

ExoWar
Blood and Fortune

by A.E. Flynn

By Fire

Sheets soaked: sweat ... hopefully. Kicked to the side and bundled around one leg. Jasik X ran a hand through his hair, pushing back the longish black tufts stuck to his forehead and cheeks. Eyes focused slowly, fixing on the wire springs of the bunk above him. For a moment his sleep-stained mind wondered how many thousands of years we had been producing these same, small, twisted pieces of metal.

Wasn't there a better way?

"Not worth the investment to improve", he mused softly to himself.

Long minutes later, Jasik slides off the bunk. Cold feet on colder floor, metal. The raised treads had been worn almost flush, shinier and smoother than the gritty spaces between them. How many bare feet, how much flesh, had been ground away to smooth a quarter-inch of steel? Jasik shook his head, trying to clear it. A great executor needed focus, needed to mind "no mind." He knew all too well how questions like these could churn in the back of one's skull, playing with your aim and your flexes for days. Worse, it could land you with a bad seal.

Eyes flit to the top bunk. Zairah Q wasn't up yet. The gendered nature of the names had clung for millennia, but it didn't mean too much anymore. Not much mattered up here, the *Real* was down there. Time to get to it he thought as he felt his fingers beginning to itch, the need to downlink out of this body and into the real world growing stronger by the minute. He scratched at his hands idly, yawned, then leaned his head against the cool plastifoam wall. Shower tomorrow.

The standard issue jumpsuit slipped on easy, a bit too big. He didn't bother spending REQ on fancier clothes - he had his eye on his own personal Downgate; Sebel said he'd seen a full 3 point increase on his downlink speeds since he had bought his own. That and the ability to mod it for better recollection, smoother transitions and deeper embodiment - a shiver tickled down Jasik's spine just thinking about the possibilities while he went through the motions of emptying his bladder in the shared bunkhab head.

"Stage two. ExoDrone Squads Seven through Nineteen, duty in ten. Stage two, duty in ten," spoke a disembodied, slightly female voice from every metallic surface in the hab.

Shuffling steps and unconcealed groans echoed through the head's open door. Jasik slid his finger up the front seam of his suit, the split healing back together under the pressure and warmth of his touch. Time to ex out. Jasik nodded to Zairah as she slid past him in the doorway, carefully avoiding her eyes as she carefully watched her feet. It was always awkward interacting "meat-wise" ... nobody wanted to be up here. They would meet later, in the chair.

Jasik made his way down the crash-hall on auto pilot, forcing his mind through the loops and mantras that helped him to detach from himself. It wasn't coming easy today, which worried him; the worry made it harder. Feedback loops, for and against - he had to spin them out before they tied him down.

The soft flexsteel of the hallways gave against his shoulder, sinking in slightly. Flexsteel acted as a cushion at low impact, at higher magnitudes of force it reacted much differently. Coming off the *down* wasn't easy and the padded walls were a safety precaution - a lot of his squaddies still couldn't walk right on the long twenty meter stumble back to the bunkhab. His breathing grew heavier, almost labored as he made the last few steps. He paused to catch his breath, leaning against the door frame and glancing around.

"Stage two. ExoDrone Squads seven through nineteen, duty in seven minutes. Stage two, Downlink and Drop in seven."

Sebel was already resting on his Downgate, in pre-*down* virtual prep. Jasik wished he had arrived sooner himself, the prep exercises were the best way to "mind no mind," but they also cost a hefty amount of REQ. Probably a worthwhile investment, judging from how well Seb was doing lately. At the pace he was setting, his stats might rival some of Zairah's early records. The conversation these days seemed to revolve around that and little else.

Jasik paced past Seb's chrome and black-leather Downgate harness. The hammock style would feel almost like floating on air (though not truly like it, as with the a-grav chairs none of them had ever seen) - the less you were aware of your body before the downlink began, the better. Jasik's assigned communal Downgate was a few meters down the line. He sat down on the patched soft-cover seat.

A crack on the left side was peeling back up: he tried to position his leg so it wouldn't rub. As long as he could de-sense through the downlink process, he'd be fine. After that his mind would rest in his ExoDrone until a transfer or re-up was necessary. It was during those crucial seconds of downlink that the mind had to be free of thought and sensation to make the best seal to the ExoDrone.

"Stage two. ExoDrone Squads seven through nineteen, final duty call. Stage two, final duty call. Initiate Downlink procedure to mark, three minutes. Mark."

Jasik noted the marked count-down floating on the edge of his vision: a shining, living display burned into his retina. He closed his eyes and it remained, a quiet reminder in the darkness. The Downgate began its prep cycle. The connections in the base of his skull and the bottom of his spine locked against the chair, the smooth metal cylinders spinning as they wove and healed together. The Downlink lobby took over his vision, the flesh orbs of his meat-wise body receding to memory.

Members of his crew, Squad Seven, sporadically winked onto the growing list. His chassis selection, a preset group of ExoDrones tailored to his preferences, were listed off to the left. He glanced through each profile, ensuring their configurations met his expectations for today's downlink. Everything was in order. The team line-up completed, all squad-mates had signed in today. Their relative experience, abstracted as a sort of calculated number through the MilTac system, was displayed beside their name along with a few other public stats - confirmed kills, drone deaths, accuracy ... the kind of things that helped everyone know where they stood and how well their squad-mates were doing their jobs.

Vision to black. Jasik made a last push to blank his mind. The mind that sleeps, the mind that does not stop. The moving mind moves over nothing. Mind no Mind. -DOWNLINK INITIATED- Meat-wise, he gasped, but his mind never knew ... he slipped through and in; all was black; a pin-prick of light; blinding white overwhelming: he was *down*.

ExoDrone Marine JX7-23 "Jax" shifted its eyes, taking in the surroundings. Ferrocete walls, an over-look window. Smoke drifted through the air, it should have stung his eyes, but didn't: this body didn't blink, it didn't need to. He flexed his arms: the body felt right, like it was his own - it was a good seal. The euphoria of battle-high began to grow; his ego reveling anew at the incredible size and strength of this body. Hefting his Heavy Flamer, he looked over at Squad Commander "Zeq" ZQ7-55.

Her immense frame was wrapped in Execution Class Siege Armor, her face was the blank staring skull-mask of that line. Blue light tinged the chromed plates of her shoulders, a large two-handed Fusion Blade resting there precariously ... casually. The neon-blue twists of plasma licked up the edges of the blade, swirling and dancing across its silvered surface. The Fusion Blade was powered directly from her ExoDrone's energy core, and could cut through almost any substance - he'd seen her hew clean through an enemy 'drone and a meter of ferrocete in the heat of battle.

Their gaze met for a moment. A booming crash echoed through the air as metal tore through the window, ripping the sky apart behind it.

The slug blasted through his right arm, passing through armor, flesh, augments and internal structure as easily as the air before them; it smoked quietly in its final resting place a decimeter deep in the wall behind him. There was no pain, only awareness: *damage to upper right bicep, damage to upper right bicep* the nerves were telling this body, he could hear them or turn them off at will.

"I guess it's going to be *that* kind of party," Jax said non-nonchalantly in the metallic, deep monotone voice of the ExoDrone's vocal register. A couple squaddies chuckled nearby. Embedded nano-tech, always cycling through his blood stream, was already stitching the wound back together.

"Get in line, Marine," Zeq replied, her voice like steel grating across rough-hewn granite.

Paradise Lost

R&R Time: 20 minutes

a small button beside let him extend it to one hour for 10 REQ. 10 requisition, the Valhalla platform internal currency, was almost nothing: he raised his hand and tapped the air where the button was drawn on the edge of his vision.

R&R Bonus Granted

a small message burst below the timer, fading as the timer changed to 59:59 and began counting down. He wanted to spend some time shaping his island in 'Paradise Lost', the world he'd been working on for a few months. It was run through DEOS, Valhalla's Dedicated Empathic OverSeer, the sub-AI tasked with managing the executors' virtual entertainment and activities.

Paradise Lost, or any of the Reals an off-duty executor wanted to connect to, didn't require a Downgate - they were served off of the Valhalla's own systems, so there wasn't any need to transfer his consciousness through a downlink to a physical 'drone brain. Here he could just connect in one of the padded chairs in the Real Center; the fittings were the same.

Jasik sat down in a chair a few meters down from a group of his Squaddies that were engaged in a simulated ExoDrone battle. Their eyes moved beneath their lids, their lips parted slightly as their faces gasped and reacted to the battle he couldn't see. The chair sagged a bit as Jasik slumped into its cushioned embrace. Connection cylinders automatically slid out, coupling to his neck and spine, the metals healing together as the world around him receded.

Welcome Jax. It's good to see you again.

"Thanks, DEOS, it's good to see you too."

You did well today, I understand your head-shot count may be a new Squad Seven record for such a short engagement.

Jasik's body twitched meat-wise, his face flushing. In the "real" he gave a mental shrug and tried to sound bored, "I suppose so, I guess I wasn't keeping track."

Ha, if I could only believe that, Jax. Well done, regardless, well done.

"Yeah, yeah. Hey, load me into Paradise, I want to finish that canyon bridge today."

You've been at this one for a long time, Jax. All that work and no one to see it. Are you planning to share it with someone soon?

"You see it every day, big D."

My presence cannot qualify as peer companionship.

"Burning REQ here D: come on, come on, nothing in the regs says I have to share."

As you say. Paradise it is. Wouldn't you prefer a nice game of Chess?

“ ... ”

Never mind, I'm sure the humor was lost in translation. I'll load you up.

Connecting . . .

There was a tickle up Jasik's spine and a sudden rush of dazzling color across his vision as the lobby system disappeared and he faded into Paradise Lost. The daylight seared his vision white momentarily, he had to stare at the ground as the noon sun burned on the sand and sea around him. A crisp wind drifted off the surf, tracing through the hair on his arms, pushing sand lightly across his toes. He took a deep breath of the salty air. As his eyes adjusted he turned slowly, taking in the quiet beauty of the Real. He sat down stiffly, breathing in a forced, even rhythm, trying to let the peace of the place soak into his bones. The waves beat against the sand, the clock in the corner of his vision counting the seconds down as he sat unmoving, almost unthinking, until they had all expired.

Oil Smoke Blood

Zeq smashed into her Exodrone's mind, her consciousness slamming against the insides of brain and synapse, bone and blood. For a moment the sharp smell of oil and smoke shot jolts of pain down her spine - this was a bad, bad seal. Zeq had always had trouble with achieving perfect seals, but this may have been her worst.

With a sudden and mighty rush the torrent of wind blasting in her ears became noticeable, the air screaming as it tore apart for her half-ton frame of living metal. They had downlinked in mid-drop, a 'Death From Above' maneuver. Their orders had been issued seventy seconds ago, they had barely jacked into their Downgate chairs when the downlink initiated. Meat-wise she was still breathing raggedly, her left side cramped.

Zeq managed to look down between her feet - she could see the battle zone speeding towards her. Through the smoke and tracers, Zeq barely caught sight of Ra's hulking silhouette as it twisted violently, her head exploding into a red fine mist.

"Hooooooooo SHIT!!!!" someone laughed across the comm, the sound of it bouncing around Zeq's skull as her sluggish mind tried to keep up. Too much of her was still UP there, in the seat.

"Gonna kill your ratios, Ra!" someone else quipped. Laughter bubbled across the comm, Ra's curses fading out as she began preparing to downgate into one of her secondary 'drones.

As the ground approached rapidly, Zeq watched the HUD displays tick down the meters far too fast to read. Blinking red indicated it was time to punch the jets. Zeq let her free-fall continue for a few more moments, pushing to the edge of a safe drop before kicking her jets in hard. Gunfire from the entrenched defenders lit up the sky, high caliber slugs and explosive anti-airthreat cannon charges created a curtain of shrapnel and death. Zeq slammed into the ground, her CiTec Firestorm assault rifle already kicking back its own incendiary reply. The Wycek Capital 'drones were now clearly visible. They were dug in deep.

More return fire screamed past Zeq's head, coming and going. Her team was behind her, jetting up into the sky or hop-trotting across the blasted terrain, taking cover only for moments as they pushed forward. Zeq's vision doubled for a moment, and for just a second she could feel the sweat-soaked damp of the cushion she was resting on, back up in Valhalla. She fell to one knee, the mental pain of existing in two places twisted through her head like a living coal.

"Yo yo yo Cap, you still driving?!" Oz yelled in her ear through the inter-mic, distorted and distant. Vision tunneling, she stumbled a couple of steps. In an Exodrone, physical pain was non-existent, but the mental anguish of a bad seal could be excruciating.

The scream of twisting metal and shredding bone slammed her back into the 'drone's mindspace. Her right arm and the CiTec were missing: in their place nothing remained but a fog of oil, smoke and blood.

Drawing her Fusion Blade from her back, Zeq gave a deep, primal roar as she ignited the blade, holding its entire mass high with her only arm. Jump jets blasting, she rocketed up into the air, soaring forward and high above the enemy position. Slugs pelted her legs and chest, tearing out chunks of armor and tissue as she cut the jets, letting gravity sling her straight down into the Wycek's embankment. Plasma burned blue and white, licking up and down the Blade; it tore furiously at the coiled magnetic fields that barely held it at bay.

Zeq cried out, twisting and thrashing on the sweat-damp cushions of her Downgate. For a moment, her eyes opened to the piercing brightness of the Battle Hall - a flash of anguish and her mind bent itself back across the link.

The Fusion Blade flashed wildly, the Exodrone's embedded combat reflexes taking over as Zeq's consciousness ebbed. It bit through stone, steel and Exodrone as she careened down into the enemy trenches, a wildfire of hell and chaos and carnage.

Long after Zeq had departed, the dimmed eyes of her *Siege Marine* Exodrone continued to capture and transmit footage. Plasma dripped from the blade, sizzling against the ferrocrete bunker floors, half buried in the collapsed pile of her final kill. Through the smoke and haze, burning figures emerged; jumping, shooting, shouting and calling out with glee. Her squad pushed through the entrance she had made, each growing momentarily larger than life in the displays as they passed over her, one by one.

Zeq came to, arms and legs still flailing as if in combat, her mind still twitching between her meat-space body in the Downgate chair and the Real-space avatar floating in the Lobby. Her stats hung in the blank void before her, unnoticed; she gave an animal howl as white-hot splinters shot through her mind again and again.

Emergency detach :: Emergency detach

3 - initiating protocol

- pain unbearable -

2 - downlink disengaging

- please just let me -

1 - retrieval completing

- soundless screaming from a thousand voices -

DETACH DETACH DETACH

Zairah woke, gasping, sitting up against the restraints and wired connections. She twisted and tore at them, squeezing her eyes shut against the strobing yellow lights. Something pinched her neck, she swung an arm blindly - then all the pain was gone, the noise went silent, the world dark.