

THE NIGHT PASSED. WE HEARD THE GREAT, FLAPPING PASSAGE OF... ONLY THE GODS KNEW WHAT. AND SOUNDS UTTERLY ALIEN TO OUR EARS.

BUT WE SURVIVED. COLD AND MISERABLE, WE SURVIVED TO THE DAWN'S LIGHT.

AND WHEN WE DID, THE GREAT CHAMPION WAS —

WE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT HE WAS DOING.

Some... some questions, great one.

How do we address you?

And... before we drew you to our time... what did you do? It's urgent that we know. What was your mission?

I...  
I'm...  
I...  
was...



# The **BATTLE** AND THE **WAR**

by NICO BATTANDO

Illustrated by C.C. EMPIK

**T**HE SKIES RIPPED themselves apart with fury, and the noise battered at him like a physical thing. It was constant, deafening—simply too loud for him to feel the cold.

The flat *whramm* of aerial bombardment, the ground shuddering with burst after burst after burst. The whine of pulse-rifles, cycling to intensity between salvos. The tinny bark of commands in his earbug, felt as vibration more than heard. And the screams of the dying.

The walls of the bunker had been breached. The frontal assault was under way. The defenders of the remote base were dug in, well armed—Scramfast ghost troops as well as Kibro soldiers, all ready to die to take Coalition forces with them. They were throwing everything they had into defending the research station.

At least, he hoped it was everything they had.

Whatever it was they were building, whatever esoteric weapon they'd been developing, it could end the war in weeks. So the intelligence boys said, anyway. It had to be taken. Or destroyed.

There was one opening. One slim, billion-to-one shot. The Kyrlic stealth-pods had gotten them this far. And all this hellish noise, all this shattering assault—billions in expense and thousands in lives—was only there to get them a few dekameters further.

The walls of the bunker had been breached. And if he and his hand-picked team could make it in...



L-Learoyd, Steven T.

Master Sergeant, Coalition Forces. You can have my serial number if you want it. There was...a battle...

Yes, yes! *That*, we know!

But we need more. You brought about such *change* — for generations, millennia — and we face such a crisis *now* —



There was... was...

I can almost see it...the light, the noise, the...

But I d-don't...



No. NO!

This is a dream. I'm floating on *Combimorfan* in some field hospital, or delirious from ki-gas burns in a ditch somewhere.

Combi... what?

A dream?



Craziest ████████ dream I ever had. What the hell are these things?

Ek?

Where does he go?

No, wait —

**NOW HOLD ON RIGHT THERE!**

Stop right there, Learoyd-Steventy of Coalitia!

I assure you, this is no dream! We have brought you here — at no small amount of expense and sacrifice — to save our world.

We have fed you. Clothed you. And we require some infor—



BACK THE [REDACTED] OFF!

Ah — ah —

Look, Hootie.



I appreciate the pants. But I don't know you. I didn't ask you to bring me here. If here is even anywhere.

I don't even know this isn't some kind of psi-ops clusterfuck, and you're not... not...



[REDACTED] it. I gotta get some air.

Arguing with a [REDACTED] barn owl...



But — but —

Barn owl?

