

PURGED SOULS

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PART I

EMBERS

CHAPTER 1

AMBUSH

*“Be as hard as the world requires you to be and
as soft as the world allows you to be.”*

—OKINAWAN PROVERB

The orange tree taunted Lori Rose, assaulting her adolescence memories of succulent oranges with sour, misshapen fruit. It teased her with its blossoms’ promising scent each spring but bore fruit that ripened only when she was away on a mission. Still, with roots that sought out deep water, it survived while anything that needed care had perished. Like most of her life choices, planting that tree hadn’t been right or wrong but a reminder that simple wishes turned into convoluted knots when tangled with the real world.

She crouched to pick up a yellow-green, lemon-sized fruit from the ground and tossed it into a basket, saving it for the marmalade she’d never make. Dry, cracked clay that in another lifetime might have supported a lawn separated the tree from the four steps in front of her bungalow. She ambled around the grayish weeds that occasionally interrupted the dusty brown, sipping her tepid coffee, and sat at the third step, her elbows on the rough, worn porch, feet on the first step.

A jade-eyed tabby appeared by the sidewalk and strolled toward the tuna bowl Lori had left on the porch. The tabby’s left whiskers

were growing back. The mishap that had deprived her of her valuable sensors had faded into the past, but the added caution she'd gained remained. She hugged the opposite side of the steps from Lori, her undulating ribs scraping the metal railing to exploit every inch of width the steps provided. Lori drained her coffee and put the cup on the steps. She stayed still, letting the tabby reach the bowl on her own terms.

The tabby sniffed the tuna, nudging her pink nose forward and back over the bowl. She licked the top, her eyes darting between the tuna and Lori. The only way the tabby ate was when Lori stayed on the steps like a living scarecrow. They'd made a silent deal years ago; she did not name the tabby or invite her in, and the tabby accepted her offerings with only mild suspicion. Though the deal kept their fragile relationship impersonal, it turned the tabby into the only living thing in the neighborhood not frightened of Lori.

Satisfied Lori wasn't going to bolt, the tabby dug into the meal, using a paw to immobilize the bowl and swallowing the tuna with quick shakes of her head. Belly full, she licked her paws and brushed them on her whiskers. She gave Lori a glance that may have been a thank you before slouching away, too cool to allow herself to be patted. They repeated this routine a few times a week, often enough for Lori to become a food source but not for the tabby to consider that source reliable.

With the tabby gone, Lori interlaced her hands and stretched her arms, palms facing out. She held the pose for three breaths and stood. She picked up the bowl and cup and rinsed them in the kitchen sink. It was a clear, sunny day, so she walked to the Marin military headquarters to clear her head. To her south, the lonely tower of the Bay Bridge's east span rose five hundred feet above the water like the spire of a long-gone cathedral, connecting nothing to nothing.

Next to it, Treasure Island shimmered like a ghost as the cool morning air hit the sun-kissed rooftops and rose in a haze. Then again, it was a ghost. She'd spent her last innocent summer on the

playgrounds there while her mom had worked on the Pearl Harbor Centennial Commemoration. She never got to hear the solemn promises to not repeat the mistakes of the past. Before December rolled around, the artificial island had become a quarantine zone, absorbing the sick and dying from the rapidly spreading Purge virus. The new year took her mom and sister along with everyone she'd known. It had taken her years to stop shaking herself awake from her recurring nightmare of begging her mom to not go to work the morning they'd locked the island down.

Ten minutes after Treasure Island and its memories disappeared around the coastline, she reached her office. She tossed her jacket on the closest of the two tan leather wingback chairs that sat to her left across from her desk. She tapped the screen on her desk, and the computational glass came to life, displaying messages needing her attention on the right, news that may interest her on the left, and her schedule and to-do list scrolling in a loop in the middle. She swiped the messages clear. If they were important, they'd reappear anyway.

Her stomach growled as she sat. She'd skipped dinner because she'd worked late, and she didn't do breakfast, the appendix of meals. She was running on coffee and sugar, a combination that didn't let her overstimulated brain generate measured thoughts.

She filled her coffee mug with water from the pitcher on her desk and took a sip. The growl was only a reminder, not a warning. Certainly not a complaint. She hadn't felt hunger, real hunger, in almost two decades. Still, the stomach cramps that ruled out sleep were etched in her memory as were the taste of bile and the stench of her breath, the products of digestive fluids breaking themselves down because they didn't have anything else to break down.

Today, lunch was a few hours away, but that gave her little comfort. She dreaded her monthly lunch with Executive Ann Lester, the attorney general of Marin. They'd talk about law and order. Lester would insist that Lori keep her soldiers off the city streets, and she'd remind Lester that those soldiers were the only reason

violence stayed outside the gates of Marin. They'd give each other insincere smiles and sip coffee.

A knock on the door pulled her away from the intelligence report detailing the movement of Kern officials her agents were supposed to gather and those of Marin officials they weren't. She waved to the screen to close the file.

"Colonel?"

"Come in," Lori said.

Sierra Rendon, her second-in-command, popped in. "Lieutenant Tran did not report for duty this morning," she said with the sheepishness of someone telling on a friend. Though Lori had warned her, Sierra still socialized with the officers.

That was one sin of which Lori had never been guilty. On most days, the thought of spending more time with her officers exhausted her. On rare occasions, she did wish she could leave Colonel Rose's skin for one night, go out for fun, check her expectations at the door, and slam down drinks with her officers. But that wouldn't do.

The dedication she demanded, the professionalism she cultivated wouldn't survive even one drink in such company, which made Sierra her link, liked by the troops and respected by the officers. Sierra most likely earned that respect by hiding minor infractions from her. That she was here meant it was serious this time. Not Tran's first offense then.

"Send her my way when she gets in."

Sierra's nod was noncommittal, her loyalties caught on a link in the chain of command.

Lori had given Sierra the wrong job. The woman could incapacitate most anyone in eight seconds if she was in a charitable mood. Otherwise, she needed half that to kill. These weren't skills that translated well to managing maintenance schedules and officer postings. Still, armies ran on logistics, and that was doubly true for Special Forces. Sierra was her executive officer because she needed to come to terms with that simple truth. Besides, Sierra was the only

person in Marin quick-tempered enough to make Lori's responses appear measured.

"Tran was scheduled to lead the new class on their first field mission," Sierra said.

Every sixteen weeks, another twenty recruits took their first steps to join Special Forces. Perhaps five made it through the training. The first field mission meant they had reached week four. They were headed to a decrepit quarter in the Uregs to clean up a few square blocks of dirt and store enough adrenaline to tolerate more abuse on their path to earn a green beret. Best-case scenario was nothing happened on their trip. Worst case was they busted a few gangbangers too dumb to hide a block away for an afternoon and concluded they were hot shit, which created a problem week five had to fix.

Now they were down one team leader, a logistical glitch that Sierra should have handled without bothering her.

"And?"

"The convoy leaves in forty-five minutes. I request permission to take this mission."

So that was it, Sierra itching to get back to the field.

Lori stood and walked to the large window facing Declaration Square, which stretched below her and connected them to the Marin Senate two hundred feet away. A plumber in a wide-brimmed hat worked on the octagonal fountain that had once hurled water sixty feet into the air. At a time of limited resources, it was the only artifact engineered with no practical purpose. An act of defiance, spitting at the heavens.

At least it was supposed to be. With roots getting into the pipes, it mostly sputtered and occasionally compounded its sins by spraying brown water.

The plumber tipped her hat at two passing soldiers and exchanged a few words that probably didn't mean anything. As the soldiers moved away, she went back to her pipes. A major announcement was in the works, and the fountain had a duty to perform that required clear water.

The plumber, the soldiers, the fountain were all too mundane, too orderly, a sharp contrast to the chaotic tent city where Rachel Czernak had announced the birth of Marin nineteen years ago. One hundred and nine boulders, three deep, ringed the fountain to remind them of their history, one for each woman who'd died defending the nascent state that first winter.

Lori hadn't been there.

The square outside her window was the same place yet not the same place. The reality of those early battles had faded. The memories that replaced them were unfaithful beasts. They morphed, painted by the mood of the moment. They lied, tainted by emotion. Collective memories were even worse, and this square had become an altar to the collective memory that they'd triumphed over cruelty, over nature.

It was a lie she worked hard to fabricate, but she knew how fragile the illusion was. They were never more than two bad decisions away from watching it shatter.

"No, you run the office today. I'll handle the recruits," Lori said, hoping this wasn't one of those two bad decisions.

"You have lunch with Executive Lester. General Gardner will be here at two, and—"

"Just deal with it." She couldn't tell whether Sierra dreaded playing politician for a day or had set her mind on shooting up a neighborhood. It didn't matter. Everything Sierra mentioned could wait forever.

Sierra hesitated for a second, said "Yes, ma'am," and headed toward the door.

"By the way, did HR ever get back to you about those discharged veterans?"

"Yes." Sierra stopped by the door. "Two moved to a small town north, one to New Cal."

"Did you verify that?"

Sierra swallowed. "Since they were grunts who'd never dealt with intel of any kind, I took HR's word for it."

"Have a quiet look. I asked for all files on discharged soldiers but received incomplete info. You know how cranky I get when I have to ask twice for anything."

"Will do. Anything else?"

"Send me the recruits' files and the mission profile."

As Sierra left, Lori brought her fingertips to the window. Polished and cold. The reflection of Colonel Rose stared back, alone. It was the result of her choices, and she was past assessing whether it had been worth the price. She wasn't here because she liked power. She was here to ensure that no new boulder would be added to the square.

Her stomach growled again, a simple biological function, her only link to a past she'd left far behind. It had not been much, but that hunger had been her own. Now she didn't even have that, because unlike young Lori, decorated war hero and Head of Special Forces, Colonel Rose had never been hungry.

Ninety minutes later, Lori swiped her screen to the last recruit's file as she sat in the passenger seat of the Humvee that led two troop-transport trucks into the Uregs. This class was miles ahead of the last two cohorts, with smart, committed soldiers acing their way forward. They even had two pilots and a combat medic, both in short supply. The promise of specialists and a high yield allowed her to smirk with pride.

She took a bite of her mushy chicken-spread sandwich and chewed three times before swallowing. It had no taste, but it did provide the calories she needed. At least the spread had the texture of the chunky peanut butter she'd loved as a kid. Since she hadn't seen a peanut in over two decades, she pretended that was what she was chewing. She stuffed the last of her sandwich in her mouth and put the screen down just in time to catch a raccoon skitter across the street and disappear behind a collapsed wooden fence. That it was active at this hour meant it had found an unlikely food source or had been disturbed. Neither bode well.

Her eyes swept the intersection and settled on the road ahead. The light of day did not flatter the Uregs. The desolate blocks so

menacing at night turned into soulless structures more sad than intimidating.

The ruins scattered across the landscape bore witness to old tragedies. In the distance, two rising columns of thick, inky smoke signaled a new one was unfolding. Wispy, gray smoke from smoldering branches always filled the Uregs. This hot-burning mess that created an impenetrable wall of fire did not belong here.

Sergeant Lise Gold eased up on the gas, keeping both hands on the wheel as they pushed up a gentle hill. The Special Forces were as much Gold's as they were Lori's, with the seasoned sergeant training, cajoling, threatening, and coaching recruits into thinking fighters without so much as raising her voice. She must have had the same reaction to the fire as Lori had, because she raised an eyebrow and shot a quick sideways glance. Lori met Gold's inquiring eye and pointed forward. Their convoy rolled on.

Halfway down the next block, three wannabe thugs stood on the sidewalk in their hand-me-down military jackets and field boots. They looked but didn't act the part, projecting excitement rather than intimidation. This was where gangs came to hire muscle for jobs they deemed too risky for their own. Considering the little regard that gangs wasted on new recruits, it said something when they shopped here. These three didn't have enough sense to scamper when a Marin unit approached. It was a miracle they were still alive, an oversight that would be corrected if they ever landed a job.

The stink of burning rubber hit her as they reached the last block. Whatever game was unfolding, it wasn't the one she'd expected. Lori took an elastic tie from her upper jacket pocket and tucked her hair into a ponytail before stepping out of the Humvee. "Proceed," she said to Gold. "Keep your eyes open."

Gold motioned the recruits out from the two trucks behind them. They disappeared into bungalows in pairs and reemerged standing guard in front of empty structures. Two recruits moved toward the five-story building perched over the previous intersection. Two others approached a van parked in the middle of the

street in front of the burning tires. It was dirty with mud, not soot. Someone wanted it to look dirty, like it had been abandoned there long ago, but the mud wasn't even dry in this hot spell. The whole scene looked staged.

The recruits had shown they'd absorbed their training. She'd decided to continue the mission when gunfire erupted to her right.

A recruit stood at the entrance of the five-story building, gun pointing in.

"Report!" Gold called.

"I saw something."

"What?"

"Movement." The recruit's timid voice trailed off. "It went up."

It? After a month of training, Lori had hoped the recruits could distinguish an armed assailant from a raccoon or know raccoons had too much sense to stick around burning tires.

Gold pointed two fingers at the building's door. The recruits took their positions. Good, at least Gold was on the ball. An hour ago, she'd have admonished the recruit for her sloppiness and used this as a teaching moment, but she was all business now.

Lori took out her tida and tapped the frosted glass. The finger-sized, featureless cylinder lit up, and a bird's-eye-view map centered on their location floated in front of her. She zoomed in, spanning ten blocks, and let it synchronize with the transport providing air support. The three wannabes were gone. She zoomed out and saw a van twenty blocks out. It wasn't moving toward them, but she didn't like that it moved at all. Though she trusted her recruits' training, she didn't yet trust their judgment.

"Load back up. We're leaving."

Gold didn't hesitate to cancel a training exercise she had spent a week setting up. She barked orders, collecting recruits two by two. The recruits had disappointed, accusing looks, but disappointed was better than dead.

Lori had rarely been accused of being too cautious, because most people didn't understand the difference between danger and

risk. Danger was a fact of life. Risk quantified exposure to danger. It let you prioritize actions based on possible outcomes. Right now, there was no upside to staying here.

Her tida chimed. She tapped it, and the map popped up again.

The van had changed direction. It would cross directly in front of their path of retreat in less than a minute. She swiped her tiered intelligent digital assistant to call the pilot of the light transport hovering above them. Unlike its big-bellied, four-rotor cousins that could have carried their entire contingent, the light transport was a responsive craft. It was built for urban combat, two tilt rotors protruding from its wing stumps to provide vertical thrust when needed. With the lack of urban anything these days, it had been relegated to supporting training exercises.

“Lieutenant Pen.”

“Yes, Colonel.” The pilot’s reply came loud and clear from Lori’s tida.

“Take out an intersection between us and the van.”

“Arming. I need...twenty seconds to line up a clean shot.”

“Do it.” In the unlikely event the van was in the wrong place at the wrong time, it’d be spooked and leave.

“The van picked up speed,” Pen said. “It will be past the last intersection by the time I can engage.”

If not, the van would notice the transport and show its hand. The risk of staying had just been quantified. “If you can’t take out the intersection, take out the van.”

“Copy.”

Her eyes moved from the map to the road and back to the map. “Take out anything that comes within two blocks of our retreat.”

“Copy that.”

With a distant explosion, the van blinked out of her map. All three vehicles had completed their three-point turns and now faced the way they’d come with the burning tires to their back. The five-story building stood like a watchtower over their retreat. Perhaps the recruit had seen something. Perhaps not.

“Lieutenant.”

“Yes, Colonel.”

She tapped the tall building hovering on her map. “One shot into this building. Now.”

The explosion shook the trucks, but they were out of debris range. She was about to motion the trucks forward when a second blast engulfed the remnants of the building. She ducked behind a truck as desk-sized concrete blocks rained down on them. She stood as the dust cleared. The intersection was buried under rubble.

“Pen, I said one shot,” she said in as even a voice as she could project.

“Not my incoming, Colonel.”

She spun around to confirm every suspicion she’d harbored for the last fifteen minutes. The recruits had jumped back out and taken defensive positions. Some were behind the trucks, some in front of the cleared buildings, and some covering their backs by the burning tires near the parked van that shouldn’t be there.

The out-of-place thugs, moving van, burning tires, staged van, the building rigged to detonate at one end of the street. The incongruities crystallized as she glanced at the other end of the street. They were trapped in the kill zone.

“On the dirt!” she yelled a split second before the muddy van turned into a fireball, shooting metal and glass in all directions. She dove, more instinct than conscious action, letting most of the pressure wave pass over her.

“Colonel!” Gold rushed to her.

Lori took a few seconds to gather herself and stood. “I’m fine,” she said though her ears were ringing. One recruit lay crumpled, her neck hanging at a disturbing angle. Another lay eight feet away, the back of her head no longer there. Lori knelt next to a third recruit. So young, though she couldn’t tell who she was with all the dirt and blood on her face. She wiped the name tag: Asher.

Fuck.

Eva Asher had been a promising one. She was smart, tough, hardworking, trying to do the right thing, not the easy thing.

Though Lori erected barriers at every step, Asher had moved through them, getting past Lori's defenses. She'd never admit it, but she felt a kinship with Asher and even liked her as a soldier, as a mirror, but only if she flattered herself. Even at her best, she'd never been a natural like Asher. But none of that mattered when your luck ran out.

The blood Asher coughed up dripped down her cheek and chin. A four-inch metal shard protruded from her chest, probably lodged into both lungs. Lori had no way to know how deep it was, though it had to be pretty deep based on the steady stream of blood Asher was drooling.

Asher's eyes fluttered and closed. She was going to drown in her own blood within minutes. The young medic, whose first name Lori couldn't recall, appeared as Asher coughed up more blood. Her feet were spread wide, anchoring her to the ground. She rubbed her bony fingers together but didn't move toward Asher. She'd been chatting with the soldiers on the way up and didn't understand that in the field, she didn't have friends, just patients and patients-in-waiting. Two of her patients had just died. The third was about to join them.

The medic had avoided looking at Asher's chest but now leaned forward. Her eyes widened, and her breathing picked up. Great, she was about to have a panic attack. "I can't. I can't help her."

The medic's nametag jolted Lori's memory. She grabbed the medic's collar and pulled her down until her face was inches from Asher's bloody chest. She lowered her voice to calm the medic and spoke into her ear. "Tess, you can do this. Asher's relying on you." Lori stood up and called Pen. "Land between the trucks and the rubble."

The transport floated down through the smoke, churning dust and soot into a sulfuric haze that reeked like death itself. By the time Pen landed, the recruits had contained the tire fire and cleared a path through the remnants of the van. Gold directed the trucks past the smoldering, foam-covered tires and the shallow crater the blast had created.

She approached Gold. "Two heavy transports are on their way." She pointed to the rubble at the other end of the street. "See if there is anything left in there or in the van Pen shot."

"Yes, ma'am."

The recruits filing into the trucks all told the same story with incredulous faces and hunched shoulders. It had not crossed their minds that this was the most likely outcome of every engagement in the field. The dead recruits had unwittingly taught them a valuable lesson.

Four recruits carried Asher's stretcher to the transport. As they staggered forward and struggled to raise her through the door, Asher's life sloshed like water in a drum on a trampoline.

Once Asher was secured, Lori hopped on the transport and sat next to Pen, motioning her up. As they lifted off, the devastation came into focus. Fires burned in three directions. Two more streets were now blocked off to traffic. No one liked them in the Unregulated Territories, because they tore it up whenever they passed through, which was fine because she didn't like the Uregs either. Nothing good ever came out of the place. Only warlords and bodies, and she had no use for either.

Within minutes, they were out of the danger zone and in Marin airspace. She made her way to Asher who was strapped to a cot with an oxygen mask hiding half her face. Despite the tube sticking out of her side, a gurgling sound came each time her chest rose, signaling that more blood than oxygen swished in her lungs. Tess was prodding Asher's side.

"Can you take that shard out?" Lori asked.

Tess leaned over her patient. She flipped on a light above the cot and used two fingers to probe around the wound. She lifted Asher a few inches and applied pressure to her side and back. The flow out of the tube intensified. Tess let Asher back down. "It shredded both lungs, and it's lodged deep. At the rate she's bleeding internally, she won't make it to Marin, but if I take it out, we'll have a sucking chest wound. Both lungs will collapse, and she won't last

two minutes.” She closed her eyes. “I wish there were something I could do for her, but there isn’t.”

Tess had prevented Asher from bleeding out with quick action and projected authority as she spoke. She had passed her first field test.

Lori accepted her prognosis. Lung surgery by a medic on a transport didn’t make sense. Then again, neither did Asher’s still being alive.

Lori pushed a few strands of blood-soaked hair from Asher’s face. The calm and innocence she saw belied the violence raging in Asher’s lungs. This was why she despised the Uregs. Here, the not-yet-jaded had no chance. The Uregs weren’t cruel, just callous, like the universe, and that callousness offended her more than the cruelty of the most vicious warlord. Offended or not, there was nothing she could do for Asher except provide the comfort of human touch for her final breaths. She took Asher’s hand. Against all odds, it tightened around hers.

“It’ll be okay,” she lied and held the hand as she waited for it to go limp.

It never did.

CHAPTER 2

LOST

“Leadership is a two-way street, loyalty up and loyalty down.”

–GRACE HOPPER

L onging for her sister’s forest-green bicycle was one of Lori’s first memories. Unlike her plodding tricycle, that bike moved with such spirit it might as well have been alive. No matter how much she begged or cried, her mom’s no remained firm, and the bike stayed out of her reach. That she inherited the bike two years later had not diminished her hatred for the word that had tormented her and long denied her her prize.

Later on, as the world crumbled and the response to her needs determined whether she lived another day, no became a dangerous word, one that put butterflies in her stomach. Nowadays, no was rarely uttered in her presence. Few people were in a position to deny her requests, and she’d learned to phrase her questions in a manner that eliminated that two-letter word from the inventory of answers.

Today, her request to see Asher had been denied, and the medical files she’d requested had failed to materialize. She’d erred in some way. Her request had been too simple to misstate and her visits to injured soldiers too frequent to allow a misunderstanding, which meant the edict to isolate Asher and seal off her files had

come from higher up. Since Lori was the head of Special Forces, higher up was a small place.

With official channels closed, Lori put out a feeler to a discreet field contact. She was disappointed but not surprised to acquire a tail before reaching the hospital exit: a nondescript gray car, pacing her. She drove south and east across Richmond Bridge and left her civilian Humvee in the Rim, a two-mile stretch in East Bay that allowed Marin to interact with the Uregs. The Rim was Marin in name only with establishments that never would have been tolerated on the west side of the bridge. The brass in Marin viewed the Rim as a necessary evil. Lori saw both a safety valve and a windsock that prevented her from being conned by Marin's insularity.

She pulled the hood of her jacket around her face as she stepped out of her Humvee and braced for the cool night. She glided through the empty intersection and took the hill away from the bay, past the relative safety of the Rim and into the unknown of the Uregs. Her tail was still with her, on foot and a block and half back.

Lori didn't flinch at the *crack* of a distant gunshot or react to the muffled *pop* that followed. That combination had only one meaning: the second bullet left the barrel and entered flesh without meeting air. A small-caliber weapon, about two blocks to her left. It was not her concern.

Fifty feet down the sidewalk, two sentries stood watch, equally unmoved by what had become background music in the Uregs. Lori did not make eye contact. The skinny one stood on his right leg, his left knee bent and the sole of his left foot resting flat against the decaying building. The one with the round face leaned against the metal gate. They were the early warning system of the local gang. Their job was not to engage but to remind you the real enforcers were three blocks away. If you were here by accident, it might as well have been three continents.

She'd worked these parts as a young officer and had come to know the local gangs and their routine. She didn't recognize these

two, but the shelf life of a sentry wasn't long. You got in when you caught the boss's eye. You got out after a few scrapes by promotion or in a body bag.

Up close, these two looked as though they believed their line of work led somewhere other than an early grave. A few years ago, she'd have pitied their ignorance-fueled optimism. Now she almost envied them.

Still, they'd done their job. She had been warned.

She took the first right and kept her pace while sticking to the middle of the street, giving herself crucial seconds in case anything came around a corner. On the next block, a woman sat on a tree stump ten feet into the overgrown green patch splitting the street. An eagle claw tattoo reached from her hip toward her left breast and disappeared behind a top that didn't cover much.

The woman did not belong here. Her fingernails, still shaped, betrayed that not long ago she'd called a cozier place than a tree stump home. Her glassy eyes poked from a confused, frozen face as though she had walked out of a classy apartment and found herself here, thirty years and three wars removed from her intended destination. As though she couldn't remember whether she should rob Lori or entice her. The woman would have to decide quickly. There were no amateurs in the Uregs, just veterans and corpses.

Lori had taken this detour through the Uregs to confirm the commitment of her tail. She had her answer, because only the most desperate or dedicated would venture into these parts. She took the next right, heading back toward the bay and the Red Spider, her real destination. You could call it a bar, though at most half the customers were there for the drinks. The other half sought to satisfy baser needs. At its core, the Red Spider wasn't in the liquor or sex businesses. It was in the discretion business.

A whiff of charred oak and sour mash greeted her as she walked in. She let her eyes adjust to the light and caught sight of Pras in a booth at the back. As she slid in across from Pras, her tail walked in and

strolled past the front bar and velvet curtains to the back bar. The tail wore a thick scarf that made her round face seem smaller than her neck.

Lori slid a small pack across the table, and Pras swiped it with one motion, making it disappear into her tunic. Lori leaned back and pulled her hood halfway back, exposing tufts of shoulder-length red hair. Compared to most of her colleagues' short crop, it expressed as much individualism as it stated she could do as she pleased. Her tail couldn't have lost her if she tried.

"Colonel Rose," Pras said, smiling ear to ear and exposing her overbite. "What an honor to see Your Excellency." Pras had a dark liquid in a narrow ceramic cup. She uncorked a bottle hidden at the end of the table and poured into a second cup before nudging it toward Lori.

Lori ignored the jibe and sniffed the cup. Sharp nail polish remover overpowered her. She took a tentative sip. It tasted as foul as it smelled, but she hadn't come here for the wine. She put the cup down. "What do you have?"

Pras leaned forward. "Just leads. I'll have more in a day."

Pras was discreet and thorough though not cheap. Then again, cheap information was worse than useless. "I need whatever you have now."

Pras nodded and pressed her lips sideways. "Four cases in New Cal, a dozenish in Kern."

"All military?"

She nodded again. "What made you think to look for this shit?"

Lori had hoped she'd been wrong, that there was a simple explanation for the secrecy around Asher's still being alive, that perhaps she hadn't seen what she thought she'd seen. It all evaporated with two nods and a handful of words. She wrapped both hands around the cup but didn't bring it to her lips. "And?"

"And nothing. They're gone, but what's interesting isn't that they disappeared from hospitals after recovering. It's that all their medical records are gone and, in the Kern cases, their entire histories. It's like they never existed."

"But you got them?"

Pras rolled her eyes. "Please."

The missing HR records on the discharged soldiers had just become part of a larger pattern, as had the interference on Asher. She wasn't going to solve any of this tonight.

She took a tentative sip from the liquid Pras insisted on calling wine and put the cup down. The tail moved from mildly irritating to constricting, her mere presence preventing Lori from relaxing even for a few minutes. Any half-decent agent would know there were only two reasons for Lori to be in this booth. One was to get information. The other wasn't, and on that option, they would have agreed on a price by now and moved upstairs. Lori rolled her eyes toward the bar. "Is she still watching?"

Pras glanced up. "Yeah. Pretending not to." She snickered. "Doing a shit job."

"I need to get out of here." Lori leaned forward.

"You want me to keep her busy while you slip out?"

She reached out to take Pras' hand. The skin was rough and leathery, not the hands of someone who earned her keep in the bedroom. But the tail, limited to half a sense in the dim light, couldn't know that. She saw only what she expected to see, which was physical contact. "No, I don't want her to get spooked. Take me upstairs and back."

Pras licked her upper lip and winked. With her big, bright eyes bulging out of her narrow face, she could be charming, even attractive if she didn't hustle you for contraband. They stood, and Lori put a hand around Pras' waist. Pras pushed Lori's hair away from her ear, leaned in to whisper, "One of these days, we'll have to do this for real," and led her up the stairs.

"One of these days," Lori said.

She bolted as soon as they reached the top of the stairwell and called Sierra on her brisk walk to her Humvee.

Sierra answered twenty seconds later. "Colonel."

"Meet me at the hospital."

“Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine, but I don’t like what’s going on with Asher.”

Lori raced across Richmond Bridge at the wheel of her Humvee, slowing down only for the checkpoint. Pras’ limited data confirmed that injured soldiers were vanishing in three states. Worse, no one was looking for them. She ground her teeth because she hated mysteries and anything that threatened order, even more so if she couldn’t shoot it.

She replayed the Uregs ambush in her mind. Whoever attacked them had stuck to a simple plan: lull them with the thugs, spook them with the fire, blow up the dirty van to scatter them, drop the building to pin them, and swoop in to take out the survivors. It had come too close to working.

But recruits were low-value targets. Why orchestrate all that to get at them? Was it a message? To whom? Her? How would they have known she’d be there?

Sierra? Possibly. Tran? Accomplice or victim?

She made it to the hospital in eighteen minutes and let go of her million unanswered questions. Sierra stood at the entrance, her toned, five-foot-ten frame towering over the reception desk. Sierra was wired to make tactical decisions and take quick action, not play poker. She broadcast her feelings with every twitch of her lips and eyes. Right now, her stretched cheeks and narrow eyes screamed embarrassed. “About Asher.”

In the fiasco, Asher making it to the hospital still breathing had been the lone piece of good news. Lori was grateful for not having to explain to Executive Yim how her stepdaughter had been lost during a training exercise. But Sierra’s eyes turned into pinholes and remained glued to her toes. She was not embarrassed. Guilty?

“She’s gone, isn’t she?”

Sierra’s eyes widened. “How did you know?”

“When did she come out of surgery?”

Sierra handed her the screen.

Lori scrolled to find the data. “Successful open-lung surgery in

forty-five minutes? Are you shitting me?” She flipped to another page. “Doesn’t even say who operated on her.” She handed the screen back to Sierra. “This thing is useless.” She rubbed her neck with one hand to slow her mind. “What do we have?”

Sierra said a lot of words, but they could be summed up by one: nothing. That’s what they had with no forced entry, no surveillance footage, and no sign of struggle. An hour after being admitted, Asher had been moved from surgery to intensive care. Two hours later, Asher had vanished and joined Pras’ data. Was Asher the lead to cracking the missing soldiers’ case, or was she bait to lure Lori deeper into this mess?

“Did you visit Asher earlier tonight, Colonel?”

“I tried, but no. Why?”

“The entry logs to all restricted areas have been wiped except for an ID fragment on the backup log. No time stamp, but the backups only go twenty-four hours.” Sierra was not embarrassed or guilty. She was concerned. “Colonel, it matches your ID.”

Great. Lori paid Pras with medical supplies she liberated from the hospital. They were nothing Marin would miss but were valuable in the Uregs, almost as valuable as the intel she received in exchange. Her access never raised suspicion, because it was one of hundreds. Having all IDs but hers wiped couldn’t be a coincidence.

“How many people knew I’d be in the field today?”

“Up till the moment you left, no one but you and me.”

It had taken them a little over an hour to reach their destination, not nearly enough time to set up what they’d faced. She’d been selfish, using a training exercise to scratch her itch from being cooped up in a glass office.

“Two recruits died on my watch.”

“With all due respect, Colonel, you saved eighteen recruits today.”

That was true only if she accepted the premise that the attack had been random. All the evidence pointed to the contrary. She reached under her hair to massage her neck again. A half-walnut-

sized lump of muscle undulated under her fingers but did not come near breaking apart no matter how hard she pulled and pushed. “Since you and I are the only ones who knew I’d be there, one might conclude one of us is responsible for the ambush and Asher’s disappearance.”

Sierra’s lips parted, and her face turned chalk white. Her side neck muscles tightened, turning her head into the top of a triangular volcano about to blow off. She unholstered her sidearm and put it on the reception counter. “If you believe that, I’m not useful to you.”

Lori had meant it as a statement of fact, not an accusation. She’d never questioned Sierra’s loyalty. She saw no reason to start now. But it said a lot that after all these years, Sierra still didn’t know where she stood. The rift Lori had inserted to keep her officers on their toes had become a chasm, and she had no idea how to bridge it. Or whether to.

She let go of her neck and clutched Sierra’s gun. The tiny dimples on the handle sucked her palm in as though they wanted to meld with her, begging her to spring into action. Her index finger rested on the barrel, smooth and cool like glass. The barrel urged caution, aware of the power hidden in its belly.

“Good thing I don’t believe that.” She flipped the gun and held it by the barrel.

Color returned to Sierra’s face. She took and holstered her gun and, without missing a beat, launched into an analysis of hospital security: ways in, ways out. She listed the next steps thoroughly, all well thought out and all wrong. This was how they conducted investigations when people disappeared from shitholes in the Uregs when they didn’t worry about being set up or being watched by their own.

“Stop. Find Tran.” She didn’t add the obvious. Tran was either in on this or she was dead. “I still can’t believe Asher made it here alive.”

“She was lucky.”

Yeah, real lucky to be impaled in the chest. Lori pulled up the

receiving medic’s report. It referred to a clean puncture as though Asher had been pierced by a sharp spear. Lori had seen the metal shards tearing up both lungs. The report did not describe the same patient.

“We’ll interrogate all possible suspects. I’ll look at who had access to the logs—”

Lori put a hand up. They had to tread lightly, because whatever they’d thought they’d been investigating had just graduated to threatening. “Focus on Tran and the ambush. Keep an eye on the investigation, but let the military police handle Asher’s case.”

“With all due respect, Colonel, Asher is one of our own. We can’t just do nothing.”

“That’s why I want you to keep an eye on them. I want to know which leads they follow and which they don’t. But finding Tran is critical. Either she set us up or someone made her disappear to get one of us into the Uregs. Until you find out which, you can’t help Asher.”

Sierra nodded but did not look happy, which was fine because Lori wasn’t happy either. The knot in the pit of her stomach tightened. She had three mysteries, which was three too many. How had Asher survived? Why were soldiers disappearing from hospitals? Who was watching her? She was stuck with pieces from three puzzles all mixed together. She couldn’t act, even through proxies like Pras, without tipping her hand. No, she needed someone with the nose to sniff out absurd leads and unlock the unlikeliest connections, someone who wouldn’t give up or be intimidated, someone no one would be watching, someone she could trust. Someone who did not exist.

From the depths of her mind, one name floated up.

He checked all the boxes.