

# Empty Boots

Lucas Moon Almaraz

## The Front

The cold winter's air chilled our bones as we immersed ourselves in the hard surface of the trench. The oppressive environment had been sapped of life by years of intense warfare. An ever present sound which had by now penetrated our very consciousness was the repetitive hum of the emms buzzing around above us, their lights having replaced the stars. The front orchestra was accompanied by the percussion of finger tapping, which increased and decreased in intensity as we took our mandatory doses of Antech.

We joked with the troops of Unit 14301 that we were just reinforcements for the emms, the latest national autonomous warfare devices, who did all of the fighting. Most of our time as warriors for the nation (warnats) was spent waiting in our trenches, rarely advancing positions when our emms had overpowered the enemy.

I noticed my finger throbbing and quickly slipped in another pill. I was near the end of my pack. The regular plug-in must be coming soon. I glanced over at my station partner Wa-G signalling that we were running out and he nodded in acknowledgement.

I thought of back home, before volunteering to the honourable front to stand up to the eternal enemy. At the time, I took life in the motherland for granted. Service then meant being part of the national tech architecture, a technological program which focused on programming weapon systems, including the latest emms. I had been in the program for 15 years since my 12th birthday. Back then, my day was consumed by the joy of tech immersion, rather than the challenge of waiting around and awkward interaction with the Unit at the front.

I'd probably spent more time with these men than I'd ever done with my family or partner. I quickly reassured myself: the nation and tech comes first.

My ruminations were suddenly interrupted by the violent intensification of the buzzing noise and a blinding flash of light. I lost consciousness for about half a minute.

I came back with an intense headache piercing my skull. I could hear my fellow warnats shouting and quickly collected myself to assess the situation.

I stumbled over to my right where the calamity had ensued. The unit stood expressionless around a pair of empty boots with a cruel lingering smoke circling up out of them. The chorus of finger tapping turned up a notch. I focused my recovering vision on the footwear and identified the tag. Wa-R had been eviscerated...

I had lost count of the amount of times this had happened since I reached the front. Looking back now, the real battle was not always with the enemy, but with boredom and tech addiction. The drug Antech had been introduced in 2050 by the concisely named Military Scientific Committee for Enhancement Against the Eternal Enemy (MCEA) to stop us warnats from using technological devices in the war zone and being tracked by the enemy. A malfunction in the drug or a lack of supplies often led to relapses and instant death via the enemy emms.

Regular monthly "plug-ins", where units were transferred for a 24-h technological immersion clinic, broke up the monotony of the front and gave us a much needed fix.

The next day on the transfer shuttle to the 75th Unit 14301 plug-in, I gazed at the empty slot where Wa-R's' holographic tag still lay. For the first time, a dangerous thought crossed my mind but was quickly replaced by the certainty of the cause: The Enemy. The Tech. The Nation. By the return trip, the buzz of our perfectly engineered technological fix had overwhelmed our sensory neurons to the extent that any memory of previous travails had subsided.

After plug-in 134 our unit reached its transfer date. The following months after Wa-R's death had followed the same monotonous pattern as before. I was excited about the prospect of returning to the motherland.

A short stout officer with an unkept beard and a wild set of eyes briskly entered our facility with a security escort and commenced the transfer ceremony.

"Warnocks of unit 14301. You have made our nation proud with your efforts. Over the 134 plug-ins you have achieved monumental gains of..."

The gleaming light reflected off his ostentatious holographic watch as he paused to check his notes.

An autonomous assistant quickly shuffled in and presented him with a device.

“24.7 metres. Congratulations and may your service continue prosperously in the motherland.” The officer declared with a fabricated tone of enthusiasm.

The tempo of finger tapping increased to reach what almost sounded like a round of applause.

The officer quickly marched out of the facility accompanied by his escort and I looked around at the warnats who I had shared this patriotic journey with.

I saw discrete smiles evoking what may have been a sense of fulfillment, relief, or perhaps even a humorous reaction to the unseriousness of the officer’s performance. Thinking back, I didn’t really know how I felt, apart from excitement about the prospect of returning to the motherland.

The rest of the time at the transfer facility consisted of a brief explanation of our reintegration process. There would be a gradual taper of our Antech doses, delivered digitally to our residences on a daily basis. A single compulsory check-in session with the MCEA was programmed for three months. After which they subtly added that we could be called back up the front. There was an air of unease in the room at this last comment.

But the reintegration process seemed simple enough at the time. We had served the nation and were going home.

To my surprise, Wa-G got up from his seat and started violently chanting. “The Enemy. The Tech. The Nation; The Enemy. The Tech. The Nation”

The chant reverberated around the small transfer facility block as one by one we joined in punching our fists proudly in the air. I felt a foreign set of emotions connecting us all together as we jumped up and down in unison.

No one spoke on the hovercraft back which dropped us off at our settlements. A quiet finger tapping chorus continued and nods of acknowledgment sent off each of the warnats as we reached their stops.

## The Taper

I returned to Sphere 331 in Settlement XRP, where I was born. My finger tapping intensified as I approached; I popped an Antech. Inside, my parents sat at opposite ends, faces obscured by opaque glasses. They didn't notice me until a robotic voice announced:

"Martin has entered the sphere".

My mother's glasses cleared to reveal tired, familiar eyes. She calmly stood up. I went forward to embrace her but any warmth was not reciprocated. As I awkwardly let go of her cold, stiff body on which my finger had been tapping she said:

"Martin, welcome back, thank you for your service to the nation."

"No worries," I muttered, feeling slightly disappointed at my rejected embrace.

A soft giggle came from my father as he continued to immerse himself in whatever important task lay behind the digital glasses.

"Your father is busy but your partner is waiting above," my mother said.

I climbed into the pod which circled around the circumference of the room to the secondary sphere above where my childhood room was located. I realised that I hadn't come here at all since I'd qualified for the national tech architecture program. Coding had taken up all my life but the Antech made that all feel distant now.

The pod door slid open. I froze.

A young boy stood before me, wearing a smaller version of my parents' glasses. For a moment, it felt like time had folded in on itself. I saw myself.

A tap on my shoulder broke the trance. I turned. Lara stood there. I embraced her. This time, there was a faint return of warmth.

Her eyes drifted past me. I followed her gaze to the boy. He stood, glasses transitioning to transparent mode.

“Thank you for your service, father,” he said, holding out his hand with careful formality.

Two days later I was deemed fit to return to the workplace. My memories of the office were consumed by technological exploration. After a hard-earned promotion to the machine learning department, crunching numbers and constructing algorithms to train the emms had been my purpose and obsession. Those first days however I could barely look at the screen.

I sat at my desk in my second week in the office disconnected from work.

“It must be the Antech keeping me off,” I thought to myself.

Lara had told me that first evening back about how she had followed a national program for artificial insemination, called the seed of future warnats. Using DNA taken from me in the military registration process, she had been able to give birth to our son without my consent.

I didn't know how to feel about it all. I tried to focus on my work but just couldn't. My finger started to tap quickly as the stress levels rose. I popped another Antech. I only had one more pill left for the day.

Looking around me, coders would barely blink as they immersed themselves in their devices. The only interactions we would have is when they hit their natvapes and glanced with contempt at my finger tapping. This was how I was treated for serving the nation... I almost missed the front.

Everyday I would count the minutes down until our 10 minute staggered lunch break. Here we would migrate one-by-one to the cafeteria. Most workers would take lunch injections and go back to their work straight away, but a few lonely souls would sit at the tables for the 5 minutes they had left.

I walked down the plain endless corridors, joined by an individual flowing out of each mysterious door to join the march towards the canteen. I now wondered what stood behind those other doors. But I had never before had the opportunity or inclination to chat with a colleague.

The long corridor finished and we entered the dining area which filtered into two separate queues. One where the majority would pick up lunch injections and a sparsely populated area where you could have a more conventional meal. I entered and

collected my physical meal from the circular conveyor filtering out of an area hidden behind the vast metallic walls of the dining hall.

After picking up my tray, I wandered to the lonely table I had been sitting on for the last week and started to dig into the stale rations.

Suddenly, I felt a strange sense of nostalgia dawning upon me and stopped eating.

“What was it?” I thought to myself.

I heard a familiar tapping sound and looked down at my own finger to confirm that it wasn't me. I surveyed my surroundings only to see a few expressionless workers scattered around the tables eating their food.

A napkin hit my glass. I followed its trajectory to a woman at the next table. Her fingers tapped like mine.

She must've been at the front. She smiled at me. I hadn't really seen somebody do that thing since I was a child. It excited me and I tried to fabricate something similar in return.

“Same thing tomorrow” she said confidently before getting up and exiting the lunch hall.

The warmth of the interaction stayed with me throughout the rest of the day's work. Back in the coding room, I kept trying to purse my lips in the way the woman had. Every effort would send a tingling sense of joy through my spine.

Back at my home sphere, I tried to replicate the smile again with my family forcing my face with all my strength. Their glasses quickly shifted back to opaque mode.

The next day felt lighter. At lunch, I rushed to the same table. Two minutes passed. I grew anxious. Then: ping. Another napkin on my glass.

She sat down beside me. “We can talk but keep looking ahead.” She whispered.

The tapping in my finger increased with anxiety as I wondered why we had to take this precaution.

“My name is Layla. It is always good to meet another tapper.”

“Tapper, that is a funny way to put it.” I thought to myself. “My name is Martin. I was on the honourable front with Unit 14301 until 2 weeks ago.”

“Not so honorable is it...” she replied.

I looked at her in shock not really knowing what to say.

She rose up and said, “Check your back pocket. We’ll see you soon.”

My heart raced. I slipped into a Hydrosphere stall. One minute on the timer. Inside my pocket was a tightly wrapped bundle. I peeled it open: Antech pills. There was a note tied to it with a thin thread:

**TAKE THESE TAPPER. MEET RECBLOCK2 SETTLEMENT XTJ AFTERWORK  
TMRW. FLUSH.**

Five seconds left. I flushed the note, swallowed a pill, and stepped out.

Logic screamed at me to forget it. What about the enemy, the tech, the nation. But I felt something I hadn’t in years: I felt alive. Whatever this was, I needed to find out.

When I got back home I told Lara that I would be staying back longer at work the next day for a special coding project. That night I could barely sleep as I tried to process what was going on. The extra antechs came in useful to control my finger tapping otherwise I probably would’ve woken Lara up.

After work, I boarded a Jetro to Settlement XTJ. It was quiet. Only a few young passengers immersed in their opaque-glass feeds.

A nuke storm began to gather as I exited the station. RecBlock 2 lay just beyond its twin, RecBlock 1, where the kids disappeared into. I found the door, scanned in, and entered.

Layla was there waiting for me. “Welcome Martin. Glad you made it.” she said.

“Why am I here?” I asked, unsure of what to feel.

“Let me scan you for one sec.” She replied with her calm certainty.

I nodded nervously as she approached with an unfamiliar device to scan my whole body. I was uncomfortable as she reached near my crotch but was quickly distracted by the opening of a second set of doors behind her that revealed a hall with several people sitting in floating chairs set out in a crescent shape.

“Follow me,” she said.

Layla sat down and encouraged me to position myself where everyone could see. Eight pairs of eyes studied me as I stood there awkwardly finger tapping away. As I looked around, they all wore a similar smile to Layla’s which calmed me down.

Layla started speaking. “Martin, welcome to the Tapper Crescent. Tell us your story.”

I ran them through my journey from pre-front, to Wa-R’s death, the difficult return until now. It was tough but sharing felt good.

A silence pervaded around the room until a young man to my left finger tapping spoke up. “We are all in the same boat Martin. We are here for you now.”

Layla nodded in agreement and spoke again. “We call this process the awakening. Let me run you through a few things. I served in the Kwrt unit on the front line.”

I had heard legends about an all-female elite unit by this name as a youngun. Layla continued.

“Like all of us I was immersed in the cause, numb to our reality and motivated to fight the existential enemy. Out on the front life was brutal. We were trained to fight alongside the emms penetrating enemy lines directly. Most of the time we had no plug-ins, Antech supplies were limited and we lost many tappers.”

The only other woman in the room started to twitch nervously and her tapping got frenetic. Layla gave her a reassuring look and the tempo slowed.

“Out there we had time to talk for the first time in our lives, away from tech. Some of us even started to question things and decided to talk to our superior officers about an early return.”

Layla paused to compose herself.

“That night while we slept our own emms assassinated most of the unit. We were able

to find another unit and escape but were never able to see the nation in the same way as before.”

I sat stunned. That kind of betrayal was supposed to be something they did.

Layla continued.

“When we came back we were dispersed all over the colonies but we decided we had to form the Crescent to make sense of this reality and challenge it. We realised we were not alone but that many other troops had increasingly started to feel and question things. That’s something I noticed in you Martin when we first met.”

I nodded slowly trying to process the overwhelming substance of this information.

“We were scattered. But we found each other. We realized the truth.”

She gestured around the room. “The tech doesn’t entertain us. It numbs us emotionally, neurologically. It disconnects us so we can be reprogrammed by the system.”

I thought of my parents, their empty eyes. My son, mimicking patriotism. The cold workplace. The silence.

“The tech isn’t just addictive,” another man said. “It’s designed to erase the impulse for human contact. That’s why there are plug-ins. That’s why there’s the taper. They rewire us to serve, not think. Taught to hate the other side rather than look at our own.”

It was too much. My thoughts spun. I felt nauseous.

Another man beside me placed a hand on his heart. “It’s okay. Step out for a moment if you need to.”

I nodded, stood, and walked towards the corridor for some air, mind reeling.

Through the translucent window, I saw the storm still raging. But something glowed through the blur: sharp blue lights approaching fast.

I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“We need to go,” said Layla.

## The Other Side

Layla led me urgently to a room behind the hall where a hologram displayed the outside perimeter. She scanned through feeds until she froze on a police hover-car. Inside sat several armed police-emms and a woman.

“No bloody way,” I muttered. “That’s my partner. Lara.”

Layla scowled, yanked a floor panel open, and shoved me toward the gap where the Crescent members were already descending a ladder. I followed them, nearly slipping on the rungs, into the dark tunnel below.

A blast thundered from above. Two members ahead of me paused just long enough to tap their lips with two fingers, then sprinted on. I translated my fear and anger at Lara into raw determination, pushing to stay close.

After what felt like hours, we reached an underground enclosure the Crescent had prepared for emergencies. We collapsed into a circle, panting, our sweat mixing with the dark soil below. I kept replaying that image of Lara, calm beside the enemy. I had been betrayed. A ‘special work project’? I had been stupid.

Layla caught her breath and spoke. “You’re one of us now. This isn’t the first time. They’ve been onto us for a while.”

Over the next few weeks in hiding, Layla told me everything.

They’d made contact with someone from the other side: a tapper defector. I found out that it was the so-called enemy who had first helped this brave soul form the Crescent, exposing the lies of our motherland.

They promised something different: a society where tech wasn’t an instrument of control, where communication wasn’t filtered by the state through opaque glasses and drugs. A society with choice.

The ideas filled the deep void and desperation in us. It was something to believe in after a lifetime of obedience. We lived on scraps, dodged surveillance, and dreamed of something freer. Something human.

But the nation didn't let go quietly. The raid at the RecBlock cost two Crescent lives. Three more since then. When the enemy offered an extraction shuttle, some still hesitated. I did.

But the truth was, I had found more warmth underground with these strangers than I ever had in my own family, especially since returning from the front. For the first time, I'd been allowed to question, to desire, to connect.

"Two minutes till touchdown," the pilot said over the intercom.

Our fingers tapped in a quiet rhythm echoing feelings of tension, anticipation and hope. The shuttle descended toward the other side of the front. The belt strap dug into my skin as we landed hard.

The doors slid open with a smooth, mechanical hiss.

I stepped out into a familiar barren landscape, scattered with empty boots.

But something was different.

The emms here were sleeker, shinier and brightly coloured. Their lights pulsed softly in hues of red and blue.

It was almost welcoming but their buzzing hum was the same. We stepped forward into our new reality, fingers tapping together.