

Half-Life

By Francesco Poli

00. INTRO TO HALF-LIFE

Everybody there? Good! First, something about me: my name is Francesco Poli, nickname Warzone, and my e-mail address is bpoli@tin.it. I like to write; be it fantasy, sci-fi, original, based on something, or even an opinion. I don't give myself restrictions - well, I try not to be coarse or trivial, but that would be the least! I already published some writings. Check out: <http://www.planetblood.com/crypt> for a fan fiction on Blood by me (Dying Times, 1999) and <http://grapesthoughts.profuse.net> for my articles - also, if you find it is down or unreachable, return after a week or so, because I'll be a regular after that!

What is my goal with this novel is to show myself, more than anybody else, that I can be a somewhat decent writer. So, when I started, it didn't matter if this was to get published on a website or not; but, with the Blackest Hole opening, this was an occasion I couldn't miss!

This novel, if you haven't understood it yet, is a novelization (everybody: DOH!) of the game Half-Life, by Valve Software. Although the game has a good plot, I still think it's underused: for example, Gordon has no lines at all, and we never get to know what is the role of this 'agency', who is the man with the briefcase, and why the experiment created such a mess. I will try to explain my version of the answers - while introducing many more questions also! So, if you find that something isn't right - might be in plain view, might be hidden - remember that detail, because it's gonna return with interests...

Note that it is unknown, as of today, if there will ever be an official Half-Life novel; but should it ever come out, this novel WILL be finished and WILL remain available - unless, of course, Valve doesn't tell me otherwise: theirs is the intellectual property, and theirs is the final decision on the legality of something based on it.

With that out of the way, on with the novel! First thing to know is that this is NOT YET FINISHED! Only chapters one through four are in a presentable form. Do mind that there aren't, and there will NEVER BE release dates for updates or new chapters. Hope that is clear - because letters asking 'when will it be out' will be nuked without a second thought. Also, this means that some parts pretty much suck. I've rewritten portions of the novel before publishing, but there still are parts I don't feel inspired (or am just too lazy) to modify yet; most of which include insufficient dialogue or insufficient description, but some are plot weaknesses (I still don't find Gordon too convincing). More on that as feedback and inspiration come in.

This also applies to typos (\$%#\$%#!), verb conjugation errors (re- @\$#@)! Happens to me even in Italian), sudden tense switching ([as above]) and pretty much contorted phrasing.

Clear enough? I hope so! Anyhow, see you after the end of chapter 4...

And without further ado:

Welcome to Gordon Freeman's personal nightmare. Enjoy yourselves...

1. FADE TO WHITE

Black Mesa Research Center, Black Mesa, Mexico

July 12, 2002

08:33 AM

“Alpha team, report status. Over.” The radio crackled on, then “Status is negative, sir. Over.” The man got instantly upset. That should have not happened. “Repeat, Alpha.”

“Alpha, reporting negative. Primary target can not be acquired, over.” The man began to get visibly nervous. “Damn it Alpha! Check again!”

The man was being more and more nervous by the moment, as he walked in circles inside the nearly featureless gray room. Secrecy be damned! He shouldn't have come this far just to make sure everything was OK. He should have just charged in, guns blazing, as usual. And who cares if a few eggheads ever got in the way? The ends, first of all.

Then the methods.

“Ssir, you should calm down. Nothing can possibly go wrong now.”

The skinny, pale and well-dressed figure was talking to him from a corner with his usual calm, reassuring, slightly hissing voice. And the figure was right. Nothing could have gone wrong. He inhaled deeply, exhaled and then settled down as the radio crackled on again.

“Alpha reporting, negative. Over.” The big man stood immediately and swore badly, throwing then the radio on the floor, putting a dent in it and bending the antenna.

“Ssir, may I suggesst...?” The large man looked coldly at the skinny figure “They may have hidden it, or set it somewhere else by missstake. If we set a recaller there, I could get in and out just before zero hour. The material is bound to be there at that time.”

The man scowled; thought for a minute, inhaled and exhaled heavily again, then nodded. “Not many more options, are there?” Although angry, he realized that leaving any option untried could bring the anger of his superiors. He was in charge of the operation, and his was the fault if he screwed up.

And already he had screwed up once.

He bent and picked up the barely working radio. “Alpha, this is Hot Dog. Barter up. Over.” “Alpha, bartering up.” One minute passed, as the two figure packed up their tools, then the confirmation “Alpha, bartered up. Moving to extraction point. Over and out.”

“Well, G, it's back home the normal way for us this time.” The big man, still quite nervous, and the quiet, skinny, shadowy figure exited the room and entered the train station unseen.

*

BEEEEEP *“Warning: hemorrhagy detected.”* *BOOOOOP* *“Morphine administered.”*

That was bad. And he felt it. That thing had really put up a fight, and unless he found some medical supplies, his hemorrhagy was only going to worsen. But how could he find medical assistance for a human being in a place like this? He was lucky that the suit could surrogate the function of his now broken left leg - but that will undoubtedly slow him down.

And the painkillers won't last forever.

He looked down below. It was a two story fall, but he was sure to survive. He floated, gently enough, down to the purplish surface, and touched down without a scratch. His quarry couldn't have gone very far, and the opening in what seemed like a cave was the logical place to begin searches...

The sound of a bell ringing from above caught his attention, and he saw another of the ships, again appearing straight out of nowhere. Strange sound, but that wouldn't have made the ship less deadly. Its laser cannon muzzle began glowing, a deep purple mass forming in front of it, mass which soon would have turned into an anti-matter projectile. There was no time: he ran forwards as fast as his condition allowed to, and dived behind a rock mere seconds before it was turned to dust by the energy blast.

The ship had passed him, though, and he knew he had about six to ten seconds to get inside before it could turn, charge up, and fire again. There was no time to lose: he ran towards the opening, getting under cover just before the ship had fired, the blast barely missing him. He switched on the floodlight, quickly scanning the entire room for hostiles.

No one was inside. Then the ground shook; dust of the unknown material that made up the cavern came down from above, and he moved as second too late as the entire roof crumbled, one of the rocks hitting him and forcing him to the ground.

He tried to stand, but his legs were completely oblivious to his orders. He could look above as he saw another one of the ships, this one strangely hovering above his position, a much larger than normal cannon glowing in an eerie green. He had never seen things like that...

Distorted laughters from all around him made him know that he was surrounded. Five, no, ten, no, over twenty of them surrounded him, their disgusting green skin and single red eye betraying their nature as living beings, hidden as they were under near full-body metallic armors.

Then another blast. Pain was much beyond tolerable as he looked to his right arm to see it wasn't there anymore; blood, instead, was splattered almost everywhere, his MP5 now a contorted and fused piece of black metal.

BEEEEEP *BEEP* *BEEP* *BEEP* *“Warning: Major fracture detect. User death imminent.”*

He could barely understand that he was shrieking out very loudly. But then, his sight turned to blood red and he couldn't hear anything anymore...

BEEP *BEEP* *BEEP* *BEEP* *DRRRRRRRINNnnn* “Come on, Gordon! You’re late!”

Gordon Freeman woke up by abruptly on his bed.

He was sweating, his heart pounding as he sat, trying to calm down from the fading images of his nightmare still sweeping in front of his eyes.

His right arm was still in position. His legs were still working. He wasn’t bleeding.

And he was in his room, alone, as usual.

It was not the first time he had this kind of nightmare. So real they were, he could swear he was actually there a few moments ago...

“Come on, Gordon! You’re late!”

He slapped his palm on the alarm clock with automated wake up message, still dizzied. The fog of sleep slowly clearing, he glanced at the time. It was 8:40 AM. He was about to lay down again as he realized that today wasn’t Sunday.

And that he had to be in Anomalous Materials... well, about twenty minutes ago!

Hit hard by the realization, he quickly stood and rushed to his bathroom; after quickly washing his theet - hygiene, before all - he returned back to dress.

He couldn’t find his tie, so he decided to skip for today.

His chemise had a stain, but he figured that after all his dressing wouldn’t matter when he got to work.

And he could not even find one pair of matching socks, so he had to fit with two different ones. He was almost forgetting his glasses as he ran out of the room.

The dormitories train station was less than two minutes running from his room, and from there, a ten minutes ride to the Anomalous Materials Test Labs.

He ran through the nearly empty corridors, unsurprising since everybody would have been already at work at this time except the night shift guards.

The train station was a large room where dozens of tracks ran both on the roof and on the floor. His was the one for Sector C, and was the closest to the entrance. He slid his security pass into its slit on the train, and hastily climbed aboard. Sensing no more passengers in queue, the train slowly started towards its destination as the soothing, although annoying, automated pre-recorded speech kicked in:

“Good morning, and welcome to the Black Mesa transit system. This automated train is provided for the security and convenience of the Black Mesa facility personnel. This train is inbound from Level 3 Dormitories to...”

*

“Subject: Gordon Freeman, Male, age 27. Education: Ph.D., MIT, Theoretical Physicsss. Position: Research Associate. Asssignment: Anomalous Materials Laboratory...”

“Get to the point G. Why do you think this egghead would be of any kind of use to us or to the agency?”

“Well, ssir, he has some... how may I say? Interesting past referencesss...”

*

Gordon sat in the train, oblivious of his surroundings as the train descended through one of the caverns that made up this section of the complex, while the train message system went on and on, seemingly forever, about how the compound was kept at a comfortable heat at all times, which was hardly true, about all the security measures, most of which were so secure their details were classified, and about the HEV decathlon that had to take place that night. Strange. It had taken place the night before, and had been the main reason for Gordon waking up late. The people who had to change the message must have been in his same condition.

The train suddenly came to a halt: a shuttle appeared in the train's path, a load of crates in tow. Gordon sighed: those shuttles took strangely long to move; he always wondered why they couldn't take faster ones. After all, it's not that they didn't have the money.

Nevertheless, his wasn't the only train delayed by the shipment; across the shuttle's path there was another train, almost empty as his...

He stood, curious, trying to see who could be moving that way at this hour. One distinct, well dressed guy was... pointing at him? No, the trains were too far to distinguish things too clearly, and his dizziness from the abrupt awakening didn't make matters any easier.

Gordon dismissed his paranoia, hoping that the dizziness wouldn't turn into yet another splitting headache, and returned to his seat a moment before the shuttle had cleared the trains' paths, which both began moving.

*

D looked at the man G had pointed as the two trains came closer.

Undoubtedly a scientist, and a quite mellow looking one. Undoubtedly capable of aborting a weapon experiment if a fly got in the test chamber...

No. Surely incapable of even doing a weapon experiment at all.

“And you want me to believe he...?” D chuckled, nervous. “G, do you think I am a fool?”

“Sir, he...”

“We don't have time for eggheads... Anyway, you really sure that our 'toy' will be in the materials storage by the time?”

How many times had he asked him? Ten? Twenty? And his answer had never changed.

“Yes, ssir.”

“Hmph. You know, G, someday I'll have to get you a better translator, I'm quite tired of your hissing around.”

G readjusted his tie and straightened his grip on his briefcase as the train moved towards its destination. It was going to be a tough day for both of them.

But especially tough for someone else...

2. ANOMALOUS MATERIALS

“...Now arriving at: Sector C Test Labs...”

Gordon was impatient of getting to work; he had been in the complex for less than two months and already had two late arrivals. That was something the higher-ups did not like.

Security was extremely strict in there: although one could board a train nearly hassle-free, you couldn't get off on your own as you had to wait for one of the security guards to let you out. This was probably made to fool wannabe intruders... But who the hell could even get into the complex? It was 'trespassers shot on sight' for over ten kilometers around the facility.

“Morning, Mr. Freeman! Looks like you're running late!” greeted Alex, the guard on duty that morning, after taking and scanning his ID from the preposted slit in the train.

“Assume the position...” Gordon removed his glasses as the retinal scanner beam moved up and down over his green eyes.

“You'd better move, Gordon. They seem to be quite pissed down in the test chamber.”
Not surprising. “Don't tell me...”

Gordon climbed down the train as Alex pressed the 'return' button on the console, and entered the Sector C Anomalous Materials Test Labs entrance still running.

He had really better hurry.

Once inside he greeted Wallace, the front desk guard, who seemingly had problems with the computer system - when he doesn't? - but he had no time to waste;

he went for the changing room, again empty as everybody was at work already, and from there, after stripping and hastily storing his clothes in his locker, to the HEV containment room.

In the room were three transparent cylinders, each one controlled by a buttons, which monitor, recharge and maintain one HEV while unused.

Only one of them was still full: the orange-and-black colored one.

Gordon didn't know why, but nobody seemed to like that color. They said that it brought 'bad luck' and all that superstitious stuff.

But Gordon was a scientist: he never cared for superstitions, and he pressed the activation button. The glass lifted and the cylinder opened, as the HEV inside began startup procedures by releasing its safety clamps. Actually, releasing the clamps meant that the suit would crumble into a heap on the floor, but that would allow Gordon to actually slip inside.

As soon as the on-board computer detected his presence, the clamps shut around him, making him as comfortable as possible. A tingle on his forefingers, sign that the suit was scanning his fingerprints, then the synthesized voice, which he found out that curiously was always of the opposite gender of the user, greeted him.

“Welcome, user Gordon Freeman, to the HEV Mark 4, protective system for use in hazardous environments conditions...” He felt the usual tingle on his face, as the standard energy field covered perfectly his face and glasses, projecting an HUD just in front of them.

The suit came with a powerful armor, much more powerful than one could think, and an integrated shielding which covered all the armor and his head, which was left free of cumbersome, and, word was, optional and expensive, helmets. The armor and shield status indicated yellow, then, as the voice talked on, they went green, indicating nominal status. His health, shown in percentage, was full.

“...Have a very safe day.”

From that moment on, the suit was fully active, and he could finally move.

He ran out of the changing rooms, the suit's nearly invisible and almost soundless servos helping him to a much higher speed he had been capable of on his own strength - another plus, as he had still very little time to spare right now.

As he descended the elevator to the test chamber, from one of the speakers came a short jingle, then an horribly synthesized male voice croaked

“Doctor Freeman to Anomalous Materials test lab immediately.”

They must be really upset down there to call him on the comm system.

He quickly got out of the elevator and ran past the analyzer's secondary computers and laser pipe feeders, waving the occasional 'hello' to his friends; he was almost at the door when a computer console blew in pieces and took fire just a few meters from him.

“It's about to go critical!” Laidlaw, the nearest person to the accident, cried as Gordon grabbed an extinguisher and sprayed the flames in a single fluid motion, the suit aiding him by counteracting the weight shock from the sudden pickup. Laidlaw calmed as he approached the console and rapidly studied the damage. “Must be yet another malfunction. Thanks Gordon.”

“No problems, Jack. See you later.” Gordon didn't alarm; it sure wasn't the first thing going bad he had seen since he began working here; equipment this advanced was bound to have malfunctions sooner or later - much more sooner than later, apparently.

He set the extinguisher back in its charge station, then entered the test chamber control room just in time to hear his colleagues worry.

“...If he doesn't make it within ten minutes, they might consider firing or... Oh, Gordon! There you are; we were getting preoccupied down here!”

“At last! Is everything alright?”

“Yes... Sorry, Joshua, Micheal, everybody... my alarm clock decided to stop working right this morning, and...”

“Damn right, Gordon, they don't make these things as they used to. That's OK, don't worry.” The group of four, relieved, returned to their seats, except Sanders that remained to talk to Gordon.

“Anyway, there’s really no time to lose in chit chat; today we will be deviating a bit from standard procedures as this is the purest sample of Etherthel we’ve ever got our hands on, and we can’t risk leaving the slightest bit of detail behind!”

Wow! Etherthel! He had heard of it, and of its incredible (and mysterious) properties, but never ever got a chance to even see it.

“Deviating a bit... You mean we’re going for the overcharge?” “Hmmm, yes, between the other things. Don’t worry; your suit will keep comfortable through all this, as usual. Now, to the test chamber! We really don’t have time to lose!”

Sanders went for the retinal scanner for the door opposite the entrance, the scanner whirred happily and the door opened.

Gordon, still excited, entered and descended the stairs to the test chamber elevator.

*

“What are you doing here? You’re not authorized!”

“Sorry, I...”

The guard waved his gun at the man.

“Turn your back against the wall, hands where I can see them!”

“Ok, officer...”

As the guard got closer, the man slammed his briefcase on the guards’ gun, knocking it back, and then on the surprised man’s neck, instantly breaking it.

“Love that ssound.”

The man readjusted his tie, and went to the stored materials. He checked thoroughly the ID tags on the storage; he was about halfway through when he heard footsteps coming from just outside of the room.

“... Yeah, sounds like an easy job. Why must we guard those things in four, as I said, is beyond me. It’s not that they’re going to spruce up legs and walk away anytime soon!”

Three were a bit too many. G quickly scanned the rest of the labels, and grabbed delightfully one of the cases.

“With all the stuff in there, it’s a miracle we haven’t all blown up already.”

As one of the guards began to enter his code on the door’s keypad, he pressed a button on a hand remote and an orange spheric field appeared in front of him. He dived in, the sphere disappearing mere instants before three Black Mesa guards walked into the room.

“...Don’t forget that Bennet has screwed up yet again!” “Yeah, bet he’ll get fired one day or another. The higher ups don’t like mistakes, especially - hey, what the...?”

*

“...Gordon doesn't need to hear this! He's a trained professional and...” The door hissed open, and the two stopped bickering as Freeman stepped in the test room antechamber. The room was but a small maintenance shed, with a few secondary monitors and two people stationed there at all times in case of emergencies.

“Ah, you're here, Gordon. Come on, let's let him in.”

Two simultaneous retina scans later, the large, super reinforced door, slowly whirred open only to shut silently as Gordon walked past. It was just yet another security measure, but the equipment in the room ahead more than justified its need.

The test chamber was a scientist's dream come true: the enormous analyzer beam emitter stood in the center of the room, coming down from the roof which was well over ten meters of height from the floor, and was almost half as wide.

It was a sight to behold when fully operative; and Gordon always found the lightshow of the analyzer fascinating, almost a living entity of its own as computer technology beyond anything imaginable perused the underlying material with unbelievable accuracy.

The enormous apparatus was not in function at the time, of course; an almost eerie red glow shrouded the chamber, together with the analyzer's console and materials elevator.

A screeching noise caught Gordon's attention to above and behind him, noise that then converted into Sanders' voice, talking from the control room hidden behind a reinforced anti rad screen.

“Testing? Testing? OK, Gordon, Micheal has just received a call saying that there have been some problems down in the material storage room, and we'll have a ten minute delay or so. So, while we're waiting, we thought we might as well warm up the analyzer. Beginning standard procedure when you're ready.”

Gordon sat at the console and began the initialization procedure. It was, at least for a scientist of his preparation, amazingly easy: just press a few buttons in the right sequence and wait for the corresponding gauges to get to green.

And he did just that, as Sanders gave his usual reports. Everything was fine and nominal...

Yet, something wasn't right. He didn't know what it was; it began slowly at the back of his mind, then crept its way to his rational hemisphere.

The word 'Etherthel' seemed to echo in his mind.

Etherthel.

Etherthel.

Etherthel...

“Is something wrong, Gordon?”

“Ehm, no, nothing at all. Sorry.” But he was lying; he had stopped, because he felt gripped in fear.

Fear of what, he did not know.

Etherthel.
Etherthel.
Etherthel!

The voice was definitely not an echo. It was almost growing in strength.

He continued, uneasy, the procedure as the enormous apparatus slowly began to show signs of life. But the voice didn't stop, until the protonic charge tester's overhead capacitors' rotors began to spin to life.

As it had come, it had gone. But still, what the hell was going on with him? It was like some kind of omen, some sort of 'sixth sense', telling him to... to stay clear of Etherthel. But why? And why had it stopped with the rotors? Gordon couldn't find any kind of rational answer. And no rational answer means no fact; for he was a scientist:

'If you can prove it, it's true. If you can't, it's not.'

That was the way he worked; that was the way everything worked.
He kept repeating the motto in his mind, as Walter continued to give his usual reports and the machine came slowly to full power.

*

"No time to lose, G. Let's begin."

The case was set in the enormous apparatus. Ten minutes, and it would be the beginning for the end of all their problems.

"Beginning destabilization in three... two... one."

The overhead wheel began rotating...

*

About ten minutes had passed, and no sign of the material yet. Gordon had calmed down from his sudden attack of paranoia, but he still didn't feel completely right about this; the machinery couldn't operate for too long, even if below overcharge.

He looked again at the machine. The sight, even through his worries, was as always wonderful: the three oval and near flat surfaces that were the overhead capacitors were rotating at about one hundred RPMs, as the large protonic charge tester streaked wildly in a multicolored beam towards the scan focus, which was also about to be hit by the main blue analyzer beam, with an effect both marveling and dizzying.

The noise in the room was high, due to the rotors' high speeds, yet he could still hear Sanders' reports.

"...Overhead capacitors operating at ninety-nine percent and..."

Gordon heard the intercom buzz on the loudspeaker, which turned off, then, after a few seconds, back on: “Good news, Gordon. Looks like they sorted out the mess down in storage. The sample should be arriving soon.”

That was good. He wanted to be done with this thing as soon as possible. Believing in those kinds of ‘sixth senses’ or not, he didn’t like what he had felt. The tester was now just beyond full charge, and in less than a minute it would reach overcharge.

An hard condition to explain, he remembered, trying to overcome the last of his worries; it was something vaguely like ‘overcharging’ those old PCs back in the late nineties: you could have them run faster and better - but if you weren’t careful, they could burn up, taking the rest of the PC with them.

Suddenly, the four lights inscribing the material elevator’s safety cage began blinking. “The sample seems to have arrived, Gordon. Let’s try to make this as quick as possible.” Even Sanders’ voice sounded a bit worried. Gordon wondered what the others in the control room felt about all this... But he knew the answer: it was just paranoia, and they were feeling as he should be, perfectly safe and normal as everything was.

The cage dropped down, going actually below the floor, just after the elevator came to a full stop in the chamber, holding the safety cart and the Etherthel sample. The enormous apparatus reached overcharge, and the overhead rotors, now useless, stopped; and the chanting began again.

The Etherthel could have been defined as beautiful; pyramid-shaped, glowing softly and smoothly, as it sat, almost impatient to get analyzed, on the safety cart’s grabbing arm. But for Gordon, it could have been the anti-Christ made material. He was simply rattling with fear, as he tried to approach the cart. Just a push, a push into the analyzer, and he could steer clear of it. Forever, clear of it.

He took one more step. “Gordon? What is going on with you today? Too many women in your mind?”

“N-n-n-o... J-just...”

He took a very deep breath and charged through his fears, his mind almost numb from the torture, grabbing the cart’s handles, eyes still shut, as he pushed it towards the analyzer beam. Sanders’ voice broke momentarily his concentration:

“Gordon, we... No. No, that’s nothing. That’s well within the limits. Go on.”

With a nearly inhuman determination, he kept going and the material finally contacted the beam.

He quickly took several steps backwards, still unnaturally fearful, as he looked at the analyzer. Strange; the beam was supposed to hit the material, instead it was circling it and was hitting directly the floor below the focus. Strange kind of analysis; he was never instructed in something like this.

“Wait a minute, Gordon, what the...? Oh, my God!”

Gordon's fears and thoughts were broken as the analyzer beam instantly reversed its flow and hit one of the overhead capacitors, collapsing in a streak of multicolored sparks with a deafening explosion.

"NO! We must revert..."

"Shutdown! SHUTDOWN!"

"Can't shutdown?"

"What do you mean, can't shutdown? Emergency procedures NOW!"

The people in the control room were obviously in a frenzy. Gordon was confused, unable to react, and the ground began shaking.

"Attempt shutdown! Again! AGAIN!"

Something was definitely wrong, as even the comm system creaked in:

"Mass system failure in Sector C! Repeat: mass system failure in Sectooooorrrr Seeeeeeeee..."

The voice slowed down considerably, then it interrupted.

The shakings worsened; Gordon fell and hit his head on the control console, his confused state getting the coupe de grace as his vision blurred. He still could see beams of green light flowing freely through the space from the Etherthel sample, bouncing on the walls seemingly randomly.

"My God... What the hell is going on in here...?"

One of the beams blew right through the control room shielding. The shrieks of the people up there were barely audible over the sound of the machinery exploding upon contact with the beams. Both the remaining overhead capacitors had already blown up when the beams seemed to have found some kind of pattern; they rebounded again on the walls, missing him by a mere centimeter, and hit the sample again, machinery still exploding all around the room.

Moments later, most of the beams were reflecting on the sample as a large green sphere formed just above it, growing larger by the second.

The explosions faded out of Gordon's mind, and the only thing he could see was the sphere.

It was mesmerizing, almost as if...

Then, Gordon's confused view was complete darkness.

*

Gordon was looking at the purple streaked sky. It was wonderful, yet, on what place on the Earth was he? He looked around; he was laying in a garden of some sort; or at least so he thought. Everything was seemingly covered in a strange, soft looking, purple goo. He soon recognized that he was immersed in a shallow depression in the ground, filled in more goo.

Far away, he thought he heard a dog barking. Even stranger.

He reached down in the puddle of goo to help himself stand up, resulting in a purple left glove. His suit's HUD was showing a biohazard symbol, meaning the air outside was toxic and that the suit's purifier was on. He listened to his breathing, which sounded unnaturally heavy, and had confirmation.

How long had he been there?

How long could he remain there before the purifier gave up the ghost and he was left to breathe whatever unbreathable gasses that formed the atmosphere

“And especially, where the hell is here?”

He turned to look better at his surroundings.

The place was distant to each and every things he had ever seen, yet seemed familiar to him... As if it was from an old dream - but he couldn't remember exactly.

He approached one of the walls encircling the garden. The goo wasn't liquid, as the pool he was immersed before was, but solid. Very solid. He punched it lightly, and saw no effect. Whatever it was, it had the consistency of rock.

“Great, Gordon. Now what?” A green glow at his eye's tails attracted him, and he turned to see a green sphere floating about a meter above ground. Strange.

He reached for it and it exploded; then it was darkness again.

*

Gordon woke in a a cave, or at least what he thought was a cave, since it was nearly pitch black in there.

The biohazard sign still hadn't dropped.

He stood up only to hear noises coming from his left. Was there somekind of atmosphere here then? He listened as they grew in intensity, and soon recognized them for some kind of distorted laughter.

Then, a creature fully covered in metal appeared, almost suddenly, in front of him and punched him back to the floor.

As Gordon, confused and scared, tried to focus on what the thing was, the beast lowered his arms to the floor, fingertips almost touching the nearly invisible ground.

An electrical charge began flowing from the ground to the creature, that quickly raised his arms, the charge growing in intensity, and pointed his fingers at Gordon. The electricity discharge went straight through him, or at least that is what seemed as darkness surrounded him again.

3. UNFORESEEN CONSEQUENCES

The chamber laid in ruins: the overhead wheel had collapsed in three parts over the floor and the entire destabilization hub was totally unusable as a large hole exposed the wrecked mechanisms inside.

One of the slaves had appeared. G rushed out of the control room to dispose of the thing before it had time to charge up; yet, before he had entered the wrecked chamber, one of the military preceded him and stopped the slave cold with a point blank double barrel shot.

D, just out of the trance from seeing the disaster, rushed out of the control room above and charged into the destabilizer chamber.

He didn't exactly seem to be happy - and G could understand why.

"Now, G, you explain me what happened. And you'd better be damn convincing!"

"Ssir, I did my parts correctly! How could I know that the destabilizer did not..."

"No excuses, G! There's only one reason why all this happened: the material you brought back was NOT Etherthel."

D grabbed G by the neck, and lifted him up.

"This is going to be your first, and LAST mistake, G! You know how the superiors will feel about all this!"

G was dropped quite abruptly to the ground, making him drop his briefcase. His face expressed pain as he quickly grabbed it back.

"Now we must just hope that the Ethertel sample is still intact back in Sector C, or we'll have to resort to plan B to take big N down... And you'd better never know what plan B is about."

D pulled out a radio from one of his mimetic suit's pockets.

"Tango, status. Over."

Nothing but static. The man was again visibly upset as his face got red in anger.

"Tango, status. Come in, Tango! Come in RIGHT NOW!"

More static, then a scared voice came in.

"Tango recon one reporting sir! Situation is critical, we have dimensional breach, repeat, dimensional breach! Resonance cascade type four, epicenter Anomalous Materials test labs. Current size is 1.4 hundred meters, failing at..."

The signal became weaker then completely disappeared as D's fist clenched the radio more and more tightly, and finally crushed it. Furious beyond imaginable, he then approached G, who had just recomposed himself.

G looked for a brief instant into D's anger filled eyes then was sent back to the floor by a punch in his guts.

*

The distant sound of an alarm echoed in Gordon's mind. Everything was black around him.

"Is this hell, at last...?"

He didn't want to open his eyes. Maybe if he didn't do so, everything would return to normal. Maybe if he didn't do so, he would find out that he had been only dreaming all along.

The alarm slowly became stronger, but it was only when a bolt of electricity hit the floor just a few paces from him that he realized that the sound was coming from the test room - the room he was in.

Slowly regaining consciousness, Gordon stood. More bolts creaked around the chamber. This was definitely not a dream, and even if it was, it was too real not to do something. Because if he stayed in there any longer, he was sure to die. Almost mindlessly, as if guided by pure instinct, he dashed to the chamber's exit, again being missed by another bolt by mere centimeters.

The antechamber had been blown apart, both of his friend lying in a pool of blood. They were obviously trying to escape, but the blast caught them. There was no time to mourn. If he remained there, he was bound to the same fate.

He tried to open the door, but all the fissures were too thin for his large fingers. Searching rapidly with his eyes the small room for anything to make lever with, he spotted a toolbox.

He crossed the room to reach it, yet another beam hitting the floor just outside the room. Inside the toolbox were a few screwdrivers, some tapes, some screws... And a crowbar!

"New utensil acquired: crowbar. Pocket 1 adapted and ready."

One of the many nice features of his suit.

He crossed the room again and broke open the door, shutting it back behind him.

The small corridor beyond was lit only by the red emergency lights, yet most of the walls were in good shape. The alarm sound still raged on.

He crossed the small corridor to the elevator and pressed the call button.

No answer.

A quick thought, and the suit responded to the command by automatically placing the crowbar back in his hands to force the elevator doors open.

He glanced inside, and, seeing no sign of the elevator itself not above nor below, decided to go for the emergency stairs.

A second thought, and the crowbar was back in its pocket, invisible from any external looker.

Gordon thought briefly back at when he first used the suit, how all and every function felt a technical wonder in itself.

Now the suit was all he had to survive.

Ironic, he thought as he climbed out of the shaft, the alarm still raging on and some cement dust coming down from the battered walls: the suit was supposed to help people travel in hazardous conditions but common knowledge was that it had never been tested outside a laboratory.

Gordon dismissed the thoughts as he climbed up to the next corridor. The roof had almost collapsed, and a few large slabs of reinforced cement were one the floor, the emergency lights completely destroyed. A green bolt streaked a few meters in front of him, hitting something hidden by the walls, sparks flying everywhere.

The control room was just ahead, and the green beams were obviously still plaguing it, hitting the remnants of machinery from time to time.

Preparing for a run-through, he briefly considered stopping to check what had remained of his friends. Then, the images of the two people he saw just five minutes before flashed in his eyes; suppressing a need to puke, he realized only now how he didn't actually feel anything then.

But it was different now; instinct had done its part and conscient thoughts would make Gordon pass out if he saw anything like that again.

So he went back to the run-through. He waited for a pause in the beams' strikes, and gave all he had, the suit again aiding him. He made it barely in time, another beam hitting just where he had been a mere two seconds before. He rushed out of the door, never turning.

Laidlaw was just beyond the egress, ducking behind a pipe, fearful that the beams would hit him.

"Gordon? Gordon! You're alive. Thank God for that hazard suit!" Laidlaw seemed agitated, yet excited.

"Jack... What happened?"

"We've had a resonance cascade, Gordon! A resonance cascade! Just as I had predicted, all along! Damn administrator, he just would not listen..."

Gordon pondered for a few seconds on the possibility as Laidlaw talked, excited as a little kid.

"Resonance cascade? That's... that's impossible! You can't *create* a resonance cascade, and surely not one capable of destroying an entire room, especially one as protected as the test chamber, along with the control room!"

"But we did! Oh, and..." Laidlaw seemed to realize his excitement was to be very short lived, as his expression saddened. "... its effect weren't limited to just those rooms..."

It was only then that Gordon realized the destruction had taken an heavy toll here too: computers in the entire corridor had collapsed to the ground, and a terminal to the central computer was shattered.

Behind one collapsed data bank, he could see legs. He tried to approach them, but Laidlaw stopped him. "You'd better not see what's there. The sight is not exactly pretty."

Damn. "Are there any survivors around here?"

"None that I'm aware of. I've already look around the place and..." Laidlaw made a pause "I found no one. I was about to leave, but I wanted to try and see if there was anyone still inside the test chamber going up.

“The elevator’s still working? Good. Because there are no survivors inside there also. Have you called for help?”

“Impossible. All terminals are offline or destroyed, and the phone line is cut. We are stranded down here.”

“Then, what are we waiting for? We’d better be going.”

“But...”

“There’s no time to mourn the dead. Unless we can get out of here before the structural damage worsens, *we’ll* become casualties too!”

Laidlaw looked confused as he reflected for a moment. “I... I guess you’re right. Lead the way.”

Gordon and he crossed the room silently, and entered the still working elevator. After they pressed the button, nothing but the alarm and a low screech sound could be heard in the room.

*

“Again you’ve proven a failure, D. Tell us, why should we give you another possibility?”

The big man was obviously at discomfort. Even though the transmission was through a small monitor, his superiors’ tone was clear; he was not going to walk away easily.

“I... I have another plan! There’s a GRS in the science team. He will be our key to Xen.”

“A GRS. Fighting our mistakes with the enemy’s is...” there was a brief pause in the speech. D was holding his breath. “No, we understand what your plan is. We’ll consider this option. Good-bye.” The connection was closed, and D was alone.

He silently waited on his knees, eyes closed, face down, his death.

*

The duo stepped out of the elevator after the brief ride. A shadow to his left warned them; “At least somebody is alive here!” Laidlaw moved forward to greet the survivor. Gordon followed just a moment after Laidlaw had been punched to the ground.

**BEEP* *BEEP* “Warning: unknown hostile biological entity detected within thirty meters. Entity signature not matched. Extreme prejudice advised.”*

Its head was formless and yellow, with no eyes. Its clothes, because it was clothed, were heavily drenched in dried blood and other - brain? - parts. Its lower part could have been mistaken for human, had at least its arms not been long as the rest of its body, and ending with three sharp razors just relaxing from the crude punch that grounded Laidlaw.

The creature staggered slowly but firmly towards Gordon, preparing to attack his next prey. Gordon looked down at Laidlaw, who still looked alive, then back at the creature.

What should he do now? His thoughts were broken as sounds of gun shots echoed in the corridor.

The creature turned, with a surprising agility, to face the new threat. Its back, exposed, was even more disgusting, as it was completely torn open showing the internal organs, which for some mysterious reason didn't fall out and on the floor.

"Bring 'em on!" Barney Wallace, the front desk guard, was firing away at the creature as it slowly walked to him. Four, five, six shots straight in what could have been the creature's head with deadly accuracy, and no result.

Seven, eight... Then a click.

And another one.

And yet another one.

Watching the scene almost out of his mind, Gordon found the crowbar in his hands. What the hell was it doing there? He didn't need it, so he commanded to put it back. But nothing happened.

He was about to try and put it down physically, when he realized he was moving. Slowly, very slowly, but definitely moving towards the creature, who was now being kicked by the security guard, although with nearly no result. His vision was blurred as he approached the thing. He thought he saw the guard say something, but he couldn't hear it. He couldn't hear anything at all.

In front of him the crowbar was being slowly raised by his out-of-control arms, and then lowered rapidly on the thing's head. Then again, and again, and again. Faster, faster, and even faster.

Until his perception of time returned to normal, and an headless monster was lying in a puddle of disgusting yellowish goo, some of which was splattered on the guard, on his suit, and on the crowbar.

"I... Uh... Woah... A-a-and I thought you couldn't hit a fly if your life depended on it..."

Gordon was breathing like an exhaust engine as his sight bounced from the body to the crowbar.

“*anf* *anf* That's what *anf* *anf* what an adrenaline rush can do! *anf* *anf*”

“Well, let's not just stand there, let's help your friend. There's a lot we need to discuss...”

*

“... Impossible. Ventilation is separate in each sector.”

Laidlaw was badly hurt; the monster's punch was much stronger than it seemed: his right arm was now almost unusable and there were contusions all over his chest. But he was going to recover, his arm and wounds bandaged by one of the few survivors in the front desk section.

Because, creatures apart, the damage had extended even that far. Gordon tried to guess what could have happened, but he found no logical reason - apart the one that saw Etherthel capable of creating a resonance cascade.

But that was out of question; Etherthel had been analyzed before, and no resonance cascade had ever formed. Which left the question unanswered

“Try crossreference with the sewers then. There’s got to be a way!”

He had met the survivors, as said; there were only five: captain Wallace the desk guard, lieutenant Jameson the front door guard, doctor Wood and doctor Coomer from Material Monitoring, which was the first thing from the entrance, and doctor Brenson, which had come from sector D offices on a commission.

They were already trying to find any other survivor, but they had met the creature - whatever that were - just as Gordon and Laidlaw did, giving them much more pressing matters. Once their problem had been taken care of by Gordon, and Laidlaw was safe, they had split again and tried to find any more survivors.

“Hmmm... But yes! That’s the way, with all the things going on I was almost forgetting!”

There were no more. For as far as they could go, which wasn’t much since this part of the sector was mostly made up of solid cement which after the accidents had crumbled, causing many corridors to become impassable without heavy machinery aiding the rubble removal, and also, most of the deaths.

Over thirty people had lost their lives in the accident, including the six down in the still inaccessible test chamber. The changing room had been transformed into a morgue, with each of the body identified, if possible, and put in a decent posture, again if possible, for the funerals which will take place inevitably in a few days.

“Damn my distraction... Let me see the sewer map!”

But, as much as they wanted, it wasn’t over yet. They were still stranded down there. The train track was completely out of order; and even if it was, the small metal bridge that connected the front door to the train itself had fallen down, and it was a fifty meters fall if one couldn’t do the fifteen meters jump - which was obviously impossible.

With nearly all the useful equipment broken beyond repair or simply malfunctioning, they could not contact the rest of the facility.

And everybody knew that each sector is kept as strictly separated from each other as possible, to prevent people to know more than they were supposed to and all those paranoia things in effort inside every top-priority classified installation.

Regular contact with each section was maintained by the supervisors, of course. But an emergency plan required a sector to never answer radio calls for over 24 hours. And with all the pranks being made between radio operators, it was probable that it would have occurred well over two days for any kind of expedition to be mounted.

Which meant, in a few words, that they were doomed unless they could find any kind of link to another sector, because while they could survive for say 12 hours, they simply had not the supplies or the food - and especially water - to sustain more.

“Not here... Not here... No, it’s not here. But there must be another map...”

So far they had tried to cross-reference sector D with sector C; since the former was but the office section of the Anomalous Materials lab, they weren’t particularly separated.

But they still had to find a way to get there. So far, nothing; the only on foot route was blocked, and with the train offline, their hopes were thinning down by the moment...

“Ah, yes! Here it is!”

Brenson, being from sector D, knew it much better than the others. And he had just given the only hope they had thus far...

“If memory doesn’t fail me, this is a maintenance elevator that goes from the sewers to the maintenance shed in sector D. From there, we can access the office complex!”

“And that would mean... going down in the sewers?” Gordon didn’t exactly like the idea.

“Sorry, Gordon. If you really don’t want to, well, I think we can...”

“No, no, nothing like that, Harold. I volunteered, and I’m going even if it was through hell. I’m not going to leave you down here. I just wanted to know... Where’s the access port?”

“Hmmm... Good question; let’s check”

“No need to.” Doctor Wood interrupted the dialogue. “It’s in the restrooms back in the... morgue.”

“Well, we’re all set, aren’t we? I’d better get going as soon as it is possible. Can you print the maps?”

“Course, we can Gordon.” Barney pressed a few buttons, and out of a slit just below the monitor slowly came out three sheets of paper.

“Wait a second... Print the ventilation schematics also. We don’t know in what shape is sector D and we’d better not leave any detail behind.”

Another button pressed, and another sheet of paper came out. Gordon picked up all three, then, silently, he made way towards the changing room, the group of six following.

Trying not to look at all the bodies there, he entered the restrooms and immediately spotted the hatch. It was hidden behind a closet, or rather, it had been hidden behind a closet, because with the earthquakes et al it had fallen down, breaking the sanitaries and setting a thin layer of water on the floor - layer that was already regressing, because flowing water had been cut some time ago.

Gordon pushed away the closet, and pulled out his still dirty crowbar; he shook to try to clean it a bit, but to no avail; he resigned and forced the hatch open.

The group was silent behind him. Then, Wallace moved forward and handed him a gun with two spare clips.

“You’ll need these, Gordon. I don’t know what those creatures are, but who knows what’s down there?”

“I... You’re right, Barney. Goodbye, guys.”

“Goodbye, Gordon.”

“Bye!”

“Goodbye? You mean ‘see you later’!”

“That’s right. See you later!”

“Good luck, Gordon!”

Good luck. Strange thing to hear from a scientist like dr. Coomer. Gordon turned to enter the hatch, but was stopped by Brenson again

“Oh, and Gordon! I almost forgot, again... Damn memory... If you can’t get an outside line from sector D, get to the surface! There’s an elevator in the warehouse section that will take you up there. You’ll surely be able to contact someone from there. Goodbye again!”

Gordon turned again, and this time didn’t stop, as he heard the hatch get shut behind him, his suit’s breastlight soon becoming the only source of light in the small, dank corridor. He began moving; the sooner he got out of there, the sooner this nightmare was over.

Yet, apart from the cause of this mess, only two questions remained:
What was the creature that attacked them before?
And especially, where had it come from?

With no answer in his hands, Gordon continued down the corridor, hoping to be alone in this place...

*

Death had not come. That meant he had another chance.

Plan B was indeed good. Much better than plan A - but also much, much more risky because it required capturing one of the most dangerous of their enemies’ agents, a GRS.

And a ‘virgin’ one, too.

The most dangerous GRS, as the most dangerous men, was the unpredictable one. And a ‘virgin’ GRS was undoubtedly unpredictable.

D stood, and began the preparations by keying his brand-new radio.

“Hot Dog to Score Six.” He paused a bit. That was an heavy order to issue. But it was required. “Hot Dog to Score Six. Begin shock procedure nine-nine codeword six-one-oh-six. Repeat, Score Six: shock procedure nine-nine, codeword six-one-oh-six. Over.” Several “Yes SIR!” overlapped over D’s radio.

It wouldn’t be long before they were in position...

*

Gordon had been walking in the dark, smelly, cramped maze of tunnels and pipes that formed the sewer system maintenance part for less than a dozen of minutes; but time didn’t help him sort out his thoughts.

Thoughts about the alleged resonance cascade; thoughts about the creature; thoughts, especially, about the gun he was wielding almost reverentially in his hand.

As for every useful tool or potential weapon, the suit had recognized the gun, set up a pocket and prepared the ammo storage unit, which allowed him to carry just one physical clip around, and refilling it almost instantly by reinserting it in the corresponding hole in his belt.

Another one of the marvelous features of the HEV, he remembered thinking three months ago during training. He briefly wondered how his trainer was doing at this time, but he dismissed the thought as he got back to more pressing matters.

What he had in hand was an handy and accurate Glock 23. Marketed first in 1982, and selected as sidearm of choice for the FBI in 1997, the Glock 23 was a weapon of fairly advanced conception for the time, easy to disassemble being composed of 31 parts plus the clip. It used standard 9mm Parabellum rounds, of which Gordon had about thirty in his storage unit.

The problem was, how did he know all that? He had never ever held a gun in his hand before HEV training, which required basic weapon handling. In fact, he thought as the HEV indicated to turn at the next corner, he didn’t even know that guns could be disassembled, as he couldn’t even guess an use for that.

**BEEP* *BEEP* “Warning: Hostile entity detected within thirty meters. Entity signature matching hostile unknown biological entity. Extreme prejudice advised.”*

On the left side appeared a rotating sketch of the monster he had met less than half an hour before.

Gordon was somewhat surprised that the suit had actually recognized the threat: must have been another feature of the suit. But he had no time to find out more; just in front of him appeared another of those horrors. It was eerily similar to the last one, except it was slightly taller and a bit more muscly - not surprising, even monsters can’t be identical one to the other.

Before Gordon could even begin to think about what to do, his gun was trained on the creature’s head and half the clip was emptied against it.

The creature staggered; then went down and stayed down, eight bullet holes in its head.

He looked yet again at the monster, then at his weapon, as he found himself reloading it, his arms completely oblivious to his commands.

After it had been returned to its pocket, he could move his arms normally again.

Just like nothing had happened.

Gordon watched the creature silently. Then he sat down on the floor, and watched the ceiling, shaking his head slowly.

So many strange things were happening. And not just the resonance cascade and all this disaster.

Not even the monsters.

It was a different thing.

A feeling.

A strange feeling.

An impossible feeling.

Or rather, an impossible lack of feeling.

He stared blankly at the motionless body. It was dead.

“My God, dead!”

Even his voice was cold and emotionless, as he was. And that was the problem. He was emotionless. But he had narrowly escaped death! And more than once! He should be afraid, afraid as he was when he was younger, afraid of death. Afraid of refusal. Even afraid of the dark, unless he was in his room and in his bed!

Instead, he was cold. And emotionless. And... and uninterested. He had already noticed that before, but didn't give it that much of attention; he thought that his complete lack of interest in vivisectioning the monster, which was what the few survivors did just before trying to find a way out, was due to his lack of stomach. Instead, he remembered, it wasn't just that. It was something different. Something strange. Something... unnatural.

Fact was, he didn't feel sorry for the creature. Actually, he didn't even remember how he had killed it, as he had killed its 'brother' before. He had just done it.

He tried to rationalize. He was a scientist; it was not his duty do despair in front of seemingly illogical facts, but to prove the scientific reasons behind them.

First option: his suit was aiding him.

No, absolutely impossible. All the suits were identical - and his weapon proficiency score back in training proved that; it was the lowest acceptable, and he still thought his trainer somehow cheated on it to let him pass.

Second option: he suffered of some kind of 'split personality' problem

The most difficult to accept, both emotionally and scientifically. But it was undoubtedly the closest thing to truth.

It was really like part of him was under the influence of a completely different being. A being that could control his feelings, his perceptions. His body.

A being that wasn't fond of science, that wasn't curious about the great mysteries of the world and of the universe.

It was a being that cared only about killing. And that knew very well how to do just that.

He moved his stare from the ceiling to his hands. For a long moment, he sincerely expected them to have changed - but even if they really had, he couldn't have seen them under the suit's black and orange gloves.

He tried to put his head into his hands, the reactive forcefield actually preventing contact of the gloves with his face; and remained thoughtless for a few minutes.

Finally, he realized he had begun to sigh. The suit was trying to weep his tears before they could corrupt too much his HUD.

He slowly recomposed himself, still sighing, and checked back at his map. It was useless, and he knew, as the suit had already plotted the best course through the place, plus as many alternate routes it could find.

But he noticed that on the HUD had appeared a phrase:

"Why does a robot always take the long route? To avoid short circuits!"

Gordon laughed hard, but not at the really stupid joke.

He laughed because the suit's software had found out that he was sad, and was trying to cheer him up by telling stupid jokes.

He stood again, resolute to have a nice and long talk with the suit software's programmer, and, stepping carefully over the body, set off through the dark tunnels, his breastlight once again the only source of light.

*

"Sir? I must respectfully object to this decision. It's unnecessarily risky, and..."

D was serious, too serious. Usually he would have been quite pissed by G's comments; but he was in no mood for outbursts. He had to keep composed, for it was the only way to succeed in the delicate operation.

"I know G. I know. But you know that we don't have any more possibilities. This is our last chance."

'YOUR last chance', G thought while replaying the whole plan in his mind.

There was something that didn't work in this plan, he felt it. But the Great One be damned if he could focus it.

*

**BEEEEEP* "Warning: breastlight power below 5 percent. Estimated battery life: ten minutes before recharge necessary."*

The light was charged by a dynamo, but to be remain charged it required him to move faster than he was right now. He turned it off, though; he was about to enter the sewage control section of the sewers - beyond which lied the Sector D maintenance elevator - and already he could see light coming through the next corner.

The chamber was looked like somekind of flow control room, with a chainlink bridge suspended five or six meters above a current of bubbling, slow-flowing unpleasantness. Most of the light in the room was coming from an overhead neon lamp, but the apparatus set about midway through the bridge was also lit in a bright green light.

He stepped forward, the suit's boots clanking noisily on the thick, steel net of the twenty meters long bridge, the noise amplified and echoed by the hollow steel structure forming the room.

Behind him, a loud thunk!

Gordon turned quickly, his gun appearing almost magically in his hands.

Nothing was there, and the gun returned to its pocket.

He was still at discomfort with what he ended up of naming his evil part; but he figured that it didn't have anything to gain by getting Gordon killed - and that it would keep him protected.

Or at least, that was what he hoped.

He turned, facing again the middle of the bridge and began crossing it.

He was about two meters from the apparatus when he noticed that the green light wasn't coming really from it, but from some kind of electrical fuzz near it.

Wondering if it was damaged, he approached it: the electrical activity was increasing visibly; small green bolts were flowing through the air from a point about ten centimeters above his eye level.

Gordon reached out, and the activity frenzied; he was repulsed to the floor an instant later, the suit lamenting.

**BEEP* *BEEP* "Warning: severe electrical shock received. Gyroscopes malfunction - readjustment in progress." *BOOP* *BOOP* "Reactive shielding at ninety percent. Gyroscopes readjustment successful. Damage negligible."*

Wow! It must have been quite a strong electrical field to drop his shields' power by ten percent. Gordon lifted himself again and watched, puzzled, as the beams continued to flow freely, only to find some kind of pattern in the air; they had grew in number and speed over the last few seconds, until they were describing a small green sphere, crackling and fuzzing in the middle of the air.

The sphere exploded, and Gordon's sight was blackness.

*

“Y-y-yes, yes... Yes. It could be done... It CAN be done! But... but it will be risky!”
The scientist’s voice was shaky, but sure; science prevailed the gun trained on his head.

“Correct answer, fella. I like reasonable people.”

“Alpha leader, quit mouthing around and get your people back to sector D. And I mean now.”

D’s voice was calm, a menacing type of calm.
The team Alpha element leader turned, saluted and went quickly outside to the Lambda courtyard.

“OK, guys! You know the orders, let’s do it. All aboard!”

The sound of thirty pairs of boots clanking on the metallic surface was covered by the roaring of an F-16 flying CAP over the site.

The thirty men had neatly split in two groups and were climbing aboard the two Chinooks, both inbound to sector D.

He boarded the second one, as his mind chanting a victory song. He needed luck - because they had failed last time. And because it was to be their first, and last time.
‘Raccoon will just be a bad dream as soon as we finish here. This time, we won’t fail...’

*

Gordon’s sight returned to normal after the brief blinding, and in front of him was a very short, flat, almost deformed two legged being.
He couldn’t make head or tails of it, literally; it could have been watching him - if it could at all, that is - as it might have been turned to the other side. Whatever of the two, it turned, showing the multitentacled part over the singletentacled one.

**BEEP* *BEEP* “Warning: unknown biological entity detected within thirty meters. Entity signature not matched. Caution advised.”*

The being seemed almost to look at Gordon, although he couldn’t see its eyes; then it began growling feebly, almost like a dog.

Gordon tried to approach the creature; its growling increased in tone. The thing was somewhat cute, and he hoped for one that this one wouldn’t try to kill him.

Then he found his gun in his hand, trained on the being, an instant before it attacked.

Gordon sidestepped the being’s jump, which ended with a noisily thud on the catwalk; Gordon rolled, turned, and began firing at the centre of the tentacles the instant the creature had recovered and turned again to attack.

He was about at half clip when the creature retreated. He stopped firing, not sure if it was his own choice or not; but no sooner that the being had run across a few meters, it turned once more, then it spat.

The green glob described an arc through the air, hitting the spot Gordon had resided mere seconds before he had raised and moved. The being charged for another spit, but was stopped cold as Gordon discharged the rest of the clip in the being's mouth.

The creature weaved, growled feebly like an hurt puppy, then flattened on the ground, motionless.

Gordon reloaded, and the gun returned to its place.

It had happened again. An unknown threat had appeared, and he had dispatched of it without even knowing what he was actually doing. And after the fight, the coldness and the utter lack of interest on the body.

But this time, Gordon wanted to go against his feelings. he approached the creature, with his complete - and unnatural - disinterest making him want to turn around and go away, and began to turn it over.

'No genital organs', he thought just before the bottom of the creature was in shown 'nor exposed body parts'. Just solid skin, and two small, compact, clawed legs.

How he knew those things, though, was completely beyond him.

He stood, the unnatural disinterest getting at last the upper hand; he was trying to rummage through his mind to find more about this creature... It was a nearly inexplicable sensation, to be curious about something already known.

The conflicting thoughts almost driving him crazy, he quit, turned and made way to the other side of the room.

He stepped just beyond the control terminal, and felt the floor beginning to give way under his feet. Stepping back, he crouched to examine closely the grating; the spot where the creature's spit had landed after missing him was completely melted, and the hole was slowly enlarging as the acid spread through the iron.

He stood, again unnaturally uninterested by these facts, and inhaled deeply, the fetid smell finding new ways inside his lungs.

He cursed himself for his last action, and quickly exited the room to the opposite side he entered: the service elevator had to be in the next room.

4. OFFICE COMPLEX

Gordon stepped out of the cargo elevator to find himself in hell.

Large part of the maintenance room walls had been blown apart, and he could see outside where everything was in ruins; most of the ceiling's backpanels had given way to show the multitude of cables they had been hiding - some of which were dangling above the floor and crackling, cut in half, extremely high voltages still running through them.

Most of the walls outside weren't as badly damaged as this one was, although a few did show sign of structural damage.

Most of them instead showed visible signs of firefights, and many presented also still fresh splotches of blood which trailed to the floor to its late owners.

Tables were upturned, to make a crude barrier, as were file cabinets and even a few blackboards.

The only source of light were the emergency lights, and the silent alarm lights.

Everything was like shrouded in a red mist.

Gordon had come out from just behind the barricade. The scene was utterly silent, except for the sound of his boots calpesteing the floor, and wood shards and blood with it.

There were about a dozen of people behind the barricade; some were scientists still in their white lab coat, and some were from security, guns still in their hands. Gordon bent to examine one of them, and realized that most hadn't been shot or clawed through, but scorched.

The burns were on the body's belly and face.

**BEEP* *BEEP* "Warning: unknown biological entity detected within thirty meters. Entity signature not matched. Caution advised."*

"GRGZXDIEXZED"

From behind him, came distorted and muttered words. He picked up the guard's still loaded combat shotgun and turned.

He gaped.

He had seen it before - but where? The being lowered his arms, his fingers almost touching the floor as a low crackle became louder when they lifted. A green field of electricity was stirring from each of the beast's fingers to the floor, and before Gordon could react, the being had lifted his arms completely and pointed them to him, who was slammed on the floor by an explosion just in front of his suit's breast.

**BEEP* *BEEP* "Warning: extreme electrical shock received. Gyroscopes malfunction - re-adjustment in progress." *BOOP* *BOOP* "Reactive shielding at sixty percent, holding." *BEEP* *BEEP* "Entity classification: hostile. Extreme prejudice advised. Gyroscopes read-justment successful. Damage negligible."*

The being charged on, then began to lower his arms again. But this time, Gordon turned a switch on the shotgun he was still holding, and squeezed the trigger: several spent shells flew out of the barrel and deposited clinking on the floor as the weapon's automatic mode sprayed the being with lead. The being blooded green blood, and it collapsed, its chest blown open.

Then Gordon reloaded, and found the shotgun back in its pocket.

And that made four times. But this time he was tired.

Tired of his impossible knowledge of weapons and enemies.

Tired of not knowing why he didn't want to know what the being was, nor how he knew that he had fired a Smith & Wesson CAWS 12-gauge combat shotgun. This time, it wasn't just despair; it was anger. He wanted to know why he knew, and why he didn't want to know.

Someone had a lot to answer to him. But who?

"I know who..."

He angrily pushed away the crude barricade. He just realized who might be the one to talk to.

*

"Alpha leader, we got a few secondaries." "Good, Alpha three. Make it clean." "Copy that, over and out."

One hour in sector D, and they were already deeply entrenched, with a bridgehead in the warehouse.

That was good, because enemy infestation was going to raise as big N realized what was going on. He just hoped that D knew what he was doing. He knew they had given almost all they could - but a GRS?

He dismissed the thought - his place was not to question the plan, just to execute it.

And for that plan, sectors D and C were to be ground zero.

*

Bodies of other extraterrestrial thunder-shooting beings, as well as of other people, were just outside of the barricade.

Gordon ignored them, still angry. He made way to a second corridor, still ignoring the obvious signs of gunfights, and crouching under another severed cable, this one also dancing wildly as if possessed by the extremely high voltage running through it.

He knew who he was looking for - but it was only when he reached his destination that he wondered how could he have survived. Because he did.

Behind the upturned desk, above various papers dirty of blood, lied a body, still lamenting. He was a mess, as were the others, but was still breathing. As soon as Gordon approached, he recognized him.

"Gordon... Oh, Gordon..." he obviously finding it hard to breathe and to talk.

"What the hell you've been doing to me, bastard? You'd better talk!" Gordon was still angry, but soon the realization that he might not know what was going on hit him.

Gordon was about to lift Kleiner's semi-conscious body, only to think better: his spinal column could be broken.

“...Gordon... I’m so sorry... So terribly sorry... They shouldn’t... I shouldn’t...”

Could he really know then?

“Tell, me Kleiner! Tell me! I need to know what the hell is going on with me! And you know, don’t you?” Gordon was furious, as John Kleiner, still breathing heavily, touched his chest wound.

“...I do... ..But?... How could... I should be... Ought to be... No... There’s no time to explain, Gordon... No time... Sorry...”

The man was obviously confused, and it was only when he turned his head that Gordon saw the scorch on his temple, surely the cause for his mental state.

“Curse myself... Cursed forever... You were the best... You are the best ones... But I... No... I...” The man paused. “Find her... Find her, and tell her I still love her, as I love you Gordon...”

The man put an hand over Gordon’s arm “My...”

Kleiner exhaled, and never inhaled again.

Gordon stood, and looked down, his anger gone. A wave of sorrow hit him, suddenly, and he sat down on the floor, again, to reflect.

Jonathan Kleiner was not only his university professor in Theoretical Physics, but also a good friend. He was different from the other professors, all out for the money and uncaring about their students’ fate, as he taught and studied physics with a passion Gordon could only admire.

He had been a standing point throughout his university life. Many were the good students in his classes; but he never declined the fact that Gordon was one of his favorites.

Gordon remembered how sad he felt when Kleiner was reported dead. His graduation was completely dedicated to him; until a few months ago, with Materas’ call and his enlisting in the Black Mesa science personnel. Only then did he know Kleiner’s fate in sector C’s science team, and he remembered that the first thing he had done was to visit him and to catch up on old times.

How happy he felt, for a friend found again...

On the fogged HUD appeared the phrase ‘A man enters in a cafe’: SPLASH!’

*

Darkness. There was only darkness... Then a voice.

“...How long... How long have I been here?”

Whose was this voice?

“*Too long. It is time to move.*”

This was his, undoubtedly.

**BOOP* *BOOP* "HEV sleep mode deactivated. Secondary functions reinitialized successfully. Have a very safe morning."*

There was blood as the darkness cleared, then even the blood cleared, and the walls began moving.

"Where am I going?"

"You already know where. You must find the one person."

"But... Now? Here? And even if I do, what then? What must I do? Tell me, please!"

"Act as you see fit. But remember what I told you..."

The voices faded, as the now-conscious brain began to recognize what was happening. The destination was clear, but unclear were the motives.

There was only one way to find out.

*

Almost one hour had come and gone when Gordon left the office. His original mission returning to the top of his to-do list, he summarized his meditations with more questions than answers.

Klenier said he knew what he did to him... and to this woman, whoever might she be. This fact, strangely, wasn't surprising for him... But since Gordon had been knowing quite a few things too many, who could say?

What was more strange, is how Kleiner survived. Gordon had examined the body closely, and the scorch on its temple wasn't actually a burn, but instead an hemorrhage. Not a cerebral hemorrhage - just a small superficial livid, expanded from two, small points. The two syringes he had found while searching the office for clues were empty, but used. What the hell had been Kleiner doing all the way through? What did he do to him? And more importantly, what were all these strange creatures roaming around the complex?

This had begun to sound like some old sci-fi movies he saw back when he was younger. He never liked sci-fi; he much preferred real science - although the very suit he was wearing could be considered science fiction by most.

Gordon sighed, and with nothing more to go on, he set out towards the warehouse, his suit still aiding him to find his way around. Because, he had found out, that there was no way to contact the rest of the complex from here, as sector D had been hit pretty badly too. Surface was to be his only hope.

The office block was silent, again, except for his footsteps and the occasional, malfunctioning, apparatus. The slaughter must have been complete; but probably a few scientists were still hiding in fear inside one of the small offices, fearing that Gordon could be another one of the monsters.

Damage was lighter in this part, but as he got closer to the warehouse area, he noticed that damage was much more extensive. Checking the map, he saw that this section was actually closer to the test lab.

Checking better, he noticed that sections with higher damage were encircled into a semicircle, with the center pointing towards the test lab. It was like the resonance cascade actually engulfed the areas with a spherical pattern, damaging everything heavily; then it sort of died out, leaving minimal structural damage.

He crossed another semi-destroyed and silent room, also shrouded in an yellowish mist as the dust from the fallen cement shined through the emergency lights, to approach the stairs up; from there he should eventually find a vehicle-only access for the warehouse, although he hoped there was an on-foot access too.

The instant he set foot on the first step, he heard something above.

It was distinctively non-human, a growl he had never heard.
It was feeble, and it increased slightly.
He climbed a few more steps, and looked above again.

Up he could see the landing for the next floor, and a small, podlike yellow thing was being projected to the floor below.

It was too late when Gordon realized the thing had claws, and the entire lower surface was a sharply-theeted mouth.

Gordon ducked as a last ditch effort; but it was useless, as the being bounced millimeters before touching his head, producing a screeching noise, followed by a feeble scream.

**BEEP* *BEEP* "Warning: unknown hostile biological entity detected within thirty meters. Entity signature not matched. Extreme prejudice advised." *BOOP* *BOOP* "Reactive shielding damage: negligible"*

The creature's bottom was in view; it was scorched quite badly from the contact with the HEV's heavy shielding, and the little beast was screeching and writhing.
Yet it somehow flipped over, and screaming feebly it returned to the attack - only to be stopped cold with a shot from Gordon's pistol.

Five times... No. This one was different. He approached and picked up the small being, because he was curious about *something*.
But it was not its origin, but its similarity with the head of the monsters back down in sector C.

Gordon dropped abruptly the small being. No, apart from that, he was again unnaturally uncaring; but he decided to stick to his mission as he climbed the stairs to the first floor landing to hear a bubbling noise coming from his right.

In a corner, within a large pool of blood, lied a scientist. Only his head was yellow, and pulsating as were his arms, slowly and disgustingly, but visibly...

*

“How is the plan going, D?”

“Fairly good. We are already well underway.”

“Good. We especially look forward to this kind of experiment...”

The connection closed, but D this time wasn't alone.

G ran to him; he was visibly preoccupied.

“Sir? Sir! We might have one more problem we never posed ourselves.”

“What now, G?” Contrary to his normal attitude, D wanted to hear everything everybody wanted to say on this plan.

He wanted everybody's opinion, because he had learned the hard way that ignoring even the slightest detail or the most improbable of problems could very well mean another failure - and his death. G, strangely, had hardly talked until now.

“How can we know what exactly that the GRS will be in its standard outfit?”

The realization hit D hard. That was one major problem he didn't think of. He couldn't get a GRS if he couldn't recognize it. And since most of his plan was about what to do after acquiring the GRS...

“...You're right.” D thought for a minute. There was one solution... But not a pretty one.

G was almost smiling as he talked “May I suggestst...”

D leaned closer to hear what G had to say...

*

The garden was so quiet this hour of the day. None of the night creatures could be heard. The figure stepped slowly, looking around blankly.

“You like it, don't you?”

“I'd say I do. But I don't. And you know why.”

There was a pause, then the voice continued.

“I'm sorry. But you know there was no other way. It was this, or death.”

“That doesn't make things easier. Two is too many. Always too many.”

“Two is the perfect number. Always the perfect number. You'll never be alone, with me.”

“And if I want to?”

“You’ll never want to. Trust me.”

The figure crouched, tears flowed from the still blank-staring eyes.

*

Gordon felt sick, as purple and yellow goo trickled down the hideous pulsing yellow thing, staining the labcoat over the blood.

Suddenly, its left arm began to pulse faster. At the height of the shoulder the meat exploded in a puddle of blood and goo, to reveal the bone, strangely dark. More small explosions and disgusting noises, until even the hand bone was fully uncovered, showing the finger bones had doubled over, and when extended were disgustingly long and thin.

The other arm began the same fate, but before it could complete, an entire 9mm clip was emptied in the being’s head.

There was no cry, but the mutation slowed and then stopped, as the being laid motionless.

Overcoming the sense of disgust, Gordon approached the body. He felt, for the second time that morning, curious about something.

“At last!” he whispered to no one; although his excitement was short lived as he braced himself and tried to remove the zombie’s head.

He couldn’t do that; whatever had happened must have fused the small creature to a human being completely.

What the hell was going on around here? He took out his crowbar for a crude inspection of the internal organs, as the suit helped him by injecting an antiemetic.

He didn’t have a vast knowledge of the human body, but the inside seemed almost normal - weren’t for the small, yellow worms that were still crawling around.

The sight was too much, and Gordon stood, his disgust almost surpassing the antiemetic’s effect. He closed his eyes, trying to cancel the hideous sight from his brain.

He failed; but as he reopened his eyes, he saw a sign with an arrow pointing to his left. The sign said ‘Sector D Warehouse’.

His mission had to be completed. More lives than his were at stake.

Recomforted, albeit very slightly, by the thought, he set in motion towards the room the sign was pointing at.

More wreckage was inside; this section was the closest to sector C. He stumbled across a few more bodies, a slight relief setting in when he saw that those were not infested - whatever these yellow head-things were, there weren’t many of them.

And that was good.

He just hoped he didn’t find more ‘brothers’ to the other beings he had met.

Gordon exited the devastated corridor to yet another flight of stairs; this, the map said, was the last.

He climbed to the halfway landing, but as he turned he noticed a man in a whitish, non laboratory suit on the top landing.

“Hey!”

Gordon called to the man, but eye contact lasted just a brief moment before the man ran away from the landing. Gordon rushed up the stairs, chasing. He entered the landing door a few precious seconds after the man, only to find the second set of doors locked, the sound of other footsteps dying fast.

In a last ditch effort, he shot the door’s lock away and pushed, but the door did not give way. He backed up and rammed the door, which held. He repeated, once, twice, trice but the door was still in place.

Exhausted, he set down.

A crackling noise, then a short jingle, and an horribly synthesized voice talked:

“Warning: Unauthorized access tentative in sector D office complex. Lethal defensive action activated.”

Behind Gordon, a ceiling panel opened; but it was only when the automated turret came dawn and began to spin up that he turned.

*

“...I love you.”

“As I do.”

That was useless, and they knew.

“We tried this for so many times, now... But you know that it will never happen...”

“It will. Why should it not?”

“I am... I am a monster. What can a monster do against perfection?”

“Everything. Just find the One Person, and you’ll see.”

“I’ve already seen. No interest. Not even friendship. Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Things have changed, and you know. You have changed. As everything has.”

The figure was silent for one more minute. Then it set in motion again, the last of the remembrances gone.

*

“No sign from her?”

“None, sorry.”

The elder woman scowled. Things were going according to the plans, except for those two wild-cards.

He was dead, that was for sure, but the woman... No activity from her for over one hour.

Bad sign. She turned to look in another monitor, and pressed the comlink button

“How is it going?”

“Perfectly, ma’am. Another two hours, and we’ll begin preliminary operativeness procedures. We expect full functionality within twelve hours tops.”

“Try to make them six. We need it before they get in too far.”

“Yes, ma’am!” The communication closed, and the woman returned to her thoughts.

*

“Enemy activity in this sector is still unknown. Stay alert people.”

Echo squad’s was the most difficult job, scouting the outer perimeter for hostiles. A few of them had even pushed quite far into the unknown territory that were the remnants of the office complex, and were installing the first of the anti assault devices that in time will allow them to conquer the entire sector.

For some, it was like chess; sacrifice a pawn to get the king, confuse the opponent and all that crap. But in truth, he knew that it was just a matter of picking the right position to hammer the enemy - a position that wasn’t always behind and above it.

“Squad! I’ve got one! Reporting unknown biological freak on first floor stair access! What the hell is that thing? They never talked of an orange and black gun-toting man-like creature!”

The Alpha leader sighed. He was right; no one in his team had ever seen an HEV, and the color orange was rare between them.

“Alpha leader to Echo Five, report in, over.”

“Echo five here, sir! Rendezvoused with unknown being presumed hostile at...”

“I know, Echo five. I’ve got ears. What you had was an HEV mark 4, probably with some egg-head inside trying to play superhero. What are you waiting to give him a lesson? Over and out.” That should keep him occupied.

“What the...? We’ve got...” An enormous electricity bolt crackled through the intercom.

“Fire! Fire! FIRE!”

“Echo seven is down! Structural damage! Structural damage!”

Several gunshots followed. He put his head in his hands after he remembered where Echo seven and eight were posted. Things were going to get really tougher now.

*

The chaingun spinned down the instant it finished spinning up. But it didn't retire; it just laid motionlessly, hanging from above. Suddenly, Gordon couldn't see anything anymore; probably a power failure of some sort. He thanked heaven for the help as he turned on the now recharged headlight.

He tried again for the door; but unfortunately, nothing changed. He'll have to find an alternate route.

The instant he thought of the alternate route, the suit's HUD presented him with a map of his current surroundings, with his destination blinking in red, his position in orange, and two routes in two different colors. He had got the hang of nearly everything by now, so Gordon wasn't particularly amazed by this, incredible, feature; nevertheless, discarding the red course which he had followed to here, he went for the green one.

The course developed from downstairs, through a few corridors and into the ventilation tunnels. 'Well', he thought, 'at least those won't smell...' and he descended the stairs.

The office complex was even more silent than before; the power failure had shut down all the damaged equipment, and his footsteps echoed as he descended the stairs, still aware for any unseen horror.

He carefully avoided to light the dead soon-to-be zombie as he reached the landing, and looked around to see find the door.

Red and nearly featureless, except for a glass window inset, there it was just in front of another body. He stepped inside, and found the gun in his gun.

He stopped and listened: no sounds, except his breathing. He took a few steps, and listened again.

Still nothing.

He relaxed as far as his 'evil part' would allow him, and followed, gun still in hand, the HEV's directions as they turned and twisted through the dark corridors. His light swayed left and right, lightning from time to time a devastated wall, a pool of blood - or a body.

He turned the last corner before the route crossed a large room. One of the monsters was there, its back turned.

**BEEP* *BEEP* "Warning: Hostile entity detected within thirty meters. Entity signature matching hostile unknown biological entity. Extreme prejudice advised."*

He wasn't the slightest bit surprised, as he was on full alert from the beginning. He fired quickly the entire clip before the beast could even realize who was attacking it - but halfway through, the trigger just produced a 'click!'

"Ammunition depleted" He should have known...

As the beast turned, obviously quite pissed, Gordon felt frozen in terror, and was unable to react as the thing crossed the short distance.

Still no reaction from him. Had his 'evil part' left?

With its left claw, the beast swiftly scratched Gordon, who stumbled back but did not fall.

**BOOP* *BOOP* "Reactive shielding at fifty five percent, holding."*

The being prepared its right claw for the next hit, but was stopped as its only eye, about the middle of its face, was hit with impressive strength.

A shower of green goo was what Gordon got, as he realized that his crowbar was in his hand.

The being cried, a disgustingly distorted cry, as the hemorrhage of goo going on and on under Gordon's unnaturally blank stare, until it was on the floor, writhing.

The writhing slowed, then stopped; and the being laid motionless in a pool of green goo.

Still pitiless, Gordon glanced the body. Again, his 'evil part' had done it...

He wished he could talk to it, wished he could tell it when to stay put or when and how and if to attack. But most importantly, he wanted to ask it what the hell it was doing inside his head.

Still somewhat confused, Gordon approached the door. It was strangely large, different from the others in the complex, and with a much larger handle. He turned it, and pulled the door open as the cold breeze from the room beyond made him shiver. The suit's climate system immediately adapted to the low temperature, and Gordon reluctantly entered the storage cell.

*

"I've lost contact, sir. There's no sign of him, over"

"Leave it be, Echo five. Finish your mission and return to base. Over and out."

An HEV. Yes, he had been scared by an HEV. Talk about being nervous...

He crouched, and set down on the wall, ten centimeters from the ground, a small, roughly rectangular object with a large lens in the middle. The object clamped and began to emit a sound. The lens refocused, and the sound pitched up, until a beeping noise confirmed the laser-activated wall mine was in place, just below its twin at about man's height.

If the infrared beam was interrupted by something living, BOOM! It became something dead.

He walked through the corridor, scanning with his MP5's flashlight for hostiles. His hand-held scanner, in his left hand, was clear but with all the things going on lately, who could have known?

His job was scouting ahead for any enemy force, and then reporting back ASAP, leaving traps in key places. He had done his job for now, having just ran out of laser trip mines, so he was returning to base for debriefing and rearming. But, even if he was quite an expert scout, his enemy wasn't a conventional force, so he was still alert for anything that could have escaped him.

He sliced the corner, nothing showing in front of him nor on his...

A small red blip, right in front of him, lasting a mere fraction of second, then nothing again. A malfunction? No, these things were state of the art.

He turned off the flashlight and stood still, listening expertly to any sound and scanning his surroundings thoroughly with his other senses. Except for a low buzz from the tripmines, and his low breath, nothing could be heard. If there was someone or something, it was really good at hiding.

A metallic clanking noise, a few meters ahead, attracted his attention. It was immediately followed by several similar but less loud sounds. He turned on the flashlight and pointed it at the source of the sound, then immediately forwards to spot a blue-something running.

“Squad! We’ve got hostiles!” He charged forward, tripped over something spherical. An explosion, then nothing.

****** TO BE CONTINUED... ******

Well? What do you think? Sucked? Rocked? Anything in between? Send everything to:

bpoli@tin.it

Misc. thoughts & thanks:

First of all, I need to thank give some thanks:

Thanks, of course, go to Valve for making the game, to Sierra for publishing it and to the entire community... well, for plainly ruling. :)

But special thanks must go to:

Black Mesa, for trying to list all the personnel and for an all around nice site. But not just for that; it's because I used *their* personnel list for the novel - and to THEM goes the full credit for it! I did that just to try and maintain a continuity; if you guys feel ripped off, though, just say so and all the names will change.

The Blackest Hole (i.e. Experiment one-four-one) for hosting this huge PDF file and for a promising web site.

And, unrelated to H-L, to Grape's Thoughts, for hosting my articles.

Very, very special thanks go to YOU, though, for downloading and taking the time to read all this.

See you for the next chapters - where the plot will start to get *really* thick...

Anticipations? No, no, and no!

OK, just one: Uplink. Got some quite cool ideas on this - some of whose, I'm sure, would surprise many of you - but I'm not completely sure on what I'll do. Stay tuned...

Slowly flowin' like the sad river of blood :(((,

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