



CASE WHITE: OMEGA

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There are poignant moments in a man's life.

I remembered three: the day I became a man at the age of fourteen, in the hands of a woman; the day I chose a woman with whom to share my life; and the day I laid eyes upon my first child, father to daughter.

The world works in threes. Three was always the magic number.

In each moment I had known bliss, happiness, joy. And a decision had preceded each of those moments.

An impact that would shape the things to come.

That standing-still of time and space, where the crossroads pointed to different paths. To know a woman, or to wait until marriage. To marry young, or marry old. To have a child, or to wait. At each decision point, I believed I made the right choice.

There was a future there—once. With blue skies and bright laughter.

But in an instant all that had changed.

In an instant—over the course of four days—I no longer knew if I was dead, or alive.



Two days ago

Minutes after the last surviving DropShips landed, command and control was besieged with reports of fighting. I couldn't help but concentrate a larger part of my attention on Carentan.

One of the larger gatherings of Com Guards was in Europe, mostly around Latvia and Estonia. I combed the communications coming in for any word of my wife and daughter. Casualties. Refugees.

Any scrap of information.

I called her phone every chance I could, but the grid was overloaded. Calls went directly into voicemail, if they connected at all. I lost count of how many messages I left, screaming at Beth to get to shelter. To get out of there. I felt hollowed out. Useless.

Helpless.

But I never let it show. Or at least I never intended to. Because, though I had a wife and child who depended on me, I also had a group of believers, of dedicated souls who looked to me for instruction, guidance and reassurance. You see—no matter how much I faulted the Manei Domini—we'd all believed in our infallibility.

And to prove how much I believed in it, I ordered the mobilization of every TerraSec Special Security unit I could find into the area to protect the populace, hold back the invaders and hopefully give Azrael enough time to intercept and destroy them.

We weren't prepared for this—not really.

I hadn't known that war was coming. It happened without warning. And a few months wasn't enough time to reinforce Terra. The SDS network was deemed sufficient to hold off anything short of a major invasion. And in truth, the space defenses succeeded beyond our best expectations.

But they hadn't been enough.

When the numbers were broken down—I did the math once the DropShips reached planet-side—the Word of Blake had only fifty-two divisions available to carry out attacks and defense, and most of those were in the field hitting and holding worlds in the former Chaos March or elsewhere in the Protectorate. But Terra's system had five major planetary bodies to protect: Terra, Mars, Venus, Luna and Titan.

The divisions left behind weren't enough.

Though we had nearly won. We routed the 394th out of North America. Apollyon wanted prisoners—and he had them. More than we could handle. All in line for the re-education centers.

But it wasn't enough. Pockets of resistance survived, and grew, and thrived.

I clutched a small picture of my daughter in my hand. Felt my heart wrench at the thought of my unborn son kicking at his mother's belly. I had failed.

I failed all of them.

And so here I sat, in my command and control chair, just beneath the podium where Lamashti had been two days ago. She had joined Azrael in the field to fight the invaders. Displayed on the noteputer I clutched in my other hand was the latest intel report from Carentan. It was a battlefield.

I wasn't sure which was worse: the not-knowing, or the fear of knowing.

"Sir." One of the nearby acolytes had stepped up to the podium. "Azrael. He has a private message for you."

A private message from Azrael.

I stood, feeling the stiffness in my back and legs. My joints ached from lack of movement. I'd sat and watched and listened for too long. So many hours without sleep.

With a heavy heart, I moved to the largest podium and sat down in the chair Lamashti recently commanded. There I set the receiver in my ear and directed the message to one of the private screens on the console.

Azrael's face filled the screen. It wasn't as unnerving as Apollyon's. Azrael, though also equipped with several cybernetic enhancements, was handsome.

"You do not look well, David."

I nodded to Azrael. "I'm afraid I've allowed my nightmares to influence my personal care." I shook my head. "Not important." I forced a smile. "What can I do for you?"

"It is I who can set your mind at rest, David," Azrael's voice was soothing. And his expression was sad. "I have grave news."

And I knew they were dead.

I felt my heart break apart inside my chest. I forgot to breathe. Forgot to think.

"David," Azrael was saying. "Please, you must listen to me. Focus on me, David. I need you to be focused. I'm depending on you."

Focus.

Beth will never smile at me again.

Treemonisha would never run to me and put her tiny arms around my neck again.

"Y-yes. Azrael... thank you for... letting me know."

I would never feel Beth's lips on mine again—never know her warmth.

I would never see my daughter's love reflected in her bright green eyes again.

"David. You have my most sincere condolences. I have identified them. And I am making arrangements to have them shipped home to you." He bowed to David. "I have avenged them. The Com Guard 166th is no more."

She would never tell me she loved me.

My daughter would never graduate, or fall in love.

The image of my bright future darkened, cracked, and crumbled away.

"Thank you, Azrael," I angrily wiped away a tear, but kept my composure. "I am in your debt."

"No, David." Azrael shook his head, his hood shifting and exposing his odd, crimson eyes for a moment. "It is you whom we all owe. You have done your best in the defense of mother Terra. And there are still more battles to win before this test of our faith is done."

I nodded. I felt empty. Burned out.

“David, if the invaders entrenched in Latvia cannot be routed, they will have to be burned out.”

I was listening, but not hearing. I nodded to him, and so he thought I agreed with him. My mind was filled with the fading sound of my daughter’s laughter.

I needed to speak. I cleared my throat. “I will endeavor to serve, Azrael. Can you release more troops to Latvia?”

Azrael paused, as if listening to something I couldn’t hear. “Yes—move the Crown of Light III-iota as well as all TerraSec Level IIs you can spare. The invaders in Latvia are larger in number,” he smiled. “But we will succeed.”

I nodded. I disconnected.

And for a little while I lost myself in a miasma of pain.



Today

The command and control center was quiet.

So much like my soul. Dead.

Waiting.

Still.

We were losing the battle—I'd known it since yesterday. The zealot Azrael had realized it as well. The Crown of Light III-iota, combined with Precincts RU-04, ES-01 and LV-01 were losing. The invaders were snugly entrenched in Estonia.

And from there, if any of them managed to get out a single message. I shuddered to think of the devastation such a leak would bring. The Word of Blake had attacked and occupied so many worlds, killed so many people; civilians going about their lives, as naïve as I had been about the true state of the Word.

Ignorant of the plans devised. Of a holy jihad embraced solely by the minds of the devout. There were so many people looking forward to a time without war. The Civil War ended. Arms laid down.

And we changed all that.

Just as the actions of the Word had indirectly changed my life, and that of my family.

It had to end.

Azrael believed he had the means to end this war. We could destroy them, burn them out—as he had proposed hardly more than a day ago. Burn them out using nuclear warheads. But I couldn't agree to that, to the callous murder of so many civilians, and even our own soldiers.

War was for the mad.

And I was mad. And angry. I knew that if I survived, I faced a lifetime of lonely nights wracked with grief. The only thing that kept me in place was my sense of responsibility, my job.

To protect Terra. I was Precentor TerraSec.

No—I *am* Precentor TerraSec.



And as precentor, I was not going to throw nukes against my home.

I... couldn't.

The doors opened and Azrael came in.

He did not float above the ground like Lamashti. No—he was stooped, and had a slight limp. It was rumored even his 'Mech limped when he piloted it.

He moved closer, his white robes glowing. "Ah, David," he said in his soft, whispery voice. "Are you prepared?"

A second passed before I raised my hand. "No, Azrael." I cocked my head. "I will not willingly kill our own people."

If it was even possible for Azrael to look surprised, that was his expression at that moment.

"You know that our people would gladly die if it meant saving Terra from the infidels."

He sounded sincere. And it frightened me that he believed what he said.

I narrowed my eyes. "Azrael, why are you here? Why aren't you still leading the forces in Estonia?"

"I was." He limped up the podium and leaned in close to see my screens. He reached out with his metallic hand and touched a few knobs. The right-hand screen switched views to one of the satellite cameras. It showed an image of Europe, and then zoomed in on the planet, refocusing twice.

I watched him, amazed at how I no longer felt the old twinge of fear. Now, as I gazed at his myomer wrist and fingers, I saw only metal. No flesh. No bone.

No humanity.

I was not afraid. I never would be again.

"David. Destroying them utterly is the only way to ensure that the Word continues."

I looked up at his face. "Are the troops still there?"

Azrael nodded and his mouth curved upward on both ends. "Yes, David. They are still fighting, defending Terra from the invaders."

I looked back at the console, at the command panel that would arm the warheads and begin a savage countdown to oblivion.

I never thought I would see such horror, much less be the one to push the button. "So—they don't realize there's no hope for them. That they will never come out."

He shifted.

"Pull them out. All of them. At least save the soldiers."

"I'm afraid we can't do that," Azrael said, and as I watched he clasped his hands together. "If we pull our forces out of Estonia, then the invaders will know something has changed. When we leave, they will leave—but as long as we are there, they will remain, like rats in a hole. Waiting for us to exterminate them."

I turned and stared at his handsome face. Such a contrast to Apollyon's. Much more human.

Which only made his words seem more insane.

"You would kill them all, giving them no chance to prepare."

"A soldier knows when he goes into battle that he may not come back."

"And the civilians? Those still trapped there? Their children? Their mothers and fathers and daughters and sons? What about them?"

"They all live to serve Blake, David." He took a step back. "Don't you?"

Yes. I do. But I didn't say this aloud.

I'd lost my life to this insane war. I'd even sacrificed a part of my soul.

In my mind, I heard my daughter call my name, and closed my eyes.

I felt Azrael close beside me, his voice even softer. "David—they killed your wife and daughter. Fired gauss slugs into a crowd of frightened civilians."

I didn't want to know this.

"Many witnesses saw the citizens beg for their lives. So many children...," he sighed on a long breath.

"Don't," I said, my own voice barely audible.

"Those same men and women, the ones who destroyed your wife's swollen belly, and ripped away your daughter's face—"

"Stop!"

"—they are there, in Riga."

I was panting, gasping. Unconsciously, I reached out and grabbed Azrael's metallic hand. It was warm.

And it sickened me.

I pulled my hand away and struggled out of the chair. I needed to vomit. The image of my faceless child—I hadn't known.

I didn't want to know.

"Those monsters are in Riga, David. Yours aren't the only loved ones they've destroyed. If they survive and they get word out to ComStar describing the situation on Terra—then more WarShips and more DropShips and more 'Mechs will come, and more innocent believers will die."

I closed my eyes.

"This is the only way to guarantee that they are all dead."

All dead. Everyone dead.

And what of the innocent soldiers? What will their loved ones do? Will they accept that their mothers and fathers died in the service of the Word?

Will it be enough?

I hung my head. I felt no comfort, no pride that my family was sacrificed in my service to the Word. It wasn't enough for me. My family died because I didn't protect them.

Guilt sat foul on my soul.

"Come, David," Azrael said from somewhere behind me. "We haven't much time. Protect the rest of Terra—or even more will die. We are all soldiers of Blake's Word. "

He was right. And I hated that he was right. Nukes *were* the answer. And he wanted me to fire them.

And then go quietly into the night.

I sat back down. The room was empty—I had dismissed the acolytes the second I realized why Azrael had come. What Azrael had intended for me to do doing all along. Burn it all down—burn them all away.

Kill them.

As they killed my family. Innocents. I nodded. Released the warheads. Azrael double-checked the targeting. I pulled the zoom back on the camera to watch from space.

It was quiet.

So very quiet.

Then, in a single instant, a flash from space.

And then—nothing.

All communications stopped. The buzzing was gone. There was no one left to talk to.

I don't know how long I sat there, watching the image change as the camera moved along the asteroid belt high above. I was dimly aware of Azrael, of his HPG communication with Apollyon. He was getting ready to leave.

"Azrael," I said. Something bubbled just beneath the surface of my consciousness. At that moment, I wasn't sure what I was feeling—though later my words would be called heresy. But I didn't care. I didn't have anything left to care for.

Or about.

"David? Perhaps you should get some sleep. You've had a trying few days."

I turned in the chair and looked at him. He'd moved down to the lowest step, on his way out. "You would agree those men and women died for their belief in the Word, gave their lives to the highest cause?"

He nodded solemnly. "Yes. They will be honored and remembered."

"And if you knew from the moment the first DropShip touched down that nuclear destruction would be the evil required to en-

sure Terra's security—then why did you leave the battlefield just before this judgment was passed?"

I didn't get an answer.

I didn't expect one.

