

## A Craving for Blood

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### Sediana Desert

The five Panthers of Chenine's troop crested the small rise on the run, their desk-size feet puffing clouds of sand with each pounding step. Behind them came the platoon of MECA infantry, large in their muted green, powered armor, rifles to their shoulders, their APCs advancing beside them. Chenine's HUD flashed a dozen enemy contacts at the bottom of the rise, and her Panther's fire-control computer highlighted what it felt were the most dangerous. It was critical information, but she didn't need the HUD to tell her that the Apaches wouldn't give up without a fight. A simple glance through her cockpit's armored glass revealed several buff-colored armored vehicles guarding the base and tracers erupting from a dozen folds in the desert, each stuffed with infantry.

As she watched, a handful of missiles left from the Apache positions, and two of them headed for her. The Panther's anti-missile system responded automatically, keying chaff to decoy the lead missile and taking the other out with the mini-Gatlin gun mounted on its shoulder. Not everyone, however, was so lucky; a bright flash amid the APCs signaled where one of the other Apache missiles had found its mark.

The MECA troops responded with a torrent of fire into the Indian infantry. An Apache vehicle—a Bradley, Chenine remembered from the identification holograms—returned the MECA troops' fire with 25mm, depleted-Uranium slugs, its turret methodically traversing the breadth of the TDF attack. Dirt and sand erupted where the Infantry Fighting Vehicle's bullets struck the desert; blood erupted where they struck armor and flesh.

Abruptly, a finger of light penetrated the Bradley at the junction of its turret and chassis. It shuddered and briefly glowed from within before the turret lifted from the vehicle: its onboard ammunition exploded. To Chenine's right, one of her Panthers clomped by, its laser cannon already searching for a new target. Simultaneously, an APC's autocannon found another Bradley, and shredded its thin armor. The fire from the TDF MECA troops continued to take its toll, and less and less return fire came from the Apache positions.

One by one the red enemy icons in her HUD blinked out. Certainly the Apaches were brave, determined warriors, but bravery and determination were not enough. *It takes training, equipment, and breeding to best the TDF*, thought Chenine with pride.

And then the Abrams fired.

There were two Apache tanks. A moment before there had been none. The impact of the two armor-piercing rounds fired from the Abrams' cannons stopped the Panther to Chenine's front dead in its tracks. Behind the tanks Chenine could just make out the gigantic doors laid in the desert floor through which the tanks must have come. They led to the Apache's underground vehicle lager, she guessed.

It was no time for guessing. The Panther to her front swung its Gauss Rifle toward the Indian tanks, but the CAT was too slow. Both tanks rocked on their chassis as they fired once more. The shells knocked the CAT to its back.

Chenine spoke, "Missiles."

The single word switched the CAT's ready weapon from the Gauss Rifle to the shoulder-fired missiles.

"Missiles ready," the onboard computer replied, its soft voice oblivious to the bedlam surrounding it. She targeted the left tank and pressed the joystick fire button once, twice, three times. Three trails of death exploded from her shoulder-mounted launcher just as the Abrams tanks fired once again.

This time the Abrams' shells tore into the underside of the prone Panther, ripping through the leg servos, stored ammunition, and finally the cockpit. A nanosecond later the Panther exploded. An instant after that, Chenine's first missile reached her target.

The Abrams also had an anti-missile system. Mounted on the rear of the turret, the system consisted of a plate-sized radar dish that controlled a rapid-fire .22 caliber mini-gun. The gun and radar had lockouts that prevented it from firing below the tank's turret, as being shot at by their own tank made infantry very reluctant to accompany the Abrams into battle. Although archaic by 23<sup>rd</sup>-century standards, the .22 caliber mini-gun was more than capable of bringing down an inbound anti-tank missile, and that's exactly what it did.

The Abrams' radar tracked Chenine's first launch, engaged the gun and lashed out with a stream of bullets. The missile exploded harmlessly 10 meters from the tank. Unfortunately for the Abrams, there were two more missiles following the first. The radar had just slewed toward the second missile when it popped up and then dove into the top of the turret, burning through the armor and into the interior of the tank; the third missile followed it through. Both exploded in the turret, igniting the shell in the loader's hands. Within a second the Abrams was a burning hulk, its crew shredded.

There was no time to appreciate her victory. Chenine's Panther rocked as a shell struck its chest. A quick scan of the instruments, revealed no damage. Heart pounding, she turned to target the other tank. Its commander was riding exposed, swinging the turret machine gun to bear on her CAT. It was a futile gesture, a brave gesture, it was . . .

*Oh my God . . .* She had known it could happen, in fact she had known that it probably would happen, but understanding it did little to ease its reality. The brave tank commander was . . . Jacob.