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EPILOGUE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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*For the 2nd Battalion the Mercian Regiment, and all British service personnel in Afghanistan.
Because real heroes in the real world are the ones we should be reading about.*

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PROLOGUE

TIME: FOURTEEN YEARS AFTER EMERGENCE DAY. PLACE: SOMEWHERE BENEATH THE SURFACE OF SERA.

For a time, the humans of Sera knew the illusion of peace...until Emergence Day.

At that moment, our people broke free from our subterranean world, erupting into the domain of these groundwalkers, and wiping out whole cities. We fought and killed the humans on their fine boulevards, in their homes, on their battlefields.

And they fought back.

In time, their valiant defense was crushed. With billions dead, humans denied their enemy control by destroying their own civilization. They launched devastating attacks on their own territory—sacrificing their own citizens—so that we could not possess it. Such is their loathing and fear of us.

Understand what a world must do to survive—what humans must do, and what we must do. But survive we must.

Now the humans' long struggle against overwhelming odds approaches the final, desperate stand...

(QUEEN MYRRAH OF THE LOCUST HORDE, ADDRESSING NEW LOCUST TROOPS WAITING TO GO INTO BATTLE FOR THE FIRST TIME.)

URBAN PATROL IN EPHYRA; 14 YEARS AFTER EMERGENCE DAY, ONE WEEK AFTER THE LIGHTMASS ASSAULT ON THE LOCUST.

I swear I can smell barbecue.

I don't mean scorched flesh—that's a stench I know pretty well. I mean *meat*, proper meat, the bitter tang of charcoal at the back of your throat, smoky fat, spices, *juices*. I'm point man today; I raise my fist to halt the squad.

See, smell *matters* when you're on patrol. It's part of the picture you build up, as much a clue as anything you see, hear, *feel*. It tells you plenty: dead bodies, how long they've been dead, discharged weapons, leaking fuel, fresh air from a distant vent when you're looking for a way out. And, of course, it tells the enemy plenty about you.

So how many Locust are left?

Marcus looks around slowly, not blinking, like he's a machine scanning the buildings. "What is it, Dom?"

"Smell it?"

Someone's probably trying to carry on a normal life in this city, pretending it's an ordinary summer day like we had years ago, wars ago. Even with billions dead, humans get on with life. Even me. Even without my wife and kids. Humans always find something to hang on to.

Marcus pauses, inhales slowly, then lets his rifle rest on its sling.

"Dog," he says at last. "Yeah, dog. Overdone."

Cole chuckles. "Save me a leg. *Two*, if it's one of those little yappy guys."

"Shit, those Stranded eat *anything*," Baird says. He's got no time for the bands of refugees living outside government protection. Has anyone? Me, I try to remember they're our own. "Maybe they'll end up eating each other and save us a few rounds."

It's their choice to stay outside. The Stranded could sign up, do their military service with COG forces, and get fed like the rest of us, but the dumb bastards still want to play the independence game—like it matters a damn now.

"Yeah, very public spirited," Marcus mutters, and carries on picking his way through the rubble.

But Baird's got a point. We all have a choice. It's dumb to keep this tribal shit going when humankind is close to being wiped out. If we had any sense, we'd all unite.

No, it's *worse* than dumb. It's suicidal.

Then it starts; the faint vibration beneath my boots.

Marcus says smell's our most basic sense, the one that grabs you hardest by the balls and gets your attention. His dad was a scientist, so I guess he knows. But not here. In the city, it's that trembling from deep beneath the ground that blots out everything else. It tells you the Locust are coming. You feel it in your guts. The grubs are boiling up from underground.

There's still plenty of them around, even after we bombed the shit out of their tunnels. They have to be the last ones standing.

"Here we go," Cole says. He checks his Lancer casually, like he's just waiting for kit inspection, not that we bother much with that kind of stuff now. "Damn, I was hoping those Stranded bums might even have some beer to go with that dog..."

Forget the beer. The ground starts moving fifty meters ahead, a slow dome rising, shrugging off the paving that's been smashed into mosaic a dozen times already. I react. We all *react*. There's no *think*. My body's been here before a thousand times, and it gets on with the job without asking my brain if it has anything to say about opening fire.

The paving cracks bulge wider as a bunch of Locust drones break through. Big, ugly, gray bastards. How can anything with two arms, two legs, and a head look so alien? We all concentrate our fire on the same spot before the things can steady themselves and take aim, and in that narrow canyon of a street, it's deafening. A single grub goes down. The rest boil out and come at us firing.

One minute I'm ducking down behind a burned-out car to fire from cover—the next I've got a vise around my neck and shoulder, and a drone is hauling me over the rusted metal, scraping my arm raw. I try to bring the Lancer's chainsaw up into its gut. But the thing's got me so close in a rear stranglehold that I can't move the damn rifle. I'm trying to grab my knife with my free hand. I can hear hammering gunfire, Cole yelling, Baird breathless like he's punching the crap out of something, and just a silence where Marcus is—except for rapid fire. Something wet sprays my face. I'm losing consciousness, but I'm taking that Locust bastard with me, you bet I am, and I ram the blade into any part of the drone I can reach.

That's for my kids. That's for Maria. That's for all my buddies. That's for—

Then it's like a grenade's gone off next to my ear. I'm breathing again, and I'm soaked in something warm and sticky. The drone drops, I mean, it *drops*. But it's still got a tight hold on me and nearly pulls me down on top of it as it collapses. It's got half a head left. I freeze, look around in the sudden ringing silence, and then realize none of us fired that shot.

Marcus sticks his hand in its skull and fishes out a round. "Sniper," he says, wiping blood from his face. The drones are dead. We're not. That's good enough, I suppose. "And not one of ours. This kind of ammo hasn't been used for years."

I *hate* surprises. Even ones that save my skin. Anyone who can shoot like that had better be on our side.

CHAPTER 1

I swear I thought the place was a museum when I walked in. I mean, it was huge, full of books and old paintings. And deserted, you know? That kind of dead silence that says just shut your

mouth and feel the awe of history. And then Marcus's mom came through the door like she hadn't seen us, reading some papers she had in her hand, and she says, "Hi sweetheart, you brought some friends home? I'll catch up with you later." Then she was gone. I saw the look on Marcus's face, and knew right then that the guy needed a brother a whole lot more than he needed a library.

(CARLOS SANTIAGO, DESCRIBING HIS FIRST VISIT TO MARCUS FENIX'S FAMILY MANSION AT THE AGE OF TEN.)

EPHYRA, PRESENT DAY—14 A.E.

Dom Santiago decided that there was one good thing about a phantom sniper blowing a Locust's brains all over his face. It took his mind off worrying how many Locust were still around.

His legs were shaking as he moved to the edge of the pit that had opened in the paving and aimed his rifle below, just in case the grubs had backup on the way. The shakes were just the aftershock of the adrenaline, but—

Liar. I nearly shit myself. The grub was choking the life out of me, a round missed my brain by inches. That's fear. Forget the adrenaline.

No, it never stopped being terrifying. The day it did, he'd *really* be dead. In the tangle of broken pipes and cables below, nothing stirred beyond the clicking of settling soil and stones. Dom couldn't feel anything under his boots now except the slight rocking movement of broken paving. The vibrations from deep in the planet had vanished for the time being, and the smell of chargrilled dog had been overwhelmed by shattered bowels and pulverized concrete.

"Hey, smart-ass," Baird called to the empty street. "Nice shot. Now show yourself."

"Better shout louder," Cole said. "He could be a mile away."

It was always hard to spot a sniper. But in this maze of destruction and shadows, there were a thousand places to lay up and wait for trade. Marcus squatted down and examined what was left of the Locust's skull again. Then he looked up and gestured in the general direction of the south side of the street.

"No, a lot closer. The round went in near the top of the skull. High angle, and a lot of kinetic energy left."

Dom looked where Marcus was pointing, trying to work out where the sniper would have had clear line of sight. Marcus backed slowly to the nearest wall and pressed his fingers to his earpiece. Dom listened in.

"Delta to Control, any sniper teams to the south of Embry? Any Gears at all?"

"Negative, Delta." It was Lieutenant Stroud: Anya Stroud, still on duty after eighteen hours. The woman never seemed to sleep. If Delta Squad was awake—so was she. "Need one?"

"Not anymore."

"Don't leave me in suspense, Sergeant..."

"We've got a joker loose with an obsolete sniper rifle. He's helpful now, but he might not stay that way."

“Thanks for the heads-up. I’ll put out an advisory.”

Cole was still focused on the roofline. Baird lowered his Lancer and started walking again. “Let’s get out. Maybe they got a sudden dose of patriotism and realized they owe us, now the war’s nearly over.”

“Maybe,” Marcus said, “he was aiming at Dom and missed. And it’s not over.”

“Stranded never fire on us. They’re not that dumb.”

“Old rifle. Great shot.” Marcus reloaded, casual and apparently in no hurry. “So I’m curious.”

Baird didn’t look back as he picked his way over fallen masonry. “Plenty of Stranded are good shots. Doesn’t mean we have to go find them and enlist them.”

Baird had a point. As long as nobody was shooting at them, it wasn’t their problem. But if someone had a sniper rifle, Dom knew it was stolen. Obsolete or not, the things were scarce. A handful of factories struggled to produce spares, let alone crank out new weapons. Every operational piece of kit, from Ravens to Armadillos to assault rifles, was a losing battle between maintenance and decay. Like all Gears, Dom cannibalized parts from anything he could grab. Baird was a master at it.

“Yeah, we need to know,” Dom said. “Because if the rifle isn’t stolen, that means the owner’s one of us. A veteran.”

Baird paused to pick up something. When he held it closer to his face to examine it, Dom could see it was a servo part of some kind. “It’s old kit and they’re thieving scum.” Baird pocketed the servo. “Because no Gear is going to hang around with street vermin if he’s capable of shooting.”

Again, the cocky little bastard was right. Dom wanted to see him proved wrong someday, if only to shut his mouth for a while. Yes, veteran Gears reenlisted after Emergence Day, even some *really* old guys, because there were two choices for any man worth a damn: fight with the COG forces, any way he could—or rot. The only excuse for not fighting the Locust was being dead.

“Every rifle counts,” Dom called after him. No, the war *wasn’t* over. “And every man.” He turned to Marcus and gestured toward the likely direction of fire. “Give me ten minutes.”

“You’ve got me curious, too,” Cole said, resting his Lancer against his shoulder. “I think I’ll join you.”

Marcus sighed. “Okay, but keep your comm channels open. Baird? Baird, get your ass back here.”

Half of this city block had been a bank’s headquarters, surrounded by snack and coffee shops that lived off the army of clerks. It was all derelict now. Dom could just about remember how it had looked before E-Day, the ranks of neatly wrapped sandwiches in the window displays, filled with the kind of delicacies nobody could get hold of now. Food in the army was...adequate, better than anything that Stranded had. But it wasn’t fun.

Dog. Damn, who’d eat a dog?

The glittering granite façade was just a shell now, with a few hardy plants rooted in cracks in the ashlar. Nothing much grew here. It didn’t get the chance. Dom and Cole edged inside the burned-out bank and looked up to see that there were no floors, and nowhere to hide. It was a big empty box. Everything that could be hauled away and reused—wood, metal, cable, pipes—had been scavenged long before.

“Well, shit,” Cole said cheerfully. “I had my fortune stashed here.”

Cole had been a pro thrashball star, a rich man in a world long gone. Wealth was measured in skills and barter now. He always treated his worthless millions as a big joke; he could find humor in just about any situation. But there was nothing much left to buy that a Gear needed. Dom decided that when life returned to normal—even after fourteen years, he *had* to think that it could—he'd follow Cole's example and treat money as easy come, easy go. *People* were what mattered. You couldn't replace them, and they didn't earn interest. They just slipped away a day at a time, and you had to make the most of every precious moment.

When I find Maria, I won't take a single minute for granted.

Dom scanned the interior and peered down into a deep crater where the polished marble counter had once been. Nothing moved, but he could see the old vaults, doors blown open. "Yeah, better cancel the order for that yacht."

"Hey, Dom, you won't find no snipers down there." Cole shoved him in the shoulder. "Heads up."

The back of the bank building was a sloping mound of rubble and debris, like scree that had tumbled down a mountainside. Above the ramp of brick, stone facing, and snapped joists, the rear wall rose like a cliff and the top row of empty window frames formed deep arches. Now *that* was a good position for a sniper—depending on what was behind the wall, of course. Dom slung his Lancer across his shoulders and scrambled up the slope for a better look.

"Nobody home, Dom." Cole followed him. "Don't you get enough exercise?"

"Just want a look-see from the top." Dom grabbed at a rusted steel bar and hauled himself up the stumps of joists that jutted from the wall. His oversized boots weren't ideal for climbing and he had to rely on his upper body strength more than momentum from his legs, so getting down again was going to be interesting. "Because he'd have to be at this height to get that shot in."

Dom heaved himself onto a windowsill and stood with his hands braced against the stone uprights on either side. It was a big solid wall, built like a bastion, and thick enough for him to stand on comfortably even in a Gear's boots. On the other side, adjacent buildings in various states of collapse provided crude stairs down to ground level. If anyone had been up here, he'd had a relatively easy route down.

"See anything?" Cole called.

"Usual shit." Dom scanned one-eighty degrees. "Not exactly a postcard to send home. Unless you live in an even bigger cesspit."

Below, the city still looked like a deserted battlefield, sterile and treeless. Smoke curled upward in thin wisps from domestic fires Dom couldn't see. There was a visible demarcation between the parts of the city that stood on thick granite—the last COG stronghold—and the outlying areas where fissures and softer rock let the Locust tunnel in. The line lay between a recognizable city, buildings mostly in one piece, and a devastated hinterland. The line itself—well, that was the margin in which most Stranded seemed to live, the unsecured areas where they took their chances.

Their choice. Not ours.

It wasn't the view Dom was used to from the crew bay of a King Raven chopper. It was static, deceptively peaceful, not racing and rolling beneath him in a sequence of disjointed images. He had a few moments to think. Even after ten years, he found himself trying to visualize where Maria might be now. Then he began wondering how they'd ever rebuild Sera, and the idea was so overwhelming that he did the sensible thing and just thought about how he was going to get through the next few hours alive.

“Dom, stand there much longer, and somebody’s going to shoot your ass off for the hell of it,” Cole called. “Let’s commandeer a vehicle and cover some ground.”

Dom wasn’t so sure the sniper had gone far. It was hard to move fast across terrain like this. You had to crawl, climb, burrow, duck. And that made it perfect to hide in. Whoever he was—Dom was sure he’d hang around.

“He’ll be back.” Dom tried not to think about the drop below. He just turned around and jumped, relying on the give in the loose rock and the thick soles of his boots to cushion the impact. It still shook him to his teeth. “He’s making a point. Not sure what, but…”

But Marcus had news to take his mind off the sniper. “Move it, guys. Echo’s got grubs surfacing three clicks west. Means they might still be moving along the Sovereign Boulevard fissure. We can get there before anyone gets a Raven airborne.”

Marcus’s voice rarely varied from a weary monotone. Even when he had to shout, all he did was turn up the volume. There was seldom any trace of anger or urgency, although Dom knew damn well that it was all still batted down, and there certainly wasn’t any hint of triumph now.

“Numbers?” Dom asked.

“A dozen.”

“But that means they’re thinning out,” Baird said. He fancied himself as the resident Locust expert, and he was. “Looks like we did it. We bombed the shit out of them.”

Dom prodded Baird in the chest as he passed him, friendly but pointed. “You mean *Marcus* did it. He’s the one who shoved the Lightmass down their grub throats.”

“Well, maybe Hoffman will hand him back his medals after all…”

“Knock it off.” Marcus turned and jogged in the direction of Sovereign. Most patrols were on foot, out of necessity; APCs were in ever shorter supply. “The stragglers could still outnumber us. Do a head count.”

Dom prided himself on hanging in there, just like his dad, just like his brother Carlos. You didn’t lose heart. You didn’t lose hope. *Resilience*, Carlos called it; a man had to be *resilient*, and not crumble at the first setback. But after fourteen years of fighting, there were only a few million humans left, and Dom was ready to grab at any prospect of the nightmare coming to an end.

No, it’ll be a different kind of nightmare. Restarting civilization from scratch. But it beats thinking every day will be your last.

The only thing that bothered Dom about dying now was that it would end his hunt for Maria.

“Right behind you,” he said, and ran after Marcus.

OFFICE OF CHAIRMAN RICHARD PRESCOTT, COG HEADQUARTERS, JACINTO.

Colonel Victor Hoffman arrived five minutes early for the meeting and diverted to the bathroom to tidy his uniform.

It wasn't much of a uniform, and this battered building wasn't much of an HQ, but if he started treating anything as not mattering—anything at all—then the rot would set in. *This* was how civilization was maintained. *This* was how a culture survived. Museums and art galleries could be reduced to rubble, and human society on Sera would carry on unscathed. But the way a man conducted himself, the basic rules of every moment of each day—*that* was all that stood between the last humans on Sera and chaotic savagery. It had to be maintained at all costs.

So Hoffman checked for stubble on chin and scalp, straightened his collar, and tried to disguise the signs that—yet again—he hadn't had a chance to sleep in thirty-six hours.

What's going to kill me first? This job, or the Locust?

The door opened behind him, just a crack judging by the muffled voice. A woman's voice; he froze, then checked his zipper.

"The chairman will see you when you're ready, sir."

A man couldn't even take a leak in peace these days. Hoffman didn't turn around. He replaced his cap. "Thank you. Give me a minute."

He counted silently to sixty, contemplating his reflection in a mirror that had also seen better days, and then turned on his heel to walk the few yards down the corridor to Prescott's office. It was a room that hadn't been refurbished since before E-Day. That, at least, won the politician a few points. He was taking the shortages like everyone else.

"Victor," Prescott said. He stood in front of a makeshift display board covered in sheets of paper, studying each in turn, then glanced over his shoulder. "Take a seat. Are things as hopeful as they look?"

Hoffman folded his cap and tried not to gaze longingly at the coffee on Prescott's desk. He picked up the briefing notes that were always crisp and ready for him at these pointless monthly meetings, and leafed through the digests. Food stockpiles—10 percent lower than target. Munitions—a third below target output. Utilities—domestic power supplies less than twelve hours a day.

Business as usual...

"All I can say, Chairman, is that since the Lightmass detonation, we've seen mainly Locust drones, and in considerably reduced numbers. Normally we'd encounter the full spectrum of Locust types over the course of a week—Boomers, Nemacysts, Reavers, you name it—and a *lot* more drones."

Hoffman stopped. That was all he had to say. Prescott stared at him as if he was waiting for him to continue and give him some good news to announce. In the brief silence, an antique clock ticked with a sound like stones falling off a ledge.

Prescott's patience held out six slow seconds. "So did it work? Has the bomb *worked*?"

Hoffman didn't like hope these days. It always tended to get crushed. He pinned down his thoughts in the realms of the measurable and predictable as much as he could.

"It destroyed the Locust citadel," he said carefully. It wasn't quite how he'd felt when the Lightmass bomb ripped the guts out of the Locust tunnels, but there was no reason to bullshit Prescott. "We're seeing a lot fewer on the surface, and it got rid of most of the Kryll. But short of strolling down their tunnels and doing a head count, I don't know what the overall effect's been. Time will tell."

"People need good news to keep going, Victor."

“And when we get some, sir, you’ll be the first to know...”

“Morale’s a commodity.”

“For the army, too. Equipment failures went beyond critical a long time ago.” Hoffman had this same conversation with Prescott every month, like clockwork. “We’re going to have to think about diverting more civilian resources to arms manufacture.”

“How am I going to justify that with fewer Locust incursions?”

Shit, I can’t win either way, can I? “With respect, who do you need to justify it to?”

“The population. They’re running on empty, like you.”

“Without an effective army, they’ll be running on *dead*.”

“I don’t want any more riots over rationing and power cuts.”

“Look, Chairman, for the moment, my Gears aren’t as *busy* as usual. It’s a good time to divert some resources into replacing as much equipment as we can. Even if the Locust *have* been defeated, you’ll still need a strong army during reconstruction. Once certain groups think the pressure is off, you’ll have a whole new bucket of problems on your hands. Top us up *now*, while we’ve got breathing space.”

It was all true, all solid doctrine, but Hoffman knew how to play politicians. They were short-term thinkers; but flag up a good threat to focus them, and they’d drag their eyes to the more distant horizon. Hoffman actually didn’t have the luxury of thinking beyond keeping his men fed and armed for the next day, week, month. So if Prescott got off his back and concentrated on civil unrest and reconstruction, it was one less hassle to deal with.

“I do understand,” Prescott said. “I’ve worn the uniform.”

For eighteen months. For appearances. Ever been under fire? No. “Then you’ll know society’s deal, sir. Gears put their lives on the line, and civilians make sure they’ve got enough kit and support to do the job. Anything less is morally unacceptable. And it’s also a recipe for defeat.”

Prescott wandered over to the window and folded his arms, staring out over the city. The grime on the glass—there was no maintenance these days, none of the trappings of a less brutal war—gave the broken Jacinto skyline a softer, more flattering focus.

He let out a long breath. “The average adult male citizen is getting by on two thousand three hundred calories a day, which is about a third of a Gear’s intake, women on eighteen hundred. Power’s off for more than twelve hours in every twenty-six. Water processing can’t keep up. If we didn’t tie family food rations to keeping children in school, we’d have feral packs of kids roaming the streets. My job’s to keep society running, Victor, any way I can. I have to think past wars. My job is *tomorrow*.”

“Well, I’m just a warfighter,” Hoffman said carefully. “My job is making sure there’ll *be* a tomorrow.”

“Okay, it’s been easy to motivate people against this enemy,” Prescott said. “It’s not the Pendulum Wars. Locust aren’t remotely human. Nobody’s got a grub relative overseas with a different side of the story to tell. They’re the antithesis of humankind, real monsters. But hate and tribalism only unite a society so far.”

“We’ve lasted fourteen years.” Hoffman stood up to put on his cap. Long practice made him line the badge up with his nose almost unconsciously, running the edge of his right forefinger down over the metal

while his left hand positioned the back of the cap. Sometimes, when he felt the death's head emblem, it made him wonder if the badge was a boast or a prediction. "This is a siege. I'm good at sieges. Give me an objective, and I'll tell you if I can do it with the kit and men available."

"I'll see what I can do," said Prescott.

Hoffman knew *get lost* when he heard it.

It *was* all men now, near enough. The Pendulum War days of women in uniform were largely over. As Hoffman left, a girl in a sober blue business suit—maybe the girl who opened the bathroom door—stood at a filing cabinet with her back to him. When she closed the drawer and turned, he could see she was several months pregnant. That was a priority job now; not just replacing engine parts and weapon components, but replacing *humans*.

Longer lead time, though...

"Ma'am," he said politely, touching a finger to his cap, and walked out into the square.

It might have been his imagination, but the sky was less heavily clouded than usual. He looked up, and saw nothing. Nothing was good news.

His radio crackled. In his earpiece, Lieutenant Stroud's voice sounded a little more strained than usual.

"Sir—two more drone incursions. Delta are heading for Sovereign to RV with Echo Squad."

"Thanks, Lieutenant. Now get some sleep. You're not the only Control commander we've got. Tell Mathieson to get his lazy ass in that seat."

"Yes sir. Stroud out."

The link went dead. Anya Stroud didn't fool Hoffman. Delta got extra attention from her, and it wasn't thanks to their refined taste in the arts. If she thought she could mend Marcus Fenix and make a decent man out of him, then Hoffman had overestimated her intelligence, but it wasn't his place to lecture her on pining after grossly unsuitable men. As long as she didn't let it interfere with her duties, it was her private problem.

And she wasn't her mother, poor kid. It must have been damned hard to grow up in the shadow of Helena Stroud.

Or Adam Fenix, come to that. Hoffman brought himself to a halt just short of actually feeling sorry for the man's son.

"You still got a lot of ground to make up with me, Fenix," Hoffman said aloud. He made his way down the road to headquarters, suddenly wanting to pick up a rifle on the way. He hadn't reacted that way in a long time; now he felt naked with only his sidearm, even in the defended heart of the city. "A *lot*."

SOVEREIGN BOULEVARD, JACINTO.

Dom could hear firing long before Delta reached the junction with the boulevard. Marcus broke into a faster run, then sprinted toward the sound.

"He's going to get us killed," Baird muttered, maintaining a steady jog. "Asshole."

Cole gave him a playful shove in the back, which was a hefty blow from a guy built like a brick shithouse. Baird almost fell. “Come on, baby.” Cole overtook him. He could still sprint like a pro. “You don’t want to get an ugly one.”

There was only ugly and uglier to choose from when it came to Locust. Dom switched comm circuits to pick up Echo’s sergeant, Rossi, swearing a blue streak as he emptied his magazine.

“Delta, you took your frigging time.”

Marcus’s voice cut in. “Yeah, well, we’re here now. Want a hand?”

“We’re two men down. What d’you think? We’re holed up in the mall. *Soon* would be good.”

They said the world was divided into those folks who ran away from danger, and those who ran toward it. It was funny how you could overcome that instinct to get the hell out if you were trained hard enough. Dom’s legs were moving independently of his brain, and as he rounded the corner behind Cole, he saw what was giving Rossi’s men problems: it was the biggest Boomer he’d ever seen, and a squad of its drone buddies.

The boulevard was a big, open space with precious little cover. Dom and the rest of Delta made their way up the road by darting from doorway to doorway, and laid up for a moment behind an overturned dumpster.

The whole area south of the House of Sovereigns had once been full of manicured trees, expensive stores, and pavement cafes beyond Dom’s pocket, but he’d window-shopped here with Maria before the kids were born. It was hard to tell that it had ever been a nice place except for the shattered stone façades. All the white marble statues that stood in the wall niches had gone; Dom couldn’t even see where the raised flower beds had been.

The Boomer and accompanying drones were preoccupied with the entrance to the mall, another converted period building.

Its weather doors were long gone. But the security shutter—a huge steel portcullis suspended between fluted columns—had been lowered. The Boomer was rattling it as easily as a night watchman checking a flimsy door. The shutter wasn’t going to last much longer.

Marcus had his don’t-say-anything-I’m-calculating face on. “Rossi,” he said, finger on his earpiece.

“Rossi, is the mezzanine floor above the entrance still intact?”

Rossi’s voice was almost drowned out by gunfire. “Yeah. All the way around the atrium. Height’s about five meters.”

“Have you got control of the shutter?”

“Sphincters—no. Shutter—yes.”

“Raise it on my mark.”

“We’ve got grubs *inside*, too. I wasn’t planning on letting reinforcements in.”

“Just raise it when I say.”

“Want to share?”

“Let the Boomer in and leave the rest to us. We’ll go in from the top.”

Rossi went silent for a moment. Dom heard a voice in the background urging someone called David to hang in there; they had wounded to evacuate.

“Haven’t got much choice, have we?” Rossi said. “Standing by.”

“Keep your channel open.” Marcus turned. “Okay, we’ve got two exits at the rear of the mall, accessible from the loading bays. Up the fire escape, along the mezzanine, and then Dom and I drop the Boomer from above.”

“What do I do, then, catch up on my knitting?” Baird said. “And how do you know the layout?”

“My mom used to go there a lot when I was a kid,” Marcus said quietly. “I *explored*.”

“And that’s what we’re banking on? Your mom’s shopping trips?”

Dom was certain that Marcus was going to punch Baird out sooner or later. He’d never seen Marcus lose his temper, but *nobody* could take Baird’s whining every day without wanting to kick the living shit out of him. The longer Marcus took it in silence, the bigger the eruption Dom expected.

“Yeah,” Marcus sighed. “So you and Cole give us covering fire if the grubs spot us moving. Once we’re in and the shutter lifts, close up and go in behind them.”

Baird was still muttering over the comms channel about what a crap plan it was, while Dom followed Marcus back the way they’d come and slipped down a side road to circle around the block. Just as Marcus had said, there was a rear entrance to the mall. The walls were still intact. The doors were missing.

Dom checked his Lancer and followed Marcus into what was obviously familiar territory to him. “When you say *drop the Boomer*, Marcus, define *drop*.”

“Jump him. Take his head off.”

Boomers were so big and powerful that they could carry small artillery pieces. They were also as dumb as planks, nowhere near as smart as drones, so one way to beat their sheer power was to outthink them and get close in so they couldn’t use their weapons.

As long as they don’t rip your head off first, of course...

Marcus shot up the stairs two at a time, running on some childhood map that was obviously still vivid in his memory. Dom had spent much of that childhood with him, but he’d never been *here*. Maybe it hadn’t been a happy place for him.

“Yeah, I thought that’s what you meant,” Dom said. “Close quarters.”

“He’ll break our fall.”

Yes, Marcus meant *jump*, too.

What the hell am I going to do if he gets killed?

Losing the kids had been bad enough. But when Maria went missing, Marcus had somehow held Dom together, whether he realized it or not. The guy was his friend, and his last link to happier times. He wasn’t replaceable; not in a ravaged world like this. The only upside was that everyone, absolutely everyone, had lost family and friends. You didn’t grieve alone. You were *understood*.

I'm not going to let him get himself killed.

Marcus, oblivious to Dom's worries, kicked open a door at the top of the stairs. The two men stared into pitch blackness.

"Lights," Marcus said, sounding as if he was talking to himself. He always did, from the moment Dom first met him. The corridor had no natural light. "Why can't they give us a damn flashlight? Okay, this passage runs past the management offices and opens onto the mezzanine by the elevator."

"What if they changed the layout since you were last here?"

"It's a protected historical building. They had to preserve the internal walls."

It was the kind of obscure stuff Marcus was good at remembering, and it always came in handy. After fifty yards, feeling their way with their hands against the walls, they turned hard right. Dom could see a bright rectangle ahead. The corridor filled with the noise of an intense firefight.

"Doors onto the mezzanine," Marcus said. It was just an empty gap now, without even the hinges left intact. "You okay?"

"Fine."

"You think I've got a death wish."

"No." *Well, maybe...sometimes.* "Hey, we do this together, okay? We always have, always will." Dom held up his fist, fingers extended. "Okay...one, two...three."

Dom was first through the doors this time, even though he didn't know the layout. The noise hit him like a brick wall. Once he was on the mezzanine, it all became clear. He could see the whole ground floor of the mall from here, from the carved drapes that flanked the interior entrance to the blackened shells of shops that lined the ground level, lit by sporadic muzzle flash. Rossi was crouched behind a retaining wall of stone by the stairs to the basement level, and a Gear—David?—was slumped on the ground near him, surrounded by dark stains. Marcus sprinted to the far end of the floor, overlooking the entrance.

"Rossi," he said. "Rossi, raise the shutter. *Now.*"

"Shit, can he get to the controls?" Dom put one hand on the stone balustrade, preparing to vault over the edge. It was only five meters. *Yeah, but it's onto a frigging Boomer.* He was so pumped with adrenaline now, so set on sticking with Marcus no matter what happened, that everything he looked at was sharp, intensely colored, and somehow both slow-motion and flashing past him. "Can he reach them?"

"*That* used to be the security desk," Marcus said. He had his rifle in his right hand; he leaned on his left hand and slid his left leg onto the edge, gaze darting between the entrance and Rossi's position. "He's right on top of the hand-operated controls."

The shutter shook. It started to lift.

"Stand by," said Dom.

"I go first, and you cover me, okay?"

"Okay." Boomers took a lot more stopping than drones. "And if you don't take him out in one, I'm backup."

The entrance was way too close to Rossi's arc of fire. As Dom got ready to drop over the edge, it occurred to him that he could easily be caught in crossfire, but by then he was too pumped to stop. The shutter lifted high enough for the Boomer to enter. It crouched under the barrier, almost squatting, then paused for a split second to look up.

Marcus put a burst of fire through it. It didn't even slow the thing down. Boomers didn't seem to feel pain. Then he crashed down onto its back.

This was a two-man job. Dom jumped too, boots first, and for a moment he wasn't sure if he'd hit Marcus or the Boomer, but either way it felt like slamming into concrete. The Boomer went down, face-first. The force of the impact winded Dom; he tasted blood in his mouth.

As the Boomer rose to its knees to shrug them off, Dom was aware of deafening fire over his head, but nothing else. He caught the Boomer in a choke hold, his arm closing around its squat neck, while Marcus emptied a clip into its gut.

He fell back to reload. Dom jumped clear and carried on firing. Shit, those things really *did* take some stopping. Not even chainsaws did the job on them.

Ordinary grubs, though...that was another matter. A drone came at them out of the rubble just as the Boomer sank to its knees, riddled with rounds. Dom turned to fire, but the grub jumped Marcus first.

"Shit—" Dom couldn't get a clear shot as Marcus struggled with the grub. He revved up the chainsaw instead. *Down through the shoulder, right through the main plumbing. Get off my buddy, you bastard.* "Marcus, *hang on.*"

But Marcus was already doing some carving of his own. His chainsaw screamed and stuttered against armor. There was a precise technique to the saw: you had to put your weight behind it, or else the blades skidded and didn't bite. The best action was a downward slice, leaning into the target, but Marcus was pinned on his back, cutting upward, and the grub was still thrashing around, even though it couldn't use its weapons close-in. Dom sliced into its shoulder—and *still* the thing kept moving.

But the Boomer was out of the game now, just a shaking mound of meat on the floor. Somehow, Dom kept it in his peripheral vision as he sliced into the grub on top of Marcus. He was sure it was never going to die until it bellowed and threw back its head, hurling him clear. As Dom scrambled to his feet, he saw a spray of arterial blood, Marcus rolling clear, then everything ground to a sudden, silent halt.

The Boomer was down. It still wasn't dead—how *could* it hold out like that?—but it would be very soon. The things bled out like any other creature.

"Any more?" Marcus said, jumping up. "Is that all of them? Baird? Cole?"

"I'm mopping up, baby."

Cole rose up from behind a shattered column and opened fire almost casually, aiming his Lancer one-handed. Dom turned in time to see a drone falling backward a few meters away, still firing in a neat arc that tilted up to punch into the vaulted ceiling.

"Nice." Marcus wiped his chin and stared at his palm. "Shit..."

Cole looked down at the dead grubs with faint distaste, and prodded one with his boot to check for movement. Then he inhaled.

"I *hate* that smell." He sounded muffled, but it was just Dom's ears recovering from the noise. "It ain't

putting me off my dinner, though. Are we done here?"

Marcus looked around. "Everyone okay? Rossi, you still there?"

"Yeah." Rossi stood up. He was spattered with blood, and it could have been anybody's—even the Boomer's. "I've called for casevac. David's in a bad way. Abdominal wound. And I need to find Harries's rifle."

It was a fact of life, driven by shortages; they had to retrieve what kit they could. Rossi and the last Gear left from Echo Squad carried David out into the open to wait for the King Raven, then went back for Harries's body. Dom, caught in that weird limbo between fighting for his life and instant boredom, found he had to keep moving. He kept seeing shadows that just weren't there. It happened when he'd pushed himself too far on too little sleep. He could have sworn he saw someone go into the mall.

"I'll look for it," he said. "Won't take long."

Baird was rummaging through his pouches and pockets, fishing out ammo to reload. "The chopper's going to be here in a minute."

"I said I'd look. Right, Rossi?"

Rossi had a tight grip on David's hand. It didn't look like the guy was in any shape to grip back. "Thanks."

Dom picked his way back through the mall, wondering what happened to the dead Locust if there wasn't a pile of corpses to be set alight to prevent disease spreading. Sometimes, when he returned to a site, bodies were decomposing, and sometimes they were gone. Maybe the packs of feral dogs and cats scavenged them. It wasn't an appetizing thought.

But he was sure the Locust didn't come back for their dead; they weren't like humans. They didn't pride themselves on leaving no grub behind.

He took another look at the Boomer. Shit: it wasn't dead. *It still wasn't dead.* Its eyes followed him as he moved around it, baleful and accusing. After all that, the thing was still hanging on, just like David. Dom aimed his Lancer, then paused to flash Marcus on the radio.

"Ignore the firing," he said. "Just finishing a job."

He emptied his clip into the Boomer. He wasn't sure if he was doing it to make sure it didn't get up again, like the manual said, or if he was doing the decent human thing and ending its misery.

It might have been a waste of valuable ordnance. But at least it was dead now. He waited for its chest to stop moving, and then cast around looking for the Harries's Lancer, ignoring the bodies. He'd been able to see some common ground with enemy troops in the Pendulum Wars, because they were soldiers just like him, but Locust—they were like everything that was rotten in people, with none of the saving graces. There was nothing to pity or love or recognize.

And they smelled bad. That smell clung to him until he showered it off, along with smoke and weapon residue. There was no sign of the Lancer. Another flicker in his peripheral vision made him turn, even though he knew it was just fatigue. There was a retail unit right ahead of him, its doorway partly blocked by rubble.

It was crazy, but he had to check.

As Dom stepped through the opening, rifle raised, he thought he'd walked into a slaughterhouse. The debris on the floor from the collapsed ceiling was littered with bodies. In the smoky gloom, he could pick out limbs jutting from the debris, and his first thought was that a bunch of Stranded had been living here when the place came under fire.

For a second, he recoiled, thinking he'd stepped on a body, but the loud crack beneath his boots didn't sound like bone, it sounded like...

Plastic.

Now he could see the bodies were just old display mannequins stripped of every reusable material. He picked up a stray forearm. Even the small metal ball joints at both ends were missing. He felt stupid, but he knew he wasn't the first guy to make the same mistake in the heat of the moment.

Dom could now hear the staccato sound of an incoming Raven. He picked his way back toward the exit, squinting against the daylight from the mall that plunged the rest of the space back into relative darkness. His gut rumbled, and he reached in his belt-pouch for some dry rations to tide him over. It was then that he looked up, the edge of the foil packet still clamped between his teeth as he started to rip it open, and found himself staring across the beam of a rifle's tactical lamp.

He aimed before he'd consciously worked out what was happening. He fired.

CHAPTER 2

I shall remain vigilant and unyielding in my pursuit of the enemies of the Coalition.

I will defend and maintain the Order of Life as it was proclaimed by the Allfathers of the Coalition in the Octus Canon.

I will forsake the life I had before so I may perform my duty as long as I am needed.

Steadfast, I shall hold my place in the machine and acknowledge my place in the Coalition.

I am a Gear.

(OATH OF THE COALITION, SWORN BY ALL RECRUITS.)

SOVEREIGN BOULEVARD.

Dom fired because no Gear would walk up on a buddy like that.

He heard ricochets, but he couldn't see a damn thing. The afterimage of the lamp and the light from the door blinded him.

"You bloody idiot," a voice boomed. A *woman's* voice, a strong accent—South Islands, or somewhere close. "You could have killed me."

The spotlight went out. Dom realized he'd dropped the ration bar. He didn't lower his Lancer. "Yeah? I

still might. Identify yourself.”

“It’s Bernie,” she said.

“I don’t know any Bernie.” His eyes adjusted to the light again, but he still couldn’t see her. “Lady, cut the crap and step out where I can see you.”

“Next time, I’ll let the frigging grub pull your head off.”

So this was his phantom sniper. She must have been trailing them all the way, and that thought bothered him more than the Locust.

“Yeah, I appreciate the help, but I still want you to step out here.” Marcus and the others must have heard the shots, but he’d already told them not to take any notice. “Move it.”

Dom had been decoyed once, when he was too young to know the score. It was a Stranded game; get a woman to keep a guy busy, then send the man to do whatever thieving he needed. The bastards had even tried to steal weapons, fuel, and vehicle parts from Gear patrols, which was a good reason for leaving them to fry. Not that the women were any less trouble than the men, but in a species on the brink of extinction—and humans *were* that species—nobody took risks with their females. They were hope, the future, the survival of society—not cannon fodder.

Dom was cut short by the thud of boots hitting the ground hard to his right, like someone had jumped from a height. He swung around.

It was the rifle that got his attention first, a really old model Longshot, a Mark 2, followed by the woman holding it.

“Shit,” he said.

She was bigger and older than he expected—although he wasn’t sure exactly *what* he expected—and wore a motley assortment of COG body armor. No youngster, that was for sure; her close-cut dark hair was mostly gray, but she didn’t look like anyone’s dotting mother. She looked like a smack in the mouth waiting to happen. She clipped the rifle back on its sling—shit, she had a Lancer, too—and stood there waiting. Dom stared at the rifle.

“Yeah, I found it,” she said. “Didn’t have these in my day.”

She turned her back on Dom, strode to the doorway, and stuck her head out. Dom could see the tattoos on her arms now. “Hey, Marcus. Don’t tell me you don’t remember me.”

Marcus appeared in the entrance, Cole and Baird behind him. They looked wary, but they were taking Marcus’s lead, and he had his arms at his side.

“I know who you are,” Marcus said. “And I thought you were dead.”

Dom struggled with the name. Bernie? Bernie... *Bernie*...

“I’m not finished yet. Got a lot of catching up to do.” She looked over everyone as if it was parade inspection and she wasn’t satisfied with the degree of spit and polish. “Who’s running the show now? Is it still Hoffman?”

“How the hell did you get here?” Marcus talked straight past her question. It was incredulity rather than bad manners. It didn’t show on his face—nothing much did—but Dom always knew when something

had shocked him because he blinked more frequently. She *definitely* had. “You got a vehicle?”

“I walked.”

“For fourteen years?”

“Yeah. Try covering a couple of continents that all look as good as this place. And remember that wet stuff called *sea*?”

Her accent sounded a lot like Tai Kaliso’s, but she didn’t have any tribal tattoos on her face. That was still enough for Dom to decide to give her a wide berth. South Islanders were all crazy, and that was by Gear standards, which allowed for a lot of crazy even at the best of times.

“Anyone going to introduce us?” Cole held out a massive hand for shaking. She took it. “Private Augustus Cole, ma’am, and the *really* ugly bastard here is Corporal Damon Baird.”

“Bernadette Mataki.” She gripped his hand. “Bernie.” Baird just nodded at her, surly and working hard on being unimpressed. “Marcus and Dom already know me.”

“Wow, lady, you got a handshake like a Boomer. I *like* that in a woman.”

“You’re a cheeky bugger, but you’ll do. Come on, Marcus, take me to Hoffman.”

Marcus made a faint grunt and jerked his head in the direction of the boulevard. Outside, the King Raven had already set down and the winchman gave them an irritated get-a-move-on gesture.

“When you ladies are ready, we’ve got wounded on board,” he said sourly, seeming not to notice Bernie at first. “Just because there’s not many—shit, you *are* a woman.”

“Hey, don’t talk about Baird like that,” Cole said. “He’s *sensitive*, bein’ blond and all.”

Baird didn’t rise to the bait. Bernie swung herself into the crew cabin and fixed the winchman with a stare, which made sure he didn’t say another word. The Raven lifted clear, and Dom caught a fleeting glance between Marcus and Bernie that bothered him for a moment. It was the kind of look that might have been a question or a warning or both.

I’ve known this guy nearly all my life. We’ve lived in each other’s pockets since we were kids. Is there something I don’t know?

“I’m not *a woman*,” Bernie said pointedly, resting the ancient Longshot across her knees. “I used to be Sergeant Mataki. And I can still do the job.”

“Yeah,” said Marcus, staring out onto the cityscape beneath. “She did. And she can.”

Mataki.

Dom found himself trying to erase five, ten, fifteen years from her face without looking as if he was staring. But she caught him looking anyway, and didn’t seem offended. If anything, she looked...sympathetic.

But she still didn’t look like anyone’s gray-haired mother.

Mataki. Mataki, Mataki, Mataki. Oh shit, yes.

Now he knew who she was. It came back with all the force of being shaken awake from a deep sleep.

She'd fought at the Battle of Aspho Fields.

She'd fought alongside his brother, Carlos.

And, like Marcus, she'd been there when he was killed.

Dom held out his hand. "Thanks," he said at last. "Nice shot."

FORMER WRIGHTMAN HOSPITAL, BARRACKS BLOCK.

It was the first half-decent bathroom Bernie had seen in years.

The fact that the building had once been a mental asylum for the crazy rich didn't trouble her at all. The rows of washbasins stretched to the far wall, and the tiles were the ones she remembered from every COG base she'd ever been in. The novelty of running water would take some getting used to. She filled a basin, plunged her head in, and savored the simple joy of fresh water before straightening up and focusing on the mirror. There was a bittersweet feel of home about it all.

She'd forgotten the smells; smoke, blood, shit, machine oil, discharged weapons, regulation carbolic soap. They filled the locker room. Marcus stood cleaning Locust guts off his armor, looking mildly annoyed. Then he took off the do-rag he always wore and rinsed it in a basin. Without it, he looked like a totally different man.

"God, is that the same one you were wearing last time I saw you?" Bernie asked.

"No." He wrung it out, then tied it back on his head without looking in the mirror. "I got a new one when Dom sprung me from jail."

"Yeah, that's what I was meaning to ask you. Aren't you curious about why I was trailing you? I've been shadowing patrols for weeks."

He shrugged. "Okay. Why?"

"To make sure you weren't with the Stranded. I heard some weird shit about you when I got here, Marcus. Is it true?"

"Depends what you heard."

"That you deserted your post, cost a lot of lives. That they court-martialed you."

Marcus shrugged. "Can't argue with that."

"Not you. Never."

"True. I got forty years. Served four. It was going to be a death sentence, but Dom spoke up for me. And got me out a few days ago."

That was Dom all over. The man would die in the proverbial ditch for anyone he believed in. But Bernie couldn't imagine Marcus Fenix running away from a battle. There had to be more to it than that—a *lot* more.

"You ever going to tell me what really happened?"

“Maybe. Are you going to tell me why you decided to come back now?”

There was an unspoken question in there. She’d put it out of her head so many years ago—deliberately, carefully—that for a moment she thought she really had forgotten what it had all been about. But it only took a glance at Dom Santiago’s face to remind her.

He was a good lad, dog-loyal and humbly brave, the spitting image of his brother right down to the neat black goatee beard. She’d found it hard to look him in the eye.

“Don’t worry, Marcus,” she said. “I’m not going to dredge up Aspho again.” No, Dom didn’t need to know the details about Carlos then, and he didn’t need to know them now. “We agreed, didn’t we? It’s been sixteen years.”

“He’s lost both his kids. And his wife’s been missing for ten years.”

Everyone had lost someone since E-Day, but that still sounded like too much for one man to take on top of losing his brother. “I bet he’s still looking for her.”

“Yeah. You know Dom.”

“What about his folks?”

“Missing, presumed dead.”

“Poor sod. I thought he’d remember me better.” Just as well he didn’t. He’d only start asking her questions. “Is your dad still around?”

“No.”

“Sorry.”

“You’ve been out of the loop a long time.”

“You bet. I went back home when I was invalided out of the army. The island was totally cut off on E-Day, so it was eight years before I even heard about the recall to Ephyra.”

Marcus looked blank for a moment as if he was calculating. “Is there *any* good news out there?”

The global communications network they’d all grown up with had collapsed, most of it within days of the first Locust emergence. “I came across a few survivors from time to time, usually in fishing villages. Harder for Locust to get at them when they put to sea.”

“That’s one way of avoiding them.”

“I had a hell of a job getting hold of a boat, but there’s a lot you can persuade people to do if you’ve got a rifle.”

Marcus looked Bernie over with a wary eye. “You’re serious, then.”

“I’m too old for breeding stock, but I can still fight. Don’t tell me I can’t hack it.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Bernie knew that as long as she could hold a weapon, she had a duty. Any civvies who stood in her way were a threat to everyone’s survival. There was no room for neutrality or going it alone, no choice of

sides to be on, and she'd lost too many people she cared about.

But everyone's lost someone. Every human, our whole species, is in mourning. What's that going to do to us? What kind of society is going to come out of this? What are we going to be like after so much loss?

Thinking that far ahead was a luxury nobody had, except maybe the politicians. But she thought it anyway.

Marcus continued cleaning up, and Bernie tried the showers. Even with cold water, it was sheer luxury. She was never going to set foot in a bloody boat again.

The main door swung open. She heard Dom's voice as she was getting dressed.

"Hoffman's on his way," he said. "Anya says it was like someone shoved a firecracker up his ass. Just said 'shit' and took off."

"Anya said that, did she?" Bernie called. "Never knew she learned that kind of language..."

"Sorry, didn't realize you were there, Sergeant."

"I'm still a civvy until Hoffman says otherwise."

Bernie waited a couple of seconds before coming out of the shower area. The last time she'd seen Dom Santiago before today, he was crying unashamedly for his dead brother, and the victory at Aspho Fields meant nothing. Six months after that, she was stuck in a hospital bed with a shattered leg, and then she was out of the army for good. It was too easy to lose touch with people.

And then—you found the people had gone forever.

She wanted to kill grubs, to wipe them out like they wiped out her world, and being a Gear gave her the best seat in the house to do that.

"I remember you now," Dom said, looking a little guilty. "It's been a long time."

"It's okay. It wasn't like I was in the same company."

"You were in Carlos's, though."

It's a normal comment. Don't start blurting stuff out. What else did you expect him to say?

"Yes," she said. "Good man, your brother. A bloody fine Gear."

That was all it took; neutral, honest, inviting no questions. Carlos was a brother anyone could be proud of. Dom just smiled to himself for a moment, a little sadly, and started singing under his breath while he took off his body armor. Fighting Locust was a messy business. Bernie thought of the chainsaw bayonet, and realized that stripping down and cleaning a rifle was a whole new game these days. Marcus was using an old toothbrush on the blades. He'd disassembled the whole chainsaw feed and was digging out connective tissue that had wound itself around the chain.

"So has Hoffman mellowed?" Bernie asked.

Marcus made that *unhh* sound under his breath. Bernie recalled it all too well. It wasn't actually a sigh; it was just an escape of disappointment, disgust, and disillusionment that he was too tired to hold in any longer. "No, he's still the asshole he always was. But he's top asshole now."

Dom, out of Marcus's eyeline, gave Bernie a meaningful glance. *Long story, don't go there.* But she didn't recall Marcus ever having that much to say. She took that as a guide to just how bad the blood was between him and Hoffman.

"Okay," she said carefully. "I'll try to stay on his least offensive side."

Marcus went on cleaning his kit. Bernie gathered her belongings—one change of clothes, three changes of weapon—and sat in the lobby area waiting to be summoned. Things had changed a lot since she'd left the service. The Gears walking past her were all men. And they looked wrung out in a way that the guys she'd served with never had, however bad things had been.

The Pendulum Wars were different, somehow. After the best part of eighty years' fighting, a kind of saturation level had been reached. Nobody really believed it was the end of the world, even if global disaster was actually around the corner.

This time, though, it was probable, and everyone knew it.

Maybe she'd just come eight thousand miles to die somewhere worse than home.

Well, at least I'll die with a square meal inside me and a decent pair of boots. And take a few more of the grub bastards with me.

"I know I said I'd take anything I could get that could hold a rifle, but you're pushing my limits, Mataki."

The voice boomed from behind her. Passing Gears stopped to stare for a second and then wisely went about their business. No, Hoffman hadn't changed much at all; solid, short, square, lips set in a thin line. She stood to attention and turned as if the last sixteen years had closed up without a single day's gap.

Actually, he *had* changed. His age showed, more around his neck than anything, and his piercing dark eyes looked somehow faded. But he still stood as if he was going to take a run at her, arms loose at his sides, weight slightly forward.

"Sir," she said, "you look like shit."

Hoffman wavered on the edge of a smile. She knew he wouldn't dare grin and look happy to see her again. "Good to see you, too, Bernie. You're not exactly combat-fit yourself."

"I know. But I can still function in full armor and hit a moving target at eight hundred meters. That's how I got here."

"Take the oath, then go see the Quartermaster." Hoffman surrendered to a faint smile, but it was brief and almost embarrassed. "Welcome back. And remember not to kiss Fenix's ass, because if I had my way, he'd still be the last man left in the Slab."

"Arse, sir," Bernie said. She didn't understand the reference to the prison—the Slab. "They're arses where I come from."

"Well, whatever it is, don't pucker up to it."

Hoffman turned and strode off. There was no point telling Marcus that she'd always liked Hoffman and that he was a proper soldier, not a useless chair-warming tosser like some she'd known. And there was no point telling Hoffman that Marcus didn't have it in him to abandon his men, and that there would have been an unselfish reason for anything he did, however stupid the decision.

She wasn't here to referee a grudge match between the two of them. She was here, she reminded herself, because she was human, and being a Gear again was the best chance she had of taking back her world.

Dom walked up to her, reeking of carbolic soap. It was bloody hard to scrub off that Locust smell.

"Come on, I'll take you to the adjutant's office," he said. "You need anything, you got any problems—you just let me know. Carlos thought a lot of you."

"Thanks. You're a good lad, Dom."

"Tell me some stories about him sometime, will you? I bet you two got up to all kinds of shit he never told me about."

Dom grinned. Bernie did her best to smile back, and followed him down the corridor. She'd tell him what she could, but she knew right then that sooner or later, he'd ask her to recount the story she swore she'd never tell.

He'd ask about the day Carlos died.

OPS CENTER, WRIGHTMAN HOSPITAL, JACINTO.

The reports of Locust incursion always came in thick and fast, but they'd slowed to a comparative trickle in the last couple of days.

That didn't mean they'd stopped.

"Sir, we've got a problem." Lieutenant Mathieson got Hoffman's attention by shoving a printout in front of him. The kid was stuck in CIC after losing both legs. "Look at this chart. Look at the direction the new incursions are moving in."

Hoffman scanned the line of short arrows formed like a figure four and the times written against them. Yes, there was a definite progression; Locust were moving north in an area they hadn't reached before, cutting between the outlying Stranded settlements and what was euphemistically called farmland. It was still shown as an optimistic green on charts. The reality wasn't anywhere near as rural—there were few crops grown in the open air, but plenty of industrially ugly hangars full of hydroponics, mycoprotein farms, and poultry units. A lone city of humans still took a lot of feeding.

The incursions weren't advanced enough to form a definite pattern, though. Not yet.

By the time they are, though...it'll be too late.

"What's your take on it, then, Mathieson?"

"It might just be coincidence, but if you extend that line...well, you can see where they're heading."

"If those things cut off the food production areas, we're screwed," Hoffman said. "The geologists swore that that was solid granite bedrock."

"It might have been the Lightmass bomb."

"What, opening new fissures?"

“Shove that much energy into confined spaces, and it’s got to go somewhere, sir.”

The ops room, a shadow of the lavishly manned center it had been in earlier years, had fallen silent except for the occasional radio transmissions from Gears in the field and the rhythmic grass-cutter sound of printers spewing out updates. When Hoffman looked up, all eyes were on him; young men too disabled for active service, reserve Gears too old to deploy, and women from eighteen to don’t-ask. It wasn’t the uniform that made them look alike at that moment. It was the blank dread in their eyes.

Give me a straight battle. Shoot, don’t shoot. Advance, fall back. But every time I do this...every time feels like I’m going to balls it up and let the whole damn world down.

Without food supplies, the city wouldn’t last more than a few months—at best. Securing water pipelines was hard enough. The Locust looked like they’d seized the opportunity to start a siege.

“They’re going to try to starve us out, aren’t they, sir?” said one of the retired men.

“You’re old enough to remember Anvil Gate,” Hoffman said. “So you know how I deal with sieges.” It had been the defining moment of Hoffman’s career. He was no longer sure whether it defined him for good or ill, but it wasn’t something he wanted to do again. “Get me the Chairman.”

Prescott, to his credit, was always available, day or night, and Hoffman cut him extra slack for that. He called back within a minute. Every back in the ops room was turned as officers returned to their duties, but Hoffman knew everyone was listening intently.

“What’s the problem, Colonel?”

Mathieson passed an updated printout to Hoffman in silence. Another four-shaped mark indicated where more Locust had broken through.

“Looks like the grubs have a new strategy. They’re cutting us off from the North Gate food production zone.”

“What kind of numbers?”

“Numbers don’t matter if they concentrate what they’ve got on creating a no-go area there. We’ve got two options—counterattack, or start clearing that sector.”

“So what are you recommending?”

It wasn’t a military option, but Hoffman couldn’t guarantee saving the zone, nor the food stockpiles there. They’d had years of practice at evacuating populations and withdrawing into secured areas as the Locust advanced across Tyrus.

“Clear the area, Chairman. At the rate they’re moving, we’ve got three days to shut down production and move everything out. Not many people to shift, but a lot of equipment and stores.”

Prescott sounded as if he was counting under his breath. “That means we need to ship people in to do the heavy lifting.”

“We’ll take in an escorted convoy, and bring it back. But we’ve got to move fast.”

“Okay. I’ll put the emergency management unit on this as top priority and they’ll get back to you with the details inside the hour. How many Gears can you spare?”

“Not as many as I’d like,” Hoffman said, “but the faster we do this, the sooner they get back to combat

duties.”

“Keep me in the loop, Colonel,” Prescott said, and the line went dead.

“Okay, people.” Hoffman slapped his hands together to get attention, as if he needed to. He could have heard a rat fart in the silence. “Dust off the contingency plan. You know your jobs. As soon as we get the vehicle numbers, plan me a route in and out, put times on it, and tell me how many assets we need to reallocate. Mathieson, put three squads on standby.”

“Very good, sir.”

It *sounded* fine. Hoffman could stand outside himself sometimes and listen to his own performance, because command was almost as much about presentation as soldiering. Gears—and civilians—needed to see decisive strength when the shit was on an intercept course with the fan. He just couldn’t convince himself half as well as he convinced them.

I didn’t earn this position. I just didn’t manage to get killed.

Earned or not, though, he held it, and there was nobody else suitable to hand it to. It was his duty. He’d do it.

And he’d pray that he didn’t screw up humanity’s last chance.

CHAPTER 3

The COG isn’t a soul-crushing machine, dumbass. It’s society. Mutual support, mutual dependence. Individuality might sound all noble and free, but it generally means crapping on your neighbors, and if you crap on your neighbors—don’t expect them to help you. Rules hold humans together. And it’s together, or die.

(PRIVATE DOM SANTIAGO, EXPLAINING TO A FORMER STRANDED WHY HE SHOULD STOP WHINING ABOUT BEING DRAFTED AS PART OF OPERATION LIFEBOAT.)

TWENTY-SIX YEARS EARLIER: OLAFSON INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL, EPHYRA, 12 B.E.

He was a rich kid, he was different, and he was *new*.

Carlos Santiago felt really, *really* sorry for Marcus Fenix. He took refuge at a desk without looking around, as if not meeting anyone’s eye would stop him from being noticed. He didn’t *look* rich—no fancy clothes, just a school uniform like everyone else’s—but everyone knew who his dad was, and where he lived.

He was also tall and skinny, very pale, with spooky light blue eyes that didn’t go with his black hair. He might as well have stuck a target roundel on his back.

The math teacher, Major Fuller, was as old-fashioned as the school building and ran classes as if he was still in the army. He even had one of those short brass-topped sticks like the sergeants who drilled Gears for parades. Every man in the Santiago family had served in the military, so Carlos knew all about that

kind of thing, but the army was everywhere, part of life itself, and especially at school. This, Carlos's dad said, was where the military *ethos* made a man of you. Carlos had to look up the word.

"Introduce yourself, boy," Fuller said.

Marcus stood up at his desk and didn't look around. "Marcus Fenix, sir."

"Age, parents, siblings?"

"I'm ten years old. My parents are Professor Adam Fenix and Doctor Elain Fenix. I'm an only child."

Oh, Fenix was dead *for sure*. Carlos's heart sank a little farther. Marcus didn't even talk like the rest of them. He had a posh accent. He was going to get *creamed*.

Fuller looked as if he was waiting for Marcus to go on, but there was a tense, empty silence, and Fuller gave up. "Class, you will make him feel part of the team," he said stiffly in his major's voice, "and you will treat him with courtesy. You will *not* behave like street ruffians. You will behave like *citizens*. Are we clear?"

The response was a mumbling chorus. "Yes, Major Fuller."

Joshua Curzon raised his hand. "Sir, if he's *rich*, why is he here?"

"You think this is a *poor* school?"

"Well, *we're* all poor..."

Fuller brought his stick down on the lectern with a crack like rifle fire. "Fenix is here because society is formed from people pulling together, not breaking away into separate groups. *Unity*. Because no man can exist on his own. No country can, either. That's why we have the Coalition of Ordered Governments." Fuller repeated this speech so often that Carlos could recite it, and maybe that was the point. It made perfect sense when he stopped to think about it. "If you look after your neighbor, your neighbor will look after you. Previous generations left a rich world for you, so you'll leave a rich world for those to come. Nobody who stands on the sidelines and thinks only of his own needs can ever be a *man*."

Yeah, that made sense too.

But Carlos understood all that, so he was more interested now in finding out how much stuff Marcus had, and how big his room was. He probably had a whole wing of a mansion to himself. The Fenix estate was *huge*. Carlos had run around the perimeter once with Dom, thinking of shinning over the walls and seeing what the gardens were like, but he never dared. Getting Dom into trouble would make Mom go crazy. He was supposed to look out for his little brother and set a good example.

The estate looked like a prison, anyway.

"Open your books," Fuller said. "Curzon, seeing as you're so interested in financial statistics, you can tell us what you learned yesterday about calculating averages..."

Carlos counted down the hours until lunch recess, watching dust motes circling in the shafts of sunlight from windows set high in the wood-paneled walls. The room smelled of permanence and wax polish. This building was hundreds of years old, and it would be here for hundreds more, war or no war. His grandfather could remember when the Pendulum Wars began, but Carlos couldn't. All in all, war didn't seem as bad as people said. Life went on.

Besides, the real war was here, in Olafson Intermediate. At lunch, Carlos kept an eye on Marcus, just in case. Nobody sat next to him at the long refectory table. They just watched him. He never said a word. Eventually Carlos couldn't stand it any longer, picked up his plate, and moved to sit beside him.

"I'm Carlos Santiago," he said. "What's behind the wall around your house? The wall on Allfathers Avenue."

"Orchard," Marcus said, not meeting his eyes.

"Cool." Carlos nodded approvingly. "Where did you go to school before?"

"Private tutor."

That explained a lot. "This place isn't so bad. Hey, I saw your dad on the news once. He's famous. A scientist."

Marcus turned and looked at Carlos. "He always says he's an *engineer* and my mother's the scientist. He used to be a Gear."

"My dad was a Gear. So was my granddad. And my uncles, and Aunt Rosa. I'll be one, too."

"You decided already?"

"It's great. Like a family, really."

Marcus appeared to chew that over for a while. Maybe the COG officers like his dad—he'd have been an officer, not an ordinary Gear—didn't see it that way.

Carlos stuck with Marcus through lunch, reluctant to give the others a chance to torment him. It *would* happen, but it would be over fast, one way or another. Carlos had a feeling Marcus was going to have a harder time of it than anyone else. He wasn't very chatty. Carlos wondered if Marcus just didn't like him, but it seemed more like he didn't know what to do or say.

Joshua Curzon and his brother Roland—a year older—shoved into Carlos's path as they filed into the main building.

"So he thinks he's too good for us..."

That could have meant Carlos, or Marcus, or both. Carlos knew he could handle himself in a fight, so he decided to set Joshua straight from the start. He found himself pitching in to defend Marcus immediately, just like he did for Dom.

"He's okay. Leave him alone."

"You're sucking up to him because he's rich," Joshua sneered. "Snob. You're an ass-kissing *snob*, Santiago."

"And you're a moron. Leave him alone."

Carlos had thrown down the gauntlet. Joshua accepted the challenge. "Take that back."

"Shove it."

"Yeah?"

“Yeah.” Carlos pushed past him, but it wasn’t over yet. He knew that.

The last hour of the afternoon was usually spent playing thrashball. Carlos suspected it was because the teaching staff wanted to take it easy before they clocked off, but it was also handy for settling any arguments that cropped up during the day. Carlos made sure Marcus was on his team to avoid leaving him waiting to be picked. Joshua fixed Carlos with that “you’re dead” stare.

It didn’t take long before Joshua made a lunge for the ball in the penalty area and brought his elbow down hard into Carlos’s back. Carlos waited for the games master’s line of sight to be interrupted and brought his boot down hard on Joshua’s instep, forcing a howl out of him.

Yeah, that hurts, doesn’t it?

“Stop whining, Curzon.” The games master waved play on. Maybe he thought it was all part of toughening them up anyway. “Or I’ll transfer you to the girls’ class.”

Marcus moved in to cover Carlos. He didn’t look the athletic type, but he was tall, and he intercepted a pass easily. It seemed to surprise him that he’d caught it; he paused for a second. Joshua tackled him with a lot more force than needed, and Marcus fell headlong. He jumped to his feet, looking more embarrassed than hurt, but Carlos wasn’t going to let that go.

Carlos caught up to Joshua as they left the field, out of sight of the games master. “I said, leave him alone...”

“Oh, I forgot, you’re his best friend.”

“It’s his first day. Give him a break.”

It should have ended there. But it wouldn’t, of course. Marcus sat down next to Carlos on the changing room bench. They were the last two there.

“Don’t worry about me,” Marcus said. “I’ll be okay.”

“But it’s not fair.”

Marcus shrugged. He didn’t seem to be giving in. It was more like he didn’t care. “I better get home.”

Carlos stopped short of saying he’d see him out safely in case he thought he was treating him like a little kid. It was hard to explain why he felt responsible for Marcus, but he did, and now that he’d taken on that job, dropping it after a few hours felt cowardly and plain *wrong*.

He left first anyway, just to make sure the coast was clear.

It wasn’t. In the shade of the portico outside, Joshua and Roland Curzon waited, hands thrust into pockets, with one of their buddies. Carlos straightened up and stood his ground.

“You think you’re really hard, don’t you, Santiago?” Joshua said. He let his arms hang at his sides. Carlos knew what was coming. “You’re always taking over and telling us what to do.”

“And what are *you* going to do about it?”

“This,” Joshua said, like he’d heard the line in a movie, and swung a punch.

Carlos was ready for it, but it still hurt, and it was *loud*. He tasted blood in his mouth right away; the crack of bone on bone made his ears ring. He lashed out automatically, just following his fists, and as he

was pummeling Joshua anywhere he could reach, he felt someone behind him.

I can't take two of them. Can I? Mom's going to kill me if I come home in a mess again.

But Roland hadn't jumped him, or the other guy, who didn't seem to be joining in anyway. An unfamiliar hand reached out, grabbed Joshua by the collar, and slammed him sideways onto the ground.

It was Marcus.

Roland Curzon pitched in to defend his kid brother, landing a punch on Marcus just above the eye, and Carlos froze for a split second while he decided whether to go for Roland or pin Joshua down. But he'd definitely got Marcus Fenix all wrong.

Marcus came back at Roland with a single punch to the face, aimed like he meant it, like a boxer, and Carlos heard his grunt of effort. Roland staggered back. There was an awful silence for a moment before Roland straightened up, blood running from his nose, eyes glazed with tears, and Joshua got to his feet. Their buddy was still rooted to the spot. That wasn't how kids here fought. It just ... *wasn't*. Carlos had never seen anyone punch like that, except grownups.

Marcus looked completely calm, like nothing had happened. But his hand must have hurt.

"Stay away from me," he said quietly, "and stay away from Carlos. Or I'll do it again."

And it was all over, as fast as it started. The Curzons beat a retreat with their useless buddy, and Carlos was left staring at Marcus, scared by the way he'd just *punched*. He didn't look strong enough to hit anyone like that.

Marcus examined his hand, then felt gingerly above his eye. "Is there a mark?" he asked. "I don't want Dad to start worrying again."

"Nothing yet," Carlos said, wanting to tell him he was really impressed but not sure how he'd react. "Tell him it was thrashball." Why would his dad be worried *again*? Ah, maybe Marcus had been kicked out of school for fighting, and that was why he was taught at home. "Why aren't you at the military academy? Your dad could buy the place."

"He wants me to mix with *people*."

"What, common people, like me and Dom?"

"I didn't mean it like that. I'm just on my own a lot."

"You would be, in that big house. Did he teach you to punch?" It seemed an obvious question. Carlos's dad had taught him how to look after himself, how to form a fist that wouldn't get his fingers broken, how to stay out of trouble unless he had no choice. "I mean, that was *hard*."

"No, he didn't." Marcus sounded forlorn. "Anyway, thanks."

"Hey, you did okay. You backed me up. That's what real friends do."

Marcus had stood up for someone who stood up for him, which Carlos felt was the best thing anyone could do. He wasn't afraid of getting hurt. And he didn't think he was special, or that Carlos was beneath him. Carlos hoped Marcus understood he could rely on him, too. Maybe he'd have to tell him that. Marcus came from a different world, and it wasn't going to be easy to work out what he thought about anything.

Marcus just blinked a few times, as if the word “friend” didn’t make any sense. “Who’s Dom?” he asked at last.

“Dominic, my kid brother. He’s eight. But he’s okay.”

“Must be nice to have a brother.”

Carlos felt instantly sorry for him. “Hey, you can borrow him when you’re fed up.”

“Thanks.”

Maybe Marcus would have forgotten all about it by the morning, or by next week when he’d settled in more.

Marcus didn’t forget, though. He seemed more at ease when he came into class the next day. He had a big bruise over his eye, and he was still quiet, but he acted as if he had a right to be there and didn’t have to apologize for being different.

The Curzons heeded the warning and left both of them alone. Nobody ever needed reminding not to mess with Santiago and Fenix again.

THREE YEARS LATER: CARLOS SANTIAGO’S HOUSE.

“I swear that boy grows every time I look away.” Eva Santiago set the table, pausing a couple of times to look out the window onto the yard. “I can’t believe he’s the same kid.”

Dom was torn between helping his mother get lunch on the table and hanging out with his dad, Carlos, and Marcus while they dismantled an old engine. Yeah, Marcus had changed a lot in the three years since he’d started hanging out with Carlos. He wasn’t skinny anymore, he didn’t talk the same way, and there were times when he even laughed. He was actually bigger than Carlos now, as tall as Major Fuller. He was thirteen, but to Dom he seemed like a grown-up already.

“He likes your cooking,” Dom said. “You’re the best cook in the world.”

His mother ruffled his hair. “What are his folks like?”

Dom shrugged. Visits to the Fenix Estate—he always thought of it in grand capital letters—weren’t like going to a friend’s house, and Marcus’s parents weren’t *folks*. The place was enormous, full of expensive antique stuff, but it felt like nobody lived there. Carlos made Dom promise not to knock anything over every time they visited. That wasn’t often.

“They’re nice,” Dom said. “But I don’t think they know much about Marcus.”

“What makes you say that, sweetheart?”

“They don’t treat him like you treat us.”

Mom put on her I’m-trying-not-to-worry-you expression. “Are they mean to him?”

“No. They just seem like they’re trying to work out who he is, and he’s *different* when he’s at home. His voice changes. You know, all posh.”

She started to smile, but it was one of those sad ones Dom didn't quite understand. "You're very smart about people, Dom. I think Marcus gets lonely, and I'm proud of you and Carlos for being there for him."

Dom lined up the knives and forks, then stood back to admire his handiwork before getting the nod from Mom to go out in the yard. He wasn't just keen to join in the tinkering on the engine; he was curious about new neighbors who'd moved in two doors away, and whose daughter climbed the trees in their yard faster than anyone he knew. He thought her name was Maria, but he hadn't plucked up the courage to talk to her yet. He was working on it.

He kept looking up toward the tree, but there was no sign of her today. Eventually, Mom called everyone in to clean up and eat. She really was a *great* cook. Marcus always had second helpings and even thirds, probably because it was nothing like the food he had at home, and treated it all like a rare delicacy he'd never taste again. Mom seemed delighted that he cleared his plate without fail. Dad was impressed by his capacity for hot sauce.

"You can eat *anything* with hot sauce," Dad said, ladling more rice onto Marcus's plate. "When I was a Gear, we always made sure we had some in our rations, because food sometimes wasn't so good, you know? Good dose of hot sauce—problem solved."

Mom laughed. "Ed, you don't need to *solve* my food, do you?"

"Course not, honey. I just love hot sauce."

"Would you reenlist, Mister Santiago?" Marcus asked. "You sound like you miss the service."

"Yeah, I would. Best times, best friends I ever had. Taught me a trade, too. But I've got a good job, and I'm not a kid anymore, so..."

There was a magic in the army. Dom saw how it lit up his father's face every time. He told great stories about the things his squad got up to, and even when he recalled friends who got killed, and his eyes brimmed, it still sounded like he wouldn't have missed a second of it. It was a world of its own. It all sounded so vivid, like the only place you could be truly alive, even if you didn't know if you'd get killed the next day.

"You've done your service." Mom didn't approve. It was written all over her face. "You don't have to apologize for leaving. The country's got to keep going, and keeping transport running is as important as fighting."

Dad smiled but didn't look as if he believed that. "You ever thought about the military, Marcus?" Dad asked.

Marcus paused. "I have, sir."

Carlos cut in as if he didn't want Marcus to continue. "Well, I'm going to enlist as soon as I'm eighteen. Sixteen, even."

"You're not dropping out of school early," Mom said firmly. "You're staying on until you're eighteen. You might get drafted anyway if the war gets worse."

"I don't *need* to be drafted." Carlos was talking about it all as if would happen tomorrow. But it was five years away; that was forever. Dom couldn't imagine what five years in the future would even look like. "I *want* to do it."

Marcus didn't say anything, but however hard it usually was to work out what he was feeling, it looked pretty clear from the short-lived frown as he busied himself with his fork. Dom didn't feel that he could join in this conversation. It was going on over his head, suddenly very grownup and worrying, but one thing was clear: Carlos would join the army, and Dom would be alone.

So would Marcus.

That was the look on his face. He had to go to college because his father wanted him to be an engineer, a *scientist* kind of engineer, not a mechanic like Eduardo Santiago. He and Carlos would be split up, and Dom could see that the realization upset him. The two of them were inseparable. That was the word his mother used: inseparable.

No. We're like brothers. It's worse than that.

"You don't have to think about any of that for a long time," Dad said. "You're still boys. Enjoy being kids while you can."

Changing the subject lifted the mood a little, but now Dom began to see the war not as something that went on in the background without touching his life, but as a real threat to everything that made him happy. He'd be just sixteen when Carlos signed up, and Mom had made it clear that she wanted them to finish school. The idea ate at him for the rest of the day.

After lunch, they went back into the yard to reassemble the engine. Dom tried to stop thinking about the war and the army, but not even wondering when Maria was going to show up could put it out of his mind.

It took something pretty bad to do that.

Mom came out to the back door, looking wide-eyed as if something had shocked her.

"Marcus," she called. "Marcus, sweetheart, come here, will you? Your father needs to talk to you. It's important."

Marcus froze. His parents never called here, so this was serious. Was he in trouble over something? No, Marcus never put a foot wrong. He laid down his tools and went into the house to take the call, and Carlos went to follow him, but Mom put her hand on his arm to stop him.

"Be there for him later," she said quietly. "He's going to be upset. I'll stay with him until his father collects him."

She beckoned to Dad and they went into the house.

"What is it?" Dom asked.

"I don't know." Carlos walked up to the back door but didn't go beyond the step. He tried to listen, then shook his head. "I can't hear anything. It must be really bad, whatever it is."

Marcus didn't come out again. A little while later, Dom heard a vehicle pull up at the front, and then Mom and Dad came back out into the yard.

"It's his mother," Mom said. "She's missing. His father said she didn't come back from work."

"Missing, like kidnapped?" Carlos said. "Murdered?"

Dad shook his head. "People go missing for all kinds of reasons, son. They usually show up again. It's

probably going to be okay. But let's be really careful what we say to Marcus. It's going to be hard for him until she comes back."

Dom followed Carlos's lead and said nothing. His first thought wasn't that she'd been kidnapped, but that she was like Mrs. Garcia in the next street, who walked out because she didn't like her husband anymore. She left her kids behind, too. Sometimes mothers did that.

Carlos gave up on the engine and went to his room. Dom gave him five minutes and then followed him.

"When are we going to see Marcus again, then?"

"I'll call him later," Carlos said. He looked scared. "He's got to go to class, too."

"What if she's not just run away, and she's dead?"

"Then we'll take care of him," Carlos said. "That's what friends do. That's what *brothers* do."

Mrs. Fenix didn't show up the next day, or the next week. Marcus, being Marcus, turned up for class after a day's absence, and never said a word about it. Carlos waited patiently for him to say something, and made Dom promise not to ask him before he was ready to talk.

The three of them sat on the steps of the quadrangle after lunch, textbooks open on their knees, silent.

"She isn't coming back," Marcus said suddenly.

"How do you know?" Carlos asked.

"Dad won't tell me where she was supposed to be."

"What does that mean?" said Dom.

Marcus stared at his hands. "You've seen movies. If someone goes missing, you retrace their steps. I wanted to know where she was supposed to be, but Dad wouldn't tell me. Why would he do that? Because he must know where she went, and he thinks I'd be more upset if I knew." It was a long explanation by Marcus's standards. "So maybe she just left. Maybe something upset her."

He didn't have to say he was worried the "something" was him. Dom could see it on his face. Marcus's relationship with his parents wasn't as easygoing as the Santiagos', but Dom still thought it was weird to think it was his own fault if his mom really *had* walked out. Dom was about to say that it was probably his father's fault, like with Mrs. Garcia, but Carlos stopped him before he even opened his mouth.

"I don't think she'd really run away, Marcus," Carlos said. "Are the police looking for her?"

"Dad reported her missing, so they must be."

Mrs. Fenix stayed missing, and by Marcus's fourteenth birthday four months later, they still hadn't found her. Marcus didn't talk about her again. He spent much more time with Dom and Carlos, though, as if he didn't want to go home at all. Mom and Dad let him stay as long as he wanted, every day, but Dom heard them talking sometimes in the kitchen late at night, about what a rotten shame it was that the boy was so hurt that he didn't want to be with his own father.

They didn't seem to talk things through, the Fenix family. But that was okay. Marcus had the Santiagos, and they had plenty enough time and talking for one more brother.

CHAPTER 4

Despite her mother's warnings, and the calls of her friends, Romily left the safe company of her friends and walked deep into the perils of the forest. She thought they would admire her independence, and respect her brave willingness to break ranks with the others. But she did not walk alone. The six-legged demon that had waited patiently beneath her house since her birth followed her, unseen, and joined the rest of his kind who rose from the depths to embrace her.

(ANCIENT TYRAN FAIRY TALE, ON THE POPULAR AND IMPROVING THEME OF MONSTERS LYING IN WAIT FOR DISOBEDIENT CHILDREN.)

WRIGHTMAN HOSPITAL ASSEMBLY AREA, JACINTO, 14 A.E.—TWO DAYS TO DEADLINE.

“I didn’t sign up to deliver groceries.” Baird ambled down the long line of waiting trucks, pausing occasionally to kick a tire. “I do *grubs*. Killing grubs. Shit, what’s up with Hoffman? Is he getting senile, or what?”

“They’re our groceries too.” Cole goaded him gently. A couple of King Ravens circled overhead, returning from dropping a team of sappers at the North Gate food facility. “Maybe *you* prefer dogmeat, baby, but I’m ready for some steak.”

“Dogs are more useful alive,” Bernie said, leaning against the running board of the nearest truck. “I survived on cat for a while, though. Not bad. Makes good gloves and boot liners, too.”

Dom wondered how long Baird would hold out against the newly formed Cole ’n’ Bernie tag team. Baird was busy pretending he wasn’t listening to the ribbing. “Why can’t they airlift the stuff?” he said. “This is just asking for it.”

“Because we don’t have enough spare Ravens,” Dom said patiently. *Come on, Marcus, where the hell are you?* “Some of it has to go by road.”

There were various ways of coping with Baird. Marcus blanked him out, Cole matched his griping point for point with noisy cheerfulness, and Dom...

Dom realized that he handled Baird almost the same way he handled his son, Benedicto. Four-year-olds always asked why, why, *why*. Over the years, Dom had grown used to a level of pain that might have passed for getting over losing his kids, but occasionally there was an unexpected spike of grief that was as searingly raw as the day they died.

Bennie would have been eighteen now, Sylvia seventeen. Dom could have been a grandfather way too young. And Bennie could have been a Gear himself by now.

You’ve got to stop this. You know where it always ends.

Cole provided a loud distraction right on cue. “So, you got any good cat recipes, Boomer Lady?”

Bernie just winked. “I’m not joking, mate. Tabby boot liners.”

“You’re shittin’ me.”

“See for yourself”

Cole squatted down to look as Bernie unclipped the straps at the top of her boots and folded down the fabric. Dom, who had seen some pretty stomach-churning and uncivilized things over the years, found himself staring with horrified fascination. It was tabby fur, all right. Silver tabby.

“Shit, poor little Fluffy!” Cole burst into loud guffaws and slapped his hands on his thighs. “Hey, Damon, you want a pair of these too? Maybe we can get you a nice ginger tom.”

Baird just walked up to Bernie and looked down.

“Yeah, real classy,” he said. “I’ll pass. But you old folk need to keep warm. We don’t want you getting hypothermic in the middle of a mission.”

Dom waited for Bernie to punch the crap out of Baird, but there was no crunch of bone. She just stood there, half-smiling at him, unblinking; and he was the one who looked away first. It was only a matter of time before he went too far with her. Baird always had to test everyone’s limits until something broke or everyone got bored.

“Everyone up to speed with the SOPs?” Bernie asked. “Long time since we did this in training.”

“It’s a waste of time,” Baird said. “It’d take thirty thousand tonnes of food to feed the city for a month. We can’t haul anything like that—maybe ten, fifteen per cent. You seriously think that’s going to make much difference in the long run?”

“So you can count.” Marcus’s voice penetrated the rumble of engines. “Joined-up writing can’t be far behind.”

Marcus appeared from behind a gun truck with Federic Rojas—Jan Rojas’s brother. He’d stepped straight into the gap left by his dead brother. Dom wasn’t sure what to say, because *I know how you feel* didn’t quite cut it. Dom had lost a brother, yes, but Federic had now lost two.

Shit, how bad must things be when a family is getting wiped out, and I’ve lost count? Even in the Pendulum Wars, that would have been news, real tragic stuff. Now...it’s routine.

But Baird didn’t let the rebuke—or the need to acknowledge Rojas—stand in the way of his demolition of the idea. “Leave ’em to it, that’s what I say. Fewer mouths to feed. Balances out.”

Marcus let out a long, weary breath. “Do you remember *any* of the values of the Octus Canon?”

“Sure he does,” Cole said, still admiring Bernie’s feline accessories. Dom found himself having an inner debate about why he would happily eat one animal and not another. “They all start with ‘Damon’s ass comes first.’”

“We’re shifting renewables and irreplaceables,” Marcus said. “Seed. Poultry. Hydroponics kit. The myco fermenters. *That’s* worth saving.”

Myco was the staple protein now that livestock farming was almost nonexistent, and Dom actually liked it. It *had* to be better than cat. It also had the massive advantage that it could be grown in factory conditions, because it was a fungus. These days, every secured section of Ephyra was expected to be an urban farm, with citizens ordered to grow whatever they could on windowsills or in backyards; flower beds and parks had been turned into vegetable plots. Dom had heard that one guy kept pigs in his apartment and took them for walks at night. The more the Locust encroached on habitable areas, the harder it got to feed the population.

There were only so many people you could support in a limited space. Dom didn't fancy dealing with food riots again.

"What are we waiting for, anyway?" he asked.

Marcus checked his armor system, activating lights and power packs. "That," he said, nodding vaguely in the direction of the perimeter.

A black speck grew larger against the backdrop of cloud, then resolved into a familiar shape. The last of the returning King Ravens dropped down into the compound, kicking up clouds of dust.

Hoffman jumped out of the crew bay and strode over to the convoy, followed by a Gear with a distinctive haircut. Bernie chuckled.

"Shit, I hope Hoffman's not planning to ride with us," Marcus said.

Dom shrugged. "Hey, he's been a lot less hostile in the last few days."

"He's just getting his second wind."

The Gear with Hoffman was Tai Kaliso, another South Islander. Dom remembered him from Aspho Fields; it was hard to miss that shaved crest of dark hair and swirling tattoos covering half of his face. His armor and Lancer were lavishly decorated, completely against regs, with tribal symbols scratched into the coating. It struck Dom that there were still a lot of Gears left who'd taken part in that operation—including himself—and somehow it seemed a talisman, that Aspho generally forged survivors.

Generally.

Hoffman took out his radio and flicked the transmit button. "Let's see if they've understood their instructions. Drivers? *Drivers!* Listen up." He paused, stalking down the line of vehicles to peer into the first few cabs. "Rule one—stay in radio contact at all times. You won't be able to see what the hell's going on fore or aft, gentlemen, and if the shit hits the fan, then this is where your redirection will come from. Let me remind you that standard operating procedures are *not* a *suggestion*—you *will* maintain one-hundred-meter intervals, you *will* clear a kill zone as fast as you can, you *will not stop* in a kill zone to rescue anyone, and if you find yourself *trapped* in a kill zone, you *will* use maximum firepower. Now—listen for your call sign, and start your engines."

The convoy drivers were a mix of civvies and Gears who could only handle light duties because of age or injury. Every truck, junker, and pickup had a gun mounted; with the Armadillo APCs, that meant the convoy had a fair amount of firepower. There was even an old ambulance and a hearse, both cannoned up. But this wasn't an open road. It would bring its own problems, Dom knew, but snaking through a city block by block—obstructed visibility, choke points, tight turns that an articulated truck couldn't tackle—was as risky as it got.

Hoffman clipped the radio back on his webbing and headed for the command Armadillo halfway down the convoy. Then he stopped and turned.

"Kaliso, you're with me. Fenix—lead vehicle with Santiago and Rojas. Mataki—rear, with Cole and Baird. Get moving."

So Hoffman was coming after all, and taking the command vehicle. Well, nobody could accuse him of sloping shoulders on dangerous missions. Maybe he was bored; maybe he had something to prove.

And maybe the COG was just so short of men that it had to be done.

“How far have the grubs advanced?” Rojas asked. “I mean, how long have we got?”

Marcus popped the hatch on the lead Armadillo and tapped Jack’s housing. The bot, a self-propelling machine like an oversized and heavily armored thrashball, lifted into the air on its jets and extended arms from recessed compartments as if it was waking up and having a good stretch. “Twenty or thirty hours, tops. Jack can do some recon when we get closer.”

“It won’t take us more than a couple of hours to reach North Gate.”

“It’s the loading that’s going to take the time.”

“Is three Armadillos enough for fifty vehicles?”

“Not really.”

“Didn’t think so.” Rojas scrambled inside and settled happily into the gun position. Dom wondered what he would have done for a job in peacetime; even though he’d lost so much in the war, he seemed to have an oddly innocent enthusiasm for fighting, and he didn’t appear to have any vengeance or malice in him. Dom wanted to ask him how he dealt with it all, but he was afraid of shattering what might have been a fragile veneer. Every man had the right to cope in his own way. “Dom, you ever done this before?”

Dom slid his back belt pouches around to the front to settle into the driver’s seat, and started the engine. “No.”

“It’s all the same,” Marcus said, climbing in beside him. “Get in, get out, don’t get in the other guy’s way, and shoot it if it moves.”

Marcus had a great way of simplifying apparently complex things. Maybe that science education hadn’t been wasted after all.

COMMAND VEHICLE, CENTER CONVOY GROUP.

“What’s got into *them*?” Hoffman grunted.

There were a lot of Stranded out on the streets, more than he’d seen in years.

Kaliso tightened his grip on the wheel and slowed slightly to glance to the offside of the APC. The road was wide enough here to run alongside the main convoy for a while. “Maybe they’ve discovered acceptance, sir.”

“Acceptance, my ass,” Hoffman said. “Don’t go mystic on me. They’re loitering.”

The convoy was now clear of the defended city and its invisible but very real boundary, and crossing the no-man’s land peppered with Stranded settlements that took their chances with Locust incursions. Settlements—how the hell *could* these people be settled? Hoffman had once been troubled by the idea of humans—countrymen, migrants, whatever—being left unprotected, but only once. They hadn’t been abandoned. They’d abandoned society—abandoned their own species.

For a moment, Hoffman’s eye saw the road surface ahead of him as pale, speckled rubble that had been hammered down again by time and movement. Then he realized that it was actually white marble fragments ground into the darker debris, the remains of a carved frieze that had run the length of the

building to his right.

It had been one of the finest archaeological museums in the world. He'd had his first serious dates here, hoping to persuade Nina Kladry that an enlisted grunt could be as high-minded as any officer cadet. *Can't be what you're not, shouldn't even try. Take pride in what you are.* An identifiable chunk of carved panel lying by the curb—a garlanded hand reaching out to him, translucent and white as death—made his scalp tighten. It was the essence of destruction, the last frantic clutch at life before sliding into the abyss.

An elderly man—a rare sight here, because Stranded didn't live long—raised a ragged, filthy arm to give the Armadillo a gesture. It wasn't exactly one of support for the troops.

"I think we can rule out gratitude." The man was probably Hoffman's own age, but he looked twice that. "Screw you too, citizen."

"You'd think there was some festival going on."

"Maybe they know something we don't."

Stranded were more an annoyance than a threat to the COG at the moment, but Hoffman still factored them into his plans. Reconstruction was going to be beyond hard; shortages would go on not for months or years but *decades*. He knew even now that the army's first task when the Locust were dealt with would be controlling these huge anarchic gangs. It wasn't going to be pretty. He hadn't been scaremongering when he raised the prospect of civil war with Prescott.

"Kaliso, slow right down, will you? I want to talk to them."

Kaliso fumbled for his sidearm one-handed and tucked it under the webbing across his chest. "Be careful, sir."

Hoffman made sure he had his own pistol to hand. It only took one second to find out that Stranded might risk shooting Gears after all. "I have to know."

The Armadillo slowed to a crawl alongside three women—a mother and two daughters by the look of it—and Hoffman opened the nose hatch. Even in the open air, the smell of body odor hit him.

"Ladies," he called, managing to maintain a neutral tone, "what's everybody doing out on the streets?"

The woman stared at him, as far from his hazy memories of Nina Kladry as a female could possibly be.

"Not for throwing roses in your path, you fascist asshole. The Locust are on the run."

"You reckon," Hoffman said. *Yeah, we're the fascist assholes who die fighting them so you don't have to.* "Based on what?"

"You know damn well. You're the ones who did it."

Stranded had their own ways of keeping an eye on Locust activity. Hoffman added this to his list of rumors without taking any hope from it.

"Have a nice, independent, free-thinking day," he said, closing the hatches. "Step on it, Private."

Kaliso was a literal man when it suited him. He slammed the APC through its gears and sent it screaming up the nearside of the convoy, cutting into the gap between the trucks.

“Hoffman to Fenix, Matak—the Stranded think the Locust have packed their bags.” Hoffman kept his forefinger on the transmit key and pondered on his next comment. “Let’s not be that optimistic. Hoffman out.”

Kaliso kept his eyes fixed on the tail of the truck in front. The jagged crest of hair gave him a look of permanent aggression, which wasn’t far from the truth.

“You think they’re right?” he asked at last.

“I’ll believe it when I see the last grub laid dead at my feet.”

“I’ll do my best to make that happen, sir.”

Yes, he would.

The total sum of humanity now was just a medium-sized city by Sera’s former standards, and Hoffman’s army was more like a few brigades. He thought back to the Pendulum Wars—huge, continent-spanning, generously resourced by comparison—and almost felt nostalgic.

Wasting eighty years fighting over imulsion supplies, over damn fuel, when all this was just around the corner.

Hoffman had been born during war and he expected to die the same way. There was nobody alive today who could remember a Sera at peace.

He took comfort from the thought that he wouldn’t have had any idea what to do with peace anyway.

UNSECURED ZONE, FIVE KILOMETERS FROM NORTH GATE; REAR APC.

Bernie braced herself against the coaming of the APC’s top hatch, still trying to balance the muzzle of her newly acquired Lancer on something solid. The teeth of the chainsaw made it impossible. After a while, she gave up and took the weight with both hands. The noise of grinding tires and hammering engines concentrated in the canyon-like street was deafening.

The tail of the last truck loomed; she pressed her mike closer to her mouth. “You’re getting too close to the truck in front...”

“Shit,” said the voice in her ear. “Now you’re a backseat driver too.”

She cut off the mike and dipped down into the cabin so the conversation wouldn’t be heard by everyone on the channel. “You need to give him enough room to back up if we hit trouble, dickhead. He can’t do a U-turn in an artic. He’d just have to reverse over us.”

Baird let the APC fall back a little, and she didn’t need to see his face to guess how he felt about that. Marcus tolerated way too much shit from that kid. It had taken her an hour to form that opinion.

“Happy now?” Baird said.

“There’s a good boy...”

“Yes, Granny.”

If Cole had said it, she would have found it funny. But this was Baird, so she didn't. "Son, if I bounced you on my knee, you wouldn't be able to sit down for a week, so *shut* it."

Cole roared with laughter. "You're gonna get spanked, Damon. Play nice, and open the nose hatch..."

He lobbed a few ration bars over the side toward a group of skinny, threadbare kids watching from a street corner like a pack of little animals. They pounced on the food. Bernie felt she was watching humanity *de-* evolve.

Maybe that's the worst thing the grubs have done to us. They've turned us back into savages.

Baird sighed irritably. "Cole, what the hell are you *doing*? You need your calories, man. Don't encourage those parasites."

"Aw, c'mon, they're just kids."

"And you know what they grow into."

"You never been hungry, Damon? You grew up rich. You got *no* idea." Cole rustled through his pockets and threw something else out the hatch as if he was making a point. Baird didn't shut it, oddly enough, as if he bowed to Cole's opinion. "And we get shitloads more to eat than they do—they *hate* us for it. Look at us. I mean, just look at how much meat we got on our bones compared to them."

"That's 'cos we have to friggin' *fight*. They could put on armor and get the same."

"Yeah, baby, I'll tell the next eight-year-old that..."

Cole's tone was still genial, still patient, but it must have hit a nerve because Baird shut up. Bernie filed that away for future use.

But it was time for her to lance the boil. "Are you pissed off because I kept my stripes, Baird?"

"Well, a geriatric who's been sitting on her ass since before E-Day wouldn't be my first choice."

It just slipped out. "So, you obviously didn't get on with your mother...what about your dad? Did you ever find out who he was? Did *she*?"

Great, you've just shown him he's getting to you.

Baird didn't bite this time. She knew why. She'd crossed the line that this war had drawn, which was that jibes about family, however well meant—or not, in this case—were well out of order. *Everyone* had lost family. A new social taboo had taken hold very quickly.

And it was easy to assume that Baird didn't have feelings.

Bernie wasn't planning to apologize—not yet, anyway. And she wasn't his squad sergeant, just along for the ride while she got up to speed again, so there was probably no point wasting time on reaching an understanding with the mouthy little tosser. He was Marcus's problem.

The radio crackled. "Control to Delta, we have updates on Locust activity. Stand by for transmission of new coordinates." It was a woman's voice; Bernie struggled to place it. "Still two kilometers southwest of your planned position."

Hoffman's voice cut into the circuit. "How long does that give us to load, Lieutenant?"

“Whatever you can move in twenty-six hours, sir. The team at the location is prioritizing.”

“Understood.”

There was a sound of rustling paper. Cole was refolding his map. Bernie tried to recall the voice on the radio, but had to admit defeat.

“Cole, who was that?” she asked.

“Lieutenant Anya Stroud.”

“Oh...yeah.” *Now* she remembered. Little blond scrap of a thing, half the size of her mother in every way. “Major Stroud’s kid.”

“Is she sweet on Dom?” Baird asked. “Seeing as you knew everyone when they were still in diapers. She always seems extra-friendly with him.”

Baird didn’t know about Marcus, then. That was just as well. “Everyone’s friendly with Dom. The Santiago boys were always nice lads.”

“You going to give us a history lesson, then? How our jailbird sergeant got to be a hero?”

Even if she’d wanted to, Bernie had no idea where to start. And history was never as clear cut as it looked, even if you’d been there in person and thought you remembered exactly how things were.

“No,” she said. “I’m not.”

CHAPTER 5

I rarely see Marcus most days. I just don’t know who he is, and it’s all my fault. I lied to him about what happened to Elain, and the longer I lie, the harder it is to come clean. Kids know when you’re lying. Then their trust withers and dies.

(ADAM FENIX, CONFIDING IN A FRIEND ABOUT HIS FEARS FOR HIS SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD SON.)

THE SANTIAGO HOUSE, JACINTO; EIGHTEEN YEARS AGO, FOUR YEARS BEFORE E-DAY.

Dom sat on the edge of the chair, head lowered, elbows resting on his knees, and waited for the explosion.

It never came. If might have been easier if it had.

“You’re sixteen,” his father said at last. “You’re just *sixteen*.”

“Dad, I can’t walk away from this.” Dom could hear movement outside the living room door; Mom must have been listening. “I have to do the right thing.”

Eduardo Santiago squatted down in front of his son to look him in the eye. “You really want to be married with a kid when you’re still a kid yourself?”

“I’m not leaving Maria to go through this on her own,” Dom said. For some reason, his next thought was of Marcus. “And I’m not going to have a kid of mine adopted by strangers.”

Dom wasn’t sure where that speech had sprung from. He had that out-of-body moment where he could hear himself the way his father might, and he sounded like a little boy repeating something he’d once heard a grown man say, without any understanding of the meaning.

But I mean it. I want to marry Maria. I always have. It’s just...more urgent now.

“Has she told her folks she’s pregnant?”

“No.” Dom liked Maria’s parents, but he’d never had to test their tolerance like this before. “I plan to be with her when she does. *I should tell them.*”

Eduardo stared into Dom’s face, silent for a moment, and then smiled slowly. “Yeah, that’s what I’d expect a man to do.”

“I’m scared, Dad.”

“I know.”

“Are you angry with me?”

“Not *angry*. I would have liked things to be different, but they aren’t, so...we’ll help you as best we can.”

“I’m sorry. I let you down.”

Dom wasn’t sure why he thought his father would be angry, because he never lost his temper; but this was something so serious that the old rules didn’t apply. He seemed more sad and sentimental at that moment, the way he looked when he was remembering dead buddies from the army. He put his hands on Dom’s shoulders.

“You *never* let me down, son,” he said quietly. “I’ve never been more proud of you than I am now. It’s easy to be brave when things are going okay, but the test of a man is how he handles himself when he’s in a tight spot.”

Dom didn’t feel much like a man right then, and the confirmation that he really was in a tight spot—his father never pulled his punches—made his gut tighten like it did when Maria first told him she’d missed a period. He felt like a kid out of his depth, wishing he could turn back time, wishing he’d done things differently. He hadn’t. He’d have to live with that.

It’s just time. It’s just early. We would have married and had a family anyway. After three or four years, it’ll be like it was meant to be.

“I’ll tell Mom,” he said at last. “Then I’ll go see Maria’s folks.”

“Want me to come with you?”

“Thanks, but—”

“You can do the talking. I’ll just stand behind you.”

Eduardo Santiago always knew how to do things right for his kids. Dom longed to have that same deft touch with his own, always there when he was needed, smart enough to know when—and how far—to

stand back. A baby on the way was a problem, but Dom's dread was rapidly giving way to a heady contentment with understanding just how much he could count on his family being there for him, even if he was determined not to burden them.

"Her dad's going to go nuts," Dom said.

Knocking on the Flores' door was close to the hardest thing Dom had ever had to do, and it turned out to be Maria's mother who went the craziest.

"I'll give you full marks for guts, Dom," said Maria's father, patting his sobbing wife mechanically on the shoulder. "You'd better marry her, then."

They needed parental consent. Neither Dom nor Maria were old enough to buy a beer, but then there were soldiers fighting on the front line who weren't old enough to do that either.

This was, Dom swore to himself, the last dumb thing he'd do in his life. He'd continue his studies, get a part-time job, and make something of himself for his wife and kid. It wasn't going to be easy. But maybe that was the point; if you got something wrong, you had to sweat a bit more to put it right, or you didn't learn a damn thing.

And Carlos would be best man at the wedding, wearing his COG uniform. Carlos just seemed to get things right every time; Dom was more determined than ever to learn from his example.

THE FENIX ESTATE, JACINTO; FOUR YEARS BEFORE E-DAY.

There was no way of sneaking up to the imposing front entrance of Marcus's home, even without the security cameras. The gravel driveway crunched under Carlos's brand new army boots.

"Is it true you've got to pee on them to soften them up?" Marcus asked.

Carlos looked down. "That's *leather* boots. No, too many metal parts in these. You just break 'em in before they break *you* in."

"Looks like they're winning..."

Carlos climbed the steps with some difficulty. He was still getting used to the thick soles and restricted movement of the knee-high boots. "You'll see. With full armor, they look the business. And they *work*."

Debating the fashion appeal of army boots was just a distraction from the task that lay ahead. It wasn't Carlos who had to perform it, but his gut was churning anyway. Marcus's old man was going to hit the roof.

Carlos found the Fenix mansion more unsettling every time he visited. It wasn't so much a house as a statement. It said that it had always been here, it always would be, and that insects like him were so temporary that it wouldn't even bother to notice him. Its massive columns and intricately carved tympanum told him to wipe his boots before he crossed the threshold, preferably through the tradesmen's entrance around the back.

This was a mausoleum, not a home. The statues in the ornate formal gardens that stretched as far as a city park now seemed more like gravestones. Jacinto's noises—traffic, distant voices, the steady hum of a city—stayed respectfully outside the high, vine-covered perimeter walls.

It felt like all the life had been sucked out of the place. There probably hadn't been much to start with. Carlos just wanted to stay long enough to back up Marcus and then get out.

"You still want to go through with this?" he said.

Marcus stared at the big double doors as if willing them to open. The dark green paint was glass-smooth and layers, years, *generations* deep. It was the portal to an alien world that Carlos glimpsed and never really understood.

"Yeah." Marcus nodded. "More than ever."

It was easy to forget that Marcus was the last and only son of a wealthy dynasty. Carlos didn't like to think of him that way; he was just Marcus, no airs or graces.

Professor Fenix wanted Carlos to call him Adam, like he was everyone's buddy or something, but he would always be a man with a stack of titles and ranks. Carlos could never bring himself to do it.

"Have I pushed you into this?" Carlos asked. "Are you just doing it because I did?"

Marcus shook his head. "I knew this was the right thing to do *years* ago."

When Marcus closed the doors behind them, Jacinto's sounds and smells vanished, and the two of them were instantly in another world. There was no sign of Professor Fenix. How could you have a normal family life in a huge place like this, where you could easily avoid each other? You didn't need to sort out arguments here. You could just run away and hide from them.

"Dad?" Marcus walked around the marbled hall, calling down the corridors that radiated from it. "Dad? Where are you?"

Carlos could hear footsteps approaching. He counted them; twenty-three. It was a long corridor in a silent house. Adam Fenix emerged from a doorway in an open-necked shirt, a small notebook in one hand.

"I wasn't expecting you back yet." He nodded at Carlos. "Good to see you, Carlos. When are you off to basic?"

"Next week, sir."

Marcus interrupted. He didn't slip back into his posh accent this time, as if he'd finally given up fitting into his father's world. "Dad, we have to talk. I've made a decision."

His father almost managed to keep his reaction nailed down, but, like Marcus, rapid blinking gave him away. He probably knew what was coming next. Carlos fought an urge to just leave them to it, but he had to stand by Marcus, even if he had no idea what backing him up meant in a polite, upper-class family argument that was all raised eyebrows and no yelling.

"Is this what we've talked about before, Marcus?"

"Dad, I'm enlisting."

Professor Fenix took his notebook and flexed it back and forth a few times in both hands, staring at it as if waiting for it to break apart. "Well, you can still take an engineering course at the Academy," he said. No, he hadn't understood what Marcus meant at all. "A military-sponsored education is as good as a civilian one. You could go on to LaCroix for your postgraduate—"

“No, Dad. I’m not going to be an officer. No commission. And I’m not going to university.” Marcus took a breath. “I said *enlist*. I’m going to be an ordinary Gear.”

“Oh, not *that* again, Marcus...”

Carlos said nothing. He almost felt guilty standing there in his uniform, as if he had a notice around his neck proclaiming I’M A BAD INFLUENCE. Professor Fenix didn’t even glance at him.

“It’s done, Dad. I’ve got my letter to report to the recruiting office.”

“It’s not *done*. We’ve got to discuss this. You’re throwing away a brilliant career.”

“We’ve discussed it already.” Marcus drew himself up to his full height. It always looked threatening, even if he didn’t mean to be, simply because he was so big now. “It’s okay for you to develop weapons, but not okay for me to fight? Carlos and others can put their lives on the line, but the job’s not good enough for your son?”

“I didn’t say that, Marcus.”

“Dad, I’ve *got to do this*. I can’t sit out the war.”

“There’s no *got to* about it. Nobody will think any less of you for not fighting.”

“*I’ll* think less of me. And it’s the only thing that’s going to make me feel alive.”

There was an awful, awkward silence. Eduardo Santiago would have hugged his sons and said whatever they did was okay by him. Professor Fenix didn’t seem to know how. His eyes locked on Marcus’s for a few moments as if he was expecting him to back down, but then he turned to Carlos.

“Can’t *you* talk any sense into him? You’re the only person he listens to these days.”

Oh boy. “Sir,” Carlos said, “all I can tell you is that I’ll make sure Marcus comes back in one piece.”

Adam Fenix looked as if he was going to make one more attempt to talk Marcus out of it, jaw muscles twitching, but then his shoulders sagged and he began fidgeting with the notebook again. Carlos felt sweat itching on his back but didn’t dare move a muscle. He was...*embarrassed*. It was awful to have to watch this.

“Okay, I can’t stop you,” Professor Fenix said. “And if I try, I’ll lose you completely, won’t I?”

Marcus avoided the question and rolled right past it. “I’m going to give it a hundred percent, Dad. Don’t worry about me. Look, I’ll be back for dinner tonight, and—“

“Damn, I have to give a talk at the university.”

They both looked defeated. “Some other time, then,” Marcus said, as if they were just business associates unable to make a meeting. “Got to go, Dad.”

Carlos would have preferred a good, honest brawl, with everything out in the open, dealt with and sorted. But people like the Fenix family didn’t seem to work the same way. Carlos followed Marcus back down the gravel path and they walked aimlessly in silence until they reached the center of East Barricade and found a pavement café.

“Dom’s getting married,” Carlos said at last. “I didn’t want to tell you until you got the thing with your dad over and done with. Maria’s expecting a baby.”

Marcus lost his glacial calm for a moment, just a flash of shock that raised his eyebrows, but that was a big deal for him.

“Wow,” he said. “How did your parents take it?”

“Pretty well.”

“How’s he going to afford it? Is he dropping out of school?”

“Mom made him promise to finish his exams. You know Dom. He’ll make it work.”

“He needs money. Look, that’s one thing I’ve got plenty of, and I could—“

“He’ll be fine. Thanks.” Carlos realized that sounded abrupt, but Dom would never accept money from anyone. He tried to soften the brush-off. “Shit, that was ungrateful. Sorry, Marcus. It’s just that Dom won’t feel he’s a man if he can’t support his family without help. Hey, maybe if we time it right, we can both attend the wedding in uniform. Classy.”

“If that’s an invitation, yes. Thanks.”

“You don’t need any invitation. You’re an honorary Santiago. You’re family.”

Carlos leaned back in his seat and watched the ebb and flow of civilians enjoying the day. The war was a long way from Ephyra, at least geographically; emotionally, though, the conflict was right here, in every home. After more than seventy years of fighting, almost every family had someone who had fought in the war, who was currently serving, or who worked in the defense industry. The reality of war was understood. Nobody could ignore it. Nobody *wanted* to.

If we hadn’t discovered imulsion, would we be fighting over other fuels instead? Water? Minerals? Thrashball?

It didn’t seem to matter now. Collecting enemies had its own inertia, and the COG had plenty. Carlos didn’t worry much about the future because it was simply hard to imagine, but now the future was actually in his own hands along with an assault rifle. It made him feel different. He was still trying to define how.

Marcus looked lost in studying the surface of his coffee. He never said much about his father, but Carlos suspected he’d probably longed for congratulations and support for his decision, knowing all the time that he wouldn’t get it. Maybe his whole life had been like that. It explained a lot. He had to jump through hoops to get a pat on the head.

“Tell me straight, Marcus.” Carlos nudged his elbow. The spoon resting on his saucer clattered onto the metal tabletop. “Are you doing this just because I enlisted, or to piss off your old man?”

“You need to ask me that?”

“Well, yeah. It’s not like you tell me every cough and spit. I have to fill in the gaps.”

Marcus’s pauses often told Carlos a lot more than what he actually said. He stared into his cup again.

“Because it’s the only place I’m going to feel at home, with people who understand me,” he said at last.

“Shit, if anyone understands you, maybe they can explain you to *me*.” Carlos managed a laugh. Yeah, Marcus wanted the general camaraderie of army life, but he wanted to be with his buddy, too. Carlos understood that. It was weird to see a guy whose family had everything still looking for something they

couldn't buy for him and didn't know how to give. "It's going to be awesome, I know it."

Getting killed, wounded, crippled—Carlos couldn't dwell on that. It wasn't enough of a reason to stay at home. Besides, anyone who wasn't ready to fight for their country didn't deserve a damn thing from it. The Santiagos didn't freeload.

The rest of that week became an avalanche of irreversible, life-changing decisions. At the recruiting office, Carlos waited for Marcus to come out of the medical examination. He could hear staff talking quietly behind a row of filing cabinets.

"That's definitely Major Fenix's son," a male voice was saying. Here at least, old man Fenix was still seen as an officer, not a scientist. "He could have walked straight into the Academy. A staff college job, even."

"Maybe he wants to be a *real* Gear," said another voice. "Not every guy wants the easiest path through life."

Yeah, they'd got Marcus about right. Maybe he wasn't so inscrutable after all. He seemed incredibly proud to wear the uniform, and Carlos had to admit the pair of them looked pretty damn good at Dom's wedding.

Dom made one glass of wine last for the whole wedding feast, as if he was afraid of what a few more drinks might do to him. It was weird to see him still as nervous as a kid, and yet also a married man with his own youngster on the way. Carlos knew it was the last time he'd see him in that state of limbo between boy and man.

He's still my kid brother. He knows I'll always be here for him.

"I've got to talk it through with Maria," Dom said, nursing the glass in one hand, "but I'm going to get a full-time job. A real job."

"Mom's going to kill you. Still, nothing wrong with being a mechanic—"

"No, I'm going to enlist."

"Shit, Dom..."

"It's the pay," Dom said. "It's good money. I've got a family to feed now."

"Sure it is. I believe you." Carlos gave him a ferocious hug and rumbled his fancy suit. He'd known Dom would join up sooner or later, but this soon—well, at least he could look out for him now. "You're all about the money, right?"

At the beginning of Frost, Maria gave birth to a son, Benedicto. By Thaw, Dom had dropped out of school and enlisted. There was the same inevitability about it as the seasons, Carlos decided. Some bonds could never be broken.

The Santiago brothers—by blood or honorary membership—were going to be together for the rest of their lives.

CHAPTER 6

A military life attracts young people for many reasons—duty, comradeship, purpose, the opportunity to test life to the limits, to learn a trade, escape from home, adventure—even patriotism. But for the youngster lacking a stable, caring home, it provides family, with all the security and meaning that goes with it. They crave the structure, approval, attention, and clear rules that their parents should have given them; and we can supply it.

(COLONEL GAEL BARRINGTON, HEAD OF RECRUITING.)

GROUNDS OF POMEROY BARRACKS, SOUTH EPHYRA, REGIMENTAL HEADQUARTERS OF THE 26TH ROYAL TYRAN INFANTRY, SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO, THREE YEARS BEFORE E-DAY.

“Stand easy,” said the sergeant, stacking mesh cages on the ground. The name tab on her fatigues said MATAKI. “I’m going to teach you how to live off the land. Because you lads are going to have to survive in some pretty hostile places without the catering corps.”

Sergeant Mataki was a tall woman in her thirties, built like a sprinter, hair scraped back under her cap, with a hint of an accent that Dom couldn’t place. She opened the cage to haul out a live chicken and tucked it under her left arm. It clucked indignantly.

“If any of you are vegetarians,” Mataki said, “it’s tough shit. We’ll do edible roots and fungi tomorrow.”

Dom had busted a gut to get into commando training as soon as he turned seventeen, the youngest they’d take him. He’d relished the punishing course; he’d found hard-fighting aggression he’d never known he had. Maria was proud of him. Carlos and Marcus didn’t look at him as the kid brother who needed taking care of any longer. He was, as one of the South Islanders put it, *nails*, as in *hard as*.

And now he was brought to a nervous standstill by a small black chicken.

The dozen or so men with him were completely silent as Mataki stroked the chicken’s head. It seemed quite relaxed in her grip, which Dom found disturbing. She wasn’t one of the usual instructors; the badges on her arm indicated she was a sniper, but everyone said her bushcraft skills were the envy of the commando training unit. Someone said she could make a six-course banquet out of two dead rats and a pile of grass cuttings.

“I’ll show you how to trap birds and small animals later,” she said. “That’s the easy bit. For most of you city boys, *this* is the hard part. Because if you can’t do this, your survival chances are shot to hell right away.”

Dom *was* a city boy. Poultry came in sealed white plastic trays from the grocery store, already unrecognizable as the free spirit of nature it had once been. Poultry didn’t look at him accusingly with pin prick pupils set in vivid orange eyes.

“You’re all *very* quiet,” Mataki said. “Come on. You’re going to be commandos. You can shove a fighting knife in a guy’s throat. What’s the problem?”

Like she didn’t know. She looked like she’d been here a hundred times.

Georg Timiou was standing just in front of Dom, and he could see the guy was edgy by the way his hands were clasped tight behind his back. “The recruitment posters never said anything about strangling chicken, Sarge.”

Mataki wasn't remotely like Major Hoffman. She had a sense of humor under that death's head badge somewhere. Dom saw a brief twitch of her lip as she looked down at her boots for a moment.

"We don't *strangle*, Private," she said at last. "We snap the neck quickly and humanely. You've already been trained to do that to a human. Chickens don't usually pull a knife on you."

City boys. Dom saw his baby son's toy animals in his mind's eye and felt deeply uncomfortable. But she was right; they'd all come from the infantry ranks, and they'd all been under fire—and returned fire. Poultry shouldn't have fazed them.

Mataki rearranged the bird head-down. "Right, take both legs in your left hand like *this*, and hold the head between your right index and middle fingers. Other way around if you're left-handed, of course. Then you push down and turn your wrist like so—"

It was the faint *crack* and the flapping that got to Dom.

"Ohhh *shit...*" said Timiou.

"Just involuntary reflexes," Mataki said.

She made it all look easy. She plucked the carcass, showering glossy black feathers everywhere, and then drew a hunting knife to prepare it, impressing on the assembled trainee commandos that rupturing the bowel was a *really* bad idea, and that disposing of the feathers helped conceal their presence.

"Make sure you find the liver," she said, displaying the alleged delicacy skewered on the tip of her blade. "Now, your turn. All of you."

They got a chicken each. Dom was mortified.

I can do this. How hard can it be?

"Let's get this right before I hand you back to Hoffman," she said kindly. "I don't want him taking the piss out of any of you. I've never had a trainee fail yet."

It was pretty motivating. Hoffman wouldn't tolerate any squeamishness, and he certainly wouldn't have had the patience to do what Mataki did then; she walked up to Timiou, stood embarrassingly close behind him, and clamped her hands hard over his, right on right, left on left.

"And...push," she said.

Crack.

She stepped back. Timiou stared at the bird, dead but still flapping wildly in his hand.

"That's all the force you need to use," she said. "Or else you'll pull its bloody head off."

It got a lot easier after that. Dom still kept checking his dead chicken to make sure he couldn't feel a heartbeat before he started dismantling it. Mataki bent over him.

"It's not first aid, Santiago," she said. "The bloody thing isn't going to respond to CPR. Now pluck it, gut it, and cook it. Because that's the only lunch you're getting today."

Yeah, it was dead.

Dom fried the carefully dissected, bowel-free portions over a campfire in the wooded grounds and made

himself eat it, but he didn't like liver. Mataki strolled past, speared it on her knife, and ate it as she walked away. Timiou watched her go as if he didn't quite believe she existed.

"Why was that so hard?" Dom said. "Killing it, I mean."

Timiou gnawed on a thigh. "Because the chicken isn't the enemy and it isn't trying to kill us. It's like having to shoot your pet dog. Always harder to kill something innocent, even for the best of reasons."

It was just a chicken, and Dom reasoned that if you didn't have the balls to kill an animal yourself, you had no right to eat it. But it raised questions he had never considered before, like where the line lay between killing that bothered him and killing that didn't. What was *he* really capable of doing? Commando training had pushed him way beyond what he'd thought were his limits, leaving him with a certainty that he could take absolutely anything, survive anything, tackle any odds. It also made him wonder about the depths he might have to plumb, and whether he'd be able to live with himself if he did.

I'll know the line between right and wrong when I see it. I know I will.

But Dom concentrated on the sense of achievement. With Maria pregnant again, Dom didn't think life could get much better or more perfectly tailored to everything he'd ever wanted, even if he hadn't realized it until now.

He loved being a Gear. He loved it more than he'd ever imagined possible. The very real risk of ending up dead or disabled was simply there in the background, a statistical fact that rarely bothered him.

But he wasn't the only one who'd found his vocation in uniform. Marcus—now Corporal Fenix—had changed. He would never be the life and soul of the party, but he was as happy and at ease with himself as Dom had ever seen him. He was *born* to be a Gear. In fact, he seemed happier with army life than Carlos.

Carlos and Marcus were deployed again, back in Sarfuth, where winter was setting in. Dom read their usual joint letter—Marcus would write one half, Carlos the other—and Carlos sounded even more frustrated than he had a couple of weeks ago:

This war would have been over a long time ago if the pen pushers at Command listened to the guys on the ground. Some days I think they want me to put in a written request to take a leak.

Marcus had added a comment below in very precise, small handwriting:

He ALWAYS wants to take a leak. It's cold enough here to freeze the balls off Embry's statue.

Marcus was developing a sense of humor. Carlos would have been happier as a commando, Dom decided. The rules were looser. A man could kick over the traces a little. Dom took out his pen, turned over the sheet of paper, and began writing a reply about the art of handling chickens.

SARFUTH, NORTHERN REGION; FORWARD OPERATING BASE, C COMPANY 26 RTI.

There was cold, and then there was *cold*.

Carlos let the APC idle to reach running temperature, scarf pulled up over his nose while he sat in the cab of the vehicle with his hands tucked tight under his armpits. If the temperature dropped much more, the fuel was going to freeze solid in the engine. Shit, anyone who was crazy enough to go sabotaging imulsion

pipelines in this climate almost *deserved* to win.

A shadow loomed in the windshield, blotting out the brilliant orange sunset, and then a gloved hand rubbed away at the layer of ice. It was Marcus. And even at minus-freeze-your-ass-off, he still wasn't wearing a helmet. He swung himself into the passenger seat.

Carlos pulled his scarf down a notch to make himself heard. He didn't like helmets either, but at least he had the sense to wear a thermal cap. "You know how much body heat you lose through your head? Are you crazy? You want frostbite?"

Marcus shrugged. "Ten percent," he said. "And maybe. And no."

He just wouldn't wear a helmet unless there was an officer around who'd stick him on a charge for it. Ever since the barber had given him his regulation crew cut on the first day, he'd taken one line of the COG uniform code to heart; a do-rag was acceptable headgear as long as it was plain black, the ties were tucked away, and the cap-badge was pinned centrally. Now he wore one all the time. Somehow it emphasized the hard angles in his face and made him look like a complete and utter bastard. That wasn't necessarily a bad thing, of course.

"I just saw the KIA signals from HQ," Marcus said. The APC's heater roared like a blast furnace, but wasn't making a lot of difference to the temperature. "Captain Harries is on the list."

"Shit. What happened?" Harries had picked up more decorations for gallantry than some regiments. She didn't seem the type to do anything as ordinary as dying. The news knocked Carlos back. "I didn't think *anything* could kill her."

"She led a charge on a gun position. It didn't surrender fast enough for her."

"Wow. Everyone's luck runs out eventually."

"If they push it."

"Her son's in Logistics, isn't he?"

Marcus puffed clouds of vapor. They froze against the windshield. "Yeah. Same age as Dom."

Dom. Carlos thought of him for a moment. Leaving someone alone and grieving when you were supposed to take care of them was pretty crappy. *Like Marcus's mom. Oh, great.* Carlos, long used to these one-sided, guess-what-he's-thinking conversations with Marcus, was again reminded that what his friend didn't say was every bit as meaningful as what he said.

Carlos changed tack. Dead mothers wasn't what Marcus needed to dwell on today. "Well, our luck's holding out just fine. Let's get moving before my bladder freezes solid."

"They're already talking about awarding her the Embry Star," Marcus said, almost under his breath. It was the highest decoration for bravery, awarded only to those who knowingly faced almost certain death to save comrades' lives. It usually ended up being posthumous. "At least she collected the full set of gongs."

"Yeah, you get a free set of wineglasses in the afterlife for that."

Marcus made a small *hah* sound and half-smiled, scraping away the ice forming on the inside of the windshield. Maybe he was hoping his mother had died heroically too, not just run off and left him in an echoing silence with the stranger he called his father. He never said. He simply wrote a dutiful letter home

once a month—from what Carlos had glimpsed—with no questions or recriminations, as if nothing much out of the ordinary had ever happened to the Fenix family.

The APC rumbled out past the checkpoint and headed for the pipeline that ran close to the border with Maranday, a neutral state with a careless way of letting Indie bastards slip in and out to launch attacks. *Porous border my ass. Complicity.* That meant being careful about where you were standing when you shot them. Carlos was getting increasingly pissed off with the niceties of diplomacy.

“They’re a day overdue,” Marcus said. He cradled his Lancer in his arms as if he was keeping it warm. “Intel’s source is slipping. Still no activity in the town.”

“Yeah, I’m never convinced their informant isn’t just dicking with us.”

“Let’s check with the snipers.” Marcus fiddled with his headset. “Alpha Five to Three-Zero, sitrep please, over.”

“Three-Zero receiving.” It was Padrick, another South Islander. All the islands seemed to manufacture snipers in bulk, except Padrick was from migrant stock. He was conspicuously redheaded and freckled. It didn’t go with his tribal tattoos, but he still had that Islander attitude, so nobody thought it was wise to mention the fact. “I’ve been watching some tosser digging animal traps along the pipeline for the last hour. He left twenty minutes ago. Check it out for us, will you?”

That could have been exactly what it seemed to be—a huntsman out trapping game attracted by the relative shelter of the overground pipeline—or it might have been something a lot worse.

“What’s your position, Pad?”

“Two-Q-J-oh-zero-three-one-three-four-seven-five-five.”

Marcus carefully unfolded a map a section at a time, barely moving his elbows from his sides and folding the sheet back on itself to present the relevant part of the grid. His flashlight clicked on. “You up on that hill?”

“No, not enough cover. We’re laid up in a snow-hole next to the descending section of the pipe, elevation about thirty-five degrees from the valley floor.”

Carlos glanced away from the snow-drifted road for a moment to glance at the map resting on Marcus’s rifle. It was getting dark fast. “They can see anything coming up the line.”

“Yeah,” Padrick’s voice crackled in Carlos’s ear. “We’re waiting for the second shift. Let’s hope they get a move on. Baz wants to watch the thrashball final.” He paused. “I have visual on you now. The hole’s a meter from the connection numbered five-bravo-nine. See it?”

“Got it,” said Carlos. The pipeline was numbered along its length so maintenance teams could identify sections. “We’ll take a look.”

Baz was Padrick’s spotter. The sniper teams could dig into a snow-hole up here and almost make it a regular little home away from home, except for a sports channel. But they *needed* to. Laying explosive devices was done by stages here, and it could take days when it wasn’t snowing enough to fill the holes. Carlos was fascinated by the efficiency; one scumbag would dig a hole and leave, then another scumbag would come along later and drop off the explosive. A little later, another would wander by and leave the detonators. Finally, a fourth would show up to assemble and prime the device before nipping off to detonate it remotely at his—or her—leisure.

Nobody was left hanging around exposed for half an hour or more, just asking to be spotted. It was random folks just passing by—and there were a couple of hundred miles of pipeline to choose from in the run from the imulsion extraction facility at Denava to the coastal refinery. All the COG forces could do was rely on tip-offs, tracking skills, and the psychological deterrent of making it very bad news to get caught.

Carlos stopped the APC and cast around looking for the hole. It was about half a meter deep, and there *was* a wire snare at the bottom. It was just about feasible that the guy was genuinely trapping the local rodents, which burrowed through the snow looking for food.

“Pad, it’s a snare,” he said on the radio. “But that doesn’t mean it isn’t a prep for a device.”

“You’re a paranoid after my own heart, mate...”

“Let’s recon farther down toward the town,” Marcus said. He stabbed at the map with a gloved finger. “If there’s a follow-up on the way, then maybe the timing’s right.”

“Keep the channel open,” Padrick said. “The last patrol left the radio on transmit, the stupid bastards. If we’d needed them, I couldn’t have flashed them.”

“Don’t worry, you got the grownups on task tonight,” Carlos said. “Fenix and Santiago.”

“Yeah, the wankers who don’t need helmets ’cos they don’t have brains to blow out.”

“We love you too, Pad...”

“Flush ’em out our way.”

Carlos killed the headlights and drove parallel with the pipeline at a sedate crawl. Anyone could hear the APC coming, but sometimes Carlos could still surprise the unwary if they were engrossed in a task. By the time they reached the likely entry point from Maranday, it was dark and the pinprick lights of the nearby town were easy to see in the sharp, clear night. It was just two clicks away. The border was a hundred meters on the other side of the pipeline.

Marcus put on his night vision goggles. “Pad’s got a point about the thrashball.”

“You bet anything on the score?”

“I’m not a betting man. Especially since the Eagles signed that new guy, Cole. Cole Train. Yeah, that’s about right.”

“He’s a *machine*. I’d hate to run into him in a dark alley. He’d rip your head off for a laugh.”

Normal life went on, and it kept you sane. Even war could be boring when you weren’t fighting and close to shitting yourself. It swung between the extremes. Carlos understood perfectly how some guys needed the adrenal buzz, even when they knew they were shortening their odds of survival, and he thought of Marcus telling his dad that the army was probably the only place he’d ever feel alive. It was true, and it wasn’t about cheap thrills; it was about knowing you’d used every cell that life had given you to its limit.

Carlos had felt exactly the same way when he listened to his own father talking about his time as a Gear. Cocooned civilian life never let you find out what you could really do or pushed you hard enough to understand exactly who you were. It was a terrible thought that so many people could die having lived around the half-full level, never knowing more, never trying more. And there was no second chance. This was the only life you ever got.

“Easier on foot.” Marcus jumped out and waded into the snow in the shadow of the pipeline. It stood a couple of meters high, supported on concrete trestles at intervals. He pulled the hood of his snow-camo weatherproof over his head. “And this is just to stop you from nagging me...”

The area was a big shallow valley, a gentle scoop out of the landscape, and they were looking slightly downhill for what seemed like kilometers. Carlos slipped his NV goggles down from his forehead and looked around. They waited for nearly an hour, walking in small circles or up and down the line of the pipe to keep warm.

Then something made Carlos hold his breath to listen. He put his hand out to get Marcus’s attention and gestured; *quiet*.

“Vehicle,” Marcus whispered. It was a higher-pitched sound than a car, a smaller motor. There weren’t even any roads to speak of, at least other than the track they were on. “Snow-bike of some kind.”

That didn’t make it suspicious. Lots of locals had snow-bikes. They stood looking in the direction of the sound and Carlos eventually picked out a small wobbling point of light with a darker shape around it. As it got closer, it resolved into a heavily clothed figure on a twin-ski bike. Marcus slipped into the cover of the pipeline and Carlos dropped down onto one knee, shoving his goggles onto his forehead to use the rifle’s optics. He tracked the guy as the bike whined past, following the parallel line of the pipe inside the Maranday border.

Could just as easily be a woman, of course.

Marcus radioed Padrick. “Alpha-Five to Three-Zero, possible trade for you. Ski-bike heading your way, parallel with the pipeline.”

“Roger that, Alpha-Five.”

Carlos started up the APC again, but killed all the lights. “Baz might get to see the game after all.”

“Let’s not be too hasty.” Marcus called in to base to report the possible contact. “Might just be some poor jerk going home after a night in the bar.”

The chances were that the noise of the ski-bike’s motor would deafen the rider to distant sounds behind him. And he was wearing a thick hood. Carlos kept it in as high a gear as he could while Marcus leaned out of the cab to follow the rider through his rifle’s optics. The upward slope of the valley meant Marcus could see him over the top of the pipeline. The bike hugged that line all the way.

“If Intel is right,” Marcus said, “this guy will be the explosives drop.”

“We could just stop him, of course. Check what he’s carrying.”

“Not while he’s on the other side of the border.”

“Who’s going to get out the measuring tape and check?”

“We’ve got our ROEs. No cross-border stuff.”

“He’s got to come this side of the line to plant the explosive.”

“And *then* we can blow his brains out.” Marcus checked his scope again. “Legitimately. Satisfied?”

It sounded stupid to Carlos, but then diplomatic rules usually did. That border jurisdiction shit was for cops, not wars. Eventually Marcus gestured to slow down and dismount.

They ducked down under the pipe and came out on the other side within five hundred meters of Padrick's position. The ski-bike had stopped almost level with the hole dug earlier in the day, and the rider was crouched down, checking through his pannier, still on the Maranday side of the border.

"Three-Zero, can you see anything?" Marcus whispered.

"Negative, Alpha-Five. He's still just a dickhead messing with his bike until he makes a move for that hole."

And then maybe he's really going to check a snare...

Carlos kept his rifle trained on the man. The night was silent except for the wind and the faint sounds of the guy handling something in his pannier.

He had to have heard the APC come to a halt. He was far enough ahead when he switched off the bike's motor to notice the noise in the sudden silence. But he carried on rummaging.

Maybe he was a genuine hunter after all.

He had his back to them now, but not to Padrick and Baz.

"Alpha-Five, whatever it is he's taking out, there's a lot of it." Padrick's voice was hard to hear even in Carlos's earpiece. "I've seen the things they hunt—they're tiny. You could stun them with your toothbrush."

"Got him..."

"I've got a shot now. Tell me when I'm clear to take it."

It was Marcus's call. Bike Guy was standing upright now, still on the Maranday side of the border, still oblivious to three rifles trained on him, any of which would spoil his entire day. Carlos could understand why it would be a bad idea to leave a harmless Maranday citizen with a COG round in their skull, but he thought it was worth the risk—Maranday was an enemy in all but name, so how much worse could things get, other than pissing off a few diplomats and politicians?

And they didn't count for shit.

"Let's see what he does," Marcus whispered, lowering himself on one arm to prone position and taking aim.

The scope's NV filter gave Carlos a pretty clear view of Bike Guy, but explosives didn't usually have a nice clear label on them. Whatever the man was handling, though, there was a lot of it. It looked like he was removing a stack of books or small sandbags. That was good enough for Carlos. The hard part was always deciding when to slot the bastards.

"It's Pad's shot," Marcus whispered.

"You're a mind reader."

"You're not big on patience."

Bike Guy turned with his arms full and walked toward the pipeline—across that invisible line that made him fair game—while Carlos watched. He heard Padrick inhale a few times before letting out a long, final breath. He was steadying himself to fire.

Any second now.

Bike Guy knelt by the hole, the last time he was ever going to do anything. Carlos had as good a close-up of his face as he was ever going to get. It was almost completely swathed in a ski mask and goggles, so there was no way of making a positive visual ID even if he'd had that level of intelligence detail.

Go on, Pad, take him...

Then Bike Guy stopped dead. He looked up, glanced to his left—he couldn't possibly see or hear Padrick from there, so what the hell had spooked him?—then got to his feet. He was still holding some of the objects he'd taken from his pannier.

He headed back toward the bike. It looked casual for a few steps, as if he'd forgotten something, but then he picked up speed.

“Pad, abort, abort, abort,” Marcus said, abandoning radio procedure. “Leave him. We're pursuing.”

Carlos was off even before Marcus finished the sentence. He put a burst of fire through the bike that chewed up its fuel tank and ripped through the steering, then plunged through the deep snow in pursuit.

You're not going anywhere, asshole, and I can out-run you...

He could hear Padrick saying “I've still got a shot, I've still got a shot...” Marcus was yelling at him to get back. Bike Guy darted away at a right angle from the bike, heading for the border. Once he was over that, there wasn't much they could do, and Carlos wasn't going to let an Indie sit there laughing at the COG like some kid playing tag.

Maybe Bike Guy thought Gears were too old-fashioned to shoot a saboteur in the back.

Marcus was almost level with Carlos. It was like running in tar, forcing Carlos into a high bounding movement to clear the clinging snow. Bike Guy dropped something but neither of them were going to stop now to check what it was.

“He'll be handy for Intel to play with,” Marcus panted. The chase was almost in slow motion. It could have ended instantly with a single shot. “Don't drop him unless we have to.”

The guy kept going. If he was armed, Carlos couldn't see a weapon. That didn't mean much. The imaginary line that Carlos had superimposed on the featureless snow was getting closer. He had his rifle, his sidearm, his knife—

“You're over, Carlos, you're over, *you're over.*” Padrick's voice filled his head. He had a better fix on the coordinates from his static position. “Carlos, you're *over the bloody border.*”

“Tough shit,” Carlos said, suddenly realizing that Marcus had fallen back. When he glanced over his shoulder for a second, Marcus had taken up a firing position and was aiming. “I can get him—“

The guy wasn't a Gear; he was fit, but he wasn't Gear-fit. Carlos tackled him from behind, more as an accidental and desperate lunge than a calculated move, but he had to stop him.

Like a few more meters was going to make it any worse. Who was going to see this anyway? Who was going to file a complaint?

Bike Guy struggled in Carlos's grip and made the mistake of reaching into his jacket. Carlos had always

wondered how he'd react to having to kill someone up this close. But he didn't even have to think about it. All that went through his mind was that it wasn't going to be *him* doing the dying. It was going to be the other bastard. There was no room for any other thought. He plunged his knife into the guy's neck before he even realized he'd drawn it.

COG COMMAND, HOUSE OF THE SOVEREIGNS, EPHYRA.

Hoffman realized something big had shifted in the course of the war when he walked into the basement briefing room at HQ.

He took off his cap and wondered if he'd been given the wrong location. It wasn't unusual to be summoned to briefings with minimal information for security reasons, but this was the first time he'd been given no information at all, and he could see he was seriously out of place and out of rank here.

It wasn't just a gathering of army officers; navy and air corps top brass were waiting in the lobby, too, glittering with seniority. And then there were the suits—the intelligence staff and COG political advisers. It was a small gathering, but in terms of sheer authority, this was a summit.

A bit rich for my blood. Maybe they want me to clean the latrines.

“You too, eh, Victor?” said a voice behind him.

He turned to see a naval officer he'd met a couple of years before. Michael? Mitchell? His first name was Quentin, as far as he could recall, and he hadn't been the full captain he was now.

“Quentin...” Hoffman said, extending his hand. He jerked his head in the direction of three admirals. “What are we, then, the hired help? Bag carriers?”

Michaelson. That was it.

“I'm not sure my boss even knows.” Michaelson's collar bore the distinctive twin shark emblems of a submariner. “And I don't know why I'm here either. I'm just Captain D Flotilla, so when told to front up, I face aft and salute.”

D Flotilla was amphibious assault and special maritime operations. That told Hoffman something, although he wasn't quite sure what; for as long as he could remember, COG doctrine had been built around land warfare—artillery, armor, and infantry. All other assets had been a sideshow. Now two small elements—special forces and amphib—seemed to have front row seats for a big show.

“Okay, so it's spec ops and frogs—any other orphans here besides us?” Hoffman asked.

“Only the orbital technology division, as far as I can see. Odd cocktail.”

The big carved doors to the main conference room eased open, and a secretary in a dark blue business suit latched them open. A polished island of tables gleamed beyond in a windowless room.

“Chairman Dalyell will be with you shortly, so please take your seats.”

It was the first mention of the Chairman that Hoffman had heard; he'd assumed this was a Chief of Staff's meeting, or a minister's. This raised the stakes enormously. Michaelson followed him in and they looked for their names on the tables.

What the hell am I supposed to contribute to this?

Hoffman had no problem telling the Chairman what he thought of the COG's defense policy or any part of it, as long as the Chairman didn't have a problem with being *told*. But part of him was afraid of being unable to supply answers. All he had with him was his wallet, ID card, pen, and keys. His attaché case—empty except for a pad of paper—had been taken by security, like everyone else's. That was unusual to say the least.

Even the generals looked apprehensive. Hoffman took some comfort from that.

Dalyell was a small, balding man in his fifties who would have passed for an accountant if he hadn't worn such sharp suits. His voice, though, could halt a battalion. He sat down, flanked by two assistants, and gestured at one to shut the doors while the other readied a projector.

"We're soundproofed in here, ladies and gentlemen," Dalyell said, "and soon you'll understand why we *need* to be. This briefing is on an absolutely need-to-know basis. Get the lights, will you, Maynard?"

The display panel flooded with light, and a map filled the frame—the coastal plain of the Ostri Republic, an independent state with a lukewarm alliance with its much bigger and more aggressive neighbor, Pelles. The room fell completely silent—no fidgeting, no coughing—as Dalyell let the location sink in.

Shit. The thought hit Hoffman between the eyes. *We're going to invade Pelles via Ostri. About damn time. That'll bring it home to them. RTI special forces inserted to prep the battlefield before the amphib assault. Got it.*

He felt better already. He glanced at Michaelson, but the man's eyes were fixed on the map as if he was thinking something else entirely.

"I want you to note a feature on the map," Dalyell said, swiveling his seat to peer at the assembled officers in the gloom. "You're going to be hearing a lot about it, at least within the confines of this room. It's called Aspho Point, and if we don't do something about it, it's going to be the end of the Coalition. Agent Settile, would you like to bring us up to speed?"

Bang.

That was the problem with assumptions. They were short-lived, fragile things. Hoffman's few moments of thinking he'd worked out what was coming had evaporated. Settile walked up to the side of the display and reached in with a battered metal rule to indicate the desolate coast. The key to the map showed the area as a mix of clay wetlands and salt marsh, with pockets of grazing land and woodland; the only features of military interest were a couple of small army bases, a string of gun batteries a long way to the north, and an avionics facility standing on a finger of land jutting into one of the many inlets—Aspho Point.

There were plenty of targets just like this in the Union of Independent Republics. There were much bigger and more strategic ones, too. Settile turned to face the room, squinting against the light from the projector.

"These wetlands around Aspho Point were originally drained for farming a few centuries ago," she said. "They're still called Aspho Fields, but it's so isolated and inhospitable that it's of more use for secure defense installations than crops these days. The research facility at Aspho Point has been developing weapons guidance systems and avionics for the UIR for twenty or thirty years, so no surprises there. But now something's changed. Intelligence shows that routine avionics work has been farmed out a chunk at a time to other places, and Aspho Point has been turned over to a single project. It's now developing a

satellite weapons platform—we're giving it the code name *Hammer of Dawn*."

Well, shit. Hoffman's scalp prickled. *How far ahead of us does that put the damn Indies?*

Settle paused for the communal rumble of dismay that rolled around the table. Dalyell gave her a nod and took over.

"If you think *that's* bad news," Dalyell said quietly, "then chew on the fact that they could be ready to deploy it within a year. Our satellite platforms are still sitting in computer modeling systems. *Theory*. So now you know what you're here for. It's not enough to deny this technology to the enemy. We have to *take* it."

That ruled out an air strike. Hoffman glanced at Michaelson again, and this time their eyes met. They both knew what they were there for now. It seemed that a decision had been made long before anyone in uniform was asked for their assessment. COG Intelligence was driving this.

"General Iver," Dalyell said, "before anyone leaves this room today, I want a plan for taking Aspho Point, seizing the technology, and neutralizing the facility, personnel included. And that plan has to be carried out within the next six months. This technology will end the war—for us or for the UIR, but it *will* be the end of it."

Iver didn't miss a beat. "I'll want your priorities spelled out, Chairman. Because, with due respect, stealing a research facility minus the bricks and mortar—which is what you're asking us to do—is a much taller order than putting it out of action."

"You just summed up my priorities in one, General."

Dalyell took his leave of the meeting. Iver got up from his seat and stared down at something he'd scribbled on the notepad in front of him.

"Let's crack on, then, people," he said at last. "This is where we start Operation Leveler. In all the years the Coalition has been fighting, there's never been a more critical mission."

Hoffman had often felt he'd been born into the wrong era and might have been happier in the more rugged and decisive days of Sera's past. But this—*this* was what he'd been born for, even if he didn't yet know how it might turn out, or even what it was. He felt oddly happy.

He knew better than to believe that a single victory could stop decades of fighting in its tracks. War wasn't that clear-cut: politicians weren't that smart. But they could *hasten* the end.

He tried to imagine what a world at peace would be like, and if there would be room or purpose in it for men like him.

CHAPTER 7

I don't know why you're whining. Yes, Gears do deserve more rations than the rest of us. They're fighting to protect us, all day, every day. It's a hard, heavy job. You want skinny runts defending us from the Locust? We'd all be dead now. Pregnant women get extra rations because they need them too, but the rest of us just don't—people live longer on fewer calories anyway, and before E-Day, that was how a lot of Sera lived. Why don't you all shut up and thank God you're still

alive?

(ANGRY JACINTO CITIZEN AT PUBLIC MEETING ON CHANGES TO FOOD RATIONING LAWS.)

SARFUTH, NORTHERN REGION, THE WRONG SIDE OF THE MARANDAY BORDER; SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO, THREE YEARS BEFORE E-DAY.

Marcus dropped down on the snow beside Carlos. “Shit, let’s move him. Come on.”

It seemed crazy to be worried about such a small detail in a war that had spanned decades and killed so many millions. But wars pivoted on the small stuff, the assassinations, the footnotes. Carlos was on autopilot as he grabbed Bike Guy’s ankles while Marcus took his shoulders, but he remembered to pull his NV goggles back into place.

The few meters to the border were harder than running ten clicks. While they heaved the body through the snow, Padrick was scoping across the landscape with his NV filter, keeping an eye out for activity and muttering that he could have dropped the bastard on the *right* side of the border.

At least Carlos had done it *quietly*.

They bundled the body under the pipeline and squatted in the cover of the APC, staring out into the darkness. There was nothing they could do about the ski-bike or the blood, but as far as Carlos was concerned they didn’t need to. It wouldn’t do the Indies any harm to know they’d get slotted if they tried to sabotage installations in COG territory, and that they weren’t even safe across the border.

“I’m going to check whatever he was placing in that hole,” Marcus said, without needing to add that if it wasn’t explosives then they were in deep shit. “Check the body.”

I killed a guy.

It wasn’t the first time Carlos had used what the instructors delicately called lethal force, but this was different; it was *personal*. It felt like a bar brawl getting out of hand. His heart was pounding through his chest and he didn’t feel the way that he had when he’d returned fire on an enemy position, or launched a mortar. And this wasn’t the moment to try to make sense of it. He opened Bike Guy’s jacket and felt around in the pockets. If it hadn’t been for the wet fabric—blood, not water—it would have been like searching a drunk. He pulled out papers, a key ring, and a small pistol, not that firearms proved anything in this part of the world.

Carlos turned the keys over in his hand. *Shit*. The key ring was a cartoon character of some kind—a bird. Long use had worn and battered it so much it looked like it had been chewed. But when he pushed back his NV goggles and shone his flashlight on it, he could see that the figure had been painstakingly repainted at least once.

Whatever it was, it meant something to this guy.

Carlos switched off the light and replaced his goggles before pushing back the guy’s hood. Clean-shaven, maybe in his thirties. He put his thumbs under the edge of the snow goggles and forced them up.

Carlos was caught off-guard by the effect in his night-vision. Bike Guy’s eyes were staring up at him, just bright disks. He’d seen it a thousand times on night patrol in living faces, but for a fraction of a second it froze him to the spot. He turned the head to one side to avoid the gaze. But the face was still a face; and

he didn't look foreign, alien, different. He looked pretty much like anyone Carlos would have passed on the street at home.

"Shit, why can't you look *enemy*?" he muttered. "Why don't you make it a bit easier?"

Bike Guy's documents didn't tell him anything except that he had a fishing permit and an identity card, both of which matched.

Marcus crunched back and stood over him.

"So," he said, dropping a couple of objects in the snow next to Carlos. They looked like packets of sugar. "Good call."

Carlos picked up a pack and squeezed it, but the faint smell told him all he needed to know. It was a massive relief. Explosives—military grade. He hadn't killed a hapless civvie out trapping animals.

"Well, his blowing-shit-up days are over," Carlos said, trying to sound like he knew all along. He knew just how close he'd come to causing the sort of incident that easily snowballed into something much bigger. "We're shifting the body, right?"

"Can't leave it here." Marcus was pissed off at him. It was a subtle thing, but Carlos was used to reading all the near-invisible signs; the way he finished the sentence on a falling note, the way he stood with his weight equally on both feet. "Come on. Let's get on with it."

Carlos could hear noises in his earpiece, the sound of Padrick puffing as he ran. He'd left his channel open. The two snipers were coming down the hillside, darting from outcrop to outcrop. They always assumed they were being observed. By the time Carlos had helped Marcus heave the body into the back of the APC, Baz was standing there waiting to mount up.

"Well, nothing else to hang around for," he said. He was a square-built guy in his forties, with a strong north Tyran accent. Carlos got the impression he never gave a second thought to the targets he dropped with Padrick. "I'm freezing. The novelty wore off about two days ago."

Padrick appeared behind him. "Shit, you're not taking your work home with you, are you? Leave the bastard."

"It's not a combat situation," Marcus said. "There'll be some regulation to cover this."

They returned to the FOB in silence, Marcus driving. Yes, there *was* a procedure for dealing with dead guys like that, as well as signing over the recovered explosives. The intelligence officer attached to the base moved in to take over. He seemed especially pleased with the ID papers, for reasons he didn't share with them.

"Hey, the pipeline's still intact," Padrick said as he walked into the barracks block. "Cheer up, Santiago."

Carlos cleaned out the back of the APC and went back out on patrol, this time with Marcus driving. They found more holes dug around the pipeline a few clicks south; but their edges were weathered and irregular, as if they'd been abandoned. They might even have been dug by animals. There were no more snares, just lots of tiny pawprints. It hadn't snowed in days.

Marcus switched on the civilian radio on the dashboard, one hand pressed against his ear so he could still monitor voice traffic on his headset. "Want to listen to the game?"

Carlos nodded. They listened at low volume, and it sounded like the Eagles were winning. “Are Islanders interested in thrashball?”

“Some of them. The Islands aren’t all one country, whatever we think.” Marcus, jaw muscle twitching, seemed to be shaping up to say something. “Okay, I take the corporal thing too seriously.”

“What?”

“You were right. If you’d listened to me, we’d have lost him. Too much focus on SOPs.”

It was a Marcus-style apology. But he didn’t have to say sorry. Orders and procedures were there for a good reason, and Marcus was the one responsible if the thing had gone wrong.

Carlos felt guilty. “I still crossed into a neutral country and killed one of their citizens, even if his ID *was* fake and he was loaded with explosives.”

“Yeah, well...it’s not always in the manual.”

“If I’d run out of luck like Harries, I could have dragged Maranday into the war for real.” Carlos thought about it for a moment, not really hearing the thrashball drama that was unfolding on the radio. He didn’t feel as good as he should have. He felt he’d let Marcus down by doing something dumb and rash. “Y’know, Dom would be so much better at this. He really loves the covert stuff. I’m built for basic soldiering. Give me a rifle and let me assault a target.”

Marcus might have smiled, or it could simply have been a grimace. “We’ll be okay when the weather warms up and the fighting season starts.”

Yeah, Marcus took his corporal’s stripe very seriously, and seemed to think it made him personally responsible for the safety of every last Gear in the COG. He was going to be pure obsessive hell when he made sergeant.

But he was nineteen. They *both* were. Carlos thought of the guys their age who hadn’t enlisted, and what they considered to be a hard time or a difficult decision, and realized they didn’t have a clue. He felt better about himself; but he also realized he lived in another world.

Who wouldn’t want to serve, though? How can they live with themselves?

Slotting Bike Guy was just a single incident in a long conflict, nothing special. The imulsion was still flowing; one more bad guy was out of circulation.

But there’ll be another Bike Guy along soon. And another. And another. It’s like taking your hand out of a bucket of water. There’s nothing to show you ever did a damn thing.

“I really want to make a difference,” Carlos said.

Marcus stared ahead. The APC bounced over rockier ground as the Eagles scored again and tinny cheering filled the cab. “How do we ever know which thing we do is really the one that changes history?” Marcus asked.

“I’ll know,” Carlos said. “I’ll feel it.”

They lapsed into silence and listened to the rest of the game. That guy Cole was like an avalanche, flattening everything in his path. Carlos wondered how much he was getting paid for this game. Did he ever wonder what it was like to be nineteen and freezing, with a dead guy’s blood on your uniform, the

most important, things on your mind being a hot meal and calling your kid brother?

Maybe he did. But Carlos doubted it.

DOM SANTIAGO'S APARTMENT, LOWER JACINTO.

Dom turned the key in the lock and waited in the hallway to listen for activity.

Two in the morning wasn't the best time to wake Maria, but he'd caught the first train he could get from camp, without thinking too much about the time he'd reach Jacinto. He placed his kitbag on the floor and found something soft and squashy; it was a toy, Benedicto's fluffy dog, its ears chewed to rags.

That meant his son could get to sleep without it. It also meant he was growing up fast.

Dom switched on the lights and got halfway up the hall before he heard the bedroom door creak open. Maria stepped out into his path, clutching her bathrobe around her bump.

She put her finger to her lips. "I thought he'd never go to sleep. Why didn't you call to say you were coming?"

"I just jumped on the first train. Miss me?"

"Dumb question..."

"I've got fifteen days' leave."

"You sure?"

"Yeah." Dom hadn't queried it. He'd learned fast not to make too many plans in the army. "Maybe they gave us a few extra days for being good boys."

"Is that your way of telling me something?"

Dom had been busting a gut to tell her. He wanted to just *show* her, to take his combat jacket out of his grip and reveal the commando insignia now sewn onto the shoulder, but that was too slow for a dramatic flourish. He simply reached into his coat and presented her with his fighting knife, hilt forward. Maria just stared at it.

"You passed."

"Yeah, I passed," he said. "I don't know how I kept my mouth shut this long."

She took it in two fingers as if she didn't want to get fingerprints on it. "You never *said*."

"I wanted to surprise you."

"It's real?" She handed it back. "I mean, you *use* it?"

"Yeah."

There were still moments when Dom felt he was a kid, wildly unsure of himself; yet here he was with a commando knife in his hand, and frontline combat experience, and a pregnant wife, and a baby sleeping in the next room. He wasn't even eighteen yet.

Sometimes, just sometimes, it all scared the living shit out of him.

“I’m really proud of you,” Maria said. “But does this mean you won’t be serving with Carlos and Marcus now?”

“Not necessarily.” Dom opened the nursery door—a grand name for the box room he’d decorated—and leaned against the frame to watch Benedicto sleeping. “It just means I’ve got the skills there to call on if the battalion needs them. It’s not like I’m in a permanent special forces unit.”

Dom missed his brother—and Marcus—more than he’d ever thought possible. But he couldn’t trail around after them any longer; his reason was asleep in the cot. Once Dom had really understood the fact that he was a father, that he was now solely responsible for three other people whose needs wouldn’t end for years, he found himself preoccupied by very different things. Part of him felt as if he’d abandoned his brother. Maybe that was what growing up actually felt like.

“You want some coffee?” Maria asked. “Have you eaten?”

“I’m fine.”

“Then we ought to get some sleep.” She slipped past Dom to check on Benedicto. “I’m all wiped out.”

“I thought your mom was giving you a hand.”

Maria went back into the bedroom. “I’m happier doing it myself. You know how it is.”

Maria liked to do things her way. He couldn’t blame her, because he wouldn’t accept any help, either. But babies were a lot of work, especially when you were expecting another one, and she didn’t hang out with the other army wives. She needed support when Dom wasn’t there.

He lay awake for most of what remained of the night trying to work out tactful ways to have his folks keep an eye on her. It was hard to offer to babysit for a woman who didn’t want to go out anywhere.

Well, he had fifteen days to try to coax Maria into a different way of doing things. She was an only child, like Marcus. They didn’t always come to terms with having a bigger family around.

Fifteen days, of course, would vanish fast. Dom found himself caught up in routine stuff like fixing shelves and buying stuff for the new baby. Carlos and Marcus got a two day pass. When the round of errands and visits was done, there was nowhere near enough time with Maria, proper husband-and-wife time.

But they’d been inseparable since they were kids. Time wasn’t really an issue. It wasn’t as if he was still getting to know her. And he had no intention of getting killed, so the time they had ahead of them stretched into unimaginable infinity.

The Pendulum Wars had reached some kind of equilibrium, however bad the individual battles were, and everyone got on with life as best they could. Human beings could adjust to any damn situation, Dom decided.

With four days’ leave left, Dom sat in his parents’ yard with Benedicto on his knee, and wondered if he’d see out his time as a Gear, a thirty-year man. The army had never been demobilized in living memory.

“Has Marcus been to see his dad?” Maria asked.

“I think so.”

“Sad, isn’t it? Just the two of them, and such a gulf between them.”

“He’ll be fine,” Dom said. “He’s a survivor. And he’s got us.”

The tree where Dom had first seen Maria climbing the branches almost seven years before was in full leaf, casting shadows on the Santiago’s yard. Dom shut his eyes, reflecting on just how heavy babies could be when you carried them around for a while. He almost dozed off. He was sure he was still awake.

But he wasn’t. His father’s voice jerked him out of a dream that he forgot as soon as he opened his eyes, and Benedicto wailed. Dom sat bolt upright, heart pounding.

“Sorry, son.” His father leaned over him and picked up Benedicto. “Call for you. It’s the adjutant.”

Shit.

Dom knew what he was going to hear even before he picked up the phone from the hall table.

“Private Santiago?”

“*Dominic* Santiago. It’s me you want, Sarge, yes? Not Carlos?”

The adj didn’t say. “You’re recalled to RHQ immediately. Report by twelve hundred tomorrow. Sorry about cutting the leave short, but there you go.”

“It’s okay, Sarge. I know you can’t tell me why on the phone, but—”

“I don’t even know. All I know is that all the commando-qualified personnel have been ordered back to base.”

Dom didn’t even remember if he said “Okay” or not. He walked back into the yard, trying to work out if he was elated, terrified, or triumphant, or if he should call Carlos first or break the news to Maria. It could only be a mission. The thought that he could roll right out of training and into a live op was...frightening.

But that’s what he’d done before; a sixteen-year-old infantry soldier, straight out of basic and into the front line. It was how things were done. He had faith in his training, and in himself.

“I knew it was too good to be true,” Maria said, but she managed to smile. She was getting used to being a Gear’s wife. “Let me know if you’re going to be back in time for the birth.”

If I can. Made it back for Benedicto, didn’t I?

“I called Carlos earlier,” his father said. “The whole Twenty-sixth seems to be moving. Not just you.”

Dom told himself that there must have been hundreds of recalls like this in the past, maybe even thousands, but nothing much had changed the course of the war. He had no reason to think his task—whatever it was—would be different. He just believed that it would.

He had to pack now. He *hated* packing.

26 RTI SPECIAL TACTICS GROUP, RHQ, EPHYRA.

Hoffman now knew the internal layout of Aspho Point better than he knew his own house.

He spent more time immersed in it, so it was hardly surprising. If he'd ever struck lucky with Nina Kladry, she'd have left him by now for neglecting her, so once again he was reminded that it was never meant to be, and that he had his just desserts in his wife Margaret.

No, dear, I won't be home tonight.

Sorry. It's work again.

The saddest thing was that she didn't suspect him of having an affair, and she was absolutely right. She knew how thoroughly the military had devoured him. Hoffman paced around the briefing room table, inspecting the sole focus of his existence at doll's house size.

The Aspho Point building had evolved from map to ground-plan to a cutaway scale model, painstakingly constructed and detailed. The intelligence folk added little details all the time; Hoffman wondered if they actually *enjoyed* it. He caught himself staring at the tiny models representing troops, his arms folded on the table, chin resting on his right forearm, and found it oddly funny.

A cup of coffee appeared beside his elbow. Agent Louise Settile, jangling with security passes strung from her belt like battle trophies, slurped her cup in a remarkably unlady-like way. He hadn't actually heard her come in.

"When you find yourself going 'Pew! Pew!' and making aircraft noises, Major, you'll know it's time to get some sleep." She was young and not especially pretty, but she was damn good at her job, so she passed muster as a goddess as far as he was concerned. "Aren't you going to need more men for this?"

"Not *inside*," Hoffman said. "Pour in too many, and they end up log-jamming each other. It's securing the exterior that's critical. Buy time, delay discovery, secure the exfil route." He straightened up and reached for the coffee. "It would really help if we didn't have to extract any guys in white coats, though."

"You really do have a problem with *alive*, don't you?"

"Are the scientists that important? I know I keep asking, but it's one more complication for us."

"We're trying to get a parallel technical team up to speed here, or as close as we can. We've got big gaps in our knowledge. We don't know how the UIR is handling global positioning—targeting—and we don't know the detail of the launch vehicle, the fuel system in particular. Our best shot on paper can't develop enough thrust to achieve the optimum orbit, and we haven't worked out acceptable accuracy for hitting targets."

Hoffman wasn't sure if that was a yes or a no, but Chairman Dalyell was clear: he wanted the key personnel in one piece.

"You're assuming they'll cooperate with you," Hoffman said.

"There's a chance." Settile took a folder out of her briefcase. "But if they're mashed to slurry, then they won't have the opportunity of seeing sense. Anyway, here's the latest aerial reconnaissance images. Nothing much has changed."

Hoffman took the folder and laid out the images on a free space on the table. There were coils of wire strung along the high water line, but they seemed to have been partly covered by material swept up the beach since the last recon run. It was a ferociously stormy coast.

"Given the value of this target, they don't seem to be maintaining adequate beach defenses."

Settile raised an eyebrow. “If I didn’t know you better, I’d say you think we intelligence folk are a bunch of incompetents.”

“I would never offer that opinion to a lady,” Hoffman said. “But you do have more than your fair share of useless assholes.”

“Aspho Point *is* what we say it is.”

“We’ll take it anyway,” he said, “because those are my orders.”

“You’re such a free thinker…”

“It’s my lack of *free thinking* that ensures there’s still a civilian government running the show, ma’am.”

Settile looked at him as if she was dismantling the sentence for hidden meaning. But she didn’t take the bait. “It’ll still be pretty bad weather in Ostri when you insert. They won’t expect a raid of that kind until their summer, if they expect it at all.”

Hoffman was only responsible for the assault on the facility itself. Landing the troops to secure the wider area, naval gunfire support if needed—that was someone else’s job. By noon, he had to have a better plan on paper for General Iver.

“Captain Michaelson’s going to be here in a couple of hours.” Hoffman got up and walked over to the chart table to look again at the landing area. It all looked so straightforward; a deserted coast, no cliffs to worry about, and a long way from any serious reinforcements. “What made you look here, anyway?”

Settile laid the aerial images on the chart, trying to line them up with the features. “Production of gyroscopic components suddenly starting up in factories where we’d never seen it before. It’s taken four years for us to get this far. I wish it were a matter of quiet industrial espionage, just copying their data and plans and getting out. But it’s not enough to be first with this capability. We have to be the *only* power with it.”

“I understand.”

“You’re going in personally, aren’t you?”

“Of course.”

“You feel left out?”

“No, I feel I’ve got twenty-five years’ experience, and there are boys of seventeen I’ll be asking to get themselves killed, so it seems kind of *lacking* not to be there with them.”

Hoffman rarely let any comment get to him, but these spooks were good at sowing seeds of doubt. It was their job. They probably didn’t even know they were doing it, not even the likeable ones like Settile.

Am I going to be a liability? Am I really doing it because I can’t face watching this from an ops room?

There was nothing worse than a commander who didn’t know when to stand back, to delegate. Hoffman didn’t think he’d reached that sorry state. It was about faith; about having it in others, and letting them have it in you.

“Who was it who said there was nothing like the occasional dead general for improving troop morale?” Settile asked.

“I’m a major,” Hoffman said.

“So you are,” said Settile.

CHAPTER 8

Maybe I don’t want no COG protection. Maybe I’m worried that you assholes gonna make me give up too much to get it. And if we ever get back to normal, I ain’t sure I’m even gonna like your kind of normal.

(FRANKLIN TSOKO, ONE OF THE STRANDED, DECLINING ANOTHER INVITATION FROM DOM TO JOIN THE COG FOLD.)

NORTH GATE AGRICULTURAL DEPOT, PRESENT DAY, 14 A.E.

It was the chickens that started bringing back the past to Dom.

As the Armadillo rumbled through the security gates into the compound, he could smell them, but he couldn’t see them. Cage-farmed poultry smelled of sour, ammonia-saturated shit, an unfamiliar smell to his urban nostrils, but he knew exactly what it was.

A sapper jogged up to the APC as Dom dismounted for instructions.

“Follow the marshals, chainsaw boy,” he snapped. He looked older than Hoffman. His name tab read *PARRY L.*, and he was a staff sergeant, a man not to be messed with. “Keep the loading area clear. The trucks need room to maneuver. Park up your ’Dills by the gates.” Parry executed a piercing whistle, thumb and forefinger clamped between his lips. A bunch of men and women in scruffy COG fatigues appeared out of nowhere. “Okay, people, fast as you can.”

This was the COG’s engineering corps, soldiers that Dom rarely saw, let alone spoke to. They didn’t look like they got three square meals a day, and he was suddenly conscious of how thin and frayed they were compared to Gears like him. There was, as Hoffman put it, a hierarchy of need even within the army; frontline first, support second. Dom wondered if they were as resentful of the combat Gears as the Stranded were.

He jumped back into the driver’s seat and reversed the APC against the perimeter fence, nose out for a quick exit. Marcus jumped down and stood surveying the compound. It reminded Dom of the flight deck of a carrier; the sappers had a plan, and however chaotic it looked to him, it was tried and tested. The area gradually filled with a motley assortment of vehicles, all directed to an exact position and made to re-park if they didn’t get it just right.

He could see why now. The forklifts could barely squeeze into the gaps. Where there weren’t forklifts shifting palletted crates, there were human chains manhandling boxes and sacks. He got out and climbed onto the hood of the APC with Rojas to get a better view.

“Shit, that’s *choreographed*,” Rojas said. “Awesome.” A massive crane swung polished steel vats onto the flatbed of a sixteen-wheeler. “I never see these guys. How the hell did they pack all that stuff in a

couple of days?”

A sapper walked past the APC. “By not sleeping,” he said. “How the fuck do you think the city keeps running when the grubs trash the water mains?”

Yeah, they were resentful. It was a shitty job, invisible and unsung. Dom watched Marcus walk a few paces with the sapper, saying something Dom couldn’t hear, and took something from his belt pack to hand to him. Dom could have predicted what he’d do. There was a glint of wrapping. Ration bars weren’t just informal currency; they were communication, apology, encouragement, comradeship, sympathy—and even guilt.

“Do they want a hand?” Dom called. “Eight guys here with good pairs of shoulders on them. I’m counting Bernie in that.” She could hear him on the link, of course. “No offense, Sergeant.”

“No, they say they’re okay. The truck crews can take up the slack.” Marcus ambled back and motioned Dom to get off the hood so he could release Jack. The bot lifted clear of its housing and hovered patiently, testing its extending arms and waiting for instructions. Marcus pressed his earpiece. “Delta to Control, we’re secured at North Gate. How are we doing for time?”

“Delta, the last reported Locust incursion was an hour ago. Also receiving reports of subsidence two clicks east of you.”

“I’m deploying Jack for a recon. Handing over control to you, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, Marcus...”

Dom didn’t say a word, and Rojas didn’t seem to notice the slip into familiarity. Dom caught Marcus’s eye just as Hoffman’s APC pulled up and backed up next to them.

“Too much water under the bridge, buddy,” Marcus murmured. “It’s kinder that way.”

For her, or for you? Dom didn’t ask. Hoffman stalked over to Marcus and watched Jack turn in midair to vanish over the perimeter fence. The last section of vehicles rolled through the gates, with the third APC bringing up the rear.

“The grubs are moving at ten to fifteen meters an hour,” Hoffman said. “That gives us a lot longer than estimated. But they’re devious bastards, so we’ll plan for the worst. They can rip up ground a lot faster than that.”

Baird walked into the conversation. “Maybe they’re tunneling deeper.”

“You got a theory, Corporal?”

“Yeah, Colonel. I have. We’re making a lot of assumptions about what they’re doing. Just because they’re moving this way doesn’t mean this is the objective. That’s us thinking like humans, not like grubs.”

Dom sometimes needed a reminder of why Baird was worth the daily food ration of three nice, normal people. He was actually an asset. He could fight hard, and he was an exceptional mechanic, but he also knew plenty about Locust. Cole claimed it was because he’d dated one once. However he managed it, Baird *had* been right about the grubs as often as the scientists. He was still alive to prove it.

Hoffman looked him in the eye for a long, silent moment. Baird pulled his goggles down again and stared back.

“Even more reason to get out of here fast, then,” Hoffman said, and walked off in the direction of Parry, who was standing on the tailgate of a truck checking off a clipboard. “Staff, you got a minute?”

Delta Squad’s normal working day was usually an uncomplicated one that left almost no time for thinking. Dom was either waiting to see what might kill him around the next corner, killing something around the next corner, eating as much as he could stuff down his throat before the next enemy contact, or falling asleep from exhaustion so overwhelming that he seldom woke up without someone shaking him or an alarm screaming in his ear. He wasn’t sure what to do with this idle moment. Spare time, whenever he could steal it, was spent looking for Maria, walking the rubble-strewn streets, talking to Stranded in the hope they might have seen her.

Ten years. Fuck, ten years. What does she even look like now?

But he would *not* give up.

Bernie Mataki had surfaced again *fourteen* years after E-Day. Dom found himself adding that margin and giving himself the hope of extra time to find Maria, because *that* was how long people could survive. *Fourteen years. Four to go.*

But Bernie’s a survival specialist.

Maria was younger. She was in her home city. She might have—

Shit, he’d done this bargaining with himself too many times before. He found he was staring down at his rifle as it hung on its sling, rubbing his fingertips along the points of the chainsaw. Bernie put her hand on his wrist.

“You can borrow my nail file, Dom.”

Sometimes it helped to be interrupted. “Hey, I remembered. You and the damn chicken.”

“I was wondering how long it would take you.” Bernie laughed. “Who was that lad with you, the one I had to help? Georg something or other.”

“Timiou,” Dom said. “He was killed a year after Carlos.”

She shook her head sadly. “I don’t know why that still crimps my guts. Chances are that most Gears I trained or served with are dead now. I just don’t like letting it become routine. If I can shrug it off, it’s like pissing on their graves.”

Dom caught a glimpse of Marcus, Rojas, and Cole heaving crates into a small armored truck, probably feeling bored and guilty. They looked like another species of human alongside everyone else. Baird watched the spectacle, leaning against a fence. Kaliso was watching Baird as if he was going to stroll across and deliver one of his weird philosophical pronouncements on life, death, and Locust guts. That couple of seconds told Dom all he needed to know about his squad.

But there was plenty he still didn’t know about Bernie. “How hard was it surviving on the road all that time? Or do I get the prize for the most dumb-ass question of the year?”

“Hard,” she said. “Even for me. Even for a Gear.”

“In what way, exactly?”

“Not knowing who else was out there. Not having comms. Realizing how fast humans turn into

shit-houses and rapists and vermin when there's nobody around to kick some civilization back into them." Bernie flexed her right hand a few times, as if testing it. "But on the plus side, I ate a lot of interesting wildlife."

"You know why I'm asking."

"Your wife, yes?"

"Yeah." He swallowed hard. "She got really bad depression after our kids died. I mean *bad*. Weeks without speaking, eating. And then when I got back one day, she wasn't there anymore."

The look on Bernie's face said it all for a fraction of a second, but she swallowed it like a pro and exuded solid confidence. Sergeants were universally good at making you feel you could do anything. Even Marcus could do that, even if he didn't do it with cheery reassurance.

"Okay, I'll help you look for her," she said. It was that simple. "You'll find her."

Even after ten harrowing years, that lifted Dom's spirits like nothing else. "Thanks," he said. "Carlos really rated you. He was never wrong about people. Promise me you'll tell me those stories about him."

Bernie nodded. "Yeah, course I will."

She didn't seem inclined to tell any right then. Lost for anything else to say, they helped out loading a truck. It was like cross-loading ammo; the sappers made sure every truck had a mix of supplies.

"In case we lose some vehicles," one of the corporals explained. "That way, some of everything gets through."

Even Hoffman was getting stuck in, shifting sacks of grain. Cole nudged Dom as he passed. Colonels didn't do that stuff.

"Shit, can't ever accuse that guy of sitting on his ass or being too grand to sweat a bit..."

But he left Marcus to die. His orders. Leave him in the prison, don't evacuate him.

Dom was still waiting for Marcus to mention that.

It was all going fine until Anya Stroud's voice suddenly boomed in his earpiece and made him jump.

"Control to Delta. I've got visual coming in from Jack—there are drones on the surface, heading in your direction. I have a Raven inbound to intercept."

Hoffman cut in. "Divert it here, Lieutenant. Pick us up and we'll engage them."

"Yes, Colonel. Five to six minutes. Stand by."

Hoffman seemed to come alive, like he suddenly remembered who he'd been at Aspho Point. It took years off him. "Rojas—you stay with the APCs. We'll need those mobile. The rest of you—with me."

His tone was almost kindly—by Hoffman standards, anyway. Dom's immediate thought was that he just didn't want an inexperienced kid with him, but then another thought crossed his mind. Maybe he thought the Rojas family had already lost enough sons.

Shit, I'm still finding I don't know anybody like I thought.

The man could be scrupulously *fair*. And that made his attitude to Marcus all the harder to fathom.

KING RAVEN A-108, TWO KILOMETERS EAST OF NORTH GATE.

“Colonel,” said the crew chief, leaning on the door gun, “we *can* put you right on the ground. All part of the service.”

Hoffman checked his rifle. “No need to expose yourself to unnecessary fire, Barber. Just stand by to extract us.”

Hoffman didn’t get to use a Lancer half as often as he needed to. He knew that the Gears were staring at him, probably thinking he was a sad old bastard trying to prove that he could still hack it like the younger guys.

Maybe only Mataki actually understood what it was all about. A similar compulsion had brought her halfway across Sera. When you knew there was more life behind you than ahead of you—not the possibility of death in combat, but the imminent certainty of final decay, no deal to be struck with fate—things looked different.

“Sir, are you sure about this?” The pilot, Sorotki, joined in. He obviously didn’t want a dead colonel on his watch. “Really?”

“What’s the matter, worried that humankind finally evolved something crazier than a Raven jockey?”

Sorotki twisted in his seat as far as he could. The cabin was solid with Gears, a tight fit for seven men, even if one of them was a woman. Hoffman could just about see the crown of Sorotki’s helmet.

“That’s not biologically possible, sir,” Sorotki said, and dipped the Raven sharply below the roofline.

He followed what had once been the line of the main road south to the coast, skimming the stumps of office blocks, and dropped to five meters to fly between the buildings for a while. It wasn’t always easy to spot Locust from the air; Control was relying on Jack to recon the area and transmit back coordinates, but even that wasn’t foolproof. The small bot could only cover so much ground. If it got too close, it was as much at risk as flesh and blood of attracting a stream of fire, and it was impossible to replace the machines now. Hoffman could remember a time when those flying buckets of bolts came by the crateload. COG technology was now sliding backward in time.

“Colonel, you think we’ve seen the turning point?” Barber asked. “The Stranded seem to think so. They’re like rats. They sense stuff long before we can. And we’re not seeing grubs in anything like the numbers we’re used to.”

Hoffman longed to say something hopeful for a change, but couldn’t. “I’ve been asked that a lot in the last few days. And my answer’s still the same. *I don’t know*. I thought the Pendulum Wars would be over when we got the Hammer of Dawn technology, but it went on for another couple of years and another God knows how many casualties.”

“Thirty thousand,” Kaliso said quietly. He had his Lancer resting stock-down on the deck, muzzle held two-handed, like an honor guard at a funeral. “Thirty thousand, five hundred, and ten.”

Nobody asked him why he could quote that number so easily, but Hoffman felt he should have known it too. He glanced around the crew cabin, wondering again what the hell was going on in Fenix’s head. It

wasn't just that the man didn't say much. It was his eyes. They were unsettling, even predatory, but not *angry*. That was what baffled Hoffman.

He was still expecting a knife in the ribs.

If I'd spent four years in that shit-hole of a prison, and some bastard had left me locked there with hot and cold running grubs for company, I'd be looking to insert something sharp. Damn right I would.

The court martial in the House of Sovereigns had spent days hearing how and why Fenix had abandoned his post to help his father. Hoffman had sat through it all; Fenix, a damn war hero, decorated with the highest honors, ignoring his orders and ultimately costing lives. Hoffman *still* didn't have an explanation. Reasons given were not the *why* he was looking for.

Fenix just looked away from him, not a trace of emotion visible, and seemed more interested in Kaliso's impressive but nonregulation lip piercings. Cole was studying them thoughtfully as well, with the frank gaze of a kid.

"Does all that metal shit make it hard to get women?" Cole asked at last. "I mean, no lady wants her mouth stapled shut, right?"

Everyone laughed, and Hoffman wished for a moment that he was still part of that camaraderie. It formed instantly. It held armies together a damn sight more effectively than any flag.

"Hey, Tai." Bernie held out her hand, palm open. "Let me borrow those things. I want to pin Baird's gob shut so we can all get some frigging peace..."

"Why ain't you got face tattoos, Bernie?" Cole asked.

"Different island." She seemed to be looking at Santiago's right bicep. He had his wife's name tattooed there. Hoffman had never thought of immortalizing Margaret that way, and now he never would.

"Different culture."

"You wouldn't be able to read 'em through the wrinkles," Baird sneered.

"And you won't be able to sit down for my boot up your arse, Blondie."

"Contact dead ahead, visual, five hundred meters," Sorotki said. "Group of grubs, maybe ten or more, moving west toward us."

The Locust would know they were coming, too. "Just set us down here and stand off," said Hoffman.

The Raven couldn't land because of the uneven rubble filling the road, but Sorotki held it a meter above the debris so the Gears could jump clear.

"You're crazy doing this," Fenix muttered as he landed with a thud next to Hoffman.

Hoffman rapped his knuckles against his chest with a hollow *thunk*. "I've got plates, Sergeant."

"I'd hate to have to do the paperwork if you didn't make it."

Fenix probably meant exactly that. It wasn't code for caring.

They formed an extended line to walk down the street, picking their way over fallen columns and shattered glass dulled by years of dirt. On a left turn from here, somewhere ahead, there was a military

cemetery. Hoffman didn't want to see the state that was in these days, because he didn't need to hate the Locust any more than he already did. It was hard to recognize the area except for a few rusted wrought iron balconies that had once been elegant and covered in flowering plants. Most hung at an angle by a single bar, threatening to fall. Only one still clung grimly to the remaining brickwork.

Hoffman cupped his hand to one ear, the signal to freeze and listen. Rubble rattled and skidded as if being kicked ahead. The grubs couldn't tunnel here. They'd lost the element of surprise. He could still hear the low-level voice traffic in his earpiece.

Yeah, why am I doing this?

Because there was no aging gracefully in the new world order. Whatever Prescott said, the definition of what was civilized had shifted. You were useful, or you were dead.

Delta Squad melted into alcoves and dropped behind solid cover. Hoffman knelt on one knee beside Bernie. She kept putting a nervous finger on the chainsaw switch as if she didn't trust it to work. Fenix squatted on the other side of her, as if he didn't want Hoffman muscling in on his team.

"You haven't dropped a grub at close quarters before, have you?" Fenix whispered to her.

"Anything under six hundred meters is CQB for me."

"Trust me, close is more satisfying."

Hoffman thought it was Fenix's equivalent of reassuring banter for a moment, but the set of his jaw said otherwise. This wasn't normal soldiering. This was personal vengeance.

Then the first three grubs came into view.

"Mine," said Fenix.

But there were more than three. There were more than ten. There was a whole shitload of them, almost on top of the squad now, just meters away. Hoffman counted at least twenty. He sighted up from the cover of a shattered wall.

And it felt *good*. He was scared and his heart was pounding, but he felt *alive* for the first time in ages.

"Let's ruin their day," he growled, and opened fire.

The first five grubs went down like bricks, and then the rest were suddenly, instantly, overwhelmingly in Hoffman's path, hideously distorted gray parodies of faces freeze-framed in the bright light of muzzle flash, seeming silent in the deafening wall of noise. He emptied one clip and dropped back to reload as Baird poured fire from a doorway. Hoffman couldn't see Fenix or Cole when he turned back again, but Kaliso vaulted clear over a pile of rubble, firing as he landed, then brought his chainsaw down in a practiced arc as he cannoned into the Locust drone. Both fell, Kaliso on top, with his chainsaw embedded at an angle across the grub's sternum and its motor screaming. No; it was *him* making the noise, *him* screaming rage into the grub's face as he cut it apart.

Bernie was halfway down the road now, moving from cover to cover, keeping up a solid wall of fire. It couldn't have taken long. Part of Hoffman's brain somehow said *the clips don't last that long, this is only seconds*, but it was like a series of vivid, detailed images, unconnected as pictures in a gallery, light and noise and stench. By then he was aware of running into the melee, aware of rounds rattling like hail on the walls, aware of the fact that he might have been hit but feeling absolutely *nothing*. A grub dropped in front of him with its head gaping open, but he paused to use the bayonet anyway.

Hoffman didn't have conscious control now. This was the familiar possession of primal hormones, still shocking and exhilarating and awful every time. His body said *leave it to me*.

He did.

Suddenly a drone was right in front of him and Fenix was behind it. Fenix just grabbed it around the neck and spun it around with him, using it to shield himself from fire. The impact of the rounds set him back a few steps, but he fired around the dying grub and took out its buddy, too. Cole, face and armor shiny with blood—not his, surely not his own—grabbed Fenix's arm as the dead grub slid to the ground.

"We lost a couple of them," Cole yelled. "I hate leavin' a job half done. Just going to finish the paperwork..."

Hoffman came to a halt. It felt as if the road and buildings were moving around him. Baird and Dom jogged around the rubble, kicking over grub bodies and firing bursts occasionally to make sure they were finished.

Baird sounded personally offended. "Die, you bastard," he kept saying. "I want to roster out. Just frigging well *die*."

Job done.

It was only then that Hoffman glanced down and found his pants leg and boot were wet and peppered with holes. It pissed him off. Not because of the pain—he'd feel it later, back at the base—but because even a colonel had to jump through hoops these days to get new kit issued.

He activated his radio to call the Raven, pausing to try to get this breath. Shit, he needed to be *fitter* than this. But suddenly he couldn't see Bernie.

"Where's Mataki?" he panted. There couldn't be that many places to lose a goddamn Gear in a deserted road like this. "Where the hell is Mataki?"