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Opening extract from **Alien Storm**

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Major Bright sensed them coming as an image in his mind's eye – four hovercopters moving almost silently through the skies above the Central Australian desert. It was part of the psychic early-warning system he'd inherited from Colonel Moss's experiment with the fall virus. He was supposed to be the leader of a new generation of superhuman soldiers, but now there was only him – stuck in the outback amidst outlaws almost as wanted as himself. The forces of HIDRA were coming to capture and imprison him, just like they had Colonel Moss.

Swinging his legs off the bed, he reached into the water bowl on the nearby table and splashed the lukewarm liquid on his face. Looking in the cracked shaving mirror on the table, he ran his hands over his closely-cropped hair and stroked a finger down the old battle scar that ran the length of his cheek. He frowned at his reflection. After six months of hiding out in the desert he'd put on a little weight in the face, but his body was still hard and muscular – barely a gram of excess fat. Bright flexed his bicep and nodded approvingly. He was ready to go to war.

At the doorway of his caravan, Eco stood to attention in readiness for any command. Eco – the eighteen-year-old kid who'd become his ostensible second-in-command at the camp during the past few months. When Bright had an order to give to the collection of almost a hundred crims and misfits who lived around him, it was Eco who delivered it.

"Is there anything wrong, sir?" the teenager asked, his thin face almost invisible in the darkness – the window shades had to be kept down during the day against the searing heat of the desert.

Bright dried his hands on a towel and looked round. "Wake the camp. We're going to be attacked. Tell them we've got about ten minutes."

Even in the darkness, Bright could see the kid's mouth fall open stupidly. Months of rage and frustration bubbled away under the major's calm exterior, but he suppressed it. Bright was used to commanding highly-trained men (the very type of men who were being sent to capture him), but here he was reduced to living with common criminals and ordering around a teenage misfit looking for a father figure. Eco continued to gawk as if he'd just spoken in Latin.

"Well?" Bright snapped, just as he would at one of his underlings when he had been in control at HIDRA. "Wake the camp! Get to it, soldier!"

"Yessir!" Eco yelped, giving some kind of half-salute as he stumbled into the blinding light of day.

Major Bright shook his head as the gangly kid exited the caravan, and then went to the cupboard near the bed. He removed a single item on a hanger and tore off the protective plastic. Even in the dimness of the caravan the brass on his old uniform sparkled – the rips and tears from his last battle with Sarah Williams and the other children had been repaired so it was almost as good as new.

Soon he would be a commander of men once more, not boys or criminals.

Laying the uniform down on the bed, Major Bright took a plastic case from the cupboard and flipped it open. Inside sat a syringe-gun and glass vials, each containing a sample of the virus serum that gave him his powers. Every few weeks he felt his enhanced strength draining, and that was when he had to inject more of the serum. He counted the vials – *only two left*.

Bright placed one of the precious vials in the gun and held it against his left arm. With a pull on the trigger, the serum shot into his bloodstream like molten iron. He gritted his teeth to stop from crying out in pain and gripped the side of the bed as his entire body was racked by muscular spasms.

One more vial, Major Bright thought as the pain subsided. *I need more serum.*

Luckily, he knew just where to find it: the original children from Colonel Moss's experiment – *Project Superhuman*. He sensed them in the east with his attuned psychic sense: Sarah and Robert Williams, the Colombian twins and the two younger ones. Their blood was the key to their powers. When Bright had their blood, he could make serum on demand. When he had that, he would be truly indestructible.

With a smile, he began to dress for battle.

Meanwhile, Eco ran around the camp, unkempt blond hair flying around his face as he went.

"Wake up!" he yelled, banging on the door of a caravan. "We're under attack! Get to your defensive positions!"

Before he reached the next vehicle, someone caught his arm, almost pulling him off his feet. Eco looked up into the eyes of a bearded biker with tattoos on his face.

"What are you shouting about, Shrimp?"

Eco gritted his teeth. *Shrimp*. He hated that nickname, but people didn't use it when he was around Major Bright.

"HIDRA is coming," he said, pulling his arm free. "Time to show your loyalty to the major."

The biker gave him a look like he thought he was crazy. He turned and signalled to two of his mates, who were dressed in jeans and leather and sporting full beards despite the crushing heat. They walked in the direction of their bikes.

"Hey, where are you going?" Eco demanded, running after them. All around the camp people were emerging from vans and caravans, blinking in the sunlight.

The biker looked round as he swung a leg over his Harley and fired the engine. "It's been cool hanging out here, but I ain't taking on no army for that freak."

Eco was aware of half the camp watching their conversation. He stepped in front of the bike. "You're not going anywhere."

The biker looked round at his friends and they roared with laughter. The man leaned over the handlebars of the motorbike until their noses were almost touching.

"You know, kid," he said, "for a snot-nosed teenager, I kinda like you. So don't make me ride this hog over your head."

Eco looked around the camp. "We can defend this place! The major will protect us!"

A murmur went up from the people watching the scene. The biker sighed and revved his engine for quiet. "Major Bright ain't got nothing but a bunch of party tricks up his sleeve. Anyone stupid enough to stick around for those HIDRA boys to roll in here—"

His voice trailed off as the door to the caravan opposite slammed open as if it had been kicked. Major Bright stepped out into the light. Everyone in the camp looked round at the towering figure – now dressed in his black and gold uniform. For a

moment he didn't move, regarding them all with his cold, blue eyes. Nobody breathed. Finally, Bright started down the caravan steps and walked slowly across towards Eco and the biker.

"Is there a problem?" he asked as he reached Eco's side.

The kid looked round, relief written all over his face. "This guy wants to leave."

The major looked at the man on the bike and raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Hey, look, it's been great," the biker stammered. He seemed to have shrunk half a metre in height since Bright walked out of the caravan. "But me and my crew didn't sign up to fight a war..."

Bright held up his hand, palm forward, fingers splayed. "Then you should go."

There was a dull thud as the biker exploded in a puff of red-tinted mist. Eco wrinkled his nose at the burning smell that had filled the air. Without its rider, the Harley toppled over onto its side. A scrap of the biker's leather jacket floated through the air and landed on the rear wheel. The other two bikers jumped off their machines and stumbled backwards, away from the major and Eco.

"Does anyone else want to disappear?" Bright asked mildly, casting his eyes around the silent audience. "No one? Sure? Then get to your positions. NOW!"

The crowd broke and ran for their assigned places around the perimeter of the camp. For the last month, when they weren't out on scavenging missions to the nearest towns, Bright had been drilling them in how to defend the camp from infiltration. Eco felt his heart race as he saw men and women grabbing makeshift weapons and scurrying behind barricades. He looked up at the major.

"Don't worry, sir. We'll see them off or die trying."

The major traced a finger down the scar on his right cheek.

"Sure. You will."

Ten kilometres from the camp, Commander Craig tapped an area on the windscreen of his hovercopter and a Heads-Up Display, or HUD, opened showing a magnified view of the desert ahead. The camp in the distance was little more than a collection of rusting cars, trucks and caravans. To the edge of the screen a window showed a dark-haired woman in her late thirties – his boss, Dr. Rachel Andersen. She was overseeing the desert assault from the safety of her office, hundreds of kilometres away at the HIDRA base in Melbourne.

"Okay, Commander," she said. "Tell me what I'm seeing."

"The aerial assault is inbound on the camp, sir," Craig informed her. He tapped a section of the HUD to the west, where a dust-cloud was rising. On Rachel's screen back at the base the vision would be highlighted. "That's the ground convoy. We've got six troop transports heading into the camp."

Rachel Andersen said again, "I hope your men understand what they're going up against, Commander."

"A group of outlaws and scum hiding out in the desert? Forgive me, sir, but this should be short and sweet."

Rachel gave him a hard look. "I'm talking about Bright. I want him restrained and in a cell by the end of the morning. No mistakes."

“Yessir,” the commander replied briskly as he reached for his com. “Ground force, hold position one klick from the camp. Air support move in.”

The three other hovercopters surged towards the camp while Commander Craig kept his in a holding pattern.

“We can watch everything from here, sir,” he told Rachel as the magnified HUD showed the copters circle the perimeter of the camp. “They’re conducting an initial scan. This should tell us exactly how many hostiles we’re dealing with and where the weak points are.”

In the window, Rachel nodded as data appeared on the screen: close-up pictures of the camp and thermal scans of the vehicles. People inside the camp showed up in red.

Commander Craig studied the thermal overview. “Looks like we’ve got about sixty warm bodies in there, sir. There’s a scattered group of about twenty moving to the south on foot. Probably deserters from the camp making a run for it. We’ll pick them up later. Our intel suggests we’ve got at least thirty wanted criminals amongst this mob.”

“I want zero casualties,” she reminded him. “You have permission to proceed.”

“We have a go,” Craig said into the com. “Air support, take out the unoccupied vehicles. Let’s clear a path for the ground assault.”

The first missile hit as Eco was running across the central area of the camp. An ageing camper-van to his left exploded, rising into the air and coming down with an almighty crash that rocked the entire camp. Eco’s legs fell from under him and he hit the sand, rolling onto his back and blinking in confusion. The sound of the explosion was quickly replaced by a ringing in his ears. He looked around and watched people running left and right, their mouths working as if they were screaming, but all he heard was the ringing.

I’m deaf, he thought as something like a massive, black bird appeared overhead – a helicopter hovering directly over the centre of the camp. Eco watched in fascination as it made a leisurely turn, taking in its surroundings, completely unconcerned with the chaos it had created below. The machine stopped its rotation and fired a second missile, lighting up a bus that formed the back door of the camp. Eco pulled himself to his feet and walked backwards, noticing for the first time that the helicopter had no spinning blades. He wondered how it stayed in the air, as two identical machines appeared above the camp.

“Hey!” Eco yelled as a man ran from his hiding place near the east wall. “Do something! Shoot at them!”

The man tossed his shotgun at Eco’s feet. “You shoot at them!” he said and fell on his knees, hands on his head. “I’m surrendering!”

Eco was about to call him a coward when he noticed that at least thirty other people had abandoned their positions and were walking into the open area. They followed the man’s lead and threw their weapons down, kneeling before the three machines hovering above them. Shaking his head to clear the ringing, Eco bent down and picked up the shotgun. It was heavier than expected and felt alien in his hands.

“Kid, don’t be a fool!” a woman on her knees beside him hissed. “Look!”

Eco held the gun limply and followed her gaze. Through the hole torn in the bus by the second missile he saw a line of black shapes approaching across the heat haze of the desert. Humvees – Eco had seen them in a film about Iraq. A few seconds later the first tank-like vehicle blazed into the camp, smashing aside the remnants of the bus and drawing up fast before the kneeling occupants of the camp. Doors on both sides of the machine swung open and six armoured soldiers ran out as the other Humvees pulled up.

Eco's legs went weak and the gun slipped from his fingers. The woman tugged at his T-shirt.

"Get down!" she said. "You're gonna get shot!"

Eco didn't move. He was fixated on the soldiers forming a line around the kneeling camp-dwellers. One of them raised a loudhailer to his mouth.

"Everyone else, come out with your hands up!" he ordered. "You won't be hurt if you give up now."

Immediately, twenty or so others emerged from the vehicles around the camp and assumed the position in front of the soldiers. The soldier with the loudhailer looked at the captain next to him and grinned.

"Mission accomplished, sir?" he said.

His superior looked around the camp. "Where's Bright?"

The door to the major's caravan swung open once more. The soldiers tensed as Bright stepped out and crossed into the middle of the camp. Twenty dart-rifles swung round to point at him.

"Knees, now!" the captain ordered. "We're taking you in, Bright!"

Major Bright looked at him. "Or what?"

All around, people dropped from their knees to their stomachs, faces in the sand. Someone started sobbing with fear. Major Bright looked around the cowering mass with contempt. Only Eco and the soldiers remained standing.

"Fire!" the captain screamed.

Twenty rifles went off at once, the tranquillizer darts slamming into the major's arms, chest and legs. He staggered back, almost losing his footing, but managed to keep his balance. The soldiers stopped firing. They looked at the still-standing target with amazement, lowering their weapons.

Major Bright winced and roughly brushed the darts away that were embedded all over his body, as if he were removing dust from his uniform. He looked back at the soldiers with an annoyed expression and said one word:

"Ouch."

The soldier with the loudhailer looked at his captain. "He's taken enough juice to sedate a zoo, sir."

The captain took a step back. "Yeah. Perhaps we need to—"

A howling sound filled the air, drowning out the last of the captain's words. On impulse, Eco ran to the major's side as he raised his hands. The ground beneath them vibrated. Bright looked round at him, his eyes blazing red now.

"My turn," he said.

All around, a tornado was beginning to form, creating a wall of sand that ripped around the soldiers and the inhabitants of the camps. The wind grew in intensity, but Eco and Major Bright were safe in the eye of the storm. Bright raised his hands higher

and the tornado raged faster. Eco watched soldiers being lifted off the ground and into the expanding twister.

Commander Craig watched the rotating pillar of sand engulf the camp, expanding as it turned. Within seconds the edge of the sandstorm was only a few hundred metres from where their copter was hovering. Ahead of them, the wall of the twister grew closer by the second.

In the link-up window, Rachel Andersen's eyes widened as she saw the camp swallowed up. "Commander, get out of there!"

Commander Craig yelled into the com, "All units! Full retreat!"

His voice trailed off as a black object was spat out of the tornado and arced through the air towards them. As it flew closer it was possible to make out what it was – one of the Humvees.

Commander Craig's mouth fell open. "That's our—"

The two-tonne vehicle slammed into the side of the hovercopter, sending it into an uncontrollable spin.

The windscreen shattered from the impact, showering the occupants with glass. The copter hit the sand a second later.

The storm had passed – and so had the camp...and the copters...and the soldiers...

Eco stood in the centre of a giant crater where the camp had once been. As the dust in the air settled he made out the shape of half-buried vehicles. It was as if someone had taken the entire desert and shaken it. Beside him Major Bright stood stock still, eyes closed, arms still held up, in some kind of trance.

A few metres away, one of the survivors of the camp emerged from the sand, took one look at Major Bright and ran off into the desert.

"Hey!" Eco yelled after him. "Where are you going? There's nothing out there!"

Major Bright opened his eyes and shook his head. "Leave them, Eco. Fools."

Eco looked round at the strange tone in the major's voice – almost dreamy, as if he were half asleep.

"Uh, Major," he said, "are you okay?"

"We must travel east," Major Bright went on, as if speaking to himself. "That is where the children are. Melbourne."

"Children?" Eco repeated, still not getting it.

"The children with the powers," Bright continued. "Sarah Williams and her brother. Nestor and Octavio. Louise and Wei. I need more serum. I need their blood."

Eco looked round at the sound of vehicles and saw the silhouettes of more Humvees approaching. The twister hadn't wiped out all of the HIDRA forces.

"I think we have a problem, sir," Eco said. "We should run."

An uncustomary laugh escaped Major Bright's lips. He grabbed Eco's wrist in his massive hand and clasped it tightly. Eco gave a cry of pain – the major really didn't know his own strength.

"Why run?" Bright hissed. "When you can teleport?"

Eco let out a cry as white light began to expand around them. He fancied he felt his skin and clothes burning. Through the brightness he saw the HIDRA vehicles driving towards them at full speed. If they didn't dodge they were sure to be run over, but the major held him firm.

"Nooooooooooooo!" Eco closed his eyes and screamed as he waited for the impact...

It didn't come.

To his surprise, Eco felt a cool breeze and several spots of rain against his cheek. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

The rolling red dunes of the desert were gone, replaced by lush green trees on either side of a deserted road. The air was thick with moisture and the sweet, cloying smell of eucalyptus trees. Blinking, Eco took in his new surroundings as the major released his wrist.

"Where are we?" he murmured, shivering at the sudden change of temperature. It was clear they were far from the desert now.

Without warning, Major Bright staggered forward, and Eco reached out to support him. Bright pushed him away, but it was clear he was struggling to stay on his feet.

"What's wrong?" Eco asked.

"The distance of the teleport has weakened me," he said. "We need to find a vehicle. Now."

As if on cue, a four-wheel drive appeared over the crest of the road, heading towards them. As they were standing right in the middle of the highway, Eco moved to the grass verge, but the major didn't budge. The Range Rover swerved to avoid him. Major Bright reached out with his left hand and caught its side. With a metallic tearing and a screech of tyre rubber, the vehicle spun around in the road and came to a halt. Seconds later, the door flew open and the stunned driver stumbled out.

"Run if you want to live!" Major Bright spat as the driver opened his mouth to say something. Without any further prompting, the driver turned tail and ran into the trees by the side of the road. Bright said to Eco, "You drive."

"Where?" Eco asked, still taken aback by what had just happened.

Major Bright jerked a thumb at a sign by the side of the road: *Melbourne 150km*.

Without another word, Major Bright walked to the Range Rover and slumped behind the passenger seat, face lined with exhaustion. As Eco got behind the wheel of the unfamiliar vehicle and gunned the accelerator, a cruel smile passed across the major's lips.

"Sarah Williams," he murmured, "I'm coming for you and your friends."