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12 to Midnight, Inc.
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Deadline, Inc.

By Michael Tresca

NOTE: This article, while usable on its own, is best used with Ronin Arts' Modern: Mercenary Manual, also by Michael Tresca.

Taylor checked the periscope again. Not that it would do him any good. The opposition, a squad sent by Deadline, Incorporated, was spread out, hiding behind crates that had proved impenetrable to the main cannon. Although Taylor's squad had superior firepower, he had limited visibility and mobility, a deadly combination.

They needed to get out.

Taylor's men had seen hopeless situations before. They knew the tide could suddenly turn in their favor. That was the way of war.

The five of them were tired, frustrated, and getting desperate. Executive Solutions had promised reinforcements, but none arrived.

The computer identified a series of crouching targets, briefly outlining them in fluorescent green in the scope. Taylor fired.

The blast tore a hole in another shipping crate. The crates were a double-edged sword - some were capable of withstanding the blasts and barely moved when hit. Others exploded with deadly results.

The Deadline soldiers stayed out of sight. Most of them had run out of ammunition firing at their armored personnel carrier. It was useless, there were no lucky shots, no exposed gas tanks, not even an eye-slit opening.

Taylor swung the turret back and forth, then put the computer on auto-scan. He turned to face four sullen faces.

"Where are the reinforcements," said Bristol, his corporal. "They should have been here by now."



"They'll be here!" snapped Jones. He was a big man, prone to sweating. His uniform was soaked.

"They're on the move again," Raines said over his shoulder. It was mostly due to his driving that they had survived as long as they did.

Taylor crouched over Raines' shoulder to look at the green view screen. Suddenly, something big loomed into view.

"SonofaBITCH!" Raines shouted as he yanked hard on the steering wheel.

The armored personnel carrier lurched and it felt as if it was going to tip. Then suddenly they stopped, hard. Taylor's head smacked into the dashboard. He cursed and fell backward.

Raines slammed the personnel carrier into reverse. Taylor tumbled backward.

"Shit!" shouted Briggs as Taylor crashed into him.

The personnel carrier jerked to a stop as it hit something else. Taylor stretched out and grabbed the turret controls.

Raines gunned it, but the personnel carrier didn't move. All they could hear was the wheels whirring in place. They were stuck.

Taylor spun the gun's scope around. He couldn't see anything. Whatever the obstacles were, they were too close for the gun to see.

THUMP.

Something big pushed up against the personnel carrier.

THUMP.

Jones started breathing fast. "What the hell are they doing out there?"

Raines swore vehemently. Tiny alarms were flashing on his control panel.

"Motion sensors say we're in the middle of three

walls,” he said grimly. “We ain’t going nowhere Searge.”

Taylor put one finger up, silencing everyone in the personnel carrier. The only sound was the insistent warning from the dashboard.

There was a banging sound along the side of the personnel carrier, near Briggs’ head. He jerked it away involuntarily.

Then another.

Then another. A horrible cacophony surrounded them. Jones started screaming at the top of the lungs for them to shut up.

The banging stopped.

Then they heard the voice of the enemy over the comm.

“This is Sergeant Trey Johnson of the 52nd squad, Deadline Incorporated. We have you surrounded. Surrender now and we’ll let you go.”

The men gave each other uncertain looks. Taylor bit his lip.

“Maybe we should-” said Jones. Taylor shot him a glare. He shut up.

Taylor grabbed the mic.

“This is Sergeant Brendan Taylor of Executive Solutions,” Taylor said. “Deadline has regularly violated the international articles of war. We reject your offer.”

Jones shook his head a few times. He disagreed but he wasn’t willing to say anything about it.

Raines, feeling useless in the front, began dictating what he could see through the view screen.

“They’re moving around, going through the crates.”

Taylor sniffed. “Looking for something to pry us open, I bet.”

Briggs frowned. “Is it true?”

“Is what true?” said Taylor.

“Is it true they killed those guys who surrendered?”

Deadline, Inc. was known for its quick, brutal raids. They were notorious for showing no mercy.

Rumors of killing prisoners abounded. But that rumor had been leveled at every mercenary company since man drew breath.

Taylor would have taken it all back after the words came out of his mouth. But it was too late for that.

“That’s what the reports said,” he said in a low voice.

Jones was sweating even more profusely, if that was possible.

“Maybe we should, Searge. I dunno. I got a bad feeling about this.”

The voice was talking again over the comm.

“This is Sergeant Trey Johnson. If you do not evacuate the vehicle immediately...we’ve found rocket fuel in one of these crates.”

“Awww, SHIT,” said Briggs.

“That’s it, we gotta surrender,” said Jones.

“They’re going to roast us. Oh my god they’re gonna burn us alive.”

Taylor could see his tactic was backfiring. He’d turned the enemy into a horrifying boogeyman. They all started shouting at once.

“Maybe we should-”

“They’ll fry us!”

“-the hatch and take as many down with us.”

“SHUT UP!” shouted Taylor.

They shut up. Four pairs of eyes looked to him.

“Calm down,” he said. “We are not going to leave this vehicle.”

Bristol looked him in the eye. “I think that’s a mistake.”

Taylor looked back. “Thank you corporal, I will make note of your disagreement in my report.”

He turned back to the comm.

“We reject your offer,” he said again.

Taylor looked through the scope. A hand poured something liquid on the roof of the armored personnel carrier. Then it ignited. The strange green flames turned into what looked like a blasting inferno, overwhelming the view of the scope.

Taylor slapped the scope away.

“What?” Jones said, his voice cracking.

“Son of a BITCH,” Raines said.

Damn it, thought Taylor. He’d forgotten that the driver could see what the scope saw.

“What? WHAT?” shouted Briggs.

“They’re doing it. The personnel carrier’s on fire.”

Jones was on the verge of tears.

“I say we open the hatch and blow as many of those Deadline bastards as we can get,” said Briggs. He patted his holster.

“We do not know that is actual rocket fuel,” Taylor said. “This is a tactic. They can’t get in. We lose our only advantage by going out there. We have time on our sides. We just have to wait them out.”

The men calmed down. Some of them were exchanging looks. Taylor started to feel like he couldn’t turn his back on them.

The comm crackled again.

“Last chance. If you don’t surrender, we’re going to pour this fuel down the turret.”

There was a pause.

“Then we’re going to light it. Despite what you may have heard, Deadline respects all articles of war and will release you unharmed.”

This time, nobody said anything. Taylor started to worry.

“Look-” he started to say.

“I say we surrender,” said Bristol. “All in favor, raise your hands.”

All of the men raised their hands. Except Taylor.

“Stand down!” shouted Taylor. “I am the commanding officer of this vehicle and you will do what I say!”

“It’s official. You WERE commanding officer,” said Bristol.

He pulled his pistol faster than Taylor was able to react. Taylor’s jaw went slack.

“Put this in your report, asshole.”

Taylor’s head bobbed backwards as the blaster

sizzled a gaping hole through his face. The impact of the blast smacked what was left of his head against the armored interior. The body flopped to the ground, sizzling.

Bristol looked around. He gave a nod to Briggs. They popped open the door.

Stunned faces greeted them.

"I'm Corporal Bristol," he said, wiping his sweaty lip with one sleeve. "I have relieved Sergeant Brendan of duty. We surrender."

Deadline, Inc. is a military arm of another company that has holdings in gas, oil, and minerals. It considers itself to be a military consultancy, and it purports to specialize in advice and problem resolution for legitimate governments. It is an independent entity, but its senior officers are former military personnel from several major nations.

Deadline, despite working in good faith, has earned itself a bad reputation for torturing, abusing, and otherwise violating all aspects of the Geneva Convention. This isn't true, although it may be true of its CEO. If Executive Solutions can't stop their rival outright, they can certainly slander them. Deadline doesn't fight these accusations because, at least in some cases, they are uncomfortably close to Spitzer's dark past.

Agenda: A mercenary organization that acts as a military consultancy.

Structure: A small business.

Symbol: A small clock with both hands at 12 o'clock with the words "Deadline, Inc." in small print underneath.

Most Common Allegiance(s): Deadline, Inc., United Nations, First World Countries.

Requisition Limit: (40) military.

Overview

Deadline was formed as a reaction to the United Nations' inability to effectively police the world.

Unlike Executive Solutions, which acts exclusively for monetary gain, Deadline, Inc. is on friendly terms with most United Nations interests and First World countries. It fills the gaps that the United Nations peacekeeping forces cannot by providing training, strategy, and specialized support for internal conflicts.

Deadline's core programs include strategic planning and project development, training in a wide variety of combat operations (including intelligence, special operations, and electronic warfare), direct combat operations, humanitarian services (medical services and disaster relief), counter terrorism, maritime support, and insertions into hostile environments. At least on paper, Deadline, Inc. purports to be the good guys.

Its CEO, Henry Spitzer, knows much. Too much. Most governments fear him, as he has done enough black bag jobs to implicate a dozen nations if he were ever to be captured. He's too dangerous to kill, too powerful to ignore. So they allow the relatively tiny Deadline, Inc. to continue operation. Because to do otherwise is to court disaster.

Structure

Chief Executive Henry Spitzer, a former senior U.N. peacekeeper, created Deadline in the mid-1990s. He was their chief assassin for some time, taking out a variety of enemies and would-be dictators that never quite made it.

Bases of Operations

Deadline is run out of a small office somewhere in Texas. On this ranch, troops are organized, run training missions, and otherwise prepare for Henry's personal war.

Resources

Deadline's resources are large, although not nearly as expansive as Executive Solutions. It negotiates

small, smash and grab contracts that are high on up front cash and small on reimbursement. Deadline doesn't want any equipment or lodging financed, but it does expect to be paid the resources it needs to get a job done. With Deadline, there's no haggling – the company regularly walks away from dubious contracts.

Unlike Executive Solutions, Deadline doesn't have access to every piece of available hardware. Still, it has enough resources to get the job done.

Involving the Heroes

PCs may end up working for Deadline after becoming disillusioned with the de facto mercenary organization, Executive Solutions. PCs working for Deadline will quickly become caught up in its mysterious CEO's machinations. What crimes did he commit and what is he hiding? Alternately, they could be sent by Executive Solutions to commit sabotage or even an assassination.

Using Deadline, Inc.

Deadline, Inc. can be a cutting edge mercenary company in a Modern campaign or a futuristic peacekeeping task force in a Futuristic campaign. The CEO, Henry Spitzer, is a vat-grown clone known as a Deadliner. Deadline, Inc. uses Super-Soldiers in the field and invests heavily in gene therapy.

As enemies, Deadline, Inc. is formidable. They are likely to conduct clandestine raids against heroes, attempting to avoid a major incident when achieving their goals. They prefer to work behind the scenes, galvanized into action only when all other measures fail.

As employers, Deadline, Inc. employees are sworn to secrecy. They operate in much the same fashion as the CIA, but have a more global scope. Employees come from all over the globe and bring their non-traditional perspectives to the field, often surprising

rival mercenary companies with traditional agents.

As rivals, Deadline, Inc. mercenaries struggle to be seen fairly and equitably, when they are recognized at all. Unfortunately, Executive Solutions has performed a very successful slander campaign in the press, which has diminished Deadline's support in the public arena.

Learning About Deadline, Inc.

The heroes can gather information about Deadline, Inc. through the use of the Knowledge (current events) or Research skills. The charts below represent the amount of detail a hero can collect by using each skill.

Knowledge (Current Events)

Deadline, Inc. makes no secret of their activities and enjoys their infamy. The popular press points to them as the worst kind of mercenaries, literally "Dogs of War."

DC 1: Deadline was formed as a reaction to the United Nations' inability to effectively police the world.

DC 5: Deadline, Inc. is a military arm of another company that has holdings in gas, oil, and minerals.

DC 10: Although Deadline, Inc. is an independent entity, but its senior officers are former military personnel from several major nations.

DC 15: Deadline, Inc. has earned itself a bad reputation for torturing, abusing, and otherwise violating all aspects of the Geneva Convention.

DC 20: Deadline, Inc. negotiates small, smash and grab contracts that are high on up front cash and small on reimbursement.

DC 25: The allegations about Deadline, Inc.'s violations of the Geneva Convention are untrue—lies perpetrated by their competitor, Executive Solutions.

DC 30: Deadline, Inc.'s CEO Henry Spitzer was a notorious "black bag" operative who committed several assassinations on behalf of the U.N.

Research

Research checks represent a hero's ability to collect data about an organization through fact-finding efforts like trips to the library and browsing the Internet.

DC 1: Deadline, Inc. is a military arm of another company that has holdings in gas, oil, and minerals.

DC 5: Deadline, Inc. headquarters is located on a ranch just outside of Dallas, Texas.

DC 10: Deadline, Inc. is on friendly terms with most United Nations interests and First World countries.

DC 15: Deadline, Inc. fills the gaps that the United Nations peacekeeping forces cannot by providing training, strategy, and specialized support for internal conflicts.

DC 20: Deadline's core programs include strategic planning and project development, training in a wide variety of combat operations (including intelligence, special operations, and electronic warfare), direct combat operations, humanitarian services (medical services and disaster relief), counter terrorism, maritime support, and insertions into hostile environments.

DC 25: Deadline, Inc.'s CEO is actually Henry Spitzer, a former U.N. peacekeeper.

DC 30: Deadline, Inc. has been involved in every major conflict around the globe since 2001.

Members

A typical attack squad consists of the following: 1 demolition expert (smart hero), 1 infiltration specialist (fast hero/soldier), 4 grunts (strong hero), 1 physician (smart hero/field medic), 1 tech (smart hero/techie), 1 transport specialist or pilot (fast hero), 1 corporal (charismatic hero/soldier)

Spitzer speaks in a raspy, raw voice that is husky from decades of smoking. He always dresses in suits that never seem to fit him quite right, and his hangdog expression and watery eyes belie a man who

has seen far too much. Deadline acts in what appears to be the UN's best interests only because Spitzer wishes it.

Spitzer is ancient. Rumor has it that a majority of his body parts have been regrown and replaced. Despite his war wounds, he is a chain smoker. He prefers to sit behind the scenes, far too cautious to reveal himself. Executive Solutions loathes Henry and would very much like to see him disappear from the mercenary scene...permanently.

Henry Spitzer (Dedicated Hero 7/Helix Warrior 7): CR 14; Medium-size humanoid; HD 7d6+21 plus 7d10+21; HP 106; Mas 17; Init +3; Spd 30 ft; Defense 19, touch 19, flatfooted 18 (+0 size, +1 Dex, +8 class); BAB +12; Grap +14; Atk +14 melee or +13 ranged; FS 5 ft by 5 ft; Reach 5 ft; SQ Deadliner (hibernate, sleepless); AL none; SV Fort +11, Ref +5, Will +12; AP 7; Rep +8; Str 15, Dex 13, Con 17, Int 12, Wis 11, Cha 16.

Occupation: Military (bonus class skills: Hide, Move Silently).

Skills: Balance +2, Bluff +6, Climb +3, Computer Use +2, Craft (chemical) +2, Craft (electronic) +2, Craft (mechanical) +2, Craft (pharmaceutical) +3, Craft (structural) +2, Decipher Script +2, Demolitions +2, Diplomacy +4, Disable Device +5, Disguise +6, Drive +2, Escape Artist +2, Forgery +2, Gather Information +4, Hide +3, Intimidate +4, Investigate +3, Jump +3, Knowledge (Civics) +3, Knowledge (Tactics) +5, Listen +4, Move Silently +3, Navigate +2, Pilot +2, Read/Write Language +2, Search +2, Sense Motive +1, Sleight of Hand +2, Speak Language +1, Spot +6, Survival +4, Swim +6, Treat Injury +2, Tumble +5.

Feats: Advanced Firearms Proficiency, Alertness, Blind-Fight, Combat Reflexes, Deceptive, Defensive Martial Arts, Elusive Target, Endurance, Iron Will, Leadership, Personal Firearms Proficiency, Renown.

Talents (Dedicated Hero): Skill Emphasis (Disable Device), Aware, Cool Under Pressure, Faith.

Talents (Helix Warrior): Haul, Light Sleeper, Survivor, Darkvision (60 ft.), Strong As An Ox, Superior Conditioning, Darkvision (90 ft.), Improved Reaction.

Deadline, Inc. Genetic Therapy

Deadline, Inc. scientists discovered how to not only replace abnormal or defective genes, but also safely improve on otherwise healthy genes. Even more importantly, they discovered ways to create retroviruses that target all of an organism's cells, thus allowing them to change various aspects of a creature.

Genetic manipulation can endow a creature with any special quality. In general, discovering the effects of performing a specific genetic modification, requires 3d10 days and a successful Research check. The DC for this check should be no lower than 20 and can be as high as the GM prefers. Scientific research is painstaking and even experiments based on solid theories must often be attempted several times before providing a conclusive result.

Once the therapy begins, the soldier must make a Fortitude saving throw (DC varies) once per day until such time as he achieves a specific number of successes linked to the genetic modification being attempted (at which point he permanently gains that special quality). Every time a save fails, the soldier suffers 2 points of Constitution damage.

Type of Special Quality	Fort Save DC	Number of Successes
+1 to one ability score	15	10
Extraordinary ability (Ex)	15	15
Supernatural ability (Su)	20	25
Spell-like ability (Sp)	20	50

During therapy, the ability remains latent, so the soldier receives no benefits from the intended manipulation. Immediately upon completing the required number of Fortitude saves, the ability

activates and becomes a permanent special quality of the soldier. A short-term treatment automatically takes effect in 1d4 minutes and lasts for 1d3 hours. At the end of that time, the character reverts to his normal state, is fatigued, and suffers 4 points of Constitution damage. A successful Fortitude saving throw (DC 15) reduces this to only 2 points of Constitution damage.

To create more drastic changes, the soldier must undergo several gene therapy treatments, each one requiring a separate set of Fortitude saving throws.

Deadliner (Template)

“Deadliner” is an acquired template that can be added to any humanoid that is employed by Deadline, Inc. (referred to hereafter as the character). It uses all the character's statistics and special abilities except as noted here.

The Deadliner template allows the character to go for long periods without sleep and still function normally. It also allows the character to enter into a sleeplike trance that lasts for many days without suffering the effects of dehydration or starvation. A character acquires the Deadliner template by undergoing a course of gene therapy (above). The regimen requires 25 successful Fortitude saving throws (DC 20).

Special Qualities: A Deadliner retains all the special qualities of the character and gains the additional special qualities listed below.

Hibernate (Ex): A Deadliner can enter into a sleeplike state that lasts for an extended period. While in this state, the Deadliner does not suffer the effects of dehydration or starvation. Hibernation can last up to a number of days equal to twice the character's Constitution. The Deadliner decides how long the hibernation will last before entering into the sleeplike state. If outside forces disturb or try to awaken the character, the Deadliner must succeed at a Will saving throw (DC 15) to end the hibernation

prematurely.

Sleepless (Ex): The Deadliner does not suffer the detrimental effects of sleep deprivation. Once per day, the Deadliner can spend 10 minutes meditating and receive all the benefits of a full 8 hours of sleep. However, Deadliners cannot go indefinitely without sleep. Once every 30 days, the character must get 2 full days of uninterrupted sleep or hibernation. Failure to do so makes the Deadliner fatigued.

Saving Throws: A Deadliner gains a +2 species bonus on all Will saving throws.

Advancement: By character class.

Deadline, Inc. Super-Soldier

While Executive Solutions has chosen to invest in cybernetic technologies, Deadline, Inc. prefers a more natural route. They success of their Deadliner gene therapy has been coupled with an advanced training program dedicated to maximizing each soldier's superior physical abilities. The results are truly frightening.

Requirements

To qualify to become a Super-Soldier, a character must fulfill the following criteria.

Base Attack Bonus: +3.

Skill: Knowledge (tactics) 3 ranks.

Template: Deadliner.

Class Information

The following information pertains to the Super-Soldier advanced class.

Hit Die: The Super-Soldier gains 1d10 hit points per level. The character's Constitution modifier applies.

Action Points: The Super-Soldier gains a number of action points equal to 6 + one-half her character level, rounded down, every time she attains a new level in this class.

Class Skills: The Super-Soldier's class skills are as

TABLE 1-1: SUPER SOLDIER

Class Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special	Defense Bonus	Reputation Bonus
1st	+1	+1	+0	+1	Haul, light sleeper, survivor	+1	+0
2nd	+2	+2	+0	+2	Darkvision (60 ft.)	+1	+0
3rd	+3	+2	+1	+2	Bonus feat	+2	+1
4th	+4	+2	+1	+2	Strong as an ox	+2	+1
5th	+5	+3	+1	+3	Darkvision (90 ft.), superior conditioning	+3	+1
6th	+6	+3	+2	+3	Bonus feat	+3	+2
7th	+7	+4	+2	+4	Improved reaction	+4	+2
8th	+8	+4	+2	+4	Darkvision (120 ft.)	+4	+2
9th	+9	+4	+3	+4	Bonus feat	+5	+3
10th	+10	+5	+3	+5	Decisive attack	+5	+3

follows: Balance (Dex), Climb (Str), Computer Use (Int), Demolitions (Int), Escape Artist (Dex), Hide (Dex), Intimidate (Cha), Jump (Str), Listen (Wis), Move Silently (Dex), Navigate (Int), Spot (Wis), Survival (Wis), Swim (Str), Tumble (Dex).

Skill Points at Each Level: 3 + Int modifier (2 + Int modifier for nonhumans).

Class Features

The following class features pertain to the Super-Soldier advanced class.

Haul: Super-Soldiers can carry more heavy gear than the typical soldier. A Super-Soldier's Strength is considered 4 points higher for the purpose of determining her carrying capacity.

Light Sleeper: Super-Soldiers are light sleepers and can make Listen checks even while asleep, without penalty. (A sleeping character normally takes a -10 penalty on Listen checks.)

Survivor: When a Super-Soldier spends an action point to modify the result of a saving throw, she may roll an additional 1d6 and take the best result, discarding the lower roll(s).

Darkvision: Beginning at 2nd level, a Super-Soldier gains darkvision. She can see in total darkness out to a range of 60 feet. Darkvision is black-and-white only, but is otherwise like normal

sight. The range of the Super-Soldier's darkvision improves to 90 feet at 5th level and 120 feet at 8th level.

Bonus Feats: At 3rd, 6th, and 9th level, the Super-Soldier gets a bonus feat. The bonus feat must be selected from the following list, and the Super-Soldier must meet all the prerequisites of the feat to select it: Advanced Combat Martial Arts, Advanced Firearms Proficiency, Armor Proficiency (light), Armor Proficiency (medium), Armor Proficiency (heavy), Armor Proficiency (powered), Athletic, Blind-Fight, Combat Expertise, Combat Reflexes, Combat Throw, Dead Aim, Defensive Martial Arts, Elusive Target, Exotic Firearms Proficiency, Far Shot, Great Fortitude, Improved Combat Martial Arts, Improved Combat Throw, Improved Disarm, Improved Trip, Iron Will, Lightning Reflexes, Nerve Pinch, Surface Vehicle Operation, Ultra Immune System, Weapon Focus, Whirlwind Attack, Zero-G Training.

Strong As An Ox: At 4th level and beyond, the Super-Soldier's carrying capacity increases as if she were one size category larger (Large instead of Medium-size, for example).

Superior Conditioning: Beginning at 5th level, a Super-Soldier learns how to shake off adverse conditions. When a Super-Soldier is subjected to

one of the following conditions, the duration of the condition's effect is halved: cowering, dazed, exhausted, fatigued, nauseated, panicked, paralyzed, shaken, and stunned. If the condition's duration is only 1 round, the Super-Soldier is not affected at all.

Improved Reaction: At 7th level, a Super-Soldier gains a +2 competence bonus on initiative checks.

Decisive Attack: At 10th level, when a Super-Soldier spends an action point to modify the result of an attack roll, she may roll an additional 1d6 and take the best result, discarding the lower roll(s).

Trey checked the ammunition on his smart rifle. Not that it would do him any good. The opposition, a squad sent by Executive Solutions, were in an armored personnel carrier with a cannon on top that had already killed thirteen of his men. They were out-manned, out-gunned, and trapped between heavy artillery and the open desert.

They needed that personnel carrier.

They had seen hopeless situations before. Trey knew the tide could suddenly turn in their favor. That was the way of war.

Every vehicle, every weapon, every mercenary had a weakness. It was just a matter of discovering it.

The cannon fired again. Trey had his men spread out, making them a difficult target—if the Executive Solutions soldiers were going to kill his squad; he was at least going to make it hard for them.

The explosion tore a hole in another shipping crate. The crates were a double-edged sword - some were capable of withstanding the blasts and barely moved when hit. Others exploded, frying four of Trey's men.

They kept out of sight. Most of them men had run out of ammunition firing at the armored personnel carrier. It was useless, there were no lucky shots, no exposed gas tanks, not even an eye-slit opening.

Trey had an idea.

The armored personnel carrier was forwarding and

reversing, swinging the turret wildly to and fro as it picked out targets. It was computer-guided, which made it twice as deadly. But the computer did not drive the vehicle; that was up to a mercenary.

Trey called four of his men over and pointed at the crate he was hiding behind. Then he began pushing it; it took only a second for his men to understand what he meant.

They put their backs into it. Slowly, inch-by-inch, it started to move. As they gained traction, they moved it into the armored personnel carrier's path.

Trey shouted into his mike. The other groups complied.

The personnel carrier veered wildly to the left, easily circumventing the first crate, but it slammed into the one Trey's men pushed out immediately behind it. The wheels squealed as the driver shifted to reverse and gunned it...

Only to hit another crate that was pushed into place immediately behind it. The turret swung around, fired in a panic, but it wasn't able to point downward enough to hit the crates butted up against it.

A minute later, another crate was in place. The personnel carrier was trapped on three sides.

Trey's men began banging on the personnel carrier.

"This is Sergeant Trey Johnson of the 52nd squad, Deadline Incorporated. We have you surrounded. Surrender now and we'll let you go."

There was silence at first. Trey was so close to the personnel carrier that he could hear them through the armor on the other side. He was running out of time—in a few hours more troops would arrive. He needed that personnel carrier.

"This is Sergeant Brendan Taylor of Executive Solutions. Deadline has regularly violated the international articles of war. We reject your offer."

Trey sighed. He didn't have time for this pissing match.

He turned to his second. "There was fuel in one of those crates, wasn't there? Pry open a few more and

see if there's anything else that might be flammable."

His second set his jaw. He knew what Trey meant.

Five crates later they found what they needed. It was weak propellant, old world stuff that would never get through armor. But for psychological purposes, it would do.

Trey walked over to the armored personnel carrier.

"This is Sergeant Trey Johnson. If you do not evacuate the vehicle immediately...we've found rocket fuel in one of these crates."

He let the threat hang in the air.

Voices were raised inside the vehicle.

Brendan's voice was still calm, but there was clearly some disagreement inside armored personnel carrier.

"We reject your offer," he said again.

Jesus, thought Trey, he's awfully calm.

Trey poured some of the fuel in front of the sight for the cannon. Then he lit it.

Some of his men stood around, curious.

He nodded. Silence was sometimes more effective.

Minutes went by. Although outside the fire looked completely unthreatening, inside that was the only thing the ES mercs could see.

Trey set his watch. Five hundred seconds.

"Last chance," he shouted through his audio enhancer. "If you don't surrender, we're going to pour this fuel down the turret."

He paused for effect.

"Then we're going to light it. Despite what you may have heard, Deadline respects all articles of war and will release you unharmed."

Another spate of arguing started in the armored personnel carrier. Trey took out an herb-stick and lit it. The likelihood of the ancient propellant igniting anything was about as likely as a sparkler setting off a nuclear missile.

The vehicle rocked. Something was going on.

There was a shout and then a sharp SPTANG! sound.

The door to the armored personnel carrier opened. A man with a bloodied blaster pistol stood in the opening.

"I'm Corporal Bristol," he said, wiping his sweaty lip with one sleeve. "I have relieved Sergeant Brendan of duty. We surrender."

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