

E. CRIBBLER



The
Price of Existence

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Prologue

Ever since the dawn of mankind, some primal instinct drives us to find proof that we are not alone in this world.

The first human left his cave to find companions. Hordes set out on long and perilous journeys to meet other tribes. For millennia, thousands of people wandered for weeks and months, wrestling with nature in order to find new people

Christopher Columbus, a navigator from Genoa crossed the ocean trusting his conviction to make contact with a new world.

For some reason this just wasn't enough. Although billions of people populated the Earth, we still felt alone. We built spaceships and searched on, leaving our home planet. We wanted to see into the

distance through the light-years.

But why? What is that longing encoded in our genes that makes us look ever further? Why do we obsessively believe that we cannot possibly be the only sapient civilization in this incomprehensibly big world? After so many disappointments why does our belief still hold, stronger than our life-instincts?

Why are we gazing at the star-studded night sky and ask ourselves again and again - you out there, who we've been searching for since time immemorial, which planet do you live on, where should we go?

And what's next when we find the much-desired answer to these questions?

If those that we've been waiting for for so long come to us...will we survive?

Extract from the diary of Kyra Tayler

15th August 2043.

Chapter one

Only a handful of them were crouching, screened by the shrubs and trees. Two women, four men and a boy, barely 16. They were looking at the road secretly, from where they expected the gezotites. They were trying to hide their breathing so that the vital sign does not give them away and the approaching enemy does not discover them prematurely. Even thus there was a good chance that they would be discovered before they can attack the troopers, because their steeds, the screnons, that they used in their raids, and while hunting the humans, could smell humans from miles.

Still, they hoped, because they had no other choice left. They had to stop the group of three gezotites that the scouts discovered from getting into the city, pillaging and slaughtering the few hundred humans still hiding among the ruins, praying for survival day after day. They knew the seven of them would not be able to overcome the approaching gezotite militants, as they were bloody

good fighters, armed with high-impact handguns, that proved to have such destructive force that terran forces were no match against them, which was obvious right from the first clashes. Not to mention the bloodthirsty screnons, resembling the ancient terran Tyrex, trained for war, that gezotites used to ride in close fights.

During their raids, which were solely about hunting down humans, they preferred to give chase to the humans this way. They killed the remaining few inhabitants of the defeated planet cruelly, just for fun.

- Steady... - Kyra Tayler patted the neck of Shad, lying beneath her. The nostrils of the grey horse flared as he fixed his gaze on the road. The horse pricked his ears on hearing her voice, but despite his owner's calming words, all his muscles remained tensed.

They must be close, thought Kyra. She knew every flicker of motion of Shad, the animal only became so tense when he could smell the enemy close by.

The two of them will be the first bait, because her horse was a remarkably swift and agile animal. As soon as the signal is given by the Commander, who just emerged from behind a tree on the other side of the road, they will spring out, upsetting the gezotite troopers for few seconds. This may give her companions enough time to attack all at the same time and lure them away from the road leading to the city. This will gain another day to live for the people living in the city - which was not worth much in these dreadful times when the best you could hope for is a quick death if you were a human and taken by a gezotite. Not to mention the possibility of seizing some weapons from the gezotites, as they were pretty low on firearms. If they were able to get hold of a single gezotite gun today, that would provide considerable protection in itself. But to achieve all this, they will have to fight a bitter fight, and the woman suspected that she or one of her companions are going to pay with their lives for today's recklessness. She knew it was worth the price, because if they were successful, they could defend themselves effectively for weeks against any intruders.

Kyra gripped the handle of the dagger in her hand. It was her only weapon; apart from this all she had was her skills and her luck. She glanced behind her, her eyes met Alicia's who, about two meters behind her, almost disappeared in the tall grass. The other woman must have been just as afraid as she was. Waned to about 110 lbs, going without food for days and tired because they could rarely get more than an hour or two of sleep in these persistently threatening times. But they were both determined to fight today.

Alicia looked back at her. Kyra saw that the other woman's mouth was barely visibly, but moving. She was praying.

She returned her gaze to the road, keeping an eye out for the Commander's signal. Maybe I should also have a few words with God, she thought. Maybe she could survive this day, if she had faith. But her faith in God was lost eight months ago. On the day when the gezotites entered Earth's atmosphere on their spaceships and without any preliminary negotiation started slaughtering humans. They were attacking simultaneously all countries, with tremendous forces and within days the planet was covered in tens of millions of corpses. The Earthen forces hadn't even time or chance to return fire. The aliens knew exactly where and when they had to attack first, in order to cripple the military operations on Earth in no time. The blue planet was in flames, the cities burned for weeks, the enemy raged on, showing no mercy to the survivors. A killer instinct was driving them; they had no pity on children, or adults. Hell was set loose on Earth, with all its nightmares.

Those humans who managed to find refuge, and were hiding from the gezotite butchers for the time being, well, they had not much to hope for. The aliens also brought a new illness to the planet

that in a matter of weeks finished off the survivors that the gezotites did not find.

Since there were no hospitals, no doctors, not to mention medication, the disease spread like wildfire among the survivors on Earth. Whoever was infected was sure to die within days: temperature, painful convulsions then death.

The disease had another consequence as well. The fleeing humans were running not only from the gezotites but started to fear each other as well. The epidemic split them into small groups, abandoning any and all that showed the slightest symptom of the affliction. More death and bitterness issued.

Kyra and her companions managed to avoid the disease so far. The refugees hiding among the ruins of the city were also lucky in this respect. But they were all very wary of any arriving survivors. They accommodated those in need, but although they let the newcomers through the border, they were held in quarantine for a few days in a separate area. They were not even given any food, to avoid all possibility of infection. Although it wasn't like the city dwellers had much food stored, when they woke up in the mornings, they could not be sure that they would be lucky enough to have anything to eat that day.

These were dark times for all of them, without even the faintest hope, that they still had a slight chance of survival even for a single more day. .

Still, they believed. If not in God, since it was long since he turned away from his creation, but they believed. In the next minute, hour and days that they could survive. And in a miracle, that must come, and in that moment when all fear will be dispelled and this blight will get the hell out of the planet.

Because this time must come. They all knew. If they did not know this in their hearts, they would not be lurking behind the foliage, waiting for the enemy. All they had to do was to keep their hope alive at the bottom of their hearts. They must live, so that humankind can be free in days to come.

Kyra heard a low grunt that caught her attention. She looked right and saw that Abe the Bengal tiger adopted a threatening posture and was staring at the road, ready to pounce.

The tiger joined them four months ago. One evening, on one of the rare occasions when they had some meat to roast in a sheltered metro tunnel, he just walked up to them. Hunger and the smell of the roasting meat must have drawn the scrawny predator that had been through hardships just like the humans. It must have lived in a zoo before the war, maybe that was why he was used to the presence of people and ventured there.

That night, he was approaching the amazed people slowly, but his behavior was not aggressive. As if he understood that the enemy was not the small group of bewildered humans watching him, but a far greater and a more troubling predator than him that they all had to face: death from starvation.

When they were only a few steps apart, he lay down and the men could clearly read all the sadness and pain of hunger in his eyes.

Brock was the first to make a move. He cut a piece of his share of the meat and, though staying at a safe distance, but took it to the tiger. The animal gobbled it up in one gulp. Then waited for another one. Of course, after this the others also shared their small but precious meal, and from that day, Abe was part of the group. He made a real fighter and a loyal companion, who fought alongside them against the gezotites over and over again.

Shad shifted again, and the woman jockeyed herself so that the moment the horse stood up, she would be seated securely on his back.

- Soon - Kyra patted the neck of the horse - On Brock's mark...
- She lifted herself a little, to see the Commander's mark for attack.
- They are close... - Alicia crept closer to them. She cocked her gun.
- Careful! - Kyra told her, without looking at her.

The Commander's arm appeared from behind the tree.

At the same time they could hear the hoof beats of the approaching screnons. They could almost feel the tremor of every single step of the huge animals, as the weight of several tons smashed against the ground.

Kyra's heart also gave a jump, thumping adrenalin through her system with incredible speed. She was not afraid, she was ready for battle with every cell in her body. She did not take her eyes off the Commander's hand for a second, she was ready to leap into action with Shad.

Brock finally gave the mark and in that moment Kyra's body and mind melded with that of Shad for a few seconds. She held his mane tightly, and he moved instantly. The next moment he was standing up and with that same movement made for the road.

Rider and horse faced the approaching gezotite group. Shad's hooves kicked up the dust around them as he set off with all his might and knowing no fear started to sprint towards the screnons and their riders who were at least five times his size.

What the heck is Kyra doing? - whispered the Commander angrily - She should be luring them away not running to meet them! She is only gonna get herself killed!

Next to him Johnson was also watching in horror the riding woman.

She is out of her mind, no question about it... she is risking all our lives.
If the gezotites don't kill the woman, I will do it myself, that's for sure. But right now, we have no choice but to help her...

There are three of them - she assessed the situation quickly. There is one in the front, must be of a higher rank among the gezotites, the two in the back must be bodyguards only. They were in armor, both the gezotites and the screnons. Their armor provided excellent protection for them - it prevents bullet as well as shrapnel wounds... It will be quite difficult to finish them, but may just be possible.

They've come to hunt, no question about it. But there are more of us this time, we have the advantage, she thought.

The gezotite in the front reacted as soon as he spotted the woman and horse riding towards them. He pulled out a gun and aimed it at her. He didn't stop his screnon, he even egged him on. At the same time he barked something to the two in the back, who then also pulled out guns and targeted the woman.

The distance between them dropped to about 20 meters, but Kyra did not hold Shad back. She saw it in her mind's eye that her companions were also ready to fire. A few more seconds and the blood bath will begin. Today only one team will go home alive.

The gezotite shot at her. Kyra saw the thin light beam emerging from the gun and instinctively lay back on Shad's back. The high impact light bullet sped past her, millimeters from her face, and missing its target finally struck the earth, where its lethal power was absorbed with a blast.

She gripped her dagger, sat up again, and fixed her eyes on the gezotite leader charging at her. She had to get hold of the enemy's weapon, so that her companions might have a chance for survival. The Commander would definitely have objected to her coup, so she did not tell him when they set out, that she was going to change the assault plan that had served them well until then. This time she was not going to be just the bait with Shad, but she was going to get hold of the weapon that the gezotites used to vaporize a dozen people in a few seconds if necessary. If they had just one of these weapons they would have a much better chance in the next raids, they may even be able to loot more assets from the enemy.

The screnon was as good as panting in her face, it got so close. She knew that there is a small place, a few centimeters wide, under the belly of the beast where vital nerves run. If she jabbed there with her dagger, she may imbalance it and she may be able to climb behind the gezotite. From then on she would be in the hands of fate.

Kyra - howled Brock behind her- Don't do it!

They started to fire at once on the gezotites, the bullets whistling past them, smashing into the armor of the enemy, but the force of the hitting bullets did not even sway them. Some kind of force field offset the energy of the bullets, they might as well have thrown eggs at them.

The gezotite leader realized that they were too close to fire at her again, he would wound himself as well. He ordered his screnon, it roared and bit at Shad with its huge jaws. Its teeth clicked just a few centimeters from the horse's neck. But shad was not frightened by the beast, he avoided it skillfully a turned to run along its flank. The screnon turned on him again instinctively, but the huge animal was not agile enough to reach Shad.

Kyra saw that place on the belly of the screnon, where the alleged spot was, where she had to stab in order to disable the beast. Luckily there was no armor covering the area, she instantly swung her arm with the dagger and stabbed the animal with all her might.

The screnon let out a horrible howl and swayed. Kyra pulled out the dagger from its flesh. A putrid, gluey fluid shot out from the screnon's belly, but by that time she already grabbed one of the straps on its side that held the saddle in place and was jumping on the back of the injured animal.

Beside them Shad dodged the guard following directly behind, and galloped into the greenery. The guard wanted to shoot the animal, but then he was surprised to see with his partner that other humans were springing on them from the trees and bushes. The gezotite turned away from the horse and aimed at the closest human. He had no time to pull the trigger, because an enraged Bengal tiger was on him. The gezotite frantically tried to protect himself with his arms, but Abe hit him with such force, that both of them fell to the ground from the back of the screnon.

In the meantime Kyra clambered up behind the leader. The gezotite, at least three times taller, turned round as soon as he realized the woman was behind him. Just in time, because Kyra's dagger was at the ready again, this time aiming at his body. In that moment he did not understand the purpose of the attack, as his armor made him invulnerable against such a primitive weapon. His arm swung and swept away the stab aimed at him, and with the same momentum he brushed the woman from behind him.

Kyra fell to the ground screaming. She prepared for the hit as she was falling to the ground, but before hitting it, her leg was caught in something. She was hanging upside down, bumping against the side of the galloping screnon. She saw that one of the gezotites was fighting fiercely with Abe and three others. Before she felt the harsh grab of the leader on her clothes she saw Peter getting hold of the firearm from the gezotite that Abe floored and in the next moment opened fire on the third warrior that was on them. In a flash all that remained of the hit gezotite were clouds of vapor.

She could not see what happened next as she felt a tug and was immediately facing the gezotite leader, whose rage was tangible, expressing his fury at the death of his partner with a bellow. Holding Kyra hostage he rode on, and she thought he will crush her in his arms.

Then, Hamilton's head emerged, with a grenade in his hand. He was charging at them maddened holding the unpinned grenade in his hand. The screnon was becoming weaker and despite the urges of its master it was slowing down. Kyra saw they were coming on to a steep slope on their left and knew she had to get free somehow, because Hamilton's plan was clear: he was planning to kill this soldier with the grenade.

She saw him raising the grenade and he was shouting out to her, that it was unpinned. In the next second the grenade was flying towards them.

Kyra only felt the force of the terribly loud explosion, then felt the screnon tumbling under them. Then she felt that the gezotite let go of her and both of them were pushed to the ground by the detonation. The huge body of the screnon took most of the devastating force of the grenade, but as soon as they touched the ground, they started rolling down the hillside unstopably. The woman was tumbling down and could not stop herself from falling further. She also knew that the body of the screnon and the gezotite were rolling along with her, dangerously close to her sometimes. If either of them fell on her, she would be crushed immediately, for sure.

Finally Kyra the rolling stopped. For a few seconds her head was spinning, she felt she had been knocked about severely and was bruised but did not feel any extreme pain in her body.

She lay motionless on the ground and was catching her breath. After she steadied herself, she moved and kneeled. To her surprise, her dagger was lying only centimeters from her. She must have been holding on to it unconsciously. Lucky I didn't hurt myself with it - she thought surprised. She grabbed the weapon immediately.

She turned to her side and then she saw the dead screnon. The carcass was heavily injured in many places, stinking blood was oozing from several parts of its body.

Kyra stood up and stepped up to it warily. The screnon lay on its side, and was so huge even lying down, that the woman was going to have to walk around it if she wanted to find out if it was really dead.

So she started for the other side of the carcass. At the same time keeping an eye out for the gezotite as well, as she hadn't spotted him yet. If it wasn't dead, it could be anywhere in the vicinity, waiting to spring on her and kill her.

Kyra tightened her grip on the dagger, and while she reached the other side of the screnon, she was preparing herself for the attack that could come from any direction.

But she did not expect what she saw in the next moment. She almost exclaimed in her shock, when she came in sight of it.

The gezotite was lying there under his screen, the dead animal trapping its master, who was still alive. The beast pinned the gezotite down with all its weight. Only half his chest and his head were visible under the screen. He was trying with all his might to get out of its grip, but the dead weight of the animal was pressing him down and without the use of his hands and feet he was unable to free himself.

When he saw the woman standing a few steps away, he stopped his desperate fight. He was looking at Kyra motionless.

- You! - she cried out, and sprang on him.

She wanted to kill! This was the chance to take revenge with her own hands for the millions of people... her family, who were all killed by these parasites within a few months. She will draw the blood of one of them and will watch it die with a pleasure that comes from the redemption of the revenge.

- Show me your face, you scum! - she hissed as she jumped frantically on his chest that was still free. She has never seen a gezotite from up close, but she always wanted to look into the eyes of at least one of them. She wanted to see the foul face of these vermin, their monstrosity, to give her strength and determination to survive. She wanted to see who they were up against, she wanted answers, why they wanted to eliminate humankind, what is that unstoppable drive for destruction that lives in the soul of this species. If they have souls at all...

- Why? - she asked wildly, while she tried to get hold of the helmet of the gezotite to remove it.
- What have we done against you? Why do you want to kill us all?

She was aware that the gezotite wouldn't understand her in any case, nor would she understand the gezotite lying beneath her, even if he answered, but the questions rose up in her involuntarily. The gezotites never looked for a contact with humankind, their only goal was slaughter, and the exploitation of the planet. It did not matter that they were humanoid in their build, their bodies resembling humans, except for their height and exceptional muscle strength, they had not the slightest sympathy, not even to find a peaceful approach because of our resemblance. Blood thirst rules them, rather than the possibility of peace.

Finally Kyra found something on the helmet that could be a buckle that straps it on. She pressed it with her hand and the part covering the face slid back, revealing the face to her, with its silvery shiny skin.

For a long moment she was just looking at him and he was staring back at her. Kyra looked at him thoroughly and was surprised how humanlike he was. Although his features were more rugged and hard, but in its build there was an uncanny similarity between him and a human face. She saw that he might be a younger warrior, if she would compare him to a human, she would place him in the middle of his thirties. There was a mark on his forehead that didn't seem a characteristic of his race, but rather something that was put there later, like a tattoo.

Kyra collected herself and the rage returned. She raised the dagger above her head to finish him off.

- You gonna die! - she snarled with rage, and held the dagger in both hands so that she can pound down with more force.

She swung her arms, aiming straight at the neck of the inert body beneath him.

Then she stabbed.

With all her might, she wanted the blade to slash the skin. She wanted to smell the blood and wanted to enjoy the last moments of life of this alien, and truly wanted him to suffer a terrible end, and she wanted to remember every second of it. Hoping to gain redemption because she lived, while millions were slaughtered by the gezotites.

But as the blade almost touched the warrior's neck, all of a sudden, her hand stopped. As if an invisible hand held her wrist, and would not let her stab. The tip of the dagger strained against the gezotites neck, but did not puncture it.

It did not even wound it.

I cannot kill him, she realized... Not like this... She could not just execute him. Her soul was kinder than that, she couldn't just act like a butcher.

Kyra's eyes met the warrior's again. She could not see anger or hatred in his eyes, just a calm resignation to death. He accepted his situation, that a member of the species he defeated, a weaker human, kills him.

It was just a second, freezing all the emotions of the two strangers. Everything they had thought and believed about each other before, all the anger, hatred and rage, in this moment turned to nothing. They were looking at each other, like two children meeting for the first time, asking themselves the curious question of 'who are you?'

Kyra collected herself, looked away perplexed and took the weapon away from the gezotite's neck. She slid off his chest and stood up.

- I do not know why I cannot kill you... - she whispered to the creature.

Then unexpectedly, Hamilton's voice was heard from the distance.

- Kyra! Are you all right?

She looked up in the direction of the man, and waved to him.

- Come on, we have to go! - Hamilton urged her.

- I'm coming - shouted Kyra.

She looked around quickly, before leaving. She found what she was looking for, as the gezotite's firearm was lying not far from him, on the ground. She ran over there and picked it up. But before running up the hill to join her people, she looked at the warrior who had been observing her peacefully.

Then she turned and ran with her loot up the hill.

The gezotite was following her with his eyes until she was completely out of sight. When he could not see her anymore, he whispered a single word in language of the humans.

- Kyra...

Chapter two

Only a few hundred people took shelter and lived in the city, reduced to ruins. A few soldiers, cut off from their units and wound up here, were looking after the embittered survivors, who joined the camp. Brock, the Commander, was one of these soldiers. He was nearing the end of his forties, he was the only one in the ragged group who had had officers' military training. He was the one, who has kept together the others in a group, accepted by all as the leader among them. He was deployed to the city during the first attack with his unit, but he was the only one left alive of his group. Separated from the military, after the disconnection of all communication, he did not leave the surviving civilians to try and join another land army, but stayed with the locals, who were scared to death, and obeyed the original command of protecting them. Which was proving ever more difficult, as the munition was running low and as people tired of the bitter fight for survival.