

# Dead Past Counting

The void gate opened, and Paladin Lieutenant Isa Holden stepped onto a seemingly endless grassy plain beneath a bright lavender sky. A plume of black smoke to the west was the only thing that marred the unbroken tranquility of the scene.

"Let's go, let's go," Holden shouted as the rest of her platoon exited the void gate. Thirty-nine Paladins split into four assault teams surged onto the plain, twenty-one enforcers armed with assault rifles, nine defenders with fusion spear and shields, and finally nine annihilators lugging heavy harbinger cannons. Her two warjacks came next, a pair of Morningstars bristling with weapons for close and ranged combat.

The last member of Lieutenant Holden's platoon stepped out of the gate and whistled. The sound was disturbingly organic coming from the tall, robotic entity simply known as Axel. "Beautiful scenery, hey, Lieutenant?" Axel said. He lacked the necessary apparatus to smile, but the sentiment was clear in his tone.

"Yeah, all except for the likely hundreds of murdered civilians," Holden said.

"And who knows how many AC raiders," added Sergeant Vickers, cocking his head, a smirk on his broad features.

Strangely, Vickers and the rest of her platoon had taken to the strange robot mercenary the moment he was assigned to them. His odd garb, strangely human mannerisms, and jovial demeanor put them at ease. Holden, too, if she were being honest.

"Well, yes, except for that," Axel replied. "But I expect this fine company will make short work of such rabble." Axel patted the huge sniper rifle he carried. The weapon was unlike anything Holden had seen in the arsenals of the ISA, the Marcher Worlds, or even the Aeternus Continuum. In fact, it looked more like an Empyrean weapon, which gave her pause, but Axel's reputation as a mercenary, odd quirks aside, was nearly flawless. Word was his contract was picked up because he'd informed the ISA that the colony on Trava might be under attack. It was suspicious, but when Trava failed to respond to all communication attempts, the ISA had no choice but to investigate.

Lieutenant Holden opened a channel to Captain Knight on the battle cruiser *Bastion's Fist* waiting at high altitude. "Captain, we're through," she said to the Warcaster. "Ready for Arc transfer."

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant," the captain replied. Seconds later, Holden felt energy pour into her mechanika systems.

"Listen up, Paladins," Holden said, raising her voice to command volume. "We're going to be outnumbered here, but reports indicate mostly vassals without warjack support. We've got them outgunned, just like we like it."

"Plus, we got Axel," one of the defenders said, a well-liked corporal named Kinnear. That drew a chuckle from the rest of the Paladins.

"You are too kind," Axel said. "Would that I had my legion at our backs, though. Then you would see real firepower, friends."

This drew more laughter, but it wasn't the first time Axel had mentioned this legion, inferring there were more robots like him, sentient automatons who were neither Empyrean nor one of the enigmatic Keepers. They'd laughed it off as another quirk of the mercenary bot, but Holden found herself wondering about it yet again. This time, she pushed the thought aside to address her platoon again. "We've got work to do. Vickers, you and the annihilators in front. Let's go."



Two things were immediately clear when Lieutenant Holden engaged the AC forces within the charred ruins of the Trava settlement. One—as she'd suspected—Holden and her Paladins were outnumbered by their enemies; and two, the AC weren't the ones who'd destroyed the colony. She'd seen the aftereffects of AC raids and knew their signature. She'd expected half-corroded rubble and corpses riddled with kinetic energy weapons. Instead, large portions of buildings had been neatly disintegrated. Strangely, there were few bodies, but the corpses Holden could see had suffered clean, almost surgical wounds that had removed large portions of their anatomy.

These facts were immaterial while the AC still threatened, however, and Holden ordered the Annihilators forward to lay down suppressing fire with their harbinger cannons as vassals opened up with spiker rifles or sought to overwhelm the Paladins in hand-to-hand fighting. Her defenders, led by Sergeant Vickers, formed a tight block of shield and energy spears as they intercepted enemies attempting to get within melee range of the Annihilators.

Holden fell back with the Paladin enforcers as they sought cover and started placing careful shots into enemy positions. The half-disintegrated ruins added an element of the macabre to the whole affair, made worse when Axel unlimbered his rifle and began pouring shots into the AC, scrambling from one covered position to another with insect-like speed and movement.

As disturbing, Axel's weapon was nearly silent, and the energy or projectile it fired was invisible. Holden could only tell that it had discharged at

all because the robot absorbed slight recoil and because she saw the devastating effects of each pull of the trigger. Every vassal struck initially reacted as if hit by a heavy kinetic discharge, stumbling or even falling backward, before the zealot's head and shoulders or a large portion of their torso simply disappeared. There was no blood, no explosion, just *more* corpses missing large sections of their anatomy.

"Hey," Holden shouted, moving up next to Axel as he sighted in on another vassal. "Your weapon's damage looks awfully familiar."

She pointed to a surgically bisected building a few yards away.

The robot mercenary pulled the trigger and disintegrated his target. "These Continuum raiders are damned menaces, eh, Lieutenant?"

Holden wanted to press the merc further, but just then, Captain Knight sent the two Morningstar warjacks in to soak up incoming fire and bring heavy ordinance to bear, and Holden had a battle to win. She ordered the Paladins to move up behind the machines, pushing through the wide central street of the settlement, killing vassals with each forward drive. Her casualties were light, and for a moment, Holden thought she might come away with an easy victory.

Vickers and his defenders, following closely behind the pair of Morningstars, neared one of the more intact buildings. They didn't see the threat and neither did Holden until the pair of animalistic rakers dropped their mimetic cloaks and sprang. The first cat-like mechanikal beast killed two defenders before the remaining Paladins destroyed it in a flurry of spear thrusts. The second raker smashed into Vickers, knocking him into a storage silo of some kind. The impact disengaged the lock on the structure, and its double doors opened, spilling its ghoulish contents in a sickening wave. Who and why they had put the bodies there could only be guessed at, but what had killed them was no mystery. Vickers went down beneath a pile of half-dismembered corpses, losing his spear and shield in the process. The avalanche of dead provided him momentary cover from the raker, but it immediately began tossing corpses aside to reach the living Paladin beneath them.

Holden watched the scene unfold, knowing they couldn't inflict enough damage on the raker before it got to Vickers. But then, Axel raced forward, bounding over debris as it weren't there, dropped to a knee, and took aim with his rifle. His finger tensed on the trigger, but he hesitated.

"Take the shot!" Holden screamed.

"There are so many," Axel said, horror staining his words. The muzzle of his rifle dipped. "One, two, three . . . No, wait, that's only two . . ."

Holden abandoned cover, drawing spiker fire that kicked up dust at her feet, and sprinted to Axel. He turned as she approached, and she saw that he was shaking. "Twenty-seven, twenty-eight . . ."

Take the goddamn shot! That's an order!" Holden screamed again, and her voice or perhaps her proximity broke Axel from his trance. His rifle snapped up. He squeezed the trigger. The raker's head and a significant portion of its upper body ceased to be, and it collapsed, looking like some rare beast on a vivisectionist's table.

"Apologies, Lieutenant," Axel said, his tone still shaky, but he placed his body in front of hers, as more Spiker fire rained down. "You should return to cover."



The battle ended shortly after the two rakers were destroyed—the remaining AC escaped into a void gate. With the enemy defeated, Holden sent her Paladins to look for colonists who might have survived the initial attack and the AC raiders that followed. She didn't expect them to find any.

That left her alone with Axel. The robot leaned on his rifle, staring down at the raker he'd destroyed.

"What the hell happened back there?" Holden asked. She'd seen her own troops freeze up in battle like that, usually because the scarring memories of past conflicts rose up to rob them of purpose and courage. But they were human, organic; the being before her was a collection of mechanika and programming.

"I am truly sorry, Lieutenant," Axel said, his somber tone an odd fit on the usually ebullient robot. "I was confused."

"Confused?" Holden replied. "You're a robot. You're not supposed to *get* confused." Axel shook his head. "Once again, I am sorry."

Holden leveled a finger at his metal chest. "I think you know what attacked this colony. It sure as shit wasn't the Aeternus Continuum that did *that*." She pointed to the corpse of a colonist; she thought it was a man, but there wasn't enough of the body left to make an accurate assessment. "Your rifle does the same kind of damage."

"No." Axel clenched his fists. "I am not like *them*."

"Like who?" Holden pressed, fear clenching her insides.

Axel said nothing, and before Holden could push further, Vickers returned from searching the ruins.

"This place is a slaughterhouse," he said and shuddered. "Nothing left alive. They even killed the livestock."

Axel took the opportunity to walk away from Holden and her questions, but she heard him muttering in low, pained tones, his optics fixed on the sprawl of partial corpses. "Thirty-one, thirty-two . . ."

And as suddenly as she'd felt she needed to know, she now found that maybe she didn't *want* the answers to those questions. At least not now, not here.

"Captain Knight," she said into her comm. "It's over. Get us out of here."

The void gate opened behind Holden, and for once, that black oblivion seemed preferable to the blighted world she left behind.