barely came under fire.

One thing I did know: infantry pukers don't let their superiors know they're having visions, not if they wanted to keep their heads from being shrunk. So I kept my mouth clamped tight.

But I could act on what I saw. When I was promoted to Company First Sergeant, I began to exercise my "inside" information in drop deployment. Dead Heads would always lead from the sharp end of the spear. Hey, if they were due to get smeared anyway, they might as well do some good for the rest of the unit.

Harsh maybe, but Alpha Company maintained the lowest casualty count in the entire 32<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry.

When you're losing a war, it's the little things that matter.

And that's the hard truth of it: humans were getting their asses kicked by the Ilkij. They outgunned and outnumbered us, and their tech was far more advanced. Humanity had only just developed the MID engine, which gave us fast interstellar travel, before we stumbled on the Ilkij – a race that had been star-faring for a long, long time – and they took exception to our presence.

The only reason we were still a factor after seven years of fighting was because the Ilkij, for as good as they were at killing humans, were just as good at shooting themselves in the foot. If they even had feet.

Their tactics were incomprehensible. Sometimes they'd throw everything they have at us. Then, when our forces were overwhelmed and about to be annihilated, they stopped and went away. Regardless of the importance of the planet. Or they would execute a surgical strike and wipe out an entire brigade to hold on to a planet with no value at all. Sometimes they would go toe-to-toe on the ground; other times they'd blast away from orbit. Their overall strategy had no rhyme or reason, no definable objectives – at least by human standards. It was as if they couldn't make up their minds whether to simply limit human expansion or eradicate us.

“Master Sergeant Duchesne?”

“What?” I barked. I hadn’t noticed Private Williams’ approach.

He nodded to the drop pod next to me. “Are these really safe?”

“Son, the Zellovksy EGX-845 Orbital Insertion Device is a precision piece of hardware. A one-time use, disintegrating protective shell. Finely tuned to the specifics of every drop, which ensured the survival and effective deployment of the soldier inside.” And, oh boy, lots of fun for the tiny percentage of guys whose pods disintegrated too soon, or too late. “This’ll be my twentieth drop, Williams, and I’m still here.”

Under my glare he bobbed his head and wandered away, obviously unconvinced by my ‘mercial chatter.

I stood and looked across the drop deck of the Lewiston; all six companies of the 32<sup>nd</sup> were spread across the echoing space. Each and every trooper readied him- or her-self for the drop into the steaming jungle of Arcoloa.

Crap.

I saw three of the damned grinning skulls wrapped around troopers. Two in my company, one in Charlie. I pulled a pad out of my BDUs and brought up the tac spec of the drop. I’d have to get Captain Beckwirth to move First Platoon into the lead element position. If they focused on First like they were bound to, maybe Second could flank the enemy’s position to the east.

I moved toward Beckwirth’s pod.

I liked the captain. His first drop out of the Academy was onto Amodei. By the end of the day, he had been brevetted from Ensign to El-Tee, then to Captain of Alpha Company. That was one really, really bad day.

But he listened to me when I came to him with my screwy deployments. I knew he was curious, but he never asked. He followed my recommendations, happy when our losses were less than others’.

He saw me coming and grimaced. “Who?”

“First Platoon, sir. Straight up the ridge. Should open the right for Second.”

“Very well, Master Sergeant.”

“And, uh, sir?” This would be the tricky part. “Is there any way you could get Captain MacMillan to move his Third Platoon to the front? Having Charlie in reserve is gonna be a problem.”

Beckwirth stared at me, eyes narrowed. He shook his head. “I cannot go to another company commander with that, Master Sergeant. He’d ask why. The Old Man would ask why. And I couldn’t tell them. Unless you want to tell me?”

“I understand, sir. At least stay away from the CP, if you can. And if there’s a way to warn the Colonel...” Muscles in his stubbled jaw moved and I shut up.

Beckwirth’s eyes moved past my shoulder and he frowned.

I turned. Two guys from Special Intelligence Bureau wended their way through the troopers; the creases on their class-A uniforms looked sharp enough to cut steel.

The taller one, with a round, melancholy face and bushy brows, spoke without preamble. “SIB would like a word with Sergeant Duchesne.”

Beckwirth bristled. “That’s Master Sergeant Duchesne. What’s this about?”

“You’re not cleared to know,” the other one said, his voice so smooth the syllables ran together. “A matter of human security.”

Beckwirth glowered. “Make it fast, gentlemen. We drop in thirty.” Bushy nodded and they both turned away with no further acknowledgement. “Move, Duchesne,” Beckwirth said. “And get your ass back here ASAP.”

I followed Bushy and Slimy across the deck toward the ‘lock into the Lewiston proper. I ignored the puzzled looks of Williams and the rest of Alpha Company, and, staring at the backs of the two spooks, wished I could just once decide who got to be a Dead Head.

We traveled deep into Navy country. The swabbies we passed gave me hard looks. I don’t know if it was because they disliked Army grunts or SIB agents. Maybe both.

We came at last to a door marked, with typically useless Navy efficiency, KN 324. Slimy ushered me in as Bushy continued down the passageway.

The room looked suspiciously like an interrogation room. Plain walls, peek-a-boo mirror, overhead spotlight, table and chair bolted to the deck.

We all knew the stories. SIB would take somebody away for “a few questions.” His buddies would come back from chow and his bed would be made, his gear gone, new nametags on his locker. Like he never existed.

“Do I need a lawyer?” I asked.

“State your name, rank and unit,” Slimy answered.

I looked directly at the mirror and sounded off. “Master Sergeant Anthony Duchesne, Company First Sergeant, Alpha Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 32<sup>nd</sup> Light Cavalry Regiment, 7<sup>th</sup> Army of the Confederation of Human States.”

“Sit down.”

Bushy re-entered the room with a thick file folder in one hand. I sat.

Slimy leaned in, hands folded on the table. “What do you know about the Multi-dimensional Inertialess Drive engine?”

“Uh,” I said. They brought me here for a science lesson?

Four eyeballs glared at me. I leaned back and shrugged. “I guess I know what everybody else knows. The MID engine makes a ship pop out here and pop in there. You get to where you're going in an instant, avoiding all those pesky laws of physics.”

“In fact,” Bushy replied. “The MID engine creates a subspace bubble around the spacecraft, which allows it to cross the time-space membrane and enter other universes. Very complex calculations predict which universes the ship needs to pass through to get where it’s going in this universe.”

“Okay....”

I missed the tag, but Slimy took over. “What most people don’t know is that many of those universes are also other dimensions of our universe. Possible futures, with an infinite number of permutations appearing and disappearing every instant.

“Every time a spacecraft jumps, it and its crew pass through some of those alternate dimensions.”

“I’ll take your word for all that,” I said. “I’m just a grunt. My job is to kill Ilkij. It’s the Navy’s job to get us there.”

...And back to Bushy. “Every time you’ve jumped, Master Sergeant, you went to another dimension. A different reality than the one you were born in.” I frowned. He went on. “There’s some growing evidence that certain people, after passing through another dimension...change.”

I started to get a bad feeling, like when I see a Dead Head on the guy right next to me, and the world’s about to fall on both of us.

“Have you ever felt...different...after a jump?” Slimy asked.

“Now that you mention it, sometimes, after a jump I gotta take a piss, when I know I went right before.”

Bushy slapped the file down on the table. “You think this is funny? Answer Agent Boering’s question.”

Agent Boring? I managed to hold back all the good ones that came to mind, but couldn’t help the smirk. “Kinda, yeah.”

“You know what kind of hole I can put you in, soldier?” Bushy leaned close. I smelled lavender and maple syrup. “A hole so deep you’ll have to look up to see down.”

Flecks of his spittle landed on my face and I gripped the table to keep from grabbing his trachea and squeezing. “You write your own material, asshole?”

Slimy, er, Boering put a hand on Bushy’s arm. “Agent Thomas, step back. Let’s all take a breath and calm down.” He didn’t raise his voice, but Bushy looked at him and nodded. He stuffed his hand into his pockets and shuffled into a corner.



Boering oozed a smile at me. “What I’m about to tell you is classified, Master Sergeant. Section K of your enlistment packet now applies.

“We believe the Ilkij use a drive like the MID. There’s evidence that they also use subspace bubble technology for something else. They seem to be able to see the future.”

I shook my head. This whole conversation had gone Twilight Zone. But it was fascinating in a watching-a-train-wreck sort of way. “If the Ilkij know the future, know what we’re gonna do before we do it, why aren’t humans extinct?”

Boering shrugged. “We don’t know. The scientists say it’s more like looking into ‘a’ future instead of looking into ‘the’ future. So there are limits, apparently, and a range of probabilities, rather than certainty. We do know, however, that they are able to accurately predict one thing: they are able to identify specific human beings that have – or will have – a significant bearing on the war and its outcome.”

“This is why their strategy seems so inexplicable to us,” Thomas put in. He pushed away from the corner and circled the table. “They seem to place a higher priority on killing those humans who pose some kind of major threat to them, rather than pursue the traditional goals of war.”

I stood, ready to bug out of there. I had an idea of where these spooks were going, and I didn’t want to go there. “If that’s all gentlemen, I have a drop to make.”

Bushy stopped his circuit and pointed at the file. “Do you know what those are? They’re After Action Reports from every commander you’ve served under.”

I moved toward the door. “Stay, Master Sergeant,” Boering said. “We want you to hear this.”

I didn’t know why I stayed. These guys weren’t in my chain of command. I didn’t have to obey them. I turned and sat back down.

Bushy continued. “Do you deny asking your COs to alter the deployment of certain elements of Alpha Company, placing specific people in harm’s way?”

“We’re all in harm’s way, every time we drop. You’d know that if you had ever put a foot dirtside.”

“So you admit it! Purposely setting up your fellow soldiers to get killed!” Bushy thrust his face into mine again.

“The Ilkij don’t need my help killin’ humans, Agent Thomas.” I should’ve shut my mouth right then, but Bushy pissed me off, making me smell what he had for breakfast. “It’s my job to make sure they take as few guys as possible.”

“Unbelievable! You bastard, playing God with---”

“Agent Thomas, that’s enough!” Boering added volume to his words for the first time and Bushy jerked as if he’d been slapped. “Go get yourself a cup of coffee.”

I looked at Boering warily. Who was this guy?

He smiled as if he knew what I was thinking, but didn’t speak until Bushy was gone. “Look, Anthony. Can I call you Anthony?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “I think you know exactly what we’re talking about. I think you can see, or sense, or feel, the same thing the Ilkij can about certain people. I think that’s why you make changes in Alpha’s deployment whenever you can.”

I stared at the opposite wall, focused on the imperfections in the two-way mirror.

“I understand. I really do. You want to keep as many guys alive as you can. If the enemy focuses on some, the others can maybe suffer less.”

There were a lot of scratches on that mirror. Probably from guys trying to get out.

“We’re not here to Section Eight you. Whatever it is you think you have to hide from others, you don’t have to hide from us. No matter what you tell us, we won’t think you’re crazy.”

I started counting the scratches. “Is that all, sir?”

Boering sat back and looked at me for a long time. I got up to 77 before he sighed. He waved toward the door. I stood and reached for the latch.

“Just one thing, Master Sergeant Duchesne. If we’re right, and the Ilkij are targeting certain individuals, then you putting them on the pointy end of the spear is doing the enemy a favor. You’re making it easier for them. Think about that.”

I left.

The drop to Arcolea was routine, as routine as a 10,000-kilometer fall in a howling, burning gel-filled cerrosteel coffin can be.

I looked around. My insertion had burned back the jungle ten meters in every direction; the steady drizzle steamed off the blackened stubble. As I watched, the vines and broadleaf bushes began to creep across the scorched ground, reclaiming it. Impossibly thin-trunked trees released seedpods from their needle-like fronds; the gossamer laments followed the rain down. Within moments, several ten-centimeter saplings had sprouted in the open space. Garishly colored bugs moved among the pale green leaves and yellow stalks, devouring the charred vegetation. The mics on my armor picked up their crunching.

You wouldn't get bored watching the grass grow on this planet.

The Mark III's cooling fans worked hard to keep my visor clear in the humidity and 40 degree heat as I pushed my way through to where the Captain stood. I called up a tactical plot; the infrared, radar and satellite composite picture appeared on the inside of my visor. Yellow triangles near my position ID'd the 96 members of Alpha Company.

Alpha had landed square on their designated LZ without losing a man to pod malfunction. That put me in a bad mood. When a drop goes that well that means something else is going to end up fubared.

Bravo, Delta, India and distant Oscar – in white, blue, red and green – too, looked to be in good order. Colonel Dulles at the CP four clicks southwest was indicated by a bright “32.” The reserve company, Charlie, was a clump of orange icons next to it.

All this snafu-less organization made my mood worse.

I broke through the treeline, my visor darkening in the whiter-than-Sol sunlight, and looked up at our objective: a vegetation-choked, tabletop mountain with nearly vertical 300-meter slopes. It was one of a line of mesas that stretched into the hazy western distance.

And on top of every one sat a company of armored Ilkij.

Captain Beckwirth's flat gray armor was spattered with purplish sap and a rainbow of bug juice from his tramp through the bush. His helmet cocked; after a moment his polarized faceplate turned toward me. "I'm putting El-Tee Salas in command, Tony," he said over the private circuit. "He'll need your help. Advance at 1315 as planned."

"Where're you goin'?"

"The Old Man wants all company commanders with him."

"Sir--" But the channel went dead and he walked away. "Williams! Krupke!" I shouted at the first two troopers I saw. "With the Captain! Move it!" They trotted after Beckwirth. I turned back to the mesa and shuffled through the jungle toward the right flank with Second Platoon. Tacplot showed me the other platoons were in position for the assault. As the timer ticked down, my tension torqued up.

At 1312, flights of F-85s came out of the south, moving faster than their shock waves. Four planes for each mesa; 24 aircraft passed over the tabletops precisely in unison. Slightly less uniform, flashes popped along the summits. Sonic booms pounded, explosions crumpled, smoke roiled.

The top of our mesa was enveloped in fire. Despite the odd shapes and colors, the local vegetation seemed to burn just fine. I wondered if it bothered the Ilkij.

"Alpha Company, advance!" said Salas over the company push.

I moved upslope with Second, crashing through the entwined plants at a trot. Despite the armor's enhancements it was grueling, but we kept it up, covering half the distance in two minutes and some change.

The crashing booms of the Ilkij guns sounded above our heads, the argent bolts seeking our jets. But the flyboys had already bugged out; one pass was all we got. The assault forces were too close to risk another strafe – or so the brass had decided.

The jungle was too thick for my HUD composite to be effective beyond a few meters, so I climbed a vine-covered spur of rock for a better view.

Just in time to see the piss fully hit the pot.

Dozens of Ilkij hunter-killers poured over the rim of the mesa, right down into the guns of First and Third Platoons. I could hear the ringing burr of miniguns, the kop-kop-kop of SAWs, the whump-boom of RPGs.

The HKs returned fire with their own withering barrage: the crackle-flash of energy weapons lit the jungle. Hot smoke blanketed the area, rendering my IR useless.

I had one heartbeat of confusion: why would the enemy give up the high ground? Half of the silvery, praying mantis-like machines were disabled or destroyed, yet they kept coming.

Then I remembered the Dead Heads. Two in Alpha's First, whose position the aliens overwhelmed as I watched.

One in Charlie's Third.

I looked down the line of tabletops, tapped into the satellite feed for a detailed view of the line of battle, and tasted bile.

Every Ilkij position was being abandoned; from every mesa, hundreds of HKs scurried downslope, right into our trooper's fire. The infrared flares of an enemy machine being destroyed were too numerous to count – and yet they still came. A simple extrapolation of their courses showed me what I did not want to see: the enemy was converging on the 32<sup>nd</sup>'s Command Post.

“Dammit,” I whispered. Captain Beckwirth. Colonel Dulles. The command staff. Charlie Company. Private Williams. They were all about to be slaughtered.

Because the Ilkij would not stop. They would keep coming until that one guy, that one Dead Head, was actually dead.

Boering's words came back to me. What if the Ilkij did know the future? What if the people I saw with the glowing skulls around their heads held some key to winning this war? And what if I was ending lives, instead of saving them?

Crap. Crap. Crap.

I leaped off the rock and landed 20 meters downslope. I didn't try to stop the tumble, willing to take the abuse of banging around inside my armor. I hit the bottom at a run. I tore through bushes and vines as if they weren't there, snapped 30-meter tall trees like chopsticks.

It still took me more than ten minutes to reach the fire zone. By that time, the Ilkij had overrun the Command Post. I listened to the regimental push and heard Captain Chapman – head of the Colonel's personal detail – order a pullout toward the marshland three kilometers farther south. The Colonel's ascender was parked there.

Sweat soaked my skinsuit, slicked every place it came in contact with the inside of my armor. I gasped raggedly, near the limit of my strength. But I kept going, focused on reaching Corporal Milton, the last live Dead Head. I had to save him.

Like I hadn't done with all the others. All the Dead Heads I'd murdered.

The HUD picked up several HKs ahead. I slowed and skirted around a concentration of the machines. I didn't want to be detected, certainly; but I also didn't want to put myself in 32<sup>nd</sup>'s line of fire. Miniguns and SAWs and RPGs tore the jungle into confetti. I didn't want to become part of the parade.

My own stinky sweat inside the Mark III, coupled with the humidity and heat outside, made my sensors almost useless. I reached up with one armored hand to wipe moisture off my faceplate. When I brought my hand down, an Ilkij Hunter Killer loomed in front of me.

It was partially disabled, and wobbled through the vegetation, unable to keep up with its comrades. One of the four legs that supported the two-meter body had been blown away, the silver plating scorched and torn. I recognized the exposed workings: a servo, hydraulic lines, optical cabling. What I didn't see was an Ilkij.

No one had ever seen an Ilkij. Every communication humans had with them was voice only. No equipment had ever been recovered, because every enemy machine – HKs, MWP's, even spacecraft – self-destructed before we could get our hands on it.

Morbid curiosity forced me to keep pace with it. I wanted just one glimpse of the aliens that were kicking our asses.

The leg joint had been blasted deep enough it should have ruptured whatever inner capsule held the alien. I should have been able to see at least some of its body, unless the Ilkij were the size of small dogs.

Sonofabitch. There wasn't an Ilkij inside. Hunter Killers were drones.

We were fighting a war – losing a war – to robots. Besides the HKs, the Mobile Weapons Platforms were probably pilotless, too. And I'd bet my last paycheck that even their warships were unmanned.

The HK stopped. The flat ovoid head, three meters off the ground, swiveled toward me with a faint whir. Its frontal surface, covered with tiny parabolic dishes, camera lenses and antennas stared at me.

One of its two upper limbs rotated and the blackened snout of an energy weapon swung my way.

I threw my left arm up to activate the Mark III's internal gun. Yelling over the roar of my weapon, I poured six-millimeter depleted-uranium rounds into the HK's already blasted leg joint at 1600 rounds a minute. The torso of my armor locked automatically so I didn't spin like a top, but the recoil still staggered me back, step by step, as I walked the fire up the body.

The Ilkij machine couldn't stand against gunfire at this close range. It floundered as dozens of holes punched through its plating. The argent bolt intended for me shrieked skyward. Then the HK crashed to the ground.

All Ilkij machines self-destruct.

I made it three steps before the world turned white and a giant punched me into the black.

Things got kind of fuzzy after that.

Somehow I made it past the rest of the Ilkij, through a rain of fire in both directions, and to our lines. I vaguely remember questions yammered at me by various people; I ignored them all and focused on my search for Corporal Milton.

I found him, yanked him off the line and headed toward the marsh. The demands being shouted through my radio turned to white noise. I turned my comms off.

I reached the LZ, the ascender's turbines howling, just as the last of Colonel Dulles' detail boarded.

I knew what I had to do, and that thought cleared my head with a jolt of adrenaline. I shoved through the personnel on the boarding ladder, one hand clamped around the hoist ring on the shoulder of Milton's armor. Inside, faceplates swung toward me. One aide tried to stop me and I kicked him aside.

I walked right up to the Old Man and jammed the muzzle of my armor's automatic under his helmet's chin.

I chinned my comm to active and winced at the uproar. People shouted for me to stand down; overlocked and loaded weapons, others promised all kind of nasty things would happen to me if anything happened to Dulles.

"Everybody shut up!" I shouted back. I had to repeat myself a couple of times while pushing the barrel farther into Dulles' chin before things quieted down.

"Now, clear this vehicle."

A new round of yells and threats. I waited. After a few moments, aides, bodyguards, even the pilot of the ascender filed out of the cabin. Soon only me, Milton and Colonel Dulles remained.

"I don't know what you're doing, Anthony," Dulles soothed. "But I'm sure we can work this out without anyone getting killed."

"I'm sorry, sir, but it's just not gonna happen that way." I tossed Milton aside and drove Dulles toward the hatch. "It's been an honor being in the Thee-Two." I pushed him outside, swung the hatch closed and dogged it.

I removed my helmet and turned to Milton. I could see the hazy red skull covering his head. See, I'd figured out a while ago that electronic images didn't work; the only way to see Dead Heads was with old-fashioned Mark I Eyeballs.

I gestured to him. "Take off your helmet, son." I went to the pilot's console and brought the engines down to a steady rumble.

Milton removed his helmet and stared, a terrified, dark-haired kid with green eyes.



“Who are you, trooper?” I had to figure out why this, this teenager, was so important to the Ilkij.

“Corporal Jonathon Milton, Master Sergeant! Third Platoon, Charlie---”

“No, kid. I mean, who are you? Who were you before you enlisted? Where’re you from? Who’re your family?”

He stared at me for a few more seconds. “My dad’s Terrence Milton Jr. His company does some work for the military. I didn’t want to follow my brother into the business – writing code all day wasn’t my thing – so I joined up.”

“What kind of work?”

“Communication software. Encryption, jamming, stuff like that. Doing some research into subspace comms.”

Like a rubik clicking all solid, everything fell into place.

“Listen. The Ilkij? The HKs and the MWP’s? They’re all drones. Remote controlled machines.”

“What? No way! Jamming every freak is the first thing the Navy does when we reach orbit. No one’s ever found a control ship or any other kind of master station.”

“Trust me, Corporal. I got real personal with an HK. And on the front of their heads? Where all their sensor gear is? There’s a tiny fractal lemniscate antenna.”

Beneath wide eyes, Milton opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. “That’s the same kind of antenna we use to activate the MID. To open a hole in subspace.” He stared off. “They’re using subspace to communicate with their drones? Amazing. If they can do it, maybe we can. Maybe we could jam the signal with an oscillating pulse....”

I waved my hand in front of his face. “Hey. You tell what I told you to the Old Man. Get him to listen. Make the Army listen. Find a way to jam that signal and we might be able to win this war after all.” I handed him my helmet. “Put this on.”

He looked at the gray globe as if it was a poisonous snake. We’re taught from day one of boot that you never, ever, use somebody else’s helmet.

“Take it.” I pulled his away from him. “Unless you want to go back out there without a hat on.”

He did. I opened the hatch. I smelled the humid heat and rotting vegetation of this bastard planet.

The sound of weapons’ fire was constant. An energy bolt arched overhead. The Ilkij were close.

I pushed Milton out, pointed him toward the command group huddled under cover a bit east. “Make sure and stay alive, kid. Make sure they listen to you.”

His faceplate turned toward me, then he stumbled down the step and crouch-ran toward the Colonel’s position. I closed the hatch.

I moved to the pilot’s chair and got the engines winding up again. I knew I was taking a big gamble. If I was wrong, I had just murdered a bunch of other people. Again.

But I figured that no matter how the Ilkij were able to predict who the Dead Heads were going to be, they couldn’t do it face-to-face. And even when they knew who, they had to rely on sensor inputs from their drones to ID their targets once the battle started.

I was betting everything on that assumption. Of course, you know what they say about assumptions.

The ascender vibrated as it lifted. It was a good thing the Army made all its non-coms learn how to fly these Orbital Transfer Vehicles. Though I didn’t think the brass ever imagined a Master Sergeant hijacking one.

The shuddering increased as the ship powered out of the atmosphere. I strapped in; my – Milton’s – helmet bounced around on the deck.

The vibrations stopped as the ascender reached orbit. I opened the primary command channel to see if my plan had worked. If I was right, I’d know real soon.

Some chatter came over. From what I could make out, the Ilkij on the planet had abruptly stopped their attack and pulled back. I smiled.

“Sky Four-Four, this is UHS Lewiston. Do you copy?”

I leaned back, enjoyed the view out the front window. Damn, the stars were bright.

“Sky Four-Four. Be advised. There are two enemy spacecraft bearing on your position. Lewiston is maneuvering to assist. Do you copy?”

Dammit. I rotated the ascender away from the Lewiston and goosed the throttle to full. I keyed the radio. “Negative, Lewiston. Do not assist. I need them to follow me. Don’t get in the way.”

A new voice came across. Agent Boering. “What are you doing, Anthony?”

“You were right. I can see...things. And what I saw was a kid who’s the key to winnin’ this war. You keep him safe. Do not ID him in any way that can be intercepted. Listen to him. Then come back out here and blast some alien ass right out of this universe.”

There was a pause. “Will do, Master Sergeant.”

All I could see were stars now. Arcoloa was behind me. Everything was behind me; only the deep black lay ahead.

“Is there anybody you want me to contact?”

“Naw. Just make sure they spell my name right.” I swallowed to clear my suddenly constricted throat. “And tell the families of all those boys that I’m sorry.”

I clicked the channel closed. The sensors beeped. The Ilkij were almost within weapons’ range.

I suddenly wished there was a mirror on this boat. I was curious to see if there was a red, misty skull floating around me.

I wondered if I was a Dead Head.