

## PROLOGUE

*Only a true warrior can appreciate the majestic beauty of the enemy fleet's flagship,*  
thought General Maada, sitting in the cockpit of his red single-seat space fighter.  
*A warrior like me.*

Dwarfing all the other capital vessels in the galaxy, the Akakie starship was a work of art. An electroplated gold layer covered her sleek, stretched oval hull. The ship's twin side engines propelled the craft forward, lighting a bright blue flare behind her. Maada did not know the exact extent of her capabilities, but he had no doubt the enemy ship could easily obliterate a small planet. His space fighter seemed minuscule in front of her.

On a VR screen inside Maada's cockpit, the Akakie fleet commander said, "General, this is pointless. Look at the size of our armada and imagine the firepower of our starships. Your fleet has nothing but puny space fighters. You have no chance against us, and I assure you invading our territory is tantamount to suicide. Just turn that little ship of yours around and go home. Unlike you, we Akakies are peace-loving people, so we will be merciful and let you go. You can even keep all those planets you have already conquered and colonized."

"You talk too much," growled the general.

The Akakie commander had a point. Their technology was light years ahead of the Xortaags'. Their ships were not only significantly bigger; they had much more powerful armaments and heavier armor. That golden starship probably packed more firepower than the entire Xortaag fleet combined. Maada's situation did look hopeless.

Which was exactly how he wanted it to look. He had been preparing for this encounter for years, and the Akakie commander's over-confidence told him his plans had succeeded.

*You filthy insects have no idea who you are dealing with,* thought Maada. He dove in, laser bolts pouring out of his crimson space fighter's cannons.

The Xortaag fleet followed him.

## CHAPTER ONE

---

New York - December 24, 2077

“Jim, we’ve arrived,” said my hover car.  
“Thanks, Max,” I said. “She’ll be out in a minute or three.”  
“Liz has spent three hours in that beauty parlor just for a Christmas party?” asked Max. “You think maybe she’s found out you’re planning to propose tonight?”

“Not unless she can read minds.”

“Honestly, you’re kind of easy to read. Do you want me to tell you what you’re thinking about right now?”

I smiled. “You have telepathic powers now? Neat trick, for a car.”

“You’re wondering if she *has* found out you’re going to propose,” said my overly perceptive car.

I held a finger up to my lips. “Be quiet. Here she comes.”

Liz got in the vehicle. She 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 hover car chimed its notice tone. “I’m sorry, Jim, but we’ll need to take a detour. SCTU has blocked Fifth Avenue between Washington and Lincoln streets.”

I shrugged. “No problem, Max. We’ve got time.”

Liz wrinkled her nose as if something in the car smelled bad. “Way too many SCTU soldiers around.”

“No surprise there,” I said. “They’re everywhere these days.”

“Still, I think something’s up.”

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

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

Max and I protested at the same time, “Hey!”

Max sent a text to my personal digital device. *Jim, can I please throw her out?*

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

Liz tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “I sometimes feel we live under Sauron’s rule and there’re bloody Orcs everywhere.”

I laughed. “Nice one. I would’ve gone with the Galactic Empire and Stormtroopers.”

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

“Come on, Max,” I said. “You know how much we love the classics.”

“Especially with all the terrible movies being produced these days,” added Liz. “I honestly don’t think there’s been a single good movie in the last ten years.”

I blew out a noisy breath. “Ten years? Try fifty.”

“Nothing beats the classics,” said Liz. “Where do you think your name has come from?”

“Max or me?” I asked.

“I was talking to Max,” she said, “but come to think of it, both of you.”

“I know you aren’t the hold-your-tongue type,” I told her, “but make sure you don’t criticize Zheng in front of others. His 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 window. “I respect what the Resistance is doing, but I honestly hope Kurt 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 his not-so-merry band of freedom fighters 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 SCTU 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 Chancellor 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, but no one intervened.

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 off an officer?"

"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," I said in a light tone, "and I'm an air force officer."

One of them gave me a dry look. "I know who you are, Major. 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 hover car without saying a word. His lack of gratitude made me wonder if he deserved to rot in jail.

I offered my arm to Liz. "Smooth," she said.

"I should've gone into politics," I answered.

"How about a selfie?" one of the SCTU 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, Jim? 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," I always said), but Liz, who was Afro-Hispanic and born in Cuba, was a natural. The two of us met some

old friends, drank pina coladas, danced, and said Merry Christmas to a million people. We talked, bantered, and mercilessly made fun of other people. 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 bit her lower lip. “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 with Liz holding my arm, walked to the front door through my small garden with its wintering rose bushes that looked like wooden candelabras.

“Cordelia, I’m home,” I said.

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

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 (all depending on whom you asked), and the number one individual 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 calmly. “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/stuntwoman 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 is 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 references to classic movies, 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 frowned at me. “You're ‘best friends’ with someone who doesn't watch movies?”

I held up my palms. “It's a very long story.”

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,” Kurt pointed out.

“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 frowned. “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 you 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 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.

"On it." I darted towards the bathroom.

A few minutes later, Liz, putting fresh bandages on Kurt's wound, asked me, "So, how did you two end up being best friends?"

"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 worldwide election some three years ago on January 12, 2075. The entire 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 Graham Zheng, an influential American general of Chinese descent, as the director of SCTU. Right under Thomas's nose, 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.

After Zheng's coup, and with my best friend leading the Resistance, I thought about leaving the air force, but flying jet fighters was my true passion. What else was I 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'd planned to propose. The luckiest man on the planet, that was me.

Liz narrowed her eyes. "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 such control that it 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'm not a terrorist," said Kurt, color rising in his cheeks. "I'm a freedom fighter. I only kill bad guys."

"We know," I said. "Still, a man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist. Or was it the other way around? I don't remember."

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 is 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, and then sighed and said, "Cordelia?"

“Mike Palermo? Nobody important,” she said. “Really. There’s no reason for Jim and Liz to know him. He’s only the director of SCTU and Chancellor 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. “Two days ago ...”

\*\*\*\*\*

New York - December 22, 2077

The icy breeze stung Sergei Molanov’s face, reminding him of Mother Russia. Armed with an STG 666 assault rifle and wearing a black tactical uniform, he was standing guard next to the main entrance of a luxurious mansion on a gloomy winter evening, wondering which of his many shitty choices in life had led him to his present situation.

On the surface, everything was great. He was the head of security for Mike Palermo, the director of the infamous Security and Counter-Terrorism Unit and one of the most powerful men on the planet. 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.

Sergei knew what he’d gotten himself into when he accepted the job. He expected the director of the security forces in the most brutal dictatorship in history to be a hard, ruthless man. He’d gotten accustomed to the interrogations, torture, and executions he’d witnessed or heard about. This was war, and the Resistance had spilled its fair share of blood. This was especially true of von der Hagen, even though he’d nurtured a romantic image of himself as a freedom fighter in the public eye.

What had gotten under Sergei’s skin was the bi-weekly visits to the three-story, eighteen-bedroom mansion where he was right now.

The mansion, built with utmost attention to quality and elegance, 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 there 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 sexually assaulted when she was only eighteen. She took her own life a few months later. Sergei hunted down the culprits, 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. 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 led 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. 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 the supersonic bullet's impact reverberated in the air. The top half of Palermo's head turned into a bloody mess, and a good chunk of his brain and a hot gout of his blood splashed on Sergei's face and neck. Palermo's body fell to the ground, twitching in death.

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

\*\*\*\*\*

Kurt, fifteen hundred meters away on top of a high-rise building, watched Palermo's head explode through his M-28 Sniper Weapon System's telescopic sight and punched the air. "Bull's-eye!"

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 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 needed to be done. Someone had to stand up to the vicious military dictatorship ruling Earth. 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. “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.”

\*\*\*\*\*

“So, where’s Allen?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” said Kurt. “We were separated while escaping, 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 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. 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. 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 find it by accident.”

“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. 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.”

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

“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. "You know what I don't understand? How come you're so good at killing people? You were a politician, for crying out loud. I would've expected you to lead a Gandhi-like pacifist movement."

"We were hopelessly outnumbered, so our only way forward was a ten-eyes-for-an-eye policy. I did have military training. You remember I enlisted during the war, right? And Allen taught me everything else I needed to know."

Before becoming Thomas's head of security, Allen used to be a Green Beret in the Canadian army. That guy knew his stuff. "Still, one has to have a natural inclination for violence to do it so well, and I never pegged you down as a violent person."

Kurt scratched his forehead. "Most soldiers who go to war aren't inherently violent, but the circumstances make them do unspeakable things to their fellow human beings."

This was getting too philosophical for my taste. I decided to change the subject. "Do you still play?"

Kurt used to play the piano. I was sure he could've been a professional pianist if he hadn't become a politician. "Do you honestly think I carry a piano with me from hideout to hideout?" he answered.

"I hope Allen's fine," I said. "Even though he never liked me."

"That's because you don't stop making fun of him," said Kurt. "He's probably in a safe house now. That old fox isn't easy to catch."

\*\*\*\*\*

New York - December 24, 2077

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," growled 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. 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 SCTU 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 Freaking 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 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.”

\*\*\*\*\*

I was pouring a cup of coffee for myself when Liz, having changed into jeans and a t-shirt and somehow looking even sexier, joined us for breakfast. I’d just started sipping my 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 obsessed with doing the right thing.”

Liz punched me in the arm.

“I really have to go. I’ve set up a time and place to meet up with the 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.”

Liz 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 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 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 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 and 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 the 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 to shake. 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?” My breath was ragged and harsh. 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 and 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 how helpless I was. I was about to lose everything I treasured in my life. My best friend was almost certainly dead. My love was dying. Surrounded by SCTU soldiers, I wouldn’t last much longer myself. Despair swallowed me up like a monstrous beast. Every single muscle in my body tightened, and I started hyperventilating, partly because of the gas and partly because of the terror. I felt like I was being pulled into a black vortex, and resistance was indeed futile. It was all over. I fought the urge to sit right there next to Liz and wait for death to come and take me.

*And all of this is your fault,* said the voice in my head.

*That might be true,* I told myself, *but giving up without a fight is just not my style.*

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 then 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 a white-hot piece of metal. 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'd rather suffer the end of Romulus a thousand times 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 the sharp pain lancing through my wounded leg more excruciating. I didn't expect SCTU 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 SCTU's databases.

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

"Drama queen 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 would 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 felt as if a knife were slowly twisting in my gut and had to fight hard to keep down a primal scream as paralyzing hurt spread through my body. There was nothing left to do. I looked around my bedroom one last time, thought about Liz and how much I wished I could see her again, bit my lip so hard that salty blood filled my mouth, and inserted another magazine into my gun.

"Three!"

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

Then everything went dark.

## CHAPTER TWO

---

Alora - Standard Galactic Date: 025.09.5072

(Earth Date: 01/05/2077)

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 Akakie 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 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 Akakie 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. The golden ship 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 the 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 experienced an actual battle. 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 Akakie science and technology significantly more advanced than 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.

\*\*\*\*\*