

EXCERPT

LEVEL 7

DANGER CLOSE



PRIVATEER
PRESS

WORLD BRANT
EXPLORATIONS

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DANGER CLOSE

Danger Close: In close air support, artillery, mortar, and naval gunfire support fire, the term included in Method of Engagement segment of call for fire indicating friendly forces are within close proximity of the target.



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*C-130 rollin' down the strip
Airborne daddy gonna take a little trip*

—Army Airborne cadence

February 6th, 2020

Archuleta Mesa, Colorado, New Mexico border

Moving at ten times the speed of the fastest jet, the object hurtled toward Earth on a collision course with Archuleta Mesa.

With a sound like falling artillery, the assault shuttle screamed toward the ground. The heat of reentry wrapped it in a match head of flame as it descended. Five hundred feet off the deck, above an explosion crater, it slowed to a near hover.

Cannon banks along the belly of the shuttle pivoted, and plasma fire blasted the surface ruins of the clandestine base code named Subterra Bravo. The plasma bolts struck in hammer blows that shook the earth, sending dirt into the air and searing the ground with appalling heat. As easily as an axe splitting rotted wood, the plasma burned through the steel and reinforced concrete of the devastated government facility.

As the assault shuttle renewed its descent, a hatch in its belly slid open like elevator doors. The massive Hydra Assault Prime, nine feet tall and heavily armored, moved up to the jump pad. Its mechanized battle armor was a dull yellow-ochre, with thick plating jutting in sharp, segmented angles and crowned with a helmet, flat black and visored.

It scanned its weaponry—its primary weapon, a plasma blaster fitted to one arm with an underslung blade below the squat muzzle and a small shield affixed to the other arm like a buckler.

Then, from five stories up, the creature jumped.

The Hydra warrior hit the earth hard, absorbing the shattering impact through its servo compensators. Behind it, streaking like comets, the other nine members of the assault reconnaissance cohort followed suit, slamming down on the planet surface and then rapidly assuming formation. The Prime gestured toward the ruins, and three Hydra moved.

The rest established a security perimeter and began running diagnostic measurements. Behind them, the assault shuttle, moving on a smooth AI function, settled to the ground. The air around the craft shimmered, and the shuttle appeared to fade away, disappearing in an illusion of invisibility. The mesa top and the buildings upon it were scorched with the residue of a massive explosion, and it was apparent a battle had taken place here—even before the plasma barrage from the assault shuttle.

The fire team returned to report the devastation inside the former research facility. The Assault Secundus approached the Prime, its posture conveying the deference due a more evolved unit. “The Ghin have withdrawn,” the Hydra warrior said, its voice buzzing within its helmet. “Air samples show degraded molecular structures consistent with Ghin spacecraft. The overlords were here but now are not.”

“This was expected,” the Prime answered.

“This one has determined there was a great battle here, Prime,” the Secundus continued. “This one concludes the Ghin and humans could be at war.”

The Prime was silent for a moment before speaking. “The overlords used the humans, offered them power, and then abandoned them when they were no longer useful. That is the more accurate conclusion. These beings cooperated with the Ghin. Therefore, they are now an enemy of the collective.”

“Prime.” A tactical forensic specialist, unworthy of a name, approached. “This unit needs to interrupt with respect.”

The Prime turned toward the Hydra trooper standing on the edge of the mesa. “Report.”

“An Earth response vehicle approaches.”

“Execute contingency.”

“This unit understands and obeys.” The Hydra turned and leaped into the air. Its incredible weight packed the soil as it jumped. The spring took it fifteen feet into the air, out over the side of the mesa.

It landed in the middle of a gravel road, bent, and jumped again. The second leap sent it thirty yards down the access lane to come down directly in front of the fast-moving vehicle, a blocky thing on four wheels crowned with a wide device that cast spinning red and blue lights.

Through the transparent glass at the vehicle’s front, the Hydra saw a human female. The human screamed in shock, but the

muffled sound meant nothing to the Hydra beyond the human's acknowledgement of its presence. The alien swept the pointed bottom edge of its shield down in front of the oncoming vehicle.

With a metallic snap, the front of the shield opened, segmented metal plates moving aside to reveal electromagnetic nodes. The nodes flashed with blue light as the kinetic dampening field materialized. As if it had struck a wall, the vehicle's metal front crumpled and the engine ripped free of its moorings.

Pinned to the seat by the crushed steel, the human female tried desperately to reach the weapon at her side. The Hydra watched clinically as she brought the stubby black projectile weapon up before it surged forward and stabbed the point of its blade-gun through the cracked glass.

The blade struck the female in the chest, slicing through her torso, cracking the sternum, and piercing her heart. For a moment she convulsed in shock, and blood spilled from her mouth. Her eyes then fixed on a single point, and the light behind them faded.

The Hydra jerked its blade free, and blood splashed the dust in long, loose loops. It lifted one leg and kicked the vehicle off the side of the mesa. Halfway down, the fuel tank burst, spilling fuel across the vegetation. The vehicle continued rolling downhill, light bar still sending red and blue light across the landscape, and finally came to rest at the bottom of the mesa. The Hydra leveled its weapon and fired a blast of plasma at the ruined vehicle. It burst apart in a geyser of fire and superheated gas.

On top of the mesa, a Hydra warrior updated the Secundus regarding the interception mission. The Hydra leader nodded and sent the trooper back to its post. The Secundus then approached the Prime, who stood watching the human vehicle burn.

“Prime.”

“Report.”

“Energy signatures to the immediate south are consistent with a human settlement. Sensors indicate the destroyed response vehicle transmitted signals to the settlement.”

The Prime turned and looked. Inside its helmet, automated combat optics fixed on the appropriate azimuth and zeroed in, enlarging. A small collection of human structures appeared in the display.

“This incident must be contained,” the Prime said. “All units prepare to evaluate human defensive capabilities and what they have or have not learned from the Ghin.” The Secundus gave a stiff nod.

Below the two Hydra, the first human casualty of the invasion burned to ash.



The invaders have arrived.

Find out what happens next in “[Danger Close](#)” by Nathan E. Meyer. Visit [Skull Island eXpeditions](#) to purchase the complete story. Available 8/14/2014.