

**FUTURE WARRIOR**

by

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It's the second wave of the intergalactic war against the Ursae, an intelligent race of aliens that live in a star system millions of light years away from Earth. The remaining troops from the first tour have come back home and the second battalion of soldiers is being trained for deployment.

IAN HUDSON is a 22 year-old native of the Republic of America. He has recently graduated from university at the top of his class, gaining his degree in Galactic Engineering. He is immediately drafted into the ICF - Intergalactic Combat Forces. The war in the Ursa Delta Galaxy still rages on, and the next wave of troops are being acquired from all corners of the country. Hudson arrives at base camp in the middle of the Alaskan tundra to begin his training.

The technology for this next wave of attack has changed significantly from the first. The troops who returned brought back information about the enemy's tactics, and the armour and weapons have been modified to be more effective. Hudson and 23 other squadmates learn to defend themselves and fight the enemy swarm, using simulated battlegrounds while on Earth. They practice infantry drills, zero-gravity and centrifugal battle training, and team exercises to be a closer-knit squad.

Halfway through their three year training and boot camp, Hudson's squad is introduced to their commander, ERIC SNOW. Snow is a veteran of the First Battalion. He was born 180 years earlier, but because of the time dilation effects of the Einstein-Rosen bridge used for travel to the Ursa galaxy, he looks to be barely 40. He's lost an arm and has a titanium bionic one as a replacement. He's one of the 13 survivors, the group known as the Elders. He is bitter and disenchanted, but after a month back in civilian life he pushed himself right back into the military, because he couldn't handle being a regular guy. He is appalled by the changes to society that have taken place, but tries to restrain himself when speaking about it.

Operant conditioning and genetic engineering are standard and mandatory in the country. Babies are more often than not genetically altered to need less nutrients to grow healthily, instead relying on the newly invented, government-engineered nutrient packs. This starts an international market of these LIFE packets, as well as a black market specifically of children, toddlers, and infants who will grow up to be able to survive on very little food. The governments of the world allow them to slide under the radar in order to get a means to an end.

Orca Squad, Ian's group, is sent up to the enormous space station in orbit around the outside of the solar system, out of orbit of the Sun, where they begin training with the Pods. Pods are what makes wormhole-jumping possible, and are much safer than transporting large amounts of soldiers in large ships. Pods are used for particularly rough passages in which the crews have to use exotic matter to hold open the wormholes. The soldiers go two by two in the pods so that if there is a malfunction and the Pod is destroyed, only those two soldiers are killed. They learned this the hard way in the very beginning, when "wormhole cruises" were made to be something demanded by the ultra-rich of Earth. After two ships of people were killed, the Pods started being created, along with the Exto. The Exto is a spacesuit that fits snugly around the wearer's body, connecting into their nervous system to be controlled more smoothly and more precisely. They come with built-in weaponry and the helmet is equipped with heat, night, and Aura vision. Auras are what the military calls the "heat" that the Ursae give off. It's not heat in the sense that humans know, but the suits can detect this energy field that surrounds the enemy, which pulses in varying colours around them. Pods are fitted for the individual soldiers as well, meant to connect in with the suit for the easiest and fastest of maneuvering.

The group spends another two years on the space station. The training gets more intense, and there are a couple of casualties. Snow and Hudson get closer, sharing the same disgust at the immorality of the war and the uselessness of it all. Hudson is intrigued with Snow, having never met someone so old. Snow is interested in the way that some of the conditioning of the new Earth had evaded Hudson somehow. He enjoys little things like a midnight glass of powdered milk, things that his fellow soldiers find weird. And he asks questions about the morality of killing an intelligent race that hasn't officially attacked Earth.

Once the training is up, they get ready to head off to battle. They get into their Pods, Hudson paired with one of his remaining squadmates. They jet off in order, one by one entering the wormhole out in the distance. When Hudson gets to the other side, there's suddenly a battle raging around them. The Pods that had gone before were fighting against faster, stronger ships. The battle seems to be going sour until the last of the Pods come through. It brings with them a modified weapon that when used, takes out the enemy's control system in their ships, rendering them giant metal coffins. The ships that were not in range of the device, called the Crusher, retreated back to their home planet at near-lightspeed. The remaining Pods travelled to the base station, a comfortable distance away from the enemy planets.

More training goes on at this base, included simulated attacks and emergency drills. The soldiers stay in top shape and prepare for the inevitable invasion of the nearest enemy planet. One night, Snow tells Hudson over drinks about the first invasion he went on, a planet that is now a barren rock once they were done with it. Half of the other squad commanders were there too, and they all express reluctance at going back into a similar situation.

A week later, the journey begins. They jump into the repaired Pods, hook up their Extos, and head off. The planet looks eerily like Earth, but the plant life is all a dark blue, metallic-like substance. The atmosphere is nearly completely nitrogen. Modified weapons are used in order to not ignite the chemicals in the air, small quantities of them unknown at the time. They explore the surface, on alert for any wildlife.

Snow calls for a halt and points out large bird-like creatures out across a vast light blue meadow. They have six appendages under a wingspan of 10 feet at least. The biggest leads the pack as they skim over the tall grass-like plain. Their legs extend under them as they fly, picking off small six legged vermin and flying off when they had all gotten one. The squads have spread out and go in huddled groups reluctantly through the field. More of the flying things are spotted and the battalion drops on their stomachs to avoid detection. They make it across the field and into the brush at the other end safely.

As they're walking through the dense forests, they see more wildlife, large insects and spiders that hang from the highest trees. A soldier in the squad closest to Orca gets sucked into a large hole at the bottom of a tree, and the helmet of his Exto gets spat back out, head still attached inside. This makes the groups hurry faster, nearly causing them to run straight into an enemy camp. There are high fences around it, possibly to keep out the large birds. Going near the fences shorts out the frequency between the Extos so they back away to make their plans.

The base seems quiet, and they can't see any of the enemy, even though the suits show their auras moving slowly around the center of the camp. Special magnets are used to bend the thick wire-like fences, as lasers in that atmosphere are too deadly to use. They enter squad by squad, flanking the camp on the sides and slowly approaching the center of the place.

In the center is a large dome with holes all along its surface to give it the look of a beehive. Snow warns his squad over the comms not to get close and to keep their eyes on the holes. Suddenly there's an alarm and the troops see firsthand what Snow meant. The enemy swarms out of the holes, crawling with four legs while two arms ready hand-

held weapons. The Extos raise shields that are specially made to absorb the Ursae weapons' energy. They return fire with sonic blasts that stun the enemy and shock their insides. The order is to kill all that attack them. As the attack dies down, much smaller versions of the Ursae come scuttling out of the dome, weaponless. They are sequestered in a pen and guarded while the casualties are counted and the rest of the alien weaponry is studied, then destroyed.

Suddenly, an explosion on the far side of the compound erupts, sending a wave of flames over everyone's heads. When it dissipates, a lot of the buildings of the base are on fire, and the squads are ordered to evacuate. Hudson realises that they had not freed the innocent young Ursae, but Snow orders him that it's too late for them. Hudson is about to react violently to Snow's refusal to help them when an image flashes in front of his eyes. It's quicker than a second, barely recognizable what it even was, but all of a sudden Hudson stops fighting and they all leave before more explosions rock the place.

The next day, the site is revisited, and there are apparently no survivors. Hudson racks his brain as to how he had lost the time between being in the middle of the fires and waking up to the bright sunlight of the planet, the sun never having gone down. It isn't until they are back resting at the base station, far from the enemy planet, that Snow reveals that they had been ingrained with subliminal commands that the Extos have been feeding to them constantly. Most of them are simple, when to be hungry and when to need sleep and when to want friendly company. But some were created that were more extreme, such as commands to override any insubordination. Hudson is appalled that the soldiers aren't told about this, and Snow tells him that his body rejected the process, which is the only reason he's able to tell Hudson any of this. They swear each other to secrecy, knowing it's for the good of the battalion as a whole that the secret isn't leaked. But now more than ever, the two of them are distrustful towards the military.

The planet is systematically explored, Pods are used to get to the places further away. Little eccentricities of the place are discovered and the soldiers find that despite the sometimes hostile life forms that live there, the planet is pleasant enough to stay on, much nicer than staying on the cramped base station. It reminds them of how Earth looked from images way before their time-- a time that Snow remembers all too well. It makes him despondent for a while, taking a break to take a walk through the forest one day. Hudson is told to keep an eye on him.

They walk through the forest in silence, Hudson hanging back at times to let the commander walk along on his own. When they come across a pink frothy waterfall running over rocks

into an equally pink and clear pool, they sit and watch the strange water, known to be too acidic for the Extos to come in contact with for more than a minute. It's a moment of peace before the comm clicks on and tells Snow that the enemy has suddenly shown up on sensors, a mass of ships only a couple light-minutes away. They race back to the Pods and take off, knowing they would only have a small window of rest and preparation before the enemy attacks.

A battle soon follows. Both sides suffer massive casualties after one of the sonic guns malfunctions and implodes, killing two additional Pods of soldiers. A cryptic message is sent over the comms in a language they don't understand. Later it is identified as the Ursae trying to communicate in the only way they know how, brainwave emissions. The enemy retreats and the squads regroup and count their losses. A malfunction in some of the Extos caused the soldiers wearing them to suffocate. Luckily, the Pods can be flown by only one pilot so none of the ships were lost. However, this causes another level of distrust between the soldiers; now they aren't fully sure if the suits keeping them alive will actually do their functions right.

It's been months since the last attack. They travel to the next nearest planet but it is uninhabited by any Ursae, so they don't stay long. Most planets in the solar system, that they can tell, have remarkably the same qualities as Earth. Except for the severe lack of oxygen in the atmosphere, and that the plants don't seem to need CO2 or sunlight to thrive, there are several similarities. They can't stay long there because they had been given orders that since they've driven the enemy out of the closest planets to the wormhole, they can return to Earth and let the next wave of soldiers replace them to take up the watch. The Orca squad finally heads home. It has been 6 years working on the mission, including the 2 years spent on the space station in their own galaxy. They are warned that the six years would be much more than that on Earth, and Snow gives them an even more direct warning that they may not recognise their own home. Most of the squad scoff at that.

They land back at Earth after months of traveling. The air is hazy as smog hangs thick in the streets. They are given special masks so they can breathe in fresh, filtered air instead of the pollution that now covers most of the Earth's population. It was nearly 80 years since the battalion left. When Hudson learns that his family is all dead, he is invited to stay with Snow until he sorts himself out. They take a train to the edge of the city, where Snow's little house still stands. It looks just how it did before his first deployment, and is even unrecognisable to Hudson. They turn on the old TV, rigged up to still receive the newest form of satellite connection. They watch the news.

Strange, soothing yet slightly off-key music plays as a fast sequence of flashing images show on the screen. They are all of bright colours, happy people, cute babies, sunlight and beaches, and leafy green meadows. Then a deep voice starts reading the news for the day, which basically reminds them that there is no crime, air pollution is down for the 40th day in a row, and the Republic is richer than ever. Snow and Hudson don't buy it a bit. The news ends with a two minute long commercial for Otium, reminding the viewers that life never felt so good as when you're taking your recommended dosage. The ad shows happy, daze-like people going about their daily routine with wide smiles on their faces. Hudson suggests they do a little digging into just what their country was like now, planning to go into the nearest city, Houston.

The pollution is just as thick as before as Hudson and Snow exit a taxi and start walking the streets. The only cars on the streets are huge buses packed with people. As they walk past, a bus empties people onto the pavement and they walk slowly, eyes glazed over, looking just like the people on the TV. They quietly bump against each other as they herd into the nearby buildings. Schoolchildren walk solemnly into their school, one bumping into Snow and apologising quietly. He bends down to pick up the book the kid dropped, but he was already gone. He looks down at the book, and it looks to be a history book. They walk over to the nearest restaurant and sit down, paying for coffee with the credit cards they were given in their care packs. The men huddle over the books, flipping through and gazing at all the things that have changed.

The tv reporter wasn't joking. There hasn't been any high level of crime for 50 years. The government created the drug Otium and started delivering it for free as testers. What they didn't tell people was that it was highly addictive. Once the majority of the population of the country was hooked, studies came out to show that now that people were mellowed out, crimes like murder, rape, and robbery were nearly completely eradicated.

They also learn that the programs that genetically engineer babies to need little nutrients to survive were still going strong. The two of them look around and sure enough, they were the only ones sitting in the diner. They keep sitting in there until a loud, droning alarm goes off and suddenly the place is packed with people. They sit and stand wherever they can find space, making Snow and Hudson squish up against the wall of their booth. They all take out small jelly packets, tearing them open and squeezing the multi-coloured mush into their mouths. They chew in silent unison. As fast as they came, they were gone. The men sit there in stunned, confused silence.

Hudson and Snow sit in a park, which isn't really a park because all the trees and shrubs and grass are synthesised plastics and silicones. The sun doesn't break through the haze, and it's still hazy. They talk about how they don't know which is worse, being in the cold, sterile environment of space, every day risking death, or back down on Earth. Snow wishes there were another option. Just then, a couple walking slowly across the grass get hit from behind with large rubber bullets. They fall and barely have a reaction as a group of men over 60 run over and take the woman's purse, shuffling around in the man's pockets and taking what they find. Snow is about to run over and help but Hudson restrains him, knowing that even with the training they were put through, the robbers had weapons and weren't afraid to use them.

They return to the house with some groceries, strange canned foods and a hard loaf of bread which was the only fresh food that they could find. They're both miserable, and Snow suggests they try to find a place to go out for the night, see if they could find company that might distract them from all the weirdness. Hudson refuses, saying the women would probably all be drugged up and no fun, just like everyone else who might be at a club. He suggests that clubs might not even exist any more.

A week later, there's a knock on the door. Snow is still reading and re-reading the history book, and Hudson is doing crunches on the floor. The man at the door is an ICF official, holding a holographic tablet. He takes down their names and military ID numbers, and suggests that they register at the nearest ICF Reserves station. They wouldn't be put back into active duty unless they were really needed. The men are both reluctant to do so.

They go everywhere together, not trusting to be on their own out in the city. Not only are there small groups of roving thieves, the new society isn't something they're coping with well. The food is making them sick, mostly modified to suit the generations of mutated humans. There were reports of two of their fellow soldiers who killed themselves, not being able to cope with the new world.

A letter comes in the post, a holographic message that claims there are two spots on a space station back in the Ursae's galaxy for them, not in combat but acting as security for a research facility. After a brief talk, they agree it's for the best, and the positions are both high-ranking ones, so they send a reply that they would take the offer.

They head off again, still somber about leaving Earth so quickly, but with a glimmer of hope about their own futures. They didn't want to give up on their planet, but they didn't

belong there anymore. The ship travels through a couple wormholes and arrives in the all-too-familiar galaxy of the Ursae.

They settle into life on the new base relatively easily. They have heavy artillery and Extos at their disposal, should they need it, but on a daily basis, they only carry hand phasers. Some days are long and tedious, but they understand how things work on the station, and their underlings aren't completely brainless. The two men practice hand-to-hand fighting and drills to stay sharp, and aren't compelled to learn about what kind of research is being done around them. It's simply clear that the people they are guarding aren't soldiers.

Life becomes comfortable for them. They start training less and less, but make sure their fellow soldiers don't let up. There's no noticeable dissent towards the two of them as leaders of security there.

One early morning, alarms sound. Enemy ships have been spotted on sensors. They would be close enough to attack their station shortly. The crews scatter to ready themselves, the scientists run for cover in their quarters. Snow and Hudson get their squads of soldiers together and into their Extos and Pods. They give each other one last look before heading into their own Pods, accompanied by other soldiers as co-pilots.

The battle is fierce. It would seem that in the two hundred years since the last encounter, the Ursae adapted some of their weapons, and the Pods fan out in small battles of their own, trying to wait it out until reinforcements from the nearest battle station could join them. Hudson quickly loses track of Snow as they veer away to fight. Ships on both sides blow up throughout the battlefield and Hudson commands his co-pilot with expert precision. An enemy starts to follow their Pod, shooting at them dangerously. Just when it seems like they've run out of options, the enemy is taken out by Snow, who zooms past them triumphantly, only to be hit suddenly by crossfire and the Pod explodes. Hudson is clearly devastated to have seen this. He slams his fists onto the control panel, making his Pod spin out of control. His co-pilot gets control, but the side of their Pod is hit by the side of an enemy ship, right on Hudson's side, and they bounce off each other, both damaged. Hudson is knocked out, his Exto working to keep his body stable.

Suddenly there's a message going out through all the comms in the Extos, as well as inside the ships. It's the same strange language that Hudson had heard on the Ursa planet. His pilot takes the Pod back to the base and Hudson gets taken away with medics, his heart having stopped from a crushing of his chest in the crash. Over the comm of the

station, there is a report of a cease-fire, for all soldiers to return to the base. The battle was over. A meeting of the enemy's leaders would be arranged. The research being done on the station was focused on the language of the Ursae, and that last communication cracked the enemy code.

As things calmed throughout most of the station, Hudson is carried off to a transport Pod, heading off back to Earth. He is put on bypass so his heart wouldn't stop again, and the doctor sends reports back to Earth to ready an operating room to give Hudson what he needs to survive, a new heart. Hudson's Pod takes off, heading off through the nearest wormhole and back towards the Milky Way.