

HERD IMMUNITY Outline (Working title)

Erin Stanton is an elite Combined Corporate Defense Force ground-pounder on the last combat drop of her deployment. She is part of the Insertion and Reconnoiter Team (IRT), literally the first boots to touch dirt on an enemy-held planet. Once the Navy boys finish cleaning out all the warships and orbital assets defending a planet's highspace, they take the "Casket Express" down to the untamed surface in a string of one-woman ablative meteors, too small, too fast, and too hot for ground-based Anti-Aircraft Artillery fire to hit with any reliability.

From there, it's her job to identify those AAA sites, sensor installations, and communications nodes, cut through jammers and interference, and relay their true positions back up to the planetary assault carrier in orbit and call down kinetic strikes, opening a corridor for the landing shuttles with their swarms of marines.

Unlike the first twenty-nine drops of her enlistment contract, this mission should be a milk-run. Both sides are just going through the motions. Everyone expects the diplomats to extinguish this latest skirmish with another 11th hour peace declaration by the end of the day. Still, the forms must be observed, so the IRT launches.

But the milk-run turns into a gauntlet as the local enemy commander goes rogue and orders a full-scale assault on her team to deny them firing coordinates on his AAA assets. Erin watches as her entire squad is picked off one by one until she too falls with grievous, life-threatening injuries. The last thing she sees as she's bleeding out in the mud is an enormous footprint. One of many, leading away from the grassland battlespace and off towards dense forests on the horizon.

Months pass while she recovers in a CCDF medical facility under an induced coma. Her dreams are not kind. When she wakes, her right arm and leg are stumps. The nurses confirm that rest of her squad is dead, save for herself and one other named Lyska. She's been medically discharged from the marines, after receiving the Purple Heart and Bronze Star, which she refuses.

She also refuses regenerative therapy because regrowing her arm and leg would take more than a year. Instead, she opts for cybernetic prosthetics, which take only a matter of days to fit, and weeks to integrate with. Upon discharge, she travels back to her homeworld and tries to pick-up where she left off with her life before joining the marines, but the old haunts and friends just don't hit the same. Her nightmares begin to intrude on her waking moments in the form of flashbacks triggered by loud, sudden noises, intense flashing lights, and certain smells.

While Erin integrates quickly with her new limbs, reintegrating with civilian life proves nearly impossible. Erin turns to self-medicating with alcohol, loses her civilian job after a blow-up with her boss, and begins her own downward spiral.

But before she can auger into the dirt, her old CO intervenes with an offer of employment more in line with her skillset and experience. It's off-world, and it means picking up a gun.

Nashar II is a treaty world, one of three disputed systems under the joint oversight of Earth and the Xre as part of the peace accords between the two peoples. Nashar II is an uninhabited biological preserve world by tradition and treaty. To the Xre, it's a sacred hunting ground. To humans, it's a scientific and pharmacological bonanza.

There is a one continent separate from the rest of the planet's ecosystem of specific importance to the Xre. Made of dry plains and rolling grass savannahs, it is home to a species of herding, herbivorous, hexapodal megafauna called hexephants. Xre have made the pilgrimage to this continent to hunt these beasts for the better part of a millennium as part of an ascendance

ceremony. They are sacred prey animals, and the entire herd is protected by treaty as part of the Xre's cultural heritage.

The problem is, the hexephants' ebony ivory tusks became a prized item among the black markets of Earth in the years after the CCDF wrested control of the planet away from the Xre, but before the treaty restored their sovereignty over the continent. A thriving poaching trade developed, starting with dirty CCDF marines looking to pad their bank accounts on the side, and eventually taken over by an organized interstellar crime syndicate.

Demand didn't dry up just because the diplomats decreed the continent trade hands. Poachers still cash in on the black gold. But a bedrock principle of the treaty is humans try humans for human crimes, while Xre try Xre for Xre crimes. And above all other considerations, Human cannot kill Xre, and Xre cannot kill human. Any cross-species killing automatically breaks the treaty, and the prior state of war resumes.

So it falls to a human to police human poachers, even on sacred Xre soil. Which is where Erin comes in. The job is simple, embed with a hexphant herd and protect them from the bad guys coming for their ivory. Peace, quiet, solitude, a fat paycheck, and wide-open spaces far away from society. With the implied possibility of occasional fits of extreme violence. It's exactly what she needs. Best of all, it's a military contractor gig, so she gets all of the toys, with none of the chain of command bullshit.

When she arrives, Stanton is briefed on the situation on the planet and given a crash course on hexephants and the local environment by a young exo-zoologist named Nadeen doing her thesis on hexephant society and language. Poacher activity scared her off her field work after one of them took a shot at her. But now that she has an armed escort, her work can resume. But poachers aren't the only danger. There are native pack predators that prey on hexephants, too. They're not supposed to interfere in natural predation. Further, one of the hexephant's staple foods is called 'blade grass,' which releases a chemical when it's being eaten that warns surrounding grasses of the danger, which then bend and whip at the attacker with serrated edges that can slice into exposed skin.

After the briefing and with little more than a tent, battle rifle, quad-mule drone, coms equipment, a handful of recon drones, and dried rations enough to get her through her dirtside rotation, Stanton deploys with Nadeen in tow. The austerity simplifies things for her at first and provides a sort of off ramp for her tortured mind. The only real hardship is the heat and occasional swarms of aggressive, biting insects.

But the hexephants are slow to warm to her presence, and slower still to offer any measure of trust. She paces behind their wake, wading through their mounds of shit and rivers of piss. The alpha, male or female she doesn't know, the leader of the herd will only tolerate her as long as she's taking up Tail End Charlie position. Last in line, first to get picked off by predators lurking in the tall grass looking for an easy meal.

Erin isn't thrilled by the arrangement, but she tolerates it as she builds the herds' trust. She also takes the opportunity to lay booby traps and ambushes for the critters hunting them. Bipedal pack hunters with sinuous, snakelike necks and bullet heads full of serrated teeth like sharks, they're nasty pieces of work. But they're also particularly vulnerable to snares, which comes in handy. Erin traps the pack leader by the throat, kills the first two lackeys to approach with her rifle, then grabs the leader by its lower jaw with her cybernetic arm. They bite down, hard, only to lose the front row of their teeth against the titanium.

She cuts the cord slicing into the pack leader's neck. "I'm the bad bitch here, son. Only room for one." Lacerated and bleeding, the pack leader darts back into the tall grass, the rest of

the pack trailing in their wake. This earns her a new measure of trust and respect with the herd, moving her up the column to roughly the middle, where all the juveniles are corralled. She's not sure if she's there to protect them, or counted among them.

Things go well for a time. Erin tries to learn the patterns and cycles of the herd. They pause at a spring and she swims for the first time in years. They pause at a field of bones and she weeps at the sight of these animals tenderly probing the remains of their ancestors. She has her first flashback since coming to this place, but one of the youths comes to her side to make sure she's okay before their mother shoos them off.

A Xre shuttle appears bearing a ceremonial hunting party. The herd doesn't flee. Instead, they close together and gesture at one another with their trunks and forelimbs until some sort of decision is arrived at. Stanton and Nadeen can only hang back and watch as the hunt commences and one of the older males is isolated from the rest of the herd. Bizarrely, the rest of the herd simply watches on impassively. Not apathetic, but not moving to help the condemned male either.

The hunters don't use firearms, preferring instead traditional bladed weapons that require skill and close proximity. The old male seems almost resigned to his fate until one of the Xre sounds a horn to signal the start of the hunt. Then, he barrels off at a dead run, the Xre pursuing close behind. Nadeen and Stanton watch through one of her recon drones as the party pulls away. The elder tires and the hunters catch up. The fight is brutal and kinetic. Two of the Xre are injured, one of them severely. But the outcome wasn't really in doubt and the elder succumbs. The Xre hold a small ceremony to honor the fallen beast and thank it for an honorable fight before collecting their trophy, gathering up their wounded, and strangely return to the herd.

The Xre pull two large, wide mouth drums out of their shuttle, present them to the herd, and then repeat a portion of the ceremony honoring their fallen prey before boarding their shuttle and returning to the sky. The herd waits until the shuttle can't be seen or heard anymore. The alpha pulls the lids off the drums. Then, two by two in order of hierarchy, the hexephants dip their trunks in the drums and spread a viscous brown oil on their foreheads and flanks. Members communally help one another spread the liquid over their thick hides for more ever coverage. Nadeen tasks Stanton with collecting a sample she can send back for analysis later.

Once the strange scene had ended, the herd goes to pay their respects to the fallen. They... chant, for lack of a better word. Their vocalizations are below the threshold of human hearing, but Stanton can feel the rhythm in the soles of her feet and reverberating through her chest. She weeps.

After the hunt, Nadeen warms up to her and stops seeing Stanton as just a security guard, much to Stanton's annoyance as Nadeen starts peppering her with questions, about her artificial limbs, her military service, her homeworld. She retreats back inside herself, preferring the artificial solitude. She passed the time writing letters back to Liska.

A few days later, one of the hexephants falls into a tiger pit and breaks two of their legs. The pit is crudely dug, but obviously artificial and a trap. Her first sign of poachers. There's nothing to be done for the mortally injured hexephant but put it out of its misery. The alpha and the fallen hexephant's youth look on from the lip of the pit until the alpha herds them away. A single gunshot rings out. But she's not finished with the scene. Knowing the poachers will be back for their kill, she boobytraps the dead hexephant's tusks.

Cut to a group of poachers. All human, themselves ex-military or mercenaries, except for one scrawny man they all call "Doc." The group arrives at the tiger pit and climbs down to the dead female and begins to harvest the ivory when Stanton's boobytrap goes off. The leader sees

it and shouts “Down!” but Doc freezes up as a laser cutter flashes a disk of energy in every direction and slices him in half just below the sternum. The rest now know they’ve got an activist to deal with now. Sitting in a tree miles away, Erin watches them bury their man from one of her recon drones.

The following day, Erin spots the orphan trying to nurse from one of the other females, but they’re repeatedly driven off. Exasperated that they’d let one of their own starve, she chastises the female, who ignores her. Angry, Erin grabs a tusk with her cybernetic arm and torques on it.

The alpha reacts instantly to a human touching the ivory of their herd. A twin trunk lashes out like a pit viper and bodily tosses Erin through the grass like a rag doll. She rolls and slides to a stop, concussed, disarmed, and disoriented. She has no time to get to her feet before the alpha is on top of her, pressing an enormous foot down on her chest with insurmountable force squeezing the very breath out of her while Nadeen begs the alpha to stop.

“More weight,” Stanton spits. The alpha relents and moves off after correcting her. Only then does Erin realize the alpha crushed her quad-mule during their charge. She salvages what she can from the wreck and manages to rig up a transmitter to put in a resupply request. The next few days are lean times, and Erin is sorely tempted to eat local despite knowing it would only accelerate her starvation.

She refuses to let the orphan starve in the meantime, against Nadeen’s protests not to interfere, and begins collecting milk from the other females to feed him. He quickly imprints on her and starts annoyingly following her everywhere.

Meanwhile, the poaching group has been busy, outflanking her and the herd and setting up an ambush ahead of their route. At a fork in the trail, they set off a bomb that triggers a stampede away from their migration path and towards a heavily wooded area where the hexephants can be separated and dispatched in detail. Stanton sees the danger and tries to head it off, but the herd is in a panic and isn’t listening.

She improvises as best she can, deploying her drones to try and find the poachers. The forest provides cover and makes tracking them from the air or keeping track of the herd impossible. But it also gives her places to hide from them, and opportunities to pick them off one at a time. Their weapons are enormous caliber, slow-firing canons optimized for hunting hexephants, not people. While her battle rifle uses small bore rounds with a high rate of fire and almost no recoil, ideal for sawing man-sized targets in half with a short burst.

Stanton manages to thin out the group, and a pack of the local predators get another, but then she falls into a narrow tiger pit dug just for her. Her drones are all shot down and her quad-mule blown up. The leader pokes his head over the opening above her and Stanton greets him with a burst from her rifle, but he’s too quick and drops a grenade down the hole. She returns the favor, snagging the pineapple in midair and chucking it back up to where he’s standing.

“I can do this all day!” she bellows after it goes off.

The poacher leader is about to say something clever when the herd Alpha charges him, throwing him against a tree and standing protectively over the tiger pit until Stanton can claw her way back out. They end up in a bit of a Tarantinoesque stand-off, with the poacher pointing his giant gun at the Alpha and Stanton leveling her rifle at the leader.

The leader relents, but just as he’s about to retreat, Nadeen shoots him through the neck with a dropped sidearm in a fit of rage. Stanton takes the gun and starts to yell at her, but she’s immediately distraught and regretful over taking a life. Stanton consoles her with a hug and wipes away her tears, only to be caught off guard again when Nadeen strains up to kiss her.

Stanton pushes her away, but the touch of another person, it's been so long. Nadeen exchanges one type of aggression for another and before either of them know it, they're passionately exploring each other.

With the standoff over, the herd reassembles with Stanton accepted as a full-fledged member to resume their migration. It turns out the orphan that adopted Stanton is the Rosetta stone. He's been learning simple English words and phrases from her and either answering them in their own language or repeating them back to the rest of the herd, who largely ignores him. Nadeen is absolutely ecstatic at the discovery and sets about building a translation matrix. Stanton pointedly reminds her this was the juvenile Nadeen wanted her to let starve to death.

The weeks stretch on as Nadeen's work expands to the point it can't be argued that the hexephants are not just intelligent, but sentient. Stanton's bond with Junior grows by the day as they teach and learn from one another. The rest of the herd begins to pay attention to Junior's bleating. Turns out they're just as shocked the bipeds are intelligent and have an ever-growing list of questions for Nadeen and Stanton.

That's when the results come back from Nadeen's home lab of the brown oil they collected after the last ceremonial hunt come back and change absolutely everything. What they thought was some sort primitive shamanistic oil is in fact a highly-refined insect-analogue repellent. It's manufactured from a plant native to the planet, but not the hexephants' continent.

Stanton has a sinking feeling and begins to probe the hexephants about their history and myths. Generations ago, a horrific disease swept across their species that caused their hides to harden and eventually crack and peel away, leaving them to die of infection and exposure. A few years into the pandemic, the Xre first appeared and began to hunt them, but always leaving behind an offering of this oil. Curious members rubbed the sweet-smelling (to them) oil into their skin, as they would with certain kinds of mud to stave off the sun. Those hexephants didn't get sick. Soon, every herd and member was using the oil, and the ceremony of sacrifice and survival became a permanent part of their culture.

A quick study of the buzzing insects that had been haranguing Stanton since she arrived and consultation with Nadeen's colleagues on the other side of the planet confirms their suspicions and fears. The insects aren't native to this continent either, and carry a plague that would be devastating to the herds if not for the repellent. Knowingly or not, the Xre brought the disease to the hexephants, and have been charging them in blood for the cure ever since.

Nadeen's dissertation and Stanton's report are nearly complete just as another Xre shuttle lands, bearing a hunting party. Their guests are a Xre hunting party, one of their diplomats, and the fortunate son of a human transtellar CEO, bearing a once-in-a-lifetime hunting permit from the Xre leadership. And he's there to hunt the Alpha as a guest of the Xre hunting party.

This doesn't sit well with Stanton or Nadeen considering what they'd just learned. While Nadeen is trying to argue that under the vague terms of the Xre/Human treaty the hexephants count as a protected sentient species, Stanton just goes ahead and shoots Mr. Silver Spoon in the kneecap when he makes a move towards the alpha she doesn't like and proclaims the hexephant hunt closed to everyone of every species.

The Xre hunting party says "You and what army," followed quickly by a pissing match between the two sides. Stanton is badly outnumbered but she has powerful ranged weapons developed during a war against Xre infantry, while the Xre warriors only brought their ceremonial edged weapons for the hunt. A fight ensues and the Xre diplomat is killed.

All hell breaks loose. Stanton and Nadeen hurry the herd along their migration while messages from both sides race out to their respective governments.

Within days there's Human and Xre warships in orbit pointing nuclear weapons in every direction in a full-blown diplomatic catastrophe with Stanton and Nadeen standing right in the eye of the hurricane. Flagships of both navies arrive on scene and start landing troops. The *Elon Musk*, Stanton's last assignment before her injury, leads the task force on the human side. They deploy an IRT team to find Stanton and drag her out of the budding warzone to face charges where she can't do any more damage. Leading the team, Liska, the only other survivor of her old unit.

Suddenly their roles flip as the best place for Stanton and Nadeen to hide is inside the herd itself. No one, on either side, wants to hurt the hexephants, so the alpha commands that the bipeds be surrounded by a wall of flesh and tusks at all times. The herd is willing to go to war to protect their newest, strangest members.

All the while Nadeen is screaming through the radio and local net to anyone who'll listen that the hexephants are sentient and demanding autonomy and protection for them from both governments under the terms of the treaty. But if anyone's listening, they're not biting.

Liska's team quickly catches up with the herd. She walks up to Stanton unarmed and tries to get her to surrender peacefully, but is utterly unsurprised when she refuses, setting up a showdown between the two pen pals while the ships above jockey for position and rattle their sabers. Infantry from both sides mass on the surface, spoiling for a fight while diplomats of both species pull back hard on the leashes of their dogs of war.

And to be brutally honest, that's all the more I know about this book. I've always been more of a pantsner in my approach to novel writing, and my outlines seldom survive in any recognizable form much past Act II. Even I don't know what's going to come out the other end of this furball. That said, I already love this book and these characters, and I very much want to see what happens at the finish line.

End Outline.