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# Going Dark (The Red Trilogy Book 3) (English Edition)



*Par Linda Nagata*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurNo Real Allies, No Fixed Enemies, No Certain Battlefields:Presumed dead by those

closest to him and with no intention of setting the record straight, former army Lt. James Shelley is recruited by a black ops outfit devoted to two things: guarding the Earth from existential threats, and the Red.

Operating for almost two years among soldiers who are enhanced, and controlled, just as he is, Shelley believes he's learned a proper caution in working with the mysterious artificial intelligence--until the Red's increasingly erratic behavior ignites an accidental war, and launches Shelley on a collision course with his old life. In the final book of The Red Trilogy, Shelley must choose who--or what--to trust, while struggling to contain an escalating conflict that threatens to plunge the world into chaos, and destroy those he loves.

Going Dark WE ARE ENGAGED IN A nonlinear war. That means there are no sides. There are no real allies, no fixed enemies, no certain battlefield. Conflict occurs across financial, communications, propaganda, terroristic, and military channels in a continuously shifting matrix that can destroy a culture, crash an economy, or ignite combat depending on the weight and direction of competing interests Including our interests, Lieutenant Logan interjects, like this is some kind of valid counterpoint to my argument. Its not. Including our interests, I acknowledge. Whatever the fuck those are. Im James Shelley, captain of ETM Strike Squad 7-1 a linked combat squad that doesnt exist in any official US Army record. Ray Logan is my lieutenant. Our low-voiced conversation is taking place a few steps away from the six soldiers assigned to ETM 7-1. We occupy a temporary berth set up in the torpedo room of a US Navy Virginia-class fast-attack submarine that is presently passing beneath the Arctic Oceans winter ice pack. The remainder of the squad is asleep in temporary bunks, stacked two high and set up side by side in a long row between the green tubes of racked torpedoes. The squad is mostly out of sight, at rest in the lower bunks, with their gear stored in good order on top. Only me and Logan are up, conferencing at one end of a narrow passage that runs between the foot of the bunks and one of the torpedo racks. The point, I go on, is that the identities of the good guys and bad guys will change; they have to change, as circumstances change. So you never know who the enemy will be next year, or in the next engagement. Ray Logan is twenty-four, making him a year younger than me. At five-ten, hes not a tall man, but his lean build and chiseled Caucasian features could have gotten him cast as an extra if hed tried Hollywood instead of the army. Hes a hell of a fighter who likes to be at the front of any assault, so its almost surreal to see him cast an uneasy glance over his shoulder, as if hes worried about someone in the squad listening in. I follow his gaze, but all I see is Carl Escamillas big, ugly bare foot sticking out from the last bunk. Logan lowers his voice even further. Jesus, Shelley, I just never thought the fucking Canadians would turn out to be the bad guys. I mean, my mom is Canadian. Nonlinear war, I remind him. Shifting alliances. The target is Canadian. If it makes you feel any better, whats going on within the target might have nothing to do with the Canadian government or even a Canadian corporation. Our present mission is codenamed Palehorse Keep, and like every mission we undertake, its been assigned to us by the Red. Our target is an exploratory oil-drilling platform named Deep Winter Sigil. Its overwintering in contested marine territory that Canada wants to claim for its ownbut were not out to referee a territorial dispute. The intelligence weve received indicates something unusual is going on in laboratories aboard the platform, evidenced by security so tight, even the Red cant penetrate it. When a secret is that well kept, we assume its dangerous, possibly an existential threat. So our mission is to approach in stealth, kick in the doors, take command of the facility, and determine what is being hidden there. We call this kind of assignment a look-and-see mission. Weve done two others in recent months. Both turned out to be illicit drug labs, which is not something wed ordinarily go after, but thats the risk of a look-and-see. I think were being sent out repeatedly because the Red is searching for a specific operation. What that operation might be, I dont know. Were told to go look, and until we do, we dont know what well find. It could be anything, from an insurmountable defense to an innocent operation. Logan gets a sour look. Like melike all of ushe used to be regular army. Nine months ago he was part of a US training force in Bolivia. His CO ordered the squad to accompany a local unit on an interdiction, which is just a kind of look-and-see. Logan had a bad feeling; he argued the intelligence was faulty. He was right. When the local unit kicked in the door, there were kids inside; no bad guys. They lit up the place anyway. I fucking hate look-and-see missions, he says with bitter sincerity. I want to tell him I hate them too, but what I say instead is, Im going to wake the squad. Be ready to take them through the mission plan one more time before we go. Our chain of command is simple. We have officers because someone has to be in charge, but we dont use designated ranks among our regular soldiers. It isnt necessary. None of them are here for the pay or the promotional opportunities. My focus shifts, picking out a half-seen, translucent icon floating at the bottom of my field of view. Its the command node for gen-com. My attention causes it to brighten, making it stand out from the icons around it all of them part of the display projected by the optical overlay that I wear like contact lenses in my eyes.

The icon offers me a menu but I ignore it, muttering, Send a wakeup call. My command initiates a signal that's relayed point to point to my soldiers. Every soldier in my LCS has an ocular overlay like mine, and every one of us also has a skullnet: a mesh of fine wires implanted beneath the scalp that monitors and regulates brain activity. Each overlay receives my command and relays it to the soldier's skullnet; the simple AI that oversees the skullnet responds, triggering a waking routine. There is no moment of transition, no confusion, no sluggishness. My soldiers awaken simultaneously, with machine precision. Some stretch, some cough, but within ten seconds every one of them appears sitting at the end of the bunks or standing in the passage but all looking at me with an alert gaze, eager to learn our status. Logan takes over. Piss and wash up. You've got five minutes, and then we're going to review roles and rules one more time. All of my soldiers in ETM 7-1 were officially killed in action or died of wounds, but death grants them no reprieve from the endless training and mission prep inherent to the army, because their best chance of surviving a mission is to understand it all the way down to their bones. Seventy minutes later, the sub's commander calls down from the control room to let us know we are ten minutes from our designated drop. Holidays over! Logan barks. And goddamn about time. Suit up! Hoo-yah! Alex Tran proclaims, exchanging a fist bump with Thomas Dunahee. And then everyone moves at once. Our packs, our weapons, and our equipment are all ready. The only prep work remaining is to get into our thermal gear. Crammed shoulder to shoulder in the tight passage, we wriggle into thermal skins, pulling them on over the silky, high-tech shorts and T-shirts that are our standard-issue under-gear. The skins are 1.5 centimeters of supple insulation that will ensure we don't die of hypothermia although we might die of heat exhaustion if our exit from the sub is delayed. I wear full leggings like everyone else, pulling them on over my prosthetic legs. The robot legs don't need to be warm to work, but they are a heat sink. If I don't insulate, they'll drain the warmth from my body. A gray, tight-fitting thermal hood with a full-face mask goes on next. I fit it carefully. There won't be a chance to adjust it after we launch, so I make sure it's comfortable, and that it's positioned so it won't obscure my vision or obstruct my breathing. Already I'm starting to sweat, but I add another layer: an insulated combat uniform printed in gray-white arctic camo. It's identical to the uniform I wore on the First Light mission, lacking insignia or identifying marks, making no claim that we are part of the United States military because we are not part of it. We only pretend to be. It helps in getting around. I pull on my boots, and then strap on a thigh holster holding a 9-millimeter SIG Sauer. A pair of thin shooting gloves, heated with embedded wires, protects my hands. My armored vest goes on last, and then I cast my gaze back along the line. Boots stomp the deck as the squad finishes their prep. Hunched shoulders straighten. Gray-hooded heads turn toward me. Only their eyes are visible, pleading to be released into the cold. Sweet Jesus, Dunahee mutters. Another minute in this heat and I'm going to puke. He's crammed into the middle of the passage. Behind him is Fadul, who has zero tolerance for griping. Puke on me and I'll stuff you under the ice, she advises him in her quiet, dangerous tone. Fadul, you're supposed to terrify the enemy, I remind her as I get my pack off the top bunk closest to me. Not your brothers and sisters in arms. Her lips quirk in a ghost smile as she catches my eye. I can do both, Captain Shelley. Dunahee mutters, That's for damn sure. Pia Fadul is tall and lean, with black hair shaved to a stubble and wide, dark eyes. After the Coma Day nuclear strike, her unit, stationed in the Sahel, went without resupply or reinforcements for nine days, burning up their ammunition defending against an all-out assault. Her post was eventually overrun by a vengeful insurgent army. I've seen some of the video recorded by her helmet cam. Not something you'd want to see twice. There were no survivors. Officially, not even Fadul. Thomas Dunahee is Fadul's physical opposite: short, stocky, and fair-haired. He's a college graduate who was working in banking when Coma Day took down the economy, along with his parents and sisters who lived in Seattle. He enlisted as soon as the recruiters' office reopened. Fourteen months later, he was recruited by the Red. Dunahee, you're on drone duty. Logan, pass him the angel. Yes, sir. The angel we brought with us is a different model than the one I used when I was regular army. It's smaller, with less range, and no satellite uplink capabilities. But with its wings folded against the blade of its fuselage, it's easy to carry on stealth missions. Logan retrieves it from an upper bunk and hands it off to Julian, who's behind him. Pass this down. Bradley Julian is a Somali veteran. Tall and slender, with deep-black skin and dark eyes, he's our quiet intellectual who tends to overthink things. Right now, he's looking anxious behind his mask something Tran notices when Julian turns to hand off the angel. Shit, Julian, Tran says. You're not worried, are you? Tran's white teeth flash in a predatory grin as he takes the folded drone. We got no need to worry. With the Red on our side, we are fucking superheroes. No way we can lose. What the fuck did you just say? I ask him. The whole line freezes. Tran looks at me, confused, concerned, as he realizes he's in deep shit. Do you imagine yourself to be a superhero, Tran? It was only a joke, Captain

Shelley. I was joking with Julian. Alex Tran is skinny and dark-skinned, his African ancestry dominant over the Vietnamese. Hes got three years of combat experience in the regular army, a bona fide war hero whose vigilance saved the lives of every soldier in his platoon when a suicide bomber targeted their operation in the Sahel. But in our outfit Tran is a rookie, the newest recruit to sign on for ETM. Thats Existential Threat Management if anyone bothers to ask, which they dont, because everything that concerns our identities or our activities is classified. This mission is Trans first as part of Strike Squad 7-1. Hes still learning to live in our peculiar, parallel world, part of a ghost squad so secret even the army doesnt know we exist. Trans gaze shifts uncertainly to Julian, before returning to me. Sir Never fucking trust the Red, I warn him. No one moves, no one speaks. All eyes are on me, everyone aware that the outcome of this confrontation will directly affect the mission and I am furious. At Tran, at myself. Five minutes from our designated drop is a hell of a time to discover that I have failed to instill in my new recruit a clear picture of our situation. Operating on the wrong assumptions will get you killed fast, Tran. Just because the Red sent us here, because it assigned us this mission, that does not mean its on our side or that it shares our interests. That does not mean it will aid us. I hesitate. I dont say it aloud, but Ive started to think the Red might not be a single entity, that instead it has multiple aspects, not all of them in sync. Im speaking to myself as much as to Tran when I say, We are on our own. Assume otherwise, and you put us all at risk. This lecture should induce a simple yes, sir and a humble apology, but what I get is an argument. Sir, I do understand. We operate on our own. We dont expect help. We dont ask for it. But we wouldnt be here, we wouldnt be able to operate at all, without oversight from the Red. One thing Ive noticed in the eighteen months since I fell back to Earth: Its not the recruits with a religious background who have a hard time wrapping their heads around the limited nature of the Red. Youre a fan of comics, arent you, Tran? Of superhero movies? He wants to deny it. I see it in the shift of his eyes. But lies dont work in our company because we all run FaceValue, an emotional analysis app that uses tone and facial expression to interpret mood and separate truth from lies. Tran remembers this and concedes the truth. Yes, sir. I am a fan. I thought so. From now on, you will forget every depiction youve ever seen of all-powerful, world-eating AIs. We are not operating within comic book rules. The Red is not infallible. It is not all-knowing. Both its reach and its ability to react are limited. Its concern for our welfare is limited never forget that and it is not on the side of the angels which means that neither are we. We all have our reasons for being here, Tran. Just make sure your reasons are grounded in reality. We are not superheroes. We are not Gods angels armed with flaming swords. We are just soldiers. Tran is still rebellious. But sir, LT told me that on your last mission That the Red came through for us? I spare a brief glare for Logan, who looks at me, teeth gritted, eyes angry behind his mask. It happens, I affirm. We do not count on it. We do not expect assistance because most of the time we wont get it. Think about it. If the Red could control the situation, why send us in at all? Tran does as ordered, his brows knitting as he puzzles over my question. Youre saying if we get into trouble, we have to get ourselves out. Can you operate under that knowledge? Under the certain knowledge that if we fuck up, no one is going to save us? Because if you cannot, I invite you to stay behind. Tran is shocked at my offer. Insulted. Infused with an anger that stiffens his spine so that I swear he grows a quarter inch taller. No, sir. I am part of this squad. Maybe I dont understand yet how the whole thing works, but we are fighting against fucking Armageddon. I know that much. I dont give a shit if were on our own or not. I intend to be part of ETM for the duration. I nod, relax my shoulders, lower my voice. Thats good to know. Now pass that fucking drone to Dunahee and make sure you are organized and ready to go. We are two minutes behind schedule, Logan warns. I nod. Helmets on. We become anonymous behind our opaque-black, full-face visors. Tiny fans kick on, but my thermal hood negates any cooling effect. I retrieve my M-CL1a HITR from my bunk and then check the icons lined up at the bottom of my visors display, one for every soldier in my squad: Logan, Roman, Fadul, Escamilla, Dunahee, Julian, and Tran. All of them green nominal. I want to see them green when this mission is done. Logan gets his own weapon and then squeezes past me to the front of the line, hauling his folded exoskeleton with him. Our dead sisters are too bulky to wear in the subs narrow passages, so well rig up outside if heat stroke doesnt kill us first. We need to move out. Logan is standing ready beside the torpedo room door. Initiate the operation, Lieutenant. Roger that, Captain Shelley. He cautiously opens the door into the passage beyond and steps out. Im right behind him, my dead sister in one hand and my weapon in the other. Our sudden appearance startles two sailors. They disappear up a ladder into the control room, leaving us to make our own way through the sub. We move quickly. A navy lieutenant dressed in Arctic gear waits for us at the foot of the ladder that climbs to the hatch. Cameras and sensors pick up nothing outside, she informs us, her restless gaze shifting from one faceless visor to the next. Not even a

polar bear. Conditions? I ask her. She turns to me in relief. Mine is a familiar voice, one she's heard on a popular show that played a couple of years ago called *Linked Combat Squad*. She knows who I am; she might have figured out names for all of us. It doesn't matter. At this point in the voyage, the crew will have developed a shared story explaining how we are a black-ops operation staffed by soldiers all reported to be dead patriots, every one of us and nearly everything about the story they tell one another will be true.

Conditions are as forecast, sir. The ice pack at this location is estimated at thirteen centimeters, enough to support your weight, with gear. Temperature is minus thirty-nine degrees Fahrenheit, wind speed between forty-six and fifty knots, heavily overcast, with wind-driven snow flurries. We are not going to be hot much longer. I feel the deck tilt and gently rock under me, then a shattering crackle as we break through the crust. My helmet picks up and enhances the faint voice of the subs commander speaking to the lieutenant through her headset as he gives her clearance to open the hatch. She scrambles up the ladder, works the mechanism, and then shoves the hatch open, bracing it against the wind before sliding back down. I glance up at a circle as black as our visors. It is 1400 UTC. The date is December 23. The sun won't look on this latitude again for months to come, and at this moment in the long winter night, storm clouds have smothered even the starlight. I focus my mind on a well-rehearsed command: Move out. My skullnet is trained to recognize neural patterns associated with common words and commands. It picks up the thought, translating it to a flat, synthesized version of my voice so that I hear myself say the words over gen-com. Move out. Lieutenant Logan takes the lead. Leaving the folded frame of his dead sister, he is first up the ladder. Escamilla follows. Dunahee and Tran work together to hand up the dead sisters and then a telescoping gangplank provided by the navy lieutenant. They follow the gear out to the hull. Julian, Roman, and Fadul go after them. I'm next, with the navy lieutenant coming last. The wind hits with vicious force as I reach the top of the ladder. It's like a negative pressure, emptying my lungs. I have to force myself to breathe as the ferocious cold ignites a searing pain in my throat. My helmet adjusts faster than I do. My visor shifts to night vision, while the audio system filters out the wind's roar, allowing me to hear the crunch of boots and a glassy clinking as the sub drifts against shards of broken ice. I climb out, joining my squad on the narrow dorsal hull. A few steps away, the fin-shaped sail, studded with masts housing communications and surveillance systems, stands tall against a stormy sky. My own communications system wakes up. The satellite relay in my pack links automatically to our secure channel and a new icon flares on my display. Confirm contact established, the rich, soft-edged voice of my commanding officer instructs. Major William Kanoa used to be squad CO, but our physician refused to recertify him for field duty after a spinal injury. Now he's my remote handler.

Contact confirmed, I respond as I watch Logan and Escamilla deploy the gangplank—a twenty-centimeter-wide bridge to the unbroken floe. We are on schedule and transitioning to the ice. But then, because missions sometimes get scrubbed at the last minute, I ask, We holding steady with the mission plan? Roger that. Sigil remains the target. We need to know what's going on inside its labs. I flinch hard as the hatch bangs shut behind me. PTSD. My heart rate spikes and I have to fight the urge to swing around with my HITR raised and ready to fire. I don't want to scare the navy lieutenant as she steps past me to check the gangplank. In the corner of my vision, an icon brightens. It's an intricate red mesh glowing against a black circle—my skullnet icon—it glows indicating a burst of activity in the mesh of wires in my head, signals sent to my brain to trigger neurochemicals that push me back toward a calm emotional center. I rarely see the skullnet icon anymore and it irritates me to see it now. I don't need a cerebral nanny always watching over me anymore. I've learned to handle my own emotions. After a second, it goes away. There is a problem, Kanoa says. His tone has changed; it's become softer, more soothing. That tells me he noticed my emotional spike, and that irritates me too. What problem? I ask as Fadul moves first across the bridge. Oscar-1 is behind schedule. Fuel issues. There's going to be a delay in your extraction. Oscar-1 is Jason Okamoto, an ex-air force pilot who has pulled us out of a couple of nasty situations. He's scheduled to pick us up in ETM 7-1's little nine-passenger tiltrotor when we're ready to withdraw. How far behind schedule? I ask. Fadul reaches solid ice without incident. She unhooks from her safety line. Logan hooks the other end to one of the dead sisters. Is he out of the game? Undetermined, but we're looking at alternate means if he can't get through. Roger that. I don't like it, but extraction was always going to be the hardest part of Palehorse Keep, and I trust Kanoa to find a way to get us out. I watch the folded dead sister slide down the gangplank, secured between two lines.

When it's safely across, Logan hauls the lines back and with the navy lieutenant's help, he sets up to send another. While they get our gear transferred, I make a slow turn, letting my helmet cams record a night vision perspective of the surrounding ice field. We are four hundred kilometers north of Canada's Ellesmere Island and only three hundred seventy kilometers from the North Pole. Immediately around us, green-tinted

flurries of wind-driven snow skitter across a channel of smooth ice. But half a klick out, the floe becomes a badland of broken blocks heaved up and tumbled together. Kanoa says, The ice has been shifting. Im sending a revised map. Roger that. Any additional intelligence on the target? Negative. No electronic traffic.

Kanoa saved my life the night I returned to Earth. He pulled me out of the cold water of the Pacific and when I stopped shivering, he offered me a chance to make a difference, to be part of the ETM strike force, a ghost unit that executes missions determined by the Red. Sometimes its hard to forgive him for thatfor giving me that choice. The dead sisters have all been moved to the ice. The squad crosses next, each soldier hooking up to the safety lines before transiting the bobbing gangplank. By the time I cross, the surface has refrozen. It looks solid, though I know its not. I walk quickly but carefully across the little bridge, relying on the lieutenant to pull me out if I slip. I dont slip. I reach the floe and unhook. The safety line snakes back, and then the lieutenant works to pull back the gangplank, one segment at a time. Around me, backpacks drop to the ice, and the dead sisters get unfolded. I expand the new map in my visors display. It shows our target to the south-southeast, only five kilometers away. The subs sensors picked up no sign of enemy forces close at hand, but we are not safe. Even in this wind, a skilled sniper could hit us from five hundred meters out.

Maybe farther. As I turn my head, the gale claws past the edge of my helmet in a skin-crawling key. Dunahee! Get the angel in the air. I need to see farther. I need a real-time view of whats out there. And make goddamn sure you keep the angel on a tether. Roger that, sir! Dunahee is already halfway into his rig, an operation made faster by Roman, who is helping him secure the cinches. Rosanna Roman is our designated marksman. Shes as tall as Fadul but more willowy. Behind her visor, her eagle eyes are blue, her hair light brown. On Coma Day, Romans unit was on the Korean Peninsula, hunkered down at ground zero under the artillery barrage of a flash war that the diplomats later excused as a miscommunicationmeaning that the United States wasnt quite as dead as some had hoped. Kanoa believes the incident was only a few minutes from going nuclear when a cease-fire was achieved four point five hours after the start of hostilities. That was too late for Roman. She spent the next seven months in a hospital in Honolulu, where she eventually died of her injuries. I unfold my dead sister. The wind nearly blows it over. Escamilla is already rigged, so he comes over and holds it upright for me as I step onto the footplates. First time Ive ever rigged up in a gale, I tell him. Yeah, always a new thrill with this job. Carl Escamilla is tall and broad-shouldered. Theres no softness at all in his sharp-featured face; there isnt any in his outlook. Hes seen too much. He was a nine-year combat veteran recently home from the Sahel when the nukes went off. He got put on emergency duty, assigned to guard a military facility when riots erupted in the surrounding community. Families panicked. Ive heard his former CO is up on charges for a massacre in which twenty-seven civilians whod been seeking refuge behind the wire were gunned down. Like all of us, hes driven by what hes seen, what hes done. The cold fact is our world is seriously fucked up. Maybe ETM can help unwind some of that. Maybe if we do, the death, the suffering weve witnessed might be made worthwhile. But who the hell knows? With Escamilla helping, I cinch the titanium struts to my legs and then my arms. I swing my pack onto the back frame. My HTR I carry in my hands. Youre clear, he says. There is a soft, ritualized chatter over gen-com as the squad runs through the standard safety checks, confirming that each rig is properly cinched, with full power. I leave Logan to supervise, while I join Dunahee and Roman. Theyre crouched on the ice, Roman helping to hold the blade-shaped fuselage of the angel against the tearing wind, while Dunahee pulls a titanium clip from the angels belly compartment. A tendril of synthetic, woven spider silk pays out behind the clip; another half-kilometer is wound around a spindle in the angels belly. Dunahee hooks the clip to a loop on his chest armor. When its secure, Roman unfolds the angels narrow wings. Their upswept winglets are separated by a one-meter span. I watch my display as the angels AI links in, its icon showing green, nominal. Angel online, I tell Kanoa. Confirmed. Angel online. A menu slides open in response to my gaze. I call up the angels video feed and get a night vision perspective of the trampled snow around Faduls pack. Angel eyes open. Confirmed. Dunahee takes the angel from Roman. I step out of the way as he angles the nose upward. Launching drone, he says over gen-com. Roger that. He lets the gale seize it. The angel shoots away, the thread of spider silk paying out behind itor at least I hope it is. The thread is so fine that even with night vision I cant see it against the ice. Within seconds, I cant see the angel either. Its lost to my sight against the low, fast-running clouds. But its eyes are open, looking down on the tossed and broken ice floes, and looking ahead to our destination. And there it is, Kanoa says. Deep Winter Sigil, rigged with high-efficiency lights, is kept lit like a downtown skyscraper on New Years Eve. What the angel sees are the reflections cast by those lights against the racing clouds. The controversial platform was towed into place last summer when the ice was in retreat. Its presence is an opening shot in a still-incubating territorial war. Sigil is a spar platform.

It floats on the oceans surface, its superstructure rising above a huge, hollow cylinder that extends seven hundred feet into the deep to keep the platform stabilized. Underwater cables, attached to the bottom of the cylinder, drop down another three thousand feet to an oceanic ridge, anchoring Sigil even against the pressure of the iceso far, anyway. Whether theres oil in that ridge, no one really knows. Initial drilling on the first exploratory well stopped at the onset of winter. But a small crew of technicians and scientists remained aboarduntil mid-October when the staff of technicians was reduced by half, electronic communications went on lockdown, and a private security company was hired to protect the facility and the staff, ostensibly from potential piracy and sabotage. If our intelligence is accurate, the drilling platform now hosts a force of ten experienced mercenaries. Maybe those mercs are the good guys in this coming conflict and maybe were the bad guys. Maybe the scientists aboard Deep Winter Sigil really are there to study the dynamics of the polar ice pack and the winter habits of passing polar bears. But I fucking doubt it. We wait while the angels tether spins out. I still cant see the line of spider silk, but I can hear it hum with tension. The hum shifts in tone as the angel initiates a turn across the wind, obeying a standard instruction set that directs it to fly in a quartering pattern that will let it survey a wide swath of terrain. But thats not going to work in this weather. Sigil can generate energy to keep the lights on, but our own power supplies are time-limited. The power packs that supply our dead sisters can hold out for twelve to fourteen hours of use; the angel has a shorter lifespan. Kanoa, the angel doesnt have the power reserves to sustain a standard search pattern against this wind. Roger that. Canceling the algorithm. Ill try to reinitiate the standard search pattern as you approach the target. Until then, well have only a narrow view of the terrain ahead, and were lucky to have that. If the wind was blowing in the opposite direction, the angel would be blown behind us, instead of ahead. Dunahee grunts and staggers a step as the angel hits the end of its tether. You doing okay, Dunahee? I ask over gencom. Roger that, sir. Its a shit assignment to be tethered to the angel, but in this wind the angel would be gone over the horizon and useless to us in minutes if it wasnt tied down. My gaze sweeps the squad icons. All remain green. We should be ready. I confirm it with my lieutenant. Logan, status? Squad is rigged and ready, Captain Shelley. Thats it, then. I turn to the sub. The lieutenant is no longer in sight. The hatch is closed. I hold my right arm straight out from my shoulder and give a thumbs-up. Seconds later, the sub drops away beneath the ice, and we are on our own. Logan, I want Dunahee on point so no one gets tangled in the tether. Roger that, Captain. Dunahee, you should see a designated path displayed on your visor. Ive got it, sir. The path is a blue line drawn on the map, but its also projected on our heads-up displays, where it looks like a faintly luminous trail laid out on the ice. Follow it, but use your judgment. The angel will red-alert if it detects the thermal signature of thin ice or open water, but angel sight is going to be limited, so proceed with caution. If you break through, its a fucking long way to the bottom. A fully rigged light infantry soldier will sink like a stone. Thats not theory. Ive seen it happen. Dunahee moves out. Logan falls in behind and one by one the others follow: Fadul, Escamilla, Tran, Julian, Roman, and then me. The footplates of our exoskeletons are fitted with tiny triangular teeth that bite the ice, reducing slippage. We go in single file across terrain that Dunahee has already proven safe, separated from one another by a standard interval of thirty meters to reduce casualties in the event of an RPG attack. Soon, the smooth ice of the freshly frozen channel is behind us. Chaos lies ahead. Last summers fractured ice floes froze together in a tumult of autumn storms, leaving a jagged surface of broken blocks and pinnacles, some rising two meters into the air. Its challenging terrain, but we make steady progress because Dunahee leads us on a path of least resistance plotted from satellite imagery by the battle AI that coordinates the squads activitiesand because the powered leg struts of our dead sisters reduce the work load while propelling us over the uneven ice in long, efficient strides. No snow is actually falling, but visibility is limited anyway because the gale is keeping loose snow aloft, whirling it through the air in a veil that blocks the ambient light used by night vision. The angel sees in night vision, but its equipped with a near-infrared camera too, and IR wavelengths easily penetrate snow. So my first look at Deep Winter Sigils glittering superstructure comes via a crisp, digitally translated black-and-white video feed. The platform is a stack of three decks perched on a round pedestal surrounded by ice. The first two levels hold a maze of pipes and cylindrical tanks lit by bright lights and caged by cross-struts. The third deck is uncovered. The north side the side were approaching supports a tangle of industrial equipment, along with a crane. A drilling gantry rises from the center of the deck. The angel is viewing it from a low angle that doesnt let me see the two-story complex of offices, labs, and dormitory rooms I know is on the southern side, but I can see lights from those facilities shining on the ice and reflected in the swirling, wind-blown snow. More lights stud the gantry, some of them aimed down at a helicopter pad built on top of the living quarters and extending out over the ice. To my surprise, theres a wind tent erected on the pad. Most of

the tent is hidden by Sigils superstructure. Only its rounded peak is visible, but thats enough to tell me theres a helicopter in residence. Kanoa, whats a helicopter doing here? Have additional personnel been brought in? Intelligence is looking into it. We continue to advance. Im not ready to suggest that we call off the mission, but the anomaly of the helicopter bothers me even more than Oscar-1s delay. Our intelligence team should not have missed something so obvious. The Red should not have missed it. Seven minutes later Kanoa comes back with an answer. Weve found a flight plan indicating a supply run only. No additional personnel. Given the distance back to civilization, the pilot probably decided to wait out the weather. We advance without incident until were just over two clicks from the target, and then the angel red-alerts. It marks an electromagnetic source point on the mapa potential enemyone hundred thirty meters south and east of Dunahee. We all drop into a crouch. This puts a low ridge of ice between me and the source point, eliminating any line-of-sight visibility. So I look through the angels eyesbut nothing is out there. Night vision and thermal both fail to reveal an enemy. We just crashed a sensor field, I conclude. Assume the enemy knows were coming. Romans whispered answer comes through first. Fuck. Roger that, I growl. From this point forward there is an excellent chance the mission will degrade into a slugfest on the ice. If it does, I dont want the enemy to be able to harvest our position data from a constellation of motion sensors spread across the battlefield. Fadul, go after the device. Destroy it. Then sweep west. Look for more. Roger that, Captain. Shes a hundred fifty meters ahead of me. I glimpse her as she departs our line, bent low, her weight and the weight of her pack supported by the struts of her dead sister. Julian, you sweep farther east. See what you can find. Yes, sir. Dunahee, I need the angel forward. I understand, sir. Stick to the plotted path. Ill be following behind you. The rest of you spread out. Pick your own paths. Move with speed. We need to close with the target as soon as we canand for fucks sake, watch the map for thin ice. Go. Dunahee moves out at almost double his prior pace, scrambling and slipping, his dead sister powering him around the blocks and over the ridges. Behind him, Logan and Tran take off, angling west, while Escamilla moves east after Fadul. Roman stays close to Dunahee. Kanoa, you got anything? Negative, Shelley. The angel red alerts twice more as we set off two more sensors. Closest personnel, go after them! The enemy has marked our positions, but the locations of their sensors are revealed to us by their EM transmissions. Kanoa is still analyzing the angels video feed. No external activity on the platform, he reports with unflappable calm. No indication of live enemy on the ice. Satellite surveillance does not indicate gun emplacements RPG! I shout over gen-com, reacting to the small, explosive flash of a rocket launch, five hundred meters east of the platform. Its a useless warning. The rocket moves so fast it finds its target before I get the last syllable out. I drop to my belly while my visor goes briefly black, shielding my eyes from the glare of an aerial fireball. The thunder of the concussion booms through the air and vibrates in the ice. My visor clears. I scan my squad icons. All green, thank God. No alerts, no injuries... no angel sight. Angel down, Kanoa informs us. Fuck. I get my feet under me, jam the teeth of my footplates into the ice, and get up again. I think, map, and the skullnet picks up the request. The maps faded icon brightens and expands. Normally its updated by data from the angel, but it works on line of sight tooand it shows most of my soldiers hunkered down. Only Fadul and Escamilla are moving. Roman! I need my best shooter active in this game. Try to get a couple meters of elevation. Weve got a merc on the ice. I want you to find that fucker and take him out. Roger that. The map shows Roman seventy meters to the south. I make sure there is no thin ice between us. Then I sprint to catch up with her, running in a bounding stride, hammering my footplates down to keep from slipping. Fadul speaks over gen-com, her tone matter-of-fact. Grenade. Boom! Despite her warning, I flinch. That puts me into a skid and I almost go down. One sensor out of the way, Captain, Fadul reports. I see the flash of another RPG launch. Fadul I want to tell her to take cover, but its already too late. The concussion shakes the ice. I dont take time to see if shes been hit. Instead, I take off again, running. The best thing I can do now is to help Roman take down the enemy. Roman, at least, is still alive. I see her ahead of me, using the arm hooks of her dead sister to try to scramble up an angled block of ice thats leaning two meters into the air. Behind you, I warn her. Im losing my grip. Im going to slide backward! No youre not. I crouch under her footplates and boost her up, guiding her feet to rest on my shoulder struts. Steady? Itll do. Belly down on the jagged surface of the block, she lines up her weapon. I tap into her visors display to see what she sees. Kanoa is there ahead of me. Mark, he says, as a targeting circle appears in her field of view. The AI labels it as seven hundred meters out. Roman has the wind behind her. She lines up, takes three quick shots. All three hit a ridge of ice no more than a foot high. Something moves behind that ridge: a tiny figure wearing white camo, rigged in a dead sister, and equipped with night vision goggles. It jerks into sight and then falls back down. Target down, Roman whispers. Confirmed, Kanoa says. Holding my breath, I scan my squad icons, trying to see who got

hit by the RPG but everything is green. Confirm. No casualties? After a second, Kanoa echoes, No casualties.

I step out of the way to let Roman slide down. An RPG is damned intimidating ordnance, but it has lousy accuracy at a distance. Dunahee is outraged all the same. Fucker was shooting at me! Blew a black hole in the ice. Fucker was already out on the ice before we got here, I point out, patrolling with an RPG launcher as a sidearm. Whatever they're protecting in there, they are serious. So we move in and we move fast. Go! Hit hard before the enemy can fully prepare: That's still our best option. So I run, closing the distance between me and the bright, cheery lights of Deep Winter Sigil. Partway to those lights is a massive block of ice looking like the remnant of an iceberg, with a sheer face rising four meters above the surrounding floe. I run toward it, using it for cover. We cannot afford to get bogged down in an extended firefight. Here, on our own, in the dark of the polar night, we have no means to recharge our dead sisters once their power packs run down. We have to withdraw before that happens, or we have to take control of the platform and tap into Sigil's power grid. Otherwise, we lose. As I run, I ask myself: What would I do if I were in command of the mercenaries aboard Deep Winter Sigil? An oil-drilling platform is an amazing piece of technology, but it is not a fortress. It's not designed to withstand an assault team armed with grenades and automatic weapons. If I commanded the defense, I would not risk my clients by hunkering down inside. I would not stage a battle that was certain to destroy what I'd been hired to protect. Instead, I would deploy my soldiers from the south side of the platform, out of sight of the enemy. I would divide them in two groups, sending one east and one west, instructing them to use the jagged ice as cover while they get into position to trap their assailants in crossfire. If we still had angel sight, we could see them coming. We don't. A knob of ice explodes in front of me. Out of instinct I dive sideways, land on my arm strut, and roll, trying to make sense of an ominous blur of red and yellow icons flaring in my visors display. I come up on my belly to a fusillade of automatic-weapons fire, each shot a sharp, hard crack against the suppressed audio of the roaring gale. I squint at the squad icons, but they're faded, translucent, hard to see because our battle AI wants me to focus on the firefight but I can see enough to know that we have wounded, with one critical red. Kanoa, injury report! I could pull up the data, but it's faster to ask. Julians down and critical. Dunahee and Fadul are mobile wounded. Estimate of enemy numbers? At least six on the ice. I look around. A meter away, there's a low ridge. It's only eighteen inches high and not thick enough to stop a round, but it offers line-of-sight cover and that's better than nothing. I belly-crawl to it, turn onto my back, and then poke the muzzle of my HITR over the top, using the muzzle cams to look around. I can't see much, because the iceberg is only thirty meters away and it's blocking my view of the platform. Frustration kicks in. I am fucking blind. I have no visual contact with the enemy, with the target, or with my own soldiers. If Delphi was still my handler, she would know what I need. She would have already expanded the map and given me a verbal summary of everyone's position but I left Delphi behind. I left everything. Map! I think and if a thought can have a bitter tone, this one does. The AI picks it up anyway and expands the map. It shows my location still a half-klick north of Sigil. Fadul is farthest out on my east. Escamilla is with Julian, getting him stabilized. Roman is behind me, but moving up fast. Everyone else is spread out to the west. Logan and Tran are in a firefight with at least three enemy soldiers. Three more enemy positions on the eastern side of the platform are marked with fuzzy icons to indicate uncertainty. Kanoa, do I have a target? Negative. No line of sight and out of range for grenades. You have to move in. Roman, come behind me! Roger that. I want the high ground, so I sprint for the iceberg. The map shows it as twenty meters long, four wide, angled from northeast to southwest. Smooth, open ice lies beyond it. I loop my HITR over my shoulder and skip-jump, using all the power of my leg struts to launch myself at the top of the wall. I don't make it to the top but I get close. I jam my arm hooks in and try to get a toehold using the teeth of my footplates but the ice is so goddamned hard, I barely nick it. Roman is right behind me. She gets under me, gets her arm struts under my footplates. Got you, Shelley! Now go, go, go. I'm levitating, enough to get my arm hooks over the top, and then my elbows. After that, it's easy to scramble onto the slanting, wind-swept surface. I look around, realizing what an exposed position I'm in, no cover at all, but what the fuck. I can see everything on this side of the platform. HITR in hand, I belly-crawl to the south edge. Check the map again. But I still don't have a target. The smooth ice between me and Sigil is patterned in geometric panes of light and shadow cast by the glittering superstructure rising against the night sky just half a klick away. Kanoa A gold targeting point pops up on my display. I can't see anything in the indicated position. You're close enough, Kanoa says. Lob a grenade. There are two triggers on my weapon. I curl my finger around the second one, the one that controls the grenade launcher while I correct my aim, bringing a targeting circle into line with the target point. I squeeze the trigger, launching a grenade from the tube mounted under the rifle barrel. The firefight to my east heats up, shots popping off one after

another as the grenade rockets away. It explodes with a flash that dims my visor and tosses up a spray of ice crystals that briefly map the winds fierce currents as theyre whipped away. No fucking idea if I hit the enemy. Kanoa puts up another target point. I cover it and shoot again. This time, when the wind carries away the cloud of smoke and ice splinters, I see a body wearing white camo and a dead sister, just like the soldier Roman dropped. I glance at the map. You got another target for me? Roman, cover it! Kanoa barks. Bam! My vision goes bright white as something kicks me in the side of my helmet, hard enough that despite the weight of my pack and my rig, I go briefly airborne, dropping back a second later to land on my side. I want to curl up to reduce my exposure. I want to crawl for shelterbut I know Ill be dead if I do. Target, I growl at Kanoa. The only chance I have is to lay down enough return fire to keep the shooter from shooting me again. I roll back to my belly, returning to shooting positionbut Im not fast enough. A rifle speaks, fiercely loud even muffled by my helmet. Three slow shots. To my astonishment, none of them hit me. Target! I scream at Kanoa. Negative. Nothing left. Romans cleared the eastern field. I shift focus from my visors display to the wider terrain. Roman is standing below on the ice, looking up at me as she cradles her H1TR in her arms. The three shots I heard were hers. Your head okay, Shelley? she asks. Fuck if I know. I check the map. Its been updated with the locations of four bodies, three of them on the eastern side of the platform, one to the west where Logan and Tran are still dueling with two live mercs. I want to get over there, help them finish things, but not until this side is fully secure. Roman, I need you to make sure those dead mercs dont do a zombie. Fadul Boom! I look up, startled by the sound of an explosion on the platform. The distant bleat of a fire alarm follows. The alarm and the muted roar of the wind are the only sounds I hear, because the shooting to the west has stopped. I scan the squad iconsno changes. No one else is hit. Logan I want to ask him for his status, but a new sound intrudes: one of the surviving mercs, shouting, pleading for backup. My helmet audio boosts the volume of his panicked voice so that each word is clear: Glover! Glover, where the fuck are you? Get out here! Get out here or were dead! Vincent Glover. Its a name familiar from the mission briefing. Grovers the CO, I remind the squad. Watch for movement on the platform, because hes going to be bringing out the big guns. Dont think so, Fadul counters. Looks like we got no heroes on deck today. Motherfuckers are rolling back the canvas hangar on the landing pad. Theyre bugging out. I cant see the landing pad from my position. Its hidden behind the platforms massive superstructure. But Fadul is wide east. I look through her helmet cam to see the wind tent sliding open on motorized tracks, folds of loose canvas shivering in the gale as the hemispherical struts collapse on each other. The tents retreat reveals a midsize civilian helicopter that my overlay identifies as an Agusta Westland. The blades are loose and starting to spin up. Its not just the pilot pulling out, Fadul says. I make out at least one, maybe two in the backseat. Fucking Vincent Glover is abandoning his soldiers. I can hardly believe it. Mercenaries work for the money, but theyre still loyal to one anotheror I used to think so. But I abandon the question of mercenary ethics when my skullnet icon lights up, indicating sudden and significant interference in my headspace. Not that I need the hint. An awareness comes over me, a certainty that I need to prevent that helicopter from leaving. I dont want to destroy it, but I need to know whats on board. Fadul, can you hit the pilot? Pilots a civilian, Kanoa reminds me. Passengers might be civilians too. Out of my range anyway, Fadul adds. And Id be shooting across the wind. Im closer than Fadul, Id be shooting down the wind, and it doesnt matter if I cant see the helicopter now, because Ill be able to see it when it takes off. Cover me, Roman. Shes a better shooter than I am, but I have the high ground. I am not letting that helicopter go. I stand up on the iceberg, brace my feet against the blast of the wind, and bring my weapon to my shoulder. You operating, Shelley? Kanoa wants to know. Roger that. Operating. Thats what we call it when the Red gets inside our heads, pushing its agenda so we feel it, so we know what needs to be done. The skullnet icon is glowing and I have no doubt at all that I am operating on a program written by the Red. More figures on the landing pad, Fadul reports as the volume of engine noise climbs. And then her tone shifts. Incoming! I dont flinch, even when an RPG explodes to the east, a last rogue shot as the helicopter goes airborne. I see the blur of its rotors through the platforms superstructure. Confidence floods me. I know Ill be able to hit it. I wait for a better angle. Two seconds, three, the wind steady against me. I think the pilot wants to stay low, keep the platform behind him, but the wind catches his ship, lofts it up. A targeting point pops up in my field of view, sighted on the engine block. I fire a three-round burst. And I hit it. I know I do. But nothing happens. Tracking its flight with the muzzle of my weapon, I shoot three more burstsbut the helicopter keeps going, accelerating southeast across the wind like its heading for Greenland. Nice shooting, sir, Roman says. Shes fucking with me. I expect that from Fadul, but not from Roman. I scowl down at herbut then I remember the RPG. Fadul! Status? I check her iconits gone yellowbut Fadul sounds fine when she says, Motherfucker missed me. I look

again at Roman. Shes standing with her head cocked, watching the retreating helicopter. The winds pulling a streamer of black smoke out of the engine block, she reports. I dont think theyre getting far. My skullnet icon fades from sight. The unearthly confidence I felt goes with it and Im suddenly conscious of my exposed position atop the highest point anywhere on this ice field. Jesus, I whisper, looking up warily at Sigils decks. Kanoa knows exactly what Im thinking. No activity on the platform, he assures me. And Logans got an offer of surrender from the two remaining enemy on the icethough you might want to move to a less exposed position anyway. Yeah. I jump down, managing not to land on my ass, but my hands are shakingand not from the cold. The Red wanted me to take that shot, wanted it enough to risk making me an easy target. Id like to believe it ran a calculation first, that it plotted the positions and status of every enemy soldier remaining and determined my exposure was minimalbut I dont believe it. The Red wanted me to take that shot. That was the priority. I head toward Logans position, checking in with my wounded on the way. Fadul, you sound functional but youre showing yellow. Whats your status? Fucking ice splinter went through my left bicep. But I can walk and I can shoot. Roger that. Dunahee, you? Shoulders broken, he whispers between clenched teeth. I can walk. Julian is not ambulatory. Hes got a hole blasted in his gut. Escamilla has stuffed the wound with putty and stopped the bleeding, but its a bad wound, hes losing heat fast, and we need to evacuate him ASAP. I dont know yet how were going to do that. This mission now qualifies as thoroughly fucked, and if were going to unfuck it, we have to move fast. Both logic and instinct tell me that whatever it is were looking for, it left on the birdand Im going to believe that Roman is right. Damaged and fighting the storm, the helicopter wont be able to stay in the air for more than a few minutes. So we need to go after it. We need to reach it as soon as we can after it goes downbut with three wounded soldiers, two prisoners, and an oil-drilling platform that still needs to be inspected, its going to be some time before we can leave. Fadul, I know youre hurting, but I need you to help Escamilla get Julian to the platform. Shelley, she points out, we dont control the platform. We will by the time you get there. Prisoners are a burden and now weve got two. Logan has got them stripped of their gear. Tossed alongside their neatly folded exoskeletons is a collection of pistols, knives, Tasers, communications gear, and night vision goggles. Theyre kneeling on the ice, still wearing their white parkas. Their thermal hoods, like ours, hide their faces. Ones a big man, his skin black behind the frost collected on his lips and eyelashes. The other has a slight build; the skin around his eyes is pale. I turn the anonymous dark shield of my visor on them and ask, Whos left aboard Sigil ? Just the civilians, the big guy says. Hes so cold, his teeth are actually chattering. We were hired to protect the civilians. But Glover ran out on us! Took Morris and Chan with him. Left us here to die. Working off of voice and biometrics, the battle AI tags him with an identity: Darian Wilcox, 26, former US Army. What were the civilians up to, Wilcox? He cocks his head, eyeing me for a few seconds, like he thinks I should already know this. Lab work, sir. Thats all I know. Important enough to bring us in. Important enough for someone to hire you. How many civilians? Twelve. The number confirms our background intelligence. Wilcox adds, None of them are going to put up a fight, sir. You can take what you need. No need to hurt anyone. Nice and friendly? Yes, sir. Wilcox, did your friends booby trap the place for us? His answer is an emphatic Fuck, no! Were a business. Were not suicide fanatics. Dumping you was a business decision? He glares up at me, his breath steaming. Hes reading a lot into my words. You dont need to kill us, sir. We dont know who you are. We havent seen your faces. Ill keep that in mind. But right now I dont know what Glover left for us, so Im going to let you go in firstjust in case. No one with any knowledge has argued there isnt an ocean of oil at the bottom of the Arctic Sea, or that it cant be extracted, but there has been a decades-long debate on whether it makes sense to try. The petroleum industry has a bigger RD budget than the gross national product of most countries, but even for them, the cost of infrastructure for offshore oil production is staggering. A failed well could bankrupt a companybut the risk isnt limited to capital investment. Its certain that along the way, there will be wellhead blowouts along with oil tanker wrecks, and of course there will be more carbon poured into the atmosphere to accelerate the chaos of heat and storm and polar melt thats been fucking over the globe in worse ways every year. And still, theres a shitload of money on the table. The developmental phase alone provides an opportunity for subcontracting companies to bleed their senior partners for billions in support, supplies, communication, and construction. Its hard for any government to say no to that. Only five hundred meters of smooth ice separate us from the platform. I want to cross that distance quickly, but our prisoners are clumsy without their dead sisters. They slip on the ice and they slow us down. But our slow pace lets Fadul and Escamilla keep up as they drag Julian across the ice, wrapped up in an inflated emergency cocoon. As we advance, I keep a close watch on Sigil s decks, but theres no activity, no sign of any defense. I hope that means the twelve civilians are on lockdown, huddled in

designated security zones, waiting on rescue. Despite Wilcox's assurances, I'm worried they're armed, that they'll put up a resistance. I don't want any more casualties. Kanoa. Here. You got a status update on Oscar-1?

He's still tied up, waiting for fuel. Waiting? I thought he had a fuel problem—contamination or something?

Negative. He's having a problem with the facility superintendent at the last refueling stop, north end of Ellesmere. That doesn't make sense. Infiltrating phony orders into military networks is a specialty of our intelligence team. I'm not going to pretend to understand how the system works. Insofar as I can tell, our

ETM strike squad uses bureaucracy as camouflage. A charade of hacked orders, false identities, and compartmentalized oversight lets us operate with the appearance of an officially sanctioned force attached to the United States Army. It's a position reinforced by a black-ops budget and need-to-know security that ensures no auditor ever compiles enough information to prove that we are not who we claim to be. So far anyway. And compared to engineering an authorization for transport aboard a nuclear submarine, convincing the superintendent of a remote listening station to refuel Oscar-1 should be easy. Kanoa, just get Intelligence to push an order through. I need to get Julian evacuated. It's a two-hour flight just to get here, and if he's not even in the air yet? We're working on it, Shelley. Or you could write an order for a military flight. There's got to be buzz on the network anyway. Glover must have put an emergency call through, and if not him, then the civilians. No. The networks are quiet. I think Sigil's communications have been suppressed. Suppressed? How? I thought we couldn't access their system. Look, even if I can get a military flight, it's going to leave a footprint that's hard to erase, and it could have political repercussions. Oscar-1 is still our best option. And you need time to run down that helicopter anyway. It's Julian I'm worried about. Roger that. We're doing what we can.

The closer we get to the platform, the harder it's going to be for us to return fire if someone does decide to shoot at us from the decks, so I call a halt when we're still a hundred meters out. Logan, I want you to take Fadul and Tran. Get in position to provide covering fire if we need it. What about the prisoners, Shelley?

Dunahee! How are you holding up? I'll do what I need to do, sir. I know you will. I need you to babysit a prisoner. The small guy. Shoot him if he gives you any trouble. Happy to, sir. And stay close to Julian. Yes,

sir. Escamilla and Roman, you're with me. You too, Wilcox. Let's find out what Glover left behind. The platform becomes an ugly industrial roof as we approach the pedestal that supports Deep Winter Sigil and houses the pipes and drill. That pedestal descends seven hundred feet into the deeps below us, but I'm only concerned with climbing its upper twenty feet to the first deck. Fortunately, there's a caged stairway to make it easy. I follow through on my threat and send Wilcox up the stairs first, with Escamilla right behind him.

They find no activity, no evidence of booby traps, so Roman and I go next. We clear the first two decks.

Kanoa checks in as we climb to the platform's third level. We've got a thermal image just in from a survey satellite. Low-res, but it shows a hotspot fourteen kilometers northeast. Probably the helicopter. Stationary?

Heat profile indicates it, but the ice is rough the whole way. It could take you ninety minutes to reach it.

Survivors? Can't tell and it'll be over two hours before we have access to another satellite over the area. We'll be there by then. Roger that. You need to go after it. Running down a helicopter: a little task to keep us busy after we secure Sigil. A quick inspection of the third deck reveals no one outside, so we turn our attention to the living quarters. Though the two-story building has multiple entrances, all but one are sealed with ice.

Wilcox gestures toward that one. Main entrance, sir. It's a glass-paned door spilling bright light out onto the platform, where footprints shadow the frost. Move in slowly, I tell him, gripping my HITR in two hands. I'll

be right behind you. Wilcox turns to look at me. It's a double door, sir. Outer door has to close before the inner door opens. I gaze past him. Both the inner and outer doors are glass, which makes it easy to see into the brightly lit, industrial-looking lobby beyond. It's an ugly room: flat-white walls, gray vinyl floor, black lockers, steel benches. Two bodies are sprawled on the vinyl floor. Both are lying face up in wide, shallow pools of blood, bullet holes drilled in their chests. Wilcox turns around, sees what I see. Holy fuck. He falls back a few steps. What the hell was going on in there? I ask him. Like I said, sir, lab work. Industrial shit.

Some microbiology. I don't know. Those people in there, they were good people. Geeky scientist types, you know? Interested in everything. And polite. I nudge him forward again. Open the door. Yes, sir. He punches a fist-sized button to the left of the doorframe. I stay behind him, intending to use him as a human shield if a bomb goes off, but the only thing that happens is the buzz-and-click of an electronic lock. He opens the door manually. I follow him through. Roman, come with me. Escamilla, you stay outside. Roger that, Captain.

The outer door closes automatically behind us. I hear it lock. The next door opens and we are washed in a billow of hot air, reeking of blood and shit. I push Wilcox ahead of me. No bombs go off. No one shoots at us. One of the bodies is that of a woman, the other a man. My overlay tags them with names. Two of the staff scientists. We stand there for thirty seconds, just listening. I hear my prisoners ragged breathing and the

soft hum of the ventilation system. Nothing else. Quiet as death, Roman says. I send Escamilla to check out the industrial shops while Roman and I search the labs and the dormitories, our prisoner in tow. Escamilla finds two more bodies. We find seven more, for a total of eleven. All shot multiple times. Kanoa identifies the dead as scientists, engineers, technicians. The only one missing is Dr. Toni Parris, a microbiologist. American. We record everything, with portrait shots of every corpse. My prisoner looks on it all in shocked disbelief. He cant come up with an explanation, but he does point out a lab that was off-limits to everyone except Dr. Parris and two of the other researchers. Its not off-limits now. Its steel door is blown, hanging on its hinges. I look past the door at two lab benches, numerous shelves, a ventilation hood, a desk, instruments I cant identifybut what draws my gaze is a stainless steel refrigerator. It looks inflated, the sides puffed out and warped, the door hanging open, the interior empty, the walls charredlike someone set a grenade off inside it. Stay out of there, Kanoa warns me. Im already sweating beneath my thermal gear; fear makes it worse. You think its biowarfare? I back away from the open door, imagining my skin itching, my lungs filling with fluid. Were missing a microbiologist, so thats my guess. She helped them collect the payload from the fridge and then they blew it to wipe any traces. I think about it, imagining some kind of plague so dangerous it had to be brewed in an isolated Arctic outpost. And I wonder: Have we found the objective of our recent look-and-see missions? I turn to Wilcox. He gets defensive: I didnt know it was biowarfare, Captain. The people who worked here, they didnt seem like that kind. We all imagine we can recognize evil. I gesture with my weapon. Move. He doesnt need any more encouragement. I suspect were all quietly hoping that Dr. Parris managed her cultures in a professional manner, because if anything escaped into the air system, we are screwed. We hustle back to the lobby, where the air stinks worse than before. Wilcox, I want you to get these bodies outside. Let them freeze. Roman, you watch him. Shoot him if he gives you any trouble. Yes, sir. You got no worries with me, sir, Wilcox says. Glover fucked me over. Im never pulling a trigger for him again. But if youre hiring... I scowl and walk outside. Kanoa. Here. What does Intelligence say about the risk of contamination? Minimal. Glover would have secured the payload. Hes not going to profit if hes dead. Okay. Then I want to leave the wounded here. Julian is not going to make it if he has to wait out in the cold. Roger that. Escamilla returns from his inspection of the industrial shops. Found two snowmobiles. Theyre both shot up. Couldnt get them started. Okay. I walk to the edge of the platform and look down. The rest of the squad is below, anonymous in their black visors, but an overlay identifies whos who: Tran and Fadul, farthest out, watching the lower decks in case we missed a threat; Logan, crouched by Julian; Dunahee nearby, a pistol in his left hand, loosely trained on the second prisoner, and his right arm bound against his chest. Fadul, I say over gen-com. Relieve Dunahee. Bring the prisoner up. Arent we heading out? she asks suspiciously. Roger thatbut were not taking the prisoners with us. No, shit, sir. Just wondering why Dunahee cant do the escort. Dunahee can barely hold his weapon. Now move. Logan stands and turns around, his black visor angled to look up at me. He opens a private channel: Why do you need Fadul? Youre not planning to shoot the prisoners? I ponder this question, wondering why Logan would ask it, wondering what hes heard about my past. I dont think he knows about Carl Vanda, a man I kidnapped, who never again saw the light of day. He does know about Eduard Semak. I told him that story myselfhow I visited the old dragon in his private space habitat and dropped him back to Earth inside an emergency escape capsule, knowing he wouldnt survive the rough reentry. I guess that makes me a stone-cold killerso I play along. I could order Fadul to shoot them, Logan. Shed probably do it. Do you think I should? Fuck, no. Shelley, they were just doing their job. Yeah, thats how I see it. And thats why Im going to let them sit in a nice warm room for a few hours, until were out of here. That okay with you? Of course! Yes. Sorry, sir. I should have known. Yeah, you fucking should have. Even Wilcox thought better of me than that. Get Julian and Dunahee up here. The wounded are staying behind. Im waiting at the top of the stairway when Fadul brings the prisoner. His eyes are wide and wary, framed by his thermal hood. Its easy to see hes scared, but I dont think too much about it because Im already engaged in a low-voiced argument with Fadul on a private channel. Youre going to stay here No way, Shelley. Shes wearing a brace on her arm where she got hit by shrapnel. The wound beneath will have been glued shut, but that doesnt mean shes ready for a run across the ice. Youll keep an eye on the two mercs and take care of Julian. Our prisoner crab-walks in front of us, trying to keep us both in sight as we herd him across the icy deck. Dunahee can do guard duty. Medical cleared me to continue the mission. Dunahee has a broken shoulder. Then leave Tran. Trans green. Your icon is yellow. Youre staying. By this time, weve reached the glass door to the lobby. I punch the button to unlock the door and then kick it open. We all stare for a second at the two corpses dumped into the vestibule between the double doors. Wilcox is standing over them with bloodstains on the cuffs of his white parka and

more red smears on his boots and his thighs. Roman has her back to the inner door, her weapon loosely aimed at Wilcox. Prisoner number two misreads the situation. He turns, kicks Fadul hard in the gut, and then makes a grab for the pistol in my thigh holster. I hit him in the face with my arm strut. I dont even think about it. Its instinct. The back of his head hits the doorframe and he drops with his nose a crushed, pulpy, bloody mess. Im not sure hes breathing. Shit. Inside the cramped vestibule, Roman has shifted her aim so that her HITR is now firmly trained on Wilcox. Dont make a move. No problem. He looks at me, his steady gaze communicating that hes a professional. I got no idea who you are, he assures me in a calm voice. No idea what you look like. So you got no reason to kill me. Get these bodies out of here, I tell him. Then I turn a guilty eye on the merc I just slammed. One more sin I didnt need. Fadul, check his vitals. Shes still hunched over her bruised belly. Can I kill him if hes still alive? Wilcox intercedes. Let me look at him. I step out of the way. Wilcox checks his breathing. Still with us. Then he takes a moment to share a little personal history. My people didnt want me to come out here. They said the fucking Arctic is cursed. Nothing works right. People go crazy. You should have listened. Wish I did. Wilcox is right. Most Arctic operations are plagued with issues: failed software, defective equipment, undelivered equipment, piracy, terrorism. The one exception? When a wellhead blew out last summer, personnel and equipment arrived without delay, and the well was sealed within seventy-two hours. It was an anomalous demonstration of competence and efficiency and strong evidence that preserving the Arctic and discouraging development is part of the Reds agenda. But the dragons still smell money, and they keep trying. Well be back in a few hours, I tell Fadul. Ive heard promises like that before. Julian is resting on a scavenged mattress in an office just off the lobby. I crouch beside him, but hes so high on pain meds he doesnt know Im there. Hold on, I tell him anyway. Then I nod to Dunahee, whos sitting on the floor beside him. Dont worry, sir. Well be okay. Dont let Fadul kill the prisoners. Yes, sir. We set out after the downed helicopter. Logan takes point, running hard. The rest of us follow in a single-file line: Escamilla, Tran, Roman, and then me. The dead sisters augment our muscle power, but they dont replace it. Sensors set into the joints measure the force of our strides. The harder we work, the harder the bones work. That means we can go a hell of a lot faster and farther wearing a dead sister than we could without one, but our bodies are still working, and its fucking exhausting to run kilometer after kilometer across terrain as rough as the ice floe. But we do it, with the wind blowing harder and fresh snow starting to shake loose from the sky. Theres no sign of life when we finally sight the helicopterno movement and no lights, not even chem sticksbut the ship is intact, sitting upright on the ice and facing the wind, showing no obvious damage. The pilot must have been able to guide it to a soft landing, which means Glover and his remaining crew could still be aboard, waiting for the weather to clear. Logan scans the ship with an infrared scope, putting an end to that speculation. Weve got a body in the pilots seat. Its above ambient, still chilling. Everything else is one temperaturedamned cold. Theyre long gone, Tran concludes. I take him with me to check it out. No one shoots as we approach. I wipe the frost off a window and peer inside at the pilot, bulky in parka and hood, head bowed, still strapped into the seat. Check the back, I tell Tran as I open the pilots door. Its a woman. Theres a bullet hole that goes through the hood of her parka, into the right side of her head. Everyone else is gone. What the hell ? I demand. Glover didnt have to kill her. He didnt have to kill all those people back on the platform. Hes looking for a big payday, Kanoa says. And hes not taking any chances. I wonder who hes really working for. I hope I get a chance to ask him. It takes less than a minute for me and Tran to search the interior. We dont find anything you wouldnt expect to find on a helicopter working in the Arctic. There are parkas, blankets, first aid supplies, chem lights, batteries... but no weapons and no biowarfare cultures. Logan has been conducting a hunt for footprints, but the gale and the now-steady snowfall are against him. Wind has wiped this place clean. Tran slams the helicopter door shut. Or maybe Santa swooped in and scooped them up. Weve got no way to tell if another helicopter set down here. No, theyre on foot, I say. Even assuming Glover knew another pilot willing to fly in this weather, theres no way a second ship could have already come and gone. Theyre going to be rigged, Escamilla points out. So theyll make good time. Logan shakes his head. They have a civilian with them. Dr. Parris isnt going to know how to use a rig. Thatll slow them down. Tran uses his HITR to gesture toward the dead pilot inside the helicopter. Until they decide to shoot her like they shot everyone else. They took Parris for a reason, Logan insists. Im inclined to agree, but that still leaves the central question. Where did they go? Our intelligence team comes through with an answer, relayed by Kanoa: Theres a private research station twenty-nine kilometers to the northeast. It looks like they changed course, tried to reach it after they knew they were hit. Private? I ask. Like for tourists? Private, like dragon-funded. Mars research. If they prove they can live in extreme conditions, then maybe they can figure out Mars. I dont give a fuck about dragon hobbies. Theres

only one thing I want to know. Have these assholes got a helicopter that Glover can steal? The data Im looking at indicates they do. You think he can make it there on foot? Because thats like running a North Pole marathon. Until he can arrange another ride out of here, he doesnt have a choice. I expand the map on my display and then zoom out until I see a tag: Tuvalu Station. The tag marks a cluster of three buildings erected side by side and linked by covered passages. I cannot let Glover get there, get that helicopter, get away. I dont know yet who was paying Dr. Parris for the work she was doing in her lab; I dont know whos paying Glover to recover that work. But I am not going to let this plague escape. The reason Im here, the reason ETM exists, is to hunt down and slam any asshole who thinks its a good idea to brew up an apocalypse. I intend to see that we get the job done. My guess is the enemy will move with all possible speed toward Tuvalu Station, but I could be wrong. If they believe theres a chance theyre being followed, then they might be waiting along the way to ambush us. Without angel sight or good satellite coverage, we cant know. So I instruct the squad to move out in parallel, keeping thirty meters between each soldier so well have eyes on a wide swath of ice. We hope to sight our quarry somewhere along that corridorpreferably before they see us.

Kanoa provides each of us a blue-line path to follow, warning us not to trust it too far. Your path is just a best guess based on limited data. The ice is shifting, so remain vigilant and use good judgment. The paths are mapped by our intelligence team: two civilian analysts, each backed by a powerful AI that can access surveillance resources provided by the Red. Thats how we obtained the low-res infrared image that gave us the helicopters location. Were still waiting for a high-res update. There are constellations of communications satellites in polar orbits, so voice and data coverage at this latitude is solid, but we need an observational satellite. The one were waiting for provides coverage in a surveillance corridor that continuously shifts west as the Earth rotates beneath it. Were waiting for it to make a sweep of our position. Until it does, we have only our own eyes to rely on, with our night vision capacity reduced by the falling snow. Glover will be in the same situation. Its possible he has a drone, but the wind is so fierce he wont be able to control it. Weve got the image, Kanoa says. Hold up! The squad halts. I crouch to reduce the impact of the wind, and then tell Kanoa, Let me see it. The detail is excellent. Tagged on the image are seven distinctly warm objects between us and Tuvalu Station. Three of those are scattered and solitary. Intelligence thinks those are seals or polar bears, Kanoa says. The other fourthats your quarry. He avoids pointing out the obvious problem: Our squad appears in the image too, as five hotspots spread out in an east-west line. Why didnt we get scrubbed? I ask him. Im used to spontaneous digital processing erasing our presence from general surveillance, but it didnt happen this time. Unknown. Resources may be focused elsewhere. Right. Didnt I warn Tran just a few hours ago not to count on the Red to back us up? Good advice, that. If Glover has access to this image, hell know were coming. He could set up an ambush. You assume that anyway, Kanoa tells me. And note the distance.

Theyre only nine kilometers ahead of you. Yeah, closer than expected. A lot closer. They might have an injury, or the civilian is slowing them down. Either way, its good news. Were running a marathon, but so are they and I want to catch them before they make Tuvalu Station. Move out! Soon, we reach a plain of smooth ice that allows us to run at a steady pace, one Id normally be able to maintain for milesbut the wind has turned every step into a struggle, the constant inrush of freezing air is eating at my lungs, and my thighs ache where the cold titanium of my prosthetics meets living bone. In the corner of my vision, I see the skullnet icon flicker. I dont have to wonder whats going on because I can feel it: The pain recedes as a rush of endorphins floods my brain. Palehorse Keep was supposed to be a short mission: Hit hard and fast with Oscar-1 waiting over the horizon to pull us out. Now its an endurance race, and we still dont know how were getting home. I call another halt as we near the last known location of our quarry. Leaving the squad to hunker down, I send Logan to circle west, while I scout east, looking for signs of a potential ambush. All we find are scuff marks and a single boot print preserved in a thin carpet of snow sheltered in the lee of an ice ridgebut the boot print is an encouraging sign. Its solid evidence that at least one individual in Glovers party is not using a dead sister, and that means theyre moving slowly. We spread out again and resume the hunt. Theres so much snow, falling fresh from the sky or being swept up by the wind, that even with night vision, we cant see far. Its disorienting. Feels like running on a treadmill, getting nowhere. But conditions are forecast to change. Theres an upcoming break in the cloud cover, Kanoa says. You should have clear skies in under an hour. A tube hooked to a bladder in my pack brings me a swallow of fortified water thats gone slushy. It chills my teeth and my skull and I dont want to drink anymore, but I make myself drink it anyway. I remind my squad to do the same. Were running across the surface of an ocean, but dehydration is a hazard we cant overlook. I check the time in my overlay. It feels like hours since Kanoa predicted clear skies, but its been only fifty-four minutes. I want to be able to see where were going, to see our enemy. I sure as fuck

hope we dont run right past them. Pull up, pull up! Its Tran, whispering over gen-com. Shit. Theyre like fifty meters away from me. I drop into a crouch, breathing hard and relieved to take a break. Have they seen you?

No. No, theyre walking away from me. Keep them in sight. Sighting confirmed, Kanoa says. He pops an image onto my display. It shows me a vague cluster of figures, details lost to snow and night vision, but one at least is rigged and one isnt. The other two, I cant be sure. Automatic weapons, Kanoa says. And that looks like an RPG launcher. I guess they wanted the option of blasting their way into Tuvalu Station. I delete the image and then expand the map. Kanoa, are we still due for clear skies? Roger that. Latest report gives you

another fifteen minutes. Okay, this is what were going to do. Logan, you and Escamilla move in behind them, just close enough to keep them in sight. Roman and Tran are with me. Were going to move around, wide to the east. Itll be a sprint, but I want to get ahead of them while the weather covers us. Were going to stop them now. We will not let them go on to Tuvalu Station. There will be no repeat of what happened at Deep Winter Sigil. Clear? I wait for the round of acknowledgments. And then I add, If it comes to shooting, wait for a designated target. We dont want to shoot each other. I start east, with Roman and Tran running

behind me in single file. Its a damn good thing the wind is blowing hard. It covers the harsh rasp of my breathing. The cold sears my throat and I half expect my lungs to shatter, but I keep going until Kanoa says, Turn west now. Cut them off. He uses GPS to position us in the path of our quarry. The swirling snow thins, revealing an expanse of ice as smooth as a frozen pond, with no cover in any direction. Standard interval, I whisper, gesturing to Roman and Tran to take up positions on either side of me. They spread out, so that we stand thirty meters apart. The wind slows. Night vision shows me a handful of stars overhead. I brace my feet, bring my HITS to my shoulder, and will myself to see past the lingering scatter of wind-driven snow.

There, Roman whispers. Seventy meters. I see them: three soldiers rigged in dead sisters and night vision goggles. The one in front carries an RPG launcher; the other two are assisting the civilian, half-carrying Dr. Parris as they support her by her arms. Drop your weapons! I bellow, not really expecting them to. And they dont. They dont even take time to process my request. I might as well have yelled Game on! My tactical AI

puts up a target. I cover it and fire a three-round burst, dropping the merc with the RPG launcher as he heaves it to his shoulder. Theres a spray of panicked gunfire from one of the other mercs shots fired without taking the time to aim. Tran hits him twice. Blood flies on the second shot, proving that at least one bullet got past armor, into flesh. Two of three are down but Roman hasnt taken a shot yet. She is standing

motionless, the wind at her back and her HITS steady, braced by her arm strut as she targets the last mercenary. He has his arm around the throat of the civilian; hes holding a pistol pressed to her head. Dr. Parris is bundled up in a parka with a fur-lined hood and a thermal mask that hides her face. Shes a tall woman, which makes her a good human shield. All I can see of the merc is his arm and the left side of his hooded head. Youll want her alive! he shouts. My overlay gets a voice ID, tags him as Vincent Glover. I dont argue with him because hes right. I do want Parris alive. I have questions I want to ask her. Id like to take him alive too, but I think the odds are against it. Quietly, I tell Roman, Take him. Bam! One shot. The bullet buzzes in past the civilians ear, cracks Glovers goggles, and drills him in the left eye. Dr. Parris is in

bad shape. Shes sitting on the ice, shaking, exhausted, incoherent. Whether shes suffering from psychological shock or hypothermia, I dont know, but we need to get her out of the weather and were still six kilometers from Tuvalu Station. I consider my options, and then I pop the cinches on my dead sister.

Escamilla, youve run slaved rigs before, right? Not something I want to remember, Shelley. Sorry. I need you to do it again. Exoskeletons are expensive. When soldiers die wearing them, the army wants them back.

Its a sergeants responsibility to recover both the body and the dead sister which is why its possible to slave one dead sister to another, so it can be walked off the battlefield even if the soldier strapped into it is dead. Youre going to strap the civilian into your rig? Tran asks. Yes. Parris is tall, at least six-one. Close enough to my height. Id rather put her into Glovers rig, but we dont have the control codes for his equipment. I crouch

beside Parris. Shes not using night vision, but the clouds have opened up, admitting an auroral light that shimmers across the ice enough for her to see me, if only as a silhouette. She squints at me past frost-covered lashes as I explain to her what were going to do. She seems to understand; at any rate, she cooperates while Escamilla helps me strap her to the rig. Roman stands watch while we handle Parris. Logan and Tran search the bodies. They empty pockets and packs, strip off hoods and masks, and then lay each soldier out on the ice and take portrait shots so Kanoa can use facial recognition to identify them. We need to know who the enemy is. Parris waits quietly, strapped into my exoskeleton, but as she begins to recover a little strength, she gets anxious. Who are you people? she asks, her voice hoarse, wind-burned. And when no one answers, her tone ratchets up: Vince killed everyone! You know that, dont you? We know it. I finish strapping into

Glovers rig. It feels small and awkward, but a few experimental steps convince me I can make it work. I walk over to Parris. What were you working on in your lab, Dr. Parris? Who are you? she asks again. Are you Canadian special forces? I dont answer. I just watch her through the anonymous black screen of my visor. Without night vision, I must appear to her as a looming shadow with mechanical edges; nothing to separate me from a walking machine. I intend it to rattle her, and it does. The pace of her breathing picks up. Youre going to kill me, arent you? No. Because you think Im part of it. Are you? No! Vince stole my work. He had it with him. The microbial cultures were in a black sample case. She tries to move, to turn, but the exoskeleton holds her in place. I need to recover it. Lieutenant? I ask. Got it, Captain. Logan comes over, carrying a frost-covered, molded-plastic case. I shine an LED light on it so Parris can see. This it? Yes. How deadly is it? Shes cold, scared, exhausted, sinking into hypothermia. Her earlier confusion returns. Deadly? I dont understand. What are you asking? I rephrase my question. How fast does it spread? How many will die? Im watching her eyes past the frost that clings to her lashes; they widen as understanding kicks in. You think its a bioweapon. Oh my God! Is that why you came? You thought I was running a biowarfare lab? What else would you be doing behind all that security? Bioprospecting. She says it like its the most obvious thing in the world. You want to explain what that means? Shes strapped into my dead sister so she cant really gesture, but she moves her fingers to indicate the ice below our feet. That world down there, its barely explored. The microorganisms on the seafloormost cant be cultured in a lab. So we analyze them in situ. In place. Its a robotic system. Microlabs. Little automated pods with nutrient chips. We grow the bacteria, test it, sequence the DNA. All on the seafloor? Yes, but I spotlight the case. Then what the fucks in there? I swear I see guilt in her eyes. Well, you see, once we have the DNA sequences, we can synthesize genes. We do that in the lab. And those synthetic genes get implanted into lab-stable microbe strains. But the legal requirements for... working with synthetic organisms... Yeah, now I understand. The only thing they brought up from the seafloor was data. She could have been doing the lab work in Toronto or Vancouver or anywhere else. But there was an advantage to doing it aboard Sigil. Youve been sidestepping the rules. You wanted to do the work out here where the jurisdiction is open to question. You have to understand. Were in competition with the Chinese, the Russians. If we waited to get permits You found something worth protecting. She nods; her bloodless lips crack as she presses them together. Weve been running simulations. We may have an effective treatment for several degenerative brain diseases. And thats worth a lot of money? Potential billions. Enough to tempt pirates. The company sent in extra security while we go through the permit process. Her voice goes soft. Vince knew what we had. We didnt tell him, but he knew. He wanted to sell the synthetic strain. He said he had a buyer. ETM 7-1 does not exist to referee shares in dragon treasure. I need you to be straight with me, Dr. Parris. Do the contents of that case have biowarfare applications? No. It has nothing to do with biowarfare. I would never work in a field like that. War is immoral. Killing people is immoral. I cant believe what Vince did. Goddamn it, Kanoa, is she telling the truth? My emotional analysis program, FaceValue, refuses to pass judgment because her face is masked, but Kanoa has more resources. Voice and pupil analysis indicate yes. And that means this mission has been a waste of time and lives. All those slaughtered at Sigil are dead because we moved inour presence triggered this disasterand the only thing that was ever at stake was money. I hate fucking look-and-see missions. Why are you still alive? I ask her. Because it was my project! Vince thought I might be useful. Thats the only reason. It parses as truth, Kanoa says. I have another question. Did he try to call his contact? Ask for support? She nods. After they had to land the helicopter, he made a call. And what happened? They were angry. From the things he said, I think they were Chinese. And then they wouldnt talk to him. And we started walking. I take the case from Logan and step away. Kanoa, you picking up anything on the military networks? Negative. Nothing so far. So what do you think? I ask him. I think Glovers employer didnt want to get caught with a bloody hand in the cookie jar, so they cut him loose. Expecting him to die? Yes. Whatever it is weve been looking for these past months, this wasnt it. I stash the case in my pack. Palehorse Keep has been a disaster, and its not over yet. I need to get Parris to shelter, and I need to get my squad safely home. Whats the status of Oscar-1? I ask. Unknown. Weve lost track of him. The base commander was questioning his credentials. Its possible hes been arrested. If thats true, we are in a really bad position. Every mission is subject to chance, but if the Red is behind us, mission support usually goes like clockwork. The Red makes sure of it, issuing orders, manipulating schedules, providing access, whatever it takes to let us move and move quietly to where we need to bebut not this time. Its like the Red pulled out of this mission. The action didnt play out as expected, and we got dumped. Something else may be going on, he concedes. Just a few hours ago, I was chewing out Tran for assuming we could rely on the Redbut that is exactly what weve been doing on this mission. We

were relying on the Red to get Oscar-1 past the military checkpoint on Ellesmere, without preparing any alternate means of refueling his aircraft. Kanoa tries to reassure me. There's no evidence of an immediate threat. Matter of time. Roger that. Get to Tuvalu Station and we'll have more options. I brief the squad, and then we move out. I'm exhausted; we all are. We ran a marathon today, but it's not just the distance that weighs on us. The cold, the wind, the adrenaline—the doubt—takes a toll. We push on anyway. At least the ice is flat. The sky remains clear. Even the wind eases a little. Six kilometers isn't far. That's what I tell myself. But it's far enough that I have time to envision new and dire worries. Kanoa. Here. Are we looking at flat ice like this all the way to Tuvalu Station? Affirmative. I don't like it. We've got no cover. If we get surprised by a nest of mercenaries? Negative. This is not Sigil. It's not a petroleum company. There is no evidence of private security. Why is it set up so close to Sigil? That's suspicious, don't you think? No, it's deliberate. There's a mutual-support agreement on file that says in case of emergency, they help each other out. Tuvalu is staffed only by a few scientists and pioneer types. Nothing to worry about. Scientists aren't harmless, I point out. They invented nukes, guns, bombs, toxins. Your cerebral wiring. Exactly. You can't trust them. I think we need to adjust your settings. Kanoa says it to shut me up and it works. But as I lope behind the squad, my footplates crunching against the ice, I wonder about it. Kanoa. Here. Does that happen? Do you sit down with medical, assess the baseline, adjust it... change who we are? You don't have enough on your mind? Tie your shit down, Shelley. You're on the easy leg of this mission. I called ahead to Tuvalu, let them know you're coming. You fucking called them? What did you tell them? The truth. Sigil was attacked, the helicopter shot down, Dr. Parris is the sole survivor. Are we the good guys or the bad guys in this story? There are no good guys, but they don't know that yet. They expect to treat Dr. Parris for hypothermia, and fly all of you out as soon as her condition improves. So we leave her there and take the helicopter? Roger that. I want you back at Sigil. There won't be room on that helicopter for everyone in the squad, but you can at least fly the wounded out. We've been calling Tuvalu a research station, but that term implies a permanence and an importance that Tuvalu lacks. Deep Winter Sigil was a billion-dollar facility built to last decades and designed to be functional whether afloat in the open ocean or locked up in ice. But as we approach Tuvalu, it becomes clear that nothing about it is permanent. The buildings I thought I saw in the satellite image are really just tents. Starlight falls in slick reflections against the metallic sheen of their fabric, making them shine in night vision. Two are shaped like Quonset huts. The third is an expansive yurt-like structure with a round footprint. Short tunnels link them together. None of the tents have windows or show any sign of artificial light leaking out. I see no movement. Several times I pause to listen. My helmet audio filters the sound of the wind and quiets the crunch of our footsteps. I hear no other sound. But my helmet does detect EM signatures—a lot of them, just like at any human outpost. Kanoa annotates the scene with labels projected in my visor, expanding on the information with a voice report. The round tent is the hangar. The other two are shared-living and research space. You can enter through the airlock on the central tent. No reason for all of us to go inside; we're not planning to be here long. Escamilla, I want you to take a walk around the outside of the facility. Look for anything interesting. Roger that, sir. Tran, take up a post outside the hangar door. Assuming there really is a helicopter in there, make sure it doesn't go anywhere. Yes, sir. You got a feeling, Shelley? Kanoa asks. I look for the skullnet icon. If it were aglow, that would indicate interference, input into my emotional state, but it's invisible, so I'm not getting warnings from on high. Nothing out of the ordinary. You're reading a little tense. Not really a surprise. Everything on this mission has been a fuck-up, and now we're about to steal a helicopter. As we near the tents, Escamilla and Tran split off to cover their assignments. The rest of us walk with Parris up to a door of insulated aluminum that opens as we approach. Bright artificial light spills out, blinding me for a full second before my visor compensates and drops out of night vision. When I can see again, I notice that color has returned to the world—and that without even thinking about it, I've turned the muzzle of my HATR to cover a stocky figure in a bright orange parka who is standing in the doorway. He glares at me from a flat, brown, wizened face framed by an orange hood. My encyclopedia runs an automatic facial recognition routine and tags him with a name: John Parker. I let the muzzle of my HATR drop until it's pointing at the ground. I suspect John Parker is already regretting this encounter, not that he really had a choice. In a low voice with a soft inflection that suggests a native Arctic heritage, he says, I have to ask you to take off your exoskeletons and helmets. Kanoa cuts in right away. Negative. Take control of the facility. I let the skullnet capture my response: Roger that. One of the most impressive aspects of human psychology is our proficiency with bullshit. Specifically, the way we use it to reduce violence in the world. I don't want to kick my way inside the facility, and I don't want to directly challenge John, but I need him to know who's making the rules. So I play

the concerned and cautious commanding officer. Thats fine, Mr. Parker, but well need to check things out first. Ill send my lieutenant in to look around. Logan, take Roman with you. Johns lips press together. He isnt happy, but hes too smart to argue. He retreats into a vestibule. Logan and Roman follow, closing the door behind them. Its just me and the civilian left waiting on the threshold. I turn to Parris. The sooner shes off my hands, the better. Lets get you out of that rig. Shes exhausted and only half-conscious. She doesnt resist, but she doesnt help either as I pull the cinches. Escamilla checks in. Shelley. Here. Found a cache of supplies outside the hangar. Cant tell what they are. Leave it. As I free Parris from my exoskeleton she starts to slump. I catch her, walk her into the vestibule, and help her sit down on a bench. The inner door is closed, but the vestibule is still warmer than outside in the wind. Logan begins to relay his report. Large room just inside. Six personnel present. No weapons. No overt signs of hostility. Kanoa watches through Logans helmet cams to ensure nothing is missed. Confirmed, he says. All six personnel cross-check with known records. Logan directs Roman to stay in the central area while he moves through the tunnel to the second tent. Looks like a dormitory. Clear the rooms, I tell him. Roger that. I leave Parris to the goodwill of Tuvalus staff, and go outside again. The dialog between Logan and Kanoa continues as I strip out of the dead mercs rig and get back into my own. Room one, clear, Logan reports. Confirmed. Room two, clear. I walk toward the hangar, where I meet Escamilla and Tran. Have we got a way out of here, sir? Tran asks me. Still waiting on that. A door in the side of the hangar opens. I turn fast, but this time I manage to keep my HITR across my chest instead of targeting the civilian framed in the doorway. Artificial light from inside illuminates a blue parka and hood, half-raised hands, gloved palms turned out, no obvious weapons. My gaze shifts from the hands to the face. Shes standing a step back from the door so the light falls at an angle across the bare skin of her face. Black skin, dark-brown eyes, elegant eyebrows drawn down in a fierce scowl, her lip curled in contempt. You got anything human left under that helmet, Shelley? she asks me. Escamilla and Tran both turn their weapons in her direction. Kanoa checks in with a monosyllabic observation: Shit. And me? Shock hits me so hard it blows every thought out of my brain but one thats so strong, so focused, my fucking skullnet picks it up, translates it to audio, and in a calm tone that in no way represents how I feel, I hear my artificial voice say over gen-com, Jaynie. Its an impossible coincidence to run into Jayne Vasquez here, at the ice-end of nowhere but then, I dont believe in coincidence. I know better than that. Shelley, take it easy, Kanoa warns as if I would ever hurt her. Jaynie cant see my face, but she recognized me anyway. Weve been on enough missions together. She knows what I look like when Im rigged. She knows how I move. I shoulder my HITR and then I reach with two hands for my helmet. Kanoa protests, What are you doing? I ignore him and take the helmet off. I peel back my thermal hood. The cold hits like fire, but I dont care, because I need to show Jaynie that I am not more or less than what I used to be. She takes a long look at me. Then she steps aside to let me into the shelter of the hangar. Inside the hangar, the air is heated to five degrees Americanbearable compared to the outside. The round walls surround a small Bell helicopter painted rescue yellow; the span of its blades is only a couple of meters less than the hangars diameter. Escamilla follows me in. Roman comes in through the tunnel that leads to the living area. I ignore them both. So does Jaynie. She pushes back the hood of her parka, letting me see that she is not wearing a skullcap. Her scalp is covered in tightly curled black hair trimmed short in a military cut. I want to ask if she got wired, if she had a skullnet put in, but I know better. You gave it up, didnt you? No skullcap. No skullnet. Youre not an emo-junkie anymore. Thats not what she wants to talk about. You are supposed to be dead. She watches me with a stonewall expression. The fucking United States Navy shot you out of the sky. Or was that faked? It wasnt faked. The navy fired the missile that brought down our little spaceplane, Lotus. It wasnt a direct hit, but the shockwave and the debris were enough to break us apart. Kurnakova is dead. And youre still here. Still Gods favorite. Gods favorite toy, maybe. Since Im not wearing my helmet anymore, Kanoa has switched gen-com to my overlay. This is not what youre here for, Shelley. The only thing you need to worry about is getting your squad safely extracted. I dont agree, sir. Dread and anticipation wage war in my head as I look past Jaynie to the tunnel entrance, imagining Delphi appearing there. I kept track of her for a while. I was glad when she partnered with Jaynie. When they set up a company together, I was sure shed be okay. So I left it at that. I stopped looking back. But now? There is a reason for this, I insist. There may be a reason, but its not one you need to understand. Get that helicopter fired up and get the hell out of there. That is an order. Kanoa is at least partly right. We need to be gone, and soon, before a call gets through to the Canadian military. So I gesture at Escamilla. Check for the key, and then get things started. You stealing my helicopter? Jaynie asks, glaring at Escamilla as he opens the pilot-side door and leans inside. This your operation? I dont want to believe it. Come on, Jaynie. Youre not going to Mars. Keys

here! Escamilla calls out. He looks in the back. Seats have been pulled. Cargo configuration, but we can work with that. Do it. Jaynie drops her chin like a fighter. Mars is the goal were working on. Thats fucking crazy. Escamilla peels off his pack and his helmet. He starts popping cinches on his dead sister because his rig has to come off before he can fit in the pilots seat. Jaynie looks at him, looks at me. Im not the one walking around with wires in my head, Shelley. No, shes just the one thinking about going to Mars. And it scares me because its possible. A one-way, privately funded expedition is under development. A lot of dragons are behind it. It wasnt long ago that I heard chatter in the barracks about the pending launch of an advance robotic mission intended to deliver supplies ahead of a crewed expedition. Did you buy in, Jaynie?

She nods. I did. Dragon-scale money was in play on our last mission together. I did my part to see that Jaynie and Delphi wound up with it, because I wanted Jaynie to have the freedom to build a sanctuary somewhere beyond the influence of the Red. Mars fits that description, but Mars is a mistake. There is nothing on Mars for you, Jaynie. Not even air to breathe. Were you sent here to tell me that? I hesitate. Jaynie has a paranoid fear of the Red and its influence over her life, but there is a resonance of truth in her words. Maybe. I look again at the tunnel entrance. I want to be sure. Delphis not here, is she? Jaynie follows my gaze. Shes been looking for you. Did you know that? She never believed you were dead. I kept telling her there was no way She doesnt get any further. Her control cracks; her voice climbs an octave. Goddamn you, Shelley, why didnt you come home? Roman is still standing watch, anonymous behind her visor, but I can see Escamillas face. Hes sitting in the pilots seat, hesitating over the checklist as he waits to hear what I will say. He made the same choice I did. Everyone in the squad made the choice to walk away from the lives theyd lived before. We all share that guilt and I know better than to apologize for it. We are engaged in a war against Armageddon, Jaynie. No one goes home from that. Escamilla nods in grim approval as he returns to his task, but Jaynies eyes are glistening. She leans in close. Her gloved hand touches my arm; her eyes plead with me. Stay. Well make room for you to go with us. Well get the wiring out of your head. Youll be okay. I dont believe in coincidence. I am not here by chance. Im not going to Mars, Jaynie, and neither are you. Its suicide. A mistake you cant come back from. She pulls away, but I catch her arm. I need you to listen to me.

I need you to understand the way things are, because there is a new standard in the world. It says that everyone has to be visible, everyone accountable. So dont keep your secrets too close or some jackboot like me will kick in your door to find out what youre hiding. She jerks her arm free of my grip and backs away.

Go to hell. Logan comes through the tunnel. Load your gear, I tell him. I shrug off my pack, but Kanoa intercedes. Youve still got Dr. Parriss sample case. You want me to give it back to her? Jaynie has retreated toward the tunnel, but shes watching me warily. Weve got no reason to keep it. Its not biowarfare material, so hand it over. Jaynie, wait. I get the black case out of my pack. This belongs to Dr. Parris. I hold it out to her. Its biological material, microbial cultures. She says its not dangerous, but you should talk to her about it, use your judgment. Jaynie crosses her arms, raises her chin, puts on a skeptical expression. You want me to return that to her? I dont want to argue about it. Do what you want. I intend to. Despite her defiant tone, she comes to take the case from me. Her hand is shaking. I think maybe mine is too. Escamilla calls out, We need to get the hangar doors open! Logan responds, Im on it! We are pirates, taking what we need. Jaynie, listen. Im sorry. About the helicopter. Its just that we need to move fast, so we dont really have a choice. She draws back. Youre sorry about that? Dont worry. Its insured. Now get the fuck out of here. She retreats to the tunnel. But as Logan opens the hangar doors, letting in the rush of the wind, Jaynie turns back. She projects her voice to make sure I hear her. Hey, Shelley, maybe well meet again on Mars, after the war! Then shes gone. Logan steps up to my side. His thermal mask is rolled up to expose his face. I didnt think that could ever happen. I tell him what I told Tran before this fucked-up mission started. Never trust the Red.

Never think you understand it. The wind is in our favor, ferrying the helicopter south to Sigil, but its still strong enough to generate white-knuckle turbulence. Escamilla says nothing, all his attention focused on the controls as he works to keep us on course and steady. Logan, Roman, and Tran are in back on the floor, crammed in with our packs, our weapons, and the folded bones of our dead sisters. Im riding in the co-pilots seat. All of us have our helmets on. Mine shows me the terrain in the green glow of night vision. Im supposed to be helping Escamilla navigate, but mostly Im thinking about Jaynie and Delphi and how hard it must be to get to Mars, and how utterly and forever beyond my reach they would be when, inevitably, things begin to go wrong. Its a line of thought that links to a weird, familiar panic and for just a few seconds Im back on the First Light mission, aboard the C-17, and Colonel Rawlings is telling me the harsh truth: You cant do anything for her. This time, though, Im forewarned. My short trip into low earth orbit required a twenty-million-dollar rocket. Mars is literally another world, vastly farther away. I know the transit will

involve complex orbital dynamics and gravity boosts, but it will also require a rocket a hell of a lot bigger and costlier than the one that ferried me into orbit. A rocket like that should be easy to track down. My thoughts snap back to the present when my skullnet icon flicks on: fiery red veins against a black background. A flood of manufactured anxiety hits me, overwhelming my homegrown fears and bringing with it a premonition that death is on its way. Im not the only one who receives the warning. Chatter erupts over gen-com as everyone speaks at once. What the fuck? Somethings up? What is it? Anybody know? Kanoa, you got anything for me? I look out the windshield, but all I see is the rugged ice below us, its low peaks and pinnacles smoothed by the recent fall of snow. Kanoa checks in, grim-voiced, speaking to the entire squad. Warning, warning. Radar indicates a fighter coming in low and dark. Tracks back to a Chinese carrier off Greenland. Trajectory indicates an intercept. Shelley Full throttle! I yell at Escamilla. Get us into Canadian territory. I tell myself there is no way a Chinese fighter will shoot us down over territory claimed by Canada, but Kanoa puts an end to my fantasy when he says in a deadly calm voice, Ninety seconds to missile range. Dr. Parris suspected Vince Glover had a Chinese connection. Its starting to look like she was right and when the Chinese decide to clean up a dirty situation, they dont fuck around. Down! I yell at Escamilla. Put us on the ice. Roger that. Our airspeed slows; the deck drops away beneath me. I twist around to look in back. Night vision details Logan, Tran, and Roman huddled on the cargo floor, their opaque visors turned in my direction. Rig up! I tell them. Move, move! Claim your compass points, and when we hit the ice, scatter! Scattering is the trained response of an LCS under air attack. The more distance we put between each soldier, the harder a pilot has to work to gun us down. Roman is first up. North! she says as she snaps open the folded frame of her dead sister. Tran is right behind her. West. Theres not enough room to extend the rigs all the way, not enough room to stand up straight. They strap in anyway. Its a chaos of titanium bones and Arctic camo as they bend and crouch and help each other secure their cinches. Logan eases his pack on, careful not to knock anyone down. Over gen-com, he says, Escamilla! You I cut him off. Ill take care of Escamilla. Right, sir. Im south, then and youd better get rigged. Clear some room. They press against the walls. I get out of my harness and climb over the seats. Tran has my rig unfolded, the leg struts bent in a crouch. I cinch up. The deck sways, but Tran and Roman both grab me, keep me from falling. Logan helps me get my pack on. I grab my HTR from the floor and loop it over my shoulder. Escamilla, you are east. Got that? Yes, sir! As soon as you get this ship down, roll out the door and fucking run for your life. I will get your gear to you. Roger that, Shelley. Logan is crouched by the eastern window. Night vision shows me a slice of sky behind him, marred by a dark mote moving fast between the stars. Escamilla, why arent we on the ground? We need a place to land, sir. Theres smooth ice ahead. Maybe twenty seconds. Too much time. Get us as low as you can. Logan, Tran, open the doors. A sliding door on each side gets slammed back, admitting a blast of arctic air along with the roar of the oncoming jet, audible even over the helicopters own engine noise. Ten seconds, Escamilla says. I wait with Logan. Roman and Tran are on the other side. The ice, shot through with broken pinnacles, speeds past, five meters below us. You are within missile range, Kanoa warns. Rocket! Logan yells. Jump! And not into the fucking rotors! A half second of blurred motion, and they are gone. Its only me and Escamilla. I reach over the seat and pop his harness. Get the fuck out. Then I turn, grab his gear, pitch it out the left doorway the doorway facing east, the one that shows me the fiery trail of a rocket slaloming toward me and I follow the gear, rolling out the door, praying I dont collide with Escamilla. I slam shoulder-first into the ice. My momentum flips me into the air. I come down on my arm struts in an explosion of snow just as the rocket finds the helicopter. Flame enfolds the world and the pressure wave hits, knocking me back in time, all the way back to Dassari: my legs blown off, unable to move, and the fighter screaming overhead, the muddy ground trembling beneath me. The Chinese fighter blows past and the vibration wanes. The present locks back in. Its not mud Im clinging to; its ice. I shove the terror away and make myself scan the squad icons. Not all green, but none flashing critical red either. Escamilla! Status? Moving, sir! He sounds like hes speaking through gritted teeth. I think I broke a fucking rib. I slap the ice with my arm hooks, launching myself to my feet. In the west, night vision shows me the fighter coming around for another pass. Enemy incoming! If youve got cover, take it! I race north, looking for Escamillas gear. I find it only twenty meters away. The squad map puts him southeast of my position. I scoop up his pack and the folded bones of his dead sister and take off in that direction, the leg struts of my exoskeleton powering me over the rough terrain. The fighter is roaring in low, hunting us, hunting me. Im the one in motion. I dont want to lead him to Escamilla, so I look for a ridge or a pinnacle of ice high enough to hide me, but I dont see anything like that. What I see is oily smoke curling over a pool of open water. No sign of the helicopter. I hear a burst from the fighters autocannon. The pilot has found a target. My squad

map assures me no one else is in motion, so I'm pretty sure his target is me. I drop Escamilla's gear. I think maybe Kanoa is yelling at me, but I'm not listening. How can I listen? Despite the protection of my helmet, the jets roar is all I hear. It's Dassari all over again and maybe because I came so close to dying like this before, I opt for a different way out. No less terrifying. I drop my HIR and shrug off my pack, throwing it behind me, hoping it will provide a target to distract the pilot. Then I dive, sliding across the ice toward the open water. I'll drown this time rather than being blown apart again. Given a choice, though? I'd rather live. Just before I drop over the edge of the ice, I pivot on my belly and hammer my arm hooks into the edge of the floe. My legs hit the water first. The weight of my dead sister pulls me down, plunging me under the surface. I am fully extended, hanging by my arm hooks, knowing that if those hooks slip or if the ice breaks, I'm heading for the ocean floor. The full impact of the cold is tempered by my thermal layer, which keeps the water away from my torso and my limbs, but as my helmet floods, the water touches my lips, my nose, my eyes. I squeeze my eyes shut, imagining my shocked brain shrinking to a tiny, hot point. It's not imagination when I feel the ice snap away under my right hook. The hook slips, but it catches again. And then there's a muffled boom! The ice shudders. The hook slips a second time. I want to breathe. Worse than that, the water is finding its way inside my thermal suit, seeping past the neckline and the wrist cuffs, climbing my thighs. It feels like razor blades slicing away my skin and I change my mind about the kind of death I prefer. I haul against the arm hooks, expecting them to slip. If they slip, my only chance is to un-cinch before I go too deep. Down on the bottom it'll be so cold, my body might never rot. Buried in silt, I could become a fossil for some freaking ape to dig up in twenty million years. Or I'll be food for crabs and starfish. The arm hooks hold. My helmeted head breaks the surface, the water drains away, and I breathe. Releasing my right hook, I reach across the surface of the floe, jam the point in, and haul myself high enough to get an elbow over the edge. The hooks hold me, so I don't slide back. I reset them one at a time, dragging myself up onto the floe. I lie there, watching the water drain out of my sleeve, amazed at the way it transforms into thin sheets of white ice before it quite escapes. I notice my body shaking uncontrollably. It's a clinical observation. I tell myself I'll be all right. My thermals are designed to hold in heat whether they're wet or dry. I make myself focus on the present. First thing: Scan my squad icons. They are green and yellow, but I'm shivering too hard to read the details. I push myself up to a sitting position. The wind is blowing, but I feel it only as a pressure. Maybe I'm too cold to feel colder. Maybe my gear is doing its job. The night has gone quiet. So quiet, a stray thought questions if I've gone deaf or maybe the audio gear in my helmet has shorted out? I decide to test it, though my chattering teeth make it hard to talk. R-roll c-call, I say over gen-com. It's a relief to hear them respond: Logan. Roman. Escamilla. Tran. W-where's the f-fighter? I ask no one in particular. Then I see it myself. It's in the northeast, a ghostly arrowhead in night vision, halfway through a wide turn that will bring it around for another pass. It never finishes that turn. The sky is clear, but distant thunder rumbles in the south and the Chinese fighter reacts, pulling straight up, rocketing toward the stars like it's intending to leave the planet. In seconds, it's too small to see, and then the southern thunder resolves into the roar of at least two more fighters streaking in pursuit. I presume it's a show of force, the Canadian Air Force scrambled to defend their offshore claims. I get up, as the two jets pass far to the east. Logan, y-you got an injury r-report? Yes, sir. Escamilla thinks he's got a broken rib. Me and Tran are just banged up and bruised. Do we have mobility? Escamilla growls, I can walk. Kanoa, y-you there? Here. We need a n-new extraction plan. In process. Stand by. I make myself stand up. I need to move. Generate some heat. Give my thermal layer something to work with. So I go looking for my pack. I dropped it as a decoy and I guess the strategy worked, because I find a second crater where the pack should be. A film of newly frozen ice is already forming on the surface of the open water. I look around, but my squad is hunkered down and I can't see them. I don't see Escamilla's gear either. I've got a feeling the crater swallowed it too, and it's on its way to the bottom. Escamilla, I think I lost your gear. Goddamn it, Shelley. I can't fucking trust you for anything. Something to keep in mind. I look back the way we came, touched by a new worry. After its second pass, the Chinese fighter swung much farther north than it needed to. Why? Did we turn Tuvalu Station into a target just by being there? I ask Kanoa. He assures me Tuvalu Station is intact, but maybe that's only because the cavalry arrived. Thinking about Jaynie as additional collateral damage on this fucked-up mission sends the chill even deeper into my bones. I want to get out of here before we make things even worse. We're still eight kilometers out from Sigil. We start walking. Progress is slow because Escamilla doesn't have his rig, and we're all exhausted but a few minutes later, Kanoa checks in. Good news. That Chinese fighter forced the Red to revisit this mission, and we finally got an order through. Oscar-1 is on his way. It's a relief to hear it. Then again, it'll be almost two hours before Oscar-1 reaches us. We keep walking, and even with Escamilla

slowing us down, we get to Sigil first. The tiltrotor is too big to land on Sigil's helipad so, fighting the wind, Jason Okamoto holds it in a hover while we load our wounded and our gear. He's in a hurry to leave, and not just because of the weather. There's a Canadian gunship an hour behind me, he tells us over gen-com as we load Julian's stretcher and secure it to the floor. And a no-fly order in effect. So far, I've got official clearance, but this is not a good time to be flying on counterfeit orders especially after that refueling fiasco. Get the door closed, I tell Tran. As soon as it latches, we're on our way, riding the buffeting wind south. Our two prisoners get left behind. Let the Canadians figure out what to do with them. It takes a few minutes to tie down our folded exoskeletons, secure our packs, and stow our helmets. We're still linked into gen-com through our overlays. Fadul grabs the empty copilot's seat. The rest of us buckle in to the fold-up canvas seats mounted on the cabin's side rails. All secure back there? Okamoto asks. Roger that. He turns off the cabin lights, and then the deck tilts as he puts Oscar-1 into a steep climb to try to get us above the worst of the wind. Its going to be a hell of a long flight home. I lean back, close my eyes, cross my arms over my chest, and dial the sensory feedback from my legs down to nothing. Its warm in the cabin. That plus the darkness and the roar of the engines quickly lulls me into a half sleep until Tran speaks over gen-com. You know what I don't get? I snap awake, my heart racing. He's a shadowy figure, sitting across the narrow cabin between Roman and Logan. What do you not get? Escamilla asks in a surly voice as he stretches his long legs across the cabin's narrow floor. I don't get why we're based in Texas. Its fucking unfair, if you ask me. Fadul is upfront in the copilot's seat, but she's hooked into gen-com, so she's part of the conversation. No one asked you, she reminds him. No, think about it. We are an illicit ass-kicking ghost militia run by an elusive, enigmatic, un-erasable AI. Right? Seems like some cool, luxury-packed, underground hideout should go along with a setup like that. Shut the fuck up, Tran, Logan advises as he wads his parka into a pillow. You got to read something besides comic books, Roman adds, wriggling around, trying to get comfortable without releasing her harness. I think Tran has a point, I say in his defense. Fadul answers, That's because you just fucking hate Texas. True enough. Strike Squad 7-1 hides in the open, occupying an officially mothballed US Army training facility—the very same facility from which the assault on Black Cross was launched late on Coma Day. We are based at C-FHEIT, the Center For Human Engineering, Integration, Training—pronounced see-fight in army-speak. Its where I trained when my prosthetics were new. I was the test case in an army program aimed at recycling experienced combat personnel who'd had their legs blown off. I proved the program worked, but when the economy cratered after Coma Day, funding was canceled and C-FHEIT was closed. Its still officially closed, but by some bureaucratic alchemy, Kanoa was able to take it over. I nod off, dreaming of ice and wind and battles I don't remember fighting. We stop briefly at the remote listening station on the north end of Ellesmere Island. This time, the counterfeit order that allows Oscar-1 to refuel is accepted, and we're soon on our way. Well be flying through the night. I sleep for another couple of hours. When I wake again, I unbuckle, check on Julian, and then move up front, just to be moving. I find Fadul asleep, her head turned to the side. Okamoto is alert as always. He's not wired, but when he flies, he runs a program in his farsights that checks his wakefulness by monitoring his gaze. He's also got a pack of pills taped to the control panel—little doses of speed if he starts to get sleepy. Old-fashioned but effective. And in a few more hours, Escamilla will come up front to relieve him. I lean over to look out the windshield, but its night over northern Canada. There's not much to see. Okamoto looks up at me. He's only fifty, but his buzz-cut hair is silver, and so is his goatee. The soft lights from the instrument panel illuminate a grim expression so uncharacteristic of him that I know right away we've got trouble. Its too loud to talk easily, so I use gen-com to open a solo link. Something wrong with the plane? No. Its not that. He returns his gaze to the instrument panel. Im not asking about the mission. Its not my business what you did up there. But you might want to know—we've got an air war going on in the Arctic. Right away, I get a sick feeling in my gut. Its big and its getting bigger, Okamoto says. Rumor on the civilian stations is that China initially scrambled a fighter. They called it a response to terrorism. Canada, Denmark, and Russia all reacted, sending out their own fighters to protect their sovereign interests. Is it just posturing? Or are they taking each other down? He shakes his head. Not much solid information. Okay. Thanks. I retreat to my seat and strap in, then send a message to Kanoa, asking him to check on the situation at Tuvalu Station. His response comes back within a minute: All personnel were successfully evacuated by the US Navy. I hope its true. Presentation de l'diteur No Real Allies, No Fixed Enemies, No Certain Battlefields: Presumed dead by those closest to him and with no intention of setting the record straight, former army Lt. James Shelley is recruited by a black ops outfit devoted to two things: guarding the Earth from existential threats, and the Red. Operating for almost two years among soldiers who are enhanced, and controlled, just as he is, Shelley believes he's learned a proper

caution in working with the mysterious artificial intelligence--until the Red's increasingly erratic behavior ignites an accidental war, and launches Shelley on a collision course with his old life. In the final book of The Red Trilogy, Shelley must choose who--or what--to trust, while struggling to contain an escalating conflict that threatens to plunge the world into chaos, and destroy those he loves.