



WAR MOVIES

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WE WATCHED MOVIES UNDERGROUND WHILE THE SURFACE BURNED.

Down our rabbit holes, we couldn't hear the bombs hit, but we felt the earth shake with their impact while we sat in the dark and watched moving pictures flicker across a silver screen. We knew what kind of hell was coming down over our heads: one full of heat, shrapnel, and death, worse than any atrocity long-dead, special effects wizards had left for us on film. When enough skybusters exploded at once, they set the air on fire. We wondered what we would find left of our home and of the Frek when we deployed up-earth, whenever that might be.

Some of the guys worried that our twelve brutal weeks in bootcamp and three more in psychprep would go to waste without one of us ever seeing so much as a skirmish.

Other guys hoped for that.

I knew better. We were weapons, and the Army didn't make weapons it didn't intend to use.

The moment the movies started I knew we'd see action before long. All they showed us were war movies and monster movies—the blockbusters, the classics, the cult favorites, and even a few hits from the last summer before the Frek dropped down and started us fighting for our lives.

The most gruesome movies ran two or three times a week. During the day we bled out our frustrations in the gyms and training rooms, and at night we stoked them again with images of violence and alienness, of combat and heroism, of strangeness, mystery, and the bloody struggle for survival. The picture shows were part of a slow burn lit to keep our rage simmering. They reinforced the narrative we'd been taught in bootcamp. They showed us again and again that only country and fellowship mattered and that aliens like the Frek could never be anything other than slaving, man-eating, evil beasts hell-bent on raping our planet and enslaving our species if we didn't stop them.

We got the message loud and clear.

One night a PFC from Kansas joked about why, if they were so hot for the "sky-fi stuff," they never showed *E.T.* Without missing a beat, the guy next to him described

in detail how he would shove a grenade down E.T.'s throat and "blow his fucking heart-light the fuck home and fuck needing to use the phone." Everyone laughed so hard they stopped the movie.

The strangest part of it is when you see some of these guys from on-screen walking around in officer's dress. Seeing them on television, like when General Wayne and General McQueen address the nation, is one thing, but in person it's unsettling. Colonel Connery is CO for our rabbit hole, and he looks exactly like the real deal, circa 1968, except you know what's knocking around his head has nothing to do with anything from back then, and everything to do with death and killing and keeping our morale high. They clone them so well, I bet even their wives and girlfriends, if they were still alive, wouldn't know the difference. It gets the guys' attention, sure enough. No one's mind ever wanders when the Colonel speaks in his powerful, Scottish accent, and whenever they run one of his old movies, a handful of guys always hit him up for autographs, ask him how it was shooting the love scenes.

He only smirks and nods as if he knows.

It's a hell of a psyche-out.



No bombing for two days.

Then our orders came through: surface clean-up for most of the men, but not for my platoon. We pulled special duty. We were to rendezvous with a Special Forces unit that had collected what our orders described as a "valuable artifact," secure it from them, and bring it to Camp Scott, on the double-quick, of course.

Leaving our rabbit hole, however, was a process.

First, advance teams surfaced and reported back on up-earth conditions. Then everyone got booster shots against possible contagion from Frek remains, took anti-rad pills, and got equipped with live ammo and full-integrity body armor to replace what we'd damaged in training.

Centcom had shipped us in and tucked us away only days ahead of the campaign to sterilize the Eastern seaboard. We'd been down-earth for two months, like cicadas waiting to hatch from the ground when the weather turned hot, and we were eager to go. Even the guys who'd been dreading the day they'd see action looked relieved to finally be doing something.

Colonel Connery made the rounds while we suited up.

Captain Willis and Captain Smith followed him.

They helped with our gear. They steadied our nerves and tried to keep us from thinking too much about the blasted wasteland that waited on the surface.

I snapped the last of my armor in place, checked my ammunition, and waited for my platoon to finish suiting up. I was their sergeant. I tried not to think about what that meant. I'd had weeks to ruminate on it. Now it was time to act.

Colonel Connery reviewed our orders with me and said he was grateful to have a man like me in his division. I wondered how much of that came from what they'd programmed into his brain on the clone farm, or if he'd thought up any of it on his own. I guess it didn't matter one way or the other. His pep talk was protocol. When he was done he slapped me on the back, said he'd keep a good cigar waiting for me, and then walked off into the crowd of soldiers.

By then my platoon had gathered at the elevator.

The ride to the surface was silent, the journey up-earth long. Anticipation poured off my men in waves. They were good soldiers: Abernathy, Barnes, Champ, Foster, Itgen, Marvin, Morris, Smith, and Testa.

And me, Colin Rook.

They were my soldiers; they were Rook's Raiders.

I hoped we'd all come back together.

I knew we wouldn't.



Riding up-earth, I felt as if we'd always been fighting the Frek, as if the pre-invasion world had only ever existed in movies and dreams, and as if no time before my first day in bootcamp had been real. I couldn't remember the day I decided to enlist or even when the Frek invasion had begun.

Like everyone else, though, I knew their first assault had come without warning.

We hadn't even known that the Frek, or any other alien life, existed until they attacked us.

Even now, no one really understands why they invaded Earth.

I lean toward the mistake theory: the Frek thought there were no intelligent species here, and by the time they figured out otherwise, it was too late to change course. If all Frek invasions are alike, then they're pretty much impossible to stop once they're underway. Frek females give birth to about 500 young at a time. Frek children pop out of the womb in little, curled-up bundles no bigger than soccer balls, but they grow to the size of lamb in about three days, and they're more vicious than badgers. The first anyone knew we were under attack was when pregnant Frek mothers, already in labor, began dropping from the sky and popping out killing machines. They dropped about thirty per continent to start, and within days 15,000 hungry, newborn Frek bastards shocked the world. What's worse is about thirty Frek out of every litter were female. Those things mature, mate, and reproduce in a matter of weeks. Soon as we caught on to that, we made hunting the brood-mothers a priority. It wasn't enough.

That's when the scorched earth campaigns began.

We started with nukes.

Freks burned to cinders in the blasts, but the radiation barely slowed the survivors. It did have the benefit of sterilizing them, which made them easier to fight without worrying about picking up some Frek microbe that would blind you or turn your organs to slush. So far the white-coat grunts have identified about thirteen separate bacterial strains the Frek brought to Earth, seven of which are deadly to humans. They're working on cures and vaccines, but anything better than the crude, imperfect immunization shots they give us in bootcamp is a long way off. You catch a Frek death germ and get sick, you may as well throw yourself in front of a firegun for all the medics can help you. Thank God, the Frek bugs haven't mutated to airborne or human-to-human transmission yet.

Centcom switched to skybusters, which had about the same effect as nukes but without spreading so much fallout. The sterilization campaigns began in earnest then.

They say Africa is clear of Freks now. Thing is it's also pretty much clear of humans. No one's sure we really won that battle.

The Frek control half of Asia and all of South America. Bombing runs along their perimeter 24/7 keep them in check.

Australia has fared pretty well with about half the country still habitable and mostly Frek free.

Europe and North America still hang in the balance.

That's where Rook's Raiders and a million other grunts came in. We were trained in the western deserts where the Frek never came and then shipped east and north where the Frek are the densest. Now it was time to go see what there was to kill.

Fighting Frek isn't easy.

The children have skin like a beetle's carapace, and they can launch razor-sharp quills from their upper legs. Shooting the bastards five or six times usually drops them. Grenades are better. The only thing that makes it manageable is they're stupid and impulsive, and they tend to come running straight at you. They're fast, though. If you let one through, there's not much you can do but pray somebody's got your back.

The brood-mothers are worse.

They're about the size of personnel helicopters. Soon as they finish giving birth, they're back on all ten feet fighting. They spit streams of the vilest soup imaginable. It'll burn you bad. Guys who are allergic to it go anaphylactic and drop dead in seconds. The worst of the germs comes from the birther spit. You might survive being doused, but you'll spend a couple of months in D and Q, shaved hairless and having layers of skin flash-burned off you, while robot medics prick you and pop tubes into all your available orifices three times a day.

The mothers are uglier than the kids too.

They lumber around like octopi with stilts rammed into their tentacles. Their heads are flat and stretched into squares, and they got five big, red eyes that never blink.

I've never seen one in person, but they showed us plenty of vid records in bootcamp. Every grunt and officer gets a camera chip implanted in their skull beside their left eye, so every soldier is a cameraman. That's created a bounty of raw battlefield footage, and the top brass use it liberally.

That shit'll give you nightmares.



We made our rendezvous, and my first thought was someone at Centcom has a wicked sense of humor. That's the only explanation I can muster for why they cloned Peter Lorre to lead the Special Forces team. It wasn't only him, either. Although the other spooks hung back in the shadows, I swore I saw Karloff and Price in Captain's bars, Rathbone a Major. We were inside a blasted-out warehouse, and it was dark and gloomy, and I had to choke back a laugh. The movies those guys made were the ones I liked best: the classic monster flicks. They were the only ones with a touch of style to them. They could be gruesome, violent, and morbid, but there were real stories there, romances a lot of the time, and none of that formulaic, jingoistic cheerleading that was in almost every war movie we saw. Those old fright flicks came closer to reminding me of what I was fighting for than anything else we watched. That's because the heroes in those movies—and yeah, sometimes the monster was the hero, like in *Frankenstein* or *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*—the heroes were almost always noble.

I could buy that in a monster movie.

Not so much in the combat pics. In those, the hero died in the end way too often, and anyway, I'd seen fifty guys wash out of bootcamp for everything from cowardice to dementia to battlefield incontinence, and I knew soldiers weren't always noble. That's

why it struck me as funny about Peter Lorre being cloned for Special Forces. He never played the hero in the horror shows. The thing about him was he was unnerving even if you didn't recognize him. He had a tic, and his eyes looked rheumy enough to slide out of their sockets. Considering the Special Forces guys fought in the dark and had little contact with anyone but the enemy, the creepier they were, the better, I guess. Not that the Frek cared, but I guess it mattered to someone.

With Lorre they even got the voice right.

"Sergeant," he said. "We have your valuable cargo, ready for transport to Camp Scott. Are you prepared to take possession?"

"Ready, willing, and able," I told him.

"Excellent. Your papers?"

I handed him our orders. He skimmed them as he led me to the back of the huge transport truck, and then he opened one of the rear doors. Inside was a canister about twelve feet in diameter and roughly twenty feet long. It was spattered with mud and other dried gunk, and it looked like a rusty, oversized oil drum. Sealed up tight and strapped down solid enough to stay put even if the truck rolled, it filled almost the entire cargo space. I'd never seen anything like it.

I asked him what they had in there.

"We have captured one of the enemy's brood-mothers before labor and have trapped it in stasis in this tank. Frek bodies are quite pliable once they're subdued."

I guess I made a face or didn't speak for too long, because Captain Lorre's expression got even more anxious looking, and he pulled out a white handkerchief and wiped sweat from his brow.

"Are you deaf, Sergeant?" he said. "I tell you we have captured one of the enemy birthers and have trapped it in this tank, yet you have nothing to say."

I'd heard him fine. No one had ever taken one of the Frek birthers alive. I thought we'd have heard the news.

"It is secret, of course, which is why we must get the prisoner as quickly as possible inside Camp Scott. You and your men only have to drive this truck home, like good chauffeurs. Do not interfere with the canister. For God's sake don't try to open it, or there will be horrible consequences. Absolutely horrible."

I asked him if he'd be coming with us.

He shook his head and wiped his brow again, and I saw why his unit had to pass the baton. Captain Lorre's sleeve pulled back from the hem of his glove, uncovering about eight blood blisters on his wrist, a sign of Frek infection. The rest of his unit must have been contaminated too. They'd probably caught the germ while subduing the birther. Word was when Special Forces picked up a Frek bug, they didn't bother coming in for triage, they simply ran suicide missions to kill as many Frek as possible before they expired. I felt a little sad for the Captain, but in the end he was only a clone. No doubt there were other Special Forces "monster units" running around out there. Centcom hated to waste a good clone matrix once they'd developed it.

Captain Lorre handed me the keys to the truck and turned to rejoin his unit. I called him back before he disappeared into the shadows.

"Hey," I said. "They forget Lugosi?"

The Captain smiled. "Oh, no, they could never forget Lugosi, but I'm sad to have to tell you he didn't make it. He's in the canister, with the prisoner."