

BATTLECORPS

SURKAI

by Ilisa J. Bick

Shelfleisland, Arc-Royal

15 July 3066: Twilight

Mara screamed, her agony slicing through the howl of the storm and the roar of the angry sea boiling over a forest of black basalt spikes bristling at the base of the cliff thirty meters below.

Jacob Geist froze. The sound was raw and shocking and so bloody he didn't think anyone could be in that much pain (and he knew about pain, oh yes) and still be alive. *God, they're killing her!* He pulled in a quick breath, and his nose tingled with the astringent aroma of pine resin and burnt wood. Sudden rivers of sweat slicked his lips with the taste of greasy salt and the sour tang of his fear, and his heart was banging against his ribs so hard he thought it was some kind of miracle his chest didn't explode.

And then Mara screamed again.

His mind balled in a frantic tangle as if his brain was yarn and someone had thrown a yowling cat into his skull. God, Mara was only one Elemental with nothing against guys with guns, and now she was in big trouble, and he had to *do* something! *Think!* Shivering, Jacob squirmed deeper into his hidey-hole of ice-hardened snow. The sea was behind him, his ice cave snugged against a stand of rough boulders along a rise leading to the bare spine of a basalt esker.

How much longer would he have the sun? He risked a quick scramble, without his snowshoes, to the ridge. Blades of cold wind burned his face, and he caught the brackish, aluminum scent of the sea. The sun rested on the horizon, its light no more than a silver glimmer illuminating a roiling expanse of black water. Not going to be light for much longer. Shelfleisland was the tip of an archipelago curling southwest from Gerechtland, Wolf-Clan-in-Exile's most remote colony. It was far south and close to the pole: winter here, not summer the way it was back home on Gutheim. As soon as the sun winked out, the temperature would go into free fall. His snowsuit (black, *black*, so he was some kind of terrific survivalist, a sitting duck in all this white, what had he been *thinking?*) held in enough body heat for the time being but when night hit, he was a goner for sure.

Only he probably didn't have until dark, and neither did Mara. His hands fisted, and he winced as snow first seared then puddled in his right hand, the one that was flesh and blood. But there was no water in his left hand, the one that didn't feel much of any-

thing because that arm was made of myomer fibers and titanium bone and artificial skin. His fingers squeezed and squeezed until the snow compressed into a lump of ice as solid and hard as an uncut diamond.

His mind raced. Okay, Mara told him that after the trees went up (and the conifers *had* blown, he'd told her they would because there was so much resin in those things they were no damn good for fires, they just blew), he was supposed to stay put and let her deal with these guys. Lyran state intelligence operatives, or maybe Prince Victor's men, she couldn't be sure. And now she was in trouble, but he was only sixteen, for crying out loud. He didn't know anything about fighting and what was he doing here, he'd been out of his mind to let Christian Kell talk him into this, he should've stayed home – only they had to stop the Lyrans or whoever they were, and right now before it was too late.

Got to hide first, figure out what to do. Quickly, he dropped to his rump. A mistake: As soon as he hit icy snow, he accelerated, slaloming down the slope and whizzing past his cave. No, no! Frantic, he tried rolling onto his stomach, but then his right boot caught, and he flipped head over heels. There was the whirl of the wind, a rush of white at his face. And then, he hit.

There was a crisp snap, like the crack of a dry branch. A searing, liquid bolt of red-hot pain flooded his right shoulder and arm, and Jacob couldn't help it. He screamed – and then snow filled his mouth and nose as he tumbled down the slope. His lungs were on fire, his arm shrieked with pain. Then he slammed into a trio of rocks coated with snow and a thick ice glaze.

He had a wild, catastrophic moment until his throat opened. Coughing out a mouthful of half-melted snow, he hauled in a lungful of keen, cold air. The effort sent a lancet of knife-edged pain slicing through his left side because, probably, he'd cracked a couple of ribs, too. He lay gasping, his chest flaring, his head spinning, his arm killing him – and that's when he saw this weird hinge in his right forearm, like a second elbow.

Then, something hard and insistent nudged the back of his head.

For a split second, Jacob flashed far from his pain and into the past. He was ten, and it was summer, the heat spilling like water over his back as he flattened into a parched meadow of tall, dry grasses that tickled his nose and made him want to sneeze. But, no, mustn't move a muscle because he had to catch Joachim. Only his twin brother had outsmarted him again and now Joachim had him dead to rights...

The hard thing butted his neck again, and that vision of summer and childhood—and Joachim, because he was truly gone—fell away, like desiccated leaves. Woozy with pain and shock, Jacob inched around by degrees until he stared into the round bore of a Gauss rifle, very real and very large.

The man's suit was cross-hatched snow camouflage, and the man's face was obscured with a charcoal-colored visor attached to a helmet that was sleeker and less bulky than a neurohelmet and entirely self-contained. A flexible tube curled from the back of the helmet to a pack snugged between his shoulder blades. The suit, probably insulated and heated, molded to his body like a second skin, tracing every curve, every bulge: a broad, muscular chest, biceps as big around as logs, and thighs thick as tree trunks.

Like a space suit. Jacob's thoughts were a jumble of fear and pain. *Only we're on the ground, and my arm hurts, I broke my stupid arm, and now we're going to die.*

The man stabbed at a control on his left wrist. The gray visor split in two, a cloud of warm, moist air billowed out and was tugged away by the wind, and Jacob looked into two eyes that were jet-black and flat as a cobra's.

"Oh, dear," the man said in a deep, rolling baritone. "Did the chick break his wing?"

***Tersus Village, Lachan Lake
Gutheim, Arc-Royal
8 July 3066***

The psychiatrist was right again, damn him. So was Christian Kell. Because his mother *was* drinking: Jacob knew as soon as he walked in because he smelled it and her—that sharp, oak-barrel stink mingling with the background odors of rancid cooking grease, stale sweat, and unwashed flesh.

The house in which they'd lived ever since Christian had taken them from Kookan's Pleasure Pit eleven years ago after Nelson Geist had assassinated the Red Corsair was silent save for the faint electrical hum of the air conditioner. A film of sweat evaporated from his neck, making the hackles stand. He shivered, the nails of his right hand biting into his palm hard enough to make his eyes water, and his left—the fake hand attached to the fake arm—latched onto the brass knob of the front door. The summer was very hot, and probably the knob was a little warm. Or maybe the knob was cold. He didn't really know one way or the other because the doctors hadn't been able to give him a hand or arm that felt more than simple pressure. Times like this, though, he kind of wished his whole body was made of myomer fibers and artificial skin. Or, maybe, just his heart. That way, he wouldn't feel so sick. He wouldn't feel like something was clawing a hole in his chest.

The kitchen reeked, and his mother hunched over the table, her long hair so oily it hung in lank, gray ropes. A grimy lace doily was tacked by an open whiskey bottle to the center of the table.

Dorete's head pulled out of a slouch, like a turtle inching from its shell. "Well, look who's come home to say good-bye," she said, only it came out: *welookwhoshcumhomt'shayg'bye*, her words all runny like ink bleeding through wet paper. Her face was ruddy from drinking, and a crust of dried saliva tracked from the right corner of her mouth to her jaw. Late afternoon, and she was still in her bathrobe—a faded sky-blue dressing gown missing the top two buttons so it sagged open at her breasts. She had on cotton-candy-pink bunny slippers, the ones with floppy ears and black button eyes and red-stitched smiles: a present from Joachim when he was ten.

Jacob, help... can't ... breathe...

Joachim, I can't, I can't hang on, my arm, the rope's caught around my arm, I can't hold you...

But the bunny's ears drooped now, and the fluff was all gone, and Joachim was dead.

Dorete's thin fingers curled like hawk's talons around a glass. Not an empty jelly jar this time: a glass, as if his mother thought that drinking whiskey out of a real glass made it all better. Except it didn't. It wasn't.

"Mom." He pried the glass free with his left hand, the one without feeling. Her fingers twitched and grabbed air, but she didn't really resist—just stared with swimming eyes that clicked back and forth like blue beads. "Mom, come on, that's enough."

"S'never nuff." Dorete's eyes jerked as she tried to focus. "You dunno what it slike, looking at you and thinking it's him, only you're never him."

"Mom." Better just say what he had to say and be done with it. "Look, I'm going tomorrow morning. Christian's set it up and..."

"Joke snon me," she slurred. "Twin boys, like two peashinpod. Even your father couldn't tell you apart, he could never. Tell. But I knew. A mother always snows..."

"Christian says I have to go back." His throat was all clogged, and it hurt to talk because he was trying really hard not to cry. "Not to climb, you know I wouldn't do that again but to be alone a little while, just have myself to rely on, like a kind of test..."

Jacob, you have to forgive yourself. You have to let Joachim go.

How can I forgive myself when that's just what happened, Christian, don't you understand?

"Test." Dorete made the word sound ugly. "Like you going long with your brother, ice climbing when you had no bizness...."

"Mom..."

"And you just *going* long!" The cords in Dorete's neck bulged, and spittle foamed at the corners of her mouth. Her blue eyes blazed with sorrow and, Jacob saw now, simmering hate. "Never thinking about what might happen because you were always the follower, you did whatever your brother said, and you were so *shtupid!*"

"*Mom!*" He felt a twist of shock and grief, and then there was a sudden crack as the glass in his left hand burst. Dumbly, Jacob stared at the spray of broken glass, the whiskey that sloshed over

his fingers and drizzled to the floor in an amber rain. Still, he clutched the razor-sharp edges very hard with his left hand, wanting the pain, waiting for the blood.

But there was no blood, no pain. Not in his hand, anyway.



Later, when he'd gotten her to bed and cleaned up the mess, he went to his brother's room. It was just the way Joachim had left it, and now Joachim's twin stood at the threshold, his blue eyes taking in Joachim's academic honors, his climbing trophies...

The glare so bright Jacob's eyes teared, and the blue ice was shiny, and the wind sheer very strong, snatching at Jacob with greedy fingers, trying to pluck him from the mountain. So, shivering, he hung on for dear life, his ice hammers in both hands and the rope secured and looped around his middle and, without his really thinking about it, his left arm just below his shoulder. From high above, there was the whack of Joachim's crampons hitting ice, the squall of an ice screw, a thwack as Joachim drove in his ice hammer, tested, then pulled himself up – then that crisp, glassy crackle only rotten ice makes when it breaks. And then, Joachim screamed and peeled back from the mountain...

No more. Jacob closed the door to his brother's room and on his memories, and left.

Shelfleisland, Arc Royal

15 July 3066: Morning

A sound: a muted shuffle, like bare feet over carpet.

Someone is here. The thought nipped at the periphery of her meditation. Annoyed, Mara gave the errant thought a mental swat. Of course, there was someone there. Stephen's ghost was locked in her brain, indelibly etched into her memory. Yet today, and for the first time since she had been exiled to perform *surkai*, the Clan Rite of Forgiveness, she had managed a brief peace, accepting remorse and regret and culpability, and that was very good because *surkai* meant nothing if she was unable to learn from her failures.

As you failed Stephen, quaiff? You questioned your Point Commander, and now he is dead, and it is your fault.

No, she failed herself! The assault on Tharkad was to begin in little less than two weeks; the Kell Hounds and Wolf-Clan-in-Exile forces joining the assault had left two months ago, and she was not with them. She had not been given the honor of doing battle with her Clan. That, too, was a condition of her *surkai* and a slap in the face as well, and she had only herself to blame!

Because you let Stephen die.

Furious, Mara jerked away, rupturing the sheen of her meditation the way a whale breached the sea. At once, Mara's consciousness flowed back into her body and she felt everything, heard everything: the bite of ice and snow-encrusted black basalt through her insulated jumpsuit, the lash of a strong winter wind cutting her cheeks, the solitary keen of a sea bird, its cry a high, weird echo reverberating against rock.

A storm coming. Her gaze drifted over slate-gray clouds before dropping to the sea. The water this far south was always very bright aquamarine in summer but now the sea was as dark as the cobalt hue of a night sky without stars. Swirling sprays of white foam licked and hissed over rock like a thousand angry serpents. Chunks of flat ice, cast-offs from tabular icebergs clustered at the planet's pole, bobbed and banged against the shore.

And then somehow, rippling under all the wind and sea, she heard the sound again.

Aff! She pulled into a crouch and, instinctively, her right hand slapped her right hip. Reflex: She cursed, silently. No weapons

or her suit. An Elemental could be lethal with bare fists, but she was *powless*, stripped of her weapons. But that was a condition of her *surkai*. For thirty days, her survival depended upon her wits – and a limited cache of supplies. The clothes she wore, two extra pairs of socks, a set of dry gloves, an insulated tent and sleeping bag, a week's worth of ration bars. A pot for melting water, a packet of matches and five sticks of fire-starters, plus a portable heater she used sparingly because there was one can of fuel. She had done well, surviving on raw snails and tiny crabs that scuttled over the rocks at low tide. And she walked, in snowshoes, twenty kilometers a day. Fifteen days and three hundred kilometers away was a radio with which she would signal for pick-up from the Wolf-Clan-in-Exile colony five hundred kilometers northwest.

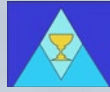


But now, there was someone here. Who? Slowly, she inched off the rock, then reached for her snowshoes that were staked in a drift and clipped them to her boots. Then, cautiously, she uncoiled, the cords of muscles in her thighs and calves bunching until she hunched in a crouch a few centimeters shy of her full height of two and a quarter meters. Cocking her head, she stilled her breathing, closed her eyes, and concentrated.

An instant later, she almost laughed. Whoever was there was strong but unused to snowshoes. The steps were clumsy, and there was the clacking sound of metal sliding against snow. Probably a youngster trying a transverse ascent instead of following the fall line. *Well, and let us see who this little whelp of a Spheroid is.* Pulling herself erect, she waited to give her unexpected visitor a proper Clan greeting.

Except she never had the chance. Out of the corner of her right eye, she caught a yellow flash of something very bright. Suddenly alert, she whipped around—and saw the ship slicing through clouds.

A moment later, she was flying down the hill.



Three days. In snowshoes. He must be nuts. Pack dragging on his aching shoulders, Jacob huffed his way up the slope, cutting a zigzag series of switchbacks. The going was tough, and he kept slipping whenever he put his weight on his downhill shoe. He squinted at the top of the esker, a narrow, black, windswept ridge. With poles, yeah, maybe he could do it, but otherwise, a straight climb was for the birds, fall line or no fall line.

Panting, he swiped sweat from his forehead with his right hand and watched steam rise from his glove. Snowshoeing had been relatively easy (relative being, well, a relative term) so long as he stuck to more level terrain, but even that was relative. Arc-Royal's southernmost continent, Shelfleisland's landscape was a crazy quilt carved by the collision and then retreat of two massive glaciers: a patchwork of strewn boulders, craggy ice-covered volcanic peaks, conical kames, narrow basalt ridges, and flat outwash plains. A vast underground aquifer supplying both this area and extending beneath the sea up to the Wolf-Clan-in-Exile's colony on Gerechtland yielded a maze of waterways that bubbled to the surface. This far south, though, the streams and rivers had iced for the winter.

The ice on the mountain was thick and blue, and the glare so bright his eyes hurt...

"Cut it out," he said, the words smoking in little steam-balls. "Just get through the next frigging week."

A week: Three days ago, Christian Kell had dropped him on an outwash terrace twenty kilometers east, pointed him southwest, and wished him luck. As added incentive, Christian had stowed little surprises along the way: extra food, dry clothes, and more fuel for his portable heater. Jacob didn't care about extra food so much, but more fuel... He'd been conservative, his fuel eked out in grudging aliquots. But by the end of a third night of huddling in his one-man tent and shivering in his cocoon of a sleeping bag (after discovering that the gnarly indigenous conifers didn't ignite but tended to explode, something he'd known but was too crazed with cold to remember until he'd nearly singed off his eyebrows) and then chopping out a block of ice with a hammer and chisel from a frozen river to melt down for drinking water, Jacob thought that a week was pretty damned long, and more fuel for his heater sounded pretty damned good. Sure, he could signal for help whenever he wanted, but no way.

Still, I'm out of my mind, even if I'm not climbing. Except he was, after a fashion, just trying to get up to that dumb esker. Pulling in a deep breath, he resumed his slog. No way around it, either: He'd checked the route over twice. Christian had him following a looping trail heading southwest to the esker which Jacob would take back toward the northeast. Christian said there was more fuel on this seaside ridge, which rose steeply and angled forty-five degrees inland. With a storm coming, more fuel sounded pretty darned good.

He was huffing so hard, it took him a second to recognize the sound, and he pulled up, surprised. *Thunder? Here? Now?* And before that thought had percolated through his brain, he caught movement and looked toward the ridge.

His first thought: *It's a tree.* Then, his second: *Wait, trees can't run on snowshoes.*

A blur over snow that boiled like dirt kicked up by tires on a gravel road. A solid *whomp* that punched the air out of his lungs as something snagged him around the middle. In the next second, he and his gear were airborne, only he was hurtling backward, going downhill so fast the air whistled in his ears.

"Wait," he managed, the words jagged out of his mouth as the woman—and it was a woman he saw now, except she was so *big*—pounded through the snow. "Hold on, wait, who . . . ?"

"Quiet," she said, not breaking stride. In five more seconds, she crashed behind a crop of massive, roughhewn boulders at the base of the bluff, and hurled them both into deep snow pack.

Flailing, Jacob struggled to right himself, but his pack pinned him down, and he was as helpless as an overturned beetle. "Hey!"

The woman grabbed a fistful of Jacob's parka and flipped him onto his stomach. "I said. Be. Quiet."

Jeez, she's huge. "Just who do you...?" and then Jacob forgot all about asking her just who she thought she was.

The air roared. Jacob felt the ground shift and shiver under his belly, and then the ship cleaved through the churning clouds with a high decrescendo whine. The ship was silver and bullet-shaped. A fighter, maybe? No, there were no quills of weapons bristling beneath either wing or jutting from its nose. Maybe a shuttle, then. Vertical spears of orange-yellow flame spurted from the tip of either wing, the heat melting snow fifty meters below. Hovering, the

ship's belly parted, and Jacob saw the twinkle of jetpacks as three metallic-gray figures spurted out like wet watermelon seeds. Two, one big and one not-so-big, had packs and rifles. The third had a box and no rifle. The bay doors scrolled together and, in another moment, the clouds folded in around the ship as it disappeared.

"Holy cow," Jacob whispered. "Who are those guys?"

"I do not know. They are not Clan."

No contractions. An Elemental: sure, her size and strength, it made sense. Wolf-Clan-in-Exile, yeah, but what was an Elemental doing here? They were hell and gone from the nearest colony. "Are you sure?"

"Reasonably. A Point would have five. They are soldiers, though. The man and woman have Gauss rifles, and they have packs and gear, so they are prepared to stay a night or two. Yet their ship did not stay behind, so they must not anticipate trouble."

"So are they Lyran, maybe? Maybe, you know, some of Katherine's people?" Excitement coursed through Jacob's veins. The Arc-Royal Defense Cordon had been in place for eight years, a move Grand Duke Morgan Kell, Christian's father, had taken to distance the Kell Hounds from Archon Katherine Steiner-Davion. That they'd had to put the Defense Cordon into effect at all and maintain it all these years was only so much icing on the cake. The chatter was that Katherine would have to be removed, one way or the other. (How, Jacob couldn't begin to fathom. Yeah, yeah, his dad had been a MechWarrior; his granddad had tagged the Red Corsair, for Pete's sake. That was the whole reason Christian Kell had shown up way back on Kookien's Pleasure Pit in the first place.) The Cordon was on the cusp of Jade Falcon space. From May 3064 to June 3065, the Jade Falcons had struck at various worlds. But they had not attacked Arc-Royal and the border incursions ceased. Unless this was a fresh initiative.

When he said this to the Elemental, she frowned. "Perhaps. They could just as likely be operatives working for Prince Victor. He has as much to gain from goading the Kell Hounds or Clan into the fight. But whoever they are—Loki, Jade Falcon, or forces loyal to Victor—why are they here?"

A good question. Jacob watched as the three figures touched down on a flat outwash fringed at its far edge by a stand of scraggly, snow-covered evergreens. The two with the rifles moved off and began a perimeter sweep while the third hugged his box.

Jacob felt the Elemental stiffen. "What?"

"That box." The Elemental had drawn herself up into a tight curl of vibrating muscle and taut sinew. To Jacob, she looked like a mountain cat. "That yellow symbol on the side."

"Symbol?" Jacob strained to make out a yellow splotch then gave it up as his vision fuzzed. Maybe Elementals' eyesight was enhanced, too. "What is it?"

"Biohazard."

"You mean a biological weapon? A poison?"

"Yes."

"But what good is a poison way out here? And poison *what*?"

"Both excellent questions. What is here that is not anywhere else?"

Jacob frowned. Well, there was snow and rock and ice, and then Jacob flashed to what he'd done that morning: chipped ice from a river fed by an underground... He gasped, turned, and saw from the Elemental's wide-eyed expression that she'd gotten there, too.

"Water," they said.



Three hours later, as they wove northeast through a forest of stubby conifers, the scientist said, "I don't like it." He'd retracted his visor (probably because a scowl didn't translate well over radio) and now he aimed that scowl at the man to his left. "I don't like it at all."

McKenzie retracted his visor and said, "You don't have to like it." (McKenzie wasn't his real name. An operative's reality was relative.) "All I said was that someone's come through. Don't sweat it. The tracks are headed south." He waved a suited hand to indicate the direction they'd come from. "Nothing to worry about."

"The point is I shouldn't have to worry at all." The scientist was small and wiry, with a face pruned by wrinkles and a pair of bright, button-black eyes that reminded McKenzie of a leggy gibbon. And the little man whined, a nagging singsong that set McKenzie's teeth on edge. "You assured me that this area was remote. Little

to no risk, that's what you told the general; that's what you assured me."

McKenzie clamped down on an impulse to pop out the scientist's button-black eyes with his thumbs. "And you should rest assured that I wasn't suggesting that we'd have flown all this way, evaded a satellite detection system, and landed in the middle of a snow-covered wasteland well beyond the Clan's defensive perimeter just to risk our necks for the hell of it."

The scientist's little monkey face mottled with rage. "Now, wait just a minute..."

"Boys." It was Prater, on the scientist's right. She was petite and brunette, and Prater wasn't her real name either. "Look, you two cretins want to hose down the snow with testosterone, do it on your own time."

"Cretins!" The scientist spluttered. "He's nothing more than an overgrown gorilla with a gun..."

"For now, we've got a job to do," Prater continued coolly. "We inject the biotoxin into the aquifer, we get off this rock," she let one shoulder hunch then fall, "and then you two can have at it."

And then, before McKenzie could really have a nice quiet think about just what he'd like to do to that little chimpanzee of a scientist, there was a hollow *whomp* as the woods exploded.



Go! Mara dashed along the bare spine of the esker. As soon as she hit the snow below the ridge, she felt the explosion like something living beneath her feet: the snow twitching and rippling with the aftershocks. To her right, a curling tongue of snow shivered loose from an outcropping of rocks and spun down the slope. *Concussive force might just start a mini-avalanche, and that I do not need.* She had to get down, fast. Leaning back, she drew back on the claws of her snowshoes, forced her toes up and took the slope with long striding, gliding steps in a near-glissande. As she made it to level pack, she cut into the woods. The explosions would draw the operatives' attention north and west; she would swoop in from the south and east. With luck, one or both of the operatives would have moved away, leaving the rear uncovered.

Through the curtain of trees, she could see how the wind made

the plumes of orange-yellow flame sputter and dip, and then, infused with oxygen-rich air, the flames belched geysers of shimmering sparks. The fires were so furious and hot she heard them crackle: a dry sound, like stiff plastic wrap.

Just as that little whelp Jacob Geist had promised: *But, Mara, they're Shelfleisland conifers, so if I combine our fuel and the stuff Christian left, I can tap into the resin reservoirs and blow a couple them sky high, don't you get it?*

Stravag, the boy's language made her head hurt. Granted, her Clan was a bit more... Spheroid than the rest, but that did not mean that an Elemental, whatever her stripes, should be so slovenly. Still, she had gotten it. In fact, she should have thought of it. At first, she dismissed him but he argued and she, grudgingly, listened. (And, *quaiff*, was that not why she was exiled to begin with? Because she would not listen?) Yes, the pup's plan was sound, and besides, they could not signal for help. She had no radio, and the pup's was broad-band only. There was too much risk that their broadcast would be overheard.

A strange boy, though, that Jacob Geist: She sensed a sadness and self-loathing that was a twin to her own. There was a story there, she was sure. Ah, but the pup was a Geist through and through, whether he believed it or not. His grandfather's courage against the Red Corsair so many years ago was legend, and the whelp had Nelson Geist's quick wits.

And good for him because he has given me a much better chance. Mara's lips tugged in a savage grin as she dropped into a low shuffling crouch. Amber light danced along the snow ahead but the pack was milky white further back, and there was light enough for her keen eyes to zero in on the shadows and hollows of broken snow meandering through the woods. The trail went left; she flanked right, her snowshoes shushing quietly atop the icy pack as she darted amongst the trees. Just ahead, she glimpsed a dark sliver very close to the ground—and then the sliver moved.

Quick as lightning, Mara ducked behind the broad trunk of a three-meter high conifer, its bark nubbly with knotholes and sticky with resin, the stuff bubbling in oozing tongues that never froze. Cautiously, she peered around the trunk. The smallest of the trio: The other two must have moved off to investigate the blasts. As if sensing her presence, the figure turned, and she hunched down, not daring to breathe, but not so quickly that she had not had time to see that its face was a blank.

Could he have a heads-up display, or is this merely protective gear? She waited a few seconds, peeked again. The figure's back was to her now. Perfect. Easing away from the tree, Mara wove a lithe pattern, her eyes trained on her quarry. The man's (woman's?) attention was drawn now to the left, and away from her. Excellent: Just a few more steps and then...

The figure spun on its heel, and as her blood hummed in her ears, she saw a pair of bright, button-black eyes set in a simian-like face and the way the little man was grinning—and the silvery gleam of a Sternsnacht Python.

"You lose," the little monkey-man said, and fired.

15 July 3066: Night

A boy. Amazed, McKenzie stared down at the shivering, sniveling figure huddled in the snow. Not a soldier at all but a stinking, puling kid in some get-up—*black, for God's sake*—that just about screamed *shoot me, I'm over here!* Christ, the kid might as well paint a bull's-eye right on his chest. Well, kid or not, he'd come up with that little fireworks display, and McKenzie was not pleased.

"Get up." Then, just for spite and because McKenzie was pissed off as all get-out, wanted off this godforsaken rock because who knew what kind of attention they were going to get now and the last thing he needed was some smartass boy-wonder mucking up the works, he smacked the boy's bad arm with the muzzle of his rifle and found that he actually enjoyed the way the kid screamed. "Come on," he said, when the kid's screams had trailed off into watery, hiccupping sobs. "Get up, or I swear to God, I'll shoot you right now."

"But it...it hurts. Really. I can't... can't move, it really hurts, it really..." And then the kid turned aside and vomited.

Wonderful. McKenzie waited until the kid had subsided into retches and dry heaves. In the gathering dusk, he could just make out the steam rising from the snow and thanked Christ he was upwind on the ridge, his back to the sea. All right, so the kid wasn't faking and was good and hurt. McKenzie cast a dispassionate eye over the boy's right arm. Limp as a flag on a windless day, with an unnatural crook midway between his elbow and wrist. Probably snapped those little chicken bones in two. Well, no matter. No kid could pull off this little stunt alone. Blow up a couple of trees for, what, kicks, you think that front line diversion isn't the oldest trick in the book, or what? Because McKenzie had no illusions: Where there was fire, there were maybe one, two more guys out there gunning for him, and he didn't particularly enjoy being some Clanner's target practice. Although this kid sure didn't look Clan to him. "Look, I don't have time for this. You can either die here, or get up. It's all the same to me."

"You're going to kill me either way." In the grainy half-light, the kid's face was no more than a ghostly glimmer of white flesh swaddled in that absurd black-hooded parka. Grimacing, he cradled his shattered right arm in his left hand. "So what's the point?"

McKenzie settled for a half-truth. "The point is you cooperate, I won't because, frankly, you're much more valuable alive than dead. Who knows when a hostage exchange might come in handy?"

"Hostage." The kid's voice was teary and choked. "We're in the middle of nowhere. You're not going to take prisoners. You're going to kill me. Why are you here anyway?"

"I don't have to answer to you," said McKenzie, really steamed now. That kid, who did think he was? "Come on now, get up," and then when the sniveling punk didn't move, McKenzie bent down and hooked a hand under the kid's left arm. "I *said*, get..."

Uncoiling, the kid leapt with a wild animal yell, and McKenzie sensed a rush of air, a feeling of movement that barreled for his eyes so fast McKenzie didn't have time to blink. And then something as hard and unyielding as steel crunched through the bones of his nose and kept going through meat and bone, and his face simply shattered.



In the split second before he made his decision, everything receded: the crash of the sea and howl of the wind, even the sting of the icy snow. Jacob became a ball of pure crystalline fury, surging to his feet and swinging his left fist—the one that felt no pain and wasn't real—with all his might.

His hand plowed through, smashing bone and cartilage and gristle with that crunchy, splintery sound an eggshell makes when you crush it under the heel of your boot. A spray of hot blood misted his face; he could taste it, salty and wet, on his tongue, and something grape-sized and soft burst as his hand smashed the man's orbits because his hand didn't, wouldn't stop. He'd built up that much rage and so much momentum—and because, of course, his left hand and arm were much stronger than a man's skull.

The man screamed: not a proper scream at all, but a bubbly gurgle, like a kid blowing air into milk through a straw. Gurgling, choking on torrents of fresh blood, the man dropped his rifle, the metal clanging against stone. He staggered back until Jacob's gory fist came free with a moist, sucking sound. Gargling, the man clawed at the sunken, bloody crater of his face, and even in that dim light, Jacob saw now that the man was blind, too, his orbits gone, the eyes squashed like tiny, jelly-filled balloons. The man bawled, and then there was something else, a rattling sound like dice on marble as the man's teeth pattered to the cold, hard rock.

The man swayed back one step, then two. Then, he just vanished.

Face streaked with blood and his hand clotted with gore, Jacob watched as the man fell away into the darkness. He was gone from sight long before he reached the sea, and the roar of the sea was so loud, Jacob didn't even hear the man scream, something the man probably did when those quills of jagged basalt speared his chest. Or, maybe, when he hit, he was already dead.

One way or the other, he was gone.



A click inside her helmet. Then a noisome mosquito whine: "I don't like it."

From her position behind a rugged conifer at the very edge of the tiny clearing where they'd been when the first tree exploded, Prater gave a soft curse. The scientist wouldn't hear, of course; her channel was open to receive, not transmit. But listening to the little man was like having a spike driven through her brain. For a split second, she experienced a not altogether unpleasant urge to lodge a Gauss slug right between the little man's eyes. That, at least, would put one of them out their misery. Instead, she keyed to their private frequency. "You never like anything."

Even against a fizzle of light static, the scientist's derisive sniff was patently audible. "You can't deny, though, something's gone wrong. He should be back by now."

"Patience. He'll be back," said Prater, not sure if she believed this. McKenzie hadn't reported in for the last half hour, and he should've tracked down whomever by now. How hard could it be? Whoever was out there had nothing tremendously sophisticated. The crudity of the diversion clearly proved that, as did the Elemental the scientist had shot. But she'd rather stick pins in her eyes than agree with the scientist.

"I still don't like it."

Exasperated, Prater pivoted on the balls of her feet. Her quick eyes flicked up and right to the heads-up display set to thermal imaging. What little light was left in the night sky had evaporated with the departure of the sun, and although she knew Arc-Royal's moon was full, nothing seeped through that smothering darkness and whirling snow, and the flames from those decimated trees had burned themselves out a half hour ago. Although he stood well back in the shadows, she easily picked out the pulsing scarlet

infrared of the scientist, as well as the muddy glow of his Python, the warmth from its barrel not yet leached away by the frigid air. At the scientist's feet was another bulky outline, its infrared signature much fainter as its core temperature continued to drop. "What about her?"

The scientist grunted. "Not dead yet. On the other hand, if she doesn't die from blood loss, hypothermia'll do the trick. If you want to keep her alive, you might consider warming her up."

"And waste resources?" After another rapid scan showed nothing approaching from the west, Prater stamped over and stood over the Elemental. The figure at her feet moved; Prater caught the low murmur of a voice filtering through the audiosensors that captured external noise and funneled sound into her helmet. Activating a narrow-beam external torch, Prater thumbed a control. Her visor split and retracted, and snow sanded her cheeks. She squinted down at the bound Elemental and shouted, "What?"

The eddies and currents of the wind and snow had tugged the Elemental's black hair free of its braid, and thick, undulating strands writhed in a halo about her face like a nest of serpents. Caught in a puddle of glare-white halogen from Prater's headlamp, the Elemental's eyes were a dark feline glitter. A ribbon of blood meandered from the Elemental's right nostril, time and the cold drying the blood black as charcoal. The entire right side of the Elemental's face was swollen and livid with hemorrhage, the imprint of the butt of Prater's Gauss rifle clearly visible as a sooty tattoo. (Prater hadn't intended to hit her so hard—but then, well, she'd lost her temper.) And the scientist might be a nuisance, but his aim was impeccable: a shot to the left shoulder and one to the right kneecap. Incapacitating, but not fatal as long as you didn't tag a major artery, always a risk. Still bled like stink, though, and talk about painful.

The Elemental's lips, swollen to the size of fat blue worms, parted. Her teeth were orange from old blood, but her voice, though hoarse, was plainly audible above the howl of the wind. "I said that if you were Clan, I would challenge you to a Circle of Equals. But even if you were Clan, I am not at all certain you would be much of a challenge in hand-to-hand combat. Besides, you have resorted to tricks. This, I expect from a Spheroid. You have no honor worth the bother of taking away."

The scientist, who had also retracted his visor, let out a nasal laugh that speared Prater's skull like a lance. That set off a quick spark of anger, but she couldn't shoot the scientist—*but don't I wish?*—and

so she jammed the muzzle of her rifle into the Elemental's chest hard enough, she knew, to bruise. But, damn her, the Elemental didn't bat an eyelash. These Clan people with their superior attitude, she'd like to smack that look right off the Elemental's face with her bare hands, maybe choke her until the Elemental's eyes bugged and she wet her pants. Prater settled instead with planting the bore of her rifle's muzzle just under the Elemental's left eye. One shot would do it. *Just give me a reason.*

"Yeah? No honor, huh? What, you don't like that maybe I'm just a little bit smarter? Got better tricks up my sleeve?" Prater threw back her head, opened her mouth, and let out a long, blood-curdling scream: the kind a woman might make if her flesh were being carved from her body a piece at a time. She flashed her teeth at the Elemental in a nasty grin. "Like that one?"

"Especially that one. Everyone knows that Clansmen do not scream like babies. Has anyone come charging to the rescue? Of course not; if there were others, they would know a trap when they heard it. But I have told you. I acted alone. You are wasting your time."

"Yeah, and I don't believe you. Oh, sure, you don't have a weapon; you were figuring you might get one of ours. But that you acted alone? Well, there's just no way you could've set those trees to blow *and* circled back *and* then cut into the woods in time. For starters, detonating the resin—and that was a neat trick, I'll grant you that—requires sustained and even heat, not a spark generated by remote timer. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that you had help, and that he's just as up shit creek without a paddle as you are, otherwise he'd have come in here blasting."

"There is no one else."

"That's crap. Because you're forgetting," Prater squatted on her haunches, nose to nose with the Elemental and so close she saw the Elemental's eyes clicking back and forth. "Tracks."

It was a shot in the dark. Prater and McKenzie hadn't found tracks. If there'd been any, the heat from the flames had melted the snow, and they hadn't spotted any further along. So, the Elemental's buddy was either really light on his feet (something Prater doubted; these Elementals were built like tanks), or more likely, the wind had obliterated the signs of his retreat. So Prater was bluffing.

And, bingo. She was close enough to catch it, how the Elemental's eyes flicked briefly away then back: glancing not west, and not

southwest, but northwest. Prater could've kicked herself. Of course, the Elemental's little buddy wasn't shadowing behind, or even alongside, but ahead. That basalt ridge, tucked away somewhere, that's where he was, had to be.

"Thank you." Standing, Prater keyed the radio at her throat. "McKenzie, come in."

"What?" The scientist wagged his Python in her general direction. "What is it?"

"Point that thing somewhere useful," said Prater, stepping away. "Like at her, that'd be a good start."

"She's not going anywhere. What is it?"

Prater ignored the question. "McKenzie, come in please, this is Prater."

"Don't ignore me!" The scientist took a shuffling step, swayed on his snowshoes, windmilled his arms, and then righted. "You people think you're so damn clever. Get in, get out, easy as pie. Well, this Clan lady found us and this is serious, and I don't like it. Why isn't he answering?"

"Because he's probably busy. Probably he figured it out, too, because whoever's with you isn't behind, is he?" Prater directed this last to the Elemental and enjoyed seeing how the Elemental stiffened. *Gotcha*. Prater showed her teeth in a nasty, triumphant grin. "And if McKenzie doesn't answer in another two seconds, I'm going after him myself."

"Where?" asked the scientist.

"Ahead, on that ridge. I'm right, aren't I?" she asked the Elemental, who'd now retreated behind a stony stare. Prater snorted. "Yeah, right, thanks a lot. Screw this. I'm going."

"You can't leave me here," said the scientist. "What if she tries to get away?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake, she's got a gimp knee. She's not going anywhere."

"But look at her! She's huge."

"Jesus." Prater let out an exasperated snort. "Fine," she said, turning her lamp on the Elemental, cocking her rifle, and taking aim. *Right between the eyes, honey*. "Say bye-bye."

There was a *kaBAM* so loud Prater felt the sound rattle her teeth, and something whizzed past her right ear. In the next instant—no, more like half a nanosecond—the scientist screamed as the Gauss slug drilled into his chest, blasting a crater that spewed pink gobbets of lung, chunks of salmon-tinged bone, and a gout of black-red blood. The impact blew the scientist back, and he collided with a tree. His body rebounded and then slammed face-first to the snow, his legs pistoning in a herky-jerky dance, like a pithed frog getting good and zapped with electric shocks.

KABAM! A slug whirred over her head, but Prater was already rolling left by the time a chunk of conifer blew in a shower of shredded bark, releasing the pungent aroma of turpentine. What the...? Nerves tingling, Prater moved: hard as hell in snowshoes but she scuttled right, trying to reach the cover of a nearby tree. The next shot punched a trough in the snow not a half meter from her left boot.

"Shit!" she hissed, launching herself for the base of the tree. She sprawled into snow face-first, felt the snow melt and cold water trickle down her neck. How was he finding her, did he have a thermal imaging system, or. . ? She swung her head left, heard another shot, and saw snow puff from the ground in the halo of her lamp.

The light. *Great, Prater; take out an advertisement, why don't you, you idiot.* She fumbled the headlamp off. Now they'd see if he was such a crack shot. She spared a rapid sidelong glance over her left shoulder. Ten meters more or less: The scientist lay unmoving, and the massive hunched shape of the Elemental was slumped alongside. Maybe the same slug that had drilled the scientist snagged the Elemental. Unlikely, though: The Elemental had been seated, her back against the tree. Probably hitting the deck and taking cover was all.

And then she had an idea: how to kill two Clansmen with one stone.

Quickly lowering her visor, she activated her heads-up. Yes, the Elemental was alive; there was the pulsating ruddy glow generated by her body heat. The scientist was history, his residual body temperature cooling to a muted aqua even as she watched.

Prater faced forward, scanning the trees to her right. Her visor's range wasn't as long or sensitive as that of a standard neurohelmet; she could manage no more than fifteen meters at the outside. If her quarry was hidden behind a tree or boulder, she wouldn't be able to

see him until she was much closer. *But if he doesn't have thermal imaging, I'll have the advantage.* Moving slowly, she detached her headlamp, palmed it in her left hand. Ready, set... now! Clicking the headlamp on, she tossed it left, out into the open.

"No!" It was the Elemental, behind and to Prater's left just on the very periphery of her vision. "No, Jacob, stop!"

Naw, naw, come on, Jake, come on! In the next instant, Prater heard the blast of a rifle shot, saw a long spurt of muzzle flash, and then she heard the high zing of a slug ricocheting off wood. And there! On her heads-up: a quick reddish flicker as a figure bobbed from behind a tree before disappearing again. Another shot, this one wild.

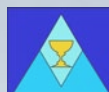
"Jacob!" shouted the Elemental again. "No!"

All right, that answered that. Grinning, Prater ignored the Elemental and kept her eyes fixed on the trees where she'd seen the muzzle flash. Her opponent had followed her light and not her thermal image, and he was an amateur to boot, just lucky shots, that was all. Twelve meters, she gauged, facing right, so all she had to do was inch her way around and circle in from the shooter's left rear flank. With all this wind, he'd never hear her. Cautiously, she edged her way around the tree, creeping along the periphery of the small clearing. Behind, the Elemental had fallen silent, and that was a good thing because Prater would've shot the woman just to shut her up. *I'll just save that little pleasure for later.* She glided along the snow, her gaze alternating between her heads-up and the snowfield and trees all around, creeping closer and closer and...

Yes! A glimmer of red that resolved into old Jake's left shoulder and, wait, where the hell was his arm? Well, no matter, but this was all right, this was just frigging fantastic! Cat-like, she eased her body around, coming in from the left, until Jake's head and chest appeared, and she saw that he was looking—to the right.

Wrong way, boy-o. Say nighty-night, Jake. Prater sprang from the trees and leveled her rifle for a head shot. Right between the eyes.

She fired.



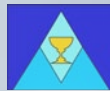
He was so busy squinting through the thick curtain of snow—at the narrow gout of white lamplight and the suggestion of a shape just beyond—and cursing himself for being such an idiot to fall for the oldest trick in the book (Book? What book?), Jacob never saw the suited figure until it leapt in from his left. Startled and off-balance, Jacob only had enough time enough to turn...

And then there was a shot: not the *BAM* of a Gauss rifle, but a *crack*.

The figure jerked, bowing in an exaggerated arch. Its arms flung wide, and then there was an ear-splitting *ka-BANG* and a fountain of sparks as the Gauss rifle discharged into the trees. Another *crack*, and the figure spun like a floppy marionette before crashing to the snow.

Wide-eyed, Jacob let out his breath in a short *hah*. What...? And then, as the snow billowed and parted, he saw Mara on her stomach, not five meters away. A snail's track of blood was smeared on the snow, marking her progress as she'd hauled herself along using one elbow and one knee. In her right hand was a pistol.

Mara met Jacob's eyes and smiled. "You are welcome," she said.



"Now what?" Jacob asked when Mara was done.

She handed him his radio. "We wait. The storm is still bad, but they will send a ship for us as soon as possible. They are anxious to see what we have here." She nodded at the black chest with the yellow biohazard symbol. "And to know who those people are... *were*. We might never know, of course. Odds are they are Loki. This is precisely something that snake Katherine would do. But no matter who they were, there are these suits our scientists would like to take apart."

"Oh." Slowly, Jacob slipped his radio inside his parka with his left hand being careful not to jostle his right arm. They had no material for a sling, and the arm hurt like hell. And he was still pretty cold. They'd dragged the biohazard box and the dead woman's pack into the tent they'd found in the woman's gear (and managed to set up, hard as hell in a storm with two hands between two people). The woman hadn't had a heater, only a sleeping bag, rations, and water. Still, it was better than sitting outside. "Don't we, uh, you know, count?"

"Marginally." Mara managed a swollen, lopsided grin. "Relax, they will not let us turn to ice and we have very good doctors. Until then..."

"I know. We wait." Jacob sighed and shivered. "Wish we had a heater, though. Using up all our fuel on those trees..."

"Necessary."

"I know. Still."

"Well." Mara paused. "There is something we could do."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. Body heat." Then, at the look on Jacob's face, she laughed outright. "I was merely suggesting that we unzip the sleeping bag, wrap it around, and zip our parkas together, carefully. My shoulder hurts and your arm can not be much better. But we will be nice and toasty. We can tell each other stories to pass the time, *quaiff?*"

"Oh." Jacob didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed. *For crying out loud, grow up; she's like, you know, an Elemental. You think she's even gonna be interested...* "Okay. Except..."

"Yes?"

"Well, I can only use my left hand..."

"Still, you have managed with the tent. And you have a very interesting left hand, one about which I am sure there is a very long story, yes?" His face must have changed because she added, softly, "I am sorry. I did not mean to hurt you, Jacob. I should not have joked about it."

"That's okay." He swallowed and even though his eyes burned with tears, he gave her a wobbly smile. "Actually, I'm kind of curious why you're here. This isn't exactly, well..."

"Normal Clan behavior? No." She sighed. "*Surkai* is not normal. Indeed, it is very hard."

"*Surkai?*"

"Our word for a ritual of forgiveness... and mine is a long story, too. I will make a deal with you. I will be your right hand, and you will be my left, and between the two of us, we will get ourselves warm and cozy. Then I will tell you about *surkai* and you will tell me how you came to be who you are. Deal?"

Jacob wasn't sure what this really meant because, well, Mara was older but she was pretty good-looking, and he was also very cold. And besides, he did want to talk about Joachim, finally. Not like he had with the psychiatrist, or even Christian, but to really get down and talk, with a friend. "Okay."

"Good. Then let us get warm, Jacob Geist, and then you and I will talk, and you will see." She looked at him through her lashes. "The time will pass so quickly and you will feel so much better, you will be sorry when we are rescued."

She was right. Four hours later, Jacob heard a whine of engines and when their eyes met, hers were, well, softer somehow. Like some inner barrier had fallen. Or maybe that's what had happened to him because he discovered that he really didn't want this to end. Not now. Maybe not for a long time. They were very close, very warm – and it felt... good. It felt right.

"Can I ask you something?" And then when she nodded, he said, "Were you in love with Stephen?"

To his relief, she didn't tell him it was none of his frigging business or ask why he'd asked. Instead, she thought about that for a moment. "No. Not in the way you mean. I loved him, but it was a love born of loyalty and a shared purpose."

"Okay," he said. Thinking: *Yeah, okay. Okay* what? "What will happen to you now? I mean, will you have to come back and finish the *surkai*?"

She looked away, and he saw her throat move as she swallowed. When she faced him again, her eyes were very bright. "I do not know. Perhaps. I do not know if one good deed cancels out a failure that can not be remedied."

It was on the tip of his tongue to say something else, but Jacob hesitated. Then he saw in her expression that she knew. Maybe even wanted him to ask. So, he said, "Could I come with you? We don't have to talk, and I wouldn't get in the way. But I could just... be there."

Mara let her breath go, a little at a time. Then she said, very gently, "I do not think that you would be allowed, Jacob and for that, I am truly sorry. It has been a long time since I let anyone... be there. But..."

"Yeah?"

"When my battle is won, whether by *surkai* or on the field with my people, I would like, very much, to know you better." And then her black eyes held him and something warm blossomed in his chest. "I would like you to know me better. Being known by someone that way might be quite... an experience. Do you think, Jacob, that this is possible?"

"Yeah," he said, and was astonished when he realized that his heart seemed to have remembered how to beat again. And, God, it felt good. "I think so."