

CHAPTER I

Baptism of Fire

Javier Acosta clung to his rifle as the troop transport vehicle carrying him bounced on the road. A quick glance at the other passengers confirmed that his eleven comrades were as nervous as he was. Despite the dim light, each soldier was staring at his companions, as if looking for courage in their numbers. They could hear the explosions outside, which the driver had so far managed to avoid, and feel the jolts of the truck.

Javier, like his comrades, was an elite soldier. He had enlisted in the U.S. Army at eighteen to escape the squalid ghettos of Los Angeles, where his only choice had been joining a gang or a life of poverty. A disciplined and efficient Marine, praised by his superiors, he had already fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. At some point, he had been noticed by C.L.A.S.H.¹ the U.N.-sponsored international anti-terrorist agency and, after an internship among the organization's troops, had become an active member of their military wing, soldiers sent to the front lines of extraordinary conflicts often involving superhuman and extraterrestrial threats.

The heavy silence in the truck was broken by Captain Alistair Wood, an Englishman whose rough manners contrasted with his posh accent. The officer pointed to the screen on the back of the driver's cabin on which various information was beginning to appear.

"Look here, boys," he said in a clear and strong voice. "Here's the situation as we know it: this morning at ten-zero-zero—about half-an-hour ago—several unidentified airships materialized over Manhattan in a perimeter ranging roughly from Central Park to the East River and from 65th to 92nd Street. Without warning, the intruders began bombing civilians and landing troops..."

Wood scrolled through the news images on the screen by clicking on a remote control. The soldiers concentrated, studying the streamlined shapes of the alien vessels, spitting rays on the city below. The next image showed the invaders: reptilian creatures, looking like alligators walking on two feet, powerfully built and armed with sophisticated rifles.

"At present, we know neither the objective nor the plan of the invaders," Wood continued. "However, we have been able to identify them because they've attacked Earth before: they are the Xans, a fierce reptilian race from another dimension, usually employed as mercenaries. They're extremely dangerous, even when disarmed."

The screen now displayed precise diagrams of the attackers, their ships and their weapons, and various biological records. The soldiers soaked up all this, which might soon make the difference between life and death.

"Right now, we're the only ones on site, except for a handful of brave NYPD officers and four National Guards helicopter. The *Leviathan*² is too far from New York to be of help right now, and the U.S. Army is mobilizing but won't be able to intervene for at least another half-hour—plenty of time for those green-skinned bastards to do a lot of damage to the Big Apple! And, of course, none of those damn superheroes are around when we need them!"

The soldiers looked at each other. All had hoped for the support of at least some superhumans in this battle—the Bronze Gladiator, the Hexagon Group... The tension rose inside the armored truck.

"The plan is by no means to repel this invasion," the captain continued. "Our one and only objective is to secure the perimeter in order to allow the civilian population to evacuate. The NYPD have already begun. We're here to provide them with logistics and tech support while waiting for reinforcements to arrive. In short, we are saving time and lives."

¹ Consortium for Law-Enforcement Action for the Security of Humanity.

² C.L.A.S.H.'s flying fortress.

A bump more pronounced than the others caused the vehicle to jump, and each soldier found himself almost slumped over his comrade on the left. Javier grabbed the safety strap. His heart started beating faster. The vehicle came to a halt. They had arrived!

Captain Wood rushed to the rear and pushed the big red button that opened the exit hatch. The rear of the transport unfolded and the light of a warm New York day crept into the cabin.

“Go, go, go!” shouted the officer as the soldiers disembarked. Javier, who was at the far end of the truck, was the last to go out. The other soldiers had already deployed according to procedure, covering themselves on every side with the typical efficiency of C.L.A.S.H.’s elite troops, a choreography mixed with a martial aesthetic.

Javier took his spot without even thinking about it, his body following a training that he had repeated a thousand times. With his pulse rifle pointed in front of him, he could see the chaos that had engulfed this section of Manhattan. In the sky, half a dozen alien ships stood still, spraying the ground with iridescent rays. On the ground, cars were burning everywhere. One could hear both screams of terror and war-like vociferous shouts in a sibilant alien tongue. Dark smoke rose between the buildings which all sported broken windows and cracked walls.

Watching this ghastly spectacle, Javier felt a cold rage grip his heart; he saw that all his comrades were stiffening. In the adjacent streets, two other troop transports took up positions and disembarked their occupants. A distant roar indicated the arrival of the National Guard’s helicopter gunships, armed with enough fire power to shoot down the alien ships.

Suddenly, a squad of Xan warriors came within sight of Javier’s unit. The two formations paused, as if frozen by surprise. Then, the guns began to talk.

Five heavily armed soldiers ran for cover, protected by the fire of their comrades guarding their position from the rear. Javier joined them almost without thinking, his reflexes honed by years of training and experience. Diving behind the wreckage of a truck, he felt, more than he saw, a laser bolt brush past him. He didn’t even have time to catch his breath; with a quick motion, he stood up and took aim at the Xans. His machine gun crackled in unison with those of his comrades. Heavy fire drove the aliens away, but without causing them much damage.

The soldiers secured the area, inspecting every corner of each alleyway. From where he stood, Javier could see that the other squads were doing the same thing, establishing a safe perimeter.

Captain Wood joined the other officers before issuing his instructions over the radio:

“Soldiers!” Javier’s earpiece spat out. “We’re going to follow an inverted triangle progression. You will take the southern flank while Captain Hung’s unit will take the north. Captain Delpierre’s unit will stay in reserve here. You have your orders! Good luck, gentlemen!”

Javier and his comrades obeyed immediately. After gathering with military speed, they advanced south of the attack perimeter silently, their jaws clenched in anger and apprehension.

They moved slowly, as each junction could conceal an ambush and needed to be approached with great caution. All the civilians they encountered were directed towards the rear. It was often difficult for the soldiers to make themselves understood and obeyed. In fact, many residents refused to leave their buildings, hoping to be safe there from the scourge descending upon their city. But the squad could not linger long to convince them. They merely nodded and moved on.

Javier was appointed as a scout by Sergeant Daek, a Korean built like a rugby player. Quick and observant, he was ideally suited for that task. He was examining a dead end when he detected some abnormal activity: the sounds of heavy footsteps on metal.

He looked up and spotted a half dozen Xans coming down a fire escape.

Laser rays started raining down on him and he leapt to take shelter behind a large dumpster. Grabbing his transmitter, he warned his comrades.

“Guys, Gators at three o’clock!” he shouted, trying to be heard over the sound. “I repeat...”

“Copy that, Acosta. Standing by.”

From his shelter at the far end of the alley, Javier saw the Xans spread out into the adjacent avenue where they were greeted by heavy fire. The young soldier saw the power of the aliens: several were hit, but barely registered the shots. Their thick scales were a natural armor that protected them better than any

bulletproof vest, even against C.L.A.S.H.'s advanced weaponry. Their laser guns, on the other hand, spat deadly fire that caused much damage to their human foes.

Clenching his teeth, the soldier tried to get out of the alley, but two Xans were guarding the backs of their comrades and a barrage of laser fire forced Javier to cower behind his precarious shelter. He decided to pull the pin out of a grenade, but instead of throwing it and thus becoming a target, he sent it rolling under the dumpster with just enough force to get it to the feet of the two aliens. The ensuing explosion was amplified by the narrowness of the alley and Javier thrown backwards by the blast. The container behind which he hid crashed into him. With his legs trapped, he still saw his squad taking advantage of the opportunity he had created: blown away by the grenade, the Xans were shot down quickly and mercilessly.

Two soldiers—Jones, a sturdy black man, and Wendell, a Texan with a thick Southern drawl—walked into the alley and pulled Javier out of harm's way. They tipped the dumpster to the side and the young Latino boy quickly got up, only to find that the pain in his ankle forced him to limp. He winced and smothered an expletive; this was no time to be hurt.

"Are you all right, Acosta?" Sergeant Daek asked from the avenue.

"Could be better, but I'm not complaining, sergeant!" replied Javier, leaning on one leg. He then turned to Jones. "What are our losses?" he asked.

"They got Lanier and Greenberg," replied the other without letting his emotions transpire. "The Doc's hurt too, but that won't stop him from taking a look at your leg."

"My leg's OK!" protested the soldier before stumbling and being caught in extremis by Wendell.

"Sure looks OK to me!" joked the Texan, continuing to support him. "We'll take you to him anyway, just in case."

Suddenly, a thunderous noise tore the Heavens apart. Javier and his two companions raised their heads, imitated by their comrades in the street. Two helicopters flew over them roaring. The sound of heavy machine guns mingled with that of the blades as the two attack vehicles set out to attack the Xans' ships.

The bullets having no visible effect, the helicopters switched to missiles, their white trails drawing curly arabesques against the blue of the sky. Again, it was a failure: the alien ships were protected by powerful force fields that kept the explosions at bay.

The helicopters made a wide turn to attack again and flew back over Javier's squad. Just then, they were struck by a powerful energy beam from the nearest Xan vessel.

For Javier, the scene seemed to take place in slow motion. The two copters exploded like overripe fruit and debris began to rain all over the city block. The bulk of the copters, burnt out but still in one piece, fell with a strange slowness along with the twisted blades of the propellers. As if in a nightmare, Javier thought that one of the wrecks was going to fall right on top of him, but that was only an optical illusion. The fireball that had become the cockpit crashed into the next street, where the rest of his squad was stood.

A final explosion shook the surrounding area and the three soldiers threw themselves to the ground.

Javier straightened up, a scream stuck in his throat. He realized that he had lost consciousness for a brief moment; a pain in the back of his head indicated that he must have been knocked out by a bit of shrapnel. He was lucky it had not been more serious.

Jones and Wendell also stood up, looking dazed. Thick grey smoke filled the block and restricted their view. Despite the anguish that gripped him, Javier let his reflexes take over. Rifle pointed in front of him, he took measured steps towards the avenue, trying to ignore the pain from his injured ankle.

After watching the perimeter through the dust and the burning wreckage, he signaled to his comrades to join him. The three of them slung their weapons over their shoulders and rushed to the crash site. The sight that awaited them froze the blood in their veins despite all their combat training.

Their squad had been annihilated. Caught in the explosion of the crashing helicopter, the soldiers hadn't had a chance. A quick tour of the perimeter confirmed their worst fears: no survivors. Scattered body parts littered the devastated street. Javier, Jones and Wendell collected tags whenever possible. In the distance, they heard more explosions, but no more helicopters flew overhead.

“What do we do now?” Wendell asked.

“We have our orders,” Javier replied grabbing his radio. “PFC Acosta base. PFC Acosta to base. Do you read me?”

Only static answered him. After several attempts, he gave up and faced the unpleasant facts.

“We’re alone,” he said.

“So, what do we do next?” Wendell repeated.

Jones took a machine gun under each arm.

“We kill each and every one of these sons of bitches,” he said with boiling rage.

Javier nodded and retrieved several grenades.

“As far as we know, we’re on our own,” he stated. We’re going to follow our original orders: get as many civilians to safety as possible, and as a bonus, destroy as many of those damn gators as possible.”

The three soldiers started moving towards the central area of the attack with determined steps.

The entrance to a Subway station was the scene of a bizarre spectacle. Police officers, whose cars were parked across the street to protect the entrance, tried as best as they could to channel the flow of refugees. The epicenter of the invasion was only a block or two away, as evidenced by the shouting, the screams and the sound of gunfire. Panicked civilians were jostling each other at the risk of injuring themselves.

Javier and his two comrades quickly reached the Subway entrance, identified themselves and asked for a status report. A potbellied NYPD officer with a sweat-soaked moustache answered them.

“Well, we don’t know much. We did run into a few C.L.A.S.H. men, but they all rushed into combat, leaving us in charge of civilian evacuations. We hope they’re holding on over there because there’s still a lot of people to be moved here!”

Javier took a look around and realized that the area was too open—an intersection between two wide avenues, with a Subway entrance on either side. An attack by the Xans would result in a massacre...

“Officer, we need to reinforce the perimeter,” he said. “Park your cars across the streets and position two men behind each. Make sure all the angles are covered.”

The policeman did not hesitate for a moment and began to relay the orders on his radio. Several New Yorkers took a stunned look at Javier’s dark blue uniform, very different from that of their own armed forces.

In less than five minutes, the intersection was fortified as he had requested. It wasn’t much, but in the end, it would have to suffice.

It was Jones who sounded the alarm. About ten Xans came out from the site of the attack. Javier decided that they had to buy the NYPD men some time. He signaled to the two policemen guarding the entrance to the Subway to speed up things, but the crowd, seeing the nightmarish creatures coming, panicked and quickly created chaos.

Jones came out of his dugout, a machine gun under each arm, and shouted his hatred as he fired wildly at the Xans. His fire mowed down several aliens, and that was the signal for the battle to begin.

The policemen took aim with their sawed-off rifles and fired. Wendell positioned himself to cover Jones and aimed at each of his targets with a professional sharpshooter’s eye. Each of his shots hit the chink in the aliens’ armored hides and killed them on the spot. But more Xans arrived, drawn by the sounds of the battle, and they began to overwhelm the city defenders. Despite their obvious lack of discipline, and the humans’ steady fire, they advanced inexorably and gained a clear advantage; their physical strength and superior weaponry made them almost impossible to beat.

Horrified, Javier saw several policemen fall after being struck by enemy lasers. These men had shown a rare courage and he swore it would not be in vain. Joining his two comrades, he broke through the ranks of the Xans, hoping to create enough confusion to give time for the civilians to flee into the neighboring streets.

A policeman used his car like a battering ram and drove towards the aliens. He mowed down several of them before a laser bolt hit his chest. The uncontrolled vehicle crashed into a fire hydrant and soon water started raining all over the intersection.

Javier, Jones and Wendell retreated into an alleyway littered with debris—a mediocre shelter, at best. The young soldier sowed their path with grenades to draw the Xans away from the civilians. The aliens went in pursuit, hoping to finish what must have seemed to them like some futile opposition. Jones stood at the entrance to the alleyway and emptied his magazines with a loud shout.

“You, bastards!”

The big man was hit from all sides by laser bolts but remained standing as long as possible. When his machine guns rattled empty, he finally collapsed, face down on the ground. Javier and Wendell threw away their now useless rifles, drew their automatic pistols—nigh useless weapons in the face of such opponents—unloading them on their opponents. With desperation, Javier saw a battalion of Xans scurrying after the population, sowing corpses amidst cries of terror.

After Wendell fell, Javier didn’t know what else to do. There was only one Xan left in front of him, and the soldier watched with ferocious pleasure as the bodies of a dozen of these accursed aliens strewed the ground in front of him. The soldier took his survival knife out of its case and brandished it in front of him.

“Come on, you f*** gator...”

The Xan observed him for a moment and a glimmer of amusement passed through his eyes. He threw his rifle to the side and walked towards the human who was challenging him.

Javier took the time to scrutinize the alien, a cold sweat running down his back. The Xan was almost seven feet high and his muscular body was completely naked. Its crocodile-like face lay directly on a large torso, further accentuating the impression of raw power it radiated. Its long mouth was lined with tapering fangs, while its fingers all ended in sharp claws. He was a monster from mankind’s worst nightmares.

Yielding to a primitive fear from the depths of time, Javier took a step back. He felt like vomiting and started to shake. Then he saw over the creature’s shoulder the death and destruction wrought by his comrades. His fear quickly turned to rage, and an animal cry came out of his throat. He leapt to the attack, his blade pointing toward the heart of his opponent.

The Xan simply swung his thick arm to intercept his attacker, but Javier feinted and aimed lower. His knife slipped on the alien’s thigh, barely cutting through the scales. Undeterred, he struck again with the same gesture, this time taking advantage of the fact that he was almost behind his opponent.

The blade arched and plunged into the back of the Xan’s knee. This time, the monster gave a cry of pain and kicked back to get rid of his foe. Hit in the chest, Javier was thrown out of the alley but managed to roll out of reach.

Breathlessly, the soldier got back on his feet as best he could. His vision blurred for a moment and a dull pain in his chest made him realize that he likely had several broken ribs.

The Xan advanced towards him with a determined but cautious step. Javier flashed a defiant smile.

“So, big guy, not so sure about me, now?”

The alien responded with a series of croaks and hisses before diving at the human. Surprised by his speed, Javier was swept away by a blow to the shoulder and cried out in pain.

The Xan brutally pinned him to the ground and crushed him under its weight. His large scaly hands grabbed Javier’s throat and began to squeeze.

While being asphyxiated, the soldier thought he could see a glimmer of amusement in the monster’s eyes. This aroused his anger again. He might die here, but he would take the bastard to Hell with him!

Javier reached out with his arm and stuck his thumb into the monster’s eye. That was enough to make him loosen, if only very slightly, his crushing embrace. That was all the soldier needed. He struck the underside of the Xan’s mouth with his blade—a smooth area, poorly protected by the scales.

The knife went in, but not deep enough, and the alien resumed his strangulation with redoubled vigor. Javier knotted every muscle in his neck to hold on as long as he could—if only for a few more seconds. His hand struck again and again to widen the wound caused by his knife.

Thick, disgusting blood flowed into his mouth as the Xan’s arms gradually weakened. At that moment, nothing else existed for Javier but the monster crushing his throat. It was a struggle of two mighty wills, each as inflexible as the other.

Finally, the alien threw itself back, its mouth and eyes dripping with a blackish blood. Kneeling over the soldier, the Xan cried out in pain and rage. Javier realized that this would be his only chance: he unhooked a grenade from his belt and pushed it into his enemy's oversized mouth before struggling to crawl as far as he could.

The Xan appeared surprised and tried to extract the metal sphere from his throat, but he was too late. The blast tore his head off and split his chest in two; it also sent Javier flying five yards away and he had to make a superhuman effort not to faint.

Lying on his back, Javier felt his strength abandon him. The surrounding silence told him that the intersection was now deserted; the policemen were probably all dead and the Xans free to continue their work of destruction.

A feeling of despair gripped his heart; guilt for not having fulfilled his duty to the end.

Suddenly, he heard a loud crash that shook all the surrounding buildings; he recognized it as a supersonic boom.

Scanning the skies, he soon spotted the unmistakable silhouette of the world's most powerful fighter plane: the Hexajet!

Javier felt a new hope in his heart. The Hexagon Group was finally here—the most powerful superheroes on Earth!

With what little strength he had left, he made a fist towards the plane.

“Kick their asses, boys!” he shouted.

Then Javier Acosta lost consciousness, lying among the corpses and burnt carcasses.