

ONE

"Stand ready!" Cort Havada bellowed. The Datha Qurl slid his shoulders sideways among the camouflaged ranks. Narrow black eyes darted from soldier to soldier as the officer tugged at packs and rifles. Mikial pulled back her auburn combat braids, running them through the back slot in the dun-colored helmet they'd given her. Sensing Cort pausing behind her, Mikial firmly planted her feet upon the cabin's less-than-steady deck. There was a brittle crunch as her Line Officer found another of his bitter corul roots to chew on. He jostled the cannon strapped to her back, then gave her braids a good-natured yank.

"Secured!" she said, her contralto reply cutting through the deeper voices around her. Mikial's claws scraped against the brass support rails hanging from the ceiling, unwilling to retract themselves.

The dirigible turned. Mikial watched as her shadow shifted in the first rays of an early sun. The only other light was from the Curtain, the violet star mist swirling across the sky. Propellers hummed through the troop compartment's black canvas skin as the airship aligned itself over a canyon.

"Brace!"

Mikial gripped the rails as the aft jump door swung up and open. Icy air washed across the smooth caramel of her high-set cheeks, chilling any bare skin not covered by her armor and battle dress. An anticipatory surge from wrist glands sent crackling sparks of energy across her palms. Her thin lips pulled back into a scowl beneath the flare of a slender nose, revealing sharp canines. Tradition or not, she hated being first in line.

Havada leaned over her shoulder, contrasting her relatively smaller height of ten hands. "Now let's not embarrass me with a broken neck, little Dathia. We've too few females in this sect as is." Laughing, he gave her shoulder guard a slap before turning to the rest with a roar. "*Jump!*"

Teeth bared in a feral grin, Mikial hurled herself across the deck until her legs flailed on emptiness. Harsh winds slashed her face as she tumbled from the airship, spreading her legs and arms for stability during the exhilarating fall. She counted three breaths then tugged at the cord, enduring the endless moment before a silky gray plume expanded above her with a cracking sound. Leather straps seized her, exacting a grunt as if she was being wrenched skyward again.

Their drop zone was obvious, a wide trail that swayed far beneath her dangling legs. Dark shadows of bordering trees beckoned like spears. The wind was faint and from the west, requiring little correction from her fingers on the guide lines. Beyond the bulge of her chute, Mikial saw the second airship approaching. On board, the medical teams of the primarily female Shandi sect were preparing for their own drop. When she looked groundward again, the windings of a deep gorge were coming up fast. Bramble Ravine.

Mikial adjusted for a slight drift, the canyon's stony crests rising around her. Legs poised, she aimed for a fairly even patch of ground, trees hissing their welcome in the wind. Releasing the harness as she hit, Mikial pitched forward beneath the cannon's awkward weight. Spitting indignantly, she wiped dirt from her angular face and quickly gathered her billowing parachute. No doubt Cort was going to have much to say about her landing, and none of it good. Mikial checked that the pistols holstered to her waist had survived the sloppy landing before finding cover at a root-entwined outcrop. Discarding her chute, Mikial unlimbered her cannon. Flipping the bipod down, she aimed the long black barrel in the direction of Bramble Ravine.

She watched as her Strike landed, both Lines melting into the brush. High overhead, her airship turned toward home.

Mikial's hunting eyes, internal receptor organs couched near her temples, reached out into the shadows, seeking the natural energy fields emanating from the Datha hidden around her. The glow of their body patterns took shape from behind the lighter radiation of covering foliage. Soon she would be able to identify individuals by their auras alone, as they would come to similarly recognize her. It was one Datha trait she enjoyed having. It kept her from blundering through the night with lamps like members of the other three Qurl sects.

Parva Conn appeared on the trail, his famous white braid hidden beneath a Strike Leader's helmet. He was lean for a Datha of over thirteen hands in height, his muscles more moderately proportioned beneath the arm and leg guards he wore. Parva moved with the grace of a seasoned hunter, his pale gray eyes constantly alert over deep brown cheeks and a sharp nose.

Parva motioned the Lines to form up. Soldiers moved quietly from their concealment, dart rifles ready. Hoisting her cannon, Mikial scrambled behind Cort before he could grump at her for being slow as well as clumsy. Meanwhile, the parachutes of the Shandi Immediate Teams were descending further down the trail. She hoped no one would require their services.

Parva moved them out in an extended line along the trail. Mikial guessed that the Minnerans were still well ahead of them in the ravine off her left shoulder. The Curtain had faded with the rising sun by the time they halted at a rocky wash.

A Datha ranger ran up to Parva, conferring with the Strike Leader for several minutes. Parva kept looking down into the ravine with growing puzzlement.

He finally turned to his waiting troops. "We'll block and flank. Cort, take your thirty into the brush. I'll move my Line forward to the next narrows and drive them into you." Parva looked back down across the field. "The Minnerans aren't using their standard infantry formations. These are too widely spaced for the usual volley fire. Something odd about their weapons, too. Assume their guns will have the range and accuracy of Kiorannan long rifles. Anticipate contact within the chime. Take positions."

Mikial studied the intended battlefield while they still had a vantage point above it. The ravine bowled out into a short meadow extending east to west, confined within banded layers of rock cut eons ago by swift waters. Thick brush capped the western edge below the Strike. A short field extended eastward from the brush roughly one hundred spans; about the distance it took for a brief run. She guessed it only wide enough to accommodate one Line - a perfect killing zone thirty spans in length. Thick mist marked out a small creek skirting the southern side of the field, the stream disappearing within a deep gully angling into the trees.

Her Line Officer motioned his detachment down the wash while Parva moved forward with his force along the high trail. Mikial wished she could shake the feeling that this was just another exercise. Slinging the cannon beneath one shoulder, she approached Cort for instructions as they reached the stream bed running along the bottom of the defile.

His quick hand signal ordered her to the right flank, not the traditional place for gunners.

"Parva wants to try this out," Cort whispered at her hesitation. Since Feren Cloa's familiar with how you handle a cannon, I'll assign him as your escort."

"Acknowledged." Mikial gave Feren a friendly nudge as her mentor wordlessly took position at her side. The middle-aged veteran winked a brown eye at her from beneath a dark-skinned brow bordered with tightly knotted battle braids. He'd spent the previous week getting

her used to how the Strike fought, taking as much care with her instruction as her own father did. Feren had even taken her father out fishing yesterday. No doubt in part to discuss her.

Feren's hand reached to hold her arm in a momentary vise, his voice a cautioning growl. "Class is over, Mikial. Being First Student counts for nothing if you get yourself killed graduating."

She nodded, needing that brief pinch of reality.

A small knoll crowned by a splintered stump became her home as the rising sun burned off morning's fog. Resting her cannon barrel over a lichen-spattered log, she surveyed the field through closely spaced amber eyes. Beside her, Feren's fingers tapped rhythmically against his gun stock. He looked almost bored.

Her thoughts drifted to the people she would be fighting soon. Of all the Servant race, the Minnerans seemed the least willing to forgive the Qurl descendants of the race who'd once enslaved them. Never mind that four centuries had gone by since civil war had devastated the lands of Min Saja and brought their Taqurl masters down. *Min Saja*. That old name was all that was left of a quarter of the world - turned to desert by the Taqurls and their now-forbidden weapons of destruction. Today's Qurls still had to contend with the bitter legacy of their forefathers, such as idiots like these Minnerans.

At first she thought that Feren had committed the unpardonable sin of revealing their position with a cough. Then the muted sound repeated, and Mikial realized that it was originating somewhere beyond the clearing before canyon echoes played their tricks. Puzzled, she gazed in vain at the line of trees across the field.

Movement caught her eyes at the far end of the meadow where the valley narrowed. Smoke curled from the right hillside bordering the treeline ahead of her. As she watched, a

sudden puff sprouted like magic from the ridge. The first distinct *CRUMP* reached her tufted ears, followed in quick succession by more plumes and concussions. Mikial realized that she was witnessing some kind of cannon bombardment right where Parva was supposed to be; his flanking maneuver to get behind the enemy must have been detected.

The odd coughing thud increased in tempo. She was sure it was coming from among the trees, but...

Something like a quick rush of birds made her look up.

A geyser of dirt flashed skyward near the creek just to her right, scattering stones and debris through the brush. Before Mikial could make sense of what had happened, another crash of sound and light erupted in front of the Line's position.

Cort Havada gave a series of signals that sent her scrambling to her feet. *Assault by flanks*. Mikial bolted as more "birds" flew in, chewing ground around the Datha blocking force.

Feren was right behind her as she dashed along the creek bordering the hillside. Glancing back, she saw Cort leading a skirmish line across the field as enemy cannon shells continued to rend the bushes they'd left behind.

Then came the next ugly surprise. It sounded like the sharp blast of a Qurl cannon, except that one report followed another in impossibly fast succession. Something raked across the rushing Datha like a deadly wind, sending many spinning in bloody sprays.

Mikial dove instinctively as projectiles far worse than simple rifle balls smashed rocks and tore the soil around her. A stinging rain of debris made it seem like an entire cavalry brigade had chosen her for volley fire.

"In the trees!" Feren shouted, slapping at her helmet. "Just ahead...see the flashes?"

"Targeted!" She snapped open the cannon barrel's bipod and raised the weapon into position. What ever the thing was, it had gone back to hammering Cort's group in the field, forcing Datha to crawl across the meadow.

Mikial clicked open the discharge switch on the side of the cannon's square battery packs and sighted her target. She guessed it to be around ninety spans away. Her cannon was effective up to four times that distance. She drew hard within herself until the fine hairs rose along her arms and special conductive sweat drenched her palms. The Minnerans' hidden cannons slammed more shells into the field, the concussions making it all but impossible for her to hold her weapon steady.

Fire spat once more from her target amid the trees. Mikial replied, discharging her stored energy in one great shudder. Her cannon's blast added its thunder to the barrage, sending a brilliant streak of lightning across the field. The enemy position blossomed into a spray of smoke trails whose glowing tips twisted skyward like angry serpents.

Mikial barely had time to gather her strength, let alone her cannon, as Feren's strong arms scooped her up into a staggering run. She started to ask him what he thought he was doing when a smashing fury from behind hurled them into a furrow between the roots of two trees. "I've got to find those cannons," she shouted as sections of pulverized hillside fell around them..

"They certainly found you," her mentor said as the barrage lifted. "We're more than halfway to the trees. Just follow the stream. Let's go!"

She scrambled with him through a pungent haze. It was simple enough to understand the lull as the fluttering sound shifted once more toward the field beside them.

Mikial held her cannon high as she leapt with Feren down the sloping sides of the gully the stream spilled into. In the same instant, three Minnerans burst from cover, heading in the

opposite direction. They were far smaller in stature than any Datha, their khaki uniforms making her think more of field workers than soldiers. The five of them met at the bottom of the gully in a confused rush.

Mikial used her forward momentum to smash the butt of her cannon against the head of the nearest wide-eyed Minneran soldier. Spinning, she caught the other with a kick to his groin before crushing his larynx with a chop of her free hand. Mikial didn't see what had happened to the third Minneran, but Feren's dripping claws were indication enough as she joined him in a run up the gully's other side. The only thought Mikial had was one of amazement at how fast the Minnerans had died.

The Datha waved her forward to a hollow where the creek dug into the ground beneath a granite wedge. Rifle fire crackled close by, punctuated by a sudden shriek as a Qurl dart found its mark. The air was tinged with a dun-colored haze from repeated shell impacts in the field to her left. *The Line won't last long under that kind of punishment*, Mikial realized. She traded looks with Feren. Grunting, he became a blur across the stream, vanishing into the surrounding foliage.

Fingers tight around her weapon, Mikial threw herself after him. Each splash seemed sure to alert the world to her presence. But the rifle fire she expected did not come. Across the stream at last, she crouched down low in the brush. Feren had taken cover to her right. His eyes locked on the same sight as hers.

Situated upon stone terraces only a few spans upstream was the Minneran battery; at least, that was the best explanation she could provide. A dozen soldiers busied themselves around what appeared to be six black stovepipes. There was no mistaking them as the source of destruction slamming into the Strike. Three of the pipes were tilted toward the valley's southeast

corner where Parva's Line was held down. The other trio of tubes was aimed toward the field. Minnerans were dropping small, finned shells into the smoking maws of these things, turning away as the pipes coughed them back out in a belch of flame. Bewildered, Mikial looked over at Feren.

He reached for her cannon, slapping the discharge switch closed and gripping the weapon's handles. Mikial felt the transfer of energy from his body. *Hope you left enough for your rifle*, she thought. She eased the cannon barrel through a gap in the tree roots. He took covering aim, giving her an encouraging wink.

Resetting the batteries to discharge, Mikial sought a target. The tubes were widely spaced and she doubted the enemy would wait until she recovered for a second shot. Mikial drew hard until her palms glistened with the need to release. That pile of green boxes the Minnerans were getting those odd-looking shells from would do fine. She couldn't destroy all the tubes, but scattering their ammunition might suffice. Mikial centered her sights and fired.

The crack of her cannon was immediately devoured by a shock wave blasting her into the loam. Stunned, Mikial pulled back her weapon, seeing nothing ahead but a cataclysmic white fog. Her ears hissed from the concussion. More explosions sent shrapnel ripping through the woods as Feren tugged hard at her shoulder. Together they sped back down the gully, urged on by scattered detonations from ammunition like nothing she'd ever seen. Insane as it seemed, they had to be using explosives as propellant. Qurl rifles and pistols used a pulse of energy to fire darts down their barrels - employing batteries that didn't blow up in one's face. Mikial doubted that anyone would be coming out of that haze to pursue them.

"Ahead!"

Startled, she saw Feren raise his rifle just as several Minnerans entered the gully ahead of them. Pushing her aside, Feren shot first, hurling two Minnerans to the ground with darts to the heart. The third leapt into the brush and disappeared.

"Watch our backs," he growled. "Minnerans are retreating all arou-"

The two dead soldiers rose up on elbows and returned fire.

Mikial could see projectiles tearing through Feren's body even as pain smashed into her awareness. Collapsing on numb legs, she saw her protector fall back in a spray of blood while firing. Dropping her cannon, Mikial drew her pistols and took aim at the prone forms. They weren't firing. Each of their faces was transformed into a red smear.

"Body armor," Feren croaked beside her, his eyes staring upwards.

"Hold on!" Dropping her pistols, she pulled open the medicine pouch on his belt.

"Aim...head." Blood erupted from the Qurl's grimacing lips as his fingers reached out to entwine hers in a fierce clasp.

Shaking her head in disbelief, Mikial heard his final breath leave him.

Brief explosions still sounded behind her as she forced pain aside and probed the foliage around the gully for more Minnerans. Her hunting eyes found nothing...yet. Lips curled back, she rolled on one side to inspect the burning source of her own wounds. A mix of blood and dirt caked her hip. She could see a gouge in her kilt's metal pads pointing to an oozing hole. Another injury stained her armored jacket just above the pistol belt.

Rifle fire erupted to her right in increasing volleys. First aid would have to wait. Teeth clenched, she retrieved her pistols and crawled up the gully's rise for better position. She wasn't worth Feren's death. Neither were the Minnerans who shortly would pay for it.

Five khaki-clad fighters burst into view, running across sunlit patches of ground in panic. One fell without a cry. The remaining Minnerans spun around, knelt, and shot back at their pursuing antagonists. Mikial felt the tug on her body's dwindling reserves as she discharged through the pistol grips. Metal darts sped toward her targets. The first two convulsed and fell as the projectiles slammed into the exposed backs of their necks. She took the third as he turned. The remaining soldier desperately flopped on his belly, only to end up sliding helplessly down the gully wall. Her dart was through the Minneran's forehead before he reached the bottom. More Minnerans charged out from among the trees. Far too many.

Mikial slid back into the gully, leaving a bloody trail behind her. Feren stared in lifeless accusation as she rolled next to him. He'd given his life for her. Couldn't she do the same for her Line? Mikial lay still as death while Minnerans leapt and stumbled across the gully, a few even jumping over her body. The only thing she could do now was survive, though conditioning screamed for her to leap up and attack instead. The Minnerans' retreat soon passed her by. Mikial's hunting eyes picked up one straggler, the panicked soldier falling headfirst into the depression. He lay there unmoving. Hissing, she sent a dart through his face anyway.

She could feel blood welling up just above her waist. Pulling out her medicine pack, Mikial poured the yellow powder into the wound, quickly numbing the pain there. She sensed the welcome ripple of her approaching Line.

A Datha slid down the dirt slope beside her. Growling, the soldier bent down and did a quick assessment of her injuries. He tied a yellow marker around an overhead branch before resuming pursuit. Other arms soon supported her as an Immediate Team pulled her out upon a bed of leaves. A Shandi female in full armor bent over her, placing her palms near Mikial's temples. Mikial felt a relaxing wash of energy and knew nothing more.

#

She danced. Mikial felt her soul whirl and spin like a rising leaf as her body moved. Her dance pattern glowed with life, an intricate latticework set like jewels within her mind. Following those lines brought a joyful release. There was music from somewhere; strange, exciting, filling her in ways she'd never known. Again and again she tried to capture those feelings, to express bodily the wonderful sensations for all to see and share. Again and again, she failed. No matter what dance style or form she chose, her movements were somehow distorted. The First Dancer was frowning at her, and she heard mutterings of discontent from the balconies. Eyes burning with tears, Mikial tried one last time, and succeeded. The audience gasped with pleasure. Mikial felt as if she could soar into the air. But instead of rising, she slipped, nearly falling. Angrily, she looked down. The floor was slick with blood.

Mikial woke with a snarl, claws extended to slash...at what?

A cluster of lights dimmed above her. The bulbs hung like buds from the open petals of a domed ceiling painted to look like a blue nightflower. A blue-and-gray quilt was tucked around her on the elevated swivel bed. She'd seen her mother's workplace many times, but never as a patient. Mikial groaned, Feren's lifeless eyes staring at her from the mud of fresh memories.

"Easy, Dathia," a female's voice spoke. An elder Shandi in a yellow operating gown bent over her, the surgeon's brunette hair bound back in a hurried-looking knot of white cloth. "Your mother will be happy to see you back in one piece again."

Mikial licked dried lips. "Where is she?"

"Counselor Yeneen is operating on one of your comrades. She is already credited with saving two before him. The Holding will be quite proud of you both. If you're wondering why you can't move much, it's because we've immobilized you." The Shandi brushed long fingers

over the extended claws on Mikial's unresponsive right hand. "It was more for our protection while we worked on you, Dathia. I will unblock just your arms now. We don't want you moving about yet."

Mikial felt her upper limbs tingle with returned use. She winced as she tried raising her left arm.

"We've pulled some odd-looking rifle balls from your side and hip and mended the damage there. You are regenerating nicely, Mikial, but it will be some time before you can return to your dancing."

"I can wait," she muttered, the dream's bite still bitter in her mind. Remembering her manners, she gave the Healer an appreciative smile. "I'm grateful for your help."

"Thanks to your bravery, our work was less than it might have been," the Shandi replied with an approving nod. "It seems that your skills extend beyond the dance floor."

"I'm not so sure."

"You have to mend, Dathia." The Shandi's hands paused gently on her forehead before sliding to her temples. "Sleep. The next time you wake, it will be in the comfort of your own bed."

#

True to the Healer's word, Mikial's eyes opened to see familiar ironwood bedposts, their dark surface scored by scratch marks from her claws when she was younger. She glanced out the window to her left. Dawn wasn't even a hint outside, the Curtain coloring the night sky in its purple hues. Heating vents blew softly across a floor whose deep orange boards were fashioned from the sturdy wood of sheld trees growing throughout the Holding's hills. Mikial smiled to

herself. It wasn't a big room, but she found the cozy confines a welcome refuge against life's impositions.

Wincing, she reached over to the nutwood stand between the window and bed and switched on the cone lamp's battery. Mikial drew the back her blankets in the soft yellow light to see what had been done to her. Her left side was one large ache, punctuated by a deep soreness in her hip. Angry lines marked where the Shandi had sealed the wounds by fusing her skin back together. The marks would disappear as she regenerated.

Mikial scowled at powerful muscles sculpting her calves and thighs. Some things would stay, unfortunately. Even her modest breasts were couched in bands of muscle that also endowed her with broad shoulders and bulky arms. The description "slender" or "petite" never applied to the few rare Dathia in the otherwise male Datha sect. She couldn't help but envy those more fortunate females in the other three sects. Especially her best friend Paleen Chimmer with the body of a reed, no claws, and fewer worries about staring down at the opposite sex. Paleen was Ipper Qurl, a sect valued for their work in both communication and general entertainment. Paleen was always good company, if not overly energetic even for an Ipper. Unfortunately, she was returning from the western Holding of Kinset where her mother's family lived. The largest Qurl Holding, the small continent of Kinset sat well off the coast of Kioranna. It would be several more days before Paleen's airship arrived home.

Mikial gave a bleak look at her reflection in the copper-lined mirror standing next to the bed's right side. Her auburn battle braids had been undone, softening a predatory face halved by a narrow nose. Her greater height and build, along with her claws, marked her as Dathia; no sect was as physically apart from the rest as hers was, and this morning she felt every bit of that distance.

Mikial looked across the foot of her bed, her nostrils catching meaty flavors issuing from beyond her door. No doubt they were the reason she'd woken up. Her stomach rumbled its consensus, the scent becoming clear. Torses! The pastry-wrapped meats were her favorite meal. Mikial eagerly scooted forward to sit up, but sucked in a breath as her hip stabbed with pain. Sighing, she pulled up the blankets and settled back to wait. She hated feeling so helpless.

After a moment the bedroom door swung open, and her mother entered bearing a white porcelain tray heaped with torses. Yeneen's curly brown hair was tied back in a manner reserved for a day's work at home. She wore her yellow morning robe as she might a surgeon's gown. Her gray eyes centered on Mikial with a determined smile below lightly tanned cheeks. "Welcome home, daughter. How are you feeling?"

"Sore," Mikial grumbled, eyeing the tray her mother sat on the dresser adjacent to her mirror. "And hungry." Her humor improved as she regarded the sizzling strips of tender meat wrapped in delicate curls of pastry. "You know I love those things."

"There's plenty of them," Yeneen said, the smaller female pulling extra pillows from the dresser beside Mikial's closet. "Here, let me help you sit up." She carefully braced Mikial's back, easing her to an upright position, then propping the pillows behind her. "I can't tell you how relieved I am to see you safely home. Your father's been boasting about you to everyone within earshot. That battle has the entire Holding talking."

"We did win, didn't we?" It was a question Mikial had never thought any Datha would have to ask after fighting mere Servants.

"Well, you sent them running for home, so I suppose we did."

Mikial shook her head. "They weren't supposed to get back home." She gave her mother a bewildered look. "They had better weapons than ours."

"Nonsense. Now eat your fill and stop looking so worried." Yeneen picked up the tray and set it across her lap. "There's milk to wash these torses down with, and plenty of fruit in the cooler if you want me to get you some. You'll be in bed for a few days, so enjoy it. You've certainly earned it."

Mikial knew better, but didn't want to share that particular burden with her mother. Soon enough she'd be giving Parva Conn her report of how she lain there next to Feren's body while the enemy ran by unscathed.