



The official novel of the epic film *After Earth*

# AFTER EARTH

Adapted by Peter David

Based on the Screenplay by Gary Whitta and M. Night Shyamalan  
Story by Will Smith



AFTER  
EARTH

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## PRELUDE

*Kitai is sleeping soundly, dreaming of his future.*

*It is not an unusual dream. He has it all the time. His dream is simple and remarkably consistent. He is running in the dream, always running, across the plateaus that served as training grounds for the Rangers. He does not see himself as any older than he is right now: eight years old. Eight going on eighteen is what his mother often says. He's not entirely sure what she means by that, but every time she says it, she does so with such a wide smile on her face that it's clearly not intended to be insulting. As a result, he doesn't take offense.*

*In his dream, Kitai is running alongside other members of the United Ranger Corps. They are not children such as he is but instead tall and powerful and confident in their abilities. And they are all carrying cutlasses, the formidable weapon that each of them depends on to do the job that they have long been trained to perform. Also, they are all adults.*

*And he is bypassing every single one of them.*

*Kitai's speed is quite simply unparalleled. He is moving so quickly, so fluidly, that it is impossible for any of the others to keep up with him. "Slow it down, Kitai!" "You're killing us, kid!" Comments such as these often rain down on him as he runs, but he makes a point of ignoring them. The others' lack of speed is not his problem. All he cares about is being the fastest, being the best. Being the greatest Ranger in the history of ... well, of great Rangers, really.*

*If there is one thing he knows about, it's great Rangers. His family is composed of nothing but great Rangers, and he is determined to surpass all of them, up to and including the general.*

*Kitai runs, he dashes, he vaults, he jumps. At one point he leaps off a cliff and actually soars through the air, free as a bird, while the other Rangers point and shout and collectively agree that he is, without a doubt, the best of all.*

*Somewhere in the distance, he hears a whining. It means nothing to him: just another loud sound to serve as a minor distraction, that's all. But he doesn't ever get distracted. He's too great and glorious a Ranger to succumb to such things.*

*Suddenly Kitai is jolted awake. He sits there in his bed, listening to his breathing, surprised by the realization that he had been asleep. The last thing he recalled was lying in bed, reading a book. He prided himself on always being awake and ready for anything. The fact that he had dozed off was bad; having to be awakened by a whining sound was even worse. Embarrassing, in fact. Or it would be if he were awake enough to appreciate the danger to which he was being exposed.*

*It takes him a few more moments to realize what the whining is: an air raid alert. The colony's alien enemies, the Skrel, have attacked. He's not hearing any explosions, though. If they're not bombing us, then what ...?*

Ursa.

*The creatures have persisted on Nova Prime for some years now. The Rangers, led by Kitai's father, managed to annihilate most of them, but the Ursa remain a genuine threat to the Novans. An unknown number of them remained, and they attacked the city without warning or pattern.*

*But what if it was the Ursa the alert was whining about? The thought paralyzed Kitai. If Ursa were being dropped off in the midst of humanity, all bets were off. For all he knew, Ursa could have made it to the interior of the compound. There could be one of them or a hundred. Since even one could kill hundreds of human beings, it didn't seem to matter all that much. Every single Ursa was a one-creature massacre machine. And considering the Raiges' apartment is only two floors from the ground, their home is right along the Ursa's projected path of destruction.*

*Kitai is in immediate danger. He confronts the fact. It makes him nervous.*

*He's eight years old. They're currently making plans to celebrate Landing Day: the day centuries ago when they first landed on Nova Prime, the world that became their new home. Landing Day is the one celebration to be found in the Nova Prime calendar. It's filled with dancing and feasting and gifts for small children.*

*Lately, Landing Day has occupied all of Kitai's attention. Despite the dangers that face the Novans on a daily basis, the notion that he might not live to see Landing Day had never occurred to him until just now. "I want Landing Day," he whispers. "I don't want to die. I want Landing Day."*

*He can hear running feet in the distance. His family's apartment is one of many in a cramped living area, and he hears voices in the distance directing people to a survival shelter. The apartments are fine for day-to-day living, but when the Skrel or one of their agents is threatening the Novans, it is standard procedure for them to take up residence in a shelter. A shelter is a heavily reinforced structure with thicker walls and only one way in and out that can be protected by a squad of armed Rangers.*

*At that moment, Kitai hears Rangers going through the hallways, making sure that everyone is heading down to the place where he or she is supposed to be.*

*One female voice in particular leaps out from the cacophony of shouts flooding over him. "Senshi?" he shouts, but he doesn't think anyone can hear him. His voice is too small, and the noise of others too big.*

*The apartment building itself is integrated into the face of towering cliffs. It took years for the apartments to be carved out of the rock; during that time, humanity resided in thrown-together shelters on the sandy red ground. But it was not an issue then, for the alien race known as the Skrel had not yet noticed the presence of humanity on Nova Prime. The assaults had not yet begun. By the time they did—by the time the ships had come swooping in, firing away at the Novans, trying to kill them from on high—the cliffside apartments provided a good chunk of the protection humanity required.*

*A few hundred or so years later, that all changed.*

*When the Ursa landed.*

*That, of course, was centuries before Kitai was born. He doesn't know much about that. Years don't have the same meaning to him that they would to an older*

person. All he knows for sure is that people all around him are trying not to panic. Instead, they're trying to behave in the manner in which they have been trained. Kitai has been trained as well. Why is he not doing what he is supposed to do?

Because he is eight years old, that's why. This would be an acceptable excuse in another time and place. Here and now, it is not, and Kitai is aware of the fact.

Nevertheless he remains frozen in his bed, as if hoping in some small corner of his mind that he will pull slumber around him once more. That perhaps the dream world of happiness and superiority is the real one and all of this—a world of constant fear and barely restrained panic—is the fiction.

"Senshi!" he calls again, and this time his voice is louder and stronger.

For a moment there is no response, and then he hears her from a distance. "Kit?" her voice comes to him.

He sags in relief against his pillows even as he calls her name once more.

There is the noise of feet pounding in his direction. The smart cloth veils that serve as a door to his room are pushed aside moments later, and he sees the concerned expression on his sister's face.

Senshi is nineteen years old. Relatively young for a Ranger; she's working her way through the ranks. Most of her responsibilities keep her in the immediate vicinity of the city. She doesn't have much experience in genuine fieldwork. That's fine with her mother, less so with her father. Fantastic as far as Kitai is concerned.

"Kitai!" she says with frustration. "Why aren't you out in the hallway? Why didn't you come when you were supposed to?"

He is not entirely certain. What is he supposed to say? I was scared?

"Never mind," she says. "Kit, we have to go. Right now."

Despite the potential dangers awaiting them, he is filled with nothing but confidence in his sister. She looks brave in her Ranger outfit. For a flash he recalls when he first saw her in it, so tall and proud. The huge smile on her face was reflected in the face of their father, who didn't smile a whole lot otherwise. Senshi is holding her cutlass, ready to lash out at anything threatening her.

"Right now!" she says, her voice louder, more insistent.

His bed is nothing more than a hammock suspended across his room, which is filled with clothes and toys. As he attempts to get out, his foot snags on the ropes. Instead of clambering out of the bed, he falls forward and lands hard on the floor, twisting the hammock around on himself.

"Oh, for God's sake," she mutters as she starts to move toward him so that she can disengage him.

That is when a loud, terrifying screech cuts through the air.

Kitai freezes. He does not do so consciously. The shriek is an inhuman noise that thoroughly immobilizes him.

Senshi's head snaps in the direction of the screeching. The blades on the cutlass—a large, ornately carved metal staff—snap out from either side.

"Is that ...?" Kitai manages to get out in a strangled whisper.

Senshi nods. Something has changed in the way she looks, in the way she holds herself. She's all business, 100 percent professional. It's as if she were merely pretending to be a Ranger until that moment.

*“They surprised us,” she tells Kitai. “They keep invading the city at random times ...” She steps forward quickly and swings the cutlass right at him.*

*Kitai lets out a startled cry, and then the cutlass slices through the ropes in his bed. It severs the bindings instantly, and he tumbles to the ground. Quickly Kitai starts pulling the remains of the bindings off himself. As he does so, Senshi asks him briskly, “You’re not afraid, are you?”*

*“No,” Kitai says. Then there is another high-pitched howl of animal fury, and he jumps several feet in the air. “Yes,” he admits, feeling ashamed but compelled by his lifelong tendency to be truthful.*

*This second source of howling is far louder, which means far closer, than the previous one. Senshi whirls and looks behind her, and Kitai cannot see the expression on her face. For some reason he is grateful for that. He suspects he wouldn’t like the way she looks.*

*“Kit,” she says softly, “get under the bed.”*

*There isn’t that much of a bed to get under, but it’s sufficient. Kitai scrambles under the torn and twisted hammock, useless now for supporting him but still good for hiding under. Having pulled it completely over his head, Kitai then backs up toward the corner. Squeezing himself into a small ball, he is certain that he cannot be seen by anyone or anything under the coverings.*

*“Senshi, come on,” he calls to her. The answer is simple as far as he is concerned. They hide together and wait for someone else to deal with the Ursa. To him, that’s the most reasonable way of handling the current situation.*

*He watches in confusion as Senshi continues to look around the room. Her eyes dart around and fix on a round glass container with plants in it. It is his garden, or at least the closest thing that he could have to a garden.*

*Quickly Senshi brings her fist down on a button at the end. The lid obediently slides open. Senshi sweeps her cutlass around and expertly attaches it to her back with its magnetic clasp. Then she quickly starts unloading the plants from the box. She dumps them all over the floor, sending dirt flying everywhere.*

*Kitai watches in confusion. He has no idea what she is doing. He finds out moments later, though, when Senshi drops the plant box onto its side and slides it across the floor to him. “Climb in here, okay?”*

*“But ... why?” He does what he’s told even as he questions it.*

*“So it won’t be able to smell you. Hurry up!”*

*He climbs and pulls his legs in after him, shrugging off the remains of the hammock. The moment he is completely enclosed, his sister drops the remote control into his hands. “Hold on to this.”*

*“But what do I use it for?” he asks.*

*“You use this when I tell you to. Or when a Ranger tells you to. Other than that, don’t come out. No matter what. That’s an order,” she adds sternly, because she knows that those are words that Kitai will respect.*

*Then she takes his face in her hands. Her beautiful eyes are emotional and deadly serious. “Did you hear what I said, little brother?”*

*“Yes, Sen—”*

*He is unable to complete the sentence because there is another thunderous roar,*

*this time from much, much too close.*

*Kitai starts to say her name again, but she doesn't wait around to hear it. She hits the remote that is in Kitai's hands and then yanks her own hands clear as the glass box closes. He is now completely closed in as Senshi backs up, pulling the cutlass off her back.*

*It is a C-30 weapon. He knows that because she boasted about it when she brought it home the first time. He recalls clearly the first time she demonstrated it around the house. It moved so quickly in her grasp that he could not even see the blades. Her mother had been impressed. Her father had pointed out things she was doing wrong and had spent an hour or two with her going over all of her mistakes. She took the corrections without comment or any evidence of frustration. That was just the way she was.*

*Once the cutlass is in Senshi's hand, she taps a pattern on the weapon's handle. Instantly it responds as thousands of steel-like fibers extend on either side. They form razor-sharp points that she can use to cut deep through the Ursa's hide and squarely into its heart.*

*The cutlass is now two meters long and ready to be employed. Kitai watches and takes comfort from seeing it. He knows that once his sister is wielding her weapon, nothing is going to be able to get past her. She is a Ranger. She has been trained for exactly this sort of situation.*

*Then he sees a shadow in the adjoining room. It is the room his mother uses for various handcraft projects. Her "relaxation room," as she calls it. It used to be Senshi's room, but that is no longer the case since she has become a Ranger and resides in the Ranger barracks. So the room was made over.*

*Now, though, as the shadow moves across it, the room has become a place of danger.*

*Senshi spots the shadow. She doesn't make a big deal about it. She doesn't scream or point it out. She simply whips the cutlass around in her hand so that it is in attack mode.*

*Then she takes one final look toward Kitai. She nods confidently and makes a down-handed gesture to indicate that he should stay low, that everything is going to turn out just fine.*

*Senshi moves into the next room, spinning the cutlass in her hand, whipping it around in a figure eight pattern. Even as she does this, she is speaking in low, sharp tones to what Kitai realizes are other Rangers. She is bringing them up to speed, telling them that she is about to engage an enemy and that the sooner they arrive there, the better it's going to be for everyone involved.*

*That is when Kitai sees the creature enter the adjoining room.*

*He cannot make out very much of it. What he is able to discern is that it's huge, moving forward slowly on its six legs. At least that's how many he is able to count in the shadow. It is growling low in its throat, seeing its enemy, ready to strike.*

*Senshi is still moving her cutlass as it darts up and down, back and forth. She spins it so quickly that Kitai can scarcely follow it, and so he is sure that the Ursa is having the same problem.*

*That is when Senshi suddenly lunges at it. She is endeavoring to make a quick*

strike, to drive it out of the room, out of the apartment.

The Ursa, at least as far as Kitai can determine, doesn't fall for the maneuver. Instead of striking at her, it drops back several feet. A quick thrust from one of its legs sends furniture crashing about.

Senshi sidesteps, allowing the furniture to tumble past her. At the same time the Ursa tries to move in on her. Senshi pivots, jabs. The creature knocks the point of her weapon aside but fails to knock it out of her hands.

For long, awful seconds it goes on, the give-and-take, the thrusting and the jabbing. Then the Ursa bunches its powerful hind legs and lunges for her—and Senshi goes low, bringing up her cutlass in a move that is certain to impale the creature.

But it doesn't.

Instead, the Ursa lands clear of the cutlass. It is a moment that Senshi wasn't expecting, and she tries to bring the cutlass back around so that she can slice into the beast's body.

Whether she is too slow or the creature too fast is something that Kitai would never know for sure. All he is certain of is that the Ursa lashes out with its clawed foot, striking out at his sister. Its claws catch her right shoulder, and she cries out in pain, stumbling backward beyond the creature's reach.

Or at least that is her intention. Her backpedaling is too slow, her movements clearly impaired by pain.

Kitai still cannot see the monster clearly, hidden as it is behind the cloth between the rooms. But he can hear. Oh, God, can he hear. He can hear as Senshi tries to thrust forward with the cutlass, and he can hear as the cutlass is struck from her hand, landing noisily on the ground. He can get a brief glimpse of her shadow as she tries to move toward it and can hear the triumphant howl of the Ursa as it intercepts her.

Another claw lashes out, and the sound of flesh, his sister's flesh, being torn from her body is so deep and so loud that Kitai wants to do nothing but scream in terror. And he hears Senshi's high-pitched shriek of agony. Kitai can briefly see an image of her clutching at some point of her upper body, wherever it is exactly that the Ursa has struck her. Then, suddenly, just like that, she goes down, and that is when Kitai realizes that the Ursa has knocked her feet out from under her.

It lunges forward then, the Ursa does, and it lets out a deafening roar that mingles with Senshi's terrified shriek.

In the distance Kitai can hear rushing feet, the shouts of Rangers. He tells himself that they're going to be in time, that they're going to rescue Senshi. Everything is going to be just fine, and years from now they will laugh at this time when Senshi almost died squaring off against an Ursa to protect her kid brother.

It is at that moment that Kitai wants to leap out from his enclosure and go up against the Ursa. He heard Senshi's cutlass fall away, and he can see that it is lying not all that far away. All he has to do is emerge from his enclosure and grab it, and he can attack the Ursa himself. He is completely positive that he can take the creature out. He can attack, thrust forward with the cutlass, and strike the monster where it's not expecting any sort of attack.

*He can do it. He can take the creature on. He can defeat it. All this he knows with absolute certainty.*

*Instead he does nothing. He lies paralyzed within the enclosure, and hot tears roll down his face. Kitai cannot move. He is terrified.*

*Then there is a final crunching noise, and he can actually hear Senshi. She doesn't sound like a Ranger at all. Instead she sounds like nothing but a terrified young girl, and a single word passes through her lips.*

*"Dad," she says softly.*

*And it's not because he's just entered to save her.*

*Kitai knows that his father is nowhere nearby, that he's on a "mission," wherever that meant. Maybe Senshi is saying "Dad" because she is seeing him in her own mind, or maybe she's apologizing because she has somehow let him down. Or maybe she's just scared.*

*Then there is more crunching and a final gasp from Senshi, and just like that, she is gone and Kitai is alone in the world.*

*The Ursa grabs Senshi's unmoving body with its teeth and lifts it up to within range of the nearest window. Senshi's shredded form is thrust into view, and Kitai can hear Novans screaming in the distance.*

*The Novans are as fearful as Kitai, perhaps even more so. Kitai can hear their footfalls as they run, can hear the growling and derisive snort from the triumphant Ursa. Then it drops Senshi's corpse right before Kitai's eyes.*

*Senshi's body lies on the floor, her face turned in Kitai's general direction. He sees her stare at him in what appears to be accusation, and he wants to turn away from her. Instead, all he can do is continue to look at her, his eyes wide and horrified, for what seems like a long, long time. Finally, he manages to look away, but even then he feels as if he's abandoning her somehow.*

*The Ursa leaps out of the room then to go search for other prey. Kitai lies there within the cabinet, no longer staring at Senshi but instead deeply into the narrow wall that constitutes the makeshift shelter Senshi has shoved him into.*

*It takes nearly an hour for the Rangers to find him. It's nobody's fault in particular, except perhaps Senshi's, for she had told him to stay there until a Ranger showed up. And that didn't happen until the Rangers who arrived had done everything they could to try to bring Senshi back. Only then did they entertain the off chance that someone else in the apartment might have managed to survive.*

*Until then, Kitai had had to remain there silent and immobile, his tears drying on his face.*

*It is not until Kitai's mother's arms are wrapped securely around him that he finally starts crying again. He keeps saying the same thing over and over: "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He blames himself for what has happened, but no matter how much he says it, his mother refuses to accept his apology—because she is certain that she might well have had two children die this night.*

*Oddly, knowing that doesn't make Kitai feel any better.*

1000 AE

## United Ranger Corps Training Camp

### i

The alarm jolted Kitai awake.

He sat up, gasping for breath. He had been dreaming, but he didn't remember the dream. He had a vague notion that it had something to do with his sister, but he couldn't be sure.

*It probably had to do with her.* Most of his nightmares did.

Kitai flopped back down onto his bed and lay there despite the howling of his alarm. Long moments passed as it continued to shout at him. Finally he reached over and slapped it, hard. The alarm's cry finally ceased, allowing him a few more moments in bed. Another person might have been tempted to roll over and return to sleep, but that wasn't Kitai Raige. All he had needed was the jolt to wakefulness; after that, he was good to go.

Kitai finally sat up, rubbing at his face. He managed to bring himself to glance outside and begin to get a feel for what the day was going to be like. This was *his* day, after all, and he needed to have some idea of what the weather was going to be like. Of course, bright skies or pouring rain, it made no difference. Today was the day, and if he was going to have to do his stuff in soggy ground, well, that was the way it was going to be.

It didn't mean he was looking forward to it, though, and when he looked outside and saw that the day promised to be decent, he gave a silent "thank you" to the powers that be. He couldn't be absolutely sure since it was still dark outside, but from what he could see, it looked promising enough.

For just a moment he allowed himself to drift back to his dream. His recollections were vague at best, but he was reasonably sure that he'd been dreaming that awful day from five years ago when he had hidden from danger while his beloved sister was torn to shreds.

The notion that he had done so—that he had relived the deep guilt that still festered within him—was one of the hardest things for him to handle. Yet he dreamed of it with a frequency that was almost sickening. He did his best to brush away all recollection of it, yet that never seemed to work for very long.

Part of him occasionally toyed with the notion of going to see a psychiatrist, but every time he thought seriously about it, he ultimately rejected the idea. It would not go over well with his father. Members of the Raige family simply had no truck with people whose job it was to muck

around with the human mind.

“You are who you are,” his father had said when Kitai had very subtly (he thought) brought up the topic of psychiatrists in the first place, “and you live with the hand that you were dealt.” That had been pretty much that.

The thirteen-year-old Kitai rolled out of bed and stretched. Waking was not something he did the way other people did. There was a procedure. First came a series of isometric stretching exercises. Then he dropped to the ground and did a hundred push-ups, which were followed by a hundred jumping jacks counted off in brisk fashion. He then crossed his room to the chinning bar he had installed back when he was eleven and did as many pull-ups as he could manage: twenty this morning.

Not bad. Not great, but not bad. Perhaps he was simply saving himself for his time out on the field this morning.

Yes, that made a vast amount of sense. He knew what he was facing this morning and how important it was going to be. His father was going to be home this evening, eagerly expecting the news they all wanted to hear. It was Kitai’s job to make sure the news would be good news.

“Kitai!” It was the voice of his mother, Faia, calling to him from downstairs. “You up yet?”

“Yeah. Why are you?”

“Made you breakfast. Thought you could use some this morning.”

He was surprised that she was taking the time. Her hours at the turbine factory were long, and mornings were the only time she ever had to catch up on her sleep. She usually wasn’t even awake before Kitai was out the door; that she had roused herself this morning was sweet of her.

“Okay, be down in a few minutes.” It was only after that that he realized he might want to say something along the lines of “Thank you.” But he decided that it would come out as weak and indecisive, and so he simply nodded to remind himself to offer thanks after he went downstairs.

He took an actual shower this morning. Water had been in short supply recently, and although they weren’t at drought levels yet, people were being conscientious about water usage these days. If nothing else, there was a bit more of a general aroma from people. It wasn’t that big a deal. Once you decided to ignore the smells of other people’s bodies, you more or less made yourself used to it. However, with all the running around he was going to be doing, getting off to a fresh start wouldn’t be such a bad idea.

As he showered, he took the opportunity to check out his body. Tall and slender he was, catching up to his father in height. His skin was dark, his head was triangular, and his hair was cut down to standard Ranger length, which was one step above a buzz cut. He flexed his biceps as the shower water poured over him. The muscles were solid, compact. He did a few aerobic movements in the shower, then ran through a self-defense sequence before he was satisfied.

Minutes later he had toweled himself off and dressed in his two-tone gray and white Ranger cadet uniform. It lacked the decorations that were common

to the full Ranger uniform, which of course made sense. How could one work toward being a full Ranger if one already had the accoutrements?

He trotted downstairs to find that Faia had made him two eggs, scrambled, plus a scattering of local fruits. His mother smiled when she saw him come downstairs. She was still wearing her nightgown with a robe draped over it. For all Kitai knew, she was going to go back to bed after he was off and grab another hour's sleep.

"Thought you might like this for a change," she said with a smile. "It's a step up from protein bars, I figure." That was true enough. Typically he grabbed a single bar for breakfast and launched himself into his day's activities. This was unusual.

"Thanks," he said. "For getting up and making it, I mean. Uh ... thanks."

"You can stop thanking me, Kitai. It's all fine."

He nodded and started plowing into the eggs. They were pretty damned good. He could taste the flavor of cheese intermixed with the eggs; she'd obviously put some in. "Good," he said as he chowed down. "Really good."

"Excellent." His mother sat across from him, her fingers interlaced. She was smiling at him, but there was something about that smile that seemed to be ... missing. That was it. It was missing ... something.

"What's wrong?" he said.

"Hmmm?"

"Wrong. Something's wrong." He hadn't slowed his eating. Bits of egg were falling out the edges of his mouth.

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Something is," he insisted. He lay down the utensil and looked at her with concern. "What's going on?"

She hesitated and then shrugged. "I just want you to do your best today. I know it's important and all that. So just ... you know ... your best. That's all you should be worried about."

"I'm not worried," Kitai said.

"Honey, I'm your mom." She reached out and placed a hand atop his. "You can admit—"

"There's nothing to admit. I'm going to do this. I'm going to go out there today on the course and finish on top on every subject, and by the time I see you this evening, I'm going to be a Ranger. That's all." He hesitated and looked at her warily. "You don't have a problem with that, do you?"

"What? No! No, of course not." She laughed slightly. "Why would you think that?"

*Because you're afraid I'll become just like Dad.*

"No reason," he said. "No reason at all."

"Well, that's good. I wouldn't want you to do anything other than your best."

"That's no problem," Kitai said confidently. "And I'll make you proud."

Her hand was still on his. She squeezed it tightly and said with a smile, "You already make me proud."

They were meant to be comforting words. Instead, for no reason that he could come up with, they made him nervous.

## ii

The suns beat down on the thirty-two Ranger cadets—twenty males, twelve females—as they pounded across the course that would determine their futures. The terrain was red and rocky, with peaks that seemed to stretch so high that they scraped the sky.

Kitai was somewhere in the middle of the crowd, and his positioning was helping to drive home some of the disadvantages he had to face simply because of his physical condition. For starters, despite the solidity of his body, he was still at least a head shorter than most of the other candidates.

Consequently, as the group moved across the rugged terrain, he had to take two steps to keep up with every single step of the others. He worked on maintaining a steady inhaling and exhaling rhythm, but it was definitely not easy. He was supposed to keep a consistent pace, but instead he was practically sprinting to keep up.

A huge river cut through the stunning red mountain range. Both suns were high in the sky, beating down on the planet's surface. Kitai remembered reading some old science texts from Earth—back when there *was* an Earth—that swore that life-providing planets could not possibly exist in a two-star system, that any planets would be crushed between the gravity wells of the competing suns. He wondered what those scientists, dead for a thousand years, would have said about Nova Prime.

*Don't let your mind drift. Pay attention to what's going on around you.*

Kitai splashed through the river, sending water spraying, as did the others. However, the river also aided him in his positioning in the crowd. Others slowed down for whatever reason, and Kitai was able to take that opportunity to speed if not into the lead, then at least considerably closer than he had been before. When he hit the land on the other side, he was actually able to advance so that only a couple of the others were now ahead of him.

But he knew that a couple was not enough. When they reached the end of the trail, he had to be first. It was the tradition of the Raige family. Not second, not third—nothing but first would do.

The course of the race took them past a growing station. It was a huge open-fabric structure that shielded the crops from the weather. It allowed moisture to reach the plants but protected them from some of the more threatening weather. The station seemed to spread forever, although he knew that it was actually only a few hundred hectares.

Kitai felt his second wind kicking in and worked to shove his progress into high gear. He saw that Bo was leading the pack and started working to move

his legs even faster despite the fact that Bo was built like a large tree. Bo was sixteen years old, farther along than Kitai in every regard: bigger, smarter, faster. But he was also breathing a bit more raggedly than Kitai was. Obviously, the stress of the run was starting to wear him down, and that was spectacular as far as Kitai was concerned.

There was a sudden drop in the terrain directly in front of them. Bo cut to the left to avoid it, and that gave Kitai the opportunity he needed. Rather than cut around the drop, he picked up speed and leaped directly over it. The trick was going to be sticking the landing, and that Kitai was able to do with style. He hit the downsloping ground ahead of him, stumbled only slightly, and then kept going. One leap and just like that, he was finally in the lead.

Bo, now behind him, called out to him, "This isn't a race, cadet!"

Kitai didn't care what Bo had to say on the subject. It hadn't been a race until Bo was behind him. And now that Kitai had grabbed the lead, he had absolutely no intention of allowing it to slip from his grasp.

Instead of heeding Bo's advice, Kitai stepped it up. His arms pumped, and his legs scissored with greater speed than he had displayed before. Slowly but steadily, he left the rest of the pack behind, separating himself from the leader and those in close proximity to the leader by a good ten or twenty meters.

The finish line was a kilometer ahead, but it might as well have been directly in front of him. He never slowed down for a moment, his feet flying across the terrain. One moment it was in front of him, and then it was behind. Kitai clapped his hands joyously in self-congratulation and then turned and faced the rest of the Ranger cadets, prepared to receive their congratulations as well.

Instead, one by one and then a few at a time, they jogged past him. The triumph he felt in crossing the finish line first was somewhat defeated by the fact that no one seemed the least bit willing to acknowledge it. Sure, granted, no one had actually been timing how long it took the Ranger cadets to cover the distance, but still, would it kill them to acknowledge his personal triumph?

Apparently so. Bo barely afforded him a glance, and then it was just a rolling of his eyes and a slow shake of his head, as if Kitai's accomplishment meant nothing.

*Fine. Be that way.* Kitai tried not to let his irritation get the better of him. Sure, the other cadets might not have been at all interested in offering him kudos for his achievement. But certainly the Ranger officers who were watching from a remote distance would have made note of it. They, at least, would understand: It wasn't enough that Kitai simply passed the course and was designated a Ranger. He had to be the best, and they undoubtedly knew why.

So what if the other cadets were unwilling to care about that? *He* cared. The Rangers who were judging him would care, too. In the end, that was all he really needed to worry about.

Once the Ranger cadets had a few minutes to gather themselves and

recuperate from the run, the Ranger Instructors—RIs, as they were called—gathered them and marched them to a canyon about a mile away. Kitai noticed that a number of the Ranger cadets were chatting with one another intermittently. No one, however, seemed the least bit interested in chatting with *him*.

*Okay, fine. That's how they want to play it? That's how we'll play it.*

As they approached the canyon, Kitai could spot RIs at the top. They had small, multiple layered devices in front of them that were giving individual readouts on each of the Rangers. Kitai knew exactly what they were for. They tracked fear levels, because the Rangers were about to be attacked there, down in the twists and turns of the canyon below. The readouts would provide exact details of their reactions, an overall score that would be called the fear prospectus.

Fear was the thing over which Rangers were supposed to triumph. Fear was the weakness that could wind up getting a Ranger killed. And they all knew why.

It was because the Ursa were sensitive to fear in their prey. They could smell it.

Over the last few hundred years the Skrel had put a half dozen or so different generations of Ursa up against humanity, and the most recent incarnations of the creatures had been the most formidable that humans had ever faced. Six-legged monsters they were, with huge maws full of teeth, not to mention the ability to blend in so perfectly with their backgrounds that they were practically invisible.

But it was their ability to smell the pheromones that denote fear, to lock on with unswerving concentration, that made them the deadliest of creatures.

So there was no ability more valuable to a Ranger than the mastery of one's fear. More important than skill with the cutlass, more important than just about anything. That was why Kitai was determined to nail this part of the testing. This, more than anything, was going to determine his relative viability as a Ranger, and there was no way in hell he was going to screw it up.

The Rangers gathered at the entrance to the valley. Some were glancing up toward the RIs who were going to be monitoring them. Kitai was not. He'd already seen them and had buried that knowledge deep in the back of his mind. The presence of the RIs was no longer of any consequence to him. Only the challenges they would be facing in the valley mattered.

"All right, cadets," called an RI who was down in the valley with them. "Take your equipment."

The equipment dispensary had been set up. The dispensary had only two things in it, with enough for every one of the cadets: a protective helmet and a practice cutlass. These cutlasses would not change shape. There were no blades on the cutlass; it was to be used strictly for practice combat. It didn't necessarily mean that someone couldn't be hurt by it, but it was a lot more difficult.

Kitai slid the helmet over his head. He held up his hand briefly, looking at it front and back to make sure that his vision wasn't impaired. *Looks okay.*

As soon as all the cadets were properly outfitted, the RI who had spoken before addressed them again. "Cadets ... enter the field of combat!" He pointed straight toward the entrance to the narrow field that ran between the cliff's sides.

"Sir, yes, sir!" called out the cadets, and marched straight into the unknown.

If there had been any means by which the Rangers could have dropped one or more Ursa into the canyons without worrying about dead cadets, they would have done so. But even Rangers had their limits, and no one in any command capacity was going to put three dozen or so cadets into one-on-one combat situations with the most vicious killing machines on Nova Prime. There would be challenges awaiting Kitai and the others, but of a more human kind.

Kitai once again found himself in the middle of the pack as they made their way slowly through the valley. This, however, was more by his choice than anything else. His positioning meant that other cadets would be the first to be attacked, giving him more time to react. He looked around as if his head were on a swivel, trying to see potential hot spots all around him, certain that the testers had come up with something special for the cadets this time.

*There!*

He reacted before he even saw it clearly. From the corner of his eye, he had spotted a quick flash of light. Could be nothing, but much more likely, it was everything.

"Left, left!" he shouted, and charged straight toward where he had seen the flash of light. *"I got it!"*

"Cadet!" Bo shouted, clearly getting tired of what he considered to be Kitai's attitude. "Fall back into formation!"

Kitai paid him no mind whatever. Instead he charged, and other cadets got the hell out of his way.

As it turned out, he was right in doing so.

An RI hiding behind an invisibility field shifted it so that he could be perceived. He had his staff out as Kitai leaped through the air, bringing his own cutlass whipping around.

The two practice staves cracked together in midair. The RI staggered from the impact as Kitai charged forward and slammed a foot into his gut. The instructor let out a startled gasp and bent over, which Kitai took as an opportunity to slam the side of his staff down into the back of his neck. The RI went down to one knee, which was something of an accomplishment. Another man might well have been sent sprawling.

Kitai leaped past him, spun around, and was ready to bring his practice cutlass slamming down as hard as he could.

Then he lost the visual.

For no reason that he could discern, Kitai suddenly couldn't see a damned

thing. A screen slid horizontally across his field of vision, blocking his ability to perceive the area around him.

“I’m dark, I’m dark!” Kitai shouted, and started to reach up to the helmet restraints so that he could pull the helmet clear of his head.

Before he could do so, the screen across his face retracted. Just like that, he could see, and what he saw in specific was the extremely irritated RI whipping his body toward him. Before Kitai could move or react, the RI flipped him over his back, Kitai landing hard on the ground.

Yet he was up just as quickly as he’d gone down. His vision restored, Kitai came in as fast as he ever had. He delivered a series of quick blows to the RI’s helmet and torso. But as rapid as his attack was, it paled in comparison to what a fully trained Ranger could do. The RI absorbed the blows, allowing Kitai to take his best shot. Then at one point he ducked backward, and Kitai missed clean. Before he could recover, the RI went low to the ground, sweeping Kitai’s legs from under him. Down went Kitai again.

“You’re out,” the RI informed him. “You’re out.”

*Like hell I am.*

Once again he started to stagger to his feet. He did it with less certainty than he had earlier, but there was still strength and determination in his deportment.

Unfortunately for Kitai, the patience of the RI had been exhausted.

As a result, before Kitai could fully bring himself upright again, the RI slammed his foot forward and caught him on the chin. Kitai let out a startled grunt as he hit the ground a third time, and this time he didn’t stand up. Not because he wasn’t trying; he most definitely was. But the RI, having tired of the battle with him, put his foot on Kitai’s neck. Even then, Kitai didn’t immediately give up, instead bringing his hands around to start prying at the foot.

“You! Are! Out!” The sound of the RI’s voice made it very clear that if Kitai continued to battle him, he would increase the pressure of the foot on his throat. The best-case scenario would impede Kitai’s breathing. The worst-case scenario, depending on the RI’s mood—which didn’t seem especially generous at that moment—was that Kitai wouldn’t be able to breathe at all, ever again.

Worst of all, the rest of the team had gathered around, breaking formation as they were intrigued by the entertaining vision of Kitai struggling for air. For the first time Kitai was actually feeling self-conscious. He stopped struggling and put up both hands in a submissive fashion.

Even then, the RI was still obviously pissed off over Kitai’s aggressiveness. He glanced around at the rest of the cadets and said sharply, “All of you! Out!”

Just like that, the exercise was over. The rest of the cadets headed out toward the next one, removing their helmets as they did so. All of them relaxed, chatting with one another. No one bothered to speak to Kitai or even help him up. Bo gave him a single annoyed glance and then shook his head.

Kitai sat up, rubbed his throat, and coughed a few times. It restored his