

BREAK-AWAY

(Proliferation, Part I)

By Ilsa J. Bick



BATTLECORPS



"Naw, naw, we got that beat. Battle of Tybalt, Amanda and me did this break-away thing. Snuggled up real close. Meter, maybe. But, see, when you get painted, you look like one guy on GCI, right? So we're going speed of heat, and then just outside visual, Amanda slid out and did this roll, pulled real hard into a split-S, ninety degrees, and she's booming, peeling angels, and I'm playing the music so the Capellans lose the bubble. Then when I yell 'Go' she does this righteous bat turn. Thing of beauty: One-eighty roll, wings-level pull-out, hooking into their bellies, and then I'm loading angels, and the Capellans are loading angels, and they're so busy looking up at me, they never see her coming from below until she rips them a new asshole. Wingman vaporized and the lead bails, but no nylon letdown we could see, poor bastard.

"Anyway, yeah, break-away. Crazy damn stunt. Never work twice.

"But you know? You live for that kind of shit."

—Colonel Charles Kincaid, as overheard in the Double Ugly, Terra

October 19, 2435

Signal Mountain, Terra ***December 22, 2438: 2030 hours***

Hackett took sixty seconds to die, ten more than the colonel expected, and he bled like stink: twin ropes of dark blood spattering on icy rock, like water gurgling on concrete. Hackett's eyes went glassy and as his knees buckled, the colonel stayed with him, playing a wash of yellow light from his flash over Hackett's face: the star in the spotlight of a terminal drama. Wisps of blood steam curled in delicate fingers, misting the chill night air. Hackett's mouth was open, gawping like a fish as he tried to breathe, but the cut was deep and had sliced his trachea in two. A saving grace: he would suffocate long before he drowned or his body drained of blood. He would lose consciousness even before that. Then, Hackett toppled face-first and very hard. A dark red pool bloomed, spreading like dark machine oil chugging from an overturned bottle. Then the flow of blood dwindled as Hackett's heart failed. Stopped.

The colonel released a slow breath that coalesced in a miasma, a kind of giving up of the ghost. His knife hand – the right – was tacky, and he caught the scent of wet rust, like the bed of an old wagon left in the rain. The knife was a standard-issue HAF KA-BAR, black on black, with a straight edge seventeen centimeters long, and oily with blood. He cleaned his hands and then spent five minutes on the knife, cleaning and then applying a thin film of boot oil to the blade. When he was done, he slipped the knife into a sheath riding his right hip and secured the thumb break over the black leather grip. His fingers lingered over incised initials on the KA-BAR's bolt butt: C. K.

Squatting, he searched Hackett. The man didn't have much, but this was standard for a Level-C SERE exercise: Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape. He took the major's rations, a jackknife. Didn't need the axe or the major's KA-BAR. Instead, he peeled back the collar of Hackett's parka and then his BDU tunic, thermal and olive tee. His flash picked up a glint of chain. The chain was blood-slicked, but Hackett's identifier tags were a metallic blue, like the color of aluminum exposed to a flame. Unzipping the parka, the colonel jerked the tags from Hackett's neck then dropped them into a radio-opaque pouch that nestled against his own thermal tee to keep the tags warm. The metal chinked.

Thumbing off his flashlight, he fitted a pair of night vision goggles over his eyes. He'd made excellent time these last few days

but had kilometers to go before he slept. He raised his left wrist, depressed the stem of something that looked like a wristwatch but wasn't. In an instant, there was the glow of red digits. He tapped in a command and received more numbers, a bearing.

So he set out, slipping in and out of shadow, here and then as quickly gone: the avatar of a gathering storm.



Yakima Proving Grounds, Terra December 24, 2438: 0800 hours

The hot, humid air of the inner habitat was musty with a lingering, ripe stink of feces mingling with mashed jack fruit. The smell always reminded Dr. Carolyn Fletcher of a cross between a New York City sewer and a cow barn. A slow rivulet of sweat trickled into the hollow between her breasts. She'd been at the target range first thing that morning; popped off two, three rounds from her Prestar-Glock 90 just for something to do. Pretty darned cold and she'd worn her black cashmere sweater, jeans and black cowboy boots: exactly the wrong clothes for the inner habitat. She felt wilted.

Her boss, Dr. Htov Gbarleman, had given the entire neuroscience staff a week off. Christmas, and all that. The military guys skedad-dled like they had rockets attached to their butts. Unfortunately, her only standing invite was San Antonio and a ninety-year-old aunt with purple hair from a bottle. So, after tossing the PG-90 in its case into the well behind the driver's seat, she opted for the lab. Data to collate, neural inputs to study. Yada, yada. Busy work.

The neurohelmet worked. No question. But the system made her nervous. Tricking the brain into churning out more neuropeptides than required... She hadn't liked it before, when the assistant director – a military type, natch, but hell of a good-looker – strong-armed Gbarleman into the augmentation loop seven months ago.

The colonel liked it just fine. Kincaid racked up a slew of kills; got a real hard-on in the sims – hooting, hollering and carrying on like a bronco-bustin' cowboy racing after the steer that got away. A shoe-in for the *Mackie*. Best man. Hegemony Special Forces Sniper Champ and all that crap. (Someone said there was a whole bunch of very pissed-off Blackhearts; just totally ticked that one of their own hadn't won. Seemed kind of dumb to Carolyn; if the Blackhearts didn't want anyone winning but HSF, they shouldn't open up the competition to every branch. Dumb. But that was another one of those military-intelligence oxymoron things.)

Call her sexist, but Carolyn was rooting for Major Cunningham. Not that she knew the pilots more than just to say hello. (Carolyn was hired help: a simian neurophysiology specialist and pretty much invisible.) Amanda Cunningham's numbers were darned good, and she was more under control emotionally. Racked up kills but without the hoo-hah swagger, joy of killing crap. Kincaid might be the

best man, but Amanda was a better woman. Except there were all kinds of politico mumbo-jumbo going on, Jacob Cameron's fingers in the pie, the Kincaid family in all kinds of industries, most of which had spent a pretty sizable chunk of change on the project, blah, blah. The final decision would be like, you know, really fair.

So, Carolyn had been in the central lab, scrolling through numbers, blah, blah. Not really paying attention but eyeing her reflection: chestnut hair tacked to her scalp in a sensible bun with a forest of bobby pins; the illusion of a heart-shaped face accentuated by a widow's peak. Thinking maybe her eyes – large, deep brown-black – were her best feature, and about how if that's all you got going it's, like, hopeless.

Then sounds seeped into the periphery of her awareness the way water bleeds into paper. She pulled out of her slouch, listened hard. The sounds were screams, but not from people; not a *person* screaming; the screams were...

Oh, my God. She tore out of the lab and clattered down an access corridor, boots banging linoleum like gunshots, but by the time she keyed in her combination code, did the retinal scan and cracked the seal for the inner habitat, the screams had stopped.

Now, she glanced over at the females huddled on a wooden platform three meters above ground. Lucy, Betty, Shana. They were still wild with fear; their brown eyes were wide, whites all around, rolling in their sockets. Tongo, Shana's infant and Jack's son, looked like he was trying to melt into his mother's chest. Linus, an easy-going adolescent male and Shana's first-born, was high in one of two sycamores that topped out near the removable ceiling grates. That was wrong.

Jack was wrong, too. The alpha male, Jack wasn't a huge chimp. Sixty kilos, a little wiry. Very sociable. Always came over for a hug. Not that aggressive but smart. The way he'd gotten to alpha male, for example. Instead of an out-and-out fight, Jack had scrounged three plastic jugs and charged the dominant male and his buddies while screaming and juggling the plastic jugs, making a hell of a racket. The other males scattered. Pretty smart chimp. Today, though, Jack was jammed in a corner like he'd been sent to timeout. Hadn't looked around, hadn't made a sound. Wrong.

Normally she never approached the chimps. Better they come to her. So she was cautious. Moved slow; made sure she had a straight line to the door. "Jack," she said, from about a meter away. "Jack, what is it, boy?"

This time, for whatever reason, Jack answered. No, strike that. He cried: an owl-like hooting, a call Carolyn recognized but didn't believe because it made no sense.

Chimpanzees cry, but they do not weep. Their sorrow is vocal: *Hoo, hoo, hoo-hoo-hoo*. Jack's was a slow crescendo that built in volume and frequency, crested. Fell. Eerie.

She reached for him, blindly, the way a mother consoles a child. When her fingers brushed his coarse, dry fur, he shuddered like she'd sent an electric charge sizzling into his bones. His fingers moved in a palsied tremor that was oddly, uncannily familiar. And then Jack pulled his head around, and she saw his face. That's when everything went to hell. When all her assumptions went out the window.

Because Jack was weeping.

Snake River, Terra

December 24, 2438: 0845 hours

Job one after the kill? Get rid of the frigging body.

Major Sarah James did everything by the book. Take sniper shots. You had to clamp down on every little twitch no matter how bone-cold you were, or that your nose was icier than a brass button. (Thank heavens, the weather was freakish and snow hadn't arrived in the Tetons yet.) So she kept still, let her heartbeat slow. Tried not to think about the way her stomach was one big, sharp, ripping cramp, like a cat's claw snagged on skin. Plus, she reeked. Hadn't seen a hot shower for three days and was pretty sure her BDUs'd stand up on their own.

None of that mattered, though, because there was the colonel on the west shore of Snake River and looking one-eighty in the *wrong* direction. Charles Kincaid: HAF Certified Rock Star with a head of blonde curls and blue eyes to die for – and the one to beat. She was dying like hell to whip Kincaid's tight little ass.

She peeked through her scope to double-check. Watched as her targeting crosshairs glowed crimson and her IFF read the identifier tags:

Kincaid, Charles

Serial # 11031902

FOE

All right. Figure, maybe, seven-three-oh meters. James emptied her lungs, the warm moist air jetting from her nostrils. Waited for the pause between heartbeats.

Beat. And... *Amanda Cunningham, eat your heart out...* Beat. She fired.

A mosquito whine and then the ruby red of laser fire cut a seam in the air. The laser needled the colonel's back, and Kincaid flinched, jerking like a fish flipped out of the water. And he went down.

And the crowd goes wild; they are celebrating in Times Square tonight. James waited a few seconds then trotted over. Kincaid was face-down, left arm flung to one side, his right folded under his stomach. His laser rifle lay just beyond the outstretched fingers of his left hand. As a precaution – and because she knew

every little thing counted – she kept her weapon at the ready and gave the body a wide berth, kicked the rifle to one side, out of reach. The colonel was playing it to the hilt. Rules said to fall down and play dead, not hard to do when you'd been pretty much semi-tasered. Not as bad as the real thing but still laid you out a couple seconds. She shouldered her rifle then nudged Kincaid's right leg with the toe of her boot. "All right, Colonel, show's over." And then she grinned because she was *that* much closer to piloting the *Mackie*: "And if you don't mind my saying it, sir... you is one *dead* mother."

In response, the colonel stirred. "Naw, not me," the colonel said. He rolled left, and then he was on his feet, hood flipping back, his right hand moving up in a single, smooth arc – and James's mind did this little stutter-step of surprise because now she was staring into the huge black *O* of the business end of a silencer. "But you are," he said, and fired.

The slug rocketed at a speed of a half klick per second along eleven centimeters of barrel plus silencer and zipped the scant ten centimeters between James and the muzzle before the *pfft* ever reached her ears.

But, by then, well... her skull had exploded.

Inspiration Point, Terra ***December 24, 2438: 0850 hours***

Major Amanda Cunningham perched atop a hummock of granite called Inspiration Point that overlooked Jenny Lake, directly behind and to the east, and the craggy, snow-covered peaks of Grand Teton and Mount St. John due west. She wasn't admiring the view. Instead, she was whittling a fishhook out of a supple whip of stripped aspen. She didn't need a new hook; it was just something to do. She'd snagged a fair-sized brook trout out of Jenny Lake just as the sun was coming up. Best time to ice-fish, first thing in the morning. She bled, scaled, scooped out all the fish guts. Buried the guts as far into the frozen earth as she could (not much) because of animals, and if a squad came by, to make it look like no one had been around. Couldn't make a fire. Smoke was a big no-no, kind of empirically obvious if you were trying really hard not to get caught. So she ate the fish raw. It was okay. Hey, people paid a lot of money for that stuff and called it sashimi.

Raw fish, whittling hooks, watching her ass: what SERE was all about. Big field manual on the thing. Playing by the rules, Amanda ought to be on the move, heading for Death Canyon, twenty-odd clicks southwest. (There was probably some irony there.) Up at Death Canyon, there was a radio she could use to vector in a rescue chopper. Deadline was midnight December 25, and a Merry Christmas to you, too.

That same manual also said that come daylight, you get a move on. She bet that's what Hackett and James and Kincaid were doing because whoever got to Death Canyon first won. The trick was not getting captured, and staying alive.

But this was the fubar part. Not only were there enemy squads gunning for your butt, *you* could take out the competition. Show you had grit, and all that crap. Taking out your own people was stupid, even if you were competing with them. Amanda hadn't survived this long playing by rules that made no sense. It wasn't like she wasted a lot of time and energy feeling bad about doing her job. She was a soldier and a realist. Some soldiers gazed at their navel, wondering if killing the enemy was like, you know, moral. Screw morality. You think the enemy's getting all existential? Don't want to kill people, be a writer.

On the other hand, some rules existed because only some people could break them and not end up vaporized. Like Tybalt three

years ago, that break-away, a stunt you bragged about in a bar. Won them a couple of medals, and then she and Kincaid celebrated in bed for a solid day, giddy with relief and tickled to be alive.

At the thought of Kincaid, a whiny little voice seeped up from some dark Neanderthal crevice of her brain: *That's what's really eating you, isn't it, sweetheart? Hard enough Kincaid's got his eye on the Mackie, but having to train with him, watching him ace those simulations. Not enough that he knows more about slug-throwers than any guy living and has the medals to prove it. But seeing him do it with that kind of weird energy he gets so you know that he's happier shooting almost than flying... got you going, hunh, baby doll?*

"Shut up, you moron." Suddenly furious, she jabbed a knothole with the tip of her jackknife and twisted, popping it out like an eye. "You think the two of you would live happily ever after? Not when there's a Cameron in the picture, right?"

She remembered the day everything went to hell. This year, a Thursday afternoon in early July: The heady, too-sweet aroma of day lilies swirling through an open window and over their naked bodies on the warm fingers of a gentle wind as smooth and soft as velvet. She'd been his wingman for four years, and his lover for most of that. They just fit together. In bed, out of it, and when they made love, she could pretend that Colonel Charles Kincaid wasn't destined for great things – and that one of them wasn't Isabelle Cameron, the Director-General's third cousin.

They'd lain in a tangle of sheets, Kincaid on his stomach along her left side, thigh to thigh. He was a leftie, and that was his side of the bed because he hated reaching across and fumbling around the nightstand for something. She was propped on her elbow, trailing the fingers of her right hand over the knobs of his spine; but, as much as she wanted him, she had to know. Call it perversity. Or maybe self-defeating. But she said, "So you're marrying her."

She expected him to be angry. Maybe that's what she wanted. Nice big fight, maybe break a couple things. Then losing him wouldn't hurt so much. Instead, he rolled up on his right elbow. Kincaid's eyes were very blue but dark, like the sky at twilight. "You know I don't have a choice," he said.

"You have a choice. Just say no."

Kincaid sighed. "Amanda, we've been over this and over this. My family has connections..."

“Who cares which uncle served under whom? I know that your family’s been in service to the Hegemony for a long time.”

“That counts for something. I’m not narcissistic enough to believe that Jacob Cameron would fall if I don’t marry Isabelle...”

“Jacob Cameron’s an idiot.”

“Being an idiot and Director-General aren’t mutually exclusive. Even if we leave out my family’s military connections, there are quite a few Kincaids with a vested interest in seeing this very expensive project through. I don’t think my relatives or their friends would be very keen on seeing, oh, billions go up in proverbial smoke. There’s a lot riding on the *Mackie*, including the future of how you and I will fight our wars.”

“And the Kincaids are keen on that, too, I suppose? More war?”

“I could say that war is a business.”

“It is.”

“Yes,” he said, “it is. A very expensive business that we can’t afford to let go bust. So if this doesn’t work, or the Camerons are perceived as weak, then the Capellans, the Federated Suns, or even some of our oh-so-loyal disgruntled nobles won’t hesitate to stake their claims and carve us up. Then little things like Tybalt, all that suffering... our people will have died for nothing, Amanda.”

“Don’t pull that guilt shit.” Her voice went watery, and she didn’t want him to see her cry. “Damn you. I hate you, you know that? And I really hate her.”

“It’s political, Amanda. It’s economic. The marriage is only one factor in a very complicated calculus that’s about as cold and hard and mathematical as the equations governing life and death. This is an alliance my family wants and the Camerons need. You know I don’t love Isabelle.”

“I know *that*,” she said, more sharply than she liked. Reaching over, she laced her fingers behind his neck and rolled onto her back, pulling him down then crushing his mouth with hers. They made fierce, desperate love and...

“Stop.” Amanda fisted her hands. The whittled point of her rough fishhook bit into her left palm, but that was okay. Mooning over some guy who was going to get married come February just as soon as he piloted the *Mackie* for its test run...

Now, *that* was an interesting bit of defeatist thinking. She unfurled her fingers and stared at a bead of bright red blood welling up in her palm. Was she trying to lose to spare herself the humiliation of Kincaid's being chosen *because* he was Kincaid? Even if she really was better?

Nothing was certain. There were, for example, three possible outcomes between now and midnight December 25. One: She could win. Make it to the radio, vector in the chopper and exit right into the *Mackie's* pilot couch.

Two: She might get captured. She'd managed to avoid two separate squads over the past three days only to nearly walk into one yesterday near dusk. Sidestepping her way down a slope, she saw movement out of the corner of her left eye and ducked back in the nick of time. Three of them, tiny as ants, making their way around Hanging Canyon; maybe a good thousand meters away and too far to tag with her target laser. She watched them long enough to figure that they were going to be between her and the pick-up coordinates the rest of the way. So they might snag her unless she figured a way to take them out of the equation.

Or, three: She could get herself killed. There were three people running around with the go-ahead to kill her if they could. One was Brian Hackett. Another was Sarah James. And the third was Colonel Charles Kincaid.

With deliberate care, Amanda broke down her jackknife, slipped it into her pocket. Then she wormed her fingers into her tee and pulled out her tags, the ones that signaled friend or foe. She dangled the metallic blue tags, watching how they spun then unwound in a blur. They chinked like tinny chimes.

Everything came down to this: Would she pull the trigger on a man she loved and hated in equal measure? Even if it was pretend? She didn't know. But she was sure of one thing. If Kincaid found her first?

"Pow," she said.

Snake River, Terra

December 24, 2438: 0846 hours

The back of Sarah James's head erupted in a fine pink mist of blood, brain and bone, releasing that heady, brackish, keenly satisfying odor of fresh blood, burnt hair and singed skin. The impact knocked her back a half meter where she crashed to the shore, her body leaving a bloody smear like the track of a large snail.

He waited a moment, watching, listening. A pity about the silencer, but in a wilderness this quiet, an anomalous sound carried for kilometers. Oh, he had a perfectly serviceable rifle. He'd even used it twice this week already. But he still had work to do. No point alerting the remaining contestants.

Still, he really enjoyed a truly well-made handgun. His SIG Pro-SP 2022 was a thing of beauty, an antique passed down through his family for generations. The pistol was very blocky, with a stippled grip plate that fit his large hand. The frame was finished in a grey-black matte, though the barrel was left bright and the metal anodized. Virtually no recoil, fifteen rounds to the magazine. It would've been so nice to hear the boom.

He looked down at James. She'd died in a nanosecond. Her hands were rigid with cadaveric spasm, the fingers curled and arms flexed until her balled fists nearly touched her shoulders, as if daring him to put up his mitts. Her unfocused eyes bugged from their sockets and her mouth was still open, her features frozen in that last moment of surprise. A baseball-sized chunk of skull a little below the crown of her head had blown away, leaving a red-black crater. Her brains drooled, puddling in a lumpy, pink-gray jelly.

Unscrewing and pocketing the silencer, he snugged the Sig-Pro into a concealed-carry holster riding under his waistband over his crotch. The barrel was still warm which was, all things considered, very pleasant. Then, he bent and pocketed his brass because you never could tell.

He levered James onto her back, rolling her like a log. He struggled with the zipper of her parka. The dispersion mesh – a conductive layer sandwiched between taslan nylon outside and an inner waterproof layer laminated with nylon tricot – made the material stiff. The zipper gave, grudgingly, with a chattering metallic sound. He slid his fingers down her thermal shirt, lingering a moment when his fingers grazed the domes of her breasts. (He

was tempted, but soldiers failed if they lost sight of the mission.) Reeling up a pair of tags, he deposited them into his specially-lined pocket.

Then he had to break her arms. The cadaveric spasm had not only drawn her forearms under her chin but clamped her elbows to her sides. So he grabbed each forearm with his right, braced against the corresponding shoulder with his left, and pulled. He was perspiring by the time the bones cracked in two. Arming sweat from his face, he hooked his hands beneath her armpits and dragged James's body – minus the lion's share of her brains that had slopped out of her cranium (he marveled how few people really understood how *liquid* a brain was) – away from the river's edge to the gear she'd stashed behind a tumble of boulders. He debated about covering the body with stones. This had been glacier country back in the last ice age, and the landscape was littered with tumble-down heaps of boulders alternating with streamlined drumlins. On the other hand, this was also mountain lion country; there were grizzlies; there were small animals eager to drag off a foot, a finger, a hand. Without her tags, they wouldn't find James, or what was left of her, for a long, long time and likely not all in one spot.

He took a moment to search her pockets. Virtually the same gear as Hackett. James's only weapon was her target laser: a non-lethal variant of the Mauser 480, the HAF standard, with a built-in IFF that pinged the identifier tags. But he discovered a pleasant surprise: a stash of cello-wrapped ration bars. Perching on a boulder, he ripped open one promising to taste like peanut butter and chocolate but didn't.

While he ate, he tweezed out a photograph from his left breast pocket. The photo had been taken at MacBeth shortly after the Battle of Tybalt; he recognized the onion bulb of the spaceport's control tower. And, of course, there was Amanda. She was willowy and very tall for a pilot, easily two meters. She stood, bulky helmet tucked under her left hand, her right hand on the cockpit ladder of her fighter, her right boot perched on the first rung. She wore an olive flight suit that highlighted the fiery cascade of her hair around her shoulders and accentuated her eyes, which were a deep green, like the depths of a forest. Cool, welcoming yet full of mystery and absolutely maddening. No matter how long he studied the contours of her face and the curves of her body, she remained elusive, like a half-remembered dream.

He chewed the last of the ration bar, swallowed. He took a long pull from James's canteen. The water tasted like tin from the purification tablets but was so cold it hurt his teeth, an ache that rivaled the physical tug he felt every time he looked at Amanda. Desire viced his chest.

Abruptly, he slipped the photograph back into his pocket. He squeezed his hands together, waiting for his pulse to slow. Then the colonel stood, turned his back on James's body and faced due west toward Death Canyon. Aptly named, because that was where he knew Amanda must and would head.

There was a method to his madness, and it was this: He'd saved Amanda for the last act – the last act *here* at any rate, and oh, what a drama awaited the Director-General; how the Hegemony would feel his wrath – because he wanted her. He wanted her, and he would have her: Amanda's body under his hands, Amanda's blood in his mouth. Amanda's *life*, and his face the horror she would take to her death. He hungered for all of that and he wanted it, up close.

But, first, they would play a little game. Cat and mouse. A cat was a study in patience, knowing when to pounce and how to maim without killing so the fun could go on and on. And then, when a cat tired?

Smiling, he straightened his right index finger, cocked his thumb: a classic gesture children throughout the universe knew.

"Boom," he said.

Yakima Proving Grounds, Terra December 24, 2438: 1030 hours

"Parkinson's disease?" asked Colonel Nathan Powers. He stood behind Carolyn's left shoulder and when he leaned down to get a better look at her screen, Carolyn caught the scent of a subtle musk aftershave and sweat. "It can't be."

"I'm just saying it's a possibility." She was anxious, his being so close. The flight surgeon was one of the most attractive men she'd ever seen: black wavy hair cropped close, dark brown eyes, and the faintest suggestion of a swell to his lower lip. He was dressed casually in a biking outfit: navy blue one-piece, insulated jacket, gloves, hat, biker glasses on a strap. The outfit was very form-fitting around the bulge of his calves and thighs, and she was having a hard time remembering not to stare and wondering how he looked with the bike suit *off*... .

She quickly turned her attention back to her screen. "I'm not sure. But this clip," she pressed a key, and the deflated, slouched figure of an old man firmed up on the screen, "that guy fits what I saw."

The clip had obviously been taken in a hospital of some sort. A splash of fluorescent overheads turned the man's papery skin a sickly off-yellow. An anonymous cotton hospital gown, also off-yellow, drooped open at the man's scrawny neck. A glistening track of saliva dribbled from his lower lip. Carolyn pointed. "There, his hands, see how they're shaking even when he's not reaching for anything?"

"I know what a pill-rolling tremor looks like," Powers rapped. "I'm a doctor, remember?"

"I know that." A wave of heat crawled up her neck, and that made her angry. *Damn these military people; they're all so self-righteous, like they're the only guys with brains.* "And I know I'm just a stupid-ass simian expert, but let me tell you something, Doctor. Chimps don't get Parkinson's. They don't get malaria or AIDS or Huntington's chorea. They may be our closest relatives genetically, but there are a lot of things they don't get unless we help them along."

Powers scowled. "Yeah, but then you're talking surgical ablation, drugs. We didn't give them anything."

"Oh, come off it," she said. Powers was drop-dead gorgeous, but she wasn't about to go brain-dead because of a pretty face. "You know perfectly well what I'm talking about."

"Yeah, yeah, I know." His tone was clipped and his brown eyes had turned flinty. "You're trying to blame some abnormal chimp shit on the augmentation loop that you just so happen not to like."

"I'm not blaming you or your precious loop. But the reality is that the loop does feed into regions of the brain most associated with attention, focus and concentration. These just so happen to correlate with dopamine-rich neurons, like the basal ganglia and frontal lobe, and dopamine depletion..."

"Then how do you explain that when we checked the chimps' neurotransmitter levels three months after we discontinued testing, their dopamine levels were normal?"

"Maybe we didn't follow them long enough."

"Yeah, you think?" He sagged back in a chair. "I'm sorry, that was uncalled for. You did right calling me. Hell. Kind of fits, too, like that crying jag. People with Parkinson's can be pretty volatile. Loss of emotional control, stuff like that." Then he scrubbed his close-cropped hair and blew out. "We're debating in a vacuum. We need a vet. I'm a people doc."

"He's TDY. In Sydney, for God's sake. I called the communications people and they said they couldn't authorize contact unless I had command approval. You're command approval."

"I'm assistant director. Gbarleman's the boss."

Uh-hunh, and that's why Gbarleman caved when you wanted the loop. "He's civilian. Anyway, he's in Tel Aviv somewhere. Hell and gone."

"Figures." Powers eyed her. "By the way, why aren't *you* gone? I checked Gbarleman's paperwork a couple days ago. You're supposed to be in San Antonio."

It crossed her mind to wonder why he cared, but she really didn't feel like getting into it. "I... change of plans. I had work. Like collating all the neural input data from the sims we ran on Kincaid and the rest."

"That couldn't wait?"

"Well, I don't mind being alone. I like when it's quiet," she lied. Then she told a truth: "Went shooting. I like that, too."

"Yeah?" Powers looked at her with new interest. "What kind of laser you got? Sunspot?"

"No, semi-auto pistol." She told him about the PG-90, and he asked a couple questions about that, like where she got ammo, and while she was kind of enjoying this and he really seemed interested, she said, "Look, we can bond over slug-throwers later. Right now, we have to get moving. Get the vet, run tests. Maybe then, I dunno, bring the pilots in."

"Over Christmas? Make a big brouhaha because a chimp's got the weepies? No way. Anyway, Kincaid and the others, they're out on some exercise."

This was news, but it tallied. Being a civilian and relatively low on the totem pole, no one told her anything. "Where?"

"I don't know. They don't keep me in the loop about stuff like that."

"So what do we do?"

"You want my opinion? I say we close up shop, turn off the lights, go shoot and then I'll take you to lunch."

She did a double-take. "What?"

"Shoot. You, me. Then eat. Couple of beers. C'mon, it's Christmas. Forget the chimps. Let it go for a couple days." Then at her incredulous look, he said, "You wanted a command decision. Well, that's it. We go at this one step at a time. You know how hard it is to change around orders?"

"No."

"Hard. Plus you got to double-check, lick the base commander's hairy ass. In this case, that would be General Coleman and I'm not hauling him away from a Christmas party or shagging his old lady because some chimp's having a bad hair day. I could be at this for hours, maybe *days*. Then, ten to one, turns out to be a big zero, and I've got me a salmon day." At her mystified expression, he sighed. "I'll spend all day, maybe two, swimming upstream only to get screwed and die. It's not happening."

It was not the answer she expected. "Well, gee, I'm sorry. Silly me, I thought the assistant director might be, you know, interested..."

“Whoa, whoa.” He held his hands up. “Just a sec, lady, how about you beam back to reality...”

“Don’t blow me off! I don’t have the authority to get anything done that needs doing. So, if you would...” She broke off suddenly. “Oh, Jesus, not again,” she said, pushing up from her workstation.

“What?”

But she was already moving for the door. “The chimps, the chimps, can’t you hear them?” Then she punched the door open, and a cacophony of screeches and yowls pillowed in a solid ball of sound. She took off at a dead run. “Come on, come on!”

It was like running down an echo chamber filled with sounds that banged around and around, and sent gooseflesh rippling up and down her arms and legs. *Jesus*. She bent down to key in her combination code, cursed when her fingers slipped. *Got to get in, got to...*

But then Powers was there. “Here,” he said, pushing her aside at the same time. “Command override.” He punched in a code, and as the door hissed, he grabbed the edge with both hands, forcing the hydraulics into a whine of protest. “Go, I’m right behind you. Just go!”

She squeezed through the door and then skidded to a halt so abruptly Powers ran right into her. The impact forced the air out of her lungs and she nearly fell. But he snagged her by the arms, hauled her up and against his chest.

And then they just stood there, speechless.

En route to Death Canyon, Terra December 24, 2438: 1230 hours

Amanda spotted the vultures first, a big black funnel cloud cartwheeling to the southwest. She didn't think too much of it. Things died in the woods all the time. But when she started her ascent to the ridge running around Phelps Lake and onto the pass for Death Canyon, she realized that the vultures were close, nearly overhead. Again, it could be a trick of the eye. Distance was hard to judge here. But then she smelled the blood and knew something was very, very wrong.

She'd been too keyed up to sleep. The feeling reminded her of a palomino she had when she was about ten, eleven. Rex, very original name: Every time that horse caught sight of the stable, he'd flat-out gallop no matter how hard she hauled on those reins. So, she was like Rex, dashing for the barn. Bad survival tactics, maybe; the manual said you kept a steady pace, you rested. She couldn't.

The first stretch along Cottonwood Creek was due south and easy, just wide open. Frozen prairie and meadow and, thank Christ, no snow. But no people either. Not even a close call and that was weird. She'd thumbed on her target laser, carried it like a real weapon: strap around her neck, stock clamped to her right side, trigger finger along the guard. She couldn't kill anything with it, but the targeting IFF had a range of about seven-thirty meters, eleven hundred on a really good day. But, no Hackett, no James. (Forget Kincaid; fine, let him win. She just had to be so close behind he'd think she was tattooed to his butt.) Weird.

She didn't catch sight of the squad either, and that almost worried her more. She'd already figured that she couldn't just shadow them but had to get around them somehow. Problem was how and where. She'd soaked in those briefings and studied maps so long she knew them better than her own name. When she cut west and headed for the mountains, there was a lot of up and down over heavily forested moraines before Phelps Lake, where she'd hook west around the lake's northern edge. From then on, she didn't have much choice but climb to Death Canyon, dogleg south and then circle to the Shelf and the radio. The way up to Death Canyon was steep, the elevation changing in a hurry the first third of the way. The trees thinned half-way. The rim, while very high and overlooking steep jagged cliffs, was all sagebrush, sparse Douglas fir and rock. Dropping into the canyon wasn't an option. With very few exceptions, there was no way to get up and down without climbing gear.

She chewed over that problem when she stopped to rest. Tried to come at it from a different angle. Not how to evade the squad, but how to thwart those guys. If she could confiscate their weapons, that made it ten times harder because then they had to get right up close. Couldn't just point and shoot and set off an electric tingle – not the almost taser-like shock associated with a kill but a little zap that let you know you'd been made courtesy of the mesh incorporated in her parka and BDUs. (No choice but to wear the clothes, the cold kind of negating the option to run around butt-naked. 'Course, she could cheat. Take off the identifier tags. Although there was a fail-safe: the tags relied on body heat. Take the tags off for more than two hours, they changed color and wouldn't revert back. Sort of a dead giveaway. Anyone found with black tags was immediately disqualified.) So, thinking out of the box, she figured it boiled down to doing the unexpected: go right down their throats. Slip in. Grab the rifles. Get the hell out of Dodge. The only thing was to find them.

The moraine cradling Phelps Lake was one massive carpet of dark-green lodgepole and white-barked pine, and the thinner, denuded limbs and peeling white trunks of slender aspen. Sunlight bathed the frozen lake behind her and set up a glare, making the vultures' black wings glisten like slick oil and giving her sun-dazzle that left her blinking away spots. She had a sense that things were going to open up soon and her cover give out. The gaps in the canopy were wider, the trees smaller, a little stunted, and further apart, and the air definitely colder.

But then two things happened at once. She glimpsed the straight edge of a frame tent – and she caught the unmistakable odor of spent cordite and blood.

She stopped cold, then ducked behind a pine. Crouched, waited. When she heard nothing, she glanced around the tree. Nothing moving and now she picked out two tents: one dead ahead facing west, and the other slightly off-center opposite, looking east. The flaps of the east tent were cracked a smidge. But that was all. The blood smell was still there: heavy, a little... gassy like blood got after coagulating.

She eased back behind the tree. Chewed her lip and tasted dead skin. Darted a glance at the vultures. Thought long and hard about what she was going to do. Because no question: something dead up ahead. She'd been a soldier too long to forget that the unexpected happened, constantly.

And that's when she thought of an alternative explanation: this, too, was a test. Would she act on self-preservation and detour without checking a site that obviously screamed for a recon? Or would she investigate, but carefully, without getting captured or "killed" herself? Certainly, a new wrinkle. She tried to remember if command had said anything about scenarios that would involve simulated casualties, and could recall none. But shit happened. Assuming, as she did, that Kincaid was ahead, she wondered what he'd done, and then got mad she was even thinking like that.

She looked right, left, behind. The tents were maybe three hundred yards. Studied the layout of the trees, how they petered out to the left and thickened to the right. Going right was the only obvious choice and, despite being obvious, the best. She moved with care and varied her rhythm, pausing now and again, darting quick looks around and behind. The silent vultures skimmed air. She edged up to the closest tent, the one opening west and away. The canvas was stiff and smelled cold. She levered right, keeping the tent on her left. She waited, listened. Smelled blood.

Go on. She shifted her weight to the balls of her feet. *You've come this far, just do it.*

Holding her breath, she edged around the corner.



The colonel tracked her with his scope and from a vantage point nearly five hundred meters due north and straight up, in a tree. He would have preferred a hardwood not a pine. He didn't like the stink of resin, and the needles were sharp. But they did possess the distinct advantage of excellent cover.

Before Amanda arrived, he used the time to check his rifle, yet another antique, a bolt-action Barrett M468. The barrel was forty centimeters long with a muzzle brake to both blast expanding air up, as well as down and back at a forty-five degree angle to reduce recoil. He'd given the weapon a thorough going-over before, but he was a stickler for detail. While he waited, he snapped out his magazine and pressed his right thumb on the first shiny bullet and then eased up, checking the return for hesitation. Ten bullets to a magazine: full metal jackets, each six-point-eight millimeters, tapering to a sharp, blood-red point. He had three such magazines, more than enough. He eased the magazine back until the catch clicked.

Scanning the area around the tents, he saw movement, braced his right foot on a limb and then his rifle on the hump of his knee and raised his scope to his eye. The scope had not come with the weapon; he'd had it custom-made so he could see who he was shooting, right up close. And there she was: a blur framed in the small circle, like a religious medal. He thumbed the focus and her face firmed. She'd thrown her hood back; her head was cocked a little to the left, and he read her tension and, he thought, a little bit of fear. Her skin was very pale and this made her remarkable green eyes even deeper. He inhaled a quick breath. She was the incarnation of the beauty he remembered, and the one he recalled in dreams.

When she paused at the edge of the tent, when he knew she would have to look, he was ready. He watched her tense, then pivot. Then she flinched, straightened in shock, and he dropped the scope's crosshairs on her back, left of center and over her heart, just as she let out a short, sharp cry of horror.

Yakima Proving Grounds, Terra
December 24, 2438: 1232 hours

"Oh, my God," Carolyn said. Her knees went water-weak, and she suddenly understood what being numb with disbelief really meant.

There was blood, everywhere. Or maybe that's just the way it seemed. The females – Lucy and Betty – still screamed from the safety of their platform. But Shana wasn't screaming. Instead, the chimp sprawled in a loose-limbed heap of congealing blood. What was left of her throat was raw, ugly, ripped wide open. Only half her face was intact. The rest was a bloody crater. One clouded brown eye stared fixedly at a point behind Carolyn's left shoulder. She'd been bitten in the belly repeatedly; chunks of gore – dark red liver and glistening bluish-pink loops of intestine – spilled over her side, and Carolyn had an insane, horrible image of a child's piñata split wide open.

Where's Linus? Where's Jack? And the baby, what about the baby? She dragged her horrified gaze from Shana, probed the habitat, finally spotted Linus hunched in a nesting den. Maybe the baby...

Powers touched her shoulder. "There." His mouth was close to her ear, and she felt his breath tickle her cheek. He pointed to a spot above her head. "In the tree."

Jack perched upon the tallest sycamore. His mouth was wide open, his lips peeling back from teeth stained burnt orange with blood. Every time the females screamed, he answered with a roar. But as strange and awful as all that was, this was worse: dangling from Jack's left hand was the limp, bloodied body of his son, Tongo.

"No," Carolyn said. Her vision went blurry with hot tears and she turned her face into Powers's chest. "No, no, no."

"Come on." Slipping an arm around her shoulders, Powers nudged her toward the door. "Come on, let's get out of here."

She balked. "No. We can't leave. We have to *do* something!"

"Like what? The baby's dead, right? That other chimp? You can't do anything for either of them."

"But, Jack..."

“Yeah, what? You’re going to climb up there?”

“I could try to get him down...”

“No.”

“But I have to do something!”

“Staying alive is good. What makes you think he won’t rip you apart? You wanted a command decision. Well, here it is. Let’s get back to the lab where we can hear ourselves think.”

She rocked back on her heels when he tugged. “What about the other chimps?”

“He hasn’t bothered them, has he? He only took out that one, and the baby. You think they’d still be alive if he didn’t have some kind of internal control?”

He had a point. So she let him lead her away. But the screams chased her, all the way back to the lab.

En route to Death Canyon, Terra December 24, 2438: 1245 hours

She let out a small cry before she was aware that she had. Then training took over. She ducked low and now she transferred the useless target laser to her left hand and then flicked the thumb break over her KA-BAR and withdrew her knife in one smooth movement. Her heart galloped and her lungs worked like bellows. Her vision swirled as she hyperventilated. *Slow it down, slow down, one step at a time.*

She didn't look at the men, not closely. Time for that in a minute. First, she had to make sure there wasn't anyone waiting for *her*. She slid along the tent she'd rounded, nudged the flap with the point of her target laser and quickly swept the flap back, her knife at the ready. Empty. Just duffels ripped open, two bedrolls. Same thing in the second tent but just one bedroll and duffel, so probably the squad's chief master sergeant's gear. She re-sheathed her knife and stepped back to look at the men. Part of her wanted to run screaming in the other direction; the other knew that she had to be thorough here if she wanted to stay alive.

The men were seated in a line: backs against the tent, the second and third man listing so their heads touched – a comical effect, if it hadn't been so awful. Single shots to the chest from a slug-thrower, large caliber. Very accurate. Whoever had killed them wanted to advertise because the men's parkas were unzipped and sagged around their shoulders. Their shirts were slit down the middle and folded back like the covers of a book so she could see each single, neat hole drilled six to seven centimeters beneath the left nipple and a little off-center. Right through the heart. Just a dribble of blood coagulated like a frozen tear. Not enough to cause the blood smell.

The reason for the smell: Their necks were slit. Ear to ear. The heart, even one that's been shot, beats an agonal rhythm for a minute or so. A quick swipe of a knife left to right, and more than enough blood drizzle. The blood had congealed in thick rivulets, like syrup, and was starting to freeze.

But cutting throats was overkill. Like lining them up as if they were spectators to a play. Unless... she took a few steps back then scoured the ground with her eyes. There, to her far right: a KA-BAR stabbed the ground. Two sets of tags coiled around a black leather handle slicked with dried gore. When she bent down and yanked

the knife, she saw the initials on the bolt butt: C. K. She cradled the tags in her gloved hand. James. Hackett. The tags were black.

The small muscles of her jaw clenched. She didn't believe for a second that Kincaid had killed these people. Okay, he was a champion marksman and yeah, he was competitive. But she knew Kincaid as a soldier and a man. If the killer had Kincaid's knife, Kincaid was dead. She was surprised that she didn't feel grief. Maybe that was because, at core, she was a soldier, and a soldier grieved when there was time. Right now, she had to stay alive.

Everything here screamed that she was the only one left. Meaning this little spectacle had been arranged for her to find by someone who knew she had to come this way. *And if he set this up...*

"He did it so he could watch my reaction," she said, suddenly. "Oh, shit."

And as if to also prove that the killer was telepathic, her left leg exploded in a single burst of white-hot pain.

Yakima Proving Grounds, Terra
December 24, 2438: 1330 hours

"Hold up a minute," said Powers. He still had her hands and now he leaned forward so their faces were less than a half meter apart. "Let's think about this. Maybe this is a good thing."

"What?" Carolyn jerked her hands away so Powers clutched air. "How can you say that?"

"Didn't you just say that this could be normal?"

"No, I said it's not unheard of for a male to kill an infant, even his own. But this is something that Jack has never done."

"Which doesn't mean he couldn't. How do you know that this kind of aggressive behavior isn't just nature asserting itself?"

She blinked. Her eyes felt scratchy, and her nose was stuffed from crying. Jack, a killer? A cannibal? Chimps could change on a whim: docile one moment, murderous the next. They also hunted, usually in packs, for fresh meat to supplement their diets. But the chimps in the habitat were fed a carefully-balanced diet; they were given chunks of raw meat at monthly intervals in an attempt to prevent just this kind of behavior.

On the other hand, she knew that chimps, like humans, murdered, and for many reasons: to establish dominance; to exact revenge and sometimes because they liked it. She said all this then added, "Let's say for the sake of argument that Jack's behavior is normal; that he killed Tongo out of jealousy or something. What about Shana? I'm not aware of any report of any *male* killing both mother and infant at the same time. Females usually do that. Jack was being... sadistic."

"You're anthropomorphizing. You have no idea what's motivating Jack, right?" When she didn't answer, Powers continued, "Maybe it's plain old aggression. From where I'm sitting, that might be really good."

She gave a bitter laugh. "Explain that to Shana and Tongo."

"I'm a soldier, you're not. When you send troops out, you don't want them being swayed by subjective factors. What they should or shouldn't do. Soldiers are trained to kill. You want them to do their job without hesitation. So if this augmentation loop not only focuses and sustains attention and concentration with no fatigue *and* heightens aggression... then that's perfect."

She gaped. "Are you... you're... you're serious, aren't you? How can this be good?"

Powers gave a horsey snort. "Come on, think about it. We're not chimps. You remember Kincaid. Remember what a kick he got? How much better he got? Now *that's* a soldier. Knows how to keep a lid on it, that's all."

"No." Carolyn stood, drilling him with a look. "I don't agree. But since I'm not the project director and Gbarleman is, I'm going to let him make that decision. I'll get through to him somehow, even if I have to bully my way to some general's office to do it. The worst they can do is fire me. So, either you're coming with me, or you're not."

He stared up at her for a long moment. She couldn't read what he thought. He had his neutral expression firmly slapped in place. Finally, he pushed to his feet. "All right, I'll come. Gbarleman needs to hear both sides. That way nobody panics."

It was on the tip of her tongue to say something about covering his ass but she bit that back. Instead, she said, "We won't know anything until we can run more tests."

"And that's a damn good thing." He looked down at her. "I don't apologize for thinking the way I do. If you were in my position you might have exactly the same response. From my perspective, this is a potential windfall."

"Mmm." She stared right back. "Well, then, thank heaven I'm not."

"And *vive le différence*," he said, without irony. "We'll go to command communications. You drive."

They pushed out of the lab. Neither spoke as they circled around back. The sun was behind clouds. The air had a metallic smell and was so cold her nose hurt.

At her car, Powers pulled up. "Aw, hell. I forgot my jacket. Look, you go on ahead; just let me run back. I won't be a sec."

Carolyn didn't need encouragement. Shoulders hunched against the cold, she trotted to her car, aimed the remote, popped the doors. When she hauled back on the driver's side, the metal was stiff, and the hinges squalled. She dropped in, slammed the door. The vinyl upholstery was frigid. Turning around, she reached behind to the passenger seat. A wedge of her sheepskin jacket was beneath her gun case still in the well; she snagged a corner, reeled the jacket in and then shrugged into it. The leather creaked with cold.

"Heat," she said, cranking the engine and pushing buttons. "Heat, heat, heat." Cold air blasted her face, and she jammed a control that sent the chill lapping her ankles. She cranked her defrosters to max, waited a few minutes, watched as her breath bunched and balled. She was just beginning to get impatient when Powers crunched up, his bike in hand. Knocked on her rear windshield, mimed putting the bike in her trunk. She depressed the latch for the trunk, waited as he took off the front wheel, folded the bike to fit and slammed down the trunk lid.

"Sorry," he said, popping the passenger's side door. A blast of cold air pillowed in. He dropped into the passenger's side, slammed the door. "Got hung up shutting down one of the computers."

"Yeah?" She popped the brake, dropped the car into reverse, pulled out then shifted into drive. Her gloves were in back; she wished now that she'd thought to put them on. The steering wheel was like a block of ice. "I was positive I shut them all down."

"Guess not," said Powers, reaching around for his shoulder harness. "Jesus, if it's cold here, Kincaid and those guys have got to be freezing their asses off in Wyoming."

"Wyoming?" Frowning, Carolyn shot Powers a quick glance then faced forward as she pulled to the stop at the end of the exit. She hit her right turn signal then swiveled her head left to check for traffic. "I thought you said you didn't know where they were."

"Yeah?"

She looked back at him. "Yeah."

Powers's face was unreadable. "Mmm." Then, lifting his chin to indicate something to her left, "Jeep coming."

She turned back, spotted the jeep. "I can make that."

"But you want to go left."

She twisted back to look at him. "No, the communications," she began. Then stopped.

Carolyn Fletcher had seen a lot of slug-throwers and more than a few lasers in her life. She liked to shoot. So she registered that the weapon was a laser pistol, standard military issue and easy to flick from single to continuous burst depending upon whether Powers wanted to drill a hole or burn a track along her chest.

"No," said Powers. "You really want to go left."

En route to Death Canyon, Terra December 24, 2438: 1330

Watching Amanda's reactions through his scope – her horror shading to disbelief and settling upon intense calculation – filled him with a certain pride. Yes, that was the Amanda he knew, the confident wingman, the consummate soldier. She turned north because he'd buried the knife up to the hilt, and far enough away from the bodies so she had to face forward. The sun spilled over her shank of fiery red hair and made it glow like copper. A glint of metal in her hand: the tags. And then he saw her study the black butt bolt, read the initials – and then her head jerked up and she seemed to look right at him.

He exhaled, brought his targeting crosshairs over her heart. Waited for his to beat. And then he squeezed the trigger.



Amanda felt the bullet before she heard the shot. There was the flash of pain as the bullet sliced through her BDUs, then the skin, then muscle and veins of her left thigh before exiting. And then the pain detonated as the bullet blasted out a chunk of meat and skin and a spray of blood combined with fibers from her clothes.

She shrieked. Her knees folded, and she tumbled down hard on her right. By the time she was falling, the sound of the shot – a startling *BANG* – clapped against her body and bounced off, echoing along the hills, a sound that would carry for kilometers.

As much as she hurt, instinct and training kicked in. She hit and rolled right behind a nearby pine. Stayed sprawled on her stomach, head down. No point in pulling into a crouch for a shot; she didn't have a weapon worth shit anyway. She listened for the report of a second shot. Heard nothing but her heart banging away. She held her breath a second. Still nothing. Her left thigh screamed with pain. She was already sweating from the shock and her stomach knotted.

Take it easy, can't afford to lose it, just hold on.

After a minute when nothing came, she crawled to a sit, back to the tree. She still had the tags and Kincaid's KA-BAR. She tucked the tags into her parka, laid the KA-BAR alongside her right thigh.

Pulled off her gloves and gave her left thigh a quick once-over. Her skin jumped beneath her fingers, and a fresh wave of nausea had her sweating and tasting sour bile. The shot was through and through, lateral aspect of her left thigh. How much damage the bullet had done would depend on whether or not it had a lead core, how much it yawed or fragmented. No way to tell any of that, but the entrance wound was small and dimpled, the material from her trousers dragged in with the bullet. Couldn't see the exit wound. Her fingers came away slicked with blood, but she hadn't felt the gush of a pumper. So that was good. Fumbling her buckle, she stripped her belt from around her waist, threaded it under her thigh and cinched it down hard above the wound. She'd still bleed, but that would buy her some time.

High velocity, lots of kinetic energy, sniper shot, something with a really long barrel. Mac 2176, maybe a Ruger-Barrett RLR 7000, and very far away. Didn't hear the shot until way after I got hit.

That meant something else. Two things, actually. That far away, her sniper had a scope. If he had a scope, he knew what he was hitting and where he was aiming. The only way to hit her at distance was to aim high: heart-high. Or he could be a lousy shot. Somehow she didn't think that was it. So he'd meant to wound, not kill.

That was like toying with her, personally. No toying with those guys lined up at the tent, and she bet James and Hackett died quick. So that meant the sniper was someone she knew, really well.

There were a lot of good snipers in the universe. But as far as she knew there was only one that mattered. Couldn't believe it but didn't see a clear alternative. And then she remembered her target laser; flipped the IFF and cautiously swept the weapon north. The IFF beeped and she looked – and that's when her world crashed down around her ears.

Kincaid.



He could see the tail of her parka and a fold of hood. He thought about firing again but gave her several minutes to absorb the situation and realize the implications. His shot had been perfect. He needed the mouse alive. He was also confident that she would move soon. She could not afford to stay in one place.

She did not disappoint. After perhaps ninety seconds, he saw her use the tree for support and pull to a stand. She wobbled, righted; through his scope, he could see how white her knuckles were, the way they tented skin as she clung to the tree. Then she pushed off, staying as low as she could, her walk a shambling lurch.

Excellent. Slinging his weapon, he swarmed down from the tree and took off in a jog to flank her right. He would, he decided, squeeze off a shot from time to time to herd her where he wanted her to go.

Run, little mouse. He moved in an easy lope, and he felt fine, better than he had in three years. *Run.*

Yakima Proving Grounds, Terra ***December 24, 2438: 1400***

They drove northeast in silence, Powers with the laser below the dash and aimed at her gut. The Manastash Ridge was north and west, the humps of the Saddle Mountains almost dead ahead. Carolyn knew the proving grounds were big, almost thirteen hundred square kilometers of rolling, dun-brown, tinder dry shrub-steppe and chaparral bounded by the sheer basalt cliffs of the Yakima River to the west and the Columbia dead ahead. If he wanted, Powers could kill her in the middle of a lot of nothing and dump her anywhere.

And he won't even need the car because Iron Man's got the damn bike...

Then she remembered her PG-90, wondered if she could worm her left hand round, slip the catch, take out the weapon. Tight fit against the door, but she thought maybe she could. She waited a sec, then let her hand fall to her lap; waited a second or two more then eased her hand to her seat...

"No, no," said Powers. "Here; I'll get it." Keeping the pistol trained, he stretched his long arm behind her headrest, reached down and came up with her case. "Looking for this? We'll use it soon enough. Both hands on the wheel."

"What do you mean *we*?" When he didn't answer, she glanced right. "You want to explain? This can't be about that damned loop."

"Not the way you think," he said. His tone was neither hostile nor amused. Just there. "Eyes on the road, please. We wouldn't want an accident."

She did what he said. "You went back and wiped my data, didn't you?" A hunch, but it made sense given his protestations then trying to talk her into waiting and finally, when she wouldn't, the need to erase her data – and her. "What I can't figure is why."

"Don't worry about it. Instead, let's talk about you. Did you know you've got a depression problem?"

"Huh?"

"Pretty woman on a base alone over Christmas. No boyfriend. No family. Sounds depressing. You think that somebody's going

to think it's abnormal when I talk about how intense you were and kind of down in the dumps? Lonely? Distracted about Jack? We talked shooting and you said you were going out with your PG-90 to do some shooting and I offered to go with you, but you refused, and now I feel so guilty... well, you see how shrinks will go for it."

"Holiday blues? What, I'm going to shoot myself over Christmas?"

"No, I'm going to shoot you. The story is embellishment."

"Why are you doing this?"

A pause. Then: "I'm sorry, but I really can't tell you. Just drive."

She fell silent. She drove. She watched the road unfurling like a broad black ribbon and wondered what in hell to do. It scared her when her mind just kept turning over the same information again and again: *He's got the pistol; he's got my PG-90; all I can do is drive...*

They were on a stretch of road now that bent in a gentle curve south toward North Fork Lummuma Creek. The creek was on her right, and ahead she saw that the road dead-ended in another road running roughly north and south.

All I can do is drive.

Carefully, she slid her eyes right. The creek had iced over; the banks were sloped like a culvert and the entire width of the creek was about ten meters and not very deep. She had a half klick, she figured, before the road veered away.

*All I can do is... **drive.***

Powers said, "Up ahead, where it dead-ends, take a right."

"Uh-huh," she said. Then, before she could talk herself out of it, she jinked the wheel right, hard, and hammered the accelerator.

A lot happened at once and in a split second. There was a squeal of rubber, the sizzle of asphalt and then a grate of gravel as the car went off the road. She felt a giddy swirl of motion; flashes of blue sky and brown grass whizzing past her windshield; the feel of her harness biting her stomach. The sudden swerve jolted Powers left; he had enough time to give a startled shout, and Carolyn had an impression of arms flailing, the laser jerking right. The PG-90's case went bumping off Powers's knees, jamming into the passenger's side well, and the case popped open. Carolyn's fingers itched to grab the gun, but she hadn't let up on the accelerator and now here was the creek and a black gap and then the car's

front wheels grabbing air and a sensation of catapulting forward, falling; a smashing, splintering sound as the car rammed into ice and rock and hard earth. She felt herself hurtling forward as the car bammed to a halt; there was a *bang* as her driver's side airbag deployed. Her harness locked as momentum threw her body against the straps so hard she'd be black and blue for a month. Her face smashed into the airbag then rebounded like a hockey puck careering from a slap shot. She was dazed, seeing stars; her neck shrieking, but she was fighting now, angry at her body, ready for blood. Powers was jammed by his airbag, too, and he'd lost hold of his laser pistol, which had catapulted into the back seat.

The airbags began to deflate, and she was ready. Unsnapping her harness, she lunged forward, pushed the limp passenger's side bag aside and scrambled for the PG-90. But he was right there, his knees pushing her down and forward. Her arms scissored; she was jammed up against the glove box; the transmission lever stabbed her abdomen. He couldn't both pin her and grab his pistol, but she couldn't get her gun either. So she twisted around, saw nylon-sheathed pant leg and bit down, hard.

She tasted wet nylon and salty blood as her teeth tore at his skin. Roaring with pain, Powers jerked away, and then her fingers brushed metal and she had the PG-90 in her left hand and she was pushing back, knowing she had to get out of this cramped space or he'd wrest the gun away...

She transferred the gun from left to right simultaneously fumbling for the door release. But her fingers skittered and then it was too late because Powers's face twisted with black fury and he lunged.

So she shot him.

Death Canyon, Terra ***December 24, 2438: 1630***

The sun was slanting down directly ahead, yellow light painting the rock brassy and much too bright. She was nearly out of energy and time. She was close to the canyon. And then? Her head spun and her skin was clammy, cold. The butt of her target laser banged against her right hip. Her left leg was one steady, aching throb and, with all the walking, still bleeding. Her left pants leg was black and smelled like a wet penny; she could feel blood oozing into her sock. Her boot squelched.

He was driving her. She knew that; figured it out when she tried circling back to find a place to hide near Phelps Lake. She had some half-formed notion of stealing back to the squad's tents, going through their rations, taking a bedroll, maybe finding a radio. But every time she made a move, there was a crack of a rifle and the high ping of bark chunked off a tree by a bullet. The fact that the two events were closer meant he'd gained ground, too, not hard when Kincaid had two good legs.

But how could he smuggle in a rifle? He's good, but he's not...

She thought about defying him: forcing Kincaid to show himself. He wasn't ready to kill her just yet. The more she thought about it, the more it seemed clear that he was keeping her alive. But why? Her brain kept snagging on that because it didn't feel right. Kincaid, why would *Kincaid*...

Then a light bulb flash in her mind: the men lined up against that tent flap, their throats ringed with bloody necklaces... Something wrong there, but what? Not the bullet holes. Not the clothes. Their necks, yes; something wrong... Then she glanced down at her own knife and the answer burst on her brain.

Of course, of course, it's the only explanation.

Twisting round, she looked down the pass and spotted him: a dark speck, growing larger. She tried using her scope, but she was shaking so badly from fatigue and blood loss the image jittered and she gave up. Instead, she waited, not sure what she would do when he reached her. But she was through running.

Because she knew something else now.



When she stopped moving, the colonel was momentarily non-plussed. A new wrinkle; he disliked wrinkles. It was very important that she get up to the rim of the canyon. It was important that she not miss the show because he did not think they had much time. But when she stopped, he peered through the Barrett's scope; saw her hair plastered to her sweaty skin and the purple shadows bruising the hollows of those eyes.

Saw her mouth form the words: *Come get me, asshole.*

Well, well. When he came to within three meters, he was disappointed not to see shock or even horror. Horror he would have understood. In fact, horror was what he preferred. But she only nodded as if confirming some wager she'd made with herself.

She said, "You need to study up... is it, Colonel? Or *Sang-shao?*"

Excellent psychological tactics: Get in the first word; ask the questions; assert dominance. Well-trained; a spitfire. Defiant even in a hopeless situation. "Colonel will suffice, although your accent is excellent."

"I was present during several debriefings after Tybalt." Her eyes raked him from head to toe, and he felt her gaze, laser-bright, linger on the taut, shiny scar that swept like a scimitar from his left brow to right jaw before diving south beneath the neck of his parka. Only he knew that the scar continued to the level of his heart, spreading like the filaments of a web. He had refused plastic surgery. Let his body bear witness.

So he knew what she saw: The scar was as pink as the skin of a newborn rat and pulled down at the left corner of his mouth so that his lips were always slightly parted on that side, a slick of drool always there. The burns had singed away his left eyebrow to the pores and his nose had been foreshortened until his nostrils resembled the black pits of a sand viper. His left eye had boiled like an egg, and the orbit burst. He saw no need for an eye patch. So the socket was a wizened, pink crater.

She said, "You've obviously compensated for your left eye. Shooting, I mean."

"Indeed. Depth perception was problematic, but I have mastered myself. One only requires a single good eye to shoot." He cocked his head, studied her expression. "So, you knew. How?"

"I didn't at first. Then I remembered that squad." She nodded at the Barrett, its sling drooping over his right shoulder. "Kincaid's

a leftie. A leftie wouldn't begin his cut under the left ear, but you cut those guys after you'd propped them up, and you did it standing behind each man. The cut's deeper under the left ear and tails off to the right. No way a leftie can do that. You had me going for a little while, though. So," she said, "where's Kincaid? You killed him, didn't you?"

He answered with a jerk of his rifle, remaining well out of her reach. She might be wounded; he knew she was physically weak. But this was a formidable adversary who had more than proven her mettle in battle. "Up there. Above Death Canyon."

"I asked you a question."

"And I'm not prepared to answer, nor are you in a position to argue."

In response, she eyed him for a second then lowered herself to the ground – awkwardly because of her leg. "I'm not going anywhere. And I don't think you'll gun me down here. You want me alive and up there. Why? What's this about, revenge?"

He grinned, awkward because of the scar. From experience, he knew the effect was ghoulish. "You are the sauce. A... how shall we say it? My reward? I am looking forward to it. For you, I have very special plans. But you are not the goose."

"Then what's the goose?" she asked, straight-faced though he detected a narrowing of the eyes and knew that, of course, she *did* know but couldn't say because this prototype battle machine was supposed to be secret. Why else assassinate the machine's pilots?

He was about to reply when he heard something not... right. Explosions. No. Thunder? He saw that she heard it, too, and then he looked left, due north. The sound came again, more distinct, and now he recognized it: the low, rhythmic *wop-wop-wop* of a helicopter, a big one from the sound, perhaps a Desert Cobra or HAF Redhawk Gunship.

They are early. How? Who alerted...?

Still too far away, however, to be a threat. He tensed fractionally, waiting to see if the chopper vectored for them or turned for the decoys he'd planted along the way. Circling, circling... he let his breath go as the sound faded. But it would be back.

He looked down to see her deep-green eyes sparkle with triumph. "You don't have much time."

"No," said the colonel. He whipped around, his booted foot whirling in a roundhouse kick that caught her on the right temple. Crude but effective. Her head snapped left, and she crumpled without a sound. He waited a moment, knelt, pressed a finger to her neck and checked for a pulse: thready but there. This close, touching her... he was tempted. But, instead, he shouldered his weapon, bent, grabbed her limp forearms then hoisted her over his left shoulder. Her target laser slewed to one side, the strap pinned between his back and her chest. She was much lighter than he expected. This was a good thing because he still had a kilometer or two to go.

The chopper was not good. It was early and this meant something had been... compromised. He shot a glance left to the expanse of the shelf that opened up in a few hundred meters and quickened his pace. He did not wish for the helicopter to find them until he was done – with both of them.

With Amanda – and Kincaid.



Kincaid knew bad. A fighter in a flat spin, him and a Capellan in a knife fight in a phone booth – these were all bad. Battle of Tybalt was worse. But the situation now was beyond bad. The situation – Capellans in the Hegemony, Capellans infiltrating Terra and one of the most secure bases *on* Terra – was damn near catastrophic.

Kincaid had four days of Capellan hospitality to assess and re-assess the situation. Three days ago – when they'd shot him and then he'd come to as hands fumbled open his parka and ripped his tags from his neck – he'd gotten a firsthand look at just how really, really bad his situation was. They could've killed him; should have. But he knew when he saw the colonel – that pink web of shiny scar instead of a left eye – he knew they were keeping him alive for a very special reason.

"I've let you live for now," the colonel hissed, so close Kincaid felt spittle against his face. Face purple with fury, lips quivering, the colonel fistful of Kincaid's shirt in one hand and twisted until Kincaid's air choked off. "You'll live," he said, as Kincaid writhed, felt the blood thudding in his temples, his chest burning, "until I find her, and then I will enjoy watching you watch me with *her*. Then I will let you see her die, but I will do it slowly until you beg

me to end her agony, and then you will know suffering the way I suffered as I watched my *wife!*”

The colonel let Kincaid go, and then as Kincaid doubled up, sucking in air, the colonel aimed a vicious kick to Kincaid’s wounded left side. He laughed when Kincaid gargled a scream. Then the colonel went away.

One thing for sure: that guy was nuts. Kincaid suspected the colonel’s men knew that, too. But they valued living. Or maybe living long enough for a transfer.

There were two guards, one a pretty nice guy as Capellans, and probably Maskirovka, went. The other was a fairly grim schmuck, also Maskirovka, who was much more par for the course. They kept him alive. One, the nice guy, dressed his wound, peeling Kincaid’s blood-soaked BDU tunic, thermal and undershirt like soggy wrapping paper. The bullet had punched a hole just above Kincaid’s left hip. The nice guy sponged the wound, fished out a red-black plug of blood clot. That started more blood flowing, but it didn’t pulse. The exit wound on his back was about half the size of his fist. Kincaid tried to remember if there was anything vital there, but his thoughts were woolly and it felt like someone was jamming a red-hot poker through his side. Then the nice guy made him swallow pills, persuading him with the business end of a laser pistol. One was a painkiller; he drifted in and out of a fog for most of the day.

That must have been when they moved him, because when he came around again in the middle of the night, he felt cold stone leeching through a bedroll, smelled damp, reached up a hand, grazed wet stone and knew: a cave. Looked around, still too groggy to do much, but saw the orange glow of a cigarette suspended in midair that seemed a thousand meters away but was probably more like fifty.

Come morning, he was with it enough to take stock. Light filtered in from the entrance to his right and splashed the rock a muted silver-gray. The cave wasn’t large. Maybe thirty meters long by fifteen wide, with a shape like the track of a bullet with a lot of yaw: a narrow opening high enough for a man to hunker down and crabwalk his way in. Then a stretch where the cave gradually opened up before the roof soared away in the center and a man could stand and move comfortably. Then a dip again as the cave tailed off, ending in the cul-de-sac where he lay.

That day he hurt a lot so he didn’t move much. He spent his time observing and figured after five minutes that he could take both

these guys without too much trouble. Question was when and how, plus he had to get healthier. One thing he knew from experience: wait long enough, everyone relaxes. He spotted his target laser propped against the far left wall in the widest part of the cavern. He tried hard not to think about Amanda because every time he imagined that colonel touching her, his skin crawled and the reality of what they were up against made things seem... not hopeless. Just daunting. So he shoved that down, boxed it. He couldn't help either one of them if he panicked.

And who was the goddamned mole? That *really* nagged at him. Couldn't figure who the asshole was who sold them out. Obviously, someone on the inside and pretty high up because the SERE was classified, the project itself beyond secret. Sure, there were a lot of people on the project, and it was hard to account for all of them. But for the Capellans to both know who the *Mackie's* prospective pilots were and, more importantly, *where* they were... that narrowed the field.

Someone in command, or maybe one of the project directors, someone who deals with us on a regular basis; someone who doesn't mind if the Hegemony falls and a whole bunch of us get killed...

The second day two things happened. One: they cuffed his hands behind his back. Nice shiny metal cuffs, and both the nice guy and Grim had a key. Two: the nice guy pestered him to get up and walk. It wasn't just to prevent a blood clot from going to his lungs. Because of the cold, the air flow into the cave wasn't great, and Kincaid's peeing into a jug made it smell like it was raining piss. Kincaid made a big show of reluctance and moved extra slow, just enough to make Grim impatient, complain about the stink and gripe about wanting a cigarette.

The cave mouth opened onto a ledge about two meters wide. A rocky dirt track that Kincaid judged was about nine hundred meters doglegged north and then east back up to the canyon rim. The track wasn't steep, but Kincaid took his time, not just because he was in pain but to scope the terrain. They were in Death Canyon, he knew; the craggy teeth of the Tetons haloed by clouds were visible north and a little east, and looking west he could see clear across the canyon. Damn close to the radio, but he figured if they knew about him and everything else, they knew about the radio. Halfway up the trail, they passed tangled clumps of dry sagebrush clinging to the canyon walls and the dark roots of Douglas fir like wiry black fingers. When Kincaid looked up, he saw that grass lipped the canyon rim to a knot of fir.

Because they'd cuffed him, he had to concentrate on keeping his footing on the track. The rock was slippery. Kincaid saw that the nice guy still had the laser pistol. Grim prodded Kincaid along with his pulse laser. Once they got far enough from the cave, Grim stepped back and looked at him expectantly.

Still cuffed, Kincaid peeked over the edge and then stared back. Paused for effect. "Just remember to give it a good tap when I'm done."

The nice guy laughed, and Grim's skin flushed copper. Kincaid kept his neutral face on. Grim uncuffed him; Kincaid unzipped, did his business, tapped and zipped; they cuffed him and retraced their steps.

By the middle of the third day, he got their routine. First off, they had contact with the colonel three times a day. Radios: no words but tapped codes that were scratchy with static. Bad. That meant he had to take both soldiers, pretty much at the same time and between radio contacts. Plus, the way those guys grinned at each other after the evening message, Kincaid figured things weren't going well for his side.

That also meant the colonel was damned efficient. Knew where to go and who was there. So, yeah, someone on the inside, someone on the project. The fact that the colonel had his tags and parka meant he could play the SERE, pretty much trick anyone into thinking that he was Kincaid. *Probably let himself get tracked by those squads.* The jolt when someone hit you with the target laser wasn't totally incapacitating but it was damned unpleasant. So the colonel must be wearing some nonconductive material under the parka and Kincaid knew he was a damn good shot. So things weren't just bad for his side. They were a disaster.

Second, the nice guy only had a laser pistol; Grim had both a hand and pulse laser rifle, and neither liked the other much. This was good. In fact, Kincaid didn't think the nice guy bought into the mission at all: weird for a Maskirovka but maybe he had that nutso colonel pegged, and that was better. For one thing, he was way too... well, nice wasn't the right word. Humane, though, like Kincaid was a homeless mutt. Kincaid asked for painkillers; the nice guy handed them over. But he was sloppy because he was a Maskirovka, not a real medic. Didn't check Kincaid's mouth, didn't stick around so the painkillers, if Kincaid was mouthing them, would dissolve. Sloppy. By the middle of the third day, Kincaid had a stash that could probably put down an elephant. But then he had an excuse to always look groggy, pretend to sleep. He

stumbled around a lot when they let him up to pee, or when the nice guy said he had to walk. (Actually, some of it wasn't acting. He hurt like hell.) He didn't even consider doping their coffee or something stupid like that. Dope in coffee tasted like battery acid. Dope in anything other than coffee tasted like poison and stank like crushed beer cans. But he played up the groggy stuff.

Grim wasn't nice. Grim was a Maskirovka who liked action. Either that or he had PMS. Grouchy. Glowered a lot while the nice guy changed his bandages. Kept that laser pointed in the right direction. Griped about having to take Kincaid to the toilet. And he liked to smoke.

By the fourth day, the nice guy and Grim were bored and sick of each other. A lot of glares back and forth. Grim smoked like a fiend. Took a smoke break about every five minutes; planted himself right at the entrance to the cave, rifle on his knee. The colonel called in that morning but not in the afternoon, and the air was electric with tension. Kincaid was moving better, but he was still stiff. The day was bright, the cave mouth glowing like a milky eye. By midday, the sun had warmed the air in the canyon enough to set up a breeze.

Around midday, Kincaid heard a rifle shot. Didn't flinch but worried. Then, every once in a while, another shot. Random. Getting closer. The nice guy and Grim flicked looks.

Then they all heard the chopper. Kincaid caught only the dull boom of it, but he saw Grim roll back and duckwalk into the cave. After a few seconds, the thumping faded. Grim and the nice guy looked at one another, and something wordless passed between them because then they turned to look at him. When Kincaid stared back, the nice guy looked away first.

Bad. It was then that Kincaid knew he'd better get gone.

Lunch or early dinner or whatever, maybe a last meal kind of thing, was some chunky stew-muck: unrecognizable hunks of meat slicked with gray-green grease and something that passed for carrots and potatoes. The nice guy brought the food in a rations tin along with a fork, a spoon and a mug of sour coffee. By then, they'd let Kincaid sit up, hands in cuffs behind his back when he wasn't eating or pissing. Despite the fact that they hated each other's guts, the nice guy and Grim did the handcuff thing right: Grim with the rifle while the nice guy unlocked the cuffs. Then Grim went to smoke.

Kincaid forced down most of the food, chased it with sour coffee. Asked for another cup which the nice guy, being essentially a nice guy, brought and this was something Kincaid was banking on. He'd seen enough combat to know that the meds guys got when they had a gut wound stoppered them up so bad that when they finally crapped they did it all at once – especially after drinking something hot, like coffee.

All of a sudden, Kincaid stopped chewing in mid-mouthful. "Oh, Jesus."

"What?" The nice guy squatted two meters away, laser dangling from his right hand.

"I don't know." Then Kincaid groaned, doubled over. "Aw, Jesus, aw, I got to take a dump. Man, I got to go like right now!"

At the mouth of the cave, Grim ducked his head and looked around. Cigarette screwed into the corner of his mouth. Scowled. "You'll have to wait." Cigarette dancing.

"We should take him," said the nice guy.

"I'm finishing my smoke."

"Jesus." Kincaid exhaled, closed his eyes. Grimaced against a cramp. "You want me to shit in my pants? Come on, for Christ's sake, I can't help it if I..." Doubling over, grimacing. "Aw, God, that hurts."

"I'm taking him," said the nice guy.

Grim grunted. "Do it by yourself then. You can wipe his ass when he's done."

"Christ." Kincaid showed his teeth in a grimace and his face got frantic. "Aw, no, we got to go, we got to go, we got..."

Two seconds later, the nice guy's features shaded into shock. He started waving his hands. "Stop, stop!"

Grim was on his feet, cigarette dangling, smoke spiraling in a vertical curlicue. "Hell he doing? Man, don't let him do that!"

"I can't! Jesus!" Kincaid squeezed out a couple tears, looked away. "I told you! Please, please!"

"Wait, wait!" The nice guy getting up fast, probably thinking he'd be the one stuck with clean-up. "Come on, I will take you!"

"Damn it." Kincaid averted his eyes. A guy ashamed to have crapped his pants. "Just a sec..." Doubling over from a cramp. "Give me a sec." Palming the fork. "Christ..."

"Will you get him the fuck out?" Grim. "Just get him *out!*"

"Come on!" The nice guy, at his right elbow. Hand on his shoulder. "Come, I will take you, I will..."

Kincaid shot up, grabbed the nice guy's right wrist with his right hand and jammed the fork into the nice guy's eye with his left. The nice guy screamed, dropped the laser, clawed at his face. Blood and eye jelly spurting, the fork jittering. Kincaid swept up the fallen hand laser with his right hand, danced right, crouched, saw Grim hunkering down for a shot – and blasted Grim just as he got his rifle set. Screaming, Grim flinched back, slammed rock; his laser discharged, burning a seam that skimmed a few centimeters above Kincaid's head. Then Grim rebounded right and disappeared.

The nice guy was still shrieking. Kincaid spun him around then smashed his left forearm into the nice guy's throat. Felt the brittle cartilage of the larynx explode and then the nice guy stopped screaming, fell to his knees, clawing at his throat, trying to get air through a fractured larynx but only making bubbly choking sounds. Kincaid pressed the muzzle of the laser to the nice guy's temple and pulled the trigger. A flash, a sizzle. Stink of roast meat. The nice guy stopped trying to breathe.

Winded, Kincaid staggered to the mouth of the cave. He looked down. Wheezed. Grim had burst like a blood-filled balloon an easy fifty, sixty meters below. His rifle was nowhere to be seen.

Damn. Kincaid sagged against the cave wall. His wound had opened up; his side roared with pain and blood was seeping down his side. The air reeked of feces and charred pig. He went back, took the nice guy's hand laser and grabbed his target laser. He would have stripped off the nice guy's pants, but the guy was small. He stripped out of his underpants though, tossed them, figured that if he got out of this alive the whole thing would make a damn fine bar story. Tugged his BDUs back on. Slung the target laser over his right shoulder. Thanked Christ he still had his parka and, in the parka, his gloves. He ducked down, duckwalked to the entrance and turned north onto the track.

If I can make it to the rise. He stepped as quickly as he could, but he was wobbly from days of immobility and unsteady on the

rocky trail. *If I can just make it to the rise, I can find someplace to wait for the colonel; he's got to come this way...*

There was a faint thumping sound now, echoing in the canyon, and he realized that it was the chopper still north but closer. He was still too far below the rim to see the chopper, but if he could get up there, signal it... *Because something's happened; now they've sent people out to find us.*

And then he had an idea. Scuttled to the halfway point, when the lip of tinder-dry scrub and sagebrush was nearly even with his right shoulder and he was still a good seven hundred meters shy of the rim. Laser thumbed to full burn, he played the stream of light over the sagebrush and gnarled roots. Instantly, the grass flashed, sparked; there was a crackle and a sputter; and in a few seconds, there was gray smoke and orange fire racing for the rim. The updraft from the canyon floor brought oxygen and the flames flared up hot and bright. He saw the fire eat its way up the hill. Smoke pillowed and swirled, and as the crackling fire spread to that trio of squat Douglas firs, there was a bright flash as the trees ignited.

Like sending up a flare. He started forward again, the whoosh and roar of the fire in his ears. They got to see it...

Then he looked up and his stomach bottomed out.



Smoke, and now the colonel knew something was very wrong. Even with Amanda slung over his shoulder, he'd made adequate time, and she had not regained consciousness. The trail had come out above the treeline and was much wider now as it headed west, worming in an S. So as the trail looped out, he saw the smoke first; and then he broke into a rough jog. Another hundred and fifty meters, and he saw the Maskirovka's body draped over crimson rock — and then he spotted Kincaid.

No, you won't steal this from me, not now! Cursing, the colonel stooped, tumbled Amanda from his shoulder and pivoted with his rifle in his right hand, dropping into a crouch. In the next moment, as he scanned the path through shrouds of smoke, he almost laughed out loud. Kincaid was perhaps six hundred meters, an easy shot, and had only a laser pistol and that pitiful target laser. He judged Kincaid was too far along the track to run

back to the safety of the cave, where he would be trapped in any case. Kincaid's hand laser didn't have the range. So the only thing Kincaid could do was vault the edge – which he couldn't because the track was sheer.

Not exactly what he'd had in mind. He would have to enjoy Amanda alone. Still? The colonel unhooked his rifle from his shoulder. It would be a pleasure among many to come.



Kincaid saw them both, the colonel and Amanda; saw the left leg of Amanda's BDUs saturated with blood; saw through the thickening smoke how the colonel slid Amanda from his shoulder to the ground where she lay, unmoving. He knew without looking that he could not go back or over the edge. So he did the only thing he could.

Jamming the hand laser into a pocket of his parka, Kincaid transferred the rifle from his right to his left hand and scuttled up the track.

One chance, I get one chance and then it won't matter because I'll be dead and the chopper might make it before he does anything to Amanda; God, how bad is she hurt, did he... ?

Kincaid's mind balked and he concentrated now on scrambling along the ridge, wincing as his side bunched and caught. A thickening gray veil of smoke hung between him and his opponent. But that meant his opponent couldn't see him either....

His head snapped up as he caught the rhythmic *whop-whop-whop* of the chopper. *Yes, yes!* He was on the move, crouching, duckwalking. The chopper was closer because the pilot had seen the fire and smoke and they would be in time to save Amanda; that was all that mattered, just get Amanda safe....

Suddenly, Kincaid's left boot crunched gravel then skittered to one side, and he slipped. The maw of the canyon opened on his left.



Amanda crawled to consciousness. The inside of her head felt like someone had thrown in a cherry bomb and clanged down the lid. A headache blistered her brain back of her eyes, and the pain along her skull and neck was bad enough to momentarily overshadow the persistent throb in her left thigh. She was aware that she was on the ground; dry sagebrush pricked her cheeks, and the taste of bloody grit was in her mouth. She heard something that sounded like cold cellophane being crinkled, but then she smelled wood char and began to choke against smoke. She propped herself up on her elbows.

They were on the rim of Death Canyon, and she saw the colonel, ahead and to her left: facing away, his rifle in his hands, thick gray and black smoke swirling over his body, the ground on fire so the colonel looked like a devil rising from a pit. She pushed up to a sit, silently groaning as she did so – and felt the strap of her target laser drag over her right arm.



No! Kincaid swayed over the edge. His boot skittered on rock then shot to the side. Crying out, he threw himself right, flailing for a handhold; he banged down, his chest punching rock, his belly slithering over hard pack – *can't lose the rifle, can't lose it!* – and then, at the last possible second, his right hand snagged rock. A shower of pebbles sluiced by but he held on, digging in with his elbows and the toes of his boots, and pulling in air that tasted of smoke and hot ash.

It had taken all of five seconds and when he dared to look again, he found that he'd slipped two, perhaps three meters from the ridge. *Take too long to climb back up.* He shot a quick glance at the smoke. The wind could shift direction at any moment and he had to be ready. And then it struck him that having fallen this far was a blessing.

Because he won't have to compensate for gravity as much; if anything, he'll have to aim a little higher.

But he had to get closer; moving away wasn't any option. His eyes darted left, searching for any toehold. There was one, not more than a meter away, and not really a ledge but a spur of rock that formed a natural saddle and it was perfect. It took Kincaid fifteen seconds to make it to the saddle and another two to drop into position. Then he blew out, trying to get his heartbeat to slow, searching for that calm place he needed to make his last shot count.



The colonel was so enraged that his anger choked him nearly as much as the accursed smoke! Eyes stinging with tears, he hunched down as the wind whipped a dark funnel cloud. He heard the crackle of dry sagebrush igniting; saw flames licking the trunks of the firs. Smoke boiled over the ridge, and then just as suddenly the wind shifted again and the smoke thinned, and now he could make out the canyon's far rim, the flat butte of a distant pass and then, much closer, there was Kincaid.

For an instant, the colonel was so surprised, he nearly whooped for joy. Fallen from the track trying to save his lady love? Well, Kincaid had failed in that as well. The fool had slithered down the slope. A pity he hadn't broken his neck but now look at him: curled on rock, a target laser no more deadly than a child's toy in hand.

And thank you for making my job that much easier. With Kincaid closer, the colonel wouldn't have to worry about gravity as much, though the wind would be a problem. Five hundred meters, perhaps. A trivial distance.

Another pillow of smoke, but the colonel was not bothered. The colonel released a breath, dropped his crosshairs even as he heard the heavy bass rumble of the chopper, knowing that nothing mattered more than this instant toward which he'd been rushing these three long years.

Because I will kill him and then I will kill both her and myself and it will be done and what has been set in place may yet succeed in toppling Cameron and this accursed Hegemony.

Waiting for the smoke to clear, judging the wind gusting east, and seeing now that his aim was perfect, his crosshairs centered on a spot just above Kincaid's left ear.

His heart beat – and paused. And in that dead space, the colonel held his breath as his finger tightened on the trigger.



It was the moment Kincaid had been waiting for. He was barely conscious of the chopper's thumping; the roar of fire; his own pain. Every distraction dropped away like a tree shedding the last of its leaves. The smoke thinned, parted, cleared, and Kincaid saw the

white blur of his opponent's face appear then firm in his scope because Kincaid had judged the distance just right. His focus was tight enough that he saw the colonel's shoulders give a little flinch of surprise, but his opponent had taken aim, had his scope to his eye...

And then Kincaid squeezed the trigger and took the shot of his life.



A searing red flash spiking the center of his crosshairs and then his right eye erupted in a starburst of pain. Roaring in agony, the colonel flinched back, stumbled, lost his grip on his rifle, which went skittering over the edge. It discharged and because it was so close, he heard the blast at the same time something hummed past his left ear. He heard the squeal and pop of gravel beneath his boots. His eye screwed shut; tears squeezed from beneath his right lid. The pain was so bad it was as if Kincaid had driven a white-hot poker directly through his eye and into his brain. He was afraid to open it; imagined that the eye had burst and he was afraid, he was afraid...

Blind! His thoughts came as jagged as shards of glass: *Laser... magnified... scope... blinded... my eye...*

Crying out in fear and pain, he twisted, bent at the waist, swung right. *Have to get up, more level ground, have to get away!* But he was too afraid to open his eye; and he couldn't see, he was blind... !

There was a rush of something whirring just behind. He heard it cleaving the air just before it barreled into his back with the force of a sledge hammer.



There was smoke and fire, and the ground vibrated from the basso rumble of the chopper, but she was on her feet, the target laser's barrel tight in her hands. She'd lost the feeling in her left leg, and the limb was numb; it was like trying to walk with a badly fitted peg. She limped forward, dancing on her right leg, trying to cover distance before the colonel could fire because she knew without having to see it that Kincaid was down there and she had to get to the colonel, she had to stop him! But before she made

it, the colonel's back went ramrod straight. He screamed and then his hands flew up, the rifle twirling away like a baton. She heard the crash of a gun shot and then he staggered back from the rim, his hands clapped to his right eye. He stumbled back on his heels – and was just close enough.

Amanda uncoiled, swinging the target laser like an axe with all her might. There was a high whistle as the butt sliced air and then bammed against the colonel's back so hard the barrel tried to jitter out of her hands. The blow sent the colonel reeling forward a step, then two, and then – he was gone.

All except his scream.



Kincaid saw Amanda lurch for the colonel, her laser cocked like a bat, and he roared with joy, cheered her on. She was a beauty. She was fire, with her red hair and taut, savage grimace. She was Death – and he never loved her more than he did at that moment.

He saw her swing and connect; he watched as the colonel rocketed from the blow, plummeting from the rim, falling away, screaming. He saw Amanda sway, take a step; saw the laser slip from her fingers and then he watched, helpless, as she folded in on herself and collapsed as a Redhawk hove into view, parting the curtain of fire and smoke and bellowing like a beast loosed from the throat of hell.

Evans Military Hospital, Terra January 10, 2439: 1825 hours

She regained consciousness by degrees. The first time, there had been a gabble of voices, the pinch of a needle and the more deliberate pain of a catheter being inserted into a vein of her left arm. Someone shouting: "Major, we gonna med-evac you, do you understand? Major, you hear me, squeeze my fingers!" She struggled to focus and must have managed to do what he asked because then someone was slapping an oxygen mask over her nose and mouth. A sensation of being swaddled, lifted; a roar of rotors and then the ground falling away. Or maybe that was her mind.

The next time, there were bright lights and a great deal more pain but all over. Her throat was very dry and there was something hard in her mouth snaking to the back of her throat. She panicked, couldn't get her breath. Then there was the voice of a woman telling her not to fight the tube; a blurred image through gummy eyelids, and then the rush of something very cold along her forearm....

More blackness. More sleep.

She awoke for the third time in a bed with aluminum rails squared in a room that was dark except for a dim lamp on a night table to her right. Her mouth was terribly dry and when she tried to swallow, it hurt. When she slicked her lips with her tongue, she discovered that they were fissured and very chapped, and that reminded her of that moment on the mountain right before she rounded the corner of the tent...

She must have made a sound because there was a rustle of fabric on fabric and then Kincaid was there. She was so overwhelmed her lips trembled and her eyes burned with tears.

"Amanda." He cupped a hand to her left cheek, and she felt his thumb wiping away the wet. "'Bout time you woke up, girlfriend."

She got weepy and that embarrassed her because she didn't want him to think she was crying because of *him*, even though she was. Her voice came out in little hitches: "I'm... I'm so... stupid... to... to... cry."

Kincaid's lips curled in a grin. "Don't worry about it. The doctors said the painkillers might do that, and even if they didn't, you've been banged up pretty bad. Go ahead, cry. I know you're glad to see me."

"You wish." She gave a weak, half-hearted laugh then winced as her throat balled. "Thirsty."

Kincaid fed her ice chips, and she never thought she'd tasted anything as wonderful. She felt a wave of relief that was as much a physical unclenching of her muscles as emotional. When she'd slowed down, he said, "Are you ready to hear what's going on?"

She nodded. "How did they find us? Why did they even come looking?"

"One of the docs back at the project called in the alarm. Name of Fletcher, works with the chimps."

"Doesn't ring a bell."

"You know her. She's one of the team but, you know, who pays attention?" He recited the story about Powers then added, "She capped Powers and then took his bike. The problem is no one knows if Powers and the Capellans planned this as a joint operation – you know, having two prongs of attack in case one failed – or if Powers was working for somebody else."

"Break-away," she said. "So busy looking at one guy, you never see the second."

He nodded. "All they found for Powers was the number of an unlisted account way the hell off-world. No idea who paid him. So it could be just the Capellans or the Capellans and Federated Suns working together, though that doesn't compute. For that matter, it could be any one of a number of nobles, someone figuring he has more right to rule the Hegemony than Cameron. The way I'd do it? Steal the *Mackie*, take out the pilots, turn Cameron into a grease smear and throw the Hegemony into chaos as the *coup de grâce*, then waltz in and put on the save. Be some pretty damned grateful businesses out there not really keen on losing out billions on an investment."

"I thought you said your relatives own some of those businesses. They wouldn't turn."

Kincaid eyed her askance. "Don't be so sure. Business is business. Any of my family gets in the way, they get eliminated and someone more... easily *persuaded* takes over."

"Then thank God it didn't happen."

"Yet." Kincaid paused. "Whoever he is, he has plenty of balls, patience, and organization. He'll be back."

She couldn't resist. "Might be a she."

"Christ, no." Kincaid grunted. "Probably just like you, and then I know we're in deep shit."

They grinned at one another. Then Amanda said, "So they fixed the helmet?"

"Well, what they *said* is that they'd gotten rid of the loop. Whether the same thing might happen to us months down the line... who knows? They did tests on me. You, too, except you were out. So far everything's okay. Fletcher's assistant director now and Gbarleman said there shouldn't be a problem. Far as HAF is concerned, this never happened."

"I don't know if I like the sound of that."

"Why tell anyone? You know how many people get killed when they're testing new systems? Happens all the time. You just don't tell John Q. But how are you going to win if you never fail?"

"Don't tell me this is one of those risk-is-our-business things."

Kincaid shrugged. "Well, it is. Sure, we could pull out. We could try to raise a stink. But someone's got to take the risk. That's why there are tests and pilots willing to fly prototypes knowing they might crack up. You accept it as part of the job, or you move on."

She had to give him that. He told her about James and Hackett, then about the squads. Then she asked what she'd been putting off because she wasn't sure she wanted to know. But she said, "So what's wrong with me?"

"You had a pretty solid concussion, a non-depressed skull fracture, not to mention losing a couple liters. You've been out for a long time."

"How long?"

"Try almost three weeks."

She gawped. "Three *weeks*?"

"Yeah. It's almost the middle of January. You were in ICU for New Year's. The nurses threw a little party, put one of those pointy hats on your head."

"I don't believe you," she said, laughing, wanting to take a swat at him. The image was pretty silly. But next year; it was next *year*. "When can I get out?"

“Now that you’re awake, probably end of the week. But you’ll have to take it easy. Where you got shot was pretty nasty. They couldn’t close it, it had been too long. So they just washed it out good and loaded you with antibiotics. Let the thing heal in by itself. They said you’ll have a hell of a scar.”

She blew out. “That’s the least of my worries. What about you?”

His lips quirked into a grin. “They kept me a couple days, then got tired of listening to me complain. The Maskirovka did okay by me so mine wasn’t as bad.” He paused, and she sensed the shift in his mood. “There’s no easy way to say this,” he said.

She read it in his eyes, and didn’t need to say it but she did anyway. “You’re piloting the *Mackie*.” When he nodded, she said, “Okay, makes sense. It’s the only logical choice now. So, yeah, right,” she forced a smile to her lips, “congratulations. I guess the best man won.”

“Thanks.” Kincaid cocked his head to one side and regarded her for a moment. “Actually, I pretty much refused.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Yeah, but I don’t believe it. The hell you do that?”

He lifted one shoulder, let it fall. “Because I was just the guy left standing.”

“What happened to all that rah-rah Hegemony crap? Don’t tell me the Director-General isn’t, you know, pissed.”

“No, he’s pretty insistent. So are all my relatives who’ve tied up capital in this thing. They want the test run on the specified date, no delays. So, you know, family on my back, nag, nag. I finally agreed to think about it.”

She was amazed when the words came out of her mouth: “What were we just talking about? Someone’s got to pilot the damn thing. Might as well be you.”

“And not you?” He frowned. “What? Why?”

“Because then everything will have been for nothing,” she said. “Hackett, James... *this*. I don’t know about you, but I came pretty close to dying. Even so, I accept that because I’m a soldier. Like you said, it’s the job. So do your goddamned job. Show the Capellans,

the Federated Suns...hell, show 'em all that we're pros. They can't keep us down. If you don't pilot that thing, then Cameron looks like a fool and we look like jackasses. Remember what you said about Isabelle?"

"I remember."

"Well, it applies. I don't like it. But I accept it because there are some things you have to do, and that's one of them. So if you can marry a woman you don't love because that's your duty, then you sure as hell are going to do this for me. Besides, how am I going to watch your ass in a *Mackie* if you don't park *yours* in that command couch and prove that hunk-a-junk works?"

He was silent, his dark-blue eyes steady on hers. Then his lips parted in a slow smile. "You watching my ass has its attractions."

"Count on it, Kincaid. I'm your wingman," she said simply. "Always have been and always will be. Because put you and me in a couple of bad-ass *Mackies*?" She found his hand and held it tight and knew she'd never let go. "The universe is in for some serious shit."

The End

Next Month:

House Steiner

Prometheus Unbound

by Herbert A. Beas II

