

SPEC-OPS

L. E. Modesitt, Jr.

“We can’t afford a war, General.”

“We’ll have a war with Seasia sooner or later. We can afford later less than sooner.”

“The people won’t stand for it, and no nation has ever stood for long against the will of its citizens.”

“Then change their minds. We need this war.”

“Change your weapons, General, if you need this war.”

Excerpt from: *The Right War*
SONYDREAMS, 2043

* * * *

I.

1559. Khorbel deJahn slid into the dim pod, sensies flicking to Duty OpsCon.

“Up-what, sir?”

“You’re last, Tech deJahn. Chimbats,” replied the major. “Nu-type. Seasies haven’t seen. Take over from Hennessy. Third seat.”

Leastwise, no scroaches. DeJahn link-pulsed.

Hennessy blinked, unlinked, and stood. “You got it, deJahn.”

“Got it.”

Hennessy had left the sensie-seat hot, damp. DeJahn wiped it with the cloth he always brought. Still hated taking over a hot seat. Leastwise, he was beside Meralez. Her eyes were open, link-blank. Sexy eyes when she was in her skull, not like now.

He pulled the thin mesh cap into place over his short mil-cut hair. Made sure the contacts handhook, blanked his thoughts, and settled into the link. *Tech first deJahn.*

Accepted. Flash background: Chimbats. Three families, each of twenty-five units. Target: any personnel at biointerdict station beta-four. See plot.

Firsties were just chitterings, light-darts in blackness. Be a while before the

biogator expelled the chimbats from the pouch under its ridged back. Side-mind went to the back plot, illuminated only in his thoughts. Green blips were the gators, swimming upstream after a tidal boost. Red blip was target—Seasie biointerdict station. An hour plus to release.

DeJahn hated pre-release. Babysitting chims just in case the vector got zapped. Seasies weren't going to see gators in one of a dozen canals and muddy streams, not the main river channel.

He might have slept in the dark pod. Would have slept, except for the majors overscreening and the checks. Time passed. Slowly.

DeJahn stifled a yawn, compared closure rate once more. Ran a complete monitor on the bioindicators, then reported. *1630. On course, on target.*

Stet, Tech deJahn.

More dark and quiet time. Time where his thoughts, behind the link, lingered on Meralez. Good body, better voice. Reminded him of Margot. Probably not good. Wished Meralez weren't pseudo les-but. Could be a front. Keep the tech types from pawing. Hazard of spec-ops. Had to find ways to remember who you were. Sex and women helped. Did men help the female techs? Or not? That why so many women partnered with other women?

More time passed in darkness. More chitterings as the chimbats got restless, their soporifics wearing off. Screen checks came, went.

Ten to release, Tech. Request acknowledge.

Stet. Ten to release. DeJahn hated the obvious. Major knew he was ready. Linked, wasn't he? Mil-type reduns still plagued pros like him.

Chitterings increased. Chimbats getting restless as the sops wore off.

Five to release.

Stet.

The chitterings were almost as bad as the scuttling and scrapings that came with the scroaches, and the smell... Tech ops said there wasn't sensie smell. Spec-ops techs knew better.

Stand by for release. Release... now!

Disorientation. Always that. Hundreds of sound-sights flashed through the integrator before settling into a shifting mosaic as the chimbats fanned out, spreading

wings, pulsing the terrain, receiving sound images.

Backwater canal below, hard to judge but no more than thirty feet wide. Grimy gray-brown surface showed the wakes of the gators. No sonic-visual on the gators. They weren't designed that way. Water blocked most of the bats' sonar return.

DeJahn squinted to focus the image. Wasn't a real squint, but the sensie-link equivalent. Trees slumped bedraggled limbs into the water on both sides of the canal.

He checked the mind sidescreen. Target was six thousand yards at zero seven one. Chimbats were sweeping across the water, scooping up insect fuel, following the canal at zero-four-four. Another two thousand, and he'd have to nudge them right.

Gators had fallen behind, following the canal. They would for another thousand yards, then would take the cross canal. No one had told deJahn, but there was a soarer-boat patrol base on the east side of the delta. Each gator could take out one, maybe two, of the boats. Boats gone, or fewer of them, and there'd be a chance to bring in the dreadnaughts—the salties. Handful of them, and there wouldn't be a patrol base. With the rivers in spec-ops' hands, be an open vector lane for all the ricelands in the area, and the J-wasps could immobilize the quantum networks at Chuo-Klyseen.

DeJahn forced his mind back to the chimbats. They needed to follow the overgrown path to the right... more right. He exerted the pressure of *danger* to the left, and the lure *of food*, big juicy mosquitoes to the left. Heat built around him. He had to ignore it, center the chimbats on course toward the target.

Thirty-two hundred and closing. That was a quick link-flash to the major, to keep him from sending an inquiry while deJahn was setting up the attack.

Nineteen hundred yards, and all the chimbats "saw" was trees and insects, and the "brightness" of water in places from an afternoon rain.

The trees vanished, replaced by paddies that didn't hold rice, or water, except for the thinnest layer, but various electronic and biosensors. Beyond the paddies was the interdict station. It didn't look like much, not in the sensie-integrated mosaic in deJahn's mind, just a gray square on an artificial square bluff seven yards above the soggy soil of the delta. Four thatched huts—the kind no one had lived in, even in Seasia, in generations—set around a graveled courtyard. Gravel? In a delta? Chimbats' sonar showed the harder composite walls that supported the bluff edges, and the mix of steel and plastic hidden under the pseudo thatch.

Pseudo bats, pseudo thatch, pseudo bluff. . . frig! Was anything real?

The mission was real.

DeJahn exerted pressure, creating the sense and image of insect prey just below the roofs of the pseudo thatch.

Chimbats angled down, wings near-silent, fangs filled with solvent and venom.

Light! So brilliant that deJahn's eyes boil-burned in their sockets.

Except it wasn't light. Sound! That was it. Screaming sound, blinding the chimbats. Feedback blasted through him. Felt like his eardrums were bursting, and long needles lanced through his eyes, coming out the back of his skull.

Frig! Major'd said the chimbats were new types ...

Blackness wiped it all away.

An alarm buzzed ... sawing into him. It buzzed again.

Somewhere, something nagged at him, telling him to wake up ... but he could sleep in, couldn't he? Sunday morning, wasn't it?

Tech deJahn . . . trigger recovery sequence . . . Recovery sequence . . .

Recovery sequence? His thoughts were sluggish. He had to do something ... didn't he? Recovery sequence? A chill ran up his spine. *Recovery one! Recovery one!*

Link one... link two ...

After a moment, or several, deJahn could feel the barriers dropping. Persona segmentation was frightening—but it had saved more than a few spec-ops techs from biobacklash syndrome ... or worse.

He blinked. He still couldn't see. Vision was usually late to return, but he didn't like being in the dark.

Interrogative status?

Reintegration seventy-one percent complete.

What was seventy-one percent of a tech? He wanted to laugh. He forced his teeth together.

The blackness began to evaporate, and holes appeared in it. One hole showed the recovery medtech looking from the porta-console to deJahn and back again.

Another hole showed the dark greenish gray bulkhead of the spec-ops pod.

After a moment, deJahn blinked, then coughed. “Think I’m back.”

“He’s green.” The medtech’s voice was bored, almost disappointed. He stood, nodded, and replaced the porta-console in its case before leaving the pod.

“Just sit there for a while,” ordered the major.

DeJahn glanced around the pod. All the other sensie-stations were empty. He supposed that was good.

Then the shudders began.

It took fifteen minutes before deJahn was ready to stand. He must have been the last. Or the only idiot who hadn’t disengaged fast enough.

He looked at the major. The officer’s cold green eyes showed nothing.

“Thought you said these chimbats were new. They were ready for them.”

“They were new. Some of them got through. About half the station’s inoperative.” The eyes softened, into mere green glass. “Get some rest, Tech. You’re off schedule tomorrow. Check with med on Monday.”

“Yes, sir.” DeJahn took two slow steps to the pod exit station, pressed his fingertips on the pad.

Cleared to depart. Status amber . . . off duty, pending medical. The exit irised open.

DeJahn took a step into the passageway outside the pod. Each step was deliberate. His balance felt off. Could be the beating his ears had taken.

His poopsuit stunk. Sweat and everything else. Biofeedback was hell on a tech’s personal system, no matter what the newsies said. Especially when your vectors got blasted before you disengaged.

He needed a shower and something to eat. There were still holes in his vision.

* * * *

II.

“What is the point of a weapon?”

“To defeat someone, or to force them to accede to what the wielder wishes.”

“What is defeat?”

“The surrender of a position, goods, territory, or even a point of view.”

“Who determines defeat?”

“Either total destruction or surrender by the one who’s in the weaker position
...”

* * * *

III.

0340. DeJahn bolted up in the narrow bunk. Sleep like deep link cobwebbed his thoughts. Sat there, unmoving. Two days off hadn’t helped that much.

0345. He swung his feet onto the plastipress deck, knew he had to get moving, get to the pod for duty rotation. Didn’t want to be last. Might be scroaches, or chimshrews. Bunk above was empty. Stennes had midwatch on screens.

DeJahn pulled on a clean poopsuit, knowing he’d need to drop off the soiled ones below before his next duty. Chim-duty was hell on uniforms. Softboots followed the poopsuit, and he fastened the bag with his linkcap to his waistband. Closed the slider behind him and hurried along the dim passageway and up the circular ramp, past electro-ops, and to the spec-ops pod.

0352. DeJahn’s fingers stopped short of the pod access plate. Took a moment before he touched the pad. It sucked the heat from his fingertips.

Entry granted The pod door irised open, and deJahn slid inside. His sensies flicked to the captain standing Duty OpsCon. “Tech deJahn reporting, sir.”

“Take number two, Tech deJahn,” replied the captain.

DeJahn stepped up beside the sensie console and link-pulsed. He was relieving Soares.

The wiry tech didn’t blink. He just stood. “Its yours, deJahn. Scowls, tonight. Best hurry. They’re in free hunt.”

“Got it.”

DeJahn touched the sensie-seat. Soares left it cool. He always did. DeJahn didn’t know how. Still, he wiped the seat before he settled down. Once more, no

scroaches. He kept the sigh inside, then slipped on the mesh cap, checked the handshake, and linked into the scowls.

He dropped into the third seat, and linked. *Tech first Khorbel deJahn.*

Accepted. Flash background: Scowls. Initial target: guards, research station gamma three-one. Primary target: technicians.

Frigging great. He had to pull the scowls off free hunt after they took out enough guards to get an opening for the scroaches and turn them to finding the scientists and technicians who were doing the research.

A sharpness of gray images overtook him, so clear that they were more disorienting than the fuzzy sharpness that came with chimbats. Disorientation through precision. Better than the looming wavering images and prey lust that pervaded the scroach links.

As Soares had said, the scowls were in free hunt.

Checking the mind sidescreen, deJahn verified the target, a bioware research station. Small, no more than fifteen science types, and twice that many guards. The scowls were priority programmed, as much as a modified owl could be. The guards were secondary. Guards didn't create biotech and bioweapons. What the station produced or researched, deJahn didn't know. He switched views from the too-distant shifting composite, to one scowl after another, stopping at one stooping into an attack on a guard post.

One of the guards turned and fired. The incendiary pellets exploded into a cage of flame and fire. The stab of pain ran down deJahn's back for an instant before he disengaged that link, later than he should have.

Quick-switching again, deJahn caught the feedback view from next owl as it struck the guard's arm. Fire-venom from the talons went straight to the guard's nerves. In instants, the guard was shaking so badly the fire-rifle struck the plastcrete under his boots. In seconds, he was beside the rifle, bones breaking under the convulsive power of his own hyped muscles.

More scowls feathered down. Alarms began to screech, and the second guard sealed the booth. That would only buy him minutes before the first scroach ate its way through the heavy plastic.

DeJahn switched images. He didn't need to see what the adapted scorpion-roaches would do. At the next guard post, the sentries were still bringing down scowls, each scowl death a line of flame into his own nerves, but the guards did not see the wave of scroaches close to underfoot, advancing inexorably.

He began to exert pressure, shifting the rodent-prey image, strengthening it, and positioning it to bring the scowls through the failing screens into the technical area. The guards were the initial target, just the initial target.

Primary target was scientists and technicians . . . primary target...

* * * *

IV.

You got bioethics issues in chim-ops. Stuff those. Big question, that's whether mod-techno weapons should be used in war at all... Two soldiers faced off at Waterloo. A bunch stormed beaches at Normandy against another bunch, or even slog-fought in the jungles of Vietnam against a VC bunch. Back then, fighters on both sides died. Lots of them. Different today. Americans changed it all when they high-teched the Middle East, used biowar in Iran. Nowadays, the tech-types use chim-ops, spec-ops, remote ops. Nothing touches them. Just like old Greek gods, they throw lightnings, never see what they've done, don't ever experience the horror. Think our special operatives are even soldiers at all? Or just techno-chims themselves?

—Editorial, *Whazup Tonight*
March 15, 2051

* * * *

V.

Thursday before breakfast, deJahn had to shower. Sometimes, dreams were almost as bad as infiltration spec-ops themselves. Even flying the scowls with the scroaches following had been bad enough. He needed a long shower, but water was one thing a forward base had. Surrounded by it. He dressed deliberately. He still had enough clean poodsuits. He'd finally reclaimed enough fresh ones for the days ahead.

He felt cleaner, for the moment, before he headed down the passageway to the tech mess and breakfast. Softboots whispered on the deck. Hard to believe that fifty yards up through the overhead was what looked like marsh and reeds in the river delta.

Tech mess was an oval room with five tables and dispensers and formulators. He tapped out his selections on the formulator, then set them on the tray, and carried the tray to the table where Meralez and Castaneda sat. Castaneda was the butch that Meralez fronted being.

Castaneda gestured. "Look like shit, deJahn."

“You, too, Castaneda.”

“All of us look like shit, all right?” Meralez laughed. “Good thing nothings up but surveillance today.”

DeJahn liked her laugh. Warm, sort of sexy, not in-your-face.

“You’ve got a thought-look,” Meralez suggested.

After swallowing a mouthful of bagel burrito, deJahn nodded, then took a sip of coffee, bitter. One thing formulators didn’t do well, along with tea and chocolate.

“Well?”

“Was a time when special ops meant guys with guns dropping on chutes into jungle,” replied deJahn. “Some ways, more honest.”

“Honest? Strange word, think you?” Meralez brushed back mahogany hair too short to move.

“Strange?”

“Snuffed is snuffed,” replied Meralez. “Back then, it was lead, steel jackets, osmiridium, metal projectiles at high speed. Now, we’re using J-wasps, S-wasps, scroaches, scowls, biogaters, snators. They’re using phonies stuffed with ultra-ex, semiclones with biopaks. We text envirosave, and they text reclaiming their heritage and defeating imperialism. Some of us get snuffed, and some of them do. Back a century, it was the same. Any more honest then than now? Don’t think so. Back then, the officers ordered. The senior ones lived, the junior ones died like techs, and lots more techs died than now.”

For a moment, deJahn considered her words. They were hers, what she thought, and that was good.

“The senior officers, brass balls and iron tits ... all the same,” snorted Castaneda.

“All the same, what?” A cheerful laugh followed the words.

Castaneda looked up. So did deJahn.

Vielho stood there, then set his tray down and slid into the vacant space beside Castaneda. “Anytime you’re talking balls and tits, Castaneda, got to be worth listening to.” He grinned disarmingly, then took a swallow of his tea.

So far as deJahn knew, Vielho was the only tech who drank tea. Or what passed for it. Then, Casimir was the only other person deJahn knew who drank it for breakfast. Where deJahn's brother had picked it up ... who knew? Casimir couldn't even explain, but he also couldn't explain why he liked teaching.

"Just jawing about officers. Little good that does."

"Better than holding it inside." Vielho sipped the tea.

"You ever think about being a teacher?" asked deJahn.

"Me?" Vielho laughed. "No way. Got as much patience as a scroach seeking a Seaside. Why?"

DeJahn shook his head. "Just wondered."

* * * *

VI.

0750. The briefing was in the tech mess. All the briefings took place there. DeJahn didn't want to be late, slipped into the spot at the table beside Meralez. She didn't look at him. He returned the favor by looking straight ahead.

Chihouly lumbered in, glanced at deJahn and Meralez, and gave deJahn a knowing headshake. DeJahn shrugged.

0801. Major Delles stepped out into the small open space in front of the twenty techs. All stood and stiffened.

"Carry on." Delles gestured for them to sit.

With the others, deJahn settled in, waiting to hear what Delles had to say. He wouldn't like it. Briefings meant trouble ahead.

Delles cleared his throat, then straightened his shoulders. His poopsuit had creases, and the gold oak leaves on the starched collars glistened.

DeJahn was just happy to have enough clean suits.

"Power is the key to any advanced technology. Even biotech and biowar require large amounts of power. In this sector, the Seaside's are still relying heavily on old-style power plants. In particular, they have a large magnetodynamic coal plant, the Tanshu-two. This mission is to bring down the plant. We'll take out the cooling systems, then the security lines, and finish up with a double, an ultra-ex powered

EMP and then red goo for the coal itself. The satellite team will be handling the biobirds for the EMP and goo. We get the dirty work first.”

A power plant? That sounded like the beginning of something, something deJahn wasn't sure he'd care for. The only reason the Seasies hadn't gotten rid of the old-style coal plants was that the costs were sunk. Spec-ops would be doing them a favor... unless a short-term power shortage happened to be necessary for some other reason. Like a sector-wide push in another few days.

He couldn't help but turn toward Meralez.

They both nodded, but so slightly that the major didn't notice, then returned their eyes to the presentation. The mess had darkened, to enhance the holo image of the target, a hulking industrial dinosaur that might have come from a hundred years earlier in NorAm.

“... water intakes are standard bioscrub ... strike team three has already planted z-clambers . . . intake volumes are down fifteen percent...”

The major droned on, and deJahn managed to catch what he needed to know, and that was that most of the techs would be on late-disengagement. Another sure sign of trouble.

The last power plant image vanished, replaced by three lists. “Check for your assignments here.”

DeJahn checked. He had the main pod, but it didn't say what he'd be handling.

“... any questions?” the major finally concluded.

“Why the late disengage, sir?”

DeJahn didn't see the speaker; but it sounded like Chihouly.

“A number of the targets require higher-than-normal acquisition ratios, and that requires greater tech presence and persistence than can be obtained through late-stage free-ops.”

“Any other questions?”

No one spoke. There wasn't any point to it, not after the major's last answer.

“Duty stations will commence at 0900. Dismissed.”

The techs all rose, stiffened, and stood while the major departed.

That left thirty minutes to kill. DeJahn got some coffee. When he looked around for Meralez, she and Castaneda had left.

He sat back down.

Chihouly sat at the next table. Neither one said a word.

Finally, fifteen minutes later, deJahn got up and tossed the disposable mug into the reformulation bin and walked toward the pod.

Meralez was one of the first into the pod, after Vielho, and deJahn was right behind her. Soares followed deJahn. Esquivel and Chihouly were behind him. The OpsCon was Captain DiLayne. Narrow-faced former tech, she'd come up the long way and never forgotten.

He dropped into the third seat, and linked. *Tech deJahn.*

Accepted. Flash background: S-wasps. Five swarms, seeded minus three months, advanced growth, designed to inject superconductives into critical components, relays, and certain bloc units. Power plant Tanshu-two. See plot.

Disorientation. Another mosaic view, with tiny lines everywhere, the result of compound eyes with enhanced resolution. All he could "see" were trees and an open field—no—what looked like a big flat pond, maybe an abandoned rice paddy, or a fish farm—the Seasies still preferred real-enviro food.

Because the view was so distance-short, deJahn checked the mental side view, noting the swarms' progress from where the nests had been seeded weeks earlier. Another thirty minutes, according to the schedule.

Swarm one was flying ahead of schedule. A vague image of a black spider and a sticky web slowed them.

He checked the side-screens. The rest of the spec-ops vectors were well ahead. They should be.

Interrogative status? came from DiLayne.

On schedule. Green.

He had to keep a tight rein on the swarms, holding them back because the early units were slower than on the schedule.

Even so, the first S-wasps hit the sonic screens, flared into chitinous fragments. Minuscule needles pinged on his brain, and he created the image of sweet

raw meat. Had to hold back the S-wasps until the scroaches and snators dealt with the guards and screens. Shouldn't be that many screens around an old power plant, even one that generated some 600 megawatts.

Screens down. DiLayne's reminder came after deJahn had already vectored his swarms toward the control centers.

From one composite image—swarm two—he could see/sense a handful of technicians in white singlets scrambling for cover, diving away from the S-wasps. A second image was a bank of equipment. He targeted the S-wasps into the vulnerable crevices there.

His whole body convulsed. A sonic net—internal—had wiped out swarm five.

His eyes burned, and the side-plot was getting faint.

Interrogative swarm status?

Operative units at sixty-one percent . . . fifty-seven percent.. .fifty-two ...

There was no automatic disengagement under a late disengage.

.. .forty-nine ...

Disengage! Disengage!

His whole body convulsed with the shock. Then, he could feel his lungs laboring in the darkness. He'd stopped breathing for a few moments. *Close... too frigging close...*

His breathing slowed. His poopsuit was soaked, his back stuck with sweat to the sensie-seat, and he stunk with fear-sweat as he eased off the mesh linkcap.

All he could do for a time was sit and breathe.

No one even looked in his direction in the dimness, even as bodies rushed past him. He shook his head and looked to his left. Soares lay limp in the sensie-chair—scarlet-flared. He wasn't breathing. He wouldn't, not ever, deJahn knew. Brain-fried.

Meralez was kneeling beside Vielho, but her words made no sense to deJahn. Vielho's body kept twitching, and he screamed silently, as if his vocal cords had been ripped out of his throat.

A medtech appeared with a porta-gurney, moved around Meralez, and slapped a trunkmask on Vielho. The medic never looked around as he strapped

Vielho into the gurney, ignoring the other techs.

“Techs ...” said the major from the ops station.

DeJahn knew what DiLayne meant. He stood, moved toward the pod exit, then touched the pad.

Tech deJahn ... released, duty status green.

He followed Esquivel out into the passageway. She didn't look back. Neither did he.

Late disengagement.

Suicide mission.

* * * *

VII.

Specialist biofeedback is required for optimal efficiency in special operations. Incomplete or null feedback impairs biounit response and efficacy in direct relationship to the total number of discrete units under operator influence and the neural complexity of the individual unit...

—SPEC-OPS 1421.45
DARPA

* * * *

VIII.

What could he do? DeJahn didn't know. Maybe nothing. Looked around the techs' mess. He was the only one there. Coffee, ersatz shit... it was cold. Nothing worse than cold, bitter, pseudo coffee.

Bullshit, deJahn. Lots worse things. Just scared that it might happen to you. He pushed the thought away. Finally, he stood, shook his head.

He took the longer passageway. Softboots scuffed on the deck, almost silent. Everything was muffled and damped in the station. Missed real sunlight. Missed lots of real things. Sickbay was at the end, south end, he'd heard. Who knew when you never saw the sun?

He stepped inside sickbay. Duty medtech just watched. Watched close.

Vielho lay in the second bay, in a medsack that surrounded all of his body. Only his face was exposed. His eyes were open, and his chest rose and fell.

A long moment passed, before deJahn spoke. “You’ll be all right. You did a good job.” Was that right? Who the frig knew? “Vielho ... I’m here ... deJahn.”

There was no response. The blank eyes did not move, did not blink.

DeJahn looked around the cubicle, located a stool. He pulled it over and sat where Vielho’s eyes could see him, if they could see.

Finally, after another ten minutes, the silence pressed in on him. So much that he had to say something. Anything.

‘Vielho ... you know ... you remind me of my brother. He’s younger. Not much, two years. He’s a teacher ... some out of the way place, Escalante ... he’s like you, always had something pleasant to say... That’s why I asked about the tea. He drinks tea. You know, one time, when we were moving the herd ... yeah, the old man still handles sheep the old way ... Casimir found one of the ewes had dropped twins late ... never found their mother ... he bottle-nursed ‘em until they were old enough to go with the others. . . .’ DeJahn didn’t know why he’d told that story, or the one after it.

Finally, maybe an hour, maybe two, later, he got up from the stool, and leaned over and put two fingers on Vielho’s forehead. “Hold tight...”

Outside sickbay, he thought he saw Meralez in the passageway ahead, and he took the one to the left, that went back to the mess, not that he was hungry. Most times, he would have been glad to see Meralez.

Not this time.

* * * *

IX.

Major Delles surveyed the techs seated at the tables in the mess. This time, more than ten chairs were empty. One would have belonged to Soares, another to Vielho ... and Chihouly. *Too many names for one lousy obsolete power plant.*

Meralez had seated herself at one end of the single long table, with Castaneda on the other side. DeJahn hadn’t tried to get close on the other side. He’d just taken the last seat near the bulkhead table.

“This is the big push.” Delles smiled enthusiastically. “What we have planned here will upset the Seasies’ economy for a decade or more, not to mention crippling their efforts to match us in biowar capabilities. What we’re doing is just a small part of an overall coordinated program...”

An overall coordinated program? More like another frigged-up mess where nothing would go like planned, and a whole bunch of techs would get dis-shock or brain-fried.

“... it’s taken some time to identify the critical targets, and not all of them are obvious, but all are critical to the sectoral economy...”

Just tell us what they are, thought deJahn. *Skip the enthuse shit.*

“... Lumut is critical to the development of the next wave of warm-water bioconversion systems . . . Targets will be the power systems, the membrane formulation complex, all comm links, and the potable water system, as well as all humint armed units ...”

Turn the place into a wasteland, just like they did with Cascadia Coast. . . and make sure no one’s left who can explain what happened. Margot had been in Cascadia, just visiting. And deJahn had applied for spec-ops the next week.

“... all the biounits are in place and registering green...”

As if you’d tell us about those that aren’t.

“... We’ll be using the main pod for the heavies, and two and three for the aux bio-units. Here are the pod assignments.”

The holo image appeared in the air beside the major. One of the names under pod two was deJahn.

Frigging support. It didn’t help that Castaneda was assigned to the main pod. He forced a smile. At least Meralez was in pod two with him. Not that she’d ever been other than polite to him, but even that helped.

“Any questions, Techs?” Delles barely paused before adding, “Dismissed. Operation begins at zero nine hundred local tomorrow.”

DeJahn stood.

Meralez walked by him, as if she would not speak to him.

He nodded, deciding against smiling.

“I saw that. With Vielho. You’re not so cold. Not like people think.” She flashed a quick smile, almost secretive, before her face turned just tech-pleasant.

Cold? He kept to himself, but he wasn’t cold, was he?

* * * *

X.

0849. DeJahn stood outside pod two. He didn’t like being early, but he liked being late even less. In front of him, Esquivel stepped forward, extending her hand. As she did, deJahn was aware of someone behind him— Meralez. He wanted to look back. He didn’t.

Then it was his turn. He extended his hand to the sensor. *Tech deJahn.*

Entry granted.

He slipped into the dimness. Captain DiLayne was OpsCon again. That figured. Delles would take the main pod. Pod two was smaller, with only four sensie-seats. DeJahn took the second seat, and watched as Meralez stopped beside the third. He smiled at her through the dimness, but only for a moment. She only nodded.

He eased the mesh linkcap into place, then settled himself. *Tech deJahn.*

Accepted. Flash background: Snators—bioexplosive. Clutches implanted in five locales, activated at thirty-six minus. Links confirmed. Five targets—all broadband nodecasters. See plots.

The good news was that his targets weren’t people, but the bad news was that he was riding herd on reptilian bioexplosives almost as deadly as ultra-ex. He’d need careful timing for the disengagement.

The five plots displayed the snators, all arrayed around Lumut, each less than three thousand yards from the target. Each had been sent in with a biogator weeks or months before, little more than a programmed bioblastula with accelerated growth patterning. That kind of planning was something deJahn didn’t want to think about.

Interrogative vector status? snapped DiLayne.

Snators green, standing by for release.

Release at will.

He didn't need any more urging. The first group of snators left wakes, so energetic was their water entry. The odor of decaying meat permeated that link.

No smell through the sensie-links? DeJahn snorted to himself, even as he blocked the decay odor and the snators slowed, their snouts turning from side to side, as if puzzled by the change, but they kept swimming downstream.

The second attack group had begun to slide through the marsh and reeds toward the nodecaster on the low hillock to the south. The last three hundred yards was across what amounted to mowed lawn, and deJahn would have to sacrifice one of the snators to take out the sonic electric gating to the lawn—it might have been a cricket field or pitch, whatever they called it.

Group three had a curving path through the public gardens, exposed most of the way. That worried deJahn. Gatorlike creatures in the gardens would certainly attract some attention, but then, if need be, he could push them into a run, and snators could make speed.

Four and five had near-direct water routes, with only the last few hundred yards exposed, but five had to cross a side road, supposedly with low traffic.

He flicked from image to image, flickering from snator to snator so fast that twice the integrator blanked. The snators' binocular vision was clear, and there wasn't much color. He wanted to get a better and quicker personal sense of locale matched with the plot map, but he forced himself to slow down.

He did have another thirty standard minutes, and the snators were fast.

Group five was running ahead, but deJahn didn't see that it mattered. Better ahead and clear than on sched and facing opposition.

Group three was already on target, less than sixty yards below the nodecaster concealed in an artificial rock cliff slightly north of the center of the gardens.

One of the local patrollers was also there, and she had a stun-rifle out, leveling it at the lead snator. DeJahn dropped the third snator into limited free hunt, because its reactions and impulses were far faster than his through the links.

Her shot went wide. She did not get a second shot.

Someone else did, with a biodetonator.

Electrofire slammed back through the links, and deJahn shuddered, even as he accelerated two of the gators toward the base of the cliff, seeking whatever access points there might be. Neither of the two lagging snators could locate the attacker, even as one registered projectiles screaming past it.

Giving up on locating the attacker, deJahn pressed the laggards after the leaders, strengthening the lure of decaying meat.

A second snator went up, this time with its own bioex, leaving flame in deJahn's eyes. He shook off the pain feedback and checked the closure. The three remaining were close enough. He triggered them, holding the link for the barest moment to make sure the command had gone true, before disengaging.

Even so, the shock rocked him, because some of the snators' death agony washed back over him.

One down, four to go.

Automatics of some soil popped up from the sides of the cricket field right after deJahn detonated and disengaged from the sacrificial snator. Two of the remaining snators were shredded by the autofire, but three others sprinted through the hail of composite to the other side and the base of the nodecaster, surrounded by three yards of impermite. Impermite was weak stuff compared to NorAm bioex.

DeJahn triggered and disengaged.

Pointed iron picks began to chip away at his skull.

Three more...

Group four scuttled and splashed through the tanks of a low-tech wetworks to reach the back side of another low hill. A dozen Seasies in dull green uniforms appeared.

DeJahn sent the lead gator toward them, using it—with an early detonation—to clear the way for the others.

Another trigger and disengage.

Now... large and ancient cannon were blowing holes in his skull. How it felt, anyway.

Interrogative status?

Three objectives triggered . . . two in progress. His entire body was a mass of fire, pseudo biofeedback fire, but it still the frig hurt.

He struggled to focus on the link to group one. Still short of target.

Five ... where was five?

Trying to cross the road, and two local patrollers were laying down a fire curtain.

That cost him two snators, but the patrollers and their vehicles went up with the bioex. He just hoped the two remaining snators had enough bioex for the nodecaster as he put them on free search-and-destroy.

Group one.

Just as he linked, he could feel the biofield constrictor sweep across the snators of group one.

He mentally lunged for disengagement... *Disengage!*

Fire! Like being bitten by a thousand scroaches. Light! Brighter than novafly exploding before his eyes.

DeJahn jerked. His eyes were open, saw only purple blackness, link-deep with no link. Every nerve in his body was a line of fire. Where was cool? Darkness? Easy... easy...

Whose voice? Knew the voice. Couldn't place . . . couldn't find.

"Who?" His voice rasped. Not his voice. Could tell he'd been screaming. Frig! Didn't want to be a screamer.

A hand touched his. Warm, welcome . . . Yet . . . the warmth was fire, knifelike, daggers like the fangs of a chimbat, like the venom of a chimshrew.

"You'll be all right, deJahn ... be fine. Just disengagement link-shock..."

Just disengagement link-shock . . . link-shock . . . Sure, you'll be fine. This time.

"Friggin ... disengage ..."

"You'll be all right." Meralez squeezed his hand once more. This time, there was no pain.

He managed to tighten his fingers around hers for a moment.

He would be fine. He was a tech.