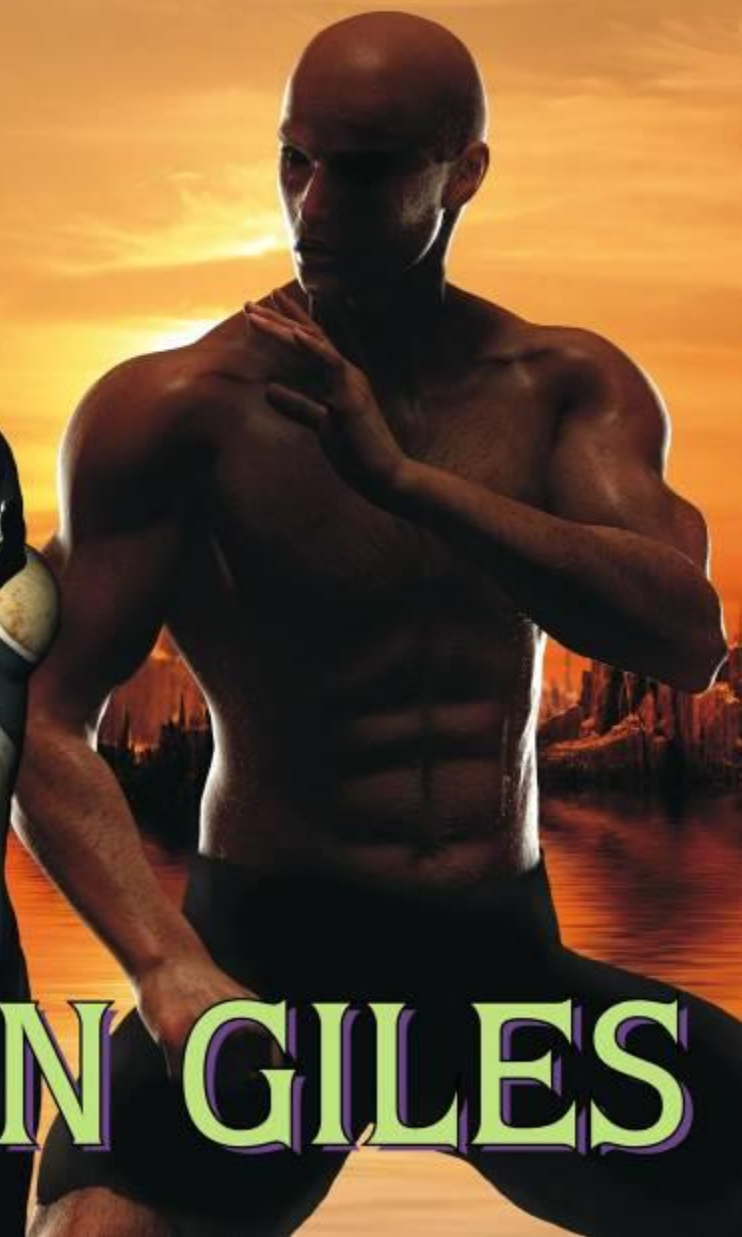


The Tournament

五.辛. 巳庚.丙.亥.癸.



DEAN GILES

The Tournament

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Published by TWB Press

Edited by Terry Wright

Cover Art by Terry Wright

ISBN 978-1-936991-47-1

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by
Dean Giles

Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the other students, I scanned the hundred-metre length of the training hall. Sunlight beamed in through windows that wrapped around the entire building. From the other end, Master strode towards us, past murals of ancient warriors painted on the stone walls, and racks of weapons: spears, swords, sticks, and chains. This time I wasn't going to get my ass kicked.

I took a calming breath of air tainted with the smells of floor varnish and stale sweat. Students cheered Master's arrival. The old man followed the time-honoured ways and wore traditional gung-fu garments, a purple tunic and loose fitting black trousers. When he moved, his clothes snapped, a hint at the power this man could generate.

I glanced at Zasha standing down the line. The black sash tied around the waist of her orange uniform disguised her powerful frame with delicious curves. She smiled her crooked little smile at me. My only friend in this academy of hard knocks.

Master shouted. "Klay, you're up. Tank, you're up."

Adrenalin pumped through me, hot as the cook fires that burned in the kitchens.

Not Tank. Anybody but Tank.

These sparring sessions were getting tougher, full contact with gloved fists until only one fighter remained standing. Technical knockouts were rare. I'd rather pilot a Class Nine Shuttle with one blown thruster and no servo boost through a dead-man spin. That didn't scare me, but Tank, he was another matter.

His wide mouth curled into a wicked sneer that revealed his pleasure in having me as his opponent. His hulking frame bulged with pumped muscles. Shovel-sized fists clenched and opened in anticipation of bludgeoning me to unconsciousness.

I took hold of the rising fear in the pit of my gut. My body was telling me: *fight or run.*

I would fight.

An adrenaline buzz flowed through my veins, heightening my senses. I accepted the challenge with a bow to Master. The students cheered and broke ranks.

Zasha rushed to my side, touched my shoulder, and whispered into my ear. “You can take him. Remember, bend like the wind. You are faster, stronger, and fitter.”

I repeated her words in my head: *faster, stronger, fitter, bend like the wind*. But Tank possessed some things I didn’t have, a killer instinct and a joy for causing pain.

Under a barrage of chants: “Tank, Tank, Tank,” I stepped to the fighting mat.

“Don’t listen to them, Klay,” Zasha shouted. “Klay, Klay, Klay.”

Students surrounded the mats. Their furore grew. “Tank, Tank, Tank.”

To hell with them.

I faced my opponent and held Tank’s stare. His solid eyes burned with hatred for me and my kind. He stood a full head taller than me, one-hundred and thirty kilograms of lean muscle augmented with military-issue strength builders. His forearms were covered in needle marks where he had injected the nano-machines that fed his muscles additional complex carbohydrates and proteins.

“If you lose,” Master announced, “it is kitchen duty for you. If you win, your name goes on the pick list for Earth Government final trials. Any questions?”

I shook my head and glanced at Zasha. She beamed with pride. Wouldn’t she love to be in my place? The warrior academy could do with twenty more just like her, but zero of me.

Tank growled and shook his bulldog jowls. We were supposed to touch gloves, but he bashed his fists into mine. The recoil almost knocked me out.

“Fight!” Master ordered.

Tank pumped the air with his fists to the chants of his name, feeding off the crowd, like I was no more than a fly in the room.

I took the time to relax my body; I shook my wrists, my hands, and my fingers, loosened up and cleared my mind. *Bend like the wind*. My carbon-impregnated skin cells oozed an alcohol-based form of nano-sweat that would help keep me cool. I wound up my knee joint motors and shifted my weight back and forth, from front leg to back leg.

Tank whipped around and delivered a flying front-kick, his heel aimed square at my face.

I slipped the strike like a shadow and pivoted left. The students’ chants faded from my awareness. Only Tank and I existed.

He attacked with a quick jab. I rolled under it and returned three of my own, two to his exposed ribs and one to his solar plexus.

That got a gasp out of him and a couple swear words Master would not have approved of him uttering.

He powered forward with two heavy hooks, left and right. I jumped back to avoid his sledgehammer blows. But I'd backed up to the edge of the mat, and with Tank steaming forward, I had no time to recover, just duck.

His fist took out three students behind me.

I revved my knee joint motors and flipped over him.

He swung around and grunted.

I landed on one foot, twisted right, and snapped out a back-kick to his mid-section. Air huffed from his lungs. I sprang backwards, bouncing on the balls of my feet, fists ready.

Tank spit a loogie on the mat. "Come here, you freak." He screamed like a girl and followed up with a side-kick that would have smashed the ribs of any regular human. My tough carbon-enhanced skin absorbed the impact, but I stumbled three steps back.

An ugly smile grew across his face. He lunged in for the kill, lashing out with a flurry of punches.

I ducked. I rolled. I slipped. I saw an opening, and unleashing all my augmented power, I struck out with a right-fisted hook to his chin.

He stopped. He wobbled.

I followed up with two jabs to his throat and a round-kick to his temple.

He stumbled.

Another fist square on his nose knocked him to his knees. He looked up at me with a raw expression of disbelief. All the anger and hatred drained off, now replaced with wide-eyed defeat.

I had won. No need to deliver the final knockout blow. He was finished. I actually felt sorry for him with all that pride, all that bragging now reduced to shame.

The sounds of shouting students crept back into my awareness. I scanned the wrenched faces all around me.

"Get up, Tank... take him apart..."

Zasha's waving arms caught my attention. "Klay!"

I smiled and shoved a victorious fist in the air.

Her face radiated terror. "Look out...behind you."

Comprehension dawned on me like a board slammed across my forehead. I spun

round.

Tank's tree trunk leg flew toward me. His hoggish foot landed squarely on my right knee, followed by the rapid ratchet-clicking sounds of newly stripped joint motors. The malfunction only staggered me, but his bucket-fist to my mouth knocked me to the mat and reacquainted me with the coppery taste of my blood.

I hobbled down the deserted corridor from the kitchens toward my room, savouring the feel of cool, rough stone beneath my bare feet. The sun would be up soon. Around here, losers got kitchen duty. I knew the cooks by their first names.

Inhaling a deep breath, I carried the weight of my existence like a broken toy. No parents. No siblings. No home. The authorities brought me to this place, after the genetic experiments.

People often feared what they didn't understand. They looked down on those who were different. Though most of the students never said anything to my face, I had seen their disdain for me in the flicker of their downcast eyes. I had heard it in their muted conversations as I passed them by. Most had taken a cheap shot at me, one time or another, and they'd even targeted Zasha for being my friend. "Zygote lover," they'd said. I caught a guy once, mouthing off, put him in the hospital.

Even still, I got no respect and remained the butt of all their stupid jokes.

The raw sting of rejection was constant.

My knee joint throbbed with each step, thanks to Tank's blindside kick. My fat lip felt like an Inflate-A-Raft under my nose. Tank and the others could make life miserable for their resident genetic freak, but I wouldn't let them see me suffer.

Doors lined both sides of the corridor. I glimpsed into an open room. Smiling photos covered the walls, family portraits from happy days. Multi-coloured fabrics hung from the ceiling, an extension of the occupier's vibrant personality.

I reached the end of the passageway and pushed open the thin wooden door to my room. My walls told their own story: bare and grey stone. A dark blue sheet hung from a rusted curtain pole to hold back the coming sunrise. My bunk was no more than an inch-thick foam mattress. A single wooden trunk under the window held all my belongings, clothes mostly, a toothbrush, but not a single picture or memento of my past.

But as much as I didn't fit in here, this was my home, a sorry pin-prick of a planet, somewhere south of the lower sector where warriors were trained for intergalactic service. I

had never asked for any of this shit.

I lay down and rubbed my aching muscles. My skin was pale in tone with a subtle metallic texture, impregnated with a complex mixture of carbons entwined into my genetic code. The bioengineers should have made my heart out of the same stuff.

I woke to the sound of hurried footsteps. Zasha skidded into my room barely coming to a stop at my bed.

“Klay, it’s time.”

“Time for what?” I asked with more than a little irritation, sleep’s warm embrace fast becoming a cold memory.

“You’re going to finally get some real action.”

I pulled the sheet over my head. “I did my kitchen duty.”

“No really. Final trials.”

My heart lurched. The desire for sleep washed off me in an instant. If what she said was true, I would be informed at morning training, so how did she already know? Unless the little sneak... I tossed back the sheet. “You’ve been eavesdropping on Master’s study again?”

“I wish it was my time for final trials.” Her soft voice didn’t mask her seriousness. “I heard him forward a request to the Grand Master that you be recommended for your first assignment.”

If she was right, training was over. I rolled off the bed, dread ploughing through my chest like a mudslide. “I’m not ready for final trials.”

“Of course you are. You beat Tank good.”

I slipped into my robe. “But I didn’t finish him. If I can’t knock out my opponent in training, how can I kill someone in battle?”

“Cause it’s kill or be killed.”

“Yeah, some choice.” I worked my knee joint motors. Few students made it as far as we did, Zasha and I, before their bodies or minds were crushed. To pass the final trials to become an Earth Government warrior was something everyone here aspired to, everyone except me. “Do the others know?”

Zasha showed me her crooked little smile. “I wanted you to hear it first.”

A bang at the door sent a shockwave through me. “Five minutes till roll call, people. Move it!”

She jumped up. “I’ll see you down there in five.”

I sat on the bed. “I’m not going.”

“You must.”

“Tell him I’m sick.”

“Master is not someone you disobey, and AWOL is a cardinal sin. I’m not lying for you, Klay.”

Damn. I couldn’t disrespect Master. He was the only father I’d ever known.

“All right. I’ll be there.”

Training commenced at o-six-hundred with a group-run through the lush forest outside our academy compound. I breathed in sharply and savoured the morning air. Still fighting the dull ache in my knee, I stretched out my strides and cursed Tank with a few of my own choice words.

The rising sun hadn’t yet warmed the soggy trail, and my bare feet made satisfying thuds that flicked cool mud up my legs. Zasha ran close behind me. Our footfalls sounded like a herd of gazelles dashing through a swamp.

The track soon opened up into farmland, an endless expanse of rice fields shimmering in the dawn’s low-angle light, and with it, the promise of another hot summer day. I deliberately thought about the weather instead of the bad news awaiting me back at the academy.

Final trials.

With my knee joint feeling better, I took the lead and passed through an old pasture, provoking the familiar sounds of cattle bells and groaning beasts. The path became an obstacle course of dung piles. Zigging and zagging, I pushed my body hard along the ancient path. Sweat ran into my eyes and blurred my vision.

On the outskirts of a quaint village, I turned towards the mountain. Carved into the grey rock, as high as the eye could see, steps—over seven-hundred of them—climbed the steep grade. Heavy foliage lined each side of the narrow stairs, and a uniform blanket of dark green spread out in both directions. I appreciated the vast beauty around me and felt as if I belonged here, away from the academy and ridicule.

I ascended the stairs two at a time, pulling in deep lungfuls of air, feeding oxygen to my muscles and augmented joint-motors. The others lagged behind, including Zasha. She was no match for my power and speed. If we were ever in battle together, I would fall back and protect her...to the death. Of course, she would tell me she could take care of herself, but

today I'd take my pleasure in beating her to the top of the steps.

As usual, I was first to arrive back at the academy. I soaked my face with cold water and stretched my muscles. Feeling energised, I was ready for training but miles away from ready for a new assignment and final trials. I wished Zasha hadn't told me what she'd overheard. That way I wouldn't have carried my angst around like a rock in my stomach all morning.

The air felt cool inside the training hall. Its high ceiling and stone walls would keep the day's heat at bay. The other students joined ranks on either side of me, Zasha on one far end, Tank on the other. We waited in silence for Master to bow, a formal signal to start the lessons.

I bowed to him knowing that behind those stern eyes a storm was brewing against me.

He paced down the line of students, his trouser legs snapping with each step. "Today you will practice forms with your weapon of choice."

I dared not even breathe when he passed by.

"Choose wisely." He stopped and whipped round in a flourish. "Begin."

Students raced for the wooden rack along the wall. I let the melee subside, strode over, and pulled a metre-long curved sword for myself. The students were quick to give me a wide berth.

Weapon in hand, I felt complete yet off balance. The sword was meant to kill, but in training, I had merely danced with it through the steps and forms of exercise and practice, beautiful in my hands, but deadly when wielded by a true warrior.

The weight of the blade tugged at my shoulder and forearm muscles, flirted with me, and begged me to dance again. I found my place on the mat, two steps and a swing from the nearest student, across the room from Zasha, who stood close enough to Tank to be mistaken for his girlfriend.

And in my mind, the sword and I danced over Tank's cowering hulk. The movements of the form crystallised in my mind like a painting with substance, depth, and vibrant colours. My body moved from one position to the next like flowing water. The sword hissed through the air with each swipe, and my sleeves cracked like a whip with every strike.

I felt alive with energy, as if the wind and the rain and the sun and the moon lived inside me, and all of their powers were at my disposal.

As I entered the fourth stage of the sword-form, Master approached and watched. His sharp eyes on me almost cracked my focus.

A knee bend, a lunge, a spin, repeat.

He gave me an approving nod. "You have learnt well, student Klay." His whisper carried the strength of a Lion's roar. "Your movements translate a deeper understanding, that power is derived not only from physical movement but also from within. If you carry this balance with you in life wherever you go, you will always radiate an illustrious power. I am honoured to witness such beauty."

Back-step. Turn. Swing.

His praise touched me like a father's embrace. It was not something he gave lightly. I fought hard not to lose my flow. I didn't want Master to see my emotional connection to him.

"However, a warrior needs more than skill to survive in battle."

Step, turn...

"I know." *Lunge.* "A warrior must kill without hesitation. I'm a little weak in that area." *Spin, swing.* "In case you haven't noticed."

"I have."

Bend, duck, leg sweep. I fought to restrain a proud smile.

"It is not easy to look into your enemy's eyes as you turn the blade. In defeat even the strongest men are stripped of their beliefs. Underneath his bravery, a warrior is only human."

"Or a genetic freak..." *jab, back-step,* "like me."

"Empathy is a warrior's greatest weakness. Harness it wisely or you will surely die."

Master's advice hit a nerve. He may have thought that I was a good student, yet after all this training, I couldn't kill anyone. Why he hadn't seen me as a failure, I didn't know.

I reached the end of the form exercise and stood at attention before Master. "I will maintain the balance you have so graciously taught me, and I will do what it takes to carry out your wishes, but I am not a killer."

Master looked at me thoughtfully for a moment...then, "In my three-quarter century of life I have learnt to see through a man's words and read what is left unsaid. You tell me what is in your heart, yet you demonstrate to me that you can kill if you must. It is a developed skill, and you have it. You are a killer."

"I am not."

He moved away and talked to another student.

I held the sword at my side like a limp length of rope while his words shock-waved through my brain. Had his iron-hard training methods made me into someone I didn't know, someone I wouldn't recognise?

The shadows grew long in my room. Dust mites floated lazily in the bright rays of the waning day. I was deep in meditation, sitting cross-legged on the floor when a knock on my door jarred me back to reality.

Master leaned in. "A moment?"

I stood, motioned him to come in.

His movements were precise and practiced even in the mundane. The room seemed to half in size, raising the hairs on my neck. He gestured to my bunk. "May I sit?"

I nodded, leery of what was to come. My new assignment, perhaps, the final trial I wasn't ready for.

The springs barely squeaked under his light-weight frame. He took a breath. "I had a family once, many years ago. My wife and three children were taken from me in war. And now, even though many years have passed, I can still see their faces when I close my eyes." Master's thin expression drooped with gloom.

I'd never seen him show emotion. Why was he telling me this?

"My life has been one of solitude since the day they died." His voice vibrated with solemn passion. "Teaching in this facility has brought me some satisfaction. When you were brought to us, it was unclear exactly what you were. Your unusual body enhancements suggested you were bred for war, maybe destined to be a warrior by design."

I sat on the bed next to him. "My destiny should be my own, Master, not by pre-design."

"Sometimes we don't have a say in the path we travel. I took you in, gave you a home."

"You gave me a house of pain."

"But here you excelled, became an excellent pilot, and I taught you the skills you'd need to survive in battle." He sat back and looked at me. "I know my teaching has been harsh, it has had to be that way, you understand? Earth is a brutal place, a seething caldron of hate and killing, nation against nation, religion against religion, man against man. Earth Government warriors have the most dangerous job in the galaxy, trying to keep the peace where peace is not wanted."

"I have no use for such a place."

"But you are fit, nonetheless."

"Yes. I have endured your sharp discipline. My body is flexible and strong from untold hours of exercise and running. I can fly a Class Nine Shuttle upside down through a gopher tunnel. All this training so I could become a warrior, a warrior who cannot kill. I am a

waste of your time, more suited for the kitchen than the battlefield.”

“Even the smallest seed cannot know that it will one day become a might oak.”

“Or a blade of grass,” I countered.

“If that is all you think you are, then that is all you will ever be.”

I dipped my chin to let him know I understood. My destiny may well be out of my control.

“I want to assure you that when you leave here you are always welcome back.” He spoke softly, not a whisper, but as a promise spoken between good friends.

“Am I going somewhere?”

“The time has come for you to embark on your final trials.”

The air left my lungs. I knew the bad news was coming, and still it took me by surprise, that he would actually say the words.

“Your assignment is to bring in Donovan Myer.”

I stiffened. The Butcher of the Beltron System. Most wanted by the Intra-Galactic League. Dead or alive. Preferably dead. Armed and dangerous. Anyone who didn’t know of Donovan Myer lived with their head in a sack. Anyone who went after him never came back. “No thanks. I’ll pass on this one.”

Master inhaled and exhaled louder than necessary. “Very well. Then I shall send Zasha in your place.”

My chest turned to ice. “Not Zasha.”

“Why not? She is eager.”

“Donovan will kill her.”

“Then she fails her final trials...while you are safe in the kitchens.”

I felt inch-worm small. He should stomp on me, squash me for even thinking that I would accept such a trade off. Zasha wouldn’t stand a chance against Donovan Myer. “All right. I’ll go.”

Master smiled. “If you pass, like a Spartan of ancient times, you will join the select group of Earth Government warriors.”

“And if I fail?”

He nodded. “Then you will die.”

I ate breakfast in silence: Rock Chicken eggs and leaf mash on rice bread. My last meal, for all I knew.

Zasha sat across the table from me. She looked lost in thought. I assumed she was trying to figure out how she would tell me goodbye.

“It’s all right,” I said, knowing I had spared her life in exchange for my own.

She looked up at me. Her unexpected smile danced with excitement. “Master came to me last night.”

That caught me off guard. He must’ve told her what I had done to keep her out of harm’s way. “What did he say?”

“My training is over.”

“You too?” This was news to me. Master hadn’t said anything of the kind.

“I’m going on assignment. Final trials.”

I swallowed. “Did he say what assignment?”

“I’m going with you.”

“Oh hell.”

Eros, Pegasus System

The hull creaked as the shuttle vibrated under the forces of re-entry friction. I felt heavy in my seat and activated my joint motors. Zasha, in the seat beside me, groaned under the intense pressure of deceleration. The mother ship shrank in the distance beyond my windscreen. In seconds we'd lose all contact with the academy.

Gravity slammed us through the thickening atmosphere of Eros. Dark grey clouds drew closer and closer until the window was filled with an impenetrable gloom.

“Radar nav,” she said, always the pro, flipping switches that deactivated the autopilot.

I breathed deeply to settle my growing anxiety. At the end of this freefall lay Donovan Myer, probably well aware of our fiery entrance across the sky.

Atmospheric conditions became worse than I expected, bumpy enough to scramble my molars. Though entry had begun well, the intense buffeting seemed destined to tear the shuttle apart.

The radar nav dropped off. Airspeed indicators redlined.

“We're losing it,” Zasha shouted over all the rattling.

I tried to maintain control while deciphering flight computer data streaming across my heads-up display. Judging from the thrashing we were taking, something had miscalculated: the angle of approach during orbit, the thick ozone layer, or the flight programmer's fumble-fingers on the keypads. Whatever the reason, this re-entry wasn't going to end well.

We smashed through a thick layer of rain clouds and broke out into open sky. The reason for the rollercoaster ride became obvious. The console showed winds approaching seven-hundred miles per hour. Hail stones the size of bricks exploded against the shuttle's armour, leaving fist-size dents.

“Shit.”

The shuttle plummeted at horrendous speed, and the greens and reds of the jungle below grew alarmingly fast. I had only enough time to pull up the nose, then nothing...

Left ankle... numb, feels broken... Wrist is twisted sideways... Head hurts real bad. I tried to move but passed out again...

I awoke to pain throbbing through my body. It was pitch black in the cabin, and it took me a second to fully appreciate how dire my situation had become. I switched on the cabin's crimson emergency lights.

Zasha was hanging upside down in her seat. Blood leaked from a gash in her head. I hung from my seat, as well, but it was a full ten metres from its original anchoring and smashed against the communications terminal, which looked busted beyond repair.

The hull appeared intact from where I was hanging. I inspected my torn flight suit and ripped skin, and I appreciated my unusual body augmentations. They had saved my life.

Zasha wasn't so well equipped. If she was dead, I'd personally slice Master's head off for sending her on this assignment with me. The thought surprised me. Master must've known all along that she could be reason enough for me to kill a man.

The seat straps unfastened easily, and I fell from the chair, an arm's reach away from the first-aid kit. I reached out for it, and wincing, grabbed it and crawled to Zasha. Felt her neck. Felt a pulse. Felt relief.

I unsnapped her belt and let her body tumble into my arms. I'd rather be wrestling Tank than holding her this way, limp as a kitchen rag. "Zasha."

Nothing.

I tore into the first-aid kit, grabbed a compress, and applied pressure to her head wound. "Zasha."

Meanwhile, I swallowed a double dose of painkillers. My injuries slowly eased their throbbing, leaving me with a sore head and a bad mood.

We needed help. Without the ship's communication system to link back to the mother ship, I was blind on this godforsaken planet. And stranded. This was no place to call home, just a tangle of jungle and rock, inhospitably hot and infested with mud rats.

I shouldn't have lost control of the shuttle. Flight computers had backups. The fly-by-wire systems had never failed before. If I hadn't known better, I'd have thought Master had sabotaged the controls. Why not? Without a functioning shuttle, capturing Donovan would be harder to accomplish, making our final trials tougher to complete, if not impossible. Still, I

didn't want to believe Master would do that to us, so I settled for *shit happens*.

The shuttle was equipped with everything: ordinance, survey maps, global positioning, survival gear, and an ATV that I hoped wasn't busted to scrap iron.

I pulled myself up to the console. Reds and greens still flashed on the panel, but the main screen was shattered. The computer interface switch was broken, but I managed to move it with my fingernail. "Damage report."

The computer responded: *guidance and communications malfunction, glitch, stabilisers out of sync*, beep, *hull compromised-ddd-dd-dd*.

Zasha's voice. "It's broken beyond repair."

I whipped around.

She'd gotten up on her knees and held the compress with the flat of her hand. Her flight suit was ripped at the elbow, but she still had that crooked little smile for me. "Are you all right, Klay?"

I wanted to hug her and kiss her and tell her I was sorry for crashing the shuttle, but elected on: "Welcome to Eros."

"How are we going to get off this rock?"

"Not with this shuttle." I moved toward her. "But I know where we can get one that works."

"Donovan's?"

"He's reported to be travelling in a Series Eight Drone ship."

"It's faster than this bucket." She pulled the compress off her head, looked at the blood stain, and winced. "How are we going to find him?"

"We'll take the ATV...if it still works."

It took me three hours to pry the eight-wheel ATV out of the crumpled storage compartment. Then Zasha went to work modifying it with more weapons than we'd probably need.

I stood back and appraised her arsenal. The jungle camouflage would help hide the ATV's bulk, visually, but it would never make a convincing stealth vehicle, not with its rumbling engines and rock-crushing weight. If it came down to it though, it was plenty capable of blowing stuff up.

We set off to higher ground. I'd hooked our communication headsets through the ATV's radio system. Zasha drove. I took road lookout, standing behind the roll bar with a

proton cannon at each shoulder. We each carried automatic pistols clipped on our belts.

I pointed uphill. "Go between those trees."

"I see 'em."

The first sign of human tracks were subtle, broken foliage and snapped branches. "Hold up."

Boots on the ground, I took a closer look, spotted half a footprint pointed to the left. "Here it is." I followed the trail.

Zasha idled the ATV along behind me.

At the top of a rise, I stopped. "Binoculars."

She tossed them to me.

I scanned the area, spied a camp. Only access was on foot through a single-track gully to an open stretch of meadow. A cook fire smouldered in front of a small tent. One man moved about.

"I see him."

"I don't like it," Zasha said through my earpiece. "He was too easy to find."

"Don't argue with success."

No other tracks were visible. He was travelling alone. And he was standing out in the open, not too smart for the galaxy's most wanted criminal.

"You're right, Zasha. It might not be Donovan. Scan the area for DNA signatures."

While I stayed low, she waved a triangular-shaped bio-reader back and forth. "It's him. Donovan Myers. Did you see his ship?"

"He must've hidden it somewhere in the area."

"We'll have to take him alive," she said. "Make him tell us where it is."

I thought of another problem. "The controls might be gen-coded to his DNA profile. No Donovan, no ride out of here."

"We can't get close enough to him now." She shut off the ATV. "We'll have to wait until dark."

"Meanwhile, I'll work my way around to his flank."

"Take this with you." She passed me the bio-reader.

I tucked it under my belt. "Stay here and wait for my command to move in."

"If he sees you, shoot to kill, Klay."

"You too."

I set off into the jungle taking a wide angle around the gully to the far side of the meadow. Once I found myself good cover, I sat back to wait for darkness. One thing was

certain. Killing Donovan would leave us stranded on Eros. We had to take him alive or this hellhole would be our home for a long time to come.

Leaning shadows fell across the tangled tree roots and greens of the jungle. It began to darken, and very quickly night was on me. I was within scanning range of the camp and set the bio-reader to wide-scan. The result came back positive. It was Donovan, asleep in the tent, and he was alone.

His tent was a one-man sleeper the same green as the surrounding foliage. He'd positioned it along the gully floor, low ground, which seemed foolish for a man on the run.

Too easily, I spotted a trap. A thick cord marked the perimeter of his camp. I guessed it was a trip for explosives, probably just a decoy for a second trap, a more deadly one.

I scanned again, this time in the infrared. There it was, the second trap, a thin laser beam, invisible to the naked eye and most likely trip-wired to a proton cannon or grenade launcher.

Proximity mines glowed in my infrared viewer, twenty yards from Donovan's camp, an afterthought perhaps, to protect the open space leading to his tent. What other traps he had set I couldn't see. Any one step could be fatal. I gritted my teeth and headed toward the camp. If I could get the drop on him, he'd certainly surrender without a fight.

The first two traps didn't pose a problem. The mines took a little longer to bypass, but I was able to enter the clearing without a sound. My bio-reader told me Donovan was still sleeping. I drew my pistol.

An explosion lit up the area with a blinding flash. The concussion knocked me back ten feet. Only my tough skin augmentation had prevented my legs from being blasted off my torso.

I rolled over into a crouch and swept the pistol back and forth. My hand shook. I had no clue as to what had triggered the explosion. Donovan was one crafty son of a bitch. Flaming vegetation revealed him crawling out of his tent. Though I had him in my sights, I didn't shoot. We needed to take him alive.

Rifle shots cracked from the trees, spitting up a line of dirt in front of me. I leaped to my left narrowly avoiding a chestful of lead. Sprawled on my stomach, I looked for cover but found nothing. What a stupid mistake.

The ATV crashed through the trees, snapping branches like matchsticks and spitting fire from its cannons.

“Zasha.”

She drove up between me and the shooter. “Need a ride?”

“Are you nuts?” I shouted. “There are proximity mines all around here.”

“If you’d rather walk—”

Donovan unleashed a barrage of rapid fire.

I dived behind the ATV. Bullets plinked against the armour plating, ricocheted and zinged over my head. “Damn!” I’d dropped the bio-reader, but I still held my gun, though I doubted I could hit a barn the way my hand was shaking. “Drive toward him and keep those cannons lit. He’ll have to stay low.”

She gunned the ATV into the line of fire. I followed behind on foot, using the fender for cover. Hot adrenalin rushed through every vein in my body. I became acutely aware of every detail around me, the fire, the flickering shadows, and the lack of rifle reports, meaning his head was down.

We had him now.

The gap between us and the edge of the clearing closed fast.

“I see him,” Zasha said. “Dead ahead behind that log.”

I slipped cover and hurdled the felled tree. He saw me, aimed, but I flipped my body in mid-air to give him a moving target. At the half turn, I pointed my gun down at him. One clean shot through his chest would end the battle.

I had no choice.

It was him or me.

Fear suddenly clouded his face, as if he knew I had him, that he only had a second left to live. His hopes, his dreams, everything he stood for, good or bad, suddenly spiralled out of his control. I felt sorry for the dumb bastard. In the time it took me to reflect on his fate, I’d hesitated shooting too long.

I hit the ground rolling and found cover behind meaty undergrowth. *What the fuck?* Master’s words echoed through my head: *Empathy is a warrior’s greatest weakness. Harness it wisely or you will surely die.*

I’d failed, but I was still alive, and that counted for something. Donovan wouldn’t get a second chance.

A massive explosion blew the ATV skyward in a burning arc. Parts flew off into the night. The hulk slammed into the ground and bounced and crashed.

“Zasha,” I shouted.

Static came back. My chest drained to an empty husk.

Fire brimmed from the mess of molten metal, the brutal result of striking a proximity mine.

No Zasha, no!

The cold barrel of a weapon butted against the back of my skull. “You should have taken the shot, rookie.”

“Donovan, you...you killed her.”

He laughed a cold heartless laugh. “I can’t believe they sent a couple fucking recruits after me.”

“I’ll kill you for this.”

He pressed the gun harder. “I think not.”

“Then go ahead.” I didn’t care what it would feel like when the bullet tore into my skull. I’d never see Zasha again anyway. What would life matter without my only friend? “Go ahead and shoot me.”

“You aint gonna get off that lightly. I knew you filth would find me here. I know how you people work. Warriors? You’re a fucking joke.” He twisted the end of the gun, pinching the skin on the back of my neck, and then whispered, “I didn’t come here to hide.”

My mind raced. *The whole thing was a trap. But why had he set himself up as bait?*

Donovan’s grip shifted, and his weapon quickly appeared at the side of my face, a sharp point pressed just above my jaw and below my ear. “You’re fate is going to be worse than death.”

How had it come to this? Zasha was dead. Who knew what this fiend had in mind for me? I needed to find a way out of this mess. Master would expect that much of me.

“You ever heard of DNA matching?” Donovan said with a growl in his throat.

“No,” I growled back at him, not to be outdone.

“It’s a highly illegal form of bio-tech that masks human DNA under a false format. Not even the best bio-reading equipment can detect the mask.”

“That’s not possible.” I looked into his eyes, the eyes of a mad man. “Is it?”

He laughed.

A sharp pain pricked my neck. Burning liquid shot down my spine. The son of bitch had injected me with something, something that turned suddenly cold, freezing my veins.

He withdrew the injector. “At this very moment, nano-machines are tunnelling into your system, programmed with my DNA. Let’s see how you like being me, mother fucker.”

My brain felt like it turned over in my skull. Then nothing...

I awoke on the wrong end of a handheld Proton Cannon. The sooty barrel told me the wielder had no qualms about using it. I didn't recognise him, some ugly oaf; his forehead looked anvil heavy, and his hands could have doubled for sledgehammers. The hum of shuttle engines was unmistakeable. My arms and legs were tied to a Medi-vac gurney. Smooth, windowless walls curved upwards to meet at a dim light fixture that ran the length of the chamber. I wasn't on Eros anymore.

"Where the hell am I?"

Shouting and footsteps followed. Three humans wearing flight suits, two brute males and one plump female, rushed into the chamber. The two males could have been twins; both stood over six-feet high with shaved heads and pronounced eyebrows. They looked like Neanderthals, probably internal bone reinforcements. It would take a serious knock to wobble those thick nuggets.

The two men stopped a few paces away, and after getting a nod from the woman, the cannon-wielder backed off to fall-in with the twins.

She eyed me through the long bangs of her blue hair that ended in a scraggly mop at her shoulders. Her square body supported a thick neck that would give a Gaian Lumberjack an inferiority complex. "Well, Donovan, ain't this your lucky day."

Not only was she ugly, she was stupid. "I'm not Donovan. My name is Klay."

"Oh?" She pulled a bio-reader from her utility belt and pointed it at me. A beep sounded. She inspected the display. "Says right here you're Donovan Myers."

The hammer-handed goon snorted. "And we're gonna be rich."

She smiled, all choppy-toothed and gnarly. "Yeah, it's payday, boys."

"I'm not Donavon. He's masked my DNA."

"Sure he did." Big Bertha motioned to her comrades. They followed her out of the chamber. The hatch closed with a hiss.

"Fuckin' bounty hunters." I yanked and kicked against my restraints. Didn't do any good, but it was better than imagining what fate worse than death awaited me.

With my hands cuffed behind me, big-boned Bertha escorted me down the shuttle ramp and unceremoniously threw me to a Skyjetty floor. A fierce wind blew in my face. I read the bulkhead sign: *Category A Prison Facility, CR2.334 Moon Base Beta. Colossus System.* Sharp mountains loomed forbiddingly close, an impenetrable barrier the only horizon. What godforsaken mess had I gotten myself into?

A suited man slapped a bundle of money in the bitch's upturned palm. She promptly kicked me in the ribs. "Have a nice life, Donovan."

I grimaced. "I'm not Donovan."

She boarded the shuttle. The ramp closed. Engines whined and the craft rose into a cloudy sky.

"I'm not Donovan," I yelled up at her.

"Shut up." Guards yanked my arms and levered me to my feet.

Giant bulkhead doors groaned open. Following the suited man, the guards muscled me into the prison. The doors clanked shut behind me. Zasha's crooked little smile rushed through my mind, Master's approving nod, even Tank's bulldog face, a life I'd lived so long ago. All gone. All ruined. Because I had failed my final trial. Because I had failed to pull the trigger. I should have been dead, but from the bleak look of this place, the slimy walls and flickering sconces, I figured it would only be a matter of time before I wished I'd never been born.

The guards shoved me onto a lift that dropped at high speed. Flickers of light in the windows revealed caverns that snaked through multi-layers of rock. The descent ended at an area marked: *Block 1*, painted in tall yellow letters across rough-hewn granite. Ten-foot security drones stood guard at heavy doors built into a cliff-like wall.

My mind raced, and my knee joints trembled with fear. Fear that I would spend my entire life in this bottomless pit for the crimes of another man.

The guards shoved me through the doors. *Block 1* was a wide open space encircled by jail cells stacked up three levels. A thin balcony went around each level, and steep staircases connected the upper cellblocks to the ground floor. The air smelled like sweaty socks and echoed the wails of tormented souls.

Security drones stood at attention around the central space. Each one carried a range of weapons mounted to their frames: razor sharp blades and mini Proton Cannons. It seemed unlikely that inmates could separate the weapons from the drone without being killed in the process.

I used all my learnt skills to control my emotions. To calm my shaking body. I was out of my depth, embarrassed by my own failures; I had underestimated my enemy and gotten Zasha killed. And now I would pay for failing our final trials.

I lay on my bunk staring at the damp ceiling. My cell was a dungeon carved in

limestone. Cast iron bars were machined deep into the rock. My muscles tensed from the cold. Occasional screams interrupted the relentless sound of dripping water, some distant, some so close they echoed off my walls. I detected tones of madness, while others shrieked of pain.

Shouts and insults grew around me, echoing off stone.

“Governor, a cigarette.”

“Stuff it, scum.”

“Your mum swallowed your brother.”

“Eat shit and die, mother fucker.”

Their taunts followed the sound of clumping footsteps.

A dark shadow appeared at my cell door. Keys rattled. The door swung open. Harsh ceiling lights flared on. A guard stood in the doorway, brandishing a hefty baton gripped in gloved hands. He wore a black uniform with silver buttons and trim. His eyes were wide open, ready for action, and he shouted louder than necessary. “You will stand to attention, prisoner!”

Years of training took over, and I obeyed without a second thought. It wasn't until I was standing that I cursed myself for my easy conformance. He might have mistaken obedience for weakness.

His thick lips rolled back into a wide grin of perfect white teeth. “Your reputation paints a scary portrait of you, Donovan. I expected a wolf of a man, but all I see is a scared kitten.”

“That's because I'm not Donovan.”

The guard laughed.

“The real Donovan stuck me with a gen mask. I'm a recruit for Earth-Government. It's all a big mix up.”

The guard banged his baton against the bars. “Don't fuck with me, Donovan.” He took a step forward and held my eyes.

I didn't blink.

“There are two types of prisoners in this cave. Those who shout.” He pushed his index finger into my sternum. “And those who whimper.” His nose was almost touching mine.

I didn't flinch.

“If you whimper, there are a few prisoners who would take advantage and do you harm. You understand?”

“I'm not afraid of anyone in here.” I lied.

“Tough guy, huh?”

“I’m not a criminal, but I can kick your ass.”

“Fuck you.” The guard swung his baton.

I ducked, parried, grabbed the baton, and snatched it out of his hand so fast, the force threw him off balance. That earned him a leg sweep. He tripped over my bunk and slammed headfirst into the wall. With a groan, he collapsed on the floor and looked up at me with crossed eyeballs.

“Cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo.” I leaned over him. “Fuck who?”

He shook his head. “Seems I’ve underestimated you, Donovan.”

“Klay.” I offered him a hand up.

He batted it away. “Mind if I have my stick back?”

I gave it to him. “If you swing it at me again, I’ll just take it away from you.”

“I believe you would.” He used the baton to lever himself to his feet, wobbled a bit. “But I know a better way to knock you down to size.”

“Will it get me out of here?”

“More like get you killed.” He staggered to the cell door. “You’ve got forty-eight hours to prepare yourself for the tournament. If you win, you get an upgrade.” He pointed his baton at the slop bucket in the corner. “A new cell with real plumbing, real food. Hell, on a clear day you might even see daylight.”

“Sounds like home sweet home in hell.”

“The warden will give you the Credit, personally, in his office.” The guard pointed upward. “On the surface. Nice and legal like...if you live, that is.”

Breath caught in my lungs. “You mean...I have to fight to the death?”

“Win three battles, after that it’s easy street for you.”

A fist gripped my heart and squeezed. Kill or be killed, Zasha had said, and here I was faced with that choice. It settled in my stomach, hard like iron casings. I couldn’t play his game. I wouldn’t. Besides, surely they would soon realise the mix up and let me out of here. This place wouldn’t be my home in hell for long.

I eyeballed him and counted to five in my head, to make him think I was thinking it over. Then: “Not interested.”

His jaw tensed and his face reddened. “Two weeks down here and you’re as good as dead anyway. If a virus don’t get you, then the madness will.”

He stepped out and closed the cell door. “But if you fight, my money’s on you, Donovan.” He switched out the lights.

As the sound of his footsteps disappeared, the dark closed around me. I plopped on the bunk and imagined Master looking in on me. Disappointment etched his old face. He'd be shaking his head, all his efforts lost on me, a warrior defeated at the first hurdle. I heard his voice. *"Even the smallest seed cannot know it will one day become a mighty oak."*

The words brought me back from the edge of despair. They echoed in my mind, and I knew what they meant. My potential had not yet been realised. I could change my fate, at least I had to try, or I'd always be just a blade of grass.

I would fight to get out of this shithole, fight my way to the top, fight to the death, and then keep fighting until I fought my way out.

I sat on the smooth rock floor, alone, and surveyed the chaos in *Block 1*. The prison had been transformed into an arena for the tournament. Prisoners and guards jammed the three tiered balconies, hundreds of them shouting and betting. Security drones encircled me, separating the crowd from the battle ground.

The intercom hummed. "Donovan. Stand up."

I breathed back burning nerves that raced through me like a forest fire. On my feet, I calmed myself, relaxed, and thought of Tank. How bad could this upcoming fight be?

My opponent bulled into the circle. He stood eight feet tall with full bio-titanium armour and chrome muscle servos augmented for speed. External motors patched his knee and elbow joints. He would probably move faster than me, but he didn't look too bright, all bug-eyed and broken-toothed. There wasn't any point trying to out manoeuvre him. I would have to hit him head-on and hard.

The crowd screamed for blood.

I'd been told that some inmates entered the prison's tournament for notoriety and the thrill, others because they were psychopaths and craved violence. However, most fighters competed out of desperation, for the warden's Credit and a better life in this hell pit. I had no idea what motivated my opponent and didn't have much time to care.

He came at me like a crazed animal. His left fist shot toward my head. I dropped my shoulder and moved inside the attack, putting my fist in range of his open side, but a sharp blade ejected from his ribcage and flew towards my throat at frightening speed.

I dodged the blade, spun, and kicked his lower leg with all my augmented motor strength. A bone snapped with an audible crack. He screamed, stumbled, and hit the rock floor with a dull slap. The blade clanked off the stone wall and rattled to a stop at my feet.

The crowd roared with joy. “Kill him. Kill him.”

I didn't have to kill him to win the match. But this was my last ditch attempt to take back what I had lost, my name and my freedom, and I was in it deep, all or nothing. I needed the warden to award me the Credit, in his office. Topside. If I was going to escape... I picked up the blade and stepped to my downed opponent.

“No please,” he cried. “Don't kill me.” He cradled his broken leg. Tears ran down his face. A sadder sight I'd never seen. Pitiful.

The crowd cheered and screamed and pointed behind me.

I turned in total disbelief. Security drones had stepped aside and let in my next rival. It was no man in any sense that I recognised.

Moving on all fours like an enormous dog, its elongated body levered two forward arms that concluded in deadly serrated hooks. Its hind legs ended in sharp pincers designed for gripping and crushing solid rock. The beast's face was vaguely human. Front facing eyes and long hook nose. Its mouth had lips that curled up in a snarl and revealed wolfish fangs.

I'd heard about this type of genetic creature. It was a Miner, bio-manufactured to withstand treacherous conditions and extract precious metals directly from asteroids. Mining companies had found it cost-effective to breed their own tools.

Miners were said to be skittish but strong, tenacious bastards. I had never seen one in the flesh until now and wondered what crime it had committed to earn a berth in *Block 1*. If my guard had been standing beside me right then, I'd have taken back what I'd said about not being afraid of anyone in here.

My last opponent crawled to safety between a security drone's metal boots. Lucky bastard.

With a roar, the Miner pounced across the makeshift arena floor and knocked me down with a crushing blow. Cruel hooks ripped across my chest, tearing through my shirt and ripping red lines into my carbon-impregnated skin. The pain was like hot coals on bare flesh. I clenched my teeth and my fist, thankful I hadn't dropped the blade.

The Miner retreated, and roaring to the crowd, it fed off their excitement and lust for blood. But in its excitement it had overestimated the damage it had done to me.

I sprang to my feet and sprinted up behind it, and then grabbed one of its hooked forelegs. It spun me around, but I held on with the crook of one arm while my other hand wielded the blade. The beast lifted me off the ground and slammed me back down. Fighting to hold air in my lungs, I rammed the blade into the elbow joint, between its layers of armour.

It roared in agony.

The blade sliced through tendon and bone. An oily spew shot out. The Miner screamed and spun around. I held on and pulled backwards hard, ripping its hooked arm clean out of its socket.

The spew became a gusher.

I flipped the severed limb in my hand, hook side forward, and in a sweeping, powerful arc, drove the sharp edge across the beast's throat, decapitating the Miner with its own severed limb. Both parts crashed to the floor.

I looked down at the torso as its life's fluid pumped from the stub of its throat. One genetic freak to another. "Sorry, pal." I dropped its arm on its chest. The head had landed near its ass. Its eyes, so human like, stared into mine, pleading, desperate.

Sympathy frothed and bubbled in my mind, brought tears to my eyes. I shook my head, bit back the emotion. It wasn't human, but it had been alive. Then rational thought won out. It was me or the Miner. I did what I had to do to survive.

Two deep breaths later, I became aware of the screaming crowd. Their shouts infiltrated me, lifted me. I had crossed the line between recruit and warrior. I'd killed another being, and I finally understood that empathy was an indulgence, mercy was a luxury.

And I felt as if a great burden had been lifted from my shoulders. It was okay to kill to survive.

I walked to the centre of the arena, scanned the crowd, and pumped my arms into the air. Tank would have been proud. Master would have been proud. Zasha would have been proud. I played my part as the winner, but deep inside I was as still as a rock. I calmed my breathing, centred my thoughts.

Two down, one to go.

I had little time to rest before my next challenger faced off with me. The Gaian Lumberjack had just cleaved a man in half with a crescent bladed axe.

Standing taller than all the other competitors, he towered over me. His chest span could have doubled for an oak tree trunk. Long white hair dangled across a raised scar that ran from his eye to his chin. He looked like a warrior of old.

He seemed well balanced on his feet and levered the metre-long axe easily across his right shoulder, as if it were no heavier than a fishing pole. He grinned at me through tobacco-stained teeth. "You ready to die, boy?"

I assumed the question was rhetorical and opted to attack before he had a chance to

react. My side-kick to his floating rib only irritated him.

“That all you got?” He swung a left fisted jawbreaker at my face.

I ducked under his sweeping arm, stepped behind him, and front-kicked him in the lower spine. That would’ve broken any normal man’s back, but the Gaian didn’t even flinch. Just backhanded me across the nose and bellowed something incomprehensible.

I tasted blood.

He laughed at me. “Come over here, boy, and I’ll show you how to die like a man.”

I might have believed him too, had he been much faster. But I had the feel of him now. For all his strength, he was just too damn slow for his big mouth.

I feigned a right-handed jab, stepped forward with my left, and swept his outside leg. It was like tripping over a curb, left me stumbling off balance, but I recovered quickly, spun around and slammed a high heel-kick to that big mouth of his.

To his credit, he didn’t make a fuss, just spit out a few broken teeth.

I moved out of range, crouched, fists balled, and waited for his next move.

“I’m done playing with you now.” He cocked back his mammoth axe and ran towards me, gaining momentum with each pounding step.

I stood my ground. My heart was an earthquake in my chest, banging on my ribcage like it wanted to get out.

“Batter, batter, batter up!” He swung the axe.

I slipped to the side, turned my body parallel to the floor, face up. The axe whooshed above my chest. I grabbed the handle in both hands and dropped to my back. His momentum catapulted him over my head. I kicked him in the groin as he flew by. He landed in a heap on the floor.

I jumped on top of him before he had a chance to move. Howling with one hand on his crotch, his grip on the axe slackened enough for me to rip it from his hand. I lifted the curved blade high, and without hesitation, drove it into his forehead.

The sound of cracking bone silenced his howling. He died quickly. I didn’t bother to dwell on the stunned look in his wide eyes.

I gazed up at the crowd. Their shouts fell silent. Most of them had lost a small fortune in betting credits. Except for the guard who’d gotten me into this tournament, he was already going about collecting his booty.

I’d won. I was the last man standing. But my biggest battle was yet to come. The warden.

An armoured drone escorted me from the arena. No shackles. No pushing or shoving. The machine actually showed me some respect. I wondered how quickly that would change once I attempted my escape.

Putting the blood of the fighters behind me, I calmed my nerves and readied myself for the fight of my life.

The drone led me into a caged elevator, which clanked and jerked as it rose. I eyed the security cameras and bet the warden was watching me.

The elevator stopped and opened up in his office.

I stepped out and surveyed my surroundings. The large room had been hewn from solid rock. No windows. I was still underground. Big disappointment. *Topside* to the guard meant something different than what I'd imagined. Daylight. There was only one door. I hoped it would lead to the outside and freedom.

Pulse cannons mounted in the high corners followed my movement toward a massive desk in the centre of the room. A man with a friendly smile sat in the high-back chair. His skin looked unnaturally pale, augmented with several wired ports along his arms, which kept him connected to the prison's infrastructure and security systems. Nothing got by the warden.

"Finally, it's my pleasure to meet the notorious Donovan Myers. You really do have a talent for violence." He leant back and smiled. "I am impressed."

"You've got the wrong man," I said and considered making my move before he spoke again, but his laughter caught me off guard.

"Yes, of course we have the wrong man. You and a thousand others in here, I'm afraid."

I sized up the security drone with a sideways glance. Big enough to use as a shield against a single pulse cannon, but four had their sights on me. And taking down the drone would get me killed quickly. I'd have to grab the warden. He controlled the cannons and the drone—

"And I know you expect to escape," the warden added, folding his arms, still smiling. His direct assumption shook me. "Was I that obvious?"

"You should know I plan for that possibility. I can predict your intentions."

I decided to be frank. "Then we can do this the easy way or the hard way. You choose."

"Very admirable, young man, but even if you were able to stop my two-ton security drone with your bare hands, how do you plan to leave this office? It is as secure as your holding cell."

“Because you’re coming with me.” I jumped over the desk and yanked him clear of the chair. Wires ripped from his connection ports, disabling his control of the prison systems. The proton cannons swivelled, whined, and pivoted downward, out of commission.

Ratchetting, the security drone dropped to a heap on the ground.

The warden screamed as he lost connection with his avatar. “You’ll die for this outrage!”

I grabbed him by the arm. “Open the door.”

He struggled against my grip, making me work hard to keep him in control. “Fuck you, Donovan.”

I slammed him against the wall. “Listen, you moron. My name is Klay. I’m a warrior for Earth Government. I’d just as soon kill you as look at you. So open the door.”

His eyes bulged with surprise, putout perhaps, at himself for underestimating my speed, my power, and my willingness to terminate his vile existence. “All right, just don’t kill me.”

I felt no empathy for him, put his neck in a headlock and squeezed. “Open it.”

“It’s not locked.”

How odd was that, not to lock a prison door? I pushed it open. Now my eyes bulged with surprise. Getting out couldn’t be that easy.

“Take me to your shuttle. Right now. And don’t fuck with me or I’ll snap your head clean off your shoulders.” I said it like I meant business, like my plan might actually work, but my heart raced with the dread of getting caught. *Block 1* was probably a vacation suite compared to the hole they’d put me in for trying to escape.

He pointed me up two flights of stairs then left along an unguarded corridor that curved to the right. Fresh air wafted in my face. The surface was near. Bustling sounds of foot-traffic and casual voices reached me like an outstretched hand.

Civilians.

The corridor straightened, and the open platform of a Skyjetty came into view. Beyond the glass doors sat a Class Nine shuttle, parked with the ramp down. Within minutes, I’d be in orbit.

A silhouette stepped out from an adjacent passageway. Female I could tell, from the shape of her goddess-like body. At this distance, her head appeared bald. She stopped, feet spread, hands on her hips. Who did she think she was, Wonder Woman?

As I muscled the warden closer to her, it became clear that she wasn’t going to move out of my way. And she began to look more like a machine than flesh and blood. Her eyes

were bright yellow and without pupils. A tight suit covered her synthetic skin, and two sheathed blades were strapped to her thighs. I was close enough now to see a barcode on her arm and digits that identified her Model and Serial Number.

A fucking cyborg.

No wonder the warden hadn't kept his door locked. Cyborgs were invincible. Escape was now the least of my problems. I was a walking dead man.

She looked at me with a slight tilt to her head.

I gripped the warden's neck tighter. "Tell her to back off."

She smiled at me, a crooked little smile.

Recognition hit me like a Miner's hooked claw, sharp and heavy to the chest. "Zasha?"

The warden chuckled. "End of the road for you, Donovan."

"What have you done to her?"

"Seems she had an accident with an ATV. Bounty hunters brought her in right before you got here. A freebee, you might say."

"I thought she was dead."

"We patched her up. Now it's her job to protect me."

A wicked sneer wiped out her smile.

"Zasha? Don't listen to him. Let me pass."

She threw her head back and wailed like a banshee.

I released the warden, took a non-aggressive stance. "Come with me. We'll both get out of this shit hole together."

The warden laughed. "Oh, Donovan, I forgot to tell you, when she's not protecting me, she's fucking my brains out."

Indecision gripped me in vise-tight jaws. The Zasha I knew, my best friend ever, would never prostitute herself out to that bastard. The warden had corrupted her.

I glanced at him. He just stood there, grinning at my predicament. To take my freedom back, I'd have to get past Zasha the cyborg or die trying—

She hit me with her fist. Bright lights blinded me. The thick taste of pain clogged the back of my throat.

Christ, she was fast. Her augmentations were first class.

I steadied myself but didn't raise a hand in my defence. "Zasha, don't do this."

She hit me again. My head fogged. I staggered. At this rate, I wouldn't stay on my feet much longer.

“Damnit, Zasha.” I raised my fists. “Don’t make me hurt you.”

She came at me fast.

I ducked and blocked a round-kick to my body. She stepped back and kicked again, hard to my left knee.

Pain shot up my leg and hobbled me long enough for her to catch me again with a spinning-kick to the temple.

Stars exploded in my brain. I hit the floor hard. My training took over. I rolled to the side. A knife blade narrowly missed my chest. I swept her feet. She hit the floor next to me.

“Zasha! Stop!”

She smelled of synthetic sweat and rubber. I energized my motor joints and executed a back-flip to my feet, stumbled on the landing.

Zasha sprang up.

I ran towards the Skyjetty to make a fast getaway. All I had to do was get past those glass doors.

A shadow flew by, and in the blink of an eye she again blocked my escape route.

“Zasha, don’t—”

She lunged at me with a savage swipe of her blade.

I slipped left. Warm blood dripped from a wound on my ear.

Her eyes glowed red with rage. She smiled that crooked little smile. How could she enjoy doing this to me?

The Zasha I once knew was no longer alive behind those pretty lips. She was once a good fighter, not quite as good as me, but now she was augmented with military spec hardware. The warden had made her into a killing machine. I could only hope she hadn’t yet fully mastered the use of her augmentations in just the few days since we were captured.

She attacked again.

I dodged to the side and took my defensive stance.

She moved with confidence, arrogance even. I’d never seen it in her before, a dangerous trait no matter how inexperienced she may have been. The attacks kept coming.

I matched her tempo, blow for blow, block for block, attack, counter, retreat. We shared the same fighting style. We’d had the same Master. I knew how she fought, and she knew how I fought. Neither one of us gained the upper hand.

But I knew what I had to do. If this battle was going to end, if I was going to escape this hell, I would have to kill her.

No hesitation.

My stomach felt sick.

I let her come forward, attacking feverishly. Face fixed in an angry grimace, her fists pounded me like pistons. I counterattacked with powerful blows. We made eye contact. Her eyes narrowed to slits of hate.

In that moment, I let myself go. I pushed aside my doubts. I held the image of Donovan in my mind, the one chance I had to kill him, and I forgave myself for the split-second choice that had gotten us both into this mess.

I wouldn't, I couldn't make the same mistake again.

Zasha's already gone.

I snapped out a punch to her throat.

She flinched.

I followed with an elbow to the bridge of her nose.

Her head snapped back.

A kick to her chest drove her backwards. She stumbled and fell, coughed and winced in pain.

I moved in and snatched her weapon from her grasp.

Her face changed from fierce rage to a gentler, softer Zasha. The face I once knew. The face of my only friend. I didn't hesitate a heartbeat, raised the blade high and buried it between her breasts.

She stiffened.

I leaned over her, whispered in her ear. "I'm sorry." I twisted the blade.

Her entire body fell limp.

"Goodbye, Zasha." I withdrew the bloody blade, rose up, and stepped away from her body. Master was right about me all along. I didn't recognise myself anymore.

"You killed her," the warden said, his voice squeaky with shock.

I grabbed him by the arm and dragged him towards the Skyjetty, blade at his throat. "You're next," I growled.

The shuttle shook and rattled as it lifted off. The warden worked the controls, and I stood behind him, the blade that killed Zasha pressed to the back of his neck.

The red sun hung low on the horizon, and hazy clouds grew larger as we sped upwards. My joint motors powered up against the heavy pull of inertia.

I felt empty. Void of emotion. Life and death meant nothing to me anymore. Only

survival. That was what it took to become a warrior. That was what it took to become a killer.

The shuttle broke out into blue sky that quickly turned dark as we left the atmosphere and blazed a flaming streak across the heavens.

“Where to?” the warden asked.

“Earth. I have some warmongers to kill.”

The warden rotated his chair around to face me and my blade. “Are you sure?”

“You heard me.”

He clapped his hands and laughed. “Well done, Klay!”

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled. “You just called me Klay.”

He looked at me, absolutely fearless. “He’s ready to be an Earth Government warrior, Master.”

“Master?”

The flight deck door slid open, drawing my eyes to a man in the doorway. He wore a purple gung-fu tunic and baggy black trousers.

Master? I swallowed. Felt like glass shards raking down my throat. What was he doing here?

Donovan Myers appeared behind him, all buddy-buddy and smiling.

“What the fuck?”

Master glided in and faced me. “You have passed your final trials, Klay. But alas,” he put a hand on my shoulder, “Zasha did not pass hers.”

Anger tore through me like a raging bull. “This was all some kind of test?”

“From the shuttle crash to the tournament to your brilliant escape, you should be proud, my son.”

“Zasha is dead, you bastard!” I slammed the blade into Master’s stomach and jerked the tip up under his rib cage. Sharp steel punctured thumping ventricles. His eyes popped open wide in disbelief. Leaning into me, he couldn’t inhale another breath. If he could’ve spoken, he would have asked me why.

“Because I’m a killer,” I whispered in his ear. “Just like you wanted all along. No hesitation. No empathy.”

He made a choking sound. His head tilted back.

Looking into his eyes, I turned the knife in his chest. The heart muscle throbbed through the blade to the handle in my fist. Then stopped. If what he’d said was true, in this final moment, all his beliefs were stripped away. All his bravery meant nothing now. He was only human, the only father I’d ever known who had made me kill the only friend I’d ever

had. My heart bled for the loss of both.

I yanked out the blade. A spew of blood followed. He collapsed to the floor.

A shuffle.

I looked up.

A scream. The warden charged at me with a knife of his own. I glimpsed at Donovan raising his gun barrel towards me.

Two more swipes of the blade, they both joined Master on his final journey.

I strapped myself into the pilot seat and set a course for earth, where killing was an every day matter, where Earth Government warriors were needed to keep the peace, a place where I would feel right at home.

About the Author

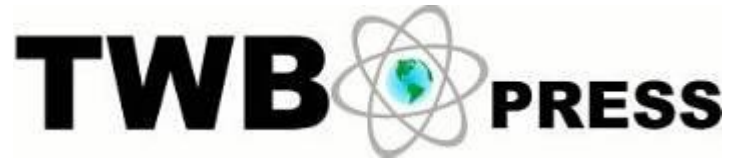


Dean lives with his wife and two young children in Surrey, UK. He owns a business jointly with his father, developing and manufacturing fibre optic components. His day job consists largely of shining light through fragile glass fibres, and trying to glue very small things to even smaller things.

A 2nd Dan Black Belt in Kickboxing, Dean has won national and international titles in the sport. In 2003 he spent a few months living, and training at a Shaolin Kung Fu academy in Northern China. He enjoys running and mountain biking, but now does most of his training in the local boxing gym.

Dean writes science fiction and horror, and his short stories have appeared in webzines in the UK and US.

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