

## Chapter One

Pandemonium. Screams. Blood.

Jape Ihucas Bolep snarled as ovals of golden flames bloomed around him and those who had gathered in the portal chamber. Drones stepped out, already firing scatter-shot at them, cutting men down at point-blank range.

Anneliese, black hair flying, dove for the lone Risnarish woman in the room. She yanked the taller Salno to the floor.

Jape saw it all in horrendous slow motion. The stippling of blood on Salno's light yellow skin, blatant against her white stripes. Efino, crawling on four legs toward them, bleeding as well.

And then a second collection pod emerged from the seething portal. Its hatch opened, spilling more Monsudan drones, an endless tide of the small but deadly creations. Cutting off more of Jape's warriors. Killing them.

The room was a vast chamber, but it felt tight, cramped as drones continued to arrive. The overbright oily smell was joined by the scent of things burning. Jape fought to breathe against the reek that tightened his chest, his twin hearts hammering.

He screamed at the rest, "Incoming! Nex, Lan, get over here. Everyone, gather with us! Regroup!"

Even as he shouted, a drone nimbly raced forward and shoved his boomerang-shaped weapon's barrel against Lan's chest. Jape's second-in-command jerked, firing at his attacker. Too late.

Brown-and-green armored flesh shredded from Lan's torso, blown apart by concentrated scatter-shot. His eyes were already glazed as he crumpled to the floor.

*"Lan! No!"*

Jape's shriek rang over the shouts and cries and sounds of shooting. But Lan could not be called back. His best friend, his second, his warrior brother—gone. In a great gout of blood and flesh, gone.

Gone.

One by one, they fell, the friends he'd worked with, lived with, laughed with. Duhon. Serek. Mun. They collapsed, dead or dying. Men he'd known all his life. In a shattering tide of blood, they were killed before him.

Others were cut off, impossible to get to through the swelling tide of drones. In the thick of it, Nex's desperate roar rose above the other shouts. "Leave me, Jape! Salno! Efino! Grab Anneliese and get out of here! Go before it's too late!"

But it was already too late. Jape's warriors were dead. The fighters he'd been responsible for, the men who counted on his leadership. He'd failed them. He hadn't realized the drones could get past the containment fields, that they could short-range port inside. And the pod in the portal...

He stared at the pod that shouldn't have been there, that had no business being there. It had finished belching out drones, but two figures remained in the vessel. Two faces peered out, faces that were not striped, that were not Risnarish.

Earthlings. Exactly as he'd been warned. Earthlings working with the Monsuda.

And all around him, his men caught in capture fields or dying or dead.

"No. No!" The denial blasted from Jape's lungs, even as Lan and the rest stared at him with blank eyes that somehow managed to accuse.

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"No!" Jape shot out of his bed, his striped body soaked with sweat. He stared wildly around him, searching for drones, for treacherous Earthlings. It took several horrific seconds before he recognized his own bedroom, lit blue by the gas giant Cadi hanging in the heavens stretched over Risnar.

When he did realize he was in his dome, that the fight had been months ago, that he'd led the charge to recover Nex and others, that Anneliese and Salno had lived, that Cas hive was still under his control, Jape's hearts slowed their frantic pace., yet the hurt did not fade. It clutched Jape's insides, a tight fist of twisting agony.

It was not a mere nightmare. It had happened. It could happen again, and Jape was no more prepared for it than he had been the first time.

As he had so many nights before, he sat down on his bed again. He bowed his head into his hands and let the grief and anger take him. His shoulders shook violently as he gave in to the loss of friends.

And more. He'd lost so much more.