

After the Melt:

A Crafting Humanity Story

By Brendan O'Meara

A lazy wind pushed scraps of paper along an alleyway in the border town. A cloudy sky provided a mottled dome to complete the aura of cold emptiness permeating the area. The street was quiet, with a low hum from the breeze blowing through the holes in the chain link fences lining the thin passageway.

Shadows owned the pavement, accentuating the eerie stillness as a group of eight soldiers in urban camouflage walked the alley.

The soldiers were covered in protective gear, their eyes enhanced with infrared vision in the waning light.

There were no signs of life and they continued through the dense stillness watching their surroundings with the calm heartbeats of lethal warriors. They were cautious, every step as deliberate as the last, matching the solitude with a steady rhythm in sync with one another.

Their leader stopped, holding up his fist: life.

His team responded crouching into defensive stances, waiting for instructions, and canvassing the area, their eyesight sharpened by adrenaline and technology. The team leader moved forward, scanning the horizon trying to locate the brief flash of life he had picked up on his sensors. He progressed further with measured steps, intensely aware of his surroundings. His peripheral vision focused on the shadows while the motion sensors built into his helmet heightened his ability to read the future.

He reached the end of the alley, and two cats strolled out from behind a garbage can, indifferent to his presence and intent on ignoring him.

For a second he thought the cats were the source of his alert. He was ready to brush it off as a false alarm. However, the due diligence of his training interfered, and he initiated a sweep of the area. He turned towards the house at the end of the alley and approached the back door. His team moved into position behind him.

The house was a squat, single-level, home with a desolate cement yard and a few pieces of garbage stuck in the chain link fence. He approached the door, turned the handle, and pushed his way inside.

He found himself standing in a kitchen. An empty pot sat in between the coil-heated stovetop and sink. The musty odor of unwashed sponges hung in the air, penetrating the filters covering his mouth and nose. He continued his sweep of the area. Just as he finished his infrared scan a flash of light caught his eye. His motion sensors pulsed.

Instantly, his rifle's sight was at his eye, safety flipped off, muzzle pointed toward the glowing light.

His hands were steady.

He took his first step, every molecule of his being tensed.

The room connected to the kitchen served as both a sleeping and living area. On the far side sat a stained yellow couch next to a coffee table with an overflowing ashtray. A mattress with greying white sheets, held up by a rusting bedframe was pushed to the other side. In between stood a TV on a sagging cardboard box. The thread-bare carpet, partly exposing the bare floor, had a worn pathway between the bed, couch, and kitchen.

The commander continued into the room watching for movement from behind the mattress where his sensors had first caught a hint of life.

There was no wind, the windows were painted shut, and the door remained in its semi-open position. Suddenly a shuffling alerted him. His hands tightened on the muzzle of his rifle. Letting out a deep breath to slow his heart rate he cautiously stepped to the end of the mattress.

Holding his breath he bent down on the far side of the bed to a pile of sheets on the floor. With his trigger finger ready, he reached out to the pile with his other hand and pulled away the sheets, revealing two tiny little girls.

They clung desperately to each other; their eyes squeezed shut. Both had mousy brown hair and were thin to the point of starvation.

Taking a second to regain his composure before calmly placing his rifle on his back, he reached into his chest pocket, and pulled out a protein bar. He peeled off the wrapper and crouched down with an outstretched palm. Emitting an *ahem* he waited.

One of the girls popped her eyes open and turned toward him a hopeful look on her face. She prodded the other girl who, upon opening her eyes did the same. The commander pulled down his mask and smiled.

He gestured with his hands, knowing the penalty a noise could bring, imploring the girls to take the food. The smaller of the two turned to the other, still clutching her shirt while awaiting a decision.

The bigger girl reached out cautiously. Her emaciated hand took the bar, broke it in half, and handed one part to the smaller girl before taking a bite herself. The two relaxed, leaning up against the bed, savoring what must have been the first food they had eaten in weeks.

The corners of the team leader's eyes softened and he stood to finish inspecting the room. He pushed the muzzle of his rifle around in the sheets. The end of his gun snagged on something shiny and he lifted it up recognizing an aluminum heat blanket. The material must have blocked their sensors, making the girls all but invisible. He shook his head making a note to talk with his tech team about that and walked out of the house to call their medic.

He subconsciously pawed his left breast pocket. His fingers reconfirmed the presence of the circular plastic drive containing the data packet; the whole reason for this mission.

The commander was greeted by the inquisitive eyes of his team. He motioned for his medic to follow him. The girls were savoring every morsel of the protein bar when they returned. The medic looked at his commander who simply nodded at the girls.

Wordlessly the medic walked over and crouched down in front of the girls who eyed him cautiously as the larger of the two pushed her counterpart behind her protectively. The medic offered two more protein bars to the girls who accepted them without hesitation.

While the medic pulled out his bag and began to inspect the children, the commander motioned from the doorway to his second-in-command who jogged across the street to greet him.

Still uncertain of their surroundings the commander used sign language telling her about the house, the girls, and their medic's inspection:

Two girls, starving; House is clear, assume the rest of the row is too; No sign of anyone else here in weeks; Donny's checking girls; We'll move with them; Do a deep dive of the house while he finishes.

She nodded her understanding and headed through the open door.

Instead of following her inside, the team leader addressed the rest of his troops:

Jayla, get up top, find a sniper nest; Tony and Karla, stand guard at the house, when Donny and Sara are finished get the girls ready to move and wait here; Tran, scout ahead for us; Luke, with me.

The team nodded their assent and the commander waited with Luke for Tran to return. Five minutes later they saw their scout wave from around the corner and they took off towards him at a slow jog.

Random bits of paper fluttered in the frigid air as they circled the town. The only other signs of life on their monitors were rats scurrying about the streets. They showed up as little orbs of bright white light moving in twos and threes searching for food.

When they reached the other side of the village the commander stopped. Tran pointed through the stone archway indicating the entrance to the town. He motioned for the commander and Luke to follow him out.

The commander nodded, flipping off his safety as they forged ahead.

As they exited the town the team leader noticed the droves of rats running in a frenzy about the winter damaged grass.

They walked on an old concrete roadway, decimated from both lack of human intervention and too much of it. The road ended abruptly in a crater where an explosion had left its crude mark on the landscape.

The hole must have stretched fifty yards across. The edge was a steep precipice, dropping straight down to the bottom.

The three made their way up to the hole, rats running in and out with reckless abandon. Their scout was batting the fearless rodents out of the way with the butt of his rifle until they reached the edge of the crater. Tran stopped and nodded his head at the impact site.

The commander and Luke exchanged a glance before stepping forward to peer into the pit.

Forty feet straight down lay dozens of bodies piled on top of one another. The corpses were in various stages of decay and the cold had kept many in a permanent refrigerated state. It was difficult to tell how long they had been there, but judging by the number of half-eaten bodies devoured by the rats it was safe to assume it had been a long time.

The commander put a hand over his mouth and nose, but fortunately the freezing conditions made the smell a bit more bearable.

“Another pit, Captain,” Tran said, staring at the hole.

“How many do you think this time?” the commander asked crouching at the edge of the crater, “60? 70?”

“Around that, maybe more,” the scout replied, shrugging his shoulders and kicking at a rat who had ventured too close to his boot, “So much for the promise of the BlankZone. This is what? The fifth one we’ve found? How many more border cities are like this? What’s it like when you get further into their world?”

The Captain grunted his response. He had no idea. He wanted to get his team, the girls, and those data packets out of this hell.

He stood plotting their exit.

“Contact the team and let them know we can break silence; the Decimation Teams have already been here. Doubt they’re still watching the town.”

“Yessir,” replied Luke.

He began to pull out his HOLO to alert the rest of the group when they heard a shuffling noise from the body pit.

All three stopped, their hearts skipped a beat as one and they stared into the pit of death watching as a single metallic disc appeared from beneath the frozen scene of gore. It rose casually into the air, climbing above the body pit, until it was floating even with the soldiers’ heads.

The commander held out a hand, instructing his team to remain still as the disc moved across the body pit. They watched as it made its way around the rim of the crater before returning to its spot in front of them, where it stopped to hover in the air as if it hung on a string.

“A fucking Sentinel?” Tran said under his breath, unable to hide his fear, “They left a Sentinel in a pile of bodies?”

“Just back up. Slowly,” The commander whispered, stepping backward.

The Sentinel did not change position but held its place in the air as if staring at them.

The three backed away from the crater. Each footstep was a new landmine. Any trip or sudden movement and everything was lost. Finally, the commander bumped into the stone archway marking the entrance to the city. He reached out and grabbed the backs of the other soldiers and pulled them to safety behind the rock structure.

“That was too close,” the captain said, making a beeline towards the house where they had found the girls, “We need to get out of here now.”

The soldiers flanking him did not need to respond, this was life or death.

Five minutes later the team was ready to move. The girls had been cajoled into climbing onto the backs of Donny and Karla. Their arms and legs wrapped tightly around their protectors while the team fell into position, the girls, and their mounts in the center for maximum protection.

The team leader was in front with Tran. His battle sharpened eyes looking everywhere for signs of movement when he was startled by a tap on his shoulder. He turned to find Sara standing behind him.

“We ready Captain?” the woman asked, shrewdly eyeing every corner with suspicion.

“Right on Lieutenant. Tran, you’re up.”

The scout nodded and took off at a jog.

The Captain held pace with Tran doing his part to check the narrow alleyways and cobblestone streets as they ran. He was ready to be out of this town. Where there was one Sentinel there were more and they could not risk waking up the enemy. Not only did they have the two girls now, but they had worked too hard to get their intel. Failure was not an option.

“Let’s speed it up,” he said, and Tran quickened his pace.

Rats continued to scurry in the corners of his vision, racing around the cement blocks, now more noticeable at the edge of town where fewer buildings stood to conceal their activity.

The commander suddenly tripped and fell forward, catching himself with his hands just before smashing his face into the pavement. He looked behind to find a dead rat, crushed beneath his boot, lying flat on the road. He cursed under his breath, pushing himself to his knees, and incidentally glancing at the sky when he saw it.

The Sentinel.

“Run!”

As one, the team quickly twisted their necks upwards and spotted the reason for the abrupt order before taking off in a sprint.

“Captain, the HOLO! It’s starting!” Sara yelled from behind.

The Captain had a decision to make; take out the Sentinel now and risk more joining, or outrun this one. He turned to see the outline of a hazy figure forming on the ground. The commander could

discern the shape of a nebulous human morphing in the air. They were only twenty or so yards beyond the city's walls at this point. Outrunning or hiding from this one was impossible, especially for a group of eight carrying two little girls as cargo. Without another thought, he stopped, aimed his rifle, and let out a burst of gunfire. The disc blew up in mid-air and the commander took off behind his team, not waiting for the others to show. It was a race to the finish.

"Keep running, go go go!" he roared at his team. His legs churned the ground and his boots weighed heavy on his feet.

He looked back over his shoulder to see five more discs giving chase at breakneck speed. He stopped, waving his team forward as the new Sentinels raced towards them across the wind burnt landscape.

He hoped he could hold them off long enough so the rest of the team could reach a place of safety. One of them needed to get those data packets over the border and the Captain was willing to risk his life for that.

He put his scope to his eye firing a single shot at the first disc in line and took it out with a burst of imploding steel. He fired at the second but missed, the high-tech disc moving at lightning speed to avoid the missile. He steadied his weapon again and let out a burst of gunfire this time casting a wider shot, dismantling another Sentinel. The other three had stopped and hazy outlines of human beings were running in his direction at an unnatural speed.

"Goddamnit," the commander growled under his breath, taking off his headgear and aiming at the three translucent apparitions running in his direction. He fired as quickly as he could, trying to slow down their movement as they closed in on his position.

Thirty yards.

Twenty yards.

Ten yards.

WHAM

The impact from the first humanoid was like being hit by a car. His back hit the ground, stars exploded before his eyes, and he willed himself not to vomit. He blinked and rolled right narrowly avoiding a static charged arm that crashed into the ground where his head had been.

He sprang to his feet twirling two ion knives in his hands as he faced his enemy and turned on the knives' power sources with a swipe of his finger. The blades' steel flickered with intermittent white light and sparks flew off at random intervals.

The faux humans circled casually. They were toying with their prey and the commander would have to react cunningly to their movements. The Captain eyed his hunters as he breathed deeply. The HOLOs were as he remembered, faster, bigger, and judging by the pain wracking his back from his

impact with the ground, stronger than he. The thing to remember was they were only as skilled as the human beings operating them. The ion blades would dissipate them with a stab placed in just the right spot.

“Come on,” the Captain gritted his teeth, daring the HOLOs to make their move.

The two nearest him sprung at once, rushing in while the third stood back waiting its turn. The one rushing from the right grabbed the commander’s wrist and whipped his body in a circle crashing him into the other HOLO’s knee before whipping him back around and twisting his wrist behind his back.

The Captain, fighting for breath, felt the hold on his wrist relax as the HOLO switched his grip. Immediately he swung his free arm around into the apparition’s neck. The figure disappeared in a flash of static. In an instant the second one was on the Captain. He lifted the commander above his head and threw him ten feet tumbling in a tangle of limbs.

Blood filled his mouth and the captain spit it out, tonguing the gash running down the inside of his bottom lip. One of his knives lay on the ground where he had first been held down, but the other he held in his hand, his knuckles white as electric currents jumped up and down its reflective surface. The transparent figure ran at him with supernatural speed jumping into the air with a knee pointing down at the Captain’s back as he lay on the ground. At the last second the commander moved, rolling to his left and jumping to his feet jamming his knife into the back of the figure seeing it disappear in a final eruption of crackling air.

The captain took a single deep breath, but again a force from behind sent him sprawling face first on the frozen ground, the wind knocked out of him. He lay face down clutching at his back, certain the ribs on his right side were shattered.

More blood pooled on the ground under his cheek and his eyesight became blurry as he was turned over by the final figure.

A blank face of hazy static stared down at him with a knee on his chest. The Captain could only watch as a hand reached around his neck and squeezed. His face was numb from being scraped across the ground but the pounding behind his eyes increased and his temples were ready to explode. His throat was being crushed like a soda can in a compactor and he knew the figure was toying with him. The callousness of it all flashed through his mind and a deep well of hatred for his enemy bubbled up from his stomach when air rushed into his lungs. Caught off guard, the captain coughed violently, flecks of blood flew painting the ground with red streaks.

“We got you Captain,” said a familiar voice as he felt hands reach under his arms and drag him across the ground. His vision was still blurry, but his breathing had started to return to normal.

“Hey Cap, can you hear me?”

The Captain tried to speak, but the only result was more blood falling down his chin staining the front of his uniform. They'd have to wait until they stopped moving to hear his voice. He attempted a nod hoping it was understood by his team.

"Ok good, you'll be all right. I'll need to take a look at that when we catch up to the team. We should be up to them soon. Once I treat that mouth and your shoulder we can move again. Sound good?"

Donny, it was Donny's voice. The Captain managed to nod again.

"Thanks Cap, by the way, nice work with those HOLOs."

"Muvfuahas," the Captain attempted to speak through a mouth full of blood, but it came out garbled.

"What'd he say?" Luke's voice broke through the pain in the commander's head.

"I think he tried to say motherfuckers."

"Tough son of a bitch."

"No shit."

A half hour later the Captain was pulling down his shirt and Donny was packing up his med kit.

The ribs were definitely broken and his torso looked as if it had been painted with a purple marker, but the shot of cortisol, lidocaine, and vitamin B was the temporary fix the commander needed. They had several more miles until they reached the border. It would take every ounce of determination he had to keep up with his team.

"Everyone ready?" the Captain asked, standing and gritting his molars to avoid wincing.

"We can hang around here for a little longer," Sara spoke up from the back avoiding eye contact and searching the area for further attack.

"No, we've got ten miles to go. Those Sentinels were there for a reason." The Captain patted Tran on the back and the scout took off without further prompting, the rest of the team followed with calm, battle ready poise while currents of adrenaline flooded their veins.

The run was smooth, the scout undoubtedly slowing down to accommodate his injuries, but the Captain pushed Tran to pick up the pace, there was no time to waste. Those HOLOs were connected somewhere and it was only a matter of time before more offensive measures arrived.

They crested a ridge and headed down the home stretch. Wind lashed up from the ground and flung bits of sharp frozen tundra into the Captain's face. He wiped a hand across his swollen eye, reopening a gash on his cheek and a warm trickle of fresh blood ran along his chin.

"Captain! They're on us!" Luke shouted from the rear guard. The Captain snapped his neck around in time to see a blinding light strike the center of his team, eliciting a scream from somewhere in the middle of the pack.

"Go go! Move!" the Captain shouted and dropped back to Luke..

While the rest of the team streamed around him the Captain caught his breath and looked at the ground. Jayla's body lay there, a burned jumble of rigid limbs. The Captain whispered a tortured goodbye and stepped away.

Explosions rocked the ground and the earth shook underfoot when the missiles landed. The dull grey sky lit up with white lights and flickered in and out bringing to life a black-and-white world.

The border lay only a mile ahead but the Captain forced his legs onward. His breathing was becoming a problem and the pain in his ribs was excruciating. Blood ran freely from his cheek and streams of the iron rich liquid flooded his senses. He couldn't tell if he was bleeding from his mouth or face anymore, he only felt warm liquid pouring down his chin and sensed his lungs were about to explode and collapse all at once.

The earth in front of him sprang up without warning. The Captain felt his body lifted in the air and thrown backwards. His back slammed into the ground and he groaned in agony as new shards of pain crackled throughout his spine. Knowing they needed to keep moving he turned onto his side to inspect his surroundings.

His team was scattered about and the Captain couldn't make anything out in the chaos.

He pushed himself up ignoring the spiking pain with each breath and went to the nearest body. Flipping it over he found Donny, half his face torn off, the other an empty shell of pulped flesh and hollow skull. Immediately to his right lay the miniature crumpled body of one of the little girls. The Captain reached out a hand to find a pulse, but the stillness of her wrist gave him the answer he needed.

The explosions had abated for the moment and he looked back to see a cadre of soldiers making their way forward across the field with their weapons raised.

There would be no questions asked, only death.

The Captain stumbled to his feet and took off across the ground, but made it only another ten yards before a pain erupted in his left leg. He fell to the ground. His knee was unsteady when he stood again but he forced himself to walk forward.

Another eruption of pain followed, this time in his shoulder and he fell again, twisting in the air and landing with a thud on his side. He sucked in air and struggled to his knees, tensing at the pain, still fighting to escape when he heard the crack of a rifle. He braced himself for the impact when he heard another round of bullets. The soldiers were executing his team. Let no one live.

The Captain dragged his leg behind him, determined to make it to safety, doing his best to complete the mission when he felt an arm loop under his shoulder.

"Let's go Captain, almost there," Luke spoke gruffly, forcing the commander upright.

The commander grunted his assent and they sped off as quickly as possible, finally reaching the edge of the border. The Captain was about to black out when he crossed the single white line demarking their place of safety.

“We ma-,” Luke started to speak but stopped and suddenly dropped to the ground.

The Captain turned and saw his young private still in the enemy’s zone clutching his neck and desperately trying to stop a fountain of blood spurting from a sniper’s bullet.

The commander acted fast, reaching for his emergency med kit. He ripped open a pack of quick clot and poured it over the wound while he searched for some gauze.

“Hang in there Luke, just keep your eyes up here, ok?” said the commander pointing at his eyes and staring into the private’s that were slowly drooping as blood pumped from his neck.

“Goddamnit,” the Captain growled under his breath as his hand slipped in the slick liquid sending a jolt of pain through his body as he braced himself on the ground.

After doing all he could, for the time being he glanced up to witness the scene around him. A new team of soldiers walked across the empty earth taking their time to eliminate the other members of his team. He gripped Luke’s lapel and dragged him the remaining ten yards to the border. His leg screamed with every step and his arm became dislocated from the pulling, but he was determined. He clutched the data packet resting on his sternum and thought about trying to throw it over the border, but it was hopeless. The BZ soldiers would get there before any cavalry came to the rescue. The Captain was not so naïve that he believed an unprotected border would provide shelter from the soldiers.

The Captain took a deep breath and pulled Luke close to him.

This was it. This was how he died, trying to steal war changing intelligence from the enemy; a mission everyone considered suicide. He drifted to thoughts of his daughter, hoping she would remember all the good times they had shared.

The soldiers had made it within twenty yards of his position and they knew their quarry was not going anywhere. They padded silently forward with smoke swirling throughout their formation.

“Sorry buddy,” The Captain murmured to Luke before he lifted his chin and looked at his killers’ faces.

Their masks were in place and the Captain realized he wouldn’t even know them.

“Figures,” he mumbled as he looked up at the sky and saw something streak through his vision. He sat with his mouth agape staring upward when the world erupted in another ball of fire. The blast knocked him flat. He did his best to cover the soldier laying across his lap, but didn’t even know if he was still sitting on the ground anymore.

All he could do was lie on his back as the ash fell and his vision faded in and out. Then, the blank outline of a human was over him placing him on a flat surface and carrying him across the border.

With his last bit of strength the Captain rolled his head to the side and saw Luke on a gurney, eyes open, blinking at the sky.

Before he blacked out the Captain clutched the drive on his chest with one thought rolling through his mind.

They made it.