

# IRON FIVE DOGS OF WAR

AN EARTHFRONT NOVEL  
Written by Seon Stronghold

## PROLOGUE

Through the cockpit viewscreen, Earth appeared as beautiful as ever and like always, Captain Kelly Winterfield marveled at it. Docked at the International Space Station for four hours now, he was sitting in the dim pilot's cabin of The Legacy II, preparing for departure.

The station controller's voice crackled over the comm. "*Legacy Two, you're good for auto and cleared for undocking.*"

"Legacy Two, copies clearance on full guidance..." Kelly responded.

The ship lurched as the powerful arms holding it in place disengaged. Manipulating the controls with experienced nudges this way and that, Kelly turned the freighter a full one hundred and eighty degrees until the view of the planet gradually changed to the white shell of the sprawling space complex.

The International Space Station was an old one, the very first. Unlike its newer counterparts, it was the only station in the galaxy with this design. A patchwork from additions and upgrades over hundreds of years, cylindrical arms ten miles long extended horizontally from its bustling core and harbored thousands of ships of varying sizes, linking them to its interior by way of retractable bridges.

The Legacy II drifted from the wharf-like structure and ten minutes later, when the computer indicated that they were safely beyond the outer edges of Earth's junk rings, Kelly took full control of his ship and ignited its thrusters.

Seven minutes later, he came out of Hyper Light and the coppery-colored curve of Venus came into view. His destination was a Military facility, five hundred feet above the base of Mount Danu. In all his time delivering for Earthfront, he had never been to this port; had never even heard of it. Whatever the cargo in his hold was, it must have been something big because only very-high-level clearance could get him surface-side on Venus. According to his agent, all he needed to do was pick up the shipment, deliver it, make no inspections and not stick his nose into it.

Whatever *it* was, he had an uneasy feeling about the whole deal and just wanted to get there, drop the shipment and get Earth-side in time to catch a shuttle home. Today was his daughter's birthday. She was, in her own words, officially ten and he knew she would never let it go if he missed her big celebration.

*Do you really have to go out this time?*

His wife had tried to convince him to stay, but this job was important and the credits it would earn him would set them good. His daughter would have a better future and he and Laura would finally be able to go on that honeymoon vacation they always wanted. After all, a Light-Class Space Trucker made barely enough credits to cover the cost of living on Earth, but this time they would be able to make the move to Pluto or Charon. Life on the Border Worlds was easily affordable and less stressful than mid-system planetary hubs. His trucking business would flourish out there too. Haulers were always in high demand on the outer edges of Sol.

The cockpit beeped three times, alerting him of his proximity to atmospheric entry.

Venus and Mercury, unlike Mars, Jupiter's moons, Saturn and Neptune's moons and Pluto and Charon, were nothing more than mining planets. The space stations orbiting Venus numbered only two but Kelly would not be docking in space on this trip. His hauler was one of a few types of interstellar Light-Classers that could make the transition from space to atmosphere and back.

At twenty thousand kilometers from entry, The Legacy II slowed rapidly, covering the remaining distance in twenty minutes before burning through atmosphere. As the ship transitioned into Venusian airspace, Kelly found, though nothing like Earth, that there was a unique beauty about this hostile world.

Sulfuric clouds, twenty kilometers thick, spread planet wide below him and lightning lit up the vast blanket in periodic displays of spectacular bursts. A few miles away and even as far as the horizon, massive barges hung miles above the surface, transporting precious ore to waiting cargo ships in vacuum but they soon disappeared and the acidic cloud cover enveloped his ship, blotting out the bright yellow sky above. The cockpit shook with turbulent winds and bucked its way through the density of the mid atmospheric storm. Beneath the perpetual cover, life on this planet existed in near darkness by day and utter blackness by night.

Kelly broke free of the haze after what seemed like ages and the ship's external lights automatically woke, illuminating huge wisps of sulfuric acid, drifting lazily along their paths. At twenty thousand feet above ground level, the lights of the mountain base came into view and the communications module crackled to life.

*"Legacy Two, this is Outpost Three Command. Give link up and pilot ident, over."*

"Captain Kelly Winterfield of Legacy Two, Venus bound from Earth." He read the identification codes on his thigh board and waited for confirmation.

*"Welcome to Venus Captain."*

The Legacy vibrated and shook as the outpost's tracking system took control, directing the hauler to a docking bay built into the side of the mountain.

The first thing Kelly noticed as his ship glided smoothly toward the hangar was the grunge built up along the outer walls of the base. Eversteel was immune to sulfuric acid but grimy deposits, collected over time, gave a disgusting appearance and covered it like a mossy shell.

The winds had also picked up. Fifty-five miles per hour to be exact but the base's auto guidance system kept the ride stable, and when he finally entered the complex, the shaking of the cockpit ceased.

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Fifty minutes later, Kelly stretched his cramped muscles and leaned against the headrest of his seat. This would be over soon. In the next three hours, he'd be back on Earth with his family and five hundred million credits richer.

The communications console lit up.

*"Legacy Two...shipment has been received, you have clearance for startup."*

Kelly responded "Legacy Two copies clearance for startup."

He jumped back into the pilot's seat, strapped in and ran through the sequence that would ready his ship for the trip home and as he hit the ignition switch, violent streaks of gunfire lit up the massive hangar outside his viewscreen.

An out of control wrecking ball thumped within, as Kelly's heart slammed against his chest. Tracer rounds shredded men and women in mechanized suits and mercilessly blew apart ships and armored vehicles. The Legacy II lifted gracefully from the landing pad, glided its way through the cavernous space and into the strong gusts outside. Without the station's auto guidance system to keep the ship stable, Kelly had to rely on natural reflexes honed by years of experience; nothing he couldn't handle.

The scene before him was unreal. A lone, military grade, walking battle tank tore the place apart as an unmarked transport ship nearby loaded cargo into its hold...his cargo.

Heart hammering, hands trembling, head swimming, Kelly sent a distress signal to Earth and adjusted his angle of ascent, then rocketed skyward wanting nothing more than to escape the madness below. He never saw the four missiles streaking toward him. Then in a bright flash of fiery debris, the last thing he felt was horror.

## FACT

Kedenians were among the first to leave for the stars. Originally, they settled on Nema, a Goldilocks planet in a system five light-years from Earth and after fifty years of disputes known as The Splinter Wars, Earthfront expelled the rogue clan, banishing them into unknown space.

Twelve years later, the Kedenian warlord Amir Kedeni and his supporters stumbled across a rich, desert planet eight thousand light years from Earth...and time passed.

As humanity colonized many systems throughout the Milky Way, large corporations, governments, and various organizations rose to rule it all. Earthfront, the leading authority in most of our Galactic Domain, is the largest governing body in existence. Yet as peace reigns throughout known space, Keden, it seems, would forever be a hostile world to Earthfront.

## CHAPTER 1 - IRON FIVE

My MAV is part of a five-man team on patrol across this barren Kedenian dunescape. I am Alpha Dog, call sign Huski. On my right, is Dachshund and Pitbull and to my left, Akita and Terrier; names chosen by us based on what breed of dog we have on our respective home planets, it is one of the worthwhile things we all have in common.

MAV's are the most widely used gear when it comes to military operations, Mechanized Armored Vehicles; walking tanks so to speak, and just like the rest of the team, mine is a Light-Class Mecha.

We are Legs Dangling at forty feet above Artificial Ground Level and heading east at seventy miles per hour. My Heads-Up-Display shows me the sandy terrain and all its contours as they intersect with the computer's generated lines. These lines keep us clear of obstacles but below dune peaks and off enemy radar. Our mission is simple. Patrol the Outlands and report any anomalies, lifeforms and or threats. We are to remain on our side of the fence. For no reason, are we to go beyond the digital and imaginary lines, which separate us from the locals. At no point are we to go weapons hot unless fired upon and some more blah, blah, blah. Personally, this being an unfriendly world and all, I think this is bullshit, but it's our mission according to SysDef, the System Defense Administration; our Diplomatic Relations Bureau stationed on this rock, eight thousand light-years from Earth.

Our Unit is here to assist these slackers because these weekend soldiers wouldn't know what to do if the Local Guerillas stood on the borderlines and stared them down, let alone declared a full-scaled attack. The only solace these pushovers have is the fact that the Kedenians know the repercussions of such

an act but as history has taught us so very often; it only takes one maniac to take the plunge.

So here we are, servants of SysDef for the time being however, we don't take orders from them. Our directives come from General, Alexander 'Hawk' Madison; one of the many heads of Earthfront Galactic, the military might and arm of our home planet spread out across the Milky Way. Our real mission, as far as our General is concerned, is to confirm that an Earth Based contingent of rebels is here along with their leader and if they are, we are to eliminate them. According to our most recent intelligence report, a few months ago, someone attacked an Earthfront military base on Venus and all of the evidence links our targets to the crime.

Another chill runs through my body as my combat suit, the mechanical and biological link to the machine, cools my skin with filtered air. My communication module lights up.

*"Iron Five...one bar to lights out, Link and rep live, over."*

Our unit is Iron Five. One bar to lights out means one hour till sunset. Link and rep live means to contact base and report what is happening. The voice in my ear is feminine yet devoid of femininity. Her name is Mirana O'Canon and she is a genuine hard-assed, straight-laced, battle-axe woman who kicks butt and takes no prisoners.

*How in the galaxy can a woman be so unwomanly?*

I respond "...Huski to base, nothing but sand and rock out here. We're runnin' one bar after lights out before headin' back, over."

*"Roger that Captain, squawk on ret."*

The com goes dead.

Squawk on return is standard procedure when dealing with Earth-based military installations. If the pilot of any craft does not provide the proper codes when returning to, or approaching a base, the 550 millimeter auto-cannons placed around the Station would go active. These bad boys are the most feared armor killers out there, and as any pilot would tell you, respecting them is always a healthy decision to make.

"Alpha..." my Com flashes again. It's Pitbull on our secure channel "...Keds Roving patrols on scan, seven clicks south."

"Okay Bull, mark 'em..." They would show up on my scanners at three kilometers but Bull's MAV is equipped with heavy sensors and detectors that enable him to see a lot further than any of us. He is our very early warning system and because he has traded most of his heavy weapons for extra eyes and ears, we keep him well protected. "...do we cross paths?"

"I've marked 'em but they're not gonna cross us...they're bugging south..."

"Okay maintain course...going dark in two."

According to my Heads-Up-Display, it is 16:55 Kedenian time, which means that in two minutes; this Solar System's dimming sun would end Keden's ten-hour daylight time. By the looks of it, tonight is going to be a bit

clearer than usual and unless our readings are wrong, there won't be another sand storm for at least two days.

"Okay fellas, going dark." I throttle down, bring my engine to hover and descend until the thud of machine meeting ground shakes the cockpit. The MAV's Automatic Balancing System keeps me from toppling over and the rest of my team fall in beside me. Mentally, I hit a digital key on my visor and watch, as we all become rippling reflections of our surroundings.

When we go dark, our stealth capabilities truly come to life. Reflective Regeneration Technology allows our MAVs to blend in to our surroundings while Bull's jamming equipment keeps us off radar and other sensor systems. I half-consciously check the Neural in the lower right corner of my screen. The Neural Link is a virtual indicator that monitors the team's individual movements, locations and life forces. We feel it, taste it, hear and see it. Even now, I can feel the life of the men under my command; a sensation that is often strange, bordering on invasive even though it has become natural over time.

"Dogs you're all a go..." I wait for my check

"Alpha you're good"

Terrier confirms that my camouflage has engaged.

"Okay let's make this as clean as possible..." I turn my head toward Pitbull and the outline of his cloaked MAV shows up on my visor; all its info and stats readily available at my command "...Bull, you know what to do. Hound, you're on guard duty tonight."

"Roger that Alpha."

Dachshund's German accent is still very strong, even after all these years away from home. His job on this run is to guard Pitbull as he scans and jams our enemies. His position is one that's close enough to Bull to provide protection but near enough to us to come in guns blazing if needed. He is the right man for the job, as he has proven so often before.

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I approach the digital lines that divide Earthfront and Kedenian law. There is a feeling of satisfaction in our defiance as my MAV crosses it. The Dune Desert is behind me, all of its massive sand banks in our wake; I give the signal and we come to a stop at the edge of a cliff.

The drop is two hundred and eighty six feet, according to my reading, and spreads out as far as the eye can see, one broad, flat, dirt and rock landscape. The view is captivating. Ten miles into the distance a city sprawls; a colossal, manmade mountain made of buildings and endless lights, wide and low on each end and rising to a peak near the center. Above it, one of this planet's two spaceports shines like a large star in the brown sky and every so often, shuttles, like little fireflies, travel to and fro.

The drop-off in front of us could be a problem. Even with our camouflage engaged.

"Terri...I thought you said this was the best route?"

"It is Alpha. It's the most direct..."

I turn my attention toward the expanse of land beyond our position

"Bull...you in position?"

There's a flicker of static before I hear him "Dug in and watching, over."

"Hound...?"

"All set..."

"Okay boys, on go and fly." I do a split second systems check "Ready..." we move closer to the edge "...set..." I push the accelerator and the gears in my machine whine "...go!"

The three of us take a two-step run, jump from the cliff and free-fall with our thrusters cold. My head swims in the sensation of the plunge and we kill the stealth. We'll show up on every radar system within a hundred miles. My altimeter counts down in a frenzy of numbers and now, with a hundred feet to go...

"...fly!"

I ask my MAV for full power. Every heat detector in the vicinity would see us, but this slows the drop. With gritted teeth, the Sol Combustion engine jolts me into a million shudders. Our rate of descent goes from fifty-two feet per second, to nine feet per second and then I shut the thrusters down, go engines-cold and brace for impact.

Enemy radar and sensors would report our five seconds of madness as a glitch; at least I hope so. We reactivate our camouflage.

"Let's move." I give the command, with frantic fists pounding against my chest, and we begin our run toward the City.

## CHAPTER 2 - DUNAN

DZ087 is one of numerous Districted Zones located along Dunan's eastern edge. Entirely the opposite of its western counterparts, it is a rough and sordid zone where seedy taverns, rundown towns and derelict infrastructures make up a dangerous and unfriendly environment. As we approach, I notice parts of its tall, perimeter wall lying scattered on the ground in some places, while in others it no longer exists. The place looks as though a nuke hit it. Buildings that would have once been architecturally pleasing to the eyes are now rundown, empty, broken, or rubble.

My MAV steps over the vandalized fence and I give the word to deactivate our camouflage. Now that we are close enough to the city, we won't need it.

Too many signals and too much equipment now run interference on our behalf. We would be no more than the usual traffic.

Our destination is down a main road and then off through a dark and usually deserted side street. So far, the folks we've passed have hardly acknowledged our presence. Everyone seems to be somewhere else, either in mind or body. There is a feeling of emptiness here, a lack of openness and freedom. The only thing I can think of is desolation. It is in their walk, their demeanor...their eyes.

In the dark sky, void of any clouds as usual, the stars sparkle few and far apart; this is a result of Keden's dusty atmosphere and unlike back home, there is no moon. A few Air and Magnatech Vehicles parked beside derelict structures catch my eye and questionable figures enter and exit questionable buildings however, our mission has nothing to do with whatever is going on here, so we continue along.

My secure com lights up "Alpha...?"

"Terri..."

"How do we know that there are no spies here?"

"We don't. This is where we're gonna have to take our chances but I doubt we'll have that problem in this part of town."

I don't worry about anyone reporting our presence to the local authorities because there are way too many illegal activities going on in this one locale for anyone to be so stupid. No one in his or her right mind would dare bring the law here and as we get to the end of the street and turn onto another wide road, everything changes. It's a lot livelier here. The glows of dull yellow street lights and neon signs everywhere, reveal many of the district's citizens going about their nightly lives, from street-side substance dealers, to vendors, to buyers, to prostitutes, all driven by a common denominator; credits.

We come to a halt outside a well-aged tavern. Like most manmade structures on this planet, it is made of metal, stripped of its yellow paint. The guards at the front entrance seem a bit uneasy. I guess I would be too if three Earthfront Mecha came and stood less than thirty feet away with guns and missile pods pointed in my direction, but they hold their positions, admirable in a way, their guns futile at the ready.

"Bull...how's the weather?"

Static hits me "...All clear Alpha..."

"Hound...?"

"Ready and waiting..."

"Terri, Akita, if anything goes wrong, do what you have to do."

"...Will do boss." Akita's voice is steady. He knows, just like the rest of us what the risks and potential consequences of coming here entail.

I power down my MAV and hit the release switch. The dashboard in front of me hisses, as the pressurized air around is expelled, and slides downward.



The legs of the machine crouch, lowering the cockpit to the ground. My harness tightens for a second, then goes loose and I unclip it.

"Be careful Alpha...eyes open."

I won't reply but Terri knows I acknowledge his concern.

The air here is warm and dry but my Combat Suit filters it in and allows me to breathe cool and moist oxygen. My visor tells me that the temperature is a nice 32 degrees Celsius and I say nice, because the daytime temp is usually anything around 60.

I climb out of my seat and down the built-in-ladder in front of my Mecha. Three new guards join the two at the door and as I walk toward them, the sound of my MAV resealing itself ripples through the far recesses of my mind until it becomes another distant background noise.

I get to the door of the tavern and one of the guards step between it and me "Who are you and what is your business here Earther?"

His gravelly voice is like the rest of all who come from, or live too long on this planet. *'It's because of the dust and sand'* According to those who are qualified to know these things. *'Gets into the throat and lungs and over time, the human body adapts.'*

"I am death to my enemies, but I am here to see Toros, my friend." I keep eye contact and though he defiantly returns my gaze, I see a flicker of uncertainty.

"Wait here." He leaves me with the other four guards and goes through the door.

Two minutes and some pass before he returns and makes way for me to enter. His colleagues seem on edge but they are of no concern. As a matter of fact, I think that the two MAV's facing us have placed a healthy bit of fear in them; exactly what I was hoping.

The guard I spoke to eyes me suspiciously but motions for me to enter through the slanted steel doors. I go without hesitation and the world around me changes from openly wild, street-side life, to controlled and nice...an almost cozy indoor getaway. The bar is dusty and hot but lively. Its yellow lights cast a dull glow across the large room. I recall from memory the exits and windows in my immediate view; on these hostile worlds, it has become second nature over time to do so.

The big bartender looks like ex Kedar; Kedenian Special forces, and two men not far from him seem to be trading something unholy. Then there is the person sitting at a corner table with two prostitutes, a Kedenian tradesman by the look of his clothing. Tradesmen on this planet are often leathery skinned because of their extensive time in the sun. Their clothes are always long and made of patchwork that covers most of their bodies including heads and faces.

"Hello there..."

I turn toward the soft voice. A woman dressed in a very short, formfitting jumper and rugged high heels is standing next to me. She takes advantage of my silence.

"You look lost hun..." Eying me like a piece of meat.

"Sorry, but I'm here on business."

"Sorry indeed..."

Like many Kedenian women her face is rough and chiseled yet very attractive and her hair, bleached and damaged, a result of the harsh weather.

"You're here to see Toros. I'm here to take you to him."

She looks at me as though I were a strange thing that made her curious. I realize now that she isn't a prostitute and remove my helmet, attach it to the magnetic clip on my waist and follow the slinky woman through the crowd and into a hallway.

The Digital Optics covering my eyes like contact lenses, Digital Eyes, or Dees as we call them, take over and feeds me second by second digital, visual information about my surroundings. They tell me what I want to know, when I choose to want it, but nothing ever prepares me for the air. It hits me like an invisible wall of stale warmth that smells like old carpets. I hate it but have no choice in the matter; no one in the known galaxy takes kindly to people in masks and helmets, especially Earthers in masks and helmets. We walk a few steps and turn through another metal door. It opens up into a large, dimly lit room made up of split-levels where women and men of many races mingle and mix.

As I tread the velvety floor, a blue haired Kedenian woman nearby looks my way and smiles but I continue on, passing what looks like a local miner and a Rokan Woman uncomfortably embraced in a purple-lit booth. I have never been to the Roka but I know what the folks there look like. Prolonged exposure to the atmospheres on the twin planets, Roka and Rokus tend to give the skin a light-purple hue. The darker the skin, the darker the hue, in my book however, purple is purple no matter how you look at it.

My escort guides me through the mingling crowd, past two guards, through another hallway, two more guards, and now an unusually broad door stands before us. With a knock, she opens it and we step into a large office where finally, I see the man I have come to find.

"Welcome my friend!" He is falsely excited to see me but it is never a problem, because I am also falsely happy to be here. The semicircular and windowless room smells of Cuban Cigars. *How in the galaxy did he get Cuban Cigars?*

"How are you Toros?" I shake his rough hand and look into the square, chiseled, hairless face as I take a seat by his desk. My escort stands between us waiting.

"Elna...drinks!" He says it as though there is a celebration to be had, then watches her slyly as she walks away. "...Very nice girl...been with my establishment from the beginning."

His voice is rough and deep...way too much dust I always say.

"You've been hiding her. I've never met her before..."

"My friend..." he gives me a broad smile "...I have more than one places of business on Keden; surely you know this?"

"You must treat her like gold then? Good help is hard to find no matter what planet you're on..." I indulge the meaningless conversation for the moment.

"Not on Darion..." He grins, reminiscing "The service there is always excellent...you ever been to Darion, Earther?"

"No, but I know of it..." I have never been to the planet of cities, but I have seen it on flybys and walked through it virtually many times.

"...Beautiful place my friend..." Toros shifts his hulking frame and the chair beneath him protests loudly. "It's been a while since I've seen you Earther. I was beginning to think that you'd left us here on this damned rock for good."

"I'm here because I need information..."

"Ah...as always, straight to the point..." His mouthful of bright white teeth flashes a broad grin.

I relax in my chair and accept my drink now that Elna has returned. Toros waits for her to leave again and after the door closes behind her, he continues. "What kind of information do you seek my friend?"

It is Kedenian custom to not ask, but for the host to present a drink of their choice to a guest. I take a sip of the blue-ish green cocktail and it is good. "What is this drink?"

He leans heavily into his big, black, leather chair. "Pine fruit, water pears and the best Kedenian Fermentia you can find. It is good, no?"

I sip it again and nod my approval. Fermentia is Keden's version of wine and ranks in the top ten for fine wines that the Galaxy has to offer.

"I hear that a small Deepcore fleet has landed on Keden..." I search his face for any sign of acknowledgement, but there is none "Do you know where they are based?" but I see his crooked mind working; the well-oiled gears of it turning at full steam.

"You've been coming to me for a long time now Earther..." He plays with his glass "...and I've always given you whatever you ask, you know this. You pay well and that is what it's all about, no? What you ask now though, puts me in a difficult position. Do me, and you, a favor my friend and leave this one alone."

He's getting shifty so I cut him off.

"Name your price."

It is as though I said nothing.

"These guys, they don't play nice. They'll find me and end me, you must understand this Earther."

"I thought you were well protected here...thought this was your domain?"

"Domain...? Earther, to these people, there is no domain they cannot reach; they'll just send their assassins or bomb everything. They have spies...everywhere, and government connections. You have no idea what you're getting into."

"Who said I was getting into anything? I just asked a question."

Toros places his drink on the desk and looks at me. The fear in this man's eyes says it all. Deepcore is obviously bigger and more dangerous here than on Earth. A burst of static hits my ear. "Alpha...?"

It's Pitbull

"...I just hacked into Toros' logs and it appears that he has ties to Deepcore. There was a transaction of fifty million Kedenian Credits two days ago to Toros for services rendered...sending to you...now."

The info appears across my Digital Eyes. Now I know why the Kedenian opposite me is avoiding the question.

Toros is still rambling. "...and I'm not stupid Earther. You don't care if I get ended by these men. All you want is...wait a minute. You wouldn't be asking about them if you weren't planning some sort of raid..." His words trail off as the truth registers.

*I wish it wouldn't*

"...or a hit...this is a hit. You're going after them on Kedenian soil..." He looks away from me in thought "...yes, you're not here under instruction from your base. As far as I know, you are not even supposed to be here. This is some kind of unauthorized operation and you don't care what happens to me when it's done..."

"I'll double the credits Toros, and give you protection."

"Protection...? Ha!"

I don't like the look in his eyes.

"...I'm sorry Earther. I can't let you this time...bad for business, you understand, no?"

The room seems to be getting a bit too small. I hate to do this but Toros has now become a liability...no, a threat. He shifts suddenly so I draw my handgun and point it toward his face.

"Don't do this Toros. All I asked was where, are, they? Please my friend, I won't mention you, I swear."

"Friend...? Ha!" His face contorts in anger "That will not stop them from knowing that it was me. No one tolerates a rodent. I'll be eaten alive."

"Last time Toros. Where...?"

"You'll never make it out of here alive Earther."

I refuse to answer. The situation has gotten out of control. Inside, I recoil at the thought of what I am about to do. I wish it were different but now I have no choice.

"Please Earther..." The bulky, bald headed Kedenian is on the edge of panic "...do not do this...you have no idea..." and as he draws his hidden gun and shouts for help, I squeeze the trigger on my Tex's Fifty-eight. The 'Hand Cannon' as is nicknamed, lets loose its bullet with a heavy thud and I move as what was Toros' head explodes into an expanding pulp.

"I'm sorry old friend."

I reattach my helmet just as the door bursts open and slam the butt of my gun into the face that appears. The big man cries out but regains his footing and lunges toward me. I shift my weight and use his own to throw him over the desk of his fallen boss.

Another thug comes crashing through the door and my Fifty-eight puts him back through it. I need to get out of this hallway; it is a death chamber the longer I wait. I fire into the first man now rising from behind the desk and begin my run, then slow to a walk beside the metal door separating my corridor from the commingling on the other side. Pushing the button to open it is either going to give me freedom or death but I'm almost out of time; everyone in the building would have heard those shots.

The door flies open and after a quick glance, I run through the now empty space and stop once more near the hallway on the other side. No one is here either. I don't like this, it's too easy but I have to get out.

"Alpha..." Terri's is in my ear "...keep coming to us."

I suck in deep breaths of purified air, and take the passageway in long strides with my heart clawing its way out my chest. Deep breaths and a well-trained, steady mind keeps me calm and thinking straight. The door to the bar and lounge is now within reach.

*BOOM RRRRRRREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE*

The initial blast hits me like a thunderclap and I open the door in time to see the front end of the tavern disintegrate.

"Alpha, come on!"

Akita's MAV stands like the Grim Reaper, gun whirling and tearing up everything moving or not and I run for it, putting a hole into the chest of another guard. I don't know for sure, but it appears as though every customer that I left in here is now holding a weapon.

While I push my legs for more speed, My MAV is already opening by mental command and bullets whiz nearby as I run up the ladder.

"Alpha..." It's Bull's voice "...heavy armor in-bound on your six. I make two Rhinos."

Terrier is on the air now, "Yeah we've got company. I got em on scope. Huski let's go!"

I strap into my seat and wake my MAV's sleeping systems. Everything comes online instantly and we turn to leave the half-leveled building. Now I know for sure that Toros had dealings with Deepcore. Rhinos are the heavy Mecha of Deepcore's operations; heavy Mecha class war machines that could level a city block in a matter of seconds. This is fast turning into a 'not-good' situation.

"Okay boys, look alive, weapons hot, Bull get on it."

I activate both missile launcher pods and hear the whir as my Auto Cannon turns to lock onto my digital targets. We go back the way we came and as we come out onto the deserted main road near the broken perimeter walls, the ground in front of us and the edges of the building nearby tear up with gunfire.

"Bull, do you have them?" I hope to God his answer is yes.

"Got 'em boss..."

"Disable the bastards. Hound, hold your position."

"Holding" he replies

I imagine Pitbull sitting in his cockpit and targeting our enemies. His two hundred and twenty pound frame, taking up his entire seat is a perfect match to the monster, Long Ranged Railgun mounted above his MAV.

Bullets twang off our armor and my missile alert systems are going mad. I hear the sound a split second before the wall to my left explodes and chunks of metal and Evercrete slam into my armor, but there is no critical damage. According to my scope, the Rhinos are a hundred and twenty three meters out and closing. My warning system shrieks as it detects their missile lock again but in a bright flash...ONE...TWO! Both heavy Mecha go down, their legs, blown out at the joints. Bull's long-range assault has done its job and now, my targeting computer alerts me.

"Alpha..." Terri's voice "...I got lock..."

"Hold!" I reply

I need to make contact so I think it, and see the module appear in the upper left of my virtual Head's up Display. I select it with another thought that activates my MAV's auto-frequency-find and it scans until I have the right one.

"Rhino squad...you have engaged Earthfront military in unauthorized combat. Stand down or we will kill you. You have five seconds to comply." Eying the time on my digital screen, I wait as the milliseconds change the seconds that will eventually bring the moment of destruction. There is static on the air.

"Earthfront dogs..." his breathing is heavy and his voice like a loud whisper "...you are the ones who will meet death..."

His hoarse voice and labored breathing makes his words heavy and in them, is the sound of finality. I look at our crippled enemies and take in the shattered scene of old buildings and the empty street behind them. One of the Rhino's, using what's left of his destroyed hydraulic legs, rolls over and brings his missile launchers to bear. My warning systems light up...I have no choice.

“Fire...!”

I mentally select how many missiles I need and my finger squeezes the trigger on my control. Four of them leave me. The cockpit shudders. Their trails of grey and black smoke joining those from Terri’s MAV creates an eerie sight as the missiles track their prey. Two seconds, One second, Impact. The fallen Rhinos flare up in a brilliant flash followed by a wicked thunder and a raging dust cloud that expands rapidly outward. It is over. What is left of them is nothing more than superheated metal, melted into clumps of hard waste. The ground where they lay is now a small crater. Their debris, just more broken pieces added to the picture of this forsaken place; we turn to head back to base, I try to push Toros from my mind.

I can’t.

The time on my HUD is 17:35.

### CHAPTER 3 - FRIENDS AND FOES

We fly into base at 17:58. The massive complex is a waste of space if you ask me. Ten miles into the Dune Desert, most of it is buried below ground. I doubt that the folks stationed here take up even half of it. Lights outline the base’s circular metal dome. Windows at varying levels appear as electric-blue lines from this distance; giving the structure an eerie glow. This architecture reminds me of how far away from home I am.

“Base Control...” I read the code on my visor and then “...Iron Five on approach, over...”

*“Iron Five, you are cleared for entry. Touch down on zero seven.”* A digital line materializes on my navigation screen. It will lead us to Landing Pad seven. The voice this time is that of a young lady. I have no idea who she is though. Many new recruits and interns often get shipped out here from time to time and as they come...they go.

*Lucky bastards*

My team and I have been here for four months. Four months of crap. This rock is nothing more than a routine-filled life of boredom, as far as I am concerned, and this is the tenth time they have shipped us out here; I can’t wait to leave it behind again.

I drop toward the landing pad four hundred meters ahead. My thrusters cry as they compensate for the loss of thrust versus gravity. In my peripherals, Akita and Hound are right with me. Bull and Terri would be behind them. I switch my engines to hover and slide the throttle back, reducing power until my altimeter reads ten feet above immediate ground level. We all kill the upward thrusts almost at the same time and our MAVs touch down with a series of heavy thuds.

*"Iron Five. Proceed to wash down. Welcome home."*

She sounds so young. Why don't these kids stay at home and enjoy their youth? But then I think of the Battle Axe who runs the base and I am suddenly more grateful for the new voice.

The landing pad; large, circular and made of dense metal is red and brown and covered with constantly shifting dust. The winds out here read at a good seventy miles per hour but our forty ton Walking Battle Tanks hold steady. While we walk, I do a thorough systems check. This is standard procedure and it will take about five minutes as my team approaches the wide opening of the outer hanger.

I follow the lines glowing on the ground ahead of me with my brain feeling the tingle of millions of microscopic neural electrical jolts. Mind and computer, linked together in a dance of pulses and waves; this stuff never ceases to amaze me. We continue, through the hangar opening and to a large chamber that seals us inside with a giant Eversteel door. Locked in now, the five of us are subjected to powerful streams of super-heated and compressed water and gas that hit our armour under extreme pressure; scrubbing us clean of dust, parasites and any other dangers that might have been picked up on the outside. I complete the systems check as every few seconds, jets of water and whatnot slam into the narrow strip of cockpit glass around me.

After our time in decontamination, we go through another set of hangar doors and stand the MAV's in their designated spaces. Each assigned space has the Earthfront E logo, and uniquely coloured lines along their edges representing rank, indicate who goes where. I log the final reading from one of the sensors on my HUD, then power down my engine and hit the release switch. A moment passes as the cockpit lights come on and my visor switches from external to normal view, showing what is really around me. Then the front section of my MAV slides downward and I climb out.

As my feet touch the metal floor of our docking bay, I remove my helmet and blink. There is a slight jab behind my eyes as the Digital Eyes adjusts to the brightly lit space and I join Bull and Akita while they wait for the rest of the team.

Standing lifelessly nearby, my MAV towers above us; its black skin casting dull reflections of lights around. I remember the first time I saw it, and the joy I felt knowing that it was mine. With its two cylindrical missile pods hanging off short pylons on both sides, and the Tex Auto-cannon mounted above and behind the cockpit, it still makes me feel insignificant.

Designed by famous weapons specialist, Gregory Tex, son of the great, General Ganton Tex, the Tex's Auto-cannon is our military's most widely used projectile weapon. It is also the Crown Jewel of Tex Contractors back on Earth.

Across the gunmetal-grey hanger, with its Eversteel floor almost reflective, small sky fighters, space shuttles, armored tanks and a few other Light Mecha class machines fill the manmade cavern. There is also a SysDef Starship here.



Our MAV Carrier, the Mirage, is here too. Originally built as a small black-ops Starship with a fully fitted weapons system of its own; she's perfect for vacuum warfare. The sleek and attractive spacecraft had been refitted to transport up to six MAVs after being assigned to us. Its primary function; to take us from space to any planet's surface and back without having to use a spaceport.

"Time to eat..." Hound says as he approaches.

"The Pitbull agrees. Nothing else to do anyways so let's..."

I have no reason to disagree with them so we all follow Bull and Hound out of the hanger and to the Mess hall.

"That was a good run guys..."

"Good run? Alpha, unless you forgot, we got no leads..."

I turn toward Terri, his black wavy hair a mess after its time in his helmet. "Of course we did..." They all look at me, puzzled "...we know for sure that the fleet is somewhere on this planet."

"But how do we know where..?" Akita jumps in.

"We'll pay another friend of mine a visit..."

"At the rate we're going..." Terri again "...you'll be out of friends by day after tomorrow. I'm thinking of unfriending you right now as a matter of fact."

We all laugh and walk toward a glass doorway that slides into the wall.

"Captain..!"

We turn toward the voice.

*Damn, it's her.*

\*\*\*\*\*

"Sit, Captain!"

She's all business. We are in her office, or prison cell, depending on how you look at it. All these enclosed metal rooms are basically the same to me, differentiated only by color and furniture. Hers is light blue with an L-shaped, blue-metal desk, two white-cushioned metal chairs, and a hidden shelving system.

I try to read her for any signs of what is to come but there are none. She's good. We sit in silence for a while. I know she is assessing me, maybe even trying to make me nervous; she should know better. Her red hair is in a tight bun today. Her eyes are livid as they scan the documents before her. There is an undercurrent there, an anger kept well in check, if I am not mistaken. On the other hand, she has what I like to call 'an unattractive, attractive face'. Even with the worn effects of Kedenian weather and the broad, painfully looking deep scar running from the middle of her forehead, down her left eye and to her lower jaw, something appealing still exists.

A Certificate case hanging on the wall behind her reveals that I need a shave. The stubble on my face, along with my black crew cut hair makes me

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