

RICHARD TURNER

FIRST STRIKE



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The Kurgan War - Book 1

by Richard Turner

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Chapter 1

Lieutenant Commander Moore's commanding officer once described convoy escort duty as nothing more than herding cattle. Freighters of all shapes and sizes filled with fuel, food, and spare parts, the lifeblood of the outer colonies, followed close behind the warship. Until they became self-sufficient, which Moore knew could take decades if not centuries, the colonists and military detachments on the far-flung borders of the ever-expanding human colonization of space needed constant re-supplying.

It was the third watch aboard the Terran Star Ship—*Raleigh* and Moore, as second officer, was on duty on the bridge. The *Raleigh* was a light cruiser armed only with guided missiles for engaging targets and anti-missile batteries for defense, not that she had fired a weapon outside of training since she had been commissioned nearly twenty years ago. Aside from the occasional skirmish with rebellious colonists or acts of piracy, the Terran Fleet had not fought a war in almost a century.

Moore sipped his coffee as he paced around the bridge. A tall, thoughtful man, Moore had never intended to make a career out of serving in the military; however, after twelve years of service, he did not see a good reason to change professions. He turned his head and studied the tactical display on the main viewing screen. There were two dozen dots on the screen, each one indicated the exact location of the ships in the convoy trailing closely behind the *Raleigh*. He had made the run from the supply depot in orbit above Valerin-7 to the outer colonies four times in the past year.

It was becoming routine and dull. He had asked for a transfer in the hopes of doing something more exciting but had been turned down. He would have to finish his two-year assignment on the *Raleigh* before moving on.

On duty with him were three other people: Lieutenant Takeda, the navigator, Chief Petty Officer Murphy, the helmsman, and Petty Officer Ramirez, the ship's communications officer. They were halfway through their watch when one of the vessels in the convoy reported that they were having engine difficulties and asked if the *Raleigh* could cut her speed slightly so she wouldn't be left behind.

Moore nodded and then asked the navigator to re-compute their arrival time at Tyr-431, a barren rocky planet used as a military surveillance station monitoring the Disputed Zone. The Terran-Kurgan War fought almost one hundred years ago had ended not in victory but in a ceasefire. Both sides still

claimed vast stretches of space; however, the treaty strictly forbade either side from entering the Disputed Zone without the permission of the other side . . . and this was never forthcoming.

Lieutenant Takeda, the navigator, looked up from his screen and said, “Sir, we can adjust our course and skirt the asteroid field on the far side of Tyr-431. We should be able to make up for any time lost due to the ailing freighter.”

“Do it,” replied Moore. “PO Ramirez, please inform Tyr-431 that we’ll be arriving a little late and that their shuttlecraft should be prepared to receive the freighters once we are in orbit.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” replied Ramirez.

Two hours later, Moore finished his duty report and started to get ready to hand over the bridge to the ship’s captain. He glanced down at his watch and saw that he had less than fifteen minutes left on shift. Moore was looking forward to getting a bite to eat followed by a run on a treadmill in the ship’s gym before putting his head down. On the tactical display he could see the convoy passing by the asteroid field. There were millions of rocks floating about. Some were no larger than a pebble while some nearly dwarfed the *Raleigh* in size. He ordered the helmsman to keep a respectful distance from the asteroids until they reached their destination in three hours’ time.

The doors to the bridge slid open.

Moore turned his head and expected to see the captain. Instead, Lieutenant Ford, a pale, slender blonde-haired man, who usually kept to himself, walked onto the bridge.

Perplexed, Moore said, “Mister Ford, what are you doing here? You’re not due on watch for another eight hours.”

Ford looked past Moore, his eyes fixed on the tactical display. “Where are we?”

“Passing an asteroid field near Tyr-431,” answered Chief Petty Officer Murphy, the helmsman, without looking up from his station.

“Good,” said Ford, his voice cold and emotionless.

Something told Moore to be wary. “Mister Ford, I asked you a question. Why are you on the bridge?”

“To do this,” replied Ford as he suddenly pulled a hidden pistol from behind his back. Before anyone could react, he fired three shots, coldly killing each man on the bridge with one shot to the head. Ford walked over to the engineer’s console, locked the doors to the bridge and quickly changed the passcode preventing anyone from overriding the computer to open the doors. Next, he moved over to the weapon’s console and with the flip of a switch, he turned off all of the ship’s self-defense systems. It was now helpless against an attacker.

Ford smiled, made his way over to the communication's console and pushed the dead body of Petty Officer Ramirez onto the floor. Using his sleeve to wipe away the blood on the workstation, Ford opened a channel.

"It is done," he reported.

A second later, just over three hundred kilometers away, a dozen triangular-shaped fighters detached themselves from behind some of the larger rocks they had been using as cover in the asteroid field and raced toward the hapless convoy. As soon as they had a lock on all of their targets, the fighters let loose with a barrage of missiles. Without waiting to see the impact, the fighters quickly banked away and sped back into the asteroid field.

Alarms rang throughout the ship. Ford shook his head. He had forgotten to disable the alarms. Not that it mattered anymore. He stood there watching the incoming missiles speed toward their intended targets. He felt nothing for the thousands of people that were about to die. He was doing his duty. Over the speakers, he could hear the ships calling, pleading for help. None would be coming today. He reached over and turned off the comms system. Ford sat down on the captain's chair and watched as one by one the ships vanished from the tactical display. Behind him, people were frantically banging on the sealed doors demanding to be let onto the bridge. He knew that it would not take them long to find a torch to cut their way in, but they would be too late. Ford stared intently at the screen as three missiles streaked through the vacuum of space toward his ship.

Opening his arms as if he were about to embrace a loved one, Ford warmly smiled, closed his eyes and said, "Lord, protect me and cleanse my soul of all my sins." A second later, the first missile struck the *Raleigh*, obliterating the bridge section and Ford with it. In the blink of an eye, the other two missiles hit, blasting the cruisers into a million pieces, killing the fifty men and women on board.

The first act of a bloody war had just been played out.

Chapter 2

The sound of an alarm clock buzzing slowly stirred newly commissioned Second Lieutenant Michael Sheridan to life. Without bothering to open his eyes, he reached over and turned off the alarm. He took a deep breath and then felt his stomach turn. Like a runner taking off at the sound of the starter's pistol, Sheridan ran for the bathroom. In the dark, he nearly tripped over one of his friends still passed out on the floor of his room. A second later, with his head spinning and his guts churning, he dropped to his knees in front of the toilet and threw up everything from his stomach.

Gagging and gasping for air, Sheridan cursed his stupidity. He and three of his friends, recently graduated from the Marine Ground Warfare Battle School, had gone on an all-night bender, drinking anything and everything they could get their hands on. When all he had left in his stomach was bile, Sheridan let out a moan and sat down on the cold floor of the bathroom. For a minute, he waited to see if he was going to be sick again; when he was not, Sheridan reached over, grabbed hold of the sink and pulled himself up.

He flipped on the light above the sink and felt his pupils shrink as the light burnt his bloodshot eyes. Taking a minute to wash the sleep from his face, Sheridan looked at the young man staring back at him in the mirror. At twenty-two, he was just about to begin his career as an infantry officer in the Marine Corps. Sheridan had short black hair, deep-green eyes, and a square jaw with a scar running down the right side. For him, it was a constant reminder of the tragic accident that had taken his sister's life when he was only ten. His body was fit and toned. At just under two meters in height, Sheridan was of average height for the Corps. The son of a fleet admiral, Sheridan had been expected to follow the family tradition of serving as an officer in the fleet. However, he had never liked the idea of being cooped up inside a ship for months at a time. He preferred getting his feet dirty and breathing real, not recycled, oxygen.

He quickly brushed his teeth and then, feeling somewhat more human, he walked back into his room and flicked on all the lights. "On your feet, you lazy bastards!" Sheridan hollered at his still-sleeping friends. "It's five in the morning, and we've got a lot to do today."

"Jesus, Mike, turn off the light and let me sleep," protested Harry Williams, Sheridan's closest friend all through the academy.

"Get up, get up!" yelled Sheridan nudging his friend with his foot.

“I’d tell you to fuck off, but you’d just ignore me, wouldn’t you,” said Williams as he sat up and ran a hand over his smooth-shaven head. Williams was also the son of an officer in the fleet. In fact, almost the entire graduating class from the academy had a connection to the military in one way or another.

“Wake the other two sleepy heads while I throw on some clothes and rustle us up some coffee.” With that, Sheridan picked up some clean-looking sweatpants from the floor and pulled them on. He made sure he had his debit card with him and then walked out of his room down to the vending machine at the end of the hallway. He returned a couple of minutes later with four piping hot cups of coffee in his hands.

“Thanks,” said Williams, taking a coffee.

Kicking an empty bottle of Scotch across the floor with his foot, Sheridan took a deep breath and vowed to himself that he would never drink again—at least, until tonight.

Slowly, his friends came to life. They looked as if they had been drinking for a month straight.

“What time is the graduation ceremony?” asked Tony Hirato, still lying on the floor trying to focus his bloodshot eyes on his watch.

“At ten,” replied Sheridan.

“Then why the hell do we need to get up so early?”

“Because we need to hit the gym for a couple of hours and sweat all this booze out of our systems,” answered Sheridan. “I’ll be damned if I’m going to the parade smelling like a brewery.”

Gregory Shipov sat on the floor looking as if he were about to be sick.

“The toilet is in there,” said Sheridan, pointing to the bathroom. “I’ve already christened it this morning.”

“Wonderful,” muttered Shipov as he struggled to stand. A split second later, his face turned green. He ran to the bathroom.

“Here’s to being young and stupid,” offered Sheridan as he held up his coffee cup, toasting his friends.

“To being stupid,” answered Williams, holding up his own cup.

Five hours later, Sheridan and his friends, now dressed in their Marine Corps dress blues, stood on parade. The graduating class of nearly one thousand new Marine officers stood at ease and listened while the commanding officer of the Marine Ground Warfare Battle School congratulated them on completing the grueling three-month course in the deserts of Nevada. All Marine officers regardless of their future specialty had to attend the training. Infantry officers rubbed shoulders with pilots, logistical officers, and even padres. As their

instructors kept pointing out, the job may be in outer space, but the battles were still won on the ground, and that was why the Battle School was the final part of their combined arms training.

Proudly, Sheridan ran his hand over his new gold bar on his jacket collar. He had worked hard to earn his commission, finishing in the top ten of his class at the academy as well as the Battle School. He already had his eye on an assignment with an infantry regiment in the elite First Division. Every commandant of the Corps in the last century had served in the First Division, but only the best and brightest were chosen to be part of the finest fighting formation in the fleet. He was sure that after the parade wrapped up and the duty assignments were given out that his name would be found beside one of the three infantry regiments that were part of the First Division.

After yet another long and boring speech that Sheridan tried his best to ignore, the graduating class was called to attention. The commandant of the Marine Corps stepped up behind the podium and eyed the sea of officers before him.

“Good morning, Marines,” said General Steinmetz, his voice deep and gravely.

“Good morning, sir!” loudly replied a thousand voices.

“Normally, at this time, I would welcome you all into the Corps and wish you well with your chosen careers. However, events have transpired along the Disputed Zone, which has changed everything.”

A loud murmur ran through the crowd of spectators watching the parade.

Steinmetz continued, “Three days ago at precisely 0745 hours, installations and ships all along the Disputed Zone were attacked. The exact scope of the losses suffered has yet to be determined. However, initial indications are that we suffered heavy losses during this unprovoked and cowardly sneak attack. The Federation Council met in London this morning and authorized the mobilization of the fleet to safeguard the colonies. Marines, we are once again at war with the Kurgan Empire.”

Some people in the crowd began to cry, afraid for their loved ones already serving along the Disputed Zone. The Marines on the parade stood silent, expectantly waiting to hear what was going to happen next.

Steinmetz took a sip of water and then spoke. “Marines, effective immediately, all post-course leave is canceled. You will all be shipping out today. I will grant you one hour to say goodbye to your friends and family who came to see you here today. After that, you are to assemble in the main hangar where you will find your duty assignments already posted.”

With that, the ceremony ended. Anxious family members flooded onto the

parade grounds, hoping to see their loved ones before they departed.

Sheridan stood there, not sure how he should feel. On the one hand, he knew that this was what he had enlisted for; on the other, he struggled to believe that after a century of relative peace, they were at war. He turned on his heels and tried to see his mother through the swirling crowd. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted Tarina Pheto looking down at her feet. With a smile on his lips, Sheridan worked his way through the crowd. "Hey there, why the long face?"

Tarina turned and looked up at Sheridan. "My parents couldn't afford to make it here today. I was hoping to spend a few weeks with them before attending advanced flight training. Looks like I won't get that chance now." Tarina Pheto was from Soweto. A slender young woman with dark skin and a bald head, she and Sheridan had had an on-again-off-again relationship for the past three years. At the moment, they were apart.

"Well, my mother is here somewhere; why don't you come with me and spend some time with her?"

Tarina's expression instantly soured. "Michael, she's the reason that we are not together."

Sheridan hated to admit it, but she was right. "I know my mother can be a bit old-fashioned at times."

Tarina shook her head. "Michael, you need to open your eyes. She's not as old-fashioned as you keep saying; she's a racist. If I were white, things would be different, but I'm not. And you know it."

Sheridan reached over and took her right hand in his. "Tarina, you know I don't care about your skin color."

"I know you don't, but I will never be part of your life if your mother has anything to say about it and until you stand up to her, we can never be together." Tarina fought back the mix of feelings raging in her heart. She let go of Sheridan's hand and melted into the crowd.

"Michael . . . Michael!" called out a woman's voice.

Sheridan turned to see his mother, escorted by a Marine colonel, making her way toward him.

"Was that Miss Pheto?" asked Sheridan's mother.

"Yes," replied Sheridan bitterly.

"I thought you two weren't together anymore."

"We're not."

"Well, it's for the best with all that's happening along the Disputed Zone."

Sheridan ground his teeth. He wanted to lash out at his mother and tell her to go to hell, but his strict upbringing and the colonel standing a few meters away prevented him from showing his true feelings.

“Have you heard from Father?” Sheridan asked, steering the conversation away from Tarina.

“Yes, I have great news. He’s been promoted to vice-admiral and given command of the newly formed Sixth Fleet. If anyone can give the Kurgan Empire a good swift kick in the behind, it’s your father.”

Sheridan forced a smile. “Mother, I doubt I’ll get a chance to speak to him before I ship out, so could you please pass on my congratulations.”

“You can pass them on yourself. I bet you’ll be serving under his command before too long.”

Sheridan cringed at the thought. The First Division was assigned to the First Fleet and he wanted to serve there and nowhere else. “Well, I find out soon enough.”

For the next thirty minutes, Sheridan made small talk with his mother while several admirals and generals, all of whom knew Sheridan’s father, feted her. If there was one thing he had to give his mother credit for, it was her ability to schmooze with party guests. He soon grew bored, gave his mother a hug, and joined the stream of young officers making their way toward the main hangar.

Harry Williams ran over and enthusiastically slapped Sheridan on the back. Together they walked in silence. Sheridan could feel the tension building in his chest. Four years of school all came down to this event. Where you went after Battle School determined your future.

Inside the hangar, the air was electric. On the far wall were several screens broken down alphabetically. Sheridan and Williams ran toward the monitor with their names on it. Together they elbowed their way to the front and searched for their duty assignments.

Williams let out a loud whoop. “Second Regiment, First Division.”

Sheridan found his name; it was listed beside the Third Regiment, Nineteenth Division. Feeling as if he had just been punched in the gut, he stepped back and dug out his phone. With a growing sense of panic, he looked up the Nineteenth Division and where its regiments were stationed. His eyes widened when he saw that the division was responsible for a sector of the Disputed Zone. *It has to be a clerical error*, thought Sheridan. He had come near the top of all of his classes. Only the best officers went to the First Division and not to some unheard of unit in an out of the way corner of the galaxy.

Sheridan’s instructor at the Battle School walked past. “Sir!” Sheridan called out trying to get the major’s attention.

“Yes, Mister Sheridan,” said Major Jowett, a short, balding man with a crooked nose on his weathered face.

Sheridan came sharply to attention and saluted Jowett. “Sir, I think there’s

been a mistake with my duty assignment.”

“Oh, why is that?”

“Sir, I’m posted to the Nineteenth, not the First Division,” explained Sheridan.

“It’s a good division with a fine reputation. It’s on the front line, so you’ll be in action long before many of your friends.”

Sheridan didn’t give a damn about the division’s reputation or where it was located. He blurted out, “Sir, I’d expected to go to the First.”

Jowett looked into Sheridan’s eyes. “Mister, we go where the Corps wants us to go. We don’t always get what we want. Get used to it. Remember, we all serve at the discretion of the Corps.” With that Jowett turned around and walked away, leaving Sheridan wondering what he could do.

Williams walked out of the sea of well-wishers and placed his hand on Sheridan’s shoulder. “Hey, Mike, I just saw your duty station. There has to be a mistake. I came behind you in every class. You should be the one going to the First Div, not me.”

Sheridan shook his head. “It’s no mistake. I’m being sent to some second-rate division in the middle of nowhere.”

“Say, why don’t you talk with your mom. I bet she can straighten this mess out.”

For a brief moment he thought about going to see his mother and asking her to chat with his father’s friends to get him re-assigned. However, that would mean he would be indebted to his mother and that was something he wasn’t about to do, not after the way she had treated Tarina. Cursing his unbelievably bad luck under his breath, Sheridan congratulated Williams and wished him luck. Reluctantly, he downloaded a copy of his orders and saw that he was due to leave in three hours. With a tension headache building in the back of his neck, Sheridan turned on his heels and went to pack. Why he wasn’t assigned to the First Division dug at him. With each step he took, he grew angrier. By the time he reached his room he was in a black mood.

Chapter 3

Sheridan walked off the shuttle and handed the petty officer processing the new arrivals on board the transport ship his tablet. After scanning the orders and the retina of his right eye to confirm his identification, the PO saluted Sheridan and told him that he was to stow his gear in the officers' quarters.

A short while later, Sheridan opened the door to his room and was surprised to see that he was the only occupant. After the general's speech, he had expected to find at least a dozen other officers shipping out with him. Sheridan dropped his rucksack and duffle bag onto the floor next to the nearest bunk bed and let out a deep sigh. This was not how he saw his military career starting. Someone somewhere must have screwed up. He vowed to himself to ask for a change of duty assignments the minute he reached his regiment.

His stomach growled, reminding him that he hadn't eaten a thing since last night's supper. Sheridan stepped out into the hallway of the aged transport vessel *Churchill* and looked up at a map on the wall. He quickly found directions to the mess hall. As he walked along, he was surprised that the ship seemed almost empty. Only two crewmen passed him on the way to the mess hall.

Sheridan stepped inside the mess hall and saw a platoon of young-looking Marines sitting at a long table eating their supper meal. They were having a loud and animated discussion about something that had happened in training to one of the Marines. It was lost on Sheridan.

A young private spotted Sheridan and instantly jumped to his feet. "Attention, officer on deck," called out the Marine. As one, the Marines shot to attention.

"At ease, as you were, Marines," said Sheridan, a bit uncomfortably. He had never actually served side by side with any enlisted Marines before. All of his interaction to date had been with his instructors at the academy or the battle school, and that was always in a formal setting.

"There'll be none of that from now on in the mess hall," said a voice from behind Sheridan. A second later, a staff sergeant entered the room. "From now on, save that crap for the parade square." The man's accent was English; Sheridan guessed the man came from the north of the country.

Sheridan saw the man looked to be about thirty and as tough as nails. His brown hair was cut close to the scalp. He was as tall as Sheridan, but with broad shoulders and a strong muscular build. His dark brown eyes seemed to examine

Sheridan for a brief moment. Walking past Sheridan, the sergeant nodded in greeting, grabbed a tray and then helped himself to some food before taking a seat at a table away from the young Marines.

Sheridan didn't know what to say or do. Training was one thing, being out on his own without anyone to guide him was another. He decided to act as if none of this bothered him, served himself some food and then walked over to the table where the staff sergeant was sitting. "Mind if I join you, Sergeant?"

"Not at all, sir, take a seat."

Sheridan sat down and put out his right hand in greeting. "Good day, Staff Sergeant, my name is Second Lieutenant Michael Sheridan."

"Staff Sergeant Alan Cole," replied the sergeant, firmly shaking Sheridan's hand.

"Are you assigned to the Nineteenth Division as well, Sergeant?" asked Sheridan as he poured some hot sauce all over his meal.

"Yes, sir."

Sheridan looked around the room. "For a ship this size, there aren't many of us deploying."

"With war declared, it looks like Fleet Headquarters has decided to send whatever they can find out to the line units without delay," explained Cole. "Until mobilization fully kicks in, we're going to have to do with what we've got. I was told that we'll be joining the First Battalion, Third Regiment, before moving to our staging area, wherever that may be. As for the ship, they're busy packing it with rations, ammo, and whatever spare parts are needed by the division. Don't be surprised if they fill your room to the roof with crap as well. From what I can tell, for this trip out, the ship is double-hatted as both a troop transport and a supply ship."

"Sergeant, do you know these Marines?" asked Sheridan looking over his shoulder at the young soldiers.

Cole shook his head. "I picked them up from Camp Lejeune yesterday. I was supposed to be escorting two hundred new Marines to the regiment, but this is all they could spare. The rest have been assigned to other units spread throughout the fleet."

"Have you ever served with the Nineteenth Division?" queried Sheridan, taking a bite of his food.

"No, I was with the First Division for eight years until I rotated home to teach at the NCO academy."

"You were with the First! How was it?" asked Sheridan.

"Sir, to be honest, I hated it. They're just a bunch of parade square soldiers. Damn they look good, but just don't ask them to fight. They're all show and no

action.”

Sheridan couldn't believe his ears. All of his instructors at the academy had drilled it into his head that to serve in the First Division was an honor. “Sergeant, no disrespect, but I find that hard to believe.”

Cole grinned. “Sir, I've got ten years in the Marines, and I can tell you that the First Div ain't all it's cracked up to be. I bet you were told in the academy that it's the best of the best. Am I right?”

“Yes.”

“Sir, if you want to learn politics, then the First Div is where you should go. If you want to learn what it means to be a Marine, then service in another division, especially one stationed along the Disputed Zone.”

Sheridan pursed his lips and then said, “Sergeant, how do you explain that for the last one hundred years, the Marine Corps commandant had at one time commanded the First?”

Cole grinned. “Sir, we haven't had to fight a major war in a hundred years, that's why. Like-minded people promote like-minded people. It's an old boys' club, and that goes for the officers as well as the NCOs. Trust me, a couple of years from now, you'll be thanking God that you didn't end up there.”

Sheridan had a hard time believing Cole. He began to wonder if the sergeant had been removed from duty with the First Division for some transgression.

A woman's voice came over the ship's intercom. “Attention, all hands, this is the captain speaking; the ship will be departing in thirty minutes. Please ensure that all of your gear is properly stowed before we head out past the asteroid belt and then make the jump to Illum Prime.”

Sheridan dug into his shirt pocket and pulled out his hand-sized tablet.

“Sir, what are you doing?” asked Cole.

“I'm looking up Illum Prime and trying to figure how long it will take us to arrive.”

“Sir, put that thing away,” said Cole bluntly. “Never let the men see you looking something up. It makes them think you don't know what is going on and it makes NCOs like me nervous.”

“But I have a question, that's why I have my tablet out.”

Cole shook his head. “Sir, let me give you a few words of advice. If you don't know something, tell your platoon sergeant, he'll understand. Never let the men see that you don't know. They look to you for leadership and guidance. They trust you with their lives. So act like you know it all. Be confident without being cocky and your troops will follow you anywhere.”

Sheridan discreetly slipped his tablet away.

“To answer your question, sir, in this old rust bucket it'll take us four days to

reach Illum Prime. These Marines may have completed their training, but they're still wet behind the ears. I have scheduled weapons training in the cargo bay for 0800 hours tomorrow morning. You're welcome to attend. In fact, I strongly suggest that you do. Some of these men may be in your platoon in a few days' time. Watching them go through their drills will give an insight into their skills and capabilities."

"Thanks, I'll take you up on your offer, Sergeant."

Next morning, Sheridan, dressed in his multi-cam fatigues, joined Cole as he put the new Marines through several hours of weapons handling drills. The soldiers were busy stripping and assembling their weapons, racing against the clock and each other. The standard weapon issued to all Marine infantrymen was the lightweight M5A2 Assault Rifle. Capable of firing 4.22mm caseless ammunition at a rate of six hundred rounds per minute, the rifle was also equipped with a grenade launcher built into the forestock. A laser and IR sight helped ensure accuracy in combat. Due to its high rate of fire, each Marine's standard combat load was ten one-hundred round magazines and six grenades, usually a mix of high explosive and fragmentation.

Sheridan looked around and noticed that the cargo bay was nearly full of supplies and equipment. "They didn't leave much room in here," said Sheridan to Cole.

"It'll have to do. Beggars can't be choosers," replied Cole. "Sir, did they issue you an M5 before you boarded?"

Sheridan shook his head. "No, I only have my pistol with me."

"Not to worry, you'll get one soon enough."

For the rest of the day Cole put the Marines through their paces. Teaching them to shoot instinctively, he drilled them for hours building muscle memory, so they could swiftly react and engage a target without having to aim. He kept stressing that technology had made weapons lighter and more lethal over the years with the ability to reach out and kill someone at over eight hundred meters. However, most engagements took place at fifty meters or less. The person who got off the first shot was, usually, the one left standing when the dust settled.

Sheridan stood back, quietly observing the soldiers. They were a mix of people from all over the planet. Slavic accents mixed with North American, English, German, and Chinese. Of the thirty Marines, four were women. They looked as equally tough and capable as their male counterparts did. The one constant was their age. He doubted that there was anyone over nineteen years old. If they were green and inexperienced, they didn't show it. If anything, he thought they were acting a bit too overconfident.

Over the next three days, Sheridan attended all of the training sessions put on by Staff Sergeant Cole. He gradually got a better understanding of the man and his experiences. While he was reticent to talk about his personal life, Cole told him that he had been a Marine fresh out of boot camp when rebels on Setius-5 tried to take power in a violent coup. For ten months, Cole and his fellow Marines were engaged in a deadly counterinsurgency campaign to defeat the rebel forces. When it was over, one thousand Marines and ten times as many civilians had lost their lives.

After a late supper, Sheridan turned in for the night. He was growing anxious to get off the ship and get on with his job. His bitterness at not being posted to the First Div had somewhat faded. Still, in the back of his mind, he was hesitant to believe everything that Cole told him about his time with the division. Before turning off his bedside light, Sheridan opened up his tablet and reviewed the latest fleet intelligence report on the Kurgan Empire.

The Kurgans are a race of highly intelligent and aggressive reptiles. Their technology is on par with Earth's. Their society and culture are as old as the human race. They are highly religious and believe that spreading the word of their Lord is the purpose for which they were created. Fanatical, Kurgans have never allowed themselves to be captured, preferring death to the dishonor of being a prisoner. The only prisoners ever taken were those incapacitated in combat and unable to commit suicide.

Their society is ruled by a hereditary ruler on their home world. Like the ancient Roman Empire, after they defeat an enemy, they bring them into the Empire and give them citizenship. Although Kurgans make up more than ninety percent of the Empire's population, they are also reputed to have large insect-like creatures as members of their far-flung territory.

Sheridan studied a picture of their adversary. It was a 3D image of a Kurgan warrior. He stood two and a half meters tall with reddish-brown leathery skin. He had a short snout and golden yellow eyes. His body was covered with armor from the bottom of his feet all the way up to his neck.

Although no one had seen a Kurgan in nearly a century, fleet assessed that their military and social structure had not changed much, and if anything, they had become more fervent in their religious beliefs.

Fatigue soon took hold of Sheridan. He turned off his light and closed down the briefing. An image of Tarina smiling filled the screen. He smiled back. Vowing to never listen to his mother ever again, Sheridan hoped that he and Tarina would someday cross paths and that he could make up for his past behavior. He knew the chances of them seeing one another in the vast reaches of space were slim. However, slim was better than nothing, he told himself before

turning off his computer and closing his eyes for what he expected to be his last good night's sleep in a long time.

Chapter 4

Sheridan shot up wide-awake. His heart was racing away in his chest. Sweat covered his body, soaking his sheets. He looked about and saw that he was in his darkened room on board the *Churchill*.

He got out of bed, flipped on a light, walked over to the sink, and turned on the water. Sheridan waited until the water was good and cold before splashing some on his face. He took a couple of deep breaths to calm his wildly beating heart.

It was always the same nightmare. He was on a planet he didn't recognize, lying trapped and helpless when a darkened shape appeared out of the fog. It was a Kurgan Warrior. Without making a sound, it walked toward him. Sheridan tried to pull his trapped legs free, but it was no good, he was going nowhere. His weapon lay just out of reach. The Kurgan stopped and looked down at him. It seemed to be studying him. Instead of finishing him off with its assault rifle, the warrior knelt down, grabbed Sheridan and twisted his head up. Baring its razor sharp teeth, the Kurgan brought its mouth down on his face. Blood dripped down Sheridan's face as he was eaten alive.

He had never read of Kurgans eating their prisoners, but it was the same horrible dream he had been having since he was a child. Shaking his head to clear the troubling images from his mind, Sheridan looked back at his bed. He knew he would never get back to sleep, not now. He checked his watch and saw that it was nearing three in the morning. He threw on his fatigues and decided to go for a run through the ship's corridors.

There was an unexpected knock on his door.

"Sir, sir, are you awake in there?" asked Cole

Sheridan told him to enter.

"Sir, did I wake you up?" queried Cole.

"No, I was already awake. I was just about to go for a run," answered Sheridan, telling a half-truth.

"Sir, the captain called. She wants us up on the bridge right away."

Sheridan instantly grew curious. "Did she say why?"

"No, and I didn't ask. The tone of her voice told me it was important."

A minute later, they walked onto the bridge and were met by Captain Lefol, who took them over to the communications console. "Gentlemen, listen," she said as she opened up a comms channel. A twenty-year veteran with the fleet,

Lefol had reddish-blond hair and light blue eyes. She was short and lean, but projected a confident air about her. Anyone who met her instantly could tell that she knew her business.

An automated voice came over the speaker. "This is the freighter *California*, we have struck a mine and have suffered heavy losses; I say again, we have struck a mine and are in need of assistance. Please come at once."

"Ma'am, is that all you've received?" asked Cole.

"Yes, it repeats itself every ten seconds," explained Lefol, her accent French. "We have tried to reach the *California* on all the usual channels. Nothing! Not a single word in reply. This can only mean that they are unable to respond for whatever reason, or they are being jammed by the enemy."

Sheridan asked, "Ma'am, shouldn't she have been in a convoy? Where are the other ships?"

"That's a good question. According to my records, the vessel was part of a small convoy led by the frigate *Orion*."

Cole asked, "Ma'am, do you know what the *California* was transporting?"

"Yes, air-defense batteries for Illum Prime," she replied gravely.

"Jesus," muttered Cole.

Lefol said, "I think it is safe to assume the convoy was attacked and probably destroyed. We should also assume that our forces on Illum Prime are also under attack, perhaps even overrun by the enemy."

"But we're still light years from the Disputed Zone," declared Sheridan.

"It must have been part of a coordinated series of deep strikes designed to eliminate the reinforcements and logistics needed to defend the border," explained Lefol. "It's a smart move and one that we would have done if we had struck first."

"Ma'am, what do you intend to do?" asked Sheridan.

"We're not a combat vessel. We wouldn't last five minutes against a Kurgan destroyer if we bumped into one. First, I want to see if there are any survivors on board the *California*. After that, we are going to jump behind one of Illum Prime's moons and see what is happening. If the Kurgans are there, we'll jump back to the nearest colony and warn them that the Kurgans are already this deep into our space."

"Ma'am, if we're not needed anymore, Mister Sheridan and I will get our Marines prepped and ready for battle," said Cole.

"That would be prudent," responded Lefol. "I'll let you know the instant we rendezvous with the *California*."

"Ma'am," said Sheridan and Cole in unison.

They left the bridge and walked back to the cramped quarters where the

young Marines were sleeping.

Sheridan left Cole to roust up the soldiers while he went back to his room to grab his gear. The instant the door slid closed behind him, Sheridan fought off a wave of nausea in his stomach. He had trained for years to lead men into combat; now faced with the prospect of people fighting and dying under his command, his mind was filled with doubt. He was an untried leader about to take a platoon of inexperienced Marines with only one NCO into battle. He dug into his rucksack until he found his helmet, ballistic glasses, gloves, tactical vest, and thin bags of liquid body armor. He placed the lightweight armor into pouches on his trousers and shirt to protect him from small arms fire and blast fragments. Made from a shear-thickening liquid, the armor remained a liquid until struck, at which time in less than a millisecond it hardened, protecting the person from grievous bodily harm.

Before he left his room, Sheridan loaded a magazine into his pistol and slipped it into the holster on his vest. Not sure what lay ahead, he grabbed four extra twenty-round magazines, just to be safe. With his helmet under his arm, he stepped out into the hallway. He could hear the sound of Cole's deep voice yelling at the young Marines to get dressed.

The instant Sheridan stepped into the hangar Cole walked over to Sheridan and handed him an M5 rifle and ten mags. "Sir, I broke into one of the supply boxes and stole us a couple of rifles," explained Cole. "I think we're gonna need these before the day is out."

Sheridan looked down at the weapon in his hand. "Yeah, you may be right."

"Sir, if Captain Lefol is right, and I bet she is, then Illum Prime is gone. We'll be lucky if we survive the next few hours to warn the other colonies that they are in danger."

Sheridan didn't reply. He stood there and watched Cole as he turned on a dime and cursed up a storm at some of the Marines who weren't moving fast enough for his liking. It all seemed to be happening in a blur.

The ship's jump engine switched off. In the blink of an eye, the ship dropped out of faster than light travel and came to an almost dead stop five hundred meters from the *California*. It was obvious that the freighter had been hit. Jagged holes covered the side of the vessel where enemy missiles had penetrated the hull. Debris and bodies littered the space around the stricken vessel. Worse than that, the remainder of the convoy, including the frigate assigned to defend it, had also been destroyed. Less than a minute later, Lefol hailed Sheridan and Cole to meet her in the ship's briefing room.

Sheridan and Cole in full fighting order walked into the briefing room. On

the wall was a 3D tactical display showing the destroyed convoy.

“Jesus,” muttered Cole as he studied the wreckage.

Lefol walked over beside the two Marines. “The only life sign we have been able to detect is coming from the *California*. It looks like someone is still alive in the medical bay. It’s weak, but it’s evidence that someone survived the attack. The ship has totally depressurized so whoever is over there must be in a survival suit.”

Sheridan looked at the *California* floating dead in space. He could see that the main air lock doors commonly used for boarding the vessel had been destroyed. If they were going to board her, it would have to be through another entrance.

“I can see by the look on your face that you have noticed that we can’t dock with the *California*,” said Lefol to Sheridan.

“Looks like we’re going for a spacewalk,” observed Cole.

“Ma’am, what are your orders?” asked Sheridan.

“I want you to board the *California* and help whoever is trapped over there. I also want you to download her computer logs. Fleet Headquarters is going to need to know what has happened, and I want to know what we are up against before we jump to Illum Prime.”

“And if the Kurgans return while we’re over there?” asked Cole.

“Then you’re on your own,” replied Lefol. “I won’t risk this ship and the supplies she is carrying to save you.”

“Understood, ma’am.”

Cole may have understood. Sheridan, however, was still having a hard time wrapping his head around the fact that he wasn’t in training anymore and that he was at war.

“Gents, we can’t afford to waste time. You have one hour to get over there ASAP, find what you are looking for and get back to the *Churchill*, or I will leave you behind.”

Sheridan and Cole came to attention, turned and left the room.

“Sir, how are you in zero gravity environments?” asked Cole.

“Sergeant, if you’re wondering if I get sick, the answer is no. At the academy, I was the top of my class in zero gravity combat training.”

Cole stopped in the hallway, looked both ways to check that they were alone, and then looked Sheridan straight in the eyes. “Sir, you need to lose three words from your vocabulary.”

“What might those be, Sergeant?” replied Sheridan defensively.

“‘At the academy.’ Those words show that you have zero experience and are used by every platoon leader that I have ever come across. Flush them from your

mind and you'll sound more knowledgeable when talking with your men."

"Well then, Sergeant, what should I have said?"

"Sir, all you needed to say was you don't get sick. Look, I know you think that I am being overly critical, but you need to understand that there isn't time to bring you along and inculcate you into being a platoon leader. Your time is now. You're in command and the Marines you are about to lead over to the *California* need to know that you know your job."

Sheridan was about to push back but realized that he was wasting time, and Cole may have a point. Instead, he asked a question. "Sergeant, how long do you think it will take us to suit up, move over to the *California*, do everything Captain Lefol wants done and get back here?"

"It's going to be tight. However, the only two people who need to get ready are you and me. I figured this might happen so I ordered eight Marines to don their suits while we're gone."

Sheridan realized that he should have thought about that himself. Cole's depth of experience and his lack of any was beginning to show. "Good thinking, Sergeant."

"I thought so," replied Cole with a grin. "Come on, sir, they pay me to worry about the little things. Now, let's get to work."

Fifteen minutes later, Sheridan, Cole, and the eight handpicked Marines stepped into the airlock and waited for it to depressurize. Their spacesuits were light gray in color. Each soldier was wearing a maneuver unit on their back to help propel them through the vacuum of space. With thirty nozzles at different locations on the unit, it was easy for a person in zero gravity to effortlessly move in any direction. At twenty-five meters per second velocity, it was going to take them twenty seconds to reach the closed airlock on the side of the destroyed ship.

The light inside the room changed from white to red. The artificial gravity turned off. The maneuver units automatically switched on and kept everyone in place. A second later the doors leading out into space slid open.

Sheridan paused briefly. He had spent countless hours learning how to fly in the weightlessness of space; however, that had been in a training environment where it was impossible to get hurt unless he really screwed up. Now Sheridan was about to lead Marines into the unknown. Taking a deep breath to calm the butterflies in his stomach, he gently pressed down on a button on one the maneuver unit's arms. He moved out of the airlock and was closely followed by his soldiers, with Staff Sergeant Cole bringing up the rear. The debris field around the *California* was thicker and more hazardous than Sheridan had expected. Knowing that any puncture in his suit could lead to a loss of oxygen

and death, Sheridan slowed his thrusters and began to deftly fly his way around the larger pieces of wreckage. His skin crawled when he saw part of a mangled body float by.

His heart started to race. His breathing sped up. Sheridan tried to focus on the job at hand so he wouldn't dwell upon the fact that he had never been so scared in his life. A voice came over the suit's intercom in his helmet. It was Cole. "Sir, slow down a bit, one of the men back here got his foot tangled in some debris."

Effortlessly pivoting around, Sheridan saw Cole pulling a Marine's foot free from some wires that were attached to a piece of the blasted-out bulkhead. When the man was free, Sheridan turned about and headed straight for the air lock. When he was about five meters from the ship, he came to a complete stop. He floated off to one side of the door while one of the Marines moved over and inserted a universal key to manually unlock the doors. Without power, the entrance remained closed. Sheridan maneuvered over and helped one of the other Marines pull the doors apart. He swore loudly when a burnt body shot out of the entrance, nearly hitting him. His heart jackhammered away in his chest. A hand reached over and pushed the body away. Sheridan saw Cole. He was calmly looking at him. With a reassuring nod, Cole told Sheridan that he was doing okay. Taking a deep breath, Sheridan turned on the lights mounted on his helmet and peered inside. Another door leading inside the ship was closed. "Open it," Sheridan ordered.

Two soldiers along with the man with the key flew past Sheridan and Cole and opened the interior doors. It was dark and foreboding. As Sheridan had expected, the ship was dead.

"Okay, we'll split up here," announced Sheridan, trying to sound as confident as he could. "Staff Sergeant Cole with Alpha Team will proceed to the bridge and download the logs while Bravo Team and I locate the life sign."

Cole stressed, "Everyone RV back here in twenty minutes or you're staying here."

"See you in twenty, Sergeant," said Sheridan to Cole as he pressed a button on his maneuver unit and moved into the blackened corridor. It was as inviting as a crypt. The four men from Bravo Team followed close behind, their lights illuminating the way.

The interior of the ship was a complete mess. Anything not bolted down to the floor now floated free. Coffee cups, papers, books, and personal items all hung there as if waiting for the crew of the stricken vessel to return and reclaim their possessions.

Sheridan stopped for a moment to study the ship's layout on a small screen

attached to the arm of his maneuver unit. “This way,” he said turning down a side corridor. As his light lit the way, his heart jumped up into his throat. Floating wide-eyed was a corpse. Her arms were outstretched as if reaching for Sheridan. Her long blonde hair hung around her face. The temperature inside the vessel was several hundred degrees below freezing. Her body was frozen solid.

“Shit,” said one of the Marines behind Sheridan.

“She probably won’t be the last one we see in here,” said Sheridan. “Come on, we’ve got a job to do.” With that, he gently pushed the body aside and continued down the hallway.

As predicted, Sheridan was right. They found four more corpses before they arrived at the doorway to the medical room. He stopped by the door, dug out a small speaker from a pocket on his suit, and placed it on the entrance. He keyed his mic and said, “Hello inside the medical room, my name is Second Lieutenant Sheridan, are you alright?”

Silence.

Sheridan repeated his message.

“Maybe we’re too late,” said one of the Marines.

“Open the door,” ordered Sheridan.

As before, the Marine using a universal key unlocked the doors while two soldiers pried them apart.

Sheridan was first inside. In the dark, a horrible sight met his eyes. At least a dozen injured men and women, who had been in the medical room when the ship decompressed, floated about the room. A cold shiver ran up his spine.

“There’s supposed to be someone alive in here,” said Sheridan. “Spread out and try to find someone in a med tube or survival suit.”

Pushing the bodies aside as he moved to the back of the room, Sheridan felt his stomach turn. He had to force his mind to block out the images of the ghost-like bodies hovering everywhere.

“Sir . . . sir, I think I found a survivor!” called out a Marine.

Pivoting about, Sheridan moved over to the soldier. He was right. Tethered to a bed was a man inside a survival suit. Sheridan quickly checked over his vitals and saw that the man was stable but unconscious.

“Let’s take him,” said Sheridan to the two nearest Marines.

After a quick check of the room, they realized that they had found the sole survivor of the *California*.

Sheridan keyed his mic and told Cole that they were on their way back to the airlock. Captain Lefol, who had been listening in, acknowledged the message.

Five minutes later, Sheridan’s team met up with Cole and his people.

Happy to be leaving the dead ship behind him, Sheridan pushed the button for his maneuver unit's thrusters and headed back out into space.

The instant that they stepped back inside the *Churchill's* airlock and closed the door behind them, the ship's jump engine kicked in, blasting them away from the wreckage. A pair of medical corpsmen waited for them on the other side of the doors. After handing off the unconscious man to the medics, Sheridan, Cole, and the rest of the Marines moved inside and stripped off their suits.

Sheridan's clothes clung to his sweat-covered body. He grabbed a towel and wiped the sweat from his face. With a heavy sigh, Sheridan sat down and looked at his hands and saw they were shaking.

"It's okay, it's just the adrenaline leaving your system," said Cole as he took a seat beside Sheridan. "It happens to all of us."

Sheridan glanced over and saw that Cole's hands were as steady as a rock. "You're not shaking."

"I've learned to deal with it, doesn't mean I wasn't scared."

Sheridan made sure that none of the Marines could hear him. Quietly, he said, "I'd never seen a dead body before today. It's not something they prepare you for at the academy."

Cole nodded. "There's plenty they don't prepare you for. Wait until it's one of your own men. Trust me, it's an awful feeling you never really get over."

Sheridan shuddered. He decided to change the topic. "Did you get what the captain was after?"

"I sure did. Sir, did the man you found have any ID on him?"

"None that I could see."

Cole slapped Sheridan on the back. "Come on, sir, let's get changed and go see the captain."

Chapter 5

With less than two hours to go before they arrived at their destination, Captain Lefol studied the computer logs downloaded from the *California*. The attack on the convoy had been carried out with surgical precision. First, the freighter had struck a cloaked mine, disabling her engines. When the frigate *Orion* stopped the convoy to allow the crippled vessel to make repairs, they were hit by a Kurgan raiding party. Once the *Orion* was taken out of action, the remainder of the ships in the convoy were picked off one by one as they tried to escape. She made a note to inform her superiors to abandon any ship that couldn't keep up with the others from now on. It was a cold move, but one she knew would guarantee a greater chance of survival for the others.

After handing over the bridge to her first officer, Lefol headed down to the medical bay to check on the patient brought over from the *California*. She found the ship's doctor checking the sleeping man's vitals.

"How is he doing?" she asked the doctor.

"He'll live," replied the doctor, a dumpy, redheaded man with a strong Scottish accent.

"Did you find any identification on him?"

The doctor handed her the man's ID discs.

"Tartov," said Lefol as she read the man's discs. "Is he in the fleet medical database?"

"Yes, he's listed as a Petty Officer Third Class. He has no history of ill health. Unless he changed jobs recently, he's a computer technician."

"Do you think he'll be coming around soon?"

The doctor shook his head. "He's got enough drugs in him to knock out a horse. He'll be out for at least another twelve to twenty-four hours."

Lefol bit her lip. She'd hoped the man would be up well before that. They were heading into a dangerous situation, and she needed answers. "Okay, thanks, Doc. Please let me know the instant he wakes up. I have a few questions I'd like him to answer."

"Can do. Is there anything else I can help you with, Captain?"

Lefol shook her head and left the room. Finding survivors on stricken ships was not unheard of. What dug at her was the fact that he was the only one wearing a survival suit when the ship was attacked. She couldn't believe that it was just a coincidence. There was more to the story than anyone knew and that

bothered her.

In the mess hall, Sheridan and Cole sat silently at their table eating a light meal of soup and sandwiches. The usual loud banter between the young Marines had evaporated. After returning to the ship, the Marines who had ventured over to the *California* came back with tales of horror and devastation. The brutal reality of war had just begun to sink in.

“Sir, shall I have the men ready for action when we arrive at Illum Prime?” asked Cole.

Sheridan nodded. He knew that Cole would have given the order anyway; he knew that it was his way of easing him into giving the orders. “Sergeant, since we don’t have a medic with us I’d like a couple of medical packs given to the troops who scored the highest on their combat first aid in training. I’d feel better knowing that we had the med kits with us just in case we need them.”

Cole looked over at the Marines and called out, “Simons, Garcia, draw a med pack each and carry it with you from now on.”

“Yes, Sergeant,” replied both Marines.

Sheridan said, “Sergeant, you picked two women.”

“Sex has nothing to do with it, sir. You wanted the best, and those two Marines are the best combat first aiders we have.”

Sheridan placed his spoon down and looked over at Cole. “Sergeant, a couple of hours ago you said that we’d be lucky to live out the day. Do you still feel that way?”

“Yeah, I do. It’s obvious that the Kurgans have been planning this for years. These strikes deep into our territory are a prelude to an all-out invasion. Illum Prime would make a great staging base for someone planning to take our outer colonies or some of the resource planets. When we arrive in orbit, trust me, we’re going to find a Kurgan Fleet waiting there.”

Sheridan sat there for a second, not sure what to say. Everything Cole said made perfect sense. “If the Kurgans are already at Illum Prime, then why is the captain insisting that we go there?”

“She probably has standing orders that state in the event of war that she must reconnoiter the planet and report what is happening. Sir, you must have studied the last Kurgan War in the academy. What is the first thing the Kurgans would do if they were attacking Illum Prime?”

“They would knock out all of the planet’s satellites, blinding it and making it unable to communicate with anyone in the fleet.”

“Precisely. They can’t send a distress message, so that’s why she has to take a look in order to determine if the planet is under attack.”

“Jesus,” mumbled Sheridan. “There has to be a better way of doing that.”
“If there is, I’m sure the captain would be delighted to hear about it.”

Two hours later, the jump engine switched off and the *Churchill* came to a sudden stop behind the largest of Illum Prime’s four moons. On the bridge, Captain Lefol ordered the ship’s sensor suite to be turned from active to passive. She didn’t want the Kurgans, if they were in orbit, to realize that they were being scanned. A small probe was launched so Lefol could get a better picture of what was happening on the other side of the moon. The ship’s navigator and helmsman hurriedly computed their escape trajectory should they need to make an emergency jump back to the nearest colony.

“Ma’am, I’m getting a coded message from Fleet Headquarters,” reported the communications officer.

“How old is it?”

“Three days, Captain.”

“Damn,” muttered Lefol under her breath. “I hope this wasn’t for nothing. Decode it and hand it to me immediately.”

On the tactical screen, the image of the probe appeared. Lefol and everyone else held their breath and watched intently as it flew over the top of the large moon they were using for cover. Lefol was counting on the probe giving off such a small signature that the Kurgans would miss it if they were in orbit.

A couple of seconds later, her worst nightmare was realized when a force of at least one hundred Kurgan ships orbiting the planet came up on the screen. Worse still, the wreckage of several Terran warships floated in space. Kurgan vessels, ranging from a large fighter carrier to dozens of troop transports, had converged to a position directly above Illum Prime’s main city. Lefol clenched her jaw when she saw hundreds of troop shuttles entering the atmosphere. The invasion had begun.

Illum Prime was on its own.

“Do you have all this?” Lefol asked her first officer.

“Yes, ma’am,” replied the man.

Suddenly, an alarm sounded throughout the ship.

A computer voice proclaimed loudly, “Warning, incoming missile fire. I say again, incoming missile fire. All hands brace for impact.”

Lefol swore. “Where are they?”

“Two anti-ship missiles coming in from the port side, time to impact fifteen seconds,” announced the weapons officer. With their sensor array turned off they had failed to detect a Kurgan fighter closing in on them.

“Time to jump?” Lefol asked her navigator.

“Ten seconds,” she replied, counting down the time.

“Damn, this is going to be close.”

With one eye on the incoming missiles and the other on the jump clock, Lefol said a silent prayer. A ship her size didn't have the power to generate a defensive shield like the big capital ships could. If they were hit before they jumped, they were doomed.

“Making the jump now,” calmly announced her helmsman as he depressed a button on his console.

The sound of the ship's engines kicking in had never sounded sweeter to Lefol's ears. In the blink of an eye, they jumped away from Illum Prime. Behind them, the Kurgan missiles streaked through the empty space where the *Churchill* had been a mere second ago.

“God damn it, she's gonna get us all killed!” shouted out a tall, black-haired Marine as the klaxon alarm blared.

In an instant, Cole stepped over to the soldier, grabbed him by the collar and looked into his frightened eyes. “At ease, Obermman, she's doing her job.”

The air in the room grew tense as Cole stared down the tall Marine.

Obermman stared wide-eyed at Cole. The threatening look in the sergeant's eyes told him to back down and shut up.

Cole let go of the soldier's collar and pushed him back toward his friends.

Scared and shaking all over, the Marine stepped back and looked down at the floor.

“That goes for all of you,” warned Cole. “The captain knows what she's doing. We're at war. You had better get used to the fact that the enemy is going to try and kill you.”

The alarm switched off.

Silence filled the Marines' quarters as they looked around at one another. Dread filled the room.

Cole said, “Prep your gear. There's going to be a platoon leader's inspection in one hour, and there'll be hell to pay if he picks anything up. Worry about me, not the Kurgans.”

It was a temporary measure to get the Marines' minds focused on something other than the enemy. Cole knew it was only a stopgap measure. The sooner they arrived where they were going, the better. The problem was he had no idea where they were now heading.

While the soldiers got themselves ready, Sheridan and Cole were invited to the captain's briefing room for an update. All of the senior officers and naval

ratings were present. An image of the current region of space was displayed on a monitor behind the ship's first officer.

Lefol kicked off the meeting. "As you are all undoubtedly aware Illum Prime is under attack by Kurgan forces. If it isn't already, it will soon be under Kurgan occupation. As we did not detect any radiation in the atmosphere, I think it is safe to assume that nukes weren't used, which means that the Kurgans want the planet's infrastructure for themselves. What you are unaware of is that I have received orders to fall back to Derra-5 to drop off our combat supplies and Marines there. Fleet assess that the next planet the Kurgans will attempt to take in our sector will be Derra-5."

The image of an Earth-like planet came up on the screen. There were three major settlements on the planet, all of which were in the northern hemisphere. Sheridan noted that Derra-5 was about to enter its winter period.

"Ma'am, which unit is based on Derra-5?" asked Sheridan.

Lefol looked over at her first officer.

"It's the home station for the Third Regiment, Eighteenth Division. However, men and equipment from all over this sector are being directed to Derra-5 to bolster its defenses," explained the first officer.

"Time to Derra-5?" Lefol asked her navigator.

"Ma'am, at our current speed, we should arrive there in just under thirty-eight hours," replied the navigator.

"I have had the information from the probe sent to Fleet Headquarters, but it is doubtful that it will get there before we jump into orbit above Derra-5. Hopefully, we'll get a better reception there than we did at Illum Prime."

A nervous chuckle ran through the room.

"Okay then, I want a complete inspection of the ship's systems before we arrive at Derra-5. I don't want something important to crap out just when we need it," stressed Lefol. "All this jumping back and forth through space has been putting a strain on the *Churchill* and its limited fuel supply. People, don't forget that we were slated for a month-long stay in dry-dock before the Kurgans attacked. I expect everyone to pull double shifts if they have to. I want us shipshape and ready for anything. Am I understood?"

"Aye, aye, ma'am," replied her crew.

"Good, now get to it. I'll expect regular updates to be provided to the first officer."

The meeting ended.

Sheridan stood and walked over to the monitor and studied the image of Derra-5. Moving his hand along the screen, he brought up pictures of the fauna and flora of the planet. It reminded him of northern Europe. Memorizing

everything he could about the three major settlements and the planet's defenses, Sheridan knew that they were in for a desperate fight. The Third Regiment was spread between the cities, meaning that only a battalion of about eight hundred men was available to defend each town. With winter fast approaching, the Kurgans, who came from a dry, hot world, would want to quickly seize the cities intact. Unless the fleet dispatched substantial reinforcements, Sheridan knew that they didn't stand a chance. The best they could do was delay the enemy, giving the fleet an opportunity to gather its forces for a concerted counterattack.

Chapter 6

Sheridan looked out at the faces of the apprehensive soldiers sitting in the mess hall. He turned on a large wall-mounted screen and brought up a picture of their next destination. “Marines, I won’t lie to you. We’re being ordered to Derra-5 so we can buy time for the fleet to mobilize. Don’t be under any illusion; the chances of any of us coming out of this alive are almost non-existent.”

A young soldier put up his hand. “Sir, so this is kinda like the Alamo?”

Sheridan grinned. “Yeah, you might say that.”

“But everyone died there,” glumly added Garcia, a slender Hispanic woman with short jet-black hair.

“We won’t be alone. Units and equipment from all over this sector are being rushed to Derra-5. By the time we arrive, there could be substantial reinforcements there. However, if history has taught us anything, plan for the worst and pray that you’re wrong.”

“Sir, what unit is based there?” asked a blonde-haired Marine with a thick Nordic accent.

“Derra-5 is home to the Third Regiment, Eighteenth Division. However, with men and material coming from all over, I couldn’t even hazard a guess who we’ll end up serving under.”

“A Marine unit is a Marine unit,” added Cole philosophically. “One is as good as another. Just remember your training and you’ll be okay.”

“Thanks, Sergeant,” said Sheridan. “Are there any more questions?”

The room was silent.

With a loud clap of his hands, Cole broke the silence. “Okay, Marines, we still have an inspection in thirty minutes. Get to it.”

Sheridan and Cole left the room.

Garcia walked over to a tall, muscle-bound, blonde-haired Marine. “So, Agnar, still happy you decided to join the Marines?”

With a broad grin, he said, “Yeah, we all got to die sometime.”

“Frigging Vikings,” muttered Garcia as she walked over to her combat gear and started to get it ready for inspection.

Halfway through the inspection Lefol’s voice came over the ship’s intercom asking Sheridan and Cole to meet her in the medical bay. When they arrived,

Lefol was standing beside a bed. Sitting with his feet hanging down over the side of the bed was Tartov, the man Sheridan had found in the *California*. He was busy chugging down a tall plastic cup of water. He was short and pudgy with thick glasses perched on his bulbous nose.

Lefol said, "Gents, I'd like you two to meet Petty Officer Third Class Peter Tartov."

Tartov stopped drinking and looked over at the two Marines. "I hear that I owe you my life."

"It was Second Lieutenant Sheridan who found you," clarified Cole.

"Thanks, sir," said Tartov, nodding at Sheridan.

"Just doing my job," replied Sheridan.

"Well, sir, I'm glad you guys came by when you did. If you hadn't my air would have run out ages ago, and I'd be as dead as everyone on my ship."

Lefol said, "It was quite fortuitous that you were in a survival suit when your vessel was hit. What were you doing prior to the attack?"

"I'd been working on the computer relays near the jump engine, ma'am. Captain Marcus' SOP was for anyone working near the engines to wear a survival suit in case there were an accident and radiation leaked from the engine. I'm not a big fan of enclosed spaces. I probably panicked, hyperventilated, and passed out. The men working with me must have found me and taken me to sick bay just before the *California* was hit . . ." Tartov's voice trailed off. "I can't believe they're all gone."

"Be thankful you're still alive," stressed Lefol.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Okay, visiting hours are over," announced the ship's doctor gruffly. "PO Tartov needs his rest."

Lefol, Sheridan, and Cole left the room and stepped out into the hallway.

"Do you believe him?" Lefol asked the two soldiers.

Cole shrugged his shoulders.

"I've met people who are deathly afraid of enclosed spaces, so he could be telling the truth," answered Sheridan.

"I don't know," said Lefol. "The doc said he was heavily drugged up. Why would he need sedation if he'd already passed out?"

Cole's eyes narrowed as he looked back at the closed med bay door. "I take it you don't trust him, Captain."

"At this moment, I'm not sure I trust you two."

With less than an hour to go until the *Churchill* arrived in orbit above Derra-5, Lefol was growing concerned that there had been no communications from

the planet. If there were other vessels from the fleet ferrying men and equipment there, the comms channels would be filled with traffic.

So far, nothing.

She didn't like it one bit. It was too much like the situation with the *California*. Lefol was beginning to suspect that the Kurgans were jamming the frequencies when her communications officer announced that she had Derra-5 on a secure channel.

"On speaker," said Lefol.

"Go ahead, ma'am," said the communications officer.

"Derra-5 Operations, this is Captain Lefol of the *Churchill*, how do you read me?"

"We read you loud and clear, *Churchill*," replied a man's voice over the ship's speaker.

"We are inbound with men and materials. What is the tactical situation there?"

"It's all quiet for the moment. Kurgan fighters have probed the outer defenses twice in the past day and a half. All were engaged and destroyed by our fighters flying combat patrol over the fleet."

Lefol's eyes lit up. "Derra-5, did you say fleet?"

"Roger that, most of the Fourth Fleet is in our sector."

"That's good news," replied Lefol.

"Sure is, *Churchill*. Please come out of your jump above the capital. Exact coordinates are being relayed to your ship's navigational computer. Shuttlecraft are on standby to ferry your Marines and material down to the surface."

"Derra-5, we will arrive at your location," Lefol looked over at the screen to check the flight time, "in fifty-three minutes." Lefol asked her comms officer to end the call but continue to monitor the channel for further instructions.

Looking over at her first officer, Lefol pensively shook her head.

He moved over beside her. In a voice barely above a whisper, he said, "What are you thinking, Captain?"

"This doesn't feel right. The orders I received from Fleet Headquarters never mentioned the Fourth Fleet moving to assist Derra-5."

"Perhaps the orders changed after we received them? We're still playing catch up with our deep space communications. This wouldn't be the first time that we were the last to know about something going on."

Lefol nodded. "Yeah, things are usually quite confused when you're in contact with the enemy."

"Shall I have the ship go to Yellow Alert just to be on the safe side?"

"Yes, and tell Mister Sheridan that I want Marines placed outside of the

engine room, armory, and the bridge until we arrive at Derra-5. I don't want any surprises." Looking back at the tactical display, Lefol began to wonder if she had waited too long to order added security placed at the vital areas of the ship. *Time would tell*, she thought to herself. The only problem was that there wasn't much time left before they arrived.

Chapter 7

Sheridan and Cole waited in the cargo bay with the remainder of the Marines. All of their personal gear and equipment was piled neatly on the floor, ready to transfer over to the first shuttle that would dock alongside the *Churchill*. While most of the soldiers relaxed, Sheridan and Cole stood at the back of the packed room discussing what was about to happen next. They expected to be scattered to the four winds, going wherever they were needed. Sheridan had lost his initial concerns and had grown to trust and respect Cole's experience and advice. He intended to ask whoever was in charge of the replacement pool to ensure that they stayed together. With a Kurgan attack coming, he didn't want to go into battle with someone he didn't know.

"Well, sir, I guess this is it," said Cole, looking over at a couple of soldiers tossing a football back and forth.

"Yeah, I suppose it is," replied Sheridan.

"Whatever happens next, trust your men to do their jobs and no matter what, you have to be the one to make the decisions. Listen to the counsel of your NCOs, but when all is done, you're the one in charge. That's why you wear that gold bar."

"I never thought it would be this way. I always imagined being posted to the First Division and being a platoon leader somewhere in Earth's solar system. Now less than a week out of the academy, I'm light years away from home and about to land on a planet that is about to be pounded into rubble."

"Yeah, those poor schmucks in the First Div don't know what they're missing," said Cole, grinning.

A voice boomed over the ship's intercom. "Second Lieutenant Sheridan, please report to the armory."

Sheridan glanced down at his watch; they were due to arrive at Derra-5 in less than five minutes' time. "What the hell?"

"Come on, sir, let's stretch our legs one last time," Cole said, standing up.

A minute later, they stood outside of the armory. Garcia and Agnar were on duty. On the floor, sitting with his hands on top of his head, was Tartov.

"What's going on here?" asked Sheridan.

Garcia said, "Sir, PO Tartov tried to gain access to the armory. When we told him it was out of bounds, he became agitated and insisted that we let him inside. He tried pulling rank, but Sergeant Cole's orders were quite specific: no

one other than an officer was to be granted access to the room.”

“When I said no, he struck me,” added Agnar.

“Dumb move,” observed Cole.

“What happened next?” asked Sheridan.

“Sir, he left me no recourse, so I struck the PO and then forced him to sit on the floor. I would have cuffed him, but we don’t have any.”

Sheridan could see a shiner beginning to fill in just under Tartov’s right eye. “What have you got to say for yourself, PO?”

Tartov looked down at the floor.

“Hey, the officer asked you a question!” snapped Cole.

Tartov didn’t respond.

“Pick him up,” Cole ordered Agnar.

With as much effort as picking up a small sack of potatoes, Agnar lifted Tartov up and turned him to face Sheridan.

“PO, answer my question. Why do you want access to a restricted room?”

Tartov stammered, “Sir, you wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.”

“Sir, there was a saboteur onboard the *California*,” explained Tartov. “I lied when I told you that I passed out in the engine room. The truth is that I was found trying to steal a pistol to protect myself. When I wouldn’t come quietly, I was detained, sedated, and placed in a survival suit. I think they were going to put me in the zero gravity brig when the Kurgans attacked.”

“What made you believe that there was a Kurgan spy on your ship?” asked Cole.

“Sergeant, I’m a computer technician. A couple of days before we were attacked, I was running a backup on the ship’s computer files and found a couple of odd-looking messages hidden in some of the outgoing transmissions. When I took a closer look at the transmissions, I saw that they were our flight plan and the composition of the convoy. The kicker was the fact that the information was being sent out into space toward the Disputed Zone.”

“Did you tell the captain?” queried Sheridan.

“I did, and when the ship’s communications officer checked my findings, the messages weren’t there. It was as if they had been deliberately erased from the vessel’s databanks.”

“PO, why didn’t you tell any of us what happened?”

“How do I know you’re not a Kurgan spy?” responded Tartov.

“Sir, we need to tell the captain,” said Cole, ignoring the PO’s last comment.

“I agree,” replied Sheridan. “Garcia, remain at your post. Agnar, you can accompany us with the PO to the bridge.”

The mood on the bridge was tense. The countdown clock on the tactical screen displayed thirty seconds before their scheduled arrival above Derra-5.

“Anything new from the planet’s ops center?” Lefol asked her communications officer.

“No, ma’am, there’s just a lot of traffic from other ships jumping into orbit.”

Lefol looked over at her first officer. “Terry, by now we should see a ton of transponder signals on the screen. I don’t see any. What do the ship’s sensors say?”

“Ma’am, there’s nothing on my screen. It’s as if the area around Derra-5 is devoid of anything.”

Lefol’s gut told her to be wary. Something wasn’t right.

The navigator began to count down. “Ten-nine-eight . . .”

The comms officer turned in his seat and called out, “Ma’am, I’ve just lost Derra-5. We’re being jammed.”

“Seven-six-five . . .”

“Emergency course correction now!” yelled Lefol to the helmsman.

The order was given a second too late. Like a red wave rippling down the side of the ship, concealed explosives detonated, crippling the *Churchill*. The hull buckled and tore open. In the blink of an eye, the crew in the engine room were sucked out into the cold vacuum of space, as were all of the Marines still in the cargo bay. Smaller blasts crippled the jump engine and the ship’s communications array.

The *Churchill* came out of its jump. Alarms sounded throughout the ship.

Lefol’s heart skipped a beat when she saw a Kurgan armada bearing down on Derra-5. There wasn’t a single Terran warship on the screen. The *Churchill*, like many other vessels, had been lured to Derra-5 and mercilessly attacked as it arrived.

“Helmsman, report,” called out Lefol.

“Jump drive inoperative.”

“Sublight drive?”

“Still functional.”

A plan instantly jelled in Lefol’s mind. “Full speed ahead! Fly right through the bastards. Navigator, plot a course for the capital.”

“Ma’am, I’m showing multiple hull breaches,” reported the first officer. “If we enter the planet’s atmosphere there’s no guarantee that we won’t lose the ship.”

“Understood,” calmly replied Lefol. “We’ll go for as far as we can and then abandon ship.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” replied the first officer as the vessel raced straight toward the Kurgan blockade.

“Jesus, what was that?” asked Sheridan as the ship shuddered and then shrieked and moaned like a banshee.

“The hull’s been breached,” said Cole gravely.

“I told you,” cried Tartov.

Lefol’s voice came over the intercom. “All hands, this is the captain, prepare to abandon ship, I say again, prepare to abandon ship.”

Cole grabbed Sheridan by the arm. “Come on, sir, we’ve got to make it to the nearest escape pod before it’s too late.”

Sheridan hesitated. “What about the rest of our troops?”

“They know the drill. If they’re not already making their way to the pods, they never will.”

Together, Cole, Sheridan, Agnar, and their prisoner ran for their lives.

As Lefol had hoped, the sudden acceleration of the *Churchill* toward the Kurgans had confused the swarm of fighters hovering around the larger warships. Although her vessel lacked any offensive capability, it was equipped with a full suite of countermeasures. Using the front of the *Churchill* as a battering ram, Lefol ordered her helmsman to keep going regardless of what got in their way. Several Kurgan fighters were smashed to pieces when they failed to get out of the way of the charging ship.

Their luck was measured in seconds. As soon as the Kurgans recovered, a swarm of fighters, like sharks attracted to blood, dove after the stricken vessel.

With a loud jolt, the *Churchill* began to enter the atmosphere. Within seconds, the hull started to glow red from the intense heat of re-entry. Although more than capable of operating inside a planet’s atmosphere, the *Churchill* was severely crippled and would die soon. It was just a matter of when.

“Distance to the capital?” asked Lefol.

“Five thousand kilometers,” replied her helmsman.

“Keep together, baby, keep together,” said Lefol under her breath.

“Kurgan fighters on our tail. They’re locking missiles on us,” announced the first officer.

“Fire countermeasures,” ordered Lefol.

From pods all over the *Churchill*, chaff and super-heated flares shot out from the ship, hoping to confuse the incoming missiles.

A dozen missiles streaked through the sky toward the *Churchill*. Seven fell for the countermeasures, veered off and harmlessly detonated. However, five of

the deadly projectiles locked onto the hull of the doomed ship and kept coming.

“Engage ECM,” ordered Lefol.

The first officer depressed a button on his console. Instantly, the ship’s electronic countermeasures activated. Designed to block an incoming missile’s radar, the ECM created an electronic bubble around the *Churchill*. As they entered the bubble, one by one the missiles were jammed.

Lefol thought they were going to make it when she saw two missiles slip through the protective screen and continue to close with the ship.

“Launch the escape pods,” said Lefol firmly, knowing that no one on the bridge was going to make it off the ship alive.

“Aye, aye, ma’am,” responded the first officer. “Launching the escape pods, now!”

Sheridan had just buckled himself into his seat when he saw the door to the pod close. His heart began to race in his chest.

The craft was not even half-full. Garcia and one of *Churchill*’s crewmen had managed to join them with only seconds to spare.

A second later, the pod shot from the side of the doomed vessel. Hurtling to the ground, they would be vulnerable the whole way down. Built for survival, each craft could land via parachutes inside a planet’s atmosphere or could sustain life for up to a week in space.

“All pods away,” reported the first officer.

At least someone got away, thought Lefol.

Closing her eyes, she awaited the inevitable.

The first Kurgan missile struck the *Churchill* near the engine room, obliterating the stern. A millisecond later the bridge disappeared in a blinding flash of light as the second hit home. Like a rock, the ruined ship plummeted toward the ground. Rather than risk coming in range of Derra-5’s ground to air batteries, the pursuing Kurgan fighters turned away and climbed back up to the growing armada of ships. They had taken another Terran vessel, the fourth one of the day. Their invasion was going perfectly to plan. Within hours, the ground forces would disembark their troop ships and begin the drop to the surface.

Derra-5 and its hundreds of thousands of citizens was now on its own.

Chapter 8

With a loud thud, the escape pod struck the ground. The parachutes automatically let go of the craft to prevent it from being dragged across the ground in a high wind. Inside, the lights switched from red to white.

Cole was the first to move. He undid his safety harness and moved over to a panel on the wall beside the closed door. He studied it for a second and then announced, "It's a little cool outside, but it's okay. We didn't land near anything toxic." With that, he pressed a button and opened the door.

A cold wind whipped inside.

"Everyone out," ordered Cole.

When the last man stepped out of the pod, Cole looked over at Sheridan, who was looking around, trying to get his bearings. With dark clouds covering the sky, it was impossible to determine which way he was looking.

They had come down beside a lake in a heavily wooded area. For as far as they could see, tall pine trees extended to the horizon.

"Sir, check your GPS," suggested Agnar.

"Private Agnar, my GPS, like yours, is useless," replied Sheridan. "The first thing the Kurgans did was disable all of the satellites above the planet. Our comms gear will be equally useless. Until we make it to the capital, we're well and truly on our own."

"Sir, my first name is Agnar," pointed out the blonde-haired Marine. "My last name is Freyenlund."

"Like the officer said, Private Agnar, nothing is gonna work," said Cole. "It's old school from here on out; navigation will be via the stars and the sun. You'd better hope that we get it right and aren't walking away from the capital instead of toward it."

"Where's the rest of the crew?" asked the crewman, shivering in the cool breeze.

"I don't know," replied Sheridan honestly. "In these woods, they could be ten meters away and we'd never know it."

"What's your name?" Cole asked the man.

"Crewman Hailu Shawul," answered the man. He was slender with East African features.

"Okay, Crewman Shawul, there's a spare rifle in the pod; it's yours from now on."

Shawul unenthusiastically nodded.

“Sir, what are your orders?” Cole asked Sheridan.

“We can’t stay here. No one in the capital will know what happened to the *Churchill*. However, it’ll be dark soon, so I say we establish a camp here for the night and then hope that we can get our bearings in the morning. I don’t relish the idea of being out here any longer than we have to.”

“Why’s that, sir?” asked Garcia.

“This planet is a lot like Earth. The indigenous species are quite similar to the ones back home with one small difference.”

“What’s that?”

“They’re huge. The bears here are over ten meters in length with four, not two, arms. There’s a breed of giant saber-toothed cats in these parts that have been known to track people for days before killing them. Also, the spiders here grow as large as a dog back home. So I wouldn’t wander too far from the camp tonight.”

Agnar clenched his rifle in his hands and peered into the impenetrable forest. “I don’t like the sound of that. Not one bit.”

Cole looked at Agnar. “Turn off the pod’s homing beacon. We don’t want the enemy to use it to find us.”

A half hour later, with a fire going, Cole sat down beside Sheridan and handed him a ration pack.

“Thanks,” said Sheridan as he checked out his meal. It was beef stew, not his favorite, but in their situation, something was better than nothing.

“Sir, we’ve got plenty of food and water. Each one of us has a rifle, and Garcia has her med kit with her, so we’re okay in that regard. If we don’t bump into any Kurgan patrols between here and the capital, we should be able to get there in one piece.”

“What about Tartov?”

“I don’t trust him as far as I can throw him. I’ve teamed him up with Agnar. I did the same for Garcia and Shawul. It’s not that I don’t trust the crewman, it’s just that he’s not a soldier.”

“I think you’re right not to trust Tartov,” said Sheridan as he dug a spoon into his ration pack. “Sergeant, do you think it will be clear tonight?”

Cole looked up. “It’s hard to tell. It might snow on us, knowing our luck.”

“God, I hope not. We don’t have any winter clothing on us. Dying of hypothermia in the middle of nowhere is not how I figured I’d die.”

Cole grinned. “Well then, sir, you’d better get us to shelter before we die out here.”

“Marvelous,” said Sheridan under his breath.

A hand shook Sheridan. Instantly awake, he reached for his rifle and looked up. Cole was standing above him.

“Sir, you need to see this,” said Cole.

Sheridan checked his watch. It was just after three in the morning. He took a deep breath to clear the cobwebs from his mind as he pulled his thermal blanket off his body and stood up.

“What’s up, Sergeant?”

“That,” replied Cole pointing up at the night sky. Sheridan looked up as hundreds of lights streaked across the heavens and then began to descend behind a tall mountain in the distance.

“I guess we just figured out where the capital is,” offered Sheridan as he watched the first wave of Kurgan forces drop from the sky.

“You know what this means, don’t you, sir?”

“I sure do, Sergeant. We are now behind enemy lines and our only hope of salvation leads directly through who knows how many tens of thousands of enemy soldiers.”

The next morning snow began to fall from the sky, quickly blanketing everything.

After briefing the four other members of the group about the Kurgan invasion forces, Sheridan asked Cole to divvy up the food, ammunition, and survival gear. He was not surprised to learn that Cole had already split up their supplies. Agnar, because of his size, ended up carrying more than his fair share of equipment.

Sheridan picked a point on the mountain range in the far distance and used that as his bearing. With him in the lead, they left behind what they could not carry and left a message in case any of the *Churchill*’s survivors stumbled across their escape pod. The two Marines with the naval ratings followed close behind while Cole brought up the rear.

The lack of warm clothing wasn’t a problem while they were walking. As soon as they stopped, the cold seeped into their clothes, making all but Agnar shiver. The weather seemed to be having absolutely no effect at all on the tall Dane. After a short pause for lunch, they pushed on through the day. An hour before last light, Cole suggested that they stop and set up camp. Sheridan picked a spot that was covered by a rocky outcropping. It wasn’t much, but as he pointed out they would at least be dry.

As soon as they stopped, Cole put the survivors to work. Shawul was placed in charge of cooking the rations. Garcia built a fire and melted some snow to

replace the water they had drunk during the day. Tartov and Cole set up a small collapsible shelter while Agnar stood sentry.

A short while later, the food was handed around. Sheridan didn't even bother to see what he had been given; he hungrily ate his meal while he recorded the day's events in a journal.

"A little premature to be writing your memoirs, wouldn't you say, sir?" said Cole, taking a seat beside Sheridan.

Sheridan smiled. "Without a map or functional GPS, we're going to have to record the details as we go along and hope that it's of some use to the intelligence section when we finally reach the capital. How far do you think we walked today?"

"No more than fifteen kilometers. The woods are thicker than any I have ever seen back home. The longer we go on, the slower Tartov and Shawul will become. They're not used to hiking for hours over broken terrain."

Sheridan looked over at Tartov. The man was asleep, sitting up. His food lay uneaten on the ground beside him.

"Someone wake up Tartov," ordered Cole. "He can sleep after he's eaten all of his food."

Garcia reached over and gave Tartov a shove. Startled awake, he looked around, wondering what had just happened to him.

"How do you plan to divide up the sentry roster?" Sheridan asked Cole.

"Two-hour shifts should work. Tartov and Shawul can take the first ones. I'll stay up with them to keep an eye on things. After that, it's over to you, Garcia and Agnar. I'll take the last shift. I like to be up before everyone else in the morning."

"Fair enough. Sergeant, I think at the pace we're going that it's going to take us five days to reach the mountains. If there isn't an obvious way around, I'm afraid that we're going to have to go up and over them. After that, your guess is as good as mine as to how much further it will be to the capital."

"We should be okay. We have enough rations to last for about ten days. Once they're gone, we can live off the land."

"Do you think we should start to conserve the rations so we can make them last longer?"

Cole shook his head. "Not for the first few days. As we get closer to the mountains, we can revisit this issue. Until then, I think our bodies need all of the nutrients we can give them."

"Sergeant, I've been thinking about what Tartov told us back on the *Churchill*. Since Kurgans can't pass for human beings, we have to face that fact that there could be a fifth column inside the fleet working for the enemy. Why, I

have no idea, but the thought is a chilling one, humans and Kurgans working together.”

Cole looked over at Tartov as he dejectedly shoveled his food in his mouth. “I still don’t trust the man. However, he’s the one person alive who has at least seen what the Kurgans or whoever were doing on board the *California*. If you’re right about traitors working with the Kurgans, and I believe that you are, Tartov just became indispensable.”

For three days, their routine never changed. Roused from their sleep just before first light, the survivors would eat breakfast, pack up their camp, and begin the long march to the snow-capped mountains.

It didn’t take long for Shawul to fall sick. Coughing loudly, his pace slowed. Instead of making fifteen kilometers, they were lucky to make ten. Garcia saw to him and gave him what she could, but with the temperature dropping and more snow on the horizon, Sheridan knew that he was going to get much sicker before too long.

“Sir, he’s got a mild case of hypothermia,” reported Garcia to Sheridan.

“He’s all skin and bones,” observed Cole. “There’s no meat on the man.”

“Do you have anything in your med kit to help him?” asked Sheridan.

Garcia shook her head. “He needs fluids, heat, and rest. Lots of rest to counteract the symptoms.”

“We can rehydrate him and warm him up, but time is not on our side,” said Sheridan. “We need to keep moving.”

Cole suggested, “Sir, perhaps a late start tomorrow might help things. We could kick off again at noon. The extra time should give Shawul the rest he needs.”

Sheridan nodded.

Garcia left to look after her patient.

Sheridan turned and looked into Cole’s eyes. “Sergeant, what if this doesn’t help and he continues to fall behind? I can’t jeopardize the rest of the group for one man.”

“Sir, if it comes to that you’ll be forced to make a decision whether to leave him behind or not.”

For the first time in days, Sheridan felt the weight of his responsibilities pressing down on him. “I guess I’ll make that decision when the time comes.”

“He might surprise us yet and make a full recovery.”

The next day, Agnar walked back into the camp, his face ashen as if he had just seen a ghost.

Cole saw the look and walked over to the big Marine. “What’s that look for, Agnar?”

Agnar tried to speak but found that his mouth had turned dry from fear. A second or two later, he found his voice. “Sergeant, I think one of Mister Sheridan’s bears has been checking out the camp.”

“Show me!”

Agnar led Cole to a game path that ran past their shelter. Massive bear tracks filled the trail. Cole wasn’t an accomplished tracker, but he could tell that the bear had walked back and forth several times during the night. He knelt down and placed his hand alongside one of the tracks. It dwarfed his hand.

Agnar was right; they were being stalked.

Cole looked out into the forest. He couldn’t see more than a few meters through the thick, dark woods. A feeling of primal dread ran down his spine. The bear could be watching him and he’d never know it until it was too late. He stood, checked that he had a high-explosive grenade loaded into his grenade launcher, and then followed Agnar back to their camp.

When noon arrived, Sheridan ordered their shelter to be struck and everything made ready to leave regardless of how Shawul was feeling. Although he had rested an extra six hours and had drunk plenty of warm liquids, Shawul was no better. To help him keep up with the remainder of the group, Garcia and Agnar had taken all of the sick man’s equipment and carried it on their backs. Struggling through the knee-deep snow, everyone soon became tired. Agnar took point and bashed a path through the forest for everyone else to follow.

Sheridan’s throat was parched. He couldn’t believe how thirsty he became in the cold. He reached down for his water bottle and saw that it was nearly all gone. Without realizing it, he had been chugging water all afternoon. He called out for Agnar to stop where he was while everyone else caught up with him. Sheridan undid his shirt to let out the trapped hot air. Steam rose from his chest. He was about to ask Shawul how he was doing when all hell broke loose.

With a monstrous bellowing cry, the bear that had been stalking them charged straight out of the forest. In seconds, it was less than a couple of meters away and closing fast.

Sheridan tried to bring up his weapon to fire but was too slow.

With a horrified scream on his lips, Shawul was struck by one of the bear’s four arms. His bloodied and mangled body flew up into the air, landing in a heap beside a snow-covered tree.

Tartov panicked and blindly ran backward, colliding with Cole and knocking him off his feet.

Garcia spun about and tried to raise her rifle to fire, but was hit in the side by the bear as it charged by. Tumbling to the ground, Garcia blacked out.

It had taken mere seconds for the bear to strike. With a loud growl from deep inside its chest, the animal's powerful jaws clamped down on Shawul's neck. With a loud snap of cracking bones, the bear shook its victim from side to side, killing him. It had what it wanted and ignored the others. The bear slowly turned around and dragged Shawul's body into the forest, leaving behind a crimson streak of blood on the snow.

"Fuck," mumbled Sheridan as he watched the bear and Shawul vanish from sight.

Agnar ran past Sheridan and fired off two quick bursts of automatic gunfire into the woods, trying to hit the beast.

"Is everyone alright?" asked Cole as he pushed a terrified Tartov out of the way.

"Shawul is gone," answered Agnar, still staring wide-eyed into the darkened woods.

"Where's Garcia?" asked Sheridan when he couldn't see her.

A second later, she sat up covered in snow. "Here, sir," she replied, rubbing her aching neck.

"We have to help Shawul," said Agnar.

"He's dead," said Cole.

"We're Marines God damn it!" shouted Agnar. "We don't ever leave a man behind."

Sheridan shook his head. "Agnar, there's nothing we can do. Staff Sergeant Cole is right. Shawul is dead. If we go into the woods looking for his body, there's a good chance one or more of us will also end up dead. You saw what it could do. We have to keep moving."

Agnar shook his head, dropped to his knees, and then looked over at Garcia for support.

Garcia stood up, brushed the snow off her uniform and walked over beside Agnar. "It's okay, big fella, there's nothing we can do for the man. Come on, Marine, we have a job to do. Now up on your feet."

With a nod, Agnar got up and resumed his post.

Cole walked over to Sheridan. In a hushed voice, he said, "That friggin bear will be back. Once an animal has a taste for human flesh, it'll keep coming after us."

"I know. What do you suggest?"

"I bet we've got a day or two before it comes looking for its next meal. We'll have to make some improvised explosive devices and ring them around

the camp at night and hope that we get a shot off next time, or we're all doomed."

Chapter 9

Without Shawul to slow them down and the thought of a four-armed bear with a taste for human flesh tracking them, Sheridan's group made good time. They arrived at the base of the tall mountain range a day earlier than anticipated. When Sheridan couldn't spot an easy way around, they slowly began to walk up a narrow rocky path that led between two tall jagged peaks. Agnar named them Freyr and Freyja, after a pair of twins from Norse mythology.

The snow had been coming down continuously for the past day. Everyone was cold and tired, but they still kept their heads up and didn't complain, all except Tartov, who looked like a drowned rat.

"Okay, we'll rest here for the night," announced Sheridan, pointing to some overhanging rocks.

"I'll get a fire going," said Agnar.

After supper, Cole insisted on checking everyone's feet. Days of marching over some of the worst terrain the sergeant had ever seen had taken its toll on the inexperienced soldiers' feet. Agnar had a blister the size of a gold coin on the back of his right heel. If it bothered him, he didn't let it show. Garcia just needed to dry her feet and change her socks. The worst was Tartov. The bottom of his feet looked like raw hamburger. Garcia shook her head and admonished the PO before getting to work cleaning and bandaging up the wounds.

"Sir, would you like me to check your feet?" asked Cole.

Sheridan didn't answer.

Cole looked over and saw Sheridan staring out into the dark. His eyes fixed on something.

"What is it?" asked Cole as he reached for his rifle.

"We're not alone."

Cole stood up and joined Sheridan.

"What did you see, sir?"

"I didn't see anything, I heard it," replied Sheridan as he moved his thumb over and changed the safety on his weapon from safe to fire.

"What did you hear?"

"It sounded like someone moving about out there."

A shot rang out.

Sheridan and Cole instinctively dropped to one knee and brought their weapons up.

A voice called out. “Drop your weapons and stand up with your hands on top of your heads.”

“Obermman, it’s you, isn’t it, you dumb ass!” yelled out Agnar. “I know it’s you. Only you could miss a target standing out in the open less than twenty meters away.”

“Agnar, is that you?” replied Obermman.

“No, you idiot, it’s his ghost.”

A second later, a disheveled-looking Marine walked next to the fire. Sheridan recognized the man as the tall, black-haired soldier who had lost his cool when the *Churchill* was fired upon.

“Marine, are there any more people with you?” asked Sheridan.

“Yes, sir,” replied Obermman. “I’ve got Andrews with me and three other crewmen. We had two more, but a couple of them saber-toothed cat things got ‘em the first night we landed.”

“Don’t be shy, people. Step forward,” said Cole.

Andrews led a couple of dirty and exhausted-looking men carrying an injured woman on a stretcher made from a blanket and a couple of long sturdy branches over beside the fire.

“What happened to her?” asked Garcia as she moved over to examine the woman’s injuries.

“She broke her leg two days ago,” explained Andrews, his accent had an Australian twang to it.

“Lay her down on the ground and let me take a look at what you’ve done,” ordered Garcia.

Obermman looked over at Sheridan. “Sir, do you know if anyone else from the platoon made it?”

Sheridan shook his head. “I think we’re it. Where were you and Andrews when the ship was hit?”

“We were on duty guarding the engine room. When the order to abandon ship was given, Andrews and I ran for the nearest pod.”

Sheridan asked, “How did you find us?”

“Purely by accident, sir. When we saw your fire, we knew we had stumbled across more survivors, or perhaps some refugees fleeing the Kurgans.”

“You all look like crap. When was the last time you ate?” asked Cole.

“Two days ago, Sergeant. After the cats attacked us, we ran for our lives. We left most of our rations back with the pod.”

Cole snapped his fingers to get everyone’s attention. “Okay, folks, listen up. Give me all of your rations and pile them up here at my feet. If I find you’ve kept so much as a stick of gum from me, you’ll wish you were never born.”

Sheridan was the first to drop all of his food. “I take it we’re going to start rationing our food.”

“Yes, sir, with four more hungry mouths to feed, we’re gonna have to stretch out our rations until we can find some more.”

For two more miserably long and cold days, Sheridan led his party through the mountain pass. Everyone took turns carrying the stretcher. Garcia had re-splinted the woman’s leg, but the injured crewman would require surgery to fix her shattered bones. With their thermal blankets draped over their shoulders to keep them warm, they looked more like a rag-tag mob than a group of fighting soldiers.

Agnar walked with his eyes glued to the rocks. He hoped to kill something they could eat. An expert shot, Agnar had grown up hunting in the woods of northern Europe with his father. If it walked on four or six legs, Agnar figured he could bring it down and cook it.

Andrews looked over at Sheridan. “Sir, why haven’t we been able to communicate with the forces in the capital? My communicator is fully charged, but I haven’t heard a thing since we landed. We don’t need a satellite to use these comms devices. Do you think the city has already fallen?”

Sheridan slowed down so he could talk with the Marine. “Andrews, the Kurgans will have established an electronic bubble around the capital, isolating it. Nothing our people send can get in or out of the bubble. As for the city, who knows? It could have been taken the first day the enemy arrived, or it still could be in our hands. I suspect we’ll find out in the next couple of days.”

That night, they took refuge in a cave. Out of the cold and with a roaring fire to keep them warm, their troubles were forgotten for a few hours. Down to two meager meals a day, everyone was always hungry.

Garcia checked on Hollande, the crewman with a broken leg, and then cleaned Tartov’s blister-covered feet.

Sheridan was at the cave entrance looking toward the heavens. For a moment, he thought about Tarina and wondered where she was and if she was safe. Sheridan knew that she had a couple of months of advanced flight training to complete before joining a squadron, but with the war going so badly, anything was possible. She could already be on the front line serving on a fighter carrier for all he knew.

An unpleasant odor wafted through the night air. Instantly, Sheridan’s heart began to race. He looked out into the dark. His hands clenched his rifle tight.

Cole walked over and was about to say something when he saw the tense look on Sheridan’s face.

“What’s wrong, sir?”

“I think the bear’s back.”

“Crap, not again. Where is it?” asked Cole as he brought his rifle from his shoulder.

“I don’t know, but there’s something moving around in the dark. I can smell it.”

Cole slowly flipped his weapon’s safety off. “How far away would you say it is?”

“I don’t know,” replied Sheridan.

Cole looked over his shoulder and calmly said, “Garcia, bring Tartov’s bloody socks to me.”

Garcia thought the order was odd, but did as she was told.

“When I tell you to, throw them just outside of the cave,” Cole said to Garcia.

“Yes, Sergeant,” answered Garcia nervously.

“Now!” said Cole.

The socks flew out and fell to the ground. A split second later, a loud blood-curdling roar tore through the night as the bear leaped down from a tall rock overlooking the fire. Its eyes glowed red in the light of the bonfire. It bent down to smell one of the bloodied socks.

Without hesitating, Sheridan depressed the trigger on his rifle and emptied a one-hundred round magazine into the beast. He might as well have fired his weapon up into the air. Not a single bullet penetrated the animal’s thick fur and skin.

With an enraged roar, the bear looked over at Sheridan and got up on its hind legs, towering above the people huddled near the fire.

It was Cole who finished off the animal. At point-blank range, he fired a high-explosive grenade into its exposed stomach. The deadly projectile detonated, tearing the bear’s midsection apart. It staggered backward. Its eyes rolled back up into its skull and with a bloody froth coming out of its mouth, it fell over to the ground, dead.

Agnar was up on his feet. He drew his knife, ran out of the cave to the dead bear’s carcass and began to cut at the exposed meat. With a smile on his face, he looked back at everyone staring at him and said, “Fresh meat for supper.”

Cooked over an open fire, the bear meat was greasy, but after eating rations for days on end, the food tasted better than any served in a five-star restaurant back on Earth. Everyone ate until they could eat no more.

Agnar wiped his bloodstained hands on his clothes and smiled over at Garcia. Sheridan saw her smile back. Fraternization was heavily frowned upon in the combat units, but he was a realist and decided to ignore their growing

friendship. They could all be dead tomorrow; who was he to put an end to their attachment?

“My beard is driving me crazy,” observed Obermman as he scratched at his whiskers.

Sheridan grinned and then found himself scratching at his as well. He had never tried to grow a beard before. He doubted that it was coming off anytime soon.

Cole walked in from outside. “Okay, I’ve booby trapped the bear’s remains. If another one comes sniffing around tonight, it’s going to get an awful surprise. Agnar, you’re on sentry.”

Agnar acknowledged the order and moved to the entrance of the cave.

With a deep sigh, Cole sat down on the dirt floor. He looked over at Sheridan. “Sir, it’s quiet out there . . . way too quiet. I’d expected to hear the Kurgan’s big guns pounding the capital by now.”

“I was thinking the same thing. The answer, I believe, is the same here as it was on Illum Prime. They didn’t nuke the city from orbit because they want it intact. Kurgans hate the cold; a winter campaign is the exact opposite of what they want. During the last war, the Kurgans conducted a lightning-fast campaign through our space to seize as many habitable planets as they could. I suspect that they’re going to surround the capital and then try to force it to surrender.”

“I take it that history was your favorite subject at the academy.”

“Correct. My major was history, and my minor was in Kurgan studies. I had a great-grandfather who fought in the first war. For generations stretching back to the first colonies, there has always been a Sheridan in uniform.”

“I don’t know my family history that well,” said Cole. “My father was in the service, but my grandfather was a teacher, and as for his father, I don’t know. My dad didn’t talk about our family tree too much.”

“In a way, you’re lucky. Tradition runs deep in both my father’s and my mother’s families.”

“Sir, Kurgan, can you speak it?”

Sheridan chuckled. “Yeah, I’m actually not too bad with it.”

“Sir, I’ve never asked this before, but is your father Admiral Sheridan?”

“Yes, he is. Why do you ask?”

“I suspect he’s wondering where you are. When the *Churchill* fails to report in, he’s going to be told that you’re MIA.”

Sheridan had been so focused on keeping himself and the people with him alive that he hadn’t thought about what would happen after they were reported missing. “Well, Sergeant, he and a lot of other parents, unfortunately, are in the same boat. Tens, if not hundreds of thousands of civilians and soldiers have

already been lost, and this war has barely begun.”

The next day, they came to the end of the pass through the mountains. As they stood on a tall hill, they looked out across a vast snow-covered plain. In the distance stood another small mountain range; nestled at the base of it was the capital city of Derra-5. However, between them and their destination was the Kurgan invasion force. It looked like a great horde spread out waiting to attack the city. They could see transport ships busily coming and going from a makeshift landing strip. Soldiers and equipment streamed from the airstrip and made their way to join the forces already in place.

Sheridan ordered them to hold up for the night. With the enemy only kilometers away, there would be no fire tonight.

As soon as it got dark, Sheridan and Cole grabbed their night vision gear, crawled up onto a rocky outcropping, and began to study the Kurgan force. Nearest to them were the enemy’s rear-echelon forces. Fuel and supply dumps ringed the airstrip. They quickly spotted an air defense regiment of guns and missiles guarding the depots. Further out were camouflaged sprung shelters that Cole guessed were being used as maintenance hangars and possibly hospitals. What caught their attention were the thousands of fires burning to the west of the Kurgans in a forest bordering a wide river that ran toward the blackened-out capital.

“What do you make of those fires?” Sheridan asked Cole.

“I don’t know, but I doubt the Kurgans built them.”

Sheridan thought back to the briefing he had read on the planet. His stomach turned at the thought of what lay before them. “Sergeant, there are three major settlements on Derra-5. The capital has about one hundred thousand inhabitants, the other two about fifty thousand each. I bet that before the Kurgans began to land, people fled the other cities seeking refuge in the capital. Those fires are probably from the people who never made it and are trapped outside of the city.”

“Jesus,” muttered Cole. “They’ll never last a winter out in the open.”

“There’s nothing our forces can do to help them and the Kurgans will ignore them and let them die. I doubt that they have the food or the inclination to feed all those people.”

“I hate to sound ghoulish, sir, but those fires light the way into the city if you ask me,” observed Cole.

Sheridan adjusted his position and studied the ground between them and the forest. Cole was right, if they were going to find a safe way to the capital, it would be there. He quickly outlined his plan for the following night. Together they crawled back off the hill to brief the rest of the survivors. Whatever happened now, they were going to have to trust in their training and hope that

they didn't run into any enemy patrols before they reached the safety of the woods. If they did, they would be cut to pieces, and they all knew it.

Chapter 10

Like spectral figures, Sheridan's group walked quietly through the fog clinging to the riverbank. Spread out, Sheridan and Agnar were in the lead while fifty meters back Cole brought up the rest. If the first two bumped into the enemy, the remainder would still have a chance to escape. Moving only at night, they had left the safety of the mountains and worked their way through the low-ground until they came to the river. Although the water was near freezing, Sheridan led them across to the far bank and away from the Kurgan forces. Rather than risk dumping her in the cold water, Agnar had carried Hollande on his back.

Wet, tired, and soaked to the bone, they were fortunate to find an abandoned cabin to sleep in during the day. Regrettably, there wasn't any food to be found in any of the cupboards. Before the sun came up, they sat down and finished off the last of the meat Agnar had cut from the side of the bear.

"How far do you think it is to the capital from here, sir?" Obermman asked Sheridan.

"It's difficult to tell," replied Sheridan, gnawing on a piece of dry meat. "I think it'll take us another two to three days to reach the outskirts of the city. That's the easy part. Getting in without being shot by the Kurgans or our own people will be the hard part."

"Why's that?" queried Garcia.

Cole explained, "We don't know where our forces are located. I, for one, don't want to blunder into a minefield or a pre-registered kill zone. Also, even if we make it all the way to our lines, we don't know any of the passwords. In short, everything to date has been easy compared to the next few days."

"I don't want to die out here," moaned Tartov. "There has to be a way in."

"There is," said Sheridan, tiring of the PO's constant whining, "We just have to find it."

Andrews asked, "Sir, do you think we might run into any Kurgans before we reach our lines?"

"If we don't, I'd be amazed."

"Okay, enough chatter," announced Cole. "Andrews, you're on sentry. Everyone else get some sleep. We've got a long march ahead of us tomorrow, so get what rest you can."

Sheridan leaned back against the wall and felt a shiver run down his spine.

He couldn't decide if it was from the wet clothes that clung to his body or something else from deep in his psyche warning him to be careful. Either way, he wished it would go away. Tired from the day's exertions, Sheridan soon drifted off into a fitful sleep.

A hand touched Sheridan's shoulder.

Sheridan reached for his rifle and sat straight up. He blinked his eyes a couple of times to clear the sleep from them.

"Sir, you need to see this," said Cole as he helped Sheridan up onto his feet. They felt like cold blocks of ice. He stamped his feet to get the circulation flowing again. Sheridan joined Cole over by an open window.

"Keep low," warned Cole.

Sheridan edged over to the window. It was light outside. He checked his watch and saw that it was nearly eleven in the morning.

"What's up, Sergeant?"

Cole handed Sheridan his binoculars and told Andrews to guard the front door. "Sir, take a look back toward the Kurgan rear echelon and tell me what you see."

Sheridan rubbed his tired eyes and then brought up the binoculars. Although it was far away, he could just make out transport vehicles dropping off people in an open field. A minute later, they boarded a Kurgan ship. As soon as the last person was on board, the large cargo bay doors closed and the craft took off and flew straight up into the cloud-covered sky. A horrible feeling of dread seeped into his body. He lowered the binoculars and looked over at Cole. "Those were humans, weren't they?"

Cole nodded. "It was hard to tell from this distance, but they looked to me like civilians being loaded up into those troop transporters."

"Why the hell would the Kurgans take civilians off Derra-5? In my studies, I never once came across anything like this. They generally ignored the human populations on the planets they invaded during the last war. I read dozens of history books at school, and I don't ever recall reading a single passage about population resettlement. After the ceasefire, we had to pick up those settlers trapped on the Kurgan side of the Disputed Zone as they wouldn't allow a single person on board their ships."

"Sir, you don't think they're gonna eat them, do you?" asked Andrews.

Sheridan shook his head. "No, Andrews, contrary to what you may have read, the Kurgans do not eat people."

"Mister Sheridan, I read this book in which they describe how the first colonists taken on Hobart-11 were butchered and eaten by the Kurgs."

“Andrews, the book you read was wrong, completely wrong. Look, the Kurgans think we’re a lesser species. We don’t adhere to their religious beliefs, and that makes us less than them in their eyes. Just like some religions on Earth won’t eat certain foods because they have declared them to be unclean, the same goes for us. They may be carnivores, but I can assure you that we are not on the menu.”

“Watch the door,” said Cole to Andrews, ending his part in the conversation.

Cole asked, “Sir, if the Kurgans are ambivalent to the colonists, why are they taking them off the planet?”

“I don’t know, but I’m sure it’s not a good thing.”

“Sir, we need to let our forces in the capital know what is going on.”

Sheridan sat down on the floor and made an entry in his journal. “Sergeant, if anything happens to me, please make sure that these notes are handed over to someone in the intelligence section.”

“You can hand them over yourself,” replied Cole, tapping Sheridan on the shoulder.

The next night after eating a quick meal, Sheridan led the group out into the dark. The batteries on their night vision gear had died days ago. Snow soon began to fall, making it hard to see more than a few meters in the distance.

Sheridan, like everyone else, was feeling the biting cold. He snugly wrapped his thermal blanket over his shoulders but kept his hands free in case he needed to use his assault rifle.

They were making their way through a lightly wooded area, using the trees for cover, when Agnar suddenly stopped in his tracks.

Sheridan, in the dark, almost walked straight into the Marine on point.

“What’s up?” he asked, his voice no louder than a whisper.

“Sir, I heard something directly in front of us,” reported Agnar.

“What was it?”

“Not sure. It sounded like talking, but I can’t be sure.”

The sound of a terrified scream, followed by a gunshot, tore through the dark.

Cole ran over and joined Sheridan.

Two more shots rang out.

Sheridan turned to face Cole. “Sergeant, keep everyone back here out of sight. I’m going to take Agnar with me and see what’s going on. If we’re not back in five minutes, find a way around these woods and keep moving toward the capital.”

More gunfire.

“Sir, perhaps I should go,” offered Cole.

Sheridan shook his head. “Sergeant, I need you to shepherd our people to safety.”

“Be careful, sir, it sounds like there’s more than one person out there.”

Sheridan nodded. He tapped Agnar on the shoulder and told the big Marine to follow him. With his weapon held tight into his shoulder, Sheridan warily advanced in the direction of the sound of a woman weeping somewhere in the cold darkness.

Voices called out.

Sheridan froze; they were speaking Kurgan.

“What are they saying?” whispered Agnar.

“Something about unbelievers getting what is coming to them.”

With his mouth turning dry with fear, Sheridan continued to advance. He could feel the adrenaline surging through his veins. He fought to control the feelings in his body. Turning back wasn’t an option.

A couple of seconds later, Sheridan slowly dropped to one knee beside a tree. Just up ahead in a small clearing were three dark shapes moving about. It was hard to tell who or what they were.

One of the shapes reached down, grabbed ahold of something and hauled it up off the ground. A terrified woman cried out, begging for mercy.

Sheridan’s blood turned cold when he heard one of the enemy fighters suggest that they should rape her before they killed her. Confusion filled his mind; Kurgans didn’t care for humans, yet he could clearly hear what they were saying.

“No!” screamed the woman as she was thrown to the ground.

“Damn it,” muttered Sheridan. He had hoped to avoid contact with the enemy, but he knew he couldn’t leave a helpless civilian to be violated. Sheridan looked over his shoulder at Agnar. “We need to help that woman. You take the one on the right and I’ll take the one on the left. I want the son of a bitch in the middle taken alive.”

Agnar nodded.

“Now,” said Sheridan as he stood up and walked out into the open. He set his weapon’s sights on the chest of his target and fired off a three round burst, as did Agnar. Both enemy fighters dropped to the snow-covered ground, dead.

The third soldier was bent over tearing at his victim’s clothes when his comrades were gunned down. He had left his rifle on the ground. Suddenly, seeing two men advancing toward him, he reached for his weapon. He was too slow. Sheridan fired, hitting him in the shoulder. A second later, Agnar stood above him and brought his gun down onto his head, knocking him unconscious.

“Sir, they’re men, just like us,” said Agnar, looking down at the man he had just laid out cold.

Sheridan stood there shaking his head. “I know I heard them speaking Kurgan.” He bent down and took a better look at soldier he had shot. There was no denying that he was human, but he was wearing a white camouflaged uniform and carrying a strange-looking weapon.

“Please don’t kill me,” whimpered a woman lying facedown in the muck.

Sheridan ran over and gently placed a hand on her shoulder. “We won’t harm you. My name is Second Lieutenant Mike Sheridan. I’m here to help you.”

Slowly, the woman turned her head over and looked up at Sheridan. Her face was covered in dirt. She looked to be no more than twenty years old.

“Are you with the soldiers in the capital?” she asked.

“No, we’re not,” replied Sheridan, helping her up onto her unsteady feet.

With tears streaking down her face, she tried pulling her torn clothes together. It was then that Sheridan noticed that there were other bodies lying facedown in the snow. He counted six men and women. All had been shot dead. He gritted his teeth in anger.

“Sir, what do you want to do with this one?” asked Agnar, pointing down at the unconscious soldier.

“Quickly tie him up and then put a dressing on his wound. We’re taking him with us.”

As soon as they were ready, Sheridan led the young woman by the arm while Agnar carried their prisoner over his right shoulder.

Cole saw them coming and stood up. “Sir, you were cutting it fine. Another minute and I was gone.”

“Sergeant, please have Private Garcia look after this woman,” said Sheridan.

Cole was surprised to see a terrified and disheveled woman standing behind Sheridan.

“Jesus, sir, what happened back there?”

“I’ll tell you later. We’ve got a Kurgan prisoner with us, and he’s human. I need you to lead us all away from here. Pick a route that takes us deeper into the woods. Find us a good spot that’s well off the beaten track. I want to interrogate our prisoner and find out just what the hell is going on.”

Thirty minutes passed before they stopped. Cole made sure that Andrews and Obermman were on sentry before telling the rest of the party to rest.

Agnar dropped their prisoner on the ground and then pulled the gag from the man’s mouth. The injured man winced in pain.

Sheridan and Cole moved over by the detainee.

“Water?” said Sheridan in Kurgan, holding up his canteen.

The man’s eyes instantly widened. His mouth fell agape. “Are you a believer?” asked the astounded man.

Sheridan shook his head. “No, not at all.”

“But you can speak the word of the Lord. Only true believers are taught the word of the Lord.”

Sheridan paused for a moment. He wanted to make sure that he didn’t mess up what he was saying. “I’m an officer and was taught Kurgan at school. Who are you, and why are you speaking Kurgan?”

“My name is Kyrad and I speak the language of our Lord.” The man looked at Sheridan’s dirt-covered face. “And you’re lying. I don’t believe that an unbeliever was taught the words of the Lord at a human school.”

“But you are human, not Kurgan.”

“Blasphemy!” It was as if the very thought repulsed the prisoner. “I am a chosen citizen of the Kurgan Empire. I am not a non-believer like you. I am Kurgan.”

Sheridan handed the man his canteen and then translated the conversation for Cole.

“I don’t get it; why does he think he’s one of them?” pondered Cole.

“I don’t know, but the Kurgan Empire isn’t homogeneous. They have other species as citizens, so it’s not inconceivable that they made humans part of their empire.”

“Sir, I thought you said that they looked down on us as being a lesser form of life.”

Sheridan glanced at their prisoner. “This man clearly is a convert to the Kurgan religion. If he and others like him were indoctrinated into Kurgan’s culture, I suspect that they might now be seen as equals.”

“Where the hell does he come from?”

“I don’t know, but I intend to find out.” Sheridan knelt down beside the prisoner. “Okay, Kyrad, I accept that you are Kurgan, which planet do you come from?”

“Kollos,” replied the prisoner, handing Sheridan back his canteen.

Sheridan wracked his brain trying to think if he had ever heard of a planet called Kollos. “Kyrad, where is Kollos located in the empire?”

“It is just on our side of the ceasefire line. It had another name at one time, but after liberation it was renamed in honor of one of the Lord’s disciples.”

“Good God,” mumbled Sheridan.

Cole asked, “What is it? What’s wrong, sir?”

Sheridan struggled to comprehend what he had just learned. “Sergeant, at

the end of the last war, there were star systems on both sides of the border that had once belonged to the other side. As part of the ceasefire agreement, we dispatched fleets of ships to withdraw our people from the Kurgan side of what we now call the Disputed Zone. They did the same for their colonists. I'm beginning to think that we weren't told the whole truth. This man is living proof that not everyone was brought back across our side of the line."

"To be honest, sir, when Tartov told us his story about suspecting that there was a traitor onboard his ship, I thought he was full of crap. However, after seeing this man with my own eyes and hearing what you have said, I have to wonder how many of these people have been infiltrated into our military."

Garcia walked over. "Sir, the woman is dehydrated and has bruises all over her body. She was probably abused for quite some time before you found her. I've given her something for the pain."

"What's her name?" asked Sheridan.

"Kelly Green."

"Watch the prisoner," Sheridan told Agnar. He walked over to Kelly and saw that she was nibbling on a cracker; there was an IV in her arm. "Kelly, how are you feeling?"

"Fine, thank you," quietly replied the woman.

Sheridan knelt down next to her. "Kelly, I'm sorry about the people who were killed by the Kurgans. What were you doing back there?"

"I was looking for my younger brother, Eric. We were all looking for loved ones who had gone missing."

"What happened?"

"We were detained by some of the Chosen."

"The Chosen?" asked Sheridan, having never heard the term before.

"That's what those traitors call themselves. They marched us away from the refugee camp and into the woods. There were more of us at first, but they took turns taking some of the people out, abusing and then killing them. Oh God, I thought I was going to die." Tears welled up in her dark brown eyes.

"It's okay, you're safe with us. Do you have any family back in the camp?"

Kelly shook her head. "My father is back on Earth visiting relatives. My mother was shot by a Chosen fighter on the first day they arrived. She tried to stop some men who were attempting to take my brother and several other young boys away."

"I'm sorry," said Sheridan, gently placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Lieutenant, the Chosen have Kurgan officers with them, but they did nothing to stop the rapes and the killing. They told us that their officers told them they could do with us as they please."

Sheridan turned his head back toward their prisoner. Hate filled his heart. He stood.

“Look after her, Garcia.”

Cole saw the cruel look in Sheridan’s eyes and placed a hand on his arm. “Sir, I know what you’re thinking, but he’s a prisoner and under our protection. He may be a murderous thug, but we’re Marines and we follow the laws of war, even if, from time to time, we don’t agree with them.”

“What would you have me do with him, Sergeant?” asked Sheridan, instantly regretting his tone. He took a deep breath to calm himself. “We can’t drag him along with us, and we can’t leave him. If he’s found, he’ll tell them that we’re out here, and they’ll come looking for us.”

“Sir, I don’t know what we’re going to do. All I do know is that if you take matters into your own hands, your men will think that they can too, and that’s when discipline falls apart. You’ve earned the right to wear a gold bar, now exercise some leadership. The right thing is quite often the hardest thing to do.”

Sheridan knew Cole was right. He wasn’t thinking straight. “Agnar, tie our prisoner up. He’s coming with us. You’re responsible to keep our prisoner alive.”

“Yes, sir,” responded Agnar. With a smile, he tied up and gagged their captive.

“What about the woman?” queried Cole.

“She’s coming with us at least as far as the refugee camp. Perhaps there’s someone there who can look after her.”

“If not?”

Sheridan let out a deep sigh. “I guess she’ll have to come with us to the capital. I’m not leaving her alone out here with these Chosen murderers.”

A sound as loud as a thunderclap going off above their heads suddenly filled the woods.

Everyone instinctively ducked and looked about trying to see where the noise was coming from. The night sky turned as bright as day as Kurgan rockets streamed from their launchers at the capital. Joined seconds later by hundreds of artillery pieces, a deadly barrage rained down.

The enemy’s preparations were over. The fight for the city had just begun.

Chapter 11

The Kurgan fighter dove for the surface of the small moon, trying to shake off its pursuer. Flying meters from the rocky surface, the craft headed straight for a canyon.

“Oh no you don’t,” said Tarina to herself as she brought her sleek ship in behind the fleeing Kurgan fighter. She was flying a Corsair, a newly designed fighter currently being rushed into service with the fleet’s fighter carriers.

Both ships had expended all of their missiles on other fighters during a dogfight above Illum Prime. They were both down to guns only.

Tarina watched as her opponent dove into the deep canyon that ran like a jagged scar along the surface of the moon. She quickly followed. Dressed in a skintight survival suit, Tarina knew that if her craft were hit that the chances of her ejecting safely were almost non-existent. Even if she did, she only had six hours of oxygen before she died.

A buzzer sounded in her helmet followed by a robotic-sounding voice. “Warning, you are flying too close to the sides of the canyon.”

“I know, I know,” replied Tarina as she skillfully flew through a narrow portion of the canyon, missing the walls by less than one meter.

Ahead, the Kurgan fighter bobbed and weaved from side to side, trying to throw off Tarina’s aim. She had to give her opponent credit, whoever was flying that craft knew how to fly.

Her ship’s targeting computer was only good for engaging targets with missiles; without them, she was reduced to using the illuminated aiming circle on her heads-up display. She depressed the trigger on her joystick. A burst of thirty millimeter depleted uranium rounds shot toward the Kurgan fighter. The shots missed, striking the wall of the canyon and tearing off chunks of rock, which hit the sides of her ship as she flew past.

A second later, her opponent shot straight up out of the canyon.

Tarina had been expecting the move and chased after him. She knew that her adversary was trying to get in behind her. However, her Corsair fighter was faster and more maneuverable than the Kurgan’s craft.

They climbed higher and higher. Every time Tarina lined up the fighter in her sight, he would move away, it was as if he knew what she was thinking.

“Warning, you are running low on fuel,” said the voice in her helmet. “Break off the engagement and return to your ship immediately.”

“There’s no way I’m letting him go, not now,” replied Tarina as she increased her speed trying to close the distance between them.

The Kurgan dodged another burst of cannon fire.

Tarina swore. Not only was she running low on fuel, if she did not destroy the enemy craft soon, she would run out of ammo as well. Up ahead, the Kurgan fighter banked over. It had given up trying to shake off the pursuing craft; it now fled straight back toward the remnants of its battered fleet.

“I got you now,” crowed Tarina as she lined up the enemy craft for a killing shot.

A red light flashed inside the cockpit. “Warning, incoming missile!”

Tarina looked down at her console and saw the deadly projectile streaking toward her from behind. She instantly reached for a button on her console and activated her fighter’s countermeasures. Chaff ejected from the sides of her craft, trying to draw off the missile. With her teeth gritted, Tarina pushed the joystick hard over as she tried to get away from the incoming projectile.

The voice in her helmet warned, “Countermeasures have failed. Time to impact: three seconds.”

Tarina, in desperation, spun her Corsair about one hundred and eighty degrees and fired her cannon hoping to strike the missile before it hit her.

A half-second later, a bright white light flashed before her eyes. Her craft shuddered.

“Okay, open it up. Get her out of there,” said a new voice in her helmet.

The image in front of her changed from deep space to a training mock-up of a Corsair. The cockpit flipped open and two technicians reached inside to remove her helmet and undo her safety harness.

“Second Lieutenant Pheto, report to Major Jolson,” called out a voice over the training hangar’s PA system.

Tarina swore. It was the third time in as many days that she had been killed during a simulated dogfight. With her helmet under her arm, she took a deep breath and strode through the building. She gritted her teeth and avoided looking into the eyes of her fellow trainees as she made her way to Major Jolson’s office. She stopped, collected her thoughts and knocked on the open door.

“Come in,” said Jolson curtly.

Tarina stepped inside the office, came to attention, and smartly saluted her superior officer.

Jolson looked up and returned the salute.

“Miss Pheto, take a seat,” said Jolson, pointing to a chair in front of his desk.

Tarina sat down; it was then that she noticed that there was another officer

in the room. Sitting off to one side was a man in his early forties. He wore a flight suit with a colonel's silver eagle on his collar.

Jolson stood up and closed the door. "Miss Pheto, do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Tarina closed her eyes for a second. *God damn it, I blew it. I'm being reassigned to a rear echelon transport unit*, flashed in her mind. Clearing her throat, Tarina said, "Sir, I had the Kurgan fighter in my sights. In another second he would have been destroyed."

"Instead, you were."

"Sir, I don't think it was a fair test of my abilities."

"Oh, and why is that, Miss Pheto?"

"Sir, the people running the simulation didn't give me a chance. My ship's radar should have detected the other Kurgan fighter long before he fired off his missile."

Jolson sat down on the edge of his table and looked down at Tarina. "Miss Pheto, you can't always count on your fighter's electronics. Sometimes they fail and all you have is your skill as a pilot to save your ass in combat. Don't forget that you broke formation to chase after that Kurgan fighter. Lone wolves tend to get themselves killed. Maybe not today, but one day in the future you'll meet your match and there will be no one to cover your six and you'll die."

"Yes, sir," replied Tarina. He was right. She had become too focused on killing her opponent that she failed to see what was around her. Her tunnel vision had killed her again.

"Miss Pheto, you're an exceptional pilot, but I don't think you have the temperament to be a fighter pilot onboard a fleet carrier," said Jolson. "It takes a disciplined team to win in battle."

Tarina felt as if her chest was in a vise and it was slowly closing, cutting off the oxygen to her lungs. "Sir, if you'll give me another chance, I'll do better the next time."

Jolson shook his head. "I'm sorry, Miss Pheto, you've had three kicks at the can. You're reckless. Perhaps if there wasn't a war on we could take the time to break you of your bad habits. However, with the fleet screaming for trained pilots, I can't in good conscience send you out there to die or get someone else killed because of your carelessness."

"Yes, sir," said Tarina, trying to not let her crushed feelings show on her face. "Am I to be reassigned?"

"Yes, you are," said the colonel. "I watched the simulation from beginning to end. Miss Pheto, Major Jolson is right, you're an exceptional pilot and I need outstanding pilots who are capable of working on their own."

Tarina sat up. The colonel didn't look like a transport pilot. The sharp look in his eyes told her he was a tough and determined soldier. Perhaps her future wasn't as a pilot hauling supplies across the galaxy.

Jolson said, "Second Lieutenant Tarina Pheto, I'd like you to meet Colonel Darcy Wright, Commanding Officer of the First Special Warfare Squadron."

"Sir," said Tarina, nodding at the colonel.

Colonel Wright looked deep into Tarina's eyes. "Miss Pheto, I'm looking for pilots who aren't afraid to take risks and have what it takes to fly missions deep behind enemy lines. Do you think you have what it takes to be a member of my team?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

Wright smiled. "Good, report to hangar nine at 0900 hours tomorrow morning. I'll have someone meet you there, and Miss Pheto, from now on if anyone asks, you are a pilot with the Three Hundred and Thirty-Third Transport Squadron."

With that, Wright left the room. Both Jolson and Pheto stood to attention until the colonel was gone.

"Miss Pheto, effective immediately your permanent records will reflect that you have washed out of fighter school and you are being reassigned to other duties," said Jolson.

"Yes, sir,"

"Good luck," offered Jolson as he shook Tarina's hand. However, his tone was less optimistic.

"Sir, do you know anything about my new assignment?"

Jolson shook his head. "Until today, I'd never heard of them, but they seem to have heard about you."

Tarina couldn't decide if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Either way, her life had suddenly taken a turn into uncharted waters and she knew it.

Chapter 12

“What the hell do you mean the prisoner is dead?” said Sheridan to Agnar, trying to keep his temper in check.

“Sir, when I went to check on him, I found that he was dead,” awkwardly replied Agnar.

Sheridan looked over at Cole. “Sergeant, check on the prisoner.”

A minute later, Cole returned. “Sir, it looks like he was stabbed under the left arm and left to bleed out.”

Sheridan glared at Agnar.

“Sir, it wasn’t me. I swear. The only time I wasn’t guarding the prisoner was when I had to go to the bathroom.”

“Who watched him for you while you were gone?” asked Cole.

“It was Andrews, Sergeant.”

Cole called Andrews over. “What do you know about the dead man?”

Andrews shook his head. “Sergeant, I didn’t kill him if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Let me see your bayonets,” ordered Cole. Both soldiers handed over their knives.

Cole inspected them for a minute before giving Agnar’s back to him.

“Andrews, there’s blood on the hilt of your bayonet, care to explain how that got there?”

“It must have gotten on there when I helped Agnar cut meat from the bear you killed, Sergeant,” said Andrews.

“Agnar, is this true?” Sheridan asked.

“Yes, sir. Andrews helped me.”

Cole handed back Andrews his bayonet. “Did either of you see anyone go near the prisoner?”

“Now that you mention it, Tartov came around asking how the prisoner was doing,” said Andrews.

“I never saw him,” countered Agnar.

“He came around while you were off in the woods taking a crap.”

“Okay, that’ll do,” said Sheridan. “I don’t want the enemy to find the body. Bury him.”

“Get to it, Marines,” ordered Cole.

Grumbling to themselves, Agnar and Andrews went to bury the dead man.

Cole stepped close. “What do you think, sir? Could Tartov be responsible for murdering the prisoner?”

Sheridan shook his head. “I don’t know. However, while Andrews and Agnar bury the body, I want you to take Obermman aside and ask him about Andrews. From the time they got on shift at the engine room on the *Churchill* right up to the minute they wandered into our camp. I want to know everything.”

Cole walked away and took Obermman, who was on sentry, by the arm. He returned five minutes later shaking his head.

“What did he say?” asked Sheridan.

“He didn’t say anything that would make me suspicious. I asked him to keep the conversation between the two of us.”

“Thanks.”

“It’ll be dark soon,” observed Cole, looking up at the ominous-looking gray clouds as they rolled in.

“Yeah, let’s hope that we don’t bump into any Kurgan patrols tonight. We’ve been lucky so far. I’d hate for us to get so close that we can touch the city walls only to be caught by the enemy.”

Cole patted Sheridan on the shoulder. “Sir, you’ve done well so far. Keep it up and we’ll get some real food and a decent night’s sleep for a change in a few days.”

Sheridan smiled. He noted that it was unbelievable what just a few words could do to raise a person’s flagging spirits.

Two hours later, Sheridan’s mood turned foul when they stumbled upon a ditch filled with bodies. He stopped counting after thirty. All of them had been killed by a single shot to the back of the head. He had Agnar find two civilian winter jackets. When Agnar returned, Sheridan moved back and led his people around the ditch so Kelly Green wouldn’t see the dead.

Off to their right, hundreds of Kurgan guns thundered away. The ground shook under their feet. A couple of kilometers away, the forward edge of the capital was a long wall of fire as the houses there burnt to the ground.

After another hour’s walk, Sheridan called for a fifteen-minute break. They had come close enough to the refugee camp that they could smell the wood burning from a thousand fires. He called Cole up to his position.

“What are you thinking, sir?” asked Cole.

“I want to get a better look at the refugee camp. I believe that we may be able to find someone there who may know a way into the city,” explained Sheridan.

“Even if with your grubby beard, you’re still in uniform; you’ll stand out

like a sore thumb.”

“I thought about that and had Agnar grab us a couple of civilian jackets from the dead bodies we found a while back.”

“Sir, if you get caught, they’ll shoot you as a spy for being out of uniform.”

“Sergeant, I think that’s the least of my worries after seeing what they have been doing to the civilians,” replied Sheridan.

“Okay then, sir, what’s your plan?”

“I want you to hold up here for the rest of the night. If Agnar and I aren’t back by first light, it’ll mean that we aren’t coming back and you can carry on without us.”

After a quick handshake, Sheridan handed off his rifle to Cole, as did Agnar. Walking around with a standard issue rifle over one’s shoulder was a surefire recipe to being spotted and shot, reasoned Sheridan. He still had his pistol and Agnar his knife, not the best weapons to go against the Kurgans with, but it was better than nothing at all.

Keeping to the trees, Sheridan led them toward the closest campfires. When they were close enough to hear voices, he raised a hand; they stopped and listened for a couple of minutes. The voices sounded tired and disheartened. When he didn’t detect anyone speaking Kurgan, Sheridan grew bold. He told Agnar to remain in the shadows while he took a look around. A second later, Sheridan stepped out of the dark and walked straight toward a group of people huddled around a fire for warmth. He could see that they were a mix of people; some were well over sixty while many were young couples holding onto their children.

“May I join you?” asked Sheridan, trying to sound as non-threatening as possible.

A man with a scraggly gray beard and thick glasses looked up at Sheridan. He studied the dirty and disheveled man standing before him for a moment. With a warm smile, he said, “Of course you can, stranger. Please join us by the fire. I’m sorry that we can’t offer you any food as we have none to give.”

Sheridan thanked the man and took a seat on a log next to the old man. Before he could say a word, a blanket was laid over his legs.

“They have drones flying over the camp night and day. They’ll see your trousers, soldier boy,” whispered the man.

“Thanks,” replied Sheridan, realizing that he was safe and among friends.

“Are you from the capital?” asked a woman cradling her child in her arms.

Sheridan paused for a second unsure what to say. For now, the less they knew, the better. “No, I’m trying to get there. My men and I were trapped outside of the city when the Kurgans landed. We’ve been trying to make our way there

ever since.”

“Are there a lot of you?” the old man asked.

Sheridan shook his head.

“That’s too bad. By the sounds of it, they sure could use a lot of soldiers to help defend the capital.”

Suddenly, from above, a spotlight shone down on the people sitting around the fire.

“Don’t look up,” warned the man.

A pleasant-sounding woman’s voice filled the air. “People, you have been abandoned and left to starve to death by your cowardly leaders. This is not how citizens should be treated. Mothers, please think of the children slowly dying in your arms. A safer, more prosperous future awaits you and your children. Anyone who wishes to join us will not be turned away. Please make your way to the open field near our aid station and you will be looked after. Remember, your fate is yours to decide: citizenship or death.”

The light switched off.

Sheridan glanced up and saw a circular drone hovering above their camp. A second later, it moved toward another group of refugees further down the river.

“We should go,” said a young man to his wife. “They’ll be able to look after Sarah. If we stay out here any longer, she’ll die of starvation.”

The man’s wife looked down at her sleeping child wrapped in several dirt-encrusted blankets and sadly nodded.

“If you go, they’ll take you off world,” cautioned Sheridan.

“We know,” answered the woman. “We’ve all heard the rumors, but what would you have me do? The military won’t allow us into the city. They say there are too many people there already. My child is going to die out here. I’m willing to take my chances with the Kurgans if it means that Sarah will live.”

“She’ll be raised as a Kurgan.”

“At least she’ll live,” responded the woman.

There was to be no more discussion. The couple stood and slowly shuffled off into the dark.

“That’s been happening nightly,” explained the old man. “First, they took all the children between twelve and sixteen years of age. Then they dragged away any man who wasn’t married and was deemed capable of fighting.”

“None of them has ever returned,” added a black woman.

Sheridan thought about telling them about the men they stumbled across in the ditch but decided to keep his mouth shut. Anything he could tell them would only make things worse.

The old man continued. “Now they’re targeting the parents with young

children. I figure before too long it's just going to be us old folks waiting out here to die of starvation or the cold."

"Why would they take teenagers?" asked Sheridan.

"It's easier to mold a teen's mind into that of a fanatic than an adult who has already formed strong opinions about what is right and wrong," explained the black woman.

"Eve used to teach at the university," said the old man proudly.

Sheridan swore. "What about the kids' parents, did they go with them?"

Eve shook her head. "Most were killed trying to stop the Chosen from dragging away their children. The others haven't been seen in days."

Sheridan thought of Kelly Green. After hearing what the people had told him there was no way he could leave her out here to die. He resolved that she was coming with them, no matter what. "How often do the Chosen patrol through the camps?"

"They come and go as they please," explained the old man. "They were a lot in the first few days, rounding up people. They haven't bothered us in . . ."

"Two days," said Eve, finishing the sentence.

"Well, that's some good news at least," Sheridan said.

"Ever since they started shelling the city, the Kurgans' focus has switched from us onto the people trapped in the capital. It's mainly drones peddling their propaganda now."

A tired-looking man leaned forward and looked over at Sheridan. "You're a soldier, why would they tell us to come here to evacuate the planet, only to bar the gates and leave us out here with the Kurgans?"

Sheridan shook his head. "Ten to one, the message was fake. The Kurgans wanted you all in one area so they could pick and choose those people they wanted to take. They must have sent the message. After jamming all communications coming and going out of the capital, it would have been easy to have one of the Chosen send out a message ordering all of you here."

"I knew it," said Eve. "The military would never deliberately abandon us."

Sheridan had heard enough. He thanked everyone, took a quick look up into the night sky for a drone. When he didn't see one, he stood. "Please forget that you ever saw me and good luck to all of you. I wish I could stay and help you, but I've got to get into the capital and let them know what is going on out here."

"Soldier boy, you can help us by staying alive," replied the old man, shaking Sheridan's hand.

Sheridan gave the man back his blanket, turned around and then jogged back to the woods. He quickly briefed Agnar on what he had learned. Sheridan then carefully led them back the way they came. Sheridan had to get the

information he had into the hands of his superiors. How he was going to do it, he had no idea. He only knew he had to find a way.

Chapter 13

Tarina Pheto walked into hangar nine at precisely five minutes to nine. She spotted a group of young officers standing about enthusiastically chatting to one another. As she approached, the air seemed charged. Excitement was etched on the faces of the pilots. Tarina noted that the group was a mix of people; some were captains, the majority, however, were lieutenants. No one looked more than twenty-five years old.

“Hey, Tarina, over here,” called out a redheaded woman.

Tarina smiled. Walking over, she warmly greeted Wendy Sullivan, a girl who had been at the academy with her. At least she wasn't alone.

“So they drafted you too,” said Wendy.

“I washed out of fighter school, you?”

“I was asked to leave navigator school. I kept getting into arguments with the other students and the instructors over their calculations,” explained Wendy. “They were always wrong.”

Tarina recalled how Wendy could do calculations in her head faster than anyone in her class. She was nicknamed the Human Computer for her skill and accuracy at plotting courses through light years of space. She also wasn't known for her humility.

“Well, I'm glad you're here. All this secrecy is a bit unnerving.”

A major walked in and told everyone to follow him to the back of the hangar. A dark curtain hung from the ceiling to the floor.

“Welcome to Triple-Three Transport Squadron,” said Colonel Wright exuberantly as he walked out from behind the curtain.

A couple of the new officers chuckled.

Behind them, the hangar doors closed.

“Before I show you the ship you will be learning to fly, I want to make it perfectly clear that you are free to leave in the next two minutes and no one will think less of you. If you stay here, you are agreeing to undertake highly dangerous missions behind Kurgan lines without the hope or possibility of extraction. Should your craft become damaged and is unable to return, it will self-destruct, taking you with it. Should you become incapacitated for any reason, your ship will self-destruct. In short, your deep space raider will not fall into the hands of the enemy under any circumstances and neither will you.”

A captain put his hand up. “Sir, what if there is a malfunction or a computer

error, will the ship still auto-destruct?”

“Yes,” replied Wright bluntly.

A murmur ran through the crowd.

“Now if any of you wish to leave and carry on to another assignment, please step aside and report to Major Fareed, who is standing off to the side of the hangar. He’ll have you sign a series of non-disclosure papers and make sure that you are dispatched with all haste to a real transport squadron.”

Tarina looked around. No one moved.

Wright looked over at a technician standing by the wall and nodded. The curtain began to rise behind him. “Now that we have that out of the way, feast your eyes on the X-5 Avenger.”

Tarina’s eyes widened when she saw the craft. It had two seats: one for the pilot, the other for the navigator. It was long and sleek, with short wings further back on the fuselage, which she took to be a sign that the Avenger could be used inside a planet’s atmosphere. At the back of the ship was a large engine unlike any she had ever seen.

Wright walked over beside the Avenger. “On the drawing books before the outbreak of the war, the X-5 was rushed into production. It is unique in the fact that it has a jump engine. No other craft this small has this capability.”

“How far can it jump, sir?” asked Wendy.

“For now, that and all other technical information will remain secret.”

Tarina and Wendy exchanged a look of disbelief. *What else was going to be classified?* wondered Tarina.

Wright continued. “You’ll note there are no racks to mount missiles on. The only weapon you will have is a thirty millimeter cannon built into the nose of the craft. As space was limited inside the fuselage, you have only enough ammunition to defend yourself. Let me be clear, this is not a fighter. The Avenger is designed with only one purpose in mind, and that is deep space reconnaissance.”

“Sir, has it been tested yet?” asked a slender, dark-haired pilot.

“Yes, but not behind Kurgan lines.”

Someone in the back groaned.

“Come on, don’t be shy, crawl around the X-5,” said Wright, waving the pilots over. “For the next month you are going to learn all about this craft and what it can and can’t do. During that time, your skills will be evaluated. Don’t bother asking to team up with anyone. All crew assignments will be my call. One last thing before I turn you over to Major Fareed and tackle the mountain of paperwork sitting on my desk. I hope that you all spoke with your folks last night because as of right now, you are confined to base. You will hand over your

phones and any other communications devices you have on you to Major Fareed. There will be no communication with the outside world until I say so.”

Wright paused and looked into the eyes of his handpicked personnel. With a grin etched on his face, he said, “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the First Special Warfare Squadron.”

Chapter 14

Sheridan was tired and hungry. His muscles were tired and his joints ached. They were down to one meal a day and in the cold, it never seemed enough. With the temperature dropping daily, the clothes on their backs were not enough to keep them warm.

Cole had a fire built. Sheridan was about to object when the sergeant pointed out that they were the only group of people sitting around in the woods without one. Having one made them fit in with their surroundings; should an enemy drone fly over it would just see another bunch of refugees trying to keep warm. Sheridan quickly relented. He knew Cole had made the right call.

An hour later, Sheridan found himself on sentry duty. They had taken refuge for the day behind a large tree-covered mound. Sheridan sat with his back against a tall fir tree looking out toward the capital. He stopped counting the number of drones the Kurgans had in the sky over the city. Every couple of minutes one would let loose a missile, which would streak at supersonic speed at its target. Occasionally, the defenders would fire a ground-to-air missile up at the drones. It was suicide. The instant the soldiers in the city fired, three Kurgan drones would fire back, obliterating whoever had been there. The Marines trapped in the capital were being systematically hunted and destroyed without the Kurgans suffering a single casualty. Sheridan wondered how much longer this uneven fight could go on.

“Pretty gloomy sight, isn’t it?” said Cole as he sat down beside Sheridan. In his hands were two cups of black coffee.

“Doesn’t make me want to go there,” replied Sheridan.

“And yet here we are trying to find a way in.”

Sheridan took a sip of coffee and felt it warm his innards as it slid down his throat. “I’ve been sitting here studying the Kurgan’s deployment and it stretches the entire length of the capital. They’ve dug trenches about two hundred meters back from the forward edge of the city. I don’t think we can get in that way. I hate to say it, but we may have to hike around the capital and try approaching it from the other side.”

Cole picked up his binoculars and studied the tall mountains behind the city. He didn’t like what he saw. They were almost out of food and with the weather getting worse by the day, he doubted they had the strength to make it. “Sir, I don’t think we could make it up and over those peaks, not with a person on a

stretcher and a civilian with us. If it were just us Marines, I'd say go for it, but we've got other people to worry about."

"I know. It looks like it's the front door or nothing."

Cole surveyed the refugee camp. A couple of seconds later, he said, "Sir, lend me your civilian jacket."

"Why?"

Cole handed his binoculars over and pointed down at a group of people standing around a roaring fire. "What's wrong with that picture?"

Sheridan studied the people for a minute and then shrugged his shoulders.

"Sir, take a good look at the man in the blue jacket talking to a couple of women near the fire."

Sheridan looked again. The man appeared to be having a conversation with the women. "Sergeant, I'm still not getting it."

"The bastard is clean and has no beard. He's got to be from the capital. I'm willing to bet my pension that he's a black-marketer who knows a way in and out of the city."

Sheridan raised up the glasses once more and studied the man as he dug into his jacket and handed over what looked to be cans of food to the women in exchange for their jewelry. "Damn, you've got good eyes. I would have missed that."

"I've seen his kind before," explained Cole. "He's a human parasite, but right now he's the answer to our prayers. Can I have your pistol too?"

With a nod, Sheridan handed over his jacket and pistol to Cole. "What's your plan?"

"I intend to drag that fellow back here so we can ask him a few questions," answered Cole, grinning. "Sir, if this goes south, get your ass out of here."

With a handshake, Sheridan took Cole's rifle and wished him luck.

With the collar pulled up on the back of Cole's borrowed jacket, he walked through the woods, eyes fixed on his target. Keeping his head down, he avoided making eye contact with any of the people moving about the ramshackle group of shelters that had been built around the fire. Cole could hear the man asking anyone else if they wanted to make a deal with him before he moved on.

"I do," said Cole, trying to sound tired and despondent.

"Ah, a new customer," said the man. With combed blonde hair and a round face, the man was the polar opposite of the disheveled refugees. "How can I help you, my good man?"

Cole kept his head down. "My child is sick. I need medicine. What do you have?"

“I don’t have any medicine on me today, but if you tell me what you’re looking for I can return tomorrow . . . if the price is right.”

“I’m not a doctor. Perhaps if you took a look at my daughter, you could determine what she needs and how much it is going to cost me?”

“Sure, friend,” replied the man, smiling.

Cole placed a hand on his arm and steered him away from the fire.

“Is your child near?”

“Near enough,” said Cole as he pulled out his pistol and jammed it hard into the man’s back.

“Just a minute, my good man, there’s no need for that. I told you already, I don’t have any medicine on me.”

“I don’t give a damn. Keep your mouth shut and keep moving. If you try anything foolish, I’ll put a bullet in your back and leave you out here to die.”

The man went to object but received a sharp poke in his side with Cole’s gun, warning him to be quiet.

Sheridan called Obermman over to take over on sentry as Cole and his prisoner walked into their camp.

With a swift shove from behind, Cole pushed the blonde-haired man to the ground. “Cover me,” Cole told Garcia while he removed the man’s jacket and dumped everything he had at his feet. Placing all of the jewelry to one side, Cole piled up the bags of freeze-dried food and saw that they were military rations.

“Where did you steal these rations from?” Cole asked the terrified man.

“I found them,” stammered the man.

Cole pulled back on the hammer on his pistol and pointed it at the man’s head. “Don’t lie to me, you little shit! You stole these. Give me honest answers and I’ll let you keep all of your fingers. Lie to me again and I’ll have Agnar cut off your fingers, one by one.”

The man looked over at Agnar, who slowly pulled out his bayonet and smiled.

“You’re not refugees,” protested the man, looking around the group. “You’re soldiers. You can’t treat me like this. It’s your job to protect me.”

Sheridan said, “Right about now, I’m willing to throw out the uniform code of conduct and do whatever feels right. Now, answer my sergeant’s question.”

Agnar flipped his knife around in the air.

The man recoiled in horror and tried to crawl away. Cole grabbed his collar and held him tight. “Okay, okay, call off your man and I’ll tell you what you want to know,” cried the man.

“Where did you get those rations from?” demanded Cole.

“I got a man in supply who sells them to me.”

Sheridan grinned. “So you know how to get in and out of the capital?”

“Yes. I was a civilian maintenance engineer before the Kurgans came. There are dozens of tunnels underneath the city. Most were barricaded up by the military, but I found one they had missed.”

“Is it far from here?” asked Cole.

The man shook his head.

“I take it you come and go at night to avoid the Kurgs?” Sheridan said.

“Yeah, there’s an old sewage tunnel that comes out near the river. The iron grate there isn’t locked.”

“When do you use it?” asked Cole.

“Usually just before dawn.”

“Good, you can take us there tomorrow morning,” said Sheridan.

The man looked about at the weary dirt-covered people standing around him. “You’ve got to be joking. There’s too many of you. We’ll be spotted for sure.”

“For your sake, I hope not,” replied Sheridan bluntly.

“Sir, what shall I do with the jewels and the food?” asked Cole.

“I doubt we could return the jewelry even if we wanted to, so bury it. As for the food, keep some for us and then give the rest away.”

Cole nodded.

Sheridan walked over until he stood over the black-marketer. “As for you, you had better be telling the truth, or Agnar’s going to make you regret the day your mother gave birth to you.”

With their reluctant guide in the lead, Sheridan waved for everyone behind him to follow. A damp, cold fog clung to the river, masking their movement.

Agnar carried Hollande on his back. As quietly as possible, Tartov and the two other crewmen were shepherded by Obermman. Garcia held Kelly Green close to her as they crept along. At the back of the pack, Cole and Andrews kept guard.

As they snuck past a fire, a dog barked loudly. Everyone froze in their tracks. An angry voice hushed the animal. Praying that they hadn’t been seen, they continued. After ten more tense minutes, the black-marketeer stopped by a lone pine tree, turned around to face Sheridan and quietly said that the grate was right below them. Leaving the man under guard, Sheridan slid down the wet riverbank until his boots touched the water. He checked both ways to make sure that he wasn’t being observed before carefully crawling over to the rusty iron grill covering the tunnel entrance. He reached down, grabbed hold of the gate

and pulled back. It was unlocked. A wave of relief swept over him. He half expected it to be booby-trapped. He scurried back up to his friends.

“Okay, the coast looks clear,” said Sheridan. “Let’s go.” He turned to help Agnar with Hollande when gunfire suddenly erupted.

Through the mist, Sheridan could only see the muzzle flashes of several weapons firing. The sound of bullets cutting through the air made Sheridan duck. He shoved their guide to the ground, brought up his rifle to his shoulder and prepared to engage whoever it was attacking them.

Agnar was already on the move to the tunnel.

A second later, the shooting stopped. A voice moaned in the dark.

“Don’t move,” Sheridan warned the black-marketeer. With adrenaline coursing through his veins, Sheridan advanced into the fog. A dark shape moved toward him. Instinctively, he laid his weapon’s sights on the person.

“Sir, please lower your rifle, it’s me,” said Cole calmly.

“What the hell just happened?”

“Andrews jumped me. Before I could bring my rifle up to fire, he hit me in the side of the head and then opened fire on the people in front of us. One of the crewmen is dead, and the other has a hole blasted through his neck. Garcia is treating him, but he won’t last long.”

“Where’s Andrews now?”

“He ran off into the fog. Can you believe it? The bastard’s one of them. He’s probably heading straight for the Kurgan lines.”

Sheridan swore. “Get everyone moving. Tell Garcia to leave the crewman. We can’t afford to waste time on him.”

“Right,” replied Cole, turning to give the orders.

Kelly Green emerged out of the mist with Obermman and Tartov, who was shaking like a leaf.

“Straight down there,” said Sheridan pointing toward the river.

A couple of seconds passed before Cole and Garcia joined Sheridan.

“He’s dead,” proclaimed Garcia.

Voices called out in Kurgan. The sound of a drone flying overhead told them their time was up. In seconds, their heat signatures would give them away and a missile would be on its way.

“Follow me,” said Sheridan, leading the way.

The inside of the tunnel was pitch-black. Sheridan turned on the light on the forestock of his rifle so he could see. A beam of light illuminated the way. The tunnel wasn’t very high. Sheridan had to bend over. Up ahead, he could see the lights from several other weapons marking where the rest of his people were.

“Hold up,” called out Sheridan.

Garcia said, "What's that disgusting smell?"

"Sewage," replied Cole.

"How far do we have to go?" Sheridan asked the black-marketeer.

He said, "It takes about fifteen minutes to get where we're going."

"And where might that be?" queried Cole.

"To an old maintenance building. My contact will be waiting for me there."

"Lead on," said Sheridan waving his rifle down the dark tunnel.

"Where's Andrews?" asked Agnar.

"He ran off," replied Garcia. "The lousy son of a bitch was one of them."

Agnar shook his head, made sure Hollande was as comfortable as she could be on his back and followed close behind Sheridan.

Sipping his cup of coffee, Sergeant Munroe was growing concerned. It wasn't like his partner in crime to be late. He checked his watch and saw that he was only a couple of minutes late. He opened up a packet of dried fruit and was about to pop some in his mouth when he heard the sound of the hatch leading down into the tunnel begin to creak open.

"You're late," said Munroe loudly as he helped to pull open the heavy iron lid.

A rifle poked out of the narrow entrance as Sheridan climbed out.

"I'm not late and you, Sergeant, are under arrest," proclaimed Sheridan. "If there are other soldiers involved in this crime, I'd think about selling them out for a lesser sentence if I were you."

Chapter 15

Sheridan and Cole sat in the hallway of an underground complex waiting to see Major-General Gruber, Commanding General of the forces on Derra-5. After suddenly appearing inside the besieged city with two prisoners in hand, Sheridan's party had been detained by the military police before being passed off to the intelligence staff. As soon as Sheridan started to recount their tale of survival outside of the capital, his entire party was quarantined until they could be properly debriefed.

Sheridan was surprised to learn that instead of a single regiment, the bulk of a Marine Division was dug in facing the Kurgan invasion force. Even with three infantry regiments, an artillery regiment, and other support arms like air-defense, military police, and logistical units, he guessed that they were still outnumbered at least five to one by their adversary. With all of their electronics jammed, the defenders were helpless to stop the swarms of drones that flew with impunity over their positions. Sheridan had spoken with a member of the operational planning staff and had learned that the Kurgan drones were now targeting all of the command and control systems spread throughout the city. That was why they had gone underground. A full-scale attack on the capital was only hours away.

They had eaten a hot meal, washed and shaved before being called down to speak with the general. With new uniforms on, both men felt as if the experience of the past two weeks had been some sort of horribly long dream that was now behind them.

The door to the briefing room opened, and a captain poked her head out of the door, "Come in, gentlemen."

They walked in, came smartly to attention and saluted General Gruber, who was sitting at the head of a long wooden table. All down the sides of the table were the various members of the general's staff.

The division's sergeant major, a grizzled-looking Asian-American soldier, waved for Cole to sit beside him.

"Please take a seat, Mister Sheridan," said Gruber, a white-haired man with a gruff visage. "My staff and I have read your report and you are to be commended for making it through enemy lines. I was more than a little perturbed to learn that not all of the tunnels under the capital had been sealed properly. That problem, I am happy to say, has been rectified. What disturbs me the most are some of the findings and conclusions that you included in your

summation.”

“Sir, if I was unclear, I apologize,” replied Sheridan.

“There’s no need to apologize, son. Your report is well written and succinct. Although we have yet to see a single Kurgan, the fact that they are using human auxiliaries is repulsive, but not unexpected. I was briefed before the war began that rumors of human colonies abandoned on the Kurgan side of the Disputed Zone after the last war had started to draw the attention of the staff at Fleet Headquarters. There are two things that have me worried. First off is the fact that there could be Kurgan spies and saboteurs here among us.”

Gruber paused and took a sip of water. He continued. “Secondly, and most alarming, is the conclusion you drew from the Kurgan kidnapping of teenage children. In your report, you said that you believe that this is an indication that the Kurgans are in this for the long haul. You don’t think that this war, like the one before it, will only last one or two years at most.”

“No, sir, I do not,” responded Sheridan firmly.

A bespectacled lieutenant colonel wearing intelligence insignia on his collar leaned forward and looked down the table at Sheridan. “With all due respect, Mister Sheridan, you’re only a second lieutenant with no real experience. How can you draw such a conclusion based on a discussion you had with some refugees?”

Sheridan sat up straight in his chair and looked the officer in the eye. “Sir, there is no other logical conclusion that can be drawn from the facts. These youths will be indoctrinated into the Kurgan religion and culture and will return in a couple of years to fight us as replacements for the losses they expect to take in this war.”

“Bloody hell, using our own people against us, it’s abominable,” said another colonel.

The intelligence colonel persisted. “Second Lieutenant, did you see any real Kurgan warriors outside of the city?”

Sheridan shook his head. “No, sir, we did not. As stated in my report, I was told that the Kurgans are here as officers only. The force facing the capital is almost entirely comprised of Chosen soldiers.”

The officer turned to face General Gruber. “Sir, I find it hard to believe that there are no Kurgan troops on the ground. All of the intelligence updates we received prior to the Kurgan invasion never once spoke of humans being used in lieu of Kurgan warriors, not one.”

“Perhaps your reports were wrong, sir,” said the division sergeant major dryly.

The general’s chief of staff interjected, “General, we could have been

receiving bad information for years. If what Mister Sheridan is saying is correct, Kurgan spies could have been operating in our fleet for generations. It's going to be hard to trust anything sent to us in the future if we ever find a way to cut through the enemy's jamming."

The division sergeant major leaned over to Cole and quietly said, "Your boy's quite smart and confident for a Two-LT. He's Admiral Sheridan's son, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is, sergeant major," replied Cole. "And yes, he is very intelligent. He has the potential to go far if he wants to. He's still got a lot to learn about soldiering, but he's already shown to me that he can work well under pressure."

"This PO you have with you, the one you found in the wreckage, do you think he could detect enemy messages in our computer files?"

"He's a nervous type, but what have you to lose by letting him poke about in your computers?"

"I know whose computer he's going to examine first," said the sergeant major, eyeing the intelligence officer.

General Gruber rhythmically drummed his fingers on the table for a minute, lost in thought. He took in a deep breath and said, "Well, even if we don't all agree on the details of Mister Sheridan's report, we can't afford to ignore them, either." He turned to face his chief of staff. "Anne, have the MPs double their patrols effective immediately. I also want all of our command and control centers guarded twenty-four-seven from now on. Draft soldiers from the artillery if you have to. Since the drones trashed their guns, they haven't had much to do."

Gruber placed his hands palm down on the table. "Mister Sheridan, I would like to thank you for efforts in keeping your people alive and in persevering against the odds to warn us of a threat none of us had the slightest inkling of."

"Thank you, sir," replied Sheridan.

"Now, if my staff is right, and I think they are, we're going to be attacked in the next few hours. I could use an officer like you on the front lines. Report right away to the Forty-Fourth Marine Regiment for your next duty assignment. My staff will let them know you are coming."

Sheridan stood and saluted. "Sir, could I please take Staff Sergeant Cole and the other survivors with me?"

"You got balls, kid. Not too many second lieutenants would ever dream of asking their commanding general for a favor." Gruber grinned. "Permission granted."

"Good luck," said the sergeant major to Cole as he shook his hand goodbye.

Outside the room, Sheridan looked at Cole. "I hope that's okay with you, Sergeant."

Cole smiled. "I gotta serve somewhere. Besides, I'd rather not have to break in a new platoon leader. You'll do for now."

"I guess we had best find Agnar, Garcia, and Obermman and tell them the good news."

"Come on, sir, they're bound to be sitting around the mess hall waiting to find out what's going on."

With that, they picked up their weapons from the MP's guarding the hallway and headed straight for the mess hall. As expected, the Marines were sitting at a table by themselves. Agnar was busy helping himself to as much food as he could. Sheridan sat down and broke the news to them.

"A job is a job," Garcia noted philosophically.

"Say, sir, what's the name of this outfit?" asked Obermman.

"Since it's a mishmash of regiments and units thrown together to defend the planet, it's called the Capital Division," replied Sheridan.

Cole said, "Come on, Marines, we've got a bit of a hike, so let's get moving."

"Why not," Agnar responded while he jammed a couple of apples into his pockets.

With Sheridan leading, they made their way through the warren maze of trenches that led from the headquarters to the frontlines. Walking out in the open would have invited a Kurgan drone missile strike. They passed other soldiers and civilians using the trenches for safety. What bothered Sheridan was the despondent look on the faces of many of the people they saw. It was as if they had already resigned themselves to defeat. He prayed that the soldiers manning the frontlines weren't infected with the same malaise, or they and the city didn't stand a chance against the coming storm.

Chapter 16

Cole told Sheridan that arriving at a new unit was like going through a sausage machine. A person gets jammed in at one end, and after a time, he passed out the other end ready to go, or at least, that was the theory. After being met by the regiment's personnel officer, a tired-looking man who chain-smoked several cigarettes while he filled out the necessary paperwork, Sheridan was told that they were to report to the unit's second battalion. Moving through the rubble of a destroyed warehouse, Sheridan led his people to the battalion's tactical operations center located in the basement of the burnt-out building. Here they were greeted by the battalion's executive officer, a harried and disheveled major, who was devastated to see that there were only five people reporting in. He had asked for thirty replacements to make up for those killed or wounded during last night's bombardment.

After a cursory glance at his files, the major told them to report to Alpha Company. Sheridan asked for directions and then saluted the major, who disinterestedly returned the compliment. Five minutes later, Sheridan and Cole stood at attention in front of their new company commander's desk.

Captain Rolleston was a broad-chested Maori, who had thick black hair and powerful arms that strained at the fabric of his uniform shirt. Intricate tattoos covered his face. "So, Mister Sheridan, I hear that you and your people made it through the Kurgan lines. Tell me, is it true that they are using humans against us?"

"Yes, sir, it is true," replied Sheridan.

"I'd hoped the rumors were just that. It seems unbelievable that humans would fight for the Kurgs."

"Sir, these people are Kurgan citizens. They don't see us as equals; in fact, they look down on you and I as being below them."

A gunnery sergeant walked into the room and grinned. "Well, look what the cat just dragged in. If it ain't Staff Sergeant Alan Cole. I thought you were back home."

"I was for a while, Gunny, but I asked for a new assignment," replied Cole.

"You two know each other?" asked Rolleston.

"Yes, sir, we served in the First Division a couple of years back. Staff Sergeant Cole is a solid NCO, if he keeps away from the bottle," said the gunnery sergeant.

“Gunny, I’m clean and sober going on two years now,” responded Cole uncomfortably.

Rolleston eyed Cole for a few seconds before reading their transfer orders. “Okay, gents, you have Three Platoon. Their officer and platoon sergeant were killed two days ago by a Kurgan drone. Sergeant James has been commanding the platoon ever since. Gunny Wilson will take you there so you can get settled in. I’ll be around later today to see how things are going.”

“Yes, sir,” answered Sheridan, coming to attention to salute his superior officer.

“Mister Sheridan, no more saluting. I don’t want to end up with my brains spread all over the wall like strawberry jam because some Kurg sniper saw you saluting me. You’re not at the academy anymore.”

Sheridan instantly felt like an amateur. He remembered his first introduction to Cole back on the *Churchill* where he said saluting was for the parade grounds and not a war zone.

“Come on, I’ll show you to your new home,” announced Gunny Wilson.

With Garcia, Obermman, and Agnar trailing behind, they made their way through row after row of demolished buildings. With one eye on the sky looking for drones, they rarely stepped outside for more than a couple of seconds.

Gunny Wilson explained that Alpha Company was set out like a triangle with two platoons up and one back. Platoon strongpoints had been established with clear fields of fire that dominated the open ground and the approaches into the city. Sheridan’s platoon was the left forward platoon. On his right flank was Two Platoon, commanded by a dour-looking officer who had a two-word vocabulary. Gunny Wilson said that the man didn’t say much, but seemed to know his job. Sheridan’s left was anchored by a platoon from the regiment’s first battalion.

A lone dog barked at something on the street. Sheridan watched as a Marine sprinted out from cover, grabbed the dog by the collar and then ran back under cover. A split second later, a missile struck the ground in front of the house, sending wood and rock flying up into the air.

“Damned fool,” muttered Gunny Wilson. “Every platoon has one. Yours is a kid named Roberts. That was him rushing out into the street to save his dog.”

“I’ll have words with him,” replied Cole.

The smell of burnt wood filled Sheridan’s nostrils as he stepped inside a half-demolished home. Dust covered everything. Papers and empty ration boxes littered the ground. A couple of disinterested Marines sat there looking up at the new arrivals. Before the gunnery sergeant could open his mouth, Cole launched into the two soldiers. Swearing up a blue streak, he gave them two minutes to get

the platoon headquarters cleaned up and the squad leaders assembled or they would live to regret it.

Gunny Wilson shook Cole's hand and wished them luck before leaving.

A couple of seconds later, Sergeant James ran into the room. He was a short, slender man who looked like he had been on his feet for the past week. "Sorry for the mess," said James, his accent Irish. "I've been too busy doing the platoon leader's job to keep an eye on the little things."

"That's alright, Sergeant, Second Lieutenant Sheridan and I are here to take that burden off your back," Cole said, feeling somewhat sorry for the man. "Do you have a platoon nominal roll? Mister Sheridan and I would like to review it before making any decisions where to place the three Marines we brought with us?"

"Only three," muttered James.

"Is that a problem, Sergeant?" queried Sheridan.

"Sir, we were hit pretty hard the day we lost Mister Folly and Sergeant O'Neal. You should have a full platoon of forty-six men. Instead, you only have twenty-eight healthy Marines. This morning four soldiers reported that they were sick and were sent back to the unit aid station. They're combat stress casualties. I doubt they'll ever come back to us. Another two were pulled from us this afternoon to top up One Platoon. They got it worse than us last night."

Cole let out a low whistle. "How are you set up?"

"I have the platoon split into three squads of eight men each. One is commanded by

a corporal, the other two by lance corporals," explained James. "The remainder of your people are in the platoon headquarters."

"Heavy weapons?" asked Sheridan.

"We have a .50 cal. It's not automated, sir. In fact, the damn thing really belongs in a museum. The soldiers in the headquarters are responsible for operating it in the event of an attack."

"With an attack perhaps only hours away, the machine gun has to be manned twenty-four and seven from now on," said Sheridan. "I'll let Sergeant Cole decide how we're going to do that."

The sound of combat boots coming down the stairs made Sheridan turn his head. In walked the squad leaders. James introduced them. Corporal Lanihan, a man with a loud voice and permanent smile on his dirty face commanded the first squad. Lance Corporal D'Amato had the second. She had dark brown, almost black, eyes and a confident air about her. The last squad was led by Lance Corporal Singh. The man dwarfed everyone in the room.

Sheridan looked over at his first command and tried to remember all of the

things Cole had told him to avoid saying. He decided to keep things short. “Alright, Marines, my name is Second Lieutenant Sheridan. We’re going to be hit hard sometime tonight or in the early morning. I want you to make sure that you and all of your people are ready for the fight of their lives. I’ll be coming around in a couple of minutes to orient myself to your squad positions. Save your breath pointing out that you don’t have enough men because what we’ve got is what we’re going into battle with.”

“Damn,” said Lanihan. “So much for all the crap we heard about reinforcements being on their way.”

“Corporal, you’re looking at it,” Cole said. “Get used to the rumor mill churning out worthless tidbits like that on a daily basis. Unless you hear it from me or Mister Sheridan, you and your men are to ignore it.”

Singh cleared his throat. “Sir, is it true that the enemy are humans like you and me?”

Sheridan could see the unease in the man’s eyes. Obviously, the thought of killing Kurgans was easier than shooting at fellow human beings. “Yes, it’s true. They are called the Chosen, and they won’t hesitate to kill you and all of your men to achieve their goals. I’ve seen what they can do, and trust me, they may look human, but they’re not. They’re Kurgan soldiers whose job is to kill you, so don’t let them. Do your job and you’ll all come out of this alive.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Singh, nodding.

“That’s all for now. I’ll be coming around shortly with Sergeants Cole and James, starting with first squad.”

“You’ll find us shipshape,” announced Lanihan.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” replied Cole.

Two hours later, with his head still spinning, Sheridan took a seat in his headquarters, removed his helmet and ran a hand through his hair. Cole had decided to have Agnar, Obermman, and one of the older soldiers operate the heavy machine gun while Garcia was brought into the headquarters as the platoon’s medic until a trained corpsman arrived to relieve her.

“So what do you think of the platoon layout?” Sheridan asked Cole.

“Not bad. They’ve clearly done the best they could with the ground they were assigned to hold.”

A Marine walked over and handed a couple of warmed up ration packs to them and then left the room, leaving them alone.

Sheridan got up, walked over to the door and closed it. He took his seat and looked over at Cole. “Sergeant, what was all that stuff about being an alcoholic? You seem to have a bit of a reputation with Gunnery Sergeant Wilson.”

Cole took a deep breath. “Sir, I’d rather not talk about it. It’s old news.”

“Staff Sergeant, we’re about to go into combat. I need to know that the man I rely on for advice and guidance is not going to have a relapse when I need him the most.”

Cole shook his head. “Sir, I won’t have a relapse, and I’m not one to talk about personal matters.”

Sheridan wasn’t about to let the matter drop. “Okay, then I’ll go first. My father is an admiral who had more time for his ships than he ever had for his children while they were growing up. My mother is a racist and an alcoholic who wrapped her car around a tree, killing my sister and nearly killing me when I was ten years old. The police buried the fact that she was drunk so it wouldn’t affect my father’s career. There wasn’t a flag officer on base that she didn’t sleep with while my father was away, which I might add was nearly all the time. So I became an over-achiever in everything I did to compensate for the attention I never got at home.”

Sheridan took a sip of water from his canteen and continued. “The family name was all that mattered when I was growing up. A Sheridan was the first man to do this, the first man to do that. It was more like being in a cult than a family. And I stupidly went along with it right until I woke up one morning and realized that the only good thing in my life was gone because my mother objected to her being black. So there, that’s the Michael Sheridan family closet laid bare.”

Cole placed his ration bag down and looked into Sheridan’s eyes. No man had ever opened up to him like that. His father was a man who hid his feelings and thoughts and he had grown up to be a man just like his father. “Sir, my wife, Ariel, left me while I was on a yearlong assignment far from home. She took our daughter, Violeta, and moved back to Earth. Violeta now calls a salesman daddy. I can’t blame my wife; I was never around.”

Cole paused for a second. “It was about a month after she left that I started drinking. I even drank to begin the day. I had booze hidden all over the place. It got to be that I could do my job drunk. Gunny Wilson found me passed out one day on the john. He was the one who recommended that I be sent back home for a few years to dry out and to get my life back in order. It was the best thing I ever did. I’ve been clean and sober for nearly two years now.”

“Sergeant, if the Corps didn’t think you were worth saving, they would have kicked you out years ago. I, for one, am glad that they chose to keep you. I don’t know what I would have done without you after we landed here.”

Cole patted Sheridan on the back. “You did okay, sir, you did okay.”

“Just okay?”

“Come on, sir, a Boy Scout could have found his way here.”

“Well, as I recall there wasn’t one around to help.”

There was a knock on the door. Cole opened the door. It was Garcia. “Sir, a runner just came from company headquarters. The CO will be doing a line tour in thirty minutes.”

Sheridan thanked her and then said, “Well, Sergeant, it looks like it’s show time.”

Chapter 17

The dull crump of incoming artillery hitting their targets all along the front line seemed to be never-ending. For the past three hours, the Kurgan guns had been relentlessly pounding the houses occupied by the Marine defenders.

Sheridan's building shook from a near miss. Dust trickled down from the roof, like snow, onto everything below it. Sheridan sat by a viewport looking out at the horizon, lit up a hellish red by the enemy's long line of guns. Inside the basement command post, each person awaited the coming assault in their own way. One of the Marines sat in the corner praying while another was flat out on the ground fast asleep. Garcia packed and unpacked her med kit. Sheridan had lost count how many times she had performed the ritual. Staff Sergeant Cole was absent, having been trapped by the heavy machine gun when the barrage started.

With a growing sense of apprehension, Sheridan knew that the instant the barrage lifted that the enemy would be coming in their thousands. He was surprised that he wasn't scared. Nervous perhaps, but definitely not afraid. He chalked that up to inexperience. Sheridan doubted he would feel this way the next time—if there was a next time.

He edged over to another viewport and looked over at the buildings where two of his squads were holed up. Through the swirling dust, he could see that both houses still stood. He was relieved. If either one of his squads had been destroyed during the barrage, he knew that there would be no way he could possibly hold his position and would be forced to pull back.

The shelling, like a demonic wave, shifted behind them and onto the depth units behind them.

They were coming.

"Stand to," ordered Sheridan. He reached down to flip his rifle's safety to automatic and saw that his hand was shaking. Sheridan closed his eyes and took a deep breath to calm his nerves. With a quick flick of his thumb, he placed his weapon on full-auto.

In the gray light of dawn, Sheridan could just make out the Kurgan trenches. The scene reminded him of a picture he once saw of the First World War. Although centuries removed from that time, the similarity wasn't lost on Sheridan when he saw all along the Kurgan lines, hundreds of crimson red banners being lifted aloft. Crimson he knew was the color that signified the Kurgan religion.

Suddenly, thousands of voices all called out as one. The word they chanted was Kurgan for God. Sheridan found it be both terrifying and exhilarating at the same time. His orders were to hold at all cost. There could be no withdrawal from their positions.

He lifted up his binoculars and focused them on the Kurgan trenches. A second later, like creatures crawling up from the pits of hell, ten thousand warriors climbed out of the jagged lines dug in the ground and began to surge forward. Without any supporting artillery to assist them, there was nothing left to Sheridan and his Marines but small arms to bring down the long white line of Chosen soldiers.

All along the line, the crew-served heavy weapons opened fire. The rhythmic noise of the machine guns firing filled the air. Tracers reached out like a long line of deadly scythes, cutting down dozens of Kurgans at a time. It, however, was precisely what the enemy wanted. They had sold the lives of their soldiers to identify where the Marines' machine guns were located. Seconds later, dozens of drones swarmed over the Marines' positions, firing off all of their missiles until all of the heavy weapons fell silent. Sheridan swore when he saw two projectiles slam into the side of the building where Cole and the .50 cal team were dug in. The building exploded and collapsed in on itself sending up a swirling plume of smoke and dust into the sky.

The long line of Chosen warriors was now less than one hundred meters away.

Sheridan placed his laser sight on a soldier and pulled the trigger. He never saw the man fall. All along the line the Marine defenders opened fire. It was impossible to miss; the Chosen soldiers were packed together running forward almost shoulder to shoulder. Everyone in Sheridan's bunker was firing as fast they could, trying to stop the white-coated mass from reaching their lines. Quickly changing his magazine, Sheridan was surprised how fast he went through one-hundred rounds.

Out front of their position, the long line of Chosen soldiers began to falter. It was like charging into a hailstorm. Men bent down and slowed down to a walk as they made their way over the mounds of dead and wounded in their path. Bloodied bodies littered the ground. The wounded knew they were on their own and began to crawl back toward their own lines. A Kurgan officer grabbed a banner and waved it over his head, trying to get his men to continue forward. He fell with a hole blasted through his head. All along the line, hesitation took hold of the Chosen as more and more of their officers fell under the lethal fusillade. The warriors had given all they could. At first, in ones and twos, they began to run to the rear and then, like a dam bursting, the entire assault force turned and

ran for the safety of their trenches.

“Cease fire,” yelled Sheridan as Kurgan smoke rounds fired by their artillery fell from the sky obscuring the enemy forces as they fled back to their own lines.

A loud cheer broke out from the battered defenders. A young Marine patted Sheridan on the back and then let out a whoop.

“We got ‘em, sir,” said the Marine. “They ain’t so tough.”

Sheridan shook his head. “That was just a probing attack to pinpoint our positions. They’ll be back, and next time they’ll bring armor for intimate support.”

“Armor?”

“Yeah, the Kurgs are just like us. They have tanks, and I’m sure they’re not afraid to use them.”

Sheridan turned to look out on the battlefield. It was a sickening spectacle to behold. In front of his platoon were several hundred Chosen soldiers. Most were dead; however, dozens lay there moaning in agony, while several more dragged themselves over the bodies of their comrades as they tried to make it back to their trenches. Sheridan knew from reading about the last war that Kurgan commanders did not believe in evacuating their wounded off the battlefield. They didn’t have medics at unit level. It was God’s will if you lived or died.

He shook his head and turned about. “Garcia, I’m going to check on the platoon. If a runner comes from the CO, send him my way.” With that, he opened the door to the basement and climbed the stairs. The smell of burnt wood filled his nostrils. Carefully moving over to an open door at the back of the building, he peered out and saw that the path was clear. Stepping out, he heard glass from the shattered windows break underfoot. He sucked in air through his teeth as his heart raced in his chest. *So much for being quiet*, he thought to himself. Sheridan lifted his foot and looked for a better place to put it down. He warily edged to the side of the house and peered around the corner. When he didn’t see any movement coming from the long line of Chosen bodies, he sprinted across the open ground to the next closest house and slid inside through a hole blasted in the side of the building.

Sergeant James greeted Sheridan with a weary smile. “Looks like we gave them a good ass kicking, eh, sir.”

“They’ll be back,” replied Sheridan. “I want you to adjust your positions in the house. No one is to be where they were the last time the enemy attacked.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because they’ve probably identified all of our positions with laser target designators and when they come again, they’ll blast the hell out of those locations first.”

“Got it, sir,” responded James.

Sheridan pushed on through the wrecked house until he came to another opening in the wall. As before, he made sure it was clear before dashing over to the building where Cole and the heavy-weapons team had been. He climbed over a pile of rubble and made his way up inside the home. It was unnervingly quiet. Sheridan called out, “Sergeant, are you in there?”

“Is that you, sir?” replied Cole.

“Yeah, where are you?” asked Sheridan unable to tell where the voice was coming from under all the debris covering the floor.

“Believe it or not, we’re on the floor below you. When the missiles hit, the floor gave way and dumped us down here.”

Sheridan pushed some burnt timbers out of the way and bent down so he could see down into the next floor. He gritted his teeth when he saw Cole wrapping a field dressing around Agnar’s bloodied head. The front of the soldier’s uniform seemed to be caked with blood and dust. “Where are the other men?” he asked Cole.

“Obermman and Shields are both dead.”

Sheridan swore. “What about the machine gun?”

“A total write off,” replied Cole. “There’s no way it could be repaired unless there was a weapons tech around, and I doubt we’re gonna see one of them in our neck of the woods for a long time.”

Sheridan asked, “Is there a way out of there?”

“Yeah, there’s a hole in the wall large enough for us to crawl through.”

“Okay then, you and Agnar head back to the command bunker and wait for me there. I’m going to check on the rest of the platoon before I head back.”

Cole looked up and nodded. “Hey, sir, keep your head down out there.”

“Trust me, I will. I have no desire to end up as a notch on some Kurgan drone operator’s desk.”

Almost an hour passed before Sheridan made it back to his command post. Cole and the rest of the people there had moved into the next room and were busy sandbagging the new firing ports.

“How are the squads holding up?” Cole asked.

“James’ squad is alright. Singh lost a man and Lanihan has two slightly wounded who refuse to go back to the aid station.”

“So, three dead and three wounded. We came off fairly light, if you ask me.”

“Yeah, I doubt we’ll be so lucky in the future.”

An out of breath soldier staggered down into the bunker and gave Sheridan a message. While he read it, Cole made sure the young man got some water. With all of their communications gear jammed, they had reverted to using

runners to pass messages. A hazardous duty with all of the Kurgan hunter-killer drones circling the city ready to blast anything that moved out in the open.

Sheridan signed the note and handed it back to the Marine, who headed out to the next platoon position.

“What’s up?” Cole inquired.

“Just an update from higher. We’re to expect another attack in the next few hours. This time they’ll be backed up by armor.”

“You called it, sir,” remarked Garcia.

Sheridan grinned. “I’m not that bright. It’s the benefit of studying the last war that gave me the foresight to know what to expect. Their equipment may have improved like ours, but for some reason, their tactics are still mired in the past.”

“It worked for them before, didn’t it, sir,” said Agnar.

“Sometimes it did, sometimes it didn’t,” responded Sheridan.

“Hey, sir, look, it’s snowing,” said the Marine who had been praying during the artillery barrage.

Sheridan grinned. At last, Lady Luck was shining down on them. The enemy’s thermal vision equipment would be severely degraded in the blowing snow. For as long as it snowed, the enemy would be blind.

A voice called out. It was a Chosen speaking Kurgan.

Sheridan edged to a firing port and peered outside. He could see a wounded man shot through both legs trying to sit up.

“What’s he saying?” asked Garcia.

“He’s asking for help,” responded Sheridan. “He wants us to put him out of his misery.”

“I’ll gladly do it,” said Agnar as he reached for his rifle.

Sheridan shook his head. “I’d rather take him alive. I’m sure regiment would love to interrogate him.”

“No one’s going out there!” warned Cole. “I’ve seen this kind of crap before. On Setius-5, the rebels told their people that if they were wounded to call out for help. Same thing’s happening here. He’s trying to draw someone out so a Kurg sniper a kilometer away can kill him. He knows his life is forfeit, he just wants to take one of us with him.”

“Jesus,” muttered Garcia as she crossed herself.

A second later, a shot rang out, echoing off the walls of the buildings. The wounded warrior slumped back, dead.

“I guess one of our snipers decided to get rid of the bait,” Cole said dryly.

Sheridan stood there for a moment looking out at the dead man. He shook his head and then slumped down onto the sandbagged parapet. The thought, *it’s*

going to be a long and brutal war, flashed into his mind. He suddenly felt tired as the adrenaline seeped out of his system. A growl from deep inside his stomach told him to eat something while he had the chance.

“I was waiting for someone else’s guts to bark out,” said Agnar as he ripped open a box of rations and tossed the meals around.

Sheridan grabbed his food out of the air. He let out a chuckle. He had spaghetti, his favorite meal. *Thank God for small things*.

Cole looked over at the soldier who could sleep anywhere and said, “Marine, what’s your name?”

“Private Angus Macdonald,” replied the Marine.

“Well, Private Macdonald, you just volunteered to become the platoon runner. Pack your kit and make your way back to the company CP and stay there until you’re sent back here with a message for the Mister Sheridan. Keep your head down and make sure that you can find your way to and from this bunker in the dark.”

The soldier nodded his acknowledgment and began to grab what few things he had, jammed them in his pack and left.

“I’d give a month’s pay for some working comms gear,” said Sheridan.

“Might as well save your money because it ain’t gonna happen,” Cole replied. “From paper maps to runners to an enemy that still believes in human waves, we’ve stepped way back in time to fight this war.”

Agnar asked, “Sir, when do you think they’ll come again?”

“I suspect they’ll spend the rest of the day massing their forces and then come at us late tonight or early tomorrow morning with everything they’ve got.”

“Sounds about right,” added Cole as he removed the magazine from his rifle and checked how many rounds were still in it.

Sheridan took a quick glance outside. The snow was coming down heavier than before; it was hard to see more than ten meters through the swirling blanket of snow. He couldn’t see the wall of Chosen bodies lying out on the cold ground anymore. “Sergeant, what do you think, should we do one last check of the squads before the sun sets?”

“Yes, sir, I was about to suggest the same thing.” Cole grinned; they were beginning to think alike. A good sign for any command team.

Chapter 18

The silvery light from Derra-5's twin moons shone over the silent field of battle. Although only a third of the size of Earth's moon, the two celestial bodies seemed to fill the cold night sky.

Sheridan rubbed his hands together. Ever since it had stopped snowing, the temperature had dropped considerably. He could see his breath hanging there like a fine mist each time he exhaled.

It was just after midnight. A fresh blanket of snow covered the ground.

"I guess they're not coming tonight," said Agnar.

"It's still early," Sheridan replied, checking his watch.

"I wish they'd come. I'm freezing," complained Garcia.

"They'll come when they are good and ready," added Cole.

Sheridan couldn't believe that anyone could be alive out in the bitter cold. Nevertheless, he could hear several Chosen warriors moaning in the dark. The sound was unsettling. If he thought he could trust the Chosen, he would have dispatched Garcia to see if she could help with the wounded. However, Cole was right. He couldn't trust them, and he wasn't about to risk her or anyone else's life. Sheridan was about to turn away when a slow, steady rumbling noise in the distance seemed to grow louder by the second. He picked up his night vision binoculars and looked out over the Kurgan lines. His blood turned cold when Sheridan spotted a row of monstrous sized tanks rumbling toward them. He had seen pictures of Kurgan tanks from the last war, but these seemed to dwarf them. He guessed that each one stood well over five meters tall and was at least fifteen meters long. Its turret was sloped with a large gun mounted in the center. He instantly recognized the armament as a rail gun, a deadly electromagnetic projectile launcher capable of firing a projectile straight through any known armored vehicle in the Terran arsenal. Behind each behemoth were columns of Chosen soldiers, using the super-sized armored beasts for cover.

"Here they come!" yelled Sheridan. A split second later, the Kurgan tanks' rail guns began to glow blue from the electromagnetic force being built up to fire their lethal shells.

He barely had time to warn everyone to take cover when the tanks opened fire. The building shook violently as one of the projectiles hit the room they had been using earlier, tearing it to pieces. The sound of the rail guns' shells tearing through the air at thousands of meters per second reminded Sheridan of a

fighter's engine flying directly overhead.

All along the Marines' line, the tanks engaged the houses the defenders had fired from. If Sheridan hadn't ordered all of his men to move to a new location, they would all be dead by now.

Cole crawled up beside Sheridan and peered out at the sea of armor as it rolled toward them. "There's no way in hell our Cobra anti-tank missiles will be able to stop that," he said, shaking his head.

"Not from the front or the sides, but could they from above?" Sheridan asked.

"Yeah, they just might." Turing about to face Agnar, Cole said, "Grab the anti-tank launcher and head up onto the roof. I want you to try to take out the tanks as they drive by."

Agnar hauled the only spare Marine in sight with him as he picked up the launcher and an arm full of missiles.

As the tanks rumbled closer, the other Marine anti-tank teams all along the line fired off their missiles in an attempt to stop the metal horde. As expected, the projectiles harmlessly detonated on the thick armor without penetrating inside. A second later, the Kurgans returned fire, wiping out the crews before they could move to another firing position. Silhouetted against the light of the twin moons, like so many wraiths, dozens of enemy drones flew in for the kill. Missiles streaked out of the sky hitting anyone unfortunate enough to be caught out in the open. Sheridan prayed that they wouldn't spot Agnar before he had a chance to kill at least a couple of tanks.

Within seconds, the tanks were less than one hundred meters away and closing fast. Sheridan could feel his heart racing in his chest. He hoped that his men listened to him and wouldn't open fire on the Chosen until they could reach out and touch them. He wanted the enemy so close that they couldn't bring their other weapons, such as their drones and now their tanks, into the deadly battle about to be fought in the shattered streets without hitting their own soldiers. The two platoons on either side of his position opened up early and were instantly attacked by the tanks and the swarm of drones hovering above in the night sky.

The wait was intolerable. Sheridan had to force himself not to open fire on a group of Chosen warriors that he could see through a side firing port as they jogged behind one of their mighty tanks. Silence gripped the bunker. The only sound was the ragged breathing of the people as they waited for the storm to break.

Rather than expose themselves on the roof, Agnar had stopped on the top floor of the building. Warily, he crawled forward, got up on his knees and peered

out of a destroyed window at the long line of enemy tanks. Agnar knew that it would take twenty meters for their anti-tank warhead to arm itself. He picked a vehicle about fifty meters away crushing some rubble under its wide metal treads as it moved toward First Squad's position. Agnar didn't know much about the Kurgan tank's capabilities, but he didn't doubt that they had a laser warning indicator somewhere on the vehicle. He decided to forgo using the laser on his launcher to aim with and used the weapon's iron sights instead. He took a deep breath, picked a spot on the top of the enemy tank and slowly pulled back on the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Agnar glanced down and swore. He had forgotten to take the safety off. Flipping it to armed, he took aim again and pulled the trigger. With a loud whoosh, the missile shot from the launcher and struck the top of the tank. In the blink of an eye, the turret exploded, sending pieces of shrapnel into any Chosen warriors near the tank, killing and wounding dozens.

"Reload!" ordered Agnar.

The other Marine quickly slid another projectile into the back of the launcher and then tapped Agnar on the shoulder, letting him know that the weapon was loaded.

Agnar selected another tank and pulled back on the trigger. His aim was off slightly. The missile bounced off the side of the turret, exploding high in the air. Agnar swore in Danish.

"We've been here too long. Let's go," said the Marine with Agnar.

Agnar didn't want to leave but knew that the man was right. He had just begun to crawl back when the top of the building exploded. The concussion from the blast knocked the air from his lungs. Attacked by several drones, the roof fell down on Agnar and his partner.

The sound of the roof being torn apart by missile fire loudly reverberated down into the basement bunker, shaking dust and debris loose.

Sheridan cursed when he was showered with dirt. The room was filled with a swirling dust cloud that blinded everyone inside. Sheridan was thankful that he was at least wearing his combat glasses so the dust didn't reach his eyes. Coughing and hacking to clear the crap from his lungs, Sheridan edged over to a firing port to get some fresh air and nearly jumped in fright when he saw a set of eyes looking back at him. In the noise and confusion, several Chosen warriors had sprinted from behind their tank to check out the building where the rocket fire had come from. The Chosen soldier was just as surprised to see another man looking back at him and tried to bring up his assault rifle. Sheridan, however,

reacted faster and fired off a burst through the opening, killing the warrior.

Cole and Garcia rushed over. The firefight was short and deadly; the Marines couldn't miss. Taking that as their cue to join the fight, Sheridan's platoon opened fire on the enemy. Scores died before they knew they were under attack. Some took cover in the debris-covered streets and tried to return fire. Stuck out in the open, they were soon cut down.

Outside, a tank pivoted on its tracks and turned toward Sheridan's building. It lowered its gun and took aim. Sheridan was wrong; the Kurgans didn't care if their soldiers were in the way. With a loud whoosh, a shell shot down the tank's rail gun and struck the ground floor right above the bunker. The explosion killed or maimed several Chosen soldiers near the house. Almost immediately, the building began to collapse down upon itself, trapping anyone still alive inside. For good measure, the tank emptied a three-hundred round drum of machine gun ammunition into the wreckage before continuing the advance.

With a loud ringing in his ears, Sheridan slowly opened his dust-caked eyes and tried looking around. Nothing of what he saw made any sense until he realized that he was lying on his back, looking up at what had been the roof. His body seemed to ache everywhere. Shattered timbers from the floor above them had crashed down, looking like the remains of an ancient prehistoric monster's rib cage. He turned his head and saw that the bunker was almost entirely destroyed. He tried to move his legs but found that he couldn't. Sheridan then tried to sit up; however, he discovered that his chest was pinned under a charred beam of wood.

His throat was parched. "Is there anyone alive in here?" he croaked.

A gloved hand reached over and gently rested on Sheridan's lips. "Don't say another word, sir," whispered Cole.

After what seemed like hours, Cole leaned close and said, "How are you feeling, sir?"

"Like crap," replied Sheridan honestly. "Sergeant, I can't move."

"I know. You're pinned under a piece of the roof. Once the enemy moves, I'll get you out of there."

"What happened?"

"The building fell down on top of us, that's what happened." Cole grabbed his canteen and held it close to Sheridan's lips so he could get some water.

Through the haze in his mind, Sheridan tried to remember what had happened to them. The last thing he could recall was a pair of eyes looking at him. He shivered. "Sergeant, what about Garcia, did she make it?"

"Yeah, she's got a broken left wrist. Aside from that, she's okay. I've got her

keeping watch. The fighting has shifted behind us. The Kurgs cut through our front line like a hot knife through butter. By the sounds of it, the rest of the battalion is still in the fight. I'm not sure what happened to the rest of the platoon. I haven't heard any gunfire near us in over an hour, so I'm not holding out much hope for them."

"What time is it?"

"It's just after nine in the morning. Sir, please try and rest. I don't think we're gonna be able to try and make it out of here before nightfall."

Sheridan silently cursed. He didn't want to lie on the cold floor trapped under debris for hours. Suddenly, a thought hit him; he had to go to the bathroom. Grinding his teeth in frustration, he knew it was going to be a long day.

An hour after nightfall, Cole and Garcia, moving about as quiet as a pair of church mice, helped Sheridan out from under the rubble. Garcia quickly checked him out and told him that aside from a slight bump on the head and a few scratches, he was alright. Sheridan looked about at the wreck that once had been his command bunker.

Cole whispered, "Okay, sir, here's the skinny. The Kurgs seemed to have stopped for the night. Their wounded have been streaming by our position all day long. Looks like our boys gave as good as they got. The problem is that I have no idea how to get back to our lines from here."

"I guess we're going to have to sneak our way through the enemy until we bump into our own lines. Let's pray that we don't stumble into some trigger-happy individuals," said Sheridan.

"I figured you were going to say that, so I've been studying the ground behind us. I think we can use that line of destroyed buildings running to the north for cover," said Cole, pointing to the ruined homes.

"Sounds good." Sheridan looked over at Garcia and asked her how she was holding up.

Garcia held up her bandaged wrist. "Nothing a sawbones can't fix, sir."

"Sir, I'm gonna lead if you don't mind," Cole said. "You took a good hit to the head and I've at least had a chance to study the route in the daylight."

Sheridan nodded. "What about the drones, won't they spot us?"

"With their wounded and dead spread out all over the place, I betting that we'll just come across as another heat signature moving about on the ground. Right now the enemy is probably more interested in what's happening in front of them, than behind."

With that, Cole put his shoulder on the door leading out the basement and

pushed hard. It slowly slid open. He carefully looked out and then stepped out into the rubble. Using the debris for cover, Cole stealthily made his way to the back of the home. When he saw that it was safe, he waved for Sheridan and Garcia to join him.

The night was cold and dark. Clouds covered the sky, threatening to snow.

A horrible moan seemed to be coming from all around them. Hundreds of Chosen warriors lay in contorted poses in the streets. Most were dead; however, dozens of mortally wounded soldiers lay there waiting to die.

“This way,” whispered Cole as he led off. He hadn’t gone ten meters when he nearly tripped over Agnar’s dead body. Garcia gasped when she saw her friend lying there with his lifeless eyes wide open staring up at the night sky.

“Crap,” muttered Sheridan. He had grown to like the young soldier.

“He died doing his job. Let’s go,” Cole said quietly. They quickly made it across the street and into the row of abandoned houses Cole intended to use for cover. In the dark, each room they walked through was like a mini obstacle course. Trying desperately to not make a sound, they moved slowly through the devastated buildings.

After nearly an hour, Cole raised his hand and got down on one knee. “We’re gonna take a ten-minute break,” he whispered over his shoulder.

Sheridan dug out his canteen and took a long sip of cold water before offering it to Garcia. His stomach rumbled. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a packet of something he couldn’t read in the dark. Food was food, he reasoned, so he opened the pack and was surprised to find that he was eating apples in a sweet, sugary sauce.

In the pitch-black of the room, a dog whined and was instantly shushed by someone. Sheridan’s heart skipped a beat. He peered into the darkness but couldn’t see a thing. A Chosen warrior could have been standing right beside him and he wouldn’t have seen the man until it was too late.

The animal whined again. A voice pleaded with it to be quiet.

“Roberts, is that you?” whispered Cole.

“Who’s there?” said the voice.

“Staff Sergeant Cole, that’s who.”

A second later, Roberts edged his way from behind a destroyed section of wall and made his way over to Cole. He was short and slender and wore glasses on his narrow face. His accent was Canadian. With him was his dog, a German Shepard.

“She’s hungry,” said Roberts.

“Get rid of the damned dog!” ordered Cole.

“I can’t do that, Sergeant. She’s all I got left. All of my friends are dead.” It

was confirmation that Lance Corporal Singh's squad had not survived the fight.

Garcia ripped open a ration pack and handed it to Roberts. "It's stew," she said.

"Damn it all to hell, don't encourage him," muttered Cole.

"Sergeant, there's been enough dead for one day. I'd hate to see the dog added to the list," said Garcia.

Cole looked at Sheridan to decide what they should do with the dog.

"It can stay for now, but if it so much as barks once, it's gone," Sheridan decided.

With an angry shake of his head, Cole dropped his opposition to keeping the dog.

For the next few hours, they quietly moved from one building to another. The dead and dying from the day's battle were strewn everywhere. A couple of Kurgan tanks stood silent in the narrow streets with their turrets blasted open. They came across some Marine and Chosen soldiers dead in one house, their bodies were still locked in a deadly embrace as they fought one another to the death. It was a disturbing sight to behold. The closer they got to the river that split the capital city into two almost equal halves, the thicker the piles of Chosen bodies became. Realizing that they weren't going to make it to their lines tonight, they sought out a basement for them to hide in for the day. It didn't take long to find a cellar that was big enough for all of them to hide in.

Once inside, Cole closed the door behind them and turned on his flashlight, illuminating the space. It was empty except for an old wooden table and four chairs sitting in the middle of the room. A deck of cards and a half-drunk bottle of booze sat on the table, a reminder that someone had once lived here. Before anyone could reach for the bottle, Cole grabbed it and poured what was left onto the floor.

"I want everyone to have a clear head," Cole said, looking over at Roberts and Garcia.

Sheridan said, "Okay, we're here until nightfall. When it gets dark, we'll push on again and try to make it back to our lines. If you've got any food on you, I suggest that you eat it as I doubt we're going to find any out there tomorrow."

"One person at a time will be on sentry for two hours, starting with Roberts, and no falling asleep," growled Cole, still pissed that the dog was with them.

Sheridan removed his helmet and pulled out a chair so he could sit down. He looked over at Cole. "Sergeant, I know that you're not happy with my decision. And a day ago I would have agreed with you. But we both know that Roberts wouldn't leave his dog behind. With all of the losses we've suffered, I couldn't just let him go."

“Sir, death is part of the job. The sooner we all get used to the idea, the easier it’s going to be to accept the loss of those people we serve with.”

“You may be right, but at that moment in time I just couldn’t say no.”

“It’s what makes you human,” said Cole, patting Sheridan on the arm. “If you aren’t conflicted when you have to decide whether someone lives or dies, you’ve lost your soul and are no better than a mindless automaton.”

“Thanks,” replied Sheridan.

“However, just to be clear, sir, if I were in charge, I would have ditched the dog and Roberts if need be, but you’re the boss.” With that, the conversation ended.

Chapter 19

Tarina sat on a red and white checkered blanket holding a glass of white wine in her hand. Sheridan had picked a shaded spot on a hill overlooking his family's home in Plymouth. He smiled at her before playfully rolling over on his back until his neck rested on her lap. She smiled at him, leaned down, and delicately kissed his lips. Sheridan thought her lips tasted like strawberries. He had never been happier in his entire life. The last few years with Tarina by his side had been a blissful blur. Every weekend they could manage to be together was spent away from the academy.

"Penny for your thoughts," Tarina said.

"I was just wondering how a guy like me was so lucky to find a girl like you," replied Sheridan.

"It must be your very large family trust fund that makes you handsome."

"That's not even funny," Sheridan said, hitting her on the arm.

"Will your parents be home tonight?"

"Yes, I called. They're on their way to meet us at the house for supper."

Hesitantly, Tarina asked, "Do you think they'll like me?"

"Sure, why not? I'm head over heels in love with you."

"Yes, but you're not your parents, just like I'm not mine. People can be judgmental even if they won't say so to your face."

"It'll be alright. You know, you worry too much sometimes."

Sheridan reached up with his right hand and placed it on the back of Tarina's neck. He could feel the warmth of her skin on his hand. Gently, he pulled her mouth down toward his.

"Sir, you need to get up now," said Tarina with a serious look on her face.

"Why would you say that?" mumbled Sheridan.

A hand shook him. "Sir, you're dreaming. Wake up!"

Sheridan opened his eyes and saw that he wasn't on a hill with the sun shining down on him. Instead, he saw a troubled expression on Cole's face.

"What's up?" asked Sheridan as he sat up in the seat he had fallen asleep in.

"Thank God for that damned dog," said Cole barely above a whisper. "She heard it long before any of us did."

Sheridan was confused. "What did she hear?"

"Listen," said Cole, pointing up at the roof.

At first, Sheridan didn't hear a thing, only his own breathing. A couple of

seconds later, his ears picked up the faint sound of something mechanical rolling over the debris-strewn floor over their heads.

Sheridan's eyes went wide.

Cole nodded and then mouthed the initials HK. Rather than risk any more casualties, the Chosen had begun to inspect houses they had passed for any Marine stragglers using armed robotic vehicles known as hunter-killers.

Sheridan whispered, "Can it get down the stairs?"

Cole shrugged.

Everyone in the room, including the dog, stared up at the roof. Even their breathing grew quiet as the machine crawled along, breaking wood and glass under its treads. They followed its movement until it came to the stairs leading down into the cellar.

Cole raised a finger to his lips.

Through a crack in the door, they could see a light shining down from above. For a moment, all was silent. Sheridan hoped that the robot would move on. Then with a thud, he heard the machine begin to make its way down the stairs. Taking them one at a time, the robot grew close.

"What do we do?" whispered Sheridan.

"We can't play dead; its thermal camera will pick up our body heat," replied Cole. He looked about. A second later, he hauled a dust-covered tablecloth up off the floor and indicated with his hand for everyone to move against the wall.

Slowly, methodically, the machine made its way down the stairs. Inside the room, everyone waited and listened as the robot extended a mechanical arm to see if the door was open. When it realized that it couldn't push the door open, it fired off a small explosive charge on the end of its metal arm.

With a sharp crack, the door lock snapped apart and the door flew open. A bluish-white laser instantly shone inside looking for movement. When it detected none, the robot advanced into the room. In a flash, Cole threw the tablecloth over the top of the machine. For a few seconds, it moved back and forth trying to pull the sheet off.

All of a sudden, it stopped moving.

Cole looked over at Sheridan and quietly pulled his bayonet from its sheath. Sheridan, his mouth turning dry with fear, did the same.

Voices above them cursed and swore up a storm. A light was switched on and shone down the stairs, looking for the robot.

Footsteps.

Sheridan heard two Chosen soldiers coming down the stairs bitching and complaining about their equipment always failing. The first one stepped inside the room and stopped in his tracks when he saw the cloth draped over the

machine. His eyes widened. He was about to step back and draw his pistol when the second warrior, not paying attention, crashed into the back of the other one, sending them both into the room.

Like a pair of coiled snakes, Cole and Sheridan struck. Neither man had ever killed a person with a knife before, but it was a case of them or the Marines and both men wanted to live. Repeatedly, Sheridan smashed his blade into the nearest Chosen's open side until his victim's knees buckled. Sheridan hauled back on his quarry and in one final thrust he plunged his knife into his dying adversary's heart.

With his heart pounding away in his chest, Sheridan let the lifeless body fall to the ground. Even in the dim light, he could see that he had killed a woman. Guilt tore through his heart when he saw the woman couldn't have been any older than himself and had skin as dark as Tarina's. Sheridan dropped his knife and fell down on his knees beside the dead warrior. He reached out and gently turned her face toward his. She looked so much like Tarina that for a brief second, he thought he had killed the woman he loved.

A hand reached over and grabbed him by the shoulder. Sheridan was hauled up off the ground. Spun about, he found himself looking into Cole's eyes. "You did what had to be done. Sir, you haven't done anything to be ashamed of."

Cole glanced up the stairs. The thought of remaining near the people they had just killed for even one second more was too much for him to bare. "We can't stay here. They'll come looking for their people."

"Sir, what are your orders?" said Cole forcefully to Sheridan, snapping him out of his daze.

Sheridan looked over at Cole. "Lead on, Sergeant, find us another spot to rest in. It's too early to start moving about outside; we'll be spotted or sure."

Ten agonizingly long minutes later, they took refuge in a nearby house. It was far from perfect, but it would have to do for now. Sheridan sat down in the corner of the room and looked down at his hands. In the gray light of dusk, he could see that the blood had dried to a reddish-brown color on his hands.

"Take this," said Cole, offering Sheridan his canteen.

Sheridan wet his hands and rubbed them, trying his best to get the blood from every crack and pore in his hands. It was no good; the blood wouldn't come clean.

"Sir, you've got to clear your mind, or this will get to you and you'll be no good to the rest of us. Between you and me, if I could find a bottle right now, I'd chug the whole thing down. So don't you fall apart on me, not now."

Sheridan lowered his hands and placed them on his rifle. "I'm okay; it's just that that Chosen warrior reminded me of someone I know. It spooked the hell out

of me.”

“I’m sure that’s going to happen thousands of times until this war comes to a close. There’s probably families firing and killing one another; they just don’t know it.”

Sheridan took a deep breath. He hadn’t thought about it that way until now. “Sergeant, do you think we’re getting close to our lines?”

“I’m not sure. When it gets dark, the fighting will kick up again. That should give us a good indication of where our forces are.”

On the other side of the room, Garcia was fast asleep with the dog nestled up right beside her. “Roberts and his dog saved our skin,” observed Cole. “Sir, you can forget what I said before; I want a dog in the platoon from now on.”

An hour after dark, the world in front of them erupted in flames. The sound of Marines and Chosen warriors engaged in combat to the death drowned out everything else. Kneeling so he could judge where the fighting was raging, Sheridan felt more a spectator than a participant to the violent struggle going on no more than few hundred meters away.

They waited until they saw wounded Chosen soldiers hobbling to the rear to seek medical help. Sheridan nodded and Cole led off once more. Slowly, moving from room to room, from building to building, they edged ever closer to the front lines. When they were less than fifty meters from the fighting, Cole suddenly lifted his hand and stopped.

“What’s wrong?” asked Sheridan.

“I could be wrong, but I thought I heard a child crying.”

For a few seconds, they stood still and listened. Barely audible over the titanic fight, they both heard a kid crying out for its mother. Cole pointed to the destroyed house beside theirs. Sheridan nodded. They all dashed over to the building and came to a sudden halt when they found a room littered with dead civilians. It looked as if they had all died when a shell struck their house early on in the fighting.

In the dark, a child whimpered and then called out for its mother. Garcia heard the cry and walked over to a turned over sofa. She bent down, stuck her head underneath and saw a young girl, probably no more than five years old hiding there. “Hey there, hon, my name is Isabel. I’m here with my friends to help you.”

The girl lay there with tears in her eyes, staring at Garcia.

“You can trust me, hon, now why don’t you come out from under there and we’ll take you away from here.” Garcia waited a couple of seconds and then gently reached out for her with her hand.

Unsure if she should, the young girl hesitated for a few seconds and then took Garcia's hand. Slowly, she crawled out from under the sofa. Fear and disbelief filled the scared child's eyes. For a second, she looked as if she was ready to bolt back under the couch when she laid her eyes on Roberts' dog. "Doggy," she said, reaching out for the animal.

Right away, the dog stepped forward and let the girl pet her on the nose. The girl smiled as she leaned forward and tightly wrapped her arms around the dog's neck. The animal just stood there and took it all in stride.

"Do you like Tammy?" Roberts asked the girl.

She nodded and kept her hands tight around the dog's neck.

"What's your name, hon?" Garcia asked.

"Danika," answered the young girl.

Garcia brushed the girl's matted hair away from her dirty face. "Danika, it's not safe to stay here. There are bad men all around here. My friends and I are here to take you to safety."

"What about Mommy? I can't wake her up."

Sheridan felt a lump in his throat when he saw Danika look over at the body of a woman lying facedown on the floor. The thought that she had been all alone for days while her family lay dead on the floor tugged at his heart.

"First, we'll take you somewhere safe and then we'll see what we can do for your mother after that," explained Garcia. "Would that okay?"

Danika meekly shook her head and then looked up at Roberts. "Can I walk with Tammy?"

Roberts smiled and handed the young girl his canteen and what was left of a candy bar.

"Sure thing, Danika, but Tammy prefers things to be nice and calm so were going to have to be extra quiet until we reach our friends. Can you do that?"

Danika enthusiastically nodded as she devoured the candy.

"Why do we seem to attract all the stragglers?" Cole whispered.

"I guess it's on account of your warm personality," quipped Sheridan.

The sound of a Kurgan tank firing its rail gun a few houses away shattered the couple minutes of calm they had been enjoying and brought the war back onto their doorstep.

"Time to leave," said Sheridan.

Cole warily edged to the shattered doorway and peered out into the darkened street. It was clear. Waving everyone to him, he pointed at the next house they were going to all run for.

Roberts swept Danika up in his arms. "Just until we reach the other side," he whispered in her ear. She wrapped her arms around his neck, closed her eyes and

held on tight.

“Now,” said Cole. As one, they darted across the street and straight into the darkened building. They stopped for a moment, listening for the sound of anyone following them or perhaps moving around in the dark. When he was sure they were alone, Cole looked over at Sheridan who indicated for him to continue.

They repeated this routine for nearly an hour until they were close to the fighting. The smell of burning wood, explosives, and ozone from the Kurgan’s rail guns hung thick in the air. With Garcia, Roberts and Danika taking cover in a cellar, Sheridan and Cole crawled through the wreckage until they found a vantage point to observe the fighting. A long street marked the furthest extent of the Kurgan advance. It was easy to make out the Chosen warriors in their white camouflaged smocks lying in heaps beside the burnt-out remains of several destroyed tanks. They couldn’t see their own people, but the occasional muzzle flash from a window or firing port showed them where the Marines were firing from. It was obvious that anyone stepping out into the open was a dead man for sure. If the Marines didn’t kill you, the Kurgans would.

Sheridan looked up at the night sky and was surprised to see that there was half the number of drones hovering above the Marine’s position as there had been just two nights ago. He wondered if the Kurgans were having problems keeping them going in the cold weather.

Cole tapped Sheridan on the arm and pointed to a smashed tank sitting lengthwise across the road. “Sir, I think I just figured how we’re going to make it to the other side.”

Five minutes later with everyone briefed up, Cole stepped off and led the group through the ruined remains of a store. Its shelves had been looted. There wasn’t a thing left on them.

Sheridan was becoming uneasy. It was too quiet where they were. All of the fighting seemed to have suddenly shifted to the next block over.

His caution was shared by Cole, who had slowed to a snail’s pace. He suddenly raised a hand, indicating a stop and slowly dropped to one knee. He whispered over his shoulder, “Sir, see if Garcia is carrying any powder in her med kit.”

A minute later, a small bottle was handed to Cole, who unscrewed the lid and squeezed the bottle sending a fine cloud of powder up into the air. As the dust began to fall, the floor of the room they were about to enter was lit up with at least six beams of light that crisscrossed the ground.

Cole whispered, “Booby traps. Probably set by our side as they withdrew.”

Sheridan knew from his training that anti-personnel mines could be set up to be triggered if an enemy stepped in front of a laser beam. Backtracking, they

carefully made their way out of the building. After a minute's discussion, Cole picked a new route through an adjacent store. He moved carefully, stopping to check each room for traps before moving on.

The eerie silence that gripped the long, black street was unnerving. Sheridan's mind began to play tricks on him. Every shadow, every odd shape became an enemy soldier. He took a deep breath to calm his nerves. If they were going to make it to their lines alive, he had to stop being so jittery.

With less than ten meters to go to the destroyed tank, Cole told everyone to wait while he checked it out.

The sound of boots crunching glass underfoot made Cole freeze in place. Like a statue, he didn't move a muscle as he listened to a couple of Chosen soldiers poking around in an empty shop. He couldn't understand a word but figured that they were looking for food. After about a minute, the men abandoned their search and left the building, heading back toward their own lines. Cole let out his breath. He removed his finger from the trigger of his rifle and cautiously looked to see if there were any more Chosen moving around in the dark. When he was sure that they were alone, he walked back and told the rest of the group to follow him. Using a nearby burnt-out vehicle for cover, they made their way unobserved to the back of the tank. Cole went first crawling on his belly underneath of the tank. Sheridan ordered Roberts and Danika, holding onto the dog, to go next. As soon as they vanished under the tank, Sheridan told Garcia to follow them while he pulled up the rear.

With one quick look around to make sure that no one was following them, Sheridan dove under the belly of the metal beast and began to crawl. Because of the size of the large armored vehicle, there was plenty of space underneath to move. In less than a minute, Sheridan was at the far side. He got up to his feet and sprinted to join his comrades. He had barely stepped inside a building on the Marines' side of the street when a pistol was jammed into his face.

"Hands up, you Kurg bastard!" snarled a man.

Sheridan heard the anger and the fear in the man's voice. He carefully raised his hands, hoping not to antagonize the frightened Marine. A pair of hands roughly grabbed him from behind, ripped his rifle from his shoulder and then pushed him down a long empty corridor. A couple of seconds later, he was manhandled into a room.

Cole stood there shaking his head in disbelief. "I guess these idiots think that the enemy has drafted little girls and dogs into the war effort."

"Are we okay?" asked Danika as she took Roberts by the hand.

"We sure are," he replied. "These people are just being careful, that's all."

A stream of invectives filled the air outside of the room.

Cole grinned. "Gunny Wilson's still alive."

The door opened and a chastised Marine waved at them to follow him. They walked through several destroyed buildings until they came to a set of stairs that led down into a basement. Inside, Sheridan saw Captain Rolleston huddled over a map.

Rolleston turned to face the newcomers. He had a bloodied bandage over his left eye. "Mister Sheridan, I take it that this is all that remains of your platoon."

"Yes, sir, I believe so. Some could still be alive trapped under the ruins, but I doubt it." For the next five minutes, Sheridan briefed his commander on what had happened to them and how they had made their way back to friendly lines.

Rolleston said, "It's truly amazing that you made it back here alive. With your people, we now have a grand total of twenty-one Marines in the company."

"Jesus," muttered Cole.

Gunnery Sergeant Wilson said, "We're being topped up tonight with whatever they can scrounge up. We're going to receive a couple of platoons of artillerymen to act as infantry."

"Something is better than nothing," noted Cole.

"Get some food into you. After that get some rest," said Rolleston. "You'll probably be going back into action later tonight."

"Yes, sir," replied Sheridan. Before he left, he found out that there was a refugee control center nearby. Roberts and Garcia volunteered to escort Danika to the center while Sheridan and Cole scrounged up some food and ammunition. After grabbing all they could carry, Sheridan and Cole found a quiet room in a building that hadn't been too badly damaged in the fighting and took a seat.

Cole took off his helmet and scratched the top of his head. He let out a weary sigh and grabbed two ration packs. Before Cole could ask Sheridan what he wanted to eat, he heard the young officer snoring loudly. Cole turned his head and saw that Sheridan had fallen into a deep sleep the instant he sat down.

Chuckling to himself, Cole dug out his thermal blanket and laid it over Sheridan to keep him warm and then picked a ration to eat. He cracked his neck, sat back and listened to the sound of battle in the distance. With a resigned sigh, he envied Sheridan's ability to fall asleep. He knew he wouldn't relax until Garcia and Roberts were back. *Such was the life of a platoon sergeant*, he mused.

Chapter 20

The night had never seemed so long and dark to Tarina. Her heart ached with an emptiness she knew could never be replaced. With her legs curled up to her chest and her arms wrapped around a pillow, she lay there. She had been told that the ship Sheridan had been traveling in had been declared overdue and was presumed destroyed in action. Alone in her room, all of the lights were off. In her hand was a picture of them taken during a visit to Paris during a break at the academy. It was one of her most beloved and cherished memories.

The door to her room opened slightly, letting the light from the hallway shine inside. “Tarina, it’s me, Wendy.”

“Please leave me alone,” said Tarina.

“I know, but I can’t. Colonel Wright has called for all of us to assemble on the flight deck ASAP.”

Tarina sat up and wiped the tears from her face. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

Wendy closed the door, plunging the room back into darkness. Tarina did not want to, but she had no choice. She flicked on a light, walked into the bathroom, and washed her face. Tarina straightened out her uniform and joined Wendy in the hallway. “What’s going on?” Tarina asked.

“No idea, but we had best hurry.”

A minute later, they joined their fellow pilots. A wild and animated discussion was brewing. Someone said that the Kurgs had attacked another star system while another spoke of saboteurs detonating bombs at Fleet Headquarters on Earth.

Major Fareed walked in and told everyone to take a seat on the bleachers behind them. A couple of seconds later, Wright entered the hangar floor. Everyone rocketed to attention. Wright stood in front of his people and locked his ice-blue eyes on them. “Folks, one thing you should never do in the military is sugarcoat bad news. It only leads to misunderstandings that can complicate things down the line. So here it is. The war to date has gone spectacularly bad. All along the Disputed Zone, we have suffered defeat after defeat. Several systems have already fallen to the enemy.”

He paused to gauge the news on the faces of his pilots. If it bothered them, they didn’t let it show. “Fleet intel has intercepted messages coming from the Derran system which seem to indicate that the Kurgs are struggling to pacify Derra-5, a planet, which fleet had expected to fall by now. In fact, if the

messages are to be believed, it is a real burr under their saddle and fleet wishes it to remain so for as long as possible.”

“Sir, what of the rumors of Kurgan agents operating in the fleet?” asked a short, broad-chested lieutenant. “Can we trust communiques coming from the Kurgan forces on Derra-5?”

“Absolutely not,” replied Wright. “That is why we have been tasked to take a look at Derra-5 in order to confirm or deny this information.”

An excited murmur ran through the squadron.

“People, I know that not all of you are ready for this assignment, so here is how it is going to go down. I will take two Avengers with me. The remainder of you will remain behind to complete your training under Major Fareed.”

A cocky captain with short blonde hair and a skin-tight flight suit stood up. “Sir, who are you planning to take with you?”

“Not you, Bradley. You’re not ready yet.”

Deflated, the blonde-haired pilot sat down.

“I will fly one of the Avengers with Lloyd as my navigator. Tarina with Wendy as her navigator will fly the second ship. Folks, this is not open to discussion, so don’t try and corner me after this meeting is over to try to get me to change my mind. I expect the flight crews to rendezvous back here in thirty minutes. We have a fast transport ship to catch that will jump from here to the furthest edge of the Derran system.”

Wright dismissed the pilots. “Tarina, please walk with me for a minute.” When they were out of earshot of the other pilots, he turned to face her. “I’m sorry, I just heard about your loss.”

“Thank you, sir,” she responded, fighting back the tears.

“Think of this as your chance for payback. If it’s true and Derra-5 is still holding out, fleet undoubtedly will kick into high gear. I bet they will plan to give the Kurgs a severe drubbing there if they can. However, they can’t do a thing until they know what is going on there. That is why I picked you. You’re the best instinctual pilot I have; that and fact that I thought you’d like the opportunity to stick it to the enemy.”

Tarina smiled. “Yes, sir, I’d like that. I’d like that a lot.”

“Good. Pack your things and meet me here. The flight to the Derran star system will take three days at full speed. After that, we’re on our own. If you haven’t already, fill out a will.”

Wright carried on, leaving Tarina alone in the now empty hangar thinking about what he had just said. Her heart was a mix of emotions. It still ached for Sheridan; however, a burning desire for revenge was brewing deep inside her. Whatever happened next, Tarina wanted payback and she intended to collect for

the death of the only man she had ever loved.

Chapter 21

It had been two days since Sheridan had gone back into the line. His new platoon of re-tasked artillerymen had been put through street fighting drills by Staff Sergeant Cole day and night until they understood what was expected of them. Sheridan would have preferred infantrymen, but they were in short supply. Best estimates put the division at about fifty percent strength with most of the casualties coming from the three infantry regiments who had so far withstood the worst of the fighting. As Sheridan studied the tactical situation on a map in the company command post, he saw that the Kurgan forces had almost taken half of the city. All along the river, there were pockets of resistance that were holding out against the onslaught. It was to one of these locations that Sheridan and his understrength platoon were going to move to in a few hours. They were going to relieve a platoon that was guarding one side of the only bridge still standing over the fifty-meter wide river that cut through the middle of the capital. The remainder of the company was going to guard the other side. A couple of squads of combat engineers were coming with him to prepare the bridge for demolition.

“Mister Sheridan, are your people ready to go into battle?” Captain Rolleston asked.

Sheridan turned and said, “They’re as ready as we could make them in forty-eight hours, sir.”

“How are you organized?”

“I have two large squads, a weapons detachment, and a small headquarters. Without experienced NCOs, I was reluctant to break the platoon down any further.”

“That’ll do. How are you set for ammo?”

“Sergeant Cole has managed to obtain a ton for us. Ammo isn’t the problem, medical support is. The only medic I have is one of my own people. Sir, are there none to spare from the division?”

Rolleston shook his head. “Unfortunately, we’re all in the same boat. The medical battalion has been swamped with casualties. There won’t be any help coming our way for a long time. You’ll have to make do with what you have.”

Sheridan did not like the answer, but he understood that they were truly on their own. He made his way back to his platoon. Cole was just finishing his final inspection of the new Marines before they made their way to the bridge.

“What’s the word from the CO?” Cole asked.

“The word is we’re on our own. What we’ve got is all we’re going to get.”

Cole shrugged. “Could be worse, they could have sent us some of the divisional staff officers as replacements.”

Sheridan chuckled. “Okay, I’m going to take the NCOs and the heavy weapons team with me for the handover. I’ll see you and the rest of the platoon at the bridge in an hour.”

“Don’t get lost on your way there, sir,” teased Cole.

Almost to the minute, Cole showed up. The platoon quickly occupied two large houses on either side of a road leading to the bridge. He was pleased to see that the soldiers that had been there before them had done a good job of preparing the buildings for defense. Fields of fire had been cleared and all of the rooms had been fortified. It would not stop a Kurgan tank’s fire, but against small arms, the houses were almost impregnable.

The crump of artillery shells landing a few blocks away alerted Sheridan that the enemy advance had begun again. His job was to hold his side of the bridge until ordered to withdraw. Behind them in the dark, the combat engineers busily prepared the bridge to blow.

Cole walked into the small house Sheridan had chosen for his command post and reported that everything was set. Garcia, Roberts, and a young artilleryman were responsible for working the only heavy weapon they could find, an automatic grenade launcher that was sited to cover the road.

“Sir, I don’t get why the Kurgs are smashing the city to pieces,” said Cole. “I thought you said that they wanted to take it intact so they can use the city’s infrastructure.”

“I know, it’s very odd. Perhaps they didn’t expect this much resistance and have changed their mission objectives,” replied Sheridan.

Roberts said, “I heard from a guy who works up at division that the Kurgs are using the planet as a testing ground to see if their Chosen warriors are loyal to the empire.”

“You should know better than to listen to rumors. Especially those coming from the div staff,” retorted Cole.

The sound of gunfire reverberating down the streets put an end to the conversation. Sheridan moved to a firing port, brought up his night vision binoculars and looked toward the sound of the fighting. He could not see any movement. The street was deserted, yet barely two blocks away, Marines and Chosen soldiers were once more locked in a battle to the death. House by house and street by street, the two sides fought over the destroyed remains of the capital.

“Unless something drastic happens, I don’t think we’re going to get hit tonight,” said Sheridan. He turned his head and looked over at Cole. “Sergeant, let’s have the platoon go to fifty percent manning for the night.”

“Sounds like a plan, sir,” replied Cole. He looked at Roberts. “Pass the word.” With Tammy running by his side, Roberts dashed over to the nearest squad.

Now all they had to do was sit and wait, and that was almost as bad as being in combat as far as Sheridan was concerned. The more they sat about, the more time they had to think about their predicament and theirs was bleak.

Chapter 22

Tarina sat behind her controls, going through a few last minute checks before she made her jump. Behind her, Wendy was checking and re-checking the calculations provided to them by the Avenger's onboard navigation computer. She would not be happy until she had verified the numbers herself.

A voice spoke into their helmets. It was Colonel Wright. "Okay, folks, this is a simple mission. We are going to jump on either side of Derra-5, switch on our sensor arrays and record everything we can before the ships automatically jump back here five seconds later. If we hang around any longer than that the enemy will acquire us and fire a couple of missiles at us."

"Got it, sir," responded Tarina.

"Okay then, let's do this."

The launch bay depressurized. A second later, the doors below the two craft opened. Using their thrusters, the two pilots flew their ships out into space. When they were one hundred meters below the transport, Wright began the countdown.

With each passing second, Tarina grew nervous. Her hands tightened around the ship's joystick. The instant Wright said "zero" Tarina engaged the jump engine. In a flash, both craft accelerated beyond the speed of light.

Three minutes later, Tarina's ship emerged on the far side of Derra-5. She could see dozens of Kurgan ships in orbit. Her craft's sensors, augmented for the flight, got to work recording everything.

Wendy began the countdown for the return flight. In just five short seconds, Tarina and Wendy had just conducted their first combat mission and proven the viability of deep space reconnaissance. Before any Kurgan ship could lock onto them, they were gone.

The belly of the transport ship suddenly appeared above them. Tarina smiled and then flew up inside the launch hangar, as did Colonel Wright. The instant the doors closed beneath them, the transport engaged its jump engine, taking them far away from the Derran system.

The bay pressurized and the artificial gravity was re-engaged. A swarm of technicians ran over to help the crews out of their ships and to replace the expended power packs in their engines.

As soon as she was out, Tarina walked over to Wright's ship. "Sir, that was one really short ride."

“Quick in and quick out, there’s nothing wrong with that,” replied Wright, handing off his helmet to a technician.

“I saw several dozen Kurgan warships and transports in orbit.”

“As did I.”

“Sir, where are we heading to now?”

“We’re going to rendezvous with a frigate and transfer all of our data to her. She’ll then jump back to the fleet with our findings.”

“And us, sir?”

“We get ready for the next mission.”

“Which is?” asked Wendy.

Wright smiled at the two eager officers. “I suspect we’ll be heading back to Derra-5 in a couple of days. Until then, I want you to review the last mission to see if there is anything we might need to change the next time we do this. And I want you two to get some rest.” With that, he turned and left the hangar.

Lloyd, Wright’s navigator, walked over and joined the two women. They were about to head to the mess hall for some food when they saw a group of technicians wheel out a couple of large objects and move them over to the Avengers.

“What are those?” Lloyd asked one of the men.

“Satellites, sir,” replied one of the technicians.

Tarina grinned at her friends. “I guess we just found out what we’re doing next.”

Chapter 23

The dark gray waters of the river flowing underneath the bridge looked cold and inhospitable. Although it dropped below zero during the night, the river had yet to freeze over. Sheridan rubbed his cold hands together for a moment trying to warm them up. He swore under his breath as a body clinging to a piece of debris from the refugee camp floated by. It was not the first they had seen and it certainly would not be the last.

They had been at the bridge for a week and they had yet to see a single Chosen warrior. Although the frontline had crept closer each day, the enemy's last major attack had met with failure. Sheridan had been told that the large Kurgan tanks were having a hard time navigating the narrow streets and that casualties on their side had been high during the last few days of fighting. A fresh division of Chosen soldiers had replaced the one in the front lines. Another attack was expected in the next twelve to twenty-four hours.

Sergeant Cole did not waste a single second. He had the men improve their defensive positions and taught them how to defend their positions when the enemy came.

Garcia, during a quick trip to the rear, had obtained several more med kits, which she gave to a couple of soldiers who said they had taken combat first aid.

Sheridan had just sat down to have a meal with Cole when a runner from Captain Rolleston arrived and handed him a note. Sheridan quickly read it over and signed the paper to let his superior know that he had acknowledged the message.

"What's up?" asked Cole.

"Looks like we're going to get another squad later tonight."

"From where?"

Sheridan smiled. "Oh, you're going to love this, they're from one of the div's logistics units. Seems that without any supplies coming in, they don't need them anymore."

"Jesus," blurted out Cole. "They can't be serious!"

"Oh, but they are."

Cole shook his head. "Where do you want to put them?"

"They can be our reserve. Have them set up a position in the house right across the street and give them a lance corporal from one of the other squads as their assistant squad leader."

“I’ll move Sampson; he’s a fairly switched-on lad for an artilleryman,” answered Cole, only half-joking.

At midnight, the reinforcements arrived. Cole and Sheridan made sure that they understood what was expected of them. They had volunteered to join the Marines on the front line, that alone made their arrival seem less onerous.

After ensuring that everything was going as good as it could be, Sheridan grabbed his lightweight survival blanket. He was about to get comfortable on the floor when Roberts stuck his head inside the bunker and said, “Sir, you’ve got to come see this.”

“What’s going on?” asked Sheridan wearily.

“The drones are back.”

“So?”

“They aren’t firing missiles. They’re playing messages.”

Sheridan was tired, but his curiosity drove him to get up and see what was happening. He stepped out into the cold night air and saw a Kurgan drone hovering above the river. The holographic image of a healthy-looking Marine appeared onto the side of a building.

The image spoke. “My fellow Marines, you listen to me. You don’t have to die. If your officers are telling you that help is coming, it is a lie. No one is coming to help you. Your own people have written you off. You don’t need to die fighting for fat, incompetent officers and politicians who sit safely back on Earth while you fight and die out here.”

The Marine’s image faded and was replaced by a woman and her two young children happily walking through an open field. The sun was shining down on them. The message continued. “Marines, join us. Life on a Chosen world is one of peace and spiritual contentment. Walk toward our lines and you will be met and greeted as a fellow comrade fighting against the injustices of your unworthy leaders.”

Sheridan looked around and saw that some of his men were attentively watching the propaganda. He had heard enough. He brought up his rifle to his shoulder, made sure that the safety was off on the grenade launcher, and then took aim at the drone. A second later, he pulled back on the trigger. With a whoosh, the shell flew straight at the target. With a loud boom, the drone blew apart.

A hand reached out of the dark and pulled Sheridan back off his feet and onto the ground just as a missile struck where he had been standing only a couple of seconds before. Sheridan looked over and saw Cole lying on the cold ground beside him.

“Sir, are you trying to get yourself killed?” asked Cole. “Didn’t you see the

other drone?”

Sheridan shook his head. “No, I only saw the one.”

“Pay more attention next time.”

“Thanks for saving my life, Sergeant.”

Cole stood up and helped Sheridan to his feet. “Think nothing of it. Now, why the hell did you fire on that drone?”

“I saw some of the replacements listening to the message. The last thing we need is people thinking about deserting to the enemy.”

Cole looked around at the men. Some were talking in hushed tones so they could not be heard. “Come on, sir, let’s visit the squads and put an end to any thoughts of desertion. I’ll put the fear of God into them. An hour from now, the propaganda drone’s message will all but be forgotten, but not my wrath.”

A couple of hours later, Sheridan was fast asleep on the floor of his bunker when he was awoken by Garcia, who handed him a steaming hot cup of coffee and another note from his company commander. After shaking the cobwebs from his mind, Sheridan took a seat and read over the message. It was an update from headquarters outlining the enemy’s possible courses of action over the next couple of days. He smirked when he saw that the enemy was not expected to do anything until they had reorganized their battered forces for another push. If history had taught Sheridan anything, it was that the enemy always did what they were not expected to do.

They were coming. It was just a question of how and when, thought Sheridan.

“All quiet,” pronounced Cole as he walked into the command post. He was bundled up against the cold. A thick white layer of frost covered his scarf.

Sheridan handed him the note. “According to the people in the know, it’s going to stay that way for a while.”

“Shall we start a pool and see how long it is until they come?” asked Cole.

Sheridan glanced down at his watch. It would be light in an hour. “Looks like they won’t be coming for a few hours. Why don’t you put your head down and get an hour’s sleep? I’ll do a check of the position and then make us some breakfast.”

Cole nodded, dug out his blanket, wrapped it around his shoulders and fell asleep sitting up in his chair.

“Sir, I’m not due on shift for a couple of hours, can I tag along?” asked Roberts. “Tammy could use the exercise.”

“Sure, why not. The troops like to see her.” Whenever the soldiers saw the dog, no matter how tired they were, they always perked up and gave Tammy a pat on the head or a playful hug. The dog, of course, loved the attention.

After almost an hour checking that everything was as it should be, Sheridan, Roberts, and Tammy were carefully making their way back to the command post. Although the drone activity had dropped considerably over the past few days, it always paid to be cautious. They were almost at the bunker when Tammy stopped, edged forward until she could see the river and began to growl at the water.

Roberts took a quick look over the side of the bridge. There was nothing there. Tammy dropped onto her haunches, growling. “Easy, girl, nothing’s wrong,” said Roberts as he reached out to grab her collar.

The hair on the back of Sheridan’s neck stood up. He was not convinced that there was nothing wrong. With his rifle gripped tightly in his hands, he peered down at the dark gray water as it flowed under the bridge.

Roberts was right. There was nothing there.

Sheridan brought his rifle up to his shoulder and looked through his telescopic sight trying to see what may have spooked the dog. After a few seconds, he lowered his weapon and shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe a bird flew under the bridge?”

Tammy suddenly got up on her feet and barked loudly.

A second later, they saw what had spooked the dog.

The enemy had arrived.

Emerging out of the river were ten hunter-killer robotic attack vehicles. They resembled giant mechanical spiders with six sturdy legs coming out from a circular body. The robots had twin-mounted machine guns and a grenade launcher built onto a central swiveling platform that allowed the vehicle to fire in any direction.

“Stand to!” yelled Sheridan at the top of his lungs as he pulled his rifle into his shoulder, released the safety, and fired a high explosive grenade at the nearest robot. A split second later, the attacker vanished in an explosion that sent pieces of the vehicle flying into the air.

The other hunter-killers sensing a threat pivoted their weapons over and released a hail of bullets at Sheridan and Roberts.

Both men dove for the ground as hundreds of rounds flew past them. Sheridan’s heart pounded away. They were trapped out in the open. He glanced over his shoulder and saw another horde of robots emerge on the far bank and attack the rest of the company.

With their targets out of sight, the hunter-killers turned their attention back to the bridge and began to climb up the embankment engaging anyone who was foolish enough to see what was going on. From out of the gray dawn sky, flew a swarm of Kurgan drones that took up position above the robots, covering them

as they clawed their way forward.

“We can’t stay out here,” said Sheridan to Roberts. “Do you have a smoke grenade with you?”

“Yes,” called out Roberts, trying to be heard over the cacophony of automatic gunfire.

“Throw it!” ordered Sheridan, pointing at a spot a few meters away on the bridge.

The grenade landed and rolled for a second before venting a heated gray cloud. Designed to mask a person’s movement, the grenade also produced a cloud that was hot enough to defeat thermal imaging sights. As soon as the billowing cloud was big enough, Sheridan, Roberts, and the dog sprinted into the mist, heading straight for the safety of the command bunker. The sound of bullets whipping through the air made both men duck as they ran. A couple of seconds later, they emerged out of the smoke at the entrance to the command post. Without stopping, like a pair of baseball players stealing home, they slid down inside the bunker before the enemy could fire upon them.

The rhythmic thud of the automatic grenade launcher firing a mix of armor piercing and high explosive rounds filled the air. Garcia was trying to land the grenades in amongst the machines as they advanced. She managed to destroy two of the robots before several of the drones flying above the bridge zeroed in on her and released a volley of missiles onto her position. In a bright flash, the shelter she had been using for cover exploded.

“No!” cried out Roberts as a billowing dust cloud enveloped the house.

Sheridan gritted his teeth. He turned to speak to Cole. “So much for no enemy activity. I think there are still six or seven hunter-killers coming our way.”

“Each squad has an anti-tank launcher with them that should narrow the odds in our favor.”

“It’s the drones that I’m worried about.”

As if on cue, dozens of anti-aircraft missiles streaked from the far bank, blasting the Kurgan drones from the sky. Unknown to Sheridan, a company from the division’s air defense battalion had moved forward under the cover of darkness to cover the bridge. The few drones that still hovered above the bridge tried to return fire but were brought down in flaming balls into the river.

Another sound, distant but closing fast, caught Sheridan’s attention. He turned his head, looked out over the river and swore. Racing up the river were three large armored hovercraft. He should have known the enemy would not have tried to seize the bridge using only robots. With turret mounted heavy machine-guns, the hovercraft opened fire on the bridge’s defenders forcing them to keep their heads down. When they were meters away from the bridge, the

enemy vessels fired off a barrage of smoke grenades covering the area with a dense gray smoke. Although Sheridan could not see it, he knew that at least one hundred Chosen warriors had disembarked and were now hurrying up the river bank to capture the bridge from both sides before it could be blown.

Sheridan's blood turned cold. The odds against his makeshift platoon were daunting. Unable to communicate with his squad leaders, he had to count on them to follow his orders. They could not allow the enemy to gain a foothold on his side of the bridge. The sound of Cole firing a grenade at one of the robots shook Sheridan back into reality. He brought up his rifle, laid his laser designator on another one of the hunter-killers and fired off a high-explosive grenade, blowing it to pieces.

The squad of Marines made up of volunteers from a logistics unit opened fire on the Chosen as they swarmed up over the riverbank. Several men fell, before the shock of being engaged by someone wore off. Within seconds, a Kurgan officer, holding a banner in his hands had the Chosen moving forward in short bounds. One man fired while his partner moved and then switched roles to keep the firing line moving forward.

Sheridan saw the officer through the swirling smoke and dropped him. A Chosen soldier ran over picked up the crimson red flag and lifted it aloft. A cheer rang out. The enemy was not going to turn and run; not this time, their blood was up. With each passing second, the intensity of the firefight increased. Bullets and grenades flew in both directions as Marines and Chosen clashed.

Tammy barked loudly. Roberts turned and saw her facing a side firing port. He ran over just in time to see an enemy soldier try to throw a grenade through the opening. Shooting a long burst at the man, Roberts brought him down. A second later, the grenade exploded outside, wounding two other warriors. Without aiming, he emptied all one-hundred rounds from his rifle's magazine into the gray cloud covering their end of the bridge. It may have been a futile gesture, but it made Roberts feel like he was doing something.

Sheridan turned to face Cole, "Sergeant, we can't sit here and hope for rescue. We'll all be dead before help arrives."

"What do you want to do?" asked Cole as he fired off a quick burst into a group of Chosen soldiers who had tried to sneak up on their position.

"I'm going to clear the enemy off the bridge."

"How the hell are you going to do that?"

"I'll take a squad of artillerymen and push the enemy back toward you."

Cole fired his rifle at a robot that was skirting around a pile of rubble. "Sir, you'll be outnumbered."

"I know, but I'm counting on the element of surprise." With that, Sheridan

patted Cole on the back and headed to the back of the bunker. He popped his head out and saw that the enemy was fixated on the bridge and not the houses behind it where the rest of his platoon was located. Hunched over, Sheridan ran as fast as his legs would go. He did not stop until he was safe.

Sergeant McDaniel, the squad leader, met Sheridan. "Sir, we can't see a thing from back here. The smoke is blocking everything."

Sheridan said, "Sergeant, that's about to change. Get your men together; we're going to push the enemy off the bridge,"

The sergeant hesitated for a second. "Sir, you want to take on the enemy with just one squad?"

"Yes, split your squad in half. I'll take half down the right side. You take the rest down the left. They won't be expecting us. Also, have your men fix bayonets."

"Sir, what about the hunter-killers?"

"Don't worry about them. The Kurgs screwed up when they fired off their smoke dischargers. For the next few minutes, the robots are as blind as the rest of us. Now get your men ready!"

With five men trailing close behind him, Sheridan raced over to a burnt-out vehicle and then peered over toward the house the Marine logisticians were fighting for their lives from. Surrounded by at least a twenty Chosen, the volunteers held their ground. Sheridan turned to look into the faces of the young soldiers with him. A steely determination met his gaze. "Okay, Marines, were going to take the fight to the enemy. They won't be expecting us, so we should be able to take them down before they know what's going on. When we leave here, we're not stopping until we reach the bridge. Don't be afraid to use your bayonet if you have to. Any questions?"

Stony silence answered him.

Sheridan nodded, turned about, stood up and began to walk toward the enemy. The other soldiers quickly took up position on either side of him with their weapons held tight into their shoulders.

The surprise was complete. The first Chosen they came across died thinking the men moving toward them were their own. Without stopping to take cover, Sheridan led his men inexorably forward. He could hear McDaniel's men on the other side of the street engaging the enemy.

A strong wind blew down the river. All around, the smoke cloud began to dissipate. They had seconds before their cover was gone. Sheridan broke into a jog, trying to close the gap with the Chosen before the smoke vanished, leaving them exposed. From out of the mist, a warrior carrying a banner ran straight into Sheridan. With a look of surprise and horror in the man's eyes, he fumbled for

his rifle, only to be bayoneted in the chest by Sheridan. With a hiss on his lips, the Chosen dropped the flag and slid down onto his knees. Sheridan pulled back on his weapon and continued.

Cole saw Sheridan emerge from the gray cloud. He got up on one knee, took aim and opened fire on anything he could see. Roberts joined him.

Sheridan jumped off the road and ran over to the house the Chosen had been trying to capture. He called out before carefully sticking his head inside. Four of the soldiers were dead and the rest wounded, but against the odds, they had held their position. He told them to hang on. Quickly rejoining his team, Sheridan told them to take cover. The smoke had vanished. Thankfully, they had accomplished their mission. The bridge was still in his hands, not the enemy's. A small knot of Chosen warriors fought to the last, trapped out in the open. The last man took his own life by pulling the pin on a grenade and holding it next to his head rather than risk capture.

Sheridan left Sergeant McDaniel's squad to hold the bridge while he crawled back over to Cole. Both men opened fire hitting one of the few hunter-killers still operational. One by one, the robots were picked off until there was not a single machine left on Sheridan's end of the bridge.

Sheridan and Cole warily stood up and looked about at the clumps of dead Chosen and the destroyed robots covering the ground.

Cole said, "Sir, sounds like the enemy is still fighting our guys on the far bank."

Sheridan turned his head and listened to the noise of battle for a second. "The automatic grenade-launcher, maybe it's still operational!"

"Roberts, you're with me," ordered Cole as he sprinted over to the rubble that had once been Garcia's position.

Dust and smoke from burning wood clouded the air. Clawing at the wreckage, the two Marines pulled away the debris as they tried to find the grenade launcher. A couple more men from a nearby squad ran over to help. After a couple of minutes' work, the men were covered in sweat and dirt.

Suddenly, Cole stopped what he was doing and snapped his fingers in the air. "Stop!" he yelled. Bending down he placed his head near the rubble and listened.

A faint voice cried out for help. Tammy barked in response.

Like possessed men, they yanked and pulled the wreckage aside trying to get to whoever was trapped underneath. Roberts let out a loud whoop when a shattered wooden beam was shoved out of the way and Garcia looked up at him. Amazingly, Garcia and the Marine with her were unhurt. When the building collapsed, the roof above them buckled and then fell down in a V-shape,

protecting them from the remainder of the house coming down on them.

“I thought you were dead,” said Roberts.

“No, just incredibly lucky,” replied Garcia as she crawled out of the hole. She was covered from head to toe in dust making her look like a ghost. Tammy trotted over and nudged Garcia’s hand with her nose.

“The grenade launcher, where is it?” asked Cole.

“It should be right beside where you found us,” replied Garcia.

“Find it!” ordered Cole to the Marines.

Sheridan was amazed to see Garcia alive as she and the other man with her ran over with the launcher and set it up so they could fire. As soon as a belt of grenades was fed into the weapon, Garcia took aim and opened fire on the enemy still fighting on the other end of the bridge. Between her fire and a counterattack by the rest of the company, the Chosen warriors were soon swept aside and destroyed.

The attack was over.

A loud cheer erupted from both sides of the bridge.

Sheridan did not feel like celebrating. They had been lucky. He turned to face Cole. “Sergeant, send a runner back to company headquarters and tell them to send some engineers over here right away. Ten to one the Kurgs cut some of the wires leading to the explosives under the bridge, I know I would have. Then let’s see how badly we’ve been cut up.”

“Right, sir,” answered Cole noting the fatigue in Sheridan’s voice. He knew that he would have to pay attention to the young officer for the next little while. He was a good man and one he knew would be hard to replace. If they were going to survive this fight, they would need men like Sheridan, and Cole did not want to lose him.

Chapter 24

The voice in Tarina's headset counted down toward zero. They had gone over what was going to happen when they arrived in orbit above Derra-5 at least a dozen times, yet she still found herself thinking about it step by step.

"Zero," said the voice. Tarina engaged the jump engine. Their transport ship instantly disappeared from view replaced by an impenetrable black curtain. Until she actually experienced it herself, Tarina had always thought that when a ship made a jump that it was still possible to see the stars passing by her ship as long streaks of light. Instead, a dark bubble had formed around her craft. So dark that even light could not penetrate it while she sped through space faster than light. Their mission was to place into orbit two satellites above Derra-5 so they could gather information on the Kurgan Fleet. Using data provided from their first mission, the satellites had been programmed to emit the same transponder signal as the Kurgan vessels in position above the planet, making them seem as if they belonged there.

Derra-5 appeared directly in front of Tarina's cockpit as the ship came out of its jump. Right away, Wendy began the countdown for the return trip. Tarina reached down and pressed a button, releasing their cargo. The satellite floated free from underneath her ship. Through her cockpit glass, she could see a wave of Kurgan shuttlecraft descending down through the atmosphere heading for the surface. She estimated that there were at least thirty.

As before, the mission only lasted five seconds. Without being detected, they jumped away. Minutes later, the belly of their support ship filled her vision. Deftly maneuvering her ship, she flew back inside, landed and then patiently waited for the artificial gravity to be turned on and the hangar bay to be pressurized.

"My God, did you see all of those shuttlecraft?" said Wendy.

"Yeah, I suspect that they were sending reinforcements down," Tarina replied.

A technician tapped on the glass. Tarina waved back. The cockpit lid lifted allowing the technicians access inside. As soon as her helmet was removed and her safety harness unbuckled, Tarina thanked her crew and climbed down to the hangar floor.

"All quiet?" asked Wright as he strolled over.

Tarina shook her head and filled him in on what she had witnessed.

“That’s important. I’ll make sure that gets passed to fleet right away. Come on; let’s see if our mission was a success.”

Together both flight crews walked to the ship’s briefing room. Wright asked the ship’s executive officer to send the telemetry being sent back by the satellites above Derra-5 to the computers in the room. A few seconds passed before the information came up.

“Bingo,” Wright said, smiling. “Now, as long as the Kurgs don’t change their transponder codes, we should be in business.”

“Sir, how long will it take for this info to reach the fleet?” asked Lloyd.

“About three days. After that, who knows how long they’ll spend analyzing the information before deciding what to do about it.”

Tarina asked, “Sir, what’s next on the books?”

Wright smiled and turned to leave. “We’ll have to wait and see what fleet wants us to do.”

After Wright was gone, Tarina looked at her friends. “Why do I get the feeling that he’s never going to truly open up to us?”

“I doubt that he ever tells anyone the full picture, not even his parents,” observed Wendy. “It’s his nature, I guess.”

Tarina let out a sigh and then looked down at the information on the computer screens. She prayed that it would provide their forces with a tactical advantage needed to engage and defeat the enemy. She did not mind her new role as a deep space reconnaissance pilot; however, since learning about Sheridan’s death all she could think about was killing Kurgans.

Chapter 25

Vice Admiral Robert Sheridan sat at his desk in his private quarters on board his flagship, *Colossus*, a newly commissioned battle cruiser. At fifty-five years of age, Admiral Sheridan was at the top of his game. He was the commander of the newly formed Sixth Fleet, currently assembling in orbit around Jupiter. In superb shape, the admiral liked to run ten kilometers a day before breakfast. Like his son, he had black hair, which was slowly turning white at the temples. What caught people's attention the first time they met him were his deep green eyes that seemed to glow in the light.

"Sir, your priority message is coming in now," announced the ship's communications officer over a speaker on his desk.

Admiral Sheridan turned to look up at the screen on the wall across from him. A second later, the image of Admiral Oshiro, the Commander in Chief of the fleet appeared. "Good day, Admiral," he said in greeting.

"Good day to you too, Robert," replied Oshiro. "Please accept my deepest heartfelt condolences on the loss of your son."

Admiral Sheridan felt a pang in his heart. "Thank you, sir."

"Robert, I know you're busy, so I'll make this short. How goes the shakedown with the Sixth?"

"Not too bad, sir, there's still a few kinks to work out, but I have the staff working day and night to get us fully operational."

Oshiro smiled. "That's good news. I want your ops and planning staff to look at options to tackle the Kurgan Fleet in orbit above Derra-5. My people have already transmitted the necessary information that they will require to formulate their plan. I want you to be able to defeat the enemy fleet, establish a perimeter and then support a ground invasion force, all in very short order. You should know that the president has expressly forbidden us from using nuclear weapons. It would appear that the Kurgans have yet to use them, and he does not want to be the one to initiate a tit-for-tat exchange of nukes like what happened in the last war. Robert, I also want you to keep this close hold, use only those staff officers you absolutely need to."

"Got it, sir. How's it going elsewhere?"

Oshiro's usually stone-faced visage, saddened. "The Second Fleet was on the border when the Kurgans struck. It put up a good fight but has had to be withdrawn to refit and reorganize after losing almost seventy percent of its

strength. The Third and Fourth Fleet have replaced the badly beaten-up Second and are engaging the enemy as we speak. I have the Fifth and First in reserve. I will not commit either formation until I know what the Kurgans' main effort is. I still don't know if they are going after our populated outer colonies or after our resource producing planets."

"They attacked on such a broad front that it's hard to determine just what they're after," noted Admiral Sheridan. "Admiral, has there been a formal declaration of war given by the Kurgan Empire? It seems so odd that they would decide to attack us out of the blue after a century of relative peace between the Kurgans and us."

"We still have heard nothing from them and I don't think we will either. Our listening stations along the border heard absolutely no chatter indicating that the Kurgans were planning to attack us. This was an extremely well planned and executed operation. Secrecy was maintained right up until the day they started shooting at us."

Admiral Sheridan took a sip of water and then continued. "You have to wonder at the timing of their attack. After decades of budget cuts, the government back home finally decides to increase the defense budget and increase the size of our armed forces by ten percent. Which I might add would still leave us with a military half the size of the one we had when I first joined as a lowly ensign."

"My thoughts exactly. It's no coincidence that they hit us before we could modernize our forces. If they can snatch a quick victory and force us back to the negotiating table like they did one hundred years ago, then we've lost this war already."

"Well, whatever the reason may be, we're at war with the Kurgans and that's all that matters right now. The historians can tell us why later."

Oshiro sagely nodded. "Robert, I'll be in your location in three days' time. I'm bringing General Denisov, the ground force commander, with me. I want you to brief me on your portion of the plan at that time."

"Right, sir. I also take it this means that you want my fleet ready to deploy in seventy-two hours."

Oshiro smiled.

"Very good, sir, I look forward to your visit."

"Robert, before I sign off, I want you to place your fleet on yellow alert. There have been rumors of saboteurs trying to gain access to the nuclear arsenals on board our ships. If they were to set off a single bomb anywhere within the fleet, the result could be crippling."

"Yellow alert it is, sir."

Oshiro's image vanished from the screen. Admiral Sheridan called for his chief of staff. If his staff thought they were busy before, they had no idea of the amount of work he was about to dump on them. While he waited, he brought up a picture of Derra-5 and its solar system on the screen and studied it. A plan already began to percolate in his mind. He wondered if his staff would see the same thing. If they did not, they surely would before he gave his briefing to Admiral Oshiro. His thirty-seven-year career was about to be tested in battle for the first time, and he did not intend to fail.

Chapter 26

“Sir, Captain Rolleston’s coming,” said Cole to Sheridan.

With a tired sigh, Sheridan sat up, pulled off his dust-covered blanket, placed his helmet on his head and walked out onto the bridge. The wreckage and frozen Chosen bodies were still being moved to one side.

“Mister Sheridan, you look like you just woke up,” Rolleston said.

“Yes, sir, I was just having a catnap.”

“Sorry about that.” Rolleston looked over at the macabre pile of Chosen dead. “I’ll get Gunnery Sergeant Wilson to clean that up today.”

Sheridan wearily nodded. He was tired and numb inside. He saw the Chosen remains as nothing more than debris that had to be removed.

“You and your men fought well yesterday,” said Rolleston.

“Thank you, sir. Any word on replacements for my casualties?”

“None yet. Besides, it won’t be your problem anymore. You’re being sent to the rear. Someone back at headquarters wants to talk to you.”

Sheridan was genuinely confused. “Sir, I don’t get it. Why would they want to talk to me?”

Rolleston shrugged his beefy shoulders. “I have no idea. All I know is that I was told to tell you that you’re to hand over your platoon to Second Lieutenant Miles and report to divisional headquarters ASAP.”

“What about the people I came with?”

“For now, I was told that they will remain here.”

“Yes, sir,” Sheridan replied reluctantly.

“Grab your things and I’ll walk you to the rear.”

Sheridan turned and walked back to the bunker to grab his few possessions. Cole walked in. “Sir, I heard it all. Perhaps they’re giving you a medal and then sending you right back here.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then you take care of yourself, sir,” replied Cole, offering his hand.

Sheridan shook his mentor’s hand and then slung his pack over his shoulder. He felt that he should say something but found himself unable to find the right words to thank Cole.

Cole grinned. “Keep your head down, sir.”

“You too, Sergeant.” With that, Sheridan reluctantly walked out of the bunker and joined Rolleston. Walking away from his platoon, Sheridan felt a

pang of guilt. They were staying and he was going somewhere safe. He did not like it and planned to give someone at headquarters an earful when he got there.

An hour later, after washing the dirt and grime from his face, Sheridan sat in a long hallway at divisional headquarters. He was sipping on a cup of coffee and nibbling on a biscuit. The people scurrying around the building were all clean and looked fresh compared to the men and women he had left behind on the bridge. A sergeant walked over and escorted Sheridan to General Gruber's office. He was more than a little surprised to see that he was going to see the commanding general.

"Second Lieutenant Sheridan to see you, sir," announced the sergeant.

"Send him in," replied Gruber, his tone tired and gruff.

Sheridan stepped inside the office, came to attention and sharply saluted the general.

"Please take a seat, Mister Sheridan," Gruber said, returning the salute.

Sheridan took a seat facing the general's desk. The division's sergeant major was in the room as well.

"I've been hearing good things about you, Mister Sheridan."

"Thank you, sir," Sheridan replied, unsure where the conversation was heading.

"How's Staff Sergeant Cole doing?" asked the sergeant major.

"Fine, Sergeant Major. I doubt I'd be alive if it weren't for him."

The old soldier smiled.

Gruber placed his hands on his table and looked into Sheridan's eyes. "Son, it's because of young people like yourself that we're still in the fight. I don't mind telling you that it's nothing short of a miracle that we've lasted this long. If we're going to keep fighting, I need to know what the enemy is planning to do so I can match his strength with mine when he attacks us again. With the damned Kurgans still jamming all of our radio and sensor equipment, I'm blinder than a bat."

Sheridan nodded, even more confused than when he walked in the room.

Gruber continued. "Son, Sergeant Major Trang and I have been discussing this and we both believe that we need someone with experience to go outside of the capital and take a look around. Our lines have held to date, but they are very thin lines. All it would take is a concerted effort in one location by the enemy and they'd easily breach the line and overrun the city before we could stop them."

"Sir, what about the divisional reconnaissance battalion?" asked Sheridan.

"Son, we're a division in name only. I never got one when they rushed

whatever they could here to Derra-5. I wish I had one, but I don't. I re-read your initial report and saw that you speak and understand Kurgan; that's gonna help you when you go outside."

"Me, sir?"

"Yeah, you, son. I need to know what is going on out there and as far as I'm concerned, you're my man."

The enormity of what was being asked of him weighed on Sheridan. He felt as if he were going to be sick.

"You can't do this on your own, sir. Can you think of anyone you would like to take with you?" asked the sergeant major, steering the conversation along.

Sheridan sat straight up. "Sergeant Major, I can think of three people who would be ideal, two of whom have already been outside the city."

Gruber said, "Give the names to the sergeant major; he'll make sure that they're brought to you. The clock is ticking, son, can you think of anything else you might need?"

Sheridan's mind was in a whirl. He had a million questions. "Sir, is the black-marketeer we detained available for questioning?"

Sergeant Major Trang nodded. "I'll get the MPs to bring him to you ASAP."

"Anything else?" prodded Gruber.

"Not right now, sir," replied Sheridan.

"Very good. I won't keep you from your assignment. Your point of contact from here on out will be the divisional intelligence officer."

"Yes, sir." Sheridan cringed. The officer had all but accused Sheridan of lying when he presented his report to the general.

Gruber smiled. "I saw that flicker of hesitation in your eyes, Mister Sheridan. Don't worry, Lieutenant Colonel Donaldson is a changed man. You'll find him much more receptive to your ideas now that we've been attacked."

Sheridan wished that he had not been so transparent.

Gruber stood, as did Sheridan. He held out his hand and Sheridan shook it. "Before you go, there are two things I need to do. First off, I would like to thank you for keeping PO Tartov alive. He's been working his ass off night and day going through our computers. So far, he has identified two suspicious transmissions sent before the Kurgan invasion. One, I hate to say, was from a member of my staff. The other was from a high-ranking civilian who worked in the capital's administrative offices. Both men have been arrested."

Sheridan had originally had his doubts, but it seemed that Tartov had been telling the truth after all.

Gruber cleared his throat. Sergeant Major Trang stepped forward and handed Gruber a small box. He opened it and then gave it to Sheridan. Inside

were a set of silver bars. “Congrats, on your promotion to first lieutenant,” said Gruber as he firmly shook Sheridan’s hand. “Keep this up, and you’ll replace me by the end of the month.”

Sheridan smiled. “Thank you for the promotion, sir.”

“You earned it. Now, son, get me that information.”

Ninety minutes passed before the black-marketeer arrived. In a quiet corner of the headquarters, Sheridan and Cole sat behind a desk. A pair of gruff-looking MPs brought in the man. He was wearing handcuffs. By the surprised look on his face, Sheridan could tell that he had not expected to see Sheridan or any of his people alive.

“Remove his cuffs,” ordered Sheridan. The MPs obliged and then waited outside of the room.

Sheridan looked down at his notes for a second before fixing his eyes on the man seated in front of him. The profiteer had long, scraggly brown hair. His clothes were filthy. Sheridan knew that water was a scarce commodity in the city. He doubted that the prisoners got more than drinking water on a daily basis. “Mister Leon, let me reintroduce myself. My name is First Lieutenant Sheridan, and according to the Provost Marshal, you are facing at least twenty years in jail for your crimes. That is, of course, if we manage to hold onto the capital. If not, then you are going to die at the hands of the Chosen when they take what’s left of the city. Since the idea of wasting away in jail or dying at the hands of your enemies is not something I bet you relish, I have a small proposal to make.”

“Go on,” said Leon as he rubbed his sore wrists.

“In return for your cooperation, the Provost Marshal is willing to adjust the time you will have to serve in jail.”

“By how much?”

Sheridan dug into a jacket pocket and placed a piece of paper down on the table in front of Leon. “If you get me everything on this list, she’ll reduce your sentence to one year.”

Leon picked up the note, read it, and let out a derisive snicker. “You have to be kidding me. All of this stuff is military gear. How do you expect me to obtain it? Why don’t you ask your own people for this equipment?”

“I did. All of the gear is listed as stolen. I wonder who could have taken it?” said Sheridan as he looked over at Leon.

“I want to be set free. If I get my hands on all of this equipment, I don’t want to spend another day back in jail.”

“Guards, take the prisoner back to his cell!” Cole yelled out.

The door swung open.

“No, wait. I’ll do what you say,” said Leon, his voice filled with panic.

“As you were,” Cole said to the MPs.

Sheridan leaned forward and said, “Now, just to make sure that you live up to your end of the deal, Staff Sergeant Cole and Private Roberts will be going with you. I expect the three of you back here by last light. If you so much as look sideways or give Sergeant Cole any guff, he’s going to make you wish you were back in your cell.”

Leon looked over at Cole. The look in his eyes told Leon that he was not a man you wanted to anger. A cold shiver ran down his spine. “There’s no need for threats. I already told you that I’ll do whatever you say.”

“Great, one last thing, though.”

“What might that be?” Leon asked.

“I’m willing to bet you know more about the tunnels running under the city than anyone else still left alive. So tonight when my colleagues and I head out, you and your two new best friends from the MPs will be coming with us.”

Leon’s face turned white.

“Thanks for your cooperation,” said Sheridan with a smile.

Chapter 27

Colonel Wright pursed his lips as he read and re-read his orders. For a minute, he thought about disobeying them, but he knew better. It would not serve his unit to have him in the stockade. He pressed a button on his desk and spoke into the ship's speaker system. "Flight Crew Bravo, this is Colonel Wright, please report to my office right away."

A minute later, there was a knock on the door.

"Please come in," said Wright.

The doors slid open. Tarina and Wendy stood there wearing their gym clothes and were covered in sweat.

"Ladies, please take a seat," said Wright as he opened his fridge, grabbed two bottles of cold water, and handed them to the women.

"Thanks," said the young officers in unison.

"Running?"

"No, sir, we were sparring," responded Tarina.

"I was about to win when you called, sir," announced Wendy.

Tarina laughed. "In a pig's eye you were."

Wright grinned, sat down and turned his computer console around so the women could see his orders. "Ladies, I've been ordered to dispatch a ship to Derra-5 in order to gather real-time intelligence on what is happening on the ground. As you can see, I have been ordered not to go myself. My superiors have deemed this mission as highly dangerous. They do not feel that I should risk going myself. To quote the last line: 'I have duties and responsibilities to the Corps that preclude me from this assignment.'"

Tarina could tell that the words were like a personal insult thrown in Wright's face. He had always gone first and shared the risks with his people. To be told to stay back was tearing him up inside. "Sir, what would you like us to do?" asked Tarina.

"Yeah, sir, you've got to let us have some fun without adult supervision from time to time," added Wendy.

If there were two people who could pull it off, Wright knew it was the women sitting across from him. "Okay then, what I need you to do is study everything you can about the capital and pick a landing zone as far away from the enemy as you can. You're going to have to calculate your jump from here to a location inside Derra-5's atmosphere. Give yourself time to start your sublight

engine or you'll smash into the ground like a falling rock and be killed on impact."

Wendy smiled. "Piece of cake. I can have my calculations for your review within the hour, sir."

Wright continued. "When you land, you're going to need to gather as much information as you can from the defenders and then get the hell out of there before the enemy gets wise and sends a drone to blast your ship into a million pieces."

"You can count on us, sir," Tarina said confidently. If Wendy's calculations were precise, she knew that she could land her Avenger on a dime if need be.

Wright stood. "I shan't keep you from your pre-mission calculations. I'll come join you in one hour's time. You can back brief me on your plan at that time. Dismissed."

Tarina and Wendy stood up, turned about, and left Wright's office.

"Have you ever calculated a jump from space into a planet's atmosphere before?" Tarina asked Wendy.

She shook her head. "How hard can it be? There has to be a first time for everything. Come on, we've got to find us a good map of the city. We don't want to come out of our jump right into the middle of a skyscraper, now do we?"

Colonel Wright found the women in the hangar bay double-checking Wendy's calculations. Instead of a computer, Wendy had grabbed a marker pen and written all over the side of a wall so she could see her work from beginning to end. Wright stood behind the women and looked over the math. He was an accomplished pilot, but her calculations left him wondering if he had missed something at the academy.

Wendy stopped what she was doing and looked over at the colonel. "Does this look right, sir?"

"Does it look right to you?" Wright asked Tarina.

"Yeah, it should work, Colonel," she replied.

"Then it looks right to me," said Wright. "When do you plan to go?"

"Sir, we want to land at night, so we were planning on commencing our pre-flight checks around 2200 and jumping at 2300 hours' local time," explained Tarina. "Ideally, we should be able to get what fleet needs and be out of there in under a couple of hours."

Wright nodded. Her plan made sense. "I've ordered the technicians to ensure that your bird is as full as they can make it with fuel. I'd hate to lose you because you ran out of fuel."

"We'd hate that too," replied Wendy.

"Well, it looks like you have it all in hand. I'll meet you back here in a few

hours' time." Wright smiled at the women and then left them to get on with their work. A nagging feeling in his stomach told him that if this worked that it was not the last mission that they would be launching to Derra-5. There was only one thing he could do now, and that was to ask his superiors to send the rest of his squadron to him as soon as possible so the risk could be shared by all.

Chapter 28

Sheridan shone his light down a dark and wet tunnel. “All clear,” he reported as he climbed down inside.

“I hate places like this,” said Garcia.

“At least no one is shooting at us,” said Roberts as he helped Tammy down.

“Not yet,” threw in Cole.

“I could have left you all on the bridge, you know,” said Sheridan to his teammates.

“I take it all back,” responded Garcia quickly. The image of the collapsed house resting on top of her head made her shudder.

“Which way?” Sheridan asked Leon.

“Straight ahead and then take the first left. It will take you to a grate that opens near the river,” explained Leon, sounding like he wished he was somewhere other than back in the cold, damp tunnels with a bunch of soldiers.

Sheridan led off. Cole had returned with everything on their list, from pistols with silencers built into the barrel to ultra-lightweight ceramic knives to fresh sets of liquid body armor. Leon had reluctantly surrendered a vast horde of critical supplies to the Marines. Garcia had managed to round up some warm, but dirty, civilian clothing for everyone to wear. Clean clothes would make them stand out among the refugees camped outside of the capital if they were even there anymore. When they were about fifty meters from the tunnel exit, Sheridan switched off his light plunging the tunnel into darkness. He waited a minute for his eyes to adjust to the dark before edging carefully to the metal grate. The ground under his feet was slick with ice. He reached into a pocket, brought out a small hand-held scanner, and checked the metal bars for explosives. With almost everything else electronic being jammed by the enemy, Sheridan prayed that the scanner would still work.

The screen read clear. It was safe to proceed . . . he hoped.

Sheridan looked over at Cole, who stepped forward with a long, narrow metal coil in his gloved hand. After examining the grate for a few seconds, Cole bent the metal into a U-shape. Slowly, he threaded the mechanism through the bars until it was looking above them. On a small screen built into a wristband, Cole studied the ground above the tunnel. It was clear. He pulled in the viewing device, removed the monitor from his wrist, and handed them off to one of the MPs accompanying them.

Sheridan turned around and looked at the senior MP, a sergeant. “Okay, it looks safe out there for now. Wait here for thirty minutes in case we suddenly return. If we don’t, head back the way you came. We’ll be back here at precisely the same time tomorrow evening. If we’re not, wait for one hour in case we’re late and then booby-trap the tunnel as we’re most likely never coming back.”

“Yes, sir,” replied the MP. “What about the prisoner?”

“If you don’t need him, leave him behind next time.”

Cole grabbed ahold of the grate and pushed it open. “Let’s go,” he whispered. As soon as they moved out onto the riverbank, they felt a cold wind bite at their faces. The temperature was well below freezing.

Sheridan quickly got his bearings and pointed off toward a line of fires burning in a wood line a few hundred meters away. With his hands in his pockets and his head down, he walked across the frozen ground trying to look as if he belonged there. He doubted the enemy was patrolling the refugee camp from the sky after the losses to their fleet of drones. However, all it took was one drone to spot them and they would be killed by a missile in seconds. He could smell the smoke from dozens of fires as it hung listlessly in the cold night air.

As they got closer, Sheridan could see a makeshift camp. Using discarded pieces of wood and pieces of destroyed buildings, the people had managed to build a shelter against the bitter winter.

Cole reached out and grabbed Sheridan’s arm. “Sir, I think we should let Roberts and his dog check out the camp before we all walk in there and find out that it’s unfriendly.”

Sheridan nodded.

Roberts patted Tammy on the head and then as casually as he could, he strolled toward a group of people standing around a roaring bonfire.

A man with a thick black beard saw Roberts and pulled a machete from his belt. “That’s close enough, friend. How can I help you?”

“I’m cold and hungry,” replied Roberts. “Can I come over by your fire? I have some things with me that I can barter with you for some food.”

“Like what?” asked a woman with dirt caked on her face.

“I have a flint and a full bottle of Scotch.”

“Step close then, friend,” said the bearded man.

Roberts thanked the man and carefully walked over to the warmth of the fire. He saw that there were at least a dozen people wearing a mix of whatever clothes they could find.

The bearded man looked at Roberts for a minute. “Friend, I’ve never seen you around before. What’s your name?”

“Roberts, my name is Roberts,” he replied, holding his hands out over the fire to warm them up.

“Well, Roberts, my name is Manfred and the woman to my right is my wife, Nancy.”

“How come we’ve never seen you before tonight?” queried Nancy.

“I’ve been looking for my younger brother for weeks. This is the last place that I haven’t checked,” he answered, recalling Sheridan’s report about missing teens.

“He won’t be here,” Nancy pronounced glumly. “They took all the young ‘uns away a month ago. I ain’t seen anyone under eighteen for at least two weeks now.”

“Is there another camp nearby where I could look?”

“You could try back in the woods. I hear there’re people still living back there. They’re none too friendly though, or so I’ve been told,” said Nancy.

“Thanks,” replied Roberts, making a turn to leave.

“Hold on, friend,” said Manfred. “What about that trade?”

Roberts stopped in his tracks. “I’ll give you the booze for some food. What do you have?”

“Only the best,” crowed Nancy. “We’ve got Chosen rations we can trade with for your bottle.”

“Are they any good?”

“No, but it’s better than starving,” the bearded man replied.

“What will you give me for my bottle?”

“Four ration packs?” said Nancy.

“Make it six and we have a deal. I’m not going to haggle with you. Make up your minds now or I’m going to walk.”

“Deal!” said the man, thrusting out his hand to cement the agreement.

Roberts shook the man’s hand and then brought out a bottle from his pocket while Nancy left the fire to fetch the rations. “How come you have Kurgan food?”

“We do the odd chore for them,” replied Manfred.

Roberts was stunned to learn that people were collaborating with the enemy. “Like what?”

“We retrieve their dead from the city and stack their bodies out in the open field,” the man said, pointing out into the dark. “They burn them at night. I’ve lost count of how many bodies we’ve seen go up in flames.”

“Anything else?”

“No, we’re busy enough carrying their dead back here.”

“Here you are,” Nancy said, handing Roberts the rations.

“And here you are,” Roberts replied, giving her the Scotch.

Nancy’s eyes lit up at the sight of the amber liquid in the bottle. She unscrewed the lid and took a sip before handing it to her husband who did the same. Both people looked to be in heaven.

“Thank you for your trade,” said Roberts, edging back from the fire.

Nancy looked over at Roberts, smiling. “Why don’t you spend the night and continue your search in the morning?”

“Yeah, that’s a great idea, rest here by the fire and warm yourself up,” added Manfred.

An uneasy chill ran down Roberts’s spine. It was time to leave. “No, thanks, I really must get going. My wife is waiting for me.”

Nancy said, “Bring her here as well. I’m sure she’d like to get out of the cold for a while.”

Roberts shook his head, turned about and walked as quickly as he could back out into the dark.

When he linked up with his comrades, Roberts passed on what he had learned.

“Do you think you can trust them?” asked Cole.

“No way! If I would have stayed, I bet they would have sold me to the first enemy patrol they saw in the morning,” replied Roberts.

Sheridan said, “Well, there are two things we’ve learned from Roberts’ interaction with those people. First, the enemy has suffered grievous losses, so much so that they are ready to use the refugees to clear the streets of their dead. Secondly, that not everyone is willing to play along with the Kurgans. I suspect the people living farther back in the woods have no love for the enemy. I think that’s something we can use to our advantage, just not tonight. We need to find out what is going on in the Kurgan lines.”

“We could snatch a Chosen soldier and interrogate him,” suggested Garcia.

“Perhaps, however, I’d rather not have any interaction with the enemy. The longer we go on about our business undetected, the longer we’ll live.”

Cole pointed to another camp about half a kilometer away. “We may find what we’re looking for over there.”

Sheridan grinned. It was near where he had first spoken to a group of refugees when they had been trying to reach the capital. It was too much to hope that the same people were still there. With a nod, Sheridan started to walk.

The site was much smaller than the one Roberts had checked out. There was only handful of people standing by a fire. Sheridan instantly recognized Eve, the black woman he had spoken to almost a month ago. She looked gaunt and tired.

He did not know anyone else. His gut, however, told him that he could trust them.

Eve's face lit up when she saw Sheridan walk into the camp. "My God, I never expected to see you ever again. We've been watching the nightly barrages on the city. It's an awful spectacle. To be honest, I wasn't sure there was a living soul left inside that abattoir."

"It's just as bad to be on the receiving end of all that fire," said Sheridan. "Trust me, there are people still alive in the capital resisting room by room and house by house. We may be bloodied, but we're far from defeated."

Eve set a hand on Sheridan's arm. "That is good news."

Sheridan introduced his team. A man in his seventies wrapped in several dirty blankets lying by the fire slowly reached out and petted Tammy's head. A smile broke on his muck-encrusted face when Tammy sat down beside him.

"These are for you," said Roberts handing over the ration packs. "I got them from someone else and by the looks of everyone here, you could use them more than we ever could."

The people thanked Roberts and then clawed at the rations, tearing the bags apart to get at the food.

Sheridan asked, "Eve, when did you last eat?"

She stopped what she was doing and looked blankly off into the dark. "I don't know . . . I honestly don't know."

"Jesus," said Cole under his breath. "One group is near dead, the other is sitting fat, dumb, and happy only a few hundred meters away. What the hell has gotten into those people? We're all supposed to be in this together."

"Some apparently don't think so," mused Sheridan. He looked at Eve. "Do you know what is going on in the Kurgan lines?"

Eve shook her head. "The only thing I can tell you is that they received reinforcements a couple of days ago. A former police officer searching for his wife wandered through our camp a couple of days ago. He said that he heard the Kurgans had brought in a fresh division of infantry and a regiment of combat engineers. He didn't say why, though."

"Engineers, now that's interesting," said Sheridan.

"I guess their failed attempt to take the bridge has made them adjust their plans," said Cole. "I bet next time they're going to try someplace else and build their own bridges across the river."

"Looks that way."

"Sir, shouldn't we report this right away?" asked Roberts.

"We will when we go back tomorrow. Also for the love of God, don't say 'sir' ever again while we're outside of the city. Use my name. We're supposed to

be a group of friends looking for food, not soldiers.”

“Sorry.”

“You should rest here until the sun comes up,” Eve proposed. “There’s a hill nearby, you can use it to spy on the Kurgans.”

Cole nodded and said, “Well, Eve, I guess we are your humble guests. Is there anything you would like to know?”

The old man paying attention to Tammy looked up. “Is the fleet coming to save us?”

“I wish I knew,” Sheridan replied, looking up into the star-filled night. He wondered where Tarina was and if she was safe.

Chapter 29

Coming out of a jump inside a planet's atmosphere was something that Tarina and Wendy had planned for. However, the harsh reality of going from a zero gravity environment in space to one with gravity was like being hit in the chest by an enraged donkey. Although tightly strapped into their chairs, the sudden jerk experienced when gravity took hold of their craft was a nasty shock to both women.

As calculated, their Avenger came out of its jump precisely one kilometer above a sports stadium. The ship's computer seamlessly switched the engine to sublight propulsion; still they were falling through the air like a rock. A second later, Tarina felt the craft begin to respond to her controls. She adjusted the ship's thrusters and slowed their descent.

"How does the landing site look?" Tarina asked Wendy.

Looking at the infrared camera image on her console, Wendy swore. "The stadium's field is covered in tents. Go for the alternate LZ."

Tarina felt her heart begin to race. They had planned this down to the last second. If they were off by even one second, they would plow straight into the side of a building. Through gritted teeth, she said, "I hope there's no one there, or we're gonna land right on top of them."

The Avenger banked over as Tarina lined it up with the sports field of a school near the stadium. She looked out the side of her cockpit window. She could not see a thing. The ground below was blacked out. With seconds to go, she engaged the landing thrusters and prayed that there was no one below them. Watching her rate of descent on her heads-up display, Tarina slowed their speed and then brought her craft for a near perfect landing. The nose of the Avenger struck something in the dark, knocking it over. Quickly switching the power off, Tarina and Wendy removed their helmets, reached over and opened up the cockpit canopy. A gust of cold air blew inside.

"What the hell is that nauseating smell?" Wendy asked as a repulsive odor wafted in the air.

"That's me," hollered an angry voice from below. "I was using a portable toilet when you crash-landed into it and knocked it over. I hope for your sake you're on our side, or I'm going to personally shoot you."

Tarina peered over the side of the Avenger. "Sorry about that. But I can assure you that we're on your side."

“Get down from there and show me some ID,” ordered the irate man.

Thirty minutes later, Tarina found herself in General Gruber’s office. Wendy had stayed with the Avenger in case something happened. All she had to do was push the autopilot. The craft would start automatically and jump her back to their transport ship.

“Miss Pheto, you’re a sight for sore eyes,” said Gruber, chewing on the end of an unlit cigar. “I hope you’re here to tell me that several Marine divisions are right behind you.”

“Sorry, sir, I’m only here to gather intelligence,” replied Tarina as she handed the general a copy of her orders. He took them and passed them straight over to his chief of staff to read.

“Can you at least tell me if fleet knows that we’re giving the Kurgans a bloody nose down here?”

“Yes, sir, they are aware that you are still fighting the enemy. However, before they do anything to help you, I suspect that fleet will want to know what is happening on the ground. That is why I was dispatched to Derra-5.”

Gruber sagely nodded while his chief of staff excused herself from the room to dig up all the information she could. “So, Miss Pheto, which outfit do you belong to?”

“Triple-Three Transport Squadron,” answered Tarina.

“Yeah, and I’m the Commander of the Marine Corps.” Gruber looked over at his sergeant major. “Does she look like a transport pilot to you?”

Sergeant Major Trang chuckled.

“That’s what I thought; damned Special Forces. Well, for once I’m glad to see one of you prima donnas. While you’re waiting for whatever it is Colonel Robbins has gone to dig up, could I offer you a cup of coffee?”

Tarina smiled. “I’d love one, sir.”

An hour later, General Gruber personally escorted Tarina back to the Avenger. In her absence, it had been ringed by a platoon of soldiers and several teams of air-defense gunners with launchers held in their hands in case the enemy decided to probe this part of the city with a drone.

Tarina handed up a bag to Wendy jam packed with maps, reports, and as many computer drives as she could carry.

Gruber shook Tarina’s hand. He stepped forward until he could look deep into her dark brown eyes. “Miss, you have to tell them folks back at Fleet HQ that we need help and we need it sooner rather than later. The Kurgs have been oddly quiet the past couple of days. They’re planning something big. I can feel it in my bones. The problem is I’m not sure that we can hold out much longer.”

“Sir, I’ll pass on what you’ve said word for word.”

“I can’t ask for much more than that. Godspeed, Miss Pheto.”

Tarina was about to climb up into the cockpit when she paused for a second. “Sir, could you move the people away from the sports arena?”

“Sure, but why would I?”

“Sir, I’ve just had a thought. It’s risky, but I bet a battalion-sized landing craft could just about fit in there.”

“I bet it could,” Gruber added, grinning.

With that, Tarina climbed up into the cockpit, locked her helmet in place, and closed the canopy. The ship’s engine sprang to life. With a quick salute at the general, Tarina applied power to the thrusters. Swiftly, the ship lifted up into the sky. When it was one hundred meters above the ground, Tarina engaged the jump engine. Instantly, the craft was gone.

Gruber stood looking up at the stars. For the first time in over a month, he felt his spirits begin to rise. Perhaps they were not going to be left by themselves to delay the enemy for as long as possible before being overrun. Surrender was not in Gruber’s vocabulary. He turned to face his sergeant major. “Dan, let’s get those people at the sports arena relocated before tomorrow evening.”

“Will do, sir. Do you think she’ll be back?”

“Of course she will. You know the Special Forces community. They’re a bunch of glory hounds. They’ll be back alright, and they’ll take credit for saving the whole damned planet.”

Chapter 30

A thick bank of ice fog hid the Kurgan positions. Even with thermal imaging binoculars, Sheridan knew that he would have to wait until the sun came up and burned off the mist before he could get a clear view of what was going on. His stomach rumbled. He handed off the binoculars to Garcia, crawled back, and slid down the back of the hill to join Cole and Roberts by their fire.

Cole gave Sheridan a warmed-up ration. "So what could you see?"

"Nothing, absolutely nothing," was his reply.

"Give it a couple of hours," said Roberts optimistically. "There are no clouds in the sky. It'll be a cool day, but you'll soon be able to see for kilometers."

Sheridan looked up and saw nothing but bright blue sky. Letting go of his frustration, he opened up his ration pack and dug in. It was a concoction of greasy sausages and tasteless potatoes. Sheridan did not care; he was hungry and he ate his meal with gusto.

A bird sang out. It was Garcia giving their warning call. Sheridan tensed, drew his pistol and flipped the safety off. Together with Cole, he made his way up the hill to where Garcia was on sentry.

"What's up?" Sheridan whispered.

Garcia handed him the binoculars and pointed to a group of refugees who had gathered in the open.

"What am I looking for?"

"Sir . . . sorry, Sheridan, take a close look at the man in a long blue parka and dark green toque."

He adjusted the glasses and focused in on the man Garcia had pointed out. His stomach knotted when he saw Andrews, the man who had turned on them, chatting with the refugees. "What the hell is that slimy bastard up to?"

Garcia said, "I can't be sure, but I thought I saw some of the people point back toward Eve's camp. I think he may be looking for us."

"Jesus, we can't let him get his hands on Eve. I won't allow it," Sheridan said firmly.

Cole reached over and placed a hand on Sheridan's arm. "We won't. He knows all of us, but he's never laid his eyes on Roberts."

A minute later, without Tammy by his side, Roberts whistled a tune as he

ambled back toward Eve's camp. On the hill, Sheridan, Cole, and Garcia lay silent watching as the two men made their way toward one another. Only one, however, knew what was about to happen.

Eve saw Roberts and waved to him. Roberts took a quick glance around. His quarry was nowhere to be seen. He quickly brought up his finger to his mouth, telling Eve to be quiet. His heart quickened the instant he spotted Andrews walk into the camp. He placed his hands in his pockets, his right hand wrapped tight around his silenced pistol.

With a smile, Andrews dug into his pockets and pulled out several tubes of high energy protein snacks. "Good morning, folks, I've been looking for some friends of mine. I heard that they were seen in this camp in the past day or so. If you could help me find them, I'd be willing to give you one of these snacks."

"What did your friends look like?" asked Eve.

"I can't rightly say. However, you'd recognize them if you saw them. I heard one of them has a dog with him."

"If you don't know how they look, how are they your friends?"

Andrews smiled. "Okay, you got me. They're friends of friends."

Roberts stood back, trying to look like he belonged there.

The old man who had petted Tammy by the fire sat up and looked at the food in Andrews' hands. "I saw a dog. The people you are looking for were here last night."

Andrews knelt down and gave the man one of the snacks. "Where did they go?"

"One of them is standing right over there," replied the man, pointing over at Roberts.

Before Andrews could draw his concealed pistol, Roberts was on him. With a swift kick from his right foot, he sent Andrews tumbling to the ground. In a flash, he ran over beside the traitor and sent his foot as hard as he could into the man's head, knocking him out cold. With his heart racing in his chest, Roberts reached down and disarmed Andrews, tossing his two concealed guns into the woods.

The unexpected sound of a pistol's hammer cocking right beside his head made Roberts freeze in his tracks.

"Hands up," warned a man behind Roberts. "Now, slowly turn around and don't try anything foolish or I'll blow your brains out all over the snow."

Roberts gritted his teeth; he should have anticipated Andrews working with someone. He cursed his luck. Roberts turned around and saw a man dressed in dirty civilian clothes pointing a pistol at his head.

"Who are you? And don't lie."

Although deep inside his guts had turned to jelly, as calmly as possible, he replied, "My name is Roberts, and I'm looking for my younger brother. I thought this man was going to attack that old man, so I stopped him."

The man shook his head. "You unbelievers can't lie to save your lives." He stepped back from Roberts and raised his gun to fire.

The attack, when it came, even surprised Roberts. With a loud snarl, Tammy dashed from her hiding spot in the woods and leaped up into the air, clamping down her jaws on the man's outstretched hand. He howled in pain and tried to reach down with his free hand to take hold of his pistol so he could kill his attacker.

He never made it. Roberts drew his concealed pistol and fired twice into the man's skull, killing him. His body dropped to the ground. Roberts walked over, grabbed Tammy by the collar and pulled her back from the dead body. "I told you to stay."

Tammy canted her head to look up and barked at her friend. "Yeah, whatever," replied Roberts.

Eve walked over with a look of consternation on her face. "You had best go. I'll see if I can get rid of the body. If not, I'll say it was a robbery gone bad. Either way, you don't want to be here when the Chosen come looking for their men."

"Thanks," said Roberts. He patted Eve on the arm and then walked over to Andrews' prostrate body. He got down on his knees and threw the body over his shoulder. With a grunt, he got back on his feet and began to jog away from the camp and back to where his comrades were waiting for him.

"Tie him up and gag him," ordered Sheridan.

"I never thought to see him again," said Cole. "What do you want to do with him?"

"We'll interrogate him when he comes to. Until then, we'll continue to keep watch on the Kurgans and try to determine what they're up to."

Andrews woke up a short time later, but Sheridan ignored him. Tammy sat patiently in front of the prisoner and growled menacingly if he tried to move. As the day wore on, it was evident that the enemy was bringing bridging equipment forward and pre-positioning for a planned river crossing.

The cold winter day turned to night.

With Garcia and Roberts on sentry, Sheridan decided that it was time to question Andrews. He took a syringe from Garcia, walked over, grabbed hold of Andrews and thrust the needle into Andrews' neck. He emptied the syringe into Andrews before dragging him over to the fire. The gag was removed.

"What the hell did you just inject me with?" asked Andrews.

“I’m not sure what its scientific name is, but you know it as truth serum,” Sheridan replied.

“You can’t do that, it’s against the laws of war to use drugs on a prisoner!”

“So is murdering civilians, but I don’t see you up in arms about that.”

Sheridan knelt down beside Andrews. He placed his lips near the man’s ear.

“Now, Andrews, or whatever your Chosen name is, you can try to resist the effects of the drug, but trust me on this, you’re going to lose. I’ll leave you alone for five minutes to allow it to work on your brain. After that, you’re going to tell me what your friends are planning and how you managed to successfully infiltrate the armed forces back home on Earth.”

The truth serum had been a last minute addition to Sheridan’s wish list of equipment they would need for their mission. It was hard to find, but Leon knew where to obtain some and did so willingly after Sheridan said that he would try to get his sentence reduced further.

After more than an hour of questioning, Sheridan looked over at Cole and said, “I think that’s it. Can you think of anything else?”

Cole shook his head. “We’ve got what we came for and then some. The information on the Chosen infiltration of the military is going to give the counterintelligence boys at Fleet HQ nightmares.”

“You’re not wrong there. We should get going.”

“The prisoner?”

Sheridan looked down at Andrews. “We can’t risk taking him with us and as much as I’d love to put a bullet between his eyes, I don’t think that’s really an option, is it?”

Cole shook his head.

“Okay then, strip him naked and tie him to a tree. We’ll let nature decide if he lives or dies.”

Cole grinned. He roughly grabbed Andrews by the collar and hauled him over to a tall pine tree. He quickly tied him to the tree, gagged him and ripped off the man’s clothing. He stared deep into Andrews’ eyes for a moment. “I doubt they’ll find your body until it begins to rot in the spring.”

With Roberts and Tammy in the lead, the team skirted the woods, avoiding any contact with the refugees as they headed back toward the tunnel entrance. At the pre-arranged hour, Sheridan cautiously made his way to the iron grate and checked in with the MPs who were guarding the passageway. He waved his team over. As they made their way back through the darkened passage, Sheridan wondered if the fleet was aware just how deep the Chosen deception had become. With no way to transmit the information off the planet, he hoped that

the damage had not been too severe and that the armed forces would discover what was afoot before too many more lives were lost.

Chapter 31

After returning to their ship, Tarina and Wendy found themselves inside Colonel Wright's office. He had just sent an encoded message back to the forward elements of the Sixth Fleet, now less than a couple of day's jump from their location.

"Okay, all of the information you brought back from Derra-5 has been sent. Your proposal, to land a battalion of Marines inside the capital, was also included," said Wright. "Now we sit and wait for their reply. It'll be at least forty-eight hours before they either say that you're both out of your minds or a landing craft miraculously appears out of nowhere on our doorstep. Jump-capable landing craft are far and few between. They could modify one, but that would take time and that's something the Marines on Derra-5 are short of. Either way, it's out of our hands. You two are to be commended for your work."

"Thank you, sir," replied the women.

"I want you to go with the assumption that they will want to reinforce the beleaguered garrison. After a decent meal and a few hours of rest, I want you to work on the calculations for the jump. I want to see both by noon tomorrow."

Tarina and Wendy exchanged a nod and saluted Wright before leaving his office. They were both far too excited to think about putting their heads down.

"Do you think they'll go for it?" Wendy asked.

"Yes," replied Tarina. "They have to. I can't believe that they would allow Derra-5 to fall."

"I guess we had best get to work. We can grab some sandwiches and a couple of drinks and then find ourselves a quiet corner of the hangar."

Tarina nodded. Wendy's drive never seemed to abate. She began to wonder if her friend ever slept. She was more like a robot than a human being at times. Tarina hoped that she could keep up with her determined friend.

Billions of kilometers away, the division's intelligence staff were busy debriefing Sheridan and his team. Several officers and NCOs furiously scribbled notes or typed away on computer consoles trying to record every word. Everything they had seen or heard was meticulously recorded. Sheridan was surprised to hear that while they were away the fleet had finally made contact with the garrison. It was welcome news.

After three hours of back and forth with the staff, the debriefing wrapped

up. General Gruber thanked them personally. He told Sheridan and his people to get some rest. They were told not to go too far as they were probably heading out again in the next day or so to gather more information.

“Mister Sheridan, I’d like a word,” said Gruber.

Taking that as his cue, Cole rounded up everyone else and led them out of the office.

Gruber took a seat across from Sheridan. “Son, the information that you brought back with you is invaluable. I now know where and when the enemy intends to hit me, and I now know all about their sleeper cells spread throughout the armed forces. It’s a chilling thought just how successful they have been at slipping their people into our military and government agencies for the past several decades.”

“Sir, it’s nothing short of genius. Undoubtedly, they were planning this war right after the last one ended. It was just a matter of timing.”

Gruber smiled. Sheridan was a bright officer with potential. He resolved to keep an eye on the young man and help shepherd his career. He thanked Sheridan, who stood and left to join his comrades.

Gruber sent word for his chief of staff to join him.

A couple of minutes later, Colonel Anne Robbins walked into the room looking as if she had not slept in weeks. There were dark rings under her puffy, bloodshot eyes.

Gruber said, “Anne, I want you to order the guard around the headquarters and the ammunition dumps to be doubled, effective immediately.”

“Yes, sir.” replied the colonel.

“Also inform the staff that our latest plans are not to be released to the regiments without my expressed order. I want to keep them close hold for now.”

Robbins nodded as she took down her notes.

“Also, I’m ordering you to get some sleep. You’ll burn yourself out, and I can’t afford to lose you.”

“Sir, I’ll get some sleep when you do.”

Gruber grinned. “Anne, I’m older than you, I can go with less sleep. Now please do as I ask. The staff can work without you for six hours.”

Colonel Robbins relented. “As you wish, sir, but not one second more than six hours.”

“I’ll make sure you get woken up,” replied Gruber, lying through his teeth. He did not intend to wake her up until her body was good and rested.

Robbins saluted and left to give the new orders to the staff.

Gruber stood up, walked over to the wall and studied a map hanging there. His mind was playing out the enemy’s probable courses of action for the coming

assault. He would have to pull a couple of battalions away from their place in the line to meet this new threat. However, if he got it wrong and they were attacked from another direction, there would be nothing to stop the enemy from taking the capital. It was the biggest gamble of his life. With a grin, he decided that unless something new came to his attention that they would go with his plan as it stood. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a fresh cigar. He lit it and savored the taste before exhaling. “Come on, you sons of bitches, try forcing your way across my river and I’ll kick your ass all the way back to Kurgan space.”

Chapter 32

Admiral Sheridan wrapped up his briefing to Admiral Oshiro on how he intended to defeat the enemy fleet in orbit around Derra-5 and asked for questions. When there were none, he stepped back and turned over the lectern to Lieutenant General Denisov, the ground force commander for the invasion. The general was his usual gruff, succinct self and concluded his presentation in under five minutes with an observation that there was an insufficient number of landing craft currently available for the assault to be conducted in one wave. He made sure everyone in the room understood that he would have to sequence his attack based upon the availability of the landing ships. He did not see it as a showstopper, just something that the planning staff needed to keep a close eye on. Both men took their seats at the table across from Admiral Oshiro.

“Gentlemen, I will take your proposals with me and present them to the federation president when I see him in two days’ time,” explained Oshiro. “I have no doubt that your plans will be approved. Therefore, you are to move ahead with your preliminary preparations. Admiral Sheridan will be overall in charge of the operation. I want you both ready to go when the order is given.”

Denisov nodded. There could only be one person in charge and it made sense for Sheridan to be that man. As long as he kept the Kurgan Fleet away from his landing craft packed with men and equipment Denisov would be more than happy just to lead the ground assault.

The meeting soon concluded. As always the staff officers who had quietly sat through the briefings at the back of the room and would have to do all the legwork rushed to ask their counterparts a million questions.

Oshiro took Sheridan by the arm and together they walked to a window looking out into space. Oshiro handed Sheridan a note; he took it and read it over. With a stunned look, Sheridan stood there grasping for words to articulate how he felt. Oshiro smiled and patted Sheridan on the back. He was about to say something when the door to the briefing room opened and a Marine captain entered, his face was ashen.

Sheridan waved the officer over.

“Sir, we’ve just received word that the *Aquila* has been destroyed,” reported the captain.

“My God, how?” asked Oshiro. The *Aquila* was a fighter carrier and the flagship of the First Fleet tasked with defending the Earth.

“Admiral, according to the reports coming in, the ship’s nuclear arsenal somehow detonated. The *Aquila* was being resupplied at the time of the explosion. Three other vessels were lost with her. Preliminary estimates put the loss of life at close to eight thousand.”

Oshiro remained outwardly calm. “Captain, pass this information to my staff right away.” The officer turned and walked toward a cluster of high-ranking officers.

“You were right to be suspicious, Admiral,” Sheridan said to Oshiro.

“This is horrible. The enemy has people everywhere. We’re going to have to double our surveillance and security measures, or there will be more losses like this.”

Sheridan placed the note from Oshiro in his pocket. “Sir, we have to assume that they have people in key positions who have access to everything that we have. May I make a suggestion?”

“Please, go on.”

“Admiral, secrecy needs to be maintained or the invasion of Derra-5 will end in failure. We need the enemy to believe that we are going to strike somewhere else. From here on out, sir, I think it would be wise to identify Illum Prime as our objective. Their agents will undoubtedly feed the enemy this information and make plans to fight us there. I will inform my staff and General Denisov’s to keep the real destination a secret until just before we make our jump to Derra-5.”

“Do it, and for God’s sake, Rob, don’t let your guard down for one second. I’m beginning to fear we could lose this war before we’ve even begun to fight back.” Oshiro excused himself and went to speak with his staff.

Admiral Sheridan knew that Oshiro was right. If they didn’t find out who was a traitor in their midst and fast, they would always be looking over their backs wondering if the person in the room with them could be trusted. It was a surefire recipe for fear, paranoia, and scapegoating. It had to be nipped in the bud before it got out of hand. A thought crossed his mind. He called over his fleet master chief petty officer. “Master Chief Rey, please find Captain Jones and have him report to me right away.”

Rey nodded and went to find the fleet’s senior medical officer.

Admiral Sheridan had no idea if what he was thinking would work. It was a long shot, but it was all they seemed to have. He reached into his pocket and felt the piece of paper in his hand. He decided to wait until the room cleared before making a couple of calls. He just was not sure how he was going to break the news.

Chapter 33

Tarina heard the buzzing in her head, but her weary mind told her to ignore it. She pulled a pillow over her head and tried to block out the irritating noise. A second later, the door slid open and the light from the hallway flooded in.

“Tarina, wake up. I have a message for you,” said Wright, his tone serious.

She instantly sat up, rubbed the sleep from her eyes and looked over at the clock on the wall. It was early morning. She flicked on the light switch beside her bed. The bright light bothered her tired eyes.

“I’ll leave this with you,” Wright said as he handed Tarina his personal tablet and left the room.

Tarina shook her head trying to wake up. She stood up and took the device from her bedside table. On the screen was a message for her from Sheridan’s father. Instantly, she found it hard to breathe. All of the suppressed emotions she had buried deep inside her heart flooded back. Why was the admiral calling her now? She knew Michael was dead. Hesitantly, she opened the message.

Admiral Sheridan appeared. “Tarina, I know that you and Michael weren’t seeing one another when the war started. However, I thought that you would want to know that based on the information that you brought back from Derra-5, Michael is still alive. He is down there fighting with the rest of the garrison. How he ended up there, I have no idea. Michael is listed as being a reconnaissance platoon leader attached to the divisional headquarters. I was told that you might be going back there. If you are, and if you see Michael, please tell him that his father loves him and that I couldn’t be prouder of him than I am today.”

With that, the message ended. Tarina sat there staring down at the screen. She reached down and played the message again, listening carefully to each word to make sure that she had it right. For a second, she thought she was going to be sick. It was all too much to comprehend. Tarina had just come to terms that Sheridan was dead. She walked over to the sink, turned on a faucet, and gently washed her face.

The door’s alarm buzzed.

“Come in,” said Tarina, wiping her face dry with a towel.

Wendy walked in. She stood there for a moment and then rushed over, wrapping her arms tightly around Tarina. “Colonel Wright just told me. It’s wonderful news that your friend is still alive.”

Tarina could not hold her feelings in check anymore and began to cry tears of joy. “Yes, he is. Michael is still alive.”

Wright coughed at the open door, trying to get the women’s attention. “Tarina, Wendy, I hate to drop this on you at a moment like this but I have just received word that we have a landing craft on route to our location, ETA six hours. I need you to be ready to depart when they arrive. As soon as you have transferred the jump calculations to the landing craft’s navigator, you will both proceed to Derra-5 as per your plan.”

Tarina wiped the tears from her face and handed back Wright’s tablet. “Thank you, sir.”

Wright smiled. “I knew you’d want to know.”

“Come on,” said Wendy to Tarina. “We’ve got a lot of work to do.” Together, the women headed to the flight hangar to join the technicians prepping their craft for its next mission.

Chapter 34

At precisely 2000 hours local time, on Derra-5, the enemy unleashed a barrage with every artillery and mortar piece they had with them on the planet. Seconds later, the shells rained down on the Marine positions facing the enemy. Whole houses vanished in thunderous explosions as the wall of flame crept forward toward the riverbank and then to the other side, pulverizing the city to rubble.

Sheridan, Cole, Garcia, Roberts, and Tammy had taken refuge in the basement of a house near the headquarters. The ground beneath their feet seemed to shake as if an earthquake had suddenly hit the capital. Dust and debris fell from the roof onto the people huddled below. Tammy raised her head and barked at the noise as if she could somehow scare it away.

“Here they come!” Cole yelled, trying to be heard over the din of the bombardment.

“I’d hate to be on the receiving end of that,” said Garcia.

Unbelievably, through all the noise, they heard someone banging away on the door. Sheridan edged over and opened it. There was a dust-covered soldier standing there. He handed Sheridan a piece of paper and then fled for cover. Sheridan read the note and then gave it to Cole.

“He has to be mad,” blurted out Cole.

“Not him, us. Come on, let’s go see what they want,” replied Sheridan. He told Garcia and Roberts to stay under cover while he and Cole went to see General Gruber.

Quickly poking his head above ground, Sheridan saw the ferocity of the bombardment. The houses along the river were all on fire, their red flames lighting up the night sky. A dark pall of smoke hung low over the city. With Cole close behind, Sheridan ran for the nearest trench system and jumped down inside. He almost landed on a mother and her two children who had taken shelter there when the shelling began. The children looked up at him with tears in their eyes. He was as scared as they were, he just could not show it.

“This way,” said Cole, grabbing Sheridan by the arm and pointing him in the direction of the headquarters.

Five long minutes passed before they arrived at the underground complex. A young captain greeted them and escorted them to General Gruber’s office.

The door was open. Gruber saw Sheridan and waved him in. “Hard

pounding, eh?”

Sheridan nodded wondering why he had been summoned.

Gruber said, “Son, my liaison officer to the Third Regiment guarding the river has been severely wounded. I want you to take his place. Head there right away and then report back to me once my little surprise for the Kurgans is sprung. I’m gonna need to know if it worked or not. I don’t have much left in the pantry to push them back with if they gain a bridgehead on our side of the river.”

Sheridan peered over at the map on the wall behind the general and saw where the regiment was located on the ground. “Sir, do you have anything you want to be passed on to the regimental commander?”

Gruber’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah, tell them to hold their ground.”

This was it. If the enemy got through there was nothing left to stop them with. Sheridan saluted Gruber and left the office. He was not privy to what the general was planning, but he prayed that whatever it was worked.

After briefing Cole, they made their way to the surface and into another darkened trench system. The longer the fight went on, the more it resembled wars fought long ago on Earth to Sheridan. A Kurgan shell landed in the trench ten meters behind them, killing four Marines, sending their bodies flying up into the air like a child’s rag doll. Bloodstained dirt and rocks rained down inside the trench.

Sheridan swore but kept moving. There was nowhere safe, not tonight. It was if the enemy knew that one last push would finally break the defender’s back. They were not holding anything back. They could sense victory was within their grasp.

When they came out of the zigzagging trenches, Sheridan and Cole found themselves inside a heavily reinforced bunker overlooking the river. A gruff-looking gunnery sergeant, who looked as if he hadn’t washed or shaved in weeks, met them. He checked Sheridan’s orders before he took them over to a lieutenant colonel who had assumed command of the regiment when its colonel had died from his wounds earlier in the day.

Sheridan introduced himself and Cole to the senior officer, who told them to keep to one side and out of the way of his people. Sheridan knew the man was under considerable stress. He acknowledged the order and moved over to a viewport with a clear view of the river. He brought up his binoculars and looked across to the far bank. The smoke and fires raging through the houses made it hard to see anything. He handed his glasses to Cole and looked down at his watch; it was coming up on 2100 hours.

All of a sudden the hellish barrage stopped. An odd, uncomfortable silence fell over the city for a couple of seconds before the sound of buildings burning

and collapsing replaced the awful sound of the bombardment. Cole tapped Sheridan and pointed to the far side of the river. Sheridan took back his binoculars and spotted a couple of wounded men staggering toward a flimsy pontoon bridge built across the river. Within seconds, the trickle turned into a torrent as scores of men, some of them severely wounded, rushed for the crossing.

Sheridan heard someone inside the bunker swear. “God damn it, they’re pulling back too soon,” said another angrily. Whatever had been carefully orchestrated was rapidly falling apart. Sheridan guessed that they had planned for an orderly withdrawal in the face of the enemy. However, after an hour of unrelenting pounding, the men had broken. It was a rout.

The sound of a deafening loud explosion further down the river made Sheridan’s heart skip a beat. He turned his head and watched as the bridge he had fought so hard to defend was blown to pieces to prevent its capture by the enemy. He shook his head and looked back at the flood of men trying to escape. It was hard to see the river as thick black smoke from a nearby fire billowed past the viewport. Switching on his thermal binoculars would not help. There were too many fires burning to be able to tell the fleeing men from the white-hot background.

“Here they come!” yelled out the gunnery sergeant.

Sheridan and Cole saw several Kurgan officers running to the river with flags held high above their heads. Behind them like a surging white wave came thousands of Chosen warriors, cheering at the top of their lungs. From concealed positions on their side of the river, Marine heavy weapons teams opened fire and cut down files of Chosen soldiers; their bodies tumbled down the steep riverbank into the cold, black water. Marines trapped out in the open on the narrow pontoon bridge fought and died under the heavy fusillade brought down upon them by the Chosen. Sheridan ground his teeth as he watched, impotent to stop the massacre. In less than a minute, there was not a single Marine left alive. The dead littered the ground or floated downstream carried by the fast flowing river.

The whoosh sound of incoming missiles told them that a deadly volley fired by enemy drones hovering above the river was about to strike. All along the Marines’ defensive position, the heavy weapons teams suffered crippling losses as the drones flew above them firing everything they had, trying to silence the weapons. The hellish noise all around the bunker was deafening. A second later, dozens of anti-aircraft missiles fired by Marine air-defense soldiers, well back from the battle, surged up into the night sky blasting several drones out of the air. The remainder quickly ducked down below the height of the houses and then skimmed just above the river as they maneuvered to a new position to continue

the fight.

Hundreds of Marines hidden in the trenches along the riverbank popped up and joined the fight. Tracers tore through the dark. For every tracer round, four other bullets were fired, killing and maiming dozens of enemy soldiers at a time.

With the far bank cleared of opposition, the Kurgans, ignoring their growing casualties, brought forward a company of tanks to bring fire down on the defenders. Sheridan saw that they were not the massive destroyer tanks they had first used, but were lighter ten-wheeled armored vehicles with 180mm cannons on them. The tanks quickly formed a firing line and began to pound the trench line, trying to silence the men fighting back.

“Over there,” called out a hoarse voice.

Sheridan tried to see what the man had spotted. He adjusted his position and then saw what was coming their way. Two large Kurgan armored bridge layers rumbled past the tanks and then stopped at the river’s edge. Almost right away, the vehicles began to extend their collapsed metal bridges across the river.

“I don’t get it. Why aren’t they shooting at the bridge layers?” Cole asked Sheridan as he watched a company of Chosen engineers rush forward to help finish building the two bridges.

Sheridan looked over and saw that the Marines were firing on the tanks and the foot soldiers only. It was as if they could not see the long metal bridges being built right under their noses. He turned to face a major and said, “Sir, what gives? Why aren’t your men trying to destroy the Kurgan bridges before they get built?”

“Wait for it, Lieutenant,” the major replied bluntly.

Sheridan looked at Cole and shrugged his shoulders. Below at the water’s edge, some of the Chosen engineers jumped up onto the bridges and secured them to the far bank. Others ran to the other side to fasten it to the steep riverbank just below the Marine trenches. They were close enough that Sheridan could hear them talking to one another. Through the swirling smoke, he spotted a couple of the tanks edging down until they were on the bridges. Behind them, Chosen soldiers cheered and ran to join the attack. They began to chant to God, in Kurgan. With their officers leading them, the enemy warriors were eager to get to grips with the Marines on the other side of the river.

“That’ll do,” announced the regimental commander. “Fire the demolitions.”

“Yes, sir,” replied an engineer lieutenant as he pressed down on a red button on an old-fashioned electric firing board.

Sheridan expected to hear a massive explosion. Instead, nothing happened.

The officer pushed the button frantically a couple more times. “The wire must be cut.” Jumping up onto his feet, the lieutenant ran to the back of the

bunker and out into the open where the cable was laid. He made it less than ten meters before he died in a hail of bullets. His sergeant and a corporal tried as well but met the same fate.

Sheridan swore. The tanks were already halfway across the river. "Take over the firing board," he said to Cole. Before the sergeant could tell him it was suicide, Sheridan was on the move. As he stepped outside of the bunker, brought his fingers up to his mouth and let out a loud whistle, a couple of Marines looked his way. "Pop smoke and cover me!" Sheridan yelled.

With a hiss, several smoke grenades tossed by the bunker began to emit a thick gray cloud covering the area in front of the shelter. Sheridan saw where the engineer officer had fallen and ran to his side. Desperate to stop the enemy from crossing the river, he dug his hands into the muck. A couple of seconds later, Sheridan found what he was looking for. He picked up the wire and began to follow it, looking for a break. All around him, bullets whizzed through the air and struck the dirt. After ten agonizingly long seconds searching, he found the split in the line. Dropping to his knees, he pulled out his knife and hurriedly cleared off the dirt and rubber coating from the electrical wires. With bullets whipping around his head, Sheridan quickly wound the two ends together. He could see Chosen warriors barely twenty meters away pointing at him, trying to warn their officers.

"Now!" hollered Sheridan as he threw himself face-first into the mud.

Cole muttered a prayer and pressed his thumb down on the firing button. A split second later, the entire far bank of the river vanished in an ear-splitting detonation. Hundreds of Chosen warriors waiting to cross the river were instantly killed by the thunderous blast. Thousands more were horribly maimed and wounded. The men and tanks on the bridges were hurled into the water and swept away as the bridges buckled in on themselves and then fell apart from the force of the deadly explosion. A thick, black cloud of smoke blanketed the river.

Cole was up and out of the bunker before the debris had stopped falling on their side of the river. He could not see Sheridan in the smoke, but he had a good idea where he was. He slid on his backside down the muddy slope until he found Sheridan lying motionless in the muck. Cole grabbed hold of Sheridan's shoulders and rolled him over. The young officer's face was caked with mud. A second later, he opened his eyes and gasped loudly as he took in a lung full of air. Coughing and wheezing, Sheridan was lucky to have only been winded by the blast.

"You're one stupid officer, Lieutenant Michael Sheridan!" said Cole, helping him to his feet. "You could have been . . . no, you ought to be dead."

"Yeah, you could be right about that," Sheridan replied.

What neither man knew was that the division's entire supply of artillery shells had been secretly buried on the other side of the river. With their guns out of action, the artillerymen, working with a handful of combat engineers, had prepared their shells for detonation.

General Gruber had gambled and won.

Chapter 35

Tarina listened to Wendy's voice as she counted backward from ten. As soon as she reached five, Tarina gripped the joystick of her Avenger and waited for the harsh jolt to her body that would come when they came out of their jump into Derra-5's atmosphere. Even though she had prepared herself mentally for the kick, her body still felt the full force of the impact.

The ship's sublight engine kicked in. Tarina reached over and activated her ship's thrusters to control the rapid descent.

"The arena's playing field looks empty," announced Wendy as she looked down at thermal image displayed on her console.

"How long until our friends arrive?" asked Tarina.

"Now!" responded Wendy. A large landing craft suddenly appeared several hundred meters directly above their heads, blocking out the silvery light from one of Derra-5's moons.

Tarina banked over and lined up her craft to land in the schoolyard as she had the last time. She reached up to key her mic to talk to the landing craft but remembered that everything on the planet was still being jammed.

Wendy turned in her seat and looked behind. "Looks like they've slowed their fall and are going to make a smooth landing in the arena."

Tarina felt a wave of relief wash over her. As she brought her craft down, she could see the fires raging all along the riverfront. It looked like a scene straight out of hell. Her thoughts instantly turned to Sheridan. She wondered if he was down there amongst the flames. She tried to block her thoughts and concentrated on landing her ship safely.

A cordon of heavily armed soldiers met the Avenger while Tarina popped open the cockpit, removed her helmet and climbed down onto the snow-covered ground. A sergeant greeted Tarina and asked her to follow him to the headquarters.

At the arena, the second the landing craft touched down, all of the exits opened. Hundreds of Marines carrying all of their equipment on their backs sprinted out. They had ten seconds to disembark. Even if not all of the men were off in ten, the doors were closing and the landing craft was heading back to the fleet.

A sergeant at the front exit counted down on the landing craft's PA system.

He grinned when he saw that they were going to make it. The last soldier was out the door with two seconds left to spare. Automatically the doors slid closed and the landing craft began to lift back up into the night sky. An automated voice told the crew to prepare to jump in five seconds time.

Unseen among the burnt-out buildings ringing the arena, a Kurgan drone tracked the massive ship as it rose up. It locked all of its missiles on the ship and fired. The landing craft did not stand a chance. One second before it was to jump away, the deadly projectiles struck the rear of the ship, igniting the fuel cells. A brilliant orange and red fireball lit up the night as the ship blew apart. Flaming wreckage rained down to the ground, killing a handful of Marines who had still been out in the open.

Tarina heard the thunderous explosion, stopped in her tracks and looked up in horror as the burning debris tumbled from the sky. She swore. Twenty people had just died in the blink of an eye.

“Ma’am, this way, please,” said the sergeant. “It’s not safe out there.”

“Yes, of course,” replied Tarina numbly.

After trudging through dimly lit trench system for a few minutes, Tarina soon recognized where she was. Inside the headquarters, the mood was the exact opposite of how she felt. Men and women were enthusiastically congratulating one another. People wanting to shake his hand mobbed the commander of the newly arrived battalion of Marines. *From the way the people were acting, you would have thought the war was over and that they had won*, thought Tarina.

General Gruber welcomed the lieutenant colonel before handing him off to his chief of staff. He looked around the room. The second he saw Tarina, he smiled from ear to ear and strode straight toward her. “If it isn’t my favorite transport pilot,” said Gruber with a wink as he shook Tarina’s hand.

“They took out the landing craft, sir.”

“I know,” replied Gruber somberly. “But we have gained eight hundred fresh soldiers. And I desperately need those men to make up for the losses I suffered earlier tonight.”

Tarina unzipped a pocket on her survival suit and handed a couple of computer drives to the general. “Sir, I was told to give these to you. They’re from Fleet Headquarters.”

Gruber called his operations officer over and gave him the drives. He set a hand on Tarina’s shoulder and said, “I have some information that I need you to take back with you. My staff should have it all packaged up and ready to go in a couple of minutes. Until then, I’d like you to meet some of my people.” He guided her through the throng of people still celebrating until they came to a

quiet corner of the room. She could see two Marines drinking coffee, caked from head to toe in mud.

“Gents, I’d like to introduce to you Second Lieutenant Tarina Pheto. This young lady is the bravest pilot I have ever had the honor of knowing.”

The soldiers looked a mess. Their ragged uniforms were filthy. Both men needed a shower and a shave. They barely looked like Marines.

“Hi, Tarina,” said one of the men covered in mud.

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw Sheridan’s green eyes looking back at her. With a scream of joy, she wrapped her arms around Sheridan’s neck, pulling him in close.

Gruber stood there with an incredulous look on his face.

“Officers,” said Cole dryly.

Wiping the dirt from Sheridan’s face, Tarina leaned forward and kissed the man she once thought she had lost forever.

“I take it you two know each other?” said Gruber. He waited a couple of seconds until the two young officers let go of one another.

“We knew each other at the academy, sir,” said Sheridan, sheepishly.

“Must have changed since I went there,” observed Gruber. “A simple handshake was good enough in my day.”

Tarina blushed. “Sir, sorry, it’s just that I thought Michael was dead.”

Gruber looked over at Cole. “Feel like getting a fresh cup of coffee, Sergeant?”

Cole grinned. “Sounds good, sir.” They walked away, giving Sheridan and Tarina a minute or two of privacy.

Tarina looked deep into Sheridan’s eyes. “Michael, I was told you were dead.”

“I know. It’s a bit of a long story. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine. Your father’s the one who told me you were still alive. He asked me to tell you that he loves you and that he’s proud of you.”

Sheridan shook his head. “They’re just hollow words from a man who barely knows me.”

“Michael, you’re wrong. I saw the look in his eyes and heard the pain in his voice. He misses you.”

“I’ll have to wait to pass judgment until I meet the admiral again.”

Tarina did not want to be dragged into another family discussion. Not again, not when they had so little time to spend together before she had to leave.

“Michael, any second now I’m going to have to leave. Is there anything you wish me to pass on to your father?”

Sheridan took a deep breath and said, “Please tell him that I’m alright and

that I look forward to seeing him again when this is all over.”

Tarina saw an officer walking toward them. Her heart ached. She knew it was time to go. She let go of Sheridan’s hand, took the drives from the major and slipped them into her pocket. Trying not to cry, she said, “Time to go.”

“Lieutenant Sheridan, I want you to personally make sure my favorite pilot gets to her ship safely,” said Gruber.

Sheridan smiled at Tarina and playfully said, “Lead on, general’s favorite.”

Five minutes later, at the Avenger, Sheridan stood facing Tarina. He held her hands in his. “I won’t ask you when you’re coming back because the odds of us bumping into one another again are probably slim.”

Tarina stepped close. “I’m sorry I broke it off with you. I should have ignored your mother.”

“No, you were right. It was the kick in the pants that I needed. Unfortunately, it took a few months to sink in before I knew how right you were. I love you, Tarina.”

“I love you too, Michael.” With that, they embraced and kissed with a passion that both had missed from their lives.

“Excuse me, you two, but there’s a war on and I don’t want to go down in flames like the landing craft did,” said Wendy from the cockpit. “While you were busy, I redid the calculations. We’ll jump three seconds after take-off. There’s no way in hell that a drone can spot, lock, and fire its missiles in that time.”

“Got to go,” Tarina said, letting go of Sheridan.

“Stay safe, Tarina Pheto.”

“You too, Michael Sheridan, you too.” With a heavy heart, Tarina climbed up into her ship, placed her helmet back on and then turned to take one last look at Sheridan. He waved up and then stepped back so she could engage the sublight engines. Tarina closed the cockpit and switched on the craft’s engine. She turned her head away and focused on her job. A second later, the Avenger began to lift up into the night sky.

Wendy’s voice filled Tarina’s helmet. “Engage the jump engine in three-two-one.”

Below, Sheridan watched as Tarina’s ship climbed ever higher and then in a flash it was gone. Slowly a smile crept across his face. She had never said she loved him before. They were the sweetest words he had ever heard. Turning his back on the Marines standing around the landing site, Sheridan made his way back to the headquarters. Until now, he had just fought to keep himself and his people alive. Now he had someone in his life worth fighting for.

Chapter 36

Sheridan found Cole sitting with Garcia, Roberts, and Tammy in their bunker. A chemical stove in the corner of the room kept the bitter cold away. A warmed up ration pack awaited Sheridan's return. Before Sheridan could take a seat, there was a knock on the door. Garcia opened it and welcomed into the room a mother with a small child in her arms.

Cole nudged Sheridan's arm and quietly said, "Garcia has been cleaning out and treating wounds suffered by kids during the last bombardment. The field hospital is overwhelmed with military casualties. They're turning away civilians who aren't in need of immediate lifesaving care."

"We don't have a lot of medicine ourselves," pointed out Sheridan.

"One of the medics who arrived with the reinforcements is a friend of hers, so he gave her a top up of her med bag. I told her it was okay to help out."

Sheridan took a seat and watched while Garcia treated the child for burns on her arms. When she was done, Garcia gave the woman a small bottle of ointment for the wounds and a couple of fresh bandages. The woman thanked Garcia and turned to leave. Roberts jumped up and held the door open for the woman and her child.

Cole waited until the door closed and then handed Sheridan his food. "I take it, sir, that the young woman you kissed back at headquarters is the one your mother doesn't approve of?"

"Correct," Sheridan responded as he took a seat on the floor.

"What young lady?" asked Roberts.

"What does she look like?" prodded Garcia.

Cole said, "From what I saw, she's quite beautiful, slender, bald, and has a strong South African accent."

"I'm not fond of bald women," confided Roberts. "But I do like accents."

"I wasn't asking," Sheridan retorted.

"Where did you two meet?" asked Garcia.

Sheridan placed his meal down and looked over at his comrades. "What is this, quiz the lieutenant day?"

Garcia nodded. "Sir, we don't get much gossip around here, so, yes, you're on the hot spot. I'd really like to know where you two met."

For the next couple of minutes, Sheridan told them all about Tarina and about his mother's dislike of her because of her skin color. The sound of

footsteps coming down the stairs to their bunker ended the conversation. A Marine private walked in and handed Sheridan a note. He read it over, signed it, and then gave it back to the soldier.

When the Marine was gone, Cole looked over at Sheridan. “So, what’s on the go, sir? More liaison work?”

Sheridan shook his head. “General Gruber wants to see you and me in his office tomorrow morning at 0800 hours.”

“Did the note say why?”

“Nope. Perhaps we’re going outside of the city again to gather more intelligence on the Kurgans’ activities?”

Cole said, “The general really likes you.”

“Yeah, I guess he does.”

“That’s not always a good thing, sir.”

Sheridan was taken aback. “Why would you say that?”

“Sir, with all due respect to the general, he’s clearly not afraid to trade lives, a lot of lives to get what he’s after. Remember when the Kurgans first struck our position on the outskirts of the city?”

“Sure. What about it?”

“A lot of good men died at the hands of the enemy’s drones. General Gruber deliberately kept his air-defense assets from engaging the enemy so he could see what the enemy’s tactics would be when they met resistance. Also, those men on the far side of the river who were massacred when they tried to withdraw . . . they did not need to be there. They were there as bait to let the Kurgans think that we were still planning to resist their advance.”

“Generals have to make hard decisions to win. Sometimes people die.”

“Sir, I’m not disputing that. If you don’t think that Gruber would use you to gain a battlefield advantage, then you’re fooling yourself. You, I, all of us are a means to an end. You’re young and you care about the people you serve with, and that’s a good thing for an officer. The sooner we’re assigned back to a regiment the less of a chance of us being used up and tossed away.”

Sheridan shook his head. “You do realize that you can be quite the cynic sometimes, Sergeant.”

Cole smiled. “Sir, I tell everyone that I meet that you’re the smartest officer I have ever met, but you have one failing.”

“And that is?”

“You trust people too much. A healthy dose of pessimism from time to time will serve you well in your career. Look, I could be wrong about the general, but my experience to date tells me to be leery.”

“Okay, let’s wait until tomorrow to see why the general wants to see us. If

it's for some foolhardy scheme, then you may be right. However, until then, I'm going to continue to be me."

Cole stuck out his hand. "Fair enough. I wish I still drank. I'd bet a case of Scotch on this and I'd win."

"Dream on, Sergeant," replied Sheridan shaking his friend's hand.

At precisely 0800 hours the next day, General Gruber's aide escorted Sheridan and Cole into his office. The general stood by a map on the wall, carefully studying it. The aide announced that Sheridan and Cole were present. Gruber dismissed the officer and asked his guests to join him by the map.

Sheridan could see all of the Marines and the known enemy positions marked on the map. The Kurgan had acted doctrinal to date; therefore, it had been easy for the intelligence staff to plot their expected locations on the map.

"Gents, in about four days' time, I'm going to need to be able to speak with all of my units and with anyone in orbit above us," announced the general.

Sheridan and Cole exchanged a look of surprise.

"That's right, gents, help is on the way. You, however, are forbidden to repeat that to anyone outside of this room. The problem is that the enemy won't let me talk to anyone, so I need someone to go outside of the capital and find and destroy the Kurgans' jamming station. My intelligence folks think that it's located here near the rear of the Kurgan administrative echelon forces." Gruber pointed to a spot on the map at least thirty kilometers from the city.

Sheridan leaned forward to study the map. They had walked within a few kilometers of the site when they were trying to reach the capital.

Gruber continued. "Obviously, you can't do this all on your own, so I'm going to provide you with a platoon from the newly arrived Marine battalion. They're fresh and are spoiling for a fight."

Sheridan said, "Sir, a platoon moving around outside the city is going to be spotted far too easily. We'll need to split up into four-man teams to move through the refugee camps as unobtrusively as possible. All I need are sixteen volunteers to get this done."

"Son, I'm not finished. I also want you to escort a fire effects officer and an aerospace controller to a safe location where they can see the bulk of the Kurgan forces. I was thinking that these high grounds to the west look good."

At the academy, Sheridan had been taught that a fire effects officer could control and coordinate the fire from a mortar all the way up to a battleship in orbit high above the planet. The aerospace controller would be responsible to bring in the landing ships and fighter-bombers from the approaching fleet. Sheridan stepped forward and studied the positions the general had picked. They

were on the route he would have to use to get to the jamming station. “Sir, this means that I need six more volunteers for a total of twenty-two. Anything more than that and we’ll be spotted for sure.”

“I think you may be selling yourself short, but it’s your call, son.”

Cole spoke up. “Sir, I have to agree with Mister Sheridan, it’s unfriendly territory out there. Too many new faces moving about will make people suspicious.”

Gruber nodded. It was done. “Gents, I’ll make sure you get the best soldiers I can get my hands on.”

“Sir, please make sure we get some women,” added Cole. “In my experience, women refugees tend to open up to other women more than a bunch of strange men who walk into their camp and start asking questions.”

“That’s a good point,” agreed Sheridan.

“Okay, I’ll make it happen. Anything else?” asked Gruber. Both men shook their heads. “Well, if that’s it, I’ll hand you two off to the intelligence staff again. They’ll give you all the details you’ll need to pull this off.” With that, he shook their hands and dismissed the two Marines. “Good luck to you. An awful lot of people are counting on you to end the Kurgans’ ability to jam all of our comms.”

Outside the room, Cole turned to Sheridan. “No pressure, sir. All they want us to do is stroll thirty clicks through enemy territory, find a jamming station, which is probably guarded by at least a platoon of Chosen warriors, blow it up and then get out of there without being killed. I think I just won my case of Scotch.”

“Yeah, you may have,” said Sheridan.

Eight hours later, in the basement of an abandoned house, Sheridan stood over a model on the floor of the ground they were going to have to move across. He, like everyone there, had changed into civilian clothing. Some carried their uniforms in their small packs to be put on later while others brought Chosen winter white coveralls. All carried Kurgan small arms taken from the dead. Sheridan looked into the eyes of the men and women who had volunteered to come with him. They all looked incredibly young to him. Although only twenty-two, Sheridan felt old compared to the sea of eighteen-year-old faces looking up at him. “Okay, people, listen up, first off, I want to thank you all for volunteering for this dangerous assignment. Secondly, and this isn’t a dig at your officers and NCOs, but you don’t know crap. It’s a different world outside of the capital. It’s a lawless environment in which refugees, collaborators, black-marketeers, and Chosen soldiers interact.”

He paused for a moment. No one said a word. Sheridan pointed down at his

model. “Marines, this is what I want to happen . . .” For the next two hours, Sheridan briefed and then quizzed his people on what they were going to do. Once he was satisfied that they understood their jobs, he broke them down into their teams. Garcia was going to lead a group escorting the fire effects officer. Roberts’ group would look after the aerospace controller. Sheridan’s assault force was broken down into four groups of four. He and Cole would travel together through the refugee camps trying to learn what they could about the jamming station. The remainder would take a longer route through the woods trying to avoid any contact whatsoever with the refugees and the enemy. They would all rendezvous at a spot near the jamming station in a few days’ time.

Cole walked over by Sheridan. “Sir, that was a good set of orders, I don’t think you missed a thing. However, time is slipping by, and we’ll need to get moving in the next thirty minutes if we’re going to meet your timings.”

Sheridan glanced down at his watch. He was surprised how fast things were proceeding. “Okay, Sergeant, let’s get to work.”

Hidden in the darkened tunnel’s exit, Sheridan looked out at the falling snow and smiled. At least the weather was cooperating. Their initial moves would be unobserved. He turned and whispered to Cole, “First team up.”

Garcia moved beside Sheridan. He shook her hand and wished her luck. “See you back at the bunker, sir,” said Garcia. With a wave of her hand, she led her team out of the tunnel. Within seconds, they were lost from sight. Roberts was up next. Five minutes later, he shook Sheridan’s hand and with Tammy by his side, Roberts and his group stepped off on their journey. At five-minute intervals, all of the teams departed leaving Sheridan and Cole alone in the tunnel.

“In for a penny, in for a pound,” said Sheridan as he stepped out into the night. He pulled up the collar on his jacket to stop the swirling snow from going down the back of his neck. Cole, with his hands jammed deep into his coat’s pockets, walked beside Sheridan, neither man saying a word. Behind them, the heavy metal grate was closed and locked by a couple of MPs.

Sheridan and his people were on their own again.

Chapter 37

Admiral Sheridan welcomed his last strike force commander to arrive on board his flagship. He then took center stage directly in front of a large screen. Under his command for the liberation of Derra-5 were three strike forces, each one built around a fighter carrier and all of its accompanying fighting and support vessels. In total, he would be leading over one hundred and fifty ships into battle.

Admiral Sheridan knew the people in the room represented some of the finest officers and master chief petty officers that he had ever served with. He was proud of them all. He cleared his throat and began. “Ladies and gentlemen, the time has come for us to strike back at the enemy. All across the frontier, our forces have been pushed back. Well, that all ends today. Until now, I have deliberately kept you in the dark as to the real location for our first engagement with the enemy. Some of you may have heard that we are to spearhead an assault on Illum Prime. That, however, is nothing more than a smokescreen to confuse the enemy. Our objective is Derra-5.”

An image of the planet and the Kurgan Fleet appeared on a massive screen behind him.

He continued. “Information provided to us indicates that the enemy has two carriers, ten cruisers, and three destroyers as his principal fighting force. There are also dozens of other smaller support vessels in orbit above the planet. When our force ratios are compared, we will have a three to two advantage in combat power.”

A slender, blonde-haired rear admiral leaned forward so she could be seen. “Sir, those are good odds; however, is there any way we could shave those odds down a little before we go toe-to-toe with the enemy?”

“Helen, there are, and it will all become clear when Captain Killam, my operations officer, presents our plan of attack. I have named this mission Operation Hammer.”

Killam, a redheaded man with pockmarked skin on his face stood up, moved over to the lectern, and began his presentation. He spoke for nearly an hour; when he was done, he asked if anyone had any questions. Aside from General Denisov, the ground force commander, forcefully reminding everyone to keep the enemy away from his landing craft, there was no discussion about the plan.

Admiral Sheridan thanked Killam and walked back to the front of the

briefing room. “Folks, this is not to be shared with anyone but your immediate staff and your ships’ captains. The enemy has people spread throughout the fleet. If just one of them discovered what we were up to, it could mean the difference between victory and defeat.”

For some, it was the first time they had heard about the Kurgan infiltration of the fleet, for others it was confirmation of their suspicions.

“Before you leave here, I want you all to know that I have ordered the removal of a small number of officers and ratings from some of your ships.”

“Why did you do that, sir?” queried an officer.

“Using the database in the fleet’s archives, my chief medical officer has been able to access the medical records of all of the settlers who were reported missing at the end of the last war. Comparing the records of the settlers with those of personnel serving in the Sixth Fleet, he has been able to identify twenty-three possible matches. I have given orders for these people to be quietly relieved of their duties and to be removed from the fleet, post haste.”

“Surely, this can’t be a foolproof method,” objected the blonde-haired admiral. “Using one-hundred-year-old records is problematic at best.”

“That is why I ordered this to be done discreetly. As far as these people’s co-workers are concerned, they have been recalled to Earth for urgent medical or personal reasons. If the screening turns out to be false, I will personally apologize to each and every person we have detained. I’d rather be forced to eat crow at a later date than risk losing a single ship to sabotage.”

“Has Admiral Oshiro been informed?” asked another officer.

Admiral Sheridan nodded. “He gave me permission to remove the people from their duty stations and to have them sent back to Earth for questioning. In the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours, this process will be repeated throughout the entire fleet.”

A tough-looking master chief asked, “Admiral, can we have the names of the people you have had detained?”

“Yes. However, I will only provide you with the names of people removed from your ships or Marine units. If I am wrong, I don’t want these people’s reputations being needlessly tarnished. My aide, Commander Roy, has the names. Please see her on your way out, and she will provide you with the names.”

With that, the meeting ended. Admiral Sheridan watched as his strike force commanders were told who had been removed from their ships. Some shook their heads sadly as if personally betrayed by the actions of the men and women under their command. Others took the information in and quietly carried on.

General Denisov walked over beside Admiral Sheridan. “Lucky for me,

First Armored Division was scheduled for live fire maneuvers when this mission came up. They are already on board their landing craft and will be here in the next five hours. Third Mechanized, an army formation, was cut to my command for the operation. However, it won't arrive until six hours after we land on Derra-5. If the enemy has been as battered as we have been led to believe, then two full-strength divisions should be enough. For now, I'm planning to keep the Third Marine Division in reserve."

"Sounds good, Dimitri," said Admiral Sheridan distractedly. His mind was elsewhere. He prayed that the general was right. His only son was down there fighting for his life. The sooner they struck, the better as far as he was concerned.

Chapter 38

A gray sliver of light crept up on the eastern horizon signaling an end to the long, cold night.

Sheridan stamped his feet on the frozen ground trying to get the circulation back into his feet. He raised his arms above his head and stretched out his aching back. He was about to say something to Cole when he heard a deep growl coming from the snow-covered bushes in front of them. His heart began to race. He slowly lowered his arms, drew his pistol and pointed it at the woods.

Cole also heard the noise and pulled out his weapon. Carefully, the two men stepped forward. They had barely stepped inside the bushes when they saw where the sound was coming from. Both men froze in their tracks when they saw a small bear and her cubs gnawing on the remains of a Chosen soldier.

“Step back, slowly,” whispered Cole. “Whatever you do don’t turn your back and run. The mother will be on you before you get ten meters.”

They moved back into the open, turned on their heels and walked as far away as they dared from the bears before breaking into a sprint. They ran for a couple of kilometers before stopping.

Sheridan said between gasps of air, “They must be attracted by the smell of blood and the prospect of an easy meal.”

“Horrible way to go,” added Cole.

An hour later, they made their way to Eve’s camp. However, when they arrived, they couldn’t find a soul. Eerily all of the dilapidated homes they had built were empty. They didn’t see any signs of a struggle. It was as if they had all decided to leave together. Cole started a bonfire to keep them from freezing to death.

“I take the absence of gunfire coming from the woods as a good sign,” said Sheridan. “It looks like everyone got away without being spotted.”

“It’s early days,” retorted Cole. “We still have another thirty-six or so hours until we link up with them again. A lot can happen between now and then.”

“So what do you say to some Chosen rations for breakfast?”

“I’d rather not, the stuff upsets my stomach. However, I guess my options are limited out here.”

Sheridan dug into a jacket pocket and pulled out two foil packets. He read the label. “Looks like we’re going to have some kind of granola and fruit mix for breakfast.”

“I doubt that even they could mess that up,” replied Cole, taking a packet and ripping it open. He took a bite and made a sour expression on his face. “I stand corrected. It’s God damn awful!”

Sheridan didn’t mind the taste. He stepped away from the fire, looking for a spot to relieve himself. He had barely gone ten paces into the woods when he stopped in his tracks. Before him was the most gruesome sight he had ever seen in his life. All of the refugees from the camp were hanging by their necks from the trees like macabre ornaments, their frozen bodies covered in snow and ice. Sheridan’s head began to spin. He staggered forward, moving from person to person until he found Eve. “No,” he moaned when he saw her lifeless eyes staring back at him. He suddenly felt guilty and ashamed. His actions had placed her and all of her friends in harm’s way. A second later, he let out a scream at the top of his lungs.

A hand touched Sheridan’s back. “It’s okay to be angry, sir. I’m pissed too. Take a couple of deep breaths and you’ll soon start to feel better,” reassured Cole.

“We did this. We’re responsible for getting Eve and everyone else killed,” Sheridan said.

“No, no you didn’t. The enemy did this, and they’ll pay for what they have done. She knew the risks involved in helping us, but she helped us anyway. She was a brave woman who didn’t deserve to die like this, none of them did,” Cole said, looking over at the corpses.

Sheridan looked up at Cole. Anger burnt in his eyes. “Andrews is to blame. I just know it.”

“We left him tied to a tree, naked.”

Sheridan stood. “I want to see the son of a bitch’s body.”

After making their way back through the woods, both men stood there staring at the tree Cole had tied Andrews to. There was nothing. The man had either escaped, or his remains had been removed by his comrades. There was no way to know for sure. However, in Sheridan’s mind, he knew Andrews was still alive and he intended to make him pay with his life the next time their paths crossed.

“Come on, sir, there’s nothing to be gained by staying here. We’ve got a long way to go today.”

Sheridan ground his teeth in anger, nodded, and with a burning desire for revenge in his heart, he followed Cole back out to their fire. Now the refugee camp felt like a ghost town. Neither man wanted to linger. They quickly extinguished their fire, slung their packs onto their backs and continued on their journey. They trudged along the wood line, always keeping one eye trained out

toward the Kurgan lines.

An hour into their march, Cole tapped Sheridan on the shoulder and told him to step into the woods. They took cover behind a tall fir tree.

“What did you see?” Sheridan asked.

“That,” replied Cole, pointing at a large truck that had stopped by an open pit dug into the frozen ground.

Sheridan dug out his binoculars and looked over at the vehicle. He could make out Chosen soldiers keeping a close eye on several refugees as they climbed up into the back of the truck. Frozen solid Chosen dead were soon unceremoniously tossed from the back of the vehicle. When there were no more bodies, a Chosen warrior walked to the edge of the hole and threw a thermite grenade down onto the remains. A wall of flame shot up out of the ground.

“It’s just like that refugee said to Roberts, they’re burning their dead,” muttered Sheridan.

“They must have suffered a lot of casualties when they tried to force their way across the river.”

“Yeah, looks that way.”

They waited until the truck drove away before continuing on their way. Trying their best to avoid contact with any of the refugees and the Chosen, they walked all day until the sun began to dip below the trees, sending long finger-like shadows across the snow-covered ground. Cole pointed to an abandoned shelter as a spot for them to take cover in for the night. Fifteen minutes later, Sheridan and Cole sat by the bonfire warming their cold hands and feet. Both men were lost in their thoughts. Neither man had said a word for nearly an hour when the sound of feet shuffling in the snow made both men jump up. They drew their weapons and stared out into the dark.

A ragged-looking Chosen soldier emerged out of the night and stumbled to the fire. His face was covered in bruises. His white coveralls were stained with dirt and blood. The man dropped to his knees and held out his hands to show he was unarmed. “Food,” said the soldier in English as he brought his dirt-encrusted fingers to his mouth.

Sheridan looked over at Cole and then back at the Chosen warrior. Slowly, Sheridan put his pistol away, reached into his jacket and pulled out a foil pack. He tossed it at the battered man’s feet. The soldier dropped to his knees and attacked the food, gobbling it down in seconds. He licked the inside of the foil packet before looking over at Sheridan. Once again, he held out his hands, asking for food. Cole threw a ration pack at the man. As before, he devoured the food.

Sheridan studied the warrior. He looked downtrodden and tired. His eyes

were puffy and bloodshot. He could tell that the man had suffered horribly in the cold.

“Jesus, sir, what do we do with him?” Cole whispered into Sheridan’s ear.

“I don’t know,” Sheridan answered. “But I bet he’s willing to trade information for food. Cover me.”

Sheridan sat down by the fire and pulled out a tube of meat paste. He held it up so the starved soldier could see it. The man instantly reached out for the food. “First, I want to know your name. Why did you run away from your unit?” Sheridan asked in Kurgan.

The soldier’s eyes widened. His face told Sheridan that the man hadn’t expected a human to be able to speak Kurgan. Sheridan repeated his question. The warrior looked from Sheridan to Cole. He crawled back and stared at Sheridan with fear in his eyes. His officers had told him that unbelievers couldn’t speak the language of their Lord.

Cole aimed his pistol at the man’s head.

“My name is Kimdar,” said the Chosen. “I’m hungry. I didn’t run away. We’ve seen humans paid for their work with our rations. I just went to look for some food.”

“Your face is bruised and your uniform is stained with blood. Did your officer beat you?” asked Sheridan.

The warrior looked down. “I was weak. I hesitated in battle. I deserved my punishment; it has helped me become closer to the Lord and for that I am grateful.” Sheridan translated the conversation for Cole.

“Ask him where his weapon is and when was the last time that he ate?” said Cole.

Sheridan asked the questions.

The warrior said, “My rifle was taken away because I did not deserve it. And I had been made to fast for a week as part of my penance. When my time of spiritual reflection is over, I will be given back my weapon and welcomed back into my unit. I just couldn’t take being hungry anymore and had to have some food.”

Cole said, “I’m not sure I believe everything he’s saying, but one thing is for sure. He may be a religious fanatic, but he knows fear. His hesitation in combat is a sure sign that they’re not all willing to needlessly throw their lives away.”

“I doubt we could learn anything of value from him. He’s probably just some foot soldier from a Kurgan infantry regiment and doesn’t know anything other than what his officer tells him.”

Cole looked down. “What do you want to do with him? We can’t let him go back to his own lines. He’s hungry, tired, and scared, but you’ve spoken their

language to him. Regardless of the punishment he'll face for leaving his post, you know that he'll report this incident to his superiors."

"I know," replied Sheridan, letting out a weary sigh.

"Give him the food in your hand."

Sheridan tossed the warrior the tube of paste. "Well, I'm not for tying him up and walking away. That didn't work out so well last time."

"Sir, if you're thinking what I believe you are, we've had this conversation before." Before Sheridan could say a word, Cole stepped forward and fired his pistol twice, instantly killing the soldier as he ate his meal. His body tumbled over onto the ground. Blood trickled out from underneath the body.

"Jesus, Sergeant, why the hell did you do that?" Sheridan demanded.

"Because you can't," Cole replied coldly. "You're a good man. I won't let you soil your hands by killing a prisoner in cold blood."

"But you can?"

Cole didn't answer the question. Instead, he grabbed the dead soldier by his collar and dragged his body into the woods. He returned a minute later, kicking fresh snow over the top of the long red streak of blood that led away from their fire. Without making eye contact with Sheridan, Cole kicked out their fire. "We can't stay here. They may come looking for the deserter. We need to put some distance between ourselves and the body."

Sheridan was conflicted. He would have done the same thing. The Chosen couldn't be allowed to live. Why Cole had taken upon himself to kill the man gnawed at Sheridan. He was the officer; the responsibility should have been his. Clenching his jaw tightly, Sheridan decided to let it go for now. It wouldn't help them to argue over the death of the soldier. It was, however, a conversation he intended to have with Cole when the mission was over.

After trudging through the snow for another ten kilometers, Sheridan was about to tell Cole that they should take a break when he heard someone speaking English over a loud speaker. Cole heard it too and pointed at a small hill. Both men ran to the mound and carefully crawled up to the top so they could see what was going on.

"What the hell?" muttered Sheridan when he looked out onto an open field and saw several dozen men in filthy and torn clothing being addressed by a Chosen warrior. A platoon of Chosen guarded the prisoners, their weapons at the ready in their hands.

"Those are Marines," Cole said.

The words of the Chosen soldier were clear and easy to hear from their hiding spot. "This is your last chance. Don't be fooled by the lies your officers told you. You can't win this war, not while your political leaders safe on Earth

use you as cannon fodder. You all deserve better. Join the Kurgan Empire as willing volunteers and you can serve the Lord by spreading his word throughout the galaxy.”

“Get stuffed!” defiantly called out one of the Marines.

“Yeah, like he said,” added another.

“Men, it doesn’t have to end this way. Please, think of your families. Join us,” implored the Chosen soldier.

“Never,” yelled one of the prisoners.

“Fine, have it your way,” replied the Chosen warrior. He stepped back, raised his hand and then quickly lowered it. The sound of automatic weapons firing cut through the air. In seconds, it was over. All of the prisoners lay on the frozen ground. Steam escaped into the frigid air from the holes shot into their bodies.

Sheridan watched as the Chosen warrior walked among the dead killing the wounded with a single shot to the head. He had seen enough. He backed off the hill and swore revenge.

Cole moved over to Sheridan’s side. “This nightmare can’t end soon enough. Come on, sir, we should keep moving.”

Sheridan nodded and began to follow in Cole’s tracks through the woods. He shared Cole’s sentiments that he wanted this to end, but not before he had killed as many Chosen as he could.

Chapter 39

With a loud whoop, Lloyd ran out onto the flight deck to welcome the rest of the squadron's newly arrived pilots and navigators. Tarina and Wendy quickly joined in the festive greeting. They traded stories over a late supper before proceeding back to the hangar.

Colonel Wright was waiting for them. "Okay, everyone, settle down. I'm just as happy to see you too, but we've got work to do and not a lot of time to get it done." A 3D holographic image of Derra-5 and the Kurgan Fleet appeared in front of the young officers. "Folks, in precisely twenty-eight hours this is where we will be going. We have been tasked by Sixth Fleet to be the first ships in the invasion armada to engage the enemy above Derra-5."

A captain with a puzzled look on his face said, "Sir, we're a reconnaissance unit. Our ships aren't configured for combat. You said so yourself, back on Earth."

"All true, Ryan; however, we won't be jumping in to duke it out with the enemy. We are going to deliver several high yield electromagnetic pulse bombs near the enemy's carriers and destroyers. If successful, these vessels will be knocked out of commission, floating helplessly in space, just as our own carriers arrive in orbit. We've already proven that you can jump with a payload attached to the undercarriage of an Avenger, so this should be a relatively easy assignment."

Major Fareed said, "Surely, Colonel, their ships will be shielded against an EMP attack."

Wright smiled. "They probably are. However, these experimental EMP bombs are five times more powerful than anything that existed in our fleet's arsenal when the war began. I have been assured that they will be able to cripple the enemy's ships once they are activated. To make sure that we put them out of commission, we will be placing two bombs per carrier and one per warship. That makes for a total of seven Avengers that will be used in this attack."

Fareed said, "Sir, we could only bring eight ships with us. The other four developed engine problems and were still being worked on when we left Earth."

"It'll have to do," replied Wright. "It at least gives us a spare, should one of the other craft develop a technical problem between now and the time we jump. For the new arrivals, I expect you to review the reports written by your colleagues. Don't be afraid to lean on them for advice." Wright turned off the

image of Derra-5. He stepped forward and locked his steely gaze on his people. “Folks, we’re only going to get one chance to do this. If we don’t succeed, there’s a good chance that the Sixth Fleet may not be able to sweep the enemy away from the planet when the landing craft packed with Marines and their equipment arrive. Just so we’re all on the same sheet of music. I don’t intend to fail . . . and neither do you!”

Light years away, Admiral Sheridan sat in his command chair and listened to the reports as they came in. One by one, the ships reported their readiness. When General Denisov said that his Marines were tired of being cooped up in their landing craft and were ready to kick some ass, Admiral Sheridan knew that it was time. He turned to his operations officer, “Captain, give the order for the fleet to make the jump.”

Calculated down to the last second, the ships under his command would arrive in three successive waves ready to do battle with the enemy. If Colonel Wright and his people failed, he felt that he could still drive the Kurgans away from the planet long enough for the Marines to make it down to the surface. After that, he couldn’t guarantee a thing. It was going to be desperate and close in battle in which the individual ship’s captains had more control over the action than he ever would. He had given his orders, now it was up to the people under his command to execute those orders.

“The first strike force is making the jump,” announced Captain Killam.

“Please let me know when the last ship has jumped,” Admiral Sheridan replied.

A couple of seconds later, his vessel, the command ship of the second strike force, engaged its jump engine and began the flight to Derra-5.

Admiral Sheridan stood up and moved over to the screen showing a tactical display of the Sixth Fleet’s movement. Excluding General Denisov’s Marines, who would be arriving one hour after the first ships arrived over Derra-5, all of Sixth Fleet was preparing for battle.

“Sir, they’re all away,” reported Killam.

Admiral Sheridan nodded. He looked into the faces of the experienced officers and chiefs who made up his staff. “Well, it’s out of our hands now. When we come out of our jump, we’ll either be facing two crippled carriers or two enemy carriers ready for battle. Either way, I know that every man and woman in the fleet knows their job and will do what they must to secure victory.”

“Amen to that,” added his aide, who crossed herself and then said a silent prayer.

Admiral Sheridan looked over at Commander Roy. “Carmen, I’m not one to ask the Almighty for support, but if you’re chatting with him could you ask him to protect the men and women of the fleet?”

Roy nodded and kept on praying. The room went quiet. Everyone turned their heads and looked over at Roy until she was done. “Okay, I’ve done all I can. It’s over to you now,” said Roy to the people in the room.

Admiral Sheridan grinned. “You heard the lady. Everyone back to work. We’ve got a battle to win.”

Chapter 40

Sheridan lay on his stomach watching a group of Chosen soldiers move about outside of a cluster of white camouflaged tents and vehicles trying to keep warm. Snow had been falling for the past few hours. With the sky covered by leaden clouds, it didn't look like it was going to let up anytime soon.

"What do you think?" Cole asked.

"From the number of antennas and dishes spread out down there, it looks like it could be the jamming station," replied Sheridan. "We're in the right spot according to the map. However, from the way it's set-up, it could just as easily be a headquarters or an administrative hub. There's really only one way to be sure. I've got to get down there and take a look around."

Cole glanced at his watch. "We've got less than fourteen hours left."

"I know. There's nothing more you can do, so why don't you go and rendezvous with the remainder of the team. Get them ready while I poke my nose around. I'll link up with you in two to three hours' time. If I don't show, hope that we got it right and burn this place to the ground."

Cole held out his hand. "Good luck and don't do anything stupid. I'll see you in a couple of hours."

Sheridan shook Cole's hand. From his pack, he pulled out a set of Chosen winter white coveralls. He had sewn up the bullet holes and cleaned off the blood from the outfit as best he could. The smell coming off the coveralls, however, was repellent. Sheridan doubted that they had ever been cleaned. He quickly checked the outfit for small grub-like lice that infested many of the sets of clothing they had been given to wear. Garcia had told him that the lice were attracted to body heat and were harmless. Still, the thought of the bugs next to his skin made him shudder. Once he was happy that there were no lice on his coveralls, he quickly pulled them over the top of his civilian clothes. Next, he reassembled his Chosen rifle and slung it over his shoulder.

Carefully, he moved to the edge of the forest and waited until he was sure no one was looking in his direction. Sheridan decided there was no time like the present and sauntered out of the woods as if he didn't have a care in the world. He was thankful for the snow coming down as it allowed him walk with his head down, avoiding eye contact with anyone he might pass. His pulse raced as he walked closer to the Chosen encampment. He strained to listen to what was being said, hoping to discover the nearby installation's true identity. As he got

closer, he noticed that many of the Chosen soldiers looked like they had been injured. Some had bandages over one eye while many more had their hands swathed in bandages. It became clear that these men had replaced the ones that had originally been here. Like the Marines dug in at the capital, the Chosen were becoming desperate for fresh soldiers and had resorted to using rear echelon troops on the front lines.

“You there, where do you think you’re going?” bellowed a voice.

Sheridan stopped and looked over at a tall, broad-shouldered Chosen sergeant who was eyeing him suspiciously. “I was told to report for guard duty,” answered Sheridan.

“I don’t know you. What’s your name?”

“Kimdar,” stammered Sheridan.

“I wasn’t told you would be coming here. You look fit enough, though. Why aren’t you with your unit?”

Sheridan’s heart pounded away like a jackhammer in his chest. He had to come up with a convincing lie and fast. The first thing that flashed through his mind was frostbite, but he didn’t know the Kurgan word for it. The sergeant stared at Sheridan. In desperation, he blurted out, “I froze some of my toes, Sergeant.”

The big soldier shook his head. “Another one! Why the Lord didn’t give you people the brains to look after your feet is beyond me. Come with me, Kimdar.”

“Yes, Sergeant,” replied Sheridan, hoping that this would be the end of the sergeant’s questions. He followed the soldier inside a large, heated tent. The smell of something being cooked on a gas stove filled the tent. Sheridan’s stomach grumbled.

“Hungry, eh? Well get something to eat and then report to that man over there,” said the sergeant, pointing to a corporal sitting behind a desk on the far side of the shelter. “Where are you from, Kimdar? I can’t place your accent.”

Sheridan broke out in a cold sweat. Desperately he tried to recall the name of the Chosen planet he was told was just on the enemy side of the Disputed Zone. “Kollos,” replied Sheridan, eyeing the nearest exit.

“Never been there,” said the sergeant with a shrug of his shoulders. “Not that it matters. Get yourself some soup and then report in.”

Sheridan let out his breath, nodded, and did as he was told. With a hot bowl of odd-smelling soup in his hands, he walked over and gave his name to the corporal sitting at his desk. He was told to take a seat and wait until he was called for. Sheridan looked around the tent, spotted a tired-looking Chosen soldier resting on a bench, and decided to sit with him. Perhaps he knew what they were guarding.

“Afternoon,” said Sheridan to the man as he took a seat.

“Hello,” replied the man. He had blonde hair and a scraggly beard. His dark blue eyes looked tired and war-weary.

“My name is Kimdar,” Sheridan said.

“Kesmon,” replied the soldier.

Sheridan tried the soup. It was a little bland but tasted good enough.

“Kesmon, have you been here long?” Sheridan asked the man.

“I got here last week after I burnt my hands trying to put out a fire,” the blonde-haired soldier replied, showing Sheridan his bandaged hands.

“That looks painful.”

“It is a small price to serve the Lord,” the man answered.

“Yes, indeed. I got careless and froze my feet.”

“We have a lot of cold casualties coming through here. Some stay, some are sent back to one of the hospital ships in orbit while others volunteer to go back to the front. It all depends on the extent of their injuries.”

“They won’t keep me here for too long. I expect to rejoin my unit in a day or two,” Sheridan said, trying to sound keen to get back into the fight.

“I tried to volunteer, but I was told that my wounds haven’t healed enough for me to leave yet. So I waste my time along with everyone else guarding this place.”

“We all serve the Lord in whatever we do.”

“Yes, we do.”

Sheridan decided to push his luck. “By the way, what is this place we are guarding? I wasn’t told what I was going to be doing, other than guard duty, when I was dropped off here.”

The blonde-haired soldier looked around to make sure no one was listening to their conversation. Quietly, he said, “We don’t talk about it. The officers lose their minds when you do.”

“Do you know why?”

“They don’t say why, but we figure it has to do with the top-secret gear they have here to jam the humans’ communications. I heard that it also stops all of their electronics from working as well. Trust me, my friend, if you know what’s good for you, you’ll never ask another question about this place ever again. They whipped a soldier in front of us yesterday, for falling asleep on duty. They found him in a restricted part of the camp. He was only trying to keep warm, but they decided to make an example of him and whipped him anyway. So just keep your mouth shut and do as you’re told. Lord willing, you’ll be back with your unit in a couple of days’ time.”

“Thanks for the advice,” said Sheridan. He quickly finished off his meal,

placed the bowl down and then as stealthily as he could, he snuck out of the tent. He glanced around and saw that the sergeant was nowhere to be seen. Sheridan, however, could hear the NCO berating some men behind a long vehicle with five antennas sticking out of the top of it. He took it as his cue to leave and began to walk toward the woods and safety. Suddenly, he heard his bogus Chosen name being yelled out. He swore under his breath and slowly turned around. It was Kesmon.

“Kimdar, where are you going? They might call your name. The corporal is not very forgiving. You wouldn’t want to get into trouble with him on your first day here. I wasn’t joking when I said they whip people here,” said Kesmon as he walked toward Sheridan.

“I’ll be there in a minute. When I got off my ride, I dropped my pack by the woods. Do me a favor and tell the corporal that I’m just going to grab my gear and will return right away. I shouldn’t be more than a couple of minutes.”

“Let me give you a hand.”

Sheridan tried to get the man to leave. “I’ll be alright. Besides with the injuries to your hands, you really shouldn’t try lifting anything heavy.”

Kesmon persisted. “It’s okay, besides I could use the fresh air.”

Sheridan shrugged his shoulders and began to walk toward the trees. When they were a few meters away, Sheridan turned to face Kesmon. “Say, I really appreciate your offer of help; however, I can take it from here.”

Kesmon hesitated for a second. “If I didn’t know any better I’d say that you’re trying to get rid of me.” He chuckled to himself. “Hurry up; I’ll wait here for you.”

Sheridan took a deep breath, knowing that things had already gone too far. He looked at the soldier and said, “I’ve got a couple of really light things, I guess you could carry them for me.”

Kesmon smiled and followed Sheridan into the forest. After walking for nearly a minute, Kesmon stopped in his tracks. “Kimdar, where did you say you left your gear?”

Sheridan’s stomach tied in a knot the second he decided to end the charade. He reached into a jacket pocket, pulled out one of his razor sharp ceramic knives and turned about. Kesmon saw the hard look in Sheridan’s eyes a second too late to save his life. Like a tiger, Sheridan pounced on the hapless soldier and plunged his knife into the man’s chest. With a look of utter disbelief in his eyes, Kesmon’s feet buckled. Sheridan grabbed the Chosen warrior by the collar of his uniform and forced the dying soldier down onto the snow-covered ground. He looked over his shoulder to make sure they hadn’t been followed before placing a hand over his victim’s mouth so he couldn’t make a sound as he lay dying in

the snow.

After a few seconds, the Chosen warrior's eyes glazed over. Sheridan reached down with a blood-covered hand and checked for a pulse. There was none. He had expected to feel guilty about killing the man in cold blood; however, after all he had seen and been through, he was numb. Grabbing the body, Sheridan dragged the remains deeper into the woods. He was thankful that the snow falling from the sky would soon erase his tracks. When he was done covering the corpse with snow, Sheridan dug out his compass, took a bearing and began to walk through the thick woods.

He had a rendezvous to keep.

Chapter 41

The word that one of the four-man teams was overdue didn't come as a total surprise to Sheridan. He had planned for the possibility of losing at least one team. There were still enough enhanced explosive charges carried in the packs of the young Marines he had with him to flatten an entire city block. With the twelve Marines plus himself and Cole, Sheridan was confident they could knock out the jamming site as planned. He grabbed a hot drink and sat down with Cole away from the other Marines. Sheridan quickly outlined his plan of attack on the compound.

Cole liked the plan; it was simple yet effective. In his experience, the more complicated the plan, the greater the chance of something going wrong.

"Until we destroy the jammers, I guess we'll just have to assume that Garcia and Roberts managed to lead their teams to safety," said Sheridan.

"They may be young, but they're good soldiers," said Cole. "They'll get their people where they need to go." With that, he stood up and went to fetch them both some food.

Sheridan checked the time. They had four hours to wait until they had to move out to attack the enemy position. He rooted around in his jacket pocket until he found some crackers. While he munched on his snack, Sheridan studied the faces of the people he was going to lead into battle. Unlike them, he had at least seen combat and knew what to expect. He chuckled to himself when he realized that he was still relatively new to the business of war. *What a difference a couple of months can make in a person's life*, thought Sheridan.

Cole returned and handed Sheridan a warmed-up ration. "Here, sir, eat this. You may not feel like eating, but your body needs the calories to keep you going in the cold."

Sheridan took the food and thanked Cole. "I hope the missing team knows to head back to the capital now that they've missed the rendezvous timing."

"Your orders were quite specific. They're either on their way back or are dead. There's nothing you can do about it, so I suggest you put them out of your mind until this is all over."

"Sergeant, when we step off, I want you on the far right-hand side of the assault force. If any Chosen soldiers or their Kurgan officers try to make a run for it, kill them. I don't want anyone who may know how to work these jammers surviving the attack."

Cole nodded. He had anticipated Sheridan's order. He would have given the same one if he had been in the young officer's place.

As night fell, the weather turned bitterly cold. A strong wind came from the north whipping the falling snow into a swirling maelstrom.

Sheridan called his three team leaders to him. "Okay, we attack in five minutes' time. Sling your Kurgan rifles and use your silenced pistols during the initial assault. I want two explosives charges per tent or vehicle. When you see a red pen flare fired up into the air, that's your signal to withdraw. Move back in pairs to the RV and for God's sake, don't leave a man, dead or wounded, for the enemy to find. Everyone makes it back here, or none of us does."

At the edge of the forest, Sheridan dropped to one knee, brought up his binoculars and studied the position one last time. He saw through the blowing snow four Chosen soldiers walking back and forth on the perimeter of the camp with their heads down. They looked unimpressed to be outside in the cold. He lowered his binoculars and placed them away. Sheridan looked at his people waiting in a long line for the signal to advance. Sheridan took a deep breath to calm the growing feeling of anxiety in his chest.

There was nothing more they could do. It was time.

Sheridan stood up. With his silenced pistol in his hand, he walked straight toward the center of the Kurgan installation. His teams quietly spread out and walked to their intended targets. When he was within ten meters of the nearest guards, one of them saw him and called out for him to stop. Sheridan ignored the warrior and kept walking. The soldier called out again and then reached for his weapon slung over his shoulder. Sheridan brought up his pistol and dropped the soldier and his partner before they could react. He stepped over their lifeless bodies and kept walking toward the main tent he had eaten in earlier. He watched as two of his men silently shot down a couple Chosen warriors before tossing their prepared charges under a long vehicle with several large antennas and dishes on its roof. They now all had ninety seconds to do what they had to before the charges detonated.

Sheridan pulled open the flap to the tent and stepped inside. It was like stepping into a furnace. Several heaters turned on full blast warmed the room. His arrival didn't stir anyone away from the warmth of the radiators. It was as if he was invisible. Sheridan couldn't believe his luck. He quickly moved to one side, reached into his jacket and pulled out his charges. He flipped the safety switch to *armed* and dropped the explosives behind him. He counted down in his head. When he figured he had less than thirty seconds until the charges went off, he brought his pistol from behind his back and started shooting. With the image

of Eve hanging lifeless from a tree in his mind, Sheridan yelled at the top of his lungs at the soldiers. He was going to exact his revenge. The first to die were the Kurgan officers followed by any Chosen, who went for their weapon. He kept firing as he edged backward for the opening. With their officers dead, the Chosen soldiers seemed to hesitate, unsure what they should do even though there was an enemy in their midst firing on them, killing them.

A second later, he was outside. He dug out his pen flare, pointed it up into the night sky and fired it. With a pop, the flare opened up over the installation. Sheridan could see in the red light of the flare his people moving back. It was all going to plan when all of a sudden automatic gunfire erupted from outside of one of the vehicles. Sheridan turned his head just before the flare burnt out and saw a couple of his people fall. With a curse on his lips, Sheridan ran to help. He heard another burst of gunfire, only this time it came from some of his Marines. By the time he arrived by the two fallen soldiers, Cole and another man were already there, bending over to pick up the casualties.

“Cover us,” called out Cole as he tossed Sheridan his rifle.

Sheridan grabbed the weapon, checked that it was on full-auto and fired off a long burst into a couple of Chosen soldiers who had run out into the night trying to stop them.

A second later, a loud explosion tore through the camp. Bright orange and red flames leaped up into the sky, lighting up the installation. Several more powerful detonations rocked the night as vehicles and tents vanished in a wall of fire.

Sheridan jogged beside Cole and the other Marine as they carried their casualties into the swirling snow and safety. They soon entered the woods. Sheridan ran ahead, pushing the branches out of the way so the men following him with their wounded comrades wouldn't be struck by them. Behind them, the last couple of charges went off destroying more of the installation and its jammers. A couple of minutes later, Sheridan stepped out into a small clearing. The rest of his people were already there waiting for him. A Marine with combat first aid training saw the two casualties being carried in and ran to help.

Sheridan reached into a pocket and pulled out a small radio. He turned it on. With a grin on his unshaven face, he said to Cole, “We did it. We have a signal.” He quickly contacted divisional headquarters in the capital said, “Tarawa.” The code word for success.

“Sir, Hebert is dead and Kim has a stomach wound,” reported Cole.

“Damn,” snapped Sheridan. “Any other casualties?”

“None to worry about. Allen and Charles were grazed by enemy gunfire, but they'll be okay after they've been bandaged up and given some painkillers. Sir,

without immediate medevac, I don't think Kim's going to last the night."

Sheridan shook his head. He'd hoped to pull his mission off without any casualties. He was about to say something when the clearing was suddenly lit up as bright as daylight from above.

"Run!" yelled Sheridan just as a missile fired by a Kurgan drone struck the ground, exploding. Three Marines were killed by the blast, their broken bodies tumbling across the frozen ground. Sheridan's people scattered and ran for their lives.

Cole and Sheridan stopped under a tall fir tree and looked up into the dark, trying to spot the drone. The sound of another missile streaking through the air made both men duck. A split second later, another warhead exploded nearby killing more of the already hammered team. Sheridan knew they had to do something about the drone before they were all systematically hunted down and killed.

Cole looked over at Sheridan, "Sir, do you have any more flares?"

"Yes," replied Sheridan as he pulled out his pen flare launcher.

"Okay, when I tell you, I want you to fire it straight up in the air."

"What are you going to do?"

Cole said, "I'm going to see if this Kurgan rifle grenade launcher is as good as ours." With that, he checked that there was a grenade in the tube and brought the rifle to his shoulder. He took careful aim at the drone as it hovered above the clearing searching for a new target to engage.

Sheridan held out his pen flare.

"Now, sir," said Cole calmly.

The flare shot up into the night. The drone took the bait and moved directly toward the light. Cole held his breath and gently pulled back on the trigger. With a loud pop, the grenade shot out of the launch tube and soared straight up into the belly of the drone. With a loud boom, the drone blew apart.

"Watch out," said Sheridan, pushing Cole to one side as the burning debris rained down where they had been standing.

Both men looked over at the heap of metal and electronics as it burnt. They knew they were lucky to be alive.

Sheridan said, "Come on, Sergeant, let's see how bad we've been hurt before another drone makes its way over here."

The casualty count stood at seven dead and two walking wounded. Cole bent down and began to pull the ID discs from the dead bodies.

Sheridan looked over at the shaken survivors. "Leave the dead where they are. We have no choice; we'll have to come back another time to get their bodies. Sergeant Cole will divide you into two groups. Each one will look after

one of the wounded soldiers. You are to make your way back to the capital while Cole and I link up with Garcia and Roberts' detachments in the hills overlooking the Kurgan lines.

When the last of the soldiers vanished from sight in the falling snow, Sheridan looked over at Cole. "How far do you think we've still got to go?"

"Ten clicks, maybe."

"Well, I guess we had best get moving before the sun comes up."

Together they made their way through the thick woods, keen to avoid any more contact with the enemy. Above them, the battle that would decide the fate of Derra-5 was about to begin.

Chapter 42

Tarina steeled herself as the seven ships' crews prepared to jump to Derra-5. All of the other jumps to date had been without incident. This time, however, she knew they were deliberately going into harm's way. From their hidden satellites orbiting above the planet they knew where the enemy's ships would be, however, once they came out of their jump they would have to fly as close as possible to the Kurgan vessels before detaching their bombs. It was a maneuver that would probably take more than ten seconds to accomplish, leaving them vulnerable to detection and engagement by the Kurgan ships.

"How are you feeling?" asked Wendy in Tarina's headset.

"I don't mind telling you that I'm more than a bit nervous about this one."

"Me too. I've already programmed the return jump into the computer. Give me the word and we are out of there."

"Sounds good. The sooner we can get back here the better."

The lights inside the hangar changed to red. Tarina let out a deep breath and watched apprehensively as the floor below them opened up. As one, all of the craft maneuvered underneath the transport ship and spread out.

Colonel Wright's voice came in loud and clear in all of the Avengers.

"Okay, people, this is what they pay us for. Stay sharp, keep calm, and you'll all do fine. Beers are on me when we all get back."

An automated voice took over and began the countdown. Tarina could feel her heart racing. Her palms inside her tight leather gloves were sweating. The instant the computer said zero all of the Avengers jumped into battle.

It was the shortest flight in her life as far as Tarina was concerned. The second they came out of their jump, Tarina and Wendy saw their target, a massive Kurgan fighter carrier. Tarina looked up and smiled. They had arrived right underneath of the enemy vessel. Tarina glanced down at her scanner; there were no fighters in the area. She quickly engaged the sublight engine and maneuvered straight up. The fighter carrier dwarfed their ship, filling the glass of their cockpit.

"Five hundred meters," announced Wendy.

"Detaching the bomb," said Tarina as she flipped a switch on her flight console. Beneath their Avenger, the experimental EMP bomb activated and floated free in space with its timer already counting down from sixty seconds. Tarina maneuvered back slightly from the bomb and said, "Wendy, get us the

hell out of here!”

“Jumping in five-four-three-two-one.”

Tarina expected the world to turn dark as they jumped away from the enemy fleet. Instead, they were still beneath the Kurgan carrier. “Wendy, why haven’t we jumped?”

“One second,” replied Wendy as she re-checked her calculations in her head. “Jumping now!”

Again, nothing happened. They were still in Kurgan occupied space.

Tarina’s console lit up. “Damn it. They have us. Wendy, can we jump or not?”

Wendy sadly reported, “I don’t think so. I think the engine must be malfunctioning.”

Tarina swore. Right away, her fighter pilot training kicked in. She pushed down on her joystick and applied full power to the Avenger’s thrusters, trying to put as much distance as she could between her ship and the bomb before it detonated.

Colonel Wright saw them flying away. “Alpha-two, this is Alpha-one, why have you not jumped?”

“Alpha-one, our jump engine is non-functional,” replied Tarina curtly.

“Head for the Marine landing sites. They’ll be along in an hour.”

“Roger that.”

The warning lights on Tarina’s console flashed red. She cursed their run of bad luck when she saw that a Kurgan cruiser had a missile lock on their ship and a pair of fighters were closing in on them. “Hang on,” Tarina warned Wendy as she dove underneath the cruiser just as it fired.

“Warning: incoming missiles,” said an automated voice in the cockpit.

“No shit,” muttered Tarina. Up ahead was another cruiser. Tarina grinned. She had an idea. Without flinching, she flew straight for the other Kurgan cruiser.

“What are you doing?” asked Wendy, her voice tense and nervous. “The missiles are right behind us and closing fast. We’ve got to get out of here!”

“Firing countermeasures,” Tarina announced calmly as she ejected several super-heated metal orbs out the back of her ship to lure off the incoming missiles. Two of the three enemy rockets locked onto the orbs and detonated. The third, however, flew straight past the others and rapidly closed on the Avenger.

Wendy cranked her head around and looked behind them. “Damn, we’ve still got one bogey hot on our tail.”

Tarina waited until the Kurgan cruiser’s stern filled her screen before she

flew underneath the ship missing it by less than a meter. Behind them, the missile locked onto the nearest heat source and flew straight into the cruiser's engine, igniting it in a massive fireball.

"You did it!" cheered Wendy.

"We've still got company," replied Tarina, watching her console as the two Kurgan fighters closed within fifty kilometers.

They never witnessed the havoc wreaked on the enemy fleet when the EMP bombs detonated. Only half of the experimental weapons went off as planned, but the results were beyond measure. One of the Kurgan carriers instantly lost power and began to drift in space. The other only experienced some electrical outages, but that was at the precise moment the first strike force from the Sixth Fleet arrived in orbit and began to launch its fighters to engage the enemy. Within seconds, swarms of fighters from both fleets were locked in a deadly struggle. Missiles streaked across the heavens as the Kurgan Fleet struggled to fight back. In less than three minutes, the entire complement of ships from the Sixth Fleet jumped into their pre-arranged coordinates above Derra-5. Hundreds more fighters rushed to join the battle targeting the Kurgan destroyers and cruisers that still had power.

"We're going in," announced Tarina as the underside of the Avenger turned red and began to heat up as they rapidly descend into the planet's atmosphere. The ship shuddered as it fell, rattling its occupants.

"I can't see those fighters on my scope anymore," said Wendy.

"Our scanners will be useless for the next couple of minutes. They won't give in that easy. We'll probably pick them up again once we get lower in the atmosphere."

"Please tell me that you weren't a real wash out at fighter school."

"I was let go because I didn't follow orders well and went after the enemy by myself."

"That's a good thing, right? You're good at dogfighting, aren't you?"

"Sorry, I never survived a single simulated engagement." Tarina heard Wendy groan. "There's got to be a first time for everything."

"If you say so."

"Fleet status?" asked Admiral Sheridan.

"Sir, all ships have arrived in orbit," replied Captain Killam. "The carriers *Ark Royal* and *Saratoga* have engaged the two Kurgan carriers. The *Kirov* has launched her fighters armed with anti-ship missiles to attack the enemy's escort

ships. Our destroyers and cruisers have moved to engage the remainder of the Kurgan Fleet.”

“Thanks. Ask for periodic reports from the strike forces, but don’t get in their shorts. Let them do their jobs and they’ll win this battle for us.”

Killam nodded.

Admiral Sheridan looked down at the tactical screen and watched as the number of friendly fighters destroyed in the fight began to climb. They may have achieved near total surprise, but that didn’t mean the enemy was going to roll over and let them walk all over them.

The pull of gravity soon began to be felt inside the Avenger. It wasn’t as sudden of a change as jumping into the atmosphere, but it was still noticeable. Tarina looked down at her terrain guidance display and tried to identify one of the pre-designated landing zones. She bit her lip when she realized that they were a good ten minutes away from the nearest one. Tarina knew she was facing aerial combat with two enemy fighters in a vessel that wasn’t designed to fight. The coming fight was going to tax all of her skills as a pilot.

“I think I’ve got something on my screen,” announced Wendy. Her growing fear came through in her voice.

“What have you got?”

“Uh . . . looks like only one of them is still after us. It’s over three thousand kilometers back, but closing real fast.”

“Hang on,” said Tarina as she put their craft into a nosedive. Plummeting almost straight down, the Avenger shook violently. Never designed to be flown like a fighter, Tarina was pushing her ship to the limit. Through the clouds, the snow-covered peaks of the mountain range south of the capital came into view.

Wendy called out, “Do something; it’s going to be in missile lock range in less than thirty seconds.”

Tarina leveled out and flew straight toward the mountain peaks. She had used up all of their Avenger’s countermeasures in orbit. Tarina knew she had to try to out-maneuver her opponent in the mountains if they were going to survive.

A threat indicator came on. “Warning, incoming enemy missile! I say again, incoming enemy missile!”

“Tell me something I don’t already know,” muttered Tarina as she aimed her ship between a couple of jagged icy peaks.

“Five seconds to impact,” said the automated voice.

Ahead Tarina saw a tall mountain. She grinned and headed for the peak. In her headset, she could hear the computer’s voice counting down. When it said two seconds, she pulled back on her joystick and applied full power to the

engine. Instantly, Tarina and Wendy were pinned to their seats as the Avenger flew straight up into the sky. Behind them, the Kurgan missile didn't have time to correct its flight and exploded on impact with the mountain.

They had little time to celebrate as cannon fire from the pursuing fighter shot past the Avenger, missing the cockpit by mere meters. Tarina gritted her teeth. Their opponent was good. She pulled out of the climb and dove back down for the safety of the mountains. In seconds, they were down inside a long valley. Skimming just above the trees, Tarina flew from side to side trying to throw off their pursuer's aim. She could see the valley opening up. Once they burst out into the open, she knew that the more maneuverable Kurgan fighter would be on them in seconds. She had to do something.

"Wendy, how close is the fighter?"

"About two kilometers back."

"Wendy."

"Yes?"

"Hang on," announced Tarina as she instantly decreased their air speed and pulled back on her joystick, raising up the nose of their ship. For a second, the Avenger seemed to hang straight up in the air. The sudden declaration on the women's chests was like being crushed in a vise.

The Kurgan fighter, not expecting such a radical maneuver, flew straight past them.

Tarina, still grimacing in pain, dropped the nose down, applied power to the engine and flew after the Kurgan ship. It was less than a kilometer away. Tarina didn't hesitate. She lined up her sights on the back of the fighter and pulled back the trigger on her joystick. Thirty-millimeter shells tore through the sky and struck the enemy craft's port side wing, tearing it off.

Tarina and Wendy both let out a triumphant cry as the Kurgan fighter rolled over and plummeted to the ground. A couple of seconds later, it hit nose first and exploded. Neither woman saw if the enemy pilot had time to eject or not.

Wendy said, "Where did you learn to do that?"

"It's an old dogfighting trick called the cobra maneuver. I never could pull it off in the simulators. I always stalled the engine and crashed."

"Thank God, for once you didn't."

They flew out of the valley. In the distance was one of the proposed landing sites.

The threat indicator sprang to life. "Warning, incoming enemy fighter."

Tarina swore and dove as low to the ground as she could. It was the second fighter they had lost contact with.

"Tarina, how much ammo do we have left?" asked Wendy.

“Not enough,” Tarina replied grimly.

“Warning, enemy fighter has missile lock,” said the computer.

Tarina desperately searched the horizon for cover. It was a vast, frozen plain. There was nothing to see for kilometers.

Wendy turned her head and looked behind. The Kurgan fighter had closed within a few hundred meters. It was toying with them. It could easily blast them out of the sky. A second later, it shot up right beside their craft. Both women looked over and saw the Kurgan pilot wave to them before ducking in behind them. He was going for the kill.

Tarina was about to order Wendy to eject when unexpectedly the Kurgan fighter exploded in midair. Flaming debris fell from the sky.

In their helmets, the women heard a familiar voice. “Keep going. We’ll be over the first LZ in two minutes.” Today, their guardian angel was Colonel Wright.

They landed their Avengers near an old, abandoned farmhouse nestled next to a frozen lake and climbed down onto the snow-covered ground.

Wright activated his emergency transponder beacon marking their position. Next, he armed the self-destruct devices on both Avengers. If anyone tried to open either cockpit without first disarming the explosives, the planes would detonate. He pointed over to the ramshackle-looking farmhouse and led them all inside.

“We’ll have to hold up in here until the Marines arrive,” said Wright. He looked down at his watch. “Shouldn’t be too long of a wait. The first wave is due in orbit in just under thirty minutes.”

“It’s freezing in here,” Wendy gripped. Her teeth chattered.

“My friend is out there somewhere,” Tarina remarked. “He’s been without heat for longer than I care to imagine. This isn’t so bad.”

Wendy regretted opening her mouth. “Sorry, I sometimes don’t think before I speak.”

“It’s okay, we all do that from time to time,” Tarina said, hugging her friend.

Wright drew his pistol. “Until the Marines get here, I want everyone to pick a window and keep a sharp lookout. Don’t forget, we’re in enemy territory. I, for one, don’t intend to end up in some Kurgan POW camp on a planet no one has ever heard of.”

Chapter 43

“Status report?” asked Admiral Sheridan.

Killam said, “Sir, both Kurgan carriers along with two of the enemy’s three destroyers have been destroyed. Unfortunately, the third destroyer jumped away before it could be finished off.”

Admiral Sheridan nodded. “How many of the enemy’s ships managed to escape?”

“It looks like less than ten percent of the Kurgan Fleet got away.”

Sheridan was impressed. “I can live with those odds. What are our losses?”

Killam skimmed his console. “Admiral, the *Saratoga* was rammed by a Kurgan light cruiser. The damage to the ship is quite extensive. She’ll need time in a spaceport before she’s ready to fight the enemy again.”

“Other losses?”

“Sir, we lost the light cruisers *Aurora* and *Olympia*. The cruisers *Lion*, *Kongo*, and *Novara* were severely damaged and will also need to be sent back for repairs. We lost sixty-three fighters in the battle. Only nine of the pilots managed to eject and have been rescued. The rest, unfortunately, were lost.”

“What are our total losses?”

“Sir, the reports from the fleet are still coming in. However, as of now we have suffered a total of two thousand and fifty-eight dead or missing, three hundred and twelve wounded.”

Admiral Sheridan closed his eyes for a moment. They had come off with comparatively light casualties; still, the thought of so many dead weighed heavy on him. He sat down and looked over at Commander Roy. “Please keep track of the casualty list for me.”

“Aye, sir,” replied Roy.

“Sir, we’ve established contact with the forces on Derra-5,” announced a master chief.

Admiral Sheridan said, “Captain Killam, have the missile cruisers maneuver into position above the Kurgan forces on the planet and begin bombardment as soon as possible. Also, warn off the carriers to be prepared to launch their fighter-bomber squadrons.”

With everything falling into place, Admiral Sheridan allowed himself to relax a little. They were vulnerable to an enemy counterattack, but he doubted that they had the forces in the region to try it. He walked over to a large window

and looked down at the planet below. His thoughts turned to his son. He hoped that he was alright and that he would soon be able to see him. They had so much to talk about. He wanted to get to know the man his son had become before it was too late and he regretted it for the rest of his life.

Chapter 44

“How long do you think it will be until dawn?” asked Sheridan.

“Perhaps a half-hour. The sky’s already turning gray on the horizon,” replied Cole.

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing.”

A sound like thunder ripping across the sky made both men stop and look up. Through the clouds, they could make out long red streaks coming down from above. A second later, a barrage of missiles shot up from the Kurgan positions trying to hit the incoming warheads. Explosions filled the air as the missiles exploded, taking dozens of the incoming projectiles with them. It wasn’t enough. Without their own ships above them to give them protection, the Kurgan air defense units were quickly overwhelmed and destroyed in a deadly hail of missiles. Less than a minute later the enemy’s command and control centers were hit. Sheridan and Cole watched in awe as another wave of at least one hundred missiles made it through the ever-shrinking Kurgan anti-missile screen and pulverized everything they struck.

“The fighter-bombers will be coming next to clear the way for the landing craft,” said Cole.

“Quite the spectacle, isn’t it!”

Cole grinned. “It sure is. I’m glad not to be on the receiving end of it for once.”

They turned their back on the barrage and carried on toward Roberts and Garcia’s position. In the dim light, Cole saw a trail of blood on the ground. He looked over at Sheridan and saw that his right hand was dripping blood.

“Sir, stop, you’re bleeding,” said Cole.

“Where?” asked Sheridan.

Cole walked over and took a quick look at Sheridan’s right arm. A dark, wet patch of blood had seeped through his jacket near his right shoulder. “Take off your coat.”

“I’m okay.”

“Bullshit! Now do as you are told.”

Sheridan slowly removed his coat.

Cole grimaced when he saw the deep cut in Sheridan’s skin. “Are you telling me that you don’t feel this? It looks nasty.”

Sheridan shook his head.

Cole leaned over to examine the wound. The instant his hand touched Sheridan's arm; he clenched his teeth in pain.

"I knew you were lying. Hurts like a son of a bitch, doesn't it?"

"Yep."

Cole dug out a small first aid kit from his jacket. He saw that a bullet had passed right through Sheridan's shoulder without hitting anything vital. He quickly cleaned the wound and applied an antiseptic bandage that also masked the pain for a few hours. "I take it you were hit during the fight at the jamming station."

Sheridan nodded. "Yeah, I didn't want to say anything. It seemed such a minor wound compared to the others."

"Until it gets infected and they have to chop off your arm," admonished Cole.

Sheridan put his jacket back on and thanked Cole.

It took them less than five minutes walking to rendezvous with their people. They had picked a location on a tall hill that overlooked the Kurgan lines. The two specialist officers were busy on their radios and small combat computers directing the incoming fire from the fleet onto the enemy.

Sheridan filled in his compatriots on what had happened after the assault on the jamming station. Roberts reported that they hadn't seen a single Chosen warrior in nearly a day. Their luck at least had held.

"Is one of you Sheridan?" asked the aerospace controller.

"Yeah, I am," he replied.

"I just got word that two of our fighters have gone down less than two clicks from here. Headquarters wants to know if you can find them and look after them until the Marines arrive."

Sheridan looked over at Garcia. "Can you and your people look after these two until we get back?"

"Sure thing, sir."

"Okay then, get an exact fix on their position and let headquarters know that we're on the move," Sheridan said.

A minute later, with Roberts, Tammy, and two Marines, Sheridan and Cole headed off in the direction of the downed aircraft.

Wright peered out into the ice fog hovering around the farmhouse. He cursed the weather. He couldn't see more than a few meters and with the noise of the bombardment drowning everything else out, he doubted he would know if an entire Kurgan regiment were to walk past their hiding spot.

Lloyd stepped back from his window and turned to face Wright. He had just

opened his mouth to speak when a shot rang out. Everyone in the old house except Lloyd ducked down. They all looked at one another. No one was sure where the shot came from. For a couple of seconds, Lloyd stood there on unsteady feet before falling facedown onto the wooden floor. “No!” screamed Wendy. She dashed to Lloyd’s side and saw that the bullet had torn a chunk of flesh and bone from Lloyd’s back. She knew there was nothing she could do for him. Wendy delicately reached down and rolled him over so she could see his face.

Lloyd saw Wendy looking down at him. His voice was weak. “Hello, angel.” He struggled to smile as he let out his gasp of air. His body went slack. He was dead.

Tarina was terrified. Her heart was pounding away in her chest. She looked over at Wright. The colonel was edging across the floor toward another window. He slowly got up on one knee and peered out into the swirling mist.

Another shot was fired. The wood beside Wright’s head splintered as the bullet passed right through it. He instantly dropped down to the floor.

“Did you see who’s out there?” Tarina asked Wright.

He shook his head. “The fog is too thick. We need to get out of here. Everyone out the back,” he ordered.

Tarina crawled over to Wendy on her hands and knees. “Come on, we have to go.”

Wendy didn’t say a word. She nodded as she gently placed Lloyd’s head down on the wooden floor.

“Ladies, let’s go,” commanded Wright.

“You in the house, throw out your weapons and come out with your hands on your hands,” ordered a voice from outside. “Don’t think about making a run for it. I have the place surrounded.”

Wright swore. He also hadn’t expected the enemy to speak to him in English.

“Did you hear that?” said Sheridan.

“Yeah, it sounded like gunfire,” replied Cole.

“I think it came from this direction,” Roberts added, pointing off to their right in the fog.

Sheridan pulled the rifle from his back. “Lead on, Roberts.”

“Spread out,” ordered Cole. “If there are hostiles out here, we won’t know it until we trip over them. Single shots only. No automatic gunfire.”

Tammy raised her snout and sniffed the air. A second later, she growled. Roberts looked over his shoulder and said, “Tammy smells something she

doesn't like."

Sheridan nodded. "Okay, everyone, be careful."

With their weapons tight in their shoulders, the thin line of Marines crept forward.

"I warn you to do as I say, or I'll be forced to burn the house down with you in it," threatened the voice.

Wright clenched his fists in anger. He didn't want to surrender, but he didn't have much choice either. He glanced down at his watch. The first wave of Marines wasn't due to land for another ten minutes. *If they could only hold out until then.*

A grenade landed by the closed front door. With a thunderous boom, the flimsy, old wooden door exploded inward. Miraculously, Wendy, who was sitting nearby, was unscathed.

The man outside yelled, "That was your last warning. I have a thermite grenade. The next one goes inside, and I don't need to tell you how horrible it would be to die roasted alive."

"Okay, you win, we're coming out," said Wright. He stood and walked to the doorway. Tarina and Wendy were about to join Wright when a burst of automatic gunfire cut through the air. Wright's body jerked as the bullets tore into his chest. His bloodied body tumbled backward into the farmhouse.

A switch in the back of Tarina's mind flipped the instant Wright's body hit the floor. With a snarl on her lips, she drew her pistol, darted over to the open door and opened fire. "If you want me, come and get me, you bastards!" she screamed.

The blood in Sheridan's veins turned to ice. He instantly knew that it was Tarina's voice he had heard. He began to run. His comrades saw him take off and ran with him.

Emerging out of the mist like avenging wraiths, the Marines burst among the Chosen warriors. Firing their weapons at point-blank range, they cut them down. No quarter was asked for and none was given. In seconds, a dozen Chosen lay in a heap on the ground.

In the fog, a man quietly crept forward and lifted up his arm until his pistol was aimed at Sheridan's head. He flipped off the safety and placed his finger on the trigger. If he was going to die, he at least was going to take Sheridan with him. He began to squeeze the trigger back. Suddenly, a dark shape appeared right next to the shooter. Before he could switch targets, the man was struck hard on the side of the head with the butt of his assailant weapon. He instantly

blacked out and tumbled to the ground.

“Man, you’re gonna regret the day you met me,” said Cole as he grabbed Andrews’ pistol and tossed it aside.

Sheridan looked toward the house. “Tarina, it’s me, Michael. Are you alright?”

“Michael, is that really you?” called out Tarina.

“Yes, do you need help?”

A second later, Tarina burst through the fog and threw her arms around Sheridan’s neck. “I thought I was going to die.”

“I wouldn’t let that happen,” he replied, taking her in his arms and holding her tight.

Roberts ran over to check on Wright. A second later, he called out for one of his Marines to help him. Colonel Wright was badly wounded, but still alive.

From above, the sound of dozens of fighter-bombers flying at treetop level filled the air. Sheridan and Tarina turned their heads and watched as a wall of flame swept over the Kurgan lines.

The ground invasion had begun.

Cole quickly established a cordon with the few people he had. He didn’t want any more surprises today.

A few minutes later, a strange rumbling noise came out of the fog. Sheridan placed Tarina behind his body and looked out into the mist. It was slowly beginning to lift. A couple of anxious seconds passed before a massive shape emerged out of the fog. With a loud holler, Sheridan jumped up into the air when he recognized the tanks. They were Pershing heavy tanks from the First Armored Division.

The Marines were here.

While a medic looked at Wright, Roberts and the other Marines moved Lloyd’s body outside of the building and covered it with a blanket.

“What do you want to do with this sack of crap?” Cole asked Sheridan as he looked down at Andrews, tied up at his feet.

“I’d like nothing better than to put a bullet between his eyes, but he’s probably worth more to us alive than dead,” replied Sheridan. “The counterintelligence folks, especially the psychics, would love to see into his mind.”

Andrews turned his head and looked up at Sheridan. With a demonic gleam in his eyes, he said, “Your friend, the old black woman, I thought you should know that she begged for her life before I strung her up.”

Sheridan let out a guttural cry and then smashed his right knee into Andrews’ head, knocking him over. Before Cole could grab him, Sheridan

dropped to his knees and began to pummel Andrews' face.

"No, that's what he wants you to do," said Cole as he grabbed Sheridan by the shoulders and pulled him off Andrews.

Sheridan fought to control the fire raging through his heart. He had never hated a person so much in his entire life. So far killing Kurgans had been about survival, this was different . . . this was personal. He looked over at Cole and reluctantly nodded.

"Get the prisoner on his feet," Cole ordered.

A young Marine ran over and hauled Andrews up off the ground. Unbeknown to anyone, he had cut his bindings using a small knife hidden in his belt. With cat-like reflexes, Andrews pulled the surprised soldier's bayonet from its scabbard, grabbed her from behind and jammed the blade under the Marine's throat. "Everyone step back, place your weapons on the ground, or I will kill this woman," warned Andrews.

Sheridan raised his hands and said, "You know we can't do that. Don't be a fool, Andrews, let her go and drop the knife."

"Screw that! I'm not going to let your people torture me for information." Andrews pushed the knife into the soldier's skin, cutting her. She winced in pain but didn't cry out.

Cole moved to one side trying to get a clear shot.

Andrews saw the move and edged back slightly using the hostage as a human shield. He yelled, "I'm not afraid to die. In fact, dying for the Lord is what I crave. I'll give you five seconds before I kill her!"

The attack never came from Sheridan and Cole. With a deep growl, Tammy sprinted at Andrews, jumped up into the air and clamped down hard on his arm with her teeth. Andrews howled in pain and let go of the Marine, who spun around on her feet and punched him right in the face. He staggered back on his feet. Blood poured down his face from a broken nose.

Roberts ran out of the building, pushed the soldier to one side, grabbed Tammy's collar and pulled her back before Andrews could swing his knife around to stab her.

Valuable or not, Sheridan had had enough of Andrews. He drew his own bayonet and stepped forward. "If you want to die, I'm willing to oblige you. Why don't you try that with me?"

Andrews wiped the blood from his face. "Killing you before I die would bring me nothing but pleasure," he replied.

"No!" Tarina screamed in fear as she ran outside. Cole grabbed her in his arms, looked into her eyes and shook his head.

Sheridan warily stepped forward with his knife held out in front of him. He

looked into Andrews' cold, unfeeling eyes.

With a loud yell, Andrews charged at Sheridan, who saw the move coming, sidestepped his opponent and slashed at Andrews' side as he ran by. Blood seeped out from a gash cut along Andrews' ribs. He grimaced in pain, spun about and dove at Sheridan, hitting him in the stomach. Both men tumbled to the ground locked in a deadly embrace.

Tarina cried out and tried to escape Cole's vise-like grip.

Sheridan and Andrews rolled from side to side, trying to pin the other. Snarling like an animal, Andrews bared his teeth and tried to force his head down so he could bite Sheridan's face. Spittle flew from Andrews' mouth as he cursed Sheridan and every non-believer in the galaxy. Sheridan cried in agony when Andrews struck him in his wounded shoulder. The painkillers didn't help one bit. The pain was excruciating. Gritting his teeth, Sheridan brought up his right knee into his opponent's stomach and pushed him away.

Both men got right back up onto their feet. For a couple of seconds, they stood there eyeing one another, trying to catch their breath. Andrews wanted to die. He wanted to end the fight, but not before he killed Sheridan in front of his friends. With a sharp flick of his wrist, he flung his bayonet at Sheridan's exposed stomach.

Tarina saw the knife strike home and screamed. However, instead of dropping to the ground, Sheridan remained on his feet. He looked over at Andrews and smiled. He slowly pulled the bayonet from his jacket and flipped it over in his hand until he was holding it by the blade.

"That can't be. You should be dead!" Andrews screamed.

"After you," replied Sheridan as he hurled the knife straight at Andrews. With a wet thud, the bayonet sank deep into Andrews' chest. With a stunned look of disbelief in his eyes, Andrews looked down at the blade sticking out of his chest. He staggered forward for a couple of steps before his eyes rolled up into his skull. A second later, Andrews fell face-first to the ground, dead.

Tarina broke free from Cole and ran to Sheridan. She expected to see blood pouring from his stomach. Instead, he stood there trying to catch his breath with a smug look on his face. "I don't understand. I saw the bayonet hit you," stammered Tarina.

"You did." Sheridan undid his jacket. Underneath was a gray t-shirt with a small cut in it. Tarina reached out and touched the undershirt. It was rigid to the touch where the knife had hit Sheridan; everywhere else it was still soft.

Cole saw the look on Tarina's face and smiled. "Thankfully, your boyfriend remembered to wear his body armor."

"It's liquid body armor," explained Sheridan. "It's super lightweight and

hardens on impact. I never leave home without it.”

Tarina shook her head. “Michael Sheridan, don’t do that ever. My poor heart almost stopped when you were stuck by that bayonet.”

Sheridan wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her close. “I knew what I was doing.”

“I doubt that. But I’m glad you’re still alive.”

“Me too.”

Chapter 45

At first, the assault on the Kurgan forces by the Marines met little resistance. After securing the Kurgan field hospitals, everything else became a target. The armored division had landed behind the enemy's rear echelon and steamrolled over the hapless logistical and combat support soldiers. When they hit the masses of Chosen infantry, the drive to relieve the forces trapped in the capital slowed down. Although battered and weakened from weeks of incessant fighting, the Chosen warriors stood their ground and fought to the death.

Denisov wasn't one to waste his men's lives fighting a fanatical foe. He pulled his armored forces back and mercilessly pounded the enemy with artillery and close air support for hours before resuming the advance. It took several days of intense fighting before the Marine divisions were able to link up with those trapped inside the capital. On the last night of the operation, what remained of the Chosen forces charged out of the ruins with flags held high. They were mowed down in waves until they had to climb over the mounds of their own dead to get at the Marines. When it was over, not a single Kurgan officer had been taken alive. The Chosen, seeing the end coming, committed suicide by the hundreds rather than be taken alive. The river running through the capital was choked with the bodies of soldiers who had drowned themselves. Only those too severely wounded to kill themselves were taken alive.

Sheridan stood beside Tarina. Both had washed and changed into new uniforms. For Sheridan, it was his first shower in close to two months. He wanted to keep his beard, but Tarina had insisted that it go.

They stood there arm in arm looking down on the planet. After all, it had been through; Derra-5 looked peaceful and serene from space. On the orders of Admiral Sheridan, they had been found and brought to his flagship. Sheridan had at first refused to follow the order until he knew that his people were looked after and moved to the rear for a few days' rest.

The door to the room slid open. Admiral Sheridan walked in. He saw his son and Tarina standing there and smiled. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

"No, sir," replied Sheridan as he let go of Tarina and turned to face his father.

"It's good to see you both," said the admiral. "When I was informed that Tarina had been reported missing, I was more than a little concerned until both

she and you were found alive.”

“Thank you for your concern, sir,” replied Tarina.

“Nonsense, I’ve always thought you two were good for each other.”

“Why didn’t you tell Mother that,” said Sheridan, not hiding the disdain in his voice.

“Michael, I’m sorry for what was said. But please believe me; whatever your mother said to you is in the past. I want a fresh start.”

Sheridan let out a deep sigh. “Simply dismissing the past won’t be easy. It took far too long for me to realize that I love Tarina, and I don’t give a damn if Mother approves of her or not.”

Admiral Sheridan smiled. “Well, I most certainly do approve of her. Shouldn’t that mean something?”

Tarina said, “Sir, it means a lot to me. Thank you.”

“Michael, you should know that General Gruber has recommended you for a Distinguished Service Medal and a promotion to captain.”

“Sir, with all due respect to the general, unless all of the people in my group are recognized, I won’t accept the honor or the promotion. It wasn’t just me who risked their life down there. I wouldn’t be alive if it wasn’t for the Marines I serve with.”

Admiral Sheridan liked what he heard and sagely nodded. “I’ll have my aide look into it and see that justice is done for your comrades. You know that after all you’ve been through, you can both choose your next duty assignment.”

“Father, I want to get back into the fight as soon as possible. A front line regiment, any front line regiment, will work for me.”

“I take it that you no longer want a position with the First Division?”

“That’s correct.”

“And what about you, Tarina?” asked the admiral.

“Right back to my transport squadron, please.”

“Yes, of course, your transport squadron.” Admiral Sheridan looked at his son and Tarina. His heart swelled with pride. Both could have taken the easy way out but instead had chosen to continue to take the risks along with everyone else.

“Michael, I think you should know that after I read your report, I had Andrews’ body examined. I was more than a little shocked to see that according to fleet medical records he had no known relatives reported missing on the other side of the Disputed Zone. In short, he is a homegrown fanatic. It is a very scary thought that some of our people have willingly adopted the Kurgan religion. This changes everything.”

Sheridan said, “Sir, it’s only going to get worse before it gets better. The key

here is not to overreact. History has shown us time and time again that if we allow our fear to get the better of us, we'll be doing the Kurgans' work for them. They want us to turn on one another. The best thing we can do is remain calm but vigilant. If we carry on and conduct our business as normal, they'll become desperate and try to force our hand. That's when they'll be vulnerable."

Admiral Sheridan grinned. His son was one hundred percent correct. He made a mental note to contact Admiral Oshiro and pass on the same message to his superiors. Hopefully, they would listen and not rush judgment.

Sheridan changed the topic. "Father, what do you intend to tell Mother about Tarina and me?"

"What do you want me to say to her?"

"The truth. That we are in love and that I don't care if she doesn't approve of Tarina. She can either learn to accept my decision or she can go through life knowing that it was her prejudices that caused me to never speak to her again."

"I'll send her a message telling her that we have spoken and that I approve of the two of you being together. We'll have to wait and see what comes from all of this."

"Thanks."

He handed Sheridan a pass key. "You know, I think I'll take a tour of the fleet. Probably won't be back until at least noon tomorrow." With that, he turned his back and walked out of the room.

"What's that?" Tarina asked looking at the swipe card in Sheridan's hand.

"It's the key to my father's private room."

Tarina slipped her arm around Sheridan's waist and pulled him close. Seductively, she said, "Well, at least we have tonight together."

With a devilish grin on his face, he said, "Yes, we do. I wonder if the ship's galley delivers."

– THE END –

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