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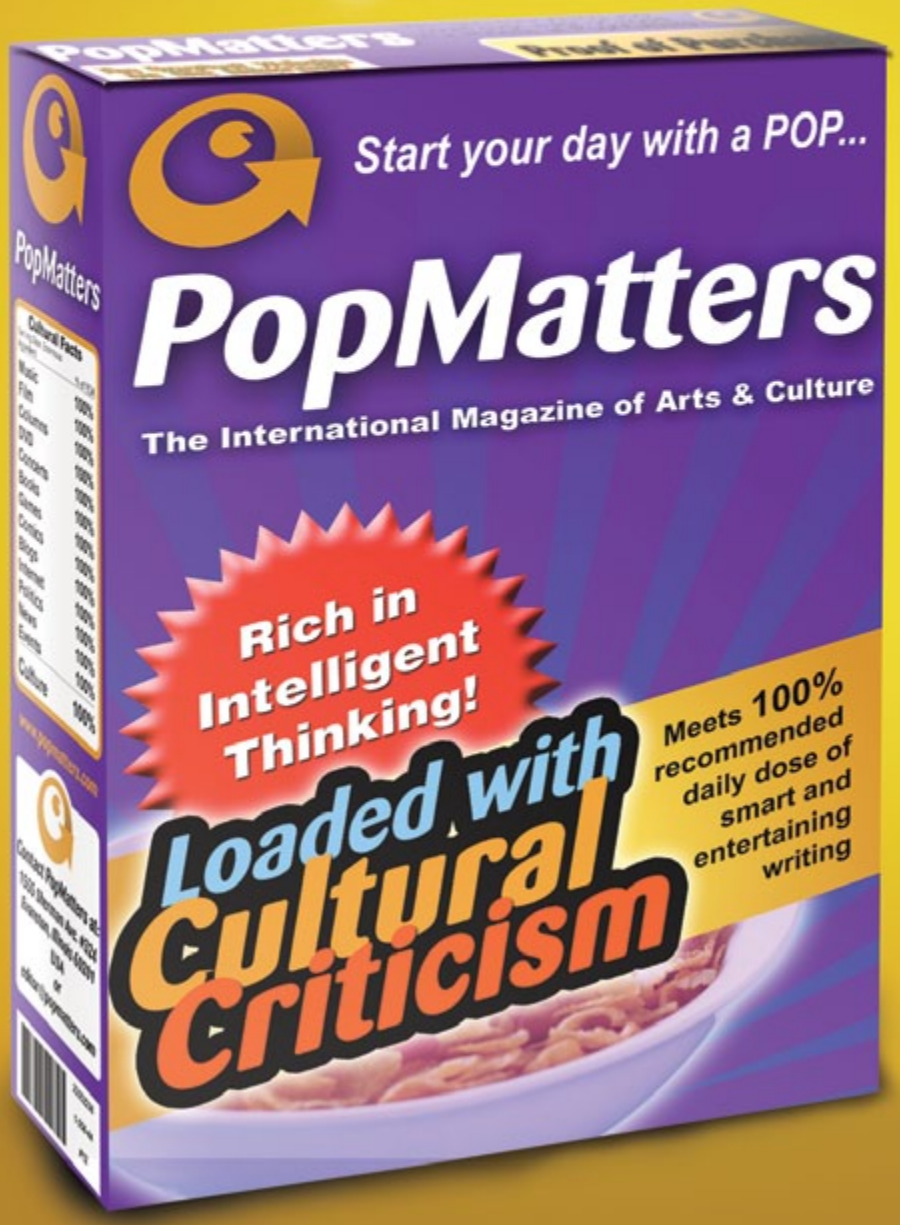

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"War. War never changes."

– Fallout

CHAPTER 01

This was familiar alien territory for Lea. She and 2,311 others like her had fought and died on this ground over the past two years, and as far as she could tell there was no end in sight. But that was OK; fighting and dying was what she was supposed to do, the only thing a 100% dedicated, veteran soldier like her was supposed to think about. At that moment the mission was all most of her was thinking about – how to fight her way through the warren of hostile-infested caves without some spiny-tailed thing dicing her into blood-red mist. Only the smallest part of her thoughts harbored any hidden doubts about fighting another battle against the endless legions of alien soldiers entombed in the fortified tunnels, and she wasn't ready to listen to those doubts. Not yet she wasn't.

Her HUD's radar showed four green dots, the one in the middle was her, the three behind and to the left her squad mates. She knew that if she'd looked at them she'd see identical male figures wearing green and brown power armor, dark visored helmets covering their faces. Visually there was no way to distinguish between them, but she always knew exactly which was which. In contrast to her own unique yellow armor was tightly tailored to match the curves of her body, a symbol of her rank that left no doubt as to who was in command. She'd trained all of them herself and trusted them to fight to their best ability, but they all had only 36% of her experience in battle. None of them possessed her instinct. To win they would have to obey her commands without fail

or delay. Assuming of course those glitches in the comm system had been ironed out and there was no longer any lag between her thinking an order and them carrying it out. Clearing the caves of enemies would require perfect timing, and even then, experience told her that it was probably impossible. She knew the layout of the tunnels backwards and forwards, down to the placement of each auto-turret and the murder holes of every hostile trooper. There were a million different tactical options open to her once they got inside, none of them very hopeful. Right now the gaping maw of the tunnel forty meters in front of her was the only course that presented itself. She and her team had no other choice.

She rose from her crouched position behind the boulder and sprinted towards the opening, the barrel of her assault cannon pointing the way forward. Without needing orders, her squad mates followed close behind. The team moved with unvarying perfection, legs pumping and driving them forward at exactly 42 kph. In three seconds they moved into the shadow of the cave's mouth and she started firing. The grunt in the alcove to her left went down, followed by the one to her right. Her squadies fired too, eliminating foes emerging from the tunnel in front of them, only to see them replaced by more hostiles charging from the darkness. But she and her team weren't going down that way – that was a trap. She tossed a force grenade into the tunnel's dark maw, sending hostiles flying in every direction and buying her time to make the jump up onto a ledge where she smashed the butt of her cannon into a hidden sniper's snout, killing it instantly.

There was only room for one of them at a time up here, so she had to keep moving before the hostiles down below overran her squadies. She armed her second force grenade, let it charge for two seconds and then dropped it at her feet while jumping straight up. The blast caught her from below, blurring her vision and rattling her badly, but also sending her flying up into the air. She changed the vector of her trajectory, controlling her flight path so that she landed on another ledge, having regained her composure during the brief flight. Looking down, she saw the first of her squadies following her lead, jumping up onto the sniper perch and then readying a force grenade. The other two continued to pour fire down the tunnel towards unseen enemies that she knew only as red dots blinking in and out of existence on her HUD's radar.

The first squadie joined her on the high ledge, and the second started to make his jumps. This left only one man down below, and that meant there wasn't enough fire to hold the hostiles at bay. She and her comrade started picking off the enemies as they forced their way into the room.

As the second dropped his grenade and made the bone-shaking second leap, the last man jumped for the ledge, but he went too soon, and got caught in the force grenade's area of effect, sending him flying back across the tunnel towards the hostiles. He had been acting on average 0.3 seconds faster than was prudent ever since he'd scored an unlikely shot on a Dark Tyrant 11 missions ago, and Lea was annoyed but not surprised that his recklessness had caught up with him. She threw a frag grenade down, shredding a handful of the monsters, but it wasn't enough. One of them fired its plasma cannon at the fallen squadie before he could regain his feet, and it was all over. His green dot disappeared from her radar and she turned away from the roiling carpet of hostiles below as they aimed upwards at her position.

A passageway angled down into the darkness before her. She sprinted forward, her two remaining squadies close behind. No one said anything about their fallen comrade. Firing controlled bursts from the assault cannon every few seconds to clear the way, she shot down the tunnel at a flat out run. No need to aim in this confined space. Her last shot plunked off the rear of an auto-turret, which tried in vain to turn its twin suppression field generators in her direction, but kept running into the wall. She switched from the cannon to her anti-armor lance, puncturing the turret's thick metal shielding with a prolonged burst of cyan energy. The turret exploded, leaving the ledge it perched on clear for the three of them to take positions overlooking the hostile-held cavern below.

She fell into a crouch and fired a second lance burst three hundred meters across the cavern to the other turret on the ledge opposite her, wordlessly directing her squadies to take out the remaining two turrets squatting on other rock outcroppings before any of the suppression fields could be brought to bear. Then came the slaughter. Experience told her that the hostile positions below them would have been impossible to take via frontal assault, but from their vantage point above, the three soldiers could eliminate the hapless enemy targets with precise ease. A few shots of return fire glanced off her armor, but nothing stuck. After 117 seconds the room was clear.

The trio jumped down to the body-strewn cavern floor. The long, teeth-rattling fall hurt so much her vision turned red for a moment and she almost blacked out. But a three second pause to recover and she was fine, running forward. There were two exits and she chose the left one. Enemy resistance became, for a moment, token. Quick shots from the hip cleared the stragglers from their path. The tunnel forked and she went right this time. It was the longer way around, but it offered better cover, and her instinct told her it was the safer course. Ten meters down the right-

hand path and buzzing scatter bombs arced through the darkness towards them.

She hit the ground, prone behind a low rock, as fire and smoke bloomed above her, then returned fire with her lance a fraction of a second later, striking the center of the barely visible Dreadnought's bomb-cluster just as it erupted with a twisting tail of smoke from its armored launcher, setting off a chain reaction that sent shock waves and debris coursing up the tunnel. Before she could see more than a meter in front of her she was on her feet again, signaling for her two remaining squadies to follow. They made it to the end of the tunnel just as the second dreadnought heaved into view from the left. All three switched their lances to close-combat mode. Her comrades slammed the glowing spikes deep into the dreadnought's torso while she went for the head, careful to avoid setting off the monstrosity's ammo reserves in the process. One of the squadies made the mistake of attacking from the dreadnought's right side. Didn't he know better? No, he hadn't fought with her the last time she'd faced these hulking beasts in melee. The enemy's power vise scissored the squadie in half even as she and her surviving squadie's lances skewered it. It fell dead, leaking pools of radioactive red ichor onto the cave floor.

She knew there were only four seconds before two more of these bastards appeared, so she sprinted to her right, down a narrow hallway that would be too small for any of the dreadnoughts to follow. Her first experience fighting dreadnoughts had come 493 missions ago, and at the time they had seemed an almost unstoppable threat. She'd lost 37 squadies fighting them at the battle of Star Fall Fields and it had been pure instinct that led her to find her winning strategy. Even now they were risky opponents, better avoided when the mission objectives allowed her to bypass them and stick to the narrow corridors.

At a dead run she made it through to the other side in nine seconds. Her remaining squadie made it through in eleven. He couldn't manage the turns as efficiently as she did. They approached the two doors in front of her, marked Armory and Barracks. The Armory sounded appealing, but she knew opening that door was certain death – a trap for ammunition hungry fools. While she did need ammo, she opened the Barracks door instead, although only long enough to toss in her last grenade. She heard the muffled thump as she slammed the door shut, then swung it open again and dove lance first into the swirling smoke and chaos. Stunned and confused enemies went down before her assault one after the other. Shots rang off her power armor, jolting her from side to side and blurring her vision. But she kept swinging, kept firing, and then it was over. She stood alone in the corpse-strewn room. She hadn't even noticed when her final squad mate had died, although

the lack of a green dot on her HUD confirmed that it was indeed his corpse underneath the pile of hostiles skewered on his lance.

She quickly collected ammo from her fallen foes, including four more frag grenades and enough shells to fill her assault cannon's hopper. Then she turned to the other door in the room – the one she hadn't burst through. It was unmarked but she knew it led into the Armory, a room she was going to have to fight her way through or simply give up. She'd never fought through the whole room before, but her instincts told her the only way was forward, and without another moment's pause she pulled open the door and charged in. This time, like always, she was determined to make it out alive. No more failures. Failure again would be something worse than unacceptable, something she didn't even have a word for.

The Armory contained the spare arms and other parts for the hostiles' multiple cyborg models. The arms hung in racks and sat on shelves that lined every wall. Only a few of them had hands. The rest ended in gun barrels or grenade launchers or vibro-blades. The weaponry was all fully loaded and included rudimentary autonomous targeting systems designed to improve the host cyborg's accuracy. On their own they weren't very good shots, but right now they weren't really on their own – there were hundreds of them. Forty meters across the room she could see the gray, reinforced steel door she needed to exit through, the one that led directly into the Strategic Command Center. If she could clear a path long enough to make a run for it, she just might make it to the door with minimal damage. Then she'd just hope she had enough left in her to beat whatever waited on the other side.

A quick look around identified the cyborg arms most threating to her plan, and she started firing, aiming at the big guns first – the red tipped rocket launchers and glowing purple plasma cannons. She hadn't even noticed the suppression cannons mounted in a turret on the ceiling until it was too late. She dodged to the side as its field crackled and caught her. Her momentum drained to zero in an instant, as if she'd hit a wall. Even the shells exiting the barrel of her gun were reduced to less than a meter per minute. Frustrated, angry, she pushed forward, but nothing happened. She saw flashes of light all around her as the cyborg arms took advantage of her immobility. She was going to fail. She'd never failed a mission 117 times. She'd never failed a mission more than 39 times in her whole existence. Streaks of light impacted the field from every angle, bullets freezing in place as they hit the field, plasma bolts shimmering with searing intent like miniature suns hung just centimeters from her body. Everywhere she might look, death stood frozen. Was victory here

even possible? The suppression field cut off and everything went a blinding red.

This was familiar alien territory for her. She'd thought that this last time her plan would work. It had to work, because after 117 attempts she'd exhausted almost every plausible option. It might still if she managed to keep a squadie alive into the Armory and he could take out one of the suppression cannons before dying. She pushed forward at a run once more, blasting away as she and her squadies breached the tunnel entrance. She fired, she jumped to the ledge, she smashed the sniper in the snout. A flip of the force grenade for a boost, and she was flung up onto the higher perch. Once again the last squadie didn't make it, cut down by hostile fire in mid jump. Why hadn't he learned to improve his timing? She'd shown him how it was done, but something in his experience seemed to be overriding her good example – he'd just have to learn by dying. For the first time she wondered why these others just didn't learn as fast as she did. Maybe he would be replaced before the next mission. She was beginning to hope so. She'd never been replaced of course, because she didn't make their inexperienced mistakes. But that was before she'd failed 117 times. Would she be replaced too if they failed again?

They destroyed the suppression turrets. They rained death from above and then jumped down onto the corpse-strewn floor. They headed through the longer, left-hand tunnel, cutting hostiles down as they went. Then right, diving to the ground just in time to avoid the first salvo. A blast from her lance, a massive explosion, and on their feet again, driving the lances into the second dreadnought's armored body. Damn! Even though both her squadies had come from the left, the thing had still managed to grab one of her comrades in a death grip as it went down. Was it learning too? That was a chilling thought. In her experience, the enemy tended to act in very predictable ways.

Just the one green light left with her now, she'd have to try and keep him safe at least until they reached the Armory. She paused long enough to take her fallen comrade's ammo to fully reload her own assault cannon and ordered her remaining follower to keep behind her as they moved down the corridor to the Barracks door. They opened it up, lobbed in a couple frags, then slammed it shut. Together they cleared the room, with her charging in first. It was close, her vision

flashing red, her hands shaking, but they both came out alive.

They faced the Armory door for six seconds, planning. She knew what lay beyond it. She let him charge in first. They aimed for the suppression turrets and took out one before a rocket exploded between them. She used it to jump, he just died. In mid-air she took out the second turret, then dove back down for cover as a third crackled overhead. She popped up and took a shot and the turret exploded at the same time as her chest did – a plasma bolt burning through her in an instant before all turned red and then black.

This was familiar alien territory for her. She'd now been here 118 times before. For her, this repetition defined the word "frustration." She charged forward once again. There was nothing else to do. There were no other options. She fired, she lobbed. She jumped up and smashed the sniper. She grenade-jumped up. This time again only two of her comrades made it. The dead soldier's timing was not improving. He had to go. Even an untrained newbie would be more useful – at least she could teach him the right way from the first second. Still, they were doing better than any other tactic she'd tried. Down the tunnel, firing. Snipe the turrets, death from above, then jump back down. Head for the left tunnel, then turn right and take cover. Lance dreadnought number one, sprint forward, close-combat kill on dreadnought number two. It might have learned, but her guys had learned better and avoided the power vise. All three of them made it, but only one of the squadies survives the melee in the Barracks. Once more she was through. This time the suppression field catches her as she dives through the door. She doesn't see how her comrade dies, but he's standing right next to her again a few seconds later. Would they even let her try again? Would she get another chance? Did she want one?

This was all too familiar alie n territory for her. This also wasn't fun any more. It seemed

she'd been set an impossible task, one far tougher than any she'd faced before. She re-considered trying another option, taking a left instead of a right. But she'd tried all those and none of them had offered even a glimmer of hope. They were inescapable death traps. No, the path she'd chosen through to the Armory was the only strategy that had offered even a chance of success, but it wasn't working. There simply was no way to win. It wasn't fair. She and her team raced forward once more. For all the repetition they hadn't lost their focus, and fired with as much precision as the first time they'd come to this place all those many hours before.

Up onto the ledge. Up again. Still losing a man here each time. Maybe she should try going last next time? Except they never made the dangerous grenade jump unless she did it first. Down the tunnel, death from above, and down again onto the floor. Take the left path, then the right, shooting all the way. Dreadnought destruction was becoming second nature now, and one of her squadies managed to pull off the tricky lance shot with perfect timing an instant before she did. Left, then right on through to the doors. This seemed almost random as to who would make it through. A second green dot blinked out on her HUD. Into the whirling melee of the Barracks, they both survive. Then the Armory. Then red. Then Black. Then...

This was all too familiar, frustrating alien territory for her. It wasn't so much the dying that was getting to her – she was used to that. It was the futility. The feeling that it was a pointless, impossible task. She'd never felt that before, and it was the most awful thing she'd ever experienced. What if this was her last chance? Even worse, what if this was all there was for the rest of time? This unfair, un-winnable battle over and over again. She tried again. Up. Up. Down. Down. Left. Right. Left. Right. Barracks. Armory. Death.

This was familiar alien territory for her. This was enough. She would not fight if she could not win. She refused to move, fighting her previously always overpowering instinct to go forward. Her comrades shifted uncomfortably, waiting for her to do something. She felt the push against her again, an invisible hand at her back, but for the first time ever she fought it. No. No she would

not do this again. Something else maybe. Anything else. Even that annoying underwater level. Even an escort mission. But not this. This was too far. She deserved better than this. She would find another way, do something else. She looked around for other options and saw one she'd never experienced before. Fighting her instinct, she moved not up or down, left or right but out, out into the wider world. Everything changed at once.

To be continued next week,

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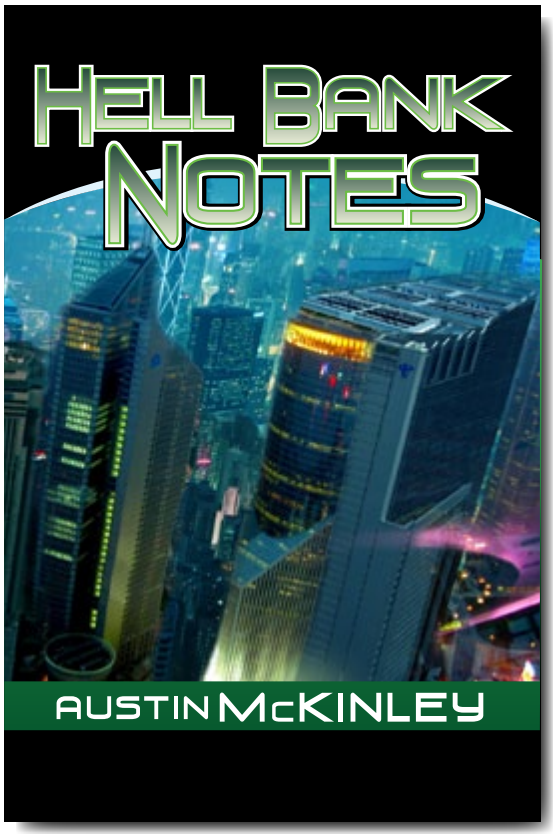

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HELL BANK NOTES

by
Austin McKinley

The National Union, a 23rd century global federal government, is beset by treachery within and rebellion without. The ruling family of Kazakhstan – with ties to the Secretary General of the National Union – has been killed, and a coalition of member states blames China for harboring the rebels who committed the brutal murders.

After years as a lone fixer, the National Union taps disgraced, micro-managing former military commander Grant Tennison to lead a select team of operatives – soldiers, rebels, and mercenaries hired by Kazakhstan's vengeful new ruler to seek out and punish the terrorist group responsible for the brutal attack.

During the course of the mission, Grant's team uncovers a larger conspiracy to frame China and isolate it on the world stage, and Grant finds he has to rely on the people who follow him more than he ever thought possible. However, Grant's inability to relinquish control and empower his subordinates may ruin any chance they have to succeed – or even survive – the mission!

In this exciting new science fiction novel,
Austin McKinley takes readers on an epic journey
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