

CHARLEY BRINDLEY



THE LAST MISSION
OF
THE SEVENTH CAVALRY

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The Seventh Cavalry

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Аннотация

A unit of the Seventh Cavalry is on a mission over Afghanistan when their plane is hit by something. The soldiers bail out of the crippled plane, but when the thirteen men and women reach the ground, they are not in Afghanistan. A unit of the Seventh Cavalry is on a mission over Afghanistan when their plane is hit by something. The soldiers bail out of the crippled plane, but when the thirteen men and women reach the ground, they are not in Afghanistan. Not only are they four thousand miles from their original destination but it appears they have descended two thousand years into the past where primitive forces fight each other with swords and arrows. The platoon is thrown into a battle where they must choose sides quickly or die. They are swept along in a tide of events so powerful that their courage, ingenuity and weapons are tested to the limits of their durability and strength.

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the Seventh Cavalry

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This book is dedicated to

Charley Brindley II

Other books by Charley Brindley

1. *Oxana's Pit*
2. *Raji Book One: Octavia Pompeii*
3. *Raji Book Two: The Academy*
4. *Raji Book Three: Dire Kawa*
5. *Raji Book Four: The House of the West Wind*
6. *Hannibal's Elephant Girl Book One: Tin Tin Ban Sunia*
7. *Hannibal's Elephant Girl: Book Two: Voyage to Iberia*
8. *Cian*
9. *Ariion XXIII*
10. *The Last Seat on the Hindenburg*
11. *Dragonfly vs Monarch: Book One*
12. *Dragonfly vs Monarch: Book Two*
13. *The Sea of Tranquility 2.0 Book One: Exploration*
14. *The Sea of Tranquility 2.0 Book Two: Invasion*
15. *The Sea of Tranquility 2.0 Book Three: The Sand Vipers*
16. *The Sea of Tranquility 2.0 Book Four: The Republic*
17. *The Rod of God, Book 1: On the Edge of Disaster*
18. *The Rod of God, Book 2: Sea of Sorrows*

19. *Do Not Resuscitate*

Coming Soon

20. *Dragonfly vs Monarch: Book Three*

21. *The Journey to Valdacia*

22. *Still Waters Run Deep*

23. *Ms Machiavelli*

24. *Ariion XXIX*

25. *The Last Mission of the Seventh Cavalry Book 2*

26. *Hannibal's Elephant Girl, Book Three*

See the end of the book for details about the other books

Chapter One



Master Sergeant James Alexander stood at the rear of the C-130, swaying with the movement of the aircraft. He watched his twelve soldiers and wondered how many would survive this mission.

Three quarters? Half?

He knew they were headed for a fight with the Taliban.

God help us. Is that cracked-up drone worth the lives of half my people? Or even one?

He glanced at Captain Sanders, standing beside him, who also watched the soldiers as if he had the same concern.

A light on the forward bulkhead flashed red. The loadmaster saw it and held up his right hand, fingers spread apart. Captain

Sanders nodded to the loadmaster.

“All right, Seventh Cavalry! Five minutes to the drop zone,” he told the soldiers. “Mount up, lock and load.”

“Hooyah!” the soldiers yelled as they scrambled to their feet and hooked their static lines to the overhead cable.

“Let’s rock and roll, people!” Sergeant Alexander shouted. “Check your buddy’s straps, packs, and ‘chutes.” He walked between the two rows of soldiers. “Don’t forget to roll when you hit the ground. Break a leg, and we’ll leave you behind to wait for the choppers.” He grabbed Private McAlister’s chest straps, yanking hard, testing the buckles. “Did anyone hear me?” the sergeant yelled.

“Yes, sir!” the soldiers cried out in unison. “Rock and roll when you hit the ground, break a bone, and you’re going home.”

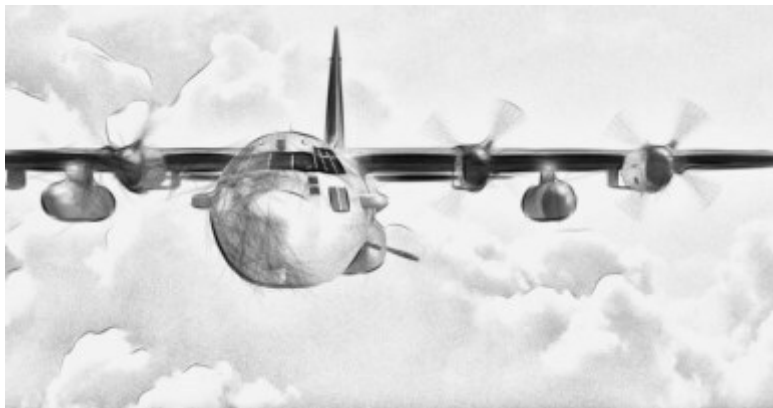
The First Platoon of Delta Company was a newly formed unit that would normally have been led by a first lieutenant. Captain Sanders took charge when Lieutenant Redgrave was relieved on charges of insubordination and audacious behavior, or more accurately, drunk and disorderly while on duty.

Another reason Captain Sanders decided to take command of Delta: Four of the soldiers were women. A recent directive coming from the highest levels of the Pentagon allowed female soldiers to serve in frontline combat.

Every woman in the company had volunteered to fight alongside the men. Sanders had chosen four women who were in top physical condition and had outstanding records in all

phases of combat training. These women would be the first in the Seventh Cavalry to face the enemy on the battlefield, and the captain wanted to have firsthand knowledge of their performance in case he had to write a letter to a grieving family.

Hydraulics squealed as the rear door of the aircraft lifted and the tailgate dropped into place. Instantly, the warm air of the cabin was sucked out and replaced by the chill atmosphere of an altitude of five thousand feet.



Alexander hurried to the back, where he took hold of a strap on the weapons container to steady himself. He and the captain looked down on heavy cloud cover.

“What d’ya think, Captain?” Alexander asked.

Captain Sanders shrugged and turned to face his soldiers. He tapped the side of his helmet, above his right ear, for a comm

check. The noise from the slipstream made it impossible for them to hear him without their communicators. He then spoke into his mic.

“Everyone who can hear me, give me a thumbs-up.”

All but two of the soldiers gave the signal.

Alexander stepped over to the first soldier who didn't respond. “Paxton, you butt-head.” He flipped on the soldier's communicator. “The captain's talking to you.”

“Oh, shit!” Private Paxton said. “Now I'm online, sir.” He gave the captain a thumbs-up.

“Your comm on?” Alexander asked the second soldier.

“Yeah, Sarge,” Private Kady Sharakova said, “but it ain't working.”

Alexander checked her comm switch. “All right, Sharakova, it's busted. Just pay attention and do what the guy in front of you does.”

“Right, Sarge. Whose butt we kicking today?”

“All the ugly ones.”

“Cool.”

Scars on a woman's face usually mark her for scorn or contempt. However, Kady Sharakova wore her disfigurement more as a badge of honor than a blemish of humiliation.

The soldier in front of her grinned and made a floating motion with his hand. “Do everything I do.”

“Oh, grow up, Kawalski.” Kady thumped the front of his helmet with a flick of her index finger.

Alexander hurried back to the tailgate.

The captain spoke into his mic. “We’ve got a layer of clouds below, stretching wall to wall. The pilot said it’s too close to the ground for him to get under, so we’ll have to jump through it.”

“Hooyah,” one of the men said on the comm system.

“You people have had four practice jumps, but this will be the first time The Seventh Cavalry has parachuted into combat. Let’s get it right so I don’t have to requisition body bags.” He looked from one grim face to the next. “The Taliban has managed to bring down one of our newest drone aircraft, the Global Falcon. We’re going to take it away from them and capture the people who figured out how to hack into the drone’s avionics.”

He pulled a folded map from the inside pocket of his camo jacket. Alexander leaned in to watch the captain run his finger along a dashed red line.

“It looks like we’ve got a hike of about ten clicks from the LZ.” The captain handed his map to Alexander as he glanced along the two lines of soldiers. “We’ll be dropping into the edge of the Registan Desert. Our destination is a range of low rocky hills to the north. The electronic beacon on the drone is still working, so we’ll home in on that. There are no trees, no brush, no cover of any kind. As soon as you hit the sand, have your weapons ready. We could drop right into a fight. I’m going out first, followed by the weapons container.” He patted the huge fiberglass box sitting to his right. “Then I want all of you to follow just as fast as if you were lining up for chow at—”

The aircraft jerked violently to the right and tilted into a dive. The captain was thrown hard against the weapons container, knocking him unconscious. He tumbled off the tailgate and into the air as his static line yanked tight.

“We’ve been hit!” one of the soldiers yelled.

The metal of the airframe groaned as the plane twisted to the left, then seemed to right itself for a moment.

Alexander worked his way forward to the door leading into the cockpit. When he pulled the handle, the door flew open, hitting his helmet and almost taking off his arm. He pulled himself into the doorway, leaning into the wind howling through the open door.

“Holy shit!”

He blinked, not believing what he saw: The whole nose section of the C-130 was gone, including the pilot and co-pilot seats. The navigator’s seat was still in place, but it was empty. When he looked forward through the gaping hole where the front of the plane should have been, he was terrified to see they were spiraling toward a jagged mountaintop, no more than two miles ahead of them.

“Everybody out!” he yelled into his mic. His soldiers stared at him, frozen in place, as if they didn’t understand his order. “Out the back, NOW!”



He ran for the back of the plane, deciding he'd better lead them rather than try to push them out. It was like being on one of those crazy floors in a funhouse at the amusement park where sections of the floor undulate up, down, and sideways. It was impossible to keep his balance as the crippled aircraft lurched and shuddered in the air.

As the plane rolled, the metal skin ripped away, screeching through the cabin like a living creature being torn apart. Alexander was thrown against one of the men. A pair of strong hands grabbed his shoulders, keeping him from tumbling to the deck.

At the back of the plane, he knelt to release the latch on one of the straps on the weapons container. When the latch popped loose, he grabbed the second strap, but the buckle was stuck, held tight by the tension. As he struggled with the latch, a hand

holding a knife shot past his head and cut the strap. He looked up to see the smiling face of Private Autumn Eaglemoon.

Eaglemoon tapped the side of her helmet, over her right ear. Alexander checked his comm switch; it was off.

“Damn,” he whispered, “the door must’ve hit it.” He flipped it on. “Can anybody hear me?”

Several soldiers responded.

The aircraft jerked to the left, flinging the weapons container out the back. The static line then yanked tight, pulling the ripcords on the container’s two orange chutes.

Alexander signaled his soldiers to follow him as he jumped out, but as soon as he cleared the aircraft, he realized he’d forgotten to connect his static line to the overhead cable. He rolled to his back to see his people streaming out like a family of olive-drab chicks following their mother hen. Their chutes billowed out as they opened one after the other.

God, I hope they all make it.

The right wing of the C-130 tore loose and pinwheeled toward them. Half of it was gone, including the outboard engine. The remaining engine was on fire, leaving a spiraling trail of greasy smoke.



“Holy shit!” Alexander watched in horror as the burning wing spiraled toward his troops. “Look out! The wing!”

The soldiers craned their necks, but their billowing canopies blocked their view above. Like a whirling reaper, the wing spun through the air, passing just ten feet beneath one of the soldiers.

“Joaquin!” the soldier yelled into his comm. “Bank right!”

Private Ronald Joaquin pulled his right control line and started a slow-motion turn to his right, but it wasn’t enough. The jagged end of the burning wing caught four of his shroud lines and yanked him sideways with a violent jerk. His chute collapsed and trailed along behind the spinning wing.

“Hit your release buckle!” Alexander yelled into his comm.

“Son-of-a-bitch!” Joaquin yelled.

He flailed at his parachute buckle while being slung around by the spinning wing. Finally, he grabbed the buckle and yanked it open to release the shroud lines tying him to the deadly wing. He fell for ten seconds, then rolled over to be sure he was clear of the wing before releasing his reserve chute. When his reserve chute popped open, he began to breathe again.

“Whew! That was close,” he said.

“Good job, Joaquin,” Alexander said.

He watched the descending wing with the collapsed chute trailing behind as it fell toward the trees below. He then yanked his ripcord and heard a *whoosh* as the small pilot chute pulled the main parachute from his backpack, then the violent jerk as

the main chute opened.

The crippled wing hit the treetops at an angle, slicing through the upper branches, then tumbling to the ground. A wisp of smoke drifted up, then the fuel tank ruptured, sending a cloud of flames and black smoke billowing above the trees.

Alexander scanned the horizon. “That’s strange,” he said as he twisted around, trying to see his soldiers and count the parachutes, but he couldn’t see anything past the canopy of his own chute. “Who’s in the air?” he yelled into his mic. “Sound off by the numbers.”

“Lojab,” he heard in his earpiece.

“Kawalski,” Private Kawalski called out. “There goes the plane, to the southeast.”

The C-130 trailed fire and smoke like a meteor as it careened toward the mountainside. A moment later, it exploded in a ball of fire.

“Holy crap,” Alexander whispered. “All right, by the numbers. I got Lojab and Kawalski.”

He counted the soldiers as they said their names. All the soldiers had an assigned number; Sergeant Alexander was number one, Corporal Lojab was number two, and so on.

More of them called out their names, then there was silence. “Ten?” Alexander said, “Goddamn it!” He yanked his right control line. “Sharakova!” he yelled. “Ransom!” No answer.

“Hey, Sarge,” Kawalski said on the comm.

“Yeah?”

“Sharakova’s comm is still not working, but she got out. She’s right above you.”

“Great. Thanks, Kawalski. Can anybody see Ransom?”

“I’m here, Sarge,” Ransom said. “I think I blacked out for a minute when I hit the side of the plane, but I’m awake now.”

“Good. Counting me, that makes thirteen,” Alexander said. “Everyone’s in the air.”

“I saw three crewmen from the C-130 get out of the plane,” Kawalski said. “They popped their chutes right below me.”

“What happened to the captain?” Lojab asked.

“Captain Sanders,” Alexander said into his mic. He waited a moment. “Captain Sanders, can you hear me?”

There was no response.

“Hey, Sarge,” someone said on the comm. “I thought we were jumping through clouds?”

Alexander stared at the ground—the layer of clouds was gone. *That’s what was strange; no clouds.*

“And the desert?” another asked.

Below them was nothing but green in every direction.

“That don’t look like no desert I ever saw.”

“Check out that river to the northeast.”

“Damn, that thing is huge.”

“This looks more like India or Pakistan to me.”

“I don’t know what that pilot was smoking, but he sure didn’t take us to the Registan Desert.”

“Cut the chatter,” Sergeant Alexander said. They were

now below fifteen hundred feet. “Anyone see the weapons container?”

“Nothing,” Ledbetter said. “I don’t see it anywhere.”

“No,” Paxton said. “Those orange chutes should show up like you white boys in the ghetto, but I don’t see ‘em.”

None of the others saw any sign of the weapons container.

“Okay,” Alexander said. “Steer for that clearing just to the southwest, at ten o’clock.”

“Got it, Sarge.”

“We’re right behind you.”

“Listen up, people,” Sergeant Alexander said. “As soon as you hit the ground, pop your chute and grab your banger.”

“Ooo, I love it when he talks dirty.”

“Can it, Kawalski,” he said. “I’m sure somebody saw us, so be ready for anything.”

All the soldiers glided into the clearing and landed without mishap. The three remaining crewmen from the aircraft dropped in behind them.

“Squad One,” Alexander ordered, “set up a perimeter.”

“Roger that.”

“Archibald Ledbetter,” he said, “you and Kawalski go climb that tall oak and set up a lookout, and get some weapons to the three crewmen.”

“Right, Sarge.” Ledbetter and Kawalski ran toward the C-130 crewmen.

“All quiet on the eastern side,” Paxton said.

“Same here,” Joaquin said from the other side of the clearing.

“All right,” Alexander said. “Stay on your toes. Whoever shot us down is bound to come after us. Let’s get out of this clearing. We’re sitting ducks out here.”

“Hey, Sarge,” Kawalski whispered into his mic. “You got two peeps coming at you, double-time.” He and Ledbetter were halfway up the oak tree.

“Where?”

“On your six.”

Sergeant Alexander spun around. “This is it,” he said into his mic as he watched for the two people. “Everybody get out of sight and ready your weapons.”

“I don’t think they’re armed,” Kawalski whispered.

“Quiet.”

Alexander heard the people coming toward him through the brush. He pressed himself back against a pine tree and cocked the hammer on his Sig automatic.

A moment later, they ran past him. It was a man and woman, unarmed except for a wooden pitchfork carried by the woman. Their clothing was nothing more than short, ragged tunics, and they were barefoot.

“Not Taliban,” Paxton whispered over the comm.

“Too white.”

“Too what?”

“Too white for Pacs or Indians.”

“They’re still going, Sarge,” Kawalski said from his perch in

the tree. “They’re jumping over logs and boulders, running like hell.”

“Well,” Sarge said, “they definitely weren’t coming after us.”

“They didn’t even know we were here.”

“Another one,” Kawalski said.

“What?”

“There’s another one coming. Same direction. Looks like a kid.”

“Get out of sight,” Sarge whispered.

The kid, a boy of about ten, ran past. He was pale white and wore the same type of short tunic as the others. He, too, was barefoot.

“More,” Kawalski said. “Looks like a whole family. Moving slower, pulling an animal of some kind.”

“Goat,” Ledbetter said from his position in the tree beside Kawalski.

“A goat?” Alexander asked.

“Yup.”

Alexander stepped out in front of the first person in the group—a teenage girl—and held out his arm to stop her. The girl screamed and ran back the way she’d come, then veered away, running in another direction. A woman in the group saw Alexander and turned to run after the girl. When the man came along with his goat, Alexander pointed his Sig pistol at his chest.

“Hold it right there.”

The man gasped, dropped the rope, and hurried away as fast

as he could. The goat bleated and tried to nip Alexander's sleeve.

The last person, a little girl, gave Alexander a curious look but then picked up the end of the rope and pulled the goat away, in the direction her father had gone.

"Weird," Alexander whispered.

"Yeah," someone said on the comm. "Too weird."

"Did you see their eyes?" Lojab asked.

"Yes," Private Karina Ballentine said. "Except for the little girl, they were terrified."

"Of us?"

"No," Alexander said. "They were running from something else, and I couldn't stop them. I might as well be a cigar store Indian."

"A tobacconist's carved Native American image," Private Lorelei Fusilier said.

"What?"

"You can't say 'Indian' anymore."

"Well, shit. How about 'numbskull?'" Alexander said. "Does that offend any race, creed, or religion?"

"Creed and religion are the same thing."

"No, they're not," Karina Ballentine said. "Creed is a set of beliefs, and religion is the worship of deities."

"Actually, we prefer 'cranially challenged' to 'numbskull.'"

"You're personality-challenged, Paxton."

"Will you people shut the fuck up!" Alexander yelled. "I feel like a goddamned kindergarten teacher."

“Early childhood instructor.”

“Mentor of diminutive peeps.”

“Jesus Christ!” Alexander said.

“Now I’m offended.”

“More coming,” Kawalski said. “A bunch, and you better get out of the way. They’re in a hurry.”

Thirty people hurried past Alexander and the others. They were all dressed the same way; simple short tunics and no shoes. Their clothing was ragged and made of a gray, coarsely-woven cloth. A few of the people pulled oxen and goats along behind them. Some carried crude farm tools, and one woman carried an earthen pot filled with wooden kitchen utensils.

Alexander stepped out to grab an old man by the arm. “Who are you people, and what’s the hurry?”

The old man yelled and tried to pull away, but Alexander held tight.

“Don’t be afraid. We won’t hurt you.”

But the man was afraid; in fact, he was terrified. He kept glancing back over his shoulder, jabbering some words.

“What the hell language is that?” Alexander asked.

“Nothing I ever heard,” Lojab said as he cradled his M16 rifle and stood beside Alexander.

“Me either,” Joaquin said from the other side of Alexander.

The old man looked from one face to the next. He was obviously frightened by these strangers, but much more afraid of something behind him.

Several more people ran past, then the old man jerked his arm free and pulled his ox along, trying to get away.

“You want me to stop him, Sarge?” Lojab asked.

“No, let him get out of here before he has a heart attack.”

“His words were definitely not the Pashtun language.”

“Not Arabic either.”

“Or Urdu.”

“Urdu?”

“That’s what the Pacs speak,” Sharakova said. “And English. If they were Pakistani, they probably would have understood your English, Sarge.”

“Yeah.” Alexander watched the last of the people disappear along the trail. “That’s what I thought. And they’re too fair-skinned to be Pakistani.”

“Uh-oh,” Kawalski said.

“Now what?” Alexander asked.

“Elephants.”

“We’re definitely in India.”

“I doubt we were that far off course,” Alexander said.

“Well,” Kawalski said, “you might ask those two chick peeps where we are.”

“What two chicks?”

“On top of the elephants.”

Chapter Two

“Ninety percent of Indians speak English,” Ledbetter said.

“Hey, Apache,” Joaquin said, “Lead Butt said ‘Indians.’”

“That’s okay; they *are* Indians,” Eaglemoon said.

“Why not Native Asian Subcontinenters?”

Alexander shook his head. “We’re not in India. It’s probably a circus troupe.”

“Yeah? Well, they must have put on one hell of a show to scare the shit out of all those people.”

“Kawalski,” Alexander said, “are the two women armed?”

“Yeah.”

“With what?”

“Bows and arrows, and...”

Alexander glanced at Joaquin, who raised an eyebrow.

“And what, Kawalski?”

“Good looks. They are two HOT babes.”

“Kawalski thinks anything with breasts is hot,” Kady said on the comm.

“That’s strange, Sharakova; I never thought you were hot.”

“You’ve never seen me in a dress.”

“Thank God for small favors.”

“How far away are they, Kawalski?” Alexander asked.

“Fifty yards.”



“For being elephants, they sure are quiet.”

“Probably walking on tiptoes.”

“Can it!” Alexander said. “Could be a trap. Be ready for anything.”

When the two elephants came abreast of Alexander, he didn't see any signs of an ambush, and the two women didn't look threatening. He stepped out from behind the tree and raised his

hand in a friendly gesture.

“Hello.”

The woman nearest him uttered an exclamation.

“Maybe these people have never seen army helmets.”

Alexander took off his helmet and brushed a hand over his buzzcut. The two women looked at each other and said something he couldn't understand.

“Now you're really scaring them, Sarge,” Kawalski said. “Put it back on.”

“Very funny.”

The women looked down at Alexander but made no attempt to stop their animals. The first elephant was about seven feet tall at the shoulder, and the other three feet taller, with ears the size of the doors on an eighteen-wheeler. His rider was a slim young woman with auburn hair. The woman on the smaller animal was similar, but her hair was blonde. Both had some sort of emblem or mark on their faces.

A few yards ahead, Lojab came out of the brush. He removed his helmet and bowed low, then straightened and smiled at the blonde.

“Hello, madam. I seemed to have misplaced my Porsche. Can you direct me to the nearest McDonald's?”

She smiled but said nothing. He watched her rock back and forth in an easy, fluid motion, perfectly synchronized with her elephant's movements, like an erotic dance between woman and beast. Lojab walked along beside the animal but then found he

had to jog to keep up.

“Where are you ladies headed? Maybe we could get together tonight for a beer, or two, or five.”

She spoke three or four words, but nothing he could understand. She then turned her attention back to the trail ahead.

“Okay.” He stopped in the middle of the trail and watched her reach to push a tree branch out of the way. “I’ll see you there, at about eight.”

“Lojab.” Karina came up to stand beside him. “You’re pathetic.”

“What do you mean? She said to meet her tonight at Joe’s Bar and Grill.”

“Yeah, right. What city? Kandahar? Karachi? New Delhi?”

“Did you see their tattoos?” Joaquin asked.

“Yeah, on their faces,” Kady said.

Joaquin nodded. “They looked like a devil’s pitchfork with a snake, or something like that.”

“Incoming elephant,” Kawalski said.

“Should we hide, Sarge?”

“Why bother?” Alexander said.

The third elephant was ridden by a young man. His long sandy hair was tied at the back of his neck with a length of leather. He was bare to the waist, his muscles well-toned. He looked at the soldiers, and just like the two women, he had a bow and quiver of arrows on his back.

“I’ll try a little Spanish lingo on him.” Karina removed her

helmet. “*Cómo se llama?*”

The young man ignored her.

“*A qué distancia está Kandahar?*” She looked at Sergeant Alexander. “I asked him how far to Kandahar.”

The elephant handler spoke a few words, but they seemed to be directed more to his animal than Karina.

“What did he say, Karina?” Lojab asked.

“Oh, he couldn’t stop to talk right now. He had a dental appointment or something.”

“Yeah, right.”

“More elephants on the way,” Kawalski said.

“How many?”

“A whole herd. Thirty or more. You might want to get out of the way. They’re spread out.”

“All right,” Alexander said, “everybody get on this side of the trail. Let’s stick together.”

The platoon didn’t bother to hide as they watched the elephants go by. The animals ignored the soldiers as they grabbed tree branches with their trunks and chewed them while walking along. Some of the animals were ridden by mahouts, while others had handlers walking beside them. A few smaller elephants followed the herd, without anyone tending them. All of them stopped occasionally, pulling tufts of grass to eat.

“Hey, Sparks,” Alexander said.

“Yeah, Sarge?”

“Try to raise Kandahar on your radio.”

“I did already,” Sparks said. “I got nothing.”

“Try again.”

“Right.”

“Did you try your GPS T-DARD to see where we are?”

“My T-DARD has gone retard. It thinks we’re on the French Riviera.”

“The Riviera, huh? That would be nice.” Alexander looked around at his soldiers. “I know you people were ordered to leave your cellphones in the barracks, but did anyone happen to accidentally bring one along?”

Everybody pulled out their phones.

“Jesus!” Alexander shook his head.

“And it’s a good thing, too, Sarge.” Karina tilted her helmet up and put the phone to her ear. “With our radio and GPS on the blink, how else could we find out where we are?”

“I got nothing.” Paxton tapped his phone on a tree trunk and tried again.

“Probably should pay your bill.” Karina clicked out a text message with her thumbs.

“Nothing here,” Joaquin said.

“I’m dialing 9-1-1,” Kady said. “They’ll know where we are.”

“You don’t have to call 9-1-1, Sharakova,” Alexander said.

“This is not an emergency, yet.”

“We’re too far away from the cell towers,” Kawalski said.

“Well,” Karina said, “that tells us where we’re not.”

Alexander looked at her.

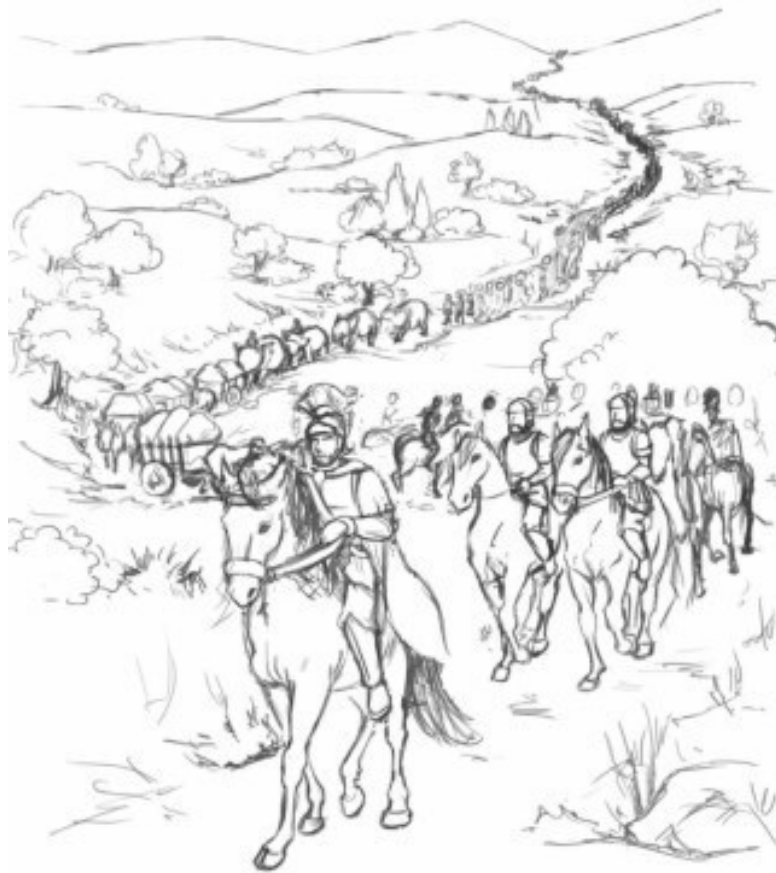
“We can’t be on the Riviera, that’s for sure. There are probably seventy cell towers along that section of the Mediterranean coast.”

“Right,” Joaquin said. “We’re somewhere so remote, there’s no tower within fifty miles.”

“That could be ninety percent of Afghanistan.”

“But that ninety percent of Afghanistan never looked like this,” Sharakova said, waving her hand at the tall pine trees.

Behind the elephants came a baggage train of ox carts loaded with hay and large earthen jars filled with grain. The hay was stacked high and tied down with grass ropes. Each cart was pulled by a pair of small oxen, barely taller than a Shetland pony. They trotted along at a good pace, driven by men who walked beside them.



It took twenty minutes for the hay carts to roll by. They were followed by two columns of men, all of whom wore short tunics of different colors and styles, with protective skirts of thick leather strips. Most were bare to the waist, and all were muscular and heavily scarred. They carried shields of elephant hide. Their double-edged swords were about two feet in length and slightly curved.

“Tough looking soldiers,” Karina said.

“Yes,” Kady said. “Are those scars for real?”

“Hey, Sarge,” Joaquin said.

“Yeah?”

“Have you noticed none of these people have the slightest fear of our weapons?”

“Yeah,” Alexander said as he watched the men walk by.

The soldiers numbered about two hundred, and they were followed by another company of fighters, but these were on horseback.

“They must be filming a movie somewhere up ahead,” Kady said.

“If they are,” Kawalski said, “they sure got a bunch of ugly actors.”

They saw more than five hundred mounted soldiers, who were followed by a small band of men on foot, wearing white tunics that looked like togas.

Behind the men in white came another baggage train. The

two-wheeled carts were filled with large earthen jars, slabs of raw meat, and two wagonloads of squealing pigs.

A horse and rider came galloping from the front of the column, on the opposite side of the trail from the platoon.

“He’s in a hurry,” Karina said.

“Yeah, and no stirrups,” Lojab said. “How does he stay in the saddle?”

“I don’t know, but that guy must be six-foot-six.”

“Probably. And check out that costume.”

The man wore an engraved bronze breastplate, metal helmet with red animal hair on top, a scarlet cloak, and fancy sandals, with leather laces wrapped around his ankles. And a leopard skin covering his saddle.

A dozen children jogged along the side of the trail, passing the wagon train. They wore short sarongs made of a rough tan fabric extending to their knees. Except for one of them, they were bare above the waist and dark-skinned, but not black. They carried bulging goatskin bags, with straps over their shoulders. Each one held a wooden bowl in his hand. The bowls were attached to their wrists by a length of leather.

One of the boys spotted Alexander’s platoon and came running to them. He stopped in front of Karina and tilted his goatskin to fill his bowl with a clear liquid. With his head bowed low, and using both hands, he held out the bowl to Karina.

“Thank you.” She took the bowl and lifted it toward her lips.

“Hold on,” Alexander said.

“What?” Karina asked.

“You don’t know what that is.”

“It looks like water, Sarge.”

Alexander came over to her, dipped his finger into the bowl, then touched it to his tongue. He smacked his lips. “All right, take a small sip.”

“Not after you stuck your finger in it.” She grinned at him. “Kidding.” She took a sip, then drank half the bowl. “Thank you, very much,” she said, then handed the bowl back to the boy.

He took the bowl but still wouldn’t look at her; instead, he kept his eyes on the ground at her feet.

When the other children saw Karina drink from the bowl, four of them, three boys and the one girl in the group, hurried over to serve water to the rest of the platoon. All of them kept their heads bowed, never looking at the soldiers’ faces.

The girl, who appeared to be about nine years old, held out her bowl of water to Sparks.

“Thank you.” Sparks drank the water and handed the bowl back to her.

She peeked up at him, but when he smiled, she jerked her head back down.

Someone in the line of march shouted, and all the children held out their hands, politely waiting for their bowls to be returned. When each boy got his bowl, he ran to his place in line on the trail.

The girl ran to take her place behind the boy who’d served

water to Karina. He glanced back at Karina, and when she waved to him, he lifted his hand but caught himself and turned to trot along the trail.

A large herd of sheep came by, bleating and baaing. Four boys and their dogs kept them on the trail. One of the dogs—a large black animal with one chewed-off ear—stopped to bark at the platoon, but then he lost interest and ran to catch up.

“You know what I think?” Kady asked.

“Nobody cares what you think, Scarface,” Lojab said.

“What, Sharakova?” Alexander glanced from Lojab to Kady.

The one-inch scar running up and over the middle of Kady’s nose darkened with her quickened pulse. But rather than let her disfigurement dampen her spirit, she used it to embolden her attitude. She gave Lojab a look that could wilt crabgrass.

“Blow this, Low Job,” she said, then gave him the finger and spoke to Alexander. “This is a reenactment.”

“Of what?” Alexander ran two fingers across his upper lip, erasing a tiny smile.

“I don’t know, but remember those PBS shows where the men dressed up in Civil War uniforms and lined up to shoot blanks at each other?”

“Yeah.”

“That was a reenactment of a Civil War battle. These people are doing a reenactment.”

“Maybe.”

“They’ve gone to a lot of trouble to get it right,” Karina said.

“Get what right?” Lojab asked. “Some kind of medieval migration?”

“If it’s a reenactment,” Joaquin said, “where’s all the tourists with their cameras? Where’s the TV crews? The politicians taking credit for everything?”

“Yeah,” Alexander said, “where are the cameras? Hey, Sparks,” he said into his communicator, “where’s your whirlyspat?”

“You mean the Dragonfly?” Private Richard ‘Sparks’ McAlister asked.

“Yeah.”

“In her suitcase.”

“How high can she fly?”

“Four or five thousand feet. Why?”

“Send her up to see how far we are from that Registan Desert,” Alexander said. “As much as I’d love to hang around here and watch the show, we still have a mission to accomplish.”

“Okay, Sarge,” Sparks said. “But the suitcase is in our weapons container.”

Chapter Three

The soldiers gathered around Alexander as he spread his map out on the ground.

“What’s the cruising speed of the C-130?” he asked Airman Trover, a crewman from the aircraft.

“About three hundred and thirty miles per hour.”

“How long were we in the air?”

“We left Kandahar at four p.m.” Trover checked his watch. “It’s now almost five, so about an hour in the air.”

“Three hundred and thirty miles,” Alexander whispered as he drew a wide circle around Kandahar. “An hour to the east would put us in Pakistan. In that case, that river we saw is the Indus. One hour to the west, and we’d be just inside Iran, but no big rivers there. An hour to the southwest is the Registan Desert, right where we’re supposed to be, but no forest or rivers in that region. An hour to the north, and we’re still in Afghanistan, but that’s arid country.”

Karina looked at her watch. “What time you got, Kawalski?”

“Um, five minutes to five.”

“Yeah, that’s what I have, too.” Karina was quiet for a moment. “Sarge, there’s something haywire here.”

“What is it?” Alexander asked.

“All our watches tell us it’s late afternoon, but look at the sun; it’s almost directly overhead. How can that be?”

Alexander looked up at the sun, then at his watch. “Beats the hell out of me. Where’s Sparks?”

“Right here, Sarge.”

“Check that GPS reading again.”

“It still says we’re on the French Riviera.”

“Trover,” Alexander said, “what’s the range on the C-130?”

“About three thousand miles without refueling.”

Alexander tapped his pencil on the map. “France has to be at least four thousand miles from Kandahar,” he said. “Even if the plane had enough fuel to fly to France—which it didn’t—we would have to be in the air for over twelve hours—which we weren’t. So, let’s cut the crap about the French Riviera.” He looked around at his soldiers. “All right?”

Sparks shook his head.

“What?” Alexander asked.

“See our shadows?” Sparks asked.

Looking at the ground, they saw very little shadowing.

“I think the time is about twelve noon,” Sparks said. “Our watches are wrong.”

“All our watches are wrong?”

“I’m just telling you what I see. If it’s really five in the afternoon, the sun should be there.” Sparks pointed to the sky at about forty-five degrees above the horizon. “And our shadows should be long, but the sun is there.” He pointed straight up. “On the French Riviera, right now, it’s noon.” He looked at Alexander’s scowling face. “France is five hours behind

Afghanistan.”

Alexander glared at him for a moment. “All right, the only way we’re going to settle this is to find our weapons crate, dig out that toy whirlysplat of yours, and send it up to see where the hell we are.”

“How are we going to find our crate, Sarge?” Lojab asked.

“We’re going to have to find someone who speaks English.”

“Her name is ‘Dragonfly,’” Sparks muttered.

“Hey,” Karina said, “here comes more cavalry.”

They watched two columns of heavily armed soldiers pass on horseback. These horses were larger than any they’d seen so far, and the men wore iron breastplates, along with matching helmets. Their shoulder protection and wrist guards were made of thick leather. Round shields were slung across their backs, and each man carried a long sword, as well as daggers and other knives. Their faces, arms, and legs showed many battle scars. The soldiers rode with bridles and reins, but without stirrups.

It took almost twenty minutes for the cavalry to ride by. Behind them, the trail was empty all the way back to a point where it disappeared around a copse of young Aleppo pine trees.

“Well,” Lojab said, “finally, that’s the last of them.”

Alexander looked down the trail. “Maybe.”

After the passage of forty elephants, hundreds of horses and oxen, and over a thousand people, the trail had been worked down to pulverized dirt.

A horse soldier galloped by on the opposite side of the trail,

coming from the front of the column. The platoon watched the rider pull his horse to a skidding halt, then turned to ride beside a man who'd just come around a turn in the trail.

"That must be the guy in charge," Lojab said.

"Which one?" Karina asked.

"The man who just came around the curve."

"Could be," Alexander said.

The man was tall, and he rode a huge black charger. Twenty paces behind him was the tall officer with the scarlet cloak who'd ridden by earlier, and behind the officer rode four columns of horsemen, wearing shiny bronze breastplates and matching helmets. Their scarlet capes fluttered in the breeze.

The man on the warhorse trotted along as the scout spoke to him. He never acknowledged the messenger's presence but seemed to listen intently to what he had to say. After a moment, the man on the charger said a few words and sent the messenger galloping away toward the front.

When the officer came abreast of the Seventh Cavalry, his horse pranced sideways as both he and his rider studied Sergeant Alexander's platoon. The officer showed more interest in them than anyone else had.

"Hey, Sarge," Karina said on her comm, "remember that four-star general who came to Camp Kandahar last month to review the troops?"

"Yeah, that would be General Nicholson."

"Well, I've got a feeling I should come to attention and salute

this guy, too.”

The man on horseback sat ramrod straight, and his polished bronze helmet with a red mohawk of boar’s hair on top made him look even taller than his six-foot-two height. He wore a tunic like the others, but his was made of a red silk-like material, and it was sewn with fine double rows of white stitching. The strips of his leather skirt were trimmed in silver, and the hilt of his sword was inlaid with silver and gold, as was the scabbard of his falcata. His boots were made of tooled leather and came up over his calves.

His saddle was covered with a lion hide, and the horse wore a heavy breastplate, along with leather armor on its front legs and a thick silver plate on its forehead. The horse was high-spirited, and the man had to maintain pressure on the reins to restrain him from galloping ahead. A dozen small bells hung along the neck harness, and they jingled as the horse trotted by.

“He does have a certain air of authority,” Alexander said.

“If anyone had stirrups,” Kawalski said, “it should be this guy.”

A scout came galloping down the trail and turned his horse to come up beside the general. With a flick of his wrist, the general turned his warhorse away from the platoon and listened to the scout’s report as they rode away from Alexander and his people. A moment later, the general gave the scout some instructions and sent him off toward the front.

The squadron of horsemen with the red capes showed more interest in Alexander and his troops than the other soldiers did.

They were young men, early to mid-twenties, well-dressed, and riding fine horses. They weren't battle-scarred like the other men.

"They look like a bunch of candy-ass second lieutenants to me." Lojab spat in the dirt as he watched them.

"Just like cadets fresh out of the academy," Autumn said.

Behind the cadets came another baggage train of large four-wheeled wagons. The first one was loaded with a dozen heavy chests. The others contained bales of furry hides, spare swords, spears, and bundles of arrows, along with many earthen pots the size of small barrels, filled with dried fruit and grains. Four wagons were loaded high with cages containing geese, chickens, and cooing pigeons. The wagons were pulled by teams of four oxen.

The wagons and carts rode on solid wheels, without spokes.

After the wagons came more two-wheeled carts, loaded with slabs of meat and other supplies. Twenty carts made up this group, and they were followed by a dozen foot-soldiers carrying swords and spears.

"Wow, look at that," Kawalski said.

The last cart held something familiar.

"They've got our weapons container!" Karina said.

"Yeah, and the orange parachutes, too," Kawalski said.

Alexander glanced at the wagon. "Son-of-a-bitch." He stepped onto the trail and took hold of the oxen's harness. "Hold it right there."

The woman driving the cart glared at him, then popped her whip, cutting a slit in the camo covering of his helmet.

“Hey!” Alexander shouted. “Cut that out. I just want our weapons crate.”

The woman flicked her whip again, and Alexander caught it, wrapping the braided leather around his forearm. He yanked the whip from her hand, then advanced on her.

“I don’t want to hurt you, lady.” He pointed with the handle of the whip toward the fiberglass container. “I’m just taking what belongs to us.”

Before he could get to her, six of the men behind the cart drew their swords and came at him. The first one shoved his fist against Alexander’s chest, pushing him backwards. As Alexander stumbled, he heard twelve rifles being cocked. He regained his balance and held up his right hand.

“Hold your fire!”

The man who had shoved Alexander now pointed his sword at the sergeant’s throat, apparently unconcerned that he might be cut down by the M-4 rifles. He said a few words and tilted his head to the right. It wasn’t hard to understand his meaning; get away from the cart.

“All right, all right.” Alexander held up his hands. “I don’t want you people to die over a weapons container.” As he walked back to his soldiers, he wrapped the whip around its handle and shoved it into his hip pocket. “Lower your weapons, damn it. We’re not going to start a war over that stupid box.”

“But Sarge,” Karina said, “that has all our gear in it.”



“We’ll get it back later. It doesn’t look like they’ve figured out how to open—”

A blood-chilling scream came from the other side of the trail as a band of men armed with spears and swords ran from the woods to attack the baggage train.

“Well,” Lojab said, “this must be Act Two of this never-ending drama.”

As the attackers began grabbing slabs of meat and jars of grain from the wagons, the woman driver on a wagon pulled her dagger and went for two men who’d climbed into her wagon to take the weapons container. One of the men swung his sword, cutting a deep gash in the woman’s arm. She screamed, switched her knife to her other hand, and lunged at him.

“Hey!” Kawalski shouted. “That’s real blood!”

The wagon train’s soldiers ran to join the battle, swinging their swords and yelling. One of the two attackers in the wagon jumped down, pulling the weapons container to the ground. A foot-soldier swung his sword at the man’s head, but the man dodged away, then stepped in, stabbing the soldier in the stomach.

A hundred more robbers charged in from the woods, and all along the trail, they leapt on the wagons, fought the drivers, and tossed supplies to their comrades on the ground.

The wagon train’s soldiers ran to attack the robbers, but they were greatly outnumbered.

A horn sounded three times in rapid succession from somewhere up the trail.

The robber in the last wagon had knocked the woman to the

floor of the vehicle, and now he raised his sword and gripped it with both hands, preparing to run it through her heart.

Kawalski brought up his rifle and fired twice. The man in the wagon stumbled backward, falling to the ground. His comrade's eyes darted from the dying man to the woman in the wagon.

The woman moved like a jungle cat as she snatched her dagger from the bed of the wagon and went for the man. He drew back his sword and began a swing that would cut her legs from beneath her—but Alexander's pistol slug hit him in the chest, knocking him sideways and over the weapons crate.

An arrow zinged through the air, passing just inches away from Alexander's head. He jerked his head around to see the arrow hit a foot-soldier in the throat.

“Spread out!” Alexander shouted. “Fire at will!”

The platoon ran along the trail and between the wagons, firing their rifles and sidearms. It wasn't difficult to distinguish the foot-soldiers from the attackers; the robbers wore ragged animal hides for clothing, and their hair was shaggy and unkempt.

“Lojab!” Karina shouted. “Bandits on your nine. Roll right!”

Lojab hit the ground as Karina fired over him, hitting one of the attackers in the face, while Lojab took out another one with a bullet to his chest.

“More coming from the woods!” Sparks yelled.

A bandit kicked away Lojab's rifle. He rolled to his back to see a second bandit swinging his sword toward him. He pulled his Yarborough knife and got it up in time to block the sword. The

attacker yelled and brought his sword around as the second bandit thrust his sword down, aiming for Lojab's heart. Lojab rolled as the sword cut into the dirt, then got to his knees and shoved his knife into the man's groin. He yelled, stumbling backward.

The remaining bandit swung his sword at Lojab's head, but Karina had reloaded, and she blew him away with two shots to his chest.

Lojab leapt on the man he'd stabbed and cut his throat.

Four more bandits charged in from the trees, yelling and brandishing their spears, running toward Sparks. They were followed by two men armed with bows and arrows.

Sparks took aim and pulled the trigger, but nothing happened. "My rifle's jammed!"

"Sparks!" Autumn yelled and tossed her handgun to him. She emptied her rifle magazine, firing on the run. Two of the attackers went down.

Sparks fired the pistol, taking out the third one.



Alexander, from fifty yards away, went down on one knee, took careful aim, and fired on the fourth man as he ran toward Sparks. The bandit stumbled, grabbed his side, and hit the ground.

One of the archers stopped, notched an arrow, and took aim at Sparks. Sparks fired twice. One of the bullets knocked the archer's head backward, but his arrow was already in the air.

Sparks heard the sickening thud, then stared down at the arrow quivering in his chest. He reached with a shaking hand to pull it out, but the shaft broke off, leaving the arrowhead imbedded.

Autumn shoved a fresh magazine into her rifle and killed the second archer. "Incoming!" she shouted.

Sparks looked up to see two more men coming from the woods, swinging their swords. He shot one of the bandits in the

thigh while Autumn took out the other one. The wounded bandit kept coming. Sparks fired his last round from the pistol, but it went wild. The bandit dove for Sparks, with his sword coming down. Sparks rolled and thrust the shaft of the broken arrow forward. The bandit yelled when the arrow cut into his stomach. He hit the ground, shoving the arrow through his body and out his back.

The deafening gunfire, along with the sight of so many bandits being cut down, turned the tide of the battle. The attackers fled into the woods, dropping their stolen goods in their panic to escape. The wagon train's soldiers ran in pursuit.

The tall officer with the scarlet cloak came galloping down the trail, followed by a troop of cavalry. He surveyed the scene, shouted an order, and motioned for his cavalry to charge into the woods.

The officer dismounted, and as he walked among the bodies, one of the foot-soldiers reported to him, talking excitedly and pointing at Alexander's soldiers. The officer nodded and asked questions as he looked over the platoon.

"Who's got the STOMP medical pack?" Alexander yelled.

"It's in the weapons container, Sarge," Kawalski said.

"Break it out," Alexander said. "Let's see what we can do for these people. Check the woman in the wagon first. She's losing a lot of blood."

"Right, Sarge."

"Sparks, are you all right?" Alexander asked.

Sparks unlatched his vest where the arrowhead protruded. He checked for damage. "Yeah." He rapped his knuckles on his body armor. "These things work pretty good."

Karina sat in the dirt by a wagon wheel, with her arms on her knees and resting her head on her forearms.

"Ballentine!" Alexander ran to her. "Are you hit?"

She shook her head but didn't look up. He knelt beside her.

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head again.

"Report by the numbers, people," Alexander said into his mic as he sat beside Karina.

Everyone reported in except Sharakova.

"Sharakova's right here," Sparks said. "She picked off six of the bad guys."

"Sparks, can you fix Sharakova's goddamned comm?"

"I shall try my best."

"Well, get on it before she wanders off and gets lost."

Karina pulled off her helmet and dropped it to the ground. "It was too damn easy," she whispered.

Alexander waited, saying nothing.

"When Kawalski shot that first one in the wagon," Karina said, "then you got the one on the ground, I just went on automatic."

Alexander patted her shoulder.

"Sarge, I've never killed anyone before."

"I know."

"How can it be so easy? These guys were no match for our

guns. Why didn't I just try to wing them instead of blowing them away?"

"Karina—"

"Where the hell are we?" Karina asked. "And what's happening to us? I thought this was just some elaborate show until that bandit sliced the woman's arm and real blood spurted out. Then that foot-soldier had his gut sliced open. Have we dropped into some surreal nightmare?"

"I don't know what's happened to us, but you reacted just as you were supposed to. All our training has been exactly for this sort of attack. You don't have time to analyze, consider options, or aim for the knee instead of the heart. Less than three seconds passed between Kawalski's first shot and your first kill. You are the perfect soldier, not a tenderhearted woman, at least not on the battlefield. That's what this weird place suddenly became, a battlefield. And guess who won the battle? The best armed and the best trained fighting force in the world. If we hadn't opened fire, those bandits would have come after us with their swords and spears after they finished off these other people."

Karina lifted her head and wiped her cheek. "Thanks, Sarge. You're right. The soldier in me did take over, but now I'm back, trying to sort things out."

"Hey, Sarge," Kawalski said on the comm. "I need help with this woman's arm wound."

"Coming." Alexander stood and held out his hand to Karina. She pulled herself up. "I'll go." She picked up her rifle and

helmet, gave Alexander a quick hug, then ran toward the last wagon.

“I’ve never killed anyone either,” he whispered, “until today.”

“You did good, Sarge,” Private Lorelei Fusilier said on the comm.

“Shit,” Alexander said. “I always forget that damn comm is on.”

“Yeah, Sarge,” Sparks said. “You did us all some good.”

“All right, cut the chatter. We’re in a whole new ballgame now, so let’s check things out very carefully. And stay on your toes. In the heat of battle, we chose sides; now we’ll see if we picked the right one.”

Chapter Four

Karina knelt beside a foot-soldier, working on a bloody gash in his thigh. The sword had gone all the way through, but if she could clean out the wound and stanch the flow of blood, he should recover.

Lying on the ground and propped up on his elbows, the injured man watched her. The other foot-soldiers went about collecting weapons from the battlefield, and she could hear them dispatching the wounded attackers—cutting their throats or running swords through their hearts. It was barbaric, sickening, and it made her angry, but there was nothing she could do about it; so, she just tried to shut out the sounds as she worked.

She finished stitching up the wound and reached for the GelSpray liquid bandage, but before she could apply it to the wound, the man screamed as a sword came down, piercing his heart.

“You stupid son-of-a-bitch!” She jumped to her feet, shoving the foot-soldier away. “You just stabbed one of your own men.”

He stumbled backward but held onto his sword, pulling it from the man’s body. Karina looked down at the man who’d been stabbed; his mouth gaped open, working in a silent, feeble cry for help as his wide eyes stared at the sky. Then his eyes closed and his body went limp.

“I could have saved him, you ignorant fool.”

The soldier laughed and took a step toward her, his bloody sword pointing at her stomach.

“I got a bead on his forehead, Karina,” Kawalski said over the comm. “Just give me the word, and I’ll blow his brains out.”

“I got my sights on his heart,” Joaquin said.

“And I got his jugular vein,” Lorelei Fusilier said.

“No,” Karina said. “This bitch is all mine.”

“Sukal!” a woman shouted from behind Karina.

The man looked past Karina, then back at her, still with that leering grin on his face.

Karina couldn’t see who the woman was—she had to keep her eyes on his. “What happened to your teeth, Sukal?” she asked. “Someone kick them out for you?”

Sukal flourished his sword like a cobra weaving a hypnotic spell in front of its mesmerized victim.

“Unless you want to eat that sword, you better get it out of my face.”

He lunged forward. She ducked, spun around, and hit his wrist with the edge of her hand, shoving his sword aside. Sukal used the momentum of the moving sword to swing it around and bring it back toward her, aiming for her neck.

Karina dropped to the ground, rolled, and scissored his ankles. He fell hard but was quickly on his feet.

She was up, too, taking a defensive stance, ready for his next attack.

He came at her, going for her heart.

She faked to the side, drawing his sword, but switched the opposite way and landed a jab to his eye.

Sukal stumbled but stuck his sword in the dirt to steady himself. He gripped the weapon with both hands, lifted it over his head, and, bellowing like an enraged bull, ran at her.

Karina brought up her left knee and twisted sideways while thrusting her foot forward in a karate kick that landed her size-nine combat boot in his solar plexus.

Sukal doubled over, dropping the sword. He then fell to his knees, clutching his stomach as he tried to force air back into his lungs.

Karina stared at the gasping man for a moment, then looked to see who was behind her. It was the dark-haired woman they'd seen on one of the elephants. She came striding toward Karina and Sukal, obviously very angry, and stopped in front of Sukal, with her feet spread apart and fists on her hips. She spoke rapidly, gesturing toward the dead man. Karina didn't need an interpreter to know she was chewing Sukal out for killing the wounded man.

Sukal was beginning to breathe again, but he remained on his knees, looking at the ground. He didn't appear at all repentant; probably just waiting for her to finish yelling at him.

The woman vented her anger, then bent down, grabbed Sukal's sword, and threw it as far as she could. She added one more insult that ended with a word that sounded like, "*Kusbeyaw!*" Then she smiled at Karina.

The word might have meant "idiot," "dumbass," or "shithead,"

but whatever it was, it certainly wasn't a flattering comment.

"Hello," Karina said.

The woman said something, and when she realized Karina didn't understand, she touched two fingers to her lips, then to her breast, and pointed to Karina.

"It's okay." Karina watched Sukal slink away. "I got in a good kick on that *kusbeyaw*."

The woman chuckled, then began to speak, but she was interrupted by the tall officer, the one with the scarlet cape. He was twenty yards away, and he motioned for the woman to come to him. She touched Karina's arm, smiled, then went to the officer.

Karina gazed around the battlefield. The wagon train's soldiers had collected all the weapons and valuables from the attackers. The women and children went about stripping the dead men's clothing, which didn't look like much; ragged animal hides for the most part.

"I guess, in this place, everything has some value."

"It seems so," Kady said. "Good job on that asshole, Sukal. I never saw anyone so surprised in my life as he was when your foot hit him in the gut."

"Yeah, that felt good. But if I hadn't put him down, I think that elephant girl would have. She was pissed."

"I wonder what she said to you."

"I think she was trying to say she was sorry for Sukal killing the guy I was working on. The wound was pretty bad, but I think

he would have recovered.”

“Ballentine,” Sergeant Alexander said on the comm. “You and Kawalski stand guard on the weapons crate. I’m going to take a walk toward the back of this column to see how much longer it is.”

“Right, Sarge,” Karina said.

Sarge looked at the soldier standing next to him. “Sharakova,” he said, “fall in with me.”

“Copy.” Sharakova swung her rifle over her shoulder.

“Good work on that cretin, Ballentine,” Sarge said. “I hope you never get that mad at me.”

“Hooyah!” Kawalski said. He was echoed by several others.

Chapter Five

After Alexander and Sharakova returned from their walk of inspection, the platoon carried the weapons container into the edge of the woods, where they built two campfires and broke out the MREs.

“While we’re eating,” Alexander said, “keep your helmets on and your weapons handy. Before dark, we’ll set up a perimeter and rotate on guard duty. We’ll do it by twos all night. Now, let’s talk about what we’ve seen and heard today.”

“Who were those people?” Kady asked.

“Which ones?” Alexander asked.

“The attackers.”

“I don’t know who they were,” Autumn said, “but they were vicious.”

“And nasty,” Kady said. “With those bearskin robes, they looked like buffalo dogs.”

“Yeah,” Lori said, “buffalo dogs is about right.”

“Look at that,” Kawalski said. “These people are still going by. How many more are there, Sarge?”

“We walked for about a half-mile,” Alexander said. “Behind this group of men, there’s a huge herd of horses and cattle. Behind that comes the camp followers. There are women, children, old people, and numerous sutlers with their wagons full of wears. Behind them are a lot of ragtag people. It’s like a whole

city on the move.”

“I wonder where they’re going,” Kady said.

“It seems to me,” Alexander said, “they’re going in the general direction of that big river we saw. Beyond that, I have no idea.”

“Hey,” Private Lorelei Fusilier said, holding up one of the MRE packaged meals. “Anybody got menu seven?”

“Yeah,” Ransom said. “Meatloaf.”

“You got Butter Buds?”

“Maybe. What you got to trade?”

“Green hot sauce.”

Everyone laughed.

“Good luck trading off that crap,” Karina said.

“You got menu twenty,” Kawalski said, “right, Fusilier?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you got Cherry Blueberry Cobbler.”

“No, I ate that first.”

“Here, Fusilier,” Alexander said, “take my Butter Buds. I hate those things.”

“Thanks, Sarge. You want my green hot sauce?”

“No, you can keep that. Anybody got a guess as to how many soldiers are in this army?”

“Thousands,” Joaquin said.

“I bet there’s more than ten thousand,” Kady said.

“And about thirty elephants.”

Karina had finished her food, and now she tapped away on her iPad.

“Here come the camp followers,” Kawalski said.

As the women and children walked by, many of them spoke to Alexander’s soldiers, and some of the children waved. Everyone seemed to be in good spirits, even though they’d probably been walking all day.

The soldiers of the Seventh couldn’t understand the language, but they returned the greetings.

“You know what I think?” Kawalski said.

“What?” Alexander took a bite of SPAM.

“I think news of our defeat of those bandits has spread all the way down the line. Have you noticed how people are smiling and starting to treat us with a little respect?”

“Could be.”

A large four-wheel wagon passed by, with a man and woman sitting on a bundle of hides in the front of the vehicle. Two oxen pulled them along. The woman smiled as she looked at the soldiers, while the man held up his hand in a salute.

Joaquin returned the man’s greeting. “That’s the first fat guy I’ve seen.”

Karina looked up from her iPad. “Yeah, me, too.”

“What are you reading, Karina?” Kady asked.

“My textbooks. I’m working on a degree in pre-veterinary medicine.”

“Are you online?”

“I wish,” Karina said. “I tried to connect again, but there’s no signal. I’ve got all my books on a microchip.”

Two riders came along the trail, from the front of the column. When they saw the platoon, they left the trail and dismounted.

“Hey,” Kawalski said, “it’s the elephant girls.”

Karina put down her iPad and went to greet the two women. Alexander, Kawalski, Lojab, and Kady followed.

The women stood by their horses, holding onto the reins. They seemed hesitant, unsure about how to approach the strangers. Their clothing was similar to the other women on the trail, but the cloth had a finer weave, and the cut was more formfitting. The colors of taupe and fawn, with bits of red trim, looked fresh and lively. Their outfits consisted of short tunics over unfooted Thorsberg trousers, and their leather sandals had beaded tassel embellishments around the ankles.

Karina held her hand out to the brunette. “Hello, it’s good to see you again.”

The woman smiled and took Karina’s hand, then spoke a few words.

Karina shook her head. “I don’t understand your language.”

The blonde said something to Kady.

“Can’t you speak English?” Kady asked.

The other woman spoke again, then the blonde said something.

“You know what they’re doing, Sarge?” Kawalski asked.

“Talking a lot and not saying anything?”

“I think they’re trying out different languages on us.”

“Yeah, well,” Lojab said, “I think they’re idiots. Why can’t

they speak English like everyone else?”

“It’s all Greek to me,” Kady said.

Alexander looked at Kady. “You could be right. Hey, Spiros,” he said into his mic.

“Yeah, Sarge?” Private Zorba Spiros said.

“Where are you?”

“I’m right here, at the other campfire.”

“Come up here, on the double.”

Spiros was soon standing beside Alexander. “Wow, they’re hot.”

“You’re Greek, right?” Alexander said.

“My parents are.”

“Try some Greek on these people.”

“I don’t speak it very well.”

“Can you say, ‘Hello, where the hell are we?’”

Spiros spoke two words, paused, looked at the ground, then at the trees. “Um...” he said, then asked a question in Greek.

The two women stared at him for a moment, then looked at each other. The one on the right asked Spiros a question.

“What?” Spiros said, holding out his hands, palms up.

The other woman asked the same question.

“What is it, Spiros?” Alexander asked. “Are they speaking Greek?”

“Yeah, but...”

“But what?”

“It’s not Greek like I learned. It’s sort of...a different dialect

or something.”

The first woman asked another question.

“I think they asked what language I spoke, then she asked if we came from Iberia.”

“Ask her how far we are from Kandahar,” Alexander said.

Spiros asked the question, and the one on the left responded.

“She asked, ‘How far to where?’ They never heard of Kandahar.”

The woman said something else.

“Hey...” Spiros stared at the blonde.

“What is it?” Alexander asked.

“I think they’re speaking Linear B.”

“Linear what?”

“Linear B,” Spiros said.

“Wait a minute,” Karina said. “Linear B was never a spoken language. It was an ancient form of written Greek.”

“You mean,” Kawalski said, “they’re not speaking modern Greek?”

“Yes,” Spiros said. “Do you remember, in high school, reading the Canterbury Tales and some of it was written in Middle English?”

“Yeah,” Alexander said.

“If someone spoke to you in Old English, you would have a hard time making it out, but some of the words are the same as they are now. That’s what I’m hearing, some Greek words I

understand, but many that are ancient Greek.”

The woman with brown hair touched Spiros’s arm and asked a question.

Spiros looked surprised, then shook his head. “No.”

“What did she say?” Alexander asked.

“She asked if we’re Romans.”

Chapter Six

“Get the Apache,” Kawalski said. “She can talk Native American to them.”

“You know what, Kawalski?” Alexander said.

“Yeah, I know. Shut the fuck up.”

“Occasionally, Kawalski,” Alexander said, “you have a spark of brilliance.” He spoke into his mic, “Private Autumn Eaglemoon, front and center.”

Autumn jogged up to where Alexander and the others stood facing the two women. “If they don’t understand English, Sarge, they sure as hell won’t understand Apache.” She’d been listening to the conversation on her comm.

“No,” Alexander said. “But at Kawalski’s birthday party, they played ‘Born This Way,’ and you got up and did the song in sign language.”

“Yeah, but I was just about two-thirds drunk at the time.” She looked at the two women. “I can’t talk to these people in sign language.” She looked at Alexander. “Unless you got a bottle of firewater tucked away in your backpack.”

“Just try it, Eaglemoon. If it doesn’t work, we’ll try something else.”

“All right, you’re the boss.” She handed her rifle to Alexander and dropped her backpack on the ground. “Since you ain’t got no alcohol, I’ll just have to wing it. Now, let me see.” She made a

hand motion, indicating all the troops in her platoon. “We,” she joined her hands in a bird-like shape and fluttered them in the air, “flew high in the sky.” She raised her hands above her head and cupped them into parachute shapes, then floated them down. “We jumped from our plane and floated down to the ground.”

The two women intently watched Autumn’s hand and body motions. The brown-haired one seemed mystified, but the blonde came over to Autumn. She touched her arm, said some words, and pointed to a crow flying above. She repeated Autumn’s sign language and finished with a questioning look, as if asking if that was correct.

“Yes,” Autumn said. “And now,” she raised her arms and held out her hands, palm up, while shrugging and looking about, as if searching for something, “we are lost.”

The blonde stared at Autumn for a moment, then made the motion to include everyone in the platoon. “Ve are vost?” She said and repeated Autumn’s signs for being lost.

Autumn nodded.

The blonde shook her head, reached for Autumn, and put an arm around her shoulders. She spoke some words and backed away, keeping her hand on Autumn’s arm. She made the motion for all of Alexander’s soldiers, then the same motion indicating all of her people as she spoke some words.

Autumn interpreted what she thought the woman was saying, “Your platoon and my people...”

She made a gathering motion toward the platoon.

“No, wait,” Autumn said. “She means her people are gathering our people...”

The woman spoke and pointed to her eye, then at the platoon.

The blonde woman and Autumn exchanged more hand signs, but Autumn wasn't speaking aloud; just watching and responding with her hands.

After a moment, Autumn reached for the woman's hand. “Autumn,” she said, putting her hand to her chest.

“Autumn?” the blonde asked.

“Yes.”

“Autumn.” She put her hand to her own chest. “Tin Tin Ban Sunia.”

“Tin Tin Ban Sunia. What a beautiful name.”

Tin Tin Ban Sunia led Autumn to the other woman. “Liada,” she said as she put the two women's hands together. “Autumn,” she said to Liada.

“Liada,” Autumn said. “I am so glad to meet you.”

The three women walked together toward the horses, away from the platoon.

Liada smiled. “Autumn.” She spoke some other words.

Autumn touched Tin Tin's cheek. “That's not a tattoo.”

“What is it?” Kawalski asked on the comm.

“It's scarred over, and it looks very much like a brand.”

“She was branded?” Kawalski asked. “Like a cow?”

“Yes, and from the looks of the scar, it was done a long time ago. It's like a pitchfork, with a snake winding around the shaft.

Then there's an arrow going across the shaft."

Tin Tin smiled and reached to turn Liada's face to the side.

"Liada has one just like it," Autumn said. "They were both branded when they were children."

Tin Tin spoke to Liada while using sign language for Autumn's benefit. She motioned toward the platoon and touched Autumn's shoulder. Liada pointed toward Alexander. All three looked at him. They were about thirty yards away. As Alexander squirmed under their gaze and shifted Autumn's rifle to his other hand, Kawalski laughed.

"Knock it off, Kawalski," Alexander said.

"Right, Sarge." Kawalski grinned.

"He is Alexander," Autumn said to Liada.

"Alder..." Liada said. "Alexder?"

"Yeah, that's a hard one. Just call him 'Sarge.'" She smiled. "Sarge."

"Sarge?" Liada asked.

"Yes, his name is 'Sarge.'"

Tin Tin and Liada spoke to each other for a moment, repeating the word "Sarge" several times.

Liada tapped Autumn's helmet with the back of her fingers and raised her shoulders.

"Oh, this thing?" She unbuckled the chinstrap and pulled off her helmet, letting her long black hair fall. She handed it to Liada. "Helmet."

"Helmet?" Liada took it and looked it over.

Tin Tin reached to touch Autumn's hair. She smiled and said something as she ran her fingers through the waist-length black strands.

"Thank you," Autumn said, "but it must be a mess."

She took a brush from an inside pocket of her jacket, pulled her hair over her shoulder, and began brushing. Tin Tin Ban Sunia was fascinated with the hairbrush. She said something to Liada.

"Oh, God," Kawalski said on the comm. "Here we go. First the hair, next they'll talk about makeup. After that, it'll be the clothes."

Liada looked at the helmet, cocking her head to the side and wrinkling her brow.

"I think Liada hears us," Karina said.

Autumn flipped her hair back over her shoulder and handed her brush to Tin Tin, who smiled and tried to brush her hair, but it was too tangled.

"Here," Autumn said, "let me show you." She pulled Tin Tin's hair over her shoulder and began at the ends. Her hair was almost as long as Autumn's. "You know what? Some women would kill for naturally curly hair."

Autumn and Tin Tin continued to talk and use hand signs as Autumn brushed Tin Tin's hair, but the rest of the platoon could no longer hear them.

"I think you've lost control of this one, Sarge," Kawalski said. Alexander agreed.

Tin Tin motioned toward the platoon and asked a question. Autumn raised her right arm and pointed toward the southeast. She made a rising and falling motion with her hand, like something far away over the hills. She then gave the brush to Tin Tin to free her hands and asked in signs, “What is this place?”

Tin Tin spoke, but the platoon couldn’t hear what she said. Autumn touched the sleeve of Tin Tin’s tunic, feeling the material. Tin Tin asked something about the zipper on Autumn’s camo jacket.

“What’d I tell you?” Kawalski said. “Here we go with the clothing. Lipstick can’t be far behind.”

“Kawalski,” Karina said, “you don’t even know what’s important in life, do you?”

“Well, apparently it’s hair, clothing, and makeup. The Apache seems to have forgotten about ‘Where are we?’, ‘Who are you people?’, and ‘What’s up with all those elephants?’”

Liada lifted the helmet toward her ear, obviously curious. She glanced at Autumn, raising her eyebrows.

“Sure, put it on.” Autumn made a motion toward Liada’s head.

“Hey, Sarge,” Lojab said. “You see that?”

“This should be interesting,” Alexander said.

“Can she hear us?” Sparks asked.

“Sure, if the Apache has the comm on.”

“Hey, babe,” Lojab said.

When half the platoon began talking at once, Liada uttered an exclamation and yanked off the helmet. She looked inside,

then around the outside of the helmet, finally handing it to Tin Tin, saying something to her. Tin Tin looked inside but shook her head.

Autumn leaned close to the mic in the helmet. "If you guys are going to talk to the ladies, do it one at a time. Otherwise, you're scaring the hell out of 'em." She motioned for Tin Tin to put on the helmet as she flipped Tin Tin's hair back over her shoulder.

Tin Tin handed the hairbrush to Liada, then carefully slipped on the helmet as she cocked her head to the side and listened. Her eyes widened.

"Sarge?"

"Sarge?" Liada asked as she began brushing her hair as she'd seen Autumn do for Tin Tin.

Tin Tin tapped the side of the helmet, over her right ear. She said something else to Liada, then both of them looked toward Alexander, who smiled and tapped the side of his helmet. Autumn pointed to the tiny mic embedded in the inside edge of the helmet and made a talking motion with her hand.

Tin Tin spoke into the mic. "Tin Tin Ban Sunia."

"Sarge," Alexander said.

Tin Tin smiled. "Liada," she said and pointed to her friend.

"Liada," Sarge said.

"Autumn," Tin Tin said.

"Yes, Autumn Eaglemoon."

"Yes," Tin Tin repeated. "Autumn Eagle Mon." She smiled at Autumn.

“Hey, Sarge,” Lojab said. “I saw her first. Let me talk to her.”

Tin Tin looked around for the source of the new voice.

Alexander pointed to Lojab.

“Lojab,” he said into his mic.

“Lojab,” Tin Tin said.

“Hi, Tin Tin.” Lojab waved.

She waved and smiled. “Misplace porch mcdongol.”

Lojab laughed. “Misplaced my Porsche.”

“Misplace my porch.”

“Good,” Lojab said.

“Good.”

Liada said something to Tin Tin, who removed the helmet and handed it to Liada. Liada then gave the brush to Tin Tin and put on the helmet.

“Sarge?”

“Liada,” Alexander said.

Lojab walked toward Tin Tin, taking off his helmet. His blond hair was clipped very short. He was a little over six feet tall, with a hard, muscular body. His sleeves were rolled up, exposing a tattoo of Jesus Christ on a Harley adorning his left biceps. Jesus wore a grin, with his halo blowing back in the wind.

“Lojab misplace my porch,” Tin Tin said and laughed.

“You’re a quick learner, Tin Tin.”

Lojab held out his hand to her. She looked at his hand for a moment, then reached to take it, but she seemed more interested in something else. She ran her hand over the top of his head.

“That’s a buzzcut,” Lojab said.

“Buzzcut.” She touched his two-day growth of beard.

“Buzzcut?”

“Yeah.” Lojab motioned toward the trees. “You want to take a walk with me?”

“Low Job,” Autumn said, “you butthead. You met her two minutes ago, and already you’re trying to get her into the bushes.”

“Well, what the hell, Apache? If she’s willing...”

“She has no idea what you want to do with her.”

“Then why is she smiling?”

“I don’t know, Low Job,” Autumn said. “Maybe she’s trying to befriend an idiot?”

“As much as I hate to break up this little party,” Alexander said as he walked up to them, “does anyone know where we are?” He pulled off his helmet.

“Sarge,” Tin Tin said. “Helmet?”

“Sure,” Alexander said. “Knock yourself out.”

“Liada?” Tin Tin said into the mic after she put on the helmet.

“Tin Tin,” Liada said. They backed away from each other, still talking and apparently testing the range of the comm system.

“We are in a place called Gaul—” Autumn began.

“Gaul?” Karina said as she came up to them, removing her helmet. “Is that what they said, ‘Gaul?’”

“Yes,” Autumn said.

“Sarge,” Karina said. “Gaul is the ancient name for France.”

“Really?” Alexander said. “What’s the name of that river?”

“I couldn’t figure out how to ask that,” Autumn said, “but I think they’re planning to cross it. And another thing...”

“What?” Alexander asked.

“They have no concept of years, dates, or even hours of the day.”

Alexander watched Tin Tin and Liada behaving like two children with a new toy. “Strange,” he whispered. “And apparently, they’ve never heard of wireless communications either.”

Chapter Seven

“I wish this damn thing had wheels,” Kawalski said.

“Quit your bitching, Kawalski,” Autumn said, “and pick up your corner.”

“Oh, I got my corner, and I’ll probably have to carry yours, too.”

The rest of the platoon fell in behind the four soldiers carrying the weapons crate.

“Where are we going with this thing, Sarge?” Lojab asked. He was on the left front, opposite Kawalski.

Alexander was on the back left end of the crate, with Autumn across from him. “All the way to the river.”

“I didn’t hire on to be somebody’s slave,” Lojab mumbled under his breath, but everyone heard him.

“We’re all doing the same crap,” Autumn said.

“Yeah, and if we would all complain, our fearless leader would do something about it.”

“Like what, Lojab?” Sarge asked.

“Like get us the hell out of here.”

“You have some idea about how to do that?”

“You’re the sergeant, not me,” Lojab said. “But I can tell you this, if I was in charge, we wouldn’t be following along behind a bunch of cavemen, stepping over elephant shit and carrying this big-ass box.”

“You’re right, I am the sergeant, and until you replace me, I’ll give the orders.”

“Yes, sir. Sergeant, sir.”

“Why don’t you just cram it, Lojab?” Autumn said.

“Hey,” Kawalski said, “look who’s coming.”

Liada rode her horse along the side of the trail, coming from the front of the column. Her mount was a spirited buckskin stallion. When she saw the platoon, she crossed over and cantered her horse toward them. She rode bareback, with her bow and quiver swung on a leather strap over the horse’s shoulder. When she came abreast of the troop, she slid off, leaving her reins across the horse’s neck. She walked beside Alexander, while her horse followed.

“Sarge?” she said, “goodnight.”

“Hello, Liada,” Alexander said. “How are you this morning?”

“How are this morning?”

“Good,” Sarge said.

“Good.” She walked beside Autumn. “Autumn Eaglemoon are this morning?”

“Good,” Autumn said.

“Good.”

She patted the side of the weapons container, and with hand signs she asked where they were going. With her free hand, Autumn made a water motion and pointed forward.

“River.”

“River,” Liada said. She made a lifting motion with both

hands.

“Yes, it is heavy.” Autumn wiped the sweat from her brow.

“Heavy.” Liada used both hands to sign for them to put it down.

“Hey, guys. She wants us to put it down for a minute.”

“I’ll vote for that,” Kawalski said as they moved off the trail and lowered it to the ground.

Liada took one of the handholds and lifted. “Heavy.” She wiped her brow and made hand signs to Autumn.

“She wants us to wait here for something,” Autumn said. “I’m not sure what.” She spoke to Liada. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Liada said, then swung onto her horse and rode away at a gallop, toward the front of the column.

“What a rider she is,” Lojab said.

“And did you see the way she mounted that horse?” Kawalski said. “Two quick steps, and she swung her leg over his back as if he were a Shetland pony.”

“Yeah,” Lojab whispered as he watched her ride out of sight around a turn in the trail. “What I could do with a woman like that.”

“My God,” Autumn said. “Will you two stop drooling all over yourselves? Someone would think you never saw a girl ride horseback before.”

The men stared at the place where Liada had been a moment before.

“Oh, I’ve seen girls ride horses before,” Lojab said. “But all

the ones I've seen had to have a guy help them mount, and that was with the aid of a stirrup. Then, as the horse runs, the girls bounce up and down like ponytailed basketballs."

"Liada just swings up on his back," Kawalski said, "then rides as if she's part of the horse."

"Autumn," Kady said, "do you think these guys have ever had a date with an actual woman?"

"Sure, an actual inflatable woman," Autumn said.

"Yeah, eight-ninety-five on eBay," Kady said.

"Just blow her up, and she's ready to go," Autumn said. "No buying her drinks, no dinner; just jump in bed."

"Oh, yeah?" Lojab said. "How about the way you girls go ga-ga over that tall, pig-ugly officer in the Little Red Riding Hood cape?"

"Oooo, Rocrainium," the four women said together, then giggled.

"Rocrainium?" Kawalski said. "How do you know his name?"

"Oh, we have ways of finding out." Autumn made some wavy hand signs, then the other three did the same thing, followed by more giggles.

"Hey," Lojab said, "here she comes."

Liada came toward them on the side of the trail, passing a herd of cattle. She was followed by a wagon pulled by a yoke of oxen. Soon, they stopped in front of the weapons crate and Liada dismounted.

Alexander went to look in the wagon; it was empty. He

glanced at the woman in the wagon. She stood with her arms folded, glaring down at him. He then saw the gel bandage on her arm and remembered the deep gash they'd treated.

"The sword wound," he whispered.

Kawalski came to the side of the wagon. "Hello."

The woman looked at Kawalski, and her face brightened. She knelt in the bed of the wagon and held out her arm for him to see. She said something, but he didn't understand.

"Yes, it looks good." He ran his fingers over the bandage.

She spoke again.

"Hey, Apache," Kawalski said, "come tell me what she's saying."

Autumn and Liada came to stand beside Kawalski. The woman said something to Liada, who motioned to her, then to Kawalski. Liada touched two fingers to her lips, then her breast, and pointed to him.

"She wants to thank you for fixing her arm," Autumn said.

"How do you say, 'You're welcome?'"

"Touch your heart, then hold your hand out flat, palm up."

Kawalski made the sign to her. She smiled and said something else. Kawalski looked at Autumn, who then looked at Liada.

Liada said to the woman, "Kawalski."

"Kalski," she said. Then without looking at Sarge, she pointed at him and asked Liada a question.

"Sarge," Liada said.

The woman spoke to Liada, who laughed. The woman said the

same thing again, along with the word “Sarge” two more times.

Liada shrugged and spoke to Autumn. “Cateri talk Sarge, um...” She made some signs.

Autumn smiled. “Cateri, I like that name. Sarge, Kawalski, meet Cateri.”

“What did Cateri have to say about me?” Alexander asked.

“Well,” Autumn said, “she said you can load your box in her wagon, then walk behind.”

“Wonderful. Just tell her the box belongs to Kawalski. Then she’ll jump down, help load it, then probably let him drive.”

“Okay,” Autumn said to Cateri. “Sarge said that will be wonderful.”

“Oh, whatever,” Alexander said.

“Okay,” Liada said, then she spoke to Cateri.

“Okay,” Cateri said. She motioned to Alexander, then pointed to the weapons crate.

“All right,” Sarge said, “you heard the boss lady, let’s load up.”

As they loaded the crate, Liada swung onto her horse.

“I think Cateri likes you, Sarge,” Kawalski said as they slid the container into the wagon.

“Really? If this is how she behaves when she likes me, how would she treat me if she hated me?”

Lojab walked over and took hold of the bridle on Liada’s horse. “How you doing, Sweet Thing?”

Liada smiled down at him, then looked at Autumn.

Autumn, standing behind Lojab, stuck out her tongue and

made a yuck face. She then brought up her foot as if to kick Lojab in the butt.

Liada laughed.

Lojab sneered at Autumn's smile. "Ask her where people go to have a few drinks," he said.

"Okay," Autumn said. "Watch her to see what she thinks."

Lojab looked up at Liada. Autumn pointed her right index finger at Liada, then her left one at Lojab. She then placed her two fingers together, laying one on top of the other and wiggling them up and down. Finally, she made a motion of rocking a baby in her arms.

Liada wrinkled her brow for a moment, but then her face brightened and she laughed.

The others, who had watched the pantomime, struggled to keep from laughing.

"What's so funny?" Lojab looked at Autumn, then at the others as they tried to control themselves. Even Cateri recognized the humor.

"Autumn," Liada said and motioned for her to come to her.

She leaned down to ask her something, then Autumn whispered to her.

Liada smiled. "Kawalski," she said and patted the horse's back, behind her. "Ride?"

Kawalski looked up at her, pointed to his chest, then at her. She nodded.

"Here." Kawalski handed his rifle to Autumn. "Hold this."

He tried to throw his leg up over the horse's back but couldn't do it. Liada offered her hand. He took it and pulled himself up behind her.

"Catch," Autumn said, tossing the rifle to him.

Liada looked back at him as he swung the rifle over his shoulder.

"Okay," Kawalski said.

She kicked her heels in the horse's sides. When the horse sprang forward, Kawalski almost rolled off backwards, but he grabbed Liada around the waist to hold on.

"That skinny son-of-a-bitch," Lojab said. "What does she see in him?"

Autumn shrugged, then flipped the switch on her comm. "Hey, Kawalski."

"W-w-w-what?"

"You're bouncing."

"No s-s-s-s-shit."

The others laughed.

Alexander watched Liada and Kawalski ride out of sight, around a bend in the trail. "Cateri," he said.

She looked down at him.

"I think this belongs to you."

He pulled her whip from his hip pocket and tossed it to her. She caught the whip and unrolled it from the handle while keeping her eyes on him. Alexander then stepped back, and she grinned and popped the whip over the heads of the two oxen.

When they didn't move, she slapped the reins against their butts. The oxen lowed in protest but then plodded forward. The platoon fell in behind the wagon.

* * * * *

Liada slowed her horse as they came to the wagons loaded with supplies.

"What's in those chests?" Kawalski said, pointing to five heavy wooden boxes in one of the wagons.

Liada looked at the boxes and said something to him.

"Hey, Apache," he said on the comm. "How do you say, 'What's in those boxes?' in sign language?"

"Sorry, White Man, you're on your own."

"Gee, thanks. Whatever it is, it must be valuable. They've got six soldiers behind it, and six in front."

Liada continued to talk and point out things as they rode past a wagon filled with sides of meat, jars of date wine, and bales of hides. When they came to the wagons loaded with earthen jars of grain, they heard three short blasts from a trumpet. Liada kicked her horse into a gallop, and soon they heard shouting and screams up ahead. Rounding the next curve in the trail, they saw the baggage train was under attack.

"Buffalo Dogs!" Kawalski yelled on the comm. He and Liada slid off the horse as she grabbed her bow and arrows, then he unslung his rifle and opened fire.

“How many?” Alexander asked as he and the others ran forward.

“Too many!”

Kawalski fired on a bandit running toward him, swinging a sword. The bullet hit the man in the chest, spinning him sideways and knocking him to the ground.

Liada said something, and Kawalski looked at her. She arched her bow and let the arrow fly. He followed the flight of the arrow to see it hit a bandit in the chest. He went down, clutching the arrow shaft.

More of them poured out of the woods, all along the trail. The foot-soldiers ran to attack the bandits, using their spears first, then at close quarters, swinging their swords.

“Kawalski!” Liada shouted.

He saw more attackers coming from the woods on the other side of the trail and shot two men who’d climbed onto a wagon. He jerked his rifle to the left, aiming at three more running toward him, but when he pulled the trigger, the magazine was empty.

“Liada!” he shouted. “Over here!”

He ejected the empty magazine and grabbed another from his belt. Liada released an arrow, piercing a man’s neck.

Kawalski hit the bolt, shoving a cartridge into the chamber, but the two men were almost on top of them. So instead, he dropped the rifle and grabbed his Sig pistol.

Liada shot her last arrow, hitting a man in the side, but he kept

coming.

Kawalski got off one shot, killing the other man.

Liada grabbed the rifle from the ground and used it to block the sword coming at Kawalski's head. Kawalski then grabbed the bandit's sword arm, shoved his pistol into the man's stomach, and fired. The man stumbled backward, clutching his stomach.

Kawalski wrenched the sword from the dying man's hand and swung it to ward off another bandit who swung an axe at him. He heard Liada yell, but he couldn't respond to her—the man with the axe came at him again. Kawalski raised the sword, aiming for the man's neck, but hit his arm instead, knocking the axe to the ground. As the man scrambled for the axe, Kawalski felt a blow to his back. He stumbled, dropping his pistol.

Liada gripped the rifle by the barrel, and using it for a club, she fended off another attacker.

A bandit came at Kawalski, swinging a bloody sword. Kawalski raised his sword to ward off the blow. The two swords clanged together. Kawalski lost his grip on the sword and fell to his knees. He reached for the knife on his belt as the bandit raised his sword for another blow.

Liada swung the rifle, hitting the man in the back of the head.

Kawalski rolled away from the falling man. As he got to his knees, he saw a bandit coming at Liada from behind her. He snatched his pistol from the dirt and fired twice, hitting the man in the leg with his second shot. When the man stumbled and fell, Liada clubbed him with the rifle.

More bandits poured from the woods, yelling and swinging their weapons.

Liada dropped the rifle and grabbed a bloody sword from the ground. Without time to get to his rifle, Kawalski grabbed Liada by the arm, pulling her to him.

“Back to back,” he said and held her back against his. “We’ll take a few of them with us.”

Liada said something, and he knew she understood.

As the bandits came at them from all sides, Kawalski shot two more with his pistol. He ejected his empty magazine and shoved another into the receiver, but before he could chamber a round, he heard a volley of gunshots.

“Here comes the cavalry!” Kawalski shouted.

Liada screamed. Kawalski fired over her shoulder, killing a man who was almost on top of them.

“Kawalski!” Alexander said on the comm. “Hit the dirt!”

Kawalski wrapped his arms around Liada, pulling her to the ground. Bullets whizzed over their heads as Alexander’s platoon cut down the bandits.

The attackers weren’t so fearful of the gunshots as they had been on the previous day, but when they saw so many of their men falling to the deadly sweep of gunfire, some of them ran for the woods. Soon, all of them were in retreat, with a few wounded bandits limping after them. These were cut down by the foot-soldiers who swarmed onto the battlefield from both directions.

Kawalski got to his knees and lifted Liada from the ground.

He pushed back her hair and brushed the dirt from her face.

“Are you hurt?”

She smiled as he inspected her for wounds. Many cuts and bruises were on her face and arms, but nothing serious. Her hands were bloody, but it was from the bandits. The skirt of her tunic was ripped on the side from her waist to her knee, but her leg was only scratched.

Kawalski tried to stand but fell back to his knees. “I guess I’m a little dizzy.”

Liada placed her hands on his neck, checking for wounds. She ran her hands over his shoulders, then down his arms and around his waist. She uttered an exclamation when she saw fresh blood on her hand. She examined his back.

He heard her say something as she put her arm around his shoulders to lower him to the ground. She helped him onto his side, leaned close to his mouth, and spoke into the mic in his helmet.

“Autumn, Autumn!”

“I’m coming,” Autumn said as she ran toward them.

She dropped to her knees, placed her fingers in the bloody rip in Kawalski’s camo shirt, and tore it open. She caught her breath.

“Damn it, Kawalski.”

“What is…” He passed out.

Chapter Eight

“Anyone missing a web belt?” Sharakova asked on the comm.

“No.”

“No.”

“No,” Alexander said. “Why?”

“I’m looking at a web belt on a dead buffalo dog.”

“What kind of web belt?”

“U.S. Army issue,” Sharakova said. “Just like the one I’m wearing.”

“Where are you, Sharakova?” Alexander asked.

“A hundred yards up, on the left.”

“Don’t let them strip him before I get there.”

“You got it, Sarge.”

A few minutes later, the others watched Sarge pull the belt off the dead man. He examined it, then passed it to Joaquin.

“It has to be the captain’s belt,” Joaquin said.

“Do you think they’re holding him captive?” Kady asked.

Alexander stared at the belt for a moment. “I have no idea.”

“We need the Apache,” Joaquin said.

“And Liada,” Kady Sharakova said.

“Hey, Eaglemoon,” Alexander said on the comm. “Where are you?”

No answer.

“She must have her helmet off,” Lojab said.

“They put Kawalski in Cateri’s wagon,” Lori said, “and took him to the main camp, by the river.”

Alexander looked around, watching the women and children strip the dead bandits of their clothing. “Let’s get out of here before they start on us.”

* * * * *

At the main camp, Alexander counted heads and found everyone present.

“Don’t wander off, people. Let’s stick together until we find out what’s going to happen.”

He walked into the shade of a tree and sat next to Kawalski, who was wrapped in a Mylar thermo blanket. Autumn was there, kneeling beside the unconscious Kawalski, checking his blood pressure. Liada and Tin Tin Ban Sunia knelt beside her, watching everything she did.

Lojab took a pack of Marlboros from his inside jacket pocket and slouched against a tree as he lit up. He exhaled smoke from his nose as he watched the people around Kawalski.

“What do you think, Eaglemoon?” Alexander pulled off his helmet and rubbed a hand over his buzzcut.

She took the stethoscope from her ears and handed it to Liada. “He lost a lot of blood, and the wound is deep. We cleaned it and stitched it up, and I gave him a shot of morphine.”

Liada placed the stethoscope earpieces in her ears as she’d

seen Autumn do, then she opened the blanket and slipped the endpiece inside Kawalski's unbuttoned shirt. Her eyes widened at the sound of his heartbeat. Autumn had become accustomed to using her hands as she talked, for the benefit of Liada and Tin Tin. Both women seemed to be able to follow the conversation, at least to some extent.

"His blood pressure is good, and his pulse is normal." Autumn was quiet for a moment as she watched Tin Tin try the stethoscope. "I don't think any of his organs were damaged. It looks like the sword went under the edge of his flak jacket and pierced him all the way through, just above the hip bone."

"You've done all you can do for him," Alexander said. "Probably when the morphine wears off, he'll wake up." He handed the web belt to Autumn. "We need Liada's help with this."

"Whose is it?"

"We took it off a dead buffalo dog." Alexander watched her as she puzzled it out.

"Oh, my God! The captain."

"They could be holding him prisoner, or—"

"Liada," Autumn said.

Liada looked at her.

"This belt," she handed it to Liada, "is like mine." Autumn showed her the one around her waist. "And Kawalski." She pointed to Kawalski. "And Sarge."

Alexander showed her his belt.

“But this one, our man is lost.”

“Lost?” Liada asked.

“Yes,” Autumn said. “Our man, like Rocrainium.”

Tin Tin removed the stethoscope from her ears.

“Rocrainium?”

Alexander looked around at his troops. “Spiros, give us some help with Tin Tin.”

Private Zorba Spiros knelt beside Autumn. “What’s up?”

“I’m trying to tell her about Captain Sanders being an officer like Rocrainium.”

Spiros spoke to Tin Tin in his broken Greek. She took the belt from Liada.

“You man Rocrainium?” Tin Tin asked Autumn.

“Yes.”

“He lost to you?”

Autumn nodded.

“Belt come where?”

“One of the bandits had the belt from our Rocrainium.”

She tried to use hand signs and motions to indicate the battle and dead bandits. Spiros helped as best he could.

“Vocontii,” Tin Tin said to Liada, then something else.

Liada agreed. “Vocontii.”

Tin Tin and Liada talked for a minute.

“Um, that bandits there...” Liada tried to sign what she wanted to say.

“The bandits are Vocontii?” Autumn asked.

“Yes, yes,” Liada and Tin Tin said together. “Vocontii.”

Autumn watched the two women as they talked something over.

“Autumn wait by Kawalski,” Liada said as she and Tin Tin stood.

“All right.”

Tin Tin handed the stethoscope to Autumn, then the two of them ran toward the other side of the encampment.

“Autumn,” Alexander said, “from what I’ve seen of those... what are they called?”

“Vocontii.”

“From what I’ve seen of them, I don’t think we should hold out a lot of hope of finding Captain Sanders alive.”

“You won’t leave him behind, will you, Sarge?” She reached to touch his arm. “Even if there’s the slightest hope.”

“Leave him,” Lojab said. “He can take care of himself.” He spat in the dirt. “We need to get the hell out of here.”

“No.” Alexander glared at Lojab for a moment, then looked at Autumn. “I would never leave anyone behind, just as the captain wouldn’t leave us. But these Vocontii are so primitive and brutal, I can’t see them having any reason to keep him alive. If they were holding him for ransom...” He looked over Autumn’s shoulder, then pointed that way.

“Oh, no,” Autumn said. “It’s Rocrainium.” She stood and dusted herself off. Tin Tin and Liada walked on either side of him. “They thought I was talking about him.”

“Well,” Lojab said, “this should be interesting.”

The two women almost had to jog to keep up with Rocrainium’s long stride. Soon, they stood before Alexander and Autumn.

“Autumn, Sarge,” Liada said, motioning to the two of them. “Rocrainium.”

Alexander was tall, a little over six feet, but he still had to look up to Rocrainium. He held out his hand.

“Sarge,” Rocrainium said. He smiled and reached to shake hands. He then said, “Autumn” and shook her hand also.

“Um, Rocrainium,” Liada said, “go...” She tried to sign but couldn’t get it right. She asked Tin Tin Ban Sunia something.

“Rocrainium,” Tin Tin said, “go foot-soldiers you Rocrainium.”

“You mean,” Autumn said, “your foot-soldiers are going to look for our Rocrainium?” This was done with hand signs as much as with her words.

“Yes, go now.”

“Oh, good.” There was obvious relief on Autumn’s face. “Thank you, Rocrainium.” She took his hand in both of hers. “Thank you very much. I can’t tell you how relieved I am. Our captain—”

“Eaglemoon,” Sarge said, “you’re gushing.”

“Oh.” She pulled away her hands. “Sorry.” Her face reddened under her dark tan. “Very sorry. I don’t know what—”

“Just shut up,” Alexander said.

He touched his heart, then held out his hand, palm up. Rocrainium responded with a word, then looked around for someone. Six of the scarlet-caped young men had come along behind Rocrainium, and now they stood nearby. He pointed at two of them, and when they came forward, Rocrainium gave them some instructions.

The two men took a quick look at Autumn, then saluted Rocrainium with their fists to their chests. They hurried away to carry out his orders.

“They must be junior officers,” Alexander said.

“Probably,” Autumn said.

“We go,” Tin Tin said, “find you man.”

Autumn touched her heart, then held out her hand, palm up. “Thank you.”

“That Tin Tin is very bright,” Alexander said as he and Autumn walked back to Kawalski.

“Yes, they both are.” Autumn knelt beside Kawalski. “They learn our language and ways much faster than I’m learning theirs.” She checked the dressing on his wound.

“Do you think we need to change the dressing on Cateri’s arm?” Alexander asked.

Autumn looked up at him. “Yes, I think you should check it.” She grinned.

“That smirk is uncalled for, and I would check the bandage if I thought she wouldn’t use her whip on me.”

“She only hit you yesterday because she thought you were

trying to take her wagon.”

“Hey, look at that,” Alexander said.

Autumn saw two columns of foot-soldiers and cavalry leaving the camp; one heading south, the other north. Each contingent was led by one of the young officers.

“Wow,” Autumn said. “They’re serious about finding Captain Sanders.”

“I think Rocrainium is second in command,” Alexander said. “And that other officer we saw yesterday on the black charger must be the headman.”

“I wonder what his name is.”

“You’ll have to ask Tin Tin that question. Those Vocontii must be a constant threat. They’ve attacked twice in the last two days, and each time we beat them back, they melt away into the forest, then regroup for another assault.”

“Like guerilla fighters.”

“What would have happened in that battle today if we hadn’t been there?” Alexander asked.

“There must have been over five hundred of them, and with the foot-soldiers and wagons spread out in a long line, the bandits are very effective.”

“They just grab what they can from the wagons,” Alexander said, “and when the foot-soldiers and cavalry charge in, they run with whatever they can carry.”

“Did you notice these people use some kind of horn to alert everyone?”

“Yes.” Alexander watched Autumn adjust the blanket around Kawalski’s shoulders. “I guess three blasts on the trumpet means, ‘We’re under attack.’”

* * * * *

They heard no news about Captain Sanders for the rest of that day.

The platoon settled into a routine, and, staying in small groups, they explored the camp. The camp followers had set up a rudimentary market in a section near the center of the encampment. After lunch, Joaquin, Sparks, Kari, and Sharakova set off toward the market to see what was on offer.

“Hey,” Lojab yelled from behind them, “where you guys going?”

“To the market,” Sparks said.

“Shut up, Sparks,” Sharakova said under her breath.

“Good,” Lojab said, “I’ll come with you.”

“Wonderful,” Sharakova whispered to Karina. “God’s gift to the Seventh Cav will regale us with his sparkling personality and dazzling wit.”

“If I just shoot him,” Karina said, “do you think Sarge would court-martial me?”

“Court-martial?” Sharakova said. “Hell, you’d get the Medal of Honor.”

They were still laughing when Lojab caught up with them.

“What’s so funny?”

“You, Bull Donkey,” Sharakova said.

“Up yours, Sharakova.”

“In your dreams, Low Job.”

They walked through a section of camp occupied by the light cavalry, where the soldiers were rubbing down their horses and repairing leather tack. Beyond the cavalry were the slingers who practiced with their slingshots. The bulging bags on their belts contained rocks, chunks of iron, and lumps of lead.

“There’s the market.” Sparks pointed to a grove of trees just ahead.

Under the shade of the oak trees, the market was crowded with people buying, selling, haggling, and bartering bags of grain for meat, cloth, and hand tools.

The five soldiers walked along a winding path between two rows of merchants who had their wares laid out on the ground.

“Hey, guys,” Karina said, “check that out.” She pointed to a woman buying some meat.

“That’s our brass,” Sparks said.

“No shit, Dick Tracy,” Sharakova said.

The woman counted out some spent cartridges the platoon had left on the ground after the battle.

“She’s using that stuff like money,” Karina said.

“Three,” Joaquin said. “What did she get for three shells?”

“It looks like about five pounds of meat,” Karina said.

They walked on, watching for more brass.

“Look there.”

Sparks pointed at a man haggling with a woman who had some cheese and eggs spread out on a white cloth. He offered her one cartridge for a large block of cheese. The woman shook her head, then used her knife to measure off about half the cheese. The man said something, and she measured off a bit more. He tossed a cartridge on the white cloth. She cut off the piece of cheese and handed it to him with a smile.

“These people are a bunch of idiots,” Lojab said, “trying to turn our brass into money.”

“Looks like it’s working pretty well,” Karina said.

“Hey.” Lojab sniffed the air. “You guys smell that?”

“I smell smoke,” Sharakova said.

“Yeah, right,” Lojab said. “Somebody’s smoking pot.”

“Well, if anyone could detect marijuana in the air, it’d be you.”

“Come on, it’s over this way.”

“Forget it, Lojab,” Sharakova said. “We don’t need to be looking for trouble.”

“I just want to see if I can buy some.”

“We’re on duty, you numbskull.”

“He can’t keep us on duty twenty-four hours a day.”

“No, but right now, we are on duty.”

“What Sarge doesn’t know won’t hurt nobody.”

Lojab walked down a slope toward a small stream. The other four soldiers stood watching him for a moment.

“I don’t like this,” Joaquin said.

“Let him go,” Sparks said. “Maybe he’ll learn a lesson.”

Lojab walked along the stream, then around a bend and out of sight.

“Come on,” Sharakova said, “if we don’t watch his back, he’ll get his balls handed to him.”

Chapter Nine

When they caught up with Lojab, he stood at the edge of a group of thirty foot-soldiers standing in a ring, watching two men fight. They laughed and shouted, egging on the fighters.

“The smoke around here is thick enough to get an elephant high,” Joaquin said.

The men were passing small bowls around. Each man would inhale deeply over a bowl, then pass it on. The clay bowls were filled with smoldering hemp leaves.

“Mind if I try that?” Lojab said to one of the foot-soldiers.

The soldier looked him over, mumbled something, then shoved him backwards, into Sparks.

Karina flipped on her comm switch. “Hey, Sarge. You online?”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“We might have a little confrontation here.”

“Where are you?”

“In the woods, below the market.”

“What the hell you doing down there?”

Lojab unslung his rifle, but before he could bring it around, two of the foot-soldiers grabbed him, while another man took away his rifle.

“We can discuss that later,” Karina said. “We’re going to need some help.”

“All right. How many should I bring with me?”

Karina looked around at the foot-soldiers; the men looked like they were ready to enjoy a good fight. “How about everybody?”

“We’ll be there in ten.”

The two foot-soldiers dragged Lojab into the ring and held him as a big, hairy man stepped from the crowd and punched him in the stomach.

“Hey, you ugly son-of-a-bitch,” Sharakova said, “knock it off.”

She stepped into the ring, cradling her rifle. The man looked the young woman over for a moment, then laughed at her.

She went toward him. “You think I look funny, Fuzzy Face?”

“Oh, God,” Sparks said, “here we go.”

Fuzzy Face pulled a three-foot-long sword from his belt and grinned at Sharakova as he flourished it around.

“Yeah, I see your little knife. Did you see my rifle?” She spun it around and placed the butt on the ground beside her right boot.

“Your move, Gomer.”

Lojab tried to get away, but the two men held him tight, twisting his arms around behind his back.

Fuzzy Face swung his sword at Sharakova’s neck. She dropped to one knee and brought up her rifle to block the blow. As the sword clanged on the receiver of the rifle, she jumped up, holding the rifle in front of her.

The man then drew back the sword for a thrust at her heart. Sharakova knocked away the sword and stepped in to hit him

in the chest with the butt of the rifle. As the man staggered backward, Sparks grabbed his bayonet and fixed it on the barrel of his rifle. Karina and Joaquin did the same. Some of the men watched them and drew their swords.

Fuzzy Face circled Sharakova, waving his sword. She kept her eyes on him. Suddenly, one of the foot-soldiers in the crowd knelt behind her and yanked her feet from under her, sending her face-down in the dirt.

Sparks ran forward and put his bayonet to the man's forearm. "Back off!"

The man let go of Sharakova and crawled backward. She rolled and sprang to her feet. She then glanced at her rifle, lying in the dirt, ten feet away. Fuzzy Face looked at her rifle, too, and he grinned and started for her.

"Here!" Karina tossed her rifle to Sharakova, who caught the rifle and waved the sharp point of the bayonet at the man.

"You want a taste of this?" she snapped.

Karina knelt to pick up Sharakova's rifle, keeping her eyes on Fuzzy Face. Joaquin came into the ring to stand beside Karina, his rifle ready. Sparks stepped over beside Lojab. Now all five soldiers of the Seventh were inside the circle of thirty foot-soldiers.

Fuzzy Face looked at Sharakova for a moment, said something, and threw his sword to the dirt. He pounded his chest, yelling like a gorilla.

"Oh, you want to fight man-to-man, huh? Okay." Sharakova

tossed her rifle on the ground and stepped away from it. “Come on, then, let’s do it.”

He ran at her, grabbing her around the neck with both hands. She pushed up her arms between his arms and brought her elbows down to break his hold, then, in a smooth continuation of her motion, she took hold of his wrist, placed her foot behind his, and pushed him off balance.

He hit the ground hard but jumped up, swinging his fist at her head. She stepped into his swing, grabbed his arm, and threw him to the ground again.

He got up, roaring with anger, and came at her. She spun around, bringing up her right foot, landing her boot in his ribs. But the blow had no effect on him. He then grabbed her foot, twisted it, and threw her to the dirt.

The men yelled and cheered, urging on the fighters.

Sharakova sprang to her feet and went after him, hitting him in the face with a quick one-two punch, bloodying his nose. He wiped his hand across his nose and looked at the blood on his fingers, then lunged at her. Sharakova swung her fist at his stomach, but he sidestepped, grabbed her arm, and spun her around. He wrapped his arms around her waist, lifting her off the ground. Her arms were pinned against her sides as he began to squeeze the life out of her. She squirmed around and pulled her right arm free, then grabbed her pistol, cocked it, and pressed it behind her back and into his side.

A loud gunshot startled everyone.

Alexander held his smoking handgun in the air. He brought down the pistol and pointed it at Fuzzy Face.

“Let her go.”

All the foot-soldiers knew what the gun could do—they’d seen it used on the buffalo dogs. Fuzzy Face let go of Kady, then stared at Alexander.

“Apache,” Alexander said.

“Yeah, I’m right behind you.”

“See if you can communicate with this ape and calm things down.”

Autumn came forward and swung her rifle over her shoulder. She stared at Fuzzy Face for a moment, then began to speak. “I am Autumn Eaglemoon. My people are the Seventh Cavalry. We came here from the sky.” She used sign language, hoping he would understand a little of what she was saying. “We wish you no harm, but if you don’t stop fighting, we will shoot every last one of you bastards.” She cocked her thumb and index finger like a pistol, then pointed to each man around the circle. “Bang, bang, bang, bang.”

“Uh, Eaglemoon,” Alexander said, “I was thinking more along the lines of a little diplomacy.”

“Do you know how to sign ‘diplomacy,’ Sarge?”

“No, but—”

Fuzzy Face cocked his hand and pointed at Autumn. “Bang, bang?”

“That’s right,” Autumn said. “Bang, bang.”

He burst out laughing and came toward Autumn. She stepped back, but he thrust out his hand in a friendly gesture. She hesitated, then reached toward him.

He gripped her hard and said a string of words, ending with, “Hagar.”

“Hagar?”

Fuzzy Face nodded. He wiped blood from his nose, then tapped his chest with his fist. “Hagar.”

“All right, Hagar.” She pulled her hand from his. “Apache.” She patted her chest.

“Apache,” he said, then signaled to one of his men.

The man came forward, and Hagar took a smoking bowl from his hand. He offered the bowl to Autumn. She looked at the bowl and shook her head.

“I would rather have something to drink.” She made a drinking motion.

Hagar yelled a command. Soon, a woman came forward with a clay jug and two drinking bowls. She handed a bowl to each of them, then poured a dark liquid from the jug.

Autumn sipped from the bowl, then smacked her lips and smiled.

“Wine.” She held out the bowl to Hagar.

He clinked his bowl against hers, then gulped down his wine. She took another sip, then drank the whole thing. They held out their empty bowls to the woman, and she refilled them.

Autumn pointed at Lojab, who was still being held by the two

foot-soldiers. “How about if they let go of him?”

Hagar looked where she pointed, then made an impatient gesture toward the two men. They released Lojab. He stumbled forward, regained his balance, then dusted himself off.

Autumn toasted Hagar. “Diplomacy!”

“Apache!”

They both emptied their bowls.

“Take it easy,” Alexander said, “you know you can’t handle your firewater.”

Lojab picked up his rifle and went toward Sharakova. “Can’t you ever mind your own business? I had the situation under control until you went berserk.”

“Yeah, you had it under control all right. I saw how you were attacking that guy’s fist with your stomach.”

“If Sarge hadn’t showed up to save your butt,” Lojab said, “you would’ve been dead meat.”

“Uh-huh. Well, next time you want to get high, go climb a tree,” she said as she traded rifles with Karina.

* * * * *

The next day, late in the afternoon, Liada and Tin Tin came to the platoon. But they were without their usual smiles and cheerful comments.

“We find you Rocrainium,” Liada said.

Chapter Ten

It was almost dark when they walked into the small clearing, two miles away from their camp on the river.

“My God,” Sharakova said, “what happened to him?”

“He was tortured,” Alexander said. “A slow, painful death.”

Six members of the platoon, along with Tin Tin Ban Sunia and Liada, stood looking down at the body. The rest of the platoon had stayed in camp, with Kawalski.

A dozen foot-soldiers waited nearby, watching the surrounding woods.

Autumn took a yellow and blue scarf from an inside pocket to cover the captain’s genitals, at least what was left of them.

“Goddamned animals,” she whispered as she spread the scarf over him.

“Did they do this because we killed so many of them on the trail?” Sharakova asked.

“No,” Alexander said. “He’s been dead for several days. I think they killed him as soon as he landed.”

“They must have seen him coming down and captured him when he hit the ground,” Autumn said. “But why did they have to torture him like this?” His body was covered with numerous small wounds and bruises.

“I don’t know,” Alexander said, “but we have to get him buried. There’s not enough of us to fight off a major attack.” He

glanced around at the darkening woods. “Not out here.”

“We can’t bury him naked,” Sharakova said.

“Why not?” Lojab asked. “He came into the world that way.”

“I’ve got a Mylar blanket in my backpack,” Joaquin said, turning his back to Sharakova. “It’s in the side pocket.”

When she removed the tightly folded blanket, a long object fell from his pack. “Oh, sorry, Joaquin.” She knelt to pick it up.

Tin Tin Ban Sunia noticed the shiny instrument, and her eyes widened. She nudged Liada with her elbow. Liada saw it, too, and it was apparent both of them wanted to ask about it but decided this wasn’t the right time.

Sharakova handed the instrument to Joaquin, and he brushed dirt from the polished metal, then smiled at her. “It’s fine.”

She spread the silver blanket out on the ground, while the others started loosening the dirt with their sharp knives. They began digging the grave by hand. Tin Tin and Liada helped, and soon the hole was three feet deep and seven feet long.

“That will do,” Alexander said.

They placed the captain’s body on the blanket and folded it over him. After they gently placed him in the grave, Autumn stood at the foot of grave and removed her helmet.

“Our Father, who art in heaven...”

The others removed their helmets and bowed their heads. Liada and Tin Tin stood with them, looking down at the body.

Autumn finished the Lord’s Prayer, then said, “We now commend our friend and commander to Your hands, Lord.

Amen.”

“Amen,” the others said.

“Sarge,” Joaquin whispered as he held up the shiny flute that had fallen from his backpack.

Alexander nodded, then Joaquin placed the flute to his lips and began to play Ravel’s *Bolero*. As the somber notes of the music drifted over the twilight clearing, the other soldiers knelt to begin filling the grave with handfuls of dirt.

Liada, too, knelt, helping to cover the dead captain.

Only Tin Tin Ban Sunia and Joaquin remained standing. As Tin Tin stared in open-mouthed wonder at Joaquin playing the music, her right hand moved as if by its own accord, like a creature coiling and blindly feeling for something in the leather purse at her hip. She lifted the old wooden flute she’d made at Carthage, eleven years before.

Joaquin noticed the movement and watched as she took the flute in her fingertips. His hands, though scarred and powerful, danced a delicate ballet over the silver keys. Tin Tin waited until he paused, then she put her flute to her lips and began to play.

The others seemed not to notice the notes of the music as they worked on filling the grave, but Joaquin certainly did—she was playing, note-for-note, *Bolero* exactly as he’d played it a few moments before. He began his music again, matching her place in the song but playing an octave lower than she.

Autumn looked at Tin Tin, then at Joaquin. She smiled as tears ran down her cheeks, then she smoothed the dirt over Captain

Sanders' grave.

It was after 9 p. m. when they returned to the encampment.

"We go to find Cateri," Liada said as she and Tin Tin turned to leave the soldiers of the Seventh.

"Okay," Karina said. "See you later."

* * * * *

It was a somber evening that night by the campfire. Kawalski had come around while the others were taking care of Captain Sanders. He felt a lot of pain, but he shook his head when Autumn asked him if he wanted another shot of morphine.

"That stuff knocks me for a loop. I can live without it."

Karina told Kawalski how the captain had been tortured to death.

"Damn it," Kawalski said. "Now I'm glad we killed twenty of those nasty sons-of-bitches."

"A couple hundred, you mean," Karina said.

"I'm talking about me and Liada. Man, is she good with that bow. And when she ran out of arrows, she grabbed my rifle from the ground and used it for a club."

"Yes," Karina said, "after the battle, I helped retrieve her arrows. She was deadly."

Fusilier took some MREs from the weapons container. "Who wants menu 7?"

Lojab raised his hand, and she tossed it to him.

Everyone sat on logs around the fire.

“Menu 12?”

“I’ll take it,” Sharakova said.

“Menu 20?”

No one was very enthusiastic about a cold meal, but a few of them tried to eat.

“Hey, Sarge.”

“Yeah, Sparks.”

“Look who’s coming.”

Alexander saw a wagon coming toward them. “That looks like Cateri.” He got to his feet, dusting off his trousers.

“And she has someone with her,” Fusilier said.

“It’s Tin Tin and Liada.”

Autumn greeted them as they rolled to a stop. “Hello.”

“Hello,” Tin Tin said.

Liada jumped down from the wagon and went to Kawalski, who was struggling to get up.

“Need arm.” Liada took his arm and placed it around her shoulders.

“Yes, I do need help.” He held her tight as he took a few wobbly steps.

“Come see.” She guided him to the back of the wagon.

“Wow,” Kawalski said. “Hey, guys, come take a look at this.”

In the bed of the wagon was a large iron pot filled with steaming grain and chunks of meat. Beside it was a dozen round loaves of bread, along with several bowls carved from wood.

Cateri reached to pull the pot to the edge of the wagon bed, then slipped two long wooden handles through metal rings on the sides of the pot.

“Here,” Alexander said, “let me help you.”

She said something that sounded more like “whatever” than “thank you” as they lifted it together and carried it to the fire.

“This really smells good, Cateri,” Alexander said as they lowered the pot to the ground by the fire.

Cateri shrugged and brushed a strand of auburn hair from her face as she removed the wooden handles from the pot and took them to the wagon. Alexander watched her walk back toward the fire, where she untied the leather string at the back of her neck, letting her hair fall. Thick and long, her shiny brown hair fell below her shoulders. She held the leather string in her teeth while gathering the loose strands together, then tied her hair at the back. She brushed by Alexander to go help Liada and Tin Tin as they broke off chunks of bread and passed them out with the bowls they’d filled from the pot.

“We are sorry,” Tin Tin said with hand signs, “for loss of your Sanders.”

“Thank you,” Autumn said and made the hand sign. “All of us are grateful to you and your people for helping us. How did you know he was our man?”

“Um, he have no...” She rubbed her cheek, then touched her hair.

“Ah, yes. He didn’t have a beard. Most of your men have

beards.”

Tin Tin filled her own bowl and took a seat on a log next to Sharakova. Tin Tin looked at Joaquin, caught his eye, and smiled. He grinned and took a bite of food.

“What is this meat?” Autumn asked Liada.

Liada said something and made a hand sign.

Autumn shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“Tin Tin,” Liada said, then asked her a question.

Tin Tin thought for a moment, then mooed like a cow. Everyone laughed.

“Ah, we’re eating moo meat,” Autumn said. “It must be beef, or maybe ox. It’s very good.”

“Too bad,” Kawalski said. “I thought maybe it was...” He made the sound of a horse whinny, then pawed the ground with his foot.

Tin Tin and Liada laughed with the others.

“I was thinking ‘woof woof,’” Zorba Spiros said.

“Or maybe ‘meoooooow,’” Kady said.

Kawalski almost choked on a bite of food, which drew even more laughter. Cateri, who rarely even smiled, laughed at Kawalski.

Karina touched Liada’s cheek. “Why did they brand you?”

Liada shook her head. “Not know what you say.”

“Brand, why?” Karina touched her own cheek and lifted her shoulders.

Tin Tin, sitting nearby, heard their conversation. She spoke

to Liada, who asked Zorba Spiros in Greek about the question. He explained that Karina wanted to know how she got the mark on her face.

“I did brand,” Liada said, touching the scar.

“You?” Karina pointed to Liada. “You did this to yourself?”

Liada nodded.

Tin Tin came to sit beside Liada. “This is...um...” She touched her cheek where she had a brand identical to Liada’s, but on the opposite side of her face. “Can not say this word.” She made a motion of working with a hoe, then she stood and made a motion like hitting someone with a whip.

“Slave?” Kawalski asked. “Is she trying to say ‘slave?’”

“They can’t be slaves,” Karina said. “They have the run of the camp and do pretty much what they want.”

Cateri, sitting in the dirt at the end of one of the logs, spoke to Tin Tin, who lifted her shoulders.

“They’re trying to figure out how to tell us something,” Karina said.

Joaquin stood and made the motion of hoeing the dirt, then of carrying a heavy load. He stopped to wipe his brow, then pretended to show fear of someone nearby. He grabbed his imaginary hoe and got back to work.

“Slave,” Karina said, pointing to Joaquin.

“Yes, slave,” Tin Tin said.

“You and Liada are slaves?” Karina asked.

Tin Tin shook her head. “I was slave to Sulobo...”

“*Kusbeyaw*,” Liada said. “Sulobo, *kusbeyaw*.”

“Tin Tin was a slave, and she was owned by Sulobo?” Joaquin asked.

Tin Tin and Liada seemed to agree.

“Yes,” Karina said. “And we all know what a *kusbeyaw* is.”

“Yzebel,” Liada made a motion of taking coins from her purse and handing them to someone.

“Yzebel bought Tin Tin.” Karina said. “Go on.”

“Sulobo.”

“Ah, Yzebel bought Tin Tin from Sulobo.”

“Yes,” Liada said.

“How old was Tin Tin?” Karina asked. “Was she a baby?” She pretended to rock a baby in her arms, then pointed at Tin Tin.

“No,” Liada said and held out her hand at chest height.

“Tin Tin was a young girl, and who is Yzebel?”

Liada rocked a baby in her arms.

“Yzebel is a baby?”

“No. Liada is...um...”

“Liada was a baby?”

Liada shook her head.

“I think Yzebel is Liada’s mother,” Joaquin said.

“Oh, I see,” Karina said. “Yzebel rocked Liada as a baby. Yzebel is your mother.”

Liada held up two fingers.

“You have two mothers?”

Liada held up one finger, then two. Pointing at the second

finger, she said, “Yzebel.”

“Yzebel is your second mother. And were you a baby when Yzebel bought Tin Tin from Sulobo?”

“No.” Liada held out her hand at chest height.

“You were a young girl when Yzebel bought Tin Tin?”

“Yes. And we...” Liada hugged Tin Tin close, tilting her head to her.

“You were like sisters?”

Karina held up two fingers, wrapping one around the other. They both nodded.

“Sulobo branded Tin Tin when he owned her?” Karina asked.

“Yes,” Liada said. “And I think for me to be like my sister, Tin Tin Ban Sunia, so I do this.” Her hands told the story quite clearly.

Karina sniffed and wiped her cheek. “I-I-can’t...”

“Imagine?” Joaquin said.

“I can’t imagine...”

“A bond so strong, one would have herself branded because her sister was branded as a slave?” Joaquin said.

Karina agreed.

Silence reigned for a few minutes.

“Something so powerful,” Kawalski said, “makes the simple routines of our lives seem trivial.”

“Cateri,” Liada said, “is Sulobo slave.”

“What?” Alexander asked.

“Yes,” Tin Tin said.

“Cateri,” Alexander said, “you are Sulobo’s slave?”

Cateri said something to Liada, who spoke to her in their language. Cateri then loosened the drawstring at the collar of her tunic, and Liada pulled the back of the tunic down far enough for them to see the slave brand on her right shoulder blade.

“Damn,” Kawalski said, “how could someone do that?”

Karina touched the scar. “So cruel, but her brand is different.”

“Yes,” Joaquin said. “Liada and Tin Tin have an arrow across the shaft of the pitchfork. Cateri’s brand has the pitchfork with the snake winding around the shaft, but not the arrow.”

“Why is that?” Karina asked.

“It’s a running brand,” Kawalski said. “In the old west, when a cow was sold, or stolen, they had to change the original brand to something different. They used a running brand to alter the old brand. That arrow on Tin Tin and Liada’s brand is a running brand, added to show they didn’t belong to the original owner.”

“These women are treated like cattle,” Karina said. “Bought and sold as if they were animals.”

“Sulobo,” Alexander said, “that son-of-a-bitch.”

Cateri adjusted her collar and tightened the drawstring. She then turned to leave them.

“Wait.” Alexander took her arm to stop her. “Don’t go.”

She faced him.

“You don’t have to be a slave. Slavery was outlawed two hundred years ago.”

Cateri glanced at Liada, then Liada looked to Autumn for help

in explaining what Alexander had said.

“Hmm,” Autumn said, “how can I say ‘freedom’ in sign—”

Lojab interrupted her. “I’ll buy her from Sulobo.”

“Yeah, Low Job,” Kady said, “you’d like that, owning a woman. You idiot butthead.”

“I don’t think the Seventh Cavalry is going to own any slaves,” Karina said.

“You stupid women,” Lojab said, “you’re all pissed because nobody would pay money for you.”

“Eat shit and die, Low Job,” Katy said.

“Knock it off, Lojab,” Alexander said. “That’s uncalled for,” he said as he watched Cateri walk away.

Chapter Eleven

As the morning sun rose over the treetops, Sparks pulled a large camo suitcase from the weapons container and popped the latches. Inside, nestled in foam, was the Dragonfly Surveillance Drone.

The other soldiers came to watch as he carefully lifted the tiny aircraft from its resting place and placed it on the grass. He also laid out a joystick controller, iPad, and several coin-sized lithium batteries.

“It really does look like a dragonfly,” Kady said.

“Yeah,” Kawalski said, “a dragonfly the size of your hand.”

Sparks placed one battery in a slot in the belly of the Dragonfly and checked the wings to make sure they moved freely. Next, he placed a second battery inside a small compartment on the controller. He flipped the switches on the controller and iPad, then lifted the aircraft to inspect the tiny camera mounted beneath the belly. As he adjusted the camera, an image appeared on the iPad screen.

Kady waved, and her image on the iPad waved also. “Yep, that’s us.”

“What a mean looking bunch,” Kawalski said.

“Yeah,” Autumn said, “and some of them smell mean, too.”

“If you would move upwind from Paxton,” Lojab said, “you might find some fresh air.”

“All right, boys and girls,” Sparks said. “Weird science takes over.” He stood and backed away. “Give her some space. We’re ready for takeoff.”

A soft whirling sound came from the wings as Sparks worked the controller. The sound increased as the Dragonfly lifted off the grass.

“Karina,” Sparks said, “pick up the iPad and hold it over here so I can see it.”



The aircraft rose above their heads. “We’ve got a good picture, Sparks,” Karina said. “Can you see it?”

Sparks looked at the iPad, then back at the aircraft as it lifted higher. “Yeah, it’s good.”

Soon, the Dragonfly was at treetop level, and Karina saw the whole platoon looking up, except for her, as she watched the display.

“Now we’ll see where we are,” Sergeant Alexander said.

“We’re probably going to see the Wizard behind his green curtain,” Kawalski said.

“Or a giant movie set,” Kady said.

The Dragonfly rose higher and higher, showing more forest in every direction.

Everyone watched the video display on the iPad.

“Wow,” Lorelei said, “look at that.” She pointed to the long trail behind the army. It stretched away for many miles to the southeast.

“And they’re still coming into the camp,” Kady said.

“Where’s the river?” Lorelei asked.

Sparks worked the controls, and the Dragonfly rotated toward the north.

“There,” Kawalski said.

“Can you go higher, Sparks?” Sarge asked.

“Check the altitude, Karina,” Sparks said.

“How?”

“Touch the bottom of the screen,” Sparks said.

“Ah, there it is,” Karina said. “You’re at fifteen hundred feet.”

“Okay, up we go.”

“Two thousand feet,” Karina said.

“Pan around,” Sarge said.

The video image on the iPad rotated.

“Wow,” Karina said, “I’ve never seen the air so clean and clear.”

“No highways, no cities, no cell towers,” Kawalski said, “no manmade structures anywhere.”

“Hold it,” Sarge said. “Back up. There, ten miles to the north. What’s that?”

Sparks zoomed in.

“It must be a town,” Paxton said.

“A village,” Kady said.

“Yeah,” Karina said, “a big one.”

“Go up higher and zoom in more.”

“Three thousand feet,” Karina said.

“How high can she go?” Kawalski asked.

“About five thousand,” Sparks said.

“I see people,” Paxton said.

Sparks zoomed in more.

“Hey, those are buffalo dogs.”

“Vocontii,” Autumn said.

“Yes, they are,” Sarge said. “And there’s hundreds of ’em.” He looked up at the Dragonfly but couldn’t see her. “Take her up to five thousand.”

Everyone watched the iPad as Sparks reduced the zoom back to normal and the aircraft lifted higher and higher.

“There’s the river,” Autumn said.

“It’s huge,” Katy said.

“Pan around the horizon, Sparks,” Sarge said.

“Look, an ocean,” Kawalski said.

“How far away?” Autumn asked.

“Probably around twenty miles,” Sparks said.

“Mountains.”

“Snowcap mountains,” Kady said.

“Whoa!” Autumn said. “Back up.”

Sparks stopped the pan and rotated back.

“Zoom in,” Autumn said, “there, focus on that mountain.”

“That looks familiar,” Kawalski said.

“It should,” Autumn said. “That’s the Matterhorn.”

“Holy shit!” Kawalski leaned closer to the screen. “It *is* the Matterhorn!”

“How far, Sparks?” Sarge asked.

“Um...maybe a hundred and fifty miles.”

“Direction?”

“Northeast.”

Sarge unrolled his map on the grass. “Karina, show me the Matterhorn on this map.”

She knelt beside him, studying the map. “There.” She pointed to a peak in the mountain range.

Sarge put his finger on the Matterhorn and measured off a hundred and fifty miles to the southeast. “That river is the Rhone, and the ocean is the Mediterranean Sea.”

“Here,” Karina said to Kady as she held the Dragonfly iPad out to her, “hold this.” Karina ran to her backpack to get her iPad, then switched it on and began flipping pages.

“Sparks was right,” Autumn said. “We are on the Riviera.”

“Thank you,” Sparks said.

“But where are the highways and cities?” Kawalski asked.
Sarge shook his head as he studied the map.

“Hey!” Karina said as she came running back to the group.

“Look at the elephants.”

“What?” Sarge asked.

“Bring the elephants up on the video,” Karina said.

Sparks rotated the Dragonfly back to look straight down.

“Zoom in a bit,” Karina said.

Sparks worked the controls.

“There! Stop!” Karina said. “Somebody count the elephants.”

“Why?” Kawalski asked.

“Just do it!”

Everyone began counting the elephants.

“Thirty-eight.”

“Forty.”

“Thirty-eight,” Kady said.

“Fifty-one,” Paxton said.

“Paxton,” Lorelei said, “you couldn’t count to twenty with your boots off.”

“Thirty-nine,” Sarge said.

“All right,” Karina said as she read something on her screen.

“Can we agree on approximately twenty-six thousand soldiers?”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Thousands, anyway.”

“I think more than twenty-six thousand,” Lorelei said.

“Listen to this, people,” Karina said. “In two-eighteen BC—”

Lojab laughed. “Two-eighteen BC! You dumb bimbo, Ballentine. You’ve gone completely off your rocker.”

Karina glared at Lojab for a moment. “In two-eighteen BC,” she began again, “Hannibal took thirty-eight elephants, along with twenty-six thousand cavalry and foot soldiers, over the Alps to attack the Romans.”

Several of the others laughed.

“Stupitch,” Lojab mumbled.

“So, Ballentine,” Sarge said, “you’re saying we’ve been transported back to two-eighteen BC and dropped into Hannibal’s army? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“I’m just reporting to you what I see; the Rhone River, the Mediterranean Sea, the Alps, someone saying this place is called Gaul, which is the ancient name for France, no highways, no cities, no cell towers, and all our watches being five hours out of whack.” She looked back at her screen. “And I’m reading off to you the facts of history. You can draw your own conclusions.”

Everyone was silent as they watched the screen on Sparks’s iPad. He reduced the zoom and panned around the horizon, searching for any signs of civilization.

“The Vocontii were the ancient inhabitants of southern France,” Karina read from her iPad. “They cared little for trade or agriculture, preferring instead to raid neighboring tribes for grain, meat, and slaves.” She clicked off her iPad and put it away.

Sparks brought the Dragonfly down to a soft landing on the grass. “It’s two-eighteen BC,” he whispered, “and that’s

Hannibal's army.”

A momentary silence lingered as the soldiers thought about what Karina had said.

“Sparks,” Lojab said, “you’d believe Ballentine if she said the moon was made of blue cheese.”

“Green cheese,” Sparks said. “And she’s right about that, too.”

Kawalski looked at Sarge. “We ain’t in Afghanistan anymore, are we, Toto?”

“Can the Dragonfly go up at night?” Sarge asked.

“Yeah, but we might lose her in the dark.”

“Even with the video on?”

“If we have a big fire going and we keep the camera trained on the fire, I guess I could bring her back down where we are.” Sparks flipped the switch on the Dragonfly and put it away.

“Why do you want to go up at night, Sarge?”

“I think we fell into a pocket of the past and it’s just this area around us. Maybe ten square miles or so.”

“Like a wormhole?” Sparks asked.

“Something like that.”

“What’s a wormhole?” Kawalski asked.

“It’s a hypothetical feature of the space-time continuum,” Sparks said. “Basically a shortcut through space and time.”

“Oh.”

“But Sarge,” Sparks said, “we saw the Alps and the Matterhorn, a hundred and fifty miles away.”

“Yes, but we couldn’t see any distant cities. At night, from five

thousand feet up, we could see the glow of city lights. Maybe Marseilles or Cannes.”

“Could be, I guess.”

“If we can spot a big city, we’ll go that way until we get out of this crazy place.”

Chapter Twelve

Autumn walked through the woods just below the Seventh's camp, looking for firewood. It was a little past sunset, but still twilight.

"You need help, Apache?"

Autumn jerked around at the sound of the man's voice, almost dumping her armload of wood. "Lojab, can't you whistle or something when you're sneaking up on a woman?"

"I ain't sneaking, I just wanted to help." He put his hand on her shoulder.

Autumn narrowed her eyes on his hand. "I know what you want." She shoved away his hand.

"Well, good. That's saves a lot of small talk."

"Yeah, right."

"You're not like the others, are you?"

"Other what?" She knelt to pick up a dead branch and added it to her armload of wood.

"The other women. They don't understand what I need."

"Oh, I think they understand you pretty well." She turned to go back toward the camp.

He grabbed her arm. "Wait a minute. You don't have to be in such a hurry."

"Get away from me." She jerked her arm from his grip, dumping her armload of wood. "You're breathing my air."

“You fucking bitch.”

“Yes, I am.” She knelt to pick up her wood. “And if you touch me again, I’ll kick the shit out of you.”

He mumbled something as she left him standing there.

Back at the camp, Autumn dropped her wood on the fire, sending up a cloud of smoke and embers.

“Is that big enough for you, Sparks?”

Sparks glanced at the fire. “Yeah.” He looked at Autumn, with her feet spread apart and hands on her hips. She wore an expression that could scare off a Buffalo Dog. “Um, yeah, that’s really nice. You’re probably the best wood gatherer in the Seventh Cavalry.” He tried to look apologetic.

Sarge sat on a log nearby, holding a tin cup of coffee. He gave Autumn a look, like, ‘What the hell’s eating you?’

Autumn relaxed and grinned. “Sorry, Sparks.” She walked around the fire toward him. “I just had a cute little discussion with your charming pal, Blow Job.”

“My pal?” Sparks opened the Dragonfly’s cover to insert a fresh battery. “Since when is he my pal?” He set the aircraft on the grass.

“Well, someone has to be his friend.” She took Sarge’s cup and sipped the coffee.

“I wish him luck in that fantasy,” Sparks said. “All right, kids, here we go.”

A soft whirl came from the wings of the little drone, then it lifted off, going straight up.

“Take her slow, Sparks,” Sarge said as he picked up the iPad to watch the screen.

“Right.”

Sarge held the iPad so Sparks could see it as he worked the controls. The campfire grew smaller on the display as the Dragonfly lifted higher and higher.

“Two thousand feet,” Sparks said. “I’ll pan around, then center back on the fire.”

They saw nothing but total darkness, horizon to horizon.

“Take her up to three thousand,” Sarge said.

Kawalski and the others came to stand behind Sarge, watching the iPad.

“Look there,” Autumn said, “to the northeast.”

A slight glow arched above the trees.

“Zoom in, Sparks.”

“Right.”

“Damn,” Sarge said. “Those are campfires.”

Lojab came in from the woods. He glared at Autumn, then folded his arms and watched the display on the iPad.

“It’s the Vocontii village,” Autumn said.

“Yeah,” Sarge said. “And it’s a lot bigger than we thought.”

“There must be hundreds of fires,” Autumn said.

“Go up to five thousand,” Sarge said.

Sparks reduced the zoom and centered on their fire again. He then flew up to five thousand feet. The display of the campfire moved off the screen.

“What happened?” Sarge asked. “We lost the fire.”

“Wind.” Sparks rotated the controls. “I need to see the fire to find her.”

“What if you can’t locate the fire?”

“I can hit the ‘home’ button, and it’ll fly back here. But it might hit the trees when it comes down and tear itself apart.” He panned the camera left to right. “Ah, we’re almost to the Vocontii camp.” He watched the display as the Dragonfly drifted toward the fires of the Vocontii. “So, the wind is coming from the southwest.” He turned into the wind and flew forward. “Here we are.” Their campfire came up on the screen. “Now that I know the wind direction, I can hold our position.”

“Wow,” Kawalski said as Sparks panned around the horizon. “It’s as dark as midnight in a coalmine.”

“Damn,” Sarge said. “I thought sure we’d see a big city. How far away is the horizon at this height?”

“About eighty miles,” Sparks said.

“So, if there was a big city out there,” Autumn said, “even two hundred miles away, we would see the glow of the lights.”

“I think so,” Sarge said. “All right, Sparks, bring her down. This sinkhole is a lot bigger than I thought.”

“If we’re in a sinkhole,” Lojab said, “we can’t get up high enough to see out of it.”

“We were at five thousand feet, Lojab,” Sarge said. “That’s high enough to see something, if there was anything to see.”

“I think we should get moving,” Lojab said, “and see if we can

climb out of here.”

“And I say we stay here,” Sarge said, “until we have a better idea of what’s happened to us.”

“Well, I vote for heading north until we come to a big city and civilization. Then we can get back to our own time.”

“This army unit is not a democracy.” Sarge stood and took a step toward Lojab. “We don’t vote on what we want to do; we follow orders.”

“What are we?” Lojab said. “A bunch of lap dogs, lying around, waiting for you to tell us when to eat, when to sleep, and when to go take a piss?”

Sarge looked around at the others as they watched him intently. “I wouldn’t call any of my soldiers lap dogs, Lojab, but yes, everyone is going to wait until I decide what to do. And that includes you.”

“Fuck this shit.” Lojab stormed off toward Trevor and the other two crewmen from the C-130.

Behind Sarge, Sparks barked like a dog.

“Down, boy,” Kawalski said. “Be good and I’ll let you sit in Apache’s lap.”

* * * * *

The next morning, Kawalski walked with Liada, down by the river. His rifle was across his back, and he carried his helmet by the chin strap.

“Liada,” he said.

She looked up at him.

“Those men are foot soldiers.” He pointed toward a group of men working on a raft.

“Yes.”

“And those are horse soldiers.”

She watched the four men ride by. “Yes.”

“The horse men in the scarlet capes...” He tried to explain with his hands, as he’d seen Autumn do. He plucked a red flower from a bush and fluttered it over his shoulder.

She laughed. “Carthage sons of, um, big peoples.”

“Ah,” Kawalski said, “the aristocracy.” He slipped the flower into her hair, over her ear. “Okay, we have the foot soldiers.” He held his hand out flat, at about waist height. “Then the horse soldiers.” He raised his hand a bit. “The sons of Carthage.” He held his hand a little higher. “Then comes Rocrainium,” his hand went higher, “the boss.”

Liada wrinkled her brow.

“Who is up here, on top?”

Liada stared at Kawalski for a moment, then her face brightened. “Big boss?”

“Yes, who is the big boss?”

“Hannibal is.”

“Hannibal?”

“Yes,” she said.

Kawalski put on his helmet and touched the comm switch.

“Anybody out there?”

Several people answered.

“Apache?”

“Yeah.”

“Sarge?” Kawalski asked.

“Yes, what’s up?”

“Ballentine?”

“I’m here,” Karina answered.

“As hard as it is for me to say this, Ballentine,” Kawalski said, “you were right.”

“About what? I’m right about so many things, I’ve forgotten most of them.”

Someone laughed.

“Remember that four-star general we saw on the big black warhorse?”

“Yeah?”

“I know his name.”

“Really?” Karina said.

“How do you know?” Sarge asked.

“Come to me,” Kawalski said to Liada.

She came close to him, and he put his arm around her, pulling her even closer until her lips were almost touching his.

“Who is the big boss?” Kawalski pointed to the mic in his helmet.

“Hannibal,” she whispered into the mic. She looked up, into his eyes, keeping her lips close to his.

He tilted his helmet up.

“I knew it,” Karina said.

“Where are you, Kawalski?” Sarge said.

“Hannibal is going to cross the Rhone,” Karina said. “Then he’s going over the Alps. Right, Kawalski?”

Kawalski pulled off his helmet and let it fall to the ground.

“Who is the big boss?” Kawalski whispered.

“Hannibal.” Liada’s warm breath brushed his lips.

“Hannibal?” He drew out the last syllable.

“Hanni...”

“Ask her when Hannibal’s going to cross the river.” Sarge’s voice came from the speakers inside Kawalski’s helmet where it lay on the ground, but it was too faint for Kawalski to hear. “Kawalski?”

“I think his comm went dead,” Karina said.

“Either that, or he’s trying to get something more from Liada,” Sarge said.

“Yeah.” Autumn giggled. “Probably that.”

Chapter Thirteen

Sergeant Alexander sipped his coffee and watched Sparks unfold the solar panels and plug in his charger to recharge the batteries for the Dragonfly.

“You know what I’ve been thinking about?” Sparks asked.

Sarge looked at Sparks and raised an eyebrow.

“We know the satellites are still up there, right?”

“Yes, because your GPS unit picks them up. That’s one of the reasons I think we’re in some kind of a sink hole.”

“You know what else might be up there?”

Sarge looked up at the sky. “What?”

“The space station.”

“Hey, you’re right. Can we contact them?”

“I don’t know what frequencies they use, but I’ve been broadcasting on all of them.”

“If we could contact them and tell them where we are, they could tell us where the nearest city is.”

“Maybe.” Sparks stared at the sky for a moment. “I might be able to rig up a strobe light and point it straight up. As the space station orbits the Earth, they see the whole surface every few days.”

“What good would that do?”

“I think I can set the strobe to blink Morse Code, maybe something like ‘S.O.S. Contact 121.5.’ If they happen to see the

blinking light, they'll figure out it's sending Morse Code."

"You ever see a satellite photo of Europe at night?"

"I know, there's millions of lights, but if we're in a hole of some kind, like you said, then there would be miles of darkness all around us. That way, our strobe light might stand out. And it would be much brighter than any campfire."

"It's a good idea, Sparks. You need somebody to help you with it?"

"No, I'll just have to cannibalize some of our electronic gadgets to rig it up."

* * * * *

It was almost 2 a.m. on the third night after Sparks set up his strobe to blink Morse Code. Everything was quiet until the radio crackled to life.

"Hello."

"Hello," Sparks mumbled and pulled the blanket up over his head.

"Hello down there." This was followed by a block of static. "Anybody home?"

"What?" Sparks threw back his blanket.

"Sparks!" Sarge yelled. "Someone's on the radio."

"Holy shit!" Sparks rolled out of bed and grabbed the mic. "Who is it?" He dropped the microphone, then picked it up. "Who's there?"

“This is Commander Burbank on the Space Station, transmitting on 121.5.”

“Commander, this is Richard Sparks – I mean McAlister. How are you?”

“I’m fine, Richard. Where are you?”

“We’re right here, on the Rhone.”

“Give me the mic, Sparks,” Sarge said.

“Tell him what happened to us.” Sparks handed the mic over to Sarge.

“This is Sergeant Alexander of the Seventh Cavalry.”

“Seventh Cavalry?” Commander Burbank said. “Are you kidding me?”

“No, sir. We were on a combat mission over Afghanistan when our aircraft was hit and we bailed out. Somehow, we came down in France. Are you guys okay up there?”

“Yes,” the commander said, “at least so far. We lost communications, and when we saw the whole Earth was dark, we checked the recorded videos for the past twenty-four—”

“Wait a minute,” Sarge said into the mic, “the whole Earth is dark?”

“Yes, yours is the first man-made light we’ve seen in the past seven nights.”

“How can that be?” Sarge asked.

“Don’t you guys know what happened?”

“All we know is that our aircraft was ripped apart just when we were bailing out over Afghanistan. Ten minutes later, we

came down in France, in two-eighteen BC.”

“What!?”

The other soldiers were awakened by the radio, and they came over to listen.

“Yes, Commander,” Sarge said, “at least that’s what we think, or else someone’s pulling an elaborate hoax on us. And no, we don’t know what happened.”

“Well, I doubt very seriously you’re in two-eighteen BC,” Commander Burbank said. “We have two video cameras pointed at the Earth that run all the time. After we lost communications, then saw the Earth was completely dark, we reviewed the videos. Seven days ago, there was a polar shift.”

“What does that mean?”

“The axis that runs through the center of the Earth shifted fifteen degrees. The North Pole is now in Greenland, and the South Pole is in the South Pacific Ocean, near New Zealand. As we watched the video, the surface of the Earth rippled from coast to coast on every continent, like a blanket being snapped from one end. Then giant tidal waves swept across all the oceans. The surface of the Earth was instantly rotated about four thousand miles.”

“Holy shit!” Sarge said.

“Every man-made structure on earth was completely destroyed. There might be someone alive somewhere, but you’re the only one we’ve had contact with.”

“Oh, my God!” Karina said. “Mom, Dad, Grandmother

Walker...they're gone? It's not possible. All dead?"

"Hello, is that a female voice I hear?" Commander Burbank asked.

"Yes," Sarge said. "That's Private Karina Ballentine.

"Private Ballentine," Burbank said, "we're all grief-stricken up here, too. As we watched the replay, we saw all our homes and families disappear."

"I don't believe it," Kady said. "My brothers and sisters, and my mom. They can't be gone just because the poles shifted from one place to another."

"What about airplanes?" Sparks leaned in close to the mic. "There must have been thousands of planes in the air."

"Every aircraft under ten thousand feet was destroyed, as yours was."

"But the airliners fly at thirty-five thousand feet. Wouldn't they survive?"

"Probably, but now there's no place for them to land. When those airliners began running low on fuel, they had to come down. Some might have ditched in the ocean or on rivers, but not many. A few people might survive a crash-landing, but then what?"

"Yes, I see what you mean," Sarge said. "We came down by parachute, and with supplies and weapons, but they didn't."

Autumn leaned close to Sarge to speak into the mic. "Commander, what's going to happen to you and your crew?"

"Is that another woman I hear?" Burbank asked.

"Yes, sir. I'm Private Autumn Eaglemoon."

“How many people are in your unit?”

Autumn looked around at the others. Several were in tears, and all were in shock and disbelief. “Sixteen.”

“Well, Private Eaglemoon, in answer to your question, we have six months of food and water, so we have a little time to work on a plan. The two Russian escape pods are really our best hope, but with both NASA and the Russian Mission Control Center at Korolev gone, there’s no way to control where we come down. If the preprogrammed descent sequence doesn’t work, we might hit the Sahara Desert or the middle of the Pacific Ocean.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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