

Leading the Dance

“They’re getting a bit close don’t you think?” Potter glanced over at Arneson as the latest set of missiles rained down less than a mile from the bunker.

“Yeah, but they’re only firing missiles at the moment, nothing that’s going to get through the shield any time soon.” Arneson leaned back in his chair and looked at the display on the wall, “When they start advancing, we’ll start thinking about it.”

“When they start advancing, we’ll only have minutes to make the difference, shouldn’t we start firing back yet?”

“Not yet,” Arneson pointed up at the display, “We’ve got a whole bunch of conventional artillery and *one* Ortilery round available, take a look out there and tell me what you see.”

“Twenty platoon’s of powered armour, two full divisions of tanks...” Potter started doing the numbers on the troops.

“Look further back,” Arneson pulled the screen outwards, “Tell me what those two big blips are on the rearguard duty...”

“Scanning, I...” Potter went pale, “Dear God, there’s two Mountainbreakers out there.”

“Yep...” Arneson settled back in his chair, “And as you can see, they’re coming from both directions aren’t they...?”

“We could drop one using the Ortilery...”

“Leaving us one that’ll walk right over us...”

“We can’t just stay here and wait for them to get here.”

“You’re mistaken, that’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

“WHAT?” Potter turned to face him, “Are you crazy?”

“Not today,” Arneson smiled and turned his chair, heading towards the kitchen, “Brew?”

Potter followed him into the kitchen still wearing the look of disbelief.

“Look, Sarge, not being funny here, but we can’t seriously be waiting till those MB’s get here.”

“Why not?” Arneson dropped a tea bag in the cup and put the milk in first, “You’re not planning on going out there to say hi are you? Where did you say you’d been transferred from?”

“The 23rd, out on the cold ridge.”

“Plenty of manpower up there isn’t there?” Arneson put a single sugar cube in the cup and stirred.

“Yeah, Eastern blok has got millions of people in reserve.”

“So the usual plan up there is to drown them in our own blood and worry about the numbers later on? I read your transfer papers. That’s why you applied to work here isn’t it?”

“Yeah, never saw the point of using up people we didn’t have going spare.”

“And you never considered that the reason why there’s so many people up there is because we don’t need them down here?”

“Can’t see how that would be.” Potter looked around, “I haven’t seen anyone except for you in the time that we’ve been here.”

“And that’s because there isn’t anyone *but* me in here.” Arneson grinned as he sipped at the tea, moving back into the control room, “The problem that most people don’t consider is that we’re not at war with the other side.”

“We’re not?”

“No, we’re not, we’re all the same race, and there’s plenty of land available for everyone if we just decided to get along with each other.”

“Yeah, but they started this, we’re just defending ourselves.”

“You believe that?” Arneson raised an eyebrow and looked back as he sipped the tea again.

“Well, they were the ones who dropped the breaker round on Vegas,” Potter looked up at him, “I was there when the Bellagio got split in half.”

“Ever wonder why they’d go after something as inconsequential as a hotel on the strip?”

“It was to show they could strike at the heart of America’s playground, to show all the rich people there was nowhere for them to hide.”

“And you don’t think a shot through the middle of the white house would have sent that picture just as clear?”

“Too much security in that area, the shot would have been intercepted long before it got to the centre of town.”

“And yet here we are with a couple of thousand troops closing in on what is, by even our estimation, a minor outpost that’s already been bombed to frag more than once.”

Arneson paused and changed the screen to satellite imaging.

“The first shot they ever fired landed here,” He lit up an area three miles from the base, “and now they’re coming back to finish the job that they started all that time back.”

“So what’s so important about this place?”

“Now you’re starting to think.” Arneson smiled, “You have to consider that there was a very good reason they hit the strip, and it wasn’t anything to do with America’s playground.”

“So what was it?”

“Way back in the late fifties, long before the cold war started in earnest and when the governments were still talking to each other, there was an exchange of personnel between the east and the west.”

“Personnel?”

“Of a sort,” Arneson took another sip of tea, “We gave them our best computer and they gave us theirs, the personnel that were sent were the engineers that had built them.”

“Computers?” Potter looked puzzled, “That was over a hundred years back, anything they gave us then would be long obsolete before they launched that strike.”

“You would have thought so,” Arneson smiled, “Certainly it caused us some consternation when we found out that the computer they’d sent was more primitive than the machines that we were using at the time. But our command knew something that theirs didn’t, and that’s why things escalated the way they did.”

Potter stayed silent as he saw the edges of the MountainBreakers move into position on the satellite imaging, although they were deep underground, he fancied he could hear the heavy footsteps of the machines as they walked ever closer.

“What we needed from them wasn’t their technology but their mindset,” Arneson turned to face Potter and shrugged, “We lacked their singular perspective on how to deal with things.”

“Perspective you can learn,” Potter shrugged, “We learned that when they first came in at Manhattan, they got the jump on us every time for the first month and they haven’t managed it since.”

“That’s because something here had decided which of their strategies they were using.”

“So they haven’t changed strategies in more than a hundred years?”

“They’ve changed strategies, but it’s mindset, not tactics that we needed to understand,”

Arneson took a loose leafed book from his console table and threw it on to the desk beside him, “They understood this from the beginning, it’s why they don’t call it strategy, they call it Dance.”

“Dance?”

“Yes, Dance, and you know what the most important part of any Dance is?”

“Not stepping on your partners’ feet?”

“Close...” Arneson stepped over, his feet moving in a passable impression of a foxtrot, “The most important part of the Dance is figuring out which Dance you’re supposed to be doing, and then making sure you know who’s leading it...”

“And what has that got to do with...” Potter pointed at the screen as the two Mountainbreakers came into view and closed to within two miles, the mobile divisions swarming around them, “This?”

“They know that we have their information here,” Arneson smiled as he sat back in his chair, turning to the screen and activating the Ortilery targeting system. “And they’ll do anything to get it, or to prevent us from keeping it anyway, that’s why they’ve committed most of their forces from the western operations.”

“Alright, so what are we going to do about it?”

“Us?” Arneson’s smile turned into a grin as he clicked in the co-ordinates for the Ortilery, “We’re just going to sit right here and wait for it all to be over.”

The crosshair appeared on the screen, centering over the top of the base.

“Us..?” Potter looked over at Arneson in horror, “But if that lands on us...”

“They will have no information as their prize and the shot will wipe all of them out.”

“And us with it...”

“If that’s what it takes,” Arneson shrugged, “That was the other thing they understood, the amount of people they’re sending is their way of telling us that they’re willing to do what it takes to remove our advantage.”

“Great, so we’re done for...”

“Patience...” Arneson pointed up at the screen as the minute countdown began, “We’ve got a whole minute to go before this is played out.”

“Not even time for a last cigarette...” Potter looked down, then walked over to the console, “No way of turning that off is there?”

“Wouldn’t be a failsafe if there was,” Arneson raised his tea and downed the last of it, “I’m going up to get a good view, are you coming?”

“Where else would I go?” Potter just felt numb, the reality hadn’t sunk in at all.

The Elevator took a half minute to get to the top of the tower and Arneson sat down in one of the main chairs, the energy shield still obscuring everything outside, but the footsteps of the Mountainbreakers now causing the ground to shake around them.

“Get your shades on,” Arneson leaned back in the chair, “Lower shields on south bay.”

The screen before them dissolved

“We’re not...” Potter’s mouth dropped open in shock as he fumbled for his shades. A star shone brighter for a second high in the sky, dropping down like someone had turned gods own torch onto the ground. There was a moment of perfect silence and then the horizon was lit with fire, starting at the centre of the blast and rolling outwards, the whole area consumed in the devastation as the cloud kicked up in the aftermath started to roll towards them.

“Raise shields,” Arneson smiled and took his shades off as he turned to Potter, “You see, the other thing about Dancing is that when you dance with the Devil, you wear steel toecaps.”

“But you targeted that shot on us, on the Vegas strip bunker...”

“What, you think we left all the things there after that first attack?” Arneson’s smile widened and he stepped back into the elevator, “We just let them think that, that’s why there was all

that protection around the bunker, you never got to wondering why the elevator took thirty minutes to get you to here? Come on...”

“There are a few more steps for you to learn before we let you on the dance floor...”