

## The Orange Hills of Eron

Incoming balon rockets scream across the night sky, the light from their massive discharges reflecting in web-like patterns off low-hanging clouds. At the edge of the jungle, giant magnetron generators hold the Confederation's command center disrupter-fields in place. From the orange hills skirting the Pelacci Mountains in the west, strategically placed Tagon-70 cannons pulse intermittently, their plasma capsules leaving yellow and blue tracer streaks as they arc into the dark canopy of the jungle.

Deep in the tangled undergrowth on the fringes of Baker Company's northwest control sector, Plasma-Fire Sergeant Jerry Wilson and Comm-Spec Seth Thomas lay cut off from their command by Zorlu reconnaissance troops. Sometimes crouching, other times crawling, they work their way through the dense, viney maze. The planet's clay topsoil, turned to a reddish-green muck by the constant downpour, boils past them in muddy streams.

"This place..." Wilson complains under his breath, "...gonna be the death of me...guys in their ivory towers...oughta be the ones slogging around in this mess...."

"Sarge," Thomas calls over his headset. "I have to take a break. This scramble pack's bashing the hell out of me, and we've got to report in."

"Now there's an idea," Wilson replies, "let's do it."

"If you're saying anything, Sarge," Thomas says, "I'm getting nothing but static from your comm link. If you can hear me, flash your helmet light."

Wilson signals, keying his helmet light on and off.

"We gotta to shut it down," Thomas says. "Must be getting moisture in the control relays or something. I'll check it out."

Wilson touches the power switch on his helmet, the seal hisses, and his night-vision

screen goes dark. He flips the hinged plate up off his face and crawls ahead of Thomas into a den-like opening that beckoned from between the elephantine roots of a massive tree, towering high above them in the canopy.

"Make it quick, Thomas," Wilson says quietly as he slides the helmet set off. "Holdin' down one place too long is dangerous. We're gonna be sittin' ducks for a plasma cap."

"Right," Thomas grunts. He shrugs off the scrambler pack with its piggy-backed disrupter field unit, then props his plasma weapon beside it. Sitting down awkwardly, he leans back against the wet tree and keys in communications tests on the scrambler pack. Switching it to continuous phase, he utters a prayer to whomever might be listening that the satellite up-link will be quick.

Good thing the disrupter's running, Thomas thinks. With a comm channel open for the up-link, and Zorlus so close, it's damned risky.

The Zorlus, a cold-blooded, lizard-like race of bipedal beings, have come to Eron in search of a new home. Their planet has died, its atmosphere toxic, its resources depleted. The Zorlus have chosen Eron for its resemblance to their own planet, eons before.

On Eron they find acceptable air, a widespread variety of plant and animal life, and most importantly, pelacite. For the Zorlus, the pelacite ore is life: processed into a granular form and used in breather canisters, it extends their life span by tenfold.

Both Wilson and Thomas were on station when the violent assault began two weeks earlier. The Zorlus started the third anniversary celebration of their arrival by launching concentrated plasma assaults from deep in the jungle. Hundreds of Confederation troopers were killed, and Alpha Company headquarters was wiped out.

Since the first expedition to Eron four hundred earth years earlier, the Confederation has

brought seventy prime combat battalions from all parts of the System to guard the giant planet. For good reason. The stockpile of pelacite on Vargus, in the Alpha Centuri System, has been mined out. Eron was now the only known source of the ore within generational reach of Confederation Starships. The orange-colored mineral is a carbon-based substance used as a catalyst in all the Heinlein Transport Drives, and the Confederation's very reason for being there.

Now, Baker Company is running low on supplies. Because of the fire-fight, none of the big freighters have been able to touch down, and are maintaining geosynchronous orbits directly over Baker Control, protected only by one Confederation battle cruiser and an escort.

Thomas hangs a small accessory light from the tree and turns it on. Taking the Sergeant's headset, he hooks up test leads from the scrambler pack, keys in a secondary test program, and then watches the display as it runs.

"So far, so good," he mutters. The display flashes at Thomas on completion of a loop, then resets itself for the next stage.

Wilson, bored by technical details and discomfited by the uncertainty of their position, scans the darkness around them uneasily. Squatting, he eases his muscular frame into a huddle beneath the shelter of a giant, fan-shaped leaf, and drops his plasmapack in the mud at his side. Hooking the long, triangular nozzle of the plasmasweep onto his belt, he touches the arming pads and sets the sensitivity to one hundred meters, then pulls a cylinder of cigarettes from an inside pocket of his mesh disrupter suit. Sliding a yellow cigarette out of one half, he lights it with the canister's heat ring. Cupping it with both hands he draws heavily on the cigarette.

"Here, sonny," he says, offering the cigarette to Thomas as smoke leaks from his nose and mouth. "Try some of the Eron tobacco I scored from one of my ladies at Daben Gruder's place last Friday."