

FONDA LEE

CROSS

# S FIRE

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The face was one that Donovan would recognize anywhere. Curly black hair, stubbled jaw, dark eyes emanating a feral shrewdness. Surrounded by his fellow soldiers-in-erze, Donovan managed not to flinch, but even in the safety of the well-lit briefing room, his chest tightened in remembered pain, and his gut jerked in a spasm of loathing.

“Kevin Warde, one of West America’s most notorious Sapience operatives,” Commander Tate said, jabbing one arm of her wire-framed reading glasses toward the photograph on the wall screen with nearly as much hostility as Donovan felt. “Taking out Warde is tonight’s primary mission objective. Intel is citing an eighty-five percent chance that he’s inside the Sapience safe house we’ve pinpointed in suburban Denver.”

Donovan sensed Jet’s quick glance in his direction, but he didn’t turn; he kept his eyes on Commander Tate and the screen at the front of the room, maintaining an outward appearance of professional calm befitting an officer of the Global Security and Pacification Forces. Everyone on the mission’s eight-person strike team knew that Donovan had a personal score to settle by bringing Kevin Warde to justice, and that he had specifically requested Commander Tate allow him to be part of tonight’s raid. After his instances of out-of-erze behavior last year, he was fortunate to have been returned to active duty at all; he needed his fellow

stripes to know that they could count on him to remain cool at all times.

“Ma’am, is this a kill mission?” Leonides Hsu’s quiet, perfectly untroubled voice was at striking odds with the grim nature of his question.

“Your objective is to eliminate Warde as a threat to public safety and the peace of the Accord,” Tate answered. “If he walks out the front door unarmed with his hands over his head, you will detain him. Based on everything we know about the man, I’d say that’s not likely.”

“In other words, don’t strain yourself thinking about it too hard when the time comes.” Cassidy Spencer grinned and nudged her partner with an elbow. The protective sleeve covering her right arm was decorated with pink skulls and crossbones. If Leon was an ice cube, Cass was hot sauce.

Thaddeus Lowell, their team leader, was studying aerial photographs of the terrorist safe house on a smaller screen, rotating the image and zooming in on it from numerous directions, no doubt going over every detail of the operation in his mind. The property they would be storming was far too close to other residences for SecPac to simply bomb it. Sapience operatives were good at hiding among sympathizers in the general population. There were three buildings in the photograph, labeled A, B, and C: one large main residence, a guest house, and a small outbuilding—perhaps a shed or a garage. Thad tapped Building B thoughtfully. “Commander, are we expecting noncombatants to be a factor?”

According to city records, the property was listed as a bed-and-breakfast. Months of SecPac surveillance had concluded that the people who frequented the Jefferson Chalet were guests of the

criminal insurgent variety. Commander Tate said, "We're having the local police clear the area minutes before we arrive, so there won't be time for sympathetic neighbors to tip off the sapes in the compound. It's possible there will be civilians in the area, but we're doing our best to make sure that's not the case. Assume the people you encounter on the property are armed, fanatical, and dangerous." Tate swiped the wall screen. "Here are a few reminders of that fact."

The scruffy image of Kevin Warde was replaced with a photograph of a clean-shaven, smiling man in his thirties, wearing a basketball jersey and holding a beer. He appeared to be at a barbecue or social gathering of some sort. "Jeremiah Cole," Tate said. "An exo builder-in-erze. Abducted on his way home two months ago. His remains were discovered in a warehouse in Boulder a week later; the sapes had harvested his corpse for panotin." Another picture replaced Cole's; this one depicted a professional-looking, middle-aged man in a polo shirt. "Alexander Reveno, a married, forty-five-year-old engineer-in-erze with two children. Snatched from a parking lot in Spokane. A video began circulating on the Sapience network three days later, showing Reveno reading from a script 'confessing' his treason and blaming the government for Hardening him into an exo. He was executed on screen. His body still hasn't been found."

The mood in the briefing room had been confident and eager, but Commander Tate's grim words sobered everyone quickly. The faces of the innocent victims on the screen were reminders that the extremists hated exos as much as they hated the zhree, that they viewed anyone with exocellular biotechnology in their bodies as part of the cooperationist government and a despised

symbol of alien rule over Earth. Donovan sat straight and tried to swallow, but a vivid image—a dilating circle of black, the muzzle of a gun filling his vision in an elongating moment of terror—crept into his mind and stole the moisture from his mouth.

*It could have been me.* It nearly had been. He would've been murdered as one of Kevin Warde's publicity stunts, his body stripped of panotin—the material that made up his exocel—so it could be sewn into combat vests worn by the terrorists. The only reason he'd survived capture last year was because he was the son of the Prime Liaison and had had special worth as a hostage.

Donovan glanced around the briefing room. It was next to Commander Tate's office in the main Comm Hub building of SecPac Central Command and was much smaller than the hall where she usually addressed larger gatherings of officers. The eight exos present—Donovan and Jet, Cass and Leon, Thad and Vic, Tennyson and Lucius—barely fit around the narrow table. The small space felt suddenly claustrophobic to Donovan; he clenched his hands. Maybe Jet was right. Maybe he should be sitting this one out.

On the skimmercarr drive over, Jet had drummed his fingers on the dashboard, staring pensively out the window but glancing sideways at Donovan every couple of minutes.

"If you've got something to say, just say it," Donovan said at last.

Jet let out a harsh breath and faced him. "I still don't think this is a good idea. We could've asked Commander Tate for some other assignment." He averted his gaze again. "Look. To be fair, you seem like you're . . . doing better. Still, it's only been seven months. Why risk running into those same sapes? Why put yourself through that?"

Donovan was silent. Jet's concern was reasonable, but defensiveness rose anyway, warming Donovan's face and sending his armor crawling over his shoulders. This past winter, his partner had seen him on some bad days, sunk into apathy or despair or self-loathing, agitated or irritable or simply numb, managing remarkably to always keep it together when on duty but sometimes collapsing, barely functional, at the end of shifts. More than once Jet had shaken him awake from nightmares, or driven him to see Nurse Therrid, or preemptively done all their usual SecPac report writing and paperwork so Donovan didn't have to.

"Besides," Jet went on, filling the uncomfortable quiet, "don't you have to prepare for your meeting in a couple of days? You're an acting adviser to the zhree zun. Isn't that a more important thing for you to be doing right now? Let the rest of us handle these sapes."

Donovan chewed the inside of his cheek but didn't look at his best friend. Commander Tate had already given him the option of an extended leave of absence months ago, but he'd refused. The explanation he'd wanted to give Jet in the car was the same one he gave himself now, staring at the tragic photographs of Sapience's recent victims. He wanted to make it up to his partner and his fellow stripes and put his lapses behind him. He wanted—*needed*—to feel normal again, to believe that even after everything that had happened last year—his capture and imprisonment by rebels, his mother's execution, his father's assassination—he could still do his job, could still accomplish some good in his life as a soldier-in-erze. Putting away a serial murderer like Kevin Warde would certainly be doing the world a favor.

Donovan hadn't felt like discussing his psychological health in the car shortly before a critical mission. "I don't want any free

passes, Jet. This raid is a SecPac priority. We ought to be on it." More quietly, "Besides, it's too late to change our minds now."

Commander Tate swiped the screen again, bringing up a further set of six photographs. "Warde may be the most wanted man in West America, but he's not acting alone. These are some of the other Sapience operatives we suspect might be in the compound tonight."

Donovan recognized two of the faces on screen right away. Javid, with dark skin and startlingly light, hate-filled eyes, had tried to kill him—twice. Donovan wasn't familiar with the next four sapes, but the final photograph was of a man he had met before. The memory of that encounter made him cringe. Dr. Nakada was younger in this picture, with a full head of black hair and softer features.

"Eugene Nakada," Commander Tate said after she'd briefed them on each of the other suspects and had reached the last photograph. "Nakada is a former scientist-in-erze who turned traitor four years ago and is now working for the enemy. Sapience takes extra pains to keep his whereabouts well guarded; there's only a thirty percent chance he's in the Denver compound, but if you get a visual on him tonight, capturing or killing Nakada is the second-highest priority after Warde himself."

"Why are we so interested in this one scientist?" Vic asked.

"Nakada may have sensitive information and expertise that would make him more of a potential threat than all those other sapes put together." Tate scrolled around on the screen and brought up yet another photograph, this time of a man in a buttoned-down navy-blue shirt and white lab coat, sporting bristly gray eyebrows over warm brown eyes. "Six weeks ago, a prominent

scientist-in-erze was assassinated: Dr. Vincent Ghosh, one of the world's foremost experts on exo physiology. Ghosh was one of the few humans to work closely with zhree Scientists and Nurses to conduct important multigenerational studies on how exocellular technology affects human biology—aging, digestion, reproduction, all of that. He was shot dead on his way out of his office in San Mateo. The murderers ransacked his lab and stole his medical research.”

Donovan studied Ghosh's photo. He'd been trained to pay attention to and remember faces, and he thought he might have encountered the unfortunate scientist before. At some event with his father, maybe? The Prime Liaison met all sorts of important people.

“Why would the sapes want to steal medical research?” Tennyson's large frame was slouched in his chair; he looked impatient to get going already.

“Isn't it obvious?” Jet growled. “They want to figure out how to better kill us.”

“The terrorists who stole Dr. Ghosh's research may have handed it over to Nakada. As Officer Mathews pointed out, they'll want him to develop a way of defeating exocels.” Tate smacked her folded glasses against her palm. “Even the *possibility* of that danger means Nakada has to be eliminated.”

All the exos in the room were solemn now. Commander Tate leaned stiff arms against the table. Donovan noticed her armor layering across tense fingers, the pattern of broken black stripes—the same Soldier erze markings all of them wore—stretched taut across the backs of her brown hands. The past year had taken a toll on the commander. She still possessed the toned build and sharply

authoritative energy Donovan had always known her for, but there were lines worn between her nose and mouth and the dense curls of her short hair had gone almost completely gray. She fixed the younger exos with a grave stare. “Make no mistake, stripes—these are bad people, as bad as they come. Warde and those like him are part of a growing faction of Sapience that advocates even more extreme tactics and violence to achieve their aims.” She straightened back up to her full impressive height. “Any final questions?”

Donovan let out a silent breath of relief. The mission briefing was over, and Anya’s face had not made an appearance on the wall screen. That meant she wasn’t with Kevin right now. She wouldn’t be in danger from SecPac, at least not tonight. Some of Donovan’s anxiety evaporated, loosening the tension in his back; he felt suddenly lighter, eager to get to work.

Tennyson too was impatient, jiggling one of his knees up and down. His partner, Lucius, was munching on a protein bar—the briefing had cut into dinnertime—but he looked nearly as nonchalant as Leon; at the age of twenty-six, he was the oldest one on the team and had seen plenty of combat before. Jet, who would normally be upbeat and ready to go, was still a little subdued; Cass flicked a paper clip at him, trying to perk him up. Vic was studying the faces of the terrorists on the screen behind Tate, the fingers of one hand combing distractedly through her colorless short blond hair. She glanced at Jet, then Donovan, and a shadow of worry passed over her face, as if she’d guessed at the conversation that the two of them had had in the car.

Had she sensed Donovan’s relief at the end of the briefing? What if Anya’s face *had* been on the screen? Donovan tried to ignore the doubts that squirmed into his brain, but they persisted,

draining some of the strength from his renewed confidence. Could he remain one-hundred-percent dependable to his erze mates if he might have to hurt Anya? Could he still do his job then? Thank erze he wasn't facing that choice today, but what if he did another day?

Donovan firmed his jaw and forced the unhelpful thoughts from his mind.

Thad looked up and down the table at his assembled strike team and answered Commander Tate with his usual confident, laid-back drawl. "We're ready to go, ma'am."

"You leave at twenty-two hundred."

# 2

They had three hours to get ready—enough time to grab a meal in the cafeteria of the officers' common hall, take a short nap if needed, gather equipment, and perform weapons checks. There wasn't a lot of talk at dinner. Everyone concentrated on eating, no matter if they were hungry or not; they knew they'd need the energy. Afterward, in the locker room, Donovan changed out of his patrol uniform and shrugged on a SecPac tactical vest. Lightweight and snug, it had plenty of pockets to carry gear and extra magazines but left his arms uncovered so he could use his battle armor freely.

Jet pulled his E201 electripulse rifle onto his shoulder, checking the laser sight. "It's too bad Saul Strong Winter's face wasn't on the screen today." Jet seated a round, inspected the chamber, and made sure the coil charger was safely disengaged before setting it down and doing the same with his 9mm sidearm. "If we could nab him tonight too, we'd get most of the sapes we missed last year." Back in October, a hostage standoff at the algae farm had been resolved without bloodshed, thanks to Donovan, but several Sapience insurgents had walked free. Anya had been one of them. So had Saul Strong Winter, the most prominent Sapience leader in West America and the man Donovan held responsible for his father's death. Besides himself.

"Saul wouldn't be with Kevin," Donovan muttered. "That's not his style." Kevin was a maverick and a committed killer; Saul

was a calculating rebel commander. “We’re not likely to get to him now that he’s holed away somewhere and turned himself into a radio personality.” Since his escape, the Sapience leader had been broadcasting popular speeches aimed at rousing support for the pro-human independence cause and stirring opposition against the government, the zhree, SecPac, and all Hardened people.

Donovan finished his own equipment checks, attached his SecPac comm unit, and fastened his night vision goggles onto his forehead. On a whim, he took the portable screen from the top shelf of his locker and sat down on one of the room’s long metal benches. After a few minutes of tapping and scrolling around on the display, he said, “I knew I’d seen him before.”

“Seen who?” Jet asked.

“Dr. Ghosh, the guy who was murdered by sapes.” Donovan turned the screen around and held it up to show his partner a news article: “Scientist-in-Erze Honored for Medical Research on the Human Exocellular System.” The photograph showed the scientist in a suit and tie, shaking hands with then Prime Liaison Dominick Reyes. “He won a government award of some sort a couple years ago,” Donovan said. “My dad hosted him for dinner at our house.”

Donovan turned the screen back around. Despite their mutual interest and commitment to human Hardening, neither of the men in the photograph had had a protective exocel of his own. A single bullet had ended each of their lives. In the picture, Donovan’s father wore a small, polite smile as he gazed into the camera. His face carried the same serious expression that Donovan remembered so well—a senior statesman projecting competence and authority—but he looked a little more relaxed, less careworn than he’d been shortly before his death.

Donovan shut the screen back inside his locker. At least it was easy to find photos of his father. His mother, on the other hand . . . he had no pictures of her.

When he and Jet were back in the hallway, a voice called out to them from behind. "Officer Reyes." Donovan turned. It took him a few seconds to recognize the approaching man. He took a stunned step backward, his exocel layering involuntarily. "*Brett?*"

Brett—Kevin Warde's sycophantic sidekick, the Sapience lackey who'd filmed Donovan's torture and driven him to the Warren in the Black Hills where he'd been held captive—was *here*. On SecPac property.

Donovan's hand jerked toward his holstered sidearm. Brett came to an abrupt halt, as if realizing it had been a mistake to approach Donovan while he was heavily armed. Startled by his partner's sudden reaction, Jet took two steps forward, exocel bristling defensively.

Brett raised his open hands; they shook slightly. "Please . . . someone told me I could find you here. I know about the mission tonight. I was on the intelligence team that made the call."

Only then did Donovan remember that "Brett" wasn't real. The sape he knew had been a cover identity. This man was an undercover SecPac agent, responsible for last year's destruction of the Warren and for Donovan being rescued in one piece. Now that Donovan studied the person in front of him more closely, it seemed plain that he was not Brett the terrorist stooge. His hair was cut shorter and he had a slight growth of beard, but those were not the changes that made Donovan stare. Gone was the Sapience recruit with the dimly worshipful grin, the bland expression, the

quick, slightly twitchy subservience. In his place was an unsmiling, nondescript man with dark civilian clothes and vaguely haunted eyes.

With effort, Donovan dropped his hand from his pistol grip and forced his armor down to a more trusting level. It was still hard to shake his visceral distrust. "Why are you here, Brett?"

The man flinched at Donovan's tone. "My name's not really Brett. There was a person named Brett Sullivan who died years ago. They gave me his identity when I went undercover. My real name is Jonathan Resnick." Even his voice sounded different; slower. He cleared his throat hesitantly. "I . . . wanted to wish you good luck tonight."

Jet's gaze flicked between the two men. "You're the agent who was passing us intel from inside Sapience last year." Jet straightened as comprehension dawned on his face. He brought his armor down and stepped forward, extending his hand. "Thank you for saving my partner's life."

Brett/Jonathan looked taken aback by Jet's gesture. He shook the proffered hand wordlessly. Donovan, no less stunned, saw that the backs of the agent's hands were banded with markings, dark as wet ink. Erze almighty, Brett really was a fellow stripe.

Donovan couldn't quite bring himself to follow his partner's lead. His mind kept flicking between his memory of Brett and the not-Brett in front of him. It was like looking at one of those picture puzzles of two images with small dissimilarities. *Can You Spot the 5 Differences?*

"Could I . . ." Jonathan said, turning to Donovan, "talk to you alone for a minute?"

When Donovan failed to answer right away, Jet said, "You can talk to both of us, if you want to talk." His armor stayed at a friendly level, but his tone brooked no argument.

Jonathan's throat moved in a swallow and he nodded. "I realize it's been a while, and you probably don't want to see me. But I finally got the papers retiring me from undercover work. SecPac's moving me to a new identity. I'll have proper erze status and a nice, quiet desk job, I hope." The agent rubbed the back of one of his hands nervously, as if he was still unused to the markings. "I spent two years of my life being someone else, and now I'm not that person anymore. I wake up in the morning and I'm not sure who the hell I am."

The man's bitterly glum tone gave Donovan pause. Self-doubt was something he understood. "At least you're done with all that now," he said, his voice softening a fraction.

Jonathan raised his eyes to Donovan in sudden pleading. "Please, you have to understand: My mission was to infiltrate Sapience's main base of operations and get to their senior leadership. SecPac was committed to cracking the cell; my orders were to not compromise my position for anything, not even to save lives. My cover identity had to be airtight. I couldn't make one misstep anywhere, or they'd kill me. Kevin would kill me."

Sweat began breaking out on Jonathan's brow as his words came faster. "Kevin was a paranoid bastard. He was also a damn good operative, and he was . . . noble in a way, generous to anyone who needed help. But he made me do things, to prove that I was really one of them. He made me film those videos. And I did it, I did whatever he told me to. We—"

Jet cut him off. "That's enough."

“Why are you telling us this?” Donovan demanded, his voice abnormally high and coarse.

Jonathan looked frantic. “I want you to know that I’m not him. I’m not that person.” He took a halting step toward Donovan, who backed up involuntarily. “SecPac still needs unmarked operatives, you know. People who can blend in, who can do what exos can’t. But I’m *not* Brett.”

Jet took a firm step toward the man. “I’ll always be grateful to you. But you should go.”

Though his exocel was thickening uneasily up his arms, Donovan put a hand on Jet’s shoulder and drew his partner back. “Look . . . Jonathan . . . I get what you had to do. I don’t think I can accept it, but I get it. You had orders and you had to follow them. No matter how terrible they were or how much you didn’t want to.” Tamping down his screaming discomfort, he stepped past his partner and offered his hand. “I know you deserve your stripes—probably more than I do. You saved my life. And a lot of other lives, with what you did.”

Jonathan’s face loosened a little, not all the way down to Brett’s usual slackness, but to something less tormented. Weakly, “You’re the only one I could say this to. The only one who could understand. I can’t escape the ghosts I’ve created, but maybe I can quiet them.” He clasped Donovan’s hand tightly and shook it. “Please . . . catch him for me tonight.”