
CHAPTER SEVEN

—FROM THE FRONT—

Frontlines of Brok August 14th, 2985

It was dawn. The sun had only just crested the horizon, lazily illuminating the sky and the land. The landscape was bare of grass, shrubs, or other vegetation that were so common to the region. Barren and dirt strewn, with barbed wire stretched in all directions. A lone fox was hunting, searching for rodents for its cubs to feed on. Birds fluttered around, teasing the fox as they searched for grubs in the soil. The birds would find no grubs, and the fox would find no rodents. All they would find is eternal silence, as a bird pecked a mine, forever removing itself and the fox from existence, scaring away the others.

The other birds landed near a piece of brush, one of the scarce few that survived the eternal fighting. The moment it moved, though, they took flight once again, terrified. The piece of brush was fake, a soldier in a guile suit. No, two. Scouts; special forces; snipers, saboteurs. Elite soldiers trained in the arts of concealment and stealth, sabotage and controlled chaos. They wore no helmet like their fellow soldiers, in favour of better concealment. They carried little equipment compared to their frontline comrades, in favour of speed and little burden.

Instead they wore mere goggles with an integrated HUD, carried silenced compact sub-machineguns, small satchel charges, target designators, light composite body armour, small detection and hacking tools, and between the two of them, an anti-material rifle. The latter most of which they would assemble once they found their target. This movement was to be the first of many.

The surrounding area was clear of enemy personnel and surveillance. They stood, readied themselves, and ran. They carefully moved from crater to crater, weaving through and around barbed wire, leaping over exposed mines, praying they made no fatal steps. They had to move quickly, but carefully. The detonation of the mine would have caused suspicion of an attack, and even though it was merely a bird, they had to hide elsewhere.

After sprinting for minutes, they heard the low rumble of Imperial heavy armour. The closest cover, where their brush camouflage would look natural, was a moss covered boulder resting metres away. They ran for it, leaping through the barren expanse, hoping to avoid any mines. They made it, out of breath, and hastily repositioned each others camouflage. They stayed close, hoping to appear as a single piece of brush growing around the rock.

The low rumble grew to a loud squeak; the tanks treads needed to be oiled. Talking could be heard as the enemy drew ever nearer. It was an Imperial heavy tank, with three soldiers riding on the tank itself. They were alert, but talking and enjoying themselves. They occasionally pulled out small pictures to show to one another; they missed their families.

One of the scouts drew a small device, and moving slowly, aimed it at the enemies. He used the tiny viewfinder to aim it at both the tank and its three passengers, tapping a small button each time. When he was done, both of the scouts HUD's were updated with the soldiers

and tank marked. They would be able to keep track of them as long as their local Command Vehicle's Enhanced Reconnaissance Information Network, nicknamed ERIN, remained online. After waiting for what seemed like an eternity, someone shouted for them to turn back. The tank backed away from the mine field, before turning back towards their outpost. Minutes later, the gentle rumble of its engines was gone, all was silent again; it was time to move.

They stood, replaced the target designator in a small rucksack, and readied themselves. Once ERIN confirmed that the marked targets were back at the outpost, the AI's voice told them it was clear, and they broke into a sprint towards the hill that overlooked the outpost. They stopped and went into a prone position before cresting the hill, peering over the peak. Before them sprawled an Imperial outpost, surrounded by reinforced fencing and sandbags, with Tier-3 automated turrets around the perimeter. Three rows of barracks sat in one corner of the compound, armouries sitting at the end of each row, and a vehicle factory in the northern corner. Beside it, a repair pad was being erected, with engineers welding together the structure.

Again pulling out the target designator, they marked the soldiers patrolling the perimeter. They observed and waited, memorizing the routes they walked. Finally, after they were confident in their ability to succeed, they stood, activated their IFF jammers, which would disable the turrets, and ran towards the fence. Once they reached it, they took cover out of sight, and waited for the patrols to come. As one soldier turned and came near, one of the scouts drew a knife. His comrade was laying flat, indistinguishable from a bush. He slowly crouched, knife concealed but ready. As soon as the soldier passed him, he lunged, sinking the knife into his foe's spine. He dropped dead, making out no sound. The scout's partner hurried over with a small device, and placed it against the dead soldier's forehead. Pushing a button, the device bored into his head, extracting the neural implant. It was a small metal sphere, no larger than a grain of rice. They needed it to bypass the turrets. If they used their jammers inside the outpost, they would be discovered. One of them placed the implant in a small compartment within their goggles.

Quickly hiding the body, they moved to the next point. They had timed everything perfectly. Seconds after they reached the break in the fence, a guard came around the corner, and he was quickly met with knife stab to the chest, followed by the snapping of his neck. The scout's partner once again proliferated the extraction device, and placed the implant within his own goggles. They were now both safe from automated defences; anything that attempted to attack them would read them as friendly. They hid the body, and waited for another break in the patrols.

Minutes later, they deactivated their jammers, and entered the compound in a low crouch.

"Echo to command, we have infiltrated the outpost, awaiting orders," one of the scouts whispered into a throat mic.

"This is command. Echo, plant charges in the vehicle factory, each armoury, and then disable the missile launchers. Our forces are defusing the mine field as we speak, you have about ten minutes," replied their field commander. No acknowledgement was needed. The more time they spoke, the easier they would be to find. They started with the vehicle factory, taking great care to avoid detection, they made their way towards the maintenance entrance. Leaning against the walls flanking the doorway, one opened the door. Inside, an engineer said

something they could not understand. He came to the door, weapon raised, suspicious about the door opening. One of the scouts rolled in front of the door, levelled his silenced SMG, and let loose a burst into the engineers chest. He crumpled before he could even yell. Both scouts moved in, and shot the remaining engineers once each in the head.

Between the two of them, they had approximately thirty high-explosive charges, weighing at approximately one pound each. One scout sabotaged the factory operations system to shut it down, while the other planted ten charges and linked their fuses. He also placed a touch sensitive detonator; a precaution against anyone wanting to defuse the charges. They sent a short query back to their commander, attaching the firing code for the detonator. They received a short reply; "Echo, you have five minutes."

Once again, they moved. The armouries were on the other side of the outpost, approximately one-hundred metres away. Moving from cover to cover, building to building, they remained hidden. Merely shrubs of death.

Reaching the first of the three armouries, they hid on the outside, readying three charges. They linked the charges to a central detonator, then went inside and buried each one in a different pile of munitions. They did the same for the other two, and moved to the fences. Again, they briefly queried their commander, attaching the detonation codes. This time, their reply was unexpected.

"Command to Echo, updating your objectives. I want a motion detector planted behind that outpost."

"Affirmative, motion detector will broadcast at 813hz," one of the scouts replied.

One of them extracted the MD from the others rucksack – a small device that looked like a sphere on a stick – and then moved towards a nearby gate. He placed it on the ground, with the point facing downward, and then pushed. The MD dug deep into the soil, holding itself straight by deploying miniscule hook like anchors. The scout opened the top of the sphere, input the broadcast channel, activated it, and closed it. Almost instantly, it fused itself shut; a tamper proof precaution to prevent Imperial forces re-programming it for their own uses. It emitted a low beep, confirming normal operation. The MD would run off of its own power for months. Unless it was destroyed or disabled, it would continually broadcast the locations of enemies and allies within a half kilometre radius.

The scout signalled to his partner, who had just finished sabotaging the missile turrets facing where the main force was coming from. He moved over, and they both hid behind the base, waiting. An explosion sounded, followed by screams. Their commander had detonated the satchel charges in the vehicle factory. The beginning of the end was upon them.

He watched, and waited. Targeting from Echo's MD showing him enemy movement within the outpost, and his UAV giving him a view of the area. The outpost was in chaos. Engineers frantically tried to extinguish the fire of the now wrecked factory. Riflemen and grenadiers rushed from their barracks' to the armouries, donning protective armour and arming themselves. Moments later, as Jekotian heavy armour cleared the hill on the northern side of the outpost, he entered the detonation codes for the charges planted in the armouries, and his finger hovered above the 'Enter' key on his command console.

"ERIN, I'm handing over detonation control to you, fire the fuses when the projected Imperial casualties are at the best you calculate we will achieve."

“Yes, sir. At the current rate of movement, optimal casualties will result...” she paused, thinking, waiting. ERIN was the AI that operated the command vehicle’s systems. While he gave the orders, she did all of the calculations and technological backend. “...Now,” she finished. The armouries detonated into fireballs; chain reactions of unshielded munitions. He keyed the microphone for the communications channel for the push.

“All forces, do not fire upon the marked infantry. Those are our scouts. Finish the Imperials, but watch your fire.”

The scouts watched as the armouries turned into fireballs. Imperial soldiers were flung in all directions like ragdolls, and metal girders fell back to the planet. They watched as Jekotian heavy armour crested the hill, and accelerated through the fencing. Armoured personnel carriers in specialized anti-infantry configurations tore through the survivors of the armoury detonations. Few survivors stood, most reeling from shellshock and trying to recover. As one APC turned to fire incendiary grenades into a barracks, a low roar filled the air; Imperial air support had headed the outpost’s plea for help.

The scout team lay silent, one of them extracting the target designator. Aiming it skyward, he waited for an eternity. Friendly armour was blown to pieces by grenadiers, infantry were torn apart by the Tier-3 machinegun turrets the scouts hadn’t yet disabled, and rotary cannons from Imperial air support filled the air with death. As soon as the Imperial aircraft passed overhead, the scout marked it, and sent a request for air support directly to Jekotian AIRCOM, urgency code RED-3. AIRCOM replied, forwarding the message to the push’s commander to confirm the situation. After the commander confirmed the request, AIRCOM reported that a Raptor was being dispatched to the region. The scouts waited helplessly as more and more friendly armour and infantry were torn apart and destroyed. Not even the soldiers dog-tags remained. They waited, and waited, and suddenly, for one of them, everything went black, as he took a round from an airborne machinegun to the chest, causing his body to partly shut down to preserve itself. His partner remained still, knowing there was nothing to be done.

Another roar of engines filled the air, meshing with the Imperial aircraft’s engines. Moments later, explosions dotted the sky and missiles roared. Imperial air craft fell from the heavens, creating craters in the remains of the outpost.

The fight was over. The Jekotians had won. But this was one of many battles. One of hundreds of pushes to move the frontline closer to the enemy. The entire time though, eight identical pushes occurred along the Brok border. By the end of the day, Jekotia would be one hundred square kilometres richer. By the end of the day, the border would be two scouts weaker.

As soon as the fighting ceased, as soon as the last weapon had its safety rearmed, as soon as it was safe, the scout stood, discarded his camouflage, and ran towards the Jekotian forces, with his partner limp in his arms. He ran as fast as he could, yelling for help. He found a medic, an entire surgical company being transported by one of the APC’s. They quickly brought a stretcher out and raised the fallen scout onto it. His heart was still beating strong, a testament to the might of Jekotian genetic engineering. He would live, he would fight again. They strapped him to it, and carried him off. Eight dropships were coming with supplies, an engineering company, and reinforcements. As soon as the first of the eight touched the ground and

offloaded its supplies, it would airlift the fallen scout to the nearest field hospital. The surgical company would do what they needed to hold his body together, take X-Rays and gene samples.

As the second dropship hit the ground, it was followed by six others. Engineers worked quickly, lowering ramps and sliding pallets loaded with supplies onto the ground, where APC's towed them out of the way. Some engineers reviewed blueprints for the outpost to be constructed, directing where certain pallets needed to be moved. Soldiers attached harnesses to the remains of the Imperial outpost, attaching the other end to APC's so the rubble could be removed. Construction would begin in a few hours, and by night fall, the barracks' would be finished. In the coming days, a vehicle factory and other facilities would be erected. The incomplete Imperial repair station would be finished with Jekotian needs in mind. The final dropship, laden with reinforcements, came in heavy. The engines roared, protesting the heavy load; a standard Locust, carrying a cargo container. As soon as it landed, a small company of soldiers disembarked, among them a Jekotian military Officer. The soldiers quickly worked to release the crate from the dropship so it could take flight, while the Officer looked around. Spotting the scout, he walked over to him and asked him his name.

"Brian Drice," the scout replied.

"Just who I was looking for. Effective immediately, you are to be redeployed. All the paperwork has been filed. Come with me, that Locust," he said, pointing at the dropship behind him, "Will take us to the briefing. Your partner, once he is able, will join you."

Behind the officer, the crate was being opened. Inside it was a tank, but not just any tank. A Jekotian Mark VII NOD; a heavy tank designed for the delivery of tactical nuclear devices. This frontline was readying itself for nothing short of total war. Brian followed the officer to the dropship, ascended the ladder after him, and held on to the ceiling mounted railings as the pilot took flight. Looking out the back of the dropship, he saw a massive expanse of wasteland. The by product of all the fighting in the region. It would be the last time he ever saw Brok.