

CARVED GENES

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PART I

DRIZZLE

CHAPTER 1

CRASH LANDING

"The truth is everyone is going to hurt you. You just have to find the ones worth suffering for."

—BOB MARLEY

Metal grinding on metal screeched inside his cockpit. Mika tapped the control screen, overriding the safeguards on the forces his damaged aircraft was sanctioned to apply. Speech mode still set to mute, the autopilot admonished him for his questionable decision in a range of hues, crackles, and tremors.

Released from its directive not to pulp its human pilot, the transport banked hard then dove harder. The strap bit into his shoulder, pressing him into his chair. The dry, rough leather sanded his cheek as the craft accelerated and vibrated.

A little more of this, and half his bones would break without colliding with anything. Still, it was better than colliding with something. A chorus of wailing alarms joined the autopilot's complaints, warning him that his descent angle and velocity ranged far outside safe landing bounds.

Like he didn't know.

He had too little thrust and even less lift—not surprising since his port wing was nothing but a stump. The only figure trending upward was the stress on the hull, ready to tear his craft apart at twenty thousand feet and a thousand miles an hour. The reptilian

portion of his brain insisted he bail. His mammalian brain urged him to go through his options again for any solution he had overlooked. His rational brain counseled him to trust the autopilot's infinitely faster reactions and take in the scenery.

The craft brought the roll under control by diving more. The ground hurtled toward him at bullet speed, and it was bigger. As the autopilot pulled out of the dive, the stern warning from the comms reached its third repetition: "Unidentified aircraft." A two-second pause. "You are in restricted airspace." Another pause. "If you do not alter course, you will be shot down."

Target Lock flashed red on the screen. He pointed forward with his hands flat, thumbs up, and pitched his wrists back as though he were bringing a barrel to his lips. The autopilot considered his input, and the nose pointed up ever so slightly.

His descent slowed, but the shaking intensified. He eased back down, and the craft plunged again. The shaking did not let up.

"This is your last warning. Identify yourself and alter course."

They still hadn't shot him down, but he was pushing his luck. He swiped the panel to enable his commlink. "Not in control of aircraft. All systems critical. I need assistance."

"Identify yourself."

"This is Scout Delta-One-Six." He tapped the screen and lifted the hold that had prevented his autopilot from sending its identification codes.

The silence extended long enough for them to run a mission check that wouldn't bring anything up. He tapped again to transmit an encoded message that would appear like gibberish.

"Alter course. Now."

"Can't do that."

"You have five seconds to alter course, or you will be shot down."

He kept his craft pointed southwest. He had sustained most of the damage in his first crash landing and burned his engines in the ensuing takeoff. "That'd be redundant."

The five seconds passed without shots being fired. "Explain."

He stretched the story to buy another minute, reaching the status update. "Port winglet and engine are gone. Main starboard at sixty percent. Aft at thirty. The compensators fade in and out, so I'm pitching and rolling all over the place. I'm not flying; I'm in a controlled fall."

There was no response.

"And I use the word 'controlled' loosely. My hull is minutes from tearing itself apart. I can't bank or do much of anything other than go straight and down."

"Proceed to these coordinates."

A spot east of Lake Tahoe popped up on his screen. Were they kidding? That was two hundred and fifty miles southeast with the high peaks of the Sierras between them.

"Not a chance. I don't have enough power or lift to get there. Have you heard a thing I said? I have, at most, eighty miles on a tight, downward cone."

"There are no places you can land within eighty miles." She was firm as though by speaking forcefully she could rescind the laws of physics.

Sweat dripped into his eyes and burned as he rolled. "I'm not going to land."

"What?" Her voice rose in genuine surprise.

"I won't have enough lift if I cut thrust, so I can't slow down. I'm going to crash." He felt detached as though it were some other pilot falling out of the sky.

"Your flight profile does not match Delta-One-Six."

The lack of urgency in her voice implied she did not believe him. If they were going by flight profile, he did not blame them. He suspected he had the elegance of a wounded bat and the maneuverability of a flowerpot.

If he hadn't known how dire his situation was, the extended silences would have clued him in. "Delta-One-Six." It wasn't a question but came from a new, more authoritative voice.

"Still here."

“Major Tomlin was in command of Scout Delta-One-Six. You are not Major Tomlin.”

He had hoped to avoid this conversation until he was on the ground. “Correct.”

“Major Tomlin has been missing in action for two weeks.”

Yeah, that.

“How did you obtain the authorization codes for this craft?”

“She gave them to me.”

“There was no, er, no one with your profile on her crew.”

The official crew profile had contained three Marin soldiers, all women. So, they didn’t need to identify him to conclude he shouldn’t be in the pilot’s seat.

“You either stole this aircraft or are responsible for Major Tomlin’s disappearance. Is there a reason I should not shoot you down?”

None came to mind. “Major Tomlin is not missing in action.” He took a deep breath and exhaled. “She’s dead.”

An audible gasp came across the link. Several voices talked at the same time. The confident voice cut through the chatter. “Have you witnessed that firsthand?”

He wished he hadn’t, but the moment was etched in his memory. “Yes.”

“How did she die?”

Lin’s serenity filled his mind, urging him to grasp his predicament and choose every word he uttered with care. And then Lin’s face fought the pain to flash a contorted smile and winked. It wasn’t a playful wink but one that forced him to face the ugly truth.

“I shot her.”

“Are you trying to provoke me into blowing you out of the sky?” The shout became a hiss before the sentence ended.

“Just setting the record straight in case this crash-landing turns into more crash and less landing.” His encoded file revealed all that, but he wanted to say it out loud anyway. He owed Lin that much.

“You have ten seconds to explain.”

That was a laugh. His screen flashed and displayed new projections. His path had not improved. “I can use some assistance in picking a place to touch down.”

“Assistance?” The intonation went up though it wasn’t a real question. “You are in restricted airspace with forged identification codes and a stolen craft. You admitted killing a Marin officer.” She hesitated as though she contemplated adding to the list of his offenses. The list must have been damning enough. “I have my finger on the missiles targeting you. I’m debating whether to shoot you down or watch you crash.”

“So, no assistance?”

After fifteen seconds of silence, the red *Target Lock* disappeared from his screen, and a new voice came on the line.

“I need access to your system health diagnostics and engine data.”

His speed had dropped to six hundred miles an hour with the starboard engines about to burn. He tapped the screen and flicked his index finger to send the requested information.

“Not receiving anything. Untap the autopilot and tilt main starboard engine forward by three degrees.”

He did so.

“Any change in heading?”

He waited for two seconds, but nothing happened. “No.”

“The change in drag differential should give you maneuverability. That’s strange.” She hesitated, umming and ahing. She must have decided he needed the truth more than he needed hope, as her words cut through the cacophony of displays. “Based on the little data I’m receiving, you shouldn’t even be in the air.”

“Good to know.”

Five more seconds passed. “Can’t link to your autopilot. The damage is with the data feed. Can’t land you from here.”

Of course not. Why should that have worked when nothing else did?

The thrust had dropped to 24 percent. The descent angle was three shades in the red. The path he was tracing wasn’t promising.

"I'm also getting an error from the landing gear. There are no diagnostics, though, so something might be wrong with the sensors," she said.

"That's because there are no sensors. Or landing gear. I lost them at my last crash."

The six-second silence unnerved him more than a shriek would have.

"Let's find you someplace soft then and see if we can get you to land this thing manually." She shot instructions as fast as he processed and implemented them.

He followed her mechanically. His mind let go of every conscious thought and focused on the one verb she had uttered that had resonated.

Land. It was a good verb. He visualized that outcome, but the rate of the dropping altimeter didn't let him believe it.

MIKA TOOK HIS HELMET OFF AND BLINKED. THE ACRID STINK OF FOAM greeted him. The fire-suppression system had squirted the cabin with a preemptive burst but not covered it with a full dose. He blinked again. The nose of the transport was buried under four feet of dirt, and the windshield had a crack running from the bottom left to the top center.

The aircraft listed twenty degrees to his right, and the door to his left was smeared with blood. He wiggled his fingers and rotated his wrists. He moved his shoulders back and down. A sharp pain stabbed at him from his left as the motion stretched his ribcage. Great, an L-bar protruded about three inches from his belly.

He tried to slide forward but was pinned. He traced the bar as far as his reach allowed. The bar came out of his lower back and disappeared somewhere around where his seat met the frame. He stretched back, grabbed the bar behind the seat, and gave it a tug.

A jolt of pain shot through his body like he had touched a live wire. He gritted his teeth and tugged again, but the bar didn't budge. Blood from his gut dripped and pooled by his right foot.

As he contemplated his options, his comms came back to life. "Status?"

It wasn't the one who had helped him land, but the unfriendly one who had elected not to shoot him down. He let the bar go. "Still here."

"Do not move. The extraction team will reach you in fifteen minutes."

"I'm not going anywhere." He chuckled though the irony was lost on his audience.

"What's your condition?"

"Minor injuries. I'll be fine. The frame of the transport is crushed, blocking the door. You're gonna need cutters. Big ones."

"Noted."

Nothing else came through, so he returned to checking for damage. He rotated his ankles and flexed his feet up and down. His left foot moved well, but his right barely twitched, causing a new explosion of pain, as though his right leg were on fire. When the pain subsided, he put his right hand on his upper thigh and squeezed. All good. He then moved down a few inches, squeezed, and released. He kept going, and it was all fine until he hit the knee, but not after.

He had broken his tibia right below the knee, but with no bones misplaced or protruding, he'd be able to run on that in fifteen minutes. All in all, he was in better shape than he had expected.

He leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. He pictured the air mixing with his blood and flowing through him: lungs, belly, pelvis, thighs, calves, and to his toes. He counted to five and pushed the air out through his nose, retracing the steps back up. He repeated the process, calming his mind. He reached fifty-four breaths before gloved knuckles knocked on his windshield.

He tapped the window on his left. The hand wiped the dirt. "Can you hear me?"

He tapped back and gave her a thumbs-up. "Yeah."

"I'm going to cut this window."

The suction grapple stuck to the window, and the saw buzzed. He turned away but didn't need to. She cut the window clean, removing the shatter-proof polycarbonate in one piece. A square face, framed in shoulder-length black hair, stared in.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, eyes on the blood.

You have no idea. The pain in his chest wasn't caused by the puncture wound. "No."

Her eyes lingered on the blood for a few more seconds before moving to the door frame. She ran her hand on the now window-less door.

"This door seems operational."

Before he spoke, she extended her left arm inside the cockpit, palming the windshield. She rotated her arm and tapped the windshield with her knuckles, exposing a faded tattoo on her forearm. A tree trunk came out of the underside of her wrist, branches running up as though trying to capture her elbow. The outside branches were barely visible, the black ink faded with time. A few blues remained on the periphery. Yellow and red branches in the core were still clear.

Someone had paid attention to his encoded message. He raised his left arm, but the pain on his side made him pause. He rested his elbow on the frame of the missing window.

"May I?" she asked at his discomfort.

He nodded. She rotated his arm so his palm faced up. She pulled his jacket sleeve back, exposing his forearm. There was no tattoo to be found.

A tattoo was the result of cells in the dermis reacting to the thousands of needles puncturing the outer skin layer. The immune system sent white cells to repair the skin damage but also unleashed macrophages to absorb the invading ink. But those cells became gorged in ink they couldn't process, creating a permanent blot in the dermis. The Purge virus' repair mechanism gave the immune system a leg up by breaking the ink into smaller and smaller globs, allowing the macrophages to carry it away.

Some inks were easier to break down, so the blacks and blues faded first. Reds and oranges came next, and the yellows and whites were last to go. Each Sentinel got a multicolored tattoo as a marker on their first training day. Watching it fade was a rite of passage, with old-timers sporting the most faded tattoos.

Her eyes drilled into his arm, as though she wanted to convince herself there was a faint outline. There wasn't. She frowned because either he was an impostor or one of the first Sentinels. The blood splattered on the windshield, and the sorry state of his transport must have convinced her. She let go of his arm and greeted him with a single wave.

"Major Judy Wells."

He forced a smile, and recognition dawned on her. Her eyes moved from his arm to his face. "You're Mika Bayley."

"That's me."

His name might have triggered half a dozen different concerns, depending on her security clearance. He was the one who had started the Sentinels with Sierra. The one with a strange connection to General Rose. The one who should be dead. The one who had uncovered the Purge's secrets with Phillips. The one responsible for Chancellor Lester's death.

Then again, since she was on cleanup duty in the Uregs, it was unlikely she was privy to anything incriminating.

"Mr. Sentinel himself." She shook her head. "No one told me it was you."

"Yeah," he mumbled, irritated by the ebullience he couldn't reciprocate.

She fingered the door. "What's the deal with the door?"

"Nothing. It doesn't need cutters." He pulled his jacket back. "But I do."

She leaned in to get a better look. She reached in and put her left hand on the bar. Her right hand found his back, and he suspected she traced the bar to its origin. Wherever it was.

"Not a problem," she declared.

She stepped back and talked to her headset. “Contusions and signs of concussion. No ID. Keep the perimeter but don’t advance. He might be contaminated.” She listened for a few seconds. “Yes, we need a medical airlift.”

His questions must have been plastered on his face.

“We don’t want anyone getting too close until we get you out of this mess, and we have to take you into custody. Not carrying an ID, entering and crashing in a restricted airspace, and all.” She sounded almost embarrassed. “Will be a lot easier if you disappear from a hospital.”

It was good dealing with a Sentinel. Whether they came from Marin, Kern, or New Cal, they all treated the rules of their titular states like an experienced driver treated traffic signs: aware of their presence as potential sources of information but ready to ignore them the moment they became an inconvenience.

She disappeared for thirty seconds then reappeared holding a cutter with a smaller saw wheel. She cut the door in two places, bending and prying it to ensure it was consistent with what he had described after the crash. It took her fifteen seconds to cut the bar free of the chair.

Then the trouble began. Mika’s hyperactive repair mechanism had healed the tissue, locking the bar into his flesh. It took her over four minutes to pull the bar out of him, tugging about an inch, stopping for thirty seconds, and tugging again. He stilled his mind and fought the urge to grab her arm.

When he was finally clear of the frame, he collapsed back, putting his head on the solid floor behind him. “Let’s not do this again.”

“Medical transport is eight minutes out.” She hesitated. “What are they going to find?”

“Not much.”

“How do we explain all the blood then?”

That was not his problem, so he looked at the transport’s ceiling.

“Colonel Rendon is eager to see you,” she said.

“I need some time.”

“She was adamant—”

“I said I need time.”

Judy’s expression grew serious. “I have orders to take you to the hospital.”

Orders had gotten them into this mess, orders that hailed from hundreds of miles away and forced them into actions that weren’t connected to the reality in front of their eyes.

“That’s your problem. Me, I’m going to borrow a parachute after we take off.”

“What am I supposed to tell the crew here who witnessed your landing?”

He waved at the mess inside the cockpit. It was as good a reminder as any that he hadn’t exactly *landed*. “You need a body in much worse shape than I am. The Uregs are full of them. Find one.”

“And Colonel Rendon?”

Sierra Rendon was in a bind, trying to fill shoes that were impossible to fill. Her tactics were for a different enemy, her ambitions limited to gaining the approval of a long-lost mentor. But none of that absolved her, not when her pig-headed risk analysis had pushed them to grapple with threats they did not understand.

“Sierra can go fuck herself.”

Judy took a step back. Sierra had a loyal following. Some followed her because she was likable and acted like one of the gang. Others followed her because she was their last link to Lori Rose, the general who had redefined Marin’s ambition, the general who could have told them they could fly, and they would have jumped off a roof. Was Judy in that camp? He didn’t care.

She leaned in again, softening her tone. “You’re about to be arrested for murder and board a military medical transport under guard. That transport is landing in Marin.”

Mika wiped the foam from the screen with his hand, then rubbed his hand on his pants. “You can land wherever you want. If you need an alibi, I can knock you out or shoot you in the transport.” He frowned. “It’ll probably be more convenient for you if you resisted a bit.”

Her lips tightened and her eyes grew cold. "Is that what happened with Major Tomlin? Was it convenient to shoot her too?"

He grabbed the hand she had rested on the cut door, twisted her thumb, and pulled her in. She stumbled, hitting her forehead on the top of the doorframe. "Do not bring Lin into this."

He let go of her thumb, and she regained her balance. She squinted as though he were an alien. She massaged her thumb. "Just how long have you been gone?"

"Three weeks."

She tilted her head back. "Jeezus."

"What?"

"You don't know, do you? Marin is under martial law. Chancellor Yim is under house arrest. Bodies with Purge-like symptoms are piling up. A convoy came out of the Uregs two days ago. They've dealt with this virus, so they offered to help."

"From the Uregs, you say?"

"That part is sketchy. But General Kuipers is convinced they're not hostile. I'm guessing we're not getting the full story."

"Kuipers?"

"She is the acting chancellor now."

"How about we skip the hospital and go straight to the Shed?"

When Judy didn't reply, he pointed to a two-foot-long, toolbox-like metal case strapped into the cargo hold. "Sierra really needs this."

Judy put her hand on her earpiece but kept her eyes on him. "Transport is almost here."

He shuffled to the cargo hold on shaky legs and unclipped the case.

She tapped the door frame with her index finger. "So, what happened with Tomlin?"

"Did you know her?"

She shook her head. "Not well. But our paths crossed a few times. She was one of the calmest people I've come across. Contagious, you know?"

"I know."

"So, what happened out there?"

His chest tightened again. "I couldn't leave her behind."

He didn't even need to close his eyes to see the moment over and over as though one more look would yield the winning move he had failed to spot the first time, as though one more look through the crosshairs could alter the past.

It wouldn't. There was no way for him to bring back Lin or forgive Sierra. To unmoor his thoughts from the last time he had seen Lin, he nudged them to the time he met her six months ago in a world in which their ignorance allowed them to pretend they lived in a simpler time. If not a safer one, at least one with fewer enemies.

CHAPTER 2

HOSTILE

*"We may not have chosen the time,
but the time has chosen us."*

—JOHN LEWIS

Mika plunged the bowie knife into his left forearm and cut to the elbow. The cold blade moved across his flesh with little resistance, as though splitting a green tomato. He put the knife on the towel and drained his glass. The bourbon lit up his chest, burning down the way it was meant to.

He put down the glass and poured another generous shot. He rested his left arm on the towel but didn't glance at the closing wound.

Drinking alone wasn't a choice but a concession to biology. Unaided, he barely tasted the liquor, much less felt its effects. A tart liquid moved down his throat like burnt, tepid tea. The whiff of oak and smoke hinted at something more but didn't deliver unless he distracted his overgrown repair mechanism for a few seconds. He didn't miss the pointless chatter or the fake intimacy of Macky's bar, but he missed losing himself in the crowd. Even if he had been willing to share his secret, Macky would never have allowed him. Self-immolation tended to chase away customers.

He gripped the knife again, cutting along the new scar running across his forearm. His blood had warmed the blade. It became less

an intruder and more an extension of his arm, a deadly weapon in search of a cause, just like he was.

Another shot, another cut. Six cuts away from the bottom of the bottle, his tida chimed to remind him of a promise he mostly intended to keep. He tapped it off, but ten seconds later, the reminder was back, brighter. That his finger-sized glass digital assistant showed the loyalty he lacked jolted him out of his chair. He downed the bottle and headed to the bathroom.

He splashed water on his arm and face. He wiped himself dry, put on his least dirty shirt, and headed out. Five months in, he still viewed the new order with suspicion. He wasn't supposed to gash himself just to enjoy a drink. He wasn't supposed to drive to Marin.

He wasn't supposed to be alive.

He reached Sierra's office late. But showing up was a concession to his history with Sierra, to an understanding they had once shared, an understanding that had descended into a haze of half-promises and full-on disappointments because of his unwillingness to honor simple requests.

He figured Sierra would launch into another one of her tirades about the futility of his quest, how hiding at home or hunting down Kern soldiers didn't advance their cause, and how she needed him here. He knocked on the inside of the open door and walked in.

Sierra sat across a round table to his left with her back to the window, talking to a soldier Mika didn't recognize.

"Mika!" Sierra got up and hugged him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders with a sincerity that shamed him into civility. Sierra had been a competent executive officer to Lori. But now, Special Forces were hers, prodding her to manage up as well as down. Replacing a legend was hard. Replacing a legend while warding off threats to their existence no one even knew existed was impossible.

Sierra pointed to the soldier. "Major Tomlin." Then she pointed to him. "Mika Bayley."

Tomlin gave him half a nod. Sierra sat down and gestured toward the lone empty chair around the table. He stood between Sierra and

the large desk to his right. This had been Lori's office. He had been here only once, but that was enough for him to distrust the place. His eyes moved to the leather chair behind the desk, to the screen on the desk, and to the two empty bookshelves connected by a low cabinet. He spun the chair Sierra had pointed to ninety degrees to put the desk behind him and sat down.

"I called you here because we have a serious problem at the border," Sierra said.

It had been weeks since he had been to the Shed, the large metal warehouse that housed Sentinel headquarters and which no one had anything good to say about. He had passed on Sierra's assignments for months because he had no interest in training Sentinels. Border patrol wasn't going to tip the scales either.

He had become an outsider, spying on the petty struggles of those around him, but not letting those struggles touch him or drag him down. It must have been a side effect of coming back from the dead. He had woken up in a world that bore little resemblance to the one he had known. One that held new politics, new biology. Finding purpose in that new world had proven impossible.

At first, Amy had been understanding, helping him put the pieces of his life back together. But she had given up at some point, his one-step-forward-one-back path meandering the wrong way too often for her. As the governor of New Cal and the vice-chancellor of Marin-New Cal, she had bigger fish to fry than mending a damaged soul.

No, that wasn't fair. Amy was still trying. He was the one who had given up on her, on them, on the world.

Sierra clicked on her tida, and the small glass cylinder projected a map between them. Marin-New Cal stretched from Monterey Bay to Mendocino, highlighted in blue. Only five months ago, Marin and the city-states of New Cal had been neighbors who barely tolerated each other. Now, they stood as a single entity with a hyphenated name as though no one expected the union to last. Still, it had become real, at least on maps, if not in citizens' minds.

Kern stood out in shades of red to the south, each shade the domain of a different general. After years of posturing and attempted invasions, Kern's indifference toward them was a distinct improvement in relations. But it wasn't policy. Kern had embarked on an introspection that had the makings of a civil war unfolding in fits and starts: a few days of extreme violence followed by months of inactivity. Mika treated them like he would treat a bloated python, as a momentarily content but dangerous predator he kept his eyes on and gave a wide berth in case it needed another snack.

A dull gray covered the Uregs, the areas stretching between them and Kern and extending to the eastern edges of California. The word "border" didn't make sense. Kern and Marin didn't touch at any point; they didn't come within hundreds of miles of touching. But that wasn't the border they would be discussing.

As if on cue, Sierra moved her finger down, and dark lines appeared to the east and north. "Here are the areas the Sentinels patrolled last month," she said. "All reports are the same: nothing. In fact, in the five months, we've been monitoring these areas, not a single person, vehicle, or transport has been spotted. Then last week we lost four Sentinels."

The Sentinels were Sierra's brainchild, an organization that operated outside the Marin military structure, with members from Marin, New Cal, and even a few from Kern. She had stumbled her way into the process that triggered the Purge's repair mechanism. Mika was an existence proof, not a roadmap, but that had been enough. They now had three dozen hard-to-kill soldiers at various stages of the process.

All to say the Sentinels weren't the sort to die by accident.

"How did it happen?"

"Short on detail. Two disappeared without warning. The next two converged to the area and reported coded transmissions and a convoy. And then nothing."

"Coded transmissions?"

“Working on it, but we have little to go on.”

“So, the chancellor is finally ready to investigate?”

Sierra shook her head. “No change in official policy. We are not authorized beyond the Uregs unless provoked.”

“I’d say you’ve just been provoked.”

Sierra frowned. “Marin isn’t going to sanction an official mission.”

Sierra dropped the hyphen for expediency, but he was still glad Amy wasn’t here to take offense. He had been chewed out for saying “Marin” enough times to know that for Amy, the name of an entity shaped its essence. As an authority figure caught between two states, Amy fought decades of entrenched preconceptions every day. To her, Marin-New Cal was a federation. Marin was an occupying force.

He brought his attention back to the map. Sierra’s words, Tomlin, his presence—all pointed to a simple conclusion. “That’s where we come in.”

“Major Tomlin can’t move across the border. But I need her to.”

Tomlin wasn’t wearing a Marin uniform. “So, she’ll take her jacket off and take a long walk?”

“Sentinel Tomlin can do just that.” Sierra missed that he hadn’t been serious.

Mika had always operated at the edges of legality. He didn’t so much break the law as he poked the empty spaces where conflicting laws met but didn’t fit. He had lived mostly alone in that space. But Sierra had now carved it wider, shoving an entire organization into that gap. That Tomlin was here meant she had checked her well-drilled Marin soldier hat at the door.

“Okay, then. How, exactly, do you want us to do this?” he asked.

“I want you to be cautious, systematic. And you do not separate under any circumstance. The Jeep will give you eight hundred miles. Four hundred out, four hundred in.”

That put them at the edge of explored space, past the gangs and warlords, past the poisoned streams and mountains. But still, it was nowhere near where they had to be.

“You can cover forty-to-fifty miles a day on foot,” she said. “So, head out fifteen days. Observe, return, report. Then repeat from a new spot.”

“What exactly are we looking for? Compounds? Military installations? Power plants?”

“Here’s all we know.” A map centered on Northern California, Nevada, and Oregon floated up.

“That’s what, three hundred miles by five hundred? You want us to walk around and see what we can find?” He chuckled. “I get it. We’re long-lived now, but I’m guessing you need an answer this century.”

Sierra stood and picked up a three-foot cylinder. She removed the top and slid out a bird-shaped drone with rotors where the wings would connect to the body.

“Latest generation flybot. Recharges by solar power in an hour and stays in the air for up to eight hours.” She pointed to the flybot’s belly. “Acoustic, visual, and infrared sensors. You’ll cut a twenty-mile-wide swath over the land.” She picked a feathery cover and stretched it over the composite wing. “Stealthy enough to pass for a buzzard unless actively scanned.”

She pointed to two spots about eight hundred miles away as the crow flew, but well over nine hundred overland with the mountains between them. “The two settlements we know of are here and here.”

At a month per trip, he was signing up for a mission that might last years, but it would get him out of New Cal and Marin. “What do we know about those settlements?”

“Population of a thousand or two, diesel-power plant, mostly agrarian.” She flicked a file to the screen, and more details covered the map. “This intel is over six months old.”

Which meant it was useless. “Why not send dozens of us? It’ll be a lot faster.”

“Faster? Sure. Discreet? Not even close. I need stealth, and I need people I trust.”

He had given her no reason to trust him in months. His activities questioned everything: trust, existence, life, death, and why the transitions were so hard. “Do you?”

Sierra's glance at Tomlin spoke volumes.

He snorted. "So, we're disposable?"

The left corner of Sierra's lip tightened and drooped. "You're both as indisposable as they come. That's why I need you."

Flattery was not in Sierra's arsenal, so he nodded.

"Get to know each other first and train together. You'll go out when you're ready."

He was trained, body and virus. One look at Tomlin's confident posture and it was clear: so was she. "What are we training for?"

"You're going to be on your own out there for extended periods. You're only going out when I'm convinced you can handle it."

He picked up the flybot. The body's fuselage was rigid with mild flex and lighter than he had expected. He ran his hand over the wing cover. "Teamwork is not my strong suit."

Sierra smiled in her disagreement. "I need to run. Marin business never stops."

Tomlin got up, as did he, but Sierra gestured them down. "Sit, sit. Talk." She pointed to the cabinet that split the bookshelves. "Help yourselves to some wine."

Tomlin sat back down. He put the flybot on the table and followed Sierra out the door. As they turned into the hallway, he reached for her forearm, but she spoke first.

"I need all of you, Mika." She took his silence as a protest. "I need to know you're up for this."

"Does she know?"

Sierra furrowed her brow—more inquiry than displeasure.

"Purge."

Sierra shook her head.

Great, he was dealing with someone who thought their bodies were indestructible because of a miracle drug that didn't exist. "Lester?" he whispered.

Two people had seen and helped him enter ex-Chancellor Lester's compound. No one had seen him leave, at least not through the only door to Lester's office. Lester's death had been announced

hours after two bodies had been rushed to a military hospital. No one had identified the bodies after a fifty-foot drop to solid concrete, but simple arithmetic implied a cover-up.

The official line stated that a guard had shielded Chancellor Lester from a bomb and both guard and chancellor had fallen to their deaths. It was true enough to match the scant evidence. But Sierra had cultivated enough conflicting accounts that the truth was nothing more than one more rumor and not even the juiciest one.

She shook her head again. "You were never there," she said and walked away.

Tomlin leaned back on her chair, eyes on him as he strolled back in. She did not speak. In fact, she hadn't said a word since he had walked in.

He sat down and reassessed her: sharp jaw, jet-black hair pulled into a loose ponytail, a collarless brown leather jacket half a size too large framing her broad shoulders, enough pockets to hide weapons for three different battles. She held her shoulders back and neck straight, the posture of a well-trained but bored soldier. It all screamed efficient, unconcerned with appearance, and good at disappearing in plain sight.

If this weren't a front, she had the makings of a solid partner. He waited for her to say something and acknowledge his presence beyond the initial nod she had tossed in his direction. But she didn't. Okay, then. "Any conclusions yet?" he asked.

"You talk a lot but don't say anything."

He took it as a compliment. "So, how long have you known Sierra?" "I've never met Sierra."

He kept his eyes on her.

"But I've known Colonel Rendon for six years," she added.

"I've met both. And I like Sierra a lot better."

She stood expressionless for a moment. Then she smiled, and he noticed her crow's feet. She was older than he had first guessed. His mind wandered to Phillips, who had looked decades younger than he had been. But Tomlin hadn't had twenty years of repair.

In her, like in Mika, the virus still focused on fixing short-term damage—broken bones and bullet wounds and falls from fifth-floor windows. It wasn't likely to address long-term repair like wrinkles.

"I'm not trying to be difficult, but I'm not good at chit-chat, and I don't know what to talk about without context," she said.

"How do we get context?"

She opened her hands, both palms up.

"How about a personal question each?" he asked.

"I don't do well with sincerity."

"That's kinda the point."

"Okay, then. You start. Why does Colonel Rendon trust you?"

That question launched an investigation, not a conversation. The answer wouldn't tell her much about him, but it would tell her why they stood here. So, she was practical.

"I met her right after the Ross assassination. I was on the witness list, and she was on the investigation team. We didn't see eye-to-eye on much, and her attitude didn't make things any easier."

"We were all a little on edge."

Having two heads of state blown up would do that. He had left that version of Sierra so far behind that it was hard for him to assign motives to her actions.

"I ran into her in the Uregs a week later. A different type of investigation. Considering I was in the wrong place at the wrong time, it was a miracle neither of us got shot. We went on a strange mission a little later. We still didn't agree on most things, but the hostility was toned down. Everything went to shit in a hurry, and that's where I met Sierra. After that, I'd let her watch my back any day."

"I thought the point of this exercise was to tell the truth."

There was nothing he could say to that because the truth was too simple to be believable.

"What you said is you met, took a dislike to each other, almost killed each other, and then decided to trust each other with your lives. Seems you skipped a step or three."

"I didn't see her between those events."

She shut her eyes for fifteen seconds. "Okay, let's say I buy that." She opened her eyes. "Why did you go on a dangerous mission with someone you barely tolerated?"

"It's my turn to ask a question."

"Not till you answer mine to some level of satisfaction. I still have no idea why the colonel trusted you, and all your answers lead to more questions."

"I wasn't crazy about the idea, but saying no wasn't an option."

She chuckled. "I'm guessing she wasn't all warm and fuzzy about you either. So, she was asked. Ordered, more likely."

He waited for her to go through the options. Someone high enough in Marin to give orders to Sierra. Someone connected enough to New Cal to do the same to him.

"Chancellor Lester?"

He shook his head. The cover-up that had erased his involvement in Lester's death had also erased Lester's duplicity. But it had been the only way to keep the secret that the virus that had killed most of the human race had left the survivors at a fork in the road, that some were on a path to immortality, healing from injuries and disease, and that others weren't. Each passing day the deception became heavier, crushing the truth a little more.

"Who, then?"

He pointed to the floor.

Lori Rose was not a name anyone felt ambivalent about. She was the pluck Marin had never possessed before or since. She had beaten Kern twice, saving Marin each time. But she had also unleashed a biological weapon on Marin soil. To defang her enemies? To prevent civil war? Or to save him? It was for the best that only a handful knew about the third possibility. Neither her image nor his existence could have handled the resulting public scrutiny.

"Lori Rose?" She didn't blink. "No offense, but isn't that like the lightning asking the flashlight to lead the way?" She chuckled again. "You might be more interesting than you look."

Lin's respect for Lori moved her up two notches in his rating. Lori had become a polarizing figure since her transport had been shot down over the Pacific. There was a campaign to discredit her and paint her as a power-hungry general. The lack of gratitude had angered him at first. But now, he relished the smears because no one would bother bad-mouthing a dead general. This meant someone believed Lori was still alive. And as long as they uttered her name, even in disdain, it meant they feared her return.

"Did she know it would work or was her teaming you two just expedient?"

"Since every decision was made at the edge of the cliff, I'd say expedient."

"Still, she had to suspect it'd work out," she said.

"Kinda like now."

Tomlin laughed. "This isn't expedient. Rendon predicted this will work because she knows both of us. So why did General Rose predict—"

"Now," he interrupted. "It's my turn."

This time she didn't protest.

"Why did Sierra pick you?"

"I don't mind working with men."

That might have set her apart in the old Marin military but not today. Though integration in Marin was slow, they had mixed a lot in five months and far longer in New Cal and the Uregs.

"Not good enough."

"It's closer than you think. You think things are different now? Most Sentinels still view themselves as a branch of the Marin army. A special branch, to be sure, but still within the structure. Very few of us know what we are."

They were not bound by Marin. They had bigger concerns than petty turf wars. They were the eyes and ears of Marin, New Cal, and Kern against a potential enemy no one had seen. The name was meant to emphasize their charter, to stand watch, not to engage in armed conflict. But even then, secrets were stacked three-deep.

"Besides, the colonel is going against Marin policy by sending us out there. So, she's picking someone whose loyalty to Marin brass is frayed."

Marin-New Cal was a testament to someone's folly. Rigid, matriarchal Marin and open, free-wheeling New Cal were two states with fundamentally different worldviews. They were still years away from comprehending each other, much less living together. But "frayed" was a good word to describe a lot of relationships: Tomlin's to Marin, his to New Cal, his to Amy.

"I take it you don't think much of the chancellor?"

"Our policies are idiotic." She frowned. "As are most of our policymakers."

"Not a fan of the executive council?"

She snorted. "I never thought much of the council. They were always insulated, out of touch with Marin's realities, preferring philosophy to practicality. Somehow, they manage to get worse at every incarnation. We went from isolationist to appeaser to chicken-shit in a hurry."

He didn't disagree with her. Amy would have probably agreed as well. "Because you let New Cal into the council?"

"It's a popular call. But it's the easy way out to blame New Cal for everything. Four of five executives are old Marin. So, arithmetic alone absolves New Cal."

Yes, the federation was a shotgun marriage.

"Still, I'd expected more from New Cal. Governor Chipps was promising. I thought she'd shake up the ostriches on the council, but she turned out to be a politician, just like the rest."

"You know about Amy and me, right?"

It took three seconds for Tomlin to connect "Amy" to "Governor Amy Chipps."

"You're bloody serious?"

She was too amused for it to be an act. So, this meeting was as much a surprise to her as it was to him because had she done even a cursory background search on him, she would have known. He

stayed in the background and didn't accompany Amy to official functions, but they lived together. There was no way to erase that footprint or any reason to try.

He nodded.

"Interesting," she said. "She made sense now and then, which is more than I can say for the others. But I liked her better as governor of New Cal. She was fresh. Sounded like she wanted to actually get shit done before she got contaminated by Marin politics."

It was his turn to snort. She didn't backtrack now that she had become aware of their connection. She was straight and not willing to bend to demands of circumstance. He suspected they would get along just fine.

He moved toward the wine cabinet. "How about we break into this and see what the good colonel left for us?"

He opened the cabinet. Lori's ports lay on their sides on the bottom shelf, undisturbed by time or Sierra. They brought too many memories for him to even consider touching one. He picked a bottle of merlot from the middle shelf, uncorked it, and poured two glasses. Tomlin took the glass he handed her, smelled it, and took a small sip.

He hadn't expected Tomlin's filters to come down after two glasses of wine. But they weren't filters; she was naturally closed off. It was hard to not like her, even when she was telling you that you were being an idiot, which she did often.

They weren't friends. They weren't even allies yet. But by the second bottle, they had provided enough insight into what made them tick to erase some mistrust. Whether that artificial bond would turn into a real one, he didn't know. The wine offered no help there. He put his glass down and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "One more question."

"Yeah?"

"Major. Sentinel. Tomlin. Do you happen to have a first name?"

She put her glass down, and her jawline tightened. "I go by Lin."

"Short for Tomlin?"

"My parents must have had a peachy outlook on life and a strange sense of humor, neither of which I share." Her eyes lost focus, most likely caught by a stray memory. She blinked back to the present. "I dropped the name they gave me long ago. Even before the Purge, there were enough ways to get into trouble. I didn't need to invite more."

She waved. "I'm Lin."

"Lin." He waved back with one single swipe of his hand, a formal gesture that belied the two bottles of merlot they had burned. "If this partnership is going to work, we're going to have to be honest with each other."

She straightened up. "Yeah?"

"We don't need training of any kind. So, what is Sierra really after?"

"We did fine for a first date. How about we call it a day before we finish the good colonel's wine."

The bemused smile that accompanied her non-answer told him all he wanted to know. Lin was in on Sierra's plan.

And he wasn't.