
William Alan Webb
THE LAST BRIGADE 3
STANDING AT THE EDGE

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William Alan Webb
THE LAST BRIGADE 3
STANDING
AT THE EDGE

Standing at the Edge

William Alan Webb

The Last Brigade, book 3



Dingbat Publishing

STANDING AT THE EDGE
Copyright © 2018 by William Alan Webb
ISBN 978-1-940520-93-3

Published by Dingbat Publishing
Humble, Texas

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Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters, and events are entirely the produce of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to persons living or dead, actual locations, events, or organizations is coincidental.

This book is dedicated to my readers, without whom I am just another guy clacking away at a keyboard.

And a higher dedication goes to the men and women of our armed forces, police and fire departments, who keep us safe and make it possible for there to be writers and readers in the first place.

Who is in charge of the clattering train?
The axles creak and the couplings strain,
and the pace is hot and the points are near,
and sleep hath deadened the driver's ear,
and the signals flash through the night in vain,
for death is in charge of the clattering train.

Edward Milliken, Death and His Brother Sleep

Cast of Characters

The Angriff family

Nicholas Trajanus Angriff — General of the Army. Nick the A to those who fear him. Idolizes George Patton's tactical genius and persona, but not as fussy as Patton about personal appearance and decorum. Like another hero of his, Winston Churchill, Angriff is sometimes accused of courting danger. As a three-star general, he led tactical missions more suited to a captain or lieutenant, usually against direct orders not to do so. His career survived because of his popularity with his men and the public, and his record of success.

Janine Marie Jackson Angriff — Nick's wife, a victim in the Lake Tahoe 'incident.'

Lieutenant Morgan Mary Randall, nee Angriff — Oldest of Nick's two daughters. Lieutenant in the U.S. Army, executive officer First Platoon, Alpha Company, 1st Tank Battalion. Call sign Bulldozer One One Two. Married to Captain Joe Randall. Nicknamed Tank Girl.

Cynthia June Angriff — Nick's youngest daughter, caught in the same attack as her mother.

The Americans

Lt. General Norman Vincent Fleming — Executive Officer of the 7th Cavalry, also the Brigade S-3, Operations. Norm is Nick Angriff's best friend, dating back to their days in OCS. Both men enlisted and worked their way through the ranks, an almost impossible feat. Fleming is the man Angriff trusts above all others.

Major General Dennis Tompkins — Survivor of The Collapse who did not go cold, but instead lived fifty years in post-Collapse America, leading his team of five survivors.

Captain Joseph Daniel Randall — The best helicopter pilot in the brigade. Married to Morgan Randall. Call sign Ripsaw Real.

Lieutenant George 'Bunny' Carlos — Joe Randall's best friend and co-pilot.

Lieutenant Alisa Plotz — AH-72 Comanche commander and Joe Randall's wingman.

Sergeant Andy Arnold — Alisa Plotz's co-pilot.

Sergeant Lara Snowtiger — Marine sniper, a full-blooded Choctaw. Snowtiger embraced her heritage and is versed in Choctaw lore. She is considered as good as any sniper in the 7th Cavalry, including Zo Piccaldi.

Colonel Benjamin Franklin Walling — Promoted to his present rank by Angriff, he commands the headquarters staff and manages Angriff's day-to-day schedule.

Sergeant Major of the Army John Charles Schiller — Trusted subordinate who runs the day-to-day routine for Angriff's headquarters. Angriff often asks Schiller for advice.

Colonel William Emerson Schiller — Brother of Sergeant J.C. Schiller, he is the brigade's S-4, Supply Officer, and is considered a savant at supply chain organization and utilization.

Lt. Colonel Roger 'Rip' Kordibowski — Battalion S-2, Intelligence Officer.

Major Harold 'Harry the Hat' Strickland — Executive Officer of the 1st Marine Recon Battalion.

Major Fitzhugh Howarth Claringdon — Executive Officer of the Tank Battalion.

Lt. Colonel Astrid Naidoo — Temporary S-9, Civil-Military Cooperation.

Colonel Khin 'Chain Saw' Saw — Brigade S-1, Personnel.

Sergeant Howard Wilson Dupree — Communications specialist and computer whiz.

Sergeant Frances 'Frame' Rossi — Crew chief for *Tank Girl.*

Dr. Sharon Goldstone — Designer and now Chief Engineer head of the Brigade's hydroponics farm. She and Tom Steeple were once lovers.

Major Alexis Iskold — Deputy S-3 and Norm Fleming's right hand.

Lieutenant Marjorie Jones — CO of FOB Westwall.

Major Edward Wincommer — CO of the 7th Cavalry Regiment, 7th Cavalry Brigade.

Major Samuel Ball — CO of the 1st Airborne Battalion.

Lt. Colonel Charles Minokawa — Brigade S-9, Civil Affairs.

The crew of Joe's Junk

Staff Sergeant Joe 'Toy' Ootoi — Gunner.

Task Force Zombie, a/k/a 'The Nameless'

Green Ghost — Longtime subordinate of Angriff's and currently his S-5, Security. His real identity is unknown, as the Nameless only have code names. Angriff trusts him completely.

Vapor — Original member of TF Zombie. Wise-cracking member of the team. He and Green Ghost have known each other since childhood.

One Eye — Original member of TF Zombie. Nickname refers to his personality.

Wingnut — Original member of TF Zombie. Taciturn, a specialist at explosives and chemicals.

Glide — Replacement addition to TF Zombie, Glide is an ultra-dangerous computer specialist. She is gorgeous, and an 8th degree Krav Maga.

Nipple — Green Ghost's twin sister. Most think she is psychotic, but like her brother, her reflexes are off the chart.

Razor — Replacement addition, the newest member of the team.

Frosty — A veteran member who started out in Third Squad and transferred to First Squad after the Congo Operation.

Operation Comeback

General Thomas Francis Steeple — Founder and driving force behind Operations Overtime and Comeback.

Colonel Amunet Mwangi — Norm Fleming's first cousin and second in command of Operation Comeback. She is Tom Steeple's closest advisor and confidant.

Claw — Former commander of Second Squad, Task Force Zombie, and head of security at Operation Comeback.

Scope — Another former member of Task Force Zombie and a sniper specialist.

Sierra Army Depot

Colonel Aretha Lamar — Elected commander of Sierra Army Depot.

Private Marcus Lamar — Aretha Lamar's grandson.

Prophet James — Aretha Lamar's son and Marcus' father.

Creech Air Force Base

General Jamal Kando — Base commander.

The Scrapers

Idaho Jack — The oldest of the scrapers, Jack remembers pre-Collapse America and has navigated the dangerous deserts of the southwest ever since, selling whatever he can find to whoever wants it. In particular, he's friends with those at Shangri-La.

Junker Jane — Jane scrapes Northern California, Nevada, Utah, and into the Pacific Northwest.

Lucia Tornado Alvarez — Junker Jane's twenty-one-year-old daughter. Everyone calls her Nado because of her restless energy. She's a master at riding horses and shooting a gun, particularly from horseback. She's also an expert with a bow and arrow, and makes her own.

Jingle Bob — Bob scrapes the area north of Idaho Jack and east of Junker Jane.

Nuff — Nuff isn't actually a scraper himself, but his father was. Now he lives alone in a small shack in the desert.

The Enclave

Bam Bam Bear — A big strong man, Bear is typical of the survivors inhabiting regions all across the west. He's the grandson of a survivalist who lived through The Collapse and learned to live successfully in a land without power or government. He's the leader of a small group that once would have been called a tribe, who live in the mountains of Northern California. They are all fiercely independent and hate the Chinese for atrocities committed over the decades.

Lissa — Bear's beloved confidant and mate.

Artu — One of Bear's assistants.

Shangri-La

Mohammad Qadim — Muslim member of Shangri-La who infiltrated the Sevens as a spy.

Operation Hail Mary (a/k/a Evolution)

György Rosos — Billionaire who used his money to undermine capitalist republics around the world, in addition to financing part of Operations Overtime and Comeback, and his own independent operation. He believes in communist totalitarianism and greatly admires the North Korean Kim family dynasty.

György Rosos, Jr. — Sometimes derisively called *ketto* (an Americanized version of the Hungarian word *kettő,* meaning *two*) by the rank and file at Evolution, the eldest son and namesake of Rosos Sr. is a naturally affable man who is constantly vying with his younger brother for their father's affection.

Karoly Rosos — Only their father matches the youger Rosos' ruthlessness and ambition.

The Sevens

Nabi Husam Allah — The Caliph of the Caliphate of the Seven Prayers of the New Prophet, self-proclaimed prophet of Allah. In truth, he is Larry Armstrong, a criminal conman. His adherents are fanatically loyal.

Abdul-Qudoos Fadil el Mofty — Emir of New Khorasan. His original name is Richard Lee Armstrong, brother of the Caliph, Larry Armstrong. He bears the title of Superior Imam, second only to the Caliph himself, who is the Supreme Imam. These titles were created by the Armstrong brothers to elevate them above all imams in Islam. He is also second in command of The Sword of the New Prophet, the military arm of the Caliphate.

Sati Bashara — Senior Aga and oldest nephew of Emir Abdul-Qudoos Fadil el Mofty, appointed head of the province of New Khorasan, a region of the larger Caliphate of the Seven Prayers of the New Prophet, encompassing parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and old Mexico. He is the second most powerful lieutenant in New Khorasan.

Prescott, AZ Civilians

Richard Parfist — Lived in a village far outside of Prescott until General Patton's Guards raided the village.

The Apaches

Govind — Chief of the Western Apache.

Gosheven — The middle of the three brothers.
Gopan — Govind's youngest brother.

The New Republic of Arizona

Lester Earl Hull, a/k/a General George Patton V — Warlord leader of the New Republic of Arizona.

Colonel Norbert Cranston — Second in command to Lester Hull and commander of the military forces of the New Republic.

Author's Foreword

I wrote this book during a six-month period in 2017. That's neither here nor there, except that bits of reality inevitably crept into the work. It wasn't intentional; that sort of thing just happens.

Politics is a natural human activity, even in a post-Apocalyptic world. For readers who may not have noticed, Nick Angriff has a certain political viewpoint. He's a product of his childhood and environment. His father was a strict Constitutionalist and so is he. And yet he's also smart enough to know that no one person has all the answers.

Modern American politics is about as fractious as possible before a society disintegrates. It has reached the point where it was in 1859 and we all know how *that* turned out. The difference today is that in pre-Civil War days, America faced no external threats capable of harming the homeland. We were left to slaughter each other in peace. But today… today the United States, and by extension the entire free world, faces multiple dire threats, any one of which could wipe us out.

Throughout our history, wars have united both we Americans and the western democracies; one need look no further than Britain in the 1930s and 40s. Clement Atlee served loyally under Winston Churchill throughout World War Two, yet the moment they declared victory in the war in Europe, the British voters threw Churchill to the curb in favor of Atlee's socialism. Bitter political foes worked together for the common good, and once their shared goal was achieved, they went back to bashing each other.

Ah, the glories of politics.

In Nick Angriff's world, he's the ultimate authority figure. By necessity, martial law rules the areas liberated by the 7th Cavalry, yet as soon as feasible, power is returned to the local level. At his core, Angriff wants nothing more than to go fly-fishing, but fate hasn't given him that option just yet. Instead, in the book to come, he finds himself confronted with a shadow from the past, something which is, to his mind, sinister and subversive. So how does he deal with it? You'll have to read a bit to find out.

There was a small subset of my readership who didn't like Nick's outlook in book one. (I know, it's hard to believe.) An author cannot have his characters begin where he or she wants them to end. Change is necessary, since perfect characters tend to be pretty boring. And in today's bitterly

divided political landscape, it didn't matter what Angriff's original viewpoint was; somebody woudn't have liked it. But now, having had some time to reflect on things, our boy Nick begins to recognize the schism that politics drove into the American public before things went to hell. Rebuilding a divided nation isn't possible without massive coercion of one side or the other, and such an entity would be doomed right from the start.

So in a very real sense, the American Odyssey begun two books ago in *Standing The Final Watch* begins to take shape here in book three. Maybe you're waiting to see how this all turns out, and are hoping I'll give you a hint. The truth is I can't do that, because I haven't got a clue. The only thing I do know is that not everybody winds up standing at the end.

Oh, one last thing. Don't believe everything these characters say. Some of them are lying.

Bill Webb, December 2, 2017

Prologue

Ten months later

Central Arizona
0433 hours, April 10

Govind stopped halfway up the cliff face to catch his breath. The screech of a circling prairie falcon caused him to look up, peering, then he continued his climb. Sweat soaked his shirt, despite sunrise still being more than an hour in the future. Over the years, he'd scaled the rocky promontory hundreds of times, and each time seemed harder than the last. Younger tribe members wanted the honor of taking the Seer her provisions, but Govind had always said no. As rarely as he understood the mystic Choctaw woman's musings, he enjoyed listening to her anyway and considered the chore his duty.

As he forced himself upward, his feet and hands found the same familiar niches in the stone they'd found for decades. The narrow ledge rimming her cave stood more than three hundred feet above the desert floor. The sheer cliff face protected her from predators, with cougars being the biggest worry, but even the big cats couldn't climb straight up. Coyotes didn't hunt in the high hills and for some reason, snakes had never bothered her.

"Dagotee!" *How are you?* "The moon smiles upon you, friend Govind," her familiar voice said in Western Apache as he pulled himself onto the ledge. "You have come early."

"I must be down again before the sun is high, Ohoyo Dreamer. Are you well?"

She giggled and sounded young. At some point, Govind's tribe had meshed the Choctaw word for woman, *ohoyo*, with the Apache concept of a Dreamer Shaman. Since then she had laughed whenever she heard it. "I am old. That is a blessing, yet a blessing with a price."

Govind did not have much time for chatting. Moving with purpose, he braced himself over the large pulley at the far end of the ledge. A rope ladder lay beside it. Thick rope looped around a flywheel and fell to the desert floor, where it connected with two heavy baskets laden with food. Grunting, he pulled the baskets up three hundred feet. The effort would have rubbed other

men’s hands bloody, but Govind’s were leather-tough after a lifetime in the desert.

Once the food was up, he carried it into the cave and unpacked the baskets, placing the foodstuffs on shelves hewn into the rock. Water ran from a spring higher up the mountain, but Govind brought milk whenever possible, either goat or sheep’s milk. Today there was none.

Mopping his face with a goatskin sleeve, Govind turned his mouth up to catch water spilling from the wall further inside the cave. The chamber measured roughly twenty-five feet wide, with twenty feet of clearance overhead, and went several hundred feet deep. So far inside the mountain, the cool air dried up his sweat. He wished he could stay longer in the cool cave, but time moved on and he had things to do.

He found Sara Snowtiger standing on the ledge, looking out over the valley.

“Someone else might bring the food next time,” he said. “A lot of the younger ones are anxious to do you this service. I feel I should let them.”

She turned to face him and again he felt amazed at how little she had aged over the decades.

“The kindness of your people is beyond measure,” she said. “If anyone is honored, it is me.”

“Is there anything we should know?” he asked, anxious to get back down.

“The tides of life are strange, especially if we are the moons.”

“I do not understand, Ohoyo. Your words make no sense to me.”

“We each affect the lives around us, Govind, like moons pulling at the oceans. Last year I felt the presence of one who is dead. I believed then my time had come to cross from this life to the next, but it was not so. I saw her dying, and did not understand, but gave her my strength. Then I lost sight of her. It has taken me all winter to regain my strength and my sight. I did not think then her death was in this world, but the next one. But now…”

“Yes?” Govind said, not following any of this. His mind went back to the day he rode out to warn the Marines of an oncoming army of Sevens, and the woman who so closely resembled the Ohoyo. He had not spoken of it because he thought it a vision of the Ohoyo, an omen from the Almighty. After all, how could her sister still be young after so many years?

“Yesterday I felt her again. She is close, and so real, as if she is not truly dead in this world. How this could be, I do not know. And she is not

alone. The world is changing. I feel it in the air, and hear it from the beasts. War is upon us."

"War came last year."

"That was far to the south. This war will engulf your people."

"Let those who come in war beware," he said. "Do you know when this will happen?"

"Not the day or phase of the moon," she said. "But soon. Riders are abroad and their color is that of blood."

"Ohoyo, I… there is something I need to tell you. Perhaps I should have done it sooner, but I was conflicted."

"What is it, my friend?"

He found her smile comforting, as always. Then her expression changed. Turning away from him, she spread her arms as though parting unseen curtains hanging before her. When she turned back, panic widened her eyes.

"Ride now! Gopan needs you! Ride north to the Rock of the Wolf. Ride fast!"

#

SECTION ONE
Warnings

Chapter 1

When you let go of what you were, you become what you might be.
Lao Tzu

Forward Operating Base Junkyard
0623 hours, April 10

Lara Snowtiger found the rider in her rifle scope. “Got him… he’s Apache, riding hard.”

“Why is an Apache riding toward us?” Captain Anthony said.

As she focused, the rider toppled from his saddle. Half a second later, a rifle report echoed across the valley.

“Rider’s down, Cap. We’ve got a sniper in those rocks across the valley. Permission to return fire?”

A second shot kicked up dust next to the fallen rider.

“Negative! We don’t know who’s who.”

“Apaches are friendlies, sir!”

A third shot hit the prone figure as the horse raced away.

“Negative! Don’t shoot.”

But Snowtiger had already shifted targets. The sniper hid in the shadow of a boulder a mile across the desert. Most of the rifle protruded forward into sunlight, which glinted off the glass of the shooter’s scope. She zeroed in as a fourth shot rang out.

“Captain!”

“Can you ID the sniper, Sergeant? Unless you can positively identify __”

She took the shot without waiting for the rest of his answer.

#

Scope had hit the target twice out of four shots, but she wanted to guarantee her kill. His head lay on a rock, almost as if he’d propped himself there for her benefit. The crosshairs centered on his forehead. She opened her mouth and took a deep breath.

Something *zinged* off the stone near her elbow and ricocheted into her mouth, missing her teeth and cutting a neat hole in her right cheek. Blood filled her throat as she swung the rifle to find this new threat, but a second bullet smashed into the barrel mere inches from her face. Before she could

duck out of the line of fire, a third sent rock splinters into her right eye.

The rifle clattered down the rear face of the boulder as Scope gagged on blood and felt it running down her neck. Her right eye burned and she closed it, losing depth perception as she followed the rifle down the rocks. Sliding and scraping fifty feet to the desert floor, she tore a gash in her right hand before smashing to a hard stop.

Who the fuck shot her?

How had she missed another sniper in the valley? She wasn't usually that sloppy, but in her haste to nail the rider, she'd gotten careless. With mission accomplished, it was time to gitfoh and do some first aid.

Below and forty feet to her left, the hot engine of her Joint Light Tactical Vehicle still ticked as it cooled. The air conditioning would be a relief from the warm spring sunshine.

"Do not move."

Her head snapped around. How could someone have snuck up on her? She was the best of the best at tracking and avoiding detection. Yet the barrel of a rifle protruded from a crack between three boulders, and in the shadows she saw a dark face behind the sights. Her brain instantly calculated the mathematics behind drawing her sidearm and snapping off a shot before she felt the impact of a bullet. The odds were bad, but she doubted her chances if taken prisoner were any better.

"What do you want?" With the slightest movement, she inched her hand closer to the holstered Sig Sauer P320 at her side.

"Stop moving. I want answers, but I *will* kill you if I must."

The wounded right eye kept flickering as blood trickled down her cheek. "It appears I don't have a choice."

"Withdraw the pistol using two fingers of your left hand, then throw it to the ground."

She reached across her body in slow motion, twisting until her right hand was out of his sight. In a blur of motion, she drew the pistol and aimed at the small, triangular space between the rocks. Taking the man behind the rifle by surprise with her speed, she fired first. His shot followed a quarter-second later.

Scope was a dead shot. She never missed, except that time.

Blood made her pistol grip slippery and the bullet went high, splintering on the boulder above the tiny opening. But she never knew that.

The rifleman's first shot struck her in the sternum. It ripped through

her spine and hit the rock behind her, ricocheting back into the right lung. The following second, third, and fourth shots smacked into her forehead and blew out the back of her skull. She toppled forward and fell to the dust below.

As her brain died, her last thought was a sardonic joke. She'd lived fast and died young, but left a messy looking corpse.

#

Chapter 2

Raise your cup, my friends,
For the life that never ends;
He lived his life as a warrior born;
Death sought him out on a clear blue morn.
Death song for Gopan Windrunner

Forward Operating Base Junkyard
0631 hours, April 10

Snowtiger hadn't waited before sprinting for a Humvee. Captain Anthony and one private scrambled in before she gunned it down the ramp leading to the valley floor. Dust and gravel flew as she turned at the bottom of the ramp without slowing down. Seconds later she jumped out as the Humvee still rolled and ran to the fallen rider, cradling his head. Taking out her canteen, she splashed water on his forehead. His labored breathing and wet cough told her he only had seconds left.

"*Łichíí itsá*," he whispered. Blood trickled from the corner of his lip. He grabbed Snowtiger's sleeve and repeated the phrase. "*Łichíí itsá!*"

His body went limp and his head tilted back, eyes still open. He still gripped her shirt. Snowtiger bowed her head and closed his eyes.

"*Nusi himmita nakni*," she said in a whisper. *Sleep, young warrior.*

"Speak English, Sergeant," Captain Anthony said from behind her. "What did he say?"

"I don't know, Captain. I don't speak Apache."

"Didn't you say something back to him?"

"That was Choctaw, sir. I said goodbye."

"You disobeyed my direct order, Sergeant. I know they call you Stud, and you're on a first name basis with MOH—" meaning the Medal of Honor "—but that doesn't give you the right to ignore the lawful order of a superior officer. What if that sniper you shot was a friendly?"

"I didn't shoot him, Captain. I didn't have time. I just drove him off."

Captain Anthony's face reddened even more. He pointed his finger at Snowtiger. "That man on the ground could have been an enemy and that sniper could have been a friend. I told you not to engage and you did anyway."

“ROE says take all measures to protect members of the brigade and her allies, sir. That’s what I did.”

“It wasn’t your decision to make.”

“He’s Apache. They’re on our side.”

“I must’ve missed that memo.”

Snowtiger rose from beside the body. Under the dust pasted to her wet face, her expression remained grim. “I was there when the Apache chief warned us the Sevens were coming, Captain. Had he not done so, we would have been overrun and the brigade destroyed. This man was with him. That’s what I based my decision on.”

“I know all about your Medal of Honor and how you won it, Sergeant, but this is my command. *I* haven’t met this chief and *I* don’t know any of that.”

Snowtiger nodded to the opposite side of the valley. Halfway to their position, a dust cloud followed another Apache, riding hard. “I think you’re about to, sir.”

#

Govind dismounted the horse before it fully stopped.

“*Stei!*” he said without looking back. The horse stayed. Three strides brought him to where his brother lay. He and Snowtiger locked eyes for a moment and he saw tears welling. With the slightest nod he thanked her.

Kneeling beside Gopan, he felt for a pulse. Finding none, he laid a hand on Gopan’s forehead and closed his eyes. “*Nii nahii’maa at’e, ya nahiika’ee at’e.*”

Snowtiger cocked her head but didn’t speak.

“It means, ‘The Earth is our mother, the sky our father.’ My brother liked it.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said.

“Hey,” Captain Anthony said. The man with him pointed his rifle in Govind’s general direction. “I need answers. Who are you and what are you doing here? You’re in territory controlled by the United States Army.”

“Gwii naasya’ye doo miikaa nach’igha da. Gojadii niigai daach’inii.”

“Am I supposed to know what that means?” Captain Anthony said.

“Something about a snake?” Snowtiger said, cocking her head.

“Don’t walk in a snake’s track, or your leg may start hurting.”

“Is that a threat?”

Govind rose and faced the captain. The only signs of his pain were the downturned corners of his mouth and his watery eyes. “This land belongs to no one, not to me and not to you. But I am no threat, Captain. This man is my youngest brother, Gopan. He rode to you with news. I was told he would be in danger and rode with the eagles to stop him, but I was too late.”

“What kind of news?”

“I do not know, but it must have been urgent. He knew he was being followed and exposing himself as a target would be a great risk, but he did it anyway. He died bringing you this message.”

“Who told you he was in danger?”

“A friend.” He momentarily glanced at Snowtiger.

“How did they know?”

“I cannot say, Captain, for I do not understand it myself. All I can tell you is my friend has never been wrong.”

The captain said nothing for a moment as he appraised the tall, lean Apache standing before him. They locked eyes and neither man looked away. Captain Anthony saw nothing deceptive in the newcomer.

“If your brother was trying to help us, then I’m sorry for his loss. I would like to have shaken his hand.”

“Thank you, Captain. I will take him back to my people now.”

Snowtiger stood, hiding her bloody hands behind her back. “He said something before he died. It was in Apache.”

“Can you remember how it sounded?”

She nodded. A strand of black hair slipped from under her helmet and lay near the long scar on her right cheek. Govind blinked when he saw it, and felt his heartbeat quicken.

“Lee-chee-ee… eet-sah. Or something close to that.”

“Łichíí itsá?”

“Yes, that’s it. What does it mean?”

“It means Red Eagle.”

“Like a bird?” the captain said.

“Not in this, no. Red Eagle is a place, a particular mountain. My brother wants me to go there.”

“Why? What’s so important about this mountain?”

“I will take my brother now, Captain. I must return him to our people.”

“I asked you a question, mister!”

“I answer the questions I choose to answer… *Captain.* And I choose not to answer that one.”

Captain Anthony turned to Snowtiger. “Sergeant, I’m relying on your personal word that this man is a friend. Do you understand what I mean?”

“I do, Captain. I’ll personally vouch for him and take whatever consequences may come from it.”

Lifting his brother as though he were a little child, Govind laid him across the base of his horse’s neck. He mounted the horse with so little effort, he seemed to float into the saddle.

“I didn’t say you could leave,” Captain Anthony said, without much conviction.

“I do not need your permission, Captain.” Govind gathered the reins of Gopan’s horse, wheeled his mount, and trotted off, but stopped again after thirty feet. “You will find the other sniper in those rocks across the valley, along with her vehicle.”

“*Her?*” Snowtiger said.

Anthony shook his head. “Who is she? Is she alive?”

“She shot at me and gave me this.” Govind pointed to the dried blood on his right temple. “Then I shot her. She missed killing me and I did not miss killing her. I do not recognize her uniform.”

“Uniform?” Anthony and Snowtiger said in unison.

He wheeled and urged the horse forward with the slightest pressure from his heels. In reply, it leapt forward into a canter, the other horse trailing behind.

#

“Oh, shit,” Captain Anthony said as the large white star on the JLTV came into view. “It’s American.” He turned to Snowtiger, sitting beside him in the Humvee’s back seat. “Still think that Indian is a friend?”

Snowtiger frowned at the potential insult and studied the captain’s eyes for a second. She decided he meant nothing derogatory and forgot about it. “Begging your pardon, Captain, but Govind saved our asses. His brother was bringing you a message and got himself killed in the process. Whoever the sniper was, she wasn’t our friend.”

The Humvee slammed through a series of animal burrows, forcing them to hold on and stop talking for a minute.

“You’d better hope you’re right, Stud.”

She bit her lip and turned away. *Stud* was her nickname among her

comrades. It was their way of showing that, even though she won the Medal of Honor, she was still one of them. But coming from Captain Anthony, it was sarcasm, not a sign of friendship.

They pulled up next to the vehicle and stopped. Rifles ready, the soldier, Captain Anthony, and Snowtiger got out. The three men headed for the JLTV while she went looking for the sniper, clambering over the rocks within earshot of the men.

“Anybody recognize what this is?” she heard Captain Anthony say.

The private spoke up. “It’s a JLTV, Captain. Joint Light Tactical Vehicle. It replaced the Humvee in the late twenty-teens.”

"That explains it," he said. "I went cold in 1999."

That caught her attention and she glanced their way. Anthony was the oldest freezer bum she’d heard of yet. Beyond where he stood, the JLTV, painted desert tan, had a weapons assembly on top with a metal skeleton surrounding a fifty-caliber machine gun. A shield protected it on the front. The front door she could see had a large white star.

“I wonder why it has a star?” the soldier said. “They stopped marking vehicles that way a long time ago, didn’t they, Captain?”

He shrugged. “Like I said, I went cold long before this thing came around. I have no idea what they did after that. But clearly, whoever owns this, they wanted it known they were Americans. The Republic of Arizona marked their vehicles this way, but where would they have gotten such a late-model machine?”

Turning back to her task, Snowtiger spotted a smear of blood on a boulder above and to her left. Following its downward trail led her to a twisted body, lying caught in a crevice between the rocks. Flies buzzed around the corpse.

After she called the men over, between them they had the dead woman stretched out on the desert floor in minutes. She wore non-regulation desert camouflage pants, tan long-sleeve shirt, and brown boots. What struck Snowtiger was the muscularity of her shoulders and the calluses on her hands, both very much like her own. She wore no dog tags and had no identification of any sort on her person.

“Damn, what a body,” the soldier said. “I’ll bet she was hot.”

Snowtiger met his eyes. “She’d have kicked your ass if you tried anything.”

“Why do you say that, Stud?”

“I just know.” She didn’t add that she would do the same thing; she didn’t have to.

#

Chapter 3

Fate is charging like a runaway train;
I can't hear it coming but I'll feel its pain.
Sergio Velazquez, from Standing at the Edge

Operation Overtime
0702 hours, April 10

Nick Angriff stood alone on his private platform outside the mountain. He stared at the faint image of the waxing moon, hanging low on the southern horizon, washed out by the morning sun. He cherished the rare times he could stand and breathe the chilled dawn air and think. Sometimes it was nice to be alone, without even Norm Fleming around, and to let his mind wander as it would.

Except that morning, his mind refused to wander away from worries and fears. He tried to focus on the moon. But no matter how long he gazed at the Sea of Tranquility, he couldn't avoid the feeling that great events were charging toward him like an enraged rhinoceros. His mind whirled with vague, ill-defined hopes and threats, and he felt like a man standing at the edge of a tornado.

To anyone looking up from the desert below, the tip of his cigar might have appeared as fire in the mouth of a spectral figure outlined in the pale dawn light. When the smoke turned harsh, he tossed the butt into the darkness of the valley below and watched the glowing tip tumble away. It reminded him of the day long ago atop the Hohensalzburg, when he'd tossed away a good cigar because Tom Steeple had ordered him brought to a meeting by force. At least he got to finish this one.

#

0727 hours

"I'm bored, Norm."

"Hmm?" Norm Fleming scanned through a clipboard of papers in his lap. "You're bored? I'll be happy to let you read some of these reports on training. It's really good stuff, better than coffee to wake you up."

"I see you haven't forgotten how much I love sarcasm."

"Just trying to help."

"Well, bored is the wrong word, anyway… anxious… expectant…

antsy, that's the word. I'm feeling antsy."

Fleming checked his watch. "You didn't call me up here before breakfast because you're antsy, did you?"

That was exactly why he'd called Fleming to his office, but Angriff realized how ridiculous that sounded. "Of course not. I need your help deciding my schedule for the next few days, picking priorities, that sort of thing."

Fleming laid the clipboard on the couch beside him and gave Angriff his familiar stone-faced look, the one that meant *stop the shit.*

"All right, all right, I'm antsy, I can't sit still, and I thought you might have a recommendation," Angriff said. "I'm getting cabin fever, cooped up in here all winter."

"You've been outside."

"For an hour or two."

"Whose fault is that? You're in charge of this whole thing; you could have built a snowman by the main gate if you wanted to."

But Angriff didn't smile. "I wish it was that simple. To tell the truth, I'm starting to empathize a little with what Steeple had to do on a daily basis, making one decision after another and all of them important. And then, on top of everything else, he got this place built. He definitely had a genius for organization."

"So now you're a Tom Steeple fan?"

"Ha. That'll be the day. But I'm sick of paperwork. I'm tired of making endless decisions about this year's crops or approving training schedules. I need to get out of here for a while… the Crystal Palace feels more like the Crystal Coffin."

"The paratroopers make their fifth jump tomorrow over at Broken Leg ridge. It's almost fifteen hundred feet up, the highest one yet. You could take a bullhorn and sing *Blood on the Risers* for them. I'm sure they'd appreciate that. Or jump with them."

"Thanks, I think I'll pass. I'm already jump qualified. What about the cavalry? I'd love a long trail ride."

"Oh, no, you don't. You know they're heading out for a fifty-mile ride—"

"Perfect! I'd better go get dressed."

"—and that I'm going with them. We can't both go and I've already been riding in preparation. You're not taking this away from me."

“I could,” Angriff said, allowing the slightest whine into his voice.

Fleming picked up on it and smiled; only old friends could interpret such subtle messages. “But you won’t. If you want to ride, Nick, you need to start practicing. My thighs felt like jelly for a week after I started again.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Go into Prescott. You haven’t been there for a few months, and I know Mayor Parfist would love to see you. Inspect the new battalion down there… see if it’s really up to Marine standards. Find out how much they’ve managed to rebuild over the winter.”

“I get reports.”

Fleming put up his hands. “You’re the one who said you needed fresh air.”

#

0740 hours

“Good morning, sir,” Sergeant Schiller said as he carefully placed a mug of coffee on Angriff’s desk.

“Morning, J.C. What’s new in the world?”

“You want good news or bad?”

“Give me the good. I’m tired of bad news.”

“The good news is there isn’t any bad news.”

“For once.”

“Doctor Goldstone’s report on the barley crop is in your inbox.”

“Good. Find Colonel Walling, tell him I want to go into Prescott.”

“Today?”

“Now.”

#

Prescott, AZ
1056 hours

“I’m damn impressed, Rick.” Nick Angriff pushed through the front door of the Prescott Courthouse and paused near the columns, an unlit cigar in his jaw. He’d cut down to five a day to make them last longer.

“No thanks to me, General. The people have worked their butts off. With winter gone and better weather ahead, I expect we’ll stay ahead of schedule. It would really help if we could get the power back on.”

“Do you have everything else you—”

At the *crack* of a rifle, Angriff felt something clip his right ear. He dropped to one knee and reached for a Desert Eagle. With his other hand, he

pulled Colonel Walling down just as a second shot zipped past. Rick Parfist's instincts hadn't dulled and he'd already dropped to his belly on the cold marble step. Guards in the plaza returned fire, aiming at a roof across the street.

"Get behind a column!" Angriff said.

Parfist rolled back under the building's protective portico, while Angriff half-dragged Walling to safety. A third bullet ricocheted off the granite behind them.

"I'm damned tired of being shot at!" He touched the tip of his ear and came away with blood.

Before either Parfist or Walling could reply, something *boomed* in the distance.

"General, are you okay?" yelled a lieutenant who crouched behind the granite base of Bucky O'Neill's statue, not far from the bottom of the steps. "You've been hit!"

"I'm fine, son. Can you see the shooters?"

"Roof across the street, sir! I've detailed a squad to shut them down."

"Do you have a radio? We need prisoners. Make sure they know that."

"Will do, sir."

"Did you hear that explosion?"

"Roger that."

"Any idea what it was?"

"Not a clue, General."

The firefight continued, but Angriff was out of danger and his concerns had moved to other things. He turned to Walling. "B.F., take Mayor Parfist to the comm. room and see what you can find out. If we're under a general attack, I want to know it."

"What about you, General?" Walling said.

"I'm staying here."

"Sir, do you think—"

Angriff interrupted him. "I'm not going to get shot! But if they take prisoners, I want to see who wanted me dead."

For the first time since they'd met, Walling risked open disagreement with his commander. "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather stay here, General."

"And I'd rather have you finding out what the hell is going on!"

Angriff's tone was sterner than he'd intended, but Walling had taken him by surprise. "Just go, B.F. I promise I won't die until you get back."

Another explosion added emphasis to his words, closely followed by a third, then a fourth.

"Go get me some hard information!"

#

1059 hours

Norbert Cranston stood atop the frame of a rusted-out Dumpster and directed his men as they looted a warehouse. In the distance, he heard gunfire, and knew his sniper team had gone through with the mission. It was damned near suicidal and he'd been afraid they might surrender in return for a good meal.

The explosion that had blown out the building's back wall would bring an immediate armed response. To block that, Cranston had deployed his most reliable men on the streets leading to the warehouse. Their mission had to succeed; they needed food and they needed it now.

When explosions two, three, and four reverberated over the city, he nodded in satisfaction. Nobody had been sure the homemade bombs would go off until they did. With any luck, they'd be gone before anybody figured out which bomb had gone off at the real target.

One of his men ran out through the jagged hole in the brick wall, stumbling through the rubble and grinning. "Colonel, there's beer in there!"

Cranston's response was immediate. "Leave the beer. Take only what I told you."

"C'mon, Colonel, it's been a long winter!"

"I said *no!* It's too damned heavy. Now, do what I tell you." Cranston gripped the butt of a pistol stuck into his belt, but didn't draw the weapon. The man gave him a nasty look before stumbling back into the warehouse.

#

Chapter 4

Wearing a bullseye, fulfilling my pledge,
Knowing I'm a target, standing at the edge.
Sergio Velazquez, from Standing at the Edge

Prescott, AZ
1109 hours, April 10

Scowling, Angriff stood with arms folded next to the statue of Buckey O'Neill. A squad of riflemen dragged two prisoners toward him. The fallen Rough Rider stared down from atop his rearing horse, as if watching to see the legendary Nick the A dispensing justice.

"It was just these two men, General," said the same lieutenant from earlier. The name on his uniform said Melendez. "We caught them on the back stairs and they didn't resist."

Angriff studied them. Their faded battle dress uniforms sagged on their bodies and their faces were gaunt, their eyes sunken. They looked half-starved and he figured it wouldn't take much prodding for them to talk. Their uniforms told him they had been part of Lester Hull's so-called Army of the Republic of Arizona. Prisoners from the previous year's battle had verified that they wore BDUs because there had been a huge surplus of them stored in Prescott. The prisoner on the left looked very young.

"Any casualties?"

"Just you, sir."

Angriff touched the crusty blood on his ear. He'd forgotten about the wound. "Good. Have you questioned them yet?"

"We tried, but they wouldn't talk to us."

"We'll fix that right now." He took one step closer to the prisoners and Nick the A came out. The veins on his neck protruded, his face turned red, and his eyebrows met in a V. His lips parted slightly to expose gritted teeth. Trembling shook his face as though he fought to keep from killing them.

The man on the right kept his head down, but the other cast his eyes away, just for an instant. That was all Angriff needed to see. He pointed to the one on his right. "Take that man away, out of earshot. Leave the other one here."

Before anybody could move, the one on his right spoke up. “You better not tell him—”

Angriff drew a Desert Eagle and shoved the tip of the barrel into the man’s mouth faster than any of them could follow, stifling the rest of his statement. With hands pinioned by the guards and a huge gun in his mouth, he looked up with a panicked expression.

“You were going to tell him not to lie to me, right?”

The man nodded.

“Good.” Angriff holstered the gun. “Get him out of here.”

Once they were alone, Angriff’s demeanor changed again. “You hungry, son? You look like you could use a good meal.”

The young man’s eyes darted back and forth. He looked up, then back down, then side to side, and then back up and met Angriff’s gaze.

“Don’t be afraid; nothing’s going to happen to you. Talk to me.”

The man bit his lip but stayed silent.

“You’re not giving away military secrets if you tell me the last time you ate.”

The prisoner moved his feet and then licked his lips.

“It’s all right, son,” Angriff said in his most fatherly tone. “Just tell me if you’re hungry.”

“Four of us split a ground squirrel the day before yesterday,” he said. “Meat’s been hard to come by lately.”

“I’ve never had an Arizona squirrel. What’s it taste like?”

“Gamey, like rat, and real stringy. Rattlesnake’s better, but if you’re hungry enough it don’t matter.”

“How’d you like some eggs, maybe some bacon? Does that sound good?”

He nodded. Angriff thought he looked about twelve years old and softened his voice.

“You tell me what I need to know, and I promise you a plate of eggs — and bacon if there’s any left from breakfast. And bread with butter. Any fruit they’ve got. Deal?”

Again the man nodded.

“What’s your name, son?”

“Willis Keller.”

“Who told you to kill me, Willis?”

“Huh? We wasn’t trying to kill you. We wasn’t trying to kill

anybody."

Angriff touched the crusty blood on his ear. "Two inches to the left and we'd both be dead now. That shot would have killed me and those men would have killed you."

"That was Marcus's idea. Colonel Cranston just told us to pin you guys down for a while, create a diversion. He said not to shoot anybody."

"Did he? Interesting. Well, so far, Willis, you're not in much trouble. At least, not with me, and I'm the only guy that matters. Nobody's gotten hurt, I mean *really* hurt, so everything's good. Now, tell me about those explosions."

Colonel Walling pushed through the courthouse doors at that moment, but Angriff stopped him with a raised hand. "Go on, son, tell me the rest."

"We're hungry, starving. The first explosion opened up a food warehouse, and the other three were just to throw you off. You know, lead you in the wrong direction."

"Thank you, Willis. Your cooperation may save the lives of your buddies. Now, I need you to answer one last thing. I need you to tell me where you're supposed to meet up after this is over. I want to offer everybody, including Colonel Cranston, the same deal I just made you."

At this, Willis broke eye contact and looked down.

"You've trusted me this far, Willis. Help me to help your buddies."

After a moment, Willis nodded to himself. "Okay… there's a clearing in the forest, about ten miles out. On one side is a rocky hill and there's trees surrounding it. Inside the hill are some big caves. That's where we keep our food, so it doesn't spoil. When we've got food."

"Did you get that, B.F.?" Angriff turned to the colonel. "Get over there, try to stop Cranston, and make it clear we don't want a fight. No shooting, except in self defense. If he's already gone, order up a pair of Apaches to find this place Willis told us about… why are you still here? Go!"

#

Norbert Cranston hadn't seen his men this energized in months. Although weak from a starvation diet, and loaded down with supplies, they moved along the game trail under the forest canopy like a well-fed troop. The discovery of a box of jerky had allowed him to reward them on the spot. Nobody was sure what kind of meat it was — goat was the likely source — and nobody cared. He let each man take two long strips to chew on the way back to camp and cautioned them against eating it too fast. A few did anyway

and threw up, but after that the rest sucked on the meat instead of swallowing it right away.

Silence followed them. A deep humus layer muffled footsteps with only the occasional snap of a branch to keep them alert. Little sunlight filtered through the dense shroud overhead. When they'd first fled into the forest the previous summer, game and small animals had scurried away through the underbrush. But not any more; nine months of intense hunting had depopulated the immediate area.

Cranston was the last man in the long line snaking its way along the trail. After four hours, the exertion had slowed them to a crawl. Once the adrenaline had worn off, a dragging fatigue overcame them, as none had any fat left to burn for energy. Streaked with dirt and sweat, the men staggered, steps turning into dragging feet, and dragging feet becoming stumbles.

But then a rock wall rose on their left and the men took heart. They were home, back at camp, and close to the caves. Within a few hundred yards they could put down their heavy loads, sit down, and eat some of their newly won food. They climbed up and down several small hills and Cranston lost sight of the column's head. A lightening between the trees ahead marked the clearing. He closed his eyes and mumbled a prayer of thanks.

Tall pines ringed the clearing. Along with the rocky hill, sunlight only shone inside it for a few hours a day. As he emerged into the clearing, the afternoon sun had passed its zenith. Dimness had returned, although it was much brighter than in the forest. For a second he wondered why his men were all standing together with hands on their heads. Then something hard stuck into his back and an unseen voice said, "Drop your weapon and put your hands on your head."

As Cranston's eyes adjusted to the increased light, he spotted soldiers around the edges of the clearing, rifles at the ready. His brain thought of several escape plans and rejected them all. They'd walked into a trap and were prisoners, and there was nothing they could do about it.

Damn.

#

Chapter 5

There is surely nothing quite so useless as doing with great efficiency what should not be done at all.

Peter Drucker

Prescott, AZ
1243 hours, April 10

Colonel Walling had been dreading one particular appointment all day. When the shooting started, he'd secretly hoped it would cancel the rest of Angriff's tour of Prescott, but no such luck. Angriff wasn't a man to let circumstances divert him if it could be helped. He had turned out to be a much more even-tempered man than legends within the Army made out, yet Nick the A did exist, and it was people like the next on his morning schedule that brought him into the light.

But first, he would relay the news from Junkyard. Walling hoped that incident might distract the general enough that he wouldn't strike the unpleasant man who'd follow.

After leaving the pursuit of Cranston and his bandits to subordinates, Angriff's only concession to the morning's attack was to take a security detail with him as he made the rounds. He stood admiring the outside wall of an old brewery, marveling at the craftsmanship of the brickwork, when Walling caught up with him.

"Signal from FOB Junkyard, General. They had an incident this morning involving dual fatalities."

"What kind of incident?"

"A sniper duel of some sort. It's not very clear yet, sir. I don't think they know exactly what happened. One of the dead is an Apache."

"Who's the other one?"

"They aren't sure, General. She was in a non-regulation American uniform, driving a JLTV with American markings, but think it might be left over from Lester Hull's crew. The officer in charge reports that Sergeant Snowtiger acted against his direct orders in firing on the sniper and allowing the Apache chief to claim the body of the dead Indian."

"Who's the officer in charge?"

"A Captain Anthony, sir. He's got a good record."

“Radio Captain Anthony that the Apaches are allies of the brigade and Sergeant Snowtiger’s judgment is to be trusted in this matter, and to preserve the remaining body as best as possible until pickup.”

“Aye, sir, will do.” Walling fidgeted but didn’t leave.

“Was there something else?”

“Sir, Colonel Minokawa and Doctor Proctor are waiting to see you.”

“Minokawa? What now? I assume it’s about the courthouse…” He chuckled. “At least it wasn’t damaged again this morning. All right, bring them over.” Angriff sipped cold coffee and made a face. A long draw on his first cigar of the day counteracted the bitter flavor.

Minokawa was nattily dressed, as usual, but Proctor’s slacks were also clean, with sharp edges, and his buttoned shirt looked brand new. Few people in Prescott were so well dressed. Angriff knew immediately this was not a man who liked to get his hands dirty, but where had he come from?

After the usual pleasantries, Angriff got right to the point. “So what do you need now that I haven’t got, Colonel?”

Minokawa smiled. “It’s not what I need, General; it’s what Doctor Proctor here needs. He requests a space in downtown Prescott to set up shop, somewhere around here, and he needs our help with cleanup, restoration, power, that sort of thing.”

“Sounds like a lot of resources. What do you need this space for, Mr… Proctor, is it?”

“*Doctor* Proctor. I need it for my office. I’m your Director of Diversity Compliance and right now my hands are tied.”

Angriff nodded and smoked, a stall tactic which gave him time to wonder what the hell he needed with a Director of whatever-the-hell Proctor had said.

“Pardon me, General,” Proctor said, interrupting Angriff’s silence. “Could you put that cigar out? It’s bothering me, and smoking really shouldn’t be allowed.”

Minokawa glanced at Proctor and shook his head.

Angriff, however, took another draw, although he did exhale the smoke in the opposite direction. “What exactly does… what was it? Diversity Compliance? Explain to me what you do.”

“Certainly, General.” Proctor made a show of waving at the smoke, even though Angriff had backed up a step and the breeze was blowing it away from his face. “My department ensures diversity among the various

personnel in the brigade. We make sure that there is no bias at play, that people are assigned their tasks based on long-established formulas."

"Long-established formulas…" Angriff said. "I see. Help me understand all of this, Doctor Proctor; these sorts of concepts really aren't my strong suit. You want to make sure that duty assignments are made according to… a formula? Is that like a quota?"

"Quotas are part of the formula," Proctor said, warming to his topic. "But it's more complicated than that. We also have to take into account gender and sexual preference, among other things. We could use an algorithm if our computers were up… which is another issue I wanted to take up with you. I know you would think it's easy to achieve the correct compliance ratios, but trust me, it's not. I trained for years to learn this job."

"Years."

"Yes, eleven to be exact. I have a PhD in Diversity."

"You're a Doctor of Diversity?"

Proctor smiled. "I am. One of the first. I helped write the standard textbook later studied at some of the finest colleges and universities."

"Uh huh," Angriff said, trying to determine if this was a prank. Norm Fleming had been known to do such things. "This space you're asking about, with the power and restoration and all of that. What exactly do you need it for?"

"My staff needs a place to work. We need interview space, a place for records, all sorts of things."

"Interviews?"

"Yes, General, in case someone wants to file a complaint."

"A complaint against who? For what?" The longer it went on, the more certain Angriff became that Fleming had set it up.

"Well, against whatever authority committed the offense."

"What are you talking about? What kind of offense?"

"Giving preferential treatment," Proctor said, as if Angriff were thick. "Using offensive language either verbal or written, incorrect body language that infers bias, sexual harassment, that sort of thing."

"Pretend I don't know what you're talking about."

"People will be given their tasks based on their representation within that section, or department, to ensure its diversity. It can be very complicated. If someone files a complaint for non-diversity, then we adjudicate the case."

"Adjudicate." Angriff licked his lower lip and glanced down, as if

tasting a food he didn't like. "Doesn't that come under the purview of the JAGs?"

"No, General, this is in addition to the Uniform Code of Military Justice."

"And it's you who determines guilt or innocence? I take it you might need to speak with the principals, such as, I don't know, Mayor Parfist here in Prescott?"

"He could certainly be involved."

"Or someone in the Seventh Cavalry?"

Proctor's expression showed he'd finally begun to realize the conversation wasn't going as well as he'd thought. "Well, yes, of course."

"For the sake of argument, Mr. Proctor, let's say one of my officers came to you and said he had been passed over for promotion because of his religion, or his race. Or his or her sex. Hypothetically speaking, of course. Then what?"

"It's *Doctor* Proctor. Assuming he or she was a minority, then we would interview them, take their statement, and open an investigation."

"What if they were not a minority?"

"Then there could still be bias, but of course…"

"Of course what?"

"There's white privilege to take into account."

Angriff closed his eyes a moment to maintain self-control. "Let's forget *that* for a minute and assume the person making the complaint is a minority. Would this lead to you interviewing other brigade personnel?"

"It could. Probably yes."

"What if they were not available? What if they were in the field on vital military business?"

"That does not matter, General. Per regulations, you would have them recalled from the field, or, if that were not possible in a timely manner, you would provide my team with an escort to interview them in the field."

Angriff grunted. Walling had gotten to know his boss pretty well by that point and was not sure Proctor would live to see tomorrow. The Doctor of Diversity, however, only had the vaguest sense of what was coming.

"You called it an offense. That implies there would be punishments if you found someone guilty of… what, being non-diverse? Is that classified as a hate crime?"

"It can be, General, and the punishments can be quite severe."

“How many people work in your office, Mr. Proctor?”

“It’s Doctor Proctor, if you don’t mind. We’re very understaffed right now. We have seventeen people but need many more, as I’m sure you can imagine. I hope to be able to use some locals eventually, but in the meantime we’ll have to make do.”

“Seventeen people.”

“Correct.”

Angriff leaned over to Walling. “Handle this as priority.” Walling nodded. Angriff shifted the cigar into his jaw, but did not bother to turn his head before exhaling.

Proctor waved at real smoke this time. “Smoking should be not allowed, General.”

“I’ll tell you what’s not allowed, Mr. Proctor… pardon me, *Doctor* Proctor! It’s… it’s…” Angriff’s hands balled into fists. He wanted to throw the smaller man to the ground and smash his face and yell that was exactly the sort of nonsense that had rotted American society in the first place, that caused Americans to hate each other. Truth be told, he wanted to shoot him. But even as his right hand went to the grip on his pistol, he blinked and took a step back.

Stop it, Nick! Stop it. This is a defining moment. Angriff took a deep breath and walked in a circle away from the others until he regained his composure. It took close to a minute. Before he spoke again, he took another deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Doctor, those days are gone; those politics are gone. I hated them then and I hate them now. Both parties amped up the animosity of their members for their own personal gain. That’s what made Americans hate each other so much and when the time came for us to pull together, it was too late. I disagree with everything you’ve said, but I also see that you feel just as strongly about your beliefs as I do mine. In private, you have just as much right to them.

“But I’ve been given a grave responsibility and all I can do is my best to see it through. I have to utilize every man and woman to help rebuild our country to the best of their abilities. Whatever I may have thought of you before The Collapse, or you of me, is no longer relevant. Forget politics; they don’t apply any more. Help me rebuild our country. I promise you, we’re on the same side.”

Proctor seemed stunned. “I… I don’t know what to say, General.”

“Doctor Proctor, have you studied the demographics of the Seventh Cavalry?”

The doctor had been terrified by Angriff’s initial outburst, but talk of his realm of expertise reassured him. “Umm… yes, General, of course.”

“And what are your conclusions?”

“I don’t understand the question.”

“Is the Seventh Cavalry skewed toward a particular race or sex?”

“Well…”

“It’s not a loaded question. I really don’t know the answer.”

“No, just over half of your personnel are classified as minorities.”

“Good,” Angriff said. “I’m truly glad to hear that, not that I could do anything about it now. Have you gone over our personnel records? You have? Then I think you’ll agree the only consideration given to personnel assignments within the brigade were talent, expertise, and training. Those are still the hallmarks. If that means I wind up with an all-white engineer company, then so be it. Or all black, or Asian; I don’t care as long as they are the best at doing their assigned duties. Do you understand me so far?”

Proctor nodded, but it was obvious he suspected a trap.

“Doctor, I’m tired of fighting against my own people. I don’t want to do that any more, and that includes you. But I want you to understand something. I will not now, or in the future, have my S-1 assign personnel based on any other considerations than their fitness for the duty in question. I have a mission to perform and only those things that further completion of that mission matter to me.”

“Excuse me, General, but what are you telling me?”

“Just this: I need you. I’ll grant your request for office space and do whatever I can to help you get set up.”

“But?”

Angriff smiled the charming smile that once graced major newspapers across the world, with deep crinkles around his bright blue eyes.

“There was a time in the past when I would have set you digging latrines, Doctor. The world you helped build collapsed, and frankly, from the view of history, it was probably doomed anyway. Our society was too fractured to survive. Alt-right this, alt-left that, and nowhere near enough alt-American. I’ve been called an alt-right racist and every other name in the book. One German guy took offense that I believe in God and some Englishwoman called me *vile.*

“However, that was *my* view. You, no doubt, would have thought me a war-mongering brute… hell, maybe you did. Maybe you read about me and said I was culturally insensitive or repulsive or maybe you wrote me off as being full of right-wing bullshit. If you did, just don’t admit it now.” Angriff winked to let him know that was a joke. “I was a nationalist, no question about it… I still am. And maybe you were a globalist, and maybe you still are. I’m guessing we were on opposite sides and I honestly don’t think reconciliation was possible back then. And in that dead world, maybe a Doctor of Diversity was considered important. Hell, maybe it *was* important and I’m the one who was wrong.

“And maybe one day we can argue about all that again. If that day comes, I promise to listen to what you have to say. But for now that’s all gone and we have to put aside our differences to survive. The United States can’t divide along ideological lines again unless we first resurrect her. That’s all I care about, restoring my country.”

“Despite what you may think, General, I care about that, too.”

“Outstanding. For that to happen, we all have to pull in the same direction. This brigade doesn’t need a diversity compliance officer because all I care about is competence. Nothing matters but how well you do your job. And you already know I have an S-1, Colonel Saw, to handle military personnel matters. So the brigade itself doesn’t need your talents, but someone else does. Where you’re needed is right here in Prescott, and later maybe in Sedona, and Flagstaff, and who knows where else?

“Mayor Parfist told me this morning that assigning people to the right projects is a burden for his office staff. Keeping up with who does what well is driving him crazy. If you become his director of personnel, and use your training to put the right people in the right jobs, then you can be a huge asset to our mission of rebuilding Prescott and the surrounding area. If you agree to only consider a person’s qualifications for a job, and nothing else, then I’ll back you to the hilt if you have any problems. And if you find somebody who *does* refuse to work with someone else for racial or gender reasons, or any reason, for that matter, you let Colonel Walling know and I’ll personally kick their ass. Is it a deal?”

Proctor thought about it for a few seconds. “If you mean everything you say, General… it’s a deal.”

“I’ve been called many things, Doctor, but dishonest isn’t one of them.”

#

Chapter 6

They have the eager eyes of men who know nothing of war.
Quintus Fabius, 489 b.c.

Prescott, AZ
1442 hours, April 10

"From a distance, they don't look bad," Angriff said to Colonel Walling.

Fifty feet away, the battalion of new recruits stood at attention on what had once been the fifty-yard line of Prescott High School's football field. Comprised of the reliable elements of Lester Hull's old Army of the Republic of Arizona, and fleshed out with local volunteers young and fit enough for military duty, they'd been incorporated as a second Marine battalion. After four months of boot camp, the day had come to see what kind of Marines they made.

"Colonel Strickland thinks they're going to make fine Marines, sir."

"If anybody can make Marines out of them, it's Harry the Hat. I wish we could have done better with uniforms." Those weren't new and some were Army; a few were even Navy.

"Colonel Schiller's working on it. Our first cotton crop will make a big difference. Don't forget we have to review the Homeguard battalion today too, general."

"I know." Angriff hadn't formally inspected troops in a long while. He scowled, put a cigar in his mouth, but didn't light it. "Let's see what we've got."

With the CO, Colonel Strickland, by his side, they took a close look at every one of the eight hundred men in the battalion's five companies. Angriff had reviewed many units in his time as a general officer, but after the inspection he came away impressed enough to ask Strickland if he could address the new Marines. Strickland beamed as he said yes.

"I'll keep this brief," he said. His voice had a natural force behind it, and the Virginia accent only empowered it further. "Today, some of you participated in an operation against your former comrades. Your professionalism was outstanding and the operation was a complete success. There were no casualties on either side and that's a tribute to both you and

your trainers. I'm very proud to have you as part of the Seventh Cavalry Brigade. I'm proud to call you *Marines*!"

A cheer rose and he let it go on for a few seconds before waving them to silence.

"Since there are now two Marine battalions, I'm announcing the formation of a Marine regiment under the command of Colonel Strickland."

More cheers. Strickland himself looked dumbstruck; Angriff hadn't told him in advance.

"That regiment is to bear the name First Marines! You've got a proud heritage to live up to, but I have faith you can do it!"

This time the cheers overwhelmed him and Angriff was smart enough to know when to stop.

#

"So you're Cranston?" Angriff said. "I've heard a lot about you. It doesn't look like outdoor living agrees with you."

Ground-in grime covered Norbert Cranston's face and clothes. In addition to his hands being bound behind him, a burly guard stood on either side, each one holding an arm.

"What do you want from me?" Cranston said. "Why not just kill me and get it over with?"

"Why would I have you killed?"

"I hear things. Even living in the forest, I hear things. You're General Anguff…"

"Angriff."

"Your people kicked the shit out of the Chinese last year after you jumped us from behind. They say you dragged General Patton out of the courthouse kicking and screaming, and then strung him up from a tree. If you did that to him, why not me, too?"

"That's a good question. Maybe I will. So far, I don't like you very much. But that's not why I'm talking to you. I'm trying to figure out whether you can be salvaged."

Cranston squinted and scowled, but Angriff noted the brief widening of his eyes and twitch at the corner of his mouth. He might as well have held up a flag reading *throw me a lifeline.*

"What does that mean?"

"You kept your men alive through a harsh winter. That's quite an accomplishment. And you apparently have some military command skills. I

need leaders like that. On the other hand, you worked for a vile human being who sold other human beings into slavery. That's an unforgiveable sin in my book, so help me understand why I should trust your motives if I put you to work."

Cranston rolled his shoulders. "It's hard to think with my hands tied."

"Tough."

The prisoner lowered his head and kicked at a pebble. "Why is slavery wrong?"

"If that's a serious question, there's no point in continuing this discussion."

"Why? I don't know who you are or where you came from. You just showed up with an army behind you and with weapons we could only dream of having. You must have been a kid when The Collapse happened, just like me, but whatever you were taught wasn't what I learned. General Patton—"

"That's not his name!"

"What?" Cranston's face showed genuine confusion.

"His name is Lester Earl Hull, and we didn't kill him. He's in the brig… jail, locked up. He was a lieutenant in the old U.S. Army during The Collapse and saw an opportunity to seize power."

"Is that true?"

"I'll excuse the inference that I'm a liar."

"You're a lot like him."

"I'm nothing like him!"

"I meant that as a compliment. I don't remember much about the old USA; I came of age in the chaos afterward. All kinds of people fought over this area. Food supplies dried up fast when Phoenix got quarantined…"

"What do you know about that?"

"Nothing concrete, but I've heard all sorts of stories. Anyway, Patton came in… excuse me, what did you say his name was?"

"Hull, Lester Earl Hull. We thought you were in the pre-Collapse army with him."

"Not me. I'm only in my late fifties. To cut this short, Patton came in and restored order. People had food to eat and a place to sleep. The price for that was strict obedience and slavery for those who resisted. That's the only reality I grew up with. If there's a different way, I'm willing to learn."

Angriff crossed his arms and inspected the man like he would a questionable piece of meat. "This won't be a popular decision with the folks

here in Prescott, but I'm going to give you one shot at rejoining the human race. One, got that? You'll be under the eye of Colonel Khin Saw, my officer in charge of personnel. If that man tells you to eat nails, you ask him how many. Is that clear?"

Cranston nodded.

"Get him out of here."

As Angriff stood and watched them leave, a tremor shook the ground. It lasted about five seconds and did no damage, but there was something disquieting about even a minor earthquake. If you can't count on the ground beneath your feet being solid, what can you count on?

"Does that happen often around here?" he called out to Cranston.

"Didn't used to, but in the last couple of years, it's happened all the time."

#

Operation Overtime
1632 hours, April 10

Angriff walked slowly down the ramp from the Crystal Palace, headed for his quarters. Dust covered his ACUs and particles fell off with every step. Sergeant Schiller would be upset in the morning, but right then he was too tired to care.

Just as he stepped off the ramp and turned left, Norm Fleming walked into the Clamshell, wearing even more dirt than he did. He smiled and patted Angriff on the shoulder, although he did notice the bandage on his ear.

"I'm proud of you, Nick."

"My life is now complete."

"I heard about what you did with that compliance guy today. I know how much you hated those kinds of people before The Collapse. The old Nick might have shot him, but you turned it around and put him to use. That's a Nick I haven't seen before."

"If you're thinking about kissing me, don't. How was the horseback ride?"

"Exhausting for me, but I'm declaring them ready for active duty. They did great. So did the airborne."

"I'm glad. Now, unless you're gonna bring me a cookie and tuck me in, I'm going to bed."

#

Chapter 7

Three things the wise man does not do. He does not plow the sky. He does not paint pictures on the water. And he does not argue with a woman.
Charlie Chan

Northwest of Creech Air Force Base, NV
1633 hours, April 10

Nado's horse crested the hill at a gallop and she gave him his head. They'd ridden the trail hundreds of times, but never before with death at their backs. She at once feared the two pursuing riders would start shooting and knew they wouldn't. It wasn't something she had that they wanted; it was *her*. Alive. Women riding alone were scarce in the desert.

A quick glance showed them forty feet back.

Too far.

With the slightest pressure on the reins, she slowed Ruffian, her four-year-old Arabian stallion, from a mouth-frothing full-out gallop to an imperceptibly slower gait. Beneath her thighs, she felt the sweat in his coat and the rhythmic rise and fall of his breathing. From years of training together, Nado knew he still had plenty left to give.

They pounded down the slope in unison, horse and rider so perfectly coordinated neither had to think about what the other was doing. Neither of the riders behind rode with the same confidence or skill. If they had, she wouldn't have had to slow down.

On the desert floor, her dust cloud boiled into their faces, as she intended. She slowed a little more so they didn't lose her. While jumping the narrow gulley she knew was there, she chanced a glance to see how far back they were.

Twenty feet. Perfect.

As expected, both men veered to either side, avoiding the worst of the dust. The rider on her right withdrew a long pole, presumably to knock her from the saddle. The other took a slightly wider circuit to her left. Ahead, she spotted the two stones she knew would be there. Only two feet apart, with a line of smaller stones marking a narrow trail until it ended in two more large rocks. You had to know it was there to see it. Nado did; she'd placed the rocks there herself.

She and Ruffian had ridden that path hundreds of times, if not thousands. The horse knew by practice exactly where to plant his footfalls and he didn't falter. As he thundered down the narrow path, Nado prayed her pursuers followed her.

She didn't see what happened; all she knew, when she looked back, was they had disappeared. The trap had worked.

Bringing Ruffian around and patting his shoulder, she stopped at the edge of a pit on one side of the narrow trail, a matching pit on the far side. Nado dismounted and peered into the darkness below. One rider lay at the bottom of each pit. The one holding the long shaft had flown straight into the pit's side, decapitating him and maiming his mount. The horse shrieked in pain from two broken legs. She drew the .45 from her holster and took careful aim at the stricken animal twenty feet below. Mercifully, the first shot was enough.

The rider in the other pit had survived with nothing more than a broken arm, and the horse didn't seem injured. The man screamed curses at her, but she walked away from the edge and out of his sight. In the distance came two more riders, but these she knew.

When they reined up in a swirl of dust and gravel, she had already remounted Ruffian.

"You mean that thing you dug actually worked?" the smaller of the two said. Both wore dusty green uniforms.

"Never any doubt, Roddy. There's a live one and his horse in that pit over there. Be careful; he might be armed. The other one's dead, his horse too."

"Horse?" Roddy smiled and shared a glance with the other man.

Nado looked down and shook her head, her face slack with sadness. No matter how hungry she got, she couldn't eat horse. "If you're gonna eat it, then you'd better hurry before it bloats in this heat."

"Hey, Nado, I'm sorry, but you know how it is."

"Yeah," she said. "I know. Meat's meat."

"C'mon, now, don't be like that."

"It's not your fault. But if asshole number two over there gives you any shit, eat him instead."

Roddy grimaced. "I know you're kidding, but… You've been gone a long time, Nado. We was worried."

"Thanks, Roddy, you're sweet. I've gotta go see Kando."

She turned Ruffian in one fluid motion. After a gentle nudge, the horse leaped into a canter. Before long she was on the paved road leading into the base, passing through the rusted signs with *Warning: U.S. Air Force Installation* in faded red letters across the top.

#

General Jamal Kando felt groggy as someone shook him out of his nap. The cool air from the standing electric fan was one of the only perks of being the commander. Powered by the sole functioning solar generator, it allowed him to sleep through the burning hot afternoons of the Nevada desert. Waking him for anything less than an emergency was dangerous and his staff knew it. So when full consciousness returned, he knew without asking it was important.

As he sat up, his skin peeled away from the vinyl couch with a ripping sound. Underneath him, sweat covered the fabric. “Well?”

Corporal Sanchez knelt so the general wouldn’t have to look up at him. “Tornado says she needs to talk to you right now.”

“Nado?” The deep lines in Kando’s face smoothed as he smiled. “Give me a minute before you bring her in.”

He moved into the squeaky swivel chair behind his desk, but didn’t bother putting a uniform shirt over his white cotton undershirt. Military decorum on the base had gone slack in the long, lonely years since The Collapse.

Lucia Tornado Alvarez swept into his office as she always did, like a dust devil. Having lived her entire life on the base, Nado didn’t give a damn about military protocols. Kando could only take her for short periods. Her restless energy exhausted him, but he loved her visits anyway. She reminded him of better times.

“This is a nice surprise,” he said. A trickle of sweat on his cheek dried in the blowing air of the fan. “I haven’t seen you for a while.”

“A scraper’s gotta scrape,” she said. “I was gonna go up into Idaho, but first I headed for Tahoe to check out the snow pack, see what the water tables would be like this year. I thought maybe I’d run into Mom, find out what going’s on up there.”

“And?”

“The pack in the Sierra Nevadas is deep, so it looks like rain could be above normal this year. The rivers should be full. The locals said game is plentiful but the Chinese are sniffing around again to the west. I spent a

couple of days with Steve Hunter up at Incline. He showed me around some. But that's not why I'm here."

"Don't keep me in suspense."

"First thing, I got chased all the way back by a couple guys who knew how to ride. They picked up my trail about ten miles out and followed me all the way into the north valley."

"Did we get them?"

"I led them into one of my traps, the one you wouldn't help me dig. Remember those? One of the men broke his neck, but Roddy has the other one."

"Who were they?"

She shook her head, tossing the thick black locks around like curls of smoke rising in the night. "I'm guessing they're from that band of desert raiders we've heard about the last couple of months, but I'll bet the guy you've got is already talking. They wore red bandanas, whatever that means. Anyway, forget about them; they're not the story here. When I was coming out of the mountains, I ran into Jingle Bob, and we shared the latest news. He was headed north but told me about a battlefield outside of Phoenix. Did you know there was a battle down there last year?"

Kando's posture changed from relaxed to rigid. He sat straight, folded his hands, and thrust his head forward. "What kind of battle?"

"A big one. Bob hadn't seen the whole thing yet, but he'd seen some of it. He got the rest from a Goshute, who got it from an Apache, who supposedly watched the whole thing."

"So this is second, third, and fourth hand?"

"Doesn't make it not true. The story the Goshute gave him was that a unit of Marines faced off against an army from the Caliphate, and the Marines won."

"By Marines, you mean Patton's troops down in Prescott?"

"No, I mean *Marine* Marines."

"*United States* Marines?"

"That's the story. But there's more. The Apache said there was another battle around Prescott, a much bigger battle with tanks and helicopters, this time against the Chinese. That's the one Bob got to see in person. He said it was true."

"The Chinese? So they finally moved on the Republic of Arizona? That's bad for us. Now they're south *and* west of us."

“I don’t know, maybe. But I got the impression this was the real U.S. military.”

“That’s impossible.”

“If you say so. But Bob heard the Americans won and won big. Beat the shit out of the Chinese.”

Kando rose and stepped over to the window. The distant mountains cast shadows on the far end of the runway as the late afternoon sun dropped to the horizon. He was silent for several minutes. “If this is somehow real, it changes everything, but I can’t waste resources chasing maybes and could-bes. How willing are you to do recon that far south? If the Caliphate’s moving north from Tucson, it’s more dangerous than ever. But if we have new-found allies…”

“Willing?” Nado said with a smirk. “*Willing*? You talk like you could stop me. Give me supplies and ammo, and I’ll find out exactly what’s what down there.”

He nodded once. “Done. First we interrogate this prisoner, but if everything checks out, I’ll give you whatever I can spare. One condition, though. You’re back within two weeks.”

“It’ll take that long to ride down there and back. A month.”

“Three weeks.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Hey, Nado?”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful, okay? Creech needs you. *I* need you. Even Fifty-One needs you.”

“Fifty-One can kiss my ass.”

#

SECTION TWO
Threats

Chapter 8

The storm always comes.

Matt Morris, author of The Unemployed Millionaire

Plumas National Forest, CA
1702 hours, April 10

The Douglas firs and Ponderosa pines thinned as the slope steepened into a ravine, with a small river at the bottom. Hidden in the tree line, Junker Jane passed the binoculars to Jingle Bob. He tracked the knot of men half-walking and half-sliding down the rocky ground toward the water.

Once they were out of earshot, Jane turned to him with raised eyebrows and crossed arms. “Well?”

“What can I say? You were right; they’re Chinese.”

Jingle Bob thought Jane had to be younger than she looked. Her face showed the effects of a lifetime lived outdoors. Light scars marked the sun-bronzed skin here and there. Deep wrinkles sprayed the corners of her brown eyes. Sun-bleached blond streaks lightened her dark brown hair, a trait from her Spanish ancestors.

“But what are the Chinese doing this far north and east?” she said. “This isn’t friendly territory for them or us.”

“You tell me; this is your hunting ground, not mine. What’s around here they’d want?”

“Nothing,” she said. “There’s plenty of game, mostly deer but also geese, ducks, and all sorts of birds… but they don’t need to move into the high mountains to hunt game. There are plenty of predators up here, too, everything from bears and bobcats to mountain lions, and they’ll munch on a human if they get the chance. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Could be a rogue outfit.”

“I guess so.”

“Or…” Jingle Bob scratched under his chin and cast his eyes skyward, thinking. “How far are we from that old army base?”

“Which one?”

“The one with the tanks.”

“Sierra Army Depot?”

“Is that the one with the tanks?”

“Yeah. It’s about fifty miles from here.”

“I’ll bet that’s it. They’re scouting ways to get there.”

“So why wander around the mountains? Why don’t they just follow the old highways?”

“Bridges, I guess. A lot of them have crashed.”

“I—”

Gunshots echoed through the ravine, AK-47s set to full automatic mixed with single reports from large-caliber rifles. Bob and Jane exchanged glances and hit the forest floor, sighting their matching Henry .45/70 lever-action rifles down the slope. In minutes three of the eight Chinese who had descended struggled back up the way they’d come, pausing to fire across the ravine to the far side.

Twenty yards from the tree line where they lay, one Chinese took a round through the back of the head and collapsed. Another threw up his hands in surrender before a dozen rounds ripped him apart. The last charged in blind panic, heading right for their hiding place. He was young, much younger than most Chinese soldiers they’d heard about. Both of them could see the terror in his face as bullets kicked up dirt around him. Whoever was shooting at him, their fire was getting close to the two scrapers, so at a range of ten feet they both fired.

The impact knocked him backward. Dropping his rifle, the soldier put both hands over his chest, where blood poured from ragged holes in his uniform. He staggered forward two steps. His face twisted until he seemed to be crying, as if he called for his mother. Tears ran down his cheeks and blood leaked through his fingers in a spreading stain on his shirt. Then he toppled over. The top of his head landed so close to Jingle Bob that he could smell the man’s sweat and see his dandruff.

“I… I’ve never shot a man before,” Jingle Bob said. His hands trembled as he wiped sweat from his eyes.

“It’s just like shooting dinner, except you don’t eat it.” Junker Jane pushed down the lever on her rifle and loaded another round. “I can’t believe you never had to shoot nobody before.”

“I guess I’ve been lucky. Shouldn’t we get out of here? Whoever killed those men is likely coming to scrounge whatever they can.”

“I know. I wanna see if it’s who I think it is.”

“And if it’s not?”

She smiled and turned his way. “Maybe I’ve found a new trading

partner.”

Minutes later, a few heads appeared down the slope, with flankers on either side, warily climbing upward. At a hundred yards’ range, Jane recognized one of them. She yelled without moving from her prone position. “Bam Bam Bear, it’s Junker Jane. Don’t shoot!”

Her voice echoed down the ravine. The scattered group tensed and raised their weapons, searching for the voice’s source. The biggest man cupped hands around his mouth and yelled back. “If you’re really Jane, identify yourself.”

“You want me to talk about that night at Mount Shasta?”

Through her binoculars, she could see the man smile and motion for the others to lower their weapons. “Instead of talking about it, let’s do it again!”

Bob raised an eyebrow.

“Not *that*,” she said. “We got drunk.”

#

Bam Bam Bear moved with grace, considering his bulk. Two of his followers escorted him to the trees, just in case, while the others began looting the bodies of the dead. A single gunshot made Bob jump, but nobody else even looked up.

Bam Bam Bear and Jingle Bob both stood an inch below six feet. But where Bob seemed molded from cured leather, lean and weatherworn, Bear resembled his namesake. Knotted muscles stretched over shoulders so wide only elephantine legs could support them. Florid cheeks reflected the exertion of climbing the rocky hillside. A reddish brown beard hung halfway to his chest. When he clapped hands on Jane’s shoulders and pulled her into him for a hug, she disappeared beneath his arms. Bob guessed his age as late twenties.

“It is *damned* good to see you, girl! I was hoping you’d show up soon.”

Jane laughed. “And I know *why* you were hoping I would, but that’s gonna have to wait. I didn’t bring any booze.” She put her hand out to indicate Bob. “Bear, this is Jingle Bob. He scrapes to the east and south, but sometimes comes around to share news. Bob, this is Bam Bam Bear. He’s the leader of a group called the Enclave.”

After shaking hands, Bear asked him if he’d brought anything good to barter.

“I wouldn’t come all this way if I didn’t. Guns and ammo, boots, high quality clothing, all kind of good stuff.”

Bear whistled. “Sounds like you and me are gonna do some trading.”

“Where did the Chinese come from?” Jane said.

“Scouts.” Bear scowled.

“What was that shot a minute ago?” Bob asked.

“Somebody too wounded to save. We only shoot them if they can’t talk or there’s nothing we can do for them.”

“You treat wounded Chinese?” Bob asked.

“We do until they tell us what we want to know. *Then* we shoot them. The Chinese kill us; we kill them. That’s how it is.”

“What are they doing here, Bear?” Jane asked.

“Looking for ways through the forest. There’s a heavily armed column on the old highway, repairing bridges and broken sections, and scouts all over the mountains. We found one of them with his spine snapped and organs ripped out, so be careful at night.”

“Mountain lion?” Bob asked.

Bear shook his head. “No, there were plenty of clear prints. It was a mountain man.”

Bob nodded in understanding. “There’s more than there used to be, at least around Tahoe and to the south.”

“We hear them every night. I know an old Washoe chief claims to speak their language.”

“Back to the Chinese,” Jane said. She’d never believed the Sasquatch stories.

“Right, the Chinese. They’re definitely heading east, with heavy firepower.”

“Bob thinks they’re after the old tanks at that army base east of here.”

Bear nodded in agreement. “That makes sense, except why now? Both the tanks and the Chinese been around since before I was born. They could have come up here any time they wanted.”

“Maybe I can answer that,” Jingle Bob said. “There was a big battle last year near a place called Prescott, in old Arizona. The Chinese got their asses kicked by some force claiming to be Americans. They lost a lot of tanks.”

“Americans? You mean, like, *American* Americans?”

Bob chuckled. “Don’t ask me who they are or how they got there, but

yeah, American Americans. I talked to a few locals and some Apache, and those are the claims."

"I guess the Chinese had all the firepower they needed before, and now they need to replace their losses. It all makes sense. How far is this Prescott from here?"

"Five weeks' ride, four if you can switch horses and don't meet anybody in the desert. But down north of Las Vegas, I saw a lot of riders in the desert of a kind I ain't seen before. They wear red scarfs and have letters tattooed on their arms. Didn't look too friendly, so with them around I'd say at least a five-week ride."

"Then whether they're Americans or not, that's too long," Bear said, becoming serious. "The Cs will be at the depot long before then."

"Can we stop them?" Jane said.

Bear cocked his head. "We?"

"A girl's got to protect her territory."

"I'm not sure we should even try. You're talking about a lot of firepower down there."

"And if they get those tanks, how long do you think you'll be safe up north in your mountains? Another year? If they're trying to get those tanks, we've got to try and stop them."

Bear had already thought it through. "I know, I agree with you. But by ourselves, we can't do more than slow them down a little. I'll have to go back to the Enclave and gather everybody who can ride, but that still won't be enough. We're friends with another group near Mount Shasta; maybe they'll help. We could use some bigger guns." He cast a meaningful glance at Jingle Bob.

"How about three RPGs?"

"You've got three RPGs? What do you want for them?"

"It's a donation. I don't want the Chinese anywhere near my scraping grounds. I've got some AK-47s, with ammo, if you need them."

"Oh, hell, yes."

"Listen, Bear," Jane said, "I heard there're still some people living on the base, and if that's true we need to warn them. They could have a radio that works, or maybe some of those tanks."

"Either of you been there before?"

"Once," Jane said. "A long time ago."

Bear pointed at her. "You and Bob alert the army base. See if they can

send us any help."

"I'd rather go with you," she said.

"There'll be time for that later." Bear turned and was gone down the slope, followed by the rest of his band.

"Just got drunk?"

"Mind your own business."

#

Chapter 9

My enemy struck me in the face, I turned my cheek to the foe,
My enemy struck me once again, and this time broke my nose;
If I'm bound for hell for fighting back, this much you should know,
My enemy died a vicious death and I left his corpse for the crows.
Yasmine Carolista, Enough is Enough

Herlong, CA
1356 hours, April 11

The Sierra Army Depot began life in 1942 as an ammunition storage facility. Situated far enough inland to be safe from Japanese attacks, the Army located it in the dry, isolated area north-northwest of Lake Tahoe.

After World War Two, the facility underwent many changes over the decades. With the army taking advantage of the ideal conditions for storing military equipment, the area grew until it finally comprised 36,000 acres. The government stored tens of thousands of surplus vehicles there, including Abrams tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles. There were also acres of ammunition bunkers, parts warehouses, medical supplies, and chemical warfare agents. In other words, the depot had everything necessary to equip an army.

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From the top of the ridge, Junker Jane scanned the desert to her east. At the bottom of the hill's eastern slope ran old Highway 395. Across the road stood a small building that had once been a store, and beside it ran the road leading into the Sierra Army Depot. A sign with paint missing labeled it the Her__ng Acces___oad. *Access Road*, Jane guessed. *Herling, Herlong?* Close by on the north lay the southern tip of Honey Lake.

A pile of sandbags by the junction of 395 and the access road leading into the base marked an abandoned guard post. Raising her binoculars, she searched for signs of life, focusing on the army base in the distance. The hazy shapes of a few low buildings shimmered in the waves of heat rising from the hot sands.

"This isn't good," she said. "The last time I was here, there was a machine gun set up right there, behind those sandbags. Guards lived in that old food store and everybody was on their toes. Now it doesn't look like

there’s been anybody around for years.”

“When were you here?”

“I told Bear it was ten years ago, but the truth is it’s probably been closer to fifteen.”

“A lot can change in fifteen years.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Jingle Bob had left his loaded-down sled with Bear’s people in exchange for a saddled horse. Together they steered their mounts down the bare slope toward the highway. At a shallow ditch beside the road they both halted, automatically scanning it for useable items. Several glass bottles lay half-buried in the dirt.

Bob pointed to them. “When this is all over, you need to scrape this place. There’s some good stuff here.”

“You’re right about that.” She indicated a metal hubcap lying in a ditch.

They crossed the highway and followed the Herlong Access Road farther east. A bent and rusty sign read *County Highway A25*. A line of utility poles led off north, most of the wires still draped from one pole to the next. Junker Jane knew that electric current once ran through those wires, but without really understanding what that meant. It was all before her time.

They passed a faded orange sign that read *END OF ROAD WORK*. Scrub bushes and leaning fence posts lined both sides of the highway. Weeds grew through cracks in the asphalt. After half a mile, they came to a stone and wood sculpture on the south side of the pavement.

“Was that here—”

“No,” Jane said. “It wasn’t.”

“What is it?”

“I’m afraid to guess.”

The shambling structure stood twenty feet high. Rock and boulders heaped into the shape of a crude Buddha made up its bulk, complete with top-knot. The seated figure held up a roundel of wood with a swastika carved into it, and four dots above the arms of the crooked shape. From behind the seated figure rose a tall wooden cross. At the juncture of its crossbeams was a circle, like a Celtic cross, except inside the circle was a Star of David.

Shaking their heads, the pair moved off again. More utility poles rose on their right, paralleling a small unpaved road leading off that way. A gate had once blocked entry, but now it lay in the sand. Ahead they saw a line of

trees turned dark green by spring growth. Neither said anything because they both knew what that meant: water.

The road ran over a culvert with a ditch on either side. The ditch had shallow pools of water in the bottom, the dirt trampled by animal tracks. The culvert seemed none the worse for half a century's neglect, which was a good thing because the ditch's sides were steep and its breadth wide. Riding through it would have been difficult, jumping it with untrained horses impossible. A steel railing flanked either side of the highway to keep cars from plummeting to oblivion.

The utility poles had moved to the opposite side of the highway now.

"What's that?" he said, pointing to their right.

"That's a house."

By pre-Collapse standards, it was more shack than house. The wood had grayed with age, although patches of flaky white paint remained. Farther away they could see other structures. Two larger cinder block storage buildings came up on their right and these appeared in better repair. A long shadow cast by the closer one promised some relief from the heat, so they rode over there and dismounted to give the horses a rest.

"Hello!" Jane called. "Anybody around?"

Nobody answered, so they walked back to the dilapidated house and went inside, calling out every few seconds. A large room came first, with a hallway leading to two small bedrooms and a bathroom, with a kitchen at the very back. Anything usable had been taken, except for a crude wooden table in the front room with something carved into the top plank.

"*Welcome to Heaven*," Bob read. "If this is Heaven, I wanna see Hell before I make a decision about staying."

Half an hour later, their horses refreshed, they remounted and rode on, passing a crossroads with a sign pointing to Honey Lake.

"I caught a big catfish there," Jane said. "Ten pounds or more, at least. I ate him for three days."

"I'm so hungry right now I'd eat him in one sitting."

"Good hunting up there, too. Not just deer, either. Ducks, geese, quail, all kinds of birds. I shouldn't be giving you all my tips. You might like scraping this territory better than the one you're in."

"Not me. I like the current scraper too much to butt into her range."

With the heat so strong, they rode on along the highway at a gentle walk. Half an hour later, a barking dog stood beside the first of a long row of

houses close to the road. Fir and young juniper trees shaded most of them, with desert peach trees scattered here and there. The clucking of chickens came from a small coop in the back.

A sagging porch on the first house showed signs of recent repair. Two rattlesnake skins hung over a railing. The dog barked some more, tail wagging so hard its butt moved side to side like a dance. It glanced over its shoulder as a young woman rounded the house's back corner.

"Well, hey there!" she called with a wave. "Where'd you two come from?"

"Out west," Jane yelled back.

Small and lithe, the woman wore a loose white frock stained with dust. Stout sandals protected her feet. A yellow rope around her head held back her tangled brown hair. She walked up to them with a total lack of fear and stroked the mane of Jane's horse. "Welcome to Heaven. My name is Sunshine."

"Sunshine?"

She nodded, grinning. Jane thought the name fit, both her disposition and her body. Naturally brown hair had been bleached by the sun. Her skin was burned to a dark reddish brown.

"My name is Junker Jane; this is Jingle Bob. We're scrapers."

"Do you live here alone?" Bob asked.

"No!" she said, giggling. "All of the prophet's family lives here!"

"Prophet?" he said.

"Yes, Prophet James. I'm sure you've heard of him."

"We haven't had the pleasure," Jane said before Bob could respond. "But we'd certainly like to. We need to speak to him as soon as possible… it's very important."

"He'll be thrilled to meet you. We don't get many visitors. I'll take you to him."

As Sunshine moved to get her own horse, Bob shook his head and chuckled. "We've got more prophets running around this country than hairs on a boar's ass."

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Chapter 10

Nothing worth learning can be taught.
Oscar Wilde

Herlong, CA
1509 hours, April 11

Jane expected Sunshine to lead them into the base itself, but she didn't. Instead, they found Prophet James hoeing a garden beside a collapsed barn, surrounded by a field of half-grown vegetables and several dozen young people dressed in smocks. Ahead of them on the road, Jane saw gates and a guard shack that marked the restricted area for the Sierra Army Depot.

At Sunshine's call, Prophet James looked up, spotted the trio on horseback, and threw his arms wide open. He was of medium height, and a piece of rough rope held back his graying hair, still streaked with brown. Bushy eyebrows fell toward his eyes. His hands were like dried-out leather, but his smile looked genuine, even to scrapers used to the deception of bartering with false friends.

"The sunshine of my day!" he said, throwing his arms wide again. It seemed to be his favorite gesture. Sunshine grinned. Jane thought his charisma made him appear taller than he really was. "And you have brought two more of God's children out of the wilderness! Welcome to you both. I am James De Shén. What names are you known by, here in the Place of Trial?"

"Swami," Sunshine said, "this is Junker Jane and her mate, Jingle Bob."

At the word *mate* Jane started to say something, but couldn't before James replied.

"Heaven welcomes you both! Please, dismount and refresh yourselves. You and your horses must be hot and weary from your journeys."

Others working the field crowded around them and helped them dismount. Dusty clouds billowed in the breeze. The horses were led to a water trough while Jane and Bob sat in hewn chairs under the canopy of a juniper tree.

James pulled up another chair and joined them, wiping his face on the long sleeve of his smock. "I am delighted see you both." He gestured to their

sidearms and smiled. “You won’t be needing those here.”

“Habit,” Jane said. By tacit agreement, Bob let her do the talking as James’ followers again surrounded them, pressing close to listen. “A lifetime wandering the open country leaves you wary.”

“Ah, yes, the flaws and perils of this imperfect world, this Place of Trial. All we can do is forge the best record of life that we can, in hopes of enjoying God’s mercy in the next.”

Jane was sorely tempted to follow that into a discussion of his beliefs, but the image of Bear and his people harassing the Chinese to slow them down kept her focused on her objective. Instead, she swallowed. “I would love to spend weeks discussing this with you.”

“Excellent!”

“But I can’t. We’ve ridden hard to bring you a warning that a Chinese task force is coming up that highway—” She pointed southwest. “—and they’re heading right for you. They’re repairing bridges as they travel and could be here within a few days, a week at the most. And they’re heavily armed.”

James didn’t react for a few seconds and she could see in his face that he was processing this information. Then he jumped up and raised his arms to the sky. “Thank you, Buddha, Zeus, Krishna, Jesus, Yahweh, Allah, and all of your other manifestations, O mighty God! Thank you for delivering these sinners unto us!”

When Jane had mentioned the Chinese, as a reflex all of his followers had looked at James and judged his reaction. Now, with him dancing in place and waving his arms, they did the same.

“What are you doing?” Jane had to yell to be heard. “Don’t you get it? The Chinese are coming to loot the depot and they won’t hesitate to kill anybody who gets in their way!”

James waved his arms and quieted the crowd. Sweat poured down his face from his exertions, but his eyes reflected an absolute joy Jane thought might have been madness.

“No, my child, you’ve got it backwards. The Chinese *think* they’re coming for the cruel weapons of war stored over yonder, but it’s not so! God leads them here! We will meet them with love instead of hate, a friendly hand instead of a hand dealing death. You’ll see, once they discover God’s love, they will settle among us in peace.”

Bob crossed his arms and scowled.

Jane gaped. Her mouth hung open without her realizing it did so. “James, none of that is going to happen. If you’re lucky, they’ll kill you quickly. If you’re not lucky, they’ll torture you first and rape the women.”

“The Great Deceiver will tell them to do so, yes, but God will overcome him yet again and turn their stone hearts to love.”

“Don’t you get it? The Chinese outlawed all religions in the areas they control. They’re atheists!”

“All the better!” If anything, his smile broadened.

“Do you have a death wish?” Bob asked, unable to keep silent any longer.

“No, my brother, I have a life wish!”

“So you won’t do anything to help secure the weapons?”

James pulled his head back and cocked it to one side. “Secure the weapons? You mean the instruments of death kept on the base?” He pointed down the road.

“That’s what the Chinese are coming for!” Jane wanted to shake him.

“But that’s outside of our control. Believe me, I have held many discussions with Colonel Lamar to let us render them harmless, but she refuses. For His own reasons, God has not yet softened her heart.”

“Colonel Lamar? Who is she?”

“Don’t you know? She’s the base commander.”

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Chapter 11

Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear.
Mark Twain

Herlong, CA
1544 hours, April 11

Prophet James tried to keep their horses, but Jane made it clear that was a non-starter. Neither she nor Bob had to draw their sidearms, but they did have to insist on the return of their rifles and the ammo. James' acolytes had removed both from the horses while they'd talked. In the end they left with everything they'd come with, plus full canteens.

"I thought you'd been here before," Bob said once they'd ridden out of hearing range.

"I have, but it was a long time ago and I came in from the northeast, over land. I met a security patrol out in the desert and we traded a few things, but they warned against trying to get closer. They said the commander at the time, General Wistick, I think, was a real hard-ass and would probably lock me up for trespassing. This was forty-plus years after The Collapse. So I never got to look inside the base, but I still remember the two guys I met."

On their left, they passed a one-time military lodging hotel with a caved-in roof. Rusted-out cars still sat in the parking lot. Beyond that, several concrete barriers lined the shoulder. A guardhouse sat in the middle of the road and showed signs of recent repair. On their right, an M1A1 Abrams rested on a concrete pedestal. Streaks of rust stained its paint, which had faded from light sand to off-white.

As their horses trotted closer, a man stepped out from the guardhouse and pointed an M-16 at them. "Stop and state your business." His obvious youth surprised her. He was no older than his early twenties.

After stopping, Jane held up her hands. "We need to see Colonel Lamar. It's urgent."

"Oh, yeah? You show up out of nowhere and demand to see the colonel, so I guess you're expectin' me to show you the way or something? But that ain't how this is gonna work. First get off those horses, real careful now, and drop any guns you're wearing."

"You don't understand—"

“I understand you better shut up and do as I say.”

Once they’d dismounted and disarmed, the youth nodded in satisfaction. “What’re your names?”

“I’m Junker Jane and this is Jingle Bob.”

“Junker Jane? Seems I’ve heard of you. Why do you want to see the colonel?”

Being tired and drenched in sweat, Jane had had enough. She pointed back the way they’d come and yelled. “Do I look like I’ve got the time to fuck around? Well, do I? You’ve got the hammer of Hell comin’ your way and I’m trying to warn your commanding officer, but I can’t do it with all the fucking idiots who keep slowing me down!” She leaned forward, eyes wide, almost daring the young man to pull the trigger.

It had the desired effect. He glared at her. “Leave your horses here.”

“They need shade. This sun’s a killer.”

“All right, bring ’em along, then. But leave the guns here.”

“Like hell.”

They remounted, rearmed, and followed the guard, who went on foot. They turned left at a stone sign with *Sierra Army Depot* chiseled into its face. Colonel Lamar’s headquarters was in the first building they came to on the right. The guard let them into a small waiting room and told them to give up their guns again, and this time they didn’t argue.

After removing the weapons, the guard knocked on a wooden door. A muffled voice responded and he stuck in his head in. A moment later he opened it wider.

“The colonel wants to hear you out.”

Jane wasn’t sure what she’d been expecting, but Colonel Lamar wasn’t it. She stood about five feet tall and weighed no more than one hundred pounds. Close-cropped white hair shone against her dark skin and gave her a soldierly appearance that her wrinkled BDUs only magnified. Jane put her age somewhere past seventy, but her erect bearing showed no sign of her years.

Her delight at having visitors was obvious. “Please sit. I’m Colonel Aretha Lamar, and did I understand correctly that you’re the famous Junker Jane?”

“I don’t know about famous, but yes, ma’am, I’m Jane, and this is Jingle Bob. I’m sorry to barge in like this, but we had to see you right away.”

“Think nothing of it!” The colonel waved her hand and sat. “Honey,

you're the first outsider we've seen in more than a year. Can I get you some water, something to eat?"

"Water would be great."

The colonel pointed at the guard and he left. "Private Lamar tells me you have something important to tell me?"

"Private Lamar?"

The colonel smiled. "My grandson, Marcus."

"I'm sorry, I was rude to him… but Colonel, you have to listen to me. The Chinese are coming and they could be here soon. They're down the highway, maybe thirty miles from here, a lot of men and armored vehicles. There's what looks like artillery, too."

"Chinese? So if they're only thirty miles from here, and you're on horseback riding to warn me, that means they could be here any time now. Is that what you're saying, we might be shooting at the Chinese in a few minutes?" The prospect almost seemed to excite her.

Jane rubbed her eyes. Dust and sun glare had left them watering and tired. "We have a little more time than that. They're stuck with using the main highways because of their large vehicles… my friends to the west said they were in Reno Junction, repairing a downed bridge, and had at least four more bridges to fix before they could get here. The road is also damaged, so we still have time to prepare a defense."

"We?"

"Yes, we. You, me, my friends in the Enclave, some others around Mount Shasta… if we don't stop them, nobody will. We're guessing they're coming for the tanks and whatever else you've got in store here. If they get those, nobody's safe."

Colonel Lamar rose from behind her desk. Frowning, she paced by the window. "How strong are they?"

"I don't know. Bear, that's my friend from the Enclave, Bear said they had some armored vehicles, and he saw hundreds of men."

"The Chinese have stayed put in their portion of California for over forty years, so why are they coming here now?"

"Bob has a theory about that."

They both turned to him. Just then Colonel Lamar's grandson came back with a pitcher of water and two plastic glasses. To Jane's surprise, they were clean. Bob downed his entire glass before answering.

"I scrape down south, sometimes as far as the Phoenix area, but

usually north of there. Last year I ran into some Indians I know, Apaches, who told me about two big battles fought last summer, one northeast of Phoenix and the other near Prescott."

"Prescott? Where's that?"

"It's in some mountains about a hundred miles north-northwest of Phoenix. There's a big pine forest near there, too. There's been a warlord in Prescott for years who calls himself General Patton—"

"Like George Patton?"

"Yes. He rules over something called the Republic of Arizona and claims it's the rightful… ummm… what's the word?—"

"Successor?" Jane said.

"Yeah, that's it. He claims it's the rightful successor to the United States, but by all accounts he's a real bastard. Anyway, the story goes that the Chinese sent this army of tanks to Prescott to capture the place and extend their reach into old Arizona. Except out of nowhere, *Americans* showed up with helicopters and artillery and tanks of their own. And when I say Americans, my Apache friend emphasized that he meant the American Army, the real one. Like from before The Collapse.

"The Chinese weren't expecting them and got their asses kicked. Lost a *lot* of tanks, to hear it told. Now, I've heard a lot of wild stories over the years, most of which turned out to not be true. But I've never gotten bad information from an Indian, in particular an Apache. Everything they've ever told me checked out, so I decided to see for myself, and damned if they weren't right, at least about the fight outside Phoenix. I found all kinds of bomb holes, spent shell casings, bones, you name it. Along what used to be Interstate Seventeen, near a little place called New River, I saw hundreds of wrecked and burned-up cars, trucks, and you name it scattered all over the desert.

"But what's really interesting is that I couldn't get too close, because there were troops there. Young troops, in new-looking uniforms. As a scraper, it's my business to know what kind of uniforms they were, and I can tell you one hundred percent they wore MCCUUs, Marine Corps Combat Utility Uniforms. I'm dead-shit certain about that. Oh, I'm sorry."

"I've heard the word before… Bob? Bob."

"I found a crate filled with MCCUUs once and so I recognized them right off. After that I decided to see if the rest of what the Apache said checked out, so I headed north for Prescott."

At this point even Jane stared at him, enrapt. She hadn't heard that part of the story. "Was that true, too?"

"I never got close enough to find out. There were patrols everywhere near the city, so I skirted it to the west and found what they call Skull Valley, this long stretch leading into Prescott from the northwest. That's where I saw the tanks. Dozens of them; I counted more than forty. Chinese tanks. Men were all over the valley, salvaging what they could, men wearing American Army ACUs, Army Combat Uniforms…"

"Are you sure they were ACUs and not BDUs?"

"Yeah, so you see what that means?"

"ACUs were in use before The Collapse, but surplus stockpiles are mostly BDUs. ACUs in everyday use would all have either rotted by now or been worn out. It's not likely a whole unit would still be wearing them. And Marine uniforms are even less likely."

"Exactly. Anyway, I couldn't stay long or get too close, but I did see helicopters flying into the city and all kinds of vehicles, and they all had a big white star on them. Now, I've seen old U.S. Army equipment before and I never saw white stars on them, so I don't know why these had them, but to my mind there's no doubt this was the real American Army. I wish you could have seen them; these guys were pros."

He refilled his water glass and drank it more slowly than the first. "So that's why I think the Chinese are coming, to replace their losses from last year's battle."

Both scrapers turned to Colonel Lamar, who stood as still as an ambush predator. She said nothing for more than a minute.

"I'm not sure what to say," she said, lightly touching her throat. The excitement in her face was gone. "If they're coming in force, we can't stop them. And it's not just our tanks and APCs I'm worried about them getting their hands on. The chemical and biological weapons storage is here, too, and enough ammunition to refight World War Two. We've got more than five thousand shoulder-fired recoilless rifles… the list is endless. But if they're bringing AFVs and have air support, there's almost nothing we can do to stop them."

The two scrapers exchanged a quick glance.

"I'm sorry, Colonel, but I don't understand," Jane said. "There must be hundreds of tanks here, and that seems like more than enough to fight off an army."

“What exactly do you think I command here? It’s true that once upon a time the base had thousands of ranks garrisoned here, but that all ended with The Collapse. When supplies stopped coming, most of the people stationed here left. Some stayed with their families, but over the years a lot of them went looking for a better life than just existing in this barren hell-hole.”

“How many men in your command?” Bob blurted.

“Ninety-seven men and women. And that’s if you count teenagers as adults. There are also twenty-one younger children. Over the years, we’ve tried to maintain three working M1A1s for just such a contingency as this, but the good fuel ran out ten years ago. I’m surprised it lasted that long, to be honest. Whatever fuel stabilizers the military developed worked well, otherwise the pre-Collapse fuel wouldn’t have lasted a year. We’ve still got some left but it’s so stale the vehicles won’t burn it any more. We do have some Javelins in the ammunition bunkers, but nobody alive has fired them, so we’ll have to learn on the fly, and the Carl Gustavs I mentioned.”

“Javelins and Carl whats?” Jane said.

“Gustavs, the recoilless rifles. Officially the M3. The Swedes developed it right after World War Two and it stayed in use right up until the end. It had a lot of nicknames.”

“And Javelins?”

“They’re anti-tank rockets.”

“Like RPGs?”

“Much bigger. They’re supposed to do a lot more damage, but they usually need two people to operate. I don’t know if you’ve seen pictures of the old bazooka, but something like that, only larger. I’ll have my executive officer bring some out… but those bunkers are more than a mile from here and Javelins are heavy. That’s going to take a while.

“We might be better off sticking with the Gustavs. They aren’t as big but still pack a wallop, and we can get some here in short order. Other than that, all we’ve got is small arms and a few machine guns. And none of my people have had any real training.”

“What do you mean, no real training? Aren’t they in the Army?”

“Technically, none of us are. We’re all children and grandchildren of those people who either stayed here or came soon after. We organized as a military unit on our own because it offered the best chance for protection, but not everybody joined. Did you meet our resident eccentric on the way in?”

“You mean Prophet James? Yes, we’ve had the pleasure.”

“Poor deluded James… he’s my oldest son, you see, Marcus’ father, and while I’m all right there with him, having faith in God, James takes it to extremes. If he doesn’t want to work that day, he says God doesn’t want him to and then sleeps all day and lets his followers do the work.

“My father was a major in the Army and we were on vacation, camping at Honey Lake, when The Collapse came. Within days, the roads were effectively closed by gangs of thieves who killed without mercy and stole whatever they could find. Dad didn’t want to risk going back to San Francisco, so we headed to the nearest Army outpost… here. We watched things go to hell in the outside world on television and decided to make this a permanent billet.

“I became CO when the last army-trained officer, General Wistick, died. We held an election and I got stuck with the job. Since then I’ve read everything on the base about how to be an officer, and I used my father as an example, but there’s still a lot I don’t know.”

“You were *elected* a colonel?”

“It was common during the Civil War.”

“I can’t…” Jane stopped herself. “Never mind; let’s see where we are now. Unless we get help, there’s nothing to stop the Chinese from overrunning this place. Are we agreed on that?”

When Lamar and Bob both nodded, she pressed on. “So how can we get help? That’s the question we have to answer. As I see it, there’s only one possible choice. We have to contact those people down south. Whoever they are, they aren’t friends with the Chinese.”

“How do we do that?”

“Don’t you have radios? This was… is… an army base. You’ve got to have some kind of communications gear.”

“Lots of it. What we don’t have is power to use them. We haven’t had electricity in at least twenty years.”

“I can’t believe the Army didn’t have emergency backups. I’ve even seen generators like bicycles, where you pedal and it charges a battery. Do you mean you don’t have anything like that?”

“My father explained to me that the base *did* have some of those, yes. But not long after The Collapse, a group of soldiers struck out east, taking with them anything and everything they wanted, including the manual generators. Vehicles, too, all the good stuff. Apparently they received a message for all units mobile enough to congregate near Chicago. I was too

young to notice, but that's what Dad told me. General Wistick verified it."

"Have you tried rigging up a hand-cranked generator?"

"We tried that. Or, rather, the one guy who said he was an engineer after The Collapse was over tried it. He built something that sort of worked, but it didn't generate enough voltage to do much of anything. It's still here somewhere. We've also tried wind generators, but you've got to remember that most of the specialists left with the others. The garrison members who remained were those with no special skills. Even the solar-powered system failed after thirty years."

"Damn, damn, damn. Without help, everything on this base is gonna wind up in Chinese hands, and they *do* have fresh fuel. Bob, how fast can you make it to Prescott?"

He whistled. "That'll take a while." He scratched the stubble under his lower lip. "Normally, I'd say a month or more, riding during the day. Jane can tell you, Colonel, that if you've got a trail to follow, you can make better time at night, but that's also when the big predators are out. A full-grown mountain lion might attack a mounted rider, if it's hungry enough. Same for a coyote pack. Wolves are the real worry, along with rattlesnakes. You just can't see them in the dark and if you stick to the old roads, they like to lie around on the warm pavement.

"But if I *do* ride at night and don't get eaten, I might make it in two and a half weeks. Maybe. Three at the outside and that would be hard riding, but it could be done. You don't have any working flashlights, do you?"

They both turned to Colonel Lamar.

"We have a few flashlights that you shake and it recharges the battery, but the bulbs are all burned out."

"If we're gonna stop the Chinese, I don't see any other choice but you riding south, do you?" Jane said. "No? Then you need to get some sleep and leave by midnight. We'll take care of packing your saddlebags. That should give you and your horse some rest. Once you're on the road, ride like hell and don't stop for anything. Anything special you need?"

"Luck. Oh, yeah, and some aspirin, if there's any around here." He lifted his eyebrows at Colonel Lamar.

"I'm sorry, any medicine worth taking is long since gone. But… when was the last time you had coffee?"

"Real coffee? I don't know, years, decades?"

Lamar smiled. "That we have. For some reason, the base had fifty

tons of freeze-dried coffee stored here when the shit hit the fan. We've barely made a dent in it."

"Hell fire, I'll take coffee over aspirin any day. Gimme a couple of pounds and I'll get out of here. You comin' with me, Jane?"

"No, I'm gonna stay here and get ready to fight. But if you happen to see Nado, tell her I love her."

"Nado?" Colonel Lamar asked.

"Lucia Tornado Alvarez. My twenty-year-old daughter."

"Your daughter's middle name is Tornado?"

"If you knew her, you'd understand."

#

Chapter 12

Follow me if I advance, kill me if I retreat, avenge me if I die.
Mary Matalin, among others

Plumas National Forest, CA
1655 hours, April 11

Bear shaded his eyes as he stared southwest into the setting sun. He balanced on the roof of a ruined shack atop a rocky hill a thousand feet high. Three miles away, the Chinese worked on bridging a wide gap over a deep ravine that looked like a crack in the world. After that, they'd have to repeat the process less than a quarter mile away where the road had collapsed into another crevasse. With open desert on either side of the road, neither spot offered the chance for a hit-and-run attack.

A petite blonde named Lissa stood next to him on the side of the roof, where the frame made a cave-in less likely. The rest of his little band lay in the shade of the nearby trees.

Bear couldn't stop grinning as he watched the faraway Chinese. At three miles' distance, they seemed like ants swarming to build a nest for their queen.

"Is it a boy or a girl?"

"I don't know, silly. I'm not even showing yet. Much."

"Me, a dad. I just… wow."

"So you're happy about it?"

"Happy, worried, afraid… but yeah, I'm happy."

"That's a relief. I should have waited to tell you until after we got done spying on the Chinese, so let's finish that and then we can talk."

"Or we could strip and do it right here on this roof."

She giggled like the young woman she was. "Stop it and concentrate. We can do that later."

"And later, and later, and later… all right, I'll stop!"

"We can't do anything until they get closer to the hills." She pointed toward the Chinese, redirecting his attention to the job at hand. "Unless you want to risk a night raid."

"I've thought about that," Bear said, re-focusing on why they'd come to that exposed spot. "But phase of the moon means we'd have to kneel and

crawl most of the way, and the chances of running into a scorpion or a rattlesnake, or even a black widow, are just too high. The first time we hit them, we need to hit them as hard as we can. We need—" He frowned, listening. "What's that?"

Lissa turned completely around, scanning for what could be making the strange *whump-whump* noise. "What's that?" She pointed at the sky to their north.

Bear had never actually seen a helicopter before, but he'd heard enough about them to know one when he saw it. "Scatter! Scatter!" he yelled.

But it was too late. The helicopter's narrow nose came straight at them as flashes hid its gun pod from view. Twenty-millimeter shells smashed into the wooden shack, exploding in splinters of wood and hot steel. Bear and Lissa had no time to flee before the structure began to collapse.

Their eyes met as he reached to throw her off the roof, but in the instant before their fingers touched a shell struck her in the upper chest. One second he was staring into her cornflower blue eyes, and in the next all her body from the waist up had vaporized into a spray of blood and organ tissue. He lost his balance and fell backward.

Stunned, he glared up as the Chinese gunship sped by, less than fifty feet overhead. It was so close, he saw the pilot's helmeted face looking down at him. Turning over, he almost rolled into the heap of gore that seconds before had been Lissa.

"No! No, no, no, no, no!"

Three more of his crew lay near the shack, torn apart by the cannon shells, while the others ran for cover in some rocks. The sound of the helicopter kept him in the moment, and the wits that had kept him alive all those years shoved Lissa's death into the background.

The shack had slumped over to one side and remained partly upright. As the helicopter banked for a second pass, Bear crawled under the wreckage and out of sight. Between cracks in the rubble, he watched the Chinese aircraft searching for targets. While crawling to another spot to keep it in sight, his hand landed on something metallic. It took his eyes a moment to focus in the darkness under the rubble, and then he saw what he'd touched: Bob's RPGs. A plan formed in his mind.

He cupped his hands and screamed through a gap in the wreckage. "Who's over there? Can you hear me?"

"It's Artu, Tamika, and Stuttering Steve. Is that you, Bear?"

“Yeah. Listen up. Here’s what we’re gonna do!”

It only took a few seconds to relate his plan. Then, as the gunship hovered a mere twenty feet over the hillside looking for targets, Bear’s three followers rose from behind a huge boulder and opened fire with their rifles. Rounds pinged off the helicopter’s armored belly and smacked its canopy. With a quick turn, it brought the twenty-millimeter guns to bear and fired back, sending them diving for safety.

Bear saw his chance. The gunship’s stern hovered fifty feet from the shack. Intent on destroying the ones who’d shot at them, its crew never saw their own death coming. He wriggled through broken boards into the open. Standing in the dust storm thrown up by the rotors, Bear took aim and pulled the trigger.

One point six pounds of high explosives tipped the warhead that a gunpowder booster charge shot out of the tube at one hundred fifteen meters per second. After thirty feet, the rocket propellant kicked in, increasing the deadly grenade’s speed to two hundred ninety meters per second. Less than a second after Bear fired, the round struck the helicopter below the tail rotor. The blast threw the machine up and forward, on its nose, and blew off the last third of the fuselage.

With its top rotor still spinning, it crashed face first into the hillside. A fireball set off the twenty-millimeter rounds and sent a pall of smoke skyward like a mushroom cloud. Intense heat drove Bear back five steps. From the midst of the pyre, he saw movement. The pilot had been thrown free and crawled through the dirt at the edge of the fire.

Bear dropped the RPG and drew his sidearm, a Glock 22. All he could think was to blow out the man’s brains. There had been no chance to process Lissa’s death, so his only emotion was overwhelming rage. But when he got to the man’s side, he saw the flesh on his face hanging in strips, exposing his gums and cheekbones. His lips were gone and so was the tip of his nose. Flames licked through holes torn in his fireproof flight suit and the fingers of both hands had curled into blackened claws.

An acrid reek, like burning bacon, drove Bear back. The dying Chinese reached a hand toward him, and then pointed at himself with the nub of his index finger. Clearly he was begging Bear to shoot him and end his misery. Instead, Bear watched him burn.

#

Chapter 13

On wrongs swift vengeance waits.
Alexander Pope

Outside Vinton, CA
2230 hours, April 11

"You're not thinking straight, man," Artu said.

"You don't have to come if you don't want to," Bear said. "But I'm going to kill every one of those fuckers I can. That shed is perfect. It's a big pile of rusty metal that'll make for great shrapnel, and it's blocking the road. They won't go around it unless they have to, because you can break an axle fast with all the holes out there in the sand. When the shed blows up, they'll think they're under attack and deploy."

"It won't delay them more than an hour or two. Come on, Bear, don't do this."

"I told Jane I'd delay them as long as I could, and I mean to do that. Every hour counts and they'll have to check out every house and barn in the area before moving on. They'll be looking over their shoulders. They might even stop for a while… damn, I wish we had enough gunpowder to rig some houses, too. I should've thought of that."

"Look, Bear, I'll follow you into a volcano if you ask me to, but this is nuts. Ever since Lissa died, you've been checked out. Suicide ain't revenge."

"Don't bring Lissa into this!" Bear pointed his thick right index finger at the smaller man. "Don't mention her again."

"I'm just sayin', something clicked over. You went from protecting our territory to wanting to kill every one of the fuckers. There's a difference, you know."

"I'm stuffing that shed with gunpowder whether you help me or not."

"You *know* I'm coming, but why not find a choke point? Even if you blow a chunk out of the highway, they'll just go around it. Holes in the desert can be filled."

"I know. That's what I want them to do. Next time, we put IEDs out in the desert."

"Huh?"

“You’ll see. Now, are you coming?”

“I said I was, and the others are, too. But without Lissa here…” He stopped. Lissa had always been the voice of reason in Bear’s ear, but by default Artu had taken over the role. “Yeah, we’re in.”

“Then quit fuckin’ around and let’s go. It won’t stay dark forever.”

#

0457 hours, April 14

The metal sides and roof of the old barn had long since fallen onto California Highway 70 in the tiny settlement of Vinton. The Chinese had gone on high alert after the destruction of their helicopter, and it had taken Bear’s group most of two nights to pack the homemade gunpowder into the wreckage. He’d insisted on using charcoal from the arroyo willow tree to make the explosives, because it burned hotter and faster than other woods and created a more powerful blast. The Enclave’s resident gunpowder maker, Ristov Kurov, hated using it for that very reason, but Bear insisted and he was their leader. Bear had personally made the two-hundred-foot-long fuse.

The house where he crouched, watching the Chinese approach the trap, lay in ruins around him. The floor had partly collapsed, so Bear traced his getaway path with care. He weighed close to two hundred fifty pounds, but the joists underneath remained sound enough to hold his bulk without collapsing. At least, he hoped so.

He’d laid the fuse in such a way that it ran from the pile of metal, through and out the back of the ruined shed, then along the back of the two houses, before it came to the rear door of the one where he lurked. The fuse he’d made burned fast and would take no more than seconds to set off the detonation. From an escape standpoint that was dangerous, as he needed to be on his horse and galloping away before the Chinese could react after the explosion. But from a standpoint of maximum damage, it wouldn’t give any Chinese clearing the wreckage enough time to escape, even if they spotted the burning fuse. In that moment, Bear cared more about killing Chinese than he did personal danger.

It all happened exactly as he’d planned. The Chinese backed up a six-wheeled armored personnel carrier to within ten feet of the heap of metal and wood blocking the highway. Seven men scrambled atop the wreckage, attaching chains to sheets of metal and the other ends to the APC. When all seven stood atop the shed at the same time, Bear lit the fuse and should have run for the back door, but he didn’t. Instead, he watched and waited.

The blast was like a giant anti-personnel bomb going off. Two of the Chinese died instantly, torn to pieces by the explosion itself, and the other five flew backward as jagged bits of metal tore into them. The rear of the APC reared up and then slammed back down. Shrapnel flew fifty feet in all directions.

"That's for Lissa, motherfuckers," Bear said.

#

Chapter 14

It is essential to understand that battles are primarily won in the hearts of men. Men respond to leadership in a most remarkable way and once you have won his heart, he will follow you anywhere.

Vince Lombardi

Plumas National Forest, CA
0937 hours, April 14

"Uhh!" Bear woke and jumped to his feet, ready to fight.

"Bear, whoa! Ice, man, ice. It's me, Artu."

The big man wiped his eyes and combed his hair back with his fingers, all in one motion. "Sorry, bad dream."

"Lissa?"

"Yeah."

"Junker Jane brought some righteous toys to shove up the Chinese's ass."

"Show me."

They found her in a small clearing, wiping down her horse. Her saddle lay to one side, giving the sweating animal a chance to cool off in the shade of a tall pine tree. On the ground near the tree lay a stack of four large-bore pipe-shaped objects. Beyond a line of trees and bushes, a gang of workers scrambled around a collapsed bridge like slow-moving ants, riflemen deployed around them. As the road slanted toward the forest, the Chinese repair efforts no longer seemed hidden or distant. If Bear listened, he could hear voices on the wind.

"I'm glad you're back, Jane. The distance between the road and the forest has gotten dangerous. We can't sneak up on them Chinese any more. Artu said you brought us a new gadget so whatever it is, I hope it's something long range."

"Sorry it took me so long. I heard about Lissa," she said, throwing the towel in her saddlebag. "I'm sorry, Bear."

"Yeah."

Jane wanted to put her arms around his massive shoulders. She wanted him to bury his head in her breast and hold her tight and let her comfort him. Deep lines creased his round face. But combined with the dark

circles under his eyes, she saw the pain of his wound was too fresh, and said no more about it.

"Where's Bob?"

"Headed south, looking for help."

"I hope he finds it."

"Back to the *gadgets* I brought," she said. "You got your wish! They're called M3E1s, upgrades of an earlier weapon called a Carl Gustav. Some people called them just Gustavs and others goose. Don't ask me why. Colonel Lamar said the U.S. Army used them for decades and this model was a later upgrade. They fire high-explosive rounds, good against anything you can shoot at. The base has a lot of them in underground bunkers but four is all Midnight could carry."

"Are they sort of like an RPG?"

"Same idea, but with better range and killing power. I only brought eight rounds, but they're rocket-assisted, so they kill out to seven hundred yards. Or so Lamar told me."

"Eight's better than nothing."

"How are you holding up?"

"It's been a long five days. We've lost five besides Lissa. We blew up some junk in the middle of the highway and knocked out one of their APCs, along with seven or eight other guys. Two days ago, they sent a bunch of infantry up here to drive us out and it got hot, but we fought them off. They were young…" His voice trailed off to let Jane absorb the meaning of *young.*

"So they're putting non-Chinese into the field?"

"Yes and no. Some *were* Chinese. We can't know how many natives they've recruited, but we know there's some. And they weren't trained like regular Chinese soldiers, either; they were raw. But it doesn't matter. They're almost to the last bridge. Even with these Carl things, I don't think we can hold them up much longer."

"You've slowed them up longer than I thought you could."

He shrugged and sat on a flat rock, hidden from the roadside by a dense stand of scrub pines. "Don't give 'em a target; they've brought up snipers."

Artu passed out cold field bread. The recipe for that crisp, cracker-like food varied depending on what grains were available. Jane tasted barley and something else… oats?

"It's hard for me to give my people a reason to keep fighting," Bear

said a few minutes later. “They’ve seen their friends die. Billy lost his brother Jake, and it’s hard for me to tell him why. If the Chinese get those old tanks and stuff, so what? It won’t affect us, at least not for a while.”

Some crumbs fell into Jane’s lap and she made sure to find them all. “I don’t know what to tell you, Bear. I’ve seen what those bastards do to the people under their control, so for me it’s time to live free or die. But for you? That’s gotta be your decision. But I’ll say this much — they’ll be up your way a lot faster than you think.”

“Me you don’t have to worry about convincing. When they killed Lissa and the baby, they made me a blood enemy for life. It’s the rest of ’em I can’t beg to keep going.”

“Yeah,” she said. Munching in silence, they stared through the bushes at the distant Chinese, busily working on the bridge. After a while, Jane sat up straight and slapped at a mosquito on her arm. “I’ve been wondering about something…”

“Like what?”

“Why the bridges? Why don’t they just cut cross-country to hit the base? Shit, they could come through this very spot and there wouldn’t be much we could do about it, not with those armored vehicles they have with them. I know there’re some deep ravines down there, but they could bridge those a lot faster than they can repair the highway. We could hurt ’em pretty bad, but eventually we’d be killed or scattered and they’d have a straight path into the base. It’s just over the mountain.”

“Yeah, but the trucks can’t drive in the open desert. Too many boulders and ravines.”

“Trucks for the soldiers?”

“No, the tanker trucks. How else are they gonna fuel the tanks at the base?”

Jane blinked. Her face went slack as the simple truth of Bear’s statement sank in. “Of course, tankers. They’re rebuilding the highway so they… they’re not just looting the base, they’re moving into it. They’re coming here to stay. Oh, shit…”

“Sorry, I figured you knew that.”

“I’m tired and my brain’s not working. Damn. And Jingle Bob’s only been gone five days, so even if there is some American military unit down there in Arizona, he won’t get there for another eight or ten days or more.”

Bear had no response; there was nothing to say.

“If we could steal some gas,” Jane said, rubbing her bottom lip as she thought, “maybe we could crank up a generator, or rig something to power the base’s radios. Then we could radio for help, or crank up a few tanks of our own.”

“That’s a lot of *ifs*.”

“We’ve gotta take chances, Bear. We’re running out of time. If they capture the base, we’re all screwed. All of you up along the coast won’t be able to move east any more. Not without going a lot farther north. You’ll be cut off up there.”

“We can’t just go ask for some gas.”

“Let’s go back down the highway ten or twenty miles. Maybe there’s a depot.”

“What the fuck, why not? Let’s take a couple of those Carl things and see if we can raise some hell.”

#

SECTION THREE
Friction

Chapter 15

A gem cannot be polished without friction, nor a man perfected without trials.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Operation Overtime
0801 hours, April 11

Nick Angriff reclined his office chair and sipped coffee. A bandage covered the tip of his ear. After his best night's sleep within memory, he felt refreshed. His mouth watered, knowing a breakfast of fresh eggs and hot bread was on the way. The day's agenda was full, as always. But the sun dazzled him as it poured in the huge window facing east, washing both the Clam Shell and the Crystal Palace in the glory of a spring morning. Angriff treated himself to a few moments of enjoying the view. For commanding generals, such moments are gone almost before they're noticed.

Sergeant Schiller knocked on his doorframe and stepped inside. "Morning, General. Did you sleep well?"

"By God, J.C., I did. I haven't slept so well in months. There's something about dodging bullets that wears a man out."

Schiller smiled, genuinely pleased that his boss was in a good mood. It made his life so much easier. "I hope you don't plan to make it a habit, General; it makes the rest of us nervous. And I understand Mayor Parfist was very upset by the whole thing. Sir, it's not on your schedule, but Corporal Dupree says he has important news about the project you gave him. Would you like to see him, or should I put him down for tomorrow?"

"No, by all means, send him in."

Dupree entered and stood at rigid attention, giving his sharpest salute. Angriff appreciated the effort, even if it didn't quite suit the corporal's demeanor. Dupree was an electronic warrior, not a physical one.

He returned the salute. "Good morning, Dupree. You have news for me?"

"Yes, sir. Per your orders, we set the trap for our tapper and activated it, and we caught something."

"When did it go active?"

"Early yesterday, General. I thought you knew."

“I did not, but never mind that now. You found something?”

“They fell for it, hook, line, and sinker. The Trojan gave us access to their entire file system before it was discovered and shut down. We took the precaution of severing the connection on our end.”

Angriff leaned forward in his chair, put his elbows on the desk, and intertwined his fingers under his chin, the pose he struck when receiving weighty news and concentrating on every word. “Are you telling me you captured the files of another active computer system? That there really is another entity out there, one that tapped our lines and stole our data? That we’re not alone?”

“Well, yes, sir, but it’s not some unknown entity. We know its name, General. It’s called Operation Comeback.”

#

0900 hours

Seven people jammed the tiny conference room behind his office. Along with Norm Fleming and Dennis Tompkins were Morgan and Joe Randall. Standing in one corner was the grim figure of Green Ghost. Angriff sat at the head of the table and Dupree stood next to him.

“Generals Fleming and Tompkins are already aware of our agenda,” Angriff said. “For the rest of you, you are here because you’re the only ones I know, without a doubt, that I can trust. Most of this command was put together by Tom Steeple and his cronies. You I can count on, but aside from you five, Sergeant Schiller is the only other one. What we’re going to discuss goes no further than this circle.”

“What about him?” Green Ghost nodded at Dupree.

“Dupree’s the reason we’re in here. And I would think it goes without saying that nothing we say leaves this room. Nothing to anyone.” He glanced at Green Ghost over his shoulder. “That includes your sister.” After pausing to make certain everyone understood, he nodded at Dupree. “The floor’s yours, Corporal.”

Dupree trembled as all eyes turned to him. Everyone else in the room was an officer, except him and maybe Green Ghost, since nobody knew exactly who or what he was. After drinking some water, Dupree began. “When Overtime was first activated, we found anomalies in the power usage and the data flow,” he said in a shaky voice.

“The corporal is being modest,” Angriff said. “There was no *we* to finding this anomaly; it was all Corporal Dupree’s work. He’s one of the best

computer people I've ever met. Go on, please."

"Uh, yes, sir. Well, we found that when the base was built, a hidden shaft led from the upper levels down through the mountain and far underground. Within this shaft was a conduit containing a data line that was hardwired to our mainframes, with an on-off relay way down inside that shaft. We had no idea where it led, and it didn't seem practical to start digging up the desert tracing it, so General Angriff approved a trap.

"We shut down access to our mainframes right after we discovered this tapline, so what I did was take a dedicated mainframe and I loaded it with as much useless information as it could hold. Within that data, however, I wrote a Trojan for whoever might access it, with hopes they would just download our data without worrying about it. The Trojan would automatically send all of their data back to us, even as we were sending them our dummy data. And that's what happened."

"Let's see if I've got this straight," Green Ghost said. "Somebody built a tap into our computers when this oversized cave was being built. That's what that relay was you had me switch off, right?"

"That's it. Right after Bettison and that whole incident on sub-floor eleven," Angriff said. "When you went down the shaft."

"So we turned their game back on them?"

"Affirmative," Angriff said. "Dupree here did all the heavy lifting."

"Damn good job, Corporal," said Green Ghost.

"Ummm… thank you…" There was no indication of rank anywhere on Green Ghost's uniform and Dupree was unsure how to address him. "Thank you… sir," seemed safe.

"So we know who they are?"

"We do," Angriff said. "Dupree can correct me if I get something wrong."

Dupree said nothing, but could think of no circumstance when he would correct his commanding general, no matter how wrong he might be.

"First, they're definitely Americans. It's called Operation Comeback, and appears to be more of a complement to Overtime than a duplicate. Second, Comeback is much smaller in scale than we are. We've got their roster and so far there's only one Army Security Battalion and some smaller specialized units, mostly recon, as combat forces. Total personnel are about 5,000. Third, they have a lot of really interesting toys, including two squadrons of A-10s."

“Warthogs?”

“Warthogs.”

Tompkins whistled. “Hell, even I remember those. Bad mothers. We could use ’em if the Chinese come back.”

“That’s for damned sure,” Angriff said. “But this cake has icing on it. Aside from some much-needed hardware, the total military personnel tops out at around seventeen hundred, although we don’t know how many of those are awake. There’s another two thousand specialist citizens, which leaves thirteen hundred people unaccounted for. Care to guess who they are?”

When no one commented, Morgan spoke up. “Politicians?”

Angriff pointed at his daughter. “Bingo. You obviously inherited more than just my good looks. There’s over a thousand politicians and their staffs. Including senators, members of the House of Representatives, federal judges, political appointees, a certain former Madam Secretary of State, and best of all, two of our beloved former presidents.”

“Is it the two I’m thinking of?” Fleming asked.

“Probably.”

“Now I can truly say that I’ve heard it all.” Fleming said his first words of the meeting. “Nobody did more to cripple our defenses than those two. How dare they survive what they wrought.”

“They dared, all right. Does that really surprise you, though? But the story of how Overtime and this other base, Comeback, came into existence makes a lot more sense if two presidents were running interference for it. Obviously the quid pro quo was them authorizing all of this just to protect their own sorry asses. But none of you have asked who’s running that show… aren’t you curious?”

Green Ghost shrugged. “Seems obvious to me. Tom Steeple.”

“Give that man a cigar. Tom Steeple is running that show over there. We can’t be sure what he wants from us, but I’ve got a pretty good idea.”

“He wants us to do the heavy lifting,” Joe Randall said, then realized he’d spoken out loud. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“It’s okay, Joe, this meeting’s a little different. I want to hear everybody’s opinion, and you’re right on the money. We’re obviously the combat arm. They see our job as liberating territory so they can come in behind us and organize it. Since they’re career politicians and bureaucrats, they no doubt believe this is the natural order of things.

“And they will be sorely disabused to discover I have no intention of

letting them run anything, much less the territory we liberate. They're the ones who screwed it up the first time and I'm not about to let them do it again. But since we now know they're out there, we have to assume they know we're here, too. After all, Tom Steeple approved every one of us being here."

"Not *all* of us," Green Ghost said.

"*Most* of us," Angriff amended. "Now our biggest problem is that we have no idea where Operation Comeback is located. So the question before us is, how do we play this?" Sipping some water, Angriff glanced around the room.

It was Dennis Tompkins who broke the silence. "If I knew a cougar was stalking me, I'd go hunt him," he said. "Maybe lay an ambush."

Everyone nodded, as if that made sense.

"Wouldn't most people try to put some distance between him and them?" Fleming said. "Why go looking for trouble?"

"If a predator is trailing you, they're expecting you to run," said Green Ghost. "So turn the tables. Right, General Tompkins?"

"Exactly so," he said. "If that cougar wants you, he's gonna catch up to you, but he's gonna do it in his own sweet time, when you don't expect it. If you go hunting him, sure, it's dangerous. Maybe he's lying in wait where you can't see him. But he ain't expecting you to come after him, so maybe he panics and makes a mistake."

"Do the unexpected," Angriff said.

"That's what I'd do," Tompkins said. "Mushroom theory."

"What's that?" Morgan said.

"Keep 'em in the dark and feed 'em a lot of shit," Green Ghost answered.

"Yep," Tompkins said. "Throw 'em off guard, act like you're damned glad to see 'em. General Steeple loves to hear his name, so tell him his shit don't stink. Give us time to find out what they're planning."

Behind them, Dupree cleared his throat. "There is one other item, General Angriff. I don't know if it's important or not."

"Out with it, son."

"Well, you may have overlooked it, sir, but Operation Comeback has two unnamed people in Long Sleep. They're only identified as J. Doe One and J. Doe Two. I don't know why; I just know that's how they're listed on the manifest."

“I did overlook that, Dupree,” Angriff said. “Two John Does. Who the hell could they be? Thoughts, anyone?” When no one spoke, he moved on. “In that case, Dennis, I see your point about seizing the initiative. Based on everything we know, the smart play is to seek them out instead of waiting for them to contact us. Be all shits and giggles until we get the lowdown on what their intentions are. Anybody opposed? All right, let’s think of how we’re going to do this.”

“A good first step is to find out where the hell they are,” Green Ghost said. “I want to get out there and see what I can find.”

“You’re just tired of paperwork,” Angriff said.

“Damn straight I am. Nothing like a lurp to get one’s mind refocused.”

“You want to take a recon platoon?”

“No, just me. And my sister.”

“Is that a good idea?”

“Would you rather I left her here?” Green Ghost raised his eyebrows.

“You’re right! Taking her is a great idea. You can go on one condition,” Angriff said.

“Don’t get killed?”

“Right again.”

“I think we should send out more lurps than just Ghost,” Fleming said. “We need to lock down Sedona and Flagstaff; they’re both in our backyard. The Yuma Marine station needs to be checked out, we need an FOB in the direction of the Superstition Mountains, one over east of Holbrook… it’s time to get out there and probe.”

“You’re the S3, Norm. That’s your department. Draw it up and let’s get it done.”

#

Chapter 16

Do not tell strangers the season when the deer come.
Translation of cave art inscription in Chauvet Cave, France

Operation Overtime
0904 hours, April 12

In the memo calling the normal staff meeting, once the secret one was done, it said the day's briefing would be on future operations, which everybody in the brigade wanted to know about. The days were growing hot again and it seemed like time to get on with their mission. Since the civilian leadership wasn't needed for a briefing on military moves, the room had fewer people and wasn't as stuffy as usual. Of course, Angriff sweated as much as always and kept his jacket on to hide that fact.

To his right sat Dennis Tompkins as third in command. Next to Tompkins, in order, were the S-2, Intelligence, Colonel Kordibowski; the S-4, Supply, Colonel Schiller; then the S-6, Communications, Lieutenant Colonel Desiree Santorio; and finally the newly appointed S-8, Finance and Administration, Lieutenant Colonel Zala Kovac. On Angriff's left, Norm Fleming sat as both the Deputy Commander and the S-3, Operations.

To Fleming's left sat the S-1, Personnel, Colonel Khin Saw. The chair for the S-5 was empty, as Green Ghost was in the field. Then came the S-7, Training, the iron-eyed Colonel Webb Dougall, and finally the temporary S-9, Civil Affairs, Lieutenant Colonel Astrid Naidoo. The permanent S-9, Colonel Charlie Minokawa, was in Prescott on detached duty. The first S-9, Lieutenant Colonel Ashley Wisnewski-Smith, had requested transfer to the artillery.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," Angriff said. "General Fleming has just put the finishing touches on the next stage of operations and I have approved them. This meeting is to bring you into the loop."

Fleming rose. His deep voice filled the room without effort. "Now that we are no longer a motley collection of individuals with little cohesion, but are a seasoned combat formation, we can trust each component with greater responsibilities. Therefore, at oh four hundred hours tomorrow, we're going to launch our first multi-day lurps, and at least one slurp."

A low buzz went around the room. Slurps, super long-range patrols,

were dangerous in the extreme, because the unit in the field was likely beyond air support. In the world before The Collapse, hovering drones might have been on call, or circling A-10s, but those days were gone. Like the Lewis and Clark expedition, reconnaissance now meant plunging into the unknown with only what you could carry.

"We're sending three Marine companies to Yuma. You'll see in your briefing folder that this force will be Task Force Quarterback. Their orders are to turn back immediately if resistance is encountered and in no circumstance to get involved in a fight against equal or superior numbers. This is an information gathering mission, not a combat one. Fortunately they are within the extreme range of Comanche support and transports. But it does no good to capture territory now because it can't be held; thus the ROEs not to initiate engagement. The Marine headquarters company will remain in Prescott as both a reserve and to continue forming their regiment by incorporating the new battalion into the system."

"What about Phoenix, Norm?" Rip Kordibowski asked. "Do we intend to investigate that city yet?"

"No," Angriff answered for him. "I nixed it, Rip. We still don't know the pathogen that ravaged it, and until we do we can't move in. It might still be infectious, for all we know."

"But!" Fleming said. "We're sending two Army recon companies down the west side of the city at a distance of about twenty miles. This will be Task Force Digger. Their mission is to collect information and press as far south as old Interstate 10, if practicable."

"I hate that expression," Angriff said, without meaning to say it aloud. Everyone in the room stared at him. He held up his hands and laughed. "My apologies. It's just that word lost Lee the Battle of Gettysburg."

Norm Fleming noticed some people nodding but others appearing confused. They looked at him for understanding. "You may already know this. On day one at Gettysburg, Lee told Ewell to take the high ground if practicable. Unlike the aggressive Jackson, who'd been killed the month before, Ewell thought Lee wanted him to be cautious. The high ground wasn't taken that day or either of the following two." He smiled at Angriff. "I'll try not to use it again."

"And I'll try not to interrupt any more."

Fleming's smile had an unspoken message they both understood: *That'll be the day.* "The rest of the Army battalion will reconnoiter as far as

Ehrenburg, on the California border. There they will deploy in defensive formation to block any unforeseen moves by the Chinese using I-10 to flank us on the south, and also to act as deep reserve in case the Marines or Army unit in the Phoenix area need support. This is Task Force Shovel.

"We already have FOBs here and here, at Seligman and Wikieup, those are designated FOBs Lonely and Westwall, but I want to push a new one out to Kingman. In support of that and as a general ready force on our western flank, first battalion, first regiment, will support a Ranger platoon in moving toward Kingman, and will then give assistance in constructing a defensible FOB there. This is Task Force Tractor. They will remain there until the end of operations, or until ordered elsewhere.

"Second battalion, first regiment, will move through Sedona and then Flagstaff to clear and secure them once and for all. Once that's done, we can begin an inventory of what can be salvaged. Second regiment and the armored battalion will remain here, in reserve, as will all of the artillery, with the exception of the armored company already in Prescott. It will stay there for the time being.

"Meanwhile, the other two Marine line companies will move straight east on I-40 toward Holbrook. This is Task Force Kicker. If they encounter no resistance and think it prac—" He stopped himself. "At the commander's discretion, they are to keep moving east until they reach Gallup, New Mexico. From there they will contact Prime for further orders.

"Last is our newest activated unit, Task Force Saber… the horse boys. Our cavalry regiment will ride to here, a small town named Meadview, which conveniently enough is near Lake Mead. There's nothing of importance in that area, and it's doubtful they'll encounter anyone, but a long ride will strengthen unit cohesion and give them valuable experience. We might also get an idea of what kind of shape Hoover Dam is in, and whether or not the generators might be made serviceable again. This is a preliminary step toward investigating Nellis Air Force Base and maybe Las Vegas.

"The primary task of all units will be to investigate U.S. military depots and bases within their designated areas, with an eye toward whether or not there is any salvageable materiel, or if the facility could be put back into service. Lastly, all air assets will remain grounded until needed."

"Any questions?" Angriff said.

"What about north into the Navajo territories and Utah?" Rip Kordibowski asked.

“We considered it,” Fleming said. “But we’re already going to be spread thin. I want to clear Nevada first and these are the necessary preliminaries to doing that. Once that’s done, we can move into Utah from two directions. Nobody wants a repeat of last year. This time, we’ve got significant reserves and we’re not pressed for time. Nobody’s about to be sold into slavery.”

Astrid Naidoo raised her hand. “General, everyone else may already know this and if they do I apologize for wasting your time…”

“No apologies necessary, Colonel. You’re not wasting my time and there are no unnecessary questions.”

“Wouldn’t it be more efficient to use air assets for reconnaissance rather than ground units?”

“Under normal circumstances, with normal meaning the world as it used to be, the answer to your question would be yes. Send out drones, high altitude aircraft, satellites… but normal isn’t normal any more. We have a limited supply of drones and most of the ones we do have are short range. I’ve parceled these out to the recon units.

“Our air component is small compared to the size of the task facing us and I made the decision to only use it on dedicated missions, for a specific objective. Every minute they’re in the air, we risk an accident or error that could cost us an irreplaceable aircraft and crew.

“Lastly, since we don’t know friend from foe and cannot question people from the air, even if we spot a settlement or a caravan, we can’t get details on who they are or what they’re doing. If we spot a train of wagons, for instance, two hundred miles from Prime, they could disappear before ground elements arrived. Did that answer your question?”

“It did. Thank you, General.”

“Green Ghost is currently away to the east on a scouting mission of his own, so it’s possible more assets will be deployed as a follow-up, or re-directed, depending on what he finds. If there are no more questions, this meeting is adjourned.”

#

0410 hours, April 13

Angriff saw the recon units off as usual, shaking hands, shouting encouragement, and generally pumping up morale for the coming operations. He felt like a football coach in the locker room right before the championship game. With his stock of cigars running out, he saved them for special

occasions, but the troops were used to seeing him smoking one so he made an exception. By sunup, they were all lost in swirls of dust as they headed off to see what they could see.

#

Chapter 17

“Am I my sister’s keeper?”
“You are if she’s nuts.”
Vapor answering Green Ghost’s question

10 miles south of Steamboat, AZ
1008 hours, April 14

The beauty of the Painted Desert could not be ignored and neither could the heat. Although only mid-April, daytime temperatures in the desert soared beyond ninety. Nipple sat in the meager shade of the Humvee and stared back at a prairie falcon perched on a boulder, while her brother fixed his binoculars on a bizarre vehicle crawling over the desert floor five hundred yards away.

“C’mere,” he called to her.

“It’s too fucking hot out in that sun!”

“You’re gonna want to see this.”

After a few more curses, she pushed to her feet and trudged up the short slope to the crest of the hill. Green Ghost handed her the binoculars and she focused where he pointed, not bothering to lie down.

“What the fuck is that?” she said.

“That’s what I wanted you to tell me. At least we know what made those weird tracks we found last year.”

“It looks like an eighteen wheeler, a big rig, but on skis, with an old airplane engine mounted on struts pushing it. And it’s dragging something behind it, some kind of sled. And those wings look like solar panels. It’s loud as shit.”

“What do you think it’s for?” Green Ghost asked.

“You don’t need something like that for just getting around. It has to use a lot of gas… wherever you’d get gas around here. I think it’s a moving truck.”

“A moving truck?”

“Yeah, you know, movers? Pack your stuff up and leave?”

Green Ghost considered it. “You’re a pain in the ass, but you can also be downright insightful.”

“Are you flirting with me?”

“Then you go and ruin it,” he said, taking back the binoculars. “I see a driver, no passengers. Let’s go see if you’re right about what he’s doing out here.”

“Whoa, bro!” She reached out and grabbed his arm with her left hand while pointing south with her right. “We’re not alone.”

He focused the binoculars on a group of horsemen far off down the valley. “Shit.”

“Lemme guess — they’re not here to welcome us to the neighborhood.”

“Sevens, a lot of them. Too many to fight.”

“Then let’s get the hell out of here.”

“No. We gotta warn whoever’s in that rig.”

“Did it occur to you he might be making a delivery? He might be a friend of theirs.”

“Then we need to blow up whatever he’s bringing them.”

#

Green Ghost pulled the Humvee directly into the path of the oncoming contraption and stepped out, leaving the motor running. With an M-16 cradled in his right arm, he held up his left in a motion to stop. One hundred yards to the west, Nipple covered him from atop a large boulder. A tall ridge hid the dust cloud of the approaching horsemen.

Inside the truck’s cabin, a man with tangled white hair waved for Green Ghost to move. The giant machine kept moving toward him, slowly, but Green Ghost didn’t budge. Instead, he took aim at the old man behind the windshield.

He could see the driver waving his arms and yelling, but couldn’t hear anything over the clatter of the airplane engine. When the truck didn’t stop, he returned his left hand to its supporting position under the rifle, an obvious warning. Using both hands to give Green Ghost the finger, the driver put the rig into neutral and it groaned to a halt on the enormous skis, sliding toward Green Ghost as its momentum died.

A stocky old man with bronzed skin climbed out of the cabin like a monkey descending a tree. “You damned fool, was your brain eaten by worms?” He stormed toward Green Ghost. A rifle shot echoed across the desert and dirt kicked up in front of him, but the man barely flinched. “Do you know how much fuel you just made me waste? It’ll take half an hour to get going that fast again!”

“That was fast?”

“Fuck off, whoever you are! If this is a robbery, you’re gonna be disappointed, ’cause I ain’t scraped nothin’ yet.”

“Aren’t you afraid I’m going to shoot you?” Green Ghost was amused, despite being aware of the danger approaching beyond the ridge on his right.

“Hallelujah! If you’re going to kill old Jack, then do it. Hell can’t be as hot as this desert.”

Green Ghost cradled the rifle in his elbow, pointing the muzzle upward. The man was older than he’d thought, and small, no more than five foot five and one hundred thirty pounds. He couldn’t help smiling. “Just Jack? No last name?”

“I’m Idaho Jack. I know you’ve heard o’ me. Everybody still alive in this part of the west has heard o’ me.”

“I haven’t, but I’m new here.”

“Ain’t nobody new here. You got a name or do I just call you jackass?”

“Green Ghost.”

Jack nodded, as if Green Ghost was a proper name. “You don’t look green to me, but that’s your business… my business is you stopping me for no good reason.”

“Maybe I want to know what’s out here, and you look like the man to ask.”

“You ain’t makin’ no sense, boy. Ain’t nothin’ out here. It’s a fuckin’ desert.”

“You’re out here,” Green Ghost said.

“I ain’t really out here, ya see. I’m goin’ from one place to another. Leastwise, I was.”

“So that’s it, just desert? No people, no towns, no villages?”

Jack rubbed his jaw and looked sideways at the younger man. “Ohh… you want that kind of information. Even if I knew, it wouldn’t come cheap. What d’ya got that Idaho Jack might want?”

“Why would I barter if you don’t know anything? Let’s not play that game; let’s start with this — where are you headed?”

“Holbrook.”

“Is that a town?”

“Used to be. I ain’t been there in a while, but last time I was through

there a few folks was hangin' on. Sevens might have run 'em off by now, I don't know. How long you gonna keep me here, Mister Ghost? It's hot as blazes and I'm thirsty."

Green Ghost passed over his canteen and Jack almost drained it. "Thanks."

Nipple ambled up, frowning.

"Idaho Jack, this is Nipple."

"They sure as hell are," he said, staring at her sweat-soaked shirt. "She your woman?"

She laughed. "In his wet dreams."

"She's my brain-damaged sister." Green Ghost cut his eyes at her.

"This guy doesn't wet my panties. My man's going to be suave and handsome and treat me like the princess I was born to be," she said. "Not some creepy shit like my brother. And speaking of creepy shits, did you forget we've got company coming?"

"Were you meeting somebody out here, Jack?"

The desert man squinted and turned slightly away. "Like who?"

"Like Sevens. There's at least fifty of them on horseback, headed toward this valley. They're behind that ridge over there. We probably don't have more than ten more minutes before they're in rifle range, so talk to me."

"Talk, my ass. How fast will that thing go?" He pointed at the Humvee.

"Fast enough."

"Turn that thing around while I get a few things out of my cab."

"How do I know you're not a friend of the Sevens?"

"I think the worms did eat your brains, son. Fuckin' Sevens ain't got no friends. All they do is torture you first and then kill you. You get me outa here and I'll tell you whatever you wanna know, about whatever you wanna know."

"Get your stuff."

Nipple covered him while he scrambled up into the rig's cab and back down again after shutting down the engine. He patted the engine cover, and then kissed it. "Old girl served me for a lotta years. I'm gonna miss her."

#

Chapter 18

Man is not what he thinks he is; he is what he hides.
André Malraux

10 miles south of Steamboat, AZ
1114 hours, April 14

Minutes later, Mohammad Qadim stood on the truck cab's roof, shading his eyes and rotating to stare around in all directions. The second vehicle's tracks in the sand led west over a long hill, but he couldn't see past that even standing on the truck. Ayaan was riding to the crest to see what lay out that way, while Qadim saw the other directions were all clear.

"Do you see anything?" Captain al-Naadi called up to him.

"Nothing. He must have been picked up by the other vehicle."

Ayaan's faint voice echoed down from the top of the hill. "There is a faraway dust cloud, Captain."

"How far?"

"Many miles."

"Rejoin us, Ayaan. Come down and rest out of the sun, Mohammad."

The rest of his company already swarmed over the ramshackle machine, taking anything small enough to carry on horseback. The machine had started life as a tractor-trailer, and would end it as scrap.

Once back on the ground, like any good cavalryman, he checked his horse. The beast's coat shone with sweat, but otherwise all it needed was a rest in the shade. He took a handful of dried corn from his saddlebag and let it eat the grains from his hand.

With his horse tended, and carefully keeping the excitement from his face, Qadim walked over to his commanding officer. "Captain, may I also look among the infidel's possessions?"

Captain al-Naadi clapped him on the shoulder and smiled for the first time since Qadim had been assigned to his company. "Of course, Mohammad. I hope you find something useful."

Without undue haste, Qadim made a show of inspecting everywhere for some sort of souvenir. Others had already ransacked the cab but he did it again anyway, and then made his way down the far side of the bed. Some crawled over the accumulated items in the wire-mesh enclosed bed behind

the cab, while others inspected the engine. Two men eyed the huge propeller blades but couldn’t figure out what to do with them even if they could remove them.

When no one was looking his way, Qadim dropped to the dirt and rolled under the truck on his back. Near the rear axle, he found what he had put there years ago. Shaped like a pistol with an extra-wide mouth, it had an orange body, now smeared black with dirt and grease. Two pieces of twisted metal held it in place. Qadim cut his finger untwisting them but didn’t dare stop.

When it dropped free, he stuffed it into the front of his white cotton pants and scooted back into the sunlight. He made it back to his horse without anyone noticing, as men either rested or looked for loot. He put the flare gun into his second saddlebag, hidden under the visible one, and breathed a silent sigh of relief.

Maybe he was being paranoid, and maybe nobody would have found it, way back under the truck bed like that. But if they had, the inscription carved into the barrel would have been hard to explain.

To Idaho Jack, a true friend of Shangri-La! From Mohammad Qadim.

#

Chapter 19

Beware of an old man in a profession where men usually die young.
Military axiom

8 miles southwest of Steamboat, AZ
1252 hours, April 14

Jack sat in the front passenger seat. Nipple squeezed into the backseat and never took her eyes off their prisoner. Green Ghost decided against taking Interstate 40 or any other main road back to Overtime. Bridges, overpasses, and other structures afforded perfect ambush opportunities, so he stuck to cross country and small tracks through the open desert.

Riding shotgun, with Nipple's P229 Combat Compact Sig Sauer aimed at his head, Jack swiveled in the seat and studied her. She felt an almost tangible touch, of her body being probed on a cold slab, like an antelope ready for butchering.

"You're one beautiful woman," he finally said.

"Eyes front, creepy old dude, and quit staring at me. I've been known to splatter brains for less."

"You don't like being complimented?"

"I don't like being lied to."

Jack clicked his fingers. "You don't believe it."

"You just want something, shitball."

"My sister thinks she's ugly," Green Ghost said.

"She does? What's wrong with her?"

He shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. She keeps waiting, thinking there's one special man out there looking for her. She's waiting to hear all those things women like to hear."

"Fuck you, B.B."

"B.B.?"

"Big Brother," Green Ghost explained. "My sister's a little *different.*"

Jack turned back around. Nipple brought the gun up. "Watch it."

"Listen to Idaho Jack, girl: don't never trust people like that, men who whisper what you wanna hear. They'll tell you they'll take you to all the beautiful places they know, waterfalls, snow-topped mountain peaks, rivers full of clear water and trout, and they'll kiss you every place you ever hoped

a man would kiss you, and tell you such beauty as yours ain't never walked the Earth before, so's you can't ever go back to anybody else without smelling them on whoever you're with. They'll ruin you for everybody else.

"And then, when you are spoilt for humanity and totally dependent on them, they'll leave you in the most heartbreaking fashion you can imagine. They'll take out your heart and step on it and you'll kiss their feet while they do it. They'll do it just because they can. You'll finally figure out what they did and why they did it, but you won't care. You'd do it all over again just for the thrill of feeling their touch one more time. It's why, back in the old times, they named hurricanes after people."

"Damn, you're flat-out weird. No man'll ever con me like that."

Jack laughed. "When you finally meet him, you'll fall harder than most."

Nipple grimaced at his blackened teeth. "Not me, you crazy fucker. I've killed more men than I've dated."

"Dated?" He pulled at the wispy strands on the end of his beard. "Dated… I ain't heard that word in… hell, I can't remember. There ain't no dating any more, not since The Collapse. There's romancing, I guess, but not dating."

"Well, fucking excuse me for breathing," Nipple said. "No man will ever romance me like that… happy now?"

"Dating… where'd you hear a word like that? That's a word from the dead world, and you two ain't old enough to be survivors."

"You mentioned my favorite word, *dead.*" She pushed the muzzle of the pistol within inches of his throat.

"So angry," he said, shaking his head. The wisps of his beard brushed the gun's barrel. "What has Idaho Jack ever done to you?"

"Men lie; you're a man. Figure it out."

Along a ridge of heaped boulders, close by on their right, they heard the *clack* of sliding rocks down the steep wall. Green Ghost veered left in a defensive reflex, expecting an attack, but it was nothing more than some rocks sliding to the desert floor. He exhaled in relief.

"You pissed her off pretty good," he said to Jack. "Be careful. I told you she's damaged and dangerous."

The old man shrugged. "I'm going to die soon enough, it don't really matter when, but if we don't hurry up and get wherever we're goin', it'll be stewed in this fuckin' heat."

“I know a lot faster way.” Nipple drew a Black Legion serrated combat knife to go with the Sig Sauer.

“That’s enough,” Green Ghost said. “And put that pistol away! The knife, too. We could hit a hole and you might kill him by accident.” He stared at her in the mirror until she did as he told her. “His only crime is irritating you, and that’s something every living person does. Plus, we need him alive.”

“Brother and sister,” Jack said, tilting his head to one side. “You look about the same age, but you seem a lot older, Greenie.”

“We’re twins,” Nipple said. “He’s the guy but I got the balls.”

Green Ghost ignored that. “Here’s the deal, Jack. We need your help. We need to know what’s out here, that’s true. People, bad guys, Sevens, all of it. We’re taking you to the place we live, and I’m telling you now, it’s unlike anything you’ve ever seen before. Once there, you can eat, sleep, bathe, and relax without fear of being attacked.”

Jack started to speak but Green Ghost held up a hand. “That’s all I can tell you for now. But while we’re driving, I also want to solve a little mystery of my own. Last year we were pursuing a party of five people across the desert, seventy or eighty miles northwest of here. They disappeared, apparently kidnapped by other people on horseback, even though we were watching them constantly. Somebody got in and out without us noticing anything wrong. Any ideas on who might have taken them?”

“Watching them?” Jack said. “When was this?”

“Back in the fall. We started to follow the hoofprints, but were on foot and had other missions to fulfill.”

“Day or night?”

“Night.”

“Remember the moon phase?”

“It was a new moon,” Green Ghost said.

“A new moon, so the desert was dark. Predators like nights like that, because their prey can’t see them coming. Lot more cougars and wolves out here since The Collapse. How close were you to these people?”

Green Ghost did not answer.

“You don’t want to tell me… which means you were far away,” Jack said, surprised. He paused a moment and watched Ghost’s facial response. “Too far for them to see you. That had to have been a few hundred yards, at least. How is it you can see hundreds of yards in total darkness? Either you’re a seer, or you have pre-Collapse technology that still works.”

It was not a question.

"Sear, my skinny white ass," Nipple said, amused. "The only good sear is what you do to a chunk of meat when you throw it on the fire. Although I prefer it raw."

The two men ignored her.

"How we saw them doesn't matter," Green Ghost said. "Can you help us or not?"

"You don't need my help," Jack said. "If you've spent any time at all out here, you already know who did it. It was the Ghosts of the Desert who took them folks, just like they do all bad people who walk these sands at night. I'd figure you know all about 'em, what with you bein' a ghost, too."

Green Ghost could not tell if Jack meant what he said or not. "Do these *ghosts* of the desert ever have real bodies, or are they like fog or something?"

"Oh, as Jesus Christ is Lord, man, I've been mostly alone out here for fifty years, but even I can tell when somebody has gone burnt in the brain… I don't mean ghost ghosts, although I've seen plenty of those. Ghosts of the Desert. Apaches."

"You mean like Govind?"

That surprised Jack. "You know him? I'm impressed. He doesn't much like strangers."

"I've never personally met him," Green Ghost said. "But he warned some of my comrades about the Sevens last year, right before the big battle. He might have saved us all."

"He's lost a lot of people over the past few decades. Mostly to that horde of locusts down south, meaning the Sevens, but also to that maniac in Prescott, General Patton. It's made him secretive and suspicious. I can't blame him. But what's this about a battle?"

"The Sevens are still a problem, but there're about ten thousand less of them to worry about now."

"Jack likes this news! What happened?"

"We killed them. And Patton's not in Prescott any more. He's in a cell inside our mountain. Prescott's in the hands of the Seventh Cavalry now."

"Well, fuck my pig with a goat," Jack said. "Ten thousand Sevens dead and Patton locked up? Now I *am* glad I met you. A friend of mine said something about this but I didn't believe him, a fellow named Jingle Bob."

"Never heard of him."

“No matter. What’s this Seventh Cavalry? Is that what you’re part of?”

“He is,” Nipple said. “I’m only with them ’cause they feed me.”

“Like feeding a mangy dog?” Jack said, finally irritated with her. She jumped forward in her seat, but before she could grab him Jack had a long knife pointed at her chest. She stopped just short of being impaled on the wicked tip. Her heart-shaped face and expressionless blue eyes did something few things had ever done before: they scared him. “This girl ain’t right,” he said. “She ain’t right in the head, Green Ghost.”

“Whoa, now, Jack. Don’t do something you can’t take back. Nipple, sit back down. Now! Don’t make me make you.”

“I won’t forget this,” she said.

“Don’t piss her off, Jack. Please. She’s my sister. If you kill her, you’re gonna make me kill you, and I don’t want to do that.”

Jack laughed. “Truth is, I’m starting to like her.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Ghost said.

“Oh, gross,” Nipple said. “Just what I need — some pervert twice my age who smells like a rotten armadillo. Where’s a hot guy when you need one?”

Her brother lifted an eyebrow. “Since when do you look for hot guys?”

“When ugly old ones start hitting on me.”

Jack laughed until he started coughing. “Girl, I’ve been wrong about you. You’d make a damned good scraper.”

“Is that what you are?” Green Ghost said, trying to keep the conversation on some sort of track. “A scraper?”

“You think I’m out here ’cause I like roasting in the sun?”

“So what’s a scraper?”

“What do you think? I scrape shit out of the wreckage. Metal is always good; guns are the best but you don’t see too many of them any more. Fuel that hasn’t spoilt, food, animals, whatever I can find. I was headed to Holbrook to pick up some old kitchen stoves I saw there in what they used to call a *diner*. Wanna know what the most valuable thing is, though?”

“Sure, lay it on me.”

“Seeds.”

“Like acorns and stuff?” Nipple said, curious despite herself.

“No, no, not that kind of seed, although if you know where I could

find some appleseeds, I know people who pay plenty for those. I mean, corn seed, wheat seed, cotton is really good, that kind of seed."

"Crop seeds."

"Yeah, that's the word I was trying to think of. Crop seeds. Can't ever get enough of those, especially anything unusual. Can't we pull into the shade for a while? Even with the windows down, I'm burning up here. I ain't so young any more."

Green Ghost pulled three water squeezers out from under his seat and handed them out. "Make it last," he said. "We can't stop except to piss, and that's another couple of hours from now. I want to be home by two thousand hours if I can."

After drinking half the squeezer, Jack smacked his lips. "Long life to ya, boy. Water is precious out here. What's two thousand hours?"

"Eight o'clock at night."

"You still keep time? With clocks, I mean. Will wonders never cease?"

"You know," Ghost said, "they grow all that stuff you're talking about in Prescott. Apple orchards, cotton, wheat, barley, pumpkins, you name it. I know for a fact we just sowed a huge cornfield."

Jack paused and scratched the skin hanging from his neck like a turkey's wattle. "So Patton is gone, huh? It sounds too good to be true. People out here lie all the time… hell, people lie more than they tell the truth. So tell me why I should believe you."

"I don't care if you do or you don't," Green Ghost said. "See, Jack, I have no doubt how tough you are, or that you've got tricks up your sleeve I've never heard of before. Like how you hid that knife so I didn't find it when I frisked you. Good job; you'll have to tell me how you did it. But you'll find out tonight that I'm dealing straight. Besides, I know what I can do, and I know you can't stop me from doing it. So don't give me any trouble; you're going to be a very happy man soon enough. At the very least, you can probably bargain for some seeds."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And take a hot shower and sit in the air conditioning for a while."

"Air conditioning," Jack said. "Son of a bitch. I'd forgotten we used to have that. And you've got it at this… what did you call it?"

"Overtime."

“Strange name. You’ve got air conditioning at this Overtime?”

“Where it’s needed. Most of the base is deep inside the mountain where it’s naturally cool.”

“How big is this place?”

Green Ghost smiled. “Big.”

#

Chapter 20

The past is never dead. It's not even past.
William Faulkner

15 miles northeast of Winslow, AZ
1518 hours, April 14

Fifty miles west-southwest of where they'd left Jack's rig, something beeped three times, stopped, then beeped three times again.

"What's that?" Jack asked.

"It's coming from you, B.B. What the hell is it?"

It had been so long since the device was implanted, Green Ghost had forgotten it was there. "Son of a bitch," he said. He braked to a stop and stepped outside the Humvee.

"Why are we stopping?" Jack said with fear in his voice. "This is a very bad idea."

Green Ghost ignored him.

"Relax," Nipple said. "He's not gonna let me shoot you."

Green Ghost took five steps away from the vehicle, walked back, and then took five steps in the opposite direction. Both times the beeping stopped. Returning to his starting point, he took five steps in both right angle directions from the original axis. It was the second one when the beeping didn't stop.

Jack and Nipple got out and joined him. "Care to fill us in?" she said.

"All of the Nameless have a similar chip planted inside them. Mine is in my left forearm. It's designed to beep when it picks up the signal of a cache hidden for our benefit. Which means we're within five miles of such a stash."

"What kind of stash? Like, weed?"

"Right, because we spent so much time getting stoned… no, it's probably guns and ammo, and out here, food and water. Maybe some cash. But who knows what else? It's like a storage closet for operating in the area."

"We're in the middle of nowhere," Jack said.

"How come I don't have one of those?" Nipple said.

"It's this way." Green Ghost ignored his sister and pointed west-southwest. "As we follow, the beeping should get stronger. If it weakens or

stops, we're off course. It's got to be in those rocks over there."

"Those rocks have got to be over two hundred feet high," Nipple said. "Let's put this on our bucket list and head for home."

"Not two hundred feet," Jack said. "More than five hundred, but it don't matter because you can't go up there. See that cave? They say a witch lives there, and the whole ridge is sacred to the Apaches. Govind might have done you a good turn once, but if you go poking around in their sacred places, I don't think he'll be quite so friendly."

"I can't just leave it," Green Ghost said. "It's a miracle we found the signal in the first place. I've gotta find out what's there."

"Son, trust me on this. Find Govind, tell him what you want, and ask him to help. Maybe he will, maybe he won't. But he won't stake you in the sun for asking. He's not someone you want to mess around with."

Green motioned them back into the Humvee. "Get in." Relieved, both Nipple and Jack did so. But instead of continuing the drive west-southwest back to Overtime, Green Ghost turned and walked away, headed for the rocky crag. The beeping continued.

#

"I don't like this at all," Jack said, looking everywhere except at the tumbled mountain of rock. "That's Apache writing on them rocks, and you can bet your ass it don't say *welcome*. They might be watching us. It feels like when Mr. Cougar is licking his teeth while watching *me*."

"I hate to agree with this shit-smelling asshole, but I don't like it either," Nipple said. "It's hot as fuck out here, and that beeping is driving me fucking crazy."

Green Ghost did not hear either of them. He walked the base of the ridge, inspecting the deep cuts and sharp boulders for signs of the cave, or perhaps a door. The further he walked left, the louder the beep became.

"Someone's been here recently." He bent down and inspected tracks in the dirt. "A very big man, flat-soled shoes. He had several packages with him… looks like a large basket and a box of some type. He rode a horse and disappeared northeast."

Shading his eyes, he craned his neck and peered up. Then he approached the rocks, touched them, picked up a handle of gravel and smelled it. He lifted the rocky soil and flicked out the tip of his tongue, tasting it. He ran his hands over the stones. "Whoever he is, he's climbed these rocks in the past few days. I can't tell if he used a rope or not. I don't

see holes for any anchor stakes… maybe somebody up above helped him. If they didn't, he's Tarzan."

"So they could still be up there?" Nipple said.

"Good chance, I'd say."

"Shit. This day just keeps getting better. You know it's getting dark?"

"We've got at least two hours of daylight left. I'm going up."

"Of course you are."

"You're as stubborn as you are stupid," Jack said. "You remind me of Steve Higdon; nobody can tell him anything, either."

Nipple threw out her hands. "And who the fuck is Steve Higdon?"

"The Master of Shangri-La."

Green Ghost had found a firm foothold to begin his ascent, but stopped at Jack's last words. "What do you know about Shangri-La?"

"Everything, I guess. I've been there often enough. Them folks are great for trading with, always want scrap metal. And Steven's not a bad guy, really. He has a genius for making something out of nothing, but he's harder-headed than a mule."

"Shangri-La exists? And you know where it is?"

"Course it exists."

"It's getting dark," Green Ghost said.

"I just said that and you said it wasn't!" Nipple said.

"Back in the car. Let's go."

"Where we going?"

"Home."

#

Operation Overtime
1728 hours

The first cigar of the day was always a treat, especially after he'd begun rationing them. Angriff had a new routine of lighting up after lunch, around 1330 hours or so, and enjoying the fresh air on his private balcony on the mountainside. Today had been too busy to enjoy one earlier and most of the day's light had faded from the valley below by the time he lit the first one. This particular cigar was drawing well when he spotted the distant dust cloud of a small vehicle heading for the main gate, below and to his right. The gate was closed and to unfamiliar eyes the rock wall appeared unbroken, but the driver obviously knew better. As it neared, Angriff recognized it as a Humvee, and correctly guessed that Green Ghost was back.

#

SECTION FOUR
Vipers

Chapter 21

In the weeds a viper waits
For prey to cross its path,
But the death its bite creates
May lead to vengeful wrath.
Old Mayan maxim

Operation Comeback
1733 hours, April 14

Tom Steeple woke at the knock on his office door. Sitting up in his swivel chair, he almost knocked the half-empty cup of cold coffee onto his keyboard. “Come in,” he called after clearing his throat.

Claw stepped through and closed the door after him. “Sorry to bother you, General, but we’ve got another Indian prowling around the front gate.”

“Is Scope back yet?”

“Not yet. I wasn’t worried until I saw this new guy. I’d like your permission to go after him, find out if he’s seen her, before it gets fully dark.”

“No long chases. If he gets away, he gets away. I can’t afford to lose you.”

“Understood.”

Steeple watched him leave and then downed the coffee. He grimaced at the cold, bitter taste.

#

Although far smaller in scale than Operation Overtime, Operation Comeback still had two secret exits, one on the mountain’s northern slope and the other on the south. Claw chose the one on the north, away from the Indian’s spying eyes. It took half an hour for him to circle to the southern side, around the mountain’s slope, but at no time did he come within sight of the Indian’s vantage point. He knew where the snooper was, but not vice versa.

A narrow crack between two boulders gave him a look at where he guessed the intruder to be, and sure enough, he spotted the telltale brown of tanned leather. The Indian hid under deep cover and Claw couldn’t make out more than a glimpse of any part of his body. But that didn’t matter; he was right where Claw expected him to be, and now he was trapped.

At a range of thirty feet, even in the dim dusk light, he could see the man from knees to shoulders through a break in the rocks. The former leader of Zombie Squad Two took aim at the man's back, sighting on the base of the spine. "Turn around slowly and make sure I can see your hands!"

Nothing happened for three seconds.

"You get one more chance and then I fire!"

Another second passed. The figure began to turn. Then Claw felt something sharp under his left ear.

"Please drop your weapon," said a deep voice from behind.

#

Claw was tied, gagged, and blindfolded within seconds. He cursed himself for being sloppy enough to get caught. Although he weighed close to one hundred eighty pounds, he felt himself being carried down the rocky slope by one man, placed back on his feet, and marched thirty-seven paces. Neither of his captors made a sound, not even a grunt, which told the veteran warrior they were a well-coordinated team.

"There is a horse in front of you," the same voice said, louder this time. "We are loosening the ropes on your hands so you can climb up, but if you try to escape, you will be tied to the saddle, and next time we will throw you over the saddle on your stomach. We have a long ride ahead of us and you would not enjoy that experience. The choice is yours."

"I've got a sensitive stomach," Claw said. "I'll play nice."

"Good."

Once he had climbed into the saddle, he gently tested his bonds. Sure enough, his hands were loose enough to hold the reins but a second rope fixed them to the saddle.

"Close your eyes," the voice said. "I'm going to remove your blindfold."

Claw felt the cloth fall away and cracked his eyelids, careful to allow his eyes time to adjust to the full sunlight. When he could open them fully, he found himself flanked by two riders. Both were American Indians dressed in loose white shirts and leather pants, wearing stout boots made of a different animal hide. Claw guessed it was goat. Long black hair was held back with simple leather cords.

"I am Govind," said the rider to Claw's right. "This is my brother Gosheven. You have a full canteen there, and the pouch on the other side has bread and jerky. We will stop to rest and water the horses and you may then

relieve yourself. Do not be fooled by the coming darkness. If you attempt to escape, or to overpower either one of us, I cannot guarantee your safety once we have you back under control. We lost our younger brother to the one you sent after him, and while I am an even-tempered chief of my tribe, the vengeance of a brother burns hot in my heart."

Claw knew better than to say anything, but he couldn't help himself. "What happened to Scope?"

"Is that the woman who shot our brother?" Gosheven said, trembling with suppressed rage.

Claw nodded.

"I killed her," Govind said. "And I wish that I could do it again for what she did to Gopan. If I believed that killing you would bring him back, you would already be dead."

#

Chapter 22

Monsters, monsters in the night,
Eyes glow bright with evil light;
Come what may, come what might,
Torture me with dark delight.
Sergio Velazquez, Dreams

Forward Operating Base Junkyard
0523 hours, April 15

Lara Snowtiger hated standing watch. As the best sniper in the 7th Cavalry, she could stay alert for days and pee into a diaper and ignore hunger pangs while waiting for the right shot. Somewhere within her were the instincts of the ambush predator that allowed her to lie in wait for as long as necessary to secure her prey. But standing watch was not like that.

FOB Junkyard sat perched on the flat top of a mountain 167 klicks north-northeast of Overtime Prime. The garrison lived in four Green Cocoons that required V-22 Osprey transport helicopters to place in the small cleared area. These self-contained, solar-powered shelters were small but sturdy semi-permanent quarters ideally suited for an FOB.

Snowtiger wouldn't have minded as much if she could have been alone. Solitude was a comfortable world for her. But being stuck on a ridge with seven people she didn't know, living in clean but cramped quarters, with nothing to do except scan the countryside for anomalies, was definitely not her preferred duty assignment.

She hated confined spaces. She had conditioned herself to living in them, but she never rested as well as she did in a tent, or a sleeping bag, or lying in cool clover under a full moon on a summer night; her Choctaw grandmother had taught her that the scent of plush grass made sleep sweeter.

All she could think about was the dead female sniper. Had she done the right thing? In the absence of facts, her mind filled in the unknown details. They had probably been much alike, and she was likely on a mission that Snowtiger herself might have been assigned. Maybe she was only following orders, like Snowtiger had done every time she pulled the trigger and killed someone. Sometimes she knew the background of her targets and sometimes not.

It was past 0300 hours when the high clouds cleared and allowed the sea of stars to illuminate the Sonoran Desert like the image of a ghostly underworld. She had established a routine. Every five minutes she would make a detailed 360-degree sweep of the surrounding mountains, hills and desert. Then she'd spend five minutes enjoying the celestial glory above.

When using her personal pair of astronomical binoculars with I3 tubes and auto-gating, the details of the moonlit desert came clean and clear, and once, when scanning a nearby hill, she'd spotted a cougar stalking something. For a brief moment it had seemed as if she watched the spirit of an Apache warrior who could not rest, perpetually hunting those who'd wiped out his people, a ghost of days long past. After that, she'd asked for the midnight to 0600 watch because that was her favorite time of day.

She wondered if the dead woman's spirit would haunt her. Snowtiger hadn't actually killed her, but she had certainly contributed to the woman's death, and ghosts could be vindictive. But what really scared her was their proximity to Navajo country.

Growing up, her grandmother had told her secret tales the Navajo never shared with outsiders, tales of what they named *yee naaldlooshii.* As a young girl, her widowed mother had dated a Navajo man, who had taken them all to Arizona for a visit. While there, her grandmother had earned his parents' trust and they'd told her details unknown outside the tribe about the mysterious creatures most people knew as *skinwalkers.* The Navajo swore they existed and so, as she scanned the desert again, spotting a small herd of gazelles, Snowtiger prayed for protection against the dreaded monsters. Death she didn't fear, but the non-death horror of a skinwalker terrified her.

During her next sweep, in the silver-white light of the gibbous moon, she spotted figures riding in the desert. She immediately feared the Navajo horrors were coming for her, but then her conscious mind wiped away her dreams and she focused on reality.

Using her night vision scope, she picked out three men on horseback. Two were Apaches — their flowing hair left no doubt — but the third man, who rode between the two Indians, wasn't. He appeared to be wearing an Army uniform.

In four strides, she was at the first EcoSphere. She opened the door and stuck her head inside. Both inhabitants stirred.

"Captain Anthony, wake up, sir. Company's coming."

#

As dawn lightened the eastern sky, the shadow of a prairie falcon raced over the rocky face of the ridge. Snowtiger watched the three riders guide their horses up the long slope to FOB Junkyard. She recognized Govind as he looked up to watch the falcon's flight. All eight of the garrison met them with rifles, including Captain Anthony. Once onto level ground, they stopped.

"You again," Anthony said. He directed his flashlight into each of the riders' faces without regard for their night vision. "What was your name?"

"Govind," Snowtiger said.

Anthony gave her a stern glance. "The man can speak for himself, Stud."

She felt her face go warm. "Aye, sir."

Govind's face showed that he sensed the tension between captain and sergeant.

"I've been officially told that you're our friend, so why are you here again, Govind? Who are these men? One of them appears to be another U.S. soldier. Explain yourself."

Once again Govind frowned at being spoken to in such a manner. Instead of responding to the captain, he spoke to Snowtiger. "This man came from the place Gopan mentioned to you before he died. *Łichíí itsá*, Red Eagle…"

"Hey!" Anthony said. "I'm in charge here. Speak to me!"

"I speak to those who show me respect and therefore deserve it in return." For the first time, Govind scowled at the American officer. The flashlight's glare cast deep shadows in his face and gave him the appearance of an angry wolf. "Red Eagle is our name for a mountain to the north and east of here, in what many call the Painted Desert. We set a trap and this man fell into it. I brought him to you in good faith and trust." He paused a moment and gave Anthony another frown. "He claims to be in your army. If you do not want him, then I will deal with him."

#

Chapter 23

For me, soldiers are all equal.
Erwin Rommel

Operation Overtime
0559 hours, April 15

Green Ghost, Nipple, and Glide were in the third level mess hall, eating breakfast, when his earbud emitted a low tone, alerting him to an incoming message. Putting down his fork, he finished chewing a mouthful of eggs and washed it down with lukewarm coffee. Then he pressed the small button at his sternum.

"Go," he said. The microphone under his throat picked up every nuance of his voice.

It was a private in the communications center. "FOB Junkyard just radioed they have a prisoner who claims to be in the American Army. They're requesting a helicopter to transport him back to Prime. I was told to inform you of this development, sir."

"Told by who?"

"Colonel Kordibowski."

"Why tell me? Who is this prisoner?"

"No such info in the transmission, sir. Captain Anthony is CO at Junkyard and he said the man had no dogtags and only gave the name Claw."

#

"This is damned fine work, son," Angriff said. "Rip says this Idaho Jack person is a gold mine of information."

Green Ghost's eyes narrowed, as if he sought a hidden meaning in the words. Standing with arms folded in the doorway of the Crystal Palace, he gave a curt nod, which was his way of acknowledging thanks.

"Come in and sit down. Tell me about it."

Sergeant Schiller had stood next to Angriff's desk but at those words he stepped back out of the way.

Green Ghost didn't move. "There's something else."

Angriff sighed and leaned back. "There always is."

"FOB Junkyard requests helicopter transport and an armed guard for an American prisoner brought in by one of the Apaches."

“An American? What do we know about this prisoner?”

“All they said was he’s American and his name is Claw.”

Angriff met Green Ghost’s eyes. “*Claw*? Are you sure they said Claw?”

“Positive.”

“Gotta be from Comeback. It can’t be anything else, unless he’s an old man.”

“They didn’t say anything about his age, Saint.”

“Get him back here ASAP. They’ve still got a dead body awaiting transport, so bring that, too,” Angriff said. “And anybody due for rotation. Give it first priority.”

“Security protocols?” Schiller asked.

Green Ghost answered that, since security was his department. “Have an armed guard standing by; otherwise, don’t worry about it. Half the base probably knows about it by now anyway.”

Once Schiller had left, Angriff threw up his hands. “Who’s going to show up next?” he said. “My next door neighbor? Did the entire country go cold?”

#

Snowtiger was too tired to even shower after coming off watch. She stripped to bra and panties and tossed her sweat-stained ACUs into the dirty clothes hamper. The air conditioning dried the moisture on her back and neck before she collapsed in her bunk and pulled the top sheet over her body. Within seconds she had drowsed into semi-consciousness.

“Stud!” One of her roommates, Amelia Rucker, stuck her head in the door. “Up and at ’em, hero, you’re rotating home. Pack your stuff; takeoff in ten minutes.”

“Huh?”

“Get up!” Amelia grinned. “You’ve served your time in Hell.”

#

0944 hours

Despite wearing another blindfold, Claw visualized the lean woman riding the bench across from him, next to the guard. He’d only had a glimpse of her before they’d covered his eyes, but he doubted he would ever forget the high cheekbones and faraway eyes, or the smooth sheen of her reddish skin. Claw had known many women in his life, none of whom compared to the woman they called Stud.

From studying the blueprints, he knew every detail of Overtime Prime, inside and out, every nook and cranny and piece of equipment, so he knew exactly where they were when he felt the UH-1Y Venom bleeding off speed as it came in to land. After an hour's flight, a grinding noise heard over the roar of the rotors told him the hangar doors were being opened. Ground crews would be clearing a space for the bird to put down, and an armed guard would no doubt be standing by in case he tried something. He smiled; blindfolded and handcuffed, they still worried about him. Good… they *should* worry.

They were trying to keep him in the dark, but he knew everything there was to know about Operation Overtime. He also knew virtually every member's personnel file. Stud could only be the sniper named something-or-other Snowtiger.

A slight jolt told him they'd landed. A few seconds later, the engines shut down and the guard removed the handcuffs. One of his guards told him to remove the blindfold but not to do anything stupid. Once again Claw grinned. When he became head of security, he'd look the man up.

With the blindfold gone, he looked for the hot Indian woman, but she had already dismounted, so he slid to the hangar deck. Work close by had come to a stop as the ground crews gawked at the stranger, and six men with rifles comprised his guard. Everything was exactly as he'd thought it would be, with one exception.

As he scanned the crowd encircling the helicopter, he saw the folded arms and angry scowl of a man he'd thought long dead. His eyes went wide and his voice betrayed his shock. "Green Ghost?"

#

"Man, am I glad to see you. You have no idea. So what's the story with that gorgeous Indian babe?"

Arms crossed as he leaned against a wall, Green Ghost's nostrils flared and he scowled at his Zombie comrade.

"Come on, man, gimme the lowdown. I know her name is Snowtiger, although they call her Stud. What's her deal?"

"She's a MedOH." He pronounced it *meadow.*

"No shit? That angelic vision won the Congressional? Was that in her file?"

"She killed a hundred of the enemy last year and saved the whole brigade."

"*That's* why everybody called her Stud!"

Claw had sat in the square room, spare of anything more than a table and two chairs, by himself for half an hour since being whisked out of the hangar. It had been so quick that he'd been wondering whether he'd actually seen Green Ghost or if it had been just a hallucination. Now the terse answers and tense body language made him grin; it was classic Green Ghost.

Green Ghost sat in the opposite chair and leaned forward on his elbows.

Claw knew that look all too well. "What?" he said, spreading his arms. "What'd I do? Don't tell me *you're* banging her."

"You let me think you were dead, you prick. You let us *all* think you were dead."

"Apparently I wasn't the only one to go cold."

"*After* The Collapse, not before."

"Yeah… that would explain why you're not on the manifest. So who else is here?"

"Don't try to change the subject. Because of you, I had to promote that asshole Adder to command second squad. Do you know what happened? Have you read the reports?"

Claw scowled. "Adder… shit. No, I haven't heard."

"Reliable sources reported a nuke being assembled in the Venezuelan jungle, under government protection, to be sold to the highest bidder. Adder took the whole squad in with him to deal with it. The *whole squad!* He had total tactical authority, planned the whole thing himself down to the last detail. Had all the support he needed and didn't once ask for my advice. The arrogant prick walked into that green hell with twelve Zombies… and he came out alone."

"Wedge? Head Case? Stiletto?"

"Dead, all of them. They got the nuke, but when I asked him why everybody else wound up dead, all he could say was *bad luck.* The bad luck was me ever letting that psychopath into TFZ in the first place, except you vouched for him. The whole thing was his fault, we knew it, and he knew we knew it, but we couldn't prove it. He got a commendation out of it. I removed him from command and got a lot of shit for it, but I wouldn't give him his place back and Saint Nick supported me. Eventually the prick disappeared."

"Fuck."

"Yeah, fucked is right. Especially your whole squad."

“C’mon, Ghost, what did you expect me to do? Do you know who recruited me to Comeback? General Steeple himself. I don’t know how he found out about me and I didn’t ask, or why he didn’t ask you. All I know is that one day I was ordered to D.C. to meet some CIA guy named Charro at a grubby Italian restaurant. It was this little place, y’know? Grimaldi’s, that was it. Dark, dirty, nobody in there except this spook and me.

“Then all of a sudden in walks the Chief of the fuckin’ Joint Chiefs of Staff. A four-star general in this dump the cockroaches wouldn’t eat at. He pitches this deal to me about the end of the country, and cryogenics, and me being the head of security at some super-secret base out west, and generally makes it clear that I can’t say *no.* And here I am.”

“What about Scope?”

“Huh. How do you know about her?”

“She flew here with you.”

It took him a second to figure it out. “The body bag?”

“I had to ID her body right before I came here. She’s pretty ripe.”

Claw blinked several times. “So the Indian wasn’t fucking with me.”

“No, he wasn’t. She killed his little brother and he killed her. And that’s a big problem for you, because he’s proven himself to be an ally of Overtime.”

“So I’m fucked.” It wasn’t a question. “Is there a way back?”

“I don’t know, but if you want to start, tell me everything there is to know about Comeback. Everything, hear me? And the first thing I want is to know exactly where it is.”

“So you don’t know its location?” Claw said.

From his tone, Green Ghost could tell he was thinking about whether this knowledge gave him leverage.

“Don’t even think about trying to negotiate this,” Green Ghost said. “You know who the C.O. is here at Overtime. You were in Kenya, and you know Saint doesn’t take shit from anybody. He’s now a five-star, and last year he stood in the middle of a highway and shot it out with about a thousand Sevens, killed God knows how many all by himself, and he won’t think twice about court-martialing a man who ran out on his command.”

“I didn’t run out. I was re-assigned! And Angriff is nothing if not fair. He won’t court-martial me over that.”

“Then *I’ll* prefer charges! Don’t you get it yet? That world is gone, the rules have changed, and legal niceties are no longer relevant. What

matters now is who you can count on."

"You know I've got your back. I always did."

"*Did* being the operative word. You know how much I leaned on you, even more than I did on Vapor or Wingnut. You were my executive officer. When you went down… well, it hurt, let's leave it at that. But I could really use you now, if I was sure I could count on you, so against my better judgment, I'll give you a chance to prove your loyalty. I'm gonna tell our S-2, Colonel Kordibowski, that you're in total cooperation mode, because you're going to be. Hear me?"

"I hear."

"Good. But before you tell him anything and everything he wants to know, you're gonna write down Comeback's exact position."

"Tell me straight, Ghost. If I do it, am I gonna get back in the game?"

"I don't know. I can't predict what Saint will do, but if you come clean, and I mean *really* come clean, I'll put in a good word for you."

"I really am sorry about leaving Zombie the way I did."

"That makes everything better."

"Come on, man, don't be like that."

"One last thing. No more cracks about brigade personnel, especially Snowtiger. Saint Nick watches out for her personally. That's why she was stuck at an FOB; he didn't want to be seen as favoring her. But I'll tell you what, if you really want to hit on somebody, try Glide. She's new in First Squad since you left."

"She's hot?"

"Yeah, she's hot, but if she shoots you down, or breaks your jaw… you can always try my sister."

"Oh, fuck no."

#

Chapter 24

When there's no clear option, it's better to do nothing.
Erwin Rommel

Operation Comeback
1429 hours, April 15

"Calm down," Tom Steeple said to the slim woman sitting against the side wall of his Spartan office. LED lighting shone harshly on her dark skin. "We've got to let things play out as they will. There's no way to hurry them."

Amunet Mwangi had never been a patient woman. In the previous world, her restless energy had served her well as a high-level fixer. She'd wielded power far beyond her colonel's rank, but the inactivity of the post-Collapse world drove her mad. Unlike the sprawling comforts that were a major component of Operation Overtime, Operation Comeback was utilitarian in design. There were only so many places to inspect, so many diversions to keep the mind occupied, and ten months after wake-up she had a bad case of cabin fever.

"I can't take it any more, Tom. You know me; being cooped up isn't my style."

"Be thankful the useless mouths aren't awake yet." *Useless mouths* was their term for the politicians still sleeping in their CHILSS.

"Oh, God, this place is already overcrowded. If I had to listen to President Mememe," she pronounced it *me me me*, "all day, eventually one of us would have to die."

"Well, let's hope they never wake up, then. Because I'd hate—" The *ding* of the intercom stopped him.

It was the corporal seated outside his office. "General, we just received an uncoded over-the-air message from Overtime."

Mwangi raised her eyebrows. "Bring it in, please," Steeple replied.

Once he had the printed message, Steeple read it aloud. "To our brothers and sisters in arms at Operation Comeback, greetings from General Angriff and the entire Seventh Cavalry. Welcome to the fight! We are sending a delegation by air to arrive your location oh nine hundred hours tomorrow. Suggest you reciprocate. General Angriff invites General Steeple to be his guest for brunch, followed by tour of facilities and wide-ranging

discussions. Please respond soonest."

She leaned forward on her elbows. "I didn't see that coming."

"Once they planted that virus in our computer system, it was just a matter of time."

"Should we wait to hear from Claw before we respond?"

He chuckled. "I doubt we'll be hearing from Claw any time soon."

#

Operation Overtime
1635 hours

The Crystal Closet was crowded again, this time without Dupree but with Nipple.

"Here's the plan," Angriff said without preamble. "Ghost, you stay here. I want you to keep an eye on whoever Steeple brings with him. Make sure they only see the big stuff. You know what I mean, the hydroponics fields, the hangar deck, that sort of thing. Take them into Prescott if you need to, show them the battlefield in the valley. Just don't let them wander at will.

"Norm, I want you to lead the delegation. Take Rip, Morgan, and Nipple with you—"

"Hey!" Nipple said. "I don't want to ride with Blondie."

"Tough," Angriff said, and this time he gave her the full force of his scowl. "I have a specific job for Morgan, and you're the only one left in this room with the skills to watch her back. You'll do what you're told and like it; is that understood?"

Much to her brother's surprise, Nipple nodded.

"Sir," Rip Kordibowski said, "I've begun debriefing Mister… Idaho Jack. No offense to General Tompkins, but the man knows every grain of sand in the desert around here. He's going to give us the location of Shangri-La plus a few other places we don't know about yet. I'd prefer to stay and work with him while he's in the mood to talk."

"I'll go if it helps," Dennis Tompkins said.

"No, that's too much of our leadership on one bird. But thank you, Dennis."

Green Ghost spoke up during the pause. "Send Glide, Saint. You can never have too much security and she's hell on wheels in a fight."

"All right then, done. Rip stays here, Glide goes to Comeback."

"So do I still have to—" Nipple started.

"Be quiet!" Angriff pointed at her.

Kordibowski intervened before it got nasty. “Just so you know, sir, I asked Claw about the two John Does. He said he did not know that Comeback even had two unidentified Long Sleepers. I think that he thought I was trying to trap him.”

“Thanks for thinking of that, Rip. Now, as I was saying, Norm, take those three and anybody else you think you might need. Joe, I want you to fly them in *Tank Girl.*”

“As you wish, sir, but isn’t a Comanche overkill for transport duty?”

“No. You never can tell when firepower might be needed, or speed. And you’re the only pilot I can trust one hundred percent.”

“What about my co-pilot, Bunny Carlos?”

“Don’t tell him more than necessary. But have him standing by ready to go, just in case this goes south.”

“Aren’t we talking about fellow Americans?” Fleming said.

“We’re talking about Tom Steeple, who is capable of anything. Let me emphasize: I don’t expect trouble. I think Steeple will be all shits and giggles, but we need to plan for all contingencies. Morgan, I want you and Nipple to break away from the group and find their CHILSS chamber. I don’t care how you do it, I don’t even care if you get caught, so long as you find out who the two John Does are. For all I know, Stormin’ Norman is over there frozen, and if he is, I want to know it.”

“I thought he died,” Rip said.

Angriff leaned back and spread his arms, meaning *that’s what everyone thought about all of us.* “Take your time looking the place over, be pushy, find out everything you can about everything. Talk to the enlisted personnel, leaf through papers, be nosy. Try to be back at Overtime before dark. Any questions?”

“I want to bring my chief with me,” Fleming said.

“Sure, take Alexis if you need her. Are there any *other* questions?”

Nipple was the only one to raise her hand. “Do I have to *sit* next to Blondie?”

#

Chapter 25

Perception is the mother of deception.
William Blake

Operation Comeback
0450 hours, April 16

Tom Steeple stood in front of a full-length mirror, inspecting his uniform. He'd rejected more formal wear in favor of ACUs because the Seventh Cavalry was a combat formation, with a hyper-aggressive CO who famously hated formal occasions. To earn their respect as the supreme commander of all U.S. military forces, he needed to look the part. "How do I look?"

Mwangi raised her eyebrows. "Like it's Halloween."

"I'm *not* wearing my class A's, so quit mentioning it. These people are combat-hardened veterans and I don't want to give the appearance I've got a flagpole rammed up my ass."

"Right… and spotless ACUs with a sharp crease in the pants makes you look just like one of the boys."

Steeple changed the subject. "You wanted excitement, Amy, and now you're going to get it."

"What do I do if they start nosing around too much?"

"Stop them."

"How? Norm is a three-star general. I'm only a colonel."

"In my absence, you're the base commander. Rank doesn't matter. If it comes to it, stand your ground and I'll back you up."

"You make it sound easy, but you don't know my cousin very well if you think that will work."

"You can do it. I believe in you."

"What if it comes to shooting?"

"Why would that happen? We're all one big, happy family who've found each other again at the end of days."

"Is *that* the line you're going to take with Angriff?"

"No, that would never work with such a sanctimonious prick. He'll want to hear about how we're going to kick some more ass and I'll be right there with him."

“Whose ass are you gonna kick?”

“I don’t know and it doesn’t matter, as long as he has other targets to focus on than us. But give me time to figure out the situation and I’ll find somebody for us to fight.”

#

Chapter 26

The fickleness of the women I love is only equaled by the infernal constancy of the women who love me.

George Bernard Shaw

Operation Overtime
0521 hours, April 16

Joe Randall finished his seventh slice of bacon, leaving only a smear of egg yolk on his plate. Fresh pork hadn't made it into the kitchen yet, but reconstituted vegetable proteins had. He didn't know which was worse, them or the MREs.

Sitting across from him, Bunny Carlos munched on a piece of toast, momentarily distracted by a certain young civilian scientist he'd noticed months earlier. As he watched her walk by, Randall speared the two link sausages on his place and stuffed them into his own mouth.

"You did me a favor," Carlos said when he noticed them missing. "Those things are like eating rocks."

"Protein, Bunny, you're gonna need all you can wolf down."

"It's disgusting… I'll take my chances."

"Never pass up the chance to eat. And I wouldn't be so obvious about staring at other women if I was you."

"Huh?"

"I'm just sayin', she might not like it."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Uh-huh, keep pretending I'm blind and haven't known you forever."

They finished breakfast in silence. Randall downed the last of his coffee before 0530, giving it enough time to cycle through his system before takeoff. It had always been his habit to check every last detail in his pre-flight inspection, and he still did. But despite skepticism about his ground crew when he had first met them, he no longer felt the need to double-check everything. Sergeant Rossi, their scud-running trunk-monkey, a/k/a their crew chief, had proven herself the best in the brigade. She'd whipped the rest of the ground crew into the envy of the hangar deck. Their performance during the battles of the previous summer was the stuff of legend.

But when he and Carlos entered the hangar and began descending to

the deck, she noticed them and walked the other way, as if on some errand.

"Huh," Randall. "That's weird."

"What?"

"Is Rossi mad at you?"

"How should I know?"

"For six months, she greeted us every day with a sharp salute and a not-so-subtle smile aimed at you. Now, all of a sudden, we're persona non grata. Did she catch you staring at somebody's ass, like I did, and start a fight?"

"What? No! Of course not. I mean, it wasn't really a fight. Not a real one."

"Shit." Randall cupped his hands over his mouth. "Rossi! Get over here!"

He thought he saw her curse before she broke into a jog. She hustled over and rubbed at a smear of grease down her left cheek. She nodded at Randall and then turned a dark look on Carlos. He lowered his gaze and looked to the side. Straightening her back, she gave them both a stiff salute.

"Whatever's going on, both of you knock it off. I don't know what happened and I don't care. All that matters to me is that *Tank Girl* is in grade-A condition to fly. Is she, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir. I wouldn't let personal matters affect my performance. Not now, not ever."

"All right, I'm giving you both five minutes to clear this up. I don't care how you do it, but after five minutes you'd better be grinning like it's the first morning of your honeymoon, you got that? And keep your voices down while you do it."

"Joe—"

"That's an order!"

#

0857 hours

Without GPS, a proper map, or any guidance signals, Bunny Carlos navigated by dead reckoning. After 65 minutes in the air, he found a flat-topped mountain with a circle of waiting people precisely where he'd calculated it would be. Joe Randall gave him a thumbs-up and within two minutes they put the huge helicopter down on the stone landing pad. It was not by mistake that the two 20mm gun pods aimed in the direction of the only structure on the mountain's top, a square shed that no doubt housed an

elevator down into the base. The welcoming committee stood far away until the slowing rotors no longer threw up dust and pebbles like a vortex.

As the engine whine died down, all Morgan Randall could think about was getting her mission over with. She was ill-suited to subterfuge of any sort, preferring direct action. The thought of sneaking around an unknown base, even if it was American, made her nauseous. And then to have to remember a cover story on top of it…

Glide was first out the door. Marine-issue Crossbow ballistic eyewear substituted for sunglasses. The butt of an M-16 rested on her hip as she scanned the dozen or so people standing near a square metal building one hundred feet away. Once satisfied it was safe, she used her left index finger to motion everyone else out of the bird.

Nipple went next, also armed and ready. Then Major Alexis Iskold gripped the handrails flanking the doorway as if she were drowning and they were the last flotsam on the sea. Norm Fleming's rarely seen Chief of Staff had never been in combat, and had only once before flown in a helicopter. On the flight over, Morgan had tried to engage her in conversation, but all the major did was nod and put her head between her legs to keep from vomiting.

Then it was Morgan's turn to exit. She walked to the front of the helicopter and awaited her husband, who came around the front a few seconds later still wearing his flight suit. Norm Fleming came last.

Morgan immediately noticed a change in the usually deferential Fleming. His spine seemed straighter and he squared his already massive shoulders like a bronze statue. Nor was the expression on his rounded face the open and friendly one he usually wore, but instead was stern and calculating. As always, his uniform was impeccable, even though his ACUs were as worn as everybody else's. He pulled his patrol cap low on his broad forehead.

Morgan had known him since she was a toddler, but not this version of Uncle Norm. This was not the gentle, jovial giant who acted as a counterpart to her father's gregarious and impulsive demeanor. This was Lieutenant General Norman Fleming, the ranking officer present, a man to be obeyed. At six feet, four inches tall he towered over the rest of them, and Morgan realized for the first time why her father trusted him so implicitly. This was a persona she'd never seen before.

Leading his small group, Fleming walked toward the little building where the welcome group stood. Halfway there, the dozen officers from

Comeback parted and a stocky black woman walked between their ranks and headed for Fleming. Braided dreadlocks fell past her shoulders. Her uniform had no name or insignia. As she drew near to him, she spread her arms in a welcoming gesture. Fleming did likewise, but Morgan could tell that he did it with reluctance.

"It's so good to see you here, Norm," she said. "Aunt Mathea would be so happy to know we're here together, at the rebirth of our great country."

"Hello, Amunet. I should have known you'd be here."

#

Chapter 27

Be careful who you trust; the devil was once an angel.
Ziad K. Abdelnour

Operation Comeback
0906 hours, April 16

Morgan Randall overheard Fleming introduce the woman to his deputy, Alexis Iskold, as Amunet Mwangi, his first cousin. Physically there was little resemblance between them. Mwangi stood a foot shorter, with a long face and twenty extra pounds. But an aura of authority hung over her like fog on a river, a palpable feeling that this woman had power and knew how to use it.

"I'm sorry that General Steeple isn't here, Norman," she said. The breeze over the mountaintop wasn't strong enough to blow away her words, and Morgan heard her clearly from her position behind Fleming and Iskold. "He decided to reciprocate your visit by flying to Overtime. In his absence, I'm base commander."

Fleming scouted the flat expanse for a moment. "Do you have hangar doors on the mountainside, like Overtime?"

She smiled. "Not exactly."

She pointed at a man standing in the doorway of the square building. He leaned inside and a second later they heard a mechanical whine. The ground shook and the rectangular outline of a platform formed in the dirt. With a *bump*, the entire edifice began lowering into the mountain, like the elevator on an aircraft carrier.

Morgan leaned close to her husband. "Once we're down," she whispered, "keep an eye out for any switches to raise the platform. We may need to leave in a hurry."

He gave her the look that meant *no shit.*

The hangar deck was tiny, especially compared to Overtime. There was just enough room for one medium-sized helicopter to be moved off the platform into a service bay. *Tank Girl* was not a medium-sized helicopter. The AH-72 Comanche was more of a flying battleship than an aircraft.

"Functional." Fleming scanned his surroundings. His deep baritone voice echoed in the metallic shaft.

“That’s all it needed to be,” Mwangi said. “We weren’t expecting to house Comanches.”

They exited the hangar through wide, sliding double doors, into a long corridor with closed doors on both sides. Morgan and Nipple brought up the rear and had trouble hearing Mwangi explaining what was what, but the rooms behind the doors were all storage or lockers.

At the end of the corridor, they came to a large elevator that held them all.

“Let’s start at the bottom and work our way up,” Mwangi said. She raised her eyebrows and a man standing by the control panel punched five, but there were also buttons for six and seven.

“Shouldn’t we start at seven?” Fleming said.

“Six and seven are nothing but CHILSS chambers. If you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all.”

“Nevertheless, General Angriff instructed me to see everything, and when he says everything, he means *everything*, CHILSS included.”

Mwangi shrugged. “Suit yourself.” Morgan saw her lick her lips.

At the seventh floor, Fleming’s entire entourage got off the elevator. Corridors led straight ahead and to the left, each framing a long wall with large doors every thirty feet. On the right side of the corridor ahead were more doors, two of which were labeled as restrooms. Symbols indicated which was for men and which for women. Beside them, other doors bore the warning *Authorized Personnel Only*.

Fleming pointed to them. “Maintenance?”

Besides the Overtime group, only two brawny guards had gotten off the elevator. Mwangi leaned halfway out, as if she expected to return within seconds. “Medical supplies mostly, plus storerooms for miscellaneous non-essentials.”

Fleming nodded, and then opened a door leading into the CHILSS chamber. As Mwangi said, it was a smaller version of the same thing at Overtime. Four levels of mesh steel rose above him, each level spaced with a CHILSS every five feet. Pipes and valves lined the walls and disappeared into larger pipes running between two rows of CHILSS. These, in turn, connected to the pods themselves through smaller conduits. Computer interfaces stood atop a metal pole beside each CHILSS pod.

With no CHILSS on the ground floor, Fleming could only look up at the bottom of thousands of pods. “How many are still occupied?” he called

from the doorway.

“Most of them,” Mwangi called back.

Fleming shot a quick glance at Morgan, who stood to his right. He winked. That was her cue.

“Oh, no,” she moaned, grabbing her stomach and doubling over.

“Are you sick again, Lieutenant?”

Morgan covered her mouth. “Yes, sir. I’m sorry, sir.”

“The restroom’s right over there. Join us when you’re better. You help her.” He pointed to Nipple, and she followed Morgan toward the restroom.

Mwangi came halfway down the hall toward them, raising her hand to get their attention, but Fleming didn’t give her the chance to speak.

“It’s all right; she was sick on the way over here. Probably food poisoning, but potentially something worse. They’ll join us when she’s better.”

“But—” Mwangi said, watching the two women disappear into the restroom.

“Come on, Amunet, I thought you wanted to show me this place.”

Mwangi pointed at one of the guards and then pointed down. He nodded, understanding she meant for him to stay with the women. The other guard joined them on the elevator as the doors closed.

#

Chapter 28

Insanity is a convenient trait among warriors.
Sergio Velazquez, from Among Warriors

Operation Comeback
0946 hours, April 16

Within a minute of the elevator's departure, Nipple returned to the hall, waving her hand in front of her face. "Whew! It's coming out both ends. Be glad you don't have to go in there."

"Been there, done that," the guard said.

"What's your name?" she said, running her blue eyes up and down his frame like he was a hot rack of barbecued ribs.

"Jerry Denstuhl."

"Well, hello there, Jerry Denstuhl; aren't you the big, handsome boy? Mine's Melovey."

"Mee-luvee?"

"Yeah, as in me lovey some Jerry Denstuhl." Nipple's left hand reached up and caressed his cheek, and he flushed, looking straight into her huge blue eyes, half-hidden under the corn-straw yellow bangs. What he didn't see was the knife that appeared in her right hand. He only knew of its existence when a sharp blade pressed against his abdomen.

"What the fuck?"

"Ssshhh!" Nipple touched her left index finger to his lips. "This isn't a time to talk, lover. This is a time for you to shut up so I don't have to cut your dick off and watch you bleed to death while screaming for your mommy. Okay?"

"You must be nuts."

Nipple laughed. "You don't know the half of it." One kick on the restroom door brought Morgan Randall out.

"We alone?"

"Just me and Jerry here, and he put the move on me so I defended myself."

Randall rolled her eyes. "Shame on you, Jerry. If she guts you like a trout, I'll do what I can to stop the bleeding, but I wouldn't do anything stupid if I was you. She's wound pretty tight."

“But I didn’t—”

“Ssshhh…”

Morgan ducked into the chamber and found the layout similar to Overtime, although much smaller. A titanic cavern had been filled with multiple levels of mesh flooring, with CHILSS lined up. Access ladders connected the levels and there were open-sided elevators at either end. Conduits ran floor to ceiling, shielding the pipes and wiring that provided the chemicals and energy required to maintain and reanimate the Long Sleepers. Morgan Randall knew from their stolen data that the two unknown subjects were on the third level, row 22, numbers 14 and 15. Seconds ticked away as she oriented herself.

Once she realized where she was, it was a quick sprint up three floors of steps, then down five rows to 22, and left ten pods. Slowing, she found number 14 and read the card over the lock, just to be sure it was the right one. *J. Doe 1*, it said. Nodding, she took a quick look inside… and felt her legs buckle.

Cryogenic pods were like stainless steel coffins, except with a clear lid. The people inside appeared waxy and stiff, their skin a bluish white, their faces dull and lifeless. Unless you knew they were alive, you would never know they weren’t dead. And when she looked through the clear lid, Morgan Randall saw something she couldn’t believe.

Stunned for several seconds, she finally shook herself and ran to pod number 15, not as shocked at what she saw this time. And then she ran for the exit. She had to get back to Prime as soon as possible.

“I’m going back to Overtime. Now!” she said to Nipple. “Stay and don’t let anybody in there until I get back!”

“Who died and made you God?”

Morgan had started to leave, but she turned back and poked a finger in Nipple’s face. “You really don’t wanna fuck with me right now!”

“All right, all right, peace out. So what do I do with hunky-boy here?”

“I don’t care. Just don’t kill him.”

#

“Of all the people I could have encountered after the end of the world,” Fleming said, “somehow I’m not surprised that one of them’s you.”

Amunet Mwangi glanced up at her cousin and smiled a cat-got-the-canary smile. “Of all people, you should know better than to underestimate me. Besides, who do you think went to bat for getting you frozen?”

“Don’t overplay your hand, Amy. I was a well-respected general in my own right, besides being General Angriff’s deputy commander.”

“That was the debate, dummy.” Fleming didn’t react to the apparent insult. The rest of their entourage was behind them as they walked toward the armaments storage cavern and they kept their voices low. “Once Angriff was selected as commander, there was strong opposition to you being picked as the number two. It was felt that would give him too much power and he might turn into some sort of tyrant.”

Why had she said that? Amunet Mwangi never said anything by mistake. Warning bells went off in Fleming’s head. *Too much power? Tyrant?* Angriff was officially the highest-ranking officer in the U.S. military, with all the power he needed, namely, command of any remnants of any branch of the armed forces that might still exist. But she obviously wanted him to pursue that line of questioning, so instead he deflected it.

“The past is a foreign country I visited once. The future is where I’m headed now.”

“That is so *you*, Norm, so stoic and philosophical. But in practical terms, do you really want General Steeple thinking you’re still Angriff’s pet poodle?”

That’s what she’s getting at! He opened his mouth to respond, but a noise from behind stopped him. The assemblage following them parted, allowing Morgan to pass through, holding her stomach with both hands.

“General, I’m sorry to interrupt, sir, but I need a minute. It’s urgent.”

“Of course,” he said, before Mwangi could say anything. Nobody followed as they walked thirty feet down the hallway. Halfway down Morgan heaved a few times as if needing to vomit. “Where’s Nipple?” he asked.

“She’s guarding the CHILSS chamber. I’ve got to return to Overtime, ASAP,” she whispered.

“Who are they?” Fleming said, arms folded and head down. He felt her forehead as if checking for a fever.

“You’re not going to believe it, Uncle Norm.”

Fleming tried to keep his face grave and not show the shock he felt as she told him. “Tell Glide what’s going on. She’s to get Nipple and then both of them head to the flight deck. You go to the flight elevator and tell your husband to prep for takeoff. I’ll cover us here.”

“Thanks, Uncle Norm. Be careful.”

#

Chapter 29

Sure, I lied to you. So what?
Nipple

Operation Comeback
1004 hours, April 16

"The lieutenant may have to evacuate back to Overtime."

Mwangi touched his forearm. "We have a full medical staff, Norm."

"I know, and this is no reflection on you or Comeback, Amy. But the doctor was emphatic that if she got sicker, we take her back at once, and we agreed."

"What's wrong with her?"

"When did I have time to go to med school?"

"She must be important. Who is she?"

"Lieutenant Randall is a personnel specialist under… what was that doctor's name, Pander? Proctol?"

"Doctor Proctor?"

Fleming snapped his fingers. "That's him. She's been working closely with him."

"She has? And Nick the A's okay with that?"

"Of course. Nick doesn't have a prejudiced bone in his body, unless you're the enemy. He's all for the diversity thing. He gave Doctor Proctor an office and everything."

"General Angriff did that? General *Nick* Angriff?"

Fleming laughed, somehow able to push his rising anger deep into his mind. "Yes, *that* General Angriff."

"I hope she's not contagious."

"Not according to the doctor, she's not… well, he said *probably* not. If you'll excuse me, I need to see to her for a minute."

"Sure, sure, I understand. Go ahead. Just let me know if they have to leave."

As he walked after Morgan Randall, Fleming could feel his cousin's eyes boring into his back.

#

The deck elevator clanged to a stop, raising *Tank Girl* into the hot

sun. On one bench inside her, Nipple sat with a zip-tied man in Army uniform, her undershirt stuffed into his mouth. Morgan sat strapped into the passenger bench. Joe Randall had *Tank Girl* ready for takeoff by the time Fleming stuck his head in the co-pilot's window. Randall didn't see him so Carlos tapped him on the shoulder.

"Get out of here before they try to stop you, but get back here as fast as possible," Fleming shouted over the engine. "And bring reinforcements."

Glide and Iskold had followed him during the elevator ride up from the hangar deck. As *Tank Girl* took off, he shouted at Glide. "Do you have any extra weapons? We may need them."

As *Tank Girl's* turbines faded into the distance, a screech made him glance up. A prairie falcon glided on thermals overhead. He followed its flight for a few seconds until it swooped after something running across the dunes and vanished behind the sun-baked rock.

#

Tank Girl was off the ground and headed southwest before anyone at Comeback realized it.

"Overtime courier aircraft, this is Comeback control. Please report your situation. Why did you leave without informing us?"

"Comeback control, this is Ripsaw Real. We initiated emergency medical evacuation protocols for a member of our party who is having seizures and severe vomiting. Sorry we left without saying goodbye."

"Ripsaw Real, be advised we have full medical staff standing by. Colonel Mwangi suggests you return immediately."

"Negative, Comeback, patient under orders to return to Overtime and I'm under orders to take her. Also, we have Corporal Denstuhl with us, helping keep the patient under control. We will return him ASAP. Encountering turbulence; need to sign off now. Ripsaw Real out."

Sitting on the passenger bench beside Corporal Denstuhl, Nipple reached past the gun in her left hand and patted his cheek. Denstuhl's nostrils flared.

"Good boy," she said. "I'd give you a cookie if I had one."

#

Chapter 30

Hospitality is making your guests feel at home, even if you wish they were.
Anonymous

Operation Overtime
1005 hours, April 16

Colonel B.F. Walling found Angriff on his private catwalk outside the mountain. “Sorry to interrupt, but General Steeple’s on a helicopter heading our way.”

“General Steeple is right there.” Angriff pointed at a helicopter approaching from the northeast. “I should have known he wouldn’t wait. I guess he’ll want a tour, so let’s give him one. Arrange transport in case he wants to go into Prescott, and rustle up an honor guard and have them on the hangar deck within five minutes.”

“Already gave the order.”

Angriff stopped, nodded, and smiled. “You’re getting the hang of this.”

Back in his office, he grabbed a favorite black Special Forces baseball cap with the logo *Mess With the Best, Die Like the Rest* flanking a skull and crossbones. Without thinking, he buckled on his double waist holster, pulled both Desert Eagles out of the top desk drawer, and slid them into the worn leather pockets. In a ritual he’d done a thousand times before, he withdrew each in turn, chambered a round, and re-holstered them. With a deep and determined breath, he went out to meet the man he despised above all others.

#

The best Colonel Walling could do on such short notice was round up Sergeant Schiller, Dupree, and two headquarters guards. Only the guards had rifles. With Walling leading the way, they barely got to the hangar deck in time to see General Steeple dismounting from a Sikorsky UH-60 Blackhawk. Angriff watched them come onto the platform that lined the hangar and descend one of the ladders.

The rotors of the Blackhawk had slowed almost to a stop when Tom Steeple appeared in the cargo door’s frame. One of the crew fixed a ladder in place but Steeple paused before descending. He spotted Angriff and waited.

And waited.

Angriff knew Steeple waited to hear the command of *atten-shun,* but he wasn't going to give it. It was a silent drama between the two of them. In the Army, you didn't bring a room to attention when an officer entered, not if a higher-ranking officer was already present. Steeple obviously hadn't heard that Angriff now outranked him… or hadn't accepted it if he had. Nevertheless, neither man acknowledged the pissing contest they both knew was happening.

After ten awkward seconds, Steeple came down the ladder, wearing a big grin. A crowd had formed around the helicopter to see the man they'd all heard about but few had ever seen before. Unknown to Angriff, Green Ghost and Vapor stood to either side, watching.

"Well, Nick," Steeple said without extending his hand, in round two of their top dog competition. "Here we are at the end of the world."

"It's a helluva thing, Tom, a helluva thing." Angriff smiled like Steeple was a long-lost friend, but didn't put out his hand, either.

"You look good. A little thin, maybe, but good."

"Living on LSMREs for almost a year will do that to you. You look good, too… fresh."

Both men understood it was a dig at Steeple's crisp ACUs.

"Maybe you can find me a battle," Steeple answered.

"I'd be glad to."

#

Walling got held up at the back of the crowd.

"Coming through, coming through," he said, pushing forward, followed by the four members of the honor guard.

In a purely reflexive action, one burly corporal cried out, "Hey!"

#

Green Ghost turned at the shout. By reflex, he slipped a Wing-Tactic knife from its sheath at his waist, holding the five-inch blade close against his leg. For a moment, all he saw was people pushing through the crowd, but then he recognized Colonel Walling and relaxed. The whole incident only distracted him for about seven seconds.

That was enough.

#

"Ghost, tail of the bird!"

Vapor's warning in his earpiece brought Green Ghost around. A uniformed man passed twenty feet in front of him at a dead run, heading right

for Angriff and Steeple. He ran with arms extended straight out, and clutched something in each hand, something round… hand grenades.

"Saint!" Green Ghost yelled. The knife still filled his right hand, so he threw it in one blur of motion, knowing it was too late.

#

Angriff's peripheral vision registered movement forty feet to his left and from there his reflexes took over. Using his left hand, he shoved Steeple backward, drew an Eagle with his right, spun into a crouch, and fired one-handed, all in less than two seconds. Bracing the gun with his left hand, he fired two more.

The first round struck the running man squarely in the sternum, pulling him up short and stopping his momentum. The second hit his stomach and the third just above the second, with each impact pushing him backward. Mouth open in a silent scream, the man tottered and fell to his knees.

"Everybody down!" Green Ghost yelled. "Down! Down!"

Angriff threw himself on top of Steeple an instant before the grenades detonated, spraying steel splinters in a fifty-foot circle. The double *bang* of the explosions was followed by the *tinging* of metal slivers striking the walls, floor, and body of Steeple's Blackhawk helicopter. Several in the crowd had been too slow dropping to the floor and were sprayed. Angriff himself felt a stinging in his forearm and saw a two-inch splinter sticking out.

As the explosions echoed through the cavernous hangar, Angriff pushed up to one knee, pistol at the ready, and sought another target. When none appeared after ten seconds, he rose to his feet and held out a hand, helping Steeple get up.

With imminent danger apparently gone, some in the crowd jumped up and ran, but most looked warily around and got to their feet. The wounded moaned as those nearby administered first aid. Walling and the guards finally reached Angriff and Steeple, circling them, on the alert for more attacks.

Green Ghost's hurried knife throw had missed. He retrieved the blade first, before inspecting the assassin's body. Or what was left of it. In a search for identifying marks, he found nothing. Both arms were blown off at the elbow. The man's uniform shirt lay in tatters under a coating of blood. Cheeks and lips were blasted away, exposing bones and teeth.

He flipped over a hot grenade fragment with the knife point and rose. Walking over to Angriff, he retrieved the three shell casings and handed them to his commander.

“What the hell just happened?” Steeple brushed at his uniform. Adrenaline filled his veins.

But Angriff shrugged, feigning calmness. “Assassination attempt. It happens around here all the time. You get used to it.”

Green Ghost fought down a grin and kept a worried frown on his face. “No I.D., no ink. If he wore a ring, it’s gone now. But I think it’s safe to say he was a buddy of Rita Watts.”

“Why is that name familiar?”

“She tried to kill you on day one, remember? Had the glass knife?”

“Right, right. What was the name of their group?”

“RSVS.”

“They’re here?” Steeple interrupted. “The RSVS is here, at Overtime?”

“You’ve heard of them?” Angriff said.

“Of course I have. Hard-case Stalinists, a splinter group from *Antikapitalista* that thought Antikap was too soft. Domestic terrorists, violent and dedicated to the destruction of the USA and all capitalist societies… and you say you’ve had trouble with them before this?”

“They tried to kill Saint here on wakeup day,” Green Ghost said.

“What happened to this Watts woman?”

“She had a fatal case of butthurt.”

Steeple crossed his arms and scowled. “Who exactly are *you*?”

Angriff laid a hand on the younger man’s shoulder. “General Tom Steeple, meet Green Ghost.”

“The leader of the Nameless? You weren’t authorized to be here!” Steeple’s explosion forced Angriff to turn away for a second, unable to suppress his own smile. When he turned back, he looked fittingly grim.

Green Ghost pointed with his thumb at the dead assassin. “And he *was* authorized to be here?”

“How dare you speak to me that way!”

“And how dare you not know he and his fellow thugs were here?”

“All right, let’s all get off our hind legs and focus,” Angriff said. “Are we still in danger?” He looked at Green Ghost.

“I doubt it. Otherwise this would have been a coordinated strike with more than just one guy. You two were targets of opportunity. I think we’re good to go for now, at least until we I.D. Hamburger Boy over there.”

#

Steeple fumed about being spoken to as Green Ghost had, but Angriff ignored him and insisted they tour the facility, while Green Ghost insisted they be guarded by the rest the Nameless. Steeple blanched when he heard there was an entire squad from Task Force Zombie on hand, but said nothing more.

It took a few minutes to assemble enough emvees to transport them all, so the two generals toured the hangar deck, surrounded by Walling, Dupree, Schiller, the other two guards, Green Ghost, and Vapor. The rest of TFZ was on the way.

As he walked through the hangar, stepping over carts filled with parts and scattered air tools, Steeple's mood changed from irritation to wonder to fear, and back again. He stopped beside Alisa Plotz's Comanche and stroked the smooth metal skin. Angriff noticed his hand still shook.

"You're missing a couple." Steeple pointed to *Tank Girl's* empty bay. A smile seemed out of place on his tense face.

"The Comanche is at your place," Angriff said. "We lost the Apache during last year's fighting. And its crew."

"You sent a Comanche to Comeback? Why?"

Angriff gave a half-hearted shrug. It was just like Steeple to ignore a lost crew and concentrate on himself. Moreover, he didn't feel like explaining himself to a man he outranked and despised; merely being around Steeple felt like somebody was sandpapering the back of his neck.

At a center point in the vastness of the hangar deck, Steeple stood akimbo and slowly turned in a full circle. "Thirty years…" he said in a low voice. "That's how long it took me, Nick. Thirty long years since I first heard the doomsday prediction and conceived of this place, before we finally sealed it up."

"The guy from NASA, right?"

"Hmmm? Oh, yes, Doctor Roger Deeson, a true patriot and visionary. I admit I thought he was crazy at first, but once I met Siree Shankur, God rest her soul, and she showed me proof that cryogenics worked… well, the result is all around us. In all those years of building this place, I only got to see it in person four times."

"Really? Only four times?" Despite himself, Angriff found that fascinating. It also helped his breathing return to normal after the assassination attempt.

Steeple nodded. "I couldn't risk it more often than that, and the last

time was in… 2007 or 2008, somewhere along there. Those last years I didn't see it at all. The last time I saw this space in person, it was just a hollowed-out cavern. And now…"

"You did a helluva job,Tom," Angriff said. He surprised himself by saying that out loud, but even more because he believed it. Shepherding this project for more than two decades must have taken superhuman energy. "Without you, the United States would have been gone forever." *And my family would not have been murdered.*

Four emvees pulled up and the two generals got into the second one. The one ahead carried Green Ghost and Vapor, four guards got into the second one, while Walling, One Eye, Wingnut, and Razor came in last.

"Where's Bettison?" Steeple asked once they were underway. "Is he meeting us up ahead?"

"If he does, it'll be a miracle. The last time I saw him, he looked like that assassin back there."

"Bettison's dead?"

"Very."

"Did you kill him?"

"I wish I had. He blew himself up after taking my daughter captive."

"He… he what?"

Angriff told the whole story as Steeple stared straight ahead, his face sinking into a deep frown. He said nothing at all and Angriff knew he was deciding what to do next. It was like his face was a computer screen and Angriff could watch as scenarios scrolled by.

Steeple stayed quiet as they drove into an elevator, side by side with the first emvee. The other two would have to use a different elevator up to the hydroponic farm. Before they stopped, Green Ghost and Vapor moved to either side of the elevator doors. Angriff drew both of his pistols, shifting the one with four rounds to his left hand and the one with the full magazine to his right.

Steeple watched these preparations through slit eyes. "Are you expecting more trouble?"

"No, but last year I wasn't expecting an army to show up out of nowhere and attack my picket line, either."

"If Bettison's dead, then who's your head of security?"

"Him." He pointed at Green Ghost, who didn't move, but kept eyes fixed on the closed elevator doors.

#

SECTION FIVE

Ties

Chapter 31

You killed my family. Prepare to die.
William Goldman, paraphrased from The Princess Bride

Atop Sugar Loaf mountain, overlooking Beckworth, CA
1246 hours, April 14

"Is that an old airport?" Junker Jane asked Bear. "What's it doing way out here?"

Bear had the binoculars and adjusted them as he spoke. "Who knows why those people did what they did? It doesn't matter any more; they're dead. What *does* matter are those fuel trucks."

A mile and a half to the southwest, a group of Chinese vehicles formed a protective ring around three tanker trucks. Three infantry fighting vehicles, each armed with two turret-mounted guns, flanked the tankers on the north, the direction from which Bear's tiny band would have to attack. Arrayed out front were several smaller vehicles. More vehicles protected the far side and rear. Sentries patrolled between the gaps.

Locals called the peak they were on Sugar Loaf. It stood at the southern end of a ridge cut with deep ravines. Pine trees dotted the top but not the southern slope. The ground between them and the Chinese was open and clear.

Bear slid below the crest of the hill, hidden from Chinese lookouts. "It makes sense now. They're building bridges so those fuel trucks can get to the army base."

"I still don't get it," she said. "Why not go cross country, capture the base, and build the bridges afterward?"

"I'm guessing they don't know what's there, so they're keeping the tanks and AFVs with them for the firepower. Us attacking them must have convinced them the base defenses are stronger than they really are, so they're gonna keep together." He paused and scratched the stubble on his jaw.

"That's a lot of firepower down there," Artu said. "I wish we still had the RPGs. Even with these rockets Jane brought, we can't hurt them — we're not in range."

"No, we're not…"

"What do we do, Bear? Go back and try to blow up one of the bridges

they’ve built?”

“I think we’ve done everything we can do,” Artu said. “It’s time to cut our losses.”

“Go home?” Jane grimaced.

“What else can we do?”

Bear’s scowl folded his face inward. He bared his teeth in a snarl like his namesake animal. “Do whatever the hell you want. But those fuckers haven’t begun to pay for what they did to Lissa and my baby.”

“Hey, man, you know I’m with you as long as it’s not suicide. What’s your plan?”

“I’m heading to Clio.”

#

Chapter 32

I never chased trouble, but if it found me, I made it sorry for doing so.

Funerary inscription believed to be for Tudiya, King of Assyria, circa 2500 b.c.

Operation Overtime
0941 hours, April 16

Tom Steeple refused to show fear in front of subordinates and his iron self-control allowed him to appear calm. But in truth, the assassination attempt had left him traumatized and terrified. Although he'd technically been in combat before, it had always been behind the action, where the biggest danger was a random mortar shell. Nobody had ever before targeted him personally and he couldn't understand how Angriff remained so calm about it. He talked to hide his nervousness, telling stories and acting like the stoic commander he thought of himself being, but deep down inside he knew the truth.

"After we're done at the hydroponics farm and reviewing the troops, I thought we could adjourn to the Crystal Palace, show you the best view you've ever seen," Angriff said.

"Crystal Palace?"

"Headquarters. The terraced levels are called the Clam Shell and my office is the Crystal Palace."

"Clever."

The emvees stopped at the main gates of the hydroponics farm. The doors slid to either side as they did at the Clam Shell, except these were titanium blast doors, not glass. Twenty feet wide and thirty high, the design allowed vehicles to pull into a parking area inside. Once Green Ghost and Vapor had gone ahead and cleared the area, they waved the rest of the little convoy through.

The director of the farm, Dr. Sharon Goldstone, heard the clatter of the emvees on the metal flooring and looked up from two levels below. As Steeple watched, she handed a clipboard to someone and then climbed the stairs. He wondered if she had recognized him yet. Maybe they could steal a few minutes alone somewhere. After all, his wife hadn't thawed yet. He climbed out of the emvee and leaned on the wire fence that separated the

landing from the farm itself.

The cavern measured five hundred feet at its widest point. From bottom to top was three hundred twenty feet. Each level contained thousands of containers with various plants growing in them. Tubes, pipes, and valves stood beside each section of containers. Natural lighting flooded the chamber through a series of mirrors, while LEDs augmented the system. The beauty of the LEDs was the ability to tune each light frequency to the optimum wavelength of the plants it fed.

Even distracted by the familiar form of Sharon Goldstone, Steeple couldn't help being awed by the immensity of the hydroponics farm. "I knew what it looked like," he said. "But it's like watching a football game live and watching it on T.V. No matter how good the picture, or how big the screen, T.V. doesn't capture the sense of space you get from actually being there. Seeing the hydrofarm in person… this is incredible."

"Nick, what a surprise!" Sharon Goldstone said. "And Tom Steeple, as I live and breathe. Where did you come from?"

"Hello, Sharon. It's nice to see you again," Steeple said.

"Nick." She touched the dried blood on his forearm. "What happened?"

"Somebody tried to kill us," he said.

"Again? I thought that was all over with."

"As did I." Angriff glanced aside. Colonel Walling edged close to Angriff's shoulder, a sure sign he needed to speak to the general. Not a flicker of expression crossed Angriff's face. "Since you two know each other already, why don't you give Tom the nickel tour of this place?"

"Sure," she said. Steeple noticed Angriff's expression when he looked at her and smiled a tiny smile. "Let me show you around the place, Tom."

#

"What happened?" Goldstone said.

"Suicide bomber from the RSVS. We barely got away."

She paused and Steeple felt the odd sensation of her inspecting his face. "I thought they cleaned all of that up last year," she said after a moment.

"Apparently not. Now fill me in on everything that's happened here, but make it fast. I figure we've got about ten minutes. I saw the look Nick gave you. How's that going?"

"It's going."

"What does that mean?"

“It means you can’t rush this sort of thing, Tom, especially not with Nick Angriff.”

“Hurry up and sleep with him. I may need your influence sooner than I thought.”

“I’m telling you it’s not that easy. He’s still in love with his wife. Just know that I’ll do anything I have to do to make sure you wind up in command.”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

“You’re the best. I’d kiss you but somebody might see. Now tell me what happened to Bettison.”

#

Angriff had gotten to know his chief of staff well over the previous nine months, and now he recognized that Walling wore his *important news* expression. “Good, bad, or indifferent?”

“Sir?”

“Your news, is it good, bad, or indifferent?”

“Oh. I think it’s bad. It’s Task Force Quarterback, sir—”

“Is that the Yuma lurp?”

“The Marines reconnoitering Yuma, yes, sir, they’re within twenty miles of the city and saw some sort of patrol flying the Mexican flag. They request orders.”

“Is this the Mexican military?”

“Unknown at this point.”

“But they’re on U.S. soil…”

“I’d say that’s correct, General.”

Angriff rubbed his chin. He wanted a cigar. “Tell them to take prisoners if possible, but under no circumstances are they to reveal their presence or risk engaging the enemy.”

“Enemy, sir?”

“If the Mexican military is on American soil, then yeah, they’re the enemy.”

Walling hated the part of his job that required him to say what he said next. “Sir, as your chief, I have to point out that the Mexicans might have filled a power vacuum to protect innocent people. We can’t know their intentions.”

Angriff’s face twisted into both anger and amazement. Amazement

that Walling found the balls to put up resistance, even though it was one of his duties, and anger that he was right. Walling fought closing his eyes in anticipation of the shit storm heading his way.

Looking for all the world like the feared Nick the A, Angriff pointed at him. “It’s a good point, B.F. Tell Task Force Tijuana not to reveal their presence either to potential enemies *or* friends.”

Walling exhaled in relief. “Yes, sir.”

“And B.F.?”

“Sir?”

“Good job.”

#

Chapter 33

No proceeding is better than that which you have concealed from the enemy until the time you have executed it.

Nicolo Machiavelli, from The Art of War

Near Clio, CA
0719 hours, April 16

In the No Man's Land beyond Chinese-controlled territory, old California Highway 70 had not fared well during a half-century of neglect. Cracks that the county highway department once repaired had widened, and the shoulders had crumbled away. Sinkholes pitted long stretches of roadway. The chain-ganged repair crews forced to work by their Chinese overlords didn't come this far north.

At one point, dense forests of pine trees lined both sides of the highway where a straightaway exited a sharp curve. A knoll dotted with California pines overlooked the curve where vehicles had to slow down. It was the perfect spot for an ambush.

Bear spread his little group from forty yards ahead of the curve, around it, and then for thirty yards along the straightaway beyond. They had chopped through four large trees and supported them with ropes to keep them from falling. Cut the ropes and they'd fall across the highway, blocking it.

One convoy had already passed. It was guarded by four IFVs, each mounting two cannon. Such firepower was too much for them, even with the anti-tank rockets, so they let it go. The afternoon sun had begun its descent into the west, throwing shadows over the road, when they saw the next vehicles coming from Chinese territory to the southwest.

"There's something in front I've never seen before," Bear said as he watched them approach through the binoculars. Only Jane lay beside him and she watched through her own set. "It's square and has a turret on top. There's two of them, then two trucks. I can't see anything behind that."

"That front thing looks a lot like an American Humvee, but Humvees don't have turrets that I've ever seen."

He gave her an odd look. "How do you know this stuff?"

"I get around."

"This is the one we've been waiting for." He cupped hands round his

mouth and shouted to the rest of the team. “This is it! Get ready!”

“I hope they can handle those Carl Gustavs,” Jane said. “General Lamar said they’re a lot trickier than an RPG.”

“It’s too late to worry about that now.” He moved around the little mound to a position where his squad could see him but the oncoming Chinese could not, and raised his right arm. Bear knew they had to time this perfectly. If they didn’t knock out the two armed vehicles right away, they’d never get another chance. With his chin in the dirt, he watched them approach.

Jane lay near his feet. She held her M-16 braced with the muzzle up, locked and loaded. With a quick glance backward, Bear winked at her, and she smiled. Sweat rolled into his eye but he ignored it. Any movement now could be misunderstood as the signal to release the trees.

As the wide car with the turret on top passed him coming out of the curve, he counted to five and then dropped his hand. Forty yards down the road, a sixty-foot pine tree began falling. Twenty yards closer a second fell, and then a third almost on top of him, and the last toppled into the middle of the curve.

One after another, the trees crashed to the pavement. Coming out of the curve, the lead Chinese vehicle had accelerated to over thirty miles an hour when the pine slammed to the ground twenty feet ahead. Pine needles and branches sprayed in all directions, blinding the driver, and he smashed into the trunk. The car’s crew hadn’t been wearing restraints and were all thrown forward and then back like sacks of flour.

From the roadside came the flash of a rocket as Bear’s team fired the first Carl Gustav. But instead of hitting the car, it struck a large branch and blew up, spraying more splinters over the vehicle. Then behind it, the other trees fell while the rockets screamed toward their targets and the second car and both trucks exploded and crashed. Bear and Jane rose from their hiding places and waited for targets to emerge from the wreckage.

Fire engulfed the two trucks as soldiers jumped out of the back and through the flames. None saw the man and woman hiding in the dense underbrush, so the pair took their time and made their shots count.

One man’s hair was on fire. He dropped to his knees at the road’s shoulder and rubbed his head in the dirt, trying to extinguish it. Another’s pants had caught fire and he tried to get them off, but the flames spread up his cotton uniform and engulfed him. Those two they let burn. As ammunition began to cook off and secondary explosions added to the chaos, they dropped

every Chinese soldier who wasn't already on fire. The man rubbing his head in the dirt had somehow extinguished the flames. Blackened skin covered the crown of his skull but he had the presence of mind to pick up a rifle, so Jane put two rounds into his forehead.

Bear inhaled the putrid smell of roasting flesh with grim satisfaction. He watched one man crawling along the pavement with no legs and no hands, using his elbows to drag himself away from the truck even as fire consumed him. Jane raised her rifle to put him out of his misery but Bear pushed the muzzle down.

"Let him burn," he said. Jane's horrified expression might once have bothered him, but not now. The bastards had killed Lissa, and they would pay.

Along with the rest of his team, he and Jane broke cover to check for signs of life among those they called *Chinese.* In fact, only the drivers and officers had been Chinese; the rest were all either black, white, or latino, but that didn't matter to Bear. Dead or not, he put a bullet in every head, just to be sure.

A movement down the road caught his eye. The lead vehicle lay buried under heavy limbs and pine needles as the tree burned where the rocket had struck it. Someone inside had restarted it and was trying to free it before the flames engulfed it, too. Then Artu darted from cover and disappeared into the foliage hiding the vehicle. Three quick shots were followed by three more, and then silence.

Seconds later Artu stepped into view. "This thing still runs!" he yelled to Bear. "But if we want it, we'd better hurry!"

"Anybody get hit?"

"No!"

Green pine needles sizzled as they burned, while the resin in the wood bubbled and spat. Orange embers floated overhead. All nine of the team stood on the opposite shoulder to the rapidly spreading fire.

"Any idea how to get it out of there?" Bear yelled over the roar and crackle of the inferno. The rising heat had become dangerous.

They all looked at each other, at the tree and the mound of the vehicle under all the debris.

Jane spoke first. "We still have four rockets left. Let's use one to blow off the top of the tree, and then maybe we can push it out of the way to open up the road."

Bear nodded once. “Anybody else got a better idea? Then let’s do it. I’ll get in and drive.”

“I’ll do it,” Artu said.

“No, I’m doing it.” With that he handed Artu his rifle, raised an arm to shield his face from the heat, and plunged into the branches and needles.

#

Jane moved everybody clear of the tree trunk and tried to find an aiming point that promised to cut the thick bole in two. With the fire spreading, she knew time was short, so when everyone was clear she directed a stout young man holding the loaded rocket launcher where to hit the pine tree. Then she slid behind cover.

The characteristic *crack-whoosh* of the Carl Gustav was followed by a much louder *bang*! Fragments of wood showered the undergrowth. Some pine needles smoldered from the blast and Jane couldn’t see through the smoke, but when she ran to the tree, she let out a whoop.

“It worked! Over here, everybody!”

The rocket had blown the crown of the tree away from the bole, and they all pushed to create an opening for Bear to drive through. The weight was too great despite their best effort, however, and branches on the far side dug into the pavement. Using all their might, they managed to create a two-foot separation, but the effort left them exhausted and drenched in sweat from the fire’s heat.

#

Meanwhile, Bear could feel the heat rising within the Chinese vehicle. It had an automatic transmission and after grinding the gears a few times, he figured out which was reverse and which forward. He gunned the motor, crushing branches behind him, and tried not to hit the tree in front, but his desperation increased with each passing second. He could feel his skin beginning to cook even through the heavy window glass.

Time was up. He either had to break free or abandon the armored car. Slamming into reverse, he leaned on the brake with his left foot and floored it with his right. The tires spun and smoked and squealed. Burning rubber rose in a black cloud and blotted out everything else. Finally he let off the brake. The heavy vehicle scraped and crushed branches until its rear end was almost in the fire. Bear shoved the gear into forward, turned the wheel, and floored it again. It bounced and jounced and several times seemed to be stuck in the tangle of foliage, but then burst into the clear and nearly ran Jane down.

Bear pushed the door open as branches screeched against the hull. He jumped out and ripped off his scorched and smoldering shirt, running to the cooler air under the trees beside the road. Jane handed him her canteen. He could see in her eyes how badly he must have been burned.

"Oh, Bear," she said, lightly touching the blisters on the left side of his face. He winced and pulled away. Blisters lined his left leg and arm. His chest hurt when he breathed and he could feel the damage to his lungs, but he tried not to show it.

After draining half of Jane's canteen, he handed it back to her. He bent over, hands on knees, and spoke in clipped phrases, all he could manage. "Here's the plan… I want you all… to go back the way we came. I'm taking… the car. The Chinese will think I'm… one of them until it's too late… I'll hit one of the tankers… with a rocket. When they're all blowing up… I'll run for the trees. You all cover me from there."

Bear could tell from their expressions they didn't believe him.

But nobody spoke until Junker Jane interrupted the silence. "I'm going with you." As if in divine emphasis, a huge explosion rocked the last truck and sent a cloud of black smoke boiling skyward. Everyone ducked out of reflex.

"No, you're not," Bear answered. "I need you covering me from the trees."

"The trees aren't in range and you know it."

"Do what I tell you." His left cheek and jaw burned like they were on fire.

"I do what I want."

"That goes double for me, buddy," Artu said. "I'm coming, too." The rest of them of them agreed.

"No!" He tried not to show the pain from shouting but it was too great. He bent over again and tried not to cough. "I'm doing this alone." Jane offered her canteen again. "No, thanks," he said. "None of you are going with me."

Artu squatted and looked him in the face. "Bad news, Bear. We're all going with you."

#

Chapter 34

If I'm to die in my enemy's sights,
Let vengeance fuel my days
And justice light my nights.
Sergio Velazquez, Living and Dying in a Brutal World

1008 hours, April 16

Bear drove with Jane beside him in the passenger's seat. The 12.7mm machine gun in the open-topped turret had been destroyed, so Artu stood in the turret and held Bear's M-16 instead. His own bolt-action hunting rifle he'd given to Bear. The other six crowded into a space made for four.

Fifteen miles separated them from their target. The APC was a Chinese Wolf with four tires, and the left two had partly melted in the extreme heat. Because of that, the vehicle leaned left and Bear had to fight to keep it on the road. Fire-blackened paint bubbled along the left side, roof, and hood. Even driving at reduced speed to avoid the potholes and gaping cracks, it should only have taken them half an hour to get there. Instead, they were only halfway to Beckwourth when Bear spotted a vehicle headed toward them.

"Shit! They must've spotted the smoke and come to investigate. Shit, shit, shit…"

"What do you want to do?"

"Nothing. Tell Artu to get down out of sight and let them pass. But get ready in case he needs to take them out."

Jane leaned into the backseat and tugged Artu's pant leg. He came down from the turret and she explained what to do. Someone handed him a loaded Carl Gustav.

As much as possible, Bear kept his APC in the right lane, only veering left to avoid dangerous holes. The oncoming Chinese APC strongly resembled an American Humvee painted faded green. A soldier manned a large machine gun sticking out from the roof, much like the Wolf he drove, except it didn't have any protective shields.

"What are we gonna do?" Jane asked.

"Get down before they see you. There weren't any blondes in the convoy we hit. I'm hoping they keep going to investigate the smoke."

“And if they don’t?”

“Then I hope Artu knows how to use that thing.”

The enemy gunner had his gun pointed up and away from Bear’s crew, obviously thinking they were friendly. The oncoming vehicle slowed as they grew closer, as if expecting Bear to fill them in on why his Wolf was bent and blackened, as well as the fate of the rest of the convoy. He didn’t. Instead, Bear held his head down as he passed the now-stopped Chinese APC. Out of his peripheral vision, he saw the other driver leaning out the window and waving for him to stop.

Artu squatted and leaned into the front seat, holding onto a steel strut that supported his platform. “They’re turnin’ around, Bear. You want me to take ’em out?”

“Let ’em get as close as you can first.” He paused a moment, letting the pain in his throat and lungs subside. “And for fuck’s sake, don’t miss!”

#

The turret ring had gaps under the shielding that allowed Artu to see the other APC gaining ground behind them. It couldn’t speed up too much because of the road’s poor condition, but it was enough to close the gap with their crippled Wolf. The gunner had swiveled the twin machine guns level with the ground but not pointed directly at them.

He could see the faces behind the windshield, both young, both Asian. Grim expressions fit the contours of their faces. Getting the Carl Gustav up through the turret ring proved difficult. Several times the tip of the weapon poked into view of their pursuers, but fortunately for Bear and his team, they didn’t open fire.

Ten yards back of their wobbling Wolf, the gunner in their pursuer spread his arms in a *what’s going on* gesture. He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, but Artu didn’t hear him. Instead he hauled the Carl Gustav into view and aimed it at the driver.

Too late the gunner realized his danger and reached for the heavy machine guns. Too late the driver saw the rocket launcher aimed at him and tried to swerve. Too late the passenger opened his door to jump out of the speeding APC. Artu took an extra second to make sure of his aim, but still had one second left before the gunner could open fire or the APC could turn. One second was enough for Artu to squeeze the trigger.

The slipstream over the Wolf pushed the blast of the Carl Gustav back at Artu and he fell into the turret tube, but by then the rocket had struck the

APC square in the middle of the windshield and blown it thirty feet in the air. Forward momentum flipped it several times before it landed top down on the pavement, with flames boiling skyward and ammunition blasting off in all directions.

#

As they continued driving, Bear struggled to get enough air into his damaged lungs and his breathing became more like wheezing gulps. He sensed her studying his face. “Stop looking at me that way. You’re churnin’ my butter.”

“You’re hurt worse than you’re telling us. Drive this heap into the desert as far as it’ll go and then let’s get back into the hills, where we can treat you.”

He shook his head. “That’s not going to happen, Jane. If we don’t stop them now…” He swallowed and took three shallow breaths. “…they’ll get those tanks and nobody will be safe. We’ll never have a better chance.”

“We’ve only got two rounds left for the Carl Gustavs! That’s not gonna kill all that Chinese armor.”

“Trust me,” he said with a smile. He could see in her eyes how badly his skin must be blistered. Strangely, it felt warm but no longer hurt. “I’ve got a plan.”

#

Finally Bear pulled over. The Chinese encampment lay astride the highway less than two miles ahead. He left the Wolf running while he and his team got out, and he filled them in on his plan. There were a few protests that it wouldn’t work, but in the end, everyone agreed. Jane could tell from their eyes that nobody expected to live.

“Let’s not keep the devil waiting,” Bear said as they again drove off.

#

Jane held on as Bear pushed the Wolf beyond its safe speed. Leaning at nearly a thirty-degree angle now, it vibrated so hard she could feel her cheeks shaking. Bear fought to hold it steady as they hit hole after hole.

Ahead the Chinese lay spread out across the highway, with the three tanker trucks protected by a Type 96 tank on either flank and two APCs both front and rear. Dozens of other vehicles were scattered about while hundreds of troops either stood guard on the perimeter or huddled near the small tent city in the desert south of the highway.

Jane saw Bear grit his teeth as the Wolf *thump-thump-thumped* its

way past 40 miles per hour. She sensed that the ruined flesh of his left cheek and jaw had begun to hurt with a pain so intense it made his eyes water, yet he didn't complain. Instead, at three hundred yards from the Chinese camp, he yelled to Jane over the sound of the vehicle's death rattles. "Do me a favor."

"Anything!"

Without looking her way, he said the last thing he ever said to her. "Remember me for a while."

#

Like a dying horse that collapses after bringing its rider safely home, when Bear stomped on the brakes and halted the battered APC, the engine died as it rolled to a stop. Curious Chinese sentries stared at the wrecked Wolf while others sprinted towards it, presumably to help any wounded. Bullets cut them down as they ran.

Jane bailed out on the left side followed by two others, both girls. Their job was to draw fire away from Bear and Artu. Once clear of the Wolf they knelt, raised their rifles, and fired at the Chinese running toward them. Then they jumped up and dove into a shallow ravine that paralleled the highway.

For a brief moment the stunned Chinese didn't return fire but that didn't last long. Bullets hissed overhead and kicked up dirt around the edges of the ditch. One of the girls rose to shoot and immediately fell backward with a red hole in her forehead. More slugs ripped into her body, shaking it like a dog with a rope.

"I'm scared!" the surviving girl said, staring wide-eyed at her mutilated friend.

Jane tried to remember her name… Susan? No, Suzanne. "Look at me, Suzanne!" she said. "Look at me! I'm scared, too. But we've got to keep their attention off of Bear." Machine gun bullets ripped along the top of the ditch. "Here's what we do. Keep low and let's crawl down a ways. Then we shoot, duck, and move again. Okay?"

Suzanne nodded.

They rose to their knees and Jane caught one soldier running in the open. She dropped him with two three-round bursts. Crawling on their stomachs, they moved ten feet and did it again. But the third time they tried it, a bullet struck Suzanne in the throat. She dropped into the ditch. Blood poured from her ruptured neck and out her mouth. Jane crawled to her side

but it was obvious the wound was fatal. Suzanne tried to speak but only gurgled up more blood. Tears poured out of her eyes and she grabbed Jane's arm, but then went into a spasm of violent shaking. That lasted ten seconds, and then she stopped forever.

With a roar, Jane came to her knees, spraying bullets until she ran out of ammo. One stocky man thirty feet away flew backward after his chest exploded from a storm of 5.56mm rounds. She threw herself back under cover as AK-47s chewed up the sand around her. Lying in the ditch and staring up at the blue sky, Jane loaded her last magazine and felt hot tears rolling down her cheeks. Bullets zipped by overhead and bits of dirt fell on her. Then the shooting stopped.

It had all taken less than a minute. Only in the silence, when she and her enemies were busy reloading, did Jane hear the explosions across the highway, or the other gunfire. Then a shadow fell across her, and the face of an angry man with a gun pointed at her blotted out the sky.

#

Half a second after Jane jumped out of the Wolf to the left, Artu did the same on the right, holding one of the last two Gustavs. Two men with rifles followed him to give covering fire. At the edge of the highway, he knelt, brought the missile launcher to his shoulder, and lined up the sights on the rear of the tank 200 yards away. The flankers knelt to either side and began firing.

Artu squeezed the trigger and heard the characteristic *crack-whoosh* of the round firing. Minimal recoil pushed his shoulder backward. One of the men behind him screamed and rolled on the asphalt. He'd been too near the back-blast and caught it on his neck and face, scorching both. Screaming, he rose and staggered away, hands to his face, until Chinese bullets cut him in half.

The high-explosive rocket struck the tank in the rear. The initial blast rocked the tank and smoke shot out from gaps in the hull. Then larger explosions rocked it as ammunition blew up. Three seconds after the rocket struck, a gigantic blast erupted and lifted the turret partway in the air. External fuel drums stood nearby and the last explosion set those off in a huge mushroom of flame and smoke. It was so violent that steel splinters cut down anyone within a hundred-yard range, buying Artu precious seconds to arm himself.

He picked up the dead man's rifle and emptied the magazine at two

Chinese soldiers running for cover behind an armored car. Both fell and rolled in the dirt. Artu removed the magazine and looked around for another one, but when he glanced at the armored car, he saw its twin guns pointed straight at him. His mind told his body to leap for the ground and flatten out, and his body began to respond. Halfway through the move, 12.7mm slugs ripped into him and he flopped backward like a fish in a skiff. He died instantly, as did his flanking rifleman, but the armored car kept firing as their corpses disintegrated in sprays of bone and blood.

#

Chapter 35

Enemies surround me, lusting for the blood
That pours from all my wounds and turns the dust to mud.
Sergio Velazquez, unpublished fragment

Clio, CA
1115 hours, April 16

With his last two gunmen on either side, Bear ran for the tanker trucks a hundred yards ahead. In his left hand he carried the last high explosive multi-purpose round and the recoilless rifle itself was slung over his shoulder. Between him and his target were two APCs, at about the halfway point.

They'd raced twenty yards when firing broke out. His flankers stopped and shot back and dust kicked up around him, but he wasn't hit.

Breathing came in hard gulps. His lungs felt raw and pain shot through his neck into his jaws. Then he was between the armored cars, which served as temporary cover. Their turrets rotated to try finding him, but couldn't shoot without hitting each other. Bear unslung the Gustav, opened the chamber by pushing the end of the tube up, loaded the rocket and closed it, ready to fire. He took aim at the middle tanker and stroked the trigger.

"If you shoot, she dies!" somebody yelled. "Did you hear me? Put it down or I fuck her up!"

Bear didn't move. The Chinese APCs blocked his line of sight to either side, and he could only wonder which *she* they meant. Standing up meant giving them a target, until he heard scraping behind him and knew there were guns pointed at his back. So he stood, slowly, fighting down the pain in his chest and face. As he did so, he kept the Carl Gustav pointed at the middle tanker trucker, only fifty yards away. He wasn't worried about dying, that was inevitable now, and both he and the Chinese knew it. The only question was whether he destroyed the tankers.

"If you shoot me, I'll still be able to pull the trigger before I die!"

"Nobody's going to shoot you," the voice replied. "We just want to resolve this without further unnecessary bloodshed."

"There's no resolving this!"

"My name is Captain Chen, commanding the Third Attack Battalion North. It's my men you've been killing today."

Water pooled in Bear's wounded left eye and trickled through the blisters on his cheek and jaw, dripping from his chin. He blinked to clear the vision in that eye, but without success. Finally he closed it and focused on staring down the sights with his right eye. "It's too bad we didn't kill them all! What do you think you can offer me to keep me from pulling this trigger?"

"This woman's life in exchange for you surrendering without firing."

"She knew the risk!" Bear said, but in truth Chen's offer had struck a nerve when he'd used the word *woman.* Those he'd brought with him from the Enclave were all younger, in their late teens and twenties. The only one of the team who might be called a woman, with the inflection Chen had put into his voice, was Junker Jane. But he'd told her about a deep ravine right off the road where she might be able to escape to the hill called Sugar Loaf. He prayed the Chinese hadn't captured her alive. "What woman are you talking about?"

"This one!" He heard the Chinese officer commanding someone several times to speak.

Finally he heard the voice he dreaded hearing. "Stop that, you son of a bitch!"

"Jane, is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me, but fuck this asshole, Bear! Blow up… ow!"

"If you hurt her, your precious fuel trucks go up in flames!"

"Bear?" Chen said, with a quizzical tone. "Not the famous Bam Bam Bear we've been hunting for years? Now I understand how so few of you have caused so much trouble. And you called this woman Jane, which means she must be the scraper we've heard so much about, the one called Junker Jane."

"If you know who I am, then you know I'm serious about what I say," Bear said. The strain on his one good eye made it start watering. "Let her go and I'll put this launcher down without firing it."

"No!" Jane screamed. "You can't do that!"

"Listen to me! I know what I'm doing, Jane. Here's the deal, Chen… you give her back her weapon, loaded. She hightails it into those mountains to the north. Once she fires the signal to show she's safe, I'll hand over this launcher without firing it."

"What's the signal?" Chen replied.

"She knows it," Bear said, praying Jane would play along as if there

really were such a signal.

She did. “Don’t do this, Bear!”

“Do we have a deal, Chen? My finger’s cramping on this trigger.”

“How do I know you’ll keep your promise?”

“I’m not the lyin’ type, Captain. Ask any of my friends, except they’re probably all dead now. But if you let Jane go free, you can do whatever you want to me. I swear by my child’s life.” *The life you stole*.

Chen fell silent, but Bear knew he really had no choice except to agree. Losing the fuel was the only thing that could delay them from taking the army depot, and they both knew it. Chen had to save it, and he had to take any chance to accomplish that goal.

“If you’re lying, we will find your child and we will kill it. I make you that promise.”

“If I’m lying, I give you my permission to do just that.”

“Very well, you have a bargain. But time is precious, so I give the woman fifteen minutes before I send my men in pursuit. Do you hear me? Fifteen minutes and not one second more.”

“Done!”

“Bear, no—”

“Run, Jane, get the hell out of here! Don’t argue, you’re wasting time, but… remember me.”

#

Bear had no way of knowing how long it had been since Jane left, or even if she had really been allowed to leave. It was all a bluff and a gamble, but it was the only play they had. His hands began trembling and his knees shaking. The sun had risen high overhead and, while it was still early in spring, the heat on his burned face felt like metal searing his flesh.

A distant shot echoed over the desert, followed a second later by two more in quick succession, and then a fourth two seconds after those. Bear had no way of knowing if that had really been Jane or not; he simply hoped it was, but the final moment had come and he was ready to get it over with.

“Your time is up and she’s safe, Bear. Now keep your pledge and lay down your weapon.”

“I swore on my child’s life, Captain. Do you know what happened to my child?”

Chen didn’t answer for a few seconds. “What do you mean?”

“My child was never born, because one of your helicopters killed my

wife while she was pregnant. My child never had a life, thanks to you."

"Fire!" Chen screamed a millisecond after Bear pulled the trigger.

#

A white fir tree more than a hundred feet high and five feet in diameter stood near the summit of Sugar Loaf Mountain. Jane stood on the same peak from which Bear and his team had observed the Chinese fuel trucks a few days before. She'd scampered through the deep ravine at a dead run and made it behind the huge tree with scant seconds to spare before fifteen minutes had elapsed. She knew of no prearranged signal to let Bear know she'd made it, so she fired off four shots at random.

Two of Bear's team still guarded the horses in a valley not far from where she knelt, but the rest were all dead and for what? They'd failed in their mission and now Bear would be a prisoner. The image of Suzanne's dirty young face came to her and the tears started again. They'd all been so young, so ready to live… and now those lives were gone.

A flash on the road made her blink and turn away. The middle tanker erupted in a huge explosion of black smoke and yellow flames. Burning diesel fuel flew in all directions over at least one hundred yards. As she watched, several Chinese soldiers dropped their weapons and ran as fire engulfed them. Some dropped to the dirt and rolled to extinguish the flames, while others just dropped. Only after the blast did she realize Bear had vanished in a wave of burning fuel, along with the two APCs that he'd sheltered between.

Flaming diesel also covered both outside tankers, but the fuel's high flash point had so far kept them from exploding. One man tried to enter the cab of the truck closest to her; she couldn't tell if it was Captain Chen or not, but the heat drove him back. And then it no longer mattered.

First the far tanker blew up, and it was quickly followed by the second one. Great swells of smoke rose high into the clear sky. The surviving Chinese stood and watched from a distance, unable to do anything else. Jane wept openly now, sobbing in great heaves even as she pushed to her feet and went to find a horse.

#

Chapter 36

Fear makes the wolf bigger than he is.
German proverb

Sierra Army Depot, Herlong, CA
1355 hours, April 16

Aretha Lamar rubbed her eyes, both in frustration at her son's intransigence and at the pollen drifting about on the warm spring breezes. She hated the dusty air of the desert in summer because the heat made you sweat and the clouds of dust coated your skin with a glue-like paste. But spring was worse, as her allergies reminded her with bouts of uncontrolled sneezing.

"James, I'm begging you to help us help you. We *need* the manpower. If nothing else, dig trenches and build bunkers so you can hide in them when the time comes."

James' followers crowded close around them. Most stood in the shade of the large Ponderosa pine in the front yard of James' shack, but one woman who was naked from the waist up danced and twirled in the sunshine, despite a lack of music.

"No, Mother, I'm sorry, but that would be a betrayal of God's trust. He has promised to keep us safe and always keeps His word."

"Son, you're not thinking clearly. Show me in scripture where He says anything to the effect that you should let your enemies slaughter you."

"There are too many passages to quote, Mother. Besides, His message was given to me personally."

"God spoke to you?" She couldn't hide her incredulity.

"He did. He told me that if I witness for Him, He would protect me and my flock. Our example will open the hard hearts of the Chinese to the glory of His word."

"Son, the only things the Chinese are going to open are holes in your body, and those of all these deluded people standing around. They'll cut you down where you stand. Please, come…" She paused and looked west, down the main road which led to the base. A rider galloped hard straight for them, one she recognized: Junker Jane.

Breathless, Jane dismounted before the horse came to a full stop. Her momentum carried her forward into the knot of people surrounding Prophet

James and his mother.

"Sister Jane!" he said, pushing through the crowd and embracing her. "You've come back to join us!"

Jane shook off his hands, stepped back, and put her finger inches from his face. "Don't ever touch me again!"

James threw his hands up. "I'm sorry, my sister."

"I'm not your sister, either. Colonel Lamar, I'm glad you're here."

"You've been gone so long, I feared you weren't coming back," Lamar said.

"I almost didn't. A very brave man sacrificed himself so I could be standing here right now to warn you. The Chinese are serious about taking this place but we hit 'em up pretty hard, so I think we've bought a few more days."

"Is that the smoke we saw earlier?"

"Yeah. They had three fuel trucks protected by a couple of tanks and some armored cars, plus at least a few hundred men. There's a whole camp not too far down the highway, where it splits off to the west. Most of it's all burned up now."

"You destroyed it?"

"I didn't do much of anything, except get a good man killed. A man named Bam Bam Bear died to destroy the tanker trucks and somebody else used one of those Carl Gustavs you gave us to take out a tank."

"I've heard of this Bear… you say he's dead?"

Jane nodded.

Lamar said nothing until she turned back to face her son. "I want you to think about what she said, James." Raising her voice, she spoke to the crowd. "I want you all to think about what she said. The Chinese aren't coming here to lock arms and sing *How Great Thou Art*. They're coming here to enslave you or to kill you. Anybody who wants to fight for their life is welcome at the base." Lowering her voice again, she spoke directly to her son. "I love you, James. Please think about what I've said."

"I love you, too, Mother. May the Lord watch over and bless you."

#

Chapter 37

Better to have one thousand enemies outside the house than one enemy inside it.

Lebanese proverb

Operation Overtime
1356 hours, April 16

The security convoy followed them to the doors of the Clam Shell. Green Ghost then slipped away to direct the hunt for any other assassins. At Angriff's urging, the Clam Shell stood to attention and gave Steeple a standing ovation. It seemed only fair. Once in the Crystal Palace itself, Steeple found the view as breathtaking as Angriff had promised.

But before Steeple could make a move to sit in the chair behind the desk, Angriff beat him to it. Schiller brought coffee and they made plans to eat lunch in the mess hall with the rank and file. A staff conference was scheduled for 1500 hours.

Tom Steeple was in the middle of another anecdote when Sergeant Major Schiller opened the door and stepped into the Crystal Palace. Steeple stopped in mid-sentence and they both turned to him.

"General Steeple," Schiller said, "I am very sorry for having to interrupt, sir, but there is an urgent matter needing General Angriff's personal attention."

"What is it, J.C.?" Angriff said.

"Umm… it's… it's out here, General. It should only take a minute."

Angriff had come to know Schiller well enough to understand that he would never barge in on a meeting of two generals unless it was something truly dire. That was precisely why he had put the sergeant in charge of his office.

So he stood and laid his cigar in an ashtray, chewed but unlit. "I'm sorry, Tom. I'll be back soon. In the meantime, help yourself to anything you find. Bathroom's around the corner."

Steeple laughed. "Yes, I know. Take your time; your command comes first."

Once down the ramp, Angriff's sanguine expression darkened. "All right, what the hell is so important, J.C.? This better not be bullshit."

The year before, Schiller would have been intimidated by Nick the A, but those days were long gone. They had truly become colleagues, despite the difference in rank, and he knew that was simply how his boss reacted to the unexpected.

"It's your daughter, General. She said she needs to speak to you right now. She emphasized the *now*."

"And you didn't want to patch her in to my office?" Angriff said. "That's probably a good call. Is she on the encrypted line?"

"No, sir, I don't mean talk to her on the radio. She's here, she's back, waiting for you in one of the private rooms in the rec hall."

"Here? What's she doing here?"

"Whatever it is, General, it's got her pretty upset."

"It's always something," he said. "Stay here and entertain Steeple until I get back."

Leaving the Clamshell, he turned right and walked quickly down the marble hallway, returning salutes every few feet, eyes roaming for threats and one hand on an Eagle. Glancing back, he saw one of Green Ghost's people tailing him. Razor, he thought, was the man's name.

The rec hall was about 200 yards down the corridor. He had only been there a few times, since it was not conducive to helping soldiers relax by having their commander hanging out with them, and so he had to ask a corporal where the private rooms were. He found Morgan in the second one he tried. She was sitting at a small poker table.

"I thought you were supposed to be checking out Comeback. Why are you here?"

"Sit down, Daddy."

"I don't want to sit down."

"Dad, please," she said, gently. "Sit down."

Something in her voice made him realize that this was not a captain and general conversation; this was father-daughter. He sat, feeling his heartbeat speed up.

"I went to Comeback as you ordered, Dad. Joe flew me, everything went off like clockwork, and I was able to slip into their Long Sleep chamber, although Nipple had to pull a knife on one of their guards."

"And?" he said. "Did you find the John Does?"

"Yes, I did."

"So? Did you get photos so that maybe we can ID them? Have you

run them through our database, or given them to the tech people?”

“No, Daddy, there’s no need. I recognized them.”

“You *what*? Who are they?”

A tear slipped from Morgan Randall’s right eye and slid down her cheek. It was rare that his daughter cried. She reached across the table and touched her father’s hand. “Daddy, they weren’t John Does, they were Janes. It… it’s Mom and Cindy. They’re alive.”

#

Chapter 38

The arrogant cannot stand in your presence. You hate all who do wrong.
Psalm 5:5

1417 hours, April 16

Angriff's face went slack. He blinked, blinked again, and kept on blinking.

"Daddy? Dad, are you okay? Talk to me, Dad, you're scaring me!" Morgan circled around the table and jostled her father's shoulder.

He shook his head, as if coming out of a deep sleep. "Your mom and sister… you're sure?" Confusion distorted his craggy features.

"There's no mistake, Daddy. It's them, all right."

He smiled and water filled his eyes. But then the smile faded. His narrowed eyes roamed the room. Lips pressed together until they turned white. His breathing deepened and whistled through his nose. "It seems that Tom Steeple and I have something new to discuss." The muscles in his forearm tightened as his hands clenched into fists; a drop of blood oozed from the splinter wound.

Morgan knew the damage those fists could inflict. Growing up, they'd always had a heavy bag hung somewhere for him to pound on. Twice he'd ripped it out with a single blow.

Angriff started to rise but Morgan stopped him. "Dad, I've seen that look. Think! Would he come here without a Plan B? And C, and D? You've told us a million times that Steeple should have been a chess player because he sees ten moves ahead. Just because we know they're alive doesn't mean they're safe."

Morgan had always had the ability to calm him down and it worked again. The image of his wife and daughter lying in a CHILSS pod drove him into a blind rage, but her words penetrated the fog of his hate and he sat back down.

"Thanks, sweetheart, you're right. Steeple had to know we'd find out eventually and what that would do to me, and made contingencies for it. He might even have planned on it. Let me think, let me think…"

Two minutes later, he called Schiller on the walkie-talkie. "J.C., this is strictest confidence, got it? Do you know where to find Green Ghost?

Perfect, tell him to meet me at my quarters in five minutes. It's urgent. Keep Steeple happy for a little while longer… tell him something blew up or whatever you have to. I should be back in twenty minutes."

After he set the walkie-talkie aside, Morgan waited for him to say something. When he didn't, she touched his forearm. "Dad?"

"Follow me to my quarters. Steeple's not the only one who plays chess."

#

Once Green Ghost got there, Angriff wasted no time.

"Here's the plan. I spoke to Doctor Friedenthall about transporting someone in Long Sleep and he said it's possible, but you need a portable CHILSS. We have some, but they aren't prepped with the necessary chemicals and their batteries aren't charged.

"So here's what we're going to do. The minimum time for the wake-up sequence is thirty minutes. An hour is better, but we won't have an hour. Morgan, you and Nipple know where they are, so you're going to do this part. First you have to shut down the CHILSS. It's easy enough but you have to follow the checklist exactly. Here's a copy. Next, you're going to need two gurneys because they won't be awake yet, but it should be safe to move them after half an hour. Do they have gurneys there?"

Morgan nodded.

"You might want to take your own regardless, so you don't have to go looking for them. Once that's done, you take them to *Tank Girl* and hightail it home. Friedenthall will have a medical team waiting.

"Ghost, you seize command and control first thing. Secure the elevators on each floor so there's no interference getting them out. Oh, hell, you know what to do. Just do it fast. I'll keep Steeple entertained here."

"Mushroom theory?" Morgan said.

"Exactly."

"I'm gonna need my whole team," Green Ghost said. "Maybe a couple more. Frosty's back from Prescott so we should all be there, but we won't all fit on one bird, and with two gurneys and the others already there, we might even need a third."

"Take 'em all if you need to. But General Fleming will be staying there. Tell him he's in command of Operation Comeback, and on my authority is cleared to take whatever action he deems necessary to secure that base."

“What if somebody starts shooting?”

“God knows I hope it doesn’t come to that, but *whatever actions he deems necessary* means just that. *Anything*. Got it?”

“Got it. Do you want a code word for success?”

“Yeah, good idea. How about *the ice is thawing*?”

Green Ghost nodded, but his grim expression showed his displeasure at operating against his own army.

“Look at the bright side,” Angriff said. “You’ve got the easy part. I’ve got to go be nice to a man I want to kill.”

#

Chapter 39

The tongue is a small thing, but what enormous damage it can do.
James 3:5

Operation Overtime hangar deck
1438 hours, April 16

Green Ghost took all Task Force Zombie personnel except Razor. Sitting next to him in the bay of *Tank Girl* was Vapor, with Glide and Wingnut on the other end of the bench. Across the bay on the facing bench were Morgan, Nipple, One-Eye, and Frosty. All of them, including Morgan, wore armor and helmets, and carried both rifles and sidearms, with as much spare ammo as they could carry. Two medical specialists rode with the gurneys in Alisa Plotz's *Hell's Hammer*.

As the adrenaline of the mission wore off during the one-hour flight, Morgan noticed Nipple snarling and talking to herself. In fact, she seemed to be *arguing* with herself, and every few seconds she said something obscene that was loud enough to be heard. Most of the words Morgan couldn't make out over the noise of the engine, but then Nipple said *hit and run motherfucker* loud enough that even Green Ghost heard it over the engines and six feet away.

"Nipple, knock that shit off!" he said. "We're in mission mode now. If you've gotta bitch, do it after."

"Fuck *after*. This sucks and you know it!"

"I said shut up!"

"He saves Blondie's mom but not ours! How's that fair, huh?"

That brought Green Ghost off the bench and right into his sister's face. "Shut the fuck up, do you hear me? I mean it."

Nipple turned away.

"What did that mean, about *Blondie's mom but not ours*?" Morgan said in a near shout.

"Nothing. Forget it."

"It didn't sound like nothing."

Before Green Ghost could respond, Joe Randall's voice came over the speaker. "Target's in sight. Prepare to land."

"No shooting unless I give the say-so; everybody got that?" Green

Ghost looked right at Nipple when he said it.

Morgan had never been on such a mission before and was content to let the Zombies go in first. But she couldn't help staring at the side of Nipple's pouting face, or forget those words about her mother.

#

Operation Comeback
1530 hours, April 17

"Excuse me, ma'am," a corporal said to Amunet Mwangi. "Two aircraft inbound from the southwest, ETA ten minutes. Presumed to be helicopters."

"Thank you, Corporal." She turned to Norm. "Two helicopters?"

He shrugged. "Maybe Angriff showed Steeple around Overtime and Steeple's returning the favor."

"Raise them and ask for ID."

The corporal cleared her throat. "We tried, but got no answer."

Along with Fleming, his chief of staff Alexis Iskold, and Glide, Mwangi stood to one side near the elevator shack atop the mountain when the two helicopters touched down. The rotors had barely slowed when Nipple jumped out of *Tank Girl*, followed by Green Ghost, Morgan, and the rest of TFZ. They ran directly toward the knot standing by the shack.

"What's the meaning of this, Norm?"

"I have no idea. Give me a minute."

Green Ghost pulled him aside for a private conversation lasting less than thirty seconds. When he returned to her side, his cousin put hands on her hips and demanded answers.

Instead, Fleming drew his sidearm. "I'm relieving you of command."

"You can't do that!"

"I just did."

Nipple, Morgan, and two medical techs, rolling the gurneys between them, took the elevator down to the last floor, while Green Ghost and the others descended a stairwell inside the shack. Three flights down, they poured into the command center.

"Hit the deck — everybody down!" Green Ghost yelled. The Nameless fanned out, guns trained, pushing everybody into a circle. It only took seconds to round up the dazed headquarters personnel and everything looked good until two security men ran around a corner.

"Shit!" one of them yelled, raising his rifle.

“Don’t do it!” Green Ghost screamed, but the man’s finger began to squeeze the trigger.

“Hey!” Glide barked from the man’s left. She took off at a dead run, straight for him, and both guards trained their guns on her. They opened fire at a range of less than ten feet. But Glide wasn’t there.

With her built-up speed, she hit the floor and slid toward them like a runner taking out a second baseman. Rounds zipped overhead and smashed into a computer monitor. Before they could lower their weapons, she struck. A fist smashed into the side of the knee of the man on her right, followed by an elbow to the back of the other man’s knee. As they screamed and fell, she hit both under their chins with the heels of her hands. When they overbalanced backward, their guns skittered across the concrete floor as they tried to break their falls.

Within seconds, Glide had both of them zip-tied with hands behind their backs.

“Damn,” one young private said, raising his hands a little higher.

“Be glad she’s on your side,” Vapor told him.

“That’s not what it looks like from here.”

“If she wasn’t, you’d already be dead. Just don’t ask to buy her a drink.”

They secured each floor in turn, except for the fourth floor. Four security men had gotten wind of the invasion and were holed up near the elevators. Morgan and Nipple were already below and, if they were on time, the two CHILSS chambers were already shut down. The clock was ticking as Green Ghost exited the stairwell into the fourth floor hall.

The newest team member, a stocky young woman with a reddish-blond crew cut, named Razor, briefed him. “Right around that corner, there’s a short hallway with the elevators right past it, on the wall facing the corridor. The guards’re on either side. They’ve got all the elevators locked open so nobody can use them.”

“Shots fired?”

“By them.”

“They wearing armor?”

“Not that I saw.”

“Any chit-chat?”

“They’re playing it hardcore.”

“Shit, we don’t have time for this. Listen up, I need something in the

bird. There's a small case under the bench, brown with no markings. It's a little bigger than a briefcase. Get it and get back here pronto."

Razor nodded and took off.

Green Ghost took a deep breath and moved to the corner. "We're all on the same side here," he called down the hallway.

One of the out-of-sight security men scoffed. "If that's true, throw out your guns and come on in. We'll talk."

"Can't do it, boys. I'm on a schedule."

"Looks like you might be late."

"I don't think so."

Razor returned within five minutes, lugging the case with her. Green Ghost opened it and retrieved a visor. Removing his helmet, he took off the visor already on it and replaced it with the new one. It extended both over his face and above to shield his forehead.

"Bullet-proof," he said. "It's a prototype and you can't see for shit through it, but it'll stop a forty-caliber round at point blank range."

Next he took out something square, with folds on each side. Those he unfolded to reveal a second section. Once he had everything open, it measured three feet square, with a strap for his arm. Razor knew what that was: a collapsible bullet-proof shield.

Finally he replaced the magazine in his M-16 with a different one, pre-loaded, and chambered a new round. "Rubber," he said. "I'd rather not kill Americans if I can help it.

"So here's the play. I'm throwing two flash-bangs. If they've got even half a brain, they'll be looking for that and open fire, but at least it should distract them for a second. I'm going down the far wall so I can take out the ones on the right. You count two seconds and then follow down the other wall. Cover me but *do not shoot* if you can avoid it. Understand? Those guys don't know we're on their side; they're just doing their jobs. Ready?"

Kneeling inches from the hallway with his M-16 propped against the wall near his right knee, Green Ghost held an M-84 stun grenade in each hand, with both trigger fingers locked around the arming pins of the grenade in the other hand. The opened bullet-proof shield lay beside him on the left. With a jerk he pulled both pins and counted in his head… one… two… three. He tossed the grenades down the hallway, which drew rifle fire and sprayed his visor with concrete chips.

He grabbed his rifle and slid his left arm into the shield's grip. With

his eyes closed, he brought the shield around front and jumped into the hallway, right as the grenades went off. He felt the blast concussion and then opened his eyes. Smoke filled the end of the hallway fifteen feet away. He was among the guards before they knew what happened.

The two to his right were still blinded but started shooting anyway. He dropped both with shots to the chest and then whirled to the other two on his left. Both of them were on their knees, shaking their heads and coughing from the smoke. Razor showed up right on time and collected all their weapons.

"They okay?" he said, nodding at the two he'd shot.

"They're breathing… I don't see any blood."

Disarmed, disoriented, and with a rifle pointed at them, the guards did as instructed and sat on their hands. Green Ghost went to each elevator in turn and unlocked them.

"Elevators clear, fourth floor secure, have medical standing by for two gunshot victims," he said into the radio. "We'll bring them to you."

"Rothat," Glide said in her abbreviated version of *roger that.* Green Ghost never got tired of her accent.

#

Chapter 40

Don't pee on my leg and tell me it's raining.
Old proverb

Operation Comeback
1542 hours, April 16

"This is an outrage, Norm, a fucking outrage! I'm the commander of this base, not some terrorist criminal." She stood in front of Tom Steeple's desk while Fleming sat in his chair.

Anyone who had ever met Norm Fleming could sense the almost limitless patience that kept him sanguine long after others would have lost their tempers. But the operative word in that assessment was *almost.* He did have a limit; it was just that most people never pushed him that far.

But Amunet Mwangi had done it before and now she'd done it again.

"I've heard enough, Colonel!" He slammed a fist on the desk. Fleming was a large, strong man and the papers on the desk jumped at the impact. The set of his jaw and wide eyes warned her to shut up. "I told you that by order of the commanding general, Nicholas Angriff, I am now the commander of Operation Comeback. You work for me now."

"What about General Steeple?" she asked.

"What about him?"

"He outranks General Angriff and appointed *me* the commander."

"Your intel is outdated, Colonel. He *used* to outrank General Angriff, but not any more."

#

Operation Overtime
1552 hours

"That was one fine lunch," Steeple said as he settled back into the couch in the Crystal Palace.

"A lot better than six months ago, anyway."

"I mean it, Nick. A fresh salad with chicken on top? Are you kidding me? That was genuinely delicious."

"It does beat the hell out of LSMREs…"

He said it in such a way that Steeple knew there was more. "Out with it, Nick. What's on your mind? But make it quick. Don't we have that

conference at sixteen hundred?”

“I postponed it again.”

“Oh.” Steeple sensed something amiss but shook it off. “Why?”

“Still waiting on some key staff members to become available.”

“Something’s bothering you, so let’s get it over with. What’s wrong?”

“All right, since you asked… Comeback. Why tap our computers? Why not tell me on the front end? Why all the secrecy?”

“We’re having *that* conversation? Now?”

“In the absence of facts, bullshit will flourish,” Angriff said. There was mild rebuke in his tone.

Steeple nodded and scratched his cheek. Despite his questions, the way he looked into the distance told Angriff he’d expected this and was surprised it had taken so long to surface.

“I had a mission to carry out,” Steeple said. “Fulfilling that mission required me to recruit the best battlefield commander possible. As recent events have proven, that was you. I’ve only read brief outlines, but I don’t know another general, then or now, who could have won the Battle of Prescott. I don’t think Julius Caesar himself could have won that, but you did.

“Was I a little disingenuous? Maybe. But if you’re expecting me to apologize for putting the right man in the right place at the right time, then you’re going to have a long wait. And I don’t think you can deny that you were emotionally spent and Overtime gave you a new reason for living.”

“No, that’s true enough,” Angriff said. “I was a basket case.” He thought, but did not say, *Because of you.* “You’re wrong in saying that I won that battle, though. My people won that. If one Marine hadn’t held off an entire regiment of Sevens for almost ten minutes, the battle could have been lost. If one half-destroyed Abrams hadn’t fought off a Chinese armored column, the battle could have been lost. The difference between victory and defeat came down to seconds, and those seconds were bought by the blood of heroes. That had nothing to do with me; the battle was won because of the courage of tough people who stood fast in the storm.”

“You could argue that without you, one of them wouldn’t have been here,” Steeple said, smiling at the reference to Morgan.

Angriff played along and grinned back. “That had more to do with a bottle of Hungarian Tokay.”

“Where is she, anyway?”

“Deployed at Prescott.”

“Well, you could also argue that if a certain general hadn’t circled the wagons to block the highway, the battle could have been lost.”

“You heard about that, huh? Well, I’m not a lobster, Tom. You don’t need to butter me up.”

“Ha!” Steeple said. “But the larger point is made. You were the man to lead this brigade, simple as that. There was no other choice. I did what I had to do to put you in that chair and I don’t apologize for it. Country comes first.”

“Does it? I’m glad to hear you say that. And by *country*, I assume you mean the Constitution and Bill of Rights?”

“That’s an odd question.”

“Why is that odd? You said country comes first. If you didn’t mean the documents on which the United States was founded, the basis for the rule of law, then what did you mean? Geography?”

“I didn’t say that, either. Why are you putting words in my mouth? Did I miss something here?”

“Sorry, Tom,” Angriff said, realizing that he was sliding into the rage which simmered just below his surface. He smiled again and sipped from his ever-present mug of coffee as a stall tactic until he regained his composure.

“That’s all right,” Steeple said. “But since you brought it up, the Constitution is the perfect starting point for updating things to reflect the new reality in the world. The past is the key to the future. So much of what made sense in 1776 is moot now, three hundred years later. There are some harsh truths facing all of us, and some hard decisions will need to be made if we’re going to rebuild our world.”

“Could you clarify that?”

“America died because the two main political parties cared more about getting re-elected than doing what benefitted the country.”

“Amen to that.”

“When we had a strong figure as president, we got more done. Look at Lincoln, or FDR. They might have stepped on a few civil rights, but overall the country was better off. Moving forward, we need to codify a way for that to be the normal course of events, instead of putting ourselves at the mercy of a fickle citizenry.”

“Now I think we disagree. Do you mean like deciding whether we need everything guaranteed in the Bill of Rights? Is that what we’re talking about? Ditching the Founding Fathers?”

“No, not ditching them; tweaking them. This is a unique opportunity, Nick. We have the very rare chance to start our civilization over again, but this time on an improved footing. We can get rid of the imperfections.”

“Imperfections…” Angriff said. “Do you know how many men and women have died defending those imperfections?”

“Come on,” Steeple said. “Those ideas are gone now; they’re in the trash heap of history. Everything they died for is gone, so how much good did all that sacrifice make in the long run? I know you still believe in the old ideals of Washington, Jefferson, Lee, and Patton, but none of those guys matter any more; they’re all gone now, just like their country.

“It’s like all the Romans who died to create the empire. We admire their fidelity to their country, but the government they fought for has been gone for sixteen hundred years. It’s up to us to build something new, something better. That’s how you honor America’s heroes, by improving what they started, not by worshiping at the altar of the dead.”

“America was just a place?” Angriff said.

“It was an idea in time, but that time has passed.”

Schiller stepped into the office doorway. “Pardon me, sirs. General Angriff, the ice has thawed on that condenser. Everything is good to go.”

Angriff nodded once. “Good timing, J.C. Thank you.” A subtle change came over his expression, one Steeple failed to notice, but it was very much like the sharpened focus when a cheetah chooses its prey out of a herd of zebras.

“We honor them by building something new and improving what they started,” Angriff said, musing on Steeple’s words. “Something new… not a republic, I assume, since we’ve already had one of those?”

“Eventually, with some changes. Closer to the Roman model, perhaps.”

“*Lord of the World*,” Angriff grunted. “I’ll be damned. Father Eric was right?”

“What?”

“It’s a book written early in the twentieth century by a Catholic priest, I forget his name… My teacher, Father Eric, made us read it for high school religion class. It’s about a world where the people worship the government.”

“What are you talking about? That’s not the Roman model.”

“The Roman oligarchy was anointed by the gods. It was like dictator by committee.”

“Maybe. But the people had the tribunes of the plebs. It had balances.”

“In the meantime, while we’re setting up whatever form this government takes, we need what? A strong man in charge, for the good of all? Like a *princeps*, like Augustus?”

“If only we had such a man. Augustus added centuries to the life of the empire. But a great leader is useless without men he can trust,” Steeple said, in his most persuasive tone. “Men he can trust to do what is necessary for the good of all. Augustus had Agrippa.”

“Do what is necessary…” Angriff mused. “Augustus did have such men, it’s true. After he killed anybody and everybody who opposed him, of course, and took their money. And let’s not forget that he turned the empire over to Tiberius, which led directly to Caligula, Claudius, and Nero.”

“And we’ll avoid those mistakes. Look, Nick, whether you like it or not, governments have to enforce their will. I would think you, of all people, would recognize that.”

“I serve in the Army to protect my country from foreign threats, not domestic.”

“And yet here you are, fighting within the borders of the country that you claim still exists,” Steeple said.

“Posse comitatus doesn’t apply to Chinese invaders, religious cultists, or traitors, as I think you know. And don’t preach to me about using the U.S. Army against its own citizens. Did you forget that I’m from Virginia?”

“The Civil War?” Steeple said, blowing his lips. “I’m not even going to justify that with an answer. If you go down that road, you could argue the Sevens are simply American citizens who chose a different form of government, like the Confederates did, which is why posse comitatus is outdated anyway, whether it applies to foreign enemies or not. Our military needs to fight anybody, anywhere, who threatens our government.”

“What government?”

“The one we’re going to install.” Steeple didn’t bother to hide his irritation at talking in circles. “To protect our people.”

“What if it’s the government itself which threatens our families?”Angriff asked. “After all, that’s why we had the Second Amendment.” He reached over to the holster on his desk corner and slid a Desert Eagle free. Turning the gun over, admiring the workmanship, he held it so Steeple could get a clear look. “Norm Fleming hates these things, you

know; he says they're much bigger than they need to be and don't hold enough ammo. The magazine only holds seven rounds. But I like 'em; you know why?"

Steeple turned his hands palms up. "What has this got to do with anything?"

"My mind wanders, Tom," Angriff said. "Maybe I'm getting old. The reason I like these so much is they fire a fifty-caliber round, and I load the ammo myself. You know, to squeeze out those few extra feet per second of muzzle velocity. Norm says I'm overloading them, but he's a worrier."

"So what? Everybody's heard of your damned Eagles. Now, can we get back on track? We've got serious business to discuss."

"Humor me. I heard you out on that plane back in Switzerland; you can spare me a few extra minutes, can't you?"

"If you'll get to the point."

"Don't worry, you'll get the point. Anyway, when you combine a fifty-caliber hollowpoint with the muzzle velocity of my hand-loaded rounds… well, they do a lot of damage to human flesh. Even a hit in the arm might cripple you for life, assuming you survived and didn't bleed out. And if I fired at a really close range… How close are you sitting to me now, Tom? Eight feet? The kinetic energy at that range, combined with the weight of the round itself, would slam the bullet right through you and leave a softball-sized exit wound. Probably go through the glass behind you, too, and it's reinforced. I don't even know if we could replace it."

"What's going on here, Nick?"

"I'm talking about my guns and what a mess they make when I shoot somebody."

"Why?" Steeple said, beginning to realize that something had gone wrong somewhere. "Because I hope you're not threatening me. That's a serious offense toward a superior officer. You could be court-martialed for that. That's not what's going on here, is it, Nick?"

"Hell, no," Angriff said. Then, as if noticing for the first time that he only wore his old three stars on his collar, he took them off, reached into his top desk drawer, and pinned on the five stars. "My Congressional appointment is quite specific. It states that I am the highest-ranking officer in the armed forces of the United States of America, which means I no longer have any superior officers. Including you, Tom."

"You pompous son of a bitch!" Steeple said. "You don't have five

stars! We haven't had a five-star general since Omar Bradley! Congressional appointment, my ass. There is no way in hell you're my superior officer. I would have known about it. Now, I order you to stand down and hand over your command to General Fleming, before you force me to take action against you. You are relieved of duty."

Having picked the Eagle up again, Angriff aimed at Steeple and took out the laminated original of his Congressional appointment.

"Be it known that by Act of the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in joint resolution acting in emergency session, henceforth from this date Nicholas Trajanus Angriff shall, by the will of this Congress, be promoted to the rank of General of the Army and is authorized to wear five stars to portray his new rank. Further, be it known that in this new rank Nicholas Trajanus Angriff shall be superior to any and all officers of the United States military, regardless of rank, seniority, or branch of service." He paused and let that sink in. "It's signed by President Collins, whoever that was. There's a clause down below that if something rendered me unable to accept this post, the promotion would go to the next highest-ranking officer in the brigade, namely Norm Fleming. Fortunately for me, that didn't happen."

Steeple studied the paper, looking for flaws, but his expression told Angriff he understood exactly what it meant. Then his eyes cut to the date. "This was signed two years after I went cold. The government couldn't have lasted that long; there was nothing left to govern."

"And yet this document made it into Overtime after it was supposedly sealed for good."

"That's impossible! Nobody else knew how to access Overtime without activating it."

But Angriff saw his eyes shift left for a split second and knew there *was* somebody else. "I outrank you, Tom, whether you like it or not, whether you'll admit it or not, and I've got twelve thousand combat troops to back me up. You said you were going to take action against me?" Angriff smiled and let the pistol drift in line with Steeple's face. "I think you have it backwards."

Steeple sat back, still in shock. "You would raise your hand against a fellow officer?"

"That's rich, coming from you, you sanctimonious bastard. You took away my life, you tortured my family, and you did it with a straight face. Of course, you've had a lot of practice at it."

It finally came to Steeple that Angriff knew more than he was telling, and that something had suddenly gone very wrong. It was time to up the ante. “I don’t know what prompted this lunacy, but do you really think you have the high card, Nick? You don’t, you know. I do. I have something you want very badly, and to get it, you’re going to have to do exactly what I say.”

Angriff casually aimed the Eagle’s muzzle until Steeple could stare down the barrel and see the concave tip of the round in the firing chamber. “You’re wrong, Tom. You don’t have anything I want, not any more. My people extricated my wife and daughter from Comeback while we’ve been talking. So now I have to figure out what I’m going to do with you. My top two choices are either to beat the living shit out of you with my bare fists, or blow your head off.”

#

Chapter 41

Do nothing secretly, for Time sees and hears all things, and discloses all.
Sophocles

Operation Overtime hangar deck
1628 hours, April 16

Once her mother and sister had been lifted out of *Tank Girl* and hurried down the hall by a waiting medical team, the job was done, the mission over. Morgan could relax. Everyone could relax. The others drifted off to eat and shower, but Morgan headed for the hospital. Once there, she stayed close to hear word of her mother and sister. Green Ghost followed and stayed with her, and Nipple stayed because he stayed.

A few minutes later a nurse came out, smiling. “Vitals are good, and at his request we’re moving both of them to General Angriff’s quarters.”

When the nurse left, Morgan smiled at Green Ghost. “I’ve got to admit, you guys are good. I was impressed.”

Before he could answer, Nipple snarled. “Did you think *Saint Nick* would send in the second team to save your precious mother?”

“Hey! I’ve had enough of your shit. What’s your problem, anyway?”

“Nipple, stand down!” her brother said.

“I’m tired of being told to shut up. Nobody ever tells Blondie here to stand down, do they? Has that sack of shit upstairs ever done one damned thing for us?”

Morgan grabbed Nipple’s upper arm and hauled her around. “I’m getting tired of you bad-mouthing my father, too.”

Nipple jerked her arm away. “Don’t grab me again.”

“Nipple!”

“Stay out of this, Big Brother. This is between her and me, and it’s been a long time coming.”

“If you hurt her—”

“She won’t hurt me,” Morgan said. “But the bitch better start showing my father the respect he deserves. I don’t know what he sees in you; you’re a raving psychopath. I’d have thrown you out of here a long time ago and we’d see how you’d fare out in the desert.”

“I’ll bet you would,” Nipple said in a rising voice. “I’ll bet you’d love

that. You're exactly the kind of sister I thought you'd be!"

Morgan stepped back. "What did you say?"

"Little Miss Innocent, acting like you didn't know."

"Like I didn't know what?"

"Shut up, Nipple. Don't mind her, Morgan. You know she's screwed up and delusional."

"You know damned good and well what's on that birth certificate, *Nick*."

"Nick?" Morgan wondered if she'd heard that right. "Why did she call you that? What did she mean by that sister crack?"

"Nothing. She hears voice, imagines things — she's out of her mind."

"You fucking coward." Nipple shoved her brother away. "I'm tired of pretending! She's gonna find out some day. They all are, including dear old Dad."

"Let's go," Ghost said, dragging her away. "Sorry, Morgan."

"She called you Nick! What did she mean? Or would you rather I ask my father?"

Green Ghost stopped and again Nipple jerked her arm free, like a bratty teenager.

"Your dad doesn't know anything, Morgan," he said. "Because there's nothing to know. Please drop it."

"Nothing to know?" Nipple was yelling by now, her voice echoing down the corridor. "No, nothing at all, except that he's our father, too!"

#

1747 hours

Angriff sat on the edge of the bed, not even trying to stop crying, and watched his wife's chest rise and fall with perfect regularity. Beside her, Cynthia mumbled in her sleep, which was a good sign. Dr. Friedenthall had cleared them medically, although until they actually regained consciousness, they were not completely out of danger.

But the miracle had been revealed, as well as the depth of Steeple's betrayal, by his wife and baby girl being alive at all. And now, when all of the evidence had said otherwise, he had his entire family back. It did not seem real, and the only way his emotional spirit knew to deal with such overwhelming news was to weep.

He brushed a loose strand of blond hair from his wife's forehead and traced his finger down her temple, the way he had done every time they had

made love. Sniffing, he backhanded his tears away. “If you can hear me, Janine, come back to me. I’m just the horse; you’re the rider.”

A light knock on the door brought him to his feet. He’d left orders not to be disturbed unless the fate of the brigade was at stake, and both Walling and Schiller knew better than to violate that order. When he opened the door, however, it was Morgan. “Come on in,” he said. “They’re still sleeping.”

“Can we talk out here?”

“Sure.” He stepped into the living room, but Morgan kept going, past the galley kitchen and out the front door into the hallway. “What’s up?” he asked, with the door safely closed behind them.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Daddy, I’m not sure how to ask you this…”

“I’ve told you a million times, Morgan: the only way to say something is to say it. It must be important if I needed to come all the way out here, so just get it out.”

“It’s more private out here, in case Mom or Cindy wakes up.”

“A public hallway is more private?” he said.

“Dad, you were twenty-three when you met Mom, right?”

“Thereabouts.”

“You dated two years and then got married. And you were married thirty years when… when Tahoe happened.”

“Where are you going with this, Morgan? You already know all this.”

“Was there somebody before Mom?”

“Where the hell did that come from? Not only is this not the time or place, it’s none of your business, either.”

“Maybe it is,” she said. “I’m not asking to pry. I really need to know. It’s important, or I wouldn’t ask.”

“There might have been one or two. I was a normal young man.”

“Anybody serious?”

“If you don’t count high school, just one,” he said. “I dated her for more than a year. She hated the military, asked me to resign, but I was a brand new lieutenant and the Army was my life. She was half nuts anyway; I suspected she was doing drugs. One day she just up and left. I never heard from her again. Your mom knew… *knows* all about her.”

“Joan Bauer,” Morgan said.

“So Mom already told you? Then why are you asking? I need to be in there in case your mom or sister wakes up.”

Morgan shook her head. “Daddy, before today I’d never heard of her.”

“What does Joan Bauer have to do with anything? For all I know, she was hit by a bus the day after she packed off. I told you I never saw her again.” Then the full import of Morgan’s words sank in. “Wait a minute. Your mother hasn’t woken up yet, and she’s the only one who would know. But you just said she didn’t tell you, so how did you find out about Joan?”

Morgan rubbed the back of her neck and looked away. “No, Dad, Mom’s not the only one. Joan Bauer didn’t get hit by a bus. She left because she was pregnant and didn’t want you to know. She thought you would make a terrible father.”

“What? That’s ridiculous… and how do you know any of this, anyway?”

“I know because I’ve met her kids, your son, my brother, and my other sister. You know, the sister who’s psychotic?”

“Psychotic? What in the hell are you—” Then Angriff backed up, felt faint, and reached for the wall.

Morgan started to slide an arm under his left shoulder, but he pushed her away. “Are you all right, Daddy?” His face was pale, and it frightened her. She had never seen him like that before, never, and she hoped he wasn’t having a heart attack.

“Joan had kids?”

“Joan had *your* kids, Dad. Twins. And they’re here, in the brigade. You see them every day. One is your head of Security.”

“Green Ghost?” he whispered. “Green Ghost is my son?”

She nodded. “I’ve seen the birth certificate. Nicholas Trajanus Angriff, Jr., born ten minutes before his fraternal twin sister, Nicole Teresa.”

#

SECTION SIX
Messages

Chapter 42

The soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts.
Marcus Aurelius, Meditations

Operation Overtime, General Angriff's quarters
1829 hours, April 16

Her last memory was of flying across the choppy waters of Lake Tahoe in an open speedboat. The boat reached shore, where she and Cynthia were half lifted, half thrown into the back seat of a black SUV waiting on the highway. There had been a sting in her arm, like from a needle, and then nothing.

Janine Angriff tried to open her eyes, shied away from the sudden light, and felt a warm cloth on her face. Lifting the towel up as a screen, she opened her eyes again and waited for them to adjust. After twenty seconds she peeked around it and saw the face of her husband.

"Nick," she said. The soft Virginia accent brought more tears to Angriff's eyes. "What are you doing here? Where's Cynthia?"

Angriff smiled in a way she hadn't seen since the nurse had first handed him Morgan in the delivery room. "She's right next to you, honey. How are you feeling?"

Janine reached over and felt the still-sleeping form of her younger daughter. Satisfied, she rubbed her eyes and propped herself on one elbow. "I'm really thirsty."

Angriff handed her a squeezer of cold water, which she drained. "Wow, that's good. So where are we? Why are you here? Have I been ill? I had a really terrible dream. Cynthia and I were on this tourist boat at Lake Tahoe, and it was attacked by these horrible men who shot everybody, but not us. There was a speedboat and then the dream ended. What an awful nightmare."

He patted her hand. "You're fine, you haven't been sick, and I don't want you to be. There's a lot to tell you, honey. A lot, and most of it won't make sense right away. Some of it doesn't even make sense to me, and some of it is going to be a shock… well, most of it will be a shock."

"What's going on, Nick?"

"You need to rest for a while. I don't want you getting sick."

“Nick, tell me what’s going on. Tell me now.”

He’d forgotten how persuasive those dark blue eyes could be; he’d never been able to say no to her. He sat up straight and rubbed his jowls, then massaged the bridge of his nose, a sure giveaway that he was stressed. “The attack on the tour boat wasn’t a nightmare, Nini. It really happened. Those people *were* killed and you *were* kidnapped. We just now got you back.”

“Oh, my dear sweet Jesus,” she said. “Dear Lord, no, not all those young people and their children. Tell me they weren’t all killed, Nick, please tell me that.”

He shook his head. “I wish I could.”

“I remember this lady watching her husband. It was chilly and she was sipping hot chocolate. He was on the bow, then there was an explosion and he was gone. She had a little red-haired girl, two, maybe three years old. They killed them, too?”

He nodded.

“Do they know who did it? Have they caught them?”

“They’re all dead, too, Nini. We killed them.”

“That’s the second time you’ve said *we*. Who is *we*?” she said.

“The people under my command and I.”

“They were Muslim terrorists, weren’t they?”

“No,” he said. “Believe it or not, they weren’t. That was all misdirection to keep us from knowing who really did it. But that can wait. There’s a couple of other things you need to know first.”

“All right, I’m listening.” Janine Angriff was not like most people, who would already have been overwhelmed by the revelations.

He handed her more water and spoke while she drank most of it. “I’ll give you the facts right off the bat, but explaining it is going to take time. It’ll probably be easier just to show you.”

“Show me what? I don’t want to wait.”

“We are, right this minute, inside of a large mountain in Arizona. Specifically, we’re inside a very large multi-branch base, which is part of something called Operation Overtime. This base was built at staggering expense over many years, and kept very secret. I’m its commander.”

“You took this assignment without even asking me?”

“Sweetheart.” He reached down and stroked her hair. Janine became alarmed, because in thirty years of marriage he had rarely done that before. “I couldn’t ask you.”

“Okay, Nick, I can see you’re upset. Whatever it is, just tell me. I’ll be all right.”

“Janine, those terrorists kidnapped you, but the world thought you were dead. *I* thought you were dead. That was what they wanted us to think. There was a memorial service and everything. I took this command because I thought my family was gone, you and Cynthia both.”

“Dear Lord,” she said. “So how are we here now?”

“That’s a very long story, and not the main thing. There’s plenty of time to talk about that later. For now… how do I say this?”

“Don’t you always say the only way to say it is to say it?”

He blurted it out. “It’s sixty years later.”

“What? What are you talking about?” Janine said, incredulous. “That’s impossible. You look tired but not older. Have you been drinking?”

“I wish so. Look, you’re just gonna have to accept that for a minute, then I’ll explain it. There’s something else you need to know that’s even more important, and for the life of me, I don’t know how the hell to tell you that, either… Let me put it this way. You have a son-in-law.”

“How’s that possible? You said Cynthia was with me.”

“Cynthia was.”

“Are you saying that Morgan got *married* before she died?”

He leaned forward and put his forehead between her breasts. There was nothing sexual about the gesture, however. A moment later he slid his arms under her and hugged her, hard. “Morgan wasn’t killed in Syria, Nini. That was a hoax, too.”

She pushed away and looked him in the eyes. “What are you saying, Nick?”

He turned to the doorway. In a loud voice, he called, “Come on in.”

Janine Angriff watched the door open, bewildered and wondering if this was nothing more than another dream, but when a blond woman in dirty ACUs walked through, she yelped, *ah!* “It can’t be. It’s not possible.”

“Hi, Mom,” Morgan Randall said.

#

Chapter 43

Shut up and say something!
Moe Howard

Operation Overtime
0731 hours, April 17

For one of the few times in his life, Green Ghost stood at attention before Angriff's desk, saluting. He wore a clean regulation uniform instead of his usual crumpled, mismatched camo and stained boonie hat. He'd even shaved.

"When did you intend to tell me?" Angriff wondered what sort of conversation he was supposed to have with his… son? His mind couldn't process that fact yet.

"With luck, never," Ghost said.

"Oh, for God's sake, stand at ease. Sit down. How long have you known?"

"That my name was Nick Angriff, Junior? Since I was seventeen. I didn't know who you were and Mom was dead when I found out the truth, so I had to look you up on the internet. We'd grown up with the last name Bauer, but before she died, Mom told us where to find our birth certificates. That's when I found out my real name was Angriff."

"You didn't try to look me up before that? That would have taken all of about twenty seconds. And then… how many years did you serve under me, anyway? Didn't you think I should know this?"

"I didn't *know* before that. Mom told us you were dead, killed in Iraq, and that it was all stupid and useless, and she didn't want to talk about it. That's back when we thought our last name was Bauer. When I said something about researching you, to see if I had cousins or a grandmother, she went berserk. Told me not to dare, that you'd left because you didn't care what happened to us and went and got yourself killed and that was where we had to leave it. There's nothing worse than your mother throwing stuff at you in her bra and panties.

"We didn't know it then, but she was dying. The drugs were killing her. Since it upset her so much, I dropped it. She said you were dead and it just didn't seem that important. There were a lot of other priorities at the

time."

"Not important to know who your father was?"

"You can't miss what you've never had."

"What changed?"

"After she died, we knew our name was Angriff, but at first I didn't bother to look you up because I still thought you were dead. We couldn't figure out why she'd used her maiden name instead of yours, but it didn't seem to matter at first. You've gotta remember we couldn't afford a computer, much less the internet. If I wanted to search for you, I had to use the computer at the library, and that was a hassle.

"Then I got picked up for vandalism… some friends and I shot up some road signs. I'd turned eighteen by then and gotten an adult driver's license, and used my real name. Angriff. One of the cops at the jail saw it and asked if we were related. He had served under you in Iraq. I told him Nick Angriff was my dad but you died over there, and he laughed, said there couldn't be more than one Nick the A in the world, and the one he knew was definitely not dead. He let me go because of my name, then I went to the Frayser library and did an internet search."

"Your mom hated the Army. I'm not really sure why, but she did."

"There's a lot you don't know. Mom was a drug addict. Crack, meth, opiates, whatever she could get. Pure grain alcohol if that's all there was. The older we got, the worse she got. For a short period when we were fifteen or sixteen, she sobered up. She got better, but then relapsed. We didn't know why at the time, but found out later.

"That led to some problems back home in Memphis. By the time she died, she was pretty much a vegetable, slept for days or stayed awake for weeks at a time, and stopped caring what we did. We lost Mom mentally when we were sixteen, lost her for real a year later. Nipple took it a lot harder than me—"

Angriff held up his hand. "Can we maybe not call her that?"

"I've gotten so used to it… How about Nikki?"

"Nikki's a lot better."

"She took it personally when Mom died, like she had abandoned us. Went off the deep end."

"Drugs?"

"Never," Ghost said. "She hates them. But Nikki's perception of the world is… different. It always has been. She wound up killing a lot of people

she blamed for Mom's death."

"Were they guilty?"

"As sin. We found a notebook Mom kept. One of the local gangbangers, a thug named Isaiah Suggs, shot her up with heroin and made her do sex favors to get more drugs. I didn't know any of this at the time. It's a long story, but I wound up helping Nikki get revenge on them. You might not remember, but I went home before the Kenya operation…"

"I remember. You went home to help Nikki with this?"

"Yeah. She shot eleven gangbangers in one morning."

"My God," his father said. "All by herself?"

"That was just the beginning. We killed a lot more before it was over, some dirty cops, too. I called in reinforcements and that's why First Squad left mission training. They flew to Memphis. When it was over, I had to get Nikki out of the country, and that's how she would up in Zombie."

"She's that good with a gun?"

"Gun, knife, bow… her brain is wired different in some ways, but in others she is just like me and you. Her hand-eye coordination is off the charts, and she never misses what she shoots at. That's why I put her through Zombie training. I knew she could take it, even if she was never a formal member. Sound familiar?"

"Like father, like daughter. How does she feel about me?"

"I think she's torn, Saint—"

"You can call me dad if you want."

"No." Ghost shook his head. "It's too soon; that's too weird. I think she wants to have you as her father, she really wants you to love her, but she also blames you for never being in our lives. She knows that's not fair, that Mom took off and never told you, but it doesn't matter. Some part of her thinks you should have known, should have felt our presence somehow, and come looking for us."

"Is she really psychotic?"

"I don't think so, but who really knows? Maybe. God knows she's killed enough people. But I think she's more of a lost little kid."

"A lost thirty-something kid who likes shooting people?"

Ghost shrugged.

"Okay, why don't you go get her and bring her in… Nick."

Ghost stopped. "No. I'm Green Ghost. I have been since the night before Mom died… it's another long story. But I don't know how to be

anybody else, not any more."

#

Nicole Teresa Angriff walked into her father's office, nodded in approval at her futuristic surroundings, and plopped down on the couch. "Nice digs, pops," she said, raising her eyebrows. "Got a Pepsi?"

Angriff studied her and said nothing. He realized immediately how much she looked like her sisters, and wondered how he could have missed it before. Her hair had a reddish tinge that Morgan and Cynthia's didn't, courtesy of her mother, but her skin was just as fair and her build was lean and tall, exactly like Cynthia's. And her eyes… her eyes were the same bright sky blue as both of her sisters'. For being thirty-three, she looked about nineteen.

"You're starting to creep me out, Saint Dad. If you don't have Pepsi, what about a beer?"

"You don't drink alcohol, but I'd be happy to get you some coffee, or water."

She cut her eyes at her brother, because only he could have told their father that she didn't drink. "I'm good."

"You are a stunningly beautiful young lady," he said. "Now that I take the time to look."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"My God, what have I missed?" Angriff said, having not heard her. "How could your mother not tell me I had two such fabulous kids?"

"What a shitty thing to say." She leapt up. "After all these years, you think a few lies are gonna make me forgive what you did to us?"

"What did I say?" Angriff said. "Nikki, I just—"

"*Nikki*?" She turned on her brother. "Why did you tell him that? He doesn't deserve to call me that. Nipple is plenty good enough for him."

"Would you shut up for once?" Green Ghost said. "You know damned good and well that Mom never told him about us. Mom told you that herself. We've talked about this a million times. Are you really so eaten up with the need to hate somebody that you won't give him a chance?"

"I don't *need* to hate him," she said. "I just *do*."

"No, you don't. You're mad at Mom for giving more of a shit about huffing paint or coking out than about us, but you're taking it out on him. It's not his fault. He's our father."

"He might be yours, but he sure as hell ain't mine." She was furious

now, pointing at her brother as her face flushed a bright red. “I haven’t had a father for thirty-three years and I turned out just fine. I sure don’t need this guy going all *daddy* over me.”

Panting from her outburst, she turned on Angriff with defiance, as if daring him to strike her. Instead, he bowed his head and walked to his favorite niche along the outer wall, from where he could see the desert beyond. Standing with his back to them, he spoke in a low, sad voice that Green Ghost had never heard before.

“It seems like this all started a million years ago,” he said. “I was on top of a mountain in Austria and it was a bitter cold New Year’s Day. This was less than three months after the Tahoe attack. I was alone in the world, my wife and both my kids were dead, so when this command was offered, I took it.”

“Boo-fucking-hoo,” Nipple said. “Who gives a shit?”

Green Ghost pointed at her, with an expression that she knew meant *shut up or I’ll make you.*

Angriff went on without pause. “As we now know, that was the whole point of Tahoe, to give me no reason not to sign on. And yet, unknown to anybody, there were two more reasons — you two. If I had known then what I know now, I would never have agreed to join up. There’s no way I could have left two of my children behind.”

“One,” Nipple said. “It wouldn’t have made any difference to me what you did.”

“I believe you.” Angriff half turned and made eye contact. “But that wouldn’t have mattered to me. I would have stayed anyway, for both of your sakes. And yet now, a lifetime later, I not only have my family back, I have more family than I ever knew about. That wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t accepted this command.”

“Spare me the whole *poor dad* routine.” But her eyes were moist and her voice trembled. “Even if you knew about us, we still would have been nothing more than an inconvenience. You already had your trophy wife and your two perfect daughters! We would never have been accepted, we wouldn’t have been anything more than the mistakes you made with a drug addict…” Unable to resist any longer, she started crying and plopped back on the couch, face hidden in her hands.

“I’ve never seen her cry before,” Ghost said. “Not even when Mom died.”

He moved to comfort his sister but Angriff put out a hand and stopped him. Instead, Angriff sat on the couch beside her. Pulling her chin around with one finger, he tried to look her in the eye but she avoided his gaze, so he whispered in her ear.

"You're an Angriff," he said. "You're my daughter. None of my kids is a mistake and none of them takes a back seat to anybody. Do you hear me, Nikki? You're my daughter, and I love you."

He hugged her and she let him, finally hugging him back. They sat there for a while, crying.

The reverie was only broken by Schiller knocking to get his attention. "I'm sorry, sir, but something's come up."

"This is a bad time, J.C. Any idea what it's about?"

"Colonel Santorio says we got a call from Australia…"

#

Chapter 44

Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or a sister is still in the darkness.

1 John 2:9

Operation Overtime
0924 hours, April 18

Angriff dismissed Nipple but Green Ghost stayed behind. She found Morgan and Joe Randall waiting for her in the hallway outside the Clamshell.

Morgan noted the red, puffy eyes in a face that had never before shown signs of human weakness. “You okay?”

“Fucking dandy, thanks for asking.”

“It’s weird having an older sister. I mean, we’re strangers, but we’re sisters.”

“From my perspective, it’s not that strange,” Joe Randall said. “You two look a helluva lot alike.”

“Do we really?” Morgan said.

“Is that why you’re drooling to get in my pants?” Nipple said. “Because you know you are.”

“Hey, no, I never—” Joe stammered.

His wife put a finger to his lips. “Ssshh! This is what she does. Ignore her.”

Nipple snarled. “Oh, I get it. You want a threesome. A little sister-on-sister action, is that it? I didn’t know you cared… Bring it on! As long as you don’t mind me fucking hubby here.”

“I think I’ll head back to the hangar deck, see if something needs calibrating,” he said.

“Bye, honey!” Nipple said as Joe Randall hurried down the corridor. “Looks like it’s just an incestuous twosome.”

“Who are you trying to impress with this act?”

“Act?” Nipple’s high-pitched laugh seemed tinged with a hint of madness. Then her voice dropped into a sinister baritone. “You don’t know anything about me. I’m the most dangerous person you’ve ever met. Do you know how many people I’ve killed? You think I’m just this skinny blond girl, but I’ve killed more than a hundred men in my life. See, I ain’t had dear old

Dad bouncin' me on his knee my whole life, like you have. Nick and me grew up on the mean streets of Memphis, so don't judge me. It pisses me off, and you don't want to see me mad."

Morgan crossed her arms and leaned against the tunnel wall. "That's all you've got?" People passing by gave them a wide berth, even the men, who usually stared at both of them.

"What do you mean?"

"It means I see right through you. I can see why this little act might bother guys, but it doesn't bother me at all. You wanna fight? Bring it on, little girl. I'm a fucking tank commander. I blow shit up for a living. I killed more than a hundred of the enemy in one day last year, so those notches on your gun don't mean much to me."

"If you're my sister, that means you have to hate whoever I hate, even if it's you!"

"You're kind of pathetic; you know it?"

Nipple blinked and felt her face warming as anger pumped blood into her brain. Nobody had ever spoken to her like that before. Never. The little boy who'd pulled her hair in third grade had gone to the hospital with a broken nose, and the kids had left her alone after that. She wanted to hurt her gorgeous sister, with the perfect boyish blond hair and tight-fitting uniform, wanted to knock out a few perfect teeth. Nipple wanted to hurt her, badly.

Hiding her face in her right hand, she pretended to be crying. Morgan took a step closer, well within range. Nipple's left hand balled into a fist and snapped like a piston at Morgan's nose. The speed of the strike rivaled a Gaboon viper, the fastest-striking snake on Earth.

But the blow didn't land. Nipple had finally found someone even faster than her.

Morgan's right hand streaked up, caught Nikki's arm by the wrist, and turned it over, all in one move. Twisting hard, she applied pressure on Nipple's elbow and forced her to her knees. Morgan's left hand caught Nipple's right wrist before she could move and twisted it inward, too.

"Aaahhh!" Nipple screamed as she felt her elbows on the verge of breaking. Closing her eyes, she tried to understand how it had happened.

"We've got the same father," Morgan said, as if reading her mind. "And the same reflexes. You're fast, but I'm five years younger than you are. Now, do you want to keep doing this, or would you rather talk?"

"I'm not some old lady," Nipple said. "I don't know how you did this,

but I'll find out."

"I did it because you telegraphed it. Does that mean you want to keep fighting? I'd hate to have to explain to our C.O. why you have two broken elbows, but I'd rather do that than get a knife in the back."

"Shit, that hurts!" Nipple said. "Fine, you win. Let go; we'll talk."

"If you try this shit again, I won't be so nice next time."

"You surprised me once. That won't happen again."

"Neither will me not breaking your arms."

Morgan released her grip and stepped back into a fighting crouch. Nipple rubbed her elbows until they got feeling back, studying her sister in the meantime. Morgan stood on the balls of her feet and her weight distribution was perfect. Her eyes never left Nipple, either. She was ready to fight.

"Let's go to the mess hall," Nipple said. A new feeling had come over her, one she recognized in others but never before in herself: intimidation. She didn't like it. "I'm thirsty."

"You lead the way." Morgan walked six feet behind her sister, just in case.

#

In the past nine months, the coffee had not changed. It still had the weird chemical taste left over from the long-term drying process, but Morgan no longer noticed. She only cared if it was hot or not. Nipple sipped on lemon-flavored water. The lemon was artificial, of course. They sat at a table in the far corner, even though the large room only held a few other people. The smell of cooking spaghetti let them know the dinner menu.

Neither woman spoke for several minutes. Nipple sulked while Morgan stared at her, arms folded, like an angry parent, even though she was the younger of the two.

"I'm not gonna bite you," Nipple said at last.

"I'm glad to hear it. Bite wounds are nasty. The mouth's got a lot of germs and shit."

"How'd you do that, back there?"

"Catch your hand?"

"Yeah."

"I told you. You telegraphed it. I knew what you were going to do before you did."

"I don't get it. That's always worked before. Plus… shit, you're as

fast as me. That's never happened before, either. How can you do all that?"

"You really want to have a civil conversation?" Morgan asked. "Or is this some new trick?"

"How come nobody ever takes me seriously? I'm not stupid."

"I never said you were stupid. In fact, as my sister, you're probably damned smart. Dad may be a lot of unpleasant things, including an asshole, but he's also a genius. His IQ is over one-forty. It's no surprise we inherited some of those brain cells. So no, I'd bet you're every bit as smart as Cindy or me. But I'm not gullible enough to think we're suddenly going to be best friends, either. If you want to talk, I'm here. If you want to fight, I'm still here."

For some reason unknown to her, for the first time in a long time Nipple wanted to think through the situation. For just a moment, it seemed as though something had dispelled what she called her *brain fog*. She described this as trying to think through mud. "I'm not sure how to do this."

"Do what?"

"You know… talk."

"You've never had a conversation?"

"Not the way you mean it."

"Just start talking," Morgan said. "You'll figure it out."

For two hours Morgan let her ramble. Most of it was details of their childhood.

"Wait a minute," Morgan said. "Let me see if I understand this. I get the part where you grew up thinking your dad died a hero in Iraq and your last name was Bauer, because your mom told you that was her married name. But it was actually her maiden name. I understand all of that. But she handed you your birth certificate with the name Angriff instead of Bauer, on the morning she died?"

"Pretty shitty, huh?"

"No wonder you're screwed up. I'm sorry, that came out wrong."

"No, you're right, I'm about as fucked as they come. And…"

When she did not continue, Morgan prompted her. "And?"

"Don't repeat this or I'm gonna be really pissed."

"I won't, promise."

"I've never told anybody this, but I don't *want* to be this way," Nipple said. "I'm tired of jokes like *if you ever feel like slashing your own tires, don't bother, just make Nikki mad and she'll do it for you.* I grew up hearing

that shit and I'm still hearing it."

"You kind of ask for it, you know," Morgan said.

"I know. It started 'cause I didn't want people asking questions about me or Mom, and it kind of became a habit. When people think you're crazy, you've gotta keep upping the ante, you know?"

"I'll take your word for it." Morgan leaned forward and rubbed her lips, thinking. "What about guys? Or girls, whichever. Ever been serious with anybody?"

Nipple blushed. It took Morgan by surprise, seeing the woman feared by so many turning as red-faced as a twelve year old.

"No." She couldn't look Morgan in the face. "I've never even… you know."

It took Morgan a moment to understand. "You're a virgin?"

"If you tell anybody, especially Nick, I swear to God I'll kill you."

"I won't, don't worry. I'm actually kind of honored you shared that with me. So it looks like my job is to be a matchmaker for my big sister."

"With my rep? Good luck with that."

"You can't give up yet; we haven't even started. So, ummm… what am I looking for?"

"Preferably someone alive."

"No, smart ass, I mean boy or girl?"

"Oh, guys. The thought of slobbering on some chick grosses me out."

"Guys, good, that makes it easier. I've got practice with guys."

"I'll bet you had your pick in high school."

"Me? Hell, no. Cindy did, but not me. I played soccer and tennis, and I was pretty popular, but Dad was stationed stateside for most of my teenage years. Since I was his first born… *that he knew about*," she added, "he was a lot tougher on me than Cindy. He showed up to most of my practices and all of my games, and if you think he's an asshole now, you should have seen him then. I had one boyfriend in high school and nobody knew it except us. Dad scared the shit out of him. College was a lot more fun."

Seeing Nipple look down, Morgan realized her words had had a different effect than she'd intended. "Oh, shit. I'm sorry, Nikki. I make it sound like my life was terrible, but while Dad was an asshole a lot of the time, I can't imagine what you must have gone through."

Nipple cocked her head. "Thanks," she said, and could not remember the last time she'd thanked anybody. "I think you mean it. But you don't have

to call me Nikki. I'd almost forgotten that was my name."

"Well, it is your name, so no more Nipple, you hear me? And here's an idea. Why don't I show you *Joe's Junk?*"

Nipple's eyes widened. "You know I was kidding about that threesome, right?"

Morgan laughed, leaned over, and hugged her sister, who was not used to being hugged. "*Joe's Junk* is the name of my tank," she said. "I thought you might like crawling inside it. But first, let's stop by my quarters and see what we can do with that hair."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing, if you want hawks making a nest in it."

They started to get up, but Nipple paused. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because you're my sister."

"I don't know what that means."

Morgan smiled. "Then let me show you."

#

Chapter 45

Love is the little sister of Death.
The Oracle of Delphi

Operation Overtime
1251 hours, April 18

Morgan Randall's quarters were on Level One, one flight above the ground level of the surrounding desert. Directly below the women's officers' quarters was the massive Motor Bay C, assembly area for the brigade's armored battalion.

"Welcome to my cell," she said as she unlocked the door. It was in the original part of the base, where the walls were reinforced bulkheads and the doors were air- and water-tight, like those in a submarine. The idea had been to increase survivability in the event of a nuclear, biological, or chemical attack. Later additions had a more normal design as research had found better ways to protect against such attacks. "Better than a five-star hotel, huh?"

The room measured eight feet by ten, with all the charm of an army barracks. The only nods to Morgan's femininity were a few basic makeup items on the metal desk against one wall. A small mirror propped against the wall was the only one in the chamber.

Like a child's first glimpse of a theme park, Nipple stood in the doorway inspecting every inch of the room. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"What's the matter?" Morgan said.

"I've never been in a girl's room before."

"You're a girl."

"Yeah, well, I'd rather not be."

"Why?"

Nipple didn't answer.

"Are you, like, a boy in a girl's body? Is that what you're saying?"

"Huh? Fuck, no! It's just… I don't know how to explain it."

"Try."

"It's not that I don't want to be a girl. I don't know *how* to be a girl."

Morgan tossed the bangs off her forehead. It was more a reflex than a necessity, since her hair was cut too short to fall into her eyes. "Then sit right

here and let's start your education."

Morgan managed to brush most of the tangles out of Nipple's hair before she started squirming.

"Ouch! Fuck, that hurts."

"When was the last time you put a comb through this mess?"

"I don't know… never? That's why I keep it short, so I don't have to."

Twenty minutes was the longest Nipple could sit still. Morgan managed to get her hair untangled and to trim her eyebrows, but then Nipple stood up and announced she was ready to leave.

"There's other hygienic things we should talk about," Morgan said.

"Not today, we're not. Now, how about showing me this tank of yours?"

#

"This is sweet," Nipple said from the commander's hatch. "How can I get one?"

Hands on hips, Morgan looked up from ground level and grinned. "Leave your brother… excuse me, *our* brother, and join the armored battalion."

"And then I can have one?"

"Not exactly."

"How come there're two hatches?"

"The one you're standing in is for the tank commander, in this case me. The other one is the gunner's hatch. It used to be called the loader's hatch but they changed the name with this model, the M1A-3. Don't ask me why; the basic layout didn't change."

"I needed one of these back in Memphis. It would have made things a lot easier. I love the name, too."

Morgan laughed. "You should have seen my father's face… damn, I keep forgetting — *our* father's face, when he found out about it. He was royally pissed."

"Does he get mad as much as they say?"

"You mean the whole Nick the A thing? No, not even close. Like he always said, it's good for your image if the troops think you're a bigger badass than they are. But Dad is over-protective of Cindy and me like you wouldn't believe. He'll be that way with y'all now. It kills him a little inside when I go into combat, and when he thought I was dead…"

“I heard about that. That was a really shitty thing to do.”

“I know. But you’d better get used to it, because he’s got a lot of catching up to do with you and you can bet he’ll over-compensate. I know for a fact that he blames himself for not knowing about you and Green… I mean, Nick. He thinks he should have realized and missing out on your whole life is really eating him up. The next time you’re supposed to go on a mission, don’t be surprised if he says no. You’re his little girl, now.”

“Tell me about the battle last year. Everybody says you’re a hero.”

The abrupt change was almost like a physical slap. It took Morgan a few seconds to refocus her mind. The smile vanished.

“I did what I had to do. My crew were the real heroes, them and Joe. I’d be dead if he hadn’t landed and threatened a major unless I got immediate medical help. We were lucky, too. My gunner and second in command, Joe Ootoi, fired a canister round at the exact second a Chinese tank fired a HEAT round at our glacis plate. That’s the front of the tank. That Chinese shell would have blown us sky high, except the canister set it off short of our hull. I lost one of my crew in that fight, a fine soldier named Marty Bright-Hu. She was the best loader you could ever ask for. Her replacement, Toska Wells, is also good.”

“Did you really almost die?”

“That’s what they tell me. Most of it’s a blur to me now. Come on, let me show you the ammunition lockers.”

“I want to see an Exacto round up close.” Nipple climbed out of the hatch.

#

At that moment, Joe Ootoi walked toward *Joe’s Junk* from the other direction. A fresh salad for lunch had put him in a good mood and he felt like whistling. He spotted his commander climbing from her hatch in the tank, but instead of swinging her legs out and sitting on the hatch, she lay on her stomach as she slid down and her uniform pants pulled tight against her butt. Morgan Randall was his tank commander, his superior and also his friend, but he wasn’t blind. She was beautiful and athletic and he wished she wouldn’t do things like that. It put guilty thoughts in his head.

Then he noticed the hair had a faint reddish tint. When she turned around, the face was similar to Randall’s, even to the same pixie nose, but different, too, leaner around the cheeks. The woman had a small scar on the right side of her chin. Then their eyes met, and life was never the same again.

#

“Joe! Good timing. I was showing my new best friend around our home away from home. Joe Ootoi, allow me to introduce—”

“Nicole,” Nipple said. “Nicole Bauer. You can call me Nikki.” She put her hand out, but the motion was jerky and shy. Morgan raised her eyebrows.

“Hi,” he answered. “My name is… uh, Joe, Joe Ootoi, but everybody calls me Toy.”

Nikki’s eyes widened. She stammered. “What… what did you say?”

“I said call me Toy.”

“Toy,” she repeated. “Toy.”

After a couple minutes of half-shy, half-flirting conversation, Randall realized she wasn’t wanted around any more and excused herself. Before she left, Nikki grabbed her elbow and pulled her close.

“Later on, can you tell me about those other hygienic things you mentioned?”

#

Chapter 46

Night is the time when all hungry things come forth.
Anasazi inscription on ruins in New Mexico

12 miles west of Mason, NV
1749 hours, April 18

Nightfall came on apace as Jingle Bob swayed in the saddle, the sixth night since he'd left Sierra. He'd pushed his horse and his body to their limits, but they both needed rest. Dreams of pushing through all the way to Arizona had proved to be just that, dreams.

Although exhausted and yawning without stop, Bob recognized his surroundings. He'd spent decades riding that territory and even had food and water stashes here and there for emergencies like that one. But he also had friends in the area and he was near one now, one he hadn't seen for many years.

A barely noticeable trail in the dust wound past a small hill, beyond which stood a small house perched on a dry riverbed. Logs of various type woods framed walls made from the blocks, while a wood plank roof covered with sheets of old shingles kept out the rain. The faint scent of burning mesquite wood drifted on the breeze, alerting him that his old friend was at home.

But old friend or not, riding up to a house in the desert without shouting a warning was a great way to get shot. Bob cupped hands around his mouth and tried to shout, but his mouth was parched. He swished a mouthful of his dwindling canteen supply and tried again.

"Taco Ted, are you in there? Wake up, old man, it's Jingle Bob!"

The only shutter on the only window creaked open enough for a rifle barrel to stick out. A man's voice responded. "What do you want?"

"Is that you, Ted? Don't you remember me? It's Jingle Bob, the scraper!"

Momentary silence raised the hair on the back of Bob's neck. He made a perfect target, sitting stationary in his saddle. One shot and whoever was inside that cabin had another good horse, and a saddle to go with it. Seconds dragged by as sweat rolled into his eyes.

"What'd the train say when it was going up the mountain?" the voice

inside the cabin finally demanded.

For a brief second Bob panicked. He had no idea what the man meant. What train? What mountain? Then two synapses fired in his brain, connecting the familiar structure with a story he used to tell a boy who'd lived here, a young boy who'd loved a certain children's story.

"I think I can, I think I can," Bob shouted in relief. "Is that Ted Junior holding a gun on me?"

The rifle withdrew inside and a moment later the door opened. A young man with a long, unkempt beard stepped into view. He didn't smile, or seem either happy or angry to see the visitor. He seemed empty. "Whyn't you put your horse in the barn around back? Then you can c'mon in and take a load off. You gotta be tired."

Bob nodded. "It *is* Ted Junior, right?"

The boy went back inside.

The barn was more of a lean-to with three sides, but the water trough was full. Two other horses skittered away when he tied his to a rail and put a feed bag with some grass he'd collected over its mouth. He removed the saddle and pad and checked the horse for any nicks, injuries, or parasites, paying special attention to its hooves and feet.

Satisfied, he walked around the front of the house and knocked on the doorframe. A large structure built into the ground ran down one side of the house. Bob craned to see around the corner to figure out what it was and got blinding reflections for his curiosity.

"C'mon in."

The screen door had actual mesh keeping the bugs out. Behind that door, a second one of thick wood faced with steel hung on sturdy hinges. On the inside were two heavy latches.

Once he stepped into the dark interior, Bob pointed at the door with his thumb. "That's quite a door you got there."

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he made out the shotgun braced on the man's crossed leg, pointed at his chest.

"Lotta things to kill you in this desert. All kinds of things come outa the mountains and they ain't picky about what they eat. If you look close, you can see dents in the metal on the front."

Moving slowly so as not to startle the man with his finger on the trigger, Bob examined the door, and then moved in for a closer look. "Those look like… are those…?"

“Knuckles? Yeah. Whatever hit that door left knuckle marks in half-inch steel.”

“Damn, Nuff, I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

The young man leaned forward. “What’d you call me?”

Bob held up his hands in a placating gesture. Had he angered his host? “I’m sorry if that name bothers you. I won’t use it again.”

“What’d you *call* me?”

“Nuff. It’s a name I gave Ted Junior when he was a kid, that’s all. Maybe you’re not Ted.” Was he about to get shot?

But Ted blinked a few times and then smiled. “You *are* Jingle Bob!”

Hands still extended, Bob nodded in relief. “Yeah, I am.”

#

An hour before sunset, Ted handed his guest the dinner he’d cooked on a real ceramic plate. Chips lined the rim and it had several small cracks, but it was an actual plate left over from the Old Times. Then he passed out steel silverware, a fork and hunting knife. Bob had his own knife and fork, but Ted’s were better.

Steaming venison and fresh carrots swam in a reddish broth. A square crumbling yellowish cake soaked it up.

“Is this corn bread?”

“Yep. Dad made it all the time, so I kind of grew up with it.”

“Where did you get corn?”

“I grow it. Dad showed me how. We’ve… *I’ve* got it in a closed stockade down closer to the river. The well still has plenty of water so that’s not a problem, and I use the corn as bait whenever I need meat. The carrots come from the greenhouse here beside the house.”

“You and your dad turned this place into something, didn’t you?”

Ted looked down and picked at his food. “I guess.”

Bob dropped his voice to a low, gentle tone. “How long has he been gone?”

“Six months, thereabouts. He said it was cancer but we never knew for sure. For a while willow bark tea helped with the pain, but as things went on it didn’t work any more, so we tried pricklepoppy, which only worked for a week or so. From then on, all he could do was bathe with some tree tobacco leaves, and that helped a little. We tried to find some marijuana seeds, but no such luck.”

“I’m sorry, Nuff. I liked your dad. He was a helluva nice guy.”

“So why’re you passing through? Looking for a scrape?”

Cornbread crumbs fell from Bob’s mouth into the broth. He chewed and then swallowed with a mouthful of water.

“The Chinese are on the move. There’s an old army base north of Lake Tahoe with all kinds of heavy weapons and the Chinese want ’em. Last year I found some battlefields down around Phoenix, recent battlefields, and watched some troops that looked like Americans. One of the battlefields had burnt-out Chinese tanks scattered all over this valley, which I think is why they’re moving up north.

“I’m headed to try and warn whoever it is down south before the Chinese can grab the army base, but I’ve been on the road five days now and I’ve got at least seven more to go. I tried to ride straight through with just some short naps, but I couldn’t do it. That’s when I remembered you and your dad lived nearby, and here I am.”

“Haven’t there always been Americans down there in… I can’t remember the name of the city, but I know they had some kind of general.”

“You’re thinking of General Patton in Prescott. He started something called the Republic of Arizona, but I don’t mean his troops. I’ve run up on them a few times and they’re just desert rats with uniforms. The Americans I mean carried themselves different. You could just tell they were trained for war. They’ve gotta have a head man down there and he, or she, needs to know the Chinese are on the move up north.”

“They don’t have any radios?”

“Not that work, plus they don’t have any power. All the engineers took off during The Collapse. Not one hand-crank generator still works, their solar charging system is shot… hell, I’m surprised anybody still lives there.”

As the room darkened with twilight, Ted opened a sliding panel in one wall that wasn’t visible from the outside but which acted as a window. He sparked a flint onto some dried straw in the small cooking pit, and when the flame was high enough he lit a fat candle stuck on a small pottery holder. Most people made candles from boar’s fat, because packs of wild pigs roamed vast tracts of the desert and surrounding regions. Pig’s fat stank when it burned, but when Bob didn’t smell the characteristic reek of such a candle, he assumed it was made from sheep tallow.

Then he caught a faint sweet scent. “Where did you get a bee’s wax candle?” he said, incredulous.

“From the Utes. I trade ’em corn, vegetables, and meat, and they give

me candles and a few other things. Shoes, too, they make really good boots." He held one up so Bob could see, snakeskin with thick leather soles.

"Hell fire, boy, I want a pair of them boots. You're lucky your feet are bigger than mine. You ever thought about being a scraper?"

"They'll make you a pair, if you trade 'em enough. I've had 'em a few years now, so they do hold up."

They ate in silence for a little while. The flickering candlelight picked out strange details that were lost in the brighter light of day. Jingle Bob smiled at the irony.

"Take me with you," Nuff said without preamble.

Bob's mind had wandered somewhere else. "What?"

"Take me down south with you."

"Why? You've got everything you need right here. Hell, I was thinking about moving in with you once this is all over. Why would you want to leave?"

"Ever since Dad died, it's been a lonely life. I thought about leaving on my own, just getting on my horse and riding off somewhere different. A couple of times I almost did it."

"What stopped you?"

"Dad's radio. He spent his entire life collecting the parts, making stuff out of scrap, doing whatever it took to get that thing up and running. And he did it, too. One night he got on the air and talked to somebody in Australia. Man, was he happy. Dad tried to explain where Australia was, but all I got was that it's a long way from here. Somebody named Craig Buchanan; I'll never forget it. He had a funny way of talking. Dad called it a… oh, hell, what was the word?"

"Accent?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's it. I couldn't understand most of what he said before the battery ran out. Buchanan asked him where he was calling from and Dad said Nevada, and then he said something I didn't understand…"

In the far distance, they heard barking. Neither man reacted because they'd heard it so many times before: coyotes.

"Because of his accent?" Without realizing it, Bob had scooted forward and was leaning on his knees.

"No, 'cause of what he said. He said something about talking to the Americans down south. I didn't know what that meant."

"Did he say who these Americans were?" Bob's words came out

breathless.

"No, and that's the last thing he said. Dad's battery ran out and by the time we got it running again, Buchanan was gone. He never got him back, either."

"Have you tried to get it going since he died?"

"Me? I haven't touched it. I don't know how to work any of it."

"May I… may I see it?"

Nuff nodded. "Sure."

Bob knew a radio and homemade generator capable of reaching Australia would take up room, but no such setup was anywhere in sight. "Where is it?"

"You want to see it *now*?"

"After we finish eating, yeah. I've gotta be gone at first light."

Nuff picked up his plate, put it to his lips, and scraped the remaining food into his mouth. "C'mon." He mumbled while he chewed. He pulled open a trap door in the far corner Bob hadn't noticed. "You comin'?"

#

Chapter 47

Tomorrow is tomorrow. Future cares have future cures, and we must mind today.

Sophocles, Antigone

Great Basin Desert, NV
1932 hours, April 18

Beneath the trap door, an aluminum ladder led into darkness. Nuff went first and disappeared. Jingle Bob followed cautiously. There was something about descending into someone else's secret, unlit underground chamber that sent electric shivers down the back of his neck. He hung on the ladder's last rung as visions of his own murder flashed through his mind. Was Nuff even then hefting an axe to split his skull?

"There it is." Nuff's voice didn't seem as close as Bob would have thought. Had he now found the axe and was headed back to the ladder?

Bob's eyes adapted to the darkness, and he realized a faint light infiltrated the ladder's shaft, above where he stood. It was plenty to pick him out for his attacker.

As panic welled and he was about to scramble back up into the little house, a faint light shone across the chamber, jerking back and forth quickly. It went out, but he could still hear a slight *tinking* noise.

"Wh-what are you doing?" he said, still ready to bolt for safety.

"This is an old flashlight that you shake and it charges a little battery inside. I don't know how it works, but that's what Dad said. It doesn't work so good any more."

"Nothing works like it used to."

"Let's see what we've got." Nuff stopped shaking it and clicked the on button. The light was much brighter than Bob had expected, or maybe any light would have seemed bright in that total blackness. "Won't last long, but I brought a candle."

"How are you gonna light it?"

"I thought you knew my dad," Nuff said, and Bob heard a little laugh. "He made this thing." Using the flashlight, he showed Bob some sort of small metal box with a sliding top. Inside a coal glowed reddish orange. He put the candle's wick into the coal and it caught a flame within seconds, and then he

slid it onto the needle-like spike of a candleholder.

A moldy, musty smell, like the interior of a cavern, overrode all other scents. By the feeble light, Bob visually inspected his surroundings. The room measured about eight feet wide and ten long, with a low ceiling that made him bow his head forward. It had rough wood panels on all the walls, roof, and floor. Here and there support beams held up crumbling sections. Boxes and barrels took up much of the space, but along one wall a homemade table held various electronic devices, all wired together. Bob had no idea what any of it was or how it worked.

At one end was something he recognized as a bicycle mounted on a frame, connected to a big box filled with screws and compartments and water, which Nuff topped up from a stoppered jug. Wires ran this way and that.

"Have you tried to work this yourself?"

"Hell, no." Nuff's long, curly hair tossed in the candlelight as he shook his head. "'Bout the last thing Dad said was not to touch anything. It's tuned to whatever made it connect with that guy in Australia. He said to juice up the generator, turn it on, and press that button right… there." He indicated a small lever on the desk. "I tried it once but all I heard was cracks and whistles."

"But you're sure he said this Buchanan guy was talking to somebody in America?"

"Arizona, yeah."

"Arizona? He was talking to somebody in Arizona? You didn't say that before."

"I didn't? Sorry. But yeah, Arizona."

Bob felt the excitement racing through his brain. "I've got to try and talk to this guy."

"We're not down here 'cause it smells good." Nuff mounted the bicycle and took a couple of deep breaths. "See that little green dot right by the button I showed you? When it lights up, press the lever and start talking."

"What do I say?"

"Hell if I know. Dad had call signs and stuff, but I can't remember 'em and he didn't write 'em down. Say whatever you think you should say."

Bob rested his bony butt on a stool and stared at the green light. His fingers twitched above the lever like a mountain lion waiting in ambush for a deer. Nuff started pumping the bicycle pedals, working up speed as the

rotating gears made a *scree-scree-scree* sound. The faster he pumped, the louder the noise.

The candle flickered for an instant and darkness fell on the green light. Bob panicked until it brightened again and then he exhaled in relief. Nuff's knees rose and fell, rose and fell in a relentless effort to generate enough electricity to run the makeshift radio setup. Bob could barely see his face in the dim light but when drops of sweat formed at the tip of his nose, they reflected the candlelight.

Minute followed minute. He had no way of knowing how long Nuff could keep this up, how long it had already been, or when, or even if, the green light would come up.

Without warning it shone green. It took him a second to recognize what it meant before he depressed the lever. "I want to talk to Craig Buchanan in Australia. If you can hear me, say something."

He kept the key down until Nuff reminded him to let it go to listen for a response, but all they heard was static. After waiting what he thought was a minute, he tried again. "My name is Bob. I'm trying to find Craig Buchanan in Australia."

Nothing.

After two more tries, Nuff began to sound winded. "I can't… do this too… much longer."

Bob tried again.

The static increased until it hurt their ears, but in the background they heard something else, too — a voice.

"Are you Craig Buchanan?" Bob said in a much louder voice.

They heard two words clearly, *yes* and *you*. The static died down.

"Hurry up, Bob!"

In desperation, Bob did the only thing he could think of. With the key down, he started talking, loud. "If this is Craig Buchanan in Australia, it's urgent that you call your friend in Arizona. Tell him to find the Americans and tell them the Sierra Army Depot is under attack by the Chinese. Sierra is spelled S-i-e-r-r-a. This is important. I repeat, tell the Americans—"

The green light flickered and went out. Nuff stopped pedaling and leaned his head back. Sweat poured down his face. "We tried."

"You a prayin' man?"

"Naw. Dad told me about God and all, but I never saw where God gave him any help. Whatever we had is 'cause Dad killt it, built it, or grew

it.”

Bob nodded. “I understand. As a favor to me, just this once, would you ask Him to help us out?”

“Can’t hurt, I guess.”

#

Chapter 48

Take calculated risks. That is quite different from being rash.
Lieutenant General George S. Patton

Great Basin Desert, NV
2208 hours, April 18

They stared at the radio for a while, as if it might come back to life on its own. But when the candle had burned low, Nuff got off the bike and rubbed his eyes. He yawned. “It’s near bed time.”

“Yeah, I know, especially since—”

“Ssshhh!”

A noise came from the cabin above, a metallic rattling sound; after seconds of listening, Nuff swore in a stage whisper. “Somebody’s trying to break into the house.”

“Are you sure?”

They heard voices now, yelling into the house, distant and muffled but distinct. “Open up or we burn you out.”

“Our guns are upstairs,” Bob said. “We need to get them.”

“No time.”

Nuff moved to the foot of the ladder. A pole hung in the stairwell with one end attached to the trap door with a swivel. He whispered that Taco Ted had put it there for just this emergency. Gently he lowered the door until again it fit into the floor above.

“What if they find it?” Bob said. “We’re trapped down here.”

Bob couldn’t see Nuff’s expression, but he heard something odd in his voice… amusement? “Would my dad build this place without a way to get out?”

He lifted the candleholder and set it down in the far corner. Nothing but wood planks showed in the wall there, but Nuff felt around and seconds later a section swung outward with a squeal of rusty hinges. Behind it was another door made of metal that looked like steel. It was round but big enough for both men to squeeze through.

“You go first, Bob. I’ve got to close up the doors behind us. I know it’s dark down there, but it’s okay, I swear.” Nuff stopped a second, leaned back, and then handed Bob the little rechargeable flashlight. “If it runs out,

shake it some more. This'll help you see any snakes or scorpions."

"Shit." On hands and knees, Bob stuck his head into the round blackness of the tunnel's entrance. Paranoia and fear ratcheted up his heart rate as he hesitated. What if *this* was the trap? What if this tunnel went nowhere? His mind told him that was ridiculous, that he'd known Ted Junior since he was a toddler and the tunnel was a way out of a bad situation. But living his life in the wide open spaces of the western deserts made him fear tight places. Caves he could tolerate, if they were big enough to stand up in. Unlit tunnels leading from secret underground rooms were a different story.

"C'mon, hurry up. What are you waiting for?"

With a nod to himself, Bob pushed through his fear and crawled forward. He gripped the flashlight in his teeth, although the wan light did little to illuminate the path ahead. It was only when Nuff followed him into the tunnel and closed both doors that he realized how very dark it really was.

The sides of the tunnel were corrugated metal. Here and there something had pushed through from outside and mounds of dust lined the bottom. Unlike the radio room, it was hot and the air tasted foul. Bob panted to get enough air and that left him lightheaded.

"Keep going straight." Nuff paused, gulping three breaths before continuing. "It's down a ways… then it angles up. Look for… handholds on either side… you'll have to pull yourself up."

Bob nodded, but then realized Nuff couldn't see him. "Got it."

After at least a hundred feet of crawling through dirt, dark, and fear, Bob gasped for each breath. When he came at last to the upward-slanting section, he found it guarded by a two-inch scorpion. Although the flashlight's beam had faded, Bob recognized it as a bark scorpion. He knew its sting could be fatal. Bark scorpions scared him, but even though he was dripping sweat and needing fresh air, he turned the flashlight over and crushed the scorpion with the back end. When it curled up in death, he found the stinger and pressed down hard with the flashlight, flattening it. Thick venom oozed onto the wood. Using a twig from the debris in the tunnel floor, he scooted it out of their way.

"What's the problem?" Nuff said.

"Bark scorpion. I moved it to the left side."

"Is it dead?"

"It is now."

It took most of their remaining strength to pull themselves up the last

twenty feet. At the surface, Bob found yet another door, but instead of opening out, it was arranged to open into the tunnel. That way if somebody stood nearby, they wouldn't see a big round door flipping backward.

Light flooded the tunnel after Bob figured out the series of latches and opened the hatch, lowering it gently to avoid making noise. It took his eyes a few seconds to adjust, even though it was night and the moon was only half full. Once they were both outside in the desert, Bob saw that a large saltbush hid them from view of the house.

Nuff put a finger to his lips and duck-walked to a rock about five feet away. With a stick, he poked around its base, ensuring no rattlesnakes called it home, before putting his shoulder into it and rolling it over. It made a soft *whump* sound and he froze, but neither of them heard any signs they'd been discovered. Nuff used the stick to dig at the hard-packed dirt, kicking up dust that stuck to his sweaty cheeks and nose. After a few minutes of scraping, he motioned Bob over beside him.

A loop of rope stuck up from the ground. Together they wrestled a long metal box out of the dirt. Both men froze at the distant sound of voices but it soon became obvious the bandits were simply yelling at each other, probably fighting over what they'd found in the cabin.

The metal box contained a 12-gauge shotgun and a weird looking pistol with four barrels. Nuff handed Bob the pistol.

"It's got four rounds. Double action; it's a three eighty. There's four more rounds in a speed loader right here." He pointed to the bottom of the grip. "But don't try it unless you've got time to mess with it. You'll have to get close to use it, but it hits like a mating bighorn."

They moved out like hunters stalking skittish prey. Their path led away from the barn and to the back of the house via a line of strategically placed bushes, which Bob realized had been put there on purpose for just such a situation. Taco Ted's paranoid preparations had paid off.

After the blackness of the tunnel, Bob felt exposed in the silver-white moonlight. They made it to the rear of the house without being seen and crept down one side. Nuff went first with the shotgun at the ready. He peeked around the front corner of the house and saw a man standing in the doorway holding a rifle. A red bandana around his head held back greasy black hair. The doorjamb was splintered where they had pried it loose from its hinges. Horses nickered close by, tied to a creosote bush. With hand gestures, Nuff outlined the situation.

After thinking for a few seconds, Bob picked up a rock and made a throwing gesture away from the house. He used his fingers to indicate that he would follow the guard if he left the doorway to check out the noise, and Nuff should take out anybody inside. A nod sealed the plan.

Counting *one, two, three* in a silent whisper, Bob threw the rock about forty feet from the doorway. As hoped, the man at the door crouched at the soft *clack* it made when it landed, but he didn't go to investigate. Instead he called inside and a second man joined him in the doorway, wearing the same red bandana. Covered by his buddy, the first man tracked the noise into the desert, away from the light. With no other choice, Bob slipped out from the side wall and prepared to rush the guard at the door, a distance of maybe twelve feet. Nuff would have to get the other one.

He sprang from a squat and dug the balls of his boots into hard-packed dirt. It took less than two seconds to cross half the distance, but the guard had time to react. He whirled and fired a shot from a bolt-action hunting rifle, which went wide. Correcting his aim and loading another round took a full second, not much time measured against the span of an entire life, but more than the margin of error in that life-and-death moment. He was ready to fire again when Bob beat him to it and pulled the trigger four times at a distance of less than four feet. The odd-looking pistol put all four rounds into the startled face. The man dropped his rifle, staggered backward into the house, and fell on his back.

Bob grabbed the rifle as gunshot blasts echoed in the quiet desert night. Answering fire came from within the house. He braced his back against the outside wall out of the line of fire. The rifle still had a round in the chamber but he didn't know where inside the third man was. Running noises made him whirl and look for a target, but it was only Nuff coming back. He took up position on the other side of the door.

"You get him?" Bob whispered.

"Took out his knees." Tilting his mouth up toward the door, Nuff yelled, "Whoever's in there, your two buddies are dead. You're alone and trapped. Throw out your weapons and you won't be harmed."

"I know bullshit when I hear it. Soon's I throw out my gun, you'll shoot me down sure as hell."

"I won't do it. I ain't like that. I don't like hurtin' folks. But I will if I have to. You're in my house without my say-so, but that don't mean you've gotta die."

Bob gulped. “He started a fire!”

The invader had found a pot filled with rendered animal fat and poured it on the table, using the candle to set it on fire. Then he charged out the door with another bolt-action hunting rifle at the ready. Dust kicked up near Bob’s feet as the invader fired on the run, stopped, reloaded, and paused to take aim.

Bob hadn’t reloaded the four-bore yet and fumbled with the quick reload tray on the heel of his pistol grip. When he looked up, all he could see was the barrel of the gun pointing at him, and the red cloth tied around his killer’s head. But that was when Nuff pumped three shotgun shells into the intruder’s torso. The impacts blew him against the house’s outer wall, where he slumped to the ground in a smear of blood.

The shootout had only taken seconds, but it was enough to doom Nuff’s home. The house’s wooden parts were old and dry. Both men rushed inside. Nuff grabbed the bucket of dirt his father had always kept handy for just such an emergency. He dumped it, but it was too late. The fire had spread quickly and there was no way to extinguish it now. The well wasn’t close enough to haul buckets of water, and with a grease fire, Bob doubted if it would have helped anyway. He tried scooping dirt in his hands, but the smoke made his eyes water and he couldn’t breathe. Finally they realized it was hopeless and gave up, running outside for air.

Bent over with hands on his knees, coughing, Nuff shouted over the crackle of the fire. “We’ve gotta save what we can!” He plunged back into the gray smoke boiling out the front door and Bob followed him. Smoke hung thick and low to the ground as the two men fought to gather up what they could. Between them they saved their weapons and ammo, some food and clothes.

As the cabin burned and Nuff sorted through the things they’d saved, Bob went a short way into the desert and sat next to the man with no knees. His bulging eyes stared at the stars. He gulped rapid but shallow breaths. Even in the firelight from the burning house, Bob could tell he was pale.

With the back of his hand, he touched the man’s cheek and found it clammy, then touched his wrist and felt a rapid pulse. He noticed something on the man’s forearm and picked up the limb so he could see it better, and what he saw sickened him: someone had branded the letters G-R into his flesh.

“You don’t look so good. I’d say you’re in shock. Without treatment

you’re gonna die pretty soon. I doubt you’re thinking straight right about now —”

“Help me…” The man’s lips stayed parted after he said it.

“Good, you can still talk. I’ll make you a bargain. You tell me where you came from and if there’s any more of you roaming around the desert, and I’ll help you. That sounds fair, doesn’t it?”

A calloused hand grabbed Bob’s shirt. The man pulled himself half-erect and looked into the eyes of the man he thought was his killer. Bob saw the terror before he shut his eyes in pain and slid back to the ground.

“Find Overtime,” he gasped. “Water…”

“I’ll getcha some, but what’s *overtime*?” It was a funny word, but he thought he might have heard it somewhere before.

“Find Overtime, tell Adder.”

“That don’t make no sense, boy. What’s overtime, who’s Adder?”

But the man’s eyes stayed closed. His breathing grew more shallow. Nuff joined them. The firelight made everything seem black and yellow, but the man’s face looked white.

“Ain’t nothing we could do for him, even if I was so inclined. Might be kinder to shoot him.”

Bob nodded. “That it would be, but I can’t do it.” He rose and walked over to the pile of goods they’d rescued. The man groaned and babbled for a while, and then lay still.

#

“So what now?” Nuff said.

“We head south. By sundown tomorrow, we’re really gonna need sleep. There’s an old town south of here; I think it used to be called Coaldale. Let’s head there. Maybe we’ll find a roof to sleep under, or walls, so we don’t have to worry about predators.”

“And after that?”

“After that we ride like hell.”

#

Chapter 49

May as well be here we are as where we are.
Australian Aboriginal saying

30 miles south of Perth, Western Australia
0248 hours, April 19 (1748 hours Perth time)

"Where the bloody hell have you been?" Claire Buchanan said.

Her husband Craig spread his hands. "What're you harpin' on about? I went over to Roy's, like I said."

"Did he have any beer?"

"Nah, couldn't get enough grain. Maybe next week. He offered some of that potato vodka, but I said no."

"So ya wasted the whole day at Roy's and got nothing for it?"

"Give a bloke a fair go, will you?"

She shook her head. "Yer a damn fool, that's what. Ya run off and leave that radio contraption on and Billy Hedger comes round. Said it was to find out about all the power we're usin'."

"Billy Hedger… there's a wanker for you."

"Wanker or not, he controls the power."

"Yeah, and who's also sweet on Sheila, old woman."

"Don't *old woman* me, Craig Buchanan. I'm two years younger than you and you know it. And I ain't blind, either; I've seen how he looks at Sheila. But I didn't leave that damned radio on so's he heard it."

"He heard it?"

"It was hard not to, loud as it was with all that static."

"I left the volume up again?"

"Yeah, and Billy just happened to be in earshot… so he says. I think he was creepin' 'round the house like you said, to get a peek at Sheila."

"I'm goin' to tell him to get stuffed. If he does it again, I'll shove a rake up his arse."

"You'll do no such thing. He's an arsehole, yeah, but we need his electricity. Do something useful instead… oh, and somebody rang you."

"Rang me?"

"That American, Ted something. On the radio?"

"Taco Ted?"

“How should I know? I wrote down what I could make of it. There was a lot o’ static, Craig, real bad, like I said. Then it cut off.” She handed him a note, written in pencil on a scrap of wood. The grain of the wood distorted the letters. He stepped out the kitchen door and held it up to the sunlight, mouthing the words as he tilted the plank this way and that to make them out.

At the first word, his heart sped up. “Chinese… attacking…” What was the next word? *Siorra?* That was what it looked like. “Siorra army…” The next word was too blocky, too distorted by the grains of the wood. “Tell Americans.”

That was it. *Chinese attacking Siorra army tell Americans.*

It made no sense, but Craig hadn’t heard from Taco Ted in several years, so long, in fact, that he’d assumed Ted had died. More to the point, transmissions from North America to Western Australia depended on perfect atmospherics. How had Ted known it was the right time to transmit? He needed to find out, because that was information he would love to have.

Back in the house, Claire’s anger at him being gone all day had dissipated. Close to sixty years of marriage soothed their arguments faster than they once had.

“I hope that made sense,” she said. “The pencil’s down to a nub and it’s hard to write on wood, but it’s all I had.”

“It’s all right, luv, thanks for trying.”

“Where you off to now?” she asked, but then saw him pulling open the door to the attic. “Oh, no, you don’t. You’re not switching on that damn radio again!”

“I’ve gotta. It’s important.”

“It’s always important. What am I supposed to tell Billy if he shows up?”

“Tell him to get lost and leave Sheila alone.”

“You’re gonna get our power cut off, Craig! What’s so important you’ve gotta call ’em right now?”

“The atmospherics might still be right to call the States. If I wait, they’ll change.”

“Who do you have to call in the States? Is this about that note? What Americans do you even know? For that matter, what Americans are still alive?”

“Besides Ted, I just know one. His name is Thomas, he lives in a

place called Prescott, and he works for some general named Patton.”

#

Chapter 50

Everything has beauty, but not everyone sees it.
Confucius

FOB Westwall, near Seligman, AZ
1434 hours, April 19

"Loot, wake up. You're not going to believe this."

Lieutenant Marjorie Jones heard drumming on the roof of her Cocoon. It took her tired brain a second to realize it was that rare weather phenomenon, rain. Picking crust from the corners of her eyes, she cleared her throat. "What time is it, Tereshchenko?"

"Fourteen thirty-five. I'm sorry to wake you, Loot, I know you didn't bunk down until an hour ago. But you've got to see what's going on out on the highway."

"Chinese?" She sat up straight and wiped her eyes.

"It's not a threat, it's… just— just take a look."

Seen from below, Forward Operating Base Westwall was nearly invisible. Built into the side of a rocky hill, a jumble of cracked rocks surrounded an interior wall of sandbags. Beyond that was a courtyard with three Green Cocoons. The engineers who'd built the FOB had cut through the narrow ridge like a tunnel. View slits had been designed into the fortification overlooking Interstate 40 on the south and historic Route 66 on the north.

Jones always slept in her ACUs. With the rain pouring down, she threw a poncho over her head and shoulders and stepped out of the Green Cocoon. The private on lookout handed her a pair of binoculars. Through a hole in the rocks facing Route 66, she focused on a figure standing in the middle of the westbound lanes of the historic highway.

It was the nude figure of a young woman, running a bar of soap over her legs and torso, bathing in the rain. Although lean, the hardened muscles of her stomach and thighs testified to her fitness. A horse stood nearby, tethered to a mesquite tree. She hadn't set up a camp that Jones could see. Nor were her clothes within sight, so the lieutenant assumed she had stuffed them into the bulging bag tied to her saddle. The only visible clothing was a pair of boots.

"Want me to go check her out, Loot?" The private tried to hide his

grin, but couldn't.

"In your dreams. Tell Siano to grab her poncho and rifle."

Extended deployment in a remote forward operating base tended to breed familiarity, so Tereschenko's continued pleading didn't surprise her. "C'mon, Loot, have a heart."

She couldn't help smiling a little. "Sorry, Shenk, not today."

Dominica Siano hustled over even as she still pushed an arm through her poncho. The exit was a four-foot-wide doorway at the rear of the stone and sandbag semi-circle, with a ten-foot-long rock wall forming a corridor to the outside. The two women hurried because rainstorms didn't last long in western Arizona and while it lasted, it would hide the sounds of their approach.

The woman was oblivious. She'd bent over to rinse her long raven-black hair and didn't see them coming. The first she knew of their presence was seeing Siano's M-16 pointed at her. The rain had slackened to a patter by then, but the naked woman didn't appear fazed either by having a gun pointed at her or by her own nudity.

"Gotta get clean while you can," she said with a grin.

"Do you usually bathe out in the open like this?"

"Not if I can help."

"But you did this time?"

"I was dirty." The woman cocked her head, as if trying to figure out who they were without asking. "Are you gonna shoot me or should I get dressed?"

"Go ahead and put your clothes on," Jones said. "But don't do anything stupid."

The young woman frowned in the way people do when trying to figure something out. Rainwater ran down her face and made her squint. "Are you Americans?"

"Who wants to know?"

The squawk of a circling prairie falcon distracted them for a split second.

"My name's Nado. Who are you?"

"Nado? That's all? Where do you live? What are you doing here?"

"Uh-uh. I'm not telling you that until I know who you are."

"We're Americans." Jones' tone was cautious.

"I don't mean Patton's people. I mean *American* Americans."

“Patton’s not in charge any more, we are, and yeah, we’re *American* Americans. Now, for the second time, what are you doing here?”

The young woman grinned and extended a soapy hand. “Looking for you!”

#

21 miles north-northwest of Seligman
1640 hours

Major Edward Wincommer watched the string of horsemen riding through the valley below. With his exec and company commanders flanked to either side, he tried to estimate the size, origin, and purpose of the cavalry force they’d stumbled into.

“I make it a hundred and twenty,” said Captain Lozano, his exec.

A few others grumbled assent.

“Any ideas as to their purpose in this area?”

There were a few guesses, such as a tribe or clan either hunting or migrating, but nothing that made much sense.

“The red scarves must be some kind of uniform,” Locano said. “If they keep to their current heading, they’ll pass through Seligman and ride right past FOB Westwall.”

Wincommer bit his bottom lip. He’d had command of the horse cavalry regiment for less than three months and at twenty-nine was young for the job. He only got the command because he was the highest-ranking qualified rider left after the various special forces units got their own horses. Screwing this up could lose him independent command and put him on some second-stringer staff, probably in supply.

“Coco,” he said to a stocky corporal with *Coconino* stitched to his breast, “radio Westwall and let them know company’s coming but that we’re in the area. Then tell Prime we’re trailing an unknown cavalry force with the intention of intercepting them, heading southeast toward Westwall.”

He sent two of his six companies ahead to pace the horsemen on the north, and two more to follow up in their wake at a safe distance. He’d follow between them with the last two companies. Their operating orders were to reconnoiter the assigned area and avoid combat, but Wincom couldn’t sit by and let a potentially hostile force penetrate too close to their operations. If it was the wrong call, so be it, but he’d be damned if he would sit by and watch.

#

Chapter 51

I'd rather be lucky than good.
Lefty Gomez

Operation Overtime, General Angriff's quarters
1720 hours, April 19

Green Ghost tried to think of some way to break the awkward silence, but he could only smile and hope Saint Nick would find some way to do it for him. But even that felt *off*, thinking of him by that name. What name felt right? General? No. Saint Nick? Maybe. Dad? He wanted that to be the one, except it felt weirder than the others.

"I wonder where Morgan and Nikki could be," Angriff said, smiling at his wife and lifting his eyebrows in a pleading gesture that meant *help me out here.*

"It was never like Morgan to be late for a family dinner," Janine said. "Cynthia, did she say anything to you about being late?"

"She said she was going to show Nikki a few things about being a lady. I don't think they'd like me talking about it at the table."

"Get my sister to be a lady?" Green Ghost said. "I'm sorry, I forgot. Get my *twin* sister to be a lady? I'd like to see that."

"Well, that's what she said… ummm…" It sounded silly calling him Green Ghost, but Nick didn't sound right either, so Cynthia Angriff avoided calling him anything. "She promised they would be here by seventeen hundred hours."

Just then the door opened and Morgan Randall stepped through, alone. She took the seat next to her mother, opposite Green Ghost. "Sorry I'm late."

"Where's Nip— Nikki?" Ghost said.

"She's having dinner elsewhere," Morgan said.

"Oh, for God's sake," he said. "Excuse me, Saint, ma'am, I'm gonna go find her. She's got to stop doing this."

"They're on the mountainside," Morgan said.

Green Ghost stopped halfway out of his chair. "They?"

"Yes. Yesterday I introduced her to my crew chief, Joe Ootoi, and I've gotta say, I've never seen a girl struck like that before. Or him. I thought

it only happened in movies."

"I don't understand."

"What's to understand? She was giggling like a twelve-year-old with her first crush."

"Are we still talking about my sister?"

"Which one?" Cynthia said.

"I'll get it right eventually. Are we talking about Nikki?"

"Yes, but that's not the name she gave Joe. She called herself Nicole."

Green Ghost sat back down, then leaned back in his chair and rubbed his lips. "Are you sure about that? She said Nicole?"

"Positive."

"In our entire life, I have never heard her call herself that. She hates being called Nicole."

"That is her name, isn't it?" Janine said.

"Yes, Mrs. Angriff, it is, but I've never heard her say it."

"Mrs. Angriff was your grandmother, dear. I'm Mother, or Mom. And if that makes you uncomfortable, then Janine."

"Thank you, Mrs… Janine. But I'm worried about Nikki. What's this guy's game, what do you know about him?"

"I know he saved my life last fall during the fighting on Highway Ten. I know he fought with me all through Iraq and Syria. I know he's the best there is, and that I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him. But we lost another crew member back in Syria and her name was Nicky, too. I think it spooked him a little bit."

"Maybe that's why she said Nicole?" Cynthia said. "To be thoughtful."

"Not my sister… excuse me, our sister," Green Ghost said. "My twin sister. Empathy's not her strong suit."

"She couldn't have known that, anyway."

"All right, so you say this guy is okay. It's just that she's never had a date before that I know of. To tell the truth, I wasn't even sure she liked men. It's weird. So what did you say this guy's name was?"

"Joe Ootoi, but everybody calls him Toy."

"Toy?" A blank stare came over him and Green Ghost fell silent.

Morgan pointed at him. "That's the same look she got when she heard his nickname. What's up with that?"

"Nicholas, are you well, dear?" Janine Angriff said. "You look like a

white ghost, not a green one. What on Earth is the matter?"

"His name is Toy?" he said to Morgan.

"Yeah, Toy," Morgan said. "T-O-Y. What's wrong?"

"Y'all are all gonna think I'm crazy… maybe I am. It's fucking weird as shit." He stopped then, realizing who sat at the table with him. "Janine, Cynthia, I'm so sorry. I—"

Janine Angriff's amused smile gave him a brief glimpse of what her husband had to love about her. She leaned forward and patted the back of his hand. "It's all right, dear. I've raised two teenagers and been an Army wife for a long time. I doubt you can say anything I haven't heard before."

"Thanks, but it won't happen again. Anyway, there was this night a long time ago back in Memphis, during the summer. August, 2006. The night before Mom died. There was this spooky area in the southwest corner of the city, down near the Mississippi River, called Voodoo Village. It was sort of a teenage dare to try to go there and steal something. We were seventeen. Nikki and I went with a couple of friends. I guess it's safe now to tell you that one of them was Vapor."

"Your XO?" Nick Angriff, Sr. said.

"The same. We were childhood friends. It's pure coincidence he had the skills to join Zombie. So some bad stuff happened that night, and a lot more bad came from it. There was this old man there they called Chief, some kind of Voodoo priest. He ran this little compound behind a wrought iron fence, weeds everywhere, all these bizarre sculptures.

"We showed up just as another car left and got blamed for killing the Chief's grandson, except he knew we weren't guilty. We just found the kid laying there, dead. The Chief chanted to himself and did something he didn't let me see, and when it was over he told me I had a ghost inside me, a green ghost, one who serves the cause of Justice, and I was the Avenger. At the time we thought he was drugged out or something, but I thought of that when they wanted me to pick my code name for Zombie.

"This Chief, he looked at Nikki and he frowned, and did something that looked like he was blessing himself, and said she had a devil inside her, a demon… what did he call it? Oh, yeah, Congo Savanne. He told her she was his servant, or something like that, and he would stay inside her until a child's plaything drove him out…"

"Child's plaything?" Cynthia said. "You think he meant a toy?"

"Yes," Ghost said. "That's what we thought it meant, a real toy, like a

doll or something. It didn't make sense, but that's what we thought. But a man… I didn't even think that was possible."

"She's a grown woman, honey," Janine said. "Anything's possible."

"I know she looks like an adult, Janine, but… acting like one? That's new."

#

Chapter 52

The world doesn't owe you, but sometimes it gives you a gift anyway.
Idaho Jack

Prescott, AZ
1736 hours, April 19

One of the first things Rick Parfist did when he became Mayor of Prescott was to have a makeshift cot installed in a corner of his office. He spent most nights at home with his family, but sometimes work became overwhelming and he slept at the courthouse. The previous night had been such a night. Sunlight lit the floor under the heavy tarps covering his window when his assistant shook him awake.

"Mister Mayor," Gracie Roe said. "Rick, get up. I think you need to see this."

Her words didn't penetrate for a few seconds, but when they did, he groaned and sat up. He still wore the same clothes as the day before. "What time is it?" he said, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"Late afternoon. You slept all day." She handed him a glass of water and he drained it. "There's something I need to show you."

"Can I pee first?"

The plumbing had been jury-rigged with a gravity system for the upper floors. He took the opportunity to splash lukewarm water from the sink on his face. When back behind his desk, he took a deep breath. "What have you got?"

"This came in on an old radio the Republic had set up. We weren't sure what it was for until today, but we've left it on for months now—"

"—in case somebody called it," he finished for her. "I know. I had to authorize it. I think that was before your time. General Angriff thought it was wasting power. So we got a message?"

"I think so. One of the comm. techs worked for the Republic, a young man named Thomas. He was badly injured in the fighting last year and only just healed and got back to work."

"Was he approved?"

"Yes, by Doctor Proctor and by Green Ghost himself."

"Green Ghost wasted time checking him out? That's a low position."

“Communications is critical. He said a traitor could endanger everybody, so he insists on approving each person in the communications chain.”

“All right, so what’s this message?”

“This is going to sound crazy, but Thomas says it’s from Australia.”

“Where’s that?”

“Thomas says it’s an island way off the coast of California, a long way out. Like, thousands of miles way out. It’s another country.”

“What’s the message?”

“It seemed important, so I wrote it down.” She handed him a small triangle of paper torn from a larger document. Typed print on the reverse side read *no dogs shall be allowed outside the residence of the owner without*… The rest of the sentence was missing.

He flipped it over. “*Chinese attacking Siorra army tell Americans*… That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

“Have you ever heard of someplace called Siorra?”

“Never.”

Parfist rubbed his mouth as he considered what to do. “Call Prime. I hate to bother them, but any message with *Chinese attacking* in it needs to be seen.”

“It sounds like a warning.”

“Oh, it’s a warning, all right. I just hope somebody knows what it means.”

#

Lt. Colonel Desiree Santorio, S-6 for the 7th Cavalry, lay on her back inside a large metal frame filled with wires and circuits. In her teeth she clenched a small flashlight while she worked on restoring power to a receiver unit. Understaffing in her office meant she was boss, tech, and janitor, all at once.

“Try it now, Corporal,” she said.

“No, ma’am,” came the reply a few seconds later. “Still nothing.”

“Damn.”

Glancing over, she saw the face of the sergeant on watch appear at the access panel opening near her feet. “Colonel, we just got a message from Prescott I think you need to see.”

“Can it wait five minutes, Gonzales? I’m right in the middle of

something.”

“I don’t think so, ma’am. It looks important. Something about attacking Chinese.”

“All right.” She sighed, knowing they couldn’t hear her. “I’m coming.”

As soon as she’d squirmed from the cage, Sergeant Gonzales handed her a comm. tablet with the message on the screen.

“Have you ever heard of Siorra?” she asked him.

“No, ma’am.”

“Me, either. Take it to S-2 right away.”

“Send it or take it, Colonel?”

“Take it. Put this in Colonel Kordibowski’s hand personally. If he’s not in his office, find him.”

Gonzalez saluted and headed out the doors of Communications Room One. Santorio watched him and had a very bad feeling about the message. If the Chinese were on the move again, it meant they were prepared this time, and that didn’t bode well for the 7th Cav.

#

Rip Kordibowski sat in his office, poring over personnel rosters from Operation Comeback, hoping to glean information on potential troublemakers. He looked up at his closed office door when shouting began outside. Seconds later someone knocked on his door.

“Come.”

It was his adjutant, Captain Charlie Wu. “I’m sorry, Colonel, there’s a sergeant from Communications who refuses to give a message to anybody but you personally. I even ordered him to give it to me, but he said Colonel Santorio said to hand it only to you. He said it’s urgent.”

“All right, bring him in.”

Gonzalez marched in stiffly, stopped in front of the desk, and saluted.

“At ease. You have a message for me, Sergeant?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why didn’t you send it through channels?”

“Colonel Santorio’s orders, sir. She said to put in your hands personally.”

Kordibowski stuck out his hand. “Let me see it.”

He handed over the tablet. Kordibowski read the message three times. “Who sent this?”

“Mayor Parfist’s office in Prescott, sir. They intercepted a transmission from Australia.”

“Australia?”

“That’s what they said, Colonel.”

“Is that possible without satellites?”

“Under the right circumstances and if you know what you’re doing, yes, sir. The mayor’s office didn’t say what frequency it was on, but I suspect it’s one of those that used to be for amateur radio.”

“You mean like ham radio?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So this could be real?”

“I’d say yes, Colonel.”

Kordibowski typed the message into his own computer and handed the tablet back. “Thank you, Sergeant. You’re dismissed.”

Once Gonzales had left, he read the message to Captain Wu. “Does Siorra army ring any bells, Charlie?”

“Siorra doesn’t, but could it have been garbled in transmission?”

“Why? What are you thinking?”

“I did a ten-year stint at the Sierra Army Depot, north of Lake Tahoe. That could be it.”

“Isn’t that where they kept all the surplus hardware?”

“Tanks, APCs, you name it, it was all up there. Just lined up in rows.”

“Ammunition, too?”

“Bunkers and bunkers of it.”

Kordibowski’s eyes focused on the air refresher grate in the ceiling as he considered the ramifications. Then he grabbed his uniform jacket off the back of his chair and headed out the door. “Call the Crystal Palace. Tell them it’s urgent I see General Angriff immediately!”

#

SECTION SEVEN
In the Back

Chapter 53

You'll never know everything about anything, especially something you love.
Julia Child

Operation Overtime, General Angriff's Quarters
1903 hours, April 19

Dessert consisted of apple pie MREs, warmed, with fresh ice cream sweetened with honey melting on top. Angriff had called in a special favor from Sharon Goldsmith to get it. As a rule he avoided using rank to get things others couldn't, but when it came to his wife and daughters, that went out the window.

He was halfway through the concoction when someone knocked at the door. Morgan sat closest, so she jumped up and answered it before he could move. "Dad," she said, coming back to the table, "it's Colonel Kordibowski."

"Thank you, sweetie." He kissed his wife on the top of her head as he passed her. "Nobody finishes my dessert. I'm coming back."

In the hallway, Kordibowski apologized.

"It's fine, Rip, that's your job. What's up?"

"This."

Angriff read the message. "Analysis?"

"We think it refers to the Sierra Army Depot."

Angriff looked at the floor as the import of those words sank in. "Were all those AFVs still up there when you went cold?"

"As far as I know they were, but I've never been there personally."

"Damn… Get me everything you've got on Sierra and meet me in my office in fifteen minutes."

He went back into his quarters and finished dessert. With a big smile he wiped his mouth, pointed at his son, and said, "Time for us to go to work."

#

Operation Overtime
1914 hours, April 19

Colonel Schiller looked up when his orderly knocked on his office door. "What is it, Corporal?"

"Colonel, Lieutenant Khoury was taking the physical ammunition

inventory as you ordered, and found something unusual." The corporal extended a yellowed slip of paper.

Schiller recognized it as a manifest for a case of FIM-92A Stinger missiles, quantity eight. It was unusual because that model had been replaced decades before, but otherwise he scanned it and was about to ask *so?* when his eyes found the name of the addressee. He had no idea who Don Charro was, but he understood the implications of a place named *Masjid of the New Prophet* in Humble, Texas.

"Did he find any more labels like this?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Thank you, Corporal. Get me an appointment with General Angriff. Tell him it's urgent."

#

Sitting behind his desk, Angriff decided not to light a cigar yet.

Sergeant Schiller stood in the doorway and his expression showed his concern. "Something wrong, General?"

Angriff started typing on his keyboard, looking for images of the Sierra Army Depot. "What tipped you off?"

"Tonight was supposed to be family night, but here you are back again."

"You know me too well, J.C. Colonel Kordibowski will be here shortly and we're going to need coffee."

"Trouble?"

"What else is new? And J.C.? Tell Colonel Walling I need him back here pronto."

"Your wish, General."

When Kordibowski came in five minutes later, Angriff knew a lot more about the Sierra Army Depot than he had before. Green Ghost had arrived, too, and sat on the couch. Kordibowski took a chair.

Angriff scrolled back up then turned from the monitor. "The last report we have from Sierra is dated five months after the initial earthquake, or about six weeks before Overtime was sealed up. We know things were falling apart then, so I'm quite surprised the report was not only written but loaded into the databases."

"Is there an inventory?"

"No, just a report. I've sent you a copy, but it looks like most of the garrison pulled out on orders to head for Chicago. The report says they took

most of the energy-generating hardware and operable vehicles with them, leaving only a skeleton staff with limited supplies to man the base. It mentions the engineers all left, as well."

"Damn. So all that hardware is probably sitting there waiting for the Chinese to take it…"

"Maybe not," Green Ghost interjected. They both turned to him. "Consider this. First, we have to assume the message is real. Otherwise, why send it?"

"The Chinese could be luring us into a trap," Kordibowski said.

"That's a long way for a trap. Getting there is the problem."

"Seven hundred fifty miles," Angriff said, staring again at his computer monitor. "I've already looked it up. But I think you're right. If they wanted to lure us into an ambush, they wouldn't do it so far away. They're after the weapons. Go on."

Green Ghost continued. "Second, if the message is real, then somebody must still be up there. Otherwise, who sent the message? Somebody had to radio Australia to let their buddy know to contact us. And third, the message says the Chinese are attacking. If there was nobody there, they'd just roll right in. They wouldn't have to attack."

"The base has a defense force," Kordibowski said.

Angriff glanced from Green Ghost to Kordibowski and back again. "There are Americans up there fighting to hold back the Chinese."

"Don't jump to conclusions, Saint. They could be other enemies, or even rogue Chinese who already seized the place."

"No. Using your own logic against you, why would they radio Australia to contact us? They're Americans, all right, and we've got to help them."

Kordibowski rose and paced a few times between his chair and the edge of the glass office wall. "If we assume there's somebody resisting a Chinese advance…"

"Yes?"

He held up his hand in a gesture that meant *wait.* "I'm thinking it through as I go… Somebody's fighting back, *but*… if they're U.S. military, then why call Australia for help? If they have a long-range radio, then why not make a blanket call for help within the U.S. first? And if they'd done that, we would have picked it up, wouldn't we?"

"I'd have to ask Santorio to be sure, but I'm pretty sure the answer is

yes."

"So am I. Which either means they called Australia first, or they have no radio and somebody else called Australia."

"Somebody else?"

"Think about it, sir. If whoever is fighting the Chinese doesn't have a radio, somebody else would have to. What if it's a ham radio setup that still works? I know very little about amateur radio, but don't they have the range to reach Australia?"

"I don't know." Angriff was about to key the intercom when Schiller appeared in the doorway with a pot of coffee and three mugs. "Perfect timing, J.C. Get Colonel Santorio up here, please. Tell her to come as she is."

After putting the pot and mugs down on the small table he'd put there just for this purpose, Schiller nodded. "Will do, General, but Colonel Schiller is here to see you. He says it's urgent."

"Oh, damn, what now?"

"Want me to tell him you're busy?"

"No, send him in. Rip, Nick, stay here. We'll resume when Santorio gets here."

Angriff didn't see Kordibowski squint when he said *Nick,* but Green Ghost did.

Colonel Schiller entered in the same formal manner he always had, erect and correct. After a sharp salute, Angriff invited him to take the other chair beside Kordibowski. The office was getting full.

"General, while taking a physical inventory of munitions, my staff discovered something disturbing." He handed over a printed spreadsheet. Paper was a finite resource and Angriff had issued strict regulations on its use, so if Schiller had used four precious sheets, this had to be important.

Next the colonel laid a shipping manifest beside the spreadsheet. "You need to look at entry FIM-92A."

Angriff picked up the manifest first, scanned it, and then inspected the spreadsheet, looking for the entry FIM-92A. He found it on page three, ran his finger across the page until he found the quantity received and the date. Beside that was the column for quantity shipped. Every other item on the sheet had a zero there, except that one. That one had a four.

Angriff laid the manifest on his desk, trying to rationalize what it said into something other than open treason. He hated Steeple, yes, but a traitor? He was vicious and amoral, without a doubt, and absolutely a megalomaniac.

But stretching that to include treason seemed too far. He had never gotten that sense of the man. “You didn’t find any more like this?

“No, General, but after the first one, we did find three more places where a square the exact size of the crate on that manifest kept the wood from aging as quickly as the rest of the box. That verified the number.”

“So they were shipping our enemies a lot of weapons?”

“I would say that’s correct, sir. Four cases of FIM-92As.”

“Stingers.”

Schiller nodded. “Basic models, but yes, Stingers.”

“How many come in a case?”

“Eight.”

“Those bastards… those damned bastards. Our own government supplied the Sevens weapons before The Collapse, and they have used those same weapons against my command, and will likely do so again.”

“I can’t respond to that, sir. It’s outside my knowledge.”

“Thank you, Colonel Schiller. Tell your people this is fine work.”

#

Schiller got up to leave, but Angriff waved him back down.

“Bill, I’ve got an important assignment for you. I need you to relieve General Fleming over at Comeback. If I give you command of the base, can you run it?”

Schiller’s face flushed, pink color running past his close-shorn hair into his scalp. “I’m honored, sir, but am I the best man for the job?”

“You are. I need a complete inventory of everything, where it is, its state of readiness, anything it needs to be made operational… and that includes personnel. We have to integrate Comeback in the fastest, most efficient manner possible. I can’t think of anyone more qualified for the job than you. Do whatever you have to do here to coordinate your efforts at Comeback with your responsibilities as S-4, but I want you to relieve General Fleming no later than thirty-six hours from now. Any questions?”

“Not offhand, sir.”

“You can call me anytime, for anything. I have full confidence in you.” He looked up. J.C.stood in the doorway, indicating Santorio had arrived. “Now, get to it.”

Schiller stood even more ramrod straight than he had before, saluted, and left.

#

Santorio had never been summoned to the Crystal Palace before. She'd been there on the platform when Nick the A had chewed them all out for not noticing the stars on General Tompkins' collar, but never in the office itself. Now her hands shook and she couldn't make them stop. What had she done wrong?

Angriff stood when Sergeant Schiller ushered her in. She saluted him and he returned it, then he invited her to sit. She nodded at Green Ghost and Kordibowski.

"Thank you for coming, Colonel. We need to know something about this message you passed on to Colonel Kordibowski earlier tonight. What type of equipment would be necessary for a radio signal to reach Australia?"

"Assuming you're talking about not using satellites, it wouldn't take anything special, sir. A radio and the right antenna is all you need. The atmospherics are where you'd run into a problem. Daytime, nighttime, sunspots, fluctuations in the Earth's magnetic field, they all play a bigger part in transmitting over long distances than the equipment does."

"So it's at least theoretically possible that somebody near Lake Tahoe could contact somebody in Australia?"

"Absolutely, sir. Conditions would have to be right, but it's definitely possible."

#

Chapter 54

We must expect reverses, even defeats. They are sent to teach us wisdom and prudence, to call forth greater energies, and to prevent our falling into greater disasters.

Robert E. Lee

Operation Overtime
2139 hours, April 19

"All right, boys, it looks like this is real," Angriff said. "If the Chinese get their hands on those tanks, it wipes out the losses we inflicted last year and then some. We've got one armored battalion, and they'd have an armored army. What can we do about it?"

Green Ghost spoke first. "The first thing is to find out if the Chinese have already taken the base."

"And how do we do that?" Angriff said.

"How far did you say it was, General?"

"Seven hundred fifty miles. Even if we averaged forty miles an hour, it would take most of a day to drive it."

"With the state of the roads, you wouldn't come close to averaging that," Green Ghost said. "And I wouldn't trust the bridges unless I had to. Then there's the issue of fuel. You'd have to send tankers, because none of the available vehicles have that kind of range, but then you'd have to escort them with APCs or even AFVs, which would use even more fuel. Not to mention wear and tear on the heavy stuff."

"So ground is out, at least in the short term," Angriff said. "That only leaves air."

"Seven hundred fifty miles is beyond the range of any of our birds," Kordibowski said.

"We've still got Steeple's Blackhawk."

"They don't have near the range," Green Ghost said, "unless they're equipped with extra tanks. We used them on an op once, a thousand-mile round trip. I was the only passenger. They squeezed in these specially designed fuel tanks for the mission. Are there any of those at Comeback?"

"I don't know," Angriff answered. "Let's find out."

#

Operation Comeback
2149 hours, April 19

Norm Fleming's nostrils flared as he sat behind the commander's desk. By and large he didn't show much emotion, but at that moment he wanted to yell at somebody. When the light on his headset came on, he slipped it over his ears and pushed the *on* button on his desk.

"What is it?" he snapped.

"Had a bad day?"

"Nick! Yeah, you might say that. Amunet's gone."

"What do you mean, *gone*?"

"Gone. No longer here. Vanished. Nobody knows where."

"Great." He heard Angriff sigh on the other end. "More rabbit holes."

"I heard somebody tried to kill you."

"Oh, hell, I'd already forgotten about that. It seems SOP at this point. Yeah, another true believer in whatever they believe in. But forget the assassins. I need you here."

"More problems?"

"Nothing I want to talk about over the radio. I'm relieving you there, Norm, because I need you here. Colonel Schiller will take over command of Comeback."

Fleming closed his eyes and smiled, but tried to keep his voice neutral. "If you need me there, that's all that matters. I'll be back first thing in the morning. I'm bringing Alexis back with me."

"No, don't come back just yet. You don't have another Blackhawk there, do you?"

"No. There're a few other general purpose birds, but Steeple took the only Blackhawk. Why?"

"I need you to check and see if Comeback has the special long-range fuel tanks that fit inside the Blackhawk, and I need it done now. If you have them, I'm sending the bird back your way to have them installed. This is priority one, Norm."

"Are we under attack?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"You've got it. I'll call as soon as I know something."

"Norm? Make it sooner, will you?"

#

"Can you think of anything else we should be doing right this

minute?”

“If we can’t rig the Blackhawk, then I don’t know what we can do besides get some sleep,” Green Ghost said. “But I think our top priority is information. Even if we can use the Blackhawk, it can’t haul more than one or two people with all that extra weight on board. So I say we send one person to gather information and then use the bird’s radio to give a detailed sitrep.”

“That’s the plan, then. I just wish we knew who sent that signal.”

“Have you asked General Tompkins?” Kordibowski said.

#

“I’m honored you thought of me, Nick.” Tompkins had gained a few pounds since the previous year, but it looked good on him, Angriff thought.

“Knock off the humble stuff, Dennis. You’ve more than earned your right to be sitting here. It’s my fault for not thinking of you sooner.”

“Did I run across anybody with an amateur radio?” Tompkins scratched behind his ear as he thought about it. “No, but it seems to me I did run up on somebody who said they knew such a man. It wasn’t that long ago, either. Somewhere up in Nevada, I think, maybe a few years back.”

“Nevada? Up around Lake Tahoe, or north of there?”

“No, further south. O’course, my memory ain’t the greatest any more, but I’d say south of Carson City.”

“That doesn’t make sense, then,” Angriff said.

“Maybe it does,” replied Green Ghost. “What if they sent out somebody looking for help? And that somebody found the amateur radio? Remember the last two words? *Tell Americans.*”

“Y’know, you might be onto something. They might have intended that message for the Seventh Cav.”

Kordibowski held up his hands in a *whoa* gesture. “Not so fast, General. Remember the message was sent to Patton?”

“Good point. Nevertheless, they reached out to Americans for help, and it’s Americans who are going to answer the call.”

#

Chapter 55

Perception is a tool that is pointed at both ends.
Hannibal Barca

Operation Overtime
0003 hours, April 20

Angriff leaned back in his chair and stretched his neck muscles. Green Ghost had slipped off to the hangar deck to see if anybody had thoughts on what to do if the extra tanks for the Blackhawk didn't exist. He'd sent Kordibowski and Tompkins to try to get some sleep. There seemed nothing more he could do that night and was about to get up when the intercom buzzed.

He'd grown to hate that sound.

"What is it, J.C.? Not another crisis, I hope."

"I hope not, too, sir, but the comm. room forwarded a message from Forward Operating Base Westwall and I thought you should see it."

"Send it to me," he said with a resigned tone.

He had to read it twice before his tired mind understood the ramifications. Then he keyed the intercom. "They're bringing this woman to Prime?" he said to Schiller.

"Yes, sir, they left Westwall late this afternoon."

"But they didn't say where she's from?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Call Communications and tell them to get in touch with Westwall. I want to know every detail."

#

0121 hours

At first Sergeant Schiller thought his boss was praying, and he took a backward step out of the Crystal Palace. But while the fingertips touched in a praying pose, Angriff's index fingers were in the corners of his eyes. Schiller had never seen that position before and wasn't sure what it meant.

"What is it, J.C.?" Angriff asked without looking up.

"I'm sorry if this is a bad time."

"How long was I asleep?"

"Not long, no more than a few minutes. I can come back."

“No, give it to me now. There won’t be a better time anytime soon. What have you got?”

“Colonel Kordibowski thought you should know the latest with this young woman being brought in by Westwall.”

Angriff sat back. “Kordibowski?”

“There’s a memo on your computer, sir. Once Colonel Santorio learned where this new woman is from, she sent it to S-2. Colonel K. didn’t want them to bring her all the way in because he didn’t want her to know our location. He ordered Westwall to detour into Prescott.”

“Smart. Go on.”

“Once they found out where she was from, the colonel decided he needed to interview her personally and ordered her brought here for further evaluation. She claims to be from Creech Air Force Base.”

Angriff stood without realizing it. “Creech?”

“Yes, sir. And Area Fifty-One.”

#

0137 hours

Arranged in numerical order, starting with the S-1, the offices of the command staff opened onto the main hallway near the Clamshell. Angriff passed that doorway and entered the one labeled *S-2 Intelligence.* A corporal sitting behind a standard metal Army desk jumped to attention when he walked in.

But Angriff waved a salute and motioned her at ease. “Is Colonel Kordibowski in his quarters?”

“No, sir, he’s in his office. He has the young woman from Creech in with him.”

“Please tell him I’m here.”

Within seconds, Kordibowski opened his door and invited Angriff inside. Sitting before the colonel’s desk was a young woman in her late teens or early twenties, with bronzed skin and long black hair with sun-bleached streaks of brown. Kordibowski offered his own chair to Angriff, but he declined and sat in one of the metal chairs next to the woman.

“Nado, this is General Angriff, our commanding officer. Sir, this is Lucia Tornado Alvarez, but she goes by Nado”

“Hiya, General, nice to know you. I’ve been telling Colonel K. we could sure use some help up at Creech.”

“Pleasure meeting you, Nado. So Creech is still a functioning Air

Force base?"

"I'm not sure about *that.* If you mean do they still fly planes, the answer's no. I've lived there all my life and never seen anything fly, ever, except once when I was kid. I saw something high overhead, I don't know what it was, but that's all. There's no fuel left that's any good, and nobody knows how to work on the planes. You guys don't have any JP-8, do you?"

Their perplexed looks told her all she needed to know. "That's the jet fuel the aircraft used, so maybe you don't have any. But, General, to answer your question about the base still functioning, if you mean do people still live there, the answer is yes."

"But there *are* planes."

"Oh, yeah, lots of them."

"General," Kordibowski said, "the way I read the situation is that a fairly large number of people live there, but for the most part they came to the base after The Collapse, having nowhere else to go. Not too many of those original people are still alive, and the ones there now are their children and grandchildren and stragglers. The base appears to have no power sources beyond a few homemade generators, and the communications systems all failed long ago."

"What do we know about these jet fuels?"

"You mean that we may have on hand? Nothing yet; I haven't had a chance to investigate."

"That's a priority after we're done here. What about Area Fifty-One?"

"That's a different story." Kordibowski turned to Nado and motioned for her to speak up.

"Yeah, about Fifty-One… Fifty-One is off-limits. Those guys are batshit crazy. We used to couldn't even ride across their land. Now we can, but we've gotta stay away from the buildings. If you try to go inside one of them, they'll shoot your ass. Before I left General Kando, he's the C.O. at Creech, he told me that Fifty-One needed me. That's a joke we all tell because those guys don't talk to us. If we get close, they shoot."

"How do they eat?"

She shrugged. "We don't know."

"What brought you here, Nado?"

"I ran into another scraper… Do you know what a scraper is?"

"Yes, Idaho Jack is actually here at Prime as we speak."

"Jack's still alive? Great, I haven't seen him in a long time. I like

him… Where was I? Oh, yeah, what brought me here. I ran into a scraper named Jingle Bob…"

"Y'all have some colorful names," Angriff said.

Nado wasn't sure what to say to that, so she went on with her story. "Bob told me about these big battles that happened near Prescott and Phoenix, and he'd heard there were real American units operating down here. We've had a lot of problems in the past few months with a group of raiders on horseback who keep attacking our farms and stealing our livestock. Two of them tried to rape me right after I met with Jingle Bob."

Angriff sat forward. "What happened?"

She shrugged. "I killed one and captured the other."

"What's the story with these raiders?"

Kordibowski took over the narrative. "They showed up out of nowhere two months ago, hundreds of them. Nobody knows where they came from or where they are based. The only thing known for certain is that each man has the letters G- R burned into his forearm."

"Burned… you mean like you'd brand a cow?"

Kordibowski turned to Nado and she shook her head. "I don't know anything about that."

"It is my understanding that this mark is exactly like a branded cow. They also wear red bandanas tied around their heads."

"We call them Red Riders," Nado said.

Angriff shook his head. "How far is Creech from here?"

"Road miles?" Kordibowski asked.

"No, air."

"More than two hundred."

"I want to establish contact ASAP. Nado, if I send a contact mission to Creech, would you be willing to go with them? They would be flying."

"You mean in a real plane?"

"A helicopter."

"Well, fuck yeah, I'll go! Oh… sorry. General Kando warned me you might not like that kind of language."

Angriff smiled his best fatherly smile. "I've heard it before."

#

Captain Wu was about to fall asleep when Kordibowski asked him to take Nado to the mess hall. Beaming, he led the way out of the S-2's office.

"Now we know who sent that message," Angriff said when they were

gone.

“This Jingle Bob fellow?”

“Has to be. It explains everything. We need to get someone up there, somehow. Damn, I wish General Fleming was back.”

“Allow me to point out that he is merely a phone call away.”

“Radio phone, Rip, not a land line. It’s not secure.”

“What are your orders now, sir?”

“Continue doing what you’re doing and—” He was interrupted by a knock on Kordibowski’s office door.

At the colonel’s call, a corporal stuck in her head. “Message for General Angriff.” She handed it to him and didn’t dawdle shutting the door.

“When it rains…” Angriff passed the tablet over to Kordibowski, who read it aloud.

“It’s from the cavalry. Following one hundred plus horsemen heading east of Seligman. Suggest FOB Westwall be ready… These have to be part of who Nado was talking about.”

“So we have to assume they’re enemies.”

“I believe they are. Regardless, we have no choice. It would be imprudent to think otherwise.”

#

Chapter 56

We are all travelers in the wilderness of this world, and the best we can find in our travels is an honest friend.

Robert Louis Stevenson

1 mile east of Hawthorne, NV
0857 hours, April 20

One of the lenses in Jingle Bob's binoculars was cracked when he'd found them, but they were Zeiss. He'd found other binoculars during his scraping years with both lenses intact, but he preferred one Zeiss lens to two of some others. Standing on a small hill, he focused on the abandoned army base called Camp Navajo, once known officially as the Hawthorne Army Depot.

"You said it was abandoned," Nuff said, focusing his own binoculars.

"It was."

"It ain't now."

"No, it's not."

A knot of horsemen gathered around a fire on the outskirts of the ghost town of Hawthorne. Bob had scraped it several times and knew that no one had lived there for decades. Until now.

"There's a lot of 'em."

"Yeah."

"This must be where them other riders came from."

Earlier in the day, they'd hidden from several hundred armed riders heading east.

"Yeah."

"You ever seen anything like this?"

"Not up here in Nevada. The Sevens ride in big groups, but I've never seen them this far north and west."

"So who are they?"

"Hell if I know." Bob slid down the hill to his horse. "C'mon, Nuff, we've gotta ride."

"The horses need a rest, Bob. Me, too."

"There's some hills a few miles southeast of here. We'll stop there. There's a spring and a cave where we can hole up for the night."

Both men wanted to gallop away, but the day had been hotter than usual, they and their horses needed rest, and so they didn't push the pace. A rusty metal sign they passed identified the road as the Veterans' Memorial Highway. Once out of sight of Hawthorne, they were again flanked on both sides by empty desert.

Neither man spoke until they'd turned into a valley that snaked between low hills leading south. The horses plodded forward into the heart of the ridgeline. Once out of sight of the highway, Bob's horse lifted its head. Its nostrils flared. It whinnied and sped up, and the rest of the horses followed.

"They smell water," Bob said.

"Better be close."

The backside of one hill looked like it had been sheared away with a giant knife, exposing the rock beneath. Halfway up a gravel slope loomed the dark opening of a cave.

"That's one big ass cave," Nuff said. "Anybody in there?"

"Rattlesnakes."

"Human or the other kind?"

Bob smiled.

The cave mouth opened into a large hall near the entrance that slanted downward into an ever-narrowing chamber. To the right a pool of water ran into the darkness. The horses almost knocked them over heading for it, but Nuff held them off until Bob had filled their canteens. When he let the horses go, they crowded each other to get at the cold, clear water.

"Damn, that's good," Bob said.

They were about to sit on a large boulder when a voice rang out from the blackness below. "Get the hell outa here 'fore I shoot."

Instinct took over and both men slid to their knees behind the rock. Bob yelled, "Hold up now! We just wanted some water."

"Get it and get gone!"

"Can't do it. We're stayin' the night. We'll be gone at first light."

"That ain't gonna work, partner. You need to *git*."

"Sorry, that ain't gonna happen, either. Look, we were gonna stay in Hawthorne, but it's filled with horsemen. We didn't like their look so we came here. I've camped here before, and weren't nobody here. Maybe you've heard of me; my name's Jingle Bob."

Silence fell for ten seconds. "I've heard the name, but how do I know it attaches to you?"

“Would I be here instead of Hawthorne if I could help it?”

“Still don’t mean you’re that Jingle Bob guy.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, friend. I ain’t never had to prove who I was before.”

Nuff looked at him like *yes, you have* but Bob waved him off.

“You ever heard of Taco Ted?” Nuff yelled. Bob pursed his lips and frowned.

“Why?”

“He was my dad.”

“Yeah? What do they call you?”

“My name is Ted. Some people call me Nuff.”

They heard some rustling followed by gravel crunching underfoot.

“I’m comin’ up. If you’re plannin’ to shoot, shoot me good and get it over with.”

The only light came from the cave mouth. They heard the man’s footfalls as he grew near and both of them readied their rifles; you could never assume anything in the wilds, not if you wanted to keep breathing.

As the figure drew near, the dim light picked out his features. The first thing they saw was his empty hands, held up and to either side. He had a medium build, worn nondescript clothes, and high boots sewn together with a heavy cord. A sure stride indicated he was younger than his leathery skin made him appear.

He stopped ten feet in front of them. “If you’re gonna kill me, go ahead, but make it quick.”

“You gotta gun?” Bob asked.

The man pointed with a thumb back the way he’d come. “Down there.”

“What about a name?”

“Joshua Dalton.”

Bob leaned his rifle against the rock, stood, and extended his hand. “Jingle Bob. This here’s Nuff.”

#

Before doing anything else, they tended to the horses, giving them the last of the forage they’d brought with them and making sure they were safe in a corner of the front chamber.

Within half an hour, they’d built a fire near the cave entrance from brush and deadwood scattered around the valley outside. Dalton pulled out a

pot, filled it with water, and soon had it heating over the fire. Once the water came to a rolling boil, he threw in a handful of leaves and flowers. Neither Bob nor Nuff asked what the leaves were, because they both knew it was creosote, commonly used in the desert to make a fragrant tea.

"You got any honey?" Dalton asked.

"I had a whole pot in my house, but it's all burnt up."

"Don't help us now."

Nuff related the story about Bob coming to the house and the fight with the bandits. He left out the radio. They shared what food they'd brought, some jerked venison and pemmican, along with three ears of corn they threw in with the tea. Dalton added a welcome slab of salted boar, some fresh miner's lettuce, and prickly pear halves. They washed it all down with cold water and the tea.

"They got here a couple months ago." Dalton's left eye twitched when he spoke. "Some of them army buildings are still in good shape. I started livin' there last year, or maybe the one before that. I hid when they showed up. I figured they'd be gone pretty quick. I was wrong.

"They moved into the base, lookin' for guns and ammo. I know for a fact them bunkers are sealed tight. They tried breakin' in. When that didn't work, they tried blasting. That *really* didn't work. I tried to find a place in town where I might not be seen, but they was too many. I came out here a few days ago. Now you're here."

"Any idea who they are?"

"Here's all I know. They got a mark on their left arm, right here, above the hand. It's two letters, G and R. I heard one of 'em say he hoped they wintered here and not in North Dakota, wherever the hell that is."

"I been there once," Bob said. "It wasn't during winter, but I hear tell the snow gets over a man's head. It's a helluva long way from here. Six weeks' ride, at the least. Some of it's over rough country, too. If these people came from North Dakota, they're here to stay."

"I didn't know it but there was a family livin' in the ruins of the city. Mom, dad, looked like three little ones, all boys. I was hidin' under a collapsed house, hopin' they wouldn't find me. They dragged them people into a cleared space and shot the father and all three of them kids. The mother was screamin' but they took her into another house up the street that still had walls… I slipped off as soon as I could. I still heard her a long ways down the road."

“Nothing you could do?”

“Shit fire,” Dalton said, “they was fifty of them if there was one. No, ’tweren’t nothin’ I could do. I don’t know what I’m gonna do *now*.” Under a messy shock of hair he glanced up at Bob.

Bob and Nuff exchanged glances. Nuff shook his head but Bob nodded. “We’re riding south,” he said. Nuff turned away. “I got a spare horse you can use, but no saddle.”

“Done!” Dalton said.

“You can ride with no saddle?” Nuff challenged.

“I got rope and a blanket. That’s all I need.”

“We’re riding fast,” Bob warned. “And by fast, I mean pushing ourselves to the limit.”

“What’s the hurry?”

“I’ll tell you when we’re well away from Hawthorne.”

“Don’t trust me yet?”

“I don’t trust anybody ’til I have to.”

#

Chapter 57

Sweat saves blood.
Erwin Rommel

Sierra Army Depot, Herlong, CA
1152 hours, April 20

The machine-gun position was stuck on the far northern edge of the base's defensive line. Honey Lake protected their right flank and hundreds of ammunition bunkers stood at their backs. It wasn't much protection for such a vital spot, but Colonel Aretha Lamar didn't have much to work with. Her biggest concern was the exposed southern flank, which was where she'd put most of the few resources she had.

"Why did you put the gun here?" she asked her grandson. "You've got a better field of fire from the hill over there." Using her chin, she indicated a small rise forty yards to the right.

"There's no support. We'd be out there all alone. And the C-people could set up behind those little hills on either side, and we'd be cut to pieces."

A wall of sandbags circled a shallow pit where her grandson and a man named Horstler crewed an M240 machine gun. Along with a pile of neatly stacked ammunition boxes filled with belts for the M240, each man had a Carl Gustav with a dozen multi-purpose rounds in addition to his M-16. Colonel Lamar inspected the position for a few minutes, squatting to see the sight lines through the firing slits, checking the security of the ammo storage from direct fire, and suggesting where to place each weapon for faster access during a firefight.

"It's good work, men. This is a strong position. Well done. Do you two have any questions for me?"

"How come we didn't set up in the old prison?" Marcus asked.

Federal Corrections Institution Herlong had once been a medium-security prison between the base itself and Highway 395 to the west. The building remained structurally sound even five decades after it had been abandoned.

"We don't have enough boots, Marcus. Even counting the women, there's less than one hundred of us. Whoever I put out there might hold the Chinese off for a while, but eventually they'd be surrounded and killed. It's a

suicide mission and I won’t allow it.”

“But—”

“No!”

Marcus and Horstler exchanged a glance, each one prodding the other to speak up. Horstler was much older than Marcus Lamar and finally voiced the question they both wanted answered. “Colonel, ma’am, we’re not getting out of this, are we?”

“I don’t know that’s true,” she said, thinking about each word before she said it. “Junker Jane and her friends have hurt the Chinese badly and delayed them by several days, so we’re not alone in this fight. And Jingle Bob rode south looking for the American army that is said to be down there somewhere near Phoenix. If he rode fast, he could almost be there by now, and for all we know help is on the way. So don’t give up hope. There aren’t many of us, but we’ve got a lot of firepower.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Horstler said. “Thank you.”

She smiled her most grandmotherly smile. “Don’t you worry, Private. We’re going to be fine.”

#

Once Colonel Lamar was out of earshot, Horstler turned to his companion. “We’re fucked, aren’t we?”

Marcus Lamar lay back against the sandbags and threw pebbles at a target only he could see. “Royally.”

#

Chapter 58

It is one of the blessings of old friends that you can afford to be stupid with them.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Operation Overtime
1202 hours, April 20

"Thank God you're back," Angriff said as Norm Fleming entered his office.

Normally Fleming would have had a sardonic comeback, but not this time. He sat in a chair instead of the couch and leaned forward, all unusual behaviors for him. Angriff knew and turned away from his computer.

When Fleming said nothing, Angriff prompted him again. "Did you bring the fuel tanks for the Blackhawk?"

"Yes. Green Ghost is overseeing their installation."

"He's not an aircraft mechanic."

Fleming shrugged.

"What else is wrong?"

"Amunet."

"She still missing?"

Fleming nodded. "Yes. We searched everywhere, but didn't find any kind of secret door or tunnel."

"So no idea where she went?"

Fleming shook his head. "None."

"What do you think it means?"

"I have no idea, but Amy's a conniving woman. She was tied to Steeple and might have thought she was next to be arrested. Whatever her motive, I doubt it bodes well for us. She's not a Nick Angriff fan."

Angriff rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Terrific. I needed something else to worry about."

#

Amunet Mwangi rushed through the blackness of the tunnel, guided only by her flashlight. She'd never anticipated needing an escape tunnel, but she couldn't risk arrest, either. If Angriff had tossed Tom Steeple into a cell, then their allies needed to know. It changed everything.

She'd been walking for hours and cramps in her hamstrings hobbled her, but there was no turning back now. The tunnel exited into a natural cave on the north side of the mountain, some three miles from the main entrance to Operation Comeback. The cavern narrowed until Mwangi had to squeeze through a muddy passage less than two feet high. Closer to the end it widened to more than thirty feet before ending in a slope leading to the desert. And right where she'd expected it to be was a big square object she could barely see over, zipped into a waterproof covering.

In the dim light and slippery footing, it took her ten minutes to remove the heavy cover and reveal the brand-new Joint Light Tactical Vehicle beneath. This one had been specially fitted with extra fuel tanks to double its range, but even so it wouldn't come close to taking her where she needed to go.

The JLTV started on the second try and she drove out into the desert, speeding away without caring about the dust cloud boiling in her wake. They wouldn't be looking for her outside the base yet, but they would be soon and she needed to be gone.

The satellite phone sat on the passenger's seat, as expected. A private satellite still in orbit and functioning would relay her call for help. At least, she hoped it worked that way, but wouldn't know until she tried it. She'd wait until she wasn't driving cross country to do that. If it didn't work, though, it was a long walk to North Dakota.

#

Angriff saw the self-blame in his friend's frown. "I wouldn't worry too much about it, Norm. She can run, but she'll just die tired."

"Forgive me if I'm not as sanguine as you are. Do you want some good news?"

"If it's *really* good news, yes, but if you're being sarcastic…"

"It's really good news. Comeback lists some pretty impressive hardware in their inventory."

"Like the A-10s?"

"Those are the tip of the iceberg. There are all kinds of exotic and experimental things. One of them is a backpack MOF, which stands for metal organic framework. Get this… it synthesizes water out of the air, even desert air."

"Does it work?"

"I don't know, but if it does and we can replicate it… but even that's

not all. There are all kinds of gadgets. Tracked, unmanned gun platforms, like miniature drone tanks, experimental ammo… you name it. But here's the best part. There are literally hundreds of single-mount hovercraft."

"Hovercraft? I knew they were working on something like that. I wonder how much training it takes to use them?"

"I don't know, but that's a potential game-changer. You could ferry a whole company over a river and never need a bridge. There's so much more, too. Phosphorous anti-tank rounds for a fifty-caliber machine gun."

"Looks like I sent the right man to replace you."

"Maybe, but he needs a hard-ass chief of security. Steeple's got a lot of friends over there."

Angriff keyed the intercom. "J.C., is Colonel Walling back yet?"

"The colonel is walking up the ramp as we speak, sir."

Seconds later, Walling stood in the doorway and Angriff waved him in. "Welcome back, B.F. We're getting the band back together."

"Sir?"

"Never mind. I need you to consult with Khin Saw about who would be the best choice for head of security over at Comeback. They need to have no ties to General Steeple."

"I'll get right on it, General."

#

Chapter 59

Enemies surround me, lusting for the blood
That pours from many wounds and turns the dust to mud.
Sergio Velazquez, from Defiance

Operation Overtime
1307 hours, April 20

Sergeant Schiller knocked on the door and Angriff waved him in, too. As the sergeant stepped forward, gunshots echoed through the Clam Shell and bullets ricocheted off the Crystal Palace's glass, right where he'd stood. Instinctively he dove down. Walling and Fleming both dropped to the floor.

An instant later Sergeant Schiller half crawled, half walked behind Angriff's desk. "Excuse me, sir. I need you to move!"

As more gunshots echoed in the Clam Shell, Angriff obeyed without hesitating, scooting his chair well back out of the way. As Schiller crawled into the open space under his desk, Angriff took the Desert Eagles from the top drawer, shoved in their heavy magazines, and chambered a round in each of them.

Streams of bullets hit the glass with sharp *pings* but without leaving a mark.

"If they concentrate on one point, they can shatter that glass." Schiller felt on the floor for something.

Angriff didn't know what he was doing and didn't ask. Whatever it was, he didn't want to distract the sergeant.

"Found it!" Schiller said. Something clicked, then all around the Crystal Palace, titanium steel shutters hummed downward.

As they closed, Angriff saw two figures running up the ramp. The doors were a foot from the floor when boots became visible beneath them. Then a knee appeared. The attacker's plan was obvious and Angriff ran over to the door. The tip of a rifle slid under the titanium blinds, but before it could fire, Angriff laid the pistol in his right hand on the floor and fired one round. Recoil flung his hand back and he couldn't fire a second one, but the scream outside the steel made it clear he didn't need to. The rifle barrel disappeared and the shutters closed.

"Think it's the RSVS?" Fleming said.

Angriff stood by the door, panting. “I can’t keep track any more. At least the blast doors are down.” There was an access ladder at the back of the platform and he hoped the rest of the headquarters staff had gone down it to safety.

“We have to assume they planned for that,” Fleming said.

“What are you thinking, gas?”

“Sarin, anthrax, explosives, who knows? But you can bet they knew about those blast panels.”

“Those doors are rated to withstand almost anything short of a suitcase nuke.”

“What about gas or bio?”

“No need to worry about that, sir.” Schiller was standing behind the desk and Angriff had no idea what he meant, but when he saw what Schiller had found, he was stunned.

The main support for the Crystal Palace and its surrounding platform was a thick titanium column, on the far right side of the Clam Shell. Angriff knew all the wiring for his headquarters ran up that conduit, but he hadn’t known the rest of it. Under the desk, a trap door had slid to one side and revealed a ladder of handholds leading down. A line of LEDs lit the chamber from within.

“I’ll… be… damned. Where does this lead?”

“There’s a panel at the bottom that brings you out beside the Clam Shell, where the column is anchored in the headquarters communications section. You can also go down one more level and this exits near your quarters. The panel is hidden in a wall and you can’t see it from the outside unless you know it’s there.”

The mention of his quarters registered in Angriff’s mind. “Janine and Cynthia are in my quarters!” He drew the second Eagle and offered it butt first to Fleming.

But he waved his hands to decline the offer. “I want a real gun.” He reached under his belt and pants at the top of his right thigh and withdrew a Sig Sauer P226, the 9mm pistol designed for the army and preferred by Special Forces and Navy SEALs. Walling still wore his sidearm in a shoulder holster from his duty in Prescott.

Angriff slid the Eagle back into its holster and almost jumped into the shaft.

“Take it easy, sir,” Schiller said. “Those rings are slick.”

Angriff didn’t care. He pushed his aging body down the ladder faster than was safe and twice nearly fell. Above him he sensed the others following, but didn’t pause to look. The shaft was fifteen feet wide, with a second metallic conduit taking up most of one side, leaving less than half that space for them and the recessed ladder. Every strand of the headquarters’ wiring passed through that inner conduit. The sound of sporadic gunfire continued outside, muffled by the steel barrier.

At the first door was a landing, but he passed it by and headed for the bottom, only to find it wasn’t the bottom. The shaft kept going down and down, out of sight, but at the second door was another landing and he stepped off there. A sliding bolt on either side held the door in place and once unlocked, it slid to the left.

Angriff peered both ways into the hallway, careful not to present a target. Twenty feet to his left, the door to his quarters stood open. The tip of a gun barrel protruded into the hall, but whoever held it stood out of sight, not giving him a target. This was Senior Officers’ country, with Norm Fleming’s quarters next to his and the rest of his staff nearby. The corridor was empty.

He slipped into the corridor and moved with the stealth that had saved him on so many occasions. Despite his age, Angriff’s freakish physical talents allowed him to move in silence, with the Eagle held in both hands pointed forward. He slowed his breathing and calmed his mind, mentally rehearsing his plan of attack.

He was three feet from his quarters and about to whirl into the doorway when a corporal sprinted into the hallway thirty feet ahead.

“General!” she cried.

The face of the man holding the gun appeared two feet in front of him. Their eyes locked and the man swung to fire, but Angriff pulled the trigger first.

The blast, combined with the weight of the fifty-caliber round, blew off the top of the man’s head, spattering brains, blood, and bone down the hallway. Before the body could even collapse, Angriff grabbed an arm with one hand and threw what was left of him out of the doorway.

Pivoting into his apartment, he took two steps and saw a sight to freeze his blood. Cynthia lay on the ground, unconscious and bleeding from a cut on her temple. Beside her was the twisted body of a man in regulation ACUs, with a jagged shard of glass in his neck and a wide puddle of blood all around him. This he took in with one fast glance. What held his attention was

the woman hiding behind his wife, with a pistol pointed at her head and her other arm wrapped around Janine's waist.

Dr. Sharon Goldstone.

"I never wanted it to come to this, Nick," she said. "But you just won't listen to reason. Now it's too late."

"Sharon?" He centered his sights on Goldstone's right eye. His hand never wavered, despite his shock.

"You're a great field commander, Nick, but my God, are you a fool! Tom Steeple put this whole thing together and he's the only one who can use it to resurrect the country. Can't you see that? Are you really that blind?"

"Do you sign off on the whole authoritarian thing, Sharon? Re-write the Constitution so one man makes all the decisions?"

"After consulting with his advisors, yes! The Republic is dead and buried. The country died because the Constitution had become obsolete." Tears ran down her face.

Nick knew she'd had feelings for him because the truth was, he'd felt the same way before Janine had come back. Was that what had triggered the attack? "I still believe in it, Sharon."

"God, you're a stubborn man. Before The Collapse, half the country hated the other, and when the crisis happened, we couldn't come together even to save ourselves. We need to make sure that never happens again."

"And you think Tom Steeple is the man to do it?"

"Steeple first, yes, but then somebody who understands how to wield power!"

"Put the gun down, Sharon, and explain what you mean. Who are you talking about, if it's not Steeple?"

"It doesn't matter, Nick. Put *your* gun down and release Tom, then turn over command of Overtime."

"Not while I'm alive. Who's behind all this, Sharon? I know you; you're a good person and this isn't who you are."

The anguish on her face changed to anger. "You had your chance. Don't you understand it's too late to worry about that now? Unless you want me to put a bullet through your wife's pretty head, here's what you're going to do. You're going to release General Steeple and any of his people you've locked up. You're going to relinquish command of Overtime and Comeback. *And* you're going to—"

As she spoke, her obvious tension spread to her arm, contracting it,

and the tip of her pistol inched upward. Angriff never took his eyes off his target. When he judged that her gun barrel was no longer directly aimed at Janine's head, he fired without warning, aiming for Goldstone's hand near the wrist. By reflex, her tightened finger pulled the trigger, but it was no longer aimed at Janine Angriff when it went off. Instead, when the huge pistol round struck her wrist, it pushed the hand backward. In the milliseconds between when he fired and when she did, the hand holding her gun redirected to aim at her own throat.

The bullet ripped through her neck as the muzzle blast scalded her face and singed Janine Angriff's hair. Goldstone released both the gun and her captor as she clutched her ruined throat. Blood poured through her fingers and soaked her shirt.

Janine Angriff turned and saw the terror in her eyes, the pleading for help. Sharon Goldstone didn't want to die and her twisted face reflected all the horror of approaching death.

But Mrs. Angriff had no sympathy for the woman who'd pistol-whipped her daughter and threatened to kill her. She smashed Goldstone's nose with the heel of her hand and swept her feet out from under her, as she'd been taught by her husband. By the time Nick knelt beside the dying doctor, she was trembling with spasms. Within ten seconds she was dead.

"Is it over?" Janine pronounced over as *ovah.*

"No. My headquarters is under attack. But I can't leave you and Cynthia."

She picked up Goldstone's pistol and did a press check to ensure a round was chambered. Then she looked back up at her husband. "Go do what you have to do, Nick. We'll be fine."

"Did you take care of him?" He pointed at the dead man with the glass in his neck.

"He had it coming." Her stern look assured him of her strength.

He turned for the door then stopped, spun on his heel, and ran past his wife to the closet. From the top shelf, he pulled down a box. Inside was a shirt of thin material, which could only be seen once he removed it. Taking off his ACU shirt and the undershirt beneath, he slipped this over his head and then put the others back on. It was the experimental mesh armor that had saved his life once before, when Bettison had shot him down on sub-floor eleven.

Ready for action, he headed for the door, stopped an instant to kiss his

wife on the cheek, and then left.

#

More chatter from automatic weapons penetrated into the titanium cylinder.

“Shouldn’t we keep going, sir?” Schiller said when Fleming stepped onto the first landing. “This leads back into headquarters.”

“We have to help our people,” Fleming said. “It sounds like they’re fighting for their lives.”

Fleming slid the door open and peered out into the communications section of headquarters. A rectangular warren of cubicles with monitors and comm. gear filled the space between him and the glass wall and massive main doors directly ahead, while on his left the room ended in a wall and hallway leading to the supply closets and bathrooms. That was an enticing escape route, but a cul-de-sac with no way out. Unlike the stepped-down terraces in the Clam Shell behind him, this area was flat. Angling upward on his right was the ramp leading to the Crystal Palace. Below the ramp, and around the column to his left, he glimpsed the Clam Shell, and directly above was the platform surrounding the Crystal Palace.

Footsteps rattled on the metal mesh above. It sounded like several pairs of boots, not just one.

A shot echoed through the Clam Shell, followed by two more. Putting a finger to his lips, he stood by, pistol locked and loaded, as the others exited the titanium column. Schiller came next with his own pistol out, and Walling was last.

Peering around the column and beneath the ramp, Fleming watched technicians in the Clam Shell, huddled in groups, some with guns, taking cover behind anything they could. One of them was Dupree. The lanky computer tech still had the M-16 he’d carried when Steeple had arrived and he’d been in the honor guard. He rose up and fired a three-round burst, and then ducked as two gunmen fired back. Some of the return fire seemed to be coming from the Crystal Palace walkway above, some from elsewhere in the Clam Shell, but with the echoes from the glass wall and stone, it was impossible to be certain.

Fleming and the others knelt beside a cubicle.

“I can’t get in!” a voice yelled from above. “This thing’s locked up tight.”

A second voice answered from the foot of the ramp, just out of

Fleming's sight but in full view of anyone outside the glass wall. "Shit! Keep trying."

Fleming's mind automatically calculated: at least two above, one at the ramp's foot, some laying covering fire and keeping the technicians busy… five or six attackers in the headquarters area, possibly more.

"We need explosives to get in there. Let's cut our losses and get out of here. Rex is hurt bad."

"Shit!" The gunman at the bottom of the ramp opened fire in frustration, spraying the office area where Fleming and the other two knelt in hiding. Bullets shattered the acrylic dividers separating each cubicle and did little real damage, but a few stray rounds ricocheted off the tower. One hit Walling in the left ankle and he cried out.

"Somebody's down there!"

Walling's ankle poured blood and he rolled in agony. Fleming chanced a peek around the corner of the cubicle where they'd hidden. Three men with M-16s fanned out and duck-walked his way. He signaled Schiller three men were approaching and what they should do. Each took a deep breath, rose, fired three shots, and then ducked back behind cover. Someone screamed.

The men on the platform above opened fire, leaning as far over the railing as they could and firing downward. The angle was bad and their shots hit behind the three men, but it pinned them down and kept them from moving. Ricochets could hit them again any time, though, which meant staying put wasn't safe, either. To make things worse, while to their left was an opening that led into a hallway, if somebody got onto the ramp on their right they'd be outflanked and easy targets.

"Think we can get back inside?" Schiller asked. "Colonel Walling's in bad shape."

"We'd have to carry him. We wouldn't make it five feet."

Walling breathed heavily through gritted teeth. "Same side. Same damned side."

Using the polished titanium surface of the column as a mirror, Fleming could see two of the men on their level using cover to sneak up. He popped up and let off two rounds, driving them to cover but doing no damage.

"Give us Angriff and we'll let you go!" one them called. "He's the one we want. We don't care about you, Fleming. We just want Angriff."

“They think General Angriff is with us! What are your orders, sir?” Schiller asked.

“We wait.”

Schiller had been under fire too many times to tell a superior he was crazy in the middle of a firefight. “For how long?”

Fleming smiled and tried to be reassuring. “Until Nick shows up.”

#

Chapter 60

Out of the darkness,
Out of the black,
Out of the ether,
Stabbed in the back.
Sergio Velazquez, from Wounded Soul

Operation Overtime hangar deck
1313 hours, April 20

Green Ghost was turning a wrench inside the Blackhawk when someone started yelling inside the hangar deck.

"Somebody's attacking the Clam Shell! They say Nick's dead and so's Fleming!"

Green Ghost slid out of the helicopter and ran over, grabbing the man by his shirt. "Where did you hear that?"

"My buddy told me. He heard the shots."

The man hadn't finished before Green Ghost took off at a dead run for the stairs leading to the level above, where corridors led into the main base. With the ambient noise of the hangar, combined with excited chatter as news of the attack spread through the base, he didn't hear the other footsteps running in his wake. Joe and Morgan Randall had been standing nearby inspecting the Blackhawk.

#

As he left his quarters, Nick still had six rounds in each pistol and two magazines in his waist holster. He walked carefully, holding the gun in firing position with his finger on the trigger, something he never did except in combat. He eschewed the elevators in favor of the stairwell beside them. It allowed him to move with the gun always aimed up and forward.

As he reached the landing halfway up to the headquarters level, he spotted a figure holding a rifle in the exit door above, standing half in the corridor and half in the stairwell. He was dressed in standard ACUs and held the door open with his body. The man's attention was drawn to the gunshots Nick could hear now, and which he knew came from his headquarters.

Without warning, the guard turned his head into the stairwell, as though he'd heard something. He listened a minute and raised his rifle. Then

he finished his turn and started down. Where Angriff stood, just below the landing, his only cover was the railing and the turn of the stairs. But if he backed down for cover, his motion would attract the guard's eye.

"Hey!" A shout came from the corridor in a voice Angriff recognized. "What's all the shootin' about?"

The guard turned away and strode into the corridor to deal with Dennis Tompkins. The door slammed behind him on its spring.

#

Tompkins wore blue jeans and a brown shirt, with no socks or shoes. He kept his hands splayed to show they were empty.

The hard-eyed guard, face hidden behind a red bandana, looked as if he wanted to spit. "Get out of here, old man. I don't want to kill you, but I will."

"Oh, please don't kill me. I heard shots and thought maybe I could help." He sauntered two paces forward, innocently, and got within ten feet of the gunman, who stood near the closed stairwell door.

"I'm warnin' you, don't come any closer."

The door squeaked as someone cracked it open. The guard jerked around, rifle held waist-high, ready to fire. The instant his attention was drawn to the door, Tompkins reached around to his back and yanked out a three-foot piece of wood that had been stuck into his pants. It was colored a dark red, and he'd made it long ago from desert ironwood. Swinging it one-handed, he smashed it into the back of the man's head. The gunman dropped his rifle and collapsed in a heap.

Two seconds later, Nick Angriff flung the door open and emerged into the corridor, a Desert Eagle aimed right at Tompkins' face.

"I wondered where you were at," Tompkins said.

#

"He's losing a lot of blood, sir," Schiller said.

Walling had stopped rolling around and simply lay on his back, eyes closed and teeth clenched.

"One more minute, J.C. If Nick's not here by then, we'll try to make it back to the shaft. That's our only hope."

"What makes you so sure he's coming?"

Fleming's smile was intentionally wry. "Don't you know him better than that by now?"

#

From where they stood by the stairwell, the curve of the corridor kept Tompkins and Angriff out of sight of the main headquarters doors.

"Wanna try that same trick again?" Tompkins had retrieved the fallen gunman's M-16.

"No, that'll never work again."

"Good, 'cause I ain't ready to die just yet."

"We need a distraction." Angriff looked all around them, but the corridor was empty. Not even a garbage can to throw. Seeing no other choice, he prepared to go in shooting, but somebody down the hall saved him the trouble by opening fire.

"You stay and watch him," Angriff said. "We need him alive."

With that, he balanced into a boxer's stance, Eagle steadied in both hands, and moved forward.

#

Lying on his stomach, Green Ghost inched a little closer and peered down the curved corridor toward the Clam Shell. Inch by inch he pushed his head along the floor until he glimpsed what lay ahead. A figure aiming a huge pistol eased cautiously toward the glass wall of the headquarters. It was unmistakably Saint Dad, and in that moment he realized that was what he would call his father when they were alone, *Saint Dad*. When around other people he would simply call him *Saint*, just as he always had, but in private...

Joe and Morgan Randall padded to a stop behind him. He touched a finger to his lips and mouthed words without speaking. *Do either of you have a gun?*

Joe shook his head. Green Ghost pointed down and mouthed *stay here*.

He sat up and pulled off his camo T-shirt. Wadding it, he jammed it into the crack where the wall met the floor. Then he gestured back with one hand, and all three of them scooted back ten feet. Ghost only had a Sig Sauer, but aiming at the shirt, he squeezed off two rounds to distract the guard in the headquarters doorway. They ricocheted from the marble flooring but the shirt absorbed a lot of the energy, and they flew down the hallway at much reduced speed. It was a calculated risk.

#

Angriff flinched as two sharp *bangs* echoed down the hall, but then realized they weren't aimed at him. Instead, somebody was giving him cover fire. He walked faster until he spotted another guard, this one in the

headquarters doorway some thirty feet distant. Holding his gun at port arms, the muzzle pointed upward, his body faced Nick directly, but his head and eyes were turned to the right, the direction of the pistol fire.

Angriff was twenty feet away when the man noticed movement and turned. He lowered the rifle to fire.

He was too late.

#

Bam! The gunshot echoed down the corridor and through the headquarters.

Fleming grinned. “Nick’s here.”

He was still smiling when bullets sprayed them from the ramp on their right. One hit Schiller in the right shoulder and thigh, while a third glanced off Fleming’s cheek. The gunman paused to reload and brought the rifle to his shoulder, but another gunshot rang out.

Bam!

The impact knocked him sideways. He rolled around for a few seconds and came to rest against the restraining mesh on the ramp side. Mouth agape, he rattled a breath. Blood fell through the mesh catwalk to the floor in large drops.

Bam! Bam!

Someone fell from the platform overhead and landed on a desk two cubicles over.

“Norm? Are you out there?”

Fleming fought down the pain in his face and struggled to keep his voice normal. “Here, Nick, all three of us.”

“Anybody wounded?”

“Open mike, Nick, open mike.” It was an old code. *We’re being eavesdropped, so I’m telling you the opposite of the truth.* “Everybody’s fine. Got that? All three of us are fine.”

“Got it. Green Ghost is here with me, and two squads of MPs are with him. I’ll give these clowns until the count of five to surrender, then we put ’em down like dogs. Roger that?”

“Roger that!” Fleming gritted his teeth as he said it. Blood soaked his shirt collar.

“One… two… three…”

“Hold it!” someone yelled from somewhere. “How do we know you won’t shoot us on sight?”

“You have my word,” Angriff said. “If you boys are part of the Seventh Cav, you know I don’t break my promises. You’ll get a fair trial.”

“What about torture? We know about that blond-haired lunatic.”

Meaning Nipple; Angriff had to grin at that. Apparently the whole base knew of her reputation. “That’ll be up to you.”

After a few seconds, a different voice spoke from the same location. “I’m coming out.”

The former attacker rose from behind a cubicle wall and put hands on his head. A red bandana still hid his face. Behind him, a single, unexpected shot made them all blink. A red mist sprayed the surrendering gunman.

“On your knees.” Angriff approached within six feet. “Norm, hold tight. Medical’s on the way.”

“If you’ve got him, I’ll help Socrates,” Green Ghost said as he slipped by.

“He’s not going anywhere.”

Seconds later, Joe and Morgan Randall raced into the Clam Shell. Seeing her father wasn’t hurt, she followed her brother to help with the wounded, and her husband followed her.

#

The eyes… Angriff recognized but couldn’t quite place the surrendered gunman’s eyes.

“Using one hand, carefully slide down that bandana,” he said.

Hate showed in the man’s eyes as he complied. Angriff saw the taut, lean face of a man he had promoted less than a year before.

“Colonel Claringdon?” He kept his eyes fixed on the man as medical personnel rushed past.

Doctor Friedenthall spoke from behind him. “Are you injured, General?”

“No.”

Friedenthall left without another word.

“*Why*?” Angriff asked.

“I’ll save it for my trial.”

“We’ll see about that.” His tiny smile was only visible because of the deep creases cut into his face.

#

Damage to the headquarters was minimal. Sensitive areas throughout the base had secondary internal blast shields for just such emergencies.

Dupree himself had tripped the deployment switch. A few rounds had hit equipment in the Clam Shell before the bulletproof polycarbonate shield had come down, but the communication area beneath the Crystal Palace had taken the worst of it, but Angriff's office remained undamaged.

"This is my fault," Green Ghost said. "I should have ferreted these people out."

Angriff trimmed a cigar and was annoyed that his hand still shook. "You can't always find a traitor before he acts."

"Even if I didn't know names, I should have seen it coming. You were the target, again. That's two assassination attempts in the past couple of days."

"From the same two groups that tried it last time, too."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Today's attack was Steeple's doing, or at least his people's doing. If anybody should have seen Colonel Claringdon's involvement, it was me, not you. As for Sharon Goldstone… I still don't understand her involvement."

"The red bandanas are new."

"Yeah. They're popping up everywhere all of a sudden."

"How's Mrs. Angriff?"

"Mrs. Angriff?"

"How's *Janine*? And Cynthia?"

"Cynthia might wind up with a scar but she'll be fine. Janine is tough, a lot tougher than you might think."

"I'm gonna go have a talk with Claringdon and he's not gonna like it."

"No, you're not. You're going to finish getting that Blackhawk mission done as first priority, and then you're going to take a team to Creech. End of discussion." The intercom buzzed, and hearing the voice of Corporal Juan Diaz instead of Schiller threw Angriff off stride. "General, Doctor Friedenthall sent a preliminary status report on our wounded."

"Come to my office, Juan."

Nervous, Diaz stood at rigid attention and saluted. Angriff returned it.

"Relax, corporal, I've shot all the people I intend to shoot for a while. I asked you to come into my office so we aren't overheard. That's a good lesson for the future."

"Yes, sir."

Angriff tried to come across as the kindly father. "The report?"

“Oh, sorry, General. Colonel Walling’s ankle was shattered and he lost a lot of blood, but he’ll be all right. He should be out of the hospital tomorrow with a cast and crutches. The bullet that struck General Fleming grazed his cheek. He’s on his way back here now. As for Sergeant Schiller, the round in his shoulder was a through-and-through and did no major damage. The one in his thigh was a little worse but nothing life-threatening. He should be back within a week.”

“Thank you, Diaz. I guess you know you’ve got big shoes to fill.”

Diaz turned to the door just as Nipple burst through it with a frantic look on her face. Joe and Morgan Randall were close behind. Morgan started to speak but Nipple beat her to it. “You’re okay?” She panted from her run.

“Thank you, Corporal. Please close the door behind you.” Once Diaz had left, Angriff smiled. “I’m fine… sweetheart. So’s your brother over there.” He pointed to the couch.

But she ignored Green Ghost. Morgan tried to ask another question, and again she was too slow. “What about Mom?” Nipple said.

Angriff’s eyes cut to Green Ghost, who sat wide-eyed with his mouth hanging open. “She’s fine, too. A little shook up. Cynthia got clocked in the head but she should be all right. I know they’d like to see you.”

The two Randalls left, rattling back down the ramp toward the living quarters, but Nipple stayed and buried her face in one hand.

“Talk to me… Nikki. Are *you* okay?”

“I don’t think so.” She collapsed next to her brother on the couch. “I’ve spent my whole life hating you, and then I heard about the attack and… and something happened inside me. I’ve never felt anything like it before. When that Bettison guy tried to kill you and Morgan, I wished him luck. Then I hoped the Sevens would do it. And when you and Steeple almost died in the hangar the other day, I got mad at the dead guy who screwed it up. But now… now…” She looked up with tears streaming down her face.

Angriff’s heart lurched. “You don’t have to explain.”

“I can’t do this any more.” After pausing and searching for a word, she threw up her hands in exasperation. “Dad! I can’t do this any more, *Dad*. I’m not a soldier, or I’m not now. I had the fire, but now I don’t. It just vanished. And without it, I’m not any good for that kind of thing.”

“Are you saying you’re quitting Zombie?” Green Ghost asked.

“Yeah, B.B., I think I am.”

“What the fuck?”

Angriff held up a hand to stop him. “What changed?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never felt this way before. It’s weird.”

“Is it this Toy?”

“Maybe. Has… damn it, it’s hard to figure out what to call everybody… has Nick told you what happened when we were young? The voodoo thing?”

“You have got to be kidding me!” Green Ghost exploded.

Angriff waved him down. “Let her talk.”

“It’s bullshit.”

“Let… her… talk.”

Green Ghost leaned back, fuming, crossing his arms and tucking his head into his chest. Angriff realized it was the same mannerism that *he* had used to pout when he was younger.

“I know Nick thinks it’s stupid and maybe it is, but this old voodoo priest said I was possessed by a demon and wouldn’t get better until I found a toy—”

Green Ghost couldn’t help himself. “He said child’s plaything.”

“Do I have to throw you out of here?” Angriff said.

“Anyway,” she continued, as if Ghost hadn’t spoken, “I never knew any different because I’d always felt the same way, angry, wanting to hurt people. I *liked* it. But now, I’m thirty-three years old. Nick and I lived nine years after you went cold. I don’t even know how old you are, or my sisters, not really. Nick’s tried to explain it to me but math’s not my strong suit. And that’s not the big thing here. I’m slowing down. I can feel it. I’m not what I used to be.”

Angriff’s voice was gentle. “I’ve seen you in action. I wish my whole brigade was as slow as you. Your reflexes and hand-eye coordination are better than ninety-nine percent of all the people who’ve ever lived.”

“Morgan’s faster. She’s the one who showed me how much I’ve slowed down and pointed out I’m not as young as I thought I was.”

“So Morgan started this?” Nick said.

She turned in her seat. “That’s not what I’m saying. I’ve only slowed down a little, I know that, but the fire isn’t there any more. I never thought about having kids or raising a family before… but now it’s *all* I think about.”

No one spoke for more than ten seconds.

“How about we do this,” Angriff said at last. “Zombie needs logistical support. Weapons checks, making sure ammunition supplies are adequate,

arranging lurps and recons, that sort of thing. Does that sound like something you could do?"

"Sure," she said. "I still want to help."

"Then let's leave it there. You're off active operations but are taking over supply duties. Nick, that leaves you down a man. Any thoughts?"

"Please call me Green Ghost. One day you're gonna slip and do it in front of others."

"I don't care."

"But I do. At least for now."

"Fine. Green Ghost."

"I know one candidate. I need to speak with him first, however."

"Not Captain Dickhead," Nikki said.

Green Ghost smiled and pointed at her. "There's my sister!"

#

Nikki had left and Green Ghost was about to follow when Angriff stopped him. "Don't forget what I said. I need you to go to Creech, not Sierra, to assess the situation there and let me know what we need to do. It is essential that we get that base up and running ASAP."

"Vapor can do that as well as I can; Wingnut might do it better. I need to be on the Blackhawk up to Sierra."

"You're going to Creech. Find somebody else for the Blackhawk."

"Is this because I'm your son and there's angry Chinese heading for Sierra?"

"It's because I need you at Creech! Is it because you're my son that you think you can argue with the orders of your commanding officer?"

Ghost folded his arms and stared at his father. In all their years together, Angriff had never before pulled rank, regardless of how much Green Ghost argued about an operation. "Will there be anything else, *sir*?"

"Yes. You'll be accompanied by a young lady named Nado who grew up on the base and can fill you in on the details. I want information by tomorrow night. Use whatever resources you need. Now you're dismissed."

#

Chapter 61

“Bite ’em, fight ’em, kick ’em in the ass,
Stomp ’em, romp ’em, make ’em chew glass.
Take ’em, break ’em, shake ’em all around,
Grill ’em, kill ’em, put ’em in the ground.”
Song of Task Force Zombie (a/k/a The Nameless)

Operation Overtime
1548 hours, April 20

Task Force Zombie operated out of a large storeroom near the hangar deck that Green Ghost had appropriated and cleared out. Everybody had a bunk, desk, chair, and a small nightstand with three drawers. Rifles and handguns were kept in lockers at the far end, while they stored larger weapons in nearby Motor Bay A. That was all they needed in post-apocalyptic America.

As not only leader of the team but also the S-5 of the 7th Cavalry, in charge of security for the entire base, Green Ghost kept an office near the storeroom. A single supply sergeant named Ulov ran things when he wasn’t around and assisted him when he was.

Ulov was showing him a stack of fitness reports when a loud knock interrupted them.

“It looks like Prince Charming is here. Show him in, Yuri.”

Shackles bound Claw’s hands and ankles. But instead of turning him sullen, his time in prison appeared to have had the desired effect. His lips were pressed tight and his eyes were pleading. Four MPs surrounded him.

“Unshackle him,” Ghost ordered.

Claw stood taller than the burly MP corporal who commanded the detail. His shoulders and thighs would have been envied by professional linebackers.

The corporal cut him a glance. “Are you sure, sir?”

Although taller than average himself, Green Ghost was lean. The corporal clearly worried about him being alone with their prisoner.

“I’m sure. I’ll be fine, Corporal.”

Once freed from his restraints, Claw rubbed his wrists and ankles, restoring the circulation. “They were a little tight.”

“I told them not to take any chances.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. To what do I owe the honor of my visit?”

“How do you feel about General Steeple?”

“Steeple? I don’t know. He’s a general; I do what he says.”

“That’s it?”

“We’re not butt-buddies, if that’s what you mean.”

“So you don’t owe him any allegiance?”

“Allegiance? What are you talking about, man? He’s my commander. I follow his orders. When Nick was my commander, I followed his orders. I’m a soldier like you are. Can I ask what’s up?”

“Earlier today…” He paused and checked his watch. “…about two hours ago, an attack was carried out on this base’s headquarters by a die-hard group loyal to General Steeple. The general was placed under arrest two days ago for high treason. This group wanted to kill Saint Nick and replace him with Steeple. They also might be affiliated with an unknown group of raiders in the countryside who wear red bandanas or scarves.”

Claw nodded, the tattoo on his neck stretching like an accordion. “Now I get it. You wanna know if I’m loyal to Steeple personally.”

“Exactly.”

“He can EABOD for all I care.”

“Don’t just say it because you think I want to hear it.”

“Listen, Zombie’s my life — the mission, the people in it. You guys are the only family I’ve ever been able to count on, you dig? Even that whacked-out sister of yours. She might have the personality of a water moccasin, but I never doubted that if my ass was on the line, she’d be there covering my six. *Unity of purpose*, *unity of mind*, *unity of soul*… I take that shit seriously, man. Steeple came along when the world had gone crazy and offered me a safe haven in return for my special talents. I didn’t have any better offers at the time, so I said yes. That’s the extent of my loyalty. If the prick tried to kill Saint Nick, I’ll personally put a bullet in his brain. Nick’s my man.”

“If I let you back in, you’ll be low man behind everybody else, including a couple you’ve never met. Got it? Vapor’s number two, Wingnut three, One-Eye four, et cetera, et cetera.”

“Even Nipple?”

“My sister is not operational at the moment. She’s taken over our logistical support.”

“She’s not knocked up, is she?”

Green Ghost slammed his swivel chair forward, pointing. “One more remark like that and you can bunk with Steeple until you two *do* fall in love!”

Claw bowed his head. “I’m sorry, man. The truth is… well, I always kind of liked her.”

Green Ghost squinted, evaluating the truth of that last statement. *Nobody* had ever said they liked Nipple. But he saw no sign of deception in Claw’s face. “Ninety days’ probation. You do nothing and say nothing to piss off anybody. Hear me? If I get one complaint, no matter how unfair you may think it is, you’re out.”

“Back to a cell?”

“That depends, but out of Zombie for sure. If Personnel puts you somewhere else, that’s up to them. You might be digging latrines at an FOB, but I won’t drive up there to give a shit.”

“I appreciate you, man, I won’t let you down.”

“Tell Corporal Ulov you need a bunk, then gear up. You’ve got an op as soon as the hangar crew finishes installing long-range fuel tanks on a Blackhawk.”

“For real?”

“You might not be so excited when you hear what it is.”

“I don’t care. I want back in the field. Any mission briefing?”

“Yeah. There’s an old army base full of tanks and ammo and shit called Sierra Army Depot. Maybe bio and chemical weapons, too. It’s up north of Tahoe. The Chinese want it and have sent a force of unknown strength to get it, and best we can tell, there’re only a handful of our people to stop ’em. That’s where you come in.”

“Sounds like fun.” Claw barked a laugh. “Are our people any good?”

“Unknown. We’re guessing on numbers and composition.”

“What kind of force is going with us?”

“It’ll be you, Vapor, a long-range radio, and as much ammo as you can carry. Your mission will be to assess the situation and to recommend, relay, and coordinate actions needing to be taken by the brigade in defense of that base. It might also be you two against an army.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“And the radio might not work at that distance.”

“I love a good desert vacation.”

“One more thing you should know. I’ve issued a standing shoot-on-

sight order if, by some nightmare, Adder shows up. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Fuck, no. I'll kill the prick in a heartbeat for what he did to my squad. Did he survive?"

"Unknown, but I've come to expect every scumbag from the old world to suddenly pop up somewhere. I won't be surprised if he does, too."

"I kind of hope he does. We have unfinished business."

"Even though he's your friend?"

"He ain't no friend of mine. But he's not part of Comeback, I can guarantee that."

"I know. I just have this feeling he's out there, somewhere, somehow."

#

Chapter 62

The bad man desires arbitrary power. What moves the evil man is the love of injustice.

John Rawls

Near Beulah, ND
1549 hours, April 20

After the mountains of the west, Amunet Mwangi found the flatness of North Dakota disorienting. The convoy of one supply truck, two APCs, and two Humvees had driven straight through from where she'd met them in east-central Utah, with breaks only for refueling. It had been a grueling 74-hour trip on the ramshackle interstate highway system of the defunct United States. Several times she'd held her breath as they drove over suspect bridges. The only food available consisted of tasteless protein bars washed down with cold instant coffee or plain water.

Mwangi had waited four days after getting through on the satellite phone, a nervous period with only the damned protein bars for food. Only fear of rattlesnakes and cougars broke the boredom. Every few hours, she'd taken off her pants and underwear to shake them out, in case a scorpion had crawled into a fold. She had never served a tour in the field and that lack of experience translated into paranoia and terror.

Since crossing into North Dakota, she'd noticed how much better the road's condition seemed to be. Signs were everywhere of recent repairs. Holes had been filled, shoulders shored up, and bridges strengthened. Unlike so many they'd crossed during the long drive that had wobbled and swayed, the last two had felt much more solid.

At a large heap of road rubble, cleared to one side, the convoy turned left. Within half a mile, they passed sandbagged machine gun emplacements and an APC. A road barrier made from scrap steel lay swung to one side, guarded by four men in fresh uniforms with rifles. Mwangi squinted at their odd salute, a right arm thrust straight forward Nazi-style but ending in a fist. All were clean-shaven with closely cropped hair.

They turned off an asphalt road onto one made of concrete, which appeared to have been recently poured. Ahead, a rectangular section of ground rose up to a forty-five degree angle. Mwangi thought it was like the

opening jaws of some massive alligator. The road ended at the edge of a black pit. Continuing the alligator metaphor, it seemed to her like the giant creature's gaping maw.

Had she been driving, she would have slowed down, but she wasn't. Instead they maintained speed. Expecting a headlong plunge ending in a fiery crash, Mwangi closed her eyes as they crossed the dark threshold.

They didn't die. The road sloped downward at a gentle angle until they reached a massive underground garage, lit on all sides by bright white LEDs. She couldn't see the far end. The roof seemed twenty feet high or more and she guessed its width at no less than one hundred yards. A concrete floor and walls reflected sounds.

A wide double set of steel blast doors lined each wall at seventy-five foot intervals. The convoy drove to the fourth set of those and stopped. Guards flanking the doors stuck out their arms in salute. Mwangi's leg muscles burned as she stepped out of the Humvee, after sitting in the cramped vehicle for days. The past twenty-four hours had been the worst. Her companions had treated her with aloof correctness but had responded to her questions with monosyllabic answers. They'd showed no inclination to engage in conversation.

"This way, please, Colonel." The man identified only as Bence smiled and extended his hand to indicate the now-open blast doors.

Mwangi's first few steps were clumsy, until the increased circulation to her legs reached the muscles. Then she regained the stiff bearing of an officer and passed through the doors as if she were back at the Pentagon and the guards saluting her were in the U.S. Army.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of a tattoo on one of the guards' arms, a stylized G-R. Something in her mind clicked. At that moment, she knew the name of her savior.

The industrial construction of the hallway reminded her of the nuclear bunkers under Washington, D.C. Steel walls and roof echoed with their footsteps on the poured concrete floor. One hundred feet from the garage, the tunnel ended in two more blast doors, each ten feet high and eight wide. When they swung open, she noted the titanium measured a foot thick.

The room beyond gleamed. Spanish tiles glistened in the glow of recessed lighting. Mahogany wall paneling spoke to an unlimited budget and an excess of testosterone. Tiger and lion pelts strewn about acted as throw rugs.

At the room's far end, a glass display case filled with items she couldn't distinguish provided the backdrop for an enormous carved wooden desk. In a high-backed red leather chair sat a heavy-set man with deep bags under his tiny, red-rimmed eyes. A beak nose hung low over a wide, ugly mouth. Arrogance hung about him like the stink of a sewer.

Another man stood beside the desk, and she recognized a younger version of the older man from his numerous meetings with General Steeple. The young man's pale complexion, trimmed beard, and black-framed glasses were hard to forget.

"Mr. Rosos," she said with a slight bow of her head to the younger man. "Thank you for answering my call for help."

With a wide smile, he beckoned her to a chair facing the desk. She felt the plush upholstery soften as she sat, caressing her sore back and thighs like a masseuse. For a moment she forgot the intense gaze of the old man behind the desk.

"It was my great pleasure, Colonel, although I admit to being surprised at hearing from you. Would you like something to drink?"

She half-closed her eyes in ecstasy as the muscles in her lower back relaxed into the chair's embrace. It was a brief moment of deep delight. "Some water would be nice."

"Of course. It will be here momentarily."

He made no calls or even signals, but moments later a guard showed up with a pitcher of ice water. When the servant had poured for her and left, the younger man waved his hand toward the older one, like a magician's assistant revealing a prop. "Colonel, allow me to introduce my father, Györgi Rosos, Senior."

"I am deeply honored, sir," she said, half rising from the chair.

The fleshy man waved her back down. His voice still had a strong Hungarian accent. "It is I who am honored, Colonel. That you would seek my help is both flattering and reassuring. But may I ask *why* you needed my help? And where General Steeple might be?"

"General Steeple is in custody at Operation Overtime. General Angriff discovered that his wife and daughter were being held at Comeback and sent in a special forces team to evacuate them while General Steeple was visiting Overtime. My team moved to stop them, but it was too late."

"Your security forces couldn't stop one special forces team?"

"They weren't just any special forces, Mr. Rosos. They were part of

Task Force Zombie."

"The ones you call the Nameless?"

"Yes. Once they were safely away, General Steeple was arrested. General Fleming has taken command of Comeback, and I assumed it was only a matter of time before I was next, so I escaped to bring you this news."

"That was very brave of you, and we are very grateful." He turned to his son and spoke in Hungarian. "*Hozd ide ezt a szukát, de légy kedves hozzá, később szükségünk lesz rá.*" *Get this bitch out of here, but be careful. We may need her later.*

#

"I hate these stupid fucking Americans." Györgi Rosos screamed in Hungarian and slammed his fist on the desk. "They're all fucking morons. They buy the best fucking weapons and wear fancy fucking uniforms and think it makes them the world's best fucking soldiers. And Tom Steeple is the biggest fucking idiot of them all. I should never have agreed to let him take command of operations!"

"If it weren't for General Steeple, Father, neither Overtime nor Comeback would have been built."

The old man pounded the table four more times, like a two-year-old throwing a tantrum. "So he's a useful idiot. So what? The world's full of useful idiots. I gave him eight billion dollars to get the job done and that should have given my opinion more weight, but did he listen to me when selecting a battle commander? Of course not. He picked Nick fucking Angriff! And now look where it's got him."

Rosos let his bulk sink deeper into the chair. His lips curled in disgust and his scowl made the drooping eye bags sag all the more. Staring straight ahead, he lapsed into the silence that his son knew very well. It meant that a new plan would soon be forthcoming.

"Our horsemen are seizing anything worth having," he said, musing. "When does the second group leave?"

"The day after tomorrow. They're taking a more southerly route than the first group."

"Delay them a few days." Rosos' tiny eyes grew beady as he squinted, as if watching something his son couldn't see. "With Steeple and Comeback lost to us, we need to rethink our strategy. We need to find new allies."

"But who could that be, father?"

The senior Rosos' gray teeth filled his too-wide mouth when he smiled. Fleshy cheeks appeared ghoulish as the low lighting picked out the deep folds in his face. "I suspect the Chinese might be looking for some new friends about now."

#

SECTION EIGHT
Gallop

Chapter 63

It doesn't take a hero to order men into battle. It takes a hero to be one of those men who goes into battle.

General Norman 'Stormin' Norman' Schwarzkopf

FOB Westwall
1550 hours, April 20

Standing orders were to challenge anyone moving on the road below. But when a horde of horsemen hove into view, Lieutenant Marjorie Jones wondered if that order still applied. Major Wincommer had radioed that two companies of his cavalrymen flanked the unknown riders on the north, but calls to those companies had gone unanswered. Were they within supporting distance or not?

The base overlooked Route 66 before it joined with Interstate 40 east of Seligman, at a point where it cut through a narrow valley. It was the only road through the wilderness west of Prescott. If the riders got past them, they could ride overland straight through the pine forest into Prescott.

Unable to raise Wincommer, she had contacted Prime and got the answer she expected but dreaded: don't let them pass.

Damn.

A hurried roadblock of stones clearly was too small to even slow the riders, but Jones stationed three people there with rifles. The FOB lay two hundred yards up a rocky slope, behind a formidable rock and wood breastwork. Two fifty-caliber machine guns, an M-320 grenade launcher, and one 160mm mortar made the position dangerous to any attacker, but Jones only had a total of eight people under her command. She'd lost her Marine sniper, Zo Piccaldi, when Prime had recalled him a few days before.

Jones stepped outside the bunker and focused on the dust cloud in the valley to the west. "Head's up, Chenko," she said into a handheld radio. "They're getting close. Remember not to shoot first. Challenge them and see what they do."

"I have to wait for them to open fire, Loot?"

"Affirmative."

Those weren't the standing rules of engagement, but to her mind Jones didn't have clear orders.

“But Loot—”

“You heard me!”

There was a pause. “Roger that.” He kept his mike keyed long enough for her to hear him mutter, “What a shit sandwich.”

Tereschchenko and the other two privates knelt behind their little stone barricade, about six feet apart. The horsemen came on in a ragged pack, their red bandanas bright in the sun. When the lead rider was one hundred yards from his position, Tereshchenko’s radio crackled.

Through the background noise, he heard the voice of Lieutenant Jones. “Stand up, Chenko. They can’t see you behind those rocks.”

“Should I paint a bull’s-eye on my chest, Lieutenant?”

“Do you want a court-martial?”

“No, ma’am, but I don’t wanna get shot, either.”

“Stand up or I’ll shoot you myself.”

The other two heard the whole conversation. By then, the riders had closed to within fifty yards. Reluctantly, they all stood. As the other two trained their rifles, Tereshchenko waved his arms over his head. He kept waving as they closed in. Forty yards… thirty-five… thirty.

At twenty yards Tereshchenko saw the lead rider pluck something from a long sleeve beside his saddle. He squinted, trying to make it out, but when his brain registered it as an automatic weapon, it was already too late. The first burst chewed into his left leg, side, and arm. His two comrades dove behind the rocks as automatic weapons fire raked their position.

#

“Open fire, open fire!” Jones screamed.

The leading horsemen had already passed the barricade when fifty-caliber shells ripped into their ranks. Tereshchenko’s friends on the road lay with their backs to the stones and opened fire on the riders passing their position. Several fell from their saddles before their return fire silenced the Americans.

Likewise, the storm of fire coming from the bunker emptied saddles and tore up horses, until the riders dismounted and took cover behind the rocks. That was when Jones discovered to her horror that each one of them carried an RPG. Now bullets ripped into their firing slits and smacked the ridge face over their heads, filling the air with rock splinters. Explosions blasted away at their protective walls as a dozen RPG rounds struck within seconds.

The radioman had called Prime at the cavalry's approach. With the battle raging, he handed Jones the handset and then ran to the firing line.

"Westwall, this is Prime. What is your sitrep?"

The excitement made her voice squeak for the first few words. "Prime, this is Lieutenant Jones." She stopped and swallowed, which helped. "We are under heavy attack from dismounted cavalry with automatic weapons and RPGs. We have wounded. Need immediate support. I repeat, we need immediate support. I am in danger of being overrun."

A heavy increase in firing nearly deafened her. She dropped the radio and ran for the wall. The attackers darted from boulder to boulder, at least fifty of them, while the remainder retreated up the valley with the horses. The bunker was nothing more than a wall of rock thirty feet long, blocking a cave entrance. The wall stood five feet out from the ridge face, making for access on either end. But if flankers got direct fire into one of those openings, they were lost.

Jones ducked to a new firing port at the exact second an RPG round exploded on the wall outside, throwing her onto her back. Two of her people collapsed around her.

Dazed, her vision blurry, she heard the radio crackling in the background and people screaming and another explosion. Getting up to one knee, she glanced around and knew the bunker couldn't hold much longer.

Then the volume of fire increased again, but somehow wasn't as loud. It was strange, as if the guns had receded further away. Woozy, she wondered if she was hearing things. But then her three remaining people started cheering and firing like mad.

Private Dominica Siano tossed her a first aid kit. The bright brown eyes roamed over her face, squinting, frowning, searching for injuries. "Are you hit, Lieutenant?"

"I don't think so. What's going on?"

"The pony boys finally showed up!"

#

When they heard firing to the south, the two companies Major Wincommer had sent to shadow the invaders rode to the top of a ridge overlooking Westwall's valley. Deployed in two lines, the American cavalry, still mounted, poured fire into the attackers' backs. It was a perfect surprise. Some of the attackers braced back to back and tried to shoot both ways, but died where they stood. Others ran for their horses. A few even made it. One

fired his RPG from the other side. The rocket-powered round sailed far over the cavalrymen's heads.

Sixty horsemen wheeled their mounts to flee the way they'd come. But the hunters had become the hunted and hundreds of horsemen wearing American uniforms rode straight for them. Trapped in a crossfire, with five or six times their number galloping down on them, the attackers milled around, trying to figure out what to do.

At that moment the first mortar round landed thirty yards to their rear.

Some dismounted, threw their weapons away, and lay face down in the dirt in surrender. But the rest, infuriated, machine-gunned their surrendering companions as they lay on the ground. Then they spurred their horses and charged straight for the Americans, Uzis blazing.

#

The distance between Wincommer's group and the enemy narrowed fast as their combined closing speed exceeded fifty miles per hour. At three hundred yards, Wincommer threw his hands out to either side and one company peeled off on each flank. At two hundred yards, he threw up one hand and halted the charge of the two companies following the road. Momentum carried them forward another thirty yards, which put the distance between them and the enemy at less than one hundred fifty yards. He ordered dismount and formed his men into a firing line of some two hundred rifles, while one in five men led the horses to safety, exactly as they'd practiced it so many times. The companies out on the flanks kept riding.

At one hundred yards, the enemy fire zinged and spattered all about them, but it was wildly inaccurate, although a few rounds hit home. One man went down with a leg wound, another hit in the head, but Uzis fired pistol rounds which couldn't penetrate their Kevlar body armor. And galloping horses made for unstable firing platforms.

At fifty yards, the Americans opened fire.

It was a massacre.

Even in the waning light of sundown, their superb marksmanship, aided by having their feet on the ground, meant they hit few horses. For twenty seconds, a storm of fire swept over the onrushing invaders from front and both sides, after which there were no more targets. Not one man remained in his saddle.

Wincommer knew exactly what to do next. "Save any wounded," he yelled. "We need prisoners but no more casualties. Be careful!"

A few shots rang out as the cavalrymen checked for wounded and diehards refused their help. Lieutenant Jones and the last two of her command still standing came out of Westwall's bunker to help check for wounded. The two cavalry companies on the valley's opposite side rejoined Wincommer. Within half an hour, they had an accurate count.

A short, wiry sergeant rode to the circle of officers and saluted. "Major, we count one hundred twelve dead, seven wounded."

"Only seven wounded, Sergeant?

"These boys were true believers, sir. At least ten of them chewed glass after being wounded. The seven prisoners are all unconscious and it looks like they took poison, too."

"Zip-tie them, Sergeant. If that's not possible, render them incapable of hurting themselves further."

"Yes, sir. And there's one more thing, Major."

"And that would be what?"

The sergeant held out his hand. In it was a leather pouch tied with a canvas string. He untied it and shook some brown shredded plant material into his hand. The inference clearly was for Wincommer to reach over and take some, so he did.

He put it up to his nose and inhaled. "That's tobacco!"

"That's what it is, all right. But Major, this is fresh."

"They don't grow tobacco in Arizona, not that I know of."

"I'm from Kentucky, Major. My granddaddy was a tobacco farmer. As far as I can remember, Kansas and East Texas are about as far west as tobacco will grow."

"If that's true…" He signaled for the radioman to approach. "Get me through to Prime, on the double."

#

Chapter 64

I don't recommend getting shot. It hurts.
General Norman Fleming

Operation Overtime
1609 hours, April 20

Norm Fleming passed six stern sentries at the doors to headquarters. Two more stood at the foot and head of the ramp leading to the Crystal Palace. Technicians swarmed over the communications stations below the platform and a few more worked on the damage inside the Clam Shell itself. Everyone saluted as he passed, their eyes lingering on the bandage strapped to the right side of his face.

He found Angriff behind his desk, bleary-eyed. "I want a transfer," he said.

Angriff laughed. "Yeah, me, too. Let's leave together." He pointed with his chin. "Does it hurt?"

"Honestly, yes, it hurts a lot. They wanted to give me pain meds but I said no. I'm a fool."

"How are Walling and Schiller?"

"Walling's foot is a mess. He's out of surgery, but it will be a few days before he's up and around. The doctor says he'll be in a hard cast for two months and a soft one for six weeks after that. Although hit twice, J.C.'s were both non-life-threatening and clean. Both through-and-throughs, if you can believe it. He's going to limp for a while, but he should be back in a few days, at least to man his desk."

"You don't need to be here. Go get some rest."

"We've got lurps and slurps out there over my plans, some mysterious woman from Creech shows up, then out of the blue we get a radio message from Australia, you're sending a Blackhawk north with no idea what's going on up there… I appreciate the thought, Nick, but I think I'll get back to work."

They turned at a knock on the door. Rip Kordibowski stood there.

"I don't like that look," Angriff said.

"Task Force Saber just fought a major engagement with the cavalry they were trailing. The enemy force attacked FOB Westwall, but Saber's

C.O., Major Wincommer, had flanked them and they didn't know it. The enemy was caught in a three-way crossfire and destroyed. Our losses were two dead, seven wounded. Enemy casualties were one hundred nineteen dead. Wincommer said the enemy wounded committed suicide rather than be taken prisoner."

"Suicide? Who *are* these people?"

"Nobody knows, General. Their only identifying marks are the brands on their arms—"

"Not G-R again."

"Yes, sir. And they wore red bandanas." He drew a breath to speak again, but paused, eyes vacant and one finger on his radio earpiece. He listened for close to ten seconds, nodded, and pushed a button near his right collar.

"Another cavalry force?" Angriff asked.

"No, sir, this was not about Saber. It was about Task Force Quarterback."

"I'm tired, Rip, and all these code names are hard to keep up with. Who are we talking about now?"

Fleming answered first. "Quarterback's the three Marine companies near Yuma."

"Right," Kordibowski said. "They got within twenty miles of the city and stopped when a military convoy went by."

"Chinese?"

"Mexican."

"*Mexican*? Oh, yeah, that's right, you told me that. I need a scorecard."

"At this point, I'm simply relaying information, sir."

"I know, but first it was the Sevens, then Lester Hull's people, then the Chinese, then these G-R horsemen, and now the Mexicans… Who's going to show up next, the Swiss Navy?"

#

Chapter 65

The life of the dead is placed in the memory of the living.
Marcus Tullius Cicero

Operation Overtime
1620 hours, April 20

The intercom buzzed. “Green Ghost on line one, sir.”

Angriff grabbed the phone. “Why haven’t you left yet?”

“The Blackhawk’s lifting off now. I couldn’t get three of my people on it, so it’s only Vapor and Claw. You told me to requisition whatever I needed for Creech, so I’m taking two Comanches.”

“Let me guess which two.”

“And a squad of special forces, along with me and Razor. That only leaves four of Zombie at Prime, so be advised and be careful. If you need them, Wingnut’s in command.”

“I’m a big boy. I’ll be fine. Now go get me a sitrep a-sap. Keep an eye out for any more of those horsemen and don’t get hurt.”

There was a long pause.

“Don’t say it,” Angriff said.

“Say what?”

“Do not say, I’m a big boy, too.”

Another pause, long enough to let Angriff know he’d nailed it.

“Green Ghost out.”

#

Angriff tried to blink himself into alertness, but the days without enough sleep had begun to sap his strength. He slurped at the fourth cup of coffee since lunch, hoping to get so much caffeine into his system that it *had* to have the desired effect. So far, it hadn’t helped.

“Good afternoon, General,” Schiller said.

Angriff stared. “What in holy hell are you doing here? Get back to the hospital.”

“I’m fine, sir.” Sergeant Schiller leaned on crutches, but couldn’t hide the waxy sheen on his face. “The bullets didn’t do any major damage, but sitting in that hospital bed was driving me crazy. I’m a little slow on my feet, but Diaz is here.”

“Did Doctor Friedenthall okay this?”

“He ordered me to stay in the hospital, but I left anyway. The comm. center sent up a message for Colonel Walling, but in his absence I took the liberty of reading it. There’s news from Kicker.”

“Don’t try to change the subject… What’s the news?”

“They’re nearing Holbrook and are heading east, per orders. They’ve surveyed all oil facilities as ordered. No sign of hostiles.”

“Good news for once. With this business up north and to the west, the last thing we need is more problems in the east.”

“Sir, General Fleming said to tell you he’s in his office updating status reports if you need him. Otherwise, he said he’d see you at the staff meeting at eighteen hundred.”

“Right.”

Schiller turned to leave and Angriff could see from the stiffness of his movements how painful that had to be.

“Oh, and J.C.?”

“Sir?”

“I’m glad you’re back.”

#

Chapter 66

Luxury ruins republics.
Charles de Montesquieu

1739 hours, April 20

At 1500 feet, *Tank Girl* shone in the setting sun as Joe Randall piloted her west-northwest. Slightly below and to his left, Alisa Plotz's *Hell's Hammer* was a reassuring presence in the wing position. Both Comanches carried only one 30mm and one fifty-caliber gun pod, with a half-load of ammo. The rest of their weight allowance was used up by the special forces squad, Nado, and the two Zombies in the cargo bays.

Unlike an AH-64 Apache, where the pilot sits behind the gunner on a raised platform, the AH-72 Comanche's pilot and co-pilot/gunner sat side by side. A narrow space between the seats allowed access to the rear of the aircraft, much like in a large fixed-wing plane. It was that space Green Ghost used to squeeze forward enough to peer out the front windshield.

Sensing a presence behind his right shoulder, Randall reached up, tapped him, and pointed to starboard. A mile or two ahead, a black gash cut through the yellow-brown desert. Green Ghost knew from studying their flight path that was the valley of the Colorado River. Tracing its path to the north, he spotted a distant blur cutting across the blackness of the ravine: Hoover Dam.

Their path took them less than two miles south of the fabled monument to American ingenuity. Ghost slid back into the cargo bay, hoping to get a better look through the large windows in the sliding door.

Nado already stood with her face pressed to the window. She wore new ASUs, which were too large, but even under the clothing he could see her lithe body. When he sidled up next to her, he realized she wasn't as young as he'd first thought. Instead of seventeen or eighteen, she now appeared to be in her early twenties. A teenager would have been *hands off* under his personal code, but a young woman was a different matter.

"See anything?"

Her words were breathless. "I see everything. I had no idea what the desert really looked like. I grew up in it, but… it's so different from up here."

"The perspective does change it." He waited, but she didn't seem

interested in chatting.

They flew past the canyon at 140 knots, the day's fading sunlight glinting off the distant surface of Lake Mead. That answered the first question they'd had about Hoover Dam: did it still hold back the lake? Moreover, from what he could see, it hadn't flooded the surrounding land, which meant water still drained through the dam.

Then he spotted a whitish ribbon crossing the canyon south of the dam, and realized the Highway 93 bridge still spanned the gorge! It would take engineers to determine its viability for heavy vehicles, but even Green Ghost knew it was easier to strengthen an existing bridge than to rebuild a collapsed one.

Tank Girl barreled directly over the middle of the canyon at 232 feet per second when something caused him to look straight north. Complete darkness filled Black Canyon. The dam itself appeared only as a dark wall in the shadows. Yet in the two seconds he had to look, Green Ghost saw something that changed everything.

There! A light glowed at the bottom of Hoover Dam, where he knew the hydroelectric generators sat above the sluice gates. Green Ghost was trained not to react to external stimuli and to control his heart and breathing rates in stressful situations, but he felt his pulse race. Hoover Dam was still in business.

#

Once beyond the river, Randall had a choice of flight paths. He could either fly straight to Creech over Las Vegas, circle south to avoid the city and expend extra fuel, or veer north to pass over Nellis Air Force Base on Las Vegas' northeastern side, after which he'd turn ninety degrees and head west toward Creech. The latter choice would give them an aerial view of Nellis but use up a lot more fuel.

He chose the direct route over the city, taking the bird up to five thousand feet for a wider view. Las Vegas had always been an oasis in otherwise empty desert. Like the edges of a scab, the city had a clear delineation from the surrounding countryside. There was Las Vegas, and there was nothing.

The artificial city had once relied on billions of multi-colored lights to provide its identity. Now only fading sunlight remained to pick out a few details. They passed over McCarren International Airport, where a few airliners remained parked on the tarmacs, some still abutting a terminal.

Beyond the airport was the Strip, famed for its garish decadence and for being the worldwide temple of hedonism.

"I never understood this place," Randall said into the intercom.

"I thought you liked to gamble," Bunny Carlos replied.

"Gamble, yes, you know how much I love poker. But casino gambling was just pissing your money into somebody else's pot."

Nobody in either helicopter saw signs of life. Coming out of the city, Randall found Highway 95, which he knew led straight to Creech. On the left were ridgelines stretching away south and southwest. Later they passed an abandoned prison, but otherwise saw nothing except empty desert and herds of wild horses and antelope. Ten minutes after leaving Las Vegas air space, Randall motioned Green Ghost forward to the cockpit. He pointed ahead, where buildings huddled around what were unmistakably runways.

#

1813 hours

General Jamal Kando knew every book in the Creech Air Force Base library by heart. It wasn't a formal library and hadn't existed before The Collapse. The long years of boredom had led to a concerted effort to collect every book from every source within a hundred miles. He loved to read, anything and everything, but military history most of all. With Nevada having had a heavy military presence, that section was well stocked, along with science fiction and fantasy. After all, when looters came through any area, books weren't high on their list of things to steal.

He also kept some books at the Tonopah Test Range Airport. That base had once been a waypoint for passengers flying in from Las Vegas and headed for one of the secure facilities in the vast area surrounding Area 51. More than fifty hangars still housed aircraft of all types, including F-117A Stealth Fighters, but the base itself was a ghost town populated only by Kando and his skeleton force.

The garrisons of both bases had been a last contingent of dedicated servicemen and women safeguarding America's war material, on the off chance anybody would ever need it again. Over the years that mission had evolved into something a bit less prosaic, like simple survival. But a loose military structure remained, with Kando in charge. He'd done everything he could to keep the USA's advanced weapons out of the hands of bandits, but that was in danger.

As often happened, he picked up a book and wound up reading the

afternoon away. Failing light made him decide to finish the current chapter and then head to the mess hall. But when he picked up reading where he'd left off, an unfamiliar sound pierced his concentration.

It was distant but growing, a deep *whump-whump-whump* unlike anything he'd heard before. His first thought was that the horsemen had come at last. He wove through piles of books on his way to the door, but Corporal Sanchez stuck his face into the room before he got there. "General—"

"I know, I heard it. What is it? The red riders?"

"No, sir, it's… it's…"

"It's what, damn you?"

"Helicopters! It's helicopters!"

Kando had only seen a flying helicopter twice in his life, both times when he was a boy in the first decade after The Collapse. The corporal had never seen one, except on the ground. He and Sanchez locked eyes, both unsure what to say or do.

Finally Kando shook his head and broke the trance. "Grab a weapon, Diego. I'm going to my room to get mine. Tell everybody to arm themselves!"

"Do you know who they belong to?"

"Who else could it be except the Chinese?"

"But General, that's not what it says on their sides!"

"They have writing on them?"

"That's what I was trying to tell you. It says U.S. Army!"

#

Hell's Hammer touched down on the runway, fifty feet from the back of a building that faced a side street. Within seconds of touchdown, the special forces squad had dismounted and deployed in a fighting arc. Five men covered the buildings facing them and the other two set up on their flanks. Ten seconds after landing, Alisa Plotz took *Hell's Hammer* back into the air and covered *Tank Girl* while her troops dismounted.

Once Green Ghost and the rest of the squad were on the ground, they advanced toward the building. Faded letters painted on the back wall read *Credit Bureau.* Fanning out, they enveloped the building from each side. Glass from the broken windows lay in dusty heaps at the front, and the doors hung ajar. Green Ghost took up position by one front corner. The squad leader, Sergeant Wardlaw, reported the building deserted.

Green Ghost radioed *Tank Girl* to bring Nado down.

“The area’s not secure. Isn’t that dangerous?” Wardlaw said.

“We don’t have much time, so we’re gonna have to chance it. Nado says this General Kando is definitely here, which means they’re probably aiming at us right now and deciding whether or not to start shooting. If they see her, they’ll know we’re all on the same side.”

“Hope you’re right, Ghost.”

“Yeah, me, too.”

#

Chapter 67

Every man has a wild beast within him.
Frederick the Great

Operation Overtime
1814 hours, April 20

Angriff's staff showed up at the meeting in their ACUs, without taking time to change and pretty up, and the chatter stopped the instant he walked into the room.

"Sit down, ladies and gentlemen. We have a multitude of crises developing and in a moment I'm going to let General Fleming brief you. But first, I want to say something about the two recent assassination attempts, the one in the hangar deck and the attack on my headquarters three days ago.

"The first was by a holdover from RSVS, the same group that initiated attacks on my person last year. They are the most violent neo-Communists from the terrorist group that disrupted the country in the twenty-tens and -twenties. Remember *Antikapitalista*? *Antikap*? Those were mostly pasty-faced wannabes wearing scarves and blocking traffic and generally acting like spoiled brats. When Stalin spoke of useful idiots, he meant them. But RSVS were killers and if any of them still live, then they remain a grave threat.

"As for the attack three days ago, this coup was launched by deluded followers of General Steeple, who as you know sits in our brig at this very moment. They wore red to simulate another attack by RSVS, but Colonel Claringdon denies knowing about RSVS activities and we believe him.

"During our conversations, General Steeple let it be known that he does *not* believe the United States should be resurrected according to our Constitution, which is a written part of Operation Overtime's mission statement. Rather, General Steeple stated that he wanted a more authoritarian form of government, with a dictator instead of an elected president. Would anyone care to guess who he thought should be that first dictator?

"I don't think anybody in this room is a Tom Steeple die-hard, but if you are, then I want you to notice the armed guards in the corners, outside the door, and outside my office. If you're on Steeple's team, then I suggest you trade yourself to the winning side, because we're on the alert now and you

won’t succeed. Spread the word. America *will* be rebuilt according to the Constitution as it was written.

“This has already cost us dearly and I’m tired of dealing with it. I’m sure you all know Sergeant Schiller, who sustained serious gunshot wounds in the attack. Colonel Walling’s foot was shattered and as you can see, General Fleming came within inches of not being here at all. My family was assaulted by these animals and my wife held at gunpoint by none other than Sharon Goldstone, the head of our agricultural production. When given the chance I shot her, but it was her own weapon that put a bullet into her throat. You should each be aware that I won’t hesitate to do it again, to her or anyone else who threatens me, my family, or my mission. And next time I won’t aim for the hand.

“I’ve told you this before but it bears repeating. I command all United States military forces anywhere in the world. *All of them!* That is the mandate given me by the last sitting Congress of the United States and I’ll be damned if I’m going to abdicate my responsibilities.”

He stopped and drew a theatrical breath. “Now, enough of that. We have plenty else to worry about. General Fleming, if you please…”

A gauze patch covered most of Fleming’s cheek, covered with white tape. He held his tablet in his left hand so he could reference it if need be. “We’ve got a lot of ground to cover, ladies and gentlemen, and we have to do it fast. I’m going to start with our lurp to Yuma and go counterclockwise from there. The three Marine companies were unable to penetrate the city because of the presence of a military force flying the Mexican flag.”

He paused and looked at each member of the staff in turn. “That’s right, I said Mexico. Whether it’s continuity of the same government as before The Collapse, we don’t know, but acting on the rules of engagement, the Marines pulled back and were not seen, and are now awaiting further orders. It would normally be our policy to evaluate how best to retake the city, but at the moment there are other crises more pressing. However, we’ve sent the Second Marines to reinforce the three companies already there in case it comes to a fight. For those who may have forgotten, the Second Marines are the battalion formed in Prescott, and as such are the first unit of the brigade recruited locally.

“Now, on to the next item. The young lady who rode here from Creech Air Force Base reports there are thousands of horsemen riding all over Nevada, looting and raping. They showed up two months ago and

nobody knows where they came from. She captured one of them before she rode south hoping to find us, and that prisoner told her they left North Dakota about six months ago."

"They sound like the Mongol horde," Colonel Santorio said.

"Very much so, Desiree. The prisoner was a low-level spear carrier, without knowledge of plans or objectives. He was a local who could ride a horse and joined up because it offered regular food and a tent to sleep in. The first thing they did was brand him with a G-R on his forearm. He said it stands for Györgi Rosos."

A babble of murmurs filled the pause. "The Hungarian billionaire?" someone asked.

Rip Kordibowski spoke up. "Györgi Rosos was a venture capitalist who used his money to influence our political races and stir up an anarchist movement in the country, Antikap. He's a nasty piece of work. That movement gave rise to the RSVS as an autonomous terrorist organization, much more aggressive than other such groups. Rosos' aim was nothing less than the violent overthrow of the U.S. government."

"That's him," Fleming said. "At least, according to this prisoner it is. Their mission is to capture as many former American military bases as possible, so that follow-on forces can loot them of anything salvageable. It appears that Creech Air Force Base and the surrounding secure area, as well as Nellis and Area 51, are the next targets."

"Did he say anything about the Hawthorne Depot?" Lieutenant Colonel Astrid Naidoo, in charge of Civil Affairs, asked. It was the first time she'd ever said anything in a meeting.

"No, they haven't, Astrid," Fleming said. "Why?"

"I did a tour there back in two double-oh two. Logistics support. That place was crammed full of ammo back then. Does anybody know if it was moved or used up?"

"No idea," Fleming said. "But now that you mention it, Hawthorne's going to become a priority. Thank you for bringing it up, Astrid; that's one I missed. As I was saying, these riders crossed the Colorado River into Arizona and were engaged and destroyed by both our cavalry regiment and FOB Westwall, but it was only by pure luck we saw them coming. The next time, we might not be so lucky.

"Green Ghost has taken two Comanches and a squad of special forces to Creech to evaluate the situation there. Once we have that information, we

can decide on our next move.

"To the north, we've learned of a Chinese threat to the Sierra Army Depot, which is northwest of Lake Tahoe. Some of you did a tour there, so you know the consequences if all of that heavy weaponry falls into enemy hands."

"Is it all still there?"

Angriff didn't see who asked, but again Kordibowski answered the question before he could. "We cannot say with a full measure of certainty what is or is not still there. However, in the interest of planning, we have to assume that most of it is."

"Damnation," said Santorio.

"Yeah," Angriff said. "Now you get the picture. If the Chinese get their hands on all that hardware, then our victory last year goes for naught."

"We killed a lot of trained crews," Khin Saw chipped in.

"True, but did you notice the age of most of them? They were the originals who came over here from China in the invasion forty-something years ago. We have to assume the Chinese are training new crews, younger ones, who've probably been raised to see the United States as evil and communism as good and pure. For anybody under the age of thirty-five, it's the only life they've ever known, so the only thing that might prevent them from training new tank crews is having enough tanks on hand to do the job."

"So how can we help them?" asked Santorio. "Sierra's a long way from here."

"General Steeple's Blackhawk was modified by installing additional fuel tanks that should give it the range to get there, although getting back is a different story. Two of Green Ghost's people went along to appraise the situation and report back."

Astrid Naidoo cleared her throat. "Excuse me, sir, but what if they need immediate reinforcement?"

Angriff's chuckle sounded more like a grunt. "There's the rub. I don't know how we help them, so in the meantime, everybody brainstorm on what we might do if it comes to that."

Seeing no other questions, Fleming moved on. "Task Force Kicker, two Marine Recon companies, is nearing Holbrook in the east, over near the New Mexico border. Their mission was to investigate any and all oil production facilities in that region and then proceed to Gallup, New Mexico. They've accomplished the first and are moving to the second, with no signs

of hostile forces. Nor has the blocking line northwest of Phoenix anything to report. That's all I've got, sir," he said Angriff.

"Any more questions?"

Several people half raised their hands but put them back down.

"In that case, you're dismissed."

#

Chapter 68

Courage in danger is half the battle.
Plautus

Creech Air Force Base, NV
1834 hours, April 20

Jamal Kando could only find nineteen people to defend Creech, and some of them had never fired a rifle before. The extreme ammunition shortage had constrained practice. Precious rounds had been saved for hunting, with a tiny supply held back for an emergency. It amounted to one half-loaded magazine each.

When he'd gathered his small group around him, he realized how pretentious he'd been calling himself a general. Facing trained troops left his hands shaking and he couldn't make them stop.

Two men kept watch for the strangers while the rest gathered around him.

"Here's what we're going to do," he said as they stood in the center of the hangar. A slight quaver seemed to go unnoticed by his listeners. "We go out the south end of the hangar and then head for the old credit union building. How many did you count, Barry?" he called out to the man standing guard nearest the tarmac.

"At least ten, maybe eleven."

"So we've got them outnumbered. You nine go with Captain Templeton; the rest of you come with me. Templeton, you circle around the front and we'll come at them from the back. Remember, we don't know who they are yet. Maybe they're friends and maybe they're not. Just because they're wearing American uniforms doesn't mean anything. They could have gotten those anywhere. The Republic of Arizona wears those."

In the sudden silence, the *whump-whump-whump* of a helicopter vibrated the hangar walls. Kando rushed to the door, but paused when only one figure jumped down. The gathering gloom made identifications difficult, but it seemed as if…

"General, isn't that Nado?" the man on lookout asked.

"I think it is," said someone else.

"I thought she went for help?" said the first man.

“She did,” Kando said, eyes wide with hope. “Maybe she found it.”

#

Green Ghost saw the knot of people running out of the closest hangar toward Nado and raced for the back door, shouting for the squad to follow him. By the time they got into open ground, Nado had been surrounded. “Shit.”

“Do we fire?” asked Sergeant Wardlaw, commanding the squad of Green Berets.

“Negative, damn it!”

“Then what are you orders?”

As he watched, Nado’s head appeared inside the crowd, her mane of black hair standing out among the drab uniforms. She seemed to be jumping around. Were they hurting her? Was she trying to escape? No, she was… dancing?

“Secure a perimeter, Sergeant, but tell your people these are friendlies. And unless I’m going blind, that man on the right is wearing the uniform of an Air Force general.”

“I think you’re right, sir. I didn’t know the Air Force still existed.”

“Me, either. All right, let’s get set up before night falls.”

#

Like everybody else, Wardlaw didn’t know Ghost’s rank. But the mysterious man who wore no insignia was Brigade S-5, so whatever his rank, he had the favor of the only man who counted. When Green Ghost left the squad leader and strode toward the group, the sergeant went the other way to carry out his orders. He didn’t like it, though. The Army had rules for a reason and if Wardlaw had to follow them, then the same should apply to everybody else.

#

Still wary, Ghost kept his rifle ready in the crook of his arm. When some of the group spotted him approaching, they turned and brought their own weapons up, not pointing at him, but not pointing away, either. Centered among them, Nado noticed their heads turn and pushed down the barrels of the rifles closest to her. Jumping up and down again, she waved. “Ghost, over here! Come on, these are my friends!”

It wasn’t that he didn’t believe her, but it went against all his training and instinct to sling the rifle over his shoulder when nearing a group he didn’t personally know. He felt sweat on his forehead despite the day cooling as the

sun faded in the west. But when Nado broke through the knot of people and threw her arms around his neck, he felt something else.

#

Green Ghost called down both helicopters and for the next half hour the assemblage *oohed* and *ahhed* over the twin Comanches. Randall and Carlos stood guard on either side of *Tank Girl,* answering questions and keeping inquisitive hands from touching anything sensitive, especially the weapons pods, while Plotz and Arnold did the same thing with *Hell's Hammer.*

Meanwhile, after also gaping at them for a few minutes, General Kando asked who was in charge of the assault team and Sergeant Wardlaw pointed to Green Ghost.

"What's his rank?" Kando asked.

"I think he's a colonel… sir."

"Does he have a name?"

"Green Ghost."

"His name is Green Ghost?"

Wardlaw's expression showed sympathy for Kando's confusion. "That's his name."

#

Green Ghost was looking for Kando when Kando found him. "Are you in charge?"

"That's right, General. Call me Green Ghost."

"I thought that sergeant was joking. Are you really a colonel?"

"What can I do for you, General?"

Kando's eyes narrowed in anger, but Ghost didn't care. Kando could make a formal complaint later if he wanted to.

"Who are you people?"

"These men are Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha Seven Seven, attached to First Army Recon Battalion, First Marine Regiment, Seventh Cavalry Brigade. I'm commanding this mission as the head of security for the Seventh Cavalry."

"What are you even talking about?" Kando shook his head in disbelief. "Are you trying to tell me you're all part of some American unit?"

"I know it's a lot to take in, General, and I promise to answer all of your questions, but right this minute I need to determine the assets of this base and if they might help us up north."

“North?”

“The Chinese are threatening an army base north of Tahoe.”

“It’s like you’re speaking another language.”

Behind them, the chatter of voices gave way to whoops. In a lower voice, Green Ghost gave a brief outline of Operation Overtime and its mission. “Do you have some place we can talk?”

Kando led Green Ghost across the runways to his office, next to an old sandwich shop. The surprise was that Kando’s office was actually an office and not some half-assed storeroom. Half a dozen wooden chairs surrounded a rusty metal desk. File cabinets took up one wall and the room had a work atmosphere to it.

“The old restaurant, we use it as the mess hall,” Kando explained. “A lot of the kitchen equipment is still useable, like the sinks and metal prep tables.”

“Isn’t water an issue?”

“It’s the Nevada desert, what do you think? But there are a few springs around here and we’ve got two wind-powered wells. We also dug some new wells.”

“By hand?”

“No, this was back when things still worked. We have drilling equipment stored away somewhere, but no fuel to run it or the pumps.”

“I remember concerns about radiation in the groundwater, back when they buried nuclear waste out here.”

“I thought you wanted to know about assets, by which I thought you meant military assets, not water.”

“I need to know if my men can drink the water here or not. If they can’t, we need to ration what we brought with us.”

“It hasn’t killed any of us yet.”

“That’s not very convincing.”

“Are you always this insubordinate?”

The lean warrior selected a seat off to the side and sat down. “If I can be blunt, you’re wearing the uniform of a general in the U.S.A.F. But you’re not old enough to have been in the pre-Collapse military, so for all I know you found that uniform in a closet. I’m not saying you’re not in charge here, or that you weren’t given your rank by a legitimate order, but my C.O. is a five-star general appointed by Congress.”

Kando’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “What are you saying, then?”

“That I haven’t lived through a thousand firefights and tight situations by assuming things are true just because someone says they are. Now, what about those assets? Specifically, do you have any aircraft and fuel?”

“There’s aircraft in every hangar on this base, and more at other airfields in the region. We’ve got everything from F-117s to AWACs. Warehouses full of parts, too. As for fuel, sure, we’ve got a river of it scattered around the area, but none that will burn. It’s all bad.”

“That’s too bad about the fuel, but outstanding about the aircraft. What about long-range transports?”

“There’s a C-5 in the hangar a hundred yards from here, one of the last planes that ever flew in. They were headed for Area Fifty-One, but didn’t make it for some reason. There’s six C-130s, too, but not here.”

“A C-5?” Ghost leaned forward. “Does it fly?”

“Not in the last forty years, it hasn’t. Could it be made to fly again? I don’t know. I don’t see why not. But our mechanics are all self-taught; nobody here knows how to service any of the aircraft.”

Green Ghost looked away, thinking.

“Oh, by the way,” Kando, “the water’s okay to drink.”

#

Chapter 69

I love the name of honor, more than I fear death.
Julius Caesar

Sierra Army Depot, Herlong, CA
1838 hours, April 20

Junker Jane galloped down the access road with knees locked, leaning over the horse's neck with her back as low and straight as she could make it. Dust kicked up ahead and to her left, and she knew the Chinese behind her had opened fire. She stuck to the road because, while the desert soil put less stress on her mount's hooves, a gopher hole or unseen rock could be disastrous to horse and rider. But with gunfire now at her back, she kicked the horse's flanks again, urging every last ounce of speed from the tiring beast.

Prophet James and his flock heard the gunshots, too, and hovered by the road's edge as if expecting her to slow down and tell them what was happening. She didn't. Instead, she spared enough breath to scream one word in passing. "Run!"

Two female guards rose from a large foxhole ringed with sandbags near the depot's gate. Jane pulled the horse to a walk and the winded creature blew out heavy breaths.

"This is it, girls!" she called, never minding the uniforms they wore. "They're coming down A25 right for you. At least two tanks, with APCs and a lot of infantry."

The two women stared at each other, frightened, and Jane knew they wanted to run.

"It's too late for that now, ladies. They're coming across the desert from the south, and maybe around Honey Lake on the north. There's nowhere to run, so you might as well hunker down and fight it out. It's your only hope. Good luck!"

She urged the horse back into a canter towards Colonel Lamar's office, and felt them watching her the whole way.

#

Mimicked by most of his followers, Prophet James twirled and danced to greet the Chinese as if he were in a San Francisco parade. Each of

them bore pots of water and bundles of flowers. A few of the spiritually weaker ones had escaped behind the woman on horseback. But the rest, thirty or so in all, surrounded him and scattered flower petals along the road, exhibiting their good will. His mother would now see what happened when you reached out to your enemies in peace and brotherhood, instead of in war. He prayed she would understand the power of the Lord to soften even the hardest hearts.

The Chinese column halted and the flankers spread out, protecting the vehicles. James waved at the leading one, an oversized car of some sort with a turret on top. Two long barrels protruded from the turret and pointed directly at him, but he wasn't afraid. The love he felt for his Chinese brothers and sisters would come through and they would lay down their arms. He knew it would happen because God had told him it would and his faith never wavered.

Twirling and singing, James approached the Chinese column. Behind him, the others did as he did, tossing flower petals from the new spring growth. They struck up an impromptu version of "This Little Light of Mine." James smiled and joined in. Reaching for a bunch of flowers held by a twelve-year-old girl named Alice, he selected two buttercups with long stems. They were perfect. He'd slide them into the gun barrels pointed at him.

A helmeted man with goggles stood in the leading APC. James had gotten within twenty yards of the vehicle when he threw out his arms and shouted to the heavens.

"Welcome, my brothers and sisters! We come in the love and peace of the Lord!"

The goggled man leaned into the hatch and yelled the last word James ever heard. "*Huǒ!*" *Fire*!

#

Aretha Lamar knew what would happen before it did. Even knowing couldn't prepare her for the horror of it, though. Standing on the roof of her headquarters building, she watched through her binoculars as her son and his deluded followers twirled and pranced toward the Chinese APCs. Close to a mile separated her from them, but she could see well enough and followed the little group's progress toward the steel killing machines.

"No, James, no," she said to no one. "Get out of there! Run, son, run!"

Flashes lit up the desert in the gathering gloom. The leading APC

opened fire with both heavy machine guns, as did the soldiers spread in a semi-circle on both sides of the road. The air filled with dust and chunks of concrete from the roadbed. She couldn't make out details, but when the shooting stopped, nobody stood in the road.

The horror of reality far outstripped her fears. It had all had such a feeling of inevitability, yet now her gentle son, who'd only wanted to spread his message of peace and love, had been blown to bits and her mind rejected the reality. Only after ten minutes of standing and staring did she walk to the ladder fixed to the building's side.

"You're going to pay for that," she said to the Chinese, who couldn't hear her and wouldn't care if they could. "You're going to pay in blood."

#

With nightfall coming on fast, the Chinese made a push to overrun the American perimeter defenses before dark. Colonel Lamar had no radio network to direct the battle. Instead, four children served as runners and carried messages to the outposts. All four were at least twelve and the oldest fourteen; everyone older than that held a rifle in a firing pit.

Lamar stood in the doorway of the headquarters building, the only west-facing edifice not blocked or fortified, Junker Jane by her side. Somehow, having the scraper there bolstered her spirits, and they listened to the gunfire together. Large mounds of sand and dirt heaped against the outer walls gave some protection against bullets and shells. But the truth was, their makeshift defenses were just that, makeshift. Against modern weapons used by determined soldiers, they were little more than a nuisance. The blackened ruins of a building across a narrow street to the west wouldn't give much cover, since the mounds of debris had been worn down by decades of wind and rain.

Small arms fire broke out everywhere along the line of foxholes and gun emplacements. The Chinese tanks stood off at long range and blasted the defenders with high explosives, while the APCs traveled with and gave covering fire to the approaching infantry. Without warning, a geyser of flame lit the sky as a Carl Gustav round struck an APC square on its glacis plate. From the south she heard more explosions. The 67 defenders could only hope to hold up the Chinese until total darkness fell.

Then she heard a sound that turned her stomach.

"Oh, crap."

"Is that a helicopter?" Jane asked.

Lamar pointed to the sky. Sunlight glinted from its surface as a helicopter flew in from the west. Although high enough to catch the last rays of the setting sun, it was low enough for Lamar to make out the intricate glasswork of the canopy. When it passed directly overhead, she realized it would land in one of the old parking lots to the east, and the only force available to keep its cargo of Chinese soldiers from attacking the southern defenders from behind was her and the children she'd kept back as runners.

"Grab your rifles and follow me, kids." Lamar didn't have to tell Jane, who was already out the back door.

#

A huge dust cloud boiled on the horizon. Vapor held on as the desert slipped by underneath the Blackhawk, like the scenes of a movie being watched at too fast a speed. Early in the flight they'd seen wildlife scurrying for cover from the unknown creature in the usually barren skies, but falling night had turned the desert floor into a blur of gray and black shapes.

"Are we flying into a dust storm?" he yelled over the whine of the turbines.

"Negative," the pilot said via the intercom. "Unknown vehicles appear to be deploying in the desert. We have a visual on the base and… hold on—" The intercom went dead for several seconds. "We have explosions to port ahead. Somebody's catching hell. Looks like the Chinese are attacking the base from several directions. Wait… we have a bogie coming in from the west, appears to be a Chinese helicopter. Am holding here to assess the situation."

"Shit," Vapor said to Claw. "We're too fucking late."

"If somebody's fighting back, there could still be a chance," Claw replied.

"What are we gonna do? We're two guys."

"We're two *Zombies*."

"Our main mission is to report the situation here, not go down with the ship."

"The only way to know what's happening is to go down there and see for ourselves."

"Fuck!" Vapor scowled. "You're as bad as Green Ghost at this risky shit."

Claw grinned. "Worse."

#

Lamar hadn’t fortified the building’s rear. Aside from the lack of manpower, she hadn’t seen the need. Now it was too late. She spread the kids at four windows while she and Jane each took one of the two doors. The helicopter dropped off its cargo and got back into the air before they could fire on it.

Several rusted-out cars still sat where their owners had left them half a century earlier. Long since drained of fuel and stripped of anything useful, they now made excellent cover. As the helicopter sped away, one of the teenagers opened fire, despite the enemy being out of range. Heavy counter-fire from Chinese troops hiding behind the wrecked cars shattered the window’s glass and frame. The teenager screamed and fell to the floor, blood streaming down her cheek, but neither of the women could spare the time to check on her.

To make matters worse, a second helicopter landed, and Lamar assumed it disgorged even more men. The gloom of dusk made it hard to be sure.

#

Jane swallowed. There was nowhere to go, nowhere to retreat. With APCs supporting the enemy troops to the west and helicopters landing them to the east, they were trapped.

In the darkness it was hard to see the Chinese at all, much less make out details, so when an RPG sparked flame and a rocket streaked toward the building, there was no time to react. The warhead hit the door Lamar was defending and blew it into small pieces. The blast knocked her backward. She fell to her knees and stayed there, shaking her head, ears ringing.

“They’re coming!” Jane yelled. Dark shapes moved furtively toward the window, staying behind cover as much as possible. So much gunfire raked the building that the kids slid down with backs to the wall, too terrified to shoot back. That left Jane on her own when the Chinese rose and rushed toward her.

#

Chapter 70

War is not only a matter of equipment, artillery, group troops, or air force; it is largely a matter of spirit, or morale.

Chiang Kai-shek

Sierra Army Depot, Herlong, CA
1849 hours, April 20

Vapor and Claw scrambled out of the Blackhawk onto the pavement, M-16s at the ready, but nobody shot at them.

"The Cs must assume we're their buddies," Vapor said as the Blackhawk took off again.

"Which gives us a short window before they figure it out. Whatever we're gonna do, it better be fast."

The gunfire picked up in volume and both men flipped down their night vision goggles. It was time to go to work.

#

Jane fired the magazine's last five rounds at a dark figure sprinting across the ten yards of open ground separating them. She heard him cry out and he went down, but she couldn't tell where he'd been hit or how bad. She had stepped back out of the doorway and leaned against a wall to reload when something struck the outside wall and exploded, stunning her. Concrete dust hung in the air and stung her eyes.

Quiet fell. The only sounds came from fighting in the distance. Jane coughed and blinked and tried to shake away the ringing in her ears. Then the figure of a soldier appeared in the doorway, its black outline stark against the faint light from outside. Her stupefied mind realized that he pointed his rifle at her.

Crack-crack-crack.

Jane's sluggish brain identified the sound as the higher-pitched *crack* of an M-16. She watched the Chinese soldier jump as bullets struck him from behind. He slumped to one side before sliding to the floor.

All she could think was *what the hell?*

#

The world had turned into the landscape of glowing greens so familiar to modern American troops, but with a level of detail only known by the elite

forces equipped with the last generation of night vision goggles. Vapor knelt beside a rusted-out Ford F-150 with no hood and took aim at a green figure standing in the doorway of the building straight ahead. With his rifle set to full auto three-round bursts, he aimed the laser pointer at the target's head and squeezed the trigger.

Flash suppressors kept their presence hidden from the other Chinese, who stood against the wall to either side of the doorway blocked by the body of their comrade. They looked around for the source of the incoming fire. Using hand gestures, Vapor told Claw to take the right hand group and he would take the left.

Both men assumed the Chinese wore body armor. The standard American 5.56mm M-16 round couldn't penetrate most enemy armor, and while a bullet had been developed that *could* penetrate it, Operation Overtime didn't have any. So both men aimed for the heads.

Their initial three-round bursts took down one C-man on either side, but also betrayed their position. The Chinese returned fire and a five-second firefight lit the night with tracer rounds and the sparks from ricochets. At the end of it, all the Chinese lay in heaps and Vapor bled from a nasty near-miss to the left temple.

"Fuck, that hurts!" he yelled, bending over and touching his face. The blood on his fingers showed bright green.

"Let's get inside where we can pop a light and I'll take a look at it."

"I'll be fine, but we've gotta let Overtime know what's going on here."

"You won't be fine if I don't stop that bleeding. Now, let's—" They both cocked their heads at the sound of an approaching helicopter. "That doesn't sound like a Blackhawk."

"No, it don't."

"BH-1, is that you inbound to our position?" Vapor said into his helmet mike.

"Negative, Vapor, we're five miles east of you. Incoming aircraft must be unfriendly."

"Roger that."

"You good to go?" Claw said.

"Never better."

They found kneeling positions where the bird sounded like it would put down. Twilight had deepened and the Chinese helicopter flew blacked-

out. But between the sound of its rotors and its silhouette, they had no trouble finding their target.

Both men opened fire at where they believed the cockpit to be. Return fire came from an open cargo bay door, but it went wild. Vapor shifted aim to where it had come from and someone screamed, then a body fell and slammed into the ground. Sparks flew as bullets hit the bird's metal hull, but it continued hovering. Claw changed magazines first, seconds before Vapor did, and nearing the end of their second magazines, flames burst from the engine.

Although nearly on the deck, the helicopter pilot pulled the crippled craft back into the air and limped off to the west. Black smoke smeared the blackening night. Both men stood panting as their adrenaline wore off.

"Hey, listen," Vapor said.

"Yeah," Claw said. "It's gone quiet. Nobody's shooting. The Chinese must have called off their attack. Maybe they don't like the dark."

"Let's hope not. C'mon, let's get you patched up. You look like a Halloween decoration. Then we can call home."

#

Chapter 71

A leader is a dealer in hope.
Napoleon Bonaparte

Creech Air Force Base, NV
2019 hours, April 20

Green Ghost spent the next hour digesting information, asking questions, and trying to think of anything else he needed to know before reporting back to Prime. Kando showed visible fatigue by the time they were interrupted by Sergeant Wardlaw appearing in the office.

"There you are," said the sergeant. "May I speak to you outside?"

"You can tell me here." Glancing out the window, Green Ghost realized twilight had faded into full night. "I trust the general." He didn't add *because I could kill him with one hand if I had to.*

Wardlaw's dark scowl indicated how little he liked that idea. "Very well. Someone named Vapor needs to speak with you concerning the situation at Sierra. We set up the radio next door."

"I'll be back." Ghost jumped up.

#

"Go, Vapor," Green Ghost said into the long-range radio's phone-like handset.

Vapor's voice came back weak but with minimal interference. "You got me, G.G.?"

"Talk louder."

"Better?"

"Not really. Gimme a sitrep."

"We're fucked!"

Green Ghost closed his eyes and counted to three. In some ways, Vapor hadn't changed since the fifth grade. "That's not a situation report. I want details."

"You want *details*? Fine, here it is. We arrived in the area near dusk and found the base under attack from two sides, south and west; we couldn't see up north but maybe there, too. Probably a battalion on each flank with armor support. When we came in, a Chinese helicopter was landing a team inside the defensive perimeter. We unloaded behind them and took 'em out."

“You got them all?”

“All eight. There’s maybe fifty defenders, we haven’t had a chance to look over the positions, and they’ve got a lot of can openers.”

“What kind of can openers? M-3s?”

“Affirmative. Gustavs — they’re gonna hurt the C-people tomorrow morning but they can’t hold, G.G. We’re in a room with a bunch of kids and their C.O., who’s hurt. What?” He spoke to someone in the background. “The mother of that hot babe is here, too.”

“Nado?”

“Yeah, her. Her mom’s here with us. She says the Chinese are putting everything into taking this place. Gotta tell ya, bro, come dawn this place changes flags. If those Chinese are pros, they’ll take it in a matter of minutes. If they’re not, it’ll take a little longer. Best case, they might hold on for an hour or two.”

“Runways?”

“I’m told no; the Chinese got ’em already.”

“Damn… all right, listen. You and Claw are *not* to be body-bag fillers, *capeesh*? Do what you can, but get out of there before the base falls. Bring Nado’s mom with you, and the C.O. and anybody else you can, but get the fuck out of there. If you get killed, I’ll be pissed.”

“Not half as much as me.”

#

Chapter 72

Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity.

Lieutenant General George S. Patton

Operation Overtime
2041 hours, April 20

Whatever was up, even Norm Fleming seemed worried about it. “Every second’s precious on this one, Nick.”

“I feel like I live my life by a stopwatch.” Settled into his chair, Angriff took out the day’s first cigar but didn’t light it. “Go.”

“Creech has a skeleton force spread over a wide area at the various airfields in the region. They’ve encountered the same horsemen we did, Rosos’ men, but so far have kept them away from the aircraft.”

“Aircraft?” Angriff perked up at that word.

“Yes, including a C-5 at Creech that might be flyable, but let me finish before we get into all that. Vapor is up at Sierra and he couldn’t raise our comms, so he called Green Ghost. Sierra’s under major attack by a Chinese armored regiment with only untrained troops and kids to fight back with. Somehow they fought off the first wave and it looks like the Chinese are waiting for dawn, but Vapor says they’ll be lucky to hold for an hour.”

“What time is dawn up there?”

“Zero six twenty.”

“So that gives us nine hours to reinforce them, ten if we’re lucky.”

“Eleven at the outside,” Fleming added.

“If I had my pickup, light traffic, and no cops, I might just make that. But I don’t and there aren’t gas stations along the way, either. So do you have any suggestions?”

“Green Ghost did, Nick, but it’s an order of magnitude above high-risk.”

“I’m listening.”

“It all hinges on making that C-5 airworthy and getting fuel up there within eight hours. If we can somehow do that, we get the airborne battalion up to Creech and drop them into the combat zone.”

“On the surface of it, that sounds insane. But if I think about it too

long, it'll seem worse. What's Plan B?"

"It *is* insane, but there's no Plan B. We can't do it, but you asked for suggestions and that's the only one that's even remotely feasible."

Angriff stuck the cigar in the corner of his mouth and rose from behind his desk. Hands clenched behind his back, he stalked to his favorite spot, where he could see out the giant picture window to the desert below. "Do we have any four-engine fixed-wing pilots awake?"

"I don't know."

Angriff stuck his head out the door and called for Schiller. "Get Colonel Saw up here, pronto." He ducked back inside. "Here's what would have to happen for this to work—"

"Are you seriously considering this?"

"If the Chinese get their hands on Sierra, it's game over. That's ten times the firepower we've got. We simply cannot let that happen, so unless you've got a better plan, we've got to see what we can send up there before morning. Now, what's the fastest road unit either here or in Prescott?"

#

2047 hours

Master Sergeant Frances Rossi did what she always did when *Tank Girl* was away — she drilled her team like a racer's pit crew. Speed was life, she said, but only if they did their jobs right. Her crew grumbled, but it had served them well during last year's battles. Everyone in the hangar knew *Tank Girl's* crew were the best, even if they'd never admit it. Only she knew that hard training also kept her mind off George Carlos and the secret she hadn't yet told him.

She'd been drilling them since 1500 hours and was about to dismiss them for the night when the buzzer went off at their work bay, followed by a voice on the intercom.

"Crew Chief Rossi, if you're there, please answer."

That had never happened before. Her heartrate accelerated from 60 to 150 faster than a Bugatti Chiron. Terror closed her throat. Had *Tank Girl* gone down? Was Carlos injured, or dead? An old-style telephone handset acted as both transmitter and receiver. She picked it up and flipped the switch.

"Master Sergeant Rossi here." She wasn't embarrassed by the quaver in her voice.

"Sergeant, this is Colonel Walling from General Angriff's

headquarters. Do I understand correctly that you and several others cross-trained on multi-engine aircraft at some point in your careers?"

The question startled her, being so far from anything she'd imagined as the reason for the call. For a moment she said nothing, trying to calm herself enough to answer coherently.

"Are you there, Sergeant?"

"I'm sorry, Colonel. Uh… I wouldn't say that I've exactly cross-trained on multi-engine fixed wing aircraft, sir. When I was based in the Philippines maintaining Apaches during Operation Gridley, we were based at Clark and I got to know a lot of Air Force mechanics who worked on C-130s and C-5s. There wasn't much to do during downtimes, so I'd hang out with them and help them service their aircraft. Sergeant Moro is a different story, sir. He put in four years in the Air Force working on transports, left for the private sector, and then re-upped in the Army. He's in a different bay. May I ask why, sir?"

"Because you and your crew, and Sergeant Moro, are flying out of here at nineteen forty-five hours. I'll put Moro under your command for this op. Pack enough clothes for a week's stay and all the tools necessary to put a C-5 Galaxy back into flying condition. We're bringing in generators, so power tools will be available. Once on the ground, you'll have approximately six hours to ready this plane for combat operations."

"I… uh… when was the last time it flew?"

"Forty years ago."

"But Colonel, that's impossible."

"And yet you're still going to do it, Sergeant. You have less than one hour. I suggest you get to work."

#

2125 hours

Motor Bay C rang with the clamor and chaos of vehicles being revved and pulled into line, power tools effecting some last-minute repair and hundreds of people shouting to be heard over the din. There'd been no time to arrange the Humvees, M3 Bradley fighting vehicles, M1127 Stryker reconnaissance vehicles, R-11 tankers, and various troop trucks into an organized column, so MPs stood in lines leading to the western exit, organizing traffic according to the orders of Norm Fleming, who stood in their midst like a maestro conducting his orchestra.

As for Angriff, he did what he did best. Walking around and between

the waiting vehicles, he shook hands, cracked jokes, and made sure every officer knew the importance of their mission.

One woman leaned out of a Bradley and called out to him. “Are we crossing any bridges, General?”

“A few but don’t worry, we’re not burning any of ’em yet!”

The paratroopers were still loading their trucks when the driver got the green light to go, forcing the last of them to scramble aboard. Angriff saluted every vehicle as it passed him, while Fleming kept their order sorted out. By 2214 hours, the taillights of the last ones were fading into the night.

“There they go,” Fleming said as he walked over to Angriff. “Now only time will tell.”

“What have I done, Norm? We threw this operation together in an hour. There’s no way it can work. The whole thing is crazy. You’ve got to make nearly three hundred miles in under seven hours, at night, over broken roads, and God forbid there’s a bridge down. This can’t possibly work.”

“And yet somehow it always seems to work out, and this time won’t be any different. You did what you always do, Nick, what you had to do. And now it’s time for me to do what I’ve got to do.”

“I don’t like it. It’s damned dangerous, you leading this one personally.”

One side of Fleming’s mouth turned up in a sardonic smile. “Now you know what it felt like back in Kenya. And besides, you know damned good and well that you’d be leading this convoy if Janine wasn’t here.”

“She’s never been close to my area of operations before, so I’ve never had to deal with it. But yeah, I probably would be. Anyway, drive like hell and don’t stop until you get to Creech. Don’t let anything delay you, Norm. Abandon broken-down vehicles, take chances. It’s dangerous but time is everything.”

“Throw caution to the winds.”

“If there was ever a time, this is it.”

“In order words, pretend I’m Nick Angriff.” Without waiting for an answer, Fleming got into a waiting Humvee and followed the line of armored vehicles into the night.

#

Chapter 73

Day has ended, night has come, time to rest my weary head;
To sleep, to dream is all I desire, please lay me in my bed.

Tomb inscription of Titus Metilius Cinna, along the Via Appia near Rome

3 miles west of Creech Air Force Base, NV
2226 hours hours, April 20

Jingle Bob kicked his horse in its flanks yet again, despite its frothing mouth and sweat-soaked skin. Nuff and Dalton galloped beside him, avoiding the dust cloud in his wake… not to mention the 25 riders chasing behind them. Bob knew this part of Nevada well and guided them by the bright light of a three-quarter moon. He knew they were almost at the old air force base where they might find shelter, but didn't shout to his fellows because they'd never hear him.

They rode in the median of old Nevada Highway 95. Galloping on the road's surface could have lamed the horses, so they chanced holes and rode in the center. Some of their pursuers used the highway to gain on their quarry. Inevitably some horses slipped on the asphalt or found a split, stepped in it, and careened screaming in a tumble that took down both horse and rider.

Ruined buildings appeared to either side, along with scrub trees, creosote bushes, and a wire retaining fence meant to keep speeding cars from driving into the houses lining the highway. Ahead, Bob made out the distant outline of mountains. On their left, more buildings appeared, but these weren't as dilapidated and were much larger. Moonlight reflected from hard surfaces he knew to be runways, and the tall skeletons of utility poles marched across the landscape.

They'd made it to Creech ahead of the Red Riders, but that wasn't enough. Somewhere in the vastness of the base lived its remaining garrison. They might welcome and help defend him, or they might be furious that he'd led enemies into their midst. As he steered his mount left across the highway and onto the grounds of Creech Air Force Base, he prayed for either luck or divine intervention.

That was when he spotted the lights. He'd never seen anything like

them before. They weren't fire because they didn't flicker. He turned straight for them and kicked the exhausted horse again, when the lights went out. It took his tired brain a second to realize they hadn't gone out at all; no, instead they shone around the outline of a man with a rifle.

#

First Joe Randall rubbed his eyes, then he twisted his head back and forth, trying to loosen the muscles in his neck. He sat sideways in the pilot's seat of *Tank Girl* as Bunny Carlos riffled through a pack containing their food.

"You want spaghetti with meat sauce, chili with beans, chicken with egg noodles, or beef tacos?"

"I'll take the tacos."

Carlos handed over the LLMRE and picked out one for himself. "I feel like chili for some reason."

"Then I'm glad we don't have to fly for a while."

They ate in silence and relief. The last of the base's residents had finally gotten their fill of ogling the Comanche and asking every conceivable question about it. Few of them had ever before seen a working machine powered by an engine, much less one that flew and carried weapons. It had made for a long day.

Long-life Meals Ready to Eat differed in packaging from regular MREs by having a collapsible plastic dish or bowl to eat from. Heating the food was the same as with ordinary MREs. Through a chemical process, water activated an exothermic reaction in a flameless ration heater packed inside the meal.

Randall finished the tacos and scraped the last bits of sauce up with the edge of his fork. Carlos didn't fool with the plastic spoon to get the last of his chili; he simply licked the bowl.

Randall belched, closed his eyes, and leaned back in his seat. "So what's the deal with you and Rossi?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, are you still together? She seemed mighty pissed the other day."

Carlos sat silent. Randall had known him long enough to know that meant he was deciding how much to share. He also knew that if he gave him long enough, Carlos would come clean. So he waited.

"I don't know what the fuck her problem is, man. Two weeks ago

everything was great, ya know? She's funny, she doesn't mind my language or my manners, she likes the same things I do. Hell, it's kind of like dating another guy except for, ya know, the lady parts."

"The sex is good?"

"C'mon, Joe, you know I don't talk about that stuff."

"Since when?"

"Not with her."

"Ooohhh…"

"It's not like that."

Randall couldn't help laughing. "It's exactly like that. You've told me about every female you've ever banged and you probably made up most of them, but not Rossi? Come on, admit it, you're hooked."

"Yeah, I know. I think you're probably right. But don't say anything to her about it, and especially not to Morgan, okay? Bro code and all that."

"What's it worth to you?"

#

Nine seconds later, Sergeant Wardlaw appeared out of the darkness. "Sir, would you mind dousing that light?" He pointed to the cockpit lights Randall had left on so he could see to eat.

"Why? What's up?"

"Armed riders on the perimeter. They say there's a lot more on their heels."

"Any idea who they are?"

"Not yet."

#

Jingle Bob couldn't see the two men escorting them very well by moonlight, but he could make out general details. Both wore helmets and something over their faces, with two long tubes projecting forward from their eyes. They reminded him of a desert caterpillar called the pipeline, which had two horns sticking out from its head.

Each man carried a rifle, wore a uniform and stout boots, and had something dark over his chest. All of that surprised him, but the real shock came when one of them lifted a rectangular object to his mouth and spoke into it, and got a crackling reply. It was a handheld radio! He hadn't known such things still existed.

"Where are we going?" he said, letting desperation rush his words. "Didn't you hear what I said about the riders on our trail? They could be here

at any second."

One of the men stopped, turned, and stared back the way they'd come. "They've withdrawn to almost a mile away, outside our perimeter. Time enough for an officer to interview you."

Bob didn't know how the man could be so confident about that. Could he see in the dark? But then he was distracted again, this time by two hulking shadows close ahead. Silvery moonlight reflected off metal. Only at a range of thirty yards did he realize they had propellers on their tops. Helicopters!

Four men formed a semi-circle around a fifth, all with the same rifles, helmets, and gear as their escorts. Men grabbed the horses' reins and motioned for them to dismount, which they did.

"I'm Sergeant Wardlaw," the tall man in the middle said. "Which one of you is the leader?"

"I guess I am," Bob said. "Are you part of the American army?"

"That's affirmative, sir, but right now I need to know about these incoming riders. Who are they?"

"Everybody calls them Red Riders on account of they wear red bandanas. They also have these marks on their wrists that say G and R. They kill anybody they come across."

"That matches our information. What's your name, sir?"

"People call me Jingle Bob."

"Thank you for your cooperation, sir."

When their two escorts resumed leading them and their exhausted horses away, Bob realized they'd been dismissed. "Sergeant, didn't you hear what I said? They kill everybody they meet!"

"I heard you, sir."

"Aren't you going to do something?"

"Of course I am. If they start a fight, we'll win it. We don't lose, sir."

#

Green Ghost and Kando listened in on the conversation via Wardlaw's open radio mike. Neither officer was worried; the Green Berets had formed a perimeter around the hangar area and nearby buildings, and were prepared to defend it. When Ghost heard about the Red Riders' tattoos and the name Jingle Bob, he started to rise from his chair.

But both he and Kando jumped, startled, when Nado's excited voice shouted behind them. "Bob's here!"

Before either could say a word, she was out the door and running.

They hadn’t even known she was there.

#

“Bob! Bob!”

He squinted into the darkness. A familiar figure sprinted toward him through the moonlight. “Nado!”

The girl wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug.

“Excuse me,” Wardlaw said. “But these riders are getting close and if they’re enemies, I need to take action.”

“He’s already told you they’re enemies!” Nuff said, unable to stay quiet any longer.

“Yes, but—”

“No *buts*, Sergeant!” Green Ghost jogged toward them. “Deploy your men for action. Randall, you and Plotz gets these birds in the air.”

“Meaning no disrespect, *sir*,” Wardlaw answered, angry at taking orders from a man whose rank he didn’t know for sure and who might even have been a civilian, “but our mission under your command is accomplished and now I take orders from either my C.O. or General Fleming.”

Green Ghost got within three inches of the man’s face. “I’m a colonel, *Sergeant*, and I have given you a legitimate order in a combat situation. Do you really want to get into a pissing match with me?”

Bob, Nuff, and Dalton had no idea who was who, or what everybody was angry about.

One of Wardlaw’s men called out, “He *is* the S-5, Top!”

Wardlaw backed up a step. “Very well, *Colonel*.” He wheeled and gave orders to his men, and they disappeared into the darkness.

“Why are you still standing here?” Green Ghost said to Randall and Plotz, who’d watched with amusement. “Get those birds off the ground!”

“Are we cleared to fire?”

“You’re cleared to vaporize those bastards. Oh, one more thing. Don’t fire on any incoming helicopters; those are ours. They’re carrying your ground crew, Randall, and a load of tools and maintenance gear.”

“My crew? Why?”

“Get airborne! We don’t have time to talk about that!”

“Why is my crew coming?”

“Get out of here!”

With that, everyone finally scattered. Bob and his friends stepped away from the giant helicopters.

“Come on,” Nado said. “This part’s windy. Let’s get inside.”

#

Chapter 74

The only thing worse than having to kill people is getting killed yourself.
Undated quote attributed to Augustus Caesar, but probably apocryphal

Creech Air Force Base, NV
2241 hours hours, April 20

Watching the distant fight while sitting in the cockpit and preparing to take off, Randall knew the muzzle flashes in the darkness came from the enemy; the Americans' rifles all had flash suppressors. Two grenades detonated too close for comfort in bursts of bright yellow light. *Tank Girl* and *Hell's Hammer* both had their rotors spinning at takeoff speed when the lights of a third helicopter appeared on their starboard quarter, three hundred yards away. Then a fourth came in right behind it. Both were Huey UH-1 Venoms.

Carlos unbuckled himself and removed his helmet, threw open the door, and shouted over his shoulder, "I'll be right back!"

"Get your ass in here!" Randall screamed.

But it was too late; Carlos was off at a dead run. The doors to the closest helicopter stood open, although the cargo bay was dark. In the pale ambient light, the face of Frances Rossi stuck out of the doorway, and in seconds he faced her. "Get out of here! This LZ is hot!"

To emphasize his point, a round ricocheted off the skin of the bird.

"No time," she shouted as the slowing rotor stirred up dust and pebbles in a vortex around them. "We've only got hours to get the C-5 in the air again."

"What?" Carlos leaned into the cargo hold, where the rest of *Tank Girl's* ground crew were waiting to jump out and get to work.

"Go!" Rossi yelled, shoving him outside. "Do what you do best! But be careful. Your son needs his father!"

She kissed him, and then slid the cargo door shut as the crew bailed out the other side. He stood there trying to process her words, when something passed his face and creased his ear lobe.

"Ow!" He reached up and felt blood. That was all it took for him to sprint back to *Tank Girl* and clamber into the cockpit.

“What the fuck was that?” Randall screamed, genuinely angry, but his anger didn’t come close to matching Carlos’.

“Get us up, Joe! These fuckers are shooting at my kid! Get us up now!”

“Your kid?” The massive helicopter lifted off. Small arms rounds pinged off the armored side.

Barely one hundred feet in the air, Carlos switched on the FLIR targeting sight and the desert immediately lit up with targets. “Yeah, Frame just said she’s pregnant and these assholes are shooting at her.” His finger tightened on the trigger.

Randall immediately made the connection with Carlos’ odd behavior, deciding his co-pilot had already suspected it when he’d run over to her. “Light ’em up, partner.”

Firing over the heads of the Green Berets, Randall and Carlos worked like the killing team they were, directing streams of fifty-caliber rounds at the luminescent shapes filling their screens. When one went down, they went to another. Thirty yards to their left, Alisa Plotz and Andy Arnold did the same thing in *Hell’s Hammer*. Only the next morning would they be able to view the chopped-up evidence of what their bullets had done to the Red Riders.

#

Both of Overtime’s V-22 Ospreys came in after the last of the Red Riders were either dead or had fled. They landed near a hangar on the eastern edge, the same one Rossi and her crew had entered. Green Ghost directed the setting-up of workstations, generators, Klieg lights, and charging stations. Engineers had come in with the Ospreys and worked to get everything operable as soon as possible.

Jingle Bob, Nuff, Dalton, and Kando all stood with mouths open and stared at the artificial lighting that illuminated the inside of the hangar like summer sunlight. People in new-looking uniforms scrambled about while six helicopters sat parked on the runway. The newcomers even ate food out of boxes and bags, and heated it with water. They’d never known anything like it. Only Nado wasn’t impressed; after all, she’d been inside Overtime.

After the shock wore off, Bob pulled Nado aside. “Your mother was fine when I left her,” he said. “And I’m sure she’s still doing fine. She’s as tough as buffalo hide.”

But Nado had been to Overtime and knew why they were at Creech in the first place. “It’s bad up there, Bob. The Chinese attacked them late this

afternoon and are coming back first thing in the morning to finish it."

"How can you know that?"

"These people," she said, indicating all the newcomers with her chin, "they're the American Army, the real one. Don't ask me how, I don't really understand it, but trust me when I tell you they're the real thing. You should see their base! It takes up the inside of a whole mountain. They sent a helicopter up north to find out what's what and it radioed back how bad things are. Right now a long line of these big military machines is heading for Creech with guns and fuel and men. All these people are here to get that big plane flying again."

"Can they do that?"

"I don't know, but they think they can do it by dawn."

"Dawn when? Do you mean tomorrow?"

"Yeah, sunup tomorrow. In that line of trucks and cars there's these men called paratroopers. They mean to fly that plane up to Sierra so those paratroopers can jump out, float to the ground, and save Mom and everybody else up there."

"I saw pictures once, in a book."

"Then you know how it works."

"I'll be damned… this must be what the old world was like, before The Collapse. People floatin' out of the sky." He rubbed an eyebrow and turned away.

#

The LED lantern lit Jamal Kando's office well. The general sat to one side, instinctively realizing he could add nothing to the discussion at hand. Green Ghost sat on the front edge of the desk, arms folded, staring at the floor as he spoke. Standing before him in a semi-circle were Joe Randall, Bunny Carlos, Alisa Plotz, Andy Arnold, and all of the helicopter pilots. "*None* of you is four-engine qualified?"

The pilots all looked at each other. Joe Randall acted as spokesman. "We fly helicopters. Getting qualified for fixed-wing is an entirely different process and takes years. We're not even in the right branch of service for that; that's Air Force flying. But I think you're asking the wrong question."

"Then please tell me the right question."

"You should be asking if anybody can fly that thing."

A corporal interrupted the meeting with a knock. Green Ghost motioned him in, and he set down a steel urn of coffee and a tray with cups,

powdered milk, and sugar. They all got in line to pour a cup, all except Kando. All he could do was stare.

Green Ghost noticed and took him a cup. “How do you take it?”

“What?”

“How do you take your coffee?”

“I don’t know,” Kando said. “It was long gone by the time I was old enough to drink it.”

“Good, you don’t have any bad habits to unlearn. Drink it black. That’s how it’s best.”

Five minutes later, the caffeine had re-energized the group and Green Ghost got the discussion going again. “All right, so let me ask the right question this time: can anybody fly that big-ass plane over there?”

Caffeinated or not, nobody spoke, in that way nobody speaks during business meetings when the next voice to be heard attracts all kinds of negative attention. Randall kicked at the ground, Plotz and Arnold looked away, and Carlos crossed his arms.

“Did I ask the wrong question again?” Ghost stared at his brother-in-law. “If those techs get that plane up and running, *somebody’s* going to fly it. If nobody volunteers, then I’ll appoint somebody. Now think. Do any of you have any experience whatsoever in flying something like that?”

With obvious reluctance, Bunny Carlos raised his hand. “During my first deployment, I made friends with some Air Force bus drivers.”

“You mean transport pilots?” Ghost asked.

“Yeah, that’s right. This was before I met Joe. We were in Kuwait and hung out at the same O club. I was in Apaches then. There was this guy named Sig… Sig Olafsen. We traded rides in each other’s birds. They flew C-130s and C-5s. I logged about thirty hours flying supply drops in a C-5, officially as third seat. Then we got caught by the base commander and our asses were in a sling. We made up this BS story about it being a bridge-building exercise; the PC fucks loved that kind of shit. But truth was, the co-pilot was usually so hung over I was in the right seat most of the time.”

“So you actually flew it some?”

“More than some. Both our squadron commanders wanted to fry our asses, but neither wanted to admit their personnel had been fucking off like that, so an official cross-training project was put in place. I took courses in flying fixed-wing, they studied the Apache, and we both logged a total of seventy-five hours in each other’s aircraft.”

Randall's mouth hung open. "I've never heard about anything like that! The Army and the Air Force agreed to cross-train their pilots?"

"What can I tell you, Joe? It happened. The whole thing was OTR, though… off the record. But if I got in trouble, the real crews were there to handle it."

"You never told me any of this," Randall said.

But Green Ghost shut that down. "Congratulations, Carlos, you've got the job. Who do you want in the right seat?"

"Captain Randall. He's got a lot of single-engine hours. But Ghost, you gotta understand, a C-5 and a Comanche have about as much in common as a whore and a nun. They're both girls, but that's it, just like these planes. The only thing similar is, they're both big and they fly. Plus, that was a *long* time ago. I don't remember any of that shit."

"That's got to be good enough. You two get over there and familiarize yourself with the controls. Takeoff is in less than six hours."

"Assuming the nut-runners get it going again," Randall said.

"They will. They have to."

#

Rossi stood at a worktable, rifling through tools, when she caught sight of Carlos approaching, Randall beside him. Having found the wrench, she took two strides and intercepted him. "Listen, I know I shouldn't have sprung on you that way, but I'm under the gun to get this thing started. We can talk about it later, okay?"

"Good, because I've got five hours to learn how to fly this heap."

"Huh?"

Randall chipped in. "Daddy-boy here volunteered to fly this thing five hundred miles north into a combat zone, do an airborne drop over a bunch of pissed-off Chinese soldiers, and then fly back. Then he fucked me over by requesting me as co-pilot."

"You did *what*?"

Bunny scowled and shared the load. "Hey, Joe's got a lot of time in fixed-wing aircraft!"

Frances wasn't buying. "I don't care about that!"

"Thanks a lot," Randall said.

"I care about you volunteering to fly that damned thing!" she continued, as if Randall hadn't spoken. Despite her being Randall's crew chief, she kept going without worrying about insubordination. "You

dumbass! I'm pregnant with your kid and I'm not about to raise him alone. Shit!"

"You won't have to. I promise!"

She turned on a heel and called her team over for an impromptu meeting. "Randall and Carlos are flying this metal mountain into combat and it is *not* going to have mechanical issues. Do you understand?"

Serious and quiet, her team nodded in unison.

"Sergeant Moro has lead on this. Now get back to work, but remember, if this thing goes down, I'm taking it out on each and every one of you. Risckldyne, I want you to paint a name on each side of the nose. Call it *Son of Tank Girl*."

"I'll need a crane to get up that high, Frame."

"I don't care how you do it. Just get it done." Finished, she turned on the two pilots again. With a curled lip and a snarl, she poked Carlos in the chest. "When this is over, you're putting a ring on my finger!"

#

"Oh, my God, Bunny, what have you gotten us into?"

The cockpit of the C-5 made *Tank Girl's* controls seem primitive. The two pilot seats looked and felt like lounge chairs, compared to the Comanche. Computer screens and instruments popped up in front of the pilots, between them, by their knees, and in seemingly every bit of free space in the entire cockpit. And where screens didn't take up the panels, dials or switches did.

"It's like an intergalactic bus," Carlos said. "Why didn't they think about this before we left Prime? You know somebody there had real multi-engine time."

"You'd think so," said a new voice from behind them. They turned. Green Ghost stood in the gloom of the engineering compartment, right behind the cockpit. "But you two are the closest thing we've got. Two of the fighter pilots still in Long Sleep are actually qualified on a C-5, but they couldn't be awakened, prepped, and released for duty that fast. You know how Long Sleep affects reflexes when you first wake up."

"I don't know if I can do it," Carlos said. "Shit, this is like nothing I've ever flown, man. Not without somebody qualified to cover my ass in case I fucked up."

"Maybe your hot-shit ground crew can't get this tub started." Ghost glanced at his watch and handed them a thick, heavily ring-bound book. "But I'm betting they do, in which case you've got a little over five hours to

memorize this."

Carlos flipped to the cover. *For Training Only: C-5 Handbook.* The table of contents listed 585 pages.

#

"Making progress?" Green Ghost asked. Several hours had passed, and puffy circles ringed both Randall and Carlos' eyes.

Joe Randall answered without looking away from the panel. "It would help if these instruments were lit up. You do realize this thing won't fly without power, don't you?"

"That's what I'm here to tell you. Electric power should be on within another minute or two, and Rossi needs you to try and start the engines as soon as the fuel gets here."

"I think we've figured out how to do that much. If we haven't, we're really screwed."

"Then stand by to power up, and cross your fingers."

"Y'know, you could have told us about this before we left Prime."

"You mean flying this thing?"

"Yeah. You knew then we were gonna have to fly it. It was a dick move not to tell us."

"Not my call. Talk to your father-in-law."

"He did that?"

"Yep."

"Oh." Randall went back to reading. "Maybe it wasn't such a bad move, after all."

#

SECTION NINE

War



Chapter 75

Only the dead have seen the end of war.
Plato

Sierra Army Depot, Herlong, CA
0212 hours, April 21

Vapor knelt and scanned the desert to the west with his NVGs. After the previous day's fighting, they'd found no evidence the Chinese had night vision gear, but he wasn't taking chances. Aside from their own scattered defenses, any heat signatures were far away. Even the wildlife sensed danger in the zone of death around the base.

"We're good," he said.

Junker Jane exited the headquarters building along with Aretha Lamar. The air inside had turned foul with the coppery scent of blood. Clean night air revived them both. Jane leaned against a tall heap of dirt and sand bracing the outside wall in the absence of sandbags.

"Normally I love the night air, but it hurts to breathe," Lamar said.

"With three broken ribs, I'm surprised you can walk," Claw said.

"I know I've said it, but thank you both for being here. I thought Jingle Bob's story about mysterious Americans was an excuse to head south and save face in front of Jane. I never believed it was true. I thought we were all alone."

"Don't go changing your mind just yet," Vapor said. "I can't get anybody on the radio and to be honest with you, there's no way they can get help up here before the Cs overrun this place. Our base is seven hundred and fifty miles from here and all we've got for air transport is helicopters."

"Dawn's in four hours, give or take." Lamar leaned against the doorframe, relieving pressure on her injured left side. "So I guess that's it. You two don't have to stick around; you know that, right? No sense you getting killed, too."

"Our Blackhawk is close by. We can fit two, maybe three more people on it now that we've used up most our fuel coming here. You and Jane and maybe a couple of the kids. It won't get us all the way home, but we'll be a long way from the Cs."

"Thank you… I haven't even asked your name and rank."

“Just call me Vapor.”

“And I’m Claw.”

“Are those supposed to be names or ranks?”

Vapor knew Green Ghost would have given her a blank stare and not answered the question, but he wasn’t Ghost. “They’re names, ma’am, like code names.”

Wheezing, she took fast, shallow breaths. It made her light-headed. “The American Army is a lot different than I thought it would be.”

#

Chapter 76

We will find a way or we shall make one.
Hannibal Barca

At the Mike O'Callahan-Pat Tillman Memorial Bridge over the Colorado River
0312 hours, April 21

The trek to the bridge had been harrowing. Even with a clear sky, bright moonlight, and headlights, drivers could only see the largest cracks and potholes before hitting them. So far a Humvee and a Bradley sat broken on the side of the highway behind them, but now the real test began. Glowing in the moonlight ahead stretched the Mike O'Callahan-Pat Tillman Memorial Bridge over the Colorado River, a/k/a the Hoover Dam bypass bridge.

The driver of the lead Humvee had volunteered to walk the bridge's entire span with a flashlight. Two lanes of traffic traveled in each direction with a concrete divider down the center. The private had a long way to walk — 1,900 feet and back.

Norm Fleming paced as he waited on the eastern bank, a high rock on one side and lower crags on the other. Far below at the bottom of the canyon, the river rushed between its steep walls. Behind him gathered a small knot of men and women from the leading vehicles, who could only stand and watch the light sweeping back and forth, far away and nearing the other side. Among them were the commanders of the infantry and the airborne battalions.

Twenty minutes later, the private arrived back, panting and sweating from his run. Hands on knees, he gasped out his report. "There's no holes in the surface, General, on either side. It looked and felt sound to me… I can't be sure. But I'll be damned if some welds didn't look fresh."

"So there's no obvious problems?"

"No, sir."

"Thank you." He turned to the battalion commanders. "I'm going first. If I make it across safely, get the rest of the column across two at a time. We're behind schedule, so once on the other side, it's top speed."

"General," the infantry commander started, "I don't think you should be the one to go first."

“Thank you, Major, I appreciate your concern, but now we’re wasting time. If something happens to me, you’re in command. Now let’s gitfoh! Next stop, Creech.”

The unaccustomed slang did the trick. They all moved like their asses were on fire.

#

Las Vegas wasn’t supposed to look that way. In contrast to the stoic persona he projected in public, Norm Fleming had always loved Las Vegas. The reflection of millions of lights during a dark desert night was something he found hypnotic. The bombast, the glitz, the sheer artificiality of it all appealed to a part of his soul he kept deeply buried from even his closest friends. Not even Nick Angriff knew Las Vegas was his favorite place on Earth.

He wasn’t a gambler and rarely played anything more than quarter slots. What he loved about the city was the raw and transparent emotionalism of it all. Emotions in Sin City ran the gamut from the lowest depression of those who’d just lost the rent money, to the euphoria of the gambler who’d hit a jackpot, or the lovers sharing a fantasy weekend. He admitted to himself it was the voyeurism that most called *people watching*. But he often sat for hours sipping single malt scotch at a bar in a busy casino, preferring the smoky and peaty flavor of Island malts.

Whenever he’d gone to Vegas, he’d stayed at the Flamingo, in a room overlooking the Strip. At night he’d opened all the curtains and lit the room in the blues, reds, and other garish colors flashing and flaring outside. Somehow, the bizarre lighting had helped him sleep. Above all, he’d loved the food, especially a pasta dish served at a restaurant facing the Strip on the hotel’s ground floor. The pasta had been homemade with a light cream sauce, garnished with capers, sun dried tomatoes, and bacon.

Speeding down old Interstate 515, he couldn’t help wondering how the city had died. Had the power shut down right away or had the Hoover Dam kept the lights on even as the food supply had dwindled? Had the people rioted or had they left to find someplace where food might still be available? And what about the thousands of visitors caught there when The Collapse began? Had they stampeded the airport looking for a way home? The dark ruins slipping by the elevated roadway offered no answers.

Fleming checked his watch. They were thirty-one minutes behind schedule. Only at the last moment did he see something in the far distance,

something he hadn’t expected to see: light, perhaps a bonfire. He twisted in his seat to stare backward, but it was gone.

#

Jamal Kando felt both awed and slighted. Except for disconnected fragments, he remembered nothing of the pre-Collapse world. Television he could picture in the form of a cartoon with little blue people. He also remembered lights at night and cars, lots and lots of cars, but however many frozen moments might still be stored in his memory, he had no sense of what that period had been like.

What he did know for certain was that for the past fifty years, he’d devoted his life to protecting the remnants of the old USA in the Creech area. Mostly he’d been keeping a promise to his mother, who’d been a colonel in the USAF and taught him about America, to protect the airplanes from people who might misuse them. He’d been just young enough to keep his vow until it first became a habit and then a way of life.

And now these newcomers came onto *his* base, the one he’d spent all his adult life protecting, and took it over without even asking him. Sure, the helicopters were impressive, and watching the two Comanches firing at the GRs had been exhilarating, but six helicopters and some technicians wasn’t an army.

“Assholes,” he said to himself. For a while he watched the activity in the hangar, especially the workers led by the dark-haired woman they called Frame, but when Green Ghost left and didn’t come back, his wonder gave way to indignation. *To hell with these arrogant bastards*. Wandering outside, he forgot potential enemies lurking in the darkness and found himself on the shoulder of Highway 95.

Decades of listening to the desert at night made him aware of how loud the clangor coming from the hangar truly was. Whines and whangs and all sorts of unidentifiable noises drowned out the usual backdrop of crickets, howling coyotes, and screeching, hunting hawks. When you grew up in the desert, it became part of your life, like a silent friend that was always there, dangerous but predictable.

Far to the south, he spotted lights. Squinting, he tried to decide how many were coming his way and estimated dozens. It could only be the convoy the newcomers had said was en route.

Hurrying to the main entrance, Kando opened the metal gates, which still hung from their brick-and-steel supports. Four Humvees pulled in and

stopped. A large black man wearing a camouflage uniform sat in the passenger seat of the lead vehicle, and he rolled down his window. Even in the darkness Kando saw three stars on his collar.

"Good evening," he said in a deep, resonant voice. "You're a general?"

Kando's left hand went to the single star on his own collar. "I am… uhhh, sir. General Jamal Kando, base commander."

"I'm Lieutenant General Norman Fleming. General Kando, as you know we're in a hurry. We need to know where to park and deploy, and how to get the fuel to this C-5. Can you show us?"

"Yes, General Fleming, of course. Follow me." He began walking into the base.

"General Kando, wouldn't it be faster if you rode with us?"

"What?" *Another arrogant jerk.* "Yes, of course, it's just been… I haven't ridden anything except a horse since I was a child."

The Humvee's driver jumped out and opened the back door. Gingerly Kando climbed inside. The slamming of the door startled him.

"Where do I go, General?" the driver asked once he was back in his seat.

"There's a road ahead. Turn right and I'll show you from there."

#

Opening the hangar doors manually had required several dozen paratroopers. Once they'd done that, they could only sit on the tarmac and wait.

Green Ghost found Fleming, Kando, and Nado standing to one side of the paratroopers. Although buildings blocked the eastern horizon, the sky overhead had begun to lighten with the approaching dawn.

"Who got elected to fly that thing?" Fleming asked.

"Carlos and Randall. Carlos actually has some minor experience in a C-5, and Randall's done a lot of fixed-wing flying."

"Can they pull this off?"

Green Ghost's answer began as a deep breath followed by a sigh. "I don't have an answer, Socrates, and I don't think they do, either. If I had to bet, I think they can get it in the air, but after that all bets are off."

"Socrates?" Kando said. "I thought your name was Fleming?"

"It's a long story."

Green Ghost pointed to the hangar, his hand silhouetted against the

brightness from inside. “If anybody knows a good prayer, now’s the time to say it.”

Twenty seconds later, a high-pitched whine started, similar to that of the two big helicopters except it kept getting louder, and then it was joined by a second whine, a third one, and finally a fourth. By the time they reached a steady pitch, Kando clamped his hands over his ears.

#

Chapter 77

Only the impossible is worth doing.
Akong Rinpoche

Creech Air Force Base, NV
0532 hours, April 21

"Ready?" Joe Randall said.

"This is nuts," Carlos replied. "I can't fly this thing."

"Sure you can. You got the engines started."

"I'm not kidding, Joe. The C-5 is the biggest airplane we ever built. It's five stories tall, for God's sake! I wish I'd kept my mouth shut."

"It's too late to back out now, amigo."

"I can't do it! If I fuck this up hundreds of people die! This whole thing is bent."

"Look at the bright side. You'll only feel guilty for a minute or two."

"It's not funny!"

"No, it's not! But you don't have much of a choice. It's either you fly the plane or the Chinese get their hands on a couple of armored corps and who knows what else? Look, I trust you enough to put my life in your hands on a daily basis and I know you can do this. This is a volunteer mission and all those paratroopers know you're a rotorhead, not a bus driver. They're getting on this plane because they want to fight, and they trust you and me to get 'em there in one piece, and that is exactly what we're gonna do."

Carlos scowled and stared straight ahead. The flight helmet felt awkward since he couldn't use the one from *Tank Girl*. The one he had to use rubbed the top of his ear, and it was already sore from the near miss earlier. "You told me something recently that I thought made a lot of sense. I'll never forget it," he finally said.

"Yeah, what's that?"

"If this thing crashes, you'd better die with it. Otherwise I'm gonna kill you for getting me into this."

"I didn't get you into this!"

"That's my story and I'm sticking to it."

#

"Son of a bitch," Kando said. "It's moving. The damned thing is

moving.”

The C-5 eased out of the bright hangar into the darkness of night, lights glowing on and inside the fuselage. Like a giant pterodactyl, it turned onto a taxiway and then turned again onto a north-south runway. Light breezes from the southwest created a minor tailwind.

Somewhere in the night, a single shot echoed across the desert, followed by a rapid flurry of high-pitched gunshots. Green Ghost recognized without thinking the report of an AK-47 and those of M-16s. Nothing indicated damage to the plane, or to anything else, and the AK-47 did not fire again. It was likely the Green Berets cleaning up the last of the Red Riders.

On the edge of the runway, the giant craft stopped. Like the snout of some mammoth shark opening and exposing a maw filled with teeth, the nose of the C-5 rose upward and revealed the massive cargo bay. Once it stood at a right angle to the fuselage, a ramp lowered to the concrete. Inside the plane, a dull glow gave enough light to board by.

“Load ’em up!” Fleming said, winding his finger in the air even though nobody could see it.

Three hundred and sixty paratroopers gathered up their gear and headed for the ramp, but not before the battalion’s senior master sergeant snarled the opening lines to *Blood On The Risers*, the official unofficial theme song of the U.S. Airborne, sung to the tune of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic.*

He was just a rookie trooper and he surely shook with fright,
He checked all his equipment and made sure his pack was tight;
He had to sit and listen to those awful engines roar,
"You ain’t gonna jump no more!"

Gory, gory, what a hell of a way to die,
Gory, gory, what a hell of a way to die,
Gory, gory, what a hell of a way to die,
He ain’t gonna jump no more!

Fleming had to smile at the bravado of those troopers, most of whom had never jumped into combat before and all of whom knew they might be using their parachutes long before arriving at the drop zone. He wished he had a video camera to show Nick how they looked boarding the plane.

From her position standing close behind him, Nado didn't sound quite as sanguine. "What a horrible song." She spoke loud enough to be heard over the jet engines. The C-5 had moved far enough away that they didn't have to yell to be heard. "Why are they singing something so awful? Do they *want* to die?"

Beside her, Jingle Bob and Dalton glanced at each other, then looked away.

"Gallows humor," Fleming said. "Laughing in the face of death."

"Does that make dying easier?"

"Maybe. I don't know. But the hardest time isn't during the battle; it's all the waiting and preparing beforehand that'll eat up your soul. Those men rode all night in cramped trucks, then unloaded and waited some more on this tarmac, and now they're loading onto an airplane to wait some more. That gives plenty of time for your nerves to get the better of you, and this is one way of fighting that."

Then he reached down and picked up his own pack, rifle, and parachute. Turning to Green Ghost, he extended his hand. "If you talk to General Angriff, give him my regards."

"You're not supposed to go on this mission, sir," Green Ghost said.

Nado and Kando listened, eyes wide, but said nothing.

"I'm the commander on the spot, and I say that my going is necessary. Are you trying to forbid me… Colonel?" He said it with a smirk.

Green Ghost stood with arms folded and his usual stoic stare as the only hint to what he might be thinking. "No, sir, you're the general. And I don't think I could stop you even if I wanted to. But if we're gonna board, we'd better get our asses moving."

"Wait." Nado reached for Ghost's arm. "You said you weren't going!"

Fleming's shocked expression turned quickly to bemusement.

"I never said that!" Ghost said. "I told you I wouldn't go if I didn't have to, and I have to."

"Why? Why do you have to go?"

"To keep an eye on him." Ghost pointed at Fleming. "My stuff's already on the plane, sir. Let's get out of here."

Shaking off his surprise, Bob trotted to catch up with them. His job would be to help pick out a landing zone. As they neared the plane, in the darkness behind him Green Ghost could just make out Nado's angry frown

and hands planted firmly on her hips.

"You might not want to come back for a while." Fleming patted Ghost on the back.

"What's her problem? What difference does it make to her?"

"Oh, you poor guy, you."

#

Nado, Dalton, and Nuff all sat cross-legged in the grass several hundred yards away from the screaming jet engines. They gaped in awe at the huge aircraft quivering on the taxiway like a cougar perched on a boulder waiting to pounce. Someone passed out MREs. The men had no idea what they were for until Nado showed them. Watching the C-5, they munched on the strange food and wondered how it got into the odd containers it came in.

"I don't much mind when people hand me food," Dalton said. The rest kept eating.

Nuff saw Nado's food in her lap, untouched. "Ain't you hungry?"

"No," she answered in an angry tone.

"If you're not gonna eat that, can I have it?"

#

Randall tapped Carlos on the shoulder and he pulled off the noise-cancelling headphone over his right ear. The whine of the idling engines had died to a background noise not unlike cicadas on a warm spring night in Tennessee.

"Zone out, Bunny, zone out. Just like last year when that Stinger was on our tail, remember? Get in the zone, forget me, forget the outside world, and just let everything come to you. You can do it."

"This isn't a movie and we're not attacking a giant round space ship."

"No, it's not a movie. It's real life and when you pull this off, you're going to be a real hero. You taxied to the end of the runway… the rest is a piece of cake."

Scowling, Carlos replaced the headphone cup over his ear. He sucked in a deep breath, exhaled, and nodded once."Here we go," he said, even though neither of them heard it. The giant aircraft shuddered as he pushed the four yoked throttles forward.

Carlos deployed the plane's two wing-mounted lights to illuminate the runway, but it remained difficult to see the concrete's edges. Grass had overgrown the shoulders and in the darkness it was impossible to figure out what had dirt beneath it and what had concrete. A few volunteers held up

flashlights, LED lanterns, and homemade torches, marking the runway's path. The Green Berets had deployed closer in to protect them from any Red Riders they hadn't yet hunted down.

As he throttled up, the Galaxy lumbered forward. Neither man noticed the desert speeding by to either side. At 120 knots Carlos felt the controls becoming responsive. The closer they came to the takeoff speed of 145 knots, the lighter the controls felt. Carlos split his attention between the air speed and angle of attack indicator in the instrument panel beyond his right hand and the runway ahead. At 143 knots they lifted off, settled back with a bounce, and then took off, angling upward. Bunny Carlos kept a death grip on the wheel.

#

Norm Fleming wasn't Nick Angriff. The legendary Nick the A would have calmed nervous paratroopers by cracking rude jokes, slapping backs, and generally acting as if flying into combat was the best thing that could possibly have happened. Fleming couldn't do that, not and appear authentic. If he tried, those hard-eyed men would see through his act and his credibility would crumble. So instead he did what he would have done on the ground.

Walking along the crowded interior toward the aircraft's rear, he inspected troopers' gear, patted arms, and uttered a few heartfelt words of encouragement. He wore the standard issue Beretta M9 handgun in a holster at his waist, the same as the rest of the troops, in sharp contrast to Angriff's famous twin fifty-caliber Desert Eagles. He carried an M-16 slung over his shoulder.

Aside from a few small firefights, Norm Fleming hadn't seen combat in more than a decade of his lifespan. Unlike Angriff, a general who had no business being close to a firefight but sought them out anyway, Fleming considered one of the perks of higher command to be getting out of harm's way. During their Kenyan deployment, he'd begun to wonder if he had a cowardly streak buried somewhere deep in his soul.

Now he was on an aircraft heading into combat. Angriff hadn't ordered him *not* to fight, because it had never occurred to him that Fleming would. And with only two practice jumps to his credit, he risked not only his own life, but also the stability of the brigade, should he be killed or, God forbid, taken prisoner. But he'd do it anyway, and knew he had a defense his commanding officer couldn't penetrate: he was doing what Nick himself would have done.

#

Chapter 78

My mother didn't raise a second stringer.
Lieutenant General Norman Fleming

Operation Overtime, Nick Angriff's quarters
0602 hours, April 21

He'd only slept three hours. Nick Angriff could feel his years catching up to him in an aching neck and stiff legs. Pain shot down his back as he got out of bed, but he remembered to be quiet so as not to wake Janine. He made for the bathroom until the smell of coffee pulled him up short. His vision was still blurred with sleep as he stumbled down the short hallway to the kitchen he'd forgotten was part of his quarters. Ahead, someone coughed, and he rounded the corner with a long stride. His wife leaned on the counter, a cloth to her mouth.

"Are you okay?"

"Nick! Don't do that! You startled me."

"I'm sorry, dear." He eased behind her and kissed the top of her head. "I'm still getting used to you being here. Did you make coffee?"

"Of course I did. I know my husband. Now, you sit down and I'll scramble up some eggs."

"Just coffee, thanks. I should've been in the office an hour ago. It's almost dawn and I've got to speak with Norm, see if they got that transport off the ground or not."

"You need to eat something, Nick. At least let me warm up an MRE."

"God, no, Nini, I'd rather starve than eat more shelf-stable eggs and rubber sausage. You know what the Marines call those?"

"If it's obscene, I don't want to know."

A buzzing alerted him to the phone ringing, which could only be Walling or Schiller since everybody else was gone. He answered her over his shoulder. "It's Marine slang. Of course it's obscene."

#

"Angriff," he said into the phone's handset.

"General, this is Walling. We need you up here a-sap."

"I thought you were back in the hospital."

"I was, and now I'm back out again."

“Have we heard from General Fleming?”

“The plane’s in the air, sir, headed north. They took off an hour late.”

“Damn! What else did General Fleming say?”

“I… General Fleming didn’t speak with us, sir. The recon sergeant did.”

“Why? Is General Fleming all right? He’s not injured, is he?”

“Not that we know of, but… but he’s on the plane, sir. With a parachute.”

“Shit. I’ll be right there.”

He turned and found his wife giving him the cold look he’d seen many times before, her left eyebrow raised and her arms crossed. Janine Angriff had a love-hate relationship with cursing; when someone else cursed she said nothing about it or reassured the speaker, but when her husband forgot, she hated it.

Holding up a placating hand, he gave her a hug. “Sorry. I’ll get better about that.”

#

“What in the hell does he think he’s doing?” Angriff paced beside his desk. “Norm’s not a combat commander. That’s not where his talents are. I thought he knew that!”

Sitting on the couch with a laptop on one side and several handheld radios on the other, B.F. Walling made for a pale shade of his former vigorous self. Under loose fitting ASUs, his body seemed gaunt and his face wan and tired. “He told the battalion commander something about the Congo, and if you can do it so can he. Do you know what that means, General?”

Angriff froze in place and stuck a cigar in his mouth. It took a few seconds for a grin to widen around his clenched teeth. “I never thought Norm could be such a smart ass.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to.”

#

Chapter 79

Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.

Sir Winston S. Churchill

West of Carson City, NV
0634 hours, April 21

"This thing's a beast!" Joe Randall said. They'd taken off the noise cancelling headphones once they'd hit 5,000 feet, flying higher than the drop altitude to avoid ground fire. RPGs in particular posed a major threat.

Normally the altitude for a combat jump would be lower than 1,800 feet, but the C-5 they flew hadn't been rigged for paratroops and had no static line, so the jump would be out the back with each man opening his own chute. The extra 500 feet of altitude would keep them in the air longer and make them better targets, but also gave them more time to get the chutes open and to deal with any problems.

"Beast is the word," Carlos said. "What's our location?"

"That should have been Carson City off on our left a minute ago, which puts us close to changing to course three-two-zero. Another ten minutes and we should see Reno off to the northwest. We'll turn then."

"Hey, Joe, do me a favor, will ya?"

"You know I will."

"If something happens… if I don't make it back, promise me you and Morgan will watch out for Frame and the kid."

"Don't be an idiot. Nothing's going to happen."

"Yeah, but if it does, just promise, okay? Make me feel better."

"Sure, if it makes you feel better, I promise. But you're still being an idiot."

"And tell my son what a great dad he had."

"Yeah, sure."

#

Sierra Army Depot, Herlong, CA
0636 hours

Vapor used a dented metal cup and drank from the water bucket in the main headquarters building. He'd spent the past three hours inspecting their

defenses and cheering everybody up as much as he could.

"The Americans are coming," he'd told them. "I'm living proof." He'd made suggestions on how to improve their station, but the truth was that calling most of the foxholes *defensive positions* exaggerated their usefulness. Even *rifle pits* overstated their defensive value.

"Think we've got a chance?" they'd all asked him.

"Hell, yes, even without my buddies. Those Gustavs you've got are wicked as shit."

That part was true; the Gustavs were badass killers and the base had lots of them. What it didn't have was most everything else it needed to survive, like trained soldiers and air support, but he left out that part.

After draining his cup, Vapor exited the building's front door into the cool air and graying light of pre-dawn. The sun would be up in a matter of minutes.

"They're not here yet," Claw said. He slouched near the slit trench twenty feet in front of the building, peering into the dim light toward the defensive line to the south.

"Us or the Chinese?"

"Both."

"They'll both show up. I don't know how, but our people will be here."

"If they're not…"

"I know. Alamo time."

"I wish I had a smoke."

"Me, too."

"You know we can't hole up in that building, right?"

"Yeah, the field of fire is too limited. Not enough windows."

"It's the fall-back position."

"Right."

"You know how it's gonna start…"

"I don't," said a new voice. Jane stepped through the doorway behind them, followed by Lamar.

The two Zombies exchanged glances and hand gestures meaning *do you want to explain it?* At length Claw gave a nod.

"It'll begin with artillery, mortars at least. You'll hear a cough and have about two seconds to eat dirt and then the world will blow up. If they've got heavy artillery, they'll start with that. Either way the buildings will be the

main targets, starting with this one."

"Why this one?" Lamar asked.

"The attack yesterday by those airborne boys wasn't random. They knew who you were and the location of your headquarters, right here. They're smart and somebody on your team is feeding them inside info. If you die, the defense collapses, and they know it."

"I don't believe that! None of my people would ever betray me! And they know what the Chinese are like. They'll fight to the end rather than be slaves."

Claw held up his hands in surrender. "Whatever you say, ma'am."

Jane paused until it was clear the others had nothing more to say. "So what should we do?"

"Do?" Vapor smiled without humor. "Kill 'em and pray for a miracle."

#

0644 hours

A dull, distant boom somewhere to the south was followed by a muffled *crack.* Vapor reacted without thinking. He grabbed Aretha Lamar's arm and pulled her into the trench twenty feet from the headquarters building, jumping in with her and protecting her injured ribs. Claw reacted identically, except Jane hadn't needed to be pulled. She'd heard Chinese artillery before.

Arcing toward them in a shrieking parabola, the shell hit thirty yards south of the headquarters building, across a road in a wooded field. Blast effect sent splinters spraying in a fifty-yard circle and shook the building. Two seconds later, dirt clods and branches rained on the backs of the Americans huddling in the trench.

"Hey, Vapor!" Claw shouted after spitting out dirt. "I've changed my mind about being here."

They felt the second shell more than the first. That one had struck and penetrated several feet of dirt before the fuse set off the payload, but the second hit the parking lot behind the building and detonated on contact. The blast wave smashed into the building's rear wall, pushing it in. The teenagers still inside poured out the front door and dove into the trench. A twelve-year-old boy started crying.

Aretha Lamar put her hands over her ears and buried the top of her head in the dust at the bottom of the trench. The kids huddled around her and mimicked her. Jane lay in the fetal position, but her eyes met Vapor's and he

saw no fear in them.

But the third shell struck thirty feet west of the trench. The ground wave threw them all into the air and sizzling shrapnel ripped into flesh. One of the teens, a young girl about fourteen, landed on her back near Vapor. She blinked and said, “I think I’m hurt.” Her brown eyes showed surprise, but not fear or pain.

He saw no visible wounds until he lifted her shoulder. A hunk of steel protruded from her mid-back up to the base of her skull. Blood spurted from several places, but she still showed no sign of pain.

Lamar tried to reach her, but Claw held her back. He shook his head at her horrified expression and mouthed *There’s nothing you can do.* The girl felt no pain because the sharp steel had severed her spine. She’d be dead in seconds from blood loss and that was a mercy.

Small-arms fire popped and stuttered during the lull between artillery rounds, and the coughs of mortars joined in. Explosions came from all parts of the battlefield, to the south and to the west, although none of the mortars fired at them yet. The Chinese attack would combine infantry assault backed by armor with mortar support against the front-line defenses. The heavy artillery aimed for whatever command and control the base defenders had left. That meant shells landing around the headquarters.

“They’ve got us bracketed,” Claw yelled. “We can’t stay here and that building’s ground zero for the artillery.”

“There’s nowhere else to go!” Vapor answered. “Unless we gitfoh!”

“What’s gitfoh?” asked Jane.

“Git the fuck outa here.”

Lamar asked, “Where would you go?”

“We call in the ’copter. There’s room for both of you, too.”

They all heard the fourth shell streaking inbound and curled as low in the trench as possible, gripping the dust as if they could anchor themselves below ground. Against all odds, the missile struck the field north of the building, where only the dried stalks of last year’s corn crop occupied the surface.

“What about them?” Lamar shouted, indicating the teens. They’d heard the whole thing and stared at Vapor in near panic.

He shook his head. “Not all of them.”

“Then I’m not going anywhere.”

Through their argument, none of them heard next incoming round

before it slammed into the far left end of the trench, three feet off the floor. The blast wave knocked them down. Rocks and dirt showered around them. Vapor had stashed two Carl Gustav launchers there with eight HE rounds, but now they were buried under five feet of dirt — but at least they hadn't cooked off.

"Shit!"

Vapor's ears rang from the explosion, so he didn't hear the drone of a helicopter until it drew close. Peeking over the lip of the trench drew rifle fire and he slipped back down, leaning against the trench wall. Specks of dirt stuck to his face. "Gunship," he said. "Theirs."

"Fuck!" said Claw.

Jane risked a quick look for herself. "A friend of mine brought down one just like that with an RPG. We've got Carl Gustavs."

Vapor pointed at the smoking mound of dirt. "Under there, yeah."

"There's more inside."

"Do you know how to shoot one?"

"I've used them."

#

Without waiting, Jane scrambled out of the trench. Bullets ripped into the loose soil around her. Vapor started up to pull her back in, but something struck him in the forehead and he fell back, a splotch of red marking the spot. The others all saw a bullet rip into the bottom of Jane's running foot and exit the top. She fell and rolled, then crawled on hands and knees to the doorway and inside. Claw rose to go help her when he heard the now familiar sound of the Chinese 155mm artillery firing.

"Jane, hurry!" he screamed, hands cupped around his mouth.

She staggered out dragging her right foot, a Carl Gustav round under each arm and a launcher in each hand. Despite the rifle fire and incoming artillery, despite the blood trickling down Vapor's forehead, he and Claw both climbed out. On either side, they grabbed her arms and threw her and the Carl Gustavs into the trench. Both of them then sprinted for shelter and jumped. The shell struck the headquarters building and exploded when they were in mid-air.

Both men were half in, half out of the trench when the boiling flames of the explosion drove them downward into its far wall. Singed hair and uniforms blackened them and they lay stunned at the bottom. Jane cried out in pain and started to remove her blood-filled boot.

Lamar stopped her. “Leave it on, Jane. I know it hurts, but if we have to run you’ll need that.”

“Fuck.” Jane rocked back and forth. “It hurts. Shit, shit, shit!”

Secondary explosions in the headquarters threw flaming fragments of roofing and wooden frame onto and into the trench. The Carl Gustav rounds they’d left in the building cooked off in the extreme heat, as did stores of rifle ammunition. Claw and Vapor shook themselves off, then stomped out the embers that had fallen among them and used anything at hand to push the burning boards off the trench. Then it got worse.

Without warning, something blew up on the edge of the trench, and large caliber machine gun rounds chewed along its lip. Vapor stuck his head up and then back down like the old whack-a-mole game, drawing a new torrent of fire down on them but seeing what he’d needed to see. A shell splinter hit the back of his hand and lodged there. He pulled it out, burning his fingers in the process, then grabbed a bandage from the first aid kit on his belt and wrapped it around the hand. The blood on his forehead kept running into his eyes, but he could only wipe it away with his sleeve.

“One bird,” he said, holding up his right index finger. “Claw! The spread of his fire seems to be about thirty feet wide. You take a CG and slide to that end, and I’ll do the same down here. On my signal, I’ll raise up and fire. You count to three and let him have another one. He’s about a hundred yards out.”

Claw gave him a thumb’s up. At the count of three, Vapor stood, took aim, and fired. Even as smoke trailed the rocket speeding for the gunship, Claw stood in turn. But as he fired, an incoming round from the helicopter’s 25mm cannon smashed into Claw’s chest and drove him back. He struck the trench wall and collapsed.

Vapor’s shot missed low and sped off into the desert. Claw’s zoomed at a shallow angle from the helicopter’s right. The pilot had expected it and kept enough altitude to veer left. The rocket missed the bird’s fuselage and percentages favored it passing through the whirling blades without being struck by one, but sometimes the dice come up craps. It smashed into one of the blades and the explosion sheared it off, throwing the helicopter harder to the left and puncturing it with hundreds of shrapnel bits. The smashed rotors threw it further sideways and it lost altitude. A few seconds later, the rotor blades slapped into the ground and snapped off, and the helicopter crashed.

The explosion incinerated both pilot and co-pilot. The flaming mass

cartwheeled, flipped over, and smashed into the desert. Burning fuel spread like water from a broken dam and poured into a nearby rifle pit. The shrieks of two burning defenders who tried rolling on the ground died quickly under a fusillade of rifle fire.

Intense heat from the flames distorted the air like heat waves in the desert, but even so Vapor could make out Chinese armor closing in, surrounded by advancing infantry. Another artillery round struck near the northern end of the trench, knocking everyone to their knees and collapsing it. When debris quit raining, the two teenagers on that end had disappeared under a mound of sand and dirt.

Cracked ribs or not, Aretha Lamar threw herself at the mound and frantically dug into it, along with the two remaining teens. “Help us!” she cried. “They’ll suffocate.”

They’re dead already, Vapor thought, and checked Claw instead. Shallow respiration showed life but the shell had ripped a hole in his armor, doing unknown damage to his chest and torso. All he could see was blood. “Jane,” he shouted. “We’ve gotta get outa here. Can you run?”

“I think so!”

Vapor tugged the handheld radio from his belt and was about to key the mike when it spoke first. “Vapor, this is BH-1. Do you copy?”

“Roger that, BH-1, Vapor here. C-people are closing in. We need pickup behind the big burning building a-sap. Have wounded.”

“Negative function, Vapor. You have three APCs flanking the southern defense line and moving straight for your position, two miles out and closing fast. ETA less than five minutes. We can’t get in and out that fast.”

“BH-1, we need pickup!”

“I’m sorry, no can do. We had all weapons removed to get the fuel tanks onboard. We have nothing to fight with.”

So that was it. Chinese infantry had closed within two hundred yards and at least one tank rode close behind them. Firing on the southern flank had grown closer, which meant that line was being overrun, and now they were flanked on the east, too. With the second defensive line to the west, the only potential escape route appeared to be north, but there open fields stretched all the way to the ammunition bunkers. Carrying wounded, they’d be easy targets. No, there would be no escape, no Saint Nick riding to the rescue or Green Ghost conjuring a miracle. It was time to sell his life as dearly as

possible.

He patted Claw's cheek. The wounded man's eyes cracked open and Vapor stuck a Beretta in his fist. Both understood the meaning: shoot at the Chinese, but save the last round for yourself. Jane held up her rifle; she was ready. Aretha Lamar had dug out one of the teens and was giving CPR while the others kept digging. They'd be no help.

He'd done all he could do. "BH-1, do you read?"

"I read you, Vapor."

"We're in deep shit here. Two Gustavs left and nothing else. Tell the girls back home we died with our boots on."

"Roger that, Vapor. Save me a bowl of chili."

"With cheese and onions." Wiping blood away one last time, Vapor met Jane's eyes. "On three." He started counting with his fingers. One… two…

"You might not have anything to kill these fuckers with," said a new, female voice on the radio, "but I sure as hell do!"

Vapor snatched up his radio. "This is Vapor, in tactical command. Identify yourself!"

"Vapor, this is Ripsaw Two. Am starting attack run on three APCs headed your direction and I'm bringing *Hell's Hammer* with me."

#

"Good news?" Claw asked in a weak voice.

"Looks like we're not out of miracles yet. We've got air support now, so stay with me, you hear? I've got some Chinese to get rid of before I can take care of that chest. Just stay with me."

Claw smiled with his eyes half-closed. "Sure. It shouldn't take you long."

Vapor rose and sprayed two three-round bursts just to get a look at what was out there, and what he saw wasn't pretty. Incoming Comanche or not, at least a company of regulars had closed with 150 yards of his position. He felt Jane watching him and slid back into the trench.

"Bad?"

"Bad enough. One hundred yards out and they're flanking us." He tried the radio again. "BH-1, if Ripsaw takes out the APCs, can you effect a pickup? Repeat, can you pick up? We cannot hold this position."

"I— oh, shit!"

#

Chapter 80

Knock, knock.
Who's there?
America, motherfucker!
The United States Armed Forces

Operation Overtime
0712 hours, April 21

Hands folded on his desk, Nick Angriff scowled as he listened to the live radio feed, relayed by the Blackhawk to Creech and on to Prime. Interference distorted the signal at times, but not enough to drown out the gist of the action. Walling sat in a wheelchair beside the couch, still using it as a table, with Colonel Kordibowski in one of the two chairs before Angriff's desk and Major Alexis Iskold, General Fleming's deputy, in the other.

"*I— oh, shit!*"

Without moving any other part of his body, Angriff rolled his eyes to Kordibowski's. Breaking radio protocol was one thing, but there had been genuine fear in that outburst. *What else can happen?* "Where's that damned airplane?" he growled, sounding for all the world like an angry bear.

#

Sierra Army Depot, Herlong, CA
0724 hours

"Is that Sierra?" Learning forward between the pilots, Fleming indicated a column of black smoke on the horizon.

Green Ghost and Jingle Bob sat in the navigator and radioman's seats. "That's it," Bob said. "I'm guessing that's a brush fire, or maybe a building… Wouldn't an ammo fire be a lot bigger than that?"

"Probably," Fleming said.

Still rigid in his seat, Bunny Carlos flew the plane like a child riding a bike for the first time. He swallowed every few seconds and kept licking his lips. Fleming felt as if the tension could knock him over.

"Come to course three-two-two," Joe Randall said.

"Coming to course three-two-two."

Randall twisted in his seat. "We need a landing zone to shoot for."

Bob pointed. "Looks like that fire might be on the base itself. You'd

best come in from the southeast. There's a gap between two mountain ranges that'll bring you out east of the base. From there, you've got about three miles of open desert."

"What's beyond that in case some of the men overshoot?"

"The munitions farm, but those are bunkers; they're not high off the ground. They should be okay landing there. But past that is Honey Lake."

Green Ghost looked at Fleming. "Your call, General."

The tactical situation was complex. Fleming knew the Chinese had deployed and attacked from the south and west, and that Honey Lake made drops to the north dangerous, so theoretically that only left the narrow strip east of the base for the LZ. But while they'd strictly maintained radio silence in case the Chinese were listening, the chatter between Vapor and the Blackhawk had come in intermittently. They'd heard about the Chinese APCs east of the base, and then something unintelligible, and then nothing more except broken static.

"Sir? We need to know."

On his right the sun was up, turning the desert a thousand shades of orange and red. He put up his right hand and blocked the glaring rays, and in that second Fleming realized they'd have the sun at their backs when they jumped. The Chinese would have to look right into the rising sun to see them. "East it is. We go."

"Begin descent to eighteen hundred feet," Randall said, more as a reminder to Carlos than out of necessity. "Start bleeding off air speed. Jump speed one-three-zero knots. Watch out she doesn't stall; you're gonna be close."

Carlos' expression hadn't changed from a tense frown and it didn't change at Randall's words. Every vibration of the aircraft shook his rigid body as he fought the plane and tried not to crash it. Randall had done all he could. Now it was up to Carlos to find that air speed balance between slow enough for a safe jump and fast enough not to stall the engine. At that altitude, any stall meant a nose-first landing in the desert.

"You want the intercom, Socrates?" Green Ghost offered him the mike.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen, this is it. There're no static lines, so watch your altitude. We're jumping at eighteen hundred feet, winds out of the west at… three knots. Sierra is under attack and the LZ might be hot, so be ready to fight. Once assembled, your first mission is to secure the

ammunition bunkers and armored vehicles. Once that's done, secure the base and defend it. Good luck and God go with you."

"Oh, hell," Randall said.

"What?" Carlos demanded.

Randall pointed at one o'clock low. "Assault helicopter."

"Can they catch us?" Fleming said.

"Not in normal flight, no," Randall said. "But we have to slow to one-thirty knots for a parachute drop and at that speed they can tear us to bits." He reached for a pair of binoculars in a pouch slightly behind him.

"Talk to me, Joe! What do I do?"

Randall kept the binoculars to his eyes but the tone of his voice changed. "Keep going, Bunny. That bird's not Chinese; it's an AH-71. That's *Hell's Hammer*! Alisa's giving us air support."

"That's impossible!"

"Maybe so, but I've got three smoke columns east of the base and a Comanche heading for that burning building to the west."

"I'll be dipped in shit," Carlos said, without relaxing the slightest bit.

#

Operation Overtime
0733 hours, April 21

"He'd better not jump out of that airplane," Angriff said. "He'd better not." Walling and Kordibowski shared a glance and Angriff saw it. "What? You really think he will? Is that what you think, Rip?"

"I don't know, General."

"Like hell you don't. You know as well as I do he's going to jump."

#

Chapter 81

War means fighting, and fighting means killing.
Major Genera Nathan Bedford Forrest

Sierra Army Depot, Herlong, CA
0738 hours, April 21

Norm Fleming had thought of a basking shark when he'd climbed the nose ramp into the C-5. The aircraft had been lowered within two feet of the tarmac in a procedure called *kneeling*, where the landing gear acted like a hydraulic lift that raises and lowers cars. The nose had then opened upward like a shark's upper jaw, while the ramp had touched the ground like a tongue. Combined with the aircraft's sleek fuselage, it had looked like a giant shark swimming with its mouth wide open to swallow plankton.

How in the world such an image had come to mind, he couldn't say. Sharks didn't fascinate him and if he'd been asked to describe a basking shark, he couldn't have done it. Yet there it was, fresh in his mind as the rear door of the airplane opened like the jaws of a monster.

Desert raced by in the Galaxy's wake as the ramp finished deploying. Wind buffeted him as he stood in the hold. With goggles down and helmet strapped on, no one could see the fear on his stony features. Few would have noted anyway. Fleming was good at hiding his emotions. But Nick Angriff would have noticed and somehow that gave him courage. How many times had Nick done this kind of thing? So if he could, so could Fleming.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and heard a voice in his right ear. "Two minutes, Socrates," said Green Ghost.

Turning, he gave the assembled men at his back a thumbs-up. The closest stood ten feet away and with the roar of the wind, he knew they couldn't hear him. "Do me a favor," he said to Green Ghost. "If I freeze up, give me a shove."

"You're not gonna freeze up."

"I've never done this before, Ghost."

"Jumped into combat?"

Fleming nodded. "That, and I've never been shot at before, either. I've led men in combat zones, but never saw the elephant. If we get down there and I screw up, I need you to tell me, or countermand my orders."

“Pardon me, sir, but fuck, no. You know better than that. You told me this shit a hundred times. Those guys back there? They’re following you because they believe in you, that you know what you’re doing. They know you’re gonna make mistakes, all of us do, but they trust you to get them out of it. If you even give a hint of self-doubt, they’re gonna pick up on it. Veterans can push through, but these guys have never been into combat before as a unit. The cohesion won’t be there until after they learn which of their buddies they can count on, and it starts with you.”

Fleming squinted even though Green Ghost couldn’t see his eyes. “I hate it when you’re right.”

Green Ghost flashed him a rare smile. “So does Saint Nick.”

Then a single word echoed from the front of the plane to the back, shouted by the troopers themselves. “Go!”

Fleming didn’t think about it. He ran down the ramp and jumped into the nothingness below.

#

His training took over the instant he jumped. Fleming didn’t think about the fact that he was accelerating in free fall to more than one hundred miles per hour, or what would happen if his chutes failed. As he’d been instructed, he counted to three and pulled the ripcord. The parachute deployed overhead and stopped him with a jolt. Only then did he notice his heart pounding in his chest.

Floating more than 1700 feet above the desert gave him fourteen seconds to observe the terrain below. Scattered fires burned all across the battlefield, but one building sent a column of dense black smoke mushrooming high into the sky. North of that were more buildings and then acres and acres of low mounds: the ammunition bunkers. And far in the distance to the north and west, shafts of morning sunlight glinted off the metallic hulls of hundreds and hundreds of tanks and armored vehicles.

A long, low ridge separated their landing zone from the base. He started making tight S turns at one thousand feet to land as close to the ridge as possible and still be on level ground. Those behind him would key on his landing area. At two hundred feet, an antelope saw him and sprang away. He flared his chute, pulling down on both toggles simultaneously. It slowed him until his ground speed was slow enough to land safely. All of the other paratroopers watched him make a perfect running landing and gather his chute in like a pro.

Green Ghost landed nearest and got to him first. “Nice landing,” he said, and smiled again.

Fleming couldn’t ever remember him smiling once, much less twice in a day. “Thanks. I want the men to assemble over by that ridge, and then we’ll set up a CP.”

“Major Ball is over there, sir, but I request permission to go find my men. They’re somewhere in the middle of all that shooting.”

He started running toward the blazing buildings before Fleming could answer. “Granted!” the general called after him.

#

“What did you mean, *oh, shit*?” Vapor repeated into the radio.

On the fifth try, he got a response. “The Chinese are breaking through the defensive line in the south.”

“The more, the merrier.”

Vapor crawled five feet to his left, rose, and fired at a kneeling Chinese a hundred yards away. Puffs on his gray-green camouflage uniform indicated hits. His target fell to the dirt, but Vapor couldn’t wait to see if he was dead. Bullets churned the lip of the trench and two mortar rounds landed close. He blinked as blood ran into his eyes.

“Vapor, do you read? You have paratroopers to the east. I repeat, paratroopers are landing to the east. Also...” Nothing but static for a moment, then, “burning and out of action.” And that was all.

What the fuck did BH-1 expect him to do? What was burning? Where? He popped up ten feet from his last firing point and fired two bursts into a C-man who’d gotten within thirty yards and was about to toss a grenade. Four rounds were on the target and he staggered. He held the grenade until it exploded and blasted his arm off at the shoulder. Vapor slid back down and wiped his eyes again. His blood turned the dirt on his finger into sticky mud.

“I’m out of ammo.” Jane sat propped against the bottom of the trench, panting.

“Doesn’t matter,” he yelled over the noise of battle. “Chinese paratroopers landing to the east.”

He slotted his last magazine into place. At the trench’s opposite end, Colonel Lamar and the teens had finally dug their two friends from the dirt pile, but they were beyond resuscitation. Like Jane, Lamar lay with her head back in seeming surrender.

Popping up to once again fire, Vapor found himself staring down the barrel of a Chinese tank, three hundred yards away. He turned to shout a warning, but it was too late. The high-explosive round hit three feet in front of the trench's lip, right where Lamar lay. The resulting explosion blew that end of the trench inward, burying Lamar and the other teens like their friends had been buried.

Vapor knew what would come next and didn't move, yelling at Jane to stay put. Seven seconds after the first one, a second shell hit the exposed mound covering Lamar. Dirt and shell splinters raked him and Jane both without doing major damage.

They still had two Gustav rounds left, but time was up. Peeking over the lip of the trench, Vapor watched the turret rotate a few degrees to its right and point straight at him. There was nowhere to go, nowhere to retreat. He could only wait and wonder what dying would be like. His mind automatically counted down the seconds until the tank could fire again.

Four… three… two… at *one* the world erupted in flame, but it wasn't him who burned. It was the tank. Something struck it right at the juncture of hull and turret. For a long second the flash of contact was all he could see, but then an internal explosion vented flame and smoke from every hatch and seam. Cannon rounds set off by the heat tore the steel machine into pieces and one huge explosion threw the turret fifty feet sideways.

Even before his brain could process what he'd seen, a giant machine swept overhead and flew west. Looking up, he saw the unmistakable outline of an AH-71 Comanche. *Hell's Hammer* had struck at last.

#

With the Chinese stunned by the gunship's sudden appearance, Vapor had a chance to scan the battlefield to the south, north, and west. Even through the thickening, drifting smoke, he could only keep his head above ground level for a few seconds. Partly he didn't want to give the Chinese a target, but mostly the intense heat from the burning headquarters was enough to blister skin and keep him down.

Through smoke and dust boiling around him, to the south he saw muzzle flashes and something exploding around the defensive line. In the second he had to observe, two defenders ran backward from an oncoming APC. Swiveling to the west and a bit north, he could tell some of the line still held, but the Chinese had broken through in places.

It was over.

“We’ve gotta go!” he screamed as the roof of the building behind them collapsed in a shower of sparks.

Jane had crawled to the tangled mound of earth, bodies, and blood where Lamar and the teenagers had lain. “She might still be alive.”

Vapor slung his rifle, cursed all women everywhere, and crawled on hands and knees to the injured scraper. He turned her by the shoulder and felt a rare moment of pity at her muddy, tear-stained face. “She’s gone, Jane, and we’ve got to go *now*! Don’t forget you have a daughter who doesn’t want you to die in this damned trench.”

The mention of Nado did the trick. “You’re going to have to help me.”

Vapor cupped his fingers and she stepped into them with her good foot. Not waiting for her to climb over the trench’s edge, he flung her out. Groaning, he lifted Claw’s dead weight as high as he could and Jane gripped him under the arms. Vapor pushed up on Claw’s feet as she pulled, and between them they wrestled him out of the trench. Vapor was last out and they both lay prone, glancing around to see if they’d been spotted. Smoke covered them, then a breeze blew it away at exactly the wrong moment, exposing them and attracting rifle and mortar fire.

“Crawl! We’ve gotta get outa here!”

As if a capricious god of war wanted to tease the other side, the breeze shifted and covered them in smoke again. Floating carbon particles stung their eyes and burned their lungs, but it was the miracle they’d needed. Coughing, Vapor pulled Jane to her feet and looped her arm around his shoulders. They each grabbed one of Claw’s feet and dragged him on his back.

Enveloped in the smoke-cloud, they had almost made it to a large field fifty feet from the fire when a random AK-47 bullet hit Vapor in the left calf, sending him tumbling to the ground and Jane with him. Before the pain fully set in, they crawled behind a tree, leaving Claw exposed a few feet away. Close to the desert floor, the smoke thinned enough for them to gulp in needed oxygen.

“Fuck, fuck, *fuck*!” He yanked out his last bandage and tied it around the wound. Blood already filled his boot. “Fuck, that hurts!”

Jane closed her eyes against her own pain, swallowed, and said, “You curse too much.”

Four rows of buildings across a narrow street beckoned them to

safety, but neither moved. The exertion needed to get there seemed too great. When a mortar shell hit the nearest building and blew in the roof, it gave them the needed excuse not to move.

#

"Ripsaw Real to Ripsaw two, Alisa, do you read?" Joe Randall repeated it again and again, but got only static in reply. "Alisa, if you hear me, respond."

Then, with perfect clarity, an answer cut through the crackling. "Used the last ammo on self-propelled artillery, took unknown damage from ground fire, low fuel. Am setting down behind a ridge to the east. Come back soon, Joe, and bring some gas with you."

He thought of an old Army joke that fit the occasion. "If you want gas, talk to the Marines. They're full of it."

#

Vapor's collective blood loss, combined with falling adrenaline levels and plain old fatigue, left him too weak and tired to move. Jane sat beside him and didn't seem much better. Streaks ran through the dirt on her cheeks.

To their south, the headquarters building, made of cinder blocks and a white shingle roof so old the tiles had curled and leaked during rainstorms, burned with a pale flame. The smoke added to the generally hazy pall hanging over the base. When Vapor spotted the outlines of figures advancing from the east, he knew the end had come.

He poked Jane's arm. "Put your hands up."

"We're surrendering?"

"We don't a choice."

Once the hazy figures got close enough, he called out, "*Bùyào pāi!* Don't shoot! We surrender! *Bùyào pāi*!"

The figures all dropped to one knee and rifles went to shoulders in a ready-to-fire motion. Then one stood and approached more slowly. At twenty feet, the contortion around his lower face and nose clarified to a wrapped cloth. The soldier approached him directly, gun ready but pointed at the ground, and paused right in front of his feet. He squatted and pushed a tied T-shirt onto his forehead.

"Who said you could take a break?" Green Ghost asked.

#

Chapter 82

Be polite, be professional, but be prepared to kill everybody you meet.
General James 'Mad Dog' Mattis

Sierra Army Depot, Herlong, CA
0803 hours

Fleming had liked Major Samuel Ball the instant they'd met. Wiry and tough, he could have been the poster boy for joining the airborne. One of Ball's distant ancestors had been a freed slave who'd owned a lot of property in Nova Scotia in the 19th century, and Fleming had once read a biography about the man. Now they knelt atop the low hill and scanned the army base spread out before them with binoculars.

"Major, we need a blocking force on our left flank. Do you think two platoons is enough if we give them two fifty-caliber MGs?"

"If that's a Chinese infantry battalion out there to the south, it could be dicey, General. What are you planning to hold back as reserves?"

"You're the tactical officer in command, Major. It's your battalion."

"Yes, sir, but I'd like to take advantage of your experience."

Fleming couldn't tell if this was a test of his combat leadership, a genuine request for advice, or simply a junior officer covering his ass. Regardless, he needed to suggest a solid combat plan and he needed to do it immediately.

"Very well, Major, here's what I suggest. We have eight platoons plus heavy weapons. Block the left flank with two platoons, and send a third into those buildings over there with instructions to hold in place. Send two platoons to capture the ammunition bunkers before the enemy can seize them. Barring that, we must retake them before they can be emptied or destroyed. We leave one platoon here on the reverse slope with the mortar squads as a reserve. That leaves two platoons to send around the right flank as an enveloping force. If we can hit their left flank from in front and behind, they'll break, and then we can roll them up."

Major Ball stroked his thin mustache. "That flanking movement could take several hours, sir. And there's that lake protecting the enemy's flank. How do we get across it?"

"The lake is our ace in the hole," Fleming said, more to sound

confident than because he meant it. “The C-people won’t expect attack from that direction, so they won’t have any flank protection.”

“Yes, sir, I agree, but that still doesn’t explain how we get across.”

Fleming was stumped. He was about to say they’d wade through a shallow part when cries came from their skirmish line in the fields, directly to the west. “Medic! Medic to the front!”

Both officers spotted a group of wounded staggering toward the ridge. It took a moment for Fleming to decipher it. Green Ghost carried one soldier in his arms, while another soldier and a woman, both covered in blood, supported each other and hobbled forward.

Major Ball didn’t wait for Fleming’s orders. “Get those people behind this ridge!”

A dozen troopers leapt to obey.

Once the wounded were safely in the medics’ care on the reverse slope, Green Ghost slumped down next to Fleming. Blood stained his chest, waist, and the tops of his thighs, but none of it was his. The general had never seen his face so drawn and lined with so many deep furrows. Fleming outlined the deployment plan and left hanging the matter of getting across the lake.

“Whatever you’re do, you’d better do it fast,” Ghost said. “The Chinese are pushing forward. Twenty minutes and you’ll be defending this ridge.”

“I’m ordering everything but the flank attack into motion, sir,” Ball said, leaving to issue the orders.

“Flank attack?” Green Ghost was still gulping down deep breaths.

“I want to turn their left flank, but we can’t figure out how to get across that lake.”

Twenty feet below them, Vapor twisted around. “Use the Blackhawk.”

Fleming’s lifted eyebrow meant *how did he hear that over all the racket?*

“It’s like his superpower,” Green Ghost explained. “Where is it?” he said to Vapor.

“It’s hiding somewhere behind those mountains. It’s low on fuel, but I’ll bet they could ferry you over that lake. Use my radio; it’s already on their frequency.”

#

Sierra Army Depot, Herlong, CA
western defensive line
0803 hours

Marcus Lamar leaned back in the foxhole and gritted his teeth against the pain. A jagged slice of steel stuck out of his leg just below the knee. The still-hot steel burned, but Marcus knew better than to pull it out. Blood only oozed out of the wound's edges because the steel plugged the hole. If he pulled it out, he'd bleed out in minutes.

Twisted arms and legs stuck out of a mound of dirt on the foxhole's other side. Explosions had buried his two co-defenders under rocks and chunks of topsoil. He smelled something combat veterans from ancient times to the present knew so well, the reek of blood and excreta from bladders and bowels relaxed in death. Lamar's temples pounded as his heart raced and he tried to calm himself. Earlier he'd managed to haul the machine gun back into firing position after the mortar round had driven its shrapnel into his leg. All he could do was refocus on fighting to stay alive as Chinese voices rang out nearby.

While dragging himself across the pit, he made sure to keep the splinter in his leg facing upward so it wouldn't tear his flesh even more. Pain lanced into his lower back and he almost passed out, but finally settled himself beside the gun and collapsed back to rest.

A wild idea came to him. Honey Lake was only a hundred yards away. If he could make it into the water, he might be able to hide and swim to safety. But where were the Chinese? He grabbed the lip of the hole with both hands to pull himself up, but jerked them back when an AK-47 set to full automatic tore up the dirt near them. He wouldn't be getting away.

A belt of fifty-caliber rounds still draped from the left side of his M2 Browning, the fabled Ma Deuce America had used since World War One. He pulled back the bolt, loading a round, and gripped the handles. Gasping for breath, he tried to ignore the screaming agony in his leg.

#

Shaped like a pair of giant lungs, Honey Lake's size and depth varied greatly depending on rainfall amounts. In dry years the lake could shrink to 3,000 acres, but that year had seen heavy snows during winter and the lake spread out to more than double that. Never deep even in the wettest of times, the water was still too deep to wade from the north shore into the Chinese rear on the south bank.

Green Ghost led the two selected platoons on a five-mile run around Sierra's northeastern corner. BH-1 and *Hell's Hammer*, flying on fumes and limping from shell damage, flew to meet them. He allotted forty-five minutes for the run, but the men might be too tired to fight if they set that pace. It would take that long for the two helicopters to arrive, so by the time the birds had ferried eighty-something men across Honey Lake, they couldn't go into the attack in less than ninety minutes, and maybe as long as two hours.

#

Fleming watched the battle's progress from the ridge top. The fighting had moved so close that binoculars were almost unnecessary. The Chinese kept trying to turn the far left flank and the platoon commander on the spot kept denying them by withdrawing far enough so they couldn't get around, but that could only last so long. Like a bow pulled back too far, either the pressure would be relieved or the bow would snap.

In the center, the Americans had met the leading Chinese elements at a row of buildings near the flaming headquarters. Fires and explosions showed that Chinese numbers were telling there, too, and the Americans had been pushed back. The two platoons on the right were in the most danger, because the only cover was the ammunition bunkers themselves.

Major Ball stood beside him, using his own binoculars. Dirt occasionally kicked up near them as errant rounds struck close by. Like the entire battalion, they both wore body armor. Fleming also wore the experimental mesh armor that had saved his life the previous year. A radioman knelt on the reverse slope. M249 light machine guns mounted on tripods and served by gunners flanked them, while two mortar squads served their tubes to their left. Below the mortars, the reserve platoon awaited orders.

"I don't like this," Ball said. "The left flank's turned, sir. We're going to have to pull 'em back."

Fleming closed his eyes but kept the binoculars in place so Ball couldn't see how overwhelmed he felt. Rapid breathing threatened to become hyperventilation, so he forced himself to inhale slowly. He'd never had to make such decisions before, because that had always been Nick's job. Who had he thought he was? All those men's lives were in his hands and only he knew what a fraud he was.

"No," he said, fighting to keep his voice calm. "We have to buy Green Ghost time to get behind them. Send a squad to reinforce that position

and tell them to hold or die. If they pull back, they'll expose the center platoon's left flank."

"A squad's not enough, General."

"It'll have to be. The center's giving way and they've got a much broader front. I'm taking two squads to reinforce there."

"You, sir?"

The surprise in the major's voice did what Fleming's personal self-discipline hadn't. It pissed him off so bad, he forgot his anxiety. "Yes, Major, *me*. I might not have two monster pistols like General Angriff does, but I've a rifle, a sidearm, and plenty of ammo, and I know how to use them!"

"I'm sorry, General, I didn't mean anything. But sir, those are my men out there. If anybody's going into action, it should be me."

"You can't, Major. Like you said, this is *your* battalion. You're their leader; they need you, not me. In this moment, I'm expendable and you're not. Stay here. This ridge is our Last Stand Hill. There's nowhere to run after this. If your men can't hold the front, they can retreat here for a final stand."

"Yes, sir. General?"

"What?"

"Good hunting, sir."

#

Chapter 83

Old men scowl at dreams unfulfilled,
They send the young to war and get them killed;
Their speeches speak of honor and will,
But never about the blood they've spilled.
Sergio Velazquez, The Spider in His Lair

Sierra Army Depot, Herlong, CA
0835 hours, April 21

The warehouses were all identical, each five hundred feet long and one hundred feet wide, with sloped roofs twenty feet high. The Americans held the two eastern-most rows of them, the front-facing one with five warehouses lined up end to end, the rear line with six. That sixth warehouse was now held by part of 1st Platoon, holding the southern flank.

The Chinese had captured the first block of warehouses, four buildings in each of four rows, after vicious close-quarters fighting. The paratroopers had grenade launchers on their rifles and those partially offset the enemy advantage in numbers, but only partially.

Fleming had stayed with the rear guard until the rest of the men had retreated to the second block of warehouses, where they'd dug in. The space between the two blocks had once been a parking lot, hundreds of steel storage containers still lined up in neat rows. That gave them partial protection for their retreat and they made it with no further casualties.

He ran inside through an open double doorway, and friendly hands pulled him the last few feet. Inside he slumped against an interior wall, panting.

"You the last, sir?" asked a platoon sergeant.

Fleming nodded.

"You hit?"

He nodded again. But when the sergeant called for a medic, Fleming stopped him. "I'm all right, Sergeant. Caught it on my armor."

"You should still get it looked at, General. That hurts like a mother."

Fleming chuckled and then grimaced. "Yes, Sergeant, it does."

"Might have cracked some ribs."

"Thank you, Sergeant, but I'll be fine."

Thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk.

Chinese machine-gun fire sounded like baseballs hitting the warehouse's outer brick walls. Stray rounds zipped through windows, shattering glass and ricocheting around inside. Paratroopers returned fire through windows and doorways at the Chinese across the parking lot, covering behind the same cargo containers.

Fleming took as deep a breath as the pain would allow and struggled to his feet. Crouched over, he joined Lieutenant Hemmeker, commander of 3rd Platoon, who knelt beside a radioman behind an old steel workstation.

"Any idea what's going on around us?" Fleming said.

"Left flank is barely holding, sir," Hemmeker answered. "Second Platoon has withdrawn to the buildings on our right and report heavy pressure. No word from Fourth and Fifth Platoons on the far right."

"We've got to buy more time—"

A series of explosions against the outside wall interrupted him. Before Fleming could react, a blast blew holes in the wall and sent two men sprawling. Several rounds sped through the hole and smashed into a long workbench, wrecking it.

"Autocannon!" Hemmeker shouted.

"IPCs, Loot!" someone yelled. "Here they come!"

Fleming ran to the wall but didn't have to peek through the door or a window to see outside. All he had to do was focus through several fist-sized holes smashed in the wall by the Chinese autocannon. It sounded a lot like a 25mm American chain gun.

Chinese infantry poured from behind either end of one warehouse, about five hundred feet away. More raced out through the warehouse's sliding double doors, and more from behind the cargo containers. As they ran the Chinese took advantage of the debris littering the parking lot between them and the Americans, making it hard to get a good shot.

At least ten holes had been knocked in the wall. Fleming fired a few rounds through one, then moved and fired a few more. Return fire bit at the holes' edges and flew through, chewing up the warehouse interior.

He glanced through one hole before firing. Three Chinese paused at the corner of a container seventy-five feet away, preparing to charge the warehouse. Fleming slid a 40mm grenade into the M320 launcher slung beneath his M-16 and pulled the trigger. It made a sound like *schwupp* and lobbed the grenade in front of the little group, then exploded and drove them

back. One man fell and twitched. Fleming finished him off with a clean rifle shot to the head.

During a pause for breath, Fleming counted about twenty men still fighting in the platoon he aided. The other survivors of the two and a half platoons committed to the sector fought on from the warehouses to his right and two o'clock position. But the Chinese seemed to be focusing on his warehouse, the sixth one at the far corner, with at least a hundred men supported by the two IPCs, and all of their reserves had been committed.

"On the left, on the left!"

Fleming looked. An IPC with a rotating turret headed straight for the warehouse's double doors. The paratroopers slammed and locked them, but 25mm cannon shells immediately ripped through the thin steel. Something blew them in and men coughed and staggered away. Again looking through a hole in the wall, he saw the IPC driving straight for the ruined and smoking doors.

"You two, come with me!" he said to the two closest paratroopers. Together they ran for the breach in their defenses. They arrived as the IPC stopped before a heap of wreckage outside. The turreted autocannon swiveled toward them and Fleming dove away from a three-round burst of 25mm fire. His chest felt like somebody had slammed it with a sledgehammer.

Without exposing himself, he peeked around the wall. Chinese infantry dismounted from the IPC's rear. He fired a burst before ducking back from counter-fire. The two troopers who'd followed him also engaged the infantry, but the autocannon drove them back under cover, too. Fleming knew that unless something happened instantly, the Chinese would be inside the warehouse and their defense line broken.

The warehouse rang with the echoes of gunshots, explosions, and screams. Fleming shot a Chinese soldier at point-blank range, but dozens more sprinted across the parking lot. Others shot back from behind the IPC. Another paratrooper appeared next to him and together they emptied their magazines, but even as their bullets smacked into the Chinese infantry, the paratrooper fell. Fleming pushed his last magazine into place, pulled back the bolt, and loaded a grenade into the launcher. He looked into the eyes of the two men on the opposite side of the smashed doors and nodded.

All three jumped into view at the same time. Hundreds of bullets flew in both directions. A rifle round slammed into his already bruised sternum and Fleming staggered back but didn't go down. He fired his grenade at two

men picking their way over the twisted door. The blast's shock wave knocked him on his back.

Shaking off the shock, he saw one of his two paratroopers go down. The last did something unexpected: he attacked. Charging past the scorched metal door, he emptied his M-16 into two Chinese who had emerged from the back of the IPC. Arriving at the armored vehicle's rear, he aimed his grenade launcher into the still-open ramp. Bullets tore at his uniform, but before he went down the trooper pulled the trigger.

The first explosion came as a dull *crump*. Smoke seeped from the IPC's firing slits and joints. A Chinese soldier, burned black, staggered down the ramp, his uniform smoldering. A cluster of attackers swarmed past him and the crippled vehicle on their way inside the warehouse, with no one left to shoot back. All of the warehouse's other defenders were spread out too far away to cover the hole in their wall. And Fleming had shot his M-16 empty.

Then a blast rocked the IPC as cannon rounds cooked off. Another one; a third. Shrapnel ripped through its skin in all directions, slicing through the bodies of the Chinese soldiers jammed together only a few feet away. Then the fuel tank went up.

Waves of flaming fuel gushed out. One last, huge explosion sent the IPC's turret flying onto the warehouse roof. It crashed through like a bomb and slammed into a cluster of workbenches. Any man within thirty feet was washed in burning diesel, and the Americans were under cover. One infantryman totally covered in flames ran screaming into the warehouse, arms extended like Frankenstein's monster. Staggering in circles, he wailed and wailed, and finally collapsed.

It took out a score of them. The Chinese attack collapsed and the shaken infantrymen retreated to the warehouse across the parking lot.

#

Green Ghost checked his stopwatch. One hour forty-seven minutes since Fleming had said two hours would be the max they could hold out. Why had *everything* taken longer than expected? They'd finally all assembled on Honey Lake's south shore, but the Chinese were nowhere to be seen. Even two helicopters flying back and forth hadn't attracted any attention.

Firing pounded to the east, most of it at least a mile distant, except for one Ma Deuce somewhere closer. The American fifty-caliber machine gun made a distinctively deep and metallic sound and unless the Chinese had captured one, some American was still out there fighting, somewhere.

The 6th Platoon he ordered to attack due east, into the rear of the Chinese fighting in the area of the tank farm and the ammunition bunkers. The 7th Platoon would attack on their right flank, into the second section of ammunition bunkers and toward the distant warehouses. Once the Chinese were caught in a crossfire, he hoped they'd surrender or flee. Then his unit could roll up the enemy line from the north.

But that Ma Deuce sounded south of their attack. Taking four men, Green Ghost ran to the sound of the guns.

#

Marcus Lamar drifted in and out of consciousness. He'd been firing the fifty-caliber machine gun in short bursts, but then blood loss took its toll. Dirt caked his face. He wiped at it with a shaking hand and the effort exhausted him, so he closed his eyes and lay his head back down in the dust.

With his machine gun silenced, a squad of Chinese soldiers ran by, headed for the fighting to the east. One stopped at the lip of the machine gun pit and sprayed the interior with rifle rounds. The bodies of his two friends jumped where they lay, but by a miracle none hit Lamar.

Near-silence fell as the fighting ended around him and the Chinese soldiers moved on. Seconds drifted past. Then with a start, he jerked upright, wide awake, wracked by terror. Without regard for the danger, he stuck his head above the pit's edge, staring west. He drew no fire.

Frantic, fueled by surging adrenaline, he swiveled, ignoring the pain in his back and leg. The Chinese had advanced past him and were several hundred yards east of where he lay. They were headed for his grandmother! He'd failed to stop them and she was in danger.

He tried to carry the Ma Deuce to the opposite side of the foxhole, but he didn't have the strength. Instead, he loaded a new belt, crawled out of the pit, and swiveled the barrel to face east. Aiming for two infantrymen trotting beside each other two hundred yards away, he pressed the trigger. The tripod absorbed most of the recoil. Tracers arced toward them, slamming into their backs, and both men went down. He smiled and shifted his aim to the next group.

#

More than two dozen Chinese bodies littered the desert south of Honey Lake. Leading his four paratroopers, Green Ghost trotted southeast, simultaneously hurrying and being cautious. Thin smoke curled from a defensive position ahead.

“This one’s still alive.” Green Ghost knelt beside a prone figure lying near a Ma Deuce, outside of a destroyed gun pit. On the killing field beyond the foxhole, huddled forms lay in clumps. Green Ghost felt the unconscious soldier’s neck and found a pulse. “Weak but steady. He’s in shock. Which one of you’s the best with first aid?”

The four men exchanged glances. None raised their hand, but three of them stared at the fourth.

Green Ghost pointed at him. “You stay here and do what you can. The rest of you follow me.”

#

“General, where are you hit?”

Fleming opened his eyes. Lieutenant Hemmeker leaned over him, outlined by light leaking through the warehouse’s shattered walls and roof.

Fleming needed oxygen, but breathing sent spasms of pain down his chest and into the muscles lining his shoulder blades. “Chest,” he whispered after drawing a shallow breath.

“What about your head?”

Uncertain, he reached up, but stopped when pain like being stabbed sliced down his side. Clenching his teeth, he forced his arm up despite the agony it caused. His helmet was gone and sticky blood ran through his scalp and down his left cheek. “It’s fine.” The lieutenant’s face blurred in and out of focus. “I’ll be fine. Help me up.”

“Sir, maybe you’d better stay down until the medic can see you.”

“Help me to my feet, Lieutenant. That’s an order.”

Scowling, Hemmeker did as he was told. Fleming outweighed him by at least seventy pounds, but the lieutenant extended his hand and dug in as the general pulled himself up.

Black and red sparkles blotted out his vision for a few seconds. Taking shallow breaths, he found that in addition to the pain in his chest, his head hurt, too. “What’s our situation?”

“They haven’t flanked us yet, but First Platoon is pulling back in five minutes. We don’t have any choice but to follow their lead.”

“No,” Fleming said. “Tell them to stand where they are.”

“But, sir—”

“Thirty minutes. If relief hasn’t come by then, we retreat in echelon. Tell the others.”

“Hey, Loot!” someone shouted. “They’re massin’ to come again.”

“General, I’ve only got ten men on their feet, and that’s counting you. We can’t hold. It’s suicide to try.”

“We’re staying put. Do you hear me?”

Hemmeker looked around at the wide-eyed faces of his men. “With all due respect, sir, that order will get all of us killed.”

“Where did you expect to die, son?”

“Preferably anywhere but here, sir.”

Fleming felt tears welling in his eyes, not from fear or sadness but from pain. The smile on his broad face must have appeared lopsided to the young lieutenant. One thing he’d learned from Nick Angriff, though: never let the rank and file see your fear.

He clapped Hemmeker on the shoulder and exuded confidence. “As long as you keep shootin’, there’s still hope.”

#

Green Ghost’s knees churned like pistons, propelling him over the sandy desert toward the Chinese infantry. He could finally see them, their backs to him as they used fire and maneuver tactics to attack 5th Platoon to the east. At least fifty were within sight when he’d closed to firing range at about 300 yards. He waved the three paratroopers to a stop, and they all took a knee and sighted on their unsuspecting targets.

Leading elements of 7th Platoon had already engaged the Chinese on the far northern flank, but those he aimed at hadn’t yet noticed they were also under attack from the west. The rest of 6th Platoon, on Green Ghost’s immediate left, had also taken up firing positions. They all squeezed their triggers at roughly the same time.

It was a turkey shoot. Fire discipline among the paratroopers remained excellent. Instead of shooting on full automatic and spraying bullets all over the desert, they fired three-round bursts and were able to keep their sights on their targets. Seven Chinese fell and hit the dirt before they could even react.

Other Chinese troops were further east, behind another line of bunkers, providing cover fire for the ones that were supposed to be advancing, the ones Green Ghost and his two platoons were shooting up from the west. When the Chinese turned around to see why their comrades weren’t advancing, the trap they were in became clear. That was all it took.

Panic rippled through the Chinese ranks. The ammunition bunkers offered excellent cover, unless you were being shot at from two different

directions. Superior numbers didn't count for much when there was no place to hide. A few took off running to the north, the only way out. The 7th Platoon commander was smart enough to order his men not to shoot those first few, letting the other Chinese think there was a way out.

Seeing their friends escape, others followed, first in a trickle, and then in a steady stream. Only when dozens had started running did the 7th Platoon's C.O. let them fire. The Americans mowed them down and the rout was on.

#

The swelling around his sternum made it hard to draw a deep breath, but Fleming wasn't about to show it. Likewise, he ignored the burning around his head wound. Instead he concentrated on removing bullets from partly fired M-16 magazines and loading them into his. It took scrounging seven magazines from the dead and wounded, but by the time a paratrooper yelled that the attack was resuming, he had two fully loaded mags. The Sig Sauer P226 at his belt still had a full load and three extra magazines. He might die, but he'd go down shooting!

This time the Chinese IPC supporting the infantry found a clear firing lane into the tangled steel that had been the double doors. The infantry didn't rush forward like they had the first time, but instead used fire support and movement, advancing in groups. Whenever the Americans tried to return fire, there were always Chinese guns trained on them. In short order, the infantry had gotten to the last of the containers, a mere thirty yards away.

One soldier took a bullet in the calf and dropped to one knee. By sheer bad luck, a 25mm cannon round penetrated a damaged spot in the warehouse's brick wall and took his head off at the shoulders.

It infuriated Fleming so much he forgot his pain and ran to the breached doors, dropping two Chinese soldiers as they broke cover to rush the warehouse. Bullets immediately struck and whined all around him. A cannon shell hit the debris to his front and sprayed him with splinters. Two slivers of steel struck his forearm. The IPC autocannon's turret turned and he looked right down its barrel.

Then it blew up. The turret flew up and out, trailing smoke. Flames shot through every seam. Burning crewmen flung the doors open and staggered until they fell. And when the fire subsided after the initial explosion, Fleming saw American paratroopers moving into firing position on both sides of the ruined IPC. From the warehouse behind the Chinese in

the parking lot came grenade blasts.

Green Ghost had arrived at last.

#

Chapter 84

Cry if you wish, scream if you must,
But never betray your comrades' trust.
Sergio Velazquez, untitled fragment

Sierra Army Depot, Herlong, CA
1018 hours

Fleming leaned against a surviving workbench and tried to breathe without it hurting too much. A medic had cleaned and dressed the wounds to his scalp and arms, but nothing could be done about his chest. After stripping to the waist, he'd peeled off the experimental ceramic mesh that had again saved his life. From sternum to navel and shoulder to shoulder, dark purple bruises surrounded angry red patches on his black skin.

Lieutenant Hemmeker stood nearby, waiting to fill him in on the battle's progress, but stopped when a lean man in mismatched and blood-spattered camo entered the warehouse. He glanced around and walked straight up to Fleming. "Nice tats," he said. "Are they new?"

Fleming tilted back his head and fought down a laugh. "New and temporary."

"They look like the ones you had last year. Maybe you should just get the ink."

Hemmeker gave Ghost a dubious look, as if expecting Fleming to rip into the strange soldier with no insignia.

Instead, Fleming laughed and then grimaced. "Stop it or I'll forget I'm glad to see you."

"Looks like you boys had some action."

"Lieutenant Hemmeker here fought a first-class battle. He's trained his men well. I mostly tried not to get in the way."

"Good job, Lieutenant."

"Thank you…" Like everyone else, Hemmeker didn't know how to address him.

"He's a bird colonel, Lieutenant. He's just shy about showing it."

Hemmeker immediately straightened. "Yes, General. Thank you, Colonel, but my men deserve the credit."

"The men are a reflection of their commander."

“Thank you again, Colonel.”

“Hemmeker here was about to fill me in on how things are going.”

“Don’t let me stop you, Lieutenant.”

“The Chinese are in full retreat, sirs. Major Ball says they’re dispersed and heading west, both north and south of the base. We’re ordered to make sure there are none left in the base.”

“What were your platoon’s losses, Hemmeker?”

“Seven dead, sixteen wounded, sir. Five seriously. Two are expectant.”

“Damn,” Fleming said. “If they don’t live, that’s twenty percent. I’m sorry, Lieutenant. Your platoon fought very bravely. Go see to your men.”

When Hemmeker was out of earshot, Green Ghost offered his canteen to Fleming, who shook his head and took out his own. Each munched an emergency ration bar. These had twelve separate sections each containing 520 calories and were meant to supply up to four days of field rations. The paratroopers had each been issued two before leaving Overtime. The taste was chalky, with a faint cherry flavor, but in that moment neither man cared and washed it down with canteen water.

“We need to collect these from the dead,” Green Ghost said. “And pilfer the Chinese for anything usable. We might be up here on our own for a while.”

“Yeah,” Fleming said. As the adrenaline wore off, his pain increased and he felt immensely tired. “So many fine young men lost today.”

“That’s how it’s always been. It’s why only old men make wars. The young know if they start one, they’ll have to do the fighting.”

“I’m old, and I didn’t make this war.”

“You’re not old, Socrates. Neither is Saint.”

“I’m not?” Fleming closed his eyes and exhaled the deepest breath he could manage. “I sure feel old.”

#

1213 hours, April 21

“The Chinese left behind two hundred and seven dead, forty-nine wounded, and thirty-three prisoners,” Major Ball said. He sat with Fleming and Green Ghost atop the eastern ridge in the warm afternoon air. “Among the base’s original force, we found thirty-five dead and seven wounded, with twelve miraculously, and suspiciously, unharmed.”

“Why suspiciously?” Green Ghost asked.

“When everyone around you is either killed or wounded, and you didn’t get a scratch, it seems suspicious to me. And don’t forget, the Chinese knew exactly which building housed Colonel Lamar’s headquarters. That seems really suspicious.”

“Go on.”

“We’ve got two knocked-out Chinese tanks, six APCs, four IPCs, and a mobile one-fifty-five.”

“That’s some serious firepower. These people put up one helluva fight.”

“The base C.O. was killed last night and apparently your people took over the defense and helped rearrange things. Everybody says it made a great difference in firing lanes, lines of sight, and overall defensibility of their positions.”

“How are they?”

“If we had a battalion aid station instead of medics, I’m told both of them would make it. Vapor should pull through. The other guy…”

“Claw?”

“Yeah, him. He’s iffy.”

“Expectant?”

“Not that bad. The woman Junker Jane lost a lot of blood and her foot’s all shot to hell, but she’ll be all right, too. Might walk with a permanent limp. But they’ve all lost a lot of blood and all we’ve got is plasma. Claw needs it the most.”

“What about transfusions?”

“We only brought a few transfusion kits and they’re already in use. The medics are boiling water to try to reuse them, but it’s a bad idea.”

“Yeah.”

Fleming opened his eyes. “Are we in contact with Prime yet?”

Green Ghost shrugged.

After a few seconds, Ball realized the question had been meant for him. “Iffy, sir, but Creech has been relaying our messages.”

“Where are the helicopters?”

“Right below this ridge. I’m looking at them.”

“Tell the Blackhawk to stand by to take me up.”

#

Chapter 85

One man can change the world with a bullet in the right place.
Sniper proverb

Operation Comeback
1228 hours, April 21

Colonel Schiller followed the battle to the northwest on the radio loop, but spent no time worrying about the outcome. As brigade S-4, it would fall to him to inventory, itemize, and prioritize how best to utilize the new assets that had fallen into their hands. In particular, that meant the aircraft at Creech and the other bases in Nevada, regardless of whether or not they kept Sierra. So instead of sitting enrapt at the updates from Herlong, Schiller worked away at organizing his report on what was available at Comeback and what had been reported to him from Creech.

The tiniest details always caught his attention. Sometimes during his career, it had gotten him commended, sometimes reprimanded, but he couldn't help himself; he was naturally gifted with an ability to find anomalies in spreadsheets and bills of lading. And so it was again.

Among the thousands of parts inventoried in the Comeback base, one innocuous computer chip stood out. The chip itself had no suspicion attached, nor had it been trans-shipped somewhere nefarious, as had happened with the Stinger missiles at Overtime. What caught his eye was the supplier of the part, Rosos Manufacturing. Everyone knew Rosos had been a leftist totalitarian hedge-fund manager, but Schiller wondered if it could possibly be the same Rosos. To his knowledge, the man never made anything in his life besides money.

Only one person was capable of deciphering the riddle. Schiller buzzed his administrative assistant and told her to get him Overtime on the phone, Colonel Wallings office. He needed to speak with Corporal Dupree.

#

Operation Overtime
1238 hours, April 21

Sergeant Schiller knocked at Angriff's office door. "General, it's Corporal Dupree. He'd like a moment."

Angriff leaned back and dug the heels of his hands into his eyes.

“Dupree… this can’t be good. He’s like the Angel of Death, a herald of bad news. All right, bring him in. And get me more coffee. Please.”

Dupree stood at attention, trembling as usual, and held his salute.

“At ease, Dupree. Don’t be so nervous, son. We won a battle today. I’m not going to yell at you.”

“I— I know I always bring you bad news, General, and that makes me nervous.”

“So you heard my remark? Never mind, I’m sorry I said that, Dupree. You do one helluva job and have saved our collective ass more than once. So what’ve you got for me this time?”

“I’m not sure what it means, General, but Colonel Schiller sent me something from Operation Comeback that he wanted my opinion on. An invoice for a computer part that came from a company named Rosos Manufacturing.”

“A computer… *part*?”

“Yes, sir, some sort of board or chip.”

“And is this *the* Rosos, as in that Hungarian anti-capitalist guy, the one who financed all those riots around the world?”

“I don’t know, sir. I’ve never heard of him or this company. What I told Colonel Schiller is that it’s not a computer company I’d ever heard of.”

“So this isn’t some known entity?”

“It’s hard to tell. There were lots of dinky specialist manufacturers, so I checked all our databases and came up empty. But that’s not definitive. It could’ve been one guy named Rosos working in his mom’s basement.”

“Rosos…” Angriff rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Any idea what it means?”

“None, sir. But like I told Colonel Schiller, it’s very weird. I mean, even if it’s legit, since when does the army buy hardware from some company so small it’s not even in the database?”

“Thanks, Dupree, you may go.”

#

Operation Overtime
1255 hours, April 21

Angriff stared at the desert from his favorite corner in his office. When the intercom buzzed, he whirled and pushed the *answer* button within two seconds.

“Colonel Santorio on line one, General.”

“What have you got, Desiree?”

“General, we’ve got General Fleming on the radio. It’s a weak signal and he can’t talk long.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I didn’t waste time asking him, sir.”

“Right, good call. Put him through.” At first all he heard was static. “Norm, are you there? Can you hear me?”

“I can hear you, Nick, but it’s faint. Listen, I don’t have much time. I’m in the Blackhawk at ten thousand feet and we’re low on fuel. We held the base against a strong Chinese attack, but casualties were very heavy. We need reinforcements, fuel, and most of all medical teams and supplies. We need a lot of blood and we need it now, along with surgeons and anything else you can spare.”

“I’ll have a relief convoy on the road first thing tomorrow! Are you expecting further attacks?”

“Not in the near future, but after they regroup, who knows?”

“How are *you*?”

“Right as rain. No damage.”

“I can tell you’re lying; you sound out of breath. So you’d better stay alive until I can court-martial you for disobeying orders.”

Angriff heard a slight chuckle. “I’ll use the Angriff defense at my trial.”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“Direct orders from superior officers not to personally engage in combat operations shall be taken as suggestions, not binding orders.”

#

Sierra Army Depot, Herlong, CA
1743 hours, April 21

Despite their exhaustion, the bodies of the dead could not be left out in the open overnight. Aside from the clouds of flies already swarming over them, they were attracting insect scavengers too, such as scorpions and fire ants. But dragging more than three hundred bodies, scattered over such a huge area, to a central location, without vehicles, was beyond the men’s remaining physical strength.

In the end, all they could do was drag the bodies to the nearest pit, trench, or depression, and cover them with stones and boulders. Nobody found Prophet James and his followers; they were too far west. When patrols

stumbled across them the next day, there wasn't much left. The American dead within the base itself Fleming ordered taken to an undamaged warehouse for burial the next day.

With the sun low over the western mountains, Fleming paused beside the deep trench where Aretha Lamar lay with her teenage girls. The savagery of the fighting showed in the craters, blood, scorch marks, and shell casings. Lamar herself was already nearly buried, as were the girls. The only words he knew to speak were the same ones he'd been using all afternoon.

"You have given the ultimate sacrifice in defense of freedom. If you can hear us now, please accept the thanks of a grateful nation."

The men assembled to fill in the trench nodded. A few crossed themselves.

Then a voice spoke from behind them. "Go tell the Spartans, stranger passing by, here we fought and here we died, our honor undefiled."

Fleming turned. Green Ghost led two stretcher bearers carrying a man wrapped in heavy, bloody bandages.

"I like the changes to the epigram," Fleming said.

"Thanks. This is Private Marcus Lamar. That's his grandmother down there. She was the C.O. of this place. Marcus fought his gun to the last and wanted to be here to say goodbye, but he passed out on the way over."

"Should you be moving him?"

Green Ghost shrugged. "When a brave man makes a request like that, I figure what the hell."

"Yeah."

#

Chapter 86

Death leaves a heartache no one can heal, love leaves a memory no one can steal.

From a tombstone in Ireland

Somewhere over South Central Nevada
1145 hours, April 21

"I told you dodging that goo would screw up my navigating, and it did. We're at least ten degrees off course."

"Stop bitching. I wasn't flying through it, not in this crate." Bunny Carlos never took his eyes off the sky ahead. "I'm not sending this bird back to the taxpayers."

"Just don't yell at me because we're lost."

"Don't tell me that, Joe! I'm smiling at our fuel gauge but it's not smiling back. We need to find a runway."

"Don't get beaded up. I'll find us one. But I know we're headed too far east."

"This would have been a lot easier with satellites, ground control radar, and ATCs."

The low whine of the huge aircraft's jet engines had become comforting. Joe had an old map of Nevada that somebody had left in the plane, with the location of several brothels outside Las Vegas scrawled in blue ink, but no charts, GPS, or modern navigational aids to help him. As he angled the map into the sunlight streaking through his window, Jingle Bob slid into the cabin. He and Carlos had forgotten the scraper was on the plane.

"How's it looking?" Bob asked, loud enough to be heard over the engines. Randall took off one headphone and Bob repeated the question. The shriek of the jets blocked the trembling fear in Bob's voice.

"We're lost in the bubble."

"That doesn't sound good."

"That's because it's not. We went around a big thunderstorm, but now we're— hold on a minute." He tapped Carlos on the shoulder and pointed to one o'clock. Slipping his earphone back on, he said, "That looks like a runway. See the big whitish area? Look just beyond that."

"It's hard to tell," Carlos answered.

“I’m telling you that’s a runway, Bunny.”

“Okay, I see it now, but how do we know that’s Creech? Try the radio again.”

Randall tried calling, but still got no response. “This thing’s dead. I say we touch down and see what’s what. Our fuel is low but we’re not out; we’ll still have enough for another short jump if we need to.”

“For all we know, that runway’s full of potholes.”

Before they could argue further, Bob started shaking Randall’s shoulder.

“Hey, man, take it easy!”

But Bob was pointing straight ahead. “I ain’t never seen it from an eagle’s eye, but that looks like Groom Lake. That’s what that big white place is called. We need to shit fire get out of here.”

“Groom Lake?”

“You’ve heard of it?”

Randall didn’t answer. Instead, he stared at a new red light flashing high on the instrument panel. He didn’t know what it meant, but red lights on panels are never good, and when they start blinking without warning, that usually means something has gone very wrong. Pulse throbbing at his throat, he leafed through the dog-eared handbook and stabbed a page with his finger. “Oh, fuck, Bunny! We’re being painted!”

For the first time in hours, Carlos turned away from the route ahead. “Painted as in radar painted? They’ve got a working radar? What if they’ve got SAMs, too? Does this tub have defenses?”

Randall pointed to ten o’clock low, where two small aircraft rose together from the runway. They were silver-gray in color, with swept wings, one engine on each side of the fuselage, and dual vertical stabilizers canted at a sharp angle. One peeled off, passing them on the right, and Randall spotted a darker gray circle on the left wing, with a pale five-pointed star inside, the markings of the United States Air Force. Within seconds, he identified the airplane he’d seen a thousand times, the F-22 Raptor.

It only took the nimble fighters twenty seconds to flank the huge transport, and they maintained station thirty feet off its wingtips. The pilots pointed down with their index fingers, in the universal symbol for *land immediately or we’ll blow you out of the sky.*

“What’s goin’ on?” Bob’s face looked bluish-white in the half-light behind the pilots’ seats. “Are they gonna kill us?”

“Shut up and sit down!” Randall said. “If we don’t land, they’ll shoot us down.”

Bob covered his face with his hands and then spread them out to his ears. Fear twisted his features, but he said nothing more.

Randall ignored him. “You can do this, Bunny. I know you can. You shot landings in one of these before, right?”

“Yeah, a few times, but that was a lifetime ago and I had a qualified captain in the left seat in case I fucked it up.”

“But you’ve done it, and you can do it again. Calm down and concentrate. You’ll be fine.”

Randall gave a thumbs-up to the visored head in the F-22 off the right wing. Carlos held the huge machine steady as they went through the landing checklist. The engine’s roar alternately deepened or increased in pitch as he adjusted air speed. Randall put the landing gear down to let the fighters know they were serious about landing. No use giving those potentially trigger-happy pilots a reason to put a missile up their ass. Tense seconds followed as the mechanical *whirr* of the gear being deployed overrode the engine noise. Randall hated the feeling of not being in control and tapped his foot as they waited for the loud *chink* to indicate they’d locked in place.

Because of its enormous size, the C-5 had a complicated landing gear system. First, four sets of doors opened like the bomb bay doors of a B-17. Then four struts descended, each supporting two axles. The rear axle had two tires on either side, while the front axle had one tire on each end, six in total. During their descent, the tires faced to either side, not front and back. The struts had to rotate ninety degrees before they locked in place and were ready for touchdown. From opening the doors to the landing-gear-ready light turning green, the whole process took twenty seconds.

Randall thought it seemed more like twenty minutes. “Landing gear down and locked.”

Final approach was straightforward enough, although convection from the day’s rising heat bumped the plane around. Carlos blinked at sweat, refusing to release the controls to wipe it away. He fought the aircraft rather than flew it, but minutes later they all exhaled as tires screeched on contact with the runway. There was a second’s gasp as they bounced twice, but then the monstrous aircraft settled into a long, slowing roll.

Only then did they notice a line of buildings off on the left, and the truck heading out to meet them.

Carlos taxied off the main runway onto a concrete pad, two hundred yards from a multi-story building with unbroken glass windows. The truck stopped near the aircraft's nose and men piled out, cradling rifles.

"Are they gonna shoot us?" Bob asked as Randall and Carlos unbuckled and rose from their seats. "We shouldn't have come here."

Randall arched backwards, stretching his sore muscles. "If they do, I hope they do it first thing and get it over with."

Carlos knew he was joking.

Bob didn't. "No, don't say that!"

Something banged on the fuselage. Muffled voices shouted for them to open up.

"This should be fun." Randall smiled at Bob to reassure him.

On the left side of the aircraft, behind the cockpit area, a hydraulic door folded down, with a stair extending to the ground once the door had locked in place. Randall went down the steps first, stopping long enough to grin and show empty hands. Bob came next and Carlos last. Randall was close enough to the ground to feel heat rising from the concrete when he noticed the faces of the men holding rifles; they all looked like Dennis Tompkins, lean, gray, and weathered. None of them looked under seventy.

A short man with little hair and one drooping eyelid stepped forward. Judging by the way the men with rifles stiffened, this was obviously their C.O. He wore no insignia, however, just oversized green pants with a matching shirt and baseball cap. "You're young," he said, more to himself than to them. "How is that possible?"

With the Galaxy back on land, Randall naturally reassumed his role as spokesman. "It's kind of a long story and we're pretty tired right now. Anybody got some water?"

"Shut up, you!" said a bent sergeant in a faded Air Force uniform. He poked at Randall with an M-4.

"Who are you people?" demanded the man in charge.

"I'm easy to identify." Randall's face turned serious. "I'm wearing the flight suit of a captain in the United States Army. My name's Randall, just like it says here." He ran his fingertip over the name on his right breast. "The lieutenant is my co-pilot. His name is Carlos. This man is Jingle Bob; he's a scraper. There, now you know all about us, so it's your turn. Who the hell are you people?"

The first F-22 touched down behind them and taxied their way. The

second fighter landed seconds later.

"The United States Army hasn't existed for fifty years." The C.O. raised his voice over the rising whine of the approaching F-22. "Unless you count that rabble over in Arizona. Where did you get an airworthy C-5? And why are you all so young? None of this makes any damned sense, so you'd better start talking and make it fast."

Randall put fists on his hips and glared back at the man. Usually he talked himself out of confrontations, but something about this old man grated on his nerves. Fifty feet away, the Raptor braked to a stop and cut its engine. Two ground crewmen pushed a platform ladder to its side. The ladder had once been painted a bright blue, but only flakes were left.

The C.O. relented. "I'm Major Jonathan Cole. This is Detachment Three, Air Force Flight Test Center."

"Thanks, Major. You don't have a working radio, do you?"

"Doesn't matter if we do," Cole said. "No outgoing messages."

"What?" Carlos yelled. "What do you mean, we can't call out? How are we getting out of here again, flying out?"

Cole pulled up short and turned around. "That C-5's not going anywhere and neither are you. You're members of my command now."

"Like hell!" Randall and Carlos said in unison. Carlos wasn't finished. "I've got a baby on the way!"

"I'm going to say this once, and you'd better understand it. This base is secret. It's the repository for the last and most advanced research of the United States and, as such, it's my responsibility to keep it safe until such time as superior military authorities return to take over from me. Those are the last orders I received and I mean to carry them out."

"Like you said, the USA's been gone for fifty years, dammit!"

"Yeah? Well, I just received those orders three weeks ago."

#

Operation Overtime
1808 hours

Angriff rose from his desk chair slow enough to hear his joints pop. He was tired. Being in combat energized him, but he found it intolerable to sit by and listen to events he couldn't influence. The irony didn't escape him that he and Norm Fleming had reversed roles.

"You need to bunk in for a while," he said to Colonel Walling, still working in his wheelchair by the couch.

“I’m fine, General.”

“You don’t look fine. You know, you do have your own desk.”

“Mmmm… yes, sir. Everything’s ready to go for tomorrow, if you still mean to go. You pull out at oh six hundred.”

“I’m still going. Regardless of what happens with my family, I’m still the commanding officer of Overtime. I’m going up top and talk with them. I’ve got a radio if you hear any word from Joe.”

“Roger that, sir. Perhaps—”

“Perhaps what?”

“It’s not my place, sir. Forget it.”

“I shouldn’t be going personally, right? General Fleming and Green Ghost aren’t here to say it, so you can. We got too many lurps still out, enemy riders abroad, my son-in-law’s missing, Sevens could show up at any time, there’s Comeback to inspect… not to mention I’ve got my family back. Did I miss anything?”

“I think you’ve got the gist of it, sir.”

“Your objections are duly noted. Now I’m going to meet my family on top of the mountain. We’re gonna watch the sunset together as I try to figure out what to tell my daughter.”

#

They both jumped when the intercom buzzed. Angriff sat back down and grabbed the receiver. “Any news?” he said without preamble.

“Sir, communications is routing a radio call to you from Creech.”

“Oh, thank God. Put it through, J.C.”

Walling still sat on his wheelchair by the couch working, and lifted his eyebrows at Angriff’s words.

“Joe, are you back at Creech?”

“Umm, this is isn’t Captain Randall, sir, it’s Sergeant Wardlaw. I command the squad that accompanied Green Ghost to Creech.”

“What does that mean, Sergeant? Any word on Captain Randall?”

“No, sir. That’s why I’m calling. I didn’t know they’d put me through to you, General.”

“Well, they did. So what’s the news?”

“Sir, Captain Randall’s crew chief asked me to call and see if maybe Prime has been in contact with him and Lieutenant Carlos.”

“No, Sergeant, we haven’t. I take it that means you haven’t either.”

“Roger that, sir.”

“All right, thank you Wardlaw. If you hear any news, let me know at once.”

“Yes, sir, General.”

Angriff leaned back in his chair and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

#

Chapter 87

A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.
Joseph Stalin

Operation Hail Mary, a/k/a Evolution
1829 hours, April 21

"Father? May I speak with you?"

György Rosos, Sr., sat in a red leather armchair under a standing lamp. He laid aside the book he was reading, *Mother* by Maxim Gorky, and motioned his son to come in.

"Good book?" Karoly asked.

"One of the great books of the twentieth century. I should have required you to read it."

"All of those Noam Chomskys weren't punishment enough?"

"Chomsky was the greatest thinker of his generation. Now, did you interrupt my leisure to irritate me, or did you have a reason?"

"New reports from the field have come in. Down south, it appears the Americans have moved into Nevada, and a large group of our cavalry hasn't been heard from in a while. It's feared they were destroyed."

Rosos gave a dismissive wave. "What of it? We'll find some more. But that news about Nevada is significant. Anything else?"

"We had eyes on a battle in northern California, where the Chinese moved to seize some old U.S. Army base… Sierra, they called it. Acres and acres of old tanks are stored there and the Chinese were about to overrun the few defenders, when out of nowhere an American transport aircraft showed up and dropped hundreds of paratroops. The Chinese were beaten and forced to retreat."

"Were they, now?" The old man pushed up from the chair and walked stiff-legged to his desk, where he sat in another red leather chair, this one on a swivel and with a hard back. "That *is* interesting. It sounds to me as though our Chinese friends might be looking for allies about now. That makes it the perfect moment to reach out to them. I want you to send the Learjet to Los Angeles with a message. Tie a note to a rock if you have to, but I want a meeting arranged with them in three or four days. Promise whatever you must. Drop a sat. phone, too, so they can call us, and be sure to include

instructions on how to use it."

"Isn't this dangerous, Father? What if they shoot down the Lear, thinking it's an enemy?"

"I doubt you have to worry about that. For one thing, they probably don't have any working radar, but just in case, tell the pilot to fly low. For another, I wouldn't think their anti-aircraft defenses are manned around the clock, not after forty years. Regardless, it's a risk worth taking."

"I'll make the arrangements."

"Good, that is good. Karoly, I think this may be the opportunity we've been waiting for. Trying to manipulate the Americans may have been a mistake, but between us and the Chinese, we can crush Operation Overtime and get rid of the Americans once and for all. Maybe then we can build our perfect society right here in North America. Won't that be a glorious day?"

"Yes, Father, it sounds wonderful."

The elder Rosos rubbed his jowls. "You sound skeptical."

"Not skeptical. I just think we may be underestimating the Americans, that's all."

"Bah! I know Americans well. They're cowards and rejects, nothing more. It was foolish to finance their idiotic plans, but in the end, it was only money."

Karoly Rosos nodded as if agreeing, but in his mind he thought, *I'm not so sure about that.*

#

Chapter 88

In every parting there is an image of death.
George Eliot

Operation Overtime
1842 hours, April 21

"Must you go, Nick?" his wife asked in her matriarchal Southern accent. A soft breeze from the west blew hair away from her face.

He'd pasted on a smile and decided not to say anything about Randall being missing yet. "Yep, no choice. We leave at oh six hundred tomorrow, but I should be back in a couple of days. We've got to get fuel and technicians up there to Sierra, and a permanent garrison. But I'm only going as far as Creech, which isn't far from Las Vegas. I'm leaving Norm up north for a while to get things sorted out, but we must find out what resources they have and how soon we can use them."

"I'm going to miss you." She coughed at the sentence's end. "Dang these allergies."

"Go see Doctor Friedenthall, you and Cindy both. I'm worried about you. Long Sleep has all kinds of potential lingering effects."

"I will."

"Promise?"

She cleared her throat. "I promise."

He turned to Cynthia, who'd been listening at their side. She smiled. "Yes, Father, me too."

"I love it up here." Angriff stared west at the sinking sun. "Norm and I've had many talks up here."

"I can leave if you'd rather get Norm up here." Janine wrapped her arms around his waist and rubbed his shirt with her nose.

"We can leave too if you want us to," yelled Cynthia over a sudden wind. She laughed and then coughed. Beyond her, Nikki and Morgan, who'd become fast friends, pointed at their parents, whispering and giggling like fifth graders. He'd noticed lines in Morgan's face earlier, but she hadn't asked about Joe. She trusted him to tell her if something was wrong. He felt guilty, but for the sake of the moment, he pushed that aside.

"I never, ever imagined this," Angriff said. "Two weeks ago, I

couldn’t fathom having you and Cynthia back, much less finding out I had four kids instead of two. None of it seems real. I’ve got to be the luckiest man in the world.”

“There you go again,” his wife said. “Talking about getting lucky. It’s all you men think about.”

“It *has* been almost sixty years,” he said, grinning.

Cynthia covered her ears. “Stop it, that’s gross!”

They watched the bottom of the sun touch a mountain in the west, content to hold each other and let the winds flow over them. Their daughters sat on the mountaintop and chatted, leaving the general and his wife to simply enjoy each other.

Something in the air caught Angriff’s peripheral vision. Janine hadn’t moved for five minutes and he didn’t want to disturb her, so he cut his eyes without turning his head. A prairie falcon blazed past overhead, its hunting scream loud at it flew off into the distance. He watched it go and then saw something else, far off and high in the sky. Sunlight reflected off metal for a bare second as something streaked toward the sun, leaving a contrail in its wake.

#

Epilogue

Los Angeles International Airport, Los Angeles, CA
1149 hours, April 23

Generalissimo Zhang Wei watched the Gulfstream G-650 circle what used to be Los Angeles International Airport at 500 feet. Cracks in the longest runway had recently been filled with crushed stone, then flattened and hardened by hundreds of forced laborers using wooden tampers. The weeds that had overtaken much of the place had been cleared from that runway. A knot of uniformed Chinese stood outside near the main entrance of the old terminal. A car waited nearby.

Decades had passed since Zhang had last seen a jet touch down at the once frantic airport. As he stood rock still, hands clasped firmly behind his back and his medals gleaming in the setting sun, he kept his face impassive, as if this were a daily occurrence. In truth, he'd never expected to see a fixed-wing aircraft in flight ever again.

The Gulfstream touched down with a screech of tires and taxied over to the knot of Chinese guards surrounding Zhang. It was painted all black with no markings except a stylized G and R behind the cockpit. Once it stopped about thirty yards from the group, eight men trotted out and formed an honor guard for their guest. Only Zhang knew that the men had been selected based upon who fit the nicest uniforms so they would present the smartest possible image.

Stairs unfolded from the Gulfstream and two men in dark jumpsuits descended, eyeing the Chinese guards with folded arms. Their uniforms carried the same emblem as the plane. Next came a huge man with broad shoulders and short beard in a plain khaki uniform. He wore sunglasses and walked as if nothing could block him. Finally, a man in his thirties came down at a jaunty trot. Once at the bottom, he pulled at the sleeves of his snowy white cotton button-down shirt and shrugged, reseating the black suit coat on his shoulders. His black leather shoes shone with a mirror finish.

Flanked by his two bodyguards, the man kept a brisk pace as he walked between the Chinese guards holding their rifles at salute. A dark, closely trimmed beard framed his square face. Wavy black hair was cropped high on the sides. As he neared Zhang, he extended his hand. The Chinese general shook it.

“Generalissimo,” he said in flawless Mandarin, “my name is Károly Rosos. On behalf of my father, György Rosos, let me say that it is a high honor to meet you on this auspicious day.”

Zhang allowed himself the tiniest smile. “*Wǒ hěn gāoxìng rènshí nǐ*.” *I’m glad to meet you*. “You speak my language well, Mr. Rosos. You do my people great honor. We have prepared a banquet for you, if you would be so kind as to allow me to drive you there.”

“The honor is all mine, General. It is good that we are together at last. Let us now celebrate our friendship, as we turn to rebuilding a better world on the decayed ruins of the United States. And please, allow me to introduce my chief of planning and security, who will be working closely with you to coordinate our moves. He is called Adder.”

The End

About the Author

Bill is a proud member of the Society For Military History and the Alliance of Independent Authors.

He’s the world's oldest teenager. Reading, writing, rock & roll, and an awesome wife make for the perfect life. The occasional beach doesn’t hurt, either.

Bill grew up in West Tennessee, riding his bike on narrow rural roads lined with wild blackberry bushes, in the days before urban sprawl. He spent those long rides dreaming of new worlds of adventure. Childhood for him was one interesting activity after another, from front yard football to naval miniatures, but from the very beginning reading was the central pillar of his life.

Any and all military history books fascinated him, beginning before age eight. By his teenage years he had discovered J.R.R. Tolkien and Robert E. Howard, Robert Heinlein and Fritz Leiber. College found him searching for his identity, first majoring in forestry but discovering creative writing and knowing he had found his life’s work.

He turned to writing history and non-fiction and was published a number of times, including in *World War Two* magazine.

In September of 2014 he wrote the first pages of what would become *Standing The Final Watch* and its sequel, *Standing In The Storm*. Who says you can’t teach an old dog new tricks? And if you like his work, a whole slew of new books are on the schedule of 2018 and 2019.

His sincerest hope is that you enjoy his works and share them with your friends.

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Also by William Alan Webb



May 26, 2039
Interstate 55, South of Jackson, Mississippi

Speeding out of New Orleans, Gomorrah drove a junker Ford pickup with dents, faded white paint, and streaks of rust. The rear bumper had wire holding it in place and the upholstery was split along the seams. The odometer read 423,109 miles. It had no hubcaps. But that was all part of the illusion. The truck had been carefully rebuilt from the ground up to racing standards, with armor plating and bullet-proof glass.

He'd slipped away without telling anyone right after the phone call and hidden in an abandoned hotel near the river. He pulled out of New Orleans a little after five a.m. Interstate traffic was light as he headed north on I-55. He passed only one five-mile-long truck convoy, escorted by four tractor-trailer gun trucks fitted with .50-caliber machine guns on both sides and either end, plus flip-down armored sides.

Passenger vehicles also traveled in protective clusters, which made single vehicles suspicious to other drivers. Several showed him pistols to warn him away as he accelerated by them. One asshole kept blocking him and held up an Uzi. The man pissed him off so bad that Gomorrah considered responding with his own weapon. He'd left the Ristokovich behind, since it was a Guard-issued weapon, and brought his own DMW 5000 pistol with

muzzle brake. The huge handgun also fired .50-caliber rounds and he had it loaded with the same DARPA-developed EXACTO rocket rounds. With that sort of firepower, it was hard not to be tempted.

Then he spotted the man's children in the back seat and floored it.

He passed at least a dozen bullet-riddled cars in the undergrowth on either side, but all looked like old wrecks, rust stained and picked over.

The dawn clouds began to break up as he turned northwest off of I-55 north onto old Mississippi Highway 27, south of Jackson. He really wanted a cup of coffee but the roadside restaurants had most all closed up. He could have elected to drive through Jackson and then take I-20 due west, which would have let him grab some fast food coffee. But that added 35 miles to the trip and Gomorrah was in a hurry, so he kept the pistol within reach and steadied the truck on the two-lane highway.

If America's interstates were dangerous, the back roads were suicide runs. Most of the rural towns in Central Mississippi had either been abandoned or overrun by gangs or militias of one sort or another, but Gomorrah's stubborn streak meant he refused to alter his driving route regardless of the danger from criminals. Between the towns of Crystal Springs and Bear Creek the land was forested and sparsely populated. If being attacked by highway thugs was in his future, he figured that would be the place it would happen.

It turned out he was right.

After less than a mile on Highway 27, a black SUV pulled out from a hidden side road and sped to catch up with him. Police sometimes used black SUVs and if that was who it was, he needed to get a message to HQ. He let them get close enough to see the driver, but the dark-tinted windows prevented that.

He pushed a small blue button at the base of the steering column.

"Listening," a disembodied voice said through the truck's sound system.

"Do you have a GPS lock?"

"Affirmative."

"I'm being followed by a black late-model General Motors SUV. Request contact with local law enforcement to—"

Thunk thunk.

Bullets struck the glass behind the cab and left divets. He glanced at the side mirror and saw men leaning out windows on both sides of the SUV,

firing rifles.

“Pursuing vehicle has taken me under fire. Maintain GPS lock, please.”

Gomorrah floored it, counting on his truck’s racing suspension and shocks to take the turns better than his pursuer. He assumed another vehicle waiting ahead of him had gotten the alert to block the road, or maybe lay down spike strips. If he got there fast enough, they might not be ready.

He was right again.

Two hundred yards ahead, a knot of men struggled to push a dilapidated flatbed truck onto the roadway. When they saw him coming, they redoubled their efforts and Gomorrah prayed he’d make it past them in time. The speedometer hovered near 100. Any faster on the rutted and worn-out pavement and he’d lose control. In his rear view mirror, the SUV had fallen more than a hundred yards back.

Fifty yards from the flatbed, it became a death race. His truck was going too fast to stop in time if the flatbed blocked the highway before he got there. Teeth gritted, he clutched the steering wheel and kept his foot hard against the gas pedal. It was do or die.

As the men strained to get the flatbed’s front tires out of a low shoulder onto the higher asphalt, two men slipped to their knees and the flatbed rolled backward several feet. Gomorrah roared past before anyone could even take a shot.

Then he did something they wouldn’t expect. He pumped the brakes to slow down and pulled his own truck across the highway. Getting out, he lay on his back and reached up under the truck. Metal clicked as the hot undercarriage began to cool. With the flick of two latches, a door opened and something slid out. Two wooden grips hung down from a green metal cylinder. Scrambling to his feet, he flipped up the sights on an M5E Carl Gustav recoilless rifle. With only one HE round for the weapon, he needed to hit on the first try.

Shots came from the group at the flatbed, but Gomorrah ignored them. Instead he knelt at the front of his truck, the vehicle shielding him from the gunfire.

The SUV sped toward him. Experience had taught him there were two ways to deal with shooters behind a car blocking the highway. First, you could plow into the car and thereby destroy the obstacle while scattering the shooters. The obvious downside to that was that it also wrecked your vehicle.

Or second, you could stop short and exchange gunfire with them. Inexperienced drivers sometimes tried a third way, creeping by the blocking car using the shoulder, but if they did that he'd have a chance to rake the car with gunfire. His preference was always the first way.

Cars could be replaced. He couldn't.

At one hundred yards, the SUV began to brake. A black-haired man leaned out of the passenger's window and sprayed bullets from an AK-47 in his direction. He knew it was an AK from its sound. Inexperienced men would have taken cover, but Gomorrah had been a target more times than he could remember. The odds of being hit were low, while hiding would give his attackers the chance to deploy. If that happened, he was a dead man. Even as rounds zinged off the pavement and spattered him with asphalt chips, he centered the slowing vehicle in the rocket launchers' sights. At seventy-five yards it had slowed enough for him to fire, but he didn't. He'd done this before.

The SUV pulled across both lanes and stopped at forty yards. The passengers got out on the opposite side. In his mind Gomorrah could picture the group around the flatbed moving toward him in the ditch beside the road, which meant the men in the SUV intended only to pin him down until they got him in a cross fire. That wasn't going to happen.

He centered the Gustav's sight on the rear of the SUV to ensure the fuel tank would explode immediately. An AK round creased his leg while another struck the sole of his right boot, but he didn't flinch. Exhaling a deep breath, he squeezed the trigger.

It sounded like a huge shotgun, except for a brief *ssss* before the crack of the propellant igniting. The high explosive round hit above the rear passenger's side tire. The initial blast lifted up the rear end and then the gas tank blew up. Flaming gasoline spread out in a twenty-yard circle as a huge fireball rose into the sky. A wave of heat washed over Gomorrah and he hobbled behind his truck. He could hear bullets popping off.

It wasn't over, though. He pulled the DMW 5000 off the passenger's seat. Forgetting whether he'd chambered a round or not, he pulled the slide back halfway. He had. His leg ached and blood made his pants stick to his skin, but once again he ignored it. First aid would have to wait, for now was killing time.

A peek around the front bumper brought a fusillade of fire. Some rounds skipped under the truck, so he moved behind the tire. Counting one,

two, three, he leaned out and fired once, absorbing the handgun's recoil in his arm and then ducking back out of sight. He smiled at a scream of pain and terror. EXACTO rounds acted like homing missiles, while the rocket booster gave it a muzzle velocity high enough to penetrate two inches of steel armor. Whoever he'd hit wasn't feeling too good right about now.

For his second and third shots, he stood and fired over the truck's hood at two men hunched over in the ditch. One went down as the .50-caliber bullet severed his spine, while the other's head exploded like a watermelon. The pow pow pow of covering fire stopped.

After waiting five seconds, Gomorrah stood with the pistol extended in firing position, but saw no targets. The SUV sent clouds of gray smoke upward into a towering pillar that could be seen for miles. None of the three men he'd shot moved.

One round had taken a chunk out of the sole of his right boot but missed flesh. The bullet to his thigh had left a shallow, bloody crease, and now the lower half of his jeans leg was saturated. Ripping the tear in the denim larger with his hands, he took a large gauze pad from the first aid kit in the truck and pressed it into the wound. Then he wrapped it with white medical tape until it lay tight enough against his skin to stop the bleeding.

As he got back in the truck and pulled away, he made sure to run over the Gustav. Once back on the highway, he pushed the blue button again.

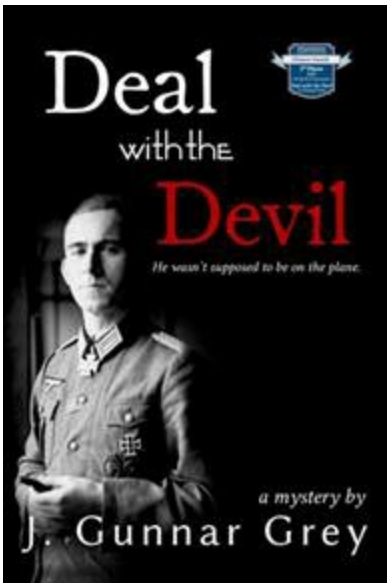
"At least three locals down, one SUV burning in the middle of Highway 27. Am on the move again to meeting with Judge."

"Stand by." The voice now had a metallic edge, meaning they'd activated the scramblers. Not a good sign. "Gomorrah, be advised SUV belonged to local law enforcement. Your orders have changed. Leave this channel open for new driving directions."

"Roger that."

Damn, damn, damn! Either the safe house had been compromised or he could expect road blocks ahead. There could only be one reason for all of this… he'd been compromised.

Also from Dingbat Publishing



late evening, Saturday, 24 August 1940
over the village of Patchbourne, England

Something soft and annoying whooshed past his face. Faust brushed at it, but it was already gone and he was too damn sleepy to care. He dropped his arm to the bed.

There was no bed.

There wasn't anything. His arm was dangling out in space. So was the rest of him. Faust snapped his eyes open. A strong wind pummeled him, tumbled him arse over head. The ground was a long way down. He was falling and it was real, not some stupid nightmare.

Panic leapt like a predator through his veins. He twisted, fighting against gravity. An icicle of light from the distant ground stabbed at his eyes, swept past him, and far below, several red flashes popped in quick succession. A rumbling vibrated the air around him, something that sounded like an artillery round exploded nearby, and sharp chemical smoke scoured his nostrils.

Then tight cords wrapped about his body, between his legs, jerking him upright and throwing him higher, dangling him across the light-slashed night sky. The rumbling intensified. His head snapped back. Above him, a parachute canopy blazed white in the spotlight from below. Beyond it loomed

a huge dark beast, moving past in impossible slow motion. It towered over him. The parachute danced closer, second by drawn-out second; then it bowed, canted, and slid away, laying Faust on his back as it hauled him aside.

He gripped the harness shroudlines, his chest and belly flinching. It was the bomber, the one he'd been riding in. The belly hatch framed Erhard's laughing face, lit from below by a spotlight. With one hand, Erhard clutched the rubber coaming, cupping the other about his mouth. He yelled something — something short — that was overwhelmed by the racket and growing distance.

Maybe the plane was having mechanical problems — but Faust, Erhard, and the mechanics had tuned the Heinkel's twin engines all afternoon. No one else was bailing out.

Erhard had thrown him overboard.

It didn't matter how much schnapps he'd slugged nor how drunk he remained. When Faust hit the ground, Erhard was toast.

The spotlight's cone slid from the front half of the bomber to the tail fin, the glare flashing across the metal and leaving a dark, mysterious line at the tailfin's hinge. The line and the glare slid across the matte metal, twisting and writhing, finally falling off the back edge. The bomber was turning from the light. It pirouetted in a slow, graceful curtsy like a prancing war horse and plowed into the side of the neighboring plane. Metal screeched and crumpled. The two bombers hung motionless, pinned to the night sky by the fingers of light from below. Then Erhard's plane rolled the other one over. Flames spiraled from the mass of cartwheeling metal.

From between the bombers fell a squirming, thrashing human. Another white canopy blossomed above it. But within moments the parachute silk convulsed in scarlet flames, melted to flaring sparks of gold and orange, and crumpled to nothingness. In a clear, bizarre second, Faust again glimpsed Erhard's face, no longer laughing but mouth open in a scream not drowned by the clamor as he fell beyond the spotlight's reach.

The entwined bombers exploded. Faust twisted, wrapping his elbows about his face, hands clutching the shroudlines. Something sharp and hot punched his right shoulder. Heat flared across his back. But when he twisted back around, the night sky was empty. The droning engines ebbed away and the searchlights vanished one by one. A final, embarrassingly late flak round exploded well behind the departing squadron and black smoke drifted through the lone remaining searchlight finger.

The light fastened onto him and his slaloming parachute, tracking his descent. He exhaled, one relieved whoosh. He'd been trained on parachutes before the invasion of Norway, months ago, but this was his first real jump. Okay, it wasn't that bad. But he couldn't wait for the ground crews to find him so he could scramble back to Paris, and if he never flew again, it would be too soon.

His breath caught. German groundfire had no reason to shoot at German planes.

Where the hell was he?

The spotlight vanished, leaving him blind upon his stage. He glanced down just as his feet slammed into something solid. His knees buckled, tumbling him backward into stubbly stalks. The scent of fresh-mown grass was overlaid with the acrid tang of burning metal. Clouds lowered the night sky almost within reach. Shoot, he didn't want to deal with Erhard's mess tonight, no matter where he was. Faust lay on his back and closed his eyes, letting the alcohol fuzz take over again. The klaxon of the air-raid alarm seemed to fade, not to silence but to an incomprehensible distance, like waves creaming over a remote Dover beach. Matthew Arnold wrote that one, about pebbles being drawn back then flung ashore by waves on the Sea of Faith. *Ah, love, let us be true to one another…*

But the unpoetical parachute harness tugged at his torso and groin, jerking him awake and dragging him prone across the field. The canopy billowed about. Sharp stubble poked his shoulders and back. He grunted, eyes jolting open.

There was a quick release snap somewhere. He fumbled with the harness, found something, and pressed it. It clicked and the pressure about his chest released, letting him twist from the harness. Any possibility of carefully gathering the miles of cloth into a manageable bundle was swept away when the rousing breeze yanked the 'chute right out of his hands. Crouched on his knees, he watched the white silk sail away, like some demented specter, toward a distant stand of dark waving trees, and tried to decide if it mattered a damn. Parachutes were reusable, weren't they? Should he try to chase the thing down? He closed his eyes and rubbed his face. Nope, he was still drunk, worrying about a frigging parachute when he should be worrying about himself.

A quivering voice blew with the breeze across the dark void surrounding him. "Jake, you sure he came down out here? I thought he was

heading nearer town."

Faust's eyes flew open. The wind gusting over his exposed skin, face and hands, was suddenly chill. He shivered and hugged himself. The twisting in the pit of his stomach was more than just alcohol coming back to haunt him. Some deep part of his soul, something as primeval as the night itself, quaked beneath his skin. But his conscious mind hadn't yet figured out why.

A second voice spoke, more quietly than the first, and steadier. "Be quiet, you daft bugger."

Another gust of cold air splashed across his face, reaching through his skin into his heart and brain and being. Faust heard his breath rasping in the night's quiet and tried to still it. But the beating of his heart was just as loud and would not be calmed.

They spoke in English.

He wanted to be still so his unseen visitors wouldn't detect his presence, but he had to admit he froze because he was too scared to move. It took long moments before he could convince his body to curl over and duck his head down between his shoulders to hide his face. And no matter what he did, his lungs demanded oxygen and sounded like a bellows working it.

"Jake, there's something moving over by the trees."

He was beginning to sympathize with poor Jake: that daft bugger really wouldn't shut up.

"Yeah, I see it. Let's work our way over there, *quietly*, now."

Faust tensed every muscle he possessed, ready to run or fight for it. But he wasn't near any trees. His nerves quivered as the wind danced over his skin. It might be a small animal, shaking the branches at the far end of the field — then he remembered how his parachute had billowed about like a live thing and blown away toward those trees. He stuffed his hand into his mouth, stifling a giggle.

He held himself still, breathing more easily, until the discreet footfalls waned in the night. Then he scrambled up, balanced a moment to make certain he'd stay that way, and staggered in the opposite direction. A hedgerow bordered the field at the foot of a small hill, and a white-painted gate partway along glowed like a beacon. He scuttled toward it. There had to be somewhere he could hide.

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