FIELD FICTION
OVER THE WALL
TERRA CONFLICTUS
JESSE ALEXANDER

brother dies becoming the warrior she always was. She wins the day. She loses the war she was never allowed to see.

PART ONE — THE CALL

CAKEWALK, MY ASS

The hit came up through the floor of the world.

Andi felt it before the cockpit told her, the Falcon-stock in her spine reading the wrongness a quarter second ahead of the instruments, the way her body always read a fall before her eyes agreed to it. Something punched the Shrike under the left wing. The whole frame slewed sideways and dropped, and the burning sprawl of Sierra Cortez tilted up at her like a floor coming loose from its joists.

Warning tone. Another. A third stacked on top of the first two until they ran together into one long flat scream.

Run the checklist, she told herself. You run the checklist. That is the thing you do.

She could not hold the checklist.

She knew the words. She had known them since she was nineteen and shaking in a sim chair while Rafe leaned over her shoulder and told her the checklist was the only thing in the universe that did not panic. Loss of lift, transfer to walker mode, no. Engine fire, vent and pray, no. She reached for the order of it and her mind handed her nothing but the strip-sun overhead, that long stripe of false light running the

length of the habitat sky, and under it the city on fire, and somewhere down in that fire her brother.

She could not remember this morning.

That was the part that scared her worse than the falling. She knew there had been a morning. She had woken up in a bunk on the Essex with the recyclers humming and she had done something stupid and ordinary, brushed her teeth, called home, sat through a briefing where a man said the word cakewalk, and now she could not assemble any of it. It was all behind a wall of white noise and altitude warnings. Like the morning belonged to a different woman, one who still believed today was a milk run.

The Shrike spun. The strip-sun went under, the city came over, went under again.

Smoke in the cockpit now, thin and gray and tasting like burning wire.

Hours, she thought. It had been hours. Cakewalk to this in a handful of hours.

Hold it together, Max. Go back. Go back to the morning and walk it forward and maybe by the time you get here you will know what to do.

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The morning started with her mother's face on a screen and the words I won't make it for the season.

Andi sat on the edge of her bunk in flight underlayers, hair still wet, and watched her mother arrange the small disappointment into something that looked like understanding. Behind her mother was the kitchen on Earth, the real one, with the window that looked out on the terraced gardens and the gray sky beyond them. It was raining there. It was always raining there now.

"We thought you might," her mother said. "Eric thought you might."

"Eric's wrong a lot," Andi said, and smiled to take the edge off it, and the edge stayed on anyway.

"Don't."

"I'm a thousand klicks past the Moon, Ma. The Essex doesn't change course because it's somebody's birthday."

"Of course not." Her mother's hands did the thing they did, folding and refolding a dish towel that did not need folding. "I just thought, after everything, you'd want to be home. Your father's been having his trouble. It would have been nice. To have the family together."

The family. Andi heard the word the way she always heard it, with the small hole where she was supposed to fit and never quite did. The family was her parents and Eric. She was the daughter who came home from it.

"Is Eric coming home?" she said.

A pause. Her mother's eyes went somewhere.

"Eric's on assignment," her mother said. "Out in the colonies somewhere. You know how it is, he can't always say."

"Yeah," Andi said. "I know how it is."

"Andrea." Her mother leaned in. "Why couldn't you just have been a little more like your brother. He found a way to do good in the world that didn't terrify us every single day."

There it was. The old wound, opened so gently you could almost mistake it for a kiss.

"Eric talks to people," Andi said. "I'm good at a different thing."

"Falling on them from a height," her mother said, and it was not even cruel, that was the worst of it, it was just true and tired. "Your father calls it that. His daughter who falls on things."

The recyclers hummed. Somewhere down the corridor a hatch cycled. Andi looked at the rain on the window six hundred thousand kilometers away and could not think of one thing to say that would not make it worse.

"I have to pre-flight," she said. "Give Dad my love."

"I will," her mother said. "Stay safe, baby. Please. For once just stay safe."

The screen went dark, and Andi sat there with the word baby and the word safe and the particular ache of being twenty-six and still nine years old in that kitchen, and then she got up and went to find out what they were doing today.

What they were doing today, Captain Drummond explained, was babysitting.

The briefing room held maybe forty of them, pilots and marine officers and a cluster of civilians in soft delegation gray who looked like they had never been on a warship before and were trying not to touch anything. Drummond stood at the front with his hands behind his back. He was old-guard, gray at the temples, a face like a closed door, and when he spoke the room shut up without being told.

"Sierra Cortez," he said, and a slow rotation of the habitat came up behind him. A cylinder colony, kilometers long, a wall of hull holding a hundred thousand people and a strip of false sun. "Built in better decades. Abandoned to itself in worse ones. There is no government there. There are warlords who hold a district until somebody takes the air recyclers, and then there are different warlords. The suffering on that habitat is real, and it is the reason we are here."

He let the rotation turn.

"A diplomatic delegation is going down to try to hold back the anarchy. Broker a corridor. Get food and medicine moving to people who have neither. The Essex is here to fly cover while they do it. Escort the delegation down, hold orbit, bring everybody home. That is the mission."

A pilot in the second row, somebody Andi didn't know well, raised a hand. "Sir, with respect, why us? Why a capital warship for a charity run? Couldn't a contractor crew do this for a tenth of what we cost?"

The room went very still. Andi watched the back of Drummond's neck.

"That," Drummond said, turning around, "is the question, isn't it."

He came forward off the dais.

"There are voices on Earth right now," he said, "in the delegation, with money behind them, who will tell you the answer is yes. That the GCOA fleet is a museum that costs too much to heat. That war went private and went autonomous years ago, the machines go first and the operators finish, and a warship full of human sailors who fight for a flag is a sentimental antique we can no longer afford. There is a bill. It is one embarrassment away from passing. It would mothball every ship in this fleet and hand the sky to the men who do it for a rate."

Nobody breathed.

"I have heard the argument," Drummond said. "It is a good argument. It is even mostly true. And I have decided that the day this navy is only a contractor with better paint is the day it is worth nothing at all. A soldier fights for more than a rate. If you do not believe that, there is a door, and there is no shame in it, and you should go work for the

people who pay better." He looked around the room, slow, and Andi felt the look pass over her and move on. "Everybody else. Wheels up in ninety. We escort some very brave civilians into a very bad neighborhood, and we bring them home, and we do it like it matters. Because it does."

He turned to go, and stopped, and said it almost as an afterthought.

"Stay frosty on this cakewalk."

Light laughter. The room broke up. Andi stood, and that was when she saw the civilian in delegation gray turn around at the back of the room, and her whole stomach dropped out of her like a bad launch, because it was Eric.

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He looked good. He always looked good.

That was the thing about Eric, he had inherited the face that made people trust him before he opened his mouth, the warm eyes and the easy stillness, and then he opened his mouth and the trust was earned because he was, genuinely, a better person than almost anyone Andi had ever met. It was insufferable. She loved him so much it made her angry.

"Andi," he said, and the smile was real, and that made it worse too. "God. They didn't tell me which ship."

"They don't tell me anything either." She did not hug him. He did not push it. They stood a careful arm's length

apart in the emptying room, two adults who had been at war so long they had forgotten it was supposed to be a cold one. "You're the delegation."

"I'm part of it. Junior. I talk, mostly, and I listen." He looked at her flight underlayers, the wings on her collar, and something crossed his face that she had spent her whole life learning to read and still could not name. Pride. Worry. Disappointment. All of it folded into one expression like her mother folding a towel. "You're flying cover."

"I'm flying cover."

"On a habitat with no law and a hundred thousand desperate people." He said it quietly. "Andi, do you ever think about the fact that you solve every problem by pointing a machine at it?"

And there it was, his version of the wound, delivered in his gentle voice that never raised, that never had to.

"You're going to walk into a warlord pit," she said, "and try to fix it with adjectives. And you think I'm the reckless one."

"Words have stopped more wars than guns ever started."

"Name three."

"I could name thirty." He smiled again, sad now. "That's the difference between us. You fly above the suffering inside a beautiful machine and you call it courage. You never have to smell it. You never have to be in the room. I'm going to be

in the room, Andi. With the actual people. That takes a kind of nerve you've never had to find."

She should have let it go. She was always going to let it go, eventually, when they were both old, when their parents were gone and there was no one left to perform for. She felt the door to that someday standing open and she could have walked through it.

"They love you more," she said instead. "Mom and Dad. Always have. Because you make the safe choice and dress it up as the brave one."

Eric's face did something then, something quick and hurt, and for half a second he was nine and she was seven and they were the two kids they used to be before the world handed them their roles. Then a delegation aide called his name and the half second closed.

"We should talk," Eric said. "Really talk. When this is over. I'll buy you the bad coffee in the officers' mess and you can tell me I'm wrong."

"You're wrong," she said.

He laughed. He went. And that was the last unhurried minute the day would give either of them, and neither of them knew it, and Andi watched her brother walk toward the transport that would carry him down behind the wall and felt, under the anger, a thing she would spend the rest of her life wishing she had said out loud.

The Shrike sat in the launch bay like something that wanted to be let off a leash.

Andi walked the pre-flight with her hand trailing along the cold skin of it, the way she always did, feeling the frame the way her family would never understand she felt it. Not as a machine she hid inside. As a body that fit her body. In jet form it was a blade, all forward want, and when it folded down into the walker it had hands, real hands, and there was nothing in her training that made her feel as honest as standing inside something that could either fly or punch.

"You're petting it again," Rafe said.

He came across the deck with two bulbs of the terrible coffee and handed her one. Rafe was forty, which in pilot years was ancient, with a face that had been broken and reset more than once and a way of looking at you that made you feel like a slow student. He had taught her to fly. He had taught her the checklist, and the dive, and the thing he called the long second, the stretch of time a Falcon-stock could open up inside a falling instant. He was the closest thing she had to family that did not come with a grade attached.

"It likes being petted," Andi said.

"It's a war machine."

"So am I."

He snorted. They drank the coffee, which tasted like a battery, and watched the deck crew swarm the marine transport across the bay, a fat ugly box of a ship with a squad loading into it, big loud gene-forged kids and a few baseline ones, somebody's laugh booming off the bulkheads. Past them, on the far pad, the delegation transport. She found Eric's gray shoulders in the crowd at its ramp. He did not look up.

"Heard you've got a brother on the soft bird," Rafe said.

"Don't."

"Diplomat." He said it the way you'd say tax auditor. "Must be a hell of a dinner table."

"You have no idea."

Rafe drank, and watched her over the bulb, and she felt the read coming the way she always did, a half second early.

"You've never been shot at," he said.

"I've been shot at."

"You've been shot at in a sim. You've flown two hundred hours of patrol and not one round has come the other way." He was not unkind about it. That was what made it land. He said it the way her mother said falling on things, like a simple true thing that everyone but her could see. "I've watched a lot of good pilots find out they're not as cold as they thought the first time the rounds come back. Reflexes don't help you when your hands start shaking, kid. Falcon-

stock or not. Some people can't handle it. No way to know which kind you are until the day."

"I can handle it," Andi said.

"Sure," Rafe said. "On a cakewalk, who can't." He crushed the empty bulb and lobbed it into a recycler and clapped her once on the shoulder, hard, the way he did. "Stay on my wing. Don't get fancy. Bring everybody home and buy your bad-coffee brother a real drink." He started for his own bird, then turned, walking backward. "And Max. If your hands shake. Tell me. No shame in it. Better than wearing a city for a hat."

She did not tell him her hands were already a little cold.

She climbed the ladder, dropped into the seat, and the Shrike closed around her like a held breath. The frame came up under her hands. The canopy sealed. Down the line, Drummond's voice came over the net, calm and dry.

"All flights, the Essex. Cleared for launch. Escort posture, eyes open, and stay frosty on this cakewalk. Bring our diplomats home."

The bay doors split. The strip-sun poured in, that long false stripe of light running away to the curve of the habitat sky, and the city beneath it, terraced and ruined and alive with a hundred thousand lives.

Andi's hands stopped being cold. They always did, the second the wheels left the deck. That was the thing she could never explain to her mother, to Eric, to anyone who had not

been built for it. She was never so calm as the moment she fell into the sky.

She fell into the sky.

She had no idea she was falling into the rest of her life.

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OVER THE WALL

Far below the descending transports, in a tower at the heart of his compound, General Yuri Vladrinov watched the GCOA come down to him exactly the way he had asked the universe to deliver them, and found it good.

He was not a large man. That surprised people. They expected the legend to fill a doorway and instead got a compact, immaculate figure in a coat with no insignia on it because his name was insignia enough, standing at a wall of glass with his hands folded behind his back in an old soldier's posture he had earned in three different armies before he understood that armies were a poverty of imagination. Below him the strip-sun lit a dead city he had bought for the price of its air. Above the city, dropping through the false morning, two escort flights and two fat transports, one full of marines and one full of the most important people in the solar system, and not one of them knew they were already inside the box.

"They sent a capital ship," said the woman beside him. Legion command-channel in her ear, class-armor matte and beautiful at her shoulder. "The Essex. Crewed. Old man named Drummond."

"They sent a museum to a fire," Vladrinov said. "Because the museum still believes that showing up is the same as winning. That is the disease. That is the whole disease, in one decision." He watched the delegation transport flare and settle toward the landing plaza his people had so carefully prepared. "Forty years they have been told that a soldier fights for something. So they fight for something, and they come when called, and they land where they are told to land. Sentiment is a coordinate. You can target it."

The transport touched down. The ramp began to lower. He could see the gray figures inside it, small and trusting, coming down into his city with their hands open and their cameras live, because the whole solar system was watching, and that was the point, that had always been the point. Let them watch. Let them watch the museum fail to protect the people it sent to do its talking.

"The escorts are in the box," the woman said. "All flights. They flew the corridor we gave them. They flew it perfectly."

"Of course they did," Vladrinov said. "They were trained to. That is what training is, the inability to do anything but the thing you were trained to do." He unfolded his hands. Below, the false sun lay along the length of the dead sky like

a blade laid flat. "When they ask me, later, the ones who still believe, how I beat a capital warship with rooftops and patience, I will tell them the truth. I did not beat the Essex. The Essex beat itself the day it decided that showing up was a virtue."

"Sir."

"Spring it," Vladrinov said.

The woman spoke into her ear. Across the ruined city, on a hundred rooftops, the Legion came off safe.

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It went wrong all at once, which is how it always goes wrong.

Andi was holding the high lane off Rafe's wing, watching the delegation bird settle into the plaza, when the plaza opened fire on it. Not at it. Around it. The whole rim of the square lit up in a coordinated ripple, contractors in class-armor rising out of rubble that had been cover she should have flagged and had not, and the diplomatic transport sat there in the middle of it with its ramp half down and gray figures spilling out into the worst place in the world.

"Contact, contact," somebody screamed on the net, "they're seizing the delegation, they're taking the dips, all flights, all flights…"

"Stay calm," Drummond's voice cut through, hard and level. "Identify, do not engage until…"

The first escort bird came apart in the air.

Andi saw it happen and her brain refused it for a full half second, the long second opening up the way Rafe had taught her, time going thick as honey. A streak came up off a rooftop, too fast, smarter than it should have been, and Vesper Two stopped being a Shrike and became a blooming orange flower with pieces falling out of it. She knew the pilot. She had played cards with the pilot.

"SAMs, we have guided SAMs," Rafe snapped, "they were waiting, this is a trap, Max, on me, hard, now."

She broke with him. The sky filled up. Tracers came up the way she had only ever seen in archive footage, a city's worth of fire reaching for her, lazy-looking until it was suddenly fast, and she pulled and rolled and the world smeared and she was, for the first time in her life, genuinely afraid in a cockpit.

Her hands worked. That was the strange part, the part she would think about later. Her hands kept flying the bird even while the rest of her came apart, jinking the Shrike through a corridor of fire that her training said was survivable and her gut said was a coffin. The Falcon-stock dive instinct fought her, wanted down, wanted to fall on something, and there was nothing under her but a hundred thousand people and her own people dying in the air. She held the high lane. She did the thing she was trained to do,

which was exactly the thing the man in the tower had bet she would do.

Vesper Three went next, off to her right, a clean kill, no orange flower this time, just a Shrike that was flying and then was a smear of debris fanning out across the false morning. Then the escort flight was three birds. Then it was Rafe and her.

"Form on me," Rafe was saying, fast and flat, the mentor voice with the fear sanded off it by forty years of practice, "we are not winning this, we are surviving this, we punch a hole in the SAM envelope and we run for orbit and we come back with the whole ship behind us. Stay on my wing. Do not get fancy. Andi. Do not get fancy."

"I'm on you," she said, and her voice came out high and she hated it.

Below her the marine transport tried to climb out of the plaza and a missile took it in the tail. It did not explode. It just stopped flying, the nose coming up and the whole ugly box of it sliding sideways out of the sky and down into the terraces with a sound she felt in her teeth, and she thought of the booming laugh and the loud kids and they were down, they were down in the city, and there was nothing she could do.

"Eric," she said, to no one, watching the seized plaza shrink behind her. Gray figures on their knees with armored shapes standing over them. One of the gray figures was her

brother. They were not killing them. They were taking them. That was worse, somehow, that was a plan, and a plan was so much worse than chaos.

"Max!" Rafe's voice, ragged now. "Eyes on your six, you've got two on you, break right, BREAK."

She broke right and the SAM that had her name on it missed the new her and found the old her, clipped the Shrike under the left wing, and the whole world she had been narrating to herself came apart.

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The hit came up through the floor of the world.

She was here now. She had walked the morning all the way forward and it had caught her, and she still did not know what to do, except now she knew why she could not remember the morning, because the morning belonged to a woman who thought today was a cakewalk and that woman was already dead.

The Shrike slewed and dropped. The strip-sun went under, the city came over. Smoke filled the cockpit, gray and tasting of burning wire, and the long flat scream of the warnings ran together, and finally, finally, with the ground coming up, the checklist arrived.

Loss of lift. Engine fire. No transfer to walker, no time, not enough air under her.

Eject. Eject was the checklist. Eject was the only word left in it.

"Rafe," she said, "I'm hit, I'm hit bad, I'm going to have to punch out, I can't hold her."

"Do it!" he shouted. "Punch out, Andi, I've got eyes, I'll cover you down, go, go, go."

She pulled the handle.

The canopy went. The seat slammed her up out of the dying Shrike with a force that grayed the edges of her vision even gene-forged, and she was in open air over Sierra Cortez, a tiny screaming human thing under a false sun, and below her the Shrike she had petted on the deck this morning rolled once, gently, almost like a goodbye, and detonated against a terrace.

The chute deployed.

The relief was enormous and total and it lasted exactly as long as it took the merc on the next rooftop to open fire and stitch a line of holes up through the canopy.

That was the rule, she would learn. That was the whole rule of the day, delivered in the first minute so she could not miss it. Every good thing came with the next bad thing already loaded. The eject saved her and put her in the gunsight. The chute opened and the chute caught fire.

She hauled on the risers, swung herself sideways, tried to spill air and slip the gunline the way a Falcon-stock body wanted to slip anything, and the canopy answered by tearing

wider. Half the silk let go at once. She dropped a sickening few meters in a single lurch, the harness biting into her shoulders, the rooftops wheeling up at her, a tenement wall, a gap, a collapsed floor full of rebar like a mouth full of teeth. The merc on the roof tracked her down and put another burst through the rag of her chute, calm, unhurried, the way you finish a thing that is already finishing itself.

She hung there in the burning morning with the silk shredding above her and the ground swinging up too fast and rounds whistling past her ears, and she did the only thing left, which was nothing, which was fall.

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She came down on a collapsed second floor in a cloud of dust and old concrete, the flight-suit airbags firing at the last instant and turning a killing drop into something that only felt like being hit by a truck. She lay in the rubble for a moment that was probably a second and felt like an hour, and took inventory the way Rafe had taught her, toes first, working up, are you whole, are you whole.

She was whole. Bruised to the bone and ringing like a struck bell, but whole.

She was also, she understood, as she dragged herself behind a broken pillar with rounds chewing the wall above her, completely alone.

"Any station, any station, this is Vesper Four," she said into her suit net, "pilot down, I am down behind the wall, do you copy, over."

Static.

"Rafe. Rafe, talk to me. Anybody."

Static, and then under it, far off, the thump of guns and the bigger thump of things falling that used to be ships. She got a flare of him for half a second, his voice torn to ribbons, "...stay down, I'm coming around, do not move from..." and then nothing, swallowed. He was alive. He was up there. That was one thread and she held onto it.

She made herself breathe. In for four, out for four, the box she had been taught in a sim chair for exactly this, for the moment the body wanted to run and the body running was how you died. The dust was settling. Somewhere below her the building still groaned, working out whether to stand or fall the rest of the way. There was a smell she did not have a word for and then did, a word her brother would have hated her for knowing. Burning people. She had flown two hundred hours of patrol and never once smelled the war. Eric had been right about that too. She was in the room now. She could smell every bit of it.

She got her back to the pillar and her pistol out of its chest holster, the small ugly sidearm she had never once fired at a person, and she looked out at Sierra Cortez.

The false sun ran overhead, serene, a strip of engineered morning lighting the ruin of a hundred thousand lives. Smoke stood up from a dozen places. Somewhere east, a transport full of marines was a fire in the terraces. Somewhere south, in a tower she could not see, her brother was on his knees with a gun at the back of his head, taken, because he had walked into the room with the actual people the way he always said he would. The milk run was a massacre. The cakewalk had a body count. Vesper Two and the marine box and how many of the gray figures already.

And down in the dust under the false sun, twenty-six years old and shaking now, finally shaking, her hands cold the way Rafe warned her they would go, Andi Max thought the thing she had sworn she would never think.

Maybe he was right. Maybe Eric was right about all of it.

Maybe she should have gone home for the season. Maybe she should have sat in that rainy kitchen and let her mother fold the towel and been the safe daughter for one stupid week. Maybe the people who loved Eric more had been loving the right child the whole time, the one who talked, the one who stayed in the room, the one who did not solve every problem by pointing a machine at it, because here she was with no machine, just a body built to fall on things and a city full of people who wanted her dead.

She thought about the bad coffee in the officers' mess. The drink she was going to buy him. We should talk, he had

said. Really talk, when this is over. She had been so sure there would be an after.

A round cracked off the pillar a hand's width from her face, and the cracking off the pillar was almost a relief, because it was a thing she could do something about, and there was nothing she could do about the rest of it.

Up on the next roof, a shape moved. Class-armor, matte and beautiful, a contractor sighting in, calling her position to the rest of them in a calm professional voice that she could not hear but knew the shape of, because the machines went first and the operators finished, and she was the thing left to finish. There would be more of them. There were always more of them. That was the doctrine. Send the platforms, send the bespoke killers, and let the museum bleed out in a city nobody would mourn.

She could lie here and let it happen. That was a real option, and she let herself look at it the way you look at a fall before you commit to it. Stay down. Wait for Rafe or wait for the end, whichever found her first. Be the daughter who finally did the safe thing.

Then she thought of her brother on his knees in a tower with a gun at the back of his head, and a hundred thousand people behind a wall under a sun that was a lie, and a fleet up there in the dark being murdered with paperwork while a man in a coat with no insignia watched it happen and called it a disease. And the thing in her that her family had spent

twenty-six years calling a flaw, the thing that wanted down, that wanted to fall on something from a height, woke up and looked at the merc on the roof and was not afraid anymore. It was something else. It did not have a clean name. It was the thing she was built for, finally pointed at the right target.

The clock did not care that her hands were shaking. The clock never did. But her hands, she noticed, had stopped.

Andi Max wiped the dust out of her eyes, got her steady hands around the pistol, and stayed down in the ruins under the false morning, alone behind the wall, with the whole war she had never believed in coming for her at once. She was unblooded no longer. She just had not done the bleeding yet.

PART TWO — THE FIRST TRIALS

DOWN AND DIRTY

The chute held for exactly four seconds.

Andi knew the number because the Falcon-stock part of her counted it without being asked, the way it counted everything, the rate of her own fall and the wind shear off the broken towers and the angle of the strip-sun overhead burning down the long axis of the sky. Four seconds of canopy. Long enough to think she might walk away.

Then the gunfire found it.

She did not hear the rounds so much as watch the chute come apart, the panels opening into ragged mouths, the air spilling out the top of it. The harness went slack against her shoulders. The horizon, which had been drifting, dropped.

There was a marine saying she'd heard Rafe quote once with a flat little grin. The clock doesn't care. She had two stories of falling left and the clock did not care that her hands were already moving, already cinching the suit collar, already slapping the manual charge on the airbag rig at her ribs because the auto-trigger needed a chute deploy it no longer had.

The rooftop came up like a fist.

The airbags blew. Twin sacs punched out of her flight-suit at the shoulder and hip, and the world turned into a single white concussion that drove the breath out of her and bounced her off a slab of habitat decking and rolled her into the lee of an air handler. Everything hurt. Nothing was broken. Her gene-forged frame had taken a fall meant to kill a baseline and turned it into a beating instead.

She lay there with her cheek on the warm decking and laughed, one ugly bark of it, because she was alive and the cakewalk had murdered everyone she launched with.

A round skipped off the handler housing two inches from her ear.

She looked up. Across a gap of forty feet, on the next roof, a shape in pale segmented armor knelt with a long rifle braced on a parapet. A Legion Scout. The optic on its helm tracked her like an eye that had never had to blink. Off its shoulder a thin pennant of comms-laser flickered, and the Falcon part of her read it for what it was. He was not just shooting at her. He was calling her in.

That's a receipt, she thought. Somebody downrange just got my position on record.

She ran.

"I have nine craft squawking distress and three gone dark," the conn officer said, and his voice did the thing voices did on a bridge when the people behind them were trying very hard to keep being professionals. "Sir, the marine transport Hardtack is down inside the habitat. We have a partial fix."

Captain Drummond stood at the rail of the Essex's bridge with his hands folded behind him because if he unfolded them he was going to put one of them through a console. Below the forward ports the cylinder of Sierra Cortez turned, vast and lit by its strip of false sun, and somewhere under that engineered daylight his people were burning.

"Recovery," he said. "I want the ready flight on the deck and a corridor cut to the Hardtack's fix. We do not leave marines in a contested zone. Helm, bring us to station-keeping over the north cap."

"Belay station-keeping."

Delegate Stephens came onto the bridge the way he came onto everything, smoothly, already mid-sentence, a tablet held to his chest like a hymnal. He was a tall man with a careful gray haircut and the kind of face that tested well. Drummond had spent eleven days hating that face with a thoroughness that frightened him.

"Captain, I understand the impulse," Stephens said. "I do. But we have a diplomatic delegation in the hands of an

armed party, and the single fastest way to get every one of them killed is to put GCOA gunships over the city. We escalate, they execute. That is the arithmetic."

"My arithmetic," Drummond said, "is that I have marines bleeding in a wreck."

"And I have a hundred and forty civilians of station Sierra Cortez who become casualties the moment this becomes a shooting war on the record." Stephens turned the tablet so the bridge crew could see it, which was the tell, the man always played to the room. "I am not asking you to abandon anyone. I am asking you to hold for ninety minutes while I open a channel. That is all. Ninety minutes of restraint against a lifetime of being the captain who lit up a habitat."

The comms officer said, very quietly, "Sir. We're being hailed. Wide-band, all GCOA receivers. It's video."

Drummond looked at Stephens. Stephens looked, for one half-second, like a man who already knew what was coming and had to perform surprise anyway. Then it was gone.

"Put it up," Drummond said.

The forward screen filled with a face.

General Yuri Vladrinov did not look like a warlord. He looked like a man who had been expensively educated and then expensively augmented, a heavy, calm, amused man in unmarked Legion gray, sitting in what was unmistakably the command suite of the habitat's central tower as if he had bought it that morning, which in a sense he had.

"Officers of the GCOA," he said, and his voice was warm. "My name is Yuri Vladrinov. The habitat of Sierra Cortez is under my administration as of this hour. I hold your delegation. I hold your downed crews. I am not a difficult man. I want one thing. I want your fleet to withdraw beyond the lunar shoals and to acknowledge, on the open record, that you could not hold what you were sent to hold." He spread his hands. "This is not cruelty. This is education."

Stephens stepped to the rail. "General. This is Delegate Stephens of the oversight committee. I am authorized to discuss terms of de-escalation. There is no reason for anyone else to be hurt. If we can establish a framework, a sequencing of mutual steps, then I believe we can resolve this without further loss of life."

Drummond watched the delegate talk and felt something cold walk up his spine, because it was good. It was so reasonable. Every word was a procedure, and procedures were how you handled a man with a gun, and also exactly how you handled a man you were secretly working for, and there was no way from the outside to tell the two apart.

On the screen, Vladrinov listened with his head tipped, indulgent. "A framework," he said. "A sequencing of mutual steps. Yes. Delegate, I admire your faith in process. Let me show you mine."

He gestured to someone off-camera.

Two of his Legion infantry walked a man into frame. The man wore the gray coverall of a station administrator, his hands bound, his face wet, and he was talking, fast, the audio not picked up, just his mouth working.

"General," Stephens said, sharper now. "There is no need for a demonstration. We are talking. As long as we are talking, no one has to."

"You are talking," Vladrinov agreed. "I am educating."

He drew a sidearm, unhurried, and shot the administrator through the head.

The bridge made a sound, a single intake from twenty throats at once. Drummond did not look away. He had decided, somewhere in the last eleven days, that he would not look away from anything Stephens helped make happen, that he would be a witness if he could not be anything else.

In the corner of the frame, behind Vladrinov, the camera caught movement. A figure in a delegate's clean suit lunged forward against the grip of two more infantry, shouting, and the audio cut in for just that, a young man's voice ragged with fury.

"You animal. He was unarmed. He was talking to you, he was, you..."

Eric Max. Drummond knew the brother's face from the manifest. He had Andi Max's exact line of jaw and none of her stillness.

Vladrinov did not even turn. He let the young diplomat be hauled back, and he looked into the lens, into every GCOA bridge in the sky.

"You haven't seen anything yet," he said.

The feed cut to black.

Into the silence, Stephens said, in a voice pitched perfectly for the record, "Captain, I think you can see now why provocation would be a catastrophe."

Drummond looked at him for a long moment.

"Get off my bridge," he said. "You can stay. Just get off my bridge."

· · ·

Inside the Hardtack, everything smelled like hydraulic fluid and copper.

The transport had come down on its side and folded its nose into a market square, and the square belonged to a warlord crew that called itself the Cinders, going by the spray-stencil on every wall and the way they whooped each time they put another belt of fire into the hull. The Cinders had old rifles and homemade armor and a great deal of enthusiasm, and they had the marines of First Squad pinned in a crippled metal box with two of their own trapped under a collapsed bench seat.

Private Okonkwo, who everyone called Smoke because he was never not chewing an unlit cigar he refused to explain, put another three rounds out the gun port and ducked back. "Sergeant. They got us boxed on three. I can hold the door. I cannot hold the door and dig out Lin and Castellano."

"You won't have to do both."

Sergeant Bako had not raised his voice once since the crash. He moved up the canted deck in a crouch, one hand on the bulkhead, and where he passed, marines steadied. It was a thing Smoke had watched him do for two years and never figured out, the way Bako could walk into a panic and turn the volume down on it just by being in the room. He did not shout. He pointed, he murmured, he put a hand on a shoulder, and a squad that had been six people screaming became one animal again.

"Reyes, Tan, on the bench, three-count lift on my word," Bako said, almost gentle. "Smoke, the door. Petlin, you are going to put a grenade through that storefront where the loud ones are, not because it kills them, because it makes them duck, and while they duck we are going to be somewhere else. We do not win this room. We leave this room. Everybody breathes."

"Sergeant," somebody said, "they got us forty to nine."

"Then it's about even," Bako said, and somebody laughed, and that was the trick, that was the whole trick. He had made them laugh with forty guns outside.

"Petlin," he said. "Cook it."

The grenade went through the storefront. The Cinders ducked. The bench came up on a three-count and Lin came out screaming with a wrecked ankle and Castellano came out swinging, and the squad poured out the breach door into the smoke and the alley behind it, marines first, no lasers, just nine gene-forged and baseline troopers with rifles and knives and a sergeant counting them through.

They made the mouth of the alley. They made the next square. Bako turned at the corner to wave the tail end through, Castellano and Lin between two shoulders, and for one second he was a silhouette against the strip-sun, upright, counting.

The shot came from a roofline eight hundred meters off.

Smoke did not hear it leave the rifle. He saw Bako's head snap and the sergeant go down all at once, the way only a dead man goes down, no stagger in it, and the whisper that had held nine people together for two years stopped.

For a second nobody moved.

Then everybody moved, and none of it was the same direction.

"Sniper, north high, NORTH HIGH…"

"Get him, somebody get the sergeant…"

"He's gone, he's gone, leave him…"

"You do not leave him…"

Smoke stood in the middle of it with his unlit cigar clenched in his teeth and watched the squad come apart in real time, nine separate panics where there had been one calm, and he understood with a sick lurch that the thing they had lost was not a man. It was the thing that made them a squad. The Cinders were already flowing back into the square behind them. The clock did not care. And there was nobody left to count.

· · ·

Andi ran the rooftops with the Scout always one building behind, and she ran the way the Falcon part of her wanted to, low and fast and reading the gaps, because that part of her had been built to come down on prey from a height and it knew how the prey ran. She was the prey now. She filed that away to hate later.

"Rafe, Rafe, talk to me, I'm down, I'm on foot, do you have me." She had been saying it into a net that gave back static for what felt like an hour. Then, in the static, a thread of him.

"See your beacon, kid, I got your beacon, stop yelling on an open channel, the whole habitat can hear you." Rafe's voice, dry as ever, flying somewhere above the strip-sun haze in the one escort Shrike that had not been knocked down with the others. "There's a clear stretch southwest of you.

Old cargo plaza. You get there, I put down, we both go home and tell them the cakewalk tried to kill us. You copy."

"Copy. Southwest. Rafe, they put a Scout on me, he's painting my position, I think I'm walking everybody right to…"

"So lose him. You're the hotshot. Lose him."

She dropped off the back of the roof into a gap between buildings and came down a rusted ladder three rungs at a time, and at the bottom of it she nearly ran over a family.

A man, a woman, two kids, pressed into a doorway with a bundle of belongings, the universal posture of people trying to be a wall. The man put himself in front of the others and held up a length of pipe, not at her, just up, just no.

"GCOA," she said, hands open. "I'm not Legion. I need the way south. Cargo plaza. Just point me and I'm gone, I swear, I'm not bringing this to you…"

The woman spat something in habitat creole that did not need translation. The man jabbed the pipe at her uniform, then up at the sky, at the burning, at the thing her uniform had brought down on their roof, and she got it. To them she was not rescue. She was the reason a Scout was about to walk down this alley with a long rifle.

"Okay," she said. "Okay. You don't help me. Fine. But you don't stay here either."

Because she had felt it before she heard it, the comms-laser flick, the Scout coming over the lip of the roof above and behind, and the family was directly in his lane.

She did the thing the doctrine never taught her. She did the thing her brother would have understood and her instructors would have written up.

She stepped out into the open, into the alley, into the Scout's sightline, and put two rounds up at his optic to make him flinch, and yelled at the family, "MOVE, go, GO," and shoved the man and his pipe and his whole terrified household back through the doorway and out the far side while the Scout's first answering round took the brick where the kids had been standing.

She caught the second round on the airbag rig she had not had time to repack. It spun her into the wall. She kept the family moving with a hand on the smallest kid's collar until they spilled out a service door into a wider street, and then she let go, and pointed them away from the south, away from where she was going, away from the trouble she was carrying.

The man looked back at her once. He did not say thank you. He nodded, the smallest nod, and was gone with his family into the anarchy.

She bled from somewhere on her scalp and grinned at nothing. Protect your medic, the marines said. She didn't have a medic. She had four strangers who hated her and

would live another ten minutes because of it, and somehow that was the same thing.

"Southwest," Rafe said in her ear. "Quit making friends. Plaza's wide open, I'm inbound. Get clear and I'll catch you."

· · ·

She made the cargo plaza with the Scout finally, blessedly behind her, slowed by a building she had collapsed a stairwell in, and she came out into a great flat open square of cracked decking under the false sun and saw the Shrike inbound, Rafe's bird, dropping its nose, transitioning toward a landing, and for one whole second the day was going to let her have something.

The grammar of the book did not allow it.

They came over the far towers, two of them, garish on their stub legs, Legion bipedal mechs in merc colors, mismatched and lethal, the kind of machine that had no business being elegant and was anyway. They came in fast and they came in low, and they came for the slow fat target of a Shrike in landing config, and Andi screamed a warning into the net that arrived a half-second too late.

She saw it the way only a frame pilot could, every line of it, the lead-off, the gun convergence, the no-way-out of it. She saw exactly what those machines could do because she

flew the only thing in the sky that could do it back, and she was on the ground with a pistol.

The two mechs put Rafe's Shrike out of the air.

It did not explode in any clean way. It came apart and cartwheeled into the far edge of the plaza and plowed a trench through the decking and stopped, smoking, on its back, one wing gone, the canopy a webbed gray ruin she could not see into.

The mechs settled out of the air on their stub legs, forty meters from the wreck, weapons swiveling, scanning. Hunting whatever had been inside.

Andi got herself into the gutted second floor of a plaza warehouse on instinct, behind a fallen beam, and lay there with her heart slamming and her pistol useless in her hand and looked down at the two machines standing over the wreck of the only person in the sky who had ever told her she could do this.

She knew every weapon they carried. She knew exactly how this ended for anything that climbed out of that canopy. And there was not one single thing she could do.

. . .

HAIL MARY

The Falcon part of her made the decision before the rest of her was consulted.

It happened the way it always happened, the way it had happened in the cockpit a hundred times, a window opening that lasted about a second and a half, and her body going through it while her conscious mind was still drafting the objection. The nearest mech had turned its back to her warehouse to cover the wreck. Its dorsal armor was a sloped plate with a maintenance ladder molded into it and a hand-rung at the top, and at the base of the canopy there was a recessed yellow lever that she knew, that any frame pilot would know, that every machine like this had to have by law and by physics. The external cockpit release. For when a pilot was unconscious and the ground crew had to get him out.

She was off the second floor and falling before she finished thinking it.

She came down on the mech's dorsal plate the way she had been built to come down on things, and her boots found the molded ladder and her gloved hand found the rung, and the machine bucked, sensing the weight, its pilot inside feeling the world tilt. She rode it. She had ridden worse. She walked her free hand up the spine of the thing to the canopy seam and grabbed the recessed yellow lever and hauled.

The cockpit blew open on its hinges.

Inside, a Legion pilot in pale armor twisted up at her, fast, augmented-fast, a hand going for a sidearm, and Andi did not give him the time. She got two fists in his harness and the gene-forged strength of a Falcon-stock body behind it and ripped him up and out of his own machine and threw him.

He went off the back of the mech and two stories down into the plaza and hit the decking and did not get up clean.

Andi dropped into the cockpit that was suddenly, gloriously hers.

It was not a Shrike. The layout was wrong and the labels were in three languages and the smell was somebody else's sweat. None of that mattered. A control yoke was a control yoke and a throttle was a throttle and she had been flying since before she could legally drink, and her hands were already inside the machine's logic, finding the verbs of it, walk, turn, lift.

The other mech fired.

It had read the whole thing in the half-second it took, its pilot smarter than the one bleeding on the plaza, and it put a burst across the spot where Andi's stolen mech stood, and Andi did the only thing the window allowed. She threw the machine sideways into a roll, a thing these mechs were absolutely not designed to do and did anyway because she made it, and the roll carried her stolen mech down off its feet and across the plaza decking.

It carried her, specifically, across the patch of ground where the pilot she had thrown was just getting his hands under himself.

She did not aim for him. She did not have to. The grammar of the day did it for her. The mech's bulk came down across him on the roll, and when she pistoned the legs and got it upright again and lifted, there was a stillness behind her on the decking that had been a man, and she did not look at it, and she filed it with all the other things to hate later.

Then she was up, off the deck, into the strip-lit sky over the dying city, in a stolen Legion mech, dogfighting the last one.

. . .

The argument had been going for ten minutes and it was about to get somebody killed.

"We go for the smoke," Reyes said. "The pilot's Shrike, the second one, it went down a klick southwest, there's a column of smoke a blind man could find. There's GCOA air down there, maybe there's a pickup."

"There's GCOA air down there getting shot out of the sky," Castellano said. "That smoke is a Shrike that got killed. You want to march toward the place where they kill GCOA, be my guest, I'm holding here."

"You're not holding anywhere, Bako said move and Bako..."

"Bako's dead." That was Lin, on her ruined ankle, gray-faced, and it stopped the alley cold. "Bako's dead and you're standing there saying his name like it's an order. It's not an order. It's a guy's name. There's no order anymore."

Smoke leaned on the wall with his cigar and watched the squad have the conversation he had known they were going to have since the moment the sergeant fell. Nine people. Nine plans. The Cinders were regrouping two blocks back and the squad was burning the only thing it had, which was the few minutes before someone decided for them.

"We're going to the smoke," Smoke said, around the cigar.

"Why," Reyes said, ready to fight about it.

"Because it's a direction," Smoke said. "And standing in an alley arguing is not a direction, and the gang back there is going to give us a direction we like a lot less in about four minutes. The smoke's a coin flip. The alley's a sure thing. I'll take the flip."

It was not Bako. It did not turn the volume down on anybody. Reyes glared and Castellano spat and Lin closed her eyes, but they moved, because Smoke had given them a wall to push against, and a squad with no cohesion will still go a direction if you give it a wall.

They went toward the smoke, loud, all over the street, weapons up and tactics gone, full-auto where Bako would have used a whisper, and the Cinders came in behind them, and the squad shot back over its shoulders and burned ammunition it could not replace and lost a man named Petlin at a crossing because nobody was covering anybody, because covering each other was the thing Bako carried and Bako was a name now, not an order.

Eight. Eight people walking toward a column of smoke because it was a direction.

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Eric Max sat on the floor of a holding room with the body of a murdered man six feet away under a sheet someone had thrown over it, and he did the arithmetic he had spent his whole life refusing to do.

He had been certain, this morning, of a thing he had been certain of for thirty years. That all life was sacred. That violence was a failure of imagination. That a sufficiently good argument, delivered to a sufficiently rational room, could always find the door that the gun could not. He had built a career on it. He had built a self on it. He had looked at his sister across a hangar deck this morning and pitied her for hiding inside a machine.

Then a man who tested well had stood at a microphone and made every reasonable objection while another man who did not bother to test well shot an unarmed administrator in the head, and Eric had finally understood the thing Andi knew in her body and could never put in words.

Some rooms do not have a door.

He looked at the sheet. He had watched the man under it negotiate for his own life with great skill and total faith and it had bought him nothing, because the person he was negotiating with had never been in the conversation. The conversation had been theater. The killing had been the actual message, and the message had been to Eric, and to the delegate aboard the Essex, and to every camera in the sky.

A guard stood at the door, bored, one hand resting on a slung weapon, watching the hostages without really seeing them, the way you watch furniture.

Andi would not negotiate with him, Eric thought. Andi would not deliver a sufficiently good argument. Andi would watch him for ten minutes until she knew the exact rhythm of his attention, the bored sag of it, and then she would do something fast and physical and unforgivable, and she would be out the door before the rhythm corrected.

Escape, he thought. The word felt obscene in his mouth, a thing for action movies and people who had given up on the

door. And underneath the obscenity, a horrible little flare of something he was ashamed to name as hope.

He started watching the guard.

. . .

In the central tower, on a screen the size of a wall, General Vladrinov accepted a connection that nobody else in the Legion was cleared to see.

The face that came up was the careful gray-haired one, the reasonable one, lit by the consoles of a GCOA bridge.

"You executed a man on an open channel," Stephens said. "On the record. Biometric, time-stamped, the whole solar system watching. Do you understand what you have just put on the record."

"I have put on the record," Vladrinov said comfortably, "that the GCOA cannot protect a single station administrator inside a habitat it claims to have come to save. That is the only thing on the record that matters. The dead man is a footnote. The footnote is the message."

"And Drummond is one bad minute from coming over my head and putting gunships in the air, message or no message. I cannot hold him forever with procedure. He smells it on me."

"Then stop holding him with procedure," Vladrinov said. "Let him send his gunships. Let him send everything. The

more of his fleet I burn over this city, the better the picture. You worry about the ship, Delegate. You sell me the evacuation. That is all our arrangement requires of you. When the civilians lift off this rock to safety, my people lift off with them, and your warship opens its bays to a humanitarian convoy and takes my Legion into its own heart, and you stamp the manifest with your reasonable signature. That is the play. Everything on the ground is mine to lose, and I do not intend to lose it."

He leaned toward the lens, and the warmth went out of his voice for just a moment, and Stephens saw the thing under it.

"Our friends were very clear," the general said. "Every military asset on the ground neutralized before the evacuation begins. No GCOA boots walking out of this city to tell a different story. You keep the bridge stupid and patient. I will keep the streets clean. We are two halves of a very tidy machine, you and I."

Stephens, the bill's champion, the man who had spent eleven days saying ninety more minutes, ninety more minutes, looked at the screen and said, "Keep it clean, then. I have a captain to manage."

The channel closed, and the traitor aboard the Essex straightened his careful suit and went back out onto the bridge to be reasonable.

The dogfight ran the length of the strip-sun.

Andi fought the stolen mech like it was a Shrike that had forgotten how to be a jet, all hands and altitude, and the Legion pilot in the other machine fought it like a man who had been doing this for years and had decided, in the last thirty seconds, that the GCOA brat in his comrade's stolen cockpit was an insult he intended to answer personally.

They tore across the broken skyline. They blew out windows for half a kilometer with their wash. The Legion pilot was better. Andi knew it the way she always knew it, instantly, in her body, the way he anticipated her, the way he kept getting his guns where she was about to be. He was going to win a contest of flying. So she stopped flying.

She put the mech into a climb she could not sustain, killed the lift at the top of it, and fell.

She fell the way her stock fell on things, deliberate, terminal, a stoop, and she rode her dead machine down onto the back of his and grabbed him in the air with both of the mech's arms, locking the two machines together, two tons of merc engineering tangled and tumbling toward the decking with no lift left in either of them.

He fought to break free. She did not let go. She held on the way she had held the maintenance ladder, the way she had held the smallest kid's collar, the way she had held a

checklist she could not remember in a cockpit hours and a lifetime ago, and she rode the tangle of both machines straight down into the heart of the cargo plaza and at the last instant rolled her mech's mass on top.

The impact went through the whole plaza.

When the dust came off it, the Legion mech was a crushed thing under hers, the cockpit flattened, the pilot inside it not a problem anymore. Her own machine was finished too, both legs folded wrong, the dorsal plate split, the systems dying around her in a cascade of three languages of alarm.

She climbed out of the cockpit of the second mech she had killed today and dropped to the decking on legs that did not entirely want to hold her, and she had won, she had absolutely won, and the day, faithful to its grammar, took it away inside of ten seconds.

She walked to the wreck of Rafe's Shrike.

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She got the canopy open with her hands.

He was still strapped in. He looked, at first, like he was about to say something dry, the way he always looked, and she said his name and got no version of his grin, and then she saw how much of him had been opened by the crash and

understood that the dry thing he was about to say had been said a while ago, to nobody, and he had been alone for it.

"Rafe." She got a glove against his cheek. It was the wrong temperature. "Rafe, I got one of them, I got both of them, I'm right here, you stupid old…"

He had been gone for several minutes. The Falcon part of her, which counted everything, told her so, and she told it to shut up, and it did not, because it never did.

She knelt in the wreck of her mentor's craft and put her forehead against the canopy frame and did not cry, exactly. It was more like something structural going out of her, a load-bearing thing she had not known was holding the rest of her up. He had taught her to fly. He had teased her about never being shot at, and the teasing had landed exactly where her family's contempt lived, and she had wanted, more than she would ever have said, to come back to him one day and watch him have to admit she could do this. And he had been dead for several minutes while she rolled a stolen mech into the ground to avenge a man who was already gone.

Behind her, voices. Arguing. Coming closer.

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The marines came into the cargo plaza loud and broken and found a GCOA pilot kneeling in the wreck of a Shrike, two

dead Legion mechs cooling in the middle of the decking, and the whole thing made no sense, and they argued about it instead of getting low.

"Is that her? Is that the pilot, is she alive..."

"Forget the pilot, who killed the mechs, you don't kill two Legion mechs with a..."

"We should go, the Cinders are right behind us, we should not be standing in the open..."

"We should hold here, there's a downed Shrike, that's a beacon, thats a pickup..."

"There's no pickup, Reyes, the pickup is DEAD in the..."

Andi heard them the way you hear weather. Eight marines with their cohesion shot off at a roofline an hour ago, no sergeant, no plan, full-auto where a whisper should be, standing upright in an open plaza with a warlord gang two blocks back and the Legion closing the net, and they were going to die here arguing about whether to die here. She had spent the whole day learning what the doctrine never taught her. She knew exactly what was about to walk into this plaza, because she had spent the morning flying the only thing that could outfight it, and these eight people were going to be a footnote, a message, a thing the general put on the record.

Every military asset on the ground neutralized. She did not know those were the words. She did not need to.

She stood up.

She picked up the machine gun off the wreck of Rafe's craft, the door gun, heavy, beautiful, and she came up out of the Shrike with it in one hand because the Falcon-stock body could, and she drew her sidearm with the other, and she walked into the middle of the plaza, into the middle of the argument, and the marines stopped arguing because there was suddenly a bleeding pilot standing between two dead mechs with a machine gun in one hand and a pistol in the other and Rafe's blood still on her glove.

"My name's Andi Max," she said. "I'm GCOA navy. I just killed those two and I've been on the ground exactly as long as you and I'm done. I'm done watching people I could've saved die because there's nobody left to count."

Smoke took the cigar out of his mouth.

"There's a general in that tower," she said, "putting it on the record that the GCOA can't protect anybody, and he is about to send everything he has into this plaza to make us part of the proof, and I have flown against those machines and I am telling you we have minutes. So here's the situation. You have no sergeant. You have no cohesion. You've been a mob since a sniper took the only thing holding you together. I watched it happen from the air."

"And who the hell are you," Reyes started.

"I'm in charge now," Andi said.

She said it flat. She let it end flat. She did not raise her voice, and the not-raising of it was the first thing she had ever done that Bako would have recognized.

"I outrank none of you," she said. "Not one. You've all seen more ground combat than I have by about a day. I don't care. From this second you are going to act like soldiers, you are going to cover each other, you are going to move when I move and stop when I stop and shut up in between, and the first one of you who decides to be a mob again, who breaks, who runs, who gets somebody killed because he wanted to win an argument in an open plaza." She lifted the pistol, not at anyone, just up, just into the space between them, the same gesture the man with the pipe had made at her hours ago, the universal no. "I'll kill you myself. Before the Legion gets the chance. We clear?"

For a long second the plaza held only the tick of cooling metal and the distant, closing sound of the city coming for them.

Then Smoke put the cigar back in his teeth and looked at the dead mechs and the dead Shrike and the pilot standing over her dead wingman with two guns and Rafe's blood drying on her glove, and he made the call the way he had made the call in the alley, because she had given them a wall to push against and the wall was the right shape.

"You heard the lieutenant," he said. "Cover and move. We are leaving this plaza like soldiers." He looked at Andi. "Which way, ma'am."

The pilot who had never been shot at this morning looked at the eight wrecked soldiers who outranked her by everything but will, and the city that wanted them dead, and the tower where her brother was learning to be a warrior at the exact moment she became a commander, and she did not feel like a hero. She felt like the only person left to count.

"Toward the tower," she said. "We go get my brother. Stay low, and protect your medic, and when I tell you to do something insane, do it fast."

The game had changed. The clock did not care, but for the first time since the chute came apart, neither did she.

PART THREE — THE CRISIS

GET THE LEAD OUT

The Legion contractor came around the corner of the gutted stairwell at a dead run, and Andi shot him in the throat before her brain finished telling her hands to do it.

That was the Falcon-stock in her. The eye ranged the angle, the body fell on it, and the part of her that used to second-guess everything was simply not invited. The merc went down with his armor still trying to seal the hole, plates clicking and grinding around a wound that was already pouring. She stepped over him into the room and put two more rounds through the visor on the way past, because the contractors were hard to kill and she was done leaving doubts behind her.

Behind her the marines were not moving.

She felt them not moving. Six of them stacked in the stairwell, gene-forged and baseline both, men and women who had carried this squad for a week of a single endless day, and they had stopped at the threshold because the pilot, the kid, the one who took the rank over a dead man's body

two hours ago, had just walked into a room full of the Legion like she was walking into a hangar.

"Get the lead out," Andi said. She did not turn around. "They go first. We finish."

She did not know where the words came from. They came out in the cadence she had heard her whole life, the doctrine they printed on the recruiting feeds, the machines go first and the operators finish, except she had flipped it. In here, the Legion were the machines. In here, she was the operator.

A Heavy stood up from behind an overturned recycler unit at the far wall, a wall of layered ceramic and a cannon for an arm, and the marines finally moved because not moving meant dying. Lin opened up on full auto and the rounds walked across the Heavy's chest plate and skated off. The big merc swung the cannon arm to track her.

Andi was already inside its reach.

She did not remember crossing the floor. She remembered being there, under the cannon, close enough to smell the ozone bleeding off its coolant ports, and she rammed the muzzle of her sidearm up under the chin guard where the armor had a seam because armor always had a seam, somebody had to get the head in and out of the suit, and she emptied the magazine into the soft channel of his neck.

He fell on her. She let him. She came out from under three hundred pounds of dying contractor with his blood on

her flight suit and her teeth bared, and the marines were finally, fully in it, and the room came apart in muzzle flash and screaming.

It was ugly. It was not a dogfight, clean lines in a clean sky. It was a knife in the dark and an elbow in a faceplate and Reyes biting down on a scream as a Scout's blade found the gap above his hip, and Andi pulled the Scout off him by the helmet and broke its neck against the door frame with both hands and a sound she would hear again, later, in the quiet.

When it was over she was breathing through her mouth and there were nine Legion dead on the floor and not one of hers, and the marines were looking at her the way you look at weather.

"Okay," said the one they called Smoke, the old one, the cigar dead and cold in the corner of his mouth because there was no fire to spare in a habitat that recycled its air. He looked at the bodies. He looked at her. "Okay, Commander."

It was the first time any of them had called her that and meant it.

That was the win. The clock did not care.

One of the dead mercs at her feet had taken a round through the helmet, and the helmet was not dead. It was a Legion field rig, networked, redundant, and the cracked emitter on the side of it was still pushing a thin synthetic

voice into the room, looped, urgent, a channel left open by a dead man.

Containment failure in the east hold. Hostages loose. Repeat. The diplomats are loose. All units.

Andi's stomach dropped the way it dropped in a stall.

Eric.

The hostages were loose. Which meant Eric, if Eric was alive, was somewhere in this nightmare on his own two feet with no one to fall on the wire for him, and she was three districts and a stronghold away and she had just stopped being able to think about anything else.

"East hold," she said. "Where's the east hold."

She turned for the door.

The door filled.

They came in low and fast and silent, and that was the first wrong thing, because nothing in this city moved silent. A dozen of them, more, pouring through the breach in a band of cobbled armor and stripped weapons and faces painted in something that had dried the color of old rust. Not Legion. Not marine. Warlord rogues, the kind the habitat grew in its dark like mold on a hull, and they did not want to fight.

They wanted to take.

A net of monofilament hissed across the room before Andi could bring her sidearm up, and then there were hands on her, a forest of hands, and a baton across the back of Lin's

knees, and Smoke's cold cigar knocked from his mouth into the blood. They were good. They were fast. They had done this before, taken people, and they took the whole squad in under a minute because the squad had just spent everything it had on the Legion and had nothing left to spend on the city's own scavengers.

Andi got one shot off. It went into the ceiling.

Then a knee on her spine and a sack over her head and the strip-sun gone, and the last thing she heard before the dark was Smoke, somewhere to her left, spitting grit and saying, "Well. This is new."

· · ·

The sack came off in a throne room that had been a water-reclamation plant.

That was Andi's first read, the Falcon eye working even blind and bound, cataloguing before she could stop it. The high curved ceiling was the inside of a cistern. The throne was a maintenance gantry chair welded to a dais of stacked filtration drums. The light was scavenged, a hundred strip-sun shards hung on wire, and it threw the room into a hundred small suns and a thousand shadows, and on the throne sat the Warlord.

He was big. Bear-stock, maybe, or something older and less documented, broad as a bulkhead, and his face was

painted the rust color of all his people but his eyes were not painted at all. The eyes were patient. That was the dangerous thing. Andi had been ready for a screamer, a cult of personality like the one she had heard Vladrinov ran, and instead she got a man who looked at her the way she looked at a horizon.

Her squad knelt in a row beside her, hands bound, hoods off now. Smoke. Lin. Reyes, bleeding but upright. Three more.

"Two factions deep," the Warlord said. His voice filled the cistern without effort. "The General's dogs in their good armor. And the fleet's children in their pretty suits. Both of you come into my district and bleed on my floor and neither of you ask whose floor it is."

He stood. The drums boomed under him.

"So I will tell you whose floor it is. Then I will decide what you are worth. The General offers a price for fleet meat. Did you know that? A bounty. Biometric on record, delivered alive." He smiled, and it was almost kind. "You are a receipt, little falcon. I just have to decide who to cash you with."

Andi heard Eric's voice in her head.

Not the words. The method. The thing he did at every dinner table for twenty years while she sat fuming, the thing she had always called manipulation and he had always called listening. *Find what the man wants that he has not said yet. Then be the only one in the room who can give it to him.*

She had spent her whole life refusing to do it. She was very tired of refusing things.

"You're not going to cash me with the General," Andi said.

The room went still. You did not talk back to the Warlord. His people tensed along the walls.

"No?" he said.

"No. Because you already know what he is." Andi got her feet under her, slow, hands still bound, and nobody stopped her, because the room wanted to hear it now. "You said it yourself. The General's dogs come into your district and bleed on your floor and don't ask whose floor it is. You think a man like that pays a bounty? You think after he's done, when the cameras are off and the fleet is dead and he owns this whole rock, he leaves you sitting on your throne of drums collecting receipts?"

The Warlord's patient eyes did not move.

"He's not buying meat," Andi said. "He's clearing a board. You're on it."

. . .

The trial was three parts, and the Warlord told her so, because he was a man who liked a frame.

"Wits," he said, lifting one finger. "Then nerve. Then steel. Pass all three and I will hear what the falcon thinks she knows. Fail one, and I cash you. Fair?"

"Fair," Andi said, and meant nothing by it, because there was no fair in this room and they both knew it. The fairness was the show. Eric again, in her ear. *Let him have the ceremony. The ceremony is what he wants. Give it to him and he owes you.*

The wits was a question. He asked her how many of his people stood in the room, and she had counted them coming in without deciding to, the Falcon-stock head-count that never switched off, and she said thirty-one and was right, and he tilted his head because most prisoners were too frightened to count.

The nerve was worse. They cut her hands free and a woman with the rust face set a habitat scorpion on the back of Andi's wrist, a forged thing the size of a hand, bred in some dark sump for exactly this, and the rule was that Andi could not move until the Warlord said move. The scorpion walked. Its feet were cold. Its tail was up.

Andi thought about the cockpit of a Shrike going down in a flat spin with the canopy on fire, and how she had run the eject checklist anyway, in order, because the panic was a passenger and she was the pilot. She held her arm so still the scorpion lost interest in her as a thing that was alive. The

Warlord watched her face the whole time and found nothing in it, because she had put nothing there.

"Move," he said at last, and she flicked the scorpion off into the dark and did not let her hand shake until it was behind her back.

The steel was the Warlord himself.

He came down off the dais and someone tossed her a blade, a leaf of scavenged steel ground sharp, and he had one too, longer, and he was twice her mass and he had killed in this room more times than she had landed a Shrike.

She could not win that fight. So she did not have that fight.

She thought about Eric. Not the diplomat. The boy. The boy who beat her at every board game they ever played because he never, ever played the game you thought you were playing. *You think the goal is to cut him. The goal is to make him show his people who he is.*

The Warlord came in heavy, expecting her to meet steel with steel, and she did not meet it at all. She read the angle the way she read a closing intercept, the body falling on the geometry, and she was simply not where the blade was. She let him swing into empty air in front of all thirty-one of them, twice, three times, a giant chopping at a falcon, and the room began to make a sound that was not on his side.

When he overcommitted the fourth time she was inside his reach, the way she had been inside the Heavy's reach an

hour ago, and she put the flat of her blade against his throat and held it there, gently, in front of everyone.

She did not cut him. That was the whole move. Eric's move. She held the kill she did not take so that every soul in the cistern saw her take it and give it back.

"I'm not here to cash you," Andi said, low, just for him, the blade still soft against his neck. "I'm here to give you the only fight in this city you can win. He's going to take everything. I can put you on the wall when he falls. You've got an army and no future. I've got a future and no army. The clock doesn't care which one of us walks out of here, General Vladrinov wins. So. Whose floor is this."

The Warlord looked at her over the steel.

Then he laughed, and the cistern laughed with him, and that was the army won.

· · ·

Eric Max had never killed anyone until today, and now he could not stop thinking like the kind of person who had.

He went over the wall of the east hold with the others, eleven hostages and one diplomat who used to believe all life was sacred, and he went over it the way Andi would have gone, which was the thought he kept having and the thought he hated. Move when they look away. Trust the gap. Don't think about the drop, think about the landing. He could hear

his sister saying it, not the grown woman with the gun, the kid, the reckless one their parents prayed over, and for the first time in his life he understood that she had never been reckless at all. She had just been the only one in the family willing to fall on purpose.

They came down a service shaft into a corridor of dead pipes. Behind them the alarm was already going, the synthetic Legion voice flat and patient. *Containment failure. The diplomats are loose.*

"This way," Eric said, and they followed him, because the diplomat had become the one who moved, and he hated that too.

He got them through two junctions on nerve and a stolen keycard before he heard the voices ahead, and he put his hand up the way he had seen the marines do it on the transport a hundred years ago this morning, and the hostages froze.

The voices were in an observation gallery off the main corridor, a glass-walled box that had overseen the cisterns when this place was a plant and now oversaw a war. Eric pressed himself to the wall below the glass and listened, and the listening was the only thing he had ever been good at, the thing Andi could not do, and now it killed him to be good at it.

One voice was Vladrinov. He had spent the day learning that voice.

The other voice came through a comm relay, thinned by distance and encryption, but Eric knew it too, because he had argued with it across a conference table aboard the Essex two days ago.

Stephens.

"The evacuation order goes out within the hour," Stephens was saying, reasonable, measured, the voice he used to block Drummond all day. "Drummond will prep the civilian transports himself. He thinks he is saving lives. He will load your people aboard with the refugees and dock them on his own ship and open his own bulkheads to them."

"And the falcon's people on the ground?" Vladrinov.

"Will be too late to matter. By the time anyone aboard understands, the Essex is yours. You take the conn, you take the ship, and you point it at the Earth." A pause. "Make it look like an accident a navy would have. Make the whole solar system watch a crewed warship fall on a city because a human held the wheel. That is the argument. That is the only argument we have ever needed to make."

Eric stopped breathing.

The evacuation was the boarding action. The rescue was the slaughter. Every refugee transport that lifted off this rock was a horse full of Legion, and Drummond was going to open the gates himself because he was a good man and good men were the wedge.

He had to carry this. He had to find Andi, or a comm, or the Essex, anything, and he had to carry the warning out of this stronghold in his own skull because it lived nowhere else.

He turned to move, and that was when they took Mara.

She was the youngest of the hostages, a clerk from the delegation, nineteen years old, and she had gotten ahead of the group in the dark and a Legion Scout had her by the hair in the cross-corridor not ten meters from where Eric crouched under the glass. The Scout had not seen the others. The Scout had not seen Eric. He had the girl and he had his weapon up and he called out into the dark.

"Diplomats. I have one of yours. Show yourselves or I open her up. You have five seconds."

Mara was looking right at him.

Eric Max, who had told his sister at every holiday for twenty years that all life was sacred and violence was never the answer, crouched in the dark with the warning in his head, and did the arithmetic.

If he stood up, the Scout took him, took the warning, and Mara died anyway and a fleet died with her.

If he stayed down, the warning lived, and the warning was a thousand lives, ten thousand, the whole crew of the Essex and the city it would fall on, and Mara was one girl with a comm clerk's hands and a scared face looking right at the only person who could have saved her.

"Three," said the Scout.

Eric did not move.

He looked at Mara across the dark and he made himself keep her eyes the way you owe someone that much, and he stayed down behind the glass with his sister's nerve in his spine and his own faith breaking in his chest, and he did the thing Andi did, the thing he had despised her for his whole life, which was choose the mission over the person in front of you.

"One," said the Scout.

The shot was very loud in the corridor and then very quiet.

Eric stayed down. He stayed down while they searched the cross-corridor and found nothing and moved on. He stayed down while the warning went on living in his skull, paid for now, the price exactly one nineteen-year-old girl with frightened hands.

When he finally moved, leading the others away in the dark, he was no longer entirely sure what he was. He had killed a man with his hands this morning to get free, and he had let a child die this hour to stay free, and somewhere in there the brother who lectured Andi about the sanctity of life had stopped existing, and the thing in his place had his face and his sister's instincts and a warning to carry, and it did not get to grieve yet.

It just had to move. The clock did not care what it cost. It never had. Andi had always known that.

He was finally learning it, three districts and a stronghold and one whole life too late.

· · ·

THE PARAPET

They came up out of the warlord districts at the strip-sun's noon, and they came as an army.

Andi had not had an army that morning. She had a dead mentor and six stunned marines and a rank she took over a body. Now she had the marines walking point and behind them the Warlord's thirty-one in their rust paint, and behind them more, the ones who had come out of the dark when the word went around that someone had held a blade to the Warlord's throat and given it back, because in a city with no law that was the only kind of legend that traveled. She had won them with Eric's tools. Wits, nerve, the held blade. She kept thinking that and she kept not being able to find Eric on the net, and the two thoughts ground against each other the whole long climb up toward the General's stronghold.

The stronghold was a tower at the wall.

That was the thing about Sierra Cortez, the wall down the middle of the sky, hull running floor to ceiling, dividing the

cylinder into the part Vladrinov held and the part he had not finished taking. The General's compound climbed the wall itself, gantries and parapets and gun positions stitched up the inside of the world, and at the top, where the strip-sun ran closest and the light was hardest, was the parapet where he liked to stand and watch his city burn.

"Machines go first," Andi told them at the base, and she meant the Legion, and the marines understood her now, and they went.

The assault was everything the morning had taught her not to do and everything the day had taught her to do anyway. No clean lines. No doctrine. The Legion held the gantries in their good armor and she sent the Warlord's people up the dead pipes on the flanks where no one builds a firing position because no one expects an enemy to climb the plumbing, and she sent the marines up the center loud, and she went up with the marines because a commander who took the rank over a body did not get to lead from the back.

It was berserk and it was ugly and it worked. They paid for every gantry. Reyes went down on the third level and did not get up. Lin lost the use of an arm and kept climbing with the other. Andi killed a Scout with his own knife and a Heavy with a grenade down the neck-seam and she did not feel the unblooded pilot anywhere in her anymore, that girl was gone, she had died somewhere around the throat of the first contractor in the stairwell and Andi did not miss her.

She fought up the inside of the world toward the top of the wall, and she did not know yet that her brother was up there too.

. . .

On the bridge of the Essex, Captain Drummond gave the order that would kill his ship, and he gave it believing he was saving lives.

"Prep the civilian transports," Drummond said. "All of them. We are running an evacuation."

His exec hesitated. The bridge was a tomb of held breath, screens full of the burning habitat, the downed-craft markers, the long silence from a pilot named Max who had gone off the net hours ago.

"Sir," the exec said, "we don't have confirmation the zone is secure for an evac, we don't have a corridor, we don't even have a head-count on who's left to evacuate."

"We have a hundred thousand people behind that wall and a delegate telling me the General will let them out if we open our holds." Drummond's jaw worked. He was old-guard, the last captain of a navy already sold out from under him, and he believed a soldier fought for more than a rate and he believed it would save him here. "That is what the ship is for. That is the only thing it was ever for. Prep the transports."

Delegate Stephens stood at the captain's shoulder, all reasonable concern, the bill's champion, Vladrinov's hand on the bridge the whole time.

"It is the humane choice, Captain," Stephens said gently. "It is the only choice. I have the General's word. The transports go down empty and come back full." He let that sit, the good-faith poison of it. "You will have saved them all."

Drummond nodded, grim, certain, wrong.

The order went down the chain. In the launch bays of the Essex, the civilian transports lit their engines, big slow ungainly mercy-ships, and the crews who flew them strapped in believing they were going to carry refugees, and not one of them knew that the holds they were ordered to fill would fill with the Legion, and that the gates they were ordered to open were the gates of the ship itself.

Drummond watched them launch on his screens. A flight of mercy heading down into the strip-lit habitat sky. Going to save everyone.

Going into the trap, because the traitor at his shoulder had spent all day teaching a good man to open his own throat.

Andi came over the top of the wall onto the General's parapet with a stolen rifle and blood that was not hers up to the elbow, and she looked up, and her brother was standing on the high gantry across the open air.

The world stopped.

It did the thing it had done exactly once before in her life, the day she soloed a Shrike for the first time and looked down at the curve of the Earth and understood for one suspended second that she was a small live thing inside an enormous indifferent machine and that she loved it. The world stopped like that. The gunfire went away. The strip-sun went away.

Eric.

He was forty meters away across the gap and three meters higher, on the General's own gantry, and he was alive, and he was looking at her, and his face did the thing.

It was the thing from when they were kids. The thing across a dinner table where their parents were taking his side again, the warrior who chose words against the reckless one who chose the height, and he would catch her eye across the candles and his face would do this exact thing, this private rueful tilt that said *can you believe these people, can you believe us, look how far the two of us got from where we started.*

He did it now, across the gap, over the war, and Andi felt her whole life arrive at once.

The flashback caught her there, the whole of it, the board games he won by never playing the game you thought, the day she dropped out of school and their mother cried and Eric was the one who drove her to the recruiting office anyway and never told them, the years of *why can't you be more like your brother* and the slow corrosion of it, and underneath all of it, always, this look. This look that said the rift was the parents' story and not theirs. That said he had always seen her. That said the two warriors who chose opposite weapons had only ever been pointing them at the same thing.

She smiled. She could not help it. Across forty meters of war, with a dead squad behind her and an army of warlords and the General's whole Legion between them, Andi Max smiled at her brother like they were eight and twelve and getting away with something.

He smiled back.

And General Yuri Vladrinov stepped out of the shadow of the gantry behind Eric and ran a blade through him from the back.

Andi did not understand it for a full second. Her brain refused it. She watched the point of it come out the front of Eric's good diplomat's coat and she watched his smile become something else, surprise, and even then he kept his

eyes on her, he kept them on her the whole time, and the General leaned down and said something into her brother's ear that Andi would never hear and would imagine for the rest of her life.

Then Vladrinov took Eric by the collar and the belt, almost gentle, almost ceremonial, and threw him off the gantry.

. . .

He fell three meters and Andi caught him.

She did not decide to. The Falcon-stock fell on him the way it fell on everything, the eye ranging the arc, the body crossing the parapet without consulting her, and she got under him and took his whole weight and went down to her knees on the General's stone with her brother in her arms and the blade still in him and his blood coming out warm over both of them.

"Eric," she said. "Eric. I've got you. I've got you, stay with me, the machines go first, you stay with me."

He was looking up at her. His eyes were already going somewhere, the Falcon-stock read it and she shoved the reading down, she would not have it, but he was looking up at her and he found her face and he held it.

"Andi," he said. Wet. Small. "Listen."

"No. No, you listen, you're going to be fine, I'm going to fly you out of here myself, I stole a mech today you should have seen it, Rafe would have..."

"The evacuation," Eric said.

She stopped.

"The evacuation is the trap." His hand found her wrist and there was no strength in it. "Stephens. He's the General's man. The transports. They go down empty and they come back full of Legion. Drummond's going to open the ship. He's going to open the ship to them, Andi, and they'll take the conn and they'll point it at the Earth." His grip flexed once. "You have to warn the Essex. You have to stop it. Stop the killing. Promise me you stop the killing."

She was crying. She had not noticed starting. It was running off her chin onto his face and she did not wipe it away because both her hands were holding him together.

"I promise," she said. "I promise, Eric, I've got it, I've got it, now stay..."

"I let her die," he said.

"What?"

"A girl. Mara. I let her die to carry it to you. So you have to..." His face broke, not from the wound, from somewhere else, the place where the brother who lectured her about sacred life had been. "I did the thing. I did the thing you do. I finally understand it and I hate it and I'm so sorry I ever..."

"Eric. Eric, stop."

"You were right," he said. "About the world. You were right the whole time and they never..." He stopped. He found her eyes one more time and the rueful tilt came back, faint, the dinner-table look, the look from the gantry, the look from twenty years of getting away with something together. "Can you believe these people," he whispered.

"Eric. Eric, no, hey. Hey. Stay with me. That's an order. I'm in charge now, you have to..."

He was already gone.

She felt it go out of him, the Falcon-stock told her the exact instant the way it told her everything, the closing speed, the angle, the moment a live thing became a thing that had been alive. She held her brother on the General's parapet with his blood drying on her arms and the rift between them healed at last in the only way the day had left open, which was too late, which was always going to be too late, and she did not make a sound, because the cost was not for the room.

She held him. The strip-sun ran hard and white over the top of the world.

. . .

When she looked up, Vladrinov was watching her from the gantry.

He had not moved. He had stood and watched the whole thing, the catch and the dying, the way a man watches a play he wrote, and his face was not cruel and it was not kind. It was satisfied. It was the face of someone confirming a hypothesis. He had thrown her brother down to her to see what the falcon would do, and now he knew, and he found it acceptable.

"You see," Vladrinov called down to her, conversational, over the noise of his Legion finishing her warlords on the lower gantries, "this is the sentimentality. This is the flaw. You will stop fighting now. You will hold the body. The institutional military always holds the body. We do not. That is the whole difference, and it is why the future is mine."

Andi did not answer him.

She laid her brother down on the stone, very carefully, the way you set down something you are not allowed to drop. She closed his eyes with two fingers. She did not look at Vladrinov while she did it.

Above the wall, through the parapet's open sky, the strip-sun lit a flight of slow ungainly ships coming down out of the high blue toward the habitat. The evacuation fleet. Mercy-ships full of nothing yet, dropping toward a city that would fill their holds with the Legion, and then climb back up to the Essex, and open the gates.

She watched them come. Every one of them a horse. Every one of them flying into the thing her brother had died

to warn her about. Drummond up there opening his own ship, Stephens at his shoulder, a hundred thousand people behind a wall and ten thousand sailors above it, all of them on the board, all of them already losing.

The General stood victorious on his gantry. Her army was dying below her. Her brother was dead on the stone under her hands. The trap was sprung and the fleet was flying into it and the man who built it was telling her that her grief was a weakness he had counted on.

He was right about the grief. He was wrong about what it was for.

Andi Max stood up off her knees. She did not wipe her face. She let the tears stand on it where the whole world could see them, because they were a receipt and she wanted it on record, and she picked up the stolen rifle, and she did not feel the unblooded pilot or the unforgiven sister or the girl who should have stayed home. All of them were gone. They had died on this parapet with her brother, and what stood up in their place had a promise in its hands and a fleet it could still save and a clock that did not care how much it had already cost.

"Stop the killing," she said, to nobody, to him, to herself.

Then she went to go and keep it.

PART FOUR — THE RISE

RUN 'N GUN

The strip-sun had gone the color of a healing bruise, that long false dusk the habitat ran when its light-rail dimmed for the cycle, and Andi knelt in it with her brother's blood drying on her gloves and a rifle she had taken off a dead man across her knees.

Eric was beside her. She had dragged him into the lee of a fallen transit pylon and she had not let anyone else touch him. He looked asleep. He looked, in the bad light, like a boy who had fallen out of a tree, and she kept catching that out of the corner of her ranging eye and turning her head and finding it was still true.

Above her the sky was full of evac craft.

She counted them without meaning to. Thirty, forty, the slow fat shapes of civilian lifters climbing off pads all across the city, lights blinking, climbing toward the wall and the dark beyond it where the Essex hung. Each one a column of people who had survived the day. Each one a coffin Vladrinov had built and Stephens had signed for.

That is the trap, Eric had said. The evacuation is the boarding. Stop the killing.

She keyed her brother's slate, which she had taken off him the way she had taken the rifle, because she was a thief now apparently, a thief of the dead. No signal to the Essex. Nothing on the fleet net. The general's people were jamming the wall, a wide gray wash of nothing where the ship's channel should be, and the only voices in her ears were close ones.

"Max." Smoke crawled up beside her on his elbows, the unlit cigar clamped in his teeth, his armor scored to the underplate. Behind him the rest of them. Five marines left out of a squad of ten, and no one else. The Warlord and his rust-painted thirty-one had bought the gantries with their bodies and stayed there, an army won with Eric's tools and spent in an hour, and the only people left standing were the ones who had started the day as hers. Kwan with the SAW. The twins everyone called One and Two. Veracruz, who had stopped talking three hours ago and just shot things now. "We can't sit on this corner being sad. They're gonna roll us up."

"I know."

"You got the thousand-yard. I get it. But I need you to have the ten-yard for a minute." He spat to the side, no cigar to light and nowhere to do it. "What's the move."

Andi looked at the sky again. Then she looked at the ground.

"The evac sites," she said. "There's a staging yard, six blocks toward the spine. The general's people are running the lifters from there, loading them, sending them up. If the Legion are getting aboard, they're getting aboard there, dressed like refugees, mixed in with the crowd." She was talking faster now, the read coming clear, and somewhere under the grief a colder thing woke up and started doing math. "We can't call the ship. The wall's jammed. So we get above the wall. We get on a transport, and we ride it up, and we tell them with our mouths."

Kwan made a sound. "We get on the trap on purpose."

"We get on the trap with guns."

"I love it," Smoke said, and he did not sound like he loved it. "Six blocks. Through a city that's all his."

"Not on foot." Andi was already up, the rifle slung, and she pointed with her chin at the thing parked slantwise across the boulevard two hundred meters off, where a Legion fire-team had dismounted to clear a building and left it idling. A heavy truck, Legion gray, the garish snake-and-fist of the general's cult sprayed down the flank, six wheels tall as a man and an open ring-mount on the roof with a crew gun on it. "On that."

Smoke followed her eyes. Started, slowly, to grin around the cigar.

"You ever drive one of those."

"I fly things, Smoke. How hard can it be."

They went in low and fast, the way she had learned to move on the ground these last hours, the way no flight instructor had ever taught her, hugging the rubble line, using the dead cars. The Falcon in her liked it down here more than she would ever admit. The ranging eye that had been built to fall on prey from a height worked just as well at street level, picking the gaps, reading the angles, clocking the two sentries on the truck before the marines even saw them.

She took the first one with the knife. That was a thing she could do now too.

The second got his weapon halfway up and Veracruz put three rounds through his throat without a word, and then they were swarming the truck, Kwan boosting Two up onto the ring-mount, the twins hauling the dead Legion infantry off the running boards, Smoke wrenching the driver's hatch.

The fire-team in the building heard it. Of course they did.

The first burst chewed the truck's flank as Andi got the cab, ducked, came up behind glass that turned out to be the kind of glass that stopped bullets, thank the general's vanity for that. The dash was a mess of cult iconography and hard tech, and under the snake decals it was just a truck, throttle and brake and a wheel, and she had the engine note in her hands inside three seconds.

"Hold on to something," she said, and put her boot down.

The truck came off the boulevard like a kicked animal. Behind her she heard the ring gun open up, Two screaming something joyful and obscene over the hammer of it, and the fire-team's building lost its ground floor in a sweep of fire as they rolled past. Andi felt the back end break loose at the corner and caught it, not with thought, with the same animal hindbrain that caught a stalling frame, and they were into the spine road and running.

"Contact rear!" One, up at the back hatch. "Two trucks, no, three. They want their ride back."

"They can want."

· · ·

It was the biggest, loudest, stupidest six blocks of her life and some clean cold part of her loved every second of it and would hate herself for that later.

The spine road ran straight toward the habitat's axis, dead straight, a canyon of dead towers, and Vladrinov's people poured out of the side streets to take their truck back. They came in their gray vehicles with the cult fist on the doors and they came hard, and Andi drove the way she dove, committed, no hesitation, the heavy truck a blunt instrument she swung through intersections at speeds that made the marines howl.

A merc gun-truck pulled level on the left and Kwan leaned out the window and emptied the SAW into its cab at six feet and it went into a pillar and came apart. On the right One died. He just died, a single round through the back hatch, there and then not, and Two screamed his brother's name and would not come down off the gun even when Smoke grabbed his leg, and the gun kept hammering.

The clock doesn't care, Andi thought, in Rafe's voice, in her dead instructor's voice. It was the thing he used to say. The clock doesn't care how you feel about it. She drove.

A roadblock ahead, two vehicles nose to nose and infantry behind them, and no time to stop and no room to go around. So she did the thing the Falcon wanted. She found the ramp of a collapsed overpass on the right, a slab tilted up like a launch rail, and she aimed the truck at it and did not lift.

For one full second the truck was a jet again.

It came down past the roadblock with a sound like the world cracking, every axle screaming, the windshield gone to spider-web, and it kept going. Andi tasted blood where her teeth had met. Behind her Two was laughing and crying at the same time on the gun and Smoke was saying something that was half a prayer and half a complaint, and the staging yard was ahead now, lit up white, fat lifters squatting on their pads with crowds streaming toward the ramps.

"There," she said. "Pick one that's loading. We go up with the people."

· · ·

On the Essex, the bridge had become a room where one man kept saying no.

Drummond stood the conn the way old-guard captains were trained to stand it, square to the main display, hands behind his back, and on the display a drone feed from the wall showed a Legion truck doing something that should not have been physically possible across the spine road of Sierra Cortez. The tactical officer had locked the feed and put a track on it because the track had a GCOA transponder squawking from inside it. A friendly transponder. One of his.

"That's a crew," Drummond said. "That's our crew. Somebody alive down there took that vehicle and they are running for the evac. Get me a read on who."

"Sir, transponder ident reads Lieutenant A. Max, Shrike pilot, listed as lost." The tac officer's voice did a small thing. "She's not lost, sir. She's driving a truck."

A breath went around the bridge. Drummond did not smile but something in his jaw moved.

"Launch the ready flight," he said. "I want eyes and guns over that staging yard inside four minutes. If my people are fighting to the evac, then by God the evac is going to have an

escort, and the escort is going to be a warship's worth of marines and not one more diplomatic..."

"Captain." Delegate Stephens had been standing at the rail the whole time, in his good suit, with his good voice. He came forward now into the light. "Belay that."

"I gave an order, Delegate."

"And I'm exercising the civilian oversight authority granted to this mission under the protocols you signed onto when you accepted the escort tasking." Stephens spread his hands, reasonable, regretful, a man who hated to do this. "We are minutes from a clean evacuation of one hundred thousand civilians. One hundred thousand. If you launch armed craft into that airspace now, you give General Vladrinov exactly the provocation he is looking for, and you turn a humanitarian success into a massacre with the GCOA's name on it. Every camera in the solar system is on this. You will not be the man who got the refugees killed."

"I will not be the man who left a live officer on the ground," Drummond said.

"You already left dozens. We mourn them. We do not throw the living after the dead." Stephens stepped closer, and his voice dropped to the register men use when they want you to feel reasonable for surrendering. "Stand down the ready flight, Captain. Let the evacuation come to us. Let it come home."

Drummond looked at the display. At the truck. At the small friendly track running flat-out toward a thing he could not yet see the shape of.

He was a man holding a line everyone behind him had already agreed to abandon, and he knew it, and he had known it for years, and he stood it anyway.

"Hold the ready flight," he said, "on the pad. Engines hot." He turned his back on Stephens, which was the only insubordination left to him. "But if that officer reaches the wall, Delegate, you are going to listen to what she has to say. And so help me, so am I."

Stephens inclined his head, gracious in victory. Behind his eyes something checked a box.

. . .

The lifter took them up.

It was a civilian model, a fat-bellied orbital bus built to move colonists, and it was packed to the bulkheads with people, families, a man with a birdcage, two old women holding hands, a kid asleep against a duffel that was everything she owned. Andi and her marines came aboard in the last crush at the ramp, weapons down and slung, just five more filthy desperate shapes in a crowd of filthy desperate shapes, and the ramp sealed, and the engines lit, and the staging yard fell away below.

For about ninety seconds it was the safest she had felt all day.

Then Veracruz, who never talked anymore, put her mouth next to Andi's ear and said, "Three rows up. Left side. The big ones. They're not scared."

Andi let her ranging eye go where it was told.

Three rows up there were six men who were too still. Everyone else on the lifter vibrated with the day, flinched at the engine surge, clutched their children. These six sat the way operators sit, loose and ready and watching the exits, and under their salvaged refugee coats their shoulders were the wrong shape. Class-armor shape. Apex-predator shape. One of them had a duffel between his boots that no refugee packs, the long hard rectangle of a breaching gun, and they were all of them angled, just slightly, toward the cockpit door at the front of the cabin.

The Legion. Hidden among the crowd. Exactly as Eric had said.

She did the math fast and hated all of it. Six of them, gene-forged, armored under the coats, in a sealed pressurized cabin full of a hundred civilians, at altitude, climbing toward the wall. She had five marines and one of them had stopped being a person an hour ago and one of them was a kid on a gun who had just watched his brother die. If this went loud, the cabin went red, and not with merc blood.

But if they got to the wall, those six walked onto the Essex behind a hundred human shields and helped take the ship.

"Smoke," she breathed. "Up front. Slow. Like you're sick, like you need the head. Get between them and the cockpit."

"And then?"

"And then the machines go first," she said, "but today we go first."

. . .

It started because the man with the birdcage stood up.

He just wanted to move to a different seat, a tired old man with a tired old bird, and he stepped into the aisle right as Smoke was easing forward, and one of the six tracked the movement, and his hand went inside his coat on pure trained reflex, and Veracruz saw the hand and the day's accumulated arithmetic finished itself in her head and she shot him through the eye.

After that it was very fast and very close and very ugly.

Andi came up out of the crowd with the knife because you do not fire a rifle through a packed cabin, and she took the second one the way the Falcon takes things, from above and behind, riding him down into the seats with the blade under the jaw where the class-armor gapped. The third got his breaching gun up and Kwan tackled it sideways and the

burst went into the overhead and the cabin screamed and a panel blew and the pressure alarm started its flat idiot bleat. Two went over the seatbacks like a thrown spear and got both hands on the fourth one's helmet and the twin who had nothing left to lose simply twisted until something gave.

Smoke had the fifth. They went down the aisle together, two big men in a space built for neither of them, and Smoke got his knife into the armpit seal three times before the merc got tired of living.

The sixth one reached the cockpit door.

Andi saw it happen across the whole length of the cabin, saw him get the door open, saw the pilots inside turn, saw what he meant to do, which was kill the crew and let the lifter fall and take all of it, the witnesses, the evidence, the problem, down into the city in one clean accident. She was already moving. She came up the aisle over seatbacks and bodies and screaming civilians and she was not going to make it, the math said she was not going to make it.

The man with the birdcage hit him with the birdcage.

It was not much. It was an old man and a wire cage and a single furious swing, and it did not hurt the merc at all, but it turned his head a quarter-second, and a quarter-second was a frame, and Andi lived her whole life in quarter-seconds. She hit him in the open cockpit doorway at full speed and they went into the instrument console together and she got the heel of her hand under his chin and put his head through

the side glass and the wind took him out into the dark over Sierra Cortez and he was gone.

The cabin behind her was a slaughterhouse and a nursery, full of the dead and the saved, and the pressure alarm bleated, and the old man stood in the aisle holding a bent empty birdcage and looking at it like he did not know how it had failed the bird.

Andi got into the copilot seat. The pilots were civilian contractors, gray-faced, hands shaking.

"Fleet channel," she said. "We're above the wall now. The jamming's below us. Get me the Essex."

"Who are you?"

"I'm the escort," she said. "Patch me through. Tell them Lieutenant Max has a flash traffic for the captain and it cannot wait."

The board lit. The channel opened. The jamming wash fell away as the lifter cleared the wall and the Essex was suddenly there ahead of them, vast and lit and beautiful, the last great crewed warship in the sky, a museum that cost too much to heat, climbing in her windshield like a promise.

"Essex, Essex," Andi said, "this is Max, do you copy, the evacuation is a trap, I say again the evacuation is a Legion boarding action, do not let those lifters dock, do not open your bays, Vladrinov's people are on the transports..."

There was a click.

And a voice she did not know, smooth and reasonable and almost kind, said, "Lieutenant Max. We've been hoping you'd call."

THE LONG FALL

> This is Delegate Stephens," the voice said. "I'm so glad you made it this far. Truly. You've had a remarkable day."

Andi's hand closed on the edge of the console. Behind her in the cabin a child was crying and someone was praying and the pressure alarm still bleated its flat note, and ahead the Essex filled the windshield, and on the bridge of that ship a man in a good suit was holding the channel.

"Put the captain on," she said.

"I'm afraid the captain is occupied." A small sound carried under Stephens's voice, far off, the sound of a bridge in trouble. "There's been a change of command."

· · ·

On the bridge of the Essex it had happened in under a minute.

The first the watch knew of it was the marine sentries at the bridge hatch going down, both of them, the soft cough of suppressed weapons in the passageway, and then the hatch

opening and the Legion coming through it. They came out of the evacuation that Stephens had brought aboard an hour early on his own authority, the first lifters, the clean ones, the bait. They wore the gray. They moved like the future of war.

General Yuri Vladrinov came through last, unhurried, helmet under his arm, a big handsome ruin of a man with the cult snake worked in old scar tissue up one side of his neck. He looked around the bridge of the Essex the way a man looks around a house he has just bought.

"Captain Drummond," he said warmly. "I have admired you for years. The last of you. The very last." He set his helmet on the navigation table, gently, a guest minding the furniture. "It's nothing personal. You understand that. You're a fine officer. You're simply obsolete, and obsolescence is not a crime, it is only a condition, and the kind thing is to be quick about it."

Drummond had a sidearm. He was old-guard and he was sixty and he had not cleared leather in twenty years, and he cleared it now, and he was fast, and it did not matter at all.

Vladrinov shot him through the heart with a pistol that had appeared in his hand the way the future appears, all at once and already won. Drummond went down at the foot of the conn he had refused to surrender, the last captain of a navy already sold, and the general stepped over him without looking down and keyed the command channel himself.

"Bridge is mine," he said, to his people, to the ship. "Seal the citadel. Vent the crew compartments on my mark. We are taking this beautiful old corpse to Earth." He smiled at Stephens, who stood at the rail with his good suit and his checked box and his sick gray face. "Delegate. You're white as milk. Killing not to your taste? You should have stayed on the ground. Your friend on the channel, the lieutenant. Keep her talking. I find I want her to watch."

· · ·

In the cockpit of the lifter Andi heard the shot.

It came down the channel small and flat and far away, one round, and then nothing, and she knew exactly what it was the way you know things you have heard all day. She had heard a great many rounds end a great many people since this morning. She knew the shape of a man dying on the other end of a radio.

"You hear that?" Stephens said, and his voice had gone strange, too high, a man reading a script that had stopped being words. "That was your Captain Drummond. The general just. He just." A breath. "I didn't know it would be like this. I thought it would be votes."

"Stephens." Andi made her voice flat and even. The colder thing under the grief had the conn now. "You can still

be the man who picked the right minute to stop. There's exactly one of those minutes left and you're in it."

"It's too late. The ship is his. The bays are sealing. You can't dock, Lieutenant, there's nowhere to put down, the only thing left is to fly your refugees somewhere safe and tell your grandchildren you tried..."

"There's one bay," Andi said.

She had been watching the Essex's flank the whole time the way the Falcon watches, and she had found it, the flight deck she had launched from this morning, ten thousand years ago, this morning. The recovery bay. Its doors were open. They had to be open. The general needed his other lifters, the real bait, still climbing up from the wall behind her. He could not seal the recovery bay until the last of his shields were aboard.

"The recovery deck's still open," she said to the shaking civilian pilots. "I'm taking the conn."

"You can't dock a lifter on a warship at speed, that's not a..."

"I land jets on that deck. Or I did." She put her hands on the yoke. "Strap in. Tell the people in back to hold the bolted things and pray to the bolted things. And you." She looked at the prayer, at the old man with the bent cage who had come forward to stand in the cockpit door because he had nowhere else to be. "Hold on, viejo. We're going home the hard way."

It was the most dangerous thing she ever flew and she flew it sick with grief and it was, technically, beautiful.

A fat civilian lifter is not a Shrike. It is a bus. So she flew it like a bus that had decided to die well, dumping speed against the Essex's own velocity, sliding in under the great gray belly where the point defense could not depress to hit her, riding the warship's shadow up its flank toward the lit rectangle of the open recovery deck. The Essex was already coming about, turning her bow toward Earth and the long fall, and Andi had to match a moving target the size of a city with a vehicle built to crawl between two pads. Forty seconds. One chance. No flare authority worth the name.

She did it on the hindbrain. The Falcon thing. The dive instinct they built into her, the part that knew without arithmetic exactly how a falling body and a moving body would meet. She brought the lifter in across the threshold at an angle that turned every alarm in the cockpit into one long scream, kissed the deck with the aft skids, lost the port engine on a crane stanchion in a gout of fire, ground a hundred meters down the recovery deck on her belly throwing sparks the length of a warship, and stopped, somehow, intact, against the inner blast door with the nose crumpled and the cabin lights flickering and a hundred

people alive in the back and screaming the good kind of scream.

"Up," Andi said, already moving. "Marines, up, we are aboard, we are home, and the man who killed the captain is two decks above us. Smoke. Veracruz. Kwan. Two. On me. Everyone else, get these people deep into the ship and hold them there."

Smoke came up out of the cabin with blood on him that was mostly not his and the cigar still somehow in his teeth. He looked at the wrecked deck, the burning lifter, the warship turning under them toward Earth.

"You flew a bus into an aircraft carrier," he said.

"I parked it."

"You parked it." He worked the action on a Legion weapon he had picked up. "Lieutenant. I would follow you into the actual sun."

. . .

They went up through a ship that was killing itself.

The general did it from the bridge, methodically, the way you put down an animal you have decided is suffering. Bulkheads sealed ahead of them with a hydraulic finality. Andi felt the deck shudder and saw frost bloom along a passage seam and understood that a compartment somewhere had just opened to vacuum with its crew still in

it. The Legion were venting the ship a room at a time, scrubbing the crew the way you scrub a record, killing a navy quietly so that only the loud death, the warship falling on a city, would be the one anyone remembered.

"He's not even fighting us," Kwan said, sealing his helmet against the next breach. "He's just turning off the rooms."

"Then we go where he can't turn off the rooms," Andi said. "We go to him."

Halfway up, the ship lurched, and through a viewport the strip-sun of Sierra Cortez did a thing suns do not do. It bulged. It flared white along its whole length, the engineered light-rail overloading, and then the habitat behind them came apart, the great cylinder colony breaking open along its spine, a hundred thousand homes spilling into the dark, the wall and the false sky and the city she had crossed all day going to glittering ruin in a single silent bloom of fire.

He had blown Sierra Cortez. The cover, gone now that it had done its work. No evidence left on the ground. Just the ship, and Earth, and the cameras.

Andi did not stop. She had stopped doing the thing where you stop.

"Move," she said. "He's done down there. Now he just needs to fall on a city."

The CIC hatch was the last sealed thing and Vladrinov had left it open on purpose.

He wanted her to come. Stephens had kept her talking the whole climb, his voice cracking apart on the channel, a procedural man drowning in the thing he had voted for, and the general had listened to all of it the way you listen to weather. When Andi's team blew the final passage door and came into the combat information center low and fast and teeth out, he was waiting at the conn with the long curve of Earth filling the main display behind him and a city, a real city, lights and rivers and millions of people, growing in the center of it.

"There she is," Vladrinov said, delighted. "The pilot who would not lose. Do you know, you have cost me almost nothing and entertained me enormously. You were never the threat. You were the show."

Phase one happened before he finished talking.

Stephens was at the rail, where he had been keeping her talking, and Smoke came through the hatch first and saw him, the man in the good suit, the voice that had blocked the captain, the procedure that had murdered a navy, and Smoke did not say anything clever. He crossed the CIC in four strides and put his knife into Delegate Stephens and held him up by it while the delegate's good reasonable face

went slack with surprise that it had come to a knife, that all the procedure in the world ended in a marine and a blade, and then Smoke let him down to the deck.

The general shot Smoke for it, once, and the round took the big marine high in the chest and spun him into the bulkhead, and the cigar finally fell out of his teeth onto the deck, and he slid down and stopped moving, and somewhere very deep Andi felt the day try to take one more.

It did not get him. She would learn that later. Right now she only saw him fall.

. . .

Phase two was just her and Vladrinov.

Kwan and Veracruz and Two were tangled up with the general's own Legion guard in the hatchway, full-auto and knives in the strobing red of the alarm, and that was their fight, and they were winning it the way the marines had been winning all day, ugly and total and at cost. But the conn, the center of the room, the place where a man could reach up and put a warship into a city, that was hers and the general's and no one else's, and they both knew it, and they came together over Captain Drummond's body with their hands.

He was Apex-Predator-grade and bespoke and a head taller than her and a legend, and he was faster than anyone she had ever touched, and for the first ten seconds he simply

hit her and she could not stop it. He put her into the conn rail. He opened her cheek to the bone. He was laughing, not cruelly, the laugh of a man enjoying good work, and he said, "You see, this is the difference, this is the whole argument, a product is better than a citizen, a product is built for exactly this..."

And Andi, with her face full of blood and her brother dead on a habitat that no longer existed and a marine bleeding out behind her and a city full of strangers swelling in the display, stopped trying to fight him the way she had been trained to fight.

She fought him the way the day had made her.

She gave him the next hit on purpose, took it across the ribs and felt one go, and used the spin of it, used his own confidence, got inside the long reach where his strength meant nothing, and she was Falcon-stock, she was built to fall on things from a height with everything she had, and there was a height right there, the raised deck of the conn, and she took him up onto it with her whole body and brought him down off it headfirst into the steel base of the captain's chair.

He was very hard to kill. She had to do it three times.

The third time he stopped laughing and stopped being the future of war and was just a big dead man on the deck of a ship he had stolen, and Andi knelt over him with her hand

still in his collar and her ribs screaming, and she did not feel triumph, she felt the floor.

The floor was tilting.

. . .

Phase three was the conn, and the conn was screaming, because the Essex was falling.

She had killed the general, and the general had set the course, and a dead hand on a dead stick still pointed a warship at a city. The main display was nothing but Earth now. The curve had become a horizon, the horizon had become land, the land had become a grid of streets and a river and a stadium and a school somewhere in all that, millions of people who had never heard the words Sierra Cortez looking up at a falling star that was a hundred thousand tons of dead navy coming down on their afternoon.

Andi got into the captain's chair. Drummond's chair. She put her bloody hands on the conn.

"Lieutenant," Kwan said, somewhere, holding a wound shut, "we don't have a flight crew, we don't have power to half the control surfaces, we don't have…"

"I land things," Andi said. "On decks. In weather. When they're broken." Her voice did not shake. The colder thing had it all now, the thing that had woken up beside her brother's body and done the math ever since. "This is just a

very big broken thing and a very big deck and I have done this all day."

She could not stop the fall. No one could stop the fall. A warship is not an aircraft, it does not want to fly, it wants to be a meteor, and the only authority she had was angle and the engines that still answered and the last of the control surfaces and the Falcon hindbrain that knew, without arithmetic, exactly how a falling body wanted to meet the ground and how, with everything she had, you could cheat that meeting by a single degree.

A single degree was the whole game.

She walked the dying Essex over on its long axis, traded the city for the river delta beyond it, traded the river for the flats past the river, the marsh, the empty engineered floodplain that some old planner had left undeveloped against exactly the kind of hundred-year disaster no one had imagined would arrive by warship. She fought the ship for every degree. She lost the starboard engines. She kept one. She flared a falling warship the way you flare a stalling frame, in the last seconds, on instinct, on the part of her that her family had called reckless and her brother had called hiding and the day had finally called what it was, which was the only thing that could have done this, and the Essex hit the flats long and flat and screaming and tore a furrow twelve kilometers across the empty mud and did not, in the end, fall on anyone.

The world went white and then very loud and then, all at once, still.

· · ·

She came to on the conning tower of the ruined Essex, in open air, under a real sky.

She did not remember climbing up here. Marines must have carried her. The warship lay in the flats like a dead leviathan, broken-backed and smoking, and from every rent in its hull the survivors came, sailors and refugees and the saved, streaming out across the mud toward the distant lights of the city that was still there because she had moved a degree. There were more of them than she had let herself hope for. The man with the bent birdcage, walking, small and far below.

Smoke was up here too.

He was sitting against the rail with a field dressing the size of a dinner plate strapped over his chest and a corpsman fussing at him and the cigar, the cigar, between his teeth, and as Andi watched he ignored the corpsman entirely and got a flame to it at last, the first time all day, and drew on it, and let the smoke up into the real air.

"Told you," he said, when he saw her looking. His voice was a ruin. "Following you into the sun. Got close."

She had nothing to say back. She sat down next to him because her legs had stopped offering opinions, and they watched the survivors come out of the ship, and for a little while that was enough, that was the whole win, all those small far figures alive in the mud.

Then she took out her slate, because there was one thing left and the clock did not care that she did not want to.

She called home.

. . .

Her mother answered on the second ring, the way she always had, because a call from this number on a day like today could only be one thing.

"Andrea. Andrea, thank God, we saw it, we saw the ship on the feeds, are you all right. Where's your brother, is Eric with you..."

"Mom." Andi watched a child being carried across the mud on a stranger's shoulders. "Mom, I have to tell you something."

She told them. She did not dress it. She had watched all day what dressing things did, the reasonable voice, the soft word over the hard fact, and she would not do it to them. She told them Eric was dead. That he had died well, that he had been brave, braver than anyone, that at the end he had been a soldier, the thing he had spent his whole life refusing to be,

and that he had used it to save a hundred thousand people he would never meet. She told them she had been there. She told them she had held him.

She told them she did everything she could and it was not enough.

There was a long silence on the line, the kind of silence that is a room on Earth filling up with the rest of someone's life.

And then her father, who had always loved the kind one, the smart one, the golden one, said the thing that the day had been driving toward since a phone call this morning a thousand years ago. He said it quietly. He said it like a man who had finally understood the shape of his family and hated the shape.

"You were supposed to protect him," he said. "That was the one thing. You're the soldier. You were right there. And you came back, and he didn't."

"Dad."

"Don't," her mother said, somewhere behind him, wrecked, drowning. "Don't, Andrea. Not now. We can't. We can't talk to you right now."

The line went dead.

Andi sat on the conning tower of the ship she had caught out of the sky, with the survivors streaming alive beneath her and the smoke going up into a real sky, and looked at the slate until it dimmed and went dark and showed her only her

own face, the gene-forged ranging eyes, the open cheek, the blood.

Smoke did not say anything. He had heard all of it. He put the cigar between her fingers, after a while, because it was the only thing he had to give, and she took it, and did not smoke it, and held it while it burned down, and the day she had won sat on her like the weight of a fallen ship.

She was the reckless one. She had been right about all of it. And it had cost her everything, and the proof was a quiet line and a dead brother and a city that would only ever remember the warship that nearly fell on it.

· · ·

In a room that had never been on the habitat, three people watched the same feed the rest of the solar system watched, and found it good.

The room was nowhere in particular and the people in it had no names that mattered yet, and on the wall the GCOA flagship lay broken in a foreign floodplain while a young officer was hailed across every channel as the hero who caught a falling navy. The footage ran and ran. The warship that nearly fell on Earth. The crewed fleet that put a hundred thousand tons of human error on a course for a city full of children and was stopped, this once, by a miracle and a girl,

and how many cities, the commentary was already asking, how many cities can be saved by a miracle and a girl.

"She did everything we needed her to," one of them said.

"She did more. She made it unforgettable." On the feed, the delegation's emergency session was already convening, already grave, already certain. The bill that had needed one embarrassment had been handed a catastrophe with a photograph. "The general thought it was his demonstration. He was a fine wedge. Wedges break."

"And the fleet?"

"The fleet is dead. It died in that floodplain. It just doesn't know yet that the burial is a vote." The first of them turned away from the wall, satisfied, unhurried, three moves ahead the way the Sons of the Serpent were always three moves ahead. "She won her war. Beautifully. Let her have it. We have the GCOA, and we have it cleaner than a battle, and we have it on schedule. Sierra Cortez was the first city."

On the wall, very small, a girl sat on a conning tower with a cigar burning down in her hand and did not yet know there had been a second war at all.

It had just taken the board.

End of Reel Four.

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