

The Lords of Harambee

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Free Sample:
Prologue through Chapter 5

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For Wendy

Earth is sick,
And Heaven is weary,
with the hollow words,
Which States and Kingdoms
utter when they talk,
Of truth and justice.

--William Wordsworth

Harambee [ha-RAHM-bey] (1) A slogan in the Swahili language meaning 'to work together for progress or towards a common goal'; to pull together (2) the official motto of Kenya in the late 20th and early 21st century (3) The third moon of Delta Pavonis Bravo, settled largely by refugees from sub-Saharan Africa during the Transsolar Corporation's "Together Pushing Forward" campaign. Site of the Harambean genocide.

Prologue

The agent was halfway up the caldera wall, scrambling over the loose scree like a wounded animal on his twisted ankle and bleeding palms, when he finally dared to look back. He was covered in a gritty mixture of sand and blood--his own or theirs, or maybe both. His left shoulder burned where the bullet had grazed him. His clogged mask shrieked like a banshee with each breath. Sulfur dioxide scorched his lungs. He reseated his mask with one hand, trying desperately for a better seal.

Lightning flashed. In the instant before darkness reclaimed the tortured landscape, he saw Kaligari filling the volcanic sinkhole below, an austere structure of steel and glass shrouded by a dirty glaze of regolith. Hard to believe people had actually lived here. Even from this distance, he could still see their bodies strewn around the cargo airlock. The husk of a Red Cross crawler spat streamers of smoke into the howling wind. A handful of relief workers huddled together like sheep, watching the erratic, oxygen-starved flames.

Darkness again, then a floating afterimage of the carnage.

He climbed on. His only thought was to get away.

The weather wasn't helping. Gargantuan thunderstorms had built up during dayweek. Dusk had dampened all that convective force, and the thunderheads were crashing to the surface like drunken gods, drowning the surface in yellow rain. The deafening wind blasted him with dirt and grime.

He reached the top of the caldera and looked out over the rusty landscape. A volcano to his right had vomited its contents into the plain below, which glowed blinding white in his thermal overlay. Discolored bulges protruded around him like boils; some had burst into pools of lava. Quarries dotted the landscape like open sores. A single road led back toward the smelters and mass driver cannon at Quariyyah. Beyond that was the PDF blockade that had destroyed the local economy, and farther beyond that, the capitol city of Doganoshiv.

The agent shivered, wrapped his blood-splattered coat tighter around his shoulders, and waited. He finally had a moment to consider what he had just witnessed. What he had been a part of. This was not how the operation was supposed to go. He had never signed on for slaughter.

Fifteen long minutes passed before a stealth skimmer appeared out of the rain, unmarked except for a desert camouflage job that rendered it nearly invisible to overhead satellites and surveillance blimps. Thank God; they'd picked up his beacon. He jumped up and waved, and the vehicle veered towards him. When the passenger door opened, the agent saw that the vehicle was empty.

A figure suddenly appeared beside him. His skin was almost translucent, adapted to a life that saw little sunlight. Blue veins bulged in his broad forehead, which was encircled by an auxiliary mindcomp ringlet. He wore no breather mask. He didn't need to, because he was not actually here.

"Trent," the agent said. "Thanks for coming."

"It was against my better judgment," the avatar said. He walked up to the edge of the caldera and planted his hands on his hips. He stared down at Kaligari, absorbing a composite image rendered from the skimmer, from satellite coverage, and from the agent's own mindcomp. "How many?"

"Fifty, at least."

"Women? Children?"

The agent nodded. His hands were shaking. Hysteria was bubbling up in his stomach. This was real. Those Zuwwar settlers weren't coming back. He said, "The relief workers had a SCOFiH military observer with them."

Trent spun. "What?"

"No one knew he was there until it was too late."

"Damn. *Damn*. What have you done?"

"I tried to stop them," he protested. "They wouldn't listen. They tried to kill me."

"They're your monster. You trained them."

"You financed them."

The spacer shot him a withering glare. "Not anymore. We're done on Harambee. You've stooped to levels of savagery we never imagined. Contrary to what you might think, we do have consciences, and we will not stand for the mass murder of innocent men, women, and children. That was never our deal. You can clean up your own damned mess."

Trent's avatar glanced up at the sky. "The next satellite will be overhead soon. Get in. Don't get any blood on the upholstery."

The agent climbed inside. Trent disappeared from the surface and reappeared in the other seat. The skimmer had two sets of manual override controls, but the displays were dark. The driving today was being done from afar.

The agent took off his shirt, rolled it up in the bloody raincoat, and stuffed them both into an empty tool bag he found behind the seats. Then he collapsed back into the soft leather. When the atmosphere in the skimmer finally cycled, he ripped off his breather mask and sucked in a deep breath. It was the best air he'd tasted in a month. Nothing as lush and delicious as Gethsemane's, but far better than the poison he'd been straining through his lungs out on the ridge.

They shot off across the bleak desert, away from Kaligari, away from the mangled bodies, away from the atrocity that bore his signature.

He was afraid to think about the future. The operation had spiraled hopelessly out of control, and the horror that had unfolded today would have repercussions. Severe ones.

Kaligari was only the beginning. Harambee was going to war.

Chapter 1

"You see my dilemma, General Sheridan," said Charles Kawande, President of the People's Republic of Harambee, beloved advocate of the Shamali people, and strongman who had finally wrangled order out of the civil war almost a decade ago. He sat on a plush burgundy sofa, immaculate in his dress jacket and a white, open-collared shirt that made a stark contrast with his handsome ebony skin. He gestured toward the window with his glass of cabernet. "My people will not stop murdering each other."

"That's a problem," said General Michael Sheridan, Force Commander of Starlight Council Forces: Harambee (SCOFiH). He was standing in front of an enormous plate glass window that overlooked Doganoshiv, hands clasped behind his back. He entertained a brief fantasy about hurling Harambee's arrogant, elitist president through the glass. If only that was possible.

Instead he stared out the window and watched Doganoshiv destroy itself. The destruction was subtle during dayweek. For seven earth-standard days Harambee's sun made its wobbling march through the bronze sky, scorching anyone or anything unfortunate enough to be exposed. The streets emptied and the fighting moved underground, and for that Earth-standard week it was almost possible to imagine that Doganoshiv was a city at peace. An uninitiated onlooker

would only see waves of punishing heat and the night's deposit of sulfur dioxide snow turning to liquid pools, then boiling off in wind-blown tendrils of yellow vapor. He would never know of the disease, crime, and militia warfare that was shredding Doganoshiv's bowels.

At dusk the undercity vomited all that carnage back into the open and the view from Kawande's window got infinitely more interesting.

Today marked Sheridan's eleventh sunset. Almost six months on Harambee.

All that remained of daylight was a bloody smear over the caldera rim. Overhead, raging winds tore the thunderstorms to shreds. Rivers of yellow rainwater poured down over the dome, obscuring everything beyond.

Thousands of watery shapes had materialized from underground, clad in loose robes and breather masks, braving the ruthless elements to erect street markets where they sold drugs, guns, and bootleg movies from the Core Worlds. Muzzles flashed in the swampy darkness as customers tested additions to their private arsenals. Militia trucks toting tripod-mounted machine guns prowled the streets, searching for their next fight.

An unusually large mob was crashing like storm-blown waves against the palace dome. Thousands of Zuwwar had turned out to protest the mass murder at Kaligari by People's Defense Force troops.

Sheridan had been enraged when the first imagery arrived in the Operations Center, broadcast directly from the Combat Shadow he'd sent with the Red Cross convoy. After everything he had done as the SCOFiH Force Commander, after all

his attempts to build some semblance of peace out of Harambee's bickering factions, this massacre had unraveled everything. Operation BRING LIGHT might not survive.

Information like this could start a war. The truth had to come out, but Sheridan had wanted to do it on his own timetable, with the appropriate agencies consulted first. So he was horrified when video of the slaughter reached the interstellar news networks an hour later. He had no idea where the footage came from. Once the story broke, containing it again was impossible. His headquarters was crawling with third-rate media teams who'd flown to Harambee to document the upcoming constitutional summit. They pounced when they saw a headline story.

Sheridan had immediately canceled all leave, recalled every SCOFiH soldier to duty, and elevated the alert level to Delta. Doganoshiv, he had warned his staff, would riot. He was right.

"My troops did not kill those people," the President said. "I am many things, not all of them admirable, but I am not a mass murderer of women and children."

"We have the whole massacre on video. I had a Combat Shadow on site. These were government soldiers, in PDF uniforms, carrying weapons that could only have been obtained from the Starlight Council. They were your men, and on the eve of the constitutional summit! Are you trying to destroy my mission, Mr. President? Do you want SCOFiH to fail? Because it sure looks that way."

"I did not give that order!" Kawande yelled.

Sheridan hesitated. Kawande might be telling the truth. If he was, things were worse than Sheridan feared. Kawande might be losing control of his army. The president's hold on power had always been fragile. Five governments had fallen before his, and a bitter civil war had left Harambee without a government for half a decade. There was no reason to believe that Kawande's government would escape the same fate.

Keeping Kawande in power was one of BRING LIGHT's primary goals. As detestable as Kawande was, the other options were worse. The alternative to his authoritarian rule was not democracy; it was another civil war between the techlords and militias that prowled the city like starving lions. Nobody wanted that future, especially the war-weary population of Harambee itself.

SCOFiH had the unenviable task of helping this corrupt dictator survive, while simultaneously nudging him towards the creation of a new transitional government. Kawande was sitting on a powder keg. His Shamali-dominated government gave almost no voice to the poorer Zuwwar who constituted sixty-five percent of Harambee's population.

A constitutional summit was finally due to begin next week, but that would almost certainly be scratched in the wake of this attack.

"I don't know if you gave the order or not," Sheridan said. "But someone in your government or military did, and if you value your presidency and the Starlight Council's support, you must rein in the PDF and ensure the constitutional summit moves ahead as scheduled. That is our most important concern."

"Impossible," Kawande said. "The Zuwwar Liberation Army is using this as an excuse to terrorize Doganoshiv. By morning, they'll have killed more innocent people than these murderers at Kaligari. I can't hold the summit now or I'll look weak. We need to crush these renegade ZLA terrorists first, then we can talk about the political process."

Sheridan cracked his knuckles behind his back and gazed out the window. He was tired beyond words. Tired of this place, with its alien beauty harboring such endless death and destruction. Tired of its people, too racist and proud to choose a better destiny for themselves. Tired most of all of its leaders, these cultured elites who smoked Cuban cigars and wore French cologne while ruthlessly warring for whatever scraps of power were to be had.

Sheridan hadn't wanted to come to Harambee. So why had he? Sometimes, usually after too much scotch, he would lie awake on his cot pondering that. Most of the time he was too numb to even consider the question. It had been something to do. It still was. Maybe that was enough. But that explanation was too vacuous, offered no consolation when he saw heaps of famine casualties dead in the streets or the bullet-ridden corpses of women and children who'd been mugged for their bottled water or breather masks. No, his decision had been rooted in something much deeper, something he was embarrassed to admit now: he really had wanted to make a difference. He thought he could succeed where General Alexander had failed.

That idealism had cost him greatly. His divorce should have beaten that naiveté out of him years ago, but he'd been stubborn. He had convinced himself that Lindsay and Claire were a sacrifice for the greater good. He'd gone on for another decade, fighting for outcomes that he was convinced rested on his shoulders alone.

He said, "Today's butchery will leave you with few friends in the Council. Heavy-handed retribution against the Zuwwar will make things worse. Restrain your troops, Mr. President. Show your good faith and commitment to the new government. Let SCOFiH keep the peace."

"Come on, General. Your troops couldn't keep the peace in my daughter's nursery. The politicians in the Starlight Council won't let you risk the life of a single soldier."

Sheridan was silent.

Kawande tipped back the last of his wine, then rose to his feet. "General, I am just as appalled as you are by this massacre, but the Zuwwar Liberation Army is using it as a pretext to terrorize Doganoshiv. I cannot allow that to happen. I will give your troops one chance to quell these riots, but one chance only. After that my army will move. And if we do not have a satisfactory security environment for the constitutional summit, I will delay it until the time is right."

"My troops will give you security."

"I hope so. It was a pleasure as always, General."

When Sheridan left, the guards pulled the double doors shut behind him, sealing off whatever scheming and planning was to be done within.

Seven months to go. That's what General Voneida had told him. Seven months, then he would be off Harambee and out of the Army. The memories of this hellhole would drain away like muddy water down a storm drain, and he could live out the rest of his life drinking margaritas and dancing with girls in coconut shells and grass skirts on a tropical island somewhere. He wished he had more to look forward to after the Army, but he'd closed those other doors a long time ago. The Army had been his sole passion then. Back before this brutal, miserable world had driven the last vestiges of idealism from his life. His island would have to suffice.

Best not to think about that now. Seven months was a long time. He had signed on for this assignment, and he would see it through to the best of his ability. He would extricate SCOFiH safely from Harambee, and give the Harambeans the best chance he could for a better future. He owed that to his troops, and to the Harambean people. Even if they wouldn't lift a finger to save themselves.

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SCOFiH headquarters was located in the dilapidated ruin of the Hotel Ambassador, a featureless cube peppered with nautical-style portals. Transsolar had thrown it up more than half a century ago to house construction workers, but some early entrepreneur had turned it into a passable hotel. The emergence of five star hotels near the spaceport had eventually driven it out of business, but somehow the building had escaped demolition. Apart from a brief stint as a drug-smuggling

headquarters during the civil war, it had sat vacant for almost fifteen years. The Ambassador was hardly an ideal headquarters, but it was the best the Harambean government was willing to lease on BRING LIGHT's meager budget.

From the street, it looked like a crusader castle. General Alexander, SCOFiH's first commander, had bulldozed the ruins of neighboring buildings and built a perimeter wall out of concrete and razor wire. Sandbagged gun emplacements defended the Ambassador from the perimeter wall, the roof, and the two gates. A Starlight Council flag fluttered from a pole in the yard, adding a thin veneer of nobility to the ancient building.

The gate guards saluted and waved Sheridan through. He rumbled over the rocky vehicle yard toward the Ambassador's front airlock. When he parked, the Jeep's brakes shrieked. Something shuddered violently in the vehicle's bowels when he turned off the ignition. Sheridan's maintainers were doing the best they could to keep the fleet running, but the vehicles were thirty years old and held together by duct tape. SCOFiH's contributors hadn't exactly done them any favors. Sheridan's personal Jeep was one of twelve that Ghana had made a great show of donating to Operation BRING LIGHT. Only five of them had worked when they arrived, and the donors had neglected to send any spare parts or shop manuals. It was a similar story with the rest of Sheridan's vehicles, with his aircraft, with his troops. Even his damned office supplies.

A frigid waterfall of conditioned air spilled over him when he entered the airlock, mixing with the toxic Harambean air he'd brought in with him. Pumps

cycled the mixture through several scrubbing cycles, injecting more and more clean air until the last of the Harambean atmosphere had been purged. Sheridan scrubbed down his uniform with one of the wire brushes hanging on the airlock wall, then vacuumed up the dust. It was a tedious ritual that the troops hated, but slovenliness was dangerous on a world where the unfiltered atmosphere could kill you.

SCOFiH's Operations Center was located in the hotel convention room, which Sheridan's staff affectionately called The Dungeon. The cracked plaster and dripping overhead pipes were a constant reminder of the hotel's ruin, and no matter how many lights SCOFiH added, it never seemed bright enough. Growling air conditioner units blanketed everything with white noise. The ever-present scent of coffee couldn't quite mask the mold and decay. Aluminum desks surrounded the room's perimeter, furnished with network portals and stuffed three-ring binders, but most of the Dungeon was empty space, at least until a visitor logged into the shared virtual workspace. At that point it became a frantic neon light show.

Sheridan's mindcomp synced with the virtual workspace automatically and the three-dimensional battlespace map unfurled before him. Hundreds of colored layers reflected a wealth of multidimensional information: zones of military and political control, troop locations, satellite coverage, conflict flashpoints. The usual crowd of officers was gathered around, studying and manipulating the map.

Sheridan's vice commander, Rwandan Colonel Robbie Murigande, was hunched over a data window like a linebacker studying a playbook. He was built

like a tank and had a glossy black head that looked like it had never seen hair, but his face was thoughtful and almost gentle. Robbie was one of Sheridan's oldest friends. He was kind, humble, and generous, but was an intense commander who was utterly ruthless on the battlefield. Exactly the sort of man Sheridan wanted on his team. It didn't hurt that he was Rwandan, which Sheridan had hoped would add legitimacy to the mission. Sheridan had taken the Force Commander job only on the condition Robbie would come as his vice.

"How's our pal Kawande?" Robbie asked with only a brief glance up.

"As cooperative as ever. What's the latest?"

"Major Cortez and his team reached Kaligari. The final death count is fifty-eight Zuwwar civilians and two Red Cross workers. The Red Cross also has two severe burn victims."

"How's Captain Marshall?"

"Shaken up pretty bad. He's not saying much."

"And the riots?"

"Still growing, all over the city."

Robbie tapped another place on the map. A photorealistic 3D model appeared, mashed up from the SCOFiH bot swarm and from local security cameras on Doganoshiv's grid. Color overlays flashed here and there as pattern recognition AIs recognized faces or spotted weapons.

"The reporters are going nuts. Captain Kiyoni promised an official statement soon. It might smooth things over if you could talk to them."

"I'll try. Did you book me a seat to orbit?"

"You leave in forty-five minutes. Oh, and Barborak's looking for you."

"Right," Sheridan sighed. Barborak. Sheridan's single biggest headache as SCOFiH Force Commander. Barborak, the fat shackles that constrained Operation BRING LIGHT at every possible turn. The laughingstock of the Harambean street and favorite star of Harambean political cartoons.

"You knew it was coming."

"I know, I know."

He walked down the hall to the office of the Starlight Council's Special Representative. It was like stepping into a parallel universe. A Persian rug covered the floor, underneath an oak desk and matching bookcase that Barborak had flown in from New Trinidad. Standing floor lamps cast a warm glow. The other furnishings would have looked extravagant even in a museum: tall clay vases adorned with intricate hand-painted knotted patterns, carved wood figurines from Kenya, an oil painting of the frozen oceans of Europa, rows of plaques signed by colleagues from previous assignments. All the trophies of a distinguished career in the Starlight Council Diplomatic Corps. Worthless junk on Harambee, down to the last piece.

Barborak slouched behind his desk, which was overflowing with loose papers and old thermal cups half full of stale coffee. He always looked like he was on the verge of a heart attack: overweight, out of breath, face dripping with sweat. A stack of chins occupied the place where his neck should be. His white dress shirt

had prominent wet stains beneath the armpits and he continually dabbed at his face with a handkerchief.

"General," Barborak said. "I was quite clear that I wanted you to come by before you met with President Kawande."

"You weren't here. I couldn't wait. Kawande was preparing to send his army into the streets."

"You consult me first. No excuses. You are the Force Commander, but you still answer to Starlight Council political authority."

"Yes, sir. I apologize."

Barborak eyed him suspiciously. "How did the meeting go?"

"Kawande denied any knowledge of the attacks. I think he's telling the truth."

"So you think his hold on the army is slipping?"

"Possibly. There's no way to know until we run a more thorough investigation. Once the rescue operation is over, I'd like to send Major Cortez and a Shadow team back to Kaligari."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible. New orders have come down. The Starlight Council is sending its own investigation team. Until further notice, Operation BRING LIGHT is suspended."

"What do you mean, suspended?"

"All SCOFiH troops are to be recalled to the Hotel Ambassador or to Al-Hurriya Spaceport. Any military operations will require approval by the Chancellor himself."

The bottom fell out of Sheridan's stomach. He thought back to the his conversation with President Kawande less than an hour ago. *Your troops couldn't keep the peace in my daughter's nursery*, Kawande had said. And he'd been right.

"Does the Council have any idea what this will mean?"

"I don't think you realize how serious this is, General. We have video on interstellar news networks of government Shamali soldiers, trained and armed by SCOFiH, massacring Zuwwar women and children. This is a public relations nightmare and it raises serious questions about our fundamental strategy of supporting Kawande. SCOFiH's enemies are jumping all over this, and it's caught the Worldsphere's attention. A coalition of NGOs is preparing a demonstration at the Starlight Council headquarters. They're expecting tens of thousands to show up."

"But suspending BRING LIGHT? The Zuwwar are rioting. Doganoshiv is destroying itself as we speak. The constitutional summit is on the verge of collapse. If we pull out now we will create a power vacuum that every techlord, militia, and disgruntled teenager with a gun will try to fill!"

"This wasn't my decision."

"Did you even try to fight it?"

"I protested, yes. But this is way above you and me, General, and it's been in the pipeline for months. Trust me. I've been watching the knife fighting on the Council for a long time. Things do not look good for BRING LIGHT."

"What do you mean? Is there something specific you haven't told me?"

Barborak pursed his lips. He studied Sheridan as if trying to decide whether or not he could trust a mere military officer with the far more serious political business of the Council. He finally said, "The Starlight Council is set to vote next month on terminating the mission."

Sheridan was stunned. "Why wasn't I told?"

"It's a closely held secret. SCOFiH's enemies have been quietly building support for a long time, but they were waiting for the right time to go public. The plan was to hold the vote next month, but Kaligari is the perfect pretext to hold an early vote."

"They'd be condemning this world to civil war."

"This world is already mired in civil war."

"Christ," Sheridan said. Those councilors knew perfectly well what would happen to Harambee if BRING LIGHT was terminated, but they had more important things to think about. Like elections.

Sheridan studied this man who was both his greatest frustration and his most important ally. Everything about Barborak repulsed him: his arrogance, his lofty detachment, his sweaty obesity and that pale, pouting face. He was the most problematic leader Sheridan had ever had to work for, but he was also the one man

who could save BRING LIGHT. As much as Sheridan hated him, he needed Neil Barborak.

He said, "I know we don't always see eye to eye, Neil, but you know what's at stake here. This world is counting on your ability to keep the Starlight Council on our side."

"I know," Barborak said. "That's what I'm afraid of."

Chapter 2

There was one little girl who Captain Julian Marshall couldn't pry his eyes away from. As he trudged around Kaligari documenting evidence, he threw regular glances at her body to reassure himself that she was really dead. He was not superstitious, but every time he turned away he felt her accusing stare boring into his back.

She was one of the first residents he'd seen when he arrived at the mining outpost. He'd been in the lead Red Cross crawler, straining to see anything through the torrent of rain rolling down the windshield, when her face had suddenly appeared: skeletal, scarcely human, seeming to float in the darkness. He'd seen malnourished children before, but never like this, never closer to death than to life. Her black skin was stretched taut over prominent, angular cheekbones. The breather mask covering her mouth and nose was torn and patched. Its straps had rotted away and been replaced with thin strips of aluminum that bit into her cheeks and left parallel scars. She looked ten, maybe twelve years old. Her eyes were yellow and vacant. It was as if she'd seen with stark clarity what was about to happen. *Why did you kill me?* that sad, cadaverous face seemed to demand, though at that moment neither of them could know the People's Defense Force was just minutes away from murdering her.

Other children had appeared after that, crowding around the two crawlers to get a share of the food that they were delivering, but it was the girl Julian would always remember. That hollow stare.

Now she lay among the corpses near the outpost's cargo airlock. Her right cheek was squished against the ground. Her eyes were wide and sightless. A red stain had blossomed on the back of her yellow dress. The box of rations she'd been carrying lay two meters ahead of her, blown out of her arms when the magnetically accelerated slug had gone right through her. The box was nearly as big as she was, marked with an unmistakable red cross.

Julian had not killed this little girl; a PDF soldier with a bulbous nose and a tight ponytail would be the one to rot in hell for that. But to Julian, it was all the same.

"Get over here, Marshall," Diego Cortez shouted from the Vertical Takeoff and Landing craft.

Julian trudged over to the VTOL. "What?"

Diego was fully kitted out, twice Julian's size with his body armor and day pack. A soldier among soldiers. He was clutching his Magrail like he expected a firefight might erupt at any moment. He didn't seem at all bothered that these same types of weapons had been used less than two hours ago against unarmed civilians whose only crime was to show up for a food delivery.

"I'm ordering you to sit down. It's over."

Julian didn't want to sit down, but he leaned up against the fuselage beside Cortez and pulled out his canteen. He plugged his mask's drinking straw into the canteen and took a drink.

Inside the shuttle, the burned Red Cross workers were screaming and crying. Julian had done his best to treat them after the massacre, but all he'd had was the lousy first aid kit from the surviving crawler. The medics were at work now, pumping them full of morphine and applying burn gel and picking away bits of charred clothing with tweezers. Julian wasn't sure who had suffered a worse fate: these, or the two in the body bags outside. The other Red Cross workers were huddled nearby, crying softly. Diego's team was carefully combing through the massacre site documenting evidence.

"You haven't said a word since I got here," Diego said. "You okay?"

"I told Sheridan to let these people starve."

"Don't go there, Marshall. This was not your fault, you hear me? These PDF bastards shot little kids in the back with rail guns in cold blood. You just wanted to enforce a blockade to shut down a terrorist network. Most of us agreed that the delivery was a bad idea. This outpost is a den of ZLA terrorists who were willing to starve every woman and child here so they could keep on fighting. The slightest willingness on their part to lay down arms, and the blockade would be over. It's shitty what happened today, but it's not your fault, so let it go."

Diego looked him squarely in the eye. He was a hard man, a veteran Combat Shadow who'd seen and done much. Julian respected him deeply. Diego raised a fist. "All right?"

Julian punched Diego's fist with his own. "All right."

"You did good today, Marshall."

That was a lie if Julian had ever heard one. What could he have possibly done well? He'd hidden underneath a Red Cross crawler, watching and recording through his optics while PDF soldiers had massacred this entire outpost. He hadn't done a thing. At the time, he'd been paralyzed by fear and by the fact that he didn't have a weapon. He'd had no time to call in orbital fire support, and even if he had, the approval would have taken hours. What else could he have done? Surely, *surely*, he could have done something.

He was a murderer and a coward. God. What would Becca think, if she knew his part in this? His "shoulder angel", as he teasingly called her? He could vividly remember a conversation nine years ago, at a waterfront coffee shop in Seattle, with salt spray in the air and the foaming, kelp-littered waves sloshing around the dock pilings beneath them. She'd read him two of her new poems, and talked about the trials and tribulations of junior high, and he'd waited with a lump in his throat for the right moment to break the news to her: he was joining the Army. She'd protested. What about your music, she'd asked, almost hysterical. What about justice and beauty and goodness, and late-night talks in coffee shops, and changing the world? It wasn't a big deal, he'd assured her. He was just doing

ROTC. They'd pay his tuition at the University of Washington. He'd stay close to home, could spare her a little money, take care of her. It was a ticket out of the life they'd grown up in and away from the Old Man. Besides, the Army would never have his soul.

Her hostility had eventually cooled, once he'd started classes and ROTC training and she'd realized that it was the same old brother who met her for coffee every Tuesday afternoon. He still landed a gig from time to time with his high school buddies, playing in small venues around downtown Seattle and the U District. Apart from the haircut, he hadn't changed that much. And the hair had grown back, once he'd become a Combat Shadow.

But he had changed. Harambee had changed him. Hardened him, warped that lofty idealism he and Becca had forged in their late-night musings.

A few years ago, his biggest concerns had been learning new guitar chords and landing neighborhood gigs with his buddies. Now? Theft and murder were the stuff of daily life. The street was the closest thing he had to a home. He stared evil in the face each day, knew it with frightening intimacy, lured on by the faint hope that someday, somehow, he could strike back against the techlord who was responsible for so much suffering on Harambee. But his private war against Rafiki Kamau had cost him something precious.

He could imagine the horrified look in Becca's eyes if she knew that he had recommended blocking the food delivery to this outpost. Yes, he had his reasons. Yes, he could explain with cold, flawless logic that a delivery now would

undermine the effectiveness of the blockade against the ZLA terrorists operating here. Delivering food now would prolong the Zuwwar Liberation Army's life and prolong the suffering of the civilians they lived among. Becca would nod, but she would understand nothing. She would only know that she no longer recognized her older brother. That she was afraid of him.

Diego went off to check on his team. He came back ten minutes later, waving his index finger in a circle, signaling the pilot to start engines.

"You're cleared out," Diego said. "I want you to brain dump, then get some sleep. We'll debrief in the morning."

"Yes, sir."

"Save me a cold one. See you soon."

The VTOL's engines lit with a blue flash. The entire aircraft shuddered.

Julian climbed on board and signaled the Red Cross workers to join him. As they filed on, he clapped each of them on the shoulder and offered a thin smile. They'd turned to him for leadership in the horrific, blood-splattered, screaming aftermath of the massacre. They still looked at him as if he might confess this had all been a bad dream.

The engine noise became a roar and they lifted into the air, rocking in the howling wind. They plowed upward through the turbulence, smacking against one another in their seat straps, and then at last, after the worst day of all their lives, they were off towards Doganoshiv.

—

When the VTOL landed on the roof of the Hotel Ambassador, a whole entourage was waiting to receive them, shivering in dripping ponchos. General Sheridan and Colonel Murigande were both there, but Julian barely noticed them. It was the civilian woman planted stoically off to one side who he most dreaded seeing.

Natalya Ivanovna was the planetary director for the Red Cross. She was as ugly as she was old, with folds of leathery skin that almost swallowed her recessed eyes. An orange handkerchief bound up her straw-like hair. Her dogged look and abrasive personal demeanor suggested something of the hardships she'd endured in a life at the Worldsphere's harshest frontiers. Today's horror would hit her hard; these relief workers were like children to her.

Julian had worked closely with her over the past year. As a Combat Shadow his specialty was intelligence collection, but General Sheridan had assigned him to a rather unique position in SCOFiH: the NGO Liaison Officer. The job kept Julian in the field, allowed him to visit many places that SCOFiH usually avoided, and gave him a diverse array of contacts outside the military. Natalya was among the most important, the mother bear who kept the NGO community on Harambee running.

Natalya came forward and rested a hand on his shoulder, but there was nothing for either of them to say. She climbed aboard the VTOL, and was immediately enfolded in the hugs and tears of the surviving relief workers.

Sheridan approached next, his fierce blue eyes fixed on Julian's. Those eyes tolerated no weakness. He extended a hand. "Welcome back, Julian."

Julian shook it, acutely aware of the blood and the grime caked in the lines of his palm. He wondered what it might have been like to have this man for a father--the one man who had ever come close to playing that role in Julian's life.

"It's good to have you back."

"Thank you, General. It's good to be here."

Sheridan studied him, and Julian had the prickly sense that he could see right through him.

"It wasn't your fault, Julian."

"Yes, sir," Julian said automatically.

"It was mine."

Julian didn't believe that for a minute, but he'd been in the Army long enough to understand what Sheridan meant. A commander was always responsible.

"We'll talk more when I get back from *Salvation's Landing*."

Sheridan boarded the shuttle, leaving Julian alone with Colonel Murigande on the Ambassador rooftop. They stood side by side, shielding their eyes from the sandblast when the shuttle lifted off again, bearing Sheridan, the Red Cross workers, and the med crew toward Al-Hurriya Spaceport. Then Colonel Murigande put an arm around his shoulder and walked him toward the airlock.

"I know it seems callous to see anything good in all this," Murigande said, "but we were damned lucky to have you at Kaligari. Those memories are priceless. You did good today."

They went straight to the Intel Analysis Shop to do a high-resolution download of Julian's memories. As a Combat Shadow, Julian had one of the most advanced mindcomps ever invented. It was Gethsemane technology, years beyond the rest of the Worldsphere. Aspects of the surgery were illegal on most worlds--the memory of the Mindcrash still cast a terrible shadow--so the Army had flown him to Gethsemane before he began Shadow training. He still made regular trips there for maintenance and upgrades. His most recent trip had been en route to Harambee.

Julian's mindcomp was always recording, always picking significant details out of the world, highlighting them in his optics and feeding them into SCOFiH's virtual battlespace. When the first PDF four-wheelers had roared into Kaligari and Julian's optics had flashed red with the first warning of an inbound RPG, his mindcomp had gone into sensory overdrive and recorded everything.

Now he watched the memories race by. The other Red Cross crawler, parked off to his left, exploding; the PDF soldiers standing in the roll cages of their vehicles, cutting down every Blood Hawk in sight in the first ten seconds; the one with the ponytail sniping the little girl in the back, then barking a speech to the huddled relief workers about the consequence of aiding ZLA terrorists.

Julian felt curiously detached as he watched these memories flash by. He knew he would watch these recordings hundreds of times in the coming days, one frame at a time, as he scoured them for clues to help him track down the sons of bitches who had done this.

When the download finished, Julian headed upstairs toward his room. His legs felt heavy, like he'd been treading water in his boots. He reeked of body odor and Harambee, and his damp shirt stuck to his back. He was fighting hard just to keep his eyes open. For hours he'd been using his mindcomp to pump supplemental adrenaline and endorphins into his bloodstream. It had kept him going, but a crash was coming that would make the worst imaginable hangover pale in comparison.

A laughing group of European peacekeeping troops fell silent and stared as he passed in the hallway. Even on the best of days, he suffered from the usual Combat Shadow stigma; the Shadows were the lone operators, the unshaven and unkempt who defied any traditional sense of military discipline and fraternity. Julian passed them without saying a word and escaped into his tiny room.

Half an hour later he woke suddenly, with no memory of lying down or falling asleep. He still wore his filthy uniform. His skin was itchy and crawling. He stripped, grabbed his towel, and squeaked down the hall in his flip-flops to the communal showers. The scalding water helped clear his thoughts, even as blood and dirt discolored the water swirling down the drain.

After the shower, Julian was ravenous. He went to the floor's common room and reheated some leftover lasagna he'd been keeping in the fridge. He took this back to his room, plucked a six pack from the stash hidden in his duffel bag, and sat on the edge of his bed to eat. The beer was warm and tasted like piss, even

though it had been imported from off-world and had cost Julian a small fortune on the black market.

Maybe it was the alcohol. Maybe it was the fact he'd finally slept, and regained enough strength that he could honestly confront what had happened today. Whatever the reason, Julian suddenly found himself shaking, so violently that his fork and plate clattered to the floor. The sight of the splattering lasagna overcame him: bubbling, sinewy strands of cheese all too reminiscent of burnt ribbons of human flesh, ground hamburger like mangled bodies. Julian vomited in the trash can, then choked on searing bile and dry heaved some more. Then he huddled in the corner of his cell, convulsing with sobs, his hands shaking so hard that they turned to blurs. Sights and sounds crashed over him. Screaming echoes, the humming of Magrails cutting down flesh, falling children.

It might have lasted ten minutes, maybe forty. When it passed, Julian was sitting in the corner beside the putrid trash can, blinking at the sharp glare of his room lights. His cheeks were wet with tears, his upper lip with mucus. All was quiet.

Stunned, a little afraid, Julian tried to laugh off what had just happened. The nervous chuckle that emerged from his throat sounded dishonest. He tied off the trash bag, checked to make sure the hallway was empty, and carried the bag to the bathroom. He wondered if he should be embarrassed, but he also knew that something deep and authentic had just happened.

He'd watched PDF soldiers murder fifty people in cold blood. That changed a man. If he hadn't broken down, if he hadn't heard the screaming echoes in his nightmares, *that* would have been occasion to worry. Maybe he still had a shred of humanity left in his jaded heart after all. Maybe Harambee hadn't stolen everything.

—

Orrin Macalaster knew the worst week of his life had just gotten much worse when a strikingly beautiful woman materialized in his quarters in the dead of night. He'd met her before--those eyes, those legs, my God, how could he forget?--but not here, never in his personal quarters on Horizon Station. She was much too dangerous to risk that.

He had security precautions to prevent this type of contact, everything from the standard Transsolar corporate firewalls to an enhanced security package for his mindcomp, but evidently Transsolar's finest technological achievements were not sufficient to keep out this blond-haired vixen who could ruin him with a single word to her government.

Thank God she hadn't appeared an hour earlier, when he'd been releasing six days of stress on the doe-eyed brunette who'd been fluttering her lashes at him across the mess hall and flashing him emotional impulses that would have made the most jaded frat king blush. Her mindcomp had translated her emotions into a digital signal that his own mindcomp had decoded and used to stimulate comparable neurons in his own brain. He had felt her lust, her all-but-spoken

willingness to do whatever he wanted. He'd been inside her head, or she in his. A cheap seduction, so flagrantly promiscuous that it was revolting. Orrin wasn't generally the type of man to succumb to such pathetic advances, but it had been a hell of a week, and he'd flashed her back a silent message with the same uncaring self-destructiveness of a man putting a shotgun in his mouth. She was a nuclear engineer, young enough to be his granddaughter, fresh out of Cal State Berkeley, with a new job on the tokamak design team for the prototype *Galleon V*. She'd been on Horizon Station less than two weeks. God knew what she wanted. A career advancement, probably. An inside connection with the Director of Horizon Station. He'd despised her even as they'd romped in his quarters. When they were finished, he did not feel better. In fact, he felt much worse. He'd shouted at her to leave, then floated over to the window where he always went to think.

It was the largest window on Horizon Station, an enormous triple-paned rectangle that overlooked the row of docks where starships were born. One ship in particular sent chills up and down his spine every time he saw it: the *Overlord*, a breathtaking kilometer of steel and titanium that would soon become the flagship for the American Alliance's new expeditionary fleet. This one ship could outfight the local defense fleets of any planet in the Worldsphere. She was the ultimate deterrent, the ultimate projector of power across the stars. She was a thing of beauty and elegance. She was also eighteen months behind schedule and billions of marks over budget. A lot of his former friends were out for blood.

He'd fallen asleep there in front of the window. Bad dreams. The universe was flying apart.

And then he'd woken to find this woman hovering over him, her rage pounding in his brain. She wore a thin gown of gray silk that clung to her body and left her perfect legs exposed. Her eyes swam with tropical seawater. Every curl of blond hair was an arc of dancing perfection in the weightlessness. Orrin had always had a weakness for these Gethsemane women, these marvels of human engineering. They were, quite literally, living works of art.

It was a shame she wasn't actually here.

Her avatar was flawless. The starlight streaming through the window made a subtle play of light and shadow across her flawless skin. Her curls swayed gently in the current from a nearby air vent. Her slender fingers were curled around a very real handhold near his door, keeping her stable in the zero-g. He could even smell her, a scent he couldn't place exactly, except that it triggered a flash of a memory: his third wife, leaning over him to light a candle. If he hadn't already known this woman was worlds away, he would never have suspected she was only a digital creation, collated with the raw imagery from his optic nerves and other senses, processed and rendered in his neural bridge, and presented to his gullible gray matter as reality. Even now, two years after his latest neurosurgery on Gethsemane, Orrin could not believe how sophisticated that world's technology had become.

"Hello, Kiara," he said, with contrived cheerfulness. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"You know perfectly well. Trent told our agent that Transsolar is closing its mining operation on Harambee. Why would he say something like that?"

"Trent does and says exactly what I tell him to."

She stared at him coolly, awaiting his explanation.

He said, "Harambee is no longer profitable. For two years now, we've bled money buying overpriced metals from Harambee to prop up its dying economy. We didn't have to do that, you know. We gave you one final chance to set things right, and you blew it. Harambee is on the brink of another war, and this one will be even worse than the last. Now I'm going to do what I should have done two years ago, and stop buying from Harambee entirely. With the next-generation ion drives, it's cheaper to push raw materials from Sol, and I have a bottom line to think about."

"The mining industry is the only viable economic activity on Harambee. If you stop buying, the world will collapse."

"Since when do you care about Harambee?"

"If Harambee collapses, it will destabilize the entire star system. What are you going to do when boatloads of Harambean war refugees show up at Horizon, looking for sanctuary? You can't afford those kinds of problems. Neither can Gethsemane. Harambee's collapse could destroy everything we're trying to achieve on Gethsemane. We are so close to the Singularity, Orrin, I can *feel* it. Every day, the technological breakthroughs are multiplying. We're only a few years away from a complete digitization of the human mind. We are building the perfect

society, and when we cross the threshold of digitization, traditional borders of space and time will shatter. We are at the doorstep of eternity."

"Everybody said the same thing before the Mindcrash. It took fifty million brain-dead Indians and a nuclear war to wake us up. What will it be this time?"

"We're not living in the dark ages anymore. We've learned since then. Look at me, Orrin. *Look* at me." She approached within centimeters of his face. Her scent was overpowering now. He felt her hot breath on his neck. Orrin closed his eyes, willing himself to disbelieve the illusion. She was not here. She was not here.

"The Singularity is already *here*," Kiara purred in his ear. He had never met a woman so erotic or so dangerous. "This is humanity's future."

"You know what I think, Kiara? I think you don't give a damn about humanity's future. I think you're neck-deep in shit and you'll do anything to get out."

Her rage exploded like a solar flare. Orrin felt it pounding in his skull.

"We're in this together. You can't just make this go away."

"We'll see." He opened a channel in his mindcomp. "Security, some... *thing* has penetrated the station firewall and hacked my mindcomp. Find it and kill it."

"This isn't over," Kiara said.

"Good bye, Kiara. Don't ever come here again."

Chapter 3

It was a beautiful day for a peace protest.

Claire Valdez hadn't known what to expect when the first calls came over New Trinidad's planetary grid for mass demonstrations outside the gates of the Starlight Council Headquarters building. She'd seen such calls come before, usually to little effect, but the demonstration today exceeded her wildest expectations.

The Memorial Gardens were packed shoulder to shoulder, and the crowd spilled out the gates into the street. The virtual crowd was even larger. When Claire toggled on the augmented reality layer in her optics, she saw tens of thousands of them: sitting on rooftops, flying through the sky, or gliding like ghosts among the real-life crowd, shouting in unison with them. For those uncomfortable with virtual presence technology, a live video feed broadcast the demonstration to secondary sites across the city.

The cloudless blue sky and brilliant sunshine, coupled with the interstellar media attention, had helped the protest reach a critical mass. The result was pleasant, freewheeling anarchy: part music festival, part tropical party, part peace protest. Whatever the reason the crowds came, whatever the protesters shouted from their pulpits, didn't really matter. The important thing was that these crowds

had made a statement the Starlight Council couldn't ignore. They were defending a cause that had been Claire's passion for years. The cause that had driven the final wedge between her and her father, that had set her life on a meaningful course, that had carried her through law school and had led her to Cries of Humanity.

Harambee.

It was Harambee that had brought forty thousand people to the Starlight Council Headquarters today. Harambee, home to one of the most immoral and unjust "peacekeeping operations" the Starlight Council had ever undertaken. Harambee, where Starlight Council troops propped up one of the most corrupt regimes in the Worldsphere. Harambee, where SCOFiH troops helped the minority ethnic Shamali enslave the Zuwwar majority. Harambee, Claire thought bitterly, where the Transsolar Corporation had a three billion mark mining operation that required "domestic security and a favorable business climate" to turn out profits and heavy metals for Horizon, its orbital shipyard.

In her job interviews for Cries of Humanity, Claire had made no secret of her dedication to Harambee. She'd been warned that this passion would never lead anywhere. Even NGOs were subject to politics, and racial oppression on a world as remote as Harambee would not draw the donations and public support that more high-publicity crises like the Titan famines would. Still, she'd been hired on as a staff attorney, and when she wasn't putting together legal briefs, she was free to pursue her vision of educating the Worldsphere about Harambee. Daily news briefs crossed her desk detailing new instances of Shamali oppression: Shamali

police crackdowns in Zuwwar neighborhoods, President Kawande paying off techlords to protect his assets in Doganoshiv, SCOFiH troops standing by while Shamali soldiers broke down Zuwwar doors and terrorized Zuwwar families.

And now, finally, *finally*, Kawande had crossed a line that put Harambee into the limelight. His PDF troops had massacred an entire Zuwwar mining colony. Claire felt revulsion at the attack, but she was ecstatic that the Worldsphere was finally paying attention to a world that had suffered so much.

"What a freak show," Lars said beside her. Nearby a stoned college student was screaming into a megaphone. Cheering him on was a crowd of grungy, shaggy-haired kids who reeked of Electric and pot. One was waving a lighter.

"And we're not?" Claire said, smiling. "Freaks, I mean?"

"Not like them. They're a liability. If the media makes too much of them, nobody will take us seriously."

They moved on from the druggies. Down the gravel path, a group was staring raptly at blank space. An icon resembling a blue coin floated in Claire's optics, inviting her to the shared workspace. She joined long enough to see that the crowd was watching a documentary about Transsolar's colonization of Harambee.

"Better," Lars said. He was a graduate student in the Intercultural Studies program at the University of Marderos and a professional activist. They went back a long way and might have had a future together, if it wasn't for the fact that Lars was gay. It was Lars who had invited her to come speak today.

"Here we go," Lars said. "On the left."

His army of volunteers had hijacked a strategic piece of turf in front of the central fountain. Lars had arranged one of the most impressive speaker lineups Claire had ever seen at a grassroots demonstration. When they approached the stage, a former Transsolar executive was talking about the injustice that had ultimately led him to leave the company. After that was a local author. He'd written a book chronicling Ethiopian families who had immigrated to Harambee to escape the AIDS-B crisis.

"You sure you want to do this?" Lars asked her. "Your father is going to kill you."

"We haven't spoken in years. I couldn't care less what he thinks."

The crowd applauded and the author stepped down. Lars met him halfway, gave him a firm hug, then advanced to the podium.

"Our next speaker," Lars said, "is a personal friend of mine, and one of the most compassionate and devoted people I have ever met. Claire Valdez--she takes her mother's maiden name--is the daughter of General Michael Sheridan, Force Commander for Starlight Council Forces: Harambee."

Someone booed.

"Miss Valdez has charted a different path with her life. She is a graduate of the University of Marderos and of Yale Law School and works as a staff attorney for Cries of Humanity, an NGO focusing on human rights abuses around the Worldsphere. Last year Claire prepared a lawsuit against the government of Europa

for its non-compliance with radiation protection standards for surface laborers. That lawsuit helped launch a series of reforms that have dramatically improved working conditions on Europa. Claire's real passion, however, is Harambee. She has campaigned for two years against human rights abuses on Harambee, and worked hard to educate the Worldsphere about this urgent issue. Please give a warm welcome to Miss Claire Valdez."

The audience erupted into applause. Claire brushed her red bangs out of her eyes, pressed her hands down her sweater and skirt, and made her way up to the podium. "They're all yours," Lars said, and pecked her on the cheek.

Claire placed both hands on the podium and looked out over the sea of bodies. Her heart thundered in her chest. *For Harambee*, she thought, and began to speak.

She talked about the history of the people of Harambee, beginning with the North African elites who had come to Harambee as managers and skilled engineers for Transsolar. Today their wealthy, privileged descendants were known on Harambee as the "Shamali", or northerners. She talked about the Sub-Saharan Africans who Transsolar had targeted as cheap mining labor with their "Harambee: Together Pushing Forward" campaign. That campaign had promised a better, and uniquely African, way of life amongst the stars. These poor sub-Saharans, many of them refugees from the AIDS-B epidemic and the devastation wreaked by rising sea levels, became known as the "Zuwwar", or visitors. Today they were paying the price of Transsolar's negligence. Claire talked about the history of racism on

Harambee, about the economic disparity that had grown between Shamali and Zuwwar, about the subsidies and patronage networks that allowed the Shamali to control the world. She talked about human rights abuses against the Zuwwar people, about the corruption of Charles Kawande's government, about the way SCOFiH had been propping up this twisted government despite its dismal human rights record. It was tragic it took such bloody circumstances to bring Harambee into the public eye, but she was glad that the time had come for action.

Those who cared about the people of Harambee had a new opportunity, but they had to take it while they still had momentum. If the opportunity slipped away, it might never come again.

That was why, Claire Valdez told her shocked audience, she planned to leave at once for Harambee. She would investigate the relationship between SCOFiH and Charles Kawande's government, and prepare a lawsuit against the Starlight Council in its own courts for its complicity in human rights abuses. She hoped other concerned citizens would join her cause, and partner both with her and with Cries of Humanity to see justice brought to Harambee.

When Claire finished in a breathless crescendo, the crowd cheered and thundered with applause. Adrenaline surged through her veins. All the years of her life had guided her to this moment; this is what she had been born for.

She practically floated off the stage. As she embraced Lars in a hug, she saw he had made good on his promise: network cameras were rolling at the base of the platform.

—
"Give me one good reason I shouldn't fire you."

Claire sat before Malcolm Whitlock's desk in an undersized wooden chair, giving her the sensation she was facing down a courtroom judge. In a sense, she was. It had taken all her nerve to knock on Whitlock's door after the angry call had come over her mindcomp. She'd made an enormous gamble with her career, and now she was wondering if she had made a terrible mistake.

Malcolm was a good man, but he was also a senior executive for one of the largest non-governmental organizations in the Worldsphere. He had professional responsibilities and he answered to an Executive Director on Earth. Claire had usurped his authority and put his reputation on the line. He had every right to be furious.

"Well?" Whitlock said. His fingers were steepled on his immaculate desk. His cool patience gave Claire the impression he could fire her and go on reading his morning's e-mail with no more than a second thought.

Claire's stomach was in knots. Her mouth tasted like cotton.

This was her last chance to turn back.

"Because," she stammered, "I have handed you the opportunity of a lifetime."

She had rehearsed this line in her car on the way here, glancing at herself in the rearview mirror. It sounded ridiculous now.

The color rose in Whitlock's cheeks. After an uncomfortably long time he said, "I'm going to let you in on a little secret, Miss Valdez. Are you listening?"

"Yes, Mr. Whitlock." She realized she was wringing her hands in her lap, and made herself stop.

Whitlock leaned across his desk. "You are not God's gift to the NGO community."

Claire's eyes fell.

"Your arrogance is going to get you fired, or worse. Mavericks can bring down entire operations, and slam government doors shut in our faces. I've seen it happen. You cannot change the world by yourself, Miss Valdez. I don't care who your father is, or where your degree is from. This is a team sport."

"Yes, sir." Claire's voice was shaking now. This was it, then. She had made a terrible miscalculation.

"You had absolutely no right. Good Lord, Claire. We will bring charges against the Starlight Council? Who do you think you are?"

"I said I *personally* would--"

"You gave millions of viewers the impression that Cries of Humanity had authorized this. You knew exactly what you were doing. You're a goddamn Yale lawyer."

Whitlock stood and moved to his window, arms folded over his barrel chest.

"Fortunately for you, I can't fire you. The daughter of General Michael Sheridan is too important. However foolhardy your announcement was this morning, it's received widespread media coverage. Donations are rolling in for your mission. And you are right about one thing: this is our first and best chance to

send a mission to Harambee. I've wanted to put a team on the ground there for years."

"Mr. Whitlock, if you authorize this, I promise I won't let you---"

"Silence," Whitlock said. "You are not forgiven. I am appointing Zachary lolunn to head the investigative team."

"lolunn?" Claire shrieked. "You're sending lolunn?"

"He has years of field experience on Harambee. Whatever personal grievances you might have with him, he is an expert, and he understands the political sensitivities of working on Harambee. You will go as his assistant. The two of you will investigate whether or not human rights violations have occurred at the hands of Charles Kawande's government. If they have, you will investigate whether SCOFiH played any role in these violations. You will write a report, which will be published through official channels. That is all. There will be no further mention of filing a lawsuit against the Starlight Council. What we do with your report will be up to the Executive Director. Am I clear?"

Claire was barely listening. Zachary lolunn. She couldn't believe it.

"What if I go independently?" she asked.

"You didn't hear a word I said, did you? Fine. Go by yourself. I'll hand you resignation papers right now, so you don't have to suffer the indignity of being fired. You'll be free. But what then, Claire? What do you have to your name, a one bedroom rental and a couple thousand marks in your bank account? That won't even cover spacefare, and you'll just be another hack on a crusade. You won't

have a chance at getting a visa from SCOFiH. You'll have no contacts. And if you do publish, what then? Do you really think the Starlight Council will take you seriously?"

He was right. As much as she hated to admit it, as much as it infuriated her that Whitlock could turn the tables and manipulate her back into his own agenda, he was right. She had no choice.

"You're right, Mr. Whitlock. I'm sorry. Thank you for this opportunity."

"There's one more thing. I did a little research after your speech. I understand that you haven't had a relationship with your father since he left you and your mother. That was what, eleven years ago? So is there something at work here that I should know about? Some hidden motive for why you're so set on Harambee?"

Claire knew this would be the inevitable question from every direction, but she still felt unprepared to answer it. What was the truthful answer? She had lain awake nights wondering that. Her passion for Harambee predated her father's assignment as SCOFiH Force Commander by several years. No one could accuse her of a vendetta. Her interest in humanitarian work dated back to a life-changing trip to Nigeria during high school. She could make a plausible case that her father had nothing to do with any of her life's work.

And yet, for all her efforts to escape him, Michael Sheridan's presence was everywhere in her life. His desertion had destroyed her at the time, had made a wreck of her adolescence. It was amazing how much force one man's absence

could exert in a life. The depression, the insomnia, the flirtation with Electric and her two years with Seth--all of that flowed out of the brokenness her father had left her with. Her hands still shook sometimes when she heard his name.

Who she was today was, in so many ways, a reaction against her father. He fought for a military that destroyed, killed, and maimed. That military had always been his mistress. Her father had never been able to love Claire or her mother as much as he loved the thralls of war. Claire had defined herself against that monstrous reality. She lived for justice, healing, and compassion. When her father later took over as Force Commander of a mission she so bitterly resented, it seemed like destiny.

Whitlock was still waiting on her.

"No," she said. "No hidden motive."

Whitlock frowned. "Stick to the truth, Claire, you're not a good liar."

Later that evening, as she was packing her bags in her apartment, her mindcomp chimed with an incoming call. The message tag was from Harambee. Claire seethed. Is this what it took to make him call?

She terminated the call request.

She would have to talk to her father soon, but not yet. He would only try to talk her out of coming. That conversation could wait until she arrived on Harambee, when it was too late to turn back. No one was going to stop her. Not Whitlock, not her father, not anybody.

Chapter 4

From where she stood outside the docking collar, Captain Elena Suarez knew it was going to be bad. The screaming behind the hatch sent her imagination into overdrive. She balled her hands into fists so the casualties about to board *Salvation's Landing* wouldn't see them shaking.

When the deck officer swung the hatch open, the muffled agony turned to sobbing shrieks. The air reeked of burnt flesh. Doctor Santiago and three nurses rushed forward into the spacecraft, toting two coffin-like gel tanks. Elena stood clear, grateful for another minute to stand alone in the familiar security of *Salvation's Landing*.

Elena had always been an outlier in the Navy, and at times like this found it incredible that she was actually in command of a space station. Though she believed in the moral necessity of war, she despised it. She'd never felt comfortable in the boisterous fraternity of military life, but spent her rare free time seeking tranquility in music or literature. She thrived on order, efficiency, and routines. Uncertainty threatened her. It was for those reasons she'd joined the Navy over the other services. In the Navy she figured she could savor the cold, sterile beauty of the stars instead of entangling herself in the messy, uncertain, and intensely human world of surface combat.

Her analytical mind and preference for routines had served her well in the Starlight Council Navy, and largely explained her successful rise to Captain. But her weaknesses, which she openly admitted to herself, had ensured her career would go no further. Twenty-two years of successful officership had culminated here on *Salvation's Landing*, commanding the Latin American contingent of SCOFiH in the backwaters of the Worldsphere. Elena could not complain. The station was undermanned and always on the verge of falling apart, but it was hers, and it served a purpose she believed in. That brought a level of satisfaction to her life that she suspected was rare in the universe.

Then something like this happened.

The screaming stopped. Doctor Santiago and a nurse appeared in the hatch, their faces ashen, toting one of the gel tanks. A naked, badly charred figure was submerged in the soothing gel. He might have been nineteen. The other two nurses followed, hauling the second burn victim, this one a Harambean local.

When they were gone, Elena stepped aboard the Skipper.

Eight more relief workers slouched in the fold-down sidewall seats, looking frightened and exhausted. Natalya Ivanovna was hovering over them like a mother-bear. Elena cursed the stupidity of the mission planners who'd placed them on the same Skipper as the burn victims. As if their day hadn't been traumatic enough.

"My name is Elena Suarez," she said. "I am the commander of *Salvation's Landing*. This is a safe place, and we will do everything we can to make you comfortable. Lieutenant Rodriguez will take you to the infirmary for medical

exams, then show you to temporary quarters. If you wish to talk to somebody, counselors and chaplains will be available."

She had planned to keep this short and practical, but the grief in their eyes stirred something deep inside her.

"You endured something terrible today," she added. "You risked your lives to bring hope and decency to a place that knows only despair, but your selflessness was rewarded with violence. I wish I could go back in time and change what happened, but what's done is done. All I can do is offer you what few comforts this station has. But I want to tell you that I'm proud of you. Today you suffered at the hands of cowardly, despicable men, but I promise you that for every one of them, a thousand more are grateful for the aid that you've brought to this world. Thank you."

A muffled cry suggested Elena had reached at least one of them. That was good; she wanted them to feel her sincerity. There was a latent distrust of the uniform among too many of these people. Every week a new batch arrived on the rotator flights from the Core Worlds: young, self-righteous activists with shaggy hair and Che Guevara shirts who spent their weekends protesting Starlight Council interventions. It didn't take long for the naive idealism to wear off once they reached the surface, but the distrust and dislike for the military never really went away. Elena made it a personal mission to try to change that.

Lieutenant Rodriguez led Natalya and the relief workers away. Elena shook hands with each of them as they filed off. Then she was alone with the aircrew, standing in the hatch, watching the group disappear into the station.

"You always were the idealist," a familiar voice said behind her.

"Michael!"

Every time he came here, he caught her by surprise. He stood on the stairs to the flight deck, dressed in filthy camouflage.

"Is it such a vice to offer them a candle of hope in their darkest hour? These aren't soldiers, Michael. The rule of our lives is justice. Theirs is compassion. Let them go on believing their compassion is making a difference."

"Do you really believe it is?"

"I know things on Harambee are worse than ever. But look past the immediate present, look at what we're doing here, and tell me that it isn't worth trying."

Michael didn't skip a beat. Arms folded across his chest, jaw sternly set, he said, "It isn't worth trying."

"You break my heart sometimes."

They stood face to face then, each scrutinizing the mysteries that defined the other: Elena in the pressed black and polished brass of her service dress, Michael standing a head taller in his sweaty, grease-stained camouflage, with the hydraulic pumps whirring in the background and the stench of burnt flesh hanging in the air. It was an unlikely place for Elena to feel moved by how fragile and how beautiful

human goodness was, but she had the sudden conviction that this was a stare-down of worldviews, with stakes that were extraordinary.

It was Michael who finally looked down. All at once the strength went out from him. His shoulders sagged under an unfathomable burden. Elena noticed the dark circles under his eyes, the loss of weight.

Michael had never really wanted to come here, she knew. He had been set to retire when the Council asked him to take command. Apathy in the Council, limited member world support, and poor leadership had made a travesty of the mission to save Harambee. So why had he agreed? Publicly he spoke of the Starlight Council's commitment to finish what it had started, but Elena suspected deeper motives: Michael's paralyzing fear of life beyond the Army, rooted in pain at a family life he'd let slip away. There was a hostile divorce in his past, and a child. These facts Michael had only revealed to Elena once, in a moment of brooding drunkenness, so she knew few details. What she did know is that Michael, adrift and aimless at an age when he should have been settling into a quiet domestic life, had accepted command of what was hailed as the greatest military and humanitarian disaster in the past fifty years. He'd done an admirable job, halting Harambee's downward slide and attaining a level of uneasy stability in just six months, but like too many soldiers sent to Harambee, the cost to him personally had been high.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so tired."

She placed her hand around his. "You need to rest. You should join me for a glass of wine. Our lounge isn't much to look at, but at least everything doesn't taste like sulfur."

"I would like that."

Wonderful. For an hour or so she would remind him that there was a world beyond war and famine. Life still had its simple pleasures, like good wine and the joy of friendship. Clinging to that knowledge had been a defining battle of Elena's life. Cynicism came too easily. Hope took effort.

"I have a meeting first," Michael said.

"You need to give yourself a rest. Can't you save it for one hour?"

"When I rest, people die," he said. Something sad and incomprehensible flashed through his eyes. Then he brushed past her. Elena watched the finest soldier she'd ever met disappear into the heart of *Salvation's Landing*.

—

After Sheridan had gone, Colonel Marian Radella cut her copilot loose to stretch his legs and get some lunch on *Salvation's Landing* while she prepped the jet for the return flight. Marian had made so many orbital runs that the station's charms were lost on her. She just wanted to get back to the Ambassador. Flying screaming burn victims out of Doganoshiv had sapped her of her will to do anything except drink herself into a coma.

Her scheduled takeoff was about two hours from now: just enough time to refuel the jet, top off the oxygen, and transload cargo. She radioed Command Post

to ensure the fueling crew was en route, then requested her cargo upload. Eighteen palettes of cargo and five inbound relief workers. Marian shook her head. What sick irony, flying fresh, naive relief workers into Doganoshiv the same day she'd flown their broken, wounded brothers and sisters out. If it was up to her, she'd meet them at the hatch and tell them to get the hell out of here. Go home. Get drunk, get laid, celebrate your youth in the thralls of licentiousness and moral degradation. Fortunately, she supposed, it wasn't up to her.

She loaded the flight plan, fed weight and balance data into the mission computer, calculated the reentry ballistics, and ran the en-route stop checklist. All that took about fifteen minutes, an unconscious repetition of countless spacelift missions before. That left her time to burn. Marian, who grew restless when left in idleness or silence, occupied herself however she could. She snapped gum and listened to bad Harambean techno music over the planetary grid. She watched a freighter dock. She played with the cockpit lighting until it was exactly right. And then, when the Skipper's auxiliary power unit suddenly died and an alarm began to blare, she slammed her fist into the overhead panel and cursed for the thousandth time the shitty aircraft the Starlight Council had dumped on her.

Displays went black as the jet reverted to emergency battery power. Marian silenced the alarm. She scanned the fault list in the mission computer, saw nothing wrong, and started the APU again. Avionics hummed back to life. Screens flickered back on. The caution and warning panel blinked red and yellow,

protesting multiple system resets. Marian worked her way across the cockpit, checking and re-arming systems for departure.

Marian supposed she should be grateful. When she'd arrived on Harambee with General Sheridan as his Aerospace Component Commander, she'd been horrified to learn that she only had two aircraft under her authority. Two and a half years into the mission, member Starlight Council worlds still weren't doing a damned thing to provide the resources required by the SCOFiH charter they'd signed.

General Sheridan, who'd been swamped in problems of his own, had fought for her, relentlessly pressing the Starlight Council to meet its obligations. The lumbering bureaucracy of the Council had in turn pressured member worlds, and four months ago fresh aircraft had finally arrived in-system: twelve unmanned reconnaissance planes, four A-model Skippers, and three Dragonfly VTOLs. They were pieces of shit, but at least some of them flew.

Pilots were still scarce. Marian was flying more now than she had since she pinned on Major, and she'd had to double-qualify in the Skipper and the Dragonfly to cover the manning shortfall. The Aerospace Force she commanded wasn't exactly impressive, but it was better than nothing. She owed Mike a debt of gratitude.

He was a good soldier and a good leader. Marian had met him five years ago in a subterranean command bunker during Everestine's civil war. She had been flying and fighting in the war for three years before the Starlight Council

decided to intervene, and had quickly risen through the ranks to become a senior air campaign planner. When the first Council peacekeepers had arrived, she'd been feisty, arrogant, and spiteful. Sheridan had single-handedly changed her perceptions of... of what? Of the Starlight Council, certainly. Of war. Of leadership.

If anyone else had asked her to join a peacekeeping mission on Harambee, Marian would have given him the finger. Everestine had enough problems of its own. Even with the war over, she was working fourteen-hour days rebuilding her new government's shattered military. The last thing she wanted was to fight somebody else's war on a world even more broken than her own. But Mike, damn him, had been the one to ask. And that was that. Here she was.

They'd arrived at the worst possible time. The meager intervention had been a disaster thus far. The original proposal called for a full-blown interstellar force of at least five thousand, but the bean counters at the Ministry of Peacekeeping had jumped on board General Alexander's technocentric plan and gnawed that down to a paltry six hundred. While the plan envisioned parallel operations to transform the government, fight techlord-controlled militias, and redevelop Harambee's life support infrastructure, the Council had rejected all three strategies. Instead, they'd settled on a cheaper, more flexible program of arming and equipping the People's Defense Force, then bolstering them with a network of orbital weapons from Gethsemane. They had not directly confronted the techlords or militias, which would have required more violence than the politicians could tolerate. The most

they'd been willing to do was impose a blockade against the ZLA heartland, and then they'd scratched their heads, dumbfounded, when the Worldsphere objected to Zuwwar children dying of starvation and preventable illness. It was a goat rope if Marian had ever seen one. By the time she and Mike had arrived, the techlords were stronger than ever and Kawande only retained control by using extreme brutality.

Mike fought tooth-and-nail to change the entire strategy, but his ideas found little traction in the Council. His job was not to save Harambee, the Council argued. His job was to get SCOFiH out. To do that, Sheridan retorted, he needed the resources to establish security, shore up Harambee's economy, and implement political reform. Mike had made amazing progress, especially with his efforts to build a new transitional government, but Marian was under no illusions about their prospects. They mostly spent their days bailing water out of a sinking ship.

"Mercy Five Zero, Doganoshiv Ops," her radio crackled.

She slipped on her headset. "Go for Mercy Five Zero."

"Mercy Five Zero, is General Sheridan with you?"

"He's on board the station."

"I need you to find him ASAP. He's not answering his mindcomp. We have a crisis requiring his attention."

"When don't we?" she muttered back into the radio.

"This one is special. Turn on the news. Any station should do."

—

Sheridan was mired in a meeting with the heads of seven different relief agencies when a twitchy ensign in a gray jumpsuit poked his head into the conference room. He made a bumbling apology, then relayed Colonel Radella's message. A crisis of some kind.

Pavan Navalkar, planetary chief for Mercy Mission Interstellar, threw up his hands. He said, "Another crisis? General, SCOFiH has lost control. You pretend to be in charge, but this entire world is unraveling. Why should we stay in place?"

"These weren't brigands, General, these were government soldiers," said Celeste Schriever of Doctors With Wings. "It's becoming too dangerous."

Sheridan had hoped that he could reason with these people in a face-to-face meeting, but he'd been mistaken. In their eyes he was the human face of all BRING LIGHT's flaws. He should have left this to Elena. She knew how to deal with these people, spoke their language.

"They are trying to scare us away," Sheridan said.

"If they don't want us here," Pavan said, "maybe we should catch a clue."

"SCOFiH is the only thing staving off a civil war between the Shamali and Zuwwar. If we leave, the government will collapse and the techlords will call the shots. When the war's over, the survivors will be kissing the boots of Rafiki Kamau or SANDFOX to buy air and water. Is that what you want? Is that the social justice you envision?"

Angry silence.

"I'm sorry you lost people this morning, Natalya," Sheridan said. "I truly am, and I swear to God, I will do everything I can to prevent another tragedy. You each have to decide what's best for your people. If you must leave, I can't make you stay. Just realize that if you pull your organizations out now, Harambee's worst villains win. A large NGO withdrawal could lead the Starlight Council to terminate BRING LIGHT. You can decide for yourselves what that will mean for Harambee. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a situation to attend to."

After leaving the conference room, Sheridan detoured into the closest head. He stood with his hands clamped around the sink, leaning into the mirror. His gaunt face stared back. Puffy darkness underscored his bloodshot eyes. Not a Force Commander; a man. A man who made mistakes, who miscalculated, who could sentence soldiers---or relief workers--to death because of a wrong decision made in the clutches of fatigue or distraction. No good commander indulged these doubts, because they led to indecisiveness and paralysis, but the thoughts were inescapable today. So many innocent people had died. What should he have done differently?

His hands were shaking. Sheridan snorted at this betrayal by his body. Despite all his years in the Army, death still hit him hard. He wanted time to be alone, to come to grips with what had happened, to get himself under control before he had to face the grind of command again. But he'd spent the last two hours riding to orbit in a frantic medevac spacecraft, then offering himself as a scapegoat for the relief agencies. Now he was on his way to defuse some new

crisis in Marian's Skipper. So much for the glass of wine with Elena. The only rest he was allowed was a few minutes in front of a toothpaste-splattered mirror in a cramped Navy head that reeked of shit. The life of a Force Commander.

Sheridan splashed some water on his face. Time to get on with it.

When he reached the Skipper, Marian was sitting on the railing outside the hatch, her scuffed boots planted on the lower rail. She'd unzipped her olive drab flight suit to the waist and tied off the sleeves to stay cool. Dog tags jangled over her brown t-shirt, which was splotted with grease and sweat. A wet tangle of black hair was plastered to her sharp cheeks. Her thin red mouth and dark eyes gave her an impish look. She was gnawing conspicuously on a piece of gum.

"What's wrong now?" Sheridan asked.

"I have a bottle of scotch hidden in my quarters if you need it," Marian said. Then she brought her hands together, pinched her fingers, and drew them apart again like she was stretching a piece of cloth. A window unfurled in Sheridan's optics. Marian gave it a tap and a video began to play.

A redheaded young woman was stepping up to a podium. Good Lord. The last time he'd seen Claire was almost five years ago. He'd been on New Trinidad to brief the Starlight Council on the coming Everestine invasion, and had invited her to coffee. She'd accepted only reluctantly. Sheridan hadn't recognized her when she showed up in the little café, bustling as it was with college students her age. She'd had to shout, "Dad!" over the music three times before he'd noticed her.

Things had gone downhill from there and ended with Claire in tears, screaming a parting obscenity at him before fleeing the café.

She was an adult now, which was impossible to believe, but his little girl was apparent in those freckles and that flamboyant red hair. She looked elegant and beautiful in her black skirt and white sweater. Her skin looked pale and creamy against the sun-baked crowd she was addressing. She glowed with enthusiasm as she talked.

At first, her words barely registered. Slowly, though, they came into focus. A speech about Harambee.

Oh. Oh, God.

When the video was over, Marian led him up to the flight deck. Sheridan had no memory of starting engines or departing *Salvation's Landing*, but when he surfaced from the depths of memory, he saw billowing yellow thunderstorms growing in the windows between tongues of re-entry flame.

When Sheridan and Marian arrived at the Ambassador, the Operations Center was bustling with activity. Newscasts were playing in a half-dozen windows above the battlespace map. Claire, the protests, her mission to Harambee. It was the headline news on every network.

Chief Hartwell met them at the door and steered them to Sheridan's adjoining office.

"Comms have been ringing off the hook," he said. "Barborak's been stomping around here like a berserk elephant looking for you. Colonel Murigande

is meeting with him right now. The press are having kittens. Captain Kiyoni wants to arrange a press conference at 0430. That'll be dinnertime in Marderos, and early morning on the east coast of North America."

Someone knocked on the door.

"Come in!" Sheridan called.

It was Robbie.

"How'd it go with Barborak?" Sheridan asked.

"I've got bad news, Mike."

"You mean it gets worse?"

"Barborak has been on the line with the Chancellor and with the Ministry of Peacekeeping. He's called for your dismissal as Force Commander."

"What!"

"He believes the Kaligari Massacre has impugned your credibility, and that your daughter's investigation will compromise your ability to command SCOFiH impartially."

"He could have at least talked to me first!"

"Alan Kramer at the Ministry of Peacekeeping put his neck on the line for you. He convinced the Starlight Council to retain you, but the Council is not happy. SCOFiH operations will remain suspended until the Council completes its own investigation of Kaligari. After that, the Council plans to vote on terminating BRING LIGHT. Rumor has it the investigative team is being stacked against us. It's a setup, Mike. The mission's over. The Starlight Council is shutting us down."

Chapter 5

Amazai insisted that a crowd was the easiest place to disappear from unwelcome eyes, but it always made Njeri Omondi nervous entering his apartment from the bustling corridor in Doganoshiv's poorest and most crowded district.

So far they'd been fortunate. Her *hijab* and breather mask made recognition almost impossible. To the throngs milling about the dim subterranean corridors of Quam Bey, she was just another faceless Muslim girl trying to eek out an existence in the shoddy apartments behind the tattoo parlors and sex shops of Gemara Street. It was only a matter of time, though, before a nosy neighbor began prying into the lives of this mysterious couple who came here only occasionally, never arriving or departing at exactly the same time.

Njeri turned into a narrow alley, littered with black plastic garbage bags from the Mandarin Palace. Homeless scavengers had torn them open in search of scraps. The dim lights illuminated needles and broken bottles among the fried rice and bits of General Tso's chicken. Someone was passed out in the shadows behind the stripped-down carcass of a dead trash collector robot, snoring loudly. He reeked of booze and piss.

A second, twisting turn took Njeri into a corridor lit by a single incandescent bulb. She stopped at the third apartment on the left, checked over her shoulder, then slipped inside.

Her world made a disorienting transformation. A playful piano sonata by Rachmaninoff welcomed her into the candlelit warmth of the apartment. It smelled wonderful: warm bread, hints of garlic and onion, something in the scented candles like cinnamon.

"You're late."

Njeri pulled off her *hijab* and shook her beaded braids free. She tossed the *hijab* in the entryway closet. As she was sliding out of her overcoat, Amazai slipped his arms around her waist. She smiled and allowed him to kiss her neck. Then she turned in his arms and kissed him lightly on the mouth. He was a big man, and his body seemed to enfold her. She liked that.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Long day."

"You can tell me about it over supper. I cooked!"

The boyish pride was charming in a man his age. When she'd met him, Amazai had been helpless to cook or dress himself properly, traits Njeri expected in young bachelors but was amused to discover in a man of over sixty. Njeri had helped him buy a new wardrobe over the months, and on many of their dates they cooked together. As Amazai's skill and confidence had grown, he'd begun cooking surprises for her. His silly grin made Njeri smile. She loved this man for so many

reasons, not least of all his ability to make her feel young when everything else in her life made her feel so old.

The gentle music and the twin candlesticks gave this dilapidated old apartment a magical aura that mesmerized Njeri every time she arrived from the sleazy streets of Quam Bey. Its furnishings were simple but adequate: a folding table and two chairs, some cooking and dining implements, and a second-hand mattress swaddled in old sheets and blankets. Piled around the mattress were books on history, political theory and law, and the spiral-bound notebooks in which they'd invested so much of their lives. The seeds of Harambee's future constitution. *In sha' Allah.* God willing.

Amazai held out her chair, seated her before the feast he'd prepared, then took his seat opposite her. They toasted their love with Chardonnay, then started into dinner with reserved elegance.

The dinner was excellent. Amazai had prepared an orzo dish, bursting with the flavors and textures of crumbled feta, garlic, chopped onions, golden raisins and sliced olives. Accompanying this was a raspberry walnut salad and toasted bread dripping with melted cheese.

Njeri was eager to unload the day's events on her poor lover, but she disciplined herself to take her time enjoying the meal. They made only small talk: Rachmaninoff, the orzo recipe, how many grocery stores Amazai had visited in a quest for golden raisins. They both laughed as Amazai speculated at the headlines

this would make for the paparazzi: Zuwwar Senator Caught Frequenting Grocery Stores. Zuwwar People Devastated.

The bouts of silence between all this small talk grew longer and longer. Triviality did not come easy to either of them. It felt insincere, a game for the young. When Njeri had scraped the last of the orzo off her plate, and sat staring into her wine glass, she grew tired of pretending.

"Our city is going mad," she said. "Zuwwar rioters injured three Shamali outside the palace. The PDF retaliated and killed five rioters. It's like this all over the city. The hawks on the cabinet are denouncing the plans for a new transitional government."

"They've been doing that for months."

"People are listening now. I made a speech today in the cabinet meeting. I begged the others not to abandon the peace process. No one listened to me, Amazai. Not one. The moderate voice has disappeared."

The good humor in Amazai's face was gone. He said, "It is the same among the Zuwwar in the Senate. Kaligari was the last straw. They have given up on politics. I saw two Senators reading Stephen Aqfiz's book today. It's pure poison. People are whispering about revolution."

"What will happen when SCOFiH leaves?"

Amazai shook his head slowly. They had spent most of their lives on Harambee, and had seen over and over the dark turn such civil disorder could take.

Neither of them wanted to speak the words that seared them with white-hot fear; the thing they had dedicated their lives to preventing. *Civil war.*

Their lovemaking after dinner was slow but desperate. Each time they came together, they had the growing sense that it might be their last. Njeri whimpered as Amazai's old, calloused hands explored her body. By the time she finished she was weeping. Amazai finished soon after, and wrapped his arms around her while she sobbed into his chest. Njeri dreaded coming here, for the pain of leaving him again.

Njeri wiped her eyes. She never used to cry. Maybe old age was making her sentimental, or maybe it was Amazai. She'd given up on love decades ago, and now that it had finally happened, it had awakened things in her that she never knew existed.

"General Sheridan came to see me today," Njeri said, suddenly remembering. "He knows the constitutional summit is dead, but he wants to bring Shamali and Zuwwar leaders together for a series of good faith talks. He thinks we can at least stop the slide into violence, and lay down an agreement that will pave the way for reconciliation talks later. I have to give it to the man. He doesn't go down without a fight."

"It's not much," Amazai said.

"It's all we have. And it won't be easy. The entire cabinet is opposed to the idea. I have my work cut out for me. There was one other thing, too. Sheridan

wants me to meet with Claire when she arrives. Take her under my wing. He is hoping that I can steer her efforts in our favor."

"You will be competing with every politician who wants to do the same. This poor girl. I wonder if she knows that every faction on Harambee is spinning plans to exploit her."

"She can help us, Amazai. You would never have promised to help her if you didn't believe that. For years we have torn our hair out with our frustration at the Worldsphere's apathy, but here is a girl who has dedicated her life to giving us a voice in the Core Worlds. She has real influence because of her father. She has publicity. If we can win her over, perhaps we can even save SCOFiH."

"So you are going to meet with her?"

"Of course. You must too."

"You're right. I'm sorry. These are such difficult times."

They held each other for a while, watching the candles burn down. The Rachmaninoff finished and silence descended.

"I hate doing this," Njeri said. "I hate meeting here in secret. Why couldn't you have been a Shamali?"

Amazai chuckled and stroked her hair. They were both outcasts. Moderates. Isolated here in this no-man's land between the twin poles of Harambean extremism.

"If I was Shamali," Amazai said, "there would be nobody left to convince the Zuwwar to negotiate. It's a good thing for you that I'm here."

He tousled her hair and tickled her side.

She squirmed and shoved him playfully. "Lucky me. I guess I'll settle for what I can get."

They wrestled a bit, laughing, but the laughter fell away as quickly as it had come. They lay side by side, feeling the weight of their responsibilities settle once more like a heavy blanket.

"You can do this, Njeri. You can convince Kawande to negotiate. You're the strongest leader on his cabinet, and he knows it."

"Thank you, Amazai."

Njeri marveled at the way they could do this: twirl about in a dance of encouragement, draw on each other for strength. Sometimes, when they were at work in their respective offices, secret allies in the political war to save their world, she imagined them fighting back to back with swords. Swashbuckling heroes of old. Lovers-in-arms.

She snuggled up to him and rested her head on his shoulder. He coiled an arm around her. "You are a good man, Amazai Nebtomo. I am a lucky woman."

"I am an even luckier man. You know I would marry you if I could."

"Maybe that day will yet come. We must have hope."

"Yes, hope," Amazai murmured. Njeri could not tell whether he really believed this tired mantra that they clung to like a plank from a shattered and sinking ship.

SCOFiH's athletic facilities were the worst Julian had ever seen on a military installation. The converted basement storage area was a single claustrophobic room with a moldy ceiling and dim, sputtering lights. Circulation was terrible. After five minutes on the treadmill, the air became a warm, sour-smelling soup that gave Julian side aches. It was difficult to get a decent workout with the single weight machine and the handful of dumbbells. Julian usually preferred to exercise in his room, doing push-ups and crunches or skipping rope.

Nonetheless, two nights after the Kaligari Massacre, Julian found himself alone in the detested gym. He caught glimpses of himself in the mirrored walls, bolting in and out of the shadows around the worn, duct-taped punching bag. Sweat gleamed off his pectorals and biceps and trickled down his back. Every time he threw a punch, droplets went flying. Puddles gleamed on the rubber-matted floor. The air was a toxic brew of sweat and breath. The only sounds were his feet on the mat, his grunts and growls, his gloves connecting with leather. For once, Julian appreciated the cave-like ambiance. He felt primal. Animalistic. And that was good, because after two days of reflection on Kaligari, Julian was mad as hell.

He'd spent his time off doing everything he could to escape his own mind. The bioengineers on Gethsemane insisted that the recordings stored in his wet memory cells couldn't possibly leak into normal memory without special access instructions. Julian had never really believed this, and the sleeping and waking nightmares he'd suffered in the days following Kaligari only confirmed his doubts. The memories were seared into his brain in high-definition.

Colonel Murigande had visited him yesterday to ask how he was feeling. Julian had offered polite, evasive answers to the colonel's questions and insisted he was fine. In truth, he felt disoriented. He was out of phase with the rest of the universe. Nobody had seen the things he had seen. Nobody could understand.

Julian spent most of his downtime sleeping or lounging on his bed with his electric guitar, the one thing in the world that successfully transported him beyond his own mind. He trusted his fingers to do what his mind could not: create order out of chaos, meaning out of meaninglessness.

This morning he had written a letter to Becca, explaining everything that had happened. After he finished it, he burned it. Becca would never understand. The letter would only frighten her.

Gradually, the trauma that had kept him shuttered in his quarters gave way to anger. He knew he had a choice to make: he could run from the Kaligari Massacre for the rest of his life, or he could get back on his feet.

This afternoon he had finally set aside his guitar. After a scalding shower and a meal, he returned to his room with a purpose. He sat down on his bed, created a new virtual workspace, and accessed the Kaligari memories still in his augmentation cells. He spent hours gazing into the eyes of the killer he thought of as Ponytail--the one who'd shot the little girl in the back, the one who'd given a speech about the consequences of delivering food to terrorists. Julian nurtured the anger that welled up in his chest, willing it to pump through his bloodstream like

adrenaline. His determination coalesced around these dark memories like a hurricane.

Those images were burned into his mind now as he danced around the punching bag, reinvigorating the body that he'd trashed with two days of inactivity, transforming his rage into recoiling arms and smashing fists. Between blows he threw roundhouse kicks, smashed his shoulder into the place a sternum would be, grappled the bag with one arm and hurled a flurry of blows into imaginary kidneys.

Julian was lost in a red haze when he glimpsed a figure watching him from the doorway.

"General," he stammered. His gloves fell to his sides.

The general wore a slack, empty expression. Julian had always seen Sheridan as a living force among men, a tireless whirlwind who empowered and accelerated everyone he touched. Maybe that's how he wanted to be seen. Tonight he looked like an entirely different man. The consequence, Julian was sure, of watching the ugliest details of his personal life paraded across the interstellar news. His daughter's speech had set the networks on fire. When Julian had arrived at the chow hall for lunch, one of the flatscreens had been running a documentary on Sheridan's divorce.

"Not a boxer, are you?" the general said.

Stunned by the implied insult, Julian didn't answer.

"Your offense is ruthless, but you leave yourself wide open. You fight angry. That doesn't win boxing matches; it wins brawls in bars. Where'd you learn to fight like that?"

Julian tugged off his gloves and tossed them in the corner beneath the punching bag, then bent to pick up his water bottle. He took a long swig. Then he said, "A shipping container yard between the Port of Seattle and the railroad tracks."

Sheridan lifted an eyebrow. "You ran with gangs?"

"Only for a few weeks. I wanted to learn to fight. God knows what Los Hermanos thought, when a scrawny white kid rode his bike into the middle of their turf looking for lessons."

"You're kidding. Los Hermanos? Why?"

"My old man."

Julian tried to say this casually, but it hung awkwardly in the air, full of pain and memory. Sheridan made a thoughtful sound and looked away. Then he said, "Well, Los Hermanos were good teachers. I wouldn't want to meet you in a dark alley. You're something else, Marshall."

Julian felt a rushing sense of warmth inside.

"I need your help with something, Julian."

"Yes, sir. Anything."

"You won't like it. I'm not going to order you, but it would mean a lot to me, as both the Force Commander and as a father, if you would accept."

Julian had been in the Army long enough to know he should never volunteer for anything, but after a request like that, how could he possibly say no?

"You've seen the news? About my daughter?"

"Yes, sir."

"She arrives in two days. Claire has created a media sensation and millions of people around the Worldsphere will hang on her every word. Her judgment could very well decide the future of Operation BRING LIGHT. Are you with me?"

"Yes, sir. I understand."

"Good. I need you to realize how important this is. I would like to appoint you as my daughter's official SCOFiH escort."

Julian reeled. Sheridan wanted to use a Combat Shadow for a babysitting job? Surely there were any number of officers better suited for the job--someone from Public Affairs, or Security Forces. Anyone else. What was this really about? Was this a diplomatic way of pulling him out of the fight? Just because he'd needed a couple days to recover from Kaligari?

"I'm serious, Julian. I'm asking you because you're the best. As my NGO liaison, you're a natural pick. No one will ask questions. You were at Kaligari. Claire will hate the idea of an official SCOFiH escort, but she'll like having exclusive access to you. You can use that to your advantage. You can help shape her thinking about our involvement here. That might be the single most important job in SCOFiH now. There's also the matter of Claire's security. She will want to

see Doganoshiv first-hand, and you know the streets better than anybody. I can't think of anybody I would rather entrust her with."

Julian knew he was being offered an extraordinary honor, but that didn't lessen his disappointment. He wanted to be investigating Kaligari, not driving Sheridan's liberal activist daughter to interviews. But he could not say no. Not to Sheridan.

"I'll do it," he said, dying inside.

—

Sheridan was sitting at his desk in the final hours of the graveyard shift, obliterating conscious thought with his third glass of Marian's scotch, when his mindcomp chimed with an anonymous call. Strange. Only a few people had authorization to call him directly, and they all knew better than to disturb him at this hour unless it was an emergency. Even the Force Commander had to sleep sometime. Or, he thought as he put the scotch and the glass back in their cabinet, drink.

He considered the possibilities. Maybe Claire was finally returning his call. Then again, that was probably too much to hope for. Maybe Madam Omondi had news about the good faith talks he was trying to cobble together. More likely some new crisis was erupting out in Doganoshiv. The whole damn city was on edge. The PDF was deployed in the streets, and brazen ZLA Blood Hawks were racing around in their trucks blaring racist propaganda over megaphones. It wouldn't take much to light all this dry kindling, especially with SCOFiH caged in this rickety compound.

Sheridan slid his camo blouse over his undershirt, began to button it, and selected the call icon floating in his optics.

The icon winked out. The chime inside his skull abruptly ceased.

"Hello?" Sheridan said.

Silence. He glanced around the room, checking for a hidden avatar.

So his mindcomp was dropping calls now. Wasn't that just his luck. At the rate SCOFiH's computer hardware was succumbing to Harambean sand and corrosion, he and his soldiers would be doing their administrative work on abacuses and papyrus before the month's end.

Well, if it was important they could call back.

He took his blouse back off, hung it on the coat hook, and dug his hygiene kit out of his duffel bag. A quick shower would finish out his day, and then a few hours of restless sleep in his cot. All so he could wake up to another day of sitting in this damned office doing nothing, while Harambee fell apart around him.

He grabbed his towel off a coat hook and headed for the door. A voice said, "*Are you in such a hurry to go, General Sheridan?*"

The voice was not human. It sounded like a talking slab of granite.

Sheridan turned. Behind him, filling most of the room, was the head of a fox, superimposed over a desertscape of blowing red sand and hellish skies. Yellow eyes gleamed out of a sea of frosted red fur, perceiving everything. Its muzzle was white, its nose black and wet. The blowing sand and roiling clouds brought the

image to life; if he took three steps forward, Sheridan thought he would fall through onto Harambee's open surface. The fox's fur rippled in the violent wind.

It was just an avatar, just an illusion rendered by Sheridan's neural bridge and projected across the real world, but the sight of it filling his office was terrifying. He knew who this was, and he had no business being here. His presence meant that Sheridan's security systems were badly compromised.

Rafiki Kamau was the techlord who most of the analysts worried about, but it was SANDFOX who Sheridan feared. Yes, Kamau funded private militias and had half the government in his pocket and undercut the legitimate economy at every possible turn, but at least he was a known player. He'd been sparring with the government and building up a shadow economy for decades. But SANDFOX was a wild card. This dark horse techlord had galloped onto the scene during Harambee's civil war, confounding everybody. He undersold even Kamau's prices, and exploited sectors of the economy that Kamau had never been able to penetrate. His militia was small but powerful. They won all their battles, and their support had been crucial in bringing the dictatorship of Charles Kawande to power. SANDFOX had mostly stayed out of politics since then and limited himself to buying and selling on the black market, but Sheridan was wary of an adversary he knew so little about. As far as the watching world was concerned, SANDFOX was nameless and faceless: a collage of symbols and images, like this fox filling Sheridan's quarters. No one knew his interests or goals. No one knew where he came from. He was almost mythical.

Sheridan walked right up to the fox and stared it in the eyes, wondering who--or what--lay on the other side of this connection.

"What are you doing here?"

"I am here to help you stop a war."

"What makes you think I want your help?"

"You might not want it, but you need it."

"I'm doing just fine without you."

"Is that so? The People's Defense Force butchered a Zuwwar village.

Kawande has either crossed a line of unpardonable brutality, or he has lost control of his army. The Zuwwar are rioting in the streets and ready to mount a coup. The Starlight Council has locked your impotent troops in the Hotel Ambassador like a cage. When the special investigative team arrives, they will dismember SCOFiH and terminate BRING LIGHT. Harambee is on the brink of civil war. You have no allies. The worlds which allegedly stand behind you want their troops to come home. If that is your definition of 'doing just fine', then you in no way merit the rank on your shoulders."

SANDFOX was right. Absolutely right.

Sheridan said, "You have two minutes."

"I have no interest in a civil war on Harambee. It would be bad for business."

"How noble of you."

"I have never claimed to be noble, General, but I am honest. Harambee knows what I am: a businessman."

"Yes, I can see that. Even when your business perpetuates a poverty cycle that's left this world mired in needless suffering."

"If you want to engage in a debate about business ethics, we can no doubt find a suitable time to discuss the violence Transsolar has wreaked on this world. For now, I have a delivery. Files. I am beginning the transfer now."

A popup window appeared in Sheridan's optics, asking him if he wished to accept the download. He said, "You've already breached my network security. Why should I trust a data transfer?"

"They're harmless images. There is no possibility of them containing a virus. Ask your comm shop, if you don't believe me. Trust me, it is in your best interest to accept them."

"Why?"

"Because if you don't, you will always wonder if you could have stopped a war. Goodbye, General. I will be in touch again."

—

Later that morning, long after Sheridan should have gone to sleep and sometime after the chow hall started serving breakfast, Major Diego Cortez tore into the Operations Center at a run. He still wore the plaid flannel pants and plain gray t-shirt he'd been sleeping in when Sheridan had awakened him a few hours before. In his hands he clutched the file folder that Sheridan had given him then, brimming with photos. His eyes were bleary and red from hours in virtual space.

"What'd you find?" Sheridan asked him.

"I have a positive ID on one of the Kaligari butchers. He's not Shamali. He's Zuwwar. I think Kaligari was a setup."

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