

Brink of Extinction Chapter Two

by Christopher Lee Buckner

CHAPTER TWO

The drop ship rocked violently as it birthed from its mother ship, which orbited low over the eastern seaboard of what had been the United States. One minute and forty seconds later the underside of the craft, which carried twenty-nine Federation Marines struck the atmosphere; blazing hot white as it descended quickly

This was Privet Thomas Anderson first drop. He had undergone hundreds of hours of simulated combat, created to as close to the real thing as possible. Yet, he was not excited like his fellow *jarheads*, which howled jubilantly as they held onto their harnesses that kept them secure to their seats, while a few other men threw up into their sealed helmets. Thankfully, that wasn't Anderson's reaction as he sat nervously, sweating under his visor-helmet.

"*Hooah! Yeah! I never want this ride to end!*" Screamed Privet Richard Tear at the top of his lungs; he sat next to Anderson repeating the same phrase over-and-over as they fell, joining other bolstering marines.

"*Hooah is army, you dumb shit.*" Anderson rolled his eyes. He disliked Tear. He was the same age as he, nineteen, but had the maturity of a ten year old boy. He was a large lug hailing from northern Canada. Apparently, they grew men big and stupid up there.

Tear's smile was wide as he nudged Anderson's shoulder, wanting him to join the celebration of their first combat drop.

"Fucking idiot," Anderson mumbled under his breath, which thankfully Tear didn't hear.

A violent rattle shook Anderson's nerves even more. A moment later an indicator inside his helmet lit up as a small icon told him

that he had relieved himself. Thankfully no one else could have known as the message was for his eyes only. More so, he was happy the suit he used was designed to be worn for days at a time, so it was built with such bodily functions in mind. The piss would be stored inside a small container within the harden exoskeleton. It would then be recycled back into something drinkable, filtered into the water pack that was located on Anderson's back, which was saturated with nutrients and vitamins, which he would need to survive. All he had to do was tilt his head slightly and drink from the straw that was under his chin, and he could do that without having to remove his helmet.

The armor could be claustrophobic and took some time getting used to. Thankfully new recruits were trained for months with the suits, first learning the basic functions: repairs, augmentations; everyone especially enjoyed the enhanced strength and speed. Then they learned to live in the suits, helmets sealed, relying entirely on the continuously recycled air, liquid nutrient packs and climate controls to survive. They were forbidden to remove their helmets even when they slept. To do so meant death in the field.

The transport finally stopped rocking as they breached the atmosphere and came into a controlled flight as the pilot leveled off.

Master Sergeant McNairy rose from his seat. He had a classic marine buzz cut and a head lined with numerous, horrific scars. Both his eyes were artificial as was one of his ears, which wasn't noticeable unless you looked closely.

"Hellhounds," he began with a roaring voice. "Today is the first day of our victory!"

The marines roared before settling down so that McNairy could continue.

"Today we take back from the *Daemons* the cities of our forefathers. You are only one platoon among thousands. Never before has our race launched such a massive assault since the first days of the war a century before. Remember your duty - Remember your training, and if you die today, know you laid your life down so that our species may survive. Do you hear me Marines?!?"

We hear you sir! Everyone spoke as one voice, which brought a warm smile to McNairy's scarred face.

As the sergeant activated a button on the wall near him, a holographic map appeared in the center of the walkway between his marines.

"You all know what to do and what is at state. Our landing is as marked." The map indicated to every marine where they were to touch down within the boundaries of Central Park, New York City, now barren of its lush trees and watery lakes. "We are to scout the area and find anything that isn't human. And if it doesn't walk upright, what do *Hellhounds* do?"

We kill it sir! All said in one boisterous voice.

"That's my boys and girls. Leave nothing alive, so that way those army shit-eaters don't take our glory."

A wave of laughter filled the drop ship as Anderson listened carefully. He knew that every transport had their own version of Master Sergeant McNairy onboard telling them the same thing. It was the nature of the military to be bold, arrogant and direct, as well to instill in their men and women a sense of invincibility. He was smart enough, however, to know bolstering from the truth — the reality of his world, no one was immortal nor was mankind superior to the enemy.

Of course humanity had the technology, the knowhow and the drive to endure no matter what, but Anderson had lost too many of his brothers and sisters to know better. Weekly as he grew up, his *house mother* received the automated messages sent by the military board, death notifications of his lost siblings. The government wanted everyone to think otherwise. They needed to convince the mob the war was still winnable. They said the federation military was near victory. They claimed the best human minds were close to finding scientific means to destroy the *Daemons* once and for all. They proclaimed that humanity would find new homes, on the space stations being constructed in orbit, or the moon, or Mars — that even if the earth should fall, humanity would continue on. Anderson did not fancy himself to be the brightest kid — otherwise he

wouldn't be a simple ground-pounder dropped three hundred miles above the earth, waiting to land in a city that had been dead for a century. But he wasn't a mindless idealistic fool either. He understood the reasons behind what the government did. It needed to keep the tattered remnants of civilization intact. Their intentions were noble and the federation had saved humanity from a horrific death that would have certainly befallen the human race decades earlier if the barrier cities hadn't been constructed, and the world governments united. For those reasons Anderson would fight and do his duty to the best of his abilities.

"Hellhounds, we shall always remember those that came before us and laid their lives down for the continuing survival of our species. But we will fight, today for the living and generations yet born, so that they will never have to face the evils that each of you must survive...Until the Daemons are gone!"

"And man free!" Anderson yelled loudly as his voice joined the rest of his platoon in confident unison.

* * * * *

New York City

Forty-two hours later..

The eerie stillness of a frozen city, left like a dusty old photograph over the mantel of a fireplace was symbolic of everything that was lost. It was Christmas Day and through the night sky, flames filled the horizon as New York burned long into the night. Tens of thousands of corpses, fresh to the touch, lie beside century old skeletal remains. They were scattered across the street like a string of broken dolls. The rivers of blood that flowed through the gutters mixed with the dust, while the smell of the newly dead, rotting quickly under the radiated night sky, which rose up like a blanket over the tattered remains of this fallen civilization.

A thick and sooty *snow* fell down from the sky, covering the lifeless remains in a sheet of gray powder. Even this late in the year the temperature was well over a hundred degrees. The radiated

surface killed everything that wasn't protected by a suit. For some, however, such comforts were no longer available as a lone survivor - Privet Thomas Anderson stumbled through the ruins of downtown Manhattan, with only tattered armor and the will to survive.

He recalled that the operation had gone smoothly, for the first few hours. He remembered sitting in the drop ship, which came down from orbit, listening to his sergeant relay his final words of encouragement. The *Hellhounds* had been among the first to land. Everything was quiet as only small bands of the enemy had been found and easily dealt with. Then reports started pouring in of enemy incursion within the perimeter.

The *Hellhounds* found themselves overrun. Even though they killed thousands of enemy attackers, the beasts were relentless. They cared nothing about how many of their kin died, not as long as they reached the human lines as each sacrifice allowed them to get closer. Anderson wished that he could say that he fought bravely - fearless in the face of sudden death. He wished he could say a lot of things, but he would be lying. He was scared and the second the order came to pull out, he ran.

There had been dozens, perhaps even hundreds of survivors that ran with him as they chased down like a herd of cattle, picked off one by one. Anderson remembered fighting, screaming and killing. It was then that he saw from the sky one of the massive warships that had descended from orbit, come crashing down as it was being attacked by a swarm of black creatures, nearly invisible against the night sky.

The ship fell, perhaps two or three miles out toward the empty Hudson River, but it didn't matter how far he was when its core exploded. Even through the protection of his armor, he felt the intense heat as the ship was consumed by fire, sending a mushroom cloud of dirt and flames into the sky. Buildings that had stood for a hundred years came crashing down all around him, as the violent shockwave that follow destroyed everything. He blacked out, his last thought of his house mother, who had already endured the loss of so many other children. How would she get over this? What would she

have left to live for? Of course, it wasn't his choice that he joined the service; everyone of his age was required.

However, he awoke hours later, his suit horribly damaged and compromised, surrounded by billions of tons of rubble and raging fires. He saw no one else alive, not the other *Hellhounds* or the Daemon — only the dead from both sides.

Among the ruins he wondered aimlessly. He ran toward any signs of human activity. However, always, before he could reach his people he was too late. Rescue had come for them, or they were already dead.

Anderson dropped to his knees and threw up a yellow puss that was mixed with ash, dirt and blood. He knew what it was. He had been exposed for too long. His skin was blistering as boils began to form on his flesh. He never imagined such heat as his lungs burned with each breath.

He struggled back to his feet. His vision was starting to blur. He knew from survival guides that he could still live for a week or two, perhaps. He needed shelter, something deep underground. Yet, those were the hiding places of the Daemon. Besides, he had to find rescue.

"Is anyone there?" Against better judgment he cried out -- *Anyone human at least?*

The old city scared him perhaps as much as the enemy did. He had seen videos of what life had been like pre-Daemon invasion — the variety, colors, smells and imagination was unthinkable today. Anderson was haunted by the ghostly windowless buildings that lined the street, suffocated by the choking ash and the endless murmur of the wind.

How could it have come to this? Why didn't they do anything when they still had the chance? His questions were not his own, but every living soul that still remained.

"Anyone, please help me!" His voice carried, lost between the canyons of towering, rotting steel. Unfortunately the faint glow of the burning fires did not illuminate his path enough as he lost his

footing and fell into one of the deep craters that pot marked the street.

His momentum stopped when he reached the bottom. Right away he could feel the wetness of his own blood as it slowly trickled down the side of his head. It took a few seconds for him to collect his thoughts and regain his footing as he stood within the pit of chewed up concrete and twisted metal. He could barely see where he was as he moved forward, but again he tripped.

Anderson moaned. It was then that he saw what it was he had stumbled over as he looked down into the still open eyes of a human being. He knew he shouldn't have screamed — Alex, his brother wouldn't have screamed, but he did anyways as he backed up as quickly as he could. It was only then that he realized there were dozens of bodies, or what was left of them as pieces of human remains were strewn about the crater.

“Oh my god,” Anderson mumbled to himself as he stared, not able to take his eyes off of what he was seeing. The men and women, all federation soldiers looked to be part of the 106th Army Airborne; an advance unit that would have been amongst the first to be deployed in the city. Like so many bodies he had seen, each were torn to shreds, with deep gashes ripped through their light body armor. Severed limbs, which were scattered all around the inside and outside of the crater floated in pools of blood, which boiled in the radiated heat.

The man that Anderson fell on, had half of his face ripped off, exposing what was left of his skull and brain. It was the horrific expressions in each of their eyes, those that still had them, which bothered him the most as he tried to carefully make his way through the bodies and climb his way up and out of the crater.

He collapsed down onto both of his knees once he reached the top, before he crawled and put his weight up against the side of a destroyed personnel carrier that was in the center of the road. Only then did he realize that he had stumbled into a staging area for the 106th.

The back hatch was open. Anderson hurried round to the rear. He quickly noticed a few more bodies inside, or at least what was left of them as there was little more than running pools of sticky blood, limbs and entrails mixed in with large chunks of flesh. He ignored the sight as best he could, along with the sudden urge to throw up and forced his way through the compartments that were still intact. A moment later he managed to find some water, which he opened and drank. He also found several radiation stems — a real life saver. He quickly, once he had finished the water injected one of the stems into the side of his neck. It wouldn't prevent him from dying from radiation exposure, but it would allow him to stave off its affects long enough for him to be rescued.

A small submachine gun, a model SM-308, which held fifty armor piecing rounds of depleted uranium sat in one of the cases. It was one of the few working weapons he'd come across. There were three extra clips plus a couple of grenades that could be loaded into the small launcher, which was attached to the underside. Anderson loaded one into the breach and clipped the rest to his utility vest. He hoped he might be able to find a shortwave radio and make contact with a federation command satellite that hung in orbit overhead, but that equipment, much like everything else inside the APC had been destroyed, and he was no technician to repair the stuff.

He suddenly heard something coming from outside. He listened for a moment, holding his breath for a long while as he waited to hear if the sound repeated. Then he heard it again, but now realizing that it sounded like a *click*, like a radio burst.

Anderson moved carefully, making sure to stay low as he looked around the side of the vehicle before moving towards the direction of the clicking, which sounded every few seconds.

He could hear someone speaking low, on the other side of a federation APC, this one was overturned.

As he rounded it he saw the origin of the sound.

"Oh my god," Anderson said low to himself as he saw lying against the overturned APC a female soldier. He rushed over to her

and saw that she held a transceiver in her hand as she tried unsuccessfully to radio in her position, over and over again.

Anderson looked the woman over seeing quickly that she was an officer.

“Captain, can you hear me?”

She had a deep gash to her midsection, which she covered up with one arm, while the other continued to try and call in her position, requesting airstrikes, only she was speaking in Russian, not English.

“Let me take a look at that wound,” Anderson said as he took out some field dressing from one of her pouches, but on closer examination he saw that there was nothing he could do as her cut had gone nearly all the way through her midsection. If he lifted her up, she may actually split in two.

“Our position has been compromised...The *Daemon* is within our lines...we need air cover,” the captain, now spoke in English as she grabbed Anderson suddenly by his shoulder, staring up at him with bloodshot eyes.

“Do you hear me? They are everywhere. We have to hold them back. We need air cover!”

“I know. Let me try, I may be able to call in for an *EVAC* for both of us. Just hang in there,” Anderson said as he took the radio away from the officer, who looked up at him in a dazed state. He could see in her eyes that she had no notion of how much time had passed. She acted as if the fighting was still going on. With her wounds and the radiation seeping into her, he couldn't fathom how she had managed to stay alive this long.

Even as Anderson stood back to his feet, switching the radio frequency, which was set to a wrong channel the wounded officer at his feet continued to repeat her message over and over; each breath becoming weaker, but she had been drilled without end to carry out her duty.

The radio clicked once the proper channel was input.

“This is Privet Thomas Anderson of the 72nd marine armored division, second battalion, third platoon - I am trapped in the city

with one wounded. We need EVAC on this position. I repeat, this is —“

Anderson turned suddenly once he heard the roof of a car cave inward. To his horror he saw a Daemon standing no more than sixty feet from him.

The beast, a four legged creature with a long bony tail, an impossibly hard jet black outer exoskeleton, and razor sharp claws and teeth looked like a mutated wolf - that is if Anderson had ever actually seen a wolf before they, like everything else on the planet had gone extinct after the arrival of the Daemon.

The Daemon, a species that the federation had classified as *Feral Hound* stared at Anderson with its four glowing red eyes.

He turned abruptly as two more appeared, climbing down the side of a building, before leaping the last couple hundred feet to the ground.

He raised his weapon, aiming it at the first Feral Hound. As he did, it brandished two rows of knife-like teeth before stepping down from the crushed car, joining its two brethren, which slowly stalked their way towards him.

“Stay back!” Anderson yelled even though he knew that these creatures would never do such a thing — hell, he didn't even know if they understood a word he said, or if they were just bloodthirsty animals.

The Feral Hounds were amongst the most common of the thousands of Daemon species that the federation had come across in the past hundred years. They were effective frontline soldiers which attacked in packs of a dozen, up to thousands. They were extremely fast, some having been clocked at seventy miles an hour, which they could maintain without much effort. They were also smart, amongst the smartest of all the Daemon breeds, which only served to make them more dangerous as they had a knack for adapting quickly. So, as Anderson shifted his aim from one Feral Hound to the next, he knew that they were aware of what his weapon could do.

As his attention was still focused on the three *Hounds* that were in front of him, he never saw the forth that rushed around behind him.

The wounded Marine screamed as the unseen Hound bit down onto her shoulder, and then dragged her into the abyss.

Anderson turned too late as all he saw was a pair of boots being dragged up and into a second story window of the nearest building, where her screams ended a second later with the recognizable sound of flesh being torn apart and bones crunched.

He quickly turned back and fired at the three Feral Hounds that were before him. Two of them leaped, disappearing from view, but his assault tore through the tough hide of the first that had appeared moments earlier.

One of the other Feral Hounds landed forty yards from Anderson. He didn't have time to eject the spent magazine and load another.

Taking quick aim as the beast rushed toward him with blinding speed, Anderson fired the grenade launcher. The blast from the explosion threw him back up against the overturned APC. There was nothing left of the second Hound, save for large chunks of dark fleshed and spackles of blood on the pavement.

Anderson looked up and saw the third Hound, its four legs and powerful claws dug into the face of the nearest high rise, four stories up. And then it roared, a sound that forced Anderson to bring his hands to his ears as the sound was deafening, sending shivers of panic up his spine.

A moment later Anderson heard several more cries coming from all directions, and then within the shadows that seemly started to shift to life, he saw hundreds more Hounds respond to its kindred's call.

He quickly loaded his weapon and did the only thing he could think to do, and that was run as fast as he could, which was considerably difficult with the body laden ground, as a sea of beasts followed him without respite.

