

New Fiction by Dion Wright: “Your Land”



“Drone up,” said Lieutenant Levi.

Heads turned and eyes followed the drone’s swift ascent to the sequoia canopy 350 feet above. It briefly hovered there before slipping out of sight, free of the enclosing redwoods and the damp shadowed ground.

“Eyeballs on the treeline,” ordered Captain Sophie Bencker. She stood next to the prisoner in the midst of the small circle of Rangers in the clearing. Good soldiers, special forces and Marines. But they’d been out here three weeks. *Too long*, she thought, and searched for Cat. It was a game to see if she could spot its nano-camouflage. *There!* Some thirty

yards away by the northeast treeline, just beyond the unit's defensive EM bubble. Still and sphinx-like, Cat was peering into the trees, perpetually ready. A hybrid predator of nano/biotech and huge male cougar, its luminescent red eyes gave troopers the shits.

Snowbird-North Fork CS Zone was an immense glory of primeval forest. In the early 2040s the UN had renamed all world forests, temperate and tropical, as Carbon-Scrubber Zones. An attempt to save our planetary lungs from incessant pillaging, it also made for good PR. Yet Snowbird had rare earth mines—and hydrothermals—which added up to very big bucks. Particularly for the Consortia, unholy alliances between defence, mining and tech-media, which sponsored most public ventures.

In the clearing, Janssen, Fernandez and Kelly were fastening their HOTS, Hostile Terrain Suits.

"I'm sick of pissing in my suit. Three weeks out, it stinks," said Fernandez.

"Yeah, you stink like a bear," said Kelly, activating her own suit. "But gotta recycle those meds."

They urinated on the march to recycle their precious mix of bio-protection and performance-enhancing drugs, triple-A approved, and a vital advantage in the Games.

Once Taiwan was off the table, the superpowers had seen the futility of endless confrontation. They could still dominate the show and make gestures to eco-stewardship while keeping a tight rein on their own populace. The business of war had become too risky for those in power and far less rewarding. Also in trouble were the bloated dope-ridden Olympics, tame sports for fractional achievements. Already losing their appeal for fragile societies ridden with eco-guilt, suicide bombers at the 2036 Mumbai Games put the nail in their coffin. Sensing an unprecedented opportunity, the Consortia and their

shadowy financiers had created the New Reality Games.

Its players were veterans and loner-chancers of all nationalities; its stars were ex-special forces. For these near-redundant military, the Games meant good money, playing with new if untested tech, and rules of engagement that were.. flexible. Survival odds were equally variable, and players needed any edge they could get. The HOTsuit was nano-metamaterial and piezoelectrical-responsive, sealed head-to-toe, and designed by Hugo Boss, to boot.

“Hey Kelly, your tits really that shape or is it just the suit?” asked Fernandez.

“You’re never gonna find out,” Kelly countered with a smile.

“These suits really protect us?” asked Koch, the newbie on his first deep patrol.

“They’ll take a hit from light fire, shield your body heat against infra-red detection, and bend light to give basic camouflage” said Janssen who really got off on this stuff. “Temporary protection against biochems, and limited EM defence”

“Can’t wait to see if that’s true,” muttered Kelly. Looking at Fernandez she added: “If the Enclavers or Smugglers get hold of you, they’ll strip it off. And dump what’s in it.”

“You’re kidding, right?” asked Fernandez. Kelly just turned away.

The New Reality Games offered a spectacle of lethal conflict at human scale in a choice of environments “protected” by a bankrupt UN. Governments bought in. The Global South ravaged by floodwaters, firestorms, and epidemics saw lands emptied by violence and migration become newly lucrative. In the First World, rulers eschewed the thankless business of governance in favour of full-on entertaining of their consumer-citizens,

those purposeless slaves to the social media mainstream as they curated their stories and imbibed podcasts. Gamers&Gamblers Anonymous briefly became the flagship 12-step recovery programme until outlawed.

“Just stay on mission, stay alive, and bank the friggin paycheck,” said Kelly wearily.

Protected forests needed protectors, and Bencker’s Rangers were among the best. They were owned by PC—the Pacific Consortium of Afrikaan Mines, AppleMeta, LevantSolar, Nike, Russian SiberNex, Vatican Zurich Holdings, and X-Disney. The PC yellow-flash-on-blue logo adorned their uniforms, along with its slogan *We fight For Trees*, which was unwise to dispute.

This particular, early Spring mission of Bencker’s Rangers was a deep sweep into Snowbird to check on the principal mining operations and tolerated human activities, read tree monitors, gather intel on strange reports filtering in from deep country, deal with any bad guys, and generally strut their stuff.

“The HOTS will keep you safe, Fernandez,” Janssen put in helpfully, exchanging a look with Kelly.

The Games were invisible to those on the ground. Airtime was not live—financially and politically way too risky—but edited and sold for online VR/AR products showcased at Moondance, the annual games fest where the world came to shop for some dynamic oblivion.

All of which made the Captiva, their new prisoner, very valuable. They’d stumbled upon her just before dawn. Strange. She was one of the forest dwellers, rarely seen. In Snowbird a deep patrol could come up against armed groups either from the fortified Enclaves of wealthy religious wackos or from Vancouver smugglers using stealthcraft to run in food, Sinopioids, weapons—oh the bosses *loved* a brush with those

guys. There were also survivalist Treeboys looking for redemption or whatever, and these Captivas, who just goddam lived here. Then there were the weird rumours, stuff that bounced around a campfire at night. *Keep the lid on that shit* thought Bencker.

The Captiva. She was compact and muscular, Asian-looking with black pony tail and a crest of grey like a warning, and eyes that missed and betrayed nothing. She sat on the ground, her hands bound behind her. Lieutenant Levi's SCAR 7.62 mm had the safety off and its barrel was in her face, and she held his gaze. Captain Bencker entered the small circle of troopers.

"Lower your weapon," she ordered in even tone.

A spasm played across Levi's well-shaven jaw; troopers watching the treeline glanced over.

"Sir, the Rules say prisoners are without rights," countered Levi. "She's probably been raped, anyway." Trooper Fernandez, down on one knee and eyes on a small navscreen, shook his head.

"Not by us," said Bencker quietly. "The weapon, Lieutenant."

Bencker never pulled rank and the quietness of her voice spoke of something coiled. Those within earshot tensed. This had been brewing awhile: a shaven-headed female commander with a reputation even outside the Rangers, and a marine hunk with a gilded tech-and-sports education and son of a Consortium bigwheel. And now this prisoner, *who likely doesn't know shit about the Games. Levi wants to waste her, WTF?*

Cat had locked its red eyes on Levi. Neurolinked to the commander, Cat received Bencker's biofeed and instructions and sent back images and recon sense-data. Levi didn't have to look at Cat, just felt the eyes. Slowly he turned from the prisoner and cradling his weapon, sauntered to the perimeter with a fuck-you roll in the shoulders. The Captiva's eyes

followed him, then went to Bencker who spoke for everybody to hear.

“The Captiva might have intel, and knows how to survive here.” *Play with what you’ve got.* Her own weapon was slung across her back, her preferred Heckler & Koch MP5 upgrade.

“Hope daddy Levi don’t spot that little scene,” Kossowski said quietly to Janssen, who nodded.

* *

Something had now opened inside the unit. An opening could be as sharp and haphazard as an incoming shell or as drawn-out as nursing a cold beer while stoned under a hot shower after a patrol in bad bush. It was all SAR, Situational Awareness and Readiness, what nerves fed on in the field to make each moment full and keep you alive. Regardless of all the think-positive shit or meticulous PPTs in a pre-op briefing, out here in deep Snowbird the mind was veined with uncertainty. *How does this Captiva survive?* wondered Bencker, moving away to sit against a small rock.

* *

Janssen finished cleaning his Glock automatic, an uncle’s hand-me-down; he loved the heft of it. He looked over at Cooper sitting on the ground with his plants. “Cooper, what you got for us today?”

A trained botanist and mycologist, Cooper could spot a mushroom at 30 yards. “The usual, some buttons, ink caps, oysters, chanterelles. And a shroom,” holding it up. “*Psilocybe semilanceata*. This little beauty will open your mind and mess with your brain. If you have one.”

“Fuck you,” said Janssen, and Kelly smiled, then noticed the Captiva looking at them.

“What’s your problem?” asked Kelly. “Hungry? You want some?”

as if teasing a child.

"Shut it, Kelly," said Cooper, squatting in front of the prisoner and holding out the mushroom with a questioning look. He waited; they all waited.

"If she won't speak, maybe Levi had the right idea," said Kelly.

"Maybe she's scared of you," said Janssen.

"Not this one," replied Kelly. "But she might hate us. And she doesn't like us picking her mushrooms."

"Sacred."

The word fell from the Captiva and drew eyes to her, and nobody spoke. Again Cooper held out the mushroom: "Sacred, how?" he asked quietly.

Bencker had put down her book and was looking at the group.

"We talk to the dead," and her eyes travelled over them, "to our ancestors." Cooper nodded, his brows knitted together, and backed away.

"Now *that* is intel," he said, mostly to himself.

Kelly breathed out audibly. "Friggin ancestors done shit for me. I don't even know my parents."

"Hey, straight up, Cooper," said Janssen, whose social skills were what you'd expect from someone on the spectrum. "What you reckon's out there?"

"No friggin clue," said Cooper. "And hope it stays that way. Anything could stay hidden in this."

"C'mon, what aren't they telling us?" insisted Janssen.

"It's probably the mines," answered Cooper slowly. "Rare

earths and heavy metals discharged into ponds and streams, then leaking into the aquifers. And the mines are just the stuff we know about." Silence.

Bush fever. Bencker couldn't let that get into her unit.

"Trooper Nurri, activate Exemption," she ordered loudly. Nurri stopped scoping the treeline through his gunsight and touched his suitPad. He was the only one Bencker could bounce ideas off of—the price of being a woman in the ancient profession of arms commanding men, some of them smart... some, well, less than smart. Nurri was self-contained and ruthless, with a devilish sense of humour and piercings in strange places.

"Snowboard CSZ is unoccupied, Captain," commented Nurri, and Bencker gave him a pointed look.

Exemption protects us but also reveals our position, I know.

"Exemption activated," quickly confirmed Nurri, knowing better than to give her attitude.

Regardless of popular misconceptions and Consortium hype, big data-assisted AI had only amplified the uncertainty of warfare for those on the ground. Sure, troopers humped hi-tech weaponry and sweated in HOTsuits, but they were up against odds they could never fathom. Game rules forbade calling in fire-support or medical evacuation. You went in and you came out. Or you didn't. Shareholders and spectators of the Games would always be the winners, so finish the mission and stay alive. Troopers functioned more or less strung out in their private meds-enhanced SAR-cloud; some of these Rangers were also stoned a lot of the time, thanks to Cooper.

"Another morning in paradise," said Kossowski, sitting on the ground and spooning rations into her mouth. "Friggin mist, it's always shifting, things appear and disappear, can't tell what I'm seeing." She licked the spoon carefully and began packing her gear.

“And drip drip drip all friggin night,” added Koch, bloodying a Tiger mosquito on his arm; dengue was rife here but the meds should handle that.

Fernandez took a last look at the photo of a lady, his, and their child, slid it inside his suit and stood.

* *

Bencker took meds; she also had Cat to bounce off. But her refuge was a tattered copy of the *Odyssey*. Where it spoke of creatures that lure ships onto rocks she'd noted: “the Sirens speak to each sailor only about himself. Like algorithms.” *Damn this Captiva.*

Bencker went to the prisoner, knelt and held out the black carbon neck-bracelet. “Put it on.”

The woman stared at it, expressionless, stared at her and down at the large dagger in Bencker's belt. The *Captiva* took the bracelet and slowly put it around her neck, clicking it to lock. She now belonged to their SecurNet—in fact, to Cat. She could try and run but... bad idea.

Bencker moved back to the rock and the *Odyssey*. Her father had also been a reader and his old copy of the *Iliad* was on her desk back at base, his photo tucked inside. It had ridden in her pack until she'd discovered the *Odyssey*, the first tale of a lost wanderer

Her father the Colonel had been a decorated warrior of the conflicts that had seen the rise of the consortia. He'd died in an infamous op at MB7, a mining-base in northeast Africa, when everything had gone fatally wrong for the unit... and unexpectedly well for its sponsors.

Twenty years later, situations were even more “fluid,” even for the Games. Slick Powerpoint assumptions broke as soon as a boot touched the drop zone—even *because* it touched the ground,

in this quantum fuck-up of a world. Bencker had become an elite soldier because her loneliness and rage could only be soothed in battle and its liminal moments, where knowing and caring were fused in pure awareness of death, of its imminence. Her personnel file was a mix of medical reports and censorial black ink, and troopers either avoided her in the mess or vied for a place on her team.

Resting on the ground against the rock, Bencker read her *Odyssey*. Kelly and Janssen, sitting nearby, exchanged looks.

"Any answers in there, Captain?" ventured Janssen carefully.

"No," said Bencker. *No answers; acceptance, maybe.* She resumed: "Three thousand years ago wars were short and small-scale, close-to and savage, sometimes honourable," said Bencker, echoing her father. She turned her head, suddenly aware that the Captiva was looking at her and the book.

"Men fought like animals, some saw themselves as half-gods," she added.

"No shit," said Janssen, nodding. "No shit."

"Uh, and the space thing that the Colonel—" began Janssen.

"The Space, his notion of leadership, Trooper," Bencker said with finality, putting away the book.

"And the women?" asked Kelly.

"They washed bodies and mourned, or waited for their men," replied Bencker. "If on the losing side they were sold, or..." she stopped, remembering the Captiva and Levi and what he'd said. Kelly and Janssen looked at the Captiva then away and began scoping the trees through their gunsights.

"Move out in ten," said Bencker. "Lifting the Bubble."

Gloved fingers checked safety locks, flipped off screens,

patted pouches, stoppered canteens, felt to ensure a knife was to hand, adjusted straps, all before catching the eye of another trooper for a long second.

For Captain Sophie Bencker, the Space was her Rangers and this forest, was achieving the mission and bringing everybody home. The troopers' HOTs were now sending in their KVIs (key vital indicators) which flitted across Bencker's visor, confirming their biochems were stable: *the Space rebalances itself*.

Suddenly she was aware how quiet it had grown. Cat?

"Check for Sweepers," she ordered. These autonomous weaponised droids were the delight of west coast EcoPuritans and ZenBuddies, each with a self-righteous agenda and no time for human messiness. Sweepers protected the forest and had the legal right to kill interlopers who didn't signal an Exemption.

"Movement, one click northeast," said Kossowski, and troopers turned and looked at her. Kossowski was on point, a comms role that demanded one's visor-SAR to be always active and attention at 100%. Point was a prime target for snipers. On the edge of Bencker's mind a wind blew down the neurolink as chunks of data fed in from Cat already speeding towards the unidentified threat.

"Moving erratically... in our direction," said Kossowski.

"Could be a Sweeper, Captain," said Nurri, frowning, and with reason.

Their Exemption was active so there should be no problem. But the briefing had said the area was empty of Sweepers and likely hostiles.

"The drone?" asked Bencker, looking around for Levi. She had just touched her sleeve panel to raise the collective EM defence bubble again when suddenly she gasped as if hit in the

gut, feeling her feet begin to slide. Koch had raised his rifle toward the northeast but was already crumpling to his knees. In the same instant Bencker's own suit-bubble was activated—Cat's doing—as she pivoted to throw herself on top of the Captiva and everything went dark.

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Seated in PC Command outside Eureka, northern California, Operations Controller Ellis squinted at the big wallscreen. "Bencker's unit?" He'd never gotten used to the Consortium's obligatory "team."

"Offline, Sir. And we're trying to confirm a sonic pulse."

"Sonic? Out there?"

"Trying to identify but interference is heavy." An understatement, given canopy density and high hydrothermal humidity.

"Find them," said Ellis as calmly as he could manage.

Sonics were not standard on Sweepers, so that should rule out a rogue droid, or so he hoped. He had maybe 30 minutes before this "situation" leaked to the Consortium's ears-and-eyes and his red desk telephone went berserk. Turning his head from side to side to ease his neck muscles, he walked oh so casually out of the Ops Room to his office. Closing the door he activated the bugscan: all clear. Carefully he punched a code into his private phone. After a lapse, another phone buzzed far away.

"Marvin." Ellis heard his codename with relief despite its nerdy ring. "What a pleasant surprise," said a rough, careful female voice.

"Aunty," he replied in what he hoped was a neutral tone: This cloak-and-dagger stuff was not his game. He paused, then: "The lady. She's disappeared on mission in Snowbird. Her unit is

down, no movement." Silence. "We're waiting confirmation on a rogue sonic pulse."

"And Cat?" asked the woman after a beat.

"Active, was active for nearly an hour after the incident, then nothing."

Ellis heard the slight seeping of breath from ex-Lieutenant M'Gele, officially KIA. She'd served under Sophie Bencker's father and her *Shibriya* dagger would reply to any who dared speak a word against the Colonel. After MB7 her missing body was just one of the strange things that had happened that day. She had survived, and only Sophie and Ellis knew this, which suited M'Gele just fine.

"If Cat is moving then the lady is too. If you have no indications of further attack then we can assume she decided to go dark." Just like that day years ago at MB7 with her colonel in their last battle. The entire squad, an ambush—though by whom had not been clear.

"Keep me informed, please." She hung up. Ranger Sophie Bencker, with the blue-eyes of her father and a ferocity all her own, was going to hunt. "Be without mercy and find your song, little leopard," M'Gele said to the shadows. She touched the red garnet at her throat, remembering the promise she'd made to her Colonel as the light had left his eyes: I will protect your daughter.

Ellis sat, not moving. He too was back to that day at MB7, as the young Watcher in Rome EuroCommand following Colonel Bencker's unit, seeing events unfold on screen, recalling the carnage found later at the mining base. Taking a deep breath he slowly let it out. Tonight would normally be an at-home with his wife Paula and their two little girls, for pizza and TV. But not this night.

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“Dad.” Captain Sophie Bencker flashed back in cinematic microseconds. “Dad dad dad.”

If only she could have known him as one soldier to another. Would he approve of her tatoos, and her shaven head, devoid of the golden locks he’d so loved? He might balk at CAT and its neurolinks; he used to look at their dog Mifty and just grunt, and it had seemed to work between them.

Her father’s image wobbled; the eyes changing to red and Cat looking down at her. Clarity flowed along their link. *But never make assumptions*: “Identify!” She said with difficulty, and felt its purring of approval. *Bagheera* entered her mind, the private name she’d given Cat, taken from a story dad used to read to her. Then down came *Breathe*, and Cat’s own deep breathing began to pace and calm her own.

“I’m good.” SAR was re-establishing itself.

“Nurri?” Nothing. “Levi? Kossowski? Cooper?... Janssen? Kelly, Fernandez?” *Cat, Sitrep!*

Down the neurolink came images of troopers scattered on the ground, none moving, and: Levi has gone. There was no signal from the drone. *What the hell happened?*

Swift activation of her HOTSuit had saved her and the Captiva. *Need to move*, she thought-sent. Cat replied with an image of the woman and a warning. Bencker flashed back: *she comes with us. Intel, survival.*

With a growl Bagheera bounded off, his sense-data flitting across her visor. Bencker nodded to the woman who sprung off fast, following Cat with ease. Bencker could see that this was her land. *Levi. WTF?*

* *

The team’s drone had returned, its control now overridden by CSZ Command. It hovered over the clearing and the scattered

troopers of Bencker's unit, then descended over each body. Away in the Ops Room, all eyes were riveted to the big wallscreen. As each face came into close-up the trooper's name appeared in a side column. They looked peaceful, thought Ellis. A message came onscreen: two MIA, Captain Bencker and Lieutenant Levi.

"Can we get a fix on them?" asked Ellis. "And what about the Cat?"

"Negative, for the moment. Damage, or environmental interference," said a young operator.

Ellis glanced at the red phone. "Levi," he said quietly. An inevitable shitstorm was heading his way once Levi Sr in corporate HQ came looking for an explanation of a lost team that included his son—and for just a few seconds of footage. Heads would roll. He recalled a saying of Colonel Bencker's: "When playing poker, remember it's always serious, even when they say it isn't." As a rookie Watcher listening to the Colonel over a beer and totally overawed, Ellis had thought this unbelievably cool. Now he was beginning to see what it could mean, and didn't like it.

"Keep looking, see what Narciss comes up with," Ellis ordered. Narciss, their mighty AI sitting on photonic quantum hardware, was there to facilitate decision-making. But in the particularly fluid "fog of war" they had to confront nowadays it was of little use. "Beware of geeks bearing gifts," he said under his breath, adding: "Keep safe, Captain Sophie Bencker."

"We have one alive!" All eyes in the Ops room flew to the wallscreen. There was an arm slowly rising. Ellis felt sick.

"Trooper Nurri, sir," said the operator.

Ellis nodded. Nurri, tough bastard. And the Games don't do immediate evac so I have to leave him, at least until Editorial decide how they can use him. He just has to survive

the next few hours.

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The two women had stopped by a pool. The one with the black ponytail approached the small waterfall, and slipped behind the curtain of water. Bencker followed into the cave.

"We are undetectable here, the water and the rock," said the Captiva, then: "Take this off," touching the neck bracelet. *Those eyes. Without you I'll probably die here.* Bencker removed the bracelet. The woman gently rubbed her throat; "I will prepare some food," she said.

* *

They were sitting by a small fire. "It's good," said Bencker, carefully spooning the hot plant stew from a bowl in her lap.

"You will piss out the meds. Your body needs to rebalance to survive here." Bencker paused in eating. "And you will take off the suit."

My HOTS? "No friggin way!" Bencker's eyes flashed. "I need to be in contact for my unit. They--"

"They are probably dead." Then, matter-of-factly: "You would have heard something by now." She waited, watching Bencker. "You must cut all comms to your base. And you cannot jog for long in the suit," she said with finality. Rummaging in a wooden box, she handed Bencker a shirt, trousers, and top like her own, in a rough grey-green fabric. "Keep your link to the..." nodding towards the mouth of the cave, "but cut its comms to your base."

Outside a shadow moved and a growl came down the link. *Cat, cool it! This woman knows her shit.*

"Also you smell wrong. Swim, wash." *She is used to giving orders,* Sophie saw, but still didn't move. The woman looked at

her: "You stopped the soldier killing me. You covered me in the attack. Now I protect you." She had brought out thick blankets, "At night it gets cold."

* *

Later, the fire down to embers. Under blankets they were close for warmth, semi-naked.

"What is your name?" Bencker asked. The woman didn't answer, but stretched her hand to touch the leather-bound *Odyssey* lying between Bencker's breasts.

"I do not know you yet," said the woman, looking frankly at Bencker's body. "What is this book?"

I asked dad the same question. "Stories of ancient warriors." Remembering his words, she added, "They were mighty as trees." The woman nodded, and for the first time, smiled.

"My father said those times were violent, men were violent, a few were godlike. They fought knowing that any moment could bring the terror of gods in blinding light, and all a warrior could do was pray, 'may the gods be on my side.'"

"Your stories are of people and the desire to be like gods. They could have chosen to be like trees, to be great without making the gods jealous."

"Trees are dying, they get cut down," replied Bencker too quickly.

The woman looked her full in the face. "We talk to our dead."

Uh huh, mushrooms. Bencker was beginning to feel lost.

They stared into the fire. "I think your father is proud of you," offered the woman. Bencker turned away from the fire, her gaze dropping to the dagger, her fingers resting on the scabbard.

“He gave me this *Shibriya*, a Christmas present. A week later came the funeral-drone carrying his ashes.”

It had been a clumsy, New Year’s Day media attempt to turn the Colonel into a posthumous legend as a prelude to the first Consortium Games. But by raising her teenage middle finger to the drone’s camera and the world, Sophie Bencker had become the angel of self-contained, traumatized anger, perfect for social media and its self-elected obsessiveness. Then she’d gone off-grid (keeping the details vague), eventually reappearing as a trained soldier hardened by pain. Now Consortium eyes and various nutters tracked the maverick Captain Bencker, Ranger. She was top dollar, with her tanned features and the sapphire eyes of her dad.

“I am sorry,” said the woman, putting out her hand gently to touch a shoulder. Bencker turned back, their eyes found each other. On the cave wall the dying fire threw their shapes which moved as if borne on the soft evening wind.

* *

It was first light and cold outside and they dressed quickly, then sat to eat in silence. Cupping her hands around a steaming mug the woman said, “You will know my name when I am sure of you.” Then added in a quieter voice: “I do not want the loss of you.”

WTF? Bencker’s gut churned. She knew about loss, her father, and now her squad.

“Do you know what happened to my troopers?” she asked.

“I was tracking you for a week.”

Bencker stared at her. “A week! But when we captured you—”

“I let myself be captured.” The words hung in the air. “We can talk later. Now we have to move. This is not a game, there are dangers.”

All clear came over the neurolink. Cat was blended into the forest shades, hard to see. All was still.

“Where are we going?” *Gotta keep my head straight.*

“Into the deep woods.” Bencker opened her mouth to ask another question but was cut off: “Now.”

Captain Sophie Bencker realized that she was going to have to trust the woman with her life. She already did so with Cat. For a soldier such trust was normal; it bound comrades to each other and to each waking day and each long night; trust defined them in a way that was absolute. But this woman was not a comrade in arms. Nor was she a stranger anymore. Bencker had unveiled herself to this woman, and with an intimacy she never showed. They were also bound together by danger. From now, uncertainty and danger would vie in her life with her capacity to trust, and this tension would be her Space. One hand resting on the hilt of her *Shibriya*, she looked up at the canopy far above and smiled.

“Ready?” asked the woman. Bencker nodded.

The woman set off at a jog through the shadows and mist among the trees. Her strong fluid gait reminded Bencker of another, many years ago: Lieutenant M’Gele. *This land is their land.* Now for Ranger Captain Sophie Bencker, the song of her hunt had begun.