

## Faith in Folly

By Lochlin Duperron

Event: T+3 hours

Pulling the sleek, smooth kinetic impeller from a hidden pocket, Ellen flipped a switch on it and fired in one action. The weapon sounded like a small nuclear blast, with roughly the same energy potential. The man in front of her, who was in the process of raising his rifle, disintegrated along with everything in a ninety degree angle from the front of the weapon. The wave of overpressure washed over her, the heat blistering her skin and throwing her backwards. Far in the facility, she could hear the incessant chorus of different alarms.

“*Very little time left...*” Ellen said to herself quietly as she pulled herself up. She had to escape, just had to, or everything that she had done, everything the Resistance had done, would have been for naught. Looking to her other pocket, she saw that the cylinder of polymorphic memory crystal still glowed a deep pink; the battery on its bottom forcing it to hold its structure. If she didn’t escape before the battery died, the Artificial Intelligence inside of it would die, and it would take everything it knew with it to its grave. The AI was an incredible opportunity for the Resistance, one that they had committed everything to getting. It was all-or-nothing, as the Resistance had overextended itself to get it.

Sprinting down the damaged corridor, dodging fallen support beams and other debris in the twilight from the emergency lights was a surreal experience for her, possibly due to the intense concussion she had incurred during her violent disagreement with the wall when she fired her weapon. Taking a right, she encountered a sealed

blast door and paused to think of a way past. She began to fret for a moment, as she had a precious twelve hours to escape and make it back to Resistance headquarters.

Finishing her retrospection, she swore. Without access to the main shaft, she would never make it up in time. It was obviously her luck that the damaged blast door was the only one that could not be circumvented in her path to the primary shaft. Doubling back, she knew her sole way out in time was the Magnetic Mass Accelerator Array, a very high-tech, advanced, large bore, surface-to-space gun that fired super-dense kinetic rounds at several times escape velocity. Finding an entry point to the firing cylinder, she pressed the open button, which flashed red and announced that due to facility alert status, the coils were being kept ‘warm’. Entering the cannon would mean that the metals in her bloodstream would be ripped out and attracted to the coils. Frowning, she knew the only way to use the cannon as an escape route would be to go to the secondary command hub for the external weapons systems, a level up. Sadly, the only way to travel between levels besides the primary shaft were locked maintenance shafts. Nothing was ever easy.

Moving down the dark deserted corridors, she saw several bodies, torn apart by the internal defense system, and walls black with carbon scoring. Turning one last corridor, she found where the staff of this level had made their last stand. Entering a battlefield of destroyed security bots, blown out turrets and corpses, many corpses, she felt the bile rising in her throat as she saw the floor was slick with the blood not only of military

personnel, but of researchers and maintenance personnel too, and their families, at the back of the destroyed barricade of furniture. Because their best way out of the level was the maintenance shaft which had been sealed at alert status, it was at the center of the barricade. Ellen would have to climb over it to get to the shaft, and over a proverbial mountain of bodies.

Pushing vile thoughts to the back of her head she vaulted the barricade and went for the door to the shaft. Locked; as expected. However, unlike the people around her, she had the access code... that's why they didn't. She had reset all the codes. In spite of herself, in her mind she saw the chief technician punching his code in over and over again, with the screams of the dying all around him. The sounds of the weapons must have been deafening in this hallway.

*"One, one, two, three, five, eight, one, three."* With just the slightest pneumatic hiss, the hatch began to rise. The main lighting was active on this level, bathing the shaft in a bright, harsh light. Squinting, a detached part of herself noticed that she had been in the dark for a very long time. Getting her feet beneath her, she quickly looked around. A few seconds of observation could save her life. Exiting, she walked the deserted hallway towards the control room. The hallway was barren, all military. This was not a civilian level of the facility, so none of the comforts that civilians expected would be here. Walking up to the transparent door of the security room, she noticed that the card reader had been partially disassembled, as if someone had been trying to break into it but had been called away... or killed, judging by the blood splatter that was on the left wall. Frowning, she grabbed the reader part of the terminal and saw that the cables still attached it to the base. Quickly swiping her false access card, she started to take a step forward, and nearly bumped into the still sealed door. A mechanical male voice read out in a monotone:

*"Access denied. The security accounts manager service is currently offline. Maintenance has been notified."*

*"Well, I doubt that maintenance is going to be responding anytime soon."* Wishing that her impeller was good for more than one shot, Ellen recalled the diagrams of the security systems she had examined before entering the facility and drew the portable security server out of another hidden pocket.

Wiring the box in, she tapped the front of the box three times, and it lit up. Text began to scroll on the screen while Ellen's eyes glazed over as she waited for the magical marvel to render an obscenely expensive security system useless.

A short sequence of beeps brought Ellen back from her stupor to find the borders of the screen flashing from the uniform black to a deep red and back again. Grimacing, she realized that her sabotage had been better than she had first expected. She had flashed new protocols to all the card readers that prevented them from completing a handshake and so prevented them from ever opening whatever they were attached to.

Beginning to tap a few commands in, she found it hard to concentrate with the steady thud in the adjacent hall. Her eyes suddenly widening, she turned towards the connecting hallway. A maintenance bot stood there, heating its spark welder up. Lunging to the side, she felt the heat from a near-fatal blow wash over her for the second time in what seemed to have been nearly no time at all. Rolling onto her feet, she sprinted around a corner. Breathing hard, Ellen swore for permitting it to get so close to her. The blisters on her skin that were just beginning to stop stinging from her first near-death experience had reawakened with a vengeance. She could give herself a painkiller she had in her jacket pocket, but it would dull her senses and slow her down. A half second slower and she would have melted into jelly beneath the maintenance bots' spark. Speed was life. Hearing the slow steady thump of the bot coming for her, Ellen forced herself to start moving again. The level was designed as a tiny square, so perhaps she could take the main corridor all the way around back to the main security office. Sprinting off, she took one turn, two, three, and ended up exactly where she started.

*"Back to square one"*. Quickly pushing the last few commands in on the black box, she saw the transparent door slide open soundlessly. Grinning, she stepped though and hit the close door button on the other side. Facilities like this were built so that doors were easy to close, but hard to open. The door closed just in time, too, as the maintenance bot, having doubled back, fired a spark at her, which splashed harmlessly against the supercomposite door. The security room was designed not only as a secondary command center but a bunker within a bunker. Crossing to the overlook command console, she typed in a few quick commands that shut down the coils to the MMAA. Going to exit, she was dismayed to find

that the maintenance bot didn't have anything better to do but watch her through the door, immediately crossing it out as an exit. Moving to the adjacent room, she found an armory.

"Wow, the Empire has nice toys." The armory was lined with kinetic accelerator rifles, larger (and more controlled) versions of her impeller along with suits of armor for an Imperial guard soldier. Beginning to don one, she saw herself in a mirror. At twenty-one years of age, Ellen had long, alizarin red hair, blue irises and very pale skin. She was dressed in an engineer's outfit, a powder blue uniform that had been worn too long. It was wet with sweat and blood, torn in many different places and covered in black carbon marks. Stripping down and finishing a suit of armor and a rifle, she suddenly realized why the Imperial soldiers were so hard to beat. The suit molded to her body and seemed to carry itself, and she could feel the power it gave her.

Finding the escape hatch that led into the firing shaft, she attempted to open it, but found it locked. However, the magnetic clamps that had previously held it shut had been disabled by some fluke of luck. Grabbing the edge of the hatch and pulling, she could hear the Neosteel resin in the motor cases bending. Pulling it all the way open, and jumping down onto the catwalk that had automatically deployed when the door "opened" in the shaft, Ellen made her way to the lift. Deploying it and climbing on, she arrived at another catwalk, which extended for her. Several seconds later she was moving up the ladder that would take her to level one. She felt like she had cheated a tiny bit, bypassing all the troubles of the other levels, but wasn't overly worried. Entering the poorly-lit foyer, she stopped dead in her tracks and froze. In front of her was a seven foot tall man-like creature, covered in rust-brown fur, similar to a fox. He stood silently, a lanky creature clad in golden robes with human proportions belying his strength. Standing bi-pedal on paws and using a bushy tail for balance, she could see in its eyes that it was fiercely intelligent, and very possibly malevolent.

"So, you are the one who has caused all that we see here." A frightening voice, mostly because it was so calm. It didn't look like the fox person could produce human speech with such a muzzle, but the voice was perfectly articulated. Trying frantically to get the rifle unslung from her back, she didn't even see him cross the five meters between them before he hit her, a powerful blow that sent her rifle spiraling away from her, but not hard enough to break any bones.

"Do you have any idea what you have done here? So many deaths, and for what, so you can hope to slaughter more innocents?" The voice was calm, but Ellen could feel in her bones that it was merely the calm before the storm. She had made the mistake of getting into hand-to-hand combat with an abomination against the one true God, a member of the genetically engineered Emperor's personal guard. He had reflexes orders of magnitude faster than hers, and he could hit her with enough force to turn her bones to powder if he wanted. The only thing Ellen was counting on was that this one was as arrogant as the rest of them and tried to play with his prey before killing her. She hoped she could knock some of the arrogance out of him, but it didn't bode well that no human had ever won a fight with one of the abominations. As long as she kept him talking he wouldn't kill her.

"I'm fighting to free my people! Something *something* like you would never understand!"

"Is that what you really believe, little girl? That you free your people by blowing them up with bombs in markets and assassination attempts?"

"The only people we target are collaborators! Traitors to their own kind!"

"Ah, yes. They collaborate by living their lives in the splendor the Empire gives to all citizens. They collaborate by not living in fear of arrest because they have not helped to slaughter their own kind."

"And the Empire doesn't? What about the inquisitions of knowledge, the orbital bombardments?"

"I did not say that the Empire had clean hands in this matter, child. No one is innocent in this war anymore. There are only varying degrees of guilt among both our sides. The difference is that those in service of the Empire give their innocence to protect that of the average person, while your side gives your innocence to try to take it away from others."

"Those people lost their innocence as soon as they turned their back on God."

"Ah, the comment that is at the root of this entire war. It never fails to come back to this. So, child, because these people do not believe as you do they are not worthy of life?"

“As they have turned their back against God, God turns his back against them.”

“Rhetoric! Do you even know what you are talking about, child, or are you merely repeating what your elders have told you? You wage your entire war on nothing more than fiction that has been rewritten since the beginning of time to control the ignorant!” Ellen could see his fur begin to fluff up; it was obviously very hard for a member of his... race to keep their emotions hidden.

“That ‘fiction’ is the Word of God, you blasphemer, you heretic! It is the commandments we must follow to enter Heaven... although soulless creatures like you need not apply. Your Emperor will soon meet the same fate as Lucifer, whom he has tried so hard to copy.”

A grin slowly spread over his face, another expression that she would have thought impossible for a muzzle. “Interesting that you should mention that, child. I find your choice of terms in this matter ironic. A heretic is someone who chooses his own path, while Lucifer actually means “The Bearer of Light”. The Emperor has truly brought light to our dark world. And even so, your religion states that your god is the only god and that you must believe in your Jesus Christ in order to ascend to your Heaven, correct? What about the Islamic peoples, the Jewish, the Hindu? None of them believe in your Jesus Christ as your lord. Are they doomed to your Hell? Are you doomed to theirs for not believing in their laws?”

“Quiet, creature. You would never understand faith.”

“Ah. It is so very hard to reason someone out of a position they have not reasoned themselves into. Your god states that you must not kill, but what about all the souls you have claimed today? Are you repentant for their deaths?”

“I am not sorry to you, animal. God will forgive me. I am fighting against a secular empire, one without morals and full of fools who play God.”

“I was hoping for something a little more enlightened. The empire is full of enlightened scientists, wonderful artists, visionary writers...”

“And acceptant of deviants and immorality at every turn.”

“You say that like it is a bad thing, child. So, you are permitted to do whatever you choose on this plane and you believe that you will be forgiven for all your sins, all the deaths you have caused? I do hope your god has mercy on your soul, for I shall show you the same you showed to those below us.”

Ellen rolled onto her gun and brought it towards him, but he was already gone. Spinning, she saw just a blur of movement before the monomolecular sword bisected her weapon. Falling backwards, Ellen drew her combat knife, a sharp carbon-steel blade. In the low light, his sword, a mimic of a rapier, had a two-dimensional blade that when looked at straight on looked like blue smoke reflected endlessly. When looked at from the side, it was invisible.

“Even in the face of the end, you show no fear, child. Your lives are so short... perhaps that is why you are willing to throw them away. Goodbye, child.” Ellen never saw his next movement. The blade passed effortlessly through her armor and into her chest, puncturing both her lungs. “I am sorry.”

“I was just doing what was right...”

“We all are, child. We all are.”

“I’m cold. So very cold.” Ellen drew her last breath just as dawn broke and light flooded through the foyer windows. Still holding her corpse, the Grand Master of the Guard watched the life drain from her features as her blood soaked the fur on his hands.

“Sleep with dreams of oblivion, child.” Retrieving the small pink glowing cylinder from her jacket, he stood and walked away, his paws not even making the slightest noise on the polished metal floor as the pool of blood slowly spread over it. Stopping in the doorway, he turned around to view the foyer; the light from the front windows was low enough to cast long shadows on the floor, giving the impression that the blood pool was coming from the darkness.