

**23**  
**YEARS**  
**ON**  
**FIRE**

A CASSANDRA KRESNOV NOVEL

JOEL  
SHEPHERD

# 23 YEARS ON FIRE



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# CHAPTER ONE

Ari tried to avoid Kobayashi Square; there were too many monitors. He walked from the rail station about the square perimeter instead, down Jin-Hai Street and across Pier, grateful the traffic monitors weren't set to bust a person for jaywalking.

It was cold in Anjula, several below freezing, but if he walked fast and kept his woolen hat down over his ears, he found it bearable. There was old snow on the curbs, tucked in the places the sweepers missed, or in sidewalk gardens where grass or shrubs tried to grow. All quite odd for a Tanushan, accustomed to that city's tropical location on planet Callay, and temperatures that rarely chilled even on winter nights. He was missing the warmth now, as the prospect of returning to it drew closer. Six months now he'd been without it, stuck here on the outer rim of Federation space, in this sprawling port city built foolishly too far south of the equator.

But in other ways, Anjula was not too different. The night streets buzzed with artificial colour, advertising hoardings, network displays, bars and theatres advertising their latest sin. People crowded the sidewalks, unbothered by the chill, some of the women even with light stockings and otherwise bare legs that Ari shivered just to look at. Here about Kobayashi Square, where transport networks clustered and VR simulation joints were famous, the crowds were sometimes huge. Tonight, they were just large—a Sunday, in the universal Federation week. In a few hours, the crowds would dwindle further. Monday was a work day and by midnight, Anjula's ten-million-strong buzz would have declined to a low murmur. Fewer people were better, for what was planned, however little sympathy he had for them.

It was the most surreal thing, to walk these streets of a huge city, on a world whose population now approached a neat three hundred million, and to know that he was about to bring it all crashing down. Well, not him alone, he'd have help. Quite a lot of help, in fact. But it had been his idea from the inception, several years planning, and lately six months of field work. And none of these people, out on their Sunday night entertainments, had any idea what was about to happen.

Sandy knew she'd hit atmosphere when the aeroshell ceased shaking. That was odd—typically reentry was a fiery affair at nearly thirty thousand kilometers per hour, but a covert insertion fired thrusters before atmospheric contact, slowing the pod to a near hover, then hit troposphere at just over five thousand, barely fast enough to make a jolt in whisper thin air. Otherwise, a series of coordinated fireballs over Anjula might have made the defences suspicious.

After two minutes of falling, she blew the shell off and took a look at where she was. The altimeter said sixty thousand meters, well high enough to see the curvature of Pyeongwha's horizon, if it hadn't been pitch black. She was descending somewhere in excess of Mach two, the air not thick enough to sustain a candle flame even if the howling gale wouldn't blow it out again. She flipped her helmet visuals to ultra-v and got some lovely colours—hot lights below, cities along a crescent-shaped coast. That was Narata, an island, perhaps a thousand kilometers end to end. Upon the far horizon, more lights—Abanda, the mainland continent. Anjula was on Narata, off the coast; a big port city, ideal for a world surfaced eighty percent by water. Its lights below were brightest, sprawling up the coast into fragmenting smaller dots: fishing towns, villages, seaside resorts. Too cold for bikinis now, though.

Spread-eagled, she looked up and around for her support. Helmet vision found them pretty fast, dark shapes falling against an even darker sky, the nearest just over a kilometer. Sandy did a slow spin and finished her count at fifty-two . . . there were fifty-six in the drop, she imagined the other four were fine, helmet visuals weren't as reliable as her bare eyes, but at this altitude she had no other option. Reentry trajectories were notoriously unreliable, a few random atmospheric interactions and you could end up tens of kilometers from where you should be. But the shadow crew that had inserted them had got it down to something of an art, and in free fall you could always correct your descent once unshelled.

She did so now, leaning forward to create a glidepath. Spread across the night sky about her, armoured figures followed her lead.

At thirty thousand meters Anjula was filling her view, patchy with broken cloud. She called up maps and overlaid them, quickly getting a match. From there, navcomp told her what was what, and she'd been committing most of Anjula to memory for the last few weeks. She could laser com her teammates to talk to them without frequency pollution, but Anjula was said to be para-

noid enough these days, and a network of low intensity lasers above the city might just be visible enough to the kind of telescope that paranoids might have down there. It was nearly impossible for them to spot the suits, though, armoured with Tanusha's latest stealth materials plus low-intensity opti-cam, not strong enough to turn a soldier invisible at close range, but black against a black sky? Even if a telescope did get very lucky and spot one of them, they were coming down so fast now they'd be grounded before anyone figured out what to do about it.

Ten thousand meters. The central parks were clear now, a chain of natural lakes left untouched by the encroaching sprawl of city. North, Taizhou hills. South, Xanh Harbour, and big docks for shipping, intricate shapes against the water. Not a planned pattern of hubs and spokes like Tanusha, but an organic, random mass. Ari said it was quite pretty.

She passed an airliner at five thousand meters and climbing, and counted several more below, circling toward one of the two major airports. Below that, even now at an hour after midnight, lots of city air traffic. Anjula was big enough that it never truly slept, just dozed.

At two thousand meters she got her first signal reception, a mass of short-range frequencies, strengthening as she fell. Bandwidth increased rapidly, and she sorted fast until her suit latched onto the agreed upon network—an ultra-band used primarily for uplink advertising, nearly unjammable. Trust the advertisers to pick that one while leaving the hospitals with low-band junk.

"Come on, Ari," she murmured, as the ground rushed up fast. "Be there." Suddenly, she found the encryption. Flash-zoomed on internal vision, saw a mass of codework and interlocking structural components that could only be Ari, with open gates just waiting for the right mate-up . . .

She provided it, and with a flash she was in, and a broad network across the entire city of Anjula blew open before her like an unfurling flag. One thousand meters. She chose a building roof and aimed for it, as her teammates appeared in quick succession upon the new network—tacnet was propagating now, using the Anjula advertising frequency as its operating base, and so much faster than usual as it found Ari's little markers and built on them like some crazed climbing vine on a trellis.

At five hundred meters the thrusters kicked, which felt a little odd at these speeds, but she quickly found her balance and settled down toward

the rooftop. She kicked harder a hundred meters up, decelerating from two hundred to fifty kph at impact, and jogged quickly to the edge for a view. The building was only fifteen stories, there wasn't a heck of a lot of super high-rise in Anjula, just masses and masses of middle-rise fading out to suburbs. She was two blocks from the southern-most central park, perhaps two Ks from downtown, and almost exactly where she wanted. Her eyes told her that she was all alone, and none of the sparse traffic on the road below had seen her descent. If it weren't for tacnet, she could have believed she were just a lonely soul on a lonely rooftop in a cold and unfamiliar city.

About the city, her soldiers were landing. Tacnet showed them down, reporting ready. Surely somewhere, someone would notice the small thruster flare and report something . . . a note to a friend, a video recording, a query to an authority. Ari would be watching that, patched into all the local comnets, sifting traffic for telltale phrases or images. So far, nothing. Sandy looked, but even with her enhanced vision, she could see nothing across the jumble of rooftops.

Tacnet showed the last unit down, fifty-six plus her.

"This is Snowcat," she said. "First wave target and lock."

Ari and his local network of rebels had selected the first wave of targets. Pray he got them all right. Sandy activated the suit's launcher, allowed tacnet to allocate her its share of the targets, then waited for the final locks to come in. They did.

"Fire."

Three missiles leaped over her shoulder, then kicked away as primary thrusters activated. They zigzagged like crazed fireflies, weaving across the rooftops. Now she could see her team's presence in Anjula, tiny bright dots appearing across the skyline like illegal fireworks on Chinese New Year. They wove and dodged, headed for targets at a variety of ranges, never aiming at what their launcher was closest to, confusing the defences. Micro-munitions, a recent addition to Callay's production lines, barely bigger than a fist, but fast, accurate and nothing micro about the charge.

She could see the flashes before she heard the booms, casting shadows in the night. They multiplied, random flares, then the sound waves struck with familiar, hypnotic resonance. Boom, b-boom, b-b-b-BOOM, boom. For a moment, it was like being back on Sao Joaquin, watching the latest



Federation counter attack roll through. But she was the Federation now, and this fight was to liberate a world, not take it.

BOOM! Something struck just up the road, a fireball rising and debris raining down. A com node, possibly, the fibre links were underground but wireless transmitters were on rooftops like this one, as were backup satellite links and first-redundancy laser com relays. They whittled Anjula's communications down, limiting options, reducing response times and creating confusion. Now the defence grids would be activating. Time to move.

She unshackled her rifle and jumped; thrusters kicked her into a low flight over the next buildings until a nice corner building loomed up with a rooftop garden. Toward the parks she could see huge fireballs rising, those would be defensive gun emplacements, secondary explosions as the ammunition cooked off. Further north, behind the tall towers of city centre, more big explosions. Parliament defences and government buildings. There would be collateral from those explosions and others, mostly civilian. It couldn't be helped.

Tacnet was slotting them in to secondary targeting now, armscomp found her one and she fired a missile as she landed, with no real interest in where it went. She ducked amidst garden trees and took a knee with a view.

Tacnet was incorporating the local network now, and she could hear/see/feel the local traffic going crazy. Perhaps a million calls to emergency services, media networks abruptly going live, police, hospitals, fire departments . . . and no doubt security services too, but those weren't on any accessible network. Or, not yet.

*"Okay, I'm getting a CNS response, very active, all units standby."*

That was Ari, tracking Central Network Security as it tried to lock its own tactical networks into place. There was no way of knowing exactly where they propagated from until they went active.

*"I have police on the streets at A-35 by H-16,"* came another, as tacnet immediately located that grid reference and highlighted it. *"Multiple vehicles, looks like a convoy."*

*"Don't hit it unless it's para,"* came Vanessa's reply. She was only coming online now, her tacnet functions took longer to propagate, leaving the first "fire" command to Sandy. But now, she was in charge. *"Police just cause confusion."*

If they're not equipped for this sort of fighting. Most weren't. They'd run the simulations many times, and Sandy concurred—they were actually



more use alive. Emergency services, too. Sandy would have vetoed shooting at them, anyhow. Yet, happily, fire trucks blocking the roads served every purpose except the defence of Anjula.

*"Airborne at C-9 and V-3. Unspecified security vehicle."*

*"Kill it."*

And so it went. Pyeongwha security would go red now, but they weren't equipped for this kind of assault; it would take them time to get assets in the right positions to be effective. In the meantime, Sandy had a facility building to reach. She couldn't head straight in because Ari thought the network defences were too advanced, and could be degraded through phase one of the assault. Give it a half hour, he insisted, and he'd have her a path inside.

Ari sat in Moon's residence and observed the chaos. Moon sat alongside, working multiple display screens and VR uplinks at once, Hideger beside him. Across Anjula, they had a network of perhaps a hundred—rebels, activists, hackers, local Anjulans and other Pyeongwhanians pissed at the system. They'd planned this for months, some of them years, and a few, decades. Now it was finally on.

Beyond the windows were flashes of light, and shockwaves that shook the glass. Power flickered and restored, and air traffic shrieked overhead as flight control sent vehicles low on emergency lanes to escape the field of fire. A pointless measure; civvie aircars were hardly the target.

Conversations clamoured in Ari's ears, network operators locked into their various infiltrations, attacking security barriers, police communications, primary information channels. Two minutes ago an old fashioned TV network had attempted to go live from a building top, only to lose uplink feed a moment later, from hacking or explosions. VTS, the government network, had crossed to live broadcast a minute later, only to receive a warhead through their studio window, then static. Who had authorised that strike, Ari didn't know. Things were happening too fast, target assignments flashing new onto tacnet by the second.

He let the team do their job. There would be plenty of time for recriminations later. He was after bigger fish.

"Okay, here they come," he declared, watching the network defences spiral out from hardpoints along the com grid. The major institutions knew

they were under attack. They'd have a defence plan to seek out the infiltrators, erase their networks and if possible, discern a physical location so their SWAT teams could take them out. That could mean a warhead landing in his lap, or anyone's lap, at any time. "I'm running counter, let's see if this works."

His counter measures were packages inserted covertly into various supposedly high security com nodes. Those com nodes now relayed attacks from Anjula's security institutions, unaware they were feeding data on their composition straight back to Ari. Within seconds he had an array of network points highlighted for tacnet. A simple publish sent them through.

"Hello Jailbait, I'd like these dead, yesterday if possible."

Vanessa wouldn't bother replying, and didn't, but after a pause of a few seconds he saw a new cascade of orange and white flashes across the urban horizon, and a whole series of network lines abruptly died. Then the sound reached him, a thunder like stampeding elephants, shaking the windows and walls.

"Dude, those are some fireworks!" Moon announced, wide eyed, as fingers flew across his interface.

Some of those security networks had used servers that weren't in reinforced locations. Some were in office buildings, where micro-munitions could surgically remove single or multiple offices, and all hardware within. Network barriers that could be snuck past when no one was looking, but were impossible to simply tear down by hacking alone, now disappeared. It was cheating, of course—hackers were supposed to hack barriers, not simply destroy their mainframes. But he'd ceased to be a simple hacker a long time ago, and now played by different rules.

"Good work," he said. "I've got barriers down all over the place . . . team, let's get inside before they transfer functions and reestablish."

Now it was a genuine fight. Sandy's target was beyond the CBD, by the northern edge of the most northerly park. She'd not wanted to land closer—confusion was a part of the assault plan, and that region was heavily guarded. But now, she had a trek ahead of her.

She leaped across several blocks, keeping low, scanning for anything that moved. There were quite a few civilians and ground cars. When she'd first heard "jetpacks," she'd nearly resigned on the spot. Those contraptions just

put you on a slow, fixed trajectory that the dumbest armscomp could blow from the sky. But these were jumpjets, it had been insisted, for short, varied bursts of flight like the grasshoppers for which they were named. Still she didn't trust them, and stayed as close to the rooftops as possible.

Tacnet showed airborne security vehicles trying to make their way from suburban bases to downtown, and getting blown from the sky. That would limit defensive deployment options. Others were trying to move out by ground, and that was more effective, if far slower. She headed for one now, grounding in a small city park between buildings to break up her flight path, then leaping again through the trees.

She landed on a rooftop seven stories up, looking onto a street afire with ruined vehicles and collapsed building fronts. Tacnet showed her a couple of likely culprits ahead, and she leaped after them, zooming vision on their newest targets—a couple of personnel carriers. It wasn't always easy to tell where they'd come from; some of the police and security stations through the inner city had armoured depots that micro-munitions wouldn't touch.

They were under fire when she landed, two FSA suits on neighbouring rooftops pouring fire onto the street below. They hadn't seen the UAV zooming around behind them for a shot, Sandy armscomped it in midflight, pulled the trigger, then landed by a skylight as the UAV screamed tumbling into a building a block away and exploded.

One of the APCs was afire, men scrambling from the back, Sandy locked a grenade on the other and blew its top turret, then ducked back as fire came at her from across the street. Suddenly a viewfeed from one of her friendlies showed AMAPS on the road, running through halted civvie traffic with that ugly, birdlike gait. Sandy's friend blew one of them to hell with a rifle shot, but suddenly there were missiles in the air and everyone jumped.

Sandy's rooftop blew up just after she'd left it, and she took the flying vantage to put multiple rifle rounds into another running AMAPS on the street below, but one of those missiles was still going, streaking about in a circle as it tried to reacquire. It picked her, and Sandy turned, shot it from the sky, and crashed onto a rooftop ventilation system with less grace than she'd have liked. Snipers snapped at her from across the road somewhere, two of them, armscomp calced and showed her where in a split second as she came up on her feet and fired twice, then dropped a free fall grenade over the edge.

"Blinder!" she advised her wingmen as the phosphorus detonated, and any sensitive lenses focused that way abruptly burned out. She went over the edge a second later, blew another AMAPS's CPU apart with a headshot, hit the jumpjets in mid-fall to land sideways and rolling as another AMAPS tore the street apart with its twin cannon, firing blind. Sandy and a wingman hit it with grenades simultaneously and it disappeared in three directions at once.

Sandy left, disconcerted that she'd dented a thruster, but otherwise unscathed. Happily, no one else tried to shoot at her as she sailed with her two companions toward a new landing. Watching snipers' heads explode was not pleasant, and if the only enemies that shot at her from now on were mechanicals like those Armoured Mobile Anti-Personnel Systems, she'd be happy.

UAVs were now proving a pain in the ass. Pyeongwha's military was restricted, like all Federation worlds, so they had few assets that qualified as full-blown military. But that left "para military," which Sandy knew from experience could include pretty much anything if you classified it cunningly. On her leaping trek around Anjula downtown, she counted five types in the air, two of them supersonic, one of them high altitude recon, and two others slow and hovering and hiding behind buildings. She disliked those most of all. She could track and hit high-motion at anything up to Mach one with barely any assistance from armscomp, but while Mach one was very visible, even she couldn't hit what she couldn't see.

She covered her teammates' blind spots as they moved, as they covered hers, and they leapfrogged forward in the most old-fashioned of infantry manoeuvres, covering about half a K with each jump. Police and para-military were getting more snipers into high buildings now, and some with missile launchers, but those were going to have trouble tracking FSA suits in opti-cam. Even so, armscomp started registering regular near misses, mostly in the air. True to Sandy's infantry prejudice, grounded meant cover, and cover meant "safe." In the old days, there'd been something called the "air force." These days, modern weapons and armscomp turned most aircraft into flying bull's-eyes.

They were closing on North Park when Anjula began closing down the advertising frequencies, having realised how the attackers were using it against them. Ari simply transitioned them to one of the emergency services sub-frequencies, and tacnet propagated all over again. They could keep frequency jumping all night until Anjula shut the whole lot down, but then

the city would be as blind as the attackers, who could then just switch to their own coms and battle through whatever jamming was thrown at them. Defending took a lot more coordination, and if Anjula's assets couldn't talk to each other, they were screwed.

Sandy paused on a rooftop long enough to track and fire a missile at a high-altitude UAV, then was startled by civvies on a neighbouring balcony peering out to take a look. She refrained from shooting, leaped instead, and scanning nearby air traffic on tacnet found one vehicle loitering suspiciously and warned her second wingman about it. There were no rooftops she liked the look of, ahead, so she grounded on the road instead and pressed herself to a wall. At fifteen thousand meters overhead, the UAV blew up. So did the cruiser she'd warned about, when a door opened to reveal security with a launcher.

There were displays and advertising everywhere at street level. Sandy realised she was in one of the entertainment strips, wall to wall graphics and dancing images. All deserted now save for several cops huddled by their cruiser, staring fearfully. Sandy ignored them and leaped again, and was immediately shot at by someone down below . . . low caliber, she didn't bother shooting back.

Ahead was a big tower, and she crashed through a tenth story window, scattering chairs in an office. Ran out into the corridor in case someone sent a munition through the window after her, fast down a corridor then kicked in a door, activating building security alarms. That brought her to a window with a view. Ahead was North Park. To the right of that, the Domestic Affairs Building. It looked like it was built to withstand a nuke, which wasn't far from the truth. Around it were gardens, all trip-wired and armed to hell, then high walls. Flames rose from several points around it, indicating it had been subject to some early strikes, but she'd studied the preliminary schematics that were all Ari's folks had smuggled out, and wasn't especially encouraged.

"Ari, I want an active schematic on Primary Target, real time if you please. No guesses." At another time it might have felt a little odd; she hadn't spoken to him directly for half a year now. No, dammit, at any time it still felt a little odd. "Alpha formation, make a perimeter and hold," she added to her wingmen. The other three would be joining them shortly, she hoped.

*"I've still got a few barriers remaining,"* came Ari's reply. *"Just hold for a little."* A little what, Sandy nearly said, but didn't. She was military, her brain didn't process "a little."



She smashed the window and jumped out instead. She fell, and the side of the building behind her exploded. Smaller neighbouring buildings gave cover for her landing, and she hit the street hard, then moved quickly along a sidewalk as burning debris and shattering glass tumbled about her.

*"Someone missed an emplacement,"* said Han, one of her wingmen.

"You think?" Sandy muttered. Probably it'd seen her break the window and fired just late. That was a happier thought than it having been about to fire anyway, and it being just dumb luck that she'd jumped when she had. Han lit up the offending emplacement for tacnet, saving his own ammunition, as elsewhere about the city, missiles leapt skyward. Ten seconds later, as Sandy sheltered at a corner, another explosion tore the air by the DA building.

*"Active countermeasures nearly got it,"* Han observed. Sandy watched a replay of what he'd seen, a storm of micro-flares about the gardens, settling now amidst the trees and bushes. Enough to distract most missiles, but not Tanushan tech, evidenced by the new smoking crater beneath one wall where the emplacement had been.

"If countermeasures are still active, they'll have just about everything up, save the big emplacements," Sandy observed. "Anyone running or flying in there is dead. Ari, either you get that defensive grid down or find us another way in."

*"Um, okay, bang on a moment . . ."* Between familiarly gritted teeth.

The front of the DA building exploded. Even though Sandy was not in direct line of sight, the intensity of the flash, and then the boom, made her duck. Then, amid the rain of debris onto neighbouring blocks, she looked up, and saw an especially large missile contrail.

Sandy suppressed a smile. "That you, darling?"

*"I told you,"* said Vanessa, *"never go anywhere without clean underwear and artillery."*

*"Yeah, well my underwear is now less clean than it was,"* said Han.

It was the Trebuchet system. Vanessa had insisted on bringing it along, descending on UAV mounts and sparing several troops to spend ten minutes of phase one setting it up somewhere hidden. God knew how long they could now keep it hidden, but for the moment it had proven a far-sighted insistence. Vanessa's operational policy had always been that obstacles were not obstacles once you'd blown them up. Facing the collapsed front facade of the DA building, Sandy found the logic hard to argue with.

"Let's go," said Sandy, targeting her three remaining missiles at surrounding department gardens, then leaping. At max power the jets pulled nearly nine Gs, and she did a fast loop over buildings, screamed low across a road and into the debris cloud of multiple explosions. Still something hit her, and she nearly crashed on deceleration and landing, digging a knee-down furrow in the turf, laying rifle and grenade shots down at everything that might be an emplacement. She continued putting down fire as Han and Weller tore in to more dignified landings, and then, just a little late, Rhian and her pair.

"*Sorry we're late,*" said Rhian, as they crashed through debris into the DA building. "*Got into a tangle.*"

"I know," said Sandy, ducking beneath collapsed steel beams, the ground an unstable mess of crushed concrete. "Let's see what we've got."

What they had was smoke and dust filled corridors, nothing working, and only the fuzziest network reception. Sandy recalled her pre-stored schematic, which was hardly precise, but it said the basement ought to be accessible from elevator shafts ahead. If that blast hadn't crippled or collapsed everything.

"*Sandy,*" said Ari in her ear, "*network.*" The connection clicked, and suddenly she was in, a vast expanse of complicated electronic schematics overlaying her vision. This was central grid, the command foundation that Anjula always pretended didn't exist. Pyeongwha was a free world, they said. Democratic, free trading, law abiding, a self-evolving society that no outside force had the right to dictate terms to. So why did it need a central network regulator, and hidden ministry compounds—the public discussion of which would get a government worker disappeared? To defend freedoms, Anjula replied, on the rare occasion they spoke of it at all. But the freedom to do what?

At a central point there were indeed elevator banks, two of them large, for cargo. Nothing worked. Han smashed the doors open and peered down the shaft, while Sandy accessed some interesting functions on her schematic.

"The shaft's booby-trapped," she observed, as they began unsealing from their suits. "Gas won't bother us, but there's a microwave projector that will clear your airways real good."

"Microwaves," said Khan. "That's so evil supervillain."

All six of them were GIs. There had been about fifty arriving on Callay over the past few years, mostly high-designation, escapees from the League who were



following Sandy and Rhian's example and claiming asylum. Rights activists had taken up their cause, and each year more turned up at Gordon Spaceport. A few with network capabilities, advanced like hers, appeared almost right on Sandy's doorstep. Most volunteered for military or paramilitary, that being the only work they knew. A few non-combatant designations had found high level civvie jobs, most in data processing or technology of some description. And a few, more concerningly, had become loners, and struggled.

Sandy got her helmet off as the rest of the suit unsealed and disassembled. The big chest plate came off first, then the arm rigs that allowed her to hold up the enormous mag-rifle, then the heavy backpack/power source which she lowered to the ground. The leg-exo shed, like a crustacean losing its shell, and the whole rig, thrusters and all, slid to an untidy pile on the floor. Her light under-armour was her regular rig, plenty tough enough for infantry work. It now had a hole through the left side of the chest plate, where the building defences had hit her on the way in.

Khan saw it. "That go through?"

"Bit." Sandy flexed an arm with a grimace. "Maybe a rib. I'm fine." Disconnecting the assault rifle from the mag-rifle, a tiny thing by comparison, but just what she needed at close range. Without the helmet, she just had a headrig—like a headband with eyepiece, earpiece and insert plugs at the back—rigged in turn to signal boosters in her backpack. More grenades from storage, and twin pistols in her back holster, and she was right to go. "Ari, can you cut power on the shaft?"

"No, *but I have a schematic for that microwave.*" It flashed up. Sandy peered in the shaft and saw the relevant points on the wall, maybe twenty meters down. Scrolling through visual spectrums, she could also see the laser grid defences.

"Lasers," she said. "First person down there will discover the correct use of the word 'decimated.'" She strode to another shaft, and smashed through the doors with a single punch, then pulled them aside.

"There's a correct use?" wondered Han.

"To divide into ten equal portions," said Rhian, also armed up and covering a corridor. "She hates it when the reporters don't know what it means."

"It's Latin," said Weller. Someone up a corridor pointed a gun at them. Weller shot him in the head before he could fire. "Deci as in ten; decade, decimal, decahedron."

Sandy put a grenade through where Ari's schematic showed the microwave's power source was. Her schematic flickered, shielding wobbled then failed, and she hacked the lasers, too. Unable to deactivate them, she fired them instead, and they tore the sides of the shaft, and each other, to sizzling pieces.

"Let's go." She jumped.