

RATS VS ALIENS



by PF Mosquito
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EXCERPT

Prologue to the Prologue

The convention hall was packed with people making their way from booth to booth and venue to venue. It was so crowded, that measuring the movement of the masses was a bit like studying the movement of a glacier. It didn't help that many of the people were dressed in the getup of a character from their favorite game: this one carrying a mock chainsaw, that one a faux spec-ops uniform replete with night-vision goggles, another like a pixie, right down to the five foot wings. In some cases, it was hard to tell if a person was in costume or if it was their regular outfit. This was particularly the case with the guys wearing muscle shirts and sporting mohawks—was this their normal look, or were they giving a nod to stealing virtual cars? Some things will never be known.

The gaming companies spared no expense, doing everything they could to attract attention to their booths. Flickering lights and giant screens permeated their space, in some cases looming over the heads of the gawkers, providing the illusion of a 3-D immersive environment. The crowds were suitably awed.

Thundering sounds of bombs and bullets emanated from the slickly produced first-person shooter rumored to have cost hundreds of millions to make. A very large crowd was constantly vying for position to get close to the table where they could fork over a small fortune to purchase a copy, get a freebie, or meet one of the persons who helped design the game.

A young teenager stood at the edge of this massive glom of gamers, straining to look over the heads of the people in front of him in a vain attempt to see *anything*. He wormed this way and that but couldn't get any closer. Perhaps he might succeed if he waited until later, he thought, when the speaker sessions begin and the exhibitors section empties out. He gazed about the hall, looking for something else to attract his attention.

In the back corner, he spied a couple of tables that only had a handful of people by it. A banner with a World War Two era tank was raised up high behind the booth. Strangely, there was a rat with a pistol perched on the tank. He decided it was worth a look.

A few minutes of moving along with the painfully slow current, he broke out of the stream and found himself in front of the booth.

A couple of older men were behind the table shooting the breeze with a motley-looking crew in front of the table. They were evidently on a first-name basis, leading him to think that both the people in front of and behind the table all worked for this game.

“What's with the rat on the tank?” he asked, flinching at the ‘squeak’ in his own voice.

“This game is owned by a company called ‘Cornered Rats Software,’ one of the men on his side of the table replied. This supposedly explained everything.

“What’s it all about?” the young man asked.

“It is a World War Two simulation,” explained a man behind the table, tipping his head upwards slightly so as to see better from underneath his cowboy hat. “We fight the war in real time using historically accurate reproductions of the weapons and vehicles that were in the European theater.”

“I never heard of it,” the teen replied, matter-of-factly.

“*Great* game,” said another of the men in front of the table. “I’ve been playing it since it was released. When it was in beta, even.”

“What makes it great?” the teen asked.

“For one thing, there is very little artificial intelligence. Most of the game-play involves real human players. That’s one of my favorite parts,” the man said.

“What I like,” said another, “is the combined arms element. You’ve got tanks, trucks, infantry, ships, planes, bombers... sometimes all at once in the same vicinity. It requires a level of teamwork that the other games just don’t have.”

“Not that we see that teamwork very often,” smirked a third one.

The first one laughed, “Which is why so many attacks fail. But when they succeed, it is spectacular.”

Cowboy-Hat Man behind the table now spoke: “Our game is the longest running massive multi-player game out there. The game requires a monthly subscription, but there are several levels, including a ‘free-to-play’ level.”

The teen didn’t seem sold.

“You said that the battle is going in real time?” the teen asked.

“That’s right,” Cowboy-Hat Man said. “Look.”

The teen looked at the large screen that was perched on a stool behind the booth and put on the headphones that were lying on the table in front of him, connected to the screen. His ears were immediately treated to the cacophony of war as Cowboy-Hat Man re-positioned the perspective shown on the screen to some kind of third-person view that allowed them to see the battle in progress, as it was playing out.

Blue and red-lettered names were visible above soldiers, tanks, and the planes that occasionally screamed overhead before passing out of view. The graphics were nowhere near on the level of the first-person shooters he was familiar with, but he could tell there was still something very cool about this game, nonetheless.

After watching for a bit, he took the headphones off.

“So, was that like a recording or something?” he asked.

“No sir,” said one of the three men in front of the table. “Like he said, this game is ‘real-time.’ That’s presently going on right now, as we speak. At any given moment, hundreds and sometimes thousands of people from around the world are battling it out.”

“That’s wild,” said the teen.

Seeing that the young man was thinking hard about signing up, the others kept quiet.

Finally, the teen spoke again. “How do I play?”

“We can sign you up for an account right here at the table and then when you get home you’ll have the link to download the game in your inbox, or you can take one of these discs with the latest client edition,” Cowboy-Hat Man said.

“Sure, I’ll try it!” the teen said.

“Great. Here, sit down. I’ll get you set up. What game name do you want?” Cowboy-Hat

Man sat with his fingers poised above the keyboard, ready to enter the young man's information.

"Harebrain," he said. "H-a-r-e-b-r-a-i-n."

Prologue

"I don't know why you play that game all the time," Joe's wife said with a smirk. She was standing behind him with her hands on her hips. Joe was playing the only game he ever played, one in which he constantly strove to liberate Europe from the bad guys. He was barely able to hear her. He was wearing headphones and they were in the middle of a particularly heated battle. But he *did* hear her.

He thought about what to say. A variety of tacts presented themselves in his mind. He could mention, for example, she had spent an hour talking on the telephone with a girlfriend, and another two hours watching some show on the television that tried to sell products for \$19.99, *and* she was continuously on social media throughout the evening. That was her way of relaxing, and this was his. He had as much to right to relax as she did. He got home from work as exhausted as she did. As he weighed his approach, he gunned down a few more bad guys and then decided it was probably best to say nothing at all... which was exactly what he did.

"You know, you're not *actually* saving the world, right? You can play that game every hour of every day of every week until you die, and you'll *never* save the world. You invest all that time, and you'll never have anything to show for it," she said. She was still smirking, but her voice had a serious tone.

Joe didn't feel like she had much of a case, since her two hours of television resulted in acquiring the 'WORLD's GREATEST OVEN MITT COL-LECTION™' (with 'free' shipping). In his book, this hardly counted as 'having something to show' for your time."

He still wisely refrained from voicing this thought, but did take a minute to consider the charge. The bottom line was that she just didn't understand the appeal. She insinuated that computer games were for kids or pimply-faced teenage boys, not grown men. He had told her that lots of men played the game, but this did not have the effect he had expected. After that, she seemed to think that only deadbeat losers played the game. She could not comprehend that many of the men were accomplished and successful, or, at minimum, content with their station in life. There were doctors, pilots, lawyers, bankers, authors, businessmen, software engineers, and probably more than a handful of millionaires. These played alongside janitors, teachers, scholars, garbage men, and mechanics, like himself. But here was the thing: with rare exceptions, nobody knew any of those details about their fellow player. And that was just the way they liked it.

There was no class, no color, no race, no creed, no politics. Sure, there were times when the game would get slow and they would make up the difference with arguing about things important and trivial alike, but in the main, they were there because they enjoyed the premise of the game, had similar interests, respected the hell out of those who had fought and died for their countries, and needed entertainment suitable to their characters and disposition.

More than that, Joe, a mere auto mechanic, was, in the game, a leader of these men. He was known and respected. His contributions valued. *He* was valued. Nobody cared one iota that in

his day job he replaced brake lines or repaired mufflers. What mattered in the game was that he had proved himself competent in the heat of battle, and his merry band had decided he would be their leader.

He was in fact a born leader, but the universe had conspired to make it so that the only place that this very real part of his nature would ever be expressed was in the context of virtual warfare.

Just how does one explain all that to someone who doesn't already get it?

He was about to take a stab at explaining it all again when the sky lit up and stayed bright as day for several minutes before the stars appeared once again. Joe and his wife stared out the window, the previous conversation forgotten.

“*What the hell?*” Joe wondered.

Already the chat window in the game world was filled with people talking about it: “WTH?” they all said together. Then they went back to killing bad guys.

Chapter 1

NOT IN CHINA ANYMORE, TOTO

It was only for a millisecond, but it was enough to catch the attention of Steve Jefferies. It was his job to notice such things, so despite the fact that he was thoroughly sucked into a CSPAN program debating whether or not it was possible to scientifically detect design, he quickly shifted his attention to the bank of computer monitors that was his job to monitor. One could say that for Analyst Jefferies, there was no debate—he detected design all the time. But were the designs nefarious? That was always *his* question.

His instinct in this case was that something was wrong... seriously wrong. The entire infrastructure of the Department of Defense's computer systems had experienced a 'blip' all at the same moment. They had each flickered as though they had lost power, but not enough to shut down or become unstable. If he hadn't been looking at just that moment, he wouldn't have even noticed, but even his television had flickered. Some quick checking of the DoD systems revealed that every system had experienced the same thing, whether it was one of their servers or a missile guidance system a thousand miles away. Further scrutiny confirmed that all commercial and private systems had experienced the same thing.

His first hypothesis was that there had been some kind of issue with the power grid. Initially, this seemed a promising lead, since their networks saw the same blip. However, it quickly became apparent that the power companies were victims, not culprits. Could it be America's enemies? Jefferies soon came to a startling conclusion: systems everywhere, including in Russia, China, and elsewhere, had experienced the same 'flicker.'

It was only three in the morning, but Jefferies knew that something as odd as this could not wait for regular business hours. He picked up the red phone.

Terry plopped down in front of his computer and threw his headset on all in a single motion. Today had been a hard day. He was ready to decompress, and for that, the game World War Two Online was the only prescription. His day in the laboratory—what he called his oversized

shed in the backyard—had seen one failure after another. He was working on his latest invention, and, as usual, he seemed one breakthrough away from ultimate success. Unfortunately, the things just kept breaking, instead. In the game, he could forget about all such things.

He logged into his voice-over-IP program, known by its abbreviation, TS, and saw that no one was on. He went straight away to the game. Some of the members of his squad were online and he typed out a greeting to them.

"Where's the action?" Terry wrote. His game name was 'thundrclp,' or short for 'thunderclap.' It sounded good when he set it up but evidently his assumption that people would simply fill in the 'e' and the 'a' sounds was false. People just called him 'thun' in the game, except for his squadmates, who referred to him as 'Thunder.' At least they didn't call him The Clap.

"You got to get to Tienen," a gamer named Doyle123 replied. "It's a mess."

Terry had never met Doyle, but they had 'known' each other for three years in their virtual manifestations. Terry knew that Doyle's real name was Kevin, that he had three kids, worked as an accountant, and was wicked-smart. In some respects, Doyle was Terry's best friend. He told Doyle all the things he couldn't say to any of his friends 'IRL'—in real life. And of course, Doyle returned the favor.

"Sitrep?" Thunder inquired, asking for the situation report.

"Game has gone screwy, in a good way. EI are pouring in," Doyle reported, indicating that enemy infantry were assaulting the town, which consequently meant it needed defense.

In their squad channel, a Talon named Haven saluted him and typed out, "Get to Tienen fast, while you still can."

"otw," typed back Thunder, letting his team know that he was on the way. Doyle was right. There were loads of bad guys charging into the town. More of a surprise was how many people were defending it, and who those persons were. Many of them were Axis players. "Why are Axis players playing Allied? And if they are playing Allied, who is playing Axis?" Thunder thought to himself.

On the other side of country, Charlie Cantor, aka 'goober,' logged into the game. Charlie chose his name specifically to add insult to injury; that is, to the injury inflicted on other players. Charlie was the best player in the game behind a submachine gun, which meant that there were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of enemy players who died violently, only to discover, in humiliating fashion, they died to a player named 'goober.'

"Eagle's Talons" was glad to have 'goober' in their squad. When he was on the scene, the Axis knew they were going to have a bad day.

Goober, on the other hand, was having a very good day. He saw Doyle's comments to Thunder and jumped into the town of Tienen without greeting anyone, and was instantly engaged with the enemy. You couldn't throw a rock without hitting an enemy player; for every time that he was laid low, he dispatched nine or ten.

Goober also noticed that people who were normally his foes were now fighting alongside him. He typed out a private message to a normally Axis player that he had much respect for, Rockhat.

"Playing allied during the campaign?" Goober asked him.

“Sidelocked,” came the reply. “Says ten minutes to wait before logging in as Axis but after the countdown, still can’t join the Axis side.”

“hmmmm,” Goober typed back. “Happy to have you however we get you!”

“Tx,” Rockhat wrote. *Thanks.*

Thunder noticed Goober's persona running next to him within the game.

“I thought we might see KellyzHero running with us, Goober,” Thunder wrote. In his home office, Thunder smirked; everyone knew that KellyzHero was a sore point with Goober. Goober didn’t fall for it. He merely typed out a smiley face and went back to killing things.

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Snapper watched as the last person left his floor, leaving him all alone in his corner office atop his twelve story office building. He was the founder and CEO of the business that owned the building, which it bought in cash. He poured himself a scotch on the rocks and fired up his favorite game. He could play at home, but his family was traveling and he liked to check the map before driving home, anyway.

Also, he enjoyed the view out over the city of Las Angeles that his office afforded, especially at night. His building was not the tallest building, but situated on a hill, he had a scene vantage point that usually one had to buy a twenty-story building to acquire. At night, the lights of the city were stretched out as far as the eye could see like a blanket of stars, a veritable galaxy at his feet. By playing from his office he could kill two birds with one stone—bask in the beauty of the scene and relax while gunning down virtual enemies.

He was as fascinated as anyone by the turn of events within the game, but didn’t see how it affected his basic game play. He found a town under attack, climbed into a control point, otherwise known as a CP, and joined the melee underway for control of the structure. Despite the fact that there were a number of quality players helping him beat back the attackers, the CP steadily fell into enemy hands. Finally, the CP was lost.

At just that moment, the galaxy blinked out; LA had gone completely dark. “That’s odd,” he said to himself.

Already the defenders were wresting control of the CP back into allied hands. The lights of LA blinked on just as they re-captured their facility. Their victory was short-lived. The enemy soon returned the favor, and re-took the CP. LA blacked out again. Now Snapper stood up and went to the window and gazed out. “How *very* odd,” he said.

Goober was having the time of his life. World War Two Online was the only game he played. The game had suffered setbacks over the years, but was still profoundly unique as far as games went. The battle ranged across a map that was half the scale of Europe and allowed for combined arms, which most games couldn’t boast. You could fight as infantry, you could grab a tank or truck, you could fly a plane, you could take the helm of a destroyer. The sound of a flight of planes going overhead, knowing that real humans were flying them, and watching a row of enemy tanks blow up as the bombs hit, was all quite exhilarating. But the setbacks

meant fewer players in the game and stalled development. In previous years, it was not uncommon for the field of battle to be crowded, but up until twenty-four hours earlier, the biggest battles tended to be only thirty against thirty—if you were lucky.

Twenty-four hours earlier, the Axis team (supposedly) had been locked out of their side and were all playing Allied. This meant a doubling of the Allied forces. And who were they fighting against, exactly? Rumors abounded, but the general consensus was that the Chinese had hacked the game. When one died, it told you who killed you. The names of their killers were strange combinations of letters, apparently random, such as 'dfjasd032f.'

There was one thing that was certain: they were not AI, or artificial intelligence. You can always figure out whether or not you were playing a computer or a real human, no matter how sophisticated the programming was. Eventually, you tapped out the diversity that the programmers had put into the game and it started to repeat itself. This allowed you to predict the behavior of the AI, and work around it, and not be concerned that the AI itself would adapt to your proven technique.

The hundreds of hacked-Axis pushing the Allies deep into France were definitely adapting. *Definitely.*

Goober didn't mind; for however good these 'Axis' were, he was killing ten to fifteen of them in each sortie. And that's just plain fun.

Casey Cunningham, aka DrMad, was *not* having fun. In the first place, there was the principle of the matter: his system had been compromised. For someone with his skill set, that just shouldn't happen. Worse, not only was someone in *his* 'house,' he couldn't get that person out. Worse yet, the person in his house had locked *him* out. His administrative permissions had been severely curtailed. It was like arriving at one's home only to find that an intruder was still inside, but had changed the locks; you could still see him through the window, eating your popcorn and drinking your beer on your favorite couch watching *your* big screen. It was humiliating.

In the second place, these particular intruders were exhibiting such skill that Casey had come to the conclusion that it had to represent an attack by a foreign government. It had been him that launched the rumor that the Chinese had hacked the game, although unintentionally. People had asked him what was going on and he reported one possibility.

By now, however, Casey knew that it wasn't the Chinese.

The first thing he tried to do was restart the server... but remote rebooting was disabled. The second thing he did was contact the company that housed the server. It was protected in a highly secured, temperature controlled environment. The company informed him that the doors to the room his server was kept in were locked tight, and they themselves could not open it. The company could not even access their own breaker box to shut off the power manually, as the room itself was protected by an electromagnetic lock. They took the dramatic step of contacting the power company to turn off the power to their entire server farm so they could regain control of their facility, and the power company told the company that they, too, had been over-ridden.

All the way up the chain, every possible way to regain control of Casey's server was blocked by the intruders. It was quite literally the case that the only route open to them was to start chopping through walls and cutting cables.

The only thing it could be was a military-grade attack. That's why he initially thought it was the Chinese. That made no sense at all, however, because it was Casey's game server that appeared to be ground zero for the whole thing. But why? There was no strategic importance to his server; it hosted the game, and that was it.

However, despite being severely limited in what he was able to do with his own server, he was able to monitor the network traffic. There were no more connections with Chinese computers than normal. Everything was the same on that score. The thing that concerned him, and perhaps even frightened him, was that the Axis 'players' were generating no *inbound* network traffic *at all*.

The *obviously* human players playing on the Axis team had to be playing from *inside* the server *itself*.

And that, of course, was not possible.

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