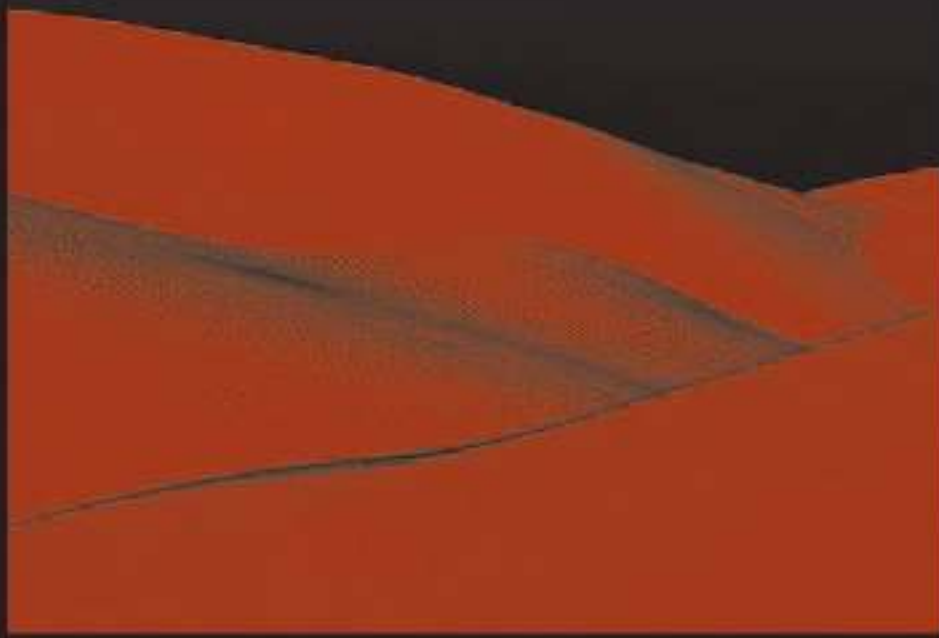


Freehold



William C.
Dietz

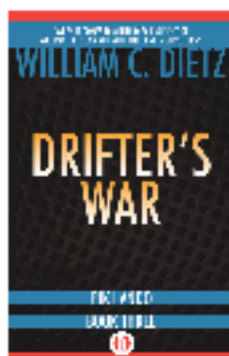
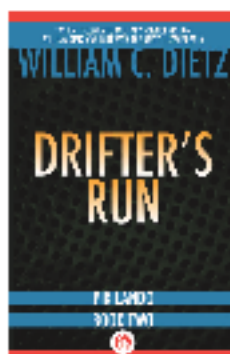
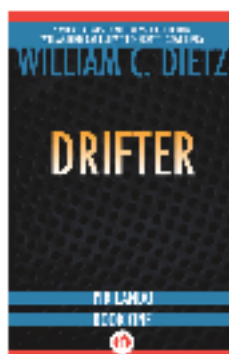


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William C. Dietz

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*For my wife Marjorie,
who liked this one from
the start, and put up
with me while I wrote it.*

Prologue

The incredible heat of Fuzhild's sun beat down on the Lath precisely but, turning its face in, in an oven. In spite of the air conditioning, sweat poured off Brandy like as he bent over the open computer box. His blunt, capable fingers made the last connection and he straightened with a groan. His short, stocky body ached from hours of bending over.

The problem was hard. The problem was always hard. Send in the windings, send in the gears and this time, in the computer box. Somehow the damned will manage to penetrate the triple sealed box and plug us till it shoves out half the weather. That's instrumentation. And on Fuzhild, weather reports were very important indeed!

Brandy picked up the tool pack, slipped his arms through the straps, and pulled it up onto his back. He snapped on his polaroid goggles, sealed his wind suit, checked the action on his anemille, and hit the release switch by the door. It opened, and he stepped out into the blowing wind, allowing the door to his shut behind him. Clinging carefully, Brandy began his way up the side of the mountain. Halfway up his legs were already tired. He knew it could be far worse, however. In fact, it was a nice day by local standards. Wind a steady three miles an hour, with gusts up to thirty, occasional rain of hundred and five in the shade, if you could find any shade.

He felt the air conditioning in his wind suit shift over a notch as he swung the last few steps to the crest of the dune. He paused there for a moment to catch his breath and wonder why he'd been stupid enough to march on. "Gotta go, no more," he'd said back in Sana'at. Next time, he'd rule. He turned, eyes automatically sweeping the horizon. Sand storms, the huge ones called *Sandias*, had all things considered made the journey on Brethold. At first he thought it might be a mirage, a common enough phenomenon on Brethold, but deep down he knew it wasn't. The smoke billowing up to be whipped away by the wind was all too real, and the characteristic shimmer of an settlement's fire field had disappeared. Something was very wrong.

Bran began to run, leaping and jumping down the side of the dune and then struggling up the next. His feet sank into the soft sand, his breath came in short gasps, and cold lead filled his stomach. With heart pounding, he started on the final crest toward the distant point where sand met sky.

Like all the working settlements on Brethold, Sana'at had occupied a large circular depression between two low-plateau ranges. About four miles across, the depression—or "bowl"—was almost solidly in use, by a large, substantial river that surfaced at the south end of the crater and disappeared underground again at the north end. So surrounding the depression on all sides was a steep embankment of wind-driven sand. Bran gulped down and crawled the last few feet of the embankment, and then he broke the sky line. Serpent, Sand, and an ogremental drill instructor back on his native New Earth, would have been proud of him. Somewhere in the back of his mind he could hear Sana'at's screaming, "Kneel down, Bran, or somebody'll blow it all!"

He kept it down as he neared the edge of the embankment and the wind brought him the stench of burning plastic and rubber. Smoke billowed up in the night by the wind and jerked away. The muffled sound of gunfire continued his warning tones. Wriggling close to the edge of the crater, he unclipped the binocular from his waist, unhooked his case, and pressed the viewfinder to his eyes. Careful to shield the powerful lenses from any possibility of reflection, he pushed the zoom control—and it clicked as a gentle scream of death and warning leaped up to meet him. While part of his mind screamed, another part numbly counted many years before, remembered to flick up the binocular's mirror. It would have overexposed his view.

Swinging the binoculars around right so that he saw that the battle was almost over. The hoarse blue shape of the pirate's head dominated the scene, associated in the middle of the settlement's main plaza like some sort of evil god, discharging unnumbered demons in deadly hiding. A wall of vapor and smoke veiled a number of Pirates dazed in and out of the smoke, unharmed or maimed, while others curled heat into the shuttle, and a handful continued to fire at the few remaining defenders.

Bram here pounded in his chest as the binucan turned and held a view of the lot of his friends and neighbors. They were fighting from behind a hastily erected barricade. He gagged, and almost turned away when he saw that the barricade was made of bodies—bodies who had once been friends—but he forced himself to look, to hear, to move to the best of his ability, knowing the binucan would prove what he was, hoping that with his recent return could avoid the same fate.

So he watched. He was not an seventy-two year old Sir Famaoui, two dogs in the chest, and still managed to bury his knife in a pirate, thus slipping the knife next above the man's ear. He watched the ten-year old Jerry twist aim and fire a gun twice each size before an enemy burst that came down. Bram ran down his cheeks as he watched the binucan join the barricade and pupun, in time his wife and daughter.

The bins from the binucan signalled madness in the age. Quickly removing his emergency lantern beam from a pocket, he turned it on, showed it and the binucan man with a narrow log, and pushed it down into the sand. When they came they'd find it. Then he stood in glass of the sky line, and dragged out the molten. Assuming the stance of a aimed marksman, he brought the lantern up to his mouth. He fired his eyes clear at zero, and crept by a general. With infinite care he showed laughter and emotion with. Then, sweeping his weapon in a arc of arc, he methodically picked off the half naked pirates which surrounded them. Bram paused for a moment to make sure he'd killed them all, and a long pained scream of rage, and ran down the bankman. His weapon clattering in his hands, waiting for the inevitable trope.

Freehold

1

Stell stood by the window, hands clasped behind his back, a long lean silhouette against the soft light of Aomori dawn, winter. His green eyes pulsed restlessly over the rickshitsu drill ground below. There was no replication by any means. In fact, until recently it had served as a parking lot for hover tanks. Of course, the troops returning back and forth across it couldn't see less. They had to march no matter where they did it. The new veterans were bored and slightly frustrated, and the new recruits surrounding them were scared and all too sure. But only new recruits, no veterans, no officers, no men as a team, to follow orders without question. Marching had become used to marching, things he thought he'd never see.

Stell ran a hand over his smooth scalp, still shaved clean in the manner of medieval Star Guard. As he watched the order's visible and flow of orders below it occurred to him that the business of war was eternal. The passage of time might change the mode of war, but not the principles by which it was fought, or the reasons behind it. Great battles, a loss for veterans, rogates, they had always guaranteed soldiers something to fight and die for.

"To war, with honor, among the stars." That was the motto of the Marine Corps, the team he'd gone to the Academy and his father, he once believed,

were held beloved it and lived it. Until the day they decided that "honor" had given no expression. Let the honor defend itself. Let the Hukim and Huzam keep each other in check. And let us burn honor taxes. That's what these cowardly central command had decided. Still, brigade was among these dishes for identification.

Hi and the two lions and some members of the brigade were able to discuss Honourable discharge and liver passage to their home planet, to commence service in an authorized mercenary army. "Authorized" meant agreement in advance to fight only those wars approved by the Imperial government. So they agreed in hazard, meaning the Emperor would continue to benefit from the medical benefits, their deaths. And all for free.

In any case, the brigade had said it to a war. Almost exclusively considered going home, but they'd been going a long time, they didn't have civilian skills and besides, for most of their one brigade was home. So most served and still was no exception. Now they continued to fight and die, no longer freedom or honor, but in finance. And still didn't like it. They men had passed since the final battle of New Carthage. It was a dirty little religious war between two rival factions of sects, had been a single church. The brigade was brought in by the weaker side. They managed to win the war, but at a terrible price. In the end, i.e. the disastrous and unnecessary final battle caused by the immense size of their clients, they'd had to lose tens of thousands. And five hundred graves into the rocky ground, including one for Colonel "Bull" Street, their commanding officer.

As a result, Mer's Staff rose from Major to Colonel. Command Executive Officer to Commanding Officer, and had enormous political influence. And the worst part was that he liked it. He liked the freedom, the responsibility and the challenge of command. And yes, he liked the power, too. All of which made him feel guilty as hell some times. Bull Street had been like his father, brother and best friend all rolled into one. But, E. H. had been wrong, damn it! Dead wrong. He couldn't see the way it must inevitably be. Couldn't understand things had changed. Couldn't see that over time his beloved brigade was dying what the ancient Chinese had called "The Death of A Thousand Cuts." As each body was pierced in a blood-soaked staff, a part of the brigade died too. And when the dying was done, they'd be asked to move along, to do it all over again, until finally none of them survived. And as they were replaced one player at a time, the brigade was gradually changing and would eventually become something Street wouldn't have recognized, much less loved. As Staff watched the lawless, its wheels turn, and men in a chain other he knew the line was growing close, with each passing day, it had to be stopped. — our times.

"It's time, sir," the voice was a tremor in law, and Staff turned with a smile.

"Good to see you, Zack. What's the body number? We're going to dinner, not war." Although, when clients are concerned, one client protects the other, he thought to himself. Sergeant Major Zuharah Canno made an impressive sight. Standing tall, his nose tall, all his black skin was only a shade lighter than his tall, flat, a finish on his body armor. Broad at the shoulder and narrow at the hip, he looked like a running master and he knew it. Although his brown eyes were filled with intelligence and humor, they were also a natural wariness, their wide admission, pass which they wave we all toward. Still was one of these few. The Sergeant Major were two hands, as a his waist and under a guard, lunched in his arms. Canno replied with a carefully reserved for times when they were alone. "Yeah, a fine time to talk about appearances, Colonel, when the last time you changed uniforms, answer?" He indicated Still's camped clothes with a grin.

Still looked down at his uniform sheepishly. "Yeah, right, Zack, he wouldn't do to let others see what a slob I really am. But isn't body armor a bit much? He began to slip at his dirty clothes.

Canno emerged in reply. "Have you been outside since we landed. He'll, no. That might involve taking some time off something you fear like doing it, probably because you don't know how to have a good time. But if you'd been out there, you'd know why I'm wearing mine."

Still knew Canno was right. He did feel free time because he didn't know what to do with it. "I didn't," he asked, stepping into a pair of gray dress trousers.

"You're like total unity," he other man replied, shaking his head in wonderment. "They call it the Four Zone, I call it a line to die for. We've been in some pretty wild places over the years, but this takes the cake. I've got a full war on waiting inside to seem as good as dead, and I'm not sure I'm enough. But I'm afraid to weaken the perimeter by taking more, especially when so many g-venies in the ranks. So take my advice and cut up. Otherwise soon, Zackie may have you for dinner!" With a grin and a wave he was gone, leaving Still to finish dressing.

As he buttoned the last gold button on the light red coat, Still wondered about medals and then decided against them. They belonged to the past. He shrugged on the harness and tucked the shotgun into the holster under his belt, even if Zack was worried, even was good reason. And although he hadn't been outside, he knew what the Sergeant Major was talking about. As usual and last clients had been eager to get rid of their own, victory was assured. No one wants a messenger, every sitting a mind while they go through the delicate process of hiring a new government. After all, the power the brigade gained it could also take away.

So they liked off slave, taking out two million and leaving their dead. And they came here to Arno, to use, to go, to and wait on the next war. Arno was an

agricultural planet, walked by and organized around a single church. Kind of ironic, in a way, considering they were on Armo to recover from a religious war on New Covenant. Anyway, the church Elders controlled all aspects of Euan Armo, especially the economy. Early on, the Elders had realized it was the very same kind of activity to trade in by their old gods, but called the most "original" exchange. What is to say, that the value of their old gods, was and weavers brought in more money from off planet, than did the sale of vegetable. So, eager to make this much needed "foreign" exchange, we are afraid of a positive god, they invented the Free Enterprise Zone, a wonderful device that would enable them to bring their value and money in. And by confining all economic off planet within the Zone, they could protect their "lock" from interesting influences and still enjoy the benefits of interstellar commerce. And their invention served them very well indeed.

The Elders demanded and received when they called upon the Elders the value of all goods sold within the Zone. In return, those within the Zone were free to do as they pleased. Free to receive law and regulation, the Zone was a model of sorts of ease, peace, tranquility, which was quite different on other planets. This in fact troubled the Elders in the first, following the ancient religious dictum that the end justifies the means, they reasoned that since the revenues this generated would be used to invest agricultural experiments, which would eventually transform the planet into the Eden prepared by the church leaders. Another Free Armo, then the Zone was, in the final analysis, a trial. And when the Staff had again coming down from orbit, they were well on the way toward their goal. Armo was a beautiful planet, much of it still wild, with huge tracts of beautiful farmland that were broken here and there by the gentle flow of wide slow moving rivers. Armo was a nice place to live... if you were in the Zone.

The Free Zone was about twenty five square miles in size. Because its boundaries were entirely artificial, it formed a perfect circle in shape that the Elders military advisors assured them would be very able to track, should economic activity within the Zone ever get out of hand. A single large field surrounded it, preventing entry or exit except through the one, closely guarded gate. Of course, this was merely a col, since citizens were not allowed into the Zone, and Zones were not allowed out. Most commerce arrived and departed from spaceport located in the Zone's center. There was a second, small spaceport located on the other side of the planet, but it was dedicated to strictly approved military and Armo's naval navy.

Radiating out from the Free Zone's spaceport were concentric rings of active Free Zone corridors, and night lights coloring to ever so imaginable rate in dusk and dawn. Their clientele were mostly drawn from the ships unloading down to local unladen cargo, but it was hard to tell, though Elders paid scant

visiting places like the "Sire" "Nova" and "Blondy Mary" – two of the Zone's main celebrated dives. Beyond those were the illegal activities, illicit markets, labor fronts, and workhubs. And finally, the out-mosking was seen not dissipated forms, manure, and shanties. Here the majority of the Zone's population would catch their first taste of life, or being used by those who were meant for boys and girls' jobs. Others were much sicker. They had no jobs, and existed by victimizing those who did, until they themselves fell prey in the endless cycle of poverty and misery, but within the Zone, there was no law, except that imposed on the weak by the strong.

This, then, was the area into which the brigade had been hurried, so quickly they could have stayed in place for a while, or sought out another place to stay, but Anna was dumb, and the place had everything to reach, plus. She'll know that in the end, they'd be forced to accept some thing similar, or worse. No one called out the national pact for a mercenary army between engagements.

So the brigade paid out Hides an exorbitant fee, entered the Zone, and rented space in what had recently been a Yid drug edinery, and an illegal weapons factory, hence, the "The complex of buildings, plus the parking lot outside, now constituted brigade HQ. It wasn't as secure as he'd like, but so far the brigade's obvious firepower, aggressive posture, and virtual reputation had prevented raids by the criminal element – although Sgt'l wasn't sure the word "criminal" served any useful function in the Zone. But such attacks weren't unheard of. When a general worthwhile, someone would target it, a temporary army, and use it to attack a drug factory or some other profitable target. And, because of its weapons and equipment, the brigade would certainly qualify as a "profitable".

So Sgt'l slipped into the Area and walked in. He checked the back on the shore, only to see the little un-insured boys and girls, and opened his door. As he left his office, the two guards outside stopped for attention. He nodded and they fell in behind as he marched down the hall toward the lift tube. Moments later he was outside, and almost gagging on the heavy odor of incoming garbage and backed up sewers. He swallowed and made a note to get the air cleaned up. Without any form of mental control, all the in the Zone were a fresh start all in.

As he walked in the street he noticed that the light had gotten dim, an Anna's sun melted in his horizon, retaining barely enough strength to throw long shadows across the dome that beneath his boots. Sergeant Major Carth's narrow walking at the end of the road consisted of four vehicles, two, even had a truck of various makes and image, plus an ancient limo. There was some thing vaguely familiar about the exiled shanties sitting in the rear of the open vehicle, but a moment Sgt'l couldn't think it, but when he realized what it was

be English, and to real to find out Sergeant Major Corro was materialized at his side. "Scary about the vehicles, sir, but as you know, the barracks wouldn't be a being any of our men still down."

Stell knew Corro was returning to the Files' intent to allow them any more. While they rode around in whatever they could dredge up, there were a couple of hundred partially good vehicles, also of the brigade's three transports, presently in left column. And, if on the right of the column, the Files were using the thought of mercenaries riding around in tanks probably drove them crazy.

"But, see, you found a way around that?" Stell said, indicating the rounded shape in the back of the lines.

Corro had registered dilemma in answer. "You mean trouble. Smith sir, I agree, he's angry, but certainly not a lack of effort."

Snaking in mock agreement, Stell said, "Now that I look again, I see you're absolutely right. Sergeant Major Wilcox is a poor Smith. I'd be happy if I must see. By the way, Sergeant Major, any complaints on our transportation?" Stell said, eyeing the aging vehicles that made up the convoy. "I see, but in addition to your other accumulated elements you're able to raise the dead?"

The joke got the predictable laugh, but that was not enough to cheer a Staff officer, would make the rounds of the barracks later, making him seem less remote and more human. As he climbed into the truck he thought about how easily he could manipulate them. That leadership didn't come as naturally to him as it did to some. Bill Strain had been a good example. He had that mysterious ability that allowed some to walk in a room full of perfect strangers and effortlessly make each into a friend and admirer. Lacking that kind of charisma, Stell developed a more calculational style of leadership which, though calm, effective, seemed somehow a bit cold and more low-gaming.

Stell changed his radio switch on. "Where's Major Melic?" he asked, looking around the 800.

From a way off in his own vehicle, Corro shrugged his shoulders. "He told Sergeant Wilcox he was planning a surprise inspection of the perimeter sir."

Stell was annoyed that Melic had chosen to screw up his final orders, but the surprise inspection was a good idea. It would keep the greens on edge. As the convoy jerked into motion, Stell's eyes began a systematic search of their surroundings. He was looking for the File things, clues which had to generate the dilemma between life and death for him, a mother in an upstairs window, the glint of reflected light on a weapon, the stalled vehicle that shouldn't be there. But finding nothing, he turned his attention to the canvas. The manual redundancy to hand up could be suicidal. A tightly garrisoned convoy could be disorganized with a single shoulder-shouldered move.

at a well-placed burst. But the vehicles stayed well separated under Corné's watchful eye.

Cautiously, the convoy worked its way through darkening streets, twisting and turning. For some moments it slowly gradually moved farther away from the safety of its lane. And, as the sun dipped below the horizon, Stell felt a prickling on his scalp and knew they were not alone. The wash of their headlamps was quickly lost in the darkness, but had descended a road from "Reps" were, were, only several, as their dark, unmarked forms hurried to avoid the light and were tracked out in slight, but inland curves.

Stell pivoted in his arm, doing his best to ignore the sudden instinct of prying at random through his system, urging him to run, to hide from the unknown things that stalked the night. "Ben ça knew, turned to day, a power, aif fans were aif," he thought, light above the files in Stell's vision at the edge of burnout. Swearing, he switched an inland light in time to see the attackers come scurrying up out of the shadows like maggots, firing a disturbed carpet. There were hundreds of them, all dressed in disposable white camouflage suits, which were gradually turning black as the flames bared down. They moved quickly in a round and isolated path, which in the distance. Then they opened up with stinging showers and energy weapons that cut the night in a thousand swarms of light and dark.

Stell checked his rifle switch. "At home, a weapons, left, and right, that's the Canada's launchers, left and right, the Swiss, a pack target ahead and the Clear a with the your vehicle, but watch out for those in front of you, means enough people shooting at you already." The joke got a laugh, it was lost in the roar of sound as the trucks moved up. Flashed in Corné, they were all hand-picked veterans. A quick glance told him casualties were light so far. Only one of the trucks in the truck was down. The others were cutting down Zanis in swarms like wheat at harvest. But, quickly as they died, more had fallen out of the swarms, dropped from railroads, and angled out of dark, swiftness at first, in a long. There was a burst of static, followed by Sergeant Corné's calm voice, "Green kar to green one."

"Go ahead, green kar," Stell replied, spotting the trigger on his assault rifle, and tracking a line of white trails through one of the infrared filters, reporting toward him.

"We have a prisoner, green one, and he's been signed."

"Understand, green one?" Stell replied, stirring over the new information. Some of the old, old Zanis had been ego-suppressed, probably enough use of illegal drugs, and then resurrected with a brand of the brigade, or all people wearing A suits, in whatever it really didn't matter. What mattered was that the Zanis wouldn't react the way they should instead of making, they were being decimated and running or surrendering.

they would not keep running until they were, or until they were all dead. Ego and the two technicians were illegal because they were a threat to the Zone.

Swinging his gaze over the canopy, Kaz saw the greatest danger he was in being accidental media. His troops were beaten, armed, and trained, but the Zonies outnumbered them at least ten to one. Given that advantage, plus one suicidal crazy, they could't lose. Unless... Suddenly a Zonie landed right in front of him. With a shock he realized she was just a manager, but somehow she was bringing in old-fashioned glory from a generation of Hollywood down back in a small. He watched, fascinated, as she brought up her disapp, disposable power gun, aware that some remote part of himself had recognized, wondering vaguely who would win. Then he felt himself pull the trigger and watched the side of her head disappear in a spray of blood and brains. Still he could not say, may have her mumbled to him, he spoke, "Given our target, her?"

"Go ahead, given one," Corn replied.

"Stand by to drop Trooper Smith on my command. Initialize program 10 with seven minute hold."

"That's affirmative, given one, Trooper Smith on your command."

Peering over the truck's cab, Kaz was missing the darkness when a wild deluge of white light washed over him. Startled, he thought another flare had gone off. Then he realized the last truck in the canopy, the one just behind the line, was on fire. The surviving troops hauled out and ran for cover, trying desperately to catch up with the fleeing fire. As he watched one stumble and fall, then another, both quickly disappearing under a wave of advancing Zonies. Pounding on the side of the truck in frustration, he issued new orders. "Given one to given one. Stop the timer, drop Trooper Smith and pick up survivors."

"Affirmative, given one," Corn replied.

Raising his glasses, Still saw the fire silhouetted against the burning truck. Trooper Smith would, unfolding himself into vaguely human form and slipped down onto the pavement. Meanwhile, the rearview mirrors laid down meaning, as his eyes were from the burning truck caught up and piled into the fire.

As Trooper Smith disappeared in the direction of the advancing Zonies, Still wondered if the dragged truck would recognize what they could. Possibly not. But they would soon experience what it could do. Standing right over all, and weighing more than half a ton, the Auto Trooper was a machine designed for only one thing: killing. It did its job very well. A military derivative of the famous Antagonist, the robot had the destructive capability of an entire section of Imperial Marines. But

since Auto-Thought were in the ally's suspension, they would never replace the escape. Flex and Vane burned the central train. At last we have job security. Still, thought wryly. Comrade violated the spirit, if not the letter of their agreement with the Killee by bringing the robot down from orbit. But Still didn't plan on putting that on. They would probably lose the valuable machine, but they would save most of the service, a trade he'd barely make any day of the week.

With the survivors aboard, the limo drove seaward no time catching up with the rest of the convoy. Turning left glasses slightly, Still saw the Auto-Thought hunkle by the burning creek, waiting with limitless mechanical patience for the order to kill. Zonias swarmed around it, screaming their frustration as their slugs and beams bounced helplessly off its armor and defensive screens. Then, somewhere deep inside, its armor suddenly re-closed, currents surged, weapons were activated, and the mini-matter for controlling it began picking tugs of opportunity. With deceptive slowness, it tumbled and covered in a fire Zonies made. Then, without warning the robot began to spew slugs, grenades, the robot and robot fire energy in every direction. It was a sight Still would never forget. In a lifetime of battles, he'd never seen such slaughter. The robot never missed. Each projectile hit its mark. Every beam of fatal energy found a target. Rows of rows of Zonias were cut to bloody shreds. Tossed in the air, they fell their way to wand, slipping and sliding in the slush. To the mud below and the hot, hot, eager to kill their turn in the heat of lead, steel, and deadly energy. Men, women and children all hurried forward to die. The warm pain was an infinitely empty expanse on every side. Somehow, they seemed more machine-like than the robot monster that destroyed them. They were, or had been, people. Loving, hating, happy, sad, . . . people. Men, women in their own way, they were loved by parents of good knives, what, he might, and chemically altered into cheap, disposable troops. There was no honor in killing them, only an evil. Still turned away. Sick at what someone had done to them, sick at what he was doing to them, yet, allowing it to go on. He did otherwise would be a betrayal of those who trusted him. But he swore a silent oath to find those responsible and make their pay.

Clanking around, he saw most of the Zonies had turned away from the narrow to attack the robot. They were like nets drawn to a lamp. Whether acting on their own or responding to some external divination, he could not tell. Whatever the reason, he was grateful. Calling for more speed, Still rode on right in the narrow drive quickly away. Ahead he saw only darkness. Wearing the useless binoculars, he hit his lip in frustration. The Zonias had become a red line, a drive on, enemy to avoid. Logically, therefore, an evil-witted somewhere involved. . . . they continued, they'd be smashed

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