



War on the Horizon

The Ahresh people of Naera had a saying: *U'la srra'tir ku' ka'lan*. Storms wash the world clean. They believed that all the bad of the previous year flowed downstream with the winter monsoons, that all it took to start fresh was a good storm.

It would take a lifetime of monsoons to wash away the blood humans had spilled on Naeran soil.

Ha'zai lay flat at the edge of the treeline, water drumming off his helmet and mud fighting to seep into the seams of his armor. Below him, down the ridgeline, Little Georgia Relocation Colony sat squatted in the muck like a waiting beast. One of the many relocation centers approved by Cosmogenesis Corporation, Little Georgia was shockingly unimpressive in comparison to some of its contemporaries. Razorwire sagged under the relentless downpour; watchtowers loomed out of the fog like broken teeth, their floodlights smearing pale cones through the deluge. The perimeter wall was a rough, brutal curve of concrete and steel built to keep the Ahresh in. Built to keep hope—and soldiers like Ha'zai—out.

His visor painted the world in overlays—range markers, heat signatures, IFF tags. The system brought back some semblance of color to the grey dawn of the winter morning.

Somewhere high above, the *Horizon* held itself in geosynchronous orbit, watching the battlefield through a small fleet of drone cameras. Small, fast, black, and insectile. Ahresh Collective Initiative media. Officially, they claimed to be for documentation, a way to catalogue the num-

ber of troops deployed, the number of casualties, the metrics of success. They hovered just behind the line of the assault, close enough to drink in the violence, yet far enough away to pretend they had no part in it.

He keyed his comm. "All squads, check in. Sound off in order."

Static crackled, then the voices came.

"Phoenix Two reporting for Bravo. We're green," Jhada said first. Her words were controlled, clipped, and professional. Ha'zai could see the shape of her outlined in blue on his visor overlay, crouched and ready near the wall they planned to breach. "We are in position at the west wall. Two minutes to breach."

"Baby Bird reporting for Delta. We're green. In position at the south wall," Turi chimed in. She was a young recruit; this was her first mission on Naera's surface where she had any kind of command, and she was practically foaming at the mouth to prove herself.

"Phoenix Three reporting for Echo. We're green here, too," Nictus followed. His voice was underpinned by the rattling of his quills—an anxious tic he could never manage to suppress fully. "My boys are bored, Maaik. Permission to fix that?"

Ha'zai rolled his eyes at the quip. "You in position? Don't see you on the HUD, big guy."

Nictus laughed, a rattling sound like wind through reeds. "Then we're doing our job. Just watch for the muzzle flash, Maaik."

"Hey, LT?"

"Yes, Commander?"

"Go fuck yourself."

Nictus burst into rattling laughter, a sound echoed over the comms by Jhada, though she tried to suppress it.

"Still waiting on your go, Phoenix One," Nictus said.

"Permission granted. Make it clean."

A new voice cut in. "Evac team is holding pattern," Ka'il said. The soft sound of wind noise crept in behind him, along with the faint whine of engines. He was already airborne. "Two shuttles in motion, third on

standby. Just give me lanes, and I'll keep them moving. Try not to send me combatants." Somehow, in the midst of pre-combat stress, Ka'il managed to sound almost jovial—a byproduct of all the missions with Nic-tus, no doubt.

"Copy, Evac," Ha'zai said. "You'll get clear lanes. Stay high until I call. No hero passes today, you hear me?"

Ka'il snorted softly. "Yes, Dad." His voice dripped with sarcasm. "Wasn't planning on it."

Ha'zai's eyes tracked over the camp one last time, committing it to memory the way he always did—every tower, every gap, every place the prisoners and guards would cluster when the panic set in. The chromatophores along his brow flickered a pale yellow—focus—but he silenced it as quickly as it dared to emerge.

"Final checks," he ordered. "Phoenix Two, Baby Bird, what's your breach charge status?"

"Set," Jhada replied. "Wall over here is weakened from the flooding. It'll tear open like wet paper."

"Set," Turi said. "We found a foundational crack. Gonna exploit it."

"Phoenix Three, you ready to pop some heads?"

"Yessir. Got eyes on two platforms with standard patrol gunmen and probable sniper nests on the north and south towers. We'll take 'em out before they even know they're in danger."

"Evac, confirm loadouts."

"Med crews staged. We've got medical restraint kits onboard. Blankets, water. All that fun stuff."

Ha'zai nodded rather than responding. Silence filled the comms for a moment, broken only by the pounding of the rain and the distant hum of the prison's generators. He exhaled slowly, a familiar weight settling on his shoulders. Leadership. Responsibility. Knowing that he was the man who decided where bodies moved and, ultimately, where they fell. It never got easier to carry.

"All teams, comms on. Listen close," he said, voice low and steady. "Primary objective is liberation and extraction. Secondary is intel capture—command center, records, anything on prisoner transfers. Do not engage for pride. Do not chase kills. Do not play to the drones."

As if on cue, one of the media rigs drifted closer, lens irising, hungry for that perfect shot of the Phoenix of Naera giving his speech. Ha'zai ignored it.

"You keep refugees moving," he continued. "Keep them low. They will panic; they will cluster in inconvenient spots. They will almost certainly run *from* us at first because they have been trained to fear the wrong things. That isn't their fault. Make sure to reassure and maintain order."

Jhada's voice came through first. "Copy that."

"Got it," Turi said.

Then Nictus. "Understood."

Finally, Ka'il. "On standby and waiting for your word. Just call."

Ha'zai's throat tightened around some emotion he refused to name. He lifted a hand—two fingers up, then a tight fist—a silent signal to his own fireteam to prepare for movement.

"Breach in three," he said, "Two. One. Light it up."

The west wall shattered like a pane of glass. Half a heartbeat later, the south wall went up in a similar cloud of smoke.

The explosion of the west wall hit with a concussive force that made the air feel solid as concrete, and twisted rebar erupted outward in a ragged fan. Mud and smoke and pulverized stone leapt up as a single filthy plume, then fell back down in clumps that struck the ground like fists.

All at once, alarms screamed to life. Floodlights strobed as power supplies near the blast site failed. Watch towers lit up with muzzle flashes—sharp, bright points of light in the gray rain. And in an instant, Ha'zai and the rest of his fireteam were surging forward from the treeline.