

# Chapter One

New York - December 23, 2047

The icy breeze stinging his face reminding him of Mother Russia, Sergei Molanov wondered which of his many shitty choices had led him to his present situation.

On the surface, everything was great. He was the head of security for Mike Palermo, the second most powerful man on the planet, right after General Zheng, aka the Great Dictator. It was a cushy job, with a fat paycheck and out-of-this-world benefits. Plus, Sergei was really good at his line of work. He and his team had thwarted three assassination attempts by the Resistance in the past two years, and during one of those he'd taken a bullet meant for Palermo. A bullet shot by Kurt von der Hagen, leader of the Resistance, no less. That had raised Sergei's status to a level he'd never imagined possible.

What had gotten under his skin—despite all that success—was the bi-weekly visits to the luxurious mansion in the New York suburbs, where he was standing guard next to the main entrance on a gloomy winter evening.

The mansion was a “gentlemen’s club” called The Harem. It was run by the Russian mafia, and it was both expensive and exclusive. Rumor had it the girls who were forced into prostitution here were kept under the influence of drugs, and the clients were allowed to do whatever they desired. This was the place where Palermo, who had violent tastes to begin with, would let his sadistic imagination run free. Sergei, like everyone else on his team, believed the stories he'd heard about what was going on inside those walls, including the one about Palermo beating one of his “dates” to death.

Sergei's younger sister, Katia—a lovely girl whom Sergei had adored—had been raped when she was only eighteen. She took her own life a few months later. Sergei hunted down the rapists, three young men from an influential family in Moscow, and killed them along with their bodyguards before fleeing to the US. Thinking about Katia made his knees wobble, and he had to lean against a marble column to steady himself.

*After all these years.*

Standing outside this door and imagining other young girls experiencing the horrors that had let Katia to suicide was a torture Sergei could no longer tolerate. But he didn't have a choice. No one walked away from a man like Palermo and lived to tell the tale. If he quit his job, he was dead meat.

The door opened, and Palermo walked out, smirking, with a satisfied look on his jowly, high-colored face. His fleshy mouth always reminded Sergei of calves liver. There was a smear of blood on his right sleeve, next to his 24-karat gold cufflink. Thinking about that creature exercising his cruelty on a terrified girl made Sergei nauseous.

That was it. He couldn't take it anymore. He'd pack a bag and run away tonight, and to hell with the consequences. But first, he'd come back here and shoot up this diabolical place. He was a dead man anyway, and he'd done more than his share of bad shit. He might as well go out doing something right.

The cracking sound of bullet's impact reverberated in the air. A good chunk of Palermo's brain and a hot gout of his blood splashed on Sergei's face and neck. No gunshots though. The shooter had used a silencer.

*Okay. This should solve my problem,* Sergei thought.

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Kurt von der Hagen, fifteen hundred meters away on top of a high-rise building, looked up from his M-28 Sniper Weapon System's telescopic sight, punched the air and said, "Bull's-eye!"

A fierce joy rippled through Kurt. Eliminating Palermo was the Resistance's biggest victory. The thrill of the hunt was intoxicating. There was nothing he liked better than planning a meticulous operation, accounting for all the possibilities, and preparing the ground for a one-chance-only long-distance kill shot. At the same time, niggling remorse dogged him. The bright, idealistic politician dreaming of world peace that he'd once been was now an assassin. He wished he could go back and take a different path, one where his talents and skills would work toward something nobler than kill after kill, but he knew it was impossible. This work had to be done. Still, his heart ached. It was something he had to live with.

*I'm glad Dad never saw me doing this.*

Next to him, his spotter Allen chuckled. "Fourth time was the charm."

Kurt took off his fingerless gloves. "I wish I'd shot him on his way in. I might've saved a couple of girls some pain," he said while removing the suppressor. He put his sniper rifle in its case.

Allen scratched his gray beard and took a drag on his cigarette. "I still think you should've taken Molanov out too."

"And I still think not," answered Kurt, dusting freshly fallen snow off his black trench coat. "He's just a soldier doing his job. In another life, we'd be good friends. Let's go. Things are about to get really interesting around here."

The older man followed him, complaining, "You won't be so forgiving when we try to kill another one of Zheng's goons and Molanov stops us again."

Kurt opened the door leading to the stairs, thinking it'd been a good day at the office.

Behind him, Allen called out, "Wait up, boy! You know damn well my old knees play up in cold weather."

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I'd finally mustered up the courage to propose to my girlfriend, Elizabeth, after living with her for almost a year.

Liz was a firecracker, a woman as soft-hearted as she was hot-blooded, equally at ease sipping champagne at a fancy restaurant and playing a monster-killing VR game with me. She was a glorious contradiction. She made some people uneasy with her volatile personality, but I didn't mind. I liked to kid her that I'd never have to cheat because I felt like I had two girlfriends. She'd roll her eyes at that.

I'd briefly thought about doing something romantic and classy. I could propose kneeling on one knee on a beach while a band was playing her favorite romantic song—2045's Best Song of the Year, "My heart, Your Heart." But it wasn't my style, so I decided to pull a Deadpool and propose in bed, only with an expensive ring, and I'd hide it under a pillow, not where Wade Wilson hid his Ring Pop.

I also decided to do it on Christmas Eve.

When I picked her up from her beauty parlor, Liz was dazzling in an emerald-green velvet bodysuit with strategic cutouts, crystal snowflake earrings and thigh-high boots. I was in a smart tux with the color modifying to complement my date's ensemble. The tux seemed to think a satiny black was the right accompaniment. I disagreed, but my suit had already proved it had a better fashion sense than I did, so I went with it.

On our way to the nightclub we used to frequent a lot—a small, cozy place called Cubano Lito—my BMW chimed its notice tone. "I'm sorry, Jim, but we'll need to take a detour. STCU has blocked Fifth Avenue between Washington and Lincoln streets."

"No problem, Max. We've got time," I told my car.

"Something's up. Way too many SCTU soldiers around," said Liz.

"No surprise there," I said. "They're everywhere these days."

She was right though. Tonight, there were too many of them in the streets. Liz grabbed my arm when Max reached a road-block guarded by Security and Counter-Terrorism Unit soldiers, all in full tactical gear and carrying assault rifles. An officer scanned my BMW and with a hand motion signaled us to continue. My car didn't need to be told twice.

Liz raised her middle finger toward the officer. Max anticipated her move and blackened her side's window. Liz reacted by kicking the car's door like a petulant child.

Max and I protested at the same time, "Hey!"

Max sent a text to my PDD. "Can I *please* throw her out?"

I thought about it for a second; then I shook my head.

"I sometimes feel we live under Sauron's rule and there are bloody Orcs everywhere," said Liz.

I laughed. "Nice one. I'd gone with the Galactic Empire and Stormtroopers."

"You guys really have to come up with more recent references," said Max.

"Nothing beats the classics," answered Liz. "Where do you think your name has come from?"

"I know you aren't the hold-your-tongue type, but make sure you don't say things like that in front of others," I told Liz. "Zheng's spies are everywhere, and comparing him to Sauron will get you a date with an SCTU officer"—I narrowed my eyes—"Unless you *want* a date with

one of them. Rumor has it Zheng has them genetically enhanced, which includes things like, eh, stamina.”

Liz giggled. “Only if they are using *your* genes, Mr. Five-Times-A-Night.”

“Am I blushing?”

“Nope. And by the way, didn’t you say Zheng was like Hitler during the air force cadets’ graduation ceremony, so loudly that half of the people in the room heard it?”

I feigned horror. “I’d never say such a thing about our supreme leader. I didn’t say he was like Hitler; I said he was the reincarnation of Hitler. Huge difference.”

Liz laughed and looked out of the car’s window. “I respect what the Resistance is doing, but I honestly hope von der Hagen doesn’t pull something tonight and ruin our Christmas Eve.”

I felt a lump in my throat when she mentioned Kurt’s name. I took my PDD out of my pocket and checked the news. No assassination attempts. No bombing. No Resistance-related reports. Just another day in paradise. I tried to stop thinking about Kurt and focus on my proposal plans. Priorities.

A few minutes later Max pulled over in front of Cubana Lito and announced, “We’ve arrived.”

I got out first and offered my hand to Liz. When I turned towards the club’s entrance, I noticed two STCU agents handcuffing a homeless man. The man wore a torn air force flight jacket. A cardboard sign hanging on his neck read “Disabled Air Force Veteran Says Fuck General Zheng!”

I chuckled. “Short, eloquent and straight to the point. We fighter pilots have a way with words.”

The man wasn’t struggling. He just stood there, shoulders slumped, looking like he’d accepted his fate. There was a small crowd of bystanders.

Liz put her hand on my arm. “I’m not normally the voice of reason, but maybe you don’t do anything that ends with us spending the night in jail?”

“Didn’t you just try to flip an officer off?”

“He wouldn’t have noticed. We were inside a moving car.”

I winked at her. “Don’t worry. It takes only a minute.”

I walked towards the two agents. “Hi. My name’s Major Jim Harrison, and I’m an air force officer.”

One of them gave me a dry look. “I know who you are, Major,” he said. “How can I be of assistance?”

I smiled and extended my right hand. “I just wanted to say thank you for your hard work, protecting us day and night, especially on Christmas Eve.”

He shook my hand, but his expression didn’t change. I added, “Let me buy you a drink inside.”

“There’s no way we can get into the club without a reservation.”

“Let me worry about that,” I said.

The two agents exchanged a look and hesitated.

Liz joined us. “Come on, guys. It’s Christmas.”

“That it is,” said the second agent. “We’re on duty, but we can take a few minutes off and get a drink.” He uncuffed the homeless guy, tore the sign off of his neck and said, “Keep this up, and you’ll end up in the Coffin.”

Liz shuddered.

“Max, take this gentleman to wherever he wishes to go,” I called out.

The homeless man didn’t even bother to thank me. He limped to the BMW without saying a word. His lack of gratitude made me wonder if he deserved to rot in jail.

I offered my arm to Liz. “Nicely done,” she said.

“I should’ve gone into politics,” I answered.

“How about a selfie?” one of the STCU men asked me. “It’s not every day we meet a war hero.”

We left the two agents at the bar and went to the table I’d reserved in the club’s second-floor balcony. Liz, who was a vegetarian, ordered a salad. I ordered a steak with fries, but I was so excited I’d lost my appetite. I barely touched my food. Liz noticed I wasn’t eating and with concern in her eyes asked me, “Are you all right? Do you want to go back home?”

I didn’t want her to suspect anything out of the ordinary was going on. I answered with the first excuse I could think of. “My New Year resolution’s losing some weight, and I’ve decided to start tonight.”

She tilted her head. “What are you planning to lose, muscle? You look like you’re at zero percent body fat already.”

I wasn’t a very good liar.

After dinner, we went to Cubana Lito’s dance floor. It was packed wall to wall with people dancing to booming Latino music. I wasn’t much of a dancer (real men don’t dance), but Liz, who was Afro-Hispanic and born in Cuba, was a natural. The two of us met some old friends, drank pina colodas, danced, and said Merry Christmas to a million people. We talked, playfully bantered, and made fun of other people mercilessly. She laughed at my jokes and often came up with comebacks that in her British accent somehow sounded funnier.

“You know, being out with such a beautiful woman’s good for my self-image,” I told Liz. “All the other guys look jealous.”

“You aren’t too bad yourself,” she said. “A lot of women keep checking you out.”

I kissed her on the dance floor, her body pressed against mine, ignored our friends’ get-a-room comments and told her, “The past few months have been the happiest time of my life.”

Toying with a lock of her curly hair, she gave me a coy glance and whispered in my ear, “For me too, honey.” Her breath was warm and reminded me of what we’d be doing later.

Life was good.

We returned home at around two AM. I was tipsy, and with Liz pressing up against me and kissing my neck, I didn’t realize we’d arrived until Max said, “Jim, we’re in front of your home.”

I owned a one-story Colonial house in Nassau County. Nothing too fancy, but not too shabby either. I got out of the car and walked through my small garden with its wintering rose

bushes that looked like wooden candelabras to the front door with Liz holding my arm. I said, “Cordelia, I’m home.”

A soft, feminine voice said, “Welcome home, Jim.”

The door of my house opened. We entered the living room, laughing and kissing each other. Then, a faint smell of expensive cologne hit my nostrils, and I found a tall, blond man sitting on my favorite sofa. He had piercing gray eyes and a completely unfashionable goatee, and he was wearing a long black trench coat. There were not one, but two freaking lethal-looking machine pistols next to him on the coffee table.

There were a few small blood stains on his shirt, my sofa and the floor.

Liz let out a tiny shriek. I put my arm around her shoulder and said, “Don’t worry. Everything’s fine.”

“Hi, Jim. It’s been a while. Merry Christmas,” said the man.

My heartbeat hadn’t returned to normal, but pretending that it was an ordinary visit, I answered with an air of nonchalance, “Hi, Kurt. So nice of you to drop by. Just a few days ago I thought splashing some blood on my sofa would give it that gritty, rebel look.”

Yep. Kurt von der Hagen, the legendary freedom-fighter, tyranny-battling rebel, ruthless terrorist, deadly super-assassin, and number one on every security agency’s most-wanted list was sitting right there in the middle of my freaking living room. Right when I was about to propose. King Kong wrench, thrown.

Liz looked at me with wide eyes. “Why’re you two talking like you know each other?”

“Sweetheart, meet Kurt, whom I’m sure you recognize from all the wanted-dead-or-dead posters,” I answered. “Newsflash: He’s my best friend. We’ve known each other since we were in elementary school. Kurt, this is my girlfriend, Elizabeth.”

Kurt stood up, grimacing with pain and clutching his side, and in perfect Spanish—which I could mostly understand but couldn’t speak—said, “It’s a pleasure meeting you, Elizabeth. May I say you look absolutely stunning.”

Liz looked lost for words, but one didn’t become an acrobatic pilot/stunt woman without fast reactions and the ability to think under pressure. “Charmed, I’m sure”—she said in English—“but in case you haven’t noticed, you’re bleeding all over our furniture. Let’s patch you up, and then you can tell me what Public Enemy Number One’s doing in our living room.”

I snorted. “Public Enemy Number One? Huh! John Dillinger ain’t got nothing on Kurt. Mr. Super Assassin eats the likes of him for breakfast.”

“With all these movie references, I confess half of the time I have no idea what Jim’s talking about,” Kurt said, “but I can already tell the two of you are perfect for each other.”

Liz asked, “You’re ‘best friends’ with someone who doesn’t watch movies?”

“It’s a very long story,” I said.

Liz had some medical training and had dealt with many wounds and injuries in her career. She went to our bedroom to bring her bag of medical tools.

“Cordelia?” I said.

“Yes, Jim?”

“What’s going on outside?”

“Nothing much. All quiet,” she said.

“Did anyone follow Kurt?”

“Not so far as I can see, and you know I can see a lot.”

“Full lockdown mode,” I said.

Half-inch steel sheets covered all my housed windows and doors. The only way someone could enter now was using explosives.

“This won’t stop SCTU, you know,” said Kurt.

“True. But Cordelia can see them coming, and it’ll give us more time to figure out what to do,” I said.

Liz came back to the living room. Kurt took off his trench coat. I got my shoulder under his arm and helped him walk to our dining table and lie on it. Liz slashed Kurt’s shirt with a pair of scissors. She unwrapped the piece of cloth around Kurt’s waist and examined the bullet wound on his side. I tried to look over her shoulder.

“Give me some room,” she told me. A couple of minutes later she added, “It isn’t bad, but you’re losing too much blood. Hold still.”

She debrided the wound and started patching Kurt up.

“Before I forget, Cordelia?” I said. “Aren’t you supposed to inform me if an armed man tries to enter my house?”

She asked with concern in her voice, “Jim, are you all right? Have you had brain trauma recently? Do want me to call a doctor?”

Much like her owner, Cordelia was a wise-ass. Liz couldn’t stifle a laugh.

Kurt flinched. “Don’t make me laugh. It hurts too much.”

Cordelia continued, “This is Kurt, your oldest friend. He’s been in this house 523 times already. The last time he was here he was covered in blood and heavily armed too, and he was accompanied by Allen, who was carrying a grenade launcher.”

Liz laughed. “What? No bazooka?”

My face grew hot. Kurt pressed his lips together and averted his eyes. Cordelia had just reminded us of the last time we’d seen each other, nearly two years ago, right before Kurt started his campaign to bring Zheng down. He’d come to ask me if I’d consider joining the Resistance. I told him starting a revolution against Zheng was suicide, and I did my best to convince him not to go down that road either. I also said I didn’t agree with his methods. I was a soldier, not an assassin. I’d killed plenty of people in combat, sitting in the cockpit of my fighter jet, but I just couldn’t do it with a sniper rifle, or worse, a bomb, especially if innocent bystanders were at risk. I was a very good fighter pilot, but I’d make a terrible freedom fighter.

That was the day I turned my best friend down.

I rubbed my temples. “How did he get in?”

“He asked nicely,” answered Cordelia.

“I need clean towels,” said Liz, still working on Kurt’s injury.

I said, “On it,” and darted towards the bathroom.

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New York - December 24, 2047

Allen knew something was very wrong.

He was in one of Resistance's safe houses, a small studio flat with a tiny window and cheap, battered furniture that looked like it'd been bought in a yard sale. Allen was sharing the place with Mark, a young man who had recently joined the Resistance. Mark kept walking back and forth and looking out of the window, his tall frame hunched. He was sweating profusely even though the room wasn't hot, and he kept sneaking furtive glances at Allen's Glock 55, which Allen had been dismantling and cleaning while sitting behind a small wooden dining table in one corner.

It looked like the younger man was trying to make a decision. Allen chose to move things forward. He put down the Glock on the table, leaned back in his chair and asked, "They got to you?"

Mark averted his eyes. His shoulders sagged. He muttered, "They've got my family," and took another glance at the dismantled gun. Then Mark pulled his own sidearm, cocked it, took a step toward the dining table, pointed the gun at Allen's head and yelled, "Don't move a muscle, old man!"

"Fatal mistake," said Allen.

Allen shot the young man from under the table, several times and in quick succession. Splinters of wood flew up in the air. Mark was hit in the chest and belly. He fell backward on the floor, blood gushing from his wounds.

Allen stood up, a smoking Smith and Wesson M&P Bodyguard in his hand. The muscles around his mouth twitched. With sadness in his voice, he told the dying man, "Ankle holster, rookie."

The door of the flat was kicked open with a loud bang, and several SCTU soldiers rushed in.

Allen's mouth went dry, and beads of sweat appeared on his bald head. Trapped in the small flat with no other exit, he was doomed. His adrenaline soaring, he took aim at the first soldier's head, right between his eyes. The barrel flashed, and the SCTU goon toppled. Allen shot another man. His gun clicked empty. The soldiers rushed him. He hit a man in the face using his gun like a club and kicked the second in the balls. Two other soldiers grabbed his arms. He went down under the weight of the attackers. They handcuffed him and stood him up. He kept struggling, but there were ten of them.

That was it then. Allen never thought he'd run forever. Still, he was disappointed that he'd let himself get captured, especially so soon after the Resistance's greatest victory, killing Palermo. He thought about Kurt and wondered if he'd managed to escape.

An SCTU captain, wearing the force's dark brown uniform, walked in and stood in front of Allen. "Where is von der Hagen?" he asked.

Allen spit out blood. "With your mother."

The officer nodded to a spectacularly big soldier, with shoulders wide as a bull. The giant swaggered closer to Allen and hit him in his belly, chin, and nose. Allen felt his nose break. With blood pouring out of his nostrils, he thought he was about to lose consciousness. These guys weren't kidding around.

He shouted, "Okay! Okay! I tell you! Jesus!"

The captain held up a hand, and the soldier stopped. Allen looked the officer in the eyes and smirked. "With your sister."

The captain rolled his eyes and was about to say something when a young STCU lieutenant ran in and saluted. "Sir! We got him. He's hiding out with a Major Jim Harrison, an air force fighter pilot."

Allen thought, *Jim Fucking Harrison? Really?*

"That Major Harrison?" asked the captain.

"Yes sir, unless there's two of them," answered the young man. The captain gave him a hard look. He blushed and averted his eyes.

"Is he a Resistance member?" the first officer asked.

"Unknown, sir, but we don't think so," the lieutenant said. "He's an old acquaintance of von der Hagen. We interrogated him a couple of times right after von der Hagen founded the Resistance, but he didn't seem to know anything."

The captain looked at Allen and flashed a satisfied smile. "Well, it appears today's our lucky day. Let's go."

He walked out of the room, followed by the other officer.

Behind them, Allen growled, "Yeah, you better run."

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Liz, putting fresh bandages on Kurt's wound, asked me, "So how did you end up being best friends with William Wallace here?"

"Huh! I got that reference," said Kurt.

"We went to the same elementary and high school together, right here in New York," I said. "After my parents died, I spent most of my time in Kurt's house. You remember I once told you my father was a politician?"

"How can I forget? That's almost the only thing I know about your dad," said Liz. "You never talk about your parents, so I decided not to ask any questions."

"Good decision," said Cordelia. "Do *not* go there."

I ignored her. "Some thirty years ago, Kurt's father and mine used to work at what was then known as the United Nations. The two of them came up with the idea of the United Earth. After my dad passed away, Kurt's father vowed to continue the work in his memory. You know how that turned out."

She did. Everybody knew. It'd be hard to miss the rise and fall of the United Earth's government unless you lived in a pineapple under the sea.

I looked at my best friend, lying injured and in obvious pain on my dining table. He looked older. No wrinkles or gray hair, but his eyes were weary, and a hardness had replaced their youthful joie de vivre. I remembered how ecstatic he was when his father Thomas von der Hagen was elected as Earth's first president after a world-wide election some three years ago. The whole world rejoiced. We all thought humanity had finally put its destructive tendencies aside and was ready to unleash its full potential. It was a global party from Sao Paulo to Tehran to Cape Town, Paris, Sydney and San Francisco. The Unification was going to start a glorious era of peace, cooperation, advancement and economic development for the human race that would last forever.

It lasted less than a year.

Thomas's fatal mistake was to appoint General Graham Zheng, an influential American general of Chinese descent, as the director of SCTU. Right under Thomas's nose, General Zheng gathered the most ruthless people on the planet around him and turned SCTU into an uncontrollable monster.

The dream of lasting peace on a united Earth died when Zheng put a bomb in Thomas's car, killing both Kurt's parents. Zheng executed all the United Earth's high-ranking government officials, declared himself ruler of Earth, and with the army and SCTU's support butchered whoever stood in his way.

Earth's national governments quickly fell in line. With both the army and SCTU concentrated in North America, the USA and Canada didn't have a choice, and the East Asia Coalition was more than happy to support Zheng. Zheng bribed the other world powers by offering their leaders enormous economic rewards. With the major countries in the world in Zheng's pocket, the smaller countries' only option was to capitulate.

The national governments bowed down to Zheng, but ordinary citizens had a different idea. They fought back, spear-headed by Kurt and a French-Canadian former Green Beret, Allen Jonson, who used to be the Thoma's head of security. These two founded the Resistance, which later spread like wildfire all around the planet.

The Resistance wasn't a Gandhi-like pacifist movement. In the beginning, Kurt and his followers were hopelessly out-matched and out-numbered; they were a bunch of suicidal guys fighting the might of Earth's collective military and security forces. Kurt decided the only way to do this was an-eye-for-an-eye policy. He went on a rampage of political assassinations, sabotage, and general mayhem the likes of which had never been recorded in history, and he proved he was really good at it. I never understood how the mild, idealistic young man that I knew turned into a super assassin. Allen trained him, and Kurt did have some military experience—he voluntarily enlisted during the war—but he had to have a natural inclination for violence to do it so well.

After Zhang's coup, I thought about leaving the air force, but flying jet fighters was my passion, and what else was supposed to do with my life? It was the only thing I was really good at. Fortunately, the air force wasn't involved in the battle with the Resistance; that was the Security and Counter-Terrorism Unit's job. If one day we were asked to bomb a Resistance stronghold, I'd walk away, court-martial or not. That was my red line. Since the coup, the air force's main function had been to stop national governments from thinking about secession,

which would've caused another war, so I'd convinced myself by staying in the air force I was promoting peace. A few months after Zheng's coup, I met Liz, and my dilemma faded in importance. The stronger our relationship became, the less I thought about leaving the air force.

And now here I was facing all these questions on the night I planned to propose. The luckiest man on the planet, that was me.

Liz, narrowing her eyes, asked me, "We've been together for a year and a half, and you never once bloody mentioned your friendship with Kurt?"

I lifted an eyebrow with a control that would make Mr. Spock proud. "How was I supposed to bring this up? 'By the way, honey, you know this terrorist guy who's killing people left, right and center? He's my best friend.'"

"I only kill the bad guys," said Kurt, color rising in his cheeks.

"Yeah. You're the Punisher," I said.

Once Kurt stopped bleeding and it looked like he was in no imminent danger, a thought rose in the back of my mind. "You saved his life. That's great, but now it's time for him to leave. If he gets caught here, both Liz's life and yours will be forfeit."

But where was he supposed to go? Out on the street swarming with security forces? He was my best friend, and I still felt guilty for leaving him alone in the first place. Plus, there was no way Liz would allow an injured man to be sent to certain death, whatever the consequences.

It was Kurt's turn to tell us how he had ended up in my house. "I'd been after Palermo for nearly two years—"

Liz and I asked together, "Who's Palermo?"

Kurt rolled his eyes, then sighed and said, "Cordelia?"

"Nobody important," she said. "Really. There's no reason for Jim and Liz to know him. He's only the director of SCTU and General Zheng's right-hand man."

"Tomorrow, I'm going to call the technicians and ask them to change Cordelia's personality from 'annoying' to 'docile,'" I said.

"On second thought," said Cordelia, "Palermo always works in the shadows, so there are very few people who know about him."

"He *worked* in the shadows," Kurt corrected her. "Allen and I assassinated him last night. While escaping, I was separated from Allen, and later I was shot. With no safe houses in the immediate area, I ended up here."

He talked a little more about the chase through the city streets, his evasion tactics and concern about Allen. Then Liz said she couldn't keep her eyes open anymore and retired for the rest of the night. This was probably an excuse to leave Kurt and me alone to talk and catch up.

"It's good to see you, old friend," I told Kurt, "but I honestly wish it was under less dangerous circumstances. I don't particularly wish for us to be put up against the same wall they'll put you up in front of a firing squad."

"I'm sorry, Jim, but I didn't have a choice. It was either this or passing out in the street. I feel much better though. I can go now."

He was obviously lying; he was still pale as a vampire. It made him look younger, more innocent. As much as I wanted him out of here, I wanted him alive more. "SCTU hasn't kicked

our door down yet, so I guess we're safe. You know my home's your home. You can stay as long as you want. You need to get some rest." I wiggled my index finger at him. "But if I get executed over this, I promise my ghost will haunt you for the rest of your life."

Kurt smiled. "You still crack jokes when you're nervous, I see."

"And sad, and angry, and frightened. A joke a day keeps the doctors away. Want to catch some sleep?"

"Way too excited to sleep tonight," said Kurt.

"Want some beer?"

Kurt chuckled. "Does a bear shit in the woods?"

"We don't have any Paulaners though," I said. "In our defense, we didn't expect a visit from you."

Kurt was born and raised in New York, but Thomas was from Munich. Kurt had inherited two things from his father's birthplace. One was his love for a Bavarian beer called Paulaners.

"How're Bayern Munich doing these days?" I asked.

"Europe's Champions three years in a row, and Super League quarter-finals this year. They wiped the floor with the other teams in the group stage," he said with a hint of pride in his voice.

I grabbed a few bottles of beer. We made ourselves comfortable on my not-bloodstained sofa and clanked our bottles. Sipping my beer, I said, "I can't begin to tell you how sorry I was when I heard about Janet."

Kurt's bright eyes turned dull, and he stared into the distance. "She didn't have a violent bone in her body. I don't know what I was thinking when I let her join the Resistance."

Only then did I realize his cologne smelled familiar. It was Dior Men Dangereux. I was with them when Janet gave Kurt the same brand for his nineteenth birthday ten years ago.

"So how's your love life now?" I asked.

"Have been single since Janet was killed."

"Dude! Not for nothing, but that was two years ago. You can't be planning to live like a monk for the rest of your life."

Kurt responded philosophically, "There's no place for romance in the life I've chosen. It does get lonely sometimes, but this is the only way."

"Speaking of romance, I was planning to propose tonight. Thank you for ruining my perfectly laid plans."

He looked regretful. "You can always do it tomorrow night."

I shook my head. "Nah. I want to do the dinner and dance again, so I have to wait a few days. I might do it on New Year's Eve."

"Can I see the ring?"

"It's in the bedroom under my pillow," I answered. "I hope Liz doesn't accidentally find it."

"She seems great, by the way."

"She is. You couldn't find a warmer, kinder and more caring woman. But just between you and me, we have a little bit of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde going on in here. She's super

volatile. She gets angry quickly and makes rash decisions. I know I just described all women, but —”

Kurt laughed. “That’s sexist. All women aren’t like that.”

“Since when are you an expert on women, Mr. I-Have-Had-Only-One-Relationship-In-My-Life? Anyway, as I was saying before you rudely interrupted me, you have no idea how bad she gets when she loses it.” I added, “Can I ask a super personal question?”

“Shoot.”

“How many people have you killed?”

Playing with his goatee, he thought about it for a minute. “Hard to tell, with all the gunfights, explosions, and whatnot. I can tell you this though: Including Palermo, I’ve assassinated fourteen high-ranking government officials. This should be some sort of record.”

Only half-jokingly, I said, “And how do you sleep at night?”

“Like a baby. I only kill evil bastards. My methods are brutal, and I don’t kid around, but I never kill someone who didn’t have it coming. Plus, I am doing humanity a favor.”

I stifled a laugh. “How do you figure?”

“Zheng’s regime will eventually fall. A war is coming. Keep in mind several countries didn’t want to join the Unification even when it was a democracy. Japan, France, and Germany are already up in arms. A strong dictatorship can fight for years and bring down the whole world with it. If we manage to seriously weaken it, we’ll expedite its inevitable downfall.”

“Wow! Lots of big words there. Have you practiced this speech before?”

Kurt smiled. “I tell you something else too. The tide’s turning. The way we’re going, it’s entirely possible we can topple the regime in the next couple of years ourselves, even without a war.”

I didn’t buy it. From where I was standing, Zheng’s regime was way too entrenched to fall any time soon. That was probably just wishful thinking.

Changing the subject, I asked, “Do you still play?”

Kurt used to play the piano, and he was very good at it. I was sure he could be a professional pianist if he hadn’t become a politician. He grinned. “Do you honestly think I carry a piano with me from hideout to hideout?”

Liz, having changed into jeans and t-shirt and somehow looking even sexier, joined us for breakfast. She’d just started sipping her morning coffee when Kurt said, “It’s time for me to go.”

Liz and I protested at the same time. “Absolutely not! Are you crazy? In the state you are in, you’ll faint before taking five steps. You need rest. It’s not safe out there.”

Kurt looked at the two of us in surprise. “I expected Jim to react in this way, but I must say I’m touched by how much Elizabeth cares about me, given that we’ve just met.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” I said. “It isn’t actually about you. Liz is sort of obsessed with doing the right thing.”

Liz laughed and punched me in the arm.

“I really have to go. I’ve set up a time and place to meet up with other members of the Resistance. If I stay any longer, I’ll lose the chance to contact them for a while.”

I had no idea if he was telling the truth or wanted to avoid jeopardizing us any further.

Kurt put on his black trench coat, holstered both his machine pistols and shook my hand. “Thanks for everything. Maybe next time we meet we won’t be living under Zheng’s dictatorship.”

I answered, “Who knows? If Zheng does go, maybe there’ll be another President von der Hagen in office.”

He hugged Liz. “It was a pleasure meeting you. Jim told me about your charity organization. I’ll be making a hefty donation soon unless you don’t accept a terrorist’s money.”

Elizabeth beamed and flashed her dazzling smile. “Be careful, Kurt.”

Kurt smiled back. “Careful is my middle name. How do you think I’ve survived this long? Don’t worry. They’ll never catch me.”

“Jim?” said Cordelia.

“Yes?”

“Something’s wrong,” she said. “I’ve just found out someone has been tampering with one of my external cameras’ feed.”

“Which camera?” I asked.

“The one covering the front door.”

With a deafening blast, my house’s door exploded inwards. Dust and smoke filled half of the living room.

A cold chill grabbed my heart, and I was rooted to the spot for a second.

Kurt didn’t miss a beat. He pushed Liz behind a sofa, shouted, “Jim! Get down,” and drew both his weapons. Two black-clad SCTU soldiers rushed in. Kurt shot them both. The sound of gunshots was ear-splitting.

*We’re so screwed.*

I jumped behind the sofa where Liz was hiding. She grabbed my hand and despite the fear in her eyes calmly asked, “What’re we going to do?”

My ears still ringing because of the explosion, I scanned the room, keeping my head down. Kurt hit another soldier. His ammunition couldn’t last forever. He took cover behind another sofa, the one that had his blood on it. Several bullets ripped through the sofa. It wasn’t having a very good day.

All the stories I’d heard about the torture and abuse people suffered in Zheng’s prisons rushed back to me, sending a chill down my spine. The image of Liz in a prison jumpsuit hit me like an eighty-ton tank. A woman as free-spirited and full of life as Liz wouldn’t survive long in prison, and that was if the SCTU soldiers didn’t shoot us first. The last thought made me shudder. I shielded Liz with my body, thinking feverishly, trying to find a way out of this mess or at least a way to save Liz.

Someone threw a gas grenade into the room.

I had an air force-issued M-25 handgun with two extra magazines in the closet in my bedroom. There were more soldiers surrounding us than the number of bullets I had, but anything was better than lying here in my living room waiting to die. Plus, if Kurt and I were both armed, there was a small chance we could create an opportunity for Liz to save herself. That way, at least there was hope.

A thought popped up in the back of my head. "Hope's a dangerous thing."

*Oh, shut up!*

I looked in Kurt's direction to see if he could cover me while I ran to the bedroom to get my gun. He was looking at me. In his gray eyes, through the smoke, dust, and gas, I saw remorse, guilt, and the decision not to be captured alive by his enemies.

My blood running cold, I shouted, "Kurt! No!"

Kurt stood up, sorrow clouding his features. He gave me a sad half-smile, dusted his trench coat off, sent me a small salute with one of his machine pistols, and with fire bursting out of both his guns' barrels, started walking towards the door.

I hesitated for a second, then I ground my teeth and ran out of my hiding spot, planning to tackle Kurt and stop him from committing suicide-by-cop. A hail of bullets hit the floor inches from me. I had no choice but to jump back behind the sofa. Helpless, I watched as Kurt, still shooting, disappeared in thick fog-like gas.

Liz called out, "Jim!"

I turned my head to find her on the floor, eyes wide with horror, clutching her chest and throat. Only then did I realize I had a hard time breathing.

The bastards had gassed us.

Watching Liz slowly suffocate made my whole body start shaking. My breath ragged and harsh, I crawled to her, held her in my trembling arms, looked into her dark eyes and said, "Everything's gonna be all right. I promise I'll get you out of this; you hear me?" I was desperate for her to believe me, though I knew she was too smart for that.

Her face pinched with fear, Liz clutched my arm, holding on tight, and managed to whisper between coughs, "Save yourself. Go now. Leave me here."

Go where, exactly?

She closed her eyes. Her body shuddered then went limp.

I pulled her closer, face buried in her thick, sweet-smelling hair, and said, "I didn't give you your ring."

It was at that moment when I realized I was about to lose everything. My best friend was probably dead. My love was dying. I wouldn't last much longer myself. Despair swallowed me up whole. Every single muscle in my body tightened, and I started hyperventilating, partly due to the gas and partly because of the terror. I felt like I was being pulled into a black vortex, and resistance was indeed futile.

I gently lay Liz's motionless body on the floor, feeling blank inside. I covered my nose and mouth with my shirt, held my breath, and used the increasingly thick gas as cover to run to the bedroom. I got my M-25, loaded it, hid behind the bedroom door frame, controlled my shaking hands with sheer willpower, aimed and shot at the silhouettes I could barely make out in the living room. The gunshots echoed deafeningly in the confines of my bedroom.

I hit a soldier who went down screaming in pain. Another soldier shouted, "Man down! We've got a man down!" and ran to the side of his fallen comrade. I drew my lips back in a snarl and shot him too. The bullet punched its way through his neck, causing a gaping hole. He fell to the ground, a pool of blood forming around him.

*I shot the sheriff, and I shot the deputy.*

Another soldier, wearing a black gas mask, stepped out of gas and smoke less than ten feet to my left. He was pointing a deadly looking assault rifle at my head. I reacted a fraction of a second faster than he did and shot him in the forehead, right where the Mark of Cain would've been. The sight of his brain splattering all over my living room bookshelves filled me with a primal, savage satisfaction.

A bullet grazed my right thigh. A sharp pain lanced through my body. It was like being stabbed with something white hot. My knee buckled, and I fell to the floor, grabbing my injured leg. I hid behind the door frame for a few moments and took several deep breaths.

"Major Harrison!" someone shouted. "Put your weapon down and walk out with your hands above your head. This is your last chance."

"We know you're injured," said a woman. "We're ready to offer medical assistance."

These guys were trying to good-cop-bad-cop me.

"I would rather suffer the end of Romulus a thousand times. I would rather die in agony, than accept assistance from you," I yelled back.

"What?" said the woman. She sounded confused.

"What's Romulus?" asked the man. "Is it a code-name for the Resistance's headquarters?"

I burst into hiccupping laughter, which somehow made my bullet wound's pain more excruciating. I didn't expect STCU goons to understand *Star Trek* references. "Yes, it is, and you'll never find it." I wished I could see the look on their faces when they ran Romulus through STCU's databases.

"That's it!" yelled the man. "I'll count to ten, then we'll come in, guns blazing. One, two . . ."

"Dramatic much?" I asked.

Resting the back of my head against the wall, I looked at my blood-drenched pants and thought about bandaging the bullet wound, but it sounded like a waste of time. I'd be dead in a few seconds anyway. I'd always imagined I'd draw my last breath in a jet fighter's cockpit during an aerial battle, not in my own bedroom in a *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* style shoot-out. I looked around my bedroom one last time, thought about Liz, bit my lip, and inserted another magazine into my gun.

I shouted, "Say 'auf Wiedersehen' to your Nazi balls!" rolled on the floor and pulled the trigger several times at a fast pace. The M-25 thundered. Enemy bullets whizzed past my head.

## Chapter Two

Commander Tarq watched his daughter walk towards him and both his hearts swelled with pride. Varina looked dashing in her white fleet uniform. All around, the Akaki war machine moved into high gear to defend against the incoming Xortaag invasion. Hundreds of shuttles and cargo ships were coming and going in preparation for the imminent battle. The sight of Alora Planetary Defense Force soldiers running around trying to be helpful made Tarq chuckle.

When she got close enough, Tarq tilted his head forward, and his two front antennae touched Varina's, sending a warm sensation throughout his body.

"Look at you, the fleet's flagship's new helmsman," Tarq grinned. "You could not possibly have asked for a more prestigious assignment in your first year of service."

Varina narrowed her eyes. "You did not have anything to do with it, did you?"

"Of course not." Tarq tried to look offended. "Just in case you have forgotten, I am the commander of Special Operations Force and have nothing to do with the fleet."

"Really? 'I have nothing to do with the fleet?' You are going with that?" asked Varina. "You think I do not know *everyone* shakes in their boots when they hear your name?"

"I do not have a clue why. I am such a nice, witty and likable person!"

Above them, a space fighter nearly crashed into a cargo ship. The pilot avoided a collision by changing course in the last second. Tarq sighed. One day, the fleet personnel's inexperience would cause a serious problem. Fortunately, not today.

Pointing at the cargo ships and shuttles, Varina asked, "Is all this really necessary? Surely *Invincible* can deal with the Xortaag fleet on her own."

Tarq shrugged. "We figured as long as we were going to war for the first time in centuries, we should make it an overwhelming show of force. Plus, why not go all the way and put an end to this plague that has infected the universe for too long?"

“So for once I am off to save the galaxy, and you have to stay behind and watch,” said Varina.

“Do not get cocky, young lady.” Tarq feigned indignation. “Who do you think has devised our overall defensive strategy against the Xortaags?”

“I do not know. The fleet admirals?”

They both burst into laughter.

“Those guys cannot find their own antennae unless someone smarter holds their hands,” said Tarq.

Varina laughed harder.

“And I am not going to stay behind,” added Tarq. “I will be on board the command ship. There is no way I would miss our first battle in several generations.”

“My shuttle is ready,” said Varina. Their antennae touched one more time, and she walked away. Tarq waited until she waved goodbye and disappeared inside the shuttle.

Tarq went back to the Akaki command center. He sat at his station and brought up a holographic image of *Invincible*. Tarq had denied it when Varina asked, but he had pulled a lot of strings to get his daughter on that ship. With the enemy fleet getting closer to Alora, he was certain the safest place for a helmsman right now was the bridge of *Invincible*. Varina’s old ship, *Dauntless*, was a fine vessel, but she did not have a fraction of *Invincible*’s firepower. Given how superior their technology was—The Xortaags did not even have starships, only single-seat space fighters—*Dauntless* was not in any real danger, but Tarq had decided to be cautious.

Tarq looked at *Invincible* with bright eyes. Dwarfing all other capital vessels in the galaxy, *Invincible* was an awe-inspiring starship. An electroplated gold layer covered her sleek, stretched oval hull. The starship’s twin side-engines propelled the craft forward, lighting a bright blue flare behind her. Alone, *Invincible* packed more firepower than the rest of the Akaki fleet combined: She was armed with several enormous, multi-barreled laser turrets, two blaster cannons powerful enough to vaporize a small moon, a few hundred missile launchers, and an impenetrable laser-based point-defense weapon system. Tarq’s people had built her to be both magnificent and invulnerable; a giant, lethal killing machine serving as the embodiment of the Akakies’ unparalleled technological superiority in the universe.

Tarq had dinner with *Invincible*’s captain a few evenings ago. During the meal, the captain bragged, “If the galaxy’s best engineers combine history’s greatest achievements in military invention into a singular war machine, such a distinguished creation will pale into embarrassed insignificance beside my ship’s awesome ingenuity and scientific superiority.”

Tarq chuckled. The captain had never participated in a war. The Akakies had lived in peace and prosperity for centuries, devoting their time and energy to art, enlightenment, technological advancements, and pulling pranks on each other. They were fondly known as galaxy’s pranksters, and it was a point of personal pride for Tarq that he had a reputation for pulling off elaborate and sophisticated pranks. They lacked both the experience and the aptitude for war, but it was a moot point. With the Akaki science and technology light years ahead of the rest of the universe, nobody dared mess with them, and the few times that an enemy was stupid

enough to try, Tarq's Special Operations Force had dealt with them with no need to involve the fleet.

*Well, if the Xortaags want to commit collective suicide, we are happy to oblige,* thought Tarq.

\* \* \*

The Xortaag fleet attacked three days later.

Aboard the Akaki command ship, Tarq touched the holographic display in front of him and zoomed on *Invincible*. With bulging eyes, he watched a crimson single-seat space fighter leading a few dozen similar but dark gray craft evade *Invincible*'s weapons and hammer her with energy bolts, causing dazzling explosions. Tarq gulped and clutched at his chest. The Xortaags' small space fighters were a lot more maneuverable and had much better weaponry than the Akakies' intelligence, gathered by Tarq's own agency, suggested. That triggered an ominous realization, given force by his recognition of who was piloting the blood-red vessel. Tarq knew that pilot. Everyone in the universe knew him.

He slumped onto his seat and buried his head in his hands. Everything he thought he knew about the enemy fleet's capabilities and tactics was wrong. He had been deceived. No, he had been a *fool*.

*Even so, this is impossible,* thought Tarq. *Invincible* was capable of unleashing a world-killing array of heavy weaponry. A thousand space fighters could not possibly be a match for her.

It was as if the pilot of the crimson space fighter heard Tarq's thoughts and decided to prove him wrong. The enemy vessel spit a deadly stream of laser bolts at *Invincible*, bringing about more explosions. Several sections of the starship were in flames.

The *Invincible* lit the space with countless white-hot energy bolts and filled it with thousands of missiles. The Xortaag vessels, and especially the devilish blood-red space fighter, zigzagged through the missiles and energy bolts with such skill that it made Tarq's blood boil with jealousy. One of the starship's blaster cannons came to life. It missed the targets and annihilated one of their own fleet's vessels instead.

*What is the point of building the most advanced weapons in the galaxy if the people using them are so damned incompetent?*

Biting his fingers, Tarq pictured Varina sitting at *Invincible*'s helm, desperately fighting for her life. He cursed under his breath and asked his assistant, "How did the Xortaag ships suddenly become so powerful? I personally observed their last two campaigns . . . Oh!"

Tarq paused for a second. "We saw what they wanted us to see."

Tarq's assistant, Lieutenant Barook, said, "My thoughts exactly." He pointed at the red fighter. "It seems you have finally met your match."

Staring at the crimson space fighter with burning hatred in his eyes, Tarq murmured, "General Maada! I should have known defeating him would not be easy."

The contents of the file Tarq himself had prepared about General Maada flashed through his mind. Maada was the Xortaags' legendary warrior and military genius. The mere sight of his

crimson space fighter sent shivers down the collective spine of space-faring species throughout the galaxy. As the commander of the fleet, there was no need for Maada to lead the attack personally. He could have stayed safely in Xortaag's command ship and directed the assault from there. Instead, the General always deputized implementing strategy and coordinating the fleet to others and rushed to the frontline. Under Maada's command, the Xortaags had conquered around a hundred planets, including a few far more technologically advanced civilizations, exterminating all their inhabitants, killing billions of sentient beings.

Underestimating the general had proved to be a fatal mistake.

"Stop biting your fingers. You are going to leave blood stains everywhere," said Barook.

Tarq looked down at his hands, and sure enough, he saw dark blue blood drops—drawn by his sharp teeth—on his fingertips. He wiped his fingers on the top part of one of his four legs and kept staring at his station's holographic display, desperately hoping for a miracle to save his daughter.

A frightened voice announced, "Here they come again!"

The crimson space fighter and its wingmen attacked *Invincible*, laser cannons blazing. Maada's vessel dived at high speed, pulled its nose up at the last moment, and did a firing run close to the starship, hitting her repeatedly from bow to stern. The gray space fighters followed it, raining deadly laser bolts on the Akaki ship. Energy bolt after energy bolt tore into her, scoring devastating hits. As soon as the Xortaag vessels veered off, a massive ball of multihued fire engulfed *Invincible*, and in a flash, she blew up into millions of minute glowing shards shimmering in dark space.

*Five thousand sailors, vaporized. Just like that.*

*And Varina.*

The thought of his daughter made Tarq feel his hearts were about to give out. His only child, who could not wait to grow up, was dead. Varina, who loved his pranks, and who never got tired of listening to the stories of how her father had saved the galaxy multiple times, was gone, and it was Tarq's fault.

The command ship was under attack. Someone shouted, "Brace for impact!" The vessel shook violently. Tarq did not pay any attention. He stared at what was left of Varina's ship, and overwhelming grief cut through him like a thousand sharp knives. Trying to use physical pain to block his mental anguish, he grabbed his two front antennae and pulled them so hard the agony made his vision blur. That worked. For a brief second.

His PDD beeped. It was a video message from Varina. With terror in her eyes, she said, "Father, we did our best," and the message cut into static.

His daughter's last thought before being murdered by the Xortaags was how she had disappointed him.

The thought made his gut churn. He twisted his antennae as hard as he could. The severe pain pushed him to the brink of losing consciousness.

Barook approached him from behind, said, "This does not help," and gently opened his fingers one by one, making him let go of his antennae.

A fleet lieutenant announced, "The fleet is retreating."

That was a diplomatic way of putting it: The Akaki ships were zooming away from the Xortaags at maximum speed. Despite the tragic situation, Tarq could not stifle a bitter chuckle.

“This is no ‘retreat,’ you moron,” Tarq murmured under his breath, his voice so faint only Barook could hear him. “This is the worst every-Akaki-for-himself, save-your-own-exoskeleton, run-for-your-life tail-turning in history.”

And the Akaki ships’ crew could not even do that right. A starship veered off its course and ran into another one. Both ships blew up with a spectacular explosion. Tarq noticed the first ship to escape to safety was *Dauntless*. He covered his face in his hands and groaned. Barook put his hand around Tarq’s shoulder in silence.

An explosion shook the bridge. Tarq looked at the damage reports coming in. For a moment, he wished Maada would come and finish what he has started. But them who would avenge Varina?

An admiral, wearing a white uniform almost identical to Tarq’s but with fleet insignia, shouted into his communication device, “You cowards! Where do you think you are going? Get back in there. I will have all of you court-martialed for this!”

“It seems they are more afraid of Maada than you, Admiral,” Tarq said, bleary-eyed.

The admiral took his frustration out on Tarq. With both pairs of his antennae standing erect in pure rage, he yelled, “And you, Commander Tarq. This is all your fault. You are supposed to be the greatest strategist ever lived. All this was your plan.”

Tarq bared his teeth for one second, but he managed to control himself. Biting the Navy general’s head off would not help anyone. He took a deep breath, steadied himself and replied, “And I paid the price for my mistake. Or has it escaped your attention that I have just lost my only daughter?”

“I have to point out the command ship is also, eh, retreating,” said Barook.

The admiral froze, then he spun on his heels, ran to the ship’s captain and started arguing with him.

Barook said, “It is safe to say you have made a lot of new enemies today.”

With Varina gone, and their extinction in sight, that did not sound like such a big deal right now.

“I am the commander of Special Operations Force. Making enemies is literally in my job description,” Tarq answered.

“Not to mention your affinity for playing practical jokes on highly influential people,” said Barook. “You remember what you did to that poor admiral a while ago, don’t you?”

Tarq chuckled bitterly. “You honestly think I remember everyone I have ever played a prank on?”

Tarq looked around the bridge. All other officers were glued to their various screens, watching what was happening in disbelief. He knew they were all thinking the same thing he was: Their catastrophic failure here probably meant the end of their species in the very near future. Unless they—more specifically Tarq himself, since he was the Akakies’ chief strategist—came up with a brilliant plan and did it fast, they were about to suffer the same dreadful fate as

the other races who had been in the Xortaags' way: enslavement for a few generations, followed by a comprehensive genocide, leaving every man, woman and youngling dead.

Tarq silently vowed, *not if I have anything to do with it.*

\* \* \*

General Maada kicked the conference hall's door open.

The four guards stationed inside the hall made no attempt to stop the general. They saluted, stared ahead and avoided eye contact.

"Wise choice," growled Maada. "I am certain you remember what happened the last time I stormed this hall."

The officer in charge, trepidation written all over his face, approached Maada. "General, with all due respect, His Highness is in the middle of an important meeting—"

Maada did not even bother to look at him. He drew his sidearm and shot the officer in the foot. The man made no sound. He folded, grabbed his foot and toppled to the floor. The smell of burned flesh filled Maada's nostrils. The guards did not move an inch and made no attempt to help their superior officer.

*Pussies!*

Deep inside Maada's brain, Crown Prince Mushgaana's voice said, "That was a bit too much."

Maada's anger coiled in his stomach. He had repeatedly asked Mushgaana to stay out of his head. He felt violated when Mushgaana, or any other members of the uniquely talented royal family, entered his mind and read his intimate thoughts.

Clenching his fists, Maada approached a big table in the middle of the conference hall, where Mushgaana and five high-ranking diplomats who had just arrived from Tangaar were sitting. He ignored everyone and addressed the prince. "I have just heard you have accepted the Akakies' peace proposal."

Mushgaana frowned. "Yes, I did."

"This is stupid," said Maada, raising his voice. "Have you lost your mind? We have the initiative now. We must push forward until we reach Kanoor."

One of the diplomats, a well-dressed young woman, sprung out of her seat. "You dare address His Highness in this manner?"

Maada glared at the woman. Nobody talked to him like that. His hand was moving towards his sidearm when another diplomat told the first one, "What are you doing? This is General Maada."

The woman's eyes widened, and she paled. She stuttered, "My apologies, General. In my defense, you look completely different in the news feeds."

Mushgaana laughed. "The general has no time for trivial matters like newsfeeds and interviews. We hired an actor to do that. But we did not want to scare people, so we decided to find someone without that scary beard and those terrifying scars."

The diplomats forced a laugh. Maada touched the scar on his left cheek. He was loyal to Mushgaana, but in moments like this shooting him in the face sounded very appealing.

Mushgaana continued, “Still, we cannot have you insult the commander of our fleet, can we?”

The diplomats sitting next to the woman pulled their chairs away from her. She leaned on the table to support her weight, lips shivering and face white. Everyone knew what was coming.

Maada stared at the crown prince, trying to get his attention, and thought, *Your Highness, if you want to melt people’s brains for entertainment, it’s your right, but I respectfully request you do not do it on my account.*

Anger flashed in Mushgaana’s baby blue eyes, and for a second Maada wondered if the crown prince might hurt him. They had been in many successful campaigns together and formed a close friendship. Mushgaana was surely accustomed to his outbursts and did not take them personally. Then the general remembered Mushgaana could read his thoughts, and he blushed so hotly his olive skin became the same color as his fabled space fighter.

Mushgaana chuckled, obviously amused by his discomfort. The woman sank back into her seat, a palm pressed to her heart.

“The peace treaty is a ruse,” said Mushgaana as if nothing had happened. “You know the Akakies are technologically much more advanced than we are, and our intelligence suggests the fleet we destroyed on Alora’s orbit was probably one-third of their total forces. We caught them by surprise this time, but the next encounter will not be so easy. The treaty will give us the opportunity to do three things: reverse-engineer a few of the ships we have captured and build a new fleet, attack easier targets, and replenish and expand our current fleet. Once we are better prepared, we will invade the Akaki’s homeworld.”

“Do you have a new target designated?” asked Maada.

With a flick of his wrist, Mushgaana brought up a holographic image. “Right there. The blue planet, third from the sun. And it is only the first of seven targets we have identified and are planning to hit one after another. Let me finish this meeting. After that, you and I must sit together and start planning our new campaign.”

Maada glared at the crown prince. Mushgaana should not have made the decision without consulting him first, but as the crown prince, it was his prerogative.

“Before you leave, let me share a military secret with these gentlemen and the lady,” said Mushgaana. “A decade ago, when the confrontation with the Akakies started to look inevitable, General Maada figured they might be watching us. In our last three military campaigns, he made our fleet perform far below their ability. We took some losses in those battles, but it was worth catching the Akakies with their pants down.”

The diplomats looked at Maada with admiration in their eyes. That made him uncomfortable. He bowed his head, turned and walked toward the hall’s entrance. The officer he had shot earlier was receiving medical attention. Maada stopped by him and said, “Sorry about that.”

Grimacing in pain, the officer replied, “Not a problem, General. It is not the first time, and to be honest, it is kind of an honor.”

Outside the hall, Maada rubbed the scar on his face and thought, *I should really learn how to control my temper.*

He nearly jumped out of his socks when, in his brain, Mushgaana said, “Have you ever considered therapy?”