

This story contains mature themes and situations. I guess this is where I say no one under 18 admitted without parent or guardian.

The Worst Xian: Installment VII

The War Years

The Bradley W.F.V. took a violent step to its right, throwing those left of the aisle against their restraint webbing, while slamming us on the right side against the cabin wall. For the past half hour the terrain had gotten steadily worse. The Bradleys had gone from rolling easily on six track balls across the rolling foothills to clambering laboriously up the rocky and cratered terrain.

Erin adjusted his helmet and shifted against the CPL unit built into the body armor. "I don't see why we have to carry all this link gear, when it will be useless with all the jamming in the zone anyway."

"Once we knock out the ECM generators it will all come back on-line," Knoll answered from the front of the vehicle.

I was fussing with my own body armour. Where it ended at my waist, the combined pressure of it and the insulated body suit weighed uncomfortably against my hips. "So all this equipment, which is designed to coordinate the battle, will be useful only once the battle is over?" I asked.

Knoll scowled back at me, as did several others in the carrier.

"You'd think you would have learned not to question military procedures during an operation, Shade," Erin whispered.

Seven grunts, mostly green, tried to avoid prolonged eye contact with the seven grunts, mostly green, on the other side of the cabin. For most in this carrier it would be our third mission. A milkrun, basically. Four Bradleys and two Powells would make their way up into the rugged mountainous zone still held by Separatist factions. We would find the local stations responsible for jamming all ground communications and electronic detection and knock them out. This would open a corridor to the other side of the mountains through which air units would move to knock out microwave and laser stations, which were knocking out satellite communications and reconnaissance.

Over dinner in the mess I had wondered aloud why hitting these stations would be easy.

"Hey Fodder Boy, it's easy," one of Knoll's table companions, an unshaven veteran on his third tour, had answered. "The stations make them as blind as they make us. More, if you consider the fact that the closer you get the stronger the effects of the jamming." He chewed, spit something on to his tray, then shoveled another sporkful of dinner into his mouth. "That's how we'll dial into them," he spoke around his chipped beef. "Basically, they set these things up, then bug out. Basically, only one in, like, fifteen or twenty is ever guarded. More or less, it's our job to go into the forest, find some toasters and unplug them."

The few others who had been paying any attention to the conversation nodded and grunted, then returned to talking about this year's Army/Navy game, and how Navy did not stand a chance. I had poked my limp vegetables momentarily, thinking about what he had said. If they could not detect us coming in any more than we could detect them, everything should go pretty smoothly. I happily ate my bland dinner thinking - with radar, radio, and satellite down, how would they know when we coming?

As the first shell rocked into the forward left corner of the Bradley, sending a spray of shattered Chaubum II and PFC Patrick Knoll over the interior of the troop carrier, the answer came to me - line of sight.

The Bradley dropped forward at an awkward angle, as it lost its front left leg to the shelling, throwing all of us against our restraints. The cabin shook and filled with the sound of the 20mm turret gun as it opened up; singing staccato along with it the was the top mounted mini-gun. The pilot was righting the Bradley on its auxiliary legs, moving it in a lopsided gait for cover as the interior lights shifted to red, indicating it was almost time to disembark.

The shock of the surprise assault was complete and overwhelming. I had already ripped off my webbing and checked my rifle before I even realized how much blood covered the cabin's interior. Judy Gustavus, a stout woman on her second tour, rushed up the wildly tilting aisle, shoving me back into my seat. She was working her way to the front of the cabin, where, I had begun to realize, someone was screaming.

Judy bunked in the barracks next to ours and was a crack shot. We had talked a few times about nothing in particular. She was from Maine - somewhere in Maine - and had left college to join the Army. She said that she needed the focus, the discipline, that she had been failing school miserably - not because she was not bright, but because she was awash with indecision.

Watching her move with purpose and action to help Patterson, who sat forward next to the remains of Knoll, I found it hard to believe she could be anything but a general. As she wrenched a shard of the Bradley's armor out of Patterson's calf, the Bradley slammed forward, throwing me to the floor and into the forward hatch. The cabin lights flashed repeatedly and the rear hatch dropped.

The noise of explosions was a hundred times as loud outside the W.F.V.

I clambered off the blood and gore slicked floor and out into the pre-dawn firefight. The sylvan mountain was lit by tracers, zipping like a bad drug experience up and down the mountain slope. Through a picturesque stand of pines I could see one of the Powells burning; it had already taken several direct hits since the attack had started a minute and a half ago. Down the slope the two other Bradleys were under intensive shelling barrage. They seemed unable to decide whether to move forward to protect us, or to fall back and defend themselves.

Erin slammed into me from behind. "GO! GO!" he was shouting, shoving against my shoulder with one hand. The reality of the situation exploded into my eardrums, the rattling of gunfire from a line of trees up slope and the rending of metal and ceramic as the second Powell to our immediate right took a hit from a fly by wire missile. The concussion knocked all of us who had disembarked from the Bradley, to the ground.

I grabbed Erin by the neck of his body armor and pulled him up so we could make for cover. He trailed behind me, firing indiscriminately towards the source of the ambush. I merely ran towards the nearest thicket of trees and underbrush for cover.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," was all Erin could say as we huddled down into the barbed scrub for protection. "Fuck."

IR should work. My left hand smeared blood all over my visor as I adjusted it. I pushed the visor up, under the helmet and out of the way. My left glove was soaked in blood, but my arm felt fine. Patting myself down I could feel nothing, aside from myself. It did not feel like I was in shock. *But what the hell does shock feel like?*, I thought.

I turned to my left, "Erin!" I shouted. I wanted him to check me to see if I was missing something, if I was hit and just too shell shocked to notice.

"Fuck," he said. Erin was lying on his back, his rifle across his chest. He turned to face me, his skin drained of color. "Shit."

There was burst of explosions from down the mountain side, I turned just in time to watch as the last standing Bradley fell in a mix of fire and explosive convulsions.

"Shit, we have got to get out of here." I began fumbling for my visor again. "Erin, let's go. Erin?"

I turned and shook him. "Erin!" Erin's face had gone from pale to ashen. His mouth gaped open and his head tilted back. His eyes stared skyward, empty. I attempted to prop him up bringing my hand under his neck for support, it was sticky wet and warm. Blood ran out of a pool in his helmet into my hand, it also coated the neck of his body armor. "Fuck, no!" I wrestled with his helmet's chin strap for what must have been an hour's worth of heartbeats, my heart pounding painfully in my chest.

Blood filled the gorget of his body armor. I pulled the Velcro tabs that wrapped over his shoulders. Blood poured out when I lifted the armor off. Shrapnel from the Powell explosion had made it past the gorget and neatly torn through Erin's softer-than steel-flesh. The pressure of the armor against his body had kept him from bleeding to death on the spot when he had been hit, but not for much longer.

"Shit." I laid my head face down on his chest, and heaved one solitary heavy sob.

A burst of gunfire, near enough to cut through the sound of shelling, broke my reverie.

The shots peeled out from two Separatist soldiers as they moved cautiously around the wreckage of the Bradley Erin and I had been in. They were mopping up, catching any stray survivors. I could see a body that lay beyond them shake and convulse as one of them fired a burst into it. I prayed whoever it was was already dead, then squeezed the trigger.

It happened just like in the movies; the two soldiers never knew what hit them. They obviously did not have the heavy body armor I did - the caseless rounds from my rifle went right through them. I could see the muscles rend and blood burst and pop before they fell wetly to the ground.

There was shout and more gunfire from above. I didn't bother to wait; I didn't look back. Branches cut at my face while underbrush tripped me. There was no direction to my headlong plunge, just away from the scene of my crime. Seconds later a thicket of weeds wrapped my ankle throwing me face first into the dirt.

All I could hear was my own breath, my own blood pumping, my own heart throbbing. It all drowned out the choking sobbing in my throat. I freed my ankle from the scrub and slipped down behind the shattered and blackened trunk of the tree. Two clicks up the mountain things were quiet - relatively, anyway. The sound of shelling and missile fire had stopped. The burning tanks and W.F.V.s seemed to have stopped exploding. I couldn't even discern any weapons fire over the distant crackle of burning machinery and advancing soldiers.

With our mission incomplete, the jamming was still in place, which meant I was still cut off from base. There would be no backup, no air support. Indeed, HQ would not even know what had occurred unless someone else made it back to tell them, and that could take hours, if not days.

*If there is no going forward, there is only going back.*

I pulled my face mask up to try and mask my IR trail better and moved to heavier cover. Fires ignited by the tracers and explosions blazed white across my helmet's visor. The ambush area raged a seething green and white inferno on the IR overlay. Wrecked machines burned acridly, pouring off long white plumes of heat and smoke through the forest's cool green. Confident soldiers stalked the scene. With their face masks down, their hundred degree breath positively burned on my visor compared to the cool of their insulated uniforms and helmets.

I checked my ammunition. With the magazine still reading three quarters full, I set up for a shot. Between the rifle's sights and my helmet's visor, the men appeared so clear they might as well have been standing in midday sun holding gaily painted targets in front of their faces. My index finger switched the rifle to semi-auto, then slipped under the trigger guard. Deep breath in, slow exhale, squeeze.

Two soldiers are standing in front of a burning troop carrier, looking for survivors to shoot. Suddenly one's head explodes. Before the second can raise his weapon, he feels a round enter the front of his throat below the chin. The specially designed round splinters apart, lodging bits into his spine. Other fragments spin and tumble, ripping through the sides and back of his throat. As his head recoils forward, muscles too torn to support it, he hears the sound of flechette rounds ripping the air around him. The soldier's body crumbles forward under its weight, and all he can think is that somewhere we all missed the punchline.

As I fingered the selector to full auto and lay a barrage of suppressing fire, the second man's head tumbled forward, nearly severed, shifting the body's balance, toppling it to the ground. In the radio silence the shouts of men and women fill the air like ancient hunters, calling and responding as they flush their prey. Soon the air is full of weapons fire, shaking the needles from the trees and furrowing the earth. Atop a nearby ridge a four legged Koslov "Tiger" lifts itself free of camouflage netting and pine branches. The thing

was awe inspiring. More spider than tiger, the Koslov positioned itself over a line of rocks and angled its body forward and down, protecting its underside from any potential threat. Knoll would be in love. Atop the sleek and slim carriage, the twin-turret mounted Vulcan cannons, radar blind, twitched nervously, ticking from side to side, up and down.

Directly between the two guns, a slim canister shaped FLIR sensor uncovered itself. This stilled the nervous cannons - instead of vainly targeting anything, everything, and nothing, they began systematically fixing on heat source after heat source, judging the potential threat, then firing or moving on.

Between the Koslov and I lay the burning wreckage of the second Powell. The once formidable hunter looked as if a child had stepped on a toy. The great and vicious insect-like machine had been hit dead center several times. Its body lay broken and burning between its splayed legs. Smoke and flashes of fire raged within its engine casing. Soldiers had steered clear of the wreckage, knowing at any minute the weapons magazines could explode.

Contrary to training, I ran away from the ambush. If the law of averages held true, then the ambush would have taken the form of an 'L' with us at the joined corner, the enemy above and to my right. We had been trained to push on through - break the 'L', defeat the attack. Unfortunately there no longer seemed to be any 'we'. Without communications it was impossible to be sure, but the last live American I had seen was Erin.

Erin.

"Well quit it, thinking that shit will just get you killed later. It's us or them."

Alone I ran. The shouting and rifle fire continued, but it seemed to head away from me. This at least confirmed that I was heading away from my attackers and not into them. Then came a noise like a loud farting - the distinctive sound of Vulcan guns firing. I stopped breathing but didn't stop running. A hundred meters away, the Powell exploded noisily, filling my visor's peripheral with white light. The Koslov rolled back several meters on its treaded feet, swiveled its turret and released a separate volley into the Bradley troop carrier where the two men I had killed, had been standing.

The Koslov had not seen me. I was mostly safe as I ran, trying to breathe steadily and regularly through the thick weave of the face mask, remembering in through the nose, out through the mouth, repeat, repeat, repeat. I no longer strained to turn or try to follow the direction of random gun fire. Nor did I stop as the last remaining magazines in the defeated armors exploded in brilliant white, sending bursts of flame and shrapnel to the treetops. Instead I moved, half hunched, breathing like a marathon runner, forcing my breath out through the gel cooled vents of my mask.

The growing dampness of the mask's interior and the action of breathing through something reminded me of breathing through my scarf on cold winter days in college. To the North and East of campus lay a ridge of beautiful, tree-lined, snowy mountains, mountains an ocean away. I put it out of my head.

Thumbing the pad on the right side of my body armor as I ran, the visor's HUD sprung up. While the chronometer ceaselessly ran, everything else was represented by blank fields and boxes. No radio link, no satellite link, no GPS, no compass. All of the emergency equipment, the things we never needed, had been on the Bradleys. Patterson had been carrying the emergency rockets that could have cued HQ of the ambush. Patterson never made it off the Bradley; neither did Gustavus.

The sky had begun to fill with dawn's colors. Oranges and blues, both vivid and pastels, chased the last few stars from the heavens. Traveling during the day would be dangerous. Locust-like hordes of helicopters and scout planes would be flying through the dead zone, doing visual reconnaissance with IR and telephoto. Our mission had been timed to coincide with daybreak so that the recon planes could send back information on support fire from above the jamming area to the massive artillery implements outside the dead zone. While this would seem to be good fortune, the Separatist choppers and planes would be out looking for survivors and hunting down enemy operations; by definition I was an enemy operation.

It took only a few minutes to find a heavily treed area, something to afford protection from the heaven's prying eyes. I spent another five, according to the chronometer, to find one that also contained some heavy

undergrowth. As I learned as a child, Heaven may know what you do but God is forgiving - it is your brother on the ground that you should really be watching out for.

Crouching in the scrub, I surveyed the mountain's rocky slope. Nothing moved. Without my visor's readouts, I had no idea how far I had run, nor exactly where I had come from. All I truly knew was I could no longer hear screams, shouts, or explosions, and that was good enough to start. I broke my shovel out and began to dig. A shallow furrow began to form, taking longer than it should have, as with every sound - the rustling of the tree branches in the slightest - my ears pricked and burned, forcing me to turn and survey the area again. My eyes darted from tree to rock to shrub looking for anything that might be a heat signature or a perceived, but ultimately non-existent, movement.

I settled back into the ditch I had dug, pulling the loose dirt over my legs and nestling my torso in behind some of the thicker shrubs. The uniform's insulation would hide my torso's heat. I thought about the fact that the mask's gel coolant would eventually fail, that did not bother me. By all estimates, the mask's effects would hold out until nightfall. By that time I would either be safe or dead.

The morning began to wear on in what was either long hours, or even longer minutes. I had shut off my chronometer and other CPL systems to save the battery power for night, when I would need it to help me find my way down the mountain in the dark.

As time wore on I became less and less patient. The long quiet, the droning of insects and rustling leaves played on my paranoia. There was no way to get out of this. The Separatists would find me and kill me, as they had the others.

*And God, Karen. A continent and an ocean away, she'll never even know I died here on a fucking mountain for no fucking reason. I don't care about these people and their fucking war or their damned cleansings and pride. All I want is to wake up and find her sleeping quietly next to me.*

*If I am going to die on this fucking mountain, I at least want to remember her face, her smile, her love, to remember the words she said to me.*

I wrestled with the closures of the armor as quietly as I could. Her photo was still in my breast pocket. I could picture it without looking at it - her sitting on the hood of her car smiling and smoking, the way I always thought of her.

*God, she is gorgeous. The powder scent of her skin, that stuttered laugh, the way she looks at me while I type; when she thinks I don't see her. Take care of her, all I want is for her to be happy.*

Saline tears burned the corners of my eyes. After moments of fumbling with the armor's catches, I freed it enough to get my hand inside to the pocket. Even under my gloved hands, the pocket retained its familiar warmth and characteristic feel. The photograph of all my reason in the world being held firmly against my chest by a heavy and battered heirloom compass.

My father's compass. My father's going away gift. An antique compass.

*If I have ever doubted you before Lord, never again.*

I pulled the photo and the compass from my pocket. Re-securing the armor and placing the compass into a secure pocket in my fatigues, I looked at the photo. It was exactly how I remembered it, how I remembered her. *If I can survive this then maybe I can make it through the tour.*

I pushed the photo into a pocket on the right side of my fatigues, opposite the one with the compass. The pocket was not empty though. I felt a small rectangular box, which I removed carefully.

I had forgotten all about the box of pills we were always issued before missions. Inside, the dark green plastic box was divided into several compartments, each containing a re-sealable plastic bag of pills. I looked at the contents - white octagonal pills, large round salmon colored pills, capsules that looked like allergy medication, several gel based caps, and in the lid, four derms.

I knew the derms were pain killers, designed for long, constant delivery. I looked over the small pictograms on the bags. The allergy pill look-a- likes had a lightning bolt and a bayonet crossed on the bag. I reasoned these to be aggressiveness stimulators, drugs developed to make people more "effective" in combat. The salmon colored pill's pictogram translated into tranquilizers. The gel caps seemed to have varying uses, from suicide to interrogation aid. Finally, nestled in one corner was the smallest bag with the most pills.

Twenty or more small flat white octagonal pills, bisected neatly with a line, sat inside a bag marked with an circle containing an exclamation point bisected by a lightning bolt. So these were the pills referred to as "minis." Designed to keep you combat ready on long operations, they had since found their way onto the streets and into the clubs back home.

I lifted the bag and broke the seal, carefully spilling out two of the octagons. As trained, I ducked my head down towards my chest before lowering my mask, and then dry swallowed the pills. I hoped to God the army engineered its drugs better than it did its "milk runs."