



## The Red: First Light (The Red Trilogy)

By Linda Nagata

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A *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of 2015

Reality TV and advanced technology make for high drama in this political thriller that combines the military action of *Zero Dark Thirty* with the classic science fiction of *The Forever War*.

Lieutenant James Shelley, who has an uncanny knack for premeditating danger, leads a squad of advanced US Army military tasked with enforcing the peace around a conflict in sub-Saharan Africa. The squad members are linked wirelessly 24/7 to themselves and a central intelligence that guides them via drone relay—and unbeknownst to Shelley and his team, they are being recorded for a reality TV show.

When an airstrike almost destroys their outpost, a plot begins to unravel that's worthy of Crichton and Clancy's best. The conflict soon involves rogue defense contractors, corrupt US politicians, and homegrown terrorists who possess nuclear bombs. Soon Shelley must accept that the helpful warnings in his head could be AI. But what is the cost of serving its agenda?

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## **The Red: First Light (The Red Trilogy) By Linda Nagata Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"...an amazing novel... *The Red: First Light* is a dark, intelligent, cynical take on military SF. It's an excellent novel that deserves a much larger audience."--Stefan Raets, Tor.com

"...an excellent novel and will likely remain near the top of my list of favorite 2015 reads. Highly Recommended" --Rob H. Bedford, SFF World

"This powerful military SF trilogy opener is set in a near future where defense contractors call the shots...Fans of thoughtful, cynical, and not particularly jingoistic military SF will love this book."  
--*Publishers Weekly*, starred review and Best Summer Books 2015

"...one of the best pieces of near future Mil-SF ever written. What's so good about it? The action rocks and the characters are engaging as hell. But this isn't just adventure fiction, it's Mil-SF and very well done, straight out of DARPA's dreambook, not somebody's fantasy." --Ernest Lilley, SFRevu

"*The Red: First Light* is a gripping exploration of the human and technological aspects of next-generation warfare. What sets the story apart is its ability to address the human level of what it is like for soldiers to live with the next generation of battlefield technology and to place it within an action-driven story..."--August Cole, *The Art of Future Warfare*

#### About the Author

Linda Nagata is a Hawaii-based American author of novels, novellas, and short stories. She has been awarded the Nebula Award, and *The Red: First Light* was a 2013 finalist for Best Novel for both the Nebula and John Campbell awards.

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#### The Red

“THERE NEEDS TO BE A WAR going on somewhere, Sergeant Vasquez. It’s a fact of life. Without a conflict of decent size, too many international defense contractors will find themselves out of business. So if no natural war is looming, you can count on the DCs to get together to invent one.”

My orientation lecture is not army standard. I deliver it in the walled yard of Fort Dassari while my LCS—my linked combat squad—preps for our nightly patrol. Since sunset the temperature has dropped to ninety-five degrees American, for which we are all grateful, but it’s still goddamn hot, with the clinging humidity of the rainy season. Amber lights cast glistening highlights on the smooth, black, sweat-slick cheeks of Sergeant Jayne Vasquez, who arrived by helicopter, along with a week’s worth of provisions, just four hours ago.

Like the rest of us, Jaynie Vasquez is wearing a combat uniform, body armor, and the gray titanium bones of her exoskeleton. Her finely shaped eyebrows are set in a skeptical arch as she eyes me from beneath the rim

of her brown LCS skullcap. I suspect she's been warned about me—the notorious Lieutenant James Shelley, United States Army—her new commanding officer here at Fort Dassari.

Not a problem. Knowledge is a good thing.

“So how do the DCs go about inventing a war?” I ask her.

She answers in the practical manner of an experienced non-com: “Above my pay grade, sir.”

“Worth considering all the same. I imagine it goes like this: All the big defense contractors, the DCs we love to hate, get together—not physically, but in a virtual meeting. At first they’re a little cold—that’s the nature of a defense contractor—but then one of the DCs says, ‘Come on, now. We need someone to host the next war. Any volunteers?’”

“Yes, sir,” Specialist Matthew Ransom says with a grin as he presents himself to me for a mandatory equipment check.

“This is serious, Ransom.”

“Sorry, LT.”

I initiate the check anyway, making an inventory of his gear and confirming that every cinch on his exoskeleton is secure while I pick up the thread of my story.

“‘Any volunteers.’ That’s a joke, see? Because a DC will never allow a war in their own country. Rule one: Don’t kill off your taxpayers. War is what you inflict on other people.”

“That’s the truth, sir,” Jaynie says in a bitter undertone as she initiates an equipment check for Private First Class Yafiah Yeboah.

Maybe I’m getting through to her.

“Anyway, the joke works, the ice is broken, and ideas start getting tossed around until one of the DCs says, ‘Hey, I’ve got it. Let’s do a war in the Sahel. It’s good, open terrain. No nasty jungles. It’s not quite desert, and we’ve already got a figurehead in Ahab Matugo.’ This sounds pretty good to everybody, so they agree: The next regional war, the one that will keep them in business for another three or four years, or even a decade if things go well, is right here in Africa’s Sahel, between the equatorial rain forest and the Sahara.”

I reach the last point of inspection, crouched in the mud beside Matt Ransom’s left boot where it’s strapped into the exoskeleton’s floating footplate. Everything looks good, so I slap his thigh strut and tell him, “You’re clear.”

The frame of my own exoskeleton flexes as I stand. There’s a faint sigh from the joints as the struts alongside my legs boost me up with no effort on my part, despite the weight of my eighty-pound backpack. The mechanical joints release a faint, sterile scent of mineral lubricant, barely detectable against the organic reek of mud and dogs.

I turn back to Jaynie. She pauses in her equipment check and asks, “So now the defense contractors have to get the war started, right?”

“First they have to choose sides, but a coin toss will do it. China winds up as primary backer of Ahab Matugo, and an Arab alliance takes the status quo—”

“LT,” Ransom interrupts, “you want me to clear you?”

“Yeah. Go ahead.” I run my gloved hand over my skullcap as he begins tugging on cinches and checking power levels. I’m remembering the buildup to this war, watching it happen while I served my first combat tour at the tail end of Bolivia. I try hard to keep my voice calm. “So we Americans . . . we don’t jump in right away. We have another war to wind up first, so we promise to intervene when humanitarian issues demand it—but we don’t discuss what side to come in on because it doesn’t fucking matter. Everyone knows we don’t understand the local politics and we don’t give a shit anyway. There’s nothing in this region we want. The only reason we’re jumping in is so that our defense contractors can keep their shareholders happy. The American taxpayers will listen to their hoo-rah propaganda media outlets and pony up the money, blaming the liberals for the bad economy while brain-draining the underclass into the army because hey, it’s a job, and even the DCs can’t convince Congress to spend ten million dollars each on a combat robot when you can get a fully qualified flesh-and-blood high-IQ soldier for two hundred and fifty thousand.”

Ransom steps back. “You’re clear, sir.”

I ignore him. “And that, Sergeant, is the reason we are here at Fort Dassari, squatting in a country where we’re not wanted and we don’t belong, and it’s why we get to go on a hike tonight and every night through hostile terrain, giving other people who also don’t belong here a chance to kill us. We are not here for glory—there isn’t any—and there’s nothing at stake. Our goals are to stay alive, to avoid civilian casualties, and to kill anyone with an interest in killing us. In nine months, no soldier has died under my command and I’d like to keep it that way. Is that understood?”

Jayne keeps her face carefully neutral. “Yes, sir, that is understood.” And then, because she’s not about to be intimidated by a male lieutenant five years her junior and with a quarter of her combat experience, she adds, “Guidance described you as a crazy motherfucker, sir—”

Behind Jaynie, Yafiah claps a hand to her mouth, stifling a snort of laughter.

“—but they promised me, no matter how much of an asshole you are, they won’t walk us into an ambush.”

I smile pleasantly. “They’ve come close a few times.”

As the most northeastern in a line of remote border forts, we are more exposed than most. The fort itself is our shelter, our base of operations. Its fifteen-foot-high walls enclose the housing unit and a yard just big enough to park two tanks—not that we have tanks, but we do have three ATVs stored under an accordion canopy.

Our mission lies outside the walls. We do interdiction—hunting for insurgents filtering down from the north, while the insurgents go hunting for us. Guidance doesn’t always spot them in time, which is one reason we keep a pack of five dogs. They’re not official army issue, but the motto of the linked combat squads is Innovation, Coordination, Inspiration . . . meaning as an LCS we get leeway to come up with our own strategies.

“One more thing, sir,” Jaynie says as I turn away. “Is it true you’re cyborged?”

“It’s just an ocular overlay.” I touch my gloved finger to the corner of my eye. “Like built-in contact lenses, but they receive and display data.”

The gold line tattooed along the curve of my jaw is an antenna, and tiny audio buds are embedded in my ears, but I don’t mention those.

“You’re not linked to the outside world, are you?”

“From a war zone? Not a chance. The only link I’m allowed is to Guidance.”

“So you’re hooked into Guidance even when you’re not wearing the helmet?”

“You got it. Everything I see, everything I hear, gets piped straight upstairs.”

“Why is that, sir?”

Not a discussion I want to get into right now, so I turn my attention to the last of our little crew. Private First Class Dubey Lin is standing on the catwalk, nine feet above the ground, peering through a machine-gun port at the surrounding trees. Dubey over-relied on organic sight, but he’s always ready to go on time and he never argues. Actually, he never says much of anything at all. “Dubey!” I shout. “Get down here.”

“Yes, sir!”

He jumps to the ground, letting the shocks of his exoskeleton take the impact and startling the dogs, who are so wound up in anticipation of the night’s patrol that they lunge at one another. Vicious growls erupt as they spin around in play fights. Ransom gets in on it, launching a few kung fu kicks and chops in Dubey’s direction, flexing his exoskeleton’s leg and arm struts, but Dubey ignores him, as always.

In the LCS ranks, we’ve nicknamed the exoskeletons our “dead sisters” because all the parts except the floating footplates look a lot like human bones. Shocked struts with knee articulation run up the outside of the legs to the hips. Across the back, the rig takes an hourglass shape to minimize profile, ending in a shoulder-spanning arch that easily supports both the weight of a field pack and the leverage that can be generated by the slender arm struts.

Packets of microprocessors detect a soldier’s movements, translating them to the rig in customized motion algorithms. A soldier in an exoskeleton can get shot dead and never fall down. I saw that in Bolivia. And if there’s enough power left in the dead sister, it can walk the body back to a safe zone for recovery. I’ve seen that too. Sometimes the dead just keep walking, right through my dreams. Not that I’d ever admit that to Guidance.

Jayne pushes me a little harder. “So if Guidance is listening in on everything you say, sir, why do you keep talking shit?”

“We have to play the game, Sergeant. We don’t have to like it. Now, helmets on!”

We all disappear behind full-face visors tuned to an opaque black.

Tiny fans vent cool air across my face as I watch an array of icons come up on my visor’s display. They assure me I’m fully linked: to my skullcap; to my M-CL1a assault rifle; to each one of my soldiers; to my

angel, soaring invisibly high in the night sky; and to my handler at Guidance. “Delphi, you there?”

Her familiar voice answers, “Gotcha, Shelley.”

They don’t call us a linked combat squad for nothing.

I use my gaze to shuffle through the displays of each soldier in my LCS, confirming that they’re linked too.

Technically, every linked combat squad should have nine pairs of boots on the ground, but at Dassari we’ve never had more than six, and due to personnel transfers, we were down to four before Jaynie got here. The army likes to brag that every LCS soldier is an elite soldier, meeting strict physical and intellectual requirements, with a demonstrated ability to adapt to new systems and circumstances. Translated, this means we’re chronically shorthanded, and no one gets a night off.

“Let’s all stay awake,” I say over gen-com. “It’s been too quiet these past few nights. We’re due.”

“Yes, sir!” Ransom answers like this is good news. Yafiah swears softly. Dubey kicks at the ground in frustration. Only Jaynie doesn’t get it.

“You know something we don’t?” she asks over gen-com.

“Just a feeling.”

Ransom says, “Sometimes God whispers in his ear.”

“LT,” Yafiah pleads. She knows what’s coming, and so do I, but I don’t try to rein him in. Ransom is my favorite redneck of all time. He loves everyone, but he’ll still kill anybody I tell him to without hesitation. His way of explaining the world may be nonstandard, but his enthusiasms have kept us both alive.

“Ma’am, this here is King David,” he informs the sergeant. “Saul don’t dare touch a hair of the man’s head and Goliath can’t get his bullets to fly straight when the lieutenant’s around, because James Shelley is beloved of God. Do what LT tells you and you might live long enough to see Frankfurt one more time.”

Ransom is six three. He has a hundred pounds of muscle over Yafiah and a year more experience, but as far as she’s concerned, he’s the dumb little brother. She turns the blank black face of her visor toward Jaynie and says, “Don’t worry none about Ransom, ma’am. He’s kind of crazy, but he’s good in the field.”

Jaynie sounds honestly puzzled when she asks me, “How can you be King David, LT? Because I would have sworn that we were Goliath.”

“Goliath,” I murmur, using my gaze to select the encyclopedia icon from my overlay, because the truth is, I don’t really know the Bible story.

But before I can listen to the abstract of the Goliath entry, Dubey surprises us all by actually speaking. “King David played his own game,” he says, his shy voice amplified over gen-com. “And he didn’t lose.”

Good enough for me.

I whistle at the dogs. The fort’s gate swings open. We head out into moonlight, the five of us, Dassari LCS.

The fort will defend itself while we're away.

• • •

We spread out so we can cover more territory, and so one bomb blast, one rocket, won't take out all of us. The primary weapon we carry is the M-CL1a, also known as the Harkin Integrated Tactical Rifle, yielding an acronym only a gamer could love. The HITR uses AI sights to fire both a 7.62-millimeter round, accurate to five hundred meters, and programmable grenades from the underslung launcher. We're also armed with a handy assortment of hand grenades—frag, flash-bang, smoke. Subtlety is not our talent. We're rigged to hit fast and hard. Powered by the dead sisters, with photomultiplier-based night vision to see where we're going, we're able to make a sweep through the entire district on most nights.

Near the fort the land is flat, and much of it is cultivated, marked off by tall fences that protect sorghum fields and tree farms from roving goats and wandering cattle. But after a couple of kilometers, the farms end. Then it's mostly scattered trees that look a lot like the mesquite I saw in Texas. We're well into the rainy season, so all the trees are leafed out and where there used to be bare red ground between them, wild grass is growing almost head-high. The dogs run through it, hunting for rogue soldiers.

A light wind sighs past, setting the grass swaying around me. I know it's rustling, but my helmet's audio pickups are set to filter out white noise, so I can barely hear it, while more distinct sounds reach me clearly: the panting of the dogs, the lowing of cattle, a bird's piping call.

With the grass so tall I can't see very far, but I keep a map overlaid on my visor with the position of each one of my soldiers marked. The map is constantly updated with data gathered by my angel—a toy drone with a three-foot wingspan, piloted by a semiautonomous AI. The angel watches over us. Everything within range of its camera eyes is recorded, and the raw video is boosted to Guidance. In offices in Frankfurt, Charleston, and Sacramento, our handlers scan the raw feed, while Intelligence teams run analytical programs to pick up any bogeys human eyes might miss.

There's always something to see. This is the Old World. People have made their homes here since the beginning of time and they'll probably still be here come the last day—which might not be as far off as we'd like to think.

Yeah, apocalyptic thoughts come a little too easily these days.

Anyway, it doesn't matter how empty this land looks; it is inhabited. People live here, raising their children and their livestock, most of them pretending there isn't a war in progress. We don't want to shoot them.

So with the angel's help we've developed a census. We know the name of everyone living within twenty-five kilometers of the fort. We know their facial details, along with their height, weight, gender, posture, and age. We know where they live, what they do for a living, and how they're related to the people around them. Using the census, the angel can ID an individual in low light, with his back turned, from over a kilometer away, and once we've got an ID we go on our way. It's rare that the people here even see us, unless we're on the road.

But if the angel turns up someone who's not in our census? Then we move in.

Not every stranger is an enemy. Smugglers pass through, and so long as they're not carrying weapons or proscribed tech, we let them go. Same for the refugees wandering south out of the Sahara. We talk to them

all and add them to our records.

But it's the insurgents we really need to find, before they find us. It's a game of hide-and-seek, and the better the angel gets at spotting people, the better the enemy gets at looking like nothing at all.

So when I get a sudden premonition of danger—a heart-pounding, muscle-tensing certainty that something seriously bad is very near—I visualize a red light. My skullcap picks up the image and displays it on the visors of everyone in my squad. They freeze. Jaynie and Dubey tap into my visual feed right away like they're supposed to. Yafiah and Ransom take a little longer, but within a few seconds we're all looking ahead toward one of our district's rare rocky outcroppings. It's an anomaly in the flat landscape: a wide, irregular formation that rises only a little higher than the low trees around it. I'm pretty sure it's natural, but it looks like it could be the remnant of an ancient pyramid, reduced to a shapeless lump after thousands of seasons of rain.

My handler, Delphi, hasn't said a word since we linked up at the fort, but the moment I break routine she speaks. "What have you got, Shelley?"

I focus on the words "A feeling." It's a phrase I've practiced, so the skullcap picks it up easily and translates it for Delphi.

She tells me what I already know: "The angel's got nothing. I'm bringing it in for a closer look."

"They're in the high ground," I say in the softest of whispers, letting the helmet mic compensate for lack of volume.

Delphi doesn't like my "feelings" because she can't explain them, but she's been with me twice when I've sensed an imminent ambush, so she doesn't argue.

I tap into the angel's infrared feed as it soars on silent wings high above the outcrop. I'm looking for bright points of heat, but I only see our soldiers and our dogs, scattered in an arc on the east side of the mound.

One of our dogs, the cream-colored female we call Pearl, is two meters in front of me. Alerted by my posture, she's standing still, testing the air with her nose. I hiss at her, urging her to move ahead. She trots forward willingly, but then she freezes just short of the mound. My helmet audio enhances her low growl.

"Fuck," Yafiah whispers over gen-com. "I want to launch a grenade up there."

So do I, but we can't do it. If it's just a farm kid out on a lark, we could all wind up in prison—and the only reason I'm in this uniform is because I desperately do not want to be in prison.

"Easy," I warn Yafiah.

I wish I could put skullcaps on the dogs. Then I might be able to get an image of what they're sensing. But the defense contractors refuse to outfit strays. They don't want to get fined if the equipment gives false results, so they'll only cap a dog if it's specially bred and trained—and that kind of dog costs twice as much as a soldier. Our LCS isn't authorized.

I hiss at Pearl again, but she lowers her head and looks back at me, refusing to advance any farther.

We'll have to go in ourselves.

I visualize an approach path: me and Yafiah moving directly in, Ransom circling around the back, and Dubey and Jaynie providing cover from opposite sides. Ransom picks it up and takes off fast, staying well back from the mound as he circles around it. Yafiah and I move in, until we have only thirty meters between us as we cautiously advance.

"There it is, Shelley," Delphi says in her businesslike voice. She sends me a still image, with a red circle around a faint heat signature she's spotted in the rocks at the top of the mound.

It's just a gray spot. Its shape doesn't tell me anything, but the thermal signature is a clue to the presence of a ghost soldier, partly camouflaged from the angel's infrared sight by a hooded suit with a thermal coating.

I shift back to angel sight. The heat signature is so repressed I can barely see it until the AI in the angel enhances the image. Then I can see it as a cocked arm, death clutched in its right hand.

"Yafiah!" I shout. "Fall back!"

Powered by her dead sister, she jumps backward four meters, dropping flat in a dense stand of tall grass. The dog, Pearl, whirls around and flees past me as I take aim with my M-CL1a. A glowing, golden point is moving across the screen of my visor. There's no way I could see the grenade on my own, but my tactical AI, using data from the angel and from the helmet cams, has plotted its path for me. An open circle marks my aim. I align the circle with the point, fire a short burst, and drop flat as a concussion booms over my head and lightning flashes. I'm up again as soon as it passes. From the top of the mound an assault rifle chatters and then, his voice low and happy, Ransom says over gen-com, "That's two for me, LT."

We're not done yet.

Delphi finds another ghost about twelve meters away from me, near the bottom of the mound. This one's a gleaming, shapeless blur, much easier to see—probably just someone crouched under a worn-out thermal blanket.

I close the distance, using my dead sister to bound in a crazy zigzag, the joints muttering and my pack creaking against the frame as I go. My target sees me coming. Maybe he panics. Maybe he's just cocky. But he drops his thermal cover and shows himself. I'm all of twenty-three, but in the green glow of night vision he looks to me like a skinny teenage kid as he sights down the barrel of his assault rifle and starts firing.

I'm moving fast. His first bullets don't get anywhere near me, but he shifts his aim and closes the gap while I fire back. I aim from the hip, using the bead in my visor to get the right line. The trigger drops away from my finger as my tactical AI takes over. A single shot, and the kid flies backward, spinning half around before hitting the slope behind him.

"Slam!" Ransom bellows over gen-com.

"Check it out," I warn him.

"Don't worry, LT, there's no one left up top."

"Approaching," Jaynie says.

I spot her on my map. “Gotcha.”

She walks out of the tall grass, her weapon aimed at the body of the kid, lying facedown, the back of his head blown out.

“Signs?” I ask.

“No. He’s dead.”

She crouches beside the body and uses her arm hook to flip it over. There’s a bullet hole right between his eyes. “Shit, your AI is good.”

I can’t feel it directly, but I know my skullcap is working, stimulating my brain to produce a soothing little cocktail, a mix of all-natural brain chemicals that puts an emotional distance between me and what just happened.

I suck fortified water from a tube hooked to a bladder in my pack, while Jaynie searches the body. We’re particularly interested in written orders and data sticks. Up above, Ransom searches the two that he killed. I watch the feed from his helmet cam. Both are kids; only one has a thermal suit. That’s not a piece of equipment we want to leave lying around, so I send Dubey to help collect it, along with the weapons.

Kids like these are not fighting for Ahab Matugo. He’s a modern, secular leader, and they hate him for it. They hate us too, of course. And they hate the people of this district, because those people put up with us. They’ve been indoctrinated in hate and it wouldn’t surprise me to learn that some DC is behind it, encouraging it, financing it, to make sure soldiers like us have something to do. Rumor is, Intelligence broke a similar scheme in Bolivia, but that investigation was iced to save corporate reputations.

I call Yafiah. We whistle for the dogs, and together we make a sweep of the mound, confirming that no one’s still hiding.

• • •

After we distribute the captured weapons between us, we move out, resuming the night’s assigned route. Just a few minutes later, the angel picks up a new presence. This one is riding a moped and isn’t trying to hide, so we get a quick ID.

“Jalal the gravedigger,” Delphi says.

“Did you call him?”

“Checking . . . No. No notification was made. He’s come on his own initiative.”

“I don’t like that much initiative.”

Jalal is a local contractor. The army pays him to handle enemy bodies, but he receives notification of a job only after we are away from the vicinity.

“Delphi, how does Jalal know we’re not the ones lying dead on the ground?”

“He knows your rep, Shelley. But you’re authorized to conduct a field interview.”

With a thought, I switch to gen-com. “Converge on my location. Leash the dogs on your way in.”

Already I can hear the whine of his moped. Maybe he’s following the smell of gunpowder, or maybe he just reasoned from the direction of our gunfire that the mound was the most likely site of the battle.

We take up positions in the grass, eight meters apart, crouched to reduce our profiles—because I don’t want to find out too late that Jalal has changed sides. The dogs lie quiet. They’re loyal to us. They know where their next meal is coming from.

I watch with angel sight as the moped draws near. Jalal is driving in the dark. Without using any lights, he’s weaving around trees and skirting the brush, pushing the moped at a fast clip. I don’t see any weapons on him, and the angel doesn’t indicate any, but he has a backpack.

I creep through the trees, putting myself in a position to intercept him.

The crunch of the tires is louder than the electric engine. When he’s almost on me, I step into the open. My HITR targets his face.

He’s so startled he jerks the front tire of the moped. The bike skids and almost goes over. “Shelley! Goddamn!”

Jalal’s eyes are veiled by the narrow, gleaming band of his farsights. It’s an easy guess that they’re capable of night vision, so I’m not surprised he can see me in the dark—but he can’t see through my visor, so how the hell does he know it’s me?

Shit. I bet he’s got his own height and weight profiles.

I say, “You got here quick.”

He answers in a local dialect, which my helmet translates in its usual creative fashion. “I am going to the city. Leaving before sunrise. Need to do the job soonest. Right?”

I eye his backpack. It could hold grenades or explosives. It’s more likely, though, that it holds shrouds.

“You can’t take three bodies on that bike.”

He blinks. Then frowns. “Three?”

“Three.”

“Okay, then. Long night for me.”

“Delphi, send him the map.”

There’s a glimmer in the screen of his farsights as the data comes in.

“Thank you, Shelley.”

He tries to get the bike going again, but I put the footplate of my dead sister against his front tire. “Tell me what’s going on. What have you heard?”

The surface temperature of his cheeks and forehead jumps a notch. He glances around, trying to figure out where my soldiers are, but he can’t see them. When he speaks again, it’s in a whisper, though my helmet amplifies it, so it’s easy to hear. “Shelley, my uncle, he called my mama. He said twelve soldiers from the north likely coming the next night or two. Seen them at a neighbor farm. Don’t know the name.”

“To the north?”

“Yes. North. I don’t know more.”

Twelve. No wonder Jalal is out here. He’s no fool. He’ll bag the bodies, bring them in, bury them long before dawn, and bill the army, and then he’ll get the hell out of here, because if the rumor is true there’s an excellent chance that when the insurgents come through, they’ll target him as a collaborator.

“Work fast,” I advise him, taking my foot off the tire and stepping back, out of the way.

“I will, Shelley. Thank you.”

As he takes off, I imagine Intelligence engaged in a flurry of activity trying to locate a dozen rogue soldiers just north of our district.

Until they find something, it’s not my problem.

Delphi says, “Cleared to continue.”

My people reappear. We let the dogs off their leashes and go on our way. No one else tries to kill us.

We get back to the fort just as the last stars are fading in a velvety blue sky. The fort detects us, recognizes us, and opens the gate as we approach. The dogs run to drink water.

I’m tired. We’re all tired, but no one talks about it. We clean the dead sisters and our weapons, then plug them into power racks in the bunk room. We restock the bladders in our packs with fortified water, getting them ready to go again. In the village cemetery, the sun will be rising over the fresh graves of three kids younger than I am, by years. I try to feel guilt, remorse, regret . . . but nothing’s there. Guidance makes sure of that.

If robots were cheaper, we wouldn’t have to be here.

• • •

There are only two shower stalls and two toilets. My house rule is that the less you get paid, the sooner you get to shower, so Dubey and Yafiah go first. “Five minutes!” I yell at them from the hallway.

Yafiah yells something back. Her voice is muffled, but I’m pretty sure it isn’t Yes, sir.

I step into the kitchen, pick up five aluminum bowls, and head outside.

The sun isn't quite up, so it's only around ninety in the yard. When I open the door, the dogs are sprawled under their canvas canopy, but as soon as they see me, they're up and swarming. I pop the tops on five cans of dog food, fill the bowls, and become god of the pack as I distribute the day's rations. It takes them about thirty seconds to finish eating. I have my dad send us mange treatments, birth control pills, and pills to knock out their fleas and parasites; their food I buy from a local supplier. It's all worth it.

I take the bowls back in. Jaynie's in the tactical operations center, still in her sweat-encrusted T-shirt and pants. She looks up and nods as I pass by. Command requires the TOC to be staffed at all times when we're not wearing helmets.

Dubey is already done in the shower. He crosses the hall ahead of me, wearing only shorts and his skullcap, disappearing into the bunk room. Ransom has taken over the empty shower stall, while Yafiah is still running water. "Hurry it up, sweetheart," I yell at her.

"I still got thirty seconds, LT."

She probably does. She's pretty obsessive about things like that.

"When you get out, go relieve the sergeant."

I wait for her disgruntled "Yes, sir," and then I take the bowls into the kitchen. By the time I've got them washed, Jaynie is taking a shower, and the second stall is open.

I pitch my clothes into the steam cleaner on top of everyone else's—everything but the skullcap—and I start the load. I'm still wearing the skullcap when I step into the shower. A glance over the partition shows me that Jaynie is still wearing hers too. Good. We're required to wear the skullcaps only when we're rigged, but in a combat zone we're allowed to wear them all the time if that's what we want to do—and I would not trust an LCS soldier who didn't want to.

The skullcap is always working, whether Guidance is riding us or not. The handbook says the brain stimulation it provides is nonaddictive, but I think the handbook needs to be revised. The only time my skullcap comes off is during the ninety seconds in the shower when I have to wash my scalp with a depilatory.

I let the many-times-recycled hot water run over me for almost a minute, working up to the moment. Then I draw a deep breath and slip the skullcap off.

I start counting seconds to distract myself as I rinse it in the shower stream. It's made of a silky fabric with an embedded microwire net, and it's shaped like an athletic skullcap, so it covers from the forehead to the nape of the neck, without covering the ears.

When my count reaches twenty, I hang it on a hook.

I think I psych myself out. It doesn't make sense that my mood can spiral so far downward in just a few seconds . . . but it does anyway. As I grab a shot of depilatory from the dispenser, a hollow black panicky despair is spawning inside my chest.

I rub the depilatory over my head and over my face where a beard would grow if I let it, focusing on my count while hot water sluices over my shoulders. I count so I don't have to think. At seventy, I tilt my head

back under the stream, and at ninety I slip the cap back on, pressing it close to my freshly hairless scalp.

I'm safe for another twenty-four hours.

I hated wearing the cap during my initial LCS training—I felt like someone was always looking inside my head—but I don't care anymore. I don't have anything left to hide.

Jayne's getting dressed when I step out of the shower. I look her over. She's maybe five eight, lean, with small, pretty breasts already hidden under her T-shirt. Her skin is dark, but not as dark as Yafiah's. Mine is brown. Dubey and Ransom are the palefaces around here.

Jayne looks up, notices my interest, and laughs. "That'll go away soon," she says as she steps into clean pants.

"Shit. Sorry. You know how it is. First day's always awkward."

"Been there," she agrees, buttoning up.

I turn away before I get myself in real trouble—but I've still got an image of her in my head.

Lust is brain chemistry, but so is the way you feel about your sisters and brothers. You might love them, you might die for them, but unless you're a twisted fuck, the last thing you want to do is have sex with your siblings. That's incest revulsion, and though I've never seen it mentioned in a manual, every LCS soldier knows that Guidance has figured out how to mimic the sensation in our heads. It might take a day or two to kick in, but it always happens. We don't live with other men and women, we live with brothers and sisters. I'm an only child, but since I've been in the linked combat squads I've learned what it's like to have siblings. We are a celibate crew.

••••

I've been asleep maybe three hours when I hear Jayne shouting from the hallway in her best sergeant's voice: "Rise and shine, children!" She hammers on my door. "Command has a new game for us to play. It's called patrol the road and you've got twenty minutes to get under way, so move!"

Basic training isn't all that far behind me. I'm on my feet and halfway into my pants before I remember who's in command at our little fort. "What the hell is going on?"

I button up and throw the door open, but Jayne has already disappeared from the hallway. I can hear Ransom and Yafiah cursing in the bunk room across the hall. Not a word from Dubey, but I'm sure he's up and getting rigged.

The tactical operations center is next to my room. That's where I find Jayne. "What is it?" I ask, leaning in the door.

She's standing in front of the desk, watching the big monitor as she straps into her dead sister. "A contractor's convoy—they're from Vanda-Sheridan—is due on the western perimeter of our district in ninety minutes or so, bringing in equipment to assemble a new listening station east of us. It's a priority project, and it's up to us to make sure the road is clean."

“Fuck! ” I stomp over to the desk to review and acknowledge the order. “I hate defense contractors. They’re fucking parasites. And Vanda-Sheridan’s a fucking beast. When I was in Bolivia, I swear to God their local agent was selling satellite data to the enemy. Vanda-Sheridan is a prime example, Sergeant, of a defense contractor happy to play both sides to prolong a conflict. And now here they are in Africa! Looking after the bottom line.”

“Yes, sir,” Jaynie says. “Fifteen minutes left before we have to be on the road, sir.”

I duck back into my quarters, get my boots and jacket on, and then head for the kitchen, where energy drinks are waiting on the table. Ransom and Dubey are already through their first round. Yafiah must be in the stall. I grab a carton, tip my head back, and empty it in a few swallows.

“Jaynie!” I shout down the hall. “Anybody sniffing around outside during your watch?”

“Just a few goats! I’m shutting down the TOC, sir!”

“Do it!”

I finish my second carton, toss Yafiah out of the stall, deal efficiently with the bodily functions, and then get my armor on.

Delphi starts talking to me through my overlay. “ATVs today, Shelley. We’ve got no intelligence on insurgents in the neighborhood, but you get to do a ground check anyway.”

“As always.”

I stomp into the bunk room, get my dead sister off the power rack, and strap in. Even though we’re taking the ATVs, you never know when you’re going to have to chase somebody down. Ransom checks my rig. Leaving him to clear the two privates, I get my weapon and helmet off the racks, grab my pack, and head outside.

Jaynie’s already in the yard, pushing back the accordion canopy of the shed where we keep the ATVs. I help her check batteries, lubricant levels, joint cuffs, and tire wear. “No issues,” she says, sounding surprised.

The informality of my LCS tends to confuse the fresh meat. We may not click heels and salute here, but if it matters, we do it and we do it right. “I only win this game if we all get out alive,” I remind her.

“Truth.”

The ATVs are low-slung, two-passenger vehicles, with the gunner’s post elevated behind the driver, and seats specially designed to fit soldiers rigged in bones. They’re not the fastest things around, but then there’s not a lot of racing competition where we patrol. They’re quiet, with four hours of runtime before the battery gives out, rechargeable with photovoltaic mats, and the four-wheel independent suspension makes them agile and stable.

The kids tend to fight over who gets to drive.

“Dibs!” Yafiah yells as she races into the yard carrying her weapon and helmet. “I’m driving. Ransom, you’re my gunner.”

He comes out behind her, looking confused. “Shit. How come you always—”

Dubey pushes past him. “I want to drive one.”

I’m mildly stunned to hear Dubey speak up for himself and I want to encourage him. “Good. You’re on. Grab two dogs and put ’em in your gunner’s seat. I’ll sit behind the sarge. Helmets on! ”

I confirm my links; I confirm the links of my squad. Then I stand by the gate, holding back the three dogs that aren’t going with us while the ATVs roll out. Once I have the dogs safely locked up, I take my seat and we’re on our way.

• • •

The road runs south for a few kilometers before it reaches the village, and then at the village center another road takes off west. The maps say if you follow that road far enough you’ll come to a city. We like to joke about taking off one day to find that city, but it’s just a game. The ATVs couldn’t get us even a quarter of the way before nightfall, so we’ll stay here until the army decrees that we should go somewhere else.

Today we need to cover only the first hundred kilometers or so of the western road. By that time we should find Vanda-Sheridan’s convoy. After that, we’ll just shadow the trucks until they’re out of our district and no longer our concern.

We’re running at thirty miles per hour south toward the village, zigzagging to avoid the potholes and the worst of the gullied roadbed. At least it isn’t dusty like it would be in the dry season. Each driver keeps the required interval of ninety meters between vehicles. Yafiah and Ransom are in front, me and Jaynie follow them, while Dubey, with the two dogs in his gunner’s seat, trails behind. IEDs are rare here, but you never know.

I prefer not to drive, in part because I don’t really know how. I grew up in Manhattan, where there was no reason to drive, and I only got my license in Texas because the army required it. But mostly I don’t drive because I want to spend my road time looking through the angel’s eyes.

I send it ahead to patrol our route, instructing it to follow a wide quartering pattern that surveys terrain on both sides of the road. It’s already gone beyond the village. Soon, it’ll reach the limit of its range—it’s not supposed to ever wander more than ten kilometers from my position—but we’ll catch up with it when we get to the other side of the village.

Up ahead, Yafiah slows her ATV to a crawl as she comes up on the edge of the village.

“Visors go transparent,” I say over gen-com. Helmets are required wear at all times outside the fort. Normally we keep the visors black to limit the enemy’s ability to identify us as individuals and to secure a very effective intimidation factor. But the people of the village are not our enemies, and my soldiers are not faceless demons.

The first few buildings are prefab sheds, but those tend to fall down when the Harmattan wind comes blasting out of the Sahara, so most of the houses are still beautiful red mud brick, with walled courtyards shaded by the spreading branches and feathery leaves of neem trees, or by darker, denser canopies of mango. A cell phone tower stands on the village periphery and dish antennas dot the roofs.

Goats are everywhere, along with chickens and guinea fowl, but only a few people are in sight, mostly grandparents gossiping beside the courtyard walls. Then we pass the school. There's an excited shout, and around twenty kids, ranging in age from six to sixteen, charge out of the school's courtyard, all of them dressed in colorful clothes, laughing and shouting because they don't get to see us very often and they think our ATVs are cool. "Hello, soldiers. Good to see you. Where you going today? Can we come?"

"No way!" Yafiah tells them. "You have to go back to school!"

They run alongside anyway. "Shelley from Manhattan!" they call to me. "Yafiah from California. Dubey from Wash-ing-ton. Matthew from Geor-gi-a!"

Then they realize Jaynie is someone they've never seen before. "Who are you? What's your name?"

"That's Sergeant Jaynie," I tell them.

"Where are you from, Sergeant Jaynie? Where are you from?"

I can't see her face, but I can hear the grin in her voice. "Detroit," she says. "Kansas City, Chicago, Philadelphia, and too many other places for me to remember." And then softly, so the kids won't hear her, though her helmet mic picks it up, "This place is paradise compared to the shitholes I used to live in."

The kids keep chattering until we reach the western road, then we wave good-bye. I have my doubts that they'll head back to class, but it's not my concern.

The western road is paved. As soon as we're clear of the village, Yafiah picks up speed. Jaynie waits for the proper interval and then she accelerates too. As we blast past the village cemetery, I spot the new graves at the back. Jalal does his job well and earns the money we pay him.

After that we pass more sorghum fields, the stalks already six feet high, with tassels of grain forming at the top. Then the flat red land is taken over by scattered trees and brush. It's been a good rainy season so far. Everything is green and the trees are skirted with tall grass that will disappear altogether when the rain goes away. For now, though, there's abundant food for small herds of cattle. The angel notes every animal and marks its position on the map. It also marks the position of two tall, thin teenage boys out tending the cattle. As we speed past they wave their long switches at us and grin.

From where I'm sitting in the back of the ATV, the vegetation looks lush, but as I gaze down on it with angel sight, its true sparseness is revealed. Not much can hide here, which makes me happy. If the ground had been disturbed by anything more sinister than wandering cattle, the angel would see it. But nothing's amiss.

Why, then, am I starting to get a bad feeling about this whole venture?

We're fifty-two kilometers out from the village, and the angel is ten klicks ahead of us, when it finally spots an approaching vehicle—just one, so it's not the contractor's caravan. A minute later the angel IDs it: a small white pickup truck well-known to us. I laugh.

"Heads up!" I call out on gen-com. "Bibata's coming into town with our dog food."

"Who's Bibata?" Jaynie asks suspiciously.

“The LT’s girlfriend,” Yafiah says.

I feel like I’m in grade school. “She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Only because you want to stay out of jail.”

“Jail?” Jaynie asks, incredulous. “You’re not here on a prison deferment?”

Yafiah again: “Oh yes he is.”

“You’re an officer,” Jaynie protests, as if this is something none of us has realized before.

“It was a crime of honor,” I assure her.

“He won’t tell us what he did,” Dubey adds, surprising me again by joining the conversation.

“Was it worth it?” Jaynie asks.

That’s not a question I want to consider, and anyway, Bibata’s white pickup is coming fast. Jaynie steers us to the side of the road. I lean out and wave my arm up and down, hoping she’ll stop. At first I don’t think she’s going to, but then she steps hard on the brakes, bringing the truck to a stop beside me. I jump down from the gunner’s seat. Ransom does too and walks back along the road to meet me. We converge on Bibata’s truck from opposite sides, both of us casting surreptitious glances at the cargo, stacked higher than the cab roof and hidden under a taut blue tarp. Anything could be under there.

I whisper to Dubey to bring the dogs. Then I make my visor go transparent and I saunter up to the driver’s window with my assault rifle cradled in my arms. The glass rolls down. I feel the holy, sacred chill of air-conditioning through the thin fabric of my gloves. But better than that, Bibata gives me a coy smile. She is definitely not my sibling.

“Ah, Shelley, my man. Were you coming to visit me? And was this the best rendezvous you could manage? I expected better from you!”

I have maybe a quarter of my ancestry out of Africa, mixed with European lines and the original people of Mexico. Bibata makes me think of pure and ancient bloodlines. Her skin is dark black, darker than Yafiah’s, and her face is strong and beautiful, with a high forehead, flirtatious dark eyes, and lips that slip easily between a teasing smile and a threat. There’s nothing between us except that I admire her, and she enjoys it—but today I get the feeling she doesn’t really want to play the game. There’s anxiety behind her smile, maybe even anger. Dubey has released the dogs. She glances at them as they run toward the truck.

“You okay, love?” I ask her.

I see a handgun shoved into the cushioned space between the driver and passenger seats, but it doesn’t concern me because she always keeps it there. Ransom scans the cab from the other side while she answers me impatiently. “Of course I’m okay! I am always okay. I have been okay since the beginning of the world.” Her voice drops to a feigned flirty tone. “Though I might be better still if you come ride with me in my truck some evening. Do you think so, Shelley? Should I come and pick you up tonight?”

I flash her a smile. “Oh, God yes, love. I’m getting stiff just thinking about seeing you with the night

wrapped around your beautiful face. But Mama's watching. She won't let me go."

Bibata pouts. The dogs have circled around to the back of the truck. They're sniffing at the tires. "Oh, you poor thing. You need to get liberated and not be a slave to Mama's ugly old customs anymore."

"Someday," I promise her.

She turns away, to stare at her perfectly manicured hands as they grip the steering wheel. Softly, she says, "I will come tomorrow, and bring your dog food."

By her quiet tone I know that something is very wrong. I imagine insurgents under the tarp, but the dogs would have given some sign if anyone was there. So I bend down, almost leaning in the window. "Tell me what's going on, Bibata."

She shakes her head. "Nothing. Not yet. But the war's getting closer, isn't it? It's not just a few stupid little boys from the north, come here to make trouble."

"No, that's all it is. Ahab Matugo is not going to come here."

"Ahab Matugo is a modern man. Maybe it would not be so bad if he did!"

"Yeah, I don't know. Maybe."

She nods without looking at me. "I'll come tomorrow." Then she puts the truck in gear, waves at me, and drives away, the window sliding closed as she goes. I'm left facing the black mask of Ransom's visor.

"I think she just had groceries," he says.

The angel switches my visor back to black as I turn to stare west down the road—the direction Bibata came from, the direction of the distant city. Then I look through the angel's eyes, but there's nothing out in that flat, hot, worn-out land except trees, and brush, and cattle.

"Dubey, get the dogs!"

He whistles them back to his side, while Ransom and I return to our gunners' seats. Jaynie starts to interrogate me, but I wave her off, addressing the squad instead. "Something's going on. I don't know what, but I've got a feeling. Stay alert."

•••

Twenty minutes later, Delphi tells me the convoy is delayed. "They're having a problem with one of the trucks. It's going to take a couple hours to fix."

I feel like a demon is scratching on the inside of my skull. "What do you think is really going on?" I ask her.

"Command would like you to answer that question. You're to continue west until you meet the convoy, but approach with discretion. Ascertain the situation before making your presence known."

This presents a problem, because the ATVs are good for only four hours before the batteries run down, and

we'll need to run at least another hour to find the convoy, which will put us past the halfway point of battery life. We've got photovoltaic mats that we can use to recharge, but policy dictates that we have sufficient power to return to the fort at all times.

It turns out Command is more interested in what their contractors are up to than in whether or not we get back to our fort before nightfall. "You're cleared to continue," Delphi says when I present my concern. "If you can get the PV mats laid out before fourteen hundred, you should be able to acquire a partial recharge before the next rainstorm moves through."

So we follow the angel west.

We're 105 kilometers out when the angel discovers the Vanda-Sheridan trucks, parked well off the road behind a screen of brush grown tall in the rainy season.

"You said there were two trucks, right?" I ask Delphi.

I see four. Two are open-bed, carrying prefabricated walls, plastic cargo boxes, and sections of antenna to be used to build a new listening post. They both have the blue V-S logo on the white cab doors. Of the other two, one is an off-road truck. The other is what we would call, in the streets of Manhattan, a delivery truck, with an enclosed cargo area cooled by an air-conditioning unit mounted above the cab. Instead of a roll-up cargo door in the back, there's a walk-in refrigerator door with a large latch.

Delphi says, "Intelligence is scoring this at seventy percent likelihood of being an insurgent operation—"

"Hijacking or treachery?"

"You may assume a hostile situation until proven otherwise. Stealth approach, on foot. Identify those present and ascertain the situation before making your presence known."

Bibata might be right about Ahab Matugo; I know I might be fighting on the wrong side, but it's not really a choice—and it makes me furious that a homegrown, American company like Vanda-Sheridan, a company that specializes in surveillance, could fail to detect corruption in their own employees. Or worse, that they might condone it. "Has Ahab Matugo started buying out our suppliers?"

And if he has, how much longer can this war last?

"Just do your job, Shelley," Delphi says.

"Yes, ma'am."

• • •

We stick to the road until we're only fifteen hundred meters from the trucks, and then we cut into the brush, continuing on for another half klick. After that we tie up the dogs, lock down the ATVs, and roll out the PV mats so the batteries can start recharging.

We advance on foot.

The angel is floating high in the sky, invisible in the glare of the early afternoon sun, but it's showing me

what I need to know: that there's very little activity at the site. I watch one man get out of the cab of the off-road truck to take a leak. He has an assault rifle slung over his shoulder. Most travelers carry guns here, but taking a gun just to piss a few steps away from the truck seems a bit much.

I watch him return to the cab, sliding into the passenger seat. There's a second man with him, behind the steering wheel. I know because the angel can see his elbow sticking out of the open window. That elbow hasn't moved for several minutes. Given that the afternoon temperature is up over a hundred, with the air so muggy it feels deprived of oxygen, I decide there's an excellent chance the driver is asleep.

Hopefully his friend will soon join him in the Land of Nod.

We creep to within fifty meters of the trucks, the sound of our approach disguised by the rustle of leaves. We're spread out, at least eight meters apart. I crouch, concealed within a stand of tall grass. I swear the lush green leaves are exhaling steam. The mud under my boots smells of cow dung. The clothes under my armor are made to wick sweat away from my body, but the sweat can't evaporate fast enough, so I'm soaked anyway. I settle down to wait for the onset of some activity that will explain what's going on.

Happily, we don't wait long. In about four and a half minutes, the cargo door on the air-conditioned truck swings open. Two men step out. Both are swaggering, grins on their faces as they pause in the doorway to look around at the lovely scrub landscape, before jumping down to the ground. Behind them, three young girls appear—young, like twelve or thirteen, their dark brown skin gleaming in the sunlight. All of their skin, because none of them are wearing clothes.

Ransom and Yafiah both swear softly over gen-com, and I develop a theory for why Bibata seemed so spooked. She's an independent woman, operating on her own, out in the middle of nowhere. Maybe she saw what was going on, or suspected. Better for her to pretend she didn't see anything than to call attention to herself. Getting on the wrong side of gangsters like these must be her nightmare.

The girls stick close together, keeping their heads down in a timid posture as they scamper into the brush. My guess is they've been sent out to relieve themselves before the party moves on.

“Delphi,” I whisper. “Permission to engage?”

“I just asked, and the answer is no.”

“We can't just—”

“No,” she repeats.

“Goddamn it!” My voice never rises above a whisper, but I'm furious. I hate being the bad guy. “Ahab Matugo doesn't tolerate slavery, so why do we?”

“You have your orders, Shelley. Don't be swayed by propaganda. Ahab Matugo is the enemy. An enemy who keeps shooting down our surveillance drones. We need this listening station, so you will allow this convoy to proceed unmol—”

She's cut off in midlecture as my visor loses its link to the angel. My overlay routes through the angel too, and it's also dropped its link.

“Helmet-to-helmet still working?” Jaynie asks.

“I hear you.”

“Something up high,” Dubey suggests. “Jamming the angel, but not us.”

“You think they have a drone? Why haven’t they seen us?”

“They’re not exactly paying attention,” Jaynie says.

True.

I think about it, and decide I can work with the situation. I can’t talk to Guidance, so that means I have to rely on my own judgment in the field. And my judgment tells me we have only seconds before one of the gangsters decides to check the feed from their drone.

“Listen up. We need to know these gangsters aren’t going to turn around and murder our precious dickhead engineering team, so we’re going to move in and make sure everything’s okay. All except you, Yafiah. See that tree behind you? The one that begins branching close to the ground? Get yourself up there and let me know the second you see anyone looking worried.” She uses her arm hooks and starts climbing. “Everyone else, stealth approach, standard interval. These gangsters are armed.”

A wind sighs through the brush, hotter than breath. It rustles the tall grass, covering any sound we make as we advance. I’m close enough now that I can hear men talking, and the whisper of scared little girls as they’re herded back into the air-conditioned truck. A door slams.

“LT,” Yafiah whispers over gen-com. “Look up. Straight up. Is that you?”

I turn my head to gaze at the sky. Seen through my polarized visor, the sky in early afternoon is so beautifully blue it almost hurts my heart to look at it. The clouds scattered across that backdrop are a pure, bright, shining white. Beneath them is a drone aircraft, floating right above us at no more than treetop level, stationary on the wind just like a kite. It looks as if it’s made of glass, translucent, so that the sky and clouds shine through. That’s good camouflage, but the edges of the drone still show, making it easy to see. Like my angel, it’s a small device: maybe four feet from wingtip to wingtip.

Yafiah wants to know if it’s my drone, so I tell her, “No, that’s not me. Get rid of it.”

“Prepare for return fire,” Jaynie warns.

With a loud burst from her HITR, Yafiah blows the drone out of the sky. There’s a small white flash and then pieces tumble down, making the brush crackle as they hit.

“Yafiah, move!” I tell her. “You’re a target. Get out of that tree.”

I pipe a thumbnail of her point of view into my visor as she drops to the ground; her footplates float as her shocks absorb the impact, and then she takes off, putting distance between herself and the tree.

Over by the trucks, men are shouting. The guard with the assault rifle has scrambled out of the off-road truck. He brings his weapon to his shoulder and sprays bullets at the perch Yafiah just abandoned.

“Return fire,” I say.

The aggressive guard doesn’t have a chance. He’s hit from four different directions and drops in a spray of brilliant red blood. We all race to new positions. Tall grass sways around me and clouds of insects take flight. From the brothel truck, I hear outraged shouts, and then I’m caught by surprise as a grenade explodes behind me. The concussion knocks me to my knees, but I’m up again in a second, my weapon raised. Fire crackles in the brush as I look for my enemy.

I spot him. Tall, grim, bearded, and dark skinned, he has a multiple-grenade launcher steadied against his shoulder. He rotates slowly, looking for a target. Idiot. He should be shooting, setting the grass and brush on fire to flush us out . . . but it’s too late to send him back to school. It’s too late when he sees me, half-hidden in the grass. My visor helps me line up my aim, I trigger a short burst from the HITR, and he collapses beside his friend.

Eerie silence falls over the brush. Even the wind has died away. I can’t see anyone. The brothel men have retreated back inside their brothel truck, closing the door behind them.

Dubey says, “That drone wasn’t jamming the angel.”

He’s right. The drone is gone, but we haven’t recovered our link to Guidance.

“So what the hell can be jamming the angel and not messing with helmet-to-helmet?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

Something else grabs my attention, a faint sound amplified by my helmet—a girl sobbing.

It puts me in a bad mood. “Get out in the open!” I scream. “All of you! Hands on your heads and leave your weapons behind. Now.”

Nothing happens for fourteen or fifteen seconds. In my head I run through possible ways of getting everyone out of the truck without hurting the girls, but before I can come up with a reasonable plan, the truck’s rear door opens and, to my surprise, the bad guys help me by sending one of the girls creeping out all on her own. They’ve even let her put on a dress. She takes a few steps and then stops. She’s crying and shaking, sure that we’ll shoot her down.

“You want the women?” a man yells. He appears at the door, a white man with some kind of European accent. I watch him looking around, trying to figure out where I am. “Take them. Take them all. More where that came from.”

“Fuck you and get out where I can see you!”

He looks right at me, guided by my voice, but I doubt he can see much. The grass is good cover.

“Take the women and leave it at that,” he warns me. “We’ve notified the Alliance we’re under attack. American gunships will be here in a few minutes. Disappear now or you won’t have a chance.”

Ransom snorts. “Idiot.”

I have to agree. Our enemy has no idea who we are; he assumes we're gangsters, here to rob him.

I don't really care if he's managed to get a call out to the army; I know a call has already gone out—because when my angel is jammed, its protocol is to retreat until it can link up again with Guidance. As soon as it reappeared on her screen, Delphi would have taken control of it. No doubt she heard our brief firefight and passed the news on to Command. With luck, gunships are already on the way—and even the corrupt Alliance is not going to be able to overlook the deficient quality of their contractor's employees once that much military hardware is in motion.

So I let the cum wad think he's got me worried. Injecting an anxious note into my voice, I say, "Yeah, okay. We'll take the women. Send the rest of them out or I'll put a grenade into your truck."

The man ducks back inside. "Go!" I hear him shouting. "Get out."

The other two girls appear at the narrow door, wearing cheap, colorful dresses. They jump down to the ground on bare feet, crying and clinging to each other.

"Tell them to follow the tire tracks back to the road," I say.

Another man, someone I haven't seen before, leans out the door and harangues them in a language I don't recognize and that my helmet isn't set up to translate. Their expressions are hopeless as they stumble off, heading for the road.

"Now get out of here," the European says. "I can hear the helicopters already."

He's not lying. I hear them too. I still can't reach my angel, though, and I'd like to fix that. On top of the cargo truck is a small dish antenna. It's the only candidate I can see for the source of the jamming signal. "Yafiah," I whisper on gen-com, "circle around and meet the girls. Make sure they're safe."

"On my way."

"Jaynie?"

"Here."

"I'm going to encourage the enemy to leave the truck. Don't let me get killed, okay?"

"No worries."

"I'm watching too," Ransom says.

I put my finger next to the trigger that will launch a grenade. Then I advance into the open with quick steps, circling around the bodies of the guards. A reek of blood and shit rises from them, overwhelming in the afternoon heat.

The European spots me—and my uniform. He's outraged. "Who the hell are you?" he screams at me. "Fucking army moron—I'm reporting you to your commanding officer!"

This doesn't exactly scare me because everything I do, everything I say, and most of what goes on in my

head is relayed straight to Command. I have no secrets. They know I'm an asshole, but they find uses for me anyway.

The helicopters are easy to hear as I aim my weapon at the side of the cargo truck. "Clear out," I advise him. "Because I'm going to blow it up."

"You fucking madman!" the European screams, and then, in a panicked jump, he leaps clear of the truck, hitting the ground hard. His feet slip in the mud and he goes down with an unintelligible curse. Two other cum wads scramble out after him. One looks African, the other mixed Arab, or maybe Indian.

"Get down!" I scream at them, and they drop, falling prone alongside their companion. I have no idea which ones are Vanda-Sheridan's engineers and which one runs the mobile brothel, and I don't give a shit.

Ransom and Jaynie emerge from the brush, their weapons pointed at the passive trio.

"Dubey!" I bark.

He appears at my side and together we go through the truck and the other vehicles, making sure no one else is there. Then I send Dubey to pull the plug on the antenna, but he's still climbing up to the roof of the truck when the angel comes back online. I know because Delphi speaks to me: "Shelley, acknowledge."

"I'm here." I wave at Dubey to come back down.

"Status?"

"We were forced to engage, resulting in two enemy dead, three captured, three refugees." The gunships are circling above us, sending up a tornado of leaves and pollen. "Tell them not to kill us, okay, Delphi?"

"Don't worry, Shelley. I'm saving that privilege for myself."

"Hey, I didn't jam the angel."

"The angel wasn't jammed! We got to watch you the whole time. All the outgoing relays worked fine. We heard every word spoken."

"I don't understand."

"No one does. For the duration of the operation, the angel stopped relaying all communications from Guidance, and even when I tried to switch your overlay to the local cell phone network, I couldn't get through—but as soon as the operation ended, two-way communication was restored."

"By who?"

"No one! No one here did anything. It just happened."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Yeah? No kidding."

••••

Too much has happened to cover up the crime. So the engineers and the slaver are all taken into custody, though I still don't know who's who. The three girls are transported by gunship to a refugee camp farther out in the Sahel—far enough to find their way back home, I hope.

Yafiah and Ransom don't have to fight over who gets to drive, because I put each of them behind the wheel of one of the contractor's two trucks. Our revised orders are to bring the load on as far as Fort Dassari and guard it. In a day or two, Command will fly new engineers out to take over the project. Delphi makes me promise that when they come to get the trucks, I won't kill them.

••••

Jayne and Dubey go first in the convoy on their ATVs. The two big open-bed trucks follow, and I come last. I'm stuck driving the third ATV, which means I can't do more than glance through the angel's eyes. It's a vulnerable feeling, not being able to study the terrain around me. I drive on the right shoulder, which at least lets me see something of the road beyond the trucks.

"Delphi?"

"Go ahead."

"You got any bogeys out there?"

"Nothing. I would tell you if there were."

I know she would. I also know she's handling other soldiers, not just me. She's busy—which is why I need to make sure I hold on to some percentage of her attention.

A few more minutes pass. The wind picks up, lightning arcs across black clouds to the south, and the air is heavy with the promise of rain.

"Delphi? The angel was hacked, wasn't it?"

Several seconds go by without an answer. I check my icons. I'm still linked.

"Delphi?"

"Tech is looking into it."

"Did you just talk to someone? Were you told not to say any more than that?"

"I talked to tech. They had nothing new to tell me."

We put another five klicks behind us. I hear the rain coming: a crackling, drumming static growing steadily louder as it sweeps across the plain.

"Delphi?"

“Yes, Shelley?”

“I thought no one could hack through our security.”

Silence.

“If you don’t answer me I’m going to think the angel has cut out again.”

“Check your icons.”

The rain hits in a sudden deluge that sluices across my visor. The live view gets replaced by a simulated view derived from my helmet’s camera buttons, with the rain distortion subtracted.

“Delphi, what if the angel cuts out again when we’re on patrol?”

“That’s a concern,” she concedes. “And it’s being discussed. I’ll let you know.”

I would like to be part of that discussion, but I know that isn’t going to happen.

The rain passes in just a few minutes and where the sun breaks through the clouds, the road starts steaming.

“Any bogeys?” I ask Delphi.

“Why, Shelley? Do you have one of your ‘feelings’?”

“No.”

“Then why are you acting like a nervous little kid?”

It’s because I feel vulnerable, going without angel sight.

• • •

Our cloud-fractured shadows stretch out in front of us, getting longer as the afternoon grows old. It’s a relief to finally roll into the village, even if we have to cut back our speed to a walking pace.

We get a colder reception than on the way out. Bibata must have dropped hints of what she saw, or suspected, because people eye the trucks with suspicion. I look for her, wanting to let her know that we took care of things, but while the angel locates her truck alongside her mother’s house, Bibata doesn’t come out to say hello. I’d like to go see her, but I can’t do it. I’d get reprimanded for harassment just for knocking on her door.

The first truck rolls past the north edge of the village. An old woman with weathered gray skin stands by the road, watching. She has a young girl beside her, about the age of the girls in the brothel truck. As I approach on my ATV, she raises her hand, gesturing for me to stop.

I relay my status on gen-com. “I’m stopping for a minute. Keep the convoy moving. I’ll catch up.”

The woman gestures impatiently at the young girl, who speaks to me in excellent English. “Grandmother

wants to know what you saw out there, Shelley.”

I’m relieved to share the news, certain that it will get back to Bibata. “I saw some bad men, but they’re not out there anymore.”

“You kill them, Shelley?” she asks eagerly.

“We killed two. Three were arrested.”

She translates this for Grandmother, who asks her a question. She repeats the question for me, in English. “Were there girls? Were they killed?”

“Three girls. They’re alive. You do what Grandmother tells you and stay safe.”

“I have a gun,” she says proudly. “If any cunt hunter comes for me, Grandmother says to kill him.”

Without a good harvest, Grandmother might not have enough food for the next year, but the war is close enough that she’s invested scarce money in a weapon that isn’t likely to offer much protection if things really go south.

“You be careful with your gun,” I tell her.

The trucks have both cleared the village. They’re picking up speed. I look around one more time for Bibata, but I don’t see her, which is probably for the better. What we have between us—it’s performance art, not love. I’ve been in love. I know.

Taking my foot off the brake, I head out.

I have to drive like a madman to catch up with the trucks.

••••

It’s 1730 by the time we get back to the fort. Delphi is as tired as I am. She checks out, leaving me in the care of my second-shift handler, a guy code-named Pagan. “Hey, Shelley,” he greets me. “Heard you’ve had a busy twenty-four.”

“Not over yet.”

“Let me know if you need anything. I’m watching.”

Pagan’s okay. Mostly I get him at the end of a long shift like this one, but he’s been my primary handler on a couple of missions, and I’ve worked with him enough that I don’t mind having him inside my head. He’s efficient and polite, and when nothing is going on, he’s good at being invisible. He’ll stay in the background until my helmet comes off, and my helmet won’t come off until I’m safe inside the fort with the gate closed and the auto-defense active. Right now I have to secure the trucks.

I make Ransom repark them on the south side of the fort, with the trailers perpendicular to the wall in a configuration that will provide minimal cover for insurgents. Then I have him unhook the cabs and turn them around so their front bumpers face the trailer hitches. No one is going to steal either the trucks or the

equipment while they're under my authority.

The three dogs we left behind in the fort are ecstatic at our return. I drop my pack and then take a minute for hugs and bruising tail thumps. After that, I get Ransom to help me haul down a crate of portable motion detectors from the bunk where they're stored. We head outside, both of us still wearing armor and bones, with the dogs cavorting around us. The sun is dropping out of sight behind the sorghum fields and the spreading branches of the neem trees, lighting the clouds on fire as we set up the motion detectors all around the trucks—a little extra insurance in case a ghost gets past the permanent detectors that monitor activity in our vicinity. By the time we're done, the first stars are gleaming in a twilight sky.

I whistle the dogs back into the fort and turn on the new motion detectors. Ransom disappears inside.

It's 1830. We're supposed to undertake our nightly patrol in an hour and a half, but I check in with Pagan and get permission to put it off until 2200.

Dubey and Yafiah are in the yard, sans armor and bones, cleaning and prepping the ATVs. I take off my helmet. "Yafiah, you're on patrol. Get your gear ready, and get some sleep."

She looks daggers at me but doesn't say anything as she follows me inside.

"Jaynie!" I bellow.

"Yes, sir!"

She appears at the door of the TOC in her sweaty T-shirt and mud-stained pants. "You and Dubey get to stay home tonight to guard the trucks. Ransom and Yafiah are on patrol with me."

Yafiah mutters something under her breath as she pushes past me, disappearing into the bunk room. She'll feel better after a few energy drinks.

• • •

I close the door to my room—a tiny compartment just big enough for my bunk and a desk that I never use. As I lie down, I think, Sleep. My skullcap picks it up, and in seconds, dream visions come walking through my head. One of them is a dragon I encountered in Texas.

I'm so startled I wake up again, blinking at the white ceiling, tinged red with dust.

I've got that unsettled feeling, like God's been whispering hints in my back brain to kick loose the memory. My rational mind resists: I tell myself that what happened today is reason enough to remember her.

It was at Dallas/Fort Worth. My flight out of Bolivia had been delayed by thunderstorms, leaving me only minutes to make my connection to New York, and I was in a grim mood, because my CO had made me turn in my skullcap before I went on leave.

The first sign of trouble came in a commotion of voices in the crowded concourse. Ahead of me, civilians fell back against the glass, making way for a phalanx of eight black-uniformed mercenaries openly carrying sidearms in their shoulder holsters. I scrambled behind a pillar, breaking a fear sweat, sure I'd walked into the initial stage of a terrorist attack—but my overlay posted no alert, presenting only a simple annotation

identifying the mercenaries as employees of Uther-Fen Protective Services, authorized to carry small arms anywhere, even in a public transportation hub.

Around me, excited civilians bounced on their toes, straining to see over the heads of the mercs while asking one another, “Who is it? Is it an actor? Can you see?”

So I looked too and saw a civilian, a woman, mature but not old, walking among the mercenaries, her back straight, her gaze fixed ahead. She was tall and slender, with stiff gold hair—not blond, but gold—framing her face in a helmet cut. Her eyes were hidden by the tinted, curved lens of her high-end farsights. She wore a silky, gray, knee-length coat, and I had a feeling she was authorized to carry small arms too, and that she had a gun hidden away somewhere in that coat.

My overlay identified her as Thelma Sheridan, principal stockholder of Vanda-Sheridan, making her one of the elite of the world—a dragon in possession of a hoard of treasure, and dangerous to disturb.

In all the world, maybe three thousand people could be considered her peers. Maybe fewer.

I felt stunned by the aura of her power; I saw the ruthlessness required to achieve her position written into her face.

The double doors of a private lounge opened to receive her, along with her escort of armed guards. As the doors closed, a hissing sea of astonished whispers flooded the concourse, along with a few shrill bursts of nervous laughter. Dragons are rarely seen. Everyone there knew they’d been granted a glimpse into a hidden world.

Afterward, I felt like an idiot because I’d let myself be intimidated by the mere fact of Thelma Sheridan’s wealth. I wondered what would have happened if I’d tried to confront her about the corruption of her employees in Bolivia. Pretty damn sure that would not have turned out well. Dragons don’t get where they are in the world by being nice.

Our politicians make a lot of noise, and they pretend they’re in charge, but dragons lurk behind them, in the shadows, where the real decisions get made.

Again I think, Sleep. This time God is silent—or maybe I’m too tired to hear.

• • •

I’m out for two hours. Then Guidance cues the skullcap to wake me. I find Jaynie in the TOC, still on watch; she still hasn’t showered. “Have we got a report on the angel?”

“Yes, sir. Tech ran diagnostics on it. No issues were detected. Command says to proceed as normal.”

So my three-person patrol heads out into the night, with five dogs to look after us and one temperamental angel.

Thick clouds hide the waxing moon, but the night is bright anyway with night vision. We follow the map Guidance has put up in my visor—the route is different every night—and we move fast. At first the dogs think it’s a great game, but they start to lag so we slow down. They don’t turn up anything suspicious, and I’m not sensing anything either. I’m hoping for a quiet night when Pagan checks in with the news that a unit

of ghost soldiers, nine in all, has turned up in the district west of us. There's an ongoing firefight. Intelligence suspects a widespread infiltration attempt so the night's satellite data from our district was reassessed. "Suspicious elements were found."

"Want to clarify that?" I ask. "Are we talking a confirmed presence or just bogeys?"

"Right now, bogeys. You get to figure out if they're real."

Great.

"Where?"

A point lights up on the map, back in the territory we just cleared.

"We just came through there."

"You were moving fast. We must have missed something."

I shunt the map to Yafiah and Ransom, who are a half klick away, one on either side of me. "Satellites have picked up bogeys, six kilometers back. We're going to check it out."

"Yes, sir!" Ransom answers with enthusiasm. He's been bored tonight.

Yafiah manages to convey an entirely different meaning with the same two words.

• • •

We search the area where the bogeys were seen and we hunt through the surrounding terrain, but nothing turns up. The dogs don't find any suspicious scents, and I'm not nervous.

"So what?" I ask Pagan. "Where are they? Or have you got noobs in Intelligence tonight?"

"Maybe," he says. "I never know who's preparing the reports. I just get the documents."

We resume our patrol, heading south again. The moon has set, so when the clouds break up they reveal a great vault of stars and satellites: bright white points against a dull, dark-green sky.

Twenty minutes later, I know where the enemy is.

It's 0330. The angel is off to the northwest, ten klicks away and at the limit of its range when I look through its eyes and see a half-dozen goats, trotting in a line. Goats don't like to move at night, so something has scared them. I send the drone back in the direction the goats are coming from—and after a few seconds I see tall grass moving beneath tree branches as if something large is passing there.

"Pagan."

"I see it. Stand by." He comes back maybe twenty seconds later. "We got at least seven ghosts."

"Damn it!" It's over eight kilometers back, in territory we just swept a second time. "They must have their

own drone. They knew when we were in the area and laid low.”

“They can’t have a drone,” Pagan says. “We’d know about it. They were probably scanning for the angel’s EM transmissions. Or maybe they just got lucky.”

The brush is thick around us. A chorus of insects still sings to the night, though not as many as when we started out. The air is humid and calm, and I’m so damn tired that everywhere looks the same to me.

“Do we go after them?” I ask Pagan, because I just want to get it over with and get a chance to sleep.

“Checking.”

I’ve been stationary long enough to make Yafiah nervous. “LT? You okay?”

“Ghosts,” I tell her. “Seven confirmed. Back the way we came.”

“Fuck.”

My feelings exactly, but Ransom is overjoyed. “Hot damn! Somethin’ to do tonight after all!”

Pagan comes back. “Command says let the ghosts go. They’re sending a kill drone. The insurgents are far enough from anywhere that no one’s going to notice. Give Ransom my apologies.”

• • •

We keep on for another hour before Command takes pity on us and sends us home. The stars are still out in force when Fort Dassari opens its gates to receive us. The dogs run to drink water, and then collapse in exhaustion.

My people don’t have that luxury. Our equipment has to be cleaned, inspected, powered up, and made ready before anyone gets to rest, because we could get called out at any time. Yafiah staggers as she steps free of her dead sister. Dubey catches her elbow and hands her an energy drink, which should keep her going long enough to finish her chores. I’ve passed through exhaustion into a state of calm clarity in which I do nothing that isn’t necessary and everything I do is in slow, smooth, deliberate motion. It’s close to being stoned.

The HITRs are cleaned and plugged into the rack to get charged. Same thing for the helmets, but I leave my dead sister on for now.

Yafiah takes a two-minute shower—I don’t even have to yell at her to hurry up—and disappears into the bunk room. Ransom is right behind her. I join Jaynie in the tactical operations center, where she’s back on watch.

It’s not easy to sit wearing a dead sister, so I just rest cock-hipped against a table. Jaynie turns from the bank of monitors, one smooth eyebrow raised, like she’s questioning my sanity. “Why are you still wearing your armor and bones?”

I scan the monitors. I’m punchy with fatigue, but there are some things worth staying up for. “Bibata’s coming. She has to drop off the dog food.”

Jayne cracks a grin and shakes her head.

“Highlight of my week,” I add in my own defense.

“You know you can never—”

“I know it.” I close my sandpaper eyes. “It’s just a game.”

I know I’m on the edge of sleep when visions start showing up in my head. Lissa’s there, in Central Park with spring flowers all around, holding my hand and plotting to run away with me to spend the summer in Europe. I’ll do it. I’ll do anything she says. I don’t ever want to love anyone else.

“You might want to lock up the joints of your dead sister before you fall over, sir,” Jaynie says with amusement in her voice.

I startle awake, check the time on my overlay. Almost twenty minutes have passed. I scan the monitors again. “I go on leave in three months.” I’m a little worried about it. “I’ve heard Guidance policy has changed, and they’re letting us use our skullcaps on leave if we request it.”

“I’ve heard that too. Going back to New York?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. My dad’s still there.” I look at her more closely, and I think to ask for the first time, “So what about you? Have you got someone? Are you married?”

“Married?” she asks in disbelief. “Marriage is for people like you, Shelley. No one I know gets married. There’s no military benefits for it anymore. Marriage costs too damn much.”

I shrug, annoyed because Jaynie has a talent for making me feel like a stupid kid.

Granted, it’s not all that hard to do.

“You fell a long way, didn’t you?” she asks.

“Yeah, I guess.”

She nods. “It’s easy to tell you come from a good family. The way you carry yourself, the way you talk. The fact that the army made you an officer even though you came in on a prison deferment.”

I shrug. “The induction contract archives my record, so it’s like I didn’t do anything. If I clear my term, the record gets permanently expunged.”

“Like it never happened.”

“Yeah. Just a ten-year detour.”

“So what did you do? What did they get you for?”

“Gang rape and setting off a bomb in a public gathering place.”

She rolls her eyes. “What was it? Frigging jaywalking?”

I can’t believe it. She got it right on the first guess. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“What?”

“Jaywalking. Illegal assembly. Disorderly conduct. Those were the initial charges. It’s not freedom we’re fighting for, you know that, right?”

“What are you talking about, ‘freedom’? We’re fighting for a paycheck, right?”

I laugh. “Yeah. That’s it exactly. Your paycheck, mine, the shareholders’.”

“So what did you do? Participate in a riot?”

“No.”

Ransom and Yafiah have grilled me for months about my mysterious past and I never have told them why I’m here, but for some reason I tell Jaynie. Maybe I’m just tired. “It started with a nonviolent protest march, a rally against the war industry.”

Her elegant eyebrows climb into high arcs of skepticism.

I start to laugh, and she realizes it’s true.

She leans forward, her mouth round with surprise. “Oh my God. No shit? You’re here, killing people, because you were found guilty of protesting the war industry?”

“Beat that,” I tell her.

She shakes her head in wonder, but she still isn’t buying it entirely. “Illegal assembly . . . that has to be a misdemeanor. How does that add up to ten years in the army?”

No point in holding back now. “It was a big march, in Manhattan. I wasn’t part of the movement. I was just out on the street, a dumb kid with nothing to do on a Saturday night, so I thought it’d be cool to join the crowd.” I touch my gloved finger to the corner of my eye. “I already had the overlay. It was a prototype, new at the time.”

“They’re still new. I never met anyone else who had one.”

“That you know about.”

She acknowledges the point with a nod. “But they are rare.”

“And not cheap, either. I used mine to record the march. Then the cops started arresting people. I couldn’t believe it. Like, what happened to free speech?”

It’s a rhetorical question, and she doesn’t answer.

“When I questioned my arrest, the cops called it resisting. I recorded that. I recorded every fucking second of it. My arrest, the strip search, everything. The cops didn’t know I was cyborged, so it was easy. Afterward, I published the video, and people could see the wreckage that used to be their civil rights. It really boosted the protest movement.”

“Goddamn, I think I saw that video.”

“You probably did.”

“So you made an illegal recording and you published it.”

“Yeah, that was the felony charge. The city government claimed I was infringing on people’s rights to privacy and exposing their cops to retribution. Of course, these days, in Manhattan, you can’t walk down a street without being recorded.”

She shakes her head. “Some balls, Shelley.”

My cheeks heat up. “Not really. I just didn’t like getting pushed around by the cops, and I was pissed.”

“Huh. You should get counseling for that.”

The sun’s coming up outside, its first rays spearing through tree branches and casting long, sharp shadows across the road. Bibata always comes just after sunrise. I watch the south road monitor, knowing it won’t be long before her truck shows up.

“So how about you?” I ask Jaynie. “What’s your story?”

She looks me in the eye. “I didn’t have to leave home, because I never had one. I do have ambition.”

“And smarts and curiosity. Are you going for officer?”

“I have my application in.”

In the army it’s still possible to come from nowhere and wind up in command. In the civilian world, that just doesn’t happen anymore.

We’re both startled by the gentle pinging of the peripheral alarm, but it’s just Bibata’s truck, still five K out. “Right on time as always,” I say, getting up.

“Mind your manners,” Jaynie warns me. “Cause Mama’s watching.”

I grin, and after retrieving my helmet and rifle from the bunk room, I head outside. The sun’s rays blaze against the roof of the fort, but the yard is still shadowed by the east wall. Dubey is grooming the dogs under the canopy. “Get rigged up,” I tell him. “Bibata’s here.”

He nods, leashes the dogs, and then disappears inside.

I put my helmet on, willing the visor to go transparent. We’re required to be fully rigged every time we step outside. That’s the rule and we lose leave days if we violate it, because the army does not want to pay out on

our life insurance policies.

I visualize the gate opening. My skullcap detects my intention and the gate slides aside just far enough that I can pass.

• • •

I stand on the side, waiting, as Bibata backs her pickup truck up to the closed gate. The truck's bed is almost empty: just ten cases of canned dog food and a basket of fresh fruit, mostly mangoes and papayas, purchased in the village. I circle the truck, swiping the barrel of my HITR underneath it so the onboard camera can scan for bombs, because you never know.

By the time I come around the front, Bibata has gotten out. She gives me a coy smile as she stands beside the cab, arms akimbo, dressed in rust-red-and-gray camo pants and a pink tube top that shows off her gorgeous breasts. "I didn't bring any bombs this time, Shelley." She pats herself down: shoulders, breasts, belly, hips. "And no guns, either, except the little one in the cab."

And just like that I've got a hard-on. She knows it too. "You ready to say bye-bye to Mama, Shelley, and go for a ride?"

"Hell yes."

But just then the gate opens behind me. I glance back. Dubey, rigged in armor and bones, is bringing out the first of the empty water barrels.

"But Mama's still watching," I add in resignation.

I extend the arm hooks of my dead sister and use them to grab the cases of dog food. I haul them inside the fort, and then I help Dubey load the barrels into the truck bed. The dead sisters are useful in moving supplies, but slinging cargo is not their primary role. The models we use are built for speed and agility. Their load-bearing capacity is limited to about three hundred fifty pounds, including the soldier's body weight. The ironic result is that when we have to distribute loads, the lightest soldiers get the heaviest burdens. Life is just not fair like that.

Dubey and I tie the barrels down. Then I hand Bibata a personal cash card, which she swipes on her phone, withdrawing payment. Technically, the army is supposed to supply us, but Bibata is a lot more reliable, so I cover the cost of water, fresh fruit, and dog food out of my pay. It's not like I have anything else to do with the money.

She turns to gaze at the water barrels, letting me admire her in profile. "These I bring back in the afternoon, Shelley." She cocks her head to look at me. "You look tired, love. You going to sleep now, yes? Make sure you dream of me."

I think that's guaranteed.

• • •

I stand in the shower for a long time, hot water running over me, probably the same water, over and over again as it passes through the filtration system. Eventually I work up the nerve to take my skullcap off.

Moving with mad speed, I clean my scalp and duck under the water to rinse, managing to slip the skullcap back on just as the dark feelings begin to intrude.

But the soothing complacency I expect doesn't come. I press the cap all over. It's seated correctly, but I'm not getting anything out of it. It's like it's gone dead.

I shut the water off and grab a towel. My heart booms, but I'm too confused to panic. That's when an icon lights up in my overlay. Guidance is calling.

Everyone gives up autonomy when they go into the military. For me, part of that was control of my overlay. It's mine and not the army's, but to keep it I had to yield root control, meaning Guidance can override anything I do and intrude whenever they want to. Usually they have the good manners not to, but sometimes they forget to be subtle.

With no acknowledgment from me, a voice starts speaking in my ears, and it's not Delphi or Pagan. It's some guy I've never heard before. "Lieutenant Shelley—"

I cut him off. "Delphi's my handler." I don't like it that he's in my head. Try walking naked out of the shower and finding a stranger sitting on your bed. That's what it's like. "If Delphi's not around, it's Pagan. No one else gets inside my head."

"I'm not in your head," the stranger says, an edge to his voice as if he's dealt with too many unstable idiots just like me. "I'm inside your overlay. And I follow orders just like you do. My name's Denario. I was told to contact you at this address. I work on technical issues. Your skullcap is scheduled for diagnostic testing, so it won't be usable for the next few hours. Thought you'd like to know."

I want to believe I haven't heard him right, but I'm not good at denial. My temper's frayed and the skullcap is not working to keep me calm, so I lay into him. "I don't know what the fuck you're talking about. There's no such thing as a field diagnostic. That doesn't happen."

Denario doesn't answer. He gives me quite a few seconds to think about things . . . like the black kernel of panic that's starting to unfurl deep inside my head, and the complete lack of any counteracting response from my skullcap. "You've taken it offline . . . haven't you?"

"It's been switched off," Denario confirms, no doubt relieved that I'm finally catching on. "You'll need to locate the diagnostic rack in the TOC. Put the cap on it. Then go take a nap. You'll have it back by the time you wake up."

I peel the lifeless skullcap off and stare at it, but there's no on switch, no way for me to activate it. I didn't even know it could be turned off. "What the hell is going on? Who ordered this? Why?"

"The why is, I was told to run a diagnostic, and I'm going to do it. I can't do it until the cap is on the rack, so the sooner you let me get started, the sooner you can have your emo drip back online again."

"Fuck."

"And don't try taking it off the rack early or the test will have to be restarted."

I don't bother to dry off. Wrapping the towel around my waist, I stomp into the tactical operations center,

where Dubey has taken over the watch. From beneath the comforting coverage of his skullcap, he glances at me with worried eyes and looks away—so I know he knows.

And since he's the only one there, I yell at him: "What's a diagnostic rack?"

"I looked it up," he says meekly. "And then I found it for you."

He gets up and moves to the little utility table set at right angles to the desk. "It's here. It's a kit. I can set it up for you, but you have to give me your skullcap."

Dubey doesn't want to touch my skullcap and I don't want him to touch it either. Some things are too personal. "I'll do it myself." I'm sure the equipment is simple enough for the lowest common denominator to manage.

He retreats to the desk. I open the kit—and discover that it unfolds into a wire-frame skull without a face. I lay the skullcap over it and the frame blazes with red light.

Denario is back in my head. "Good job, Lieutenant. Now go to sleep. Things will be all better by morning."

"It is morning, asshole."

"Not where I live."

Dubey doesn't say anything else and neither do I.

Back in the shower room I trade my towel for a pair of shorts, then I retreat to my room, close the door, and lie down in my bunk. The black kernel in my head is blooming. It was never part of my life plan to be an emo junkie. What the fuck happened to me? I gave up my life for one stupid, defiant act when I was nineteen and I fucking don't want to think about it. I don't want to think about Lissa. I don't.

But the memories are chasing around inside my head in a whirlwind of resentment until I'm left pressing my hands against my forehead as if I can squeeze them out.

There's a knock on the silly little panel that counts as a door. Before I can muster the energy to curse whoever it is, the door opens and Jaynie comes in with peace in her right hand. I turn my head as she holds it out to me: one small blue pill nestled in her dark palm. She says, "I talked to Guidance. You're authorized for a single dose of don't-give-a-shit. Take it, Lieutenant. It'll let you sleep."

"Thanks." I take it out of her hand, but I don't pop it right away. She gives me that questioning look again. "I'll be okay," I tell her.

"I know."

She retreats, closing the door behind her. I hold the pill in my palm so long that its blue coating starts to dissolve against the heat of my skin. I've run three missions in less than forty hours. Nothing was wrong with my performance on any of them. Nothing was fucked up. Command wasn't happy about the Vanda-Sheridan contractors, but we did put the bad guys out of circulation, we saved the girls, the equipment is safe just outside the fort, and new engineers are on their way. And I finished another fucking patrol after that. They have to know there's nothing wrong with my equipment.

And then it hits me. They're just checking my skullcap before they pull me in for a diagnostic.

Why?

Why, when I've performed above and beyond?

And then I know.

I'm standing on the edge of an abyss and I know, I know, I know.

It's the King David thing.

I should kick Ransom's ass for coming up with that tag, but I know that's what they're worried about and suddenly I'm wondering too—how the fuck do I know things? How do I know when we're about to get slammed? And why haven't I ever wondered about it before?

There's a blue stain in my palm when I finally put the pill under my tongue. God must have forgotten to whisper a warning to me that Satan was about to drag me to the edge of the black abyss. I don't want to look down there and see the faces of all the people I've killed. So I go to sleep instead.

••••

A soft knock on the door: tap-tap, tap. The rhythm repeats several times. I hear it, but it's not quite enough to wake me up. Ransom's bellowing does the trick though: "Jesus, Yafiah, just tell him."

I'm halfway to my feet when the door opens and Ransom leans in. "The rack is green."

The don't-give-a-shit has left me confused. "Then the test is done?"

"It's done," Ransom confirms. "Message from Guidance says your skullcap is cleared for use."

I'm relieved, oh yes. But then I indulge in a brief moment of machismo, toying with the idea of not picking the skullcap up right away, of not putting it on . . . of proving to myself and to Guidance that I can live without it . . . but I'm only thinking about it because the don't-give-a-shit hasn't really worn off yet.

I get up. Ransom opens the door wider like he expects me to bolt into the hall. It's tempting, but I make myself put on pants first, and a T-shirt. I skip the boots, but I walk out of the room. Yafiah's standing in the hall behind Ransom, watching me with wary eyes. I wonder how many men she's seen go berserk when they can't get their fix? Not that I'd ever ask.

It's two paces to the TOC, two more to the utility table. The rack is green just like Ransom reported. My skullcap is there, but I don't touch it. I look over my shoulder instead, wanting to be sure.

"You got a message?" I ask Ransom. "It's cleared for use?"

I have to be sure, because I do not want to start the testing over again.

"Here. You can look at it."

Ransom comes in, touches the main screen. Text appears, confirming what he told me. I sigh and pick up the skullcap, worried that it will still be offline—but that worry evaporates as soon as I slip it on.

Like every other LCS soldier, my brain is randomly peppered with a myriad of tiny organic implants called “neuromodulating microbeads.” The position and function of each bead is known to the skullcap. Some are chemical sensors that signal deviations from a baseline, while others can be directed by the skullcap to stimulate neurochemical production.

My brain has deviated a long way from the baseline. The skullcap registers that and reacts. A sense of calm sweeps over me so quickly I wonder if I’ve psyched myself into it—just expecting to feel better, so I do. But in that moment I don’t really care.

• • •

It’s only midafternoon, so I go back to sleep. But just before seventeen hundred I’m awake, feeling shot full of adrenaline for no reason at all. Did someone shout out an alarm? I can’t remember it, but why else am I awake?

I’m on my feet and dressed, boots on, within a minute. I throw the door open and stomp over to the tactical operations center. “What’s going on?”

Ransom is on watch. “Nothin’, LT. Everything’s quiet. Everyone’s asleep.”

I stand behind him and scan the screens. I check the messages. But he’s right—nothing’s going on.

I feel like somebody’s pointing a gun at my head.

In the kitchen, I heat up a meal. I’m halfway through it when I suddenly remember what I’ve forgotten.

The chair legs scrape the floor as I stand up. “Ransom!”

“Sir?”

He’s at the door of the TOC when I step out of the kitchen. “What happened to Bibata? She was supposed to bring the water.”

“She did, sir, while you were asleep. The sarge logged it.”

I glare at him for several seconds, as if it’s his fault everything went as it should have. Then I return to my dinner, but I can’t eat, so I pitch it into the composter and I go outside.

The temperature’s up around a hundred—not too bad for this time of year. The dogs are sprawled in the shade of their canopy. Tails thump, but it’s too hot for them to get up and greet me—just like any other afternoon. Nothing is wrong, nothing is going on, but my anxiety is getting worse.

I wonder if Denario fucked up my skullcap.

Or maybe this is just the hangover that follows a dose of don’t-give-a-shit.

Something's wrong.

I climb up to the catwalk and gaze through the peepholes. The trucks are where they're supposed to be, waiting for new engineers. The road is empty. A light wind rustles the nearest sorghum field. A stick fence keeps the goats out. I see them in the distance, browsing in the shade of a grove of neem trees.

I patrol the catwalk, but there's nothing to see in any direction, and there's no sound except the rustling of leaves, the bleating of goats, and the buzz of insects. I wipe away the sweat on my face. My T-shirt is wet with sweat. And my anxiety is getting worse. I don't want to be here, inside these walls. I don't want my soldiers to be here. I want to get out.

But that's crazy. We're safe here.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I flinch as a green question mark flashes in my overlay. Unknown caller? I'm not cleared for phone calls. I wonder if I should answer, and then I do, but no one's there.

“Guidance is fucking with me,” I mutter.

I go back inside, intending to call in, to ask Delphi or Pagan or whoever's on duty what the fuck they think they're doing, but I don't make it to the TOC. I'm barely in the door when a sense of urgency slams through my brain. It's now, God whispers. Whatever's happening, it's happening now.

I know I've lost it. I know I've cracked, but I don't care. I start screaming. “Everybody, up! Now! Something's coming. I can feel it. A slam's coming. Get on your armor and bones. Now! ”

Ransom pops out of the TOC, wild-eyed. “King David?”

“Do it! Armor and bones!”

“Yes, sir!” He launches himself down the hall to the bunk room. “Dubey, up!” he shouts. “Yafiah! King David says armor and bones!”

The door to Jaynie's room pops open. She's got on her T-shirt, pants, and boots. “Status, sir?”

“I don't fucking know! We just need to get out of here.”

Delphi is talking to me via my overlay. She can call me on it, but I can't call her. “Shelley, take it easy—”

I cut her off as Jaynie pushes past me into the TOC. “Armor and bones, Sergeant!” I shout after her, and then I duck into the bunk room.

Ransom, Dubey, and Yafiah are all getting their armor on. I join them. Jaynie reappears, looking at me like I've gone nuts. “Sir, there are no orders.”

“You have my order, Sergeant. Get your rig on now.”

I see Yafiah cast a doubtful look Jaynie's way, while Delphi tries to talk me down. Dubey's looking

scared—of his crazy commanding officer? Ransom’s excited. He’s already strapping on his dead sister while I finish securing my armor.

Delphi gives up on me and goes away. No one else speaks as they strap in. It takes maybe three minutes for everyone to get rigged. I pass out the weapons. “Get your packs and helmets and get out!”

I pull my own helmet on, wait for them to clear out, and then follow them to the door. The fort’s gate is sliding open; the dogs are racing out. Guidance comes in over gen-com—not Delphi. This is the voice of someone older: a woman I’ve never heard before, and she’s speaking to the entire LCS.

“Dassari LCS, warning: two fighter jets are coming out of the east. Flying low—”

“Our fighters?” I interrupt.

“No. Ours are on intercept, but—”

“Get out!” I scream at my people. The two trucks outside are going to be a target, but so will the fort—and it can’t protect us. It wasn’t made for an air war. “Get out! Get as far away as you can! Get out of sight!”

Dubey and Yafiah break first. Our training is to separate, and they do. Dubey cuts east; Yafiah takes off north. Jaynie and Ransom exit behind them. I’m the last to go. My dead sister propels me out of the yard in two strides.

I can already hear the distant thunder of jet engines. I feel like we’ve been betrayed. This is not supposed to be an air war. Small-arms only. Since when can Ahab Matugo afford jets?

“Find cover!” I scream as we race to put distance between ourselves and the finest trio of targets in the district. “Don’t get caught in the open!”

I cut northwest, cross the road, and bound through tall grass between the scattered trees. Ransom is ahead of me, running for all he’s worth, looking like he could leap the trees in a single bound. Jaynie’s angling northeast toward a neem grove. Yafiah has stopped. Her readout is showing two loose cinches on her right leg. “Yafiah!”

“Fixing this shit, LT!”

“Get going!”

I look for Dubey. He’s a labeled point on my visor, running south of the fort, toward what I don’t know. It’s open ground out there, no trees at all, just goat-grazed pastures.

“Dubey, find shelter!” I scream, but he doesn’t answer. He just keeps going.

Fuck.

Out in the open like that, he’s going to make an irresistible target for an adrenaline-shot pilot with an autocannon.

Goddamn it. Why the hell did we have to get stationed in such open country? Why not a jungle or mountains

or something?

Already I can see the bright points of the incoming fighters low in the eastern sky. My brain is squirming in panic. I know, I know, I know I need to keep running. God's voice is as clear in my head as it's ever been: Get away! Get far away—from the trucks, from the fort—but Dubey's just a scared kid. I don't want to give up on him. I don't want him caught out in the open.

So I defy God. I turn around and race back after him.

"Shelley!" Delphi screams at me. "What are you doing? Don't go back to the fort. You're going to get hit!"

"Gotta get Dubey!"

"No! No time! He's panicked. He's checked out. His handler can't get through to him."

That's why I have to go after him.

I blurt between breaths, "Tell his . . . handler . . . tranq him!"

If Guidance can slow him down, it'll give me a chance to catch up. If I can catch him, we can cut back north toward the trees.

But the jets are closing in with unbelievable speed. I feel cheated. I thought I'd have more time. As I round the fort, the fighters are so close that the roar of their engines sets my teeth vibrating. I look for Dubey—and I know it's hopeless.

His handler has gotten him to stop running, but he's way out in a pasture, with panicked goats fleeing past him as he turns back to look at me. There's nowhere out there for him to hide and no time left to get to cover. "Get down!" I order over gen-com. He drops.

I turn and run the other way. Ten long strides to the nearest sorghum field. I vault the fence. The stalks are over six feet high. Maturing sorghum makes good cover from the ground, but I've spent a lot of time looking through the angel's eyes and I know it doesn't hide much from the air. Too bad I've got nowhere else to go.

A different roar cuts past the raging of the jets. A missile is screaming in and the fort is about to go a hundred feet up in the air. I drop. The red dirt between the stalks is slick and wet from the rain. The ground is shaking. I roll into a ball, knowing it's going to be all about luck for the next few seconds.

Luck abandons me. I'm way too close to the fort when the missile hits. The shock wave picks me up. I'm being crushed by sound alone, sent plummeting down a newly opened pit straight into Hell while billowing orange fire whirls in my vision and—

I check out of the world for a few seconds.

Next thing I know, mud and burning chunks of steel and plastic are raining down on me, pummeling the back of my helmet and my armor. I'm furious. I want to kill someone in Command. They told us this was a ground war, a fucking ground war.

I flinch at another concussion, deafened again by another massive explosion. A blast of heat washes over me.

I try to get my eyes to focus. I want to check my visor, see where my people are, but everything has shut down. Guidance must have shut my system down so the pilots can't track the EM signals.

The ground shakes again as one of the fighters sweeps past and then I hear the concussive bursts of what has to be an autocannon. Just like I feared, the pilots are hunting targets on the ground. I close my eyes and pray for them to leave . . . and they do. The roar fades. West, I think . . . toward the next border fort.

My helmet switches back on. The fans blow cool air across my face as the visor initiates its boot routine. I try to get up.

I'm lying on my belly, held down by the weight of my pack, with my arms pinned under me and my head turned to the side. I try to push myself up, but the dead sister isn't working. The sister's titanium bones won't bend, so my arms are locked in place, and I can't get my legs to move. I manage to flop onto my side just as my visor wakes up. I don't like what it shows me. Someone's been hit. Their critical status posts in bold red, but my brain is still hammered from the explosion and I can't get the readout to make sense to me. I give up on it as motion draws my gaze beyond the visor. Bounding across the pummeled ground I see my favorite redneck of all time, coming to my rescue.

"Jesus, Shelley!"

Ransom's voice is pitched weirdly high and shaking. Or maybe it's just that my ears are fucked up.

"Jesus, Jesus, Jesus," he chants as he goes to his knees beside me.

His armor looks flash-fried and I can't see his face past his opaque visor, but I can see he's moving okay. "You wounded?" I ask, because I haven't managed to figure out my readouts yet.

"Shut the fuck up!" he screams at me.

He shrugs off his pack, slams it down against the mud, opens it, and starts tearing through the contents.

"I'm not hurt, Ransom. It's just the dead sister's broken. Uncinch me so I can get up."

It's surprisingly hard to say all that. I'm just lying there on my side, but suddenly I feel like I'm on the verge of sleep.

"Hang on, Shelley," Ransom says.

Like, what else am I supposed to do? "Who's hit?" I ask.

He doesn't answer. I don't know what the hell he's doing.

I try again to bend my arms, but the effort makes me dizzy. "Come on, Ransom. Pop my cinches. Do it now."

"I need to turn you on your back."

He does it. The sky is full of boiling smoke. I think I hear the crackle of fire, but I'm not sure. My hearing's kind of off; not too surprising given that I just got blown up by a missile.

“Delphi?” I ask tentatively, surprised she hasn’t been nagging me. “You there?”

“I’m here, Shelley.”

A whisper is about all I can muster. “What the hell just happened?”

“A new player came into the conflict, one with deep pockets.”

“And Command didn’t know?”

“I don’t know what Command knew.”

A gun goes off not too far away. I flinch hard and try again to sit up, but I can barely lift my head off the ground. “Delphi, what the fuck is wrong with me?”

“I’ve got you maxed out on endorphins,” she whispers, a quaver in her voice.

“Both tourniquets on,” Ransom announces.

None of this makes sense to me; it just makes me angry. “Ransom, what the fuck are you doing? Get this dead sister off me!”

A second gunshot makes me freeze. “Enemy on the ground?”

Ransom answers, “No, LT. It’s just . . . the sarge. She’s shooting the dogs.”

I close my eyes, realizing that Delphi’s got me so high I’m imagining things.

“Sarge says it’d be wrong to leave them here to starve,” Ransom explains.

“I can’t hear her. I didn’t hear her say that.”

“You don’t need to.”

“Goddamn it—” I’m on the edge of a tirade when I hear footsteps crunching through the mud. I turn my head to look.

Jayne’s walking past us through the charred and blasted remnants of the sorghum field, heading for the road. She has her assault rifle clutched in her hands as she moves in stiff, measured steps. Yafiah is two paces behind her, walking in exactly the same way as if it’s a game of copycat, except she’s not carrying a weapon. I see a crater blasted into her armor right in the middle of her chest. Jayne turns her head to glance at me. Yafiah doesn’t, because she isn’t real anymore. It’s only the frame of the dead sister that’s holding her body up.

“Oh fuck,” I whisper, watching the beloved dead walk past. Jayne’s got Yafiah’s exoskeleton slaved to her system. That’s the easiest way to move a body to a pickup point—and it means the exoskeleton will be in position for retrieval too. The army will want to reuse that.

I look again at the screen of my visor. The critical status post I glimpsed before is gone. Delphi must have

wiped my visor's display. My gaze shifts to the smoke-filled sky. "Where's Dubey?" I ask in a whisper.

"We got slammed, LT," Ransom says as he finally starts popping cinches to free my arms from the struts. "Dubey's dead. Yafiah's dead. We'd all be dead, if you hadn't made us run when you did."

I lose some time, because the next thing I know, Jaynie's sitting next to me, cross-legged, her visor transparent, the face behind it sad and thoughtful. My helmet is off. The sun is low in the sky. It glares in my eyes, deep orange behind a heavy veil of smoke. The air stinks of burned fields, and I'm so hot I want to puke.

"What's wrong with me?" I ask Jaynie.

"You'll be okay."

No way does she believe that. I can see it in her face.

"Did you kill all the dogs?"

The fine lines of her eyebrows draw together as she studies me. She's not going to answer my question because she's got one of her own. "What made you panic back there? How did you know we were going to get slammed? You knew before Command knew. You knew before Guidance knew."

I wet my lips. My whole mouth feels so dry all of a sudden I'm not sure I can speak, but I get three words out. "I just knew."

"He's King David," Ransom says. "God told him to get us the fuck out and that's what he did."

"Yeah? Going back after Lin was a dumbass move, sir. God should have told you not to be a hero."

"God did tell me that," I whisper. "I didn't listen."

Her lips draw back; she's furious—like she can't believe the level of stupid she's forced to witness. "Why the fuck not?"

I don't know what to say.

But when her head turns, when I see her staring at my legs, I get scared—more scared than I have ever been before. "Tell me," I whisper.

"Both gone," she says, "just above the knees."

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