

Riders of the Centauri Range
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The Centauri wind swept across the Range sending ripples through the tall grass. Thinking like most 17-year olds that he was invincible, Tom Provost's only response to the gust was to button his fur-lined jean jacket and tighten the string of his broad-brimmed hat over his chin. He did not want to give up his spot atop the ridge. From there he could watch the herd of Tauri Beasts below and could just barely make out the smoke plumes from the McShane spread to the north. On a clear day he could also see Fenmore's Ferry on the West River. Behind him lay the Ore Mountains, a distant, weather-beaten line tapering off to the southeast. The rolling, gully-filled Range was broken by an occasional cluster of lights, spreads like his father's: a house, a stable, a barn. If you had a good horse, and you knew how to ride, and you knew how to use the terrain to shelter yourself from the Range wind (and what self-respecting rancher didn't?), you could ride the distance between the West River and the Ore Mountains in two days. Tom had done it many times with his father.

Up in the sky Tom could see a cluster of satellites against the stars: a communications relay for the planet's cell network, a weather satellite, and a docking station for the yearly drones that made the four-year journey from earth, bringing supplies and a handful of new settlers.

He looked a few kilometers to the west where a cluster of lights illuminated the ranch. *Don't care if the wind is sweeping in*, he thought. *Rather stay on this hill then go back there*. He didn't think of his father's spread as home, not any more, not in the eighteen months since Dave moved in. Certainly not in the six months since his twin half sisters were born. *They hardly notice I'm there anyway*, he thought.

As another gust blew in, Tom walked back to his horse, carefully tethered to an iron spike he'd driven into a boulder, and took out his digital binoculars. He scanned the heard of Tauri Beasts below. The big, dumb, furry, rhino-sized creatures were huddling against the cold. They were a delicacy in the Unites States and the West, expensive enough for his father to start a new life on Centauri with little hope of ever returning. His father always said life on Centauri beat war taxes, terror gangs, and wondering if the bus you were on was going to blow up.

His cell crackled, 'Tom?' It was Dave. Tom didn't answer right away, hoping that Dave wouldn't call again. 'Tom?'

Tom took the cell off his belt and depressed the respond button. 'Yeah.'

'I just got a call from the Fenmores.'

'What'd they want?'

'Cassie Fenmore says there are some Gaza Cats skulking around the ferry and wants to know if you can ride out tomorrow and take care of them.'

Gaza Cats were utterly fearless, quad-fanged feline predators. The first settlers named the cats after Gaza, the most hellish, Islamist terrorist-infested place on earth before the Israelis nuked it. Even after a generation spent hunting down every last male, and ruthlessly dousing their cub-packed dens in gasoline, a smart rancher didn't go out onto the Range unarmed for fear of running into a pack.

Tom groaned inwardly, but not about the Gaza Cats. It was Cassie Fenmore that bothered him. Tom didn't want to revisit that. He thought about telling Dave to go

himself but thought better of it. His father would have told him it was his responsibility to look after Cassie and her mother after Mr. Fenmore was killed. He would have been right, Tom knew.

‘Yeah, I guess I can ride out there tomorrow.’

‘Okay, good. Cassie sounded like the Gaza Cats were really spooking her, I’d never heard her like that before, strained and scared....’ He trailed off and changed the subject. ‘Coming in tonight?’

Tom bristled at the thought. ‘Naaa, I think we got a few Gaza Cats here, too,’ he lied, ‘I better stay out.’

‘You’re going to spend the whole night out on the Range before riding out to the Fenmores?’

‘I can handle it.’

‘Won’t you get bored?’

‘Got my pod, brought my monthly school assignment. I’ll be fine.’

‘Food?’

‘I got jerky and Centauri flat bread.’ *And whiskey*, he didn’t say.

‘Where did you get Centauri flat bread?’

‘That Centar trading caravan that came through last week.’

Unlike his predecessor, the new Centar king had been sending trading expeditions into human territory. People liked the extra money and the visitors. The Centars enjoyed the contact too, roaming far and wide on the east side of the river.

‘You sure you don’t want to come in?’ Dave asked. ‘Your sisters would like to see you.’

‘Half-sisters.’

Dave didn’t speak for a few seconds. In the background, Tom thought he heard his mother say something like *leave him be*. ‘Suit yourself.’

‘I’ll let you know when I set out. Goodnight.’

Tom didn’t wait for a reply.

It was a long, lonely night. Tom didn’t care. He watched as, one by one, the ranch lights on the Range flickered down. Tom listened to music on his pod as Centauri B rose in the night sky. When he got tired of music, Tom worked on the algebra portion of his monthly school assignment in the dim light cast by Centauri B. He had a good head for math, Tom was finding out. After that, he read his Bible. He liked the story of Exodus. He fell asleep leaning against the rock to which he tied his horse, his Bible folded on his leg. Tom dozed lightly so he was halfway aware of what was happening around him, a skill his father had learned in the U.S. Army and passed on to him.

By the time Centauri B set and Centauri A rose, Tom was in the saddle. Before starting out, he rang up Dave’s cell, left a message that he was leaving, and turned his off so Dave couldn’t call him. Then he rode out onto the Range. To relive his boredom, he’d occasionally spur his horse to a gallop and race through the tall grass or ride down into one of the many gullies and gulches, weaving through and between the rocks. After successfully navigating a particularly narrow, winding gully, out of old habit Tom reached down and patted his horse on his white nose. ‘Goodboy,’ he said without thinking. Then he admonished himself. *Forget it. He’s just a horse. Don’t get attached.* He tried not to get too attached to anything anymore.

An hour after Centauri A reached its peak, Tom dismounted and ate his lunch while the horse grazed. After relieving himself, Tom watered the horse, rubbed down his back, and got moving again. He hadn't been back in the saddle for ten minutes when he saw a rider coming from the north, heading southwest on a path that would eventually intersect his own. Even at several clicks he recognized the grey horse's rider Jena McShane.

Great. Just great. What the hell is she doing out here? Tom thought. Before too long Jena saw him and steered his way. They met up after a few minutes.

'Jena,' he nodded.

'Tom,' she nodded back.

When he was younger, Tom had had a crush on Jena. He had always been drawn to her blue eyes and long brown hair. Not since the Aliens landed. In the aftermath, Jena had cut her hair short, and the sparkle had gone out of her eyes to be replaced by something that Tom couldn't quite put his finger on. It was dark and vicious and scared Tom that the smart, pretty girl he used to play basketball with could carry that around with her.

She wore a fur-lined jean jacket similar to his own and the same broadbrim. Unlike Cassie Fenmore and a lot of other girls who wore their pants low and a size too tight, Jena stuck with baggy, cargo-pocketed jeans. She had a carbine slung over her back, a pistol on her belt and a shotgun in her saddle holster. 'Jesus Christ, you're packing a hell of a lot of firepower.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'Never know if the Aliens will come back.'

'They're not coming back,' Tom insisted. 'Not after we kicked their asses.'

'You talk pretty tough for someone whose father was killed by them.'

Feeling rage well up within him, Tom raised his fist but thought better of it. Instead he replied, 'So was yours.' Then, after a few awkward seconds, he regained his composure, 'Where're you headed?'

'The Fenmores'. Shoot some Gaza Cats.'

'The Fenmores'? But they called me.'

Jena laughed. 'But only after calling me first.'

'They called you first?'

'I was out on the Range bringing in a stray Tauri Beast. My mother said she didn't know when I was coming back, so I guess they called you.'

'Oh.'

'That surprise you?'

'A little.'

'Well, beggars can't be choosers.'

'Thanks.'

'I'm surprised you came out.'

'Better than spending the day with Pencil Neck.'

'Your stepfather?'

'I have no stepfather. Dave is just some guy who lives in my father's house.'

Jena smiled. 'And sleeps in your mother's bed.'

Tom had had enough. Without hesitation he punched Jena in the mouth hard enough to knock her off her horse. Fortunately for Jena, but unfortunately for Tom, she was holding the pommel of her saddle. She wiped the blood from her mouth. Then in one

swift motion, she un-slung her carbine and with the butt bashed Tom in the eye, knocking him to the cold, hard ground. Holding his left hand to his eye, Tom scrambled to his feet.

‘Not my fault your mom likes having a man around the spread.’ Jena turned her horse west and said, ‘Let’s go.’

After several clicks of silence-filled riding, Jena turned south.

‘Where’re we heading?’ Tom asked, even though he already knew the answer.

‘The battlefield,’ she replied.

Tom sighed in resignation. After riding south for another two clicks, they spotted the ridge Jena was looking for and galloped up the gentle slope to the summit. While Tom stood behind her, folding his arms against the cold wind, Jena stood before the rocks, mumbling. Not prayers, he realized, but hate-filled oaths at the long dead Aliens. Tom got down on one knee, crossed himself, and mumbled a prayer for Jena’s father and the other Rangers that had been killed there.

Jena turned to Tom and scowled, ‘What the hell good does that do?’

‘Well, what the hell good does it do coming up here and thinking about how much you hate the Aliens?’

Jena didn’t reply. Instead she walked to the other end of the ridge. Reluctantly, Tom followed. Together they looked down at the field below. The field had recovered from the scars of battle after two years, the tall grass filling in the scorch marks left by the Aliens’ beam weapons and covering the craters carved out by the Rangers’ grenade launchers and recoilless rifles.

From atop the ridge Jena’s father had led a company of Rangers against the Aliens. Tom and Jena had wanted to fight, but Mr. McShane forbade them. When Jena tried to go forward with Rangers anyway, Mr. McShane got his point across by slapping her so hard he left a hand print across her face. Instead they watched from a stand of rocks as Mr. McShane and his men killed several Aliens and blew up a few of their vehicles before being cut to pieces by the Aliens’ beam weapons. With the time bought by Mr. McShane’s Rangers, Jena’s grandfather, Jack McShane, himself an officer who served in the Canadian army during the Islamist Wars, rallied the remaining Rangers and whatever ranchers he could scrape up and ambushed the Aliens 20 kilometers further east. It had been a lopsided victory for the humans. Every one of the Aliens had been killed in exchange for one human, Tom’s father. Near as anyone could tell, the Aliens had been looking for slaves or living samples of Centauri’s indigenous wildlife. They had rounded up a few dozen Centars. The Aliens had only taken a landing ship down, leaving their mother ship in high orbit. The humans shot it down with a makeshift missile hastily built by Ore Mountain technical engineers.

They stood on the rocks for a good ten minutes before Tom, the wind biting through his jacket, said, ‘Can we get the hell out of here, please?’

‘Not yet. Go on yourself.’

‘I’ll wait.’

‘Afraid of facing down Cassie by yourself?’

‘Screw you.’

Tom walked back to his horse and mounted up. But rather than ride off, he reached into a saddle bag and took out a well-thumbed history reader. The Range’s teacher would be back on his spread in a few weeks, and he wanted to make sure he had all his assignments completed. The reader was the size of a small notebook and contained

several chapters on varying history subjects, at the end of which was a Q/A section. After finishing a chapter titled 'Islamist War Two: 2030-2037,' Tom folded the reader against his horse's neck and answered the questions at the end.

He hadn't noticed Jena walking back to him until she said, 'What do you bother with that stuff for?'

'My father always liked me to get good grades.'

She mounted her horse. 'If Dave cared about your grades, would you fail?'

'Shut up.'

Tom read another question. Not knowing the answer, he asked Jena. 'Hey what year did Indonesia invade Australia?'

'I don't know, 2030 something. I remember Mr. Epthminion talking to my dad about it, said his family was lucky to get out of Brisbane before the Islamists marched in and head hacked everyone they could get their hands on.'

Tom checked off the right answer, closed the reader and put it back into his saddle bag.

'Don't let me keep you from your studies,' Jena mocked. 'I'm sure the Fenmores can wait too.'

Without responding, Tom spurred his horse down the ridge. Jena followed. At the bottom they found a line of Bipedasaur tracks, the preferred mount of the Centars. Tom stopped his horse and looked down at the tracks. The clawed, three-toed tracks pointed to the southeast.

'What's with the fresh Bipedasaur tracks?' Tom asked. 'Not supposed to be another Centar caravan until winter fully sets in.'

'Who cares,' was Jena's only reply.

By the time Centauri A was drifting down the far horizon, Tom and Jena had topped the small hill which overlooked the Fenmores' place. The ground on the far bank still showed a black ring from the bonfire and shallow depressions left by the barbecue pits from last month's King's Festival.

Tom looked away with a mixture of shame and embarrassment.

Noticing Tom's discomfort, Jena couldn't resist adding to it. 'What's the matter? Don't like looking at the scene of your big blow up with Cassie?'

'No.'

'Maybe you should have thought about it before you dumped her at King's Festival? What'ya think?'

'How was I supposed to know she'd burst into tears, make a big scene and ruin the festival for everyone?'

'Maybe if you thought about it for ten seconds...'

Tom ignored Jena's unhelpful remark. 'Maybe we could move King's Festival to another spot?'

Jena shook her head, a big ironic smile across her face. 'Nope. We're required by treaty to celebrate the Centar King right there. You're outta luck.'

Looking at the ferry, Tom couldn't see the boat on the east or west bank. *Must've taken it up river*, he thought. There was no one moving around the ranch house, the boat house, or the stable either.

'That's funny,' Tom said. 'Usually at least a couple of people are hanging around the ferry waiting for a ride across. And where's the boat?'

Jena shrugged. 'I don't know. Mr. Scott took six guys across last week to hunt Gaza cats for the Centars. Maybe they want a pick up down river? Thought about going myself, but my mom needed me. You know how the Centars hate Gaza Cats.'

They rode down to the ferry. As was customary, he and Jena came in at a slow, steady gait, with both hands on the reins, to signify that they were not in distress.

'C'mon. Let's hurry up so we can shoot those Gaza Cats and get the hell out of here.'

'Don't want to hang around?'

'No.'

'Not interested unless she's rolling in the grass with you, eh?'

'It wasn't like that.'

'It wasn't? That's all you seemed to ever want to do with her.' She gave him a devilish smile. 'Remember that time I caught the two of you on the ridge overlooking your spread?'

'Vividly. You announced your presence by firing a round into the air.'

Jena continued, 'All I had to do was ride to the sound of moaning. *Oh Tommy! Oh Tommy!*' she mocked.

Tom's response was to spur his horse to a trot.

'Hey you're not supposed to come in like that unless something's wrong. They may get the wrong idea and shoot you...or me!'

Tom turned in the saddle. 'If Cassie or her mom could shoot, they wouldn't need help with the Gaza Cats, would they?'

By the time Tom got within shooting distance, he could see a figure standing at the entrance way to the Fenmores' ranch house. It was Cassie. He waved and rode up to her.

Her big, long-lashed, brown eyes looked at him with a strange sense of desperation and hope.

'Hello, Thomas,' she said.

'Since when do you call me Thomas?'

Suddenly, Cassie's eyes held utter terror. Tom looked at her strangely and was about to ask what was wrong, but he never got the chance. He heard a hissing sound, and didn't realize what it was until a spear tore into his leg. A moment later another spear pierced his horse's neck. Tom screamed as his terrified and dying horse bucked and twirled, throwing him from the saddle. He landed on the ground, spear shaft protruding from his left leg. He took a few deep breaths, looked around him, and saw a pair of Centars coming at him from behind the Fenmores' house.

Tom tried to get up, but he couldn't move with the spear in his leg. He took hold of the shaft and tried to rip it out, causing unbearable pain. Tom fumbled for his rifle, but it was still on his back, and he couldn't reach around to get it with the spear in his leg. Hands trembling with pain and fear, he gripped the shaft with his left hand and snapped it with his right, screaming from the pain as he did so.

The next thing Tom knew, a Centar was standing above him. The mouth at the end of his long snout curled up in rage, showing his flat incisors. The Centar's young horns were stumps atop his head. Even so, he menacingly bucked his head up and down as if he had the long, pointed horns of tribal leader. Tom actually saw the Centar's spear coming at his chest, and to his amazement, had the presence of mind to defend himself.

He rolled back the other way, taking the Centar's legs out from under him and dropping the Centar across his stomach. Tom grabbed him by the neck and, with his free hand, punched as hard as he could, first in the eye, then the snout. He felt bone break and cartilage yield to his blows. The Centar rolled down Tom's body, flailing wildly in the air. Tom freed his good leg, cocked it back and kicked the Centar in the throat. He felt the Centar's airway collapse before his foot. He writhed on the ground in front of Tom, unable to breathe.

Knowing there was another Centar, Tom pushed himself up onto his feet, kicking his left leg out from under him to keep his weight off it. He saw the other Centar coming for him, spear raised over his head. Without time to aim, Tom held his rifle at his hip, took the safety off, and fired. The round took the Centar point blank in the stomach. He fell at Tom's feet and gushed blood all over his boots.

By then Jena had descended the ridge. Tom held his hands to the spear shaft protruding from his thigh as Jena dismounted and ran to Cassie, who had crouched to the ground, hands over her ears, eyes slammed shut.

'Where're the rest of them!' she demanded. 'They don't fight in groups of two. Where're the rest!'

Cassie wouldn't take her hands off her ears, so Jena slapped her. Cassie opened her eyes and looked up at Jena in horror. 'A bunch of them went out looking for you and Tom,' she whimpered.

'Why? What the hell is happening?'

Cassie didn't say anything.

'Cassie!'

'I don't know. They killed my mother and made me call for help. I called you and then Tom after I called for Mr. McEntee.'

'The spread south of here?'

'Yes, they killed Mr. McEntee when he rode in last night. Not long after, a big group of Centars came across the river.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. They split up. One group went north, one group went south.'

Tom looked down at his leg, which was now covered in his own blood and throbbing painfully. He ground his teeth and let out a growl from deep in his throat. Hearing his cry, Jena looked up from Cassie and ran over to him. Cassie followed.

'Tommy, does it hurt?' Cassie asked.

Tom grasped his leg. 'Jesus, what do you think!'

'What are we going to do, Jena?'

'We're going to have to yank it out.'

'The hell you are!' said Tom.

'No choice, Tom. We gotta get out of here. Those Centars out looking for us must've heard your shot. They'll be back.'

Jena sent Cassie inside to get a first aid kit and some alcohol to disinfect the wound. Then she washed it with water from her canteen.

'Can I have some of that?' Tom asked. After he took a long gulp, 'What are the Centars doing?'

'It sounds like an invasion.'

‘That’s stupid. If there were something big going on, Dave would’ve called my cell...’

‘Where is it!’ Jena demanded.

‘It’s in my saddle bag.’

Jena ran over to Tom’s dead horse and dug out his cell of his saddlebag. She ran back over to him and turned it on. The holographic touch screen said there was no signal. She tried hers and got the same result.

‘Hell of a time for the cell satellite to be out,’ she said.

Cassie ran back out with the first aid kit and a bottle of Ore Mountain vodka. Jena wasted no time in getting to work. Without even warning Tom to brace himself, she ripped the spear shaft from his leg. Tom saw white and nearly passed out from the pain. When she was sure she got the entire spear point, Jena poured the vodka over the wound, inducing more gut-wrenching pain. She then stuffed the wound with gauze and bandaged it.

‘Think you can ride?’

Tom nodded. Jena sent Cassie to the stable to get two horses. She came back with the horses and several bags of barley and oats. Tom slowly mounted up, wincing with pain as his wounded leg bounced against his horse’s saddle.

‘Let’s go,’ Jena said.

‘Jena, wait,’ Tom said.

Cassie was kneeling in front of her horse, sobbing uncontrollably.

‘Cassie, let’s get going!’ Jena shouted.

She shook her head, ‘I don’t want to.’

‘Cassie!’

Cassie ignored Jena and kept crying.

Jena got down from her horse, strode over to Cassie and brought her to her feet. Jena started shaking her.

‘Pull yourself together and mount up!’

Cassie’s response was to try to put her arms around Jena. Jena shoved her away and unholstered her pistol. She threatened Cassie with the butt and said, ‘Mount up now or I’ll knock you flat and tie you down to the back of my horse.’

Cassie looked at Jena in shock. When she still didn’t move, Jena raised the pistol over her head. Cassie finally turned around and mounted her horse. Tears still streaming down her face, Cassie spurred her horse forward. As they were ascending the hill, Tom turned to Jena and said, ‘Did you have to rough her up like that?’

‘Yes.’

When they got to the top of ridge Jena took out her digital and scanned the Range. She stopped on the northern horizon.

‘Like I thought, group of Centars coming in.’

‘How far?’

She pressed the range finder button. ‘Less than three clicks.’ She pressed the resolution button to clean up the image she was getting. ‘There must be at least ten, all mounted on Bipedasaurs.’ She smirked yet again. ‘Looks like if we’d come straight in instead of stopping of at the battleground, we would’ve ridden right into ‘em.’ She put the digital away.

‘So what do you want to do?’ Tom asked.

'I say we go out the way we came in, from the battleground. We can take in the Range, see if they're any Centars around. If not, we ride for your spread.'

'Fine.'

Jena nodded. She turned in the saddle to face Cassie. 'Can you keep up?'

Without looking up from her saddle Cassie replied, 'I can keep up.'

The trio rode down the other end of the ridge and onto the Range. They sidestepped open ground as much as possible, riding between hills and through the Range's many gullies. Once they heard a series of gunshots to the east, but otherwise saw no evidence of Centars. At last the ridge loomed in the distance. With no choice but to do so, they galloped at full speed across the battlefield and ascended the crest. Once at the top they tried their cells but still got no signal.

Jena and Tom scanned the area with their digitals.

'I see some Centars west of us,' Jena said. 'Looks like that group that was coming into the ferry. They're cutting across our trail though. They're thinking we went north.'

'Crap, you have to see what I'm looking at,' Tom said as he focused on the north.

'What.'

Tom saw a long column ten clicks north. It was a mixed group of mounted and dismounted Centars, marching north by east. A click to the column's south was a much smaller group, and atop a ridge to the north, Tom could just make out another such group.

'You have any idea how many that is?' Tom asked.

Jena shrugged. 'Five hundred?'

'Maybe.'

'They're headed for your place.'

'And the Conners', Tom said, 'And the Rooneys', and the Smalleys', and the Cannons', and...'

'I see smoke,' said Cassie.

Tom scanned the horizon again. 'She's right. There are a couple of plumes to north.'

'...And a bunch more to the east,' said Cassie

'It's like they're trying to wipe out every spread between here and the Ore Mountains. How do they know where to hit us?' asked Jena.

'Those trading caravans,' Tom said.

'My God... They've been planning...'

'...for a while,' Tom finished her thought. He looked around. 'We stay up here and sooner or later they'll spot us,' Tom said.

Jena looked at him. 'Where's a good hiding place?'

'There's one a little more than a click from here, even has a spring.'

'There is?'

'We hid in it on the ride back to your grandfather's after the battle with the Aliens.'

'I don't remember it.'

'That's because you were still out cold.'

Jena's eyes narrowed. 'Oh.' Then. 'Sounds like our best bet.'

'But Tommy, we have to warn your family!' Cassie protested.

Jena turned in the saddle, 'Shut up!' she growled.

‘It doesn’t matter anymore,’ Tom said.

‘How can you say something like that?’

Tom pointed to a billowing smoke swirl about ten clicks away. ‘That’s my father’s spread.’

They dashed across the open Range. Though it took less than ten minutes, the ride couldn’t go quick enough for Tom. The whole time he felt like the entire Centar army was watching them.

Once they got into the gully, Jena fed and watered the horses. When she was finished Jena helped Tom dismount.

‘Sit on that rock,’ Jena said to Tom when they were finished. ‘I’m going to change your bandage.’

Jena undid Tom’s bandages and disinfected them with more cheap Ore Mountain vodka. As she wrapped a new bandage around Tom’s leg, Jena said, ‘Those Alien lasers must’ve packed quite a punch. I don’t remember this place at all.’

Hearing Jena repeat the lie he had told her about how she’d been rendered unconscious during the first battle with the Aliens, Tom shamefacedly turned away from her.

‘What?’

Tom shook his head. ‘Nothing.’

Jena stopped wrapping Tom’s leg and peered at him. ‘Thomas Michael Provost, I know that look. What are you hiding from me?’

Tom shook his head. Jena took Tom by the collar and said, ‘Tell me, goddamn it.’

‘You want to know? Fine,’ Tom said, as his own anger welled up. ‘You weren’t knocked out by rocks kicked up by an Alien laser. I punched your lights out.’

Tom held his hands in front of his face in the expectation that Jena would hit him. Instead she asked in confusion, ‘Why?’

‘Because you un-slung your rifle and ran after your father’s men, even as they were getting slaughtered. I caught up to you and tackled you and punched you until you passed out. That’s why you had all those welts on your head.’

Her face twisted in rage, Jena said, ‘You son-of-a-bitch.’

‘The hell I am,’ he replied. ‘I picked you up and carried you across my saddle and hid out here. If it weren’t for me, they would have killed you on that ridge. Or killed you here.’

‘What do you mean, killed me here?’

‘Forget it,’ was his reply.

‘Tell me.’

Tom pointed down the other end of the gully, where it ran up and met the flat plain. ‘I was up there, watching the Aliens pass about half a click from here. All of the sudden I felt something grab me. I knew it wasn’t human, somehow. Next thing I know, I’m wrestling this Alien. Big mistake for him. They’re smaller than us, you know. I threw him off me and got up. He pointed his laser at me, but I kicked it out of his hands before he could fire. Then I was on top of him, my hands around his neck. I kept choking him. Just didn’t seem to want to die. Finally, I just grabbed a rock and bashed his head open. His brains ran all down the rocks.’

‘Tom, I didn’t know...’

‘Nobody knew. I never told anyone. I don’t know why he just didn’t shoot me from the get go. Wanted a prisoner, I guess.’ He laughed ironically. ‘I’ve killed two sentient alien species. How about that?’

For the first time in a while, Jena was at a loss for words, she said nothing as she finished wrapping Tom’s wound. Tom didn’t speak either.

As it did in late autumn, Centauri A set rapidly. They dared not start a fire. While the gully shielded them from the howling Range wind, they were cold nonetheless. Afraid that they would stumble upon a Centar ambush in the dark, they waited until dawn to get moving again.

Back out on the Range, they moved cautiously, surveying the land from ridges and hilltops before dashing across the open to the next high point. In the distance they saw a band of Centar riders and more columns of smoke, sure evidence of more spreads being attacked. They rode like this until they came to the last ridge before the Provost spread.

Without wasting time or words, they rode up the ridge and beheld the devastation the Centars had wrought on the Tom’s home. The house, barn and stable were all smoldering. Tom saw half a dozen horse carcasses beside the stable. The herd of Tauri Beasts were gone.

‘Oh, Tommy, I’m sorry,’ said Cassie.

‘Let’s go down and check it out,’ was his grim reply.

‘You sure you want to see what’s down there?’ Jena asked.

Tom nodded.

They came onto the ranch at a trot. As they drew closer, the smell of rotting and burning animal flesh filled the air. Methodically as his father had taught him, Tom searched the spread for his mother and Dave at the well, the stable, the barn, feeling relief when he didn’t find them at one place, and then dread that he would find them in another. Behind the charred remains of the house that dread was fulfilled. About ten meters from where the back door used to be, Tom found Dave’s body.

His long, tall body lay front down in the dirt, two deep wounds were in his back where a Centar spear had been driven in and withdrawn. His skull had been smashed in, soaking graying black hair in blood. His face was pointed to the north, towards the creek. Several feet behind him was the U.S. Army issue M-101 rifle that had belonged to Tom’s father. Shell casings lay all around. In his left hand Dave held a pistol. A spent magazine lay at his feet. Tom looked around and saw a dead Centar fifty feet away and another ten feet behind that one.

Jena and Cassie rode up to Tom.

‘Looks like Dave went down fighting,’ Jena said. ‘Maybe he wasn’t such a pencil neck after all.’

She dismounted and picked up the M-101 rifle and handed it to Tom.

‘We may need it.’

Tom nodded. He took out the magazine, saw it was empty and dropped it. Jena fished through Dave’s pockets and found a half dozen clips.

‘Dave seemed to be heading towards the creek,’ he said. ‘Maybe my Mom and the twins went that way.’

Just inside the tall grass which flanked the creek they found another dead Centar, shot in the back by Dave. The tall grass along the bank had been recently trampled. Tom

trotted down the bank and, after a hundred meters or so, found his mother. She had propped herself against a rock, her mouth agape, brown eyes opened to the sky. A swath of her shoulder-length red hair had been taken as a war trophy. Her right hand was held over the large wound in her stomach from which she had bled to death. In her left hand rested the handle to the twins' baby carrier. The twins were not inside.

Not knowing what else to do, Tom crossed himself and said the Lord's Prayer. By the time he was finished, Jena and Cassie came up behind him.

Cassie started to cry. 'Why are they doing this to us?!' she wailed.

'Keep quiet, Cassie.'

But Cassie kept crying, and got louder.

Jena scowled, 'Shut up!'

When Cassie still wouldn't stop, Jena punched her in the side. Cassie lost her balance and slipped off the saddle, landing on the muddy bank next to Tom's dead mother. Tom thought she would scream at being so close to the body. Instead she looked at the empty carrier.

'Where are the seats?' Cassie asked.

'What seats?' Jena replied.

'The baby seats!' she shot back. 'All she has is the carrier. Where are the seats? Where are the twins?'

'Did the Centars take them?' Jena asked.

Tom shook his head. 'There are no tracks. The Centars never got here.'

'You don't think she put them in the creek, do you?'

Cassie's eyes went wide. She scrambled off the bank and got back on her horse, kicked it into a gallop and rode down the stream, her horse's hooves splashing water into the air, as she called after them.

'Christ, if there're any Centars within five clicks, they'll hear her. C'mon.'

Jena followed Cassie up the stream. Tom took one look back at his dead mother and did the same.

Tom caught up to Cassie and Jena a minute later.

Cassie had found the twins. Their seats had drifted downstream before getting caught on a log. Cassie sat on the log, the seats beside her, with each of the girls in her arms. She cooed and made funny noises at them as if they were on a picnic instead of racing for their lives. Jena was still mounted, watching.

'Cassie found your sisters,' she said dryly. 'Sorry, half sisters.'

'Are they okay?' Tom asked, unused to being concerned about them.

Cassie looked up at Tom. She was choking back tears of joy. 'I found them, right here. They were asleep,' she sniffled. 'The water lulled them to sleep.'

'How are we going to take them across the Range with the Centars on our tails?' Jena asked.

Cassie looked up and, with a mixture of horror and fury, replied. 'You don't plan on leaving them here?!'

'Don't be an idiot!' she snarled. 'But I'm not lugging them.'

'I'll take them both,' Cassie insisted.

'How's she gonna carry both of 'em,' Jena demanded.

'That's no problem,' Tom said. 'We'll rig up a sling and tie a seat to each end. Each twin will counterweigh the other.'

Jena thought about it for second. 'Should work. Where'd you come up with that?'

'Dave used to take them for horse rides like that.'

'Oh.'

Jena cut a length of rope for a sling and tied each of the twin's seats to it like Tom said. She lay the sling across Cassie's saddle. They balanced perfectly.

'Should work,' said Jena.

Cassie smiled. 'And the rocking motion should lull them to sleep.'

Jena didn't say anything to that. In the carrier, Cassie found diapers and formula for the twins. After refilling their canteens and watering the horses, they were ready to go.

'Cassie,' Jena said, 'get the twins as ready as you can.'

Cassie nodded. 'I'll feed, change and burp them. Hopefully they'll go to sleep after that.'

'Good.'

Tom looked at Jena. 'Do you want to press on to your mom's place?'

Jena shook her head. 'I know what we'll find there.'

'So where to?'

'Just like last time. We go as best we can towards my grandfather's.'

'Think we can make it there tonight?'

Jena shook her head.

'Me neither.'

'How far then?'

'Halfway, I figure. You know that hill about two clicks east of the Mason spread?'

'The one with the gigantic boulders we used to play king of the mountain on?'

'Yep. We can hide out there after dark.'

Tom nodded.

'Now, Cassie,' Jena said in a condescending tone. 'There's no stopping for feeding or changing the twins. If they cry, they cry. That's all there is to it.'

For the first time since he'd dumped her, Tom saw real anger on Cassie's face. 'I know you think I'm just some wide-eyed range bunny, Jena, but I'm not stupid. Okay?'

'Okay.' Jena unholstered her pistol and threw it to Cassie, who caught it with both hands. 'Can you shoot that thing?'

'Yes.'

'Good.'

With no more words they set out. After a hard afternoon's riding, once again moving slowly along the ridges and dashing across the open spaces, they arrived at the hill Jena had suggested. With Centauri A setting and Centauri B rising, they set up a cold camp among the massive boulders, put atop the hill, no doubt, by some long-ago Ice Age. Tom sat down against one of the rocks as Cassie changed his dressing. Then she turned her attention to the twins, who lay contentedly on a blanket.

Cassie looked up from them and asked, 'Would you like to feed your sisters?'

Tom recoiled, looked over his shoulder, and said, 'I better see how Jena's doing.'

He pulled himself up to his feet and hobbled to Jena, who lay flat on the edge of the ridge.

'Get down!' she ordered.

As quickly as his injured leg would let him, Tom got down on the ground next to Jena.

She pointed down to the Range. Tom followed her finger and saw a column of Centars, all mounted on Bipedasaurs.

'They were riding east, but they just stopped there. I counted thirty-three.' She scanned them with her digitals. 'Looks like they're watering their Bipedasaurs.'

'They come up here, what do you want to do?'

'I figure we fall back to the rocks, fight until we're dead.'

Tom nodded. 'Yeah.'

They watched as the Centars fed and watered their Bipedasaurs, and then took a meal of flat bread.

Tom and Jena's silent observation was interrupted by the sound of babies crying. Jena turned around and glared, as if her stern gaze could stop the babies from crying.

'Shhhhh!' she tried.

When that didn't work, Jena low crawled over to the rocks.

'There's a bunch of Centars a klick from here,' she said to Cassie. 'Keep those goddamn kids quiet.'

Cassie nodded, 'Okay,' then she turned to the twins and said in a silly voice, 'Now you two have to be good girls and stay quiet...yes, you have to be quiet...'

Jena trotted back to where Tom lay and got down next to him.

'Look at her.'

'What?'

'She's acting like we're on some kind of family vacation.'

'Hey!' Tom replied. 'She likes kids. You have a problem with that, you watch the twins and she'll stand guard.'

'Hmmmph,' she smirked. 'Like I'd trust her to do that.'

'Jesus Christ, Jena. What is your problem with her?'

'She's just some wide-eyed, pretty thing. She can barley shoot. She's useless on the Range. I don't get what you ever saw in her.'

'What, you didn't like that she and I were together?'

She scowled at him. 'I didn't like the whole goddamn thing.'

'Well, I'm sorry you didn't approve of the two of us together.'

'I didn't approve of what you did to her.'

'What do you mean, what I did to her?'

'She lost her father and her brother, and she needed something special in her life, and she turned to you. What did you want?'

'What the hell do you think?'

'I see. She was ready and willing so you just did what you wanted with her.'

'No one held a gun to her head.'

'No one needed to, Tom. She's been after you since we were thirteen.'

'Thirteen?'

'She always liked your red hair,' Jena dryly said.

Confronted with the reality of what he'd done to Cassie, Tom didn't say anything. Instead he turned his attention back to the Centars, and saw they were getting ready to move.

'Looks like they're mounting up.'

While he watched the Centars resume their ride to the north, Tom thought about what Jena had said.

‘You know, it was nice having something that wasn’t my dead father, or Dave, or the twins...’

Jena was not convinced. ‘Yeah, for you it was nice. What was it for Cassie? Was it nice, or was it something more?’

Tom looked away.

‘And when she wanted something more than just sex, what did you do? Did she tell you that she loved you?’

Tom didn’t answer.

‘Did she?’

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘And that’s when I realized things went too far and dumped her.’

‘Oh, *that’s* when things went too far.’

Tom punched the ground in anger, ‘Hey, what the hell do you care anyway? Huh? What do you care about me and Cassie?’

For the first time in two years Tom saw Jena’s face free of its hard grimace. For an instant she looked at him with those wide, blue eyes, at once affectionate and sad. When Jena realized what she was showing Tom, she turned away from him. Then she looked back, her scowl returned.

‘Because it could’ve been me,’ she said.

Tom’s eyes grew big with comprehension. ‘It could have been you?’

‘You heard me.’ She got up on one knee. ‘I’m going to check the other side of the ridge. You stay here.’ She kicked his bad leg and trotted into the darkness.

Tom stifled a shout. When the pain subsided, he said under his breath, ‘It could have been her? Jesus, how badly did I blow it?’

With the ever present wind his only companion, Tom watched the Centar column ride off. A few times he tried his cell, but there was still no signal. He thought about tossing it away but thought better. In the distance, he saw a fire start, another spread going up in flames. He thought it might have been the Galloways’. Not long after, a patch of orange firelight shone even further in the distance. *The Hulls’ spread?* Tom wondered.

They spent the long night on the hill. Like their fathers had taught them, Tom and Jena switched posts about halfway through the night. From his new post looking east, Tom could see the Ore Mountains looming closer now, a blue silhouette under Centauri B. He saw no lights. Tom hoped it was because everyone was operating under blackout conditions. But he could see several fires, spreads which the Centars had torched.

Throughout the night Tom dozed lightly, his chin rested on his hand. An hour before dawn he was shocked awake by a bang, distant but loud nonetheless. Before Tom realized what was happening, he heard another, and then another. He saw the flash to the northeast. A second later this was followed by another flash and accompanying bang. Then Tom saw several smaller flashes. He didn’t need the follow-on staccato sound to tell him it was gunfire.

By the time he’d gotten his digitals out and trained on the battle, Jena flopped down next to him.

‘What did I miss?!’ she asked. ‘Where are they?! Where are they?!’

With one hand Tom pointed to the distant flashes.

‘How far?!’

‘Ranging it now.... just under five clicks.’

By then a second group of gun flashes was visible. These were north of the first group.

‘Wow....’ Tom exclaimed as the fire grew more intense. ‘Those are M-101s.’ There was another bang like the ones that started the battle. ‘That’s gotta be a recoilless...’

‘Yeah...’ Jena said through grinding teeth, ‘Get the bastards.’

She took out her digitals and trained them on the battle. It lasted only another minute before the firing suddenly cut off.

‘Looks like whoever started that thing is bugging out.’

Tom put his digitals down. ‘That has to be your grandfather.’

Jena looked at him. ‘You think so?’

‘Has him written all over it. Sprung a trap, fired everything he could, and then scrambled. He talked about doing stuff like that all the time when he was in the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry.’

As if to emphasize the point there was a series of louder, more forceful explosions.

‘Those are mortar bombs, covering the retreat.’

‘Why’s he retreating before the job’s done, damn it?!’

‘Cause he’s outnumbered. Just like in the Islamist Wars. This is how they fought ‘em all the way back to the English Channel.’

There was one last barrage of mortar bombs and then silence.

‘Now he’s disappearing into the night, probably back to the Ores or some base close to them.’

‘How do you know?’

Tom shrugged, ‘I always listened to his stories at King’s Festival. Guess it sank in.’

‘Oh.’

After Centauri A rose, Tom and Jena saddled their horses while Cassie fed, burped and changed the twins. Then they set off.

Under the theory that it was the last place the Centars would want to be, they rode through the new battlefield. It was pockmarked with craters from mortar shells and grenade launchers. The Centars had yet to pick up their dead.

‘Why’d they leave all their dead here?’ asked Cassie.

‘Penance,’ Tom replied.

‘Penance?’

‘For getting killed by your enemy.’

The trio didn’t spot a Centar patrol until the afternoon, but this was ten clicks away. Tom had hoped they’d run into some Rangers but they saw none. They did come upon two more spreads that had been burned, but thankfully they saw no bodies; the people must have had enough warning.

Progress was so good Tom and Jena toyed with the idea of making a nighttime dash to for the Ores but got cold feet when they spotted a larger Centar raiding party cutting north along the Range. Instead they settled down in a wide gorge at the base of a 50-meter high cliff.

While Cassie fed the twins and Jena walked the perimeter, Tom cleaned and redressed his wound. When Cassie finished feeding the twins, she turned to Tom and asked, 'Tom, could you come here and watch the twins while I get their diapers out of my saddle bag?'

He dismissed her with a wave. 'I don't do that baby stuff.'

'Would you prefer I lay them in the grass with the bugs? Come here and hold your sisters.'

'Half sisters.'

Cassie barred her teeth and almost snarled, 'You're all they have, you know. Least you could do is start acting like their brother.'

Finally shamed, Tom hobbled over to Cassie and took the seats from her, lay them at his feet, and eased himself down to the ground. As Cassie unsaddled her horse and got their things, Tom looked into the twins' faces and saw his mother's brown eyes looking up at him. Cassie's words echoed in his mind, *You're all they have, you know.*

Tom looked at his little sisters, 'My God,' he said. 'We're orphans.'

He felt his eyes well up. As he thought of his dead mother, his burnt-out home, and all the other people who must have been killed by the Centars, Tom's efforts to hold back his tears were futile. As soon as Tom brushed the tears from his cheek, more took their place; he realized to his shame that he was bawling uncontrollably. He'd never seen his father do such a thing. What would he have thought?

Tom didn't hear Cassie's footsteps, so when she put her hand on his shoulder he jumped in surprise. He tried to wipe the tears away from his eyes and cheeks, but it was no use.

'It's okay, Tommy.'

'No it isn't.'

'Come here, Tommy,' Cassie put her arms around Tom and pulled her to him.

Unable to resist, Tom wrapped his arms around her. The twins watched, oblivious as Tom cried himself out. They were silent. He didn't know how long they'd been sitting there when, 'Again with you two?'

Jena stood over them, carbine balanced on one hip, hand placed incredulously on the other. Tom disentangled himself from Cassie, stood up, and looked around.

Lest Jena get the wrong idea, Tom spoke. 'I was just...'

Jena nodded skeptically, 'Yeah, I know what you were doing. This is a fine time for that sort of thing. Don't you ever stop?'

'Leave him alone, Jena.'

'You gonna make me?'

Cassie stood up. 'Yes.'

Unused to being challenged by anyone, much less a girl like Cassie, Jena held up her free hand in mock surrender. 'You guys make it quick. I can't stand guard *and* watch the twins.'

Tom stood up. 'I'll stand guard.'

He hobbled to the other end of the gully as fast as his wounded leg would let him. He expected to hear Jena mockingly call after him, but thankfully she didn't. Tom propped himself up on a rock and tried to concentrate on keeping watch. Instead his thoughts kept wandering to his feelings of guilt, not only at the way he had treated his

sisters but Cassie too. Rather than just let him wallow in pain, Cassie had done everything she could to ease it.

After a few hours on watch, Jena came to relieve him. But instead of helping Tom to his feet, she sat down next to and took a bottle out of her pocket. It was the whiskey Tom had packed. Jena took off the cap and took a swig.

‘You went through my stuff?’

She shrugged and handed him the bottle. Tom took a drink himself. ‘Thanks.’

‘Thought you could use one.’ She took the bottle back and finished it off.

‘Easy there.’

‘Keeps the hate down.’ She put the empty bottle back in her pocket. ‘How much longer, you figure?’

‘We can make it across the Range to the Ores tomorrow.’

‘Think so? We’ll have to ride real hard.’

‘We can do it.’

Tom was wrong. After being on the Range for less than an hour, they spotted a Centar scout party and had to spend most of the morning hiding in a deep gorge. Just after noon they spotted another one and had to duck behind a ridge to keep from being spotted. Both parties had been sweeping north across the range, rather than west, as if they were looking for people making their way to the Ores. In the afternoon they spotted a large column moving southwest and hid out in a gully for more than two hours as it passed. By dusk they had finally reached the last hill before the Ore Mountains, which were still over five kilometers away. A quick digital scan revealed the Range between was crawling with Centar parties, making a nighttime dash an unacceptable risk.

As the trio searched for a suitable place to camp, Tom saw several small holes filled with recently churned-up soil. Next to one hole, a drill spike had been left lying on the ground. He couldn’t imagine what the drillers had been looking for.

Jena pointed to a clump of boulders just below the hillcrest. ‘How ‘bout there?’

Cassie walked over to the rocks, looked around and said, ‘Could we go over there instead?’ She pointed to another outcropping down the slope. ‘There’s more protection from the wind, better for the twins.’

Jena sighed and rolled her eyes. ‘Fine.’

Cassie took the twins and walked over to the outcropping.

‘*It’s better for the twins,*’ Jena mocked.

Tom punched her in the arm.

‘Ow!’ Jena exclaimed as she rubbed her arm.

‘Leave her alone, would you?’

‘What do you mean, leave her alone?’

‘She’s watched those kids during this whole ride. Fed them, changed them, sung them to sleep.’

‘Big deal.’

‘Oh yeah? I’d like to see you try it.’

With that, Tom hobbled off to get a blanket and canteen off of his horse.

After settling Cassie and the twins among the rocks, Tom and Jena took up positions. He hunkered down in a ditch halfway down the slope, facing west and south. For more than an hour he saw nothing except a few Centar riders, one heading back west, the other cutting north across the hill front. Not long after the north rider disappeared

from his view, Tom heard firing to the south. At first it was just a scattering of rifle shots, but by the time he trained his digitals on the area, it had built into a crescendo. Tom picked out dozens of individual flashes. He didn't take his eyes off the battle as Jena flopped down beside him.

'What's happening?'

'Lots of noise and firing, more than that battle we saw last night.' He peered into the night. 'Judging by the flashes, lots of M-101s, lots of carbines.'

'Must be Rangers.'

'Yeah,' Tom said as the fire intensified. 'Must be spread out over half a klick at least.' A new, faster flicker added to the light display. A few seconds later they heard a rapid, popping sound. 'There goes a machinegun.'

Jena trained her digitals on the battle. Together they watched as the firelight blazed, a steady stream of angry flashes in the night. After ten minutes of this, another machine gun opened up this one further south.

'The Centars just tried to flank your grandfather,' Tom commented. 'That machinegun was waiting for them.'

He heard the distinctive *shu-shu* sound of mortar bombs. Seconds later the rounds impacted close to the southern machine gun. These explosions were followed by several more. 'Wow...that's gonna hurt them,' remarked Tom.

As the battle continued, it seemed to Tom that the rifle flashes spread out, curving south and east so that the humans gained the Centar's right flank.

Away from the firing, Tom made out dozens of Centars heading north, right for the hill. He kept his digitals trained on them, looking for some sign they were going to change direction. They didn't.

The mortars sounded again. Their bombs arched high into the air, their whistle becoming louder until they descended to the ground, exploding behind the withdrawing Centars. Tom thought they were strays, but more followed, casting firelight on the Range.

'Can't they shoot?' Jena asked.

'Your grandfather's driving them north.'

'Why's he want to do that?'

Tom shrugged.

They continued watching as several dozen Centars turned into several hundred. Eventually they formed a ragged line and faced south. A second, smaller line peeled off from the first and continued north. For a terrifying minute Tom thought they were coming up the hill, but instead they ran parallel to it, taking up a blocking position between the hill and the Ores.

'What are they doing?'' Jena asked. 'Why would they just sit there like that?'

'Good question.'

Several minutes later a rider came in from the west. Through his digitals, Tom saw him ride up to another Bipedasaur-mounted Centar. Even in the dim light from Centauri B he could tell by the length of his horns that the second Centar was some kind of leader. The rider kept pointing back to the west. Out of curiosity Tom got up on his elbows and pointed himself west, then he scanned the horizon with his digitals. He didn't like what he saw.

'This is not good.'

'What?'

‘Look.’

Jena scanned in the same direction. ‘There must be hundreds of Centars.’

‘I’d say at least a thousand,’ Tom said. He hit the range finder on his digitals. ‘Less than five clicks and coming fast.’

‘Coming here?’

‘Well, they’re coming west.’

‘Think they’re gonna want this hill?’

Tom put his digitals down and thought about it. He looked to the southern Centar skirmish line, then over his shoulder where the western line was. ‘They seem to be trying to block it off.’

The large Centar column drew closer. There was scattered firing to the south. Then to the north Tom heard several explosions. He looked over in time to see mortar bombs landing on the Range. Through his digitals he saw a couple dozen Centar riders heading north. A column of dismounts followed, moving northwest.

‘Looks like we’re surrounded,’ said Tom.

‘I better go check on Cassie and the twins,’ Jena said.

She low crawled up the hill. While she was gone, the Centar column’s vanguard reached the base of the hill. Tom feared they’d climb it, but instead they fanned out along the bottom, setting up a perimeter as the rest the column approached. By the time Jena got back down the hill, the head of the column was coming in.

‘What’d you tell her?’

‘Told her the Range was crawling with Centars and to stay down and quiet. I also told her you were real impressed with her child-rearing skills.’

‘Why?’

‘Seemed important,’ she smiled irreverently.

‘What did she say?’

‘Nothing, but I did see a tear come to her eye.’

Instead of responding, Tom scanned the incoming column. While cavalry gathered behind them in groups of twelve, the Centar infantry dispersed at five-meter intervals.

‘Think they know we’re up here?’ Jena asked.

‘I think they think someone is up here. If they thought it was just us, they probably would’ve stormed the hill first chance they had.’

‘Maybe they think there’s a bunch of Rangers dug in.’

‘Something like that. Otherwise, why wait?’ Tom said without taking his eyes away from his digitals. ‘I think maybe....’

Jena waited for Tom to finish, but he didn’t. ‘You think maybe what?’

‘Never mind. Tell me I’m not seeing this.’

‘Seeing what?’

‘Look at the end of the Centar column. Zoom in real tight.’

Two hundred meters from the base of the hill, trailing behind the column, was a vehicle. By the sleek, aerodynamic curvature, the sloped front, rear turret, and negative gravity propulsion, Tom and Jena recognized it instantly. They had destroyed several during the invasion: It was an Alien hover car. Standing in the open turret hatch was a slender, narrow-headed, flat-faced, white-skinned Alien.

Jena put her digitals down. Then, in one swift motion, she un-slung her rifle, aimed, and squeezed off two rounds. The bullets slammed into and exploded the Alien's chest, sending a mist of red blood into the air. Its lifeless body fell back into the hover car.

Tom looked at Jena and shouted, 'What the hell are you doing!'

Rather than answer, Jena quickly squeezed off two more rounds, paused and then two more. Tom looked back at the hover car with his digitals to see one of the two Centars lying dead on the ground, the other squirming in agony next to him. Jena finished him off with a bullet through the chest.

'Great!' Tom shouted. 'That's just great! Now they *know* we're up here!'

Jena looked at Tom, her face twisted with hate. 'Then start firing. Make them think there's 20 of us!'

Jena fired quickly, her carbine making a *pop pop pop* sound until the clip was empty. She ejected the spent clip and slammed home a new one. 'Fire, dammit!' she shouted.

Tom raised his father's M-101 and let lose a quick burst. The rounds sailed harmlessly over the heads of the Centar skirmishers, all of whom were lying on the ground. He kept firing until the clip was empty. As he reloaded, he saw bullets ricochet off the Alien hover car.

'Forget the Aliens!' he shouted. 'Get the Centars!'

The skirmish line of Centars rose as one and started coming up the hill. Tom sent a long burst down the slope. He actually saw a Centar fly back as two rounds hit him. The Centars all dropped to the ground, but they were ten meters closer. A second later they rose again. Jena squeezed off several rounds, one Centar flew back, another fell forward. Tom added his fire to Jena's, dropping a third. He sprayed more rounds above their heads, trying to keep them down.

'We have to get out of here!' he shouted as he took out the spent cartridge and fumbled around his belt for a new one.

Jena fired a shot down the hill and got up on one knee. 'Can you run?'

Tom got up next to her. 'Do I have a choice?' He let rip with another long burst and stood up. 'Let's go!'

Jena put her arm around Tom to support him. Together, they ran up the hill as best they could. When the Centars realized Tom and Jena were running away, they got up and pursued. Tom twisted around and fired a burst down the hill, sending the Centars sprawling back to the ground.

'We keep going this way, we'll lead 'em right to the twins!' Tom shouted.

'Where do we go, then?!'

Tom pointed with his rifle to a large, grass-covered dirt mound.

They hobbled over to the mound and flopped down behind it. He landed in something soft and gooey. As Tom was trying to figure out what he was lying in, Jena fired a trio of shots.

'Got another one of the bastards!'

Tom smelled his hand and recoiled at the overpowering stench. 'Jesus, this is Gaza dung.'

Jena looked down at him. 'What?'

‘I fell in a pile of Gaza dung!’ With a clenched fist, he pounded the mound.
‘We’re sitting on a nest of Gaza Cats!’

Jena looked at Tom and then down at the nest. She jumped out in front in search of the nest hole. Finding it after a few seconds, she got down on her hands and knees and started ripping grass out of the ground. When she had two large handfuls of the dried, brittle grass, she tossed them down the hole.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m tossing grass into the Gaza nest, what does it look like?’ Jena replied as she ripped up more grass.

‘Why?’

‘Fire at the Centars!’ was her response.

She pointed down the slope where the line of Centar skirmishers had resumed their advance. Still wondering what the hell Jena was doing, Tom leveled his rifle and fired, sending three rounds ripping into the lead Centar. The rest dove for cover. After a few seconds, Tom saw a Centar pick his head up off the ground and look up slope. Tom took it off with another burst.

When Jena had stuffed all the grass she could find into the hole, she got down in front of it, balanced herself on her arms, and kicked it into the nest. She then took a lighter out of her jacket pocket and lit the grass. Jena leapt to her feet, grabbed Tom by the arm, and pulled him up.

‘Run!’ she shouted.

Tom tried to keep up but his bum leg just wouldn’t let him go that fast. In desperation Jena grabbed him by the jacket and dragged him up slope. After 20 meters, they turned around to see black smoke billowing from the hole.

‘Burn!’ Jena screeched.

‘They’re coming up again!’ Tom shouted as the Centars resumed their pursuit.

They both got down on one knee and fired. Once more the Centars dropped to the ground.

Seeing movement at the base of the hill, Tom took out his digitals and scanned.

‘Well,’ he said to Jena. ‘Looks like we made ‘em think there’s a bunch of us up here.’

‘Yeah,’ Jena replied as she reloaded, ‘Good.’

‘No, not good. There’s a couple of hundred Centars lined up at the bottom of the hill, and they’re coming for us.’

Jena fired a couple of rounds down slope. ‘Good, let ‘em come. I got a trap for them.’

‘What, you think that little fire you set is going to catch them?’

‘No, I think...’

Jena didn’t have time to finish her answer because out of the smoke-choked nest sprung an angry Gaza Cat and her terrified cubs. The mother darted down the hill, saber teeth bared, hissing in the night, her powerful legs eating up ground two meters at a time. The mama cat decided the nearest Centar must be the aggressor, leaped in the air and took his throat between her saber teeth. Before predator and prey hit the ground, the Centar was dead. Her four cubs, taking their cue from mama, attacked the next nearest Centar, swarming over him and dragging him to the ground. When mama was finished with her prey, she howled into night.

Evolved from herbivore herd beasts, obvious prey for a Gaza Cat, the remaining Centar skirmishers took off down the hill. Seeing them run, the Gaza cats followed, hissing and howling as they went. Tom and Jena heard more howls, as other nearby Gaza Cats emerged from their dens to feast on the prey. Hearing the howls of the Gaza Cats and seeing their comrades coming down the hill with a pack of furious Gaza Cats chasing after them, a few of the Centars in the main force broke ranks and ran into the night. Others began to waver and step back. That was enough. The whole line broke and scattered.

‘Jesus!’ Tom exclaimed. ‘They’re running away.’

‘Yep...’

‘I mean, I know the Centars hate Gaza Cats, but they got a whole army down there.’

‘The Gaza Cats won’t hold ‘em forever. We gotta find a way outta here and--’ Jena was cut off by the sound of two gunshots from the hilltop.

‘Cassie!’ Tom shouted. ‘The twins!’

There were several more gunshots. Jena took off up the hill. Tom followed along as best he could. By the time he got to the outcropping, Jena was standing atop one of the rocks, her head thrown back in laughter.

‘How the hell do you reload this thing?!’ Cassie shouted, her voice full of rage, twins bawling at her feet.

Tom saw a dead Centar behind the rocks. Two bullets had taken his face off. Behind him was another Centar carcass. Two live ones were running across the hill top. Tom raised his rifle and was about to shoot when the Centar disappeared in a hail of bullets.

‘What the hell was that?!’ Tom shouted.

His question was answered when two jeeps crested the hill and came about ten meters down the slope. Seeing the Centars re-form at the bottom of the hill, the drivers slammed on their brakes. Instantly their rear mounted machine guns opened fire.

A man jumped out of the passenger seat of the nearest jeep and ran over to Tom, Jena and Cassie. He carried an M-101 rifle and wore an old battle helmet complete with mic and an Australian flag emblazoned on the front. In the light of Centauri B Tom could tell he was in his early thirties, not old enough to have fought in the Islamist Wars. The helmet must have been a hand-me-down.

‘What the hell are you kids doing here?!’ he shouted over the roar of machine gun fire.

Jena stepped forward, ‘Fighting our guts out! That’s what we’re doing up here!’

‘Yeah?!’ he shouted back. ‘Do you have any idea what you’ve done? You’ve ruined the whole plan!’

‘What plan?!’ Jena demanded.

‘This whole hill is rigged with explosives! We were going to lure half the Centar army up here and set it off like Copenhagen in 2032.’

‘Is that what all those holes were?’ Tom asked.

‘Dug half of them myself. Plan’s shot now.’ He looked down the hill at the Centars and looked back at Tom and Jena. ‘You two get in the jeep so we can get the hell out of here.’

Tom spoke, 'Now hold on. We got a young mother with two babies here, and I don't want them hanging off the back of some jeep getting pelted with spent cartridges.'

'Babies?' the Ranger asked.

'Young mother?' added Jena.

His eyes went wide. 'I'll radio back for someone to pick you up.'

'You have radio?' Tom asked.

'We rigged up a couple of radio towers in the Ores, so they're working now.'

He turned his back to the fighting, slipped his hand underneath the helmet and pressed a finger into his ear. 'Black One One, this is Able One One. I have civies here, including babies, I need another jeep, ASAP.'

'Whose Black One One?' Jena asked.

'That's military code,' said Tom.

'Black One One is Colonel McShane,' said the Ranger.

'Colonel McShane!' Jena exclaimed. 'Tell him Jena McShane is here.'

He looked at her in amazement. 'You're Jena McShane?' He pressed his finger to his ear again. 'Colonel, I have your granddaughter here.'

Tom waved at the Ranger and pointed down the slope. 'Look down the slope, scan the Range. There's an Alien car down there.'

The Ranger looked at Tom. 'What?'

Tom pointed harder. 'Look?'

The Ranger took out his digitals and scanned to where Tom was pointing. 'Holy Jesus...he's right.'

'Black One One. I'm sending you a live feed of what I'm looking at down here, over.'

The Ranger hit a button on his digitals which transmitted what he was seeing back to Colonel McShane. They couldn't hear what Colonel McShane was saying, but the Ranger kept nodding his head and saying, 'Yes, sir...yes sir.' Then, 'I see the antenna array on the car and the transmission dish. It's definitely pointed towards The Southern sky, at our cell satellite....Yes, sir. Understood. Able One One out.'

The Ranger turned to Tom and Jena. 'Change in plans. The Colonel wants that car. We're not going to blow the hill. Instead we're going to fight for it.' He turned and waved for one of the jeeps. 'I'm dismounting the machine gun. The three of you and the kids can ride back to the Ores.'

Jena shook her head. 'I'm staying.'

'Me, too,' added Tom.

The Ranger nodded.

With a flurry of socket wrenches and mallets, the Rangers took the machine gun and its mount out of the back of the jeep. Cassie took the twins in her arms and got in. Tom hobbled over to her. 'Me and Jena are staying here.'

Then, without thinking, he stuck his face out and kissed Cassie on the lips.

She kissed him back and smiled. 'I knew you'd come your senses.'

'Yeah, Yeah.' He punched the back of the jeep twice. 'Take off!'

Tom watched as Jena and his two sisters were spirited over the hilltop and down the reverse slope.

As Cassie and the twins' jeep went down the hill, a long column of Rangers ascended. Some wore military battle gear, well-worn helmets, and chest armor. Others

simply had broadbrims or even baseball caps. Once they topped the hill, the lead horsemen pointed left and right, the riders fanned out across the top, and dismounted. Two-thirds, about 20 men, got down on one knee, while the other third took the horses to the rear. Then, on command, the entire hilltop erupted as a mixed bag of M-101s, carbines, and rifles spat fire down the slope.

Jena got down on one knee and added her fire to the crescendo. But Tom's eyes were fixed on Cassie's jeep as it made its way past more advancing militiamen and jeeps towards the Ores. The passing jeeps, three of them, sped past Cassie, pausing only to blink their lights in acknowledgement, and continued towards the battle. But rather than climb up the hill, the jeeps raced out onto the Range. When the jeeps were a good half klick into the open, their drivers slammed on the brakes and spun the wheels so that they faced the exposed Centar flank. Then three heavy-caliber machine guns spat fire at the Alien hover car. The car's extensive antenna array was sheared off by the concentrated fire. The car had armor, but it couldn't hold up to American-made, heavy-caliber machine guns. Soon the rounds penetrated the hull and ricocheted inside. The car sagged to one side, spun around and came to a halt. The fire persisted for a few seconds, then ceased.

It took Tom a few moments to realize it, but in his pants pocket he felt a familiar buzzing. He reached in and took out his cell, which was blinking blue and red with messages. 'My cell's working!' he shouted to the Ranger.

'Your cell's working?!' The Ranger reached into his vest pocket and took his cell out. It, too, blinked. Other men along the ridge reached into their pockets and produced cells, which got signals for the first time since the war began.

'Roger Black One One,' the ranger said into his helmet mic, 'we are checking fire.' He stood up and waved his arms, twisting his body from right to left, making sure he got the attention of both sides of the line. 'Check fire! Check fire!' After a few moments, the firing subsided and stopped. 'Keep your fire down slope!' the Ranger knelt back down next to Tom and spoke into his mic again. 'Black One One, you are clear to advance, over.'

Tom looked at the Ranger and pointed at the jeeps on the range. 'That's Colonel McShane down there?!'

'You got a better place for him to be?' the Ranger shouted over the renewed firing.

The three jeeps sped out to the disabled Alien car and surrounded it. While the crew from one jeep jumped out and cautiously approached the car, the other two poured fire onto the Range, one towards the group of Centars at the base of the hill, the other to the north. Tom trained his binoculars in that direction and saw a large body of Centar cavalry.

Caught between the Rangers and the jeeps, the Centars took devastating fire. They tried a desperate charge up the hill but the Rangers dropped them by the dozen. The mortar crews found the distance and dropped bombs on them as well. After a few minutes in the cauldron, the Centars had had enough and withdrew north. The warriors went running into the night in small groups, rifle and machine gun fire chasing after them.

When the only sound of battle left was the mortar bombs being lobbed into the distance, one of the jeeps drove up to the hill. The man in the passenger seat stood up. He wore a tattered helmet with a Canadian Red Ensign painted on the top. It was Colonel McShane.

‘Lieutenant, radio Baker One One and tell him to bring his command to this hill. When they get here, take your men down the hill and set up a skirmish line from the base north to my jeeps.’

For a moment he looked at Tom and Jena. Then he ran over to the latter. Grandfather and granddaughter embraced; the former did not hold back.

‘Your Mama’s dead, Sweetheart.’

‘I know, Grandpa,’ Jena said through stifled tears.

Tom watched in amazement. He had never imagined Jena capable of that kind of emotion. ‘How did you three make it across the Range?’ Tom could see that as he held her, Colonel McShane’s hands were visibly trembling.

She sniffled. ‘Ran, hid, fought,’ she sniffled again. ‘We left a lot of dead Centars behind us.’ Jena wiped her face and turned towards Tom. ‘Tom killed one with his bare hands.’

Colonel McShane let go of his granddaughter and walked over to Tom, who tried to step forward himself but was unable to. With all the action he and Jena had just seen, his leg was throbbing.

They shook hands.

‘So I have you to thank for bringing my granddaughter across the Range.’

‘Other way around is more like it.’

Colonel McShane smiled. But Tom didn’t.

‘Jesus, Colonel. What the hell is happening?’

‘I wish I knew, Tom. No one understands why the Centars started this.’ He nodded toward the battlefield below. ‘Seeing that Alien hover car, things make more sense.’ He shook his head. ‘But we’ve stopped them, though. It’s cost us a hell of a lot, but we’ve stopped them.’

‘What happens now?’

‘What happens?’ Colonel McShane gave another big smile. ‘You and my granddaughter are getting a ride back to the Ores.’

Colonel McShane turned and waved towards his jeep. ‘Let’s go.’

The driver pulled up. Colonel McShane helped Tom into the passenger seat. Then he pointed to Jena and pointed to the backseat. Jena shook her head no.

Colonel McShane snapped his fingers. ‘Now, young lady.’

As strong willed as Jena was, she didn’t yet have the constitution to resist her grandfather. She hung her head, slumped her shoulders forward and dejectedly got in the jeep.

‘But I want to fight.’

‘You’ve done plenty of that. Besides, you think I trust your uncle Henry and his kids? Someone’s got to take over for me after I’m gone, and you’re it.’

‘What about you?’ she asked.

‘I have a hundred Oremen 10 clicks north of here. On my signal they’re coming onto the Range and attacking the Centar cavalry north of here. I’ll take these men here northeast, try to cut off their escape.’

Colonel McShane pointed towards the Ores. The driver hit the accelerator and went down the hill. The last Tom and Jena saw, Colonel McShane had mounted a horse and was loading his rifle.

The jeep took them across the Range in silence until Tom spoke. 'Looks like you're going to be some big general one day?'

Jena smiled a big, toothy predatory grin and nodded. 'Yeah.' Then her smile went away and her face became most serious. 'You serious about Cassie this time?'

'Yeah,' Tom answered without hesitating.

'Don't mess it up this time.'

To drive her point home, Jena punched Tom's bad leg.

'Aw!'

She grinned from ear to ear.

Just before sunrise, they detonated the explosives buried beneath the hill. It was too dangerous to dig them up. Tom, Jena and Cassie never imaged an explosion that large, but Colonel McShane said they paled in comparison to the nuclear blasts the United States Air Force released on the French and Belgian ports in the summer of 2032, as the last remnants of NATO's forces scurried across the channel. He said he'd never forget standing atop the Dover cliffs, by then a brevet captain in a devastated rifle company, seeing the American B-2 bombers high in sky, knowing what they were about to do despite the thousands of refugees desperately trying to motor, paddle, or even swim their way across to England.

It took two week of hard fighting for Colonel McShane's polyglot army of Rangers, militia, and volunteer Oremen to drive the Centars back across the West River. After pausing to rest and measure the damage, 57 spreads had been destroyed and 214 people killed, 30 of them in formal combat in exchange for nearly a thousand Centar warriors. The burgesses unanimously voted to continue the war with an offensive into Centar territory. There were sure to be more Aliens on the other side of the West River. The Aliens could not be allowed to have a secure base. The Oremen were already developing missile and laser defense batteries for when their ships returned.

Once he got to the hospital back in the Ores, Tom's leg healed within a week. But he wasn't among the militia volunteers riding with Rangers across the West River. His sisters needed him. Besides, Cassie wouldn't want him to go. So one morning, when Tom rode out from his father's spread - he had trouble thinking of it as anything else - to take a look at Fenmore's Ferry, he was surprised to find a growing army nestled between the hills and the river.

There was a small tent city where the Fenmores' house used to be. Rangers and militiamen walked in streets and alleyways, broadbrims atop their heads, rifles slung over their backs. Tied to a rope line along the river were hundreds of horses. Parked in another line further back were a dozen jeeps. Several had machine guns mounted in the back, and one had a large, recoilless rifle. Looking past the river, Tom saw four horsemen riding into Centar territory; another group of four rode south, on patrol, he imagined. Outside of King's Festival, Tom had never seen so many people gathered in one place. He stared in awe for several minutes until a lone person came out form the camp and rode up the hill towards him. Tom could tell by the grey horse that it was Jena.

She nonchalantly galloped up the hill, as if she owned the place.

She pulled up along Tom. 'Shouldn't you be back at the spread with your wife and kids?' she said sarcastically.

'Fiancée,' he corrected.

‘Whatever. The least you could do is get her a ring. You know she’s expecting that. Or maybe you could just put a roof over her head.’

‘Hey, we have a nice tent set up. I cleared out the wreckage, and I got the foundation laid down. Give me a month and we’ll have a nice ranch spread, He started to go about his big plans, ‘There’ll be room for the twins, and another for the future and I’m going to...’

Jena held up her hand. ‘I don’t need to hear about you and Cassie havin’ kids, thanks.’

Tom smiled. ‘Jealous?’

‘You wish.’

‘That’s quite an army your grandfather has there.’

‘Yeah, we’re just waiting for a bunch of Oremen to get here with their big guns. Then the invasion starts. Already had a firefight yesterday.’

Tom noticed that Jena had a black bandana tied around her arm and dark feathers in her broadbrim. Tom pointed to the armband. ‘What this?’

‘Scouts,’ she replied, her face coming alive with a prideful smile. ‘My grandfather created a platoon of scouts and made me the head of them. We all wear the black arm band and feathers.’

‘Congratulations.’

‘Too bad you’re not coming along. I need good men.’

Tom laughed.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘I think that’s the first time you ever complimented me.’

‘You earned it.’

There was silence as Tom looked for the words he was trying to say. ‘Look back when we were riding for our lives, the things you told me...’

She stood up in her stirrups, ‘What about ‘em?’

‘I’m sorry for... I don’t know...breaking your heart?’

‘You think I have a heart?’ She laughed. ‘It’s over. Forget it. But if Cassie ever comes to her senses, look up me.’

Tom laughed as well. ‘Yeah.’

‘I better get back to my platoon. My grandfather wants me to take them across the river tonight. See what I can find.’

‘I should get going too. I managed to round up most of the Tauri Beasts the Centars ran off, but one of them is missing. I think we got a new nest of Gaza Cats nearby.’

They shook hands.

‘Good luck,’ Tom said.

Jena turned her horse and trotted down the hill. Over her shoulder she said, ‘Why are you wishing me luck? Cassie Fenmore? You’re the one who’s in trouble.’

Tom watched Jena until she disappeared inside the tent city. Then he turned around and started back to his spread, where Cassie, Anna and Alison were waiting for him.