

CHRIS PEASE

# Operation Swordstrike

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# Foreword

This short story acts as an important piece of story telling for the novel, Project Vanguard, in which the hero, Jack Halliday, encounters a character who's appearance is vitally important to their mission to save humanity from war.

If you haven't read Project Vanguard yet - Let this act as a teaser. Enjoy.



## Operation Swordstrike

With a satisfying clunk, the landing gear retracted into the Valkyrie drop-ship and the crew onboard adjusted themselves within it. The crew were all Global Command Marines, their gear almost identical apart from the occasional pin badge indicating the rank each soldier held. The Marines rocked gently as the drop-ship exited the huge Frigate's cargo bay doors on route to the planet's surface.

Among the crew was a highly decorated Marine, his uniform slightly discoloured from previous combat missions, the gold Major badge clinging to both pieces of his upper arms. Along the jawline of his helmet was printed the name 'Jack Halliday'. Holding the metal handrail above him, he turned and allowed the assault rifle to hang by the belt clip from his armoured vest.

"Okay Marines, we are just minutes away from one of the most important missions of this war," Jack glanced behind him to peer through the large viewpoint at the front of the drop-ship, "This mission is going to determine what happens in the next few days. I cannot tell you how dangerous this assault will be or how important it is that we succeed today."

The Marines looked up at Jack as he spoke. They looked with

respect at the decorated Major who had more battlefield stories told about him than any other soldier in the service. The Marines felt comfortable and knew they were in safe hands with Jack leading them. Jack twisted and pushed a button on the wall of the cockpit and a brief augmented reality image of a facility shimmered on and off as they viewed their target.

“Our target is a Hydroxii facility that command want neutralising. The facility is known as ‘The Foundry’. We have a number of Valkyries on route to lure the majority of their forces away, but there is no way they will leave this facility unprotected, probably by a squad of Paladins.”

Jack took a moment to pause, looking to each Marine as they took in the information. He noticed how a handful shifted uncomfortably in their seats, twisting and adjusting their bodies and rifles as he spoke. The Hydroxii Paladins were a class of incredibly powerful soldiers within the aliens ranks. Stories of their strength weren’t uncommon from survivors of the battlefields. The Paladins were ruthless in their fighting, using a type of blade that was made up of concentrated plasma, and were usually reserved for up close encounters.

“I understand your fears, I do, the stories you hear in the barracks, in transmissions, between officers, remember that they are true. What we will accomplish today will ring out across the rest of us as a counter. We can win this. They can be defeated,” Jack paused again as a few of the Marines nodded uncomfortably. He twisted behind him as a buzz in his earpiece caught his attention.

“ETA two minutes, Major,” the pilot shouted to him.

“Okay Marines, take a breath, take a moment to slow it down,” Jack spoke calmly to the soldiers who in turn did as they were told. As the Valkyrie drop-ship began to enter the atmosphere

of the planet, it shook and was immediately rocked by the surrounding weapons' fire.

"Sixty seconds!"

"Okay, on your feet!" Jack let go of the handrail above him and stepped to the rear of the drop-ship, steadying his feet on the metal flooring, the red light above the landing covering the Marines. The drop-ship shook as it landed and the red light changed to green, the ramp descending to the mud floor. Immediately the Marines came under attack and Jack aimed, returning the assault with his own barrage of rifle fire.

Sprinting for the treeline, Jack pushed his body against a trunk and tensed as the plasma fire scarred and burnt the opposite side. Turning to the landing zone, he paused to see three of his Marines already killed in action. He swung his weapon round toward the plasma barrage. The enemy combatant in the treeline shuffled into cover as the bullets hit their mark and Jack pressed on. His target turned quickly and shot a single plasma round, Jack fired a short burst and hit the Hydroxii soldier knocking him onto his back. Jack stepped toward the enemy and confirmed the kill as the Hydroxii lay unmoving.

Jack twisted, pressing himself against a nearby tree, and pushed his communications piece, "Alpha team, come in, re-group on my location!" Jack pulled the magazine from his weapon and threw it aside, pulling another from his belt and loading it. Checking over his shoulder, a number of Marines jogged into view, huddling together.

"Major. . .," the closest Marine gave a brief salute as he stepped alongside.

"Lowe," Jack twisted to count the squad of Marines he had left - five, "Is this it?"

"Yes, Sir. Think we got lucky. Are there still enough of us to

complete the mission?" Lowe asked gesturing towards the rest of the survivors.

"It's enough. We just need to—" Jack's reply was cut short as an explosion shattered the tree trunk he was resting on, pushing the Marines in all directions from the blast radius. Laid on his back, Jack's ears rang briefly, the incoming fire muffled as he opened and closed his eyes trying to regain his senses. The sound of gunfire echoed around him as he quickly came to, watching as two of his Marines knelt down, working together to bring down an approaching Hydroxii soldier.

Jack shuffled upwards and brought his assault rifle to his shoulder, opening fire on a blur in the treeline. As the bullets rippled against the aliens' advanced technology, he jumped forwards as fast as he could.

"Paladin!" Jack fired again as the Hydroxii Paladin pulled its signature weapon from its hip, igniting a blade and pushing it into the Marine's chest, knocking it aside with its arm. The Marine alongside stepped back, fumbling for a new magazine as the Paladin pulled a smaller weapon from its belt and shot into the Marine's chest. Falling backwards from the plasma fire, the Marine wildly fired his assault rifle as Jack scurried away, using a nearby tree for cover.

Jack took a moment before moving out from his cover, coming face to face with the Paladin who raised its fist. In the chaos of the fighting, a popping sound whistled passed Jack's helmet, the projectile embedding firmly into the tree and detonated, knocking Jack onto his back once again.

Jack groaned, his rifle hanging loosely in his grip, "Again?" Jack muttered under his breath as he tried to bring himself to stand. The gunfire was muffled in his ears as he glanced from side to side, the fighting close by had dissipated. Pushing



himself to his feet, Jack shook his head as he looked around. There were no Marines in sight. As he pondered how he was going to finish the mission, the sound of twigs being broken under foot caught his attention.

Shouldering his rifle, Jack stepped cautiously into the battered forest, avoiding the strewn chunks of tree trunk and branches that had covered the enemies' movements. Swaying from side-to-side, he crept into the forest, before twisting as he heard a groaning sound nearby. Jack stepped through a thin layer of smoke as he approached the noise. Expecting to find one of the Marines, he was shocked instead to see the Paladin that had surprised them. He aimed his weapon and pulled the trigger, but nothing happened. Leaning the rifle downward, he noticed that his weapon was out of bullets.

The battered Paladin laughed and coughed painfully. "Forget to reload, human?" the Paladin said mockingly as it coughed aggressively, seething from the pain of the wound.

Jack stepped forwards and examined the alien. The Hydroxii Paladin was slumped against a tree. As the smoke around it was cleared by the wind, the extent of the alien's injuries was revealed, despite its huge hand trying to cover the wound. The wound was large and likely the result of the detonation of the grenade that caught them all by surprise. The Paladin was wearing its usual warrior style armour, though its weapons were nowhere to be seen.

"Looking rough there," Jack spoke bluntly.

The Paladin sneered and seethed again, "Nothing I haven't dealt with before, human."

"Probably, but I doubt you'll get the help you need before. . ."

"Before what, human?" the Paladin shot a look at Jack as he spoke, "Before your kind finish the job?"

“I was thinking more before you bleed out, but. . .” Jack slowly allowed his rifle to hang from his chest strap, carefully using his free hand to unclip the spent magazine.

The Hydroxii glanced up to the human and laughed under its breathe, “I think you intend to do the honours, human.” The Hydroxii spat blood from its mouth at the feet of Jack who stood unflinching, “Though to die on this blasted planet, in the name of what? Honour?” The alien spat again and groaned from the pain, “This blasted war. What has it achieved us? You? What do we fight for soldier?”

Jack stood for a moment to consider the question. In all the conflicts and combat he had been engaged in, nobody really knew what the war was really about, besides simply surviving. What were both sides to gain from the other’s defeat?

“You know, you’re right.” Jack pushed a magazine into his assault rifle and pulled the loading pin, “I’ve often wondered how we got to this point. First contact turns violent? We humans fight between ourselves enough, I don’t know how we found the time to fight something as scary as you guys.” Jack stepped closer to the Paladin who shuffled uncomfortably as the human approached, “Sounds to me like there’s a conflict of interest.”

Jack knelt in front of the alien combatant and gestured for the alien to move its hand from the wound. The Paladin slowly moved its hand to reveal a deep burn that had penetrated the alien’s powerful armour. “Lucky shot I guess. . .” Jack sneered as the alien moved its hand again.

“So, what now, human? We’ve discussed the war and our feelings on it, what do you intend to do with me?” The alien looked at the human in front of him, unsure of where this interaction was going.

Jack took a long look around before turning back to the Paladin,

“How far is your base?”

The alien laughed before replying, “Why? So you can finish the job?”

“No, I know where *that* base is, I mean your operating base. You must have a medical team, right?” Jack tilted his head, keeping eye contact with the alien. The Paladin begrudgingly lifted and pointed its hand deeper into the forest. “Excellent, well let’s get you off this floor and back to your people. Come on.”

Jack indicated for the alien to lift its arm before moving it himself. The Paladin resisted and knocked Jack aside. “Why would you help me, human?” the Paladin asked with a tone Jack wasn’t expecting.

“Sometimes it’s these moments that define you. This moment is what will separate us from the conflict and prove that we humans are not just weak, mindless soldiers. Maybe it will define the war for future generations, hmm?” Jack waved his hand again as the alien stared for a moment back at him. The unexpected gesture completely threw the Paladin off in a way the alien wasn’t expecting.

As the Paladin lowered his defence, two humans appeared from behind Jack. “Major Halliday!” the lead Marine called out. The pair had their rifles aimed squarely passed Jack who spun with his hands out.

“Wait!” Jack ordered, “Stand down, both of you!”

The Marines looked to each other and hesitantly lowered their weapons, “Sir?”

“No need for formalities, I need your help. Help me grab this Paladin.” Jack shuffled under the alien’s arm as it wailed in pain, grunting beneath its helmet.

“I’m not carrying that thing!” one of the Marines replied.

“What are we doing, taking prisoners?” the other asked.

“No. We’re taking it back to its base,” Jack replied as he watched the Marines glance at each other in confusion, “Listen, either help me carry it, or cover us.”

“Sir, I don’t get it. Why are we taking it back to its people?”

“Yeah, we’re gonna get killed when we get there!”

“Rules of engagement,” Jack replied bluntly, “The enemy combatant is injured and unarmed. Now help me deviate from the mission so we can get back on mission.”

Jack began to move cautiously as the Marines followed in confusion. The four soldiers walked through the dense forest, the marines were positioned behind Jack and the alien as they stepped slowly onward. Nobody spoke as they ventured through it. The sound of fighting echoed around them. Sometimes they would pause as gunfire was followed by plasma then a detonation of some form of explosive. Fighters flying overhead often startled the group, but still they continued on until sound of the fighting was barely audible.

After a few more minutes the team stopped as the sound of heavy footsteps approached. Soon a squad of heavily armed Paladins appeared ahead of them. The Marines stepped with their rifles aimed forwards but the alien leaning on Jack spoke in its own language and the Paladins paused, reacting with the same confusion as the humans had earlier. A single Paladin stepped forward and spoke in its own tongue. The aliens engaged in conversation, the lead Paladin pausing, taking in Jack’s figure. Jack turned as best he could and nodded for the Marines to lower their rifles. Begrudgingly they did as they were ordered to.

The Paladin lifted its ally’s free arm over and Jack sidled out from underneath it, the weight off his shoulders was a relief.

The aliens turned for a moment and the wounded Paladin spoke, "Thank you, human Jack." The Paladins moved and Jack stepped forward, finding the remaining aliens quickly aiming their weapons at him.

"And what do they call you?" Jack called out.

"My species call me, Mjuyr."

The Paladins turned and the humans stepped back, the fighters on each side held their breath.

Soon the humans were back in the forest and Jack shouldered his rifle once more, "Okay Marines, back on task," Jack peered at the ammunition counter reading as full and aimed forwards, "Time to tackle The Foundry. Marines, on me!"

Jack moved with steady strides as his remaining Marines followed closely behind. Their mission and actions of the day, would mark a pivotal moment in the human-Hydroxii war, something that would prove crucial in the future battles to come.

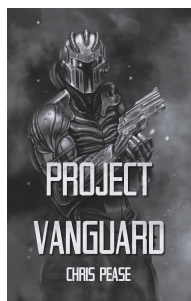


## About the Author

Chris Pease is a Cumbrian writer. When he isn't plotting some end of the world story, he can be found in the seat of a go kart, raising a small family of nerds or the usual day job.

## Also by Chris Pease

My work mostly consists of science fiction, action and horror, often both. If you enjoyed Operation Swordstrike, why not have a look at my other shorts and full length novels. And keep an eye out for more novels coming soon...



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Available at Amazon and your local library.

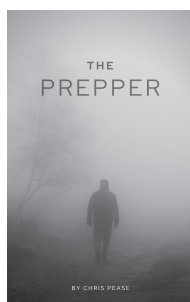


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