

A room, full of violence to come. Then with the nasty white light of LEDs. Then a man came in and sat between the metal lockers. He took a machine from his pack and ran protocols on it. Alone awhile, he stared at its screen. His comrades followed him in at last.

The man kept on with his preparations. All the other soldiers had their own rituals.

Two laughed together at dirty jokes. Two more in quiet focused synchrony checked their weapons. Another, shirtless, brisk, dropped and clap-push-upped at his comrades' feet. The leader of the night's enterprise came. He examined a map with such close attention it was as if he had found it in a tomb. The first soldier continued running diagnostics on his scanner.

Someone entered ready already, bulked up in an insignia-less khaki jacket zipped up to his chin as if it were cold. No one paid him attention. But as he cast his eyes around the room they caught those of the man with the scanner and the two nodded at each other.

The door sounded, a final time. This time everyone looked up at who stood at the threshold.

A tall lean figure in unmarked dark clothes, looking at them from below a long fringe of black hair. He stood still in silhouette.

Alone among his comrades, the man with the scanner stole a glance at one of those who had been preparing his weapon, while that man, in turn, regarded the new arrival, as did all the others.

The dark-haired man entered and that stillness broke and everyone went back to how it had been. The first man raised his scanner again, checking on its workings, took in the whole room in its scrying screen. He let it linger for another moment over he at whom he'd sneaked a look, switching his machine's registers, converting the soldiers into a landscape of colored contours.

In the corner the newcomer stood head down and alone. Someone approached him.

The man with the scanner frowned. It was not the unique vortex of darkness on the screen that made him hesitate: he had seen the dark-haired man so manifest many times before. It was the anomaly of he who approached him—the shorter soldier with his jacket done up tight. That jacket was white and opaque on the screen, as clothes should not be. It glowed. It was shielded.

“Hey,” the deployer of the scanner said at what he saw on-screen.

“Ulafson?” He watched as the soldier in the jacket tentatively approached the Unit's asset.

He was too far away to hear. He scrolled to an audio-capture setting to read the scanner's AI approximation of what it discerned from lip motions and the faint fringes of sound waves, but it could not get a clear reading.

The tall man turned to look at Ulafson approaching him and whispered as if beseeching. Ulafson held out his arms and came in fast, suddenly. His target regarded him without emotion. In

came the would-be embracer, mouthing something, looking as if he was crying, and the man with the scanner said, “Hey!” again, loud enough now that everyone turned, and they all shouted too, and they saw the soldier in the done-up jacket pull a pistol from its pocket, and he was sobbing, you could see it now, and he aimed his weapon not at the figure toward whom he stumbled but out at the room, at everyone who now watched.

“Stay back!” he shouted.

The tall man with black hair reached out with his palm flat against the oncomer’s chest, blocked his path. He did not punch, did not knock him down, just stopped him. The sad-faced target did not speak or move in any other way, only held the shorter man at arm’s length as he strained to close the last distance.

The jacketed man shoved and grunted as the other held him off, and with his free hand unzipped his coat and reached into some inside pocket and there came a click and a glint of metal.

“Weapon!” someone shouted, as if he were not already holding a weapon, aiming it at them, at those alongside whom he’d killed and almost died. “Ulafson, no!” came another voice.

Gunshots. Very loud. Ulafson spasmed as the soldier with the rifle, at whom his comrade had glanced, braced, firing short bursts, face aghast, sending fire into the upper chest and thighs, avoiding whatever it was for which he reached, and Ulafson cried out under the onslaught and dropped his pistol but stayed standing, somehow, still shoving, fumbling, as bullets tore

through and into his own target, who kept his face impassive as blood bloomed from him.

But he twitched, and his arm slipped. Those very bullets that were killing the jacketed man pushed him past his quarry's blocking arm at last, right up close, into a clinch. With a last breath of triumph he pushed a hidden trigger.

The room filled again, with smoke and metal and noise and fire.