



DEATH'S HEAD: MAXIMUM OFFENCE

DAVID GUNN

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

Lieutenant Sven Tveskoeg's genetic makeup is only 98.2 percent human.

The remainder is non-specific and could explain his enhanced healing abilities, superior strength and sociopathic tendencies. A badass soldier with a hair-trigger temper and a moon-sized chip on his shoulder, these qualities would condemn a man in any decent society.

Luckily, Sven doesn't live in a decent society. He lives in the empire of the tyrant OctoV: part machine, part boy, part god and all evil. Sven's unique qualities have brought him to OctoV's attention and earned him a commission in the Death's Head, the élite corps dedicated to killing and dying for the greater glory of – you guessed it – OctoV.

Now Sven and his Aux squad are heading for the artificial world of Hekati. A citizen of the U/Free (an empire not only vaster than OctoV's but also technologically superior) has gone missing and Sven and the team must find the poor, lost soul. But on Hekati, nothing and no one can be trusted. Somebody wants Sven dead, too.

So what else is new?

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Death's Head

Maximum Offence

David Gunn

Pietro, who could field-strip a sniper rifle faster than any man I've met . . .

Prologue

Flicking dust from his sleeve, General Indigo Jaxx adjusts a dagger at his hip and then ruins everything by tugging at the collar of his uniform. He is a general in the Death's Head, for heaven's sake.

No, Indigo Jaxx shakes his head.

He's *the* general.

His regiment is the emperor's chosen force. Empire ministers fall silent at his approach. Colonels sacrifice entire brigades to win his approval. Men offer their wives, so their sons might find places on his staff.

It is absurd to be nervous, but he is. OctoV has that effect on him.

The beloved leader has that effect on everyone. Stiffening to attention, General Jaxx waits for his emperor to appear in a swirl of static, with words that will scour the inside of his skull like a hot desert wind.

Come on, thinks General Jaxx. *Please. Get this over with.*

As he prepares for his mind to be invaded, someone opens the office door behind him and the general turns, cold fury on his lips.

'Is this a bad time?'

The questioner is in his early teens. He wears a green cavalry uniform with a jewelled sword and has ringlets falling to his shoulders. His hair is blond, but it is his eyes that people notice. They are the blue of deep space and just as empty.

Indigo Jaxx blinks.

'I said . . .'

‘No, sir,’ says the general, standing straighter. ‘Absolutely not.’

OctoV smiles. ‘I’m so glad,’ he says. ‘I wanted to congratulate you.’

The general goes still.

‘Really,’ says OctoV. ‘Producing victory from defeat . . . Having produced defeat from victory. That’s subtle, even for me.’ He nods towards the general’s Obsidian Cross. ‘I’d give you another medal, but clearly you’ve got them all. What is it now?’

‘Imperial knight, grand master, sir. With extra palm leaves and bar.’

‘Very impressive.’

General Jaxx is being mocked. Given the other choices, he is happy to get off that lightly.

‘Well,’ says OctoV. ‘I must go.’

Now it comes, thinks the general, as he watches the boy head for the door. He tries not to tense as OctoV turns back.

‘By the way,’ OctoV says. ‘What’s he doing now?’

Who? The general thinks desperately. *What is who doing now?* ‘Do you mean Sven, sir?’

‘Yes,’ says OctoV. ‘Of course I do. What is Sven doing now?’

The general swallows. ‘We’re lending him to the U/Free.’

His imperial highness OctoV, glorious leader, the undefeated, eternal ruler of more worlds than can be counted, laughs. It strips General Jaxx’s skull and reduces his self-control to tatters. Around him, the walls of his office begin to spin.

‘You have the best ideas,’ says his emperor. ‘Keep me up to date.’

Indigo Jaxx wants to say, *Yes, sir. Of course, sir.* But he is on his knees vomiting. So OctoV walks through the nearest wall with the general’s words unspoken.

Part 1

Chapter 1

THE MAN SPINS round, knife already drawn, and hesitates. It's not his fight. Anyway, he's only in Farlight for OctoV's birthday, unloading luxuries from a cargo ship on the edge of a landing site. And his knife is new, bought that afternoon from a stall in the road behind Golden Memories.

He doesn't feel ready to use it yet.

A wise choice. Someone is about to get hurt and it doesn't have to be him. That *someone* is standing in my doorway. And half of my bar door swings from a rusted hinge, while the rest lies at his feet.

'Quiet,' I say.

A girl next to me shuts up.

I am not sure she knows she screamed.

This is my bar, but it is Aptitude's home and she's family. At least she is until her mother and father get out of prison.

'Sven,' she says.

'Later . . .' My gaze flicks across the room and settles on a wiry young man with a pointed face, floppy hair and narrow shoulders. He's reaching into his jacket. At a shake of my head, he lets go his revolver.

Neen's nineteen.

In the field, he's my sergeant, but we're not in the field, we're on leave. So he's running security for a bar I own on the outskirts of this city.

Raising his glass, Neen grins. He, for one, obviously intends to enjoy tonight's show. As we watch, the man in my doorway jacks the slide on an oversized pistol, and takes a slow look round to check we've noticed.

'Sven.'

Aptitude is getting nervous.

I smile, but it is at another girl entirely. Wandering over, she sits on my lap and snuggles up to me. Aptitude scowls to see me slide my hand up Lisa's skirt. What she doesn't see is the knife I take from Lisa's garter.

'Subtle,' says a voice. 'Understated, anything but obvious.'

The intruder believes my gun is talking about him. He has pegged my corner of the room for the comment, but he can't work out who to blame. As the man lumbers over, Lady Aptitude Tezuka Wildeside leans back in her chair.

'You,' he says. 'Got something to say?'

She shakes her head frantically.

Satisfied, the man starts to turn away. Big mistake. Turfing Lisa off my lap, I pick up my own chair and smash it over the back of his skull. He drops, but only to his knees.

'Finish it,' says Aptitude.

'Not yet. I'm enjoying myself.'

'Sven.'

Clambering to his feet, the thug stares at me.

'Yeah,' I say. 'I'm Sven Tveskoeg.' How many seven-foot tall ex-Legionnaires can he see in this bar?

Behind the man stands another. Federico Van Zill, provider of protection to half the bars and brothels edging the landing fields below Calinda Gap. A rumour says the war against the Uplifted will be over soon.

That is bad for Van Zill.

As long as we're at war, there's a chance I'll be killed and my troopers with me. An end to the war would mean Van Zill gets some permanent competition. Peace isn't going to happen, of course. And it's disloyal, unwise, and probably treasonous to suggest otherwise. However, Federico Van Zill is an idiot. So I've been expecting this visit.

When Van Zill's thug pulls a knife, I laugh.

It's huge, with slots cut into the back of the blade. The slots are meant to say *this is a man ready to drag his*

enemy's entrails through an open gut wound. You can tell a lot about a man from the knife he chooses.

You can tell a lot about a woman too.

The blade I take from Lisa's garter is a third of the size. It lacks teeth, blood channels and other finery but it's razor-sharp and made from glass.

All you have to do is stab once, then snap it off at the handle. You can buy ten for the price of the shiny toy in the hands of the man opposite.

When Neen flashes five fingers, a boy behind the bar breaks the news to the punters crowding round him. The odds on our fat friend have just halved.

'Come on,' I say.

Watching my blade, he fails to spot that I'm watching his eyes. This is a man used to getting his own way and that is a weakness. In addition, he's impatient. So he stabs and leaves himself open, only not open enough.

I block.

And go back to circling.

Neen's seen me kill swiftly. All of my troopers have. But catching Neen's puzzled face in the crowd I realize he has never seen me bide my time. *Kill early, kill often . . .* It's our unofficial motto.

This is different.

I've never gutted someone in front of Aptitude. She's a well-brought-up kid, and I'm trying to keep it that way. One of the reasons this man's made me angry. He's still watching my blade and I'm still watching his eyes.

Soon everyone is waiting on what will happen next. And their expectation makes my attacker clumsy. He jabs so obviously it has to be a feint. As his gaze flicks right, I know what's going to happen.

He waits for me to begin a block before switching hands, smiling at his own brilliance. Then his brain is playing catch-up, because Lisa's knife is deep in his belly and I'm dragging

it upwards. A single rip opens him from groin to breastbone and a tumble of guts slides to the floor.

Aptitude screams.

Lisa's more practical. She opens a window.

You can say what you like about the girls from the barrio below Calinda Gap but they've seen it all before, and probably twice. Tossing a blanket over the twitching corpse, my bar manager Angelique nods to a boy behind the counter. He can drag it out later.

'Boss,' says my sergeant. 'What about rat face?'

Van Zill looks less smug with Neen's revolver to his head.

'Take rat face outside,' I say. 'Shoot him.'

'*Sven . . .!*'

No need to ask who that is.

'A week ago,' I tell Aptitude, 'a man refused to pay protection to this piece of shit. What do you think happened to his twelve-year-old daughter?'

Aptitude is fifteen.

She doesn't like my question.

Turning back to Neen, I say, 'Take him outside. Make sure he knows what happens if he ever comes back.'

Our glorious capital is built in the caldera of an old volcano, and smog traps heat and makes the air hard to breathe. Corpses rot quickly here and large ones rot faster than small ones. Don't know why, but it's true. Lisa ends up helping the boy behind the bar to drag the body out back. Then fetches ice to keep it fresh until Angelique can arrange collection.

'Do I close up?' Angelique asks.

'No way.' I shake my head. 'We stay open.'

The music goes back on. We offer a round of cold beers for everyone on the house. A couple of cargo captains who were going to call it a night change their minds and head upstairs with three of the local girls.

A technician watches them go, summons up his courage and follows. He has two blondes in tow, and I'm not sure he

looked closely before grabbing their wrists. No doubt he'll discover soon enough that one is a boy.

'Chill some *cachaca*,' I tell Lisa. 'Make sure our customers have a night to remember.'

Drunks talk.

That thug will become a giant, his knife a razor-edged sabre, my own moves unstoppable and insanely vicious . . . Our reputation will grow. That's good, because tomorrow sees me, my sergeant and the rest of the Aux present ourselves for duty. I need that reputation to keep Aptitude safe until we get home.

'All done,' says Neen, rubbing his fists.

'Good. Anything I should know?'

Neen hesitates.

'What?'

'Told the little shit to pay us from now on.'

I grin. It's a good call.

'How much?'

'Twenty per cent,' says Neen. 'Straight off the top, no deductions. Last day of each month. No exceptions, no excuses . . .'

This is a farm boy, an ex-militia conscript who should have been dead months back. Would have been if I hadn't taken over his troop. I wonder where he got the idea. Then I see his sister behind him and know exactly where she thinks he did. Shil is scowling, but that's nothing new. Shil's always scowling. We have history.

'Problem?'

'No, sir,' says Shil.

'Good . . .'

I look round the bar. 'Get drunk,' I tell Neen. 'Get laid. Acquire a hangover. We ship out tomorrow.'

Neen grins. 'It that an order, sir?'

His sister sighs.

Chapter 2

HINGES CREEK AND Angelique pokes her head round the door.

'Sven,' she says and disappears. Might be the fact I'm standing naked in the middle of my bedroom. Must be the gun in my hand.

'What?'

Reappearing, she nods as a towel goes round my waist and the SIG-37 goes back in its holster. 'I'm sorry,' she says, 'but she won't . . .' Who *won't* is obvious, because a girl slides past Angelique and looks around.

'Pre-fab construction,' she says. 'Early-Octovian. Original walls and door. Original electrics from the look of it . . . You do realize,' she says, 'this building was only meant to last five years?'

'I like it.'

'You would.'

Her nose wrinkles at the smell, but she catches herself quickly. And when she brushes past me to the open window, it could be to examine its sash cords. Because that is what she does.

'Original fittings,' she says.

Maybe she catches my irritation.

'You don't mind?' she says.

'Of course not.'

If she hears an edge to my voice, she doesn't let it show. Anyway, going to the window doesn't help with the smell because the air beyond the window stinks of dog shit, burning rubber and hydrocarbons from the landing fields outside. Where does she think the stench came from in the first place?

'You really like it here?'

'Yes,' I say.

Angelique is looking between us. 'You know each other?'

'I'm sorry,' says the girl. 'Didn't I say?'

'No,' Angelique says flatly. 'You didn't.'

Angelique might be blonde, generously built, free with her body, but she has the temper of a redhead, and it's coming to the boil. I don't need the argument, and I don't need the complications an argument will bring.

'Ms Osamu,' I say, 'may I introduce Angelique, my bar manager?'

They glare at each other.

'Angelique, this is Paper Osamu, ambassador for the United Free to the Octovian Empire. Ms Osamu has full plenipotentiary status for this edge of the spiral arm.'

Angelique doesn't know what it means either, but has enough brains to recognize it as trouble and best avoided. 'She's U/Free?'

'Yes,' I say. 'She's U/Free.'

Paper Osamu smiles.

'But . . .' says Angelique, and gets no further.

My visitor looks a good year or two younger than Angelique, who is nineteen at most. Paper's also wearing rags. They are undoubtedly expensive rags. Probably ripped from exotic silk by a famous U/Free artist and sewn together with strands of web from a spider that has been taught to shit silver. But they still look like rags to me. And if they look like rags to me, then they're going to look like rags to Angelique, only more so . . .

The furthest she's been from home is Maurizio Junction.

That's eight streets away.

'Coffee would be good,' says Ms Osamu. She is looking at Angelique as she says this.

'You'll find it downstairs.'

Angelique shuts my door with enough of a slam to make the windows rattle and the U/Free ambassador laugh. 'Are

all your women so jealous?’

‘She’s not *my women*.’

‘Really?’ Paper Osamu looks at me.

‘All right. But only the once.’

‘You’re such children—’ Ms Osamu catches herself, apologizes. The U/Free are big on not being rude about others. They have laws about such things. Me? As far as I’m concerned, if you think someone’s a crawling heap of shit, you’re allowed to say so. Just don’t be surprised if they pull a knife on you.

Taking a piece of card from her pocket, Paper Osamu says, ‘Look . . . The general’s invited you to a breakfast he’s giving in my honour.’

I check both sides of the invitation.

‘Want me to read it?’

‘I can manage. My old lieutenant taught me.’

‘Bonafonte deMax?’

It’s my turn to stare.

‘I checked him out,’ she says. ‘At the general’s suggestion.’

We live in a city full of generals, empire ministers and senators. Also heads of the high clans, distant cousins of the emperor and trade lords. However, round here, if someone says *the general* they mean General Indigo Jaxx, commander of the Death’s Head and my ultimate boss.

‘And call me Paper,’ she adds. ‘We’re friends.’

First I’ve heard of it.

Walking over to my wardrobe, Paper finds my uniform. The jacket has been cleaned since she last saw it and the blood’s come out. My boots are also clean, which must be Angelique’s work, because I don’t remember scrubbing them.

There’s a waterfall of silver braid tucked inside one of the boots, a holster over the back of a chair and a dagger’s sheath on the mantel over the fireplace. The dagger itself keeps the sash window from sliding shut.

'Antique,' says Paper, looking at the blade. 'You steal this?'

'General Jaxx gave it to me.'

'So,' Paper says, 'I guess that means he stole it.'

'Paper . . .'

'The blade's old Earth,' she tells me. 'All old Earth artefacts are protected under United Free legislation. No trading, no selling, no transfer between systems without a licence.'

'Could have been in his family for generations.'

'We'll make a diplomat of you yet.'

'God forbid.'

'I'm a diplomat,' she points out.

'So you've said.'

Arranging my uniform on the floor, Paper stands back and looks expectant. She's medium height, athletic without being muscled, just enough hips to grip, a tight rear and high breasts, which are full without being large. She's also black-haired, but that means nothing. Last time we met her hair was chestnut and her eyes were blue. Today they are green.

'Sven,' she says. 'You need to dress.'

'Then get out.'

'I've seen naked men before.'

'Yeah,' I say. 'I'm sure you have.' Dropping the towel, I stamp over to the shower. It's a real one, the kind that uses water. Unfortunately, its sides are made of clear glass. Paper walks round it slowly, taking a good look.

'Impressive,' she says. She's not talking about the cubicle.

I keep my back to her as I pull my trousers over wet skin and buckle my belt.

'May I?' says Paper's voice behind me.

So polite, the U/Free.

Reaching up, she wipes a drop of water from my shoulder where it vanishes under the edge of my prosthetic arm. 'Exquisite workmanship.' The stump has a tortoiseshell

effect where badly healed flesh used to be. It gives a dull click as she taps it. Then she taps my arm itself, which rings slightly.

'You lost this to a ferox?'

Nodding, I turn round.

She is standing so close that I can smell woman under whatever scent she's wearing. And her pupils are wide, those little black dots no longer little but vast, reducing the green of her irises to a thin circle around the edges.

'Really?' she says, breathless. 'A ferox?'

'It was old,' I say. 'Almost dead.'

'I heard you cut off its head.'

'Needed proof.'

'Of what?'

'That this wound wasn't self-inflicted.'

'People do that?' she asks. 'In the desert . . .?'

Smiling, I say, 'In the desert, people do anything.' Then, because she's still close, I wrap one arm around her waist and pull her close, raising her chin with my other hand.

'*Sven . . .*' She twists away before I can stop her.

'Thought we were meant to be friends?'

Paper Osamu tuts. 'Come on,' she says. 'Let's get you dressed.'

Helping me into my jacket, she adjusts my holster, buttons my braid into place, hangs my Obsidian Cross, second class, on its ribbon around my neck, and rips my blade from the sash window. Which, obviously enough, crashes shut.

The U/Free can be strange sometimes.

When we get downstairs the others are waiting. Telling Neen I'll see him later, I ask Aptitude to help Lisa clean up and the rest to get on with whatever needs doing. Angelique scowls when I hold the door for Paper. Shil merely raises her eyebrows and makes sure that I've seen.

'Who's the eldest one?' Paper demands, the moment we're outside.

'Shil . . . My sergeant's sister.'

'Had her too?'

'Paper!'

'Just asking,' she says.

Paper mutters something about research, and I stop listening when she starts using words like *polyandry*. I'm pretty sure there's a *primitive peoples* in there somewhere. But she catches herself, glances at me and decides I'm not paying attention anyway.

'She likes you,' Paper says, bringing it back to my level.

I could tell her that Shil hates my guts and has done ever since I made her brother my sergeant. But I don't bother. 'No, she doesn't,' I say instead.

'Believe me,' says Paper. 'She does. I know these things.'

Paper probably means she once read something about the mating habits of those *primitive peoples* she was muttering about. As we walk, the city of Farlight wakes around us and she tells me my mission. The one I'm meant to keep quiet about.

We're being borrowed by the U/Free. *We* being the Aux. Although that is a secret, obviously.

'You understand?'

'Yes,' I say. 'I know what secret means.'

Paper sighs. She doesn't, however, tell me why we're being borrowed. That's going to come later.

The houses become larger as we head downhill, and keep getting larger, grander and cleaner until we near Farlight's centre where huge mansions hide behind heavy gates. The gardens are green and roses flourish. People down here have enough water to waste on plants. It's an interesting idea for someone who grew up on a frontier fort in the desert.

Elegant hovers wait outside shops as we get closer still. Uniformed guards usher high clan families into retailers so

exclusive I have no idea what they sell. And nothing outside gives a clue. Paper watches me watch them. There is something knowing in her gaze. As if this is what she expects me to do.

Cold air blasts from shop doors.

For a few seconds, as they leave, the families experience the heat with which the rest of this city lives daily. And then sides lift on sleek hovers, and chauffeurs and cold air welcome them inside. This was Aptitude's life once. She's never seemed to miss it.

'What are you thinking?' Paper asks.

'Nice car,' I say, as a smoked-glass monstrosity slides away. She glances at me strangely.

A virus attack hit this area before I was born. A few of the streets melted. Most just dripped a little and then solidified. Although few of them dripped as much as OctoV's cathedral. This looks ready to collapse into a puddle the moment the sun rises high enough.

It's looked like that for five hundred years.

That's what Paper tells me as we skirt the square and duck under an arch in the shadow of the cathedral, that leads down an alley and into a smaller square beyond.

Behind this is a long and narrow lake, looking like a river, that divides the north from the south of Farlight. The lake stinks in summer, and it stinks in winter. Only not quite as badly. Bodies have a habit of turning up in that lake. A number of them badly mutilated.

I know where we're going.

What interests me is that Paper also knows. I'll give good money she hasn't been before. The Death's Head aren't known for issuing open invitations to their regimental HQ.

The square is dusty, the grass even browner than the last time I was here. No one's wasting any water round here. A fir tree droops behind rusting railings, stripped of its needles by the heat as surely as if someone had lit a bonfire underneath. The HQ itself is immaculate.

'Don't tell me,' says Paper.

Glancing from the freshly painted door to the rusting railings, from the scrubbed steps to the parched earth showing between patches of dead grass, she says, 'Subliminal reinforcement of already established hierarchical patterns . . .'

I ignore her.

Elbowing my way through a crowd around the door brings me to the steps at the same time as a major in the militia. His chest drips with braid and he's wearing a row of ribbons probably awarded for dressing himself. A young woman hangs off his arm. She has as many jewels as he has medals. In addition, her breasts are doing their best to fight free from her blouse. It's a heroic battle.

There's no doubt what the jewels were awarded for.

'*Lieutenant,*' he says.

We stare at each other.

Maybe I'm meant to stand back, or something. When I don't, he draws himself up to his full height. This is a head shorter than me. 'I order you to give way . . .'

OK, so I shouldn't grin.

'Sven,' says Paper. 'Let him go first.'

'Why?'

'Because I outrank you,' says the major.

Like I give a fuck. 'Tell me,' I say, 'what are all those ribbons for? Heroism in the face of overwhelming . . .'

My nod takes in his partner's generous flesh.

Anything the major intends to say - and he looks like someone who intends to say a lot - dies at a bark of laughter from the top of the steps. A crop-haired man with wire glasses hiding pale blue eyes stands in the doorway. He's wearing a simple uniform. No decorations except a single Obsidian Cross.

'Wondered what was holding everyone. Should have known . . .'

The major's eyes flick from me to General Jaxx. Then from General Jaxx to Paper Osamu, and some dim understanding of who this strangely dressed woman might be finally reaches his brain. He looks like a man already regretting getting out of bed.

Paper and I go up the steps first.

Chapter 3

THE DROP GLIDER is so old it comes from a time when stealth meant making the edges pointed and painting everything matt black.

Now it just looks dated.

An X73i says the pilot. Then admits he had to look it up, because he's never flown one before. In fact, he didn't know any still existed.

'Great,' says Neen.

He shuts up when I glare at him.

Our pilot has been jumpy since we began to drop. All he and his co-pilot have to do is sit in their little cabin upfront and steer this thing in controlled descent. So I don't see their problem. We are five hours out of Farlight and half a spiral arm away. That's what happens if your general lends you to the U/Free. You present yourself at their embassy one afternoon, sign papers stating you undertake the job willingly, and head downstairs into a shitty little basement.

I think we're going for a briefing.

Perhaps a medical.

What am I meant to think? The basement door opens on one planet and closes on another? That would be bad enough. Only it doesn't. It dumps us on board a U/Free ship in low orbit over a planet. The ship's bigger than most cities.

Well, cities I've seen.

Fifteen minutes later, we are dropping towards the planet's surface in an out-dated glider, dressed as mercenaries but minus any weapons. Clearly, we're going to be given those later.

'How much longer?' asks Rachel.

She's my sniper, all red hair and attitude. Heavy breasts and broad hips. She has been fucking Haze, my intelligence officer, for the last six weeks. We've all been pretending not to notice.

'Zero one five,' says the pilot.

There is cold desert below, and if villages exist down there they don't show on the scans. According to our briefing Hekati is five rocks out from a double star on the inner fringe of a spiral. It lacks oil, minerals and decent agricultural land. I'd ask what we're doing here but I already know. Destroying a weapons factory.

'Don't worry,' the co-pilot tells Rachel. 'I'll get you down safely.'

On screen, which is how we see them, his boss quietly takes a medal of legba uploaded from inside his shirt, and I know we're in trouble.

'Actually,' he says, 'you won't.'

Touching the medal to his lips obviously closes a circuit.

As the pilot's skull explodes, jagged splinters take his co-pilot through the head, and splatter two helpings of brain across a bulkhead. It happens too fast to stop, even if we could get through the security doors to the cabin.

'Sir?' says Shil. 'We're . . .'

'Yeah,' I say.

We are doing what happens when a drop glider loses both its pilots, we're crashing. The X73i is a thousand feet above the desert floor, and headed for a cliff half a mile ahead. The cliff is a good thousand feet higher again.

'We'll have ridge lift,' says Haze.

Half of what Haze says is nonsense. The rest can sometimes save your life. He might be large, moon-faced and clumsy. But he's not as large as he was when we first met on a battlefield and I stopped him being chopped up by enemy guns. Although he still sounds simple to anyone who doesn't know different.

'Wind hits a cliff, sir,' he says, 'it rises. Creates an updraught. The updraught will give us lift.'

'Not enough,' I say.

We have about two minutes before the cliff face and this plane get up close and personal. All we've got going for us is the fact the desert floor is rising as it approaches the cliff. A thousand years of sifting sand for all I know.

'Sir,' says Rachel. 'The exit's jammed.'

'Of course it is. It's tied to the system.'

'One minute thirty.'

'Sir,' asks Haze. 'You want me to override the glider's AI?'

As I said, he is my intelligence officer. Only, he's not an officer and his intelligence isn't something most people recognize. But he has more shit in his skull than I have and two metal braids one each side of his skull to prove it.

'No time,' I tell him.

'One minute twenty-five.' He's counting down to the AI's internal clock. 'I can probably—'

'Haze.'

'Sir?'

'Prepare to jump.'

'But sir,' says Rachel. 'The exit . . .'

'Fuck the exit.'

One minute ten.

Dropping to my knees, I punch my fist through the glider's floor and rip with my metal hand. Cold wind swirls into the hold and scoops trays from a trolley. The air on this planet is thin and we're losing the oxygen mix that keeps us comfortable.

'Help me.'

Ceramic slices at their fingers but they tear anyway. Leaving me to snap the optic fibres that run like veins under the skin of this craft. We wobble. Of course we bloody wobble. You rip holes in a glider it's going to get upset.

'Grab what you can.'

When Rachel just stands there, I push her towards the rear of the plane. She wants to protest, but doesn't dare. She grabs food packs and begins tossing them through the rip in the floor.

'Just drop the lot.'

She does.

A gun cabinet clings to a rear bulkhead. It's locked, but one punch takes it off the wall. The cabinet has no back, which makes locking it pointless and gives us our only weapon. A fat distress pistol, with three flares. As Rachel throws out the pistol and tosses flares after it, part of me wonders how we are going to find this stuff.

'Jump,' I tell her.

When she hesitates, I push her after the gun, the flares and all that other stuff she has been tossing out. Haze follows, looking shocked.

The others don't need encouraging.

So I hit the ground and roll to put out flames. A split moment later, a second explosion drops fifty tons of cliff on what is left of our glider, burying it. The first explosion might be an accident. The second is intentional. I just have time to think this before rocks begin rolling my way.

'Incoming,' I shout.

A small boulder, the size of a three-wheel combat, tumbles past, then a larger one, maybe the size of a house, followed by a cartwheeling splinter as long as our buried plane.

Progression, I think.

Flinging myself behind a rock, I wait out the landslide. The crawl space is too small, so I jam my legs into the gap and wait it out some more.

A year ago I wouldn't have known what *progression* meant. Mind you, a year ago I was someone else. These days I'm Sven Tveskoeg, lieutenant with the Death's Head,

Obsidian Cross, second class. What I'm doing out of uniform is a whole other question.

'Sir . . .'

Haze, from the sound of it.

'Sir . . .'

'Over here,' I call, and he stumbles uphill, Rachel in tow.

She has the distress pistol in her hand, which means she's already started hunting down the supplies we dropped. I like Rachel; she's one of my better finds. Haze knows I think this. I am not sure he is happy.

Mind you, I'm not sure I give a fuck.

'You're burnt.'

That's Haze for you, always stating the obvious.

'Not badly,' I tell him. 'Report.'

He looks at me.

'Rachel . . .?'

'Sergeant Neen's down, sir. Arm broken. Corporal Franc has a broken ankle. I'm OK. Shil's OK.'

'And you?' I ask Haze.

'I've got a headache.'

I am about to say, *of course you have a fucking headache. You just fell thirty feet.* However, something stops me. Haze's eyes are glazed, his face is sweating. Any minute now, his nose is going to start to bleed. It is a habit of his.

'We're being watched?'

'Think so, sir.'

He might be soft as uncooked dough and have even fewer social skills than I have, but if Haze thinks we are being watched . . .

Mind you. In the middle of a desert?

Satellites are possible. The sky is clear, almost purple. Not a single cloud, although infrared lenzing means clouds don't present a problem these days.

We'll deal with the watchers later.

'Find the flares,' I tell Haze.

'Yes, sir.'

To Rachel I say, 'Take me to Neen.'

'Franc's worse . . .'

Rachel adds *sir*, when she sees my face. But it's too late. As I step towards her, she steps back; and then makes herself stand her ground. Although she twists her head away from the blow she thinks is coming.

'Sergeants outrank corporals,' I say, and leave it at that.

We find Neen against a boulder, clutching his arm. His face is tight and he has bitten through his lower lip.

'You needed yet?'

'No, sir.'

'Why not?'

'Thought we might need them later.'

Ripping open a combat pack, I stab a syringe into his neck and feel the bulb deflate as morphine enters his bloodstream. There are better drugs and better ways to deliver them, but morphine is cheap and effective and you can buy it anywhere.

Counting down from five, I let the drug do its job and then reach for Neen's forearm. The thinner of the two bones is broken. But it hasn't ripped its way through his skin and the break feels clean.

He is lucky.

'Find me splints.'

When Rachel comes back, it is with a strip of ceramic from the glider's tail, and a length of fibre optic that thrashes in her hand like a wounded snake. Seems the rear section of our glider broke free. Must have been that hole I ripped in the skin.

Haze carries a food parcel, two flares and a water bottle.

'Find the other bottles,' I tell him.

'Sir . . .'

 Rachel wants to say something.

It's written on her face and that is an improvement. A few months back she wore her hair over her eyes so no one could see her face at all. After the surrender of Ilseville, a Silver Fist officer put his gun to the back of her head to