

A MOST TRAGIC INCIDENT AT THE PERIPHERY



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Chapter One

Foreign Aid

Artem sat on his cot, watching the humanitarian distribution through the tent flaps. The canvas walls did little to muffle the sound of trucks backing up to the distribution point, diesel engines grinding as drivers maneuvered between concrete barriers. A helicopter passed overhead, rotors beating steadily toward the mountains where the shooting usually came from.

His back ached from sleeping on the thin mattress. Three months since the beating during his first week of service, and the pain still flared when he bent wrong or carried equipment too long. The medic had given him pills that made him drowsy, so he saved them for when the pain became unbearable.

His AK-74 lay beside him on the cot, the rifle's polymer stock worn smooth from constant handling. He knew every component of the weapon by touch - could strip and reassemble it blindfolded after weeks of drill. The rifle was old but sturdy, manufactured years before he was born, but it functioned reliably. Orders were clear: the weapon stayed within arm's reach at all times. Losing it, or letting someone steal it, meant punishment severe enough that soldiers sometimes slept with the rifle in their sleeping bags.

Outside, civilians formed orderly lines near the trucks. Some wore traditional Tashkerian clothing, others dressed in worn Western clothes. Children stayed close to their parents, occasionally pointing at the soldiers. The whole scene looked organized, almost peaceful, except for the armed guards positioned around the perimeter and the distant crack of rifle fire every few minutes from the hills.

Artem tried to imagine what was in the humanitarian crates being unloaded. Food, obviously. Medicine maybe. The boxes had foreign writing on them, English or German text he couldn't read. Some bore symbols he recognized from television - red crosses, stylized wheat sheaves, logos of organizations he'd heard mentioned on the news back home.

The work felt important. Maintaining security during humanitarian operations was exactly why the federation had deployed forces to this province. The separatists had been disrupting government services for years, attacking supply convoys, threatening civilians who remained loyal to the federation. International organizations needed protection to do their work safely. Without military presence, who knew what the terrorists might do to prevent aid from reaching people who needed it.

Another rifle shot echoed from the direction of the mountains, closer than usual. Several soldiers glanced toward the sound, then returned to their conversations. After two weeks of deployment, the sporadic gunfire had become background noise, like traffic or construction work. Contact reports came in regularly over the radio, but nothing requiring immediate response from their unit.

A sergeant walked past carrying a radio, speaking in the clipped tones NCOs used when reporting to command. Artem caught fragments: "...intermittent contact... small arms fire... no casualties..." The words sounded routine, administrative rather than urgent.

He shifted position on the cot, trying to find an angle that didn't aggravate his back, keeping one hand on his rifle. Through the tent opening, he watched civilians approach the distribution tables with documents and identification. Families received packages proportional to their size, everything documented and recorded by officials with clipboards.

The routine was beginning to feel monotonous. Two weeks of watching distributions, listening to distant gunfire, cleaning weapons, and writing reports. No one had explained how long the deployment would last or when they might see actual combat. Some soldiers speculated they'd be home by winter. Others thought this was just the beginning of a longer operation.

"Artem!" Misha appeared at the tent entrance, slightly out of breath. His expression carried the particular urgency that meant either trouble or opportunity. In the military, those were often the same thing.

"What's happening?"

"Just come. Bring your mess kit."

Artem grabbed his metal bowl and spoon from beside the cot, then slung his rifle across his shoulder. The usual pain protested as he stood. He followed Misha through the camp, past other tents where soldiers cleaned weapons or wrote letters.

They approached a group of men clustered behind the supply tent, partially hidden from the main camp area. Starshiy Serzhant Volkov stood in the center, using a crowbar to pry open a large wooden crate. The same foreign markings covered its sides, along with shipping labels and customs stamps identical to those on the humanitarian supplies being distributed at the front of the camp.

This was wrong. The realization hit Artem as he watched Volkov work. These supplies were meant for the civilians outside, the families

with children he'd been observing through the tent flaps. This was stealing.

Volkov glanced up as they approached. "Good, more hands." He resumed working the crowbar along the crate's edge. "This should feed a family for several days, according to the documentation."

"How did you get it?" Artem asked.

Volkov shrugged without looking up. "I and two guys just took it from a truck when nobody was watching." The crowbar found purchase and the lid began to separate from the frame. "Driver was arguing with some official about paperwork. Took maybe thirty seconds."

The lid came free with a sharp crack. Inside, various packages and containers were arranged in neat rows, each labeled in foreign languages. Volkov began lifting items out: plastic bags of rice and pasta, canned goods with pictures of fish and meat, several chocolate bars in bright wrappers.

"No way there's enough food here for twelve men," someone said. "But it doesn't matter."

Volkov opened one of the cans with his field knife, the metal peeling back to reveal preserved fish in oil. The smell was rich and salty, unlike the bland rations they usually received. He passed it around along with a single spoon.

When the can reached him, Artem accepted it despite his moral questioning. The fish was saltier than anything he'd eaten in weeks, rich with oil that coated his mouth and left him wanting more. He took his portion and passed it along, watching as the others examined the remaining contents.

"What are these?" Misha held up a rectangular package wrapped in colorful plastic. Foreign text covered the wrapper, along with pictures of grains and fruits arranged in artistic patterns.

"Some kind of Western food bar," Volkov said. He tore open the wrapper and broke off pieces for distribution. The interior contained pressed grains and dried fruit, dense and sweet with a texture unlike military rations. "Probably costs more than we make in a week."

Someone found a jar with a brown paste inside. The label showed a picture of peanuts, but the contents looked unfamiliar. Volkov unscrewed the lid and sniffed the contents cautiously.

"Peanut butter," he announced. "Americans eat this."

He dipped the communal spoon into the jar and tasted it, his expression shifting from suspicion to interest. "Dense. Salty. Very rich." He passed the jar around.

When the spoon reached Artem, he hesitated before tasting. The texture was unlike anything he'd encountered - thick, almost paste-like, but smooth. The flavor combined salt and sweetness with an underlying nuttiness that lingered on his tongue and seemed to coat his teeth. It was intensely satisfying in a way that surprised him, more filling than anything from their standard rations. He found himself hoping they would find another truck to steal from.

The soldier next to him tried to take a second spoonful before passing the jar along. Another man grabbed his wrist.

"One spoon, you pig," the second soldier said without real anger. They struggled briefly over the utensil before the first man released it, grinning.

The jar continued around the circle. Several men examined the nutritional information printed on foreign labels, though none could perfectly read the language.

"Look at this," Artem said, pointing to numbers on a chocolate wrapper. "According to these numbers, this one bar contains almost enough calories for one meal."

"Perfect," Misha said, grinning. "I hereby appoint myself Minister of Public Health for our new country." He gestured toward the empty crate and scattered wrappers. "My first official act is to declare a famine emergency and request immediate international assistance."

The others laughed. Someone else picked up the role-playing: "And I'm Minister of Defense. Our primary security threat is protecting these humanitarian supplies from unauthorized redistribution."

"Minister of Interior here," another soldier added, unwrapping a second chocolate bar. "I'll handle customs documentation to ensure proper import procedures for all future aid shipments."

"We should write reports for the international community," Misha suggested. "Dear United Nations, the sovereign nation of Tent Seven requires immediate assistance. Our population of twelve faces severe nutritional challenges."

"Keep it down," Volkov said quietly, though he continued eating his chocolate bar. "Sound carries."

Artem found himself smiling despite the absurdity. The exotic flavors and foreign packaging made the whole experience feel like a small adventure rather than theft. The rich foods had improved everyone's mood considerably, creating a sense of shared conspiracy that felt almost comradely.

The gunshots came suddenly, much closer than before. Sharp cracks of rifle fire, then the deeper sound of a machine gun. Shouting erupted from the main camp area.

Volkov dropped the chocolate wrapper and grabbed his weapon. "Move!"

The men scattered toward their equipment. Artem ran with the others, the usual pain spiking with each stride. Someone was yelling grid coordinates over a radio. A truck engine started nearby.

A military transport helicopter approached from the south, flying low and fast. The rotor noise grew overwhelming as it passed directly overhead. Dust and debris swirled up from the ground, mixing with fragments of discarded food wrappers, stinging Artem's eyes and filling his mouth with grit that tasted of chocolate and foreign spices. He ducked instinctively, one hand covering his face against the rotor wash, the other keeping his rifle secure.

The helicopter's shadow moved across the camp, then continued toward the mountains. Artem looked up at the massive machine as it departed, its rotors beating the air with mechanical precision. For a moment, watching the aircraft disappear into the distance, he felt very small and insignificant.

Chapter Two

Refresher Training

The sprint dashboard showed red across three separate velocity metrics. Sanna stared at the burndown chart while her coffee went cold. One hundred and thirty-seven story points remaining with eight days left in the iteration. The backlog had grown to sixty-seven items since Monday's refinement session.

"There's something on the news," Henrik called from his workstation. "Major incident across the border."

The development team's second monitor switched from deployment pipelines to a live news feed. The anchor spoke in measured tones about a terrorist attack on federal infrastructure in the Tashkeria region. Footage showed smoke rising from what appeared to be a government complex. The camera angle suggested the broadcaster was positioned several kilometers away.

Tensions had been escalating for months, but the conflict had remained mostly guerrilla activity from the mountain regions. This was the first time separatists had attacked critical federation infrastructure.

The death toll had reached fifty-six federal servicemen and civilian workers. A federation representative appeared on screen, stating they would not let such aggression go unpunished and announcing massive military mobilization to restore order.

"That's the regional capital," someone said. "You can see it from the border checkpoint."

Sanna looked toward the office windows. Beyond the city's edge, past the final residential developments climbing the lower slopes, mountain peaks created an irregular horizon line. She had driven that route countless times during weekend hiking trips. The Tashkeria regional capital sat perhaps fifty kilometers away, visible as scattered lights on clear evenings.

The news switched to archive footage of Veligrad Federation military vehicles. Tanks with reactive armor blocks and infantry carriers that looked decades old. The reporter mentioned mobilization of federal forces to restore order in the separatist province.

"They wouldn't be stupid enough to keep pushing west," Henrik said. "Not with our defensive positions."

Sanna returned to her terminal. Four failed build notifications had accumulated during the news segment. She began copying error logs to the build engineers channel on Slack with a plea for help.

At fourteen thirty-seven, her phone buzzed with a text message from an automated system.

MOBILIZATION ORDER: Report to Grensevakt Station 7 by 0800 tomorrow for refresher training. Duration TBD. Acknowledge receipt.

She typed "Acknowledged" and sent the response.

The office Slack channel began filling with messages as other reservists updated their teams about sudden absences. "Military training

called up - will be offline for a few days, see you soon!" The tone remained casual. Standard procedure during regional tensions.

Sanna opened her own status update. "Away on military service - back soon. Please reassign my current tickets to the rest of the team." She quickly submitted a leave request through the HR system for military duty.

The sprint would definitely miss its deadline now.

She called her husband to arrange childcare logistics. Their three children would need pickup coordination for the next few days, possibly longer. He handled the conversation with the same efficiency they used for managing school schedules and weekend activities.

That evening, she packed her military duffel bag with personal items and checked her old combat boots. They still fit properly.

The train to the border station departed at seven-fifteen the next morning. The car filled with reservists traveling to various positions along the frontier. Most were in their thirties, a mix of men and women who had completed their mandatory service years before and maintained their reserve obligations. Conversations remained quiet and professional.

Sanna recognized several faces from previous training rotations. The man across the aisle worked in municipal planning. The woman near the front operated a small restaurant in the city center. She noted the mix of fitness levels among the group. Some reservists looked like they might struggle to sprint more than a few minutes, while others appeared to follow the current Instagram gym trends with possibly pharmaceutical assistance. Well, the gym enthusiasts could handle the heavy machine guns if needed, she thought with dry humor. A few passengers checked their phones for civilian work messages before the mountains interrupted cell coverage.

The universal conscription policy had been implemented after Normark nearly fell sixty years ago, when their population was bled dry defending against invasion. Both men and women served because the country could not afford to waste half its potential defenders. Sanna understood this history without needing to discuss it. Her own family lineage traced back to that conflict in ways that remained unspoken but known.

The train followed a valley route that paralleled the border fence for the final twenty kilometers. Through the windows, she could see smoke columns rising from Tashkeria territory. The artillery sounds had been audible from the city for two days now.

At Grensevakt Station 7, they formed groups according to their unit assignments. Sanna's border guard section included twelve reservists. They received current uniforms, body armor, communications equipment, and rifles from the armory. The quartermaster processed them efficiently through the standard equipment accountability procedures.

Personal electronic devices were powered down and secured in individual lockers - smartphones, smartwatches, fitness trackers, anything with connectivity. They could be tracked or compromised. Additionally, command likely wanted full attention on military duties without civilian distractions.

Their first briefing covered the current situation. Federal forces had deployed to suppress separatist activities in Tashkeria. The Normark government was implementing precautionary border security measures during the regional instability. Their mission involved refresher training on current equipment and tactics, with potential deployment to border positions depending on how the situation developed.

"How long do we expect this deployment?" someone asked.

"Could be a few days, could be a few weeks," the sergeant replied. "Depends on how quickly the Veligrads sort out their internal issues."

After the weapons familiarization session that morning, they conducted a training march into the mountains with full equipment. The route led to an observation position that provided clear sight lines across the border valley. At midday, they established a rest position on a smaller mountain top.

The reservists unpacked portable chairs and tables from their rucksacks. Someone distributed the standard field rations: nutriscore-rated sandwiches with butter and ham, along with regulation sports drinks. The man from municipal planning had smuggled a bag of praline chocolates in his combat pack.

"Anyone want some?" He offered the bag around the group.

The squad shared the chocolates alongside their official rations. When the NCO noticed, he took two pieces and laughed.

"Don't let me catch you doing this again," he said. "I don't want our weekend leave cancelled over contraband candy."

From their elevated position, Sanna could observe the entire border region. The terrain funneled all vehicle traffic through three mountain passes. Any movement along those routes would be visible from multiple observation points.

"Superb line of sight," she commented to the reservist beside her. "You can see the entire border. Look at those roads between the mountains that lead inland."

Movement caught her attention on the neighboring slope. Five men in army uniforms approached what had appeared to be natural rock formation and knocked. A concealed hatch lifted from the mountainside. Someone opened it from inside. They carefully transferred a heavy machine gun and several ammunition crates down the

ladder, then disappeared into the mountain bunker. The hatch closed, making the position invisible again.

Freedom was perhaps only guaranteed by enfilade fire from concealed bunkers at fifteen hundred meters.

She finished her chocolate and packed the wrapper in her equipment bag.

Chapter Three

Contact

The afternoon sun cast long shadows across the semi-arid farmland as the patrol moved along the dirt road. Dust kicked up by the three BMPs ahead settled on everything, coating uniforms and equipment with a fine layer of grit. The armored personnel carriers moved slowly, engines grinding in low gear, their tracks churning the packed earth. In safer areas, the soldiers would ride inside the vehicles, but here they walked alongside for protection, ready to respond if the BMPs hit mines or came under attack.

Artem walked fifty meters to the right of the road, PKM ammunition belts draped across his shoulders. The weight pulled at his back, but the pain had become manageable. Beside him, Misha carried the machine gun at the ready, scanning the tree line that bordered the scattered farm fields. The vegetation was sparse but dense enough to conceal movement.

The patrol had been searching for the terrorists who attacked a checkpoint two days earlier, killing a sentry. Radio intercepts suggested they might be hiding among the farm buildings that dotted this area. So far, they had found nothing.

Stone and wood farmhouses appeared occasionally behind low fences, most looking abandoned. The fields showed signs of recent cultivation, but no workers were visible. Either the farmers had fled, or they were keeping indoors while military vehicles passed through their area.

"Eyes on that tree line," Misha said quietly, adjusting his grip on the PKM. "Perfect spot for an ambush."

Artem nodded, checking the positions of the other soldiers spread across the flanks. The second squad was visible on the left side of the road, moving parallel to their position. Everyone looked tense. This terrain favored defenders, and the whole platoon knew it.

A radio crackled somewhere behind them. Volkov's voice carried over the engine noise, relaying grid coordinates to someone. Routine check-in with the platoon leader, probably. The BMPs continued their slow advance, turrets traversing left and right.

They approached a cluster of farm buildings set back from the road. Two stone structures with wooden additions, surrounded by a few scraggly trees and brush. Fencing divided the property into small fields, creating multiple sight barriers.

The lead BMP halted. Its engine continued running, but the column stopped. Soldiers on both flanks took knee, weapons ready. Artem watched as the second squad began crossing toward the far side of the buildings, using a covered approach.

Standard clearing procedure. Check the buildings, secure the area, continue patrol. Artem had practiced this drill dozens of times during training.

The second squad reached the far side of the buildings and took position. Hand signals passed between the squad leaders. Everything looked routine.

That was when they heard the noise.

Rustling came from a thick patch of bushes twenty meters to their right, near the edge of the farm property. Branches moved against each other, too deliberate for wind. Something was pushing through the vegetation.

The soldier closest to the sound raised his AK-74, finger moving to the trigger. His eyes were wide, focused on the spot where the bushes continued moving.

"Contact!" he shouted, and fired.

Everything erupted.

Misha immediately swung the PKM toward the sound and hammered out a long burst. The machine gun's heavy rounds shredded branches and kicked up dirt. Every soldier within earshot opened fire toward the bushes. AK-74s chattered from both sides of the road as the entire platoon engaged what they assumed was an enemy position.

The closest BMP's turret traversed with mechanical precision. Its 30mm cannon opened up with sharp, rhythmic cracks. Each high-explosive round blasted chunks from the hedge, sending debris flying in all directions. The coaxial machine gun added its own stream of fire.

Artem found himself shooting repeatedly, his AK-74 bucking against his shoulder. The overwhelming noise made thinking impossible. He aimed at the bushes and kept pulling the trigger, following everyone else's lead.

For thirty seconds, an entire platoon of soldiers and armored vehicles concentrated their firepower on a small patch of vegetation. The hedge disintegrated under the assault. Dirt fountained up where cannon rounds struck the ground. What had been a thick line of bushes became a smoking, shredded mess of broken branches and scattered leaves.

"Cease fire! Cease fire!" Volkov's voice cut through the noise, but it took several repetitions before the shooting stopped.

The sudden silence felt strange after the violent noise. Smoke drifted from dozens of muzzles. Artem's ears rang from the combined gunfire. His hands shook from adrenaline.

"What's the situation?" The platoon leader's voice carried from the direction of the BMPs, but he was running toward them, staying low.

"Movement in the bushes," Volkov called back. "Engaged unknown contact."

Volkov pointed to his assistant squad leader, then to Artem and Misha. "Check it out. Everyone else, maintain overwatch."

The assistant squad leader moved forward with Artem and Misha following, weapons ready. They approached what remained of the bushes carefully, scanning for additional threats. The area looked like it had been hit by artillery. Splintered wood and shredded leaves covered the ground. Shell craters from the 30mm rounds marked where the hedge had stood.

The assistant squad leader stopped and raised his hand, then called back to Volkov. "Area clear. No additional contacts."

"Move up," Volkov ordered.

The rest of the squad advanced and formed a perimeter around the destroyed vegetation. Only then did they see what they had done.

They found the boy in the wreckage.

He was perhaps twelve years old, wearing a torn shirt and work pants. The concentrated firepower had torn his small body apart. It was difficult to see that this had once been a child, curious about the military vehicles passing near his family's farm.

"I thought... the bushes were moving. It could have been anyone," the soldier said quietly.

No one spoke for a long moment. The scale of firepower they had brought to bear on a single child was overwhelming to contemplate.

"Kid shouldn't have been here," another soldier said, but his voice carried no conviction.

Volkov arrived and looked down at what remained of the body without expression. He unholstered his Makarov pistol from his belt and knelt beside the torn flesh, placing the weapon in the debris near where the child had fallen.

"Mission accomplished," he said in a flat voice. "We eliminated a terrorist conducting reconnaissance on our patrol." He stood and looked at the soldiers around him. "Someone get photos for the report."

A soldier from the reconnaissance element jogged over with a military camera. He began photographing the scene, making sure to capture the pistol near the boy's remains.

"Been promoted to enemy combatant upon receiving multiple mortal injuries," Misha said quietly, his voice carrying forced humor.

"What happens if we get shot then?" someone asked.

"Immediate reassignment to permanent rest status with full benefits package," Misha replied. "Complimentary transportation home in regulation wooden container, ceremonial flag included."

A few soldiers laughed nervously. Someone slapped Misha's back in camaraderie. Artem found himself smiling despite the horror of the situation. The humor felt wrong but necessary, like pressure being released from somewhere deep inside.

Volkov looked at Misha with a hardened expression. The laughter died immediately.

The photographer finished and nodded to Volkov. "Documentation complete, Sergeant."

Volkov retrieved his pistol and holstered it. He spoke briefly into his radio, reporting the contact and confirming the elimination of a hostile combatant. The transmission was routine, professional, giving no hint of what had actually occurred.

The radio crackled with acknowledgment. Standard procedure continued as if nothing unusual had happened.

"Move out," Volkov ordered. "We're done here."

They walked back toward the road, leaving the boy's body in the wreckage. The BMPs were already starting their engines, preparing to continue the patrol. Everything returned to routine.

As they regrouped, Artem tried to understand what had just happened. Had he killed a child? The shooting had been so fast, so automatic. Everyone had fired. It was impossible to know whose bullets had found their target.

But the boy shouldn't have been hiding in the bushes, watching soldiers in a combat zone. That was dangerous. Maybe even suspicious. Kids could be used as spotters for terrorist groups. It happened, according to the briefings they received.

The official report would say they had eliminated a hostile conducting surveillance. The photographs would support that conclusion. The planted weapon provided evidence of armed resistance.

Maybe it was better this way. Cleaner. The boy was dead regardless of how they characterized it. At least this version protected the soldiers who had acted on legitimate tactical concerns in a dangerous area.

Artem shouldered his ammunition belts and followed the patrol back to their vehicles. The sun was beginning to set, casting the farmland in golden light. Soon they would return to base, file their reports, and prepare for the next mission.

The usual pain in his back felt distant now, overwhelmed by newer discomforts he could not yet name.

Chapter Four

Live Fire

The instructor laid the new equipment across the demonstration table in the briefing room. Assault rifles with modern optics, compact tasers, pepper spray canisters, restraint equipment. Twenty-four reservists examined the items while he explained updated protocols.

"The old rules of engagement were simple," he said. "Call five warnings, fire warning shot, then engage if they don't comply."

A reservist from the municipal planning office laughed. "We used to speed through the warnings during exercises. Stop-stop-stop-stop-stop-BANG-shoot!"

Several others nodded with recognition.

It seemed crude now, but they had been eighteen back then. The kind of dark humor that teenagers with automatic rifles developed instantly.

The instructor remained serious.

"Right, and that's exactly why these rules changed. We've signed international conventions now. Non-lethal options first for civilian encounters."

Sanna picked up one of the tasers. The device felt heavier than expected, with clear safety mechanisms and usage instructions printed on the side. Modern equipment designed for professional law enforcement rather than military expedience.

"So if they are federation infiltrators, they kill us first with silencers?" asked the restaurant owner.

"If they have weapons, you shoot on sight," the instructor replied. "Non-lethal options are for non-combatants only."

"What if they have concealed silenced weapons and shoot us when we approach with tasers?"

The instructor paused. "Then you assess the threat level and respond accordingly. Use your tactical judgment."

That still didn't solve the identification problem, Sanna thought. How do you tell the difference between a desperate refugee and a professional infiltrator until it's too late?

Another reservist raised his hand. "We actually signed these international treaties? When?"

"Five years ago. International Convention on Border Security and Human Rights."

The instructor began demonstrating taser deployment procedures when gunfire erupted outside, from the direction of the border. Sharp cracks echoing off the mountain slopes. Close enough to distinguish individual rifle reports rather than the distant artillery rumble they had been hearing for days.

The briefing room went silent. Everyone turned toward the windows facing the frontier.

"That's not training fire," someone said.

The instructor was already moving toward the radio equipment. Within seconds, the alert klaxon began sounding throughout the station. Voices shouted orders in the corridor outside.

"Training's over," a sergeant announced from the doorway. "Live ammunition. Move to the armory now."

The reservists formed lines at the equipment counters. Quartermaster personnel distributed magazines, combat loads, body armor. The casual atmosphere from the morning briefing disappeared completely. Sanna checked her rifle's action and loaded a full magazine.

Outside, diesel engines coughed to life. Three wheeled armored personnel carriers sat in the motor pool, their faded green paint and worn interiors showing decades of service. Reliable workhorses that started eventually despite their age.

Sanna's squad climbed into the rear compartment of the lead vehicle. Twelve reservists plus gear filled the cramped space. The driver engaged the transmission and they began moving down the mountain road toward the border checkpoint.

Radio chatter filled the compartment through the intercom system. Initial reports from the border described an attack on the Federation checkpoint. Multiple casualties. Unknown number of attackers. No pursuit observed.

"Federation border post attacked by separatist forces," the radio confirmed. "Raiders fled back into Tashkeria territory. No Federation response elements detected."

The municipal planner sitting across from Sanna looked relieved. "So it's not war yet."

"Not yet," she replied.

Through the small windows, smoke columns were rising from scattered points around the regional capital. She could hear the distant rumble of explosions echoing through the mountain valleys, deep bass notes that seemed to shake the ground beneath her feet. Artillery fire created a rhythmic percussion against the peaks, while jet engines screamed overhead as Federation aircraft worked the high country.

"Medical assistance requested at Checkpoint Alpha," the radio announced. "Wounded Federation personnel requiring immediate attention."

The APC rounded a curve and the border facility came into view. The main checkpoint controlled the primary trade route between the two countries. A well-maintained road passed through reinforced gates and inspection stations. Concrete bunkers and defensive positions covered the approaches from both directions.

Bodies lay scattered around the checkpoint buildings. Dark stains marked the pavement where the wounded had been moved. Papers and documents blew across the road in the mountain wind. The Federation flag still flew above their side of the crossing.

Normark border guards were already establishing a security perimeter. A mix of professional personnel and young conscripts who had recently completed their mandatory service. Medical teams worked on two wounded Federation guards near the main building.

Sanna's unit dismounted and formed up with the other arriving reservists. A senior NCO briefed them on the tactical situation.

"Separatists hit the Federation checkpoint approximately one hour ago. Coordinated assault from multiple directions. Twenty Federation casualties confirmed. The attackers approached from their own territory, hit the blind spots behind the fortifications."

He pointed toward the Federation bunkers. The defensive positions faced toward Normark, designed to repel invasion rather than raids from the rear. Grenade damage was visible on the supposedly secure sides of the structures.

"They knew exactly where to hit. This wasn't random terrorism. Planned military operation."

The wounded Federation guards were conscious and providing details to the medical teams. The attack had lasted nearly twenty min-

utes before the separatists withdrew with captured documents and equipment.

"Our mission is border security and infiltration prevention," the NCO continued. "The separatists demonstrated they can conduct cross-border operations. We maintain defensive positions and assist with casualty evacuation."

Radio communication with Federation authorities confirmed medical cooperation arrangements. The wounded guards would be transported to the Democratic side for hospital treatment. Official notifications were being processed through diplomatic channels.

"All border crossings closed indefinitely effective immediately," the radio announced. "No civilian traffic permitted in either direction. Maintain defensive positions and process any crossing attempts according to emergency protocols."

The word "indefinitely" settled in her stomach like cold metal. She wouldn't be returning to her debugging sessions and sprint deadlines anytime soon. The children would have to adjust to daddy handling bedtime routines alone. This wasn't the few days of refresher training they'd all assumed.

Sanna's squad received patrol assignments along the frontier fence. As they moved toward their assigned sector, helicopter rotors approached from the west. Three Normark attack helicopters passed overhead, heading toward mountain positions where they could use terrain for cover.

Walking along the fence line, Sanna looked across toward the capital on her right. The bombardment of separatist positions continued on the horizon. Jets drew contrails across the sky like predatory birds circling their prey.

"They won't get to do that to our country," one of the reservists said, watching the smoke columns rise. "These separatists might have

overrun a checkpoint, but they couldn't hope to breach this border with their pickup trucks and RPGs."

"It's not the separatists I'm worried about," another replied. "What happens when the Federation decides we're helping them? Or just drops a bomb on the wrong side of the border?"

"They can try," someone else said grimly. "We've been preparing for this eventuality for sixty years."

Someone started singing quietly in their own language. Sanna recognized the melody immediately: "Bella Ciao," the old Italian antifascist song they had somehow translated and adopted during the Great War. It had been popular among conscripts ever since, passed down through generations of mandatory service.

The familiar words drifted across the mountain air:

*"If we should fall defending freedom,
Lay us down beneath the mountain stone..."*

One by one, the other reservists and border guards joined in, their voices creating a somber harmony. The song's rhythm seemed to match the bass rumble of distant explosions, each verse punctuated by bombs falling on the separatist positions.

The melody carried a melancholy defiance, the chorus of farewells echoing across the peaks while smoke columns rose from the nearby mountains that felt too close for comfort. Voices that sang of dying for freedom harmonized with the sounds of people dying for seeking freedom.

The song continued:

*"In the shadow of the mountain flowers,
Children wander, asking why,
They bloom so bright upon the hillside,
Born from where the brave ones lie..."*

The melody spoke of sacrifice creating beauty for children to discover. Sanna's own three were safe at home, but other children were about to learn very different lessons. This wouldn't stop at the mountains. It never did.

They were in the first row to watch the terrible spectacle unfold.