



**STEVE
LISZKA**

**THIS
MACHINE
KILLS**

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For Buddy and LouLou

Part 1

"The world is filled with people who are no longer needed -- and who try to make slaves of all of us -- and they have their music and we have ours."

Woody Guthrie

Chapter 1

Each time a rock struck the vehicle, Doyle's fingers gripped the handle of his assault rifle a little tighter. Taylor stared at the boy's delicate white knuckles; he had been mesmerised by them since leaving the City. Unlike the rest of his team who wore their scars and calluses like a badge of honour, Doyle's virgin skin was yet to be tarnished. Taylor tried, but was unable to recall a time when his own hands had represented such innocence.

As the philistine attack continued, so the unease in Doyle's face grew. If it wasn't for the monumental effort it was taking not to throw up in front of the recruit, Taylor would have offered him some words of reassurance. Not that there was anything to worry about; the rocks would only rebound harmlessly off the Rhino's steel skin. The effects the missiles were having on Taylor's fragile state of wellbeing however, were far more damaging.

With each impact, a hollow clatter ricocheted around the vehicle's inner walls before smashing its way into his brain. His head felt like an anvil being hit by an ironmonger's hammer. He was about to question why he had only stopped drinking a few hours before the patrol started when he remembered where it was they were going. After that, his actions the previous evening seemed obvious.

"Doyle!" he yelled, when he could watch the boy's finger hover over the weapon's trigger no longer.

He kept recalling an incident where some other newbie had blown his commanding officer's head off and put a load of holes in two of his team-mates. The Rhino they were travelling in had hit a pothole, and the boy, finger on trigger, had unloaded his magazine into the back of the vehicle.

At the sound of his name, Doyle straightened up in his seat. He was a skinny kid with long, awkward limbs and an Adam's apple that looked ready to burst out of his throat at any second. He was barely twenty years old, yet his bulky body armour, which hung loosely from his slight physique, made him look much younger. Taylor thought he could easily pass for sixteen. This would be Doyle's first live patrol since coming out of basic training.

The boy craned his head forward to hear what was being said over the roar of the engine, the added weight of the armour making it difficult for him to manoeuvre.

"Yes Sarge?"

Although he put on a brave face, Taylor could see he was scared shitless and was glad about it too. Being afraid would keep him sharp and hopefully alive long enough to get out of the shit-hole they were about to enter.

"You got your safety on?"

"Yes Sarge."

"Good, and take your finger away from the trigger. I want to be worrying about what's going on out there," Taylor directed his thumb over his own shoulder, "not in here."

Lennox's huge frame leant across and grabbed Doyle by the shoulder. His mass made him look absurd in such a contained space.

"The Sarge is right sunshine, save your bullets for the ferals. There's enough of them out there."

Lennox was wired. His eyes bulged and the muscles in his thick neck twitched spasmodically. He had just taken his juice; the pills that SecForce gave its employees to give them enhanced combat awareness. The amphetamine-based concoction also made the men aggressive and jumpy, making the work of their hungover boss even more difficult.

Lennox nudged Doyle's arm, almost knocking him off the bench they sat on, "Just watch how I handle my shit today and you won't go far wrong. I'm gonna tear those motherfuckers up."

Taylor ignored him and continued instructing Doyle. He'd given up on the rest of his team but Doyle was young; there was still hope for him.

"Just remember, do not fire unless I gave the order," he said, "I'll tell you when you need to be concerned."

From his corner of the vehicle, Rudy removed his head from his bony hands and looked up at Doyle. A smile crept onto his grizzled face, doubling the number of crag-like wrinkles etched onto its contours.

"That's right boy, no shooting," he said lazily, "the Sarge don't like it when we start shooting."

If Doyle looked young for his age then Rudy's face was far too old for the forty-five years it had been in his possession. It looked like it had borne witness to a lifetime of cruelty. Taylor wondered if it was the job that had aged Rudy, and if so, he tried to imagine what he would look like in a few years time. He didn't think the outcome would be good. At the age of twenty-nine, he already felt like an old man.

"Just stay calm and be professional," he said with his eyes fixed on Rudy, "that's all a good trooper needs to do."

With the smile still on his face, Rudy returned his head to its resting position. Taylor continued to stare through him, feeling the urge to smash his fist deep into the man's skull. He relented though, as always. Despite being the oldest and smallest of his men, Rudy was by far the most dangerous.

The monotony was interrupted by what must have been a particularly large rock smashing into the side of the Rhino. Involuntarily, Rudy jumped fractionally from his seat. It was only a small movement and could have easily been missed, but Rogers, the quiet man of the team, had witnessed the indiscretion. He caught Taylor's eye and together they shared a brief smile. A dull burst of gunfire quickly responded from above their heads.

"That's right assholes," Rudy mumbled to nobody in particular, "now who's throwing stones?"

Taylor turned to the rear of the vehicle where a broad pair of legs stood. The body's upper torso disappeared into a hole in the roof.

"Everything ok up there Skinner?" he asked, the message being transmitted via his throat-microphone.

"It's all good Sarge, just a bit of feral action. Looks like we've got a clear run now."

The answer came quickly and clearly into Taylor's ear-piece, cutting straight through the background noise. You could say what you like about SecForce, but their gear really was the tits.

The doors of the Rhino swung open and the team quickly filed out only to be a hit by

an oppressive wall of heat. If being stuck in the back of the noisy and airless metal box had caused them discomfort, it was nothing compared to the smell that immediately assaulted their nostrils. The stench of raw sewerage, left to fester in the heat of the warmest summer on record, was excruciating.

Taylor discreetly used his hand to cover his mouth, trying not to imagine the particles of filth he was absorbing into his still-healthy lungs. Doyle gagged, barely making it a safe distance from the rest of the team before ejecting his breakfast. Taylor felt relieved; at least he wasn't the only one suffering. The others laughed at the new boy's weak stomach.

"Welcome to the Old-Town," Rudy said. He was already halfway through his first cigarette.

"Don't worry," Taylor lied, "you get used to it."

"Hey Skinner!" Lennox yelled up to the owner of the pair of legs that had been taking up valuable space in the Rhino. The man's upper body, which was even bigger than Lennox's, revealed itself from behind the protection of his gun turret. Thick, black tribal tattoos ran the length of Skinner's colossal arms and up his neck where they transformed into dragon's heads that snapped at his jawbone. It was Skinner's job to stay in position and keep a lookout for hostiles whilst the team were being briefed on their mission.

Even though it must have been uncomfortable and Taylor had often heard him moaning to Lennox about his problems with chafed nipples, Skinner wore his body armour directly on his bare skin. His spartan dress code wasn't just a response to the searing heat. For Skinner, it was important his victims witnessed the true size of the man about to mow them down with the mighty fifty-calibre machine gun he wielded.

"Any luck dude?" Lennox asked.

"Oh yeah, Dog."

He put his clenched fist to the side of his head and then quickly opened his fingers in a demonstration of someone's brains being blown out. Like many of the troopers that had spent time fighting abroad, Skinner spoke with an exaggerated American drawl that mingled strangely with his own localised accent. Like the others he also insisted on using slang the Americans had given up on years before.

"Right in the fuckin' head Sarge," he elaborated, wanting to make sure Taylor had not misunderstood the subtleties of his mime.

"Good work," Taylor said quietly as he turned to address the others, "quickly then, gather round."

The team assembled in front of him, Doyle still wiping vomit from his mouth as Skinner listened from his perch. With their helmets, assault rifles and body armour on, Taylor almost forgot he was no longer in the overseas division of SecForce. Apart from the colour of their uniforms; black as opposed to one shade of camouflage or another, there really was no difference in this team and the ones he had been in charge of in Canada.

The driver of the Rhino slowly got out of the vehicle and walked stiff-legged to Taylor's side. Taking no interest in the others he stretched his arms overhead before scratching his nest of thick, black curly hair. Without the slightest hint of urgency, the stout man finished his preening and rested his hands on his rotund belly.

Taylor, who had watched with bemused curiosity, offered the unlikely looking

trooper a sarcastic smile,

“Thanks for joining us Spike.”

Spike nodded, returning a curt smile of his own.

They had pulled up on a patch of waste ground that had once been a place of recreation. In the old days, a Sunday morning on the vast space would have seen at least ten games of football being played by wheezing men who hadn't bothered turning up for the mid-week training session. A single, splintered goalpost was the only visible testament to the ground's former life. Other than that, it looked more like a battlefield with large craters pock-marking the whole site and a complete absence of grass. Taylor could remember his father putting him through sprint-training drills there whilst the other kids his age played keep-ups.

The area was the unofficial buffer zone between the State-of-the-art City that lay behind them, its skyscrapers gleaming as they reflected the morning sun, and the urban squalor known as the Old-Town they now faced. It was to this decaying pile of bricks, steel and rubble that Taylor was about to send his team.

“Listen-in then boys,” he said, his voice raised but calm, “this area has been identified as a hot-zone.”

He nearly blushed as he heard himself speak. He sounded just like Captain Mason.

“From the information we've been given, it's highly probable that last week's attacks were launched from here.”

“Yeah right,” Lennox grumbled, “I bet we don't see shit.”

“I'll take fifty dollars on that,” Spike answered quickly, “something's gonna go down today. I've got an ache in my balls and you know what that means.”

Lennox reached over to shake Spike's hand in acceptance of the bet, “I hope you're right bro, I feel like popping some of those fuckers.”

Spike laughed, “You won't 'pop' anything, I've seen your shooting and it's fucking ugly.”

Lennox shook his head, “Why you gotta talk shit like that in front of the new boy?”

“Because it's true,” Spike answered, before breaking into a deep, belly laugh.

“Listen to this Doyle,” he said, turning to address the newest member of the team, “one time Lennox over here left his helmet on the ground and this stinking old dog pissed all over it.”

“Shut up Spike,” Lennox said.

Spike ignored him, “So then he decides he's going to teach it a lesson and tries to take it out.”

Lennox's face had begun to redden, “I said shut the fuck up, Spike.”

“The fool went through an entire clip and still managed to miss,” Spike continued, undeterred, “I'm telling you, the thing was so old it could barely walk. I swear I never knew dogs could laugh until that day.”

He gave Lennox a smile as he wiped a tear of mirth from his eye, “Even that mutt could see what an asshole you are.”

Although they all laughed, it was Doyle who was Lennox's target. He stared at the boy accusingly,

“You think that's funny do you?” he growled, “Well you try talking to me like that fat fuck just did and you'll you get my boot up your ass.”

He jabbed his finger towards Doyle, “I want the respect that is due.”

“Hey Lennox,” Spike said, his middle finger sticking up, “respect this.”

Taylor quickly stepped in before things could escalate, “Ok girls, let’s play nice. Lennox, I’m sure Doyle has the utmost respect for you, right?”

Doyle nodded back, a little too quickly for Taylor’s liking.

“And Spike, I think you’re mistaken. This is going to be a simple patrol. I don’t expect any trouble, Ok?”

Spike quickly caught Taylor’s meaning.

“The Sarge is right, this’ll be a breeze,” he said to Doyle, “you’re going to have to learn to ignore me. I’m just the fat driver, I don’t know shit.”

“There we go,” Taylor said, a note of content in his voice, “now if you don’t mind, do you think we can get back to the fucking brief?”

When nobody said anything he continued, “You all know the routine, we’re going to sweep the entire area.”

He pointed towards the crumbling streets that consumed their view. Dilapidated buildings loomed over them from both sides, poised to collapse on anyone foolish enough to pass beneath them.

“If anything looks suspicious, we investigate it, and if we come across hostilities, we respond with the necessary force. Otherwise...”

Taylor cast his stare onto Lennox and Rudy, “You keep control, I don’t want to see another bloodbath today. Got it?”

“Yes Sir!” Doyle shouted, as Lennox and Skinner grunted in the affirmative. Rogers gave a solemn nod. Taylor knew he was steady and unlikely to get trigger-happy.

“What about you Rudy, do I make myself clear?”

“Oh yeah Sarge,” Rudy replied, “crystal.”

Lennox shook his head, “This is fucking bullshit man, look at the size of me, I’m built for smashing shit up, not walking. I’m going to lose some serious muscle mass today Sarge. You realise that, right?”

“What you complaining about?” Skinner called down to Lennox, “I love these patrols.”

Looking up at his friend, Lennox used his hand to shield the sun from his eyes,

“That’s ’cos you to get to sit up there shooting the fuck out of those sons of bitches. How about we change places for once?”

Skinner laughed, “I don’t think so bud, you know I’m the only one allowed to play with Vicky.”

He reached out and run his hand lovingly along the black metallic paintwork on the giant machine gun in front of him. At least twenty stick men were stencilled along the side of the weapon in white spray-paint. A large, red cross went through each of their torsos, neatly quartering the victims.

“My girl needs to be treated right. If you came up here, you’d just jam her up with those clumsy hands of yours.”

He leant forward and kissed the gun, “That’s right baby, I’m not letting that fool anywhere near you.”

Taylor turned to Doyle, who was staring into a ditch off to his left.

“Doyle, pay attention! I thought I made myself clear at base.”

“Sorry Sarge, It’s just...” he nodded at the bloated corpse of a man facedown in a slow trickling river of shit. He was wearing a white t-shirt with his trousers wrapped

around his ankles exposing the mottled veins on his greyish-blue ass to the world.

It hit Taylor that this was probably the first time Doyle had seen a dead body. Unlike the rest of his team who were so familiar with death they forgot to notice it anymore, Doyle had spent most of his life sheltered in a germ-free, air-conditioned atmosphere. He was a City boy, where powerful fans blasted over the populace, protecting their delicate noses from the decay that festered around them. Taylor envied him for his ignorance.

“Stay with me,” he told the boy, “you’ll be fine.”

He only hoped he sounded convincing enough.