

Backshot

David Sherman
&
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BALLANTINE BOOKS

STARFIST: FORCE RECON

BOOK I

BACKSHOT

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The Queen of Killers

First sniper team's Bella Dwan broke formation and came to stand one pace to Athon's left. She showed her teeth to the Marines of second platoon in a grin. Her grin was no more friendly than that of a hungry shark.

"Lance Corporal Dwan," Athon said to second platoon, "will explain to you the operation and capabilities of the M14A5 sniper maser. She won't go into any great detail about how it functions, none of you have the advanced degrees in physics you'd need to understand them.

"Lance Corporal." He stepped aside.

Bella Dwan was petite and had what on another woman might be called an elfin face—as long as one didn't look into her eyes. They were cold and hard, and had made many a strong man excuse himself and depart for other environs. They called her the "Queen of Killers."

To:

**Larry Smith
Corporal, USMC
1st & 2nd LAAM Bns
RVN, 1965–1968
Forever a Marine . . .
And a Good Friend**

1946–2004

Semper Fi

PROLOGUE

“Look!” Jorge Liberec Lavager gestured heavenward at the meteor flashing across the sky. His daughter Candace was sitting on the bench beside him in the dark. “Some of the best things in life are free, Candie, and nature is one of them.”

“I hope it doesn’t hit anybody,” Candace replied sarcastically.

“That’s my girl!” Lavager responded cheerfully. He put his arm around her shoulders and drew her closer. “Most meteorites are harmless,” he continued. “They burn up in the atmosphere before they reach the ground. They’re nothing to be afraid of.”

Candace sniffed. “I know that, Daddy.” Although she was only sixteen, in the past three years since Annie Lavager, Lavager’s wife and Candace’s mother, had been killed in an assassination attempt aimed at him, Candace and her father had become extremely close. For his part, Lavager was impressed by his daughter’s solid common-sense attitude toward world affairs. She was a realist and not afraid to speak her mind, and he appreciated that. Too many of the people around the former general—his aides, his cabinet ministers—only told him what they thought he wanted to hear.

She feigned a cough. “Daddy, must you smoke those foul cigars? You’ll die of something if you don’t quit. And besides, they’re far from ‘free.’ ”

“I am shocked!” Lavager said with mock outrage. “Shocked that anyone could refer to a prime cigar like this Davidoff Anniversario as ‘foul’!” He chuckled. “And when you discount the things in life that are free, with what’s left over you get only what you pay for. My first rule of economics, Candie. Besides, I’m going to die of something someday anyway, so while I’m alive I’m going to live!” Lavager drew deeply on his Anniversario, a terribly expensive smoke imported all the way from the other side of Human Space. He savored the cigar’s complex layers of rich flavors: a sweet earthiness tinged with a slight hint of leather and sweet spicy undertones, all blended into a smooth draw that burned perfectly. Slowly he let the flavors out through his nostrils.

“Father, don’t talk that way!” Candace waved the smoke away with a hand. Ever since her mother’s death, she had been very aware of her father’s mortality, and the fact that some people on Atlantis wanted him dead only added to her growing sense of uneasiness.

Atlas’s major moon wasn’t visible and the stars overhead shone with particular brilliance in the night sky. The lights from New Granum, the Union of Margelan’s capital city, far below the mountaintop that was Lavager’s getaway, glowed warmly down in the valley. Despite her best effort

to dispel the cigar smoke, a fine white cloud hung suspended in front of her father's face. The thought occurred to her that with the tip of his cigar aglow in the night her father might make a good target for someone hiding in the foliage below. She hoped the presidential security team watching over them from someplace out of sight was alert.

"I'm going to smoke this cigar right down to the band, Candie. Your mother liked the smell of them, and what was good enough for her is good enough for everyone else, including you, my dear." He drew again on the Anniversario.

Cigar smoke was a smell Candace had associated with her father for as long as she could remember, and she did really like the aroma of a good cigar. But their bantering about his smoking habit was a game father and daughter played, part of the ritual they followed when by themselves, which was not very often these days.

"Candie," Lavager said suddenly, "let's go to Ramuncho's! I'm hungry." Ramuncho's was his favorite restaurant in New Granum. He often dined there when his cabinet was sitting or when the planetary council, of which he was a member, was in session.

"Daddy, it's close to midnight! You have an important cabinet meeting in the morning."

"So what?" Like his daughter, Jorge Lavager often spoke just what was on his mind, inflaming his enemies and sometimes even his friends. "I'm hungry, I want some of Ramuncho's paella. Come on, let's go. You can drive."

"I can?" That offer almost made Candace start for the car. Then she caught herself. "What about your security detail? Daddy, you have to be more careful!"

Lavager made a dismissive gesture with one hand. "Let them sleep." Ever since the assassination attempt that had killed his wife, Lavager's aides had insisted on constant personal security for the head of state. Slipping off by himself, as he was proposing to do that evening, Lavager often gave his bodyguards fits. But giving in to the alarm in his daughter's voice, he relented. "All right," he sighed. "We'll order up a snack—but only after I've finished this cigar."

They sat quietly for a few moments. Candace hugged her father tightly. "Daddy, I don't want to lose you too," she whispered.

"Don't worry, you won't, Baby."

"But so many people in this world hate you."

"Yes, and some with good reason, Candie. I made a lot of enemies when I led our armies. I had to do things I'm not very proud of."

"But you're not a general anymore, Daddy. You're a statesman." She pronounced the word proudly.

"Yes, I surely am. But you know, once a general, always a general. You never really take the uniform off as far as some people are concerned. You're always on parade, as it were." He drew on his

cigar and slowly exhaled the smoke.

Primarily an agricultural world, Atlas had early split into regional power centers that evolved into independent nation-states, rather than maintaining a centralized world government as had nearly all other human-settled worlds. Those nation-states, in the manner of nation-states throughout history on Earth, warred among themselves with the major center of power shifting from one nation-state to another over the years. The Union of Margelan, under a succession of astute leaders, most recently Jorge Lavager, had been highly successful for more than a century in defending its interests. Its military success had led it to impose certain demands upon the losers, mostly the cession of some territories and acceptance of Margelan's hegemony over others. The Union of Margelan's main adversaries had been the countries of North and South Solanum, Oleania, and Satevina. Margelan's main advantage, aside from excellent leadership, was the fact that unlike the other nation-states it had developed heavy industry that could produce the weapon systems needed to wage modern warfare—but over the years this had proved a tremendous strain on its economy.

Atlas was fortunate in one way, however. When the world was first settled three hundred years earlier, it had been on the fringes of Human Space, but by Lavager's time it sat astride one of the busiest spacelanes of the Confederation of Human Worlds. That enabled the nation-states of Atlas when they weren't at war with one another, to easily export their products to other worlds. Gradually it dawned on the politicians of Atlas that if they could attain a state of peace among themselves, no matter how uneasy, everyone would prosper. To that end it was agreed to form a League of Nations that would represent the interests of all the nation-states and, it was hoped, settle their differences amicably. The League had sat at New Granum since the end of the war that had established the Union of Margelan as the most potent military power on Atlas—Lavager's predecessor once removed had demanded that as a major concession for peace.

The League of Nations was a league in name only and its success at keeping the peace had been limited at best.

“Daddy, will there be another war?”

Lavager did not answer immediately. While he often entrusted secrets of state to his daughter whom he secretly hoped might someday succeed him, there were things he would never tell her. “Probably,” he admitted at last. “But,” he added, “I have a plan.”

“Daddy, the other day Beresford Tuchman stood up in the League and said that Margelan is not a state with an army but an army with a state. Everyone believes there's another war coming and that you will start it. The League is a joke.”

Lavager laughed. “They've been saying that about us for years, Candie. Yes, the League has not been very effective, but it gives all the nation-states of Atlas a forum. That's important. But Candie, I live long enough I am going to impose peace on this world. I'll do it by force if I have to but I prefer another method.”

“Which is?”

“Ummm. I have something up my sleeve.” Candace could not see her father’s smile in the dark.

“Can you tell me?”

“Nope. It’s something I’m working on.” The silence between him and his daughter grew pregnant.

“Damned fine cigar,” he said at last.

“Daddy!”

“I’m developing something in our labs, and once it’s ready I’m going to use it to impose order and tranquility on this world, and that is all I can tell you about it now, Candace.” She cocked her head. Her father used her proper name only when he was very serious. “This information must remain between me and a few others—and you never even heard what I just told you.” What concerned Lavager most about his daughter’s knowing too much was not that she would tell anyone—he knew from experience he could trust her with the most sensitive secrets—but the possibility of her being kidnapped and subjected to any one of many methods used to extract information from unwilling sources. A realist, he knew that if he couldn’t prevent that from happening at least he could keep safe what he was doing in his research laboratories.

“A weapon,” Candace snorted, a statement, not a question.

“Yes, of a sort.” Lavager smiled. “Look, figure the politics. Our ambassador to the Confederation of Human Worlds recently filed a dozen dispatches reporting how a number of member worlds in the Confederation feel uneasy about our intentions in this sector of Human Space. We sit astride an economic lifeline here on Atlas. They’re afraid that if someone succeeds in unifying Atlas he’ll create a shipping bottleneck in these spacelanes and attempt to extract stiff tolls. As they see it, keeping us each other’s throats is in their best interests. So until I’m ready to show my hand, I’ve got to keep my plan under wraps.”

“I understand,” Candace conceded.

Lavager put his arm around his daughter again and drew her close. “When the time is right—Well, I’d like a ham and cheese sandwich before bed. Care to join me?”

The pair stood and Lavager led the way back toward the house, followed silently by the presidential security team. In the sky overhead another meteor flashed brightly before disappearing over the horizon.

CHAPTER

ONE

**Fourth Force Recon Company, Fourth Fleet Marines, Camp Howard, Marine Corps Base Camp
Basilone, Halfway**

“ ’Toon, ten-hut!”

The Marines of second platoon, Fourth Force Recon Company snapped to attention at the command from their platoon sergeant Gunnery Sergeant Alf Lytle.

“Section leaders, report!”

“Squad leaders, report!” first section leader Staff Sergeant Suptra commanded in turn.

“First squad, all present and accounted for!” Sergeant Jak Daly shouted. His three Marines stood at attention a rank to his left.

“Second squad, all present and accounted for!” Sergeant Wil Bingham and his three men were directed to first squad’s left.

The four Marines of third squad were also present. Fourth squad would have completed the fourth rank of second platoon, but it was on a deployment, running a reconnaissance mission for the armory. Only the four Marines of fifth squad were present from second section; sixth, seventh, and eighth squads, along with their section leader, were on a mission in support of a peacekeeping operation somewhere else. All seven members of the platoon’s sniper squad were present in the third rank, as reported by the squad leader, Staff Sergeant Athon.

Once the reports were complete, Gunny Lytle faced about and Lieutenant Tevedes, the platoon commander, marched toward him. Lytle raised his hand in a sharp salute and announced, “Second platoon, all present and accounted for, sir!”

“Thank you, Platoon Sergeant,” Tevedes said, returning the salute. “You may take your place.”

“Aye aye, sir.” Lytle executed an about-face and marched to his position two paces in front of

Lieutenant Tevedes looked with pride at his Marines—*his* Marines. He'd previously served as platoon sergeant and a platoon commander in a Fleet Initial Strike Team, a FIST. Before that he'd been first a reconman, then a squad leader in Seventh Force Recon Company. This was his first command in Force Recon, and he looked forward to the day when his entire platoon would be sent out on a mission. Individual-squad and multi-squad deployments in support of Confederation army units or the armed forces of Confederation member worlds were the bread and butter of Force Recon, but platoon-size missions were nearest to the hearts of the platoon commanders; those missions were when they got to demonstrate that they could do more than train their Marines and provide them with mission planning and support, that they could successfully lead them in harm's way.

"I'm sure you will be happy to hear that sixth, seventh, and eighth squads have completed the phase of the peacekeeping mission with the army and will rejoin the platoon in a couple of weeks," Tevedes said.

The Recon Marines were too well disciplined to show a reaction, though they'd been looking forward to the return of the three squads—by tradition, when two or more squads returned from deployment, the entire platoon was given a week's leave.

"That's what I thought," Tevedes deadpanned at their stone-faces. "Fourth squad is still bogged down trying to instruct the army on the difference between unconfirmed reports and the hard intelligence generated by Force Recon, so it'll be a while yet before they come home."

That brought out snickers from several of the Force Recon Marines and hoots from one or two. "Leave it to the doggies to not know the difference," someone murmured just loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Quiet in the ranks," Gunny Lytle said out of the side of his mouth.

"In other company news," Tevedes continued as though there hadn't been an interruption, "first platoon is deploying on a six-month training mission to Carhart's World, where they will establish a recon school and train the first generation of instructors for a new Carhart Armed Forces special forces reconnaissance unit. Add in travel time and whatever bureaucratic nonsense they'll have to deal with when they arrive on Carhart's World, and they'll probably be gone for seven months or longer. In the unlikely event that any of you don't understand the significance of first platoon's extended absence, it means there will probably be additional deployments for the rest of the company for the duration of that deployment."

There was little reaction to that news; as much as half of the company was on deployment at any given time anyway, and it wasn't all that unusual for a squad to have as little as two or three weeks Standard, between deployments, though the normal rest and training period was at least two months Standard, and occasionally five or six months.

"The same squads from third and fourth platoons that were on deployments the last time I gave you an update are still on deployment, but I don't imagine we much care about when they're due back, n

unless it interferes with our coming leave.” Tevedes was right, his Marines were more interested in what they would be doing until sixth, seventh, and eighth squads returned.

He gave his platoon a bland look that could be interpreted as, “Don’t ask me,” then said out loud, “Everyone who’s been in Force Recon long enough has run into a situation where you didn’t expect to need a sniper, but suddenly you do. So we are going to spend the next two weeks on the range, where we will all fire sniper weapons for orientation and qualification.”

This again was the kind of announcement that didn’t provoke an overt reaction. They all knew that if a mission didn’t require a sniper, the squad or squads that went on it didn’t take sniper weapons with them either, so the training didn’t make much sense. But it was an opportunity to fire—and qualify with—more weapons, and the Marines all enjoyed spending time on the range.

“Commander Obannion,” Tevedes continued, “told me that came from very much higher-higher. Which probably meant Obannion, the company commander, got the orders from Lieutenant General Indrus, the commanding general of Fourth Fleet Marines. “So get ready to head for the range. You know what that means. We leave at oh-dark-thirty tomorrow morning. Transportation will be provided. Platoon Sergeant, dismiss the platoon.”

“Aye aye, sir!” Lytle responded. He saluted Tevedes, who returned the salute, about-faced, and marched toward the company office.

Lytle waited until the lieutenant was halfway there, then faced the platoon and said, “You heard the man. Get your asses into the barracks and get ready to go play bang-bang with weapons most of you will never use.”

Camp Hathcock Controlled Ranges, MCB Camp Basilone, Halfway

Camp Hathcock, like Camp Howard, was a small part of Confederation Marine Corps Base Camp Basilone. Camp Basilone itself sprawled over more than eighty thousand square kilometers, which was far more space than was required for the headquarters of a Fleet Marine Force and its attendant units. But Camp Basilone was also home to the Marine Corps Combat Development Center, where new tactics and most Marine-specific weapons and equipment were developed and tested—when six or seven FISTs assembled to run war games together, or in opposition to each other, they needed prodigious amounts of space to play in. Terrain and weather were also a consideration, and Camp Basilone provided a full range from semitropical swamp through desert, temperate forest, and savannah, all the way to alpine. The installation also included several built-up areas, ranging from rural villages to a mock-up of a major metropolis—every one of which could be used for live-fire training for the full panoply of Marine Corps weapons.

Camp Hathcock was the smallest of the “camps” that made up Camp Basilone, only five kilometers deep by ten wide, backed up against the Veridian Ocean, but its area of influence via firepower was far larger: Air and sea craft were banned for a distance five kilometers to its sides and twenty kilometers beyond the shore.

Warrant Officer Jaqua, Fourth Force Recon Company’s training officer and range master, was read

for the platoon's recon squads when they reached the range. Masers slung over their shoulders, Staff Sergeant Athon and his sniper squad stood in a rank behind him.

The four squads of second platoon available for that training evolution formed up in front of the company training officer the same as they had for morning formation behind the barracks.

Jaqua stood, hands clasped behind his back, casually looking them over. "I know," he said before his inspection could make anybody uncomfortable, "that most of you have already done orientation and firing of various sniper weapons. A couple of you have even fired all of them. But not one of you has fired any of them for qualification. We are going to spend the next two weeks correcting that deficiency."

Jaqua could say "deficiency" without giving offense; in addition to his Distinguished Blasterman and hand-blaster Expert badges, his chest bore the uncommon Expert Sniper badge with the scarlet pips that indicated he'd qualified at that level with all three of the sniper-specific weapons.

"We aren't going to overwhelm you with firing all of our weapons at once; we only have two weeks and that's barely long enough to familiarize you with them. Instead, we will spend the first week concentrating on learning the maser. On Friday, you will fire the maser on the qualification range. Next week you will spend four days firing the mid-range projectile rifle and the long-range sabot. Next Friday, if you feel sufficiently comfortable with either of them, you will fire it for qualification."

He raised a hand to stop the groans of protest he expected and quickly added, "If you qualify with any of these weapons, that qualification will be entered in your Service Record Book and you will be authorized to wear the appropriate badge. If you fail to qualify with any weapon you fire for qualification, that failure will *not* be entered into your service record. There is no requirement in the Basic Reconman MOS for qualification with sniper weapons, so it wouldn't be fair to officially note any failure to do so. But qualifying with additional weapons will look good in your record."

He smiled. "Besides, some of you might decide you like firing sniper weapons and want to apply for sniper school. Force Recon can always use new snipers who have prior experience as reconmen."

"Now, I'll hand you over to Staff Sergeant Athon and his snipers for basic orientation." He made an about-face. "Staff Sergeant Athon, front and center!"

"Sir!" Athon sharply stepped in front of Suptra and saluted.

"Staff Sergeant, take command of the trainees," Jaqua said before he cut his salute.

"Aye aye, sir!" Athon held his salute until Jaqua cut his and marched away, then stood with his feet at shoulder width and his hands on his hips, and ordered, "Lance Corporal Dwan, position!"

First sniper team's Lance Corporal Bella Dwan broke formation and came to stand one pace to Athon's left. She showed her teeth to the Marines of second platoon in a grin. Her grin was no more friendly than that of a hungry shark.

“Lance Corporal Dwan,” Athon said to second platoon, “will explain to you the operation and capabilities of the M14A5 sniper maser. She won’t go into any great detail about how it functions, but none of you have the advanced degrees in physics you’d need to understand them.”

“Lance Corporal.” He stepped aside.

Bella Dwan was petite and had what on another woman might be called an elfin face—as long as one didn’t look into her eyes. The other Marines of Fourth Force Recon Company were about equally divided as to whether, if she was seen off base in nice civilian clothes, she would look more like somebody’s kid sister or like someone worth pursuing as a woman. But they all knew better—and no Marine who knew her ever saw her as a woman to pursue, much less as anybody’s kid sister. Her eyes were cold and hard, and had made many a strong man excuse himself and depart for other environments. They called her the “Queen of Killers.”

Dwan was a very unusual Marine. She was still under thirty and not yet through her first eight-year enlistment, which was the only excuse her chain of command had for not offering her a meritorious promotion to corporal. She was qualified as Expert with blaster, hand-blaster, and most sniper weapons. She wasn’t qualified as Expert with the maser because she had surprised the competitive shooting community by earning the treasured Distinguished designation with the maser after only three years of part-time shooting in authorized competitions.

Dwan unslung her maser and held it across her body at port arms. “This is the M14A5 sniper maser,” she said, in a voice only slightly less elfin than her face. The weapon was little more than a meter long. Its rear half resembled the buttstock and firing group of the standard blaster carried by Marine infantrymen and Force Recon. Forward of that, the “barrel” group was a dull metal cylinder about three centimeters in diameter sitting in a short, knobby, wood forestock for almost its entire length. The barrel was slotted at regular intervals. Midway along the cradle, a handgrip dropped down. The “muzzle” tapered to a point, circled by a series of tightly spaced rings that diminished in diameter as they approached the point.

“The M14A5 sniper maser is an electrically operated, tightly focused, single-shot, shoulder fired microwave weapon. It has a maximum immediate kill range of two hundred meters, and a maximum effective kill range of four hundred meters.” Her grin broadened. “It can cause sunstroke at nearly a kilometer and severe sunburn at a klick and a half.”

Then her smile tightened. “The M14A5 is a very quiet weapon. Someone with keen hearing can possibly detect it at a distance as great as five meters, but no farther. It fires a tightly focused pulse of high-intensity microwaves. A three-quarter-second pulse, at two hundred meters or less, striking a human target anywhere from the crown to mid-thigh, will kill before the full pulse has completed. To kill at four hundred meters, the entire three-quarter-second pulse must hit in the same point somewhere between top of head and groin.

“The wave is so tightly focused—don’t ask how, I don’t understand the physics any better than you do—that it is virtually undetectable by any surveillance device not directly in its path. When the target is killed, it drops straight down and shows no external sign of being shot.”

Her grin became wider than ever. “Gentlemen—that means you, Marines!—that means a sniper who is good enough at snooping and pooping can kill his—or,” she cleared her throat, “*her* target without being discovered.

“Now, I know most of you badassess are Expert Blastermen, accustomed to firing plasma bolts at targets as much as a klick away and hitting them nine times out of ten, so you may be wondering what’s so difficult about firing a weapon that can kill only up to four hundred meters.

“It’s that three-quarter-second pulse. There isn’t any recoil, or not much, but you have to maintain a solid lock on your aiming point for that entire three-quarters-second. You might be surprised at how many Marines can’t.”

Lance Corporal Wehrli from second squad raised his hand. When Dwan acknowledged him, he asked, “If that’s so, why doesn’t the maser have a stabilizing system?” He gritted his teeth when she gave him a you’re-cute-when-you-ask-dumb-questions look.

“Weight and noise,” she said. “Snipers have to be able to move slowly and silently. That means carry nothing you don’t absolutely need. And every stabilizing device makes noise, no matter how slight. The maser gets heavier if it has enough shielding to silence the stabilizer. The more weight a sniper carries, the more chance he or she has of making noise. A silent sniper *makes* kills, a noisy sniper *gets* killed. It’s that simple.”

Dwan looked about, but nobody else raised a question, so she continued her lecture.

“Aiming is easy. You look through the optical sight, lock on target, and squeeze. The M14A5 is a line-of-sight weapon, and is unaffected by wind, weather, or gravitational effect within its effective kill-range. Which doesn’t mean it isn’t affected over ranges measured in thousands of kilometers, but that effect’s from solar winds and Jovian-sized gravity wells. And by the time the waves travel that far, they’re so dispersed it really doesn’t matter.

“The basic elements of firing apply, BRASS: Breathe, Relax, Aim, Slack, Squeeze.” She looked about for more questions, but when none immediately came, Staff Sergeant Athon stepped forward and took over.

“You all know the range routine for new weapons,” he told second platoon. “I have all six of my snipers here, and there are twenty-three of you. Each of my people will take a squad, Sergeant Gossn will take the command element. They will give you dry-firing instruction, supervised by Gunner Jaqu and myself. We’ll go right down the line. First squad, you go with Lance Corporal Dwan. Second squad—”

“Come on, big boy,” Dwan said, stepping close enough to slap Daly on the shoulder. “Bring your kiddies with you.” She marched toward a section of the firing line a hundred meters distant and didn’t bother looking back to see if first squad followed—she knew they would.

Daly pursed his lips at the undue, almost insubordinate, familiarity of the “big boy” and should’ve slapped—not to mention the insulting “kiddies”—but Bella Dwan was allowed to get away with minor infractions and insults, she was that good at what she did. Besides, like everybody else in the

company, Daly was wary of her and didn't want to do anything that might provoke her anger; she wasn't known as "the Queen of Killers" just because of the look in her eyes. Everyone knew how she had earned the name.

With twenty-seven confirmed kills to her credit, she had more than any other woman sniper in the Confederation military—more than most male snipers, for that matter. But that wasn't why the men of the Fourth Force Recon Company were wary of her.

A tall, strikingly handsome, and drunk—that's important, he was drunk—Marine who thought himself irresistible to women hadn't believed pixie-faced Bella Dwan when she repeatedly told him "no." Nor had he taken her seriously when she had told him he was about to lose the hand he put on an inappropriate portion of her anatomy. When he took further action with his inappropriately placed hand, so did she.

The navy doctors who operated on him successfully regenerated a new hand to replace the one Dwan had removed from the inappropriate part of her anatomy. But as a permanent reminder to him that when a woman repeatedly says "no," she really means it, they only regenerated one of his testicles.

The court martial board that tried him took his drunkenness into consideration and only gave him a General Discharge for Disciplinary Reasons instead of several years of hard time and a Bad Conduct Discharge for attempted rape. Of course then-PFC Bella Dwan had also taken his drunken state into consideration in refraining from killing him.

The court martial board that tried then-PFC Dwan found her not guilty of assault and battery, aggravated assault, assault with a deadly weapon (her hands and a knife she was carrying in a thigh sheath), and several other charges, on the basis that she acted in self-defense and showed reasonable restraint.

And Bella Dwan *never* encouraged other Marines to make advances, or made advances herself. So the men she served with were always very careful with her.

Dry firing was an exercise all of the Marines had repeated many times since they first trained on the range in Boot Camp on Arsenault. Take a solid shooting position. Draw a solid sight picture on the target. Control breathing to steady the sights on the aiming point. Gently squeeze the trigger until the firing mechanism goes off and a plasma bolt, projectile, or beam moves downrange at the target. Keep the sights pinned on the aiming point all the while you're squeezing.

It's called "dry" firing because it's done with an empty weapon. Do the same thing with a loaded weapon and it's called "live" firing. During his dozen years in the Marine Corps, Sergeant Jak Daly had done countless hours of dry firing on all kinds of individual weapons. Dry firing wasn't as particular fun, but he knew it helped him get his first round on target when he finally got to live-fire the weapon—and getting that first shot on target, that *was* fun.

On the range master's command, Daly lowered himself into a solid prone firing position and

swiveled the butt of the maser into his shoulder. Through the maser's sights he found the target, simple 40-mm bull's-eye target fifteen meters distant, and aimed at the center of the smallest circle. A laser pointer that closely matched the weight and balance of a maser's power pack was used in the maser for dry firing. In the sights, the red dot jiggled around Daly's aiming point until he let out his breath, then it steadied down. The dot slowly spiraled until it settled where he wanted it, though it continued to move in a small circle, mostly inside the 5-cm bull's eye. He gave the trigger a steady squeeze until the red dot brightened, indicating the maser had fired. He kept the trigger back for a count of one-thousand, which he estimated was about three-quarters of a second, then let it go.

The circle described by the dot hadn't moved more than a millimeter or two during firing.

"Not bad, big boy," Dwan's voice said from too close to Daly's ear. "Your target's got some serious sick bay time ahead of him. If his doctors are good enough, they might even be able to figure out what he came down with a high fever."

Startled by her closeness, Daly rolled to the side away from her and jumped to his feet.

"What do you mean, 'sick'?" he demanded. "I was dead on for the whole time."

Dwan nodded. "Mighty fine shot—with a blaster, or any projectile weapon." She looked from the target and rose on her toes to lean close to his face, staring harshly into his eyes. "That much movement might cook an organ, but you need to hold steadier to cause severe enough trauma for a clean kill. Let me show you what I mean."

Dwan took the maser from his grasp and dropped into a modified sitting position, with her elbows locked on the insides of her knees instead of her knees tucked into her armpits, and aimed; Daly assumed the modification was because of her short stature. He studied the way she sat, he didn't think the flesh over any of the arteries in her arms was in contact with her knees; her pulse wouldn't affect her aim.

"Watch the target, not me," she ordered.

Daly jerked his eyes from her to the target. The red dot on the target didn't look like it was moving at all, not even when it briefly brightened.

"That's what we mean by 'steady,'" she said, hopping to her feet and shoving the maser at him. He grabbed it just as she let go of it. "Now try it again." She stepped back so he could resume his firing position.

Daly dropped into a sitting position, but Dwan nudged his shoulder with a knee. "Stick with your form for now," she told him. "It's easier."

Daly shot her a glance, but did as she said. He paid more attention this time to the almost imperceptible movements caused by the blood pulsing through his arteries, and shifted his position slightly so those points weren't in contact with anything. He chided himself mentally as he took air; he'd learned on the range in Boot Camp how tiny pulses in the arms and legs could be transmitted to a weapon and throw off one's aim; he should have realized they'd have more effect on a weapon than

needed to have a tighter lock on its impact point.

This time his aim was steadier. The dot didn't hold as tightly as Dwan's had, but the bobble was less than a millimeter.

"Is that good enough?" he asked, rolling to the side and looking up.

But Dwan was no longer there; she was five meters away, leaning over Lance Corporal Wazzer, giving the junior reconman instruction.

Daly shot a glare at her, but quickly wiped it off his face; he didn't want the Queen of Killers to see it. He resumed his firing position and tried again. After a few more shots, his dot held steady within its own diameter on every shot.

"If you can do just as well sitting and kneeling," Dwan suddenly said, "that's good enough to qualify as Marksman."

Daly rolled halfway to the side and looked over his shoulder. She was standing between his wide spread feet, looking downrange.

"How long have you been there?" he asked.

"Long enough." She looked down at him. "Your Marines needed more attention than you did. You're pretty good, big boy. Try the sitting position now." She gracefully stepped from between his feet.

Daly swiveled up and around until he was sitting with his feet spread wide and his knees up. He pulled the maser into his shoulder and leaned forward until his armpits slid into position on top of his knees—the sitting position he'd been taught on the range in Boot Camp, the position he'd used for firing for qualification a dozen times since.

Suddenly, Dwan was on her knees next to him, forcing her fingertips between his armpit and knee pads up. "Hold still," she snapped as she wiggled her fingers to where she wanted them. She held them there for a couple of seconds, then pulled her hand out.

"No good, you've got a pulse on bone, you won't be able to hold your aiming point. Remember how I sat? You should, you were eye-fucking me hard enough. Try it."

Daly remembered and turned red at her comment. "I wasn't eye-fucking you, Lance Corporal," he snarled, "I was studying your firing position."

She sniffed. "Call it what you will, I saw you."

Daly didn't confront Dwan further, but slid his feet forward a few centimeters and straightened his back until his elbows were inside his knees. The position felt odd.

"Now try it."

He steadied himself and aimed. The dot moved more than it had when he was prone, but not much as the first time he tried prone.

“That’s better, big boy,” Dwan said, and clapped him on the shoulder. “Keep practicing.” Then she moved on.

By the end of the day, Daly had spent two hours in each of the three firing positions used for qualifying with the maser. Dwan declared him good enough to qualify as Marksman, the lowest of the three noncompetition qualification rankings.

By the end of the week his proficiency had improved to the point where he was able to qualify as Sharpshooter with the M14A5 maser—he missed Expert by only two points out of two hundred.

The weapon Sergeant Jak Daly found most interesting the next week was the M111 sabot rifle with 10X optical sight. Unlike the M14A5 maser, the M111 had stabilizers in its forestock that the barrel rested on. The M111 was designed for long-range sniping: It fired a fin-stabilized 8-mm projectile with a maximum effective range of one kilometer and a kill range several times that—even though a hit at three clicks would be due as much to luck as to skill, a hit in a vital spot would still kill at that distance.

“Never, *never* snipe with the M111 at less than five hundred meters!” Staff Sergeant Athol cautioned. “It makes a loud *boom* and has a fairly large muzzle-blast fireball. A sniper using the M111 needs that five hundred meters to have a chance of escaping whoever—or whatever—comes for him after he fires. A full click is better: The rifle’s report probably won’t be heard at that distance, and the fireball won’t be seen by anybody who isn’t looking in the shooter’s direction.”

Daly qualified Expert with the M111. He chose not to fire the M2Z mid-range projectile rifle for qualification; two new qualifications were enough for now.

CHAPTER

TWO

Ramuncho's Restaurant, New Granum, Union of Margelan, Atlas

For Jorge Lavager, the Union of Margelan's leader and a representative to the Atlas League of Nations, dining at Ramuncho's in New Granum during work hours could be an ordeal, because everywhere he went the press was sure to follow. And in these times when the nations of Atlas seemed on the verge of a war that many commentators and politicians claimed would threaten the precious trade routes of the Confederation of Human Worlds in the Atlas Sector, reporters swarmed like bees about a honeycomb whenever Lavager appeared in public. So he dined during the off hours or late at night when business kept him in town, often in a back room reserved for his use, and always with friends.

To the great consternation of Franklin al-Rashid, his Chief of Security, Lavager had dismissed his bodyguards that night. "I can take care of myself," the old soldier told his security officer, patting the sidearm he always carried beneath his tunic.

"Sir, one of these times—" al-Rashid began. Lavager was a security chief's worst nightmare, always taking chances and never listening to sound advice.

"Not tonight, Franklin. Now go home, leave us to our dinner and cards."

After that night's dinner, cards consisted of some hands at the ancient game of Hearts. Since they were lieutenants together, Lavager and his Army Chief of Staff, General Locksley "Locker" Ollweiler had enjoyed a friendly competition seeing who could lay the queen of spades on the other. Just then Lavager had the two of clubs in this hand, so it was his lead. On the deal he had not gotten the right suits to take all the points to "shoot the moon" and pile twenty-six points on the other players' score so he had deliberately shorted himself in clubs to break hearts first chance and maybe get away without taking any points at all. Henri Parrot, the Minister of Finance, had passed him the queen and the two of spades and the jack of hearts. He glanced sharply at the minister, who grinned behind his hand. The dreaded queen and two were the only spades in Lavager's hand!

Locksley shifted his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other, folded his cards into the palm of one hand and slowly rearranged them.

Lavager led the two of clubs. Locksley regarded his hand carefully before following suit, then took the first trick with the ace of clubs. He then led the ten of spades. Lavager played the two. He hoped someone besides Locksley would take the trick and then lead clubs, so he could drop the queen, but the old General took that hand as well. Lavager felt a sinking sensation in his stomach because he knew Locksley would lead a spade next, fishing for the queen and hoping he could make one of the others eat her and take the thirteen points that would add to their score.

Grinning evilly, Locksley next led the jack of spades. “Goddamn you, Locker!” Lavager shouted, slapping down the queen because he had no more spades and, according to the rules of the game, had to follow suit. Subsequently he took twenty of the twenty-six points that made the hand.

“Locker, how the hell did you know I was short on spades?” Lavager asked, shuffling for the next hand. He glanced at the score pad. He had eighty-seven points, Locksley none, Henri three, and Attorney General Fitz Cennedry, ten. Thirteen more points and Jorge Lavager would be out and Locksley would be the winner.

“I didn’t. I’ve just been doing that for the past thirty years, just like you short yourself in a suit so you can unload points on me.” Ollwelen grinned, puffing contentedly on his cigar. Often in the games neither Locksley nor Lavager won because their main concentration was on screwing each other, not winning the game, even though they played for money—a credit a point.

“Locker, I ought to put your ass back in the grass, remind you what’s important in this life.”

“Did you hear that?” Locksley turned to the attorney general. “Just another example of how power goes to the heads of politicians in this nation of ours—send a man off to war just so he can win the cards.”

“War? Did I hear someone say ‘war’? May I quote you on that?”

All heads snapped toward the door to the main dining room. There stood grinning none other than Gus Gustafferson, Galactic News Network’s chief correspondent on Atlas.

“How the hell did you get in here?” Lavager asked. “Why aren’t you in bed with some animal at this hour?”

Gustafferson made an airy gesture with one hand. “Ramuncho’s gone home and I gave a note to the waiter.” He waved a wad of credits in one hand and stepped unbidden into the room, making a show of waving the cigar smoke away from his face.

“Gutsy,” Lavager said, “you could very easily get yourself shot busting in here like this.” The reporter’s nickname, one he hated but one Lavager delighted using, was “Gutsy Goofy,” bestowed on him because he’d do anything to get a story and because his big ears and huge nose made him look stupid. He wasn’t. What he was was an insistent, argumentative, opinionated interviewer who never allowed the facts of an issue to override his preconceived ideas.

“You can’t shoot me, sir, members of the media are immune to assassination.”

“Yeah, just like you’re ‘immune’ to the truth,” Attorney General Cennedry commented sourly.

“How many billions of people have you misinformed this week, Gutsy?” Locksley asked.

Gustafferson grimaced. “Touché, General. What’s this I hear about you going to war?” He made a show of activating his personal comp.

“Turn that damned thing off!” Cennedry snapped.

Gustafferson made a show of deactivating his comp and putting it away. “I have a good enough memory,” he murmured. “Statement?” he asked aloud, looking inquiringly at each of the officials, holding out a fist as if it were a microphone, coming back to Lavager and smiling. “Anybody care to talk about the imminent failure of your Five-Year Plan?” He bowed toward the Minister of Finance, who scowled. “What’s going on out at that place near Spondu?” The question was delivered like a cannonball, and it was instantly clear why Gustafferson was there at that hour.

Despite himself, Lavager stiffened. The facility called the “Cabbage Patch” was a high-security research center in the mountains near the town of Spondu, about forty kilometers northeast of New Granum. “That’s a top secret government facility, Gutsy. No comment. You know that.”

“But Excellency,” Gustafferson shifted now into his falsely obsequious mode, “Everyone’s talking about a new superweapon you’re developing out there. One you’re going to deploy to propel Atlas into the Confederation’s economy.”

“Only because you’ve been feeding everyone that crap for the past six months, Gutsy,” Perrin replied. “What we have at Spondu is an agricultural research center.”

“Uh huh. Sure it is. It just *used* to be a weapons research facility.”

“Things change, Gutsy,” Lavager said as calmly as he could. “You know that. Hell, you change faces all the time in your stories.”

Gustafferson ignored the jibe. “Come on, Jorge, an interview? Just fifteen minutes of your time?”

Lavager was not the kind of man who insisted on etiquette in his relationships with people, but the way Gustafferson used his first name was intended to insinuate a close personal relationship that didn’t exist.

“See my Director of Public Affairs and take your place in line, Gutsy. When your number comes up, sure, fifteen minutes. Now get out of here. This is a private gathering and it’s late.”

“You don’t have a private life, Excellency,” Gustafferson said, grinning, but he turned to the door and left the room.

“Jorge, if you’d kept your security team on duty he’d never have gotten in here,” the Attorney General said.

“Yeah, well,” Lavager stared after Gustafferson, momentarily lost in thought, “those guys have a hard enough job as it is without me keeping them up all night to watch over our game. Gentlemen, we’ve got to find out who’s leaking information about the Cabbage Patch. If that guy knows we’re developing something up there, who else knows about it?”

Office of the Director, Central Intelligence Organization, Hunter, Earth

“So, Palmer, my dear fellow, tell us. What is going on in, what is it, the Cucumber Patch . . . ?”

“Cabbage Patch, not ‘cucumber.’ ”

“Quaint name. Speaking of cucumbers, try some of these sautéed Vagarian cucumbers with a slice of this excellent Ciricussian bread. Delicious, I assure you.” He twittered. “That’s probably why I had cucumbers on my mind.”

Palmer Quincy Lowell, Deputy Director for Intelligence, helped himself to the sliced cucumbers and bread generously offered by J. “Jay” Murchison Adams, Director of the Central Intelligence Organization, and ignored the question of the Cabbage Patch while he enjoyed the cool taste of the succulent gourd.

“This wine is exquisite!” Somervell P. “Summy” Amesbury exclaimed. Amesbury functioned as Lowell’s Chief of Staff. The three often lunched together in Lowell’s office at CIO headquarters in the Fargo suburb of Hunter.

“That wine, my dear Somervell, is a specially imported vintage of Katzenwasser ’48, which I received only last week. I was sure you’d appreciate it.” Lowell smiled. He helped himself to a bread-and-cucumber sandwich, delicately wiping his fingers on the monogrammed napkins that were a staple feature on the table at the luncheon gatherings. “Gentlemen, do not overdo it,” Lowell held up his well-manicured forefinger, “we have—I know you’ll simply love this, Palmer!—creme d’collon soup with sherobie crotons as the main course!”

Palmer Quincy Lowell grunted with the pleasure of anticipation: Creme d’collon soup and especially sherobie crotons were a favorite of his and one of the reasons he weighed 170 kilos.

“And for dessert I have the most wonderful sherbet,” J. Murchison Adams announced, taking another bite of his cucumber sandwich. He wiped his lips delicately and sighed. “But now, to business. I have a meeting with the Confederation Security Council tomorrow and I’m sure this business involving Atlas is going to come up. What is going on out there, Palmer? Who’re your sources? And what in Human Space is this ‘Cucumber Patch’ place?”

“Ah, ‘Cabbage Patch,’ old boy. Our source is the chief of the trade delegation on Atlas, of course. He’s a very experienced operative and has spread around quite a bit of money to develop his own stable of reliable informants. You might recall, Jay, a line item in this fiscal year’s budget, quite a sizeable sum—”

Adams waved the comment off impatiently. Budgetary matters, especially contingency funds for agent payments, were of little interest to him. His concept of what the Director of the CIO was focused on was strategic intelligence, not the mundane day-to-day business of administering

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