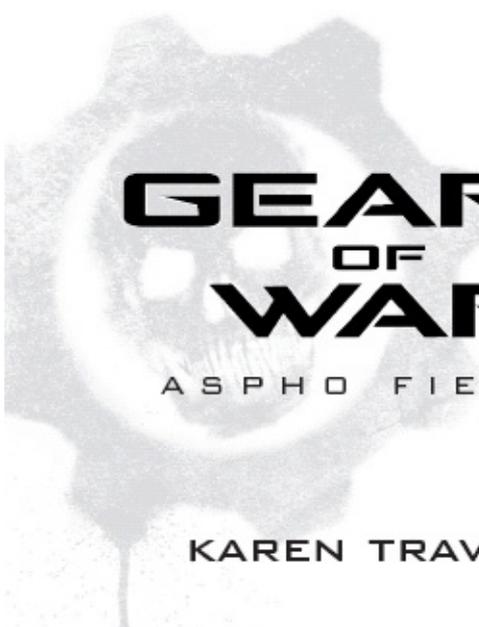


# GEARS OF WAR ASPHO FIELDS

KAREN TRAVISS



BALLANTINE BOOKS



**GEARS  
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*For the 2nd Battalion the Mercian Regiment, and all British service personnel in Afghanistan. Because real heroes in the real world are the ones we should be reading about.*

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## PROLOGUE

**TIME: FOURTEEN YEARS AFTER EMERGENCE DAY. PLACE: SOMEWHERE BENEATH THE SURFACE OF SERA.**

*For a time, the humans of Sera knew the illusion of peace...until Emergence Day.*

*At that moment, our people broke free from our subterranean world, erupting into the domain of these groundwalkers, and wiping out whole cities. We fought and killed the humans on their fine boulevards, in their homes, on their battlefields.*

*And they fought back.*

*In time, their valiant defense was crushed. With billions dead, humans denied their enemy control by destroying their own civilization. They launched devastating attacks on their own territory—sacrificing their own citizens—so that we could not possess it. Such is their loathing and fear of us.*

*Understand what a world must do to survive—what humans must do, and what we must do. But survive we must.*

*Now the humans' long struggle against overwhelming odds approaches the final, desperate stand...*

(QUEEN MYRRAH OF THE LOCUST HORDE, ADDRESSING NEW LOCUST TROOPS WAITING TO GO INTO BATTLE FOR THE FIRST TIME.)

**URBAN PATROL IN EPHYRA; 14 YEARS AFTER EMERGENCE DAY, ONE WEEK AFTER THE LIGHTMASS ASSAULT ON THE LOCUST.**

I swear I can smell barbecue.

I don't mean scorched flesh—that's a stench I know pretty well. I mean *meat*, proper meat, the bitter tang of charcoal at the back of your throat, smoky fat, spices, *juices*. I'm point man today; I raise my fist to halt the squad.

See, smell *matters* when you're on patrol. It's part of the picture you build up, as much a clue as anything you see, hear, *feel*. It tells you plenty: dead bodies, how long they've been dead, discharged weapons, leaking fuel, fresh air from a distant vent when you're looking for a way out. And, of course, it tells the enemy plenty about you.

So how many Locust are left?

Marcus looks around slowly, not blinking, like he's a machine scanning the buildings. "What is it, Dom?"

"Smell it?"

Someone's probably trying to carry on a normal life in this city, pretending it's an ordinary summer day like we had years ago, wars ago. Even with billions dead, humans get on with life. Even me. Even without my wife and kids. Humans always find something to hang on to.

Marcus pauses, inhales slowly, then lets his rifle rest on its sling.

"Dog," he says at last. "Yeah, dog. Overdone."

Cole chuckles. "Save me a leg. *Two*, if it's one of those little yappy guys."

"Shit, those Stranded eat *anything*," Baird says. He's got no time for the bands of refugees living outside government protection. Has anyone? Me, I try to remember they're our own. "Maybe they'll end up eating each other and save us a few rounds."

It's their choice to stay outside. The Stranded could sign up, do their military service with COG forces, and get fed like the rest of us, but the dumb bastards still want to play the independence game—like it matters a damn now.

"Yeah, very public spirited," Marcus mutters, and carries on picking his way through the rubble.

But Baird's got a point. We all have a choice. It's dumb to keep this tribal shit going when humankind is close to being wiped out. If we had any sense, we'd all unite.

No, it's *worse* than dumb. It's suicidal.

Then it starts; the faint vibration beneath my boots.

Marcus says smell's our most basic sense, the one that grabs you hardest by the balls and gets your attention. His dad was a scientist, so I guess he knows. But not here. In the city, it's that trembling from deep beneath the ground that blots out everything else. It tells you the Locust are coming. You feel it in your guts. The grubs are boiling up from underground.

There's still plenty of them around, even after we bombed the shit out of their tunnels. They have to be the last ones standing.

"Here we go," Cole says. He checks his Lancer casually, like he's just waiting for kit inspection, not that we bother much with that kind of stuff now. "Damn, I was hoping those Stranded bums might even have some beer to go with that dog..."

Forget the beer. The ground starts moving fifty meters ahead, a slow dome rising, shrugging off the paving that's been smashed into mosaic a dozen times already. I react. We all *react*. There's no *think*. My body's been here before a thousand times, and it gets on with the job without asking my brain if it has anything to say about opening fire.

The paving cracks bulge wider as a bunch of Locust drones break through. Big, ugly, gray bastards. How can anything with two arms, two legs, and a head look so alien? We all concentrate our fire on the same spot before the things can steady themselves and take aim, and in that narrow canyon of a street, it's deafening. A single grub goes down. The rest boil out and come at us firing.

One minute I'm ducking down behind a burned-out car to fire from cover—the next I've got a vise around my neck and shoulder, and a drone is hauling me over the rusted metal, scraping my arm raw. I try to bring the Lancer's chainsaw up into its gut. But the thing's got me so close in a rear stranglehold that I can't move the damn rifle. I'm trying to grab my knife with my free hand. I can hear hammering gunfire, Cole yelling, Baird breathless like he's punching the crap out of something, and just a silence where Marcus is—except for rapid fire. Something wet sprays my face. I'm losing consciousness, but I'm taking that Locust bastard with me, you bet I am, and I ram the blade into any part of the drone I can reach.

*That's for my kids. That's for Maria. That's for all my buddies. That's for—*

Then it's like a grenade's gone off next to my ear. I'm breathing again, and I'm soaked in something warm and sticky. The drone drops, I mean, it *drops*. But it's still got a tight hold on me and nearly pulls me down on top of it as it collapses. It's got half a head left. I freeze, look around in the sudden ringing silence, and then realize none of us fired that shot.

Marcus sticks his hand in its skull and fishes out a round. "Sniper," he says, wiping blood from his face. The drones are dead. We're not. That's good enough, I suppose. "And not one of ours. This kind of ammo hasn't been used for years."

I *hate* surprises. Even ones that save my skin. Anyone who can shoot like that had better be on our side.



## CHAPTER 1

*I swear I thought the place was a museum when I walked in. I mean, it was huge, full of books and old paintings. And deserted, you know? That kind of dead silence that says just shut your mouth and feel the awe of history. And then Marcus's mom came through the door like she hadn't seen us, reading some papers she had in her hand, and she says, "Hi sweetheart, you brought some friends home? I'll catch up with you later." Then she was gone. I saw the look on Marcus's face, and knew right then that the guy needed a brother a whole lot more than he needed a library.*

(CARLOS SANTIAGO, DESCRIBING HIS FIRST VISIT TO MARCUS FENIX'S FAMILY MANSION AT THE AGE OF TEN.)

### **EPHYRA, PRESENT DAY—14 A.E.**

Dom Santiago decided that there was one good thing about a phantom sniper blowing a Locust's brains all over his face. It took his mind off worrying how many Locust were still around.

His legs were shaking as he moved to the edge of the pit that had opened in the paving and aimed his rifle below, just in case the grubs had backup on the way. The shakes were just the aftershock of the adrenaline, but—

*Liar. I nearly shit myself. The grub was choking the life out of me, a round missed my brain by inches. That's fear. Forget the adrenaline.*

No, it never stopped being terrifying. The day it did, he'd *really* be dead. In the tangle of broken pipes and cables below, nothing stirred beyond the clicking of settling soil and stones. Dom couldn't feel anything under his boots now except the slight rocking movement of broken paving. The vibrations from deep in the planet had vanished for the time being, and the smell of chargrilled dog had been overwhelmed by shattered bowels and pulverized concrete.

"Hey, smart-ass," Baird called to the empty street. "Nice shot. Now show yourself."

"Better shout louder," Cole said. "He could be a mile away."

It was always hard to spot a sniper. But in this maze of destruction and shadows, there were a thousand places to lay up and wait for trade. Marcus squatted down and

examined what was left of the Locust's skull again. Then he looked up and gestured in the general direction of the south side of the street.

"No, a lot closer. The round went in near the top of the skull. High angle, and a lot of kinetic energy left."

Dom looked where Marcus was pointing, trying to work out where the sniper would have had clear line of sight. Marcus backed slowly to the nearest wall and pressed his fingers to his earpiece. Dom listened in.

"Delta to Control, any sniper teams to the south of Embry? Any Gears at all?"

"Negative, Delta." It was Lieutenant Stroud: Anya Stroud, still on duty after eighteen hours. The woman never seemed to sleep. If Delta Squad was awake—so was she. "Need one?"

"Not anymore."

"Don't leave me in suspense, Sergeant..."

"We've got a joker loose with an obsolete sniper rifle. He's helpful now, but he might not stay that way."

"Thanks for the heads-up. I'll put out an advisory."

Cole was still focused on the roofline. Baird lowered his Lancer and started walking again. "Let's get out. Maybe they got a sudden dose of patriotism and realized they owe us, now the war's nearly over."

"Maybe," Marcus said, "he was aiming at Dom and missed. And it's not over."

"Stranded never fire on us. They're not that dumb."

"Old rifle. Great shot." Marcus reloaded, casual and apparently in no hurry. "So I'm curious."

Baird didn't look back as he picked his way over fallen masonry. "Plenty of Stranded are good shots. Doesn't mean we have to go find them and enlist them."

Baird had a point. As long as nobody was shooting at them, it wasn't their problem. But if someone had a sniper rifle, Dom knew it was stolen. Obsolete or not, the things were scarce. A handful of factories struggled to produce spares, let alone crank out new weapons. Every operational piece of kit, from Ravens to Armadillos to assault rifles, was a losing battle between maintenance and decay. Like all Gears, Dom cannibalized parts from anything he could grab. Baird was a master at it.

"Yeah, we need to know," Dom said. "Because if the rifle isn't stolen, that means the owner's one of us. A veteran."

Baird paused to pick up something. When he held it closer to his face to examine it, Dom could see it was a servo part of some kind. “It’s old kit and they’re thieving scum.” Baird pocketed the servo. “Because no Gear is going to hang around with street vermin if he’s capable of shooting.”

Again, the cocky little bastard was right. Dom wanted to see him proved wrong someday, if only to shut his mouth for a while. Yes, veteran Gears reenlisted after Emergence Day, even some *really* old guys, because there were two choices for any man worth a damn: fight with the COG forces, any way he could—or rot. The only excuse for not fighting the Locust was being dead.

“Every rifle counts,” Dom called after him. No, the war *wasn’t* over. “And every man.” He turned to Marcus and gestured toward the likely direction of fire. “Give me ten minutes.”

“You’ve got me curious, too,” Cole said, resting his Lancer against his shoulder. “I think I’ll join you.”

Marcus sighed. “Okay, but keep your comm channels open. Baird? Baird, get your ass back here.”

Half of this city block had been a bank’s headquarters, surrounded by snack and coffee shops that lived off the army of clerks. It was all derelict now. Dom could just about remember how it had looked before E-Day, the ranks of neatly wrapped sandwiches in the window displays, filled with the kind of delicacies nobody could get hold of now. Food in the army was...adequate, better than anything that Stranded had. But it wasn’t fun.

*Dog. Damn, who’d eat a dog?*

The glittering granite façade was just a shell now, with a few hardy plants rooted in cracks in the ashlar. Nothing much grew here. It didn’t get the chance. Dom and Cole edged inside the burned-out bank and looked up to see that there were no floors, and nowhere to hide. It was a big empty box. Everything that could be hauled away and reused—wood, metal, cable, pipes—had been scavenged long before.

“Well, shit,” Cole said cheerfully. “I had my fortune stashed here.”

Cole had been a pro thrashball star, a rich man in a world long gone. Wealth was measured in skills and barter now. He always treated his worthless millions as a big joke; he could find humor in just about any situation. But there was nothing much left to buy that a Gear needed. Dom decided that when life returned to normal—even after fourteen years, he *had* to think that it could—he’d follow Cole’s example and treat money as easy come, easy go. *People* were what mattered. You couldn’t replace them, and they didn’t earn interest. They just slipped away a day at a time, and you had to make the most of every precious moment.

*When I find Maria, I won't take a single minute for granted.*

Dom scanned the interior and peered down into a deep crater where the polished marble counter had once been. Nothing moved, but he could see the old vaults, doors blown open. “Yeah, better cancel the order for that yacht.”

“Hey, Dom, you won't find no snipers down there.” Cole shoved him in the shoulder. “Heads up.”

The back of the bank building was a sloping mound of rubble and debris, like scree that had tumbled down a mountainside. Above the ramp of brick, stone facing, and snapped joists, the rear wall rose like a cliff and the top row of empty window frames formed deep arches. Now *that* was a good position for a sniper—depending on what was behind the wall, of course. Dom slung his Lancer across his shoulders and scrambled up the slope for a better look.

“Nobody home, Dom.” Cole followed him. “Don't you get enough exercise?”

“Just want a look-see from the top.” Dom grabbed at a rusted steel bar and hauled himself up the stumps of joists that jutted from the wall. His oversized boots weren't ideal for climbing and he had to rely on his upper body strength more than momentum from his legs, so getting down again was going to be interesting. “Because he'd have to be at this height to get that shot in.”

Dom heaved himself onto a windowsill and stood with his hands braced against the stone uprights on either side. It was a big solid wall, built like a bastion, and thick enough for him to stand on comfortably even in a Gear's boots. On the other side, adjacent buildings in various states of collapse provided crude stairs down to ground level. If anyone had been up here, he'd had a relatively easy route down.

“See anything?” Cole called.

“Usual shit.” Dom scanned one-eighty degrees. “Not exactly a postcard to send home. Unless you live in an even bigger cesspit.”

Below, the city still looked like a deserted battlefield, sterile and treeless. Smoke curled upward in thin wisps from domestic fires Dom couldn't see. There was a visible demarcation between the parts of the city that stood on thick granite—the last COG stronghold—and the outlying areas where fissures and softer rock let the Locust tunnel in. The line lay between a recognizable city, buildings mostly in one piece, and a devastated hinterland. The line itself—well, that was the margin in which most Stranded seemed to live, the unsecured areas where they took their chances.

*Their choice. Not ours.*

It wasn't the view Dom was used to from the crew bay of a King Raven chopper. It was static, deceptively peaceful, not racing and rolling beneath him in a sequence of

disjointed images. He had a few moments to think. Even after ten years, he found himself trying to visualize where Maria might be now. Then he began wondering how they'd ever rebuild Sera, and the idea was so overwhelming that he did the sensible thing and just thought about how he was going to get through the next few hours alive.

“Dom, stand there much longer, and somebody’s going to shoot your ass off for the hell of it,” Cole called. “Let’s commandeer a vehicle and cover some ground.”

Dom wasn’t so sure the sniper had gone far. It was hard to move fast across terrain like this. You had to crawl, climb, burrow, duck. And that made it perfect to hide in. Whoever he was—Dom was sure he’d hang around.

“He’ll be back.” Dom tried not to think about the drop below. He just turned around and jumped, relying on the give in the loose rock and the thick soles of his boots to cushion the impact. It still shook him to his teeth. “He’s making a point. Not sure what, but...”

But Marcus had news to take his mind off the sniper. “Move it, guys. Echo’s got grubs surfacing three klicks west. Means they might still be moving along the Sovereign Boulevard fissure. We can get there before anyone gets a Raven airborne.”

Marcus’s voice rarely varied from a weary monotone. Even when he had to shout, all he did was turn up the volume. There was seldom any trace of anger or urgency, although Dom knew damn well that it was all still battened down, and there certainly wasn’t any hint of triumph now.

“Numbers?” Dom asked.

“A dozen.”

“But that means they’re thinning out,” Baird said. He fancied himself as the resident Locust expert, and he was. “Looks like we did it. We bombed the shit out of them.”

Dom prodded Baird in the chest as he passed him, friendly but pointed. “You mean *Marcus* did it. He’s the one who shoved the Lightmass down their grub throats.”

“Well, maybe Hoffman will hand him back his medals after all...”

“Knock it off.” Marcus turned and jogged in the direction of Sovereign. Most patrols were on foot, out of necessity; APCs were in ever shorter supply. “The stragglers could still outnumber us. Do a head count.”

Dom prided himself on hanging in there, just like his dad, just like his brother Carlos. You didn’t lose heart. You didn’t lose hope. *Resilience*, Carlos called it; a man had to be *resilient*, and not crumble at the first setback. But after fourteen years of fighting, there were only a few million humans left, and Dom was ready to grab at any prospect of the nightmare coming to an end.

*No, it'll be a different kind of nightmare. Restarting civilization from scratch. But it beats thinking every day will be your last.*

The only thing that bothered Dom about dying now was that it would end his hunt for Maria.

“Right behind you,” he said, and ran after Marcus.

**OFFICE OF CHAIRMAN RICHARD PRESCOTT, COG HEADQUARTERS, JACINTO.**

Colonel Victor Hoffman arrived five minutes early for the meeting and diverted to the bathroom to tidy his uniform.

It wasn't much of a uniform, and this battered building wasn't much of an HQ, but if he started treating anything as not mattering—anything at all—then the rot would set in. *This* was how civilization was maintained. *This* was how a culture survived. Museums and art galleries could be reduced to rubble, and human society on Sera would carry on unscathed. But the way a man conducted himself, the basic rules of every moment of each day—*that* was all that stood between the last humans on Sera and chaotic savagery. It had to be maintained at all costs.

So Hoffman checked for stubble on chin and scalp, straightened his collar, and tried to disguise the signs that—yet again—he hadn't had a chance to sleep in thirty-six hours.

*What's going to kill me first? This job, or the Locust?*

The door opened behind him, just a crack judging by the muffled voice. A woman's voice; he froze, then checked his zipper.

“The chairman will see you when you're ready, sir.”

A man couldn't even take a leak in peace these days. Hoffman didn't turn around. He replaced his cap. “Thank you. Give me a minute.”

He counted silently to sixty, contemplating his reflection in a mirror that had also seen better days, and then turned on his heel to walk the few yards down the corridor to Prescott's office. It was a room that hadn't been refurbished since before E-Day. That, at least, won the politician a few points. He was taking the shortages like everyone else.

“Victor,” Prescott said. He stood in front of a makeshift display board covered in sheets of paper, studying each in turn, then glanced over his shoulder. “Take a seat. Are things as hopeful as they look?”

Hoffman folded his cap and tried not to gaze longingly at the coffee on Prescott's desk. He picked up the briefing notes that were always crisp and ready for him at these pointless monthly meetings, and leafed through the digests. Food stockpiles—10 percent lower than target. Munitions—a third below target output. Utilities—domestic power supplies less than twelve hours a day.

*Business as usual...*

“All I can say, Chairman, is that since the Lightmass detonation, we've seen mainly Locust drones, and in considerably reduced numbers. Normally we'd encounter the full spectrum of Locust types over the course of a week—Boomers, Nemacysts, Reavers, you name it—and a *lot* more drones.”

Hoffman stopped. That was all he had to say. Prescott stared at him as if he was waiting for him to continue and give him some good news to announce. In the brief silence, an antique clock ticked with a sound like stones falling off a ledge.

Prescott's patience held out six slow seconds. “So did it work? Has the bomb *worked?*”

Hoffman didn't like hope these days. It always tended to get crushed. He pinned down his thoughts in the realms of the measurable and predictable as much as he could.

“It destroyed the Locust citadel,” he said carefully. It wasn't quite how he'd felt when the Lightmass bomb ripped the guts out of the Locust tunnels, but there was no reason to bullshit Prescott. “We're seeing a lot fewer on the surface, and it got rid of most of the Kryll. But short of strolling down their tunnels and doing a head count, I don't know what the overall effect's been. Time will tell.”

“People need good news to keep going, Victor.”

“And when we get some, sir, you'll be the first to know...”

“Morale's a commodity.”

“For the army, too. Equipment failures went beyond critical a long time ago.” Hoffman had this same conversation with Prescott every month, like clockwork. “We're going to have to think about diverting more civilian resources to arms manufacture.”

“How am I going to justify that with fewer Locust incursions?”

*Shit, I can't win either way, can I?* “With respect, who do you need to justify it *to?*”

“The population. They're running on empty, like you.”

“Without an effective army, they'll be running on *dead.*”

“I don’t want any more riots over rationing and power cuts.”

“Look, Chairman, for the moment, my Gears aren’t as *busy* as usual. It’s a good time to divert some resources into replacing as much equipment as we can. Even if the Locust *have* been defeated, you’ll still need a strong army during reconstruction. Once certain groups think the pressure is off, you’ll have a whole new bucket of problems on your hands. Top us up *now*, while we’ve got breathing space.”

It was all true, all solid doctrine, but Hoffman knew how to play politicians. They were short-term thinkers; but flag up a good threat to focus them, and they’d drag their eyes to the more distant horizon. Hoffman actually didn’t have the luxury of thinking beyond keeping his men fed and armed for the next day, week, month. So if Prescott got off his back and concentrated on civil unrest and reconstruction, it was one less hassle to deal with.

“I do understand,” Prescott said. “I’ve worn the uniform.”

*For eighteen months. For appearances. Ever been under fire? No.* “Then you’ll know society’s deal, sir. Gears put their lives on the line, and civilians make sure they’ve got enough kit and support to do the job. Anything less is morally unacceptable. And it’s also a recipe for defeat.”

Prescott wandered over to the window and folded his arms, staring out over the city. The grime on the glass—there was no maintenance these days, none of the trappings of a less brutal war—gave the broken Jacinto skyline a softer, more flattering focus.

He let out a long breath. “The average adult male citizen is getting by on two thousand three hundred calories a day, which is about a third of a Gear’s intake, women on eighteen hundred. Power’s off for more than twelve hours in every twenty-six. Water processing can’t keep up. If we didn’t tie family food rations to keeping children in school, we’d have feral packs of kids roaming the streets. My job’s to keep society running, Victor, any way I can. I have to think past wars. My job is *tomorrow*.”

“Well, I’m just a warfighter,” Hoffman said carefully. “My job is making sure there’ll *be* a tomorrow.”

“Okay, it’s been easy to motivate people against this enemy,” Prescott said. “It’s not the Pendulum Wars. Locust aren’t remotely human. Nobody’s got a grub relative overseas with a different side of the story to tell. They’re the antithesis of humankind, real monsters. But hate and tribalism only unite a society so far.”

“We’ve lasted fourteen years.” Hoffman stood up to put on his cap. Long practice made him line the badge up with his nose almost unconsciously, running the edge of his right forefinger down over the metal while his left hand positioned the back of the cap. Sometimes, when he felt the death’s head emblem, it made him wonder if the badge was a boast or a prediction. “This is a siege. I’m good at sieges. Give me an objective, and I’ll tell you if I can do it with the kit and men available.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” said Prescott.

Hoffman knew *get lost* when he heard it.

It was all men now, near enough. The Pendulum War days of women in uniform were largely over. As Hoffman left, a girl in a sober blue business suit—maybe the girl who opened the bathroom door—stood at a filing cabinet with her back to him. When she closed the drawer and turned, he could see she was several months pregnant. That was a priority job now; not just replacing engine parts and weapon components, but replacing *humans*.

*Longer lead time, though...*

“Ma’am,” he said politely, touching a finger to his cap, and walked out into the square.

It might have been his imagination, but the sky was less heavily clouded than usual. He looked up, and saw nothing. Nothing was good news.

His radio crackled. In his earpiece, Lieutenant Stroud’s voice sounded a little more strained than usual.

“Sir—two more drone incursions. Delta are heading for Sovereign to RV with Echo Squad.”

“Thanks, Lieutenant. Now get some sleep. You’re not the only Control commander we’ve got. Tell Mathieson to get his lazy ass in that seat.”

“Yes sir. Stroud out.”

The link went dead. Anya Stroud didn’t fool Hoffman. Delta got extra attention from her, and it wasn’t thanks to their refined taste in the arts. If she thought she could mend Marcus Fenix and make a decent man out of him, then Hoffman had overestimated her intelligence, but it wasn’t his place to lecture her on pining after grossly unsuitable men. As long as she didn’t let it interfere with her duties, it was her private problem.

And she wasn’t her mother, poor kid. It must have been damned hard to grow up in the shadow of Helena Stroud.

*Or Adam Fenix, come to that.* Hoffman brought himself to a halt just short of actually feeling sorry for the man’s son.

“You still got a lot of ground to make up with me, Fenix,” Hoffman said aloud. He made his way down the road to headquarters, suddenly wanting to pick up a rifle on the way. He hadn’t reacted that way in a long time; now he felt naked with only his sidearm, even in the defended heart of the city. “A lot.”

SOVEREIGN BOULEVARD, JACINTO.

Dom could hear firing long before Delta reached the junction with the boulevard. Marcus broke into a faster run, then sprinted toward the sound.

“He’s going to get us killed,” Baird muttered, maintaining a steady jog. “Asshole.”

Cole gave him a playful shove in the back, which was a hefty blow from a guy built like a brick shithouse. Baird almost fell. “Come on, baby.” Cole overtook him. He could still sprint like a pro. “You don’t want to get an ugly one.”

There was only ugly and uglier to choose from when it came to Locust. Dom switched comm circuits to pick up Echo’s sergeant, Rossi, swearing a blue streak as he emptied his magazine.

“Delta, you took your frigging time.”

Marcus’s voice cut in. “Yeah, well, we’re here now. Want a hand?”

“We’re two men down. What d’you think? We’re holed up in the mall. *Soon* would be good.”

They said the world was divided into those folks who ran away from danger, and those who ran toward it. It was funny how you could overcome that instinct to get the hell out if you were trained hard enough. Dom’s legs were moving independently of his brain, and as he rounded the corner behind Cole, he saw what was giving Rossi’s men problems: it was the biggest Boomer he’d ever seen, and a squad of its drone buddies.

The boulevard was a big, open space with precious little cover. Dom and the rest of Delta made their way up the road by darting from doorway to doorway, and laid up for a moment behind an overturned dumpster.

The whole area south of the House of Sovereigns had once been full of manicured trees, expensive stores, and pavement cafes beyond Dom’s pocket, but he’d window-shopped here with Maria before the kids were born. It was hard to tell that it had ever been a nice place except for the shattered stone façades. All the white marble statues that stood in the wall niches had gone; Dom couldn’t even see where the raised flower beds had been.

The Boomer and accompanying drones were preoccupied with the entrance to the mall, another converted period building.

Its weather doors were long gone. But the security shutter—a huge steel portcullis suspended between fluted columns—had been lowered. The Boomer was rattling it as

easily as a night watchman checking a flimsy door. The shutter wasn't going to last much longer.

Marcus had his don't-say-anything-I'm-calculating face on. "Rossi," he said, finger on his earpiece. "Rossi, is the mezzanine floor above the entrance still intact?"

Rossi's voice was almost drowned out by gunfire. "Yeah. All the way around the atrium. Height's about five meters."

"Have you got control of the shutter?"

"Sphincters—no. Shutter—yes."

"Raise it on my mark."

"We've got grubs *inside*, too. I wasn't planning on letting reinforcements in."

"Just raise it when I say."

"Want to share?"

"Let the Boomer in and leave the rest to us. We'll go in from the top."

Rossi went silent for a moment. Dom heard a voice in the background urging someone called David to hang in there; they had wounded to evacuate.

"Haven't got much choice, have we?" Rossi said. "Standing by."

"Keep your channel open." Marcus turned. "Okay, we've got two exits at the rear of the mall, accessible from the loading bays. Up the fire escape, along the mezzanine, and then Dom and I drop the Boomer from above."

"What do I do, then, catch up on my knitting?" Baird said. "And how do you know the layout?"

"My mom used to go there a lot when I was a kid," Marcus said quietly. "I *explored*."

"And that's what we're banking on? Your mom's shopping trips?"

Dom was certain that Marcus was going to punch Baird out sooner or later. He'd never seen Marcus lose his temper, but *nobody* could take Baird's whining every day without wanting to kick the living shit out of him. The longer Marcus took it in silence, the bigger the eruption Dom expected.

"Yeah," Marcus sighed. "So you and Cole give us covering fire if the grubs spot us moving. Once we're in and the shutter lifts, close up and go in behind them."