

Brink of Extinction Chapter One

by Christopher Lee Buckner

CHAPTER ONE

“Hurry, I can see the light.”

Leona barely heard the words that came out of Julius' mouth as his sooty faced stared back at her with intense purpose. She could see sunlight as it resonated around his head indicating that they were near to the surface.

“We'll be out of here soon, commander. Just hurry.”

“We can't leave the others,” Leona's words trailed as if she wasn't the speaker. She did not want to go back into the darkness, but the thoughts of leaving her men behind were too much. Regardless, her legs carried her forward and toward the light.

“They're gone. There is nothing we can do for them,” Angelo said as he followed behind her.

The ground was loose and difficult to find footing, but together the three inched their way closer to the surface, having left the horrors they hadn't been prepared for, behind them.

“I'm responsible for them,” Leona cried as she fought back tears, not just from sadness but from the bright glare that was growing before her.

“And they gave their lives to save...” Angelo's words were cut short as he suddenly screamed in agony. Something had grabbed his leg — teeth bearing down through flesh and bone, pulling him down into the cavern.

Leona turned sharply and tried to reach for him, taking hold of his right hand.

“Commander!” Julius shouted as he reached and grabbed the back of Leona's blood-soaked shirt, holding her steady as she too was being pulled by whatever had Angelo.

“Help me!” Angelo screamed as he dug his nails into the side of the wall.

“Hold on! Give me your other hand!” Leona shouted. Her grip was strong and her footing ensured, but what had latched onto Angelo's leg was stronger than she, and was determined to take him down.

“I can't hold on...” Angelo's eyes opened wide as he felt a sudden pain shoot through his back. Moments later globs of blood sprayed out of his mouth and splashed over Leona, her eyes filled with terror.

“Hang on!” Leona screamed as she tried to pull her man to safety, but she could see in his soulless eyes that he was gone. And then, with one powerful tug, his body was torn from her grip, his shoulder ripped from its socket as the body was dragged into the gloom.

“Angelo!” Leona cried while still holding onto his severed arm before releasing it. She could hear the sounds of the creatures eating his body as crunching mixed with the splashing of blood against the cave walls, filled her ears.

“Commander, we have to move. Angelo is gone.” Julius forcefully pulled Leona, dragging her towards the heat that grew more intense with each foot they climbed, she, however, never let her eyes raised as she stared down into the abyss below her, trying to see through the swarming blackness at the beasts that lie below.

Leona jerked awake as she sat in an oversized chair. Her brow was covered with sweat and her skin was hot to the touch. She found herself having difficulty breathing. She was hyperventilating. It took five minutes before she finally started to calm down, but still, even as she put her hand to her chest she could feel her heart racing uncontrollably.

Her skin was hot and sticky. The smell of death had lingered, sticking into her pores, beckoning her to join the rotting corpses that swelled in her mind. She had been in Hell. A real place as physical as anything man could have ever dreamt possible. She wanted to cry for help as she had done that day, now years past, but not a whisper left her parched lips.

The memories of the war were never far from Leona's mind. Even here in the tranquility of space, the faces of those dead, her comrades were often the only souls she saw for days. Now, it was her work that consumed her for hours without rest, like an obsession, a drug which compelled her to carry on no matter how physically exhausting it was.

Leona found it difficult to focus as her head was throbbing and her vision blurred. Eventually she forced herself to steady her breathing and regain her composure, as she took one deep, careful breath after another, which she'd been taught by the psychologists she had seen over the past five years.

I can't take this any longer, she thought.

As the clean recycled air filled her lungs, she raised her hand to her forehead and wiped the moisture from her brow before she closed her eyes once again, to better collect her thoughts.

I am so weak. I'm a fucking coward for allowing this to consume me night after night, she cursed silently.

She dread nights like this, which were all too frequent. She felt powerless, something Leona found hard to accept. She was a thinker, a survivor, a soldier, trained like all her kind to endure.

I'm not in the position to allow this to continually control me...Get hold of yourself!

She had been told years ago that her dreams were the result of survivor's guilt. That she, both physically and mentally beat herself up to have lived while so many others had died. It was only human to feel this way, or so she had been told.

I don't give a damn what they called it. I don't have time to be human, to feel sorry for myself and dwell on past guilt. I have no right, not when the last of the human race depended on me and the success of the project. My sanity is a small price to pay to end this war.

Leona pushed the falling strands of her jet-black, shoulder length hair from her cheeks, as she opened her oval brown eyes, now feeling at least for the moment, better. It was only then that she

noticed the flashing yellow light above her head, signaling to her that she had left her work opened and unsaved.

She forced her eyes shut in frustration at her carelessness.

How could I be so bloody stupid?

She reached up and placing her fingers over the holographic controls, which lay in front of her. Her fingers moved frantically double-checking the millions of lines of data that were displayed in front of her. When she was satisfied that everything was in order she saved the program with just a flick of her finger.

Phoenix Project — Saved. Each of the three computer screens read as she closed down her workstation after forty-eight hours of toiling nonstop with barely a moment's rest; she was done for at least a couple hours.

Once she deactivated the computer the holographic screens that surrounded her disappeared, and with its glow gone the lab was nearly pitch-black. Only the intense glow of the earth outside brighten the room as it cast through the sparse windows that lined the far walls; the warmth still soothing.

Ominous sounds filled Leona's mind once the room was dark. She had heard them before — the terrifying noises of humanity's enemy, which grew louder and louder until she could not take it a second longer; she hated the darkness, always had.

“Shut up! Shut up!” she cried out as she slammed her palms against her ears, while shutting her eyes tight. A moment later only quiet remained, as it should.

Opening her eyes she looked around her empty lab, which only she ever occupied. The silence could have driven most people mad as only the faint *hum* of the air processor could be heard, or the expanding and retracting of metal with the temperature outside. Leona had learned a long time ago to live without others — living beings. The dead, well, they were with her at all hours of the day, regrettably.

“When will this all come to an end?” she asked herself, halfway expecting an answer.

Finally after two days of being grounded to the large chair that surrounded her, she reached behind her head and grabbed the base of a hard metal tube, which was connected to several thick wires that ran through the chair. She held her breath and twisted the object, yanking it out from the base of her skull. Her eyes squinted from the uncomfortable feeling of the cold spear-like object being pulled out from her brain. The action caused tears to form in her eyes, a natural reaction and not a sign of her own intolerance to pain.

Once the device was removed, Leona exhaled and ran her hand through her hair until she touched the spot where the linkup had been surgically implanted. It was a small incision, one that was unnoticeable when her hair dropped over the hole at the nape of her neck, but each time she linked herself up to the station's computers she felt that much further away from the rest of the human race. She knew more than anyone down below how important *Phoenix* was; it was their last hope, her gift to those few precious souls living each day with the threat of extinction.

Leona deactivated another small button that was built into her chair. As she switched it off, slowly her body began to rise until she was several feet above her workstation, floating freely like an angel born without wings.

She drifted across her lab, moving with the grace of a swimmer through water. This was one of the things she loved about living in space, the feeling of being free from the burden and weight of the hopes and dreams of an entire species. However, as she floated by the windows that overlooked her world, it never took more than a casual glance to remind her why she had locked herself in this rotating, artificial tin-can.

In the distance, just a faint dot from where she was now, was *Phoenix*, an artificial satellite meant to save the world. Further still were the faint outlines of larger space stations — much grander than the small metal habitat she was on now, which she inhabited with only a dozen other individuals. Those monoliths in the sky, while safe from the war below weren't large enough to save all of mankind. A

few thousand called them their home. Even then they were the best and brightest — the last hope that the human race would continue if everything else failed.

She did not linger. She could, and often times had stared down at the earth for hours at a time, watching the unrecognizable landmass, nearly devoid of its once majestic features and seven seas, drift slowly by. No, something else called her right now, something she hated as much as her dreams yet needed.

Stopping before a series of long metal cabinets, Leona opened one of the drawers. Inside, among the many tubes and trays sat a single plastic bottle, which she reached out for.

She felt dazed, which was caused by days without sleep or food, not to mention having her brain connected to the computer for longer than was recommended. This tended to leave her weak and dependent on something more than sleep or food could provide.

Popping the cap off, she allowed the pills inside to float upwards. There were only three left as it were. She stared long and hard at the small cylindrical objects, each twirled before her eyes, which she stared at with contempt.

She hated everything about the pills, that she depended on them to be able to complete her work, or that they seemed to have more control over her than her own free will did. Most of all, she despised the tiny things because somehow they triggered her mind to recall everything that she so desperately wanted to forget. It was a side effect of keeping her mind active and ready for the link to the station's computer.

You little bastards...

She reached out violently and grabbed each of the pills in her palm, and in one motion forced them into her mouth. As they ran down her dry throat, Leona closed her eyes and waited. After only a few moments, she could feel the chemicals make its way through her blood, rejuvenating her cells and her mind so that she may be awake for another twenty-four hours without rest or food.

She shut her eyes as tightly as she could, demanding that her visions not to resurface. But no matter how strong her will was she

could already feel the suffocating warmth on her skin, the sickly smell of death and rot, and uneasy loneliness all around her. She was there again, surrounded by darkness: consumed by distant haunting sounds of unnatural creatures, and the screams of her people as...

She forced herself to escape the vision as tears dropped down the sides of her cheeks.

I could have done better. I should have been there for them. I should have brought them home.

As Leona closed the cabinet, she looked at the fuzzy reflection of her own face that stared back at her through the stainless steel doors. She was strikingly beautiful with well defined eastern features, full cheeks and lips, and dark brown eyes. However, she didn't see what beauty others might have seen, she saw only the reminders of what she had suffered - the deep scars that ran down the right side of her face, and her eyes that were devoid of life.

He could never love the woman you've become.

She hated herself. This was not the image of the woman she once was: proud, strong, beautiful — now she was a vessel to be used and thrown away.

At least my mind still belongs to me. You bastards couldn't take it.

Leona turned her eyes away from her reflection and eased herself over towards the nearest window and looked down at the world that she and so many others had been fighting to save. However, with each new day — each passing year, humanity was slowly slipping away.

The land was not green anymore, but gray and brown, stripped of its trees, grass and rivers. Large gaping scars caused by both nature and man, dotted the planet like massive bullet wounds. What clouds remained was red and toxic. What fell from them was no longer anything that brought hope, but only more death. The continents were now vastly different as the ocean had receded dramatically, as the atmosphere had changed, becoming hotter and irradiated. She knew that one day very soon the seas would be gone entirely, leaving behind a barren and toxic world that would be more like

Venus than Earth. Mankind could never walk on the surface of the earth again, no less try to rebuild its tattered civilization.

She smiled, not amused, but saddened by how hopeless it all seemed. She was a girl who was quite literally trying to save a whole planet.

This is ridiculous, she mused.

A century ago that was the crusade — *save the earth — save the whales — save the trees* — It was all gone now.

Even if I succeeded, what is worth saving? Is survival today really worth the legacy that would be left for future generations? Or am I merely prolonging humanities suffering a couple more decades, if that? These thoughts lingered constantly, but Leona knew she couldn't give into her fears. She had to follow her heart and try to make a difference, because man deserved a chance. She would work herself to death to save the lives of the few, the last tens of millions alive. But it wasn't only her sacrifice that was going to be made, but others; brave souls that she would have to trust and ask to possibly die in the coming days that troubled her the most.

“*Iya,*” she spoke low in her English accent. “Locate and play me the files on the Earth Federation - special operations team, Valkyrie Team Six.”

“*Confirmed - Valkyrie Team Six File found.*” The computer replied in its monotone voice before it began to read off the team roster, and their collective backgrounds, military records and mission reports.

Leona kept her eyes focused outside as she gazed down on her world, looking as a mother would at a cancer striking child.

The files that she had requested the computer to read she'd heard a dozen times over. She knew their names, faces and records. She knew that all of them were good soldiers and would and had, bled for the salvation of the human race. Regardless, she did not relish the thoughts that she needed them — needed him.

I need you, Alex. You're the only one I can trust. You've never let me down — not once.

Closing her eyes once more, Leona didn't fight against her memories. She allowed the terrible visions to take hold. Soon she

wouldn't have to worry anymore. She was coming home, back to earth.

