Reverse Engineering

Mark Cole

GREEN METAL BEETLES FILLED THE SKY. Electric death crackled off their deadly antennae and fell on the city below. It played up and down the crowded streets, shattering buildings, boiling asphalt, vaporizing cars.

Dull olive-drab shapes huddled against the crumbling remnants of a wall. One of the men cursed under his breath.

A faint sound echoed up the ruined street: a tinny tinkle, like fine gold chains dragged along the pavement. It grew louder, more regular; it took on a slow, deadly beat. A blinding blue light filled the end of the street, throwing strange shadows towards them that jerked and leapt in a terrifying rhythm.

And then they came, hulking armored shells of black and green. Their metal feet clanged and clattered on what was left of the paving.

The creatures waved the black devices in their claws and streams of power sizzled out of them. Dazzling light wrapped itself around a burning tank, crushing it with a splatter of molten metal.

"Ever see anything like it?" the oldest soldier asked. Two dull black bars showed dimly beneath the camo netting on his helmet.

"Sorry, Captain," the young red-haired man told him. His ill-fitting uniform had no markings. A heavy string of cameras dangled from his neck; bits of equipment hung from every pocket. He held out a handful of meters. "There isn't a reading on any of these that makes any sense."

The Captain nodded and stared down at the tips of his heavy boots. "Then we're just going to have to capture a few of their weapons." He jerked a thumb at the sergeant. "Get the civilian back into the shelter."

It took them four hours. But what the hell, they did it.

"Here, catch," the Captain said as he pushed through the narrow door. He tossed a massive black weapon across the damp, concrete room, then bent down and dragged a soldier into the room behind him. He left a long smear of blood on the floor.

"Lighter than I expected," the red-haired technician muttered. He shook it gently and something rattled deep inside.

"Now get that thing apart and let's see how it works," the Captain growled.

The technician turned the weapon over his hands. He released a slide, undid a few fasteners and pushed a lever out of the way. He paused for an instant, his eyes on his toolbox but somehow far away. "Captain," he said, his voice uncertain, "those things must be centuries ahead of us." His fingers moved across the weapon on their own. A large component—perhaps a magazine—dropped out of its bottom. "Their technology defies every law of nature we've ever discovered." He disengaged two large side plates. They hit the floor with a tinny clatter that aluminum pie plates might have made. "There's nothing in here we can understand, there can't be." He detached what looked like a complex aiming mechanism and set it carefully aside on the table. He depressed a tiny spring and the upper portion of the weapon slid backwards with a faint jerk. The technician eased it back, his eyes on the Captain's.

"As far as we're concerned, this might as well be..."

With a sudden steely twang, the weapon's slide leapt off its tracks and landed on the floor. A large spring bounced away in another direction. The rest of the weapon slipped from the technician's hands and crashed onto the table. A hidden compartment popped open, scattering its contents across the counter: a few shards of bone, a small, smooth pebble, what looked like the skull of a tiny bird, and some sort of silver talisman.
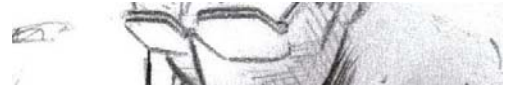
"...magic." The word seemed to stumble out of his lips.

The Captain picked up the weapon and peered into the compartment. It took up most of the space inside.

It was empty.

He stared at it, his eyes wide, the hard lines of his face suddenly gone.

"That isn't good." ⓕ

Mark Cole hates writing bios. Despite many efforts he has never written one he likes, perhaps because there are many other things he'd rather be writing. He writes from Warren, Pennsylvania, where he has managed to avoid writing about himself for both newspaper and magazine articles.