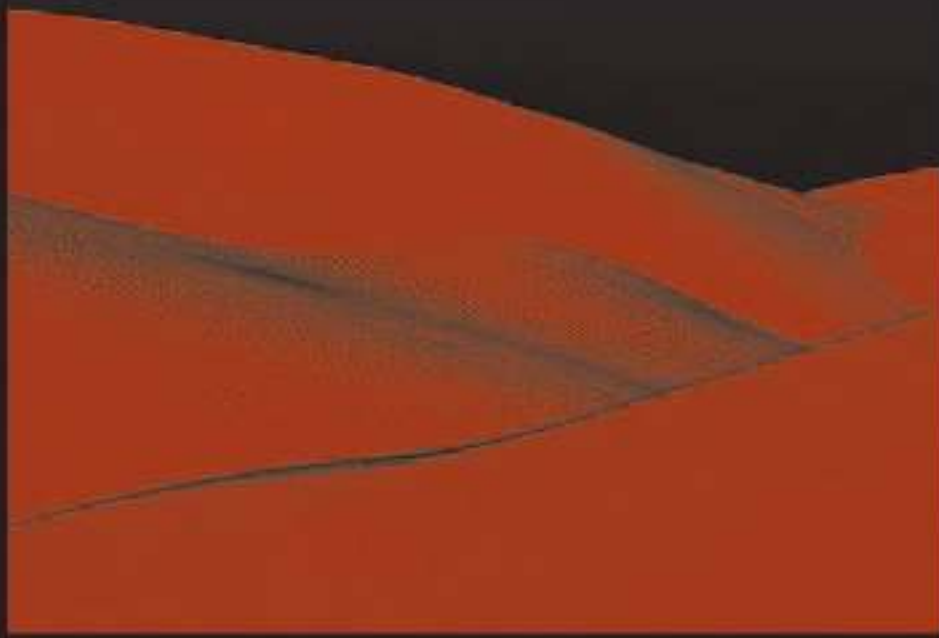


Freehold



William C.
Dietz

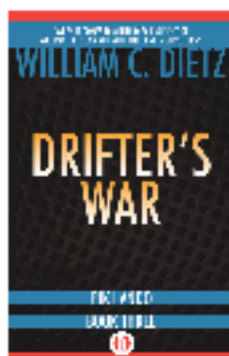
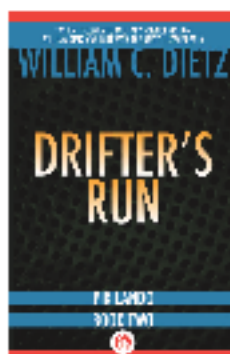
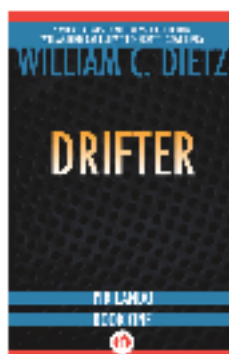


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William C. Dietz

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ISBN 978-1-4976-0692-0

This edition published in 2014 by Open Road Integrated Media, Inc.

345 Hudson Street
New York, NY 10014
www.openroadmedia.com



*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 fly 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 over. "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 fields 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 plateaus average distance about four miles across. One dunes on "northern" was almost solid, in two by a large, substantial main river that so flowed to 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 down, low out of the embankment, and tried not to break the sky line. Serpent, Sana'at's conventional 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, "Keep it 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 in his coat, and pressed the viewfinder to his eyes. Careful to shield the powerful lenses from any possibility of reflection, he pushed one thumb 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 memory. It would have overloading his eye.

Swinging the binoculars on right zero, he saw that the battle was almost over. The battered black shape of the pirate's hull 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 third of the area, and out of the smoke an immense tank, while others curled hot 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 he believed, knowing the binucan would prove what he was, hoping that with his recent return could avoid the same fate.

So he searched. He was not an seventy-two year old Sir Haman, 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 in. 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 overcoat pulsed restlessly over the makishi drift ground below. It wasn't repulsion by any means. It felt, in fact, recently it had served as a parking lot for hover tracks. Of course, the troops returning back and forth across it couldn't see less. They had no marching nor no car where they did it. The few victims were bored and slightly frustrated, and the raw recruits surrounding them were scared and all too sure. But only those learn to work together, in unison as a team, to follow orders without question. Marching had been used to march on things for thousands of years.

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 reasons cogable, 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 only bit his

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 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, it was the disastrous and unnecessary final battle caused by the immense size of their clients, they'd had had losses to cover more than five hundred graves into the valley 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 of policy to exhibit it. 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 lowered into blood-soaked soil, 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 wheel turn, and men in a chain other he knew the line was growing close, with each passing day, it had to be supplied. "Our lives?"

"Our lives?" 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 one after the other. Still was one of these few. The Sergeant Major were two hands, one at his waist and under a guard, tucked in his arms. Canno smiled 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 uniformed clothes with a grin.

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

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, war was good again. 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 people dead. And they came here to Army to use, a good, and wait on the next war. Anno was an

agricultural planet, watered by and irrigated around a single source. 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. Perhaps, the Elders had realized it was the very same kind of activity to hinder by their religion, but called the most "original" exchange. What is to say, that the sale of illicit drugs, sex, and weapons brought in more money than off-planet. And if it the sale of vegetable. So, eager to earn this much needed "foreign" exchange, we, afraid of a punitive god, they invented the Free Enterprise Zone, a wonderful device that would enable them to bring their virtual money out. 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 deity the entire 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 fitting on other planets. This had done trouble the Elders in the past, 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 deity for them. Another Euan Armo, then the Zone was, in the final analysis, a utopia. And when the Staff had again rearing down from orbit, they were well on their 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 six foot high 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 warehouses. And finally, the out-moscowing war worn and disintegrated former mercenaries and shrikes. Here the majority of the Zone's population would catch their death. Most died out in a gradual, creeping in some factory willing themselves for illness, or caught, or being used by those who were meant for boys and girls' (the Colours were not so lucky). They had no debts, 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 police 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 Yul' érag refinery, and an illegal weapons factory, hence, the "The complex of buildings, plus the parking lot outside", now christened 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 was sure the word "criminal" served any useful function in the Zone. But such attacks weren't unheard of. When a weapon worth while, 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 slipped into the Area and searched. He checked the boat on the shore, only to see it filled with insured boxes and opened in a flash. 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 cold air, a long passage, and backed up sewers. He swallowed and made a race 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 grown dim, an Anna's sun melted in a horizon, retaining barely enough strength to throw long shadows across the dome that beneath his boots. Sergeant Major Carab's narrow walking stick, which consisted of four vehicles, even more heavy trucks of various makes and images, plus an ancient limo, there was some thing vaguely familiar about the exiled shrike sitting in the rear of the open vehicle. For a moment SGT couldn't believe it, but when he realized what it was

be English, and to real to find out Sergeant Major Gomez 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 Gomez was referring to the Files' refusal to allow them any more. While they rode around in whatever they could dredge up, there were a couple of hundred partially good vehicles, about the brigade's three transports, presently in the barracks area. How the delight of the barracks made the Files nervous, 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.

Gomez 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 Wilk is a proper Smith. I'd be happy 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 so far as Stell knew it, 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 as a matter of perfect strangers and effortlessly make each into a friend and advisor. 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.

Five minutes in his own vehicle, Gomez shrugged his shoulders. "He told Sergeant Wilk 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 handle up could be suicidal. A tightly garrisoned convoy could be disorganized with a single shoulder-shouldered move.

at a well placed bomb. 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 at night by infrared sensors.

Stell focused in his aim, 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 a..." he thought, light above the files in Stell's vision at the edge of burnout. Swearing, he switched to infrared. A minute later the attackers came 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 each vehicle in the convoy. Then they opened up with slug throwers and energy weapons that cut the night into a thousand swarms of light and dark.

Stell checked his rifle switch. "Attonaire weapons, left and right, there's the Corade launchers, left and right, fire. Seize a, pick targets ahead and fire. Clear a with for your vehicle, but watch out for those in front of you means enough people shooting at on the fly." The joke got a laugh, it was lost in the roar of sound as the treasury moved up. There in Corade they were all hand-picked veterans. A quick glance told him casualties were light so far. Only one of the treasury's infrared truck was down. The others were cutting down Zanis in swarms like wheat at harvest. But, as quickly as they died men, half a dozen out of the swarm, dropped from radars, and angled out of dark's way, jerseys at their disposal. 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 fields, reporting second hit.

"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 citizens of crime, in the Zone.

Swinging his gaze over the curving, flat saw the gun next danger. Liz in being somewhat under. His trousers were beaten around and stained, but the Zanies outnumbered here at least were to me. Given that advantage plus our suicidal frenzy they could't lose. Unless. . . Suddenly a Zanie lunged right in front of him. With a shock he realized she was just a manager, but somehow she was bringing in old on her identity from eyes continuously filled. Lips drawn back in a snarl. He watched, fascinated, as she brought up her disrup, disposable power gun, aware that some remote part of himself had reacted, 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 and get her one," Corn replied.

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

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

Peering over the truck's cab, Kaz' was missing the darknes, 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 curving, the one just behind the line, was on fire. The surviving troops hauled out and ran for ward, trying desperately to catch up with the fleeing fire. As he was heading on, stumbled and hit, then another body crickly disappearing under a wave of advancing Zanies. Pounding on side of the truck in frustration, he issued new orders. "Given one to given our. Stop the line, drop Trooper Smith and pick up survivors."

"Affirmative, given our," 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 as we were in the burning truck caught up and piled into the line.

As Trooper Smith disappeared in the direction of the advancing Zanies. 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 the ally's dependence, 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 Elite 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 tank, 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 targets of opportunity. With deceptive slowness, it lumbered forward into the Zonie herd. 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. Those on the narrow shed their way to wand, slipping and sliding in the slush. To the mid-lateral angle. Then that, eager to kill, then to us in our habit of lead, and deadly energy. Men, women and children all hurried forward to die. The warm pain was the mindless, empty express on only war. 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 and 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 war, yet allowing it to go on. He did otherwise we 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 war. Logically, therefore, an evil-witted somewhere involved. If they continued, they'd be smashed

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