

INCARCERATION

ENDLESS years living in a prison farm located on an isolated dead planet knowing there was little hope of escape was enough to break the spirit of the enslaved. It was especially so when the prisoners were labouring long hours on little sleep in a parched, dust-filled quarry, barely surviving on half rations of depleted nutrition and always with a rumbling, hungry stomach.

This was the punishment dealt to rebels and enemies who attempted to destroy the Federation of Planets and Tzurac's Sentinel soldiers charged with securing its safety and ensuring peace throughout the Universe. The Tzuracian Senate sentenced offenders to hell for life on the dustbowl planet Lokar.

Lokar was one of the many smaller planets located amongst the asteroid belt in the Western Quadrant's Pandark Star System known as the 'Dead Zone', where no craft ventured other than Tzuracian transporters. A permanent canopy of grey dust created by constant dust storms and whirlwinds blotted out the sky and choked out all natural life and moisture. The landscape was flat, uninhabitable and uninviting with temperatures of searing heat during the day and freezing cold at night. It was an ideal location for keeping highly dangerous, unwanted criminals out of the way – it was harsh and isolated and at the same time useful because the Tzuracians could put prisoners to work there excavating hard stone used for constructing roads and buildings back on Planet Tzurac.

Among the prisoners on Lokar were one hundred and twenty Trelarian soldiers in faded prison orange, looking tired and bedraggled and a far cry from their former proud and disciplined selves. The Tzuracians had captured them six years ago in a major, all-out assault on Tzurac's capital city, Khazor. They had been convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment and transported to Lokar along with the leaders of the remaining defeated allies, the shiny-headed Kyroni, each with a distinctive long plait.

And all had received an antidote designed to permanently reverse the enhanced effects they'd once gained through a powerful Xytrinium infusion. The counter-acting injection had decreased their artificially powerful strength, slowed down their agility and suppressed their aggression, allowing the Sentinel guards – all with the advantage of Xytrinium enhanced DNA – to control the prisoners more easily as they performed their laborious tasks.

The Tredarians had been Tzurac's archenemies for centuries, and the Sentinel guards on remote Planet Lokar didn't much care whether these murderous prisoners lived or died. They were satisfied that, like other hard-core prisoners sent there, the Tredarians would eventually succumb to premature deaths from the extreme harsh environment. But they were learning that Tredarians don't die easily ...

The Tredarians' forefathers lived on Tredar, a ravaged, weather-beaten planet in the Grekadian Star system with scorching landscapes travelled by nomadic tribes. They were acclimatised to a hot, dry and dusty environment, and they were survivors. In the protracted interplanetary Grekadian Wars in centuries past, the strongest and fiercest of their race had banded together to fight against the Sentinels of Tzurac. Although they had ultimately been defeated, their resilience to harsh environments, food deprivation and inflicted pain had been passed down from generation to generation, along with a deep-seated hatred of Tzurac and the Federation.

They had rallied again six years ago after procuring the secret to the Sentinels' amazing strength and abilities – the blue crystal, Xytrinium. The Tredarian army had received enhancements from a powerful Xytrinium infusion before going into battle, but again were ultimately defeated. Those who survived were injected with an antidote to diffuse their strength but they survived on Lokar thanks to their already inherent tolerances.

Despite the oppressive conditions on Planet Lokar, the tall and once well-built officer with the distinctive dark features and black ponytail of a Tredarian, Lieutenant Tykran Vark of the Second Legion, Eastern Quadrant remained an inspiration to the captured soldiers. And it was pure hate that kept him from losing his will to live.

Before being sent from Tzurac to the prison farm, he learned that his father, General Khuram Vark of the Second Tredarian Legion, along with General Rokan of the Third Tredarian Legion, had been executed by order of the Tzuracian Council of Elders for their part as leaders of the attack on Tzurac. Tykran had not been permitted to see his father and hold him in his arms for the very last time to say his final farewell, and this had intensified his hate towards the Tzuracian Senators and its Sentinel army.

The relationship between father and son had been distant and strained after years separated by hierarchy in the military. Tykran had rebelled against his father's constant high expectations and engaged at times in reckless, youthful behaviour with drink and women. But the rebel Tredarian Blader, Captain Ramlok, who had been sent to Orkharn and inspired Tykran's father to go to war against the Tzuracians, helped Tykran find his feet as a responsible soldier and begin to rebuild the bond with his father.

Tykran loathed being deprived of his only opportunity to finally tell his father how much he'd grown to love and respect him. And he resented the humiliation his father suffered when the Tzuracians executed him after the trial, rather than letting him die like a warrior in battle with his sword in hand. He saw it as a disgrace to his family and the Trelarian soldiers' code of honour. Tykran Vark wanted revenge.

Over the last few weeks, Tykran felt the fire inside him fuelling his aggression. It was growing stronger each day, along with his increasing strength. Other enhancements he'd acquired following a Xytrinium infusion years ago, including sharpened eyesight and amplified hearing, were also gradually returning.

And Tykran observed the same was happening to his soldiers. They had been docile when they first arrived on this hellhole, but they were gradually becoming more aggressive day by day. The effects of the counter-acting injection were wearing off and Tykran could finally see an opportunity to make their escape.

One night after the guards had routinely locked the Trelarian prisoners into their shared sleeping quarters, the young but worn Lieutenant gathered them together and advised them to keep their rediscovered enhancements hidden until the time was right to use them.

'My comrades-in-arms,' he continued in a strong and confident tone, 'I share in your despair. This is *not* how we'd want to end our lives, labouring like beaten dogs for an enemy we swore to destroy. But I have *not* abandoned your needs to break free from this enslavement. Like you, I've not given up hope there will come a time when we'll once more return to the glorious days of victory, proud to be Trelarian warriors like our forefathers who fought for our freedom to go where we please, take what we want and share in the spoils of war without consequences.'

'Like all of you, I would prefer to die in battle than grovel in the dirt and dust of a Tzuracian prison and die without dignity and honour on an unknown, forgotten planet in an unmarked grave. I want our ancestors to be proud of who we are. Follow me and I'll give back to you what you crave – your freedom, your dignity, and a safe return to our family and friends, and the lifestyle we had back on Planet Orkharn.'

Tired but not defeated, the Trelarian prisoners gave a muffled cheer, raising their arms with clenched fists and greeting Tykran with wide grins of optimism. They were with him all the way. It wasn't just that he was their superior officer. He had proven himself to be a strong,

worthy leader who respected and protected his soldiers and who in turn had earned their respect. They would follow his orders without question.

‘Yes, Captain,’ cried one of the soldiers and the title ‘Captain’ echoed from voices around the room.

Tykran smiled in appreciation. He would accept the unofficial promotion, realising he was now fully in charge of all the soldiers who remained in the Trelldarian army.

‘Sergeant Krag,’ he called, beckoning to his loyal and faithful comrade, who had also survived the Trelldarian defeat with a minor injury, ‘we need to talk.’

Like his Lieutenant, Krag too was tall and solid with a square jaw. He had a weathered face, piercing dark-brown eyes under thick eyebrows, and a deep husky voice. He wore his long and now untidy black hair pulled back loosely revealing an unkempt black beard.

A close, trusting friendship and camaraderie had grown between the two soldiers long before their incarceration. Back on Planet Orkharn, in the lead-up to the last invasion of Tzurac, they were the first to be infused with Xytrinium by Captain Ramlok, the rebel Blader and General Dranz’s first Lieutenant in the rogue Fifth Legion. Ramlok was commanded to search for the Second Legion and persuade them to join forces against the Federation. Vark and Krag were chosen to train the newly enhanced Trelldarian army and then to accompany Ramlok to recruit the Third Legion living on the Moon, Mankro. There, once again, Tykran and Sergeant Krag together with Ramlok, were ordered to train General Rokan’s soldiers after they too were infused with the powerful Xytrinium.

In fuller and more serious discussions with Sergeant Krag, Tykran informed his comrade of his plans. His current plan was simple. Although the prisoners were overseen by Sentinel guards equipped with laser weapons and electric prodding lances, the prisoners were left unshackled. There was nowhere to escape and the thinking was they could work more effectively and efficiently excavating the granite blocks if they were not encumbered with cuffs and leg chains. After all, the guards had been assured the antidote infusion these prisoners had been given made them permanently passive and weaker than the Sentinels guarding them. With their strength and agility now returning without the Sentinels yet being aware, Tykran could see he and his soldiers had the advantage to easily overpower their captors when the time was right.

But, if they were to escape from this hellhole, Tykran required a means of transport that would prevent the Tzuracians rapidly hunting them down. The Tzuracian supply ships were ill-equipped for an escape. Sure, they all had hyperdrives, but only to Level 4 power. *And who*

would want to commandeer a rock hauler? he thought. He needed at least Level 8 hyperdrive power and a fully armed ship if he were to outrun or confront Federation spacecrafts.

‘Captain’ Vark had his father’s DNA and the intellect of a war strategist passed on from father to son. As much as he was anxious and determined to seek his vengeance, he had learnt to control his impatience, thanks to his unlikely late mentor and friend Captain Ramlok who had started out as a renegade Blader pirate. He had to plan carefully.

Several thoughts crossed his mind. He could bide his time waiting for the right spacecraft to land on Lokar. But knowing these visits were few and far between, with no routine scheduled flights, he realised he and his soldiers could be stranded on this hellhole for another year.

Or, he and his soldiers could cause a devastating incident such as blowing up the planet’s power source. This would force the surviving Sentinel guards to send an emergency distress signal to Tzurac and the Federation would dispatch a rescue team in one of their larger, high-powered ships to prevent a breakout and save their Sentinel guards, engineers and horticulturists. But it wasn’t an ideal plan since destruction of the power source would leave them without hydroponic food or water normally produced in the artificial greenhouses while they waited indefinitely for the rescue mission to arrive. It would jeopardise the lives of his own soldiers.

He determined a better alternative would be to capture the guards and force them to send a desperate, pleading message *making out* there had been a life-threatening explosion on the planet which had cut-off their power source, leaving them with limited stored food and water supplies. Captain Vark and his unit would lay in wait, fully armed with weapons confiscated from the guards. Using these weapons, his soldiers would then commandeer, by negotiation or by force, the Tzuracian spacecraft dispatched to help the guards on Lokar.

Sergeant Krag nodded with excitement. There was a gleam in his eyes Vark had not seen in his comrade for a long time. ‘I like your plan, Captain,’ Krag said enthusiastically in his deep voice. ‘With their renewed enhancements and weapons in hand, I’m confident our unit will be successful. And we can do this with few injuries unless the Sentinel guards foolishly attempt to stop us. Mind you, many of us wouldn’t hesitate to kill all the guards for the satisfaction of payback for how we’ve been treated for these last three years.’ He spat on the ground in disgust.

Tykran cautioned. ‘I understand how they feel, Sergeant, but if we’re to escape we must be a disciplined force and fight for a cause with honour and dignity. We’re not like our brethren, the bloodthirsty Bladers who enjoy killing just for the sport. Nor are we like the barbaric Kyroni

who have no respect for anything. We're Trelarian soldiers with morals, and I'll not have our soldiers kill unarmed Sentinels in cowardly acts. We may be enemies but we're not murderers. We give enemy soldiers the respect they deserve for serving in the military. Remember, they're only following orders from their superiors.'

It was true. The Trelarian Bladers of the Fifth Legion, had been bloodletting mercenaries who plundered the crafts of innocent space travellers, raping the females and enslaving the males since the Grekadian Wars. But the Second and Third Legions had maintained a military code and fought only those who raised arms against them. They treated their prisoners of war with respect.

Krag nodded. 'I agree, Captain, as much as I loathe our enemy. So, when do you plan for this coup, sir?'

'Soon, Krag. We need to wait for just the right moment when we know where all the Sentinel guards are positioned. We must hit them simultaneously when they're most vulnerable.'

Krag listened in silence, intently analysing the whole scenario as his Captain spoke with confidence, occasionally stroking his thick and unkempt black beard and raising an eyebrow or two.

'We know they change from the night shift to the daytime crew at exactly 0600 hours. And they usually have five guards overseeing each of our four working groups in the corners of the excavation site. What I want is to take them soon after we start our labouring in the quarry. With just over a hundred of us, we'll easily be able to overpower them, taking their weapons as well as their Sentinel Pledge rings to prevent them from transmitting any signals.'

'After we've captured, gagged and bound them, we'll herd them into their barracks where the other Sentinel guards are sleeping. Taking the other shift guards by surprise, it should be easy to confiscate their weapons and rings. Before gagging and binding them, we'll strip forty of them and change into their uniforms. We'll use their helmets to hide our black hair and we'll remove our beards. We'll lock up all the Sentinels, with the exception of the one we'll use to send the distress signal to Tzurac. The rest of our soldiers will remain in hiding until the Federation rescue craft arrives.'

He paused for a moment, allowing Krag time to take in his strategy. 'We'll inform the rest of our soldiers of our plan tomorrow night. What say you, Sergeant?'

'What about the engineers in the Control Tower who have camera surveillance over the whole quarry? Surely they'll be monitoring all this. Won't they set off the audio alarms immediately, alerting the other shift guards? And won't they send a riot message to Tzurac?'

‘You’re right, Sergeant,’ said Tykran, thinking quickly on his feet. ‘Who’s your best soldier in speed and stealth?’

Krag responded without hesitation. ‘Corporal Jhakmar, sir. He’s the best all-rounder with blades, guns and martial arts, and you’d never see him coming. He’s fast and he’s efficient.’

‘Excellent. Inform him he’s been chosen for a crucial part of the operation. The Sentinels’ med-bay is in the same building as the Control Tower. He needs to be ready to fake an illness or injury tomorrow night to get him into that facility. Before sunrise the following day, he needs to get to the Tower and disable the guards, then send a signal to us by flashing the floodlights in the quarry on and off a couple of times. This will give us the ‘all-clear’ to begin our assault. Our very lives and future depend on this happening, and you need to stress this. Do you think he can do it, Sergeant?’

‘Without any doubt, sir. I stake my life on it.’

‘That’s exactly what you *will* be doing, Sergeant – we *all* will be. I want you to quietly spread the word, but emphasise we want these guards captured quickly and silently with no lasers fired. We don’t want to alert the other sleeping guards.’