

The Post

by Jesse Krenzel

In his dream, Marine Lieutenant Avery Dalton is back on Earth. A child again, he's walking with his father in the golden warmth of a sunlit meadow where tall blades of green grass bend under the weight of sparkling dew drops. Ahead, at the edge of the clearing, a stream trickles among rocks beneath a copse of trees. A lazy patch of shade shifts beneath the swaying branches and then trembles and darkens. The darkening slides out from beneath the trees and floats toward the Daltons across the open ground. Grass shrivels to dead brown curls as it passes. Father's hand tightens on his and Dalton feels the coarse, warm callouses soften and grow cold and damp. He looks up to his father's shadowed face where two glowing reptilian eyes peer back at him. The dad-thing hisses and . . .

Dalton woke and bolted up from the dirty cot and stumbled to a metal table in the middle of a small dark room. With his heart thumping in his chest, he struggled for breath in the thin air of Triton 3 and tried to sort dream from reality. He recognized the interior of the abandoned miners' shack, a small metal Quonset hut made of rippled steel panels. He choked and coughed on the stink of sweat and the fine dust stirred by his movement. Near the window, a shadowed figure moved. Dalton reached for his sidearm, but the holster was empty.

"They got into your head, didn't they?" said the figure.

"Where's my pistol?" said Dalton, a little calmer now that he also recognized the dull, raspy voice of Private Bull Crane.

"On the table under the paper. I took it when you dozed off. Didn't want another shooting."

Dalton picked up the pulse pistol. The familiar grip and weight reassured him. "Don't ever touch my gun again. You're not in command here."

Crane rubbed the crop of greying stubble on his burn-scarred cheek and looked around the dirty shack. "Command? Okay, *Lieutenant*. What are your orders, SIR? You mean like that, Dalton?"

Dalton holstered his weapon and strode over to the open window where the muscular Crane stood watch. He didn't like being so close to Crane, whose heavy frame dwarfed his own slight build.

Outside, the evening temperature remained warm. In the twilight, the barren landscape of Triton 3 had the color of scorched aluminum. A line of hundred-meter-high pinnacles of grotesque twisted rock jutted from the grey sand like the exposed fingers of some gigantic, buried creature.

Crane stuffed a piece of chewing gum into his mouth. “They get in your head when you sleep. It’s what they do, like with Wickham.” He nodded toward the disabled Marine Lander Two a few hundred meters downslope where the bodies of the six slain Marines were sealed. The lander’s white skin looked ghostlike among the grey dunes, too distant to show the jagged holes torn by Wickham’s machine pistol. No one had warned them of the dangers of dozing off here before the two rescue landers had touched down, or before Private Peter Wickham had awakened screaming and emptied a full magazine into the rest of his squad.

“They’re glowing like crazy down by the mine,” said Crane. “I think they’re getting ready to make their move.”

Dalton saw it too, the eerie yellow glow on the dunes and on the distant pinnacles, lit as if by unseen campfires. The Science Officer had described the Ammutts as “shy and docile bioluminescent reptiles.” Glowing bovine-sized lizards is what they were, and the faster they moved, the brighter they glowed. *Shy and docile?* Doubtful, in light of those disappeared miners and the Ammutts’ morbid telepathic powers that the scientists had somehow missed.

“Any word from command?” asked Dalton.

Crane looked at him in disbelief. “Yeah, sure. The captain called and said she was sending down a couple of hookers and a case of beer. What do *you* think?”

“Did you hail the Command Ship, or not?”

“Yeah, I hailed them, every ten minutes while you were in dreamland.”

Dalton turned on the transmitter. “Command Ship, this mining camp Alpha. Do you read? Command Ship, do you read?”

The radio hissed with dead air.

“Must be over the horizon,” said Dalton, checking his watch.

Crane snapped the slide on his pulse rifle. “They’re gone man. They left orbit.”

“No, they didn’t. That’s not the way we do things.”

“Who’s ‘we,’ Dalton? You got worms?”

“Planetary Marines don’t leave soldiers behind.”

“Well, *Lieutenant*, they’re gone, and *we’re not*. Exactly how is that not ‘left-behind’?”

“They’re coming back. When they get the wounded stabilized on the Command Ship, they’ll be back.”

“Yeah, right. With the beer and the hookers.” Crane raised the rifle and scanned the terrain with the scope.

“They’ll be back, all right,” Dalton said, more to himself than to Crane. “They can’t leave this system without the Infitium.”

Crane looked at him. “What?”

But Dalton had said all he wanted. Crane didn’t need to know the rest of it – that the captain had left the miners’ incredible cache of pure Infitium behind when she’d evac’d the wounded.

Crane lowered the rifle. “What did you say about the Infitium?”

“You know, Crane, we wouldn’t have to worry about the locals if you hadn’t opened fire on them. The miners were here for a year without an incident. Then you came.”

“Hey, the miners didn’t just evaporate, and those lizards got into Wickham’s head. Some kinda alien mind-fuck. That’s a fact . . . slimy things crawling around in the rocks, all yellow and shiny. Freakin’ creepy.”

Dalton looked at him. “They’re life forms. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“Hey, I may not be the sharpest knife in the armory, but I know my job. We came for the Infitium; mission accomplished, so quit whining about a few bleeding glow-sticks.” Crane stiffened and raised the rifle to his cheek. “Movement on the right.” He pointed to a pinnacle maybe fifty meters away. “Three of them. I can take ’em out.”

“Let’s not piss them off any more than they already are.”

“If they come in force, it’s all over.”

“So what? You want to surrender? Want to walk out there and tell those things you’re sorry for slaughtering their ‘Welcome Committee’?”

“No, I want a perimeter I can defend. Not this.” Crane kicked the wall of the shelter, denting the thin metal with the toe of his boot.

“*This* is our post, Private. *This* is what we defend.”

“They’ll tear this place apart. We could climb that peak over there, right to the top. If they come at us, it’ll be one or two at a time. We can pick ’em off easy, like a video game. Pop-pop,” he said with a thousand-yard stare. He focused on the line of pinnacles that bordered the trail to the mine. “I think they’re coming.”

The rock formations grew brighter, shimmering against the grey-black twilight with the movement of unfocused shadows. Dalton thought he heard them, a thousand whispers and hisses in the back of his head, sounding like radio static.

“Oh man. They are definitely coming,” said Crane. “We gotta get to the peak now. Dalton, you hear me?”

“We can’t go.”

“What?”

“We can’t carry the Infitium up the peak, and we can’t leave it.”

Crane looked confused. “What Infitium?”

Dalton pointed at the footlocker under the table.

Crane looked down at it. “You think the captain left fifty kilos of pure Infitium behind with a screw-up like you?”

Dalton returned to the table. “You didn’t need to know.”

Outside, the night air filled with the sound of movement. A thousand clawed feet picked their way through rocks and sand.

Dalton switched on the transmitter and locked it. “In fact, you don’t know anything, Private Crane, except for killing. We’re going to defend the Infitium, *here*.” He imagined Senator James Dalton listening to an archived recording of this audio months from now, realizing how wrong he’d been about his son.

Crane turned on him. “Come on Dalton. Think about it. Lander One was damaged on landing. Remember? Why would the captain risk leaving the Infitium behind for a second landing she might not be able to make?”

“There wasn’t enough room.”

“There was without us.”

“No, it’s here in the box. The captain said so.”

“Jesus, Dalton, she only said that so you’d give up your seat. It was in that body bag they took with them.”

“That’s a lie.”

“You didn’t wonder why she took a body instead of you or me?”

“She’s coming back for us and the box.”

Crane checked the window again, then put down his rifle and reached for the footlocker. “Man, we do NOT have time for this.”

Dalton felt dizzy. The static in his head was louder now, resolving into distinct growls and hisses. “Don’t touch that!”

Crane slid the footlocker easily on the gritty floor. “Feels pretty light, Dude,” he said in a mocking, sing-song voice.

“Leave it alone. I’m warning you.”

Crane lifted the locker chest high and shook it. “This thing is em—”

Something heavy boomed against the side of the hut. Another object struck from above, something soft and heavy that slid down the arced roof as sharp claws dug at the seams and rivets. More bodies struck the shelter like raining sandbags. The ceiling and walls bent inward, deforming more with each strike. Long black claws picked and scratched at the metal, working their way into seams and cracks, tearing jagged holes in the sheathing. Shafts of yellow light stabbed through the holes and danced in the rising dust.

Crane dropped the footlocker and reached for his rifle. A claw shot through the open window and skewered his shoulder like a fishhook. It pulled him, screaming, toward the lit window opening.

Dalton seized the fallen pulse rifle and pointed it toward the window. He squeezed the trigger on full automatic. Crane’s body came apart in a flurry of scarlet bursts as the creature pulled his torso out the window. The screaming voices in Dalton’s head melded with the shriek of tearing metal. He dropped the rifle and fell on the empty footlocker, covering his ears until the walls and the roof gave way to the silence and the golden warmth of a sunlit meadow back on earth.

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