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Chapter Four The First Blood

“Sir, it appears there has been an accident, along the Western Coast, we have reports of fire fights and we’ve lost contact with an external outpost,” a soft woman’s voice crackled over the captain’s headset.

“Check the satellite feed, radio chatter, and scan our own channels, it could just be rumors and power-outages, but I don’t want to make any mistakes,” he instructed into the mike, the blue light from the monitors glowing on his face as he overviewed his subordinates.

“Do you think it’s Bruiskies?” A dark skinned radio-analyzer said to the captain, spinning in his chair, “The chatters been acting up in the past month, could they be making a move?”

Generally, when you state the worst possible thing, a full-scale war with one of the five superpowers, you cringe, but not Jericho Warick. The hardcore veteran was enlisted at sixteen and has been so for fourteen years, he fought in the Second Bruiska-Katan War, the Blood Hill Riot as a sniper, and the Guerilla Wars of Miltibar. His shaved head was covered by a military cap and his fatigues were in blue digital-camo, his body was heavily muscled and his sharp facial features were covered in thick stubble.

Running a callused hand across his face and throat, he tapped the touch-screen and brought up an overhead satellite feed of the coastal outpost the com-operator previously mentioned before. He studied the isometric view of the compound, noticing no signs of movement, but no common signs of battle such as blood or ground disturbed by explosions as the camera panned around. Jericho sighed quizzically, his mind pondering the possible reasons for this, either this is a large communication issue, or the first act of war since the last decade.

“Nova,” he alerted his current com-operated, “I want a mobile-unit of two armored personal carriers, two squads of infantry, and a Commissar Attack Helicopter,

deploy them to Harkward Base and tell them to await my command. I do not, I repeat do not, want to mistake this, ok?"

"Yes sir, Commissar Attack Heli already moving, call-sign Warhawk,"

"Copy that,"

"Stay still!" Kate commanded Jon who was wiggling on his cot while Kate tried to stitch his shoulder.

"Ok, Ok, just watch that needle, I don't want another scar," he wined, his wound twitching with pain.

"Watch your mouth, or you will have some more accidental scars,"

"Fine... how bad does it look?" he asked.

"A little on the worse end, you got some red goop in it, probably a lot of germs, so ill grab you some disinfectant,"

"Red goop? Sonuva... It's saliva from that first creature I shot, got pretty much everywhere when I shot it in the head,"

"What the hell were those things anyhow? And why were they here?"

"Hell if I know, Laoka probably does, ill ask him if I see him," he told Kate.

"No you won't, you aren't getting out of this hut with that wound, if it gets infected you'll probably pbutt out before I even get you," she informed him, to which Jon replied with a sarcastic, "Really mom? I wanted to go play outside!"

She slapped his head and was out of the hut before he could retaliate. He *Pfffted* and looked around the hut once again, then picked up the egg from his backpack. The little dragon looked more developed than before and the egg seemed thinner. Peering inside, he noticed that the wings now had skin flaps, the claws were more pronounced, and its facial structure looked complete. Even if Jon wasn't a biologist, it seemed that the egg was almost ready to hatch.

"Hmmm," he said to himself, wondering if this was good or bad.

Putting the egg aside, he stood up off his cot, almost falling over because his legs weren't used to walking yet. Deciding he was going to talk to Lakao, he put his boots on and started outside, hoping Kate wouldn't know before he was out.

Pulling the door open on creaking hinges, he was greeted with a similar morning like the one before, the mist hanging lightly on the rice paddies. He started for the Hall, where he thought breakfast would be served, hoping for his new friend and teacher to be there, boot heels clicking along the cobblestone. Going down the street where he killed the lizard-thing he noticed a brown drakox mopping the place where it landed, the corpse gone.

"Hey, what are you doing?" He asked questioningly, not in an interrogative fashion, but in a half-interested way.

"Oahh," He started in the guttural manner they talk, "The blood is poisonous, unless treated with the *Terip*. Why do you ask, hummi?"

"Hummi?"

"It's a slang term for human, you'll probably hear it more,"

“Ok... well what if someone gets this saliva in a wound or happened to put it in his mouth?” He slowly asked, the drakox’s eye ridges furrowed.

“Well, it depends did this someone-,” he started with funny glare aimed at Jon “-happen to be drinking a lot of *Terip*?”

“Let’s say three large mugs?”

“That *someone* will be fine then,” the drakox said with a laugh, to which Jon replied with an embarrbutted one and started to walk away.

“Wait, Jon Griffin right?” the brown one began, grabbing Jon’s shoulder, “Some of us won’t be so tolerant of you as some of the others you met, it’s some racial thing I don’t understand. Just watch yourself,”

“Will do,” he buttured “what’s your name by the way?”

“Sark.”

So Jon got to the Town Hall, while pondering what Sark said, wondering what the Drakox could have against him or Kate, though he could see what they have against Grease. Putting it aside, he clambered up the wooden steps up to a deck, opening the double doors to the warm hall. He saw Lakao, eating his bread away from most of the other drakox on the middle table.

Jon quickly slid next to Lakao, grabbing one of his berries.

“Hey, I really want a debrief, please,” he said, giving a cocky grin, berry in his teeth.

“Like what? What happened after you pbuted out? What those things were? Or even if there is any leftovers?” Lakao replied, flicking Jon in the forehead with a clawed hand for taking a berry.

“Yeah, I believe that sums it all up, especially the leftovers,”

“Ok, Ill start with the lizard things, they are called Varters, really nasty. They normally inhabit the jungle to the south of Katan, but I have a bad feeling they’re being, or have been, pushed out, and as you’ve seen, they have been thrown straight into the village. Normally they aren’t so hostile, but I guess they just got a little riled when they stumbled on us,”

“And that means?”

“They will be nice unless someone or something will mess with them again, but I think they have just made this area their hunting grounds, thankfully they eat small rodents,”

“Hmmm... well anyway, I just met one of the villagers named Sark,”

“Our blacksmith,” Lakao informed.

“Yeah... he said something,” his voice lowered to a whisper, looking at the drakox on the middle table “about the Drakox having some sort of beef with humans? Is it true?”

“Well Jon, every species has there racism, but ours goes farther back than most think,” he started off, Jon leaning in.

“You see, back around two-hundred years or so, our ancestors and your humans met each other for the first time. It all went smoothly until the separatists of both group started getting a little... more involved,”

“When the human and drakox racists tried using peaceful discussions to separate all ties with each other and failed, they started forming violent groups. Hangings, killings, and pillaging happened very frequently, and eventually we headed into the jungle, keeping tribal-like, while humans went off to be the dominant species, building things like cars, tanks, guns, and great cities,”

“So these drakox who don’t want us here are the sore losers who heard their grandpa’s stories?”

“Exactly, but watch yourself, I don’t know how far they will go, Mingle has prohibited any harm done to you, but things can go bad really quick,” he said warily, Jon glancing at the nearby drakox again.

“I will... so see you later for some training?” he questioned.

“Tomorrow, I think Kate would kill me if we did anything today... speak of the devil...” he said with a small smile on his lips as Jon closed his eyes and cursed. He turned around to see Kate tapping her foot, arms crossed over her chest.

“I will see-,” Jon tried to tell Lakao as Kate grabbed his ear, dragging him back to the hut, scolding him with a variety of jabs and insults calling him an irresponsible idiot.

Jon woke up after the nap he took after Kate almost tore his ear off, looking out the window to see the stars and moon. Curiosity took a hold of him again and he grabbed his rifle, opening the door and shutting it quietly. He sat down on the porch and looked at the small grbuttland opening, right before the jungle. He stared into the dark abyss in-between the trees, hearing the soft flutter of chirps from the Varters, less hostile and more of a rounded bleat.

Jon’s hands tightened on the rifle, the Varters running swiftly on the grbutt as they came out of the trees. Their arms bumped against their sides uselessly as they moved about gracefully. Some stopped and nipped at the others in the pack playfully, an almost-cute cat and mouse game they played with cheery bleats of excitement. The moonlight played tricks on their scales, glancing off while making it seem as if they were made of water.

A rather small one decided to walk towards Jon, warily stepping forward like a bird with its nose pointed out. Jon prepped his gun in hand, but the little creature continued ever persistent, finally putting its nose on his knee and inhaling his smell. Then it walked up the porch to sit at his side, cooing lightly. Jon cautiously put a hand on its neck and rubbed down its back, its backbone bumping against his fingers. It arched against his touch like a cat, but then looked up as its friends scampered back into the jungle. It followed without hesitation, leaving Jon alone with his gun in his lap. He jumped a little as Lakao sat down next to him where the little varter had been.

“I heard some of the others talking, I have a feeling they’re going to try something against you, Kate, and Grease,” he said quietly.

“By ‘try something’ you mean ‘beat the crap out of’ or ‘beat the crap out of them till you die’?” he said with his sarcasms not even wavering.

“You are a smart mouth aren’t you?” Lakao said, his steady gaze non-wavering in the face of Jon’s cocky grin.

“I try,”

“Well stop it, and I think the option where you die fits these circumstances, you are leaving tomorrow. Mingle is arranging a hunt so most of the village will be gone and you can leave unhindered,”

“Ok, what about our training?” Jon asked.

“Shooting someone should suffice for now, plus you can handle yourself fine already,” he buttured Jon, “I’ve already informed Kate and Grease, I’ll have some packs of food and supplies brought to Kate, then she and Grease will meet you in the morning,”

“I guess this is goodbye then?” Jon asked with just a bit of sadness.

“Until further notice,”

They shook hands and Jon went back into his hut, taking apart his rifle and cleaning in his nervous state. He started gathering his things, putting his belt and pistol holster on, grabbing his gun and sliding it in. Throwing a few of his survival tools in his bag, he noticed his egg on the endtable. Once again, the shell seemed noticeably clearer, but still hard as rock. He wrapped it in a shirt and dropped it inside the bag, wishing it the best of luck. Wrapping himself in the warm embrace of his blankets on his cot, he curled up against the wall while he waited for morning and thought of what it would bring.

“Jon...” Kate whispered and shook his shoulder.

“Jon...” she whispered again, making Grease walk over.

“Here let me try,” he whispered and leaned in close to Jon’s ear.

“JON! Wake your bloody butt up! We are leaving!” Grease blasted into his ear. Jon woke up in a flurry, throwing up his blankets and his hand going to his gun.

“Very subtle Grease, how ‘bout we just get all those human-hating Drakox back here,” Kate spat at him.

“What the darn! I mean damn! You couldn’t have just shot me or banged pans in my face first... damn...” Jon sarcastically clued-up Grease, Kate grabbing his backpack and pbutted it to the disgruntled sleeper.

“Come on, Mingle gave me that map back,” She said and shook the map for emphasis.

“Ok,” Jon said, getting up and shrugging his shirt on, “do we have all the gear?”

“That we do, so get your butt in gear,” Grease piped up. Jon did a quick sweep of his room for anything he might of forgot; finding he had everything, he followed the others out the door with his backpack and rifle slung over his shoulder. Kate then broke into a trot, going south towards the jungle; Jon and Grease followed closely.

“Shouldn’t we, like, be going north, towards Miltibar?” Jon chimed in, remembering the brief glimpse he had at the map.

“Yeah, if you want to swim a river with all this stuff,” she said stiffly, “there is a bridge about five miles south.”

“Really... Well... Oh, I don’t know,” Jon started then stopped.

“What?” Grease said looking at Jon as they broke into the cover of the jungle.

“Well... Lakao said those Varters were pushed from their territory to the south, I just don't think it would be healthy for us to run into whatever caused it,” He stated, wringing his hands a little.

“Don't worry about that, it's only like five miles, nothing bad could happen in that short a time span,” Kate rebutted, with a short *Pfffffft*.

Unfortunately, some bad can happen in such a small time span, especially when you involve things like trekking through unknown jungle with an unreliable map.

The fast, repeating, beat of the Commissar Attack Helicopter was almost inaudible through the pilots helmet. It was almost a soft lullaby if you flew it under the influence. It was practically skimming the tops of the furrowed, green trees; their wing-weapons clipping the tips of them at times.

“Warhawk, you're lulling off course. Is there a problem?” Sarah's radio operator squawked over the headset.

“Nothing control,” She answered and righted the joystick on her controls lightly, bringing the chopper back to its steady level.

The cockpit of the firepower monster was box-like and slightly roomier than the other helicopters in the Katan Airforce, allowing Sarah to stretch her arms a bit after the long flight from Harkward Base. She looked down at her gunner who was operating the controls of the 20mm turret located under the nose. He sat in front of her and slightly below, with monitors switches around him. Sarah was still not acquainted with him since they picked him up at Harkward after her other gunner finally retired, good riddance.

“Hey,” She said quickly and looked at a few gauges, “What your name?”

“Brian, Brian Wilks,” the young man answered; he was not much younger than her, considering she was only twenty-two.

“I'm Sarah Jennings, where are you from?” she asked, still keeping tabs on her own controls.

“An old town called Geysers, on the north-eastern island of Katan, you know the big snowy one?”

“Yeah I know, my family has a cabin up there, how long have you been on the 42nd Airbourne?”

“First mission, I hope we get some target practice, I've wanted to try out the guns on these babies since the simu-,” Brian started to say but was cut off as their head-sets crackled.

“Warhawk, we have a few signatures, we still trying identify, but we need visual confirmation, control out,”

“Copy that control,” she said with fingers on the mike of her headset, “Looks like you might get some of that action you want,”

“Sweet... Oh by yeah-,” he tried to say but was cut off again by control, a urgency in their radio operators very apparent, even as a red light indicating a missile lock started blaring.

“Warhawk! AA lock! I repeat AA lock, prepare evasion action!”

“Brian! Get ready on the counter measures, I’m gonna- Oh crap! They fired!” She just got out as an open space in the jungle, about a mile off, lit up with a bright flash and a missile, streaming white, leapt from the tree tops.

Jon and the others once again found themselves hiking through boring jungle, though, thankfully not on a steep incline like before. His boots sifted through the leaves as he was reluctant to pick up his feet; sleep was a harder foe than most. Though it was still hard, he found that hiking was a lot easier than when he started after their boat was lost. He was a bit hesitant to reminisce that far back in fear of bringing back thoughts of Reed, but he was dead and you can’t heal that.

“So Jon, have you ever been to the north-east island, I’ve heard its very cold compared to here?” Grease asked, trying his best for making small talk, to which Jon was thankful.

“Yeah I have actually, I remember that I would take a bus up there after my paycheck from... well from *things*, and rent a snowboard,” Jon answered, remembering those freezing cold bus rides at night with only a thin jacket, “I’d ride the slopes at night so the rangers wouldn’t catch me using the place without paying, but then I found this nice cabin with nobody home that I would crash in,”

“Really? What does snow feel like?” Grease asked, enthralled.

“Well, it’s cold I’ll give you that,” Jon started off, but was stopped when he heard a resounding, buffeting sound to the something to the south-west.

“What the hell is that?” he asked aloud, being answered as he said it. A large helicopter appeared to south, moving towards them. As it closed on them, a loud whisking noise was heard, followed by an overhead explosion as the SAM missile impaled the helicopter’s tail. The flying machine took the hit and the tail blew right off in a flames. The helicopter started spinning and falling, backend covered in flames, small explosions, and billowing smoke. The entire troop of misfits stumbled back, covering their eyes from the flash of heat and light, the resulting noise leaving them dazed. They watched as the chopper fell out of view, into the trees.

“Whoa! Holy crap!” Jon yelled.

Brian and Sarah’s helmet-covered heads were being pulled left and pressed against the window from the g-forces of the spinning aircraft. She screamed into her mike as she tried to right herself and hit the ejection button, which would disengage the cockpit from the chassis and ignite jets to catapult it in the air where a pair of parachutes would pop out. Her arm was nearing the control panel on her right, fighting the invisible force. Sarah just thought she would make it, but in the corner of her eye the trees came at them incredibly fast.

The entire helicopter shook and crashed into the canopy, the branches *whapping* against the glass. Sarah watched helplessly as the nose of the Commissar collided with a solid trunk, tearing Brian’s half of the cockpit away while the rush of air buffeted her. She clearly saw the crimson blood splashed against the broken glass. With the red warning light accompanied with the blaring noise of the caution tone, the aircraft started rolling on its side while still in flight. Sarah could only pray as she saw the waters of a

jungle swamp rush towards her to meet in a gigantic splash of water and grey smoke from the extinguished fire. She tried to free herself from her seat belt but quickly fell unconscious as the wave of water hit her like a wall of bricks.

Jon saw the tower of smoke from their nook in the jungle, a look of astonishment on his face; Kate and Grease seemed equally stunned with their mouths slightly open. Thinking quickly, he started running towards the crash site, slapping the ferns and bushes out of the way while trying not to trip on the vines.

“Come on!” He yelled back at his companions, “We have to go help!” With a hesitant look between the two of them, Kate and Grease started off in Jon direction, while he sped off through the forest.

“You know...” Grease said panting, “I think Jon is going to get us killed one of these days.”

“Well, you know he’s always been a bit heroic,” she said with a sigh.

Jon’s pant legs were wet with dew and puddles as he sprinted to the smoke, slapping against his calves. He constantly stumbled in little ditches and holes while Kate and Grease lingered behind, trying to catch up with him. He then saw a clearing in the trees and burst into, skidding to stop as his kicked up dry dirt.

Finding himself on a road, with fresh tire tracks, he looked to his left and saw what appeared to be a camp with concrete walls. Barbed wire covered the tops of the walls, with an iron gate, hanging open, where the road connected with it. Sandbags were sitting on either side with imposing 50. Cal turrets sitting like lead-shooting guardians. A watch tower sat behind the wall on the right side, watching the road. That’s when Jon saw the sniper perched their and the two large men with thick black jackets standing with the turrets.

“Haserg!” The sniper called out in Bruikish, pointing at Jon, “Tora! Tora!” The two men pulled the heavy guns level and the sniper pulled his rifle to his shoulder. Jon dived back into the jungle on the other side of the road, hitting the mud heavily as the trees around him started getting ripped apart by the machine gun fire. Bark and leaves exploded off like wooden shrapnel and pelted Jon’s neck and head as he crawled out of the line of fire. Kate and Grease popped out of the jungle much like he did before and dove back again, a road across from Jon.

Grease pulled a submachine gun hanging from his neck and started blasting away at their attackers. He drew their fire and he hid behind a tree, Kate following his lead as she pulled here pistol. With the three offender’s fire drawn, Jon bolted back towards the smoke, wondering if this was all in vain while hoping his friends would be okay. The *clap-clap* and loud *bangs* from the machine guns and sniper were almost deafening.

As his clip drew empty, Grease’s head was almost taken of as a bullet blew off half of the tree trunk into his face, small pieces of wood buried into his faces. Cursing, he fell to the ground and started pulling the wood out, small trickles of blood running.

“Are you okay!?” Kate yelled through the blaring noise the guns created.

“Yeah,” he said with an agonized sigh, “it’s just a flesh wound!” He picked up his gun and loaded another clip and popped back up and started blazing away.

Jon practically flew into the stagnant swamp, the once green trees replaced with grey cypresses. He unslung his rifle and backpack on the run, dropping them on the beach right before he hit the water, splashing. Up to his waist with water and algae, he fought his way to the helicopter. What was left of the front end dipped into the water, making whatever crew members alive there totally submerged. Its rotors spun feebly, still trying to free itself like a trapped animal.

He dove into the black water, swimming under the broken cockpit, avoiding the shattered glass. Barely able to see past five feet, Jon battled against his crying lungs as he saw the pilot, strapped into a seat with her head lolling to the side. His hands fumbled with the buckle, clammy with the cold water. His knife called out to him and he unsheathed it quickly, letting out a bubble of air as he did. Wishing with all his life, he cut at the belt with the long knife. It unsnapped and the woman's body started to sink when it was released, but not to be deterred, Jon grabbed her collar and kicked with all his might. The sunlight that barely glittered down to Jon was his tormenter, making fun of him and laughing at his feeble attempts to reach the surface. His clothing and the girl lagged him back down as he let the rest of his air go, a bubble that he wouldn't be able to get again.

Then that widening happened. He found that last burst of energy, that last vestige at hope. His eyes broke through the black waters spell, he saw his chance and he took it. He broke the surface and floated on his back, bringing the girl out of the water and keeping her head up. Kicking his legs and using his one arm, he hit the shore and dragged both of them up on it, laying her down.

Quickly, he knelt down next to her, putting two fingers on her neck. Beyond all the gods wishes, he found a pulse, finally wondering where the other member was, remembering the other seat that was gone. Then he saw the nose of the chopper, lying on a sand bar about fifty yards away, hearing a painful groan and creak of metal.

As he sprinted to the wreckage, hearing thumping rounds of the turrets and the fast repeating rounds of Grease and Kate. That meant that they were at least alive enough to shoot, but he didn't know how long that would take.

He hurtled a piece of metal sticking out of the ground, looking to be a piece of the wing. He hit the ground and rolled, he wet clothes picking up mud, dirt, and foliage as he went.

Then one of the more horrendous sights he'd seen since they started this forsaken journey assaulted his vision. The man laid there, his legs cut off at the knees, coughing up blood that ran like a river down his face to pool beneath his head. His helmet lay away from the crash rolling around limply. Jon fell to his knees next to him, feeling his stomach almost hurling as he tried to talk to the man.

"Hey," He said softly to him, "What your name?" The man's eyes locked onto him, filled with pain, sadness, and tears.

"Bri-," he started off, but coughed up more blood, "Brian, *hagghhh*,"

"Your hurt pretty badly-," Jon started off.

"I'm- I'm going to- to die, don't pretty it up," he said with the loudest voice he could muster up.

"Take these," Brian said with his shuttering hand reaching into his jumpsuit and pulling out a clinking chain, covered in blood, "Dogtags,"

“Okay... I’ll see you with Taret,” Jon said, looking away, making a hard decision. He pulled his pistol and Brian gave Jon a look that said *yes*. With a tear running down his cheek, he put the gun to Brian’s temple, his hand tightening, but before he could do it Brian’s hand reached out quickly. He gripped Jon’s collar violently and convulsed, the blood from his mouth splattering on Jon, falling limp.

He looked about as young as Jon, like he had the cocky attitude and exuberance he had. But that was gone and now things just got real, even after Captain Reed.

Jon closed his eyes and hung his head, wiping a dirty hand across his face. He gave a quick prayer and stood, trying not to look at Brian’s mutilated legs. He looked back across the beach, seeing the women roll and move a bit. In contrast to his entrance, he walked slowly, barely finding the will to walk. He took off his wet hat and tossed it into the jungle, running a hand on his head, feeling his bristly, short brown hair. His boots squished methodically as the machine gun fire continued its long beating, Kate and Grease’s now less frequent. It was a surprising effect on him, especially when he usually was fine with death. Finally coming to the girl, he kneeled and she woke up slowly, coming out of her forced sleep startled. Noticing him, she scuttled away fearfully, looking at him like a corned animal.

“Who are you?” she said, confused, taking a look at her sinking chopper.

“I’m Jon,” he said slowly, a hand out reassuringly, but she just backed away more, “I pulled you out of the water.”

“How do I know I can trust you?” she said, pursing her lips. He just held out the dogtags. She now looked sad and confused, but still had an angry look on her face, taking them and looking at the inscription.

“You can’t,”

“He was the new gunner...” she said softly, not directly at Jon, “His first mission...” She now looked lost, but Jon put a hand on her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he said with such solemn eyes, but she just brushed his hand off, giving him an angry glance.

“Take this,” he added and gave her his handgun, noticing his rifle in the sand. Then something snapped in his head, he was going to give those Bruiskians hell.

The girl nodded, gripping the dogtags tightly in her fist. Then everything went red, not clear, pure red. It wasn’t like a widening; it was a tunnel, a tunnel of pure rage and fire. The red quickly disappeared, but it was still there, but more mental than visual.

“Stay here,” Jon commanded, the girl nodding, her suspicious glare unending, “I am going to kill these guys.”

He picked up the rifle, checked it if it was loaded, and chambered a round when he found it was. He felt the click of the round in the chamber, closing his mouth and grounding his teeth to greet it. Now his vision went clear, the narrow fading into a wide screen, he quickly picked out where the sniper and turrets were and his friends, even through the dense trees. He started running, the ferns whapping at him like before, but unlike last time, he was an angel of death, not life. He could see every stitch of movement, the leaves flickering or that fearful bird, cowering under the boughs of a large tree.

He saw the road, the turrets, and the watchtower, but instead of shooting, he ran along the road, but still in the trees. He was unseen, like a ghost, stealthily as any fly on the wall. Finding himself behind the two machine gunners, next to the camp’s wall, he

quickly crouched and aimed at the sniper above him. The scope zoomed up closely to the target's face, the reticule on his forehead, making out his scars and mangled beard. He was clearly Bruiskian, from what he saw in the taverns, but really that didn't matter when he pulled the trigger. It is always the slowest, the first bullet from your own gun, but then everything around you speeds up.

The man's face exploded in bloody ruin, his body and rifle tumbling off the tower like a ragdoll. It landed heavily on the ground next to the man closest to Jon, making the bulky soldier look directly at him, an angry battle cry emanated from the man's throat and he charged while unsheathing a dark-looking blade. Jon hurriedly tried to chamber another round, but the damned bullet jammed, causing him to sweat. When he realized he wasn't going to be shooting, he stood and held the rifle like a club. The Bruiskian bellowed and swiped at Jon with his knife, but he just sidestepped him and lifted his gun overhead and swung down. The butt of the rifle collided with the man's head, cracking like a watermelon being hit by a baseball bat. He dropped like a rock, dead, and Jon set his eyes on the other soldier, but Grease surprised him by letting off a burst of round, knocking the man down with blood exploding out his back.

"About time Jon! I mean holy crap, what'd you think we would do? Eat the bullets!" Grease hollered at him across the dirt road, but his questions went unanswered.

"One second!" Jon called back, already diving back into the trees. With the young gunner still haunting his memory, he found his adrenalin waning, his actual weariness becoming a bit more apparent. He trumped through the jungle once more, coming back into the depressing swamp. As he stepped onto the beach, the pilot was now standing and swung around to face him, pistol raised.

"Oh, it's just you," she subtly snarled and turned back to her sinking chopper, crossing her arms and tucking her hands in her armpits.

"I know this is a bad time," Jon started off, walking next to her, "but we have to leave,"

"Yeah," she said, giving one last look at her helicopter and stuffed the dogtags in her front breast pocket.

"My name is Sarah," she said coldly, holding out a hand reluctantly.

"No last name?" he asked, trying the best to be compassionate, especially at her recent experience.

"None that you need to know..." she said, making the corners of Jon's mouth dip.

"Follow me, me and my friend took care of the guards at the gate, I'm not sure how many more of them there are, but I haven't heard any shots yet," he finished and picked up his backpack, still laying on the beach.

"Really! I am getting tired of this kid's crap, running off into the woods, getting attack by lizards, blowing up a helicopter, getting Reed-,"

"Shut your mouth!" Kate spat, her eyes glowering at Grease, "he did not get Reed killed! He saved are buttes from the helicopter, alerted the village to the varters, and right now might be saving someone else's life! You better show some respect to that, I certainty do,"

Looking daggers at each other, Jon, followed by Sarah, stumbled back out of the jungle.

“Hey guys, I got the pilot... what the hell are you guys doing?” Jon yelled out to his friends, confused at the looks they were giving each other.

“Nothing!” Kate spat, giving Grease one last dirty look.

“Kate, Sarah,” gesturing to the two, “Sarah, Grease,”

“Hi,” the once-chopper-pilot said with a brief, uncaring tone, lifting up a hand slightly.

“Well sorry if I can’t continue offering pleasantries but we have a bit of a job to do?” Jon asked rhetorically, pointing at the gate.

“Oh no, we don’t have to go in there, we can just keep walking,” Grease alerted frantically, waving his hand negatively.

“Oh don’t be afraid, all that could happen would use being shot, what’s there to worry?” With that last sentence, Jon felt that kick in his step from berating Grease till he was all flustered and red in the face.

“Are you guys like mercs or something,” Sarah chimed in. The team just looked at each other, Jon answering, “Sort of... we weren’t hired for anything, we just kind of stumbled upon this base thing...”

“Then what do you do about me?” she asked, just a hint of selfishness.

“Just follow me,” Jon said, ending the conversation and trotting towards the gate, leaving them behind.

“Does he do this a lot?” Sarah asked with sour distaste, walking next to Kate. She was about the same height of six feet, pulling her helmet off to releasing a dark-brown pony-tail. She was staring daggers at Jon as he trotted away, obviously disliking this group, being that he was a little gung-ho and was probably illegal.

“You have no idea.”

Jon, Grease, Kate, and Sarah lined up along the left side of the wall, using the twelve foot barrier for cover. Jon in the lead, saw the dead Bruiskian that Grease gunned down laying in the blood splatter dirt. Seeing an assault rifle laying next to him, Jon slowly peeked out of cover, looking at a big concrete structure surrounded by dark green military tents. A variety of soldiers lay around dead, appearing to be both Katan and Bruiskian. Jon quickly grabbed the gun and pulled back into cover, slinging his sniper rifle back onto his back and putting the looted weapon into his shoulder.

“What do you see?” Kate asked, pistol at the ready.

“A bunch of dead, both Bruiska and Katan, I don’t see any living though,” Jon said, distracted while he thought, “Ok, Kate and Grease, you clear the tents to the left, me and Sarah will take the left. Are you an okay shot?” He asked, worrying about Sarah’s safety, despite her demeanor.

“I wasn’t always a chopper pilot you know,” she answered, cocking the large pistol Jon gave her before.

“Okay... go,” Jon finalized, moving to the first tent on the left, Sarah and him standing on either side. He looked inside; seeing more dead, cots, and footlockers, he walked in, not really paying attention while he looked at his new toy. It was a Bruiskian 7-K4, built for medium ranges and semi-auto capabilities; it was the standard-issue weapon for the cold country’s low-grade infantry.

“Hey,” Sarah whispered, leaning over one of the dead on the cots, “All of these guys have slash marks everywhere, bullet holes too.”

“I think these bastards we just shot came in at night, silencers and what-not, picking off the camp one tent at a time, then the varters came and scavenged, slicing up the bodies,” he answered the silent question.

“Aren’t you the military genius,” she said, looking up at him with a sarcastic smirk.

“What?” he said a little confused.

“It was a compliment, a little thank you after you saved my butt,” she said, deciding to give him a little respite from the recent cold she showed his way.

“Yeah I tend to do that,” that arrogant grin returning.

“Well don’t do it too often, I don’t like owing people,” she ended, killing his smile.

All the other tents were exactly the same, dead strewn around with shell casings and guns thrown about. Jon did find an army jeep in one of the large tents, a large 50. Cal gun, like the ones out near the gate, mounted on the back.

Afterwards, they met in front of the imposing concrete building with the double doors made of iron, a second story with smudgy windows sat on top with an antenna sticking out of it. Jon filled the other two with what they found out and asked a question.

“Do you think we can use the antenna to call your... people-captain things?” he asked Sarah, trying to find his words, who looked up at the metal roof-topping.

“I guess so,” she answered, still looking, “I still remember my com-operators frequency.”

“So what’s the plan?” Grease asked, cutting in.

“You know I never have a plan!” Jon answered cheerfully, finally finding that one thing to keep his mind off Wilks, and put his boot through the door.

“So why hasn’t he been shot yet?” Sarah engaged Kate.

“We really don’t know, either he has skill or just incredibly lucky,”

The inside looked like a field hospital, with surgical tubing, medical supplies, and gurneys lining the hallway. It was dark, and with what appeared to be red paint on the walls, but Jon knew what it really was. The hallway split into three separate paths, one straight, one right, and one left. Doors lined the walls periodically; Jon quickly peeked into the nearest one next to the exit. It was a hospital alright, a surgical table in the middle of the room, scalpels and other medical tools on a tray next to it, and a big over head light.

“Stay here,” he told Sarah, walking inside. On the wall, scratches from varters were very apparent; also the blood on it was in a strange splatter pattern. It wasn’t circular like a gun shot, but more like some one took a cup of blood and just threw it along the wall. Putting it aside, he then looked at the counter with a sink to his right; he saw a boot sticking out from behind it. He quickly rounded the counter, gun raised, but the man was dead, throat cut almost half-way off. Sighing, he noticed a light switch above the sink. As he flicked it up, the overhead lamp went on for a brief second, and then exploded as it shorted out. Cursing, he walked back outside, into the hallway. “Dead guy,” was all he said.

“Ok, we have to find a radio, lets all split up, ill take the north-east, Grease you handle the north-west, Kate south-east, and Sarah, you finish up this section,” he told his party, while pointing with his gun, who went off to their respective quadrants. Jon trotted down the hallway, taking the right path and opening the door to the left, quickly clearing it. He did the same for the next three doors, and then heard a scream and a gun shot when he reached the fourth.

“Crap! I thought he was dead!” Sarah called out, “he jumped up like a zombie!”

“You alright?!” Jon called back.

“Yeah, I’m fine, just a little scared, that’s all.”

“Okay... good!” he finished and turned back to his door, doing the same peek in he did before. Unlike before, though, he found a bigger room with a variety of computers and terminals, then he saw switch box, all dusty.

“Hold on!” he yelled out of the room, “I found the light.”

He flipped the switches on and the lights flickered, filling the room and hallways with florescence. That’s when he saw the radio, at a desk with a man slumped over, a knife in his neck. Pushing the man out of the chair, he sat in it, feeling it creak from wear.

“Hey Sarah! I found the radio, what’s is the frequency?!”

“99.216, pass code is *Streetwalker*, my helicopters call-sign was *Warhawk!*”

“Okay!” he confirmed back.

“99.216...” he murmured, tuning the clunky military radio in. The needle, moved back and forth as he turned the knob, a light flicking on the console.

“Present pass code,” the female voice came over the mike.

“Yes!” he said softly, and then presented the pass code.

“Accepted, this is control?”

“Yeah uhh... I’m in this base thing, maybe one of your outposts, my ‘team’ and I just killed a bunch of Bruikians, I just saved a helicopter pilot from drowning, I believe it was *Warhawks*,”

“Sir! We have Warhawk!” Jon heard faintly, then, “Give me that!”

“This is Captain Jericho, you said you have Warhawk’s pilot? What about its gunner?”

“Dead sir, died in the crash,”

“Damn, well what’s your name and what the hell are you doing there?”

“I’m Jon Griffin, I’m here with my companions, Kate Watson and Greas- I mean Geoffrey Bengal, and we were in the jungle-”

“Why were you in the jungle?”

“It’s a long story,”

“I’ve got time,”

“Well, truth be told sir, we’re pirates, and we were hunting the coast when we got this tip of a charter boat,” he started telling the story, “Well, it wasn’t a charter, it was two Bruiskian agents, and they had a little something of value onboard,”

“What was it?” the Captain asked, a bit more forceful as if he sensed Jon was trying to avoid the truth.

“I’d rather not tell you over the radio, sir,”

“That bad huh?”

“You could say that, anyway, our captain was shot and the agents were killed, ‘bout a week later a transport helicopter found us, demanding... the package,” Jon continued, dancing around his words.

“So in the end I blew up the helicopter-,”

“Wait, you blew up a helicopter? By yourself? How?”

“Well sir,” he started off, a smile pecking his lips, “I took a box, put a little plastic explosive on it, rigged a charge, and told the guy on the chopper it was the thing he wanted. We dove off the boat and well... boom,”

“You intrigue me Jon, you have no previous military experience?”

“I got in bar fights? Does that count?”

“No, but please continue,”

“Okay, so after that, I washed up on the beach and we’ve been hiking through the jungle, trying to get to Miltibar and give you this... thing,”

“Good, so, what’s the status on the camp?”

“We haven’t found any Katan survivors, we’ve killed about four Bruiskian soldier, the tents are fine and this field hospitals power is still function,”

“Damn, well did you find any anti-aircraft weaponry?”

“Like missiles ‘n stuff? No,”

“That means, they probably have a SAM in the hills, sorry, but I can’t get you extracted, can you get yourselves to Miltibar?”

“I think so, I found a jeep and some fuel, it will probably take us another week, do you have a town or something we can stop at along the way?”

“Let me check with satellite... yes, the town of Marks, about fifty-miles north,”

“Okay, ill contact you again there,” he was about to turn the radio off but then added, “Sir? Does this mean there’s going to be a war?”

“Well I’m not going to sugar-coat it, but I believe so, Bruiskia acted against the New Treaty, we can’t just stay here and do nothing, control out,”