

# OPERATION SHIELD

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# OPERATION SHIELD

A CASSANDRA KRESNOV NOVEL

JOEL SHEPHERD



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Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr  
59 John Glenn Drive  
Amherst, New York 14228  
VOICE: 716-691-0133  
FAX: 716-691-0137  
WWW.PYRSE.COM

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# CHAPTER ONE

Vanessa saw stars, then bright colours, felt hands under her arms, dragging her. Cold, and sweat, and a struggle for breath, voices yelling and nearby gunfire. Her boots were skidding, dragged along the floor. Then a massive shock, and the whole station seemed to lurch. Reverberations on tacnet—she still had tacnet, it didn't need her conscious to run. Someone forced a mask over her face, tightened the strap, then a flood of cool oxygen.

Into an airlock then, emergency overrides holding both doors open, armoured bodies rushing them through. Then a cramped space, shielded lights, she felt herself picked up and dumped into an acceleration sling, straps pulled tight about her on automatic as other bodies found their slings, someone's tac-sergeant yelling to move move move!

Thrust hit them harder than seemed reasonable, slamming the slings down and out, absorbing the G that built and built, her vision darkening . . . and then stopped, and she was floating the other way, then rebounding as the sling's auto-tension sorted itself out. More voices, questions, someone wanting the ship feed but receiving a negative. Marines didn't get ship feed, they buckled up and just presumed they were never more than a second from being plastered into some bulkhead by sudden manoeuvres. Marines who got ship feed sometimes got cocky and thought they could see a clear window in which to unbuckle, only to discover that a three-meter drop at ten Gs was the equivalent of falling off a thirty-meter building at one G—and they broke just as many bones.

"Rickey?" She could hear someone asking. Rhian, she thought. "Rickey, you okay?"

"Her vitals are stable," came Cai's voice.

"I'm okay," she murmured. She couldn't recall what had happened. One minute they'd been evacuating Antibe Station bridge with assistance from *Mekong's* marines, and the next everything had gone wrong.

"Fast approach!" the sergeant was shouting again. "Two minutes! Could manoeuvre any time!"

If some fool on station was dumb enough to fire on them. Who would

be dumb enough, with *Mekong* parked barely three clicks off their stern? But someone on station *had* fired on them. Were they suicidal or what?

There was no manoeuvring, just a two-minute wait, then a more sensible deceleration. A crash of grapples, then secondary arms, as *Mekong* grabbed the limpet in a tight embrace. More movement, and she was unstrapped, then hauled floating to the disembark. Vanessa protested she was okay but was ignored. Disembark whined open, air equalising with a painful inner ear pop, and then they were floating up the passage that separated *Mekong's* habitation cylinder from its engines.

Into the central spine, and Vanessa shrugged away her assistance; she really was feeling a little better, her vision clearer, no longer so dizzy. Rhian—because it *was* Rhian, she could only now see—made her grip more gentle but did not remove the hand.

Central spine was rotating, and now they took a service elevator to the outer rim, and gravity kicked in.

“We fire on station?” one of the marines was asking.

“Fucking felt like it,” said another.

“Any idea why they shot at us?” asked one more.

“Guess they don’t like us,” said Ari, typically deadpan.

“Fucking dumbass Torahns. They’ll be lucky Captain doesn’t blow them away.”

Vanessa wanted the bridge, but Rhian dragged her to medical instead, down narrow, dog-legged corridors past *Mekong* marines and crew, then into a narrow side corridor to a medical room, where she was loaded into a chair while a med came and peered in her eyes and asked questions.

“Dunno,” Vanessa answered. “Maybe they gassed the corridor when we got out.”

They’d been cooped up in Antibe Station’s bridge for about fifty hours. Antibe Station had stopped trying to cut their way in when *Mekong* had arrived, but they hadn’t been very friendly either. *Mekong* hadn’t asked for their safe release; *Mekong* had demanded, and Antibe Station had said yes, pleased enough just to be rid of them but also left with no choice when a Federation carrier parked nearby leveled full firepower at them.

The med looked questioningly at Rhian, who shook her head. No gas. The med attached various sensors and hooked them up to various things that

beeped, while Vanessa took deep breaths and tried to stop her heart from racing. That was an unpleasant sensation. The only time she'd experienced something similar was in her previous life, as an office worker straight out of uni. She'd been to the doctor, who told her it was likely a panic attack . . . ridiculous, because she didn't *get* panic attacks. The doctor had smiled and said that's what they all said.

She didn't think this was a panic attack, though. All that had stopped once she'd joined the CSA, many years ago. She might have had panic attacks as an office worker, but in the CSA, despite all the hard work, stress, and danger, nothing close—most nights she'd slept like a log.

A marine stuck his head in the door and informed all present that their berthing assignment had been issued.

"Wow," said Ari. "I've never had a berthing assignment before. Is it fun?"

"It's overrated," said Rhian. "You go check it out."

"You go," Ari told Cai.

"Berthing assignments don't excite me," said Cai, leaning on the straps of the med-room take-hold.

"I'm under orders to escort *someone* to see the berthing assignment," the marine said impatiently.

"I'll go," said Vanessa hopefully.

"You stay," said the medico firmly.

"I'll stow it," Rhian muttered, heading for the door and the marine's escort. She was the logical choice as the most experienced spacer present. Vanessa had the feeling the nostalgia of space travel had long since worn off for her. Rhian had family back on Callay and would rather be back there than anywhere.

A few minutes later, Captain Reichardt himself ducked his lanky frame under the low doorway to medical. He wore a spacer's jumpsuit and a leather jacket with patches denoting his ship, and Third Fleet, of which *Mekong* was part. Anyone not familiar with Fleet might not immediately recognise him as a Captain; spacers were a sparse and practical lot, hats and ostentatious insignia could catch on things, or become a variable-G hazard. But everyone who served on *Mekong* sure as hell knew.

"What happened?" he asked her, a mild Texan drawl.

"Attack of the vapours," said Vanessa. "Delicate constitution."

He nearly smiled. "My toughest marine sergeant says you CSA SWATs are

the only grunts she knows crazier than Fleet Marines. I was shocked, 'cause I didn't think her capable of compliments."

Vanessa shrugged. "Had some help." With a glance at Cai.

Reichardt followed her gaze. "Good to meet you in person," he said to Cai, extending a hand.

Cai leaned and took it. "Likewise."

They'd met in cyberspace, though. Cai's friends had destroyed a League warship that had been trying to nuke Droze at the time. Cai's friends had then jumped, though no one thought they'd gone far. Everyone was now pretending Reichardt had done it, though *Mekong* had been somewhat out of position for that to be true. Likely someone would discover the truth of it eventually, but for now, better for *Mekong* to take the fall than have everyone know the truth.

"Excuse my bluntness," said Reichardt, "but what are you?"

"A GI," said Cai.

"I'm the Captain of a Federation Fleet carrier," said Reichardt. "I'm currently at the center of the biggest blow-up in Federation-League relations since the war. Billions of lives hang on what we do here. Excuse me if I require more information."

Cai seemed to think about it for a moment. "I'm a GI made by the Talee. Don't ask for a designation, Talee don't use them, and any number I gave you would be meaningless."

"Why did they make you?"

"A number of reasons, most of which I'm not at liberty to discuss with you. But mostly, for recon."

Reichardt frowned. "To spy on humanity?"

Cai shrugged. "You call it spy. I call it recon. Talee won't interact with humans directly, as you've noticed. But this puts them at the disadvantage caused by a lack of information. I'm an answer to that, among other things."

"What other things?"

"Like I said, can't discuss it."

"Great," said Reichardt. "Just great. Your buddies just blew a League warship to bits over Droze, but you're not allowed to talk about it. You tell them that they can't both violently intrude into human affairs, and then maintain a safe distance, both at the same time."

“I have,” said Cai, with a very faint smile. “Many times.”

“And what do they say?”

“Can’t talk about it.”

“Why not?” asked Ari, from somewhere behind Vanessa’s head. “Why the secrecy? Talee are more advanced than humanity, that’s pretty obvious. What’s to fear from interacting?”

“Many things,” said Cai. “Again, I can’t discuss it. But understand that they don’t do this from some unthought impulse, something reactionary and unreasoning. They reason very well, I think. And they have reached a series of well-thought conclusions, conclusions that encompass my purpose here. But I can’t discuss those conclusions. There is too much at stake to risk the gain of some false impression. False impressions between species of differing psychological makeup could be very dangerous.”

“So you’re like a translator,” said Reichardt, leaning one hand against the doorframe. Spacers rarely stood unsecured. “Someone who can understand both psychologies. A go between.”

Cai thought about it for a moment. Then nodded. “Perhaps.”

“But your brain is structurally human?”

“I’m a GI. GIs can be modified.”

“To see things both ways,” Ari finished, nodding in wide-eyed comprehension. Cai said nothing.

“So let me tell you how things stand,” said Reichardt. “Right now we’re tucked in close to station, so Pantala’s anti-ship missiles can’t frag us. They’ve got some super hightech stuff down there, at these ranges if we break away from station, the only way we’ll survive is if we jump clear. So for now, the station is our shield.

“The reason we can’t jump away is because of our mutual friend Commander Kresnov, currently occupying Chancelry Corporation HQ down on Droze. We’re her firesupport—without us threatening her enemies from orbit, she’s dead. We’re clear so far?”

“I was here from the beginning,” Cai said calmly. “I know all this.”

“Between species of differing psychological makeup,” Reichardt said with an edge of sarcasm, “misunderstandings can be dangerous. Are we understanding each other?”

“Perfectly.”

“Good. As things stand, both I and Commander Kresnov have committed a technical act of war against the League. And Commander Rice here too. Pantala space and New Torahn space in general is still technically League territory, and we’ve violated it. League warships will be arriving here as soon as word gets back to them, and likewise Federation warships shall be arriving on the back of the message I sent. We can only hope that they don’t come in shooting, or it’ll look like the Battle of Sirius Junction all over again.

“My excuse, and Commander Kresnov’s, is what she uncovered in Chancelry HQ on Droze. Something that not even you’re aware of, I don’t think. But I can assure you it’s big, and definitely within the Federation’s security interests. I’ve no guarantee the Grand Council will see things that way, but I can hope, otherwise its all of our necks on the block.

“So, my question to you is this. What are your friends going to be doing, during the time between when all these ships start arriving, and now?”

“Watching,” said Cai.

“Do you need to talk to them?” Reichardt pressed. “Because if you do, I can coordinate those communications. On the other hand, if you’re thinking about using those fancy network capabilities I’m told you have to gain covert access of my ship’s coms to talk to the Talee in private, I promise I’ll blow you out an airlock. This is my ship, and you ask permission first. Are we clear?”

“Very clear,” Cai affirmed. “I don’t need to talk to them. They are aware.”

Reichardt frowned. “Of what, exactly?”

“Of many things.”

Reichardt scratched his head. “This is going to be like having a fucking leprechaun aboard, isn’t it? Talking in fucking riddles.”

“I could wear a little green hat if you like?” Cai offered.

“What’s a leprechaun?” Vanessa wondered.

“Strange little people whose purpose in life is to piss off starship Captains.”

“But that’s me,” said Vanessa.

“Tell me about it,” said Reichardt. “What’s wrong with her, Doc?”

“Couldn’t say,” said the medico, watching various screens. “Give me a few hours.”

“You’ve got ten minutes,” Vanessa said drily.

“Watch her,” said the Captain, pointing a warning finger at Vanessa, backing out the door. “She’s my unlucky charm.”

“Hey!” Vanessa retorted. “You’re still alive, why so negative?” *Mekong’s* Captain was gentleman enough to give her a dry smile as he left.

Naturally the emergency alarm sounded the first time Sandy let Kiril come with her to see the weapons bay.

“Kiet, what’s going on?” she asked as tacnet emergency lit all channels. Something in the parameters she’d laid out had been breached. About the bay, captured weapons systems were firing up, engines whining, running lights flashing. Much of this they were planning to run automated if they had to; they didn’t have the manpower otherwise.

There was no reply from Kiet. Sandy led Kiril to the center of the bay’s wide ferrocrete floor, the safest place when automated systems were activating, and ran a full tacnet scan. It showed central Droze, the corporate zones, five primary districts arrayed around a central, neutral hub. About that hub, Droze city sprawled away into the night, but that was not a main concern. She was in occupied Chancelry Zone, and the four other corporate zones were all unfriendly. In the past, before the united Torahn government had been formed, they’d shot at each other. Now they prepared to do so again.

Immediately she saw it highlighted—something had crashed in Central Zone. But the weather was bad, and the only view was a com tower camera on maximum magnification, which showed only the remains of a rotor nacelle amidst residential rooftops and a few trees. And now came a mass of new highlights, activity around the encircling corporate zones, tanks and AMAPS moving, spikes in registered com traffic, weapons bay doors sliding open. She snapped quickly into the secure matrix, where Kiet and a few of his network specialists had been probing corporate nets on systems Sandy and Cai from orbit had helped design . . . and ran straight into a blank wall. She was locked out of her own system? What the hell?

“Kiet!” she snapped. “Either respond or I’ll presume you incapacitated and have you removed from command!”

Tacnet declared that Kiet was in D-2, eighth floor. So was Rishi. Sandy began breaking into defensive barriers, unlocking complex systems she knew far better than Kiet did, and certainly better than Rishi . . .

“Sandy, what’s going on?” Kiril asked. He wore his favourite 3D glasses, linked to slate and booster they gave him a good overlaid display of his sur-

roundings—not as fast as uplinks, nor as detailed, but pretty cool for a six-year-old. Across the bay an AMLORA was firing up properly, a howl of engines, a giant six-legged bug now straightening, then walking with huge, thumping steps toward the main elevator. “Sandy, look, the AMLORA’s moving!”

On the Armoured Mobile LONG RANGE system’s back was a huge launcher and enough missiles to level city blocks. The legs would let it operate in places wheels couldn’t go—not fast, but better for concealment and camouflage. Here in Chancelry they’d captured six. The other corporations between them had about fifty. If it came to an artillery contest, most of Chancelry’s rounds would not survive the opposing missile defences, and would then be destroyed by counter battery fire, along with most of the Chancelry complex.

Sandy smashed a couple of final defensive barriers, hard enough to give tacnet a wobble . . . visual portions crashed, then rebooted from 3D static, confused and struggling.

“Sandy!” Kiet shouted at her. “*Leave it alone, I have it under control!*”

“Are you deploying?” She could see it now, portions of tacnet the barriers had hidden. GIs, Kiet’s troops, moving fast toward the crash site. And sideways, toward the Dhamsel Corporation border.

The secure network had once gained some connectivity with surrounding corporate systems, not a big presence, mostly through the overarching intranet that linked the neutral spaces between corporate entities. Now it was all shut down, the surrounding corporations must have physically cut the intranet, and with it, nearly a week’s work.

“Rishi, talk to me,” Sandy demanded, holding Kiril close to her side as vehicles crashed and hummed into life around her. “Rishi, if you’ve entrusted a major operation to Kiet then you’re about to get into trouble, he’s not up to it.”

“Sandy, we got a response from some Heldig GIs,” came Rishi’s voice, terse, preoccupied. “*They wanted out, they attempted escape, but someone just shot them down, we don’t know who.*”

If she weren’t sliding into combat mode, Sandy might have sworn. They weren’t supposed to make a move without her, she’d thought they were agreed on that. But with this rabble of recently freed GIs, it wasn’t always clear who was in charge. Logic said her, as the highest designation and unchallenged, most experienced and lethal combatant. But Kiet hadn’t agreed with her

methodology on freeing the other corporations' GIs, and on his side were the majority. Rishi's GIs, the former Chancelry experimentals, were split between the high designations, who wanted to help but had no sense of how, and the lower designations, whom no one trusted.

"That's wonderful," she said. "Would you like my help, or do you want to wait until everyone starts dying?"

*"You're not the only one with combat command experience,"* Kiet retorted.

"In case you've forgotten," she said, "I'm the only one who Captain Reichardt will listen to. And without the threat of an orbital strike, and mutually assured destruction, we'd have all been dead a week ago."

*"We are not going to allow some Freddie squish to veto our freedom!"* Kiet snapped. *"Now leave us alone, we're busy!"*

The link disconnected—a block, because tacnet never truly disconnected. He'd fucking blocked her.

"Kiril, let's go," she said, and grabbed the boy up.

"But I wanna stay!"

"Tough."

She took off running, rifle in one hand so it didn't bounce, Kiril in the other. The latter burden made her somewhat slower than she'd have liked, but as the ferrocrete stretched toward the underground tunnel, she adjusted her steps to short leaps, skipping out to five normal steps, then eight, then ten at a time. It made her fast, but she had to watch Kiril's head on the ceiling, and keep the trajectory low so he wouldn't bounce painfully with each impact.

The huge steel elevator doors were already opening on her uplink signal, and she got inside and signalled the lift up. It went, slowly, as Sandy scanned tacnet for the nearest unoccupied armour suit.

"That was fun," Kiril announced of his ride, rubbing a bruised backside. "Where are we going?"

"To synthetic assembly," said Sandy, checking her rifle and wishing she were already armoured . . . but walking around in armour for a week wasn't practical, any armour needed downtime maintenance, they had it on a roster system that left most of them unarmoured much of the time.

"Where?"

"The GI factory," Sandy explained, slotting the grenade mag, chambering a round.

“Why are we going there?”

“Because if someone drops artillery on us, that will be the safest place.”

“But it’s not deeper underground than the other basements,” Kiril said doubtfully. “I looked at it on my glasses, and I think the other basements are safer.”

Six years old or not, there was no coddling Kiril about nasty possibilities. Which was something of a relief, because she wasn’t good at it anyway and had no idea how to take care of children beyond what she’d seen third-hand from others.

“I don’t think they’ll want to damage the GI factory if they can avoid it,” she said. “The people who ran Chancelry are hiding over with the other corporations, and they want their headquarters back. The GI factory is one of the most valuable bits.”

“Wow, did you know there are big power cables running down the wall here?” He was pointing at things only he could see with his glasses.

On tacnet, Sandy could see the other corporations firing up to full mobilisation. Exactly how tacnet knew, given their limited resources here, she wasn’t sure. Had Kiet deployed new intel assets?

“Why won’t Kiet listen to you?” The elevator was nearly at the top now, above the ferrocrete ceiling that would perhaps stop a couple of armour-piercing AMLORA rounds, but no more than that.

“Kiet thinks all the other corporations’ GIs should be freed right now,” said Sandy. “I was trying to be patient.”

“You mean he was being *impatient*,” said Kiril with wise emphasis. “Danya tells me all the time, me and Svetlana, don’t be impatient. He says we can get hurt if we’re impatient. Is Kiet going to get hurt?”

“Worse,” Sandy said grimly. “Everyone else will.”

“Sandy, when are we going to rescue Danya and Svetlana?” Looking up at her with those big, serious eyes.

Sandy looked at him for a moment. There was probably some kind of adult-to-child moment to be had here, that she’d know how to do if she’d had some practise. But with her head full of tacnet and combat reflex, it wasn’t her thing.

“I don’t think they need rescuing, Kiril. They’re in Rimtown and they’ve lived in Rimtown all their lives, like you. I’m sure they’re much safer there than here.”

Probably shouldn't have said that either, but it was true.

"But I want them here!"

"I know." There was a dull, unpleasant feeling as she said it. Something twisting deep in her gut. "But the corporations have us surrounded and out-gunned, and I couldn't bring them here if I wanted to."

"We have flyers in the bay," Kiril retorted, pointing back that way. "We could fly to them."

"We'd be shot down." The elevator reached ground level, A-5 building of Chancery HQ, wide aprons and heavy, triple-layer security doors leading to the outside. "Besides, we don't know where they are and if we tried to contact them, that contact could be traced and lead the corporations straight to them. Come on."

She bent for him, but he went on his own. "I don't need to be carried," he muttered, walking fast.

"Well, then you need to run," said Sandy. "Can you run?"

"I can get there on my own." Kiril walked across the apron to new secure doors that Sandy was already opening with a mental uplink. Within lay a long internal corridor. Out on the courtyard space between buildings, another AMLORA was positioning, missile launcher angling skyward.

Sandy kept up. "I promised Danya and Svetlana I'd look after you. You don't want me to break my promise to Danya, do you?"

Kiril said nothing for a moment. Then held out his arms. Sandy picked him up and resumed running, slower this time, as the low ceiling would not allow bounding. She opened doors in their path with uplinks, patched directly into the local network. Building 5-A became the much larger 7-A, which remained a mess after the uprising, externals shot to hell, all windows gone and much of the outer facing walls and offices. One part of the internal corridor sagged where the wall had caved, ceiling threatening to collapse, but once she squeezed through the gap the floor was relatively clear, shielded from external bombardment.

Rishi had led her Chancery GIs in an uprising that had sheltered here and in a few other buildings, trying to gather enough firepower together to survive against what Chancery unloaded on them, trying to recapture these buildings. Then Sandy's force had arrived, with Kiet and his older desert dwellers, come in from five years in the sands to right this one, horrid injus-

tice. The Chancelry uprising would have been put down if they hadn't arrived when they had.

7-A adjoined to 2-A, a detour around ruined adjoining passages, through a cold and dusty night and air that smelled of sulphur. It wasn't breathable to humans save with lung and bloodstream micros that filtered the toxins; even Sandy had had them added, being synthetic didn't make her immune to bad air. Then through more heavy, secure doors, into a waiting atrium that this time demanded realtime ID, then to the top of some stairs.

"Su and Alice will be down there," Sandy told Kiril. "They'll be monitoring all the GIs' systems. Do you think you can stay with them until the emergency passes?"

"Can I help them?" Kiril asked, brightening a bit. He loved technology. Down in the bowels of Chancelry's experimental synthetic-person assembly plant, there was plenty of that.

"Sure, but only if they ask you to, okay?"

Kiril nodded. "Sandy, is there going to be fighting?"

Developments on tacnet did not look promising. A lie might have been parental. "Probably," she said. "But I'll try to stop it from reaching here."

"Be careful," said Kiril as she left.

"I will," she assured him . . . and uplinked to Su and Alice to tell them Kiril was on his way down. They'd have no problem, they liked Kiril and could always use someone to carry small things or bring coffee.

She closed the entrance up behind him and ran, across courtyards, dodging debris no one had yet bothered to clean up, several burned-out vehicles, a destroyed AMAPS from before they'd gained control of Chancelry's defensive grid, a lot of broken glass. A link opened from orbital relay; that would be Mekong.

*"Reichardt. Commander, what's going on?"*

*"A bunch of GIs launched an operation to free the neighbouring corporations' GIs without me," Sandy formulated silently, easier than speaking while she ran. "I'm assuming they've isolated the killswitch lockdown, but I've no idea how long that'll last, a group of Heldig GIs tried to escape by flier but they were shot down in neutral territory, we've various units converging on that spot now."*

*"Sounds like your revolution just met with a counter revolution. You have no control at all?"*

Sandy skidded to slow down, then dodged through the main door atrium of building 9-R. Here the last few armour suits were racked against the wall, several being occupied even now by late-arriving GIs, additional ammo, and weapons too.

*“I’ll have control once it all starts to go wrong, Kiet’s not much of a tactician. I did tell you we were at odds over tactics where the remaining corporate GIs were concerned.”*

She pulled off her jacket, emptied pockets, and slammed her back into the spread torso armour—this was only light stuff, League-issue urban armour, not the quality of her CSA gear. But in urban spaces with heavy firepower, a bit of extra protection, plus carrying capacity, never went astray.

*“Commander,”* came Reichardt’s reply, *“you should know that I cannot provide direct support to any operation that is not under the direct command of a Federal officer or agent.”*

*“Mate, just shoot when I say shoot, okay? This was a very broad interpretation of the Federal Interest from the very beginning, you know the stakes as well as I, don’t go pulling all this semantical crap now.”*

*“This reply is not adequate.”* Reichardt didn’t seem very amused. She was asking him to commit to firing orbital warheads on her say-so that would kill tens of thousands of people here on Droze. He’d wear the responsibility without any of the control, and he hated it. But she didn’t have a choice.

*“This situation is not adequate.”* She sealed the armour up with a whine and click of interlocking joins and powering micro hydraulics. She left the helmet off for her preferred headset, additional sensors, and processing. *“But it’s all I’ve got.”*

She took off running.

The main entrance to Chancelry HQ was not defended by a wall of any kind, just a pedestrian space, a few gardens, then civvie roads, light rail, and shopping. Everyone in Chancelry worked for the corporation; inside the zone there were no outsiders to defend headquarters from. But they had parked a big fuck-off tank out front, so described because its multiple rapid-fire auto-cannon, street sweeper anti-personnel systems, and missile launchers gave nearby residents an unmistakable message.

She took off running up the main street. Up ahead, she didn’t need tacnet to tell her the shooting had started. The night sky was lit up with rapid flashes and random tracer. Now an explosion, a lingering flash. Then another.

A new connection lit up her internal visual. CEO Patana, Dhamsel Corporation. *“Commander! You end this provocation at once!”*

With the intranet cut, she had no way of telling what was going on in the other HQs. The idea had been to create a new uprising, like they’d accidentally caused with Rishi here in Chancelry, but with alternate routes created to ensure they could see what was happening. Now they were blind and had nothing like the force to attack the other corporations directly as they’d done initially here. Damn Kiet for moving too soon.

*“The true provocation is the continued utilisation of any synthetic person in armed bondage,”* Sandy replied, bounding now at over 60 kph down the suburban road. Now eighty. Admitting she wasn’t in control would be dangerous. *“Release them all now and this stops immediately.”*

Tacnet showed Kiet’s troops crossing the border into neutral land ahead, under heavy fire. Civilian areas, joint administered between the corporations, and they wouldn’t risk excessive civvie casualties. But they could zero on the roads, avoiding buildings.

It didn’t take her long to get close—she could see the deployment clearly, support lines with heavy weapons ahead, scattered across apartments and street corners, others deployed ahead, across neutral territory. In there, tacnet updated periodically, new hostiles where identified, fire positions, trajectories. It looked relatively restrained, too many civvies around for the heavy stuff. And here ahead there were more civvies, running in the streets, a few carrying kids and terrified. Fucking Kiet, she was going to wring his neck.

“Get indoors!” she yelled at them, pointing. “Stay indoors, armscomp will shoot at the roads, not the buildings!” A few complied, the others kept running. A support line GI on the corner saw her and connected on direct talk.

*“Commander, we’re holding the support line in case Dhamsel tries to cut off the retreat . . .”*

Sandy leapt, ignoring that soldier, onto a neighbouring rooftop, then up to an apartment balcony—she didn’t need some greenhorn explaining to her a fraction of what she already knew. She could see Dhamsel Zone from up here, then across the built-up neutral zone, the other corporate zones beyond. Dhamsel was the problem, they shared a long flank with Chancelry, now crawling with what tacnet identified as military vehicles.

Chatter indicated the advance party had reached the crash site, visuals

showed a military flyer demolishing half a house amidst a sprawl of debris. Big apartment building nearby, civvies now running for cover, probably the reason the companies hadn't just blown the wreck. The flyer couldn't have held more than twelve people, Sandy thought Kiet might have lost more than that already. She uplinked to Reichardt again and got his Com officer instead.

"Get me Cai, please," she asked.

"*Cai*," came the reply, remarkably fast considering relay distances.

"We have the corporates' killswitch channels locked down, but they'll be trying to unlock it."

*"I know, find me a point of access and I'll try and stop them."*

Cai had been instrumental in making that happen over the last week. Sandy didn't even know exactly what his technology was, except that it was a vastly superior version of what she had, an ability to manipulate huge volumes of network data in very short time frames. Over the last week he'd helped them to infiltrate corporate networks via the intranet and to isolate corporate security channels and codes that they would use to trigger the killswitch—the ultimate failsafe against their own GIs. Access to Chancelry's own codes had helped them know what to look for, but of course the other corporations had known that and had changed to backups.

"Look," she said, having a reasonable view up here, and being somewhat confident opposing AMLORAs wouldn't take out this building with all the civvies around, "Kiet's trying to help the escapees, but if the corporations break your barriers and trigger the killswitch, every GI they have will be dead instantly."

*"You're sure they'll do it?"*

"Very. Rishi's uprising scared the crap out of them, they've had all their GIs in lockdown for a week."

*"Cassandra, the only reason we're able to maintain those blocks on the killswitch channels is because of the hardline infrastructure in Central Zone . . ."* There was a working pause, even Cai needed to stop talking when the info-overload hit him. *"With Kiet attacking Central Zone they now have an excuse . . ."*

"I know," said Sandy. "But a lot of that stuff is built into civvie infrastructure, they can blast some of it but not all of it." She called up her own schematics, searching for the intranet structures, the only infrastructure still connecting Chancelry networks to the other corporations. Nodes, junctions, and interfaces highlighted in Central Zone and Chancelry Zone.

How long until they figured it out? She did some fast calculation . . . assuming they'd tried to use the killswitch on those GIs who were escaping, and it hadn't worked . . . the blocks would show up in a few minutes of processing their systems. More minutes to hunt solutions, various departments consulting, arguing . . . how scared were they of their own GIs? Only the higher designations, not the regs, most of whom didn't even have killswitches. Which left her with. . .

Missile fire, her eyes flicked to it, zigzagging madly across the dark sky. Then dove, and a bright flash, in a target zone far away from the current fighting. Another, then one more flash. Two intranet nodes disappeared from her schematic.

"Kiet!" she shouted. "They're taking out the intranet! We're out of time, get all your people out of wireless range!"

*"I can't do that, we have more GIs breaking into Central Zone from Dhamsel! You can't see them on tacnet because they're keeping silent, they don't want to draw fire!"* Gunfire in the background, heavy explosions—big weapons, she reckoned. Not attacking, just hemming them in. It matched with what she could see on the streets.

Another explosion took out one more intranet node. They had to buy more time.

Her subconscious saw the cannon fire coming her way before her conscious mind could process it, and she leaped for empty air on reflex as the balcony and chunks of the building wall disintegrated around her. Fell, hit a rooftop, and slid, then leaped for the road as concrete crashed behind her.

"Cai, get me a full intranet diagnostic," she called as she thudded to the road. "What are they going to hit next?"

She ran up the road as Cai processed—that had been tank fire, someone was evidently scanning the horizon and looking for anyone high up, possibly they'd figured it might be her. Not *that* worried about civvie casualties then.

*"Cassandra, right here,"* said Cai, and several points formed on tacnet in Neutral Zone, forming a network. *"Their analysis will tell them if they take out these five points, intranet will collapse."*

"Kiet, I need a team!" Sandy was already running, past several more GIs in heavy suits, missile launchers on their backs awaiting tacnet's next targeting assignment. "Intranet protection in Central Zone, if it goes down they'll reestablish killswitch channels and we'll lose all of them!"

No reply from Kiet, tacnet showed him engaged in heavy fighting, probably he couldn't fight and command like she could. Fuck him—she enabled her own command structure on tacnet, a little trick Kiet wouldn't know she had, overrode Kiet's protocols and established her own secure coms.

The security wall was breached, but she jumped an intact section, saw missiles streaking overhead to intercept flying targets farther up that might have been engaging Kiet's forces. GIs from the rear line were leaping the wall after her, pulling off Kiet's reserve line to do so.

*"What if Dbamsel outflanks us?"* one asked.

*"You wanna save the other GIs or not?"* Sandy snapped.

Here in Central Zone the roads were more built up, multi-level apartments and lower four-storeys. The roads were grid pattern, and Sandy paused at a building wall to peer around a tacnet-blind corner . . . and rolled back as heavy fire blew brickwork thirty meters back down the road. Tacnet tagged the shooter as some kind of armoured vehicle and tried to lock a missile onto it, but already it was moving and they had no visual fix, the anti-armour missiles on the heavy suits moved too fast to acquire mid-flight and would probably get jammed anyway.

"D-5, D-7, pincer left, blockers hold here, E-4 get ready to flank right." She ran fast left across the road, GIs with her, fire pursuing—Kiet's forces were too far into Central Zone to be of any help here, and these corporate units (Chancelry, she thought) were threatening to cut Kiet's retreat.

She jumped for rooftops, leaping across sloping tiles, springing long and low across intervening yards, then slamming down flat for cover as heavy fire intercepted from five hundred meters left. Tile fragments and chunks of roof went spinning, Sandy locked and returned fire, not a challenging shot even at half a K, but the target was armoured. The corporations had prepared well for this, her killing options were limited.

She kept moving, more GIs running with her, several in heavy suits loosing missiles at whatever tried to shoot at them, big explosions from that side and a notable reduction of incoming fire. But their move was noted now, and the response ahead would be concentrated.

Two buildings from the end of the block, a rooftop AMAPS opened up on them from a hundred meters with rotary machine guns . . . or tried to as Sandy shot it first, sliding on a rooftop, then dropping to a back yard as rapid-fire

grenades came in from somewhere, big explosions sprayed fragments everywhere as she ducked behind a wall. That brought all the other GIs down off the rooftops as well, one of them injured. More grenades came in, then rapid-fire mortar, Sandy already scrambling down a narrow lane between building and wall to the road, and the cross street beyond, but still no direct line of sight.

“E-4 flank right,” she called to the units she’d sent over that way, “we’ll try to pin these guys here!”

*“If we don’t get cut to pieces first,”* someone muttered.

A huge airburst overhead, and the air was full of shrieking shrapnel, roadside trees above Sandy lost limbs and windows shattered. Sandy hurdled the side wall to the next property, not wanting to expose herself on the street with artillery coming in, and tried to duck up the narrow front garden of this apartment building. Immediately she was under fire from the crossroad ahead, one of the facing buildings, rounds shredding the wall between her and the road as she plastered herself against the next wall, gained a tacnet visual from someone behind her, and popped up to fire. She hit the window the rounds had come from, but the shooter was gone, displacing as well-trained soldiers learned to do against GIs—shoot once, move like hell, cover, and shoot again.

“Dammit, these guys are well trained,” she announced. She couldn’t stay under this arty, but moving across that road was going to cost her. “Someone get me a visual on that road.” If she had a visual she could use missiles and dig the fuckers out.

Tacnet showed her someone smashing into a building, running down a corridor, and peering out a window . . . a brief glimpse of the road ahead, buildings on either side, vehicles down below, a few civvies and one big one . . . it flashed, something boomed nearby, and the feed went dead. Sandy locked a missile request into tacnet for that location, pointed her grenade launcher across the road, and fired. Raced and dove through the hole it made in the wall, smashed across a room, up a corridor, then kicked and punched a ragged hole in an adjoining wall—civvies were all in the basements, thank god.

BOOM! as her missile request hit the place opposite her new position where the tank had been, only she doubted it was still there. Grabbed a scanner off her belt, found a window and tossed it to the road—if she’d done it from her previous position it would have been seen and grenaded. This one

bounced, little cameras recording all directions, tacnet recording positions dutifully, now fixing the tank, an AMAPS just across the street . . .

Already the missiles came in, blew the tank to hell and most of Sandy's apartment building with it. The next thing she knew, she was under rubble and would certainly be dead if she'd been a straight, and with several tonnes on her, her armour might break, but she wouldn't. She heaved it off her, smashed some uncooperative bits, and crawled out amidst the debris to the sound of massive fire coming up and down the road, her GIs now rounding that previously lethal corner and shredding anything that didn't run away.

Then pressed on, fast, knowing they were leaving a lot of enemies hiding in buildings to ambush them on the way back, but GIs survived in high-intensity battlespace by moving fast and not allowing the enemy to concentrate firepower. They'd nearly gotten stuck against that roadblock, and Sandy hated it. Direct thrusts into intensely hostile battlespace were not what GIs were made for, she had little firesupport here; the enemy had all the advantages of well-prepared terrain and tactics, and she'd already lost four of the roughly fifty GIs who were accompanying her now on this thrust into Central Zone against Kiet's previous orders, plus several more wounded who'd fallen back or were holding the lines of retreat open. The farther she pushed in, the more surrounded she'd become.

Advancing over rooftops was a pain, leaping and running from one to the next, under fire from surrounding buildings, some of which they could silence with return missile fire, but anti-missile systems were taking out more and more of those. Worse, they were under observation here, and enemy tacnet was dropping light arty and missiles on them that only fast evasive action could save them from. But they had to stay off the roads because one tank or AMAPS could turn those narrow canyons into deathtraps.

By now the surrounding circumstance was chaos; Cai and now Ari announcing in her ear that various corporate networks were showing signs of instability. Internal trouble they said, sign enough that there were GIs breaking loose in there, though exactly on what scale these particular revolutions were, there was no way to tell.

Ahead the first intranet nodes were only a few hundred meters away. Sandy put a grenade through a nearby apartment window, leapt for cover behind a rooftop eave, fire snapping past, then dropped to ground level as a missile

blew a neighbouring rooftop to hell. Ran at ground level until space ran out, then sprang back up, bouncing off a high wall to make a new rooftop, other GIs bounding forward amidst sporadic incoming . . . a crash as AP grenades blew one of them flying into a wall, more indirect fire hurtling in as Sandy slid once more and fell to the ground, cover from more explosions.

Pressed against a wall as concussions blasted masonry around her, she discovered that she wasn't enjoying this at all. She couldn't do anything about all this incoming; they were exposed here, the enemy were using indirect fire, always the best policy against GIs, and no amount of synthetic physical toughness would save them from accurate high explosives. But if they didn't capture the intranet nodes and stop the corporations from reactivating the killswitch . . .

A burst of cannon fire ended a GI's run across the rooves ahead, and Sandy sprinted across a yard, over an adjoining wall, and found the fallen GI on a carport rooftop, arm and part of the chest gone, blood everywhere, dying amidst convulsions. It was Angela, nice girl, low 40s designation; a few days ago Sandy had chatted with her about music, clothes, and the strangeness of civvie fashions. She'd never see any of that now. Before she could think another thought, another huge airburst had her rolling for cover and blew another of her team off a rooftop onto the road.

"Cai!" she yelled. "I need to make contact with all the corporate GIs if you can swing it! I can't protect all these intranet nodes, just this one closest will be a struggle, I'm getting shot to hell out here and if we keep going we're all dead!"

Then she saw the AMLORAs rising. Not heading for her, she realised a second later, watching those trajectories unfold. Heading for . . . Chancelry HQ.

"Reichardt!" Crawling into a narrow space between buildings for better cover as more arty came in. "Kressler and Heldig just launched AMLORAs, target Heldig and fire now, one orbital round to my fire control."

A pause that felt like a lifetime. "*I see only three AMLORA rounds fired,*" came Reichardt's reply. "*You're asking me to kill thousands of people on that?*"

"One round to my fire control," Sandy repeated, leaping back up to rooftop level, where tacnet identified a target. "It will take four minutes to arrive, if AMLORA firing has ceased by then I'll detonate it short of the target." Landed and lay flat on the rooftop, scanning apartment windows nearly a kilo-

meter away. A human face appeared, with laser ranger, a tacnet-filler. Sandy fired, a slight pause then the head blew off. She moved before they could counter-track her.

Detonations back at Chancelry HQ, but she had no time to observe what they hit. If Reichardt refused her, they were all screwed, the corporations were testing them, a failure to respond would encourage more of the same.

*“One round to your fire control,”* said Reichardt. *“On its way, good luck.”*

Sandy skidded over rooftops like a crazed pebble bouncing along the surface of choppy water. Hurdled an intervening street and paused at a good vantage over a minor industrial complex ahead. The infranet node was under that somewhere.

“Hello, all corporate CEOs,” she announced on general frequency. “This is Kresnov. If you all look skyward, you’ll find your defence screen radars showing you an incoming orbital round from where *Mekong* parked them in geostationary over your heads. That’s what happens when you launch AMLORAs at Chancelry HQ. One of you is about to die, I haven’t decided which yet. Keep firing AMLORAs and the rest will follow.”

It would come in several thousand Ks too fast for anti-missile defences to stop. Not quite a nuclear-scale blast, but enough to make a permanent geological feature where a corporate HQ had once been.

GIs smashed into buildings for cover overlooking the industrial complex and used that to gain line of sight. Missiles took out a tank, several AMAPS, but their ammo was now getting short. Fast, close engagement silenced more targets, then GIs were blowing holes in factory walls and dashing inside, Sandy joining them.

A fast run through one warehouse complex, someone uncovered tunnels beneath buildings that hadn’t shown up on the schematics. Sandy jumped down a ladder, into a dark space filled with pipes and cables, and followed several junction signs until she reached a wide open space with big fuel cell generators in industrial steel containers, a lot of power routings, and a bunch of ceiling wiring along the aircon that looked like it was probably coms.

“This is why they can’t blast it from the air,” she announced, transmitting visual feed from her headset. “It would take out power for half of Central Zone.” Power in Droze was serious, with no native water and air that got lethal in poor weather; power could be life and death.

“If their security situation gets bad enough,” said Rishi at her shoulder, “they might blast it anyway.” Rishi wore a heavy suit, new shrapnel holes in the armour, the back-mounted launcher smoking from a recent shot. She’d no sooner spoken than two of the five remaining nodes disappeared. On a nearby rooftop, tacnet prioritised a visual feed showing two fireballs rising.

*“Just because they’re underground,”* came Poole’s voice, *“doesn’t mean they can’t blow them by hand.”*

Looking at this, she could make a few schematic guesses about the intranet nodes—they relayed the signal above ground via a mass of antennae scattered over these buildings. Above ground, that could be jammed, but jamming would sever corporate forces’ own communications. Besides which, nodes like this ran networks underground, and you had to cut those lines of transmission as well as block the wireless frequencies if you wanted to jam the network, because the network would adjust information flows and leapfrog severed sections by alternate means. Thus Cai’s instruction that these five primary nodes all had to go down simultaneously to block the signal. Three left.

And three minutes left on the orbital round. Sandy gave orders, deploying a defensive perimeter about the industrial complex. She was above ground between buildings when a call came in. It was Patana, CEO of Dhamsel Corporation.

*“You’re about to commit a warcrime by the Federation’s own statutes,”* he told her.

“Don’t care,” said Sandy. “Let your GIs go, peacefully, and cease all offensive actions, or those incoming rounds will multiply.”

*“If your Captain agreed with that rationale he’d have fired more than one round already. Furthermore, not all of our GIs want to leave.”*

“Good,” said Sandy, walking to a corner near the complex perimeter. “Then you won’t mind dropping your internal emergency alerts and allowing full observation privileges to our Captain in orbit.”

*“Commander!”* one of her soldiers cut in. *“I’ve got GIs, escapees!”*

Sandy looked, saw broken visuals, running men and women, a few armed, none armoured, some wounded. Looking desperate and bloodied, like they’d just run through heavy fire without the means to fight back.

*“. . . lots dead!”* one of them was shouting, as Sandy’s troops laid fire back up the road they’d come down. *“We heard about your uprising, we heard what they were doing . . . corporates locked us up, a few of us they just killed . . .”*

"*We had to get out!*" a girl shouted over the top of her friend, eyes wild. "*We had to get out, they were gonna kill us all, I heard them talking!*"

". . . *we can level Chancelry HQ well before any orbital warhead gets here, and we will if you do not terminate that round immediately!*" Patana was yelling at her. "*You have twenty seconds to terminate or we open fire!*"

"Most of my people aren't even in Chancelry HQ," Sandy said coldly, crouched on the complex perimeter and watching escapee GIs rushing across the street ahead, pursued by tracer fire. "Better yet, you just selected yourself for targeting. Everyone in Dhamsel Zone now has two minutes to live, unless you comply."

"*Ten seconds!*" Patana shouted. Sandy didn't need audio analysers to hear the tremble in his voice. "*Kresnov!*"

"See you in hell, motherfucker."

"*Commander!*" Reichardt overrode her. "*You're not going to kill thousands of people just because you're pissed off. . .*" Sandy cut him off. She had fire control, it was out of Reichardt's hands now. If Patana fired, everyone back at Chancelry HQ was dead, Kiril included. If she backed down, same thing. Only this way, she'd take that asshole with them.

AMLORAs launched, lots of them. She could see them on tacnet, bright flares against a dark sky. But immediately, she didn't think they were heading for Chancelry.

"Incoming!" Sandy yelled, as a dozen other voices echoed it, and GIs took off running to get clear of the industrial complex. "They're going to blast it!"

Across from her was a market building with a truck drive-in at the rear. Sandy raced into it, down the slope, and tore through a roller door to basement parking.

"Cai, we're about to lose the intranet!" She slid behind several large vehicles, other GIs rushing in around her. "Do something fast!"

A series of huge thuds, and the ground rocked and shook. The concussion made her ears pop, shook light fittings from the ceiling.

"*Commander, I can't do anything,*" said Cai helplessly. "*I'm not a magician, the intranet is the only thing preventing the reestablishment of killswitch channels.*"

Save shooting her own AMLORAs at them. Which would most likely not do enough damage and would invite counterstrike that would surely level Chancelry HQ, and would not be responded to by Reichardt because she'd have shot first. Time moved at a crawl. She stared at the tacnet picture, stared

at it so hard her brain nearly bled, like staring at a chessboard so hard you could force some new, miraculous move to appear from the harsh reality of squares and pieces. But no matter which new angle she considered it from, the reality was the same—checkmate.

*“Those AMLORAs were not fired at Chancelry HQ, Commander,”* came a new voice. CEO Huang, Kressler Corporation. It was an integrated com, patched into multiple receivers, Reichardt included. *“The Federation is just over a minute away from a strike killing several thousand League citizens for no commensurate reason. When League Fleet arrives, this will be presented to them as an act of war.”*

*“No way, Commander!”* Kiet interjected. *“The minute you terminate that round, they’ll use the killswitch!”*

“They’ll use it anyway.” Sandy got to her feet. Past the combat reflex, she could feel very little but dawning horror. GIs sheltering in the basement loading bay were also standing, staring at her. Hers was a command channel, not usually accessible to regular troops, but now it was open. She didn’t remember changing those settings, but she must have.

Reichardt cut in. *“Commander, you are a Federation operative. You cannot single-handedly commit an act of war and expect to retain the Federation’s support in whatever you choose to do next.”*

Think about the long game, he meant. Think about the larger things at stake. That was easy for someone sitting in orbit thousands of clicks away to say. Someone who did not have to look into the wide eyes of fellow synthetics who had only just managed to break free, hoping for freedom and a long life, now to realise they were all about to die.

Forty seconds. High above, the round was entering atmosphere. Tacnet showed the intranet gone, all remaining nodes removed. Corporate GIs had no autistic mode, no defence against the killswitch signals; even if they could turn their uplinks off, the codes would reactivate them, anywhere within range. Her own had been shut off, barriered behind so many layers that even Cai couldn’t get in there without direct cable access and several hours with serious barrier breakers. But this was what it was built for. A big red button, labelled “press in case of revolution.”

“Don’t do it,” she whispered. “Please.”

*“We won’t do anything,”* came the response. *“We haven’t done anything. Terminate the round now, and we’ll talk.”*

Lies. She ought to let the round land, for preemptive revenge. But whether it landed or not, they'd still use the killswitch. The only question was whether she'd betray the trust the Federation had placed in her by granting her a commission in the process.

*"Don't you do it, Commander!"* Kiet shouted. *"You can't back down now!"*

A girl walked to her, a GI, unarmed in a torn and bloody tracksuit. She looked scared. "Don't forget about us," she begged. She grasped Sandy's hands. "Don't let this happen to any more of us. Promise you won't."

Fifteen seconds.

"I promise," said Sandy. Escapees hugged each other. Her own troops looked at her disbelievingly, then back again, with mounting desperation. Surely they hadn't gone through all of that for nothing?

Ten seconds. Any closer and the round would do damage. Sandy triggered termination and saw the signal on firecontrol abruptly vanish. Time passed, a frozen stillness. Then a great, rolling boom, like some unworldly thunder. If she'd been outside, she would have seen a great light high above, a brief and secondary sun.

*"Very good,"* said Huang with satisfaction. *"Now we can complete our transaction."*

Some GIs fell immediately. Others screamed and thrashed. The implants in their brainstems turned white-hot and exploded. Straight human brains had no nerve receptors, but in GIs it wasn't that simple. Sandy forced herself to watch, as others cried, or embraced the dying, or turned away to stare at the walls. This she was going to remember. This would not be for nothing.