

JAMES ESPARZA PRESENTS

**WORLD
WITHOUT
END**



**CHILDREN
OF THE
SILENT ONE**

A SHORT STORY



Kingdom of Dun

The Border Valleys

Stains

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WORLD WITHOUT END

A Fantasy/Sci-Fi world full of diverse landscapes and interesting, unique civilizations that strive to exist in a world of both ancient kingdoms and futuristic cities. Technological wonders built decades ago, and mystical creations that live and breathe together in this ever-evolving world of adventure and terror.

This Lands of Light stand as a single bot of light on an endless plain of darkness, ravaged by war for ages. Countless kingdoms and people vanished, leaving nothing but ruins and bones behind. It was only when the darkness known as the abyss sprang to life, assaulting the single territory of light from all directions, that the three ruling kingdoms were forced to unite their ancient powers and cutting-edge technologies to survive.

Decades passed, yet the ceaseless assault persisted, and an official declaration of war against the darkness itself was made. New borders were drawn, and the kingdoms forged pacts of trade and focused on economy and knowledge. Amidst the chaos of constant warfare, an era of adventure dawned. The three kingdoms opened their borders to one another, trading goods and ideas, while intellectuals and warriors braved the untamed regions of light, confronting rogue factions and fighting against the encroaching darkness.

The Border Valleys

This place stands as a natural border region between the very different kingdoms of Dun and Whitlow. A green landscape that pulsates with a sense of savagery. Many brave souls venture forth into the unkept jungles to carve a land of their own, far from the bustling Cities of Whitlow, and the stringent Orders of the Dun. There was a hidden treasure of freedom for anyone who could tame this green landscape of jungle filled valleys, and rapid flowing rivers.

The Dun, a strong and noble people from an ancient society ruled by 9 stringent Orders, who use an awesome spiritual power to help govern their people. They are strong, but seen as a strange people who cling to the past.

Whitlow is a nation unshackled from the chains of tradition. A people who forge themselves in a new age of enlightenment through the findings of hidden knowledge, their great creations have become the backbone of their nation.

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Both kingdom and nation alike have been receiving distress calls from the borderlands. An infestation of abyssal creatures has taken root, leaving many frontier towns in ruins and gore. The Dun are preparing a hunting party of elite warriors to cull the beasts while their scouts gather information on the menace.

The Whitlonians have set up three outposts with minimal forces to police the surrounding area. The Whitlow Private Security Corporation, known as the DRC, has taken over the outposts and filled them with their most elite Woodland Rangers, complete with top-of-the-line equipment and power suits. After many months, only one base still stands: Helios 3, which is under the leadership of the DRC's most experienced commander. Nonetheless, the situation grows dire, and Helios 3 has begun to send its own request for emergency aid. Meanwhile, the Dun hunting party travels through the infested lands, well-prepared for the fight to come.

A WORLD WITHOUT END SHORT STORY

Children of The Silent One

A SHORT STORY

Commander Taverd sat down at his desk at the end of another brutal day. His hands shook as the thought of the days events ran through his mind. He looked over at a pile of blank paper and a small pen that sat atop of it. Protocol dictated that all official requests be made by paper and hand delivered by the messenger of choice. He scoffed at the idea of sending another messenger that would never return from the treacherous valley his small outfit of men found themselves stuck in.

Taverd slipped on his fancy military device charmingly named, G.L.O.V.E, or Global Logistics and Operations Virtual Environment. It could do a multitude of things, basically controlling all electronic aspects of the base itself. Right now, all he needed to do was send an emergency message directly to Command, or so he thought.

The Base AI spoke through his intercom built within his desk.

"Powering on... Connecting to network... Establishing secure connection to mainframe... Voice recognition systems online... Greetings, how may I assist you today?"

"Input emergency transmission to Command, record my message now," Taverd ordered.

"Voice recognized, emergency transmission up-link connected. Recording message."

"This is an emergency message from Commander Taverd of Helios outpost 3. We are under heavy attack from the Children of the Silent One, giant arachnid-like creatures. We have suffered heavy casualties, losing over a dozen men in the last three months. These attacks are coming in with increased frequency, at least twice or three times a week. We are currently in a full defensive position, but are unable to repel these creatures on our own. We urgently request reinforcements immediately...End recording, send message."

"Recording Stopped. Message sent through encrypted lines."

Taverd sat down and filled a glass of his finest local brew, it tasted like dirt water but it got the job done. His nerves were steel but he needed something to relax him enough for bed, no matter how fortified the outpost was, just right outside those walls. Those things were out there, waiting for them.

Lieutenant Tanners awoke to an emergency audio recording being broadcast through the speakers on his bunk, as well as his UI terminal. He canceled the feed as he rose to his feet. Tanners turned to his computer and connected with his superiors.

"This is Lieutenant Tanners. We received another emergency message from our border outpost, sir. I got first platoon ready to reinforce their position."

"Negative, Lieutenant! We need you right where you are. We got an emergency evac force being prepped."

"You said that a week ago."

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“Are you speaking out of line, Tanners?”

“No, sir.”

“Nonetheless, you are correct.”

“Sir?”

“The infestation the men at Helios 3 were sent to quell has grown out of hand. We lost all contact with surveyor drones within the sector. You're not a rescue force, Tanners. It would be against protocol to send you in. So...The official mission for your platoon is to go in and collect the survey data from Helios 3, and re-establish our surveyor drones within the region. Your platoon has full authority to engage any hostiles that prevent you from completing your mission. You got me?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Don't fail me Lieutenant.” The connection went dead.

Tanners stepped away from the computer and exited his quarters without turning off the broadcast. For many of the Rangers within the outpost, the day was just starting. Within the mess hall, the soldiers on standby enjoyed another military breakfast. Private Garls walked up to the front of the food line as his head shot back and forth at the selection of food.

“And what the hell do you think you're looking at?” The cafeteria staff asked.

After a long pause, Garls replied, “I just want some mashed potatoes.”

“We ain't got none...”

He turned his head and looked at Private Lewis sipping at his coffee with a plate of eggs and mashed potatoes in front of him, before turning back and facing the chef.

“What's that?”

“We ain't got no more...”

“Lewis, you got the last of the damn mashed potatoes!”

“I got whatever he put on my plate.”

Across the hall, Sergeant Morris poked at his cold mashed potatoes and spat.

“Look at those idiots. They wonder why they end up at the ass end of the Nation. Probably how Central Command sees the whole lot of us, just a bunch of barking dogs.”

Private Knite lifted her head from her plate. “Huh...Ah, they’re at it again. I don’t even remember what Central looks like. They wear symbols on their shoulders like us, right?”

“Well, the chow's not bad for this mutt. You going to eat that, Sarge?” Private First Class Rodney asked.

“Get your eyes off my plate, you freaking hound!”

Laughter broke out across the table, but it was abruptly cut short when Tanners entered the mess hall.

“Officer on deck!”

Everyone jumped to their feet and stood at attention.

“Alright, Rangers, we finally got the order! We’re prepping the transport now; you got 30 minutes to get your asses prepped.”

All the Rangers saluted their commanding officer.

“What the hell you waiting for?!”

Most Rangers quickly took a seat and downed their food as fast as possible, while others threw their food away and ran to their bunks instead. Morris and his squad finished their meals in 5 minutes and were in the armory in no time. The platoon was scrambling around, trying to beat the clock; it was a scene of minor chaos.

The first batch of disciplined Rangers arrived at the 10-minute mark. They lined up in the docking bay in

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front of two giant metal doors. The rest filtered in, with all but two beating the clock. Tanners walked up and down, inspecting the men before they would board. Each man smashed his hand into his armor and called out loud over his helmet's intercom.

“Locked and loaded, ready to go!”

It was music to Tanners' ears. His soldiers' ritualistic cries were only dampened by the base AI ringing out over the intercom.

“Alert, alert. Gate 9 docking approved, stand by for Gate activation...Stand by...”

The giant doors creaked as they slowly lifted open, exposing the interior of their transport vessel. The first squad of 10 men entered the vessel, followed by another 10. The AI rang out once more as the first 20 Rangers filled up the first vessel.

“Alert, alert. Gate 10 docking approved, stand by for Gate activation...Stand by...”

The second gate opened, this one without an attached transport. The Rangers felt the heavy breeze of the cool woodland air from the other side of Gate 10, including Tanners. They saw countryside with blots of trees littering the territory off into the horizon. In front of them, a transport was slowly backing up into the gate, slowly.

“Let's go, Rangers!” Morris ordered as he marched towards Gate 10. He stood outside the gate and saw each of his men into the vessel before finally joining them, after a roughly 10 minute wait for the 2nd transport as the 1st was clearing ground ahead of them. Tanners took a seat next to a young private who seemed a little spooked. The front visor of his helmet flew open for him to get some air.

“These padded seats are nice. They're big enough to fit a full suit of Mark 2 DR Armor and give you room for your weapon.”

He slid his rifle in between their seats, and it auto-locked

into a secure compartment.

“Don’t puke. It’s going to be a little bumpy, but you’ll live to see the killing field, soldier.”

The young Ranger nodded.

The treads of the vessel could be heard under them, shaking the interior about as they traveled over rough terrain. Tanners pulled up a map to see where they were. They were not a mile away from their base, and their transport was already rocking back and forth. Tanners knew the heavy winds often shifted the overgrowth and brought down trees that littered their makeshift road. The sound of crunching under the heavy treads could be heard beneath their seats.

Tanners' transport vessel led the way as Morris was busy fighting off a nap in the transport some minutes behind them. The vessel out front cleared a way for the second to ride smoothly across the freshly crushed branches and debris.

“Dang sarge how long are we going to have to travel?” Garls pouted

“Do your freaking research, dummy. We’re three days travel from Helio 3 by transport. Get comfortable, or activate your suits' suspended animation, but for goodness sake, let me get some freaking rest. Got three days of this bull crap to put up with.”

“We’re going to have to go into S.A before we all piss ourselves,” Rodney said.

Knite lowered the visor of her helmet.

“Sounds like a good idea to me. I had a big drink before we hit the road. Wake me up when we get there.”

“I was about to tell you the same thing,” Rodney replied.

Both of them chuckled before dozing off. Many of the Rangers would join them within the hour. Tanners in the other vehicle was one of the last to enter suspended

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animation, and when they were less than 3 hours away from their target. Tanners was the first to awaken. The road was much smoother, as it was more often traveled this far out into the border territories. Tanners got up and moved to the front of the vessel, there he hit the comms button to talk to the engineer.

"Engineer, you awake?"

"Awake and at it, sir! We are three hours out and..."

"And?"

"Sir, we got something on the radar, approaching fast, from all sides!"

The internal alarm of the vessel rang out, and the sound of the transport's auto guns filled the air outside. The alarm system woke up all Rangers, and a HUD appeared on their visors showing the approaching hostiles on radar.

"There's too many of them!" The Engineer called out as gunfire filled the speaker.

"Do your job, soldier, fight them off if you have to. That's an order!" Tanners looked towards his Rangers. "Hostiles incoming, you know what to do!"

The Rangers aimed their weapons through the old vessels defensive ports and joined the auto torrents in repelling the threat. With minimal visibility and fast-moving targets, few could actually hit what they were aiming at. Strange, white, arachnid-like creatures darted towards the transport from all sides, and when the auto guns ran out of ammo, they pounced onto the first vehicle. Their bone-like appendages could be heard bracing up against the metal as they inspected the shell of the transport.

"They're here!" The Engineer cried out, and shots rang from the cab of the vehicle before his screams filled the intercom.

"Damn it!" Tanners turned off the feed.

Screaming came from the back of the transport as a sharp claw-like appendage pierced the hull and sliced a soldier's

armor wide open, leaving a large gash across his chest.

"Medic!"

Tanners heard the screaming from the back. Private Lewis was sitting beside Tanners, frozen and scared in his seat. Tanners saw his eyes glued to his rifle, and a look as if he was thinking of doing something stupid.

"Keep calm, kid."

Lewis froze as one of the appendages pierced the back of his skull. Tanners saw his vitals flatline in mere seconds.

"Everyone out of your seats, we're in combat, Rangers!"

Multiple Rangers opened fire through the metal hull, leaving wide holes that seeped covered in arachnid blood, as the light of day pierced through the carnage. A Ranger in the rear of the vessel pried open the emergency exit in a panic. On the other side, he was met by two pincer-like claws that dragged him out of the vessel and away from his fellow Rangers. A few arachnids rushed in through the now-open emergency hatch and pounced on the first few Rangers they encountered. The men stood little chance against the vicious arachnids. They tore through their armor and gored their flesh under their strange claw-like appendages.

Tanners picked up his rifle and blind-fired through the hull, where a series of arachnids assaulted the weakened metal of their vessel-turned-tomb. Panels of the vehicle were being ripped off as Rangers were now being pulled from exposed portions of the vehicle shell. The scene was punctuated when an explosion from the second vehicle startled the spiders, giving the Rangers an opportunity to blast their way out.

Tanners had escaped the transport with three Rangers at his side. A lot of the spiders retreated into the brush.

"I think they're leaving," a young private said.

From the dark overgrowth, a web shot out and caught the private on the chest. He was yanked by the armor into

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the heavy brush. Tanners lifted his rifle but couldn't get a shot. The other Rangers ran in his direction, ending up in the cross hairs of their commanding officer. The other two Rangers who went in pursuit were swarmed by a series of spiders that leaped from the brush. One of the men was able to lift his rifle and let out a single round, ripping through the spider that would have landed atop him. The other found himself on the floor as a pale spider tore through his helmet's visor and ate at the poor man's face. Two other arachnids ran from the brush and leaped upon the downed man.

The standing Ranger shot at the creatures attacking his friend, but they soon turned their attention on him. He managed to kill two more before the pouncing spiders swarmed him. Tanners shot at those charging him from afar but knew there was nothing he could do any further. He pulled a small grenade and tossed it into the swarm of feasting spiders, bringing the tortured men's pain to an end.

He lifted his rifle and finished off the rest. Tanners turned around and saw the wreckage that was once their vessel. From the wreck, three spiders covered in fresh Ranger blood crawled out. There were no life signs coming from within; all his men from the first vessel were dead.

Tanners opened fired, killing one of the spiders. The loud blast from his rifle startled the other two. One leaped toward him as the other scurried off. The Ranger took aim at the beast; it seemed as if time slowed down for the man to look the thing right in the eye. He pulled the trigger, a single round tore that ugly arachnid face in half. Tanners looked upon his handiwork with pride when a web shot from somewhere within the overgrowth latched onto Tanners' back. With one ferocious pull, he was ripped off the ground and sent flying through the air. Tanners lost his rifle as he landed halfway closer to the overgrowth.

He took out his sidearm and blind-fired while laying on the ground. A shriek came from the dark overgrowth, the web grew weak and Tanners ripped the silk off of him. Before the Ranger could get to his feet, the arachnid that scudded

off had returned. It leaped atop the man and clawed at his armor. He lost his sidearm as he attempted to keep it from sinking its strange clamps into him. He grabbed two of its many appendages and threw it off of him. Tanners reached down and took out his combat knife; with a primal rage, he rushed forward and jumped on the back of the spider and savagely thrust the blade into its back over and over again.

“You! Killed! My! Men!”

He ripped the blade out from the now-dead creature. Tanners stood, as four more arachnids exited the brush and began to encircle him. The Ranger lifted his knife, prepared to join his men. From behind him, a youthful voice yelled aloud.

“Get down!”

Tanners turned, and to his surprise, there was an out-of-place man. In black robes, adorned in gold patterns. This was a Dun, one of those strange mystical foreigners from the other side of the borderlands.

“I said down!”

A spider leaped at him, forcing the man to hit the ground. The strange Dun performed his foreign magic, a blinding light struck the kneeling Ranger when the sound of the spiders terrible shrieking filled his ears. In a moment his sight was returned and 4 charred arachnid bodies laid around him.

“You...” Tanners struggled to rise to his feet. The man did not have the strength, his sight became narrow as the feeling of a numbing veil fell over him. The known world drifted further away as Tanners passed out on the bloodied floor.

The smell of freshly cooked meat caught the attention of the dazed lieutenant. He was pulled out of combat by familiar figures, survivors from the 2nd vessel. The familiar voice of Sergeant Morris calmed the dazed lieutenant as he went in and out of consciousness.

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“I think he’s awake.”

The familiar voice of one of his Rangers filled his ears. Tanner's eyes shot open. He quickly got up and looked around. There were a number of his Rangers, all from the 2nd transport.

“You’re alive... Damn good to see some of you.” Tanner's voice was dry and rough.

Sergeant Morris stood up from the group of sitting soldiers.

“Good to see you too, sir. The Dun, they helped us get you out of there.”

Beside his Rangers were a number of Dun, dressed in their strange-colored robes. There were roughly two dozen of them. They fashioned a campsite on top of a steep and rocky hill. They could see their destroyed transports in the far-off distance.

“Who are you?” he asked.

One of the Dun stood up. The one that helped him earlier.

“I am Master Loid, leader of this hunting party. We were tasked with eliminating the threat caused by The Children of the Silence One, the spiders that attacked you.”

“Yeah. Care to share more?”

“They are a second generation of children. We believe a single mother has killed off all females and has become an uncontested queen in the area. We are going to kill her. You are safe here, our camp is surrounded by protective stones. They ward off the wildlife, including the spiders.”

“I see... Protocol dictates I send this information to my superiors, but there are a number of Rangers in an outpost a couple of hours travel from here. We were supposed to aid them. Will you help us get there?”

“As you can see, we do not travel by vehicle. We had a series of horses that could not make it through the thick brush. Which direction did you say they were in?”

Tanner pointed off in the opposite direction of their destroyed vehicles.

“I see... That is near the heart of the infestation. Your men should not be there. It is not our duty to aid you, but we are headed near there ourselves. If you and your men can provide shelter and sustenance for my band of hunters, we will see you to your base.”

“I’m sure our mighty corporation will be in your debt.”

“Very well. Rest and eat, there is much travel to be had Lieutenant”

Tanners sat beside Sergeant Morris and the few survivors: Knite, Garls, and Rodney.

“How are you boys holding up?” he asked.

“Sore...Alive though,” Garls replied.

Knite nodded. “Lost a lot of good men back there, sir.”

“Don’t think about it, soldier. We still have a mission to do,” Tanners said reassuringly.

She nodded.

Tanners looked at Morris. “And you?”

“I’m good, sir,” Morris replied, clearly holding back pain.

“You’ll live...What do you know about our hosts?”

“Not much, sir. They like to keep to themselves. They seem powerful, though. You can almost feel that strange mystical stuff.”

Tanners concurred. “It’s called an aura. It’s their way, I guess. Right now, it’s being used to our advantage, and that’s what counts. Right now, it’s important to get some rest. I’ll talk to their leader when we’re well-rested.”

The Rangers ate around the fire, one by one retiring to a simple bed mat that was laid out for them. The surrounding

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Dun seemed to meditate in circles, almost as if taken away in some kind of trance. Tanners had minimal contact with the Dun and saw their strange ways as just different from their own. He hoped that included charity and assistance, something the Whitlonians were not known for.

The next day, Tanners wasted no time beginning negotiations. He met with Master Loid near the center of their camp, under a pitched tent.

“Good day, Master Loid. I hope this isn’t too early for you.”

“Not at all, Lieutenant. I prefer meeting the day early. I am sorry for what has happened to your men. I saw that a few had a rough time sleeping...I take it you want us to aid you in your current mission?”

Tanners remained silent for a moment.

“You are correct. We have that entire sector mapped. There’s nothing there our outpost would not know the location of. Using our technology, we can lead you directly to your target. We can even aid you in its defeat. We were already on a rescue mission.”

“You want us to save even more Whitlow soldiers?”

“Something like that. We have a base under assault by these things. We don’t have enough men to reinforce the outpost. There’s word an emergency force was deployed to help out our outpost. If you can help keep us secure long enough for them to get there-”

“That is beyond me, Lieutenant.” Loid interrupted. “We are a hunting party, not a defense force. We can get you and your men to your outpost. From there, we will slay the mother of these creatures. That should give your outpost a fighting chance. We believe them to be a hive mind, without the mother, they will be left in a state of disarray.”

“There’s a lot we can offer you, Master. The Woodland Rangers won’t forget the aid you provided. It’s no small thing. For that reason, I won’t push the matter further. I would ask you to think about it though.”

“We will see when we get to the outpost, Lieutenant. Eat up and rest. We leave in three hours.”

“Thank you, Master Loid.”

Tanners returned to Morris, who was waiting under a tree.

“Sir?”

“It seems negotiations have only begun, Sergeant. How are the men?”

“Not bad, considering all things, Sir. Knite had trouble sleeping. So did Rodney.”

“I hear you. We got a long journey ahead of us...”

Morris joined the others as they ate a Dun breakfast, a sweet porridge-like meal made of figs, almonds, spices, and hot water.

“What do they call this stuff?” Rodney asked as he played with his meal.

“Damn it, Rodney, eat up. Three hours would take an idiot like you to eat breakfast,” Morris scolded.

Rodney chuckled in reply. “How’s it taste, though?”

Garls lowered his empty plate. “It’s good, son. Eat up. It’s sweet and rich with protein and fiber.”

“You sure? Smells funny...” Rodney hesitated.

“Dang it, Rodney!” Morris yelled, awakening the sleeping Knite from her mat. He turned looked over at her. “Knite, you have half an hour before I kick you awake. You need to eat and prepare for the journey. Got it?”

She gave her him a thumbs up.

“Good enough for me.”

Their Dun hosts seemed to keep to themselves, even when they packed up their camp and began their journey. The Dun were secluded in the rear and the front of their natural

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formation. The camp was surprisingly small; even the camping equipment lent to them was carried by the Dun. All were on high defense. After the ambush, the Rangers were not going to be caught off guard again.

Garls carried his heavy rifle that packed enough firepower to tear through a boulder. Morris carried a motion detector to give the men an early warning of the next possible attack. The Dun hunting party did not seem to carry many weapons. The few among their party in black robes carried daggers, but the majority of Dun, those that dawned themselves in red did not have weapons at all. After several hours of traveling through rough terrain, with all small talk exhausted, Private Rodney couldn't help but start asking questions. He looked over at a cute, stoic-looking brunette with green eyes.

"So... What's with the no weapons thing? You a hunting party, right?"

She nodded in reply.

"Awesome... You, uh, come here often?"

She shook her head.

"Awesome... So, you don't talk much?"

She shook her head again.

"Alright, cool. I do... I talk much."

The now awake yet tired Knite punched Rodney in the arm.

"Shut up, Rodney."

He gave her a big smile. "Keep your guard up, Knite. There are spiders out here."

"Don't remind me..."

Knite bumped into the person in front of her as their traveling caravan came to a sudden stop.

She looked forward and saw a giant web blocking the path

ahead of them. Her jaw nearly dropped at the sight.

Garls looked down at his gun. "I think we'll be okay?"

"Let's keep it moving," Tanners called.

Rodney looked over at the cute Dun who didn't seem disturbed by the sight of the web.

"You guys that good with your hands? You must be a beast in the ring."

He saw a light smile run across her face for a quick second before it returned to a cold stare.

"Ha. Yeah. I dig me too."

He caught up with his fellow Rangers.

"Now's not the time for charming girls," Morris told him.

"Just enjoying what's left of the day, sir."

"You got too much damn energy for this crap, and I don't got enough..."

Moving through the dense jungle slowed them down severely. There were high canopies above them that cast long shadows upon the crowded jungle floor. Gigantic roots slithered out of the loose soil and, like vines, spread out across the unkempt terrain. Tanners saw the Dun use their magic to clear the way. Loid would lift his hand in front of him as they walked, and the plants and brush would clear a path for them - one that would remain open through the constricting jungle.

Time was lost in this place, the sky was distant, and all around them was an ocean of green flora, that felt like it was constantly reaching out for them. The sound of distant life forms would echo across the otherwise silent jungle when a gust of wind would bring the biom to life. After hours of traveling they finally broke out of the constricting green tide and rise to hire ground, the outpost was in the distance. Their small caravan stood on top of a hill that overlooked the rest of the valley. In the middle of a wide

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clearing sat their outpost. From the distance they saw the base had a vehicle patrolling the area. To see a Whitlonian structure of any kind brought a smile to Tanners face.

"Looks like we got activity. I'll see if we can pick them up on comms,"

After several tries in different areas, there was nothing. It was like they didn't have a comm station at all down there. Tanners approached Loid seperatly to discuss the matter, leader to leader.

"I don't like the looks of this."

"It may not be wise to approach an unfamiliar base after walking for so long." Loid suggested.

"But if the place is as deadly as you say, those stones of yours may not be enough to keep us alive out here until the first greens."

"Very true, Lieutenant."

"I say let's go for it. Can't be more than an hour's hike downhill. The terrain will aid us. Just got to watch our step."

"Hmmm. I fear you may be correct. Let's gather our forces and continue forward."

Tanners nodded.

It was considered unwise for the Dun, as well as against protocol for the Whitlonians, to travel such distances this late in the day. The Lands of Light do not know darkness; the flora of these lands turn white to prevent further photosynthesis. The once green ocean they trekked through now slowly turned snow white as the party gathered themselves and continued downhill back into the constricting jungle for which they came.

As they traveled through the thickening brush of the untamed wild, there was an ominous sight of scattered webs that began to permeate the landscape. The thick canopy of the trees shaded the ground, with the mixture

of shadow and overgrowth stunting their line of sight. Loid led the way with his dagger drawn, being ever careful not to get caught on a branch or web. Near the rear, Garls found himself walking backwards with his finger hovering over the trigger.

"These webs are everywhere... Crap, we better be close," Knite said.

"You good?" Garls asked.

"Ha! Good? Yeah. Freaking great..."

Tanners, who walked some feet in front of the bantering Rangers, lifted his finger to his mouth, demanding their silence, as his other hand motioned for them to stop. Some of the Dun noticed this and gave Tanners a look of confusion. Tanners pointed up at the thickening canopy and they noticed that it was not just webs and foliage. Knite's eyes widened as the band of travelers saw many sleeping spiders resting in the webs.

Up close, they could see their tainted forms - a white exoskeleton that contorted in strange ways, their predatory, claw-like limbs, with two frontal claw-like appendages that the creatures nestled under their bellies, the weak point of the spider-like arachnid.

Glances and whispers were spread across the startled group. With little other option than to continue forward, the Dun readied themselves. Those among their ranks, who dawned redcloaks and chest armor turned to the left and the right, they extended their arms and, through the use of their strange magical ways, their hands glowed dim as a fire-like aura extended from them and formed the shape of a spear in one and a shield in the other. This aura dimmed as it forged itself into Dun weaponry. Each carried a dark wooden spear with an adorned metal tip, along with an adorned black shield. Although the weaponry seemed to be fashioned by the same hand and in the same style, each had unique adornments upon them.

The Rangers kept their gaze on the unordinary weaponry of this hunting party. Tanners snapped his men to attention.

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"eyes forward men, you can look at the shiny stuff later."

The party slowly proceeded forward. As they did they felt the surrounding brush begin to vibrate unnaturally, the sound of a loud engine approaching startled the surrounding arachnids. The creatures extended their claw like limbs far from their bodies and swiftly scudded across the many webs that littered the canopy. They ran in all directions, not giving notice or care to the humans beneath them.

"Engines."

Morris lifted his short-wave motion tracker and saw the distinct signature of a DRC mobile unit.

"Sir, we got a vehicle moving straight for us. They know we're here!"

"This is a good thing?" a female voice asked.

Rodney turned his head and saw that cute Dun looking at him.

"Hey...Uh, yeah. It's a vehicle transport. You never seen a car before?"

"No. It sounds terrible."

"You can sit next to me if you want?"

She folded her brow and turned her back. Rodney smiled as they saw an off-road transport break through the constricting brush. The vehicle was nearly 4 feet off the ground, towering over the group. A side door opened from the cabin, and a confused-looking Ranger stared at the group.

"What the Hill do we have here?"

Tanners pushed his way to the front of the band of travelers.

"Sir!" the Ranger said in a stiffened voice.

“At ease Ranger. You got here just in time...Got a few extra seats in this rover?”

They managed to cram everyone in or on top of the now slowly moving vehicle. It was a simple off-road troop transport made for a single squad of 12 men. Not two dozen Dun and five stranded Rangers. It was an uncomfortable ride that was mostly made in silence. Along with them were two Rangers operating the vehicle, far from a full scouting party. They seemed distressed themselves, as if hoping that they would be the ones being rescued instead of being the rescuers.

Tanners spoke directly to their commanding officer over the two way comms, with one Cleon Taverd. The man who sent the many distress calls Tanners was forced to ignore for so long. Taverd was informed of their situation, and agreed to shelter the Dun. Morris noticed most of the hunting party they traveled with seemed concerned.

“See something you didn’t like huh?”

He asked one of the red cloaked warriors. It was an older Dun man who seemed to ponder the question before he answered.

“There are more of them than expected. They should not be this far from their nest, unless there was no room left for them there.”

Morris nodded.

Once they arrived at the outpost, it was as their rescuing Rangers described. All walls had large scratches on them, and one gate was thrashed, with multiple entrance points for spiders carved out of it. One wall was destroyed with makeshift defenses made out of the debris from their once standing gate. When the Rangers entered the outpost, they were met with looks of confusion.

"Hey, where's the rescue party?" a voice called out from the famished crowd of defenders.

"No idea, we're the Surveyor repair team..." Morris replied.

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"Doesn't look like much," Taverd, their commanding officer, said as he met the ragtag band of travelers.

Taverd stood out from among his famished men. Not only was he wearing a finely pressed, classic officer's uniform, but he also stood tall and held a stoic face that exuded comfort and control.

"Welcome to Helios 3, spider paradise. Tanners and Loid, right? I think we have much to talk about."

Tanners saluted his superior officer. "Yes, sir."

Taverd lit a cigar under his wide hat, adorned with an emblem of his company. "We've got some fresh smoke inside. You look like you need some. Boys, treat our guests well. You two can follow me."

The inside of the command center was cramped but useful; every wall was covered with monitors, revealing every inch of the base. With an overhead drone shot of the base in real-time. The three men, Tanners, Taverd, and Loid stood around a map of the sector.

"This place looks pretty compromised, and those damn spiders are vicious. The things took out most of my men in a transport ambush."

"They're smarter than they seem. The first attacks were light assaults on our walls. It took us a month to realize they were looking for a weakness. Once they found one, they came at us en masse. We lost a lot of good men."

Taverd walked over to a window overlooking the destroyed wall.

"We thought we'd seen the most of it, but less than a week ago, a giant arachnid burst through that brush over there. We thought it was a convoy transport on the radar; we didn't think they'd get that big. The thing tore through the wall with ease. Luckily, the auto cannons did a number on its shell, and one of our officers gave his life to detonate a payload of stored ammo. It was a dumb move, but it chased the thing off."

Loid stepped towards Taverd.

"Did you follow it? That might have been the mother of these things."

"No. We had too many injured. Our makeshift hospital has more wounded than we have fighting men right now. We did sent a scout drone, we lost track of it close to the nearby mountains"

"Are there no air transports, sir?"

"There are. We've got two who are out right now. We've been transporting all those who can move without dying. Those things though, they aim to kill by decapitation and maiming."

"Commander Taverd, which direction did the beast go?"

"Master? Is it? Interesting title. Are you going to kill this thing, Master Loid?"

"No doubt."

Taverd thought for a moment, calculating the amount of Whitlonian lives that could be saved by letting the Dun deal with this.

"Alright Loid. I'll give you your shot."

"We will need your help."

"Help? The Hill you do. Look around you."

"Whats a Hill, I keep hearing you Whitlonian say this?"

"It's a shitty thing like your lack of a plan so far."

"The situation is even more dire than we expected. The infestation of these spiders cannot be faced head-on. I have a plan, but it will need your aid...Commander, I will leave the majority of my force here with you."

"You want us to distract them?"

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"We can bait them here, and a small contingency can find their mother. If all else fails, she will show up again, and we kill her here."

"Or we die, sir."

Taverd looked at Tanners as he pondered their words.

"Sooner or later, they will assault you again. We can do it in our favor and kill their mother before she comes back, and she will come back, Commander."

Taverd looked out the window at the destroyed wall.

"Have you faced them yet?"

"Yes."

"Anything like the mother?"

"Yes."

The Commander looked down at his wristwatch ticking away.

"Alright. What's the plan?"

Loid pulled out two small vials. "It just takes one to attract a horde of males to the location. If we are correct she may be the only female in the area. This will attract most spiders outside the nest, though they will be visious and looking for a fight."

Taverd took one of the small vials. "They will be looking for a female, huh? Oldest trick in the book. There's still a lot to discuss. Tanners, get your men some food. I'll inform the Rangers once we're done here. We may have a battle to prepare for."

After much deliberation Taverd slipped on the G.L.O.V.E device and began to speak into a small microphone. His voice was broadcast across the base to every Ranger in the outpost. They didn't know when the next attack would come, so they decided to set up defenses immediately, giving their new arrivals time to rest. It had been decided,

there was going to be a fight.

Taverd's men reinforced all their defenses, pulling old panels from the inner buildings of the outpost and forming a new makeshift wall. They created interior defenses to pull back to. The final plan was to reinforce the hospital, which used to be the extended mess hall. That would be where they made their final stand. Some weapons were laid out beside the wounded Rangers who littered the mess hall. Most of Tanner's Rangers and the Dun who accompanied them were in the adjacent building resting. A few were outside helping, as they could not rest.

A handful of Dun were led about the base, seeing what the coming battlefield would look like. As they did, the two transports returned. They were made for simple recon and emergency medical evacuation. It barely had enough room for five people, including the piolet. It was always a sight to see a flying transport vessel land, but for the Dun, it was something only heard of. They gawked at the smoothly descending machines that sent up a gust of wind.

Their loose clothes flapped at the violent gust, and some dust blinded their eyes. All surrounding Rangers looked away as the vessel descended. The cute Dun girl lost her footing and fell back, only to be caught by Private Rodney.

"Hey there," he said while keeping his head down.

She jumped out of his arms and made herself proper.

"Thank you."

"No issue. I never did get your name, though."

She looked away from him. Rodney shrugged.

"Laan." She said with her back slightly turned.

"Lawn?"

"Something like that."

She held back a smile.

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"Why so cold sometimes, Laan?"

"We are different, too different."

"Are we now?"

"Our ways are seen as silly and misunderstood. Our gifts are seen as power and magic. It is not. We understand. It is important for us to protect that which we understand."

"Protected from what?"

Before she could answer, another Dun called to her. With a guilty look upon her face, she bowed and heeded her fellow Dun. Knite walked up to Rodney with a cup of something hot.

"How'd it go, champion?"

"Way too Dun for me."

She chuckled, "No way? I would have never thought."

"Shut up."

"Do you think anyone has ever actually shut up after being told?" Knite continued.

"How about 'screw off?'"

Knite walked off laughing, Rodney returned to his duties as they had a lot to prepare for. They were expecting multiple waves of arachnids. Hundreds of those bastards were going to rain down on them. Men took ammunition out of the transports and began to load up the auto cannons. There were four on each wall. With four guns being wrecked, along with an entire wall, one of the wrecked cannons was turned into a makeshift auto emplacement, aimed directly at a small opening between the jimmy-rigged defenses.

The outpost was a total of 54 men strong: Taverd and his four survivors, 24 Dun, and 25 outpost defenders, 13 auto cannons, 15 combat drones, and 2 transports for to drop off the monster hunters into the heart lair of the beast, and recover them. Each warrior knew the plan. The Dun would

be placed atop various defensive towers to rain down their magical hate upon the approaching spiders. If and when they breached the walls, they would route to designated locations, and hopefully mount an offensive attack to retake the wall.

Engineers would focus on repairing and rearming combat drones and auto cannons. They would be stationed near the landing zone. The landing zone would be the first fallback site. If they lost the LZ, they would lose drones and air resupply. From there, it's a last stand within the hospital, alongside their wounded Rangers.

That evening, the Dun's chosen warriors performed their foreign ritual. They all circled around them. A few of the red-robed warriors stood guard as all others sat on the floor and went into a stone-like trance.

"What's all this about?" Knite asked a little too loud.

One of the guards glared over at the young Ranger.

"Hey there. Uh, sorry?"

He looked away with a cold indifference.

Morris tapped her shoulder.

"Good job, hero. You looking for a promotion? They're going to be at this for a while, Knite. You should get some rest while you still can."

"No kidding, Sarge."

Knite took a seat, telling her sergeant she would turn in after one more cup of coffee. She awoke in the shade under a tree, with her third cup half empty at her side.

"Oh boy."

Knite looked around and eyed her squad heading for their positions. After getting a minor scolding from Morris, she joined them just in time to get a post designation. Because their squad was so small, they were assigned as replacements to the various positions suited for their

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capabilities. Morris would take up command of the Eastern Gate, the least assaulted gate there was. Garls and his heavy gun would be used to suppress the arachnids in the air, while guarding the Dun. Rodney and Knite would act as a gunner crew, managing one of the auto cannons during the fight. They were also placed under Morris' command. Tanners would oversee the landing zone, managing resupply and reinforcements. Taverd oversaw all aspects of the defenses from within their command structure. Outside, Garls sat in one of the four passenger seats in the second transport. Each transport carried two gunners and two exorcists, just in case something were to happen, half the hunting party would still be on mission. Loid and the other exorcists seemed less than excited as the strange machines took flight. Garls himself never felt too comfortable being an air gunner, but it was something he was trained for.

The passengers of the now-flying transports looked at the jungle down below them. A female Dun Exorcist with blue eyes and blonde hair seemed petrified in her seat. They hovered above the base as the pilot informed their position.

“Commander, we are good to go, ready for deployment.”

“Understood. Await the first sighting of the spiders, then make your move.”

“Understood Commander.”

Below the flying transport vessels, the defenders prepared for combat. One of the Duns cracked the small vials and released a pungent odor into the atmosphere. The lively jungle that surrounded them silenced in minutes, as if the jungle itself retreated into the darkness of its own canopy. The drones picked up on their movements before anyone else. Several combat drones opened fire into the surrounding brush, and the sound of spiders shrieking in pain could be heard from within the walls.

A web shot up and snagged a drone, yanking it under the canopy.

“Drone B3 is down, launching drone B4!”

Taverd went over to the engineer overseeing the drones.

“Detonate B3 and get all drones way above the canopy; we can’t have them being picked off this early in the fight.”

In the air, the first batch of spiders could be seen breaking the treeline and crossing the open field towards the makeshift wall.

“Contact!” A youthful voice cried out from within the wall’s defenses.

A line of rifles aimed outward as the commanding officer yelled aloud.

“Fire at will!”

The crawling beasts met a hail of gunfire that sent their limbs flying amongst the unleashed devastation of Whitlonian firepower. The transports saw a startling amount of spiders heading for the walls, that was their signal. Taverd saw the two transports disappear beyond the mountainous sector and into the heart of the beast.

“Godspeed, gentlemen.”

“Godspeed, Commander.” The pilot called back for one final communication.

Taverd turned his attention to the escalating battle. The makeshift wall was the weakest, and as expected, the spiders were assaulting it the most. The surrounding walls saw spiders testing the defenses, as Morris and his men saw none. Knite and Rodney knelt down behind the auto cannon with heavy helmets to protect their hearing. Morris was next to a heavy gunner that had his gun aimed directly at the gate, just in case it was compromised. Everyone stood frozen, as the sounds of the surrounding battle encapsulated the facility.

The Dun defenders held their own against this first wave of arachnids. They summoned bows using their strange ability’s, and shot arrows of blue spectral-like energy. Some Rangers were momentarily distracted by the Dun and their awesome abilities, but the sounds of the dying arachnid

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were enough to draw any man's attention back into the fight. With the combined force of ballistic firepower and Dun understanding, the invading arachnids were torn to pieces, their blood stained the landscape. Piles of spider corpses began to mound in the surrounding plains. It may have been early, but hopes were high among the defenders.

Taverd kept his eyes on Morris and his defense force. The other walls had ramped up in attacks strong enough to match that of the makeshift wall. Yet still, not a single arachnid even scampered by the East Gate. The Commander looked over their supply of drones.

"Lieutenant Tanners, I need you to dispatch two drones to East Gate for perimeter check."

"Sir? I don't think we can spare that."

"Tanners, there's no hostile assaulting East Gate whatsoever. Also, that's an order."

"...Yes, sir. Tanners out."

Tanners turned around to face the engineer, but his seat was empty. He assumed the man was AWOL and took up his station. He quickly activated two drones and sent them off to East Gate. He looked up to the sky as the drones flew off; he wondered where that hunting party was and how long this unfolding nightmare would last.

As Tanners looked up, the men in the transports looked down upon an endless sea of webbed canopies.

"This is a good thing," one of the Dun said.

"A good thing?" Garls replied.

"The nest should look like this. Don't fly too far off, Whitlonian bird. We'll need you to pick us up."

Garls rolled his eyes at his condescension. They soon noticed an unnatural deformation within the jungle. It was a clear path leading into one of the surrounding valleys. The lead transport dispatched its single scouting drone to scan the area. The drone detected a large underground cavern

with a sizable heat source down below.

"We found her. You boys ready?" the pilot asked.

Loid gave him a smile and a nod.

"Alright, we're going low. Looks like you guys were right; there are almost none of the bastards here. Barley anything is being picked up on our sensors."

The lead transport found a clearing in front of the cavern entrance; the entire place was white with silk. The vessel hovered over the area just long enough for the two Dun to exit. The second transport soon descended down below.

The surrounding jungle was an abyssal hive for these abomitable creatures. The landscape was covered in many overlapping webs that looked like a growing fungus that infected the jungle from the top of the canopy to the floor below. The very ground was hidden under the silk. As soon as a single foot was laid upon the floor, the disturbance of the web sent a vibration deep into the cavern. A whisper of something angry echoed deep from within the black cavern that was burrowed into the tainted mountainside.

The gunners scanned every inch of the surrounding white, as the pilots did their best to keep their eyes off the peering darkness that escaped the cavern entrance. Loid stood tall before his fellow Dun as they departed from their Whitlownian allies.

"We'll keep the entrance covered until you guys are ready to leave," the pilot said.

The two vessels hovered over the area with both their scout drones patrolling the surrounding valley. The four Dun made a simple one-line formation. They each drew out a distinct dagger with a glowing stone in the center of the hilts. Garls saw the four men disappear beyond the light. They walked in silence while the surrounding dark consumed them; soft sounds of arachnid creeping about echoed off the walls as they continued. The sound of streaming water and crawling creatures escaped the dark. Cold air breathed through the body of the mountain as the

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intruders continued down into the beasts lair.

A leaping spider jumped towards Loid; he pointed his blade as the stone in the center of his hilt glowed a blinding white. Burning light rays shot forth and ripped the creature in half. Several more spiders jumped out of the dark; the Dun Exorcists brought a terrible light into the lair of these creatures, and they slew the visious arachnids with an awesome wrath of discipline and power.

They traversed deeper into the cavern, continuous waves of spiders were vomited out of the mountain to hinder their progress. The aracnids were slain all the same, leaving small piles of burnt and mutilated spider carcasses in their wake. There were multiple small passages as a single large one tore directly into the mountain at a downward slant. The battle lead them deeper into the belly of the mountain.

Back at the outpost, the continued silence at East Gate was only punctuated by the drones that failed to pick up any signs of hostile life, all while the other gates were under tremendous assault. Morris stepped down from his high position beside the gunner. If there was a trap, maybe they were just waiting for approaching bait. He walked towards the heavy gate and looked through the small port hole; there was nothing out there. After a good long look, he turned around and re-approached his position. As he did, he noticed the gunner he stood beside moments ago was missing.

His confused look drew the attention of all the surrounding defenders. They looked in the direction their sergeant was gazing. Morris pulled out his tracking radar; to see his gunners current position. He saw the gunner moving at a fast pace to the interior of the base. morris pointed to a few of his defenders.

"With me! Rest of you watch your backs and hold position!"

Three Rangers and one Dun followed Morris into the base. He ran at breakneck speed while glancing at the screen of the tracker. The signal was lost as they approached the storage depot. The small squad inspected the location. The ground was disturbed, and a dozen dug-up holes littered

the area.

"They're in the base." Morris said.

He looked within a hole and saw torn up armor laying inside of it.

"And they're taking people."

A creeping sound came up behind the men. The Dun warrior turned around and saw the engineer from the landing zone being dragged behind a large white spider.

"Monster!" The Dun warrior cried.

With shield and spear in hand, he charged forward. The creature was caught off guard, the spear ran right through the spider's face and deep into its belly. It shrieked aloud and curled up as it swung it frantically swung its many limbs around, clashing up against the heavy shield of the Dun warrior. Each lashing strike was weaker than the last as the creatures painfully demise ripped all life away from the abomitable thing. The spear was desummoned by the warrior, an astonishing sight to see the summoning of Dun weapons alone, but to see a desummoning from within a creature was awfully spectacular.

They rushed to the fallen engineer. The man was petrified and seemed to have died from suffocation some time ago.

"They took out our gunner and our engineer," a Ranger said.

"Vital roles to a defense," the Dun warrior replied.

Morris nodded. "They can't be that smart. Relay this back to command, we've got a bug hunt on our hands."

They collapsed the tunnels with a few grenades before retreating back to the gate. Various critical units were reported missing across the outpost. Six men were sent to hunt down the spiders and any more compromised locations. When arriving back to the gate, Morris heard gunfire. More spiders had infiltrated than originally thought.

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Knite and Rodney peeked over the towers defenses and into the empty field, all while the raging ball encompassed them on all sides.

"This is too creepy." Knite whispered.

"Shush. Don't wanna give away our location."

"You know. If anything happens I got your back."

"What?" Rodney asked.

"Just saying."

"Yeah, okay Knite. Thanks..."

"Just saying."

All of East Gate's defenders felt the unnatural disturbance in the atmosphere. Another soldier took up the gunner's position, and the surrounding Dun had their faces tucked behind their vast shields as their spears were pressed forward. All eyes were on the gate...

From under the surrounding dirt, spiders slowly lifted themselves from burrowed hiding places across the outpost. As they did, a large wave of spiders stampeded out of the brush and rushed East Gate.

"Contact!" Rodney yelled.

The four auto cannons tore through the first wave of spiders and shredded apart the blinding brush. Some Dun on the ground formed a shield wall, while others atop defensive towers shot their spectral arrows into the growing horde. As all attention was drawn, the gunner felt the sharp sting in the back of his neck.

He took in a deep breath as his body began to stiffen, his breathing became harder, and his body thumped loudly as every inch of him was now paralyzed, and he slowly suffocated. Before his body could hit the ground, four other spiders were pouncing through the air. Two Dun and two

Rangers received their petrifying venom as the startled defenders broke into disarray.

East Gate was surrounded by hidden arachnids. When the tunnels were destroyed, they pounced and assaulted the defenders across the outpost from their flank. When Morris arrived, he was greeted by a scene of chaos. One of the two Towers was already lost, and two of their four auto cannons along with them.

Rodney and Knite were trapped in the other tower; the two blasted spiders off the side of the structures walls. The Dun engaged in melee combat against the arachnids; a few of them were swarmed by two or three and overtaken. Others ripped apart the creatures, leaving them scattered across the dirt floor in pieces. Spiders were leaping through the air onto confused Rangers' backs as Morris tried to take hold of the situation.

The initial shock attack was highly effective, not enough made it in to keep up their assault. When Morris arrived, they easily turned the tide of battle. While drones began to open fire on the spiders coming from the exterior of the wall.

"Form it all up, men, we're not done here! You, get on the top of that gun!" Morris ordered his men into new defensive positions.

The Dun locked shield and created a rear guard, with their spears pointed outward. Across the base, various surprise attacks were happening. Taverd looked over the unfolding nightmare. It seemed they found the tunnels just in time to seize their infiltration. The two other fully fortified defenses suffered casualties but held their lines; for the makeshift wall, this proved too much. Both their towers were lost in the surprise attack; the manpower to eliminate the encroaching spiders could not be met, and when a soldier cried, "They're coming over the wall!" the defenders scattered in disarray.

Various spiders leaped from the high wall onto retreating Rangers, as other defenders who did not retreat were swarmed on all sides. With Tanners barking orders, the

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Rangers pulled back to the landing zone and reinforced the flanks of the surrounding defensive walls. Now that it was compromised, their job was to regroup and mount a shock offensive to retake their positions and get the auto cannons active.

Their old defenses were swarming with spiders. The Dun archers had remarkable precision and focused on those that were coming over the walls. The Rangers made firing lines and gunned down the spiders who touched ground inside the compound. Taverd was glued to a spy drone far in the sky, looking upon the carnage. He saw a seemingly infinite stream of spiders start to pour out of the brush and onto the makeshift wall. Piles of arachnid bodies made a mountain on either side of the wall; it was beyond saving.

“Tanners, release all the drones.”

“Yes, sir!”

Tanners put down his rifle and rushed to the computer. He heard the buzzing of half a dozen drones as they flew off and immediately opened fire on the lost wall. Tanners loaded in a fresh magazine into his rifle. Taverd saw a mounting swarm of arachnids covering all sides of their facility. All gates were under heavy attack, and as the last 3 walls were slowly being lost.

“All units, retreat to the hospital. We need to consolidate our forces and prepare for our final stand.”

Morris pointed at his guard posts and ordered them cleared first. Knite and Rodney slid down a long ladder just as the gun was overtaken. Various spiders spilled over the wall and overtook the canon. Rodney looked up and ran into an adjacent building as a giant spider landed right where he was standing. Knite turned back and unloaded her rifle into the thing.

"Rod, where the hell are you?" she looked around but saw nothing. Another spider pounced down in front of her.

"Knite, we gotta go!" Morris called.

She gunned down the bastard, then another, and another, nowhere did she see her friend. She ran towards her fellow defenders as they pulled back. Rodney made his way through this foreign facility. He looked through a window and saw a number of Dun fighting off spiders. He jumped out and gave them backup.

"We're in full retreat, let's go!" He called out.

The group rushed through the facility towards the hospital. The lines had broken and spiders were around every corner, as lost and frantic people ran back and forth while being picked off by the encroaching menace. Rodney himself lost the group he was with but followed some fellow displaced soldiers only to be led into a horde of spiders who were found feasting on some fresh kills inside the facility's.

A few of the Rangers disappeared outside the building. The others stood their ground and opened fire on the arachnids. The ensuing gunfire unfortunately attracted more spiders. From the exit from which they came, a pack of three rushed in and assaulted their flank. The Rangers ran to the center of the room, shooting in all directions. Rodney thought this was it.

From one of the windows, Laan jumped through. She slammed her spear into the ground, and a large blinding light extruded from her weapon and burned the spiders. Many tried to escape the light but succumbed to their wounds. The Rangers used this as their opportunity to escape, all but Rodney, who went to Laan.

She was bending down on one knee, and leaning on her spear. As he approached she looked up the familiar face and struggled to give him a smile. Rodney went over and lifted the weakened Dun.

"You okay?"

She gave him a light nod.

"We are close. Only a few buildings away from the hospital, I think."

He looked outside and saw spiders crawling about, each

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headed towards the hospital, or roaming the various buildings. A few were already approaching their position.

“Come on...” He led her upstairs and found a small storage closet. He laid the girl down and used his rifle to block the door.

“If they come, I got this.”

He pulled out a grenade. She locked eyes with him.

“Master Loid will see our task through. I refuse to take my own life; it is not our way.”

“ You saw what these things do to people. You wanna die like that?”

“I will not die.”

He smiled.

“Yeah, I don’t understand.”

She rested her head on his shoulder.

"Maybe one day you will."

Tanners held firm, even after the retreat order. He, along with five Dun and six Rangers, refused to. They offered the many Rangers and Dun time to retreat, each knowing the potential sacrifice these men were making. They traded glances with the passing warriors, which gave them unfounded strength. Taverd overlooked their position from afar. Witnessing the continuous sparks of gun fire, as bullets hailed into an endless flood of relentless terrors; that streamed forth from the jungle.

“Good man...”Taverd slipped on that stupid G.L.O.V.E one last time.

"AI, activate central alarm, emergency three. Lock down my position."

"Yes, commander."

Taverd pulled out a small glass and filled it up with military grade booze.

"I was saving this for the victory, I guess."

A runble shifted through the secluded buildings as all the surrounding windows were sealed with heavy blast shutters, along with all the doors. The Commander sipped his liquor in a completely calm demeanor, and with his free hand, he lifted the G.L.O.V.E.

"Turn off all base speakers except for us."

"The Commander Center?"

"That is correct A.I."

"Understood...You're live, sir."

"This is Commander Taverd of the Woodland Rangers, come get me you bastard."

The old speakers vibrated heavily as his voice echoed through them. The ocean of spiders began to shift, Tanners and his line of men felt the elevation as the spiders redirected themselves towards this new and curious target.

"If any Rangers can hear this, I order you to pull back to the Hospital! ...You men know what to do without me. You're well trained. Make me proud, don't you dare die."

He put the broadcast on repeat and contacted Tanners.

"Leutenant. I don't know if this is possible, but I need you to redirect all drones over my position. When they overtake it, set them to camacazi mode on my position."

Tanners clip ran empty as Commander Taverds words filled his ears.

"Sir. I don't think I can."

"The equipment compromised?"

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"No sir."

Tanners could hear the spiders flooding over the building, an overwhelming sound as a choast of limbs clattered up against the metal of the build.

"...The payloads should be enough to buy you time to get out of there Tanners, also. That's an Order."

"...Okay."

"Don't let them get ya kid. This can't be your last time on the line."

"Yes sir!"

Tanners ran to the equipment-laden table and stumbled about as his hands shook, redirecting the drones to hover above the building as quickly as he could. He set a 1-minute timer, hoping that wasn't too much time. The building could not be seen under the hill of spiders.

Taverd hid the G.L.O.V.E inside a reinforced safe with all the recordings of the situation, just in case his death wasn't enough. He put down his drink and stood firm, looking over the many screens that showed every inch of the base. He saw Rangers and Dun fighting together, forming shield walls and lobbing grenades over them. Ranger Snipers with rack aim archers shot spiders off active auto-cannons. For a moment, his mind took him far away from his tomb, to a place that had never been seen before. He saw an army, a people across the lands who worked as one to finally conquer that endless darkness.

"Sir." The A.I. interrupted.

"WHAT?"

"It's time. They breached the floor below and are making their way to your position. The first drones are dropping now...Godspeed, Commander."

"Godspeed, A.I."

Within the treacherous cavern, the Dun fought their way through minor hordes of spiders. Piles of them had to be brushed aside as they littered the clogging tunnels.

"I'm sick of this nonsense!" one of the Dun cried out.

He stepped forward and smashed the blade of his knife into the ground. The earth in front of them began to deform as a glowing and burning, liquid-like substance bled from the mountain. A living magma was summoned before them and shaped itself into a serpent that illuminated the dark tunnels. The snake rushed forth through with its wide jaw open, spitting an acid-like venom that dissolved all it touched in mere moments.

Deep within the cave sat a lair of absolute darkness, a cold plain that existed deep within the belly of the mountain, carved out by the Queen herself. Here was her lair, and from afar, the Queen, along with her minions, saw an unwelcomed light swiftly approaching from the distant passage. All spiders retreated within as the serpent of light and fire tore through all that it touched.

The serpent deformed at the entrance to the beast's lair, making way for the four warriors of light to face the her. The place was covered in silk, and spider eggs littered the walls, as the queen herself rose to the sight of these intruders. Her colossal silhouette encompassed the black, as the sight of many of her royal defenders ran forth to meet the invaders of her kingdom.

The Exorcists prepared for battle. The lair's entrance was a sizable distance away from the insulted Queen. The cavern itself could fit a quarter of the outpost. With blades drawn, each Exorcists walked forward while putting distance between eachother. One of the Exorcists lifted his hand to the air, a strange glow of light wrapped around his wrist like a snake. It extended outward above his head, and he swung this radiating rope-like substance forward like a whip made of heat and light, slashing through the approaching spiders and illuminating the surrounding black, where many more arachnids slowly crawled out of unseen caverns.

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Others propelled down from the darkness that ascended the cavern. Another of their fellow Dun made his way towards the center of the lair. There, he sat in a meditative stance, with his hands pressed together and his cloak covering his face, his body illuminated with a aura that poured over him like a liquid and consumed his form, leaving a shape of formless light that sparked in that dark abyss like fire. It violently pulsated and swayed its flame about. From it, the forms of woodland creatures made of a similar aura escaped from the flame and assaulted the darkness.

These unnatural creatures rushed the defending spiders, exploding into proportioned blasts of pure energy and splattering the remains of the arachnids across the caverns. A group of wolves circled the fire that summoned them, as four charging deer headed straight for the Queen. Just behind the deer were two Dun warriors. Loid possessed the unique ability to move at great speeds when focusing himself, and he easily caught up with the deer and hopped on the back of it, it's pulsating flames left no mark on the warrior.

Loid lightly tapped the antler to direct the creature. The remaining deer unfortunately met a giant web that was shot out at them. The first two deer exploded and deformed the web. The last rushed through it and continued their charge. Various spiders propelled down at great speed to attach themselves to the deer, but all were evaded.

The one deer met the mother and managed to avoid the beast's slashing pincers and exploded directly in the Queen's face. This distraction allowed the final Dun, trailing behind the deer, to rush the mother and stare into her eyes. She shrieked aloud, but as she peered into this Dun's blue eyes, the beast fell into a spell, lowering her defenses.

"That's it..." the Dun warrior whispered.

The summoned deer Loid rode atop of hopped over various spider eggs littering the walls, climbing a great distance above the Queen spider. The deer jumped right over it, and Loid pulled out his dagger as they descended the great distance below. While Loid fell from the sky, a single spider propelled down, avoiding him and landing right on the back

of his fellow Dun, she who was keeping the spider under trance.

This Dun, a young Master Exorcist named Lucy, lost focus and jumped backwards. She lifted her blade, and the center stone let out a mighty blinding light. It burned the mother Queen, as well as the spider upon her back. The Queen shrieked at the searing pain, and it swung its limbs in many directions. One of which met the deer in free fall, swatting it and Loid away. The deer exploded as it met the ceiling of the cavern, but Loid was caught by his fellow Dun's whip_like ropes made of light, which extended to a great distance.

Loid was brought to his fellow Dun, and the rest of the ceiling started to collapse upon the lair. Various spiders could be seen falling down along with the many rocks. Each of the Dun across the battlefield was scooped up across much like Loid was. They were brought to the center, Lucy was wounded by her encounter with the spider, she had to be carried. Loid placed her upon his back, and the other two began to run ahead of him. At breakneck speed, he caught up quickly, even with Lucy in tow. His gifts of Understanding were more than enough to see them through.

It was a long jog through to the surface, as they eventually approached the light of the cavern, they saw both their transports had landed. Their gunners were firing into the brush as spiders leaped out at them.

“They’re here!” A voice called out.

One of the pilots rushed to helped get Lucy onto the first transport, the other was shooting out of the pilots seat with a sub machine gun. The gunners of the first transport sacrificed their seats to allow the Exorcists to leave with fire cover. Once fully loaded, the first transport left, and the gunners, including Garls, rushed for the second vessel. Before they could make it, the Queen Mother busted out of the cavern with little life in her. She rushed forward and plummeted into the second transport, which rolled and eventually exploded under her, sending the Queens entrails across the surrounding jungle.

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All who witnessed looked in shock. The jungle around them groaned with an endless cry from the spiders, coming from all directions. The two men looked at each other, stood back to back, and in seconds, spiders streamed toward them. The men gave them all they had, blasting through the jungle, ripping apart arachnid and trees alike. When it seemed their weapons were finally matched by the endless tide, two whips made of light fell down from the sky and tethered the men. It was a great surprise when they lifted off the ground and found themselves attached to the moving transport. The men hung above the jungle while they flew all the way back to their outpost. Below, they could see the many spiders retreating towards the cavern.

Once they arrived, they were horrified at the sight. After 10 minutes, they chose to land just outside the walls, as the landing zone was destroyed and buried under a mess of lifeless arachnid. The gunners, along with the Exorcists, approached the base with caution. Their escape vessel stayed hovering slightly over the terrain, ready to leave at a moment's notice.

The scene that met them was one of grotesque horror. Piles of charred and shot-up spiders littered the unrecognizable base. Buildings had vanished, and bits of men, torn uniforms, and robes could be found under every other claw. The men approached the hospital to the best of their ability, as nothing looked the way it used to. The command center now stood as a burning rubble of spider and machine, the various defensive walls all stood as their own small mountain of corpses. An auto cannon could still be heard rotating, as the emergency request for ammunition broke the dead silence.

The warriors gathered near the landing zone; somewhere in there could be Lieutenant Tanners, for all they knew. The men continued on. They broke up into groups of four, Garls went towards a big building that looked like a hospital. He peered in to another nightmarish scene, this one smelled of burnt flesh. He stood by the doorway and decided it may just be best to yell.

"Hey, it's us! We did it, she's dead!" Garls called out into the

building. A thump came from above.

"Hey, guys...We got soft contact here."

The rest of his search party gathered on his position. He pointed his rifle forward as the sound approached. From the dim interior the boots of a Ranger, next to the shoes of a Dun could be seen, slowly descending a stair case.

"We got survivors."

"Damn straight you do..." Rodney called back.

They helped Rodney with Laan and sat them down outside the building.

"Does the rest of the hospital look like this?" Garls asked.

Rodney slowly lifted his arm and pointed off in the distance.

"The hospital's that way."

Garls looked in the direction he was pointing.

"Where's everyone else?" Rodney asked.

"Here, take some water...They're out searching. The command centers thrashed. I don't think Taverd made it."

"I don't think a lot of people made it."

Loid stepped through the corridors of the old mess hall along side his men. The entire area was charred with ballistic fire and burn marks from the use of Understanding.

"They held here..."

They went deeper into the building and saw that the area where they kept all the wounded was mostly cleared out. Half the men, and all the beds were torn to pieces. The once white place now was drenched in various coagulated shades of red. Loid inspected the room, and the many pieces of men that were littered about.

"A contingency of men must have stayed to defend those

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that couldn't move. They must have created a second fallback zone...Poor men."

Loid covered his mouth before pushing the door to the next room; he found it welded shut. He hit the door in frustration. From the other side, he heard the sound of sighs and groans before going silent. Once again, he struck the door. A bullet came ripping through, almost striking Loid.

"You idiots! It's us...We did it."

After a half hour of unwelding the door, the survivors gathered outside. Tanners stood leaning up against a tree as they assessed the situation.

"You look like you can use a bath, sir," Morris said as he approached.

"Yeah, I concur, Sergeant. You okay?"

"I'm breathing, sir."

"You okay?"

"I don't think so.."

"Well, be not okay later, Sergeant. The men need us."

Morris stood up straight, let out a sigh, and saluted his Lieutenant.

Tanners returned the salute before his eyes met two privates pissing on spider corpses.

"Hey you two, that's how you get jungle flu!"

Tanners trotted off towards the two men to scold them. Knite let out a chuckle from behind Morris.

"That was cute, Sarge."

"Shut up, Knite."

His tired face lit up as he saw Rodney from afar, carrying four hot drinks in his hand.

Knite turned around and nearly cried.

“You son of a! Why four drinks, idiot?”

“What do you mean?” He motioned to his side.

There stood Garls leaning on his gun.

“How long have you been standing there, idiot?” Knite pouted.

Before he could reply, the ground shook as the jungle once again came to life.

“What the Hill!” Garls muttered.

Everyone took whatever defensive position they could.

“We can’t survive this, we’re freaking dead.” Rodney said.

Laan put a hand on his shoulder. “Mind if I fight along side you?”

“I mean, yeah of course. We got this.”

She gave him a brave yet famished smile, and from the center of her hand, a glowing figure slowly shaped itself into the form of a bow. She pulled back softly on the string, and a spectral arrow of blue appeared.

The trees parted ways as something big approached, but from within, nothing biological crept out. It was a heavily armored transport vessel, one that easily carried two platoons of Rangers. The machine parked in front of the torn apart base. From the cockpit, a single engineer stepped out and looked across the landscape with a shocked and confused face. Tanners approached the vessel.

“Looking for someone?”

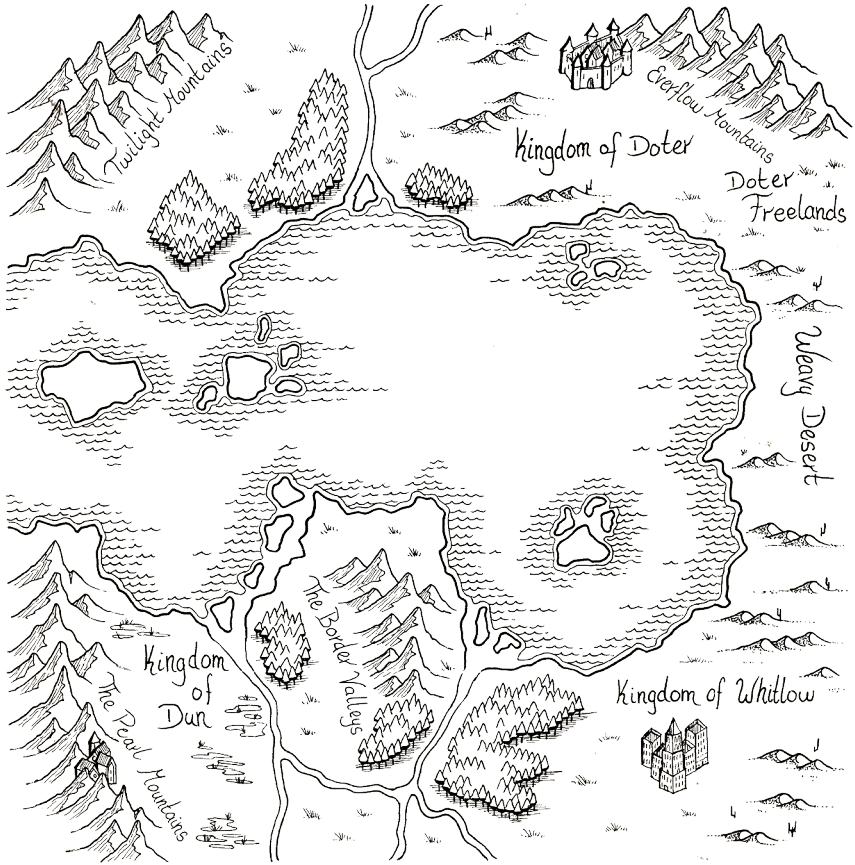
“Uh, yeah, I got a shipment of two platoons of Rangers, here for emergency aid. Heard you boys need them.”

Taverd looked over his shoulder at the destroyed base.

“We can use a hand with some surveyor drones...”

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MAP OF THE LANDS OF LIGHT



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