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THE GRASS IS GREENER ON THE OTHER SIDE

“How do you feel, Ruan?”

“Anxious,” Ruan replied over the helicopter intercom, the digital buzz hiding the intensity of his emotion. This was his first anti-smuggling operation.

“Real combat is nothing like training, Son,” his father, seated next to him, said for the thousandth time. “Not with 3D helmets, not with laser guns. But you will be all right.”

The squad members all gave him a hearty thumbs up. Most of them were his father’s age, highly experienced hunters, with hundreds of hours spent chasing the Deniers near the bioborder. To share the seat on a helicopter with them made Ruan feel incompetent, despite his outstanding academy record.

He wasn’t afraid of the enemy. He was terrified of letting his father down.

The landscape flitted in a roll of blurred colors, tundra brown, filthy ice, lethargic green, russet scrub, hazy blue. Ruan had seen detailed imagery of the Chaos, but this was the first time he found himself outside the highly controlled, precise, pure world he called home. A world normal people called home.

“Let me tell you a story, boy,” the squad sergeant piped in. “It all started in the late 20th century…”

Ruan sighed. He wasn’t in the mood for fighters’ melancholy, for that ever so slightly distorted view of history the way soldiers had it. Ruan had read all the books and listened to all the lectures, and he knew all there was to know. He did not plan on respecting his foe.

There was nothing to respect in people who tried to smuggle toxins into his world. There was nothing noble about men who tried to ruin his way of life, to destroy the delicate balance of his home.

As far as he was concerned, the smugglers were targets for his rifle’s scope, and that was it.

“27… 28… 29… 30.”

Ruan slowly raised his face from the sanitizing fluid. It burned his skin, but he had to

be sure. He might be harboring a disease or an infection that the normal world had eradicated a hundred years ago.

He wiped his face and looked at himself in the mirror.

His gums were bleeding from flossing, and his lips were shriveled from the disinfectant solution he had injected. The air around him smelled like chlorine and mint.

His mind replaying the encounter with the smuggler girl, Ruan walked back into his simple soldier's bedroom, bright white except for his gear, currently sealed in a cleaning machine, undergoing treatment.

He checked his calendar. 15:30, he had the mission debriefing. 16:30, his first kill trauma appointment with a combat psychiatrist. 17:00, his second kill trauma appointment with another psychiatrist. 17:30, yoghurt enema. 18:00, yoga. 19:00, gym.

He walked to the door. He put his hand on the breathing kit, and his hand trembled as it touched the silver capsule of carbon-dioxide, attached to the mixer. The little dial still read two thirds, and he had enough for until at least next week.

He put the mask on, and left.

"Scanners show a scattering of human targets, seven kilometers, bearing 021 degrees," the mission leader in the isolated flight cockpit announced on the intercom.

"This is it, Son," his father emphasized.

Ruan focused on his routine checks. Gun, ammunition, safety, scope, batteries. His helmet, his breathing kit. He had already made sure all his gear was working and properly calibrated, but there was solace in repetition. He liked the predictability of the outcome.

The helicopter side doors growled open. A violent gust of wind rushed into the helicopter, shaking the craft, making them sway, tugging at their uniforms, lifting their feet off the perforated floor. The temperature dropped instantly, and the large red readout above their heads plunged deep below zero. Strange, Ruan thought, that the world affected by global warming would have so much snow and ice. And even more so on the side occupied by the Deniers.

"Take positions," the squad commander ordered.

Giving his harness a last tug, Ruan leaned out of the helicopter. He wanted to blink

and squint instinctively, but the helmet kept the world away from his face. He was breathing a perfect mixture of breathable air, and the visor blocked all harmful radiation. He was safe from harm.

What his protective gear couldn't help with was the buffeting.

His shoulder slammed into the side of the fuselage, then he detached suddenly, violently, and would have dropped his rifle had it not been secured to his harness. A fresh fist of condensed air bobbed him up, then down. He had trained in the helicopter simulator for many hours, but nothing really compared to real winds, deadly winds, trying to snag him away.

The pilot lowered the craft and slowed, assuming a standard strafing run. Two men to each side, they would engage targets in the front sector, where it was easier to hit. Being right handed, Ruan was on the starboard.

He shouldered the rifle and waited for the target feed from the mission leader. Soon enough, he saw them. Five… six… nine human shapes, lighter shades of gray on a monochrome display, moving through the sparse spruce forest, spread out. They were still too far to engage, but that gave Ruan plenty of time to aim. It would be a shame if he missed his first shot. He tried to forget about his father right then.

The smugglers were cunning. They used dozens of methods to evade detection. They had countermeasures for ground sensors, air sensors, satellites, cameras. It was a never-ending battle, technology and skill locked in a lethal wrestle. This enemy team had almost managed to get to the bioborder undetected—until an underground listening station had picked up human voices. Now Ruan was about to get baptized in combat.

He felt no anger, no hate for the deluded humans living on the other side. Truth to be told, he pitied them. He pitied their primitive, anarchistic ways, he pitied their disregard for science and fact, and he wished they would embrace the future. But for all his sympathy, he was wildly protective of his world. He wouldn't let smugglers bring in poison.

Safety off.

"How do you feel, Ruan?" the doctor asked.

"Defiled," he admitted. He had spent the last three hours undergoing medical examinations.

The doctor nodded. "We shall have to book you an appointment with a psychiatrist. Post enemy contact treatment and counseling."

“Doctor?”

“Yes, Ruan?”

“Will I live?”

“The checks indicate no viral or bacterial infection. The damage from exposure you suffered in the Chaos atmosphere is minimal. However, I would still recommend a lung purification session, and you might want to adjust your diet for a week or two, with more fiber and protein.”

It was Ruan’s turn to nod. “Thank you, Doctor.”

He was just about to shoot when the enemy started running. They had heard the helicopter. Breathing evenly, Ruan aimed and aimed, tracing a dashing target over small ridges and tiny dips in the ground, around trees and rocks, down dried up and frozen river beds. It took patience and focus, but he managed to keep the crosshairs steady on the leftmost target.

He fired. The white blob of heat on the display stopped moving.

“Well done,” someone cheered.

He wanted to shout his thrill until they had to mute him on the intercom, but there were still eight more targets to kill. He pushed his excitement down and focused.

The helicopter rocked. A wild, sudden drop, and Ruan’s rifle slammed into the hardened visor of his helmet. The aircraft spun a quarter of a circle, and Ruan lost aim. The Deniers vanished outside his envelope, behind the craft’s double tail.

“Gents, I’m afraid we have sustained damage to the main rotor,” the pilot announced calmly. “I will have to land.”

Ruan hesitated only a second before he pulled himself into the rear cabin. There was no indication the helicopter was damaged, no smoke, no alarm, no fires or shouting. But the pilot was a veteran, and he knew what he was doing.

Ruan waited.

Old, dirty snow blasted up as the downwash of the rotor disturbed the chaotic landscape. Ruan waited for the harness light to go off.

The commander clicked his tongue to draw their attention. “Squad, we continue on

foot. Be careful. This is their turf, and they know what they are doing. They also seem to be armed with heavy weapons. Don't take any chances please. Switch to in-helmet systems, now. Make sure your positioning beacons are working. Half circle pattern and back, half a kilometer out. Now, good luck."

"Good lu—"

"How do you feel, Ruan?"

"Angry, Dad."

"Why is that? The mission?"

"Yes, the mission."

"It was a good mission, Son. You don't need to feel bad about it. We killed five of them, with no casualties on our side. You had two kills yourself, and that's mighty impressive for a first combat sortie. And you almost managed to kill a third, despite your helmet and gun malfunctions. I am proud of you."

Ruan sighed. "I know, Dad."

"So what's the matter, Son?"

"I got confused. I wasn't focused."

"If every one of us told you about all the times we had our mistakes, confusions, fears, terrors, and bungles, you'd finish your military service twice over before we got to tell you the half of it."

Ruan grimaced. "It's not that, Dad. It's…"

The landing was hard.

Raw pain jolted up his buttocks, into his spine, his neck. His head banged into something—or someone. The helicopter interior was flashing red. The noise was deafening. Anything that could ring rang, low tone, high tone, low tone, high tone. Then, the sound went away in a sudden pop, and there was a single, empty note in its place, drilling into the center of his brain. It was pitch black. More pain.

"How do you feel, Ruan?"

"Disoriented." Ruan waited for the pinging in his ears to subside.

“Ruan?” He waved and nodded. “The rendezvous is—BLIP—will be there. Got it?”

Ruan tapped his helmet. Maybe the comms were damaged, maybe his ears refused to work. There was thick, oily smoke gushing from the fuselage, curling up and away in the strong wind. They would not be flying back in the same craft.

“Spread—BLIP.”

Ruan stared at the commander? “Go? Go?”

“Yes! Go!”

Ruan edged out of the damaged helicopter, and was sprinting the moment his boots touched the gravelly ice, running toward the forest. His breathing system automatically adjusted the mixture level, and the metab-unit injecting chemicals into his blood stream, keeping his lungs open and his muscles rested.

The pinging faded. His head cleared.

The filthy, spoiled world of Chaos unfolded before him. Ugly, wild, unpredictable. True, they had the sky the same color as back home, but it was polluted with carbon-dioxide and methane. The trees had needles and the shrubbery even grew flowers here and there, but Ruan figured they were all acidic and drenched in heavy metals. Why anyone would subject themselves to life in such conditions baffled his intelligence and intuition.

A bird exploded from behind some thorny bushes, startling him. Then, someone was firing at him.

He ducked, rolled, hid behind a lichen-eaten rock. Shards of stone exploded around him. He waited, then very slowly, burrowed into the nearby brush, and aimed. There was a man kneeling next to a tree, maybe four hundred meters away. An easy shot while airborne, effortless when prone and steady.

He fired. The second smuggler dropped dead.

Ruan was up and running again. He saw the third target, aimed, fired, missed. He missed! He bit off a curse as he gave chase. Well, maybe his arms were a little shaky. After all, he had been running for quite a while now.

The target was zigzagging between trees, quick, small, nimble. He would stop now and then and take a pot shot back at Ruan. Even so, Ruan had to duck or take cover because even random shots could kill. He had read about the probability of an unaimed shot fatality in close-range engagements during his second year at the

academy. It was 1 in every 19.33 million bullets for small arms fire.

There was a loud beeping noise in his helmet—it was a warning from the positioning system. He had stepped out of the agreed-upon hunt radius.

Conscious of the risk of getting injured during the first mission but consumed with the burning need to please his father and his friends, Ruan pursued, treading through snow and gorse. The Denier was getting tired, he noted. The distance shortened. Soon enough, Ruan would take the sho—

Suddenly the sky was utterly blue above him.

He was lying on his back.

I’m shot, he thought, sad statistics running through his head. No, he wasn’t shot. Something had just tackled him.

Then he felt the cold on his face.

It took him a moment to understand what had happened. He was exposed!

Ruan rolled over, fighting panic and disgust. His helmet lay in the snow just behind him, the air tubes torn, snagged around a low branch. He let out a shuddering breath.

What now? Continue the chase? Head back to the helicopter?

His training kicked in. First, compose yourself. You won’t die. The Chaos air is contaminated with carbon-dioxide and methane. Prolonged exposure may lead to severe health problems, but it will not kill a human outright.

Second, finish the damn mission!

Hot breath steaming between his gritted teeth, Ruan rose, anger replacing confusion and revulsion. He could handle this impure environment for a while. He would get this job done.

He started running again, inhaling the frigid atmosphere of the Chaos.

Soon enough, he was panting, wheezing, spitting, a bubble of snot tickling the tip of his nose, refusing to come out. Running in exposed, contaminated air was difficult. But the Denier seemed just as affected. He was only twenty or thirty meters away. No longer capering or taunting, rifle held low, plowing doggedly through slush and thorn.

Ruan knelt, steadied his breathing and aimed. He pulled the trigger.

The gun malfunctioned.

Looking closely, he found the barrel jammed with spruce needles and hard ice. Snarling, he slung the rifle over his shoulder. Then, with his father's spirit whipping resolve into the back of his mind, he stood on burning, rubbery legs and continued the pursuit.

An age later, he caught up with the enemy. Tripped him. They went down in a breathless grunt. Ice scratched Ruan's cheeks, made his eyes water. He wanted to puke his soul out, but his tongue was thick and swollen and raw. Fighting dry retches, he yanked his target over. The man was too exhausted to fight back.

The man was—

A woman.

He was a she.

"How do you feel, Ruan?" the doctor asked.

"Strange," he said, the pale violet lighting and the rushing water ambient noise of the psychiatrist's office increasingly irritating.

"Is it the fact you have killed men, or the fact that you have failed to kill the third smuggler?"

"Neither. I don't think about that. It's the… other thing."

"The contact with the Denier woman?"

"Yes."

"But that would point to the fact you have failed to kill her."

"My weapon malfunctioned."

"You could have killed her using your hands. Statistics show that only 1 in 6,544 women have the strength or training or both to survive such an encounter."

Ruan rose on his elbows. "Have you ever tried to kill anyone with your bare hands, Doctor?"

"This session is about you, Ruan, not about me. Projection and aggression. Perfectly

normal for post-combat trauma. I will increase your dosage of zinc and relaxants, and I will also sign you up for an aggression attenuation workshop."

"I just couldn't strangle an unarmed person, that's all."

"Is it because the enemy was of the opposite gender?"

"I don't know."

"You may also need an equality awareness workshop, too, but the nearest term available is not for two months, I'm afraid. Have you ever had thoughts or fantasies about rape?"

"What?"

"Passive denial. Noted. Do you have erectile dysfunction?"

Ruan rose from the water-filled bed. "I had better leave now, Doctor."

The girl was staring back at him, all too tanned, with bristly jet black hair and shaved temples, shiny piercings under her lip and in her cheek, and a small tattoo of a lizard on her thin, gulping neck. Her eyes were steel blue and staring at him with mad amusement.

No fear there.

Ruan pinned her arms down, waiting for his heartbeat to settle. But it just kept on hammering in his ears, red, misty gongs of nausea. His stomach threatened to punch through his spine.

She kneed him in the groin, and he'd have felt immense pain if not for his armor. Realizing he was immune she tried to wrestle away, but she was too small, too weak to shake his bulk off. Resigned, she rested her head on the snow. The piercing stare did not go away.

Ruan wondered what he should do now. Strangle her? Bash her head in? He had never trained for that. His training had never included female targets, either.

"Go ahead," the girl taunted, in an antiquated accent. "Do it."

What is it like to kill a man – a person – barehanded? Did he even dare touch her? Who knew what kind of disease she carried.

"Come on, pretty face, finish it."

Ruan blinked hard. Did she just call him pretty face? Of course, it made sense. His careful genetic grooming and immaculate, healthy living conditions would make him extremely attractive to the flawed citizens of the Chaos.

But then, the girl under him was pretty, too. Her face was oval, symmetrical, with a sharp chin. She had tiny freckles across the bridge of her nose. There was a scar on her jaw—UV exposure, Ruan thought with alarm and wonder. Yet, her hair was healthy, her teeth white and perfect.

If anyone had a pretty face, it was her. In fact, she was as beautiful as any woman in the normal world.

Now what? She still had to die.

“How do you feel, Ruan?”

“Confused.”

“Why is that?”

“I have been thinking about life recently. About human history.”

His meditation teacher rolled her eyes. “A soldier and a philosopher. Have some tea.”

“No, thank you. I was wondering… how did things go so horribly wrong?”

“Wrong?”

“There are thirteen billion people living on the other side of the bioborder. And they seem to be getting along just fine, despite the radiation and pollution and all the carcinogens in their meat. The world didn’t melt, there were no tidal waves or anything… I mean, maybe—”

“Ruan, this is exactly why we have these meditation lessons. So you can cleanse your mind of poisonous thoughts.”

“What if the Deniers have it right? What if all the measures we’ve taken to protect ourselves are meaningless?”

“Ruan, what are you talking about?”

“Like, why do we use carbon dioxide capsules?”

“Because that’s how you get the gas, Ruan.”

“But plants need it, too.”

“And that is why we have the greenhouse zones.”

Ruan rubbed his forehead. The artificial incense was giving him a headache. “No, that’s not what I mean. There are plants out there, too. They grow just fine without our modifications and UV modulation, and all the rest. The Deniers use their atmosphere without any problems.”

“The carbon dioxide in the Chaos is contaminated, Ruan. Everything is. That’s why we control our environments. Beyond the bioborder, they have genetic diseases. They have obesity. They have a million problems.”

“What if I wanted to kiss a girl?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Why do I have to wait for her DNA report and her medical screening? Can’t I just kiss her?”

“Ruan, I believe you should see a psychiatrist. These are rather disturbing thoughts.”

“No, I mean, if I like someone—”

“You follow protocol, Ruan. You follow it.”

Her hot breath washed over his face and he turned away, trying to focus on his mission. He could not hear the helicopter rotor, could not hear any shots. The world was silent except for their erratic, labored breathing, and the cry of some subarctic bird hiding in the scree somewhere.

“Come on, brave soldier. Finish your mission.”

Ruan tried to imagine himself choking the life out of her. He closed his eyes hard, his own sweat burning, itching. “Why do you hate us?” he snarled at her. He opened his eyes.

She wouldn’t stop looking at him!

“What’s your name?” she asked suddenly.

Shocked, Ruan heard his mouth answer the question.

“I’m Mia,” the girl said.

“Why do you hate us? Why do you want to destroy us?”

Mia frowned, but still smiled. “Too much oxygen, is that it, Ruan? What the fuck are you talking about?”

He let go of her left hand, and reached into her camouflaged suit. He padded and probed, yanked pockets and zippers open. He felt ashamed for groping a woman this way, but it was all part of the mission. He felt deeply disturbed that his fingers had to touch unknown contents on her person, even through a thick layer of nylon and polymer.

His fist closed on half a dozen slim, round casings.

He pushed them under her nose. “Why are you trying to smuggle these into my world!”

Mia made an incredulous face. “It’s profitable business, Ruan.”

“You are trying to poison my people!”

“That’s carbon dioxide, Ruan.” She snorted with laughter.

Ruan fixed his gaze on the silver casings. Standard breathing capsules, used throughout the normal world. Each one was a month’s worth of breathable carbon dioxide.

“Poison,” he repeated.

“Supply and demand, Ruan,” Mia said, her breath steadier now. “Your folks want it, we deliver it. Cheaper, too! Worth the risk of an occasional raid across the bioborder. Now, what you should be worried about are those people on your side who would have paid half the price to get our capsules.”

She was mocking him, trying to confuse him.”Enough,” he grated. He tossed the capsules away.

“Just remember, you kill people for trying to smuggle a vital—”

“I said enough!”

“If you’re going to kill me, please hurry up. I’m getting cold here.”

“Are you insane?”

“Stop shouting. I can hear you and smell your perfectly engineered breath all too well.”

Ruan raised his fist. She raised her chin. The smile never wavered.

“How can you live with yourself,” he growled, feeling defeated. His training had not included this, either.

“It’s just business, Ruan.”

“You are trying to undermine our morals and culture! You are trying to make our children sick.”

“Your bloody children have never tasted chocolate! Now there’s a crime!”

“Chocolate is not healthy!”

“What about milk?”

“It’s not healthy!”

“Then why do mothers have it in their breasts?” She chuckled.

Ruan raised his fist again, but he felt embarrassed doing it. She was deranged. He might as well kill her out of pity.

“Well, Ruan, what now? Are you gonna keep pretending you’re about to kill me? Or do you have more sordid thoughts on your mind?”

“Give me one good reason why I should let you live,” he said.

Her face went blank. “All right, pretty face. One.”

She pushed her head off the ice. And kissed him.

“How do you feel, Ruan?”

“Skeptical.”

“Good. Skepticism is a sign of a healthy, curious, intelligent mind. What is that you feel skeptical about?”

“Two things. One, the outcome of this session. I believe it won’t really be productive.”

“Hmm. Early signs of depression and cynicism. I might recommend a magnesium and selenium cocktail. And why is that, Ruan?”

“Because I don’t think I will feel better after we part ways today, Doctor. For one thing, I’ve never met you before. It’s always a different face listening to me and writing prescriptions. The idea of meeting a psychiatrist is to help you with a mental or emotional issue you might be facing. That’s clearly not the case here.”

“Hmm. Disregard of authority. What is the second thing?”

“The reason why I was asked to meet you. The conversation with my meditation teacher.”

“Please elaborate.”

“…are we doing the right thing?”

“Yes, Ruan. We have saved the planet, and humanity.”

“But humanity—most of it—lives outside the bioborder, and the planet is still here.”

“Yes, Ruan, but at what cost? All that disease, all that pollution, all that chaos. We’ve cured the civilized world of all of these, and we can focus on making our society as productive and effective as it can be, without violence, without destroying the environment.”

“We put it in a cage.”

“It’s the only way to preserve nature, Ruan.”

“But, ‘without violence’? Why do we still have a military, then? Why am I around?”

“We need armed forces to protect us from the Deniers. But, specifically, when your parents were asked to choose your genetic predisposition, your father wanted his military career carried over in his offspring, which is why the geneticists preserved your aggression genes.”

“I know that.”

“There is another reason why you were summoned, Ruan.”

“What is it?”

“The council asked me to inform you that it has selected two potential partners for you. One of the candidates scored low on the aggression scale, so if you want your child not to continue in the army, you may choose so. The other comes from a similar background to yours, and there’s a 76% chance your offspring would become an officer within two years of military service.”

“What if I want… something else?”

“You can present us with a list of desired genetic traits, and we will determine the best candidate.”

“No, I mean, what if I want to date a random girl? Just go out and—”

“Ruan, what are you talking about?”

What if I wanted to kiss a girl, he wanted to say again, but it was pointless. “Nothing. Just a thought.”

“A very dangerous, unhealthy thought.”

“Why is that?”

“Because that’s how chaos starts.”

Horrified, he crawled back, touching a gloved finger to his lip. No. No. No!

He had been trained to read tiny facial expressions and gestures, to anticipate enemy action, to see it happen before it happened.

And then a crazy, suicidal girl from Chaos had kissed him.

She had sullied him.

Ruan rose to his feet, wondering what kind of disease he was developing. He took his surroundings in: a world with unfiltered cancer rays penetrating his skin, air full of heavy metals, unhygienic contact with a woman from Chaos.

He realized how cold he was. His exposed head hurt from the chill. His ears and nose were numb. His eyes hurt from the morning sun glaring against the beaten, wind-licked snow. His throat was raw from breathing in frigid, polluted atmosphere.

He needed immediate medical attention.

“Get lost,” he whispered.

The girl quickly got up and ran away without looking back. Ruan waited a moment, then looked behind him. There, a smudge of smoke. Mindful of bullet statistics and the fact he wore no helmet, he headed back toward sanity. His lips tingled.

He wondered if he might die.

“What it is, Son?”

“It’s… the girl.”

His father snorted. “I have to admit, that’s one deranged woman. But you’d have to be, to risk your life smuggling things across the bioborder.”

“No… I mean—”

“I know, Son. I read your report. She hit you in the face and ran away. It happens. Unarmed combat is always messy, unpredictable. No point torturing yourself over it. Whenever a mission goes wrong, all the protocols go down the drain. It becomes a game of discipline, superior firepower, and luck. There are no rules out there, Son. Hey, we got lucky our helicopter wasn’t destroyed, and we didn’t die in the crash!”

She kissed me, and I let her go, Ruan wanted to say.

But he had told no one.

Couldn’t tell anyone.

“Let me tell you a story, Son.” Ruan nodded weakly at his father’s tale. The old man was soon in full swing, retelling one of his best, about that two-day standoff in Australia’s coal mines.

Ruan barely heard a word.

What would people think if they knew he’d been manipulated by a tattooed Denier girl? What would happen to his military career? Once the doctors started probing and questioning him, they would learn all the grisly details.

That he still felt that kiss on his lips, despite layers and layers of antibiotic creams.

That he hadn’t stopped thinking about her.

Ruan focused on routine checks. Gun, ammunition, safety, scope, batteries. His helmet, his breathing kit. He had already made sure all his gear was working and properly calibrated, but there was solace in repetition. He liked the predictability of the outcome.

He walked with a calm, sure step. Technicians and mechanics hardly paid him any attention. Ruan watched them carefully, though. Most of all, he watched their faces, their noses and mouths, covered with breathing masks like his own. Despite the purity of gases he was inhaling, Ruan felt a shortness of breath in his throat. Maybe he was just excited.

Inside the controlled space of the hangar, Ruan took his breathing kit off. He stepped toward the helicopter. He handed the orders pad to the flight officer. The man pursed his lips, golden moustache dancing. “Hey, long time no see. How do you feel, Ruan?”

“Eager,” Ruan replied.

The flight officer frowned. “Just you? Won’t it be risky?”

Ruan smiled. “That is why I will have you to extract me, if needed.”

“So what are you going to do exactly?”

“It is a covert operation. Infiltration and reconnaissance.”

The flight officer shrugged. “Let’s take you in.”

“How do you feel, Ruan?”

“Better.”

“Do you still have those skepticisms?”

“No, I am rehabilitated. The three months spent in the mind purification center have helped me understand the error of my ways. I believe it was the shock of my first military engagement. I feel strong and focused again, and I am eager to resume my service and protect our world.”

“Wonderful. Well, your sheet does show some significant improvement. We can reduce your dosage, and I shall write to your commanding officer to reinstate you to full combat duty.”

“Thank you, I appreciate it, doctor.”

“You are welcome. That is why we are here, to help.”

It was early summer. The snow had melted, withdrawn, leaving behind a carpet of bright green and violet and ocher, colors that never seemed so vibrant inside the sealed zones back home. So, yes, maybe the plants were exposed to extra radiation and heavy metals, but he liked them better this way.

“No enemy in sight,” the intercom buzzed.”Let’s find a soft spot to land.”

There were no incidents this time.

“Good luck.”

Ruan stepped out of the cabin. With the sound of rotor blades fading into the distance, he walked into the nearest woods. Shafts of golden sun dappled the crystal shade, stabbing through the branches and needles. A picture of bliss and beauty.

Carefully, Ruan removed his rifle and put it on the ground. He turned off the comms, turned off the positioning system, and disconnected the air unit. He removed his helmet.

He inhaled the smells of Chaos. Not so bad.

Not bad at all.

Years and years of selective training and indoctrination, undone in just one moment. Well, not quite true. It had taken the specialists, analysts and the rest of the uncaring, single-minded staff some four months to methodically, calmly, scientifically destroy his conviction. Or so they believed.

What offended him the most was that it wasn’t personal. He had never seen the same doctor twice.

Ruan did not feel angry. Or bitter. He did not feel violated for having been administered all those medications, forced to undergo all those workshops and questioning. He felt... relieved. After so many years of worrying, the illusion was gone, and the giant wall of fear that had besieged his heart had been shattered. It didn’t make him happy, he didn’t suddenly hate anyone. He just wanted to get away, to forget.

And yes, there was the other thing.

Arms spread wide, he walked through the woods, waiting, knowing they would show up eventually. They did. Men and women in camouflage, looking like nature itself, hair

sprouting branches and leaves. Mia was among them, her beautiful features striped with brown paint. She was smiling, and he couldn’t help but smile back.

“You again, pretty face?”

She did remember him. “Yes, me.”

“What are you doing here? No support, unarmed. Do you have a death wish, Ruan?”

His name, too! “On the contrary.”

“So what are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to tell you something.”He tried to ignore the grim faces of the men around her. For him, only Mia mattered now. “That I liked that kiss.”

She chortled. “Of course you did.”

Ruan approached, and no one challenged him. “I was wondering…”

“Yes?”

“Can I have another one?”